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RADIO PLAY: THE KOLKATA STORY

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Abstract

Radio play or radio drama is a unique form of entertainment. Far removed from the usual proscenium theatre or the films, it is a format that is totally dependent on sound. The Kolkata station of All India Radio boasts of producing radio plays that has not only enthralled the listeners over the years but has also set a benchmark for this discipline.

Keywords: radio, play, drama, sound effects, Orson Welles, producer

Origin of Radio Play

Tim Crook notes in his article *British Radio Drama: A Cultural Case History* that ‘the first radio drama experiment in British broadcasting history on October 17th 1922 from the research station at Writtle near Chelmsford, Essex in England.’ From the same source we come to know that two years later the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcast the ‘first British play written for the radio medium’.¹ Wikipedia, however, takes us back to the 1880s in order to pinpoint the birthday of radio drama.² But that period certainly did not gift us with any continuity in this regard. Therefore, we would love to focus more on English language plays that had actually set the ball rolling. In *A Brief History of Radio Drama in America* Don Kisner says, ‘Radio drama was born in 1927, when networks began adapting short stories, and even writing original scripts,

for broadcast.’³ He is of the opinion that radio drama reached its peak in America in the 1940s and does not mince words while saying, ‘Radio drama is over 70 years old, and, for all serious purposes, has been dead for 50 of those years, being used only occasionally in the classroom as a novelty or curiosity.’⁴ His piece was written in 1998 and will definitely depress listeners in various parts of the world who are still in love with radio plays.

One researcher of radio plays broadcast from the Kolkata (earlier Calcutta) station of All India Radio (AIR) informs that on the night of 3rd September of 1927 the first programme having features of a radio play was broadcast from this station. He uses the word ‘Micro-drama’ to describe the programme. In the same year the Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society had broadcast two English language plays. One was *The Girl Who Wasn’t* by Ben Norton and the other being *The Folly of George* by Mathew Bolton. These were for the listening pleasures of the British who ruled India at that time. Several plays written in the Sanskrit language was broadcast in the initial years of Kolkata station. The tag for the first radio play in Bengali could go to *Daye Pore Dargroho* written by Jyotirindra Thakur. The play was produced by a group called Chittraa-Sansad and acted in by their members.⁵ According to another source the ballad *Basantaleela* presented by *Natyamandir Sangstha* led by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri was broadcast on 5th December 1927 and could well vie for being the first programme akin to a radio play. The same source, however, mentions that the first, proper radio play broadcast from AIR Kolkata was *Naranarayan*. In fact, a selected portion of the play was presented. The direction was again by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri.⁶ The script was by Khirod Prasad Bidyabinod and it was broadcast on 16th December of the same year. Kolkata was one of the two cities in 1927, the other being Mumbai (then Bombay), to get the first radio stations in the country. Considering this fact it can well be said that the plays mentioned above were certainly among the firsts in the country.

Shaping Production

Parents shape the thought process of their wards; followers are influenced by the style of the forerunners. In a similar way radio drama was largely influenced by the theatre stage. The beginning of radio drama in all the concerned countries drew sustenance from the stage. Ahindra Choudhury, a renowned stage actor of the early decades of the twentieth century, took interest in radio drama and acted in a number of those at the Kolkata station of AIR. He had high regard for this form of drama. Reminiscing about his participation in radio plays he wrote, ‘For me, the actor in a radio drama has a greater responsibility. The audience is not visible in this case, nor do

we have the support of makeup and stage craft here. Thus the actor has no way of making good his deficit in acting. Only proper acting can entertain radio listeners.’ Thus he drew a sharp line of distinction between the parent form and the successor form. At the time when Ahindra Choudhury participated in radio plays, those were just copies of popular stage plays. The plays went on for three hours and were broadcast live. Thus they presented *Prafulla* penned by Girish Gosh, *Shah Jahan* by Dwijendra Lal Roy and *Chira Kumar Sabha* by Rabindra Nath Tagore.⁷

There are, however, more elements in a radio play, the proper management of which can ensure success. Before going into the details we might take a look at an outstanding success that took place on a Sunday dated October 30, 1938. On that day millions of Americans, tuned to their radio sets, were shocked when radio news alerts announced the arrival of cruel and blood-thirsty Martians. It was actually a radio play produced for the programme *Mercury Theatre on the Air*. In order to beat his much popular rival on radio, *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, the head of Mercury Theatre tried to think up something novel. He decided to adapt H G Welles well-known novel *War of the Worlds* to radio. Howard Koch did the job for him. The broadcast started at 8 pm on the aforesaid day and people actually tuned in during interlude music in the Chase and Sanborn Hour which occurred at 8.15pm. They had missed the introduction of Orson Welles as well as the initial announcement which declared that the composition was based on fiction. There were weather report and music capsules broken by news alerts and interviews saying that the Martians had arrived. Those interviews were scripted and recorded in such a manner that they appeared real. People thought that the Martians were actually killing human beings and that even the army battalions were thoroughly vanquished. They telephoned the radio station and wherever they could. The radio had completely befooled them. The next day the *New York Times* ran these headlines: **Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact, Many Flee Homes to Escape `Gas Raid From Mars' -- Phone Calls Swamp Police at Broadcast of Wells Fantasy.** All in all, the play on radio was a resounding success.^{8,9,10}

As we analyse this success it becomes absolutely clear that the seed of the success lay in the script itself. The *War of the Worlds*, had it been broadcast unchanged in its original form would not have commanded such attention. Thus adaptation holds a crucial position in the success of a radio play. A producer is therefore justified in spending days, if not months, in discussing the script with the adaptor until it becomes satisfactory. As a sequel to this analysis we can rightly conclude that the stage theatres that were broadcast live or recorded on AIR Kolkata were nowhere near to an ideal radio play.

In an article in 2007 Manoj Mitra, the renowned playwright, stage and film actor from Bengal highlighted the exclusivity of radio scripts. Drawing from his own experience he narrated how Birendra Krishna Bhadra, head of the drama section of AIR Kolkata had challenged him to come up with an adaptation of *Nana Ranger Din*, a novel by Santosh Kumar Ghosh. Bhadra wanted to see how many original dialogues could be retained in the radio adaptation by Mitra. Without any hesitation, Mitra admitted, he found it extremely difficult to retain the dialogues. Going deeper into the issue Mitra had given another very instructive example. He was doing the adaptation of *Jabanbandi* by Annada Sankar Ray. Impressed by a dialogue in the original story he wanted to retain the same in the radio format also. The only problem with the dialogue was that it was exceptionally lengthy. Radio scripts do not allow lengthy dialogues. When Mitra analysed its effect on the audio medium he had to climb down from his earlier stand and make several changes to the dialogue, in effect breaking it down into smaller pieces. Thus his analysis serves to bring to the fore the unique quality of radio drama script.¹¹

Another important element for radio play is sound effects. Just as special effects can lift the appeal of a film to a great height similarly ingenious use of sound effects can catapult a radio play to a sublime level.

Sound Effects

Interestingly enough, very little literature has been spent in India on analyzing the role of sound effects in radio drama. This is probably due to the average Indian's and especially the Indian artiste's aversion to indulge in any discussion concerning application of tools and machines. As a result there have been discussions on scripts and acting neglecting the critical role of sound effects. Like many of the art forms that we use today radio drama originated in the west and sincere focus on its elements are best found in that part of the world. One video documentary made in 1937 titled *Back of the Mike* showcases the production, use and effectiveness of sound effects in radio drama. The description from a concerned website is reproduced below in toto.

'Back of the Mike is a short film done in 1937 for the Chevrolet Motor Company depicting the behind the scenes look at the making of a Western radio show. This documentary shows the various ways sound effects are created during the broadcast. Rain was created by pouring sand over a spinning potters wheel which sent it down a metal funnel onto a microphone which was covered by a paper bag. Fire was created by wadding up plastic wrap close to the mike.'¹²

The film is available on the Net and offers the viewer a comprehensive idea of the illustrated use of sound effects. Radio plays in AIR Kolkata have many a times but not always used sound effects produced indigenously to good effect. The studios were possibly never equipped with tools equivalent to those that are seen in the film *Back of the Mike*. However, producers did their best to improvise the effects and often succeeded in a remarkable way. An intimate interview with award winning producer Samaresh Ghosh revealed how he used the debris from the junkyard to produce the effects of a mountain-road accident. He put all the pieces on a plastic chair, turned on the mikes and threw the chair to a corner of the studio room. The crash was neatly recorded. Ghosh even insisted on recording the rolling away of small pieces which was done by microphones kept at floor level. Thus the accident came loud, clear and detailed to the listener. But Ghosh was not satisfied. He wanted the listeners to listen to the sound of rolling of wheels of the car damaged by the accident and lying by the way upside down. He used a comb to produce this effect. As he rolled his thumb on the teeth of the comb, putting gentle pressure, the desired effect was created.¹³

Such an endeavour is not very uncommon in the production of play at AIR Kolkata as has been stated earlier. Later producers like Jagannath Basu, Dr. Dipak Chandra Poddar, Asis Giri etc had also made improvisations to create striking sound effects. These are absolutely important in giving the radio play the touch of reality and thereby make it lively.

Multitasking Producer

The producer of a radio play is often required to multitask in order to make his production absorbing. Thus several skills like acting, singing, playing musical instruments, writing and adapting scripts come to his help during the hours of production. One of the great stalwarts of radio drama production at AIR Kolkata, Birendra Krishna Bhadra, was himself a good actor. So was Jagannath Basu who took charge in the mid-seventies. Sukla Bandopadhyay also had a remarkable voice that was often put to appropriate use. Bhadra was a good singer and played a number of musical instruments as well.¹⁴ Bhadra and Baani Kumar had mastered the art of editing scripts to perfection. Bhadra was a celebrated playwright as well. Another great personality associated with the drama section of AIR Kolkata was Pankaj Kumar Mallick. Originally an outstanding singer and musician he acted in several plays and helped to compose music for many plays as well.

