

Broadcasting and Music in India

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In India, broadcasting and music are so closely connected that their rise and fall also exhibit a close correspondence. Consequently, one can describe the golden age of broadcasting as the golden age of music too. The reason is obvious. Percentagewise, music is the staple food of Indian broadcasting. From fractional gaps to minor fillers and from interludes to national programmes it is music, music all the way. As music is the most aural of the arts it is natural that broadcasting leans heavily on it. It is the very nature of the medium that dictates this and any attempt to decrease the proportion of time given to music in favour of more direct 'messages' only tries to ignore the nature of the medium. On the other hand, musicians have depended on broadcasting for wide, varied and repeat audience and patronage.

However, we should be careful to distinguish between a medium and the agency that exploits it. As broadcasting in India enjoys a monopoly position this distinction assumes special importance. It is my contention that the advantages that have accrued to music in Indian broadcasting are advantages of the medium itself. The agency that controls broadcasting in India, the All India Radio, can take little credit for it. The existence of a parallel or alternative broadcasting service would have clinched the issue. However, the thematic analysis that I propose to take up will at least clarify the position.

First, let us take a look at the matter of musical classification followed by AIR. The question is important because this classification has a direct bearing on AIR's customary programme-planning, which can be aptly described as planning for 'chunk-broadcasting'. The current classificatory categories, namely, classical, semi-classical or light classical, and light, plus the kind-wise classification of film music, devotional music, etc. are, in a loose sense, musicologically oriented. It might have been admissible and perhaps adequate in times when there was little music (fewer radio sets and more limited listening). We know that there was a time when there were no music schools or colleges, no public concerts, nor was there a plethora of conferences. In this period it was useful to employ musicological categories. However, with the propagation agencies working in full swing, the situation has changed. The proliferation of musical

events inevitably caused indiscriminate presentation of quality-wise indifferent music. This needed a prompt and powerful corrective, which is possible only through mass media like AIR. The phenomenal growth of the mass aspect therefore necessitated a quality-oriented classification. For example, one may classify music as entertainment music, educational music, experimental music and cultural music. Obviously, this classification unsettles the current hierarchic musicological classification because a khayal presentation can be inferior, quality-wise, to a programme of ghazals.

To dilate on the theme, we may say that most film music and other musical manifestations of temporary aesthetic validity will be included in the category of entertainment music. By educational music we refer to music which might not have any mass appeal or commercial value but which we know to be authentic. This is the music which provides models for serious musicians and students of music. Experimental music is a category that, I admit, is poorly represented today. But it is a category that holds promise of growth in the future. Experiments in harmonization and orchestration, in choir-singing, in using electronic musical instruments and such other attempts will come under this category. By cultural music I refer to that broad spectrum which includes primitive music and system of folk music in their unprocessed and undoctored form. Inevitably, there is some overlapping in the new scheme but the virtue of being quality-oriented cannot be denied.

Unlike the current classification this categorization will keep the programme-planner on his toes. He cannot rely blindly on the grades or classes of artists as shown in his registers. He will have to use his sense of judgment in respect of each of the items and then schedule them at the proper listening hours, quality programmes being scheduled for peak hours. Today the scheduling can be made by just tabulating fixed time-slots and the graded artists. Consequently, at present programme-worthiness is not a precondition of scheduling but something that is ante facto. This undoubtedly acts as an invitation to unimaginative, clerical chunk-broadcasting, leaving the defenceless listeners to face the music - they have opinions but no voice!

My quality-oriented categorization has another edge to it. It operates a sliding scale for the artists too. They cannot assume that they will be automatically scheduled at peak hours because they were top-graded once upon a time. In the performing arts there are no annual examinations and no eternal degrees are awarded; performers have to prove their mettle every time they perform. My classification will mean that whatever be the international fame of an artist, he slides down the peak hour scale if and when his item deteriorates. Performers should not be allowed to rest on the laurels

that they have won in the past. Too many of our performers today are superficial, stagnant and complacent.

