

SANKHYĀ

THE INDIAN JOURNAL OF STATISTICS

Edited By : P. C. MAHALANOBIS

VOL. 11

PART I

1951

IN MEMORIAM : ABRAHAM WALD

Professor and Mrs. Abraham Wald died on the 13 December 1950 in an aeroplane accident on their way to Trivandrum in south India. I wish to say here a few words about their last days in India.

In May 1950 when I was in New York I asked Professor Wald whether he could come to India for three months during the winter of 1950-51. He said he would be very glad to do so and wanted to bring Mrs. Wald with him, and offered to undertake some supplementary work in India to facilitate this being done. On my return to India, a formal invitation was sent to him from the Indian Science Congress Association to participate in its annual session at Bangalore in the first week of January 1951, and an invitation from the Indian Statistical Institute to give some lectures and to hold research seminars at the Institute in Calcutta. Arrangements were also made for him to participate in the work of the International Statistical Education Centre in Calcutta under the sponsorship of the UNESCO.

In September 1950 I again met Prof. Wald, who with his characteristic thoroughness, had been collecting all kinds of information about India and his work here. He wrote to C. R. Rao in advance giving a tentative programme of work with bibliographical notes. His seriousness of purpose and the trouble he was taking were most impressive.

Before my departure from the U.S.A., he also made enquiries about his travel arrangements. He asked me with some hesitation whether I would mind if he and Mrs. Wald stopped in Paris for three or four days on their way to India. He was somewhat apprehensive that this might not be quite fair as it would cut into his time in India. I told him that he should of course halt in Paris.

Professor and Mrs. Wald reached Calcutta on the 20th November. Wald was anxious to meet the members of the Institute and to know something about its work. I showed him the National Sample Survey and mentioned some of the problems which were arising in this connexion. He was extremely receptive, and a few days later he told me that he intended, at the seminar stage, to explore possibilities of some of his theoretical ideas being used in the design of sample surveys.

On the 23rd and 24th November he gave two introductory public lectures on statistical decision functions. He, of course, gave a masterly exposition striking a perfect balance between the exposition of the logical structure and a most lucid statement of his views. He then settled down to his lectures and seminars in Calcutta. I went to Delhi and returned to Calcutta on the 10th December. I found, even in these few days, he had created a deep impression on our workers. C. R. Rao spoke to me of the plans they were making to take up a number of research projects. Wald was also anxious to get to grips with some of the problems in sampling surveys.

On the 11th December 1950, Wald spent the morning with us at our house, and lunched with us. He and Mrs. Wald had, in the meantime, visited Darjeeling during a week-end, and Wald was enthusiastic about the magnificent views of the Himalayas they had seen from Darjeeling.

Wald and I had a long talk about his future programme of work. He had been invited to give a lecture at the Indian Science Congress Association at Bangalore, and he asked me many questions about what kind of lecture he should give. He said he did not mind speaking extempore at advanced technical discussions, but he always liked to have enough time to prepare more general or popular lectures. He had a craftsman's interest and joy in the quality of the work.

He was planning to give lectures at Trivandrum and Bombay, visit Delhi and Agra, return to Calcutta and go to Bangalore for the Science Congress session. Trivandrum is 1400 miles by air from Calcutta, but only a little over 300 miles from Bangalore. I did not see any point in his undertaking a 4000 miles round trip to Trivandrum in the middle of December when he was due to go to that very part of the country again a fortnight later. Wald had, however, given definite dates to the Travancore University and was reluctant to change these. I failed, with tragic consequences, to dissuade him, and I can never forgive myself for not having pressed my views with greater force.

The Walds left Calcutta early in the morning of the 12th December, halted the night at Bangalore, and next day they left Bangalore in a scheduled flight. The plane was on time and maintained radio contact with Coimbatore, the next stop, until about a quarter of an hour before the scheduled time of arrival. Suddenly contact was lost and the plane disappeared. The Indian Air Force started a search but could not trace the plane for several days. On the 19th December 1950 the wreckage was found in a hilly tract. The subsequent enquiry showed that there was plenty of fuel and apparently nothing was wrong with the plane. According to the verdict of the official enquiry, the accident was due to an error of judgement on the part of the pilot. This is the story of the last few days of the Walds in India.

Professor Wald was with us for a very short time, but he has left a deep impression, and he has contributed something to our Institute which will live for ever. We pay our homage to his memory in love and sorrow.

Editor.