



BOOK REVIEW

'This is the Congress Radio calling on 42.34 meters from somewhere in India'

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Usha Thakkar. (2021). Congress Radio: Usha Mehta and the Underground Radio Station of 1942. Penguin Viking, India.

The enchanting world of media and journalism history has been meticulously documented by authors from various backgrounds, including historians, journalists, media experts, and academics. Among India's prominent pioneers in this field is Nadig Krishna Murthy, whose groundbreaking work in 1966 laid the foundation for future scholarship. Building upon this legacy, scholars like D. Sadasivan, a former historian turned journalism professor at the University of Madras, delved into the growth of public opinion in the colonial Madras Presidency, offering insightful narratives published by the University of Madras. Another significant milestone in India's newspaper landscape was explored by the erudite Canadian-born professor Robin Jeffrey in his 2000 publication, shedding light on the country's newspaper revolution with a specific focus on the language press. Esteemed historian A. R. Venkatachalpathy has made valuable contributions to the field by examining the colonial print culture of Tamil Nadu, uncovering the rich tapestry of the region's intellectual heritage, and pioneering research in print culture within South India.

When it comes to the history of radio broadcasting in India, [i]Academic contributions have been relatively scarce. Nonetheless, Thangamani, a distinguished Professor of History[ii], has admirably filled this void by meticulously documenting the captivating tale of broadcast history in Tamil Nadu during its formative years from 1924 to 1954. In addition to the academic community, many firsthand accounts and insider perspectives have emerged from high-ranking officials who served in Akashvani, popularly known as All India Radio. Notable works by officials such as Baruah (1983), Awasthy GC (1965), PC Chatterji (1991), and Mehra Masani (1985) offer unique insights into the inner workings and evolution of broadcasting in India. Across the seas, Asa Briggs, one of the foremost historians of broadcasting in Britain, has deepened the field with a series of notable works. His recent masterpiece, 'A Social History of the Media from Gutenberg to the Internet', encapsulates the transformative power of communication technology throughout the ages.

A substantial addition to the realm of Indian radio history comes from a captivating recent book by Usha Thakkar: "Congress Radio: Usha Mehta and the Underground Radio Station of 1942." Usha Thakkar presents a compelling narrative that chronicles the story of

Usha Mehta, who, driven by a staunch commitment to India's independence, established an underground radio station to disseminate hope and resistance during the peak of the freedom struggle. Thakkar's meticulous research provides a profound understanding of the power of media in shaping social reform.

1942 holds historic significance, shaped by World War II and the Quit India movement. As conflicts raged across Europe, Asia, and the Pacific, thousands of people gathered at the Golwalia Tank Maidan in Bombay on August 7, 1942, for the All India Congress Committee meeting. The momentous Quit India Resolution was passed there, and Gandhiji's mantra of "Do or Die" was proclaimed. This proclamation began a series of revolts and conflicts between the British rulers and Indian citizens. Amidst the reverberation of Gandhi's mantra and the nation's unwavering focus on freedom, a 22-year-old student named Usha Mehta, participating in the AICC meeting, took Gandhi's motto to heart and established an underground radio station to react to the propaganda broadcast through the British government's mouthpiece, the All India Radio.

Recognizing the pivotal role of communication with the public in its past campaigns, Congress conceived the idea of a secretive radio station, with Usha Mehta becoming its compelling voice. The Congress Radio was the secret anti-imperialist voice of the Indian National Congress, shrouded in secrecy from all but those involved. On August 14, 1942, Usha Mehta helped establish Congress Radio, just seven days after the proclamation of the Quit India Movement by the Congress Committee. Broadcasting at 42.34 meters, Congress Radio fearlessly transmitted its messages for 104 calendar days until it was forcibly taken off the air on November 12, 1942.

The clandestine Congress Radio brought messages from Gandhi and other leaders to the masses, reported the unofficial version of events and fought disinformation until its members were arrested and imprisoned in November of the same year. Though grounded in Bombay, Congress Radio's impact resonated far beyond the city's seashore, inspiring freedom fighters nationwide. The British responded to the Quit India Movement with heavy repression, arresting nearly 60,000 Indians within twenty-four hours, including Gandhi, Nehru, and most of the Congress leadership. Protests burst forth in Bombay, with thousands of freedom fighters taking to the streets, targeting post offices, railway stations, and telegraph offices, as deactivating the communication network and transport system would render the ruling British in solitary confinement and undermine the government.

Radio served as a powerful tool for propaganda but came at a significant cost. To acquire the necessary equipment, a next of kin of Usha Mehta offered jewellery. The team included Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Vithaldas K. Jhaveri, and Chandrakant Jhaveri. Vithaldas Jhaveri solicited the help of Nariman Abarbad Printer, a professionally trained radio engineer, to construct the Congress Radio transmission set. The owner of Bombay's Chicago Radio, Nanik Motwani, supplied the necessary broadcast equipment. At precisely 7:30 p.m., Usha Mehta announced, "This is the Congress Radio calling on 42.34 meters from somewhere in India."

The Congress Radio team feverishly determined to frequently change their operational spaces, often moving from one flat to another. Since newspapers quite often hesitated to cover politically sensitive subjects, Congress Radio became the only reliable source of information for the people. Usha Mehta famously stated, "When the press is gagged and all news banned, our transmitter certainly helps a good deal in furnishing the public with the facts of the happenings and in spreading the message of rebellion in the remotest corners of the country." Dr. Ram

Manohar Lohia, and a few other members of the team, read the news in English, while Usha Mehta read it in English and Hindustani. Their programs enlarged impulse, linking people from all across India. Initially, broadcasts were limited to only once a day, but later expanded to twice a day, in English and Hindustani. Large groups would gather in villages and cities around a radio receiver to listen to the broadcast, which boldly criticized royal rule and wide-open Britain's spoils of India.

Within the radio broadcasts, Usha Mehta interspersed reports of local uprisings with pre-recorded speeches by Mahatma Gandhi and other revered leaders. Despite constantly relocating their broadcasting base, the organizers of Congress Radio were eventually arrested, abruptly ending their courageous venture. After independence, Usha Mehta's invaluable contributions to the freedom struggle through the clandestine radio earned her India's second-highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan.

The book's annexure, titled College Radio, vividly captures the remarkable bravery of young college students who defied the world's largest empire. It provides a compelling account of their audacity and determination in adversity. Furthermore, the book's appendix presents a treasure trove of valuable collections, including police reports and court records.

This book is a historical document of a group of passionate young patriotic fighters who operated the Congress Radio, passionately propagating the dispatch of freedom and spreading vital information about the struggle against the oppressive regime of the British government. Within a brief period, they made history and transmitted trustworthy news to the Indian people, instilling assurance among them and unsettling the British authorities.

A re-look into the workings of the Congress Radio is enlightening and invigorating. It breathes fresh life into the epitomes of freedom and dedication, offering a respite from our troubled and despondent times. This book is recommended for anyone eager to explore the untold tales of bravery, resilience, and the unwavering spirit of those who tirelessly fought for India's freedom, as well as the intriguing, lesser-known stories from India's captivating broadcasting history.

Notes

[i] In India, radio broadcasting began in 1923 with the Radio Club of Bombay, followed by the Calcutta Radio Club set up in the same year. Both went bankrupt after a few years. Nevertheless, it was not until 1936 that the Indian State Broadcasting Services (established in 1930) became the All India Radio (AIR) or Akashvani.

[ii] Professor Thangamani served in the Department of History at Madras Christian College, Chennai, and his doctoral research has been developed into this book.

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