The Foreign Hand

In the early 1970s Piloo Mody, then a member of the Opposition, appeared in Parliament, wearing a placard proclaiming ‘I am a CIA agent’. He was lampooning the then prevailing tendency to hold the ‘foreign hand’ responsible for many of the country’s ills. At the height of the Cold War, in a sharply polarized world, ‘foreign hands’ seemed to be everywhere, controlling and shaping events in the developing world. In the years since, the CIA (and many other intelligence agencies) have lost much of their sheen; their vaunted abilities to gather intelligence and influence events has been punctured by highly visible failures. Sometimes, as in Iraq and the mysterious case of the ‘weapons of mass destruction’, the failures may have been deliberate. But, more often, the ‘foreign hand’ as represented by covert agencies has been a remarkably inept instrument, at influencing the course of events, in a planned manner. It is only in the popular pulp fiction, for which I must confess an inordinate fondness, that covert agencies act effectively as a ‘foreign hand’. The recent controversy on the appointment of foreign advisors and consultants to the Planning Commission suddenly raised the spectre of the ‘foreign hand’ once again. The singularly maladroit move to appoint ‘consultants’, particularly Western companies which specialize in dispensing reports and advice, was clearly bound to attract trenchant criticism. Even in this era of globalization, there seemed to be a sense of apprehension at the idea of foreign agencies influencing the process of national planning and governance. The ‘foreign hand’ had suddenly reappeared in a new guise.

The Planning Commission episode appears closely on the heels of the discussion on ‘foreign coaches’ following the Olympics. Once the doping scandals broke, fingers were suddenly pointed to weightlifting coaches in Belarus. The foreign coach concept has been readily accepted in sport; even when India loses to New Zealand in cricket, we do not point fingers at John Wright. Even the Pakistanis and Sri Lankans seem comfortable with foreign coaches. Despite an abundance of experienced players who have retired from active sport, our national teams seem to invariably require a ‘foreign hand’, to weld them together. Presumably, foreign coaches are perceived as neutral professionals, untouched by the prejudices that seem to be inevitable with local coaches. Planning, of course, is a much more serious business than sport; foreign coaches who tell the government how to manage the economy and infrastructure projects must undoubtedly attract adverse attention.

The ‘foreign hand’ is, of course, also evident in science. An historically interesting example is the case of the American ecologist Dillon Ripley, who worked with India’s foremost ornithologist, Salim Ali in the 1950s and 1960s. An article, dramatically titled ‘Scientists or Spies? Ecology in a Climate of Cold War Suspicion’ details the manner in which the US Army funded a large scale study of bird migration to the Bharatpur sanctuary, from Russia, Central Asia and China (Lewis, M., Economic and Political Weekly, 15 June 2002, p. 2323). In a compelling analysis, Michael Lewis details the convoluted thinking that connected ‘bird banding’ studies of migration to studies of ‘transmission of biological pathogens by birds for defensive purposes’; an activity which he concludes ‘is only a hair’s-breadth from turning that information to an offensive purpose’. Lewis’ story details the manner in which PL-480 and Smithsonian Foreign Currency Programs, were used in an irresistible funding net, which drew Salim Ali and the Bombay Natural History Society into a tangled web of intrigue. This controversy was to coincide with a period where there were deep suspicions of foreign intentions, leading to a gradual freeze on foreign funding for science projects, in the early 1970s.

Three decades later, the world has changed in many ways and so have the policies of the government. Foreign grants are no longer taboo; indeed they are a badge of honour to be proudly worn as a mark of successfully negotiating the ostensibly, tough course of ‘international peer review’. A close examination of many international grant applications reveals complex requirements for collaborations and evidence for experience in foreign laboratories, limiting these grants to the best of our national institutions. In areas like biomedical research, foreign foundations like the Wellcome Trust, a registered British ‘charity’, have for some years provided handsome grants.
to young investigators. The US National Institutes of Health has also entered the area of direct funding of Indian investigators. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has entered the arena of infectious disease research and the Howard Hughes Foundation may follow suit. Indian agencies cannot hope to match these bodies and it is likely that at some time in the future, many of our most promising biological scientists will depend primarily on foreign funding. Grant salaries, ‘fellowships’, travel funds and flexibility of operation will prove seductive; a far cry from the stifling bureaucracy that needs to be negotiated by individual investigators, when they deal with some of our national agencies.

