

AVAILABLE LIGHT: OMAR BADSHA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

by DANIEL MAGAZINER

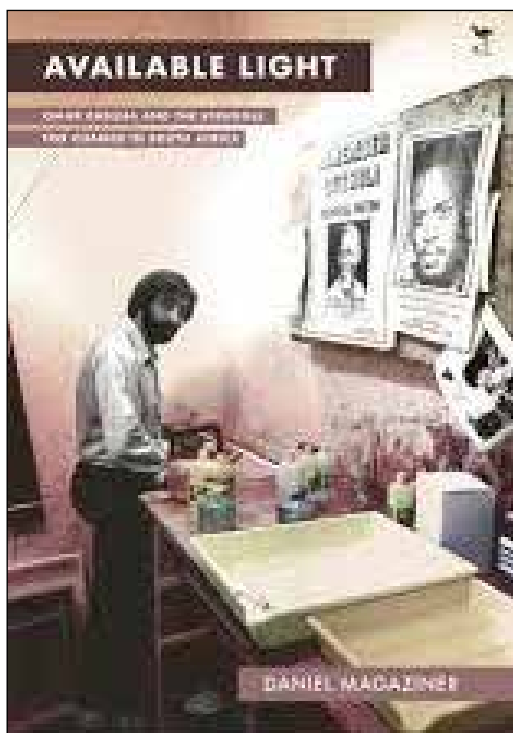
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ARTIST, photographer, trade unionist, community activist, historian and archivist, Omar Badsha is perhaps best summed up as an organic intellectual immersed in community struggle. He has never held high office in any political organisation, but like many grassroots activists played a significant part in South Africa's liberation. And like many, he found both process and outcome disillusioning.

In some ways he resembles the legendary A.K.M. Docrat who lived in the Grey Street area of Durban where Badsha grew up. The grandson of Muslim immigrants from Gujarat, Badsha was born in 1945 and is able to remember the ethnic riots of January 1949 from a brick thrown through the window. His father Ebrahim was a signwriter, a frustrated artist and prone to violence; his mother Miriam had a breakdown and the marriage collapsed. A broken home, dyslexia and a ghetto existence framed Badsha's youth and to an extent his entire life.

He failed matric but found his feet as an artist, winning prizes and working for the Natal Society of Arts. But apartheid was at its height and required ethnic identification, which Badsha rejected in favour of individuality and creative universality. His political involvements were catholic and involved the Unity Movement and Congress, the latter the result of family connections. His nickname, Mole, reflected his networking capabilities and opaque role as a courier for Docrat and Phyllis Naidoo.

An early associate, Jeevan Desai from the Durban Students Union, killed himself. His artist friend Dumile Feni went into exile in 1968, struggled and died young. Badsha decided against the perils of exile and survived; adaptable and versatile. In 1970 his family was relocated from their Douglas Lane home and Badsha became involved in the intellectual and industrial challenges of the Durban Moment alongside Strini Moodley, Foszia



Fisher and Rick Turner. This was a world of wages commissions, the workers' benefit fund and the Institute of Industrial Education. Badsha contributed to *Isisibenzi* and ended up working with Halton Cheadle organising textile workers at Prilla Mills in Pietermaritzburg. By 1974 he was secretary of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, one of the founding affiliates of the workerist FO-SATU bitterly opposed by the communist-influenced ANC.

With Turner he frequented Gandhi's Phoenix settlement north of Durban and photography took the place of art in his activism. His pictures of conditions at Chrome Chemi-

cals played a part in overseas pressure that brought improvements in conditions. Having married Nasima Coovadia in 1976, he became a dissident photographer publishing in *Staffrider* and a book, *Letter to Farzanah*. This was directed at his infant daughter and was banned; against which Badsha correctly refused to appeal on the grounds that repression was the norm in South Africa.

As a photographer Badsha associated with David Goldblatt and Paul Weinberg and was a founder of Afrapix at Khotso House in Johannesburg. Denied a passport, he was unable to attend the Gaborone Culture and Resistance Festival (1982) but frequented Phoenix and worked with the Amouti residents' association during the decade of the United Democratic Front. The outcome was his book *Imijondolo* published in 1985, which documented the change underway at Inanda bringing the area to crisis point that would lead to the destruction of Phoenix. He had also photographed the outcome of the Ngoye (University of Zululand) massacre of 1983. In this fashion, the freelancing Badsha was a 'nobody who was also a somebody'; whose images should 'sear our consciences' as Desmond Tutu put it.

Involvement in the Second Carnegie Conference led to publication of *The Cordoned Heart*, but without a passport Badsha was unable to travel to New York

for the international launch. At this point the Badshas moved to Cape Town where Omar was appointed to the Centre for Documentary Photography at UCT, founded the Cultural Workers Congress, and identified new areas for community involvement. But this marked a turbulent period in his life on a number of fronts. Unsurprisingly, he fell out with UCT; he was detained for two weeks; and, perhaps most serious of all, he was expelled by Afrapix. The last may have been a consequence of lack of practical input, but it was certainly also tied up in ideological conflict as some individuals parted company with the values of the struggle to become entrepreneurs.

Badsha was known as a hothead, undiplomatic and prone to temper with a tendency to take things personally. Magaziner clearly had a bumpy relationship with him, although only one side of that story inevitably appears here. Badsha's background explains much of this, but the much-vaunted transition to democracy was a challenging time. For people of ultra-strong commitment such as Badsha the necessary compromises were a step too far. It soon became apparent that the ANC was not interested in the concept of the cultural worker embedded in the community; but creativity linked to more elevated, moneyed levels. Exactly the same happened in sport and recreation. Badsha's response was regarded as over-combative. In the long-term he was proved largely right.

In the meantime, Badsha received his first passport at the age of 45 and travelled to, among other places, Tadkeshwar his ancestral home. The family moved to Pretoria and then back to Cape Town as a result of his wife's work, but at the expense of health and relationships.

It was in this context that Badsha started his most successful enterprise, SAHO (South African History Online), which became a remarkable networked interactive resource; a people's history project with major educational spin-offs and an antidote to attempts to establish an official version of South Africa's past. It has involved a certain amount of banditry, although of the Robin Hood variety rather than Amazon's AI; a forerunner of the creative commons. And above all, it is a notable achievement for someone with no formal qualifications, although subsequently recognised by national honours and an honorary doctorate.

Magaziner contentiously argues that "'The Struggle' was always a myth, a collective delusion, a useful fiction' (p. 12) in the search for identity and meaning. It was certainly the latter, but also a great deal more – a hope for a more equitable and just society, for instance. Maybe this was unreasonably utopian, but it was Badsha's friend Turner who strongly advocated such optimism. To say the struggle was delusion is conveniently post-modern. Above all, the South African government subscribed to the concept, to which the number of assassinations, disappearances, detentions, banishments and cases of persecution attest.

And to deny the struggle is surely to remove the meaning of Badsha's life. A consistent thread runs through it: uncompromising commitment of the survivor. There are those who believe he dwells still in the heady days of the 1980s. But he is correct to think that there is too much forgetting and to believe in the importance of the past. His type of historian and his approach to history have a crucial part to play. And the context in which they developed is certainly no illusion.

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