

Bhaskar Chandavarkar

Composer, Thinker, Musician and friend

In Remembrance of the Time Past

Eminent composer and musicologist Bhaskar Chandavarkar passed away a year ago, July 25, 2009. Writes filmmaker Arun Khopkar, "The loss was not just the family's, but also of our culture and of the institution (FTII) that he was an integral part of – which never honored him sufficiently, notwithstanding his lasting and massive contribution."

Overture

What struck you about him when you met Bhaskar Chandavarkar the first time, were his good looks. His light brown



eyes shone with intelligence, wit and mischief. There was a spark, which flashed just a nanosecond before he said anything witty and sharp, a frequent and still unpredictable event. He had a baritone voice, which lent itself easily to the cadences of his thoughts, especially as it turned into laughter, clear and sonorous. His features were well chiseled and so was his expression, in speech and in music. He was tall by Indian standards, lean and supple. He used his hands eloquently when he spoke, as many

musicians do. His slender and graceful fingers weaved the patterns of his thought in the air in calligraphic hieroglyphs. Though he had the passion – and looks – of a Romantic artist, he had all the discipline and restraint of a classical artist. He carried his good looks as elegantly and casually as he carried his brilliant mind, his sitar and his brightly coloured kurtas.

In the FTII of the seventies, you had a number of interesting teachers to whom you could relate in different ways – but Bhaskar stood out. He had no sacred cows, at least none that I could detect. Even when he spoke about Pandit Ravi Shankar, whom he loved and respected immensely, he would not hesitate to tell anecdotes about him. Once Panditji and Khansaab Alla Rakha were waiting at the airport in the VIP lounge. As the flight was delayed, they began to practise. Panditji was facing the entrance and a young and beautiful princess entered. She saw Panditji and started walking towards him; noticing her, he changed over to imitating her gait. Khansaab didn't understand the reason for this sudden switch, looked at Panditji, then following his eyes, saw the lady. He responded by picking up, then embellishing upon her gait. They ended in a *tihai*, which was timed with her reaching them!

Bhaskar would never put anyone on a pedestal and think of him/her as beyond critical examination. He had a terrific wit, which could turn acerbic, when he chose to. But at most times it was full of *joie de vivre* and had a quick, light

touch. He had a keen, logical and analytical mind, which made conversing with him a delight. And he had a kind of imagination that could fly as easily into the past and the future as it could soar over the present. All this attracted me to Bhaskar, but I realized that he was not someone you could get easily close to. You had to earn it.

No one who heard Bhaskar lecture in any of the three languages that he lectured in – English, Hindi and Marathi – could fail to notice what a brilliant teacher he was. Not only did he know his subject – music – well but he also had a broad and deep view of it, which you realized gradually. It was not only passion for his subject and its knowledge that made Bhaskar special as a teacher and person. It was his passionate engagement with life, his wide range of interests, his ability to see links in areas as remote as *gandhashastra* (the Indian discipline that studies fragrances) and music. Indian *attar* has strong links with the earth. Not only are there *attars* made from flowers, but there is also an *attar* that has the fragrance of the earth drenched by the first shower of the season, expressed by that lovely Sanskrit word *mridgandh*. Bhaskar was linked indissolubly with the earth, its sounds, its colours, its sights, its textures and its fragrances. He was equally related to the life of the cosmos. He was an avid reader of science fiction and had corresponded with Arthur Clarke, who responded warmly. Clarke had made some error in one of his novels – if I remember right, it was *Rendezvous with Rama* – about music. Bhaskar wrote to him and brought it to his notice. Clarke accepted the correction gracefully and wanted to meet him.

Composer

The word *rasika* is far more active than the somewhat bovine ‘consumer’. Even *rasika* is inadequate to express Bhaskar. Linked with his keen sense of appreciation was his creative mind, which left its stamp on Indian cinema, theatre and music – in theory, practice and application. His was a mind that could synthesize classical, semi-classical, folk and other forms of music, combine them with human voices in an operatic fashion, treat sound effects musically and produce the break-through sound of *Ghashiram Kotwal*, India's greatest contribution to world theatre. It was a play that rocketed above its contemporaries, having broken the sonic barriers separating dialogues, singing, sound effects and instrumental music and fusing them into one body of sound. This body entered into a vertical montage with the dramaturgy of Tendulkar's text, the mise-en-scene of Jabbar Patel and choreography of Mulgund and created a fourth dimension.

