150TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SIR ASUTOSH MOOKERJEE:
A TRIBUTE

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This year (2014) the 150th birth anniversary of Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, one of the few legendary figures of Indian education, a man of great personality, high self-respect, towering administrative ability and a fearless fighter for academic autonomy is being observed. In this article the life, academic and other activities of Sir Asutosh Mookerjee have been discussed.

Introduction

This year (2014) the 150th birth anniversary of Sir Asutosh Mookerjee is being observed. He may be called a product of Bengal renaissance that was initiated by Raja Rammohon Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. He was a person of high self-esteem, courage, academic integrity. He had and a general intransigent attitude towards the British Government and was called the Tiger of Bengal. He never compromised with his principles. During his childhood his meetings with Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were a major source of inspiration. He was a distinguished mathematician of his time. He pursued his mathematical studies and research even when he was busy as a lawyer. He wrote a book in mathematics titled “Geometry of Conics”. He was one of the most dynamic figures in Indian education and its true builder to whom the country will always remain indebted. He strived hard to establish a synthesis of the best of Western and Indian culture and education. This great son of Bengal passed away on May 25, 1924 in Patna.

Early Life and Education

Asutosh Mookerjee was born on 29th June, 1864 at Bowbazar, Kolkata. His father Dr. Gangaprasad Mukherji was a renowned doctor and his mother Jagattarini Devi was a pious lady. He was brought up in an atmosphere of science and literature at home. From his childhood he was fond of reading books on various subjects. At the age of five he was admitted to Sishu Vidyalaya at Chakraberia, Bhowanipur and showed an aptitude for mathematics. In 1879, at the age of fifteen, he passed the Matriculation examination of Calcutta University from South Suburban School and stood third. He was then admitted to Presidency College. In 1883 he passed the BA examination of Calcutta University and stood first and received the Ishan and Vizianagram Scholarships and the Hurrish Chander Prize. He was then admitted to the post-graduate classes. In 1885 he passed the M.A. examination in Mathematics and was placed first in first class. In 1886 he passed M.A. examination in Natural Sciences (Physics). He was the first student who was awarded a dual degree from Calcutta University. On the basis of a competitive examination he received the prestigious Premchand-Roychand scholarship. He also studied law from City College and stood first in all the three examinations of law and won the ‘Tagore Law Gold Medal’ for three successive years: 1884, 1885 and 1886. He obtained the gold medal offered for a competition among law students by Maharaja Sir Jyotindra Mohun Tagore. In 1888 he obtained B.L. degree. In 1894 he obtained Doctor of Law.

It is worth mentioning that when Asutosh Mookerjee was only a first year student he published a paper entitled “Proof of Euclid I, 25” in Messenger of Mathematics in which he gave an elegant new proof of the 25th proposition of the first book of Euclid. He published nearly twenty
original research papers of high quality, some of which are listed in the Appendix. His third paper entitled “A note on elliptic functions” was published when he was a postgraduate student. It was considered to be of “outstanding merit” according to Cayley of Cambridge. Asutosh could become a mathematician of the world rank if he confined himself to the pursuit of Mathematics only.

Career

Sir Asutosh Mookerjee was appointed the Tagore Law Professor in 1897 in the Calcutta University. He had then published a book entitled “The Law of Perpetuities in British India”. In 1888 he started practicing law at the Calcutta High Court. He was appointed a judge in the Calcutta High Court in 1904. He acted as the Chief Justice for some time. Some of his judgments are still quoted as masterpieces. In 1906, Asutosh was appointed as the Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University, and he continued to hold the post for four consecutive two-year terms (1906-1914). He was the second Indian Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. Again in 1921, he was appointed as the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University for a two-year term. In 1923 Lord Lytton tried to impose conditions on his reappointment as Vice-Chancellor. Being a man of high self-respect and committed to academic autonomy he considered the conditions unacceptable and rejected the offer.

