

CURRENT SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

Coping with liberalization

Liberalization, to most people refers to the dramatic changes that have taken place in the economy of the country and indeed the world. At *Current Science*, however, we have been wrestling with problems of a different sort; the liberalization of our Correspondence and Opinion columns. The journal, over the past few years, has attempted to provide a broad forum for the expression of diverse opinions on matters of interest to India's disparate and widely diffused scientific community. On occasion, the journal has initiated debate; the attitude of government towards science, the National Science University proposal and the Academy's science education document are instances. To the average reader, opinions on matters of science policy make far more interesting reading than the turgid prose of most research articles or the esoteric scholarship of historical sections and book reviews.

The fact that all is not well with Indian science has been belaboured extensively. Institutions (and individuals) have been criticized; often obliquely, sometimes directly. Out of this criticism has come a better appreciation of the problems that we face; but certainly no definite solutions are in sight. Does open expressions of dissent and disagreement serve any purpose, other than purge the writer of tensions; providing cathartic relief? As editors we are acutely aware that to the writer, nothing seems more important than his opinion. The opening of the pages of this journal to a broad spectrum of correspondents has, however, led to a backlash. A scientific establishment unused to debate, overly sensitive to criticism and unfamiliar with liberal practices, elsewhere, has begun to worry that the pages of this journal may be used to cause irreparable harm to the fabric of Indian science. Is the edifice of our science

so fragile that even murmurs of dissent assume the proportions of a major catastrophe? The abilities of the editors to act as liberal overseers of the journal does not obviously inspire confidence.

The start of a new year seems an appropriate time to reiterate the primary goal of this journal, which is to provide a forum for the publication of the results of the most interesting scientific research in the shortest possible time. Unfortunately, editors must choose (with the help of reviewers) the best from what they receive. This, as in the case of most Indian journals, is simply not good enough. While pious opinions are invariably voiced in public and in committees, there has been no major effort at improving the quality and appearance of our research journals. *Current Science* caters to a broad, interdisciplinary audience. The journal must therefore have 'something for everyone'. It is this compulsion that motivated the introduction of sections which are of general interest. Some of these have grown into 'problem sections' of the journal. Ironically, what is unread does not bother the critics; the difficulty is with the matter that is widely read.

The task of the editors is to tread a delicate path and real (and imaginary) transgressions are unavoidable. Apologies to authors, readers, reviewers and even editorial board members have been growing—a sure sign of success in unleashing a genie which may now be difficult to bottle. Should opinions (and editors) be fettered? We strongly believe that liberalization must mean more than Kellogs cornflakes. An all-round liberalization of thinking, an ability to respond and learn from criticism, an openness in accepting ideas from unexpected quarters, a sense of humour which permits

us to laugh at ourselves and a consciousness of our own fallibility may indeed provide a more attractive path to the future. Should scientists speak up individually and collectively? The answer from two widely different sources is an unequivocal, yes.

Michael Atiyah (the outgoing President of the Royal Society) has called for scientists 'to criticize the establishment where necessary' and 'to demonstrate that independence of thought really is the hallmark of a scientist'.

At an entirely different level, the Beatles said it all in their inimitable way:

Nowhere Man

He is a real Nowhere Man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody.
Doesn't have a point of view
Knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?

Nowhere Man please listen
You don't know what you're missing.
Nowhere Man the world is at your command.

He's as blind as he can be
Just sees what he wants to see
Nowhere Man can you see me at all?

Nowhere Man, don't worry
Take your time, don't hurry
Live it all, till somebody lends you a hand.

(Sung to an academic in the motion picture *Yellow Submarine*, and also featured in a Beatles album with the same title.)

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