

Women in Indian Broadcasting

by
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This article by the ex director general of All India Radio(1974-79) describes the specific problems of women broadcasters in All India Radio; at the same time it gives us insights into how women end up being discriminated against even in Central Government employment.

WHEN you visit a radio station, chances are that you will be received by a programme executive or a producer who is a woman, well turned out and glamorous. This is particularly so with Doordarshan. Announcers, newsreaders, compères on the air or on the screen, women seem to be everywhere. However a few rungs up the ladder, you will find them in a miniscule minority. What is true of India applies equally to other commonwealth and other Asian countries. No woman has got anywhere near the top in the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, or in Canada. There have been three exceptions to this general rule. Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin has been the general manager of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation for over a decade. Ms Beverly Wakem was appointed director general of Radio New Zealand about five years ago and she is currently president of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union. And finally Ms Chueng Man-ye, director of Radio Television Hong Kong, in succession to Mr Bhaskar Ghose, is now president of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association.

In All India Radio (AIR) Miss Mehra Masani, who passed away on April 6 this year, was placed at the top of the list in the first selection of station directors by the UPSC after national independence. The men who were third and fourth in the merit list

became directors General in their turn but Mehra Masani got no further than



Mehra Masani

deputy director general. Earlier she had been member secretary of the Chanda Committee in 1965, and a member of the Indian delegation to the UNESCO general assembly in 1968. After being passed over for the third time she took voluntary retirement. Among AIR staff she was highly respected for her decisiveness and efficiency. Nothing but male chauvinism can explain her exclusion from the top post, which was rightfully hers.

Since Masani's time there have been two women deputy director generals— Mrs Thakur, who retired a few years ago, and Leela Bowdeker, who died a year ago, shortly after she assumed charge of her post. Currently, there is no woman at the level of

deputy director general in AIR.

In Doordarshan also no woman has gotten further than deputy director general. One of them, Ms Meera Mozoomdar, retired a few years ago. At that time the post of additional director general was vacant but she was denied it. Currently, Mrs Chitra Narain is deputy director general in Doordarshan (DD). Since the cadres are common between AIR and DD, it does not matter whether a person is posted in one department or the other. So much for the separation of DD from AIR, to which Mrs Gandhi attached so much importance 14 years ago! One step below, in the post of station director, women occupy about 15 out of 100 posts.

On the engineering side the picture is even more dismal. In the history of the departments only three women have reached as high as two levels from the top, that is, the grade of superintending engineer. And even this has happened only during the last three or four years. In a joint AIR/DD cadre of nearly 350 posts of station engineer there are barely half a dozen women.

There are, of course, circumstances in the nature of work in AIR and DD which militate against women. For example, persons in the programme and engineering cadres are liable to transfer. Transfers in any case create problems, related to schooling for the children and housing, not to mention the

dislocation and financial loss, especially since no house awaits you at the other end. For a married working woman these problems are immensely compounded. How is one to divide the family and run two establishments? In all the cases I have mentioned so far, with two exceptions, it is single women who have risen to top positions.

What especially affects engineers is postings at transmitters and at construction sites. A new transmitter frequently comes up at a place somewhere in the interior; a transmitter has, in any case, to be at a considerable distance from a big city. Government has never bothered as to how the staff are going to manage. What actually happens is that they camp in a couple of rooms in the transmitter building and an improvised kitchen is set up, with the watchman as cook. No woman has ever, to my knowledge, been posted on a job of this kind.

Even at functioning transmitters there is a problem. These transmitters are at a distance from the city centre and at some locations, staff have to stay overnight. Living conditions are primitive, to say the least. Toilets in AIR and DD, as in most government offices, are in a dreadful condition. To try and ensure that toilets were reasonably clean was one of my important concerns; a senior woman engineer, whom I had asked to inspect the women's toilet jointly with me, found my request insulting.

These things apart, it was the attitude of the authorities towards women which made things difficult for them. It was in the decade of Dr B.V. Keskar's stewardship of the ministry(1952-1961) that the women saw their worst days. There was an order to the effect that two persons working in AIR could not marry one another without government permission! If permission was granted, it was made clear that the

couple would have no claim to be posted in the same city — it could be taken for granted that the department would soon find them posts as far from each other as possible. Not that such things did not also happen earlier, under Prof Bokhari(1941-46). In 1946 two close friends of mine, Iqbal Malik and Amita Roy, decided to get married. There was some critical talk among their immediate superiors about this forthcoming intercommunal marriage. Amita, being a forthright



Naina Devi

person, went to see the director general, Professor Bokhari. He said that it was their personal affair, but with the partition of the country round the corner, such a marriage would not be wise. Moreover, his view was that having husband and wife in the same office would never do as they would start telling lies to help each other! Amita resigned her job within a week and AIR lost a top flight personality.

Among staff artists, that is, producers, news translators, newsreaders and announcers (the category is dwindling) the position has been different. Though liable to transfer, staff artists are not generally transferred. Transfer was, however, used to get rid of a woman if the authorities wanted to give the job to someone else. During the Keskar regime, appointment of producers was totally arbitrary. In the case of one

woman producer who was served with orders of transfer, the chief producer, Thakur Jaidev Singh, noted on the file that this married lady was "very intelligent and efficient and it was unfortunate that she would be forced to resign since her husband held an important job in Calcutta." To this I added my mite, saying that it was highly immoral of AIR to use such tactics to get rid of efficient workers in order to make room for persons whom the authorities favoured. But nothing could shame the powers-that-be. I must add that this ploy was also used against males.

