

Dr Vinod Shah's Protest by Suicide

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YET another bout of heart-searching about the methods by which scientists are promoted to senior posts within the Indian government service has been triggered off by the suicide last week of Dr Vinod H. Shah, an agronomist at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (see page 123). In a long suicide note addressed to Dr M. S. Swaminathan, Dr Shah says that he has sacrificed his "life in disgust so that other scientists may get proper treatment". Dr Shah, who was 35, had been trained at the University of Wisconsin in the 1950s, and specialized in maize agronomy. Since his return to India in 1960, he worked first for the Rockefeller Foundation and then for the Indian Agricultural Research Institute. At the time of his death, Dr Shah was Principal Investigator and Associate Project Coordinator of the Maize Improvement Scheme at the agricultural research institute.

The immediate cause of Dr Shah's grievance was that he had not been appointed to either of two senior posts in agronomy which have been filled in the past few weeks by people Dr Shah considered to be less well qualified than himself.

In his suicide note, Dr Shah complains that Dr Rajendra Prasad, recently appointed Professor of Agronomy at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, is not qualified as an agronomist but as a soil scientist. Similarly, Dr Shah says that the new head of the Division of Agronomy at the Agricultural Research Council, Dr Rajat De, is a plant physiologist and not an agronomist.

One of Dr Shah's complaints is that it is unfair that people like himself with formal qualifications in agronomy should be passed over while scientists qualified in other fields should get the jobs. The official rejoinder is that agronomy is eminently an ill-defined discipline to which scientists with all kinds of other qualifications may usefully contribute. And in any case, it is said, there are agronomists and agronomists.

Dr Shah's letter goes on to complain that in the present organization of the agricultural research organizations, it is customary for senior people to suppress their subordinates by depriving them of research students or technical assistants, and he says that he has himself been dealt with in this way. He also com-

plains that administrative bottlenecks are many and often humiliating. The Director or Director-General seldom likes to hear complaints against the head of a division or a professor. Mediocre people are also recruited in preference to candidates with experience, energy and drive because they have the tact to keep the authorities close to them by fair or foul means.

The suicide letter also complains that Dr Swaminathan has in the past few years been presented with "a lot of unscientific data" chosen deliberately to "fit in [with] your line of thinking". He mentions specifically advice on the use of potatoes in a new crop-rotation plan being designed to produce four crops a year and the development of fertilizers from which nitrogen is released only slowly.

The issue of Dr Shah's suicide has this week been taken up in the Rajya Sabha (the Indian House of Commons) by members of both the Congress Party and the Parliamentary Opposition. On Tuesday Mr F. A. Ahmed, the Minister of Agriculture, resisted a demand that there should be a parliamentary inquiry into personnel relations at the agricultural research organizations, and threw a cat among the pigeons by making public the names of the members of the two selection committees responsible for the appointments of Drs De and Prasad. One immediate result will no doubt be to increase the difficulty of recruiting scientists to these invidious positions. Dr Swaminathan, who became Director-General of the Agricultural Research Council only three months ago, and who has retained his post as Director of the research institute pending the appointment of a successor, says that in neither case was he personally a member of the selection committees, and that in both cases he felt no reason to recommend to the Minister of Agriculture that the choices which the committees had made should be set aside.

The demand for a parliamentary inquiry is an echo of the occasion in June 1968 when the Government of India was compelled by political pressure to set up a committee of inquiry into the affairs of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research under Mr A. K. Sarkar, a retired Supreme Judge of the High Court, but with representation from both the Rajya Sabha and the scientific community. Ironically, Dr Swaminathan was himself a member of the Sarkar Committee, which even-

tually (in 1970) produced a report which vindicated the CSIR of most of the charges of irregularities in the making of appointments. On this occasion, Mr Ahmed said that he would remit the question of Dr Shah's suicide, and the complaints in his suicide note, to an international committee of the Council for Agricultural Research, which is already considering organizational problems that have arisen within the agricultural research organizations.

Whether Dr Shah's suicide will turn out to be, as he intended, a starting point for the reconstruction of personnel policies within the government's research organizations remains to be seen.

Indeed, one of the obvious difficulties is that some of Dr Shah's complaints rest on the premise that he had been denied his rights because the authorities have not paid enough attention to the principles that appointments should be determined by a consideration of the formal qualifications of the candidates who offer themselves for senior appointments. On balance, however, there is good reason to think that the formality and inflexibility of present arrangements for making senior appointments are the most important obstacles to the more efficient organization of publicly supported research in India.

Another unfortunate consequence of the affair is that it will strengthen the unhappy tradition in which the internal affairs of supposedly autonomous research organizations become political footballs. The fact that Dr Swaminathan, a distinguished scientist who has played a monumental part in the success of Indian agricultural research in the past few years, has been personally exposed to political attacks will in the long run be a great misfortune, whatever the rights and wrongs of Dr Shah's complaints. There may be much in Indian science that needs changing to meet Dr Shah's complaints about unethical suppression of young scientists by their seniors, about the difficulty of obtaining the official ear when grievances need airing and about the preference given to mediocre scientists who are prepared to toe a professorial line, if his complaints prove to be well founded, but it will be sad if the reputation and authority of Dr Swaminathan is unnecessarily and unjustly damaged in the process when he has only just become the head of the organization against which those complaints are made.