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EDITORIAL

The importance of being impolite

'I have already come to one conclusion as to why science in India is developing with disappointing slowness. It is not because Indians are stupid or lazy. It is because they are too polite.'

J. B. S. Haldane

Some months ago a thoughtful colleague in Calcutta sent me a little book entitled 'Science in Indian Culture', authored by J. B. S. Haldane. This collection of essays, written shortly after Haldane's arrival in India in the late 1950s, has been reprinted by the New Age Publishers Pvt Ltd, Calcutta in 1991. Haldane, a biochemist, physiologist, statistician and geneticist, one of the most colourful figures of 20th century science, came to Calcutta to work at the Indian Statistical Institute. Haldane was the product of a liberal education at Oxford, at a time when the sun never set on the British Empire. His 'only academic degree obtained by examination was in *Littarae humaniores*, commonly called Greats at Oxford. This examination is based on the study of philosophical and historical works in the ancient Greek and Latin languages'. He had no formal degrees in the subjects on which he left an indelible impression. Haldane was a confirmed Marxist in the 1930s; disillusioned only when Soviet genetics came under the spell of Trofim Lysenko. Haldane brought mathematical rigour to genetics and together with R. A. Fisher and Sewall Wright is considered as 'one of the founders of modern population genetics theory'. Haldane described himself as 'a man of violence by temperament and training'; in the trenches of World War I under enemy fire, he 'found the experience intensely enjoyable'. In the evening of his career Haldane was to come to India, a socialist convinced of the virtues of non-violence, with an abiding interest in Indian philosophy and culture. In his assessment, 'India has made many contributions to world culture. Perhaps, the greatest is the ideal of non-violence. Europe's greatest contribution is the scientific method. If these can be married, their offspring may raise mankind to a new level'. Despite advancing years and a major interest in Indian philosophy, Haldane arrived in India with a clear

purpose: 'to escape responsibility for appointments and other administrative work, in order to do research and teaching'. Unhappy with Britain's drift after World War II, Haldane became an Indian citizen and worked in Calcutta and Orissa, until his death in 1964. His training in the classics drew him to Vedic literature and Indian mythology. His definition of the classics bears repetition: 'I mean documents in languages no longer used by all members of a population, documents which are judged to be worth reading for their own sake, and not merely because they serve to determine a historical fact.... I would be inclined to expand this definition and say, documents which are, at least in part, worth learning by heart for reasons other than the conciliation of supernatural beings'. Haldane was not an unabashed Indophile; retreating from the rough and tumble of Western Science, to the seclusion of newly independent India. This country drew him for many reasons, but he came with the intentions of doing science and promoting its cause. He brought with him a robust common-sense and a clarity of thought, which has served Western science so well over the last century. In his essays Haldane proved to be a sharp, if somewhat critical observer of the way science was (and still is) done in India.

Politeness is not a characteristic that one associates with our institutions. Rarely, does one encounter courteous behaviour in our government offices. Nevertheless, to Haldane the Indian characteristic of 'politeness' was a major impediment to the advance of science. In his words: '...again at scientific meetings and usually in ordinary discussion my Indian colleagues are polite about one another's work. In Europe we are usually polite about the work of juniors and highly critical of that of men and women of established reputation. At a recent international meeting on genetics, an American got up after a paper by my wife and said that he will not let her misleading views pass without criticism. She felt that she had reached the status where one is criticized without mercy. She and I at once formed a friendship with the critic. We had something to talk about. In my opinion only a few branches of Indian science have reached the stage of maturity where this is possible.

I may criticize some of my colleagues as I would criticize British colleagues and hurt their feelings severely. Once again I am up against the choice between politeness and efficiency. I do not know how I shall resolve this dilemma. I hope that as Indian science grows up it will become less acute'.

Over four decades after Haldane's musings, it is clear that Indian science has not 'grown up'. Indeed, constructive criticism and debate on science are largely absent in many fields. We now have 'experts' in almost every area; supposed super-specialists, who can rarely be questioned even when they spout the most improbable nonsense. The elevation to the status of an 'expert' is usually by administrative decree; knowledge, accomplishment and most importantly, commonsense, are rarely prerequisites. Haldane's view that 'politeness' must be discarded in debates with senior, established scientists is sacrilege. It is still possible to critically evaluate a research student's results in a local seminar; almost heresy to raise doubts in presentations by 'senior scientists'. In universities and national laboratories, administrative seniority is often associated with scientific infallibility, rendering many of our institutions intellectually sterile. But, 'politeness' claims the greatest toll in the decision-making committees of funding agencies. Here again, it is easy to question and contradict junior and unestablished investigators; it is nearly impossible to stem the tide of scientifically questionable projects that emanate from well established individuals and institutions. The growth of 'big science' in India has spawned a host of inter-institutional 'coordinated projects', with a limited scientific base and dubious scientific utility. We can think of mega projects, with limited chances of success and restricted impact, without undue fear of criticism in the decision-making bodies of government; any doubts are always raised only by those on the fringe. In planning for the future, the most

outrageous claims can be sustained with little more than a murmur of dissent. This state of affairs prevails in almost all fields, carefully nurtured by our culture of 'politeness' and encouraged by those who have advanced mindless optimism as the key ingredient in scientific progress.

Haldane loved India and his essays are peppered with many perceptive observations on the conduct of our science and scientists. He would probably be disappointed at our continuing 'politeness', were he here today. In an essay entitled 'The Scandal of the Science Congress', describing a meeting held at Mumbai, Haldane could very well be talking about present-day Congresses. He describes a meeting marked by poor arrangements for lectures, an ever changing academic program, the absence of lectures describing original science, but good arrangements for tours and food. In Haldane's words, in one of the lectures, 'the lantern was almost absolutely useless. I was in the second row of the lecture on elementary particles by Professor Abdus Salam, a Pakistani who has recently been given a chair in London. Many of his slides could not be read...'. He goes on to say: 'It is time that responsible persons in India realized that the invitation of foreigners to such Congresses lowers the prestige of Indian science considerably. So do the tours arranged for them later. They are too polite to express their feeling to their hosts but not always too polite to express them to me'. Many years on, I could not but help feeling that Haldane would be surprised at how little things have changed. But, he did have a prescription. In talking about the Science Congress he felt, 'there would be little difficulty in making it useful. This would involve discourtesy to some influential people. But in science efficiency is more important than courtesy'.

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