

The Pied Piper of IT

This is in response to Vidyasagar's letter¹ about Gangan Prathap's Guest editorial². No doubt, Prathap's analysis was somewhat unjustified, but it cannot be dismissed entirely as rubbish. I believe Prathap was not just expressing his ire over the decline in the number of young graduates opting for 'classical professions' and science, but that of the nature of the IT jobs they are doing. Many of my students who have just joined 10 + 2 (15–16-year-olds) and almost all who are studying for their B Sc, have already decided about a career in IT, despite the fact that they begin to show remarkable spurt of interest in physics. Why? Is it because they find IT interesting (or more interesting, say), as Vidyasagar believes? Definitely not! but rather because of peer pressure and money! Vidyasagar is as sorely mistaken as the colt that carried Christ into Jerusalem could have been, in believing that the people of that city were welcoming it! It is naive to believe that students who choose IT for their careers are interested in IT and can thus lead a 'fulfilling' life. It is money that interests them and the things that money can get, not to forget frequent visits abroad especially to the US. These are people who, to quote Thoreau, 'walk in the woods not for the love of it, but for the wealth its timber' (from *Life Without Principle*).

Vidyasagar claims that, until the advent of the IT sector in India, the world's image of India was that of a beggar nation. In fact, with IT, this is only confirmed! And which world may I ask had such an image of India? The world projected by Hollywood or the BBC? Not the 'learned' world, surely. For, the 'learned' world, which need not include our esteemed neighbours and similar nations and the 'unlearned' peoples of the West, know we are still a beggar country. The 'learned' world knows that a nation is seldom respected for wealth as much as for its science and literature. Prathap rightly asks: What is the nature of the majority of IT jobs our intelligent graduates are doing? Do they deserve to do such menial jobs? Have they chosen them out of sheer in-

terest? I reckon not. That the IT sector has single-handedly brought out this transformation is utterly wrong. Long before IT is believed to have helped raise India's image, it was the 'green revolution' and satellite technology that accomplished it. (Ask the 'learned' world!) Look how satellite technology has strengthened India! It is not IT only that has strengthened this nation. Hope Vidyasagar can look beyond IT. Technology, no matter which, can enslave. Only science, good science, can transform. And may I add, the arts too.

Vidyasagar's counter-accusation that Indian science research is as 'coolier', if not more, as say, IT, is somewhat justified. But whoever claimed that all or most Ph D research is essentially scholarly or revolutionary work? Sure enough, it can lead to good work, if not great work, if there is willingness on the part of the research scholars to make risky sacrifices of money, quick recognition, status and fame (unlike, alas, as is well known with some of their predecessors and seniors). But with the quality of students who now opt for research, this may be a tall order, nay, even impossible. Revolutionary work though, is rare and the reasons why there are not many such accomplishments to our credit lie elsewhere. Regular readers of *Current Science* editorials must be well acquainted with such problems. But this fact remains. Good science is by nature taxing. Few can afford it. Vidyasagar happily dismisses science produced in our country as 'crap'. True as it may be, this is not news to readers of this journal. Countless editorials and response letters have bemoaned the lack of good science and have suggested many good ideas to transform the nature of science work in our country. At least this journal is self-critical rather than self-aggrandizing as our IT friends generally are. Such 'crap' continues to be published and their quality well analysed by this journal, to which I am grateful. And regarding the error made by Naik about the percentage of students leaving for the US, let us not miss the wood for the trees, or strain the

gnat for the log, or ...well, one can go on.

To my friends in IT, may I quote from the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* by Robert Browning:

'And it seemed as if a voice
(Sweeter far than by harp or by psaltery
Is breathed) called out, "Oh rats, rejoice!
The world is grown to one vast drysaltery!
So munch on, crunch on, take your
nuncheon,
Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!"
And just as a bulky sugar-puncheon,
All ready staved, like a great sun shone
Glorious scarce an inch before me,
Just as methought it said, "Come, bore

I found the Weser rolling o'er me.'

The Pied Piper of IT is doing a good job with the rats. We appreciate that. But lest we forget to make amends and prevent this great Pied Piper of IT from ridding our town of all its children too, it is well for people like Prathap to mark the cry of the people of Hamelin:

'Rouse up, sirs! Give your brains a racking
To find the remedy we're lacking,
Or, sure as fate, we'll send you packing!'

It is a challenge now to produce a Pied Piper that can undo the damages of his counterpart. Yes, *one* will do.

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1. Vidyasagar, M., *Curr. Sci.*, 2005, **89**, 1645–1646.
 2. Prathap, G., *Curr. Sci.*, 2005, **89**, 1063–1064.
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