

# Irfan Habib and Basic Issues

K.N. RAJ

We are meeting here this evening to protest against the suspension of Professor Irfan Habib and one of his colleagues by the authorities of the Aligarh Muslim University and to express our solidarity on this matter. It is my privilege to have been invited to speak on this occasion. I would therefore like to associate myself first with this protest in no uncertain terms, though I am fully aware that the authorities of the Aligarh Muslim University will take no notice of our protest. We must protest not because of any naive expectation that our voice will count but because we owe it to ourselves to defend the principles and ideals for which Professor Irfan Habib has stood up and therefore to build up among our people a clear understanding of what it is that is at stake.

Professor Irfan Habib has been in the news now for several months, and protests on the campaign of vilification and persecution carried on against him by the University authorities and others have poured in during this period not only from within India but all over the world. Professor Habib is not just another academic, or just another historian; he is a scholar of international renown, widely respected not only for his scholarship but his personality, character and outstanding integrity and courage (some of which are qualities rare even among scholars of international renown). Yet not only has all this protest left the authorities of Aligarh Muslim University unmoved but there has been so far not much open expression of support for him of condemnation of the University at the higher levels of leadership in our country. This does not necessarily mean that they support the action taken against Professor Habib; it is possible that at least some of them have been active behind the scenes. Yet it is not without significance that many of them prefer to be discreet and

This is the script of an address by Dr Raj at a Solidarity Meeting, organised by the Indian School of Social Science, Trivandrum, on August 18, 1981.

silent, though at least some of them would have been among the first to protest if such action were being taken in some other country like the United States, the Soviet Union, or the United Kingdom.

It is not always clear whether even those who are protesting know what exactly they are protesting about. Some of them seem to be concerned merely with Professor Habib as a person, some others with his ideological beliefs, and still others with the wickedness of the Aligarh Muslim University. All these are important in their own way but, if attention is focussed only on them to the exclusion of other more basic issues, we shall be doing an injustice to Professor Habib and the larger cause for which he has stood up that concerns every university in India with no exception and everyone who has anything to do with them.

It is necessary therefore to recall what sparked off all this early this year. Professor Irfan Habib was interviewed by a newspaper correspondent about the problems of the Aligarh Muslim University, and in the course of his remarks he made some uncomplimentary observations about the state of the University. The main focus of his observations was on the extent of indiscipline in the University among the teachers and students, how it was being condoned by the University, the lack of integrity in regard to both admissions to the University and the conduct of examinations, how academic standards had fallen so low that the graduates of the University had become almost unemployable, and how the University authorities had compromised on all this to the extent that even some criminal elements were being permitted to stay in the hostels and carry on their activities. He also referred critically to the practice of University teachers being allowed to go on long leave, for periods of three years and more, to take up employment in the Gulf countries or elsewhere; how their posts were therefore being kept unfilled by adequately qualified persons; and how this was affecting the teaching work in the University. It was these observations which aroused the wrath of some of the teacher and student organisations as well as of the University authorities, and of the communal elements behind them. A serious slur had been cast on the Aligarh University, they said, and it had been done through the medium of a newspaper; Professor Irfan Habib must therefore go.

The subsequent story, including the events that led up to his recent suspension, is nothing but a repetition of the kind of tragic comedies that are being enacted now in all our institutions without the artistic relief that goes with the portrayal of such drama in our local *kathakali* performances. There comes even a stage when Professor Irfan Habib is clubbed along with a lot of others of a completely different feather, and collective action is taken against them both to confuse issues and gain time, so that distant witnesses of the drama from Trivandrum are induced to protest solemnly against the suspension of not only Professor Habib but of his colleague as well.

It is good to be around by such blatant dishonesty, unfairness and persecution even if we do not have command of all the facts. But it would be still more dishonest, and hypocritical, if we do not also recog-

nise that what Professor Irfan Habib was talking about in relation to the Aligarh Muslim University is equally true, in varying degrees, in almost every university in our country now.

