THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

May 18, 2023

# Radio Resonance

**By: David Lelyveld**

*Radio broadcasting in colonial and early post colonial South Asia blurred borders of established authority and stimulated rumour, gossip, and conversation, despite technical constraints and state controls.*

The itinerant radio disc jockey in Stanley Elkin's novel *The Dick Gibson Show* (1971) was trying to provoke a response in sparsely populated rural Nebraska in mid-20th century America by insulting and slandering the owners of the small broadcast operation and playing old, outmoded, and scratchy recordings. Hoping that someone would complain, he only succeeded in boring his audience and driving them away. No one noticed when the transmitter broke down, even as the announcer kept talking and the music continued to play.

Isabel Huacuja Alonso tells a similar story about radio broadcasting in India during the final decade of British rule and the early years of independent India and Pakistan. For much of that time, the technology was inadequate, audiences were sparse, and at times broadcast authorities seemed almost intent on driving them away. Her study deals with the period from the late 1930s when mostly reluctant British officials treated the new technology with a combination of apathy and suspicion, as trivial or dangerous, until the late 1970s and early 80s – all before state-run television became popular, then surrendered to private, commercial competition, only to be nearly overtaken by the rapid revolution of the internet and social media. Academic studies of these developments have only recently, huffing and puffing, attempted to catch up with them and put them in historical context.

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Huacuja Alonso's energetic research and imaginative interpretations, however, show that broadcast history can be of wider historical significance. The book argues that despite technical and financial constraints and efforts of the state to contain and control the airwaves, radio broadcasting reached out to a wide South Asian population, crossing boundaries of political authority, and stimulating what she calls "radio resonance" – rumour, gossip and conversation amongst the "millions" who heard about, even if they did not actually hear it.

## The master's voice

The book moves through three episodes to make its case. The first is World War II, when Nazi Germany and Subhas Chandra Bose, working first under Nazi and afterwards Japanese auspices, used radio to undermine British imperialism. Second, the first decade of independence, when All India Radio (AIR) fostered standards of music that drove listeners to turn to Radio Ceylon to hear popular film songs. The third section deals with the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war and its aftermath, out of which emerged AIR's Urdu service, aimed at Pakistan but attracting a significant Indian audience.

Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were broadcasting by shortwave to India for several years before the war broke out in 1939, and indeed their programming (but not the Soviet Union's) was listed and advertised in AIR's English publication, *The Indian Listener*. The BBC had established an Empire Service in 1932, largely addressed to a European audience. All India Radio, established only in 1936 out of two stations, Bombay and Calcutta, was a latecomer, poorly financed and only modestly expanded to five other sites. The Germans and Italians were broadcasting celebrations of Hitler and Mussolini in English along with some Hindustani as part of their well-honed propaganda apparatus. The BBC caught up early in 1940 by establishing a more decorous Indian Service and recruiting writers like George Orwell. E. M. Forster, Mulk Raj Anand, and Atiya Hussain.

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At about the same time, All India Radio, like the BBC mostly dedicated to literary distinction, expanded its broadcasting schedule in eight languages to make room for more news bulletins and what was frankly called propaganda. Under Patras Bokhari's leadership, AIR

recruited a significantly larger staff, including writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Upendranath Sharma 'Ashk', Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sachchidanand Hirananda Vatsayayan 'Ageya', Noon Meem Rashid, Akhtar Hussain Raipuri, and Nirad Chaudhuri. Despite the oral potential of broadcasting to overcome illiteracy and the multiplicity of scripts, every word was written in advance, in English, for all news bulletins to be translated into Indian languages and subject to censorship. With respect to Hindi-Urdu broadcasts, a great effort was made to establish a unified Hindustani in the face of vociferous opposition from advocates of one or the other as marks of separate Hindu or Muslim religious identity.

Huacuja Alonso's main attention to wartime broadcasting, however, concentrates first on broadcasts from Nazi Germany and then its offshoot Azad Hind Radio under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose, the leading militant nationalist before the war, especially in Bengal, had been forced out of the presidency of the Indian National Congress for his opposition to the Gandhians, and subsequently, with the outbreak of World War II, arrested by the British for sedition. He escaped and managed to make his way to Germany, where he joined forces with the Nazis. Shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, he recruited other expatriate Indians for shortwave broadcasts in English, Hindustani, and other Indian languages from Berlin. Motivated entirely by opposition to British rule, he told his listeners to ignore "the internal politics of other countries" – presumably the conquest of nearly all of Europe and the visible oppression and ultimate genocide of the Jews. "The enemies of the British imperialism are our friends and allies."

