

Interview with

Bishwadeep Chatterjee

On *Bajirao Mastani*



How did you prepare the sound design for the film Madras Café ? Realizing that is a different kind of film which you have been doing so far.

To start with this was a very interesting and unusual subject for Bollywood. Shoojit Sircar has been living this subject for quite a few years before the conditions were conducive enough for him to actually start making the film. There is a considerable amount of research that has gone into making the film and apparently John agreed to do the film. So when Shoojit actually sat down and explained the whole idea about that the journey of an Indian intelligence officer with the backdrop of the LTTE, the Sri Lankan problem and the assassination of the ex prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, a vital part of our History (which my generation lived through) came alive.

The film was shot in N. Delhi and Kerala. Being a very sensitive subject, shooting in Sri Lanka was out of the question, so they decided to shoot in Kerala, as the terra firma is very similar

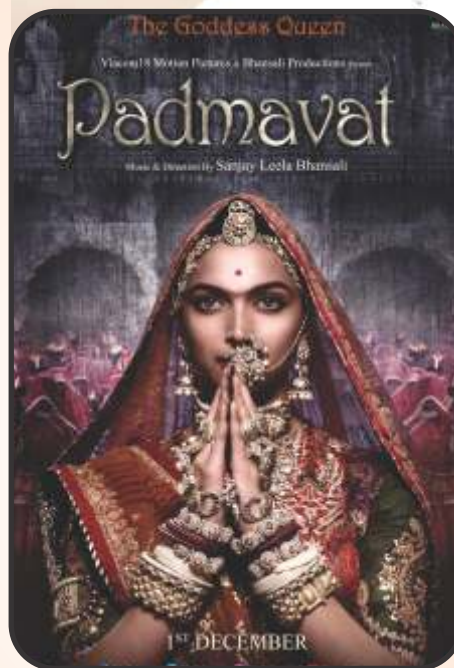
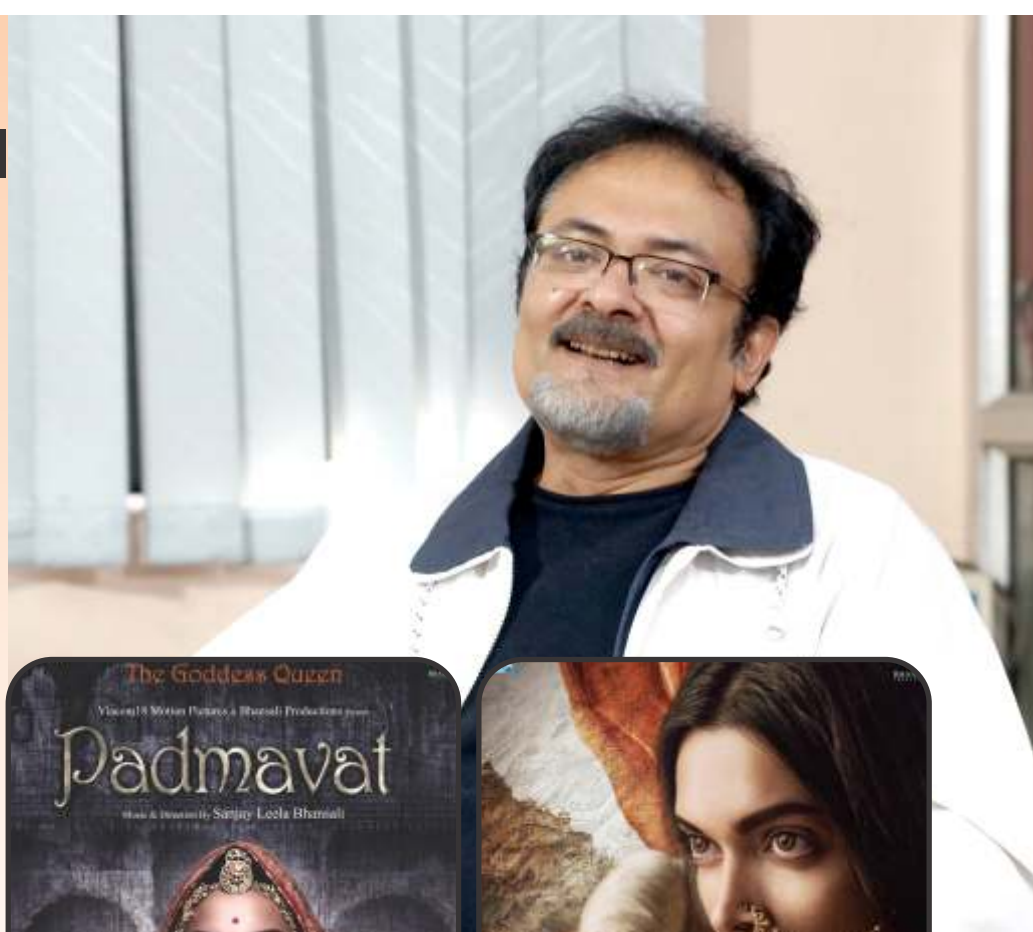
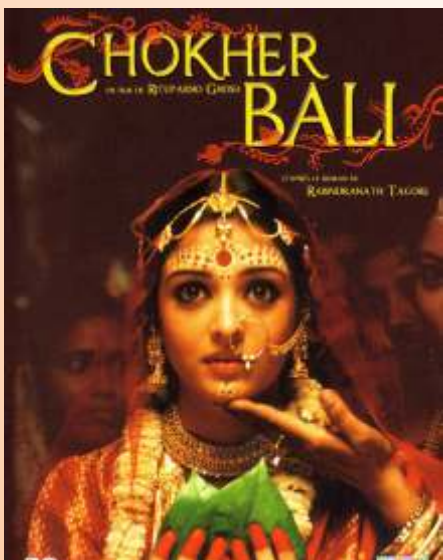
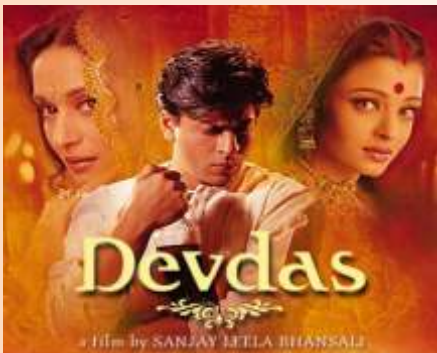
to Sri Lanka.

