Surabhi: The limitless earthen vessel

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This vessel contains all of nature
Within it lies all Creation.
This vessel brims with the Seven Seas
Within it lie the infinite Galaxies.
This vessel contains priceless Treasures
Within it resides the Supreme Evaluator.
This vessel resounds with Cosmic Sound
Within it flows the Fountain of Life.
Says Kabir, Listen all you Faithful
Within this vessel dwells the Creator!—Saint Kabir

This verse by the famous Saint Kabir
has often been quoted in ‘Surabhi’ brochures and episodes. It presents succinctly in poetry what the programme strove to present using mass media—a slice of the rich plurality that India has nurtured. ‘Surabhi’ denotes fragrance—the fragrance of clay, the fragrance of a child and mother, an accumulation of a wider fragrance.

‘Surabhi’ began in the early 1990s when the documentary format had a negative perception among television audiences in India, who equated it with Government propaganda. ‘Surabhi’ stormed Indian television with its interactivity and content, interactivity that reached out to its audience as well as those who were presented through this cultural showcase. The content brought to the people a glimpse of their own life and living—their own culture; the ‘vessel’ that is part of us and within which we grow.

It showed the various facets of the individual—some glossy, some rustic, some coloured, some monotoned, some antique, some new. It was the first programme to reach out to people on equal terms, to ask them questions and elicit answers that would reflect in the show, something taken for granted in today’s programmes.

This rich content and viewer-friendly format were both integral to Surabhi’s appeal. But the real challenge was in giving importance to the supposedly less ‘classy’, less ‘popular’ and less ‘star-valued’ subjects to retain its essence and reality, while still catering to popular taste. In a sense, sometimes the ‘folk’ and the ‘rural’ were romanticised using slow motion shots, lighting effects and mood music; but this did not make the subject kitschy. Instead, it appealed to an audience that was not prepared, informed or initiated to appreciate it. To that extent, Surabhi was a course in cultural appreciation for the masses. It presented to India the lives of its peoples and how art was a reflection of those lives.

Thanks to Surabhi, art and culture were no longer the domain of the elite. The common man was introduced to artists and craftspeople from all over the country, from Jangarh Singh Shyam, a tribal artist from Madhya Pradesh to a modernist like M.F. Hussain. The subjects chosen were eclectic—the BMX stunt cyclists of urban Maharashtra, the coconut tree climbers of Kerala, the architecture of the Hampi temples, Laurie Baker’s work, the carvings on the Taj Mahal, the decorated walls of the traditional Bungas in Gujarat, the ‘Ramlila’ of North India, innovative contemporary plays, the lost process of metal casting practised by Sri Karunanidhi Sthapathy in Tamil Nadu and by folk craftsman Jaydev Bhagel in Bastar (M.P.). Change and innovation, tradition and modernity, folk and classical, all were represented and treated with zeal and passion. A passion that was derived from the art and artistes themselves. Surabhi aimed to salute this passion, seek it even in the oft-ignored and highlight it as a thread that binds lives, communities, cultures and nations.

Surabhi provided a platform for lesser-known artists like Abdul Majeed Ansari (a ‘Surahi’ maker who makes exquisite clay-ware by pasting together delicate strips of clay), or for local art forms like that of Karagiri pottery in Vellore, Tamil Nadu. Yet, in essence, the

Karigari potter brothers at work
programme was a platform for its audience; they participated to extend their understanding of living culture, they presented their views and suggestions and ideas. It was a two-way process where they learnt about other cultures within the country and even abroad and got insights into their own ways of life. The two-fold learning included the interaction of the Surabhi team with those being filmed. A new dimension was added to their understanding of culture. Infact, the broad definition of culture that Surabhi now boasts of imbibing and propagating is one grown out of their experiences in the hinterlands of India. What was presented to the audiences was rich with the understanding gained through that interaction.

‘Surabhi’ thus evoked a new understanding of the aspirations of the people of India and touched a deep chord of cultural connectivity. It gave people a sense of pride in their culture—a pride that had been battered by centuries of colonisation, followed by years of liberalisation. The audience was heartened by the sense of confidence they received; there was an overwhelming sense of reassurance that we were culturally equal to the rest of the world. What’s more, ‘Surabhi’ demystified ‘classical’ culture and elevated ‘popular’ culture. It showed that classical music was not superior to folk music but a continuum. It offered two planes of expression at the same level. It pioneered a new form of interactive communication to go beyond a television show to become a symbol of national identity. When ‘Surabhi’ first went on air on national television, the channel with the greatest outreach at that time, it was different from other programmes. It spoke with and not down to the people; it created a niche for itself, reaching out to both the urban and the rural audiences. Today, with so many private channels, dishing out ‘popular’ entertainment to mainly urban masses, the rural majority is ignored. This is a new challenge for ‘Surabhi’; to find a new format and deal with the paradox of bridging the urban-rural gap and forming an urban–rural interface in its new avatar—‘New Surabhi’ on the Star Plus channel every Sunday morning.*

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