

Kind words

It was nice to read the letter of V. R. Shashidhar, titled, 'A few words of appreciation for editorials' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 626). I feel cheated as Shashidhar has taken words out of my mouth, but since confirmation of scientific facts is as important as their discovery, I cannot delay any further to pen down my hearty reciprocation of Shashidhar's appreciation of recent *Current Science* editorials. What impresses me most is the choice of the topics and the witty finish with which the subject is dealt within 1.5 to 2 kbs. But it needs 3 billion unique bps (base pairs) to make the point! Unlike

Shashidhar, it has been rather late transformation for me to read the Editorial first and the letters next, but I must admit that I now look forward to every *Current Science* issue with a great deal of eagerness. While I have been generally critical of Indian dependence on individuals, in this case the individual difference is a welcome thought. The mental stimulation even if short lived is well worth it. It also needs to be acknowledged that it is not only the Editorials, but the whole get up of the *Current Science* is now unique. The masterly summary of Non-coding RNA by S. C. Lakhotia (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77,

479) is one such example. Even the 'inside' is now as attractive as 'outside'. If a subjective gradation of science journals is permitted, I would not hesitate to keep *Current Science* at the top of broad-based science journals. I am glad that I contributed to its life subscription before its stock goes up.

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The condition of science in India: A serious issue

Given the anxiety shown by our respected and senior custodians of science about the precarious condition of science in our country (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 483), I feel the urge to convey the students' point of view. J. V. Narlikar, being a very respected scientist of India, is very much justified in foreseeing a shortage of motivated science students in the years to come. I feel that personalities like him can advise the government and get a policy change enacted in the favour of science.

Truly, the majority of science students are those whose second choice was science. The majority of science stream students at the higher secondary level, which is the basic level on which a major decision affecting the whole career is taken, do so to get a chance to go to the various engineering and medical courses. The reason for this is the better job prospects. Here I would like to add a fact that as far my knowledge goes, very few of the academicians who are in science send their progenies to the science fields. The reason is very simple. They do not like their children to face the same problems which they faced in their life. The same reason is applicable to the fact that most of the

science graduates lose a year or so on the average in trying their hands at different professional courses. This is the period when much of the scientific temperament and enthusiasm most needed to excel in science gets suppressed. This trend can be verified by the views of the majority of higher secondary boards' toppers throughout the country. In majority of cases, they dream of only civil services and other professional courses. Importantly, the theoretical science courses in the JEEs get lower priority and even those who opt for them prefer to go abroad. The situation warrants something effective and drastic to be done to raise the rating of science as a career. The need of the hour is that people should think practically to improve the rating and consequently, the demand for science. I would like here to present a practical situation.

Let us consider the case of a fresh graduate aged twenty on average. No matter whatever his/her discipline is, he or she ought to be career conscious. In case he/she is from the science stream, the case is ideal for our study. Let us take that he/she adopts science as a career. Unless he/she completes his/her Ph D from an institute/university of

repute, chances of getting permanent employment is quite remote. The irony is that most of the time we forget to think that even for a scientist, employment is necessary. Scientific pursuit cannot be sustained unless one has career certainty. Now the process of getting a Ph D takes at least 7 years after B Sc on an average. By this time he/she becomes 27/28. If he/she does not get a regular position after that, then where will he/she apply his/her skills?

Now let us give a social dimension to our thinking. By any standards, a person aged over 27-28 years should be expected to shoulder the responsibility of his family. Those students who opt for the competitive exams get a regular job by the age of 25 on an average and get settled in life. But, in the case of academics as a chosen career, this is not possible even after the age of 30. The fellowships provided are hardly enough to support one's family. In such circumstances, to think that a majority of meritorious candidates will take science as a career, is ridiculous. Those who possess the mettle to succeed, provide it in the field of civil services and get better returns in a number of ways. The social recognition too, is high for them.

Of course the main factor here is the pay and perks. I do not mean that money is everything but it is something even for those in science. Unless this fact is understood and given a serious thought to, any talk of improving the condition of science is a farce.

