

India and Bangladesh join hands for radio diplomacy

All India Radio is set to launch Akashvani Maitree, a Bengali service aimed at those living across the border



A file photo of the Prasar Bharati office in New Delhi. Photo: Ramesh Pathania/Mint

An initiative launched in 1971 to back Bangladeshi nationalists in their liberation struggle is set to take flight again, this time on the wings of a powerful radio transmitter that will put forward India's perspective on issues facing the subcontinent.

After five months of preparation, All India Radio's (AIR) Kolkata station is ready to launch Akashvani Maitree—a service in Bengali aimed primarily at Bangladeshis—as New Delhi looks to strengthen diplomatic ties with Dhaka.

A similar initiative had “tremendous success” in 1971 during Bangladesh's war of independence, recalls veteran broadcaster Upen Tarafdar.

Sangbad Bichitra, a programme he produced for AIR Kolkata and beamed across the border, helped “neutralize” Pakistani propaganda.

It used to be banned in Bangladesh, Radio Pakistan being the only legitimate service on air, but people used to follow *Sangbad Bichitra* secretly, he says.

AIR continued to run a truncated service of six-and-a-half hours a day aimed at Bangladesh till April 2010, when it was suspended as the beaming transmitter collapsed.

The service had by then lost its relevance as well, say officials at AIR Kolkata.

Six years on, New Delhi's radio diplomacy with Dhaka is being revived, this time with the promise of greater participation from across the border.

Though it will control programming, AIR expects its Bangladeshi counterpart, Bangladesh Betar, to provide content to Maitree.

The service, to be beamed from Chinsurah, 35km from Kolkata, will create an opportunity to blend content from India and Bangladesh with the aim of further strengthening the already close “cultural, economic, political and emotional” ties between the two countries, says AIR's concept note on Maitree.

The service, which was to be launched on 28 June, has been briefly delayed because President Pranab Mukherjee couldn't make time to officially inaugurate it as scheduled.

But AIR Kolkata is ready with programming, and officials say that the service will hit the airwaves next month.

“It's an outreach programme,” said Jawhar Sircar, chief executive officer of Prasar Bharati, India's public service broadcaster. “No radio channel has ever taken an initiative to strengthen relations with neighbouring countries.” He added that Bangladesh officials are excited about the initiative.

A new 1,000-kw transmitter has been commissioned and it is capable of beaming both digital and analogue signals across Bangladesh, said Amlanjyoti Mazumdar, station director at AIR's external services division.

Digital streaming along with other multimedia content will be available globally at airworldservice.org, and eventually through an app.

Though the radio signal will be available to Indians as well, the service is primarily aimed at engaging Bangladeshis in interactions with India, according to Mazumdar, whose external services division produces programmes in 15 foreign and 12 Indian languages to be beamed outside India.

Maitree's content is to be decided by the external services division, and produced at a dedicated studio at AIR's Kolkata station, said Sutapa Dutta Gupta, the broadcaster's Kolkata head.

To start with, the 16 hours-a-day service will have three news bulletins—including one from Dhaka—and entertainment programmes, she said.

It appears that AIR is trying to create a platform through which New Delhi can air its views on developments in Bangladesh at a time when the country is getting increasingly polarized between the secular and radical Islamists, said a Kolkata-based professor of international relations, asking not to be named.

Much in the same manner as *Sangbad Bichitra* in the early 1970s, Maitree could potentially be used to counter Bangladeshi right-wing propaganda, the professor said.

“You may not be able to turn the hardened ones, but there are many more fence-sitters you can influence,” he added.