Why should we be bound by the musicological classification? Broadcasting is a mass medium and should be concerned with the communicative ability of music. Today the need is to communicate a sense of quality, of excellence and not a sense of categories; there are many better qualified agencies to do that job. AIR is not yet effectively aware of the philosophy of mass communication operative in a changing society. It still sucks its musical ideas through the hookah of a medieval musicological classification!

The only drawback in my ideas is that the concerned personnel will have to work more and with a greater sense of responsibility. The buck then cannot be passed on!

AIR continues with the well-worn and outmoded framework. It shows almost a complete lack of flexibility, which is a consequence of not having a clear-cut policy of musical culture. Such a policy would have provided it with norms for taking fresh periodical bearings as to its musical strategies. For example, various policies are possible in musical culture; propagation, education, preservation, creation, appreciation or research are some such basic policies.

Further, one can have equally varied strategies for pursuing these policies. For instance, beaming programmes intensively at select audiences, reaching larger audiences intermittently, using broadcasting as an information channel or as a basis of exchange, treating it as a culture-initiator or as a reinforcing agent, bringing home through it the vague universals or stressing with its help concrete individual differences and respect for separate cultural identity. All these are strategies. Strategies are devised, changed or reshaped for carrying out the policies. Policies are ultimate, vague but long-term while strategies are intermediary and concrete but, comparatively speaking, of a temporary nature. Strategies are inseparably bound up with results. They are to be abandoned when the results are attained or when it becomes clear that they cannot be attained. The music classification we discussed was a strategy dictated by certain ends in view; AIR misunderstood it as a policy. Only flexibility would have enabled AIR to see that strategies outliving their days become positive obstacles.

Other instances of a lack of proper policy and consequent failure to build up a follow-up chain of strategies and measures can be easily enumerated. Finding new talent, auditioning the artists, educating the layman, building the archives, doing some sort of impresario work for budding artists are a few examples. Each of these strategies

failed to yield any impressive result because AIR's efforts are not backed by a clear-cut normative conception of policy coupled with an equally clear enunciation of strategies and measures to be executed with the required thoroughness.

It can be argued that in fact AIR has been pursuing all the aforementioned policies. Statistics can of course be produced from its log books to prove the point. But this is deceptive. First, because taking into consideration the nature of chunk-broadcasting the statistics become less reliable as to the quality aspect. And secondly, the main point is not what has been intended by AIR but what has been achieved. Except the propagation of music, AIR policies have been largely unsuccessful because it failed to perceive the altered situation due to the emergence of other media and continued on its course of fighting on too many fronts. It should have changed its stance quickly when the other agencies and media matured and grew in competence. An essential principle of media operation is this awareness of change in the relative effectiveness of the members of the media family. Duplication in media operation is nothing but clogging the channels. AIR can, for instance, hand over the tasks of the building up of archives, educating public taste, tapping new talent to various universities and regional academies and concentrate on impressario work and propagation schemes. Broadcasting as a medium should be made available to the above agencies without the AIR authority acting as a super-control. In other words, there has to be a decentralization of authority to use and shape the medium as the demands made on it are so varied that AIR will be unable to cope with them for lack of expertise. No single agency can be expected to possess the expertise essential to meet demands so varied. Hence policy-wise decentralization of authority and limited autonomy to the decentralized units is the only way out.

What I have argued so far means that AIR has to change its basic attitude towards broadcasting.

First, it has to realise that it is a specialised agency of the mass medium category and hence cannot afford to operate like any other interchangeable administrative wing of the government. It must have creative administration instead of mechanically functioning bureaucratic cells. The undercurrent of anti-specialization is the main obstacle in bringing this about.

