

To
The President,
Society for Scientific Value
Delhi

August 29, 2006

Dear Sir,

sometimes in April-May 2006, a former student of Dr. Gopal Kundu, NCCS, sent a mail to a few Scientists in NCCS informing them that in some of the papers published by Dr. Gopal Kundu's group involved use the same photographs of Western blots to depict expression of different genes. Indeed, examination of these papers appear to confirm the matter. This was even more surprising since Dr. Gopal Kundu was awarded the prestigious Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar Award for the work including some of the papers involving apparently fraudulent use of the Western blot data. When this was brought to the notice of the Director, NCCC, he appointed a committee composed of in-house scientist-faculty who examined the matter and concluded that some of the papers including at least a couple published in the prestigious Journal of Biological Chemistry did contain objectionable material and asked Dr. Kundu to retract the said set of papers. It is not clear whether Dr. Kundu did or did not retract the papers. In view of the damning report of the internal committee, the Director NCCS, appointed a high-powered committee, composed of 7-8 members, which included a few members of the Governing Council and Research Advisory Committee to examine the matter. As a founder-proposee of the NFATCC to the then National Biotechnology Board and subsequently the DBT, the first Research Director of NFATCC and as a past member of the Governing Council of the rechristened NCCS, I had the privilege of discussing the issue with one of the committee members who claimed expertise in Image Processing and told me that, "upon cursory examination of the data books furnished by Ms Hema Rangaswami, the primary accused in the case of digital fraud, I didn't find anything suspicious as positive prints of each Western Blot were accompanied by appropriate negative of the digital picture". On such basis, the Enquiry committee exonerated Dr. Gopal Kundu and associates of any wrong-doing in the matter.

It appears that the members of the Enquiry Committee of 7-8 eminent personalities deliberated on whether Dr. Kundu's publications have any impropriety involved and exonerated him. The exoneration could be an honest opinion of the committee, lack of application by the committee or could have some complicity. The complicity, if any, could be direct of a repugnant kind which need not be elaborated, or it could be the most common manifestation of apathy of self survival that haunts nearly every such committee.

The enclosed .pdf files and the list of reasons that confirm duplication of data are self evident and are enclosed. What is striking is the fact hat the committee examined the record books of the student who claimed these to be

the ones containing the actual experimental data recorded at the time of the experiments, Dr. Kundu appears to have been exonerated. The Committee evidence did not take the obvious into account that the examination of the records was at best cursory and, we understand, no effort was made to determine whether the record was created *post facto*.

Such an enquiry requires forensic skills though not too elaborate. Most of us can tell if the record is written on the same day or on different days since the pressure of work and therefore attention vary day to day. But then, why should one ask the questions when they are inconvenient? The complicity appears to be primarily apathy compounded by shoddiness of the worst kind. The result of this presumably extraordinary act of *laissez-faire* is that the morale among the Scientists and Student-workers in the concerned institution reaches an extra low as people have already talked at length on what happened. A committee which is headed by a former Director of a major academic institution with many members from the same institution, past and present, cannot afford to deliver a dichotomous decision so that the will of the chairman would prevail. Did it?

There are many questions that surface now. In addition to the possible act of self plagiarism pales in the face of the enormity of what the committee has done. This indicates in the strongest possible signal that nothing can and ever will be done to correct a wrong by a scientific committee. It is common knowledge how the excellent scientific efforts in dissecting MITC poisoning during Bhopal tragedy was thwarted by high powered committees and the murders have escaped scot-free, at the behest of the interested.

It is necessary now to appoint an investigating committee whose brief should be well defined to reexamine the digital fraud/self-plagiarism by Kundu group. They have to examine the evidence and its possible *post facto* tampering the lab reports/journals. If that turns out to be so, the members of the committee must face greater penalty than the concerned scientist for the shame they have brought on the credibility of the Indian Scientific Establishment. I find it shocking that the scientists do not understand generally that the shoddiness of an enquiry committee has greater significance than the self-plagiarism that was investigated. The judge being corrupt or incompetent has far greater significance than one accused escaping without a conviction. The latter speaks of wrong doing while the former asserts institutionalization of corruption in science in this country. It is time that one is worried about being a member of a committee that gives an untrue report, which is as poisoned a chalice as proxy or gratis authorship, as Nature commented some time ago. I am sure there are enough fearless souls in the country that will not pander to the whims of Chairmen and dictatorial Science Leaders and do the right thing. I suggest that the Scientific Community decides now and once and for all that one cannot hide behind the anonymity of a committee and its report and ensure that some Fear of Justice is inculcated also among committee members.

Finally, the issue has broad implications since the perpetrator was recipient of the prestigious Bhatnagar Award suggesting that the Awards committee itself did not do proper homework in examining candidate's publications, a practice presumably of common knowledge in the Indian Scientific community that the names of Awardees are often rigged in advance by the clique/s ruling the awards' committees.

It is also surprising that a prestigious American journal like the Journal of Biological Chemistry obviously has a faulty peer-review system as it failed to catch the extraordinary similarities (sic identities) in pictures of Western blots published in successive volumes. Or, does it also foster the possible genealogical relationship between the reviewers and authors of such papers! The Journal of Biological Chemistry needs to be questioned in this regard. It is likely that the fraud of this dimension should not go unpunished as such as these bring bad name and disrepute to thousands of scientists in India who slog in the search of discovery and repute in the process of scientific enquiry. What I call as the "Kundu Effect" appears to be a sequel to Summerlin's painted mice or the infamous Kinase cascade in the U.S.A., and, more recent stem cell research fraud in Korea. I trust that the Society of Scientific Value will take cognizance of my letter, seek the truth and let it be made known to all.

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