It is not widely known that Asutosh served as Lecturer in Mathematics and Mathematical Physics at the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science from 1887 to 1889. He delivered lectures on physical optics, mathematical physics and pure mathematics. His lectures were of exceptionally high standard.

At the age of 25 he became a member of the Syndicate of the Calcutta University. Since then he was a member of the Senate and Syndicate of the Calcutta University for more than sixteen years. He acted as the President of the Board of Studies in Mathematics, Calcutta University for 11 years. He represented the University to the Bengal Council from 1899 to 1903. He was Additional Member of the Viceroy’s Council representing Bengal from 1903 to 1904 and a Member of the Indian Universities Commission in 1902.

Asutosh’s Views on Education

Asutosh Mookerjee believed that to unbound the society from racism and discrimination of the British rule it was necessary to spread the light of knowledge from grass root to higher level of education. Thus he resolved to create a modern university out of his Alma Mater. He had a vision of the kind of education he wanted young people to have. He wanted to synthesize the best of Western and Indian education and culture. In higher learning and teaching he preferred to follow the Western model, but stressed on teaching of Indian languages, Indian History and Philosophy. He took initiative to introduce Bengali at the Entrance and Fine Arts examinations. He introduced several new academic graduate programs at the Calcutta University: Comparative literature, Anthropology, Applied Psychology, Industrial Chemistry, Ancient Indian History and Culture as well as Islamic Culture. He also made arrangements for post-graduate teaching and research in Bengali, Hindi, Pali and Sanskrit. He believed that active research of the faculty members is absolutely necessary for post-graduate teaching. His views are reflected in his convocation address in 1912, in which he said, “That in order to bring the post-graduate teaching up to the standards of the best of the western universities, more diversification and specialization in the post-graduate courses was necessary. The Lecturers selected for such teaching should be specialists in their particular branches of study, who could give the students the results of the latest study on the subject; these were not to be found in the textbooks but had to be gathered from specialist journals.” In his convocation address in 1908 he said, “I hope the concept of research has come amongst us to stay and will spread throughout the land from peak to peak.”

Asutosh’s Contribution as Educationist and Educational Administrator

Before discussing the remarkable contribution of Asutosh Mookerjee in the field of education in Bengal, a brief review of the attitude of the British Government towards education in this country is needed. Although some liberal Englishmen, such as David Hare, Rev. Alexander Duff, William Carey, etc., helped in setting up educational institutions in India, the British rulers did not want to educate Indian people in Western education because of the fear that “education will be fatal to British rule.” They felt that the Indians be given elementary education so that they can serve the British administration. However, a decision was made to set up the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay; Calcutta University was founded on 24 January, 1857. But the Government was reluctant to spend much money on higher education. So Asutosh took initiative to collect donations for Calcutta University from the affluent and education-loving persons. During the period from 1908 to 1922 a donation of Rs. 45 lakhs were collected, out of which Rs. 40 lakhs was earmarked by the donors for pure and applied sciences. Asutosh approached two lawyers Taraknath Palit and Rashbehary Ghosh for
donation to Calcutta University. They donated Rs. 14 lakhs and 10 lakhs respectively. These donations enabled Asutosh to start the departments of Physics, Chemistry, Applied Mathematics and Applied Botany.

Asutosh played a pioneering role in broadening the scope of higher education in the country. As Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University he integrated teaching and research at the University level for the first time in India. He was the first to introduce teaching classes in various subjects in the university. He started a number of post-graduate departments in science. He also played an instrumental role in strengthening the teaching of arts subjects at the post-graduate level. He changed the very direction of Calcutta University. Before he became the Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University, it was only an examining body and controlling the schools and colleges affiliated under it.