In the end, my contention is that those at the helm of the affairs should look at the matter with a different perspective. The pay structures need to be

reviewed in a renewed sense. There is need to think out of the class system of central government employees. Today the main work force for research of any research institute/university – the research scholars are underpaid (the stipend is slightly above the class-IV employees' salary). Now that a former professor of repute is heading the HRD ministry, things should take a different course. We hope that this community

wakes up and gives the government a clear and influential signal so that we are left with enough talent to carry the country over to the next millennium on a high note.

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Stray thoughts of a retired scientist

I have been mulling over the editorial 'Reviewing a review' (*Curr. Sci.*, 10 November 1998). In assigning Bhargava's ire to the *apres moi le deluge* syndrome, the editor has personalized and trivialized the problem. This is being less than fair to the silent majority of hard-working scientists in this country, who are deeply unhappy and despondent over the rampant 'self-glorification and cronyism', but have no other recourse except to turn their faces away in utter disgust.

Yes, people do feel more secure in launching their critical comments at the system only after they retire from active service. But they are hardly to be blamed for this, given the existing climate in this country. No scientist in his right senses is likely to jeopardize his future scientific career by indulging in criticism of the present. Even after retiring from active research, it is rare to find anyone with enough commitment to attempt to find out what has gone wrong with the system.

Bhargava's criticisms can be grouped under two heads:

- i) Those dealing with breaches of morality and ethical behaviour in a broad sense: Patronage, cronyism, lack of accountability, self-glorification, plagiarism, careerism without commitment, fraud, dishonesty, lack of integrity, sycophancy.
- ii) Criticism of intellectual and scientific capability: Mediocrity, lack of originality, ignorance of scientific methods.

I believe the concerns referred to in the second group have already been addressed by several distinguished educationists and debated in various fora. I have nothing further to add in this matter. It is the first group therefore that I wish to comment on.

A few weeks back, there was an interesting news item put up on the notice board of the Pune University Chemistry Department. This summarized the results of a survey conducted by some organization on the general impression of the common man about different professions. The questionnaire had asked for a rating of each profession on a scale of 1 to 10 with respect to several parameters. The ones which are most relevant here are: i) Which profession promises to give the maximum material benefits to its practitioners? ii) Which profession confers the greatest dignity to one who is engaged in it? iii) Which profession do you respect most? iv) Which is the most corrupt profession in your estimate? Not surprisingly, 'teaching' and 'science' scored the lowest in material benefits and highest in 'respect' and 'dignity'. Seemingly, the most satisfying evaluation as far as the scientists are concerned, is the public rating of the professionals in terms of their proneness for corruption; politicians and policemen top the list and scientists and teachers occupy the last two positions.

Obviously, this is something we should congratulate ourselves about. But a small nagging doubt persists in my mind: Are scientists really less cor-

rupt by nature, or do they appear to be less corrupt since the fruits of corruption are likely to be less substantial in their case? Are favouritism, nepotism and cronyism the exclusive prerogatives of politicians and bureaucrats?

I am quite sure that most of us scientists have encountered examples of the kind of unethical behaviour referred to earlier during our careers – in recruitment and promotion, in choosing the recipients of awards and honours, in election to Fellowships, etc. We cannot sit back and ignore this under the specious plea that corruption exists everywhere.

The institution of awards has already received editorial (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 1080) and other (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 1521) attention. Let me add my bit also here. There was an interesting news item in the *Times of India* of 26 June. Somebody had filed a public interest litigation in the High Court against the Government's decision to give a cash award to one of our ex-cricket-heroes. I wish the same public-spirited gentleman would also turn his attention to the Awards to the 'scientists' of this country. The proliferation of 'societies' seems to be the consequence of the need to create more awards. If all the awards of the existing Academies and Learned Societies have been exhausted, then create new societies. Each new 'society' can of course institute its own awards. As for the dispensing of awards, in most cases the awardees seem predetermined, perhaps by way of settling professional debts, or honouring per-