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Ameen Sayani and Radio Ceylon: Notes towards a History of Broadcasting and Bombay Cinema

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The interview with Ameen Sayani that follows draws attention to one aspect of film culture that remains largely neglected—the role of radio in shaping Bombay cinema’s cultural geography. To suggest that film shares deep connections with radio and television (and now, digital media) seems to state the obvious. Yet, apart from brief mentions of radio and television as important sites for audiences’ engagement with film music, there is no sustained historical study of how broadcasting may have shaped the workings of the film industry. We are yet to pay close attention to the ways in which relations between media in Bombay have defined circuits of capital, production cultures, and policy decisions among other things. The brief account of Radio Ceylon below suggests that we need to think about radio and television as more than just platforms for the circulation of film music.

With archival material such as the following conversation with the legendary broadcaster, Ameen Sayani, it is possible to begin by considering how Binaca Geet Mala, an immensely popular film music program that reached audiences across India, gave shape to Bombay filmmakers’ imagination of a “national audience.” To be sure, this is just one of many lines of inquiry that one could pursue. The transcript that accompanies this section raises many other questions—how radio mediated relations between stars and fans, the emergence of what Neepa Majumdar (2001) has termed “aural stardom,” licensing and copyright norms, and so on.

Radio Ceylon and the Making of Bombay Cinema’s “National Audience”

The story of film songs and broadcasting has been narrated mainly from the perspective of All India Radio and nationalist elites’ interventions in the realm of cultural policy. As the story goes, Dr B.V. Keskar, Minister of Information and Broadcasting (1950–1962) deemed film songs “cheap and vulgar” and brought about a nearly complete ban on films songs (Awasthy, 1965; Lelyveld, 1995) (see Image 1). While Keskar attempted to create “light music”—with lyrics of “high literary and moral quality” (Awasthy, 1965, p. 51) and music that would steer away from the “tendency to combine western and
eastern music as was done in Hindi films” (The Hindu, 1957)—listeners began to tune in to Radio Ceylon for Indian film songs. As one oft-quoted survey of listener preferences noted, “out of ten households with licensed radio sets, nine were tuned to Radio Ceylon and the tenth set was broken” (Lelyveld, 1995, p. 59). Recognizing the enduring popularity of film songs and acknowledging the difficulties involved in forging a new “taste public,” Keskar relented and on October 28, 1957, announced the launch of a new variety program called *Vividh Bharati* that would “consist of popular music and other light items” (The Hindu, 1957). The press release also pointed out that of five hours’ programming on weekdays, nearly four hours would be dedicated to film songs (see Image 2).
Image 2. Press Release introducing the Vividh Bharati program.

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This was, without doubt, a struggle over defining “national culture” and as Lelyveld points out, government-controlled All India Radio was expected to play “a leading role in integrating Indian culture and raising standards” (Lelyveld, 1995, p. 57). However, this narrative, in which Radio Ceylon makes a brief appearance, does not shed light on any other aspect of the film industry’s relationship with radio. How did producers, music directors, and playback singers react to All India Radio’s policies? How exactly did the overseas programing division of a commercially operated broadcasting station from Colombo establish ties with the Bombay film industry? What role did advertisers play? And what was the production process for a program like *Binaca Geet Mala*? In 1951, Radio Ceylon established an agency in the Colaba area of downtown Bombay—Radio Advertising Services—in order to attract advertising revenue and recruit professional broadcasters who could record both commercials and programs. It was through this agency, headed by Dan Molina, an American entrepreneur who had lived and traveled across the subcontinent, that Ameen Sayani and a small group of producers and writers created a number of film-based radio programs including *Binaca Geet Mala*. Sponsored by a Swiss company named CIBA and using two powerful short-wave transmitters located in Colombo, *Geet Mala* was initially produced as a half-hour competition program in which seven random film songs were broadcast every week with audiences invited to re-arrange the songs chronologically. With 100 rupees as the jackpot every week, the show attracted attention immediately and according to Ameen Sayani, “the very first program, broadcast on December 3, 1952, brought in a mail of 9,000 letters and within a year, the mail shot up to 65,000 a week.” Recognizing the difficulties of the competition format, Sayani and other producers decided to transform *Geet Mala* into a one hour “hit parade” in December 1954. While continuing to encourage audiences to write in with song requests, CIBA, after consultations with their sales personnel, identified 40 record stores across India that would send weekly sales reports to be used as the basis for the countdown show. However, when it became clear that some film producers and music directors were involved in rigging record sales, *Geet Mala* producers decided to set up Radio Clubs (*srota sangh*) across the country as a “popular” counterweight.

