

All India Radio's Glory Days and Its Search for Autonomy

COONOOR KRIPALANI

In the recent row over the “autonomous corporation” status of the Prasar Bharati, the fate of state broadcasters like All India Radio is in a deadlock. In the face of competition with private broadcasters, the corporation cannot exercise full autonomy in managing the state broadcaster, even though the Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Act, 1990 has been passed. Functional autonomy remains a far-fetched reality with the government of the day finding it difficult to cut the umbilical cord with the state broadcaster. As AIR is reeling under the pressure of this managerial conundrum, one should not lose sight of its historic role as a nation builder, as well as its contribution to the cultural landscape of India. Many of the towering intellectuals, musicians, writers and theatre personalities of mid to late 20th-century India were associated with this remarkable institution.

As India celebrates 72 years as an independent sovereign nation, it would serve us well to remember the immeasurable influence of All India Radio (AIR) in shaping the cultural landscape and mindset of the nation. Despite India's inherent diversity, the achievement of this sense of nationhood is to be lauded. The idea of nation included not just geographical unity, but also the social, cultural, economic and scientific developments that all Indians, irrespective of the differences in language and religion, could be proud of. In building a socially and politically cohesive national entity, based on democratic and secular principles, the services of AIR were used to educate the populace on what that meant and how it would work. In the decades following independence, AIR as the state broadcaster enjoyed a monopoly of the airwaves. It emerged as the sole source of news, views, knowledge and entertainment for the Indian audience. During the early years of independence, radios blared from every home, street, corner shop; and with the coming of transistor radios in the 1960s, from every passing bicycle. Since there was primarily one station, listenership of every programme was almost ubiquitous, thus influencing most of the Indian citizenry in common cultural patterns, and political, social and economic concerns.

In pre-independence India, radio played the twin role of a medium of communication as well as a tool of propaganda. During World War II radio services were used by the military for internal transmission of strategies and troop movements. It was also vital as a medium to transmit news to the public. A shortage of paper and limitations of widespread delivery of printed matter made radio's reach to a wide audience a boon. Furthermore, the delivery of instant news—live reportage from the field—assured radio's popularity as a medium of communication. It was also a tool for propaganda in these years, used by both the Allied and the Axis powers. The efficacy of radio broadcasts was not lost on the Indian freedom fighters, either. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, a group of Congress freedom fighters started underground radio broadcasts, exhorting people to uphold the struggle and bringing to their attention news that was censored in print media and on the official news channels. A dangerous enterprise, the chief movers of this effort of Voice of Freedom radio were constantly on the run, broadcasting from different locations in order to avoid arrest. Mostly run by Congress stalwarts, the radio came to be called the Congress Radio. But, soon, the authorities found them, arrested all the leaders, and shut down these airwaves.

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Coonoor Kripalani (coonoor.kripalani@gmail.com) is an independent scholar.

During the partition of 1947, the existing radio stations contributed to connecting displaced persons with their family members and loved ones on both sides of the new borders. After independence, AIR emerged as the primary broadcaster in the country; and the incumbent governments endeavoured to use the services of the state broadcaster in the newly formed nation's growth and development processes. One of the early successes of AIR was evident when India went to the polls for the first time in 1952. The Election Commission used AIR as the state broadcaster to inform the public on constitutional issues, universal suffrage, registration of voters and the voting process. The voter turnout was huge and the election process was free and fair. Later, during times of national emergencies, such as war or natural disasters, the Prime Minister would reach out to the nation through AIR broadcasts. Even in this era of television, internet and social media, this role of AIR cannot be underestimated. The current government in Delhi understands this well. Soon after assuming office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that he would broadcast on AIR to the nation regularly his thoughts on topical matters (RMBiz 2014a). This 20-minute broadcast, *Mann ki Baat* (speaking from the heart), aired monthly since 13 October 2014, has already garnered 66% of radio listenership in the large cities (Haq 2014), and earns ₹2,00,000 for a 10-second ad slot in contrast to the conventional rate of ₹500 to ₹1,500. Modi is, perhaps, the first Prime Minister in the last three decades since Indira Gandhi to understand well the power of AIR broadcasts.

Evolution and Outreach Expansion of AIR

Broadcasting in India began in 1927 as a private enterprise. Owing to the inability of its owners to keep it funded, it was taken over by the government as the state broadcaster (Baruah 1983; Luthra 1986). In 1935, Lionel Fielden, an employee of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the public service broadcaster in Britain, was appointed as the Controller of Broadcasting in India. In that capacity, he took charge of the Indian broadcasting service. Although a British public servant, Fielden was keen to create an "Indian" broadcaster that would communicate news of relevance for the Indian polity. He came up with the name All India Radio to mark the national character of such service (although, by 1956, Akashvani [Voice from the Sky], used by Mysore State radio pre-1935, was deemed a more appropriate name for national radio), cultivated friends among Indian intellectuals and people of talent, and inculcated a broadcasting culture that is still fundamentally entrenched in AIR. In a personal interview with the author, Ameen Sayani, a veteran announcer of AIR, commented that, under Fielden's leadership the Indian broadcasting services had surpassed even the BBC during the 1940s and 1950s.

