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Forging a Nation on Air: Radio and the Early National Soundscape in East Pakistan (1947–1952)

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Abstract

As All India Radio Lahore station signed off its programme on the eve of 14 August 1947, a new voice of a new nation was heard. Thus was born Pakistan's national soundscape. Radio brought new promises to bind together a people separated by culture, geography, and language. In the first decade after its birth, Radio Pakistan heralded itself as a transformatory tool with which the build the new nation, beginning with immediate plans to turn Urdu into a lingua franca, to employ Islamic motifs into the nation's conscience and sound out nationalist sounds and requiems to invoke rituals of national cohesivenes. Yet these efforts soon revealed deep fissures. In Dacca[1], Tagore's ballads continued to haunt West Pakistan despite prohibitions. In Karachi, Zulfikar Ali Bukhari trained broadcasters in an ornate Urdu that was alien even to many in the West. The national anthem, composed in stylized, Persianized diction, was received as distant and foreign. By following these debates over anthem, language, and song, this article argues that the project of forging a unified national soundscape was, from its very beginning, a project laden with tensions — one that already anticipated the fractures that would later unmake the nation.

Keywords

Partition, Radio, Pakistan, Language, Bangla, Urdu

[1] I retain the old spelling 'Dacca' as it was known before 1982.

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Introduction

Nations, when newly born, often begin with silence: borders are drawn on paper, signatures exchanged in rooms, and flags raised. Yet these gestures, for all their symbolism, do not immediately resound in the ears of the people who are meant to belong to the new nation. For Pakistan in 1947, it was the radio that filled this silence. The microphone became the instrument through which an imagined community was to be conjured: sounds and voices stitched across the ether into a seeming fabric of unity. When a nation is willed into existence, its initial mark is carried on and attested by sounds and hence onto a soundscape.

This paper draws on R. M. Schafer's foundational concept of the "soundscape" from the 1970s, referred to as a "sonic environment" or "sonic landscape" that pertains to acoustic ecologies. This paper is also in dialogue with the works of Emily Thompson and David Hendy, by way of which I approach "soundscapes" as not just sets of sound or noise, but to think of "soundscapes' as sonic atmospheres, and acoustic resonances that influence and shape how we think about the social concerns pivotal to the history of modern Bengal. Sounds are intrinsic to how we understand history; sounds matter as much as sights, as both carry and convey how we understand history and how we situate ourselves within that history.

Whereas soundscapes are formed because of specific, individuated sounds, I argue that the concept covers and captures far more nuanced complexities of historical and cultural moments. Both Hendy and Thomson point out that there is something almost palpable and definite about soundscapes in that these tend to be produced due to human actions, thereby making soundscapes revelatory of human actions. Soundscapes are intrinsically connected to our emotional lives; they shape our moods, actions and dispositions. In this paper, I demonstrate that soundscapes should not be relegated to the backgrounds of history; for soundscapes speak volumes about a people's social, cultural, emotional and intellectual

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capabilities and aspirations. If we listen closely to certain soundscapes, generated during certain periods and epochs, we gain insight into how history unfolded, how certain sounds gave meaning to people's lives, and how the acoustic landscape is revealing of how people felt, thought and acted during crucial historical junctures.

At midnight of 14 August 1947, All India Radio Lahore aired its closing remarks. This was a pivotal moment in the history of South Asia, for it marked a radio station signing off from the airwaves to bind itself to another new nation altogether. Mainstream listeners bore witness to that historic moment as they heard a series of sounds, jingles and voices heralding the birth of Pakistan. The first announcement broadcast from Lahore was in English, the next was in Urdu, followed by a Bangla transmission from All India Radio Dacca, which aired a recitation from the *Qur'an* and Bangla songs. The nation thus began with a polyphony: a collective moment of linguistic unity in which Urdu, Bangla, English, and Arabic coexisted, giving resonance to the earliest national soundscape, even though, within these inaugural sounds, lay later seeds of discord.

Radio Pakistan was tasked with a monumental responsibility: to turn a linguistically and geographically diverse populace into a single, unified community. Urdu, spoken natively by barely three per cent of Pakistanis in the West, was installed as the sonic emblem of unity. Islamic motifs were enlisted to provide moral and spiritual coherence. Songs of loyalty and belonging were broadcast as rituals through which citizens might learn to feel for a place they had never visited, or for fellow citizens they would never meet. But as with all rituals, there was a gap between intention and reception. The very soundscape designed to unify was also experienced as alien, distant, and sometimes incomprehensible by people in both wings of the new nation.

In Dacca, Rabindranath Tagore's ballads continued to reverberate on air despite later

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official restrictions, their melodies a reminder that Bengali culture could not be assimilated so easily. In Karachi, Zulfikar Ali Bukhari, an icon in South Asian broadcasting and later the director of Radio Pakistan in 1947, who, trained in the exacting elocution of the BBC, insisted on transmitting from radio a Persianized Urdu of the Lucknowi school that sounded grand and dignified but which most listeners could barely follow. Even the new national anthem, written by Jhallandiri, with its heavily stylized diction, was mocked in the press as a composition intelligible only to the educated elite. In the quest to forge a national voice, what emerged was a chorus of unease — Bengalis feeling marginalized, Punjabis and muhājirs[2] assuming authority, and ordinary listeners turning to Radio Ceylon and All India Radio for songs and news broadcasts that they could comprehend and appreciate.

