

Beginning of Broadcasting in India

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A leading historian once said that we, as a nation, lack the sense of history. In keeping with this 'tradition' when the All India Radio (AIR) authorities decided to celebrate the golden jubilee function in July and August 1977, they never bothered to research about the early history of broadcasting in India. This fact was borne out by the speech of the director general of All India Radio on July 23, 1977 at Bombay. In the Golden Jubilee function, while welcoming the prime minister, Mr Morarji Desai, the director general appealed for funds to write the history of broadcasting in India.

It is not known as to what prompted AIR to go in for golden jubilee celebrations in 1977. Perhaps under the relaxed atmosphere created by the new government AIR wanted some occasion to celebrate, and selected the first fifty years of the inauguration of the Bombay and Calcutta radio stations of the Indian Broadcasting Company for this purpose. It was called 'Fifty Years of Broadcasting in India' and as an after-thought, it was qualified as 'Fifty Years of Organised Broadcasting.'

The AIR brushed aside all the early broadcasting as, in its view, it was all experimental. The fact that the so-called organised broadcasting — a commercial venture of a private company — was also an experiment which failed within 33 months of its inauguration, was conveniently overlooked.

In all the special features put out over the radio and TV and the articles published on this occasion in various magazines and newspapers, there was a mix-up of fifty years of broadcasting in India, and fifty years of Bombay station. And some VIPs even called it 'Fifty Years of AIR!' In none of these writings or broadcasts, however, any mention was made of the early broadcasting stations set up at Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay in 1924.

It is on the records that broadcasting in India was started by the Madras Presidency Radio Club, and Mr C.V. Krishnaswamy Chetty was the pioneer of this venture. While he was a student of the Madras Christian College, Mr Chetty read about the experiments carried out abroad by Hertz, Righi, Branley, and Marconi. During the vacations he used to spend hours and hours in assembling battery cells and wireless receiving sets with 'Coherer'. Later he went to the United Kingdom for higher studies and obtained a B.Sc. (Tech) degree in 1910. He was elected Associate Member of the Institution of Electrical Engineers (I.E.E.) On his return, he joined the Madras Electric Supply Corporation. In 1914 he was appointed as an electrical engineer by the Madras City Corporation. At that time he was a full



