

Revisiting Broadcast Rebellion: Analysis of Clandestine Radio in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema

Mousami Jena*

Dr. V. Santhi Siri**

Abstract

Radio's place during the freedom struggle in India has not yet been studied in depth. During the Quit India Movement (1942), Congress Radio, operating underground, became a voice in the communication grid amid colonial censorship which aimed to prevent the spread of pro-nationalist information. This study examines the narrative construction of clandestine radio in the Hindi-language film Ae Watan Mere Watan (2024), directed by Kannan Iyer, which focuses on the clandestine radio operated by freedom fighter Usha Mehta. The qualitative interpretive approach of this study utilises narrative analysis to interpret the construction of characters, events, conflict(s), communication practices, and the resolution of the narratives within the film. It introduces Usha Mehta as a young political figure whose communicative practices change her from an observer of the nationalist politics into an active participant in the struggle for freedom. The film helps make the collective memory of India's anti-colonial struggle more visible in today's popular films.

Keywords: Congress Radio, Usha Mehta, Narrative analysis, Clandestine broadcasting, Bollywood cinema, Quit India Movement

Background

The freedom movement of India has revealed the context of political leadership, revolutionary activity and print journalism. Press was highly censored by the colonists, and the Indian press had a history of facing surveillance, regulation and hostility. In this kind of

* Research Scholar, **Associate Professor, Department of Electronic Media and Mass Communication, Pondicherry University.

communication environment, there was a need for alternative communication to maintain political awareness and convey messages challenging colonial power. Radio was a unique mode of communication that could reach people who couldn't read or access print. The history of clandestine broadcasting around the world has been linked to political conflict, resistance and the dissemination of alternative information in the context of political conflicts, information control, and communication practices. In the Indian scenario, the underground Congress Radio created during the Quit India Movement highlighted a special case of political repression and the use of radio as a counter. After the arrest of several leading Congress leaders, the Congress Radio was set up secretly in Bombay in 1942. The station was closely linked to Usha Mehta and her associates. It was used for broadcasting messages, speeches and information while opposing restrictions on the circulation of political news. Its historical significance lies in its technological role and function as a means of communication.

Congress Radio has not received the attention it deserves in the popular imagination of the Indian Independence movement, compared with the attention paid to political leaders, protests, and revolutionary movements. Films offer a significant platform for the recovery and transmission of such marginalised narratives. Contemporary movies are one of the areas where such marginalised histories can be recovered and narrated to viewers. Historians' films are not about the past, but about the historical past as it is represented and narrated within the context of present-day culture. Cinema is an important medium in which historical events are reconstructed and understood, as Rosenstone (1995) argues, but it also serves as a medium of representation in the construction of identity and culture. Indian cinema, especially Hindi mainstream cinema, has often dealt with the colonial history and India's freedom movement. Historical films are thus considered not only entertainment texts but also cultural sites where historical figures, events and political memories are reimagined. Karmakar and Catterall (2025) note the intricate connection between Indian cinema and the concepts of independence, especially in today's political and cultural climate. These images emphasise overlooked characters, reinterpret unknown

historical events, and bring forgotten aspects to national history for a modern audience.

Keeping this in mind, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* (2024) becomes an important case to study the clandestine portrayal of radio in contemporary cinema. The film, directed by Kannan Iyer and released on Amazon Prime Video, focused on Usha Mehta and the Congress Radio during the Quit India Movement (1942). The film does not simply show radio as a passive technological object, but rather as a central component of resistance. The narrative is built around coded communication, surveillance, broadcasts, and clandestine locations.

There was a mixed reaction to the film, with some reviewers praising it for “trying to make the relatively unknown tale of Usha Mehta popular,” while others faulted certain aspects of the acting and directing. Despite these, the movie turned out to be a significant cultural document for analysing cinema’s depiction of communication and resistance. This analysis thus moves away from the question of whether the film is an accurate rendition of the actual history to examine how it constructs the narratives of Congress Radio. The aim of this study is not to discuss the film as a primary record of the Congress Radio, but to examine the nature of the film’s representation of radio, Usha Mehta, colonial control and resistance from a present-day perspective.

The study uses narrative analysis as the primary research method. The narrative analysis allows for an attention to the organisation of events, conflict, turning points and resolutions that the film constructs in the story of Congress Radio. The study is interested in the narration of Usha Mehta, the young woman who begins to awaken her political consciousness, her progression toward becoming an active radio broadcaster, and the change of radio from being a technology to a technology of secret political communication. The study fills a gap in the intersection of media history and film studies. The study thus seeks to answer how, in the contemporary Bollywood narrative, a historical symbol of communication becomes a symbol of resistance and collective memory.

