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**Queen of humour: a candid interview with award-winning writer
and filmmaker Sai Paranjpye**

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Queen of humour: a candid interview with award-winning writer and filmmaker Sai Paranjpye

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In the 80s, at a time when there were hardly any women filmmakers in the Indian film industry, one woman made a trendsetting impact. A woman who had published her first book of fairy tales at the age of 8, won the Asian Broadcasting Union Award in Iran for her first made-for-TV movie, 'The Little Tea Shop,' and won three national awards for her first feature film 'Spars'. She is Sai Paranjpye— a woman of steely determination, a woman of sparkling wit and humour. Moving from writing to theatre, television to films, and back-and-forth, Sai Paranjpye has straddled many mediums with aplomb. While her children's stories have enthralled generations of young people, her TV serials have become household names and her films have wooed audiences and critics in India and abroad. She has won several State, National and International Awards for her books and films, including the prestigious Padma Bhushan award in 2006, conferred by the President of India. In this candid interview, Sai Paranjpye reveals her life journey, both personal and professional, to filmmaker Sridhar Rangayan, her one-time assistant director and long-time friend. We get to know her —up, close and personal — and learn where she draws her inspiration from, how she weaves it into her writings and films, and, most importantly, where her trademark humour comes from.

Sridhar Rangayan: Before we talk about anything, let's talk about your brand of humour, which is very special and very unusual...there have been many writings.

Sai Paranjpye: I always see the funny side of things. Human foibles, frailties offer an unending source of humour. I would quite simply describe my brand of humour as very homey or homely. Human relationships reveal so many quirks which are so fascinating that they provide fodder to a creative mind. Quite simply, I would say that my humour makes you smile, even chuckle, not roll off your seats in the aisles laughing your head off.

SR: Where did your innate sense of humour come from — your upbringing, your family, your social milieu?



SP: I guess the main source of me, or anyone having a keen sense of humour is genes. Both my mother and my Russian father had a delicious sense of humour. My parents were divorced and I was brought up by my maternal grandfather. I used to call him Appa— Sir Raghunath Purushottam Paranjpye —Appa was a renowned mathematician. He was India's first Senior Wrangler from Cambridge, no less. And India's first official film or 'Indian news review' was made when Appa came back from England, triumphed from Cambridge. And Ranji has won the first cricket this thing. So the headlines were — "Ranji and Pranji make India proud". He had a wonderful sense of humour too.

SR: You must have been a very naughty child?

SP: Not really. I had no brothers or sisters or even aunts or uncles. So I was a bit of a loner. Also I was a roly-poly kid, never much good at games which required agility or speed. So I would invent fantastic dramatic games involving gangs hunting for hidden treasures and so on. They were regular screenplays with secret agents and espionage. Needless to say, I was always the kingpin in these games. When my playmates tired of a particular variety, I would always move on and invent the next one.

Appa had gone as India's first High Commissioner to Australia and then he would visit all kinds of different places, exotic places

My mother, Appa and I stayed at this farmhouse in Northern Territory, which had lots of aborigine workers and so on. It was a sheep farm and it was a one-storey wooden bungalow with veranda running right around it; and there was a rocking chair in the veranda. I must have been about seven or eight years old. So I would sit in this rocking chair and rock away and enact these fantasies. I would spend hours enacting one-girl extravaganza where I would be all the characters —wicked wizards, conniving courtiers, kindly kings, swashbuckling princes and of course damsels in distress... there would be dialogues, there would be suddenly someone who comes, and so there might be a scream in between, you know, and horses galloping... oh the works. It would put a Hindi film to shame!

So I would sit on this rocking chair and rock away and have these fantastic one hour, two hour sessions. One day our host, an Australian lady, asked my mother with great concern if I was quite 'normal' (*laughs*).

SR: And which language would you do all this in?

SP: I guess Marathi then... because I had not yet got to speak English too much.

SR: And your grandfather used to be part of all this?

SP: Never. He was not even aware of these escapades. Mummy was quietly amused, but never a part of it. It would be totally a one-girl show.

SR: After you grew up, when you started reading, which books did you find interesting?



SP: Appa was extremely fond of literature, and as a child I would read all kinds of books aloud to him while he shaved. I read Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, the Bronte Sisters, and Charles Dickens with him, all before entering my teens. And alongside, of course, mummy kept a stock of more child-like fare - like Winnie the Pooh...all the...all the Winnie books were like bible in our house...

