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EDITORIAL

An editor's pleasure

The job of an editor often seems to involve a never-ending succession of routine chores; marking incoming manuscripts to referees, reading reviewers' reports on incomprehensible articles, composing soothing letters to irate authors, whose papers have been rejected by intemperate referees, and the inevitable struggle to beat printers' deadlines. At a journal like *Current Science*, editorial worries can extend to finances, circulation and, of course, impact factors. Misprints on the cover page can form the theme of a recurring editorial nightmare; fortunately in real life these are infrequent. An editor's tasks are generally routine, but the volume of clerical work can sometimes be tiresome. There are undoubtedly a few highpoints in an editor's existence. At *Current Science* one of the editor's privileges is to see all the books which come in for review. There is a certain indescribable pleasure in running one's hands over a glossy new book, randomly turning the pages to get a glimpse of its insides. On occasion, a book can lie with the editor for a few days, allowing hasty reading of bits and pieces of the text. Editorial privileges can run to even more extreme levels; I have at times received copies that do not appear to be intended for review. A few weeks ago there appeared on my desk a large package containing three excellently produced volumes entitled *The Shaping of Indian Science* (Vols I–III, Universities Press, Hyderabad, 2003). These volumes reproduce the Presidential Addresses at the annual Indian Science Congress, organized in three sections: 1914–1947, 1948–1981 and 1982–2003.

The Indian Science Congress was an idea that appears to have originated in 1911–1912, in a proposal that emanated from P. S. MacMahon of the Canning College, Lucknow and J. L. Simonsen of the Presidency College at Madras. The first Science Congress was held at Calcutta in 1914, under the presidentship of Asutosh Mukherjee, Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. His views on the utility of the Congress were clear: 'Personal association amongst scientific men may be pregnant with important consequences, not merely by fruitful exchange of ideas; cultivators of science, by periodical meetings and discussions, may bring their aims and views prominently into public notice, and may also, wherever necessary, press them upon the attention of the government—a contingency by no means remote, for, as experience has

shown, even the most enlightened Governments occasionally require to be reminded of the full extent of the paramount claims of science upon the Public Funds.' (Vol. I, p. 2). In the years leading up to Indian independence, the Science Congress was presided over by both Indians and Englishmen. Prafulla Chandra Ray was President in 1920 at Nagpur. His address has much of relevance even today. In exhorting industrialists and princes of business to support the pursuit of science, Ray said: 'I stand on the platform of a city which is the home of a thriving cotton industry. Here we have merchant princes and successful mill owners and businessmen. The great philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, himself a self-made man, acted on the motto that "to die rich is to die disgraced" and gave away more than 100 crores mainly for workingmen's reading rooms and research institutes. I appeal to our wealth and eminence to follow in the footsteps of the great benefactors of men and I am sure that with their help the cause of science will flourish.' (Vol. I, p. 93).

The early presidential addresses and the biographical sketches provide a glimpse of the men and their times; M. Visvesvaraya, J. C. Bose, C. V. Raman, Shiv Ram Kashyap, M. N. Saha, U. N. Brahmachari, T. S. Venkatraman, J. C. Ghosh, B. Sahni, Ardeshir Dalal, D. N. Wadia, S. N. Bose, S. S. Bhatnagar and M. Afzal Husain among the Indians. Raman's 1929 address at Madras is devoted entirely to his discovery 'of a new phenomenon . . . which has a bearing on the fundamental problems of Physics and Chemistry'. (Vol. I, p. 227). L. L. Fermor's 1933 address at Patna begins with an allusion to Raman's impending move to the Indian Institute of Science and notes prophetically: 'At present Calcutta may be regarded as the centre of scientific research in India; but with the transference to Bangalore of one of her leading investigators, she will have to guard her laurels'. (Vol. I, p. 290). The birth of *Current Science* in July 1932 also finds a prominent place in Fermor's speech. Indeed, this journal's origins may be traced to discussions at the 1932 Science Congress in Bangalore. Fermor makes a case for subscribers: ' . . . if Indian Science deserves the dignity of supporting an All-India journal in Science, it can easily secure this dignity by what is really a trivial increase in the number of subscribers; for what are 500 subscribers amongst over 300

million people.' (Vol. I, p. 291). I might indeed echo Fermor seventy years later in exhorting readers to subscribe, because no government grant can substitute for the support provided by a legion of dedicated subscribers, many of whom will also contribute to the journal. Volume I ends in 1947 with a 'stenographic summary' of Jawaharlal Nehru's address at Delhi on 3 January 1947. Nehru's words on the need for the Science Congress to work independently of government bear recounting: 'Governments may be good and may be bad, but Governments normally are very slow and the only thing that moves them is some immediate public outcry which affects their future indirectly. Therefore, I should discourage among the scientists a reliance always on what Government may or may not do.' (Vol. I, p.574).