Research gap and significance

Nationalist leaders, print journalism, mass movements and

revolution have been well studied in the history of the Indian freedom movement. The communicative aspects, on the other hand, have not been as evident in common historical discourses. Radio is especially important because it was the first medium to provide a means of communication that did not require people to read or write. Clandestine broadcasting has established its importance in situations characterised by censorship, political conflict and information control. The historical value of Congress Radio has, however, seldom been examined in relation to the modern-day discursive images of communication. Historical cinema has also made it clear that movies play a role in reconstructing the past rather than merely reproducing historical events (Rosenstone, 1995).

The research gap of this study is therefore located at the intersection of two areas:

1. The history of Congress radio as clandestine communication during India's freedom struggle
2. The role of contemporary cinema in reconstructing historical and national memories.

The study contributes by examining how *Ae Watan Mere Watan* constructs Congress Radio as a narrative device of resistance and how it positions Usha Mehta as an agent of communicative and political action. The significance of the study lies in the understanding of freedom struggles over communication. By examining how cinema narrativised this communicative dimension, the study highlights radio as part of the infrastructure of anti-colonial resistance.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine how *Ae Watan Mere Watan* narratively constructs clandestine radio as a medium of anti-colonial resistance during the Quit India Movement.
2. To analyse the narrative construction of Usha Mehta's involvement with Congress Radio.
3. To examine how the film represents colonial information control, surveillance and the circulation of counter-information through radio.

Conceptual framework

Narratives create characters, turning points and resolutions that audiences interpret throughout. In historical films, the construction of the narrative is significant because filmmakers need to make complex historical processes into emotional stories. In the present study, therefore, specific events, characters, and conflicts are presented, allowing viewers to learn about Congress Radio through the eyes of Usha Mehta. Narrative analysis is especially valuable because it enables tracing the path from political awakening to radio broadcasting, surveillance and imprisonment, establishing a trajectory of communication as resistance.

Representation and historical memory

Hall (1990) stresses that cultural identity is not a historical substance but is continually constructed through representation, and thus cinema becomes a significant cultural site for the interpretation and re-imagining of history. Historical films can introduce less known people and events into the current public discourse. In this context, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* gives visibility to Usha Mehta and to Congress Radio as a communication practice integral to the anti-colonial struggle. The study thus proposes to understand the film as a site of mediated memory, in which a historical communication practice is reconstructed through the narrative conventions of the present.

Methodology

The study adopts qualitative interpretive research with narrative analysis. This analysis is appropriate because the study concerns the organisation of a historical episode. It does not assess the accuracy of the film's historical content or audience reactions, but rather the narrative construction of characters, events and communication practices. *Ae Watan Mere Watan* (2024) was intentionally chosen because it focuses on the role of clandestine Congress Radio and Usha Mehta, offering a contemporary case study of how popular cinema reconstructs a relatively neglected aspect of the freedom movement in India. The analysis focuses on the construction of the central character, Usha Mehta, and her relationships, helping to narrate the story of resistance. The analysis

is directed towards the ways in which the film makes radio a symbolic and communicative tool connected to freedom, national identity and historical memory. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical and is not considered a stand-alone historical archive. The analysis is concerned with the meaning the film creates through its representation, not with the assumption that it is a true representation of history.

Findings and narrative analysis

From political awakening to communicative agency

The movie starts with Usha Mehta's childhood experiences of colonial oppression and nationalism. Her experience of political violence in her childhood, shaped by her interest towards Gandhian thought, laid the groundwork for her resistance to the freedom struggle, which predates her radio career. Usha's transformation does not start with the radio transmitter; it is the medium by which a pre-existing political consciousness takes communicative shape. The cinema thus establishes a link between political consciousness and communication technology, with radio emerging as a meaningful medium because Usha recognises its potential to spread information beyond immediate spaces of protest.

Radio as a narrative point

Radio becomes a key turning point in Usha's story; the transformation is central to it. The radio receiver introduced the space, which could send out messages of nationalism. The film thus transfers the technology from private to the political realm. The film's main plot is the creation of Congress Radio, which centres its establishment. In an era when colonial restrictions were limiting the spread of nationalist information, Usha and her associates were building an alternative communication channel. The opening phrase of the broadcast, "Yeh hai Congress Radio" (This is Congress Radio), creates a sense of identity for the secret station and sets the tone for broadcasting as a form of communicative presence. Patriotic songs and messages with the names of nationalists further reinforce the ideological identity of the station.

The constant movement of the secret radio station is another

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significant storytelling technique, in which broadcasters move to evade colonial surveillance. The mobility of broadcasting apparatus from homes to apartments is a story of dynamic survival that requires secrecy and adaptation. This repeated motion creates a cinematic conflict between two types of communication infrastructure: colonial surveillance versus clandestine broadcasting. The British authorities' efforts to find the transmitter by triangulation form a cat-and-mouse game that propels the story. The radio's survival is not due to its technological capabilities, but rather to the fact that its operators employ secrecy, mobility and decentralised locations to avoid surveillance. The transmitter is thus no longer just a technical device; in fact, it has served as the focal point for risk, resistance and surveillance. The film creates a communicative context in which the official voice of the colonial government dominates, while underground broadcasters try to spread other messages.

