

During the tumultuous times of pre independence period, the Indian People's Theatre Association was formed by a group of like-minded theatre stalwarts to culturally enlighten the masses. However, within the next 6-7 years, the IPTA was systematically brought to a standstill by the government. Yet, some of its members took forward IPTA's vision and carried on the struggle through different organizations. *Bohurupee* was one such organization which was founded by *Shombhu Mitra* and *Bijon Bhattacharya*. However there was a major ideological difference in *Shombhu da's* vision. He practiced theater for the sake of art and he did not believe in necessarily propagating theater as a political tool. He also produced more than eight plays of Tagore, and most of the foreign language modern classics which the then leftist movement looked down upon as an elitist pursuit. This criticism was later proved to be wrong as *Bohurupee* also produced plays deeply rooted in the grassroots of the Indian ethos. With an exception of a few, plays by *Badal Sircar*, *Vijay Tendulkar*, *Girish Karnad* and *Manoj Mitra* were introduced in *Bengali* by *Bohurupee*.

*Bohurupee* has been creating exceptional *Bengali* plays since 1948. Through all these years, *Shombhu da*, *Bijon da* along with *Tripti Mitra*, *Kumar Roy* and *Tapas Sen* tirelessly pursued to uplift and experiment with *Bengali* theatre. As I look back at all those years of *Bohurupee*, I feel simply awestruck to assess its contribution to *Bengali* theatre. The dedication and perseverance of its members have been incredible! Completely self funded and with only a passion for the dramatics, *Bohurupee* managed to produce innumerable plays in *Bengali* while bagging multiple awards through the years.

In today's world, the existence of such institutions with no political affiliations, commercial equations or ulterior motivations is almost impossible to find! When the cultural space is getting shrunk every day, the presence of groups like *Bohurupee* proves to be an inspiring icon.

In late 60s, as a greenhorn in the theatre world, I remember hearing my *Guru Satya Dev Dubey*, as well as other stalwarts such as *Badal Sircar*, *Shyamanand Jalan*, *Vijay Tendulkar*, *Mohan Rakesh*, *Girish Karnad* talk ecstatically about his performances. I had also noticed that their creative arguments and contrary views on the theatre space dissolved into a collective admiration society when the topic came to him.

When the murmurs begun to filter in about him 'hanging his boots' any day, my lurking fear of not being able to experience the magic of Sombhu Mitra seemed to be coming true!

At one of the theatre parties, *Damubhai Jhaveri*, the big boss of Indian National Theatre mentioned to me, "Our city will soon spread a red carpet farewell to *Shombhu da*"! And what a spectacle it was! A gala festival of celebrated *Bohuroopee* plays, *Putul Khela*, *Rakta Karabi* & *Oedipus* descended on *Bombay*. There was also the additional attraction of a young *Saolee Mitra* in their new production of *Pagla Ghoda*. For me, nothing else trumped the opportunity to watch *Shombhu da*, *Tripti di* and *Kumar Roy*.

I remember the excitement of being a part of a theatre fraternity which transcended linguistic barriers. The auditorium was filled to the brim with the who's who of English, *Marathi*, *Hindi* & *Gujarathi* theatre. So much so that, a sizable group of local *Bengalis* had protested for being deprived of witnessing such a historical occasion in early 70s.

Half an hour before the performance of *Oedipous*, *Damubhai* took me back stage to meet *Shombhu da*. Dressed in a period costume amidst the towering sets full of angular steps, he looked frail and tiny. As he was trying to read some small piece of paper without his glasses, *Damubhai* introduced me, "This is *Amol*." He looked at me for a second and gave an infectious, warm smile! My embarrassment of disturbing an artiste just before the show, and the awkwardness/tension of a youngster having not many credentials disappeared as he said softly, "I'm still trying to come to terms with my recent cataract operation. But do come and see me tomorrow morning, if it's not too inconvenient." He stopped me from touching his feet and turned away to enter his world ... And what a glorious world that was! There was no trace of a frail looking man nearing his 60s. Instead, I was swept of my feet by a commanding youth trying to probe into his past, present as well as future. His subtle expressions, imposing gestures and smooth gliding movements on those complicated steps conveyed so much beyond words. With *Tripti di* in tandem, it was a perfect virtuoso *jugalbandi*.

Next morning over breakfast, I asked him if he had asked *Damubhai* to bring me to him. He just brushed it away affectionately and wanted to know my reaction to the last evening's performance. In the coming years, I had the privilege of experiencing his magical world whenever he visited *Bombay* or at his residence, in *Calcutta*. He held my finger and guided me to re-learn the basics of theatre; he confronted me with a challenge of re-defining a classic; he scolded me for having a partial perspective of life! On rare occasions, we talked about films...mine and then his '*Jagte Raho*'.

In 1980, the screening my first directorial film 'Akriet' in the US was stopped by Vasant Sathe, the then I & B minister. I called Shombhu da and requested him to lend his support. As I started giving him names of other artistes supporting me, he simply said, "Amol, I'll be with you even if I'm the only one!"

I guess it was his constant struggle against conformist institutions and ideologies that made him feel duty bound to take a stand for a cause he believed in.

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After a tiring day's outdoor shooting of 'Britto' in a sultry, humid Jute mill compound in Chandan Nagar was over, Tripti di joined 'the younger lot' as she referred to us. I don't remember how the conversation from films shifted to theatre. May be it was vivid memory and mention of her spellbinding solo performance, Aparajita. I distinctly recollect that the atmosphere in that dingy room was suddenly filled with a magical glow ... Hours passed by as she recited Bengali poems of 'the younger lot'. I had the audacity to say that a couple contemporary Marathi poets were at par if not better. There was a shocked silence around. Then I recited a couple of poems by C. T. Khanolkar. Anil Chatterjee hugged me while saying, "Didn't I tell you, Tripti, despite being a staunch Marathi, I see more of a Bengali in him!" And then the adda went on till the early morning hours!

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Although I remember quite a few of Kumar da's performances from different Bohuroopee productions, what's etched in my memory is his image as the director of 'Galileo'. His brilliant production had managed to overshadow the sheer nostalgic moments of Shombhu da's celebrated comeback performance. So it was only inevitable that I talked about it passionately when we met again after decades in early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I reminisced his earlier performances of Shashi in Pagla Ghoda; Badal da's tremendous contribution not only to the modern Indian theatre but to the parallel Marathi theatre movement in particular; Tapas da and his significant though brief participation with the Marathi theatre; above all, his stupendous contribution to the Bohuroopee post Shombhu da-Tripti di era. Kumar da participated in that conversation in his subdued, minimal style, but his demeanor changed as the topic touched the throbbing nerve of young generation actors' dilemmas. He talked about how theatre is the only space that can withstand the additional pressures of television coming right into the bedroom. And then he signed off with his unflinching faith in "theatre on theatre's terms"! I was the fortunate solo audience to that towering, understated styled Kumar

da performance. As he put his hand on my shoulder before seeing me off, he said, "You are a *neka Bengali, Amol*, not a *Marathi!*"

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"It is in the nature of man that he is compulsively driven to overcome the dictates of mere convenience. In the early days of civilization, as he needed to draw water, he invented the urn. The urn was filled but not his heart. So he began to decorate it with color, patterns and his imagination. What an incomprehensible and strange craving... that represents the artistic quest!" these words of *Shombhu da* while accepting the Magsaysay Award is the quintessence of *Bohuroopee's* astonishing accomplishments.

We all as theatre aficionados ought to feel totally indebted to *Bohuroopee!!!*