

Personalities - Kanwar K. Kaul**Dr. Gwash Lal Kaul****A Legendry Physician of Kashmir**

Dr Gwashlal (Gashlal), born 1900, at Fateh Kadal, Narpirastan, Srinagar, the second of six brothers; was the first Kashmiri physician and one of a few in the country to qualify and obtain the MRCP from the prestigious Royal College of Physicians, London. On return from England in the nineteen twenties he was appointed Medical officer Civil Hospital situated at Hazuribagh, serving as the senior physician and Physician to Maharaja Hari Singh, in 1931. He wore a typical English three piece suit and felt hat, and a watch in the waist coat pocket with the chain dangling along! It was the influence of English education and culture among the educated during the British Raj. His contemporaries in the medical field were Drs. GL Vaishnavi, first ENT and Eye surgeon and Sham Lal Kaul Karihaloo, specialist in Chest Diseases, and others. His passions were listening to good music and seeking the company of *Sufis* and saints.

Dr Gwashlal was 'notorious' for his love of good music and the company of seers and sages. He would never miss an opportunity to hear a good musician or seek the company of a saint. He had

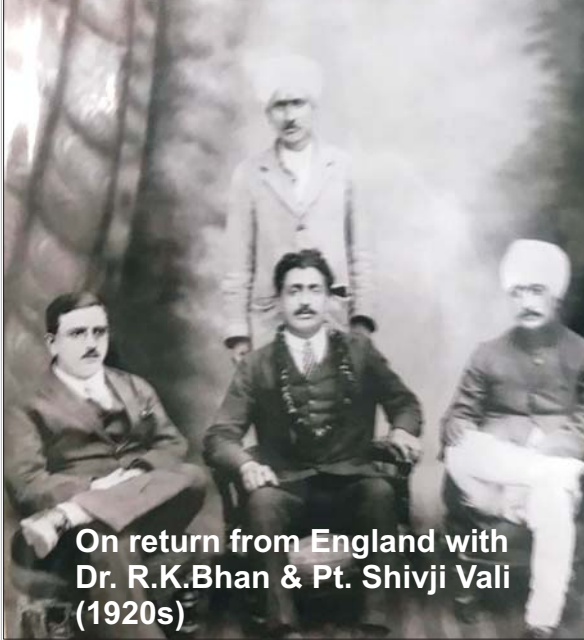
earned himself a bit of 'notoriety' in these pursuits which he followed, sometimes, in preference to his professional commitments.

Once, sought by the Maharaja urgently,

Dr Gwashlal could not be traced. The Maharaja, knowing his 'addictions' is said to have ordered his men to look for him sitting in the company of a recluse ascetic or listening to music somewhere! Such was his reputation. Professionally however, he was unmatched.

Patients attributed 'miraculous cures' at Dr Gwashlal's hands. He was known as a legendary figure in the medical field on account of his mysterious treatment modes, so much so that a well known Kashmiri Urdu writer Arif Baig¹ has devoted a chapter in his book '*Nyari Yaadein*' to his professional genius and the ways he treated some of his patients. Baig narrates the story of a relation's child who was diagnosed by surgeons as a perforated appendix, a serious and often fatal condition in those days of





On return from England with
Dr. R.K.Bhan & Pt. Shivji Vali
(1920s)

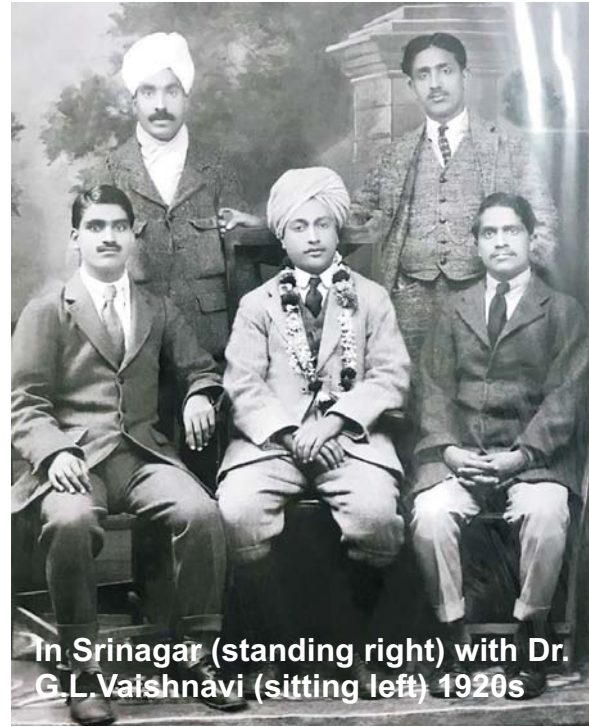
nonavailability of antibiotics. When my father was consulted, he ordered ice and placed the child in an ice filled tub to freezing point for a while. The boy is said to have recovered in a few days after this procedure!