Each week’s show, recorded in Bombay, would be flown to Colombo and broadcast from 8:00–9:00 pm on Wednesday and as Sayani reminisced, “the streets would be empty on Wednesday nights…in fact, Wednesday nights came to be known as *Geet Mala* day.” I wish to draw attention here to the ways in which the film industry became involved with *Geet Mala*. The overwhelming popularity of *Geet Mala* led to complaints from music directors when their songs did not feature in the weekly countdown. Sayani suggested appointing “an ombudsman from the film industry” who would check the countdown list. With established figures like G.P. Sippy and B.R. Chopra assuming this role, producers and music directors seemed satisfied with the process and according to Sayani, information regarding record sales and popularity among audiences in different parts of the country began circulating in the film industry. By the mid-1950s, directors and stars from the film industry were participating in weekly sponsored shows on Radio Ceylon and film publicity quickly became a central aspect of Radio Ceylon’s programs. As Sayani recalled, no film was ever released without a huge publicity campaign over Radio Ceylon and later, Vividh Bharati. Radio, in other words, provided film stars, directors, music directors, and playback singers with the opportunity to listen, speak to, and imagine an audience.

I do not wish to suggest that the picture of the “audience” conjured by radio shows carried greater weight than box-office considerations and the information that producers, directors, and stars in Bombay received through distribution networks. But it is possible to open up a new framework of inquiry by considering radio’s role in making the films, songs, and stars of Bombay cinema a part of the daily life of listeners across India, in creating a shared space for listeners in locations as diverse as the southern
metropolis of Madras and a small mining town like Jhumri Tilaiya in the northern state of Bihar, binding together the nation-as-audience, and enabling the Bombay film industry to imagine a “national audience.”

Transcript of Conversation with Ameen Sayani

The conversation took place on July 4, 2008, at Ameen Sayani’s home in the Churchgate area of downtown Bombay.

All India Radio and “national culture”

Ameen Sayani (AS): There was a time, way back in the 1940s and early 1950s, when All India Radio (AIR) was one of the finest radio broadcasting organizations in the world. They had fascinating features and programs. All the best writers, performers, speakers…used to come and take pride in participating in programs at AIR. And AIR was fairly widespread. They had national programs, mainly news, and also some musical programs and a lot of local programs in many languages. Local stations used to do this, and link up used to be with the national service, in many towns and cities across the country.

Now, this went on quite well until two things happened. The first slight hit that AIR got was the division of India. There were lots of people at the helm of AIR [who left India]—even the Director General and the Director of the very important Bombay station, Zulfiqar Bokhari, and his brother. One was in Delhi and the other in Bombay. The elder one was also a fabulous writer, of great eminence. And the younger brother was an absolute legend in broadcasting—he used to have a beautiful deep voice and a tremendous understanding of the medium. Some of the greatest broadcasters we had, flourished at the time. They left [India], as did a number of other good broadcasters, but India had a lot of excellent people left.

