

**Radio as an instrument of rebellion: review of the film *Ae Watan Mere Watan***

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It was sometime between 1886 and 1888 that Heinrich Rudolf Hertz, a German physicist, was able to transmit electromagnetic waves through the air proving Scottish Physicist James Clerk Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism. But radio gained currency only during the Second World War when America's Office of War Information took control of the private shortwave operations and initiated Voice of America (VOA) network.

*Ae Watan Mere Watan* (Iyer, 2024) is set around the same period. In fact, the bombing of Japanese city Nagasaki and the launch of Quit India Movement in India took place on the same date – August 9, 1942.

Directed by Kannan Iyer under the banner of Dharmatic Entertainment, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* (Iyer, 2024) chronicles the story of Usha Mehta (Played by Sara Ali Khan), a college student, who established an underground 'Congress' Radio along with her friends Kaushik, Fahad Ahmed during the Quit India Movement to take the message of Indian freedom fighters to common people. The 2.12 hour long film, set in 1942, depicts the cat and mouse games Mehta and her friends indulged in with the then British authorities and police in Bombay in taking the message of freedom to the common Indians. The film released on Amazon Prime Video on March 21, 2024.

Mehta and her friends believe that after the 'Quit India' call to British by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on August 9, 1942 and ban on Congress, there was no avenue open to the freedom fighters to communicate truth to the people. The newspapers and the radio were dishing out British propaganda. Mehta, daughter of a judge who was very fond of the then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, decides to set up a clandestine Congress radio to be a media between freedom fighters and the hoi polloi.

Mehta believes that India lost the first freedom struggle in 1857 because the British controlled the entire communication machinery. She buys a radio set and starts broadcasting recorded speeches as well as live messages from the Indian freedom fighters. The British authorities try and ultimately succeed in arresting Usha and her friends but not before they along with Congress leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia reignite the freedom struggle through radio broadcasts.

The film is a tribute to late Usha Mehta, a recipient of Padma Vibhushan, one of India's highest civilian honours. Born in a village in Gujarat, Mehta's family migrated to Bombay (now Mumbai) after her father retired as a judge. The broadcast would start with the words: "This is Congress Radio calling on 42.3 from somewhere in India".

During its initial inception, Radio was invoked not just by states seeking liberation from foreign rule but also by the latter to prolong their footprints in the territories occupied by them. Japanese relied on media including radio broadcasts in the Philippines to re-engineer Filipino consciousness. Filipinos, on the other hand, turned to shortwave signals from the KGEI (a shortwave radio station founded by General Electric in 1939) in the United States, and BBC in London (Enriquez, 2023).

In India, Madras Presidency Radio Club (MPRC) transmitted the country's first radio broadcasting programme on May 16, 1924 to foster the study of radio communications in the Presidency (Menon, 2014). Indian State Broadcasting Service (ISBS) converted into All India Radio (AIR) on June 8, 1936 but started broadcasting 27 news bulletins daily to counter the Nazi propaganda only during World War II (Prisha, 2023).

Clandestine radio broadcasting in Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa demolished the propaganda of Imperial rule and boosted people's yearning for freedom (Evans, 2022).

Even Indonesian Radio Rimba Raya (RRR), which was established in Aceh, helped the nationalists to thwart propaganda and dismiss Dutch provocations (Muttaqin et.al, 2022). In Goa, Voice of Freedom, an underground radio station, followed Congress Radio to make people aware about their freedom struggle against the Portuguese occupation. The radio, managed by Libia Lobo, played speeches by Indian freedom fighters like Vinoba Bhave who appealed to the Dutch to quit Goa peacefully.

*Ae Watan Mere Watan* has a great premise. After all, it is about repression of the media in India under an authoritarian regime and the former's efforts to somehow reach the common people. Film critic Rohan Naahar feels it's metaphor about the 'vitality of press freedom in authoritarian times' and makes a statement against propaganda movies and media. "Unfolding like that legendary "Heartbreaking: The Worst Person You Know Just Made A Great Point" meme, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* is inspired by (not based on) the life of Usha Mehta, who, along with her activist friends, was instrumental in founding the underground Congress Radio during the Independence movement. Spurred on by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and fuelled by a stubborn desire to rebel against her British sympathizer father, Usha's story is not only timeless, but it is clearly also a metaphor for what is happening in our country today" (Naahar, 2024).

The film makes this point time and again through Usha Mehta, the film's protagonist. "English are brutal and terrorists," she tells her father when the latter questions her about her long absence from home and underground work for Congress. Her *raison d'être* for starting a radio is to promote truth in an atmosphere when the entire media apparatus ((newspapers and radio) under

the boots of foreign occupiers dishes out falsehood. The objective of the Congress radio is in sync with what Mahatma Gandhi believed in. Gandhi, a publication house in his own right (he published seven newspapers at different stages of his life) believed that “Freedom of the press is a precious privilege that no country can forgo”, “The sole aim of journalism should be service” and “The true function of journalism is to educate the public mind, not to stock it with wanted and unwanted impressions” (Gupta, 2001).