A Kashmiri author, Dr Gulzar Mufti² - a surgeon settled in England has the following account of Dr Gwashlal which I quote from his book:

“My mother recalls those times when he was in his prime and used to be the final port of call for all health matters. It would be fare to say that he was the first Kashmiri to introduce and establish the specialty of General Medicine in the Valley, and the title of a Physician Specialist”.

He loved poetry and often quoted great poets, both in Urdu and Persian. His affable nature, attractive personality and professional competence as an eminent physician attracted people to him.

As a medical student in the nineteen twenties, at the King Edward Hospital and Medical College in Lahore now in Pakistan, Dr Gwashlal would often visit Iqbal the great poet at his home. Iqbal used to smoke 'Hukka' and had a long decorated smoking pipe connected to it at a distance. He was often found lost in thought while smoking, not noticing my father's presence for a while and then suddenly 'waking up' with apologies! Incidentally, the great poet is known to belong to a Kashmiri Pundit 'Sapru' family. His family had embraced Islam. At home at Sheikh Bagh in Srinagar, gatherings of friends with common interests in music and poetry were frequent at our home. Performers of *Sufiana Kalam*, and Hindu devotional forms of Kashmiri music played on indigenous *rabab* and *santoor*,



In Srinagar (standing right) with Dr.
G.L.Vaishnavi (sitting left) 1920s

both string instruments, sometimes the harmonium, accompanied by local percussion instruments. Among the performers were well known Kashmiri Sufiana musicians including Mohamad Abdulla Tibatbaqaal on santoor, Sana Ullah on rabab and Satlal on sitar. Kashmiri poetry has its own romance and spirituality. Lalded, Habba Khatoon Shams Faqir and many others provided soulful poetry on Soofi philosophy unique to Kashmir. A noted poet and his teacher, Master Zinda Kaul, was frequently an honored guest at these gatherings. (See Pragaash April 2020 p 24)³

Ruling princes in India were well-known for holding performances of music in their courts, by famous national singers of classical music. This has been one very significant reason for keeping alive the tradition of classical Indian music until the post-independent India which otherwise could have become extinct. My father's discerning ear for music was well known at the Maharaja's court. As a result he was often required to hear the singers before they performed and to recommend the choicest pieces that would be presented at the royal court. The names of Mallika Pukhraj, Begum Akhtar, Hirabai Badodekar, Balramsingh, Gangubai Hangal, and Kesarbai Kelkar from Bombay (now Mumbai) and many more whose names do not come to my mind now.

KL Saigal, the legendary singer, belonged to Jammu and sometimes visited his home town. Dr Gwashlal knew him and was his physician while at Jammu and once in Calcutta. At one of his Jammu visits, sometimes in the forties, a private



London during his studies for MRCP, as paying guest

gathering was arranged for the family and a few very close friends whom Saigal consented to meet. Being a celebrity this was not possible at Gwashlal's Rehari residence or at a public place where he could be thronged by people. The gathering was thus arranged at the residence of the Chief Warden, Jammu Central Jail, which was under Dr Gwashlal's administrative jurisdiction. The campus of the jail was of out of bounds to the public. He sang to the delight of those present. Sitting right in front of him, he asked me³ what I would like him to sing for me. As a young boy of less than eight years I had heard of his '*ik bangla bane nyara*' which, to my utter delight, he sang for me!

