



Astronomer R. G. Chandra



Young R. G. Chandra



R. G. Chandra with his Telescope

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Letter to the editor

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Radha G. Chandra: A little-known Indian Astronomer and the AAVSO

During the British rule of India, Scientific advancement in Europe and America was a strong influence on some celebrated Indians. Radha Gobinda Chandra is one. Chandra was born on July 16, 1878 in the village of Jessore, now in Bangladesh. His academic career was brief. He chose not to pursue higher education. In his boyhood he became interested in the stars and planets. In 1910 when Halley's Comet appeared. Chandra took the opportunity to study it with simple binoculars. He was at this time a petty clerk in the collector's office of Jessore. After his day's toil he kept meticulous records of his astronomical observations. In 1912 he purchased a 3-inch refractor from England.

On June 8, 1918. Chandra observed a new bright nova in the constellation aquila. Nova aquilae 3. He reported it to the Director of the Harvard College Observatory and co-founder of the AAVSO. Edward C. Pickering. After this contact with Pickering Chandra became an active member of the AAVSO, regularly contributing his observations.

Besides the AAVSO Chandra was a member of the American Meteor Society, the American Museum of Natural History, the Lyon Observatory in France, and the British Astronomical Association.

From whatever is available of his old record, it appears that contemporary astronomers attached a great importance to the observations made by Chandra. The merit of his observation is apparent from the letters written by Howard O. Eaton, recording Secretary of the AAVSO on May 19, 1920. In this letter he states.

I want to thank you very much for the splendid list of observations of variable stars, which you have been sending to the AAVSO. To help Chandra in his meticulous study on observational astronomy, in 1926 Harvard College and Mr. Charles Elmer presented him with a 6.25-inch telescope on loan, which was sent to his native village far from the United States. In the later years of his life, when Chandra could no longer make observations, he tried to return the telescope to Harvard. Ultimately however, the telescope was given to the late M.K.V. Bappu, an Indian astronomer who was the former Director of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics. He kept this historic telescope in the Kavalur Observatory, India, as a tribute to the dedicated work of Chandra.

The Education Department of France honored Chandra by conferring on him the title “Officer d’Academie” in 1928.

In June 1946, the AAVSO published an Honor Roll of those individuals who had contributed 10,000 or more observations on variable stars. The roll contained 25 names from all over the world, one of whom was Chandra. In 1947, he was elected to honorary membership in the AAVSO. Chandra contributed 37,215 variable star observations to the AAVSO from 1919 to 1954.

Harlow Shapley, Director of Harvard College Observatory, very aptly wrote to Chandra on December 12, 1950.

“The American Association of Variable Star Observers, with Head-quarters at the Harvard Observatory, is honored to salute you as one of its important contributors from abroad.”

The outstanding contributions of R.G Chandra to the field of variable star help to a great extent in the classification of these stars. Chandra maintained a life-like ancient Indian “Rishi” (saint) and died on April 3, 1975 at the age of 97. It is unfortunate that no serious attempt has so far been made to explore the complete works of Chandra. His scientific papers and articles are scattered in various journals and he wrote several books on astronomy that are still in manuscript formal. A man without any form education or an equipped observatory. But only with extreme devotion and hard work Chandra made his life a beacon to every serious voyager in the domain of science.

Dr. R. Chakrabarti