

‘Radio Ceylon’ – the cultural landscape in India during the twentieth century: a brief note

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Introduction

Broadcasting, in its implication, range and impact, set up the most powerful medium of mass communication in India. It is very likely that in a vast and developing country like India where the reach of the printed medium is not very extensive or intensive, the value of broadcasting as a medium of information and education is immense. While the total circulation of all the newspapers in India, including both English and Indian language papers, is around 8 million, there are, according to a recent estimate, nearly 400 million (out of a total population of 625 million) potential listeners to ‘All India Radio’.

Genesis of ‘Radio Ceylon’

Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), similar to India, was weak in terms of the available resources in the 1940s and 50s, but they made good use of their resources, at least in the field of radio broadcasting.

‘Radio Ceylon’ (now ‘Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation’, in Sinhala: ‘ලංකා ගුවන් විදුලි සේවය Lanka Guwan Viduli Sevaya’) is the oldest radio station in Asia. ‘Radio Ceylon’ started in Sri Lanka then Ceylon, being the vanguard for many other radio stations that later came to be famous around the world, inspiring countries such as Hong Kong, Korea, India and Singapore to enter the world of wireless media.

‘Radio Ceylon’s account goes back to World War II, when the British government established a radio station in Colombo to neutralize German and Japanese war propaganda and to transmit news of the war to Allied forces in South and Southeast Asia.

History began with the coming of Edward Harper during the time of Sir William Henry Manning. Harper was the chief engineer of the Telegraph Department and soon started working on wireless broadcasts. The initial experimental broadcast was in as early as 1923. The first experimental broadcast was in fact made in 1924, but the world had heard it a year earlier from the Telegraph Department, just three years after the launch of broadcasting in Europe. Harper and his assistants had broadcast gramophone music as an experimentation using radio equipment from a captured German submarine.

The British government installed a powerful transmitter in the station, from which broadcasting reached most of Asia. When the war ended and Ceylon gained independence, the

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British handed the transmitter over to the Ceylonese government. The specific introduction of 'Radio Ceylon' was in December 1925 by Sir Hugh Clifford, the Australian broadcaster. The station reached broadcasting heights in South Asia after the war, leading the way in the world of entertainment and news. In the beginning, senior management officers of the station came from the 'British Broadcasting Corporation' (BBC). They worked diligently to make 'Radio Ceylon' world-recognized, and it certainly was then.

Thus, with the support of a number of well-trained broadcasters, including Clifford Dodd, the Ceylonese government started an Asia-wide commercial service. Initially, most of their overseas programming was in English.

Beginning of Indian broadcasting

In India, the history of broadcasting is inextricably interlocked with the history of a crucial epoch, an epoch that saw the height of India's struggle for independence, the attainment of freedom and the first steps of a newborn nation on the way to implementation and be in motion of economic reform.

Broadcasting in India started on 31 July 1924, when the 'Madras Presidency Radio Club' went on the air for the first time. The Club did a broadcasting service for three years. However, their pioneering effort became defunct in 1927 owing to financial crisis.

The attempt towards a regular broadcasting service was made in the same year (1927); some enthused businesspersons in Bombay started the 'Indian Broadcasting Company' who chose the two premier cities of Bombay and Calcutta for its purpose: the Bombay station began on 23 July 1927 followed by the Calcutta station on 26 August 1927. In March 1930, the 'Indian Broadcasting Company' had to go into liquidation. After a month, the then Government of India took over the charge of the Company's affairs and consequently, the 'Indian State Broadcasting Service' was born; but the awful situation was not over. The government took over the broadcasting facilities, beginning the 'Indian State Broadcasting Service' (ISBS) on 1 April 1930 and continued for two years as an experiment, and permanently in May 1932. After operating the service for about eighteenth months, the Government came to a decision to close it down having concluded that the service was almost not a workable proposition. However, public opinion began to claim itself and the Government gave up the contemplated closure. Thus, in May 1932, 'Indian Broadcasting' received its permanent lease of life. The next four years were noticeable for some significant developments and, on 8 June 1936, 'Indian State Broadcasting' was given its present-day name, 'All India Radio'.

