

## Obscurantist criticism

In the correspondence<sup>1</sup> by S. C. Tiwari, we find the editor being criticized and NRI scientists humiliated in a singularly unconfined outburst of emotion. The writer makes four points. One, that everything published in *Nature* or *Science* about India invites the attention of the *Current Science* editor. Two, the correspondent is unhappy at not being cited in the editorial<sup>2</sup>. Three, that dedicated 'resident scientists' are being ignored. Four, that the work done by elite institutes are a colossal waste of money.

The editor, rightly quotes *Science* or *Nature*, not because they are 'foreign' journals but because they are among the most premiere and highly respected journals in the world. It is their premiere nature, not the country of publication that makes them quotable. And why not? For, these journals in fact act as portals for many all around the world to look at India and make an idea about it. And in a world in which science is, hopefully, international, in participation and scope, portrayal of science in India to the world community matters. Thus it is no shock that the editor is duly concerned.

Whom the editor cites is purely a matter of his personal discretion. If the editor found someone more quotable than the correspondent, so be it. Some people might be prompted to consider themselves icons of crusaders for salvaging science in India but even the editor can be iconoclastic at times. Such is the irony of human existence.

The correspondent says that IIT faculties are all foreign returned. The scientists in premiere institutions who have scaled some heights are scoffed at by being referred to as 'so-called eminent scientists'. So we are dealing with a small

subset here – scientists who are not in premiere institutions, not eminent, without foreign experience. So to be deemed fit enough in his eyes to serve science in India, one has to be a part of a small subset.

India does not have a systematic, let alone extensive, post-doctoral position system (except in premiere institutes with the foreign-returned scientists, which is strictly out of question, of course). Nor does the correspondent approve of assigning faculty positions to foreign-returned scientists. So, the poor Indian Ph D, to be deemed fit enough by him, is someone who has not done post-doctoral research in any premiere Indian research institute (where the bulk of post-doctoral opportunities lie) nor has he/she done it abroad. I think everybody will wish to know from the learned correspondent, where exactly the massive number of Indian Ph Ds go to do post-doctoral research to be deemed right in spirit and character. On one hand, we keep out the NRI scientist (who, by the way, had no choice but to go abroad as there are not many post-doctoral positions in India and also because he might have wanted to work with somebody abroad about some question) and also the scientists in elite Indian institutions. What exactly do we do then? Fill in faculty positions with people with Indian post-doctoral experience? Very soon, there will be unfilled posts for dearth of suitable candidates, not because the candidates are not suitable but because there are not many candidates who fit the bill so rigidly, in the first place.

He talks about elite institutes, colossal waste of money, fashionable research topics, imitating the West, etc. Why is the

correspondent not being specific, for there aren't, I believe, innumerable of these elite institutes. Then let us examine their publication history and we will learn what he means by waste. To demean cutting-edge research by branding it fashionable and imitation is in the same strain of anti-occidental psyche that has plagued India and has found recent culmination and approval in Vedic 'science'.

In the final paragraph, the correspondent excels himself by giving personal examples, whose reference in a scientific discussion is in poor taste. Such third person comments of the 'I have myself seen' kind are but signs of weakness of logic. So does he want higher education and research allocation to be decreased to channelize it to primary education? If not, I fail to see the point being made.

Finally, science is a human endeavour. The cocooned individual may feel safe himself but does his personal feeling of safety matter to science? But, when cocoons want to expand, so as to put blinders on others, the scientific community has to take a stand to counter their views effectively. Obscurantism is detrimental to progress. Period.

1. Tewari, Suresh, *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **84**, 861.

2. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **83**, 1297–1298.

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## Ph D and quality control

With regard to the editorial<sup>1</sup>, I would like to comment on the possible causes for deteriorating quality of the Ph Ds in India. In the last year itself, more than 1500 (approximately) Ph D dissertations/theses were submitted in various universities in

India. The reason: UGC exempts those candidates who submit their Ph D theses on or before 31 December 2002 from qualifying in the UGC/NET examination for the post of lectureship in universities. Has anybody tried to check the quality of

these theses? Who is going to check the quality of work? Secondly, those completing their Ph Ds from institutes of repute (IITs and others) are not willing to work in India either on the pretext of lack of infrastructure in other institutions

or not getting good financial support or PDFs. They leave the country mostly never to return. Thirdly, those doing PhDs in different universities in India and trying to get good quality research publications, have to work under minimal pay scale and without any long-term job security. This is also one of the causes that makes most youngsters to go for MBA or other avenues rather than opting for research as a career. Those who want to carry out research are deprived of this

opportunity to work in institutions of repute due to not getting qualified in UGC/CSIR/NET entrance tests. Can anybody prove that only those who have qualified in these competitive examinations have the brain and aptitude to carry out research? These facts have to be kept in mind and there must be some rule which stipulates that students doing PhD in India should contribute something to the science and scientific community in India rather than to other countries.

I. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **86**, 737–738.

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## Indian Science Congress Association and the VIPs

M. K. Unnikrishnan<sup>1</sup> raises a serious issue about the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA) and the so-called VIPs (Very Important/Isolated Persons). So far as the achievements of ISCA are concerned, there is nothing to criticize. It fulfills its objectives even today. Thousands of scientists meet, establish contacts and present their results. It is an important part of India's scientific culture and needs to be continued.

I am not sure how many of us are familiar with the history of the ISCA and its objectives. Let me start with its commencement so that in the end we can judge whether VIPs were an important part and see how the political elements encroached into scientists' terrain.

The idea of organizing a science congress was initiated by two British chemists, J. L. Simonsen and P. S. MacMohan (also sometime referred to as MacMahan or MacMahon), with the thought that scientific research in India might be stimulated if an annual meeting of research workers could be arranged. They were also of the opinion that not only would the direct personal contact of workers be of great value, but also the general public would be brought to realize the importance and value of scientific research<sup>2</sup>. On 2 November 1912, the two Professors with 17 'foremost men of science' in India held their first meeting in the Asiatic Society, Calcutta<sup>3</sup>. Due to the efforts of these persons, after the pattern of the British Associations for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), the Indian Science Congress was established, which held its first meeting in Calcutta from 15 to 17 January 1914 (ref. 3), under the

patronage of the Asiatic Society. In 1931, after adopting a constitution, ISC was renamed as Indian Science Congress Association<sup>2</sup>. Since its foundation, a meeting of the ISCA has been held every year under the leadership of distinguished men of science.

Steven Tomlinson (Assistant Librarian of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which possesses the previous records of the BAAS) informed me that, in general, the inauguration was done by a high-ranking scientist (private communication, 11 March 2003). However, in India, for good intended reasons we started the tradition of inaugurating the annual meeting of ISCA by the Prime Minister as stated below.

Our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was associated with the ISCA even before independence. In 1938 he sent a message to the Silver Jubilee Session of the Congress, in his capacity as the Chairman of the National Planning Committee of the Indian National Congress<sup>4</sup>. List of past Presidents shows that only once, that is, in 1947, a politician, none other than India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was elected as the President of the 34th Session of the ISCA. His progressive ideas towards science and technology were known to every scientist of the time, thus his election is not surprising. More importantly, it was the time of the transfer of power from the colonial government to an independent India. India was passing through hard times due to separatist movements. Thus Nehru's election was a symbol of the solidarity of the scientific community. There was no reason to complain about

the inauguration of the ISCA by him in the next four to five years. In the euphoria following Independence, Nehru truly represented India. In my opinion, the first five lectures delivered by him at the session of the ISCA were inspiring and dealt with scientific policies and development<sup>5</sup>.

After some years, scientists like C. V. Raman, criticized the continued practice of inauguration of the ISCA by a Prime Minister. In an article, V. T. Srinivasan quotes Raman's protest as follows: 'Can you give me the example of any other country in which Science Congress is inaugurated by politicians? Every year, for 17 years continuously, the organizers of the Indian Science Congress could think of only Prime Minister Nehru to inaugurate it. And now they have caught hold of his daughter to do it. How self-respecting scientists can go on listening to piffle spouted by politicians in a 'Science Congress' is something which I have never been able to understand.'<sup>6</sup>

Let us see what Nehru thought about these invitations. On 2 January 1952 at the 39th Session Nehru said: 'It has become the custom of this Science Congress or its Reception Committee to invite me year after year to these annual sessions and for me to come here and, well, utter, if I may say so, some platitudes. Well, I come here realizing that I do not throw any particular light on a situation that you might have to consider. Nevertheless, I come here, partly because it satisfies me and I am interested in the development of science in India.'<sup>7</sup> Once again, after five years, at the 44th Session in Calcutta, Nehru becomes even