

Harish Bhimani
Indian Artist and Writer

YT: You are widely regarded as ‘One of the Most Recognisable Voices of India.’ While having a powerful voice is one aspect, mastering the art of voiceover requires technical expertise as well. Could you share how you trained yourself in the finer nuances of this craft?

HB: Thank you for your kind words. Look, larynx, the voice box, is something one is born with. But taming, refining, cultivating it are options rarely employed. As for my learning the craft, it happened rather dramatically! In my early days, after I had taken a treacherous plunge into the voice world - post a Chemical Engineering degree, an MBA and a stint with a leading global MNC - I was still a ‘Regular Voice’ in a tearing hurry to becoming a ‘Professional Voice’ – little knowing what that really involved! At that time, as even today, there was no institute, no courses - not even dubious money-spinning workshops - to guide me on my path. As a last resort, I approached the then reigning voice artiste Sam Berkeley-Hill - a remnant of the British Raj, an Anglo-Indian - to take me under his tutelage. But he told me point blank, in his rather high-pitched voice, and not in a soothing tone, “Why should I teach you?! If I do, you'll overtake me in three years!” In my greenhorn naiveté, I took this as a rare compliment by a doting veteran – at least 25 years my senior! But no, he was dead serious! After enduring his less-than-warm hospitality – not a glass of water offered - as I descended the narrow, dimly-lit stairs of his cramped Colaba dwelling, his diatribe echoed in my ears, “Why should I teach you... you will overtake me in three years,” much like an offended protagonist in an over-the-top climactic movie scene! Wonder, if Eklavya felt the same way when Guru Dronacharya, in the epic Mahabharata, refused to make the tribal archer his disciple! But I almost heard myself retort, “Why three years? I'll overtake you in three months!” I didn't know how though. In that disturbed state of mind, on my hour-long journey back home, I hammered out an all-encompassing study program - pronunciation, tone, timbre, pitch, voice projection, expression, all without losing spontaneity! The only problem was that I was the Course Designer, the Teacher, the only Student, as also the Grading Examiner! And what do you know, that set of exercises has stood me in good stead to this day - 50 years on! I have used the same ‘syllabus’ for coaching sessions of Voice Artistry. And I am loath to share that ‘algorithm’, because I believe that practice and prayer should remain private. So, in a manner of speaking, I inadvertently followed Shakespeare's dictum, a la King Lear, “Mend your speech a little, lest you may mar your fortunes.” The learning process, of course, continued - and continues to this day. No one taught me, but I kept learning from several stalwarts in their own genre - without ever being formally inducted - again, like Eklavya! And yes, I did keep the three-month promise! Sometimes, a sordid episode can work as a trigger for a much-needed traction. I must admit that I was tempted to tell Mr Berkeley-Hill that he was right in his ‘overtaking’ surmise. But I let it pass, as I was brought up to respect age. I seriously believe that when you stop enjoying the process of learning, the end of your professional journey is well in sight.

YT: With a career spanning more than 28,000 recordings across genres, how do you usually prepare before entering the recording booth? Does your approach change depending on the type of assignment - whether it is a narration, dubbing, advertising or an audio book?

HB: Preparing for a recording is an internalisation process - quite like an actor's, only less perceptible and more personal. For a voice artiste, there are no sets, movements, lighting, costumes or co-actors to lean on. Perhaps that is why audio performance is called 'Voice Acting' while screen performance often becomes reacting. Apart from 'One of the Most Recognisable Voices', 'Samay', 'Timeless Voice' and such monikers, I have been - hopefully justifiably - called the 'most moldable voice' which must be because my real guide before starting a recording is the script - its words, the emotions contained in them - and what the writer seems to want to convey in between the lines. I also keep in mind the age group of the target audience. It was, in fact, this very 'moldability' that won me the most defining assignment of my life - the voice of Samay in Mahabharat. To illustrate how vital it is to prepare for a recording, I will let you know that for the Mahabharat's Samay, now considered an iconic recording, we took 3 sessions of 4 hrs each to determine tone, pace and pitch of the delivery! And how singularly fortunate I was, that the sessions were being directed by the legendary triumvirate - the veteran filmmaker B R Chopra, screen writer and novelist Dr Rahi Masoom Raza and the celebrated poet-lyricist Pt Narendra Sharma. But, of course, this doesn't happen in every project. But prepare we must. So, how do I prepare for a recording? Post an initial reading of the script, of course, under my breath, I humbly submit myself to the director, because I only have the script, he holds the entire vision. The emotional quotient of a recording comes from a strange combination of confidence and humility - the humility to accept that the script is supreme, not the voice, however decorated that name might be.

