

Anant Bhagwat – PADWA is his middle name

One of India's finest Bridge personalities is threatening to call it a day as a director for many months now. In a freewheeling interview, Ravi Raman spoke with Anant Bhagwat on the day before Gudi Padwa – After all he is a **Player, Author, Director, Writer** and **All-rounder (PADWA)** – He was an ace national level Badminton player in addition to his Bridge exploits. He has just released his new book and it was the right time to catch up with him

You have been a director, author of books, writer of columns in newspapers but less of a player. How do you feel about it?

I started playing in 1975 and played till 1989. I then realized that I will never become a good player as Badminton and Bank of India did not leave me enough time to study Bridge. But I wanted to be in touch with the game – so I became a director. I have never regretted my decision. The writings and the subsequently the books are a bonus. But let me tell you I enjoy writing more than playing or directing because it satisfied my creativity. I still like to play but only as entertainment.

Badminton to Bridge – While it was a shift from one to B to another, it was a significant change. Are you happy with the change?

Badminton is my first love. The switch from an action packed game to an idle game was a happy one because I decided to sever my relations with Badminton. But the game refused to release me. I am still a part of the selection committee of the Maharashtra Badminton Association. But the game of Bridge has given me a lot of money, fame, recognition and above all a purpose to live. After each sickness of mine, this game provided me with a vigour to pursue Bridge and therefore I am very happy with the transition

As a director of Bridge, what changes in player attitude would you like to see?

Basically, players need to be tolerant of the opponents. When a beginner comes to the table, the experienced players should not browbeat them. The players should also be more ethical. Hiding the truth from the director should not be resorted to. Questioning the director's decision even if it is wrong should not be practised. There are other forums to correct the lapse of the director. But we find that players cannot digest a ruling against them. While on this subject, I must also admit that sometimes directors are overbearing and rub the players the wrong way.

The one irritant that I find in players is indiscipline. They come late, play slowly, discuss too much, write wrong scores and then expect the director to be lenient. The players get riled if they are penalized. Take the case of mobiles. In every tournament, you will find a few mobiles keep on ringing. This is an insult to the opponents and organizers. But if a director penalizes them, immediately, the swords are drawn. This attitude has to change

What motivated you to write books on Bridge? How as the experience?

I was a journalist since 1984. I had the streak of satire in my writing. When I read Victor Mollo and Hugh Kelsey's books, I was inspired by the humour and technical acumen. So when the "Pioneer" offered me a job of a reporter, I grabbed it, because I wanted to give publicity to the game. I feel that this is an under-published game and I wanted to correct the injustice. As I said, it also satisfied my creativity. Later when "Busybee" offered me a column in the "Afternoon", I was beside myself with joy as he was my idol. He told me to continue my satire in the column of the "Champ". That was the ultimate motivation.

Humour and a Director does not seem to go well together. Please comment

Most players have a split personality – they are very nice away from the bridge table but very nasty when they are on the bridge table. Similarly, I think I have a split personality. While directing, I am very stern but while writing I try to be humorous. I have tried feebly to imitate Victor Mollo and PG Wodehouse in my writings but I have not been able to become a perfect director like Subbu

Increasing number of tournaments but lesser number of players – seems to be a paradox – What are your views?

First of all, I don't agree there are lesser number of players. If you watch closely, there is a substantial increase in the number of players in tournaments, except for Nationals. The rising costs are also a hindrance to the middle class. But why should we count only tournament players? There are countless number of players who play Rubber Bridge at clubs and home. They don't play tournaments because of the rigid rules. But they support the game. What the game lacks is publicity. Newspapers like Times of India should be pressurized to publish news of tournaments and we should have separate tiers for amateur players and professional players. The rules should be a bit relaxed for the amateur players. Then the players will come to tournaments

Popular perception amongst non-bridge players is "Bridge is a game of gambling" – How do we change this perception?

The answer to the above question is what I have stated earlier – Publicity. There was a time when cricket commentary was not broadcast for the full day. See the change now. Similarly, we have to market the game. Let the positive side of the game be known to the public at large. The public should know the number of countries playing this game is more than those playing cricket, hockey and baseball!

Why do you think Indian Bridge team fails at international level despite have some world-class players?

In my opinion, we lack discipline and lack of permanent partnership. Look at players like Rodwell-Meckstroth, Lauria-Versace, Fantoni-Nunes – they have been playing together for years. In India, I can think of only Shridhar-Sunerram and Kiran Nadar-Satya. The ego of bridge players also contributes to India's downfall. Everybody thinks he is the best player. I see even young players in Maharashtra who smoke and drink incessantly. How do they become international experts? Practising together is easy with BBO but self-discipline is lacking. When I listen to the discussions on Bridge, the accent is always on who is wrong and not what is wrong. If there is consistency, sponsors too will come forward.

Finally, you have been saying you are going to hang your boots as director but we see you as director in every tournament including the one held today. Please comment.

Yes, I have been saying that I want to retire but the game and my friends force me to polish my hung shoes, every now and then. But if you noticed, I have stopped going out of Mumbai for directing. This tournament, for example, Aniruddha requested me one day earlier to direct the tournament. I couldn't turn down a request from a sweet person like him. So I may direct a few tournaments in Mumbai and Thane but my national directorship is definitely over. I regret it certainly – I will miss the atmosphere but as they say, "All good things must come to an end", like this interview.

In Conclusion

If you have only interacted with Anant Bhagwat the director, I request all of you to meet Anant Bhagwat, the human being. A great achiever and who has a view point on every event occurring on planet earth and my innumerable interactions off the bridge table summarizes him as "A Man with a vision and whose contribution and sacrifice (not playing Bridge) must be noted and thanked by all bridge players". Thanks for all your contribution to bridge.