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ISEC, CALCUTTA: THE PIONER CENTRE FOR STATISTICAL TRAINING OF GOVERNMENT SPONSORED STATISTICIANS FROM DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF THE THIRD WORLD, MAINLY FROM ASIA AND THE FAR EAST

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1. Introdution

In 1916 W.T. King in his book (King, 1916) attributes the appellation "Father of Statistics" to Gottfrid Achenwall of Germany who first applied the term "statistics" in 1746 to a series of lectures primarily about data concerning the land, its products, the Government, state, resources and the like. But it was Karl Pearson and R.A. Fisher who laid down the theoretical foundations of modern statistics which enabled statistics to emerge as a new discipline divorced of its original pure descriptive background. While this is the global scenario of modern statistical development, the name that comes up first in the context of statistical education in Asia is that of P. C. Mahalanobis. The happy coincidence of the birth centenary of P.C. Mahalanobis with the first scientific Meeting of the newly formed IASE provides a suitable forum to assess his contribution towards dissemination of statistical knowledge in Asia. Mahalanobis realised the importance of statistics in the twenties during the nascent stage of its development in the West and recognised statistics as the "key technology" in planning for the economic development of independent India. He pioneered the statistical movement in India, in fact in Asia at large, by founding the Indian Statistical Institute in 1931, the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the International Statistical Education Centre (ISEC) in 1950. He truly guided India to assume the leadership in the spreading and development of statistical education among Asian countries. Last but not least, the influence of Fisher on Mahalanobis and the interdependence of these two statistical giants of this century have the greatest impact on the statistical system in India and, *ipso facto*, on the statistical education of Asia as a whole.

2. Birth of ISEC and SIAP

After this short prelude, I come directly to the aspect of statistical education in Asia I plan to dwell upon in this write-up. I would like to focus on the training of staff for government statistical offices. The views expressed are formed by my experience of running the various activities of ISEC in the capacity of its Member-Secretary, Board of Directors over last six years. It may be recalled that after the establishment of the International Statistical Institute (ISI) in 1885 its small initial membership consisted mainly of official statisticians, and an important activity of ISI in the past 107 years has been the upgrading of statistical procedures and organisations, particularly in the third world countries, by support for the training of government statisticians in international statistical training centres. Among these the earliest and the most important one in Asia is the International Statistical Education Centre (ISEC) at Calcutta. P.C. Mahalanobis felt after Indian independence the need to bridge the gap between academic and official or government statistics for socio-economic development of the country. This urge led him to set up ISEC at Calcutta within the precincts of the internationally famous Indian Statistical Institute in 1950, which was recognised and is being operated by ISI jointly with the Indian Statistical Institute, under the auspices of UNESCO and the Government of India. Since inception the centre has been providing statistical training to government sponsored statistical staff from countries in the Middle East, South and South East Asia and the Far East. Its coverage was later expanded to the Commonwealth countries of Africa. At present ISEC is the only centre of its kind which is directly under the supervision and control of ISI.

Among other international statistical training centres that attract international participation is the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific (SIAP) at Tokyo. A brief account of the genesis of this institution which has been in existence for the last two decades may be of some interest. Wide appreciation of the need for a regional training institute in the field of statistics was stimulated by the recommendations of the sixth session of the Conference of Asian Statisticians held in December 1964. In order to remedy the critical shortage of trained personnel at the professional level in many Asian countries, the Conference urged the establishment of a statistical training centre for the region so as to promote training conducive to development of statistics and to bring about regional cooperation in statistical activities. In March 1965, the 21st session of the ECAFE (now ESCAP) endorsed this recommendation with the formation of an Expert Group, with C.R. Rao as chairman, to advise on the concrete steps to be taken in this direction. In January 1969,

the UNDP approved the proposal of the ECAFE to establish the Asian Statistical Institute (ASI) at Tokyo as an autonomous inter-governmental institution under the aegis of ECAFE. The Institute was formally inaugurated in 1970 and assumed its present name SIAP in September 1977.

The SIAP General Course lasts six months and is a thoroughly professional course in statistics. It accepts applications from all countries in the ESCAP region subject only to availability of funding and slots, which are usually 30 a year. English is the medium of instruction in both SIAP and ISEC.

