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Radio in India: The FM Revolution and Its Impact on Indian Listeners

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If you ask most people who invented Radio, the name Marconi comes to mind. Usually KDKA Pittsburgh is the response when you ask about the first Radio station. But are these really Radio's firsts? In the interest of curiosity and good journalism, we set out to determine if these were in fact Radio's firsts.

Broadcasting began in India with the formation of a private radio service in Madras (presently Chennai) in 1924. In the very same year, British colonial government approved a license to a private company, the Indian Broadcasting Company, to inaugurate Radio stations in Bombay and Kolkata. The company almost went bankrupt in 1930 but the colonial government took away the two transmitters and the Department of Labour and Industries started operating them as the Indian State Broadcasting Corporation. In 1936, this very Corporation was renamed All India Radio (AIR) and was controlled by the Department of Communications. When India became independent in 1947, AIR was made a separate Department under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

The early history of Indian radio broadcasting in independent India set the parameters for the succeeding role of television in the nation. At Independence, the Congress government under Jawaharlal Nehru followed three major goals: firstly, to achieve political integration; secondly, to attain economic development; and finally, to achieve social modernization. Indian broadcast media was expected to play an important role in all three areas. In those days radio was considered as an integral medium of communication, primarily due to the absence of any motion medium. All the national affairs and social changes were informed through the waves of broadcast media and within no time, popularity of radio spread nationwide. Indian radio proved to be a prime medium of social integration.

The story of FM radio is one of success and tragedy.

In the mid-30s, Major Edwin Armstrong, an inventor who had already devised a successful circuit to improve AM radio, came up with a whole new approach to transmitting radio signals.

Armstrong was clearly a technical genius. Although his life was cut short, he's still considered the most prolific inventor in radio's history.

Even though he had improved AM radio in significant ways, Armstrong was well aware of AM radio's major limitations:

- static interference from household appliances and lighting
- limited audio quality (frequency response and dynamic range)
- Night-time interference between many stations (co-channel interference), because of ionospheric refraction, especially in rural areas.

FM Radio was first introduced by All India Radio in 1972 at Madras and later in 1992 at Jalandhar.

Phase One: In 1993, the government sold airtime blocks on its FM channels in Madras, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Goa to private operators, who developed their own programme content.

Ameen Sayani, one of the most popular radio announcers of Indian Radio, is presently working for Red FM. He attained fame with Binaca Geetmala and Bournvita Quiz Contest and ruled over the airwaves during 1950s and 1960s. His elder brother Hamid

Sayani has also been a radio personality of international fame. The celebrity actor Sunil Dutt started his career in Indian media through Radio. Vijay Kishore Dubey and Shiv Kumar Saroj are also two of the popular radio announcers of Indian Radio. In many countries, non-profit radio broadcasters thrive. They have become the platforms for the languages, voices and views of citizens and local communities that would otherwise be ignored. There are over 1000 community stations in Latin America and over 2500 non-commercial educational stations in the USA. Post-apartheid South Africa, a democracy much younger than India, is currently listening to around 100 community broadcasters. It is this wave of the radio revolution that has missed India thus far. Radio even though many consider it an obsolete medium in this generation, still has its use. People may not hear it to receive news or to send signals but they hear it without even realizing it.

Many broadcasters thought that maybe the time for Radio is over with the introduction of i-pod's and MP3 players but with the beginning of online radio, it is safe to assume that the Radio is making a come back.