

The cowboys in Indian science

The above title appearing in *Nature* (17 September 1998, 395, 233–234) in P. M. Bhargava's review of Dilip M. Salwi's book, *Nonsense in Indian Science* (Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 1998) appeared to be a misnomer. Since the book as well as the review attempted to pin-point scientific frauds and racketeers in Indian science, the title should have more appropriately been, 'Injuns in Indian science'; it is well known that 'Injuns' (Red Indians) were the true villains of 'Westerns' (American cowboy stories) and not the cowboys themselves, or so we were led to believe. However, we are digressing. Balaram's rejoinder (*Curr. Sci.*, 1998, 75, 869–870) was apt in the sense that it lambasted Bhargava's review of Salwi's book. Indeed, retired and prominent scientist-managers in our country are a frustrated lot. From unlimited clout in the corridors of power to sudden oblivion. But are we getting caught in the wrong foot by criticising Bhargava and forgetting Salwi's scurrilous piece of writing? Or is it that Bhargava's vitriolic outpourings and Salwi's observations are a true reflection on the current state of affairs plaguing Indian science? Perhaps, we should sit back and ponder for a while (giving our prejudices, idiosyncrasies and preconceived notions a back seat).

Like the all-prevalent caste system in India, the scientific community in India is broadly divisible into major castes (with numerous sub-castes, gotras, etc.). The 'scientist-manager' belongs to the uppermost caste. By merit or fraud, hook or by crook, diligence or nepotism, perseverance or political connections, the scientist-manager sits at the helm of affairs, deciding science policy, pay and service conditions of fellow-scientists and funding research projects. In the process, he manages to corner a fair number of awards and foreign jaunts for himself through his ability to remain in the lime-light. In complete contrast is the 'scientist' or 'scientific-worker'. Being at the bottom of the moth-eaten caste system, he has to not only carry out 'dreaded' laboratory

work, but also has to please scientist-bosses (managers) and petty clerks alike. And woe-betide the scientist who fails to adjust to this soul-killing system; the only options left to such misfits is to approach a court of law for redressal of genuine grievances or else, simply commit suicide. A third, more attractive option is to migrate to greener pastures abroad, labelled as a traitor, who deserted his motherland for filthy lucre. It is another matter that with one-tenth of the effort that one has to put in futile activities in his motherland, a person is able to concentrate on his work and achieve acclaim. Such a miracle-worker is then proudly referred to as the 'Indian-born' scientist who achieved so and so.

To a vast majority of scientists, however, neither of the three options described above can be acceptable. Caught in a labyrinth of family obligations and bureaucratic pressures (daughters to be married, sons to be sent to business school, the proverbial house to be constructed, loans to be paid off, promotions, increments, postings, etc.). The 'average' scientist has no other option but to succumb to the system. If the system says, 'publish or perish', can the scientist remain aloof? If the scientist-boss says, 'Insert my name in the research paper or...', can the menial scientist refuse? If a scientist-manager presents a paper of doubtful scientific integrity, can his subordinate, the scientific-worker be far behind? And therein sets the rot. The average Indian scientist is actually a paid government civil servant, those in 'pure' government departments like DST and DAE, even more so than those in 'autonomous' government organizations like CSIR or ICAR. However, all scientists are universally under the purview of CCS (Conduct) Rules, first framed by the British for their civil servants. Although this may not be the sole reason for mediocrity in Indian science, and jargon like 'scientific temper' and 'social obligation' sound fine, the ground realities are much harsher.

Democratization is an oft repeated term. And the ones who clamour the loudest of democratization are those scientist-managers who were autocrats themselves during their active service careers. In my decade-old career as an Indian scientist, I have come to the sad conclusion that it is the scientist-manager who is responsible for the excessive bureaucratization of Indian science. Eager to show his administrative clout, the scientist-turned-manager is often more bureaucratic than the oft-maligned bureaucrats themselves. Quoting (and misquoting) freely from CCS Rules, the scientist-manager, surrounded by his cronies, is often a stickler for antiquated rules and procedures. Such 'managers' often manage to create an atmosphere of oppression, thereby muzzling the scientific freedom of his subordinates. Of course, such persons are the first to clamour for democratization when they face the other end of the stick, after retirement or simply when their managerial tenures are over. And history keeps on repeating itself... From the above scenario, another aspect of democratization would be an elective process, where scientists could choose their bosses through secret ballot. On a more serious note, however, is democratization a true panacea for all our scientific ills? But our country has been a democracy for the past fifty years...

A simple question would be an apt ending to this discussion: Democratization or not, just how many of us scientist-managers and scientist-workers would prefer our offspring to become scientists like ourselves in the present systems? From the answer, it will be apparent that there is a preponderance of Injuns and very few cowboys in Indian science. As a career option, it is best to be avoided.

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