Professor Habib has been very concerned that the provisions of a new Bill that is to be introduced in the Parliament will give the Aligarh Muslim University the status of a "minority" institution, that it will enable the authorities of the University to flout many rules, conventions and criteria vital to academic institutions, in the name of the rights of minorities; and that all means of redress will then be closed. This has made him very unpopular among those whose idea of minority rights is that they should have the power to abuse power in the name of minorities, and even among those who are free from such desire but are keen to have the electoral support of minorities in their other activities. But we should be able to understand without difficulty how real are in fact the dangers he fears since, in even this progressive State of Kerala and even without universities being declared as "minority" institutions, various injustices are being perpetrated with the full knowledge and acquiescence of almost all political parties, and others standing by as helpless spectators.

This is the case not only in Kerala but in every State in India. Till a few years ago, the University of Delhi was free from some of these pernicious influences; unfortunately, it is no longer so. Even in the University of Delhi there have been, though perhaps on a very small scale, some irregularities of an extremely serious nature of the kind Professor Irfan Habib talked about in his newspaper interview. I can also say from direct personal experience as the Vice-Chancellor of that University over a decade ago that, when some of the powers strongly entrenched in the system were in fear of being exposed, the reaction was much the same as it has been in Aligarh, namely to confuse the issues and make it impossible for anyone who posed a danger to them to function in the University. Such elements are also extremely clever in securing the support of the teacher and student organisations, including the so-called progressive ones, in a variety of ways. In fact, they are capable of such manoeuvres, often in close liaison with various political parties in support of each other's interests, that the person who dares to raise inconvenient questions is the one who is most likely to appear as the odd man out, an eccentric, a starry-eyed idealist, or worse. If honest Vice-Chancellors are hard to find now, and those with other qualifications are often in premium, the reasons are not far to seek.

A few Universities in India have a provision for review of their work every few years. Among them are the Universities of Bangalore, Karnatak and Mysore, whose record has to be reviewed by a high-powered commission appointed once in five years under an Act passed by the State Legislature. At the invitation of the Chancellor of the Universities (who, in as Kerala, is the Governor of the State), three of us (Professor C.N.R. Rao of the Indian Institute of Science; Dr Jaganatha Reddy who was previously Vice-Chancellor of the Sri Venkateswara University, and I) were persuaded to accept membership of this

commission early in 1979. We took our work very seriously in the belief that, since Karnataka was progressing rapidly both in industry and in agriculture and had already built up a good infrastructure in the three Universities, we should do what we could to help these Universities.

It did not of course take us very long to realise that the same kind of unholy mix of politics and inter-communal and inter-caste rivalries as in most other States had reduced the Universities to shambles and that nothing much could perhaps be done. Nevertheless, having taken up the work, we decided to do our best; and Professor C.N.R. Rao, one of the foremost scientists of our country, spent enormous time and effort working out the structure and some details of a new type of under-graduate courses that could be introduced in the three Universities, for starting a process of academic rejuvenation. We also went into a number of other problems, and submitted our Report in August 1980. According to the provisions of the Act under which the Commission was appointed, the Government is to take decisions on the recommendations made and place before the State Legislature both the Report and a statement of the reasons for not accepting these recommendations that it has had to reject. We were assured by the Chancellor that the necessary action on the Report would be taken before the end of the calendar year 1980; later I received a letter from him, in reply to a communication from me, saying that it would be completed within a few months. All these date-lines are now over, and those who are familiar with Karnataka politics and what is now happening in the Universities there will know that these are not only matters over which the Chancellor has little influence or control but nothing much is likely to be done. Like all other such reports this one also will be probably given a decent burial, if possible away from public view.

This experience brings me to home ground and what is now going on here. We have all been witnesses recently to an interesting *kathakali* performance connected with the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor for the University of Kerala. I do not wish to make any observations reflecting on the persons who were considered for the appointment or on the person on whom the choice finally fell. But I would be less than honest if I do not take this opportunity to mention that, like many others within the Universities here as well as among members of the general public, I share the uncomfortable feeling that the Governor of the State, who is the Chancellor, has been used as a scape-goat by clever persons operating behind the scene to conceal many relevant facts.

