



A Century on Air: Broadcasters, Listeners and Radio Politics in/from South Asia

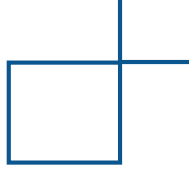
WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

12 October 2026

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO)
Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin

Organized by Anandita Bajpai, State and Society Unit and CRAFTe (Crafting
Entanglements: Afro-Asian Pasts of the Global Cold War)

Introduction



This workshop revisits radio history in South Asia beyond the institutional story of colonial and postcolonial state broadcasters. It is almost a century since the Indian Broadcasting Company first began transmitting in 1927. The papers bring together different aspects (temporal focus, themes, actors etc.) of this media history, though a common question runs through all: who was/could be heard and who was left out? One strand of papers is concerned with contested airwaves: the nationalist “hacking” of colonial frequencies in 1932, broadcasting in the princely states, and the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, through which Bangladesh was “heard into being” from outside its territory in 1971. The second turns to broadcasters and listeners, recovering their voices through vernacular memoirs, radio periodicals and listener-authored film-song stories. The workshop closes by shedding light on the reach of wireless itself. Radio promised to overcome distance, but as can be derived from the final paper on the Andaman and Nicobar islands, dealing with colonial wireless stations unto today’s ocean surveillance, the same promise has turned indigenous inhabitants into noise at the edge of the network. Together, the contributions place South Asian radio in a comparative and transnational frame, showing how the airwaves have shaped publics, nations and their margins.

**Photo: Jyothidas KV, April 12, 2022 © Anandita Bajpai*



CRAFTING
ENTANGLEMENTS
Afro-Asian Pasts of the
Global Cold War



Programme



Welcome and Session I

09:30-11:00

Welcome

Anandita Bajpai

Congress Broadcasting and the Hacking of British Indian Radiowaves, 1932

Kama Maclean

Transimperial Soundwaves, Local Particularities: The Emergence of Radio Broadcasting in India's Princely States

Gianni Sievers

11:00-11:30

Break

Session II

11:30-13:00

Reading *The Indian Listener*, c. 1935-56

Vebhuti Duggal

Radio Memoirs: Lives on the Airwaves and Beyond

Anamitra Ghosh

13:00-14:00

Lunch Break

Programme



Session III

14:00-15:30

Sounds Without Borders: Radio and the Making of Bangladesh

Mahrouba Mowtushi

Geeton-Bhari-Kahani : Listening to Hindi Film Song Fanfiction on the Radio Airwaves, 1960–1979

Isabel Huacuja Alonso

15:30-16:00

Break

Session IV

16:00-17:00

Islands That Listen: Acoustic Infrastructures and the Production of Distance in the Andamans

Debashree Mukherjee

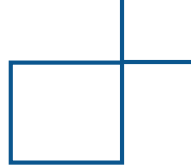
Closing Remarks

Anandita Bajpai

17:30

Dinner

Abstracts



Congress Broadcasting and the Hacking of British Indian Radiowaves, 1932

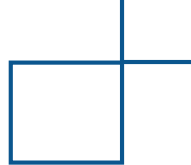
Prof. Dr. Kama Maclean (Universität Heidelberg)

The nationalist history of radio use is thought to have begun in 1942, during the Quit India Movement. This paper details the unknown beginnings of Congress Radio, by locating its formation in the second phase of civil disobedience, in 1932. In Bombay City, an epicentre of the movement, congregation in public spaces was banned, and protesters who disobeyed this were beaten by police or arrested. Given this, a great deal of agitation went underground, evidenced by the defiant and intermittent publication of the Bombay Congress Bulletin, and the audacious broadcasting of nationalist programs by Congress workers on the bandwidth of the Indian State Broadcasting Service. This earlier history of nationalist broadcasting has not been studied in any depth. This paper demonstrates how enthusiastic Indian uptake of wireless exceeded the initiatives of the British government, who lacked the technical instrumentation to locate the transmission.

Transimperial Soundwaves, Local Particularities: The Emergence of Radio Broadcasting in India's Princely States

Dr. Gianni Sievers (Utrecht University)

Almost a century ago, in 1926, the establishment of the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC; later renamed All India Radio) and the subsequent launch of two broadcasting stations in Bombay and Calcutta marked the beginning of professional wireless radio broadcasting on the subcontinent. Whereas the IBC was entirely dependent on the British colonial government and its programs were subject to heavy censorship, its monopoly in British India did not extend to the princely states. Rather, these states retained substantial freedom to establish



their own broadcasting stations within their territories. This paper explores the emergence of radio broadcasting in India's princely states—still a largely understudied subject—through four case studies: Baroda, Bhopal, Hyderabad, and Rampur. Taken together, these cases show that radio broadcasting in India developed through a complex interplay of transimperial circulation and local adaptation. While princely states enjoyed greater autonomy than British India in establishing and operating broadcasting services, they nevertheless remained deeply entangled with colonial structures of regulation and censorship. Radio consequently became a medium through which political authority, cultural identity, and social distinctions were negotiated across the linguistic and territorial boundaries of colonial India.

Reading *The Indian Listener*, c. 1935-5

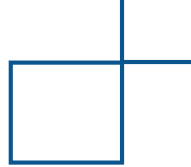
Prof. Vebhuti Duggal

(Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, India)

This paper examines *The Indian Listener* as an intermedial and inter-sensorial object. In so doing, it hopes to examine not merely excavate a history of radio from the periodical or its place within a larger sonic ecology but as a source of a history of listening and a transforming sensory regime.

