

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF KAMLA BAKAYA

1900-1973

My mother: teacher, activist, poet

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## Kashmiri Pandits

My parents were married in 1919. Both my father, Autar Lal Bakaya, and my mother Kamla (nee Aga) were from Kashmiri Pandit families that had emigrated from the Kashmir valley several generations ago and settled down in northern India. The Kashmiri Pandits had adopted Urdu as their spoken and literary language and had produced many eminent Urdu poets, writers and scholars (Ratan Nath Sarshar, Brij Narain Chakbast, Brij Mohan Dattatreya Kaifi and others). In 1931 and 1932 two large volumes of Urdu poetry, each running into some 800-900 pages, were published from Allahabad under the patronage of Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru. Called *Bahar-e-gulshan-e-Kashmir*, these volumes contained verses by hundreds of Kashmiri Pandit poets, each contributor introduced with a brief biographical note. Since my father left no written records about himself, the facts about his life given below are mainly based on his brief life-sketch in the first volume of *Bahar-e-gulshan-e-Kashmir*, on what we had heard from our elders, and on our own experience of living with him for short periods. For several years, he was honorary editor of the journal *Bahar-e-Kashmir*, published from Lahore by the Kashmiri Pundits' Association, but we have no copies of this journal now.

Autar Lal Bakaya was born in the Punjab town of Gujrat (now in Pakistan) in 1898. He had his schooling in Gujrat and came to Lahore for his college education. His college record up to his B.A. shows that he was a man of exceptional brilliance. For his M.A. he joined Government College but here his luck ran out, and he was unsuccessful in getting his Master's degree. This was probably around the time of the Rowlatt Acts and Gandhiji's call for satyagraha, just before the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in neighbouring Amritsar. Indian students were subject to many humiliations, including a compulsory roll call by British soldiers during the days of martial law in Lahore. This failure kept Autar Lal out of a government job and compelled him to sit at home without employment for eight years. But he made many friends in the Government College and took part in drama and literary activities. Many of his contemporaries and friends later became writers and men of eminence in various fields.

My parents' was an arranged marriage, as was the norm then. My mother was three years younger to my father. She was born in 1900 in Rawalpindi and came from a family where the atmosphere was very different from what she found in her husband's family, which was much more conservative. The eldest of many children, she was taught at home by her father since there were then no schools for girls. Her father Pt. Rup Kishen Aga was in judicial service and retired as district and sessions judge of Allahabad, which was then not only the capital of the United Provinces but also the political capital of the country. The Nehrus lived here, so did such luminaries as Tej Bahadur Sapru and Madan Mohan Malaviya. The All India Congress Committee had its headquarters in Allahabad. The city boasted of one of the oldest Indian universities and had a rich social and intellectual life.

Even before he was posted in Allahabad, my grandfather, being a judge, always had a large house with a garden. He was a lover of books, and he brought up his daughters without making a distinction between them and his sons. The house had a rich collection of books in English and Hindi. My mother lived in the midst of nature and enjoyed the kind of freedom that was rare in those days for girls. She was always fond of keeping a diary and when she was married, she brought with her a box full of her diaries and notebooks, something which roused not a little curiosity and gave rise to many snide remarks amongst her in-laws. Some of these diaries have survived and they show the mental pangs she had to suffer because of her different background. She tried her best to learn housework and adapt herself to her new life, but she had often to hear comparisons with the wife of my father's younger brother Bishan Lal, who had got married earlier. The younger *bahu* was fair-complexioned and good-looking and was, moreover, in tune with the customs and atmosphere of the house.

Though my father and mother came to know each other only after they got married, they soon came to love each other. My father gave my mother many books, including English poets', to read when they had a little time to themselves in their room at night. He suffered mentally as he was unemployed, and he longed to have an independent home.

Avenues of employment for educated youth in those days were scarce. Most well educated Kashmiri Pandit young men dreamt of a government job, which my father's temperament ruled out. My uncle Bishan Lal got employed early in his life and had a safe job with the railways. My grandfather Mohan Lal Bakaya was employed as a *sarishtedar* (overseer) with a senior British officer in the district courts. His was considered a very respectable and well-paid post.

### In Gwalior State

My father was persuaded in 1925 by his mother's close relative Col. Haksar, then the Prime Minister of the princely state of Gwalior, to buy land in the small

township of Ganj Basoda in the fertile Malva region of Gwalior State, where he settled down as a *zamindar*. Soon he was elected the President of the Panchayati Board and Chairman of the Traders' Association. He also began privately studying law. He had always been interested in literature, both English and Urdu, and recited his first Urdu verses in a mushaira in Basoda in 1928. My mother, who had for the first time set up an independent household, found herself enjoying a life close to nature and learnt to milk cows and keep poultry. She kept her small house tidy and occasionally plastered the floor and the lower part of the walls with a thin mixture of cow-dung and fine straw, the smell of which we children loved and which was said to have disinfectant qualities. Occasionally, we would all travel in a *dhamni* (bullock-cart) and enjoy the ride, the bullocks with bells round their necks racing like horses on the *kaccha* pathway which led to our land in Chak Jiyajipur three or four miles away. While we lived in the township of Basoda, the land was looked after mainly by a headman who lived in the *chak*. A few peasant families lived here in thatched huts. There was a well from which the entire *chak* drew its water and I remember the graceful deer which would come bouncing there to quench their thirst from the water collected in the small tank, built next to the well. The only *pucca* structure in Chak Jiyajipur was a longish room with a single open window and a shelf built into the wall, where I remember to have seen several interesting books, including one on co-operative farming!

