

# THE RADIO'S ROLE IN THE UNIFICATION OF INDIA

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(English Version)

As we celebrate United Nations' World Radio Day on the 13th of February, it may be a good idea to look at how this humble instrument succeeded in bringing emotional unity among one of the most heterogeneous people who ever came together as a single nation. The story of the radio could start with Jagadish Chandra Bose, who succeeded in establishing the first working wireless signal in Kolkata in November 1894, but as he did not proceed to register his patent, the world, recognises Marconi as the inventor. He obtained the first patent two and a half years later and started commercialised radio transmission.

Incidentally, it was the USA that led in the development of radio in the second decade of the 20th century, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was born rather late in 1922. This too may have gone unnoticed, had it not been for the newspaper strike in 1926, which brought people to the radio for news. Experimental radio stations were set up in Bombay and in Madras in 1923-24, but the first commercial attempt was made in Calcutta and Bombay in the middle of 1927, by a new company that the Crown took over to start the Indian State Broadcasting Services in April, 1930. It was, however, only when Lionel Fielden of the BBC's Empire Service assumed charge in Delhi in August 1935, that this new All India Radio really took off. A highly creative person, he had his regular run-ins with the bureaucracy of Delhi: with his no-nonsense style. "I quarrel frightfully with all the Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries", he confessed in a letter to Lord Reith, "but I don't see how I can do anything else".

Matters may not have changed much in eight decades! His unit was renamed as 'Akash Vani', by none other than Tagore himself.

The Second World War gave a fillip to radio services in India and Britain had to act fast because German propaganda was reaching South and South-East Asia through the short wave. The British response was to set up the most powerful transmitters under Radio Ceylon, from where the South East Asia Command functioned as the voice of the Empire, for counter propaganda in this vulnerable region. After the War, when the British left these transmitters in Ceylon, the new government looked around for funds for these 'white elephant' that required a lot of power and resources. It was then that an imaginative young man named Ameen Sayani started his Binaca Geetmala that soon captured the imagination of an entire generation of Indians, irrespective of their different mother tongues. Though popular Hindi film songs appeared as some sort of a 'lingua-franca', India's Information minister, BV Keskar, was not amused. He passionately pursued the cause of classical Indian music over the State radio and branded film songs as kitschy lera-lappa. It was only when Parliament rose in favour of Hindi movie music that Keskar was finally forced to start Vividh Bharati in 1957: to disseminate popular music in India. It brought in an entirely new 'culture' of appreciation and internalization of Hindi film music, that ultimately completed Sardar Patel's task of binding together 565 princely states and 14 British provinces, with their multiplicity of cultural identities, languages and outlook.

It proved that John Strachey's statement in the late 19th century was wrong that "there is not and never was an India...no India nation, no people of India" and that Seeley erred as well in saying "India is...only a geographical expression, like Europe or Africa, and is the territory of many nations and languages." With its strong reliance on Hindi film music, came to be one of the factors that played a critical role in the unification of the soul of India: but this

aspect has hardly received the attention that it deserves. The British military and political systems got us physically together, and the railway and postal networks got us closer even while the English language and education system created a 'national middle-class'. But it were radio waves and their catchy melodies, lyrical imagery and sentimental memories actually helped achieve a unique 'homogenisation' across the length and breadth of India.

The golden period of Indian film music was in the 1950s and 1960s, with composers like Anil Biswas, C. Ramchandra, SD Burman, Naushad at their creative best, when the dream merchants of Bombay brought out classics like Shaheed, Samadhi, Andolan, Jhansi Ki Rani, and Mother India films. The songs of Bade Ghulam Ali, Lata-Asha, Mukesh, Talat Mahmood and Hemanta Kumar filled not only the eyes and ears, but also the hearts of all Indians. This helped overcome whatever reserve the non-Hindi speaking masses may have had against the language.

One of the main reasons for the success of Hindi film songs was that they appropriated the folk genres and expressions of every possible source. How Hindi films have borrowed freely from different traditions as disparate as folk music and Qawwali; western tunes and Indian classical music; Lavani and Nautanki dance tunes to lyrics of Viraha and sheer devotion. Vividh Bharati's programmes consisted not only of film songs, but also a whole variety of dramas, musical skits, features and a large amount of music of other kinds and genres. They reflected the entire spectrum of cultural variety that this nation offered.

One of Vividh Bharati's first programmes that continues to this day is entitled Hawa Mahal which is contributed by other local AIR stations. During the 1962 war, Vividh Bharati broke new ground and started its iconic Jaimala programme that was led by film personalities : almost unheard till then,

anywhere in the world. Nargis started it, followed by Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle, Mukesh, Manna Dey, Naushad, Sunil Dutt, Amitabh Bachchan, Meena Kumari, Balraj Sahni, Ashok Kumar and Dev Anand. Jaimala was to encourage Indian soldiers, who were fighting on the front, in a war that was not particularly favourable. In 1965, Akashvani's Vividh Bharati service played a historic role in uniting the entire country in one single voice. This is when it was realised that the earlier barriers between different groups of Indians seemed to have melted away and a totally unified India stood behind the frail Lal Bahadur Shastri. Both Akashvani and (more so) Vividh Bharati had thus scored over Radio Ceylon in this short span of time.

The next significant step in the life of this service came in Nov 1967, with the introduction of commercials and advertising (the Commercial Broadcasting Service) and Vividh Bharati was still known by this name until recently, when we changed it to simply 'Vividh Bharati'. By the latter half of the 1960s, transistors replaced valves in radio sets, and this meant that receivers could become smaller and portable. There was an immediate expansion of radio services and listenership, and transistor radios started becoming so affordable that they became an essential part of a middle class family, along with at least one steel almirah and one ceiling fan.

One of the major reasons for Vividh Bharati's popularity was not only its content, but its sheer reach propelled relentlessly by an ever hungry army of listeners from Jamnagar to Jhumritalaiya, and from frozen Kargil to the hot, sweaty Kanyakumari. The debate is almost over, as Bengalis and Malayalis vie with each other to make Hindi film songs over Vividh Bharati, in their rather questionable accents. The country that Churchill had predicted would splinter within a few years came together to mock at his grave.

AIR succeeded in doing more for the popularisation of colloquial Hindi, than what the protagonists of Sanskritic Hindi could ever dream of.