

A Small Biography of Alshashtri Jambhekar – The First Indian who Headed the Colaba Observatory

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The Colaba observatory was established by the East India Company in 1826 for astronomical observations and time keeping services for Bombay (Mumbai) port. The geomagnetism and meteorological measurements started in 1841 by Prof. Orlebar who was then the Professor of natural philosophy (science) at the Elphinstone college. However, in 1842 he had to go on the medical leave for two years. During this period, one Indian luminary - Balshashtri Jambhekar (BJ) was appointed as the Head of this observatory. Considering the fact that at that time, most of the top positions in India were occupied by the Britishers, exceptionally a great honour was bestowed upon this young Indian at an age of just 31 years. Undoubtedly, it was because of his proven merits in the scientific field. It is known that Dr. Nanabhoy Moos was appointed as the Director of this observatory in 1896. He is considered to be the first Indian Director this observatory. Therefore, the merits of Dr. Moos, must be appreciated. However, just for an academic interest, it is worthwhile to place on the record that BJ, had headed this Institute during its establishment phase more than fifty years earlier.

India Meteorological Department (IMD) was established in 1875. Then Colaba observatory became a part of IMD and afterwards, it was granted an autonomous status by the Government of India as Indian Institute of Geomagnetism, Mumbai (IIGM) in 1971. In view of this, it would be appropriate for us to know about this genius who was a leader of the science of our discipline (the earth science) during the middle of the 19th century when the recording of the meteorological and geomagnetic observations had just commenced in our country at Colaba.

BJ was a multifaceted intellectual with the profound knowledge of the literary fields as well as the various branches of the science and mathematics. Apart from this, he had an excellent caliber in different quarters. Every Indian will be proud and would be astonished when he gets acquainted with his achievements in those days. Hence, his biographical sketch is briefly highlighted

below in order that it would provide information and inspiration to many of our colleagues of the present and the coming generations.

Early life

He was born on 6th January 1812 in a remote village- Pombhurle in Sindhudurg district of Konkan region, Maharashtra. After primary education in Marathi and Sanskrit, he shifted to Mumbai at age 13. There, he excelled in many fields as fast as it was almost impossible for any other person, especially when the educational institutions, means of knowledge like books, newspapers were not available in India as they are today.

Subjects and languages mastered by BJ

When most of the population of India was illiterate, he had mastered several subjects like physics, chemistry, astronomy, botany, geology, geography, history, mathematics, psychology. Moreover, he had also grasped nearly one dozen languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, Gujarati, Telugu, English, Greek, Latin, French and Persian.

College faculty

The Elphinstone college is the first college of Mumbai established in 1835 in the memory of the British Governor of Bombay Presidency- Hon. Mountstuart Elphinstone. The first two Professors appointed for the college were Arthur Bedford Orlebar for science and John Harkness for the general literature. Along with them, BJ was appointed as an Assistant Professor of Hindi in this college at the age of 22 years. It is ironical to note that he never had any opportunity to attend any college even as a student, but entered the premises of a prestigious college directly as an Assistant Professor ! Later on, during the leave period of Prof. Orlebar, as stated above, he was elevated to the rank of Professor. He taught many subjects in the college including sciences, mathematics and astronomy. Some of his notable students who derived inspiration from him were: Dadabhai Naoroji -first Indian to become a member of British parliament, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad- the social reformer

and the first batch medical doctor of Mumbai. It is worthwhile to note that in 1842 his salary of Rupees 450 ! Most probably, at that time he was the highest paid Indian under the British empire. Needless to say that the most of his salary was spent for the social cause.

Contribution to journalism and the library

In tune with the new technology of the printing, he started the first Marathi newspaper, 'Durpan' (mirror) on 6th January 1832. It was a bi-lingual paper with Marathi for the general public and English for the British rulers. The Marathi and English columns were printed side by side like the mirror images. As such, BJ is considered as the father of Marathi journalism and 6th January is observed as 'Patrakar Din' or the 'Journalist's day' in Maharashtra to mark respect to him for his invaluable contribution to the society in this way. 'Durpan' was published for about eight years. Then he started a monthly, 'Digdarshan' in 1840. The articles on variety of subjects along with the maps and the diagrams were published in this magazine. Further, realizing the importance of the books for spreading the knowledge among the public, he established 'Bombay native general library' in 1845 for the common people.

Books authored

BJ has authored nearly one dozen books which included Neetishashtra, History of India, English Grammar, History of British Rule in India. Even today, only a few students who opt for mathematics at the college level, know about a branch of mathematics- calculus. Considering this fact, it was a commendable work to learn that about 175 years ago he wrote the books on Differential and Integral Calculus in Marathi (Shunyalabdhi and Moolaparinati). The purpose was that the local students should not be deprived of this western knowledge of mathematics just because they didn't know English. While continuing to work on the ancient Indian literature, the philosophy and other topics at the higher level, he also prepared the text books for the school students on different subjects. He brought out the first print version of one of the sacred books in Marathi - 'Dnyaneshwari'. It is a poetic commentary on 'Bhagwad Gita' composed in the regional language by Saint Dnyaneshwar in the 13th century for the propagation of our ancient Indian knowledge among the masses.

Social reformer

He worked for women's education, promotion of widow marriages, abolition of 'sati' custom and enlightening the people against the superstition.

Research work and honours

He was the first Indian scientist whose research papers on various topics were published in the 'Quarterly Journal of Asiatic Society'. Therefore, BJ may be regarded as the first Indian scientist in the modern times with an impact on the international community. He deciphered some of the ancient Indian inscriptions. During 1842-46, he was a member of the Executive Committee of Bombay branch of the Geographical Society, London and also that of the Royal Asiatic Society. He held the position of the Secretary of the Native Education Society and also worked as the Inspector of the schools in the Presidency. He was appointed as the Justice of peace (JP) in 1840. It was a unique distinction because the JP had the privilege to occupy the bench along with the grand juries of the court. He was also rewarded by the king of France for the knowledge of French language. In view of all these distinctions, he is aptly called as Acharya Balshashtri Jambhekar.

Considering the credits and the recognitions which BJ achieved in a short life span of just 34 years (1812-1846), undoubtedly he was not only an individual personality of an extra-ordinary talent but an institution encompassing several disciplines. Still, he was a very modest person who was respected and loved by both the rulers at the high level as well as the locals- a very rare distinction.

We all the Indians are fortunate to have such a precious jewel among our forefathers. Let us salute this bright Sun (son) of the land who had played leading role when the foundation of the modern day science and scientific education was laid down in our country. Especially the meteorological community much owe to him for his pioneering contribution to the earth science in our country.

Reference

Publications by the government of Maharashtra, Acharya P.K. Atre, V. R. Kale, Neela Upadhyay and some websites