By October 1929 the last of my parents' five children was born. The elder children were all born in my mother's *maika*, as was the custom. But my youngest brother was born in Kasur (now in Pakistan), a sizeable town where my paternal grandfather was then posted. We used to visit our grandparents on both our father's and mother's side from time to time and stay with them, sometimes for a few months. My elder brother Shashi was just over a year older to me. However, the next child after me, my sister Vimla, came after a gap of almost five years. She and the younger sister Sarala were both born in Allahabad. I remember the confinement room in Allahabad as well as in Kasur where the babies were born. We were not allowed to enter and see the baby for many days after it was born.

With five children—three sons and two daughters—the problem of schooling for the eldest two, who were now seven and six years old, arose. Basoda then had no good school. It was at this time, in 1930, that my mother's father, Pt. Rup Kishen Aga learnt that some young women were preparing to leave for Rome to study the Montessori Method of teaching small children under Madame Montessori herself. My grandfather wrote to my parents proposing that my mother join the group and agreed to bear all related expenses. He made the same proposal to my mother's sister Roop Kumari and her husband, Gopal Narain Shivpuri, who lived in Allahabad.

### Mother becomes Montessori teacher

This is how another sharp turn came about in my mother's life. From some extracts that my mother copied out in her diaries from my father's letters to her, one learns that he wrote to my mother that he was prepared to go to any length to see that she got the best opportunities for self-development and attained the greatest heights, including an independent career. This was something extraordinary, as it meant dismantling the independent household they had set up in Basoda after such a long struggle. Moreover, my mother was leaving behind five children. My aunt faced no such problem, as her husband lived in Allahabad, and they had then no children. Her husband had a small practice in the local courts as a young lawyer.

All of us children were packed off to Allahabad, to be looked after by our grandmother and our aunts. Most of my ten uncles and aunts were then in college in Allahabad. So we became part of a large joint family and my elder brother Shashi and I soon started going to school, while the younger children were fondly looked after by my grandmother and my aunts.

My mother kept a diary in Rome too, and many of her class notebooks with detailed notes in English and Italian have been preserved. A new world opened up before her, an advanced world where she could put her latent creative abilities to use. Madame Maria Montessori emphasized recognizing the child as an independent person, and helping to develop its personality, something that was in tune with my mother's instinctive thinking. My mother also kept some notes in a small pocket diary that she carried with herself even in buses and trams and in which we find some verses, some stray thoughts and her "philosophy of life". Titled "Desultory Journal" and "Freaks of madness Baptised on Tram C.D. Evening 10 March" (1931), it is a very interesting record. We learn from her notes that when she and her sister finished the Montessori course successfully, their father joined them on a short tour of Europe, including Paris and London. They arrived in London when Gandhiji was there to attend the Round Table Conference in September-October 1931. He met pupils and teachers of the Montessori course in the Great Hall of University College, London. There is a photograph in Muriel Lester's book, 'Gandhi, World Citizen', published by Kitab Mahal, Allahabad in 1945, in which my mother and aunt are seen with Gandhiji, along with the pupils of the Montessori course, watching Mahatma Gandhi at his *charkha*.

Since there were no Montessori classes in India then, my mother wrote to Mrs. Annie Besant for help. In a letter to Kamla, dated April 22, 1931, Dr. Tarak Nath Das, wrote from Munich, where he then lived, urging her to contact Gandhiji and Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya on her return, so that with their help "some worthy and rich Indian may start a Montessori school at Delhi, or Lahore or Cawnpore or some other city where you may teach...." Dr. Das was a well known Indian radical nationalist, who later became Professor of Political Science at Columbia University in the USA.

### At Ganga Ram School, Lahore

Thus my mother came to join the Sir Ganga Ram Girls High School in Lahore on her return to India. The school had just started in its temporary premises. Meanwhile, my father too had left Basoda and was appointed headmaster of a new school in Gwalior State. However, he was again not destined to remain very long in an independent job. Bishan Lal, his only brother, died of meningitis in 1934 when he was hardly thirty-five, leaving behind a widow and two daughters. My father gave up his job and returned to Lahore to be with the family. We stayed initially with my paternal grandfather in Model Town, and later rented a small house not far away so that we could live independently. Later still, when Ganga Ram School got its new campus, we shifted from Model Town to a house within walking distance of the school in Lahore proper.

After her return from Europe, my mother's status had changed and her abilities came to be grudgingly recognized by her in-laws. My father, jobless once again, decided this time not to look for a regular job and started giving tuitions in English and soon became quite popular with his students, who were ladies from well-to-do families doing college courses. All the children were also now studying in Lahore. Shashi and I were already in college and the younger children, my sisters Vimla and Sarala and our youngest brother Rati, went to Ganga Ram School, where my mother taught.

In the late thirties, Ganga Ram School shifted to its new extensive campus on the outskirts of the city. It also got a new distinguished principal, Miss Mrinalini Chattopadhyay. She belonged to the well-known Chattopadhyay family of Hyderabad. Her father had been the first principal of Nizam's College and a well-known scientist. (Nizam's College later became the University of Hyderabad.) The eldest son Virendra Nath Chattopadhyay went to study in Europe, where he became a revolutionary and was finally forced to live in exile in Germany.

