

Interview of Ameen Sayani (Ja'49) with Mrs Puja Pant
Editor of Scindia School Review

Ed. Your family was deeply involved with the Indian struggle of Independence. Are there any special moments of those formative years which had a great impact on you?

AS: My parents were close to the great leaders who strove for and ushered in our Independence. I was therefore fortunate, as a child, to have sat at Bharat-pita Gandhiji's feet, stood next to the scintillating Pandit Nehru, heard the orator Maulana Azad at my grandpa's house and had lunch with 'underground' leader Aruna Asaf Ali at our home.

My initial years at Scindia, too, were nationalistically eventful: I stood and saluted the first tricolour flag to be raised on the Fort on 15th August 1947, was shocked and wept at the news of Bapu's assassination, sang Bapu's beloved *bhajans* in the choir led by our Vice-Principal Pathak Saheb when we went down to the city along with the urn containing Gandhiji's ashes.

Ed As a student of The Scindia School did you take active part in debates, dramas and elocutions?

AS: I had injured a kidney before joining Scindia in 1946, and was forbidden all sports for over a year. But that didn't diminish my fervour for participating in other activities. My great love was acting, and there are two related events I still remember:

My first play on the Fort was 'Crimson Coconut', in which I was playing an inebriated waiter. Our dear *guru* and director Khanolkar Saheb had accidentally left a half-empty beer bottle on a sideboard of the restaurant set, which I mistook for water and took a big gulp. Consequently, I kept slurring and stumbling so realistically that, for many days, the whole school talked about "*kya zabardast acting thi Ameen ki, sharaabi waiter kay role mein!*" (I've hated beer all my life thereafter!)

Another great *guru*, Thakar Saheb, announced that the annual school play in 1948 was going to be 'MACBETH'. I pleaded to him for the title role, but was found to be too short and too plump – and so the tall, tough and handsome Sami Khan was given the role. Seeing my disappointment, Thakar Saheb said, "Look, why don't you be the understudy for all the main characters, and step in if anyone falls ill?" So that's what I did, and 'fortunately' Sami fell ill, and I began to rehearse as Macbeth. But alas, Sami (who much later become a Lt. General in the army) recovered promptly in a few days and played Macbeth in the final show, and I was shunted off to the role of Second Witch!

Ed: How did you get a break in the All India Radio?

AS: My brother Hamid (who was an outstanding broadcaster in English) inducted me into All-India Radio Bombay's English programmes when I was just seven. Besides English, the only other language I had really studied was Gujarati. When Hamidbhai was appointed Director of Programmes for the Indian Agency of Radio Ceylon, I asked him whether he could give me some work, since he was after all my *guru*. He pointed out that the scope was only for good Hindi/Urdu voices, and I was weak in both languages (though I had familiarised myself with written Hindustani).

So, crestfallen, I began attending some of the Hindi recordings. And once, by sheer fluke, I got the job of reading (with much exaggerated fervour) the weekly commercial announcements in a sponsored Hindi amateur singing show for a health-drink called Ovaltine. Thereafter, with many helpful kicks from the Almighty and my "never say die" spirit of a "*naye Bharat ka naya naujawan*", I kept slowly inching towards my career.

Then, in December 1952, I got landed with 'GEETMALA' (because no one else was willing to touch it at the low fee being offered). Fortunately, AIR had banned film music by then, and Radio Ceylon was playing it in abundance. So, the programme became a hit overnight — and I, the poor '*nausikhiya*', was soon thrown into undeserved prominence as a '*hangaamaydaar, hulladbaaz Radio Madaari!*'

Q4. According to the Wikipedia you are the most imitated announcer even today. What do you have to say about this? Do you think it is right if some freshers begin with imitation and gradually evolve a style of their own or should they have their own original style right from the beginning?

AS: Although nearly three hundred radio presenters all over the world still copy that old sergeant-major style of mine, I have thankfully mellowed! I don't think anyone (except mimicry artistes) can ever make a mark except by developing one's own individual personality and then pouring it into one's style. And, particularly for radio, you need to learn the spoken (not just the written) form of the language you are working in. The aim should always be to communicate accurately, clearly, simply and sincerely. And, however much fun and frolic you indulge in, always remember to be 'in sync' with the world and its values.

Q5 You have won numerous awards, the latest being the Padmashri. Which award or recognition do you value the most?

A.5: My favourite Awards (prior to the Padma Shri) are:

(a) The Advertising Club Bombay's 'Golden Abby' Award to 'Geetmala', as the 'Best Radio Campaign of the Century.' (The credit should actually have gone to Indian film songs, which were absolutely divine.)

(b) The Indian Society of Advertiser's 'Gold Medal' for my contribution to Advertising through Radio. (What they probably meant was that I had sold millions of analgesic pills to cure the millions of headaches my programmes generated - and, if the pills didn't cure them, I sold millions of tubes of toothpastes to help people "grin and bear" those headaches!)

(c) Delhi's Hindi Bhavan's 'Hindi Ratna' Award. (This perplexed me, since I had never really studied Hindi! But they fortunately clarified that the trophy was only meant for people from other language streams who had helped in propagating simple Hindi.)

Q 6 You have ruled the airwaves and are undeniably the Golden Voice of Indian radio. Could you please share with us your success mantra?

A.6: Funnily, it was my initial 'foghorn' voice and '*dramaybaaz*' style that seemed to make an impression in the aura of funereal seriousness that AIR had receded into those days. Among the many things that later rescued me from my obnoxiously loud style was Lin Yu Tang's definition of

CULTURE (read "decency"): "CULTURE IS THE CIVILIZED EXPRESSION OF ANIMAL INSTINCTS"!

Ed: Thank you, sir.