

## Indian science and conflict of interest

This is in response to the editorial titled 'Is Indian science ready to tackle conflict of interest in a rational way?' by E. Arunan.

The editorial contemplates that the reason for India not progressing the way Europe did is partly or largely due to not recognizing conflict of interest or not doing enough to avoid it, which has affected the decision-making process. The author also mentions 'As of today, one can see scientists sitting in committees selecting their own students/junior colleagues from among a list of scientists for an award, a fellowship, a position or project'.

Of course, the efficacy of our scientific programmes requires upholding the highest standards of professional ethics by all the scientists and administrators involved in the decision making processes. The Department of Science and Technology (DST) and its Science and Engineering Board (SERB) made sincere efforts to address this issue by formulating and implementing a conflict of interest policy starting 2 May 2016. DST and SERB/DST provide the largest extramural research and development support in the country to strengthen S&T capacity and capability through its wide range of programmes to address the varied needs of our research community. Support to a large number of projects and fellowships is provided every year based on a peer review process including external blind reviews and recommendations of expert committee/programme advisory committees. Conflict of Interest policy is one of the major underlying principles guiding the evaluation process which protects the integrity of the decisions and mitigates the issue of biases. The policy aims to sustain transparency, increase accountability in funding mechanisms and provide assurance that processes followed in award of grants are fair, unbiased and non-discriminatory. It is ensured that provisions of the policy

are rigorously followed by the reviewers, expert committee members and DST/SERB officers who are directly or indirectly related to the decision making processes.

Thus, we would like to submit that the proposals submitted to DST or SERB undergo the rigorous review process in accordance with the provisions of Conflict of Interest policy. DST and SERB are committed to award grants based on scientific merits alone and we truly appreciate the efforts of the scientific community to adhere to the Conflict of Interest norms in the letter and the spirit.

Details of the Conflict of Interest policy being implemented in DST is available at <http://dst.gov.in/ethical-guidelines>.

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1. Arunan, E., *Curr. Sci.*, 2018, **114**, 1385–1386.

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### Response:

I read the Correspondence by Subrahmanyan<sup>1</sup>, Govind Swarup<sup>2</sup> and five heads of various Divisions of the Department of Science and Technology on the editorial written by me. I thank them all for reading and their comments. The main objective of the editorial was to start a discussion on this important topic, i.e. conflict of interest. Subrahmanyan and Swarup have focused on Radhakrishnan's contributions to radioastronomy

before taking over as the Director of the Raman Research Institute. Subrahmanyan has also expressed doubts about the verifiability of some comments mentioned in the editorial. The historical facts mentioned on Science in India were taken from the two books referred in the editorial, published by the Indian Institute of Science and the Indian Academy of Sciences. I refer all those, who are interested, to read these books.

Akhilesh Gupta *et al.*, have mentioned about the policy on conflict of interest introduced by DST starting 2 May 2016. I welcome this important step by DST. I hope all other funding and award giving agencies from the Government have already adapted a similar policy and if not will do so soon. After the editorial was published, I came across a general article by Premila Mohan and Ramaswamy Brakaspathy<sup>3</sup> on the SERB merit review process in which they discussed about conflict of interest. I must point out that the article by Mohan and Brakaspathy was submitted on 27 December 2017. However, I saw it only when it was published, two issues after the editorial appeared. I hope all Universities and Institutions introduce their policies on dealing with this and other such ethical issues. This is a common practice in leading universities in the world. Transparency in dealing with such issues would serve us well in the long run.

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1. Subrahmanyan, R., *Curr. Sci.*, 2018, **115**(2), 193.
  2. Swarup, G., *Curr. Sci.*, 2018, **115**(3), 369.
  3. Mohan, P. and Brakaspathy, R., *Curr. Sci.*, 2018, **114**(9), 1835–1839.
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