The youngest sister, Suhasini, also went abroad and lived in Berlin with her exiled brother Virendranath, from where she went to Russia to study at the International 'Red University' in Moscow. She returned to India in the late twenties and was the first woman to join the then underground Communist Party of India. Her elder brother was the poet, singer and actor Harindranath, who later became a Member of Parliament after the first elections, held under the new Constitution adopted in 1950. Another sister, Sunalini, was well known as a cine-artiste, doing elderly roles. The most distinguished of all was the eldest sister Sarojini Naidu, 'the Nightingale of India', poet, orator and the first Indian woman to become President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. (Annie Besant, a British theosophist who had settled down in India, had earlier been elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1917.)

With Mrinilani Chattopadhyay as principal of Ganga Ram School, her house soon became a hub of activities and a meeting place for the cream of Lahore's

intelligentsia--its writers, artists, musicians, students and intellectuals. Suhasini and Harin came to Lahore from time to time, and during those days the house became alive with noise, laughter, songs and animated discussions.

Kamla organized an exhibition of paintings by tiny tots of her Montessori class, which attracted much attention. At about this time the school celebrated for the first time January 26 as Independence Day. The national flag was hoisted and patriotic songs were sung by the pupils and teachers. Among these songs was one composed by Kamla, '*Azad karenge, Hind tujhe...*' This song later went on to become a great favourite with the national movement and was sung all over India in pre-Independence years. Harin Chattopadhyaya chose Kamla as the feminine lead in one of his plays which was staged in the newly inaugurated open-air theatre in Lawrence Gardens, Lahore's famous park.

Meanwhile, fate brought Mme. Maria Montessori to India, where she arrived in Adyar (Madras) in 1939, accompanied by her adopted son Mario. Dr. George Sidney Arundale and his famous dancer wife Rukmini Devi were instrumental in inviting them to India. Madame Montessori and her son left India after the war ten years later, when they could return to Europe after the defeat of fascism, which had forced them to leave their country. In India, Maria Montessori lectured on her method and developed an international following on her approach to child education. The Montessori Method was ardently supported by such eminent Indians as Rabindra Nath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Dr.S. Radhakrishnan and Dr. Zakir Husain. Kamla was thus able to meet her beloved teacher on Indian soil.

### **Bakayas take to politics**

In those days Lahore was the most important educational, cultural and political centre in northern India and its most populous city as well. The younger intellectuals of Punjab were greatly influenced by radical politics. As the Second World War progressed, under the influence of Suhasini, who came to Lahore often and was an extraordinarily gifted organiser, the entire Bakaya family was drawn into radical politics. Suhasini came to see us in our home. She was interested not in 'mere politics' but also in music, literature and the arts. Shashi, the eldest of Kamla's children, had started writing Urdu verses while he was still at school. In college he became a serious student of English literature. He joined the D.A.V. College initially, taking science subjects, as advised by his elders. But he had no interest in the science stream and fell short of the required minimum of attendance, and was not allowed to sit in the final Intermediate examinations. However, he became the captain of the college cricket team and won the first prize for his contributions to the college magazine.

After he had he lost a year, he decided to change his subjects, along with his college, for his third and fourth years. He joined B.A. (Honours) with English as his main subject in the Forman Christian College. He finished brilliantly, standing first in the college in English and Economics and winning a gold medal. Here too he became captain of the college cricket team. But he was criticised by the Lahore student leadership, who thought he was wasting his time, playing cricket and writing poetry in revolutionary times. So, though he had friends among many of them and read his poetry in the radical Renaissance Club, he did not take active part in student politics in Lahore. But whenever Suhasini came to Lahore, she listened to his poems, seriously discussed them with him and encouraged him. After he had finished his B.A. (Hons.), she persuaded him to come to Bombay and join M.A. in Elphinstone College there. So he arrived in Bombay in 1941 and joined M.A. with Honours in English. But in 1942 he left college for a full-time political career and joined the newly started Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU). He was elected General Secretary of its Bombay branch at the first conference of the Bombay FSU in June 1945. Shashi wrote many Hindi patriotic songs which were then sung all over the country. The most popular of them was '*Hindi hum chalees karor...*' (*We Indians are four hundred million strong...*)

Meanwhile, in 1940 my father had decided to apply for employment in the newly-started Hindustani Section of the BBC (Radio) in London. It seems that my mother was against his going abroad during the war as she feared he might not be able to come back alive. But the opportunity of finally getting some decent employment and going abroad was too tempting and my father decided to take the risk. He had been earlier going from time to time as a 'casual artiste' to the All India Radio Lahore, where he was paid for each appearance, and where he finally secured employment. He usually took part in radio plays. He was selected, and he left. Balraj Sahni and his first wife Damyanti—she died in 1947 after they returned to India and when she was already a well-known actress--were among those who joined the BBC Hindustani Section along with my father. The political implications of this move did not strike us then, but later from Shashi's letters from Bombay we learnt that we should not have allowed our father to go as it was then, presumably, an 'imperialist war'.

All of us, younger brothers and sisters, had now joined political work in various ways. An FSU group was started in a room in our house at 7-B, Birdwood Road, Lahore. My sister Vimla had joined the Kinnaird College after she finished school. She was followed there by our youngest sister Sarala. Vimla was taking an active part in students' union politics and had also started working amongst women inside the walled city. In college she organised the students on many political issues. She joined the singing squad of the Lahore Students' Union and went to Bengal during the great famine of 1943 to help the victims of this man-made calamity. I had graduated in 1942 and joined a part-time diploma course in journalism in Punjab University, since I did not think it was any use going in for an M.A. degree. I had started working also in the trade union movement in Lahore.

