



## Scenes from a Radio-Active Age

FAKRUL ALAM

As my siblings and I grew up in the first half of the 1960s, the radio set was the most sought-after device in our house. Till Baba bought a television set for us towards the end of the decade, it was our main source of entertainment, news and small talk.

Waking up in the morning then, we would hear Baba listening to devotional songs on India's Akashvani. Somewhat later, he would be tuning on to Rabindra Sangeet being played on its Calcutta station. Quite often he would hear folk songs—Abbasuddin was his great favorite. On Sunday mornings Baba would listen to Pankaj Mallick teaching Rabindra Sangeet songs (when Pankaj died in 1978, a very grief-struck Baba told me that he had listened to this particular program almost without fail every Sunday—for over 30 years!). The radio was what he went to sleep with as well, for he would listen to Indian classical music at night till he dozed off.

It was only in early evening that Amma would claim the radio set to listen to her favorite programs about the countryside and ways of growing plants and raising poultry. If we children had refreshments with her then, we would be amused by what she was hearing, but not totally indifferent to her fondness for the mofussil town ambience that the radio program revived for her through such broadcasts. Another memory I have of her is listening to the radio as she prepared Iftar to break our fasts during Ramadan. We children would look forward eagerly to the siren sounding or the radio announcing it was time to have the special delicacies she was preparing then after the mandatory glass of water had been gulped.

For some time, we siblings were quite indifferent to these so, so solemn songs, seemingly monotonous tunes, and the quaint programs that my parents paid attention to. We children were mostly indifferent as well

middle of the decade, however, we were all overwhelmed by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. We would argue about our favorites before class, during tiffin and on our way home. "Is there a song like 'I wanna hold your hand?'" one of us would declare. Someone else would immediately counter: "Satisfaction" is so much better and soulful! The radio and sports events seemed to be all the stuff of entertainment and conversation we boys needed outside studies.

On weekends and holidays when we stayed home, the transistor radio set in our house kept changing hands. Saturdays and Sundays, Baba would monopolize the radio till mid-morning. But when he snoozed off around 9 we siblings would take turns in listening to the radio. My eldest sister had the first claim; she would listen to Binaca Geetmala on Radio Ceylon's Hindi songs station—the weekly countdown of the Hindi film songs that had been most acclaimed invariably enchanted her. Then it was my turn to take over the radio so that I could listen to Radio Ceylon's English station "Hit Parade" songs. I listened to the station as long as I could, till my father would reclaim his constant weekend companion for another round of his kind of music, or news on either Akash Vani or Dhaka radio.

By the mid-60s, and with increasing frequency, we started to listen regularly to the songs being played on Dhaka radio station on weekends. Rabindranath had made a comeback on the station, and it was no coincidence that Nazrul's patriotic songs, especially songs about breaking prison shackles and becoming free, were being played over and over on the radio, at times sung by someone so animated and exhortatory like Abdul Latif. The Bangladesh movement was gathering momentum and the Bengali men and women running Dhaka radio station were doing their

the sixties I would increasingly feel left out of the vibrant conversation going on amongst us friends about what had excited them the most the previous evening. Invariably, it was what they had watched on Dhaka television that mattered now. Except for a few class friends, who remained addicted to music and ready to share stories about favorite songs and singers in between classes and the basketball court in St. Joseph's School, most would talk only about what they had *seen* and not *heard*! Wasn't last night's episode of *Danger Man* or *Fugitive* so very thrilling? And could there be anything as crazily funny as the *Three Stooges* episode aired last evening?

Until Baba purchased a television set for us in 1969, I felt mostly left out of all the enjoyment being generated by the television sets in my friends' drawing rooms. Inevitably, radio programs became peripheral to school conversations. After the 6-point movement had gathered immense momentum and when Bangabandhu had been incarcerated, Akashvani's news still claimed attention as a source of alternative news and we still listened to the Binaca hit parade songs on Radio Ceylon or Rabindra Sangeet and Modern Bengali songs on weekend afternoons when Dhaka television had no broadcasting sessions, but that was all the attention time Radio could claim on us now.

And this was the way it was till 1 March 1971, when Radio once again became the main attraction in every Bangladeshi home till the end of the year. On March 8, we all were swept away by Bangabandhu's 7th March speech, broadcast a day late but in a splendid show of defiance by Bangladeshis in Dhaka radio station. True, after March 26 of the year, we had to make sure that the radio set was tuned at a low volume; the slightest sound of troop movements outside would lead to us shutting down the radio completely. But whenever we could, all day long we would listen to the radio whenever we could. From the time we heard the first broadcast of Shadheen Bangladesh Betar, we were hooked to it, for it played only what mattered for us. The narrative being strung together by Radio Pakistan radio and television broadcasts was so despicable!