Initial chapter of AIR's development was barely complete when the Second World War broke out. AIR had to change itself to the demands of very new circumstances. Once the war ended, AIR's planners tried for future development. However, like everything else, it had to wait till India's own future was settled. During the partition of the country and the migration of a large number of people, AIR did yeoman service to thousands of uprooted people, carrying to them the reassuring voice of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation.

There were many broadcasts on different occasions, among which the most remarkable was the coverage of the Mid-night Ceremony denoting the transfer of power. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister said: "Long years ago we made tryst with destiny and now time comes when we shall redeem our pledge not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the mid-night hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to Life and Freedom...".

In 1947, just after independence, AIR's network comprised only six stations, i.e., Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Lucknow and Tiruchi. With the incorporation of princely states, AIR took over five stations of Aurangabad, Baroda, Hyderabad, Mysore and Trivandrum. The Five Year Plans gave a new momentum to the development of broadcasting resulting in a unique expansion.

AIR's ban and increase of popularity of 'Radio Ceylon'

However, soon the AIR took a drastic decision. For several years commencing in 1952, 'All India Radio' (AIR) stopped broadcasting film music because BV Keskar, the then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, under whose charge AIR fell, decided film songs had become vulgar, erotic and Westernized. He first imposed a ten percent quota on film music and, after discussions with the 'Film Producers Guild of India' became futile, AIR stopped broadcasting film music altogether for several years.

AIR's prohibition, however, did not have an effect on the genre's popularity, as people tuned to 'Radio Ceylon' to listen to film music. "Radio Ceylon was at the right place and the right time," said Ameen Sayani, the celebrated radio anchor, whose compelling voice was among the many that 'Radio Ceylon' carried to listeners in India. "They ('Radio Ceylon' staff) knew that 'All India Radio' had banned film music. So, the decision to start a Hindi service then must have been deliberate."

Nevertheless, a glimpse through the film and entertainment magazines of that time tells that Keskar also had followers, and that the ban stimulated an ardent dispute. While some accepted film music because it effectively mingled Western and Indian styles of music, others laid blame on film music directors of copying pieces of foreign music and creating vulgar, un-Indian music. A reader named SG Bapat wrote to the 'Movie Times' in 1952, "In pointing out the low moral tone of the industry, Dr Keskar was merely calling a spade a spade... The cheap, sexy, degrading and humiliating standards of our present day film have their genesis in this wolfish attitude." Another reader named Firoze G from Bombay wrote to the same publication that year, "Present day film songs are insane, frivolous, and nonsensical in the extreme". Many in the new government were of the view that transmitting popular film music on the country's official broadcasting channel was unsuitable of a young nation ready to prove itself as a world power. Vigilance was increased against popular *lara lappa* film songs, and they were substituted with light, classical music that would improve and encourage cultural taste that was degenerating. The attempt was forcefully executed with refusal of the public to go along with it, as Sayani said, "When people found out they could hear Hindi film music on 'Radio Ceylon', they started getting fed up of AIR and started shifting to 'Radio Ceylon.'"

Soon, in this context, 'Radio Ceylon' saw the potential of playing Bollywood (Bombay,

now Mumbai is usually known as Bollywood due to its famous film industry) filmy songs in their Hindi service. It was in the early 1950s, they employed presenters from India who came to Colombo and would broadcast from the 'Radio Ceylon' studio there. The initial anchors that joined them included one person named Balraj Dutt, who afterward became a big Bollywood star under the name Sunil Dutt.

Ameen Sayani became the most renowned person associated with 'Radio Ceylon.' However, he was not actually a member of staff of 'Radio Ceylon.' He was a freelancer who worked for sponsors like Binaca. Ameen Sayani was staying in Bombay and there he recorded the sponsored programme namely 'Binaca geetmala' and their recorded versions were then flown to Colombo for broadcast. The domestic announcers, on the other hand, were based at Colombo, and they were staff of 'Radio Ceylon.'

