

The reader can see that scientific evidence gathered so far for the strike of an extraterrestrial object has remained sketchy, some critics even holding that the entire history of nearly five decades of fieldwork represents little more than a chain of mistakes. At best, whatever evidence there is, invites challenge. W. Kundt has mounted such a challenge (see *Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 399–407. Citations to asteroid/meteoroid/comet theories can be found in this reference). He has suggested ‘more than seventeen reasons why the fiery Siberian event was *not* caused by the “infall” of a stony asteroid, nor of an (icy) comet’ but rather by ‘the volcanic ejection of some 10 Mt of natural gas which ignited by self-generated lightning’. He has even presented estimates of the mass and kinetic energy of the vented gas, the size (and geometry) of the vent(s), outflow time-scale, supersonic and subsonic ranges of escape velocity, termination of the buoyant escape towards the exosphere, and so on. Snowflakes, newly precipitated at very high altitude, were conceived as reflecting sunlight that reached the night-side of the earth and caused nights to be brightly lit following the event, reminding people of similar nights after Mount Krakatoa blew its top off about a decade before. Kundt has conjectured that the event may well have led to present-day production of kimberlite, which can form a diamond-bearing matrix (a mica-peridotite named after Kimberley, South Africa, the source of de Beers diamonds). No reports have appeared, however, of diamonds having been found in the vicinity of the event site. And, Kundt did not cover in his ‘explanations’ what some

expeditions (many now international) have claimed – certain biological consequences like accelerated growth of biomass, genetic variations in certain local ant species, in the seeds and needle clusters of a species of pine, etc.

As I said earlier, considered opinion has been that sci-fi accounts have degraded the event to absurd fantasy, but a short story I remember having read many years (decades!) ago would seem to have combined, in any uncanny manner, the normally accepted extraterrestrial impact and Kundt’s diamond-formation theories, and sort of bridging the gap between the ‘in-fall’ and ‘out-gas’ scenarios. The title of the story was *A Large Diamond* and its plot went something like this: the hero was an adventurous Briton who travels alone, hacking his way through miles of rolling *taiga* country (beautiful, they say!), crossing rivers and streams, and plodding through bogs and swamps. Enduring summer temperatures reaching the upper thirties (°C, of course!) and, worst of all, breaking through ‘walls’ of mosquitoes, he reaches the edge of a brightly sunlit ice-field and sits on a flat area of ice to take a rest. Absently, he opens a pen-knife and tries to scratch the bright surface of ice he is sitting on and realizes that it was... .

No, I shall not be fair to the reader and I shall reveal how much more our hero ‘realizes’ a comet or meteorite has struck a coalfield and the heat and pressure creates a huge diamond. On his return to England to announce his claim over what he has discovered, he learns that an earthquake had struck the Siberian region and the giant diamond he found has vanished into a cavity, presumably cracked open by the impact.

Because of its genre, it appeared to me that the author of *A Large Diamond* could be none other than H. G. Wells who, I presumed, was following-up on a story written earlier. Wells’ *The Diamond Maker*, was published in the 1890s, much before the Tunguska event, but not long after Moissan had made diamonds (microscopic ones!) by dissolving graphite in molten iron under high pressure and removing the iron from the frozen ingots with acid.

I have just found out from Robert Mitchell of the University Library, University of Arizona, that author of *A Large Diamond* was not Wells but Lord Dunsany, famous in the early part of the last century for his fantasy stories. It was originally included among *The Travel Tales of Mr. Joseph Jorkens* published in 1931 by G. P. Putnam and Sons (London and New York), some two decades after the Tunguska event. It has appeared in many other anthologies as well.

I thought it would be quite easy to get hold of an anthology with Dunsany’s stories. Such anthologies are very popular with the membership of recreation clubs, mostly made up of professionally-trained (therefore, English-knowing) Indians, and very likely to be found in the ‘reading room’ of these clubs. But my efforts, limited as they were, did not meet with success.