I was fortunate to observe him in one of his most creative periods – composing the music for *Ghashiram Kotwal*. I had heard many of the pieces as he composed them – fresh from the oven! I saw the early rehearsals as also the nearly five-hour long dress rehearsal in Chinchwad. Importantly, I could observe and participate vicariously in his excitement of creation. Through his work, teaching and writings, Bhaskar taught us not to have snobbish distinctions like classical, popular and folk about art forms – *Ghashiram Kotwal* was living proof of this.

Ghashiram made you realize how well Bhaskar understood literature, drama and narrative traditions. It was this sense of narrative – in literature as well as in music – that enabled him to compose music for *Ghashiram*, which retains its unity in spite of its diverse sources and moods. He was easily one of the most well-read Indian musicians of our times, with a broad range of interests, many of which found expression in his music.

The sounds of *Ghashiram* expressed a complete spectrum of human emotions. It had the joyous eroticism of the *tamasha* music, lyricism of *thumri*, shamanistic hypnotism of religious chants, grandeur of North Indian Art music, playfulness of folk music, innocence, tenderness of women's songs, and the beastly brutality and Kafkaesque terror of the shrieks which he used during the torture scene. Bhaskar made this rich spectrum of sound even richer by its



ironic deployment. It is this irony that lifted *Ghashiram Kotwal* to the heights of a tragedy, as it dealt with the fate and meaning of human life, but also offered an ironic interpretation of it. If anyone in India had understood the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect, not only intellectually, but also sensuously, it was Bhaskar. It was this musical irony that prevented catharsis and forced you to sit up and *take sides on what was happening on the stage*. His music rose above gimmicks such as using placards (grown gimmicky through overuse) or other stylistic devices like talking directly to the audience. Because Bhaskar understood that *before you could make the audience feel alienated you must involve it in the play*. Alienation is the shock produced by sudden landing when you think you are flying smoothly. Brecht stands on the shoulders of Aristotle, not on bare level ground.

It is a sad comment on our times that the very same people who wanted to paint with tar the faces of all artists involved with the production of *Ghashiram Kotwal*, today hold it as a measure against which the triumph of 'Marathi' culture on the global scene should be viewed. *Kalay tasmai namaha!*



Thinker and Historian

The principles that Bhaskar evolved while working for plays were the same as when he worked on films, with the proviso that he was deeply aware of the technology of cinema and its potential for sound. One of the most irritating platitudes of film studies and film aesthetics has been the statement, "Cinema is a visual medium." Films were never silent even when only the whirr of the projector accompanied them. Live music played a significant part in winning audiences to the new medium of cinema as the studies of Noel Burch, Rick Altman, Michel Chion, Elisabeth Weis and others have shown us about Western and Japanese cinema. We know that the situation in India was not very different and Bhaskar has described it beautifully in his article *Sound in a Silent Era*, written for *Cinema Vision* in 1980. From the birth of Indian sound cinema, its music has been an important factor that was for years neglected by 'serious' film theoreticians of cinema as well as those of music.



Bhaskar wrote two articles for *Cinema Vision* in 1980: *Sound in A Silent Cinema* and *The Great Film Song Controversy*. The former is more in the nature of an interview of Joseph Frances Nazareth, one of the musicians who gave live music to silent films. There are also thoughts about the relationship between the moving image and live music that accompanied it, but in a nascent form.

The latter article, *The Great Film Song Controversy*, is a deeply felt and well worked-out analysis of the Hindi film song, which suggests concrete answers to a question like 'What are the characteristics of what is called Indian music and does the Hindi film song fulfill them?' Analyzing the Indian musical tradition across its centuries of evolution, Bhaskar worked out eight criteria, which define this

elusive 'Indian-ness'. These criteria are not a closed system, in the nature of necessary and sufficient conditions but are more like Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance', which makes them open and non-dogmatic. It is a treat to read these criteria written like the *sutras* of ancient Indian texts – notable for their brevity, elegance and precision. Volumes have been written on this subject of Indian-ness, in music as well as in other arts. What is



remarkable about Bhaskar's writing is its lucidity of style, clarity of vision, erudition and before all, the driving engine of his passion for music. What he has achieved in this single article on the Hindi film song, is far beyond what pundits have attempted in weighty tomes. He has not only discovered important theoretical principles, but has applied them to specific songs like Salil Chowdhury's composition *Itna na mujhse to pyaar jata, ki mein ek badal awara*, for the film *Chaya*, based on the opening theme of Mozart's 40th in G Minor and compared it with the BeeGees version of the same theme. Using his criteria, Bhaskar shows how Salilbabu has 'Indianized' it, so much so that it is difficult for a Westerner to notice the original source.