The Communist Party became legal in July 1942 when it changed to its 'People's War' line, some months after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. In Lahore, study circles and Party schools were held in their new office in a large building on McLeod Road. All of us went there from time to time. Vimla went to the First Congress of the CPI with the Punjab singing squad. The congress was held in May-June 1943. Though not a delegate, she attended the sessions and listened to the speeches of communist leaders who had come from all over India.

### **Father's death, and the family's move to Bombay**

My father was suddenly taken ill and died in September 1943. This terrible news was conveyed to us through two successive cables, which came from London, one informing us of his grave illness and the other of his death. We were all shocked. Though she did not show it, my mother was shattered. She was hardly 43 and my father less than 45 when he died. By now, we children had started taking decisions about our own lives and took our mother more or less for granted. No religious or other ceremonies were held after my father's death and my mother was taken away for a few weeks by her brother, Dr. C.M. Aga, to Bareilly, to give her a change. Our grandparents with the entire family shifted to our house, but we children strongly opposed this 'intrusion' and they had to move out to a rented house not too far from our house. My mother got the sympathy and support of her principal and colleagues at school. We did not then realise that a very important phase of her life had ended when she was still comparatively young. In 1944, we decided to shift to an uncertain future in Bombay at the suggestion of Suhasini and Shashi. My mother was leaving her house and a good fourteen-year-old job. After my father's death, she had perhaps little interest in the house. But her school and the little children she taught might have revived her interest in life. But we thought she identified with everything her children did and we had a right to take her support for our shifting to Bombay for granted. Perhaps, after my father's death my mother too wanted to leave Lahore, where she had spent so many years with him, and start life anew.

My sister Vimla and I were the first two in the family to arrive in Bombay in June 1944. Vimla had already finished her Intermediate in Kinnaird College, Lahore and she joined Wilson College in the third year taking the B.A. (Honours) course in Economics. I joined as a sub-editor in the People's Publishing House, which belonged to the CPI. We lived temporarily in a part of an old house near a TB sanatorium, off Wadala, a suburban station. After some months we were able to shift to 6-B Willingdon Colony, Santa Cruz, a very much better house and much more conveniently placed. We soon had the entire first floor of the house of two floors, in a Catholic cooperative housing society. My mother initially found a job in a school, but since it was not suitable, she later shifted over to tuitions in two rich Marwari families, in one of which, that of the Dagas, she taught three boys. The eldest, Raja, as far as I can remember, already was in school. The twins, Ram and Lakshman, were taught by my mother from the first standard to the end of their

school. Here she was much respected by Mrs. Daga, who was not very much educated, and was simply adored by her sons. She told them stories and recited to them poems she had read and had composed herself, and the boys became very fond of her. The other family was more educated and the gentleman even became an M.P. but—unlike the Dagas, who never deprived my mother of her salary when they temporarily went out of town--this other family went out for long months on holidays and did not pay her for the period when they were out of town, not realising that my mother's entire family depended on her earnings. Shashi continued to stay at Khar with Suhasini and her husband R.M. Jambhekar,<sup>[2]</sup> who had been released after serving a long period of detention in Nasik Jail under the Defence of India Act. A veteran trade unionist, Jambhekar was a fine artist, speaker and writer and also sang very well. He came from the illustrious industrialist family of Jambhekars and Kirloskars. He had joined the CPI in 1929 as a young man, along with his close friend and cousin S.G. Sardesai.

Life in Bombay was hard for my mother. She had to travel long distances by bus and suburban train to get to her tuitions, do the essential shopping on her return journey to Santa Cruz, cook and take care of the house. She was the only earning member of the family. I got a "Party wage" which, in those days, was Rs.40 a month. From this Rs.28 was deducted for two meals which I ate at my place of work at the Party headquarters ('PHQ') and the rest was spent on tea and sundries after office hours. Shashi did not get even a Party wage, so far as I can remember, and apart from a hectic work schedule, also assisted in cooking etc. at home, and during the late nights wrote his English poems and his Hindi songs. A lover of cricket and physical exercise in Lahore, he had become thinner with overwork and under-nourishment, which he readily accepted. My mother noticed this, and was troubled, but looking after one's health was not part of 'revolutionary life' as far as her children were concerned.

### After the War

The end of the war (the Germans surrendered on 7 May 1945 and the Japanese on 14 August) was met with joy by us all. We felt the day of India's freedom too was not far. The trial of the INA prisoners that started soon afterwards roused the entire country in their defence. The INA officers, Gen. Shah Nawaz, Col. Sehgal and Col. Dhillon, were sentenced on January 3, 1946. But times had changed and the sentence was remitted and the officers released the same day. On 23 January the same year, on Subhas Bose's birthday, a large meeting was held on the Chaupati sands. After the meeting a section of the crowd, incensed by some anti-communist speakers, started shouting slogans against the communists and marched towards the Party headquarters. Suddenly, the crowd attacked the PHQ building and tried to break in. They were stopped by the Red Guards stationed at the gate. Soda water bottles, bricks and stones started raining on the building where dozens of comrades were still there. They fought back valiantly, many were badly injured. I do not know

how my mother came to sense that among those who were surrounded in the building might be her children. How she managed to enter the building in the chaos that reigned then we do not know. The building had a tiled roof and those who could not fight back with *lathis* climbed on the roof and broke the tiles which were used as flying missiles to fight the mob below. The police did not come for over an hour after the attack started. Then Col. Dhillon of the INA arrived and shamed the crowd, which soon dispersed. The badly injured were taken to hospitals.

