

SHYAM

A STAR FORGOTTEN



A Biography by
BIMAL CHADHA

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BIMAL CHADHA

Edited by

MANEK PREMCHAND



BLUE PENCIL

SHYAM

A Star Forgotten

Bimal Chadha

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Bimal Chadha asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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www.bimalchadha.com

“Send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

- John Donne

We should feel a sense of belonging to the entire human race, and hence should consider it our personal loss when anyone passes away, because his death has taken away something from mankind. The suffering and death of others should impact us today, because one day the funeral bell will surely toll to announce the end of one's own life. We all need prayers for our conveyance to the unknown.

The above quote forms a cornerstone of my life's philosophy, and while the specific reference here is to my uncle Shyam, I have felt it for others too. I hope I have been able to do some justice to the people featured here.

A handwritten signature in white ink on a dark background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Bimal Chandra". The first name "Bimal" is written with a large, stylized 'B' that loops around the first few letters. The last name "Chandra" is written with a large, stylized 'C' that loops around the first few letters.

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed in bringing this book to fruition. Through this collective endeavour, we have not only created a book but also forged lasting connections, transforming acquaintances into cherished friends who are now akin to family. Each individual involved has invested their passion and dedication, making this project a true labour of love. Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to each and every one of you.

Veena, Monica & Akshay
(Bimal's wife, daughter & son)

Manek Premchand who embraced this book like fish does to water, editing it meticulously and contributing significantly to the final outcome. A friend of Bimal, he treated us like family, demonstrating unwavering support.

Prof. Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmed, a cherished close friend of Bimal who conducted extensive research on Shyam. His steadfast

guidance, support, and affection for us are invaluable. His consistent encouragement and ongoing engagement with us over the years truly reflect his dedication.

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Antara Nanda Mondal, who had previously worked with Bimal on the book when he was still with us, has seamlessly transitioned into becoming like family, along with her husband Partho. Antara has shouldered the majority of the workload in designing the book. She has admirably borne the brunt of our requests and tirelessly worked through numerous

nights to ensure the successful completion of this project. Her dedication and efforts are truly commendable.

Partho Mondal has been a patient collaborator, sharing the responsibilities of designing and managing the continuous back-and-forth of alterations, striving for perfection. A gentle soul with a remarkable flair for creativity, Partho has played an instrumental role in shaping the visual aspects of the book.

Nuzhat Manto, who profoundly misses Bimal, has enveloped us with overwhelming love and compassion. Always ready with words of encouragement, she has made us feel like cherished family. Nuzhat's warmth and affection beautifully carry on the legacy of her father, adding a special touch to our journey.

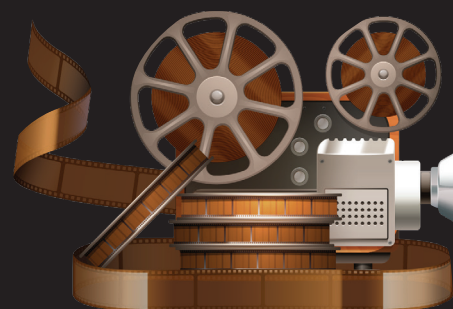
Vinod Gulati, who on our first meeting put us at ease and reassured that the book printing was in capable hands. The unforgettable lunch he prepared for us showcased his warmth and hospitality. A true gentleman, for whom we will always be grateful.

Sudarshan Kakkar, from Jalandhar City, 86, who was in constant touch with Bimal through mail and would recall every little anecdote related to Shyam. He would generously share every piece of information he could find and provided

valuable guidance on the manuscript. Before signing off, he would always bless him. Our sincere respect to Sudarshan Ji for the motivation and support that played a crucial role in completing the book.

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Dalveer Singh, who tirelessly produced sample after sample overnight for designs and consistently met impossible deadlines. He is our go-to person for everything impossible.





Shyam's iconic still from Majboor

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BIMAL CHADHA

(21 February 1946 - 3 February 2022)

Bimal Chadha

A Life Well-Lived

Born on 21st February 1946 in Rawalpindi, Undivided India, Bimal Chadha's formative years unfolded across diverse Indian locations due to his father's army postings. He started schooling at Garrison School, Mumbai, and then at St. Ornella's School when their family moved to Pune. He was exposed to the essence of diversity and cultural amalgamation from a young age. He graduated from St. Francis College, Lucknow, and later pursued a Masters in Biochemistry from the Lucknow Christian College.

His professional journey commenced as a medical representative at Hoechst, but the trajectory of his career took a turn towards marketing, earning him recognition as one of the country's leading marketing professionals. His notable stints included contributions to media giants like *Times of India*, *India Today*, and *Indian Express*. His intuitive understanding of people and their needs propelled him to excel in marketing. Recognised as a leader in his domain, he received numerous awards and accolades. His influence extended to teaching at the Times School of Marketing, where his insights enriched budding marketing professionals.

Bimal's professional journey mirrored his personal one, marked by transitions between cities like Chandigarh and Jammu and finally settling in New Delhi in 1985.

Bimal's exceptional linguistic abilities reflected his deep-rooted interest in local cultures. Beyond Hindi and English, he conversed effortlessly in Marathi, Gujarati, and Bengali and even had a modest command of Kashmiri and Dogri. His mother tongue, Punjabi, resonated in his heart, connecting him to his roots and fostering his passion for understanding people at the grassroots level. Bimal epitomized the philosophy of being a good human first, transcending the barriers of religion and faith.

As a devoted husband to Veena, Bimal embraced the role of a father with unwavering commitment. His children, Monica and Akshay, were raised with values rooted in appreciating diverse faiths and prioritizing kindness. Family vacations, often road trips spanning different states, were not just leisure but opportunities for cultural exploration and interaction with local communities. Akshay now lives with his mother in



New Delhi. Monica is married to Rajan Mehta and they have a daughter, Meher and live in Sydney, Australia.

Bimal Chadha was not just a man of knowledge but a living encyclopaedia for his friends. His open-door policy, extensive knowledge, and unyielding friendships were legendary. He was the torchbearer for family values, putting his family first, no matter the circumstances.

Beyond the corporate world, Bimal was an ardent lover of the arts. His passion for old films, Urdu, English, and Hindi literature, and his extensive research on his uncle Shyam, the erstwhile Bollywood actor of the 40s, showcased his multifaceted personality.