Colonial authority —→ control, censorship and surveillance

Congress Radio —→ alternative information, nationalist messaging and mobilisation

Usha Mehta and the narrative construction of youth political agency

The film centres on Usha Mehta who uses communication to lead political agitation. She was not a prominent political figure, but rather someone who gradually stepped from the sidelines to help set up Congress Radio. Communication, organisation and technological experimentation are the ways in which Usha's agency emerges. Her youth is thus narratively significant. The film depicts political participation as available to people outside the formal political system of authority. In the film's story, she serves as a symbol of the potential for individuals to emerge from the ability to communicate and organise. The film consistently associates broadcasting on Congress Radio with messages conveyed as part of a shared national consciousness and collective mobilisation. The film is not about the passive consumption of information; rather, the broadcasts are linked to demonstrations, flag-hoisting, and other public involvement. This is important as it places the radio in the middle between the colonial oppression and the common people. The film shows that radio is not

just a medium for delivering messages from leaders; it also links those messages to listeners who can translate them into action. Sound is particularly important in the narrative representation of movies. Patriotic songs and announcements on the radio set the mood for the secret station. Songs like “Sare Jahan Se Accha” and “Vande Mataram” link the process of broadcasting to emotional and symbolic constructions of nationhood.

The clandestine radio thus conveys messages through affective communication using slogans and vocal performance. This enables the construction of audio broadcasting as an emotionally charged political practice, and radio not only for communication but also to express national identity. The climax of the story is the final broadcast and subsequent arrest. However, the stoppage of broadcasting does not mean the end of Usha’s political agency; rather, the arrest is a sacrifice of the story. When Usha refuses to reveal details about her associates, it further solidifies the film’s portrayal of her dedication to the movement.

Initially, she is depicted as a politically aware young woman, inspired by the Gandhian ideal; by the end, she is a dedicated member who has embraced imprisonment as a price for political engagement. This signifies the film does not build Usha’s political persona through her association with the well-known nationalist leaders. Rather, it is her own deeds that define her. The narrative thus moves the historical spotlight from political leadership to communicative agency at the grassroots level using clandestine radio.

Radio as a symbol of resistance

Throughout the movie, the radio undergoes a symbolic transformation. The transmitter, hidden locations, broadcasts, songs, surveillance and eventual arrest collectively transform radio into a material symbol of the struggle over information. The narrative analysis reveals that *Ae Watan Mere Watan* is a process in which technology becomes a weapon of independence repression. Radio is not just a historical artefact in the background of the freedom movement; rather, it situates radio between colonial information control and nationalist communication. And thus, radio becomes political when it disseminates messages that are not part of the dominant information structure.

Discussion and conclusion

The role of radio as a medium of resistance during independence and liberation movements represents a crucial yet underexplored dimension of media in communication research. The movie *Ae Watan Mere Watan* brings visibility to the story of clandestine radio, positioning it not merely as a communication tool but as a means of alternative public spheres under conditions of authoritarian control. The primary function of the Congress Radio in the movie was to depict anti-colonial mobilisation with greater youth participation, which had a transformative impact on India's freedom struggle. The second finding is about mobility and resilience. The multiple station moves illustrate the need for flexibility in clandestine communication. The film's depiction of shifting locations produces a story in which the communication infrastructure becomes part of the conflict and is linked to collective mobilisation. Communication is thus politicised when information is turned into collective awareness and action, as the narrative suggests. The film helps to preserve history by introducing Congress Radio into the popular culture of the present. It is not a comprehensive history of the communication industry, but rather a way to make its relatively unknown history visible to today's audience. The film can be seen as continuing the cultural reconstruction of India's freedom movement. It reminds audiences that anti-colonial resistance was not just about mobilisation, it was also about information, voice and access to communication. The film's story focuses on the political relevance of the communication system in times of censorship and repression. Therefore, *Ae Watan Mere Watan* can be interpreted as a recall of the broadcast rebellion, in which the transmitter becomes a metaphorical space of information and political voice.

Theoretical contribution

The study highlights radio as an active part of India's anti-colonial communication history. It argues that communication infrastructures should be taken into account alongside political organisations, leaders and mass movements in the history of the freedom struggle. The study illustrates how present-day Bollywood cinema reconstructs historical communication through narrative strategies of character

development, conflict and emotional mobilisation. The study demonstrates the potential of contemporary cinema to resurrect relatively forgotten historical stories.

Limitations

The study analyses a single contemporary film. Hence, the results cannot be extrapolated to all Bollywood portrayals of the freedom movement in India. It focuses on the representation of film, not on its reception. It cannot, therefore, be concluded whether the film is successful in fostering the viewers' historical awareness or patriotic identification. The study does not seek to provide full historical accuracy of *Ae Watan Mere Watan*. It is directed towards the narrative construction of Congress Radio and Usha Mehta. Future research could be expanded through comparative analysis of historical films portraying the Indian independence movement and archival analysis of Congress Radio broadcasts.

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