

Pandit Moti Lal Nehru

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Prince among men, Pandit Moti Lal Nehru was born on May 6, 1861 at Agra. The ancestors of Pandit Moti Lal Nehru were Kaul Brahmins and residents of Kashmir. Impressed by the scholarship of Pandit Raj Kaul, King Farrukhsiyar brought him to Delhi in about 1716 and granted a house to him for his residence by the side of the canal which used to run through the heart of the city known as Chandni Chowk. As a result of their residence on the bank of the canal or *nahar* the descendants of Pandit Raj Kaul became known as Nehrus. Pt. Raj Kaul's grandson was Pt. Mause Ram Kaul whose son Pt. Laxmi Narayan was the first Vakil of the East India Company at the Mughal Court, Delhi. Pt. Ganga Dhar, son of Pt. Laxmi Narayan was a Police Officer in Delhi and as a result of the Indian War of Independence of 1857, he had not only to lose his service and other belongings but had to shift to Agra along with his wife Srimati Jeorani and two sons Banshi Dhar and Nand Lal. Pt. Ganga Dhar died at a premature age of 34 years and after about three months of his death Srimati Jeorani gave birth to Moti Lal. At that time Srimati Jeorani was financially hard up and Moti Lal had not the privilege unlike his illustrious son of being born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Moti Lal was brought up by his elder brother Nand Lal (grandfather of R. K Nehru). After having been given lessons in Arabic and Persian in his childhood, Moti Lal received English education and took to the profession of law like his elder brother Nand Lal.

He topped the list in the Vakils' Examination and started practising law in 1883 at Kanpur under the apprenticeship of Pandit Prithvi Nath. Three years later, in 1886, Moti Lal shifted to Allahabad and started his practice with his elder brother Nand Lal. At the very threshold of his career Moti Lal was destined to shoulder the responsibility of a big family. Pt. Nand Lal died in 1887 at an early age of 42 years leaving his wife and five sons to be looked after by Moti Lal. His first wife and the son born of her having died, Moti Lal married Srimati Swarup Rani and was blessed on November 14, 1889 with the son who rose to be the first Prime Minister of India.

Moti Lal had a phenomenal rise in the profession of law and while still in his thirties his income rose to be about Rs. 2,000 per month and by the time he crossed his forties it had reached five figures. What goes more to his credit is that to reach the heights which he did in the profession of law, Moti Lal had to march through a galaxy of giants of the Bar like Sir Walter Colvin, T. Conlan, C. H. Hill, G. T. Spankie, A. Strachey, Dillon, Sir Charles Ross Alston, Munshi Hanuman Prasad, Munshi Jwala Prasad, Pt. Ajodhya Nath, Pt. Bishambhar Nath, Sir Sunder Lal, Mr. Jogendra Nath Chaudhari, Munshi Ram Prasad, Mr. Dwarka Nath Banerji and Babu Durga Charan Banerji. In recognition of his merits the then Chief Justice Sir John Edge for the first time since the establishment of the High Court admitted Pt. Moti Lal to the roll of advocates of the Allahabad High Court in 1896 along with Pt. Sunder Lal, Mr. Jogendra Nath Chaudhari and Munshi Ram Prasad and in 1909 he received permission to appear and plead before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. Moti Lal was not only a shrewd lawyer and incisive in argument but also possessed in abundance a strong commonsense. He was a good debater and had a gift of persuasive advocacy. He was a staunch friend and a straightforward opponent. Being full of humour and a man of ready wit he commanded the admiration of the Bench and the Bar alike. Above all he was very industrious and conscious of the fact that there was no short-cut to success in the profession of Law. In one of his letters to his son who was then at Harrow Pt. Moti Lal wrote-

"To my mind it is simple enough, I want money. I work for it and I get it. There are many people who want it perhaps more than I do, but they do not work and naturally enough do not get it."

Moti Lal had handled numerous important cases of big Zamindars and Taluqdars. One of such cases was the *Lakhna Raj* case of district Etawah which came to him in 1894 and remained with him for over thirty years till ultimately his client succeeded from the Privy Council where Moti Lal went and conducted the case. In the concluding phase alone of this case Moti Lal received a fee of Rs.1,52,000. It was in regard to this case that Sir Grimwood Mears the then Chief Justice had observed that no man at any Bar in the world could have done that case better than Pt. Moti Lal Nehru.

The facts of this case are that Raja Jaswant Rao of Lakhna, district Etawah had a son Rao Balwant Singh by his senior wife Rani Ratan Kuar. Not being satisfied with the character of Rao Balwant Singh, the Raja disinherited him and subsequently by a conditional deed of gift he conferred his estate upon his junior wife Rani Kishori. Rao Balwant Singh fought without success for the estate up to the Privy Council.

