

## Lost innocence or brazen cohabitation?

The bold editorial in *Current Science* (2001, **81**, 229–230) deserves applause for questioning the propriety of the Indian Academy of Sciences in organizing an opening lecture by R. Chidambaram 'to celebrate Pokhran II and its scientific objectives'. The editorial also bemoaned the Academy's loss of innocence in straying from disseminating science to publicizing a technological event. I submit here that the editorial criticism should have gone further.

Despite the dispute regarding the yields of the Pokhran II tests, the Academy departed from its usual silence on controversial issues and provided a vehicle for the official version of the controversy. In taking sides, the Academy seems to have been more eager to be an agent of the government, rather than an impartial forum for debate.

The lecture's mocking reference to the opposite viewpoint on yields being Western in origin, begs the question as to why Indian counter-views are missing (apart from P. K. Iyengar's criticism of the official yield estimates). Perhaps the answer lies in the active discour-

agement of criticisms of the scientific establishment. It is tempting to recall the Lysenko affair in Soviet genetics as a historical parallel. Under Stalinism, the state resorted to incarceration in Siberian labour camps and physical elimination to suppress dissent and debate. Fortunately, that type of coercion does not exist in India and hopefully will never arise. Instead, the Indian scientific community seems to silence itself on such issues, which is why there is no debate.

It remains to ponder over the editorial's description of the organization of Chidambaram's lecture as representing the Academy's loss of innocence. This judgement is a matter best explored by scholars like Shiv Viswanathan or Ramachandra Guha or Dhruv Raina, with their insight into institutions and movements. In turning to such scholars, it is worth seeking their detailed examination of the hypothesis that the Indian Academy of Sciences has gone through three phases. Phase I (innocence), in which the founding fathers of the Academy jealously guarded their independence from the imperial government.

Phase II (lost innocence), in which the Academy (out of expediency rather than principle) actively courted government patronage and made scientific secretaries office-bearers of the academy, ignoring the resulting conflicts of interest. Fortunately, many of these heads of scientific departments had been strongly influenced by the founding fathers and kept the relationship with the government in check. In the current, Phase III (brazen cohabitation), the veil of innocence has been discarded. There is not even a pretence of an arms-length relationship with the government.

Despite this state of affairs, the Academy can return to its original objectives, but this reformation will depend on the academicians who have not yet been corrupted by association with government patronage and on those who, having been tainted, are prepared to repent and reform.

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## The role of Vice-Chancellors/administrators in universities

Some of the points suggested by Virk (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 628–629) should be taken into consideration, while appointing Vice-Chancellors (VCs) and administrative officers in the universities.

In the appointment of VCs some mechanism should be evolved where there is no political interference at all. The growth of the universities after independence has not been up to the mark. There can be many reasons for the falling standards in higher education, especially those of science subjects. The standard of education depends on the leadership of the particular institute/university.

It has been observed in many cases that the VCs generally restrict them-

selves to the physical boundaries of their institution/university. On the other hand, the university should have no academic boundary. The administrators/VCs should have a very broad spectrum of vision about university teaching and research.

The performance of any administrator/VC can be judged from the number of nonacademic activities, viz. strikes, *sine die* closure of the institution, raids in the hostels, police force in the campuses, hijacking of the administration, etc. that have taken place during his/her tenure. There is no point in calling the police force into educational institutions. On the other hand, one should find out the root cause for such activities.

It seems that nowadays the universities are busy in admissions, examinations, re-examinations, revaluations and declaration of results, and they are far away from academic activities.

I am sure that the managers of the educational system in the country or those who are concerned with it will give a serious thought to academic activities.

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