

Pranlal Mohanlal Buch ; A nephew's tribute

■ *Dr. M. N. Buch*

My grandfather, Mohanlal Rangildas Buch, had four sons, Bhupatrai, Pranlal, Dolarai and Neelkanth (my father) in descending order of age. My father was the youngest and he was known by his nickname, Neelambhai. The eldest brother, Bhupatrai, was twenty years older than my father and Pranlal, the next in age, was twelve years older than my father. My grandfather died young and the eldest boy, Bhupatrai, left a flourishing legal practice in Karachi and joined the service of Limbdi State in order to look after his brothers and sister. Of all the brothers Pranlal was academically the brightest, but his mettle can be judged by his decision not to study beyond the Bachelor's degree and take up a job to help his elder brother to look after the family. The world was his oyster but his sense of duty was so strong that he preferred to join the Imperial Bank of India (now State Bank of India) as a clerk.

For 70 years Pranlal maintained a small flat in a building called Bala Prasad opposite the Matunga (west) station. This house was the base for all the children of the extended family who came to Bombay in pursuit of higher studies. From this house they emerged as Doctors, Engineers, Business Executives, Civil Servants, Lawyers, Bankers and Chartered Accountants. Pranlalkaka was the great banyan tree under which all congregated and all acquired knowledge. I spent one year in Elphinstone College, Bombay and though I lived in the hostel I spent every evening at Bala Prasad. Pranlalkaka himself with very modest means and with three sons to educate, fed us, looked after us, gave us shelter and, being as proud as Lucifer refused to accept even a penny from us by way of recompense. I have yet to come across a more generous soul than him, who would literally give away the shirt which he was wearing rather than see you go shirtless. His personal reward was the very high esteem in which the entire extended family held him, together with three sons, Indu, Kishore and Dinesh who dazzled us by their brilliance. Indubhai was a scientist of repute in the world of drugs and pharmaceuticals, Kishorebhai was a naval scientist and India's greatest expert on marine paints and Dineshbhai was and is a teacher with the gift of Saraswati.

Let me tell two stories of Pranlalkaka's pride. I knew that he liked the chaadars made in Bhaglapur and I brought him a pair on one of my visits. They only cost me Rs. 16 for the pair but Pranlalkaka refused to accept them unless I took money from him. He considered it inappropriate to accept presents from his nephew because after all he was the family elder. The second incident relates to him and Kaki visiting me at Bhopal. They were to go on to Delhi to visit my mother. I purchased tickets for them by Punjab Mail by Ist Class and despite all of Kaka's insistence I refused to take money from him. On reaching Delhi he wrote me a postcard which read something like the following :- "You are a very obstinate boy and you insisted on buying our train tickets. As a punishment my watch fell down the toilet commode in the train. Had you let me buy my tickets this would have not happened." Pranlalkaka, despite the early struggles he had, was extremely well read and kept abreast of what is happening in the world. Every visit to him was a period of learning discourse and discussion, argument and even controversy. One never felt the age difference because he treated you as an absolute equal. Sumankaki was the peacemaker when arguments became heated. She and I played a game in which she would hide all the delicious snacks which she

prepared and I would exhibit my detective skills in unearthing them. In this I beat my cousins hollow.

Pranlalkaka only wrote postcards but he could get more into a little postcard than I could into five fullscap sheets. The postcard was always live and omnibus, it had news, the happenings in the family, Kaka's views on current affairs, advice when needed and always a message of good cheer. The last postcard he wrote was penned three days before he died and it reached me the day after his death. I compared it with the postcard he had written fifty years earlier and which I had hoarded. I could detect no difference between this postcard and the one written fifty years ago in the matter of handwriting.

Because my father was the youngest brother Pranlalkaka had the greatest affection for him. He looked after him in his college days in Wilson College, Bombay, he encouraged him to go to the London School of Economics for higher studies, he insisted on his appearing for the ICS examination in London and he was always the pillar on whom my father leaned throughout his life. He was there when his beloved younger brother, Neelambhai, died in Bombay on 5/3/1954 and it is he who helped the family to face this tragedy. He and Ma had a wonderful relationship in which they constantly spared with each other as Sumankaki looked on with amusement. Ma and us three brothers always knew that Pranlalkaka was there to support us and stand by us in all circumstances and this was the greatest comfort we could have. The Buch family was and is nucleated and our branch became furtherest because my father was in the Punjab cadre of the ICS. One met members of the family at infrequent intervals, but the bonds withstood the rigours of separation and grew stronger over the years. Even today we cousins and the children are closer to each other than real siblings. This has only been possible because Pranlalkaka set the benchmark of family values which have survived through adversity, periods of happiness and periods of sorrow. All I can say is, thank you, Pranlalkaka.