After a long gap of seven years – a seven year itch of writing? – Bhaskar got back to writing about the Hindi film music in 1987 and this time with a series of five articles. They were written for *Cinema in India*. As these articles are now available only in archives but nevertheless are so relevant to us today, I would like to take the liberty of speaking about them at some length.

They are titled *Birth of the Film Song*, *Growth of the Film Song*, *Now It's the Bombay Film Song*, *The Arrangers*, and *Song of the Instruments*.

I'd like to outline the issues that Bhaskar chose to address and not go through a summary of each article. Broadly speaking these are as follows:

- Explore the main streams of Indian music that went into the making of the Hindi Film Song;
- Analyze how the recording technology of the 78 rpm disc as well as programmatic nature of music modified these forms;
- Trace how orchestration and harmony were introduced into a predominantly melodic musical culture;
- Show how a Pan-Indian musical culture emerged and was helped by migrations of people through events like the Second World War;
- Investigate the market forces that made music a lucrative component of the Indian cinema;
- Critically examine the deep musical structure of the Hindi film song and show how, across decades, it is substantially unaltered;
- Account for the extreme popularity of the Hindi film song across class, caste, creed, age and sex;
- Give a feel of the persons who created this form;
- Describe the key instruments explaining which, when and how they lend colour to the Hindi film song;
- And most importantly, show the openness of the Hindi film song to absorb a global musical culture.

It is a triumph of Bhaskar's critical imagination, deep knowledge of the history of music and culture, that he is able to provide an original and astonishingly coherent framework within which these issues can be addressed and probable hypotheses proposed, all within a span of five short articles.

As you read these articles, you ride a time machine that takes you through various musical cultures, periods and issues, as diverse as gamelan music of Indonesia, Messiaen's *Turangleela*, Vedic chants, and Goa's educational system and its impact on Hindi film music (music was a compulsory subject and it brought many arrangers to the Bombay film industry at the time of the Second World War), the importance of words and language to the Indian song, African and Latin American percussion, *und so weiter*. Bhaskar is a great scholar without ever being 'scholarly' for the sake of amassing mountains of data. The proverb says that 'one stroke of a blacksmith's hammer has more power than a hundred strokes of a tinker's tool'. Bhaskar's precisely aimed and timed hammer blows come from his vast knowledge, make their point and his argument moves on without any display of sterile 'scholarship'.



Bhaskar's seminal articles take you into the kitchen of film music, introduce to you not only the chefs and their chief assistants but also those accompanists and technicians whose names get mentioned in small print or not at all. Writing with the passion of a musician, a composer and an analyst, he has made a lasting and original contribution to the field of film studies. It is a contribution still unsurpassed in spite of the mass of 'critical studies' from various universities in India and abroad. For true 'studies', you need to have passion, intellect and an openness coupled with a deep understanding of the cinema and music *from within* and not just funding and fellowships obtained by networking with foundations and university departments. In this spirit, he is linked with the long

line of thinker/practitioners, like Eliot, Eisenstein, Ghatak, Abhinav Gupta, than with the dry as dust academia.



These articles bring out not only his own inclusive and synthesizing spirit but also cast light upon how a similar spirit informs some of the most important creations of our culture, be it a dance form like *Kathakali*, which combines shamanistic, Hindu, Mopla Muslim and tribal cultures, be it a music form like *khayal* which harmoniously blends elements from dhrupad, folk, Persian and Arabic music or our latest 'hybrid' the Hindi Film Song. Bhaskar traces the ever-widening circles, which lead the Hindi film song to become a Pan-Indian and even a Pan-Asian musical form. While traveling in Central Asia, one still meets people who greet you with the famous *Awara hun*, when they recognize you as Indians. In times like ours, when narrow, parochial and fundamentalist forces are on the rise, such writing holds humanistic values at the forefront.