Passionate about movies in all languages, Bimal's home resonated with various musical genres. His in-depth knowledge of Indian artists was phenomenal; ask him about a singer, and he would provide details only found from a close source. His commitment to promoting local talent led to the formation of musical societies.

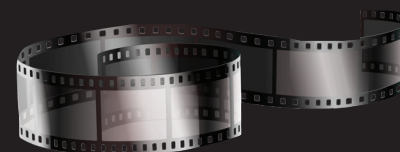
Deeply affected by the partition of India and having lost numerous friends in the wars between India and Pakistan, he harboured a profound connection with individuals from across the border. This sentiment was notably evident during his research for his book, fostering many friendships while

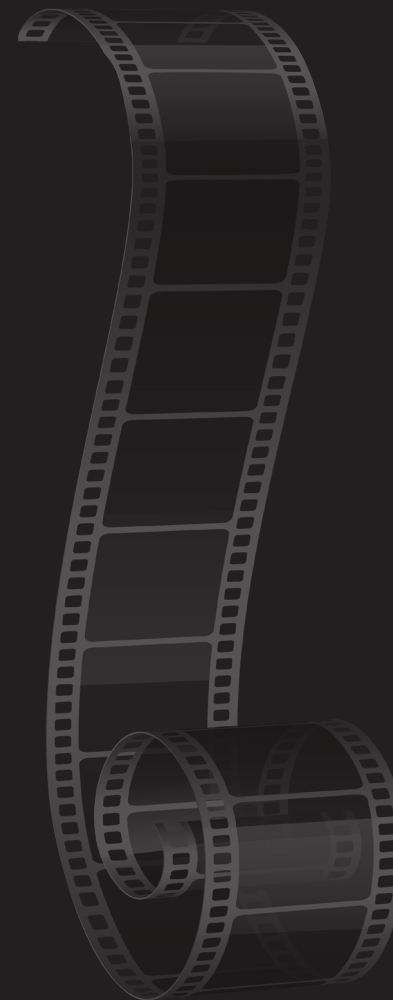
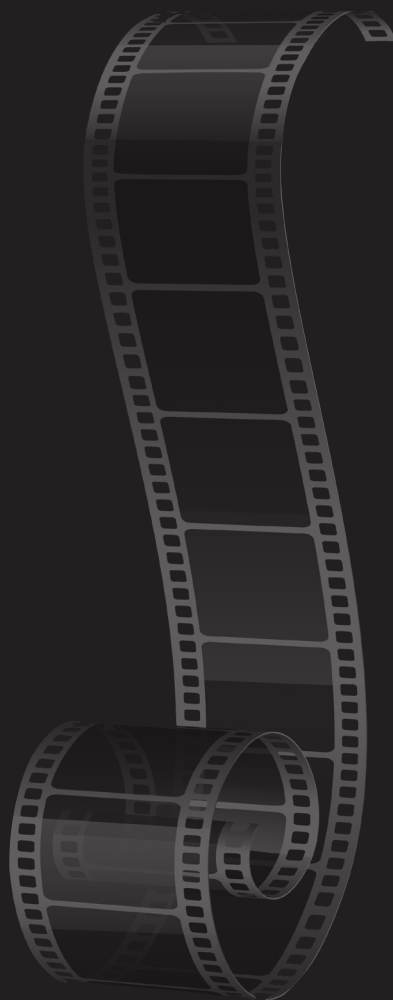
exploring this poignant chapter of history. His dream book on Shyam, which unfortunately stayed unfinished at the time of his death, is a testament to his commitment to preserving family history and stories.

Apart from the book, his post-retirement mission was to revive the old school association of St. Francis College, demonstrating his commitment to his alma mater.

In his later years, he delved into calligraphy, focusing on his favorite language, Urdu. He penned numerous articles for editorials, extensively sharing his life experiences and knowledge.

Bimal's passing on 3rd February 2022 revealed the depth of his impact on people's lives, from close friends to the *maalis*, *paan walas*, and *chowkidars*. Despite COVID restrictions, the multitude who attended his funeral spoke volumes about the profound impact he had on the lives of those fortunate enough to know him. His legacy lives on in the hearts of those he touched, a testament to a life well-lived, marked by compassion, kindness, and an unwavering dedication to humanity.





SUNDER SHYAM CHADHA

(20 February 1920 - 25 April 1951)



In Patanga

Introduction

Manek Premchand

This book is a fascinating account of Shyam, the successful actor whose life was cut tragically short by, of all things, a fall from a horse, just when he had settled in to stardom and seemed to have the world at his feet. The essential story has been written by his nephew—his brother's son, Bimal Chadha—who dedicated several years of his life to shine a light on his uncle's life and cinema.

I had met Bimal many times before he sadly passed away on 3rd February 2022, and in each of those meetings, his eyes had lit up when he spoke about his uncle. At such times, seeing a charge in his passion I would smile to myself, internalising the feeling of what happens to people when they are obsessed with a mission. Being a music lover, I had earlier heard a few songs filmed on Shyam, none more popular than *Tu mera chaand main teri chaandni* from *Dillagi*. Then one day, I was amazed to hear what the film's composer Naushad said about this song in an interview. Effectively, that *Dillagi* was perhaps the only film anywhere in which the actor who played the villain had sung for the hero! Not just that, the villain's name was Shyam too—Shyam Kumar to be precise. In the film, both Shyam the hero, and Shyam Kumar the villain were wooing the heroine, Suraiya, so they were adversaries. In



Suraiya in *Dillagi*

the recording room though, they were buddies, with Shyam Kumar playbacking for Shyam! Then I learned about Shyam's premature death, triggered by a fall from a horse and being dragged for a distance. When it comes to sending a shudder down your spine, such imagery can hardly be worsened. Perhaps that is the reason why an overwhelming number of people who remember Shyam today first tell you it's the actor who fell off a horse.

Like everyone else, most Indian film personalities live normal life spans, i.e., 60 years or more. Some, however, have died

too early. Such names include KL Saigal, Guru Dutt, Meena Kumari, Geeta Dutt, Madan Mohan, Madhubala, and Sanjeev Kumar, going on to Divya Bharati, and Sushant Singh Rajput in more recent times. But perhaps just two of our film celebrities have fallen off a horse. That would be the Marathi actor and director, Baburao Painter, whose fall in the early 1920s had left him with a permanent speech problem, and Shyam Chadha, for whom it was fatal. He was just 31 when his life was suddenly snuffed out in 1951.

