



He was a unique person; his thinking was unique, which defined his way of composing music. He was always itching to do something new. Music was always with him. He recorded a few songs when his father was unaware, and those songs were brilliant – matching his father’s high musical standards. One of those songs was **“Gaata Rahe Mera Dil”** from *Guide*, and the other was **“Kora Kagaz”** from *Aradhana*. He even introduced polyphony into Indian film music, creating a new scale system that listeners found refreshing. In the studio he was gentle with singers: he would quietly come into the recording booth and say, “Your pitch is slightly off here, but you’re doing a fantastic job,” always ending with encouragement. I learned from him; I followed Pancham’s singing note-for-note when I sang, imitating his style exactly.

He had a great band of musicians who completely understood his mind and style. I would often see musicians like Hari and Shiv practicing quietly; he welcomed everyone’s ideas and encouraged them to follow their instincts. He even encouraged my jazz experiments, knowing that as I grew as a musician, it would benefit us both. I would spend long days in his studio – we’d arrive by car in the morning and warm up on our instruments – but it never felt like work. One morning I was warming up on the guitar when Pancham quietly appeared at the door. He sat down listening, then said he thought the Bach piece I was playing was “very good,” repeatedly telling me I was “very good.” That was high praise from him. He was playful and friendly – often forgetting I was twenty years older than him – and he had a great sense of humor. He loved dancing and being around us; whenever he was there he was always happy and full of life. I remember him running around the music room in his lungi, just enjoying the music everyone was making.

In one session, we were working on a song based on a simple folk melody (ektaara style). Pancham transformed it by adding percussion, turning the single-string sound into something rich and modern. He used instruments like the Madol, Tabla Tarang, and Duggi Tarang to create a melodic rhythm pattern. Essentially, he played a single chord on the guitar, and that chord became like the “dha” (the base beat) of the song’s rhythm. It was incredible – the guitar chord itself became the heartbeat of the track.

He explained that if you listen closely to that song, you can hear the shakers more prominently than the bass instruments – that’s how you instantly know it’s Pancham’s style. When Pancham first burst onto the scene, he drew college and school kids into Indian film music. I remember watching one of his films seven days in a row – I bribed my friends with small change for cinema tickets – because getting tickets was such madness with long queues. His music gave us immense joy; it felt like everything we wanted was being given to us through his songs. It was complete musical madness, and he didn’t have any ambition beyond that musical madness.

When I was composing my own music, I tried to think like R.D. Pancham. He took a simple ektaara melody and transformed it on the guitar; I took that same melody and adapted it on the piano. But I also had to consciously separate my own style, so I fought to avoid copying him. Still, he influenced all of us deeply. There really was no “new school” of music after Pancham created his sound in the 1960s; today’s composers still follow that trend, only with more modern recording techniques and sounds. He was always listening and experimenting. If he needed a new sound, he’d find it – sometimes even sampling everyday noises. In the studio he would see music in everything. I remember one rainy day he and his team were blowing into half-filled beer bottles to make a sound; fifteen days later he used that exact rhythm in the song **“Mehbooba Mehbooba”** from *Sholay*. He was one of those geniuses who could pick up a rhythm anywhere. Even with today’s hi-fi equipment, you can still hear how much work he put

into those recordings. His music wasn't "clean" and sterile; it had a raw quality because of all the effort and experimentation in the recordings.

He also absorbed all kinds of music – from Bossa Nova and Pink Floyd to Latin rhythms and Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals. He believed that every note in the universe belonged to him, so he could freely reuse them. He used to say that even if Bach or Mozart had written those notes, he could still use them – because it's the combination that makes the tune unique. His compositions were deeply emotional; he composed with his heart. He didn't limit himself to traditional forms, which gave Indian pop music a new musical vocabulary.

He said his Puja (Pooja) albums were among his best work. They weren't really religious songs, just modern compositions; typically one song on each album would become a cult hit. Since there was only one record label then, there were no copyright issues – many of us would hear a song in a Bengali film and adapt it into Hindi. For example, he mentioned that **"Nahe Nahe"** from *Jawani Diwani* was actually a Bengali tune originally. He suggested that if you really love Pancham's music, you should explore his Bengali films (he composed for about 28 of them) and Puja albums to discover all the hidden gems.

