

On the decline and fall of academic empires

P. C. Sarkar

Having committed a crime of no mean proportions by naming this article after Gibbon's immortal *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I hasten to add that most of our academic establishments appear to be no less than empires, with their huge campuses, Vice-Chancellors/Directors with immense financial and administrative powers, and a vast army of powerless minions slaving away under one emperor, then the next. Having been domiciled in Lucknow, a city of considerable academic distinction, and also by pursuing a research career, I have had an opportunity to observe several of our academic and research institutions closely. One of my earliest memories is of CIMPO, the Central Indian Medicinal Plants Organization. Housed in a dank building on the Lucknow-Sitapur highway, this laboratory evolved into the modern Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CSIR). The personal charisma of Akhtar Hussain, former Director, had contributed much towards its success. From its tiny rented premises in my neighbourhood at Niralanagar, Lucknow, the National Research Laboratory for the Conservation of Cultural Property eventually acquired its own *deluxe* campus and also earned laurels for its Founder-Director, O. P. Agarwal. The National Botanical Research Institute, Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany, Industrial Toxicology Research Centre and U.P. Remote Sensing Applications Centre developed similarly within a short time-span.

During my stay at the National Academy of Agricultural Research Management, Hyderabad, I witnessed how the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology had developed into the most sophisticated laboratory of biological sciences in the country, under the gifted leadership of P. M. Bhargava, while the neighbouring R R L., Hyderabad, had evolved under A. V. Rama Rao to become the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology. While success stories like this are legion, the other side of the picture depicts a greater number of sick establishments, well past their prime,

and lumbering towards the 21st century like drugged elephants. One of the lectures on research management at NAARM, had casually discussed the inevitable rise, plateau and decline of academic establishments. NAARM itself had humble origins. From a Central Staff College of Agriculture, it had become a prestigious ICAR institute under the dynamic leadership of K. V. Raman.

While the simple statement above explains successfully why many of our institutions are crowned in glory while a greater number wallow in dejection, it becomes imperative to find ways and means to stem the impending rot. If a decline in productivity of every institution is inevitable, it becomes necessary to anticipate it in the very early stages itself, like some sort of a prognosis. The most glaring example of this all-pervasive rot is perhaps in our 'Oxfords of the East'. Without naming any university in particular, it is generally well accepted that many such universities with their vast campuses and Indo-Saracenic architecture are now well past their prime. When the VC of Delhi University could resign due to paucity of funds, one shudders to think of the fate of universities in other, poorer states of the country.

During my days as a lowly research scholar at IIT, Delhi, I was exposed to a whole gamut of experiences and tales narrated by PG students from all parts of the country flocking there. A bizarre incident of my time was the visit of an eminent professor of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, with his son, who had applied for admission to the PhD programme. That the son returned to Visva-Bharati within a short span of time is another story. During the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, the entire campus was spruced up; in areas where the land was arid and there was no greenery, cut grass was meticulously spread by hand, so that the entire campus would magically appear 'green' to the Duke. Beauty was skin-deep, even in this Nehruvian modern temple of learning. In a recent personal communication, M. K.

Chandrashekar of Madurai Kamaraj University described the 'sovietization' of the minds of scientists due to the degradation of our universities into intellectual and scientific ghettos.

The picture is very much common, if not universal: a dynamic idea, concept or commodity, a charismatic academician with the right impact and a favourable politico-administrative atmosphere, giving birth to a new academic empire, the leader relinquishes charge in due course, others take over and through the years, the central idea somehow gets clouded in the rat race for power and pelf. When an establishment is celebrating its golden jubilee, it may also be the time to sound its death knell.

The moot point is that can we continue to act like academic ostriches in this post-GATT era of economic liberalizations and ISO 9000? Or should we sit up to perform honestly a fault-finding exercise and declare boldly a new plan of action? Perhaps NISIADS, New Delhi, could conduct a study on the inevitable decline of all academic establishments and devise a model for forecasting as well as avoiding it. For example, when a research institute has completed 25 years of existence, a thorough study of its past performance, present status and future prospects could be mapped out by experts (genuine experts only). Should it be established by the parameters developed by NISIADS that the institute will no longer be productive, then the institute mandate should either be diversified or, better still, be changed altogether. Every establishment should have this built-in mechanism to undergo a periodic self-check or carry out self-diagnostics. It should not wait for the government to constitute a witch-hunting exercise. And what should the government do with perpetually sick establishments? Should a general lock-out be declared, the scientists being deployed elsewhere, or should the government also do an honest soul-searching exercise to tackle genuinely the problem of low productivity of its intelligentsia by alleviating, if not eliminating, all their grievances?

The recent clamour of CSIR scientists for substantially higher pay scales from the Fifth Pay Commission, the perpetual and numerous CAT cases of ICAR scientists throughout the country regarding their pay scale anomalies and other similar phenomena of academics and researchers fighting for justice, all raise the pertinent issue of pay + perks versus productivity. While many emerging Asian 'tiger' countries are increasing their investment in R&D, India's investment has fallen from 1.1% of the GNP to a mere 0.83%. NRI scientists imported under TOKTEN are reverting to the country of Kentucky Fried Chicken, while home-grown scientists continue to languish.

According to press reports, at the 1995 Indian Science Congress, when researchers complained about Indian industry preferring outdated foreign technology to indigenous know-how, an industrialist snapped that being a 'buyers' market, it was for the scientists

to offer their technology to the industry. This is a vital sign for the times to come (or have already come). The Indian businessman unfortunately expects state-of-the-art technology (at par with what is developed in developed countries through massive inputs from the private sector itself) at cheap rates or preferably free, from our under-equipped government-funded labs, with the scientist as 'seller', India being an avowed socialist country.

On the lighter side, a research establishment should now be declared 'sick' when its staff spend more time reading *Money Opportunities* rather than relevant research journals, when the frequency of publications falls drastically below zero, when the quality of research output becomes amusing rather than thought-provoking and when students and non-teaching staff (in a teaching establishment) remain on *hartal* for more than 10% of working days available. The government could also

constitute a Board of Academic and Research Reconstruction on the lines of the BIFR to identify its 'sick' units and offer them to private parties.

Perhaps the government should pass a legislation making it mandatory for all industrial houses with an annual turnover of Rs 1 crore to contribute 10% of their gross *profits* to the laboratory or university of their choice. In return, the government would give an undertaking that it will recruit only science post-graduates with diplomas in marketing management as scientists, for better 'selling' of the technologies generated by them. Research and educational establishments will no longer be empires; they will simply be grocery stores. And grocery stores are highly profitable.

P. C. Sarkar is in the Chemistry Division, Indian Lac Research Institute (ICAR), Namkum, Ranchi 834 010, India.