Rao Balwant Singh had three wives, Srimati Naraini Kuer, Srimati Kaithiwali and Srimati Dunaju. After Rao Balwant Singh's death, Nar Singh Rao claiming to be the son of Rao Balwant Singh and Srimati Dunaju filed Suit no. 131 of 1916 against Rani Kishori and her daughter Beti Mahalaxmi Bai as also against Srimati Rameshwari Devi, widow of Raghubans Rao son of Beti Mahalaxmi Bai to recover the estate which was the subject-matter of the deed of gift aforesaid. Written statements were filed in this suit under the signatures of both Moti Lal and Jawahar Lal and Moti Lal appeared in this case from that stage up to its conclusion by the decision of the Privy Council on 31st January, 1928. The main defence to the suit was that the plaintiff was not the son of Rao Balwant Singh. In the alternative, it was pleaded that even if a contrary assumption was made, the plaintiff was not entitled to any part of the property by virtue of the terms of the deed of gift aforesaid which had the effect of conferring an absolute interest on Rani Kishori in the properties comprised therein.

In the trial court, the case was conducted by Tej Bahadur Sapru for the plaintiff and Moti Lal for the defendants. The defendants' case was that Srimati Dunaju had never given birth to a child. In spite of persistent efforts having been made on behalf of the defendants, Srimati Dunaju refused to submit to

medical examination on one pretext or the other and the suit was ultimately dismissed. The plaintiff filed an appeal in the High Court at Allahabad and a futile effort was made at the appellate stage also to get Srimati Dunaju medically examined. The appeal was dismissed and Nar Singh Rao appealed to the Privy Council where he made an application that his mother was prepared to get herself medically examined. This application was allowed and Dr. Vaughan Sawyer and Dr. Miss A. Louise McIlroy were nominated by the Board to examine the lady, who examined Srimati Dunaju and certified her as having given birth to a child. Their Lordships of the Privy Council on July 26, 1926 ordered the High Court to reconsider the whole case accepting the correctness of the certificate if the High Court was satisfied about the identity of the lady who was medically examined as aforesaid. The identity of the lady who got her examined was not challenged and the High Court expressed its opinion that the suit was liable to be decreed except for a portion of the properties in suit. Moti Lal along with Sir John Simon appeared in the Privy Council for the defendants-respondents and even after accepting that the plaintiff was the son of Rao Balwant Singh his appeal was dismissed on the alternative case taken by Pt. Moti Lal in the written statement that even if the plaintiff was the son of Rao Balwant Singh he was not entitled to the estate on a correct interpretation of the deed of gift aforesaid.

Moti Lal was a good cross-examiner and was known for his repartee. He was once cross-examining a stiff-necked high Military Officer and while he was putting some preliminary questions which appeared to the witness to be superfluous he asked Moti Lal "Do you think me to be a fool?" and promptly came the snub "Of course not. But perhaps I may be mistaken".

At another occasion while he was addressing a jury and impressing upon them not to get confused, the Judge observed "Never mind the jury, the jury can look after itself". And quick was the reply "My Lord that may be so, but I want it to look after my client".

Some of the other important cases conducted by Moti Lal, were the *Tamkohi Raj* case at Gorakhpur, *Amethi Raj* (Sultanpur) case at Lucknow, the *Dumraon* case at Arrah in Bihar and the *Kayastha Pathshala* case.

In the *Dumraon* case Sir N. N. Sirkar a leading barrister from Calcutta appeared with him and the famous Mr. C. R. Das appeared for the opposite side. Having watched the manner in which Moti Lal conducted this case Mr. C. R. Das is reported to have told Mr. N. N. Sirkar that he would any day deem it an honour to work as Pt. Moti Lal's junior.

Chief Justice Sir Courtney Terrell of the Patna High Court was so impressed with his argument in the famous "The Searchlight case" that he spoke very high of Pt. Moti Lal to the Maharaja of *Darbhanga* and thus was Moti Lal engaged in the *Darbhanga* case.

Moti Lal earned a lot of money. At one stage during the struggle for freedom it occurred to Jawaharlal Nehru that he was doing nothing to earn a livelihood and when Moti Lal came to know about it, he affectionately told him not to be distracted from his goal on account of money and the reason given by him was that it would not be possible for the son to spend even in a year what the father would easily earn in a week.

