

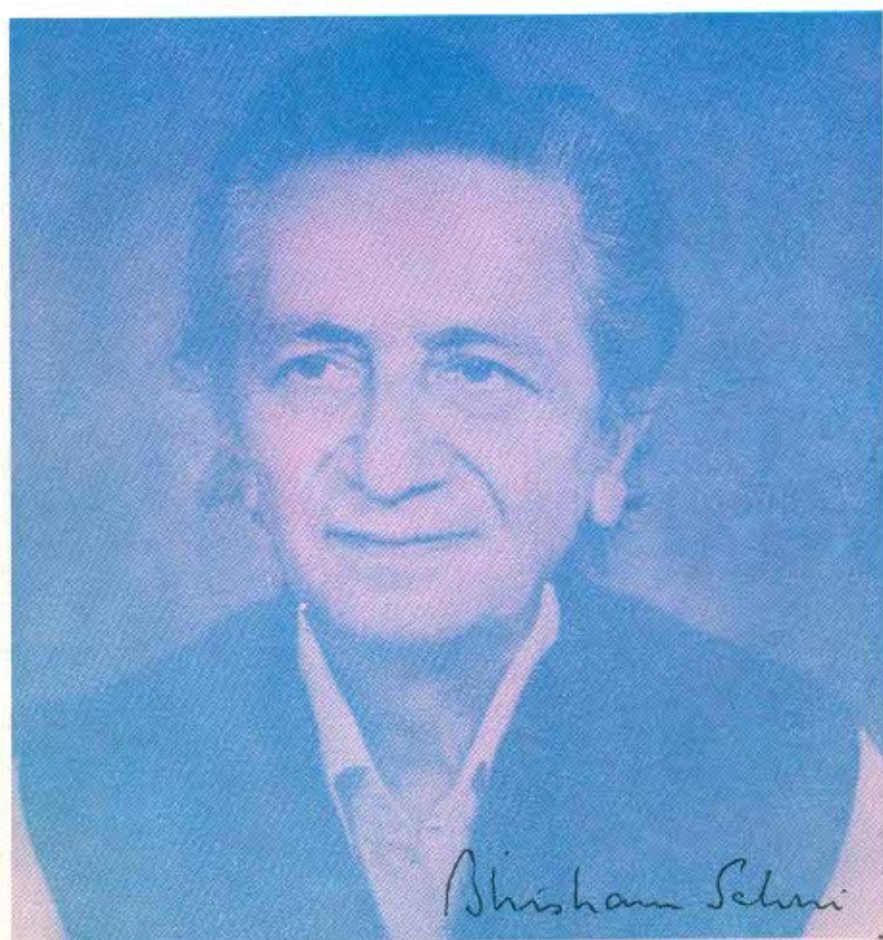
20 January 1993



Sahitya Akademi

meet the author

Bhisham Sahni



After the partition of
the country in 1947,
I came from Rawalpindi
by the last train
that arrived in India
on 14 August 1947.
Bhisham Sahni

In the introduction of the English translation of Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (The darkness), Govind Nihalani, the eminent film director, made an excellent observation of the interactions between fact and fiction: 'A Dramatic historical event usually finds the artistic/literary response twice. Once, during the event or immediately following it and again after a lapse of time, when the event has found its corner in the collective memory of the generation that witnessed it. The initial response tends to be emotionally intense and personal in character, even melodramatic. On the other hand, when the event is reflected upon with emotional detachment and objectivity, a clearer pattern of the various forces that shaped it is likely to emerge. *Tamas* is the reflective response to the partition of India—one of the most tragic events in the recent history of the Indian sub-continent.'

One cannot disagree with Nihalani's basic assumption that emotional attachment with the events demands a kind of deproximity with the time for the creation of a masterpiece. But for an in-depth appreciation of the works of a mastercraftsman, readers will probably have to reach the 'I' within the 'they', explore the man within the men, meet the author within the characters, remove the partition to have a glimpse of the formation of the author's psyche. On 14 August 1947 the last train that arrived in India became oblivious of its old route but the human mind could not erase the first thirty-two years from his life.