I am also aghast by the decision taken by the State Government to introduce a new Bill making it binding on the Chancellor to accept the recommendation of the Pro-Chancellor, who is the Education Minister, in all such matters. It is possible that the Chancellor has erred in some way, but I cannot accept the position that either the Education Minister, or the Chief Minister, or the entire Cabinet is the repository of all wisdom and can alone be trusted with important matters concerning the universities.

**MAINSTREAM**

This has nothing to do with my judgement of them as individuals, most of whom happen to be persons I have both respect and affection for; the essential point is that they are naturally and inevitably concerned with political pressures of all kinds, to some of which they have to bow, and therefore leaving things to them would reduce the universities to an even worse position than they are in already. Reforming universities is a hard enough task even if left to the ablest academic men, persons like Professor Irfan Habib; what happens when politicians appoint their favourites as Vice-Chancellors we all know from the experience in Aligarh as well as elsewhere. No self-respecting academic will want to be the candidate of a particular political party or group or Minister when it comes to matters of this kind.

In fact, what is now being proposed by our State Government is an extremely serious infringement on the autonomy of the Universities in Kerala and should be condemned and resisted as strongly as the actions being taken against Professor Habib. If we do not do so, it will not be long before our universities are no better than the Aligarh Muslim University in any respect whatsoever. Academic virtue, like charity, must begin at home.

It is both surprising and sad that, even in Kerala where we are all so much in agreement on questions such as the undesirability of centralisation and the

need for greater autonomy in all matters, no thought is given before decisions concerning very deeply the interests of the universities are taken. And this is basically why the universities in India are in the state in which they now are.

Professor Irfan Habib is an extraordinarily courageous man, with both integrity and faith of a very high order. This is what has made him challenge almost single-handed the powers-that-be within the Aligarh University and outside, in order to try and set matters right and in the belief that it can be, if he is given adequate support by others outside. Those of us who have not had the same degree of courage and commitment must not only salute him but at least give him the minimum support he requires, above all by not allowing anyone to deflect attention from the basic issues involved. Professor Habib himself can get a good position in any university in the world, and we need not be excessively concerned about his future professional career, though his personal safety is indeed in danger. So let us not make this an occasion for merely protesting against his suspension from the Aligarh University but use this as a provocation and starting point for clearing up all universities in India to the extent we can, above all by depending on the many teachers and students who might be ready to come forward provided the leadership given is sincere, honest and intelligent. (August 18) □

## COMMUNICATION

### Essence of Scientific Temper

TODAY the pursuit of knowledge has been relegated to the background by the degenerate compartmentalisation of disciplines, which in turn leads to fragmented perception and results in a practically indifferent attitude towards the deeper inter-connections of complex reality. At this particular juncture, it is indeed heartening to note that an effort is under way to underline the need of a "comprehensive attitude charged by scientific temper." We fully agree with the authors of the 'document on scientific temper' that the need of the hour is to emphasise the need of a movement for the much-needed 'second renaissance' in our country. (*Mainstream*, July 25, 1981)

Man essentially is a rational being and has the capacity to think and act rationally. The main point of distinction between man and animal is man's ability to ask three basic questions — How? Why? What? Keeping this inherent uniqueness of man in mind, we must analyse the situation in our country. Today the bitter fact before us is that man no longer deems it natural to ask the basic questions. Thus the main point of distinction between man and animal is lost. And it is precisely this factor which has given rise to the demonic rise of hero-worship. The main target before us is to remove the irrational aspects of our societal and individual orientation. The time and energy spent on rationally justifying our irrational acts should be put to better use, and this is possible only after a certain degree of scientific awareness is built up. It is for us to understand that our potential is gravely threatened by our 'traditionally in-built lack of innovations coupled with indifference to logical and rational thinking'. Complementing the drawback is the 'culture' of the neo-rich class conjured up in order to adhere to parasitic demands.

