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Birth of Broadcasting in South Asia: From Amateur Interest to the State Enterprise

ABSTRACT

Advancement in technological innovation has brought significant progress in the medium of communication. It has also transformed society and institutions by inclining people towards intellectual openness. This research article looks at the beginning of broadcasting in South Asia. It then sheds light on the journey of radio from amateur interest to the state enterprise. In the last part, the researcher underlines initial contribution and constraints of radio in South Asia. The study adopts archival and historical research methods. Archival documents are collected from the India Office Records at British Library, London. These resources are extracted using criterion sampling technique and linked with other contemporary sources. The researcher concludes that radio found fertile ground for growth in South Asia on account of two significant aspects: vast scattered area and widespread illiteracy. It was one of the earliest innovations, which played significant role during the peculiar conditions of South Asia. A few private radio club gradually emerged including the club of Calcutta. These clubs were licensed by department of industries and labour. The radio broadcasting was institutionalized in 1926 with some regulations. This endeavor was supported by the viceroy of India, who was optimistic about its growth. Major constraints included lack of financial resources, lack of investment, controversy between the

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provinces and central government to control radio, lack of affordability, and linguistic issue. From the other side of the coin, radio contributed towards awareness in the area of education, politics and entertainment. It was also used for the development in rural areas of the country.

***Keywords**: broadcasting, radio, history, development, South Asia.*

Introduction

The invention of printing-press in the fifteenth-century ushered mankind into a new era of communication. As the press made tedious, time consuming and expensive process of copying books by hand, easy and affordable, it enabled wider dissemination of knowledge. After the passage of a few centuries since the invention, a time came when printing started being used as a tool of mass communication. In 1690, the first information pamphlet was printed (Medoff & Kaye, 2011). However, two major disadvantages were associated with print communication. Firstly, it required literacy amongst the people to decipher the text; and secondly, the printed material had to be physically transported to places. Both these factors hampered the growth and utility of print media as a tool for mass communication.

Next phase in communication ushered with inventions of electricity-based means of communication, like the telegraph and the telephone. But these were essentially one-to-one communication systems covering distances. The invention of the radio opened vistas for its use as a medium of mass communication. Initially, radio waves were also used for two-way communication, but it was realized that radio's most important role was "not as a means of point-to-point confidential communication but as a means of instantaneous collective communication" (Bensman, 2000). This revolutionized the media at the start of the twentieth century,

the way no other means of communication had ever done before.

Radio reached South Asia within no time ushering a new era in the field of communication. The broadcasting went through an evolutionary process, from amateurish radio-clubs to private enterprise, finally ending as the government's most valued asset. The objective of the present paper is to trace that evolution. For this purpose, the research article first discusses about the birth of broadcasting giving a background in technological advancements in the world. It then highlights the journey of radio from amateur interest to state enterprise in South Asia. Finally, constraints and contribution of radio in the initial era in South Asia are discussed.

Methodology

The present study mainly adopts archival and historical research methods under the paradigm of qualitative research methodology. The researcher collected the data from archival documents available in the India Office Records at British Library, London, which mostly comprised the correspondence amongst various public office holders on the subject. All these resources are extracted using criterion sampling technique and correlated with other contemporary sources. Furthermore, books and other publications pertaining to the research objective were also studied. This data was analyzed through the application of archival research methods.

Birth of Broadcasting

The invention of the radio can be attributed to the Industrial Revolution, during which the 'technical innovations not only brought economic rewards but also provoked greater intellectual ingenuity' (Ashton, 1997). The first discovery was made in 1844 with the development of a system of

communication by 'Samuel F.B. Morse', that used electricity to send messages over long distances within no time (Medoff & Kaye). Two decades later in 1864, James Clerk Maxwell, a professor of experimental physics at Cambridge, theorized on the nature and properties of the electromagnetic spectrum' (Sloan, 1991).

In 1888, another scientist Heinrich Hertz was the first person to transmit and receive radio waves over five feet. This was followed by the Italian scientist Guglielmo Marconi, who started with thirty feet between the source and receiver of radio waves and increased it gradually from 275 meters to three kilometers, and then across the English Channel. Finally, by 1901, he transcended the radio waves over the Atlantic, covering about 2000 miles (Dunlap, 1951).