Foreign (and private) influence has already entered many of our national laboratories, which have been goaded to earn their keep. Large multinational companies can, with limited investments, recruit teams of scientists to tasks which are of direct interest to the funding organizations. While the infrastructure (manpower included) has been built with public funds, its diversion to a private (or foreign) cause can be readily effected by the infusion of ‘project funds’. The lack of direction and purpose in many national institutions makes them ripe for picking. Globalization and the spectre (most often, brandished threateningly) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its treaties is enough to banish ‘protectionists’ from the scene.

The most dramatic impact of the 21st century ‘foreign hand’ is in the opening of the higher education sector to foreign institutions. Most recently, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is reported to have withdrawn the requirement for prior clearance, before Indian institutions enter into memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with foreign institutions. This is undoubtedly a pragmatic step, which reinforces the autonomy of universities and institutions. At the same time, this delegation of power places a considerable demand on the decision-making processes in our institutions. The education sector is flooded with foreign universities eager to gain a foothold in India, which can provide an inexhaustible supply of students. The substantial fees charged for foreign degrees (including those granted collaboratively with an Indian partner) make higher education an attractive business opportunity and India an irresistible market. Most newspapers have a weekly education supplement, carrying a remarkably diverse range of advertisements. Foreign universities, many largely unknown institutions, announce impressive courses of study; local agents who recruit students are also featured. Some of the more well known universities seem to be lending their names to ‘collaborative’ degrees, presumably for a price. The entire education sector, deregulated and cut loose in the new economy, presents a bewildering picture. Our own institutions, barring a select few, seem curiously non-competitive.

The growing pressure on Indian institutions to enter into MOUs with foreign universities is a phenomenon that needs to be carefully examined. The most fruitful academic collaborations are those where partners contribute equally and benefit equally. This ideal is rarely achievable. There is a danger that Indian universities will become mere conduits through which foreign partners will recruit students and tap faculty for teaching. The lure of foreign travel and handsome honoraria will prove difficult to resist; institutional interests will slowly become subservient to personal gain. In most collaborative arrangements it is necessary to clearly enunciate institutional interests. For many of our scientific laboratories, programs which quickly bring in new technologies would be beneficial. Unfortunately, it is these very technologies that are often jealously guarded and often denied.

In thinking about foreign coaches and ‘foreign hands’, I must not forget the ubiquitous non-resident Indian (NRI). Many distinguished expatriates are keen to contribute to local development. There are also many who are keen to dispense advice, finding opportunities in the many programs initiated by the government. Some bodies, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) is one, even have a formal mechanism for a Scientific Advisory Committee (Overseas). Here the foreign hand is decidedly of Indian origin. Is such advice useful? Are these now the foreign coaches, who will train our biologists for the competitive world of international science? Or are such bodies an anachronism, a reminder of past insecurities?

In considering foreign influences in today’s context, it is clear that we cannot return to a xenophobic past. Neither can we allow paranoia about globalization to dictate decision-making. A degree of caution about the apparent benefits of ‘globalization of science’ to countries like India is merited. Richard Gallagher notes in an editorial: ‘…governments view science at best, as a cutthroat business venture and, at worst, as a political pawn’ (The Scientist, 15 March 2004, p. 6). In both science and higher education it may be necessary to dispassionately evaluate the effects of the growing presence of foreign institutions. We must learn to manipulate the foreign hand to suit our collective purpose.

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