

ASHOK DESAI - BOMBAY and DELHI (1932 – 2020)

It is often said that extraordinary people were ordinary people who did everything with extraordinary passion. It is also said that Death would be the judgment day on how good a painter you were in painting your life ('Unposted letter'). Ashokbhai painted his eventful life of 87 years with honours and extraordinary accomplishments. Scion of the 'law' pervasive family of Desais, he excelled culturally, academically and professionally. Concluding his innings with contentment and a smile, he gave glimpse of human qualities in the present day India.

I met Ashokbhai over four decades ago at Bombay in the chambers of our late senior S.V.Gupte (1903-85). I was there to attend the programme at the Bar library for unveiling the portrait of Gupte. Ashokbhai guided the proceedings. The then Solicitor General K.Parasaran was the chief guest. The High Court Chief Justice presided. In fact, I refreshed my recollection December last, visiting the library. Ashok was among the earliest associates of Gupte at Bombay. I happened to be the last one at Delhi. That was the bond between us.

Gupte had previously been a friend to Ashok's father (established on the criminal side). Gupte believed that ideally one should commence law practice in High Court and experience a measure of success before arriving in Supreme Court. He was one such; coming to the Supreme Court (1964) on appointment as Addl. Solicitor General and within a short time as Solicitor General. Ashok in his turn, was among the leading names on the Original Side of the High Court at Bombay. Ashok too arrived at the apex court (1989) on appointment

as Solicitor General. Both had later adorned the office of Attorney General for India. It was a moment to cherish for me, when Ashok held the highest Law office.

Gupte's portrait was unveiled at the Supreme Court by the then Chief Justice M.N.Venkatachalaiah. Ashok was at the Supreme Court by then. He later led the centenary programme in memory of Gupte in 2003. Justice Venkatachalaiah (then in retirement) delivered the Memorial Lecture. Ashok hosted a dinner for the former chief Justice with a select gathering at his home.

My maternal uncle (mama) late Kashinath Pavate had been a contemporary to Ashok at the Fergusson College. They met again at London after Pavate completed his study at Cambridge and Ashok completed his, at the London School of Economics and then called to Bar from the Lincoln's Inn. My mama remembered their friendship warmly; the wives of both have the same name 'Suverna'!

Ashok's professional qualities and performances, have been extensively appreciated. His genial temperament and composure were marked by erudition, and aided by humour at hand. He spent long hours preparing every case thoroughly. He was a class apart in court performance, disarmingly persistent as a skilful artist. His case-appearances have been catalogued by many of his admirers paying tributes to his memory. I had seen him too from close quarters.

Performances of Hindustani music attracted us. I would also recall occasions when I would drop in on way home, at Ashok's Defence Colony house, at tea-time for a chat over an hour or more. He would discuss many of the books he had read. Talk of LSE and Ashok would light up. I remember an evening at our place over dinner. It was my pleasure to see Ashok enjoying conversation with a former LSE professor, James Mayall.

Rarely do two contemporaries have matching qualities. Clive Nicholls QC (1932-2017) was from Cambridge, with expertise in modern extradition law. He may have been known to Ashok. A fellow- QC described Clive *as humorous, optimistic, hugely energetic person, a generous host, constant source of stories about his work, his family and the law.* I would describe Ashok too, in these terms.

I will miss Ashokbhai, a personage who left a mark on me. What was striking was his positive approach to life with joy. I attempted a phone call at Bombay a week before he passed away most unexpectedly. He was not well. I could not talk. The words of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan describe the purpose of Life: dividing it into two stages – Life before death and the other after death. *'Life before death is preparatory period and life after death is the reward period'*. The deeds of Ashok have earned him more than adequate rewards. I bid you farewell Ashok bhai. You have left behind a host of knowledgeable admirers and friends who traversed your path. May God in his infinite mercy grant you eternal peace.

My wife Shalini and I convey our sincere condolences to Suverna ji and family.

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