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MEGHNAD SAHA: A PHYSICIST PARLIAMENTARIAN

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ABSTRACT

Meghnad Saha (1893 – 1956) is a prominent architect of modern science in India. He was the physicist of international reputation. His *theory of thermal ionization* was a breakthrough in astrophysics. Each of his contributions – as a physicist, teacher, an active social thinker, educationalist, scientific institution builder and Parliamentarian – is important in Indian history. His work as a Parliamentarian is unknown even for the well educated people. Here I overview this dimension of his multi-faceted personality.

INTRODUCTION

Meghnad Saha was born on October 6, 1893 in Seoratali, a small village near Dacca, which is now in Bangladesh. His father Jagannath had a small grocery shop in the nearby Baliadi market area. Meghnad's primary school teachers realized talent of this boy and they persuaded his father for his further education. He joined Presidency College in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and passed out M.Sc. in mixed mathematics. In college Subhashchandra Bose was his junior.

Asutosh Mukherjee, a visionary educationalist of Bengal, offered Meghnad a lectureship in mathematics at newly founded University College of Science in Calcutta, where he was a vice-chancellor. Later on he was shifted to physics department. Meghnad studied physics on his own and started research career in it. His theory of thermal ionization was a breakthrough in astrophysics. He was elected as Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) of London at the age of 34. His name was proposed for the Nobel Prize also but due to many complex reasons it was not awarded to him (Friedman 2001). Meghnad Saha had a multidimensional personality – a physicist, teacher, an active social thinker, scientific institution builder and a Parliamentarian (Naik 2016).

Social Concern

Saha was of the firm opinion that in a country like India, the problems of food, clothing, eradication of poverty, education

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and technological progress can be solved only with proper planning, using science and technology. In 1938, Congress was in power in seven provinces. Netaji Subhashchandra Bose, then president of congress, convened a meeting in Bombay (now Mumbai) to discuss various issues about planning. A National Planning Committee was appointed under the Chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru. Saha was the core-committee member as well as chairman of two sub-committees. He worked hard on preparing reports of National Planning Committee. After independence he was not included in planning commission. He was opponent of *spinning wheel, khadi* and *handloom*. He advocated large scale industrialization and fast marching of USSR was his role model. From various platforms, such as addresses, articles in periodicals, formal and informal discussions and personal communications with friends and colleagues, he promoted national planning and economic development plans. During first few years of independence he realized that there was confusion about priorities and planning in ruling party, the projects of national importance were not executed properly, higher education was neglected, administrative lapses hampered the progress etc. He became restless. He thought floor of Parliament was the correct place to address the nation about this.

Member of Parliament

For a university professor or a scientist it was not an easy task to contest for parliament. He was not a member of any political party, therefore mobilizing resources, in terms of money and manpower, was difficult. But he made up his mind and contested in 1952 from Calcutta north-west constituency as an independent candidate.

A large number of students, teachers, friends and colleagues joined his campaign and he won with sweeping majority. He took his oath as a Member of Parliament in May 1952.

National problems

The national problems; such as, higher education, river valley projects, large scale industrialization, and atomic energy, were his important concerns. His speeches, arguments and points he raised in debates in Parliament are full of information, analysis and inherent fervor about countrymen's progress (Chatterjee and Gupta 1993). In his very first speech in Parliament in 1952, while speaking on address by President he said that it was regret to note in the President's address, absence of any reference to the problems of educational reform particularly in the sphere of university and professional education. In 1948, government of India had appointed university commission headed by S. Radhakrishnan and Saha was one of its members. He had first-hand information about sad state of education in India. The commission had recommended the creation of an autonomous university grant commission to allot grants to different universities and professional institutes, according to their needs and demands. Even after two years government had not paid attention towards it. In the same session while speaking in course of the debate on demands for grants for union Education Ministry he stressed that the university education should be concurrent subject. While working on the education commission, they found that almost in all the provinces the universities were pulling in different directions; there was no unity of purpose. Sometimes they were following policies which were highly provincial and detrimental to the cause of unity.

Many of the universities were being made tools of state policies. The commission was convinced that education should be free from taints of provincialism; universities should train a number of high class workers, in the interests of the country as a whole. Therefore it was thought that it should be a central subject, and if not wholly a central subject, at least a concurrent subject. In the same speech he further said that the contribution of India in science during the British regime particularly after the First World War had been glorious. Many scientists with very meager means had attained international recognition. He expected that the coming generations should become far bigger scientists. It was the nation's duty to provide them with the facilities; the laboratories and libraries

where they could get their training and they could serve their country. Saha's native village Seoratali remained literally under flood waters for a period of 4 to 5 months in monsoon almost every year. He was deeply concerned with the problems associated with floods. He had given a lot of thoughts to this problem. After independence government of India had launched the Damodar valley project. To review its work, Parliament had appointed the committee. The committee pointed out irregularities. While speaking on capital outlay on multipurpose river scheme, Saha criticized Damodar Valley Corporation by giving details and insisted on overhauling of whole administrative machinery.

He participated in discussions on diverse topics, such as, finance bill, unemployment, progress report on five-year plan for 1953-54, Indian tariff, soda ash and dye stuff industry, peaceful uses of atomic energy, rehabilitation, oil exploration, railway budget, states reorganization and so on. In Parliament sometimes his questions or objections were difficult to answer or explain, because they were based on thorough study of the subject with scientific approach. On such occasions concerned people used to make personal attack on him, forgetting that he was also an elected Member of Parliament like other members.

Conclusion

Saha was not a politician. He entered Parliament for the national cause. If he would have been included in Atomic Energy Commission or given some important work of national reconstruction with due freedom, he would not have thought of entering Parliament. His career as a Parliamentarian from 1952 to 1956, till his sudden demise was successful. He raised the questions about his dear subjects like higher education or river valley projects and compelled the authorities to rectify mistakes and remove administrative flaws in the interests of nation. The range and the depth of topics he discussed in Parliament shows his wide ranging interests, analysis, scientific approach and above all ardor for progress of the country.

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