One form of harassment specially directed against women was the manner in which AIR took note of anonymous letters. The home ministry's orders explicitly stated that note was not to be taken of such letters unless there were strong reasons to the contrary. Yet, ridiculous letters to the effect that a woman worker in AIR had been seen lurching at a restaurant with a male worker was enough to get the moralists at the directorate general working overtime. In one case there was an orchestrated campaign against an attractive woman engineer at my station. I assured her of my protection but asked if she could throw some light on what could be behind all of these letters. She told me that she had received an offer of marriage which she had turned down. She was more highly qualified and better placed than the man. His family was trying to make things hot for her. Fortunately, the crisis passed. In many cases, government officials connived in such foul play. No doubt there must have been a fair number of cases in which women in AIR were forced to give up their careers on grounds like the one I am reporting.

Two things I noticed about women in AIR. For one, they seem to be less competitive than men. As a result, they are more friendly with their female colleagues. It seemed to be common

for women to give each other presents, often expensive ones like *saris*. In professional matters, too, they would help each other out. Such gestures were rare among men.

Secondly, I noticed that when women became heads of stations they tended to function as mother figures. They were often addressed as mother (Ma or Amma) and they often acted the role. In Delhi, where Mehra Masani presided for over a decade, she was always settling the petty squabbles of her male deputies, most of whom were older than she was. In some stations the seniormost officer is the engineer who is supposed to be the head of the office. Even in such establishments I found that the engineer would defer to the mother superior! This role helped women

directors instil a team spirit in the staff and to get the best out of them. Women heads were also more concerned about the personal and family problems of staff members. In all these ways they tended to fill important gaps in our system, which is impersonal and rigidly hierarchical. How do we create conditions in AIR and DD which will enable women, especially married women with family responsibilities, to rise to the top levels in the programme and engineering cadres? Some of the difficulties that they face are common to all those working in the media, in the night shifts. But some are peculiar to these departments. A major problem for women arises because of transfer of one or other of the spouses. Either the woman gives up her job or

the household has to be divided, involving additional strain since the children would normally stay with her.

The ministry of information and broadcasting is notorious for its utter lack of consideration for the welfare of its staff. Persons are shunted off at a day's notice to remote places to set up new transmitters or to man new stations. There is no housing and no amenities are provided. The murder of Lasa Kaul, Director of the DD centre in Srinagar, less than a year ago because he was not provided with security, which had been asked for repeatedly, highlights the government's callousness. What could help women is not a change of policy but adjustments to meet individual needs and to ameliorate hardships.

Some Women I knew in AIR

The writer I got to know best on the AIR staff was Rajni Panikar, whom I first met in Calcutta in 1965. Rajni was a Punjabi married to an army officer from Kerala. Her forte was the satirical novel and short story. In our family we referred to her as “panicer”, because if there was even a hint of a crisis she would be panicstricken. But once in the thick of the fray she was very courageous, looking after her staff like a mother hen. She died suddenly of a heart attack in 1974.

Among other talented women writers I have known are Kobita Sinha and Kishwar Arya, both of them station directors today, but they were recruited as staff artists. My estimate is that Kobita is among the top Bengali poets now. Her work includes about 30 novels. Kishwar, the daughter of a distinguished Urdu literary critic, is a prose writer who has also written plays. She has received awards from UNESCO and the central and UP governments. Listeners will remember her moving obituary programme on Begum Akhtar.

If Mehra Masani has been the most notable figure among women in the programme cadre, her opposite number among staff artists is undoubtedly Naina Devi. Apart from being a top class light classical singer, she is a recipient of the Padma Shri for her services to music and to musicians. When the singer Rasoolan Bai was in terrible distress after the Ahmedabad riots in 1970, and later in her old age, it was Naina Devi who collected funds and mustered other support for her. This is to mention just one of her benevolent achievements.

Another woman, who represents the very antithesis of the cultivated background from which Naina comes,



Raj Begum

is the Kashmiri folk singer Raj Begum. Of very humble origins, she had a voice like champagne, which rivalled that of Pakistan's Reshma. When I came across her in 1953 she was a staff artist on Rs 40 a month and in poor health. Today she is a very important and respected artist in Kashmir which, as people in Srinagar admit, is due to the help she got from Radio Kashmir. That she is not better known is due to the short-sightedness of the Gramophone Company which, being interested only in quick profits, has concerned itself with film music and little else. Raj Begum retired a few years ago, proud that she had been

able to educate her children, one of her daughters being a doctor. Raj Begum, when I last met her two years ago, was in poor health, with the usual ill effects on her voice. Before it is too late the director general of AIR would be well advised to rescue her recordings from the Srinagar station.

I want to end with a reference to a colleague who was not famous or specially talented, but who for me represents what is best in AIR's women workers. Leela Ghosh (nee Awasthy) was a programme executive at the Lucknow station when I was posted there in 1953. I noticed that she was very hardworking and never complained, though many uncomfortable jobs were thrust on her. One day she applied for study leave to prepare for her MA in Hindi. Her immediate superior, a distinguished Hindi poet, recommended that her leave should not be granted and disciplinary action should be taken against her because she had not taken prior permission to continue her studies as required under the rules. Anyway, the leave was granted and she went on to get her PhD as well. Later she married a Bengali engineer in AIR. It was an intercaste marriage and the gentleman was of lower status. No rigmarole of getting permission for Leela! She made her husband resign his job, he could do better in private business. Unfortunately, her husband passed away a few years before she retired. She was seriously injured when a truck knocked her off her moped, but she carried on. Since 1953 there had always been a *rakhi* for me at Raksha bandhan, brought by hand or sent by post. That ceremony ended a few years ago — Leela Ghosh passed away.