

A few days back, the author of this book, *Anjum Katyal* asked me to write a few lines about *Badalda*. When I browsed through her rigorous effort in the form of 'Towards a Theatre Conscience', my first reaction was, '*Badalda* deserved this during his lifetime!' *Anjum's* book is not only so well researched in terms of immaculate footnotes and authentic chronology of events but also has in depth analysis of *Badalda's* vital plays. She has also added varied quotes from almost all significant *natakwallas* supporting her succinct observations. All this gives a holistic perspective of Indian theatre and not just *Bangla* theatre spread through four decades from 1960s to 1990s. The interjections from *Badalda's* '*Purano Kasundi*', his memoirs, made me feel as if *Badalda* himself was conversing on that point. This book is going to be providential to the younger generations as it recreates the ambiance of *Badalda's* long-spread creative journey. If not him himself, as he did to me and my generation, this book will inspire the tenderfeet.

Through my following note I wish to highlight *Badalda's* stupendous contribution to the experimental *Marathi* theatre movement in 70s & 80s which the world outside of *Marathi* theatre might be oblivious to. We the *natakwallas* of my generation owe so much to *Badalda* that I feel fulfilled to be a part of this splendid treatise.

In 1966 the Government of *Maharashtra* had convened a committee for seeking solutions on infra-structural and urban redevelopment issues of Bombay (as it was called then). The Central government deputed *Badal Sircar* on this committee as a 'town planning expert'. The area of New *Mumbai* was developed as a result of the said committee. During that time, *Badalda* used to visit *Mumbai* very often. At the end of the day of his official role, his feet automatically walked in the direction of *natakawallas*! On one such evening, *Satyadev Dubey* introduced me to *Badalda* as the translator of his play "*Ballabhpurer Rupkotha*" into *Marathi*. I had co-directed the said play with *Dubey* which was the very first production of a *Marathi* play by Theatre Unit (a group headed by *Dubey*). I had also performed the lead role. Though at that time *Badalda* was casual towards my triple role que *Vallabhpurchi Dantakatha*, later he grew tremendous affection and attachment towards me.

Late *Rajabhau Natu* of *Maharashtra Kalopasak* (a leading *Pune* based theatre group) had invited *Badalda* to meet theatre practitioners from *Pune*. I escorted *Badalda* from *Mumbai* to *Pune*. The voyage started then with countless puffs of cigarettes continued for next 35 years, long after I quit smoking! *Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata, Delhi...* our meeting places kept changing but our bond remained insoluble. People surrounding both of us went on changing; our lives also

changed a lot but our mutual love remained untouched. I kept on meeting him with or without any purpose!

After '*Vallabhpur...*', Theatre Unit decided that I should translate *Badalda's* new play '*Pagla Ghoda*' and direct it in *Hindi* and *Marathi* simultaneously. I sought *Badalda's* written permission and also expressed my desire to deviate from the realistic set design conceived by him while writing the play. *Badalda* pounced on me and said, "Why ask for my permission to alter anything in the play? Whatever you wish to change, please do so!" When I tried to convince him of my different interpretation, he added, "Whatever I had to write, I've done so. Now you are free to murder my play!" He added with a twinkle in his eyes, "However I reserve my right to declare publically that you've murdered my play."

I directed '*Pagla Ghoda*' in *Hindi & Marathi* in 1968, then again in *Marathi* in 1980, and once again in 2009 in *Bengali*. These 3 productions were completely different from each other. The play offered me immense scope for different interpretations which is offered rarely by most of the plays. *Badalda's* writing was so powerful and layered that it had the strength to convey the theme even through different theatrical styles. *Badalda* liked my interpretations specially the one in which the central character of the Girl was performed by six different actresses. He also commended my editing of his text which brought down the performance from 2 and half hours to 90 minutes. While patting on my shoulder, he said, "a few years ago, I had managed to cut it to 105 minutes. Further editing was an achievement on your part!" I haven't come across any playwright who appreciated the director's versions so genuinely. Most hesitate to let the director change even punctuation let alone appreciating different interpretations! *Badalda* was one of a kind indeed!

