

Surfing the airwaves HAM-handedly

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: At 8 a.m. each day, VU2IJ, VU2AF and VU2BEJ in Mumbai gear up for their daily chat with AP2AD in Lahore. Their family and friends know these men as Jimmy Mistry, Adolf Shepherd, Derek Jefferies and Ahmed Mohammad. But when the four amateur radio operators chatter over the airwaves in Morse Code—a daily ritual that's now two decades old—they take on the alphanumeric call signs that identify them to HAMsters around the world.

They're part of a global family of HAM enthusiasts who were lured to their pre-Internet hobby by the prospect of striking up random friendships with people across the seven seas. So what if HAM radio is considered a dying activity, at best a hobby for senior citizens? Mumbai's approximately 150 amateur radio enthusiasts refuse to let go of their Morse keys even in the slick age of mobile phones and Net chatting.

Friendship, they say, is what keeps them going. Some old-time city HAMsters have airwave friendships that date back to the '50s. Mr Mistry tells of how he and his wife offended their cousins while on holiday in the US—the retired timber merchant and photographer chose to live with HAM pals rather than family. He also recounts the time he was unable to find a hotel room in Washington, but was dragged into a buddy's welcoming home after spotting a HAM antenna on his roof.

Even so, acknowledges former IAF ground engineer Shepherd, the thrill of real conversation cannot be replaced. Like other HAM enthusiasts, he looks forward to putting faces to the alphanumeric handles at annual conventions and HAM fests.

Mr Jefferies was once BEST deputy general manager. Now 83 and confined to a wheelchair, he revels in the ragchewing companionship his hobby offers. Across the city, Dr Avinash Vengsarkar, identified as VU2AVI, joins in when professional hours allow the busy cardiologist to cruise with them.

The name by which they know their hobby—HAM radio—is possibly an acronym of the surnames of two radio pioneers, Hertz and Marconi. To start bridging the continents, you need to get yourself properly equipped. Amateur radio paraphernalia once occupied more than half a room's space, but now fits neatly on a table top. Still, unless you're

dexterous and assemble a home-brewed set, the equipment can cost a pretty packet.

Once you've got the gear, you need to learn basic Morse code, elementary electronics, HAM-Cal (computer-generated HAM calculation) and government rules, Mr Mistry said. The ministry of communication closely monitors the air and its regulations take a serious view of obscene language, religious or political propaganda. Flouting these rules could lose a HAM his licence.

After this, you're finally ready to seek out fellow practitioners in the approximately 300 countries that have HAM stations, beeping CQ (seek you) thrice, then announcing your individual alphanumeric sign. Indians are assigned airnames beginning with the code VU2. Pakistanis are designated AP2, Malaysians 9M2, Japanese JA, while Americans tune in with W, Australia VK and Germany DM.

STARS AND TRIBES

Although the British dissuaded Indians from pursuing the activity, post-'47 there was no stopping subcontinental hobbyists.

Even as borders created new divisions, HAM radio transcended them. The Mistry-Shepherd-Jefferies trio maintains a warm daily schedule with their friends across the border, sitting excitedly behind their sets from 8 each morning for a couple of hours, then hooking up again in the evenings. "Given the five- to 10-hour difference between the time zones of the rest of the world and us, everyone else sleeps or works when we're ready to roll," says Mr Mistry. But Pakistan and Sri Lanka share similar time zones with India.

Still, it isn't as if amateur programming is just a matter of radio pals jumping in together. HAM also stands for Help All Mankind and signalling for assistance in crises remains a longstanding obligation it fulfils, often acting as a second line of defence. The 1971 Pakistan war saw amateur radio enthusiasts complementing the Home Guards in Mumbai.

When Gujarat's Morvi dam gave way a few years after, as did the phone wires there, Mr Mistry and his friends served as the only reporters of the disaster. The Latur earthquake saw them to the rescue again. Regularly called for the Himalayan Car Rally, HAM cars still crisscross the country accompanying other rallyists.

(This weekly series explores the numerous subcultures that add sparkle to the Mumbai mosaic.)