

CHAK (VU2TTC): THE BLIND GENIUS OF HAM RADIO IN INDIA



Chak (VU2TTC) amidst his homebrewed ham radio station

Acknowledgement:

- Sri Deepak Sarma (from The Hindu)
- Staff Reporter, The Hindu
- Sri B.M. Hedge, VU2HEG
- OM Chakravarthy, VU2TTC

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Twelve years back, Mr. B.M. Hedge, VU2HEG (who was the Vice-Chairman of Karnataka Regional Engineering College Amateur Radio Club) arranged an amateur radio demonstration-cum-lecture (Perhaps the first informally arranged ham radio demonstration in Guwahati, Assam, attended by a large number of Short Wave Listeners) under the initiative of Sri Deepak Sarma (who had since passed the ASOC Examination but was not receiving his license. I lost touch with him long time back and don't know whether he received his license or not). The ham radio demonstration was attended by many short wave listeners (including me), when OM Hedge, VU2HEG demonstrated us the operation of his state-of-the-art FT-77 transceiver by contacting a very special station located in a small village 170 kms South of Madras. The blind genius of amateur radio-Mr. Chakravarty (fondly known as Chak), VU2TTC introduced himself to us via VU2HEG and an on-the-air lecture was delivered by him. It was a great astonishment to the radio enthusiasts in Guwahati (including me) when they came to know that, Chak, VU2TTC pursued his career in ham radio only when he went completely blind and that he was running a completely home-made radio station to his credit! My friend Sri Deepak Sarma could not even resist his desire to visit Chak personally in his small village. Deepak collected a copy of "The Hindu" (SUNDAY, JULY 28, 1985) which was carrying an article titled "TUNED TO THE WORLD WITH A HOME BREW". The article was all about the blind genius of ham radio: Chak, VU2TTC, whom we heard through VU2HEG. I have still preserved that article which was given to me by Sri Deepak Sarma as a token of his visit to Chak's (VU2TTC) ham radio shack. I take this opportunity to republish the article in my web-site with acknowledgement to "The Hindu" Newspaper. At this moment I would like to offer my gratitude to OM Hedge, VU2HEG and OM Chakravarthy, VU2TTC, who had greatly inspired me to become a ham radio operator.

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TUNED TO THE WORLD WITH A HOME BREW

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"EVEN though I cannot see, I am bringing the world to my house through my hobby." These words, stated without any trace of self-pity, sum up the saga of Mr. R. Chakravarthy, the blind ham (amateur radio operator) from Paithambadi-Chatram village, off Villupuram, Tamil Nadu, simply known as "Chak" to hams all over the world. "Welcome to my shack," he announces as he leads us up a rigged-up ladder to his terrace-shack and proudly displays his "home-brew" amateur radio equipment amidst a tangled skein of wires , supplemented by an array of switches and also points to his new acquisition-sophisticated, imported equipment.

Never one to cavil at his fate or weep over his shoulders, Chak speaks fluent English as he cuts jokes, breaks into whodunits and brands his hobby "a crazy one." And he goes on to illustrate his remark with the story of a hermit who raised a cat to catch the mice wreaking havoc in his hut, then bought a cow to feed the cat with the milk and then engaged a servant to look after the cow. Drawing a parallel, he says, "You can start (on this hobby) with RS 200 but may end-up spending 2,000 or 20,000. This hobby is for experimentation and not entertainment in the field of wireless technology, he pointedly remarks.

How did he get initiated into this hobby (which was almost by fortuitous circumstances) overcoming his crippling handicap and its attendant troubles, and making him a hero among fellow-hams?

Chak lost his eye-sight in 1960 because of a retinal detachment. He was hardly 22 years and had obtained a B.Sc. (Hons) in Mathematics from the Annamalai University. "I was very depressed and spent six years at the Egmore Eye Hospital, spending 20,000 trying to regaining my sight but to no avail. Detachment of the retina is incurable." The doctors were, obviously; slowly preparing him for the eventuality.

During his sojourn in the hospital, Chak, however, attended a number of medical conferences on eye diseases and picked up quite a bit on the subject. "I am half a doctor in ophthalmology. I can feel the tension in the eyes of a patient and say whether he suffers from glaucoma or trachoma," He reminisces "Blind patients suffering from stomach-ache used to holler out for nurses and whenever the nurses were absent, I quietly used to administer them distilled water. And when the patients later thanked the nurses, I was found out and given a scolding."

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"However, with the light world gone, I turned to the hearing world,". He soon bought a pile of books on electronics and parallel circuits, which were read out to him by the staff nurses and his brother. R. Varadachari, who had been a pillar of strength to him. "I assembled my own radio-set in the hospital in 1961 and slowly developed an interest in electronics. Taking my handicap sportingly, I returned to my village in 1966 and started assembling valve-sets and high-fidelity amplifiers. Long before I took to hamming, I made my hi-fi amplifier system in 1972 (which almost brings down his shack with the blast of Hindi songs) and also assembled an electronic key.

But the rub lay in soldering the joints. Not only did Chak learn soldering wearing gloves but his brother and his nephew helped him in the task while he supplied the circuit ideas.

Chak was married in 1969. "My wife is not worried about leading me anywhere, She is my friend. When I told her about my disability before marriage, her reply was, "What if the person I marry loses his sight afterwards?" (The couple have two daughters and a son-all school-going).

