

24 October, 2001

The Editor, Current Science
Bangalore -- 560 080

Dear Sir,

LOST INNOCENCE OR BRAZEN COHABITATION?

The bold editorial of August 10, 2001 deserves applause for questioning the propriety of the Indian Academy of Sciences in organizing an opening lecture by P. Chidambaram "to celebrate Pokhran II and its scientific objectives." The editorial also bemoaned the Academy's loss of innocence in straying from disseminating science to publicizing a technological event. I submit here that the editorial criticism should have gone further.

Despite the dispute regarding the yields of the Pokhran II tests, the Academy departed from its usual silence on controversial issues and provided a vehicle for the *official* version of the controversy. In taking sides, the Academy seems to have been more eager to be an agent of government rather than an impartial forum for debate. .

The lecture's mocking reference to the opposite viewpoint on yields being western in origin begs the question as to why Indian counter-views are missing (apart from P.K. Iyengar's criticism of the official yield estimates). Perhaps the answer lies in the active discouragement of criticisms of the scientific establishment. It is tempting to recall the Lysenko affair in Soviet genetics as a historical parallel. Under Stalinism, the state resorted to incarceration in Siberian labor camps and physical elimination to suppress dissent and debate. Fortunately, that type of coercion does not exist in India and hopefully will never arise. Instead, the Indian scientific community seems to silence itself on such issues, which is why there is no debate.

It remains to ponder over the editorial's description of the organization of Chidambaram's lecture as representing the Academy's loss of innocence. This judgement is a matter best explored by scholars like Shiv Viswanathan or Ramachandra Guha or Dhruv Raina with their insight into institutions and movements. In turning to such scholars, it is worth seeking their detailed examination of the hypothesis that the Indian Academy of Science has gone through three phases. Phase I (**Innocence**) is the phase in which the founding fathers of the Academy jealously guarded their independence from the imperial government. Phase II (**Lost Innocence**) is the phase in which the Academy (out of expediency rather than principle) actively courted government patronage and made scientific secretaries office-bearers of the academy, ignoring the resulting conflicts of interest. Fortunately, many of these heads of scientific departments had been strongly influenced by the founding fathers and kept the relationship with government in check. In the current Phase III (**Brazen Cohabitation**), the veil of innocence has been discarded. There is not even a pretence of an arms-length relationship with government. Despite this state of affairs, the academy can return to its original objectives but this reformation will depend on the academicians who have not yet been corrupted by association with government patronage and on those who, having been tainted, are prepared to repent and reform.

Yours truly

Amulya Reddy