

# BUILDING NATIONHOOD THROUGH BROADCAST MEDIA IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

By Coonoor Kripalani



Jawaharlal Nehru addressing the nation from the Delhi station of All India Radio on the night of September 7, 1946. Source: *Frontline* 30, no. 7, April 2013 at <https://tinyurl.com/lyq6tmm>.

The role of broadcast media in building patriotism and nationhood in postcolonial India is enormous. While television is a latecomer, radio was an essential vehicle from the early twentieth century onward in promoting the culture that would define the new nation, so most of this essay is devoted to radio. Although the recent rise of private TV is briefly discussed in this essay, in the case of both radio and TV, the role of government media in nation-building receives center stage.

**In the post-Independence decades, radios blared from every street corner shop, home, and, with the coming of the transistor radio in the 1960s, every passing bicycle.**

To unify a population of disparate linguistic and religious groups into one nation was a challenge that went hand in hand with social and economic development. Building a cohesive political entity based on democratic and secular principles required reforming the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the nation. The founding leaders envisioned a progressive, modern nation with equality in gender, class, caste, universal education, self-sufficiency in agricultural production, and industrial development.<sup>1</sup>

These ideals were challenged by the notion that India could not survive as a unified nation. The politics of colonial domination were etched in the national consciousness. India was poorly perceived in the West—as overpopulated, mired in poverty, and a victim of its own culture.<sup>2</sup> Debate over unrest in various states lasting well into the 1970s led to domestic concerns about whether India could remain a unified nation. State-controlled broadcast media had a monopoly of the airwaves until the early 1980s. It was one of the most useful tools for the government to inform the public of national issues, urge citizens to work together to build the country, and counter external threats by broadcasting India's point of view across its borders. When independent India went to the polls for the first time in 1952, the Election Commission used All India Radio (AIR), which had banned party propaganda, to educate the public on the constitution, universal adult suffrage, registration of voters, and the voting process. The success of these efforts was evident by the huge voter turnout and the conduct of a free and fair election.

## RADIO DAYS

India, after the 1947 Partition, inherited six of the nine existing AIR broadcasting stations established by the British. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB), recognizing radio's value to the nation, rapidly installed additional transmitters. By the end of 1960, AIR boasted a total of fifty-nine, while fifty-six new transmitters were to be set up within the following year.<sup>3</sup> As the number of transmitters grew, more areas of the nation were covered. Simultaneously, the vast talents of numerous artists and intellectuals were harnessed for broadcast over the national airwaves. Most of these individuals went on to shape the cultural landscape of the nascent nation. The purpose of national broadcasting was to showcase local talents and culture as symbols of national unity. The most important task was to ensure that the output of programs was clear, entertaining, educational, informative, and intelligible, with the aim of fostering a national mindset and culture.

In the post-Independence decades, radios blared from every street corner shop, home, and, with the coming of the transistor radio in the 1960s, every passing bicycle. So pervasive were the broadcasts that often people heard the radio regardless of whether they wanted to or not. Music programs were interspersed with news broadcasts, commentaries, and interviews. As there was primarily only one station, everyone mostly listened to the same program. In times of emergency, war, or natural disaster, broadcasts by the Prime Minister had every ear in the nation tuned to AIR.

Music was—and continues to be—a huge part of radio programming. Up until the mid-1970s, music programs included popular Hindi film music, classical vocal and instrumental Indian music, and limited broadcasts of popular and classical Western music. Music was one of the areas most impacted by radio.

AIR replaced the royal patronage that music and other performing arts lost after Independence. Artists clamored 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 prominence through AIR. Notable among them was Ravi Shankar, the internationally renowned sitar player, composer, and conductor of the National Orchestra. A host of others who played different traditional

instruments such as *tabla*, *sarod*, *santoor*, *shehnai*, and the flute also rose to national prominence through broadcasts.

