

Miles to go . . .

Gupta¹ has addressed a relevant and burning issue regarding Indian science. However, the process that he has suggested shows a weak, fragile and self-pitiable face of Indian science and Indian scientists. Why at all should we request, forcibly get submitted or for that matter take away research proposals to benefit Indian journals? No charity or pseudo encouragement will solve the purpose until it really has the sublimation of strong will and quality of research, by all of us. I feel that science journals are not going to be benefitted by this attitude. Merit and merit alone attached to the journals can fetch attention of Indian and non-Indian scientists. Do we wish to publish the journals only for us and just for the sake of publishing them? Can we per-

form better by force, etc. that too in science, which is all about mental freedom and novel thinking? The reasons for the low standards of our journals are not simple but intriguing. I think that even if good scientific publications come from India in Indian journals, the situation may not change much. We have to analyse why few scientists from western countries publish in our journals, despite dealing with issues, relevant and contemporary to us, while we may find a paper from UK appearing in journals published from Czechoslovakia, Poland, etc. with poor print quality and low impact factor. Why not in Indian journals? What is the deterrent for them? Ultimately, our journals have to be as homogenous in representation as any other journal of international repute.

I also feel that while there could be priorities or policies, there is no national or international science. We do some research just for the sake of doing it or for several reasons as mentioned earlier². Let us take some clues and do our bit to improve our journals and cherish respect world over.

1. Gupta, Y. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **86**, 241.
2. Lakhota, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **85**, 20–23.

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The IIM imbroglio

I refer to the recent decision of the HRD Minister to slash the fees of the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) from Rs 150,000 to Rs 30,000. Although it does not affect me directly, I am concerned with it as a physicist, educationist, and a thinker. It raises certain basic issues on higher education, quality, excellence, self-financed institutions, government's role, etc. In a broader sense, it concerns all of us. I have not liked this step at all. Here are my views.

Nowadays, it is well-known that in some elitist schools, the fee for the kindergarten is Rs 15,000 or more. Several colleges and universities run non-grant (self-financed) courses such as BCS, MCS, MCA, MBA, electronics, instrumentation, and even physics, mathematics, etc. The fees are of the order of Rs 15,000 to 25,000. Private engineering colleges charge an annual fee of Rs 40,000 to 80,000 and medical colleges charge lakhs of rupees. We also know what quality of education our children get even at this price. When compared with these, Rs 30,000 per annum for a degree in IIM is nothing.

I am aware of the principles of social justice, education for all, etc. After all, who does not want education, or anything for that matter, at a lower price?

But I am also in favour of quality and excellence in all pursuits. When we have 10,000 colleges and 300 universities, should we not have even a handful of institutes which could be said to be excellent ones, of international standards?

As soon as a student is selected to join an IIM, banks are more than willing to provide loans. As chairman of IIM, Ahmedabad, N. R. Narayanamurthy has said, no selected student was unable to join on account of higher fees.

All departments of the government, HRD, S&T, Defence, UGC, etc. have started talking about excellence. Let us be pragmatic. In today's world, excellence comes at a price. There are no low-cost short cuts to excellence. The high earnings of the IIM faculty members (through consultancy) and the highly favourable teacher–student ratio are cited as negative points by the government. 'Do you know', they tell us, 'that they have a teacher–student ratio of 1 : 3, better than many business schools in the US!', as if this is something to be ashamed of. On the contrary, I would consider this to be a positive point, and we should be proud of the fact that our IIMs are doing better than many international business schools.

For the last decade or so, the government has started applying budget cuts to institutions of higher education. Colleges, universities and CSIR laboratories are being asked to generate funds through industry support, patents, a variety of self-financed courses, etc. Suppose an institution manages to do that to the full extent, the government should only be happy about it.

A good institution requires not only good faculty but also good infrastructure – hostels, sports facilities, cultural facilities, computer laboratories, enough internet connectivity, and a library with the latest books and journals in various areas.