Unfortunately, in the early 1950s, a new information and broadcasting minister called Dr B.V. Keskar came to the scene. He had some lofty ideas, and he did some good things for AIR like creating a good national program of music. But as far as film music is concerned, he somehow was very antipathetic. He seemed to feel, and I don’t know how and why he came to this conclusion, that Indian film music was vulgar. And that we should only have classical music and good folk music and create light music, which he dubbed sugam sangeet. And he felt that all these film songs should be chucked out, and he did chuck them out. In 1952, songs were totally banned, at a time when the golden period of Indian film music had already begun…Anil Biswas, Hemchand Prakash, Vasant Desai, C. Ramchandra, and all these people…S. D. Burman, Naushad. They were at their zenith, and so were the singers and lyrics writers. Just imagine the tremendous force that was ruling those days—every single individual in the field a giant.

Besides, there were three great things that Indian film music had been doing— it was the only home entertainment, and a powerful source of home entertainment and enjoyed popular listenership, because everyone, whether they understood Hindi well or not, used to listen and was absolutely in love with Hindi film music. Another thing that film music did was to help promote the national language in its most
simple and beautiful form—Hindustani. If you remember, Gandhiji wanted to make Hindustani the national language of India. He said let’s have a language that everyone understands—it is not sanskritized, nor does it have too many difficult Persian or Arabic words. It is open, colloquial. Now this had happened to other languages, like Gujarati and Marathi. These languages had become simple and sweepingly popular, and so had Hindustani. Hindi films and film music had done it for Hindustani as well. Also, Hindi film music was, in many ways, a great promoter of national integration. So all these qualities were thrown overboard, and AIR was almost dead as far its popularity was concerned.

Radio Ceylon in Colaba, Bombay

AS: Initially, Radio Ceylon did not have any good announcers or anyone who knew much about broadcasting. It was when Mountbatten left, his Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) donated their transmitters to the government of Ceylon because they were near Colombo, and said do whatever you like with them. On those transmitters were stared the commercial services of Radio Ceylon...

With Keskar’s 1952 ban on film songs on AIR, there was a protest, a grand protest, within the film industry in India. But Keskar was quite strong, and he was adamant and said “nothing doing, I don’t want film music.” So almost overnight, within three months, the entire popular listenership shifted there, to Radio Ceylon. Initially, their programing did not include any sponsored shows or commercials. They had a few programs—film music mostly, but also some bhajans and other songs. They were based in Colombo, and Indian film music was easily available and they would play the songs. It was only later that they began paying a small license fee for the music. The point is, the producers and music directors and singers were getting an outlet that they didn’t have within India. So it became very popular, and in 1951, Radio Ceylon created its Indian agency in Bombay to look after their commercial interests and to bring good professional broadcasters to record commercials and programs in Bombay.

This agency was called Radio Advertising Services. It was founded by an American called Dan Molina, a very enterprising and dedicated man. And Hamid Sayani, my brother and guru in broadcasting, who brought me up in English broadcasting from when I was seven years old and was himself a great English broadcaster, was appointed Program Director of the agency of Radio Ceylon in its production wing, which was called Radio Enterprises Private Limited. That was how we started recording programs and commercials in Bombay. And there were some absolutely fabulous programs in those days, starting with a program called Ovaltine Phulwari and Ovaltine Amateur Hour.

The Ovaltine Amateur Hour was on the English service and Phulwari was on the Hindi service, where amateurs, good new singers, used to come and sing. Many people came—Mahendra Kapur, Sudha Malhotra, and so on, and we also used to get a lot of professional senior singers like Talat Mahmood and Geeta Dutt. And we used to get various other people—Jagmohan Sursagar, for example—to come as guests to sing in the amateur hour to encourage the kids and newcomers. Now, incidentally, I also started my career in that program though not as a singer. I couldn’t sing a single note. When Hamid became the Program Director, he took on a senior producer called Bal Govind Srivastav who was producing lots of good programs and was a very good writer as well. He got his team together and the main compere in his team was Manmohan Krishna, a character actor who was also an excellent broadcaster and singer. I went to Hamid bhai and said look, you are my guru, give me some work. I had wanted to do something in Radio Ceylon. He said yes, but most of the programs are in Hindi and you are an English broadcaster and
a Gujarati-medium student. He said I spoke in English and Gujarati accents, and could not speak with the other absolutely fabulous broadcasters. In English there were just a couple of programs and Hamid bhai was doing them, so there was not much scope.

