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The Indian Institute of Science

Since the Irvine Committee reported on the unhappy circumstances which prevailed in the Institute at the time they commenced their labours, the "atmosphere of insecurity and misery", to which they had drawn pointed attention, would appear to have worsened, if the correspondence recently published in the press is credible. In the concluding section of the report, the Committee, almost in a prophetic spirit, made the remark which is at once encouraging and disturbing that "if given a fair trial and if operated in the right spirit, the proposals will enable the Institute to begin its semi-jubilee period with renewed hope, but if our scheme fails, it can only be through the clash of personalities beyond the remedy of any powers possessed by a Reviewing Committee". We doubt whether the Institute really suffers from any clash of personalities, but we are prepared to admit that there is almost an irreconcilable war of ideals, arising from two academic luxuries which the Institute can hardly afford. The first of them is apparently a body of elderly authorities composing the Governing Council, whose imagination has become by routine administration as rigid as perhaps their arteries on account of their advancing age: the other is a group of ardent young students and members of the staff who, inflated with noble ideals, are impatient to dash forth to win their spurs in extending the frontiers of knowledge. Any school girl who has passed her matriculation examination on common sense will tell us that the former is as dangerous a symptom as the latter is a healthy sign, for a generous enthusiasm and sterling ambition, when wisely harnessed and judiciously directed, must at all times constitute an invaluable asset for the Institute. We need hardly observe that it would be a historic case of wasted

opportunity if the zeal of the young men were compelled to lie fallow or interpreted as synonymous with aggressive spirit.

We have no access to the confidential documents of the Council. No responsible officer of the Institute has disclaimed the statements made in the press, impugning the principles and policies underlying the recent proceedings of the Governing Council. Where, however, one partly resorts to the press and the other remains passive, it is natural to assume that the public statements may in some measure be vitiated by exaggeration of the actual state of affairs. . . .

The appointment of Sir Venkataraman in the first instance as Director, and later as Professor of Physics, amounts almost to an epic episode in the annals of the Institute. Having perpetrated this act and as a necessary consequence, the Governing Council should have recognised the wisdom of taking the only logical course of inviting a number of Venkataramans to occupy the professorial chairs of other departments, so as to establish a balance of scientific power and a healthy competition among them on perfectly equal terms. If anything is clear in this complicated world, it is clear that administrators are profoundly ignorant of the modern teachings of folklore and human psychology, and failure to appreciate the truth of the maxim that an academic institution is as weak as its strongest member of the staff, inevitably led the Irvine Committee to record that they were confronted at the outset of their task with issues involving the personal relationships between the Director and the Staff, imposing upon them the undesirable necessity of investigating "the disquieting state of affairs". . . .

In 1936 the Irvine Committee remarked as follows on the work of certain departments:

"Some research of sound quality has been carried out, but much of it would come appropriately within the programme of investigations carried out in the Universities for a first research degree."

It is appropriate in the light of these observations to enquire whether or not the administration of the Governing Council during the five years intervening between the two Committees, had started the Institute on a process of retrogressive metamorphosis, resulting in its emergence as a University attempting

work of the MSc standard. It will be useful in this connection to remember that most of the scholars coming to the Institute for inspiration and guidance in higher researches, have already obtained the MSc degree, and a fairly large number, the Doctorate degree of Universities enjoying a high academic reputation. . . .

. . . We have infinite confidence in the sincerity and good faith of the Governing Council, consisting of distinguished scientists, eminent educationists, recognised leaders of public opinion and mature administrators, who have undoubtedly the well-being and prosperity of the Institute nearest to their hearts, but, all the same, having regard to the uniformly impartial treatment accorded to the authoritative pronouncements of all the Committees, respecting the status of the Institute, the qualifications and the breadth of outlook on the part of professors and the range, and quality of scientific work to be initiated and pursued by the superior staff and scholars, we are afraid we cannot rely too confidently on the stability of the mental institution of the Council. It is a well-known psychological fact that almost as a rule when we are compelled to be sensible about working actions, our mind does not necessarily ensure during the same period perfect rationality. It is equally true that administration is a human invention whose treachery is capable of making the admitted virtues of any system a convenient excuse for indulging its vices; for the boldest among us must often shrink from the mental discomfort which is the only reward accruing from our capacity to face truth, though admittedly one of the greatest virtues. . . .

. . . The students and the staff are the only real and legitimate custodians of the destiny of the Institute. It is their duty to fulfil the intentions of the Founder. They must enjoy the unfettered freedom to direct and influence the fate and fortune of the Institute. If, however, the concerned authorities do not see the need for altering the complexion of the constitution, they should have at least the fortitude of mind to face the probability of the next Reviewing Committee assessing the work of the Institute as falling within the programme of a glorified First Grade College. . . .