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Of the few veteran science journalists that India can boast of, R. Ramachandran is irrefutably one. He is currently the Associate Editor of *Frontline*, a fortnightly magazine brought out from New Delhi by The Hindu Group of Publications.

Ramachandran (a.k.a. Bajji) is a Ph D in physics. Following a friend's suggestion, he began working as a science correspondent for *The Hindu* in 1984. Even today he writes stories for the newspaper. Before returning to work at The Hindu Group, he had been the Science Editor for *The Economic Times*, and for *Business India*. He also contributes to *Physics World*, a journal published by the Institute of Physics based in London.

If you have had the opportunity to be an audience to Ramachandran's talks, or read his S&T columns in *Frontline*, then you may have noticed that they are loaded with data. Many are left wondering if his knack for analysing data is an effect of his doctoral degree! How Ramachandran switched over from science to science journalism, and what he thinks of the state of journalism in the country, are questions to which *Current Science* seeks answers from this interview.

'The Hindu' was looking for a science graduate 'with a Ph D' for the job of Science Correspondent, and that's when you applied. It's surprising that the newspaper was looking for a doctorate.

I had not seen the advertisement. My friend told me that it was so and I presumed it was so. Following this I met the Editor and things worked out. But The Hindu Group does employ a good num-

ber of highly qualified people, not only for science but for all fields of journalism. It didn't surprise me at all; there are many doctorates in *The Hindu* and *Frontline*.

What did you realize after joining 'The Hindu', having done a Ph D in physics?

As a student I had been exposed to matters related only to physics. Moreover, it was a specialized field of particle physics. Science journalism was exciting in the sense that you may not be doing high-level science, but it exposes you to many areas of science. It requires you to spend some time understanding other areas which you are not familiar with, whether it is mathematics, engineering or biology and that interested me. I immediately started enjoying it a great deal. When I began I had no illusion that I am going to change the world by being a journalist. It just happened and exposed me to a lot many things.

It is argued that a science background is necessary for reporting science...

There are very few journalists that exist in the country as specialized science journalists, and they are mostly from a science background. But that does not mean that it is necessary if the journalist is willing to put in some effort. I know some journalists who cover science but do not have a background in science. My wife does a fair bit of science reporting, particularly in health, but she is a literature graduate. She has picked up science related to health issues while being on the job. So, it is not very difficult as far as journalism goes. If you want to get deep into the very details of something, you may require some kind of a specialization in science, but by and large for general reporting on science, I don't think that is very essential.

It is repeatedly said that there is not much S&T coverage in the Indian dailies. How do you think the coverage can be expanded?

I think the mindset of newspaper establishments has to change. S&T impinges on everything that we do in our daily

lives and there is an underpinning of science in all public policy issues. Therefore, it is important that newspapers and mass media recognize the importance of science and the role it plays in day-to-day lives of the society. Newspaper management must look upon science as a means for the betterment of society, both in terms of welfare as well as general well-being. I think they can do well by recruiting more science journalists and make this a profitable and exciting profession.

Are you in favour of the idea of dedicating a fixed number of pages to science in the newspapers?

Yes. *The Hindu*, for example, devotes a good amount of space to science. It has a specialized science page as well. Besides, it devotes some amount of space for general news columns to science-related news. Such publications can allocate a single page once a week entirely to science. This is what happened when I was at *The Economic Times*. It was a profitable experience for me in terms of being able to put together some important events during the week's time or those that were topical, into one page, which I was required to edit as well as to produce. That experience of production of a page is important for any journalist to get a hands-on experience on designing a page or the use of appropriate illustrations. Such experiences are also important for a journalist, not only writing stories. So, if a journalist gets the job of being in control of a single page of S&T, that experience can be very useful.

Science is usually heavily reported when there is a political angle to it (w.r.t. GMOs, melting of Himalayan glaciers, etc.).

It is not necessary that you look at science stories with only immediate political implications or immediate impact. Science is so vast that there are diverse topics to understand and to disseminate to the public in general. It is unlike political journalism where you have to depend on what is happening today and write about it. Science journalism is not restricted by anything of that kind. If something of immediate political rele-

vance has happened, you must look into it. But if nothing is available, then there are hundreds of topics. That's how it should be and that's how science journalists should look upon science journalism and not constantly look out for 'breaking news' stories.

What do you think of press release journalism? It's contested that a press release is a means to spoon-feed journalists.