Anyhow, one day, at a recording program, the Ovaltine commercial announcer did not turn up and I was asked to read the script. I read it, and was told I was putting too much dramatics into it. But they also told me that from that day onwards, I was to record those commercials. So that’s how I got started and gradually grew in Hindi broadcasting, through Srivastav’s programs. It was only later that I became involved in Geet Mala.

Geet Mala

AS: Until Binaca Geet Mala came along, nobody knew how popular Radio Ceylon was. It was to start as a half hour competition program playing seven random songs of old and current films and there was a 100 rupees jackpot attached to the rearrangement of those seven songs [competitors had to place these in chronological order of release date]. It was announced in our office that we had a budget of only 25 rupees for somebody who could take on the entire burden of scripting, production, presentation, and checking the mail. Everyone got a little cheesed off—what’s the point of doing so much work for so little money? But I thought it was a good opportunity—in any case, all I was getting as payment at the time was one tin of Ovaltine!

So I said ok, I’ll do this. This was my own production, and Srivastav was the main producer in our unit. Later four or five others joined. So Binaca Geet Mala started and we were expecting 40–50 letters initially. The very first program—broadcast on December 3, 1952—brought in 9,000 letters. Everyone jumped for joy and so did I, and then I sat down holding my head. I had to sit alone and check every single letter. Later, I got some help, some from my college friends and from people in the office. But within a year, the mail shot up to 65,000 a week and it was impossible to carry on.

The mails were coming from all over India. See, Ceylon had three shortwave transmitters—one 100KW and two 30KW—and signals were reaching right up to the east coast of Africa besides covering the entire Asian continent. It was phenomenal. But then we stopped the competition format and changed it into a hit parade, which became a rage within three weeks or so. We stopped the competition because there was no place in the office to sit—it was so popular, we felt what’s the point of going on and looking through 65,000-odd letters. And we had to store the letters too, in case someone came up and asked for a clarification.

Forging a “national audience”

AS: But no one in India had heard of the hit parade format and it took about three weeks to catch on. I too was skeptical initially, thinking it was rather silly…like a countdown. The first question we had to face was, what would be the polling base? In those days, there were 78rpm records and it was fairly easy for shopkeepers to tell what was the order of popularity of songs based on sales.

So CIBA, the sponsoring company, through their sales force, contacted about 40 shops across India and we used to get weekly sales reports from these shops. And those were so correct that HMV in those days—this was mid-1950s—HMV used to say look, this is the only system by which we can get
proper feedback. Because sometimes it happens that if a song becomes popular, all the copies are sold and sales drop because there are no more copies. So they used to say, please let us know when a song is climbing in popularity so that we can make sure there is enough stock. We also took, in the initial stages, another angle to the program and that was farmaishes (requests). In any case, people were writing to us, so we felt we might as well take farmaishes. But there came a stage when we were flabbergasted to realize that there was a lot of rigging going on—either music directors or singers or producers were deliberately sending fake farmaishes. One day, I saw about 50 letters in slightly different handwriting for a certain song. I started turning them around and all of them had the postmark Kalbadevi, Bombay!

So we dropped farmaishes and started another system—the radio clubs. Now by that time, we had started encouraging groups of young people to listen together and to react, give their opinion, feedback as to which song they thought was going to climb. We used to get letters from very avid listeners, and some of them used to say, “we are listening to your show along with our friends.” And our letter went back saying if you are listening with your friends, why don’t you form a club? Give your club a nice name, and if you have the funds, type up a letterhead or at least have a rubber stamp. Get people together at one place to listen, if you can, otherwise figure out two or three places where people can congregate and listen. Then send us, every week, your top songs so that we can play the songs you have chosen. And they responded. At the peak, we had 400 radio clubs all over India.

