

By ATUL ANAND



Remembering Dadu

On November 26, I got an early morning message from Vasudha that Dadu had passed away around 1:45 am. After the initial shock, I messaged another mutual friend Amita. This has been heartbreaking news. I am still coming to terms with his death.

The first time I properly met Dadu was in January 2016. My memory of that is a bit blur. We had a meeting in Panjim on January 18, a day after Rohith Vemula's death, to discuss having a protest gathering. I had requested that meeting. If I recall correctly, advocate and left leader Thalmann Pereira was the key person to get that meeting together. Dadu and a few more people from Goa had attended that meeting. It was decided in the meeting to form Social Justice Action Committee in Goa and have a protest gathering in Panjim on January 21.

Just after the protest gathering on January 21, Dadu had asked me to join him for a walk. We started from the park where the protest gathering had happened and walked around in Panjim. Dadu had been observing me for some time, and he had so many questions for me. He asked me why I wanted to have this protest? Who was I? What was my interest in Ambedkar and anti-caste politics? What caste did I belong to? I answered his questions while we walked. I trusted him as a fellow Ambedkarite. It's different for people in anti-caste politics to ask one's caste location. Often one asks another about their caste to feel comfortable, to trust and to decide how much one can reveal about themselves. It's about making yourself vulnerable to another person and letting the other person be vulnerable to you. It's much different from a Brahmin or an "upper caste" person asking about your caste or beating around the bush to know your caste. At times, I have regretted being vulnerable to people. I never regretted being vulnerable to Dadu. Being vulnerable to Dadu was reassuring. After learning about me, he shared his views of the anti-caste politics in North India and what he saw as problems.



A screen-grab from a two-circles.net video story “Bhima Koregaon: One Year of Violence and Apathy” featuring Dadu Mandrekar, December 2018. (Licensed under CC BY-ND)

Later, he would tell me proudly about all the places of Buddhist significance he had visited, including the ones in Bihar. He was the first person to tell me about an important difference between a government definition/categorisations of castes and a socio-religious definition of castes. He would ask me questions curiously, then he would give his take on issues. Like a good experienced teacher he would share his learnings. His behaviour was warm. At the same time, he had his firm beliefs that he could convey clearly. I met him several times in Panjim during the last four months of my stay there. We were part of the Social Justice Action Committee which he co-founded and was one of the most fervent members in my view. I met him again in December 2018 during my last visit to Goa. That time he took me to his home in Mandrem. I met his wife and son. Their home was full of Ambedkarite souvenirs, portraits and literature. I realise now that it was also the last time I met him.

I believe Dadu had a habit of holding people’s hand while he walked or talked with them. He had once gently reprimanded me for not being mindful of the traffic in Panjim. He held my hand to make sure that I don’t get hit by the traffic. Though, I am sure he didn’t need a reason to hold hands on several other occasions. I never consciously thought about his gentle masculinity until he is gone. Though it was always part of his behaviour and it put people at ease. There are so many pleasant memories of him that I would like to preserve. I remember how a day before I left Goa in the late April 2016, he wanted to spend some time with me. I was busy with packing, but he insisted that I accompany him. He took me to a printing shop

in Panjim and gifted me a copy of one of his photographs of Diksha Bhumi, Nagpur with a poem he had penned. I was so happy to receive that parting gift from him.

Remembering Dadu



Dadu Mandrekar (in a light blue shirt) with other attendees at a protest gathering organised by Social Justice Action Committee in the wake of Rohith Vemula's death in Panjim, January 21, 2016. (Photo by Atul Anand)

I particularly remember one instance from my visit in 2018. We were on a bus ride from his home in Mandrem to Panjim. We were invited for lunch at Amita's place. During that bus ride, we were having conversations on anti-caste politics and gender. We would have some differences on issues, but he would listen to me patiently. That is rare to find. I appreciated and liked having that space with him. He was like a grandparent but with all the good bits and more. I wanted to interview him for a video story on the anniversary of the violence near Bhima Koregaon. He wished to do that interview in Panjim, at the office of the insurance company he worked for. I regret that I couldn't plan better to get more time with him for a longer video about his life. After we finished the short interview, I asked him how he would want to be identified in the video. I suggested "Writer and Ambedkartie Activist" to go with his name, and he agreed. I know that those two labels wouldn't capture everything about him. He was an excellent photographer, a journalist, a poet, a good friend, a caring person and so much more.

I regret that I couldn't call him recently. The last message he had sent me in the early

November was a link to a video story. It was about a village in Vaishali, Bihar whose Bahujan residents had adopted the path of Buddhism. I appreciate the opportunity to get a glimpse of his extraordinary life. Dadu was a chosen family, losing him is like losing a parent and a dear friend.

I am sure Dadu's legacy will persist. Jai Bhim!

(Atul Anand is a media practitioner currently based in New Delhi. He is originally from Bihar. He taught at Don Bosco College, Panjim during 2015-16 and was also a part of Social Justice Action Committee, Goa.)



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