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DR. USHA MEHTA

Mr. Shanker :

Dr. Usha Mehta is at present Professor of Political Science in the University of Bombay. She was an active participant in the 'Quit India' movement of 1942. Along with some other colleagues, she was responsible for broadcasting patriotic propaganda material from a ghost radio transmitter called 'Congress Radio', between August and November 1942. She will give her reminiscences of the role she played in the freedom movement.

Dr. Usha Mehta :

When the Second World War broke out, India <sup>was</sup> declared to be a belligerent country much against her own wishes. The leaders resented this very much and so did Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation. The 'Quit India' struggle began taking shape in his mind and he used to give hints regarding this in the columns of his weekly Harijan. So sometime before the movement started, some of my colleagues and I were thinking of what to do in case the movement was launched. It was our earnest desire to contribute our humble <sup>mite</sup> might to the cause of freedom. Also our perusal of the history of the past campaigns had convinced us that a transmitter of our own was perhaps one of the most important requirements for the success of the movement. When the press is gagged and all news banned, a transmitter certainly helps a good deal in furnishing the public with the facts of the happenings and in spreading the message of rebellion in the remotest corners of the country. When we heard the speeches of Mahatama Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad and others, in the AICC session

held in Bombay in August, our determination to run a secret radio became very firm and we began making preparations for it. We had realised the tremendous propoganda value of a transmitter and the idea that with a powerful transmitter we could also reach foreign countries thrilled us immensely. However, we had one very big problem and that was where to get the money from. Some relatives of ours volunteered to give their ornaments. We were, however, reluctant to accept this offer. Somehow, we pulled our resources together and approached a technician friend of ours, who was running classes in radio mechanics. He consented to build a transmitter for us and it was ready by about 13th August. Side by side, another group led by Vithalbhai Jhaveri, also was trying to work a transmitter. Besides these two, several other groups were also working and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, who knew all these groups, tried to coordinate them. One fine morning my uncle, Ajit Desai, delivered a note from Dr. Lohia addressed to Babubhai and myself. The note read thus : "I do not know you personally but I admire your courage and enthusiasm and your desire to contribute your <sup>mite</sup> ~~might~~ to the sacrificial fire that has been lit by Mahatma Gandhi. May I request you to come and meet me at your earliest convenience?" The meeting took place on the evening of August 17, 1942. Babubhai Vithalbhai and myself ~~were~~ present at the meeting. We did not know each other, nor did we personally know Dr. Lohia. Still, all of us immediately consented to work together as a team and our first announcement on the radio came on August 14, 1942. The announcement was "This is the Congress Radio, calling on 42.34 metres from somewhere in India". This announcement was almost the realisation of a long-cherished dream for all of us. Our radio was not one only in name. We had our own transmitter, a transmitting station, a recording station and also a call-sign and a

and a distinct wave-length of our own. So far as our programmes were concerned, we used to begin with "Hindustan Hamara" and end with "Vande Matram". In between, we had news relays, speeches, appeals and instructions for the workers in the struggle. We used to broadcast both in English as well as in Hindustani. Originally, we used to broadcast only once a day, but later we used to do it twice, once in the morning and once in the evening. So far as our own news items were concerned, we used to get news from all over India by special messengers. Also, the office of the All India Congress Committee, which was in Bombay then, used to supply us with important news. Sucheta Kripalani was in charge of the office and we used to maintain constant contact with her. News item was a daily feature of our daily programme. We were the first to broadcast the news of the Chittagong Bomb Raid, of the Jamshedpur Strike and of the happenings in Ballia. We broadcast the full description of the atrocities <sup>in</sup> of Ashti and Chimoor. Similarly, we gave the news of the running of parallel governments in Bihar and Maharashtra. When the newspapers dared not touch upon the <sup>se</sup> subjects under the prevailing conditions, it was only the Congress Radio which could defy the orders and tell the people what actually was happening. So far as our appeals were concerned, they were meant for different <sup>sections</sup> ~~doctrines~~ of society, like students, lawyers, workers, policemen and women. We also used to explain our policy and the nature of our struggle from the radio. Explaining the difference between previous freedom struggles and the present 'Quit India' movement, Dr. Lohia said in one of his speeches: "So far we were conducting movements but now we are conducting a revolution. In a revolution there is victory or defeat. This revolution is not of one party or community but of the whole nation". That the movement was not motivated by malice, but only by a desire to secure

justice was also made <sup>very</sup> clear by us. "India has no enmity for the British or any other people". We who are the heirs of a long heritage of suffering sympathise with the sufferings of the people of War-time England, the people of bomb-tormented cities of China, Russia, England and Germany. Our fight is against a system that <sup>denies</sup> derives the right of existence of two-thirds of the human race. Our hatred is for an administration which seeks to perpetuate human injustice!!! The instructions that were given were: "Undoubtedly the rivers of India should flow with blood but that blood should necessarily be Indian blood." On October 2, 1942, instructions were given for <sup>the</sup> celebration <sup>of</sup> Gandhi Jayanti in a fitting manner. The instruction was: "Celebrate the day with great enthusiasm and revolutionary fervour and with a bang! To the women of Ashtik and Chimoor, who <sup>were</sup> afflicted by the atrocities, the message of the Congress Radio was: "You resist and resist injustice and atrocities with all the might at your command. In this attempt you either get killed or kill others; for rape is outside politics." In the response that we got from the people was very, very good and they not merely used to look forward eagerly for our news bulletins and talks but they also helped us in spreading the news to those who could not listen to the radio. Thus we had planned out both <sup>aspects of</sup> our broadcasts. Our planning was good and so was the response. Still there were many difficulties in our way. The first difficulty was regarding finances but somehow we met that difficulty by <sup>pooling</sup> pushing our resources together. The second main difficulty was to escape the notice of the Police van, the detecting <sup>van</sup>. The van used to chase us regularly and very often it was merely a question of touch and go. However, we used to shift from place to place and thus were able to evade the police van and detective <sup>ng</sup> van