Though telegraph was already in operation, which had solved the problems of distance and speed to a great extent, still it required an extensive and expensive network of wires between the terminal stations. This made the telegraph-based communication system limited and vulnerable. Limited due to physical and geographical barriers, which did not allow laying of wires. Whereas, vulnerable because the system only worked when wires were in place. "This meant, for example, that outlaws could cut the wires between two points and prevent news about a train robbery from being sent to law enforcement officials" (Medoff & Kaye). As radio circumvented both these weaknesses, it attained popularity for preferred mode for shore-to-ship and ship-to-ship communication.

Soon afterward it was discovered that radio could be used as a medium of electronic mass communication implying 'one-to-many' model, as against the previous 'one-to-one' models like the telegraph and subsequently telephone. Even the term 'broadcasting' describing radio transmission, was taken from agricultural vocabulary, which basically meant casting the seeds in all directions using a circular hand motion, rather than planting them in rows (Lewis, 1991). This aptly described the mass-communication nature of radio transmissions.

Marconi was the first person who came up with the idea of commercial use of radio transmissions beyond the laboratory. Being a patriotic Italian, he first offered his own country's government to use his invention. But the Italian government turned down his offer, stating that his discovery was 'not serious enough to deserve official consideration' (Chase, 1942). He then moved to the United Kingdom where he established his company bringing a radio in the field of commercial enterprises that opened new vistas of its advancement in the subsequent times.

The first person who developed the vision of making radio as a household item was David Sarnoff, who was a wireless operator in New York when the tragedy of *Titanic*'s sinking took place. It is said that "he picked up the radio signals of distress from the unfortunate ship and 'stayed at his wireless station for the next 72 hours receiving information about survivors" (Medoff & Kaye, p. 19). In a memo said to be written by him in 1920 to American Marconi Company he outlined his "plan of development which would make radio a 'household utility' in the same sense as the piano or phonograph. The idea is to bring music into the house by wireless" (Gross, 2003, p. 14).

Elaborating further about his vision, Sarnoff wrote, "The receiver can be designed in the form of a simple 'Radio Music Box' and arranged for several different wavelengths, which should be changeable with the throwing of a single switch or pressing of a single button… The box can be placed on a table in the parlor or living room, the switch set accordingly, and the transmitted music received. There should be no difficulty in receiving music perfectly when transmitted within a radius of 25 to 50 miles... The same principle can be extended to numerous other fields as, for example, receiving of lectures at home which can be made perfectly audible; also events of national importance can be simultaneously announced and received" (Ibid, pp.14-15).

The new era in use of radio as a medium of mass communication ushered on 2 November 1920, when the results of the 1920 'presidential elections were read over station KDKA in Pittsburg' (Edwards, 2004, p. 5). It attracted the public attention in the United States and proved to be the beginning of the phenomenal growth of radio across the globe.

Taking Roots in South Asia

Radio found fertile ground for growth in South Asia on account of the region's peculiarities. "Two most significant aspects of the subcontinent around the turn of the twentieth century were its vastness and spread of its settlements over long distances. The region measured one and a half million square miles and inhabited about 240 million people" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1898, p. 731). This area and the population were almost equal to that of the then entire European continent excluding Russia. But, unlike Europe, "more than 97 percent of Indian population lived in the suburban areas and small towns, vastly scattered in the nooks and corners of the country. Of the total number of 493,444 towns and villages, only 44 were having a population of more than fifty thousand. Less than two percent of the subcontinent's population lived in the towns and cities having more than fifty thousand inhabitants" (Encyclopedia Britannica, p. 745).

Another peculiarity of the subcontinent was widespread illiteracy amongst its inhabitants, which contributed as one of the factors for impeded growth of the printed means of mass communication. Close to the dawn of the twentieth century, "the aggregate number of all the newspaper copies published in English and local languages were just about a hundred and fifty thousand" (Encyclopedia Britannica, p. 776). These newspapers mainly covered theological debates between the Christian missionaries and local religious preachers. However, sometime before the advent of radio, the focus of discussion in the print media had shifted to an extent to political issues.