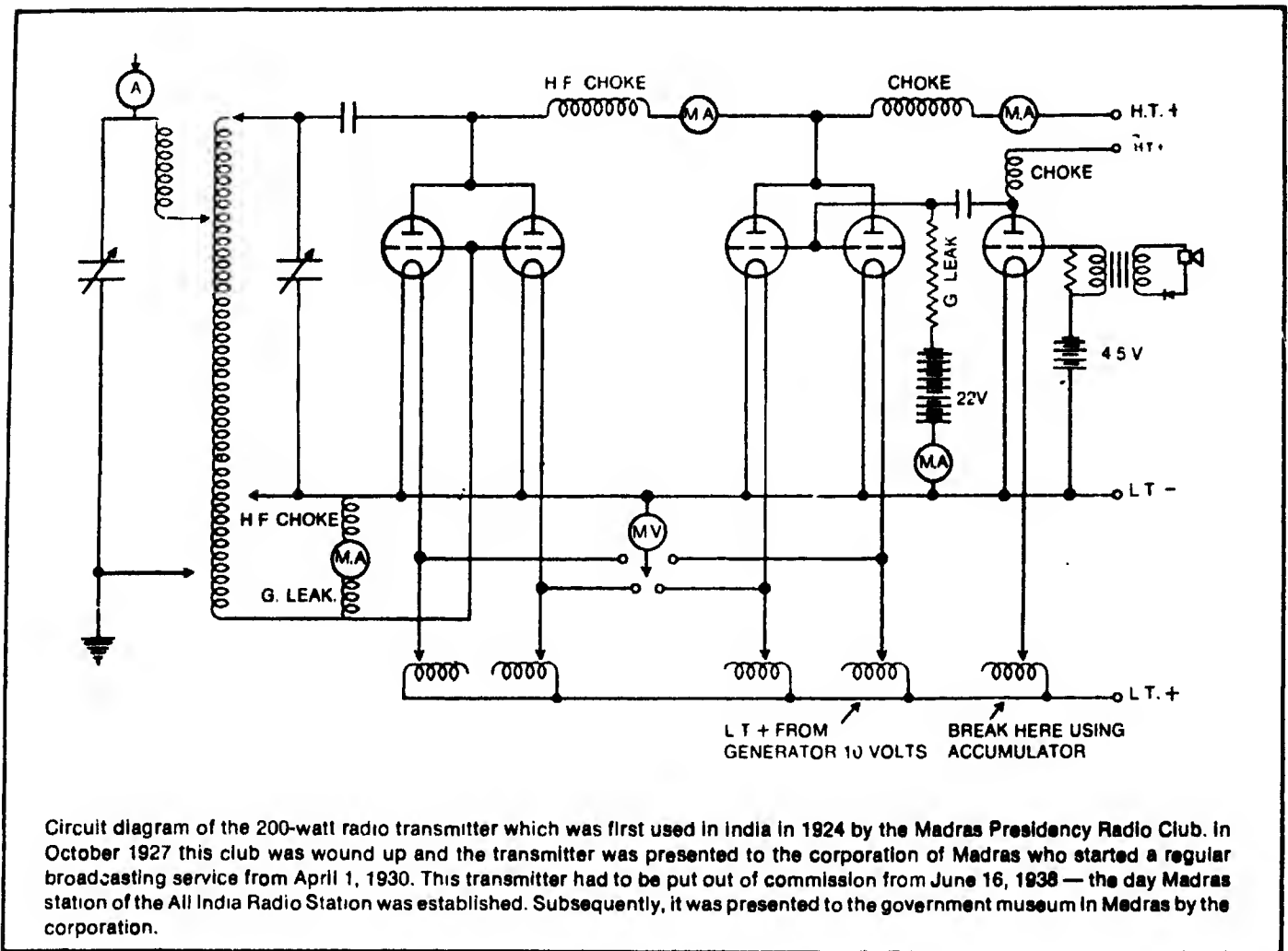
Madras Presidency Club's radio transmitting set which was presented to the Madras city corporation and was in use till 1938

member of the I.E.E. and the secretary of its Madras branch.

While in the UK, he observed the emergence of wireless communication at close quarters. On returning to his homeland, he rigged up a better wireless receiver which picked up radio stations from the UK and the Hague. Since broadcasting was pioneered by the radio amateurs in most of the western countries, he was very much interested in assembling a transmitter for broadcasting in India. But the non-availability of the vital components for the assembly of the transmitter was a major hurdle. It is believed that he even attempted to fabricate triode valves for his transmitter with the assistance of goldsmiths and glass-blowers, though with no luck.

In the beginning of 1924, a representative of the Marconi Company brought a 50 watts transmitter and demonstrated it in all the major cities in our country. His demonstration in Madras triggered the enthusiasm of the amateurs there. Taking advantage of the favourable climate, Mr Chetty founded the Madras Presidency Radio Club with H.E. Viscount Goschen, the Governor of Madras, as the patron. It appears that the club got some hard-to-get components for its transmitter from the representative of the Marconi Company. So much so, within two months of the formation of the club the members assembled a 50-watt transmitter and started broadcasting from July 31, 1924.

Later, this club obtained a 200-watt transmitter from



Marconi Company which, it seems, was a present. This transmitter had two oscillator and two modulator valves with a preamplifier for the microphone. These valves required 24 volts DC for filaments and 1,500 volts for the plates. To supply these two voltages a double commutator generator coupled to an electric motor was used. The transmitter was tuned to 411 metres band and was coupled to a six-wire cage aerial which was 12.2 metres high with a counter-poise of four wires 7.6 metres below the aerial and 2.4 metres above the ground level.

