

Remembering Bharat Ram

Five days from today is the birth centenary of Bharat Ram of DCM. Most might remember him as one of the two businessmen – the other one being Har Prasad Nanda of Escorts – whose companies were raided by London-based Swraj Paul in the 1980s. It was India's first hostile takeover attempt, thwarted only when the highest authorities in the land interceded. Members of the Delhi Golf Club would perhaps remember him as the frail man who didn't miss a game till days before he died in 2007. But Bharat Ram was more than that. He was the link between the past and the present, a witness to every phase of modern Indian business: from pre-independence nationalism to Nehru's socialism and to the liberal present.

His father, Lala Shri Ram, had built DCM (it was called Delhi Cloth & General Mills; Bharat Ram strategically changed it to DCM during the Paul affair – this required the shareholders' consent and the raider had no option but to disclose his stake), north India's first industrial enterprise. They were called the Kotwal family, because Lala Shri Ram's great-grandfather was a *kotwal* in Delhi during the 1857 mutiny. "The only intelligence that I seem to have displayed was in the choice of my parents," Bharat Ram reminisced at the time of his 70th birthday in 1984.

The family lived in a *haveli* in a congested lane in walled Delhi. It was still the Delhi of old. The rich travelled in horse-drawn *tongas*, and sent their sons to courtesans to learn etiquette and Urdu. But Lala Shri Ram sent Bharat Ram to Modern School, then at



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Daryaganj, and then to St Stephen's, located then at Kashmere Gate. It was an elite college where not everybody could get admission; several of the teachers were English, and many of the Indian teachers were Anglophiles. When the college's principal suggested that Mahatma Gandhi never gave any account of the money collected by the Congress, Bharat Ram and others called a strike. The principal had to defuse the situation by saying that it was never his intention to cast aspersions on Gandhi's integrity.

Bharat Ram joined DCM in 1935. "I was callow enough to feel that DCM was awaiting my arrival with bated breath," Bharat Ram said in his memoirs. Thus, on the appointed day, he entered his father's room with a wide grin on his face and sat on a chair in front of his desk. He got the shock of his life. Lala Shri Ram looked at him sternly, made him get up and said: "Do you know why I asked you to come here?" When Bharat Ram began to fumble for words, he added: "I have called you to

tell you that when you are in the office, you are not my son and I am not your father. Go and take your instructions from Khan *Sahib* (Ahmad Islam Khan, the general manager)." A few months later, Bharat Ram had to face his father's wrath one more time when he reported for duty one hour late. Bharat Ram said he got late because the car wasn't available to bring him to the factory. This enraged Lala Shri Ram. "Do the other workers come in their cars? You could have walked to the mill," he told his son coldly.

Bharat Ram got married to Sheila in 1935. Lala Shri Ram sent them to meet Gandhi to seek his blessings. Gandhi was living in a colony of untouchables in Delhi. When Bharat Ram and Sheila reached, he told the newlyweds: "My thirst for begging is simply unquenchable. I do not mind taking ornaments either." Sheila got the message, took off her gold bangles and handed them over to Gandhi.

This nationalistic streak would long stay with Bharat Ram. In 1941, the imperial government knighted Lala Shri Ram. He became Sir Shri Ram, though he preferred to be called Lala Shri Ram till the end. His knighthood didn't go down well with Bharat Ram, who shot off a long letter of disapproval to his father.

It was customary for the family to feed all their workers at festivals. Whenever he travelled abroad, Lala Shri Ram would return with gifts for workers. He started the practice of nomi-

nating a worker to the board of DCM. However, it remained a token gesture – the worker would always be too overawed to speak out at the board meetings. Bharat Ram imbibed this spirit. Once, at a meeting in the DCM factory, a worker said something rude to Lala Shankar Lall, Lala Shri Ram's younger brother. Incensed, Lala Shankar Lall gave him a tight slap. Bharat Ram got up and demanded that he should be slapped by the worker. Of course, the worker never did that. Bharat Ram hob-

nobbed with the power elite of Delhi but never used his clout to get things done out of turn. In the 1960s, he was denied permission to make tyres. Later, his licence to make nylon tyre cord (under SRF) was cut to a third.

In 1990, the DCM family split after staying together for 90 years as differences

had cropped up between Bharat Ram and his younger brother, Charat Ram. (Their eldest brother, Murli Dhar, had died more than 40 years earlier in a plane crash in Pakistan, where the family owned a textile mill at Lyallpur.) But it was done with all decency; there was no mudslinging. The two brothers were actually quite different from each other. Bharat Ram was the public face of DCM and more of a people person, while Charat Ram was a hard-nosed businessman and hands-on administrator.

For his children, Bharat Ram was second to none. After Lala Shri Ram died in 1963, it was proposed that his grandchildren and their progeny would take the surname Shriram. While Murli Dhar and Charat Ram's sons agreed, Bharat Ram's children took the surname Bharatram because they felt their father was no less than Lala Shri Ram.

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