As Sayani memorizes it, the station's Hindi programming suffered from trouble. "Radio Ceylon's Hindi Service began in a very amateurish manner," he said. "They had some records and few people who knew the language. But at that time they were not well trained." However, after the AIR's ban on Hindi film music, as the station became accepted in India, 'Radio Ceylon' staff utilized this prospect and developed a well-equipped Hindi branch in Colombo. "When 'Radio Ceylon' started getting popular, Daniel Molina, an American living in India, noticed that there was a chance for a business venture. He started 'Radio Enterprises,'" said Sayani.

Molina's company produced sponsored programmes for 'Radio Ceylon.' Magnetic tape copies of these programmes were flown every week to Colombo and were broadcast back to India via Ceylon's WWII transmitter. Sayani's programme, 'Binaca Geetmala', which became a national sensation, was one of those programmes that made the weekly pilgrimage from Bombay to the Colombo studios. Ironically, a military transmitter initially used for the purpose for promoting the war cause in the Asian British colonies and communicating with the Allied forces in Asia, played a key role in popularizing film music in India in the 1950s and 1960s.

Initially, the in-house programmes of 'Radio Ceylon' were nowhere near as impressive as their sponsored programmes. It was Vijay Kishore Dubey, employed in 1954, who was assigned with the job of improving the format of 'Radio Ceylon's in house programmes. The young generation of India grew up listening to these programmes in the 1960s, which was a result of Mr Dubey's efforts. Dubey used filmy tunes as the signature tunes for 'Radio Ceylon's programmes. For example, 'Dastaan' movie's tune served as the signature tune for 'aap hi ke geet' programme.

Another enduring contribution that Vijay Kishore Dubey made in programming was to make it obligatory to have a Sehgal song as the last song in the 'purani filmo ke geet' programme just before 8 am.

Vijay Kishore Dubey left 'Radio Ceylon' in 1956 and Shiv Kumar Saroj continued Dubey's job. Other announcers who joined 'Radio Ceylon' Hindi service included Manohar Mahajan, Dalbir Singh Parmar, Vijay Laxmi etc. Parmar tried to coin new Hindi words for typical English words. For example, he would say 'laghu tarang' for short wave, but gave up using this term when his enthusiasm could not impress the audience.

Functioning of 'Radio Ceylon', which earned vast popularity amongst Indian youth

'Radio Ceylon' functioned in three shifts. The morning shift started at 7 am in the earlier days, but later it was made 6 am. The first programme was usually instrumental music of Bollywood songs, followed by filmy *bhajans*. Then songs from a single movie were being played in the "Ek hi film ke geet" programme from 7:15 to 7:30 am. 7:30 to 8 am was for "purani filmo ke geet". The slot from 8 am to 9 am was for the *farmaishi* programme (programme on request) called "aap hi ke geet". This programme made some Indian places famous among the listeners like Jhumri talaiya, Ganj Basoda, Akola, Nanded etc.

9 am to 9:30 am was the time when programmes like songs from a single artist, or *quawwali*, or *ghazals* were played on different days of the week. 9:30 to 10 am was the least popular one when classical music was played. It was also the time when schoolchildren would be leaving for their schools. Those days, schools would start at 10 am, not 8 am as is the case these days.

When 'Vividh Bharati' in India started in 1957, they not only had song-based programmes, they also had news, which they relayed from the Delhi station of Akashwani. 'Radio Ceylon' too decided to have at least one news programme, but they did not have the resources to have competent staff for this Hindi news. So they hit upon a novel idea. The first *sabha* of BBC Hindi service began at 6 am and ended with eight-minute long news beginning at 6:20 am. 'Radio Ceylon' Hindi service started relaying this Hindi news.

This was a very good step for 'Radio Ceylon' because BBC was regarded very much for its impartial reporting and professionalism, whereas Akashwani news was mainly government publicity. In addition, this 6:20 Hindi news was the earliest Hindi news in any radio stations that one could tune into it.

The afternoon programme of 'Radio Ceylon', which started at 12 o'clock, was not much popular. This could be because most of their likely listeners at that time were busy in their offices. There was a programme in the afternoon where only female listeners were intended to send their *farmaishes*. This programme ended at 3 or 3:30 pm.