He had an eye for talent. As the Vice-Chancellor, Asutosh picked up brilliant scholars from all over India in different positions of the university, such as Dr. C.V. Raman, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Acharya Brojendranath Seal and many others. No other Vice-Chancellor made any such attempt so sincerely and so energetically for the benefit of the students and the educational institutions as he did. As a result, Calcutta University earned international reputation and came to be known as a Centre of Excellence. At that time Raman was an officer of the Indian Accounts Service and after office hours carried out research at the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science. Asutosh was highly impressed with Raman’s research publications and offered him, much against opposition, the coveted post of Palit Professor of Physics. Asutosh managed to overcome the oppositions and Raman joined as Palit Professor of Physics. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan was a Lecturer at Mysore University. Asutosh offered him the prestigious King George V Professorship of Philosophy. Among the young scientists appointed as Lecturers were Meghnad Saha, Satyendranath Bose, Sisir K. Mitra in the Department of Mathematics who excelled as great scientist. The Botany, Zoology and many other departments flourished due to Asutosh Mookerjee’s effort.

Though the British rulers were reluctant to provide funds for higher education, they were very keen on controlling the affairs of the university. Lord Curzon’s education mission, in 1902, identified the universities, and Calcutta University especially, as centres of sedition where young people formed networks of resistance to colonial domination. The cause of this was considered to be the granting of autonomy to these universities in the 19th century. Thus, during 1905-1935, the colonial administration tried to reinstate government control on education. In 1904, when Lord Curzon was the Viceroy, a new University Act was passed. According to the provisions of the Act the new Senate would have a majority in favour of the views of the British rulers. The Act was opposed by Asutosh Mookerjee and Gopala Krishna Gokhale. Rabindranath Tagore also strongly criticized the Act. As a member of Sadler Commission, set up in 1917 under the Chairmanship of Dr. M.E. Sadler, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, to examine the condition and workings of Calcutta University, Asutosh Mookerjee observed, “Perhaps the main result of the Act was to make the control and supervision of the Government over the University policy more direct and effective than it had hitherto been……and the Government of India retained the power conferred upon it by the Act of 1857, of cancelling any appointment. Moreover, the Vice-Chancellor, the Chief Executive Officer of the University, was to be appointed by the Government; ...... in short, almost every detail of University policy was made subject to its supervision.”

Asutosh, as Vice-Chancellor, boldly stood against the British rulers, when situation demanded, to protect the autonomy of the University. He refused to carry out the policy of the Government, which, in his opinion, was unjust and derogatory to the interest of education, often to the embrace of the Government. In his famous speech in the Senate in 1922 he said, “…… I call upon you, as members of the Senate, to stand up for the rights of your University. Forget the Government of Bengal. Forget the Government of India. Do your duty as Senators of the University, as true sons of your Alma Mater. Freedom first, freedom second and freedom always – nothing else will satisfy me.” In 1923, in another lecture he said, “…. Freedom is its (education) very life of blood, the condition of its growth, the secret of its success. ….”

In the first year of his Vice-Chancellorship Asutosh did not agree to implement the recommendations of the
British rulers to disaffiliate a number of schools because a number of students in these schools had taken part in the movement against the partition of Bengal. He managed to convince Lord Minto that such a move would be unfair and unwise. This was his first victory against the British rulers.

It is well known that Subhas Chandra Bose was rusticated from Presidency College for allegedly assaulting Professor Oaten for abusing Indians. There was immense pressure on Asutosh, the Vice Chancellor, to rusticate Subhas from the University. But he could not allow the academic life of a student to be nipped in the bud for standing up against injustice. Instead, he arranged for young Subhas to continue studies at Scottish Church College.

It has been mentioned earlier that in 1923 he declined to accept the proposal of Lytton for his re-appointment as Vice-Chancellor. Lytton wrote, "If you can give an assurance that you will not work against the Government or seek the aid of other agencies to defeat our bill, then I am prepared to ask the concurrence of my Minister to your re-appointment as Vice-Chancellor". Asutosh’s reply reflects his commitment for academic autonomy and the spiritedness that guided him in his dealings with the British rulers. He wrote, "...It may not be impossible for you to secure the services of a subservient Vice-Chancellor, prepared always to carry out the mandates of your Government and act as a spy on the Senate. He may enjoy the confidence of your Government but he will not certainly enjoy the confidence of Bengal. … I send you without hesitation the only answer an honourable man can send – an answer which you and your advisers expect and desire. I decline the insulting offer you have made to me."