At the time of independence, there were nine broadcasting stations in undivided India. When the country was partitioned in 1947, six of these remained in India. New transmitters were set up rapidly, and by the end of 1960, there was a total of 59 transmitters. Within the following year,

56 additional transmitters were proposed to be set up (*Hindu* 1960). As the physical amenities grew, more areas of the nation were covered, and so too was a vast pool of talented artists and intellectuals harnessed, to broadcast on the national airwaves. Over the past seven decades, AIR has evidenced significant growth in its outreach. In 1947, a mere six broadcasting stations covered only 11% of the population, across 2.5% of the country's area. But, now, AIR boasts of 420 stations reaching nearly 99% of the population and 92% of the national area with broadcasts in 23 languages and 146 dialects in the home services; while the external services broadcasts in 27 languages, comprising 12 national and 15 foreign languages (AIR 2017).

AIR Programmes in Building National Identity

In order for India to take its place among the democratic and secular nations of the international order, the early leaders of independent India had to struggle to emerge not only from the shadow of colonial domination, which was etched in the national psyche of the new nation, but also the West's perception of India as overpopulated, crowded, dusty, mired in poverty, a victim of its own culture of religion and the caste system (Myrdal 1968). Despite such analyses and dire predictions of India's imminent collapse (a very common notion in the decades well into the 1970s), there was an emerging interest in India from the West. The fledgling nation was admired amongst the world's colonies, for winning freedom through non-violence; and later, for adherence to the principles of non-alignment and *Panchasheela* (the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence) during the Cold War period. The political ideologies of India's leaders at the time (particularly Mahatma Gandhi and his protégé, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru) elevated them to global stature. Consequently, world leaders beat a path to India, such as Fidel Castro's emissary, the communist revolutionary Che Guevara, Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, and United States (us) President John F Kennedy (when he was a senator) and later his wife, First Lady, Jackie Kennedy, amongst others.

AIR's broadcasting services were effective in making Indian citizens aware of the country's position and importance in the world, and her external relations with friends and foes. Therefore, the visits of these foreign dignitaries were publicised on the airwaves. For example, Che Guevara's interview where he had famously expressed his respect for Gandhi and his peaceful revolution; Nkrumah's AIR broadcasts, wherein he reflected upon the anti-colonial, anti-feudal and anti-capitalist views that he shared with Prime Minister Nehru and their commitment to the non-aligned movement; Kennedy's first State of the Union Address in 1961, where he praised "the soaring idealism of Nehru" (Rajghattal 2013); and later in 1962, First Lady Jackie Kennedy's visit to India as the us's goodwill ambassador. Amongst other broadcasts were those from the Shah of Iran, Queen Elizabeth and the young Dalai Lama (who fled to India in 1959), and various visiting leaders from Russia, Syria, Arabia, Egypt, China, Japan, Yugoslavia, and Ethiopia.

Apart from political personalities, India was also a stage for the visits of writers, poets, actors, musicians and intellectuals from around the globe, many of whom were broadcast from AIR. At the same time, the fledgling state broadcaster faced a variety of challenges at home. For example, October 1947 brought an incursion of Pakistani tribals into Kashmir, who advanced to Srinagar, the summer capital. The Hindu ruler of this Muslim state, Maharaja Hari Singh, quickly acceded to India and asked for military support to push back the invaders. The following month, in order to counteract fierce propaganda from across the border, a radio station was established in Jammu, which was formally inaugurated by the Maharaja with a broadcast to the people of his state. The following year, a radio station was opened in Srinagar, and together they constituted Radio Kashmir. All technical matters for this entity were supported and financed by AIR. In addition, a Kashmir Unit was opened at headquarters in Delhi, initially as part of the ESD (external services division). This unit broadcast news and other programmes in Dogri, and eventually was transferred to the Internal News Services. It was some years later (1956) until procedures and finances could be regularised that these units and Radio Kashmir could be integrated into AIR (Chatterjee 1998; Shivnath 2007).

News and current affairs: One of the main programmes on AIR was the news at specific hours. In the years that AIR had monopoly of the airwaves, its role as state broadcaster was critical in the dissemination of news. Since the news came from the state broadcaster, it was assumed that the contents would be credible and fair, and not influenced by the political ideas of the ruling party of the day. Sixty news bulletins were broadcast daily in all major Indian languages and English.

The news programmes consisted not only of news bulletins, but also news commentaries and other topical discussions. The guest list included illustrious personalities such as writers like Aldous Huxley and Arthur C Clarke, diplomats like the UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, businessman Sir Homi Mody, and astronaut Yuri Gagarin, among others. The programme covered diverse themes ranging from population control, to agrarian matters, women's welfare, literary discussions, scientific discourses, arms and military affairs, music, and others.

AIR gifted the country with many legendary news anchors and announcers, such as Melville de Mellow, Roshan Menon, Surajit Sen, Lotika Ratnam, Preminda Premchand, and Nobby Clarke, who set the tone and style of AIR outputs and established a long-standing relationship with pan-Indian listeners. Melville de Mellow, famous for his epic seven-hour commentary of the journey of Mahatma Gandhi's cortège to the cremation grounds, which he did with his Hindi-speaking counterpart, S K Tripathi, was also well known for his annual commentaries on the Republic Day parades, sports events and funerals of eminent leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

Music: Music was, and continues to be, a huge part of the programming. Up until the mid-1970s, music included popular

Hindi (film) music, light and classical Indian music, both vocal and instrumental, as well as limited broadcasts of popular Western music, and classical Western music. Music became one of the biggest markers of cultural identity through the medium of broadcasting, uplifting the nation in times of national emergencies, unifying it in times of external threats. Further, AIR replaced the royal patronage that music and other performing arts lost at independence. Artists clamoured to be broadcast on AIR, and to be classified as radio artists. Radio provided a platform for artists to be heard by millions, and the exposure led to opportunities to perform at private, public and official occasions. The role of AIR in the promotion and preservation of classical and folk music cannot be underestimated.

Most of the great classical musicians of the previous century gained national eminence through AIR. Notable amongst them was Ravi Shankar, the internationally renowned sitar player, composer, and conductor of the National Orchestra. A number of others—such as Vilayat Khan, also a sitar virtuoso; tabla maestros Ahmed Jan Thirakwa, Kanthe Maharaj of Banaras and Alla Rakha; sarod ustads Allauddin Khan (also guru of Ravi Shankar) and his son, Ali Akbar Khan; Pandit Shivkumar Sharma, santoor player par excellence; Bismillah Khan, the famous *shehnai* player and Hariprasad Chaurasia, the flautist; violinist V G Jog, credited with having introduced the violin into Indian classical music—all rose to national eminence through radio broadcasts. Over the years, many of them contributed to film music, further enriching the cultural landscape of the nation.

Ravi Shankar's contribution to world music is well-recognised. His 1967 recording of a *jugalbandi* with world-famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin, accompanied by Alla Rakha on the tablas, is legendary. It was the start of a lifelong friendship between these musical geniuses. Shankar's mentoring of the Beatles—teaching them the sitar and eastern music traditions—led to the creation of new genres of popular music in the West, as well as a lifelong friendship with George Harrison. Ali Akbar Khan also contributed to the spread of Indian classical music by opening schools of music in California, first in Berkeley and later at San Rafael, as well as in Basel, Switzerland. Like Shankar, he too collaborated with Western musicians, as did the percussionist, Rakha. He elevated the status of tablas by being the first to play them as a soloist, as well as bridged the gap between Carnatic and Hindustani music by playing with renowned artistes of both gharanas. These cultural ambassadors of the nation changed the music scene both within India as well as on the international stage.

Among vocalists, recordings of famous *bais* (courtesans who kept up the classical singing traditions, but had now lost royal patronage), such as Rasoolan Bai, Siddheshwari Devi and Begum Akhtar, were made by AIR and preserved for posterity. Though banned from entering Broadcasting House (as they were viewed as women of dubious repute) in the initial years, the importance of preserving their great musical traditions led Programme Executives (Pexes) and technical staff at AIR to record them in their own environments. Some years later, these rules were relaxed, allowing them to be broadcast from

AIR studios directly. Classical singers of different gharanas were broadcast from AIR, bringing their exceptional talents to the common citizens and paving the way for younger musical talents from genteel families, like Shanno Khurana, Shanti Hiranand, and even royalty like Naina Devi, to become professional musicians. In these years, the famed ragas (classical musical compositions, passed through generations via oral tradition) were notated and recorded for future generations of musicians. Broadcasts of these ragas made them known throughout the country, whether played by the gharanas of the North or Carnatic music of the South, binding the music traditions of the country for all.

These dynamic changes in India's musical traditions greatly influenced Hindi film music. Famous voices of the day, such as Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle, Manna Dey, Talat Mahmood, and Mohammed Rafi, among many others, dominated the airwaves for decades, well into the 1980s. Music generated by films had a large patriotic component, especially in times of external threats. Songs such as "Kar Chale Hum Fida Jaan-otan Sathiyon" ("friends, we have sacrificed our lives for the nation," from the 1964 film, *Haqeeqat*) extolled the valour of the soldiers who gave their lives defending the motherland against Chinese incursions into Indian territory along the north-eastern border in 1962. Two songs from the film, *Shaheed* (1965), "Ae Watan Ae Watan" (oh motherland) speaks of the love of the country and the sacrifice of people from different regions, while "Rang De Basanti Chola" (colour it saffron), offering a similar sentiment of self-sacrifice, has become a slogan, reappearing in the 2006 film of that name. "Mere Desh Ki Dharti" ("the soil of my land," from *Upkaar*, 1967, a film that valorised both peasants and soldiers following the 1965 war with Pakistan) voiced love of the land from which "grows gold, diamonds and pearls." Such songs, broadcast over the radio, remain part of the national vocabulary.