Kashmir valley was known for saints and seers of all shades, and with genuine credentials, both Sufi, and Hindu. I have had personal experiences of these as a boy, accompanying my father at almost every visit. I distinctly remember *Sobur Sahib*, who lived in a secluded place near the Pari Mahal and gave black pepper corns as *Tabarruk*. Some I heard about and some that I met include Sati Ded, Sonabab, Kashkak of Wayil, Nandbab,

Gopinathji and Swami Laxman joo - all well known in the valley. Swamiji was an intellectual and an authority on Kashmiri Shaivism. Sonabab once asked Dr Gwashlal to carry firewood on his head and walk through a busy market, apparently to teach him the value of humility and to shun his ego forever. This he did gladly.

I have been a personal witness to a bizarre sight I saw one night when I was a primary school boy. *Sona Bab*, a revered saint, smoked a '*Chillum*' of *charas* (a Cannabis herb), and remained in trance for long hours. Dr Gwashlal was an ardent devotee of his. Walking in one late night he 'ordered' him to drive for a visit for an audience with '*Jwala Devi*' the fire goddess. He seemed to be in a hurry and hurled all invectives for not hurrying up to keep the appointment. The driver was asked to pull out the car from the garage and move. I, my father and a couple of others from the house got into the car but the driver, Kanahya Singh hesitated saying that there was no fuel in the tank. He had measured it with his wooden 'gauge' and it showed only about half inch of petrol. More expletives from *Bab* and we had no choice but to move whatever the consequences. My father addressed the driver and quietly told him go on till we were forced to stop. *Bab* ordered the driver to driver towards *Bijbehara*, a village on the Srinagar-



Sometime in
1930s

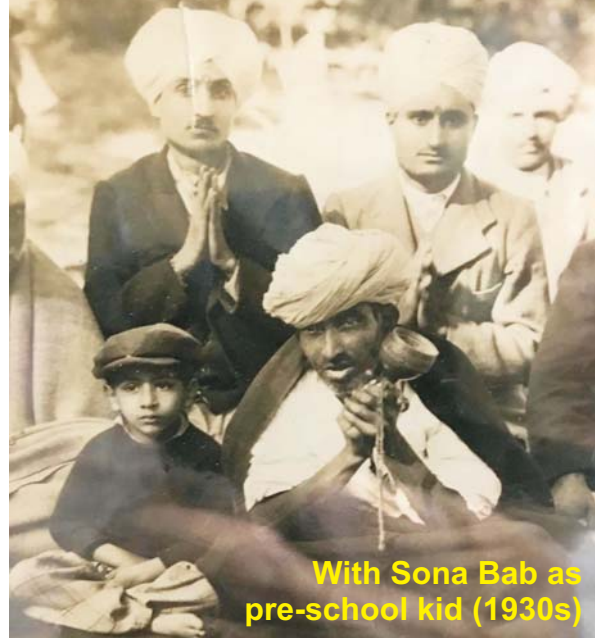
Jammu highway. As we neared the Batra Petrol pump along the golf club for a fill up, severer invectives rained in on the poor driver and we were compelled to move on. After we had driven some miles on the road, *Bab* ordered a right turn into a dry rice field where he ordered us to get out, line up facing the north with folded hands. As we stood in anticipation, I witnessed a sight seen never before or thereafter. A

bright blinding light appeared in the sky, unlike a lightening, stayed for a few seconds and disappeared! Seems beyond any scientific reasoning and unbelievable, but it seems to me as if it was yesterday! We returned, leaving *Bab* at his downtown home in. As we stopped back home at our garage, the car had to be pushed in as it was out of fuel! There may be doubts about the quantity of fuel in the car, but the bright light that I saw that night is indisputable.