The editors have painstakingly collected stills which give you a flavour of the period and persons under discussion. It would be a great service to our cultural scene if these articles were put together and issued in book form. It would also serve as a reminder of how a deeply universal culture is different and far more valuable for a genuine understanding of our past, present and future than a shallow 'global culture'.

(N.B.: Two series of his lectures are now being published in Marathi in a book form on 25th July, in Pune, to mark his first death anniversary: *Vadyaveda*, about instrumental music, and *Bharatiya Sangeetacha Mool Tatve*, about the fundamentals of Indian Art Music. His lectures in Heggodu, Karnataka, have been published in Kannada – *Sangeeta Samvada* – and are very popular.)

For the next generation

The concept of a *gharana* is familiar to all who know North Indian Art Music. But even in cinema, it seems to have relevance. It is a concept that helps us to understand certain continuities, discontinuities, and sharp breaks. Bhaskar was linked with two of the most important figures of modern India, Pandit Ravi Shankar who was his guru, and Ritwik Ghatak who spent a year at the FTII when Bhaskar was a lecturer there. They both knew the power of music and sound. Their work drew upon a large number of sources and traditions. They were both able to achieve great syntheses from them. Bhaskar not only knew them as individuals but also analyzed their work. He drew inspiration from it and went his own way. The music syllabus that we had was helped and inspired by these two great artists.

Any syllabus is like the framework of a raga. Without a great performing artist it is a dead and often useless ornament. Bhaskar was that performing artist who brought it to life, gave it color and light, because teaching is essentially a performing art. Bhaskar's teaching music was one of the best things that happened in FTII. Since it is such a major contribution of Bhaskar's to Indian cinema, and its importance is known only to those who have benefitted from it, for posterity let me put the record straight here.

Bhaskar used to have a three-hour lecture with us every Monday morning in our first year, neatly divided between 9.30 a.m. to 11 a.m., for what he called the listening session and then the theory session from 11.30 a.m. to 1 p.m. I mention the timings because it created the atmosphere to put you into a musical mood. Morning light is soft and especially so in the wooded campus of the FTII, the chirping of birds filling the air as you walked to the class. The listening session was held in the music room, next to the Wisdom Tree. In this session Bhaskar used to play to us various LPs, ranging from Harry Belafonte and the Beatles, from Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar, Amir Khan to what is now called World Music. We were given just minimal information about the music that was played for over an hour and half. The exercise was to learn to listen with great concentration and without any prejudices.

All cultures tie you down to a musical system that is linked with a certain way of listening. For an Indian ear brought up on melody, it is a struggle to be able to understand harmony and chords. For a Westerner, Indian classical music, especially in its slow and majestic unfolding in the *alap* exposition, can be boring and eventless since he is not used to detecting and appreciating the microtones brought into play. Bhaskar sensitized our ears, with the *experience* of music rather than with information about it. He felt that if the music enthused you, you would seek the relevant information. If it did not, then the information would fall on deaf ears.

Bhaskar's music theory lectures had an exceptionally wide scope. Though we were not students of music, he believed that as practitioners of cinema, you had to know music fairly well, before you could use it significantly in your films. He began with the music closest home for Indian students. He dealt with the history and theory of North Indian and Carnatic Art musical systems: *thaat* and Venkatamukhi's *melachakra* systems of classification, introducing us to key musical terms, concepts and forms. He not only taught us significant principles of music but also made them relevant to our work. In the Western system you studied classification and grouping of instruments for orchestra, forms like sonata, scherzo, rondo, concerto, symphony, ballet music and opera. We also discussed movements in music like music concrete, minimalism, pure and programme music and so on. He did all this so that you would be able to work on your own film music and make intelligent choices.

Along with musical forms, he sensitized us to the colour of sound. His lectures on instrumentation were informative and full of feeling for the colour that the instruments lent to music. Once Yehudi Menuhin was asked, "What has music given you?" and he replied, "It has taught me to listen." So Bhaskar made us *listen and not just hear*.