"Ae Mere Watan ke Logon" (oh people of my country), dedicated to the soldiers who fought the Chinese at the border in 1962, was sung most movingly by Lata Mangeshkar at the Republic Day commemoration following the war in 1963. It has been sung and broadcast by many leading singers over the years. Similarly, "Vande Mataram" (hail to the motherland), composed in the late 19th century, is close to a national anthem. Deeply etched in the national psyche is "Saare Jahan Se Achha" (the best in the world, composed in 1904 by poet Muhammad Iqbal. Set to rousing music by Ravi Shankar in 1945, it retains nationwide significance to this day, as a marching tune as well as a patriotic song. Special programmes for the armed forces broadcast from AIR played these together with other patriotic songs extolling the oneness of the nation, sanctity of the borders, the beauty of the land, and love and sacrifice not only of the soldiers, but also that of their families.

Jazz got a fillip with the 1958 tour of the Dave Brubeck Quartet, sent by the us government to promote American culture during the Cold War years. Jamming with Indian musicians, Brubeck stated, "we understand each other." Following this success, a number of African-American jazz musicians were sent by the us government as goodwill and cultural

ambassadors, most eminently Duke Ellington in 1963. Ellington had a huge fan following in India that grew even more after his visit, and jazz programmes were commonly broadcast on AIR, promoting jazz appreciation and fusion of music styles.

Creation of Vividh Bharati

One of the greatest promoters of Indian classical music was B V Keskar, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, for almost a decade from 1952. Highly regarded for his efforts in that regard by classical musicians, Keskar, on the other hand, had firm ideas about the unsuitability of popular Hindi music for the general public. By 1950, music comprised 75% of AIR's programming (Sen 1950: 27). It included all genres of classical and popular music, as well as fillers between programmes, and music needed for radio programmes such as plays, jingles and sound effects.

Keskar felt that popular tastes needed refining, and banned popular film music on AIR in 1952. This struck a costly blow to AIR. With this ban, says Ameen Sayani (2008), the library of film music at AIR was destroyed, "and with it the soul of mass communication." The very popular *Farmaishi* (request) programme, one of the greatest programmes of AIR in Sayani's view, broadcast film music that "played a tremendous role in building up the ethos of India." It was the work of great writers, film directors, composers, lyricists, whose work the freedom movement had given great impetus. By independence, India had a whole army of these creative talents. Their work, Sayani points out, was one of the greatest sources of national integration. People all across the country tuned in to listen to these programmes of popular music, promoting Hindustani, a language that was simple, beautiful, elegant, expressive and easily understood by all.

The ban created a vacuum that Radio Ceylon quickly filled. It began to broadcast music on a popular show called "Geetmala" on the Binaca Hit Parade, anchored by Sayani. Not only were millions of Indian listeners tuning in, but Radio Ceylon went commercial and was broadcasting advertisements to their listeners. It even went so far as to set up offices in Bombay at the time, to sell commercial spots to Indian companies wishing to advertise on the radio show. Indian authorities were reluctant to allow advertising of what the prevailing socialist ideology considered useless consumer goods, while Radio Ceylon capitalised on this market.

AIR responded to the fall in the numbers of its listeners and the loss of advertising revenues by establishing Vividh Bharati, broadcast on medium wave, in 1957. Vividh Bharati's initial five hours of airtime were mostly taken up by popular Hindi (film) music, but gradually began to broadcast a variety of programmes such as radio plays, like the popular Inspector Eagle, by dramatist Vinod Sharma (producer, Vishwamitra Adil), quizzes, biographies, travel programmes and others. Sayani's popular music programme was brought to Vividh Bharati, as the Colgate-Cibaca Geetmala. Soon enough, Vividh Bharati wooed back AIR's listeners and, till today, holds its place as one of AIR's most listened-to programmes, supporting a popular national culture.

Drama and poetry: Entertainment by way of radio drama was broadcast and drew in some of the best talents of the country. Encompassing the classical, traditional, serious, comedy, melodrama and musicals, radio plays in English, Hindi and the vernacular were immensely popular with listeners. The works of Marathi playwrights like Mama Warekar, P L Deshpande and Vijay Tendulkar were regularly produced and aired from the Mumbai Station, as were the Gujarati plays of Adi Marzban. They were successors to the likes of Krishen Chander and novelist and playwright, Saadat Hassan Manto, who wrote over 110 radio plays for AIR in the 18 months he worked there between 1940 and 1942. Habib Tanvir, who went on to become a prolific playwright and brought theatre to the rural areas, employing both folk actors along with professional theatre actors, worked as producer in AIR Bombay in 1945. These great artistes produced both radio plays as well as theatre shows, where they left their mark on production and content. Hindi radio plays series like *Modi ke Matwale Rahi* (mystery), *Hawa Mahal* (comedy) and *Dhol ki Pol* (political comedy created to boost morale during the Chinese invasion of 1962) were scripted and produced by in-house dramatists and producers like Vinod Sharma, Chiranjeev, K P Saxena, Deena Nath and Daleep Singh. The list of these illustrious names is just a smattering of the talent employed by AIR in one or two stations. Across the country, local stations hired talented artists for language-specific programming, necessary as the states of India were created on linguistic lines. To hold together the polity of the nation, it was essential to target audiences in the languages they best understood.