This article tells the story of those first years, between 1947 and 1952, when the national soundscape of Pakistan was not yet fixed but contested, improvised, and unstable. I trace the history behind the inaugural broadcasts, the contested debates on the nature and language of the national anthem and national language, and the sonic struggles between Bangla and Urdu over the airspace of Pakistan, to demonstrate that radio was both a tool of state power and a platform for cultural resistance and resilience. If Benedict Anderson imagined nations as communities of print, Pakistan reveals a different story: a nation that sought to imagine itself in sound, only to find that sound had ways of slipping from control. In what follows, I examine how Radio Pakistan's early experiments in forging a national soundscape reveal the paradoxes of nation-making. Sound could bind, but it could also fracture. It could inspire reverence but also mockery. In these sonic tensions, we find not only the story of how a nation tried to speak

[2] Muhājirs, meaning "migrant" in Urdu, are usually Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated from North India to East and West Pakistan during the 1947 partition.

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itself into being but also an anticipation of the fractures that would one day unmake it.

This paper asks: How did Radio Pakistan attempt to forge a unified national soundscape, and how did tensions over language, song, and broadcast practices reflect broader struggles over cultural authority and belonging? By examining inaugural broadcasts and debates over Urdu and Bangla, it traces the ways sound both unified and fractured the emerging nation.

First Sounds of Independence (1947)

At the stroke of midnight, when the map of the subcontinent was abruptly redrawn, the airwaves too were partitioned. In Lahore, the announcer Zahur Azar declared in English that listeners were now tuned to the Pakistan Broadcasting Service. Mustafa Ali Hamadani followed in Urdu with words that attempted to be both factual and momentous: "This is Pakistan Broadcasting Service, Lahore. We now bring to you a special programme on 'The Dawn of Independence'". In that moment, an abstract entity — a state defined on paper and in treaties — sought to become audible.

In Dacca, a similar ritual unfolded an hour later. The Bengali playwright Nazir Ahmed announced the inauguration of the Pakistan Broadcasting Service, his words accompanied by a recitation from the *Qur'an*. Then came the voice of Abbasuddin Ahmed, the celebrated folk singer, whose first songs for Pakistan were sung in Bangla, most notably, "Shokol desher cheye piyara" followed by an Urdu nationalist song, "Jami ferdous, Pakistan ki hogi zamane mein" (Ahmed 2014, 131). Abbasuddin's performance could be seen as an act of deep national symbolism as it nodded to the Bangla and Urdu-speaking peoples of the new nation. The usage of Urdu on air signalled the emphasis on pan-Islamism, while the Bangla songs acknowledged and resonated with the nearly sixty per cent of the nation's eastern population in Bengal. Both

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sounds mattered, for both languages were intrinsic to the new nation.

These are what we call sounds that formed the national soundscape broadcast to air and imply a sense of national unity. The sequence of sounds — English, Urdu, Bangla, and Qur'anic Arabic — was meant to be inclusive, as though the air itself could reconcile the distances of geography and history. But even here, fissures were audible. From the airwaves of the Lahore station, the emphasis fell on Mohammad Iqbal's Tarana-e-Milli, a poem steeped in Persianized Urdu and pan-Islamic longing, envisioning China, Arabia, and India as part of a boundless Muslim geography. In Dacca station, the familiar cadences of Bangla folk music reminded listeners of the deltaic soil and riverine culture from which they drew identity. The Lahore broadcasts projected a universalist Islam; Dacca sounded local, earthy, and rooted to the Bengali sense of self. Thus, even at the moment of unity, divergent sonic imaginations of Pakistan were already audible.

Figure 1: The 1951 insignia of Radio Pakistan, designed by Chughtai

The insignia designed by Abdur Rahman Chughtai for Radio Pakistan in 1951 captured

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this ambition and its contradictions (figure 1)[3]. With a crescent moon positioned at the top and the symbol of the evil eye at the base, the insignia took the form of a bird in flight — most likely the shaheen (the falcon), so central to Iqbal's poetry. Within it was inscribed a powerful Qur'anic injunction: "Speak true to the people" (Surah al-Baqara, 2:83). The design is simply stunning for its compactness and geometry, as it harmoniously envelopes multiple implications. The insignia of an offering in poetical economy and modernist beauty, while at the same time, inlaying the design with the moral junctions of the ummah. It demonstrates a multi-sensorial need to listen, watch and disseminate truth.

But the thorny questions of who or what exactly the "people" were and in what language this moral "truth" is to be spoken and shared were not raised. The precise placement of the evil eye at the centre of the insignis creates further drama. It suggests that Radio Pakistan is more a broadcaster of sounds and voices, but that it is imbued with the god-like omnipresent power to watch over, listen and know its people. It signals reassurance and faith in sound. However, there is also the unmistakable injunction of surveillance attached to the insignia's multisensoriality. The gaze of the evil eye, then, can be both reassuring and perilous. Lofty, dramatic and grand in design, the insignia of Radio Pakistan suggested that the airwaves of the new nation was already teeming with a multiplicity of sounds, voices and implications and that radio had arrived to create a coherent narrative from it.