Press release is not meant to spoon-feed a journalist. It is mainly indicative of an event that could be of interest to the news publication. It draws attention to a particular event. Beyond that the journalist should do some extra work and supplement it with other data and put out the story. There are some who do not want to put in any effort and that is not desirable.

You are of the view that paid news concept has crept into science journalism. Please elaborate.

This has started happening with regard to products, particularly of the pharma industry, which is bringing new drugs and vaccines into the market. It has crept into the visual media by way of pharma sponsoring programmes around that disease-related drug/vaccine and this sort of undertones the value of the medicines that they are producing. It has been subtly introduced by editorial control over such programmes so that the product or the kind of product they are coming out with gets highlighted. This is not desirable because one doesn't know the intrinsic value of the drug they are producing and if it is a good drug, it should come from the medical authorities through appropriate tests and not through advertising campaigns that are introduced through news in newspapers or TV programmes. We have been criticizing paid news in the political arena and I think over time this will also become true in such large numbers that we should be concerned with as to how to avoid 'paid' science news.

What do you think of investigative science journalism?

Well, I cannot claim to have done much of investigative science journalism myself. I don't think there is much of it, except in the areas of health. There are lots of cases that require some amount of digging. In areas that I normally write

about such a thing happens only in defence-related research activity like in the Department of Atomic Energy or Department of Defence Research, where not many details are put out in the public domain, so you need to investigate and dig it out. But in health-related areas such as clinical trials, extremely unethical practices do happen during drug trials, in the marketing of banned drugs, in new biological areas, smuggling of serum and blood, etc. These kinds of issues require some amount of investigation. Science does not offer as much of investigative potential as other areas do. By and large science deals mostly with objective criteria of doing experiments, results and so on. So there is not great scope of investigative journalism unless one makes it a point to do only investigative stories and looks out for these kinds of things.

Do you think misreporting could happen because of working on tight deadlines?

It can certainly happen. But I think science doesn't get old over a few days' time. Unless there is some real breaking news, I don't think that science journalists need to bother too much about this 'breaking news' kind of practice. You can work on a subject or news item over a couple of days and then put out the story; there is no harm in it. It doesn't become old. Two days or even a week later, science news is as good as now. In fact, I had to do that because a news item appears immediately in a newspaper, but I write for a magazine that is published every fortnight. It also buys you some time to do things properly and more accurately than otherwise. If you have to meet a deadline then you should be able to do only that much which you are absolutely sure of, without any errors, say in 200–300 words or 400–500 words. You can also reserve the things that you have not touched upon for a later time when you can elaborate upon the same topic in a much more detailed article. Though the pressure can be there to produce a story today or every day, if you don't want to strain yourself or feel pressurized, science journalism that way is really flexible. You don't have to really come under the pressure.

What according to you should be the code of conduct for journalists, considering the recurring breaches?

There are written down rules that are given to you when you join an organization. These list the do's and don'ts, and you are expected to follow them strictly. It is unlike ethics for scientists or other professions where a larger umbrella group is deciding on the ethics. In journalism it is probably within the confines of an establishment that certain rules and norms are set and have to be followed. But these are also in conformity with what the umbrella organizations, such as the Press Council of India, recommend. These do not vary much from one organization to another.

It is another matter to see how journalists respect them and there is no intrinsic mechanism of checking unless somebody makes a complaint, which is true of the scientific community as well; unless somebody makes a complaint about unethical behaviour on the part of a scientist, it doesn't get noticed.

All of us read newspapers and magazines and notice violations. You might argue that the implementation of such norms is effective, probably so, but I can't see of any other way than journalists themselves exercising that restraint and working within the norms set by the organization. For example, when somebody says 'do not quote me', then it is ethical not to quote him; when somebody says there is an embargo on a certain news item, you should not publish it before the embargo is lifted. But I know of cases where just to be the first one to put out news, some journalists break the deadline and publish the story; that is unethical but has become part of the habits of the profession.

You just mentioned that stories of ethical breaches in science are exposed by media when someone complains about scientific misconduct. If that is the case, then is Indian media serving as a watchdog at all?

