

Tribute to Ameen Sayani

Siraj Syed

Ameen Sayani

The incomparable radioman, compère, and my Guru



We recorded the first sponsored 15-minute radio programme to promote the film Bobby (1973) in Studio B at Radio Enterprises Private Limited (REPL), Cecil Court, Colaba, Bombay. The voices were Ameen Sayani, Ashima Singh and I. This was my major radio break, although I had been doing programmes on radio ever since the first Yuva Vani broadcast in Hindi on All India Radio AIR). Ashima Singh was a Delhi girl who had migrated to Bombay, where her husband had been transferred. She was young, married and three years older than me; she had an infant son, who she brought to the studio. I think she has done some programmes for Delhi television. And Ameen Sayani was the number-one broadcaster in the country. This was his 21st year in the medium. Besides speaking, he also produced and occasionally wrote his programmes. Those days, nothing in India was live, all pre-recorded. And only one radio

channel, with hundreds of stations all over the country. As I read my first line of the Bobby Programme No. 1 script, he said, “Cut”.

This one word could have meant the end of my career, so my heart sank. After all, I had three years of radio experience, part of which was with Ameen Saahab himself. What had I done wrong? The two seconds that elapsed between the ‘unkind’ cut and being told the reason for the same were unbearable. Then came the reason: “Get Ameen Sayani out of your voice. I do not want to imitate myself on my programme. Be yourself.” This was heartening. It made sense. Why would a listener accept a voice slightly similar to Ameen Saahab’s when he was part of the programme? And Ameen Sayani could have chosen anybody from the 20-odd voices who freelanced for him. Which meant that he picked me for my original voice.

The similarity, if any, was purely unintentional. I was speaking for the first time with my guru. My co-voice was a married woman with a child whom I barely knew. And here was a script demanding that I flirt with her, on air, for the whole of India to hear. I was naturally nervous. But once the nervousness was overcome, Bobby was a breeze. It won me second prize at the Radio and Television Advertisers' Association's first RAPA awards in 1975. I got my first fan mail at 'Binaca Geetmala, Post Box 439, Bombay 1'. This was so because addresses of sponsored film radio programs were never announced, and the fans had the brainwave to send it to the most famous post box address in India, Binaca Geetmala.



Binaca Geetmala was what made Ameen Sayani 'Ameen Sayani. Launched as a 30-minute random film song show on Radio Ceylon (RC) in 1952, involving listeners by asking them to rank the songs and offering token prizes. This was much before AIR started accepting any advertising. Indian advertisers who wanted to promote their products, services and films made a bee-line for Colombo via Radio Advertising Services (RAS), RC's agency in Mumbai and Madras. Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) had no qualms about accepting Indian spots (short audio ads, usually of 15-60 seconds, called jingles when singing was part of it, comparable, somewhat, to the film teasers we now find on YouTube). RC earned millions of dollars and pounds, while AIR

would not budge from its stand that accepting ads was demeaning to the sanctity of their service.

Wednesday night, 8 pm, was the only real prime time in India when streets were deserted; people gathered in restaurants that played the radio or went over to houses of friends who had one and remained glued for 60 minutes. Many would stand outside windows. Ameen would play the top-ranked sixteen songs of the week, based on record sales and votes of Listeners' Clubs. There would be a bugle fanfare before the top song of the week, and all the talent associated with that song would feel vindicated: the music director, the singer, the lyricist, the director and the producer. Getting a place in the 16 *paidaans* (steps of a ladder) was an achievement, and reaching the top was a crowning glory. Among its avid listeners was an 8-10-year-old-boy who loved Ameen's rich, clear voice and flawless pronunciation. He would be taken every Wednesday evening to a mini restaurant in Gamdevi, Mumbai, by a group of 5-6 men in their twenties and treated to a samosa in return for predicting which song would reach number one position. The older boys had a betting routine, of which the little kid was blissfully unaware. He would innocently name the song, and they made some quick bucks nine times out of ten. The boy with that unbelievable, uncanny knack was yours truly.

Perhaps it was this distant association with Binaca (a toothpaste) and the presenter of its programme that would, one day, land this B.Sc. graduate in Ameen Saahab's office to be anointed as his only pupil in the world. It was a great blessing that I got to work with the man who conducted the Binaca Geetmala without a break for about 42 years. Our association lasted a full 55 years, with some breaks in between. Breath control, microphone discipline, giving life to every word, absolute clarity, always sounding interested in what you are saying, never shouting... He taught me all this, as well as compèring (anchoring) live events, often co-compèring variety entertainment programmes, he on one microphone and I on the other. One of the first such shows was at his alma mater, St. Xavier's College, where the Sangeet Mandal would organise an annual event. He, of course, being an ex-student, did not charge any fees, but he made sure I got a small amount since I was then a student at National College. The singers who sang in these programmes were prominent Xavierites, like Pankaj Udhas, Sharda

(later Kavita) Krishnamoorthy, Anuradha Paudwal (real name Alka Nadkarni), Shailendra Singh and Harendra Khurana.