Let us not forget that the first years following independence witnessed radio become more than a tool of communication between the far-flung regions of its eastern and western regions. A new self-image was thus inaugurated vis-à-vis radio. What else could enact sovereignty if not to speak and to sound out through the state organ of the radio? And if

[3] Celebrated as a national artist, Chughtai also designed the logo of Pakistan Television, depicting a geometric hologram of a peacock.

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speaking was so significant, imagine huge groups of people tuning in to listen to the nation's sounds—how else can a new nation create an immediate sense of belonging? One of the questions or concerns that listeners in the early days of Radio Pakistan did not consider right away, but which led to irascible debates, was this: Is this what Pakistan had promised to sound like, and by implication, promise its people?

The Language Question in East Pakistan

Difficult questions about national identity and cultural continuity were raised among East Bengalis in the early years following independence. The question of what was to be the national language of the nation became a focal point of contention. The state gravitated towards the dominance of the western wing of the nation as the seat of political and cultural dominance, even though Bangla was the lingua franca of the majority of the population in the East. The need to assert a central and unified national identity was of paramount importance, and language became an inevitable point of debate that illuminated broader and more perilous tensions that would slowly surface in the history of Pakistan.

Several events led to these escalating tensions. The first was when students at the University of Dacca staged vociferous protests in December 1947, insisting that Bangla be declared the national language of Pakistan. Three months later, these tensions worsened when Governor-General Muhammad Ali Jannah, on a visit to Dacca on 21 March 1948, declared that Urdu was to be the state language. Jinnah's declaration was seen by Bengalis as a complete dismissal of Bangla. Jinnah's visit led to widespread grievances that would plant seeds for bigger movements and institutions that would take up the issue of language. One such organization was the Tamaddun Majlish and the All-Party State Language Action Committee that quickly mobilized public opinion, united students, intellectuals and political leaders around

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the debate of promoting Bangla for state language. This culminated in the tragic denouement of 21 February 1952 when police opened fire on a group of student demonstrators, killing many. The day would later be memorialized as the Language Movement Day in post-independent Bangladesh as a symbol of Bengali cultural sovereignty and resistance to outside encroachments.

The language debate led to the formation of the East Bengal Language Committee in 1949. It was tasked to deliberate on the future of Bangla in the social, political and educational spheres in the East. Members of the Committee included both scholars and students, but also bureaucrats and political leaders who were concerned with the state's stance on Bangla. We know that the discussions by the Committee exposed both subtle and overt forms of control in the state's language policy. One of the crucial proposals that the Committee considered was the proposition to Arabize the Bangla script, and with it, a plan to systematically shift the usage of sadhu-bhasha, the Sanskritized form of Bangla, to chalit-bhasha, the colloquial registers of Bangla

The state's proposal to reform the Bangla script was framed in such a manner that it evoked the need to modernize Bangla. Supporters within the Committee pointed out that the usage of Arabic orthography would facilitate a closer alignment with Urdu and lead the way to a more cohesive sense of Islamic cohesion between East and West Pakistan. While the suggestion is pragmatic, given the complex linguistic makeup of Pakistan, the implicit aim of employing Islamic cohesion by way of the Arabization of scripts to bridge the linguistically diverse regions of the nation, demonstrated to the proposal's detractors of ulterior motives by the state to control the East. The state-sanctioned proposal to Islamicize Bengalis by Arabization of the Bangla script shows how language became a site of ideological governance.

By sanctioning an Islam centric vision of Bengali culture and language, the state then

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had to worry less about the "Hindu" and "India" centric heritage of Bengal. Even the plan to move from sadhu-bhasha to chalit-bhasha carried problematic inferences. The suggestion that the colloquial registers of chalit-bhasha would be seen as a sort of democratization of Bangla, thereby making it more accessible and attractive to people from all walks of life and especially those unused to the refined Sanskrit forms of sadhu-bhasha, East Bengalis, especially the intellectuals, perceived this plan with suspicion and misgiving. They argued that an eradication of sadhu-bhasha would "flatten' the historical and linguistic depth of Bangla, which has borrowed profusely from many languages, from Sanskrit and Prakrit variants of South Asia and even beyond, from Persian and Arabic. Bengalis also noted that sadhu-bhasha has been a carrier of layers upon layers of literary and intellectual resonances for Bengalis since its evolution in the nineteenth century. The transition from sadhu to chalet will interrupt the continuity of Bengali literary tradition to which many speakers felt a sense of kinship and belonging. Bengali, in all its variants, connected its native speakers to their historical and cultural pasts.

Radio Pakistan Dacca played a central role in advancing the state's preference for chalit-bhasha over sadhu-bhasha. The directive from Karachi station, which had gradually become the chief broadcasting station since 1951, required Bangla broadcasts to be in chalit-bhasha for two reasons: first, to ideologically distance Bangla from its Sanskrit, and by extension, "Hindu" and "Indian" heritage which were perceived to be "un-Islamic"; and second, to standardize the use of modern Bangla.