'I want to write about people of this soil but I know nothing about the farmers. I have no clue about the pain of the fishermen and toilers. Besides what kind of dramatic moments can possibly be offered in my middle class urban life? What new can happen in my mundane routine?' all these questions were powerfully raised in his '*Evam Indrajit*' written in 1960s. I and many of my contemporaries were truly motivated by this brilliant play. Ironically someone who perceived life as the never-crossing parallel railway tracks, drastically kept crossing the never-ending paths vanishing into the horizon! The poetics of his writing was so different and completely lacking in his real life that one always wondered 'how and from where does he get these inspirations of rebel and toil?' His scripts offered a fresh impetus for contemplation every time one read those!

In 1990s *Badalda* quit the city based theatre scenario of *Kolkata* and began to explore avenues outside of the proscenium arch. During the Emergency, his theatre took a novel turn. A totally unconventional form was evolved through his "*Juloos*" and "*Tisvi Shatabdi*" which didn't necessitate sets, lights or a stage. His "*Baasi Khabar*" and "*Bhoma*" highlighted his anti-

establishment stand though he was never active in any party politics. The vivid memory of *Badalda* himself performing with his *Shatabdi* colleagues in Curzon Park on a Sunday morning during the early Emergency days is still etched in my memory. I was wondering as to how the din of the tram and heavy vehicles had receded miraculously as the performance began sans glamour of costumes, lights and music; just then a posse of horse mounted policemen surrounded us. To my utter surprise, neither the performers nor anyone from the audience paid attention to that force and they left after a while. This stirring experience inspired me and the Mumbai based '*Bahuroopee*' troupe to perform '*Juloos*'. That was our small protest against the Emergency. We performed the play over 200 times in every possible nook and corner of Mumbai as well as all over Maharashtra! *Badalda* had started performing his plays in the rural areas of West Bengal. There was an underlying thematic similarity between his earlier plays and these low cost productions i.e. protest against suffocation of the educated middle class, and his firm faith that 'surviving enables everything'! With his shift to the rural audience, *Badalda* conceptualized and also realized his dream of the 'Third Theatre'. He believed that a distinct form should be created beyond the 'First Theatre' that exhibited the traditional folk art, and the 'Second Theatre' that represented the urban themes with the western influence. In this journey, *Badalda* got estranged from most of the mainstream theatre practitioners. The critics also distanced themselves from his complex plays. Despite this ostracism, *Badalda* continued his search for variant expression.

In 2004, I heard that *Badalda* was admitted to a nursing home as he had met with an accident. When I called my local friends to verify the news, none of them knew about it. "He has been a recluse", "now he is absent from the theatre world" and more such comments were unexpected from the *Bengali* theatre fraternity. I must add that I felt disturbed by these insensitive remarks. Next day I just landed up at *Badalda's* house. His eyes welled up to learn that I had gone to *Kolkata* only to be with him and for no other purpose. He was bed ridden; he admitted that he could not afford to have a round the clock nurse. In addition to his physical ailments, psychologically he was at his lowest. He felt neglected by his contemporaries. Though my body was with him that whole day, I was thinking of a solution to pull him back to life. How could I help him without hurting his esteem and pride? I thought of organizing "*Badal Sircar Festival*" in *Pune* as a retrospective of his stupendous contribution to Indian theatre. All the theatre stalwarts like *Dubey, Shyamanand Jalan, Pratibha Agarwal, Vijay Tendulkar, Amrish Puri, Rajinder Nath, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Naseeruddin & Ratna Pathak Shah, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Nilu Phule, Rohini & Jaidev Hattangadi, Nana Patekar* and many others participated in the festival. On the concluding day, once again I did '*Juloos*' with new comers from various colleges of *Pune*. *Badalda's* interview for almost half a day proved to be the centre of attraction. On behalf of the entire theatre world, we handed over a sumptuous amount to *Badalda* as his 80th birthday gift which he could not refuse.

Overwhelmed with the genuine love of audience he had experienced at *Pune, Badal* expressed his gratitude in one line. "Your love is going to keep me alive at least for next 20 years." Though he didn't live for those many years, he certainly was rejuvenated. He translated a few books, he finished writing a play based on the sex workers of *Sonagachi*, he also thought of performing it with those workers themselves...

He is no more with us now! But his incessant quest for life will always inspire me; his magical words will continue to haunt me -

"Though I don't see the end of this road,
Though Heaven is not assured at that end,
Nor a promise offered
To make me forget those aching feet,
Why does this voyage NOT seem without a purpose?"

- **AMOL PALEKAR**