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Versatility of Venu Chitale [1910 to 1995]

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Venu Dattatreya Chitale, also known as Leela Ganesh Khare (28-12-1910/12 to 01-01-1995), was an Indian writer, BBC Radio broadcaster, and secretary to George Orwell during the early years of the Second World War. Venu Chitale's was a life of prodigious work: she joined the BBC around the Battle of Britain, assisted George Orwell, and spoke for India's freedom movement. Chitale was born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India, and was in England between 1934 and late 1947. In 1940, after assisting with volunteer work in a local air raid precaution unit in Oxford, she moved to London to work with Orwell, then BBC Radio's talks producer. In 1940, at the request of Z. A. Bukhari, Chitale began her career with BBC Radio as secretary to the BBC talks producer George Orwell with the India Section of BBC Radio's Eastern Service. There, her contemporaries included Una Marson, Mulk Raj Anand, Balraj Sahni and Princess Indira of Kapurthala. Every month she wrote and delivered a programme preview, which Orwell edited, and regularly read out translated scripts in Marathi, her mother tongue. She became a broadcaster for both the India section of the BBC's Eastern Service, where she read news and gave recipes in Marathi, and the BBC Home Service, where she taught British listeners vegetarian cooking at a time when meat was rationed. Around 1944, Chitale began working for Krishna Menon at the India League in London. Towards the end of 1947, after India's independence, she returned there and assisted Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit at refugee camps set up in Delhi following the Partition of India. Her first novel, "In Transit", was published in 1950. Chitale's life is recorded in a chapter in Vijaya Deo's 'Sakhe Soyare', a book in Marathi. In 2017, the BBC produced a video about her.

Venu Chitale was born in Shirol, Kolhapur, in Maharashtra and her date of birth is given as 28 December 1910 in the 1939 England and Wales Register, and as 1912 in Sahitya Akademy's Who's Who of Indian Writers (1961). She was the second youngest of seven children and raised by her older siblings following the death of both her parents. After attending 'Huzurpaga', one of the oldest girls' schools in Pune, she went to St. Columba High School in Mumbai's Gamdevi district before gaining admission to Wilson College, Mumbai, where she was a boarder. There she met the Afrikaaner teacher Johanna Adriana Quinta Du Preez, who was impressed by Chitale's interest in theatre. Chitale and Du Preez travelled to England together after an astrologer had predicted family troubles should Chitale marry. She subsequently entered University College, London, where in 1934 she studied Montessori ways of learning. At the onset of the Second World War in 1939, they were both at the University of Oxford; Chitale registered as an external student while Du Preez was studying journalism. There, she volunteered at a local air raid precaution unit, where her role included alerting locals to bombings and assisting in rescues. For South Asians living in Britain, 1939 was a torrid year.

The war was about to reach Britain's shores, shipping was disrupted, and travel had become dangerous. Many South Asians were scrambling in this tumult to get home to safety – but not Venu Dattatreya Chitale. A student at Oxford in her late 20s, Chitale first volunteered for the local air raid precaution unit, warning citizens of imminent bombings and helping them with subsequent rescue-and-aid missions. She then moved to London to work with the BBC's Indian Section, where she read news, presented other programmes and assisted the writer-broadcaster George Orwell. Her unique life is the subject of a chapter in scholar Vijaya Deo's Marathi book Sakhe Soyare and of a Marathi video produced by the BBC in 2017. "Hers is the story of a woman who defied the times with her unconventional choices and went on to become a spokesperson for India's freedom movement."

In 1941, in one programme titled "The kitchen in wartime: some suggestions for doing without meat", Chitale gave her suggestion of a vegetarian alternative to sausage and mash and spoke of what she thought an Indian housewife might do in Britain with the limited availability of ingredients and fuel; in another, she talked of "appetizing curries". In 1942 she approached Orwell's wife, Eileen Blair, with a request to help out with Blair's In the Kitchen series on the BBC Home Service. "Chitale also talked to a British audience on the cooking series The Kitchen Front taught listeners vegetarian cooking at a time when meat was rationed". In addition she broadcast recipes to Indians in India in the programme 'In Your Kitchen'. In 1943, Chitale contributed the chapter on the European refugee children's exhibition in E. M. Forster, Ritchie Calder, Cedric Dover and Hsiao Ch'ien's book Talking to India. How popular she was with Indian listeners was documented in 1943 in an unclear Report on Indian Programmes. BBC producer Trevor Hill later recalled in his memoirs Over the Airwaves, that during his early years with the BBC's Overseas Services at 200 Oxford Street, when he was still in his teens "the person I knew best and enjoyed working with was a diminutive, cheerful young Indian woman from Poona, Venu Chitale". Not understanding Marathi, he once played her broadcast from end to beginning. According to Sejal Sutaria, who has written on Chitale's programmes "illustrate how Indians hired by the BBC during the Second World War faced conflicting needs—to establish their solidarity with Britain during the war while maintaining their allegiance to Indian independence from the Raj".

