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Other Stories:

Magnetic Fields Festival
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The IRAA Experience:
Aditya Mehta on the Evolution of IRAA Awards With Tribute to Nikhil Mehta's Legacy

THE "IRAA" EXPERIENCE

AWARDS FOR THE AUDIO INDUSTRY IN INDIA

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an "award" as a prize, such as money, a trophy, etc., given for an accomplishment.

By Aditya Mehta, Sudeep Audio

The 18th IRAA Award trophy proudly held by Sudha Mehta and sons Aditya Mehta and Jaysheel Mehta

*The **IRAA Awards** trophy, designed as a '**Shankh**' (conch shell), reflects the thoughtful symbolism behind it. The blowing of the Shankh signifies the start of auspicious occasions, perfectly connecting it to the essence of sound and celebration.*

The **National Film Award for Best Sound Design** is one such prestigious accolade presented annually by the National Film Development Corporation of India. Introduced at the 24th National Film Awards in 1976, this award celebrates excellence in sound design across films produced in all Indian languages. Over the years, it has evolved, with the 70th National Film Awards exclusively recognizing the Best Sound Designer. Although the removal of subcategories like Location Sound Recordist and Re-recordist of the Final Mixed Track faced criticism, this shift highlighted the singular role of sound designers. *(Source: Wikipedia)*

The evolution of IRAA Awards

In 2006, **Anil Chopra** and some esteemed Indian music industry professionals such as **Daman Sood** and the late **Nandoo Bhende** conceptualized a unique award series dedicated to the audio and music fraternity. Unlike other awards chosen by celebrities, these honours would be adjudicated by active audio industry professionals. Thus, the **Indian Recording Arts Academy (IRAA)** Awards were born. Over the years, these awards have become a coveted recognition among sound engineers in India.

From modest beginnings

Until 2022, the IRAA Awards were part of the PALM Expo, held in the month of May, with a relatively small audience comprising the winners themselves.

In 2013 (at the 6th IRAA Awards), my company, **SudeepAudio.com**, was awarded the Best Pro Audio Dealer in India. This event was modest and was attended by a handful of award winners. Later, Sudeep Audio became a media partner of IRAA for three years from 2021 and produced insightful interviews with key figures like **Anil Chopra** (Founder and Chairman), **Pramod Chandorkar** (IRAA Director), **Smita Rai** (Chief Coordinator and also Editor of PALM Magazine) and with several jury members. These interviews, which can be found on Sudeep Audio's official channel shed light on the rigorous selection process, the importance of the awards and the enormous efforts that go on behind the scenes.

What makes IRAA unique?

The IRAA Awards stand out for their rotating jury leadership. Every 2 years (and henceforth every year), a new Vice-Chairman (also a sound engineer himself / herself) heads the jury, ensuring fresh perspectives. Comprised of top music industry professionals, the jury undertakes an exhaustive selection process fuelled purely by their passion for the craft. Such a system, based on professional integrity and dedication, is unparalleled in Indian award ceremonies.

The IRAA Awards trophy, designed as a *'Shankh'* (conch shell), reflects the thoughtful symbolism behind it. The blowing of the Shankh signifies the start of auspicious occasions, perfectly connecting it to the essence of sound and celebration.

Nomination Fees introduced

Until its 15th edition, IRAA nominations were for free. However, a nominal fee of ₹500 per entry was introduced from the 16th edition onward. While this change initially sparked debate, it ultimately led to a surge in entries—reaching 1,400 submissions! Charging a fee added value to the awards, making entries more meaningful and competitive. Production houses and studios began nominating their sound engineers and music teams, reflecting the awards' growing credibility.

The Red-Carpet era begins

In March 2024, under the guidance of Vice-Chairman and sound engineer **KJ Singh**, the IRAA Awards embraced a red-carpet format, fulfilling Mr. Chopra's long-time vision. Supported by Genelec, the 17th IRAA Awards at NSCI Club, Worli, Mumbai, set a new benchmark.

Sound engineers donned elegant attire, accompanied by family members who celebrated their achievements. Attendance grew from 60-100 to over 200 guests, thanks to expanded jury participation and sponsorships. Submissions came from across India, showcasing the awards' national appeal.

The 18th IRAA Awards (2024)

The 18th IRAA Awards, sponsored by **Genelec**, held at NSE Banquet Hall, Mumbai, on November 29, 2024, honoured works from 2023. The professionally organized two-hour ceremony was attended by nominees, some of whom were accompanied by their family members. It appears that, in this edition, the winners were not informed in advance.

My late father, **Shri Nikhil Mehta**, was posthumously honoured for his lifetime contributions to audio recording, as unanimously recognized by the entire IRAA jury. His remarkable career as a studio owner, sound recordist and music editor spanning from the 1970s to the 1990s, has left an indelible mark on the industry. Even in his later years, he remained passionately involved, managing analog and digital audio archives, setting up the Sudeep Audio website (India's first pro audio portal), editing "converSAtions" videos for YouTube, and creatively repurposing waste materials into Bluetooth preamps. He continued to work tirelessly until his passing in September 2021, at the age of 86.

At the IRAA event, a standing ovation for Nikhilbhai (as he was fondly known) followed a short video presentation, underscoring the enduring legacy of audio and music professionals. Their work continues to inspire, even in their absence. These awards exemplify the profound and lasting impact of exceptional contributions, proving that great work resonates beyond time—a true testament to the purpose of IRAA.

Veteran sound engineer, **Shri Avinash Oak**, messaged later, "Wonderful! A great man. A fabulous sound engineer, and a fitting tribute to his monumental work in audio."

A Gratitude Note

This article is not just a thank-you to IRAA for honouring my father but also is a tribute to their commitment to excellence. Their dedication to recognizing truly deserving talent uplifts the entire industry.

Keep shining, Team IRAA!

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