

Bhalchandra Bhopatkar

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The month of April brought me a series of sad news one after the other. First, my uncle Kama Kaka died on 12th, followed by my mother-in-law Rashmi Kaku on 15th, followed by Bhopatkar Kaka on 19th. All of these people had reached the ripe age of 80 and had passed away after living rich and full lives. Their deaths were certainly big personal losses to me, but still, the passing of these stalwarts seemed like part of an inevitable, natural process.

And yet, I remember clearly, Bhopatkar Kaka's death felt like a surprise. It felt as if a young man had been snatched away by providence prematurely, a young man who was still in his prime, in the middle of serious action.

My impression of Bhopatkar Kaka was that of the real *Dev Anand*¹, a young man to his very end. I knew Bhopatkar Kaka as a man who had a pleasant and lively personality, someone who always greeted me with a big smile and the part-jovial, part-adulatory address of *Abhay Raje* (Prince Abhay!). I knew him as a man who enjoyed alike the big and the small pleasures of life – an ample proof of which was our last year's trip together when I drove my parents and Bhopatkar Kaka and Kaku (his wife) to the Hare Krishna temple in Issaquah. Once there, Bhopatkar Kaka got busy admiring the temple's architecture, the numerous paintings of Krishna hanging on the walls inside, and the temple's various features and services. His enthusiasm was no less than that of a curious school student who is hungry for knowledge.

True to his "forever-young" nature, Bhopatkar Kaka was fiercely self-reliant – he went about doing his activities and work on his own, sometimes alone if necessary. He traveled a lot, and stayed alone in hotels if required. He often visited my house in Pune to call upon his friend – my father – and if I was present at such meetings, I offered him a ride in my car back to wherever he was staying. But, he always insisted that I dropped him at the nearest auto-stand or a convenient bus stop.

Bhopatkar Kaka understood and appreciated the importance of friends and relations in life. He also appreciated the fact that relationships don't just flourish on their own; they require nourishment, investment of effort and time, acts of affection. In today's world of "networking" which is all about making connections for hidden motives of furthering career or business interests, Bhopatkar Kaka's style of genuine, loving, and selfless social networking was very endearing.

This quality of "active socialization" is actually quite hard to practice as you get old. Indeed, we see so many old people becoming aloof, bored, indifferent, and lonely, even though they still have many friends and relatives. Bhopatkar Kaka did not fall in this trap and expect friends to come to him. He proactively sought people, built new friendships – with young and old alike,

and kept in touch with them from wherever he was. He called friends on the phone, visited them, brought cakes to their birthdays, sent them New Year greeting cards. Long after the world had stopped exchanging letters and cards, Bhopatkar Kaka continued this wonderful and intimate tradition. I still have the New Year card he sent to me this year, in which he has expressed his affection for me in his own hand-writing. Last year, he personally carried a birthday cake to Rashmi Kaku (my mother-in-law) with whom he shared his own birthday!

Bhopatkar Kaka lived his life, to the very end, like a simple, middle-class Indian man. This was a matter of personal choice, not an exigency forced by financial wherewithal. He understood the importance of simplicity, of living frugally, of the power of money when it is applied to addressing social inequities. He dressed simply, and wherever he went he took auto-rickshaw, public transport, whatever means were available to the common people. I believe when he traveled in Mumbai he loved hiring those creaking age-old yellow cabs.

When I met Bhopatkar Kaka first he had already retired from active service and had dedicated himself to the cause of women's education. He was actively involved, to his very end, in running night-schools in Mumbai for women who worked (often on menial jobs) during daytime. He helped numerous girls and women rise from poverty and desolation by offering them the opportunity to educate themselves and seek better opportunities and make superior life choices. He worked relentlessly for this cause, talked with people who seemed interested and sought their participation. I was one of those folks who find it easy to write small checks and feel involved in "social cause", and Bhopatkar Kaka sent me periodic newsletters about his schools and shared news of his girls' progress. In fact, the last letter I have from him (the New Year card) contained a list of girls who had shined in a local state-wide aptitude test.

I must share an interesting example of Bhopatkar Kaka's never-dying desire to stay involved with social causes. During one of his trips to the US, the unfortunate episode of Columbine happened when several high school students were gunned down by a couple of their own school mates. The country was in a shock and everyone was discussing the matter with great agitation. Bhopatkar Kaka didn't just content himself with the gossip, but got together with my father and proposed that they should write a letter to the US president (Bill Clinton) and suggest to him some ideas based on the Indian model (whatever it was!). They actually followed through this proposal and mailed a letter to the White House!

Bhopatkar Kaka knew no malice. I never saw him malign anybody with bad words, make fun of anyone on his back, or discuss anyone's shortcomings. He preferred to stay positive, focus on the goodness in each person, enjoy every person's company purely for its human worth, and do as much good as possible. In contrast to many people that perform "social work" Bhopatkar Kaka did not seem to have developed cynicism and tendency to criticize.

I do hope that I am able to practice at least a fraction of this unique flavor of Bhopatkar Kaka's youthfulness when and if I become a ripe old man!

Foot-notes:

1. Dev Anand is a Bollywood star who was known for his ever-green youthfulness.

Addendum:

Photo taken during Bhopatkar Kaka's last visit to Seattle (2014). This photo was taken in front of the Hare Krishna temple in Sammamish. From left: Bhopatkar Kaka and Kaku, Mrs. Asha and BG Joshi (my parents who were visiting around the same time).