Not too many films in the past have dealt with young adolescent freedom fighters. More often than not they have portrayed the freedom fighters as white khadi-clad old men and women of puckered up skins and grey hair or middle aged people. *Ae Watan Mere Watan* protagonists are not just fired by angst and rebellion for honest communication they are also torn apart by a dilemma between Gandhi’s vow for celibacy and a primal urge for physical intimacy. But the filmmaker hardly explores the latter and simply pushes the issue aside after a short burst of clumsily written episode. The director has clearly squandered the opportunity.

The film is too slow to start with. It only picks up pace when young radio artists change frequent locations to avoid detection by police vans. They change around half a dozen places before being apprehended. In fact, there are more than three reasons why the message fails to get delivered to the audience. Firstly, the filmmaker is not clear whether she is making a biopic on Usha Mehta. The film is set in 1940s and ambience and authenticity of the pre-independent India is all there. But ultimately what we see on the OTT platform is not entirely her story. Secondly, the acting of almost all actors except Imran Hashmi and few others leave much to be desired. Thirdly and most importantly, majority of the scenes in the movie look stage managed and fail to create an impact because the writing is poor.

Many scenes – to take as an example two scenes involving the protagonist - look staged and offer no explanation. Usha Mehta, played by Sara Ali Khan, is forced by her father to swear by him not to indulge in rebellious Congress activities – look staged. No explanation is provided as to why Usha Mehta chooses to practice celibacy and takes a vow in the presence of Gandhi.

To her credit, the director has invested a great deal in creating 1942 and it has paid off. She has created the ambience of the bygone era by shooting some of the scenes in black and white.

The first broadcast of Congress radio took place on August 14, 1942 and the last happened on November 12 when the police arrested Mehta and three of her friends. The filmmaker has taken liberties to make her product look secular. Mehta, in an interview with BBC in the past, had recollected the names of her accomplices Chandrakant Babubhai Jhaveri and Vithaldas K Jhaveri and Nanka Motwane. But the film introduces a character called Fawad Ahmed. Sara Ali Khan claimed in a promotional interview that *Ae Watan Mere Watan* ‘isn’t so much a biopic of freedom fighter Usha Mehta as it is a tribute to her spirit. It’s very difficult to put ourselves in that ideological and geographical time frame. We’re free citizens. The stakes and scenario of that time is so different to today’ (Naahar, 2024).

Sara Ali Khan is an utter misfit in the title role. Even her delivery of dialogues like ‘Karo Yaa Maro’ (Do or Die) does not make much of an impression. Her performance looks laboured and acting is not about labour. It is all about getting under the skin of a character. Be in simple salwar- kameez wearing braids, plaited hair or a saree, she remains Sara Ali Khan in every scene and never becomes Usha Mehta.

Imran Hashmi has acted brilliantly and is hardly recognizable as the great Ram Manohar Lohia. The supporting cast of Sparsh Shrivastav, Abhay Verma, Sachin Khedekar, Alexx O’Neill and

Anand Tiwari is okay. Sparsh Shrivastav in particular is terrific in the role of what he calls an 'incomplete man' on account of being polio-afflicted.

Gandhi's baritone 'karo yaa maro (do or die), for a difference, has masculinity built in it. Though the film makes a point against blind faith through Kaushik's dialogue '*Tu us aadmi ki andhbhakti karta hai jo khud andhbhakti ke khilaf hain* (You blindly follow a person who himself is against sycophancy)" to Fahad, the portrayal of Gandhi has flattering written all over his cameo. But Gandhi and Nehru are never flashed out because the filmmaker's focus is on Ram Manohar Lohia.

Produced by Dharmatic Productions, the streaming arm of Karan Johar's Dharma Productions, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* is greatly hemmed by poor writing. Apart from Sara Ali Khan, the other weakest link of the film is its dialogues penned by Darab Farooqui who has also written the screenplay with the director Kannan Iyer. A bit of simplification could have made the dialogues more appealing ridding them of their philosophical bent.

The climax scene where Fahad and Usha argues over who will handle the final broadcast of the Congress radio with the police on their toes looks and sounds hilarious. To Fahad's argument that he has always felt incomplete due to his polio-afflicted leg and that the bravery would help him redeem his life Usha flaunts her status as a female. But she never faced any pressure or harassment on account of being a girl. Remember, nobody in her household - neither her father nor her old aunt - restricts her or questions her meetings with young boys or late nights. In fact, her father, despite being a British loyalist, encourages her to give wings to her dreams in early childhood. What probably makes Sara's Usha more cardboard is lack of a backstory. The writer offers no explanation as to why daughter of a British Indian judge turns out to be a rebel against her father's employers.

In the name of music, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* has a two minute eighteen second long retro song O Julia, Dil ye tera ho liya (O Julia, this heart is owned by you now) picturized on a radio engineer and his partner, who force Usha (Sara Ali Khan) and Kaushik (Abhay Verma) to join them. The song is good as long as it lasts and is an expression of Usha and Kaushik's tender feelings for each other and the power of radio. Alas! These and other finer elements are missing in the rest of the film.

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