

The opening night of 'Yayati', a play in Hindi produced by the Indian National Theatre – curtain was about to open when I managed to reach 'Rang Bhavan', the open air theatre adjacent to the Xavier's college in *Dhobi Talao*. I, as a teenage theatre enthusiast, was overawed to see that the auditorium was filled to the brim! People around me were talking about a young writer called *Girish Karnad* and his script as one of the path breaking Indian plays. They were also excited that every top name in the theatre world - *Amrish Puri* from Hindi, *Tarla Mehta* from *Gujarathi* and *Sulabha Deshpande* from *Marathi* – was to be seen performing live on stage. And above all, it was directed by none other than the young, firebrand *Satya Dev Dubey*, they whispered!

And then the curtain opened...

Whatever unfolded on stage for next two hours, I had never experienced anything like that till then!

While returning home after the performance, the crowd around me in the local train ceased to exist, for I was in a different world! I remember being bowled over by the fact that a period, costume drama could be performed with such an austere simplicity. I also kept remembering all those magical moments filled with understated yet brilliant performances, especially that of *Sulabha* who had played the least important role of a 'daasi'.

Soon after that in 1967, *Dubey* offered me a role and I made my debut in theatre with a Hindi play '*Chup! court chalu hai*'. I also made my entry on silver screen with a *Marathi* film '*Shantata, court chalu ahe*' in 1968. The lead actor in both was *Sulabha*. I still remember being in awe of her dazzling performance in '*Yayati*' and getting an opportunity to rub shoulders with such an outstanding performer right in the beginning of my career was indeed a great privilege! She, despite being a celebrity, was a disciplined, hardworking actor and a simple, warm human. In fact, seniors such as *Amrish Puri* and *Sulabha* both made all the juniors like me feel at ease from the word go. The first show of '*Chup! Court...*' was performed in the annual *Maharashtra* state Drama competition in *Nagpur* and the fact that we bagged almost all the prizes, was no surprise to the theatre world. After the results were announced, an impromptu party to celebrate our success ended next day early morning with *Sulabha* singing a sensuous *laavani* in *Marathi* and then *Puri saab* taking the evening to a heady climax with "*Babul mora...*". Later, for quite a few years, such parties after the first show of a new Theatre Unit production used to be held at *Arvind*, *Sulabha*'s residence; the dissections of that performance invariably led to heated arguments, but the tempers used to cool down the moment *Sulabha* came from the kitchen with the plates filled with typical 'Bombay style' fish preparations!

And then breaking away from *Vijaya Mehta*'s *Rangayan*, *Arvind* and *Sulabha* formed their own theatre group *Awishkar*. They both toiled hard to get a dilapidated school hall near *Dadar* railway station and created a viable alternative theatre space. Subsequently, *Chhabildas* went on to become a hallowed space in the Indian experimental theatre movement.

As the inaugural attraction of *Chhabildas Theatre*, 'Pratima', a play in free verse by one of the finest poets/playwrights in Marathi, Chim. Tryam. Khanolkar, was to be performed. I was privileged to act with Sulabha once again. Additionally, she agreed, though reluctantly, to direct the play which also featured Shreeram Lagoo. During the rehearsals, the director Sulabha had a tough time making the actors do choreographed movements; so did the music composer Bhaskar Chandavarkar with our live singing! In the party after that show, Deshpande home reverberated with applause not merely for the performances but also for Sulabha's culinary skills.

Much later, we were shooting for Kantilal Rathod's 'Ramnagari' in Hindi. The film was based on an autobiography of a successful singer actor from Marathi folk theatre. While a bhajan was being picturised on us, Sulabha as my urban, uneducated mother, started correcting and teaching me a few things in singing, and that duet suddenly got transformed into a heart warming moment between the mother and son! She did it with such finesse that it was like attending a master class. While watching the edited rushes of that song, Jaidevji said, "a composer rarely gets such pleasure of seeing his own composition being bettered!" and then embraced both me and Sulabha.

The effortless ease of getting under the skin of the varied characters that she played in films was equally brilliant. Plays such as 'Avadhya' (Marathi), 'Sakharam Binder' (Hindi) were remembered mainly because of Sulabha's unexpected depiction of sensuous, earthy women. It won't be an exaggeration to say that for a few decades in Marathi theatre, no actress other than Sulabha managed to stamp her own identity, which was as brilliant and yet distinctly different from the Vijaya Mehta school of acting. Her contribution to the experimental and children's theatre as well is stupendous.

Unfortunately, the present day media obsessed with the 'commercial success' tends to overlook such nuanced details. Marathi Theatre is also considered (and often looked down upon) as 'regional'. And more regrettable, the present day generation remains oblivious to this glorious part of our cultural history!