One of Shashi's last poems was a long poem on the Indian Naval Ratings' Strike that broke out on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1946. Many of us, including Shashi were stranded in the PHQ for several days as many Party members had converged there on hearing that the Naval ratings had gone on strike. Suddenly a 24-hour curfew was declared. British soldiers in armoured cars shot at unarmed Indians who were demonstrating in the streets in solidarity with the ratings. Among the hundreds killed were many communists who took part in the demonstrations. In the PHQ, food was rationed. We slept on newspapers spread on the floor at night. It was in such conditions that Shashi's long poem was written. The ratings' strike spread to other ports. It was called off on February 23, when Sardar Patel and other Congress and Muslim League leaders, including Gandhiji, advised them to go back to their duties. They were assured there would be no victimisation. Opinion in the country was sharply divided, as radical leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali, and the communists, supported the action of the ratings as a revolutionary uprising against the British rule.

Serious communal riots broke out all over the country in 1946 following the Muslim League's declaration of 'Direct Action Day' on August 16. Along with many of his comrades, Kamla's eldest son Shashi went to donate blood for the victims of the riots. He died a few weeks later on September 13 after a brief illness. Coming within three years of our father's death, this was a great shock to us all. But we did not at that time realise how much our mother must have suffered to see her first and most talented son die when he was not yet 25. Suhasini too was shattered and did not emerge out of her room for many days. In retrospect, one thought comes to mind: Shashi was a sportsman and a lover of physical exercise when he came to Bombay five or six years back. Was neglect of one's health really a part of one's revolutionary duty? However, as always, our mother suffered her loss silently. We, Shashi's younger brothers and sisters, greatly felt the loss of our eldest brother, to whom we looked up as our friend, philosopher and guide in the new life we had chosen to live.

Before his death, among his many other activities, Shashi found the time to act in a film called *Azadi*, directed by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya . He played the main role as a student leader. The then popular actress Vanmala played opposite him. I remember we went once to see the outdoor shooting. The film was completed but, like many other films in those days (and even now), could find no willing distributor and was never released. After Shashi's death a special show was organised in a studio and some of us were able to see the film. It was a good film with a message

and it is a pity it has remained unknown even to cinema historians and has been completely forgotten.

### I join AIFSU

I was asked at the end of 1946 to join the office of the All-India FSU and assist R.M. Jambhekar, who was the general secretary of the All-India FSU, in running the office and the newly-started monthly, the 'Indo-Soviet Journal'.

My sister Vimla had continued to study at the Wilson College where she soon got into the list of merited students, got a scholarship and did not have to pay any fees. After she passed her B.A. with Honours in Economics, she joined the School of Economics. But she did not finish this course as the All India Students' Federation selected her to go to Prague to work as India's representative in the International Union of Students (IUS). She left on 14 June 1947.

Our younger sister Sarala had taken up nursing. She was selected to go to England on a scholarship for further studies after she had finished her nursing course in Bombay. She left on August 8, 1947. She was on the boat to England on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 when India became independent and celebrated the event with other Indians on the seas, while Vimla celebrated it in Prague. For many months my mother was busy preparing for both her daughters' overseas journey. She gave them her best saris and stitched blouses to go with them. She also got them some warm clothes for a climate very different from that of Bombay.

The youngest brother Rati had also finally got admission in the Grant Medical College in Bombay where he was studying for his MBBS degree.

My mother had continued to work with the Bombay FSU women's section where she was a much respected figure, being the eldest amongst all the women. She also took a lot of interest teaching her students, especially Raja, the eldest, and the twins Ram and Lakshman of the Daga family, telling them stories and reading out poems to them.

While Nehru was still Vice-President of the pre-Independence Interim Government, the first Asian Relations Conference was held on his initiative in Delhi from March 23 to April 2, 1947. The Jambhekars were invited to attend and they went to Delhi, where they met the first Soviet delegation from the Asian Republics which had come to attend the conference. I remember that when the delegation was leaving for home from the Santa Cruz airport in Bombay, quite a large number of FSU workers spent the night sleeping on the floor of our Santa Cruz residence, to get up early in the morning and march to the airport to bid the delegation farewell.

## Independence

Then came 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, which was observed with great joy by us all. I remember we marched, along with thousands of people of Bombay, throughout the previous night, singing patriotic songs. Among the banners and portraits we in the FSU carried was a portrait of Shashi, who was no longer there to see the freedom of which he had sung and for which he had fought. My two sisters, Vimla and Sarala, had also left for Europe. Of my mother's five children only two were now in Bombay.

Towards the end of 1947 the Jambhekars also left for Europe. Their trip was intended to establish contact with VOKS (Soviet Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) and with societies of friendship and cultural relations with the Soviet Union in European countries. The FSU was doing very well all over India and its work was expanding. The Jambhekars had gone to Europe for a few months, but soon events that followed in India made it impossible for them to return home until the winter of 1951.

India not only got its independence on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, the country was partitioned. Partition brought untold miseries to millions, forcing them to leave their ancestral homes and migrate across the new borders. Unprecedented communal unrest led to thousands being killed while they were leaving for an unknown future. Gandhiji was in East Bengal, trying to put out the flames of frenzied communal killings almost single-handedly. He did not take part in Independence Day celebrations. From there he came to Delhi, where he was assassinated on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948, leaving the nation stunned.

