

Papa Ji: A Remembrance

(An excerpt from the book Inclinations And Reality)

My uncle Papaji was just three years younger than my father. He was born shy, aloof, and brainy. He had few friends in his younger years. It was only in his later years that his efforts to come out of his cocoon paid off and he became more sociable and assertive. But sometimes in his overzealousness he would become an uninhibited and an opinionated talker, making extreme statements on people and things. He excelled as a student and used deft strategies to score high in exams. After completing his education in Kashmir, he went to Government College in Lahore, which was considered the Oxford University of India at that time, to get a Masters degree in English. Given his emotional personality, it was strange that he chose to take up literature instead of physics, history, or political science. On returning to Kashmir, he briefly taught English but having qualified in Kashmir Civil Service, he became a police officer. Again, a police officer's job was not in synch with his personality but he took it because it was monetarily a more rewarding job than other viable jobs, with potential for better growth than an English professor's job.

He married into a family not socially as prominent as Kauls were. He did so because he valued the education of the woman in question, who was called Pyari in our family after her marriage. There was another reason for marrying in that family; it allowed his and his wife's wedding gifts to be transferred to his younger sister, Gorajigri, when she would get married two months later. Pyari was a double college graduate, a regular graduate and a teaching graduate. She was also the first teaching graduate in the state. These qualifications gave her a special status in Kashmir those days. The irony is that her education brought a lot of problems in her married life, as she refused to move with Papaji from Srinagar many times whenever he was transferred to different districts of the state on the grounds of not willing to abandon her duties as the headmistress of a girl's school. Also, she did not share his intellectual tastes and found him cold and unromantic, describing his personality as lacking in passion.

For about the next three decades and a half in the police service, my uncle blazed a trail of devotion to duty, incorruptibility, and efficiency. He became one of the most iconic figures in the state. Being highly principled, stern, and unbending, he was feared at his work, both by his subordinates and his superiors. Together with his superior professional abilities, he became *bête noire* of the higher state management, as they did not know what to do with him. He was among a few non-bribe taking police officers in the state, which made his superiors uncomfortable; his intellectual stature and high-mindedness made them nervous. He could not be fired, so he was often transferred to different districts of the state. He became a shining symbol of honesty and “efficiency” (a word used for professional abilities in India, which seems to have come from the old British management mindset) in an ocean of public corruption and stained morality. Add to this persona his six-feet height and reed-like leanness, he became a visible image of strength and sharpness.

After being treated as a pariah almost all his career, the crowning glory came almost at its end when he was promoted as the head of the police for the state (called IGP, Inspector General of Police, in those days). How did this happen? Customarily, Kashmir IGPs were recruited from outside the state. As the current IGP’s tenure was coming to an end, Papaji went to the state chief minister, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, asking him if local police officers lacked the ability to become an IGP. Abdullah, known for his pride in Kashmiris, responded that that was not the case and that future IGPs could be sourced internally. Lo and behold, in the next recruitment process, Papaji was selected for the post. This big feather on his professional cap apparently mitigated the years of step-motherly treatment he went through in the police organization.

With all the successes in his career, family, and social life, he remained less than happy. In my 25 years of correspondence with him, he complained many times about his inability to see much value in life; turning him almost into a nihilist. He often saw life as a cruel joke played by gods on the innocent and helpless human beings. He would quote Shakespeare from King Lear,

“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport.”

He unconsciously believed that intelligence was an end by itself; nothing more was needed to live. That is, no faith in a system of thought was required to live, like in religion, art, science, etc. All that was needed was good brain power and the knowledge of the hard realities of life. The supreme irony of his life was that while he had evolved to achievements in character, intellect, and cerebral pyrotechnics, he had missed the spiritual dimension of human life. His perennial disenchantment with life provoked Babuji, his elder brother, to coin an epithet for him, “A Devdas without a Paro.” (Devdas is the legendary hero of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel of the same name. Devdas leads a very sad life and hastens its end by alcoholism, because he is unable to marry his childhood sweetheart, Parvati)

During his police career and later when he retired, he took refuge in books. He read widely in English. He loved Urdu poetry and could quote many a verse fluently. He was also good in quoting from English literature. He questioned some of the basic ways in which our society lived, thinking they were hypocritical and therefore of not good value. The problem was that he was much less emotional than the common people, so unable to understand some of the popular social intercourse. He believed all the prophets of mankind had failed it. He thought Kashmiri Pandit refugees did not deserve much sympathy as they were doing all right. Our correspondence was impregnated with arguments and debates as we were emotionally and intellectually antipodeans and, therefore, our views on art, culture, civilization, etc., were on the opposite ends. With Pyari’s untimely demise, and emigrating to New Delhi in 1990 due to the militancy in Kashmir, he struck the lonely phase of his life, which did not leave him till the end. Books did not provide permanent relief to him. He often asked me if book reading is all that life is about.

His influence on the family and the personalities of its members remains strong. Because of his high moral integrity, that too in a highly corrupt society, he has left a significant record of his services, a scintillating impression of his character.

His life looks to be tragic to me because he had been born with the capabilities to do a lot more than he did—both in public and intellectual arenas. The following verse may make my point clearer:

He came as a beacon penetrating the dark overcast skies,
To illuminate a patch below, to stir a cleansing
Of its stained fabric, to show us the new way to live.
But somewhere he lost interest in his work
And folded his supreme abilities and character,
To rue on unfairness of life, to lament on its immutable pain.

But I realize all of us are born one-piece. That is, our limitations are a part of our total personality. Papaji, on the larger canvas of his life, could not be any different than he was. This is the uniqueness of every person, laced as it is with human dimension.

It is both ironic and unfortunate that most of the third-generation youngsters in our family did not know his achievements and his character, leaving them bereft of the inspiration he imbued in others. For me, during my exile years, he offered me his home to live in, and left me alone. Beyond that, he continued to remain a fatherly uncle to me through the vicissitudes of time.

He suddenly passed away on 20 March 2008 after only a week's hospitalization for pneumonia and back problems. But these problems were swept over by septicaemia, the powerful infection contracted in hospitals (which is found in India in high frequency), which rapidly gained control over his various organs and proved fatal. Some people believe that the fatal blow came from the festering tuberculosis that had invaded his lower vertebrae much earlier than his final hospital visit. For a man who had never spent a night in a hospital, and who possessed superior health genes and who maintained it with a tenacious and obsessive discipline, the manner of his demise was painfully surprising. People

took cold comfort in the fact that it was the hospital infection, septicaemia, that killed him and not his health.

With Papaji's departure, Kauls lost the last pillar of their clan. His iron strength of character, his keenness of mind, his robust will to live, and his durable wisdom made him into an iconic figure. Kauls who knew him well will keep on thinking about this larger-than-life person till their end. If an epithetical pronouncement is made about his understanding of human life, it would be the following words from Shakespear's play Macbeth, which he cherished passionately,

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's is but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.