

**Remarks made at the felicitation function to celebrate the 60th birthday of Professor
Kankan Bhattacharyya, Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science**

Calcutta, Friday 12th December 2014

It is a pleasure for me to say a few words about Professor Kankan Bhattacharyya, whose 60th birthday we are celebrating today. Professor Bhattacharyya is a distinguished scientist who has worked in the area of experimental physical chemistry and built up a whole school of research in this country. He is a worthy student of a worthy teacher, Professor Mihir Chowdhury, and in turn he has mentored a whole group of well qualified and competent students who in turn have set up their own research groups in various parts of India.

I have known Prof. Bhattacharyya for nearly 20 years now and have admired his honesty and sincerity of purpose. He is impartial and objective, and quick to recognize genuine talent whether it is in his seniors, his peer group or his juniors. At a very early stage, he recognized the importance of quantitative measures of research output and the invaluable use of impact factors and h-indices. We are at an intermediate stage in India in our scientific development. The earlier qualitative and practically ad hoc assessment of scientists was far too approximate and led easily to an abuse of the system and the projection of undeserving elements. We are not yet at a stage when we have a large enough and sophisticated enough peer group to make out which are the really good papers which set new trends, and which papers have merely made it into the top journals because they confirm already existing models that were propagated elsewhere. In this interim period, there is no substitute for number of publications, impact factors and h-indexes and anyone who says otherwise is kidding himself. Professor Bhattacharyya has always relied on these quantitative indicators in assessing scientists. It was he who once told me that the impact factor of a journal where you publish your paper is not what is important, but rather the impact factor of the journal in which your paper is cited. A little thought will convince you about the utter truth of this statement.

Professor Bhattacharyya, myself and several others present here are around 60 years of age and we have witnessed three distinct phases in Indian social, political and economic development. During the time we were growing up, till around the late 1960s or early 1970s, there was a feeling of optimism that somehow everything would turn out fine and the gentle breezes of Nehruvian and Lohiaite thinking were moving the ethos of our country. However, there was a sudden change in 1971 and we were immersed into a period of 43 years of intense turmoil, conflicts, social and cultural divisions of all sorts and all this led to and culminated in corruption of the most severe type. This corruption became more and more endemic and the last 10 years, namely the period of UPA coalition rule have been completely disastrous. It is a measure of Professor Bhattacharyya's resilience and concentration that he built up his considerable scientific reputation during these disastrous years. It is not easy when everything around you seems to be

going against the principles according to which one was brought up. Please also remember that scientific patterns anywhere always follow the social, political and cultural patterns of the day. They inevitably must, and corruption in the scientific system is something we have all had to live with for many years now.

The third phase is something we have just got into after the election results this year. What this third phase will bring for science I cannot say but this much I will say, that Professor Bhattacharyya, myself and many of you here are not so old that we can ignore this third phase altogether. We shall have to live and work as honest scientists in the years to come even as it is becoming clear that the entire Nehruvian ethos will be replaced by a new and different pattern in a greatly simplified India. Whether we will be better or worse off with this simplification remains to be seen.

In this intermediate stage in our scientific progress, there is also an inevitable conflict between the qualities that are required to do good science and to do good administration. Professor Bhattacharyya has always been a scientist and will always be a scientist. Very briefly, he was an administrator and we had often discussed, prior to that period, as to how science should be administered in this country. At present, there are far too many gaps in the science administration set up in India, and there are far too many people who desire these administrative jobs, either because they cannot do science and life is stretching out too long in front of them, or they are just addicted to the fawning and adulation of sycophants who inevitably cluster around those who albeit temporarily occupy these so called centers of power. Professor Bhattacharyya does not belong to either of these categories. He sought the position of Director, IACS because he genuinely felt that he could make the oldest research institution in the country into a vanguard of the new India and the new science that must occupy a pride of place in our country. That he could not do so, or that he was not allowed to do so, is not a matter for discussion today. We have not yet matured as a scientific country to evaluate our administrators dispassionately and yes, fairly. Some of them are good men and they are doing their job well. On the other hand, many administrators themselves separate themselves from the community and preen like demi-gods. None of this is very good and Professor Bhattacharyya, who found himself in the cross fire wisely decided to resume his full time research. This, in itself, shows the caliber of the man. How many administrators of science voluntarily give up these positions today?

I will finally refer to his associate editorship of the Journal of Physical Chemistry, which is one of the most venerable of journals in the ACS stable. This is an ultimate accolade for a physical chemist and he has been doing this job for many years now. All of us know the Americans and we all know the ACS. They would not retain an associate editor in one of their most important journals for so many years unless he was upholding the cause of the subject in an honest, fair and dispassionate manner. He is the first Indian to have handled the refereeing of papers for an ACS journal. Among all the recognitions and awards that he has received, I would rank this as the highest of them all.

As for Indian scientific awards, almost all of them are rubbish and so I will not say too much about them.

I have no doubt that Professor Bhattacharyya will go from strength to strength in the years to come and that his contributions to Indian and international science will continue to be recognized by one and all.

I wish him all the best on the occasion of his 60th birthday.

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