

Mahendra Lal Sirkar - Science Visionary

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Centenary of Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru Stamp India-2000

Mahendra Lal Sirkar (1833-1904) was born in 1833 in a poor family at Kolkata. He lost both parents early in life and was brought up by his maternal uncle. He learned Bengali and English from home tutors, and secured admission to Hare School as a free student, in 1840. At the school David Hare, a great educationist made a lasting impression on him. Later he left for Calcutta Medical College, as he was bent upon studying medicine. Sirkar obtained his IMS in 1861 and MD degree in 1863. (Second MD of the then Calcutta University).

Although educated in modern system of medicine, he was attracted by Homoeopathy after reading William Morgan's book. Convinced with the alternative medicine, he soon read a paper "the supposed uncertainty of medical science" at the British Medical Association meeting (1867), and advocated support for homeopathy. BMA disapproved his stand and dismissed him from the Association. Although ostracized for his interest in homoeopathy, his practice in modern medicine rose steadily. Soon Mahendra found himself at the top of



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his profession with an unchallenged supremacy and also went on to be a leading homoeopath practitioner of India.

Amidst the demands of his time, he initiated the historic science movement in August 1869, by starting it as a science class at his residence, every Sunday. His pamphlets brought enthusiastic response from students and several newspapers. Over Rs/- 8,000 were received as donations. With these funds the **Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS)** came into being on 29th July 1876, with Mahendra Lal as the Secretary. The foundation stone was laid by Lt. Governor Sir Richard Temple, while Viceroy agreed to become the Patron. The visionary in Sirkar relentlessly carried the flame of Indian science with zeal and optimism. Within few decades, **Sir C. V. Raman** brought in vindication of the pioneer's vision. It is at the laboratory of IACS, that the legendary Raman discovered Noble Prize winning Raman Effect in 1928. Raman paid a rich tribute to Sirkar during a Civic reception in Calcutta when he received Nobel Prize in physics (1931). Raman found that light scattered by the molecules in a solution was altered in wavelength. From

the nature of alteration, deduction could be made about the structure of the molecule. The principle of molecules altering wavelengths of the light (Raman spectrum) indirectly became the bases for CT Scans, nuclear magnetic resonance or MRI imaging.

Mahendralal became Hon. Magistrate and Sheriff of Calcutta (1883), and was made a C. I. E. (1887). In 1898, he was honored with a Doctor of Law degree by Calcutta University.

In the course of his career, he treated several notable people, like noted author Bankimchandra, Maharaja of Tripura and the great ascetic **Ramakrishna Paramhansa**. Sirkar visited the spiritual giant several times between October 1885 and August 1886. He diagnosed his disease as cancer of the throat and made a plea to him to stop his extensive discourses, singing, and dancing. However, Ramakrishna did not heed his advice.

In 1898 Sir J.N.Tata (1839-1904) bequeathed a part of his property, worth Rs/- 30 Lakhs toward establishment of a new institute of science, which took shape as **IIS** at Bangalore. Mahendra Lal was disillusioned with his countrymen, particularly rich Bengalis; He felt that Bengal had rejected its own 30 yrs old **IACS**. At one of the meetings, he concluded his speech with a couplet:

"Now my weary lips I close
Leave me, leave me to repose"

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