

Fictitious author?

Balaram¹ writes with his usual elegance in the editorial 'The mores of publishing in science'. However, he makes a factual error in dismissing Alpher of the famous Alpher, Bethe and Gamow paper as a figment of Gamow's imagination. In fact, Ralph Alpher was George Gamow's Ph D student. When the two wrote up a paper on big-bang cosmology, Gamow, who had a sense of humour, insisted on having Hans Bethe as a co-author—much against Alpher's wishes—to complete the phonetic 'alpha-beta-gamma' authors on a paper².

The editorial also refers to the controversy surrounding the Nobel Prize in

1923 for the discovery of insulin. It would interest readers to know that although the research work was done in John Macleod's laboratory in Toronto, Canada, Macleod himself was on a fishing expedition in Scotland when the crucial experiments were performed^{3,4}. His contribution, then, by any standards—whether 1922 or 2002—would be in keeping with his not being an author in the seminal paper. It is an entirely different matter that he shared the Nobel Prize with Banting.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **83**, 1429–1430.

2. Gribbin, J., *Science – A History, 1543–2001*, Allen Lane, London, 2002, p. 601.
3. Pai, S. A., *Nature*, 1997, **389**, 224.
4. Porter, R., *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, W.W. Norton and Co., New York, 1997, p. 567.

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Science Congress and the VIP syndrome

Even truth changes every eight to ten years.

—Henrik Ibsen

I attended the recent Science Congress at Bangalore along with my family. While queuing up for lunch, my son, a thirteen-year-old boy studying in class eight, asked me why there was a separate enclosure to feed the VIPs. Did they get better (or different) food? Or is it that VIPs cannot be in our company while we eat? I had already taken such discrimination for granted, but my son's question set me thinking.

The idea of a VIP rests on the old-fashioned, feudal, unfair assumption that, except a minority, the world mostly consists of unimportant persons. It is fundamentally abhorrent to modern democratic spirit. Yet, even the most enlightened circles in India accept it as inevitable. Many even fail to notice the discrimination that is intrinsic to it. Such discrimination also violates Article 14 of the Indian constitution, which guarantees equality to all Indians regardless of caste, creed, sex, etc.

Will the organizers define a VIP and the privileges granted to him/her? Is the classification based on rank or performance? What are the criteria? Can these be justified in modern times?

In India, it is not unusual to sacrifice the interests of a thousand individuals, if

not more, for the convenience of a single VIP. For instance, take the inauguration of the Science Congress. Thousands of delegates had travelled long distances only to find the registration counters closed on the day of inauguration. Registration was postponed to the afternoon because the PM was coming! And the change was non-negotiable.

What is the PM's role in the National Science Congress? It is fine if such events go on unobtrusively. But in India, a VIP can never show up at a function without blocking traffic, enforcing security checks, admitting a cavalcade of hangers on, and of course, wasting precious time. In retrospect, the Prime Minister's presence only jeopardized the event. Many of us had to skip the inauguration and several scientific sessions, not to speak of lunch.

I fully understand the need for protecting our PM. I also understand the security risks associated with a person of such authority. So why is the PM not kept out of the actual Science Congress? If inauguration is absolutely a must, which I am not sure of, why not get it done on the previous day and spare the delegates the agony of waiting on an empty stomach with their ample luggage strewn about?

VIPs routinely present themselves posturing as benefactors on many such key events. This is typically a hangover

of monarchic times. I have heard that when the King of Oman takes a ride on the streets, he now and then stops the car to present bounties to citizens walking by the roadside. On such occasions, the local policemen are expected to whisk away any foreigner from the streets, lest the bounty is lost on an outsider.

Politicians in India, like the King of Oman, never lose an opportunity to posture themselves as patrons and protectors of our republic. Democracy can, and must, do without such patronage. Social inclusion is an important aspect of development. Whether it is the cause or result of development is debatable. But social inclusion definitely improves self-esteem, which improves performance. I do not see why it should not apply to science as well.

History teaches us that democracies do better at science. Science is essentially the spirit of reasoning. If our scientific community cannot ask questions regarding the concerns of everyday life, I do not see how we can go any further in our pursuit of truth.

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