3. ISEC experience

The ISEC offers a 10-month (June to March) Regular Course of training every year leading to a Statistical Training Diploma. The courses are divided into two parts. The first eight months are devoted to training in general statistical methods including training in official statistical systems, the latter being conducted by the Central Statistical Organisation of the Government of India. During the last two months of the 10-month period, each trainee specialises in one selected branch of applied statistics including data processing depending upon the background and need of the trainee arising from the type of Government Organisation he/she is attached to. As mentioned earlier ISEC Calcutta receives applicants from a region wider than that of ESCAP. The average number of participants per year is 25-30, the number being limited by the availability of financial support from various sources. A majority of the trainees have been supported by fellowships awarded by the Government of India, mainly under the Technical Cooperation Scheme of the Colombo Plan, the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Plan, Aid to Sri Lanka and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation scheme. The United Nations and its specialised agencies and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, Commonwealth Secretariat, London have awarded fellowships to a few trainees. Since its inception in 1950 the Centre has provided training to about 1200 trainees representing a panorarna of 56 countries mostly belonging to the Third World. Developed countries like Japan, Australia, New Zealand have initially trained their government statistical staff at ISEC and maintain high regard for the training offered at this centre. The countrywise distribution of the trainees is shown below.

Afghanistan	18	Israel	1	Solomon Islands	1
Australia	1	Japan	26	South Africa	1
Bangladesh	22	Jordan	1	Sri Lanka	131
Bhutan	26	Kenya	4	St. Christopher	
Brunei	16	Republic of Korea	41	Nevis-Anguilla	2
Burma	43	Lao PDR	3	Sudan	2
Kampuchea	3	Malaysia	20	St. Lucia	1
Republic of		Malawi	4	Swaziland	4
China (Taiwan)	5	Mauritius	2	Syria	1
Peoples' Republic		Maldives	25	Seychelles	1
of China	4	Nepal	15	Tanzania	36
Ethiopia	6	New Zealand	1	Thailand	53
Fiji Islands	19	Nigeria	55	United Arab	
Gambia	10	Pakistan	64	Republic	2
Ghana	3	Philippines	89	Uganda	13
Hong Kong	15	Papua New Guinea	2	UAE (Abu Dhabi)	4
India	229	Sarawak	1	Vietnam	19
Indonesia	64	Singapore	17	Western Samoa	2
Iran	21	Sierra Leone	9	Zambia	31
Iraq	5	Somalia	1	Zimbabwe	1

The Regular Course is an intensive course with hardly any break in between. The response to the Course is increasing every year as is manifest by the fact that the number of applicants has more than doubled since the ten-month Regular Certificate Course was transformed to a 10-month Diploma Course. The fascination for a diploma or degree among the government statisticians for the betterment of their career acts, quite likely, as an incentive to undergo this course. Moreover, the academic flavour of the course content is an added advantage of the ISEC course over a shorter pure professional course in the sense that the successful trainee feels better equipped to take up higher studies subsequently. In addition to the Regular Course at ISEC, a few government statisticians are admitted on an individual basis, for special courses of varying durations and in different subject fields. Electronic data processing with statistical packages merits special mention.

A number of difficulties are associated with the training programme of the official statisticians, at the Centre. In view of varying needs of countries in the Third World for training statisticians, the ISEC has set only some minimum prerequisites for admission. They must however be able to follow classroom instruction in English and express themselves clearly through spoken and written English. But the language problem is almost always there with such a diverse group of international participants representing usually 15-20 countries each year. Besides the language, the

heterogeneity in academic and practical backgrounds of the selected participants is a major deterrent to conducting the training in the most efficacious manner. As a remedy the applicants should preferably be graduates with a few exceptions like Bhutan, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Maldives, Pacific Islands and few others from the Third World where formal education either does not exist beyond secondary school level or is too expensive to be accessible to most of the nationals. As for instance, government statistician participants from Sri Lanka and India are, more often than not, master's degree holders while those from Maldives, Bhutan Pacific Islands and the like have only secondary school background and have to put in hard work to cope with the general standard of the Regular Course. Many developing countries in Asia and Africa or more precisely, in the Third World neither have national facilities to train their official statisticians nor do they have resources enough to send the officials abroad for training without foreign financial assistance. All along ISEC has been ostensibly playing a premier role in imparting training to numerous statistical personnel from these countries. Considering the current trend it is likely that ISEC will continue to enjoy the same status indefinitely as it has been doing since 1950 and maintain the high reputation of Indian statistical education the legacy left behind by P.C. Mahalanobis.

Bibliography

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