In the years since independence, the Science Congress has slowly changed its character. It is an annual event which dominates the first week of January; a massive jamboree that moves around the country. The traditional inauguration by the Prime Minister is the centrepiece of every Congress; an occasion for government to periodically reiterate a commitment to support science. Security and formality dominate an event that appears increasingly designed to showcase the administrators of science. Scientists and academicians appear unimportant at the annual Congress, where even attendance dwindles after the inaugural session. In looking at the collected addresses of the presidents of the Congress, I realized that Vol. II (1948–1981) marked a transition, where a body of scientists slowly metamorphosed into an appendage of government. Vol. III lists 22 addresses. More than half of the Indian Science Congress Association's (ISCA) presidents over the last two decades have been Secretaries to the Government of India; undoubtedly men and women of eminence. The absence of academicians in large numbers tells the story; a gradual drift of perception, where the imprint of governmental authority holds sway over mere scientific scholarship. The volumes do indeed provide a fascinating glimpse of the growth of science in India over a period of 90 years. They should provide a starting point for a future analysis of the historical role of ISCA in 'The Shaping of Indian Science'.

There have been institutions which have been carefully nurtured by the commitment of very dedicated individuals and Bangalore is home to one of them. For the last 45 years the Geological Society of India has functioned unobtrusively, producing a journal, which has appeared with unfailing regularity. In 1974, B. P. Radhakrishna became its editor. In 1984, on the occasion of the society's silver jubilee, he began to write a monthly editorial. On the threshold of his 85th birthday, the Geological Society has produced an Anthology of Editorials authored by a man of extraordinary commitment, dedication and talent. (*Random Harvest*, Geological Society of India, Bangalore, 2003). This simply produced book must be read widely, for Radhakrishna writes with enviable clar-

ity and simplicity on some of the most pressing problems of our time—water, environmental degradation, urbanization and conservation. He has, through his writings, been the most articulate champion of geology and allied disciplines, which today are the Cinderellas among the sciences in India. In his Preface, Radhakrishna recalls the objectives that Mahatma Gandhi prescribed for the editor of a newspaper, in *Hind Swaraj*: '(i) to understand popular feeling and give expression to it, (ii) to arouse among the readers some desirable sentiments, and (iii) to fearlessly expose popular defects'. Radhakrishna notes that his writings have been guided by these principles. True to his ideals, in 1989, when talk of scientific ethics in our circles was limited, Radhakrishna wrote on the V. J. Gupta scandal, which shook palaeontology, assuming international dimensions. Radhakrishna's essays, some short and others substantial, are unfailingly readable and of special value to uninformed readers like me. While the pages of *Current Science* carry a great deal of geology, I can hardly count myself as an enthusiast of the earth sciences. It is Radhakrishna's writings that have, for several years, highlighted the importance of a discipline that we need to purposefully exploit for progress.

Radhakrishna, and I must confess that I have never had the privilege of meeting him, comes across as a rare jewel, striking in his simplicity and prodigious in his talents. He notes: 'I am proud of the Indian way of life—a life of contentment, compassion for all living beings, respect for elders, tolerance, humility, service to others, belief in after life and rebirth, which has sustained Indian civilization for the last 3000 years and should not therefore be given up. These sentiments find a place in my editorials, reflecting my preference for the traditional Indian way of life.' He goes on to borrow from Tagore to list the benefits he has received from his writings:

*'Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not;
Thou hast given me seats in houses not my own;
Thou hast brought the distant near and
made brother of a stranger.'*

As Radhakrishna's colleague M. S. Rao notes in his thoughtful introduction, the 'Geological Society of India is honouring itself by this Anthology'.

The books that I have dwelt on in this essay have been produced in India. They deal with the growth of our science, provide insights into the men who were principal actors and highlight many problems which remain paramount today. They should be required reading for those who today would like to don the mantle of the shapers of science in India. In parts, they may prove inspirational to those merely interested in the pursuit of science. Receiving these books, unsolicited, at my desk has been a pleasant surprise; an editor's pleasure.

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