When World War II arrived, it made new demands of Chitale and people like writer Mulk Raj Anand, who was in London. They were spokespersons for their country's freedom, seeking an end to British domination, and yet it was equally urgent for them to resist the forces of fascism and authoritarianism. As records show, Chitale joined the Indian Section of BBC's Eastern Service in 1940, a division that would attract powerhouses like Mulk Raj Anand, Princess Indira Devi of Kapurthala, actor Balraj Sahni and his wife Damayanti,

political activist Ayana Deva Angadi, Sri Lankan poet JM Tambimuttu and Anglo-Indian biologist-poet Cedric Dover. Established in 1940, the Indian Section was expanding quickly. “To its initial Hindustani broadcasts were added broadcasts in Tamil in May 1941, Bengali in October 1941, Gujarati in March 1942 and Marathi around the same time”. Orwell officially joined the Indian Section in August 1943. Peter Davison, the editor of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, mentions that the famous British writer had a part in a radio play written by Chitale, sometime before he joined the BBC. The play was about the British Parliament’s abolition of slavery in 1833. Other parts were read by staffers like AL Bakaya, Balraj Sahni and the Jamaican feminist-writer Una Marson. Orwell’s part, Davison writes, as a slave owner was brief, but had some memorable lines like, “You low animal. We’ll have the cows answering back next.” Sejal Sutaria of Grinnell College in Indiana has written about Chitale’s work for the BBC. Her story links to recordings of Chitale’s broadcasts for the weekly BBC Marathi magazine programme *Radio Jhankar*. In one broadcast, *The Kitchen in Wartime: Some Suggestions for Doing Without Meat*, Chitale shared with her British listeners some Indian vegetarian recipes – including one for mashed potatoes and beans – to help them tide over wartime austerities. “I have been over here now for several years, and have kept myself as fit and fed as in my own country without meat or fish,” she wrote, adding, “As far as my diet is concerned, I have hardly felt the war at all.”

In another piece, ‘The Hand that Rocks the Cradle’, Chitale described how several of her British women friends had given up their privileged lifestyle to work during the war – either in canteens or as mechanics and volunteers. ‘The Children’s Exhibition’, another of her broadcasts, appeared in *Talking to India*, a series produced by Orwell. In it, she described her visit to an art show by refugee children from 15 countries in a London suburb that had been bombed. The paintings, she said, showed pluck and resilience, despite the all-round preoccupation with war. Landscapes were popular as a subject, as were animals, such as “fat cows, funny-looking bears and ridiculously amusing monkeys”. Chitale concluded by writing that children from a devastated Europe could find refuge in Britain, where they were also given a chance to develop their talents. Around 1944, Chitale began working for Krishna Menon’s India League, and became an elected member of the Asiatic Society. In December 1946, at an All India Women’s Conference meet in Hyderabad presided over by Sarojini Naidu, Chitale made a short speech introducing herself as an Indian woman who had come “5,000 miles from England”. It was a land where there was little public interest in India, and the only question she was often asked related to the “Hindu-Muslim problem”. To get over its many divides, Chitale suggested in her speech that Indians should learn as many of their own languages as possible, to understand one another. Chitale’s association with the Indian Section came about somewhat propitiously. As Deo writes, Chitale had authored a piece – perhaps in translation – for the government, which got her recommended to the BBC.

Chitale provided a vivid description of her time in England in an article that she wrote in 1963, long after her return to India. “I was young and impressionable, full of enthusiasm about English literature, and actually almost lapped up books as a cat laps up cream. I was very lucky in my guardians. They were English and Dutch ladies who put the best books in my way. They guided me in my reading and in seeing plays staged in London, in Edinburgh, in Oxford and in Stratford on Avon. ...I was in England for fourteen years, fourteen precious young healthy years of my life. I lived in a cottage full of dainty flowers, and more full of wonderful books... I dined on nuts and fruit and on the most luscious greens and vegetables that any fastidious naturopath could prescribe. And I did this in the company of English friends who lived for ideals, whether they were humble or elevated did not matter”.