But all said and done about the prep, one of the most important components of voice recordings is spontaneity. That is why, narration is a bit of a tightrope walk - because conscious preparation and spontaneity are an oxymoron - contradiction in terms! How can you sound spontaneous if you are already over familiar with a script? Therefore, If the script is cleanly written - free of grammar and syntax hurdles - I actually read it for the very first time on the mic, live, as we record. I did exactly that this morning for a recording meant for posterity - for a museum. My logic is simple: the first reading of anything evokes a pure, instinctive emotional reaction. A voice artiste must catch that fleeting moment and transmit it gently into the microphone. Basically, my ultimate prescription is that "Don't just read a script, tell a story."

YT: You began your journey as a young freelancer working as a photographer, writer, and radio artist to support your education. In today's world, where financial independence is often delayed, how important do you think it is for young people to become self-reliant early on?

HB: To put things in the right perspective, I didn't choose to work early - I was forced to, in order to pay for my management studies. We were not a family struggling to survive, but my father firmly - if mistakenly - believed that these 'new-fangled' management courses could not make anyone a manager. According to him, "You must work your way up a corporate ladder!". So, with few options left, I turned my hobbies into income streams - so that I could work in short bursts that didn't derail my demanding academic schedule. I didn't realise that I was actually testing my suspected artistic skills if they were of any acceptable professional standards! So, out I went with photography (restricted to mgt. school events & candid portraiture), writing two articles a month for a technology periodical, and recording youth radio shows. This continued till I received a loan scholarship to complete the rather demanding curriculum. Ironically, the same education helped me venture into these very hobbies - now at a truly professional level! But to

answer your question about financial Independence early on, in my opinion, no, I don't see it as a virtue worth nurturing - unless there is a dire financial crunch in your family. If not, focus on your studies, focus on your future, remind yourself that this is the only chance to gain some real theoretical knowledge.

YT: Your narration in B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat remains iconic. The re-telecast during the COVID-19 lockdown was met with massive enthusiasm, even among younger audiences. How do you see the values and messages of the Mahabharat resonating in today's social and cultural context?

HB: Mahabharat is acknowledged as the world's greatest epic. It is said that every plot in the world literature can be found in the Mahabharat. What Mahabharat doesn't have, probably, does not exist! Like the Godfather franchise is sometimes referred to as the Mahabharat of crime stories! You ask about the youth connect. Consider this. Today's streaming youth icon Netflix has produced a web series called Kurukshetra – and in English too! Oh, BTW, they have morphed the Samay of the TV serial into Ved Vyas of the web series! (and which too has been narrated by me) See, even the American entertainment conglomerate thinks that the epic will connect with Gen-Z. Now, how does Mahabharat resonate in today's social and cultural context... Notwithstanding debates on its historicity, the Mahabharat is deeply relevant today. Remember, what the Samay propounded early on... (“...aur yah ladaai har yug ko apne-apne Kurukshetra mein ladani padti hai, kyonki har yug ke Satya ko vartamaan asatya se joojhna padta hai...”) “And every era will have to fight its battle in its own Kurukshetra, because the verity of each age must contend with the burgeoning falsehood in its midst.” And this is exactly what we see happening even today the world over - whether it is Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Hamas or our own country! And this is just one aspect. And what about the mainstay of the Mahabharat – ‘blind’ love for a son? This is deeply ingrained in the present-day Indian polity, for all to see and suffer!

So yes, Mahabharat is very much relevant today, and I think it will remain so, given the human penchant for conflict and filial infatuation.

YT: Artificial Intelligence is now producing human-like voices. Do you see AI as a threat to professional voice artists, or do you think it opens up new possibilities for the industry?

HB: Every new technology seems like a messenger of doom - from typewriters to calculators to computers to email and the Internet – although they end up giving more than what they snatch. But yes, AI voice feels truly disruptive — more than just a loud wake-up call. Let me quickly explain how. IVRs — Interactive Voice Responses — are machines that speak like humans. These are commonly called ‘prompts’ (not to be confused with the elaborate questions you need to frame while conversing with an AI platform). And would you believe that nearly 75 per cent of prompts are no longer being recorded by voice-over artistes? They're generated by AI. Which means: any recording that does not require emotional input will increasingly be outsourced to machine. But there is a certain monotony about machine speaking which creates ennui – boredom. And yet, an AI voice is often preferred to an untrained human voice that might sound uneducated or simply uncouth. AI, in that sense, has raised the floor - and with it the ceiling. You can hear this uplift in hundreds of YouTube videos that now sound more polished - elevating our browsing experience. Actually, more than AI voice, AI writing is

becoming the real disruptor. When you ask AI to write, it researches, thinks, composes in multiple styles, and gives you so many alternatives that it becomes difficult not to accept its suggestions. And, of course, using AI for writing isn't labelled plagiarism. As for new possibilities — yes, VO artistes will need to expand their skillsets and leave repetitive work to AI. In the long run, this will push professionals to use their innate talent more fully, thereby raising the standard of their output. My word to existing voice professionals is this: unless you cultivate your own individual 'X factor', I'm afraid your work may soon be usurped by a smart machine. In matters of sheer speed of reading (data), comprehension and logic-aided response, we can't beat AI even at an elementary game of Solitaire! But take heart — human-led projects will continue to need human inputs, because every leader wants to add their own voice to the process. And yes, like every technology, AI will be misused — just as mobile phones and digital payments have been. But being entirely electronic, it will soon develop its own checks and balances. Look at YouTube: it threw up massive IP issues initially, but gradually solved them — automatically, at scale.

