

## Probing misconduct – Role of SSV

The Society for Scientific Values (SSV) is not surprised with angry letters<sup>1-3</sup> from the scientists affected by our report on the case of misconduct by Kundu *et al.* at NCCS, Pune. But the judgemental editorial pronouncement such as ‘bodies that arrogate to themselves the power to pass judgements with little regard for individual rights’ is most unfortunate. The contempt for third party interventions, be it from Modak or SSV, is as stark as the propensity to be soft towards the concerned scientists. Clearly, the message to anyone worried about scientific misconduct in India is that they should avoid treading on the ‘dangerous path’, ask no questions, and make no comments lest the career of somebody is affected.

And, does SSV have any authority or role in such matters? In the absence of any serious interest shown by our science Academies, SSV is the only though reluctant ‘watchdog of scientific integrity’ with a track record of many successful investigations for over two decades. Many of our members, including EC members, are Fellows of one or more national academies. In the current case, SSV did a transparent and thoroughly professional investigation over several months and I am proud to stand by its report as its President.

The original source of the allegation was not Modak or SSV but an e-mail apparently from a former student of Kundu. As a result of an investigation by an internal committee set up by the Director, NCCS, Kundu admitted the charges, wrote a letter to *JBC* to withdraw the published paper in question but later, citing duress, requested *JBC* to withdraw the letter of withdrawal. Thereafter, the Director, NCCS set up a second committee of six distinguished scientists, headed by Padmanaban (who is also the Chairman of the GB of NCCS). This committee exonerated Kundu *et al.* of the charges. As a concerned co-founder of NCCS, Modak requested SSV for an investigation of the case in view of the importance of the case and the opposite views of the two enquiry committees. SSV initiated enquiry by sending several queries of both technical and non-technical nature to Kundu (corresponding author), who responded to all of them through e-mail,

telephone calls, and one personal visit with me. A copy of the second report was received but the report of the first committee was not made available. Also, Kundu was reluctant to provide the original blots/films since, ‘he had only one copy of the original’. The analysis of the image by the SSV experts identified seven identical figures between the two *JBC* papers which were sent, along with other related queries, to Kundu as well as to the Director, NCCS, and Secretary, DBT and gave them ample time to respond.

The *Current Science* Editorial advice ‘including members from other disciplines can bring a much needed freshness to an investigation’ is exactly what SSV did: The MATLAB analysis was done by an image analysis expert from a computer science faculty, with no involvement whatsoever with biology or NCCS or SSV. For all the fuss made in *Current Science* about the access to original blots, we are not at all clear how Padmanaban Committee determined which original strip belonged to which published image (since all three published images were almost identical). This was one of the reasons for SSV’s dependence on the published data, apart from Kundu’s reluctance to part with the original blots. Even if those three original blots belonged to the three published images, ‘processing’ them so much that different images look identical is an act of misconduct in itself (misrepresentation of data). In fact, Padmanaban’s acceptance in his letter<sup>1</sup> that ‘when these strips are processed to highlight only the bands of interest using Photoshop, all the three look identical’, proves the point.

SSV did not take any public position on the case till it completed its investigation. In the meantime, *JBC* published the withdrawal of one of the two papers of Kundu and an editorial titled ‘Photoshop: friend or fraud’. We enquired with *JBC* and *ASBMB* regarding the basis for their withdrawal and were informed that notwithstanding their knowledge of the exonerated by the Padmanaban Committee, their internal investigation revealed ‘deliberate misrepresentation’ through ‘image duplication and reuse of data’. They stood by their decision and declined Kundu’s direct appeals and Padmanaban’s

indirect appeal recently through *Current Science*. SSV’s own investigation revealed many more similarities than the two on the basis of which *JBC* withdrew the paper. SSV report includes critical comments on the authors, the journal (*JBC* and *ASBMB*) and the authorities (NCCS and DBT). Its contents were debated word by word in two EC meetings with a court-room spirit and modified repeatedly till it was adopted unanimously. Our final report was sent to Kundu, *JBC/ASBMB* and the authorities. Having received no comments, the report and over 100 pages of supplementary materials were put on the SSV website ([www.scientificvalues.org](http://www.scientificvalues.org)). This is in total contrast to the Padmanaban Committee report, which gave its verdict in a short paragraph without any details whatsoever. Yet, SSV report did not make any accusation on Padmanaban or the members of his committee, except that it currently ‘does not have any evidence to distinguish between wilful complicity and an honest error of judgement’. It seems that our critics have not bothered to read our report. We cannot convince the accused even though SSV findings have also been endorsed by independent experts from other reputed institutions in the country.

Ethical values in the pursuit of S&T are coming to the centre stage in the emerging globalized knowledge era. To take a position that one should not report or examine unethical practice in a civic society would be an end of that civic society. Let us not forget: ‘History of the world civilizations shows that the societies have risen to a higher level not through mechanical or technological efficiencies but by practising sound moral and ethical values.’ (quoted from *Gita and Management* by Swami Bodhinanada).

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1. *Curr. Sci.*, 2007, **92**, 1467–1473.
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  3. *Curr. Sci.*, 2007, **93**, 121–122.
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