In December 1947, Chitale returned to Bombay. Deo writes that Chitale started helping Vijayalakshmi Pandit in her work with women and children in the refugee camps set up in Delhi following the Partition. Chitale’s first novel, *In Transit*, was published in 1950. Some excerpts are available in *Women’s Voices*, a book edited by Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira. That same year, she married Ganesh Khare, a chartered accountant, and from then on, she was known as Leela Ganesh Khare. ‘*In Transit*’ is centered on a Brahmin family living in a wada (a community-based neighbourhood in Pune). The book, for which Mulk Raj Anand wrote the preface, depicts three generations of a family, and how they were impacted by the growing nationalism from 1915 to 1935. It details a certain way of life, its customs and rituals, and how with time, the younger generation found those conventions meaningless. The novel portrays the ‘wada’ culture of the city of Pune in the nineteen thirties when the Brahmin middle-class orientation was essentially patriarchal and orthodox. Women and especially widows had a very tough life and many inhibitions. The metaphors in the utterances above speak volumes about the domination and oppression suffered by women at the hands of males. Later in life, Chitale wrote articles in various newspapers, such as the Marathi daily ‘*Navashakti*’, occasionally broadcast on All India Radio, and was involved with several grassroots women’s groups in Bombay. She wrote another novel, ‘*Incognito*’, in 1993, this time under the pseudonym Weenoo. As Pereira and de Souza write, the book follows Shesha, one of the characters from her first novel, as she travels around Europe.

“In *Radio Empire: The BBC’s Eastern Service and the Emergence of the Global Anglophone Novel*”, Daniel Ryan Morse draws attention to the dynamic intersections between literature and radio, exploring how the BBC’s Eastern Service, directed at educated Indian audiences, influenced the development of global Anglophone literature and literary broadcasting. Pushing against the siloed ways in which literary modernism is often studied, this fresh and ambitious book reveals the profound impact of the BBC’s Eastern Service on the printed and broadcast word. This distinction, astutely made by Daniel Ryan Morse, draws our attention to the dynamic intersection between the literary and the radiogenic within a broader field of growing scholarly interest in the mid-twentieth century and its refashioning of modernist practices. Morse argues that studying radio transmissions by well-known global Anglophone writers such as Anand and lesser-known ones like Attia Hosain and Venu Chitale transforms our understanding of the literary texts they authored. In doing so, he also highlights the extent to which literary and media studies are able to ‘speak’ to each other, and how significant this mode of interpretation and analysis is for each field. The focus of the book is the BBC’s Eastern Service, which began wartime broadcasting to India from May 1940 onwards. Although the service was at first on air for ten minutes daily, broadcasting news in Hindustani, it expanded rapidly, incorporating programmes in English, Bengali, Marathi, Sinhalese and Tamil. Consequently, its broadcasting time also increased. The English-language programmes, on which Morse focuses, were intellectual in nature, not targeted towards Indian mass appeal or for British officials stationed in India, but at university students and the English-speaking educated elite of the country.

In a finely written chapter, Morse considers Hosain and Chitale’s respective mid-century novels *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and *In Transit* (1950). He takes into account the two women’s class and social background as much as their race and ethnicity, and presents them as ‘transnational feminist writers’ (161) rather than simply Indian ones. Morse argues that both writers create hybrid

forms of the novel that adopt radiogenic features. In a fascinating instance of ‘media convergence’ (177), Chitale’s use of sound in her novel, he highlights, draws upon formal innovations from her BBC radio show in the 1930s on the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Significantly, employing such techniques enabled both Hosain and Chitale to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of nationalism in their novels. As Morse says, ‘Their placement of the personal and familial on the same level as national politics is at the heart of their feminist critique of Indian nationalism’ (156). What then constituted the home for Hosain and Chitale? How did Indian women emerge as citizens in the interwar years? And, after 1947, how much did the newly independent states of India and Pakistan deliver on their promises of gender equality? It is only by engaging in a comparative study of broadcasts and the Indian Anglophone novel, Morse persuasively argues, that we can address these questions. Chitale died in 1995. The BBC video in 2017 has rightly brought Chitale’s forgotten achievements back into public consciousness.

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