Radio plays continue to be broadcast on the fourth Thursday of each month, in Hindi and all regional languages by the National Programme of Drama. The Central Hindi Feature Unit produces specific entertainment programmes that are aired on alternate Thursday nights and repeated the following mornings on the Rajdhani channel.

Poetry was also given airtime, and annual gatherings of writers, playwrights and poets from around the country and at times from the region, were held, encouraging interaction of literary talent from different regions. The famous Punjabi novelist, essayist, and poet, Amrita Pritam worked at Lahore Radio Station before partition, and continued at AIR Delhi's Punjabi Service till 1961. Her colleagues at AIR Bombay (now Mumbai) included other poets like Rajinder Singh Bedi and Noon Meem Rashid. By employing such eminent poets and writers, AIR created literary networks and provided state patronage to intellectuals.

Farm radio: A lot of resources were deployed into Farm Radio, designed especially for the agricultural sector, which engaged more than three-fifths of the population in the country. Programming for farmers was one of the cornerstones of nation-building and self-sufficiency in food production. Farmers were taught about new farming technology, farm management practices, social forestry, environmental protection, and were provided weather information via radio. All these were instrumental in realising the Green Revolution in India.

Much of the farm radio programming is still ongoing. The Farm and Home Unit broadcasts programmes of interest to the farming community, such as the work of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute. Topics like soil conditions, use of organic composts and medicinal plants such as neem in soil renewal, encouragement to grow pulses and oilseeds, the Crop Insurance Scheme and the need for national food security are regularly broadcast to the agricultural sector.

The 'magazine programmes': The diversity of AIR broadcasts is further captured by the five "magazine programmes," which are aired by turn on Wednesday nights. *Sahitya Bharati* is a literary programme that discusses creative writing and modern literary trends in all 23 Indian languages. *Sanskriti Bharati* discusses cultural issues; *Chitra Bharati*, produced by Vividh Bharati (Mumbai), is devoted to cinema; *Vigyan Bharati* deals with scientific developments and issues; while *Yuva Bharati*, is a youth programme.

Programmes for Children, Youth and Women

Much before the 1990 Prasar Bharati Act to "inform and stimulate the national consciousness in regard to the status and problems of women and pay special attention to the upliftment of women" (Chapter II, Article 12 (2)(g)) came into being, AIR was already hosting radio shows for women. Strong female characters and role models were encouraged, and special programmes were targeted for women, such as programmes on family planning, nutrition, health and hygiene, which were part of building a nation of informed women, who could exercise the right judgment on the domestic front. At present, the Health and Family Welfare unit covers programmes relating to women's and children's well-being. Besides, covering the broader issues of health and hygiene, nutrition, women's empowerment, entrepreneurship and education, current topics such as trafficking, sex-selective abortion, obscenity, gender discrimination, wage disparity and maternity benefits are also given due importance in these programmes.

Programmes for children and youth (Yuv Vani) were also very popular. With an eye to nation building mixed with an element of play, these programmes brought children together in Broadcasting House, and at other times at Teen Murti House with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru or other national leaders. Many of these children continued to broadcast well into their adult years, some even making a profession of it. The shared childhood experience of being together at these children's programmes, which included storytelling, orchestral music, singing and games, at Broadcasting House was a tremendous exercise in building national memory. Currently, programmes for children cover age groups between 5 and 13 years. They offer plays, stories, both modern and epic, choral singing, and special features. In addition, they are taught their rights, equal status of girls, security, and sanitation.

Yuv Vani, a programme aired for youth, was introduced in 1969. While it provided entertainment, both Indian and Western music and other light programmes, it gave young people a

chance to voice their opinion on current affairs and suggest solutions for difficult matters. Talk shows bridged inter-generational exchanges, provided a platform for points of view, and broadcast interviews of interested personalities. Many university students and young professionals had the chance to be radio jockeys or broadcast their views on this programme, and it became immensely popular. However, by 2014, AIR decided to axe the show (RMBiz 2014b), but continues with another youth programme, Yuva Bharati, on every fifth Wednesday (AIR 2017).

