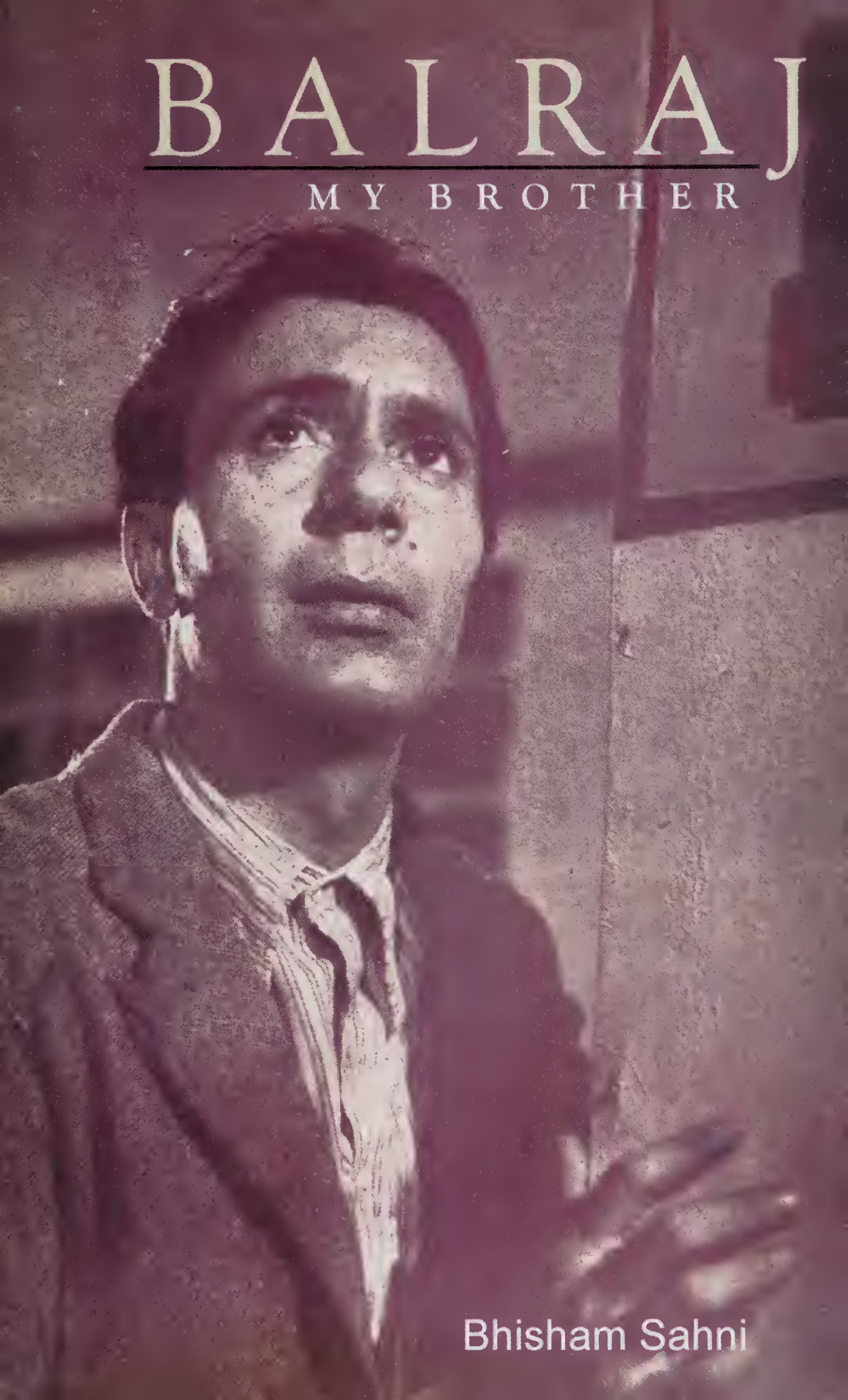
# BALRAJ

## MY BROTHER



Bhisham Sahni

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*National Biography*

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BHISHAM SAHNI

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

ISBN 978-81-237-2242-9

First Edition 1981
Reprints 1991, 1998, 2007, 2012 (*Saka* 1934)



₹ 65.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
Nehru Bhawan, 5 Institutional Area, Phase-II
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi-110 070

*To Shabnam*
*who is no more*

## Contents

# 1

## CHILDHOOD

My elder brother, Balraj, was born on the 1st of May 1913 at Rawalpindi. Our mother used to tell us that soon after his birth, when she was lying exhausted in bed not knowing that a baby boy had been born to her, she fainted on hearing the sound of a brass-band playing outside the house. Earlier, at the birth of every child in the house—and there had been five daughters in succession—our father's elder brother, a stern man of orthodox views, who would be sitting on a cot outside the house waiting to know the news, would get up cursing and swearing and walk away in disgust. This time, on learning that a male child had been born, he had rushed to the market and brought a brass-band along to celebrate the occasion. Of the five sisters born in the family, only two were living at the time of Balraj's birth; the other three had died, one after the other, during childhood.

The first name given to Balraj, was Yudhishthir (pronounced as Yudhishter). But it had soon to be given up because one of our aunts, our father's sister, could not pronounce the name properly and often confused it with 'register'. There was quite a craze in those days among the Arya Samajist families of the Punjab to choose names for their children from among characters of the Hindu scriptures, and where children already had Punjabi names, to change them and adopt Hindi names. Thus the name of one of our sisters, Veeran Wali, was changed to Vedwati.

The house in which Balraj was born was the house of

simple, God-fearing, middle-class parents. Our father, Shri Harbanslal Sahni, an import agent by profession, had risen from poverty, and through sheer hard work had come to have a comfortable income and some property in Rawalpindi. He had started life as a clerk in the Commissariat at Rawalpindi, but had later given it up to do independent import business. By the time Balraj came into the world Father had begun to enjoy considerable eminence and respect in the city, both as a man of means and as a devout Arya Samajist. His love for the Arya Samaj was reflected not so much in his religious beliefs and the rituals followed in the family as in his support of the social reforms launched by the Arya Samaj in Hindu society.

Many stories were current in the house about our family background. We belonged to Bhera, a small town in Shahpur district of Punjab (now in Pakistan) from where our grandparents had migrated to Rawalpindi. Bhera, an old medieval town located by the side of the river Jhelum, was once a flourishing centre of trade and commerce. It seems to have enjoyed considerable historical importance in bygone days, because one of the invasions of Mahmud of Ghazni was directed against Bhera—a fact which the people of Bhera never tire of mentioning. Bhera had a sandstone wall round the city, with four gates in it, now in ruins, and the remains of some princely palaces, called Sheesh Mahal. Balraj visited Bhera twice: once during his childhood days when the entire family went there, according to custom, to celebrate the marriage of our elder sister, (sometime about 1921), and the second time in 1961, when he visited Pakistan nearly fifteen years after the partition of the country. Bhera seems to have left an indelible impression on Balraj's mind. It was a unique town in many ways. It was the only town that we know of, which was divided into *mohallas* (neighbourhood) exclusively on the basis of castes and sub-castes. Thus, there were separate streets of the Sahnis and the Sethis and the Kohlis and so on. By the time our grandparents migrated from the city,

it was already in ruins. The course of the river Jhelum had receded far from the city, and moreover, saltpetre had appeared in the land, destroying its fertility. When Balraj first visited it in his childhood alongwith the family, it was a deserted city, most of the houses having collapsed; in some, the locks still hung on their beautifully carved, medieval doors, while the walls lay in heaps of rubble beside them.

There had been an earlier migration also in our family, and that was said to have taken place from Kabul in Afghanistan. When it actually took place is not known. Some political upheaval seems to have taken place in Afghanistan, when there was an exodus of refugees, among them, one of our ancestors, Mahesh Das Sahni, who, along with his kith and kin, came and settled down in the plains of Shahpur district. The family thus is quite familiar with migrations, displacements and the lot of refugees; the last migration having taken place from Rawalpindi, after the partition of the country in 1947.

Our grandfather, Lala Thakurdas, had worked as a *munshi* with a lawyer at Rawalpindi. His wife, our grandmother, was known to be a lady of remarkable qualities: intensely devout and courageous by nature. It is said about her that when one of her sons died, in the prime of his youth, she did not cry; instead, she sat by the side of her dead son, his head in her lap, and kept chanting hymns and prayers. She bore the shock of his death with remarkable equanimity. She is also said to have been gifted with a poetic temperament and often composed verses of a devotional type. If it is true that children and grandchildren inherit some of the traits from their elders, then she too must have influenced her descendants, some of whom were of a literary bent of mind. There were many stories current in our family depicting her integrity of character and honesty of purpose. Once our father, who was then working as a junior clerk in the Commissariat received a 'gift' of ten rupees from a contractor on getting

his bills cleared. When he handed the amount to his mother late in the evening, she chided him and sent him to the contractor's house immediately and would not let him enter the house unless and until he had returned th money.

The home and the surroundings in which Balraj's childhood was spent had peculiarities of their own. Father, though a businessman, had no regular business premises. He kept only a small office on the ground floor of the house, from where he conducted all his business. A few files, a typewriter, a table and a few chairs constituted the establishment. Once a week, usually on Thursdays, he would be sitting at his typewriter, typing out letters with one finger—for he had never learnt proper typewriting. In the family it was known to be the day of the 'foreign mail', when we children were not supposed to go into his office, or disturb him in any way. The 'foreign mail' was cleared on Thursday evenings, and it was on Thursday morning that Father would sit down to type out his letters. Why he did not think of doing so on other days of the week is still a mystery to me. The whole family was on tenterhooks the whole day long. And, he was invariably late with the mail so that the letters had to be posted at the railway station. The only servant in the house, Tulsi, would then be summoned to take the letters either to the post office or to the railway station. Punctuality, orderliness and regularity—qualities characteristic of import agents—were entirely missing in Father. Thursday's work over, he would again relapse into his usual routine—long morning walks, preoccupation with the Arya Samaj activities and its different charitable institutions of which he was a very prominent member.

Father did indent business. Most of his dealers were in far-away places like Quetta, Kabul, Srinagar, Peshawar, and he received supplies mainly from English and French firms. Hence, most of his business activity was confined to writing letters, and as we learnt later, he did

an excellent job of it.

In the room adjoining his office lay boxes full of samples of all kinds. This room was opened only once in a while, but for Balraj this was as fabulous a place as Ali Baba's cave. It was an endless source of curiosity, because these boxes contained a fascinating assortment of all kinds of samples, like gold-rimmed china cups and saucers with interesting inscriptions on them, such as 'remember me' 'forget me not', etc., knives with fancy handles, face-creams from France, different types of pencils, specimens of cloth with coloured pictures on them, braids and laces and what not. Not that Father dealt in all these things. Export offices sent these to him because he was a known importer. Otherwise his main line in business was braids and laces which he imported from France for his dealers in Peshawar, Quetta, Kabul, etc. Earlier he had done good business in green tea which he would import from Shanghai and sell in Kabul and Kashmir.

Father lived a relaxed life, one of the surest signs of which was, that he was late for everything. When it would be time for the midday meal, he would go to take his bath; when it would be time for the evening meal, he would pick up his stick and go out for a walk; when the family members would be sitting in the kitchen (for we all ate in the kitchen) waiting for him to join them at meals, he would sit down to say his prayers.

The evening meal in the kitchen was the best part of the day. Mother would sit by the fireside making *chapattis* (unleavened bread) while we four children, two brothers and two sisters, would sit and eat jointly from two *thalis* (plates). Balraj would regale the family with his little anecdotes and his mimicry—he was excellent at mimicking all sorts of people. The servant, Tulsi, a boy from the village Roomli in Poonch district, who had been with the family for nearly twelve years, would make some odd remark which would send our two sisters into peals of laughter. They used to take great delight in teasing Tulsi; Father

would invariably join in this laughter. As was his habit, he would clap his hands before he would burst out laughing. Even when he was not participating, there would be a twinkle of love and affection in his eyes for his children.

The evening meal over, we children would get into bed, while Father would stroll leisurely up and down the main living room, and chat with Mother, who would be sitting on a *charpai* (cot), mending or stitching something. Father would comment on the current affairs, particularly of the Arya Samaj; he would often talk about the need for social reforms, the need to instil faith and optimism among children, the need to study Hindi and Sanskirt, the role of the Muslims, who, according to him, had brought demoralisation into Hindu society, etc.

Mother, though deeply religious-minded, was different. She was more independent-spirited. She did not necessarily subscribe to all that Father believed in and was often critical of the Arya Samaj and of Father. She would often go to the Sikh *gurudwara* (religious place) or say her prayers in Punjabi or attend discourses of 'Sanatanist' sadhus and preachers. Mother was illiterate but she had a very inquisitive mind and with her own effort had begun to read and write Punjabi and Hindi. So keen was her desire to learn that she applied herself to the study of Urdu and English also, and at one time to the study of Sanskirt, too; but due to little encouragement from her circumstances, she could not make much progress.

Between the parents, Mother seemed to be of a more determined nature. Father loved simplicity and was not much bothered as to how one was dressed and how one lived. But Mother was keen that her children should be well dressed, should have nice things to play with, and should be taken to fairs and festivals, etc. There would be quite a scene in the house every time there was a festival like Dussehra or Diwali. Once Father took Balraj and myself along to the Dussehra fair, but by the end of he day, both of us had been lost. Several members of the Arya

Samaj, peons and *chaprasis* were sent out in search of us, and ultimately when we were traced, Balraj was found at one end of the town and I at the other. But this misadventure did not dampen Mother's enthusiasm. The first harmonium that came into the house, and later on, the first gramophone, came through her insistence.

When alone, Mother would sometime sing songs to us, which were rather sad and fatalistic, about the nothingness of life. While she would be singing, sometimes Father would shout from his office below, telling her not to sing such sad songs. "Children must not hear songs of *vairagya* (renunciation)," he would say. "Sing to them something optimistic and cheerful." But it seems Mother was already a sad woman, having lost three of her children at so young an age, one after the other.

But so far as running the house was concerned, neither of them was much of an example for the other. Mother would often misplace her bunch of keys and the whole family would be ransacking the house in search of it. Milk would often boil over or the curd would not set. She wasn't much good at cooking either. In the garage on the ground floor, where the cow was kept, the calf would often break loose from the peg and suck away half its mother's milk. On quite a number of occasions an astrologer was consulted to indicate where the bunch of keys might be lying. Mother would often leave home after the midday meal, on a round of relatives and *satsang* (religious congregation) and thereafter go to some *katha* (recitation of religious hymns) of an intinerant sadhu. On her return, often the day would be declining by then, she would hurriedly prepare the meal.

It was a traditional home, with a small, well-knit family. Father was religious minded but not a fanatic. We all prayed twice a day, morning and evening, but there was no set prayer. Occasionally the *havana* (sacred fire) was performed and the whole family sat round the sacred fire, including the servant, Tulsi, who was regarded as a

member of the family. Balraj was very fond of the *havana*, even though we children, including him, did not know the meanings of the *mantras* we chanted, or the significance of the rites that were performed. He found something fascinating about it: whether it was the dancing flames, or the ritual of oblations or the smell of incense and the atmosphere created by the chanting of the *mantras* or all combined, it is difficult to say. But he was always very enthusiastic about the *havana* in his younger days.

There were the usual do's and don'ts in the family—the younger must respect and obey the elder, no one must tell a lie or use foul language. Father laid great stress on simplicity. Balraj's head was close-cropped with a fairly prominent *chutia* (plait) on top. Cinema was out of bounds for us. Cold baths, long walks, prayers, such reading as improved character and such vegetarian food as promoted good health, were the order of the day. Moral teachings, printed in Hindi, were hanging on the walls of a couple of rooms. One of them was in the form of a chart which defined virtue and vice. In part it ran as follows:

> Simplicity means life, ostentation means death.
> Austerity means life, indulgence means death.

Some couplets from Tulsi's *Ramayana* were also displayed:

> Where there is wisdom, there is prosperity, (and) where there is indiscrimination there is adversity.
> (जहां सुमति तहां सम्पत्ति नाना, जहां कुमति तहां विपत्ति निदाना)

There were, however, some peculiar features in our way of life, which left the children somewhat puzzled. As a businessman, Father had dealings with Muslim merchants, including Pathans, who would now and then visit us at our place. Contrary to the derogatory remarks he would often make about the Muslim community, his attitude towards these guests would be very cordial. He entertained them at meals, etc. But after they had left, the

utensils in which they had been fed, would be cleaned with burning hot coals—a thing which was not ordinarily done in the house. We lived in a predominantly Muslim locality and Father's relations with our neighbours were very cordial, yet he would not allow his sons to play with Muslim children in the street. Our two sisters studied in the girls' school run by the Arya Samaj. But strangely enough, Father discontinued their studies even before they had reached the middle standard. These two sisters were brought up under strange restrictions. We had a balcony on the first floor of our house, facing the road. Our sisters were never permitted to go to the balcony or to peep out of any of the windows of the house. They were expected not to laugh loudly or sing loudly. If, by any chance, their voice became loud enough to be heard by our neighbours, Father's harsh reproof would be heard from his office below. If a passerby in the street happened to be singing a love-song or a Punjabi *tappa*, as often happened in those days, we children were expected to shut our ears with our hands, lest the lewd words of the love-song should be heard by us.

Such was the household environment in which Balraj's childhood was spent.

So deep was Father's love of the Arya Samaj, that instead of putting his sons in a regular school he sent them to a small *gurukul* (known as Gurukul Pothohar), located outside the town and run by the *gurukul* section of the Arya Samaj.

There was a regular initiation ceremony. Balraj's head was shaved, and the guru, after the *havana* and the chanting of Vedic hymns, bestowed on young Balraj the *yagyopavit* (sacred thread) and the yellow *dhoti* (cloth tied at the wait) of the *brahmacharis* (those who have renounced the world). The ceremony over, Balraj was asked to go round the congregation, bowl in hand, and ask for alms, as was said to be customary with the *brahmacharis*. The congregation which consisted largely of middle-class Arya

Samajist friends of Father, filled Balraj's bowl with currency notes and small coins. Mother did not react very favourably to this part of the ceremony. She was extremely annoyed when she found that all the money had been pocketed by the guru in the name of *guru dakshina* (teacher's fees).

The *gurukul* was situated in a double-storeyed house, outside the city, at a distance of about four miles (six kilometres) from our house. Balraj was about seven years of age then, and it was a long distance to trudge from the house to the *gurukul* every morning and return late in the evening. We were not resident *brahmacharis* of the *gurukul*, but only day scholars. Sometime later, to make it easier for Balraj and myself to go to the *gurukul*, Father bought a pony. It could, only euphemistically be called a pony for, in reality, it was an old nag, most unwilling to go out of the town in the morning, with two boys on its back, and it had to be pulled in front by Tulsi, the household servant. But on our way back it would suddenly pick up all the energy in the world and would occasionally throw us off its back.

The curriculum in the *gurukul*—there were nearly forty *brahmacharis* in all, mostly from poor families from all over the district—consisted mainly of Sanskrit grammar and language. Balraj was taught *Laghu Kaumudi*—the annotated *sutras* of grammar—along with *Riju Path* and *Hittopadesh*. Balraj turned out to be quite good at conning the *sutras*. He had learnt by heart more than a hundred *sutras* with notations within a short time, without, of course, the slightest notion of what they meant. Besides, he had an excellent handwriting, and was generally regarded as a precocious child, obedient and respectful, with transparent honesty. In his yellow robes he looked like a budding monk.

On Sundays, the entire contingent of young *brahmacharis* clad in their yellow robes, and led by an elderly *vanaprasthi* (one who resides in the forest), was

brought from the *gurukul*, taken through the streets of the city, to the Arya Samaj. Walking in a row, with their heads shaven and small *lathis* (sticks) in their hands, they looked like a row of Buddhist monks. Of the two sections of the Arya Samaj, Father belonged to the 'college section' which stood for the modern western type of education, and which ran a number of D.A.V. schools and colleges. The other section, known as the '*gurukul* section', believed in the continuation of the ancient, classical form of education, and ran a number of *gurukuls*. Despite his close association with the 'college section', Father has been persuaded to send his sons to the *gurukul*, perhaps because of his keen desire that they should have a good grounding in Hindi and Sanskrit.

One day, however, the *gurukul* episode came to a sudden end. Balraj suddenly declared that he would not attend the *gurukul* any more. I have vivid recollection of that afternoon, when Balraj stood in front of Father's table in the office, his face flushed, and in his voice a ring of determination.

Father looked up from the typewriter. I expected that he would frown and look shocked. But he merely raised his eyebrows and said, "Why, what's the matter? Why don't you want to study in the *gurukul*?"

"They don't teach us anything there. I want to study in a regular school."

There was a moment of awful silence. Then Father suddenly smiled one of his warm, affectionate smiles, and getting up from his chair, went into the inner courtyard of the house and shouted for Mother. He always did this, whenever there was an important development in the house and he wanted to consult her.

Mother came and sat down on the leather-covered bench, her hands folded in her lap. As soon as she learnt about Balraj's decision, she said, "He is right. Which other boy from among the families of your Arya Samajist brethren, has been put in the *gurukul*? And what has my son done to be subjected to this beggary?"

Mother had never been enthusiastic about the *gurukul*. She didn't know or care much for what was taught there, but she knew that the *brahmacharis* lived a beggarly life, which she did not like. It was a brief conference. Balraj's face was still flushed and he looked determined. Father relented sooner than we had expected. He again smiled and said, "I didn't want you to study there for a long time. I only wanted that you should have a good grounding in Hindi and Sanskrit. From tomorrow you will go to the D.A.V. School."

Thus ended this brief chapter. The next day Balraj was admitted in the fourth standard of the D.A.V. School. Studies in Hindi and Sanskrit, however, continued, at home. Father engaged a tutor for this work, and this arrangement continued for the next five or six years. Urdu was the medium of instruction at school, and soon after, English became one of the compulsory subjects. Now that I think of it, had Balraj not spoken out his mind boldly, studies in the *gurukul* would certainly have continued for at least another two or three years.

Life at school was radically different: a lot freer and more varied. Balraj could now play in the street and have a large number of new friends, mostly from lower middle-class families, that gave him experiences of all sorts.

It is nice to reminisce about his school days. Bold initiative and an inventive, imaginative mind, characterised his boyhood years; these qualities were reflected as much in the games he played as in his studies. There was always something unconventional about his choice of games. An archer once gave a performance with bow and arrows in the Arya Samaj. The next day Balraj had made his own bow and arrows and was shooting at targets blindfolded, as the archer had done. A horse-fair was held in the month of March every year, near our house in Rawalpandi, at the close of which a tent-pegging contest took place. The riders, holding lances in their hands, charged at top speed and aimed at a wooden peg planted in the ground.

Balraj also took up this game. Only, we had neither lances nor horses; so the lancer had to come running on his own legs and take aim at the target with a *lathi* having a pointed nail fixed into it. Very often Balraj would organise drama performances in the house and enact incidents from the lives of Swami Dayanand, Rana Pratap, Shrawan Kumar, and others. For the audience he had our two elder sisters, our mother and occasionally Father and Tulsi, the servant. Balraj would play Rana Pratap at Haldi Ghati or Mool Shanker (childhood name of Swami Dayanand) serving his aged, blind guru. Or there would be the historic battle between Alexander and Porus in the lanes of our *mohalla*, with catapultiers operating from roof-tops. Or, Balraj would give a magic-lantern talk on the life of Swami Dayanand. The slides would be pieces of paper with certain words cut out in them in such a way that their enlarged image would show very nicely on a wall when put in front of the candle-light. When Balraj was in his seventh standard, he brought out a handwritten journal named *Haqeekat*, a one-page magazine, giving news of hockey matches, religious discourses, and such polemical subjects as idol-worship, widow-remarriage, etc. The journal ran for three issues, and had to be discontinued because of the labour involved in writing it by hand. Thus, the one quality that characterised most of his activities was bold initiative. He would soon tire of a game which he had played several times and invent another. Later in life, too, it would not take him long to break away from a profession or a set pattern of life and adopt another. He had a forward-looking mind and never felt nostalgic about the past. Once a thing occurred to him, it would soon grow into an obsession, and unless and until it was translated into reality, he would have no peace.

Balraj had begun to apply an independent mind to things and started asserting himself rather early in life. Some pampered children who are spoiled by fond and indulgent parents also do the same. There was good

enough ground for pampering him also. He was the first male child in the family, after five daughters and parents were traditional enough to rejoice over the birth of the perpetuator of the family name. He was fair and very good looking; pretty children, receiving lavish praise, tend to become vain and conceited. But it was different in our family. Our parents lived a rather austere, simple life. Father was always keen that his children, particularly his sons, should be simple, hard-working, and unassuming. Even though he had become fairly well-off materially, life in the house was still like that of a lower middle-class family. Fineries and good clothes and things of luxury were nowhere to be seen in the house. Cups and saucers came into the house for the first time when Balraj was studying in college. So also the dining table. These were regarded as items of 'modernity' and Father was suspicious of them, regarding them as indicative of a new-fangled European way of life which he mistrusted. Mother was already a fatalist in outlook and Father had been deeply impressed by the ideology of the rising middle class of those days, which believed in progress through hard work, personal integrity, and a robust optimism in life. So neither of the parents was indulgent towards Balraj. There never was any scented oil in the house. When, near about 1929, the electric supply company was set up in the city, Father was not at all keen to have electric fittings in the house. Ours was virtually the last house in the city to have electric light. And then, too, the feeblest bulbs were put in because Father believed that electric light was injurious to eyesight. Balraj was not permitted even the luxury of a few inches of hair on his head. For shoes he invariably had *gamashahi jooties* (crude, handmade shoes). A person who has worn them alone knows what they are like. One had to put plenty of linseed oil in them for the first few days in order to soften the leather. It was said about the people of Bhera in general that if the shirt is clean, the pyjama must be dirty, for they considered it inauspicious

to have all the items of dress well-washed and clean.

Balraj had a strong will but he was not wilful or obstinate. I don't remember his ever insisting on getting anything for himself. Nor was he much interested in wearing nice clothes and the like. I would not be wrong to call Balraj a good Arya Samajist boy. Obedient, dutiful, excellent at Hindi and Sanskrit, who knew the entire *sandhya* (evening prayers) and the whole of *havana-mantras* by heart, regular at prayers and at the weekly congregations, but at the same time who was not docile or timid but had a will of his own; he was a boy with a radiant, handsome face and transparent sincerity.

The tendencies which later gave him his individual personality, both as a man and as an artist, were already discernible in his boyhood days. He was fond of drama. He would knock off an occasional verse in Sanskirt, on the model of those that he studied in the textbooks. Besides, what impresses me now is the distinctive aesthetic taste which he showed in his preferences. He would pick up verses which had a peculiar rhythm and cadence; hence, his liking for the *havana* ceremony, and such rituals.

It was in those days, when Balraj was still at school, that another death took place in our family. One of our two surviving sisters, Savitri by name, died of pleurisy. She was nineteen years of age at the time of her death; a very good-looking girl, pale and extremely soft in her speech and manners. The night she died, perhaps she had a premonition of her approaching end, for she asked both Father and Mother to chant Vedic *mantras*. It was during the chanting of these Vedic hymns that our sister breathed her last. Chanting turned into loud lamentations as soon as it was discovered that she was no more.

But within an hour or so of her death, something happened which brought a peculiar kind of relief to the bereaved family, and which must have left a lasting impression on the mind of Balraj. Our elder sister, who was married and was staying with us in those days, gave birth

to her second child, a daughter, within minutes of the death of our sister. Our mother who had been attending to her dying daughter, was soon attending her other daughter in labour pains. When the girl child was born, it was said that the dead sister had been reborn in the family. Perhaps this was said only to console the children.

In 1928 Balraj sat for his matriculation examination, from the D.A.V. School, with science and Sanskrit as his elective subjects. He scored a brilliant first division. He was placed second in the entire district and was awarded the university scholarship.

After matriculation Balraj joined the D.A.V. College, Rawalpindi, for his intermediate studies, with Sanskrit and philosophy as elective subjects. College for a student meant in those days, as it largely does today, introduction to western thought and values. The English language became primary in the curriculum, and since it was the language of prestige, college education also implied a change in the student's outlook and way of life. It meant wearing of trousers, adopting the English mode of dress, conversing in English, seeing English movies, shaving off one's moustache and having a stylish hair-cut, reading English fiction, etc. Alongside this, it also meant losing contact with the traditional Indian thought and culture, and customs and ceremonies, and developing some sort of dislike for them.

At this stage in Balraj's life came a gentleman, Jaswant Rai by name, who was to prove to be one of the most powerful influences on his life. Jaswant Rai was his English teacher at college. He was a handsome man with a very sensitive mind and a genuine love of literature, and a liberal outlook on life and society. He had a very charming and attractive personality. But perhaps, his greatest quality was that he was an inspiring teacher of literature and enjoyed universal admiration of the student community. Everyday, returning home from the college, he would be carrying with him a bunch of flowers, presented to him by

his students. Such was the veneration in which he was held that the entire class would be sitting in pin-drop silence before he would arrive in the class-room. He would hold the students enthralled when he would explain passages from Shelley's 'Ode to a Skylark' or any other poem, reveal its hidden beauties and supplement his observations with experiences from life. The aesthetic enjoyment of poetry was thus greatly enhanced. He took to Balraj as readily as Balraj took to him. In the evenings Jaswant Rai would go for long walks, accompanied by some of his close, admiring pupils. Balraj soon became one of the company. They would sometimes go towards the cantonment and end their walk at the bookshop of Messrs J. Ray & Sons, where Jaswant Rai would take a look at the new arrivals and invariably buy a few English books, and thereafter return via the two cinema halls, having a look at the stills of the western films being shown there. In the eyes of the young Indian students, the cantonment was the centre of western culture. Gaily decorated shops, neat, well-kept roads, with fair, golden-haired British or Anglo-Indian women and British tommies in uniform, walking along. For them a visit to the cantonment was like a peep into the western way of life. Or, Jaswant Rai would take his disciples—who were jocularly called Jaswant Rai's *vanar sena* (monkey brigade)—on a long hike through the countryside, through the fields on the other side of the town. The walk would be full of fun, anecdotes, laughter, discussions and debates.

