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The Journey Since 1947-II: Radio Times

By: Kalpana Sharma

From a small footprint in 1947, radio grew to cover the entire country and was to be found in homes of the rich and the not-so-well off. The age of the internet has not diminished its importance; why else would it still be government controlled?

Before the TV remote, there was the radio dial. My earliest memory of our radio times was fighting with my cousins, during the summer holidays in the 1960s, about which programme would be played on the radio. There was only one radio in the house. It was a wooden box with dials, occupying a prominent place in the living room.

Visiting cousins like me were treated like country hicks by the Bombay cousins, who knew how to twist and turn the dial to connect to a particular radio station. And that was Radio Ceylon.

But before Radio Ceylon, there was the Radio Club of Bombay.

Radio broadcasting arrived in India several years before Independence. The British colonial government began issuing licences for medium wave radio stations in 1923. The first broadcast took place from the Radio Club of Bombay, followed by the Radio Club of Bengal and the Madras Presidency Radio Club.

The range of these stations was limited, and radios were expensive. Only the rich could afford them. This was by no means a mass media yet.

In 1927, the Indian Broadcasting Company was set up and this was the start of radio broadcasting in India on a professional basis. Although the company lasted for only three years, it ultimately led to the formation of the Indian State Broadcasting Service in 1936, which graduated to All India Radio as we know it today.

At the time of Independence, there were only six radio stations in India —in Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Tiruchirapalli and Lucknow. Radio reached only 11% of the population and covered only 2.5% of the country. Today, All India Radio, one of the largest broadcasting networks in the world, has 262 radio stations covering almost 92% of the geographical area of India. Its programmes are in 23 languages and 146 dialects.

By way of contrast, Radio Ceylon only came into existence in 1949. It inherited a powerful short wave radio transmitter set up during World War II by the South East Asia Command (SEAC) of the Allied forces.

In 1951, Radio Ceylon recognised that the Indian market would attract advertisers. That is when it also branched into Hindi film music. Binaca Geetmala, for instance, one of the most popular programmes helmed by Ameen Sayani, was sponsored by Ciba, which was promoting a toothpaste to compete with the more established brands, Colgate and Pepsodent.

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This was a period when All India Radio did not broadcast Hindi film music. Apparently, the minister in-charge, B. V. Keskar did not approve. AIR stuck to promoting classical Indian music and remains, even today, one of the richest repository of classical music.

It was the runaway success of sponsored programmes like Binaca Geetmala on Radio Ceylon that finally pushed AIR to set aside the rule about Hindi film music. In 1957, its commercial channel Vividh Bharati was established, directly competing with Radio Ceylon for listeners.

Today, inundated as we are with the visual medium, it is hard to imagine a time when the radio fulfilled our needs for news and entertainment. It wove a magic of sorts.

The visual media restricts imagination. What you see is what you are compelled to believe is the reality. The radio, on the other hand, leaves your imagination unfettered. For instance, we had no idea, even as we listened to Ameen Sayani, what he looked like. Was he

young? Was he old? Was he good-looking? It didn't matter. His voice, and his choice of music, was all that counted as we listened to his programme.

And when the radio became portable, it also became less elitist. The transistor radio was everywhere. In villages, in small towns, in cities, at the local chai shop, in hovels and grand havelis.

Of course, radio was not just music. It was also sport, especially cricket. Young or old, boy or girl, there would be no argument when a cricket match was on. The radio had to be tuned to the cricket commentary. It was always playing in the background. Remember that in those days, there was no one-day cricket, leave alone T20. Only full five days of a test match.

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Even if you left home and walked to your bus stop or train station, you could catch the score. “Score kya hai?” was the refrain as you passed the local chai shop where the commentary was blaring full blast for everyone to enjoy.

In between the music and cricket, there was news. The daily news bulletin from AIR was heard almost everywhere in the country. Even though it was the government's version of events, it was not blatantly coloured in the early years. In the absence of any other mass media, radio was the main source of news.

Although AIR was entirely government-owned and was never autonomous, it still had some credibility in the years after Independence. As Indians had no experience of what radio without government control would be like, AIR's monopoly was unchallenged and its interpretation of events was generally accepted.

That credibility got seriously dented in 1975, when Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency. AIR was soon to be known as All Indira Radio, as only news that echoed the narrative set by Indira Gandhi could be broadcast.

For those of us who were journalists during the Emergency, when print was censored, and radio news was unreal, short wave radio, that had once been the way we accessed Hindi film music by way of Radio Ceylon, became the only source of information about India. BBC World Service, which we strained to catch on our transistor radios, was the only source of reliable news about our own country. Mark Tully, the BBC's correspondent in India became a household name. Even after he was told to leave the country in 1975, he continued to find ways to access what was happening in the country and broadcast this news.

When the Emergency ended in 1977, and Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party were defeated in the general elections, the Janata Party government made the first attempt to create a BBC-like structure for radio and television. A committee, first helmed by Kuldeep Nayar, and later by B. G. Verghese, both senior editors who had been on the wrong side of Indira Gandhi, proposed setting up an autonomous broadcasting corporation.

A diluted version of these suggestions was incorporated in a Bill in 1979. But it went nowhere as the Janata Party government fell. After remaining in cold storage for almost a decade, the idea was revived when V. P. Singh briefly led the country and the Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Act 1990 was passed by Parliament. It still took another seven years before Prasar Bharati came into existence in November 1997. And that too at the prompting of the Supreme Court which ruled in 1995 in the *Ministry of Information and Broadcasting vs Cricket Association of Bengal* that “airwaves are public property to be used to promote public good and expressing a plurality of views, opinions and ideas”.

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Today, we have Prasar Bharati, but it does not represent the “plurality of views, opinion and ideas”. On the contrary, it is as much a voice of the government in power as were AIR and Doordarshan under Indira Gandhi.

The monopoly and stupendous reach of AIR, has been leveraged most effectively by the current government to further its agenda. In many countries, authoritarian leaders have used the mass media to entrench their rule. India is no different.

The person who has benefitted the most from a government-controlled mass medium like radio is, of course, the prime minister. Through his monthly *Mann ki Baat*, Narendra Modi has been able to speak directly to almost every Indian. This has played a significant part in building up and sustaining the personality cult around him, raising his stature above the party to which he belongs, and which in turn he leverages effectively for his party to win elections. This explains why, despite the multiple ways in which people can access news and information, the government continues to control news and current affairs on radio.

In 2001, in some ways the monopoly of AIR was broken when the government permitted privately-owned FM stations to be established. Radio City Bangalore was the first. Since then, more than 200 FM stations have been established, several of them owned by media houses that also have newspapers, magazines and television stations. Yet, the government still does not permit them to carry news or current affairs programmes. They are allowed to relay news bulletins from AIR, but nothing more.

Given the bonus that a dedicated radio service gives to the government of the day, it is unlikely that the policy on news and current affairs will change any time soon. So what began in 1947 as All India Radio, still reaches all India. But it is not the voice of all India. It remains the voice only of those who hold the reins of political power in India.

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