In the environment characterized by the vastness of the country, scattered settlements, and wide spread illiteracy, radio was the most suitable medium of mass communication. Despite its vast potential, radio had a humble start at the hands of some enthusiastic individuals with the assistance of radio set manufacturing companies. "British India had its first radio broadcast in August 1921, when the Times of India collaborated with the Posts and Telegraph Department to transmit from its Bombay office. The Broadcast was a music program for the benefit of the governor of the province, who heard at Poona, at a distance of about 280 kilometers" (Ahmed, 2005, p. 6).

This experiment motivated fans to establish private 'radio clubs' in major cities. The radio club of Calcutta made historical contribution, when it initiated first systematic broadcast in November 1923 with the help of a transmitter provided to it by a radio manufacturing company (Page & Crawley, 2001, p. 35). Next was Bombay where the club was established a few months later by its citizens. Another city that ventured into broadcasting was Madras, but it could not sustain the enterprise for long (Ahmed, p. 6). Though these clubs were private enterprises and initiatives, they required a license from the department of industries and labor. "Broadcasting licenses have so far only been granted to two radio clubs which broadcast for the benefit of their members in Calcutta and Bombay; and to one commercial firm whose license is for demonstration purpose only", read a government communique dated 19 May 1924 (Government of India, 1924)

The program composition to be put on air had to be in conformity with the guidelines issued by the department. The instructions issued in 1924 made the broadcast of 'weather reports and forecasts' compulsory, subject to the condition that they were 'supplied by Director-General Observatories'. Similarly, the clubs were required to compulsorily broadcast the 'government communiqués and notices' if so, 'required by the government'. The optional programs left to the discretion

of the radio clubs included "concerts and other musical items; theatrical entertainments and items; student's programmes; lectures, readings or addresses, provided the subject is entirely non-political; children's programmes; news; extracts from newspapers and periodicals; speeches, provided that Government has previously approved of the speech and/or the speaker; advertisements; and any other matter subject to the general or special permission of Government" (Government of India, 1924).

In case of broadcasting news, it was explained through a note that it should be 'strictly confined to press messages supplied by specified news agencies approved by government'. Students programs had to be 'strictly confined to educational matter of a non-political nature'. In case of extracts from newspapers and periodicals, the condition for broadcast was 'if such extracts are in the nature of news or comments on news, they must be subject to previous arrangement with the news agencies in each case'. They were further told that the 'Licensees are not permitted to broadcast any extracts from newspapers on behalf of the newspaper concerned, either gratuitously or on payment, without the previous concurrence of the approved news-agencies'. In case of relaying the advertisements, it was pointed out that 'in order that the standard of programmes may be maintained the amount of advertisement matter permitted shall not normally exceeded 10 percent of any program as regards the time taken to broadcast' (Ibid).

The first step from an amateur activity towards institutionalization of radio came in March 1926 when the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) was formed as a limited company. After six month, on 13th September 1926, it partnered with government to set up radio stations in the country, which led to the first formal broadcasting in India from Bombay on 23 July 1927 (Siddiqui, 1991, p. 9). The viceroy of India Lord Irwin accompanied by the governor of

Bombay Sir Leslie Wilson chose to formally inaugurate the broadcasting in South Asia from 'Radio House' of the city.

It was regulated to play a national anthem before start of the formal broadcasting in India. The secretary of state for India, Lord Birkenhead's recorded message from London was the prime broadcast, 'whose voice was plainly audible'. He 'emphasised the immense possibilities of broadcasting in India, and said he looked forward to the day, not far distant, when every village in the countryside would listen, though the medium of its own vernacular, to the true story of the day-to-day happenings in the world and the expression of the quickening thoughts and ideas which, but for the conquest of the ether, would never have reached them'. The viceroy was highly optimistic about the success of this new medium in the subcontinent. In his address, he stated that though "broadcasting in India is today in its infancy, but I little doubt before many years have passed that the numbers of the audience will have increased tenfold" (Rueters, 1927).

He underscored the importance of broadcasting in peculiar conditions of South Asia. 'India offers special opportunities for the development of broadcasting. Its distance and wide space alone make it a promising field'. Speaking about the entertainment and education element of broadcasting, the viceroy was candid that there were many households where 'social custom debars from taking part in recreation outside their own houses. To all these and many more broadcasting will be a blessing and a boom of real value both for entertainment and for education'. While formally opening the first radio station in South Asia, Lord Irwin also assured the broadcasting company of the government's full support. "Declaring your Bombay station open, I am glad to give you the assurance that the Government of India will watch your progress with close and sympathetic interest and will do everything in their power to assist the development on sound lines of this Indian enterprise" (Rueters, 1927).

