

I had stumbled upon *Vijay Dan Detha's* writings way back in 1984-85. During the subsequent years, I read almost every word written by this diminutive, stocky man who amazed me primarily with his unique style. The content and the spoken quality of his story telling used to snatch me away from my 'urban' setting. I was in awe of the native wisdom that kept reflecting through his characters as well as their grounding in the folk culture. Finally I met him much later in 2002, when I could gather several pieces of this writer scattered in my mind.

It was evident that "*Bijji*", as he was fondly known, was rooted in his soil and drew his strength from the folklores and the oral traditions of our country specially Rajasthan. He spent his life in researching the myths, legends ingrained in his land. What was truly alluring to me was his ability to find contemporary relevance in the age-old traditional tales while retaining the charming texture of such stories 'told' by our grandmothers. Without constructing in any ideological frame, *Bijji* propagated values like freedom from institutional constraints, emancipation from contradictions of modern/urban life. Many of his tales narrated themes which were beyond his time. *Bijji* often used a "*sutradhar*" to convey twists in the stories using sarcasm at its best. Many times messages expressed by the *Sutradhar* communicated his own progressive viewpoint. He criticized the plight of women, exploitation of poor & commoners resultant from the patriarchal surroundings. Often he projected his class bias against the riches and the haves. His heart was with the marginalized. The elaborate descriptions of nature were quintessential to his make-belief world. His vivid images of nature gave visual richness to his words.

As his admirer, I can go on writing about his work even when I am not a literary critic!!!

In 2002, *Sandhya Gokhale* (my wife) & I approached *Bijji* for his consent to our proposal to make a film on his short story '*Duvidha*' which in my opinion is a classic. We made it clear to him that we were not pursuing to "remake" of the film made by *Mani Kaul* on the same story. We shared our interpretation and also told him that we would be making changes in the original story. We also explained to him the stylistic details and our vision of the film. It was a pleasant surprise that the veteran writer welcomed our approach which was a contrast to *Mani's* film. He heard our ideas with an unexpected open mind. During the process of writing the screenplay of '*Paheli*', *Bijji* often helped *Sandhya* to capture the ethos of that love story. With him as our 'guide', our journey to his remote terrain was a pleasure. Having a comparative argument on regional literature as

we gulped down a huge glass of 'lassi' in the morning in a corner shop or discussing the influences of Western short stories on his own writing while finishing 'daal baati-choormaa' at noon in a *dhaba* surrounded by truck drivers from different parts of our country, was yet another enriching experience for both *Sandhya* and me.

Before the film '*Paheli*' was made, the complete screenplay was sent to *Bijji*. He gave his response in his transparent style during our next visit. He said that since he re-told the traditional folk stories with his view point, he sincerely valued *Sandhya's* effort to re-re-tell that story with hers! After our return, he also wrote a very warm letter to her appreciating her changes in the original story as well as her feminist interpretation. I had encountered a few much lesser writers who had obstinately expressed their resentment to any change in their writing in the past. On that background, *Bijji* was indeed different!

Cut to -

A couple of years ago, I was requested by *Bijji's* publishers to release a new anthology of his celebrated stories at a function in *Delhi*. Apart from seeing this as an appropriate occasion to express our gratitude publicly on behalf of all the readers to such a prolific writer, I agreed to their request primarily because it would have given me yet another opportunity to meet *Bijji*. Unfortunately, he could not travel due to ill health and had to cancel his trip at the last moment. Instead, he sent an earnest invitation to both of us, "Since I am confined to *Borunda* now, please make it convenient to visit our tiny village and spend a few moments with this old man!" In that brief message, *Bijji* had also urged me to start working on '*Doharee Zindagee*' as early as possible. This is yet another brilliant story written by this great writer who had granted its filming rights to me.

Dissolve into -

I heard that *Vijay Dan Detha* is no more.

It's disheartening to know that *Bijji* will not be around to see '*Doharee Zindagee*' on the celluloid if and when I'd be able to make it!

I am very proud that many of his books are translated in *Marathi*. Similar efforts ought to introduce this fascinating writer to people of diverse backgrounds all through the world.