

R.B. Sapre (1915 – 1999)

Sapre Loved Chess & Chess Players

by Manuel Aaron

Ramchandra Bhargava Sapre was born a century ago on 4 March 1915 in Akola where his father, a chess lover, was a Civil Judge. After the death of his father in 1919, 4-year old Sapre was brought up in Malgund by his maternal grandfather Balakrishna Laxman Antarkar, a Sanskrit scholar who was also good at chess.

His childhood

From Malgund, Sapre, his mother and a sister moved to Ratnagiri. When plague erupted in Ratnagiri in 1924, the family moved again, to Devrukh to stay with his uncle who was actively involved in India's freedom movement.

In his childhood, Sapre used to make his own chess pieces from wood. For black he dipped the pieces in ink. The bishops were conical and the rooks cylindrical. However, their ignorant and unappreciative landlord who was described by Sapre as a 'killjoy' considered them as bad omen and burnt them in the boiler.

Losing his father at the tender age of four and moving from place to place to complete his education in the backdrop of the Freedom Struggle in which quite a few Indians were involved in the early part of the 20th century, life must have been very unsettling. In his early years he was poised to join

the anti-British freedom movement, but was stopped by his widowed mother as most mothers would be inclined to do. He limited his activities to collecting funds for his friends in the Underground.

Shatranj ke Khiladi

At first, like most men of his generation, he started playing chess with Indian rules. However he learned modern chess rules from Parsi and Iranian friends at Ismail College, Bombay. In 1938 he met a man with a chess book on a tram. This happened to be S.V.Samant, a strong respectable player of those days. Up until that time Sapre had not imagined that there could be books on chess. It changed his life as he became an avid chess player and an addict.

Sapre wrote in the July 1983 issue of Chess Mate that it was unfortunate he got so involved with chess that he never got to pass his BSc. His fascination and talent for chess was so great that he did not realise the harsh realities of life. He was like the Nawabs of Oudh in the Munshi Premchand novel, Shatranj Ke Khiladi based on 19th century India which was made into a film of the same name by Satyajit Ray in 1977. In that the two Nawabs fought

over a chess game while the British were at their gates to usurp their kingdoms.

During his Twenties and Thirties one would expect Sapre to be at his creative best over the chess board. But unfortunately that period saw political upheaval in the country and the Second World War. There were no tournaments of note around Bombay and he could not afford to travel to Madras and Calcutta for tournaments even if he knew about them.

Getting started at 34

Sapre's chess career started to bloom only in 1949 when he was already 34. The CCI (Chess Club of India, 1947-1964) based in Bombay with V.V.Vad as secretary had a great role to play in Sapre's and India's chess development.

According to available information, Sapre's first tournament success was second place behind veteran B.D.Alurkar (1896-1960) in the 1949 'Members' Tournament' of the CCI. The same year, Sapre had his first great tournament victory. He was first in the Premier Division of the Bombay Presidency Chess Tournament organised by the CCI. He finished ahead of the cream of Maharashtra's chess players like B.D.Alurkar, B.P. Mhaiskar, M.K.Gawande, S.V. Samant, V.V.Vad, M.T.Babur, M.H.Pradhan, et al.

In late 1950 when the CCI organised the Bombay State (Premier Division) Tournament as a 13-player league, the Swiss Master Robert Fontana was first, Sapre second and Pandurang G Dongre third. (see pic below)

