

## History of the Indian Institute of Science

Recently, I read the editorial by P. Balaram<sup>1</sup> entitled 'The Birth of the Indian Institute of Science'. Since my name is mentioned in it as the author of *In Pursuit of Excellence (IPE)*, a history of IISc (c. 1896–1901) of which the birth of IISc (1896–1909) is a part, I wish to share some thoughts, briefly.

A reference has been made in the editorial to J. N. Tata's letter to Swami Vivekananda with the observation that 'Harris' original biography of Tata confines this episode to a footnote'. This letter, which has been reproduced by me in *IPE* (p. 21) with an indication of the encouraging role of Sister Nivedita, has, perhaps, escaped the attention of the editor.

Burjorji Padshah's contribution to the formulation of the original scheme of 'Teaching University of India' and afterwards, was no doubt substantial; but that he was the 'central figure in realizing Tata's vision', as indicated by the editor, would relegate the incessant struggle of J. N. Tata, who rekindled the hope after Curzon (31 December 1898) had almost extinguished Tata's vision. A close study of the available records of what happened in the next 4–5 years, reveals that it was Tata who continued to be the central figure till his death in 1904. Even thereafter, had Padshah been sober and adopted an approach of reconciliation, as Tata did earlier, and no confrontation, probably the path of realizing the latter's vision could well have been somewhat smooth.

The editorial has rightly stressed the importance of hunting archival sources for writing history. For the preparation of *IPE*, during my visit to London (1991), I

studied the old documents pertaining to the birth of IISc and its formative years, preserved in the India Office Library and Records (London) and National Archives (New Delhi). Since only a third of them was permitted to be photocopied/xeroxed, about 170 pages were selected and obtained by me. Around 60 of these, including 41 pages of manuscripts have been reproduced in *IPE* (Appendices). The latter include the financial aspects worked out by Ramsay and a letter by J. N. Tata addressed to the Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for India in London. The bunch of non-reproduced ones (about 110 pages) was handed over to the IISc Registrar's Office.

If the full story of IISc and the men who built it is to be written, the entire archival materials germane to this story and now available in the India Office Library and Records; Ramsay and Travers' papers; related documents in the Royal Society – all in London, and the National Archives, New Delhi, need to be studied.

More importantly, one has to go through the files and records of the Government of Mysore, which throw light on the role of Dowager Maharani (Vanivilasa Sanidhanam) and the Dewans who offered the land with some financial support, since this offer appeared to be crucial for the location of IISc in Bangalore. I have been attempting to examine them.

It is my fond hope that IISc would take the necessary steps for the procurement of copies of all the archival materials from the aforesaid repositories. For, it is only in-depth studies coupled with sound historiography that would result in 'a tale worth reading', as hoped by the editor. A

book dealing exclusively with this tale deserves to be brought out on the occasion of the IISc centenary.

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1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **94**, 5–6.

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### Editor's note

The IISc Archives now has available over 2000 pages of photocopied material from the National Archives, Delhi; the Tata Central Archives, Pune, and material from University College, London. The editorial refers to previously unavailable correspondence of Sister Nivedita. Reference has also been made to the extremely insightful analysis of Kim Sebal published in 1985. Rending of available records would undoubtedly enhance our understanding of the complex events that took place over a century ago. Emphasizing the role of Burjorji Padshah in no way diminishes the unmatched vision and actions of Jamsetji Tata. As chroniclers of past events sometimes note 'time blots out small merit and fattens big glory'. My own reading of papers that are accessible today suggests that Padshah's contributions were indeed decisively important in the establishment of IISc.