Riding a horse was considered smart in those times. It was the mid-20th century equivalent of driving a sports car today. The filmmaker Mehboob Khan was just an 'extra' till he was admired for riding a wild horse, rodeo-style, in *Shirin Khusru* way back in 1929. Later on, action scenes with men mounted on horseback were typically found in stories of dacoits (Sunil Dutt in *Mujhe Jeene Do*, Amjad Khan in *Sholay*, etc.). Since such action scenes were hazardous, filmmakers often used trained doubles for them. But even for songs, just getting





Shyam playing the murli in *Dillagi*

on a horse and being taken for a canter wasn't easy. And yet, many still preferred riding a horse themselves. Baby Tabassum and child actor Parikshit Sahni rode one during the song *Bachpan ke din bhula na dena* in *Deedar* (1951), Dev Anand went horseback in *Insaniyat* (1955) as he sang *Zulm sahen na, zulm karen ne, yehi hamaara naara hai*. Later still, both Dharmendra and Suchitra Sen rode horses during the song *In bahaaron mein akele na phiro* (*Mamta*, 1966).

But the grapevine tells us that after Shyam's accident, most people were aware of the dangers involved. They were informed, mainly through word-of-mouth, of the tragedy that had visited the debonair actor who was young, robust, and at the peak of his career. So if it could happen to Shyam, it could happen to anyone.

Shyam is an epithet of the dark-skinned Lord Krishna, who famously played his enchanting flute and loved butter. As I write this, my mind rushes to the film *Dillagi*, in which the opening scene introduces us to Shyam who plays his flute, mesmerising all the girls in the neighbourhood, Lord Krishna style. Not only that, soon after, he has a spat with his *bhabhi* who won't give him any part of the butter she is making. He then proceeds to play the flute in many a song in the film.

Then I think of the popular KL Saigal song, *Ek raje ka beta lekar udne waala ghoda* from *President* (1937). There is a line in it that goes, *Itne mein honi ne apni bansi wahaan bajaayi* (where *honi* means fate; so this line means, 'fate intervened by playing its flute'). In this case, playing the flute is figurative of course, but taken in Shyam's context, one is prone to say, "Ouch, that hurts!"

It has been two years since Bimal Chadha passed away. At his home though, he is considered to be very much alive, guiding and loving them. A striking portrait of his adorns a central position in the family's living room in Delhi. His large-heartedness, his humour, his love for music, his *Punjabiya*, none of these were lost on his friends and family, who remember him so much, and so fondly. His son Akshay has clearly inherited his father's passion for offering a light to dispel the darkness enveloping the life and times of a

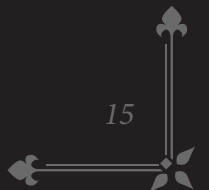


Having a spat with Bhabhi in Dillagi

significant actor and beautiful person. Bimal's wife Veena shares this mission. I am grateful they have offered me a platform to edit this touching book in which the narrative essentially belongs to Bimal Chadha, who penned extensive first-person-account notes that spanned several years. His story is helped generously by his father, Harbans Lal Chadha (Shyam's younger brother), with copious inputs from many other people who knew Shyam or then knew about him or his cinema. All of us have collectively endeavoured to correct the historical error of glossing over an actor who formed a key link in the timeline of Hindi cinema during the middle of the 20th century.

As you read on, you may find emerging the focus of a handsome young man, gifted for the screen, with a Casanova-like image when it came to his leading ladies, but given all that, a generous human being, never forgetting family values.

(Manek Premchand is a renowned Film Historian and author of several books on music and cinema.)





In Patanga





(L to R Sitting) Din, Harbans, Taji, Bimal, Shyam
(Standing behind) A house staff member and Bhapa

Memories for a Lifetime of Joy

Bimal Chadha

As I sit at my table to write the extraordinary story of my uncle, film actor Shyam Chadha, my mind is filled with dozens of memories, some sad, most happy, but none of them dull. These start in my childhood. As such, I have confirmed these events with my parents and other family members, so this is high-fidelity. I begin with early memories of a typical evening at our home.

The scene is our large drawing room. My uncle Shyam is surrounded by his friends and I hear laughter and wisdom and the odd song happening. I am too young of course, so all that goes above me. Being young, I also remain unobserved in this milieu, even as the elders indulge me when I'm spotted. At times unexpected people drop by. When he is not shooting, Shyam loves these sessions at home. He enjoys taking a shower and then getting into comfortable clothes



Shyam with Manto (4th from left) and others

such as his silk *tehmat* (a kind of lungi worn by Punjabi men) and a white *kurta*.

Besides my dad and my *Mamaji* if there's anyone from the family visiting us, he is expected to join in such an assembly and offer his inputs. Amongst my uncle's regular friends are the writers Rajinder Singh Bedi, Rajinder Krishan and Manto.

The actor Om Prakash lives right across the street and filmmaker Ramesh Saigal is just down the road. They have only to be informed to join in. I remember many others i.e., writer Ismat Chughtai, her husband Shahid Lateef, and then Krishan Chander, Balraj Sahni, Randhir, C Ramchandra, and many others visiting us on some evenings.

Manto always prefers to sit on the floor. Because he dresses in a white kurta-pyjama and has dishevelled hair, he looks like an ordinary man. One day someone asks him why he sits on the floor. He replies, "I am afraid I might fall off the sofa when drunk." While everyone else drinks from glasses, Manto prefers to drink in the tall metal tumbler which is famously used for

Punjabi *lassis*. When asked why the metal tumbler, he says "So that none of you may see my drink, how much I drank or left in the glass." He is very fond of me, perhaps because I am the first and only child of my family. But Uncle Shyam is also extremely fond of me, so much so that I call him 'Shyam Daddy'. This means the child in me fails to recognise my

own father. Shyam often puts his hand around my waist or shoulder, holding me firmly, so that I don't stray away. He teasingly addresses me as 'Suar da Puttar' (Son of a pig). Manto retorts from the floor: "Eh Sher da Puttar hai" (He is a son of a lion). When Manto defends me thus, I flex my arm to show them my biceps. Manto hugs me tight, plants kisses on my cheeks, and holds me in his arms, after which he makes me sit on the floor beside him or in his lap. I can still feel his warm hugs and kisses, which tells me just how much Shyam and Manto must love children.

