

## 8TH OF JUNE: 80 YEARS OF INDIA RADIO

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(English Version)

“I quarrel so frightfully with all the secretaries and deputy secretaries”, raved Lionel Fielden, the first Controller of Broadcasting, as he started operations of All India Radio on this very day, exactly 80 years ago. One wonders if matters have improved since then, despite an occasional non-Hegemonic bureaucrat who pops up as a saviour. But it is not as if radio in India began on this day, because several enterprising Indians had actually started toying with the new instrument within just a few months of January 1922, when the British established their BBC. The early commercial ventures,

however, floundered and the Crown had to take over the fledgling industry in April 1930 but the tempo picked a year later when Lord Reith, the first Director General of BCC, sent Fielden over to Delhi.

The Viceroy’s mandarins had allotted a princely sum of two and a half lakh rupees and came up with several ‘sensible objections’, but these hardly deterred Fielden, as he went about setting up radio stations in Delhi, Bombay, Lucknow, Madras, Calcutta and Dhaka. His passion ruffled many feathers and the British bureaucracy had to shell out nearly ten times the budgeted amount. Obviously, the Empire preferred a more reasonable and pliant officer, but Cambridge and Lord Reith had instilled sterling qualities in Lionel Fielden. He had the guts to invite Verrier Elwin, the bête noire of Viceroy who had pronounced anti-imperial views, to speak on the radio on ‘Empire Day’. These are a part of the legend of radio in colonial India, and many bemoan its constant mellowing down even under more democratic

Regimes. AIR's charge was shuttled from one department to the other, until a new department of information and broadcasting was created in 1946, which meant that AIR's parent was a decade younger than itself. Radio's primary focus was news and Charles Barnes, the first news editor, started the 'central news organisation' in August 1937. When the Second world war broke years later, the Viceroy's government understood the supreme importance of radio for propaganda and counter-propaganda. This led to the creation of AIR's 'external broadcast' division and by 1945, AIR had news bulletins in several foreign languages, in addition to many India ones. An interesting feature of AIR was that 'regional language' bulletins were prepared centrally in English in Delhi and then translated into different languages. This practice continues till today. The empire took no risks with local variations of the national narrative and neither could the new nation that was born in an ocean of blood, out of 14 'British-India Provinces' and from 565 'princely states'. Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged radio's real worth and on the 12th of November 1947, he came over to AIR's new studio on Parliament street: to make a passionate appeal to very angry refugees. Though India inherited just 6 radio stations from the British, it realised the importance of this medium for knitting a diverse nation together. Government ramped up AIR's pace of expansion: from 6 to 25 stations in just 5 years, which shot up to 86 in less than twenty five years. At present, All India Radio is a part of Prasar Bharati and it has 418 stations, including FM ones, which makes it the world's largest multi-lingual public network. However, unlike the home service of the BBC, India has to cater to numerous competing ethnic and linguistic aspirations. Akashvani thus speaks in as many as 146 tongues, while its news services division broadcasts in 91 languages and dialects every day. Nehru's information minister, B V Keskar, had very

staunch views on what music should be broadcast and he permitted only classical Music, which effectively reinvented a sanitised version of Indian tradition. Young India, however, differed and preferred popular Hindi film songs, but Keskar would have none of this. Radio Ceylon's Binaca Geetmala thus Found a gap and captured the imagination of this infant nation, with Ameen Sayani's seductive packaging of Bollywood songs. After five years of Dogged resistance, the government finally gave in and in 1957, AIR started Its version of film music and programes on Vividh Bharati. It bécame Immensely popular despite hot government breaths on its shoulders. Programes like Hawa Mahal, Chhaya Geet, Sangeet Sarita, Sargam and Farmaish Geet enthralled Indians in all walks and every corner. We Appeared to have finally risen above linguistic barriers to create a new Supra-national identity, that was articulated through emotive verses, Sentimental lyrics and captivating music. Bollywood Hindustani spread all Over through the radio and this helped in winning over those Indians who Had severe ideological objections to the ramming down of orthodox Sanskritic Hindi. The wars of 1962, 1965 and 1971 united millions of voices and Opinions and, here again, AIR played an unique role in stimulating new Patriotic fervour through news, commentaries and Jaimala songs. Iconic Commentators like Jasdev Singh and Melville de Mellow instilled national Pride through poetic renditions of national celebrations like Independence Day and Republic Day, while the sports commentaries of Pearson Surita, Suresh Saraiya, AFS Talyarkhan, Ravi Chaturvedi, Anand Rao and Berry Sarvadikari pumped high adrenalin into generations of listeners. Then, there were legends like Surajit Sen and his sister, Lotika Ratnam, as well as Devaki Nandan Pandey and Vinod Kashyap who enlivened news and Mesmerized the nation. There is hardly a single famous artiste in India

who Did not begin his or her career in AIR and maestros like Ravi Shankar joined AIR and set up Vadya Vrinda, the national orchestra. Despite challenge from private FM operators, the old warhorse still gallops, Transmitting, for instance, in 30 different languages and dialects for just 30 Lakhs in Manipur, so that India's delicate plural equilibrium remains stable.

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