It situates this radio periodical within a broader set of radio and cinema periodicals/journals/magazines of the time to examine them as objects that narrate and participate in media histories but also as objects that have contiguities and continuities in form, language, and region. In this way, the paper hopes to consider the specificity of Indian and South Asian radio history narratives in the late colonial/early post Independence period and to place them in a comparative frame with radio histories in other parts of the world.

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Radio Memoirs: Lives on the Airwaves and Beyond

Anamitra Ghosh (Universität Heidelberg)

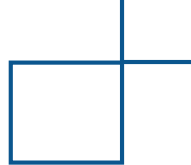
All India Radio employed Indians from across the country to ensure its programmes reached every Indian. The number of radio personnel peaked during the Second World War. They were always on the lookout for “charismatic voices” that could inspire and rally people to the British cause. I focus on three of these popular broadcasters, all of whom worked for the Calcutta Radio Station and later wrote memoirs.

What were their experiences? My paper looks at radio histories through the lens of those working behind the microphones. Through a detailed study of selected vernacular memoirs and letters, I aim to recreate a texture of the past beyond the colonial archive and contribute to the burgeoning body of literature on Indian memory of the war and beyond.

Sounds Without Borders: Radio and the Making of Bangladesh

Prof. Dr. Mahruba Mowtushi (BRAC University, Dhaka.)

Bangladesh was, in an important sense, first ‘heard into being’ before its territorial borders were secured. This paper explores how Bengali radio broadcasts participated in imagining the nation. To understand the sonic landscape that created Bangladesh in 1971, I ask what happens when a nation is sonically produced from outside the national territory that it claims as its own. To understand the soundscape that produced 1971, we have to go back to 1947. I argue that the transformation from colonial radio in the era of All India Radio to Radio Pakistan and finally to the clandestine broadcasts of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (SBBK), the ‘free radio of Bengal’, documents more than a history of changing political control over broadcasting. It documents the struggle over what and who could be heard, how



they should sound and what kind of collective identity could be imagined and consolidated through sound.

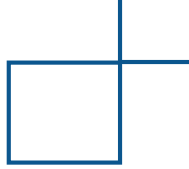
The technology of broadcasting could transmit as well as edit political reality. It could make sounds of dissent disappear by turning a hostile crowd sound supportive. Against the controlled national soundscape amplified by Radio Pakistan, SBBK is generally thought to have cultivated and experimented with a more heterogeneous Bengali soundscape that incorporated accented voices and regional dialects previously barred from the airwaves of the nation for being too provincial and not Pakistani enough. And yet, SBBK complicates as much as resolves the history of sonic exclusion for its heterogeneity itself was carefully curated under conditions of profound spatial dislocation as it moved from Dacca, to Chittagong, to the jungles of Burma and finally to Calcutta. Following the onslaught of the 1971 war, SBBK operated from Indian territory. The question, then, is not whether SBBK created a more democratic and pluralistic soundscape than Radio Pakistan, but how it actually negotiated the creation of an aural map of the nation – through the strategic repetition of certain sounds – from outside the nation.

Geeton-Bhari-Kahani : Listening to Hindi Film Song Fanfiction on the Radio Airwaves, 1960–1979

Isabel Huacuja Alonso (Columbia University, New York)

Geeton-bhari-kahani (story-full-of-songs) is a genre of lowbrow broadcast audio stories—sometimes authored by radio listeners, sometimes by broadcasters—that features four to six Hindi film songs. Focusing on the genre's evolution, its peak years (late 1960s/early 1970s), and Radio Ceylon's program *Panghat Par* (By the well's edge), in this presentation I hope to show that this uniquely South Asian, but transnational storytelling genre constitutes a kind of fanfiction. In doing so, I challenge assumptions about what fanfiction is and invite scholars and

Abstracts



historians of media in and beyond South Asia to seriously consider the significance of fan-authored radio content to popular cultures.

Islands That Listen: Acoustic Infrastructures and the Production of Distance in the Andamans

Debashree Mukherjee (Columbia University, New York)

In this paper I examine the Andaman Islands as an acoustic and infrastructural space in which technologies of communication, surveillance, and environmental sensing have been enlisted in the promise of overcoming distance. I argue that “overcoming distance” is first a rhetorical and material operation before it can be a technological achievement. Remoteness must first be produced, measured, and made audible as an obstacle before the need to overcome distance can feel urgent.

Beginning with submarine cable schemes and wireless stations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the archipelago was stitched into imperial circuits linking British India, Burma, and the Straits Settlements. Today, the Indian government’s controversial Great Nicobar project once again situates these archipelagic islands as a logistical hub, at the cost of its biodiversity, its coral reefs, and its indigenous tribes. Further plans for hydrographic, seismic, and underwater acoustic sensing seek to turn the ocean itself into an archipelagic surveillance surround. In the Andamans, listening has repeatedly cast Indigenous inhabitants as noise at the edge of the network—unheard even as the technologies designed to overcome distance have made the islands increasingly audible. Drawing on media studies’ explorations of underwater sensing technologies, I consider the colonial and postcolonial histories of telecommunications projects in the Andaman and Nicobar islands in order to understand the production of acoustic distance/proximity, and its consequences.