

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 95 Number 12

25 December 2008

EDITORIAL

Burjorji Padshah: Realizing a Vision

The impending expansion of the number of central universities and institutes of technology and science comes fifty years after the establishment of the IITs, a century after the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and a hundred and fifty years after the Universities at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta came into being. Each phase of the development of higher education and scientific research in India has happened at a critical point in history. The manner of establishment of these institutions, and the motivation for their creation have been widely different. Their evolution in the subsequent decades has also been distinct; the universities have blossomed and faded a little, while the IITs and IISc have weathered the passage of time and emerged as frontline institutions. An analysis of the growth and development of India's institutions may well prove instructive in planning the course for the current expansion. Can any useful lessons be learnt by studying the past? Embedded, as I have been, in the midst of IISc's centenary year, the past has loomed large, raising the question: 'Are anniversaries merely sentimental occasions for celebration or are they opportunities to reflect on history and ask questions about the future?'

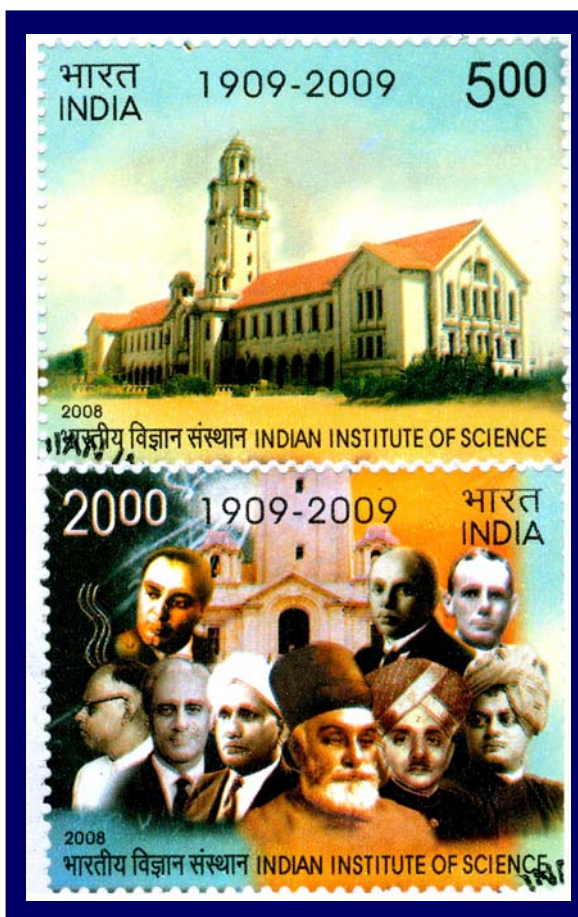
In seeking to preserve and document the history of the institution where I have worked for so long, a small group of colleagues joined me in attempting to put together an archives. IISc is a hundred years old and the preserved records are sparse. Cataloguing and organization have not been considered as necessary activities, adding to the enormity of the task at hand. We realized, very quickly,

that 'collection' must precede 'cataloguing and preservation', while 'study and analysis' are best left to future scholars who might like to dig into the past. Even as we began our task of building an archives for IISc, I came across Francis Crick's dismissive characterization of the archivists and historians of molecular biology: 'The world seems to be made up of three kinds of people; Collectors who collect and don't always much care what.

Scholars who hoard every scrap of paper. And people like myself who wonder why'. Our surroundings abound with people who share Crick's assessments of archivists and historians, making the task of collection sometimes unrewarding. But, digging into the past can on occasion reveal nuggets that provide insights into men and matters which are an integral part of institutional history.

The IISc centenary has been marked by the release of two postage stamps that provide a glimpse of an institution's past. Philatelists will undoubtedly search for legends to attach to these images. The building depicted on one stamp is of course the iconic 'tower' of the Institute; a structure erected nearly a century ago, its majesty undimmed by the passage of time. But it is the other stamp, featuring some of the men who built the institution and those who enriched it by their work, which reflects history. Most recog-

nizably in the centre, with the tower in the background, is Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, the man whose vision for 20th century India was remarkable for its clarity and foresight. J. N. Tata's act of philanthropy in creating an endowment for setting up an institution for research has been unmatched in the century that has followed. The Maharaja



