

The early Indian Academy of Sciences: The Bhera connection

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It is remarkable that four of the fellows elected to the Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore in its year of establishment, i.e. 1934, were connected with a small town Bhera now in the Sargodha district of Punjab in Pakistan. In three cases the reason is common. By virtue of being the ancestral place of Ruchi Ram Sahni (1863–1948), Bhera became the birthplace of his two sons, the palaeobotanist Birbal Sahni (1891–1949) and the geologist Mulk Raj Sahni (1899–1983). It is however not fortuitous that the industrial chemist Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar (1894–1955) was also born there. He is linked to the place and Lahore through the Brahmo Samaj. The connection in fact played an important role in Bhatnagar's personal and professional life.

The opening of the railways facilitated movement of people and ideas. The Bengal-born Brahmo Samaj made its appearance in Lahore in 1861. Although very soon it lost ground to Arya Samaj (established at Lahore in 1877), it had a far greater impact on Punjab than is realized. Brahmoism became a channel by which Bengal's intellectual resources became available to Punjab where it attracted a small but influential band of educated people. Significantly, the Brahmo Punjab became the destination for young adherents from the neighbouring areas who were disowned by their families because of their beliefs.

R. R. Sahni was an important citizen of Lahore. He went there in 1879 as a high-school student and remained there till the end of 1884. After an absence of two years, he returned to his alma mater Government College Lahore in 1887 as a science professor, where he served till retirement in 1918. Subsequently, he joined public life¹. Sahni joined the Brahmo Samaj while still in high school and remained an active member throughout. No doubt due to the efforts of Sahni, a Brahmo Samaj mandir was set up in Bhera. More to the point is the 1892

establishment of the Anglo-Sanskrit School², which appointed Bhatnagar's father Parameshwari Sahai as the second master. Sahai became estranged from his Panipat-based family and chose to move away. Shanti Swarup was born there on 21 February 1894. Sahai however died some eight months later, and his wife along with her children left to live with her father in Sikandarabad in Bulandshahar district of the United Provinces. Bhatnagar would return to Punjab, this time to Lahore, 14 years later under the care of his adoptive father-in-law.

Fortunately for the Brahmo Samaj, the wealthy philanthropist Dyal Singh Majithia (1848–1898) became 'its admirer and supporter'. In the 1890s, Sahni as the secretary of the Samaj frequently asked him 'for subscriptions for one fund or the other'. In February 1897, Majithia established a school in Lahore called Union Academy. The name was subsequently changed to Dyal Singh High School, which is often applied retrospectively. Since the school met with great opposition from large sections of the Hindu society, Sahni sent his family away to Bhera and became the first resident superintendent of the school boarding house called Brahmo Ashram³. Sometime later, [Rai Sahib] Raghunath Sahai took over as the headmaster and emerged as an important Brahmo leader of the region.

How Sahai discovered Bhatnagar is a story that deserves to be told in some detail. In 1908, Raghunath Sahai and his son Bishwa Nath Sahai travelled from Lahore to Panipat to attend a wedding. Here Bishwa Nath found young Bhatnagar, also a guest, acquitting himself exceedingly well in a ghazal recital competition. Bishwa Nath who was a psychology graduate gave an I.Q. test to Bhatnagar and found him to be much above average. He brought this to the notice of his own father Raghu Nath, who discovered to his delight that Bhatnagar was the son of his old friend. The family was persuaded to hand over the care of

Shanti Swarup to Sahai, who brought him to Lahore to his home and school.

Bhatnagar passed his matriculation examination in 1911. A year earlier, Dyal Singh College had been opened with Sahni as a member of its Trust in accordance with the benefactor's will. After passing his Intermediate examination in 1913, Bhatnagar joined Forman Christian College from where he passed his B Sc in 1916. Perennially short of funds and dependent on his scholarships, Bhatnagar now took up appointment as a demonstrator first in Forman Christian and then in Dyal Singh College, and passed his M Sc in 1919 as a private student. At this stage Sahni arranged a scholarship for Bhatnagar from the Dyal Singh College Trust, which enabled him to spend two years (1919–1921) to obtain his D Sc from London University⁴. Bhatnagar was a brilliant student, but surely the fact that Sahni had been his father's employer and his father-in-law's colleague in the Brahmo Samaj would have helped.

1. Kochhar, R., *Phys. News*, 2013, **43** (in press).
2. Hussain, S. S. M., *50 Years of Government College Lahore 1864–1913*, Izharsons, Lahore, 2005, p. 401.
3. Sahni, R. R., In *Brahmo Samaj and Dyal Singh Majithia* (ed. Madan Gopal), Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 30; 38.
4. Kochhar, R., In *The Life and Work of Sir S. S. Bhatnagar* (ed. Richards, Norah), NISTADS, New Delhi, pp. xiv, xvi–xx.

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