Look, man invents machines so he can delegate repetitive labour and free himself for creativity - and invent even more machines! But this time, we've created a machine that is itself creative, because it can 'think'. But can it think better than its inventor? Theoretically, improbable — but with today's (neural network) technological velocity, not impossible. So, the only practical path forward is to use AI to your advantage, ride the wave, and keep honing your craft. In a sense, AI seems to live by a Hindi idiom: *Maan na maan, main tera mehmaan*. Come what may — I am here to stay.

YT: You have seen the evolution of Indian media for decades. How do you feel the role and importance of voice artists have changed from the radio era to today's digital-first world?

HB: Oh, what a journey of audio technologies! From 2-inch-wide magnetic tape weighing nearly 3 kilos for just 10 minutes of audio, to ¼-inch spools, to magnetic digital, to the early digitals — and now the present-day AI that dares to challenge human capability!

With so many technologies in play, the voice has become a true instrument of free speech. "Have idea, will speak!" But when media multiplies, we often fill the space instead of elevating the content. YouTube and similar platforms suddenly opened up a massive universe of voice recordings — but with minimal budgets for voices. As a result, voice artistes couldn't hold their price lines, and a whole new breed (really, a new horde!) of voices entered the fray. In this duel of quality versus quantity, mediocrity had a field day. And who came to the rescue of the fastidious listener? Ironically, the very AI that is also an existential threat to the voice industry! Today, in the gush of content, we largely hear two kinds of voice-overs — either clinically clean delivery (thanks to AI) or rendition of genuine distinction. Gone are the oafish, untrained, uncultured non-voices. Is this good or bad? Well, both - good for listeners, not so good for voice artistes. AI is throwing the gauntlet - it's for voice artistes to pick it up.

As for the good old radio - there was once an era when there was, well... only Radio! And yet, more than a hundred years later, it has adapted beautifully and co-existed with every new medium. Radio continues — and will continue — because it remains a 'live' electronic friend: an informer, a reminder, a music buddy. Technology may change; companionship does not. The role of human voice will certainly become more important - but only if it rises above the synthetic voice. Voice artistes will have to work harder to convey what lies 'between the lines', rather than merely vocalising words that contain information. Ultimately, voice will rule, simply because

people will read less and hear more. But beware - synthetic voice (AI) is working tirelessly to sound increasingly real. You have, of course, heard of deepfake!

I see the universe of communication expanding so dramatically that more and more human voices will be required - except for routine announcements.

YT: Today, many young voiceover artists rely heavily on social media platforms to showcase their talent. What is your advice to emerging artists who want to stand out in this crowded digital space?

HB: What the youth has today, by way of resources, we didn't have even a hundredth of - whether it is content-creating technology, editing interfaces, or platforms to showcase ideas. So go right ahead, strut your stuff, be unabashedly narcissistic! But don't go overboard and inundate social media just because "Jo dikhta hai, woh bikta hai." Only what is seen, sells — but be seen with dignity. Make the best use of the ecosystem without constantly harping on "I, me, myself." That can quickly slip into cheapness. Be selective. Be short, but sophisticated. Your language is your personality. And understand the timeless value of rarity. Remember, where speaking is concerned, you are paid for class - for something out of the ordinary - because ordinarily, absolutely everyone speaks.

YT: Back in the 1980s, you seamlessly transitioned between radio and television, both of which demanded very different presentation styles. What skills or mindset helped you adjust to both so effectively?

