

RADIO

Right Frequencies

Several projects are now exploring how the radio made the world a smaller, better place

When radio became popular around the world in the late 1920s, one of its chief uses was to disseminate state propaganda. No one could have imagined that this very tool would become an accessory in thawing cultural differences, and lead to interesting exchanges of perspective. At the peak of the Cold War, for instance, a generation growing up in Madhepura (Bihar) was glued to the transistor. Radio Berlin International (RBI)—the foreign broadcasting station of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany—was the source of news for many listeners' clubs in Bihar, including the Lenin Club in Madhepura chaired by Arvind Srivastava. In 1990, after the reunification of Germany, the club and RBI both, sadly, withered away.

Going through RBI's archives, Berlin-based academic Anandita Bajpai discovered the correspondence between the radio station and the listeners' clubs. She was struck by its intimacy, the unlikely friendship. Eventually, Bajpai managed to locate Srivastava. "I googled him, knowing that he was a poet and a part of the Bihar

Progressive Writers' Association," Bajpai recounts during a video chat. In Madhepura, Bajpai discovered in the attic of the Lenin Club, RBI paraphernalia and, with it, a forgotten exchange between two radically different cultures. This became one of the core chapters in her recent book, *Cordial Cold War*, and a documentary, *The Sound of Friendship: Warm Wave-lengths in a Cold, Cold War*.

There are today more projects like Bajpai's that are all trying to examine how sound has played an essential role in building intimacy between cultures. Historian Isabel Huacuja Alonso is working on a book called *Radio for the Millions* that looks at radio broadcasting in Hindi and Urdu between the years

1920 and 1980. Former radio journalist Syma Tariq, who is currently pursuing her PhD at CRiSAP (University of Arts, London), has also collaborated with Colomboscope (colomboscope.lk) on a six-part radio series, *A Thousand Channels*. This features talks, music, poetry from places such as Assam and Bangladesh, and even Australia. ■

—Tatsam Mukherjee



BAJPAI WAS STRUCK BY THE INTIMACY IN THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE EAST BERLIN RADIO STATION AND THE LISTENERS' CLUBS