Administrative Structure and Management

The production of programmes is predominantly centralised, especially that of news and news-related items. The overarching objective of centralisation is to ensure that a standardised content is made available throughout the country. The Directorate of News receives, prepares and distributes the daily news bulletins. The news was always broadcast from Broadcasting House in Delhi and the other AIR stations depended on Delhi to supply them the main news bulletin. News from foreign and neighbouring countries was gathered by the Monitoring Service of AIR. Based in Simla, the staff at the reception site would listen to various foreign transmissions and record those of importance or interest to listeners, creating a daily digest of world broadcasting summaries. In the case of news commentaries, the programme executives (Pexes) identify speakers for topical discussions.

Staff training was a critical department for training incumbents on a range of issues starting from radio programming to engineering and technical matters. All announcers were taught elocution, voice projection and modulation, for best broadcasting results. The regional stations of AIR more or less mimed the staffing structure of the centre. To understand how programmes were being received and to get listeners' feedback, every station had a listeners' research department. Audience feedback was gathered through listeners' letters and through questionnaires. These features still continue at AIR.

The external services of AIR aimed at Indians overseas as well as foreign listeners. Apart from English, in the early years AIR was already broadcasting in Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, Persian and Pashto. Over time, Swahili and other European and West Asian languages were added. Broadcasts comprised news, music and entertainment in these languages, at specific times, promoting Indian culture as well as countering propaganda of hostile neighbours. Today, this service has expanded to 27 languages, 15 of which are foreign.

Critical Feedback

Criticisms levelled by both the press and the public at AIR in recent times had already begun by the mid-1970s. The limitations of AIR's reach both within and outside the country, the lack of appropriate programming in terms of language, rural communities, minority communities, women, and children, its educational programmes, its music programmes, and the National Service of news and current events was deemed dull and irrelevant, talks by VIPs and politicians were deemed of

poor quality, the Hindi language being used was considered too Sanskritised compared to the dream of India's founding fathers of Hindustani as a unifying national language, plus AIR's attempts at cultivating tastes in music (promoting classical Indian music and denigrating Hindi film music) were all areas where experts felt AIR could improve its services (Masani 1976). Masani (1985) stated that there had been no change in programming from 1938 to 1984, or in catering to the underprivileged listener. (Programming for the educated, however, had the benefit of incorporating this group into the national culture and identity.) Furthermore, she pointed out, all talks and programmes were governed by the AIR Code of 1967, which was entirely negative and gave no guidelines to encourage free and fair debate that could reflect diverse opinion on controversial matters.

While all these criticisms brought to light drawbacks in terms of lack of manpower and competency, and the lack of sufficient funding, it should be noted that AIR also acted in a manner to redress the situation. In some instances, the price of rapid expansion had implications for quality control. For instance, when more stations were opened to cover a greater geographical area, centrally prepared programmes were broadcast until ground staff were sufficiently trained to broadcast regionally appropriate programmes.

While the debate over Hindustani giving way to a *shudh* (pure) and high Hindi over the radio raged in the 1960s and 1970s, by the 1980s it was hardly a matter of comment, as a new generation of listeners was quite familiar with this style of Hindi. In fact, AIR can take credit in improving the quality of language nationwide. Ironically, today, on air and in interviews, English words that can be quite simply stated in Hindi, are interjected into speech as matter of slang or style, without any adverse comment!

The charge of AIR promoting classical Indian music to the neglect of popular Indian music (*filmi geet*), may well be legitimate. However, the work done in the early years of independence (1950s to 1980s) in popularising and preserving these traditions deserves to be lauded. Without the patronage of the state through AIR, it is likely these artistic traditions would have died without a trace. Broadcasting this music in its myriad forms made it familiar to people across the country. Fortunately, much of it has been preserved in recordings, even though some of it is now lost.

The success of Vividh Bharati's offerings of popular Hindi music and light programming spoke for itself, and the authorities finally agreed in 1967, to allow commercials on Vividh Bharati, not exceeding 10% of the total broadcasting time. It is the belief of many radio experts that AIR could be a self-sustaining autonomous corporation, through income from advertising and licensing fees, if ever government controls are lifted.

The ESD was particularly criticised (Malik 1977). Broadcasting for 52 hours round the clock in 16 foreign and eight Indian languages at the time (1985), today the ESD broadcasts 57 transmissions for almost 72 hours covering over 108 countries in 27 languages, out of which 15 are foreign and 12 Indian (AIR 2015). Amita Malik's comments in her 1977 work that India's

self-image as a beautiful and scenic land of peace-loving people was in contrast to the perception overseas of a land steeped in poverty and superstition, and of a nation aggressive towards its neighbours. It was the job of the ESD to project a better image of the country overseas. Since 1948, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was responsible for external publicity, so the ESD had to coordinate work with MEA as well as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB), which has overall responsibility for broadcasting. Soon tussles for control between the two ministries made the situation for the ESD and AIR very difficult indeed (Masani 1976: 23).