HB: When I started out, in the mid-seventies, the then recently-coined term Prime-time (in India) was already upon me even as I was floundering in my new profession - which I could hardly define yet! My entry-to-attainment phase (AKA 'struggle period') in the voice industry was, mercifully, 3½ months - against an accepted average of 3-5 years. My then already 'established' colleagues deridingly, almost to vent their envy, called me 'that new Sunday prime-time guy'. My prime-time journey began with TV news and radio shows simultaneously. And yes, I did some serious flitting between these rather coveted assignments on a daily basis. And these tasks did have varying, sometimes contrasting demands – a matter-of-fact yet involved delivery for TV news to writing & elevating serenity of hosting a Yoga show – with the venerable Yoga Guru Dr Hansa Yogendra – anchoring India's first Music Talent Contest TV show – Lehr Lehr Sangeet – to the tightrope walking of radio-TV commercials to documentaries, corporates and planetarium narrations to controlled emoting in radio plays to writing dialogue for prime time TV serials (Khandaan, Subah, Inkaar, Sukanya...) and to say nothing of the live music stage shows - topped by the peerless Lata Mangeshkar in 21 countries! And I wasn't unaware that my elite audience in the various genres comprised industry captains & a growing rank of well-wishers & detractors. How I 'transitioned' between the diverse demands of media and segments was essentially because I couldn't have enough of the exhilarating experience that my chosen profession was affording me, and I wanted to do my best every time, everywhere! I still don't know if there is an established skillset to battle this rather baffling variety of presentation styles, but yes, tweaking one's mindset definitely helps. I did it by sometimes consciously reminding myself (moments before cameras or tape rolled or curtains went up) that, "Hey, at this moment, what is that 'extra' that only I have but my audiences don't and which I am about to present to them? And right now, this audience Is the most important entity in my life. Lemme give my best." And really, the very

next moment, I would be pleasantly assertive If it was a newscast and I'd be Informative without being condescending If it was a documentary narration and so on. Soon, this became second nature. And it better be, because on the performance level I mostly did not have the luxury of retakes - except For the tedium-inducing endless retakes for TV commercials. I have always believed that the more you think, the more you rehearse, the less spontaneous (and more stylized) you become.

To be honest, in the middle of my performances, live or otherwise, I have often asked myself if I am thoroughly enjoying the experience!

YT: With decades of experience, you have seen fame, recognition, and the evolution of media. If you were to imagine the 'future voice of India,' what qualities beyond talent would you hope it carries to inspire the next generation?

HB: Look, voice artistes are traditionally 'disembodied' voices. They have a voice out of the ordinary... a style, grace, panache but not a name. Because if they did, the message that their voice carries might be diluted. And yet, a name to the voice imparts them fame! And that fame comes from being seen and discussed, not just heard. In India, no voice artiste of tomorrow can be really successful unless he's good at both Hindi and English - which would be in addition to another chosen Indian language, if at all. Working in and for studios in the US, I have learnt that they seem to think that we are battling with multiple languages, whereas I think we are blessed. Let me take a minute to tell you that while recording documentaries (in global English) in an LA studio, a Hollywood director was flabbergasted to learn that English was not my first, not my second, It was actually my 3rd (in fact, the 4th language, if you count my mother tongue Kutchi). He disarmingly said, "Hær(r)ish, never embarrass an American by asking how many languages he knows. Well, barely one!

But at the same time, I would also caution that since we in India deal with multiple languages, our communication tends to be deficient. We tend to use recently-heard words rather than those that express our thoughts! Voice professionals will have to train themselves to think in the language they are communicating in. From my experience of recording globally, I can say with some license that the Indian English today is considered one of the most comprehensible English and, in fact, accepted as global accent. That is why English is a very important component of any voice-over artiste of India. Decades ago, a Canadian pop philosopher Marshall McLuhan had said, "The medium is the message." It cannot be truer than today. So, please tailor your message according to the medium. If the attention span is getting shorter, design your content in the least possible words – to first gauge interest, and then deal with details. What is needed apart from talent? Empathy and humility. Humility to keep you grounded, to accept supremacy of the script over one's voice - however valuably branded It might be. And empathy, belief in the script at hand is essential to be able to convey the soul of the subject contained 'in between the lines' of the script. In short, not just a great voice, but a complete communicator.

YT: Your voice and work have inspired generations. As you interact with young students today, especially those at institutions like St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, what message or advice would you like to share with them as they begin shaping their own careers and identities?

HB: Advice? Awww... Look, you're a high-IQ bunch. But really, please think seriously about how not to choose your career. When you're standing at a life-changing crossroads, don't go by trends or by loose 'drawing-room advice,' especially from people who agree with everything you say. Use both head and heart — which really means having a thorough discussion with yourself, almost mercilessly interrogating yourself. Then speak to someone you truly believe is a well-wisher, not someone who compulsively distributes free advice. Many will tell you that money is not important — particularly, if you belong to a well-to-do family. But I beg to differ: monetary compensation is also a gauge of appreciation of your knowledge and performance hitherto. And if you make a wrong career decision, don't let it shame you. You may lose a couple of years, but you will gain through the rest of your life. Remember, even God, Google, and Gandhi can sometimes make mistakes (not necessarily in that order!). So can you. Er, so did I! My parting word: in a world that is becoming more and more competitive, you may want to consider a short life-mantra — Perform or Perish. Look, you are the most important person to yourself. So, focus on yourself... until the world focuses on you.