Dr. Doolittle, Alice in Wonderland, Pollyanna, and all the Enid Blyton stuff... they were my special mates...all these characters from the books... I think much of my thinking, my outlook and of course my humour was nurtured by this exposure.

The Western part of my upbringing gave me the capacity to see the funny side of life, and to be able to laugh at myself.

At the cost of sounding unpatriotic, may I say that Indians do not have much of a sense of humour? In fact we frown upon laughter, fun and frolic. It is frivolous to have a good time. Every story must have a ‘moral’ clearly stated at the end. Fortunately having been brought up in the company of Pooh Bear, Alice, Tom Sawyer etc., I learnt to value the quirky and funny side of life.

I am also an ardent Agatha Christie fan. Apart from the murder and mystery, her humorous takes on human follies, are just priceless.

Another author was Jane Austen — especially her ‘Pride and Prejudice’ —it is another supreme example of humour at its best. To pay myself a backhanded compliment, I like to think that, some of this exposure has rubbed off on me.

SR: What about P. G. Woodhouse?

SP: Not my cup of tea. I tried; I never liked his books. Lots of my friends worship at PG’s feet, but it just never grabbed me. I tried at least four-five times but I could never go beyond the first few pages. It’s like cricket... I could never ever understand or like cricket. There are so many who like it, including my grandfather. During the radio cricket

commentary, you were not allowed to talk! I have never understood the game, never liked it and I feel it is so tedious and tiresome!

Likewise Woodhouse... maybe a blind spot with me, obviously!

SR: When was the first time you used humour in any of your work, maybe in your early short stories?

SP: You can’t just sprinkle humour in a written text like pepper and salt. It is an integral part of your style. I don’t think humour has ever been separated from my work.

SR: From writing to television to films — how has the journey been? Of course they are not a linear progression, but all of them are interrelated surely.



SP: My career as a writer began as a child. My first book (of fairy tales) was published when I was eight year old. Mother discovered ‘the writer’ in me... and I’ll tell you how... she used to tell me bedtime stories every night. I must have been seven or so. One day she said,

“Look now I am bored and I can’t tell you a new story every day. You tell me a story today”.

I said, “Ok.” So I told her along story... there were *Sadhus* (holy-men) with blue beards and stuff like that.

She said, “Oh that was quite interesting. Who told it to you?”

I said, “No one. I made it up.”

She said, “Don’t be silly.”

I said, “Yes. I have got so many stories made up like that.”

She said, “Are you kidding me. Tell me another one.”

So I told her another one. And that was my undoing! (*laughs*) From that day onwards I had to write three pages of something or the other, everyday before I was allowed to go out to play. So I became a little writer at the age of seven or eight. Mummy published the book of my various writings of fairy tales. Of course everybody said, “Fantastic, your child at the age of eight, has published a book”.

But I feel there must be so many talented children around, who haven’t been blessed with parents or with a mother, like I was. Their talent must be certainly going unsung... like flowers in the forest — blooming and fading. So I always feel slightly guilty about that.

SR: Was this book published in India or in Australia?

SP: In India. I still have a copy with me!

SR: Where did you do your schooling?

SP: My schooling was in Pune and Canberra in Australia. I was in Canberra for four years. Then I came back and finished my schooling again in Pune, then, Fergusson College. I was never a distinguished student, unfortunately. I mean, look at my grandfather, the kind of academic career he had. I would just sort of scrape through. But I used to be in every debating and theatrical activity, winning prizes.

SR: What did you graduate in afterwards?

SP: BA and that was it. (*laughs*)

SR: And then you started working?

SP: My first job was with a Radio station. I was an announcer, first in English and then Marathi. Then I became the compere of children’s programs. And then I started writing plays for children - for the radio week. I would write a play, we would produce it, we would mount it and it would be staged in front of an invited audience for the radio week. So it was broadcast and seen at the same time. And then that was it! One show and it’s over!!

We felt what a waste of labour! Putting all this effort writing the damn thing; putting it up, mounting it, rehearsing for a month or so... so we started the Children's Theatre in Pune along with Arun who would later become my husband. I would write these plays and then direct them. I must have written about ten-fifteen of them in Marathi. Out of which, I think about ten of these children's plays are published in book form (*with a naughty twinkle*) and to brag a little, out of these ten plays, eight of them won awards—four national awards and four Maharashtra State Government awards.

