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EDITORIAL

Marking a Transition

This will be my last regular appearance in this column. Over the last few years, writing this fortnightly essay has consumed me as no other activity has. I must admit, I have never enjoyed any other activity as much. Readers of this journal have generally been an encouraging and forgiving audience, who will, I am sure, bear with me if this last editorial is largely personal. In 1988, Sivaraj Ramaseshan appeared in my laboratory, unannounced and really unknown to the young students, who surround me. He had retired a few years earlier as the Director of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc). I knew him reasonably well then, although as a relatively junior faculty member age and position were natural barriers. Ramseshan was, as always, charmingly persuasive. He had a new mission; the task of rejuvenating *Current Science*. The journal had fallen on bad times, with diminishing numbers of manuscripts received and accepted; each issue becoming slimmer in size. He needed help and had arrived in person to recruit me. I had (and still have) no idea how Ramaseshan felt that my assistance would be useful; his presence was enough to draw me into a venture to which I have devoted a fair part of my energies over the last seventeen years. Ramaseshan was an enthusiast in the area of scientific publishing in India, among many others. He brought to this journal a new sense of mission. His goals were simple. An interdisciplinary Indian science journal must be widely read in India. It should publish the best of science carried out in this country. It should have a wide reach, penetrating the far corners of our country, drawing readers and authors, who represented the wonderful diversity of India. The journal should offer a forum for discussion of issues that concern science and scientists; providing a level playing field, where opinions could be expressed both by established authorities and unknown readers. These were goals, I could readily identify with. Ramaseshan's offer allowed me to fulfil an adolescent ambition of becoming a journalist; here was an opportunity to work and eventually write for a journal, where the management doubled as the editorial staff. For a while, I helped Ramaseshan anonymously, until he reconstituted the Editorial Committee in 1990. Like all committees the mundane burdens of carrying the routine work forward were limited to very few members and I was quickly drawn in to much closer association

with Ramaseshan. As he grew older the inevitable problems of age began to intrude, compelling me to slowly usurp his duties at this journal. In 1995, I joined him as an Editor at a time when he was decidedly becoming frailer. In looking back on the decade that has sped by so quickly, I am struck by the reassurance that Ramaseshan provided me by his mere presence, as the journal grew in size and entered a new era, where discussion of contentious issues could be freely entertained. Ramaseshan had begun the process of liberalization in the early 1990s, opening the pages to a free-ranging discussion of the National Science University, which had then been proposed as a non-resident Indian initiative. Ironically, over 13 years later the government is now in the process of establishing two National Institutes devoted to science teaching and research, an experiment which may revive the concept of research universities.

For several years, this journal did not have a regular editorial column. Ramaseshan and I did write on occasion and looking back I found only 7 columns in the three years between 1995 and 1997. At an editorial board meeting held in July 1998, a senior member suggested that any good interdisciplinary science journal (presumably he had *Nature* and *Science* in mind) must have a regular editorial; the unstated assumption was that editors must have opinions and must not be afraid to express them. It was this hint of challenge that was provocative. A few days later I penned the first of many columns, entitled 'Funding basic science' (*Current Science*, 1998, 75, 77). In re-reading my initial attempt, I am struck by how frequently I have repeated this refrain over the years. Written in the background of the euphoria over Pokhran, the editorial emphasizes a favourite theme: 'Increased budgets for "strategic research", the absence of any new, major initiative for academic science and complete identification in the media and in political circles, of science with the activities of the defence, atomic energy and space establishments do not augur well for the future of basic science in universities and research institutions'. Much water has flown under the bridge since then; public funding for science has steadily increased. Since that first essay which appeared on 25 July 1998, there have been 166 editorials that have followed and it has fallen to my lot to author all except

one. The fortnightly cycle has been trying at times, although deadlines have somehow always induced a surge of adrenalin. The column has had many faithful readers and it is the critics amongst them, who have always provided the most important insights on issues that I treated inadequately.

