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Personal Impressions: In memory of Dileep Padgaonkar

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DILEEP WAS a colleague and a friend, and his sudden death has left me saddened, bereft and just a little frightened by the impermanence of life. We joined The Times of India at almost the same time in 1969. Dileep as its official European correspondent. His profusion of dispatches from Paris, where, if my memory serves me right, he had been studying film, gave thousands of readers in India their first in-depth view of the brisk intellectual and cultural debates that Europe was generating at the height of its post-war boom and self-confidence. To say that reading about these was exciting would be an understatement. For Sham Lal, our editor, whose love of books and ideas has become the stuff of legend, it was manna from heaven.

Dileep came back to India and joined the editorial team in 1973 and, from then until the Emergency led me to seek an intellectual refuge at Oxford, we shared a cabin on the old, untidy, third floor of the Old Lady of Boribunder’s building in Bombay.

Our ways parted when Dileep accepted a job at UNESCO as the press advisor to its most controversial but visionary Director-General, Mahatma Mbow. When Mbow was forced out of his post in the late 1960s by the US for insisting that the world needed a New International Information Order to prevent the voices of the poor of the world from being appropriated by the media mammoths of the rich nations, Dileep, I suspect, felt the time had come to move on. He returned to the Times in 1986, but soon found that it was not the paper he had left a decade or more earlier. Girilal Jain, Sham Lal’s successor, had retired. Inder Malhotra and I had resigned, and Sanjir Jain was busy turning the TOI into a money-making machine.

Eventually Dileep, then the editor, too, resigned and, with Arvind Das, another dear friend and colleague, set up Asia-Pacific Communication Associates (APCA) and Biblio. Both have been orphaned by his passing.

My best memories of Dileep, however, are not of our days in Mumbai and Delhi, but of one wonderful weekend together, listening to the Sawai Gandharva music festival in Pune in the mid-1970s. It was a weekend in which we listened to music all night, slept late and socialised in the afternoon till the concerts began again in the evening. It was there that I met Dileep’s father, and saw Dileep in the home where he grew up. His father was a retired civil servant whose life was spent immersed in books and music. A quiet, deeply thoughtful man, close friend of VN Deshpande, the organiser of the festival, and of Pandur Bhusen Joshi, Dileep’s father loved to read and wrote beautifully. I have never forgotten my meeting with him because to me he epitomised the very best in the Hindu society of Pune and, for that matter, India.

Children take the strengths in their parents for granted, so I have often wondered whether Dileep ever realised how much of his talent for writing and love of reading came from his father. The fact that he chose to give up Delhi and return to Pune makes me believe that he did.

— PREM SHANKAR JHA
Former editor of The Economic Times and the Financial Express