


BY MEHER MARFATIA


TEN days ago, the deep rasp of a voice that brought on roars of laughter for well over half a century was silenced.

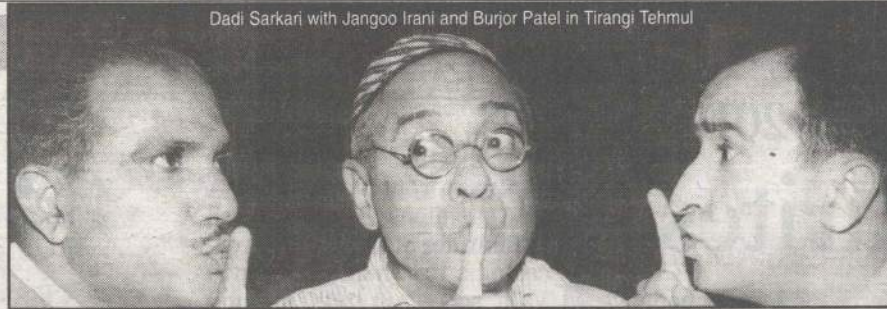
The community is certainly the poorer for losing its jester supreme in 88-year-old Dadi Sarkari, our vintage actor from the *naatak* era that thrived in its 1900s heyday.

Spotted by Homi Tavadia and Phiroze Antia, Sarkari was overwhelmingly popular for his spontaneous talent, ready wit and imposing build. Delighting three generations of theatre-goers, he starred as the comic lead of plays written by Phiroze Antia, Adi Marzban and Dorab Mehta for 55 years, sharing top billing with stars like Dinshah Daji, Pилоo Wadia, Ruby and Burjor Patel.

Rather like the popularity of a newspaper like the *Jame* is hardly restricted to Parsis, these dramatic capers were enjoyed equally by Gujarati-speaking Hindus, Bohra and Khoja Muslims. Adored performers like Sarkari and Mino Davar simply strode on stage to thunderous applause. So much so, they were forced to wait whole minutes before getting the chance to utter a single line.

Play rehearsals would throw up surprise abilities. Sarkari discovered that he could sing when music director Vistasp Balsara coaxed him into trilling Talat Mahmood's *Tasveer teri dil mera behla na sake*. The act thrilled viewers, wowed by this sensitive new side of their favourite funster. This raving audience appreciation, the encore curtain calls, the deafening applause lasted all the way till his final and personal best play-*Buddha e Maari Boundary*.

Dadi Sarkari with Jangoo Irani and Burjor Patel in Tirangi Tehmul



The laughter just got softer

A tribute to the late Dadi Sarkari, the Gujarati theatre thespian who believed Parsis are born great at comedy



Ruby Patel in Gher Ghunghro ne Ghotalo

Others unforgettable productions he was a vital part of, bannered by geniuses like Antia, Marzban and the Indian National Theatre were *Chalo Jher Paiye*, *Piroja Bhavan*, *Kataryu Gap*, *Chhupo Rustom*, *Mari Pachhi Kon*, *Kutra ni Puchhri Vaaki*, *Tirangi Tehmul*, *Ugee Dapan ni Dor* and *Gher Ghunghro ne Ghotalo* - remade as *Buddha e Maari Boundary*, Sarkari's swan song and personal best from among his plays.

He passed away with remarkable grace, while at a customary lunch rou-

tine at his beloved Elphinstone Club. Exactly the way he would wish it. Hearing the news from theatre veteran Bomi Dotiwala, I recalled Sarkari's words: "Every man must go when his time is up. I want to be in style. *Paana ramta ramta athva bhonu jamta jamta javu joiye!*"

It proved a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. The man who enjoyed little more than a good hand or two of cards with cronies would excitedly boom over the telephone line, "*Dikra, hu jeetuch...*" I'm winning the game, so can't talk now.

"Can we fix things later?" That was in response to my call for an interview for *Laughter in the House* - my book on Parsi theatre spanning the 1940-2000 decades.

We had met initially at his Peddar Road residence, sifting through albums of play stills, kept aside by his daughter Zarin. Ever the attentive host, he plied us (his old colleague Sam Kerawalla and me) with an assortment of six kinds of biscuits and orange fizz. As Kerawalla entered, the two men hugged at the front door itself, with mutual shouts of *Jabarjast!* Meaning, "We're the best", it stayed the same hearty greeting the friends exchanged over a lifetime.

A widower for some years, Sarkari was most likely found at his social haunt - Elphinstone Cricket Club in Fort - where we recorded the thespian, me on my Dictaphone, Sooni Taraporevala with her camera. Completely at home here, among stewards who buzzed around him (he was *Dadi Seth* to them), this was where he religiously repaired almost daily, "to win at cards, of course", he chortled.

A winner he was, hands down, right from age 14, when he spiritedly participated in talent parades organized by local groups like the Youths Own Union. The funny bone was already firmly in place. "I'd adlib the jokes *ne lok kharkhar hase*. How people cracked up laughing. Good comedy is difficult to do, but Parsis are born great at it."

We were scheduled to meet a mere day after the fateful afternoon that claimed his life. "Let's look at how your book on us all has progressed," he exulted. "I will come wearing a new tie in its honour!"

That was one appointment he was not destined to keep.

(RIP, Dadi Seth)