I remember the excitement with which we tuned in to Shadheen Bangla Betar Kendra day after day during our 9 months' liberation war. The declaration of independence, the stirring songs, the satiric, sarcastic, exhortatory skits under the rubric of Charam Patra, news items about Mukti Bahini victories and Pakistani army casualties gave us all hope and made those of us in occupied Bangladesh look forward to the end of the war. We would listen to Dhaka radio or watch Pakistani television only to get stuff for derisive comments. Much better alternatives other than Shadheen Bangla Betar Kendra appeared to be BBC and/or Akashvani radio broadcasts. All day long, it was radio that sustained us and gave us hope in the at times agonizing, always suspense-filled, and occasionally frightening moments of those nine months.

And that was how it went till December 16, 1971 when finally, and decisively, radio became relegated to a distant second place as the source of news and entertainment. The television set became the supreme source for relaxation from the moment Dhaka TV broadcast news about the muktis taking over Dhaka and showed the Pakistanis surrendering sullen-facedly. Radio was only what we would listen to occasionally from then on!

And now? I listen to FM stations only when doing my constitutionals. But it was on one such occasion that these scenes from a radio-active age that had claimed a permanent place in my memory's corridor felt worth sharing with my readers!

Fakrul Alam is Director, Bangbandhu Sheik Mujib Research Institute for Peace and Liberty, University of Dhaka.



to the news broadcasts we would have to hear in succession on the Indian station and on Radio Pakistan's Dhaka station almost every hour when at home. Only when Dhaka was tensing up every now and then because of one of the many turbulent events of the 60s did I and my siblings pay attention to the news broadcasts—after all, we just might hear on those occasions that schools would be shut down—giving us a day off from the homework to be submitted on that day!

On weekdays, we would have no further exposure to the radio till evening since we would be off to school immediately after breakfast. But the first thing I did there when I met a few of my school buddies was to share our excitement about what we had heard on Radio Ceylon the previous evening. In the early part of the decade we would swap our feelings about the latest songs by Pat Boone, Elvis Presley, Jimmy Reeves, Cliff Richards or Connie Francis and Nancy Sinatra. After the

bit to subvert the Pakistanis and support the 6 points movement and the hartals and strikes being called in their own ways!

On Monday and back in school, I would swap stories about the songs and the singers we had heard with my friends, each of us gushing about what we had heard the previous evening. But our conversation was increasingly being punctuated by news events as well—filtered stories about confrontations taking place between the Pakistani authorities and Bangladeshi demonstrators. Radio entertainment was still everything to us outside schoolwork, friends and sports, but everyday news items on Akashvani and BBC about what was happening in Pakistan were becoming more and more worth listening to!

In 1964, however, Dhaka got its first television station. For a while it did not matter to me and my siblings that we had no television set in our house for the radio still sufficed for entertainment. But in the second half of

## Echoes

BY TASNEEM HOSSAIN



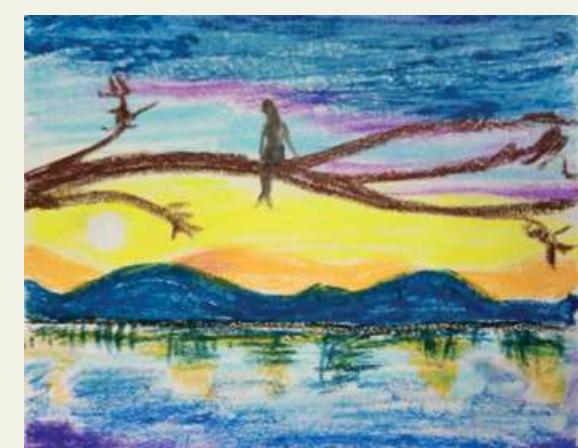
I roll and roll and roll,  
Till I reach my desired goal.  
The branches grow forth,  
Till my body aches and is sore.  
My body turns old.

The fruits on the branches grow ripe,  
It's time for flight,  
Time to hit the roads,  
Repeats many more folds;  
A story that never grows old.

Tasneem Hossain is a multilingual poet, columnist, op ed columnist and training consultant. She is the director of Continuing Education Centre, Bangladesh.

## SHARING MY NIGHT

BY JESMIN ABEDIN



Sharing my night  
In this mild low light,  
With ice and fire,  
Puzzled by the riddle of the gyre,

Hiding behind you  
By turning into your shadow,  
Hiding from what or whom  
I really don't know.

Chasing you from dawn to dusk,  
Have you ever wanted to ask  
What I want from you?  
I'm looking for you.

No sense of the world,  
I'm ashamed of my own sigh,  
Your voice in my ear makes me fly.

Waiting to be your prisoner,  
Oh, waiting is an embarrassing hassle,  
Your arms are my castle.

Confession of my restless heart:  
I don't want to lose you,  
Can you hear me?  
I'm looking for you.

Diurnal dreams can easily  
Turn into infatuation,  
Perhaps it's just my craziness,  
For me it's more than desire,  
Enjoy my love, it is my passion.

I pray that the essence  
Of my presence  
Becomes a Tsunami in your mind,  
Be my Braille, my devotion is blind....!!

Jesmin Abedin has an MA in English from ULAB and is the author of a collection poems in Bangla. She runs her own business but her passion is in writing.