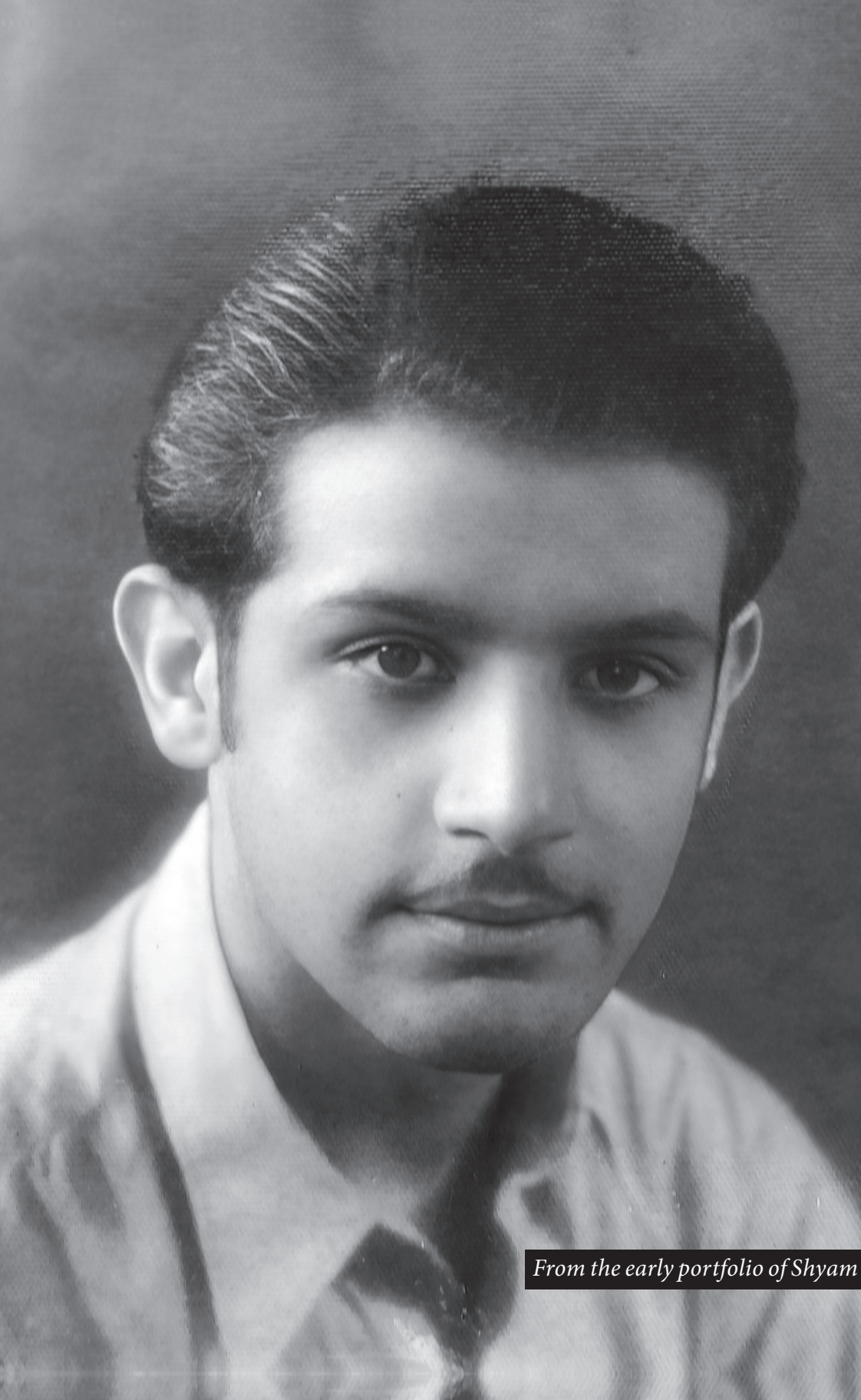
Yes, Shyam and Manto are very caring and loving, and it is true their children will, in time, get the best of their fathers. But we're running ahead of the story. First, we continue with my boyhood. So when the first drinks are being poured, I advance my small silver baby glass for my quota. My drink is made too, a diluted two drops of Scotch in my baby glass. The last drink is kept aside for my dad, Shyam's younger brother. Shyam asks me, "Shall we offer him one?" In benevolence, I nod my head and gracefully allow him. They say "Cheers" and I raise my glass too. That done, it is time for healthy discussions. These can be on any topic under the sun, except politics, work and ragging. These three subjects are taboo in this forum. The focus is more on anything literary, mostly a good book or a piece of poetry. Typically, someone reads a bit from a book and then throws it open for discussion.

"You preach Punjabi but write in Urdu. Aren't you a double-faced person?" Manto feels deflated, thinks for a moment, and then is ready with an answer. "I would be the happiest to write in Punjabi, but Punjabi cannot earn me my two meals, support my family and my daaru (liquor). Hence, it becomes unavoidable for me to write in Urdu."

That silences Bedi.

Shyam is a very active participant in these. But the language has to be Punjabi. Should anyone speak in any language other than Punjabi, he is exposing himself to Manto's wrath. Manto can use the choicest abuses in chaste Punjabi, something he cannot do in his prodigious writings. His argument is, "We all hail from the Punjab, and Punjabi is our mother tongue. Why speak in any other language?" Fair enough!

But he is not done yet. He contorts his face to mimic the English that is uttered by anyone at such meets, for everyone to laugh their heads off. Writer Rajinder Singh Bedi is the quickest to react to Manto. After showering the choicest



From the early portfolio of Shyam

Punjabi expletives on Manto, he adds, “You preach Punjabi but write in Urdu. Aren’t you a double-faced person?” Manto feels deflated, thinks for a moment, and then is ready with an answer. “I would be the happiest to write in Punjabi, but Punjabi cannot earn me my two meals, support my family and my *daaru* (liquor). Hence, it becomes unavoidable for me to write in Urdu.” That silences Bedi.

All such living room sessions at our home are held way past my dinner time. But I eagerly wait for Shyam to be ready and the sessions to start. And once they begin, they end late. At some point, I nod off, and later, go to sleep for the night. It is invariably Shyam who picks me up and gently puts me on my bed.

