

Quit India Movement and 'illegal' Congress Radio

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THE All India Congress Committee met at Bombay on August 5-8, 1942 to tell the British Government to quit India. Gandhiji gave a *mantra* to the Indians to imprint it in their hearts and 'let every breath of yours give expression to it. The *mantra* is: *Karenge ya Marenge under ahimsa.*' Draft instructions for the public for participating in the Quit India Movement were to be made public "only on failure of the contemplated negotiations... were to cover a period of at least three weeks", said Gandhiji. But on the contrary, Gandhiji was not given time and was arrested. Thus the British Government once again proved its worthlessness before the infinite patience and resourcefulness of Mahatma Gandhi.

Then followed a spontaneous mob violence protesting against the arrest that took place in Bombay on August 9, 1942. The unarmed people became angry, and determined either to remain free in an independent India or die in the process. Their wrath fell on railways, telegraphs, telephones, police stations, post offices and other government buildings because inactivating the means of communications and transport would make the ruling British incommunicado and destruction of government buildings might literally unseat the government. The telegraph machinery which had rescued the British from the anger of the *sepoys* in 1857 could not help them much during the revolt of 1942. Sir Reginald Maxwell, the Home Minister, told in the Central Legislative Assembly that more than 250 railway stations were either damaged or destroyed. By September 15, 1942 more than 550 post offices were destroyed. More than 3500 instances of wirecutting were reported.

In what process the wrath fell on the railway station was recorded by one railway official on August 17, 1942: "One point in this connection, which has emerged from the recent happenings, is that these riotous attacks have in nearly all cases, occurred at stations from which the civil authorities have despatched Congress leaders under arrest; and the mob usually start as the triumphal processions accompanying the arrested men to the stations."

The idea of the Congress Radio was mooted immediately after the arrest of the Congress leaders on August 9, 1942. It would keep the people informed about the progress of their historic revolt and other national and international news. India and the whole of the world were making news in 1942 — the year of Indian revolt and a year of the Second World War. Amongst the Congress leaders who

organised broadcasting Congress messages and programme during this movement, Ram Manohar Lohia was the most prominent. He requested Vithaldas Madhavji Khakar to take the initiative in organising the Congress broadcasting system and fund it as well! According to the Home Ministry records, Vithaldas Madhavji Khakar was a Gujarati, aged about 20 years and hailed from district Una in Junagad State. He was the chief organiser of the Congress Radio enterprises and was responsible to Ram Manohar Lohia. The records further state: "He had not previously come to notice from his Congress activities." V.M. Khakar approached Nariman Abrabad Printer, who was quite well trained in wireless and radio engineering, to construct the Congress Radio transmitting set.

The Home Department assessed Nariman A. Printer in the following words: "This accused has no sympathy for the Congress as such. He is, however, an unscrupulous individual and will not hesitate to engage in unlawful activities for the sake of profit if he thinks he can get away with it. Before the outbreak of the war he held an Amateur Transmitting Licence in connection with his activities with the Bombay Technical Institute."

However, by August 26, 1942 the transmission system was made ready, and the top floor flat of the Sea-View was hired for broadcasting the Congress programme. Subsequently, the Congress was on the air on August 27, 1942 on 41.78 metres wavelength. In addition to Khakar and Printer, Usha Mehta and R.A. Mehta were also deeply associated in making the Congress broadcasting a successful endeavour. A biographical sketch of Usha Mehta is found in the records of Home Department which says: "Miss Usha Mehta is a Gujarati, aged about 22 years, and a native of Surat district. She passed Matriculation in 1935, BA in 1939, LLB in 1941 and was prior to her arrest, reading for MA. She also passed the 'Kovid Exam' in Hindi. She was the lieutenant of Vithaldas Khakar throughout all the stages of the Congress Radio enterprise. She made several of the records used in broadcasts, repeating the speeches written by Ram Manohar Lohia. She also operated transmitter and did the necessary announcing through the microphone. She is obviously an ardent Congress woman but had not come to notice before in this connection."

The Congress broadcasting station had mainly operated from Bombay and Nasik. But the broadcasting station was shifted many times to evade police detection. It started its broadcasting from Sea-View Building at Chowpatty. Thereafter the transmitters were shifted to Ratan Mahal at Walkeshwar Road. Furthermore the Congress Radio went on air from Ajit Vila, Laburnum Road, Laxmi Bhuvan, Sandhurst Road, Parekh Wadi Building at Girgaum Back Road and finally from Paradise

This article is based on "Secret Congress Broadcasts and Storming Railway Tracks During Quit India Movement" edited by Shyamalendu Sengupta and Gautam Chatterjee, Navrang Publishers, RB-7, Inder Puri, New Delhi-110 012 (Price Rs 250 pp. 284) (1988).

Bungalow near Mahalaxmi Temple until it was detected by police on November 12, 1942. Even traces are found when Vitthal Rao Patvardhan brought the broadcasting equipment of the Congress Radio (which Madhav Limaye called Azad Radio) to Nasik. It was kept in Sankaracharya Math from where the 'Azad Radio' went on the air. But fearing perhaps police raid the transmission equipment was immersed in the Godavari river.