Among vocalists, recordings of famous *bais* (courtesans who kept up the classical singing traditions, but had now lost royal patronage) were made by AIR and preserved for posterity. Classical singers of different schools of music, or *gharanas*, were also broadcast from AIR, bringing their exceptional talents to the ears of common citizens and paving the way for younger musical talents from genteel families to become professional musicians. In these years, classical musical compositions passed to generations through oral tradition, known as *ragas*, were notated and recorded for future generations of musicians. Broadcasts of these ragas popularized them 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.<sup>4</sup>

In turn, these musical traditions went on to influence songs from popular Hindi cinema, which would go on to constitute most of India's popular music. Famous voices of the day such as Lata Mangeshkar, her younger sister Asha Bhonsle, and Muhammad 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-o-tan Sathiyon* (*Friends, We Have Sacrificed Our Lives for the Nation*, from the 1964 film *Haqeeqat/Reality*), extolled the valor of soldiers who gave their lives defending the motherland against Chinese incursions into Indian territory along the northeastern border in 1962. Two songs from the film *Shaheed* (*Martyr*, 1965) became very popular during this time. *Ae Watan Ae Watan* (*Oh Motherland*) speaks of love of country and the sacrifice of people from different regions, while *Rang De Basanti Chola* (*Color It Saffron*) offers a similar sentiment of self-sacrifice, became a popular slogan among Indian freedom fighters, and later served as the title for a popular 2006 film. *Mere Desh Ki Dharti* (*The Soil of My Land*) from *Upkaar* (*Gift*, 1967), a film that celebrated both peasant and soldier 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*, 1963), dedicated to the soldiers who fought the Chinese at the 1962 border war, was sung most movingly by Lata Mangeshkar at the Republic Day commemoration following the war. It has been sung and broadcast by many leading singers over the years. Similarly, *Vande Mataram* (*Hail to the Motherland*), composed in the late nineteenth century, is now close to being a national anthem. Deeply etched in the national consciousness is *Saare Jahan Se Achha* (*The Best in the World*), composed in 1904 by the poet Iqbal. Set to rousing music by Ravi Shankar in 1945, it retains nationwide significance to this day as a marching tune and patriotic song. Special programs for the armed forces broadcast from AIR played these together with other patriotic songs extolling the unity of the nation, sanctity of the borders, beauty of the land, and love and sacrifice not only of the soldiers, but also their families.

The orthodox thinking that prevented courtesan singers from entering Broadcasting House, the headquarters of AIR, also stopped broadcasting Hindi film music—deemed not refined enough for the Indian public—in 1952. The very successful popular music program, the *Binaca Hit Parade*, anchored by Ameen Sayani, shifted to Radio Ceylon as the *Cibaca Geet-mala*. Immediately, listeners shifted loyalty to Radio Ceylon. The steep decline in listeners led AIR to reverse its decision. It launched a new channel, *Vividh Bharati*, in 1957, which focused on broadcasting mainly popular film music (Sayani returned with Colgate-Cibaca Geetmala) and light



Ravi Shankar (with sitar on right), Yehudi Menuhin (left), and the great tabla player Alla Rakha (center) in the New Delhi All India Radio studio. As many readers know, Ravi Shankar made an immense contribution to world music.. Source: Redid News at <https://tinyurl.com/lnwf63r>.

entertainment such as plays and interviews with film and media personalities. Even today, *Vividh Bharati* attracts the maximum number of AIR listeners and continues to help promulgate a national popular culture.

Dissemination of news was a critical function of the state broadcaster. News was received, prepared, and distributed to AIR stations and broadcast daily by the Directorate of News in Delhi in order to ensure the standardization of news throughout the country. Sixty news bulletins were broadcast daily in English and all the major languages of India. The assumption that the news was true and unbiased and that AIR would not act simply as a mouthpiece of the state or the ruling party would be severely challenged in the decades to come.

News programs also included commentary and discussions encompassing a wide variety of topics. The work of program executives was to identify topics and speakers for broadcasts, talks, and discussions. Guests included scientists, professors, civil servants, ministers, educators, artists, writers, and prominent intellectuals. Program themes varied between population control, agrarian matters, women's welfare, literary discussions, scientific discourses, military affairs, and music, among others. International speakers such as writers Aldous Huxley and Arthur C. Clarke, UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, businessman Sir Homi Mody, and Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin all appeared on AIR programs.

The fledgling nation was admired for winning freedom through non-violence. World leaders beat a path to India, such as the emissary of Fidel Castro's Cuba, Che Guevara, who famously, despite his own commitment to violent revolution, expressed his respect for Gandhi and his peaceful revolution to rid India of colonialism in an AIR interview. Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana had a strong personal bond with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nkrumah's broadcasts reflected their shared anticolonial, antifeudal, and anticapitalist views, and their commitment to the nonaligned movement. John F. Kennedy visited India in 1951 as a Massachusetts Senator. He respected Prime Minister Nehru as one of the great leaders of the twentieth century and praised "the soaring idealism of Nehru" in his first State of the Union address as US President.<sup>5</sup> In 1962, he sent Jackie Kennedy as goodwill ambassador to India. Her visit garnered publicity on the airwaves, further cementing US-India ties.