SR: And when you say you were working for radio — you were working for Bombay station?

SP: No, Pune. All India Radio, Pune. After a short stint at the film and television Institute of India, teaching speech and acting, I went on to work with Delhi Doordarshan, as a producer of television programmes for eight long years. I wrote many teleplays and serials, along with the usual duties of churning out regular programs.

SR: But how did the shift from Pune to Delhi happen suddenly?

SP: As I said, I was in Pune with All India Radio, and then I went to the National School of Drama in Delhi for two-three years on

scholarship to study dramatics and theatre. Then I got a job with the Film Institute as a lecturer in speech and acting. By that time I got married to Arun Joglekar and I had Winnie. She was one year old. I remember all the students celebrated her first birthday... they gave me a lovely party. Students were extremely fond of me. And you know who the students were? Jalal Agha, Sadhu Meher, Rehana Sultana – this was my batch!

While I was in the Film and Television Institute of India, this job with the Delhi Doordarshan was announced a producer's job. I applied for that and got it. After that I settled down in Delhi.

SR: Was Delhi a culture-shock?

SP: Nothing was a culture-shock to me. I adapt very easily. Also, I spent bit of my childhood in Lucknow, so my Hindi was strong. I quite enjoyed Delhi. From TV, the next logical step was films. Bombay beckoned. I left my government job and entered the big bad world of Bollywood! (*laughs*)

I am happy to say that I made my mark from the very first film. My success is perhaps due to the fact that my characters are not stereotypical and often do the unexpected. A gentle humour permeates through the storyline.

I have always been a 'Jane of all trades'... or a media meddler, hopping from cinema to

theatre, to TV and back... as and when the fancy took me.



SR: Your first film ‘Sparsh’ (1980) was a landmark film, talking about a very crucial social issue with great sensitivity but it did not use humour much, or did it?

SP: Ah! My beloved first child—‘Sparsh’! Though set against the backdrop of a blind school, dwelling on the love saga of a physically handicapped man and an emotionally handicapped woman, Sparsh was in no way a sombre or grim film. It had so many enchanted magical moments.

To give you a little backdrop, when I was in television, my boss, station director Mr. Murthy called me and said, “Sai, the World Handicap Day is around the corner so why don’t you go to the blind school and do a little documentary, a 10- minute documentary on the blind school for the World Handicap Day. I said, “No... no, Mr. Murthy. Please don’t send me.”

He was quite astonished. He said, “Why?” I said, “No... no...I can’t bear to see blind children.” And you know, when I see a blind person, I go all very weepy. I am too sensitive. So Mr. Murthy said, “Aha! You constantly fight with me that women don’t get plum jobs and assignments, that we differentiate and are partial to the men producers and so on... and here I give you something interesting, and you tell me that you are very sensitive and pulling this card on me”. He said, “Nothing doing. You jolly well go there and I will personally see what you do and what kind of a film you make. Go!”

So I went with a very heavy heart. And then Sridhar, when I entered the gate, what do I see — it was a huge beautiful campus in Delhi next to the Oberoi Hotel. It’s called BRA – Blind Relief Association. As I stepped in through the gate, what do I see — a rollicking ‘tug-of-war’ on the lawns! About 7 to 8 children on each side. They had a big rope and they were pulling and pushing, screaming and falling down and laughing. I said, “My Gosh! Are these the blind children?” It was so normal... except they couldn’t see. The whole place was so lively... I mean, nowhere I felt like I had a lump in my throat. They came up (to me). It was really marvellous.

Then I met Mr. Mittal who was the Principal of the blind school and he made such an impression on me. He was slightly aggressive. Not our idea of a blind person at

all. He had done PhD from Wisconsin, very suave and very dynamic. I was really impressed.

I did make my little film, that documentary. But more than that, the entire incident stayed with me. I wrote a teleplay called 'Raina Beeti Jaaye.' Kulbushan Kharbanda and Sushma Seth acted in it. It was a one-hour play and it drove Delhi crazy. So many letters, so many replays... so many request that we want to see 'Raina Beeti Jaaye,' again and again. It was wonderful.

But I always felt that I had not been able to do full justice to the subject because I didn't use too many blind children. With one hour I concentrated on the love story. It was the love story of this blind principal and the widow who has just lost her husband. She is grieving and has cut herself off from all social life. She comes into the school with a friend to buy candles for Diwali, because the blind children make candles. Then she sort of falls in love with this man. This fellow says why don't you come and spend some time with these children. That's just to give you the gist of the story. I don't want to go through the whole story. But I wrote this and it was very successful. Then I said I must do a film and must get all the blind children in it.

