Subscribe to Jubilaum! 4 issues for 4 euros! Click here!

LONG READ

The radio station at the heart of an India-GDR friendship

The untold story of a historical bonding is now coming to light.

Anand Srivastava, photographed in 2015. Rundfunk für Indien (Radio for India) in the 1980s/Courtesy: Anandika Bajpai Pvt. Ltd.

By Gowri Sharma
11 Jun 2022

Listen to this story:

Berlin, Germany – The affinity between a vanished and transitional period in global politics. The end of the Cold War was dissing the world order. The Berlin Wall was gone and traditional economic politics was being ushered in, and India was ending following the assassination in 1984 of its prime minister Indira Gandhi.

KEEP READING
- Palestine endangered: A new face for local radio
- Israel's war for right attacks in Germany express fears
- How did the fall of the Berlin Wall impact Germans of colour?

Keen to keep up with global current news and affairs, Arvind Srivastava, then a young man working in the Indian Embassy in East Berlin, was tasked with producing a weekly Indian state of affairs, would gather daily with a group of fellow students. Together, they would tune in to Radio Berlin International (RBI) and its Hindi-language socialist-tilted big-radio programmes.

From 1959 until German reunification in 1990, RBI served as the German Democratic Republic's (GDR), or East Germany's, international radio broadcaster, transmitting news, views and culture across the world through its multilingual broadcast platform.

For Srivastava, now 87, and a writer and poet, RBI played a pivotal role in illuminating his global vision during the Cold War.

"In the eighties, most of the students I met were undergraduate or postgraduate students from Third World countries, who were in the process of information technology, radio was the only practical medium," he tells Al Jazeera.

"When the world was divided into two camps, by nature our country was very close to Soviet ideology. We were curious, and it was a matter of urgent pride for us to be part of the global solidarity against imperialism, colonialism and racism."

Srivastava founded the local listeners' club, also known as a Lesen-club, in Hallbergmoos. The club was one of many across India's Hindi speaking regions including Punjab and Haryana in the north, Bihar in the east, and the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Listeners and authors who shared the GDR's political values listened to RBI together.

The private screening of the film "The Sound of Friendship: Wenn Wasserträger in Berlin. Later Wap" brought together former colleagues from the GDR's RBI Courtesy: Lalitha Gopal Menon/Gowri Sharma

'Entangled history'

But these listeners were more than just consumers of a state-media mouthpiece. Their interactions with the Hindi-speaking East German moderators, which played out through correspondence and via the airwaves, led to them actively shaping what the station broadcast.

They represent what has been described by Indian researcher and academic Anandika Bajpai as the "truly entangled history of India-GDR relations" that still reaches from today, more than 30 years after RBI stopped airing.

Advertisement

Your News, Your Way
Sign up to stay updated with your our global commentary.
SIGN UP NOW

Sign up for Al Jazeera
Week in the Middle East
Your local newspaper page all in one!
E-mail address
Sign up
By signing up, you agree to the Privacy Policy.

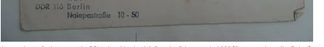
ADVERTISEMENT
The content is created and maintained by third parties, and imported onto this page to help users provide their email addresses.
Discover the latest business, work, personal planning, and more.
What is the latest on Ukraine – Russia?
Scientists and Artificial Intelligence Discover Hidden Patterns in Interactions
Big Tech trends on responsible investing objectives
The Latest Market Insights from The World's Finance Leaders – Experience Economics
TAMPON

Press conflict in Israel's Marjeya has 'completely ruined' businesses
READ MORE

Solar-Unternehmer erfindet "Trick"

"Even earlier in some Indian homes, people would gather daily with a group of fellow students. Together, they would tune in to Radio Berlin International (RBI) and its Hindi-language socialist-tilted big-radio programmes.

"Even those who were not part of the Lesen-club, or Lesen-Kreis, in Hallbergmoos, Munich, Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden and other places,



An envelope of a letter sent by RBI to local Lenin club founder Srivastava in 1982 [Courtesy: Anandita Bajpai]

Bridge between past and present

German reunification in 1990 led to the closure of the station with it being absorbed under its West German counterpart Deutsche Welle as the country's main international broadcaster that remains on air today.