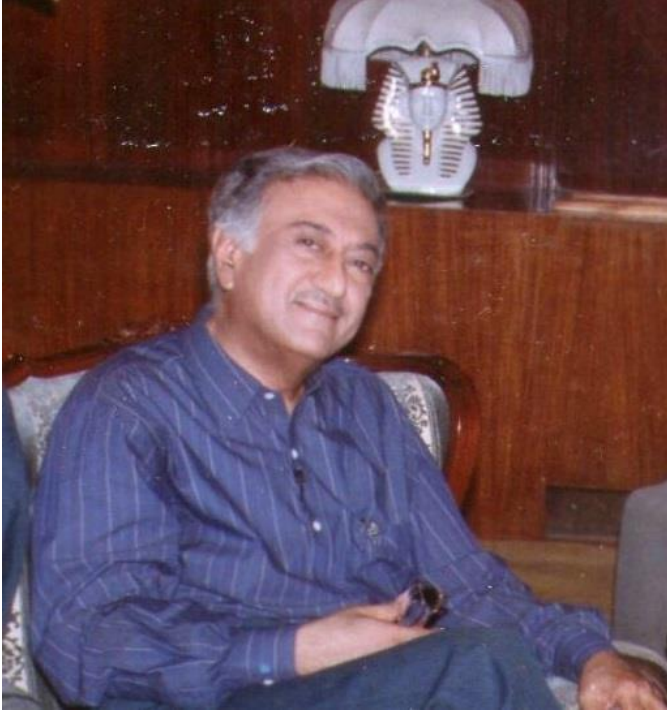
My association with the production of Binaca Geetmala was peripheral. Ameen Saahab would write the programme himself, and if he needed some input, he would go to Riaz, his Chief Copywriter and my only sibling, who passed away in 2007. But when it came to Binaca Geetmala's Silver Jubilee celebrations, in December 1977, at the Shanmukhananda Hall, he assigned me three tasks: deliver the invitations to our music greats, or their families (like the Madan Mohans), on my behalf, record messages from music directors like C. Ramchandra and Sajjad (who were reported to be hotheads and recluses) on huge, barely portable tape recorders, and procure the prints of two Binaca Geetmala Annual topper songs, from films which were, by then untraceable: lost, burnt or destroyed. This kept me running around and occupied for about three weeks, but it was all worth it. When the Top songs of the last 25 years were projected live in 35 mm prints of pristine quality, in the presence of dozens of music greats and thousands of music lovers, it was a sight to be seen. Backstage, while the songs were being savoured on the other side, Ameen Saahab approached me, patted my back and said, "Bete (son), I must say you have done a great job." Praise came very rarely from the master. When the name of the toothpaste was changed to Cibaca, an All-India Binaca Dealers' meeting was held at the same venue. He deputed me to compère that event and announce the formal change.

Perhaps it was this dedication and commitment to my *ustaad* (teacher) that he called me over one day when he was in his late 80s and beginning to lose his memory. He could not

remember many important faces, names and dates. He was also getting a little senile. His family and I were persuading him to write his autobiography, but for reasons unknown, he was reluctant. The man who contributed in no small measure to the success of films like *Sholay* and *Roti Kapada Aur Makaan* and product-promoting programmes like *S. Kumars Ka Filmi Muqaddama* (which had a team of nearly 30 writers) and *Saridon Ke Saathi* (mainly written by Riaz), wasn't keen on penning his memoirs. Finally persuaded, the nod came a little too late. With his deteriorating health and failing memory, it became difficult to fill in the gaps, and sometimes, he came up with rather odd ideas about the book's formatting. So it was decided that whatever he could remember and whatever could be discovered and corroborated would go into the book. But he insisted on one demand, "Siraj will write the chapter on Binaca Geetmala." Naturally, this would be the book's most important chapter, and I was extremely reluctant to take on the responsibility. Binaca was his baby. For many, Binaca Geetmala was Ameen Sayani and Ameen Sayani was Binaca Geetmala. How could I...? In the end, I could not say "No" to him. When he read it, he said, "I don't know what else is going to go into the book, but the chapter you have written will remain the best chapter." There were tears in my eyes.



All his family and well-wishers (lakhs of them) wanted to see the book published during his lifetime. That was not to be. On 20 February this year, I kept getting phone calls from people who wanted to confirm whether AmeenSaahab had passed away. They could not reach Rajil, his son, so the next source had to be me. I did not know. His devoted son and caretaker for the last 10 years of his life, Rajil, had not informed me deliberately. He did not respond to dozens of my phone calls either. I went to the Sayanis' home at Churchgate, and nobody was there.



From there, I went to the hospital, where he was reported to have breathed his last. They confirmed that he had indeed died and that his body was in their morgue. But Rajil was not around, busy making funeral arrangements. The next day, my nephew Raza

told me that Rajil had informed him about AmeenSaahab's death but told him not to break the news to me immediately, lest I suffer a great shock. Suffer a great shock, I did. After my mother's death, 15 days after my brother's in 2007, I always saw a father figure in him. But he had to go one day. At a few months past 91, it was not early.

The radio's best and most famous voice was silenced forever, but it lives in thousands of recordings, possessed by his fans, and on social media. It is some consolation for me that the last sponsored programme and the last spot he recorded, shortly before his passing away, were both written by me, and the one-hour programme had him and I speaking together. And it is a matter of real pride that some years ago, he told me that I was now his Chief Copywriter, a vacant position until some 14 years after my brother's death. *Behno aur bhaiyo* ("sisters and brothers, his signature words that sailed on all airwaves from Asia to Africa, words that were the crutches of his 1,00,000 or more clones and mimics), can we ever think of film music, film personalities and even radio itself, of the era 1952-2018, a staggering 60 years, without Ameen Sayani?

Siraj Syed is member of FIPRESCI-India.