Scientifically analysing all this, we come to the conclusion that progression is our destiny as human beings. Based on a rational attitude, and the propensity for systematic questioning the need to progress, is fundamental even in the basic biological sense. Even in a far-flung society based on a system of social equality, the human potential is bound to open new vistas and take up new challenges in the sphere of knowledge. It is, therefore, a basic necessity to fight the forces which aim at making us idle hedonistic creatures — a complete contradiction of our basic natural mould. Any human being capable of sensing this reality will not spare any effort to defeat this inherent irrationality and parasitism.

Here comes the significance of scientific temper, which calls for an attitude of mind based on a 'rational and logical world outlook and pattern of behaviour.' This prime need, therefore, is to attack explicitly our contemporary and traditional ethos — or else the 'periods of scarcity of creativity' cannot be comprehended. The bitter fact has to be accepted that except in isolated cases our social and cultural sciences are lagging behind the natural sciences of the day, and it is precisely this factor which gives rise to the inconsistency in the methods adopted therein. The hesitation to re-examine knowledge on the basis of new discoveries is firmly moulded in practically every field, and it is for violating this trend that science is blamed for its 'inconsistency' and 'lack of human factor'.

In every field of knowledge, there is need to distinguish between 'perfection as an euphemism for stagnation' and perfection as an attribute of the method'. The essence of science demands comprehension of the 'logic of nature', and not imposing 'our own logic' on it. But the exploration of this logic cannot be affiliated with the absurd mystification of phenomena. This attitude must become an ingredient of our world outlook, while comprehending either the 'logic of nature' or the 'logic of history and society'. And it is precisely through this method that we can process the collected information, create meaningful patterns cutting across the degenerate compartmentalisation, which is the prime hindrance in the path of 'total and dynamic perception'. This is possible only through the application of the scientific method.

Along with the attempt to achieve 'total and dynamic perception', it is necessary to locate the importance of dialectical interplay between a social order, and the temper prevailing in

society. The point is thus to be borne in mind that any attempt to build a scientific temper in society is bound to clash sooner or later with the Establishment, as it is the concrete manifestation of the irrational social order. Similar is the case if we go back to history. We find that institutionalised religion in no form tolerated science. Keeping in view this almost certain hostility of the Establishment toward a scientific temper, it is to be understood that scientific temper should not only provide the basis of social orientation, but should also provide the basis of individual and personal attitude both in theory and practice; and should strive to define the intellectual growth of man.

As for contemporary ethos, it is vitally necessary to pinpoint that one of the factors underlying its inherent paradoxes, is the mistaken attitude towards the inter-relation between science and society. Our society made the basic fault of choosing wrong priorities. We borrowed less of the scientific method and more of the technology from the West. Even this anomaly could have been corrected had there been a process of scientific application to our genuine priority requirements. This lack of correspondence between the level of technology and scientific temper, is governed by our need of production, which in turn is determined by the class-structure in a given society. Consequently, we have ethos and temper where an astrophysicist consults horoscopes before marrying. The need today is to locate scientifically our priorities and to apply the scientific and fundamental method to our problems.

No doubt science and technology are deeply inter-connected, but the fact remains that all technology is *not* universally suited, while all science is. Our intellectual responsibility demands that we undertake the task of attacking the societal structure and the inertia which it generates. As a minimum requirement a movement should be launched to inculcate the method of science into all our academic and personal experiences, and various intellectual endeavours from top to bottom.

This has to be the precise beginning for a social transformation inspired by scientific temper. The prime attack should be on empty, emotional glorification of our ignorance. We recognise the negative fact that even in socialist states, and among the Left in our country, the spirit of scientific temper is yet to be established. How else can we justify the fact that in spite of a social order conducive to the growth of scientific temper, things like personality cult are sought to be promoted? We cannot but term it as 'negation of the logic of progression'. In our country too, the Left circles in practice lay more emphasis on 'emotionalism' than on 'commitment' inspired by 'systematic and rational thinking'. While going about these aspects it is vitally necessary to have a high degree of 'sense of history and process of culture' and analyse it in both the historical and contemporary aspects.