For many, the proposed linguistic reform was not neutral technical measures but symbolic acts of cultural sanitization, diminishing the historical and spiritual registers of Bangla in the name of bureaucratic expediency. One such critic was the famed scholar and philologist Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, a regular and popular guest speaker at Radio Pakistan

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talk shows in Dacca. Before a talk was broadcast, programme producers were given a written copy of the proposed talk by Shahidullah, who was in the habit of writing in sadhu-bhasha. Without seeking permission, producers would rewrite his talks in chalit-bhasha, visibly annoying Shahidullah (Rahman 2013, 57-90). Elsewhere, I have written about other incidents detailing Shahidullah's reactions at the promotion of chalit-bhasha on air, because he thought Radio Pakistan had turned the Bangla into what he called a moshkora or a "joke". In these periodic outbursts lay more than anger: it revealed the fragility of Bangla in the airwaves caught between reverence and reform, and tradition and modernity (Mowtushi 2024, 1239).

Proposals to standardize Bangla on and off air were met with strong rebuttal from the intellectual and student communities of East Pakistan. They perceived these proposals as authoritarian impositions to sidestep Bangla and Bengali culture secondary to Urdu and Punjabi culture. Students, poets, writers and activists gathered in Dacca to debate and protest what they perceived as state control. While many university students drafted language manifestos, activists organized public rallies and discussions that showed that the passion and vision Bengalis harboured for Bangla as a marker of sovereign identity. The state's attempts to "sanitize" Bangla of "Hindu" registers and to streamline it to the vision of an Islam-centric nation famously backfired for these proposals alienated Bengalis. More and more people took part in debates and discussions on the language issue so that a matter of bureaucracy was turned into an actual, living, breathing struggle that enmeshed millions in the East.

The resistance by Bengalis to sanitize or streamline Bangla was not a concern of aesthetics or a matter up for literary debate. Language was a political tool, hence a political concern with resonances that outweigh emotions and affective registers. When Bengalis resisted the state's impositions on Bangla, what they were gradually coming to terms with was resisting what felt like, to many were the authority and surveillance from West Pakistan. These

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protracted debates on whether to Arabize Bangla or not became inseparable from unsettling questions of whether or not the government was willing to respect and respect Bengalis. Tensions over scripts and linguistic registers gradually turned into tensions of political resisters, with more and more Bengalis contemplating the possibilities of regional autonomy. If Bangla has no place in the new nation, if it is to be "modernized" and "fixed", what does that say about the place the native speakers of Bangla have in the national registers? East Pakistanis began to articulate a collective sense of Bengali selfhood which asserted that the Bangla culture cannot be pilloried under the homogenizing logic of a government that favoured Urdu and West Pakistan.

Tensions escalated among the members of the East Bengal Language Committee. They considered the difficult task of coming to a form of reconciliation between the state's proposals with regional sentiments and affective concerns. The rising tide of public rallies and demonstrations and widespread scholarship on the fate of Bangla gradually reveal to us that the state's attempts at linguistic reform in East Pakistan would be met with considerable hostility.

The tussle between sadhu-bhasha and chalit-bhasha, in fact, was a reflection of bigger anxieties about cultural identity and political autonomy. Supporters of chalit-bhasha argued that modernization of Bangla and the usage of colloquial registers would serve the educational, administrative masses better for ease of communication. But defenders of sadhu-bhasha (such as the famed philologist Muhammad Shahidullah) were not far behind in making a case for the need to preserve the depth and literary richness of sadhu-bhasha intrinsic to modern Bengali literary and, by extension, cultural refinements. The debate, then, of whether to move away from sadhu to chalit was not a matter of style, diction, or syntax; for the debate revealed the state's vision and negotiation between the past and present, between tradition and modernity

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and between regional identity and national identity. Ultimately, how Bangla should "sound like" and (look like!) was tied to complex questions about the place of Bengalis in the national *imaginaire* of Pakistan.

The stakes were high; proposals for linguistic reformation of Bangla, far from being a technical concern, illuminated ways in which language, by indirect means, raised thorny questions about cultural autonomy and political recognition of Bengalis on the state level. What the state, safely ensconced in the West of the country, did not comprehend was how emotively connected the Bengalis were to their language. They not only spoke it, but based their moral, cultural and historical consciousness on it. The Language Movement of 1952 made these concerns visible to Karachi, alarmed at the pace and depth at which, for Bengalis, the defence of Bangla was tied to a defence of their cultural, regional, and political identity.

Bukhari and the Ideals of Sahi Urdu: Training the Nation's Voice

On the eve of 14 August 1947, Pakistan inherited three medium-wave radio stations from All India Radio: Dacca, Lahore, and Peshawar. Their reach was limited: just 6.8% of the land, touching barely 15.7% of a population of 33 million, then the largest Muslim-majority nation on earth (Ahmad 2005, 129). In the East, Dacca's signal reached only about 15% of residents, while Lahore and Peshawar together reached roughly 21% in the West (Ahmad 2005, 129). The two wings existed acoustically as much as geographically: disconnected, distant, and awaiting the possibility of a shared auditory, and thereby, national space.

The construction of Karachi station, completed in 1949 after two years of painstaking effort, offered that possibility. For the first time in the history of the new nation, the eastern and western wings were to be linked electromagnetically. The Karachi and Dacca stations became the sonic lifeline of Pakistan, carrying and relaying news, announcements and cultural

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programmes. This was by no means a small feat. We have to remember that the broadcasting infrastructure that Pakistan was bequeathed after partition was a system shaped by the needs of the colonial administration under the aegis of its controller of broadcasting, Lionel Fielden, a BBC man, though a staunch critic of the colonial government in India. What Pakistan actually inherited, in terms of wireless infrastructure, was three small radio stations riddled with technical limitations, uneven electromagnetic distribution and a sea of talented but scattered radio personnel, many of whom left for India or freshly relocated to either Lahore or Dacca in light of the partition (Khalid 1987, 43).

