

Inaction on a Himalayan scandal

Panjab University should do more to resolve the Gupta controversy. There is more at stake in the issue than the reputation of an individual.

It is now more than a year since the Gupta controversy erupted in the pages of the journals *Nature* and *Science* (see *Current Science*, 1990, 59, 13). V. J. Gupta of the Centre of Advanced Study in Geology, Panjab University, was accused of committing serious fraud in two decades of work on Himalayan palaeontology. Surprisingly, no stratigrapher or palaeontologist has come forward with an independent reading of the situation. This silence, amounting to indifference, is disconcerting.

J. B. S. Haldane, the famous British scientist who chose to settle in India and spend his last days in this country, when questioned on the tardy progress of science in India, is reported to have said that this was because Indians were polite and had not developed a critical attitude in examining the work of colleagues. We wonder whether the lack of reaction to the serious charges against Gupta could be attributed to such an attitude. The cause of science is best served through open discussion. Let it not be said that we are afraid of speaking the truth for fear of offending men.

Gupta himself has so far failed to adduce clear evidences to disprove any of the charges – (i) recycling fossil finds, (ii) giving unreliable information as to localities, and (iii) plagiarizing. One of the more serious charges was that the fossil finds of Gupta were based on materials stolen from other laboratories or obtained from colleagues for teaching purposes. It should not have been difficult for Gupta to produce the originals of the recycled fossils with their registration numbers, dates of collection and field descriptions, as entered in field notebooks and laboratory registers of different periods, to prove that his finds were genuine and not recycled as alleged. He has failed to do so, in spite of ample opportunities given. What is annoying is his way of confusing issues, so that neither himself nor anyone else can make head or tail of what he is talking about.

We are left in the dark as to the full findings of the two-member investigating committee supposed to have gone into this question thoroughly. The full text of their findings has not been made public as yet, except for brief excerpts in a press note released by the Panjab University (see *Current Science*, 1990, 59,

244). It is, however, apparent that the committee had not examined the collection carefully in the light of the charges of recycling and plagiarism levelled against Gupta. It was within their power to probe a little deeper and ascertain the genuineness of the fossils in his possession. Instead, they seem to have taken the easy way out by recommending a scientific expedition to be led by Gupta to a few selected localities at the earliest in order to solve the dispute with regard to the authenticity of fossil occurrences and allegations of recycling. We fail to understand why Gupta should have been asked to lead the expedition. Besides, it is beyond our comprehension as to how allegations of recycling can be proved or disproved in the field.

Panjab University should, without further loss of time, take action to appoint a commission of enquiry with clear-cut terms of reference. It cannot brush aside the criticisms made against its inaction so far as irresponsible. What is at stake is not just the reputation of an individual, but of the university as a whole. Any effort at playing down or covering up the episode will cause irreparable damage to Indian science.

Whatever be the motive behind the wide publicity this controversy has received, it is clearly our responsibility to set our own house in order and maintain at all costs our fair name and a reputation for integrity. Mistakes are committed in every walk of life. The greatest mistake that we can make is to fail to learn from them and steer a clear course.

What is necessary is prompt action. Dilatory tactics in these matters have the risk of keeping a deplorable episode alive, damaging the whole fabric of science. An early resolution of this controversy is essential for the health of science in India in general and of Himalayan geology in particular.

We had said earlier that Indian palaeontology was under a cloud. It would perhaps have been more correct to say that it was under fire. Let us fervently hope that in this fiery ordeal all that is dross will get burnt to ashes, leaving only the pure metal behind.

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