

A serious fallout

The transfer of a scientist for speaking out against the views of the Atomic Energy Commission's chairman raises important questions of scientists' freedom to publish and voice opinion.

On reading the newspaper reports (1 August) that R. V. G. Menon, director of the Kerala Government's Agency for Non-Conventional Energy and Rural Technology (ANERT) in Thiruvananthapuram, was removed from his post for having written a letter critical of the nuclear power programme to a newspaper, many citizens were disturbed. Letters were written in the popular press: 'My anger is because a citizen of a democratic country was sacked as he had an opinion of his own which he expressed.' 'It is surprising that in this era of *glasnost* we are taken back into Stalinist Russia. . . .' We too received a number of telephone calls.

Menon, an M Tech in nuclear engineering from IIT, Kanpur and professor at the College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram, was on deputation as head of ANERT. He wrote a letter in the Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhoomi*—in response to observations of Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) chairman P. K. Iyengar. This open letter 'put the Government (of Kerala) in an embarrassing situation when they are trying all out to persuade the Nuclear Power Corporation to establish an atomic power plant in Kerala'. The Kerala Government, deciding that Menon's conduct was against government servants conduct rules and that it could not have an individual who disagreed with government policy to head a government body, terminated his deputation and sent him back to his earlier post, which, incidentally, is also a government one. Menon feels that this cannot be construed as a punishment or harassment and that he has no complaints to make. Menon's letter appeared on 22 February, his deputation was to end in March 1990 but had been extended for a period of two years in April, his reversion order was issued on 30 July, and he relinquished charge as director, ANERT, on 31 July. One does feel that the removal of Menon has helped to focus attention on the nuclear issue to an extent that no amount of activism or publicity would have achieved.

A number of scientists sent us clippings of news items relating to this episode, saying that it was a fit case for debate in *Current Science*. We shall not discuss whether

Menon's statements on the lack of safety or the high cost of nuclear power plants are right, nor shall we dwell upon the statement alleged to have been made by the AEC chairman that only nuclear scientists are competent to air views on these matters. We shall content ourselves with raising a few issues that come out of this episode. These are complex problems and much discussion may be necessary before they are resolved.

Firstly, does a scientist have the freedom to publish his results or his views in a scientific journal? This is not as simple a matter as it seems. There are organizations that are extremely careful about the quality of science coming out of them. Some of these insist that every paper, before being sent for publication, must be presented at a seminar to be vetted—a procedure that appears to be a healthy one. In others, a committee examines the paper. This, we are told, is sometimes fraught with the danger that some 'deputy director' may insist on his name being added to the authors' list. Such committees would also look into whether the names of all those who have contributed have been included as authors or if the contributors have been adequately thanked. The question is: should scientific quality and scientific ethics be controlled by committees or should they be left to evolve slowly so that a healthy tradition is established? In many Western countries academic institutions allow their employees freedom to publish their papers, knowing that journals, by their refereeing system, take adequate care to maintain quality. In India some institutions permit their scientists to send their papers to journals abroad, not realizing that poor-quality papers can also be published in them. Laboratories/institutions that are conscious of patenting their results impose a restriction on the freedom to publish as every scientific result has to be scrutinized carefully before it can be announced. Finally, organizations like those of atomic energy or of defence feel strongly that there is need for some confidentiality; but there are some who feel that too much is being made of this concept of secrecy.

Secondly, we come to the case of scientists who are

'government servants' wanting to publish their scientific work. We know that the Finance Department of colonial India was 'pleased to permit' C. V. Raman to publish all his scientific papers between 1907 and 1917 when he was in its employment. We understand that even today permission has to be sought to publish scientific papers.

Thirdly, we have the case of employees of government scientific organizations publishing material that is not scientific. There was the ludicrous case of a member of a scientific department who was asked to explain why he published poems in literary journals without seeking the permission of his employers. We understand that the intervention of a kindly superior officer prevented 'action' being taken against him. This litterateur had the last laugh, for, after he resigned from the department, he wrote two novels about the department, one lampooning some of its scientists and another which received awards from the state and national academies. The science department concerned is probably still unaware that it has become a part of literature.

It is well known that Government objects strongly when the views of a scientist are contrary to its avowed policy. What does a dedicated scientist with genuine concern about matters scientific do when his convictions

go against government policy? Autonomous organizations, which are usually funded by government, have, for reasons best known to themselves, opted to follow government rules. Can a scientist in government or such organizations actively participate in public debates on scientific, cultural, environmental or economic issues?

But one thing is certain. If a government servant publicly states anything against government policy without permission, he breaks the conduct rules in letter and violates the contract he entered into when he was employed. He can therefore attract censure or punishment. But are such draconian measures necessary? On the other hand, does not the spirit of the laws of a democratic country permit, indeed exhort, an informed citizen to question that which is deserving of debate? These are difficult questions and the scientific community has to find the best way of arriving at a consensus.

Many in India can still hear the strong but, alas, lonely voice of that great soul, who, when confronted with the might of the British empire, said, 'I am here, therefore, to invite and cheerfully submit to the highest penalty that can be inflicted on me for what in law is a deliberate crime and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen.'