In the film we managed to include many of the day-to-day incidents of the blind children that are their way of living and playing. Like when they play cricket, their 'special ball' is

made by stringing crown-caps of soft drink bottles on a wire ring which made a sound when thrown so that the batsman could hear 'the ball' coming towards him. The fielder could also hear the ball and run to catch it. So innovative! I have incorporated many such incidents in the film.

I think that despite a seemingly sober subject I have been able to make it very entertaining, very warm.

SR: Also a character like Naseeruddin Shah's in 'Sparsh,' has a very tongue-in-cheek humour. It's a very different kind of humour. The repartee she makes with Shabana Azmi are killers! In that film, you were having two different kinds of humour in the same film.

SP: (*nods*) Absolutely, there are also little things like when she, Shabana, sees him, Naseer, coming. Just like every woman goes to do her hair and put on little powder when she sees her sweetheart coming, Shabanato goes to the mirror and she picks up the comb but she realizes and she puts it down. She takes a perfume and sprays herself because that he will know.

Also when she goes to buy a wedding sari, the shopkeeper recommends her a sari with colours that will compliment her complexion, but she goes for the one with rich texture as it is smooth to touch.

But the film is not only about the good and happy side of things. It is also about the fallibility of human beings. Mr. Mittal, the Principal of the blind school, had said, “Sai for God’s sake don’t make us out to be saints.” And that is true... every character has to be human.

SR: How difficult was it for you to find funds to make the film, especially considering you were a woman filmmaker and there were not many women filmmakers in the industry then?

SP: Very difficult! But I found a producer in ‘Basu Bhattacharya’, who was a friend.

SR: And he had seen the play ‘Raina Beeti Jaaye’?

SP: No, he had read the script and he had full faith in me (*pause*) but I got him the money through another friend, Bakul Patel, who is a very influential name. So that’s how ‘Sparsh’ got made.

SR: What about releasing it? How difficult was it to release a film such an off-beat film?

SP: (*ruefully*) “*Release hi nahi hua na! Bahut saal tak release hi nahi kiya*” (Sparsh couldn’t get a release for quite some years.) ‘Chashme Buddoor’ was released first. So people think ‘Chashme Buddoor’ was my first film. Only after ‘Sparsh’ won awards, it got released. But now I forget all these things Sridhar. I just

don’t remember these details. *Fairly difficult, but ho gaya!* (It was fairly difficult, but finally happened)

SR: ‘Chashme Buddoor’ (1981) is iconic and path-breaking. It had a specific Sai Paranjpye touch of humour... you followed it up with ‘Katha’ (1983). Where did the inspiration come for these films?

SP: ‘Chashme Buddoor’ again was based on a tele-film called ‘Dhuan Dhuan’ which I had written. It was about three friends, who are all good-for-nothing. In the film, the Farooq Shaikh’s character sits sober and serious and the other two are vagabonds, but in the tele-film they are all vagabonds. They all have this crush on the same girl and they spin these yarns, and then in the end they despise the girl saying, “She has sort of gone with each of us that means she is no good, so let’s forget her”. And they all go back to their cigarette passing it around!

SR: So nobody gets the girl there? In ‘Chashme Buddoor’, Farooq Shaikh’s character is romantically linked with Deepti Naval.

SP: Oh yes!!

SR: When you wrote ‘Dhuan-Dhuan’ or its celluloid avatar ‘Chashme Buddoor’, were

these characters based on people who you knew, or met?

SP: Yeah. People I knew in the sense people around, youngsters around, the kind of good-for-nothing characters — in a very good natured way... not sort of demeaning them.

SR: Actually when you earlier said people around become fodder for your works, I wanted to ask you, do they just stay in your mind or do you kind of make a note or something? Like today you saw something interesting, would you kind of make a note and bring it out to in a script later on?



SP: No, it's woven into my thoughts. It stays in my mind's computer somewhere. At the right moment it comes back. Like 'Disha', which I consider my best film, I took many years to write the script... 17 years! Not that I was writing everyday for 17 years!!

