

PROF. AMALENDU BANDYOPADHYAY**(1930-2020)**

“I get pleasure when I deliver a popular lecture on astronomy before the students and general mass. When I was in class eight I organized a small club named ‘Sabuj Sangha’ and that was the start of my science popularization programmes”.

The above quote is from none other than Prof. Amalendu Bandyopadhyay. He was born on 1st February, 1930 at a village of Mugkalyan, Bagnan in the district of Howrah. In his childhood years he studied at Mugkalyan High School, where incidentally his father Late Surendra Nath Bandyopadhyay was the Headmaster. Under his guidance he gradually acquired a scientific temperament and developed interest to explore science and rationality in every subject, he studied.

Amalendu Bandyopadhyay (AB) passed Matriculation from this Mugkalyan High school but could not afford to continue his studies at Calcutta due to his father’s low pecuniary condition and hence had to travel all the way to Varanasi to stay with his maternal grandfather and subsequently got admitted to Banaras Hindu University from where he passed I.A., B.Sc. and M.Sc. in applied mathematics with a special paper on astronomy. It is worth-mentioning here that AB had to struggle day and night and work hard to continue his studies and for that matter,

to meet the expenditure of his studies, he had even to earn by tuition. Indeed he could really understand then the meaning of “Self help is the best help”.

During his M.Sc. course, he fortunately came in contact with the famous mathematician of the country, Dr. Vishnu Vasudev Narlikar (father of the famous astrophysicist Prof. Jayant Vishnu Narlikar), as his teacher. AB called him as “a saint in the field of mathematics and astronomy”.

It was Prof Narlikar who had, in fact, instilled in him the meaning of art of science communications, specially astronomical science, art of teaching, art of how to propagate astronomy in a popular way amongst the common people at large.

After passing M.Sc., AB joined as a lecturer in DAV College, Varanasi in 1952 with a salary of only Rs. 192 per month, where he worked for nearly four and half years. But he, being the eldest son, had to bear the financial

burden of whole of the family then. At that very crucial period, his mother advised him to take any government service relating to science. According to his mother's advice, he appeared at the UPSC examination and got the job at India Meteorological Department in the astronomical section of its Nautical Almanac Unit as a junior scientist. Actually this was the turning point of his life which made him a legend afterwards.

In the meantime, Calendar Reform Committee had been established in November, 1955 under the chairmanship of Prof Meghnad Saha. Nautical Almanac Unit (NAU) was founded on December 1, 1955 as a part of the Calendar Reform Committee, which started functioning at its office located at the Institute of Nuclear Physics, Calcutta (now Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics) and thereafter became the part of the Regional Meteorological Centre, Calcutta. AB joined this Unit in 1956 as Senior Scientific Assistant. After that he was promoted to the position of Senior Scientist in the Aviation department, Government of India and there he worked from 1962 to 1968 with all credits.

Meanwhile the post of the "Scientific Officer-in-Charge" of NAU fell vacant. AB applied for the post and was selected out of 22 candidates. According to his own submission, "While being in charge of this Unit, I had to face many an unfavourable experience there. I applied all my unceasing exertions to uplift the Unit but in vain due to noncooperation from some of the staff there. Nevertheless my struggle prevailed and I started thinking that this department should be separated and become such a Unit of Astronomy which would be the first in India second in Asia after Japan, just to fulfill the dream of Prof Meghnad Saha".

No sooner had he thought it, than he contacted Prof Hiren Mukherjee, the then Member of Parliament, through whom he could mediate his plan to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister. Success came. Mrs. Gandhi formed a committee in 1976 under the chairmanship of Dr. R. Ramanna to review the matter. Ultimately with the relentless efforts of Prof Amalendu Bandyopadhyay, NAU had been made an independent Centre with a new name as "Positional Astronomy Centre" or PAC and would be controlled by Director General of Meteorology, Government of India. So the formal inauguration of the PAC took place on April 26, 1980 at New Alipore, Calcutta and Prof Amalendu Bandyopadhyay became its first Director.

