

‘Beyond the Peak’

By a Correspondent

The discussion on Radhanath Sikdar at *Boi-Chitra* (second floor, College Street Coffee House), Kolkata on 16 April evening was a grand success. More than sixty Radhanath-fans filled the hall, with many standing outside. The meeting was conducted by Dr Amit Chaudury, an IT scientist. Tracing the lineage of *Boi-Chitra* to the famous C Guha Studio of Old World Calcutta, he narrated how in its present avatar, *Boi-Chitra* has been trying to build up a cultural milieu outside the crass culture of today's mainstream Kolkata. The publication of Ashish Lahiri's book *Radhanath Sikdar : Beyond the Peak* was the latest in the series of its small ventures, wholly voluntary. Next he invited Ashish Lahiri to introduce the main speaker of the evening, Ms Ajana Chaudhury, a former Director of the Meteorological Office, Kolkata and Honorary Research Fellow, The Asiatic Society.

Mr Lahiri narrated how, while browsing the net for new information on Radhanath Sikdar (1813-1870), he had stumbled upon the excellent site “Cloud and Sunshine” (with a separate section on Sikdar) maintained by Prof R R Kelkar of Pune. It was through Prof Kelkar's kind advice that Lahiri came in touch with Ajana Chaudhury, a septuagenarian, who has been doing formidable research on Sikdar for many years. Ill-health had stopped her from giving her research a complete shape. Detailing some of her research on Sikdar and thanking her for guiding him in unearthing some valuable material, Lahiri then requested Ms Chaudhury to take the floor.

The lady, frail and weak-sighted but graceful, held the audience spellbound for an hour with her eloquence. While praising Lahiri's effort, she showed the 'gaps' in his book and hoped that with further research, which is bound to be strenuous, these would be filled.

She, herself a meteorologist, went into some technical detail to bring out the nature of Radhanath's meteorological contributions and innovations, pointing it out that Radhanath was equally competent and original in both meteorology and geodetic surveying. She also cited numerous references to bring out the various phases of the 'controversy' about Mount Everest. Some sources clearly mention that it was Sikdar who made the crucial final-stage calculations from the raw data supplied by other observers; others deny his role altogether, some blowing hot and cold on the issue, some even going to the extent of claiming that the calculations were made not at the Calcutta office of the Survey of India at all, but at Dehra Dun. She showed that SOI documents themselves prove otherwise. Ms Chaudhury, however, made the significant point that calculating the height of 'Peak XV' was relatively a minor achievement of Sikdar's; his real brilliance lay in the innovative application of spherical trigonometry, in astronomy and in meteorology.

She dealt on a series of scandalous episodes of injustice against Sikdar. 1) The famous report by Blanford and Gastrell on the great Calcutta storm of 1864 extensively uses data collected by Sikdar, without giving him credit; 2) the same report mentions one non-existent Rajnath Sen, but not Radhanath Sikdar! 3) Later, Blanford, while maintaining that the meteorological data collected during 1852-1876 were "the firmest piece of our knowledge of the climate of Calcutta", forgot to mention that Sikdar was the Superintendent of the Survey Observatory for the period 1852-1862; 4) Sikdar's name was wiped out from the third (1875) edition of the Survey Manual compiled by Smyth and Thuillier, the most important scientific and technical parts of which were acknowledged in the first two editions (1851 and 1855) to be written entirely by Sikdar; 5) Piddington was given credit for introducing certain meteorological innovations actually done by Radhanath; 6) George Everest extolled the 'rare mathematical genius' of Sikdar and at the same time acquiesced in fining Sikdar the stupendous sum of Rs.200/- (in 1843!) for the 'crime' of taking up the tortured coolies' cause; 7) George Everest's dual role was further revealed when he, fourteen years after his retirement in 1843, accepted the appellation 'Mount Everest', although it was he who had all along strictly enforced the practice that all known peaks must retain their local names (e.g., Kanchenjunga).

However, these things, painful as they were, were only to be expected in a colonial set-up. But, Ms Chaudhury lamented that even in post-1947 India, this tradition of criminal neglect continues. The Centenary volume of the Meteorological Department of India, 1975 does not even mention Sikdar! With sarcasm, she hoped that maybe in the bi-centenary volume, 2075, the 'mistake' would be corrected!

A very lively question-answer session followed. Samar Bagchi, former Director, Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Kolkata, suggested that if specific and incontrovertible data on Sikdar were made available to him by the Boi-Chitra team, he might use his good offices to try to open a gallery on Sikdar at the BITM in 2013 to commemorate his bi-centenary. Bagchi also wanted to know how Sikdar reacted to the 1857 Rebellion. Ms Chaudhury replied that although no specific facts in this regard are known, circumstantial evidences go to show that Sikdar had all along defied his British bosses. According to her, his nationalism was beyond reproach, which was why he had become involved in so many imbroglios.

While appreciating Sikdar's originality, Dr Pradip Majumdar, the well-known historian of Indian mathematics, wondered whether Sikdar combined some of the traditional Indian mathematical methods with the new mathematics he learned at the Hindu College? This could be an interesting area of research. Dr Majumdar also opined that the British brand of mathematics had hampered the development of Indian mathematical genius, so that even today Indians lag behind the philosophical-mathematical achievements of the French and the Italians.

Dr Santanu Chakravarty, researcher in history of science, wondered whether people are making too much of the colonial nature of the injustice meted out to Sikdar; for such injustice, deplorable as it is, has been part of India's Brahminical culture throughout. As a Brahmin, Sikdar himself was a part of that oppressive tradition. Moreover, such injustice is a part of any structured state, irrespective of whether it is colonial or not, present-day India included. He, however, noted with appreciation the categorical instances given in Lahiri's monograph of the naked racial arrogance of some of the British surveyors.

Ashish Lahiri noted with delight that a scholar of Prof Martin Bernal's eminence has taken note of his little book. Prof Bernal has commented that given the fact of the British Raj, such acts of injustice were perhaps only to be expected. Lahiri also gratefully mentioned Prof R R Kelkar's and Anjan Sen Sarma's tremendous enthusiasm in reinstating Sikdar to his deserved glory. Anjan Sen Sarma, he noted, was a collaborator of Ms Chaudhury's.

Jugalkanti Roy, a senior science journalist proposed that instead of dwelling of who has said what about Sikdar, it is better concentrate on digging out his actual works (an uphill task, of course) and make an objective appraisal of his greatness as a scientist. Regarding changing the name Mount Everest, his suggestion was to make a representation to the Royal Geographical Society.

Sutapa Bandyopadhyay, singer-cum-social activist, said she was proud to be a resident of Chandan-nagar, a one-time French colony, where Sikdar spent his last years and where a road has been named after him. She promised to fish out details of Sikdar's last years from the municipality records there.

Jibananda Chatterjee was unhappy that in the din raised about Sikdar the scientist and the beef-eating Derozian, perhaps Sikdar the man was being forgotten.

Dr Sankar Nath, a cancer-specialist and Radhanath-enthusiast and Dr Chittabrata Palit, the eminent historian, were present at the meeting.

A proposal to form a committee that will coordinate research on, and publish an authentic biography of, Sikdar was mooted. Discussion on the proposal will be held soon.

Many more questions were in the offing, but it was well into the evening. So, on Samar Bagchi's suggestion, Sutapa Bandyopadhyay sang a befitting song to close the meeting. □