At home, Jaswant Rai lived in a large family of grown-up brothers, under the parental roof provided by his father, an eminent medical practitioner. The atmosphere in this house was very different from the one in which Balraj had so far lived and breathed. There was nothing of religious zeal or social involvement in this house. It was a family of well-to-do, well-dressed and well-educated people who believed in good living. It was a large family and laughter rang in the house. They were very hospitable

and different varieties of meat were cooked every day in their house. Moreover, they had many Muslim friends with whom they were on very intimate terms, who would sit and eat with them in the interior of the house, and even the womenfolk of the family did not observe any *purdah* (veil) from them.

All these things were very new for Balraj. His horizons began to expand and his outlook began to change under this influence. Balraj's visits to the Arya Samaj became less frequent. *Havana* and prayers almost totally ceased. Balraj began to see western films, which were, earlier, almost taboo. He began to eat meat, which was still not cooked in our house. Trousers took the place of pyjamas. A dining table and a Japanese tea-set were brought into the house (earlier we used to sit and eat in the kitchen) on his insistence. Tea began to be prepared now and then. Stylish hair appeared on Balraj's head in the place of the close crop and the tuft. And soon enough Balraj was talking in English in the house, much to the annoyance of Mother who could not make head or tail of what he said. There was, however, nothing unique or untoward in this, because every college-going student was adopting these ways. Balraj had not lost his moorings. Under this powerful impact he developed a broader and a more liberal outlook and a more sensitive appreciation of literature. He began to shed off some of the austerity and orthodoxy in which he had been brought up.

An event of far-reaching significance for Balraj was the annual session of the Indian National Congress in 1929, on the bank of the river Ravi in Lahore. Balraj went to attend the session along with some friends and came back highly enthused. For days he kept talking of what he had seen there: the huge concourse of people taking the pledge of complete independence and Jawaharlal Nehru, who was then the idol of young India whom Balraj had seen dancing along with others under the national flag. He had come into contact with those powerful currents which

were shaping the destiny of our people, and was imbued with patriotic fervour.

A year or so later, Bhagat Singh was hanged, and his body was disposed of under the cover of darkness. A wave of indignation swept through the length and breadth of India. So deeply was Balraj moved by this event that he wrote a poem in English on the death of the martyr. I happen to remember the entire poem by heart and I would like to append it below:

They cry, they moan, they wail for him
For he died and left them;
But I,
I cheer whilst I sigh, I say,
Sucked in India, child of chains,
Thou wert lucky.
For whilst thou lived, thou bleeded,
The bindings stressed thee.
But now
High in the regions free thy soul shall soar
Where no more slavery chains shall reach.

Yet one thing grieves me, still, could I
Attain a free liberated yard of sacred earth
Where thy wretched remains, now slavery-bound
Could lie and freely rest!
But how could that be?
Thou wert a slave,
And for slaves a quiet rest?

Remember then, my departed brother,
To send thy soul on earth again if Lord ordains,
Pray, press for a desert strand,
Why come again to a land
Where youth is cold
And honour sold,
Where heroes bleed
With none to soothe

Where graves are digged and ploughed,
Where tears are to be shed in foreign tints,
Larks in the cages sing,
The jail-birds vie,
To make the iron-bars their own!

The poem is charged with emotion, and reflects how Balraj was becoming aware of the struggle that was being waged for India's freedom from the British yoke. Under Jaswant Rai's influence he was freeing himself from the traditional and rather narrow and conservative sphere in which he had heretofore lived, while the national upsurge was involving him both mentally and emotionally. It was certainly a period of expanding horizons for him.

Father did not approve of many of the new things that Balraj did or introduced into the house, but he gave a lot of latitude, was always loving and affectionate and did not impose himself on Balraj, in whose integrity he had implicit faith. Father had taught us to get up early in the morning and go out for a walk, first thing in the morning. Balraj began to get up late in the morning. He would lie down in bed, fold the pillow double under his head and read a novel, something which Father never liked. On seeing him, Father would jocularly remark, "London making?" and move away. Father liked Jaswant Rai and regarded him as a good influence on his son. Jaswant Rai had the unique quality of endearing himself as much to the elderly people as to the young ones. His advice would often be sought by old ladies in family disputes, as also by young couples and young students. And he always found some way of pacifying the person, and smoothening out the complications, at least for the time being; his persuasive words serving as a soothing balm on aching hearts. He would often talk of the 'golden mean' as the principle of his life and would quote 'thus far and no farther' as his favourite maxim. His friends would tease Jaswant Rai sometimes by saying that that was the reason why he

always walked in the middle of the road, kept a butterfly moustache instead of either shaving off or having a regular moustache, dressed himself in *khadi* ( but *khadi* that was not handspun and hand-woven but mill-made), admired the Congress movement but did not plunge into it, and so on. He was a typical liberal intellectual of those days, opposed to orthodoxy, but not radical in outlook. He would greatly admire national aspirations and yet keep away from the struggle.

One day, a police officer, accompanied by a contingent of policemen, came to our house with orders to search the premises. For Father it was an unnerving experience. For three full days the search went on, but nothing incriminating was found against Balraj. At last the search was over and the warrants of arrest against Balraj were withdrawn. This awful fuss was caused by a prank played by Balraj. He had written a letter to our girl cousin Urmila Shastri, a well-known Congress leader of Meerut, that an order had been placed for two bums, which should soon be arriving. The letter had been intercepted by the police, and a search made of our house for two bombs. In Hindi the word bomb is written as '*bum*' and has two meanings. It means 'bomb', and it also means a wooden shaft used in *tongas* (two long wooden shafts between which the horse is harnessed). Balraj had meant the latter. We had a *tonga* in those days and Father had decided to buy two new shafts for it. The joke cost the family dear, because at one time there was real danger that Balraj might be thrown into prison.

Like other young men of his generation, Balraj too was growing up under the twin influence of the freedom struggle and of western thought and culture. Perhaps that was one reason why Jawaharlal Nehru, when he emerged like a comet on the political firmament, was so spontaneously admired by the educated youth. Balraj was as much enthused by national aspirations as by the study of English literature. No wonder he spoke about 'tears are to be

shed in foreign tints'. Under the influence of Jaswant Rai, he was adopting a 'liberal' outlook, only somewhat more dynamic.

Near about this time, Balraj wrote another poem in English, a few stanzas of which I still remember, which reflect a maturer handling of diction and a finer sensibility. The poem has for its background the valley of Gulmarg in Kashmir, with its hill ranges under the canopy of darkness and the scattered lights of peasants' houses:

There is a silence, deep, unearthly,
But oh, for the far off roar,
Of torrents, fatel[illegible] lovers
That part to meet no more.

No more to meet the queenly hills
No more to pl[illegible]nge in glory
Only to burst away at night,
From bed so hard and hoary.

Each lonely lamp conceals a shell
To which man's joy or care
Creeps; overnight, just moon and stars
And lamps of blue, the night is fair.

At such an hour I leave my hut,
For a mound of glistening dew,
I sit and gaze, afraid of stars
On a twinkling light of blue.

Balraj possessed a sense of rhythm, a powerful imagination and intensity of feeling—the three requisites of a good artist.

It would, however, be wrong to think that he was only given to reading books, that he was of a brooding, contemplative frame of mind. He was not the one to sit in corners and read for hours on end. On the other hand, he loved company and had all the zest for adventure. He was not an introvert. Though not much of a sportsman, he had always been fond of games and an open-air life. At school

and college, his pet preoccupation used to be getting hold of a few friends and going out on long cycle-rides or on long, long walks. He would one day say, "Let's go to Murree on cycles!" It would sound a fantastic suggestion because the hill-station of Murree was situated at a distance of forty miles (fifty kilometres) from Rawalpindi. But the distance never mattered to him. He would just get hold of his cycle and leave, very often without any preparation in respect of food or money. I remember numerous such trips with him. From Murree to Kohala, from Srinagar to Gulmarg, from Rawalpindi to Murree, and many others. When he would see a hill, he would want to climb it; when he would see a lake, he would want to swim across it. Such was his temperament. A certain restlessness of mind was manifest even in those remote days. I wonder if he had ever spent two consecutive days in like manner in his life. He hated table-work or a set routine. Perhaps this restlessness of spirit was partly responsible for the impatience that he would begin to show whenever a way of life would assume the form of a set routine. It was perhaps because of this that he did not take to any steady job or employment or occupation, for years and years. He was also bold and fearless. Never was he conventional. There was always a freshness in whatever he did; a touch of originality and independence of spirit, all his own. And he had a remarkable capacity for making friends. There would always be one or two bosom friends of his and a number of companions. And curiously enough, now that I think of it, his bosom friends all along were persons of a very dark complexion—Girija, during his school days; Prem Kirpal during his college days; Rama Rao during his IPTA days, and others. Moreover, he always had someone to look up to and emulate—Jaswant Rai in his younger days, and P.C. Joshi in his later years.

In April 1930, Balraj sat for his intermediate examination and scored a first division. Soon after, he left for Lahore to pursue higher studies.

## 2

# AT LAHORE

Quite a drama was enacted in our house when the time came for Balraj to proceed to Lahore for higher studies. He had passed his intermediate examination in 1930 from the local D.A.V. College. For higher studies it was necessary to go to Lahore, which was then the centre for higher education and the seat of Punjab University.

Father was of the view that Balraj should study commerce, and for this, should seek admission in Hailey College of Commerce in Lahore. Being a businessman himself he used to visualise a business career for both his sons. He would often wax eloquent over the bright prospects that such a career would open for them. "Rawalpindi is hardly the place for import business," he would say. "For this, I would like one of my sons to set up office in London, and the other in Karachi. One brother should look to supplies and the other brother should secure orders. That will be real import business. The wise ones have said, even if you have to pick up a handful of earth, you should do so from a big heap of earth and not from a small one."

Balraj had little interest in commerce, and still less in joining Hailey College of Commerce, an unknown entity compared to such renowned colleges of Lahore as Government College and Forman Christian College. For a student in those days, and particularly for one from a provincial town, the name of the college he joined was more important than the studies he chose to pursue. Government College and Forman Christian College had a glamour about

them which no other college had. And Jaswant Rai, Balraj's mentor, had studied in Forman Christian College and had told him umpteen stories of the life students led in those two colleges. Besides, Balraj had a literary bent of mind and was not inclined towards commerce. But out of deference for Father's wishes, he went to Lahore and applied for admission in Hailey College of Commerce.

At the time of departure from Rawalpindi, Father had given Balraj a number of letters addressed to Father's friends, requesting them to place their guidance and help at Balraj's disposal. One such letter had been addressed to Lala Sain Das, the principal of D.A.V. College, Lahore; an eminent educationist and a leader of the Arya Samaj. After applying in Commerce College, Balraj went straight to Lala Sain Das and told him that he had no desire to study commerce and requested him to intervene with Father on his behalf and get him to agree that Balraj might join some other college and take up the usual degree course. Unexpectedly enough, Balraj found in Lala Sain Das a sympathetic soul who agreed to write to Father accordingly. Pat came Father's reply saying that if Balraj did not want to study commerce, he should study agriculture, and for this, should join Agriculture College in Amritsar. In Father's order of preferences, in respect of life's vocation, commerce came first and agriculture second. In his view agriculture too ensured an independent life and bright prospects. Father had intense dislike for service as a profession. He had been in service once and had found it very stultifying. Balraj went to Amritsar and put in his application. But his heart was not there. The time for joining Government College was running out. Just when the admissions were about to close, he again knocked at Lala Sain Das' door and said to him, in a voice ringing with earnestness and agitation, "My father is bent upon ruining my life. I don't want to join Agriculture College. Why is he so keen on putting me there? "

That settled the matter. "Go and get admission in

whichever college you like. Go with an easy mind. I shall sort out the matter with your father," Lalaji soothingly said to him.

Thus it was that Balraj joined Government College, Lahore in October 1930 where he was to study for his B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. (English) for the next four years.

Government College, Lahore, was certainly a college with a difference. It was one of the few colleges run directly by the then British government in India. With an imposing building, spacious lawns and playgrounds, a swimming pool, and a number of Englishmen as lecturers, it was the last word in social prestige. It occupied a leading position in sports, attracted the best students from all over the province, and it served as a kind of recruiting ground for officers for all the major administrative and military services in British India. For anyone aspiring to rise high in government service, in those days, Government College was the right place to join. As a matter of fact a degree from Government College was said to be the master key which 'opened all doors'. Many of its lecturers had studied in Cambridge and Oxford and consequently, the college had an English air about it. The latest fashions in dress in England did not take long to be introduced there. In the month of October, many of the English lecturers would return from England after their summer vacation, and whatever clothes they would be wearing on arrival, would become the fashion for the next year. The boys would rush to the tailors to get suits made to the latest cut. The students of Government College dressed smartly, sang English songs, took off their sola hats right in the English style to greet their teachers and as far as possible, adopted English ways and manners. To study in Government College, for an Indian student, was like studying in miniature England.

India was seething with unrest in those days. Gandhiji's second Civil Disobedience movement had been launched, preparations were afoot for a Round-Table

Conference in London, and the activities of the terrorists were increasingly attracting young patriots. At a stone's throw from Government College stood the building of D.A.V. College, which pulsated with national activity. As a matter of fact, it was from this college, after climbing its low boundary wall that Bhagat Singh, the renowned revolutionary, had committed his first insurrectionary act against the British government. But inside the precincts of Government College, not even the echoes of the outside world were heard. Many a student of Government College took pride in narrating how once a student came to the college wearing a Gandhi cap on his head, and was expelled within minutes from the rolls of the college. Students would discuss with relish His Majesty's New Year message, the latest events in sports or the latest American films starring Greta Garbo and Ronald Colman and others, but seldom was a word whispered about the freedom struggle. Otherwise, the college hummed with activity. There was an air of achievement all over the place: in sports, academic life, competitive examinations and so on.

The four years' stay in this college, from 1930 to 1934, proved momentous for Balraj, in many ways. He had not joined the college with a view to pursuing a service-career afterwards. The thought of entering a profession had not engaged his attention. As a matter of fact, taking to a profession never assumed any importance for him even in later life. He never thought in terms of a set vocation or a stable regular job. He was not cut that way. And government service was an anathema to him, because, in the atmosphere prevailing in the country, government servants were looked down upon as instruments of repression against the people. May be, if Father had not been well-off, and if Balraj had to shift for himself, he would have thought in terms of his future prospects. But that was not the case and he was blissfully indifferent to these considerations.

When, during his first vacation, Balraj came to

Rawalpindi, he was wearing his college blazer and a sola hat and had many exciting stories to tell about his college. He was quite enthused about it. He had begun to enjoy a kind of freedom he had never known before. His mind was opening out to new influences and new impressions. He spoke about his English teachers, particularly about Eric Dickinson and Langhorn, with great interest. He spoke about the college boat—club, of which he had become a member, about his new friends—Prem Kirpal and others. Eric Dickinson had studied in Oxford and was a man of genuine literary interests. Besides, he was very sociable with students; students walked in and out of his house freely and affectionately addressed him as 'Dicky'. "He lives in style, somewhat resembling oriental pomp," Balraj would say. "His seven-room apartment is stacked with books and every room has statutes of Gautam Buddha, with the lights so fitted that each time you press a button, the benign smile on Buddha's face lights up. In his dining room, the shaded electric light falls right over a tray of flowers lying in the middle of a big, round mahogany table. He is a carefree soul, and with leather patches on his coat and a pipe in his mouth and gentle, amiable ways; he is very different from the kind of aggressive British officers whom we have been seeing in Rawalpindi."

Of Langhorn, too, Balraj spoke with great enthusiasm. "You see, he even criticises Shakespeare. He would read a passage from *Hamlet* and say, 'Now, here is a crude country yokel from Stratford-on-Avon speaking'." Balraj was impressed by both Dickinson and Langhorn and became an enthusiastic student of English literature.

In Government College, Balraj began writing stories, too, in English. Some of these were published in the college journal, *Ravi* by name. One of the stories, a touching love-tale, is located in Chinari, a wayside village on the way to Srinagar, where a young passenger, stranded because of the landslide, develops a tender attachment with the young wife of a *dhabawala* (wayside food-shop), in

whose house he and many other passengers are lodged. The attachment is nipped in the bud when the road is repaired and the caravan of cars and buses resumes its journey towards Srinagar. He also wrote a few poems, one of which ran somewhat like this:

A pen...
A sheet of paper, lily white,
And Gods descend!

On another visit home during his vacations, Balraj brought with him a number of gramaphone records of western music, including Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata', Kroestler's violin recital 'Pathetique' and Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Sheharazad'. He had heard these at Dickinson's house and was enamoured of them. He also spoke enthusiastically about Shelley's poetry and read out passages from 'The Revolt of Islam' and 'Prometheus Unbound', and 'Ode to the West Wind'. He had also brought the reproductions of a number of paintings including one by Botticelli and talked about Mona Lisa, and Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci.

Besides his studies, Balraj had become the assistant secretary of the boat club, had joined the dramatic club, and was also an active member of the university union, of which he was later nominated as president by the then Vice-Chancellor, A.C. Woolner. And he was writing stories and poems, too, though not very regularly.

It was in Government College, too, that Balraj gained his first real insight into the realistic theatre. The dramatic club of the college was then run by two stalwarts, G.D. Sondhi and A.S. Bokhari. Sondhi had studied in Oxford, and it was widely rumoured that he had the rare distinction of playing the role of Hamlet on the Oxford stage, whereas Bokhari had been to Cambridge and understood the art of dramatic production very well. Government College was famous for its dramatic performances. Bokhari was an excellent director and Sondhi, a remarkable stage-designer;

together they made a fine team. The most distinctive feature of their production was realistic portrayal. Actors spoke on the stage in a natural conversational style; not in the exaggerated and stylised manner prevalent in the Parsi theatre. The stage-settings were realistic too. And the plays, usually adaptations from western plays, were of varied nature. Bokhari was extremely painstaking as a director and would insist that each movement, each gesture, each pause in speech, should be 'natural'; there should be nothing exaggerated or stagey about it. Rhetorical utterances, exaggerated gesticulations were absolutely taboo.

Although Balraj did not act in many plays, yet his active association with the dramatic club proved of immense benefit to him later on, both on the stage and the screen. The productions were also distinguished by attention to detail; there was nothing shoddy or unbalanced about them. They were slick productions, meticulous attention having been paid to costumes, sets, timings, etc. Everything was carefully planned and executed. The translations were invariably good, done usually by the noted Urdu writer, Imtiaz Ali Taj. In those days boys played the role of girls and Balraj, then a student of M.A., was chosen to play the role of Lady Foylo in 'The Man who Ate the Popomack'. During his stay in the college, Karel Capek's famous play 'R.U.R.', H.C. Nanda's '*Lili da Vyah*' (Punjabi) were staged. A year or two after leaving college, Balraj was again associated with the production of 'The Builder of Bridges' on Government College stage.

In 1933, when Balraj was in his final year at college, I joined the same college in Lahore and we lived together for about a year. His enthusiasm for Government College had considerably waned by that time and his attitude was becoming increasingly sceptical. He was no longer awed by the impressive ceremonials or the lordly ways of Government College lecturers. He had, meanwhile, been awarded the college-colour in boating and had been nominated

president of the university union by the Vice-Chancellor. Perhaps it was due to this growing scepticism that he resigned in a huff from the secretaryship of the boat club also. There was some misunderstanding in respect of a small amount in the accounts, and Prof. George Mathai, the honorary president of the club, asked Balraj to explain his view on the matter, and Balraj in a pique, resigned. Later when Prof. Mathai affectionately asked Balraj to resume his association with the boat club, Balraj's cryptic and rather curt reply was, "Sir, I have little self-respect left to spare."

The university union, of which he had become the president, was a students' organisation subsidised and run by the university authorities. There was another students' organisation, too, known as the students' union, which was a mass organisation and which was closely linked with the national movement. The university union was one of the means by which efforts were made to keep the student community away from politics and the national struggle. Lectures and seminars and small conferences were organised to discuss academic and literary questions. At the close of one such elitist conference Balraj threw a bombshell when he remarked in a short speech:

> To describe to you my impressions of this conference, I shall narrate to you a Punjabi anecdote, which runs as follows: One man says to another, 'At the top of my house there is a garret; above that garret there is a loft; within that loft there is a box; within that box there is a bag; within that bag there is a purse; within that purse there is a counterfeit paisa. I shall take out this counterfeit paisa and entertain you to sweetmeats'.
>
> Balraj sat down.

On another occasion, speaking perhaps at a dinner party, attended by quite a number of dignitaries of the university, Balraj said,

> The educational system in our country can be compared to a dinner party. The guests are dressed in their best dinner jackets, the table is glittering with silver cutlery and the costliest crockery, there is a host of waiters in attractive livery, but also, there is nothing to eat!

Such utterances merely reflected a kind of protest against the establishment, a kind of refusal to toe the line like other students. Mentally, he was finding it difficult to identify himself with an institution which served the British interests. Hence, such little notes of protest.

If anyone had seen Balraj during those Lahore days he would remember him as riding an old cycle, dressed in an odd way: a round-topped *pattoo* cap on his head, his college blazer, and below it, Scottish knicker-bockers! This unconventional dress had been designed by him and his college friend, Chetan Anand, and efforts were made to introduce it among other students also. This was their way of flouting the conventional norms of Government College.

Balraj used to make acid comments about Government College quite frequently. Once, on the occasion of the Diwali festival, he and I were passing through Anarkali, (shopping centre) which was full of milling crowds, and some student misbehaved towards a girl passing by. Balraj said to me: "He must be a Law College student. Law College students are notorious for this kind of behaviour. But don't you believe that Government College students are any better. Only they misbehave in a more sophisticated way."

On another occasion, seeing the photograph of the members of the Indian hockey team, in a newspaper, he remarked, "You can make out a Government College player at once. He will stand right in front when a photograph is taken. A Government College student will push ten other players aside to be able to stand in the foreground."

He often used to say, "This college attracts the cream of students from all over the province, and turns them into bureaucratic scum."

Balraj once very contemptuously spoke about a cousin of ours, a senior student in the college, who, in his thesis, had used the word 'Congresswallahs' for Congressmen.

The question of entering civil service never crossed Balraj's mind. This was partly due to his family background and the early influences, and partly to the fact that by and large, the bureaucracy was looked down upon as an instrument of oppression in our country, in those days.

An incident took place at the staging of 'The Man who Ate the Popomack', which, though of little significance in itself, points to Balraj's rather bold and nonconformist temperament. The plays in Government College usually commenced at 9 p.m., after dinner. After the show, the cast would assemble in the spacious staff-room, where a table would be laid for light supper. Student-members of the cast were served tea with slices of dry bread, while the lecturers would be seen munching sandwiches, meat cutlets and puddings. Had the lecturers eaten in a separate room, it wouldn't have mattered much, but they ate their sandwiches and puddings at the same table at which students munched dry bread. One evening, however, when the play was over, and the cast assembled for supper, it was found that the tiffin-boxes of the lecturers were empty. Some fellows had eaten up their supper while the play was going on. Whether Balraj was one of them, I cannot say for certain, but certain it is that he was very happy that the high and mighty lecturers had been taught a lesson. The lecturers were tight-lipped over the incident. When someone said the lecturers had brought their tiffins from their homes, Balraj retorted, "It makes little difference. They had no business to eat cutlets, when we were munching bread." It certainly required courage to do this kind of thing, particularly in those days, when

Government College lecturers behaved no less than I.C.S. officers of the government.

Balraj was not much interested in sports in later years, but he was fond of swimming in the college swimming pool and of long walks and excursions and outings. Most of the time he moved within the academic ambit, the college and university libraries, Eric Dickinson's house, the swimming pool, the university union and an occasional visit to Stiffles or Lorangs, the two restaurants on the Mall in those days. The coffee house as a students' haunt did not exist then; it was opened a few years later. He was very fond of reading, although there was nothing systematic or organised about his reading. As a matter of fact, there was nothing methodical about any of his activities. During the days when he was taking his M.A. (English) examination, it suddenly occurred to him that he should read more of H.G. Wells'—one of the novelists prescribed for the M.A. students—novels and not confine himself to the two novels prescribed in the syllabus. And so, during the few preparatory days at his disposal, he paid little attention to the textbooks and went on reading and enjoying H.G. Wells' novels. The approaching examination was for him an unwelcome intrusion in his enjoyment of Wells' books. Consequently, he spoiled his paper and did poorly in it.

It was during those days, in his last year at college, that one day he came home looking very excited. We were then living at 16 Cooper Road, where we had rented two rooms in the house of a friend. Balraj had gone for a haircut to one of the expensive hair-cutting saloons on the Mall. On coming home, he picked up a copy of the college magazine, again got on to his cycle and disappeared. He came back about half an hour later, excited as before.

"What is the matter?" I asked him.

His face flushed. "At the hair-dresser's an Anglo-Indian girl cut my hair. I told her that I wrote stories and

she expressed a keen desire to read them, so I took the college magazine to her. She is interested in literature, you know. She impressed me as being very cultured."

How many stories of Balraj's this 'beautiful and gentle hair-dresser' read, I do not know, but nothing seems to have come of this acquaintance, because Balraj did not mention anything about her afterwards.

Balraj developed quite a few friendships and strong attachments in those days, particularly in Kashmir, where our family used to live in summer. What with his handsome face, his candid and buoyant disposition and very sociable ways—he was a delightful conversationalist, bubbling with humour and zest—his company was often sought after. A young girl, a friend of one of our cousins, became Balraj's ardent admirer and once dreamt that Balraj had become the president of the United States and was coming down a broad staircase to meet her! On another occasion, a young lady, another of our family circle, got annoyed with Balraj over something and retorted, "Don't you take airs that you are very handsome. Your father is much more handsome than you are!" Another friendship of those days was with our girl cousin Santosh, junior to Balraj by about five years, which was destined to prove strong and fateful in Balraj's later life. Social life of the young people in those days was confined very much to family circles. Thus it was that friendships and attachments grew. There was little of the open and uninhibited meeting of boys and girls as developed later in our big towns and universities. Such friendships remained 'nice and proper', hedged in, as they were, by tradition and convention.

Independent and impetuous by nature, Balraj would do things which were often off the beaten track. But it would be wrong to think that Balraj's interests and inclinations had assumed a set direction or had matured into a passion or even an all-absorbing interest. At times he would show a rare sense of determination, bordering on

obstinacy. He was also more sensitive and bold, reacted sharply to what was happening outside the precincts of Government College, and was more socially aware than the average Government College student.

Our family would spend the summer season in Srinagar in those days, where Father had built a house, close to the house of his late sister and her large family. Once, we had all gone on a picnic to one of the Mughal gardens, where Balraj suddenly took it into his head to jump across a waterway. The waterway was fairly wide and had a stony pavement on either side. Other boys also joined in. But it was a risky business. If the person could not jump over the waterway, his foot would fall into the water, and the uneven surface of the water-bed could cause a sprain or a fracture. Balraj tried once, twice, a third time, but failed. Each time he would come running from a distance and his foot would fall right into the water. Other boys, too, did not succeed, but soon enough they gave up and went away. But Balraj would not give in. He kept trying. He would sit down at times to take some rest and then try again. After many an attempt, he at last managed to jump across the waterway, and returned to the company, looking triumphant and elated.

I remember another incident too which was even more hazardous than the earlier one. This also took place in Srinagar. In the Exhibition Ground in Srinagar, there was a high wooden slide and Balraj suddenly decided to slide down it in the standing posture. Its surface was very glossy, and even those who slid down it sitting on their haunches, very often lost their balance and tumbled down to the bottom. To come down standing was certainly inviting trouble. A person could fall on his head and break several bones in his body, if his balance was upset. He could even fall over the low railing on to the ground on the side and get hurt badly. But there was no stopping Balraj. Twice he tried, and both the times he fell down very badly, his trousers torn at the knees and his body

bruised at many places. But he would not give in and kept on trying, much to the annoyance and nervousness of his friends, till at last he discovered the hang of balancing himself; he came down in the standing posture, with splendid grace and balance, his hands outstretched.

The house that Father had built in Srinagar had quite a few fanciful touches given to it by Balraj. He designed an arched high gate in the outer wall of the house, which gave to it the appearance of a church-entrance; he designed an octagonal dining table, upturned wooden pegs for clothes and very low armchairs for the verandah, innovations which proved to be very expensive for Father, but were certainly very original and striking.

