

FOREIGN TRAVELS AND INDIAN SCIENTIST

For over fifteen centuries, crossing the boundaries of India (भारतवर्ष) for foreign travels (परदेशगमन) was considered an act of pollution and, if ever undertaken, required penance (प्रायश्चित्त). Therefore, the Indian elite of that decadent era rarely travelled abroad. Under the British rule this baneful prejudice disappeared by the end of the 19th century but local and foreign public funds for travelling became liberally available only after the political independence in 1947. Let us leave out the employees of the airlines, merchant navy and Ministry of External Affairs where foreign travel is the hard part of the duty. Of the remaining Indians, the intellectuals—particularly the scientists—have now been travelling abroad with frequency and duration which are certainly impressive. If we assess the situation by counting the physical movement of the human beings, the stamina of the Indian scientists leaves no doubt of their imminent success in recovering that travelling fame which all their seventy-five or so xenophobic generations had lost in the past.

Thus, from 1947, foreign travel has come to constitute an increasingly important activity of the Indian scientists. In this connection, allow me to quote (without identifying, which is, of course, immaterial) my friend who is an Indian medical scientist. I hasten to add that he is a typical married, patriotic-minded, competent, extensively travelled, honourable individual in his late thirties and that sex, curiosity, greed, mental instability and migration are not at all his motives for travelling. I totally respect his honesty when he thinks that plenty of foreign travels would bring good to science in India. He has written me recently from abroad which I quote here simply because it aptly reflects the prevalent views of a typical Indian scientist—

“One thing I strongly differ as usual from you is that one should go and work at other centres. You forgive me but I am telling you that I confess I am far behind in technique than this place. Of course, Prof. here has been in it for the last 33 years and has developed not only the concept of motor unit but has seen the techniques being developed. He is 67, works, if for nothing else but to find a great eccentric philosopher, I think the trip was worth it. I have settled down and have started working. His techniques of nerve fibre studies are quite different. I met one more great Dr. He has a great work on carbon monoxide poisoning and atheroma production. I think I now have some leisure and also have been able to organize my thought process and read in the last six weeks about what is happening. They have advanced here since I saw them last in technology but they are not even near the break-through. S.D. & S.E. & number (illegible) all computerized but that does not solve basic problem”.

The affectionate but unsympathetic reply was.

"I am late in replying your kind letter because I was thinking on its substance. One thing I have never understood and that is why one should go abroad and spend half or all one's working life at other centres. You forgive me but I am telling you the things bluntly. I observe that you find yourself far behind in "techniques". Accept my sympathies for your professed technical backwardness because all your life you will remain so. This is not your fault—it is the tragedy of your self-imposed fate. Unfortunately, it is also the fate of the present Indian society. This is simply because we have been running after the foreign techniques and technologies instead of developing the local genius which is the fountain-spring of all those wonderful techniques and dazzling technologies. So my dear friend you will never be able to put up any good show in your life by learning second-hand techniques abroad.

Judicious foreign travels are of use only to the seniormost policy-deciding men and to the raw junior scientists and you are neither. If you stick to your own problems and work them out by your own suitably modified techniques in your own laboratory like your European Guru Prof. . . . (who you say, has been 'in it for the last 33 years'), you will become equally respectable. So don't hang around there—come back quickly and start your own work here. I think science in India is in hot water because, instead of becoming intellectuals, many Indian scientists prefer to become 'technicians' of the latest fashions in science in the West even if they are irrelevant to the Indian needs."

I beg the comments of your learned readers for further discussion.

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