While the ESD's Urdu transmissions had some success in Pakistan promoting a common culture, as did requests from overseas fans for popular Hindi music, overseas listeners perceived AIR as less objective and more government-controlled than the BBC. Malik cited lack of competent staff for these overseas programmes, with poor accents and poor programming. Furthermore, India had not put to use its position in the broadcasting networks of the international community such as the Arab States Broadcasting Union, the Asian Broadcasting Union or the International Telecommunications Union. By doing so, Malik stated, India had not only let itself down, but "It has let down the whole non-aligned world, and given a walk-over to the affluent west" (Malik 1977: 158). She conceded, however, in the case of Bangladesh before it became independent, the ESD "gave the people the correct news of what was happening in their own country and they won many friends for India" (Malik 1977: 20).

The charge that AIR was not an impartial broadcaster, but one that promoted the government's point of view and disallowed dissent began to get louder by the 1960s. As a result, the critics said, the quality of programmes suffered. The case was made that the wide reach of radio, where less than 5% of the population read newspapers, meant AIR news captured the largest number of listeners. In the process of standardising the news it made the news uninteresting. Over-centralisation, because AIR functioned as a government department, forced radio to withhold news until it was sanctioned by the proper authority. As a result, it broadcast stale news rather than use its advantage to broadcast current news before it appeared in the print media. Furthermore, the suppression and dilution of news became a worrying trend, as it was used and perceived as a mouthpiece of the state and of whichever party was in power (Masani 1976: 70–77). This was something that Lionel Fieldon, AIR's first director-general, had battled in his years at AIR. The British government disallowed him to broadcast any of the leaders of the freedom struggle. His work was also frustrated by the slow permissions from government for the broadcast of ceremonies and news items, which made the news stale or obsolete. As the pioneer who gave AIR its kick-start, Fieldon stated:

All India Radio grew and grew inevitably out of my control ... I could not stop the growth of red tape or the accumulation of a deadly routine. (Luthra 1986: 157)

With the passing years, there were calls to make AIR an autonomous unit. Mehra Masani, one of the fiercest proponents

of autonomy for broadcasting, described India's broadcasting system as one in line with those of totalitarian societies, thereby suffering all the defects of "one-sided information, often doctored and distorted, with no scope for expressing dissenting views, and dull and stereo-typed programmes" (Masani 1976: 152). Essentially, democratic India had inherited a tool of colonial control and continued to use it in exactly the same way.

Mass media has developed, said Masani, so that the public receives messages but cannot react, and it was the right of every individual to have the ability to communicate through the media (Masani 1976: 145–46). (The use of social media in the 21st century has made this dream of broadcasters come true.) Like other experts, Masani also believed that hundreds of radio and TV stations were needed to serve limited areas and their special needs (Masani 1976: 166), as well as provide competition to the state broadcaster. (This too happened with the introduction of FM radio and the opening up of the airwaves.) In addition, the rationale for calls for change was that a respected broadcaster had to be free of government controls, to express a variety of views and differences of opinion to truly reflect the pluralistic society of India. As early as 1948, Prime Minister Nehru expressed his views in favour of AIR's autonomy along the lines of the BBC, but no action was taken. In response to the clamour for autonomy, in 1964 the Chanda Committee was formed to look into the matter. Two years later, in 1966, it submitted its recommendations for AIR to "be liberated from the present rigid financial and administrative procedures of Government." Finally, in 1970, upon the recommendation of the cabinet, it was agreed that the time was not suitable to make AIR an autonomous corporation. However, two recommendations of the Chanda Committee were implemented. The first was to separate AIR from Doordarshan and the second was to allow advertising on Vividh Bharati.

Need for Autonomy

The abuse of power and misuse of state institutions, particularly the media, during the Emergency (June 1975 to March 1977) made clear the need of separating AIR from state control. A glimmer of hope was offered by the Janata Party in 1977 by its election promise to make AIR autonomous. Upon winning the election, the new government convened another committee under the Chairmanship of B G Verghese, to reconsider autonomy for Akashvani (AIR) and Doordarshan. The Verghese Working Group upheld most of the Chanda Committee recommendations. It recommended autonomy for the state broadcasters, Akashvani and Doordarshan, under an entity named the National Broadcast Trust. However, it diverged from the Chanda Committee in that it recommended both arms of the media, radio and television to be administered under the same umbrella organisation. Hopes were raised, but dashed as the government rejected these proposals and instead offered its own bill, to introduce Prasar Bharati as the autonomous entity under which AIR and Doordarshan would operate. Even so, this was not implemented before the Janata government fell.

Indira Gandhi was back in power by 1980. Seeking to reassure the disappointment at this watering down of the original promise of autonomy for the media, the government explained that “functional autonomy” for the media was more important than the setting up of an autonomous body. This was a bitter disappointment to critics who realised that in addition to government controls over broadcasting, professionalism at AIR was imperilled if its staff remained as government employees and had no proper service of broadcasters to which they could belong (Masani 1976: 79).

