



# A jugalbandi of words

**SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY**

**Chaitanya Tamhane's The Disciple opens up the world of Indian classical music with all its rich complexities to cinema audiences. But what does one of its own think of this representation? Carnatic vocalist, writer and activist TM Krishna puts compelling questions to the young, celebrated filmmaker**

CHAITANYA Tamhane's second feature *The Disciple*, which premiered and won accolades at the prestigious Venice International Film Festival last year, dropped on Netflix last week. The deeply reflective piece of work enters the hallowed spaces of Indian classical music, gently probing themes of devotion, mysticism, spirituality, learning and performance through the character of classical singer Sharad Nerulkar (Aditya Modak), who is inducted into the form by his father, and is desperate to attain mastery and purpose.

mid-day played fly on the wall as Tamhane engaged in conversation with noted Carnatic vocalist TM Krishna, touching on the nuances of the guru-shishya parampara, the true meaning of artistry, Kishori Amonkar, individualism and the weight of history, the pursuit of fame and the rigidity inherent in this historically Brahmanical, middle-class tradition.

**Edited excerpts from the interview:**

**TM Krishna:** So, Chaitanya, first of all, thank you for making the film. The first thing that struck me was that it presents a world which is rarely seen and the complexities within it, and in many ways doesn't judge too many things in that world. That was fundamentally a lovely position to take, because it allows the viewer to view that world with its rough edges, with the sublime existing with the not-so-sublime, and the conflicts therein. I enjoyed the film for its ability to

just look at something. As an insider [well, I am an insider, but partially possibly, because I come from the south of the Vindhyas], personally, it reminded me of some of the conversations I had back in the '90s. It was a little nostalgic there. Even if you're a listener of the music, this is not a universe you actually see. I think that's something we forget. Unless you're really in it, you actually don't see it, so it's kind of a microcosm. My first question to you is, what drove you to this subject?

**Chaitanya Tamhane:** Thank you. Coming from you, it means a lot. I'm a big fan. I've attended some of your concerts and have been completely blown away. I have read your writings and followed you online.

I've had a weird trajectory with Indian classical music because in my early 20s, I stayed away from this music. I almost had a problem with that world because I wasn't able to separate the music from these other concepts that surround it like extreme reverence, unquestioning faith, even simple things like touching someone's feet

as an obligation. And then around five years ago, the bug just bit me. Through the years, what has interested me are the qissas, the anecdotes, because I love stories of geniuses and secret knowledge and rare books. So, that really got me in. And then I started listening to the music and experiencing it for what it is.

**TMK:** Yes. Often, you wonder, what are these stories? You are told these stories which I can bluntly say are factually nonsensical. But the stories carry a lot of things within about the culture that they inhabit. So, a story about an 18th century musician being told within a community will tell you lots of things about the community, about how they perceived the individual, for example.

But I want to start with this whole notion of talent. What is the determinant of talent? If I ask of the protagonist, Sharad, was he a talented singer or was he mediocre? Was he a person trying to live his father's life? There is the fundamental question about who

is judging this talent.

**CT:** So, that's the thing. For me, what's beautiful about any art is that the viewer projects his or her own intuition, imagination and worldview on it. Otherwise it's a bit boring. I wouldn't like to kill that mystery for you or anybody who watches the film. It is important for me that [viewers] ask these questions. I wonder, are we judging people for their intent or their ability, because there are people who have great ability, but ill intentions.

**TMK:** So, if I were to judge him, I'd say he was an average singer, and it was obvious that you were showing that he had limitations, but if you dig a little deeper, that's probably true of every singer. So, it raises the whole question of how I, as a guru, perceive limitation in a student. Is that in a way also limiting the student? Is Sharad, for example, also limiting himself because of a perception? In the classroom, for example, when he struggles, the guru simply asks him to try again without giving him an idea of how to do so. That was a fascinating part of that [guru-shishya] relationship. It made me think of what I do with my students. Sometimes, you use a template and you presume that it will work for everybody.