His method of teaching combined the historical, analytical as well as anecdotal aspects of music so well that the musicians and their times came alive for us. And what a raconteur! His sense of timing was as perfect in telling a hilarious anecdote as it was in his music – delivering the punch line with the same grace as he would finish a *tihai* ! Once he was an invigilator for our terminal examination and a student was trying to peer into what his neighbour was writing. Bhaskar noticed this and politely asked him, "Shall I get you a zoom lens?" One of my classmates had the habit of putting his feet up on the chair in front so high up that the lecturer never saw his face but only the soles of his shoes. After observing this behavior for some weeks Bhaskar asked him, "Now that I am thoroughly familiar with the features of your shoes and can recognize them anywhere, may I see your face?"

Both Eastern and Western Musicians featured. He told us about this great pianist who was very particular about the height of his stool, which he kept adjusting. Once he took it up and down, down and up, millimeter by millimeter, for



several minutes, but no one setting satisfied him. Finally he got the required height by adding a sheet of paper to it – after which he gave a brilliant recital!

...And this great Ustad who was to give a national programme during the monsoon. He had left home but had not reached the radio station, where an audience was waiting as the programme was going live on air. Worried, the authorities reported the matter to the police who found the Ustad's car parked on Marine Drive; the Ustad himself was following the giant waves that were crashing across the road with *taans* in *Mian Ki Malhar*, the *taan* ending precisely when the wave crashed! He was very resentful of the police who had interrupted his music. Bhaskar esteemed the creativity of these musicians but also enjoyed their follies and eccentricities.

Bhaskar led you gently into thinking about the music of your own film. He would begin with short films, especially those that had made significant contributions to the way sound/music was used. A film would first be projected without switching on the sound track and you would be asked to break it into sections for adding sound to it. These sections had to be justified to Bhaskar, by their unity of theme, plastic treatment, pacing and so on. Here it was not just what you said but how you arrived at it. The path was more important than the destination. Based on these sections, he would ask you to suggest which ones needed music and if so, what the kind of music you would want in terms of style, instrumentation, tempo and so on. This was an important step in verbalizing your ideas about music. It helped us later in discussing our sound tracks with music directors. Though there were no sound designers in the days I was a student, the concept was not new. For Bhaskar would never separate music from the rest of the sounds in a film.

Having made us actively design a possible sound structure for the film, Bhaskar would then play the film with its original sound track. We had to compare our notes with the way the filmmaker had actually got his film scored. The auteur's solution was discussed, never as the best or the only solution, but one solution selected as more effective than the others. Thus he opened up the creative process for us rather than provide us with ready-made solutions or dogmas.

Anyone who has thought about teaching of any creative art form knows how difficult it is to make the student (or a co-respondent to use a better word) understand the nature of the creative process with its ever-changing principles, as different from a set of fixed rules of composition. Bhaskar was close to the ideal teacher who says to the student, "I have nothing to teach you; but if you want, you can learn from me."

He was one teacher that you felt instantly drawn towards, but to win Bhaskar's confidence was not easy. In your first year, he interacted with you more or less within the confines of the FTII. If in that year you proved yourself worthy of

a closer interaction, in your second year, you were allowed a cautious entry into his home. It is here that we met Meena his wife, an important part of his life and creativity.

Family man

A few minutes walk from the FTII, the Chandavarkars lived in a small bungalow at the intersection of Law College and Karve Roads. A small garden gently wrapped itself around this place. As the traffic in the seventies on these roads practically died down after 7 p.m. – difficult to believe today – you sauntered down to his place to hear him do *riyaz* on his sitar with his tabla player. He would sometimes briefly tell you what he was playing, but mostly you just listened. His *riyaz* was serious business. It was almost always followed by some serious and some relaxed but never forced conversation and at times you stayed on for potluck. The Chandavarkars were also fond of making wines and sharing them with friends, which included those students invited to their home. Meena's cooking was famous for its excellence and you looked forward to the invitation.

Bhaskar and Meena were wonderful hosts. You were happy to see such a good looking couple, matched in their tastes and values, so obviously in love with each other. For students away from homes, homes of some of the teachers were substitutes and often better ones. Held together by kinship ties of cinema, drawing often from the same spiritual resources, you shared more with the teachers than with your family. I certainly got from the Chandavarkars and the Bahadurs what I did not get from my family.