Kashmir, then a princely state, was also the holiday resort of many Englishmen. In places like Gulmarg, Sonmarg, the Europeans holidayed in large numbers. The middle-class educated youth in those days viewed the situation in a strange light. Maharaja Hari Singh of Kashmir in their eyes was a rebel prince. They had all the sympathy for the prince, and looked upon the presence of the British as an encroachment. The prince, soon after his enthronement, had taken a few independent steps, for which he was admired by the young people. He was said to have opposed the British Resident and insisted that only one flag should fly in Kashmir and that should be the prince's flag; he was also said to have instituted a twenty-one-gun salute for himself, a salute which was reserved for His Majesty the King. It had not taken long for the prince to be humbled and shown his place, but he had created quite an impression as one who had stood up for his rights. And it was largely believed by young people that the many stories current about the prince had been spread by the British to blackmail him. Consequently, their attitude towards the British tourists and holiday-makers was somewhat hostile. Once in Gulmarg, Balraj was riding a pony on the bridle road when an Englishman happened to come from the other side. "You should not

whip the horse so badly," remarked the Englishman as he passed him by.

Balraj stopped the horse and retorted, "I have seen Englishmen whip human beings in a worse manner. Your sympathy for the horse is rather misplaced."

In those very days the first mass upsurge of the people of Kashmir was taking place against the princely rule. Its objectives were not very clear then, and the middle-class young men felt quite bewildered and had little sympathy for the struggle of the people. Sometimes jokes were cracked at the expense of Kashmiris, who would stampede in the face of a *lathi*-charge and leave heaps of their *chappals* (footwear) and *lohis* (warm blankets) behind on the ground. While the sentiment against the British was strong, there was little sympathy for the struggling Kashmiris. Balraj, therefore sprang quite a surprise one day, when he said, sitting among friends: "Why, all the purse-strings in the state are either in the hands of the Maharaja or the Punjabi traders who do not belong here and who exploit the local inhabitants."

Balraj's observation was disturbing to many ears.

Balraj's association with Kashmir, starting from early thirties, was to become deep and intimate. Kashmir became for him a kind of second home. He revelled deeply in its idyllic surroundings, long hikes, long swims in the lakes, and mountain-climbing. Kashmir was to become for him a place of deep personal attachments. It was here that he wrote some of his charming little poems and stories. It was also to become a field for his cultural and literary activities in the years to come.

## BACK FROM LAHORE

In April 1934, Balraj returned to Rawalpindi after doing his M.A. in English and joined Father in business. It sounds rather odd that he should have done so, particularly when his interests did not lie in this direction. This decision, which in reality was less of a decision and more of an attempt to evade a decision, can be understood when we know that the only alternative to business in those days was government service, and that had been rejected outright both by Balraj and Father. Writing in those days could not be viewed as a career, and I wonder if it had ever occurred to Balraj to adopt writing as a whole-time occupation. Perhaps writing and business paired well for a person of Balraj's temperament.

Father's business was a very convenient affair. He held the sole agencies of some firms in England and France, for whom he secured orders from the market, and earned his commission. Over the years he had come to have a regular set of clients and a few running brands for which orders were secured without much effort. Very often the dealers would send orders on their own, which Father would forward to the manufacturers and suppliers. Thus, indent business, which Father had been doing, involved little risk, and also little or no investment. When Father used to think of expanding business, it was in terms of introducing new lines of trade such as piecegoods, etc. When Balraj joined him, Father tried to revive his old connections with piecegoods manufacturers and also

secured a few new agencies. For Balraj, to do this kind of indent business was easier, for it did not involve any financial risk, and gave him plenty of time to himself.

Balraj took to business in his usual carefree, nonchalant manner. He could not become a typical commission agent even if he wanted to, with his college education, his free and easy ways and his literary bent of mind. To be a good commission agent meant cultivating good relations with shopkeepers, putting up with their whims, and offering all kinds of incentives to secure orders. In our markets, a commision agent, particularly the one who does indent business, is looked down on by the dealers as a bit of a nuisance. If he is dealing in a well-established commodity then he is received with a welcoming smile, but if he is trying to introduce a new line, he is kept waiting for hours before the shopkeeper condescends so much as to look at his samples. A commission agent has therefore to have perseverance and a thick skin; qualities which, alas, Balraj did not have. A needy commission agent might have gone about placating customers, distributing calendars and free gifts among them, and putting up with all kinds of humiliations. But Balraj was not ready. Nevertheless, he took to it cheerfully and tried to develop it in his usual playful, unconventional style. A flat was taken on rent in the market and a regular office set up in it. As was usual with him, he designed its furniture—a semi-circular table with numerous drawers, high, roof-touching almirahs for samples—and engaged a broker and a peon.

I remember one occasion when he was busy launching a new variety of long cloth into a market, in a rather naive manner. He had received a small consignment of this cloth with a view to introducing it in the market. The usual practice in such cases is that a few pieces of the new variety are distributed among the principal wholesale and retail dealers and thereby the reaction of the market is assessed. But Balraj went about it in his own way. He decided to popularise the name of the brand first, which in

this case was Harrick's long cloth. He sent out a few of his old college friends into the market to ask for Harrick's long cloth at different shops, thinking that thereby the shopkeepers would be induced to place bulk orders for a variety for which the customers were enquiring. But the game flopped sooner than Balraj had expected. One of the shopkeepers, who had himself been an old classmate of Balraj recognised these familiar faces, and told one of them to send Balraj to him so that he might teach him how to promote the sales of long cloth!

The fact of the matter is that even if Balraj had been more seriously inclined he would not have made much headway in business. It was one thing for Father to dream of large-scale business in big commercial centres, it was quite another to plunge into such business. He himself had earned his life's earnings penny by penny through hard work, contending himself with small orders and small commissions. Had he earned through speculation, he would have developed at least the speculative mentality of a businessman. Moreover, he had never had much hankering for wealth—which is a serious handicap for one who professes to be a businessman. You cannot expect a man to play on high stakes who is always reciting couplets from *bhakti* poetry, condemning lust for riches and eulogising charity and social service or telling his children the virtues of simple living and high thinking. By the time Balraj returned from Lahore, Father was already living a semi-retired life, devoting much time to the missionary activities of the Arya Samaj. Father was not too keen to invest big sums of money to do business on one's own account, and Balraj was not too keen either that he should do so. And indent business of the type from which Father had made his money, was already becoming obsolete; the manufacturers were keen that the agent should set up a regular showroom and hold stocks of goods on his own account. To expand business meant setting up a wholesale shop, for which neither Father nor Balraj was prepared.

For Balraj, it was easier to do indent business because it did not involve any risk and was much less subject to market fluctuations. Hence, the end of the tether was reached sooner than either of them expected.

Balraj was therefore preoccupied with business in a casual sort of way. Much of his time was spent with his old friends, Jaswant Rai, Bakshi Kalyan Das and others. Long walks, long hikes on the bicycle, long discussions on poetry and politics, a lot of fiction reading, filled his time. Balraj did not plunge into any serious activity on his return from college. Life was a bit of a lark for him in those days, although this period did not last long. An interesting little episode would give some idea of the playful manner in which he passed his time in those days.

Among his friends, Bakshi Kalyan Das was one, who, like Balraj, loved adventure and open-air activity. They would go out together on cycles to discover bathing pools in the countryside or climb the Murree hills or go out on long walks. Now this young man suddenly found himself betrothed to a girl against his wishes. He did not have the courage to break off the engagement because he could not displease an old uncle of his, who had brought about this engagement. Well, Balraj came to his rescue, in his own inimitable way. One fine afternoon he wrote out an anonymous letter, addressed to this old uncle, wherein he implored the gentleman not to ruin the life of the girl and to call off the engagement because the boy chosen for her was 'impotent'. He then gave it to his office peon to deliver at a particular shoe-shop which was being run by the elderly gentleman. The letter was delivered but, alas, the gentleman was not taken in. The culprit was also easily traced because one of his shop-assistants recognised Balraj's peon. And so the game was out and the elderly gentleman walked down to our house the same evening to lodge a complaint about Balraj's misdemeanour. The betrothal, however, was called off later, because some sort of misapprehension lingered in the minds of the girl's

parents and it was not easy to establish beyond doubt that Bakshi Kalyan Das was perfectly fit and healthy.

It was near about this time that Balraj's own engagement took place with Damyanti, Jaswant Rai's younger sister. The proposal had been mooted a year or so earlier, when Balraj was in his final year at college. Balraj had always held Jaswant Rai in great esteem and regard, bordering on veneration and had felt deeply honoured at the proposal. But with his usual candour he also told Jaswant Rai at the very first opportunity, about his attraction for his cousin, Santosh. Jaswant Rai, while appreciating Balraj's candour and sincerity, dismissed the attraction as mere 'youthful infatuation' pointing out to Balraj that among the Hindus, marriage with one's first cousin was out of the question. Jaswant Rai's world was law for Balraj and the matter ended there, at least for the time being and Balraj's marriage with Damyanti was solemnised on 6th December 1936 at Rawalpindi. As life showed later it was neither mere 'youthful infatuation', nor were the rules of Hindu society which forbid marriage between first cousins to prove too sacrosanct.

Damyanti was an exceptionally charming girl, with a loving and generous temperament, and transparent sincerity. The youngest daughter in a family of five brothers and two sisters, she had received the love and affection of everyone in the house, and had grown up to have a very sociable and cheerful personality. Her coming into Balraj's life was like a ray of sunshine. Together they made a very charming couple.

I returned home after completing my studies and found the atmosphere in the house greatly altered. That was in the summer of 1937. Father looked vexed, and Mother would take me into corners and whisper to me the goings on, about which she was no less worried. She would want me to speak to my brother and tell him to sober down a bit, for, as she put it, "He is not the first boy to get married in the world." Balraj and Dammo—as she

was affectionately called—had, by their unconventional ways become the talk of the town, much to the embarrassment of both our parents.

Rawalpindi was a provincial town; a kind of town in which everything is everybody's business. Every little incident that occurred would get known to everybody within a matter of hours and become the talk of the town. Conservative in many ways, it had its own norms and conventions. Women were not expected to walk step in step with their husbands in the streets, but behind them with the face slightly covered. If a couple was going in a *tonga*, the husband was supposed to sit on the front seat, with the coachman and the wife on the back seat. Women were not expected to go bare-headed in the open or laugh loudly in the street or even move about freely. Naturally, therefore, when, soon after their marriage, Damyanti appeared, sitting on the carrier of Balraj's cycle, wearing her most ordinary clothes, without even a gold bangle on her wrist, out on a long ride towards Topi Park, it sent a shiver of shock through every family-friend and relative who saw them. There was hardly anything of a newly-married bride about Damyanti, from the very first day of her marriage. Sometimes the couple would be seen wandering about in the fields outside the town. One afternoon they were seen standing in an open wagon of a goods train moving out of Rawalpindi and heading towards Chaklala, a suburb of Rawalpindi. No wonder, Balraj's unconventional ways were proving to be a source of embarrassment to both our parents. Both were wrapped up in each other and went about unmindful of what people thought of them. And yet, truly speaking, there was hardly anything extraordinary or radical about what they were doing. In the context of another town, their behaviour would have appeared perfectly normal.

There was yet another thing that worried Father. Balraj was fast losing interest in business. The plea that it might only be a passing phase and that Balraj might soon

settle down to a normal routine of life would not convince Father. He would shake his head and say that he feared Balraj would not stick to business.

As a matter of fact, the day I returned from Lahore, Balraj was not in Rawalpindi. I was told that he had gone with some 'bearded fellow', Devendra Satyarthi by name, to collect folk-songs in the surrounding villages. Mother also complained that 'the bearded fellow' had been staying in the house for nearly a month, and that she did not know how much longer he and his family would stick on.

A few days later both the 'vagabonds' returned, happy and enthused over the bagful of folk-songs they had collected. Devendra Satyarthi was already well known in the field of folklore and was soon to venture forth into other linguistic regions, besides the Punjab, to collect folk-songs. The present collection of 'Pothohari' folk-songs was to prove to be a valuable contribution in this field, and Balraj had taken to this work with an eager enthusiasm.

Gradually however, as time passed, Balraj's inner restlessness increased. What outwardly appeared to be his reckless, rather Bohemian way of life, was in reality, a manifestation of this inner restlessness. He was not content with the mode of life he had adopted and his impatience with it was increasing, with each passing day. That also explains the varied shifts that took place in his interests during the next few months. Dissatisfied with the vocation he had adopted, he was now groping for a better outlet for his talents and energies.

The visit to the villages in the company of Devendra Satyarthi had been an entirely new and exhilarating experience. His literary interest which heretofore had been largely nursed on English literature, and had been confined to books, was now finding a living local context, and the person with whom he had been going about, was a dedicated soul who was doing pioneering work in this field. Soon after, Balraj's attention turned towards writing in Hindi.

The craving to live in a bigger world, to expand his horizons and enlarge his sphere of experience, to know more about people and places, was something intrinsic to his nature, which asserted itself again and again in his life. He was made that way. Father sometimes thought that Balraj had a flighty temperament and would not stick to anything. That was not so. It was the inner urge to grow, to live a fuller life, to seek self-expression in a wider sphere that made him restless and forced him to make new experiments.

In the late summer of 1937, when we were all in Kashmir, Balraj suddenly took it into his head to launch a literary journal in English. He had found an associate in Durga Prasad Dhar, who was then actively engaged in students' politics and had become equally enthusiastic about the venture. Both of them got receipt books printed and went about collecting funds. The journal was to be called *Kung Posh*, a Kashmiri name, meaning 'saffron'. Near about the same time Balraj learnt about the famous Kashmiri poet, Mehjoor, who worked as a revenue official in a remote village in the valley. Balraj went to meet him and brought with him a few of the poet's famous lyrics, and learnt from the poet many facts about his life. (Years later, when Balraj was well-established in the films, he got the Kashmir government interested in the production of a feature film on Mehjoor's life. With his initiative and perseverance, the film was made—the first feature film in Kashmiri language—with Balraj's son, Parikshit, playing the role of the poet, and himself and Kishori Kaul in the roles of the poet's father and singing girl respectively. The film was directed by Prabhat Mukherji.)

That summer in Kashmir turned out to be a very eventful one. We had innumerable guests staying with us, including Jaswant Rai, B.P.L. Bedi and his wife, Freda, with their infant son. The Bedis were at that time entering Indian politics as socialists. They were bringing out a quarterly journal from Lahore, called *Contemporary India* in

English. They were also toying in those days, with the idea of bringing out a weekly in English which could cover both political and cultural matters.

It was in those days, too, that Mr Bhawnani visited Kashmir, along with David, the famous screen-actor, then a young man bubbling with zest and energy. Mr Bhawnani was then producing a film called '*Himalaya ki Beti*', and offered Balraj a role in the film. But Balraj did not have any inclination to go in for a film career at that time. A very cordial friendship, however, developed between him and David.

It was in those very days that Balraj with Durga Prasad Dhar, Bamzai and some other enthusiasts decided to stage an English play, James Flecker's 'Yasmin' in Srinagar. Copies of the play were typed out and rehearsals started in Sri Pratap College. In those days boys used to play the parts of girls and Bamzai was selected to play the role of Yasmin, the leading lady.

All these varied activities, more or less at the same time, only reflected Balraj's inner restlessness and his increasing dissatisfaction. Such cultural ventures were perhaps a desperate attempt on Balraj's part to convince himself that he could seek some satisfaction for himself even while he was pursuing business as a career, that he could somehow reconcile business with his inner urges. He had stuck on to business for nearly three years, out of deference for Father's wishes, but his heart was not in it, and his dissatisfaction had begun to increase.

Then one day, there was a showdown in the house. It was late August and all the guests had departed. Balraj suddenly declared that he was leaving home to seek his fortunes elsewhere. Perhaps Father was half-prepared for such a declaration but he was nevertheless shocked and unhappy. Balraj had no clear idea as to where he intended to go and what he intended to do. Every time Father asked him, his reply would be, "Give me your blessings and let me go. I shall certainly find something to do."Then

followed days of endless argument, heavy with depression.

Father was anxious on many counts. How will Balraj support himself and his wife? Father had seen hard days himself and did not want that his son should face similar hardships, particularly when Balraj had no clear idea as to what he intended to do and was taking a leap in the dark. As the days passed, Father's anxiety increased. Sometimes he would bring out his old ledgers to show Balraj how lucrative his business had been. Sometimes he would dwell on the virtues of an independent life which a businessman enjoyed. "You will sleep your own sleep," he would say, repeating a Punjabi saying, again and again. Sometimes Father would ask Damyanti to dissuade her husband from going out on a wild-goose chase. Not only between Father and Balraj, but also between Father and Mother there would be endless arguments. Between the two, Mother was more composed, and took a more balanced view of the situation. In her own characteristic way she said one day, "Every fledgling flies out of its parents' nest when it grows its wings; you should be happy that your son is eager to stand on his own." At another time she said: "The only other person that Balraj should consult is his wife. It is for Balraj and his wife to decide about their future. You and I do not come into the picture."

But Father would not listen and became increasingly restless and impatient. Once, sitting in the verandah, he took his turban off his head and said, "Look, have some consideration for these grey hair. I am no longer young. You have a duty towards your ageing parents also." But Balraj was adamant. Not that Balraj was not attached to the family. He was too deeply attached to his parents to cause them unnecessary hurt. He was also aware of the wrench that his leaving home would cause to the family. But his mind was made up and no amount of persuasions and appeals were to be of any avail. Business had become odious to him. And he felt that he had drifted too long in a

way of life which was indolent and wasteful and that he must plunge into some sort of activity and make way for himself.

When, despite all his efforts, Father did not succeed, he gave in, in a manner typical of Father. When he was convinced that Balraj would not budge, Father started attending anxiously to the preparations for Balraj's departure. It was a touching sight. Balraj must have the right kind of clothes; he must be properly supplied with money. Mother got busy with preparing a canisterful of *pinnies*—a typical practice in Punjabi homes when mothers prepare a large quantity of sweetmeat-balls for their sons when the latter are departing on a long journey. Father sent out letters to his friends and relatives in different towns, requesting them to help Balraj in whatever way they could, if Balraj called on them. He even got a letter of credit opened in Balraj's favour. And when the day of Balraj's departure came, he did something which was again very typical of him. He handed to Balraj a dozen or so postcards, all of them addressed to Father himself. On each postcard a few lines had already been written to the following effect:

Dear Father,

Damyanti and I are both keeping well by God's grace. Please do not have any anxiety on our account.

Your affectionate son

Handing over the postcards to Balraj, Father said, "I know you are a lazy fellow, but I believe that you can do this much. You have only to sign one of these postcards once every week and post it to me. This will keep us informed that both of you are keeping well. I don't ask anything else of you."

On 20th of September 1937, on the eve of his departure, Balraj explained to me the few rules and technicalities of Father's business. He told me what C.I.F. and C.I. meant, or what F.O.R. Bombay meant, how rates were

calculated, how *hundies* were drawn; he explained about indents and invoices and demurrages, and the next morning he and his wife left home to seek their fortunes in the wide world.

**At Lahore**

Their first halt was at Lahore. There Balraj took his first, and also his last, plunge in journalism. We had been waiting for news from him with breathless suspense, at Srinagar, when suddenly one day, nearly a month after his departure, a bundle of big, yellow posters, announcing the publication of a weekly, named *Monday Morning,* arrived. Enthused over my brother's first independent venture, I went about hanging these posters on the trees and on the walls of houses in our locality. The editorial board consisted of Mr and Mrs B.P.L. Bedi, Balraj and Jag Parvesh Chunder, an erstwhile college fellow of Balraj. Although Balraj did not have any clear plans at the time of his departure, on meeting the Bedis at Lahore, the project was revived and the weekly paper launched.

There were two English dailies that were published from Lahore in those days: *The Tribune,* a nationalist daily, and the *Civil and Military Gazette,* a newspaper that supported the British government and its policies. But neither of the two appeared on Mondays. So, it was thought that the appearance of *Monday Morning* would fill a gap and ensure ready sales.

Looking at it from this distance of time one wonders at the nonchalant manner in which the venture was launched, for the editors had neither the resources nor the know-how of a weekly journal. Their enthusiasm and youthful energy were their only assets. It was planned that the paper would cover, beside news, cultural events and contain stories and poems, as also articles projecting socialist thought and ideology.

We waited eagerly for the first issue of the paper, but when at last it came, my heart sank. It was a two-sheet

paper, full of printing mistakes. We did not know what impact the paper had in Lahore, but it was certainly poor showing and a bad beginning. We attributed it to lack of experience and anxiously began waiting for the next issue. The second issue, a week later, was even worse, so far as printing mistakes were concerned and we feared that such a paper was not destined to last long. A couple of more issues came, but none was such as could promise survival, let alone a bright future. Father was keen that Balraj should have some measure of success in his first venture, for otherwise he would be sorely discouraged. Meanwhile, we received a letter from a relative living in Lahore, saying that he had met Balraj inside a printing press, where he sat on the floor, unshaven, in high fever, correcting proofs and that Balraj looked tired and exhausted. Father was about to despatch me to Lahore, to see how matters stood with my brother, when we received Balraj's own letter saying that he had walked out of the venture and that he was not sorry for having done so. We almost heaved a sigh of relief. The paper had involved considerable strain, both physical and financial. Moreover, Balraj had soon enough learnt that this was not the kind of activity for which he was meant. The experience had left him sad, but a good deal wiser.

It was during his stay in Lahore that Balraj began writing stories in Hindi. In a sense, he was not entirely new to this sphere of Hindi writing. Quite a few of his friends and relatives, some of them even from our own family, like Chandra Gupta Vidyalankar, our brother-in-law, Satyawati Malik, our girl cousin, and Purusharthawati, our highly talented and sensitive girl cousin, had been regularly writing in Hindi. Balraj's output was not much, not even regular, but his stories were well-received and he had begun to be noticed. One of the stories, written in those days, *The Return*, is the story of a Kashmiri peasant who is released from jail on the eve of the Maharaja's birthday in Srinagar. Coming down the Hariparvat, the

old jail on the hill where he was confined, he finds the city of Srinagar gaily bedecked and a festive atmosphere prevailing all round. Elated by the sight, he joins the crowds that throng the streets and goes celebrating the Maharaja's birthday, in his own way. He is still in a joyful mood when, at dead of night, he finds himself in a residential locality of well-to-do people. Emboldened by a renewed sense of confidence and well-being, he walks into one of the houses. Going from one room to the other—the inmates having gone to see the celebrations—he chances upon a bottle of wine, which he drinks in his mood of light-headedness. Soon intoxicated, he begins to sing and dance and imitate the calls of the night-watchman who has meanwhile come on duty. The poor wretch is again arrested, and when the day breaks, he finds himself being taken back to the same jail on the hill, from which he had been released the previous evening.

There was a certain boldness of spirit and vitality in Balraj's stories. He was tackling new themes, which dealt not merely with private emotions or domestic situations but were related to the wider context of social life.

While in Lahore, he again began to take active interest in dramatic activity. The dramatic club of his old college, Government College, was taking up the production of 'The Builder of Bridges', and Balraj got involved in it. The play was being produced by his old teacher, Harish Kathpalia, and Balraj's wife, Damyanti, was cast in the main role.

Balraj's stay in Lahore, however, was shortlived. Before he knew where he was, he and his wife had packed up their few belongings and had left for Santiniketan.

It was not exactly to Santiniketan that they had gone. Their immediate destination was Calcutta, where S.H. Vatsyayana, the elder brother of one of Balraj's old classfellows and a zealous Hindi writer, was then living. Balraj and Damyanti landed up in his flat and Balraj started looking round for work.

In Calcutta his output in writing increased somewhat. He began contributing humorous pieces to a pictorial weekly, called *Sachitra Bharat*, from which he earned exactly four rupees per article. His interesting children's tale, *'Dhapor Shankh'*, was written in those days.

Life was becoming hard for him. Literary contributions did not bring any money worth the name, and Damyanti was carrying his child. And so, when Balraj learnt about a vacancy in Santiniketan for the post of a Hindi teacher at the meagre salary of forty rupees a month, he applied for it, and on securing it, left for Santiniketan. That was in the winter of 1937. To find himself suddenly in Santiniketan was an entirely new and exhilarating experience for Balraj. It used to be said in those days that Sevagram was the political capital, the seat of India's struggle for freedom, where the Father of the Nation lived, and Santiniketan was the cultural capital, where Gurudev Tagore lived. The currents of the aspirations of the Indian people and their cultural and political awakening passed as powerfully through Santiniketan, as they did through Sevagram.

Santiniketan was located in idyllic surroundings, and had a refined, rather rarified cultural atmosphere. Music pervaded the scene. Balraj was thrilled when he was woken up at dawn on the very first day by the strains of a melodious song sung by a group of boys and girls, out on the customary *vaitalik*. Classes were held in the shade of trees. And sitting under a tree, you could always have a glimpse of Tagore, with his fair, handsome face and flowing white beard sitting in his chair in the verandah of his house. There Balraj listened to Bengali music, and to the inimitable tunes composed by Tagore himself for his lyrics. Balraj had come to live and breathe in an atmosphere different from the atmosphere prevailing anywhere else in India. So far he had lived in places where the Englishman's presence was felt in everything, where art and scholarship had the stamp of western culture on them.

Here was a place which was typically Indian, where, though the western influence was not kept out, it did not dominate either; where artists and thinkers were living closer to the life of their own people. It was not a kind of exclusive retreat, as it was then made out to be, away from the strife and struggle of life. It was pulsating with the aspirations of our people, who were yearning to develop culturally on their own, who were waking up to a new renaissance of culture. There Balraj met artists, scholars and revolutionaries who had dedicated themselves to the cause of the country's freedom. And it also so happened that while Balraj was there, at first Gandhiji and later Pandit Nehru, visited Santiniketan. Besides Tagore, there were such stalwarts as Kshitismohan Sen, an authority on medieval poetry, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, the famous Hindi scholar and writer, Nandalal Bose, the great artist, who drew for his subjects from the life of the common people. No wonder it was a highly exciting and enriching experience for Balraj.

There were young men in those days who poohpoohed Tagore's poetry, which to them reeked of sentimentality and mysticism, to whom Santiniketan appeared as a 'circus of culture'. But Balraj, despite all his youthful exuberance and sense of independence, had never nursed a sceptical attitude to things. There was much that impressed him deeply and influenced his personality and his view of things, although he did not romanticise or glorify things either.

In far-away Rawalpindi, Father was still uneasy and anxious about Balraj. There was as yet no indication that Balraj was settling down in life, and what Father had heard about Santiniketan, it must have added to his anxiety rather than lessened it.

On one occasion a Sikh youth called on us at Rawalpindi. He was a young artist who lived and worked in Santiniketan and had come on a short holiday and Balraj had asked him to call on us before he returned to

Santiniketan. He was an extremely simple and unassuming young man, very gentle and soft-spoken. As expected, Father showered him with questions, about how much money Balraj earned, how he and his wife were lodged, and if good quality of milk and *ghee* (fat) were available in Santiniketan. The young artist tried to allay Father's apprehensions as best as he could. At last Father said, "Are people religous-minded there? Do they offer their prayers regularly?"

To Father, next to a man's vocation, the most important thing was his faith in God. For him, it was a test of moral integrity in a person if he offered his prayers regularly. To this, the young man replied, "There is no temple or mosque in Santiniketan, but God's name is very much there on the lips of the people and in their hearts...."

The answer pleased Father so much that he began to take a more charitable view of Santiniketan and of Balraj's stay there.

A few months later, Balraj and his wife came to Rawalpindi, for a brief stay. Both of them were dressed in simple, home-spun *khadi*. Balraj looked a changed man. His head was close cropped, he had a goatee on his chin, and he was wearing a curious-looking *pattoo* (coarse woollen) waistcoat which he had designed himself. Father was both pleased and worried—pleased because his son was a man living up to Father's ideal of simple living and high thinking, and worried because he was still a flotsam. At Santiniketan, besides teaching, Balraj was writing stories in Hindi. He was still contributing humorous essays to *Sachitra Bharat*—one of which entitled 'Dwivediji is still Laughing', a short character-sketch of Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, which was a very engaging piece. His stories, *The Overcoat*, *Basant kya Kahega*, and others were also written at this time. He also went to attend a conference of Hindi writers in Calcutta, in the company of Hazari Prasad Dwivedi where he had the chance to meet Jainendra Kumar and a number of other eminent Hindi writers. H

indulged in some debunking also at the conference directed mainly at the highly stylised mode of expression that prevailed among some Hindi writers at that time.

His love of drama too had continued to hold his interest. He staged Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* at Santiniketan: a venture which proved very instructive to him, particularly in respect of the technicalities of production, in which the Bengalis had many original ideas.

In later years, speaking about his stay at Santiniketan, Balraj often dwelt on the conversation he had once had with Tagore, on the question of the language which a writer should adopt as his mode of creative self-expression. Although Balraj was writing in Hindi at that time, and would now and then compose a poem in English too or translate one into English—as he did one of Dhani Ram Chatrik's Punjabi poems, which was published in *Visva Bharati*, a journal brought out from Santiniketan—he did not have any clear-cut ideas on this question, and largely believed that it made little difference if a creative writer wrote in his mother tongue or in any other tongue, acquired by him, be it English or Hindi. Tagore's views were very clear and emphatic on the subject. When Balraj told him that he wrote in Hindi, although his mother tongue was Punjabi, and that Hindi was the language of our people, and one of the important national languages, Tagore's answer was: "A mistress can never take the place of a wife, however, attractive she may be."