But Pakistan also "inherited" Zulfikar Ali Bukhari, an icon in broadcasting in South Asia, who, as a protégé of Lionel Fielden in All India Radio, completely transformed the Delhi and Bombay stations into studios that would set the benchmark for broadcasting in South Asia could and should achieve. Under the watchful guidance of Bukhari, the east-west sonic alliance was cemented with much conviction and soon a sonic alliance of sorts graced the airwaves of Pakistan by way of state broadcasting.

A demanding master, under Bukhari, the radio staff toiled laboriously to establish Pakistan Radio. This work went beyond fiddling with technical contraptions and into the realms of affective candour and camaraderie. For it was under Bukhari that radio was able to forge a sonic bridge between the two annexes of the nation by bringing together distant voices and sounds on the airwaves of the nation. Broadcasts were not merely electromagnetically transmitted sounds but robust declarations of a nation sounding itself out and hearing itself. Transmissions from Dacca, Lahore, Peshawar, and soon Karachi became loud signposts indicating the difficult task of uniting a nation of multiple faiths, religions, climes and cultures under a single fold. The wireless soundscape resonated with the emotional rhythms of the people and their diverse ways of life as Bukhari and his team painstakingly enabled various

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voices to make themselves heard to the nation. Though limited in reach (because shortwave transmissions cannot cover great distances), the early transmissions were by no means faint or for the faint of heart. These early transmissions were acts of persistence and imagination, making the reality of a united Pakistan audible and palpable to its own people and to the world.

Bukhari experimented with the possibilities of broadcasting a national soundscape. Even though the stations were modest, and the staff either novice or unsure, Bukhari guided his team to form the first tentative sonic possibilities of uniting East and West Pakistan through radio. Programmes were created with the sole purpose of forging a robust national soundscape. And if the nation is to be heard on air, it had to settle on a language, and the choice of language for transmitting programmes on radio fell on Urdu. Bukhari was partial to Urdu, being himself an accomplished speaker of Urdu and an Urdu poet. Notwithstanding Bukhari's partiality for Urdu, the political elite in West Pakistan also felt that it was fitting that Urdu be the sonic language of broadcasting. Urdu bore the prestige of North Indian Muslim high culture and refinement; it was saturated with Persian and Arabic inflexions and influences and was thereby thought of as an apt vessel of Muslim piety and cultural refinement in South Asia.

But setting aside its exalted associations and rich literary history, in reality, Urdu was spoken by less than three per cent of the population of Pakistan, of which the majority were in Karachi, the muhajirs who emigrated from India after partition. It begs to be asked on what basis then should Urdu be installed as a sonic language of unity if it is spoken by so few people and is itself an import from the newly partitioned India? What radio listeners in East Pakistan and non-Urdu speakers could not initially comprehend but soon came to realise was that plans to decide on Urdu as a sort of emblem of national unity were not a linguistic decision per se but a political decision or will made to look like a linguistic decision. Was radio then to be used as a sonic tool to discipline a multilingual nation into a kind of enforced sonic coherence by

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broadcasting programmes in Urdu when the majority did not speak or understand the language?

Perhaps no other person embodied this linguistic decision more in post-independent Pakistan, apart from Jinnah, than Bukhari himself, the formidable Director General of Radio Pakistan. Trained by Fielden and the famous BBC programme producer Hilda Matheson at the BBC, Bukhari's commitment to radio was spiritual and fastidious. In his brilliantly evocative memoir called Sarghuzast, written in Urdu in the early 1970s, Bukhari writes meticulously about the life he had carved out for himself, and a legion of faithful proteges and followers in service to the radio. He explains in an exquisitely poetic prose style that for a "radio man" (or woman) to sit before the studio microphone is to shoulder a profound responsibility to mankind. He writes eloquently in the memoir about the power and charm that a voice transmitted on the airwaves carries to influence and touch the heart of the listener. Voices on the airwaves should be poised and carry "quiet authority". Words are sounds that cascade as stunning gems rippling outwards in the air to move people. For Bukhari, speaking on the radio is never a matter of sound alone, though, for he considered an art to be able to speak with quiet grace on air, with the power of awakening unseen emotions and thoughts within the listener (Bukhari 1966, 34).

Bukhari goes on to write that voices on the radio have to convey charm and authority, and at once sound inviting and unyielding (Bukhari 1966, 35). It is broadcast programmes transmitted by elegant voices that draw listeners to the medium, creating anticipation and reverence with every programme and every transmission. What lay behind the grace, the charm, and the anticipation, however, was a strict regime of discipline and control. Mistakes on air were not permissible with Bukhari, and a slip of the tongue, however inadvertent, would be met with strong rebuke from the programme producers and station directors who kept a careful record of mishaps and methods of amelioration (ibid). What Bukhari brought to Radio Pakistan post-independence, among many wonderful things sonically harnessed, was a stern

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framework of regulation and surveillance which he had inherited from Fielden and the BBC.

