

*LETTER TO THE EDITOR*

WOES OF RESEARCHERS IN INDIA

Sir,

Brain-drain is not a new phenomenon in India. The country has been a victim to the departure of the best and brightest in Indian academia now. And while much rhetoric is wasted on how the flower of Indian youth does not realize its obligations to the society that nurtured it, very few care to examine the reasons that lie behind its exodus of scientists, engineers and doctors, which is proving so expensive for our own progress.

Some time ago, I had the good fortune to go to the United States on a research project, and spend a few years there. And my stint there opened my eyes to the yawning abyss that exists between the work culture there and the one that prevails here.

I found the scientific community there truly believes that work is worship. Their dedication to work is tremendous. The workday over there is not just eight hours to be got through before you catch a train home. It is 10 hours or more of hard, concentrated work, wherein lunch is more often than not a sandwich munched while riffling through reports, and mugs of coffee swallowed hastily lest the project get delayed. Students spend even their weekends and holidays designing new experiments, chasing deadlines for submission of articles and abstracts, preparing for conferences and meeting, and doing all those countless

things for which they can find no time in their busy working week. I could hardly manage three weeks' leave in seven years that I spent in the US. And they are handsomely paid in return, for number of hours that they put in, rather than the fixed monthly income our scientists get here in India. What lesser incentive could you have to work than to know that whether you put in that little bit extra or not, your salary cheque is going to be exactly the same at the end of the month. In fact, if one can get by on four hours of work, who would put in 10 hours?

I found working in US sheer delight. The labs are well maintained, bright and cheerful, with latest in equipment and procedures available readily at hand. Infrastructure is designed to aid, rather than hinder. Libraries are well stocked with latest research material, and all information is easily accessible.

Contrast that with the mess that passes for laboratories in India. A total lack of requisite facilities, outmoded equipment and badly maintained at that, an air of decay hangs over them. Those responsible for maintaining the equipment and the labs that house them couldn't be bothered less. Complaints about the conditions loose their way in red tape and procrastination. The loser is scientific mettle and spirit. And the

result is a general sense of lethargy, lack of accountability, and consequently, a half-hearted approach to projects that should imbue their researchers with zeal and enthusiasm.

Another consequence of this all-pervading lethargy in Indian research organizations is that the home somehow extends itself to the lab. Long hours are spent discussing family affairs, with everyone joining in with their little bit of gossip. In the US, I found that talk about personal matters was frowned upon even by colleagues, who were eager to get on with their work.

The eager scientist in India finds his way further hampered by time-consuming bureaucratic delays in getting both information and infrastructure. I remember in Ohio where I worked, I just needed to ring up the company for any equipment I needed, and it would be delivered directly to my lab by the next morning, come hail, snow or storm. Indian scientists, I find, lose half their enthusiasm in just filling out the innumerable forms required to requisition a piece of equipment.

I have also noticed, since my return to India, a certain lack of sensitivity here to the need of elderly and physically challenged. Libraries do not have lifts or

ramps for wheelchairs to help researchers who might need them. And most libraries are badly kept. Journals arrive late, so you don't have the latest information available when you need it. Some users have no compunctions about tearing out a magazine article that specially interests them, thus leaving the next user at a disadvantage.

Electricity breakdowns are frequent and come as a bolt from the blue. All this has a negative impact on ongoing experiments as well as on the health and survival of the animals that are kept for research. In all the years I spent working in the US, we had just one 10-minute power-cut, that too with several warnings to make sure that work did not suffer. Strikes and a huge number of unwarranted holidays add to the woes of Indian researchers.

I can only conclude that because of several external factors beyond their control, Indian researchers find it difficult to keep themselves motivated. Accountability is a major motivator, which is missing here. And accountability can be ensured only if external factors leading to delays can be looked after effectively. Modernization of labs with state-of-the-art equipment, removal of bureaucratic hurdles, more interaction with reputed international scientists and last but not least, minimizing infrastructural impediments can go a long way in reducing the woes of Indian researchers.

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