



Interview with Sound Designer

Bishwadeep Chatterjee

On URI (The Surgical Strike)



URI is a film that is a war biopic where the treatment of the sound is different from other movies at it focused more on the action at the war zone rather than the emotions of the actors. What was the kind of research that you underwent to generate these sounds?

Director, Aditya Dhar sent me the script of his proposed film URI after briefly explaining that he was making a film on the 'surgical strike'. I found it so gripping that I couldn't put it down till I finished reading the entire script, and when he asked me how I felt, apparently I told him that I could "Hear his film". A blueprint of my sound design was already forming in my mind. What he eventually made was even more interesting than what was written. It surpassed my expectations. You see, we are the 'first audience'.

I was thinking that this would be the first film of its kind and I wanted a sound design unique to the film. It had to be contemporary and impactful. I already started doing my bit of research- I downloaded a fresh library of modern weapons and electronic sounds. Sounds of guns, fighter aircraft and choppers are not easy to record because of complicated bureaucratic procedures of obtaining permissions and tall expenses.... We therefore resort to library sounds. Though most of these sounds are available with most



professionals, it is my unique treatment of these sounds that I believe integrates well with the particular film that I'm working on. Of course, the subject of the film dictates what is required.

This was an out and out war film, with very well choreographed action sequences and carefully mapped out graphics, which made it easier to design the sounds of the action scenes....

Aditya does not believe in going overboard with his actors being unnecessarily loud. Most Bollywood and 'Masala' regional films have actors whose dialogues are louder than the explosions caused by bombs and guns... and this is mostly perceived as 'great emotions' by actors or 'great acting'... it is then usually followed by them breaking into a song and dance ritual even on the battlefield... But on a serious note, the theaters were charged with various emotions.... The surgical strike was a revenge for the URI terror strike. Now that itself is a big emotion. The death of Karan and his funeral... the protagonist's sick mother... the bonhomie between the soldiers.... With situations being highly emotional because of the way it was scripted, there was no need for actors over doing their parts. Music played a great part in cementing the action and non-action scenes emotionally too.

You pointed that there was something distinctly different about the weapons used by terrorists and by the army. How did you distinguish it in terms of the sound of firing bullets and other similar sounds?

I used modern sophisticated gun sounds for the NSG commandoes while the terrorists were mainly using AK 56 assault guns. Throughout the film there is a distinct difference between the soldiers and the terrorists. We dramatize the gun shots by adding layers of sounds of various frequency ranges, the thickness is enhanced by boosting the low ends, which enriches the sound creating a forceful impact, without being too loud or noisy. In reality a gun sound is completely devoid of glamour... some even sound like fire crackers! Even fist fights, knife fights etc. have layers of Foley and other incidental effects that qualify the action... much like how make up glamorizes an actor... (Remember the "dhishooms" and "dhichkyaons" of the late 60's and the 70's? We have come a long way since then.)

In my films, Foley plays an extremely critical role. I preside over Foley like a hawk. This, to me adds the much desired 'texture' or 'grain'.

Flashes of the gun firings need to be synchronized. How does this kind of synchronization happen when there is a high risk of the scene looking absurd if the two don't synchronize well?

More often than not, CG always ends up overshooting the deadlines... complex and elaborate movements or action scenes take time to render. The pressure of the release date plays havoc in the post-production stage, especially sound - which is the last major department shaping the film. I usually take the brief from the assistants who oversee the visual posts like DI and graphics. But this time I went along with Aditya to see how the graphics were shaping up.

This helped me source the sounds and keep them ready. The size of the gun shot flashes, explosions, chopper movements, their magnification and their movements on screen determines the corresponding sounds, intensity of the explosions, tracers of bullets - whether left to right or right to left or front to back etc. can only be done once the graphics land at our doorstep. In spite of the time limitations, I cannot let the film pass without addressing the final sync points and other detailing. We



have learnt to deliver on time without compromising on the basics. There was a scene towards the end as Vivaan narrows down on a terrorist which was supposed to have both of them firing at each other. But the director wanted it to look like Vivaan never shoots, but waits for the terrorist to run out of bullets before he pounces on to him.... the graphics and hence the sound had to be redone in order to justify the action. This suddenly gave meaning to the scene.

Also I remember you saying about the styling of the sound in previous Interview, not the style per se, the format. Did you have to put some effects or plug-ins for processing the sound to make it more dramatic?

There is never a static moment when it comes to Sound. Like the visuals, sounds are also constantly changing. There are changes when I am moving; the sound source is moving, change of ambience according to the time of the day etc. For example, if I am at home, in my living room, early in the morning, the ambience of my locality will be constant for a certain period of time till I decide to shift away from the window or walk to the kitchen. My perception will change, as the ambient sounds will be perceived in a different way. As the day progresses, so does the soundscape - from the early morning tranquility and sounds of birds (whatever little of which we have left in Mumbai), activity outside starts getting busier, people going to work, increase in traffic, the hawkers,

cacophony of the big cities 'in action' till nightfall and the sounds of the night. When you see a bus approaching from a distance, you hear a faint low mid frequency rumble of the vehicle till it comes close to you and stops. As it gets closer, the engine sounds start getting more defined, the low and high frequencies open up, the mechanical sounds of the contraption, the tyres on the surface etc.

