

## Pioneer of the institutional history of Indian S&T

### *An obituary of Baldev Singh*

When Baldev Singh died on 22 April, after a brief illness, he was, in accordance with his wishes, cremated without religious ceremony or rituals of any kind. A few days before he died, my wife and I visited him in hospital. I noticed he was having blood transfusion through a blood-bag made by an Indian firm licensed to manufacture it by an Indian corporation, the technology having been developed by an Indian laboratory. True to form, till his death, he believed in trusting products of indigenous technology. Both these events characterized Baldev as nothing-else will: a turban-wearing Sikh, secular to the core, with the courage of his convictions (even when he changed them, he did so openly when sufficient reasons were revealed to him) and a complete commitment to indigenous technology, its fostering and its utilization. He never held one position in public and another in private on any matter of public policy.

Born in 1921, Baldev was a product of, and participant in, the National Movement, a member of the All India Student's Federation. He belonged to the old school with regard to his attitudes and his self-effacement.

Baldev started his career with CSIR as Research Officer in the Regional Research Laboratory (RRL), Hyderabad (1949-56), as a colleague of the late S. Hussain Zaheer, whom Baldev considered as his mentor (as did many others who came into close contact with Zaheer). He was a 'bench scientist' and worked on the extraction of alkaloids. He moved his professional interests and concerns to the area of technology-transfer to industry when he was

appointed to the position of Technical Liaison Officer at RRL, Hyderabad, between 1956 and 1962. When Zaheer became the Director-General of CSIR, Baldev became the Officer-in-Charge, Industrial Liaison and Research Co-ordination at CSIR Headquarters, and in 1973 the Chief of the Technology Utilization Division of CSIR, and retired in 1979.

The period in Delhi brought out the nationalist in Baldev. Besides serving as the Secretary to the Third Reviewing Committee of CSIR (1963-64), Baldev fought many-a-battle in Delhi, in favour of indigenous technology and against mindless import. He did this by, amongst other means, maintaining a large cross-correlated data-bank in his head.

As with many who stay long in one institution, Baldev would respond to criticisms of CSIR with counter-criticisms of other S&T agencies (see for example, his otherwise seminal piece 'Perspective before CSIR', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXII, No. 17, 25 April 1987).

What will Baldev be remembered for? His colleagues and those who succeeded him will remember him for interactions they had with him, mostly friendly, some adversarial, but always in favour of a nationalist stance *vis-à-vis* Indian technological development and the drive towards self-reliance. But the post-independence generation will remember him for his pioneering contributions to the institutional history of Indian S&T, contributions that he made from the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum and Library where he was Professorial Fellow from 1984 until his death.

If you want to know what the scientopolitics of the four Review Committees

on CSIR were, you will have to turn to Baldev's writings. If you want an account of what was worthy of acceptance in their recommendations and why, then ditto. If you want to know what advice Nehru received from the late D. N. Wadia regarding the conservation of our thorium resources, and what clear and precise orders Nehru gave on that subject, you will have to turn to Baldev Singh's volume on Jawaharlal Nehru on Science and Society (Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 1988).

Three Nehru books were in preparation when Baldev died (Nehru and Atomic Energy, Nehru and Industrial Development, and Nehru and Education), and a biography of Hussain Zaheer. It should be the endeavour of his colleagues and friends to make ready these volumes for publication.

The Zaheer Science Foundation was an obscure society when Baldev became its Secretary. In five years he transformed it into what it is today: a body with extensive country-wide individual and corporate membership; a clear, albeit modest, programme of lectures, scholarships and other activities; land in New Delhi where a building is planned and some money in hand.

Through the institutional history of Indian S&T, Baldev bridged the gap between social scientists and natural scientists; through that history he bridged the gap between generations. These are Baldev's lasting contributions.

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