

MELBOURNE
CSA MELBOURNE CHAPTER
MEETING - SUNDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2022
TOPIC: LIFE AND TIMES OF PROF ALLEN ABRAHAM (1865-1922)
SPEAKER: LOGAN THURAIRATNAM

Hemal Gurusinghe, Convenor of the Melbourne Chapter presided over a well-attended meeting which featured a talk by Logan Thurairatnam on the life and achievements of Prof Allen Abraham, the multi-talented astronomer and academic.

Before proceedings began, the chairman called upon Hugh Karunanayake the Founding President of CSA to make a brief presentation on the formation of the Society, to mark its 25th year of service. Hugh made a brief recapitulation of the formation of the Society which he thought was due to the collaborative effort from like-minded individuals with a common interest in preserving the heritage of the richly endowed country. He made pointed reference to the formation of the Melbourne Chapter whose first President was Dr Srilal Fernando, ably assisted by a coterie of dedicated members most of whom have unfortunately passed on and are no longer with us, but the excellent record of service continues.

Logan's informative presentation about his extraordinarily talented kinsman kept the audience enthralled. His presentation was supported by detailed historically recorded facts. Prof Abraham who was orphaned at the age of 11 years was placed in the care of American Missionaries who provided him access to an excellent education he received first at Union College, Tellipallai and later at Jaffna College. He had the rare distinction of holding two chairs at Jaffna College, in Mathematics and in Tamil which he held until his death in 1922 at the age of 57 years.

A man gifted with a rare intellectual curiosity, Prof Abraham was deeply interested in astronomy, and had access to the college telescope for his observations. The return of Halley's comet in 1910 was an event that was eagerly awaited by the scientific world, and during a presentation he made at Karaitivu on 26 March 1910, which was reported in the Ceylon Observer of two days later, the professor predicted that the comet would be visible to the naked eye in mid April 1910. He proved his prediction correct when he and his students became the first persons in the world to see and record the comet sighting. That occurred on 14 April 1910 and was duly recorded in the Jaffna College Miscellany of June 1910.

His other predictions including one that foresaw Venus affecting the motion of the comet was explained in detail to the audience by the speaker. Among the Professors other talents was the composition of Christian lyrics. Twelve of his compositions are in the hymn book of the Church of South India. Many of the lyrics have an indigenous base and are rooted in Hindu devotional songs. His efforts constituted a process by which indigenous culture was woven into the practice of Christianity, a feature which has since gathered momentum. Prof Abraham was also an

indefatigable proponent of temperance, a factor behind Karaitivu remaining "dry". The speaker concluded his talk by adverting to the publication of the biography of Prof Abraham on his 100th death anniversary and its listing in the NASA-Harvard Astrophysics Data System as well as in the Houghton Library (Harvard University), Royal Astronomical Society, British Library, and the State Library of Victoria. The presentation was followed by a question and answer session dealt with admirably by the speaker Logan Thurairatnam.

Hugh Karunanayake

References:

<https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/>

Allen Abraham (Ambalavanar Subramaniam) and the Halley's Comet, (2021) Neptune Publications



Hemal Gurusinghe kicking the meeting off



Hugh explaining the CSA's 25 years of existence



Speaker Logan Thurairatnam