It all began when a very dear friend of mine, Vijay Parulkar in Pune, he was a cameraman, took me to meet this man, Vilasrao Salunke, who had started *Pani*

Panchayat (rainwater harvesting) in his village and done miracles with it. He said, "Sai you must come and see that". So I went. It was really magical what he had done. And then he said, "Now to top everything I will take you to our Soma. He is sort of emblem of our village, champion of our village."

So then we went to meet Soma. A typical farmer wearing a very interesting cap – with no top, just the rim. They said the sun had worn off the top of the cap. He had worn it for eight years. They introduced us saying, "This is Soma and this is Soma's well"... pointing to a well there right outside his hut. I peeped in and there was water. I was told Soma dug this well, for eight years he was digging, every day. He was a farm labourer so he went to work on some farm and then come home and dug... (he would) get up early in the morning and dig; sometimes he dug all night... because he was convinced there was water. The whole village would laugh at him. He was called *Yeda Soma* (mad Soma). His wife, he says, left him many times. Always to return, poor thing! Indian woman, where would she go?!

Then one day he struck water and now he has a last laugh. He suddenly became the village hero.

SR: How old was he when you met him?

SP: He must have been 45 years or so. I got his photograph. He and his wife! In the film

Om Puri played Soma and Shabana Azami played his wife.

SR: So that's how you found your 'Disha' (1990)!

SP: *Sunotoh*, hush, listen... though Soma's story was stored in my mind, it was not enough to make a full-fledged film. Then Subhashini Ali, Filmmaker Muzaffar Ali's ex-wife, she said you only know of one part of Bombay you don't know how the other half lives. She is a communist. So she took me to this 'Gala'. Gala is where migrant mill workers live in a room. 40 people staying together in one room about 18 feet by 14 feet!

(*Exclaims*) Oh, I was sort of taken aback when I saw their dorm. But I met all these mill workers...they were such fun, not broken in spirit. I asked, "how do you work it out?" They said, "Discipline is the thing. We all have (*spreads out her hands*) this much of space... a *chatai* space, enough to spread our bedroll on the floor to sleep. But only for eight hours, mind you! Because after eight hours, the shift changes and the next chap comes and says, 'Hey pal! Up my turn now'. So you roll up your *chatai*. He spreads his. And that's it!"

Then he said, quite proudly, that on the wall each of them have a hook. Everyone has his own hook and they can hang whatever on that hook. So there were photographs of parents, deities, children, *lezimsdholakis*, garlands and all kind of stuff...

Again I was mesmerized and said God this is amazing! And that's how 'Disha' developed.

SR: You kind of merged these two stories into one!

SP: There was also a third one about *bidi* workers, which was a minor subplot. Women *bidi* workers and how they were exploited.

SR: And that's why your films are kind of slice-of-life stories.

SP: Life around you offers so much inspiration. Just go around with your eyes and ears wide open. And things start taking shape, unfolding with amazing speed. Before you know it, you are imbibing all kinds of things. Like, I always say, I plagiarize from life.

Coming back to 'Disha', when I was talking to those mill workers I just couldn't get over it... I said, "That means you just have space to sleep in?" He said, "Yes, enough space to sleep in, but not to turn over!"

I used this in the film's dialogue... and when people watched the film they complimented me for it. I just told them that it's borrowed. Not mine! (*laughs*)

Do you know that my very first children's play 'Pattanagareet' (The Land of Cards) came to me in a public bus? I don't know, when, why. I can't explain it. It suddenly came to me, the whole play un-ravelled when I was in the bus,

going from Pune Radio station to my home at Sambhaji Park.

Always my thinking process, thought process, would really get inspired in a moving vehicle; bus, car, plane, whatever...

So I was coming home and suddenly ideas started spinning in a crazy rush. I got so scared that they will go away, so I wrote on the back of a bus ticket. Little points — like thirteen cards, joker being the odd man out, he is *Shantidoot* (the peace maker), kingdom of hearts and kingdom of spades are at war and the war never ends because they are equi-balanced, etc., etc. So I kept on jotting down furiously. Then I went right up to the end of bus route. Forgot to get off! I was just writing on this bus ticket till it sort of filled up. And then I said, "Oh my god. Where am I?"

So I came back home and immediately wrote my very first play 'Pattenagareet'. As I told you before that got a State award!

SR: You have won numerous awards — national and international — which is the one you treasure most?

SP: I'm very proud of awards for 'Sparsh' because that was my first film. The film got, not one, but three National Awards — Best Hindi Film, Best Screenplay for me, and Best Actor for Naseerudin Shah.