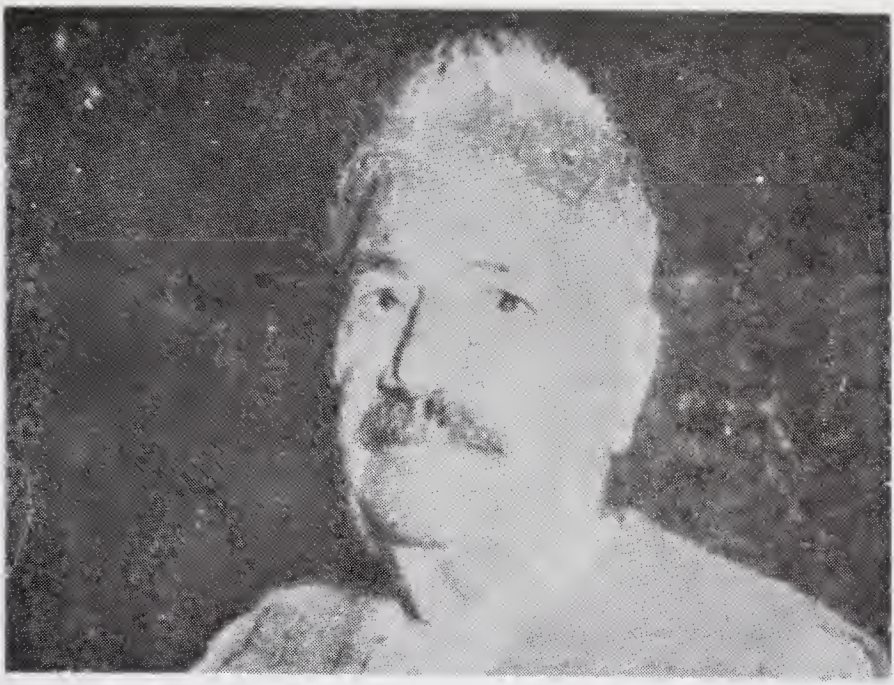
And he told Balraj, that, although he often translated his own poems into English, he never composed them originally in English; he also referred to Guru Nanak's poetry, and reciting one of the couplets said how difficult it was for him to render it into any other language.

This observation had stuck in Balraj's mind, and years later, when Balraj turned enthusiastically towards the Punjabi language, he remembered Gurudev's advice with immense sense of gratitude.

Days in Santiniketan were passing well. Damyanti

Balraj in his teens.

Balraj as a student at Lahore.



Balraj's father, Shri Harbanslal Sahni.

Balraj's mother, Smt. Lakshmi Devi.

Damyanti as a student in Santiniketan.

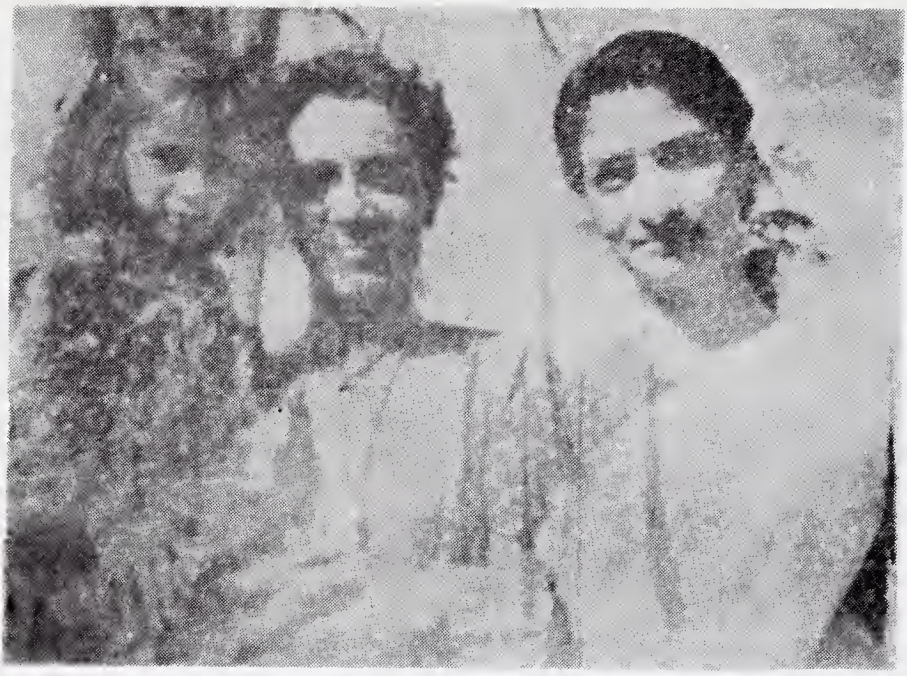
Damyanti with Amrita Sher-Gil.

Balraj and Damyanti in *'Dharti ke Lal'*.

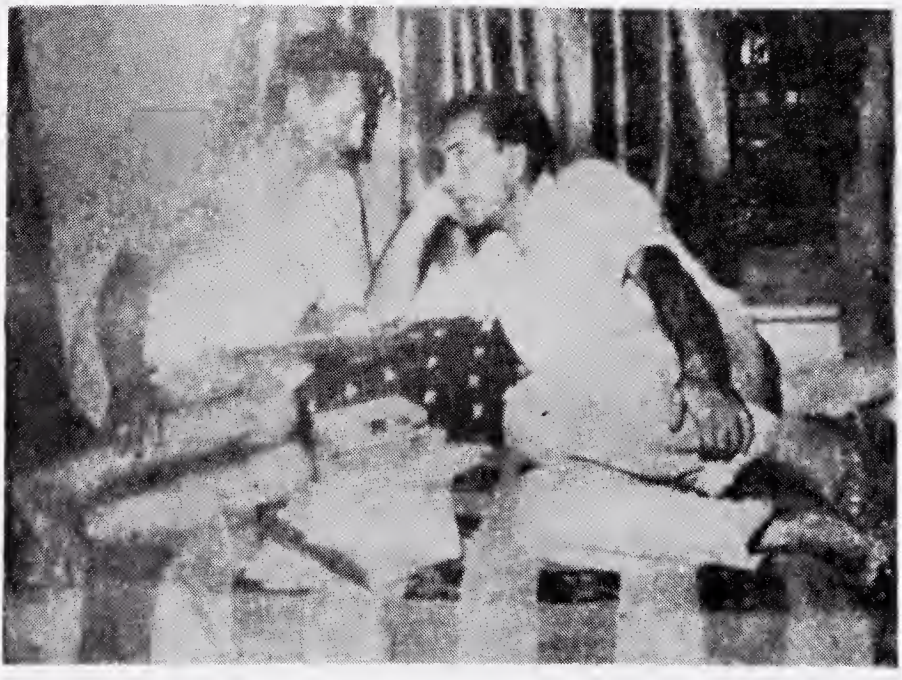
Balraj with his two daughters, Shabnam and Sanober, in Darjeeling.

Balraj and Nirupa Roy in the film *'Do Bigha Zamin'*.

Balraj with son, Parikshit, in *'Pavitra Papi'*.



Balraj, Santosh and Sanober soon after his release from Bombay jail as a Political prisoner in 1953.



Author with brother, Balraj.

studied for the B.A. examination at Santiniketan. She bore her first child there too. Balraj was getting interested in the Bengali language and had made considerable progress in it.

But then, a new development took place, which turned still another leaf in Balraj's life. The Wardha scheme of education had been launched by Dr Zakir Hussain with the blessings of Gandhiji and had its headquarters at Sevagram. At one of the A.I.C.C. sessions held in Calcutta, to which Balraj had gone to look after a stall put up by Santiniketan, a proposal was mooted to him if he would like to go and work in Sevagram on the editorial staff of a paper, *Nai Talim* by name, brought out by the Wardha scheme of education; Balraj readily agreed. And so, Balraj and Damyanti left Santiniketan and proceeded to Sevagram (Wardha) where Gandhiji lived, in search of 'pastures new'.

# 4

## AT SEVAGRAM

Balraj did not go to Sevagram on his own initiative. If by initiative we mean visualising possibilities of gain and taking timely action in the desired direction, then Balraj was not much of a man of initiative. More often than not, he drifted from one sphere of activity into another. He only took a determined step when a situation was utterly contrary to his inner nature and temperament. At the same time he had an insatiable thirst for new experiences and for living in a bigger and more stimulating sphere. If any opportunity came his way when he could be amidst new surroundings, meet new people and see new places, he could not resist it; he would pack up in a day and leave, without looking back even once. He was incapable of thinking in terms of a career or security. Giving up one occupation and taking up another did not make much difference to him. But he had an inner consistency of character and outlook, and he never did anything which militated against that inner consistency.

It was not necessarily patriotic zeal or the desire to serve the cause of basic education that had prompted Balraj to go to Sevagram. The only temptation was to live close to Gandhiji, to have the thrill of living close to a man who was leading the nation in its struggle for freedom. Balraj did not hero worship Gandhiji or follow him blindly. Nor was he a carping critic of Gandhiji, of which there were quite a number among the young people in those days. But he, nevertheless, held Gandhiji in great regard

and esteem. Balraj was still hovering on the periphery of political affiliations and had not been drawn into the vortex of the freedom struggle. Although drawn towards the currents that were shaping the destiny of our country, he still regarded art and culture as his main domain of activity; and he had as yet but vaguely realised that the two spheres of activity were very closely linked with each other.

We, in Rawalpindi, began to get familiar with new names from his letters—of Dr Zakir Hussain who had played a leading role in initiating the basic scheme of education, of Aryanayakam, who was looking after its implementation and was the editor of *Nai Talim*, the journal for which Balraj had gone to work. He would also write that Sevagram was a flat, arid place, located at a distance of five miles (eight kilometres) from Wardha, that Gandhiji was not the least interested in art and literature, that Kasturba was carbon copy of our own mother, that oranges were in abundance in Sevagram and the surrounding areas, where he had seen 'hillocks' of oranges, that there was no electricity in Sevagram, that people used hurricane or oil lamps, that every day some national leader or the other dropped in at Sevagram and went about the place like any ordinary person, so on and so forth.

Ever since Balraj had left home, Father would periodically send me to him wherever Balraj happened to be, to ensure that all went well with him, and also to persuade him to come back home and live a businessman's contented life. These semi-spy missions suited me splendidly. They would afford me a lovely holiday with Balraj. I would convey Father's message on arrival, ask the necessary questions, as a matter of form, to keep my conscience clear, and then the holiday would begin, with long walks, all sorts of gossip, comparing notes and sharing experiences. As time passed, Father's insistence on business grew considerably less, but his anxiety about Balraj's 'rudderless' life remained the same. And so I found myself in Sevagram also, in the winter of 1938, on a similar mission.

It was late in the night, when the train stopped at a small railway station. It was pitch dark on the platform. All I could see was a hurricane lamp swinging to and fro on the platform. That was Balraj, looking for me and peering into different compartments.

The *tonga* moved through a vast, flat area, on a *kucha* (unmetalled) road, and as we sat in it with our legs tucked up, Balraj lighted a *bidi* (Indian cigerette).

"Since when have you started smoking *bidis*?" I asked him.

"Everyone smokes *bidis* here."

"Do you see Gandhiji every day?"

"No, only sometimes. His hut is in the *ashram*. We live outside the *ashram* area." And then he went on to say, "Rajen Babu is here these days. You will see him. A few days ago Rajaji came here. Do you know, Gandhiji is such a stickler for time, he did not give more than five minutes to Rajaji. Showed him the watch and concluded the meeting."

There was a ring of emotion in Balraj's voice.

The *tonga* stopped in front of a cluster of thatched huts. Before I knew it, Dammo came running through the dark and put her arms round me and her laughter rang through the surrounding darkness.

"Sh...sh...Dammo, people are sleeping."

In one of the huts, towards the left, a light was burning.

"That is our office." Balraj said, "Shri Aryanayakam is still working. He works till late in the night."

And Balraj told me that Shri Aryanayakam had received his higher education in England, and on his return home, had joined Gandhiji and was doing national work and living on a bare pittance.

Hurricane-lamp in hand, we were walking on the mud-floor of a verandah; there was a row of rooms one beside the other, opening into it. In one of these rooms Balraj and Dammo lived. My luggage was dumped into it

and now we were moving towards the kitchen which was located at the other end of the verandah. It was not much of a kitchen; it had no door to it, and only a few boxes had been put together on top of which utensils had been arranged.

Dammo put a lump of boiled rice on my *thali* and poured *dal* on to it.

"Nobody eats meat here," she told me, "and mind, people here eat only with one hand, the right hand, not like the Punjabis breaking *rotis* with both hands," and then, peering into the darkness, said, "in the courtyard, out there, there is a *hammam*, we all wash our utensils there. After meals, everyone take his *thali* there, washes it and puts it back in the kitchen. Today I shall wash your *thali* but from tomorrow you will have to do it yourself. That is the rule here. There are no servants here."

"Let him eat his food first, Dammo. You know the sort of fellow my brother is. He will go and wash his *thali* even before he has eaten anything."

The meal over, we were sitting by the *hammam* chatting away in whispers. The sky above was a vast blue-black canopy studded with millions upon millions of glittering stars.

"Today you are washing your *thali*, tomorrow you will have to wash your commode also. There are no sweepers here, and no flush-latrines," said Dammo laughingly.

And Balraj told me of a new kind of self-help latrine which had been designed by Gandhiji.

"Do you meet Gandhiji everyday?"

"No, only sometimes, when we attend his prayer-meetings or when I have to ask him something concerning our work."

"Don't you attend the prayer-meetings everyday?"

"No, it is not compulsory. Only the inmates of the *ashram* are supposed to attend them regularly."

"What is the difference?"

"People living in the *ashram* have to live under a

more strict discipline," said Dammo.

"They have to observe celibacy also," added Balraj, laughing

Suddenly a strange sound was heard from far away, as of someone striking a gong.

"What sound is that? Did you hear it?" I asked.

"It is Japanese *bhikhu* playing on the gong."

And finding me somewhat bewildered, Balraj added, "A Japanese Buddhist monk has recently come to this place. Every day he makes a big round of Gandhiji's hut, covering a circumference of nearly eight miles (twelve kilometres) in one round. He is doing his *parikarma* (circumambulation) at this time. In the evening, after completing as many rounds as possible, he will come to Gandhiji's hut in time to attend the prayer-meeting. Sometimes he does the *parikrama* at night. You should see the obeisance he pays to Gandhiji."

In the deep silence of the night and over the vast expanse of the countryside, the sound of the gong, played intermittently, fell on our ears, now clearly audible, at other other times, muffled and low.

"I have written another short story," Balraj told me, enthusiastically.

"What is the title?"

"*Bi-Gudgudi*, I shall read it out to you tomorrow. Tell me what you think of it," he said and then added, "have you read Bacchan's *Nisha Nimantran*?"

"No. I have only heard about it."

"I have got a copy of it. It is a nice collection of lyrics."

Before dispersing for the night we decided to accompany Gandhiji on his morning walk the next day. "Anybody can join in. I will introduce you to him," and Balraj continued laughingly, "there is a dark-skinned fellow, an *ashramite*, who accompanies Gandhiji every day. He smells awful. Whenever he finds anyone sticking too long to Gandhiji, he quietly starts walking by his side and the

fellow falls back within seconds. That is Gandhiji's non-violent method of regulating interviews."

"Doesn't Gandhiji feel his smell?"

"Gandhiji has no sense of smell."

"Don't you go on believing what your brother tells you," chirped in Dammo. "He makes up all kinds of stories."

"I shall take you to the evening prayer. The morning prayer is held at four in the morning. So, that is out of the question. There are many more people at the evening prayer. You will see Kasturba. I tell you she is the ditto copy of our Mataji; sits like her, with her tiny little hands folded in her lap. And like Mataji, too, she keeps opening her eyes again and again during prayers."

"And keeps criticising Gandhiji also," said Dammo. "You see, I met her and told her that I wanted to live inside the *ashram*. 'Nothing doing', she said, 'stay where you are, with your husband. Even if Bapu agrees, I won't'."

It was morning now. I was standing in the verandah, breathlessly waiting for the moment Gandhiji would pass that way on his morning-walk. Balraj was still sleeping. It was impossible for him to get up early in the morning. There was a nip in the air. At a distance on the left, stood the village of Sevagram, a cluster of huts with thatched sloping roofs. The extensive landscape looked green and fresh, with palm and date trees dotting the horizon. The narrow, dusty road by which I had come from Wardha the previous night lay like a white ribbon between the mounds and hillocks in the distance and in the village of Sevagram. The fields were very tidily demarcated, giving the look of a government farm.

There was no question of getting a morning cup of tea there. There were no tea-shops. Nobody read the newspaper in the morning, either; the newspapers arrived in the afternoon. I had not seen any chairs or benches anywhere. All work was mainly done by squatting on the floor, sitting on straw mats. Balraj told me that nobody

smoked inside the *ashram*, barring a few exceptions like Maulana Azad and Pandit Nehru. The place looked rather bare and very austere. There were hardly any flower-beds to be seen anywhere.

There was Gandhiji! A thrill of joy passed through my body. A thin stick in hand, and his famous watch dangling by his side, and with his rather frail body, he looked exactly as he did in pictures with which I was so familiar. I was sulking away because Balraj hadn't woken up and I did not have the courage to go and join the small group by myself, which was slowly walking along the road.

It was when the group has receded far into the distance, that Balraj came running into the verandah, "Why didn't you wake me up?" he said, and then peering into the distance, added, "No harm is done. We can meet him on his way back. There is a T.B. patient living in a hut near that mound. Gandhiji goes to him every morning to chat with him for a while."

We set out to join the group and succeeded in doing so before it started returning. The T.B. patient was chatting away merrily with Gandhiji. He appeared to be an ordinary Congress worker. I wanted to hear what Gandhiji was saying, but both were speaking in Gujarati, which I could not follow.

The party was now returning. Balraj stepped up to Gandhiji and said, "This is my brother, Bapu. He came last night."

Behind his glasses, Gandhiji's eyes had a bluish tint, I noticed, as he smilingly looked at me. "You have dragged him along too," Gandhiji said, and chuckled.

"No, Bapu, he has come to spend a few days with me."

"I thought you had dragged him over, too, to work here," Gandhiji chuckled again.

Balraj, in his *khaki* shorts and coarse home-spun shirt was walking along the edge of the dusty road. I was walking alongside Gandhiji and noticed how short he was; I was almost measuring my stature with his. I also

noticed his dust-covered feet and *chappals*.

Having nothing to say to Gandhiji, I reminded him of the visit he had paid to our home-town of Rawalpindi, years and years ago, soon after the communal riots in Kohat. There was a twinkle in his eyes, "Oh, how I used to work in those days. I would never get tired."

He continued to reminisce. He vividly remembered the Company Bagh (Company's garden) in Rawalpindi, where he had addressed a meeting, as also the house opposite the garden in which he had been lodged. He remembered a number of names too, including that of a certain advocate, Mr Jan, and enquired about him, although his visit had taken place eighteen years earlier.

"I think it was while returning from Kohat that the door of our running car flew open and Gandhiji was thrown out on the road," someone behind us, was speaking in a loud gutteral voice. I looked back. It was Mahadev Desai, Gandhiji's secretary; a tall hefty-looking person, carrying a thick, long stick.

Soon enough, Gandhiji got lost in conservation with Mahadev Desai and I fell back.

It was late afternoon. A young peasant boy was sitting by the roadside opposite Balraj's room, panting heavily, with his livid face covered with perspiration. He shook his head again and again and complained that he was not well and that Bapu must be called at once. A group of people had gathered round him, and told him that Bapu could not be disturbed because he was attending a very important meeting. The boy tried to get up again and again, took a few steps in the direction of Gandhiji's cottage, but then, held his head between his hands and sat down.

Suddenly I saw Gandhiji coming across the field, towards us. It was somewhat difficult for him to walk on uneven ground; he had covered his head with a white piece of cloth to protect himself from the sun and was carrying his thin staff, as usual. I was surprised that he

should have left the meeting and come to attend this ailing peasant boy.

"What is the matter with you?" Gandhiji said, as he came over.

The boy shook his head violently and said, "I am going to die, Bapu."

Gandhiji looked at him intently for a little while, felt his body, put his hand on his belly and said laughingly, "Here, put your two fingers deep into your mouth and throw up whatever there is in your stomach. You have drunk too much of sugar-cane juice, it seems."

The boy did what he was told, threw up and then lay down on the ground, feeling somewhat relieved. Gandhiji waited for a minute or two, and then, "You are a mad fellow," he said, chuckling, and turned to go back towards his cottage.

Such was the place, and such its surroundings where Balraj was living. There was nothing to indicate that it was the nerve centre of our freedom struggle; it was too placid and quiet and flat.

"Are you going to take to political work?" I asked Balraj, as we sat down on the grass in the lawn opposite his hut.

"No, I don't think I will take to political work. I shall only do cultural work. I want to be a writer."

"Then what was the point in coming to Sevagram? You could have continued to live in Santiniketan."

"I don't know...It is not necessary to live in Santiniketan in order to become a writer...How could I resist the temptation of coming to Sevagram? It was such a good chance that came my way. But I am not cut out for political work."

It would be wrong to think that Balraj had any confusion in his mind on this score. He did not think that he had come to the wrong place. He was quite clear in his mind that the writer was not a recluse and need not live away from the currents of life, of social and political

activity, even though he may not be an active participant in it. Even at that stage he did not look upon writing as an activity to be pursued in privacy. Of course, he had not come to Sevagram to seek experience as a writer, but it was the artist's instinctive urge to be close to this vortex of a powerful upsurge in our country's life. A few years later he was to come even closer to political activity, and consciously too, when he came to believe that political activity was integral to cultural activity. His experience of life at Sevagram contributed vitally to the development of that outlook which he was to have as an artist in later years. It gave him breadth of vision, a closer acquaintance with the aspirations of our people and a deeper understanding of life as also deeper sympathies.

"If you have to choose between Tagore and Gandhi, whom will you choose to live with?" I suddenly asked him.

"What a question to ask," he said.

"But suppose you have to."

"Of course, I will choose to live with Gandhiji."

"But you don't believe in his fads, in his *khadi* and austerity and all that?"

Balraj became silent for a while and then said, "His fads are not important. Gandhiji is not to be viewed in terms of his fads..." Balraj became somewhat excited and then added, "Do you know, at the time of the Round-Table Conference, when Gandhiji went to London, the British Prime Minister tried to browbeat him. At one of the receptions he said to Gandhiji, 'Mr Gandhi, we have enough ammunition to wipe out your entire movement in one day, if we wish to'. At which Gandhiji smiled and said, 'Mr Prime Minister, our people will play with your ammunition the way our children play with crackers at the time of the Diwali festival'."

I looked at Balraj. He was deeply moved, and I could feel the surge of emotion that had welled up in him. Gandhiji for him was the symbol of that mighty upsurge which was pulsating in the country and to the tune

of which Balraj's own heart throbbed.

* * *

Nearly a year had passed, and the scene had changed. Balraj had come away from Sevagram and was now on his way to England, to take up a new assignment, as a broadcaster in the Indian section of the B.B.C. I felt as though a change had come over him, which irked me. He and I were going in a *tonga* towards the cantonment where he proposed to get a few woollen suits made from Mohammed Ismail, an expensive and sophisticated tailor. I had not been able to reconcile myself to the view that Balraj should choose to go to England of all the places, and serve the very country against which our people were fighting, particularly after he had been living and working with Gandhiji.

"Will you get cloth of British manufacture for your suits?" I peevishly asked him.

"I am not particular. But if good Indian cloth is not available, I shall buy British cloth."

"How can you wear suits of British cloth when you have been wearing *khadi* all these years?"

"But I can't wear *khadi* in England. I must wear the dress of the country where I am going to live and work. One should wear the right kind of clothes."

"How can you think of serving the British? What would Gandhiji think?"

"I have come with Gandhiji's consent and approval. I have not run away from Sevagram. As a matter of fact, Lionel Fieldon asked for Gandhiji's permission to take me to work in the B.B.C."

War had broken out in Europe. Lionel Fieldon, who had been working as the director of the All India Radio in Delhi was returning to England to organise an Indian section in the B.B.C., and being an ardent admirer of Gandhiji had gone to Sevagram to bid farewell to him. It was in the course of a conversation with Gandhiji that he had broached the subject of taking Balraj with him to England to work as one of the announcers.

Although India was seething with discontent at that time, the leadership of the Congress was also anxious and concerned about the rise of fascism in Europe, and in the conflict against fascist Germany, their sympathies lay with the democratic forces. The Congress leadership was offering its moral support to the anti-fascist forces, and was prepared to lend active support, too, on the condition that India was guaranteed her freedom by the British government at the end of the war. The war thus was an international issue and involved not only the relations between India and Great Britain but also the fate of democracy in the world.

In 1940 Balraj and Damyanti left for England. Their young son, Parikshit, who had been born a few months earlier at Murree, a hill station near Rawalpindi, in July 1939 was left with our mother. He was too small to be taken along to a place where, due to war, conditions were becoming abnormal. As a matter of fact, the very day Balraj and Dammo arrived in London, Hitler's first bombs fell on St. Paul's church and elsewhere in England.

Thereafter, the pattern of life in the family at Rawalpindi, too, underwent a change. Mother got absorbed with Balraj's little son. In the evenings, she would sit down by the side of the radio set, which had been one of the articles of Damyanti's dowry, and the needle of which had been so adjusted as to receive the programmes from the B.B.C., whenever it was switched on, so that she could listen to Balraj's voice whenever he made any announcement during the half-hour programme. Father, as usual, had given letters of reference to Balraj for his old suppliers and manufacturers, and kept writing to them also to give whatever assistance they could to his son. Mother's time-table remained unaltered throughout the next four years that Balraj and Damyanti stayed in England. She did not miss switching on the radio even for a single day, although she knew that Balraj's voice could not be heard every day.

# 5

## BACK FROM ENGLAND

Four years had passed. It was the summer of 1944. The family was waiting for Balraj's return from England. Now that I think of it, looking back on those early years of his life, it seems that we were always waiting for him either to return from somewhere or to leave for somewhere. And every time Balraj came, some refreshing change would always be noticeable about him. 'How he has changed now,' I was wondering as I, along with our parents and a large number of friends and relatives, stood at the railway platform at Rawalpindi, waiting for the Frontier Mail which was to bring him, his wife and his little daughter Shabnam, who had been born in London; what surprise was Balraj going to spring on us now?

A son's return from England was always a big occasion in our small town of Rawalpindi in those days. Friends and relatives had come in large numbers, garlands in hand, to greet Balraj. Father's social prestige had already gone up because his son was returning from England.

The train steamed in. But as Balraj stepped down from the train, his appearance proved to be a bit of a damper for many. He was standing in the door of a second-class compartment (not a first-class compartment), wearing pale green shorts, and a coarse cotton shirt with *chappals* on his feet. Balraj looked too simple for the occasion. He did not have even a pipe between his teeth. That was not the way sons returned from England in those days. He should have been dressed in an impressive suit

and stepped down with the air of an 'England-returned' and spoken with an accent. And he was taking the luggage out of the compartment himself. Some friends were really disappointed.

Balraj looked rather pale and emaciated. His hair, too, had thinned, and he had greyed on the temples. He also looked somewhat lanky. He had always had a ruddy complexion. Four year earlier, when he had left for England, his boxes were full of freshly-tailored suits from Mohammed Ismail's shop. To see him now in his pale green shorts and a coarse, cotton shirt and *chappals* was rather bewildering. Damyanti, too, was in a *salwar* and *kameez*. She had grown somewhat plump; her thick black hair was done up high on the head, looking like a bird's nest. She carried little Shabnam in her arms.

Mother was sitting in a wheeled chair—she had broken her hip-bone in an accident while he had been away—with her little grandson, Parikshit, standing by her side. It was truly a family reunion. Soon after his arrival, a small incident took place which revealed rather eloquently the change that had come over him. On his arrival, according to custom, our parents had got a large quantity of *ladoos* (sweetmeat) prepared. Friends and relatives were offered these when they came to felicitate Balraj on his return. A certain old friend of Balraj's who was somewhat anglicised, declined to accept these *ladoos*, despite Father's insistence, on the plea that he did not relish Indian sweetmeats. Speaking with flawless English accent, he wanted to know about the Big Ben and the tower of London and Westminister Abbey. But when Balraj turned the conversation towards India, the friend spoke rather disparagingly about the 'Congresswallahs' and their agitation. Balraj got up and left the room, without turning round even to say good-bye to him. The friend, who had expected greater spiritual kinship between himself and Balraj, although he himself had never been to England, was sorely disappointed at Balraj's rather un-English behaviour. Balraj

never forgave him for having declined the *ladoos* father had so affectionately offered him.

A change had come over Balraj and this time it was much more radical.

Heretofore, my impression of Balraj had been of a free-and-easy, adventure-loving person, who did not have an inhibited mind, who never followed rules of conduct for their own sake; a self-assertive person who would not pause to think once something caught his fancy or an enthusiasm gripped him, and, who cared little for consequences; who was never tortured by regrets or torn by doubts; a person who loved to do new things and cared little about what people thought about him; warm and loving, but with a free and easy kind of temperament; who loved company and was very fond of fun and laughter, always ready with the latest yarns and jokes; and, who could not follow a set regime in life and hated to do tablework. Such had been my impression of him before he had left for England. I often remembered his behaviour in different situations and his experiences. I remembered how once, when he had just left college and had joined Father in business, he and I had gone with a wedding party to a town called Lala Musa. The wedding party had been lodged in some railway quarters near the railway station. One evening, he and I strolled into the railway station, where in one of the waiting rooms we ran into two cousins of ours sitting over a bottle of whisky. They had chosen this secret retreat, because the 'elders' in the *barat* (group) were staunch Arya Samajists and strongly disapproved of alcohol. Balraj did not drink himself in those days. On seeing Balraj they felt terribly embarrassed as though they had been caught red-handed. Balraj stepped up to the table, picked up the glass of one of them, had a few gulps from it, to make them feel at ease, and then excused himself and left. Needless to say, that the rest of the evening was spent in hot argument between him and me, over the question of whether it was necessary for him to touch the drink

himself to make them feel at ease.