Advertisement

Wella Professionals Notino

Wella Professionals: Haarpflegeprodukte

Notino

Jetzt einkaufen

The station's closure was a sad moment for both RBI's staff and listeners, a sentiment that was shared at the private screening at the Funkhaus.

Screened in front of more than 100 people, the crowd included a number of people from RBI's past, including former RBI director Klaus Fischer.

At a reunion of sorts for former employees in their former workplace, the story's protagonists spoke about how good it was to see this history finally being told.

"When I visited India after the station's closure, former fans said that while they were all happy about German unification, they missed RBI. This, alongside now with the film, illustrates the importance of RBI, the long lasting, personal relationship between journalists and listeners," says Imhof, who found the reunion an emotional experience. "It also shows how we still share the same human ideas and the feeling of one community."

There are plans, pandemic permitting, to take the film across Germany and India. The film has since been dedicated to Srivastava's wife Poonam Lata Sinha and father Harishankar Srivastava "Shalabh", who both passed away from COVID after the film was made.

Going forward, Bajpai says she will continue to work on furthering the oral, visual and written archive on the cultural links that remain untold.

"What I find more sort of striking about these stories, is that at the end of the day, it's about individual and collective human recognition. A lot of the people from that time have felt that their voices have disappeared and I think this kind of research places them back on the map in more ways than one," she says.

Back in Madhepura, Srivastava continues to use his role to raise awareness about the shared history, having recently overseen an exhibition of memorabilia in his hometown that is due to be shown again next year.

"The roots of Indo-German friendship are very deep and spread across the fields of education, literature and research. The film can play an important role in giving new heights to the relations between our two nations and is a bridge between the past and the present," he says. "It is a strong start, but there is still much of this historical narrative yet to be told."

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA

ADVERTISEMENT

This content is created and paid for by advertisers and does not involve Al Jazeera journalists.

Brasiliens Aktien und der Ölpreis: Aktivierung des Turbomodus?
Franklin Templeton

Brasiliens Aktien und der Ölpreis: Aktivierung des Turbomodus?
Franklin Templeton

The latest trends on responsible investing
MarketViews

What is the latest on ETFs?
MarketViews

Elevate your trading today. 81% of retail CFD accounts lose money.
FOREX.com

LISTEN TO THESE PODCASTS

From: The Take
In a new space race, who's in and who's out?
Are we entering a new space race? Later this month, Japan aims to land a probe on the moon's south pole. If it's successfu...

From: The Take
Netanyahu calls for control of Egypt-Gaza corridor
We are bringing you updates on Saturday and Sunday as the war on Gaza continues. Israel's Prime Minister has called again ...

From: The Inside Story Podcast
Can a divided EU have any meaningful policy on Israel's war on Gaza?
The European Union is divided on Gaza. Germany fully supports Israel. while others like Spain, Belgium and Ireland are cal...

RELATED

Revisiting Germany's genocide apology to Namibia
The Herero and Nama people continue to demand justice for Germany's colonial atrocities from more than a century ago.
24 Nov 2021

Palestine underground: A new face for local radio
How Radio Alhara is taking a grassroots approach to shaping a new landscape for protest, culture and local journalism.
30 Oct 2021

'We're afraid': Far-right attack in Germany reignites fears
Berliners are fearful of increased far-right violence following deadly attack in Hanau targeting migrants.
21 Feb 2020

How did the fall of the Berlin Wall impact Germans of colour?
Non-white Germans say their euphoria over unification was short lived as racist dynamic unfolded after historic event.
8 Nov 2019

MORE FROM FEATURES

Ethnic conflict in India's Manipur has 'completely ruined' businesses

Remembering Issa al-Souri, a little boy killed when Israel bombed a church

Season of intimidation: Attacks on Ghana press escalate ahead of 2024 polls

UEFA set to 'lose power' but will football's Super League take off?

MOST READ

Dozens of dead, wounded rushed to Al-Aqsa Hospital amid Israeli bombing

Blinken convinced of path to peace, despite killing of Hezbollah commander

Alaska Airlines warned of issues with Boeing plane before blowout

OPINION
Putin is starting 2024 from a position of strength

© 2024 Al Jazeera Media Network