

REMEMBERING THE 'PLAN MAN' OF INDIA

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P.C. Mahalanobis | Photo Credit: THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

Today, June 29, is national 'Statistics Day', in 'recognition of the contributions made by Prof. Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, the 'Plan Man' of India; it is also his birthday. It was P.C. Mahalanobis, who established a strong statistical culture in India and nourished it diligently through his lifelong endeavours. Incidentally, June 28 also marked 50 years since his passing. Revisiting the life of India's statistical inheritance from P.C. Mahalanobis is of utmost importance as various kinds of concerns regarding data collection, its publication, and data quality have emerged in recent years.

Mahalanobis certainly believed data to be instrumental in efficient planning for national and human development. Planning in the newly independent nation in the 1950s was largely based on the data obtained from various surveys. His fairytale-type success story is due to the blending of his talent with his dedication that thrives into perfection. The socio-political situation and Jawaharlal Nehru's reliance on Mahalanobis certainly helped.

At the centenary of Rabindranath Tagore's Visva Bharati University — which Mahalanobis was instrumental in shaping in its most difficult formative years — it might be very interesting to discuss the [relationship between two of the greatest Bengali stalwarts, i.e., Tagore and Mahalanobis](#). Tagore treated Mahalanobis as a close confidant, despite an age gap of 32 years, and they shared a three decades long friendship. Mahalanobis explained to Rani, his future wife: "It will be wrong to say he [Tagore] is my Guru..., 'I love him' is the right expression."

Young Mahalanobis came to know about statistics, the subject, 'by chance' when, in 1915, his voyage to India from England was delayed. However, it is possible that Tagore was instrumental in bringing Mahalanobis, a professor of physics at Calcutta's Presidency College, into formal statistical activities, when, in 1917, he introduced him to the scholar and educator, Brajendranath Seal, who asked Mahalanobis to analyse the examination records of Calcutta University. It was perhaps Mahalanobis's first statistical venture with real-life data.

Seventeen-year-old Mahalanobis first met Tagore at Santiniketan in 1910. Then, as Satyajit Ray wrote, "When Rabindranath came to London in 1912 with his translation of *Gitanjali*, Prasantachandra, Kedarnath [Chattopadhyay] and my father [the Poet and writer Sukumar Roy] were present. He [Sukumar] mentions gathering in Rothenstein's house more than once in his letters."

The bonding between Tagore and Mahalanobis, however, was strengthened. In 1919, when Tagore had written a public letter to Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, protesting the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and renouncing knighthood, he asked Mahalanobis to read it first. Mahalanobis accompanied Tagore on many of his international visits, mostly in the 1920s. He often documented the details of such trips with rigour. With a statistician's perfection, Mahalanobis wrote a series of essays titled 'Rabindra Parichay' ('Introduction to Rabindra') for the prestigious Bengali magazine, *Probashi*. He also wrote a book, *Rabindranath Tagore's Visit to Canada* in 1929. When Tagore met Einstein in 1930, Mahalanobis was also with him. In fact, Einstein asked Tagore about a young scientist named Bose. Tagore was surprised as Jagadish Chandra Bose, Tagore's friend, was certainly no longer a young man. Mahalanobis then informed Tagore about Satyendra Nath Bose, another doyen, who would be ever-remembered for Boson, at least.

Mahalanobis introduced Tagore to cinema when, in 1917, he took Nitin Bose, the father of cinema technique, to Bolpur. At the request of Tagore, Nitin Bose photographed a dance recital of girls. The 17-minute film was processed in an improvised lab in Mahalanobis' laboratory at Presidency College. Mahalanobis, at the Presidency College during that period, was a mixture of physicist and statistician. More precisely, a physicist was turning into a statistician, slowly but steadily. His physics background certainly helped shape his statistical ideology and perfection, which, in effect, yielded trustworthiness in his surveys, methodologies, and analyses.

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Mahalanobis established the Statistical Laboratory within the Baker Laboratory at Presidency College. Tagore also visited the Statistical Laboratory several times. In fact, it was Tagore who coined the Bengali word, 'Rashibijnan' for 'Statistics', and there is little doubt that this was only due to the bonding between Tagore and Mahalanobis. In 1933, Mahalanobis founded *Sankhy*, the *Indian Journal of Statistics*. In the first issue of the second volume of *Sankhy*, Tagore depicted Statistics as "the dance steps of numbers in the arena of time and space, which weave the maya of appearance, the incessant flow of changes that ever is and is not".

Mahalanobis, of course, helped Tagore immensely in his dream project — the founding of Visva Bharati. He not only served as a joint secretary of Visva Bharati for 10 years from the beginning but he was also a member of the governing body, executive council, academic council, and the agricultural board. Also, Mahalanobis' contribution to preparing Tagore's life calendar is astonishing. He even corrected some errors here and in also the bibliography prepared by the famous Bengali writer, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay. When Tagore modified his writings, he wanted to destroy the earlier drafts. Mahalanobis, however, preserved them – a clear conflict between the attitudes of a poet and a statistician. Detailing and perfection were an inherent nature of Mahalanobis. These were also reflected in his surveys and data collection.

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Tagore's dance drama, 'Basanta' (meaning 'Spring'), had a premier at the Calcutta University institute auditorium on Mahalanobis' marriage day. Tagore attended the marriage ceremony after the show. He presented them with the manuscript of 'Basanta'. Such a special bonding with the poet, certainly, did supply Mahalanobis with a different kind of light — that would help him create a rich statistical legacy for the country, and a trustworthy system of data collection and analyses. The system worked nicely for a few decades even after his demise.

There is little denying that data, in general, is on an ever-expanding pathway and is growing exponentially. Statistics, the subject, is also changing amid a wave of data science. One needs to adopt, for sure. Attempts such as transforming the Planning Commission to NITI Aayog or merging the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) with the Central Statistical Office (CSO) to form the National Statistical Office (NSO) may not be enough though. One certainly misses a person of the stature of Mahalanobis at the helm of the system. Also, the Mahalanobis-type innovation, dedication, and diligence are dearly missed.

Atanu Biswas is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

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