

Baldev Prasad Sharma

A brief profile

Prof S P Shrivatsa

A grand old man blessed with rare qualities of head and heart, Baldev Prasad Sharma had the proud privilege of being the oldest journalist of Jammu and Kashmir.

Sharma, who breathed his last on 23rd January 2005 at the age of 95, has to his credit 68 years of distinguished service as a media person and research scholar. He began his journalistic career as early as 1927 when he was still a student of Class ten of the Sri Pratap High School, Srinagar.

First graduate from his village Pauni (Reasi), Sharma has some more firsts to his credit. He was the pioneer of English journalism in the State, having launched the "Kashmir Times" as a weekly newspaper from Srinagar on September 24, 1934. He was the first Dogra to head the Information Service of the State as Principal Information Officer. He was also the first Dogra to be elevated to the rank of a Station Director of All India Radio, his last posting being as Station Director, Radio Kashmir, Jammu from where he retired on January 1, 1967.

Born on January 1, 1909 at Srinagar, in a respectable

Dogra Brahmin family, Sharma completed his schooling at Shri Pratap High School, Srinagar and then joined the Sri Pratap College at Srinagar for higher education. He graduated securing a first Division from the University of Punjab, Lahore, in 1931.

A self-made man as a correspondent of the "Ranbir", then the only Urdu newspaper published from Jammu, he paved his way to success by spending spare time in a library, reading newspapers and magazines. By the time he completed his educational career, the State saw the rise of the agitation by the Muslim Conference headed by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. In the same year Sharma got appointed as a correspondent of three big newspapers - "The Times of India", "The Hindustan Times" and "The Tribune". As an eye-witness to many upheavals and turmoils in the State since then, his objective reporting of events brought him acclaim from all sides. In 1935 he was appointed as a correspondent of the world's one of the best-known news agencies - Reuters.

Enterprising young journalist as Sharma was, he thought of starting his own newspaper, an English weekly, in 1933. Restriction on Press had been removed by the Maharaja in 1932 when he enacted Press and Publications Act in the State. Sharma filed a declaration for publishing a newspaper named "Kashmir Guardian". The declaration was accepted by the District Magistrate. During those days no printing press was equipped to print a weekly newspaper regularly. Therefore, he started publication of the "Kashmir Guardian" in Urdu. He launched the "Kashmir Times" on September 24, 1934. Soon after that, the paper had its own printing press as the response from readers was encouraging.

After attaining fifteen years' experience in journalism, Sharma joined the Publicity Department of the State as Information Assistant in 1942. After that, a separate Bureau of Information was created and Sharma was appointed as Associate Editor of the "Jammu and Kashmir Information", a monthly magazine.

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah who became the Head of the State Administration on October 30, 1947, decided to reorganize the Publicity Department of the State to effectively counter the propaganda of Pakistan and appointed J N Zutshi and Baldev Prasad Sharma as Secretary and Undersecretary respectively of the Information and Broadcasting Department. Sharma was assigned the duty of looking after the Radio Station Jammu which was inaugurated on December 1, 1947 by Maharaja Hari Singh. Another Radio Station also started broadcasting from Srinagar on July 1, 1948.

In 1951, Sharma was appointed Principal Information Officer of the State with a separate Bureau for different parts of works such as press releases and news service, reference and research, counter-propaganda and publications and printing and distribution etc. A number of pamphlets, poster, booklets, giving factual information about the various issues facing the State were published.

In 1953, Sharma was also arrested as one of the close associates of Sheikh Abdullah, who was dismissed from the State premiership and arrested on August 9, 1953. After his release, Sharma did not find the political atmosphere congenial and sought transfer of his services to All India Radio. After serving at the Calcutta, Bhopal and Indore stations of All India Radio, Sharma was transferred back to Jammu and later became the first Station Director there.

and retired on January 1, 1967, after rendering 8 years' distinguished service in the electronic media.

