

### The quality of research in *Current Science*

I read with interest 'The quality of research in *Current Science*'. Its take-home message is that *Current Science* should not compromise quality in what it accepts for publication and that the journal should set itself high standards in this regard. One cannot agree more with the author in this conclusion. The problem, however, is how this goal can be achieved.

We all recognize a good published paper. Into its making goes a substantial amount of disciplined thought—not only of the author but also of the reviewer and the editor. By corollary, a poor paper is deficient in these inputs. While the credit for a good paper goes essentially to the author, the blame for a poor one rests principally with the editor and his reviewer, for they had the right to ask for improvement or to reject the paper. The merit of a journal is decided as much by its editor(s) and reviewers as by its contributors. Coaxing the authors to have pride in what they submit is therefore only half the story!

If we often prefer to send our best papers to 'standard' journals overseas it is because we value their thorough and often relentless reviewing. While doing so we hone our paper to the best of our ability, for is it not a challenge to see it through? In such an exercise, the spirit of an *asvamedhayaga* often prevails—'who dares to rein in my paper from being published?! This same spirit is, alas, lacking when we send a paper to a good Indian journal like *Current Science*. A *chalta-hai* attitude in the author is bolstered by his reviewer and eventually conceded to by the editor, leading to a downward spiraling of quality. It is precisely this trend that has to be reversed if *Current Science* is to serve as a disseminator of quality Indian science.

How can this be done? In two ways: First, attract the best research work being done in the country for publication in its pages, and second, sublimate the manuscript with sparkling reviewing and editing. Obviously our ablest scientists should send their most valuable contributions to *Current Science*. It is here that the two science academies of the

nation, the Indian Academy of Sciences and the Indian National Science Academy, can help in a positive way. Its elected fellows and members may be charged with sending their best papers to the journal. This will blaze a trail for others to follow. In this drive to attract the best papers, *Current Science* should weed out ruthlessly any marginal or substandard submissions. As this can only be done by top-notch refereeing by able scientists in the relevant areas, *Current Science* should have on its roster reviewers who have themselves contributed significantly to the advancement of science. Again the two academies can provide help with their ready-made expertise—the fellows and members. The editor of *Current Science* should be able to draw on their help more as a right than as an obligation.

A thought may cross the mind of those who are likely to be affected by this plan (a Kamaraj plan?) as to why they are being singled out. I believe they have a much more positive and visible role to play for Indian science than what they appear to do now. The stalwarts of Indian science earlier in the century have done all this and more, thus literally lifting our country into the fold of scientific nations. But a soul-searching has now begun, and its theme is 'whither Indian science?' Can we justifiably say it is alive and well between the covers of journals published overseas? If so, why refurbish *Current Science*? Why react to the cry 'Why *Pramana*?' uttered some time ago? A 'sacrifice' is called for by all—if it can indeed be called a sacrifice. And, as in the past, the members of the academies should lead, for who else know the way better.

1. *Curr. Sci.*, 1990, 59, 5.

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In 'A tasteless chemical mix'<sup>1</sup> Prof. Krishnan bemoans the fact that, while *Current Science* publishes a large number of original research papers in chemistry, the quality of the papers is

poor; they are generally routine and uninteresting and not on 'topics of current interest'. He says there are a large number of chemists in the country publishing good papers and asks why *Current Science* is not considered as a medium for publication of these papers. He advances some reasons for this predicament, but in my opinion he has missed the most important point.

I should first point out that this sorry situation applies not merely to *Current Science* but to all Indian scientific journals. The main reason appears to be that most Indian chemists (and other scientists for that matter) prefer to send their research papers to foreign journals as a matter of prestige and in order to gain recognition abroad. Their best papers get published there and it is generally the second-best papers that are often rejected abroad or papers that the authors feel are not likely to find acceptance in foreign journals that are communicated to Indian journals like *Current Science*. It is no surprise, therefore, that the standard of Indian journals is poor.

The solution, in my view, is for eminent chemists like Prof. Krishnan to communicate their better papers on 'topics of current interest' to *Current Science* and other Indian journals. Once they give the lead, other chemists will surely follow. With good papers coming in, refereeing standards will automatically improve and so also the quality of the journal.

1. *Curr. Sci.*, 1990, 59, 187.

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### Indian editions of foreign journals

The so-called developed countries know their games very well. We get a supercomputer when it is obsolete. A technology is transferred to us at exorbitant cost when it is clear to them (and not to us) that the technology would be useless in a few years

in their countries. Now that they assess (in my opinion) that their scientific publications are likely to lose the market in their own countries soon, they would like to find a market in countries like India. Apart from serving their business interest, such moves also scuttle indigenous developments.

Today, India publishes about 1500 S&T periodicals, of which at least 200 may be considered scholarly. Most of these journals are available at a 'throwaway' price, even by Indian standards. How many libraries in India subscribe to a significant number of these journals? UGC has been expressing concern at the plight of university libraries that have not been able to subscribe to even a handful of journals for want of funds. Subscription to all the Indian S&T journals costs less than Rs. 0.4 million per annum. Even if a small part of the money that would be spent in publishing foreign periodicals in India is allocated to university libraries to pay for their subscription to Indian S&T journals, the very character of our universities will change. What an electrifying effect a periodicals section that displays about 500-700 issues has on young minds!

For a change let us stop looking up to our big brothers in the West and start concentrating on our own talents and resources in the country.

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### Historical notes

The historical note<sup>1</sup> on John Henry Pratt and the theory of isostasy makes absorbing reading, especially in this, the bicentennial, year of George Everest's birth.

The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India (officially designated Great in 1818) was a monumental work and provided matchless, highly accurate, uniform data over a large land mass. As an early historian of Indian surveys, Clements R. Markham, FRS, wrote<sup>2</sup> in 1878, 'The story of the Great Trigonometrical Survey, when fitly told, will form one of the proudest pages in the history of English

domination in the East.' Identification of the highest Himalayan peak and the discovery by Pratt are befitting outcomes of this survey.

I would like to make a suggestion regarding the articles under 'Historical notes'. It will immensely enhance their value if they are accompanied by references to important primary and secondary sources. A general reader will still find them interesting, while a more serious reader will be able to delve deeper into the subject.

1. Radhakrishna, B. P., *Curr. Sci.*, 1990, 59, 333.
2. Markham, C. R., *A Memoir of Indian Surveys*, 2nd edn, London, 1878.

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*There is an error in line 16 of column 2 of the article 'Archdeacon Pratt and the theory of isostasy' by B. P. Radhakrishna in Current Science, 59, 333. The year of publication of Pratt's papers in Philos. Trans. R. Soc. London is 1855, and not 1985 as printed.*

- Ed.