Trained by Fielden, the director of All India Radio, and Matheson, who revolutionized the art of talking on air for the BBC, Bukhari was painfully precise about diction and intonation, often reducing young announcers to nervous wrecks. Learned in refined Persian and Urdu poetry, Bukhari is thorough about Urdu elocution and pronunciation. Sahi Urdu, meaning "correct Urdu", became his mantra as long as he served Radio Pakistan. The voice on air was not to be casual or colloquial but carefully cultivated, polished to convey authority and dignity. Bukhari's ear gravitated toward the Urdu of Delhi and Lucknow, with its elaborate Persian inflexions, its delicacy of pronunciation, and its sense of musicality. This choice was as much aesthetic as it was political. To Bukhari, broadcasting a national voice without the cadences of Persian and Arabic was no voice at all; it had to have gravitas, and should not be lacking in what he believed to be the "sound" of elite Muslim identity. Yet for countless listeners — Punjabis, Sindhis, Bengalis — this ornate Urdu was bewildering, even incomprehensible. The very sound intended to unite, though pleasant to listen to, was in practice estranging.

For Bukhari, "radio was not only entertainment, it was an organ of authority" (36). Radio announcers and performers at the studios in Dacca, Lahore and Karachi were trained to embody this new linguistic ideal. Young women, many of them in purdah, were taught to face the microphone with poise, their voices carefully monitored for pronunciation. Men were corrected on their pitch, emphasis, and breathing. To speak on Radio Pakistan was to be initiated into a ritual of sonic purification, where the air itself was to be cleansed of error and shaped into a singular national idiom.

Elsewhere I have written about how veteran broadcasters often remembered their earliest days at Radio Karachi not only as the start of their careers, but as a kind of linguistic

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apprenticeship. Zaheen Tahira, Agha Nasir, and Iftikhar Arif recall how their Urdu elocution was sharpened under the vigilant supervision of Bukhari. He instituted what came to be known as the "pronunciation checker", a painstaking exercise where intonation, pitch, and emphasis were corrected until each syllable sounded just right.[4] Voices on the radio had to be trained like musical instruments; there were to be no hurried consonants, no wavering vowels, no raspy breath or overbearing hisses on air.

The same spirit of discipline governed the studios of Radio Dacca. There, producers like Ashfaque-uz-Zaman kept announcers to a strict checklist: every utterance in Urdu had to be delivered with sahi — that is, impeccable — pronunciation (Rahman 2013, 272, 354). Behind the polished voices that reached listeners across Pakistan were hours of rehearsal, repetition, and correction. The microphone became less a tool of transmission than a stage of exacting discipline, where speech was shaped into the official register of a young nation still trying to find its voice.

And yet, the microphone cannot always be bent to one's will. Listeners did not always hear what was intended. A rural Bengali farmer, tuning in on a shared radio set in a village tea shop, might catch fragments of lofty Urdu phrases but register them as distant and foreign. In urban Dacca, poets and musicians resisted by continuing to write and perform in Bangla. The project of sahi Urdu revealed an irony at the heart of the new nation: the more it tried to enforce unity through sound, the more it revealed the dissonance at the national level that refused to be contained.

[4] This is from an essay written by Rabia Mushtaq that features an interview with Zaheen Tahira, accessed 16 March, 2024, https://magtheweekly.com/detail/697-radio-pakistan-the-forgotten-jewel-of-bunderroad.

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The Debate of the National Anthem

Few sounds are as deliberately engineered as the national anthem. Unlike folk songs, which emerge organically from the rhythms of daily life, or devotional hymns, which travel on centuries of ritual practice, an anthem is contrived. It is meant to be sung in unison by strangers, to lend weight to solemn occasions, and to embody in music what constitutions try to capture in words. For Pakistan, still in its infancy, the choice of the anthem, especially the question of which language to compose it in, became an early test of what it meant to sound like a nation.

During the colonial years, a great many songs and poems were composed in honour of the Muslim qaum. Yet, when the moment arrived to designate a national anthem for the newly formed Pakistan, none of these cultural expressions were judged adequate (Qasmi 2024, 677). In late 1948, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced a competition open to anyone who would like to submit a composition suitable for the new nation. To that effect, five thousand rupees would be awarded to the best lyricist and another five thousand to the best musician. The task was not trivial. Should the anthem sound Islamic, Persian, South Asian, or modern? Should it be in Urdu, in Bangla, or in some hybrid language that could bridge both? The committee formed to decide included two emblematic figures: Jashimuddin, the Bengali folk poet, from Dacca station, and Bukhari, the guardian of Urdu's purity, from Karachi station.

More than two hundred submissions poured in from all corners of Pakistan. There were entries that relied heavily on Persian diction, others were in Urdu but riddled with Persian flavours and vocabularies which even native speakers of Urdu found difficult to comprehend. There were a few submissions in Bangla, that spoke of the Bengal delta's wet alluvial folk charm and cadences in folk spirit. The committee, rather infamously, chose a song by the famed musician and poet Hafeez Jallandhiri as the winner of the competition. I say infamously because Jallandhiri's lyrics were steeped in ornate Persian that was stunning in poetic overtures

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and grand in terms of acoustics, but with little accessibility. The person who set the musical note to accompany Jallandhiri's lyrics was Ahmed Ghulam Ali Chagla. The first time the national anthem was broadcast was on 13 August 1954. In the weeks, months and years that followed, the national anthem would be played each evening after the concluding news broadcast of the day, to signpost a deliberately repeated gesture to accustom the listener to its words, rhythms and cadences.