The book's focus on "Bose's Radio Voice" – without the benefit of recordings and relying on anxious British official monitoring and later published versions – has to deal with the very limited availability of radios in India at the time, some 179,000 registered in 1943. Huacuja Alonso points out that people could hear radios communally, as from tea shop loudspeakers, and that there were no doubt many unlicensed receivers. Even then, the availability of these shortwave broadcasts could not have reached the overwhelming majority of the Indian population. But her point here, as elsewhere in the book, is that radio could reach people by word of mouth despite the energetic efforts of the British to punish anyone caught listening to what the enemy had to say.

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What is less clear is to what extent such "resonance" might be distorted as it moved from person to person over large distances and how it might have weighed against the somewhat more accessible AIR and BBC efforts and more established forms of communication. While the BBC and AIR avoided mention of the Bengal famine, Bose blamed it on British rule and offered to supplement the rice supply with shipments from Burma. But Bose's commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity and his advocacy of an amalgamation of Hindi and Urdu tended to be erased in transmission. If the substance of what Bose and his colleagues said as against what people heard is probably irretrievable, the main message was that here was a heroic figure battling against British rule. This has indeed resonated and magnified after his death at the end of the war and has only grown since then. Huacuja Alonso documents Bose's explicit admiration of Hitler but does not speculate about its possible role many years later in the rise of fascist tendencies in present day India.

## Becoming 'national'

*Radio for the Millions* bridges over the standard dividing line of independence and partition in 1947 to take on the continuities in governance and format of India's state-run and centralised broadcasting operation during the period of Nehru's leadership, as well as substantial transformations with respect to language and music. The project of Hindustani as the national language was dropped in favour of a highly Sanskritised Hindi in India, with Urdu mostly across the border as the putative official language of Pakistan.

When Balakrishna Vishwanath Keskar became minister of information and broadcasting in 1952, he extended what he considered to be the role of radio in raising and purifying the cultural standards of its listeners by reforming the music they could listen to. Though he had a doctorate in international relations from Paris, Keskar had also trained in north Indian classical music. While fostering performances by some of India's greatest musicians, especially if they were Hindus, Keskar denounced and in effect banned the playing of popular music from films, not least of all because their lyrics tended toward Urdu. He was determined to develop an audience of connoisseurs, even as he continued earlier efforts to introduce orchestral arrangements and meld Carnatic with north Indian styles. Reluctantly conceding some airtime to "light music" for the multitude, in 1957 Keskar tried to fob them off with Vividh Bharati.

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But this was the era of S.D. Burman, Naushad, Shankar-Jaikishen, of Mukesh, Muhammad Rafi, Geeta Dutt and of course Lata Mangeshkar. Indian audiences whether in tea shops or colleges wanted to hear the good stuff and not just by going to cinemas as part of lengthy film narratives. Leaping like Hanuman over the sea was the newly formed state-run but commercial service of Radio Ceylon, with an Australian director and a relatively powerful transmitter left over from the British military, all beyond the control of Indian authorities. Working with a private American-run advertising firm in Bombay, Radio Ceylon made it possible for Indian and also Pakistani listeners to hear the music of the films on programmes like the *Binaca Geetmala* in between advertisements for toothpaste. Huacuja Alonso captures the enthusiasm of this enterprise by locating letters and journals of the listeners, interviews with the popular broadcaster Ameen Sayani, and an account of Radio Ceylon's considerable gramophone library.

During the Indo-Pakistani war in 1965, Radio Pakistan managed, over a 17-day period, to mobilise considerable patriotic support for its war effort by enlisting the singing of Nur Jahan and a good deal of Urdu poetry. Although there had been Urdu programming on All India Radio, primarily from the Srinagar and Hyderabad stations but also in national broadcasts, Indian authorities now felt that they needed to combat Pakistani broadcasts by instituting the "external" Urdu Services. Again, through interviews and a collection of listener letters, Huacuja Alonso finds a significant audience not just in Pakistan, as intended, but also in India, especially among those displaced by partition, who find in the broadcasts a fond nostalgia for a lost and idealised world. Once again, she stands at the blurred borders of established authority and finds at least some people who transcended them.

Interviewed by a BBC reporter after the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, Narendra Modi stated that his one regret had been his inability "to handle the media." In more recent years, despite the proliferation of private channels and modes, there has been a concerted effort to restore the subordination of communications to centralized power that had characterized late British and early independent India. *Radio for the Millions* holds out some hope, perhaps naive, that such authoritarian ambitions will not prevail.

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