Of all Shyam’s friends, I remember music composer C Ramchandra as a boisterous person, though I have no recall of how he manages the conversation in a predominantly Punjabi milieu. Perhaps he is busy listening, laughing, drinking, and humming something. There is something about him that is very striking. A tall man dressed mostly in white, he always makes a noticeably grand entry into the house. For a few moments, all conversations stop, and heads turn to greet him.

Giving the musician a big hug, and thumping his back like a long-lost friend, Shyam addresses him as ‘Rao Sahib’ while the visitor calls my uncle ‘Shyam Rao’. The two are working

on a film together. The atmosphere now changes and becomes lighter.

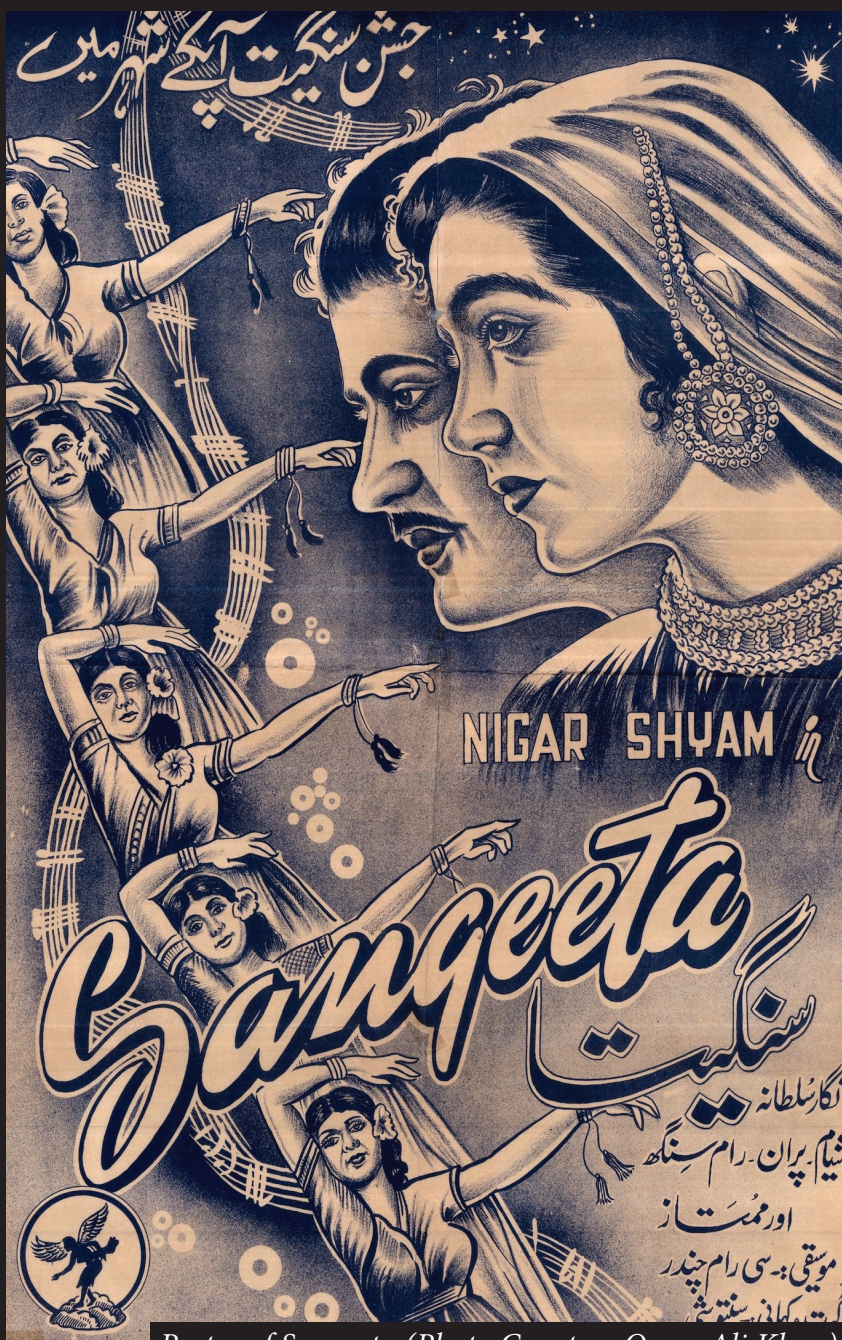
I remember Ramchandra's pervasive, throaty, and resonating laughter. The composer meets everyone present, one by one, visiting dignitary style. He turns around asking for *Maanji* (my grandmother) and *Bhabhi* (my mother) and starts walking towards their bedrooms. I am asked to escort him, and I do so, holding his index finger. He touches *Maanji's* feet to seek her blessings. He meets *Bhabhi* very warmly and affectionately.

He returns to the drawing room and tells my uncle, "*Shyam Rao, kya mast tune banaya rey terey wastey*". When signalled, the composer's driver walks in with his harmonium. This is how Rao Sahib's singing sessions begin. He sings a song, looking expectantly for appreciation from Shyam as he sings. He sings more of his composed music very well and ends up receiving loud cheering and clapping from all. But it's too early to wind up, so they drink and they cheer and they want to hear more. The music infested Rao Sahib's night is made, as he sings away to a swooning audience.

On a few occasions, C Ramchandra brings along a young man who has recently started composing



In Shabistan



Poster of Sangeeta (Photo Courtesy Omar Ali Khan)

for films. His name is Madan Mohan and he has been added as a composer for Shyam's film *Shabistan*, with some tunes already made by Ramchandra. This is because Ramchandra is having some issues with the producer of the film. Madan Mohan's surname is Kohli, which thrills many people in our family, because the Kohlis, like the Chadhas, are *Khukhrains* (more about them later), and the family wants to see if they can set up a girl from their community in a marriage alliance with the young man. Sadly, they are disappointed, for he is already engaged to be married. But they will not be disappointed with his music. Especially one of Shyam's closest friends, Om Prakash, who would later make films and give the music-making to Madan Mohan, with remarkable results. Examples of such films are *Gateway of India* (1957), *Chacha Zindabad* (1959), and *Jahan Ara* (1964).

But that is going to be in the future. We will soon look at a few of Shyam's intimate friends. Right now, Madan Mohan feels out of place and shy among the seniors, but the carefree environment seeps into him and he begins to feel at home. Shyam looks to him with expectations and wishes the young man all success in *Shabistan*.