So we used to keep the sales as the base, but the radio clubs as a counter so that we would know that if a song suddenly dropped in sales when it was very popular, it would mean that the records were not there. But if it remained high in the radio clubs, that would balance things out. And that became an absolute rage...you were of course too young then, but Geet Mala became legendary. Just like how the streets would be empty when B. R. Chopra’s Mahabharat or Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan would be on television, the same thing happened to Geet Mala. It was on Wednesdays, 8–9 p.m. Wednesdays came to be known as Geet Mala day.

Radio Ceylon and the Bombay Film Industry

AS: Initially, we used to record at St Xavier’s College in a sound recording training studio, but we soon shifted to where I am now (Colaba, downtown Bombay, in a building adjacent to Regal Theatre), where you came to see me. That entire floor used to be Radio Ceylon’s office, three rooms for producers, one for Hamid bhai, two big studios, one transfer studio, and rooms for other people. We used to record on tapes, every single day. And every week’s quota used to fly by Swiss Air, Air Ceylon or Air India to Colombo. Sometimes, we did get into trouble, especially with Geet Mala, because with Geet Mala we were not supposed to record too much in advance. The popularity poll had to reflect a current mood. As it is, we used to be about two weeks behind because CIBA used to get the sales reports and the radio club letters and all of that was computed. I was given that list and then the show was produced. And another thing was, by the late 1950s, when Geet Mala had become very popular, some great music directors came to CIBA to say that something fishy was going on because their songs weren’t being reported as popular and that they were losing business as a result. They were not ready to recognize that their business had in any case gone down because their career was waning...so they said close down the program and CIBA of course refused. And CIBA said you can look at how we do the polling—look at
the registers, look at the polling, this is how it’s done, now you tell us how can we close this down. So then they agreed, but said do something for us.

Since they were great music directors, we decided we would do the countdown with the same methods but without announcing the 16, 15, 14 countdown right up till number 1. So the older listeners knew what was going on and knew which song was number 1. But the newer listeners did not quite catch on and things became haywire. So finally I suggested, why don’t we go to the film industry and get them to appoint an ombudsman who will see our lists and ok them. The first one was G. P. Sippy, then B. R. Chopra. We would take the list to them, and they would go through and okay it. We also had an internal system by which CIBA could not do any hanky-panky. And I could do nothing since they were sending the lists. So we developed a pretty strong system.

For us, the main emphasis was films and the film world. Srivastav, the senior most producer, had a tremendous friendship with film people and a lot of them came on board. We used to have Talat Mahmood, Mukesh, film stars like Nimmi, Nargis, Meena Kumari…a lot of them would come and do weekly shows, sponsored shows in our studio. Also, a very big aspect of Radio Ceylon, and Vividh Bharati later, was the radio publicity of feature films. And it was a rage—no film was ever released without taking a huge publicity campaign over Radio Ceylon. We would use not just the songs but also the dialog tracks. Film publicity was a big aspect and of course, the publicity of songs through Geet Mala meant that if a song featured on Geet Mala, the record sales did go up.

It was because of Radio Ceylon’s popularity that the Indian government relented and said let’s bring back film music. So in the late-1950s, Vividh Bharati was created. It had a tremendous blend of heritage and modernity, parampara and pragati, let’s say. And this soon became quite popular. Then commercials [on Vividh Bharati] started in the 1960s and the popularity grew even more. Radio Ceylon was still popular as it was on shortwave and reached many more people. Thousands of pockets between the Vividh Bharati stations, which broadcast on AM, got only Radio Ceylon. Then in the 1970s, Radio Ceylon’s reception started waning and Vividh Bharati’s popularity grew. By 1978–79, Vividh Bharati was booming in all the main cities and they were producing several sponsored programs.

References