## Farmers received timely weather advisories and could even take courses on agriculture via radio.

The Shah of Iran, Queen Elizabeth, and the young Dalai Lama who fled to India in 1959 all spoke on AIR, as did visiting leaders from Russia, Syria, Arabia, Egypt, China, Japan, Yugoslavia, and Ethiopia. These broadcasts made Indian listeners aware of their nation's importance in the world and its external relations with friends and foes.

Programming for farmers was one of the cornerstones of nation-building and self-sufficiency in food production. In collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Education, AIR established Farm and Home Units at ten stations. Farmers learned about water and soil management, social forestry, environmental protection, new high-yield seeds, and farming methods. Farmers received timely weather advisories and could even take courses on agriculture via radio. All this was important in helping India achieve the famous 1960s agricultural Green Revolution that ended famine in India.

The External Services broadcasts of AIR were aimed at Indians overseas, as well as foreign listeners. In addition to English, in those early years, AIR was already broadcasting in Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, Persian, Urdu, and Pashto. In time, Swahili and other European and Middle Eastern languages were added. Broadcasts included news, music, and entertainment. Foreign broadcasts both promoted Indian culture and countered propaganda of hostile neighbors.

"Edutainment," as it is called now, through radio drama, drew in some of the best talents in India. Classical, traditional, serious, comedic, and melodramatic musicals and radio plays in English, Hindi, and languages such as Marathi and Gujarati 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. Habib Tanvir, who went on to become a prolific playwright and brought theater to rural areas, employed folk actors alongside professional theater actors and worked as a producer in AIR Mumbai in 1945. These great artists produced both radio plays and theater shows, where they left their mark on production and content. Hindi radio play series like *Modi ke matwale rahi* (mystery) and *Hawa Mahal* (comedy) were quite popular. In an effort to boost morale during the 1962 China war, AIR produced *Dhol ki Pol*, a political comedy series. AIR radio theater programs were scripted and produced by in-house dramatists and producers such as Vinod Sharma, Chiranjeet, 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, which was necessary, as the states of India were created on linguistic lines. In order to ensure that diversity promoted unity, it was essential to target audiences in the languages they best understood.

Poetry was also given airtime. Annual gatherings of poets from around the country and at times the region were held, encouraging interaction of literary talent from different places. The famous Punjabi novelist, essayist, and poet Amrita Pritam worked at AIR Lahore before the 1947 Partition and continued at AIR Delhi's Punjabi Service until 1961. By employing such eminent poets and writers, AIR created literary networks and provided state patronage to intellectuals.

Other programs targeted women. Even before the 1990 media-related Prasar Bharati Act required programs 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," the sensibility to do so was observed in radio programming.<sup>6</sup> Strong female characters and role models were encouraged, and special programs educating women on family planning, nutrition, health, and hygiene were all attempts to build a nation of informed women who could exercise the right judgment on the domestic front.


Programs for children were also very popular. With an eye toward building the postcolonial nation, these programs mixed an element of play to bring children together at Broadcasting House and at other times at Teen Murti House, the residence of Prime Minister Nehru. Many of these children involved in the programs continued in broadcasting well into their adult years, some even making radio a profession. The shared childhood experience of being together at these children's programs, which included storytelling, orchestral music, singing, and games, was a tremendous exercise in building national memory.

*Yuv Vani (Young Voice)* went on air in 1969 to allow a platform for youth to give voice to their interests and aspirations. Recruiting youths from high schools and universities, it gave a vast number of young people an opportunity to build their broadcasting talents and earn some pocket money. Many of them remember their days at *Yuv Vani* fondly, and for several, it created a lifelong love of broadcasting. Targeting specific audiences of farmers, women, children, and youth, these programs aimed to include all segments of society in the national endeavour and create a shared national identity for future generations. All this bears testimony to the crucial roles AIR played in building nationhood: the promotion of national unity, both culturally and in the face of external threats; institution-building; agricultural self-sufficiency; industrial development; culture; literacy; education; and foreign relations. AIR still has the ability to reach 99 percent of the population and continues to influence listeners. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi understands this. Soon after taking office, he announced that he would broadcast to the nation on AIR regularly. The monthly broadcast, *Mann ki baat (Speaking from the Heart)*, gives the Prime Minister a chance to inform the citizens of India his thoughts

