

CURRENT SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

Current Science: Then and now

Current Science was born in July 1932. The journal's conception took place at a meeting of academicians during the Indian Science Congress at Bangalore, in January 1932. A little earlier in August 1931, Martin Forster, the Director of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore had circulated a questionnaire soliciting views on the starting of an 'Indian Science News Journal', patterned after *Nature*. Forster's initiative was based on the enthusiasm of a small group of scientists at Central College and the Indian Institute of Science. It was a wonderful time to think of starting a high quality interdisciplinary science journal in India. C. V. Raman had received the 1930 Nobel Prize in physics. The stirrings of science were evident in many universities in India. Forster's proposal met with enthusiastic approval and by early 1932 several influential scientists had promised support; among them were Raman, S. S. Bhatnagar, M. N. Saha, Birbal Sahni and J. C. Ghosh. The first issue of the new monthly journal appeared in July 1932, after a remarkably short gestation period. The inaugural issue was a slim 22 pages and carried research communications covering a wide spectrum of science, from the 'Raman Effect in Liquid Carbon Dioxide' to the 'Longevity of Micro-filariae (*Wuchereria Bancrofti*)'. The Board of Editors was identified: F. H. Gravely, Superintendent, Government Museum, Madras, C. R. Narayana Rao, Professor of Zoology, Central College, Bangalore, V. Subrahmanyam, Professor of Biochemistry, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore and B. Venkatesachar, Professor of Physics at Central College. The annual subscription was Rs 6 and individual copies were priced at a princely, 12 annas. The second issue appeared promptly in August 1932; its contents included an unsigned editorial article on the 'Future of Agriculture in India' and the obituary of Sir Dorabji Tata, dwelling on the tradition of philanthropy nurtured by J. N. Tata and his son. This issue also carried an appeal for a *Current Science Rupee Fund*, which exhorted all those 'interested in science in India' to contribute 'one rupee'. A group of scientists who would help collecting the one rupee donations was listed; their addresses ranged from Lahore (S. S. Bhatnagar) to Dacca (J. C. Ghosh) and Allahabad (M. N. Saha) to Madras (H. Parameswaran).

The *Current Science Working Committee* noted that 'if all were to help the aggregate . . . would suffice to relieve the Committee from pecuniary anxiety'. *Current Science* in its early days was off to a flying start with the editors of *Nature* (Richard Gregory), *Die Naturwissenschaften* (Arnold Berliner) and *Science* (J. Mekeem Catell) becoming corresponding editors. Paradoxically, the pages of the early issues of the journal suggest that the world was a smaller place in those days.

The editorial columns of *Current Science*, in the first two decades of the journal's existence, addressed many key issues of national interest. In May 1933, the journal carried an unsigned editorial entitled 'An Indian Academy of Science'. Authored by the journal's first editor C. R. Narayana Rao (1882–1960), the essay noted that 'the early establishment of a National Academy of Science should secure closer and better organized co-operation of activities among all research institutes in India, and exercise through its official journal a wider influence for the consolidation and promotion of the best interests of science'. The editorial envisaged an Academy that would 'be a company of thinkers, workers and expounders comprising members of the New Estate upon whose achievements the world must in future depend for the preservation and advancement of civilization'. In words which appear curiously out of place today, the essay suggested that for members of the Academy 'their professional spirit must be service, rendered with absolutely no thought of personal advantage' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1933, 1, 335). B. R. Seshachar in an obituary of Narayana Rao notes that 'the founding of the Indian Academy of Sciences at Bangalore under the Presidentship of C. V. Raman was a result of this appeal' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1960, 29, 173). Over six decades later, Sivaraj Ramaseshan attributed the authorship of the 'Academy essay' to C. V. Raman. He also wryly noted 'that the essay was so effective and logical that any and everyone who read it wanted to start an academy of sciences' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1994, 67, 636). The first two editors of *Current Science* – C. R. Narayana Rao (1932–1942) and the biochemist M. Sreenivasaya (1942–1950), of the Indian Institute of Science – steered the journal to a prominent role in the shaping of science