Constraints and Contributions

The biggest constraint faced by radio during the period of its infancy, was the lack of financial resources. Though Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) was supposed to raise its capital through public subscriptions as with other commercial companies, that could not happen. In addition, the government had imposed radio license fee at the rate of ten rupees per annum and a surcharge equal to ten percent of the retail price of the radio sets on all the sold sets, a major portion of which also went to the broadcaster. However, this proved to be problematic as it was supposed to be collected through retailers, which did not prove easy (Page & Crawley, p. 36). This plunged the IBC into financial difficulties.

In these circumstances, the IBC decided to approach the investors in the UK. The general manager of IBC, Eric Dunstan, led that campaign. Inviting the potential investors, he stated in his communique dated 01 March 1928 that "two stations are now transmitting regularly from Bombay and Calcutta. The progress made has been sure but slow – although not slower than was anticipated. The originally issued capital of 6.25 lacs of rupees was, however, altogether inadequate for the undertaking. The major part of this money, five-sixths in fact, went in the preliminary expenses and the capital cost of these first two stations, leaving barely a lac for running expense" (Dunstan, 1928).

Explaining the reasons for poor response of Indian investors in buying the shares of his company, Dunstan told the British investors that "broadcasting in England took a year or so to establish itself on an economic basis, and it is not, therefore, to be expected that the case will be different in India where an immense amount of propaganda has been having to be done even to explain what broadcasting is". He stated that the "capital so far invested has come from Indian sources and was subscribed under the misapprehension that it would bring a speedy return. It has not; and an investment in which a

dividend is not more or less immediate do not appear to the Indian investor, and for this reason, it has been impossible to get further capital in India" (Ibid)

He also gave a blueprint for establishing broadcasting system during the subsequent five years to cover entire South Asia with the help of four radio stations, operating in Calcutta, Bombay, Lahore, and Madras. He wrote: "with four stations, a very substantial part of India can be given a reasonable service of broadcasting and the service will be self-supporting, even at the present slow rate of progress, by 1932. As at present planned, the Company intends to open, in addition to Bombay and Calcutta, two further stations at Lahore and Madras respectively, under an arrangement with the Government by renting from them their already existing wireless stations adapted for broadcasting. This would result in establishing a system capable of reaching every part of the continent". He formally announced the opening of the subscriptions, subject to the condition that the entire amount needed by the company would be raised (Ibid).

The office of the secretary of state for India in London, which by that time was occupied by Lord William Peel, took note of the IBC's campaign and invited the viceroy's comments on it. In his detailed telegram dated 8 March 1928, viceroy Irwin downplayed the importance of broadcasting in India saying "it cannot be said that broadcasting is, under existing conditions, of immense strategic importance in India. It is true that if the distribution of receiving sets were even to become in any way comparable to conditions in England, broadcasting might in an emergency be of great importance, but it would seem to be somewhat misleading to suggest that such a time is within our present horizon" (Viceroy of India, 1928).

He also cautioned his boss in London not to fell prey to Dustan's arguments stating: "In discussion, Dunstan will probably magnify the loss to the Company due to evasion of license duty, but this is really small and at present insignificant in relation to their financial position, though we are doing

utmost to check it". He also advised him that "we consider it undesirable that you should be associated in any way with Dunstan's propaganda in England for raising capital. For any such action on your part may not unreasonably be misrepresented as implying at least a moral obligation on the part of the Government of India to compensate the investors if the Company had to go into liquidation, even after it had succeeded in raising additional capital in England" (Ibid). With such response from the government, it was no wonder that during the next two years the company went bankrupt and stopped broadcasting in March 1930. The Government assumed control of broadcasting directly from 1 April 1930 and established another outfit to carry on the business under the title of the Indian States Broadcasting Service (ISBS), which 'continued with similar programming as the former Indian Broadcasting Company (Ahmed, 2005). Subsequently, the ISBS was transformed into 'All-India Radio' (AIR) when the business of broadcasting in India was handed over to Mr. Lionel Fielden, a former employee of BBC.

