

CORRESPONDENCE

ISRO spy scandal – rumour mongering

We live and work in a largely democratic environment. The point was brought home eloquently in the New Year by the *Current Science* Editorial (vol. 70, no. 1) 'Coping with liberalization'. In this context, the so-called 'ISRO spy scandal' reveals disturbing possibilities that ought to concern the Indian research community, particularly those scientists who work in disciplines that may be deemed strategic from the security viewpoint.

Having enjoyed government support over several decades, our research laboratories are suddenly exposed to market economy equations. To make the environment more competitive, the concept of sponsored projects and merit promotions is being pursued more rigorously. Several years ago, a scientist leaving the laboratory would invariably also be leaving the country. Today, scientists are looking for careers either on their own or with *local* private companies and multinationals. The average *below average* scientist may not be quite prepared to cope with this new situation, particularly when haunted by the reality of double digit inflation (in contrast to the Finance Ministry's statistics), exploding consumerism and its messiah – Cable Television. No pay commission can quite compete with multinationals and all said and done, there is one thing the System simply can't enforce – work. This deadly combination of frustration and ample time to feel miserable about it gets to work on the mind.

Our research laboratories (like any large organization) are not immune to petty rumour mongering, professional jealousy, vindictiveness and the irrepressible (and irresponsible) desire to (mis)use one's official position. Seniors often mistake forthrightness for arrogance, confuse ini-

tiative with insubordination and appear to cultivate sycophancy to a level that would make our politicians blush. Juniors sometimes resent pressure to deliver and refer to a correlation between work and pay. Eventually, frustration with one's own inability to achieve makes someone else's well being much more difficult to accept. And like the proverbial 'crabs in the bucket' one begins to work on anonymous letters, rumours, corridor and canteen discussions – and allegations. These circulate in an environment where vigilance is treated without consideration of technical aspects – a stenographer of yesterday may be watching over security aspects of highly involved technical effort. The ISRO spy scandal may find its roots in such a situation.

Given the above scenario, it does not take much effort to translate malicious feelings of frustrated individuals into a witch hunt. In most cases, including my own experience, it may only be a nuisance that is eventually healed by time and a change of environment. The ISRO case goes beyond that. Consider the damage done to the personal lives of the people concerned and the projects they worked on. In a country, where the most effective Export Only Units have been premier educational institutions, what kind of motivation does the ISRO spy case provide to young specialists who may consider staying back, rather than rushing to the closest US Consulate? Those who do stay back are more likely to enroll in an IIM for further studies, rather than split atoms, hack enemy aircraft signatures or interpret satellite pictures.

Allegations through rumours must not be allowed to cause damage to the profession that places above all, the uninhibited and unrelenting search for the

truth. Science, technology and innovation (like any other creative endeavour) cannot flourish in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Senior officials, particularly top management, must be sensitive to questions regarding the integrity of their colleagues. To do so, they must reach out to colleagues down the line and promote open debate, rather than be closeted in the four walls of an air-conditioned office. When the management is unable to sync with staff and feel the pulse of day-to-day happenings, it begins to rely on hearsay and eventually, an outside agency (however incompetent it may be) may be brought into the picture. Can we have leaders who can vouch for the integrity of their colleagues by putting their own jobs on the line?

The background of the ISRO spy scandal must be studied, rather than simply brushed aside as an aberration 'that can't happen to me', or taken lightly, by noting that the 'truth eventually came out'. We may do well to ponder about the incurable scars left behind on the bodies of our colleagues and on the minds of their families and try to digest this reality in the framework of our 'liberated (largest) democracy'. We face the unenviable task of making Indian science and technology globally competitive. The task is already made difficult by the paucity of resources and a bureaucracy designed to stifle initiative. Introduction of fear and suspicion into the environment will guarantee failure.

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