He noted that we'd constantly find new ideas in the studio. He saw rhythm in everything, even simple vocal sounds. He would hum syllables like "baba, bhud bhud" to create rhythms. He said things like, when he played *"Sholay"* to everyone, people called out "babuba babuba," and that rhythm was in the song. It was as if he could just hear music in the air.

Everyone who knew him loved him. He said that in an industry full of villains, Pancham was a gem. Once, Pancham recorded a song using his own money to make sure it was perfect – he said he poured so much heart into it. He never did music for money or fame; he was too classy and above all that. We used to wait to see what outfit he'd wear next – one day he'd be all in white, the next day in jeans and a red shirt – always stylish like a hero. He was generous and fun-loving. He once bought some of the finest vodka in the world and poured us drinks, joking about day drinking and giving me playful advice to drink at night instead. His house was full of gadgets and instruments – we felt like his kids there, always having fun. In Calcutta, just hearing Pancham's name was like getting a day off; his home was all music and play.

He lived life on the edge. He loved fast cars and took advantage of being young; he wasn't worried about money or investments. He really *did* live life king-size, throwing big parties and spending freely. But by nature he was also very simple, kind-hearted, and clear-souled. He poured everything into his work, almost like an opera in its own way. He felt the pain when a project flopped. For example, he was deeply hurt by the failure of the movie *Sagar*. He kept saying "the music was so good" as if trying to reassure himself. Even so, he enjoyed making it. He didn't open up about his sadness, but it was clear he was wounded by those failures. He noted that people's memories are short – when things go well, everyone jumps on board, but they forget when things go wrong.

I asked someone why I didn't hear much from Pancham in his later days. He said, "You'll be surprised – I haven't recorded a song in two months." He observed that Pancham had drifted off the main wavelength of film music; he was always marching to his own beat even as the world changed. He said that's the lesson for all of us: Pancham was such a great composer and human being, but he believed so deeply in those who loved him and in the balance of success and failure that it drove him into solitude. It almost drove him insane, and in the end, it made him a very lonely man. It was one of those harsh lessons – every profession has ups and downs, and if you can't manage the downs, you might succumb.

He shared a famous story about composing. A lyricist handed Pancham some lines for a song (for "*Kuch Na Kuch*"). Pancham struggled and said the melody was "crap." The lyricist pushed him, and after Pancham left and reflected, he returned the next week with a gorgeous tune – he even sang it in Bengali on his harmonica. The lyricist got goosebumps listening to it. It was simple and bare, just one melody repeated, yet absolutely beautiful. The lyricist said they had never heard anything like it. It gave me goosebumps too when I heard it. It reminded me of what others have said: they wish they could write something that pure. It was a lesson in how minimal a melody can be – nothing else, just that one tune – and still be incredibly powerful. Pancham gave that melody life and went on.

On 31 January (the New Year's night), on the set of *1942: A Love Story*, I threw a huge party. I'll never forget it: his car rolled in, he came down the steps, and we played "**Ladki Kyon**". The whole crowd started dancing. That was the last moment of glory I saw him experience. Everyone was dancing to his music that night – it was a very special moment for him.

Afterwards, reflecting on his legacy, this person said something really striking. He compared Pancham to great Western composers: Puccini and Richard Rodgers. He said, just as Puccini and Rodgers created immortal melodies, Pancham would be the third greatest melody-maker of the 20th century. Their music is immortal, and Pancham's songs will also outlive him and be remembered forever. He reminded us that when remixing old songs, you can't just slap on a new beat – you have to keep the soul of the original composer and lyricist. Change the arrangement, but carry the essence. He gave an example: there was a song with a brilliant tune whose movie flopped, so it was forgotten. Only when that tune was remixed by younger artists did people remember it – and that, he said, is a great compliment to Pancham. He kept repeating how good the remix was, how good the music was. "Thanks to that remix, people today are talking about it," he said. And he noted with a smile that if people say a new hit is "the next R.D. Burman," that's okay – R.D. lives on in how they say it.

Then he closed with a few poignant lines in Hindi:

"और तुम यूँ ही दो कदम चल कर।  
(And just keep walking two steps like this.)"

"पंचम चाल है।  
(This is Pancham's style.)"

And he mentioned the title of one of Pancham's songs:

"जीवन के दिन।  
(Days of life.)"

These lines underscored the message that Pancham's music is about life and moving forward, and that his style lives on in all those who follow his path.

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