

## *L'affaire RRI*

Matters connected with the Raman Research Institute (RRI) have recently received much publicity in the 'media' and have been widely discussed in the Indian scientific community. We reproduce below, a report that appeared in *Nature*, which, although brief, reflects well both the tone and content of the massive coverage received in the popular press in India. We also reproduce the only public statement from the director of RRI (which also appeared in *Nature*).

Many people have raised with us the question of the role of *Current Science* as a journal that carries news, opinion, comment and debate on matters that concern science in India. We therefore thought it worthwhile to clarify our editorial stand on this question.

It appears that the press has already provided *de facto* a channel for expression of views about the controversy itself and the individuals and institutions involved. In our view, a constructive role for *Current Science* at this stage would be to debate the many wider issues that have been thrown up in the course of this episode. Some that come to mind at once are listed below but there must be many more.

- (1) Can a system of appointment by contract in a scientific institution work in the Indian context?
- (2) What are the scope and limitations of autonomy in scientific institutions?
- (3) What are the obligations of an institution towards its scientists, and vice versa?
- (4) How central a role does the nurturing of the younger generation of scientists—be they research students or young postdoctoral fellows—occupy in the aims and objectives of research institutions?

Such questions have often been discussed in private but seldom openly in print, and *Current Science* will therefore be happy if readers express their views on these and other vital matters that bear on the health or even survival of our science. However, it seems to us that the best time to launch such an open discussion would be when the passions raised by the recent events have cooled off, if not disappeared, and the wounds suffered by individuals and institutions are at least protected by scars if not healed. Accordingly, we hope to carry a debate on these wider issues in a few months from now.

*Editor*

### **Storm at Bangalore institute**

THE Raman Research Institute (RRI) in Bangalore, founded by the late Nobel laureate C. V. Raman, is passing through a crisis because of the treatment of 52-year-old Professor C. V. Vishveshwara, a theoretical physicist of international repute. His abrupt sacking, followed by the renewal of his service contract "under impossible working conditions", has sparked off a controversy.

The reasons given for terminating Vishveshwara's contract are that he failed to attract bright young people, to guide a single student towards a PhD or to build a school in general relativity and gravitation, the field of his specialization. He was also informed by V. Radhakrishnan, the director of RRI,

who is C. V. Raman's son, that his scientific work was just "acceptable", implying that it was not outstanding. But Vishveshwara was not told why the institute waited for 14 years to discover his deficiencies.

The eight-member RRI council, which manages the institute, is within its legal rights to terminate contracts without giving reasons. But Vishveshwara's case has aroused sympathy within the scientific community because of his international stature. One of the pioneers in black-hole physics and one of India's best-known relativists, he is next only to the director in seniority and is the only Asian elected to the Berne-based international society on general relativity and gravitation.

A student of Charles W. Misner, Vishveshwara joined RRI as an associate professor in 1976 and was made full professor in 1980 for a five-year term. His contract had been routinely renewed twice, but when the next renewal came up in September 1990, he was asked to quit. His well-wishers believe that the director's decision, later endorsed by the RRI council, smacked of jealousy and vindictiveness. Radhakrishnan, who has not made any comments, says he will respond at an appropriate forum.

Vishveshwara's case was all set to be closed, but the council was forced to reconsider the issue in the wake of a memorandum signed by some 200 scientists as well as by appeals from several of his collaborators in the United

States and Europe. At its last meeting in December 1990, the council agreed to renew the contract on condition that Vishveshwara would carry out only personal research in his field without interacting with other researchers at RRI.

The council also made it clear that the contract was being renewed "for extraneous reasons" and not on the merits of the case. Vishveshwara's room has also been moved from the physics block to the administrative block. Vishveshwara, who says that no self-respecting scientist would want to work under such humiliating conditions, has appealed against the "conditional" offer that his contract should be renewed.