But also, obviously, the most prestigious award is the Padma Bhushan—the President's Award. That sums up everything that I have done. It's for theatre, television and it's for my media work. So I'm very proud of that award and I feel it was well deserved, if I may say so!

SR: Of course! What about any of the international awards which mean special for you!

SP: Oh, (*exclaims excitedly*) 'Disha' won two awards at Rencontres Cinématographique de Cannes. I didn't go but Winnie took 'Disha' there and it won two awards at the festival. It won both the Best Jury award and the Best Audience award with handsome cash prize for each (*giggles*). So Winnie came all jubilant from there. That was something. Especially 'Disha' being my favourite film!

SR: Surprisingly 'Disha' has not been written about much... it got sort of subsumed by your other more popular films...

SP: *(cuts in)* Because it got a lousy distributor
(adds with a smile) Sai Pranajpye!

SR: *(laughs)* Oh, okay! You distributed ‘Disha’ yourself?

SP: Yeah, what the hell do I know about distribution? But you know who my Delhi distributor was? Manmohan Desai! He had come home. I don’t remember how and what we decided. But he said, “Sai I will distribute your film”. We talked for about one hour. We hit it off so well, it was magnificent. He had a great sense of humour and he laughed and we talked and talked. And then to see him off, I went up to the lift and I said, “*Manmohanji, ektamanna hai* (I have a desire). I want to make a really very silly film. Nonsensical film absolutely, *Jiske nasar, napeir* (that has no head or tail)!

He smiled and said, “*Sai, Yeh hamare liye chod do* (Sai, leave that to us)! You go on making your nice sensible films. *Kyon humare pet per laatmaartiho* (why do you want to snatch our bread)?!” It was so sweet.

Coming back to ‘Disha’, when I was talking to those mill workers I just couldn’t get over it. I said, “That means you just have space to sleep in?” He said, “Yes, enough space to sleep in, but not to turn over!” I used this in the film’s dialogue... and when people watched the film they complimented me for it. I just

told them that it’s borrowed. Not mine!
(laughs)

SR: Wow, that’s cute. But how do you feel when ‘Chashme Buddoor’ released in Bombay? Where was it released? Which theatre?

SP: I think that theatre is defunct now, in Tardeo, called Ganga Jamuna. When you go from Haji Ali up Tardeo at the end on the right there was this theatre. So, it was released there. And I remember Devyani Chaubal had come to see the film and she could not stop talking about it. She said, “A director is born... a star is born”, blah blah. Anyway that went off very well. Then I was telling Gul (Anand), the producer, “Why don’t you have it released in the suburbs too?” He told me with his kind of humour, “Sai when you make the film did I ever interfere, saying take this shot from here and put your camera there? Then why are you telling me how to distribute it, in which theatre! I was properly chastised!

SR: Was it an instant hit at that point of time?

SP: Instant, meaning, about five days. After five days, everybody was going like, “*Ai Chashme Buddoor dekhikya?* (Hey, have you seen Chashme Buddoor?)”

SR: Because those days there were no big marketing strategies. It was through word of mouth, and that was real.

SP: Absolutely, it used to be so organic those days! Oh that reminds me of another incident. You know that ‘Katha’, which was placed in Marathi milieu, we shot it in a very beautiful, realistic *Wada* in Pune. So we said we must have a special screening for the residents of that *wada*. In FTII we had a special screening, called all those people. And Sridhar, from the word go... they were so excited.

SR: Watching the film?

SP: No, recognizing their flat! Zeroing on their belongings, which were used in shooting the film. Not bothered about the film at all!! I felt very betrayed, but then said to myself, “C’mon see the funny side of it!”

SR: Also, in ‘Katha’ you played with the whole Marathi milieu for the first time...

SP: Yes. Two of my films are very Marathi in that respect. One is ‘Katha’ and one is ‘Disha’. ‘Disha’ is also totally Marathi... and in that, it is ‘*khedut*’ Marathi, rural Marathi.

SR: What about your serials? Sorry, we never talked about any of your TV serials at all. You set a benchmark for good serials that were huge family entertainers, like ‘Ados Pados’

(1984), ‘Chhote Bade’ (1985), ‘Hum Pancchi Ek Chaal Ke’ (1992)...

SP: *Arrey abhi... kyakya baat karengey!* (let it be, how many things can we talk about?!). I enjoyed making them and people enjoyed watching them. So let it be that.