Such evenings are memorable moments in Shyam's life. He loves a full house of friends, of music, of sparkling conversation. The laughing, living and drinking away in a carefree atmosphere. This is his innermost circle of friends whom he loves and wants to be with. This is what Shyam lives for.



Mun Ki Jeet record – Aye chaand na itraana

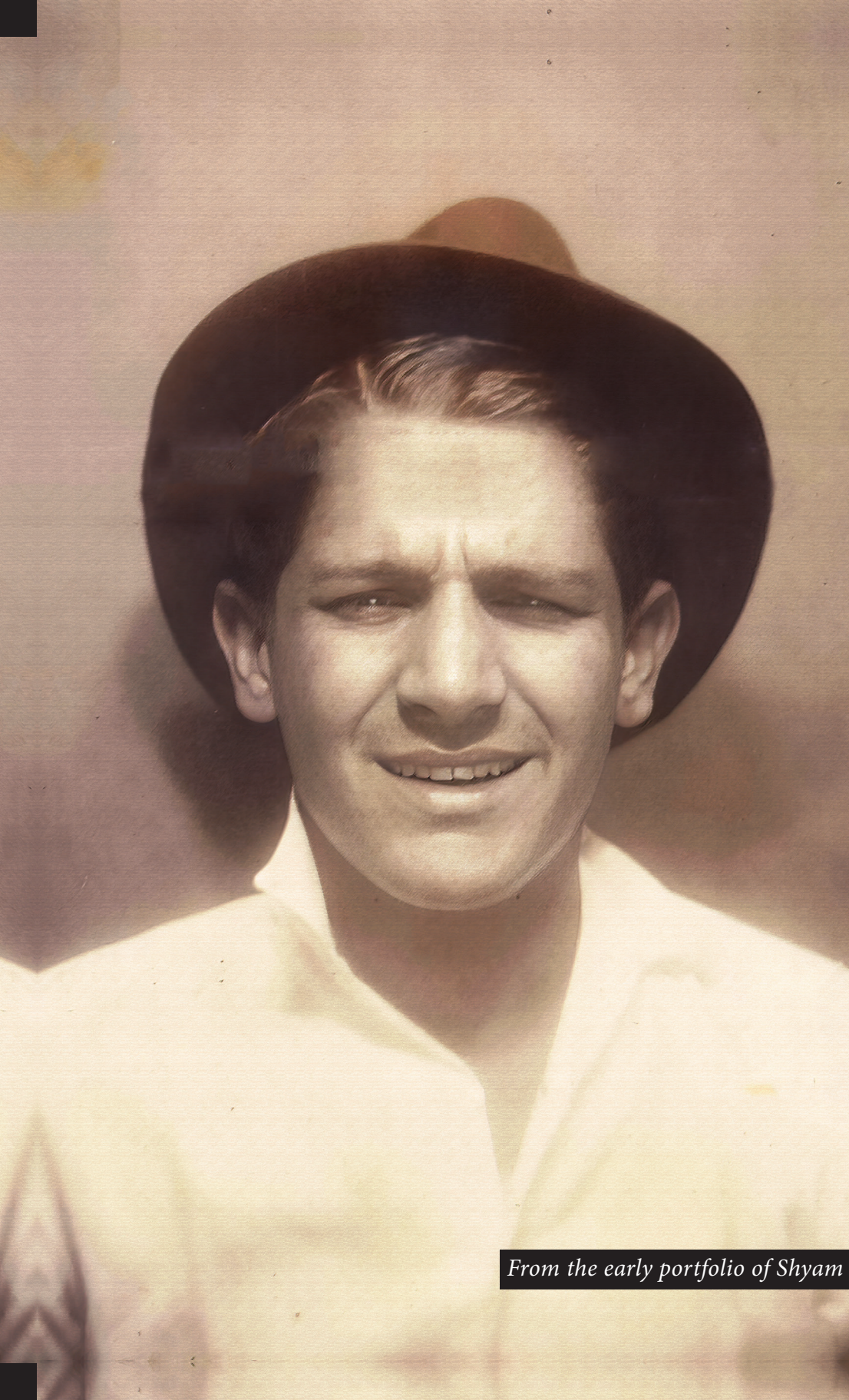
But is that all that I recall about him? No, there's much more, in those early, impressionable years of my childhood.

In fact, the earliest memory that I have of Shyam is someone who mildly smelled of cigarettes and a very nice perfume. Someone who would hold me tight in a hug and plant kisses on me. His hug felt different, it felt like coming from someone who really loved you deeply.

He always wanted me around him, either sitting on his lap or sitting beside him with his long arms wrapped around my shoulders. I always felt his protective and warm presence over me. I grew fond of Shyam Daddy, like I was with my parents. His presence made me feel safe and cared for. He was someone special who loved me the most, like *Maanji* or *Pushi Bua* (his sister, my aunt) or anyone else in the home. They all loved tapping or then touching me or somehow drawing my attention. Perhaps because I was a roly-poly, chubby child. But Shyam Daddy was someone very different and special to me. Even as a child, I began to recognise his special caring and our developing bond.

I recall I would look for him in the house. Sometimes he would be around but most of the time he would be missing. When he did come home at night, he would sparkle up the house. Everyone would flock around him. It felt like daybreak in our house.

As I advanced another year or so, his indulgence of me grew stronger, so much that, in fact, he corrupted me and spoilt me. Then, as his protection increased over me, I became increasingly daring, with something of an attitude developing in me. The subconscious feeling that he indulged the child in me at a time when everyone indulged him so much had perhaps given me that attitude. As such, sometimes I would



From the early portfolio of Shyam

make a mistake. This he didn't appreciate, because he never wanted me to be nasty or mean or disrespectful. One stare from him meant I would immediately back off with my tail between my legs. I did not want to upset him, because he was always nice to me. He would get upset, but after a few minutes, he would call me to hug me and lovingly explain exactly where I had gone wrong. I would hold my Adam's apple in a pinch and promise never to repeat the mistake, to be a good child. Everyone would rush to hug and cajole me for my innocent apology.

It was Shyam Daddy who gave me both my names (Bimal and *Chunoo*), something that I have described elsewhere in these pages. Gradually, as I grew up, I began calling him Shyam Daddy. He has remained so in my mind all these years, Daddy. Even today, in any reference to him in a family conversation, I address him as Shyam Daddy. Clearly, some childhood memories are strong enough to last a lifetime.

