

## Viewing a reviewer

The editorial, 'Reviewing a review', pertaining to my review in *Nature* of 17 September 1998, that appeared in the 10 November 1998 issue of *Current Science* is neither a review of a review nor a contradiction of whatever the author of the book or the reviewer had said, but a personal attack on the reviewer. It is an example of a strategy followed by most of our leaders: when X criticises what they have done and they know that the criticism is justified, they try to find fault with X and thus shift public's attention from the real issue. I sight the following in support of the above.

(1) The quotation that the review begins with, is taken out of context. In the *Nature* review it begins with, 'Dilip Salwi is right when he says that science in India today is characterized by a pervasive mediocrity...'. If fault has to be found with the paragraph, it must be found first with Salwi and not me who has merely 'repeated' his words! It is indeed incredible that in Balaram's write-up not a word is said against the book or the author. In fact, Balaram himself talks of 'the rising mediocrity and lack of accountability' in our scientists. So it is alright if Salwi or Balaram say so, but not if I do the same!

(2) Balaram comments 'Bhargava too is in the grip of ISI Philadelphia' when I refer to a case where one of the three so-called national science academies, elected as a Fellow a scientist, over 40 years old and involved in basic scientific work, who did not have one independent paper in a journal indexed in *Current Contents*. I would like to see Balaram appointing such a person as even an Associate Professor in his laboratory.

(3) Balaram sarcastically refers, out of context, to my resignation from the three science academies in 1994. He ignores the fact that, in spite of my request, my letter of resignation was never circulated to the members of any of the three academies and the fact that I had many letters (even telegrams) of congratulations from many, including Fellows of the academies, following my resignations. It is on record that at last two distinguished Fellows protested strongly but in vain at the academies' apathy to my letter.

(4) Balaram says that my being able to build the CCMB 'would hardly have been possible if there was not a broad consensus on the need for excellence in modern biology and if the venture had not been fully supported by the science managers of that time'. Balaram could not have been more wrong. Indeed, there was no consensus of the kind he mentions and there was only criticism and more criticism of the CCMB when it was being built, including from biologists (and administrators) in the Indian Institute of Science, even after it was finished and acclaimed universally. And as regards support from the concerned science managers, he surely must be joking: CCMB was built in spite of them and not on account of them, an occasional exception here and there granted. I had to resign three times from the Directorship of the CCMB while building it; on two of these occasions it made national (even international) news, with editorials in some of the country's best-known newspapers.

(5) Balaram says that I attribute 'much of what is wrong to the absence of democratization of our science management', while I have attributed the wrongs primarily 'to a failure to democratize knowledge'. As an additional indictment, he goes on to say that 'the virtues of democratic processes are most evident to the once powerful when they no longer command authority', implying that I have talked about democratization only after I left the Government! He is obviously (and understandably) oblivious of the fact that I have been commenting on these issues for the last 40 years in hundreds of articles (in respectable publications), public lectures, appearances on radio and television, and press statements, and that there have been questions in the Parliament or by the Government on more than one occasion as to why my services should not be terminated under the conduct rules for what I have written or spoken.

(6) Balaram explains away my endorsement of the contents of Salwi's book which, as I have said above, he has not refuted, as 'merely the case of difficulties in adjusting to an uncomfortable situation, where an once influential scientist finds himself on the

sidelines...', and the 'after me, the deluge syndrome of our scientists'. Firstly, I was never 'an influential scientist' as I was never a part of the scientific mafia. He confuses 'influence' with the acknowledged power of truth, courage, perseverance, honesty, integrity, concern, transparency, efficiency and positive action, just as he confuses power (which has nothing to do with a person's official position) with authority which the position gives to a person. Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and C. V. Raman (after he left the Directorship of IISc) had no authority but considerable power.

(7) Balaram asks the question, 'How much truth is there in Bhargava's scathing attack?' Firstly, should it not be called Dilip Salwi's scathing attack as mine was only a reiteration of what he had said in his book. Secondly, should not Balaram have answered this question point by point, objectively, which he did not.

(8) Balaram chides *Nature* for providing 'ample and visible space for Bhargava to publicly display his sense of frustration'. *Nature* invited me to write the review, and surely did not know what I was going to write! As regards my displaying a 'sense of frustration', could CCMB have been built if I were prone to frustration?

(9) Balaram says, that I have 'admitted that we do have centres of excellence'. He forgets that I have not 'admitted' this but I have pro-actively and emphatically stated this, and chided (not 'gently') the author for not only not stating this but also for two other important acts of omission. And my not mentioning IISc at Bangalore or the Indian Statistical Institute at Calcutta was not a Freudian slip; it was deliberate as, in the context of my review, the institutions I mentioned and several others I did not mention, merited priority.