This is best demonstrated in the attitudes of the AIR programme personnel. Being at most superficially acquainted with the fine arts or any of the academic subjects, they are always pruning down their artists/experts or engaging only convenient experts under the pretext of keeping the broadcasts within the reach of the so-called

common man. They are never able to extract the best out of their artists because they are easily satisfied with sub-standard performances and do not have the force of personality and learning to attract the best in the field. Again, as they themselves have not gone deep into any of the fields of culture and learning, they can become aware of excellence only when it is publicised and acclaimed journalistically. They do not possess the talent of nosing out excellence from the fields of latent achievement and contribution. Nothing can be more detrimental to media workers than this lack of moral authority born out of individual achievement.

What might be the genesis of this subterranean anti-specialization? In my opinion the cause is the naive faith in the possibility or desirability of cultural democracy or the equality of potential talent. To say the least, this is absurd. Practical facts of life should not blind them to the truth that a cultural aristocracy is bound to exist and it is bound to play a great part in any medium dealing with cultural matters.

A typical case of this anti-specialist attitude is AIR's indifference to a matter that should be of utmost importance to it: media research. The AIR hierarchy fails to notice its own specialist position in the totality of communicative endeavour. Further, it remains oblivious to the special character of communication in the performing arts. Consequently the media philosophy that AIR follows remains a specimen of anachronism. For instance, it still believes in repetition, obviousness of message and efficacy of stylized content. These characteristics are useful, adequate or even necessary in a simpler society where broadcasting is the sole or main medium operating in comparative isolation. But they hardly remain positive forces when broadcasting becomes only one of the many media functioning in a free field. Under these circumstances AIR can and should become more suggestive, more innovative and self-reliant in the creation of auditory images if it has to succeed.

For musical application of the above reasoning let us take a close look at the phenomena of fillers, signature tunes and musical interludes. A filler, as the name suggests, is intended to fill a gap; but looking at the temporal nature of the medium it should act as a suggestive link. Filler pieces can be stocked more imaginatively and instead of inserting them they can be used more purposefully. As the minimum duration required for the registration of any sensation on human beings is about .55 milliseconds, any filler or similar material amounting to a minute must be taken as a unit of potential meaningful experience and efforts should be made to handle the filler more purposefully. A signature tune has to be an identifying phrase and not an elaborate musical composition. Like a leading note it will create more expectancy. A transmission-opener signature tune, can be slightly more elaborate but the signature

tunes of various programmes must be designed to create a sense of expectancy and tension. On the other hand, an interlude is a self-sufficient musical unit of small proportions. Context-wise it may perform one or more of the following three functions: it may consolidate the mood of the earlier programme, it may suggest the mood of the succeeding programme or it may just act to make a clean break and allow a fresh start. AIR interludes, on the other hand, are casual affairs. All that is music is not to be treated in the same manner. There is no democracy in the realm of effects! To feel for the subtle changes in the demands made one needs a special kind of sensitivity known as programme sense.

What is this programme sense? Programme sense is the negation of casualness about any aspect of a programme. No detail is insignificant for a programmes man. The seating arrangement, the state of instruments, the toning up of the accompanists to the required level, availability of accessories and creation of a congenial atmosphere - these are matters of deep concern for a programmes man in music. A programme man does not treat his material as a commodity but as an organic being. AIR personnel with programme sense is a vanishing tribe.

The chief reason for this crucial shortcoming is the recruitment policy that AIR follows. Like any other governmental agency it relies too much on paper qualifications. It should not, because ability in various arts is too fine a quality to be proved by our outdated examination system. In addition, AIR should devise special personality tests to recruit its personnel. It has to take its in-service training more seriously. Perhaps the staffing pattern will have to be freed from the criterion of seniority, which is an easy way of giving promotions. Let us divorce the monetary gains and the increase in authority that go with promotions. Similar logic should be followed in the case of the underprivileged classes. Give them opportunities to learn, facilities to work and additional incentives, but let us not ignore the capacity to originate, shape and execute ideas. All workers in the cultural field deal with intangibles and sometimes they get a feeling that the dice are loaded against them as far as material gains are concerned. Those who love the work will grin and bear. Media people belong to this kind, or at least they should.