Permit me to enjoy those magical days a little more. Sometimes, on entering the house, Shyam would shout out aloud in Punjabi: "*Suar da Puttar kaun hai?*" (Who is the son of a pig?). I would rush to his open arms and exclaim loudly: "*Main!*" (Me). On other occasions, he would ask, "*Ullu da pattha kaun hai?*" (Who is a student of a fool?), or even "*Mera sher da puttar kaun hai?*" (Who is my son of a lion?). Such

imageries of birds and animals, when mixed with Punjabi language and a fun tone, can lend a lot of spark in an adult-child conversation, something that can well be understood by Punjabi speakers.

At times we would play hide and seek. His tall frame would get on all fours as he would look for me. Eventually, someone would point to where I was hiding. Once I was found, he would hold me tight, kissing me all over and throwing me up in the air two or three times. I would land safely in his arms. I still feel that fountain of a sudden gush of love when I remember such games. My time with him would fly so quickly.

Sometimes, he would surprise me with a special gift. I loved the toys and colourful books he brought me. There are two toys that I remember so well. The first is a miniature replica (a dinky) of a Willy's Jeep of the US Army. I still have it with me and feel it in my fingers and hand as I remember Shyam Daddy. Another toy was a set of plastic English alphabets in a velvet pouch. I learnt the alphabet as also the making of simple words with this bunch of alphabets. Sometimes I would be asked to pick one of the 26 letters from the bag, then I would have to say what word began with that letter. At other times, he would play games by hiding a few letters and asking me to search the bag. When I couldn't, I'd say they were not here. The next moment he would quickly put the removed letters

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back in the bag, then bring them all out. When I found what I had missed, there would be a loud hurra from everyone around. *Pushi Bua* took it on herself to continue with me when he was away.

Another incident comes to mind, but perhaps I am a little fuzzy about it because I was the culprit and I was young! So my mother sharpened my focus for this story. Once, there was a party at our place. As I mentioned earlier, I used to be made to eat earlier than the adults. So I ate earlier on that day too. Except this time, not in our regular crockery. It was some expensive Japanese one, perhaps a Noritake set. By accident while at the dining table, I dropped a plate and it broke into smithereens.

My mother started fuming. She scolded me loudly and I began crying. Shyam heard the commotion in the next room and rushed to the scene. But instead of being upset with me, he was red with anger at mummy. He didn't say a word. He put me lovingly on his lap and fed me my dinner. Then he took me to wash my hands, after which he made me sit at the table again. Next, he handed me a plate from the set and asked me to break that one too. He saw my perplexed expression. I was expecting to be reprimanded, but he was actually asking me for an encore of my performance! I refused his request to break a plate, but he persisted and asked me to break it. I hesitated.

But guess what? He took one and broke it himself! This way he was leading by example, so that I don't fear any reprisal. I was still in two minds, so he held my hand and we both hurled a plate together. That done, he offered a cheer and we both clapped together happily. More people entered the room and they joined the fun, with me enjoying my centre-stage act. Spurred on by an appreciative audience, we continued the rampage. A quarter plate, a serving bowl, a side plate, a dinner plate, all flung, one by one. Shyam Daddy and I demolished the whole exquisite dinner set sitting at the dining set side by side, with my legs dangling, enjoying the fun. Performance over, he took me to my room. After I brushed my teeth, he put me to sleep by narrating a story. Soon I was in deep slumber.

visiting him on the sets was quite an experience. I would see delight and pride in his eyes. His familiar "suar da puttar" was not absent in the studios either. Hugs and kisses over, he would make me sit on his shoulders and take me around the sets of which I had zero knowledge.

Everyone slept with the incident behind them in their minds.

The next morning at breakfast time, he gently talked to mummy. He said, "All children are innocent at his age; they do not know what they do. Only they can accidentally drop a plate and break it. You or I cannot. He has learnt his lesson. We both broke the entire dinner set and we enjoyed the act, so that he may forget the scolding. But he will remember the fault. Never scold children. Teach them with love and gentleness. They will remember it forever. They are impressionable and innocent flowers."

This way he was also telling us that while we must value expensive things, we must not get overly attached to them.

Finally, they are very small in the larger canvas of life. I now suspect that perhaps something of this had to do with his work. It was strenuous and it was challenging. He would be on the studio floors for hours, with grease paint on his face and all the arc lights dazzling him. He would have to be under someone else's skin for hours. Sometimes he was doing two shifts together. All that must have meant a lot of stress. And I was his stress-buster. His adorable pink-cheeked nephew in whom he perhaps saw the innocence of his own past. But of course, this is just conjecture.

What is not conjecture was his happiness with me, and vice versa. I was the monkey that he trained, entertaining his friends and family in the evenings when he was free. He would talk endlessly to his friends about the pleasure I gave him, including to his co-stars and crew. Yes, my visits to his studios had also begun.

Visiting him on the sets was quite an experience. I would see delight and pride in his eyes. His familiar "*suar da puttar*" was not absent in the studios either. Hugs and kisses over, he would make me sit on his shoulders and take me around the sets, of which I had zero knowledge. All his co-stars would give me the same welcome treatment, knowing what I meant to Shyam. I would be very uncomfortable with women in full makeup, kissing me, and leaving marks of gaudy lipstick





Style and Shyam went together

colours on my cheeks. I would try cleaning them with my palm but only end up smudging them all over my cheeks. But I also liked the ladies because they smelt nice, and were very pretty. Someone from the makeup department would be summoned to remove the offending lipstick marks from my cheeks. For reasons I don't know, these makeup guys would always give me a new hairstyle, which I detested. The hospitality crew would continue to take care of us. Coca-Cola was served with straws in bottles. Oh yes, that was nice! I often tried finishing one but would often leave it just half done. My little stomach would fill up fast. Cakes and pastries were my favourites, and I was brought these as well. I was too small to appreciate the shootings themselves, which I found boring. So, after a while, I would get restless.

There was always a still cameraman at hand. Family pictures on the sets were a must. In many photographs you will find Shyam Daddy and me together on the sets, quite happy to be in each other's company. As we would get ready to leave, a bag of goodies would be gifted to 'someone special'. That's me, thank you! The goodies would contain sweets and chocolates. In the car, everyone would want me to open the pack to show them the contents, but I would vehemently say "No way!" The more they teased me, the firmer my grip would be on the bag.