During the post production, Shoojit would call us after every sequence that was edited to show us the feel of film. Then he would discuss what sort of Music and effects he wanted. I would sit with him and make my notes... What were the types of guns that were used, what kind of helicopters and aircrafts were used by the IPKF, radios, communications, types of computers and tape recorders, telephones etc...slowly piece by piece the entire soundscape started unfolding.

It was a bold subject to approach keeping in mind the kind of mainstream films Bollywood turns out every year, but it had to be treated realistically. It was a story that was told through the eyes of an intelligence officer, his angst, his traumas, his emotions and eventually his guilt of not being able to prevent the assassination of a political leader. Though the character was fictitious, the situations were very real. The treatment had to be very delicately balanced. It wasn't a war film, it had a very strong

political backdrop, one couldn't take sides and it had grim and dark overtones. We had to be very careful not to go overboard and make it sound like a war movie!

Almost co incidentally Dolby came out with a new theater format called the "Dolby Atmos" during our Audio post production, and naturally, as a technician who has always wanted to stay ahead of time with the latest technology, I wanted to have it for Madras Café. Most of us are aware of Surround Sound. We now commonly have 5.1 and 7.1 formats in surround, in public theaters but here was something which was even beyond these. It was actually "128.1"!! While 5.1 and 7.1 had the conventional LCR in the front and various divisions of surround speakers along the sides and behind the viewers, Atmos took it a step further by adding two arrays of speakers on top, added more speakers to make the surrounds sound like they were an extension of the LCR and reinforced the LFE by adding more sub woofers to the



surrounds with crossovers. This film just HAD to be in Dolby Atmos..

Why you felt so because lot of action were involved chase, firing etc?

Yes. From the candid back offices of the government, straight out into the war zone, then back to the protagonist's personal and protected home and again straight out into the war zone, then again the war coming onto our shores, destroying his own house and family, and eventually the assassination of the very person his department was supposed to protect... The sound had to be very dynamic.... I needed the range but not the volume, so if I had adequate dynamic range and a very proportionate reproduction of sound almost like a 3D effect in audio, there was never a need

to go high on the volume to create a dramatic impact. I could achieve this by the silences of the more mundane scenes opening up really "wide" when it came to the action scenes.... Even a distant chopper flying over us was enough to create tension. When it came to explosions, the impact was created more by the falling debris from above than just the loud bang. Similarly, the travelling and crisscrossing of bullets and missiles were more dramatic than the sound of gun fire and rocket launchers..

Could you elaborate the scope of stylization in terms of sounds in this film.

The film starts with a faint chopper sound at a distance in the quiet mountainside of the Himalayas... The



sound of the chopper amplifies...and suddenly in a flash you are dragged into a war zone where the choppers are flying above you and there are bullets flying and there is an explosion and...you realize it was a horrible dream of a traumatized retired government agent, our protagonist.

There are several such moments in the film. The scene where the assassin, a lady, was being made to wear the now famous belt-bomb. The extremists went through an entire dress rehearsal as to how the assassination would be carried out....in that sequence when she is dressing up and other women are dressing her up, you can hear the sounds or ornaments, bangles. I shut out every other sound and you could just hear the twinkling of the ornaments, the payal, the bangles and I kind of spread it all over so there were little twinkly sounds of all these emerging all around you. It was to highlight a very feminine quality of a woman dressing up as though she is going for a wedding. This was in complete contrast to what was going to follow next... a very ghastly end. When eventually she did pull the trigger, what followed the sound of the explosion was a continuous high frequency note. I tried to simulate what happens to us when there is a sudden loud explosion near our ears. Because it is a very unusually loud explosion which you are not prepared for, your ears start "ringing", so I tried to recreate that effect. As he is lying on the floor, thrown off by the blast I blurred out all the sounds and just kept a heartbeat, as though from his point of view everything comes to a standstill.... Everything is in slow motion and there is smoke, there is grime and there is this high frequency note which creates a sense of shock, till faintly you hear a child crying, women crying, ambulance sirens and the sounds of chaos bringing him back again to reality

Tell us something about Background music Required for Madras café.

Shantanu Moitra composed a beautiful theme for this film. He used an electric solo violin which laced all the moods together...whether it was the violence, the loneliness, or the tragedy or the overall somber mood of the film. But the music was minimalistic and very much like an undercurrent. Most importantly, he worked around the sound design.

Can you talk about the foley part for this film?

In this particular film I was very concerned about the foley because that is what really brings out the texture in sound. I needed grit.... I wanted a lot of metal, leather, dirt and grime. I wanted to smell the gun powder, the machines of war, the dust, the wet forest... and I think good foley almost lets you do that.

Which are the other films in Hindi language are been done in this Atmos?

Madras Café is the first Bollywood film that has been fully done in Native Atmos. Now most big banner films are wanting to mix in this format.

What about the theaters playing this sound system?

Well, there are only two theaters currently in Mumbai that have Atmos. Chennai has a chain of 5 or 6 theaters that have the same. Probably by the time you publish this there may be a few more all over.

How Do you see the future of Atmos sound system in India ?

I see a good future of Atmos in India. Its just a matter of time, but we'll get there.

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