Within days of his retirement, the then Chief Minister of the State, Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, decided to utilize the services of Sharma to counter the mounting Pakistani press and electronic media propaganda. First as officer-on-Special Duty and then as Director Field Survey Organization, Sharma launched an English Daily "NEWS" from Srinagar. A weekly journal "Chaman" in Kashmiri language (under the editorship of G R Nazki and Akhtar Moi-ud-Din). A monthly magazine in Dogri language "Phulwari" and a Hindi weekly "Duggar Samachar", (both edited by M R Chanchal), were also standardized under his guidance. Besides this, almost all prominent newspapers from Pakistan were received by the organization through diplomatic sources and Sharma used to prepare and confidentially circulate a weekly resume of articles pertaining to Kashmir. To counter the propaganda, the Field Survey Organization under his headship regularly issued back-ground material to newspapers in the State as also to Radio Kashmir, Srinagar and Jammu.

Much later, Sharma worked as Chief Editor of the "Cooperative Bulletin", (English monthly and Urdu weekly), but after a few months resigned from this job to engage himself whole-heartedly in research. He was the first scholar to challenge the statement of the well known linguist Dr. Grierson that neither the Dogri type nor any printed book in Dogri was in existence at the time when he had come to Jammu. Sharma proved that about twenty Dogri books, some of them in Dogri type were actually printed years before Dr. Grierson came to Jammu.

These books, Sharma held, established beyond doubt

that during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's reign, the Dogri script had been modified and improved. He also located samples of the Dogri type cast during Ranbir Singh's reign, in Shri Pratap Singh Museum at Srinagar.

Sharma's tireless services in digging the past of Dogri language and culture brought him the distinction of being elected unanimously as President of Dogri Research Institute, Jammu, in 1978. He remained President of this institute for over a decade. Under his presidentship the institute made remarkable progress. Several seminars were organized. Dogri scholars were honoured and a regular paper-reading programme was held.

Sharma also unearthed the Dogri translation "Lilawati", a rare Sanskrit book by a famous Indian astronomer and mathematician, Bhaskaraharya. This Dogri book was printed at the "Vidya Vilas Press", Jammu in 1873 A.D. Credit goes to Sharma whose discovery established that its translator, Jyotshi Visheshwar, was the first Dogri writer of Jammu at a time when books were printed by lithographic process at the "Vidya Vilas Press" and by typographical process at "Sri Raghunathji Press Jammu".

Another remarkable discovery by Baldev Sharma was the 1290-page Dogri book "Vyavahar Gita" written on the instructions of Maharaja Ranbir Singh by Jyotishi Vishweshwar. This book in three volumes was printed at Shri Raghunathji Press, Jammu, in 1884.

Sharma also served the Sahitya Akademi as a member of its Dogri Advisory Board for nine years. He was commissioned by the Sahitya Akademi to translate into Dogri an English monograph on Sufi saint Baba Farid. He also remained a member of the Advisory Committee of Shri

Ranbir Sanskrit Research Library, Jammu, for several years. He was also a member of the Programme Advisory Committee of Srinagar Doordarshan and of Radio Kashmir, Jammu.

Another remarkable research in the history of journalism in Jammu and Kashmir conducted by Sharma established that the first newspaper was started from Jammu as early as 1867 AD. The weekly "Vidya Vilas" as the newspaper was called, was a bilingual newspaper, with two columns per page, one half in Hindi and the other half in Urdu. Its editor was Vainkath Ram Shastri. It was the journal of "Vidya Vilas Sabha", a literary and cultural organization of which Maharaja Ranbir Singh himself was the patron.

It was for his distinguished services in the field of journalism and research in Dogri language and literature that Sharma was honoured by the Dogri Research Institute and other public bodies and newspaper organizations in Jammu. The Jammu and Kashmir Government also honoured him on his 80th birthday (1989) for his commendable services in the field of administration, journalism, broadcasting and Dogri research.

(Prof Shrivatsa is a retired Professor of Sanskrit.)