**CT:** That's an interesting observation, and that's also why I found this whole world of Indian classical music so apt to tell a story around. The story was originally about a magician; I had written



*The Disciple* gently probes themes of devotion, mysticism, spirituality, learning and performance through the character of a classical singer

**Continued on page 15**

Continued from page 14

a play called Grey Elephants in Denmark. I find lots of similarities between cinema, magic and music. The core concept refused to leave me, and I started re-imagining that conflict within the context of Indian classical music. It is a kind of life risk almost, you know: you are not supposed to doubt your guru, you can't go guru-hopping, but you don't know where you'll end up. It'll be such a long time before you'll know whether the guru was right for you. Who is the guru to say that you are not talented and should give this up.

**TMK:** And what is so ingrained in the world of classical music is that if you fail, nobody is to blame but yourself. There is a scene where the guru admonishes the student who is already nervous on a performance stage in public. Now, that is power. He is a very nice man, but he is still the guru. You subtly bring that dynamic [to the fore]. This power inequality is intrinsically problematic, and as a teacher I know that I also feel the power. He [Guruji played by Arun Dravid] is a decent man, but he carries in him the historical memory of how the power should play out, and that came out nicely, I thought.

**CT:** I question why all our constructs of meaning, identity, self and purpose in life are shaped by visible and invisible, conscious and sub-conscious stories which we've been told or we have told ourselves. Like you say, maybe we are playing a role. Maybe the guru has never questioned the power dynamic. And it's circular—he is also dependent on the student. It is also not easy for him to let go of the student.

**TMK:** I speak from experience when I say that you can feel that you are losing something when you let a student go. There is a selfishness; you can't deny it, there is a sense of ownership. I also like how you explored the various generations. When the next generation of students are learning from the same guru, they see him differently.

Your protagonist's father has told his son from childhood that he has to be a musician. This whole idea of passion is complicated. The fundamental question is: do we really love it or are we told to love it? Can you talk about that?

PIC AMAR RAMESH



I speak from experience when I say that you can feel that you are losing something when you let a student go. There is a selfishness; you can't deny it, there is a sense of ownership. I also like how you explored the various generations. When the next generation of students are learning from the same guru, they see him differently

TM Krishna

**CT:** Yeah, someone can be really good at something, that brings him or her prestige and validation. Sometimes, we mistake that to be love. This is a complicated question, which requires dissolving the ego. We often live out the dreams and aspirations of our parents and sometimes, we make the mistake of thinking that we have broken those shackles. The father is a catalyst, but I also wanted to explore the theme of our heroes being our oppressors, and how important it is sometimes to let go of idols.

**TMK:** I don't know whether the Maai in your film is Tai [one of the foremost Hindustani vocalists Kishori Amonkar] but the similarity was too close...

**CT:** Maai is actually a combination of a bunch of different musicians.

**TMK:** The environment is oppressive and I want to make an insider's observation. There is this negation of the individual in this entire culture, which is deeply problematic. You are only a passage in something that is already flowing. Your job is to flow with it and in order to flow, you have to drown fully, which is sadhana. You can't be yourself, and therefore the past becomes a burden. And this

comes out in the film; none of the individuals are seen as individuals. They are just containers of something else. Bringing Maai as a voice was a brilliant idea. I loved that you show Sharad is always on a motorbike when he listens to her. That added that idea of moving in a modern sense and also moving back, in the emotional and intellectual sense.

I want to ask you, what was the role of the reality show? I was wondering if you were passing a judgement on it.

**CT:** I was not interested in commenting on the state of reality shows in this country. I was more interested in that [reality show] character being a foil for Sharad's own aspirations, [a sign of] his yearning for validation, fame. They almost become mirrors. Her trajectory is more a reflection of his state of mind. The reality show

It is a kind of life risk almost, you know: you are not supposed to doubt your guru, you can't go guru-hopping, but you don't know where you'll end up. It'll be such a long time before you'll know whether the guru was right for you. Who is the guru to say that you are not talented and should give this up?

Chaitanya Tamhane

character could easily have been a YouTuber, except in his world, it's a reality star that someone of his generation and background would be watching. There is this envy for youth.