Moti Lal was known for his princely style of living and enviable hospitality. He had a love for the latest and the best. He started his career from a house located in the heart of the city of Allahabad but soon found the environment not to be congenial and shifted to 9, Elgin Road, in the Civil Lines. In 1900 he purchased from Kunwar Parmanand a house opposite the Bharadwaj Ashram and renovated it to his choice. This house was previously owned by Mr. Justice Mahmood. The famous poet "Akbar Allahabadi" had named his house as "Ishrat Manzil" and on being asked by Pt. Moti Lal to suggest a name for his house, he suggested "Anand Bhawan" both connoting the same meaning-the Abode of Bliss.

Later when Moti Lal entered politics he renamed this house as "Swaraj Bhawan" and gifted it to the Indian National Congress and the munificent gift was accepted by the then Congress President who happened to be his own son Jawaharlal. Moti Lal constructed another mansion adjacent to his former house for his own residence which is now known as "Anand Bhawan". He was the first citizen of Allahabad to own a car which he imported in 1904. Moti Lal placed his reputation much above money as would be clear from a very apt illustration. The Raja of Amethi having won his case referred to above offered a lakh of rupees to Pt. Moti Lal. Instead of accepting such a huge sum Moti Lal asked the Raja to wait till his emotion of victory had subsided. Subsequently, the Raja expressed his desire to pay Rs. 25, 000 cash and settle a few villages yielding an income of about Rs. 6, 000 per year on his son Jawaharlal. Pt. Moti Lal again refused the offer and the reason for doing so as explained by him to his son was that had he accepted the offer he would have been condemned behind his back and his reputation which he valued most would have suffered. Shakespeare truly said:

*"The purest treasure mortal times afford,
Is spotless reputation; that away,
Men are but gilded loam, or painted clay."*

His contempt for money becomes apparent from the following quotation from a letter written by Moti Lal in 1920 to a very respectable client on his expressing some difficulty in regard to payment of fees:

"No man in his senses can for a moment doubt the Supreme Contempt I have always had for money. My whole life is an illustration of this. I have so far been sought by it and have now forcibly closed my doors in its face."

It may be recalled that Moti Lal had by 1920 given up his active practice and had plunged into the struggle for freedom.

Moti Lal was very affectionate to the members of his family and his love for his son knew no bounds. The manner in which Jawaharlal was bred and brought up and the education which Moti Lal gave him could be a matter of envy even for a prince. On July 26, 1907, the father is reported to have written to his son who was then receiving education in England the following words of advice and blessings "Go on working, my dear boy, as you have been-good, solid, steady work, interspersed with a fair amount of recreation, amusement and exercise-and you will shine out as one of the leading lights of your time". There can be no manner of doubt that the son respectfully acted upon the advice of his father and made himself worthy of his blessings.

Moti Lal's two daughters Sarup (Srimati Vijai Laxmi) and Krishna had a similar paternal affection showered upon them which has held them in good stead in the later years of their life. Moti Lal's affection for his only grand child whom he called Indu was again unique and it seems that the impact of the personality of the grandfather (Dadu) upon Indu was greater than of her father (Papu). How proud would the grand old man have been, had he lived to see his little Indu as the Prime Minister of India.

Even though Moti Lal did not have any idea of entering active politics, he was by force of circumstances brought into it, but once having entered it he put his all at the disposal of the motherland.

"For our sakes, without question, he put from him all that he cherished.

Simply as any that serve him he served and he perished.

All that Kings covet was his, and he flung it aside for us.

Simply as any that die in his service he died for us". - Kipling.

His position as a political leader came to be recognised second only to, Mahatma Gandhi. Nearabout the beginning of the present century, the Indian National Congress happened to be divided into two groups known as Moderates and Extremists and at times a great tension prevailed between them. In the beginning of 1907 a suggestion was made to Moti Lal in a meeting held at Anand Bhawan to have a U. P. Provincial conference of the Congress organisation to be presided over by him. Moti Lal was reluctant but had ultimately to accept the honour of presiding over this conference. Moti Lal was influenced in his political career to a great extent by Gokhale. Subsequently he fell under the spell of Mahatma Gandhi and the relationship between Sabarmati and Anand Bhawan throughout remained very cordial.

