Homecoming

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The journey of an international scientist back to the home country is not as smooth as it is projected in different fellowships and return home schemes. Many saner voices caution that the experience of returning home to Indian Medical Institutes must be characterized by a “prepare to suffer, not to regret” attitude. This is exemplified in the following narrative, which I decided to write at the advice of my students. About 14 years back, when the world was not re-enlightened to the wonders of “Avastin,” a drug which can rescue the devastating effects of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), our team in USA was working day and night to open the doors of knowledge and hope, paving the way for a unique animal model of AMD, which symbolized the characteristic features of the disease that causes central vision loss in aged individuals. Away from the sunny winter evening of 2002, I scrambled with the thought of sacrificing the entire colony of senescent MCP-1 knockout mice (in which *MCP1* gene was deleted from birth) so that the colony maintenance fee could be saved. Sacrificing of mice has always been a subject of constant philosophical debate since I took to biotechnology research. Therefore, my senior colleague and I decided to run an eye check of these aged mice just like hundreds of old patients take their turns by a slit lamp operated by a licensed eye specialist. One after the other, to our excitement, the eyes showed remarkable morphological features reminiscent of AMD. This observation was followed by an unbelievable speed of high risk experiments which were to prove whether the mice eye indeed represented a good model for human AMD. From real-time PCR analysis and electron microscopy to sophisticated MALDI-TOF, all the experiments

were completed in a short span of a few months, raising hopes that AMD patients will get to have a drug (screened through such a model) that could finally halt the disease. After many sleepless nights and innumerable experiments, the fruits of labor appeared in the pages of *Nature Medicine*, a symbol of lifetime achievement. When the US lab was honeymooning with *Nature* publication, expecting to be funded from all major agencies, the Vice President of the University Association called me to his office and offered to provide me with a better opportunity in career advancement and a lifetime offer of radiology residency to my wife. “Shall I call up the Radiology Chair?” he implored me. I was humbled. However, I was frantically searching for a good excuse to leave the laboratory and return home (India) instead. A special position was simultaneously being created at that time and I was to be a hot candidate. On one hand lay the luxurious and attractive intellectual landscape, and on the other hand, there was an empty laboratory space which needed equipments, grants, research scholars, power backups, and intellectual freedom. This was an uphill task in the absence of intra-mural research funding. Without second thoughts, I grabbed the first opportunity to return home, tempted by the challenge it posed. Shocked with my decision, many of my colleagues in the US remarked in disbelief, “We cannot believe it.” Others compared my decision to quit as inspired by our Brazilian “hot-head” friends. The Vice President was really keen to call up the Chair of Radiology so that my wife will find a happy workplace; so he offered again. However, I had made up my mind to return, inspired by the thoughts my family had installed in me.

Ironically, questions of why I returned awaited me. “He must have been fired” rent the air. Initially, I was taken aback, but slowly I got used to comments of some zealots.

I knew that I was preparing for a long drawn battle with mindsets that did not want to see the change that challenge demanded and would do anything to stop the development agenda.

Within a couple of months, I discovered that the patent application, generated from our discovery in the US, did not have my name as a co-inventor. Much to the chagrin of my US counterparts, I rose to the opportunity and made inquiries to secure an inventorship claim for my US-based discovery, while being in India. While I was trying to work out arrangements with my generous American attorney, I wrote an invited review article when I was informed that an invitation from a prestigious journal was received based on our *Nature* paper. The review article was to be authored between me, as primary author, and to be submitted jointly along with the person with whom the inventorship conflict was raging. With every passing day, the University and my attorney began to exchange more and more notes until a thorough examination of the research notebook and records of both my colleague and me ensued. To the astonishment of all, none of us had mentioned the date and time of discovery in our note sheets, making it difficult to resolve the inventorship dispute. By this time, my US colleague, presumably angered at my inventorship claims, wrote to the Editor dissociating himself from the invited review, requesting the editor to retract the invited review which was about to be pub-

lished. Things were heating up and the results from our homegrown *Brahmi* were simultaneously showing up promising data. Challenge was immense at both fronts.

The attorney analyzed the entire correspondence between the authors and the editor, clarifying that this must have happened because the US colleague was upset as I had raised the issue of inventorship with the University. Thus, the retraction, based on ‘irreconcilable authorship dispute’, became the hotbed of academic politics, during that time, as I had no time or enterprise to dispute it further. I was settling down in establishing the laboratory and struggling to get the *Brahmi* data out and could therefore ill afford to sustain the political battles in the initial phase of my career.

The purpose of research activities in India would have easily been lost to professional rivalries, politics of inventorship claims, and false allegations had I not maintained the calm and the pace of research productivity. The need for installation of a robust research administration can root out acts of research misconduct, hidden data frauds, corrupt practices, and ethical impropriety which often become overshadowed by false allegations and installation of committees with vested interests.

Disclosure Statement

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