Hardly a month later, the CPI at its Second Congress held in Calcutta in February-March 1948 declared that on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 India had not got its freedom, but the Indian bourgeoisie had betrayed the Indian people and struck a deal with British imperialism. A most sectarian and adventurous political line was adopted at the congress under the leadership of the new general secretary, B.T. Ranadive. P.C. Joshi, who had built up the Party since his election as general secretary in 1936 (after release from prison in 1934, having served his sentence in the Meerut Conspiracy Case), was declared a 'reformist' and was soon expelled from the Party. Most of the leaders went underground, others were arrested. The disastrous sectarian political line continued until an editorial in the Cominform journal at the end of January 1950 denounced it. In less than two years the membership of the Party was brought down from 89,000 (at the time of the Second Congress) to 20,000.

Among the many arrested and detained in January 1950 were Kamla's youngest son Rati, her brother-in-law Madan Bakaya and her future daughter-in-law Kamal Kamat.

### My TB is diagnosed

Meanwhile, in April 1949 I fell ill with the many years' old TB that had never been diagnosed and had now spread to both the lungs. After many weeks of waiting for admission in the only TB hospital in Bombay while undergoing treatment at home, I was finally admitted to hospital where I spent two months and came out with strict instructions for following up the treatment. During these two months my mother came from Santa Cruz to the TB hospital in Sewri, quite a long way off, to see me during visiting hours practically every single day.

During late summer my mother took leave from her work and came with me to Bhowali to settle me there in a small rented block, since getting admitted to the Bhowali TB sanatorium was out of the question. A servant was hired and trained to cook and look after me. After about a month, my mother returned to Bombay. In those days a number of doctors from U.P. used to come to Bhowali during the summer months to treat TB patients privately. I was sent a monthly allowance to cover my expenses of living and treatment in Bhowali by my aunt in Bareilly. I learnt later that my mother had paid for this by disposing of much of her jewellery which had remained with her and which she was saving for her daughters.

### Indo-Soviet Cultural Society

The FSU team in Bombay, in spite of the loss of Shashi and the long absence of the Jambhekars, their senior leaders, carried on for many months and the organisation worked more or less normally, until the Calcutta Congress line started gradually affecting it too. Their monthly journal was 'transferred' to the Party headquarters and turned into a fortnightly as a substitute for the Party weeklies that had been banned. An underground girl student leader was sent to live in our house incognito and my mother had to look after her as well, while she was there, pretending she was a visiting relative. My mother visited my younger brother Rati in Arthur Road Jail whenever possible. The FSU women's group had no function in those 'revolutionary' times and remained passive.

After about three months in jail and consequent to the collapse of the sectarian line, my brother Rati was released along with other detainees, so also were Kamal Kamat and Madan Bakaya. Fortunately, the Grant Medical College allowed Rati to rejoin, and he was able to resume his M.B.B.S. course.

Most communist detainees were released later in 1950. The FSU active workers got together to take stock of the state of affairs in their organisation and decide what to do in order to revive it. Unlike many other organisations, the FSU team had remained more or less intact. Prolonged discussions were held for several weeks in late evenings to chalk out the future course. The Jambhekars also returned in early 1951 and found that the younger generation had already come to unanimous

conclusions about the future of the movement. Meanwhile, the delegation of prominent scientists, writers and artistes, led by Dr. A.V. Baliga and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, invited by VOKS to spend more than a month in the Soviet Union, had returned. Dr. Baliga was amongst the foremost surgeons of the country. He had given shelter to many underground leaders during the 1942 movement, including Aruna Asaf Ali. There was much rethinking going on in all political parties after independence. Aruna Asaf Ali visited the Soviet Union in 1950 and had prolonged discussions with Soviet professors A.M. Dyakov and V.V. Balabushevich at the VOKS. In her turn she told these eminent academicians that their assessments of Gandhi and Nehru had often been wrong. On her return she persuaded Dr. Baliga to go to the USSR and see things for himself.

The VOKS invited in 1951 a delegation of prominent Indians led by Dr. Baliga to visit and tour the USSR. Other members included Delhi scientist Dr. J.J.Chenoy, Calcutta physician Dr. Barada Ukil, poet Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, writer Bhabani Bhattacharya, journalists Rana Jung Bahadur Singh and Sham Lal and dancer Chandralekha.

On his return Dr. Baliga was welcomed at the airport, among others, by A.M. Shirali and myself on behalf of the FSU. We asked for an appointment and soon met him in his clinic. He told us that while in Moscow he had extensive discussions with leaders of VOKS and he felt that a new non-political cultural organisation should be started, rather than trying to revive the FSU. It should reflect the reciprocal character of Indo-Soviet cultural relations. For this a Preparatory Committee of prominent Bombay citizens for the organisation of an Indo-Soviet Convention and Cultural Festival was set up under Dr. Baliga's leadership.

I had recovered from my illness sufficiently to be able to take active part in this work and was appointed one of the secretaries of the Preparatory Committee, the other secretary being my friend and old FSU colleague A.M. Shirali. Dr. Baliga was one of the top surgeons of the country and had wide social contacts. He was not one of those prominent people who 'lend their name to a cause' while others 'run the show'. He was comparatively young at 47 years of age, and with his great prestige and numerous friends and admirers he was able to inspire other members of the Preparatory Committee with his clear thinking, foresight and extraordinary energy. At ground level the entire team of FSU workers enthusiastically worked for the success of the new venture.

After several months of work the festival and convention was finally held in mid-March 1952. A Soviet delegation led by prominent poet Nikolai Tikhonov attended. Among its members was the popular Azerbaijanian singer Rashid Beibutov, who won the hearts of the large audiences by his melodious voice and his Azerbaijanian, Russian and Hindi songs. Dr. M.R. Jayakar, Vice-Chancellor of Poona University and a well-known Liberal leader of the Gandhian era, inaugurated the convention and festival. Many prominent artistes, dancers and singers took part in the festival and performed before packed audiences. On March 14, 1952 the Indo-Soviet

Cultural Society came into being. Its National Council elected Dr. Baliga President, Vice-Presidents were Dr. V.K.R.V. Rao, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Mrs. D.R.D. Wadia and poet Vallathol.

