

OBITUARY

PROFESSOR BIRBAL SAHNI, M.A., D.Sc., Sc.D., F.R.S.
1891-1949

THE cutting short of Birbal Sahni's life at a time when a new epoch of further fruitful activity appeared to be commencing for him came as a painful shock to every one. I had myself sent him a telegram, ten days prior to his death, expressing my confident hope that the newly established Institute of Palæobotany would, under his direction, make valuable contributions to science and to national welfare. At this juncture, when India's science is being reorganized under a new dispensation, Sahni could indeed ill be spared. It is appropriate that *Current Science* should publish appreciations of Sahni's life and career from several India's leading botanists. These naturally contain expressions of their profound sorrow at his being called away in the midst of his work.

I had known Sahni myself for thirty years, having first met him when I was a guest at his father's house in Lahore, delivering a course of lectures at the Punjab University. Since then, we had come together, travelled together and worked together many times and at many places. Every fresh contact only served to strengthen the impression produced on me of a most lovable personality, full of vigour and enthusiasm, and endowed with an unbounded passion as well as a very remarkable capacity for scientific achievement. Amongst the many pleasant memories which I carry in my mind is of my stay on more than one occasion at Lucknow as the guest of the Sahnis in the beautiful home which they built for themselves on the banks of the Goomti river. I cannot help feeling that it was in the highest degree appropriate that it was ultimately decided to locate the Palæobotanical Institute in the city with which the Sahnis were for so many years and so happily associated.

It is scarcely necessary for me to write anything more, except to add that I associate myself fully with all that has been said by his distinguished scientific colleagues in the following pages.

C. V. RAMAN.

IT is my task, honourable yet painful, to pen a few lines about the late Professor Birbal Sahni, Sc.D., F.R.S., both as a man and as seen against the background of science.

But in these few lines I do not propose to present anything like a critical estimate of Prof. Sahni's career, for the simple reason that I stood too near him to be able to possess that aloofness without which no such estimate can be usefully attempted. This very nearness, which disqualifies me to a certain extent, gave me exceptional opportunities to become acquainted with his innermost thoughts and hopes, with his ideals and aspirations, and with the main springs of that magnetic influence, which he exercised on all who came in contact with him.

Born on November 14, 1891 in the Punjab, he was the second son of the late Prof. Ruchi Ram Sahni of the Government College, Lahore. After a distinguished career at the Central Model School and at Government College, Lahore, he left for England in 1911 and joined Emmanuel College, Cambridge. After taking his degree in Natural Sciences tripos with high honours he took up research under the renowned palæobotanist Sir Albert Charles Seward. His inspiring guidance created that love for research in young Sahni which can be found only amongst great masters of a subject. While at Cambridge Sahni received grants from the Royal Society and from his own College in aid of his valuable researches. He remained in England throughout the first World War and in 1919, after his D.Sc. of the London University he returned to India to join the Benares Hindu University as Professor of Botany. In 1920 he left the Hindu University to take up his appointment as Professor of Botany at the Government College, Lahore. But within a year he left Lahore to take up his appointment as Professor of Botany at the newly started University of Lucknow, where he remained till his death. His sudden and untimely death only six days after the laying of the foundation-stone of the Institute of Palæobotany has deprived us of one of the world's greatest botanists.

The first thing that struck any one who came to know Prof. Sahni, was his pure, fervent and profound love for Science. In all my experience, I have met only one other, so utterly absorbed, day and night in thoughts of science and that is Sir C. V. Raman. To these two, India's past was and is a matter of great and legitimate pride,