Diary speak of how a Puneite became Senior Wrangler in imperial England

UTE by chance, while on a visit to London, I came across a diary kept by Sir Raghunath Purushottam Pranjpe. The 1900 diary was rescued by Madhu Abyankar from a heap of papers to be disposed as trash. Fortunately, it was in good condition and Madhu readily gave me a photocopy. For me, it was a veritable treasure—because, in 1899, he had become India’s first Senior Wrangler. To generations of Indian students of mathematics at Cambridge he was one of the idols to emulate.

A Senior Wrangler was the student who performed best in the Part I of the Mathematical Tripos—the mathematical test at Cambridge University which had the reputation of being the toughest of its kind. Traditionally, mathematics has always enjoyed great prestige at Cambridge and the Tripos is its oldest examination. While the results of other subjects were simply pasted on the notice boards, the result of the Maths Tripos is ceremonially read out by the Chairman of Examiners from the inner balcony of the Senate House, when the clock at the neighbouring University Church of St Mary’s strikes nine in the morning. In earlier times all Wranglers—students who had attained first class—were ranked in order of merit with the Senior Wrangler topping the list. A mark of the distinction enjoyed by the Senior Wrangler was that he was the first graduate to be presented to the Vice Chancellor for award of the degree.

Later, since the high honour led to severe competition, sometimes an unhealthy one, ranking was abolished by the University in 1909. Till then there were only two Senior Wranglers from India, Pranjpe being the first of the two.

His diary is a period piece reflecting how an Indian student, back in the 19th century, lived in Cambridge and prepared for a difficult examination in a very competitive and alien atmosphere, and his social interaction at a time when the British Empire was as its zenith.

An example of the situation at the age narrated by him in his autobiography, Eighty Four Not Out is quite revealing. When he became Senior Wrangler, the British papers highlighted the news and Viceroy Lord Curzon sent a congratulatory message to Pranjpe’s old college, the Fergusson College in Pune. However, for this spontaneous act of notoriety, the Viceroy was told off by then Secretary of State for India, because the college was known for sympathising with freedom fighters. Even Pranjpe’s scholarship from the Government of India was renewed with difficulty because he had been a volunteer for the Indian National Congress during its 1896 session in Pune.

This diary covers the time when Pranjpe continued at Cambridge with the more research-oriented Part II of Mathematical Tripos. Then, he was in the distinguished company of G H Hardy, the pure mathematician who later became mentor and co-worker of celebrated genius Ramanujan, and James Jeans whose contributions to astrophysics continue to inspire present generations. When the results were announced, he was placed in the higher echelon of the first class along with Hardy, with Jeans falling one notch below. The diary records the days preceding the examination. It reflects Pranjpe’s tension and anxiety. His comments—everything appears to have gone out of my head and seems quite new. I must buck tomorrow—

Jayant Nalikar (right) with Wrangler Pranjpe in 1900

Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics Emeritus Professor Jayant Nalikar talks about Raghunath Purushottam Pranjpe—India’s first Senior Wrangler in Cambridge. While in London, Nalikar found the diary kept by the mathematician in 1900. Through its pages spill out glimpses of how an Indian studied in the hallowed portals of Cambridge, rubbing shoulders with fellow mathematician G H Hardy, his activities and impressions of the Boer War, and of Mathematics Tripos. Then, he was in the distinguished company of G H Hardy, the pure mathematician who later became mentor and co-worker of celebrated genius Ramanujan, and James Jeans whose contributions to astrophysics continue to inspire present generations.

There does not appear to be any likelihood of my doing anything good there—may ring a bell in the minds of the most serious students having pre-examination jitters.

The notes provide a glimpse into his recreational activities. Tennis and cards seem to feature regularly. I believe his liking for besique continued to his final days (he died at 90). There are occasional references to his dining at Munshi’s—an eating place where Indian students could get a Hindustani meal.

There is also mention of him buying a bicycle for 11 guineas, with a small additional payment for a lamp. Pranjpe enjoyed bicycle rides. He also mentions watching cricket, and records watching a magnificent 158 scored by Ranji against the University at the Fenner’s ground.

The pages also reveal that letters from home took several weeks. The news of the death of his wife reached Pranjpe a month later. So did occasional bulletins of plague rampant in Murdi, Pranjpe’s village in the Konkan.

OCCASIONAL entries on the progress of the Boer War are found in the diary—with Pranjpe being more sympathetic to the Boers rather than the imperialist British. The intelligentsia probably felt the same. Thus entries like Mafeking, Pretoria, Johannesburg and Ladysmith to relate to the battles taking place. Pranjpe also gives the expenses incurred on big and small items—items that would cost several pounds today were available for a few shillings. The handwritten information printed in the early pages lists the Royal Family followed by the British Cabinet with salaries of the ministers in brackets. The Prime Minister drew 5,000 pounds and the income tax rates were a few pence. It must have been good to be rich in imperial Britain. Finally, as a Cambridge graduatearry Pranjpe when, after visiting Oxford, he found it prettier than Cambridge.