

How Ameen Sayani helped unite the soul of India

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Just a couple of days after the sad death of the one and only Ameen Sayani, I stumbled upon a photo with him, taken by his son at the NCPA, Mumbai. ‘August 2019’ was scrawled on it and I had gone there to deliver the Jamshed Bhaba Memorial Talk on Indian Culture. I was his great admirer and came to know him well from the time I headed All India Radio and Doordarshan, as CEO, Prasar Bharati.

During my public talk, I pointed to Ameen Sayani in the audience and mentioned why I considered him not only as a fascinating entertainer — India’s iconic and first radio jockey — but as someone who made a great yet unrecognised contribution in the cultural unification of India. I explained that, by popularising Hindi film music on radio throughout the diverse and often-conflicting subcontinent, he helped in creating a common mass medium that everyone understood and loved. The entire hall of some 1500 people suddenly got up to clap, spontaneously, as a tribute to Ameen sahab. He, too, rose from his seat to acknowledge the gesture and to take a bow. He wiped his spectacles, as his eyes may have been moist.

After the talk, I went straight from the podium to his seat. He hugged me and whispered that it was one of his finest hours. Though Ameen ji was 85 he was so fit that I really never imagined then that this was the last time I would see him alive.

For those who do not know the full story— it began with his programme of introducing Hindi film music over ‘Radio Ceylon’ in August 1952. India had emerged as one nation from 14 British Indian provinces and 565 kingdoms or different princely states only five years earlier. Physically, it was united, amidst partition riots and inter regional conflicts — but it had neither a common language nor any real emotional unity. People spoke in hundreds of different languages, for English was only the language of the educated, but many regions resisted the imposition of strict Sanskritic Hindi as India’s national language.

This was also the time when the Indian government had wanted people to listen only to high brow classical music and ghazals. India’s first Information and Broadcasting Minister BV Keskar branded Hindi film music as low-class ‘laralappa’ and banned (yes, banned) Hindi film music over the monopoly radio network, All India Radio. Paradoxically, it was also the golden era of Bollywood when its haunting music and exquisite lyrics and songs enraptured everyone. The masses were, therefore, thirsty for such popular music — despite its ban over the national radio. Only a minuscule percentage owned expensive gramophones and very few could afford to go to cinema halls.

In 1952, a Swiss company called CIBA that sold Binaca toothpaste then, decided to sponsor a Hindi film music programme over Radio Ceylon. It was called Binaca Geet Mala and Ameen Sayani was the 'jockey'. Sayani's outstanding introductions and interventions soon made it a super hit parade of popular songs. He told me one day 60 years later, while chatting in his little studio in Colaba, how he recorded each week's show in Bombay itself, and how the spool was dispatched to Colombo. It was broadcast from 8 to 9 pm every Wednesday. Since Ceylon's British Second World War transmitters were very powerful — they were meant to reach war-ravaged Southeast Asia — Binaca Geetmala could be heard in most parts of India. It became so legendary that people stopped everything on Wednesday evenings to listen — and, in the process, imbibed the easy Hindustani language, that was peppered with Urdu romantic words and sweet colloquialism.

But BV Keskar and the mighty Akashvani refused to acknowledge the voice of the people — even as Sayani's popularity soared to dizzy heights. After 5 years of public criticism and resistance, however, All India Radio has to capitulate and began its own popular film music channel, called Vividh Bharati in 1957 — on the lines of Ameen ji's. With its vast network and talented staff artistes and singers — many of who were from Bollywood — Akashvani's Vividh Bharati service played an ever better and more comprehensive role in uniting the entire country in one single voice. Vividh Bharati's iconic programmes, like Hawa Mahal, Jaimala, Aapki Farmaish, Bhoole Bisre Geet, Chitralok, Chayageet and the lot enraptured Indians — whether they liked Kitabi Hindi or not. They bound together audiences from obscure Jhumritalaiyah to better known metros in one emotional family — more so, when transistors spread radio like wildfire in the 1960s. The cassette mania took over, thereafter.

What about Sayani? His later Colgate Cibaca Sangeetmala ran from 1954 to 1994 on Radio Ceylon and then he started doing programmes for Vividh Bharati — reaching out to more Indians and bonding them. He recorded some 50,000 radio programmes and gave his legendary voice to about 20,000 jingles. He also hosted TV shows and carried voiceovers and cameos in Hindi movies. But, it was his role as one who catalysed the process of emotional unity among Indians is one that remains unique and really unforgettable.