Prasar Bharati and Autonomy to AIR

Finally, the Prasar Bharati Act was passed in 1990, granting autonomy to AIR and Doordarshan within it. Implemented in 1997, the structure and staffing of AIR and Doordarshan are under the umbrella organisation of Prasar Bharati. As previously, AIR is headed by a director-general, who is assisted by additional director-generals at headquarters and in 10 regional offices. To assist in technical matters the director-general is aided by an engineer-in-chief and additional director-generals (E) in the regions while the planning and development unit assists in development matters of AIR. The deputy Director-General looks after administration and finance, together with an additional Director-General (administration), while another additional Director-General assists with programming. The security wing, headed by three senior staff, is responsible for the security of both AIR and Doordarshan, while the director of

the Audience Research Wing conducts surveys and provides feedback on audience preferences. As previously, News Services, External Services, Transcription and Programme Exchange Services and Research continue as separate divisions. The Staff Training Institute in Delhi continues as the National Academy of Broadcasting and Multimedia, to train staff for both programming and technical matters. Additionally, three more training academies located in Bhubaneswar, Shillong and Mumbai, take care of regional needs.

Prasar Bharati, however, yet seems far from an autonomous unit, as it is governed by the MIB. The Prasar Bharati board comprises a chairman, one executive member, one member (finance), one member (personnel), and six part-time members, who are all appointees of the President of India. The other board members are the director-general (Akashvani), ex officio; director-general (Doordarshan), ex officio; one nominated representative of the Union MIB; and two representatives of the employees of the corporation, of whom one is elected by the engineering staff from amongst themselves and one is elected by the other employees from amongst themselves. The Prasar Bharati board was meant to be reporting directly to Parliament, says Mrinal Pande, former Prasar Bharati board chairperson, and totally autonomous, with the MIB as its enabler. In practice, budgets are prepared by the ministry and spending is controlled by the ministry, creating a lot of bureaucratic procedures and slowing down the necessary responsiveness of this media corporation.

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In a peculiar twist to the cry for autonomy and independence by critics, the employees of Prasar Bharati wish to remain as government employees, to have job security and reap the benefits of such employment. Perhaps, for the first time in its history, the chief executive officer (CEO) spoke frequently and openly in the press about his frustration with the lack of autonomy. Expressing his annoyance with other media persons in the private sector, the former Prasar Bharati CEO, Jawhar Sircar let off some steam on Facebook, giving insights into the workings of Prasar Bharati. This was reproduced in the press (Sircar 2015).

Why don't some big mouths, fat wallets and starry statuses in the media take up my job in Prasar Bharati PB at ₹9,000 per month, a car and a flat? Instead of running after multiples of crore?

Try managing 30,000 government employees with unions and sarkari work culture, along with some 20,000 other casual hands? After all, we have thousands of installations to manage and be responsible for, not one fancy studio.

Try catering to the politics of aggression every day as well as corruption, internal opposition and sabotage?

While, in another interview he said that

I have reached a state of equilibrium. I have realised that I cannot be the only autonomist around while 30,000 people are screaming “we don't want autonomy”. I can't get autonomy (for PB), the rest of the country and the machinery has to support it. (Kohli-Khandekar 2015)

Based on this interview, the author inferred that:

Prasar Bharati. One of India's most asset-rich media firms is in a mess. In spite of a ₹2,140 crore handout from the government last year, it remains financially and qualitatively hobbled. This is largely because no government—irrespective of its ideology—has ever cut

the umbilical cord with PB. The corporation cannot hire or fire its own people, it cannot raise money. It does not even own its assets—1,400 transmission towers, lots of spectrum and real estate—because no government ever transferred them to Prasar Bharati after the Act that created it was passed in 1997. It is completely beholden to the MIB, despite its status as an “autonomous” corporation. Instead of a BBC then, India has a monolith that employs 31,621 people churning out 33 channels that few people watch. There are now only 10 million DD or terrestrial homes out of a total of 161 million TV homes. (Kohli-Khandekar 2015)

Such a public diatribe from a corporate head is unprecedented. By the end of 2016, Sircar had stepped down. In January 2017, Shashi Shekhar Vempati, former executive at Infosys and CEO of Niti Digital, was appointed the new Prasar Bharati CEO for a period of five years with effect from June 2018. The future of Prasar Bharati is difficult to predict in the face of competition with private broadcasters and tension between the ministry and Prasar Bharati. In March 2018, a public spat erupted when Prasar Bharati Chairman A Surya Prakash announced that the ministry had withheld salary funds owing to differences between the two (Chaturvedi 2018; Sappal 2018). As a result, he stated, Prasar Bharati had to pay staff salaries for January and February out of its contingency funds. A tweet from the new Prasar Bharati CEO, Vempati, stating that the funds had been released on 28 February 2018, and that the reports were “Attempts to create panic malafide,” put a lid on the matter (NDTV 2018). It is hoped as in this case, with the appointment of a corporate sector CEO instead of the traditional bureaucrat, the state broadcaster will find a path to recover its glory days.

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