The programmes were transmitted daily between 6 pm and 8 pm. In the evenings whichever artist dropped in at the club, just for the fun of singing on the radio, was handed over the microphone. The improvised studio of the station had a piano, tabla, mridungam, a leg-harmonium, and a gramophone with pick-up. If no artist turned up, the gramophone records were played. Mr Victor Paranjoti and Biostead used to present western music and programmes in English. The names of some leading Carnatic musicians are also found in the list of those who frequently gave concerts.

The club's transmitter was under the charge of Mr T. Kodandaramiah. Apart from maintaining and operating

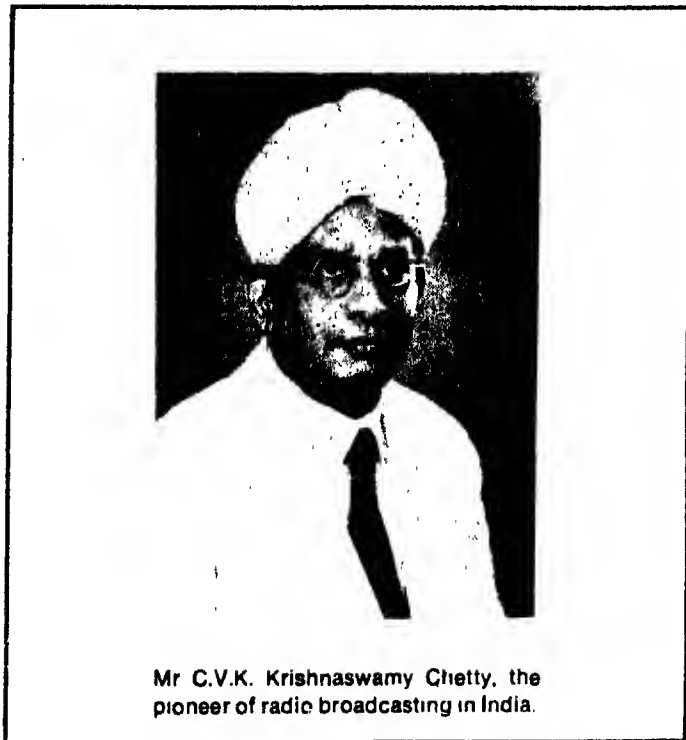
the transmitter, he was also doing the announcements and disc-jockeying—purely a voluntary service. Mr Kodandaramiah was the first broadcast engineer, radio announcer, and disc-jockey of India.

When this station began broadcasting, there were only about thirty enthusiasts who could receive the programmes in their crystal sets. In those days assembling a crystal receiver was a technical feat. And getting a licence for it from the British government was a tough job. But, within a year, the number of licences rose to a hundred. Some of them used a single-stage audio amplifier with a 'diaphragm speaker' that could be heard in a room. The Madras club was getting a share of the radio licence fee collected by the Posts and Telegraphs department. However, the expenses in running this club station were largely met out of the contributions and donations received from its members. Eventually, mounting running expenditure and lack of sustained financial support from the members forced this club to wind up broadcasting in October 1927—nearly fifty years ago.

Very shortly after the beginning of the Madras Club Station broadcasting with call sign '2GR', the Radio Club

of Bengal started its broadcasting with call sign '2BZ'. It was followed by the Bombay Presidency Radio Club—call sign '2FV'. Bombay's 100-watt station was heard in far off places such as Ranchi and Rawalpindi. Its broadcast were in 387 metres band.

The Radio Club of Bengal was publishing a monthly entitled 'Radio' since January 1925, edited by Mr G.



Mr C.V.K. Krishnaswamy Chetty, the pioneer of radio broadcasting in India.

Briggs, with the editorial and publishing offices at East India Radio Co. (Grosvenor House, Calcutta). The 'Radio' was priced Re 1 per issue and was well patronised by the advertisers. It was the first radio magazine of India.