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Faculty are responsible for politicization of academics

The letters published in *Current Science* by Rao¹ and others² show that teachers are alive to the declining respectability and credibility of the university system, but there should be no room for pessimism although we may not be able to correctly diagnose the ills and suggest remedial measures. Presently there is lot to be gained from them and little

that the incumbents have to or can contribute to the universities, and such people are restless to rise to the above posts.

Rao¹ has enumerated several factors that have led to inferior appointments, and academic mismanagement and dishonesty in the universities, but he seems to have underplayed the role of faculty

in all this affair. How do the politicians know about the vacancies for the faculty positions? Who informs them about national and international fellowships, research grants and other funds? It is the teachers who do so and invite interference from politicians and the government. The most important reason for ills in the university system is the fact

that faculty gain favours out of turn and merit. Teachers are part of the system which has become corrupt. If the teachers decide to be fair to themselves and to others and accept no favours, the government and the politicians will have to think twice before they intervene in any matter regarding the universities.

University teachers are part of intelligentsia of the society. Who else shall we expect to have a positive and corrective attitude? If the government is aware of the academic calibre and general righteousness of the teachers in the uni-

versity, it will hesitate to impose a non-academic and inferior VC on them. Interference with our university system is a vicious circle that has to be broken by the persons who belong to the system and who suffer.

The most useful suggestion by Rao¹ seems to be the splitting of UGC into College Grants Commission (CGC) and University Grants Commission. Though the CGC is operating in some of the states, it has to be on a central level to strengthen teaching and raise the academic level of the colleges. This fact will prompt the government

to make better appointment for the VC's post, academically and administratively.

1. Rao, A. S., *Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 1391.
2. Virk, H. S., *ibid*, 628–629; Basa, D. K., *ibid*, **80**, 1364; Gupta, D. P., *ibid*, 2001, **81**, 1511.

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Why beat around the bush? It is time we took some risks to attract young ones to science research as a serious career

I was a bit perplexed by the recent comment of H. S. Virk (*Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **82**, 8) that the laboratory facilities and opportunities are not limiting for pursuance of physics by youngsters while reacting to P. Chaddah's (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 868–869) suggestion to encourage physics as an avocation or a hobby. Virk had, not long back (*Curr. Sci.*, 2000, **78**, 659), expressed that it was the job situation that was the culprit, and that Western culture was doing the damage to our spirit. I wish to point out that when we look for causes elsewhere, not on home grounds, such contradictions are inevitable. Chaddah's proposal, however, would also be sterile if implemented because chances are it would remain unused, not because there are no bright ones who might like to pursue physics as a hobby, but because the young ones, howsoever bright,

would be looking forward to good and inspiring teachers, not providers of facilities. How many of our award-winning young scientists have succeeded, *if they have tried at all*, in inspiring even their own children to take up research in science as a serious career? Even a crude survey would be an eye-opener.

The debate will go on endlessly without making the slightest dent anywhere until *we analyse our own role in setting the house in order and actually act when the need arises*. Unfortunately, most do not like to act because of apprehension of the heat that could be generated and, in the process, may leave scars on our cozy career that we look upon as a 'job'. But if we sincerely want a change, the risks have to be taken to set our house in order. Is there, really, any easier way out? Debates

would help only to enlighten us about our own role and stimulate in generating a value system that will sensitize the scientific community to protect such risk-takers from going to oblivion. Such individuals might succeed in shaping future role models, of a different quality than what exist today in our profession in India, who would, in turn, inspire the next generation to excel individually or as a team. It is certainly a long path, but perhaps the target would be achievable if the debate remained focused on our own role to begin with.

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Science and technology policy documents

I am happy to see that the editorial (*Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **82**, 5–6) expresses concerns on the issue of science, technology and public perception. But, I am afraid the issue is complicated by the perception which I feel needs to be corrected.

Yes, we have traditionally drawn dividing lines between science and technology (S&T) but the government policy statements have not. The editorial refers to the 'Science' Policy Resolution of 1958 as being a science policy. This is incorrect. The title of this docu-

ment (which has been quoted incorrectly) is 'Scientific Policy Resolution' (SPR). It is not merely a question of semantics. Homi Bhabha and Jawaharlal Nehru (believed to be the authors of the famous SPR document) were concerned with lack of understanding and the en-