

AIFF: Interview

**Latika Padgaonkar**

**Sai Paranjpye**



When she penned her memoir - *A Patchwork Quilt: A Collage of My Creative Life* (2020) – Sai Paranjpye said that the quilt was now complete, it was her “final hurrah”, and she was now “free to look back and relive all her exciting adventures.”

Not quite. Sai’s latest play, *Eevlese Rop*, which she directed, was performed in Pune last year. Less known is her documentary on the renowned astrophysicist Dr Jayant Narlikar which was screened at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) over five years ago but finds no mention in her *kala pravas* book.

But this year, her substantial body of work gained full recognition. The 10<sup>th</sup> Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival (held In January in Chatrapati Sambhajnagar - erstwhile Aurangabad) conferred on her the prestigious Padmapani Lifetime Achievement Award (*in picture above*). Before a largely Marathi speaking audience, Sai spoke about Marathi cinema, and expressed happiness that it was travelling beyond the usual Mumbai-Pune circuit. She referred also to the “sunshine” in her work, to the fact the she had always steered cleared of melodrama in order to make her films “different.”

And now, there is another cherry on the cake: NFAI-NFDC held a three-day event in March featuring ten of her films (features, children's films, documentaries) to an extraordinarily appreciative audience. In a Q&A session, one young man confessed with much reverence that while he had not known of Sai Paranjpye, he was thrilled to have discovered her now. Sai laughed heartily, turned to the audience, repeated what he had said and expressed her pleasure that the young man had been so honest!

There is no dearth of information about Sai on the internet. With the quantum of her work and her many accolades, Sai – a Padma Bhushan awardee – has been in the public eye for decades. But given her Padmapani honour and her birthday recently, I thought it was an apt moment to spend a relaxed afternoon together, reminiscing with her about her artistic journey. I began with a couple of questions and then let her pick up the mantle, recall nuggets of information and tell her story....

**Saitai, you have had a most remarkable career; a rich and diverse one in AIR, National School of Drama, Children's Film Society, FTII and Television. You have written and directed plays and films, and been a writer - in fact your first book for children (*Mulanha Mewa*) was published when you were just eight years old. Have all these cultural and literary fields inspired you equally or have some been more inspirational than others?**

I have had a splendid time working and experimenting in different mediums and have enjoyed them all. The common thread that binds all of them is the script. Once inspired

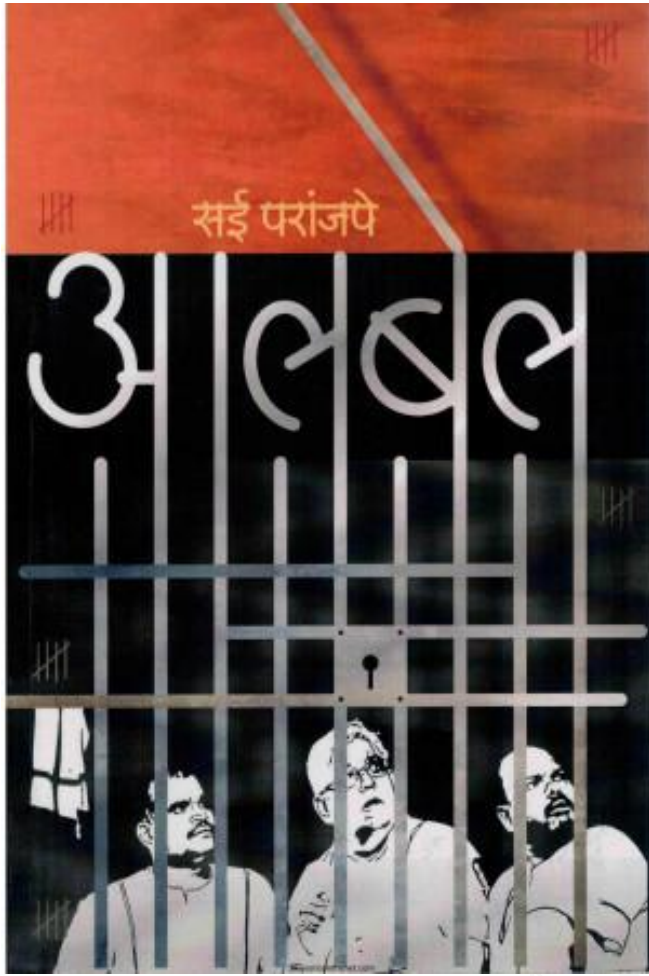
by something, I begin writing. Thereafter, the script starts taking its own form and can then become a radio play, a theatrical work or a film.

**You went to France for a year on a government scholarship to study theatre, and got a chance to see plays by some of the greatest French and European playwrights. You say that this experience helped shape your theatre aesthetics. Can you elaborate?**

Yes, Paris did make a tremendous impact on me as a creative person. In terms of production, writing, acting, mounting of a play, and in the energy and dedication that went into its staging. The plays by Jean-Paul Sartre, Ibsen, Strindberg, Paul Claudel, Natalie Sarraute, Samuel Beckett et al - apart from plays directed by the big names of theatre such as Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud - goaded me to write. Apart from serious drama, I also saw "revues" – light, entertaining, not overly ambitious works which gave you momentary fun and were forgotten afterwards, and I myself went on to write three - *Nanda Saukhya Bhare*, *Sakkhe Sejari* and *Punha Sejari*. Each one was extremely popular and each enjoyed more than a thousand performances.

