FAREWELL TO MERIT

Once upon a time there was a country A, which had a well-established university B. A few distinguished scholars from B migrated to another part of A to set up another university C, which became a rival to B. Name A, B, and C.

The answer? For A read England, for B read Oxford and for C read Cambridge. This happened seven centuries ago and is the historical context of the Great Schism known to me. No one would, how-

I receive letters from students in this age group seeking advice on how to deal with science despite parental pressure and also the pressure from society to opt for medicine and engineering, especially if they have been scoring good marks. I point out to them that a research scientist or a university professor these days is not badly paid, and anyone with a real motivation to do valuable research has a chance to enjoy a career free from the intense day-

These are the worrying cases, especially when we probe them more deeply.

Why do these young and active beings decide to act this way? Because science and technology (S&T) infrastructure is largely government-controlled, and the government criteria do not put much premium on merit. There are other criteria too well known to be detailed here, which often decide appointment, whether scale post or promotions or in senior appointments. Thus, the would-be achievers feel frustrated; they either fold back their wings and stop aspiring, or they leave our shores to seek opportunities where merit and achievement are not only rewarded but are considered necessary for survival.

Today, academic posts in many of our universities are not filled because there is a lack of available talent; but because there is a lack of will to go after the way to acquire it. No vice-

chancellor wishes to take the risk with the spectre of demolition and court cases staring him/her in the face. Contrast this with the situation prevailing seven decades ago when Mahatma Mohan Malaviya was setting up the Banaras Hindu University (BHU). He raised money for his university, for which he went round seeking help from the maharajas and other wealthy dons, for the British raj did not look kindly on the institution. But even more zealously, the Mahatmas went even solving the problem not only beyond the provincial boundaries, but also casting its net for talented Indians abroad. He recruited several promising young academicians and entrusted them with positions of responsibility, employing them to nurture excellence in their respective fields. Today's self-indulgent bureaucratic rules would have foundered on this procedure, but look at the distinction that the BHU achieved in the Thirties and the Forties.

We should learn from this example and try to retain these achievers of today in our midrasthey create new challenges that present challenging tasks before them, with big rewards and incentives if they succeed in executing them. At the same time, clear signals must go to everyone that there is no bailing out of the lazy and the non-achievers.

Although the institutions of most countries decree that all citizens are equal, nature itself goes for variety. Amongst any population group the abilities of individuals vary, be it in science, mathematics, literature, the fine arts, music, what have you. This has always been the case as history of any culture will show. History also tells us that behind the lasting effects of any civilization were these select individuals, who produced excellence. Nobody remembers the mediocrities.

Yet, in today's ambience in the country, the task of nurturing excellence is viewed with suspicion as undemocratic elitist or anti-

The emphasis is on uniform treatment being good, egalitarianism, etc. Today's framework in a scientific institution would allow an Albert Einstein, with the Theory of Relativity under his belt, the same normal privileges that are given to an average Tom, Dick or Harry just for being on the pay-

roll. From the point of view of social justice, this is the safest pro-

duct because apparently it guarantees that nothing will go wrong. But it also guarantees that nothing will go right either, so far as excellent science is concerned. It is a pity that even our best centres of excellence in science are guided by the same books of Mahatma Gandhi that spell out the rules and regulations of any bureaucratic government department.

How inappropriate this is can be seen by contrasting administration from science. In the former, increasing age brings wider experience, broader perspective, and greater confidence in the job, and the rules set out for advancement in the administrative service reflect this. In science originality, daring and fearlessness of outlook are crucial for achievement, and these are found at the beginning of a career, rather than towards its end. It is in the early stages of the career that the scientist needs greater encouragement and greater incentives. By follow-

covering the administrative pattern for career advancement in science, we fail to recognise and reward merit when it is staring us in the face.

Those who have heard the story of Emperor Aurangzeb and music may like the following parody, applicable to the modern Aurangzeb.

Emperor Aurangzeb was looking out of his window, when he saw a procession with several persons singing.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Sir, this group is heading for the airport for a farewell party," came the reply.

"Indeed, and may I ask who is leaving the country?"

To the Emperor's question, the reply was "Merit, Sir." "Good!" exclaimed Aurangzeb, "Tell merit never to come back; it is not needed here."

Husain lies the base of our brain greas...
in-day pressures on a medical doc-
tor. After all, what can be better
than being paid for one's hard
work? To science, I tell them, pro-
vided you really like it and are
good at it.

Merit and motivation are
necessary for doing well in
science and deriving satisfac-
tion from it. Lukewarm attitude
and mediocrity do not pro-
duce first-rate science and, if
you cannot do first-rate science, you
might as well shop and go home.
But it is not that and moti-
vation sufficient? Sadly, in the
In-
dian context they are not a point
will shortly elaborate upon. But
the fact remains that it is becom-
ing increasingly difficult to attract
the motivated and the meritorious
to science in India.

Viewed in this context, the oft-
repeated claim that we have the
third largest scientific manpower
in the world (or it is the second,
now that the Soviet Union has lost
its identity) sounds hollow. For,
in terms of quality and motivation for
excellence, the average level of
our science is nothing to boast
about.

The BRAIN drain in the In-
dian context is the usual
sense is largely concerned
with the migration of Indian
scientists and technologists to the
West. Is this a serious loss to the
country? Do we need to worry
about it? In what way can we
minimize it? These are the ques-
tions often raised and discussed.
First of all, we need not shed
tears for every Indian who re-
receives the green card or who gets
permission to settle abroad. There
are many with modest abilities
who are attracted by the greener
pastures abroad, whose
contribution towards the progress
of the mother country would
evertheless have been negligible.

Then, there are those meritori-
ous ones who, after going abroad,
have acquired skills in highly
specialised areas for which our
present technological set-up does
not provide any outlets. Unless
these outlets are desirable for our
development and we make con-
scientious efforts to create them here,
we can do nothing to bring back
scientists of this type. Certainly,
we have no right to criticise them
on so-called patriotic grounds.

But what about those who could
have been absorbed in our present
set-up, but who nevertheless went
abroad and are working there far
efficiently than they could
have if they had chosen to remain
here? Why do so many of our
bright IIT graduates prefer to do
their post-graduate studies
abroad, rather than in our own
universities and research insti-

tutes?