

Remembering Padmakar

On January 20, 2009 I lost a very dear friend and a comrade. Padmakar V. Panat was a very close friend. He was a part of my family.

Our association goes back to our days in Berkeley, California where I met him in 1967. We were both graduate students – he in Physics and I in Civil Engineering. Those were the days of Vietnam War protests and Free Speech Movement in Berkeley. The world seemed to be getting radicalized and we were not immune to the happenings around us. It was in this environment that we grew together in Berkeley. We shared ideas and interests beyond physics and engineering. But there was more to Padmakar than his razor-sharp intellect, his wide range of interests, and his knowledge of equally wide range of subjects. Padmakar led a simple ascetic lifestyle, had no pretensions, carried malice towards none, and was a warm and a caring human being.

We spent about six years together in Berkeley and its environs, first as neighbors in the same apartment building and later in the married student housing after both of us were married. Padmakar was my daughter's most favorite *chacha* and Vijaya (Mrs. Panat) her most favorite *chachi*. They both showered her with enormous affection. Once when she was only two years old, she quietly slipped out of our apartment, walked down the stairs, crossed the street and landed in Padmakar's apartment without our knowledge! Padmakar and Vijaya were her second set of parents! That was a reflection of our close relationship. We spent a lot of time together, whether it was in conducting a post-mortem of world events, dissecting Marxism and socialist practice worldwide, discussing history or philosophy, listening to Bhimsen Joshi or trying to copy K.L. Saigal. Or in crazy things like simply driving together miles and miles to nowhere, or satisfying our pizza craving at 2 in the morning by making our own pizza from dough and yeast, or going on a freshly-cooked-home-made *gulab jamun* guzzling spree over the week-ends!

In 1972 we both graduated. He was determined to leave for India within two years. He never took a Green Card. Before he packed up he decided to return to India via Soviet Union. I drove him to the Soviet Consulate in San Francisco for him to make inquiries. The Consul there discouraged him from flying into Moscow from the US. The procedures were too formal and bureaucratic and the expenses were high. The Consul suggested instead that he make that trip from India. Years later I learnt first hand that the Soviet Consulate in San Francisco, and probably everywhere else too, was under 24 hour surveillance by the FBI and a record was made of every entry to and exit from the Consulate.

Padmakar could not go to the Soviet Union but he did pay his obeisance to Karl Marx at his grave in London when he visited Britain on his way back to India.

The 12,000 miles distance between us separated us physically but it did not lessen the closeness of our relationship. He visited the U.S. on a few occasions and always made it a point to visit us in California. In 1977 he was in Japan where he had an accident in which he fractured his arm. Despite that, despite the inconvenience of one arm plastered and

disabled, he took a trip to the U.S. to meet us! I visited him in Pune in 1989 and 2003. I was planning to invite him to Kashmir to enjoy and marvel at its beauty. Before I could make up my mind, the terrorists had taken over. I was too late.

In 1984 he took a computer (a PC) from here as a gift for his department. Not knowing all the formalities of Indian Customs, he got into trouble at the Delhi airport. There were suggestions made to him that he would come out ahead financially by paying the penalty and the duty and then selling the computer at a substantial profit. He was incensed by the suggestion. He decided to fight the Customs to have the PC released without any charges. It was, after all, not for his personal use, but for an educational institution. His battle lasted months but, finally, he prevailed. That was characteristic of him – scrupulously honest, tenacious, principled, and above all the temptations, which many amongst us easily fall for.

I visited him in Phoenix last September when he had returned home from the hospital after his kidney failure. Despite the severity of the health problem he was facing, his spirits were high. That was another of his characteristic. He was not a defeatist no matter how terrible the odds against him. In the midst of his serious health problem, he took me through the mathematical underpinning of CT Scan and laid out in front of me the simplicity and the elegance of Radon Transform! His son Rahul, whom he named after Rahul Sankrityayan, added to his strength. He was very proud of Rahul. “I don’t have to worry, Rahul knows best, he knows what he is doing,” he confided in me one day while discussing his hospitalization, feeling secure in the care and attention he was receiving.

Earlier, he had shown me his book on Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics with immense pride. The book had just been published. But he wanted to write one more book. He wanted to leave something for the future generations as his contribution. He wanted me to do the same. “Leave something for the younger engineers after you are gone,” he advised. And when the discussion veered to some other subjects, he remarked, as if anticipating what was coming, “In the end we are all equal!”

Today Padmakar is no more. I lost a dear comrade, a younger brother, a friend, and a well wisher. I have lost a part of my family.

You taught me many things, Padmakar. For me, you were a symbol of simplicity, selflessness, love and caring. You were a true friend. You will be missed a lot, Padmakar.

Maharaj K. Kaul
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Fremont, California