Our brains do the processing for us... but when we are trying to simulate this effect with machines, we have to feed the parameters to get the desired effect. After recording the various effects of the vehicle separately, we lay them together and work on the individual tracks. We equalize, compress, add reverbs, delays, work on levels etc. In short, this is called processing... we also take the liberty of dramatizing certain sounds to create certain effects. Like in URI, when the ambush on the soldiers happened at the start of the film, the aftermath was stylized a bit, with the music creeping in and the high frequencies of the effects rolled off and reverbed out to give a feeling of sadness and despair....

There is one particular sequence in which the chopper comes in for the rescue and goes. In that the sound frequency of the blades goes high and then fades away. So how do you create that perspective?

In continuation from the previous question, the chopper sounds are

introduced as a dull pulse, with the rolled off high frequency sounds of the chopper until it opens out when the choppers come in frame in the following scene... I love pre-empting the sounds of the following scene wherever its possible... we call it a 'sound overlap'. This makes transitions very interesting.

Recalling my visit to the graphics department, I got to see the various maneuvers of the choppers.... How far they are... the speed at which they are travelling... how they suddenly fly over your head...etc. I had several chopper sounds at various speeds, various perspectives, their passing, hovering, banking, blades rotating, chopper interior,etc. depending on how the shots are taken, the graphics done and how their movements are, we must intelligently lay the different sounds of the choppers to create a certain effect. When the chopper suddenly comes towards you and flies above your head, I panned it in Dolby Atmos, where the sounds come from the speakers above our heads... I would like to specially mention the Dolby Atmos film format that enables us to push our imagination and technically achieve the desired effect.

I noticed that URI has a different kind of background music, which is quite difficult to describe. So, what kind of discussion did you have with the composer particularly? When so much of fighting is going on, you need a constant play between the silence and sound. The movie required a consistent track to maintain the continuity of the war. So the question arises, how to create the tension but not be too loud?

Let me first compliment the music composer Shashwat Sachdev for his brilliant composition of the songs and the film score. What helped big time were the matching sensibilities of the director, composer and myself... Shashwat and I shared our views, I sent him my sound design and he played me his tracks. He would insist on not having music in certain sections-even though he had composed for those sections and thought it was overkill. Most of the films that I work in, I have a proper discussion with the composer, in order to understand our respective spaces better. In the heavy action scenes of URI, where



explosions, bullets, machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades etc. are all over the place, we didn't have music with heavy percussions or drums as they would clash with the war sounds.

At the same time, we must realize that continuous firing, explosions and noise would make everyone uncomfortable and it could lead to ear-fatigue. Music, though subtle, has a balm like effect and it brings out the emotions. But there are moments when the music flourishes, like the title sequence, the funeral sequence, the victorious moments, the inspirational moments....

There are particular scenes in this film where instead of dialogues; emphasis is given to small low volume sounds like breathing and gesture sound to convey the feelings. So, how did you assure that these subtle hints would communicate and resonate with the audience?

We make the mistake of underestimating our audience's intelligence especially in India. We don't have to underline every action with a dialogue or a 'Voice – Over' explaining the obvious... That's why cinema. There is so much beauty and class in being subtle; often these subtle sounds enhance the emotions tenfold. In the scene where terrorists enter an army camp in Uri, which ends with the main terrorist being shot in the head, Karan picks up the terrorist's gun. The gun is linked to the grenades on the terrorist's body and we eventually realize that the

Important Films of Bishwadeep Chatterjee



pin of the grenade is dislodged and Karan's death was inevitable. I played with silences there... it sent a chill down everyone's spine when the realization of the tragedy happened.

There are sequences in the jungle, both in day and night, when the firing is taking place. What kinds of existing natural ambience sound that supplement such a location?

URI opens with establishing the jungle bordering Nagaland, Manipur and Myanmar... It's an early morning shot where the camera rises from the ground level to an aerial view of the vast thick forest. The scene is tranquil with sounds of frogs, crickets, insects and a chorus of birds.... Little do we suspect that these beautiful forests harbour so much hatred. This gets revealed when an army convoy gets ambushed.

What about this artificial bird's The Garud sound design who is used as Spy Camera?

The Garud played a significant role in the story. It was important to blend the mechanical sounds with sound of flapping wings for authenticity. After establishing it as a mechanical bird and not a real one, there was no need to keep on justifying the device or else the mechanical sounds could distract from the drama.

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