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EDITORIAL

Researching the Past

Book lovers held up in airports, by the customary delays in flights, face the hazard of being seduced by the attractive displays of new arrivals in airport bookshops. On a recent excursion I was compelled to browse, ending up inevitably with a book, that I would almost never finish reading in a reasonable length of time. I am now the proud possessor of a hardbound copy of William Dalrymple's *The Last Moghul*. So far I have read reviews of the book, some criticism by the more scholarly and traditional historians and noted with satisfaction that a recent year-end feature placed it on a list of books that the Prime Minister found worthy of mention. I was also drawn to the book because one of its major themes was a description of Delhi in 1857. Some years ago I had been castigated by a perceptive and critical reader of *Current Science* for alluding, incorrectly, to the events of 1857 as the 'Sepoy Mutiny', a phrase picked up from books by British historians. The critic pointed out that a more acceptable description would be a 'War of Independence'. Dalrymple's book seemed to present a new view of those momentous days. I must confess that I have not gone past the Introduction, although I have read a few pages at random. Finding time to read has become difficult. But, there is enough in the first few pages of Dalrymple's book to provide a basis for reflection. Can yet another book be written on the events of 1857? The answer is undoubtedly, yes, especially if new documentary material is uncovered. This is precisely what Dalrymple has done, discovering hitherto unread material in repositories from Lahore to Rangoon and, of course, most importantly in the National Archives in Delhi. Dalrymple notes that in 1923 Vincent Smith complained 'that the story has been chronicled from one side only'. He then adds: 'Yet all this time in the National Archives there existed as detailed a documentation of the four months of the Uprising in Delhi as can exist for any Indian city at any period of history – great unwieldy mountains of chits, pleas, orders, complaints, receipts, rolls of attendance and lists of casualties, predictions of victory and promises of loyalty, notes from spies of dubious reliability and letters from eloping lovers – and all neatly bound in string and boxed up in the cool, hushed air-conditioned vaults of the Indian National Archives'.

Why have I begun this column with Dalrymple and his book, surely a topic as far removed as can be from the concerns of readers of this journal? The answer lies in the nature of the two tasks that I have been confronted with in recent months; tasks that would be well accomplished if I had the benefit of a carefully catalogued written record. The first is the job of writing about the early years of this journal, which is now in its 75th year of publication. The second is the formidable job of building a

permanent archive at the Indian Institute of Science, which is rapidly approaching its Centenary Year. In both tasks I have been astounded by the absence of catalogued records in the organizations themselves; a clear sign that an historical record is not a matter of grave importance.

The careful maintenance of a written record and the building up of archives and repositories of documents is, undoubtedly, a Western practice. Oral history is more popular in India, with every story embellished in the retelling. Organizations which retain every file in dusty and disorganized disarray, usually discard them by the truckload in periodic cleaning operations. There is no resident archivist, who sifts through the piles of paper looking for the bits that may help a future chronicler to piece together an authentic and interesting story. I felt the absence of a written record, files of correspondence and photographs, most acutely when confronted with the self-imposed task of writing on the early years of *Current Science*. It seemed appropriate to mark the anniversary by tracing the roots of the journal and discovering the personal stories of its founders. To the hard-nosed reader of a scientific journal, pragmatic and focused, history will undoubtedly be of little more than passing interest. But, as the journal's present custodian, it did seem important to look back at the extraordinary achievements of my predecessors, especially those who midwived *Current Science* into existence.

Starting the journal must have been a formidable task; sustaining it in the early years even more demanding. The need for a journal, interdisciplinary in content and modelled on the great scientific periodicals of the time, *Nature*, *Science* and *Die Naturwissenschaften* would have been easy to articulate. Indeed, the available record shows that an Indian Science journal was conceived in discussions at the Science Congress and its birth hastened by the positive responses received to a questionnaire, circulated in 1931 by Martin Forster, then Director of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore. I would have loved to see this questionnaire and read some of the responses, for it is really these little bits of correspondence that provide a true glimpse of the times. Unfortunately, no records are traceable. The daunting task of producing, delivering and nurturing the journal was left to a very small band of intrepid editors operating out of Central College and IISc in Bangalore. Seventy five years later I can only imagine the difficulties they would have encountered. Resources would undoubtedly have been meagre and the logistics of producing a monthly, devoted to science, forbidding. But, I suspect in the heady days of the early 1930s science in India was riding the crest of the wave. Raman had

just received his Nobel prize. The renaissance was in full bloom in Calcutta. From Dhaka to Lahore, science seemed to be emerging as a force that would envelop the Universities across the country. In Bangalore, IISc was entering its third decade, clearly developing into a major centre of research. Living in these times, authors and supporters would have been enthusiastic and energetic in promoting the new venture. The journal counted amongst its strongest supporters many young and dynamic men of science, who in later years would build many of the institutions which are so important in India today. Among them were J. C. Ghosh, Birbal Sahni, S. S. Bhatnagar in addition to Saha, Bose and Raman. However, as anyone who has started or run a journal must know, the hard work is done by a few footsoldiers, who fight the daily battles of regular production.