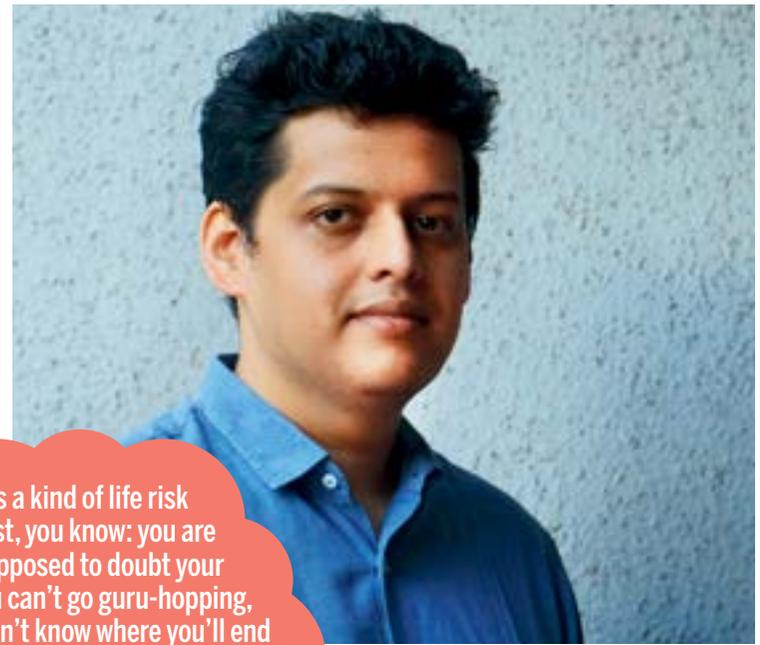
**TMK:** But this is exactly what the world of Indian classical music thinks of reality shows. They will not say it publicly, so I am going to say it. [The classical world] makes an infra dig towards the reality show because it is seen as one of quick fame and money, but they [purists] envy the fame that emerges from it. It is a very interesting struggle, because they believe they are pristine and cannot be sullied by the commercial world. And yet, they yearn for that world, one of celebrity status and access.

**CT:** There is also another imbalance that's unfolding [in the film]. Sharad is stuck to the old stories, but the rules of the game have changed. The speed at which somebody becomes famous, the concept of spotlight or pan-India validation has accelerated beyond our imagination because of the internet. So, it's also a reflection on this corrosion that is happening because of the changing times.

**TMK:** Yes. I think this also comes out beautifully in the soundtrack. Aneesh [Pradhan, tabla player] curated it for you and a lot of credit should go to him. I like the way the tanpura comes in; it's almost dissonant at times.

Also, I'm curious why there was no mention of the fact that this is a very Brahmanical, middle-class environment.

**CT:** This is an interesting question and has got to do with people's expectation of stories, and cinema in particular. Nobody might ask you



that question when you perform or sing a raag. But when it comes to stories, there is an expectation that certain boxes need to be ticked.

**TMK:** I think I ask because of my own preoccupation. I want people to ask this question about the raag. But was it [anywhere on your mind]?

**CT:** It was definitely a thought. I mean, look at the surnames. Even in Court [his 2014 film which looks at the Indian legal system through the trial of an ageing Dalit protest singer accused of encouraging a manhole worker to commit suicide through his protest poetry], I never used the word 'Dalit'. Caste is always present as a reality, but I didn't find it necessary to verbalise it. It's a deliberate choice.

**TMK:** I'm going to propose a counterargument: the reason why you say you and I don't see the need to utter the word is because we come from caste privilege.

**CT:** But that's what I mean: to look for that need in cinema is not necessarily my preoccupation. I feel strongly [about caste reality] but when it comes to making a film, there are different aesthetics at play for me. I am also not delusional about who my audience is. I am very clear about the limited appeal [my film will have] among a bourgeois bubble of culturally literate people. I run into a lot of obstacles with that audience as well.

sucheta.c@mid-day.com



The film brings a complex dynamic between guru and disciple to the fore