Once, with the intention of having '*deedar*' of Sobur Sahib, I followed in tow with my father to this visit. We drove to *Gagribal point* along the Dal Lake parked our car and took a *Shikara* ride across the lake. Climbing towards *Pari Mahal* we reached Sobur Sahib's abode. He welcomed us in that lonely hideout and put a pot of water to boil for tea. While we sat, he was at his *Tasbih* for a while, praying. He pulled out some black pepper corns (*Tabarruk*) and gave one each to us with blessings. A moment

later he looked up at the clear sky and all of a sudden beseeched us to leave immediately, before the water for tea could come to boil. Fearing something ominous, we rushed down the slope, took the boat across the lake, boarded our car and drove back home. Gusts of wind overtook us and in a while the sky was overcast, and by the time we reached home a severe thunderstorm, with strong winds and rain lashed the valley. That was a storm of a magnitude the likes of which were rarely witnessed in living memory, uprooting the massive century old Chinar trees, raising high waves of water in rivers and lakes, razing buildings to the ground, floods, power failure and blackout. Many boats in the lake had capsized and were it not for *Sobur* Sahib's timely warning we may not have made it to home that night.

One evening *Sonabab* was seated on a carpet spread out in our lawn in the house where we were living in a rented accommodation, behind the Nedou's hotel. Around him were his devotees, watching him smoking his *Chillum*, almost in a trance and at which he would stay for hours. He spent nearly three days in the lawn rarely going into his tent nearby for sleep, resuming his seat during the day. A Ladakhi on horseback happened to pass by on the road outside overlooking the lawn. He went back and forth several times looking intensely at the gathering. Presuming that he was looking for directions, our gardener went out to help him. The Ladakhi, seemingly astonished, asked the gardener about *Sonabab*, who he was and since when had he been there. The gardener explained, adding that he had been there for the last 3 days.



With Sona Bab as pre-school kid (1930s)

Disbelieving him, the horseman said he had seen himself the same person at *Baltal* in the morning. "How could he be here when I saw him seated on a rock at *Baltal*, smoking his *chillum*? I have been riding from there all day, faster than any person could reach here before me?" The gardener said he must have been somebody else. The rider sought to see *Sonabab* closer and after satisfying himself insisted that *he* was the person he saw. Swearing, he said he had offered his *chillum* to him as he stopped by! This anecdote was remembered well and as a young boy, even though I could not then understand the mystery of the situation, I was a witness to the scene. As I grew up, I tried to analyze the story to offer a rational view of the incident from my scientific thinking as a professional, and brush it aside, but have found difficult to do so! Could a person be present at two different

places simultaneously? Or could one disappear from one place to reappear on another? Or did the horse rider have an illusion?

(See the story of 'the saint with two bodies' - Swami Pranabananda in the book 'Autobiography of a Yogi' by Paramhansa Yogananda).⁽⁴⁾

After settling in Jabalpur, in MP, after my retirement in 1991, brief visits to J&K, mostly to Jammu, were confined to weddings, I had not visited Srinagar after 1979. I expressed my desire to do so to my son during one of his visits home to Jabalpur from US. He managed to squeeze a five day visit in July, 2016. The intention was to see old friends and visit places I had been missing, essentially to revive memories down the lane. It was a delight to meet Qazi Shahdeen, over a hundred years old who lived at Karan Nagar with his doctor son (Retired Dean Medical College Srinagar). He knew and remembered my father with nostalgia. At the age of 103 years he was alert and his memory was sharper than one would expect at his age! Mr. Shahdeen had retired long back as Deputy Commissioner in the Kashmir government Civil Service. He had a story to tell us about my father which goes thus:

“Well dressed, in a three piece suit, he was following a 'faqir' in rags”. The faqir was Sonabab. When asked why a gentleman of his status was following a man in rags, my father said

“I have obtained highest qualifications in my profession but still wish to have the ability to diagnose a sick person's ailment as he enters my door which my elite qualifications do not provide



- it is for that divine quest that I follow these ascetics”.

1. Mirza Aarif Beig; 'Niyyari Yaadein' Kitaab Ghar, Maulana Azaad road, Srinagar, July 2002, page 132

2. Gulzar Mufti; 'Kashmir in Sickness and in Health'. Partridge India, Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd. 2013 page 25.

3. Kanwar K Kaul; See Master 'Zinda Kaul' Pragaash April 2020 Page 24

4. Paramhansa Yogananda 'The saint with two bodies' Autobiography of a Yogi, Jaico Publishing House 1975 Bombay, 1975, page 19.

(Excerpts in this article are drawn from the book "When My Valley Was Green", Kanwar K Kaul-Notion Press, 6 McNichol's Road, Chetput, Chennai 600 031 2017).

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