On another occasion he told me of one of his escapades in Bombay. This too occurred during his 'business' days. He said that once during one of his business trips to Bombay, he went to the Juhu beach. A young prostitute made eyes at him and smiled, and he was terribly intrigued and went up to her. She demanded eight annas, which he promptly gave. They then walked along to a lonely spot on the beach. But when she began to fondle and caress him he was so unnerved that he got up and ran away. He said that the girl kept shouting after him, "Here, take your money back," but he did not stop to turn round even once.

This was the kind of person he used to be before he had embarked for England. But on his return I found him to be very different. All his Bohemianism was gone. There was nothing free and easy about him. Adventure for its own sake had also lost its meaning for him. Politics had assumed an importance for him which it had never had before. He looked more high strung and concerned than ever before. In his habits, too, he had become more active and alert. And curiously enough, he spoke little about the writing work he had done in England, although he mentioned casually a couple of radio-plays that he had written and broadcast.

On the second day of his arrival in Rawalpindi, he told me that he was going to attend a meeting of the Muslim League which was to take place in the Company Bagh (Company's garden) that evening, and which was to be addressed by Feroze Khan Noon. I was taken aback. He had never shown such interest in political meetings before, not even in the Congress meetings. As a matter of fact when I had visited him at Sevagram, he had asked me to attend the forthcoming session of the Congress at Haripura, which I did, but to which he had not gone himself. He went to that meeting. Soon after, he attended a public meeting held under the auspices of the district

Congress committee also. The political struggle in the country was taking a new turn: the issue of Pakistan had begun to dominate which was soon to result in communal tension; besides, after the war the national leaders had been released and the country was once again seething with discontent. Balraj appeared much more involved in political developments now than he had ever been before.

Father's thoughts had naturally turned to what Balraj would do next, what career he would adopt and in which direction he would turn. Mercifully enough, he did not mention 'business' this time because he knew that Balraj had gone out too far to return to business. Perhaps he had come to realise that the 'business' he was offering was neither very attractive nor lucrative any more and that he had been indulging in a sort of wishful thinking in the hope that business would keep his son under the parental roof.

Days passed and Balraj gave no indication of what he proposed to do. Within days of his arrival he received a tempting offer from the All India Radio for an executive post. But before anyone knew about it or before any discussion could take place in the family, Balraj had declined it. This bewildered Father, because four years' broadcasting experience in the B.B.C. was a good qualification and itself a strong recommendation for a good post in the All India Radio. Balraj's thoughts were elsewhere, although he did not have any clear idea in his mind as to what he would do to earn his living and what vocation he would follow. Perhaps he was waiting for something to turn up.

After a few days' stay in Rawalpindi, Balraj and Damyanti along with their two children and some members of the family left for Srinagar.

The situation in the house was very much reminiscent of the situation that had prevailed when Balraj had returned from college, after completing his studies, and was preparing to launch out in life.

This time, too, the plunge into the future was taken in

Srinagar. One day Balraj suddenly announced that he was leaving for Bombay to act in a film based on Maxim Gorky's play, *The Lower Depths* which was to be produced by Chetan Anand, an old college friend of his. It was shocking news for Father. He had never expected that his son, brought up in the best Arya Samajist traditions, highly educated, married and with two children, and having worked in the prestigious British Broadcasting Corporation would fall for so disreputable a profession as that of a film-actor, a profession which was pursued by the riff-raff of society.

Further, the credentials of the producer of the film did not inspire any confidence in Father that the project would succeed. All that Balraj could tell Father was that Chetan Anand had been at college with him, where he used to write poetry, that he had been to England for some time, from where he had returned without having done anything in particular, that till lately he had been a school teacher, etc.—qualifications which would hardly convince a father that bright prospects awaited his son in Bombay. No wonder, Father was once again passing sleepless nights.

This time, too, it was in the month of September (1944) that Balraj left Srinagar along with Dammo and their two children, Parikshit aged five and Shabnam less than one year of age. This time, however, Balraj was not going out to seek experience and adventure. He was going in a different frame of mind.

During the war years, while in London, he had seen the world in flames. He had had occasion to perceive the nature of that life-and-death struggle, and the powerful economic and political factors which had led to it. The extermination of millions of Jews in Nazi concentration camps, Hitler's blitzkrieg, the bombardment of European cities including London, the heroic resistance of the Red Army against the advancing hordes of Hitler, and the collapse of governments in Europe, all shook Balraj into

the consciousness of the stark naked realities of life, from which there was no escape, and about which one could not nurse the attitude of a dilettante: what he saw as the collapse of the old world and the emergence of a new one. The world could not be the same again with its empires and colonies. He saw that the struggle for freedom in his own country was part and parcel of a much bigger struggle going on world scale—between the forces of progress and the forces of reaction.

Balraj had lived in the heart of London, where he had experienced the horrors and the privations of war, and he was convinced that an artist could not remain a mere spectator of life's drama; he, in his own way, must take part in it also, both as an artist and as a citizen. His views about art and the role and function of an artist also had undergone a change.

In that titanic struggle his sympathies lay with the Soviet Union and the democratic forces. He was induced to study more seriously and closely the implications of the underlying ideologies that were at work, and he was drawn irresistably towards the Marxist understanding of the social phenomenon. His stay in London had made him a convinced Marxist. When Balraj decided to go to Bombay to take part in Chetan's film, it was not so much to become a screen-actor or to adopt a film-career for himself or to have a fling at film-acting as it was to use this powerful art medium to present life's realities before the viewer and try to make them more socially conscious.

A few months after Balraj had left, Father sent me to Bombay to find out how he was faring and how the film was shaping out, and if he could still be persuaded to leave the horrid profession and think of something better. I had gone on such missions earlier also, and I readily agreed.

I was received at the railway station by Damyanti, and as we proceeded towards Pali Hill at Bandra where they were staying, I asked Dammo about the progress of

the film. She looked at me questioningly and said, "Film? Which film?" And then, she smiled and added, "You will see for yourself."

I was taken to a spacious flat on the first floor of a house in Pali Hill, which, I found, was occupied by a huge lot of people, including Chetan Anand and his wife, Hamid Butt, his wife and two sisters-in-law, Balraj and his family, besides two brothers of Chetan Anand, Goldie and Dev Anand. Some rehearsal was going on in the big common room in front, in which all the inmates of the flat were engaged, and there was intense excitement. It turned out that this was not the rehearsal of a scene from *'Neecha Nagar'* (Lower Depths) but a play which was being put up by the Indian People's Theatre Association in which Chetan Anand was playing the leading role and Balraj was directing. Final touches were being given to the production of K.A. Abbas' 'Zubaida'.

I was soon to learn that the production of the film *'Neecha Nagar'* had been shelved for the time being due to financial causes and that a more important work had been taken in hand. Balraj was in the thick of the activities of the Indian People's Theatre Association, popularly known as IPTA.

I was also soon to discover that the IPTA was not a mere drama organisation but something in the nature of a movement. I had already witnessed one of its memorable performances relating to the Bengal famine, when a dance-and-song group of the IPTA had toured north India to raise money for the victims of the Bengal famine, and I had seen how women, moved by the spectacle of people's suffering had taken their golden bangles off their wrists and donated them for the suffering people of Bengal. IPTA was to play a very powerful and significant role in the social and cultural life of our country. Linking itself closely with the life of the people, and drawing largely on folk forms of dance, song and drama, the IPTA was soon to become a powerful centre for the revival and

development of social drama.

When I arrived, a discussion was going on as to how a horse could be brought on the stage. There was a marriage scene in the play, the marriage party was to come to Zubaida's house, and Balraj was keen that it should look a real *barat* (procession) with the bridegroom on horseback, and a brass-band playing in front and a regular *milni* (a ceremony) taking place among the relations of the bride and bridegroom.

"I tell you, it will be great!" Balraj was saying again and again. It was his idea and he was bent on carrying it out.

"You can't bring a horse on the stage, Balraj, be sensible!" Chetan said.

"Why not? Imagine, a white horse, beautifully saddled with a golden cloth on its back. I tell you, it will create a sensation."

"Suppose the horse shies on the stage," said Chetan.

"Or does something worse," quipped in Hamid Butt.

"Even if you succeed in bringing it, it will distract the attention of the audience. People will look at the horse more than listen to your dialogue."

But Balraj had his way; only, the horse was not brought on the stage. The *barat* walked into the hall—the play was staged in Sunderbai Hall—led by a blaring band, and behind them all came the bridegroom on a white mare, with *chhatra* (an umbrella) and all. Only the bridegroom on horseback stood at the entrance to the hall, for all to see and from there got down and walked in when the *milni* was over. The *milni* took place inside the hall, right in front of the stage. It did provide a novel and exciting and highly spectacular marriage scene. Even otherwise 'Zubaida' went down magnificently with the audience. Its dialogues were crisp and witty; its language, was the actual, spoken language of the section of society about which the play had been written; its theme was a contemporary situation and charged with a sense of social

concern. Despite the structural weaknesses of the play, it went off very well and became a forerunner of the plays of social commitment which were to appear for years to come, on the IPTA stage. It was also the beginning of Balraj's long association with K.A. Abbas, another bird of a feather, a founder-member of the IPTA, and a person of deep social commitments. They were to work together in a number of stage-plays, films and social and cultural activities, perhaps the most magnificient of which was to be the production of *'Dharti ke Lal'*, a film on the Bengal famine of the early forties in which Balraj was to be one of the actors while the script and direction were Abbas'.

The IPTA was to make its own contribution in the development of Balraj as an artist. The realistic stage, with which he had been associated earlier, was urbane with its emphasis on restraint and polish. It did not have the abandon and the spontaneity and passion of folk-drama. IPTA was a movement drawing heavily on folk-forms. It was also playing not before the elitist urban audiences but before crowds of common people. This combination of realism with the verve and vigour of folk-drama helped Balraj a great deal in establishing character, and in charging his performances with powerful emotional content. But for this, too, the time had not yet come.

Balraj has described his initiation thus:

> One morning I read in a newspaper that a play produced by the Poeple's Theatre was to be presented somewhere. I knew something about the People's Theatre of China, but wherefrom had this People's Theatre of India dropped? In the evening, after climbing down and climbing up many staircases during the day, I went into B.P. Samant & Co.'s office and I happened to ask the well-known film-journalist, Mr B.P. Sathe, 'Mr. Sathe, is there a People's Theatre in Bombay?'
>
> 'Why not? I am myself a member of it,' he said

laughing. 'I am just going to attend its meeting. You too come along, if you feel like it. Khwaja Ahmed Abbas is going to read his new play.'

On my instance, Chetan too accompanied us.

Near the Opera House, there was Professor Deodhar's music school in a narrow lane. It had a small hall too, which could accommodate about a hundred persons. On one side there was a small stage. That hall was to become the centre of the activities of the IPTA.

About twenty boys and girls were sitting under a fan. Abbas was about to read his play. Abbas and I knew each other a little. While in London, I had read a few of his short stories also. But we had never met. Abbas shook hands with us without getting up, and began reading the play. It was difficult to judge the quality of a play by listening to it only once. I felt that it did not have much emotional depth or dramatic development. These thoughts were crossing my mind when Abbas suddenly made a curious statement.

'Friends, I am happy that we have Balraj Sahni in our midst today. I am now handing over this play to him with the request that he should direct it for us.'

I had no words to utter. But I was sensible enough not to decline. I was tired of the forced idleness in which I was living. At least I would have something to do.

Thus, unexpectedly a phase began which has left an indelible impression on my life. I am still proud to call myself an artist of the IPTA. This play was 'Zubaida' which was staged in Bombay in the winter of 1944.

Balraj was like a man possessed. He had no thought for anything except the IPTA and its activities. A change had come over Balraj. Earlier he had only emotionally been involved with the national struggle; now he was an

active participant in it, as a theatre artist. That line of demarcation between art and politics which he had drawn earlier had all but disappeared and he had begun to believe that the two activities—artistic and political—were to be fused together. IPTA was a dramatic movement of social commitment. It aimed to present a graphic, vivid picture of social reality, not from the angle of a detached observer but of a participant. Art is created not in a spirit of neutrality but of deep and passionate involvement and that was the reason why the IPTA made a profound impact on the development of the theatre in India during the forties. Those of us who have witnessed or participated in the activities of the IPTA cannot but remember it with a sense of elation. Its branches were shooting up in every linguistic region. In Bengali they would stage the *jatras* on contemporary themes, or shadow-plays, or plays in the best traditions of Bengali theatre; dance-and-song ensembles grew up in many states; the Maharashtra branch would stage *pawaras* while the U.P. artists would present *nautankis*. The movement was reviving folk-forms as also innovating new forms. Besides, western plays would be adopted and staged, as for instance, Gogol's 'Inspector General', J.B. Priestley's 'They came to a City', and 'Inspector Calls' and many others. The IPTA was unique in having brought the artist closer to social reality as also inspired him to participate in the struggle on the side of progressive forces. Dramatic activity was no longer confined to the elite or the professional theatre. The IPTA stage gave Balraj that sense of involvement and participation which he had not had earlier. No wonder he took to it as fish takes to water.

Needless to say that, instead of advising and persuading my brother to return home, I got converted myself and came back to Rawalpindi with the script of 'Zubaida' in my pocket.

At the time of the communal riots, the IPTA squads went and staged shows on communal harmony in areas

where communal tension prevailed. On the eve of Partition and after Partition, in the riot-torn areas of Bombay and numerous other cities and towns, such plays as Abbas' *'Main Kaun Hun?'* were staged dozens of times, sometimes at great risk. The singing squads sang songs on topical issues written and composed by Prem Dhawan, Shankar Shailendra, Amar Sheikh, Anna Bhau Sathe, Gawankar and others. An interesting feature of the activities of the IPTA was, that after the rehearsals in Deodhar Hall in Grant Road area, the IPTA enthusiasts would board the suburban train on their way home to different localities, and sing these songs in chorus inside the compartments. Sometimes a crowd of passengers would gather round them and the whole compartment would resound with these patriotic, progressive songs.

Such was the activity which had gripped Balraj and he had virtually become a whole-time IPTA artist and functionary; Chetan's group had virtually dispersed and some time later Balraj and Damyanti left the flat in Bandra and took on rent a small bungalow in Theosophical Colony at Juhu. Damyanti became the bread-winner for the family. She took to acting on the stage and in the films. She too was an IPTA enthusiast and a fine artist; and she had been converted to the Marxist ideology even earlier than Balraj. She joined the Prithvi Theatre in Bombay at a monthly salary of four hundred rupees. Prithvi Raj, the renowned Indian screen-actor, had, in those days, started a semi-professional theatre which used to perform plays on progressive national themes at the Opera House. Damyanti was one of the artists engaged by him, and some of her performances, particularly the one in *'Deevar'* was long remembered. She also played in the famous IPTA film *'Dharti ke Lal'* and was selected for roles in a number of films such as *'Hulchul'*, *'Door Chalen'*, *'Gudiya'*, etc. She was doing well in the films and her prospects were brightening up.

Such activities were a far cry from what Father had

expected of Balraj on his return from England. That Balraj should have taken to a profession which was no profession at all, and that his wife should earn for the family, and that also by acting on the stage and in films, was too much for him to reconcile with. It hurt his sense of propriety as also his deep-rooted moral convictions. And so, one fine morning he landed up in Bombay to see things for himself.

In those days the IPTA Central Square had rented a house in Andheri with a spacious yard outside. Under a big banyan tree in this yard, there was a raised earthern platform which served the purpose of a stage for rehearsals. Sometimes private shows were presented in this place.

One such performance was a musical concert which included songs, dances and a couple of skits organised and presented by the cultural squad of the IPTA led by Benoy Roy. Balraj took Father to this performance and sat through the show by his side. Father listened to the songs and watched the performance with intent interest and curiosity. His interest increased as the performance proceeded. The patriotic songs, imbued with the spirit of struggle and sacrifice, so deeply moved Father that after the performance he hugged Balraj and said, "If this is what you are doing here, I have nothing to complain."

On 29th April 1947, Damyanti suddenly died. During the shootings of '*Dharti ke Lal*' in rural areas, a few months earlier, Damyanti had contacted amoebic dysentery, perhaps from the pond-water which she and other members of the group had been drinking. An overdose of amatine injections by a careless doctor and excessive physical exertion on Dammo's part brought about her sudden collapse.

It was a staggering blow for Balraj. Dammo's passing away in the prime of her youth, at the age of twenty-eight, was like the removal of the king-pin from Balraj's life. She had been to him a devoted wife and a very enlightened life-partner. During the last three years they had been pursuing together these activities, in the same ardent and

selfless manner, which had not only brought them closer but also made their marital life wholesome and happy.

Balraj suddenly found himself in a void. But he bore his loss with courage and fortitude. What helped him most was his sense of dedication to the cause to which as an artist, he was devoted, heart and soul. He would often leave his bed at night and go off to the sea-shore and sing patriotic songs and thereby seek strength and courage for himself. Besides, he plunged even deeper into his work to seek solace and strength.

In August 1947 came Independence and with it the partition of the country. The atmosphere was charged with tensions of all kinds. Communal hatred stalked the land, many a city and village was in flames; the frenzy causing untold suffering and bloodshed. There was also a sense of jubilation at the fact that at long last, the country had become free. There had been riots in our own home district of Rawalpindi where more than two hundred villages had been razed to the ground. Jubilation, anxiety, apprehension, all went together. There was also the exodus of refugees from Pakistan. At the time of Partition, Balraj was in Bombay, his two children were in Srinagar with our mother, while Father was all alone in Rawalpindi. And communication had become difficult and transport facilities snapped. Soon after, Kashmir was invaded by the tribals from Pakistan which further complicated the situation. Damyanti's passing away and with the losses suffered by Father due to the partition of the country, the financial situation had also considerably altered.

A new chapter opened in Balraj's life. The ensuing years were to see him in the throes of a struggle, greater and keener than he had ever faced before.

6

# IN THE WORLD OF THE CINEMA

Soon after his arrival in Bombay in 1944, Balraj learnt that the production of Chetan's film was being delayed due to financial difficulties, that there was a danger that it might be indefinitely postponed or even shelved. Chetan was making desperate efforts to collect finance but was facing insuperable difficulties. Suddenly Balraj found himself alone in a strange, unfamiliar place, and called upon to fend for himself. It was one thing to dream of becoming a screen-actor; it was quite another to gain a foothold in the industry. Financially, too, Balraj's position was not very sound. He had brought with him savings from his service in the B.B.C. but they did not amount to much. Besides, he had no intention of asking Father for money, whom, he felt, he had annoyed, by coming away to Bombay in a nonchalant manner. And his family was with him: Shabnam barely a year old and Parikshit, just five. Chetan stood by him like a true friend, despite the fact that his own resources were limited, and introduced him to a few of his contacts. But mainly, Balraj had to face it alone, and consequently a period of struggle began for him.

He was starting his film-career with quite a few serious handicaps, the biggest of these being that he was already thirty-four years of age; an age when he could not expect to be considered for the roles of young matinee heroes. During his stay in Bombay his health too deteriorated and he soon began to look drawn and haggard. Besides, there was the financial stringency and in his own

words, "Bombay is not a town for such film-aspirants as have limited resources. The little money that I had brought from England was running out. I had no desire to get money from Father."

He wrote in one of his letters years later, reminiscing about his early years in the film-world:

> The real reason why I lost in health was financial worry and an irregular way of life. What did I not do in those days to get a little money. The manager of one of the branches of the Traders' Bank had been an old class-fellow of mine. Now and then he would give me small loans from the bank; at one time there was an overdraft of two thousand rupees against my name. Suddenly one day, this friend of mine received transfer orders. He had to leave in a month's time and it was my moral duty to pay back the loan before he left. To discharge this obligation, the efforts I made were like digging a well with my bare finger-nails. I could do nothing more than to do some radio programmes or do some translation work. How much money could I expect from such work?

He met Bhawnani, who had once come and lived with us in Kashmir and had even offered a role to Balraj at that time. Now, in Bombay, Bhawnani invited him to dinner but did not mention the films even once. All that he said was that Balraj's face resembled that of Gary Cooper which Balraj took as a compliment, but which was meant to convey that Balraj had grown too lean and thin for the role of a hero in Indian films; the Indian audiences preferred chubby and round-faced heroes. Similar was his experience with letters of recommendation, promises and assurances. It was not easy for him to gain a foothold in the film industry in those early days.

"Seeking a role meant going up the stairs and down the stairs of producers' offices and studios, umpteen times a day without any definite answer coming from anywhere,"

wrote Balraj, years later.

Sensing Balraj's situation, Chetan quickly put in a word with Phani Majumdar, the well-known producer and director, to accommodate Balraj in some of his films. A film called 'Justice' was on Phani Majumdar's schedule and he tried Balraj for it.

Balraj's first experience of the film-world was a memorable one. He was sent to the make-up room where the 'extras' had their make-up done. In his own words:

> I was led into a big room where quite a number of men were sitting and having their make-up done. I did not know that they were 'extras'. Even if I had known, it would not have made any difference to me because till then I did not know what an 'extra' was... Soon enough I was chatting away with them. They had come in their best clothes because they had to appear in the scene of a tea-party. They treated me with regard and consideration when they learnt that I had only recently returned from England. From their talk it appeared that they were no ordinarily people. One of them told me that he had four furniture shops in the town; that he came to the studios sometime just for fun's sake; that he was also thinking of producing a film himself one day in which he would give me the role of a villain, because from my face I looked exactly like an English villain.
>
> Not only he, but everyone sitting there had some such project of making a film one day in his head. Everyone had a story up his sleeve which he had written himself, everyone would talk of his close and friendly relations with the famous film-stars, some of whom had agreed to act in his film...One of them, a Pathan, Aslam by name, talked in low, unassuming tones. Soon enough he began to talk ill of Phani Da. Phani Da, he said, had given him a small role in an earlier film, with the promise that in his next film he

would give him a major role and that in the film after that, he would be give the hero's role. According to these assurances, he should have been put into the hero's role in the current film. But nothing of the kind happened. Instead, he had been made to hang around and was now huddled into this room with the 'extras'. At this, tears came into Aslam's eyes. I suddenly realised that an exactly similar promise had been given to me also by Phani Da.

Balraj continued to describe the events of that day:

During the rehearsal, I felt my jaws stiffening, like dry leather, and just refusing to relax. My voice too was low and almost inaudible. I though Phani Da would express his dissatisfaction with my performance but instead, he exclaimed, 'Very good shot, okay!' at which some people clapped and whistled, some others came and shook hands with me and congratulated me, because this was my first 'close-up' in the films. Phani Da sent for *'rasgullahs'* (sweetmeat) in my account and distributed them among the assemblage. Everyone was praising my performance. I was puzzled. I knew that it was false praise. But then, why were they indulging in false praise?

This is a secret of the world of showmanship which people outside can understand only gradually.

Yes. It was a false promise. In the world of the studio no one tells the truth to anyone. They all praise him on his face and talk ill of him when his back is turned. People outside would consider this as a mean act. But for people inside, this is a big booster. In the film world no one feels mentally secure. All live on deceptions. Everyone lives within the bubble of his dreams. No one wants to prick the bubble of another's dreams. This is a kind of show of sympathy for one another. Suppose one of them had come and frankly told me what he thought of my performance,

my self-confidence might have been shattered and I might not have been able to do any work the next day.

Later he was to appear in a shot with Sneha Lata, the heroine of the film, who refused to have any rehearsal with the 'new recruit'. "During the shot, she would converse with me but she would not look at me; she had her eyes on the camera all the time. All the time during the shot, she made me feel as though I was suffering from some foul disease, and that she must keep me at a distance," he said.

Reminiscing about this experience Balraj wrote:

> I had thought that there were no walls of 'high' and 'low' in the film world. How sadly mistaken I was! In the film-industry there were walls at every step. In the other spheres of social life, these walls may be made of brick and mortar, but in the world of Hindi films these walls are made of granite.

He had not only had his first experience of the movie camera, he also had his first peep into the make-believe world of the film-industry.

When Pani Majumdar's 'Justice' was completed, Balraj was invited to a private screening of the film. "When I saw my close-up on the screen I felt as though a big stone had fallen on my head. My face looked like that of a corpse. The make-up made it even worse. I never thought I would look so horrible," Balraj said.

Phani Majumdar, however, stuck to his word, and gave Balraj an important role in his next venture '*Door Chalen*'.

More difficult than securing roles, was facing the movie-camera. Balraj had had some stage experience and also very useful training as a B.B.C. announcer. The art of 'normal speech' on the microphone with its pauses, stresses and intonations, which he had learnt in England,

were to prove to be a great asset for Balraj. Similarly, his close familiarity with the realistic stage, both in India and in England where each movement and each gesture on the stage were natural and authentic as opposed to the excessive gesticulation, flourishes and flares of the Parsi theatre and its sing-song, oratorical delivery of sentences, was also to play a very significant role in Balraj's development as a film-artist. But the time had not yet come. The struggle to gain a foothold as also to acquaint himself with the technique of screen-acting was, for the next few years, to prove to be hard and painful.

> Going before the camera appeared to me to be like going before the gallows. I would try hard to compose myself. Sometimes the rehearsals too would go off all right. Everyone would encourage me. But right in the middle of the shot, something would go wrong, and I would feel every limb in my body going stiff; my tongue going down my gullet. Thereafter, one retake would follow another. I would feel as though everyone standing around me was staring at me. I would try hard not to think about it but to concentrate on the role and my performance, but everything would go out of focus, and I would feel as though the doors of the art of acting had been closed on me for ever and ever.

This situation persisted for quite some time. Writing in the context of another film, a year or so later, Balraj wrote with great candour:

> I was in bad shape when '*Hum Log*' went on the sets....The fear of the camera, which had always been oppressive like a 'mountain on my chest', became unbearable. Anwar Hussain was playing with me. On seeing him act, my self-confidence would desert me, and I would lose my nerve altogether. What to talk of shots, I could not even rehearse properly. My

situation can be understood by the fact that at one time, when I came out of the studio for a breath of fresh air and lay down on a bench, I wetted my pants.

After 'Justice', *'Door Chalen'* was the second film for which Balraj had signed with Phani Majumdar. It was an important side role, with Kamal Kapoor as the hero and Naseem Jr. as the heroine. Damyanti had also been given an important role in the film. It was during the shooting of this film that Balraj was drawn irresistibly into the vortex of IPTA activities.

Thereafter Balraj devoted most of his time and energy to the IPTA activities. Nevertheless, his struggle in the film industry continued. *'Door Chalen'* was followed by *'Gudiya'*, a film based on Ibsen's famous play, *The Doll's House*, which was produced by Rajni Kant Pandey and directed by Achyut Rao Ranade. Balraj and Damyanti were cast in the main roles.

Before this new film went on the sets, both Balraj and Dammo had had the experience of acting in the famous IPTA film *'Dharti ke Lal'*, written and directed by K.A. Abbas. Balraj was closely associated with its production also, which brought him into a still closer contact with the technicalities of film-production. *'Dharti ke Lal'* had, despite its numerous drawbacks, set a new trend, which was later on developed by Bimal Roy and Satyajit Ray. Balraj's own performance in the film had also been laudable. He was gradually shaking off his stiffness before the camera but it was not easy. He continued to face the stark realities of the film-world and lived through its ups and downs, which on the one hand depressed and discouraged him and on the other, hardened his determination to make good in the sphere into which he had drifted.

How did he get rid of his stiffness? He tried any number of devices to boost his morale. 'These fellows do not know a thing,' he would say to himself in the studio

when he would feel shaky inside. 'I will show them what good acting is.' This was one way. Another was that he would ignore looking at anyone in the studio, and while facing the camera, would try to think of something very pleasant, like his little daughter's face, or a bed of flowers or a beautiful landscape, which would put him in a nice frame of mind. Sometimes he would work up a mood of religious indignation in himself; a kind of attitude of protest to bolster up his self-confidence. He would closely watch the movements of other actors on the sets and try to find out the clue to 'natural acting'.

Reminiscing about the shooting of '*Door Chalen*', Balraj wrote:

> I noticed that before the shot Agha would be talking to us in a normal way, but as soon as the camera would start he would begin to behave in a queer manner, like a crazy person. He would make all sorts of funny movements. I would dismiss these movements as a kind of silly show off. I would think that Agha was overacting, which is a big defect of Indian films. But when, after the shot, everyone would sing praises of his performance, I would feel irritated. I would think that I should be the one who should be praised because my acting was so restrained and natural....As soon as the shot would begin, Agha would 'enter' his role. And when the shot would be over, he would 'come out' of it and be Agha once again. I had read about this but had not comprehended that what I was doing before the camera, could hardly be given the name of acting.

In the context of another film, '*Hulchul*' in which he was performing with Dilip Kumar and Nargis, he wrote:

> Right up till a few seconds before the shot Dilip and Nargis would be sitting and chatting away. But as soon as the shot would commence, they would

> 'enter' their respective roles, whereas I would be left outside my role. I too would try to act naturally, but I did not know that to be natural meant to enter one's role and then be natural. And for entering the role, a mental act was required. I was unaware of this mental act. That is why I thought that I was being natural whereas Dilip and Nargis were being unnatural. The reality was just the opposite.

Balraj would seek the advice of other actors, a quality which only a real artist can possess. He once asked David, with whom he was acting in a film, how he remembered his lines whereas he himself was always forgetting them. David explained to me lovingly,

> Behind every word in a sentence stands an image. In other words, if you visualise that sentence in your imagination you see a series of pictures. If while speaking you keep your mind on this series of pictures, you will not forget your lines.

