

Dilip Mandlekar: my big shot neighbor

It was 4th February 2021. A long year with Covid-19 had already numbed my senses to news of disease and death. Not everyone had died of Covid-19. Ruth Ginsberg, Sean Connery, Chadwick Boseman, Irrfan Khan, John Le Carre, Jim Lehrer, Alex Trebek, my own schoolteachers, the list seemed endless. And yet, when I read the impersonal WhatsApp message saying “Sad to inform you that respected Shri D N Mandlekar left for his heavenly abode today morning at 3 am”, I felt my heart miss a beat. No! It can't be Dilip Kaka! He was so young, full of energy, active, and full of future ideas! Just a few weeks ago I had talked with him on the phone, and he had sounded as positive and enthusiastic as always. I was pretty sure it wasn't him.

Alas, the news *was* about him. He had suffered cardiac arrest early that morning leading to his untimely and shocking death.

Like many other senior denizens of Panchavati, Pune, my association with Dilip Kaka had begun through my parents. They had become close friends and so one day I joined their group as well. We started the custom of meeting for breakfast every once in a while. Often it was outside, at some place such as “Anna Idli” or “Way Down South”. But often it was at Dilip Kaka's house in Mantri Avenue where Kaku cooked delicious Upma or Pohe followed by aromatic coffee. Dilip Kaka had a beautiful house very close to my house, and his garden was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. It was the chief attraction to visit his house.

After the preliminaries Dilip Kaka would proudly usher us out to his backyard porch which led to this garden. We would walk through the narrow lanes lined on both sides by beautiful plants and Dilip Kaka would point out this flower or that fruit and tell us some interesting fact about it. He was totally in love with his garden, and so were we. There were special corners – one for meditating, one for sitting on a bench, one just to go round and round around a tree. His backyard faced west, and so, if we met in the evening, the marvelous colors thrown by the setting Sun would add further mystery and majesty to the garden.

Dilip Kaka loved music and played the flute. We sometimes played music together, although more often he preferred to sit back and listen to youngsters play or sing and applaud their talents. His words for the musicians were always full of appreciation and encouragement.

Dilip Kaka had had an illustrious career as a civic administrator in the Indian Civil Service and he continued to be engaged with issues facing the Panchavati township. He was active in solving problems and never took a backseat and went into a “retirement mode”. People could always rely upon him to use his influence and analytical skills to come up with strategies to sort out issues. He was rightfully proud of his administrative career and happily offered anecdotes when someone showed interest, but never boasted about it, or even mentioned any of his numerous accolades.

Dilip Kaka loved traveling and one of our favorite topics of discussion was interesting places to visit in North America. My father, who is another indefatigable traveler, would get lost along with Dilip Kaka

in enthusiastic reminiscing of wonderful places across the world that they had both visited. I think Kaka and Kaku had practically covered the entire globe through their annual sight-seeing trips. We had even planned to do the Alaska Cruise again together starting from Seattle, where I live.

I could go on writing about Dilip Kaka and his amazing qualities and the wonderful time I have spent in his company. To me, he was a wise mentor, a friend, a source of inspiration – one of a handful of people that were on my “must see” list during my India visits. For me, his house was like a temple that pilgrims want to visit again and again – never feeling fully satisfied. I am going to miss him sorely.



Outside “Anna Idli” 2018

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Written: February 2021