SR: What do you think of the slapstick comedy that has become the fare these days on television?

SP: *(With a flat face)* Next question!

SR: Ok! What do you think of the current crop of films – mainstream Bollywood fare, regional films, and independent / alternative films? Is there space for diverse kind of filmmaking?

SP: Some films have been extremely good. I have enjoyed them. Starting from ‘Lagaan’, that is as far back as I can go. Brilliant film! Lovely! Then I liked ‘Chak De’ and ‘Munna Bhai’—the Gandhi ji one. I thought that was quite delightful. I didn’t like its prequel though.

SR: Did you ever see Manmohan Desai’s films? As you said, he was a friend.

SP: Of course, ‘Amar Akbar Anthony’ and many others. You just leave your head outside and enjoy those. *(Gets distracted by her pet cats)* Then some regional cinema, some Bengali films were good, and the recent Marathi crop has been quite interesting.

SR: What do you think of the film which was nominated for the Oscars—‘Harishchandradi Factory’?

SP: Oh... I didn’t care for it. Did you see it?

SR: I saw it and I thought it had a kind of humour which was harking back to some of your work. Maybe not in the same way, but I thought it pays tribute to it in some way.

SP: No, I didn’t like that. I also didn’t like (the film) ‘Bal Gandharva’. But all said and done they are different efforts. Whether you like them or not, you would appreciate the fact that they have gone off the trodden path. Oh, and I must talk about a fantastic film... you are talking of humour, I will tell you of a film! It’s a Marathi film called ‘Dhag’ - meaning when you go too near to the fire, you feel the unbearable heat. So it’s called Dhag. Locale is a typical old-fashioned crematorium. There is a family who is in-charge of the crematorium. The family is consisting of a husband, wife, husband’s mother and a son and a daughter. Any death in the village means bread butter for them! It has brilliant black humour; with this macabre storyline... it holds you like that! The relationships are so fantastic and the characterization is so wonderful. I just can’t stop talking about it. You must see it.

SR: Yes it’s very heart-warming to see that these days Indian regional cinema is breaking

new ground, experimenting with uncommon stories. What about any international filmmakers... being inspirational in anyway?

SP: (Federico) Fellini. I love Fellini. I just adore him. His sense of the ridiculous, his use of characters and landscape, and every frame of his is vibrant. The vibrant quality of a Fellini film is something that I just adore. Back home, I like Satyajit Ray... also a lesser known filmmaker again from Bengal —Tarun Majumdar is his name. He has made a lot of good movies. You can find so much day-to-day humour in his films.

SR: Apart from films, who has inspired you in life?

SP: Both in life and work, I must talk of Achyut mama – Achyut Govind Ranade. He was a very dear friend of mummy from college, and throughout their lives, they were very close. He was a film director. He introduced Balraj Sahni in ‘Gudia’ based on (Henrik) Ibsen’s ‘Doll’s House’. Achyut mama was not an average director but an excellent scriptwriter.

So when I came back from Australia, I must have been about 12 years. I had put on a lot of weight. So to lose weight, mummy made me go to Fergusson hill for walks. Achyut mama’s duty was to take me. We used to go for long walks right up to Fergusson College. On these walks, he would tell me film stories, like

‘Good Earth’, ‘Gaslight’, ‘Madame Curie’; all kind of fantastic Hollywood film stories of those days. He would tell the films as if I was seeing a film. He didn’t use the technical lingo like close-up, trolley and zoom-in and all that. But he would say, “We see a village from the top, little-little huts there”. And I would imagine that. “Suddenly we are inside in a hut and we see a *chulah* and there is *tawa* on it. Suddenly “Phat... a *bhakriis* dropped on the *tawa*”.

SR: So you could almost see the shots... frame by frame...

SP: Without realizing that I was seeing a film. He told me a story, a very interesting story. It was the story of a film called ‘Lok Shahir Ram Joshi’ which in those days was a rage when I came back. Ram Joshi was a famed Marathi *Lavni* poet and he was an alcoholic. So one day Ram Joshi makes a fool of himself. He is dead drunk and loses miserably at an extempore song competition. So he decides to give up alcohol. Then we see him at night. He is restless. He is wearing this beautiful muslin *dhoti*. He is pacing in his living room. We only see his feet and the *dhoti* trailing behind. Pacing restlessly, we see his feet and then suddenly the nook of the *surai* gets caught in his *dhoti* and that gets dragged with him. So you see that being dragged.

