

Come June, stars will shine in city planetarium again

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Pune: Here's good news for astronomy enthusiasts in the city. After almost seven years, the planetarium housed in the New English School on Tilak Road is set to open its doors again by June this year. Once considered to be the first planetarium set up in Asia, the facility has been non-functional since 2004. Due to technical difficulties and damages to the machine, the dome remained closed. Now, the machines have been repaired even as the dome is being re-painted and push-back chairs have been installed.

Rs 1 crore will be required for the entire renovation project. "By December, the planetarium will be complete with all latest facilities. However, the facility will start functioning by June, offering access to students and astronomy groups," said Ajit Patwardhan, chairman of Deccan Education Society, which runs the planetarium. The New English School has appointed eminent astronomer and member of the fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, London, Parag Mahajani, as consultant. Mahajani has been instrumental in getting the projectors repaired and bring back the planetarium to life.

The projector installed at the planetarium was imported from Philadelphia in the mid-50s. It was a manually-operated machine. In 2004, the projector started malfunctioning and eventually it had to be shut down. Efforts were made to repair the machine, but in vain. "Recently, we consulted with Mahajani who took a look at it and decided to get it repaired. Two trials were taken after the repairing work was done and now the machine is doing great and is completely operational. Now we could run the planetarium once again," said, Dilip Kotibhaskar, chairman of the planetarium.

A minimum of 100-seat capacity planetarium will be ready and a telescope which is at least 100 years ago will also be installed, even as sky watching sessions will be resumed. The planetarium was established in 1954, which was first-of-its-kind in Asia those days. "The projector matched to those in America in those days and was bought at Rs 50,000. The projectors available now are different and they are priced over Rs 55 lakh. However, Mahajani, who is the consultant to Nehru Planetarium in Mumbai, is of the opinion that the clarity of this projector is brilliant and therefore, we decided to get it repaired."

Home to the renowned Inter University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (Iucaa) and the National Centre for Radio Astrophysics (NCRA) and numerous astronomy clubs, the city understandably has a huge appetite for astronomy, and over the years this has only witnessed a rise. The one thing that was missing was a planetarium, which the city is set to get.

