

# THE BIRTHDAY CHRONICLE

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The glorious 100 years: A life larger than life itself



**“IT’S THE HUNDRETH YEAR OF AN EUSTERE GENIUS WHO ENLIGHTENED MANY LIVES”**

‘Birla’ literally means ‘a rare person’ and Basant Kumar Birla, the grand old man of India, always lived up to his name. On the occasion of his birth centenary, the BVM fraternity remembers the loveliest, greatest and most kind soul. A few glimpses, down memory lane.....

Basant Kumar, or ‘BK’ as he was popularly called, was born in 1921 and is survived by daughters Jayashree and Manjushree. A legend in his own right, BK, grandfather of industrialist Kumar Mangalam Birla, leaves behind a legacy that includes several companies and an empire which by modest estimates is worth at least ₹10,000 crore.



The multitudinal personality learnt the ropes the hard way. The story goes that a

13-year-old Basant was told by his uncle Brij Mohan..... it was time he earned some pocket money by buying and selling shares. The very first year, he earned about ₹4,000 and paid taxes. The youngest son — and perhaps the favourite — of his father Ghanshyam Das Birla, he let go of his dream of becoming a graduate despite enrolling at Presidency College (now Presidency University). Instead he interned with the family group. Throughout his life, BK Sir believed he was a trustee of the confidence that his shareholders reposed in his companies. He wouldn’t pay ‘exorbitant’ salaries to hire ‘outsiders’ for top posts. “People from within his organizations would work their way up,” recalled a former group employee.

Kesoram Industries, the flagship of the BK Birla Group, is a case in point. Founded in 1919 as Kesoram Cotton Mills Ltd, the company began as a cotton textile mill and later expanded into the production of rayon. BK Sir led it all the way as it entered the tyre and cement sectors around the late 1980s and early 1990s. As soon as the government started easing control on cement, BK Sir set about the task of creating large capacities not just through Kesoram but also under the aegis of Century Textiles and Mangalam Cements. Century Textiles and Industries is another example. From a single-unit entity in 1897, it has transformed into a commercial powerhouse with interests in diverse industries including cement, pulp and paper and real estate.



### **A Visionary Industrialist**

Decades before Indian corporates went on to own manufacturing units abroad, BK Sir set up and ran a textile factory in Ethiopia. And his imagination always materialized.

### **An Eminent Educationist**

Schooling came to an abrupt end for BK Sir, who entered the family business at 14 and started managing the companies by 18, but he tried to make up for his own lack of formal education by ensuring that his son Aditya went abroad to pursue management studies.

Parsimonious in his habits, BK Sir built schools, colleges, engineering and management institutes all over the country. Some of the most noted ones include BK Birla Institute of Engineering & Technology in Pilani, BK Birla Centre of Education in Pune, Birla Institute of Management Technology in Delhi and Ashok Hall in Kolkata.

शब्दों के रंग जो आपको समर्पित  
आपके विचार काव्य रूप में.....

काल के धरातल से दूर मैं रहूँगा, किन्तु मेरी  
सोच, मेरी अपेक्षाएं सदैव ही जीवित रहेंगी,  
अमूर्त की कल्पना में, मूर्त अवलोकन में .....  
मैं रहूँ या ना रहूँ,  
विस्तारित तुम करना, हर विलक्षण, अक्षुण्ण  
वेदना को अंकुरित करना,  
उससे वृक्ष बनाना, उसे सींचना,  
और  
मेरी कही को सहेजना या ना सहेजना,  
अग्रिम, अग्रसारित, अन्यतम तुम रहना  
अप्रत्याशित को प्रत्याशित में बदलने की जो  
विधा है  
उसे सीखना,  
और.....मैं यहीं रहूँगा  
एक मजबूत दीवार सा  
देदीप्यमान उस सूर्य की एक किरण सा  
और तुम्हरी सफलता पर असीम खुशी के साथ  
मैं यही रहूँगा.....



He also gave Kolkata the Birla Academy, with an enviable collection of paintings and sculptures, and a world-class auditorium in Kalamandir, among others. Basant Kumar Birla, known in his close circle of friends and among peers as 'Babuji', was the father of late Aditya Vikram Birla.



He also handed over responsibilities of educational institutions and temples to members of his family. **"I believed in hard work and rigorous application and picked up the workings of each department by actually attending to every nitty-gritty detail,"** said he once.

“एक साल तक कंपनी के कर्मचारियों के साथ बैठ। उनसे बात -चीत होती। चाय , पानी , खाना , पीना , उनको मिलता मैं भी वही खाता पीता। प्रायः सब आदमियों के नाम मुझे याद हो गए। मेरा सबसे स्नेह हुआ तथा शायद उनकी सद्भावना भी मुझे मिली।

इस पृष्ठभूमि में भी सबसे मेल जोल तथा मैं भी उनमें से एक हो गया। उस समय के तीन चार आदमी अभी कुछ समय पहले तक केसोराम में काम कर रहे थे। जब - जब वे मुझसे मिलते , मुझे बड़ा आनंद आता। पुरानी बातों का विस्मरण होता। उनका सुख दुःख पूछता तथा आवश्यकता होती तो कुछ मदद भी करता। “

“धरातल से जुड़े बिरला जी के एक स्वरूप का अंश” .....

(स्वांतः सुखाय से)

#### A GLIMPSE OF THE REAL PROMINENCE

Until a few years ago, BK Birla was known to keep regular work hours from 9 in the morning to about 4 in the afternoon when he was in Kolkata, and toured his factories once every month. Sir, during his prime, had friends in the corridors of power, but he never used those relationships to his benefit.



In one of his expansive moods, Sir once recounted an interaction where Dhirubhai Ambani, founder of Reliance Industries, would often rib him for the “laboratory scale” of Century Enka. **“We (Dhirubhai and him) were together for more than two-and-a-half hours, exchanging notes on old times and talking of just about everything under the sun,”** Sir reminisced once.



Ambani reminded him about a suggestion he had made years ago on the expansion of Century Enka’s capacity, something Sir BK Birla had agreed then. Many believe Birla was ahead of his time. Vallabh Bhansali, co-founder of Enam Securities explains why Sir Birla was ambitious for his time putting up cement plants of the scale then. He would quote his father Late G D Birla, who taught the family a cardinal principle. **“Those who can’t keep track of expenses and taxes should not hope to survive,”** Bhansali quoted Birla as saying. **“This will ring very loud in today’s time when many businesses are over-leveraged and finding it difficult to survive,”** Bhansali added.

Sir Birla was known to be frugal in his habits, telling people close to him: **“I don’t need a suit costing Rs. 50,000. I will instead use it for charity.”**

***SUCH WAS THE PRUDENCE, FARSIGHTEDNESS, PERCEPTIVENESS, PRODIGIOUS VISION HE HAD.....INDEED HE LIVED TO THE SAYING “Life has no full stops”.***

**BVM, NAINITAL  
[NEELU JAWLA, TEAM EDITORIAL]**