of Mysore, whose generous gift of land and promise of financial support brought IISc to Bangalore and Swami Vivekananda, who provided J. N. Tata with inspiration and moral support, are easily recognizable. Some of the men who worked at the Institute over the decades and contributed to its reputation as a centre for research must be easy to name: C. V. Raman, Satish Dhawan, G. N. Ramachandran and Homi Bhabha. Featured on the top right of the stamp are two men who may be unrecognizable to many, but are key figures in the history of the Institute—Burjorji Padshah (1864–1941) and Morris Travers (1872–1961) the first Director (*Current Science*, 2008, **94**, 1109). Of the two, Padshah was undoubtedly the more remarkable man. The main building of IISc has a commemorative stone on which are inscribed the names of those who were formally associated with the governance of the institution at that time. The stone has been seasoned over the century and the inscription is hard to read. Among those whose names are etched for history there is that of B. J. Padshah. When I began the archival task a couple of years ago, I had seen the name and knew he was an associate of J. N. Tata. But I had little idea of the critical role he played in ensuring the birth of the Institute and no idea of his untiring efforts towards realizing J. N. Tata's vision for the development of research and industry in 20th century India.

Burjorji Jamasji Padshah came under J. N. Tata's wing even 'when he was a child running about the horse stables' (*TISCO Review*, August 1941, p. 613). Armed with a degree in philosophy (a background that may explain many of his views in charting a course for the infant IISc) from Elphinstone College, he became a professor at the Sind Arts College (later D. J. Sind College) in Karachi in 1887. An obituary notice in the *Sind Observer* (June 25, 1941) provides the titbit that Ratan, J. N. Tata's son, 'lived with Padshah at Karachi and was a student of the D. J. Sind College'. This obituary is remarkable for its account of Padshah's early career, noting that he held 'the record for the number of subjects he taught—Philosophy, History, English, Mathematics. . . . The Engineering Branch (which subsequently developed into a full fledged college) also received great encouragement at the hands of Prof. Padshah'. His erudition and wide ranging knowledge of a remarkable spectrum of subjects is noted in every account of Padshah's career. He was a prolific letter writer and traveller. Even casual inspection of his correspondence, some of it now available at IISc, reveals a man of formidable intellect who tenaciously pursued the goals set by J. N. Tata's vision for modern India. Padshah's contributions to the Karachi of his times may have been recognized by the naming of a road after him, although the obituary in the *Sind Observer* notes that 'the pioneering work he did for Karachi and Sind deserves a more suitable commemoration'.

Padshah's contributions to the establishment of IISc were first recognized in the early 1960s when a young American researcher, Kim Sebaly, came to India to study the factors contributing to the development of the newly established IITs. Like Columbus who set sail for India and discovered America instead, Sebaly found that the roots of technical education in India could be traced to the founding of IISc by J. N. Tata. In researching IISc's early history Sebaly discovered Burjorji Padshah. A well documented scholarly account appeared two decades after Sebaly's visit to India (Sebaly, K. P., *History of Education*, 1985, **14**, 117). Padshah was involved in all the major projects conceived by J. N. Tata, but executed after Tata's death in 1904; the hydroelectric project, IISc and the Jamshedpur steel venture. He worked hard but unsuccessfully in obtaining 'imperial status' for the technical institute at Jamshedpur, which was to provide metallurgical training to Indians in the 1920s and 1930s. In an analysis published two decades ago, Sebaly draws attention to 'Tata steel and higher technical education in India: The Padshah Plan 1916–1921' (*History of Education*, 1988, **17**, 309). He notes: 'In 1942 (one year after Padshah's death) the central government established the Council (Board) of Industrial Research which would eventually oversee the creation of the National Metallurgical Laboratory in Jamshedpur in 1950'.

Padshah emerges as an extraordinary figure who corresponded with Viceroys from Curzon to Willingdon, Gokhale, Gandhi (with whom he disagreed on satyagraha), Ratan and Dorab Tata. Descriptions of Padshah by those who knew him, highlight his encyclopaedic knowledge and his courteousness even in disagreement. For a man trained in philosophy, his abilities to manipulate and remember numbers, as recorded by his contemporaries, seem remarkable. At IISc in its early years Padshah seemed intent on nudging the institution to embark on studies in the social sciences and medicine. The 1898 document for the proposed University or Institute of Research included a 'Medical Department' and a 'Philosophical and Educational Department'. The latter was envisaged to engage in a wide variety of disciplines ranging from Indian History and Archaeology to Statistics and Economics. Padshah met resolute opposition to his ideas from the first Director of IISc, Morris Travers. Between 1907 and 1913 there was little agreement but Travers had launched the institution towards its eventual focus of science and engineering. Both men severed their association with IISc in 1914, in none too happy circumstances, but lived long enough to see the institution emerge from its early difficulties. A complete account of Padshah's life and times may reveal the strength of character, intellectual abilities, tenacity of purpose and personal commitment that are necessary in realizing a vision.

P. Balam