Thus at those dark hours of news black-out the Congress Radio rent the air which worked as an inspiration to the masses. It spread the message of secularism, internationalism, brotherhood and freedom. On censorship the Congress Radio on October 20, 1942 transmitted: "This is Congress Radio calling from 42.34. Now we will give you news in Hindi. The entire world is aware that a ban has been laid on the publication of news nowadays. All the news coming from outside into India and also sent out of India are censored. Even the provinces in India are ignorant about the news in the neighbouring provinces. Not only that, but one part of a province is ignorant about the news in other parts of the same province. The news which are gathered by the press, reporters are not even allowed to be published before they are censored by the Censor Officer." In a Congress broadcast of October 19 the Radio said: "The newspapers are nowadays suppressing the truth and are spreading falsehood. You should not read such newspapers."

Thus the "secret" Congress Radio took up the challenge and disseminated the much needed information to the masses so that a 'leaderless' movement could be sustained and deal the final blow on British imperialism. The broadcasts contained national and international news items and discussions.

From October 8, 1942 the Special Branch of the CID commenced the monitoring of the Congress Radio broadcasts. Police stenographers were used to record these broadcasts. The Commissioner of Police, Bombay recorded that: "The task was not easy as the transmission was not always of a very high quality. The daily report of these broadcasts continued up to the seizure of the set on 12.11.42." Thus texts of daily Congress Radio broadcasts, which have been left behind for posterity, project our national commitments to secularism and internationalism and concern for rural people as well.

Answers to Mass Rape

It transmitted the uncensored news of British brutality on unarmed Indian masses especially on womenfolk. In a Congress broadcast of October 19, 1942 it answered a vital question: 'How can we prevent mass rapes of our women by soldiers? What should we do?' At the 9.07 PM transmission in English it said:

Without hesitation we answer: do all that you can. You should of course, try to prevent acts of rape as any other by non-violent resistance; but if you are free and still alive, then kill or get killed. Rape is outside politics. It is the most bestial thing any Indian can imagine.

Secularism

The Congress broadcast propagated secularism and tried to bring about Hindu-Muslim unity. A broadcast beamed on October 12, 1942 said:

We offer Id greetings to our Mohamedan brothers. The war is going on in the world at present. Never was a war fought like this. Lakhs and crores of people are dying in this war. ... On the one side there is the British power and they are fighting for the upkeep of world freedom, that is, they are fighting to keep 40 crores of Indian in their clutch. On the other side there are Indians who are unarmed and weak but are offering brave opposition. Those who love freedom include Hindus, Mohamedans, Parsis and Christians. To speak a lie is considered to be legal nowadays. The greatest lie which has been spoken is that the demand for freedom is being made only by a few people and that 9 crores of Mohamedans are against the independence of India. Such a lie can never be spoken over the surface of the world except by the Britishers. History tells us that lakhs and crores of Muslims of this country have always fought for the freedom of this country shoulder to shoulder along with us and their sympathy is always with us.

British Atrocities & On-the-Spot Reporting

News of the Congress secret broadcast mattered much then to the news-starved population but today also it matters to historians and common man as well to reassess the Quit India Movement. In a news from Bihar on October 20, 1942 the Congress Radio said:

In Muzaffarpur collective fines of Rs 6000 have been imposed on a small village of Sahar. Out of this a local Khadi Bhandar from Rs 5000(?) in which the whole khaddar shall be worth(?) much more has been confiscated. In this village people going about khadi caps have been assaulted by the police and compelled to keep away their caps at the point of a bayonet. In the same village a baby of two years was murdered by a British Tommy for no other fault than that of being a child of a Congress worker. Thus the British onslaught reached inhuman lengths.

Surat figured in the news item of the Congress Radio on October 20, 1942, which happened to be Usha Mehta's birthplace. She narrated the humiliation of women on October 7, 1942:

A number of women were arrested in Surat while a procession was taken out from Gandhi Chowk. 14 girls who took part in it were arrested and pushed into an urban police van. On the way to the Police Station the girls were subjected to molestation by the police with the result that they refused to leave the van. They were subsequently dragged out and a complaint was made to District Superintendent of Police who refused to accept the statement.

The Congress Radio took steps ahead of the then radio journalism to report first hand happenings of the worst affected district of Central province—Chimur. Dr (Mrs) Valazkar, Mrs Vimla Deshpande, Ms Vimla Abhyankar, Dwarkabai Deshpande Devaskar went to ascertain correct facts. Those reports were beamed in the air by Congress Radio on October 28, 1942:

Case No. 1: The following is the true statement:

While I was going to my grandmother's house an English soldier stopped me. I then went to a house nearby where he followed me. There was an old man in the house in whose presence the soldier dragged me and outraged me. I was pregnant with nine months.

Case No. 2: The following is the true statement:

One Wednesday August 19, 1942 my husband and father-in-law were arrested. On Thursday two English soldiers came to me. There was no one in the house, my mother-in-law having gone to take food to prisoners. One

soldier stood at the door and one came to me. I told him that I was a pregnant woman. But he did not listen. Then they outraged me. . . the same night I delivered a girl.

