

NEWS

SYMPOSIUM ON AL-BĪRŪNĪ AND THE INDIAN SCIENCES

A two-day Symposium on al-Bīrūnī and the Indian Sciences was held in the premises of the Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi, on November 8–9, 1971. Organized as a part of the UNESCO Project on the Development of Science in Central Asia during 9–13th centuries A.D., with which the Indian National Science Academy has been associated, the Symposium was attended by 90 scholars including 6 from foreign countries—from the U.S.S.R. 2, Afghanistan 1, Iran 1, Lebanon 1 and Kuwait 1.

The main object of the Symposium was to discuss and to evaluate from the point of view of history of science the varied accounts of Indian sciences as reflected in the works of al-Bīrūnī who visited India in the early part of the eleventh century A.D. and sojourned in the western and northern parts of India for over a decade. In his introductory remarks at the Inaugural Session, Prof. F. C. Auluck, Convener of the Organizing Committee for the Symposium, stressed the need for a proper perspective in order to understand the significant contributions of Central Asia which admittedly played a major role in the evolution of ideas and technological practices in the ancient and medieval periods. He also entered a plea that the universities of the region should take up studies in History of Science and exchange of scholars in this field.

Inaugurating the Symposium, Prof. B. R. Seshachar, President of the Academy, emphasized the need for more intensive studies in History of Science so as to obtain not only an integrated picture of the development of science but also emphasize the scientific tradition of the country. He exhorted that the universities must play an ever increasing role in the teaching of and research in History of Science. In view of the wealth of source materials available in India in different languages and also the need for studying them intensively as well as in an inter-disciplinary manner, Prof. Seshachar suggested that the Academy would be glad to consider the feasibility of establishing an Institute for History of Science under its auspices.

He described al-Bīrūnī as a man of colossal intellectual proportions whose sweep and breadth of learning encompassed a vast area of intellectual activity of the times. Al-Bīrūnī came to India at the time when the scientific activities in India as well as in Central Asia were at their peak. He was a constructive genius, great synthesizer and true scientist of that age. Prof. Seshachar hoped that al-Bīrūnī's comprehensive accounts of the Indian sciences would be discussed at the Symposium critically and intensively. He paid a special tribute to the foreign participants.

Messages wishing the Symposium all success were received, among others, from the President, Vice-President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of State for Education and Social Welfare, Government of India, Dr. Sarva-palli Radhakrishnan, Prof. Rene Meheu, Director-General, UNESCO, Paris, and the Secretary, the British Academy, London.

Twenty-two papers were presented and discussed at the Symposium under the following 4 Sessions:

(1) Al-Birūnī's sources; (2) Indian Sciences as reflected in al-Birūnī's works; (3) Al-Birūnī as synthesizer and transmitter of scientific ideas; (4) Other aspects on al-Birūnī from the point of view of History of Science.

In his exhaustive paper, Dr. Ajay Mitra Shastri critically examined the Sanskrit sources of al-Birūnī. Dr. (Mrs.) Bina Chatterjee gave an account of al-Birūnī's knowledge of Indian Astronomy with reference to the works of the outstanding Indian astronomer, Brahmagupta (seventh century A.D.). Observations of al-Birūnī on the Hindu methods of determining the terrestrial latitudes and longitudes were described by Shri S. N. Sen, while Dr. A. K. Bag threw light on Indian arithmetic in al-Birūnī's account of India. Shri V. B. Mainkar dealt with metrology of India as portrayed by al-Birūnī. Dr. B. K. Nayar examined critically al-Birūnī's understanding of Sanskrit prosody, as also his ideas on the method of science communication in India at that time.

The current trends in studies on al-Birūnī in the U.S.S.R. were highlighted by Academician B. G. Gafurov in his paper which, in his absence, was presented by Prof. Bongard Levin. Academician M. S. Asimov dealt with al-Birūnī's work in Dari language entitled (tr.) "The Book of Learning the Elements of the Art of Astronomy". Prof. Zaryab Khoyee presented an account of the historiography of al-Birūnī, while Prof. Abdul Hayee Habibi threw fresh light on Birūn, where al-Birūnī was born. In his view Birūn was a city in northern Khorasan.

Dr. S. M. R. Ansari discussed in detail the physical researches of al-Birūnī with particular reference to determinations of specific gravities. Shri Aziz Tonki brought out, with illustrations, the system of roads and cities in India as described by al-Birūnī, while Dr. S. M. Z. Alavi gave an account of the geographical knowledge of al-Birūnī.

The Symposium was indeed a forum for exchange of ideas among scholars well-versed in Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. The discussions on the role of al-Birūnī as synthesizer and transmitter of scientific knowledge of his time, which was one of the themes of the Symposium, pointed to the necessity of further intensive studies in this direction.

The following recommendations were adopted at the Plenary Session of the Symposium:

1. The Indian National Science Academy be requested to explore, with the assistance of UNESCO, the possibility of publishing the Proceedings of the Symposium in the major languages of the world.

The Proceedings should also contain a critical introduction to the life of al-Birūnī as also the consolidated bibliography of his works.

The scholars who presented their papers at the Symposium be requested to send their revised papers to the Academy by the end of January 1972, for incorporation into the Proceedings.

2. Critical and facsimile editions of the major works of al-Birūnī be brought out by collating the different manuscripts concerned so that they would serve as authentic source materials for further interpretative studies on al-Birūnī.

3. Efforts be made to locate the manuscripts of such sources cited by al-Birūnī in his different writings as have not been located so far.

4. Translations of al-Birūnī's works into different languages be published.

5. UNESCO be requested to constitute an International Committee to coordinate and promote studies on al-Birūnī and his role in the Development of Science.

6. In 1973, the thousandth birth anniversary of al-Birūnī be celebrated all over the world.

Presiding over the Plenary Session, Prof. B. R. Seshachar said that the Academy would be glad to institute one or two fellowships for specialized studies on al-Birūnī and to undertake, within its own resources, the publication of his important works. He stressed that the synthetic outlook and assimilative spirit of al-Birūnī is worthy of emulation even at this time when the similarities are overlooked and differences magnified among different culture areas.

B. V. SUBBARAYAPPA
Member-Secretary
Organizing Committee