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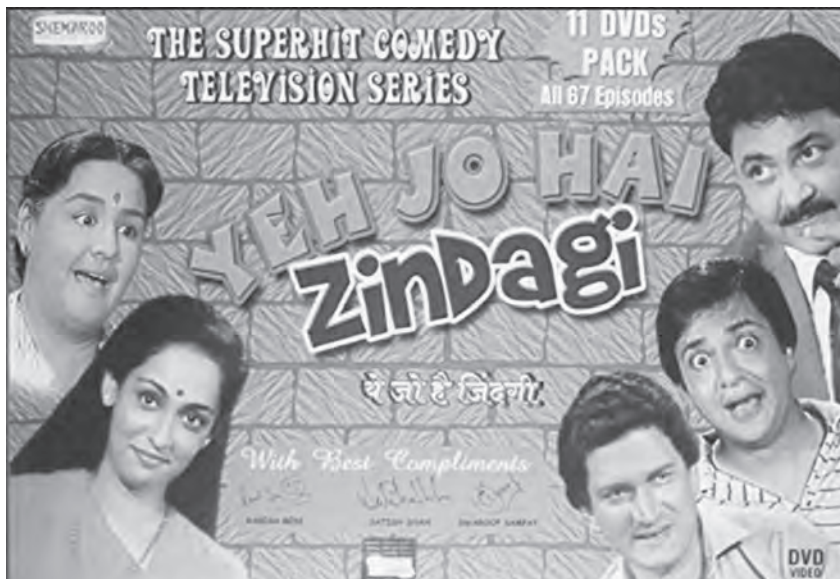


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An estimated 400,000 color TVs were imported at that time (1982), with another 90,000 component kits imported for assembly in India.

on important topics.<sup>7</sup> Modi is the first prime minister in three decades to broadcast from AIR. With 66 percent of listeners in large cities tuning in,<sup>8</sup> it is very lucrative for AIR; a normal ten-second ad slot sells for over 1,000 times the regular rate during *Mann ki Baat*.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE RISE OF TELEVISION

The national government introduced television in 1959 as a medium of education, rural upliftment, and community development. Named *Doordarshan* (*Distant Sight*; DD) and housed in a small studio in Broadcasting House, it operated in black and white on an experimental basis at twenty-one community centers, where viewers' feedback could be garnered. Two years later, an educational project funded by the Ford Foundation was launched with 250 TV sets in Delhi schools, broadcasting twenty lessons a week on various subjects. By 1965, TV was broadcasting daily for an hour, and a number of AIR personnel were requisitioned for the job. The main programs were *Krishi Darshan* (*Agriculture Vision*), a half-hour program aimed at farmers, and *Chitrahaar* (*A Story of Pictures*), which aired on Friday evenings and played song clips from famous old films, with a full-length film shown once or twice a month. Gradually, the duration of programming was increased and included some entertainment, in addition to programs about health, sanitation, medical care, and family planning.

Over the years, more TV stations were opened in cities around the country: Mumbai in 1972, Srinagar and Amritsar in 1973 (both of strategic importance to counter Pakistani TV propaganda), and Kolkata and Lucknow in 1975.

In 1976, two important developments occurred. The first was the transmission of education programs through the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) project, using a satellite provided by NASA that included broadcasts for primary and preprimary schools and on improving agricultural methods for farmers. SITE facilities also allowed for televising Independence Day flag-hoisting, the President's speech, and the Republic Day Parade with its military band finale, "Beating of the Retreat," in 1976, bringing these national celebrations to the villages for all to watch. The second development was the separation of radio and television into two government entities with separate staff, budgets, and office facilities under the umbrella of Prasar Bharati (PB), the broadcasting entity reporting to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB).

Color TV arrived in 1982 when New Delhi hosted the Asian Games. Import rules were relaxed, allowing people to buy TV sets from overseas. An estimated 400,000 color TVs were imported at that time, with another 90,000 component kits imported for assembly in India. Local manufacturers went into overdrive to produce color TVs before the start of the

games, giving a boost to local industries and entrepreneurs. The arrival of TV took some of the shine out of radio as urban listeners now began to switch to watching TV, reflecting rising consumer audiences' preference for visual media. But with its deeper penetration into the hinterlands, radio still retained its supremacy.