The evening programme was the prime time programme. It began at 6 pm and continued till 8 pm. It was from 8 pm onwards that sponsored programmes if any, were broadcast. There may have been sponsored programmes of 30 minutes durations on some of the weekdays. Wednesday was naturally reserved for the one hour sponsored programme 'Binaca geetmala'. Small time advertisers began to have 15 minutes sponsored programmes from 7:45 to 8 pm and most radio listeners had tuned in to 'Binaca geetmala' at that time.

Sunday was the day when there was no break between morning programme and afternoon programme and the programme that began at 6 am would extend well into the afternoon. The 'aap hi ke geet' programme on Sunday was presented at 1 pm, by which time there may not have been too much enthusiasm left among listeners.

Sunday sponsored programmes included programmes like 'Polydor Sangeet Dhara' at 9 am. 'Tabassum ke chutkule' was at 10 am where Tabassum would read out her jokes to Ameen Sayani.

A slot was purchased by a Christian missionary organization too who would present their own sponsored programme at 9:30 and the audience used to hear their prayer in Hindi ‘*Vandana karte hain hun*’. ‘*S Kumar ka filmy muqadma*’ was also broadcast on Sunday.

Advertisers not only presented their sponsored programmes, but there were small advertisements of few seconds’ duration too, namely the advertisement of Brylcreem who had signed cricketer Farokh Engineer to endorse them. The ‘Sportsweek’ publishers would give advertisements for their Urdu newspaper named ‘Inquilaab.’ (Now both ‘Sportsweek’ as well as ‘Inquilaab’ have ceased publishing). Advertisements of new films were played during the ‘*aap hi ke geet*’ and other such popular programmes. For a song lasting 3 minutes, the announcer would read out the list of *farmaish* senders that consumed more time than the duration of the song. Moreover, after every song, there would be advertisements.

Certainly, such advertisements were not played during the duration of a sponsored programme. For example, if ‘*S Kumar ka filmi muqadma*’ was being presented, then only S Kumar’s advertisements were played. Advertisements of movies etc. were not given at that time. Producers of new movies also bought 15 minutes slots on Sunday to advertise their movies, and these programmes typically had Ameen Sayani encouraging the listeners to watch these movies by playing songs from these movies.

‘Radio Ceylon’ earned such an enviable reputation for itself across the sub-continent that ‘The Hindu’ ran a listing of radio channels known as ‘Ceylon Radio Times,’ which reviewed short-wave transmissions of different radio stations regularly.

‘Radio Ceylon’ Hindi service was ‘musical opium’ for the young generations in India. They were totally sold out on ‘Radio Ceylon,’ and this situation continued till 1970s when Indian I & B ministry finally decided to allow advertisements on ‘Vividh Bharati’. Television revolution in India in mid 1980s finally sounded the end of radio everywhere, and that included ‘Radio Ceylon’ (which was renamed as Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation in 1972) too. However, it was good, rather great as long as it lasted.

Epilogue

Launched on 16 December 1925, ‘Radio Ceylon’ was the first broadcasting station of South Asia. In today’s time of dish TV and podcasting, radio is almost gone but for an entire generation in India, ‘Radio Ceylon’ set the standard for radio programming and enjoyed vast recognition. Then, from the 1950s and up until the 70s, ‘Radio Ceylon’ was challenged by the new competitor on the block, ‘All India Radio’ (AIR). By 1971, Ceylon had disconnected all links with the Indian news industry. ‘The Press Trust of India’ officially notified that ‘Radio Ceylon’s services were no longer required. ‘Radio Ceylon,’ which had once formed a crucial part of the cultural landscape of India between the 1950s and 70s, now diminished into a separate sphere of control. ‘Vividh Bharathi,’ the commercial wing of AIR was launched to contend with ‘Radio Ceylon.’ This is the story of the sensitive relationship the two competitors shared during the peak of their popularity.

India and Sri Lanka, by virtue of their common colonial history are bound by a strange dynamism, simultaneously familiar yet complicated. The relationship that ‘All India Radio’ and ‘Radio Ceylon’ shared at the time reflected this same dynamic. The politics of competing nationhood and the obligations of competing for the same audience were significant in the creation of their entwined relationship.

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