



Vol. V] APRIL 1937 [No. 10

A lecture to the scientists

We have recently read extracts of the speech addressed by Lt.-Col. R. S. Weir, Director of Public Instruction, U.P., to the National Academy of Sciences, India, at its Annual Meeting held on the 15th January. It the press has reported the address faithfully, we have no hesitation in saying that the Director's utterances are as amazing as uncalled for, and, proceeding from an Officer who directs and controls the educational destiny of one of the most progressive and enlightened provinces in India, they are fraught with incalculable mischief, if pursued to their logical conclusion. It must be remembered that the members and fellows of the Academy have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of scientific researches, and some of them occupy the foremost ranks among the International Scientists, and all of them have made significant contributions extending and enriching scientific knowledge. We are bewildered that, in such a distinguished company, the Director of Public Instruction should have indulged in cheap sneers at their work and achievements. Criticisms so flagrantly wide off the mark are not likely to affect the prestige and reputation of the Academy whose glittering record has earned for it esteem and recognition both in India and abroad. We propose to deal with some of the extracts of Lt.-Col. Weir's speech.

'The Universities get larger and larger, their machinery is overloaded with their third class students, and their fields of instruction are widened. Their libraries

grow larger year by year. There is much running to and fro. But few men seem to have the time to ask why they are attending the University or to what end all this accumulation of knowledge is directed.

'The attention of the public has been very forcibly directed of late to the absence of a plan in our educational system. In these provinces the expenditure from public funds on secondary and collegiate education is twice the expenditure on primary education. In consequence the market is overloaded with educated young men, qualified in philosophy and economics while the illiterate peasant toils humbly in his fields'.

Those who are intimately acquainted with the progress of Education in India and her growing educational needs for a proper readjustment of the people's social and economic conditions, favour not only the growth and expansion of the existing Universities, but also emphasize the need and desirability of establishing such educational foundations in increasing numbers. The prevailing criticism of our Universities is that they do not offer sufficiently wide and diversified courses of instruction, and that they are too conservative and prone to restrict their studies to formal subjects, almost ignoring the modern sides.

We are unable to understand why the Director is harsh on the third class students; probably he is unaware that success or failure in an examination supply no standards by which the promise of the future may be estimated. Originality of thought or achievement cannot be measured by the same units as those we use in testing the knowledge of prescribed text-books. Academic distinctions need not necessarily imply success in public life. The Universities do not exist to produce only stars of the first magnitude; they can justify their existence if they fill the firmament with illumination emitted by stars great and small. Third class students have often proved capable and worthy citizens and have contributed to the richness of public life. . . .

The whole speech is based on ignorance. The Director suffers from loose thinking.

We shall give one or two instances of both.

'A similar state of affairs seems to exist within the Universities—a lack of plan, of co-ordinated effort. There is no lack of funds—although Universities are always pleading poverty—and in the Budget ample provision is found for scholarships and research but in the direction of this provision things are not so satisfactory. There is no dearth of researchers. No lack of effort. But the result is largely an accumulation of educational lumber. The shelves of the libraries groan with papers that are of no use to anybody. The desire to see something in print rather than the desire to do something worth doing, something considered as contribution to a planned system, is responsible for the cluttering up of our laboratories with much useless material.

'Further I have no doubt that these research scholarships are a great temptation to young men who see no immediate opening in the world. The real spirit of the researcher is absent. Do these young men of to-day undergo difficulties and hardships, devise expedients, live dangerously, sacrifice anything or lack any comfort?'

Lt.-Col. Weir has manifestly a very queer concept of the meaning and influence of scientific research. He is confusing the accidental with the essential. No amount of poverty, hardship and self-sacrifice will produce the scientific spirit. It is born, and no born scientist is daunted by these circumstances when they confront him. Every school girl knows that scientific work is not inspired by any motive, and that the value of science is not to be measured by practical service, though its results might contribute to material prosperity. Every child knows that knowledge like most things has two sides, viz. theoretical and practical, and that what is theoretical today may be used to-morrow for commercial gain or materialistic domination. . . .