



Book Review

Isabel Huacuja Alonso. (2023). *Radio for the Millions: Hindi-Urdu Broadcasting Across Borders*
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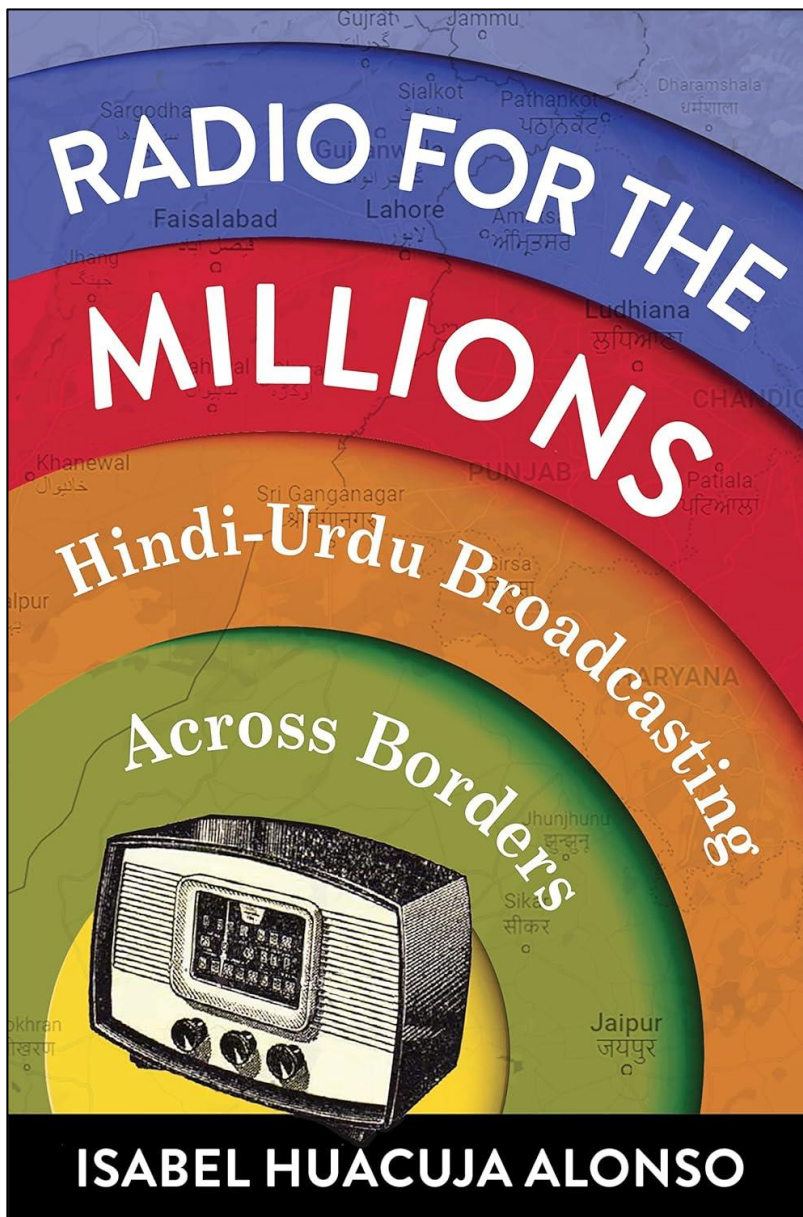


Image 7.1: Jacket Cover. (Source: Columbia University Press / public domain).

Radio for the Millions is not only a book that captures the history of radio as a medium in South Asia, it successfully shows how radio history is intricately entangled *with*, in fact how it aurally and affectively shaped, the history of the subcontinent (from colonial to postcolonial times). To put it in the author's own words "[...] the study of media forms, and in particular sound media, is fundamental to the study of history– [...] South Asian radio history *is* South Asian history" (p. 203). The author illustrates this convincingly by showing how tracing the history of the medium in South Asia inevitably leads to rethinking several temporal and spatial divides which are otherwise usually treated as 'obvious' and pre-given in the history of the subcontinent. One such temporal divide, which does not govern the structuring logic of this book, is Partition and the simultaneous independence of the states of India and Pakistan. The author successfully shows (Chapters 1 and 2) how radio's arrival, presence,

eventual persistence and popularity was a journey that began in the 1930s and spilled over right into the 1980s. Similarly, spatial divides (territorial borders) informed by the realities of Partition, new nation-states and their competing nation-building projects, in fact could not always be maintained on airwaves, which brought together listeners *across* borders. Both these divides are never treated as given in the book – the author goes into specific moments when the divides were actively produced and exacerbated via radio (for e.g. war time coverage on Radio Pakistan in 1965) or when they were overcome also through radio (for e.g. All India Radio's Urdu Service which became a platform for exchange for both Indian and Pakistani audiences).

