

SURAJIT SEN:THE VOICE INDEPENDENT INDIA GREW UP WITH FALLS SILENT

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It was on the first day of Independent India, just when 'midnight's children' were catching up with their much needed sleep, that a tall young man of walked into All India Radio's very British headquarters in Delhi. His name was Surajit Sen full 22 years of age, who had left the army as his seniors told that promotions were neither guaranteed nor quick enough. So, he decided to serve the nation not with the gun but with his baritone voice. He joined as an English newsreader, a post that would bring him and his sister, Lotika Ratnam and colleagues like Melville de Mellow, Riaz Kadir and Ranbir Singh more fame than they could ever expect. They replaced and often bettered more 'English' names and voices like Stephen and Vincent Charrier, the two Jaffreys and Nobby Clarke, which was more than a bit difficult.

Little did Lt Sen realise when leaving the rank conscious armed forces that a quarter of a century later he would be rubbing shoulders, both literally and physically, with General Arora. It was Dhaka where the world looked on in wonder at the ignominious surrender of General Niazi and the Pakistani army. The 16th of December 1971 is a date no Indian would forget and it was Surajit Sen who was specially flown into Dhaka to narrate the running radio commentary of India's most glorious hour. His impeccable English was heard with respect a thousand miles away.

His old trainees of AIR, all of whom retired long ago at quite senior ranks, recall how he would come to the news service division in the beautiful art deco building on Parliament Street. He was always there well before time and unlike most other newsreaders; Sen would take an active part in the backroom, practising his script over and over again. He would chat with news editors and others whose existence was carefully hidden, just to get the feel of the story that he would speak about. Those days, every news item was "cleared" by government authorities, as radio was considered as an extension of the state apparatus. But Sen had no misgivings and he remained old school news persons to whom patriotism was more important in that form. His voice was grave, modulated, lyrical and yet controlled. In his later years his chief complaint was that news was no more controlled or dispassionate and the high decibels would make him moan.

Sen was also a Sports Caster par excellence and he was able to best combine his news instinct with the other passion when he reported amidst the mayhem of terror at the Munich Olympics. He was among the top advisors of the government where sports were concerned but that did not stop him from resigning from the high committee when he felt he was not being heard. That was Surajit Sen. He maintained some distance from the questioners in the print media but was always available to Prasar Bharati and the Information Service for trainees.

Successive generations of media persons and numerous listeners from the nineteen fifties to the eighties remember him as a larger than life hero, which he definitely was. Radio was the young nation's lifeline and Sen was among its most recognisable and admired voices. His English accent was the role model for several generations of aspirational Indians and even the best of English school boys and girls learnt the way the Queen's language needed to be rolled out from him and his colleagues.

With his death today at a ripe 89, India has lost a part of the history of her childhood, adolescence and youth.