I don't think that we are watchdogs of any kind. I told you right in the beginning that I have no illusion about changing the world and bringing things to correctness. But if some unethical practice of some kind is brought to our notice, it is newsworthy, and it is important that such things are brought to the notice of the public in general and the scientific community in particular, then we write about it. What happens usually is that the person who has come across such a breach is a whistle-blower and is unable

to expose this explicitly in the normal domains of his profession (in his research institute or academy). In such situations, the whistle-blower approaches the media to expose those things because he doesn't want to get named or be victimized for what he is doing. Therefore, media as a kind of intermediary agency becomes a watchdog rather than being the watchdog per se. We are not looking out for unethical stories all over the place. Such issues drop in our plates because somebody wants to expose it through the media.

Other countries conduct workshop for scientists training them about how to interact with the media. Such things are not commonplace in India.

That's right. If the Ministry of Defence or Ministry of External Affairs or science departments could have a weekly/monthly briefing for the journalists and talk about ongoing research projects and events, then that would help to keep the contact alive and build a certain sense of confidence between journalists and scientists. It is not correct to suddenly spring a press release when something big happens and then expect a journalist to write about it. Unless there is a constant rapport, journalists will not have confidence in scientists and scientists will not trust them. It has to be a two-way process. A constant interaction, over tea or lunch, will give a forum where people can freely talk, but that kind of atmosphere is not there in this country. When something happens a press conference is called and a press release is furnished. That's the end of it. I have never seen a Department of Space or Atomic Energy briefing in New Delhi. Unless Fukushima or Jaitapur happens, there is no press conference.

How often does a journalist report on topics he or she has no grounding in?

Very often. I do that all the time (laughs). And in the process one makes mistakes too. But what one should do is spend some time over these subjects. It can be time-consuming and that is why science reporting on the one hand has the charm of understanding things that you are not familiar with, but on the other hand requires a lot more effort than reporting routine political and cultural events not requiring you to spend a lot of

time in preparing the story or report. So science journalism to that extent requires some kind of rigour and willingness to put in that kind of time and effort.

Often the headline to a story misrepresents the story...

Well, you cannot put the blame entirely on the reporter. This depends on the man at the desk or the person who edits the copy, subs it, and puts it in the pages of the newspaper, and probably gives a catchy headline with the obvious intent of attracting the reader. But at the same time, the sub-editor should realize if and when the sub-heading is contradictory or wrongly representing the content of the story itself. The sub-editor should guard against this. It will be good if they also have a person with science background at the desk level so that any science story or science-related story goes to the person who can understand the subject and then give the headlines.

Most of the national dailies take no interest in deputing reporters to cover science and technology conferences/meetings...

That every science meeting or conference be covered should not be expected. Journalists also have a particular judgement or choice of their own to say whether that particular conference or meeting is of interest or not, or whether the publication itself will be interested in its coverage. That someone must come and attend an event because an invitation was sent out should not be expected.

In one of the talks that you delivered about science communication you mentioned that there is a great deal of improvement required in the way media functions. Are there any concrete suggestions that you would like to make?

There are a lot of improvements that can be brought about in the way science journalists operate. First is to get over this hang up of 'first report' and 'breaking news' concepts that create problems. Then, you must try to see the linkages between a pure science story that you are doing and related public policy issues – how is science going to impact the society and what is its relevance for the society? Not every story will have that kind of implication, but you should be able to

look for that and if there is, you should include that aspect as well.

What do you think are the downsides of being a science journalist?

Downside has to do with the context in which you operate, not science journalism per se. One is the limitations of the establishment you are working in, for example how much importance your organization gives to science reporting. Many publications do not have dedicated science journalists or dedicated space for science reporting, because of which journalists who are required to cover science find it extremely constraining to do a story and often find that the story does not find space in the newspaper. It can be very frustrating.

The other constraining context in which you operate is that the scientific community and scientific institutions in the country are extremely reluctant and reticent to talk about the work that they are doing. Somehow, there is extreme distrust of the media all around but for whatever reason, they are not willing to take this extra step to establish a cordial relationship with the media by sharing information and being proactive to talk about new research projects and achievements. These kinds of things unfortunately are not forthcoming from the scientific establishments in the Indian context. So, frequently one has to look for topics and events that are happening elsewhere and not within the country. There is no central window that tells you the important information coming from a laboratory. This is where I think the institutions can do a lot more by appointing information officers and by amending the institute policy to require that the researchers (maybe after their research is over) give a brief summary of their work that is understandable to the lay public and post that on their website. If such a thing happens in all institutions across the country, journalists can immediately access the information, get in touch with the scientist concerned and write a detailed report. It is fairly common in the countries abroad. You click at the website of any institution based abroad and you find a list of things that they are doing; their achievements and research publications are all available.

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