In an editorial entitled 'Towards New Horizons' the 'Indo-Soviet Journal,' organ of the AIFSU, bid farewell to its readers and well-wishers and asked them to join the new organisation and make it successful.

My mother was happy and attended the main public functions and cultural programmes of the ISCUS festival and convention. She was also happy that though I was elected a member of the ISCUS National Council and its Executive Committee, in view of my health I did not take upon myself more demanding work as an office bearer.

In the next few years all Kamla's four children got married one by one.

In April 1952 my sister Vimla got married in Bombay to an old comrade and friend, Satya Pal Dang. She worked for a short time in an advertising agency but she and her husband decided in 1954 to go to Punjab where they settled down in the small suburban area of Chheharta near Amritsar and devoted themselves to work among the working class. They settled down in a working class area where they began living like any other working class family. My mother was very attached to Vimla and she was happy her older daughter had found a life's companion.

### TB again

Her main concern now was to see that I got good treatment for tuberculosis. Soon the VOKS invited me come to the USSR for medical treatment. But getting a passport to travel to the Soviet Union in those days was not easy, especially for members of the CPI. Indian passports in those days had the legend stamped on them 'Valid for all countries of Europe, except the USSR'. Tuberculosis was considered almost an incurable disease then in India. It needed lifelong treatment and periodic rest in the hills for those who could afford it. In our own family, two of my father's sisters had died of TB at a young age. Many of us in those days had great trust in the Soviet medical system and thought Soviet doctors could cure almost any disease. Dr. Baliga had also come back greatly impressed by the achievements of Soviet medicine. When I asked him, he said that he did not think the Soviet Union had any miracle cure for TB, but "their sanatoriums are excellent and a few months of treatment and rest there will do you a world of good."

At this time my uncle G.K. Handoo (husband of my mother's younger sister Kishan Handoo) who was a top-ranking IPS officer and Deputy Director of the IB (forerunner of RAW), wrote to my mother that if I wanted to go to Russia *only* for treatment, he could help me with a passport. He sent me the application form, which

I sent back to him duly filled in with photographs etc. We were surprised that I received a passport within a week from Delhi. In mid-1952 my mother and other family members and friends bid me good bye. I wanted to go via Delhi and Kabul, a more economical route than via Europe. So I arrived in Delhi and put up with my uncle Madan Bakaya, who stayed with his brother-in-law at Tees Hazari. When I went to the Soviet Embassy for a visa, I learnt to my dismay that my passport was endorsed only for the USSR and not for Pakistan and Afghanistan and I needed transit visas from both these countries. So I gave my passport for necessary endorsement. Delhi had no buses in those days and I used to go to Connaught Place every day on a cycle with Madan Bakaya, who had taken charge of the Peoples Publishing House bookshop on what is now Baba Kharak Singh Marg but in those days was a refugee market with a few makeshift shops and many *dhabas*. This was just to pass the time as I had nothing to do at home. We used to cycle back in the evening. Summer had set in, and one night I woke up to spit quite a lot of blood, indicating a relapse of my illness.

Meanwhile, my uncle G.K. Handoo discovered that my name was listed in police records among those who were not to be issued passports. So my aunt came and broke the news and said that nothing more could now be done and I should return to Bombay. She bought me an air ticket by the night Dakota service to return to Bombay. (It cost about a hundred rupees or so.) And thus I came back to Bombay!

My mother was not ready to give up so easily. A relative of hers, Prof. P.N.Kathju, who was married to Kamla Nehru's sister, had written to her that he could help me with a passport, when he came to learn about my illness. Prof. Kathju was not only closely related to my mother on her mother's side but was also a childhood friend. So my mother now wrote to him. He told her later that he personally met Pt. Nehru and reminded him that when Kamla Nehru was seriously ill with tuberculosis and had been taken to Europe for treatment, the British Government had released him from prison to be with her. Pt. Nehru intervened and wrote to Dr. K.N. Katju, the Home Minister, and soon I got a new passport, duly endorsed for all countries of Europe, including the USSR!

In July 1953 I was able to leave for Moscow, this time via Europe, directly from Bombay. I spent over seven months in two Soviet sanatoriums and returned via London, where I met my sister Sarala and her husband Robin and other friends and spent several weeks. Since I was advised not to travel by air by the Soviet doctors, I came back to Bombay by steamer. In the Soviet Union, apart from regaining my health, I made a serious attempt to learn Russian. My mother was happy that her efforts to get me a passport had brought about positive results.

### Teaching Russian

I continued to work actively in the ISCUS. But now I had also to look for some avenue of earning a living. I soon got a number of tuitions in the Soviet Trade Representation and the 'Sovexportfilm' to teach some of their employees English. I also took up translation work from Russian. In ISCUS I was invited to run certificate and diploma classes in Russian which I did in an honorary capacity and I taught there for over five years. Since Russian was not taught in India anywhere except in Delhi University, where it had been started soon after the war ended, ISCUS classes in Bombay attracted many students. Teaching is one of the best ways of learning a language. I was often asked to do interpretation work whenever Russian delegations arrived in Bombay. In 1960 I was selected lecturer in Russian at the IIT Bombay, where I taught technical Russian for over seven years, before moving to the Institute of Russian Studies in July 1967. The IRS joined JNU, when the University was started in 1969.

