By MARIA AURORA COUTO

Maria Aurora Couto remembers Dadu Mandrekar

Deeply grieved by Dadu Mandrekar's sudden death. I valued his friendship, his sincerity and directness in conversation. I first met him in 2002 when researching for my book, A Daughter's Story (2004). On enquiry I was told where his office was, a government department alongside Azad Maidan, and made an appointment through a friend. My husband Alban urged me not to go into the office but send word that I was outside in the maidan.

Where shall we sit for a conversation, I asked. The Mandovi lounge was a favourite place where there was silence and usually no other tables occupied. No, he said, I did not feel welcomed for many years. Now it's ok, it appears, but I shall not go. Why not here in the garden….is it too much traffic around? Ok, come, I'll take you somewhere, and he took me to Cafe Prakash, the favourite haunt of journalists, I was told later.

A long conversation and many others followed over the years on our verandah in Aldona. He turned up unannounced, photographed birds and foliage if I was having an afternoon nap, never disturbed, sat long, developing a bond of trust I valued. He was very excited when the DDK Festival of Ideas was initiated, walked up each time Romila Thapar lectured at the university, (in the Visiting Research Professors Programme programme for three years, initiating it with an inaugural lecture) presented me with a striking photograph of Romila and myself, though I've no idea when it was taken, shared his pain, incidents at work including at a newspaper where he was well-liked but he mentioned an unmentionable incident. Despite his many achievements and general acceptance, he felt it hovering under the surface. He struggled fearlessly, undaunted, emerging as a leader and writer.



ers Dadu Mandrekar

Photo by Dadu Mandrekar

Once on the verandah he said: do you know why I come here? Not because you are Alban Couto's wife, not because you are a writer. I was silent, embarrassed by such directness, though I had got used to it from the time he shared his experiences since childhood, and his first encounter with Ambedkar's work. He had ordered the book by VPP, not knowing he had to pay on delivery. His mother pawned earrings to find the amount… I come, he said, because you look at me differently, you will not understand what that means but I know what it feels. Things have changed, he said, but still attitudes remain.

The last time I met him was when I went to listen to Anand Teltumbde's lecture. The late Alito Siqueira had alerted organisers of my severe problems with mobility. He saw me after I had got on to the pavement, shooed everyone helping me away, caught hold of my hand, supported my shoulder, and led me to the first row, a comfortable chair with a cushion I'd brought along.

His silences, cryptic WhatsApp messages taught me much, humbled me.