The public reception of the national anthem was moderate. The grandeur of its diction alienated many who observed a disconnect between the sonic ritual of listening to the anthem and public sentiment. Newspapers in Dacca did not hold back from openly criticizing the choice of the anthem as being one that would alienate the average listener in the East who would struggle to follow the meaning of the lyrics without a formal grounding in Persian. Even people in Lahore, writing in newspaper columns, joined in with a volley of abuse, with many sarcastically suggesting that since the anthem is so steeped in Persian, it would be a fitting gift for the Shah of Iran, then on a state visit to Pakistan (Qasmi 2024, 219-223).

Notwithstanding the many criticisms that it had to face, the anthem continued to be played with almost a sort of ritual and religious fervour on the radio. In his important work on state-sanctioned national rituals and emblems, Qasmi notes that the Education Department of the government made sure to add the singing of the national anthem part of the educational curriculum. This was especially the case across schools in Punjab. In Lahore, government officials visited schools and colleges such as the Government College Lahore, Lahore College for Women, Junior Model School, the Pakistan Boy Scouts Group, and the PAF Officers' Mess, conducting hour-long training sessions each day on the virtues of singing the national anthem (Qasmi 2024, 694).

Schoolchildren across Pakistan had to memorize the lines of Jallandhiri's ornate lyrics,

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even if they stumbled over the arcane diction. More importantly, each evening, it was played at the close of broadcasts from Karachi, carried across the airwaves to Dacca. The anthem's lofty stateliness was meant to inspire reverence; its repetitive cadence was designed to cultivate obedience. But it is difficult to command reverence, and obedience (to sound, symbol, signs and soundscapes) guarantees neither affection nor national cohesion. The singing and playing of the national anthem of Pakistan sounded and felt more like a lesson in syntax and lexicon than a song that was to unite people under a common fold. Listeners were keenly aware of the distance between the grandiose ideal that it voiced and sounded and the linguistic reality that they inhabited, far removed from high Persian poetic splendour.

Criticism of the national anthem soon took on a sharper edge among Bengali-speaking East, where demands arose for songs in Bengali that could genuinely embolden national feeling. In fact, Bengalis had been composing patriotic songs even before the very birth of Pakistan, as is attested by Abbasuddin Ahmed in his memoir. He writes that together with Kazi Nazrul Islam in Calcutta, the two composed and set to music several nationalist songs as early as 1946 (2014, 131). Abbasuddin's "Zamin Firdos Pakistan ki hogi" was already available on record by October 1947, while Nazir Ahmed's "Pakistan Zindabad" had become a popular fixture in schools across East Pakistan since the early 1950s.

There was a vociferous debate among Bengalis about whether an anthem unintelligible to the majority did not, in effect, risk deepening estrangement rather than fostering unity. These critiques were sharpened by the comparison with India and its choice of a national anthem written by a Bengali, Rabindranath Tagore, even though the vast majority of Indians did not speak Bangla: "Why could Pakistan not imagine a place for Bangla within its own national repertoire?" many wondered (Qasmi 2024, 676-677). To placate Bengali audiences in the East, the committee under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, responsible for the anthem,

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simultaneously recognized two pre-existing "national songs": Kazi Nazrul Islam's martial "Chal, Chal, Chal" in Bangla and Iqbal's "Sabah parh phir shukat ka" in Urdu.

In hindsight, the anthem debate reveals more than a quarrel over words and melody. It demonstrates the extent to which the early Pakistani state believed that unity could be summoned through the distinct sound of high Urdu. If a certain diction could be drilled into the tongue, if a certain melody could be played often enough, then perhaps the fractures of geography and culture would dissolve into harmony. Is harmony, as the radio waves soon proved, the same as unison? Can it ever be?

Tagore on Air

If Urdu as the lingua franca and the choice of a Persianate national anthem could be imposed from Karachi, it soon dawned on the state that Bengalis are anything but pliant to encroachments on Bangla. What illustrated this with stunning obstinacy was with which Bengalis resisted state-led imposition of the "sanction" of Rabindranath Tagore on the airwaves of Pakistan. A Nobel laureate and spiritual and literary icon of Bengal, the works of Tagore had long been woven into the soundscape of Bengal, way before the arrival of radio and its technological entrapments on the shores of South Asia. Tagore's songs, called Rabindra Sangeet, carried the lyricism, philosophy, and melodic distinctiveness unique to Bengal. To Bengalis, Tagore's songs were more than just songs, but felt deeply woven into the very fabric of Bengali life that struck many chords at what it meant to be Bengali, how to write like one, sound like one and be one. Rabindra Sangeet has been sung at Bengali weddings and festivities, seasonal and religious, rehearsed in schools and taught in institutions to adults and children alike. What the government in Karachi failed to fathom was how intrinsically embedded Tagore's works and his very presence were to the Bengali way of life. Tagore reminded the

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state of India and Hindu ideology and communal tension, so that Tagore was not a welcome addition in the airspace of the new nation. His philosophy of humanism and his embrace of Bengal's syncretic culture did not fit neatly into the Islamic ideological framework that officials in Karachi sought to promote post-1947.