Amalendu Bandyopadhyay retired from the PAC in 1988 at the age of 58 and joined at Birla Planetarium in 1989 as a Senior Scientist and in-charge of the

Astronomical Research Section. "As an in-charge, I could start a Post Graduate Diploma Course on Astronomy here for the students along with a good library. Indeed this type of PG Course was the first of its kind in the country then", AB said. He was attached to this M. P. Birla Planetarium, Calcutta till his last breath.

Apart from his professional activities, AB poured all his efforts for the popularization of the Astronomical Science amongst the students and common mass at large throughout his life with a view to disseminating the essence of astronomy in particular and science in general. It had become his passion to break and wipe out the prejudices and superstitions relating the concept of astronomy. For that matter, even he was invited to Baharin, UAE to deliver some popular astronomical lectures in 2009. Even to diffuse the knowledge of practical astronomy, he always encouraged the common people for sky observations, to organize astronomy-camps during the celestial events to watch and study both in naked eye and with aided eye using binoculars, telescopes etc. He was a staunch fighter against astrology and to convey the science of astronomy he published more than 2500 popular astronomical articles in different journals, magazines, newspapers and took part in almost 536 radio and television shows. This is in fact unique for any astronomy popularizer in the country. AB wrote eight books to his credit, five in Bengali and three in English. But to his professional credit, he presented thirty research papers on astronomical science in both national and international seminars; subsequently most of these papers were published in the prestigious science-journals of repute. As an ardent research person, he fully utilized two total solar eclipses in 1980 and in 1995 and an annular solar eclipse in 2010 from India for research purposes.

Apart from his possessing high ranks in PAC and M.P.Birla Institute of Fundamental Research, M.P.Birla planetarium, Calcutta, AB was elected member of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) of Paris in 1979. Actually he was the bona fide member of the following Commissions of IAU : i) Ephemerides Commission and ii) History of Astronomy Commission. He was elected Life Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society of London in 1988 and was also elected Member of the British Astronomical Society of London in 1991. In 1994 he became the Fellow of the West Bengal Academy of Science and Technology. He was the Life Member of Astronomical Society of India, Bangalore, Life Member of Indian Science Congress Association, Calcutta, Life Member of Indian Science News Association, University of Calcutta, Life Member of Indian Association for the Cultivation of

Science. He was intimately associated with Indian Science News Association (ISNA). He was Treasurer of ISNA for a long time and was in the editorial board of Science and Culture. He was elected one of the Vice-Presidents of ISNA in the last year and continued in this position till his death.

Prof Amalendu Bandyopadhyay was associated with many other organizations like Sky Watchers' Association, sometime being its President, Advisor of Kolkata Astronomy Centre and so on.

Amalendu Bandyopadhyay was honoured with "G.P. Chatterjee Memorial Award" from Indian Science Congress Association in 2012, "Gopal Chandra Bhattacharjee Memorial Award" from the Government of West Bengal in 2002, honoured with D.Sc. from Burdwan University in 2003, "Jayanta Bose Memorial Award" from Bangiya Bijnan Parishad in 2013, "National Award for best Science and Technology coverage in the mass media" from Government of India in 1995. He was awarded with

prestigious "Jagattarini Gold Medal" from Calcutta University in 2012 (the first recipient of this award was Poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore in 1921), he was conferred with "Sibnarayan Roy Memorial Award" from Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 2014.

With all his vigour and astronomical activities, Amalendu Bandyopadhyay used to lead a very simple life almost without any disease. But suddenly he breathed his last with all consciousness till death on 22 June, 2020 at 8-30 pm while he was 90 years old. People will remember him for his monumental works on astronomy and a good samaritan for years to come. We pay homage to this great person. □

Dr Sankar Kumar Nath
Consultant Oncologist,
Vice President, Kolkata Astronomy Centre
e-mail: Sankarku_nath@yahoo.co.in
(with acknowledgement to
Kaustuv Chaudhuri and Joydeb Dey)