So my search for the journal's roots began by trying to piece together a profile of the first editor, C. R. Narayan Rao (1882–1960). There are no records of the files he must have created at the journal office. Even the precise location of *Current Science's* first home is not precisely identifiable. It must have been on the campus of the IISc which, in a touch of delicious irony, I happen to head today. Unlike Dalrymple, I did not stumble on any archival treasure. Searching for long lost files, within institutions disinterested in history, seemed an unproductive approach. Instead it seemed more pragmatic to search for the families and students of my predecessors, in the hope that some long forgotten documents would be found, surviving over the decades in the dark and untouched recesses of a family cupboard. The task of tracking down Narayan Rao's descendants required the energy, enthusiasm and unbridled optimism of youth; qualities that I lost a long time ago. Fortunately, I was able to recruit a young colleague at the journal, Riki Krishnan, to the undoubtedly stimulating task of unearthing papers which would provide us an insight into the early days of *Current Science*. We were successful in locating Narayan Rao's son, C. R. Ramachandra Rao, now in his eighties, living in the middle class locality of Jayanagar in Bangalore. Even as we moved across the throbbing heart of the city to talk to him, I could only speculate on how peaceful Bangalore must have been in the 1930s. Central College's historic campus, where Narayan Rao worked and where Raman first lectured on his effect, must have been a far cry from its gridlocked present. We were greeted with the utmost graciousness and old-world charm by Narayan Rao's son, who told us of his father, of *Current Science* and the formidable, and at times difficult, figure of Raman. Fathers can leave an indelible impression on their sons. As we sat, silent listeners sipping the traditional coffee, I could see that the old gentleman in front of me was a child again, recalling events that must have been long buried in the recesses of the mind. I have heard many lectures, seminars and talks, but rarely have I been as captivated by an account of a personal history. He spoke of his father as a writer and scholar, a man who befriended *Nature's* editor, Richard Gregory. As one who has read almost all of the early editorials in *Current Science*, written in the 1930s, it became clear to me that even though we were only recording oral history, we had indeed discovered the author of many of those extraordinarily perceptive unsigned columns. We were given an unexpected and wonderful gift; well-preserved letters received by Narayan Rao from a host of correspondents in the 1930s. It was in this treasure that we found correspondence with Richard

Gregory, spanning a period of over two decades. We came away with the feeling that one task had been reasonably well accomplished; we now knew something about the man who laid the foundations, so firmly, for this journal. Narayan Rao's remarkable scholarship and commitment was evident in all that we heard and read.

The starting of an interdisciplinary science journal in the 1930s must have contributed substantially towards the creation of a community spirit amongst scientists in India, at a time when the stirrings of modern science were just beginning to be felt in this country. Ironically, a vision for an 'Indian Academy of Science' articulated elegantly in an editorial in this journal in 1933, quickly became a focus for controversy. Unification and fragmentation have been recurring themes in our history; scientific activity has not been an exception. Nevertheless, in the 1930s and 40s this journal was the major vehicle of communication between scientists in far-flung parts of India. The early band of editors, Narayan Rao in particular, struggled with finances. It is a tribute to the community of the times that the journal survived the most difficult periods of its history, without a break in production.

In attempting to research this journal's past, I was struck by how much we have disregarded the task of maintaining archival records. Even where they are available, their existence is little known and shrouded by an enveloping disinterest. Bangalore's historic institutions of science will soon mark important anniversaries. The IISc will reach a century in 2009 and coincidentally the Indian Academy of Sciences will celebrate its 75th year. These institutions and *Current Science* have had an historic association. In the 1930s the linkages would have been very close. Little remains of this record. In searching, admittedly in a cursory fashion, for archival material, I have been forcefully reminded that matters of the moment are more important; digging into the past is hardly a productive activity.

In the many years that I have heard accounts of the past, the early years of science in Bangalore, the dominant figure that emerged was always C. V. Raman. Larger than life, the lustre of his achievement undimmed over the years, Raman seemed to be the force behind this journal from its inception. His long, formal innings as President of the Working Committee of the Current Science Association from 1948 to 1970, ensured that the journal bore his stamp over the decades. In attempting to return to our origins, in marking 75 years of this journal's existence, we came upon the work of the first editor, C. R. Narayan Rao. It is to him and his successor, M. Sreenivasaya that this journal owes a great deal for their selfless stewardship in the difficult early years.

In attempting to conclude this essay I turned again to Dalrymple, asking the question: 'How does a historian come to the end of a long story'. In ending his tale of the turbulent events of 1857 and the last years of Bahadur Shah Zafar, Dalrymple takes shelter in a familiar quote, attributed at times to Edmund Burke and at other times to George Santayana: '... those who fail to learn from history are always destined to repeat it'. This ending seemed inappropriate for the minor research into the past that I have described. But then I was reminded of an oft forgotten dictum that must worry historians: '... time blots out small merit, while fattening big glory'.

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