Kamla's younger daughter Sarala had got married at the end of 1953 in London to Robin Kumar Basu, a friend who was doing a course in printing technology in Leeds. They visited India when their first child was about a year old. My mother was happy to see them and her first grandson.

In 1955 I got married to Kamal Kamat.

### Mother on her own again

Another chapter was to start in my mother's life. She was now free of the responsibilities of looking after her children. They had all grown up and had found work. Three of them were married. In May 1955 her youngest son Rati passed his MBBS examination and in February 1958 he got married to Ramala Kapoor, a fellow doctor in the Grant Medical College. But my mother's responsibilities were far from being over. Both her parents were still alive and lived with her brother Dr. C.M. Aga in Bareilly. My aunt (Dr. Aga's wife, Raj Dulari Aga, who had done her M.A. in Sanskrit and was a contemporary and friend of poet Mahadevi Varma in Allahabd University), had suddenly lost her eyesight, and soon after she lost her hearing too. My grandmother was ill. So a call came from Bareilly to my mother to come and help look after her parents. She left for Bareilly sometime in 1956.

Soon after her arrival in Bareilly the word got round that a highly qualified and experienced Montessori teacher had arrived in the city. She was invited to open a school and look after it as its principal. And thus she once again resumed her favourite profession of teaching young children. She became head of a small institution, the Vishnu Bal Sadan. She was now working in a Hindi-speaking area. One after another, many of her new poems for small children were born. As in Lahore and Bombay, the poems were read out to the children and they

enjoyed immensely listening to them and reciting some of them. My mother never thought of herself as a great poet and never thought of getting her poems published. They were written, often in pencil, in her school exercise books, or simply on pieces of paper.

Unfortunately, the dates of writing are not there, except on a very few occasions. One of her oldest poems is 'Kyon?' meant for older children. Many of her shorter poems were written during her school years in Bareilly and are meant for smaller children, as all children in Vishnu Bal Sadan were beginners.

After she shifted to Bareilly, from time to time we visited her and our grandparents, who had also shifted to Bareilly from Allahabad some years after my grandfather retired. My uncle's house took over the role of my grandfather's, and became the place visited by a large number of relatives and so we met many of our childhood friends there during the summer vacations. My mother also visited us and stayed with us in Bombay. She came to look after our house and our two small children in Delhi for almost a year in 1969-1970, when Kamal went to Moscow for a ten-month Russian teachers' training course.

At the end of September 1971 my mother went to England to spend some time with my younger brother Rati, who was then living and working in Manchester. As I too had to go to Moscow to work for a Ph.D. at that time, we travelled together up to Moscow by an Air India flight which went to London via Moscow. In 1972 summer and 1973 winter I visited my mother and my brother during the summer and winter breaks I got. She was not very well when I saw her last in 1973, but her grave illness had not been diagnosed. She died of cancer on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1973. My sister Vimla had travelled to England to see her during her last days. Sarala, my other sister, was also with her; she and her husband Robin lived and worked in Leeds in those days. So, out of her surviving four children three were with her, as also her younger sister, Kishan Handoo, who had travelled from India to see her.

A few months before her death she wrote to my aunt Sushila Ganjoo in Kanpur a letter in which she asked her to distribute her meagre assets—some jewellery and her old brass *paandaan* among her children and some others in the family. Sushila Masi sent me a copy of her letter. It is a moving document, showing her concern for others even when she was herself seriously ill. But the most valuable of her assets were her poems and these should at last reach the children of this country.

A remarkable feature of her poems is their extraordinarily expressive language. It is close to the simple spoken language current in her time in places like Lucknow and Allahabad and spoken by Kashmiri Pandits outside Kashmir. It contains words of both Sanskrit and Persian origin, and was called 'Hindustani'—a name Gandhiji wanted to give India's principal link language. Kamla's expression is notable for its spontaneity and the effortless flow of words. The imagery comes prominently from a child's thinking; it is natural—at times joyful and playful and at other times sad

**and thoughtful. Her poems reflect the wonder, joy, inquisitiveness and the innocent sadness of a child's mind.**

**Though many of her poems reflect patriotic sentiments and a keen desire for a just and humane social order, they are not dry and didactic, but spontaneous and the product of a deeply sensitive mind. Kamla's patriotism is genuine love for her country and its people and her quest for social justice is a strong desire to see good triumphing over evil.**

**My mother's ashes were brought to Delhi by my aunt. The urn containing my father's ashes had been kept in our house all these years. Both my parents' ashes were immersed in the Yamuna together some time later.**

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<sup>[1]</sup> Formerly Professor, Centre of Russian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This note was written for Prof. Krishna Kumar, Director, National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), in connection with his proposal to publish one of Kamla Bakaya's longer poems *Kyon?* as an illustrated booklet for children. He had read Kamla Bakaya's poems given to him and wanted to know something about their author.

<sup>[2]</sup> Suhasini had left her first husband ACN Nambiar and her eldest brother Virendranath Chattopopadhyaya in Berlin when she came to India in the late twenties. The Jambhekars naturally wanted to know what happened to both of them. It was later discovered that "Chatto", as the famous revolutionary was called, had managed to escape to the USSR, where he worked in Leningrad for many years in the Soviet Academy of Sciences. He was among the many foreign communists who lost their lives in Stalin's "purges" of the nineteen-thirties. Nambiar, who remained behind in Germany, was luckier. He joined Subhas Bose's Azad Hi