

Broadcasting memories

Pandit Amarnath looks back with nostalgia on the five decades of broadcasting over the All India Radio

I don't remember what day October 16, 1942 was, except that it was the day of my first broadcast from All India Radio, Lahore. I sang three items: Eman, Gaud Malhar, and a short bhajan. When I came out of the broadcasting station a crowd of students, boys and girls mostly from Dayal Singh College, greeted me warmly and whisked me away to the Mall Road coffee house. When I reached home that night my parents, my brothers, my sisters, all my near relatives were waiting to welcome me.

After that I started getting regular broadcasts, at least twice a month. Being the youngest 'classical singer' of AIR Lahore, I had the blessings of even ustadhs like Abdul Wahid Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Barkat Ali Khan, Umaid Ali Khan, Chhote Ghulam Ali Khan, Ashiq Ali Khan -- all of whom were regular broadcasters.

There were no auditioning system then to select talent, as we have today. Off and on someone heard performing in public was picked up. Public opinion mattered with the authorities: that is what promoted the artist. My fee of Rs 20 per broadcast became Rs 25, then Rs 30, and at the time of Partition it was Rs 40. The fees ranged from Rs 45 for D.V. Paluskar to Rs 55 for Amir Khan, broadcasting from Delhi, and Rs 65 for Abdul Wahid Khan broadcasting both from Lahore and Delhi. Faiyaz Khan was the highest paid with a fee of Rs 90 when the ceiling was at Rs 150.

By the time the country was partitioned I was a professional in the music scene. But we reached Delhi as miserable refugees, and had to face a hard struggle to survive. AIR then became a big support, for while thousands of refugees were starving, I was lucky to get four or five programmes a month.

It was during this period that I started learning from Ustad Amir Khan. We did the *ganda* ceremony in AIR itself, in the presence of so many artists. I remember hiring the

canteen for two hours in the afternoon for that great moment of my life.

In 1949 I joined the AIR staff as music supervisor and composer and served till 1956. I composed hundreds of songs during this period; but a few of the most memorable ones were destroyed later by the producers and chiefs of light music. Some of these were popular years later too.



Pandit Amarnath in 1942

Yes, so much harm has been done to the AIR archives! There was no policy for preserving music by re-recording and converting the old discs to tapes. Although new machines were introduced, the producers seldom knew how to handle them or make perfect recordings. Today we have lost hundreds of recordings of the peak era in Indian music. So many of the great masters sang for AIR: Faiyaz Khan, Kesarbai Kerkar, Roshanara Begum, Abdul Wahid Khan, Abdul Karim Khan, Rajab Ali Khan, Amir Khan, Ghulam Ali Khan. Whosoever was the chief or deputy chief producer then did not think of preserving this vast treasure. As a result much of it is irretrievably lost.

That was the time when radio

stations were centres of culture. To us they were no less than temples of Saraswati. But now the atmosphere has so deteriorated that it is difficult to keep your inspiration intact. No satisfactory arrangement for accompanists, no up-keep of crucial instruments. In fact, you are lucky to find a good pair of tambooras.

There are some moments which will remain etched in my memory. One day while a fresh disc of mine was being tested in the studio Vilayat Khan happened to pass by. He stopped to hear what he thought was my ustad, Amir Khan Saheb's singing! Since I was present there Nag Saheb, the programme executive, proudly introduced me as the singer. Vilayat Khan Saheb hugged me and ever since he has had a soft spot for me. I was also very happy when I was invited to participate in one of Amir Khan Saheb's National Programmes as his prime disciple. It was the Guru Shishya Parampara series. Khan Saheb sang Mian Ki Malhar and I sang Gaud Malhar. I was really surprised with the newspaper coverage of this programme. Here I must lament the fact that radio programmes are no longer covered by professional critics, though that was a very popular newspaper item till some years ago. And what a service the newspapers did that way for both AIR and its artists.

We need to re-establish a sense of mission at the AIR and Doordarshan. A consciousness of our heritage. A sense of commitment to its preservation. A love for the artist. Time was when AIR had a place where artists could meet each other and talk between recordings. Today a celebrated artist does not even have a place to sit while he waits for his gatepass to enter the studios.

If we care for our culture we must be sensitive to these things as well. The reason our institutions function mechanically is that our people think mechanically. That is where we have to reassess ourselves.