A centralized national program for TV was begun in 1982, but feedback was unfavorable and programming once again returned to the local stations. To improve social and educational programming, film industry professionals were invited to create content for DD. In the 1980s, TV serials like *Hum Log* (*We People*), depicting the lives of ordinary middle-class people and aimed at giving the message of family planning; *Buniyaad* (*Foundation*) on the aftermath of Partition; *Nukkad* (*Street Corner*), a comedy on the day-to-day lives of common folk; and *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* (*This Is Life*) were all extremely popular. Crime thrillers and programs for children like *Malgudi Days* were also produced and broadcast.

*Rangoli*, like *Chitrahaar*, showcased film music and had for its first anchor the famous actress Hema Malini. Immensely popular serials on the Hindu epics the *Ramayana* (Director: Ramanand Sagar) and *Mahabharata* (Director: Ravi Chopra) in the late 1980s were controversial for contributing to Hindu nationalism as a political force, though for many viewers they were simply just entertainment. As audiences demanded more programs, popular programs from NBC in the US like Jacques Cousteau's *Secrets of the Sea* and David Attenborough's *Living Planet* were aired on DD, and in the 1990s, entertainment like *Yes Minister* and *Diff'rent Strokes*, were introduced.<sup>10</sup>

Television as a government monopoly was broken with the arrival of new foreign technologies. The lack of government regulation of television made it relatively easy for entrepreneurs to create alternatives that competed with the state broadcaster. Cable TV was introduced in the early 1980s, and any number of entrepreneurs plunged into the business of providing it. Coinciding with the video boom, local cable operators were in the money.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, in 1989, the Mumbai High Court ruled that showing videos on cable TV constituted public viewing and copyright permissions were necessary to do so.

Satellite TV was introduced with CNN's coverage of the Gulf War in 1991. Earlier, Li Ka Shing's Star satellite beamed sports, MTV, BBC, and Star TV as the satellite footprint covered South Asia. It became host to a new Hindi satellite channel, the popular Zee TV, which provided the kind of entertainment Indian audiences, tired of message-ridden state programming, had been waiting for. Zee TV became a phenomenal success, and numerous other private channels like Sony Entertainment Television followed suit, broadcasting via satellite. The large number of channels also prompted the production of a great deal of content contributing hugely to the growth of the industry, but certainly diluting DD's market share, as well as commercial revenues that it had begun to collect in 1976.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding criticisms such as the introduction of "immoral" culture, that TV was a distraction for youth at exam or homework time, and the advertising of useless consumer goods, commercial TV had arrived to stay. The state broadcaster's loss of its monopoly raised a host of issues, not least the competition for viewership and commercial space. The dilemma between airing popular programs, criticized for eroding the core values of



Color television set in rural area of India. Source: *The Hindu Business Line* at <https://tinyurl.com/mj2ofsh>

Indian culture, and those that are more suitable to the national narrative upholding Indian culture and norms is one that continues. But the intervening years had already seen state broadcasting as one of the principal architects in building the national narrative, and remains as its foundation.

Since the 1970s, policy has flipfopped over, making PB an independent corporation. At present, the situation remains static: PB is a corporation, but still reports to the Indian government and lacks the independence of a commercial organization, and thus has a competitive disadvantage in contrast to private providers.

### TV, NATION-BUILDING, AND THE FUTURE

Yet DD's influence in shaping a common national culture and identity—in terms of unity, education, more robust agricultural production, the promotion of scientific and industrial advances, and the attempt to bridge the gap between urban and rural dwellers through common exposure to the same dramas, humor, voices, actors, and news—is indisputable.

Although statistics are somewhat contradictory, at least one apparently reliable survey indicates that as of 2015, 54 percent of Indian homes had televisions, with ownership higher in urban than rural areas. However, substantially more rural people watch TV than these statistics suggest because of access to community centers and other communal viewing locales.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to predict if the combination of government television and private TV providers will attain the high levels of nation-building achieved in the past through government radio broadcasting. It also remains uncertain whether new social media afforded by the Internet will primarily contribute to or subtract from national and social cohesion. ■

### NOTES


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COONOOR KRIPALANI is Honorary Institute Fellow at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (incorporating the Center of Asian Studies), University of Hong Kong. Among her publications are a succinct biography of Mahatma Gandhi and several articles on popular Hindi film. Kripalani's coedited volume, *Indian and Chinese Immigrant Communities: Comparative Perspectives* (London, New York: Anthem Press and Singapore: ISEAS, 2015), contains her article comparing overseas Indian and Chinese communities in film. Currently, Kripalani is researching the role of All India Radio as the state broadcaster of India. She also writes bilingual books in Hindi and English for children.