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## Digitopia now?

There has been long-standing lamentation about the plight of Indian science and especially of fundamental research, now echoed more often than before by the venerable elders of the scientific community. Human resource flows from the postcolonial economies to advanced economies is not a new phenomenon. Even before the colonial yoke was cast off; Europe suffered a haemorrhage of world class scientists, driven into exile in the US when the Nazis dismissed Jews from university positions. This exodus of scientists, led by Albert Einstein in 1933, caused a shift in the centre of gravity of world science to the US. The magnitude of this transformation may be understood in the light of the answer Paul Dirac, gave on a visit to the US in the 1920s to a query. Asked what he thought of physics in America, Dirac laconically said "there is no physics in America!" When the diaspora arrived, not only did they contribute to the Manhattan project, they transformed obscure agricultural universities like Cornell into research leaders. America was handed on a platter exceptional talent it would have taken several decades if not a century to produce, left to its own devices.

The flight of talent from the poor to the rich countries is also not new. After all, the centre-periphery relationship was built into colonial science, since the production of knowledge was tied to colonial interests openly and deliberately. Colonial subjects were discouraged from the creative pursuit of science and tech-

nology and were to be husbandmen, not grandees. John Seeley, the imperial historian claimed that Britain acquired an empire in a fit of absence of mind. While this has overtones of Oliver Sacks and John Cleese, 'oops, we have an empire', the Seeley syndrome was evident all the way through the years of colonial rule, the denial of mens rea while committing crimes against humanity. Recent imperial apologists need only read Jeffrey Sachs' 'The End of Poverty' for the stark statistics that marked out colonized societies from independent ones. No amount of cricketing bonhomie can conceal the fact that colonized societies suffered the depredations of mercenary armies for whose upkeep they were required to pay, an arrangement that made the Mafiosi seem angelic by comparison. If the mafiosi took protection money, they kept their word; they had a code of honour.

The advent of the information age, the global village is very much in evidence. Distances have been annihilated like never before and a global economy has emerged in which the poorer countries began to have some comparative advantages that they could use to bootstrap themselves into the league of the rich and powerful. However, celebrations of 'India shining' are somewhat premature, as the previous political dispensation found out to their dismay when they were unceremoniously turfed out by an electorate which was not impressed by advertising slogans and chose to rely on their own experience. Outside the metropolises, the vast hinterland houses about 70% of the population, who live at subsistence level and there is systematic amnesia about these fellow citizens of ours and their plight. They need livelihoods, nutrition, clean water, sanitation, security, education and much else, before they can exercise their rights as equal citizens of our republic.

The digital age has opened up a range of possibilities for our people to monitor governance, to articulate legitimate demands and to be able to get to know, even without stirring from their khatias, what is happening in the world at large. It was information through the medium of television that made the Berlin wall crumble, since the systematic lies propagated by the Soviet ruling clique could be perceived as such by the average citizen. The digital revolution has the potential to transform governance and the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, so that greater accountability is enforced. However, one must not underestimate the wiles of statesmen, since the standard ploy is to deflate civil society criticism by encoding it in bureaucratized, so that even the problem is forgotten, let alone the solution. Giving way to cynicism is morally culpable, even if it appears to be warranted, since it is the hope of a better world that alone can inspire us to make use of the powerful tools in our hands to effect a decisive transformation. Digitopia now, perhaps not, but that does not mean digitopia never.

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