

## **N A N N Y *Grandmother***

By Ram Lal Bhutani

A few months after my birth in 1928, my mother died suddenly. My nanny, mom's mom, just took me over. My father was then only 28 years old and the family proposed that he should marry again. My nanny fully supported the idea and that is why she took me over, as also my sister 5 years older to me, for she strongly felt that she was in a better position to rear us up than a step mother. There was, yet, another tragedy in the family. My father was assassinated in 1932 when I was 4 and he a youthful leader of 32. He was an educationist and a lawyer, was one of the founders of the Hindu High School, Dera Ghazi Khan, Punjab (then in India, now Pakistan) and was its Vice-Principal. He remained in the forefront of India's freedom movement and cultural activities. This gruesome incident occurred after he had addressed a public meeting.

I was never told anything about my father's demise as I was too young and away with my nanny. Much later, when I was 6 and able to grasp the situation, my nanny told me that a patriot has to pay the price of leadership and that I should nurse no ill feelings against the assassin whoever he may be. Day in and day out, whenever she would start her morning prayer, and often she would bid me to be by her side, she would repeat that we must repose our faith in non-violence.

I had all the comforts of an affluent home but one thing that bothered me was that my nanny had poor eye sight and, later, she became hard of hearing. Another childhood memory that has remained with me is that I do not recollect that I saw my nanny speak with her husband, that is my grandpa. She always praised him and said he did his best to look after her.

My grandfather, Rai Sahib Lala Ishar Das Mahta, retired from a senior post (Traffic Inspector, if I remember aright) in the railways in 1935. The last station of his posting was Kala Bagh on the bank of river Indus and I was a student in class two in the local municipal school. On his retirement, we all shifted to our home town Dera Ghazi Khan. In his brilliant career, he had earned promotions and the title of Rai Sahib. After retirement, he acquired many lands in the Dera Ghazi Khan area. As a rich landlord, he held a number of important positions in the community. He played tennis at an elite club with British district officials and with important chieftains from the Baluch tribes like the Leghari family. (Incidentally, a scion of this family, Mr. Farooq Leghari, is now the President of Pakistan). My grandfather also nursed many institutions with which my father was associated, e.g. Hindu High School, Sanatan Dharam Sabha, Gow-shala and other charitable trusts. During his service and even afterwards he took special pains to get the best medical treatment for his wife. My nanny would recall how she was taken to top eye specialists in Moga, Lahore and other big cities of Punjab but her affliction, which began in the 1920s, continued nevertheless.

Did she ever complain about her ailments? No. Never. She was always her contented self. That was part of her tolerance, her culture. She accepted it as God's will, and, often in a jocular mood would say: See the good Lord does not want me to see bad things or

listen to bad talk! Popular in her neighborhood, she was known as 'Mata Ji' -Respected Mother-just as we addressed her. And my grandpa, we all called him 'Pita Ji' - Respected Father.

Her work day began at 4 a.m. She would like to warm herself up by grinding about a kilogram of wheat on a hand stone-grinder. She maintained that her wheat flour was better than that done in a mill as it was cool, hand-milled and thus retained its strength. Then it was time for her prayer session, followed by kitchen work and so on; poor eye sight and poor hearing were no handicaps to her.

She was jovial and had a good sense of humor. On occasions, when she would ask me to pass on a message to the grandfather, she would preface it thus: 'You know, Ram, I can't speak to him direct. He is literate and I'm unlettered. He held a high post and, now, he is head of the community and me ... just a housewife! Perhaps that's why he doesn't speak with me.....' To me this in itself was a message. Did she really feel hurt? Ignored? This thought tormented me some times. I couldn't understand this custom. Everyone said this was the tradition those days that whenever a person became a grand father, he stayed away from his wife as a social ethic. This may be so, but I did observe many old couples conversing and consulting with each other. I didn't like it but didn't express it either, lest I'm misunderstood. Sometimes I felt that my nanny considered me as her young confidant and thus gave vent to her inner feelings. I stayed with my grandparents till I passed the matriculation examination from the Hindu High School in 1943. As I grew in years, I could discern her hurt but I could not put it across to my grandfather, realizing that he was going by his own aesthetic values and norms.

My nanny's nature pleased me. She was cheerful and had full faith in the divine. I was impressed and influenced by her philosophy to remain calm and contented. And, she maintained her cool and kept her composure even when she was a widow after my grandfather died in 1948, soon after the partition of India when we all had to flee from Pakistan and migrate to Delhi.

