

## Glimpses of India's Statistical Heritage

Stories of Some Pioneers

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*Glimpses of India's Statistical Heritage*

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This is an unusual book. It gives accounts of events in the scientific lives of ten outstanding senior statisticians and probability theorists of Indian origin, in their own words. They are: R R Bahadur, D Basu, V S Huzurbazar, G Kallianpur, D B Lahiri, P R Masani, K R Nair, C R Rao, S S Shrikhande and P V Sukhatme. All of them were born during the period 1910-1924, at different places in India and Burma, from Delhi in the north to Parur (Travancore) in the far south and Rangoon in the east to Budh (Satara) in the west. Their family backgrounds were also different. Some were born to affluent parents whose financial support ensured smooth sailing in their formative years while others were less fortunate and had to strive hard. However, the intellectual struggle and the excitement of carving out new paths in uncharted areas were present in all of them, which we can clearly see by reading the book.

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the second quarter of the twentieth century. In India, the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) was established in 1931 and the first Master's programme in statistics was started by the University of Calcutta in 1941. All the pioneers covered in this volume completed their university education in the 1930's or 1940's. All of them had their initial training in mathematics and were academically oriented.

The opportunities for research in mathematics as such were severely limited then – firstly there was the depression of the thirties which was followed by instability caused by war and partition of India. The field of statistics looked relatively attractive at that time, providing more job prospects and scope for research. It seemed that the prevailing forces drew all these persons under the gravitational pull of statistics. Almost inevitably the majority of them came into contact directly or indirectly with P C Mahalanobis who was occupying the centre stage of Indian statistics from the thirties and this had varying degrees of influence in the evolution of their intellectual lives.

The situations which determined the course of life of these pioneers are as varied as they

are interesting. How crucial in Huzurbazar's career was an educational administrator's advice to stick to his original supervisor Jeffreys, in spite of an almost general consensus to the contrary among the subject-matter experts! It seems unbelievable that the noted probabilist-mathematician Kallianpur once dabbled in development economics and it was perhaps the attitude of political decision makers which brought him back into theoretical studies. Lahiri asserts that the mention of his name in the footnote of a paper published in an early volume of the journal *Sankhyā* was instrumental in his being inducted into ISI service many years later! How amazing it is that C R Rao's coming into statistics was the result of an accidental meeting with a stranger in a hotel in Calcutta, where Rao was staying to appear for an interview in the army survey unit. Sukhatme recounts how a searching query ('Ours is a poor country. How would a chair in statistics help the country?') by the BHU supremo Madan Mohan Malaviya during an interview, ultimately changed his life and so though his doctoral work was on bipartitional functions, he devoted his life entirely to the application of statistics to the fields of animal husbandry, agriculture and nutrition.

The accounts given by the authors are heterogeneous in scope, contents and length. Some describe only particular episodes or phases in their research lives whereas others give detailed descriptions of their academic or professional lives; some give the reasons behind particular ideas thrown up or

particular points of view adopted by them, whereas others give fairly long outlines of their contributions. In many cases, to appreciate the full significance of their accounts, one will have to be acquainted with statistics or probability. But their intellectual integrity shines through all the technical details. One gets the sure lesson that talent and drive apart, it is this trait which propels a researcher to make lasting contributions in his area of work.

Apart from first hand information about the authors, this volume contains interesting side lights on many well-known contemporary personalities – statisticians and others like Mahalanobis, Fisher, E S Pearson, Jeffreys, Wald, R C Bose and the Education Secretary, Sir Pheroze Kharegat. One gets to know the vicissitudes which marked the growth of the ISI and IASRI in their early days.

One rarely gets in a single book the autobiographical accounts of so many stalwarts of Indian origin who have left a mark in their field of research. Teachers and post-graduate students of statistics and mathematics can benefit by reading this volume; it may be of indirect interest to others who are curious about the history of progress in science in the Indian milieu.

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It may be regretfully noted that V S Huzurbazar passed away in 1991 and P V Sukhatme in 1997.