One particular play that upheld the acting and production faculty of Bhadra was *Proloy*. Written by Sachindra Nath Sengupta this was declared by Bhadra as the first two-hour play for radio. It was the first drama at AIR Kolkata to be preserved. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of the first broadcast of the play. However Bhadra had thereafter edited it to bring it down to one hour duration. The truncated version was broadcast on 5th June 1959. Bhadra acted in the lead role. He was the producer also.¹⁵

The availability of in-house actors helped a producer in many ways. The budget would come down and it was easier to communicate with actors who were colleagues. Several outstanding plays were produced involving in-house actors. One good example was *Aloy Fera* produced by Ajit Mukhopadhyay. It was historical in the sense that it was broadcast just after Bangladesh gaining independence from the domination of Pakistan. It included several realistic elements like the original speech by the then Prime Minister of the country Indira Gandhi wherein she stated India's endorsement of the independence of Bangladesh. It also incorporated the speech of the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh Mujibur Rahman at the Ramna Maidan in Bangladesh and several snippets from AIR Kolkata's Bengali version of Radio Newsreel. The producer needed sensible acting which was made possible by insiders like Jagannath Basu and Sukla Bandopadhyay who acted alongside famous stage actor Satya Bandopadhyay.¹⁶

National Programme of Plays

1954 is a landmark year in the history of drama production in AIR all through the country. A new scheme was introduced in this year whereby stations in different parts of the country will be able to contribute outstanding plays from the treasure trove of regional literature. It was named National Programme of Plays. The first play to go on air under this scheme was *Chandalika* by Rabindranath Tagore. It was broadcast on 14th July. The Hindi adaptation was done by Hans Kumar Tewari and music direction was by Gyanprakash Ghosh. Gradually several outstanding play from Bengal found place in this scheme. There was *Prafulla* by Girish Ghosh, *Daak Diye Jaai* by Bidhayak Bhattacharya, *Debi Chaudhurani* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Septopaser Khide* by Satyajit Ray, *Jatayu* by Agni Mitra, *Timi Timingil* by Narayan Sanyal etc. The incentive, of course, was more to the adaptor than to the producer. However, when the producers at AIR Kolkata set about to adapt and produce plays from far-off regions they had to

innovate in more ways than one to portray the societal features of the concerned regions. It was a challenge that ultimately enriched drama production at AIR Kolkata.

Varying Themes and Wide Participation

Drama producers at AIR Kolkata had experimented with varying plots in order to keep pace with the times. The efforts, fortunately, has not remained confined to lesser melodramas which undoubtedly are more popular with the masses. AIR Kolkata has indulged in class while catering to the mass. It was not afraid to produce play based on the theme of society's cruel attitude to homosexuality. Dr Dipak Chandra Poddar's play *Sudha-ke Ami Dekhini* treated the listeners to a completely different presentation and implicitly asked for a more humane approach towards homosexuals. In the not too far away past the station had produced heart rendering plays on ragging in colleges or the crushing effects of sound pollution. Thus the drama produced by AIR Kolkata had never been out of rhythm with the times.

The plays based on science fiction produced by AIR Kolkata merits mention. *Septopaser Khide* mentioned earlier and produced in 1975 swept the listeners off their feet. This was the first play to bring Akashvani Annual Award for the station. Samaresh Ghosh also produced a handful of plays on science fiction in his career. Those were absorbing to say the least. In 2008 the present author (Dr Manas Pratim Das) produced a series of thirteen plays based on science fiction penned by renowned Indian authors like Prof Khitindra Narayan Bhattacharya, Prof Aneesh Deb, Dr Bimal Mitra, Samarjit Kar, Prof Jayant Vishnu Narlikar, and Dr Amit Chakraborty etc. The series was sponsored by Vigyan Prasar, an autonomous body under the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. The series was greeted with appreciation from listeners who asked for more.¹⁷

Over the years the drama section of AIR Kolkata has been blessed with the support of well known authors and actors and actresses. Legendary film and stage personalities like Uttam Kumar, Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Geeta De, Anup Kumar, Basanta Chowdhury, Shaoli Mitra and Sabitri Chattopadhyay etc have participated in numerous productions. They had never taken this art form lightly as their published reminiscences testify. When Shaoli Mitra, the daughter of legendary Sambhu Mitra, reminisces about her lead role in the production titled *Koni* where a girl from a very poor family struggled in the swimming pool under the close watch of a never-say-die coach, our heart melts. As the story went, the girl finally made it big at the national competition

and there was possibly no listener who could help his or her tears rolling down the cheek at the end of the play.¹⁸

The drama productions of AIR Kolkata keep up the tradition even in this era where classical broadcasting has suffered huge setbacks due to various reasons. While it brings smiles and tears to the listeners it equally serves the purpose of education and conscientization.

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