It was not long after the completion of *'Gudiya'* that on 29th April 1947, Damyanti died; and the situation for Balraj changed radically.

He had arrived in Bombay in the summer of 1944. Barely three years had passed. But these were years of hectic activity: at one level, of intense enthusiasm and social involvement, rich in varied experience, and at another level, of privation, struggle and painful suffering.

Soon after Dammo's death Balraj went to Rawalpindi and therefrom to Srinagar, taking both his children with him. The scene was no longer the same. Rawalpindi had been in the grip of terrible communal riots, and now presented a picture of desolation. More than two hundred villages of the district had been razed to the ground, the streets of Rawalpindi were filled with dazed refugees from these villages, and slowly caravans of refugees from all parts of the Punjab were streaming out of the province

towards Amritsar and Delhi. Many a town in the Punjab was burning. The decision in principle, about the formation of Pakistan, had been taken. People were mostly bewildered and did not know if they would be able to stay on in their homes or would have to leave.

In Srinagar, the tension was much less, but a sense of uncertainty prevailed there also.

Balraj's mental state was no better. Grief over Dammo's loss was mixed with a painful sense of personal blame. With characteristic candour, Balraj wrote:

> She had never wanted anything for herself. She was happy in her simple clothes, in her *salwar* and *kameez*, and she radiated joy wherever she went. Even though she was earning thousands as a budding screen-actress, she was giving away most of her earnings to social causes, and herself went about in buses.
>
> It was my duty at that time to stand by her, to value her artistic talents and to spare her trivial household chores. But in my pettiness, I was almost envious of her fame and success. She would come home, tired from the studio and I would want her to get busy with household work. To assert my superiority as a man, I would take upon myself even unnecessary jobs of the IPTA. Without a word of complaint, Dammo had taken on herself a load of work which was too heavy for her to carry. It hurts me deeply to remember these things. Dammo was a precious jewel, bestowed upon an undeserving person, who did not know its value and did not feel grateful for it.

It was during his stay in Srinagar that Balraj received the offer of playing the leading role in a film called *'Gunjan'*, the story of which had been written by the noted Hindi writer, Amritlal Nagar. And so in July 1947, leaving his children in Srinagar, Balraj returned to Bombay.

He was cast in the film with Nalini Jaywant and

Trilok Kapur, and the film was directed by Nalini Jaywant's husband, Virendra Desai. When he arrived in Bombay he learnt that he did not exactly have the hero's role in it, that the story had two heroes, and he was cast as one of them.

The film flopped. And it struck another severe blow to Balraj's self-confidence.

> There is a psychological side to character-portrayal of which I was ignorant, nor had it been necessary for me to know it. I had often lost my nerve before the camera and felt my limbs grow stiff. But my attitude was that of a patient who, instead of going to the doctor at the right time, keeps hiding his ailment, in the hope that it would be automatically cured one day.

Balraj's involvement with the IPTA also continued unabated. But at this time, a radical change came in the assessment of the situation by the Communist Party and in its political line. The party adopted an attitude of confrontation against the Nehru government. This new policy affected the functioning of the IPTA to a considerable extent. Though the IPTA was not a communist organisation, its membership comprised leftist and left-oriented democratic writers and artists, yet the initiative in its activities had been taken primarily by the Communist Party. The performances staged by the IPTA became more and more critical of the government, and, on the other side, the policy of the government too became more and more repressive. Many old activists of the IPTA differed with this approach and gradually withdrew from its activities. The inner core of the activists also became sectarian in outlook and did not desist from dismissing some of the functionaries on grounds of 'right reformism', from the organisation. The strength of the IPTA squad was depleted, and they found it difficult to perform before the public also because the police was all the time dogging their footsteps. Balraj, however, remained closely

associated with the activities of the IPTA right up to the time of his arrest in 1949.

In March 1949, nearly two years after Dammo's death, Balraj married Santosh, our cousin. He had turned towards her in his loneliness and pain, and the attachment of younger days asserted itself. What had been termed 'infatuation' of his younger days, had, in reality, never completely died down. Even after his marriage with Dammo, it would, now and then, raise its head and cause a good deal of mental and emotional disturbance. But it would blow over because the fondness, the regard and the identity of outlook which had developed between Dammo and himself had continued to grow with each passing year of their marital life. But now both Balraj and Santosh were lonely and somewhat rudderless. Santosh was at that time in England, where she had gone, after her separation from S.H. Vatsyayana, her former husband, and was supporting herself with odd jobs and assignments from the B.B.C. and other organisations. Marriage with Santosh, however, considerably embarrassed the elders in both the families, because among the Hindus, marriage with the first cousin is always frowned upon.

It was in those days that Balraj signed a contract with K. Asif for his film '*Hulchul*' in which the cast consisted of, besides, Balraj, Dilip Kumar and Nargis. In the film, Balraj had to play the role of a jailor who is the heroine's husband. Ironically enough, the director, one day, took Balraj to the Arthur Road prison in Bombay to acquaint him with jail-life and the duties of the jailor. And soon after, Balraj was arrested while taking part in a demonstration and was sent to this very jail. The jailor, whom he had met with Asif, would often eye Balraj inquisitively in his prisoner's uniform and remark, "I think I have seen you somewhere."

The shooting schedule of the film was disturbed by Balraj's imprisonment. Arrangements were, however, made that Balraj would be brought out on parole from the jail,

during shooting days, to enable him to play his role.

Balraj had been arrested within a fortnight of his second marriage. Conditions at home were none too favourable. The family was living in Delhi, where Father had purchased a small house in a refugees' colony. Balraj's children were yet very small: Parikshit, nine years of age, and little Shabnam barely five. There was little in the house to fall back upon.

There was much to strain Balraj's mind in those days. Though thrown among political workers, Balraj knew little about struggles on a purely political plane. There was much that baffled him. There was practically no news from home. Nargis' mother would sometimes arrange to have Balraj's wife in the studio when Balraj was shooting on parole so that both could meet each other. That was about the only contact Balraj had with his family. And his performance in the role of a jailor gave him little satisfaction.

After six months of jail, Balraj was released. He returned to a situation which was none too encouraging. The IPTA was on the rocks. His finances were low, and the struggle to gain a foothold in the film-industry was still as hard as it had been earlier. It would often appear to him as though he was starting once again from scratch. Was it worthwhile?

> Why should I have returned to this cursed city of Bombay? Why should I not go back to the Punjab and live among my own people? What am I doing here? But then, what guarantee is there that things will be better there? I must become financially independent. I must gain proficiency in my work. I must work harder. I don't feel happy doing film-work, but I must succeed as an actor. I must. The question of going back to the Punjab does not arise.

The lean condition of his finances is best illustrated by a touching episode. On the eve of the Diwali, when he

came home, he overheard a brief conversation between his two children. Parikshit was saying to his sister, Shabnam, "What a silly thing crackers are! People waste money for nothing."

The children had sensed the situation in the house. This piece of conversation overheard, touched Balraj to the quick so much that he retraced his steps, borrowed some money from a friend and brought crackers and sweets for his children.

To earn a living Balraj was doing odd jobs. He and Santosh dubbed a Russian film into Hindustani. He got a contract to write the screen-play and dialogues for Chetan Anand's next film, which later on came to be known as '*Baazi*'. His little son Parikshit was also given a child's role in '*Hulchul*', portraying the hero's childhood days. Parikshit was also offered another role in Nitin Bose's '*Deedar*'—roles which were very reluctantly accepted for his little son by Balraj.

Soon after '*Hulchul*' he was given a role in Zia Sarhaddi's film '*Hum Log*', in which Balraj was to make his mark as an unemployed youth from a lower middle-class family. This was the first film in which Balraj to a certain extent came into his own, and shed off his stiffness. He narrates this experience in his own words which is at once interesting and very revealing.

> I was in a poor way when the shooting of '*Hum Log*' started. I could not act well in a single shot that day...In the evening while returning from the studio, I said to Zia, 'I am not worthy of the confidence you have reposed in me. You have been able to secure the direction of the film with great difficulty. I won't mind in the least if you take on someone else in my place.' To this, Zia's answer was, 'Balraj, whether we sink or swim in this venture, we shall do so together,' an answer which overwhelmed me by its sympathy and generosity.

On reaching home, when I met my wife, I burst out crying and struck my head against a wall. 'I can never become an actor, never,' I cried! Just then, Zia's assistant, Nagarat, a youth of hardly nineteen years of age, happened to drop in. Seeing me in that state he began rebuking me at the top of his voice, 'Coward! Calls himself a communist, when in reality his soul is grovelling at the feet of the moneyed people. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

Dumbfounded, I looked at him. Nagarat went on, in the same tone, 'You can't act! Nonsense! You can act much better than others. But not so long as your eyes are set on their cars and so long as you are overawed by their fame and money. Anwar is rich, he is Nargis' brother. That is why you can't breathe freely. Envy is eating you up from inside. Your eyes are not on art but on money! That is the biggest thing in your eyes....

Nagarat had seen me act in one of IPTA plays called 'By the Roadside' in which I had played the role of an unemployed, ailing youth. Throughout the play, the youth pours out venom against the capitalist system. I used to act in that role with great passion and in a very impressive manner. My role in *'Hum Log'* was also of the same kind. Then why was I striking my head against the wall?

Nagarat had hit the nail on the head. He had revealed to me the clue to my role—hate! Hatred towards everything! Hatred of life. Endless hatred.

I felt my frozen body relaxing. All night long I kept fanning the fire of hate within myself....The next day when I went to the studio I was in a frame of mind charged with this sense of hate towards an unjust and cruel system....I found to my surprise that I knew my lines by heart. During the rehearsal I uttered my sentences in a manner as though a hawk was swooping upon a sparrow. Zia hugged me to his heart....

> I began to come up to his expectations. What I was doing was something rather absurd, but in the context of that role it was correct and to the point. My boat came out of the whirlpool. Luckily my dialogues too were oratorical and dramatic....

*'Hum Log'* clicked. Balraj's performance made a powerful impact. Though Balraj had still some way to go before he could establish himself as an actor of quality, he had crossed the initial hurdles. Financially, too, he felt somewhat more secure, although he still had many ups and downs to face. *'Hum Log'* was followed by *'Badnam'* which failed miserably. He was given a contract to write and direct a film *'Solah Ane'* which enthused him a great deal, but which did not come off. It was when he came to act in *'Do Bigha Zameen'* that his talent came into free play; the identification with the role became almost total and Balraj made his mark as a highly accomplished screen-actor.

**Do Bigha Zameen**

In Jogeshwari, a suburb of Bombay, there is a colony of milkmen from Uttar Pradesh. The day Balraj was chosen for *'Do Bigha Zameen'* he began visiting that colony. He would study the way the poor milkmen went about their work, the way they walked and sat and chatted. "The *bhaiyas* are very fond of tying a *gamchha* (cloth) round their heads, and each one of them does it in his own way. I too bought a *gamchha* and started practising with it. But I was not able to do it so well. My success in *'Do Bigha Zameen'* was largely due to this close study of the life of these milkmen," Balraj wrote.

When he went to the sets, Balraj felt enthusiastic about the role, because it was in keeping with his heart's desire.

Part of the shooting was to take place in Calcutta. Balraj made it a point to travel in the third-class railway

compartment, so that he could feel his role, so that he could watch how the peasants got into a compartment or went out of it, how they lay down or talked. A similar scene was to be taken for the film also. In Calcutta he went to the office of the rickshaw-pullers' union, and with their assistance, learnt the technique of rickshaw-pulling.

But again at one point, he lost his nerve, and felt that he could not do justice to the role.

In Balraj's own words:

> I was confused and bewildered. Actually depressed, I sat down in my rickshaw. Soon enough, a middle-aged rickshaw-puller, who had been watching this *tamasha* (show) from a distance, came over to me. He very much resembled the *bhaiyas* of Jogeshwari, but was very weak in health, with shaky teeth protruding out of his mouth and face full of wrinkles...
> 'What is going on here, Babu?' he asked.
> 'A film is being shot,' I replied.
> 'Are you taking part in the film?'
> 'Yes'.
> 'What is your part?'
>
> Thinking that my mind would be diverted somewhat by talking to him, I started narrating the story of the film to him, as once Hrishikesh Mukherji had narrated it to me. He too had the same reaction. Tears flowed from his eyes. 'This is my story, Babu, this is my story,' he exclaimed!
>
> He too had two *bighas* of land in a village in Bihar, which was mortgaged with the *zamindar* fifteen years earlier. To get that plot of land released, he had been plying the rickshaw on the roads of Calcutta for the last fifteen years. But he had no hope left of redeeming it. He kept standing near me for some time, heaving deep sighs, and then went away, saying again and again, 'This is my story, Babu, this is my story.'
>
> A voice rose within me. To hell with the art of

acting!....Who is a more fortunate person than myself who has had the privilege of telling the world the story of a suffering, helpless man. I have been entrusted with this responsibility, irrespective of whether I am worthy or not of carrying it out. Come what may, I must spend every ounce of my energy in discharging it. It will be cowardice, a sin, to turn my face away from my responsibility.

Then I, as it were, imbibed the soul of this middle-aged rickshaw-puller within me, and stopped thinking about the art of acting. I think the real secret of the unexpected success of my role lay in this. A basic rule of acting had come my way suddenly, not from any book but from life itself. The more completely the actor identifies himself with the role he has to play, the more successful he will be. When Arjun in the *Mahabharata* was going to shoot his arrow, he fixed his gaze only at the eye of the bird, which was his aim....

A film commentator of *Amrit Bazaar Patrika*, writing about my role, had said, "There is a touch of genius in Balraj Sahni's acting." This touch of genius had been imparted to me by that middle-aged rickshaw-puller.

A film producer in the Soviet Union had remarked, "There is a whole world drawn on the face of Balraj Sahni." This world too was that of the rickshaw-puller. It is a shame that even twenty-five years after Independence, that world has not changed...

When, one day, I die, I shall have the satisfaction that I acted in *'Do Bigha Zameen'*.

*'Do Bigha Zameen'* hit the headlines. Balraj's reputation was established. But some time had still to pass before he could have financial security. It was nearly six months after the release of *'Do Bigha Zameen'* that he was able to get another contract, in Ramanand Sagar's film *'Bazuband'*.

It was nearly ten years after his arrival in Bombay, that Balraj's struggle to establish himself as a screen-actor was at last over. He was by then, forty-one years of age. He began to be approached with new roles. He was sought after. It was in those days that he signed contracts for *'Aulad'*, *'Taksal'*, *'Akash'*, *'Rahi'*, and others. In the ten years between 1944 and 1954, he had acted in barely ten films, but in the next nineteen years of his life he was to act in no less than 120 films.

Ten years is a long time to struggle, and that too single-handed and in a principled manner, retaining one's integrity, and holding one's head high.

Leafing through my father's old diaries, I came across a newspaper cutting, which he had pinned on one of the pages. It was a review of *'Aulad'* dated 24th April 1954. It said:

> Balraj Sahni, who has marked out for himself the role of the suffering have-nots with a heart, fits into it with naturalness. That very humane quality which is subtly visible in his personality is his forte and charm. The farmer of *'Do Bigha Zameen'* is the servant of *'Aulad'*. In both he is cast as the affectionate husband and father fighting against the ravages of circumstances. Both have tragedy because both are realistic.

Father had now begun to take legitimate pride in Balraj's achievements and kept such cuttings wherever he could get them. One after the other, Balraj's performances impressed the spectators with their ease, naturalness and human sympathy.

During this long period of preparation before he could discover himself and come into his own, we have glimpses here and there of that process through which he was passing and of how ultimately he succeeded in overcoming his handicaps of stiffness and self-consciousness.

"If your lip movement is relaxed, you will act naturally," he once said to me. At another time, he remarked,

"Let your movements be tiny movements, not big movements." These and many more were the dictums by which he was teaching himself. At one time he would be reading Stanislavsky's famous book, *An Actor Prepares*, which he regarded as his Bible; at another time he would be reading a book called *Modern Acting*, written by Clark Gable's wife, which he later said proved disastrous for him, because he had read it prematurely.

> How can an actor perform his role naturally if a thick layer of make-up is put on his face? I did not know then, that to reach the stage of natural acting an artist has not only to accept but also to adapt himself to many a constriction and limitation.

At another place, he wrote:

> The life of an artist is full of contradictions and complexities. Sometimes the very weaknesses and limitations of his character help in his artistic development.

He made this observation in the context of Charlie Chaplin in whose autobiography he noticed that Charlie Chaplin's life-story was very absorbing as long as he was writing about the days of his poverty and obscurity; but, it became colourless and dull when the period of his success began, when he was lost in his personal affairs and kept the company of lords and ladies. "And yet," wrote Balraj, "It was in this very period that he gave to the world his finest films."

To a certain extent this could be said of Balraj also. Success in the films was also accompanied by a sense of inner dissatisfaction both with the film-world and with himself; by a sense of guilt too at times that he was compromising with his conscience. Strange urges too had begun to assert themselves and his preoccupation with personal and domestic problems also had begun to increase, at the same time as fame and success had come his way. And yet it was in this very period that he too gave us

his finest performances.

At another time Balraj spoke about 'restraint and intensity', the two requisites of good acting. He once talked in glowing terms about Lawrence Oliver's performance in a war-film.

> He is a guest artist in that film and has a very small role to play—that of an officer in charge of aviation. In one scene he telephones the Defence Ministry and asks for more war planes. 'I want more aeroplanes'—this one sentence he uttered with such intensity and yet with such restraint that it sent a shiver down my spine; this one sentence makes the audience feel the awful situation facing the country.

Restraint and passion—these were perhaps the key principles which he valued. This was the ideal which he had set before himself as the hallmark of acting. Once, years earlier, he was talking to me about Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*, and drew my attention to the two words which Lear utters in moments of terrible inner tension and agony—'Unbutton here'. "These two words convey much more of Lear's inner suffering than any rhetorical speeches might have done," Balraj said.

He also attached great importance to a powerful imagination and strong grasp of reality in an actor.

> Anyone can become a good actor, but to become a great actor one must have an imagination which is at once strong and which can soar high.

Speaking about realism in art he said,

> It is characteristic of realism that it gives a third dimension to art. In my work on the stage and on the screen I have tried to bring this third dimension into my roles. For an artist this is the most difficult path, and yet the one in which he really experiences the joy of creation. The actor should try to present the

character so vividly that at every step a new facet of his personality appears before the spectators.

It is when, in keeping with the gestures and mannerisms, in which most feelings of the character manifest themselves, that the portrayal becomes revealing. But mere mastery of these external gestures will not take an actor very far; it will not go beyond lending proficiency and slickness to his performance. In reality it is the soul of the character that has to be revealed and that is only possible if the artist is a humanist, if he identifies heart and soul with the character, if his sensibility comprehends instinctively the character's inner being.

Balraj's achievement lies in this that he was drawn heart and soul, towards this fundamental aspect and thereby succeeded in portraying the character convincingly. The external gestures and mannerisms are important; they typify an individual's behaviour in society, but there are some gestures which emanate from the inner being of a person; they are the gestures through which the soul cries out. The two simple words uttered by Lear with the attendant gestures convey all the agony that is in Lear's heart. It is in such eloquent gestures that Balraj excelled as an actor, portraying the character. He did not neglect the mannerisms, the external behaviour. "Watch a person how he walks," he used to say, "that will give you the key to his character." He also spent hours and days studying the behaviour of a character, how he sat, how he talked. He spent days studying the way of life of the Pathan moneylenders when 'Kabuliwala' was being filmed, or how *tonga*-drivers drove the *tonga*; such gesticulation lends authenticity to his performances. When you think of his portrayals you think of the characters and not of Balraj the actor. Each portrayal stands on its own; is distinctly original and independent. Balraj merges his own identity with the identity of the character, and that he does because of his intense imaginative sympathy with the character that he is portraying.

"Acting is not art alone, but science also," Balraj observed at one place. "Any person by studying and practising on scientific lines can become a good actor."

For this, besides imaginative sympathy and identification with character, it was also of paramount importance to have a social perspective, to be able to place character in the broad social context. In this, Balraj asserted, Marxism was of great value.

> Those people who have no knowledge of Marxism, consider it as a political doctrine. This is a big mistake. Marxism views every aspect of nature and life from a scientific angle. It removes many a misconception from our minds, and shows us the real situation. I think, the study of Marxism, in our times, is as useful for an artist, as it is for a sociologist or a politician.

Once, when Balraj and I were standing outside the Old Delhi Railway Station, a postal clerk came up to Balraj and said, "When will you make a film about us? Don't we deserve any attention?" It is very true that he had endeared himself specially to the poorer sections of our society, the lower middle-class people, the petty shop assistants, the railway employees, the clerks, teachers and the like. His deep imaginative sympathy helped no doubt, but more than that it was his social involvement and commitment, and his broad social perspective that brought out the inner pathos of the life of these people.

Balraj was a very hard-working artist. He believed that nothing helped an artist more than hard work and a sense of dedication towards his work. Besides hard work, Balraj had certain other remarkable qualities which helped him in his development as an artist. One was his extreme modesty. He was always learning from others. He was never jealous of anybody and had the artist's genuine humility and wanted to learn whatever and from wherever he could. The film-world is full of petty jealousies, scandals,

back-biting, gossip and the like. Balraj always had a hundred stories to tell. But it would often happen that while talking about some current scandal or story about a person, he would exclaim, almost ecstatically, "But you should have seen him play in that film. Great actor! Hats off to him!" Whenever he saw art, he went into ecstasies over it. The person, his faults, his doings and misdoings, were all forgotten; his art alone shone out before Balraj's eyes, and he gave him enthusiastic praise. Sometimes, perhaps, his praise was a bit over-enthusiastic and exaggerated. Nevertheless, he had the capacity to praise where he thought praise was due and that was a great quality. For hours he would watch Dilip Kumar act on the sets and try to learn the ease and grace of his performance. He would wax eloquent over the talent of Meena Kumari, Gita Bali and others.

A film-reviewer, writing about Balraj in 1954, observed:

> The actor who was in Delhi recently slipped into the Odeon (theatre) at the premiere of his film, towards the end of the show. Not many recognised him and he queued out with the crowds. The modesty of the man is apparently genuine.

What helped him retain his modesty was the fact that he was completely free from any illusions about the place and importance of the screen-actor in our social life. Once, he and I walked into a shop in Connaught Place to buy a cardigan jacket. As usually happened, he was soon spotted out, and when we came out of the shop, a small crowd of his fans had already gathered. Balraj was smiling and polite as the young people surrounded him to get his autograph on diaries, currency-notes and note-books, etc. He kept giving autographs, and also kept threading his way out of the crowd. By the time we reached the car, a big crowd had gathered. There was a lot of cheering and hand-shaking. As we ultimately managed to drive off, I

said, "Great, isn't it? How they admire you!"

Balraj smiled softly and said, "You have only heard them cheer; you have not heard them boo. When an actor turns his back, they jeer and boo. Don't be mistaken. I only enjoy the cheap popularity of a film-actor. The crowd gathers only out of idle curiosity."

Whether it was genuine praise for his talent or mere idle curiosity, he never gave much importance to it. He never took it seriously. Of course, one day he said to me, "I wonder how it will be with me when I go back to live in obscurity. Perhaps I am so used to living in the limelight that I won't be able to put up with obscurity." But he did not nurse any illusions about the nature of this limelight.

On another occasion he narrated to me an experience which was both touching and significant, and threw some light on how Balraj viewed an actor's life.

'Do you remember....?' he asked me.

Of course, I did. She had been one of my favourite actresses. Balraj went on,

Well, one day....and I were standing at a bus-stop. I had earlier called on her, and she had come to see me off, at the bus-stop. Some young fellows spotted me and came over to ask for my autograph. Not one of them took any notice of...I felt embarrassed. I told the boys who the lady was. I told them that she was the famous....the idol of millions. Even then, they did not bother to ask her for her autograph. That is what happens to an actor. One fine morning he may suddenly find himself a back number.

When I expressed disagreement with him, he got irritated a little. He told me about a number of one-time film-stars who were then living in privation and want and for whom no one cared. He said:

There are more broken lives in Bombay than there are in any other spheres of art and culture. There are

> persons who had made their mark in one film, but then, by some queer twist of fate, were pulled down the current, and for years waited for another such 'break', but it never came. There are those who begin their career with minor roles, and years pass, and still they are doing three-minute roles and continue to do so, clinging to the hope that one day they will have better roles to play. And there are hundreds of such persons. An air of uncertainty hangs over the film-world all the time. There is an appalling waste of talent; for one successful actor there are hundreds who knock from door to door. And all for what? To produce these commercial entertainers! And on the other hand, there is the hero, driving about in imported cars, living lavishly, his way of life not even remotely related to the conditions prevailing in the country, and inwardly even he is feeling insecure, conscious of the fact that the hobby-horse on which he is riding may throw him down any moment. It is more tragic in the case of women than in the case of men.

He was all the time conscious of a kind of unreality that hung over the life of an actor as much as it did over the film-world in which he lived.

> We who make people laugh and cry, who transport them into a magic world, we ourselves begin to live in that world, render our own life into a film or a drama and thereby become all the more entertaining for our spectators.

On another occasion he said:

> The phantoms that move about on the screen reflect the reality of the film-artist's life.

Whenever Balraj spoke about his film-life, he spoke either apologetically or with a gnawing sense of guilt. Why was it so? Was it false modesty? I believe this was

the natural reaction of a sensitive person to the conditions prevailing in the cultural sphere, his sense of dissatisfaction coupled with a strong desire to spend his energies in doing something worthwhile. Balraj had grown up in an atmosphere charged with idealism. In his childhood days there was the Arya Samajist atmosphere in the house where Father talked intensely of the necessity of social reforms. Later, during the freedom struggle, the atmosphere was filled with national urges and aspirations and the spirit of dedication. He had lived in close proximity to the two great idealists of our time—Gandhi and Tagore. And subsequently, when he became a convinced Marxist, his mind was again fired by a sense of commitment to the cause of suffering humanity. Such a person cannot easily reconcile himself to the sordid reality of a sphere where art it at a discount and money-values prevail. He very often felt himself part of a machine which was commercialising and debasing art. To grow rich and famous as part of this machine gave little personal satisfaction or any sense of fulfilment. Moreover, his first attempts at literary work had been very promising. The IPTA activity had also been satisfying because in it he had felt himself to be a part of that struggle for a better social order, imparting a certain awareness to his audiences. Both in writing and on the IPTA stage, the individual effort counted for something. But in the vast, amorphous film-world, he, as an individual, could do little. Hence, the occasional brooding that he was wasting his time, that he was not meant for that sphere.

Nevertheless, he was convinced of the power and influence of the film as an art medium. And in his own way, he took initiatives several times towards the production of wholesome, progressive films. It was on his initiative that the first film in the Kashmiri language 'Mehjoor' by name, was produced, dealing with the life of the famous Kashmiri poet of the same name. Balraj and his son, Parkshit, both acted in it; Parikshit playing the poet's role.

Similarly, he helped in the production of Shri Rajendra Bhatia's *'Pavitra Papi'*, a film based on the novel of the same name by the Punjabi writer, Nanak Singh. He was also keen that a film-studio should be set up in the Punjab, his home-state.

Balraj felt strongly about certain aspects of film production in India. The films, like literature, must be rooted in the life of the people, he used to say; the reason why good films are made in Bengal is that Bengal is a compact, homogeneous, cultural entity, where the film-makers are from among the people of Bengal, where there is uniformity of language and culture, where writers and film-makers are closely linked. This cultural homogeneity is lacking in respect of Hindi films. The Hindi films are produced in Bombay, there being no film-studio in the Hindi speaking region of India...a heterogeneous mass of film-workers including actors and producers (mostly hailing from the Punjab), writers and technicians work together to manufacture films. The films do not emerge from the life of the people, but are to suit, in most cases, box-office requirements, and fitted into the framework of certain formulae. Hence, all the superficiality of these films. The cultural perspective is lacking among the film-makers. This is borne out also by the attitude of the film-makers, towards the scenario of a film.

> The attitude towards the scenarios has been very mechanical in the Hindi films (in foreign films it is just the opposite). A scenario is looked upon as an exercise in filling in scenes with dialogues, after the outline of the story has been determined. Sometimes scenes and dialogues are not written down even till the day the film goes on the sets. It often happens that the cameraman, after adjusting the lighting, etc. is waiting to take the shot, when the dialogues are hurriedly scribbled....
>
> In those days, Shashidhar Mukherji was regarded

as the wizard of the box-office. None of his films ever failed. The formula he followed was simple—he kept the scenario deliberately weak. If the scenario is weak, the spectator would wait impatiently for the songs and dance sequences. If the spectator finds the scenario of absorbing interest, he would take less interest in songs and dances, which is not good from the box-office point of view, he would argue. There is only one dependable basis for the success of Hindi films—the songs.

I think it is a big mistake to write the scenes and dialogues separately. The scenario is like a plant, every part of it; the roots, the stalk, the branches, the leaves, all grow naturally in the natural order...