My more serious plays were *Jaswandi* (*Panje* in Hindi, it was brought to the stage by Vijaya Mehta and was also translated into and performed in Gujarati and Sindhi). It won awards and was one of my major successes; *Maza Khel Mandu De* (Let's Play House). This one had a feminist theme. It involved one old and two younger women staying together. Although each one has her own dreadfully sorrowful story to tell, the old woman is lively

but with a bitter sense of humour – one of the nicest characters I have created.



The three characters of *Aalbel* are all murderers living together in a prison cell. Two of them have their own reasons for killing while the third is a contract killer. Inspired by Sartre's play *No Exit* which I had seen in Paris, this theme had stayed with me for a long time. But I wondered why Sartre was so bitter about human beings, why for him "Hell was the other People". Out of this apprehension was born *Aalbel*. The three characters in his play are together in one cell in afterlife for eternity and they make life hell for one another. I changed this to make life bearable and meaningful.

*Mogara Phulala* (The Jasmine Blooms) was a fun play but a major flop. I borrowed the idea (only the idea, mind you!) from Neil Simon, a favourite playwright of

mine. It is about Gaja, a staid, well-meaning middle-aged married man and his friend Harsh – flashy, charismatic and divorced. Harsh mocks Gaja for not enjoying life, urges him to have affairs and pushes him into something of a trap.

By now I had cultivated a following. But this play shocked and annoyed the audience. What? How could I possibly write a comedy on extramarital relationships? (In her book Sai writes: "If this play disappointed my audience, I would like to state that I, in turn, was disillusioned with them. To laugh uproariously for three hours and then pull a long face and say. 'No, no. This does not reflect our culture at all,' – isn't that sheer hypocrisy?")

**You have not just written and directed your plays and films, you have also designed your sets?**

Yes I have. When you direct a play or a film, you see the characters move and so much depends on their movements. I have always tried to make my sets inventive, imaginative. I remember once when we performed in Gokhale Hall in Pune. We covered the stage and all the walls with newspapers; another time with gunny bags, and a third time with strings of colourful beads!

**You maintain that *Disha* is your favourite film...**

I have always been fascinated by *chawls*. When I was a child, I would go to a chawl – Bapatwadi - not too far from my house and stay with Salu Maushi. I loved the atmosphere of camaraderie and togetherness. In *Katha*, the location was a *chawl* but I did not focus on *chawl* life. In *Disha*, however, I

discovered – not a *chawl* but something that went beyond it: a *gala*, located within a *chawl*. A *gala* was a long room where some 40 migrant workers could stretch out, cheek by jowl. This kind of community life has a totally different colour.

For *Suee* (on drug addiction and rehabilitation of addicts), my research was extensive. Uddhav Kamble, a senior police officer helped me generously. Thanks to him, I was able to shoot in jails. Eldrid Tellis, Founding Director of Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust also gave me his full support. We heard some harrowing tales about drug addicts. One man narrated that he was once so drugged that he didn't know he was lying on a railway track. The train went over him and ripped off his arm – and he felt nothing!!

But it was *Papeeha* that demanded the maximum amount of groundwork. I was mesmerized by the writings of Padma Bhushan Chandra Praasd Bhatt who had played a stellar role in the Chipko movement. I traversed many forests of Maharashtra (Palghar, Tadoba, Dahanu, Mahabaleshwar, Bhamargarh among others), collecting information on customs, rituals, beliefs, dress and food that I would later weave into my narrative. For instance, I saw how tribals would sink their hands into ratholes to extract the grains of rice that rodents had stolen! The stories that the forest guards recounted were truly fascinating but what makes my hair stand on the even today is how, apparently, the forest comes to a standstill when someone arrives to chop down a tree!

Once, during a wedding feast in the forest, we were served red rice (it looked half

cooked), boar curry (I could not bear to eat it so an old man sitting near me helped himself without any qualms) and chutney made of ants.

Each forest people had a different language. But because these forests were in Maharashtra, the influence of Marathi was evident, its stamp was everywhere. In the film, however, we concocted our own lingo. Purely fictitious!

As for *Sparsh*, what struck and moved me hugely was the atmosphere of fun, ambition, confidence and the positive spirit in both the children and the adults living, working and studying in the Blind Relief Association...so different from what I had imagined...

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Sai's life has been one of researching (and retaining – her memory is formidable!), understanding, imbibing and sensitizing herself to the intricacies of the different worlds that exist around us...worlds we may be aware of but pay little attention to in daily life. But she has chosen to enter these worlds and to foreground them in her films and plays, all this reinforced by fine, understated dialogues, a discerning eye and by deft camera work (high-angle shots or a freeze on her final images, which makes it 'just there but not quite' and leaves you to guess).

Is she through with writing? She says so, but I don't believe it. Her observations are forever keen, the urge to write still intact and her pen and her heart forever ready to bubble to the surface, forever willing (in her words) to turn "visual poetry into verbal artistry."