Communication with the masses is another vital task; this is possible only by having a very profound assessment of the average 'Indian psyche', by participating in democratic struggles and side by side providing a critique of these struggles from within. We thus conclude that it is necessary not only to lay bare the anatomy of the societal structure but also to constantly re-examine our 'own set of axioms' by applying the scientific method coupled with insight and creative impulse.

We earnestly wish to join hands in a movement for the spread of scientific temper based on commonly shared concern for our present and past.

*Purushottam Agrawal,  
Ashok Srivastava,  
Sameer Nandy,  
Suman Kesri,  
Jai Dutta Jha,  
Arvind Bedi,  
Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay*

*Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi*

## Part of Larger Struggle

THE statement issued by well-known scientists and academicians in India on Scientific Temper (*Mainstream*, July 25) is highly laudable. Besides, looking at the conditions in the country, it has come out not a day too soon.

My first suggestion is that it should be translated in our main languages and distributed in tens of thousands of copies in our colleges and university campuses.

At the same time, since the signatories themselves have called for a discussion on the statement, I would like to make some comments on it.

I do not want to waste space by giving quotations from the statement. But there is a transparent conclusion which emerges from a number of observations made in it which the authors have not drawn. This lacuna stands out even more glaringly since they base themselves on the views and active role of Jawaharlal Nehru, and because they have raised the question of the application of Scientific Temper not only to natural sciences but also to social problems.

In the long period of human history it is the decadent, exploitative social classes — in other words, the forces of social, economic and political reaction — that have been the bulwark of superstition in opposition to Scientific Temper. Similarly, it is the rising social classes that have been the champions of Scientific Temper. Why this has been so needs little explanation. All sorts of irrational, unscientific, obscurantist theories are the necessary ideological weapon of those who cannot defend their privileges and vested interests on rational grounds.

The same medieval Catholic Church which persecuted those who asserted that the earth moves round the sun also helped to crush the revolts of the serfs against the feudal barons. In the USA today, those who are burning Darwin's books are the same people who rain bombs on every newly independent country fighting to consolidate its national independence. In ancient India the Brahmin priesthood that oppressed the Shudras also anathematised our doctors who developed Ayurveda as a systematic science. In their brief spell of power, it was our votaries of Hindu Rashtra who disbanded the CSIR and proscribed rationally written text-books on Indian history.

This means that the struggle for Scientific Temper is inseparable from the struggle against social, economic and political reaction. The authors of the statement correctly refer to the British colonial power as the dominant reactionary force against which our progressive national movement had to fight when we were under foreign rule. They also point out that, by and large, our freedom movement was a renaissance with Scientific Temperament.

Does it not follow that in independent India socialism alone can be our scientific social goal? Has not capitalism become a hopelessly unscientific social organisation, in fact, a disastrously unscientific one, in the second half of the twentieth century? In the reverse, there can be no socialism without science, and contemporary scientists would be betraying their professional conscience if they do not come out boldly in defence of socialism.

Further, who but the neo-colonialists, the landlords and the unscrupulous capitalists represent the force of reaction today? And further, is it not the workers, peasants and our progressive intelligentsia that represent the forces of progress in contemporary life?

Chauvinism, casteism, communalism, religious obscurantism, superstition, etc., are, on the one hand, weapons of socio-economic reaction. Simultaneously, judged from a purely rational view-point, they are patently stupid and unscientific.

Similar is the threat of nuclear war now blatantly held out by US imperialism. It is not only egregiously diabolical, it is utterly senseless since such a war would be an invitation to suicide by those who brandish the threat.

My suggestion, therefore, is that it is not enough for our progressive scientists and academicians to give a call for Scientific Temper in very general terms. They have to pin down the social forces that stand for reaction and superstition today, as also the forces that stand for reaction and superstition. And they have to give a call to the progressive forces to fight those who stand for exploitation, reaction, superstition and obscurantism.

Bertrand Russell, Joliot-Curie, Kosambi followed this path. True science is never dogmatic but it certainly is partisan. What would science be worth if it did not fight superstition which, in essence, means all beliefs in all spheres of life which do not stand the test of practice? The authors of the statement have referred to Galileo. A still better example would have been that of Bruno.

*Bombay*

*S.G. Sardesai*