

Padmanabhan Balaram

An Outstanding Editor

'Why do editors write editorials? The purpose, I believe, is to provoke thought and discussion in the hope that incessant articulation of well-known problems will eventually result in a reasonably successful solution'. So wrote Padmanabhan Balaram in 1999. He had been by then persuaded by Professor Ramaseshan to assist him in reviving the journal 'Current Science' which was in bad shape. It is now nearly seventeen years since Balaram had taken charge of this new responsibility and, during his stewardship, the journal has gained a new stature and is presenting a better image of Indian science. In fact, Balaram has virtually transformed the journal both in shape and content and it is now read by young researchers of all disciplines from different parts of the country. The Editor has never been discouraging or destructive, but has encouraged scholars to come out with new ideas, his whole object being the advancement of science. He has chosen leading workers to write review articles giving a broad picture of the developments in that particular field and has



presented good book reviews of all important publications. In all these ways he has helped in raising the standard of the magazine. Articles are well selected and each number is of interest, not only to the specialist, but also to a large spectra of scientists. He has persuaded research institutes to take special interest, bringing out special issues, thereby enlarging the scope of the journal.

It is with considerable regret that we learn that Prof. Balaram has given up this responsibility of editorship consequent on his elevation to the honoured position as Director of the Indian Institute of Science. We have the satisfaction that he will continue as a professor orchestrating the brilliant ideas of the young in the most creative years of their life thereby heralding resurgence of new activity in that hoary institution.

A few words should be said about 'Current Science' and how it started and evolved. The journal is the brain child of a few eminent scientists who wished to promote a scientific journal in India covering diverse fields of knowledge, promising editorial cooperation. S.S. Bhatnagar, M.O. Foster, L.L. Fermor, C.V. Raman, J.C. Ghosh, K.R. Ramanathan, M.N. Saha and Birbal

Sahni were among those who took the initiative and the journal started in 1932, the first issue appearing in the same year under the editorship of Prof. C.R. Narayana Rao, Professor of Zoology, Central College. Editorials were not regular features in the earlier days, but the few that were written were always 'mature, bold, representing a high standard of journalism'. The prestige accorded to 'Current Science' in the earlier years was in a large measure due to the interest taken by C V Raman who assumed the Presidentship of both the Indian Academy of Sciences and the Current Science Association in 1947, a position he retained till his death in 1970. This helped Current Science by taking away the financial responsibilities in running a fortnightly journal. The main reason for continuing Current Science was that it provided the facility of fast communication of results. The journal started and continued as a monthly till 1964 and was then converted to fortnightly issues.

Sivraj Ramaseshan took over as President of the Indian Academy and soon assumed the responsibility of running the journal. I know how fully absorbed he was in advancing its reputation. Apart from improving the standard of papers, other aspects such as the quality of the paper used, the press where it was printed and the quality of illustrations did not escape his attention. Colour plates were introduced and the cover page was redesigned by including a good photograph in colour. His persuasiveness made all of us members and ensured for it a good circulation.

Prof. Ramaseshan's greatest contribution to 'Current Science' was his discovery of Prof. P. Balaram who was more of a recluse and least known to most of us. Ramaseshan drew Balaram out of his shell and, as years passed by, when he saw the rapid progress the journal was making, quietly withdrew into the background and gave Balaram a free hand. Balaram in his writings has disclosed little of himself, his family background, early education or the range of his interests and has remained a stranger to the art of self-advertisement. His editorials were thought-provoking, original and courageous although revealing the humanistic culture of a scientist, well versed in literature, classical and modern — a rare combination of qualities indeed!

'The service to a professional Society is one of the most important professional contribution a scientist can make, playing a fundamental role in distributing knowledge as well as providing a forum in which new ideas are tested.' We know how well Balaram has discharged this obligation.

I also for some time served as editor of a Journal and have an idea of the tremendous pressure under which editors have to work. Now, as I sit writing a few words of appreciation about Prof. Balaram, I recall the words of Cardinal Newman which had provided inspiration and guidance:

'I shall console myself with the reflection that life is not long enough to do more than our best, whatever that may be, that they who are ever taking aim make no hits, that they who never venture never gain, that to be ever safe is to be ever feeble, and to do some substantial good is the compensation for much individual imperfection.

With thoughts like these, which such as they are have been the companions and the food of my life hitherto,

How wonderful and comforting these thoughts were can only be felt to be believed.

A Journal can be characterized as good, if its editor is good. It is always sad when good editors with a brilliant record retire, but among the large talent available in the country we need not feel anxious and surely there will be good new blood waiting to be given a chance. Whoever is the new incumbent will have to work very hard to come anywhere near the standard set by Balaram.

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B P. RADHAKRISHNA