Suave, simple and sagacious, she let her opinion be known by way of suggestions. In May 1949 I was getting ready to proceed to USA on my first assignment and was scheduled to leave Bombay in June. She held my arm and asked me innocently, 'Listen Ram, you won't go alone? Who will cook for you? I'm worried. Why can't they post you within India? I'm old. I may die any day. Won't you shoulder my dead body? ... Well, if you are going, then don't go alone. You are engaged; she is 17. Get married and take your bride with you. Do you know I got married when I was only 13! My husband took me along. The railways gave us quarters. Won't they provide you accommodation there? ...'

Some days later, realizing that I may not have taken her suggestion seriously, she gave me a surprise one morning. As I was ready to leave for office, she was all dressed up and politely said, 'Won't you get a tonga or a coach? I'm coming with you to see your boss, the Minister. What kind of new government is this after the independence? Won't they allow you to take your bride to America? Don't they give you married accommodation in foreign lands?'... That did it. That day I went to office, of course alone. I was working then with the Minister of Labour and that afternoon I met a senior officer in the Ministry of External Affairs in South

Block. My departure was postponed and fresh passages were arranged for two. I got married on 4th June 1949. My wife and I sailed from Bombay in July and reached Washington D.C. on 10th August, 1949.

That was my nanny. She handled things in her own way. She commanded respect by her wonderful behaviour and by making herself useful in looking after several minor duties and chores. Occasionally, she would consult her brother Jamnu Ram Bhutani, who was a few years younger to her, and she addressed him always as ‘Nikka’ i.e. Junior. Uncle Jamnu Ram (lovingly called by us ‘Mama Ji’ always touched her feet by way of respect whenever he dropped in to see her. We all made it a point that she was fully respected and given due importance; and made to feel that she was wanted and welcome in the family. Even in her seventies, she was peaceful and cheerful and, above all, helpful in house work. Rites, rituals and observing fasts were part of her life. Her daily routine hardly changed: rising up at 4 a.m., singing her prayers, washing clothes, helping peel vegetables etc. And, as she always put it, “I do so to keep myself busy and healthy. Activity gives me appetite. How can I just sit idle?” She loved laundering clothes and did this to a fault. She would collect soiled linen each morning for washing and, because of her poor eyesight, would sometimes pick up even those clothes that were already washed.

As grand children, we asked her at times to tell us a story and she was happy to do so. Often these were fables from scriptures and epics. Once, one of us asked her, “Grandma, did you ever attend a school?” She burst into laughter and put it wittingly, ‘Are you kidding? So you people want to send me to school now? Do I need education? Yes, I’m unlettered, not inexperienced.’ She then paused, became somewhat serious and remorsefully added, “I very much wanted to, but my parents felt that girls always worked at home. So why send them to school? On my own, I learnt to write a few holy words and can write the name of my husband. You know, I am a devout wife; I cannot utter my husband’s name! So I used to write his name when need be. Well ... to me, what really matters is integrity, not illiteracy.”

Nanny’s gentle advice during prayers shaped my bent of mind and my aptitude. A noble soul, she always stressed that a person ought not compete with others in evil. Don’t do down the other person but, instead, work hard to raise yourself up. The way she lived her daily life, that was a message.

She was born in 1885 and died in 1968. It was a chance I was in Delhi between my two foreign postings. And, luckily, I was with her, at her bedside, at the time of her death. Mata Ji became memory. A chapter had ended, a vacuum created. Will I ever be able to complete a memoir on my nanny? I think not. Memories are strong; my pen weak, it wobbles.

Her name was Uttami Bai, that literally means: The Best Lady. *And that she was!*

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## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What's in a name? Call a rose a lily, it will still smell as sweet. For those expecting a baby, the wait and anticipation includes the search for a suitable name for the child. Some wish to carry on the name of a grandparent. Some prefer a name more modern, some melodious, while some like it exotic. Whatever? The chosen name truly matters, for you don't want your child to feel embarrassed by it later, in the class or career.

Ask your own children, who are about to become parents, how they feel about the name you gave them, when they were born. Perhaps that trendy name, you took such pains to choose, has already become *out-of-date!* No matter how the parents-to-be feel about their own names, they will still spend much time looking for a special name for their own children. And, the cycle goes on.

We had a neighbor in Accra, West Africa, who told us that his father was 'a man from the bush' and did not waste his time over, nor gave much thought to, the naming of his five children. He simply named them after the day of the week on which they were born. His brother was named 'Monday' for he was born on a Monday. And, he himself was called 'Kofi' - which meant Friday in his tribal dialect. How apt!