The most difficult part has been to find a topic each fortnight; the clock always seems to tick more rapidly than it should. In trying to avoid being repetitive I have ranged far and wide, at times writing on topics in which I have little or no expertise. Books and book reviews have always been inspirational. Writing about them has been very fruitful; kind and generous readers sometimes sending me copies of books they feel I should read. Committee meetings, often indescribably dull, can sometimes throw up a marvelously provocative phrase and I have tried to be alert to every opportunity. The canteen, where my colleagues argue about the state of science has provided both sustenance and stimulation. It is here that I have heard of the demise of disciplines, chemistry, physics and even genomics amongst others. At times, an editorial column has appeared as an aftermath. Controversies are always welcome, when editorial deadlines are impending and I have discussed my share, ranging from inappropriate awards to missing generations of leadership in Indian science. Another favourite has been the rise of the culture of citation counting and the insidious stranglehold of the impact factor. Writing about science and scientists has been particularly fulfilling. An easily recognizable failing is that I have over-indulged in the practice of using quotations, poetry being a special favourite. Critics have pointed out that at times the columns appear to have been written by a school teacher, intent on completing an English lesson; a charge that does appear to be legitimate. This column has also, albeit infrequently, been used to mark the passing of men I knew; men who greatly influenced the environment, where I have worked all these years. In writing about Satish Dhawan, G. N. Ramachandran, Sivaraj Ramaseshan and Hosur Narasimhaiah, I have been sharply reminded of their commitment, dedication and influence. Reflecting on their lives, I have shed a tear, in the solitude of the night, sometimes from a sense of personal loss, at others from the realization that even the most admirable men are only mortal. When one chronicles greatness, Thomas Gray's sombre line resounds: *The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

Many of my columns have dealt with problems of practicing science in India. They have, at times, been critical of government agencies, institutions and procedures. I have been elitist on occasion and populist at other times. Contradictions and inconsistencies will be obvious but these are the inevitable corollaries of excessive writing. In thinking about writers as conscience keepers and articulators of dissent, I was drawn to the description of an orator by Winston Churchill: 'An orator is the embodiment of the passions of the multitude. Before he can inspire them with any emotion he must be swayed by it himself. When he would rouse their indignation his heart is filled

with anger. Before he can move their tears his own must flow. To convince them he must himself believe. His opinions may change as their impressions fade, but every orator means what he says at the moment he says it. He may be often inconsistent. He is never consciously insincere'. I believe whenever I have written on emotive issues, the description of an orator might also fit the writer. In writing publicly on issues of science in India I realize that I have tried to acquire a position that can sometimes be comfortable; an ability to influence without responsibility. This is a natural attribute of the press, whose desire for power was devastatingly described by Stanley Baldwin (who borrowed his turn of phrase from Rudyard Kipling): 'Power without responsibility is the prerogative of the harlot through the ages'. Readers who have a weakness for invective might do well to read an elegantly written essay in *Frontline* (17 June 2005, p. 82), which begins with an unforgettable quote:

*You taught me language and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse*

— *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare

Over the past few years, I have dangerously skirted many potential conflicts of interest. When I have criticized public organizations and government departments, their response has been benignly indifferent. Having recently accepted the position of Director of the Indian Institute of Science, I am even more conscious of this issue. Handling conflicts of interest is not easy; any misjudgement can lead to public embarrassment. It is this issue, together with the tiredness that creeps in when a hobby turns into a chore, that prompts me to take a break. The column will, of course, continue as fresh contributors fill the breach.

In my years as a writer I have never publicly acknowledged those who have helped me. M. S. Venugopal and Chandrika Ramesh have accepted handwritten scripts, delivered at the last possible minute, and, in a feat of alchemy, have transformed them into perfect page proofs in a few hours. Errors have always been mine. In the early years Ayan Guha, a Ph D student in physics at IISc drew cartoons to accompany the text. When we met, invariably at the coffee shop, we would discuss a possible topic and then part ways; he to draw a cartoon, while I penned a column. When he left, as all our students seem to do, for the United States, this journal lost a rare talent. When I began, most of my background work was done in the library; *Google* had not yet intruded. Age and competing demands have taken their toll as I am able to do little aimless browsing amongst the stacks. In the last few years I have had the luxury of a young colleague Riki Krishnan, who by scouring libraries and the Internet produces more material than I can possibly read. He has urged me on, constantly suggesting topics, with an enthusiasm that has been truly infectious. Finally, a word of thanks to those who make writing a pleasure, the many responsive readers of this journal.

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