

THE IRAA STORY: BUILDING CREDIBILITY THROUGH TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE



*In this exclusive interview with **Smita Rai**, Editor, **PALM Expo Magazine**, **Pramod Chandorkar** discusses the **India Recording Arts Awards (IRAA)** and how, during his tenure as **IRAA Director and Honorary Vice-Chairman**, he spearheaded the establishment of a strong jury and implemented a foolproof assessment process that transformed IRAA into a platform celebrating technical excellence over popularity. As the architect of IRAA's rigorous evaluation system, he explains the methodology that has made IRAA the most credible recognition for the sound engineering fraternity.*

THE GENESIS: ASSEMBLING A NO-NONSENSE JURY

Take us back to the beginning. How did you assemble the jury for IRAA?

When **Anil ji** and you approached me in 2017, I suggested a list of jury members. The IRAA team reached out to them, but the response wasn't encouraging—there was little excitement or interest. So, I personally spoke to each one and shared my vision for IRAA. I chose these individuals because they're respected, no-nonsense personalities who only associate with genuine art and engineering excellence.

They were candid: "I don't want to be part of something shallow." Once they understood our vision and saw we were serious about credibility, they said, "If you're doing this properly, then yes, we can make this credible." That's when they came on board, and we began working together toward this goal.

TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE OVER POPULARITY

What was the guiding philosophy when defining the award categories?

From the very beginning, I was clear that we should not get into the popularity game. We are talking about sound engineering, mixing, recording—which has nothing to do with the popularity of music. Popularity is not directly connected to quality.

That's why I insisted we focus on technical excellence, which can only be decided by people who truly understand it—professionals whose expertise is respected by the fraternity based on the credibility they've earned over the years.

DEFINING CATEGORIES AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

How did you go about deciding which categories to include?

We all sat together and did extensive brainstorming about which categories to include. The most important question was: How are we going to assess it?

The assessment criteria were written down first. If a category was too difficult to assess objectively, we didn't include it. Before any category is introduced, the jury discusses the assessment basis in detail—how many marks can be given, what each mark means. Everything is clearly defined in the system.

BUILDING A FOOLPROOF ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

What makes the online assessment system foolproof?

While nominations were always online, the entire assessment procedure had to be digital to ensure there cannot be any interference or inclination towards anyone.

Codes are given to each entry as per category, so the jury is unaware of whose nomination it is—unless it's a popular track and someone recognizes who has done it. But as an individual entry, the jury has no information about the entrant. The jury is completely focused on listening to the quality rather than knowing where it has come from and who is involved in it.

How do you ensure jury members don't influence each other?

Based on each jury member's expertise, the IRAA office assigns a specific set of nominations. No one knows what others have received or how many nominations exist in each category. This ensures no favouritism.

At the first level, every jury member marks independently. I might know the top runners in my lot, but not what others are scoring. I assess completely

independently based on my judgment. Every mark is recorded online—not just scores, but also comments explaining why someone deserves recognition or has been marked lower. These comments add tremendous value to the process.

In the second level, the top scorers from each jury are once again sent for assessment to all jury members to identify the top contenders. Even those who haven't assessed certain entries in the first level, now get a chance to review them at this stage.

At the final stage, all jury members sit together to decide who gets the highest recognition.

HANDLING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

What happens when a jury member is nominated? How do you handle potential conflicts of interest?

All our jury members are actively working, so it's possible they've done excellent work that deserves recognition. At times, a jury member is nominated.

We created a clear system: If any jury member is nominated, that track is not sent to them for assessment. If it reaches stage three—where all juries discuss together—that jury member recuses themselves. In physical meetings, they step out of the room. In online meetings, they log out until the decision is made.

This ensures no bias. It has happened that a jury member was nominated and did not win because someone else was better. We've done this consciously to protect the award's credibility.

We don't even have to ask—jury members proactively declare, "This is my track," or "I'm associated with it." For example, if one of my studio engineers is nominated, I recuse myself to avoid any inclination to favour my studio. We recuse ourselves voluntarily.

BALANCING CATEGORIES AND COMPETITION

What are your views on adding new categories? Some nominees want more categories, but others say the ceremony is already too long.

I always feel that every aspect of sound engineering involved in the industry should be recognized, mentioned, and if possible, awarded. This is the only way to motivate people to continue good work.

As of now, I don't have any categories in mind that we're missing. But yes, we do get requests from potential nominees. We assess them NOT based on emotions, but based on how can we assess it?

If we don't find a foolproof way of assessing any category, just for the sake of making someone happy, I'm not inclined to add it. I would rather ensure it can be assessed properly.

CHALLENGES IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

What are the biggest challenges during assessment? What do you expect from nominees that may not be happening?

I won't call them challenges, but ensuring accurate credits requires considerable effort. Sometimes published credits differ from what nominees submit, and we must verify everything to maintain fairness.

I request all nominees to be transparent and provide accurate information during submission. Otherwise, the administration spends significant time verifying details, and we risk crediting the wrong person after decisions are made.

Please be conscious and thorough when submitting nominations—ensure your input data is correct. Also, remember you don't have to nominate only yourself. If you know someone who has done excellent work, be gracious enough to support the fraternity and nominate them. This strengthens our community and ensures deserving talent gets recognized.

Some people may then ask, "Why should I pay for someone else's nomination?"

I'd like to reiterate that the entire jury is working tirelessly at a heavy creative cost to themselves, without any commercial remuneration, besides a token honorary honorarium that we get from IRAA.

If the jury is dedicating so much effort for the fraternity, it would be great if the fraternity also contributes. The cost charged covers administrative

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expenses only. Organizing a lavish award ceremony with cocktails and dinner, producing the trophies, and managing the entire event requires substantial funding. However, the nomination fees collected cover only a tiny fraction—specifically, the cost of storage space needed to handle all the heavy files submitted. I hope the fraternity understands this and comes together, because this is being done for them. There is no commercial motive. We're not related to glamour, so commercial exposure is unlikely.

THE IMPACT OF RECOGNITION

What drives the aspiration among nominees? Are they getting more projects based on winning awards?

I'm not aware if that's the reality, but I'm sure the aspiration comes from the fact that their work is appreciated—because no one else has ever done that for them. Somewhere, they prove to themselves, to their family, to everyone, that "I've been working so hard." And as I said, it's a technical art. The art needs to be appreciated.

I don't know whether winning turns into more projects—I hope so. I hope it helps them get more work or get better paid because they have an award in their portfolio now. But yes, any appreciation for good work is always encouraging. Only when good work is appreciated will people want to continue doing good work.

What are your hopes for IRAA going forward?

I believe we should invite more prominent industry figures as Chief Guests to present awards. This would help us communicate our mission and approach to the broader industry—not for commercial purposes, but to expand our reach.

Greater exposure will ensure more people recognize those who put in tremendous effort behind the scenes. This visibility may inspire other awards to equally appreciate and honour the technical arts.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND AI

How do you approach challenges like balancing traditional categories with emerging technologies such as spatial audio and AI? What if somebody uses AI in their work?

If somebody is using AI—like if AI has mixed or done the work instead of a human—we'd have to create a system to identify whether it's AI or real human work. That means investing in that kind of technology.

But I would rather say to the fraternity that this award is for honouring humans—the "Actual Intelligence". They should be responsible enough not to cheat by submitting work generated from "Artificial Intelligence" as their own.

We can always create a technological safeguard, but I'd rather trust the fraternity to be aware and submit with their own conscience. Obviously, if we discover that someone using AI has nominated, we'll let the world know.