Our school teacher felt strongly that the naming of a baby was an important matter and could not be treated lightly. He told us that those, who believed in the ancient tradition of India, preferred to name the child after a god or goddess, taking care that the first letter of the first name should correspond with the calculation of the newborn's horoscope (libra, virgo, whatever). He insisted there was logic in all this. Not mere astrology, but much more.

Let us say, you name your son after a popular god, Rama or Siva or Krishna. Think of how many times, each day, that particular God would be invoked when the child was called. And, how many times throughout the year, and how many astronomical times in a lifetime! Imagine, how many times we recite the name of God in our prayers, or a devotee repeats His holy name by telling the beads or counting a rosary? Give a child a god's name and you attain the same objective.

Haven't scriptures ordained: "It is the *last thought* that determines your next birth." And you may be just doing that when you summon your child to your death bed. Consider how lucky you are when you utter the holy name of God as you *breathe your last*. It may be your passport to a bright next life! The chosen name may determine your own auspicious re-incarnation.

So, don't ever say what's in a name!

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## **SOME ELEVATING IDEAS**

Don't judge people by their appearances but by their intentions.

When you lose, don't lose the lesson.

Don't let a little dispute harm your great friendship.

Talk slow but think quick.

You know the old three R's (reading, writing, 'rithmetic). Learn the new R's:  
Respect for self; Respect for others; Responsibility for your actions.

Spend some time alone; solitude soothes often.

Keep your doors and windows open to let fresh wind and ideas flow in, but don't let winds blow you off your feet.  
Be open to suggestions, don't let your values go off.

Talk slow but think quick.

Trust in God but lock your car.

A loving atmosphere in any home is important. Do all you can to create harmony and tranquility in your home.

Share your knowledge. It is a good way to achieve immortality.

Cash and ornaments can be stolen, but not knowledge. Knowledge is the power.

Learn the rules first before you break some.

Remember that the best relationship is the one where your love for each other is greater than your need for each other.

When you say: 'I love you'. Mean it.

Never laugh at anyone's dreams.

Give people more than they expect. And, do it cheerfully.

If you find a question embarrassing, don't lose your temper. Instead, ask politely, 'Why do you want to know?'

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compiled by Ram L. Bhutani

## THE MASTERPIECE

‘Indeed, this is a piece of art!’ I exclaimed when I looked at the painting of a flying dragon. “And, it took the artist three years! ... ,” added Arnold Smith.

Our neighbour in the Happy Valley area of Hong Kong, Mr. Arnold Smith was as much a connoisseur of art as he was an astute businessman. Tonight, he was leaving the colony for good and returning to England. He continued, “Believe you me, I brought it from the artist just a few hours back.”

Confiding in me, Arnold Smith elaborated he had approached Ming, the renowned Chinese artist in Kowloon, some three years back and had asked him if he could do an oil painting of a flying dragon. He was looking for a good masterpiece. Something worth taking home and keeping as a family heirloom. The artist had agreed to do the job.

After almost a year, Arnold Smith went to check with the artist if his painting was ready. The artist pleaded for some more time. Another year passed by. The artist assured him that he was working on the project. The businessman retorted, “What? A project? Mr. Ming, I asked for just one painting, not Taj Mahal!”

On his third trip, after another year, Arnold Smith was brusque. He blurted out, “I know, Mr. Ming, you are a top artist but I am honestly disappointed. I just can’t wait any longer. You know I have wound up my business here and I am leaving Hong Kong tonight.” The artist apologized and asked Mr. Smith, “Can you spare a few hours today? I shall then do it, right in your presence.” Arnold Smith was touched and felt truly honored by this special gesture.

The artist brought the easel, brushes and several paints. While the businessman sipped Chinese green tea, the artist got busy. In a couple of hours, he drew an excellent flying dragon that could be the pleasure of any connoisseur and a treasure for any art gallery. Arnold Smith was delighted. He paid him handsomely but could not resist his curiosity. He remarked, “Mr. Ming. I am indeed indebted to you ... but, why did you put me off for three years, when you could have done the job in just three hours?!”

The artist then opened the door of his inner gallery and led Arnold Smith into it. What Arnold saw was stunning. There lay several dozen paintings of the flying dragon of the same design. Pointing to that cluster of paintings, Ming said softly, “You see, Mr. Smith, I have been practising all these months. You said you wanted a *masterpiece*, didn’t you. A piece of art to treasure!”

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*Ram Lal Bhutani*