

MULKH RAJ SARAF

Father of journalism in J&K

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As my memory goes to early forties when I was just a student of 2nd primary, I remember that one day a postman came to our residence at Village Surari (Sialana) and delivered two packets of the newspaper, one of which was containing several issues of the 'Daily Ranbir' (Urdu) and the other one that of Chand (Urdu weekly). On that day, my uncle Pt Shambhu Datt, then known as Pt Shambhu Datt Sheranwala luckily was not at home. I could not control my childish curiosity to see what was written in them, though then I was not well-versed in Urdu language.

However, very hesitatingly I tore out the wraps of the both packets and started seeing one after another issue. I remember that only a few such issues which were containing some pictures and the photographs of some personalities could attract me. I read that 'The Ranbir' was edited by Late Mulk Raj Saraf and the Chand' (Weekly) by Sh Narsingh Dass Nargish, both prominent journalists of our state, of yesteryears. Later, I was told by my uncle that Lala Ji was known as the father of journalism in our State.

Saraf was born on April 8, 1894 in a small town, Samba of Jammu district in an ordinary Saraf family. When he was just a small boy he was deprived of the

parental love and care. So much so his three brothers also expired one after another. He was thus brought up by his uncle, who was living hand to mouth. It was but natural that without parental love and care he had to face a lot of problems during his early boy-hood. But very bold and courageous as he was despite all types of hardships and heavy ordeals he joined Samba High School, at the age of eleven which of course was very late. But he continued his studies with full devotion and passed his Matriculation examination with distinction. Thereafter, he got admission in the prestigious Prince of Wales College, Jammu (now known as Gandhi Memorial Science College in 1919). Though the bad financial condition of his uncle was not allowing him to go for higher education, his burning desire and determination to achieve something unprecedented was really exemplary.

During this time, he developed a good habit of reading daily newspaper and journals while sitting in the reading room of the college library. After graduating from the Jammu college, he joined the Law College, Lahore, but could not complete his law course as Jallianwala Bagh's massacre shocked him to such an extent that he left his studies. That unprecedented massacre kindled in his mind a burning desire to revolt against the tyranny of the British rule. Coincidentally, the All India Congress Committee held three days session in Amritsar during those days, which young Mulk Raj Saraf also attended. It was that session which gave impetus to him to fight against the tyrannical rule of British Government who had terrorized entire nation. During that session he met a number of national leader including Mahatma Gandhi and Lala Lajpat Roy and was inspired to be an active member of the Indian National Congress. Actually, he was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's call to Indian youth to boycott

colleges and schools run by the British Government and join freedom movement so that the struggle could be accelerated and the British rule could be thrown out as early as possible.

On the advice of Lala Lajpat Rai, he took over as sub-editor of daily "Bande Matram" which was just started by the former. After sometime, he left the job of Bandematram and came to Jammu to start a daily newspaper from Jammu. We prepared a project for bringing out his newspaper 'Ranbir' in Urdu language. Maharaja Pratap Singh, the then ruler of J&K State was however, not granting him permission on one pretext or the other. But even then he did not give in. Ultimately, it was June 24, 1924 when his long cherished desire was materialized and the Weekly 'Ranbir' (Urdu) was formally started. Later on that weekly 'Ranbir' was converted into biweekly and after a few months, the bi-weekly became a daily newspaper. He himself says:

After strenuous efforts spread over more than three years during the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh (1885-1925), I was permitted in 1924 to bring out Ranbir. It remained the only newspaper in Jammu and Kashmir for more than seven years. Maharaja Hari Singh's Government somewhat relaxed the Press and Publications Regulations of 1911 (Bikrami) which resulted in the appearance of several newspapers and other periodicals in 1930s. still it was not before 1944—twenty years after publication of Ranbir that a Prime Minister of the State as he was then designated, was to hold his first full fledged Press Conference "to meet the journalists collectively instead of individually." The PM was none other than Sir B.N. Rai who later played a crucial role in drafting the Constitution of India. The Press Conference was truly historic—not only because it marked the beginning of the open encounters between the Executive and the Fourth Estate, but also because it turned out to be first and last open bid by the autocratic regime to

curb the expanding freedom of the Press in the State. A liberal and wise bureaucrat believing in discretion being the better part of valour beat a hasty retreat in face of stiff resistance put up by the journalists' fraternity to nip the evil in the bud. I had the privilege to lead my young brothers-in-arms. Among the participants were Prem Kannah (Martand), R.K.Kak (U.P.I), Vishwa Nath Kerni (Sundershan) Shambhu Nath Kaw (Vakil) Balraj Puri (Pukar) Ch. Mohammad Din (Al Insan), Yagin Ali Maskeen (Kisan), and Ghulam Mohidin. (Khidmat) etc.