successfully for more than three months. Similarly, the official radio used to jam our broadcasts. Hence we got disgusted with them and some of our colleagues used to call it not 'All India Radio' but 'Anti-India Radio'. However, we tried a counter-trick by trying to jam the broadcasts of the official radio. Similarly we thought of having a net-work of broadcasting stations throughout India so that our work might not suffer, even if one of the sets <sup>was</sup> were seized. However, we could not get more than two sets prepared. Another ingenious device we invented was to separate the broadcasting and the recording stations. Originally, Vithalbai who was in charge of one of the broadcasting stations took over as the Director of the Recording Station and we had a panel of writers and workers, writers and speakers. Some of the important speakers were Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan, Moinuddin Harris and Miss Coomij Dastur. Most of the speeches in English were relayed by Dr. Lohia and Miss Dastur whereas the Hindi speeches were delivered by Harris Bhai, Achyut Patwardhan and myself. Also we had a band of volunteers who used to help us carry the records from the recording station to the transmitting station. Thus we thought we were safer with the division of work amongst the two groups. After we had successfully worked for about three months, on November 12, 1942, we were arrested. However, a week prior to that the police <sup>had</sup> raided some of the important radio shops, important amongst them being the Chicago Radio CO.'s shop. Many of the technicians, including one Jagan Nath were arrested. Following the information which they got from these technicians, the police came to know that Babubhai Khakkar, Vithal Bhai Jhaveri and myself, were mainly responsible for running the radio. Hence they raided the office of Babubhai Khakkar on November 12. Myself and two other colleagues were

present in the office when it was raided. When we came to know that the police had come to the office we tried to remove some of the important files and literature connected with the Congress Radio and were successful in that. From there I immediately rushed to our recording station where Dr. Lohia and Harris Bhai were busy preparing the programme<sup>for</sup> that evening. I went to the station and told the doctor : "Our colleagues are under arrest. Bhabubhai's office has been raided and one does not know what will happen next!" His immediate reaction was : "What happens to our broadcasting station.?" I said : "The decision is yours, the implementation ours". Hurriedly consulting Vithalbai, Harris Bhai and others, like one possessed, he said "The fight for freedom cannot stop. The work must go on even if the circumstances are adverse." And I said "The work will go on". Immediately therefore, I rushed to the technician, the assistant of <sup>the</sup> one who had <sup>+</sup> bought the police to Babu Bhai's office. I requested him to prepare another transmitter overnight. He consented to do so. From there<sup>re</sup> I went home and then to the broadcasting station, along with Chandrakant<sup>h</sup> bhai Jhaveri. The programme went on as usual. We played 'Hindustan Hamara' We relayed some news bulletins and also one talk. Just when<sup>we were</sup> at the end of the programme, playing 'Vande Matram', we heard hard knocks on the door and the Deputy Commissioner of Police, his military technicians and his troupe of fifty odd policemen smiled and smiled triumphantly when they were able to break open three strong doors. They asked us, no they ordered us, to stop playing the record 'Vande Matram'. We did not oblige them. The record was over. We wanted to announce the news of the spectacular raid and of the betrayal by one of our technicians who had accompanied them to the station. Also we wanted to announce our arrest at the post of duty, but the traitor

of the technician came to the rescue of the police and tampered with the fuse. Of course, our colleagues who were listening to the radio did get the <sup>hint</sup> wind of our arrest when they heard the hard knocks. The breaking <sup>open</sup> of the doors perhaps served as a call-sign of our arrest. Immediately there was darkness everywhere and the police were afraid that perhaps we would escape. Nothing of the sort, however, happened, because Bapu had taught us to face the consequences of our act. From the broadcasting station we were taken to the lock-up. From the very next day investigations started. On the next day, Vithalbhai was also arrested and so was **Narak** Motwani, the proprietor of the Chicago Radio Co.

After prolonged investigations for about two months and more, the police prepared a charge-sheet and the accused were five. They were Vithaldas or Babubhai Madhavji Chakkar, Vithalbhai Jhaveri, Chandrakant Jhaveri, **Narak** Motwani and myself. The charges levelled against us were possessing, establishing, maintaining and working illegally a wireless telegraph and apparatus appertaining thereto, causing disaffection amongst, and interfering with, the discipline <sup>and</sup> of the performance of their duties by members of His Majesty's Forces and other public servants, undermining public confidence in the national credit and in Government currency notes, which were legal tenders in India, and encouraging and inciting the public generally to refuse and defer payment of land revenue and taxes payable to the Government. We were tried in a special court presided over by Justice Lokur. Professor Vimadalal was the Public Prosecutor and amongst the defence counsels were legal luminaries like Motilal Setalvad, **Kanhyalal** Munshi, Justice Tandulkar and Mr. Thakkar. The trial went on for full five weeks and the sentence came in **May**.

Vithalbhai and Manak Motwani were acquitted for there was no evidence found against them. Chandrakantbhai Jhaveri was sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment, Babubhai to five year's and I to four year's rigorous imprisonment. I went to Yarwada jail and was released in April 1946 when the Congress Government came to power. I came back from jail a happy and, to an extent, <sup>a</sup> proud person, because I had the satisfaction of carrying out Bapu's message "Do or Die" and of having contributed my humble <sup>mite</sup> ~~might~~ to the cause of freedom.

Mr. Shanker :

Thank you very much Dr. Usha Mehta for your reminiscences of broadcasting from a secret radio during the 'Quit India' movement in 1942.

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