So I said excitedly, “Achyut mama, that means he doesn’t give up drinking.” He said, “Very good. You got it.”

SR: But she liked your later films like ‘Chashme Buddoor’, ‘Katha’ and ‘Disha’?

SP: I don’t remember specifically. But she liked mostly what I wrote...my screenplays, more than my films!

SR: Which of the different mediums you have worked in... which did you enjoy working on most?

SP: So difficult to say. Each medium has its own charm, fascination, own limitation and frustration. I love them all. Actually theatre has that immediate *nasha* (high). I mean nothing like when the third bell goes and you hear the audience, the rustle and laughter. It’s a truly live experience.

SR: What about actors? Has there been anyone who has been difficult to work with?

SP: (Promptly) Nana Patekar.

SR: When a director and an actor meet, there are bound to be differences? And having known you, how particular you are about what you have written in the script...

SP: I have always opted for intelligent actors. So you see Naseer, Shabana, Aruna Irani,

Farooq Sheikh, Om Puri...all are very intelligent people. One can have a one-on-one conversation with them. They can argue, they can suggest things. You either accept or don't accept. But it's very scintillating.

SR: But would you change your script if an actor needs some space to...

SP: If I'm convinced. If an actor just wants to show off, then no! Never!! That's why Nana was not happy with 'Disha' because the film ended on Raghuvir Yadav!

SR: That's what I am trying to understand... A director and writer knows the entire space in which the film is set and sometimes actors just see only some parts of what it is. They don't see a complete view of it and that could be clashing.

SP: Some actors don't even read the whole script! But someone like Naseer, when I asked him to do 'Sparsh', he first read the script. He was a little jittery. When I told him that his character was based on Mr. Mittal "I would like to meet him before we start shooting" he said. Mr. Mittal was flattered no end. So Naseer went to Delhi one week ahead of our shoot.

When I reached with my unit a week later, a distraught Mr. Mittal met me. "Sai! Please take your hero off my back", he begged, "I'm getting paranoid. He is constantly breathing down my neck. When I am teaching, of

course, he sits there in the class. When I'm in a meeting, he is behind me. I can't go the loo because I feel Naseer may be watching. Enough!"

SR: How important do you think are the technical aspects of filmmaking, in terms of camera, editing. Are they crucial, or you think a good story/ script/ screenplay is enough?

SP: No...no. How can that be? (*a bit impatiently*) Because, if my story was enough in itself, I would be happy to jot it on paper! Why would I bother putting it on celluloid? But the fact is, if you want to make a film you have to take all its different aspects into account very seriously, "*Achchi photography ho, Achcha background music ho* (Good photography, good background music)! Good acting, good locales, good costumes! Come on, there is no undermining the value of all these different contributory factors.

SR: Would you kind of, usually, have a say in most of these things or you leave it to the people who you think knows best? How does it work for you?

SP: If I have technical limitations and I don't pretend that I'm a technical wizard. So that's the beauty of the whole thing. You put your faith in the cameraman and you tell him what you want. I tell him the mood of the scene and what I want from that scene, and leave it to him

to do the lighting his way or what lens he has to use. I only tell him I want a close-up or a mid-shot, etc. Likewise with the sound-recordist, costumes and so on.

I love editing. I come alive on the editing table. Actually being the writer-director, I do my editing as I write. And then I make small adjustments because sometimes you have not been able to do or get what you wanted, due to unforeseen constraints.

SR: What's the one project which you have in your kitty, which you are yet to make, and which you're really excited about?

SP: (*Brightens up*) Ah! Round the corner hopefully. It's a script I had for quite some time. It's called "Xapai" about an old grandfather living all alone in a tumbled-down

mansion in Goa. Xapai in Portuguese or in Portuguese influenced Konkani means 'grandfather'. So Xapai has 10-12 children... they have all got married and have gone on their own ways. The film begins when his 90th birthday is round the corner. All his children come from all different corners of the world, with their husbands, wives and children. They all are descending on this mansion and the film takes off from there. It's going to be a quite a fun riot... as there is humour, scintillating local colour, Goan music, warm family moments, heady romance, et al.

SR: So will it have all the trademark Sai Paranjpye ingredients to make it a huge success?

SP: Wait and see! (*smiles mysteriously*)