Another constraint was the controversy between the provinces and central government to control radio. The background of this controversy lied in the political situation prevailing in India in 1930s. There was an ever-increasing demand for autonomy and independence from foreign rule. To resolve the issues relating to the questions of self-governance as well as the political future of the region, a series of Round Table Conferences (RTC) was called in London from 1930 to 1933. An outcome of these political deliberations came in form of the India Act of 1935, which "helped the cause of representative and responsible governments in the provinces. Each province was provided with a Council of Ministers, which was to be responsible to the legislature" (Mahmood, 2002, p. 14).

This meant for the British rulers that the representatives of the local political parties were to take control of the provincial governments after the elections. The central government was

apprehensive of the consequences of such a powerful medium of mass communication in the hands of newly emerging local political leadership. It was argued that there were political rivalries as well as ethnic and religious differences amongst the provinces, there might be 'radio-wars' amongst the provinces. It was pointed out that if the provinces were given control, the "broadcasting would be used as a weapon in inter-provincial rivalries, in disputes with the central governments, or even for anti-imperial purposes" (Page & Crawley). Based on these arguments the central government decided to retain radio under its control.

Yet another constraint was the confusion amongst the policy makers in India as to which language should be adopted for official broadcasting in view of such a large number of local languages and dialects spoken in the different parts of the region. However, this issue was resolved during a visit of the viceroy to London in 1934, where BBC's founder and first director general, Sir John Reith, convinced him of developing a national broadcasting service in India based on Hindustani language. His contention was that "If two-thirds of the native population can understand, even if it cannot speak Hindustani, the problem might not be so difficult" (BBC Memorandum, 1934).

Lastly, at this stage of development, radio had still many limitations of design that hindered its use. One of the most significant problems was the cost and size of a typical four-valve radio set. In those days the cost of the radio set was about five hundred rupees, which was a huge amount and only affluent families could afford it. Then the radio sets needed electricity for power, in addition to long wires needed to serve as antennas. This devoid the radio of its mobility in the earlier part of its life, which was overcome only in 1960s transistor radio sets appeared.

On the other side of the balance, in addition to the conventional functions of the media, i.e. information, entertainment and education, radio made a contribution in the

field of development in South Asia. It dawned on some British civil service officers to use radio for development in rural areas of the country. They got inspiration from the experiment made in the Soviet Union, where the government had installed over half a million radio sets in villages by the late 1920s. These officers saw an infinite range of possibilities of using radio communication for bringing positive changes in social as well as economic spheres in the subcontinent. The first officer who used radio broadcast in India for the developmental purpose was Punjab's Commissioner for Rural Reconstruction, Mr. Frederick Brayne. He arranged for a Punjabi broadcast from YMCA Lahore to a dozen surrounding villages in 1932 and found that it was an excellent and very effective mode of communication for local populace. Encouraged with the results of first experimental broadcast in Lahore, the British officers conducted another experiment at Peshawar in 1933, where a 'very small transmitter of 0.25 kilowatts was used for rural uplift from 1933 onwards (Page & Crawley, 2001).

Based on these experiences, the officers deduced certain lessons to make communiqué effective in the Indian environment, highlighting that in order to be attractive to the audience, each item must be extremely brief. He further advised them that the broadcast should be in the local dialect and the subject matter should be familiar to the listener. The terminology should be based on the items of his daily use. His conclusion regarding the potentialities of radio was that if "properly handled, the wireless [radio] can be made to mean for the Indian village such health, wealth and comfort, as it has never known. Broadcasting can do more in a few years in the general spread of knowledge than all other methods of education put together can do in a lifetime" (Hardinge, 1932).

Conclusion

The radio in the subcontinent has gone through an evolutionary process spread over about a century. Starting from a humble background of being an amateurish interest, it evolved into an overwhelming state enterprise as the first electronic medium of mass communication. It transcended the barriers of writing and reading in an overwhelmingly illiterate society, which had widely scattered human settlements in a vast region. Drawing lessons from its evolutionary phase, radio could be used even today as the cost-effective technology for furthering the cause of development, building bridges between different and divergent communities and enhancing the social and political empowerment of more than a billion people of this region.

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