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Since that was the time of struggle for the country's independence from the yoke of British rule the "Daily Ranbir" had to play a very important role for awakening the masses in this part of India also where they were bearing the yoke of double slavery.

In May 1930, Mahatma Gandhi was arrested by the British and like elsewhere in the country, the people of J&K too demonstrated against that arrest. 'Ranbir' took lead and highlighted the nationalistic views more boldly. Maharaja Hari Singh took strong exception and issued a lengthy order for banning further publication of 'Daily Ranbir'. Thus, the further publication of that paper was stopped till November 1931.

Between 1930 and 1944, when the said paper was banned, saraf had to face many court trials and tribulations, including confinement, banishment, security demands and so on. But as sincere and dedicated journalist he was, he never gave up.

As soon as the 'Daily Ranbir' resumed its publication, Saraf worked for its standardization even more vigorously. He had to fight on both the fronts i.e the collection of relevant material especially related to the last leg of freedom struggle and then its proper arrangement in the concerned columns from the

journalistic point of view. Thus, the 'Daily Ranbir' picked up a good standard and also gained popularity day by day not only in our state but in neighbouring states like Punjab also. It also goes to his credit that in addition to his newspaper's busy schedule he used to spare time to take part in several political and social activities also. He was an active member of Dogra Sadar Sabha which was a very popular organization during early twentieth century. That organization also had held its 3 day session at Srinagar in October 1926. After that it was also banned by Maharaja Hari Singh. When Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah started National Conference's unit in Jammu during 1940, he requested Lala Ji to allow the former to hold his party's first meeting in Ranbir's office. Lalaji happily permitted him to do so.

At the time of the partition of our country during 1947, this paper was again banned for pleading the cause for the release of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah from the states imprisonment and also for state's final accession with Indian Union. But the paper, however, was soon allowed to resume its publication.

Apart from 'Daily Ranbir's' publication Lala Mulk Raj Saraf also started an Urdu journal 'Rattan' for children. This journal however stopped publishing in 1947. Lala Ji also wrote several books out of them Meri Pakistan yatra, (my journey to Pakistan,) which was awarded by J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, and Sher-i-Duggar Lala Hansraj (both in Urdu language) are worth mentioning.

He also attended the first world conference of the journalists at Helsinki (Finland) in 1956. He was one of the members of the Indian delegation.

Saraf was a Gandhian in true sense of the term. He was also involved with several social organizations such as

the 'Indian Red Cross Society'. J&K Samaj Kalyan Kendra a home for aged and infirms, 'Gouraksha Samiti' "Ved Mandir Bal Niketan" (a home for the orphans) and was also founder-president of Raj Mahal Publishers' society.

It was my good luck that I was introduced to him by his elder son Om Saraf in 1962 when I had come from Kurukshetra University after completing my M.A., (Skt.) I was really impressed by his towering personality and sweet behavior.

For his pioneering work in the field of social services and journalism, he was awarded 'Padma-Shree' award. He was also conferred the Robe of Honour by IFWJ at Cuttak (Orissa). Having widely travelled in Soviet Union, Britain, Germany, China, Pakistan and America etc Lala Mulk Raj Saraf was an ocean of experiences and knowledge. At the age of 88, he undertook a journey of Pakistan and later at the age of 92, he went to America. Age was no bar for him.

This great journalist popularly known as "Father of journalism in J&K" always worked for the cause of journalism with full devotion and a missionary zeal. This great journalist breathed his last on 21 February, 1989 at the residence of his son Ved Rahi (a well known Dogri writer) in Mumbai. Then he was running in the 95th year of his age.

(The author is a former Professor of Sanskrit.)