(10) Balaram defends the situation in India, by stating that similar problems exist elsewhere too. He forgets that whenever and wherever any case, for example of plagiarism or scientific misbehaviour or contravention of law, has occurred amongst scientists in the West, the issue has been raised, discussed publicly, and taken to its logical con-

clusion and justice done, taking into account the scientific record, record of public service and the reputation of the individual. Otherwise, a Nobel Prize-winner, Carleton Gajusck, would not have been jailed for about a year during 1997–98. In our country, in spite of the frequency of such cases being orders of magnitude higher than in the West (I invite Balaram to come and study just the ones on my record), not one serious investigation has taken place and not one person brought to books as he/she should have been. On the other hand, we have often attempted to crucify (with much greater vigour than we exhibit for the guilty whom we love to protect) the innocent, specially if they have dared raised their voice against injustice.

(11) Balaram calls me a 'once prominent member of the establishment' and places me in the category of those with a 'mindless desire for approbation from overseas'. Nothing ever could be further from truth. He forgets that I was actively involved in the fight for Independence and that there have been innumerable occasions on record from 1954 onwards when I have taken a stand against unfair Western domination (see, for example, my lead article 'US a World leader? An unsubstantiated claim' in *The Tribune* of 6 April 1996). He forgets that I was the only Indian scientist (that, too, while in the Government) who took an open and unequivocal stand against the original draft of the Indo-US Vaccine Action Programme when the scientists of the IISc supported it. Eventually, my stand was vindicated. He of course would not know of any of the cases (e.g. of cytome) where we saved nation-wide damage of substantial magnitude by Western commercial interests, by bringing them to the notice of the con-

cerned Governmental authorities and pursuing the matter, or of our actively fighting Union Carbide (and not unsuccessfully, vide the recent Supreme Court Judgement) from the day of the Bhopal disaster till today.

As regards my being a part of the Establishment, I do not know where to begin to contradict this. Shall I mention the parliamentary inquiry against me in the 1960s when I gave a talk on the Soviet arms aid to Pakistan; or my close links with the large number of NGOs which I thought were doing very well but which were black-listed by the Government of that time; or my being summoned by the Sarkar Committee in Delhi to give evidence on the statements that I had made against the then Government's stand on cow protection at the time of the cow protection agitation in the late 1960s; or the presence of a CBI person at every public talk that I gave for years (I think, till the 1980s) on account of my supposed left leanings; or the interception of my mail by CBI; or the telephonic threats to my life and that of my wife and children; or my severe indictment of the stand and action of the Janata Government during 1978–80 in regard to the Method of Science Exhibition, that I had set up during 1975–77 – an issue on which hundreds of articles have been written around the world (for example, see *Science*, 1979, 204, 393; *Nature*, 1984, 308, 598); or the occasions when questions have been asked by the Government as to why my services should not be terminated under the conduct rules; or hundreds of my articles and press statements that have been highly critical of the Government from 1960 onwards till today, published in some of the country's and the world's best-known magazines, newspapers and periodicals?

(12) Balaram concludes from my review that I do not have 'self-confidence and self-esteem'. I suspect his definition of these qualities is very different from the conventional one!

(13) Balaram talks about our 'shining stars', our 'men and women of brilliant achievement', etc., implying that I have ignored them. He obviously did not read the following part of my review: 'Then there are significant individual exceptions to everything he (Dilip Salwi) says. The life and work of some of these outstanding people who helped to build modern India still hold important lessons for the future of science here...'

(14) Balaram does not quite understand the title – 'The Cowboys in Indian Science'. The title was *Nature's*, not mine, and they could not have done better, for one meaning of cowboy, according to the *OED*, is 'one who is boisterous or undisciplined, or wrecklessly unscrupulous'. I, however, did not understand the cartoon that followed Balaram's review. And I wonder if there has not been an 'anagram-atical' mistake in the title of Balaram's editorial. Should it not have been titled 'Viewing a reviewer', rather than 'Reviewing a review'.

I am extremely embarrassed to have to write so much about myself but there are occasions when this needs to be done to make a point which is far more important than the individual, and I believe this is one such occasion.

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## Computational chemistry: Much ado about nothing

The ambivalence in India toward 'science', whatever one understands by that, is beautifully illustrated by different articles in your 10 December issue. On page 1099 the Editor writes on approving puff piece about 'virtual chemistry' continuing the propaganda on

behalf of such unreal science. He writes, 'the power of modern computational chemistry cannot be underestimated'. No! It certainly has been regularly and grossly overestimated and oversold for the last twenty years. On page 1122 a different article laments the fact that

India neglects her botanical resources for healing.

The empirical fact is that so-called first principles calculations, increasingly funded for 20 years, have made a flat zero contribution towards the structure or synthesis of solids. Max