Balraj acted in about one hundred and thirty-five films, establishing therein some memorable characters. If despite all the superficiality and melodramatic nature of Hindi films, he was able to present authentic, highly moving and vivid portrayals, it was because be brought to the films, besides his sensitive, artistic temperament, a breadth of outlook and deep social awareness. There is a rich and varied gallery of these portrayals: the clerk ('*Garm Coat*'), the peasant ('*Do Bigha Zameen*'), the domestic servant ('*Aulad*'), the Pathan ('*Kabuliwala*'), the refugee ('*Waqt*'), the rich mill-owner ('*Ek Phool Do Mali*'), the Muslim businessman ('*Garm Hawa*'), to name but a few, in which Balraj merges his own identity into that of the character he is portraying. Because of his peculiar background and mental make-up and values, he often found himself a misfit in the film-world, and this in turn made his work all the more difficult and his struggle hard and painful. In a way, he was all the time swimming against the current, and at times it was hard going. Besides, he did not indulge in any of the 'tricks of the trade' to gain prominence; instead, he conducted himself with rare dignity and grace and the pride of an artist. He was never involved in the politics of

the film-world. Knowing that a film-artist's career in our country was precarious, also that everything was calculated to the box-office potentialities of the film, he still maintained throughout his integrity as an artist. Nor was he obsessed with the idea of blazing a new trail, as some romantic idealists are. He was detached and objective enough to know which little niche he had to occupy in the film-world, and strove hard to occupy it with credit. He seldom had any misunderstandings with a director or confrontation with any producer. All his struggle was with himself as an artist, and in this his humility, his receptive frame of mind, his objective understanding of reality went a long way to help him emerge successful, and thereby in his own way he blazed a new trail also.

> Uphill now I have been working with honesty and self-respect. If these are lost, I would go to the dogs myself.... (letter dated 22nd June 1954).

On another occasion when I wrote to him to put in a word for me with someone, he replied,

> I have never approached anyone on my own behalf and now I feel I shall be doing you injustice if I did so on yours...There is a joy in plucking the fruit straight from the tree...I would not like to be deprived of that satisfaction (letter dated 11th July 1956).

He came into prominence in the film-world by dint of his integrity as an artist and sheer hard work. Soon enough, his films began to run to packed houses and to hit the 'jubilee' lines. Awards began to pour in. Recognition came, and with it, fame and money. Despite the ups and downs of film-life, his 'star' was steadily on the ascendant. Anyone visiting his house in Bombay, would be struck by the dozens of trophies marking the jubilees of several of his hit films; also by the scrolls of framed addresses presented by numerous societies and groups all over the country.

In 1969, he was awarded the Padmashri by

the Government of India.

Side by side with films, Balraj continued to maintain a living contact with the stage. By 1950 or so, the activities of the IPTA in Bombay had virtually ceased. Balraj, alongwith a few close friends and drama-enthusiasts, formed a small, amateur drama group called 'The Juhu Art Theatre', which included his wife Santosh, Nitin Sethi, Mohan Sharma, their talented wives, and several others. Thus, Balraj's dramatic activity continued, almost uninterrupted. Together they staged Gogol's *Inspector-General* followed by *'Azhar ka Khwab'*, a play based on Shaw's *Pygmalion* and a few others. His associates became, more than drama artists, his close and dear friends who stood by him in many a difficult moment in later life. In the sixties the IPTA also began to revive its activities and Balraj once again began to appear on the IPTA stage. One such memorable performance was in the role of Ghalib, in the play titled *'Akhiri Shama'*, the dialogues for which had been written by Kaifi Azmi and the play directed by Sathyu. The play was successfully performed in the Diwan-i-Aam of the Red Fort of Delhi on the occasion of Ghalib's centenary.

Balraj forged intimate links with the Punjabi stage as well. He became an active participant in the productions of Punjabi Kala Kendra—a drama group run by Sardar Gursharan Singh, an artist of deep social commitment and dedication. Balraj would sometimes go all the way from Bombay to Amritsar in order to take part in these Punjabi plays. He would sometimes tour with the drama group in the interior of the Punjab. This association continued till the last days of his life. As a matter of fact, hardly a week before his death he had been absorbed in the production of one of Balwant Gargi's plays in Bombay.

7

# CREATIVE WRITING

Gradually as time passed, and his talent as a film-artist blossomed forth, a new madness seized him. It was in reality, not new; it had been there all the time, only it had lain dormant. It was love for the Punjabi language, and Punjabi literature and culture. Now it asserted itself with a force and passion of which Balraj himself was perhaps unaware. There were many reasons for it. He had left Punjab long ago and felt nostalgic about it, and yearned to return home. But it was not mere homesickness; it was the logical consequence of his struggle as an artist. As an artist he had come to realise that he must strike roots in the culture of his own people, that he must have a sense of belonging and must draw his sustenance as an artist from the life and culture of the people from among whom he had sprung. An artist's art begins to wither away or ends up in becoming mechanical and superficial, if he has no such roots.

There were other factors too: his love of literature—his first love—had begun to assert itself. He still believed that he had missed his vocation in life and that he must turn back to literature. Coupled with that was his increasing dissatisfaction with the type of films that were made, and he felt that the quality of the films produced was in no way commensurate with the amount of time and energy spent on them.

In the summer of 1954, returning from Manali, after a shooting spree of '*Badnam*' we find him going to Amritsar

to have the *darshan* (meeting) of the famous Punjabi novelist, Nanak Singh. Already in 1953 he had begun writing letters to me in Punjabi, in the Gurmukhi script. In a letter dated 12th May 1955, he wrote:

> I do not have the least attachment with films. I am devoted only to literature. And that also, most of all, to my Punjabi literature. Even if I am not able to do any original, creative writing in Punjabi, I can at least translate into Punjabi, and that way live a useful life...People need the best of knowledge in their own language. This is the only real way of taking the country forward....

In his letters he again and again mentioned that after saving a little money he would like to return to Delhi and settle down, either in Delhi or Srinagar, and devote all his energy to creative writing.

> You will be glad to know that Amiya Chakravarti has again put me in his next film. This time the heroine will be Vijyantimala. It is very likely that a few more contracts may come my way on the strength of this contract. If I am able to save some money this year, then by next year, I intend to get out of this mud... (letter dated 20th Feb. 1956).

For a time he kept dreaming of returning home and setting up 'our own Santiniketan', as he put it, a kind of small, simple habitation, where he and I and some others would live a simple life and devote all our time to literary activity.

> Shooting goes on day and night. There is a credit balance of seven or eight thousand rupees in the bank....My only desire is that during the next six months or a year, I should have a saving of twenty thousand rupees, and then I shall be able to call my life as my own. If by any chance I am to save thirty

> thousand rupees then I shall pull you over also and we shall set up our own 'Santiniketan' in Kashmir (1954).
>
> Again a few months later:
>
> I am quite in a position to save twenty thousand rupees this year...A free house is provided to us to live in, in Delhi, as also in Kashmir. Keeping all these things in view, if you draw up a plan, then nothing will give me greater pleasure than that we should together set up our 'Santiniketan'. At present, a large part of life cannot be called our own. For creative work this is a big problem. But if we can sit together and think of a way out, we can find one, although I well realise the difficulties involved (letter dated 12th May, 1955).

This was also the time when his talent was being more and more recognised and he was getting deeper and deeper into the 'mud' as he put it. Sometimes I used to wonder if his craving for a literary vocation was not somewhat similar to Father's nostalgic love for business in his old age, something for which he craved but for which he was not ready to take pains. But it was not so with Balraj. He had actually begun to devote hours to the study of the Punjabi language with an ardour which was truly enviable. Besides reading, he filled notebooks with phrases, idioms, proverbs; he would sit with Mother and jot down the expressions that would fall from her lips; he would go to the *gurudwaras* and listen to the recitations from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, as also to the songs of the *ragis*. Once, while in Bombay, he took me one night to a remote *gurudwara* where some *ragis* from the Punjab had arrived and were going to sing. We sat and listened till about 11 in the night; thereafter Balraj proceeded to his studio where he had night-long shooting and I returned home.

It was not merely a question of nostalgia. It was

primarily as an artist that he turned towards his own language and the culture of his own region. He felt uprooted from the Punjabi culture. He believed that no art can grow except in its own environment. He would cite the case of the Bengalis, the Keralites and the Maharashtrians, etc., all of whom had cultural homogeniety. He would complain bitterly that the Punjabis themselves had paid scant respect to their language and culture. When the British were here the pride of place went to the English language; and next to it came Urdu. After Independence, when the social status of Urdu declined and that of Hindi rose, many a young Punjabi writer turned to Hindi. The Punjabi language had been neglected by the Punjabis themselves, which was a queer phenomenon. No people in any other state had considered their own language with such scant respect as the Punjabis had done. That is why, he would argue, even though the film-work of Bombay is dominated by the Punjabis, the artistic and cultural standard of the films is so low.

The more closely he linked himself with the Punjabi language and culture, the greater was the flowering of his talent as a screen-artist.

His visits to the Punjab became more frequent. Within a few years he was on friendly terms with a large number of Punjabi writers. His circle included Nanak Singh, Gurbaksh Singh, Navtej, Jaswant Singh Kanwal and many others and strong personal friendships grew with them. Balraj had always had a strange fascination for literary personalities, as much as he had for the places associated with literary personalities. He was passionately fond of meeting writers and artists. If ever a poem moved him, his immediate desire would be to meet the writer of that poem. When he went to Pakistan in 1960, he made it a point to visit Heer's tomb (the heroine of a Punjabi romance, *Heer-Ranjah*), although the place was far out of the way. Quite a number of times when he visited Delhi, he would visit Ghalib's tomb. Similarly, years earlier he had

gone and made the acquaintance of Mehjoor, the noted Kashmiri poet, in a remote village, in the interior of the Kashmir valley.

Soon enough, he got himself a Punjabi typewriter—an office 'Remington'—and learnt how to type on it. A stage came when he would carry the typewriter to the studio with him and during intervals of shooting, withdraw into his cabin and start tick-ticking an article, an essay or a poem.

His dream of returning home and setting up his own 'Santiniketan' was not materialising. He was getting more and more involved with films. Other considerations too, held him back. In a letter to me dated 1960, he wrote:

> I consider it necessary to build a house, because one must have some place, particularly when Parikshit also is taking training in the same profession, and Shabnam and Sanober too have been brought up here (in Bombay). I shall feel more free when the house has been constructed. If later on I think that I should leave Bombay, the house can be sold or rented out. So far as I am concerned, I am more inclined towards the Punjab and Punjabi literature, and I am trying to get absorbed in it.

Alas, when at last he got ready to leave for the Punjab, when a house in Preet Nagar had been purchased and set up, when he had reduced his film commitments to the minimum, and, when it was only a matter of days for him to go and live there, death took him away!

But in his heart he certainly had set up his 'Santiniketan', his little Punjab, the tiny home of Punjabi culture, from which he drew his sustenance and inspiration both as a film-artist and as a man of letters.

He would very often talk about that observation which Acharya Kshitismohan Sen had made to him in the late thirties at Santiniketan:

> A prostitute can acquire wealth, fame, comfort, and luxury, but she can never have the status of a wife. So it is with a foreign medium of expression also.

At one place, in his reminiscences about his film-life he wrote:

> Marxism has taught me to view the problem of language in a scientific manner. Impressed by the views of such great men as Tagore and Gandhi, I was myself turning to the view that for every artist and writer, his own mother tongue is the best medium of self-expression. The study of Marxism further strengthened this belief of mine (*Meri Filmi Atmakatha*, p.108).

This of course, does not mean that he devoted himself to the study of the Punjabi language to the exclusion of other languages. As a lover of literature, he valued other languages as much and studied whichever other language he could. While in England he had brushed up his knowledge of the Urdu language painstakingly in order to be able to read Ghalib's poetry. He was a great lover of Ghalib and we spent many a happy hour together reciting and discussing his poetry. He was quite versatile in the Bengali language also and had read practically the whole of Tagore in Bengali. Once, when he was passing through Delhi, and I met him at the railway station, he read out to me a long poem in Bengali from Tagore's works, which he had been reading earlier. So enthusiastic was he about this poem—it was a dialogue between two characters in the *Mahabharata*—that he talked of nothing else till the train steamed out of the platform and he resumed his journey. While in Bombay he learnt both Gujarati and Marathi with great interest. And at one time, I found him studying the Tamil language too. He was good at learning languages and was quite proficient in their use.

In 1960, Balraj went on a tour of Pakistan. He was

terribly excited about it because of his intimate associations with Rawalpindi, our home-town, with Bhera, our ancestral town and with Lahore, the town where he had received his higher education and from where later on he had launched out in life. But personal associations apart, he was going, as it were, on a one-man goodwill mission, because of his immense love and regard for the people of Pakistan. On his return he wrote his famous travelogue, *Mera Pakistani Safar*, his first major work in Punjabi.

On the back-cover of the book, Balraj is shown in a close embrace with Bostan Khan, Balraj's boyhood friend and neighbour. He was thrilled on meeting his old playmates, among whom one plied a *tonga* while another had become a car-driver and a third was a *tehsildar*, and so on. He was thrilled on hearing the language of his region; the sweet, mellifluent Pothohari; at Bhera, he met an old woman who knew our parents and several other relations and who spoke to him of the days gone by and treated him like a son. He went to Jhung, a small town in Sargodha district, to visit the grave of Heer, the heroine of the great Punjabi romance. It was a tour done on a purely emotional plane. A small incident would show how Balraj viewed things.

At Rawalpindi, Balraj went to have a look at our house in Chhachi *mohalla*. Ever since the partition of the country, we had no knowledge of what had happened to the house. One letter alone had come from our neighbour to the effect that the lock on the front door had been broken open and many things carried away soon after our departure. This was the normal thing in those days on both sides of the Punjab border and the evacuees took it for granted. But there was still the curiosity about the occupants of our house.

When Balraj reached the house, a marriage was being celebrated there, and a feast being prepared to entertain the marriage party. Balraj introduced himself to the occupants—a family of middle-class Muslims uprooted

from east Punjab—and soon enough, Balraj was serving food alongwith other members of the family to the members of the marriage party!

This book is a warm, deeply human document, revealing that the chords that join us to the people and culture of Pakistan are tender and imperceptibly fine, and yet strong as iron. The book was well-received and translated both into Hindi and Urdu.

That was Balraj's first major venture into Punjabi literature.

Balraj was soon writing regularly and with considerable ease. The initial period spent in learning the language and the script which had been strenuous was now over. He felt increasingly free and self-confident. He again and again talked of the effortless ease with which he expressed himself in Punjabi: "Earlier, I hesitated in writing verse. Now I knock off anything: essay, reminiscence, poetry, anything. Language is no barrier. I feel I am in my elements."

This, of course, does not mean that he was not self-critical. He would often complain that he had lost the hang of writing a short story or that his verse was still stilted. But of this he had no doubt that he was finding his moorings as a writer. He was contributing book reviews regularly to the weekly *Ranajit* in Bombay, and sending articles, poems to *Preet Lari* in the Punjab and *Arsi* in Delhi. The Likhari Sabha of Bombay, with the active participation of Balraj, hosted a conference of Punjabi writers in Bombay.

*Mera Pakistani Safar* was followed by *Mera Roosi Safarnama* in 1969, another notable travelogue which described his three weeks' tour of some parts of the Soviet Union in the company of Giani Zail Singh and another friend from the south. This was not Balraj's first visit to that great country. He had first visited it in 1954 as a member of the film delegation to take part in a festival of Indian films where *'Do Bigha Zameen'*, *'Awara'* and some

other films had been screemed. He had returned from it highly enthused. "Oh, what a country! What people! What life!" he had remarked in one of his letters on his return. His association with the Soviet Union increased and he paid several visits to it thereafter, sometimes as the member of a film-delegation, at others as the member of a delegation sponsored by the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society of which he was one of the vice-presidents. He had also stayed there at one time in connection with the shooting of '*Pardesi*', a joint venture between Indian and Soviet film-workers based on the life and travels of Afanasi Nikitin, a Russian trader of the 14th century, in which he had played the role of Afanasi's friend.

The book contains an account of delightful and stimulating day-to-day experiences, written in a chatty informal style, interspersed with serious reflections and comments. Its very charming feature is its objectivity: the attempt to portray things as he had seen and experienced them.

The book was highly acclaimed and won him the Soviet Land Nehru Award. Soon after he wrote a pamphlet putting forward a strong plea for the adoption of the Roman script for purposes of communication among different parts of the country. He took the cue from the fact that the Roman script was already in use in the Army for all notifications and was serving a useful purpose. If adopted for all-India purposes, it would eliminate much of the friction caused by the controversies over the scripts of different Indian languages. Balraj got the pamphlet printed at his own expense and circulated it widely among intellectuals and public men.

In 1970 he wrote another pamphlet titled: *A Letter to Hindi Writers*. This was originally written in Punjabi and later translated into Hindi by the well-known writer, Sukhbir. Balraj sent it to the foremost Hindi periodicals, like *Dharma Yug* and others, but none agreed to publish it, and consequently this too was published in pamphlet

form in 1972 by himself and freely circulated.

Since Balraj had begun his career as a writer in Hindi, he thought that he had a claim on the attention of Hindi writers.

There is a very significant contribution on the question of Urdu in recent times and deserves a careful study. He began by criticising a certain Urdu convention held on Bombay, which he suspected, intended to declare Urdu as a minority language. It was the British, Balraj said, who had linked the question of language with religion as, for instance, by making Urdu the language of the Punjab, since the majority of the people living in the Punjab happened to be Muslims—and thereby sowed the poisonous seeds of communalism in the social life of the country. To declare Urdu as a minority language was a step in the same direction.

> The hateful imperialist conspiracy of linking language with religion has been dealt a staggering blow by the Bengalis of East Pakistan. The Bengali Muslims by rejecting Urdu as their language have thrown into the dustbin its claim to be an Islamic language. Similarly the Hindus of Tamil Nadu, by refusing to accept Hindi as the language of all Hindus, have dealt a mortal blow to this obsolete concept.

He further said:

> Our country is a family of many peoples and nationalities. Each one of them should enjoy equal rights. The people who go about shouting unthinkingly, the slogan, 'one country, one language', must learn a lesson from the experience of Pakistan. This is not the path of unity but of regression and backwardness...

Going back into history and tracing the relations of India with the areas from where the invaders had come in the past, Balraj said:

The nationalities that invaded India before the advent of Islam, belonged to the same racial stock to which we belong and so did the nationalities which invaded India after the advent of Islam to which they had been converted. The same blood ran in their veins; their languages too had originated from Sanskrit....

Further:

For hundreds of years the Persian script has been used in northern India, alongside the local scripts. Due to hundreds of years of use the Persian script too, like the Mughal dress, has become something Indian. We do not know whether the famous Punjabi poet, Sheikh Farid, wrote his verses in the Persian script or in the Gurmukhi script, or in which script Waris Shah wrote his famous epic, *Heer Ranjah*. But for a Punjabi it makes no difference, both are the historical scripts of the Punjabi language...In the same way, in your state of Uttar Pradesh, both Persian and Devanagari scripts have been living side by side, like two sisters. Who knows whether Amir Khusro, while writing his couplets used the Devanagari script or the Persian script, or Malik Mohammed Jayasi, the author of *Padmavat*? But it makes no difference. Both are great Hindi poets. Urdu became the favourite of the upper classes and of the city-dwellers, and courtiers. But those who wrote in Urdu consisted of both Hindus and Muslims...

No harm would come to Hindu-Urdu by having two scripts. By denying Urdu its right, the people of U.P. have delivered a heavy blow to their own social and cultural development....

Balraj said further:

To try to get the rights of Urdu accepted in areas where Urdu is not the mother tongue, is to link Urdu with the Muslim minority. If Urdu is not the

> language of Punjabis or the Bengalis, it also cannot be the language of the Marathas, the Telugu people, the Tamilians, the Keralites, whether they are Hindus or Muslims. The welfare of the Muslims of these states lies in that they should love their mother tongue the same way as the Bengali or Bangladeshi loves his Bengali language. The birthright of Urdu must be granted to it in U.P., because it is the mother tongue of that area. Undoubtedly, Urdu must get equality with Hindi in U.P. No fair-minded person can deny this. Hindi and Urdu have no animosity with each other. It is one language written in two scripts, in the same way as Punjabi.

His arguments are weighty, cogent and well reasoned. Behind his views is a sense of concern, all too sincere. It is unfortunate that in our society, a public debate on questions of vital concern is never encouraged; it is always presumed that either academic people or politicians are competent to express their views on them. The situation is further vitiated by communal passions which are very easily roused and which thwart the very possibility of discussing the question dispassionately and objectively, in national interest. Balraj was public-spirited enough to speak out his mind on the subject that greatly disturbed him.

Near about this time Balraj started working on a three-act play in Punjabi. He worked hard at it and revised and re-revised the script several times. It was titled *'Bapu ki Kahega?'* (What will Bapu say?). It was a social play worked out in the form of fantasy.

In this play a certain selfless, elderly, social worker, who had been a local Congress leader, lies wounded in a hospital as a result of the disturbances that had taken place in the city. In his delirium he imagines himself to have crossed the line between life and after-life and entering the region of the dead, meets the old national leaders, Gandhi, Nehru, Bhagat Singh and others and puts

questions to them which disturb him; he seeks answers from them because he is unable to comprehend contemporary reality.

Balraj, however, was not destined to see it performed on the stage. The play was presented for the first time on his first death anniversary in Delhi, by the IPTA artists of Bombay, and was ably directed by Sathyu.

Balraj was becoming prolific in his literary output. At one time he was contributing two series of articles: one relating to his experiences in the film-world, which were later compiled and printed under the title, *Meri Filmi Sarguzasht* (My Film Experiences), and the second to his experiences in general, which were more like pen-portraits of individuals—mostly people from the lower walks of life—which too were compiled and printed under the title *Gair Jazbati Diary* (Unsentimental Diary). His pen-portraits are graphic, vivid, and charged with that broad human sympathy which was Balraj's predominant quality as a writer. And his film-reminiscences throw a flood of light on his own struggle as a screen-artist as also illumine many an aspect of this art and its integral elements. They are reminiscences with a difference. Written with candour and sincerity, they reveal Balraj's inner personality—his humility, his receptive frame of mind which can appreciate the artistic talents of others, his balanced social perspective—as also the nature of the sphere in which he was working. Concrete and factual on one side, they are presented against the larger context of our social life and moral and aesthetic values. Gossipy and highly entertaining with film personalities, 'extras', the glimpses of studio work, and the anecdotes of the film-world, they are also deeply moving documents bringing out the ironies of film-life, its make-believe, its pathos, etc.

Balraj was writing verse too. His poems, written mostly in free verse, include one long poem *'Waiter di Waar'* (The Ballad of the Waiter), which appeared in *Preet Lari*, in 1972, and a number of shorter poems.

We also find him working on a novel planned on a big canvas, which he left unfinished. Thus we have, among his writings, two travelogues, two books of reminiscences, one full-length play, some poems, two phamphlets, one convocation address which he delivered at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, and a large number of articles, essays, etc. All these were written in the Punjabi language. Among his earlier writings when he was writing in Hindi, we have a collection of short stories, printed under the title *'Basant kya Kahega'* (What will Basant say), a children's book *Dhapor Shankh* and a number of humorous essays and pen-portraits. There were other writings too, as for instance, the few poems that he wrote in English when he was at college and the translation of a few poems into English, a radio play *'Woh Aadmi jis ke Sir main Ghari thi'* (The Man with a Clock in his Head) which he wrote in London when he was working with the B.B.C., the stage-play *'Kursi'* which he wrote while working with the IPTA and the scenario of the film *'Baazi'*.

It is a modest output, but viewed against the background of his otherwise heavily preoccupied life, it is considerable and also significant.

Recognition came to him in this field also. The Languages Department of the Punjab government honoured him with the Lekhak Shiromani Award in 1971, which was very dear to Balraj's heart.

Writing about his work, an eminent Punjabi critic, Sardar Kapur Singh Gumnam wrote:

> His utterances go deep into the heart because they emanate from his experiences. His personality is fused with his writing, as sweetness in milk. Reading his Russian travelogue, the reader feels that he himself is standing before Balraj and listening to his conversation. His writing is of a personal nature; the reader gets introduced to every member of Balraj's family, but more than that, he has a good glimpse of Balraj's

own transparent soul. Balraj is as proficient in the use of irony and satire as he is in cogent reasoning. Sometimes he adopts the dialogue-technique for the exposition of profound scientific, social and philosophic issues, which is highly effective. Balraj does not allow sentimentality to have the better of his reason. That is why his style is basically argumentative. It provokes the reader's reasoning faculty. His deep study enables him to discuss different topics with cogent reasoning, while the artist in him keeps the interest of the spectator and the reader constantly alive. The consummate actor that he is, he is able to convey the poignancy of a moment in a light vein, in a simple gesture. There is truth in what he says; so are sincerity, spontaneity, candour, good-heartedness. Therein lies the magic of his pen. The fact that Balraj was a fine writer, helped him to become a great actor.

Restraint and sweetness which characterise his conversation with friends, also characterise his writing. He never writes a single sentence in excess.

He loves truth. He does not see only one side of the picture. He is bold and fearless when he makes any statements. If, on the one hand, he expresses a sense of revolt against the imperialist mentality of the British, on the other hand, he does not ignore the beauties of the English language. He is at times brutally frank. He never minces matters. He does not even spare himself, and the candour with which he castigates himself makes his writing all the more fascinating. He has, above all, the self-respect of a genuine artist and writer...

Besides his other writings, he maintained his copious diaries and a vast correspondence. His letters were highly stimulating and had a flavour all their own.

Besides his writing work and his dramatic activities, he was also taking acting part in public life. Any progressive

measure, a meeting, a procession, a demonstration, a fund-collecting campaign, an electioneering campaign and Balraj would be in the forefront of the participants. In July 1955, he led the Indian youth delegation to the World Youth Festival in Warsaw (Poland). Immediately on return, in October 1955, he left for China, as a member of the film delegation led by Prithviraj, and accompanied by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Chetan Anand and others. He plunged into the election campaigns of Krishna Menon, an old friend of Balraj's from London days, of Smt. Subhadra Joshi, Shri Amar Nath Vidyalankar and others, on different occasions. This involvement with public affairs continued till the end of his days. As a matter of fact, he was out on electioneering in Indore on one occasion, when the sad news of the death of his daughter was conveyed to him. Any social disturbance, any riot or natural calamity and Balraj would forget everything and be at the spot to render whatever service he could. Even a few days before his death, he had been touring the drought-stricken areas of Maharashtra. Such was his sense of commitment. He could not bear to remain aloof and unconcerned when a big tragedy occurred in any part of the country. Once I accompanied him to the riot-devasted town of Bhiwandi. K.A. Abbas, I.S. Johar and a few other film-people were also with us. We went from Bombay by car in the morning and returned the same evening. But two days later, Balraj went back to Bhiwandi, this time alone, and stayed there for a fortnight at a stretch and did whatever he could to give relief to the sufferers. "If you go for one day, the sufferers think that you have come on a sightseeing tour of their suffering," he remarked. Balraj filled many a page of his diary with his experiences at Bhiwandi. With the same sense of concern he went to Bangladesh and toured parts of West Bengal during the days of the Bangladesh war. All his public activities, his travelling and relief work, were integral to his personality as a socially conscious artist and citizen. From tiny social issues, to issues of great

moment, he showed a great sense of concern. A few days before his death he had sent a letter to *The Times of India* complaining about the cutting down of coconut trees in the vicinity of the Juhu beach.

How he managed to combine his social activities with writing, film-work, dramatic activity and domestic responsibilities, reveal a remarkable example of self-discipline and passionate involvement. He would attend to his copious correspondence himself—he was very prompt at replying to letters; he would do a lot of travelling, during which he would read books, mostly of a serious nature. I remember seeing him once in a suburban train of Bombay, poring intently over Engels' *Anti Duehring*, a heavy and serious book.

As a mark of recognition of his public-spiritedness, he was once approached for nomination to the Rajya Sabha, which he declined on the ground that he was not cut for political work. A month or so later, he told me that he had made a mistake in declining the offer, because membership of the Rajya Sabha would have given him a rare opportunity of travelling throughout the length and breadth of India, and acquainting himself closely with the situation prevailing in the country.

8

# AT HOME

It would be wrong to think that with recognition and success, and with the freedom to pursue his cherished interests, Balraj's life had become a sort of smooth sailing. It was nothing of the kind. As it is, for an artist, there is no resting on his oars. Every new role brings new challenges, involving, on the artistic plane, the same struggle as his earlier performances. Moreover, it was not given to him to have peace of mind or to live a quiet, settled life. Ever since he had left home, his life has been restless and full of struggle. The impetuosity of his temperament, though chastened with time and experience of life, was not conducive to a quiet life. And then who can control his fate, or know from which direction a blow is likely to come to shatter his equanimity, or escape life's complexities and rude shocks?

Balraj, despite all his initiative and drive and the breadth of his outlook, had little practical sense. He was not a man of affairs. Over the years, he had drifted more and more away from the need to solve practical, everyday problems of life. In the matter of human relations too, despite all the varied experiences of life, he had remained somewhat of an idealist, and at times could not cope with a tricky, complex situation, and he had to face quite a few serious odds in life. The main source of his strength was his personal integrity and his steadfast adherence to certain basic principles and tenets, which helped him, in his hours of difficulty to keep his chin up and to continue to live as wholesome and creative a life as possible.

His domestic life calls for some attention.

For many years Balraj had lived in a small house, situated in the Theosophical Colony on the Juhu Church Road. During Damyanti's life-time, and later on too when Balraj was a devout activist of the IPTA, the house, though small, used to hum with activity. It afforded little privacy, its thatched roofs leaked every monsoon, it could provide few creature-comforts and it was used as a public place by all the film and IPTA enthusiasts who would walk in and out of it at all odd hours, but it was a house that had plenty of human warmth. Being close to the Juhu beach, on Saturdays and Sundays, the kettle was kept boiling for all and sundry; many would use Balraj's house as a kind of dressing room for a bath in the sea. After a good swim, they would come back, walk through the rooms with muddy feet, have a freshwater bath in Balraj's bathroom, and thereafter sit down to discuss politics over endless cups of tea. There was no family life as such for Balraj and his children were often neglected.