Chak's opportunity to become a ham presented itself in 1974 when he chanced to listen to a ham-station on 41m when he was repairing a transistor-radio, The ham, Prof. Jayaraman, was giving a demonstration on ham radio to the Tiruchur Engineering College students and it was then that he came to understand amateur radio. But to his dismay he found that when he wanted to know more about this amateur radio hobby, no ham gave him his address on the air (which is forbidden) and the nearest hams were in Bangalore and Madras. Luck soon came his way when he read about a ham-station in a receiver-book and also got the ham's address-Mr. Hari Rao of Bangalore.

Chak and his wife met Mr. Hari Rao in Bangalore who asked them to meet Prof. Vasan of Salem. "The tragedy was everybody was prepared to help me but did not know how to help a blind person get into this hobby," he says. It was Prof. "Vasan, who gave Chak the address of Mr. M. V. Chauhan of the Federation of Radio Amateur Societies of India, whose "achievement was to initiate me into the hobby, He has helped me a great deal."

Mr. Chauhan gave him all the assistance to learn Morse-code and also got him a number of Morse-code recorded cassettes. Mr. K. Mahalingam, President of the Madras Amateur Radio Society, also helped him in this regard.

Another ham, Mr.Seshanandam of Nellore tutored him on the telecommunications part of amateur radio-its rules, regulations, procedures, frequency allocations for hams etc.

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The lessons were taped and played many times over and he committed them to memory. Meanwhile, he attained a proficiency of sending 30 words a minute-both sending and receiving. He appeared for the Amateur Radio Operators' Certificate Examination in December 1976 with the help of a proxy and attended the viva voce on telecommunications.

However, doubts were raised about his safety. How could he solder and how did he keep his children away from his shack? His reply was, "I solder with gloves on and my shack is upstairs, free from domestic activity and whenever. I enter my room, I latch it from inside. Besides, all the equipment is on a wooden rafter, above the reach of children."

A visit to his house by an official from the Union Ministry of Telecommunications made his dream come true: he received his ham license in December 1978. (His call-sign is VU2 TTC). "And finally, on March 9, 1979, I made my first contact with VU2MKS-Kumar of Cochin-with just one watt transistorized transmitter and using my Philips transistor for receiving. It cost me only 200." he says with a triumphal look on his face.

From then on, he has never looked back. Chak is now the winner of three prestigious awards: the VU9 award of Asiad 82, the Worked Republic of India Award, and the Worked All Continent Award. One among the seven Indians so far to have got the VU9 award for Asiad 82, he bagged it for contacting 532 foreign hams on his home-brew set-up, which is 50 watts on Continuous Wave and 20 watts on Amplitude Modulation. The second award was for contacting 50 other fellow Indian-hams and the "Worked All Continent Award," for establishing contacts with hams in six continents-North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Europe and 1- Oceania (New Zealand and Australia).

However, his big day was when he met Mr. Rajiv Gandhi (a M.P then) who is a ham himself in 1982 at a hams' meeting in Hyderabad. He proudly shows us a photograph of himself with Mr. Gandh!

"My ambition is to get 100 countries (to contact 100 foreign hams) on 40m with my home-brew set-up. I have already finished 87 though it is difficult to work with my set-up," he says. In addition, he has already made 30,000 QSOs) (a communication between two hams is called a QSO). "In all my efforts, my nephew Govindarajan, is my PA in electronics," he adds jocularly and shows us the bundle of QSL cards (cards sent by one ham to another whom he has contacted) and jokes about the postal expense entailed on him. "I send thin QSL cards (put in an envelope) to hams abroad to cut down on my postal rates and use thick cards for local hams. I am sure I will be flooded

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with letters once people read your write-up on me. They should write to me with a self-addressed stamped envelope."

As if to demonstrate his hamming ability, Chak tunes in the transceiver and quickly encounters his friend, Mr. Babu from Pondicherry. Soon Mr. Krishnan Kutty of Trivandrum and Mr. Raman of Karaikudi follow and he has an informal chat with them.

Seeing this reporter trying to break the ice with them, he promptly observes, "This is one hobby where you should be able to master the art of talking about everything and anything with a stranger." Switching over to another band, he works a new contact-a ham from Korea and is quite thrilled about it.

Chak's ancestral house (he comes from a lineage of Sanskrit scholars) is situated right on the southern banks of the broad "Thenpennaiyar" river and it is in the fitness of things that he should have rescued his villagers from a flood in 1979 by warning them about the impending danger using his transmitter.

He talks excitedly about Steve Baur a fellow-ham from West Germany whom he first contacted in 1980. "He is a close friend now. He came to Paithambadi in 1981 and 1983 and on both the occasions, stayed with me for a fortnight. Mr. Baur has gifted Chak a transceiver, while a Japanese ham, Mr. Kazu Nakamaro gave him the linear amplifier for the transceiver. Mr. Chauhan helped him in clearing them from the Madras Customs, The battery and the battery-charger were gifts from Mr. Babu of Pondicherry and Dr. Samath of Trivandrum. An exquisite gift, which is of much use to him, however, is a Casio voice-clock, gifted by the ham, Ambadi Bhaskar of Tiruchur. With the press of a button, it announces not only the time, but also the date and month and instructions like "It is time to wake up", "it is time to go out" etc. It also announces the results of calculations up to eight digits. All the announcements are shown on a display. "Hams from West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Madras come home because of their love and affection for me" he says.

As we say good-bye to Chak what keeps echoing through our minds are the words of a villager when we asked him: for directions to Chak's house: "Isn't there any possibility of taking him to Madras and have him undergo an eye transplant surgery? He has done so much for our village. He gives tuitions to all the children here." And as Chak himself says, "Coaching children (in school lessons) is my secondary hobby while hamming comes first."