Ramananda Chatterjee, the father of Indian journalism, wrote,1 “The services rendered to Calcutta University by Sir Asutosh Mookerjee deserves unstinted praise. No man ever devoted his intellectual powers, his energies and his time to the service of this University to the extent that Sir Asutosh has done. No one possesses such grasp of the details of all its affairs as he does.” In a similar vein, Lord Lytton said,1 “Asutosh, in the eyes of his countrymen and in the eyes of the world, represented the University so completely that for many years Asutosh was in fact the University and the University Asutosh.”

Other Activities

Sir Asutosh Mookerjee was instrumental in founding the Bengal Technical Institute in 1906. He founded the Calcutta Mathematical Society in 1908 and guided its activities as the President of the Society from 1908 to 1923. Asutosh College was also founded under his stewardship in 1916. He was conferred the Director of Science by the Calcutta University. He presided over of the inaugural session of the first Indian Science Congress held in 1914.

Honours

The year, in which he passed his B.A. examination, Asutosh was elected as member of the London Mathematical Society. He was the first Indian whom the Society has conferred this honour. He also became member of the Mathematical Societies of Edinburgh, Paris, Palermo and New York, member of the Royal Irish Academy, member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, a fellow of the Edinburgh Royal Society and Fellow of Royal Astronomical Society. He was thrice elected as the President of the Asiatic Society. He was a polyglot learned in Pali, French and Russian, and was awarded the titles of ‘Saraswati’ and ‘Shastravachaspati’ by the pundits of Bengal for his service to Indian education. In 1910, he was appointed the President of the Imperial (now National) Library Council to which he donated his personal collection of 80,000 books, which are arranged in a separate section. Mookerjee was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Star of India (CSI) in June 1909 and knighted in December 1911.

Conclusion

The growth of racialism on the part of the British and its attendant discriminating practices entered deeply into Asutosh’s soul. Consequently, he felt, it was only through broad-based higher education among its countrymen that they could be cured of their sense of intellectual inferiority to the Westerns. This led him to fight for the cause of education in the country. He firmly believed that academic autonomy, not government control, is needed for raising the standard of education and so he fearlessly opposed the British rulers whenever they attempted to establish control over the functions of the University. Even in independent India we find that the Union and State Governments as well as the ruling parties are attempting to increase their control in every sphere of education. To pay real tribute to the great soul, Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, the educationists and the education-loving people should come forward to resist the attacks on education and academic autonomy.

Acknowledgement

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A Partial List of Asutosh’s Research publications

1. Proof of Euclid I, 25, Messenger of Mathematics, 10, 122-123 (1888)
2. Extension of a theorem of Salmon’s, Messenger Math., 213, 157-160 (1883-84)
4. On the differential equation of a trajectory, J. Asia Soc. Bengal, 56, 117-120 (1887)
5. On Monge’s differential equation to all conics, J. Asia Soc. Bengal, 56, 134-145 (1887)
6. A memoir on plane analytical geometry, J. Asia Soc. Bengal, 56, 288-349 (1887)
7. A general theorem on the differential equations of trajectories, J. Asia Soc. Bengal, 57, 72-99 (1888)
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10. The geometric interpretation of Monge’s differential equation to all conics, J. Asia Soc. Bengal, 58, 181-185 (1889)
11. Some applications of elliptic functions to problems of mean values, J. Asia Soc. Bengal, 58, 199-213, 213-231 (1889).
13. Mathematical Notes (Questions and Solutions), Educational Times, London, 43, 125-151 (1890); 44, 144-182 (1891); 45, 146-168 (1892).

References

3. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia