

Himalayan Fossil Fraud- A view from the galleries By S.K. Shah, Palaeontological Society of India, Special Publ-4, 2013, 140 pages

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While attending a recent seminar, in some delegate's hand I saw a book with a title "Himalayan Fossil Fraud" by S K Shah. Out of sheer curiosity, I borrowed the book from that gentleman for a hurried perusal. I became so engrossed that I read it through in a single sitting. The book is a historical narrative about a dark shadow that fell on Indian palaeontology about a quarter century ago and how Indian geoscientists coped with it. While I was familiar with the entire episode of fraud perpetrated by Vishwajit Gupta, who was my contemporary academic fraternity and a short-time friend from our Himalayan Geology Institute expedition to the Lipu Lekh pass in the Kumaon in 1971, I found the text presented by Som Shah had the touch of a professional narrator, accurate on all details. Yes, there are a few unintentional slips here and there caused by the initial confusion in conflicting data amongst the detractors and supporters of Vishwajit. This apart, the story is about certain brave personalities who were involved in unmasking this scientific fraud of mega dimension. To my mind such minor slips will not diminish the impact this publication is going to make on the young generation of geoscientists, particularly in this country.

This Special publication of the Palaeontological Society of India No. 4 has done a yeomen service to the geosciences with its focus on the younger generation of practicing Earth Scientists. Most of the contemporary rising stars in the Earth Sciences were not even born or were "going to school" when Vishwajit was busy in philandering and polluting the geological literature. This young generation has no knowledge about the filth and dirt that was created when this sordid affair of large scale plagiarism, recycling and "ghost" reporting was being exposed. This new generation is also entitled to know that if some scientific investigation produces "dirt" and "filth" by using unethical and fraudulent means, it does not go unpunished at the end. Such "dirt" may remain suspended for some time but ultimately it settles and the truth prevails. This publication is also important because it reinforces the recommendations of various scientific as well as legal bodies of the country. The Indian scientific community at large and the earth science community in particular learned the hard way that editorial tightening of the belt was necessary if India was to survive at the international level. Gupta's publications

including five volumes of Gupta's discredited book were disbanded. The polluted data was being used as study material in the teaching institutions and many young teachers conducting stratigraphy courses were still recommending students to read them. It is worth mentioning that the majority of the younger faculty in the premier University of Delhi had any knowledge about this sordid event of the yester years.

Som Shah, an old friend and colleague in Delhi took pains to produce 15 Chapters to narrate the story of grand saga of academic pollution by a single man, once walking tall and arrogant amongst his fellow professionals. Gupta had developed such a big following and fan-club that his papers sent to Geological Society of India was published without any scrutiny or review. This I learned from my own personal interactions with the then editor about how V J Gupta's papers were given precedence over previously accepted manuscripts including mine. Using very straightforward and simple words Shah explains the importance of writing this report and the need to resurrect the dead. Piltown Man controversy is not new, but why it is necessary to revisit the story again and again ? It needs to be retold that such hoax are responsible for creating "bad" science and the bad science can not deliver good. It serves as a reminder to each generation to keep away from such scientific crimes. It is a different matter, that some generations refuse to learn and repeat the same mistakes , only to be guillotined on an appropriate time.

Som Shah has provided us with all the available official documents which were used for nailing the lies of Vishwajit. None of us had access to these so called confidential papers. It is however disturbing to note that some of detailed enquiry reports are still not made public. This is a time to ask why these institutions of higher learning and academic distinctions remained soft on Vishwajit's scandalous scientific activity ? What were the compulsions of these authorities to withheld these detailed reports? Why only half baked reports were made public and instead of nailing Gupta , sullied the names of a few whistle blowers with half truth ? The role of Punjab University administration including its senate remained disgraceful in the history of the University. A few PU administrators expressed surprise as to why there is so much of noise in the academic community when Gupta has not bungled any money!! Why should rearranging a few pieces of rocks from India and abroad be given so much importance? That shows the scientific bankruptcy of our administrators at that time. And the situation is no different today.

With Chapters like 'How It all Started', 'Talent Strikes', ' Panjab University Drags its feet', ' Role of Gupta's co-authors', 'The enquiry', the whole sequence of activity related to unearthing of fraud has been reconstructed. While Vishwajit had disfigured the entire stratigraphic sequence of the fossiliferous lithologies of the sub-continent, Som Shah has produced a sanitized sequence of events leading to fixation of guilt to its perpetrator.