Born in 1915 in Rawalpindi, Dr Sahni had his early education in his

home-town. At school the medium of instruction was Urdu and in the higher classes English was a compulsory subject. He learnt Hindi and Sanskrit from a tutor at home. He graduated from Government College, Lahore. Dramatics, debating and hockey were his main interests at college besides his studies. He received M.A. in English Literature in 1937. He was nominated President of the University Union by the Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University for the year 1935-36. He joined the Indian National Congress when Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement in 1942, and later worked with the Relief Committee when the communal riots broke out in Rawalpindi in March 1947. The last train to Delhi brought him to India on 14 August 1947.

The home was lost and there began the search for the house.

He joined the Indian People's Theatre Association in Bombay later and worked as a performing artist under the guidance of his brother Balraj Sahni. Dr Sahni directed the famous play *Bhutgari* adapted for the stage by K. A. Abbas. In 1950, he joined a college under Delhi University as a lecturer in English and his family settled



Receiving the Akademi Award from
Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji



At the Asian Writers' Meet in New Delhi

down in Delhi. He lived in Moscow from 1957 to 1963 and worked as a translator with the Foreign Languages Publishing House. In 1963 he returned to India and rejoined the post of lectureship. His close association with different religious communities since his childhood inculcated in him a secular approach to life and literature. A committed secular humanist, all his writings express his unconditional allegiance to the common men irrespective of their caste and religion. His primary concern is the cause of the common people with whom he had a kind of emotional attachment. But the message must find its perfect medium. Dr Sahni's craftsmanship has been well acclaimed on different occasions by literary critics.

Dr Sahni started writing short stories at the age of 16. His first story 'Neeli ankhen' (The blue eyes) was published in the famous journal *Hansa*, then edited by Amrit Rai. He has so far written more than a hundred short stories which have been compiled in several volumes, such as *Bhagya rekha* (The fateline, 1953), *Pahla path* (The first lesson, 1956), *Bhatakti rakh* (The wandering ash, 1966),

Patarian (Footpath, 1973), *Vangchu* (1978), *Shobhyatra* (The procession, 1980), and *Nishachar* (The nocturnal, 1983). His short stories reveal a fine sense of craft. Some of them are reckoned among the best pieces in Hindi literature, such as 'Chief ki daawat' (The chief's party) and 'Amritswar aa gaya hai' (Amritswar is just ahead). Mention may also be made of 'Vangchu' and 'Lila Nandlal ki' (The play of Nandlal) for their technique and satire. Besides, he has written stories for children also, collected in the volume *Gulel ka khel*.

Tamas is considered an outstanding contribution to Indian literature for its artistic control, firm grasp of reality, excellence of characterisation, and its humanity and authenticity of experience. The progressive, secular and nationalist perspective of the writer is reflected in all his works in general, but it probably finds its best expression in *Tamas*. *Basanti* is also considered one of his best novels. He has also written four plays including *Hanoosh* that has been widely appreciated.

Dr Sahni has also written, in English, the biography of Balraj Sahni, the well-known writer and

actor, under the title *Balraj, My Brother* (1981). He has also written articles in Hindi and English on various topical issues.

Apart from being an outstanding writer in Hindi, Dr Sahni knows Sanskrit, Urdu, Punjabi and Russian. He has translated about twenty-five books from Russian into Hindi, including Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. He has also translated into English stories of Hindi writers, such as Yash Pal, Amarkant and Kamleshwar, and Punjabi writers like Nav Tej Singh and Gurudayal Singh.

A renowned theatre-personality, Dr Sahni has acted both on stage and in films and television serials. His anchor role in the film *Tamas* and title-role in *Mohan Joshi bazir ho* have earned him many accolades. Currently he is acting in a key character-role in the internationally famous Italian director Bertolucci's ongoing movie project 'The Little Buddha'.

Dr Sahni has received a number of awards for his excellence as a writer, such as the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Shiromani Lekhak Award, U. P. Government Award, the M. P. Kala Sahitya Parishad Award, the Lotus Award from the Afro-Asian Writers'

Association and the Soviet Land Nehru Award.