I would be hell-bent on not opening it till Shyam Daddy

came home at night. He was not aware of the goodies himself, but he would join in the teasing. I would open the bag at his behest and spill the goodies on the table. The greedy *oohs* and *aahs* were acts put up by everyone. The first piece would graciously be put in my mouth by Shyam. Then I would offer him one and he would relish it, like I had. Both of us would nod our heads, in appreciation of the taste. I would then first carry the platter to *Maanji* and offer her one. Soft chocolates were her favourites and I would wait for her response. I would then hand another piece to her because she was the head of the family and someone very special to all of us. In an act of generosity, I would later go to others to offer them one. Such bags of goodies became my earliest lessons in sharing equally. Give each one his favourite, and see their surprise and happiness. Partner that with *josh* and celebration. Make them feel special and important. That person would be transformed.

This sharing was not just for me. It was for everyone. Shyam Daddy meticulously went about doling out his love, affection, and caring, making others feel happy and special. As we will shortly see, we had to move to Poona. When that happened, I missed and longed for him, his pranks, touch, hugs, and warmth, since he was my favourite person in the whole world! But his weekend visits to us were like Diwali. The home would buzz with activity, we would be treated to



With friends

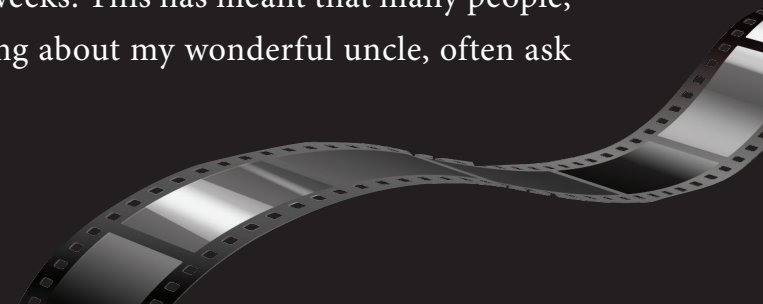
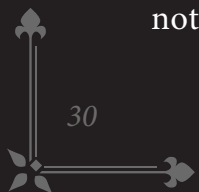
outings, and his friends would come home and have fun.

At times when he came to Poona for work in the studios, his trips were longer than weekends. At such times, he always planned some activity or the other on a daily basis with the family, which included *Maanji*. Recalling such incidents makes me quite emotional, so much so that unstoppable tears drop down naturally on my face. Remembering such events, I stop writing immediately. Then it takes me days, and sometimes weeks, to stabilize myself and begin again. In addition to a happy feeling, there is always some remorse about the good person that he was, and then the unfairness of his passing away at all. It has not been easy thus far. But I feel blessed as the firstborn and eldest one, and the love and affection I have received from everyone in the family is heart-warming. Most of the family has gone one by one, but their blessings are very much with me even today. My thoughts go out to Shyam Daddy's children, Sahira and Shakir.

On Sahira's first birthday, a grand party was organised for children. Special handmade cards made for them by Shyam Daddy were sent out. My brother and I received our invites by post with a covering letter from him. These are still with us. At the time, my dad was posted in Jabalpur. In fact, we had just moved there, so we couldn't have attended. The army is not that generous.

Shyam Daddy was married to Mumtaz aunty, who was nicknamed *Taji*. They are detailed elsewhere in this book. But it is sad that neither Shyam's daughter Sahira, nor his son Shakir knew their father at all. Sahira was just over a year old when her father died, and Shakir was born two months after his father's passing away. They both grew up without him. *Taji* Aunty brought them up both very lovingly. Her love reminds me of Shyam Daddy, who doted on them too, but he never made me feel neglected in any way, or then jealous of any other child. Even when he had little Sahira on his lap, his other hand would be around my waist. He would ask me, "Is she nice?" My smile, accompanied by a nod and a twinkle in my eyes would say it all. I would always hug him and kiss him on the cheeks. That was perhaps my thank you to him, for the gift of a sister that he gave me. I would see him cuddling her, rubbing his nose on her cheeks, kissing her tiny hands. This man was a fountain of love to babies; he was so gentle and so caring.

I have spent decades questioning why this wonderful person had to go so early. The question has haunted me for as long as I can remember. Such thoughts have frequently brought tears to my eyes, and as mentioned earlier, all that has made me stop working for the day. Such a day has often extended to become weeks. This has meant that many people, aware that I am writing about my wonderful uncle, often ask



My dear Banchu,

But for your telegram
I have had no news of you. Hope
everybody is ok. & busy seeing sights
& having parties.

Enclosed Sahira's invitation
card for Chumoo & Jumo. I hope
you like it.

Love!

Shyam

Chumoo
5/11/51

Handwritten letter by Shyam for Sahira's birthday

me where my book has reached, and when it will be released. I do not honestly know when I will finish it. But I know that when it is published, it will be seen as an honest remembrance of a boy who lovingly recalled a fatherly person he used to call Shyam Daddy.



(Editor's note: Bimal was coming to the end of his moving story about Shyam and had planned to publish it as a book in 2020, to mark the birth centenary of his uncle. However, Covid arrived worldwide in the first quarter of the year and then everything went into a tailspin. After that, Bimal himself passed away on 3rd February 2022.)





With a friend in the volleyball court

A Bit About Our Family History First

We are Khukhrains

Let me first offer you a little historical background about our family, which will help us better understand the story of Shyam the man and the actor.

The *Khukhrains* (a sect of *Khatris*) are warriors from ancient times, i.e., from about 2500 to 3000 years ago. They used to be well-trained, robust men who understood the art of war, and they had fought a lot in the plains of Punjab, and on the banks of Jhelum River. They were good horse riders who could get battle-ready in minutes. Eight surnames come under the umbrella of the *Khukhrains*: Anand, Bhasin, Chadha, Kohli, Sethi, Sawhney (Sahni), Sabharwal, and Suri. To preserve the purity of their clan, they usually married within their community. You will find this clan among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims too.

Gradually, over the centuries and after many military victories, they were rewarded with tracts of land by the kings to whom they reported. Finally, as the wars ended, they found themselves as landlords of multiple acres of prime, fertile land. Hence, over time, they morphed into an agrarian community



A vintage sketch of Shyam from the family album

END OF SAMPLE

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