

Obituaries

M.K.VAINU BAPPU

Dr M.K.Vainu Bappu, President of the International Astronomical Union, and the main architect of the revival of astronomical studies in India, passed away in a Munich hospital on 1982 August 19. He had completed his fifty-fifth year only a few days before his unexpected death. Yet even in this short span of time he left several indelible marks in the course of history of astronomy.

Vainu, the only child of Manali Kukuzhi and Sunanna Bappu, was born in Madras on 1927 August 10. Bappu senior was an astronomer at the Nizamiah Observatory, Hyderabad, and young Vainu inherited from his father a deep fascination for the wide and mysterious cosmos. After obtaining his Master's degree in physics from Madras University, he joined the Harvard School of Astronomy and got his PhD in 1952. He returned to India after a year of post-doctoral work at the Hale Observatories, and was chosen to lead a team of scientists in establishing a modern observatory at Nainital. Under his leadership, a new observatory was born; he guided it in its first steps towards a fruitful future.

Bappu left Nainital to take over as Director of the Kodaikanal Observatory in 1960; his major achievement lies in the transformation of this old, and rather static, establishment into an active centre of astronomical research. The observatory, which was started by the East India Company in the late eighteenth century, had once seen top-class scientific work under astronomers like Norman Pogson and John Evershed, but was now in dire need of modernization and the replacement of its outdated observing facilities with modern equipment. Bappu employed his foresight and organizing skill in this task. He inspired another young group of astronomers to join him in a multi-pronged development programme; important points of his plan lay in the setting up of laboratories for up-to-date optical, electronic and mechanical work and the introduction of modern detectors and computer methods in observational work. Bappu's vision did not fail him; by the early 1970s a new observing station at Kavalur was producing results comparable with those of the world's leading observatories.

Bappu had formulated ambitious plans for the growth of astronomy in India. He had identified new thrust areas and convinced other physical laboratories to take up work in related projects. He played major rôles in the formation and growth of academic societies, nurtured a new international journal in astrophysics, and took great interest in the popularization of astronomy among the young. Working within the framework of financial

restrictions, he had to temper his plans with patience and restraint. Even so, a 93-inch telescope, completely designed and fabricated in India, is expected to be operational in 1983; it was Bappu who had conceived and steered this project until his last days, and it is a pity that he did not live to see the realization of his dream.

Bappu's life was woven on the loom of astronomy. Even as an undergraduate he had published papers on variable star observations, having been a keen amateur astronomer. Within a few months of his arrival at Harvard, he discovered a comet – a result of his close familiarity with the skies. During this short stay as Carnegie Fellow at the Hale Observatories, he jointly discovered an important phenomenon in stellar chromospheres – what came to be known as the Wilson–Bappu Effect. Working in India, he shed much light on subjects as diverse as the structure of the solar atmosphere, planetary rings, Wolf–Rayet stars, clusters, stellar associations and galaxies. He was intimate with the language of the ceaseless stream of photons that bring us the secrets of the stars.

Vainu was always formal – always the gentleman – but in his own charming way he managed to combine reserve with his innate friendliness and generosity. When he laughed, it was always politely; but you knew that his eyes and heart were laughing. His interest ranged from painting, music and literature to gardening and architecture; he has left ample signs of his artistic talent in the institutions he nourished to maturity. A wonderful speaker, he could hold an audience entranced with his lectures. And he loved to quote from classics; in his library, one finds volumes of Shakespeare, Scott and Kipling (freely interspersed with Wodehouse and Richard Gordon!) rubbing shoulders with Wiley, Reidel and McGraw-Hill publications in science and astronomy.

Bappu deservedly won laurels in India and abroad. He received many national awards for his excellence in scientific work. Among the tributes to him from outside India, mention may be made of the Donhoe Comet Medal (1949) awarded by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, and his election as Honorary Foreign Fellow of the Belgium Academy of Sciences and Honorary Member of the American Astronomical Society. He was elected Vice-President of the International Astronomical Union (1967–73) and became its President in 1979. The several visiting appointments he held in institutions in USA, Europe and Japan give us only a faint idea of how deeply he was involved in the development of astronomy.

Bappu's association with the Royal Astronomical Society was spaced over more than 30 years. He was elected a Fellow on 1951 December 14 and an Associate on 1978 February 10. He last visited the Society in 1981 January, during his period as President of the IAU and was admitted as an Associate on that occasion. He took the opportunity to express to the Council his thoughts on the problems met by astronomers in less wealthy countries. In his untimely death the Society has lost one of its most ardent members, who spared no efforts in the attainment of its aims.

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