Neglecting even one of the above aspects may result in falling behind international standards. Many government agencies are willing to give funds for equipment, but hardly any agency provides funds for its maintenance. 'Maintenance is your responsibility', is the standard argument. And who will provide funds for building enough and the best of hostels? Donations, alumni support, fees, private support are the only few channels available for these.

I imagine the following scenario. Suppose I am running a private institute or university, with several faculties. I raise

money from fees, consultation, industry support, management, and some government support through projects (UGC/MHRD/S&T). I collect good faculty who establish a good reputation for teaching and research, and a good liaison with industry. As I create suitable conditions to attract better faculty, without bothering about the number of positions, the teacher–student ratio improves, and the feedback of ‘feel good’ continues. My reliance on government funds reduces.

This is exactly what the government wants. But in reality, the government is giving out contradictory signals. On the one hand, the government wants institutions to generate funds and become self-reliant, and on the other, it puts hurdles in their path.

Is it possible to create self-supporting institutions of higher learning which do excellently well, not only in teaching but also in research and development? IIMs were, in fact, marching towards that goal, but unfortunately they have been pulled back.

Many industries now have good R&D wings. MNCs such as GE and HLL have excellent research laboratories, with mod-

ern equipment. They employ Ph.D.s (in materials science, chemical engineering, physics, metallurgy, etc.) and pay them well. Their R&D laboratories are far superior to most university departments in the country. Obviously, they run these as a part of the business proposition and expect to earn from them in due course. Foreign universities are establishing their centres and providing various courses and degrees at a cost. Can we not establish half a dozen such institutes of international standards? The trouble is that we have not yet learnt to look at our educational institutes as a business and industry, yet talk of quality and excellence. After all, private industries do thrive without government support. Why can we then not allow at least some institutes to follow the industry path?

The phenomenon of private, self-financed and yet excellent institutes has appeared on the educational horizons of our country in the past decade or so. We do have a Sylvan International University, a few totally self-financed colleges, some of them autonomous, and quite a few international schools spread over the country. The government should help spread this culture.

Having decried the MHRD’s decision, let me say that I am surprised at the apathy shown by all directors and board members of IIMs. I am amazed how meekly they are taking this decision, lying down. Shekhar Gupta’s centre-page editorial in *Indian Express* (10 February 2004), is a telling account of the apathy. I would have expected effective protests from individuals and groups, and even some resignations on this issue. The only protest was a letter from Narayanamurthy and his meeting with the Prime Minister. But after that, there is silence everywhere and all the concerned people seem to have accepted the fait accompli.

Let the government open five new IIMs, with annual fees of Rs 30,000 and provide all the funds to the new IIMs. Let us see the result after five years or a decade. It will be clear which of these institutes (the old or new IIMs) are preferred by brighter students, and even by poorer ones among them.

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Workshops on open access

Tushar Chakrabarti¹ suggests that ‘government funding agencies can enforce that all the research works carried out with their money are published only in Indian journals’. While his intentions are good, I doubt if this suggestion would be acceptable to many researchers. To some it may look undemocratic and others may see it as bureaucratic interference and curtailment of freedom. What the funding agencies could do is to insist that all findings resulting from their support should be made freely accessible to all through either publication in a toll-free (open access) journal (such as *Current Science*) irrespective of whether it is

Indian or foreign or by placing the paper in an interoperable institutional archive. This is what the Budapest Open Access Initiative and champions of open access such as Stevan Harnad are advocating.

On a suggestion from M. S. Valiathan, President of the Indian National Science Academy, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai, is organizing two three-day workshops on open access in the first week of May 2004. These workshops aim to train 40–48 persons from higher educational and government research institutions in setting up institutional archives using the eprints software and the Open Archives interoper-

ability protocol. Those who want to attend the workshop may please contact Mr S. Senthilkumaran, Associate Director, MSSRF, Chennai 600 113, India. e-mail: <senthil@mssrf.res.in>.

1. Chakrabarti, T., *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **86**, 625.

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