In the twentieth century, particularly from 30's onward, panic, fright and blood constitute the nightmarish experience of many of us who belong to this sub-continent. All these experiences find their finest expression in Dr Sahni's writings but as an author he also dreams of a new order of amity and harmony out of the tragic experiences of his and his generation. Govind Nihalani rightly points out, '...he (Dr Sahni) provides an insight into the contradictions of human nature, the complexities of a fanatic mind, the subversive nature of communal politics, the terror of religious fundamentalism, the undercurrents of faith and hope in the midst of the most violent of tragedies.'

A Select Bibliography

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- BASANTI, 1980
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With P. Machwe, Prayag Shukla, F. A. Faiz, Sulemanov, Shrikant Verma, S. D. Saxena and B. B. Agarwal



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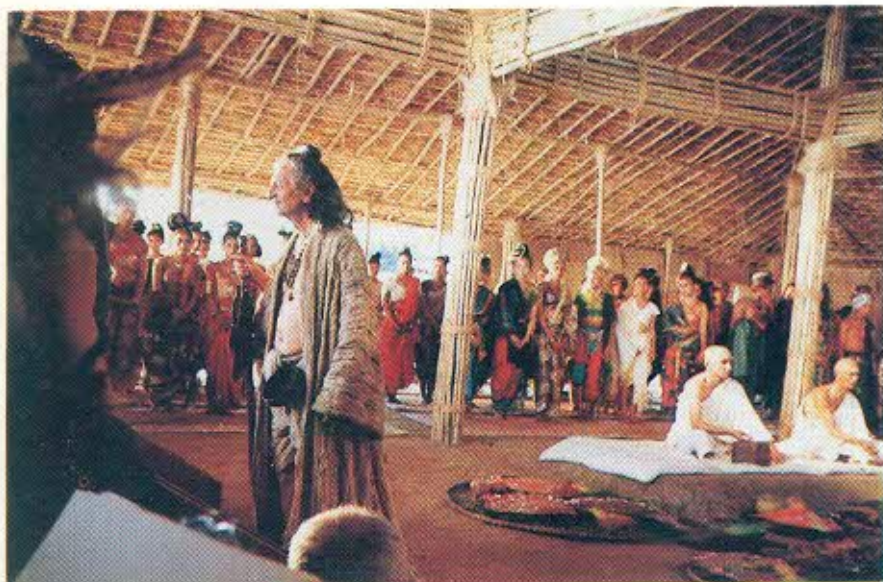
- 1931 : Matriculation from
D. A. V. School
1933 : Intermediate Examination
1935 : B. A. (Hons)
1937 : M. A. in English literature
Joined father's business
Honorary lecturer in
D. A. V. College
1942 : Took part in Quit India
Movement
1944 : Marriage
1946 : Staged a number of plays
including Manik Ban-
dyopadhyay's one-act
play on famine
1947 : Left Rawalpindi for Delhi
1948 : Joined I.P.T.A.
1950 : Took teaching as a regular
profession in a Delhi Col-
lege
1953 : First collection of short
stories published
1957-63 : In U.S.S.R. with Foreign
Languages Publishing
House; translated a num-
ber of books into Hindi
including Karl Marx's let-
ters on India
1958 : Ph.D from Punjab Uni-
versity, Chandigarh
1963 : Rejoined lectureship in
Delhi

A Chronology

1915 : Birth at Rawalpindi, now
in Pakistan

In Saeed Mirza's 'Mohan Joshi hazir ho'





As Asita in the film 'The little Buddha'

- 1965 : Editor of *Nai kahaniyan*, a journal of short stories
- 1967 : First novel published
- 1973 : *Tamas* published
- 1975 : Sahitya Akademi Award for *Tamas*
- 1976 : Elected Secretary-General of 'The Progressive Writers' Association
- 1977 : First full-length play published
- 1980 : Collection of stories for children published
Retired from teaching
Lotus Award of Afro-

- Asians Writers' Association
- 1983 : Soviet Land Nehru Award
- 1987 : *Tamas*, directed by Govind Nihalani, was serialized in Television
- 1990 : Hindi-Urdu Sahitya Award
Nominated member of the National Integration Council
Member, National School of Drama
- 1992 : Vice-Chairman, National School of Drama

The family

