Ganesh Prasad

(1876 - 1935)
(The Father of Mathematical Researches in India)

Dr. Ganesh Prasad was born on the 15th November, 1876 at Ballia, U.P. He belonged to a well-to-do Srivastava Kayasth family. He had his early education at the Government High School, Ballia from where he passed the matriculation examination in 1891 in the First Division. Later on he studied at the Muir Central College, Allahabad, where he took his B.A. degree in 1895 with first class honours in mathematics. After taking his M.A. degree from Allahabad and Calcutta Universities and D.Sc. from Allahabad in 1898, he proceeded to Cambridge for higher studies in 1899 as a Government of India scholar. By then, he had already served as a lecturer at the Kayasth Pathshala, Allahabad, and at the Muir Central College, Allahabad, for about two years.

During his stay at Cambridge, he studied with men like Hobson, Forsyth, Baker and Lamour. While at Cambridge, he sat for the Adam's prize competition. None of the competitors was awarded the prize, and so Dr. Prasad went to Gottingen and showed his paper entitled `On the constitution of matter and the analytical theories of heat', the one he had submitted for the Adam's prize competition, to Prof. Klein, who appreciated it very much and honoured him by getting the paper published in the Gottingen Abhandllingen. While at Gottingen, he came into contact with men like Sommerfeld, David Hilbert and Georg Cantor.

After five years of stay abroad, Dr. Prasad returned to India in 1904 and was appointed additional professor of mathematics at the Muir Central College, Allahabad. Within a year of his appointment at Allahabad, Mahamahopadhyay Pt. Sudharkar Dwivedi, then head of the department of mathematics at the Queen's College, Banaras retired, and Dr. Prasad was sent there. He was the only professor of mathematics there and he had to teach all the four degree classes. Before going to the college, he used to help two students in preparing for the D.Sc. degree.

In 1914, Sir Asutosh Mukherji, the then Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, invited him to occupy the Ras Behari Ghosh chair of Applied Mathematics. After staying for four years at Calcutta, he came back to Banaras in 1917 to serve as the professor of mathematics at the Banaras Hindu University and honorary principal of the Central Hindu College, Banaras.

Here he completely reorganized the teaching of mathematics. In 1923, he was once again invited to Calcutta, this time to occupy the chair of Hardinge Professor of Mathematics. He continued in this post till his death on 9th March, 1935 while attending a meeting of the Agra University.

Dr. Prasad was elected president of the Calcutta Mathematical Society in 1924 and the vice-president of the Indian Association for the Advancement of Science, Calcutta and held both these offices till his last. He was a founder member and Fellow of the National Institute of Sciences, India (now Indian National Science Academy). He was also one of the founders of the Agra University.

Dr. Prasad made many important and lasting contributions to mathematics. He published over fifty papers in various Indian and foreign research journals and wrote 11 books of which `A Treatise on Spherical Harmonics and the Functions of Bessel and Lame' has become almost a classic work. He worked on a variety of subjects which included the Theory of Potentials, Theory of Functions of a Real variable, Fourier series, Theory of surfaces, etc. At the time of his death, he was engaged in writing a paper on the expansion of an arbitrary function with infinite zeros. This paper, if completed, would have been his most valuable contribution to mathematics.

Dr. Prasad had a great love for research. He could do anything to promote research. He built up strong centres of mathematical research both at Banaras and at Calcutta, during his stay at both these places. While at Banaras, he founded the Banaras Mathematical Society. Research scholars from all parts of the country used to flock around him for carrying on research in mathematics. He, too, had a great love for his students and always tried to help them in every possible way. He inspired many young researches. His students include names like the late Dr. A.N. Singh, Dr. Gorakh Prasad, Dr. R.S. Varma, Dr. B.N. Prasad, Dr. N.G. Shabde and Dr. R.D. Mishra.

Dr. Prasad did a lot for the advancement of education in general, too. He took special pains for the introduction of compulsory primary education in villages in U.P. He donated a sum of Rs. 22,000 for the education of girls in Ballia, and a sum of Rs. Two lakh for the toppers at the M.A. and M.Sc. examinations of the Agra University. He donated large sums of money to the Allahabad and Banaras Universities also.

Dr. Prasad was a great lover of Hindi. He had a great hand in getting Hindi introduced as a subject of study in the university classes. He also got the first volume of his book entitled `Some great mathematicians of the nineteenth century' translated into Hindi.

Dr. Prasad's life was one of simple living and high thinking. He was extremely simple in his habits and exercised very strict self-discipline. His sense of punctuality and regard for time were simply marvellous. While he was at Banars, he had no interest other than that of mathematics. Frankness also was one of his virtues. His life could very aptly be described as that of a saint of the ancient times living in the twentieth century.