At least one dissenting RRI council

member has resigned, and several senior scientists, including nuclear physicist Raja Ramanna, have asked the president of the Indian Academy of Science, Professor C N R Rao, to find a solution. A decision on Vishveshwara's appeal will be made at a special meeting of the Raman Trust, of which Rao is a member, on 2 March.

"Nothing that happened in the scientific community in recent years has disturbed it as much as the unfortunate developments in RRI", said S R Valluri, a former member of the council and fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences. Pointing out that the harassment of Vishveshwara signalled the "erosion of ethics of Indian science", Valluri resigned from the academy, describing

this step as a "penance" for the acts of fellow members of the academy who served on the RRI council.

The government's Department of Science and Technology, which supports RRI, had adopted an ostrich-like attitude, saying it cannot interfere in the problems of an autonomous institute. But Valluri in his resignation letter observed that academic freedom did not prevail in RRI which, some of its scientists say, has become a family fiefdom of the Indian Nobel laureate.

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New Delhi

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## Raman rejoinder

In the news item on the Raman Research Institute (RRI) in Bangalore (*Nature*, 349, 732, 1991), your correspondent has rightly stated that I have not commented publicly but would do so in an appropriate forum. Perhaps it is appropriate to comment in *Nature* if only to clear up distortions, inaccuracies and omissions in the report.

(1) My recommendation to the governing council on Dr C. V. Vishveshwara's contract was not a "sacking" and the abruptness was only apparent. It was certainly not abrupt to the person concerned. Anyone who runs an institute will appreciate the many avenues one goes through in such a case before seeking more drastic remedies. Since things started to go wrong in the mid-1980s, the process has occupied roughly half of Vishveshwara's stay at the RRI.

(2) The international reputation based on his early work was of course the reason why Vishveshwara was invited to set up a school of research in the first place. Your report deals very cursorily with the more relevant question of what was achieved (or not) subsequently. Any visitor to the rest of the astrophysics group at the institute can confirm that the overall atmosphere has been one of friendly interaction, open discussions, participation in seminars and training and encouragement of students and young people. Many colleagues (all

junior to Vishveshwara) have contributed to this atmosphere and their work has been recognized by the best form of peer review—invitations to talk at international meetings. If Vishveshwara had measured up to these standards, there would have been no need for me to make a negative recommendation to the council about his contract.

(3) The case was by no means "all set to be closed" when the deciding authority (the governing council) took it up. Three meetings were held and a committee was appointed which submitted a unanimous report\*. An important part of this report was the stress on building a new school in relativity and gravitation as the old one did not take off.

(4) No restriction on collaboration or the use of institute facilities existed before, during or after the council's resolution. The reference to personal research, which has been twisted to imply the opposite in your report, simply refers to the council's perception confirming my belief that Vishveshwara's earlier role as the nucleus of a group should come to an end. The decision I took to shift his office was a natural consequence of his changed role and has been blown up out of all proportion. The new office is a pleasant one, in the same building where I work. More

\*The committee consisted of S K Joshi (NPL, Delhi), Convener, K Kasturirangan (ISRO, Bangalore), P J Lavakare (DST, New Delhi), O Siddiqi (TIFR, Bombay) and G Swarup (GMRTC, Pune) —Ed

research activity will shift there in the future as and when the need for space arises.

(5) The fact that the unanimous resolution of the council overruled my earlier recommendation and that the trust further tempered the contract and my executive actions clearly show the system of due process and checks and balances at work. This is very far from the image of the institute's functioning conveyed in your report.

(6) A good part of the report covers opinions of various individuals and is thus selective though factual.

(7) The institute's main funding agency, the Department of Science and Technology (represented on its council) is needlessly criticized as being ostrich-like. In fact, its stand reflects its own independent assessment of the role and limits of a funding agency.

I am confident that RRI will continue to be judged by the quality of its atmosphere and research output and will not be found wanting. My colleagues who have worked to build up and maintain this quality would like nothing better than to be allowed to return to their task, without disturbance from ill-informed outcry.

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