Moti Lal started his political career as a Moderate but in his later days partly under the influence of his son and also because he was angered at the attitude of the then Government he bade good-bye to the "Moderates". In 1910 he was elected to the Provincial Council. Later on he was elected leader of the Swaraj Party in the Central Legislative Assembly and was considered to be one of the foremost parliamentarians and an outstanding leader of marked capacity. The speeches of Moti Lal inside the Legislative Assembly and his addresses as President of the Indian National Congress in its sessions at Amritsar and Calcutta are master pieces. Moti Lal had to serve imprisonment several times in the cause of the motherland and his first imprisonment took place on December 7, 1921, when he was arrested at Anand Bhawan along with his son and is reported to have given the following farewell message to his countrymen: "Having served you to the best of my ability, it is now my high privilege to serve the motherland by going to gaol with my only son. "

A description of Moti Lal's personality would certainly be incomplete without referring to his high sense of humour. He was universally loved and admired for his wit and humour. It is not possible to give detailed description of this part of his make-up in a short space and it will suffice to give just one illustration of his sense of humour . On the eve of his departure from Simla after walking out from the Legislative Assembly, as leader of the Swaraj Party in pursuance of the mandate of the Kanpur Congress, an extraordinary and amusing address was presented to him by a group of distinguished ladies on September 18, 1926, in the following terms:

To Pt. Moti Lal Nehru, M. L. A., Leader, Swaraj Party.

On the opening day of Legislative Assembly, we the petitioners belonging to the superior sex looking down from the heights of Heaven were much grieved to behold the worthy leader of the Swaraj Party bereft of his moustache and shed many tears. The petitioners consider that the leader of the Swaraj Party has been guilty of destroying one of the beauty spots of the nation by this sacrilege. By this ruthless act the Assembly hall looked denuded of its best ornament as does the Divan-e-Khas without the peacock throne.

The petitioners consider this act on the part of the leader above named to be a bad example to the other members of the Assembly. They fear that the other members may likewise take it into their heads to destroy other beauty spots...

The undersigned petitioners hereby beseech Pt. Mti Lal Nehru and pray to him on bended knees to allow the down like beautiful sumbal tresses to adorn his face once more and thus restore one of the greatest national monuments before the dawn of another year. (Names of signatories omitted).

Pt. Moti Lal Nehru was, as might be expected, equal to the occasion and replied to the members of the superior sex in the following terms:

"Mrs. Bhola Nath and others of the superior sex:

I am obliged to you for the address that has just been read. I shall treat it as valued souvenir and it shall go to my children and children's children as an heirloom so that they may learn by the mistakes of their ancestor. You have placed me in a great difficulty. My sense of chivalry extends to the whole of the superior sex and I know there are those in it who admire, me and not merely my late moustache. It is impossible for me to say at the present moment what the result of the plebiscite of the whole sex will be.

While I appreciate the whole sentiments you have expressed I must find means to consulting those who have not signed this address. Being accustomed to the procedure in the Assembly I can only think of the very familiar motion that the bill be circulated for opinion. Meanwhile I promise you that it will have my earnest consideration. (Here Sir Mohammad Shafi whispered something to the speaker who continued). My friend Sir Mohammad Shafi who has not yet shaken off the dust of office suggests another official formula and I gladly accept it. It is that I shall grow my moustache again if it is necessary in the public interest. I hope this will satisfy you. I thank you again for the interest you have taken in my moustache. I hope I shall live to interest you in me as I am."

The principal hobbies of Moti Lal were wrestling and *shikar* and to know his religion, we have to turn to Thomas Fuller's adage "A good life is the only religion".

On the passing away on February 6, 1931 at Lucknow of such a great advocate, politician and patriot and above all 'a finished gentleman from top to toe,' the country was plunged in deep grief and innumerable condolence resolutions were passed and references made on this occasion including a full court reference in the High Court. Speaking on that occasion on behalf of the Advocates' Association Sir Iqbal Ahmad said:

"My Lords, it was my privilege to work as a junior to Pt. Moti Lal I and I can say without the least fear of contradiction that he stood on footing of his own and occupied a unique position in your Lordships' Court. A lawyer of the keenest intellect, a brilliant advocate, a consummate cross-examiner who was equally at home both in original and appellate work, it was a pleasure to hear him argue a difficult case either on facts or on law. My Lords, I can say without exaggeration that I have not come across during my experience a greater advocate or a more brilliant lawyer. Truly he was one of the giants of the profession. People like him raise the status and the dignity of the profession.

My Lords, he has died full of years and full of honours. But his death will be mourned by all who admire greatness in man and goodness of heart. The world is the poorer today than it was yesterday in culture, in refinement, in ability and in learning."

And the Chief Justice Sir Grimwood Mears observed: "With his wide range of reading and the pleasure that he had taken in travel he was a very delightful private companion and wherever he sat at a table there was the head of the table and there was the centre of interest. He has left behind a very great reputation in this court and his name will always be associated with this Court and be one of the traditions of this Court."

In the words of Wordsworth it can truly be said of him,

*"Yet shall thy name, conspicuous and sublime,
Stand in the spacious firmament of time,
Fixed as a star."*