'Radio' issue of January 1926 is available with this writer; it contains articles, both technical and general, and programme schedule of the Calcutta, Bombay, Rangoon, and Colombo stations. It also has a listing of the foreign broadcast stations heard in India. At the end it has a single page 'call book' containing call signs and addresses of the 42 amateur stations in India which were active in 1925. As per the information in this issue, by the end of 1925 Calcutta and three amateur stations were broadcasting regularly on the medium waves with 100 watts power each. They put out concert music, news, time signals, weather reports, etc.

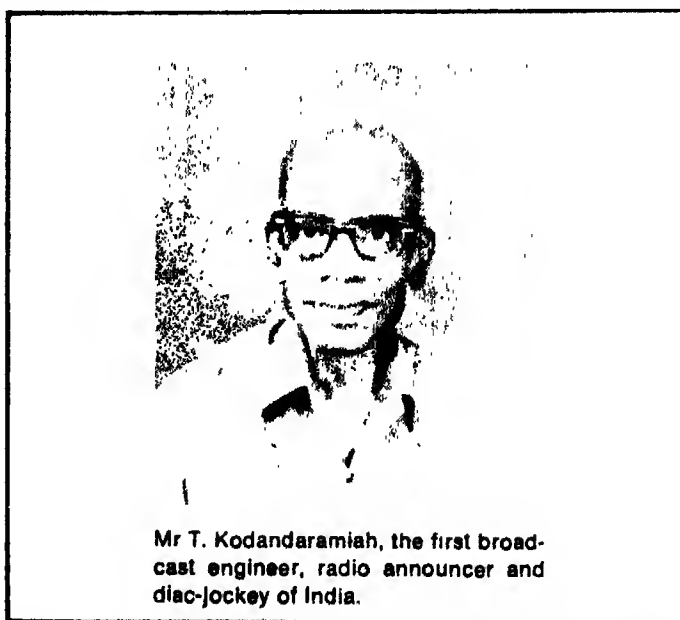
In 1926 the Indian Radio Telegraph Company, which undertook the building of beam stations for Imperial Wireless Chain, received the permission from the government of India to form a separate company for the purpose of broadcasting in India. As a result, the Indian Broadcasting Company with a capital of Rs 1.5 million was formed to set up two high-powered radio stations at Bombay and at Calcutta. This company was to get 80 per cent of the radio

licence fees collected by the Posts and Telegraphs department with the remaining 20 per cent going to the government.

The Bombay station of this company was inaugurated on July 23, and the Calcutta station on August 26 of 1927. Consequent on the commencement of broadcasting by this company, amateurs and amateur clubs were prohibited from broadcasting and were asked to confine to their point-to-point communication only. And the power of the amateur transmitter was also restricted to 10 watts. This put off the Bombay and Calcutta amateur broadcasting stations. Since there was no radio station of the company in Madras, the Madras club radio station was allowed to continue. But due to financial difficulties this station was wound up later, after forty months of fruitful operation.

Transmitter of the Madras club was presented to the Madras city corporation by Mr C.V.K. Chetty; he successfully persuaded it to take up broadcasting as an amenity to the public. As a result, the corporation's broadcasting was inaugurated on April 1, 1930 by Dr A. Ramaswamy Mudaliar. This station had an improvised studio in the annexe and the transmitter on the terrace of the Rippon Building. Since Messrs C.V.K. Chetty and T. Kodandaramiah were both working in that corporation, naturally they were also looking after the transmitter and the entire administration of the station till 1938 when opening of the Madras station of AIR forced the closure of the corporation's broadcasting.

Thus, between 1924 and 1938 Mr C.V.K. Chetty pioneered broadcasting in India. Throughout he was ably assisted by Mr T. Kodandaramiah. When the history of broadcasting in India is written, the names of these two



Mr T. Kodandaramiah, the first broadcast engineer, radio announcer and disc-jockey of India.

pioneers should be written in letters of gold, and Mr C.V.K. Chetty given the due credit and declared as The Father of Broadcasting in India. □