The team of ladies who went to gather news reported that "since the Military entered on August 14, only children and women were left behind after removing all men. Soldiers took possession of all the houses, looted them and outraged the women to their hearts content. In order to escape many women hid themselves. They were remaining in groups of 25 and 30. For two whole days the women and children could get nothing to eat not even water to drink. Since their houses were occupied by soldiers their kitchen and provisions were taken by the soldiers. Small children could not get milk. The people starved. The soldiers hunted for young women—even women who had just given delivery and girls of 12 and 13 were outraged." Thus many unreported atrocities, transmitted by the Congress' clandestine radio, has been documented in this book, which shook the whole India. So daring was the Congress Radio which intensified the people's revolt against the brutal British.

Appeal to Workers & Peasants

The cause of workers, peasants and people had been championed by the Congress. A message from the All-India Congress Committee was beamed on October 27, 1942. It was in Hindi and meant for the workers. They were told that:

The free India will be of the workers and peasants. The effective weapon to open the gate of freedom and break the chains of slavery is hartal. The workers in factories and mines would have to cease work, as their work would further enchain and enslave them, and would be instrumental in killing thousands of their fighting brothers in different parts of India.

There were also a few appeals from the Congress Radio to railway workers; one of them ran thus:

You are helping that government by driving the railway, which has killed 75 thousand of your brothers.

They were therefore requested to stop the wheels so that the movement of the arms could be stopped and the government rendered inactive.

Directives to Soldiers

Gandhiji's own appeal to Indian soldiers went on air on October 27, 1942. It said:

Soldiers are also included in the programme. Today soldiers and the men of the army come to me; they come to Jawaharlal and to Maulana and they tell us that they are with us. They have also known the tyranny of the Empire. I would tell the soldiers that you should make it clear to the government that "we are with Congress. We do not want to run away from our posts. As long as we accept pay from you, our duties we will perform. Your just orders we shall carry out but the order to fire on our own people we shall never obey."

In a very important broadcast of October 26, 1942 the Congress in its *akashvani* announced an Appeal of the All India Congress Committee to the Indians, especially Sikh, soldiers:

Brave soldiers and Comrades! A month ago we received news that about 306 soldiers were shot in Meerut by usurper government but we did not give publicity to this news as it was not confirmed. Confirmation have come from reliable quarters in New Delhi and similar incidents are reported from elsewhere. It appears that there were skirmishes between Indian and British soldiers.

Consequent upon the Indian soldiers' refusal to fire on unarmed country men British soldiers are reported to have practised black treachery in disarming them and making them stand before the firing squad. We are aware that you have got a strong hatred against the British rule but what we need today is concerted action.

Reports about Students' Participation

During the Quit India Movement, the students' participation in the mass movement remained a vital source of inspiration for the masses. Congress' illegal radio did give credence to their efforts. In one news item of Trivandrum the radio beamed on October 29, 1942 said:

The student community is carrying on the fight for freedom with great force. They brought about a successful strike during Gandhi Jayanti. More than 40 of them were arrested. They were very badly treated. One contractor was threatened that if he would not persuade his son to apologise his whole property would be confiscated. The contractor persuaded his son and he apologised. But since then his whereabouts are not known after his release.

The Congress Radio described the scene of Travancore which says that on September 11, 1942, when the college reopened after the holidays, the national flag was flying gaily on the college building as also on the high school. Notices calling upon the students to go on indefinite strike were plastered all over the city. The Secretary of the Students' Federation was arrested for carrying a national flag and shouting slogans. The strike was organised in the Mission College and the student leader was extorted.

Congress Radio and its Internationalism

The Congress stood for world peace and internationalism. On October 20, the Congress Radio broke its silence when a female voice went on air:

The Congress Radio calling. The Congress sends her message of goodwill and peace to all the peoples of world. The message is to all the coloured races of the world who are suffering; to countries who are unable to resist aggression; to countries still resisting the might of repressor and to countries betrayed by their own governments. India is at present suffering. To the world mankind, the Indian people send a message of hope of peace and goodwill. Let us forget today the violence done by one people upon another. Let us only remember that for establishing a truly peaceful and better world, we need each country's kindness, each people's individual acts. We need Germany's technical skill, her scientific knowledge, her music. We need England's liberalism, her courage and literature. We need Italy's elegance. We need the old achievements and the new triumphs of Russia. We need the gift of laughter—beautiful laughter-loving Austria. We need her culture, her love of gracious living. And China what shall we say of China? We need her wisdom, her courage and her new hope. We need the glow and spirit of adventure of young America. We need the knowledge, the childlike simplicity of the primitive people. We need all mankind for the resurrection of peace, for the resurrection of her own dignity.

Likewise the Congress Radio continued to broadcast in the spirit of internationalism until it was detected by the police on November 12, 1942. The 'illegal' Congress Radio, however, could broadcast the message of independence to the Indians—educated or illiterate, peasants or workers in Hindi and English as well. Since the programme was preceded by the song *Hindustan Hamara* and ended with *Vande Mataram* it is interesting that on the night of its seizure *Vande Mataram* was being played at the conclusion of that day's broadcast. □