As students in my times were older and the teachers younger, the gap between us was narrow. In a sense it was a spiritual coming of age that you experienced in FTII. I got a sense of my identity and potential that has been with me till this day. And some of the teachers, Bhaskar in particular, are still with me, though some of them are no longer physically around. You realized what it means to be an artist also by examples that people like Ghatak and Bhaskar set with their own creative lives.

Continued dialogue

Dialogue between Bhaskar and his students did not end with their leaving the Institute. Many had such bonding with him that they invited him to score music for their films. Bhaskar's scores for films like *Maya Darpan*, *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hein?*, *Maya Miriga* and many others was a continuation of this dialogue. He was forever helpful to those filmmakers who wanted to make different kind of films by working within the constraints of limited or practically non-existent budgets in the first decades of the alternative cinema. He worked with Girish Karnad, Mrinal Sen, Aparna Sen, Jabbar Patel, Vijaya Mehta, Nirad Mahatapatra, Amol Palekar, Chitra Palekar and many others.

When we look at the seventy or so films he scored for, you realize that many were in different languages. This brings me to certain important aspects of Bhaskar's musical personality. One was his catholicity of taste combined with the vastness of his musical knowledge. Second was his ability to work in circumstances, where 'less is more'. Filmmakers from many regions and cultures could feel that this was the man who would understand the music of the culture in which the film was rooted and, more importantly, would aim to universalize the specifics of that culture through the



medium of cinema. In a country like India where musical traditions are diverse, it is difficult to find such a man. A local musician many times looks for a certain 'cultural authenticity' that fails to convey musical experience to someone outside that culture. Or a musician steeped in a different tradition may use the regional culture just to add that revolting element known as 'local colour' for fake authenticity. Bhaskar steered clear of both these extremes because he understood the 'specific local' aspect of music as well as its 'musical universal' aspect.

Close-up view

I did only one short film with Bhaskar as the music director. It was a ten-minute film on computer-aided design, done with the technology of 1976, for the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. We had a wonderful team; Bhaskar did the sound design (called music in those days), RamMohan did the animation and R. K. Joshi designed fonts on the computer for the film. We often met in the lovely seaside canteen of TIFR or in my room or went for walks.

I would like to speak a little about the film, because it showed how Bhaskar conceptualized the music. The film was to persuade designers, architects, artists and suchlike to use computers. In those days these professionals were mostly unaware of what computer technology could do for them. (Then PCs were unheard of. The first complete personal computer was the Commodore PET, introduced in January 1977. The popular Apple II soon followed it.) The idea was to show how an artist's creative work involved many mechanical operations which could be easily done by the computers. So, we wanted to show the mechanical part of the human activity and link it to the creative part of the computer.

Bhaskar had an ingenious solution that could only come from an artist who was at home in science and in the arts. Or rather who saw the common ground between them. He thought that he would like to use Indian musical instruments, which are close to human voice or use the same *tessitura*. That was to be the human part of the film. But he would not use them for melody but as colour, as a Western composer would do, to produce harmony and not just melody. The sound of the music was eerie, it was not electronic music like Stockhausen's, nor was it abstract like that of Cage. It was a music that had a human presence and warmth and at the same time was mathematically precise and a little distant. It was a music that attracted and fascinated you, without your understanding why. It was a music made in the image and likeness of its enigmatic maker, Bhaskar.

Rani Burra (also an FTII student at the same time) sent me a collection of Bhaskar's pictures, including one with Meena. They are all images now without the Sun, the meaning of the word *Bhaskar*. Yet they bring back the warmth as well as remind you, that you cannot go too close to the Sun. Bhaskar was a very private person. After he passed away, the family put a 'no condolences please' notice in the newspapers. The loss was not just theirs, but also of our culture and of the institution that he was an integral part of, which never honoured him sufficiently, notwithstanding his lasting and massive contribution.

Finale

I walked into the Main Theatre of FTII to deliver a lecture on the aesthetics of sound to mark the Golden Jubilee of the Institute. My lecture was dedicated to Bhaskar and Ritwikda. I walked past the Wisdom Tree, where we had sat with both of them. I looked at the old music room, our *Jalsaghar* which was Bhaskar's room and the sounds of all that I heard came back in many layers. Underlying was Bhaskar's voice, his gentle laughter...which have vanished now. As Basho would have put it, only the wind lives there now.