and science communication amongst academics in India. Sreenivasaya, one of the founding members of *Current Science Association* was prescient in considering the quality of our journals, which had begun to multiply in the late 1940s: '... when one takes into account the quality of our work, the manner of presentation, and the standard of get up of a good proportion of these journals we shall be confronted with a depressing situation which does not warrant any complacency on our part. Many of the journals have a poor circulation and their finances are far from satisfactory'. Raman became President of the Current Science Association in 1947 and was a major influence until his death in 1970. A succession of editors, G. N. Ramachandran (1950–57), A. Jayaraman (1957–58), A. S. Ganesan (1958–73), M. Sirsi (1973–74) and M. R. A. Rao (1974–88) have steered the journal's course, through the decades when the face of science changed with extraordinary rapidity. While *Current Science* remained the medium for publishing very short research communications and announcements, the journal had to face competition from several specialist journals published in India and the rapidly growing number of international journals, which attracted the best of Indian authors. By the 1970s the editorial columns no longer appeared with any regularity; the journal slowly transformed into a vehicle for publishing short research reports. This transition coincided with the rise of scientometric analysis, which provided rankings of journals and scientists; Indian journals began to become increasingly self-conscious about their 'impact'. In 1978, S. Ramaseshan speaking at a seminar on Primary Communication in Science and Technology in India said: 'To any one who surveys the quality of scientific publications produced in the country, the position would certainly appear to be bleak. This need not lead to total pessimism – as there are still a few journals in India which must be considered good by any standard of assessment. The question, therefore, is not whether we can produce a good scientific journal in India but what is it that has made the majority of them so bad'. In his lecture Ramaseshan made many new proposals for revitalizing struggling journals. He noted: 'But problems in India are different and difficult. We must evolve our own methods of tackling them'. Eleven years later in March 1989, Ramaseshan was a lead speaker at a 'Brain Storming Session on Indian S&T Journals' organized by IIT Madras and a non-governmental organization, 'Patriotic and People-Oriented Science and Technology Foundation'. He had just taken over as editor of *Current Science*, a journal with limited circulation and impact. It was my privilege to hear him; almost the only speaker with a passion for running scientific publications. He stood out among the participants, many of whom suggested impracticable solutions to the difficult problem of improving journals in India.

Ramaseshan, whose 80th birthday this issue celebrates, turned his talents to the task of transforming this journal

at a time when journals, the world over, were entering a period of transition. The electronic revolution was still on the horizon, but colour, high quality printing, rapid refereeing and punctual production were the accepted international norm. This journal had been converted into a fortnightly in 1964, straining publication schedules. The experiment that he set in motion is still being conducted. Ramaseshan restored the original conception of the journal as a medium for both original research and general matters of interest to scientists. He introduced the 'Correspondence' columns, which now appear regularly, as a device to present diverse opinions on matters of concern to science and scientists. On occasion, he initiated a debate on controversial matters, which invariably elicited a wide response. Colour and a constant improvement in the quality of paper and printing were a feature of the years after Ramaseshan entered the editor's office. He has been a tireless solicitor of manuscripts, an enthusiastic proponent of thematic issues and a resolute champion of the right to criticize establishment positions.

In reviewing, albeit briefly, the journal's past and in recording our appreciation of Sivaraj Ramaseshan's stewardship, which has brought us to the present, it may be appropriate to dwell a little on what may lie ahead. The journal is larger, glossier and hopefully, more readable than it was fifteen years ago. Publication schedules are adhered to, circulation has increased and the journal's finances are no longer a nightmare for its managers. The journal's local impact appears to have risen, although its 'impact factor', as measured by the ISI, could do with considerable improvement. There are several issues of concern. The journal still does not attract enough of the large number of good research papers produced by Indian scientists. Some fields of science, notably physics, chemistry and molecular biology are under-represented on the journal's pages. Refereeing procedures take an inordinately long time on occasion and the gap between receipt and publication of a manuscript is sometimes unacceptably long. We need to plot a course towards steady and speedy improvement. The journal must attract authors and readers; it must necessarily offer rapid publication for the former and interesting fare for the latter. In a hark back to 1932, my colleagues and I must appeal to the Indian scientific community; subscribe, contribute, read and cite the journal. As an interdisciplinary journal which publishes original research, reviews, general articles and commentaries on issues of policy, *Current Science* is unique in the developing world. In opening its pages to debate and dissent the journal upholds the tradition of free enquiry. The journal has had a rich past and will undoubtedly have an even richer future. It should be our endeavour to raise the journal to a high rank in the world of science; there can be no better tribute to the founders of *Current Science* and Sivaraj Ramaseshan, to whom we owe an immeasurably large debt of gratitude.

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