

Western challenge to free passage of scientists

The Western concern for freedom and democratic values seldom travels with them beyond their common borders. That is how they always end up in paradoxical double-speak whenever it is a matter of West versus the rest.

The recent denials of entry visas to Indian scientists by Western countries on the pretext of the nuclear explosions is yet another case of Western dichotomy. R. Chidambaram, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, was refused visa to attend a conference of the International Union of Crystallography (IUC), of which he is the vice president. Other scientists from nuclear research facilities were refused visas for attending professional meetings in UK and Germany. Latest reports indicate that the US has plans to expel Indian scientists working there on exchange programmes.

The West has always been champions of the principle of 'free circulation of scientists' and they never tolerated refusing entry for scientists to a country on political grounds. They have had innumerable opportunities to argue for this ideal when the apartheid South Africa was alive. Whenever a country refused entry for scientists from apartheid South Africa or anti-Apartheid activists protested their presence at international meetings, the Western champions of liberty sprang into action.

I was subjected to a liberal course of lectures on the virtues of unrestricted travel of scientists in New Zealand in 1990 when I supported a group of anti-Apartheid protesters demonstrating against the presence of scientists from South Africa at the International Ornithological Congress held at Christ Church that I was attending. Mine was a lone voice in the 2000-strong assembly of scientists, and the Western kins of apartheid rejected my arguments about the impropriety of delegates from the apartheid regime attending the meet, interpreting them as political discrimination and violation of the principle of free circulation of scientists.

The sanctions against South Africa were based on a UN General Assembly resolution that called for boycotting

South Africa on all fronts including scientific research. Nevertheless I chose silence when I was shown the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) resolution on the free circulation of scientists. It is this principle for which the West always claimed to stand that they have violated in the case of our nuclear scientists.

ICSU is an umbrella forum linking national science academics and international scientific bodies, and the National Academy of Science of the US is its national adhering member as is our Indian National Science Academy. In pursuance of the resolution of the ICSU General Assembly of 1963, they have set up a Standing Committee on the Free Circulation of Scientists to respond to issues related to the topic. IUC, which was holding the controversial meeting in USA, is one of the twenty international scientific bodies affiliated to ICSU.

One of the primary requirements for an organization to host an international conference is a commitment to arrange visa to all intending participants to enter the country in question. The denial of visa to Chidambaram to attend the meeting of IUC in his capacity as its vice president also constitutes a breach of the commitment the US host organization has made to IUC.

A silent majority of this country sees the explosions as a challenge to none but the 300 million Indians who live in eternal poverty. Seeking to build nuclear clout in an ocean of poverty, illiteracy, diseases and social insecurity is an exercise the Indian ruling class alone has the community disregard to undertake. But the country has the internal strength, including the numerical majority, to contain the reactionary political formations that feed on delusions of nuclear clout.

The Western claims of concern about nuclear dangers in South Asia are laughable. Where was this concern for South Asia when the French-Japanese shipment of plutonium heading for Japan sailed through our waters in 1992 defying our protests. Their total disregard for our concern had forced me to

boycott the First World Conference of Science Writers held at Tokyo in the wake of the nuclear shipment, which I was scheduled to address as a guest speaker.

The West's hit list is already a long one. Socialist Korea, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and now, alas, India and Pakistan. Students from these countries were already denied admission to courses related to nuclear technology conducted by British universities as was confirmed by their Royal High Commissioner David Gore-Booth during his last tenure in another country. We need not, however, worry about this as the British universities are now substandard institutions, which are, in the absence of government funding, maintained by the hefty fees paid by Arabian Gulf students.

The international scientific community need to urgently respond to the challenge posed by the Western officialdom's propensity to ostracize scientists from countries that do not readily toe the Western line. Scientific forums such as ICSU and intergovernmental organizations like UNESCO should be used to address this concern. ICSU's interventions on the topic so far have been visible only in the cases of rebel scientists from the former Socialist Europe, White scientists from the apartheid regime and Israelis.

As it is often hard for scientists from developing countries to obtain entry visas to industrial countries, even in the absence of issues like nuclear explosions, international organizations ought to give priority to developing countries to hold their conferences. Aside from eliminating the excruciating visa problems, the organizers and the participants could hold/attend such conferences in these countries at substantially lower budget than in industrial countries.

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