Throughout the book, the author relies on 'radio resonance' as a sensitizing lens to elucidate how, even in the absence of archival sources, radio listening as a practice has left very concrete traces which can help reconstruct its histories. This approach works successfully and especially for the first two chapters, which deal with Axis radio broadcasts and those by the Indian revolutionary and Axis-sympathizer Subhas Chandra Bose (from Germany and later Singapore) on his radio station called *Azad Hind* (Free India). There is no way to assess statistics related to the actual number of listeners, for e.g. those not registered (and paying a license fee) or how many listened collectively often relying on one set owned by one person in a group. There are also no concrete statistics related to how many listeners tuned into axis broadcasts or Bose's programmes. Nonetheless, the author shows how radio's formative presence and its steady popularity as a medium can be gauged through its resonance. For e.g. this is evident from magazine advertisements that increasingly showed new radio models launched by companies hinting at the technology's increasing popularity; or from 'rumour' and 'gossip' which made people talk about what was being broadcast on radio; or in the anxiety-effects that Axis radio broadcasts had on the colonial administration, pushing it to also revise its strategies and respond to Axis propaganda. While 'resonance' continues to inform the author's take on tracing how radio permeated people's everyday lives for decades to come, and is a concept she often refers to throughout the six chapters, it is perhaps most befitting and most accessible in this first section. The two chapters concentrate on the genre of news and how airwaves became a site for anticolonial agitation for Bose, fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda for Axis broadcasters from Germany, Italy and Japan, and how tracing the histories of both makes Bose's, often de-emphasized ties to sponsoring Nazi/fascist regimes apparent.

Chapters 3 and 4 transition into the second genre of focus – music. These are brilliantly written chapters which speak rather well to each other. While chapter 3 traces how independent India's presiding Information and Broadcasting minister B.V. Keskar attempted to create "citizen-listeners" (p. 86), pushing to train and teach Indian audiences to become sensitive to Hindustani and Carnatic classical music, chapter 4 traces how Keskar's ban on Hindi film music on All India Radio backfired and contributed to the simultaneous success of Radio Ceylon, which ran several film music programmes. Keskar's term and his pedagogic attempts throughout 1952-62 at creating the category of 'Indian' citizen listeners, who valued India's (understood mainly as Hindu) rich musical heritage, was not free of anti-Muslim and casteist politics. Chapter 4 historically sketches the biography of Radio Ceylon, which capitalized on the possibility to transmit Hindi film songs to eager Indian and Pakistani audiences through the airwaves. The author also interviewed the station's most popular broadcaster Ameen Sayani, who hosted the *Binaca Geetmala* show and was a radio celebrity across the India-Pakistan border. This is a remarkable feat, not only because such interviews are a way to capture and chronicle Sayani's radio aura and his own narrative of his fame and popularity among listeners. It is also valuable because it is perhaps one of the last interviews given by the broadcaster

before his recent demise in 2024. The author shows how the format of Radio Ceylon's music programmes made it exceptionally popular because listeners did not just listen in, but also felt that they were participants, part of the shows' aural atmospheres. One historical detail, which is certainly not insignificant and runs as a common thread from the first two chapters into the next four, is the broadcasters' linguistic choice and usage of Hindustani (over Hindi or Urdu) and how this produced both aural and textual liberties for listeners across territorial (national borders between North India and Pakistan) and linguistic divides, who could interact with broadcasters in Hindustani (in some cases, as seen in the last chapter, via *both* the Devanagari and Nastaliq scripts).

Chapters 5 and 6 draw attention to the genre of radio drama, focusing on two different kinds of affective charges that radio broadcasts produced – war time patriotism embedded in sentiments of hate towards the 'other' nation and nostalgia for a time that existed prior to Partition and the creation of two nation-states. The author intelligently weaves these two contrasting emotional repertoires together, also hinting at their fragility especially during the tense years after 1965 up to 1971, which witnessed wars and the creation of the state of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan). While chapter 5 exclusively looks into radio dramas and songs which were produced by Radio Pakistan for a brief, but intensely 'radio' active, 17 days for the listening publics of Pakistan, chapter 6 focuses on All India Radio's Urdu service which was especially designed for West Pakistan's Urdu speaking audiences shortly after the 1965 war. We are thus introduced to how national pride, support for the nation's war efforts, and anti-Indian sentiments were produced round-the-clock by radio. Chapter 6 fantastically elucidates how AIR's Urdu service not only became popular among West Pakistan's Urdu speaking audiences, but also among several listeners across North India. It became a platform for listeners with pre-Partition pasts on the 'other' side of the border to share and exchange pre-partition memories with each other. The chapter once again establishes the transnational or translocal nature of radio reception pasts despite broadcasting stations being embedded in the logic of nation-states and separated by territorial divides.

Radio for the Millions is recommended reading for historians and anthropologists of South Asia. It is also an instructive read for scholars from media studies (radio studies, sound studies, reception studies, fan studies, etc.), especially those who have diverted their gaze beyond Euro-America to colonial and postcolonial contexts in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The author cannot be commended enough for being one of the few scholars who has extensively explored archival sources as well as interviewed interlocutors *across* the territorial divide of India and Pakistan. In doing so, she certainly brings a sense of contentedness to all fellow South Asianists, who come from either of the two countries and are usually barred from direct access to both archives and interlocutors from the 'other' side.