With the IPTA activities subsiding and Balraj's own preoccupation with the films increasing, the place became somewhat quieter. Balraj also decided to send his children to public schools where they could live a more disciplined and regular life. Balraj and Santosh continued to live in the same house for quite a few years after that, and their little daughter Sanober, grew up there.

But in 1961 Balraj set about building his own house on a big plot of land on the Turner Royal Lane (now named Balraj Sahni Marg) near the Sun 'n Sand Hotel. When the house was constructed it was named 'Ikram' after the name of the architect. It is seldom that a house-owner names his house after the name of its architect. A relationship of such trust and friendliness had developed between the architect and Balraj that Balraj wanted to express his sense of gratitude by naming the house after him.

It was a commodious house but not a well-planned

house. A smaller and more compact house would have served his purpose better. This sprawling house was built on the principle of personal privacy—something which the members of the family had been deprived of in the old house—but on which, alas, an exaggerated emphasis was put in the construction of this house. A huge bedroom with attached bathroom was allotted to each member of the family. Once a person withdrew into his or her room, he or she would be completely cut off from the rest of the family. During the midday siesta, an awful silence would fall over the house. With the two elder children sent to the public residential schools, the three of them—Balraj, Tosh and their little child Sanober (and later on Sanober also was sent off to join Parikshit and Shabnam at the Lawrence School, Sanawar) needed a much smaller house to live in. Even otherwise a house is a more cheerful place to live in which the inmates, though provided with their privacy, frequently run into one another during the day. Here each room was like a big, huge box completely unconnected with the other. Such structures increase one's loneliness and tend to make a person more and more exclusive. Balraj's room was located in one corner of the first floor, whereas Tosh's personal room was on the top floor. Moreover, Tosh, by nature and temperament was rather reserved and exclusive in her habits. The structure of the house did the rest, and therefore whenever a visitor entered it, he had the feeling that he was entering a mausoleum. This radical change in the environment, despite all the success and prosperity that had come Balraj's way, did not prove to be an unmixed blessing.

Balraj's social life too, gradually became somewhat restricted. He was no longer singing in the suburban trains as he used to with his IPTA friends. Fewer people dropped in and those too were busy people who had little time to relax over cups of tea. Hence, there was little of that abandon and bonhomie which used to be a characteristic of Balraj's way of life. It had become more sedate and less

frolicsome. He lived a more organised life no doubt, kept his appointments to the minute, never missed his schedule with the studios, etc. but that abandon and jollity were now missing.

The desire to go and settle down in Punjab was still there, but it was being partly fulfilled by his regular attention to writing work and its increasing output. His children had now grown up and their needs had to have priority over his own. Parikshit had spent his early childhood in Punjab, and later studied at Sanawar and at St. Stephens College of Delhi but the other two children, Shabnam and Sanober, had practically no associations with Punjab. They belonged more to Bombay than to Punjab. The huge house built by Balraj was to prove another deterrent to his leaving Bombay. One may have strong cravings and feel nostalgic about things but many of one's decisions are dictated by one's immediate circumstances and his circumstances were getting to be complicated. And so, Balraj stayed on in Bombay; only his visits to Punjab became more frequent, when he would sometimes tour villages or stage plays in small towns. And the copious correspondence he kept up with writers, artists and public men of the Punjab kept him closely associated with Punjab's life.

There were other developments too. Both Father and Mother came to live with him in Bombay. Father had a severe set-back in health in 1957; soon after I went to Moscow to work there, and Balraj could not leave the parents alone in Delhi. Balraj served them as best as he could, but these lifelong ties were soon to snap. Father died in 1961 and six years later, Mother too expired. During these years, sometimes the parents would come and live in Delhi, when Balraj would be constantly coming to Delhi to look to their requirements. This too added considerably to his responsibilities.

Parikshit returned from Moscow in 1965, where he had gone to study film-direction, at the Gorky Institute of

Cinematography. Having lived in a film atmosphere totally different from the one prevailing in India, and having worked with such stalwarts of the Soviet film industry as Bandarchuk and others, he found it difficult to adapt himself to the conditions prevailing here. He was also very sensitive to the fact that roles should be given to him because he happened to be Balraj Sahni's son. He wanted to stand on his own feet and wanted to be regarded as an independent entity. Every father wants to spare his child the rigours of struggle which he himself had to face and wants his son to benefit from his experience. Father had wanted the same thing for Balraj and now Balraj was wanting to do the same for his son. For a time, Parikshit felt terribly alienated because he could neither strike an equation with the film industry nor with his father. And consequently there was strain on both sides. There were also uneasy questions between the grown-up children and Tosh and at times adjustment became a difficult problem. In their younger days, the children had not enjoyed the benefits of a compact home-life. Balraj used to be painfully conscious of the fact that his old house had become such a noisy public place, that the children were neglected and that they did not receive as much attention from their parents as they deserved. And afterwards they were sent to study in public schools. This aspect too of their domestic life had had its effect on the make-up of the children, which, to a certain extent, added to the difficulties of adjustment.

Perhaps the worst sufferer in this respect was Shabnam, Balraj's second child from Damyanti. Born in England in 1943, Shabnam was barely three-and-a-half years of age when her mother died. During her childhood days, Balraj was engrossed in IPTA work and in his struggle to get a foothold in the films. Financially too he was hard up. Later on, the child was sent to the Lawrence School, Sanawar, for studies. Balraj was deeply attached to his children, particularly to Shabnam, about whom he had

always been troubled by a gnawing sense of guilt that he had not been able to give his best to the child, who had virtually been left in his care by her dying mother.

Shabnam grew up to be a beautiful young girl, with her mother's gay and chirpy temperament. She was also a very accomplished tennis player. She had a striking resemblance with her mother, which endeared her all the more to Balraj and other members of the family.

But life was to prove very cruel to her, and consequently to Balraj also. After her graduation from the Bombay University, the girl was married away but the marriage went on the rocks soon after. The maladjustment was caused primarily by the fact that Shabnam had been married into an environment which was entirely different from the one in which she had been brought up. She was married into the house of service people where great emphasis is laid on style of living, on frugality and budgeting of income and expenses, on external appearances, etc.—things which proved too constricting and exacting for her—for which she was not prepared and for which she had received no training. Compared with this, hers had been a very free and easy life. She also suffered from the severe handicap of not knowing anything about housekeeping, a quality which counts most of all with service people. She had no memories of Balraj's straitened circumstances, and her girlhood had been spent in affluence and ease and therefore she did not have a thrifty mind which can regulate expenses. Despite the fact that she was considerate and careful in the extreme, she had suddenly found herself in a situation which bewildered her. She found it hard to cope with the demands made on her as a housewife. Shabnam soon lost her nerve and self-confidence.

Balraj lost his equanimity of mind and did a lot of rushing about to ease her situation. He was also a man who loved not wisely but too well. He lacked both tact and patience. It was enough for him to know that his

daughter was suffering to lose all his equilibrium. He was all the more disturbed when he realised that Shabnam was hiding things from him so that her situation should not make him anxious and unhappy. Shabnam would not, on her own, say anything to him about her domestic life. And so the matters had continued to drift, till one day Shabnam attempted suicide.

In our country when marriages go out of gear, the father of the girl is left with no choice except to get his daughter back into his own house. Perhaps the only way by which a girl's situation can improve is by her being capable of earning her own bread and standing on her own feet.

Bewildered in the extreme, the girl had attempted suicide. The pathetic part of it was that she was all the time blaming herself for her inability to cope with the responsibilities of a housewife.

Shabnam soon cracked up and was put under the treatment of a psychiatrist. Sometimes she would come into her own, be cheerful, confident, and at other times she would be depressed, wavering, not knowing which way to go.

The most awful thing about the situation was that Balraj was left to cope with it all alone. Parikshit was too preoccupied with his own problems and was also rather young and could not understand the gravity of the situation as it was developing. Tosh, despite all her sense of concern, would not go beyond presenting her point of view, and leaving it to Balraj to take the final decision in a given situation. This over-cautious attitude on her part put her in a position of detachment and so Balraj was left alone to grapple with the problem as best as he could. Balraj was too bewildered and anxious to be able to take an objective, dispassionate view of the situation. No father in such a situation would be able to cope with it alone.

In one of his letters he wrote to me:

I have little worldly sense. I have no faith in my judgement. But at this time it is a question of my daughter's life. And I have to rely on my worthless intelligence. If my intentions are good, God will listen to me and grant me my prayer...My love alone is showing me the way and I hope that I shall emerge from this trial....At this time my only support is my daughter, Sanober. May God add my years of life to hers; I have no words to praise her...Shabnam goes to teach in the school. She is fully conscious. But she is careless about herself. Sometimes she starts talking too much, at others, becomes absolutely glum. It will take time....

Again and again in his letters he would try to minimise the gravity of the situation, so that we might not become too anxious, even though, in his heart of hearts he knew that things were worsening. He once wrote:

You are right. If one goes away from the place of action for a while, one is able to view the situation in a more detached way. But that is only possible if circumstances permit one to do so....But you need not be anxious. Fate has ordained that there should be perpetual drama in my life.

'मुश्किलें इतनी पड़ीं मुझ पर कि आसां हो गयीं'
(I was beset with so many difficulties that it became easier for me to face them.)

His anxiety and bewilderment increased, however. His letters began to reflect his depression more and more. Writing from Madras in August 1968, he again wrote:

It is now two days since I came here. Today is the third day....My mind was very restless on the first day. But gradually I noticed that even unbearable anxieties become less unbearable when a person goes far away from the scene of occurrence...

Next month he was at Manali in connection with the shooting of a film, from where he wrote:

> The weather here is excellent these days, but my mind is so beset with worries and anxieties that I have no time to notice it (letter dated 18th September 1968).

In April 1970, Parikshit's marriage took place with Aruna, Chetan Anand's niece. The situation in respect of Shabnam did not improve. Balraj's mental suffering too continued unabated. In August 1970 he wrote:

> Perhaps my last letter made you anxious. I beg to be excused. In fact, it is the height of foolishness to take things to heart. Life is something very beautiful. Each day is a boon and a blessing. How beautiful were those few moments when I was swimming in the Nagin Lake. Truly, worries make a man small. In future I shall try my best to see that worries do not disturb me. One harms oneself for nothing, and there is no gain at all.
>
> You will be glad to know that I have started working on that cursed play again and am getting absorbed in it. This time I shall see it to the end....

Balraj continued, as bravely as possible, to face the situation and try to resolve it, but he was meeting with little success. Shabnam's condition continued to deteriorate.

> My life is going on at its old clumsy pace. I have failed both as a father and as a husband. Sometimes when life appears to be worth living, I do a bit of writing. At such moments I take life into my arms, as it were. But now the sun shines less, most of the time it is cloudy weather (letter dated 13th December 1971).

Barely a week later he wrote:

I have come to such a pass that I cannot understand

what is right and what is wrong. I have to bear what has befallen me (letter dated 19th January 1972).

Meanwhile a clot developed in Shabnam's head which was not detected. She would sometimes complain of seeing double, but both the psychiatrist and the family doctor would dismiss it as a subconscious attempt on Shabnam's part to draw attention and win sympathy for herself.

And in these painful circumstances, on 5th of March 1972, the poor girl died. Balraj was not in Bombay at the time of her death. He was away to Madhya Pradesh on electioneering work.

Shabnam's death broke something within him from which Balraj never completely recovered. He tried hard to get over it by plunging into activity and drowning his sorrow in work. But it became increasingly hard and difficult.

In *'Garm Hawa'* there is a scene in which a daughter commits suicide. Her father, played by Balraj, enters her room to see what had happened. It is one of the most poignant scenes in the film, and Balraj without uttering a word, expresses the agony of a father's heart. The scene was highly praised as the hallmark of Balraj's acting talent. People did not know that for Balraj it was the re-enactment of a scene he himself had lived through, in his own life.

**The Last Phase**

Balraj became tight-lipped about his inner suffering, and went about his work in as normal a manner as possible. He cut down film-work considerably, so that he might devote more time to writing. A couple of years earlier he had purchased a small cottage in Preet Nagar. He got it repaired and furnished so that he might go and live for longer periods of time in the Punjab. He even left his old car with me, so that it would be easier for him to travel about in the Punjab.

*'Garm Hawa'*, a film on the plight of the Muslim community in the wake of Partition, was Balraj's swan song. He gave in it an outstanding performance of the Muslim merchant of Agra, who becomes an alien in his own country. He had seen and experienced the ravages of Partition on his own family which was uprooted and had lived through those harrowing times. The daughter of the Muslim businessman dies in the story. If the portrayal is authentic and moving in the extreme it is because Balraj's own pain had gone to the rendering of it. The grace, the dignity and the superb restraint with which the Muslim gentleman of the film carried himself were also Balraj's own. His last performance, was, in some ways, his greatest.

But Balraj was straining himself beyond his capacity. He completed his play *'Bapu ki Kahega?'* and began working on his novel. Once again his old dream of living in the Punjab and devoting all his time to literary pursuits gripped his mind. There was a proposal to appoint him as the principal of the Film Institute at Poona of which we came to know only after his death, when, at the first anniversary of his death, the then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Shri I.K. Gujral, referred to it in his address. In 1972 he was nominated member of the senate of Guru Nanak University in the Punjab. He was also offered the membership of the Rajya Sabha which he declined. He was cutting down on film-work but he could not resist plunging into social work, wherever something disturbing occurred. He was once again travelling, staging plays, and also winding up his work in Bombay.

In November 1972, Balraj was invited to deliver the convocation address at Jawaharlal Nehru University of Delhi. It was the first time in the history of our universities that a film-artist had been so honoured. Many an elitist intellectual scoffed at the idea. Even the university teachers and students were sceptical. Letters appeared in Delhi newspapers on the morning of the convocation, ridiculing the idea of an actor delivering a convocation address. But

the address turned out to be such a thrilling and inspiring piece that it left the entire audience deeply impressed and admiring.

It was a piece of plain speaking which Balraj gave, and he gave it in his inimitable, simple, candid, free, and easy manner. He was talking more to the students than talking at them. The address was sprinkled with anecdotes, personal experiences, reminiscences and the like and it was effective and forceful in that it drove home quite a few home-truths, and made the student community sit up and think.

It was a forceful plea for independent thinking. He said:

> Whichever way I turn, I find that even after twenty-five years of Independence, we are like a bird which has been let out of its cage after a prolonged imprisonment—unable to know what to do with its freedom. It has wings but is afraid to fly into the open air. It longs to remain within defined limits, as in the cage.

A free man, according to Balraj is the man who has the power to think, decide and act for himself. "But the slave loses that power. He always borrows his thinking from others, wavers in his decisions and more often than not, takes to the trodden path."

And Balraj cites instances to show how practically in every field of activity we are looking to the West to show us the way. This is obvious in the cultural sphere even more than in other spheres. Our films are imitations of western films.

> Our novelists, story writers and poets are carried away with the greatest ease by the currents of fashion in Europe. The habit of borrowed and idealised thinking is present in some form or the other, everywhere, so much so that we begin to appreciate our own

> things only when the foreigners begin to appreciate them. Tagore became Gurudev all over India only after he received the Nobel Prize from Sweden, and our *sitar* became a star instrument only after the Americans gave a big hand to Ravi Shankar, and I assure you, yoga has to get a certificate from Europe before it can influence the home of its birth.

It was not an academic address, nor was it a ceremonial formality. Balraj addressed himself directly to the student community and every word that he uttered went home. It was not only a plea for independent thinking, but also a powerful plea to have the necessary courage to abandon our slavishness and to create values befitting citizens of a free and independent country.

Balraj's involvement with public life continued unabated, but it was hard for him to overcome the pain that was constantly gnawing at his heart.

> Having cut down film-work I have a lot of time on my hands, but very often my mind goes blank, and I just do not know what to do with myself.....

In the same letter, half humorously he talked about the prospects of his going back to live in obscurity, and said:

> The very thought of just becoming one of the many is depressing and unbearable. So what remains of all the big progressive declarations? And when I look around, I find that almost all my progressive friends are like that too. They talk of the people all the time, but in practice, most of their energy is spent in rising above the people, in becoming something, in making a name and getting fame. I think that is the basic contradiction in our lives. And very often we are not even conscious of it.....From our very childhood, our upbringing and education condition us to regard that activity of prime importance which brings its reward

in money or social advancement. We may idealise, praise or even crave for that which does not bring such a reward but only from a position of security and comfort (letter dated March 1973).

In his diary of March 1973, there is a page, which reflects the unbearable suffering of his heart. However hard he might try, he was not able to overcome the thought of Shabnam and the galling consciousness of his own inability to solve her problems. Perhaps if Balraj had spoken out his mind, if he had confided to his near ones of his grief, it would have brought him relief. But these are the ironical if's of life, about which we speak when the game is already lost. A couple of months earlier, Balraj happened to be in Delhi and one evening, my wife and I took him to a drama performance. While watching the play we suddenly discovered that it dealt with the sufferings of a young mismarried girl. It was a painful story, very similar to Shabnam's own poor lot. I glanced stealthily at Balraj and found that tears were streaming down his cheeks. But when the interval came and the hall-lights went up, Balraj was trying to behave as normally as possible, with his handkerchief over half his face so that people might not recognise him, a practice which he often followed to avoid being noticed. And when we decided to leave without seeing the rest of the play he kept on insisting that we should continue to see it and felt sorry that he had spoiled our fun.

In his diary dated 3rd March 1973, nearly a-month-and-a-half before his death, he wrote:

> A year has passed since dear Shabnam left us for ever. I do not have the courage to ask anyone what the exact date of her death was. It is my own instinctive guess. She was born on the 3rd of November, she died on the 3rd of March.
>
> Long ago I had thought that I would observe a fast on that day, I went out to the beach at 7, feeling

extremely miserable. I thought that in an hour or two, I would calm down somewhat; perhaps I would get some light for living in the future. But no. The anguish increased....I noticed a darkish stone lying on the beach. Making that my focal point, I tried to make out whether the tide was rising or receding. For a long time the symptoms indicated both. Perhaps the stone was too far away. I went up to it and found that it was someone's footprint. The tide was rising. The Footprint was washed away. At that very moment I noticed a field-rat knocking about on the sand. Perhaps it had wandered to the beach from some garden near by. Now it was tired; and thirst was forcing it to go towards the water, thinking that one danger would rid it of another. The wave came and wetted it. The field-rat kept lying there, regarding it as the will of Fate, It did not have the strength to move its limbs or to struggle. Soon enough it received its deliverance.

I too have begun to crave for such a deliverance.

After a little while Kabir Bedi and his little child came and sat down beside me. I at once made friends with the child. Once upon a time I used to play with Shabnam in the same way and used to make her run on the beach. Two of us would hold her arms and make her swing and tell her that we had turned her into an aeroplane.

Further up, Parikshit was sitting with some friend of his. Today he was looking healthy and nice. May he live long. May God grant him success. I walked along and sat down a little further up. Here, Anju and Kuki came and met me. Kuki went away for a walk, and Anju lay down on the beach nearby and began making patterns in the sand.

At last they too left. It was about 1 o'clock....a sense of desolation and emptiness came over me. I then took a decision about one thing—that I would henceforward live in the Punjab and die there too.

....As I started walking back home I felt as though I heard Shabnam's voice calling me, "Come on, Daddy! Daddy, come on!"

On 8th April, barely five days before his death, Balraj wrote a brief letter to me saying that he would be leaving for the Punjab on 13th of April and insisted that I should get ready to accompany him. Ironically enough, this is the only letter from Balraj which I tore up in all my life, thinking that it contained nothing except the simple information that he was coming on his way to the Punjab. There was nothing new about this piece of information either, because he had been writing such letters in the past also, though I had never torn up any of them. Alas! Now when he was actually determined to return to the Punjab, he could not make it.

Balraj died on 13th April 1973, a day considered auspicious by the Punjabis. It is difficult to say with any sense of certainty, but it is very likely that his inner grief had brought about the severe heart attack from which he died. He had always been a man of robust health. Only once, during the days when *'Garm Hawa'* was being shot in Agra did he complain of physical discomfort, but then dismissed it too, attributing it to a sluggish liver. Even on the morning of the attack he was feeling fit and fine. He went, according to his daily routine, for a swim in the sea, did exercise and got ready to go to the studio. He was waiting for a telephone call from the studio when he lay down for a little rest, as he complained of uneasiness. It turned out to be a massive heart attack and he was rushed to the Nanavati Hospital.

It is characteristic of Balraj that when he was being taken in the lift to his room in the hospital, he dictated a note to the doctor attending on him, saying:

I have no regrets.
I have lived a full and happy life!

## Postscript

Balraj is no more. More than twenty years have passed since he died. People remember him with love, for the warmth and radiance of his personality, for his unique art and his accomplishments and for the contribution he made in our cultural life. There is a saying in our country that after death, the most precious thing that a person can leave behind is a certain aroma, a certain fragrance of his personality which emanates from all his life's work and activities. And this Balraj too has left, to an enviable degree.

Perhaps it is difficult for a brother to be objective in his assessment of one who has been so close to him, and whom he had idolised all along in his life. But a biography, to my mind, is primarily a search for the sources of strength in a man's personality, those which made him what he was, and not a search for his weaknesses or failures or frailties, with which practically every human being is beset. If a man grows and acquires a stature, it is despite those weaknesses and frailties and failures. We eventually judge him not in terms of his failures, but in terms of his achievements, and what he gave to society.

Balraj was all of one piece. There was no dualism between his outer and his inner self. He was always himself under every situation and could not help being himself. It was inconceivable for him to behave differently from the way he felt.

He had a certain impetuousness of character,

particularly in his younger days, which made him bold and reckless. He would take a plunge without much forethought or calculation, and many a plunge that he took, was a plunge in the dark. Numerous such occasions come to mind when he behaved impetuously and recklessly; occasions both trivial and of some consequence. Once, as a young man he entered an Englishmen's club, during a Ball, in his college blazer and knicker-bockers simply because a friend of his had dared him to do so. On another occasion he barged into the office of the textile commissioner in Bombay, much to my consternation, in defiance of the textile commissioner's instructions to his peon, not to allow anyone in. He not only barged in but also had a tiff with him for issuing such instructions. He seldom considered in a calm frame of mind the pros and cons of a situation before taking the plunge. Once a thing gripped his mind, there was no question of considering or reconsidering the negative and the positive aspects of the problem. That is how he left home for Santiniketan, and later Santiniketan for Wardha, and Wardha for England. This trait in his character, on the positive side, certainly helped him make bold experiments as an artist, as to overcome his hesitations and weaknesses, as also to widen his horizons. Once he lost interest in a thing or felt constricted by it, he would lose no time in getting out of it. Money was never a consideration with him, at any stage in his life: neither during his days of want, nor when he was well-off.

But impetuosity with him was not Bohemianism. It was always a search for fuller and better avenues of self-expression; a search for greater knowledge and experience. He could not live within a set framework of rules and conventions. He was not adaptable that way. He could neither think nor act in grooves. "I am that proverbial monkey who shuns the fire, and yet, must put his hand into it," he wrote about himself once.

His zest for life was infectious. Whatever he loved, he loved intensely and went all out for it, whether it was the

theatre, the Punjabi language or his roles in the films. He got involved passionately in whatever he would take up. He could never work mechanically or half-heartedly. He would radiate optimism and love of life. Even in his darkest moments, he would think of life as something very precious, of which every moment should be lived fully and joyfully. That is the reason why he would struggle hard to overcome his failings and disappointments.

Everytime I remember him, I am reminded of his gay, zestful temperament. Every time he came to Delhi, we would set out on our old motorcycle, sometimes visiting friends and relatives, at other times on long journeys to Sanawar, where our children were studying. The moment we would leave our house, he would burst out singing or start reciting verses or tell the latest yarn or gossip. A man of rare candour and frankness, he was utterly unmindful of what people would think or say about him. Gul Kapur, an old friend of ours, once told me, that on the occasion of his son's marriage in Bombay, Balraj danced in the streets, according to the Punjabi custom, alongside some other members of the marriage party without caring for the fact that a crowd had gathered round him. There was a certain ease and abandon about him in the company his friends when he would regale them with his yarns, anecdotes, experiences and enthuse everyone with his zest and enthusiasm. Long walks, visiting places, having all sorts of experiences, meeting all sorts of people, were things in which he revelled.

He had a heart at once warm and eager and generous. He maintained a regular contact with his old school and college friends and his relatives till the end of his days. His filial attachments too were very strong. He once wrote to me:

> Youth has certainly begun to decline and our separation from each other has begun to irk me. It is years that I lived with you, with Father and Mother. The

> kind of life I am living, away from you all, has begun to appear to me to be very artificial and fake....

On another occasion, complaining about my short, rather matter-of-fact letters, he wrote:

> I do not enjoy your letters. I like such letters as give me the feeling of a hearty embrace....

In a letter to Father, he once wrote:

> .....I will act on your advice fully, but on one condition that after the rains, in October or November, when the weather cools, you will both come and live with us for at least six months....If in the meantime, I am able to possess a car, I shall go over to Delhi and bring you down myself.

When his situation as a screen actor improved, and money started coming in, he began to feel more and more concerned about the needs of others. He would send money unasked, to whomsoever he felt was in need of it and very often write to me to help our poor relatives in distress, on his behalf.

Mr Rajinder Bhatia, an old associate and friend of Balraj, told me of an incident which is very revealing. Once one of Balraj's typewriters was stolen. Days passed and it could not be traced, and Balraj almost gave up the attempt. Then one day Mr Bhatia suddenly found the typewriter lying in a shop, recognised it to be Balraj's and learnt from the shopkeeper that a young man had left it with him to be sold. This young man turned out to be the son of an old friend of Balraj's. When Mr Bhatia told Balraj about it, Balraj gave Mr Bhatia some money and requested him to go and buy back the typewriter saying, "It seems the boy is badly in need of money. This will help him out of his difficulty."

On the day Balraj died, a big crowd had gathered both inside and outside his house. Apart from friends and relatives and some dignitaries, there was a motley crowd

of fishermen, hotel-bearers, the poor people of the locality, even street urchins. His house had become a public place. But I was overwhelmed when I learnt that the fishermen had walked down from Varsova on learning about his death and kept vigil by his dead body all night long, that the hotel-bearers were those who had been financially helped by Balraj during the days of their long strike against the management, that almost everyone from among the poorer people there had had some personal association with Balraj at one time or the other, and held him dear.

Nothing gave him greater joy than mixing with people, travelling in buses and in trains and rubbing shoulders with all and sundry. Once, when he was already a celebrity, we travelled together by bus from Jammu to Delhi, doing the journey in one day. At every wayside station he would be spotted and a small crowd would gather round him. Then invariably the owner of a tea-stall would insist that he should drink tea at his tea-stall; a shoe-shine would insist on polishing his shoes; and since Balraj invariably had a camera hanging from his shoulder, many people would insist on being photographed with him. Such things happened practically at every stop. Many photographs were taken by me and Balraj kept writing down the addresses of his fans who had got themselves photographed with him. There must have been about thirty such photographs. Within a fortnight of his reaching Bombay, Balraj sent me a big packet of prints alongwith a fairly long list of addresses and asked me to send them to the persons concerned.

A few years later, when it became difficult for him to cope with the crowds, and he was still very keen to move about among people, he got a mask made for himself, so that he could go about incognito, wherever he liked. It was a simple device: a pair of spectacles (without any glasses fitted into them), an artificial nose, and a butterfly moustache under it. With that on, he moved about freely.

He combined social intercourse with a good deal of

serious study. His study was varied and included literature, political writing, social and historical studies and books of general interest. Seldom was he found reading detective fiction though, just as he was seldom seen playing cards. Yet there was nothing bookish about him and he carried his knowledge lightly.

He was always much concerned about the general perspective that a person had in life. It was primarily to have a correct, balanced perspective that he mixed with all the strata of the people, read serious books, and took pains to study—all that contributed to his social awareness. The keenness with which he visited drought-stricken areas or places where communal riots had taken place, was prompted as much by the desire to be socially useful as by the desire to know the reality, to be aware of what was happening in society. He considered it an integral part of his work as an artist, as a writer and as a citizen.

Such was his make up. A modest, extremely hard working person, with great personal integrity, he was entirely self-made. His perseverance and hard work had resulted in giving him, not only fame and a sense of achievement, but also a radiant, well-rounded personality. He was perhaps one of the best examples of what an artist should be, in our times. And in the words of Iqbal Singh, the eminent journalist and erstwhile editor of *Socialist India:*

> Balraj was generous and warm-hearted in his responses, almost to a fault; utterly loyal to the causes with which he was associated—and the most central among these was India itself—and those whom he admitted to his friendship. That is why those who knew him well, miss him beyond all forgetting.... (*Socialist India*, 21st April, 1973).

Printed by : Personal Graphics & Advertiser Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

Balraj Sahni, the noted film and theatre personality, was, in the words of his close observer, "generous and warm-hearted in his responses, almost to a fault; utterly loyal to the causes with which he was associated—and the most central among these was India itself—and those whom he admitted to his friendship. That is why those who knew him well, miss him beyond all forgetting..."

Bhisham Sahni, a well-known writer in Hindi, has written this personal account of his elder brother's life to acquaint the readers with the sources of strength in Balraj's radiant, well-rounded personality.


National Book Trust, India