By the early 1950s, directives were quietly issued to curtail his presence on the air. Music programmers in Dacca were instructed to limit or exclude Tagore's songs altogether, replacing them with compositions that emphasized Islamic identity or Urdu poetry: less Tagore and more of Iqbal and the ghazals of the old masters. The reasoning was rarely articulated in official documents, but it was obvious enough: Tagore represented a Bengal that was too "Indian", too "Hindu", and too secular to be comfortably housed within the new definitions of Pakistani nationalism (Anisuzzaman 2008, 1058–1069).

Efforts to restrict the broadcast of Tagore's music from Dacca reached the floor of parliament in both 1955 and 1967. In the latter year, Ayub Khan's Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Khwaja Shahabuddin of the Dacca Nawab family, argued in the National Assembly that only those works composed by Tagore during his residence in East Bengal should be permitted on air. He further assured members that "necessary steps" would be taken to curtail the playing of Rabindra Sangeet in the future. Attempts to silence playing the works of Tagore on air ultimately proved futile, for the more the state sought to control the air space, the more Bengalis flouted these orders.

In 1961, the situation escalated with a dramatic denouement for the government when it prohibited the celebration of the Tagore centenary. People in East Bengal openly spurned the ban by celebrating with even louder and bigger fanfare with public festivities. Interestingly, Karachi treated these celebrations as a deliberate tactic by India to stake claims on East Pakistan and of Bengali disobedience to the state. Even though these bans on Tagore were short-lived

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and more of a political nature than an attack on Bengali culture, what it demonstrated to Bengalis is the state's disrespect and disregard for Bengali culture, and for the state to treat East Pakistan cautiously and nervously. We do not know what role Bukhari might have played in the initial ban on playing Tagore on air, but it is likely that he had a hand in relaxing these restrictions so that Tagore came back to the airwaves with a loud bang on the airwaves of East Pakistan. Karachi mandated a time limit to the playing of Tagore songs on air. In reality, however, almost every single programme producer in Dacca and Chittagong made it a point to ignore these restrictions by surreptitiously slipping in an extra Tagore ballad. It is through such quiet but persistent defiance that I hope we begin to see how the Bengali radio personnel in East Pakistan carved out a space for themselves that gradually altered the tune of the national soundscape from one that sounded authoritarian and rigid to more welcoming of regional flavours and cadences.

Yet the airwaves, lacking definite contours, are difficult to police. Broadcasters in Dacca, many of them Bengali musicians and producers, resisted this political injunction made to look like sonic policy in subtle ways (Mowtushi 2024, 1237). They slipped Tagore songs into programmes, disguised as requests from listeners, or paired them with devotional numbers to soften their presence. Listeners, for their part, noticed when Tagore was absent. Letters arrived at the Dacca station asking why their beloved Rabindra Sangeet could no longer be heard. Listeners waited impatiently outside the studio in Nazimuddin Road to accost programme producers, complaining that to silence Tagore was to amputate the very sound of Bengal (Rahman 2013, 239-250).

Policy and practice turned the airwaves of Pakistan into a contested arena in the East. The official soundscape was to project an Urduized and Islam-centric soundscape; however, in reality, the national soundscape carried all sorts of sounds and voices. We see this most

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prominently in Tagore's persistent presence over the airwaves of East Pakistan and the ways in which radio staff and radio listeners alike made a strong case for refusing to erase Tagore from the airwaves. Erasing Tagore would have been a major affront to Bengali cultural identity. With each song and each ballad that the stations in the East played, it reassured Bengali listeners that the national soundscape of Pakistan has to make space for Bengal and Bangla. National unity and coherence cannot be engineered by linguistic hegemony or religious logic alone, for a nation of multi ethnic and linguistic makeup has to make allowance for a multiplicity of voices and sounds.

Tagore tuned into a fault line with which to measure the processes that were at play in the airwaves of East Pakistan. Banning him would make the state anxious and nervous of the East; hearing him on the airwaves would reassure Bengali cultural autonomy. Tagore's persistent presence in the airwaves of East Pakistan thus became a crucial historic juncture where the limits of Pakistan's sonic nationalism began to falter and eventually break apart.

Conclusion

The first decade post-independence witnessed major plans to aspire to a kind of "sonic nationhood" that the state hoped would unify the nation. What it exposed as time passed by were loud dissonances in the fabric of the national soundscape. Attempts by the state to sanitize and streamline Bangla to Arabise, modernise and Urduise it would be met with staunch opposition by Bengalis who held Bangla close to their hearts as a testament to their identity and sense of being. The history of Radio Pakistan from 1947 until 1952, makes audible discontent that was escalating on the language issue, on the state's treatment of Bengali culture and the relevance of political representation by Bengalis. Far from being able to establish a solid foundation, these early years of the nation revealed fractures and dissonances between

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state and regional government, between bureaucratic ambition and the lived, local linguistic realities that wanted recognition and respect.

In tuning into the early years of Pakistan through radio broadcasts and the tensions and politics surrounding transmissions, I hope this paper has been able to demonstrate that the early soundscape sought unity but was never able to guarantee it. Sounds and soundscapes that radio forged are ephemeral, and turn into ether, but the sonic history reveals cultural and political fractures and fissures that would come to define East Pakistan's subsequent decades as it sought political autonomy. The sonic story of 1947–1952 foreshadows impending dissonances and the fragility of the nation.

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