

Commentary

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Recalling Obaid

I sit here at the assisted living facility where I am well cared for, searching for memories of my first meeting with Obaid Siddiqi. It must have been 1961. I had known about Obaid for some time, since he had done his thesis work with my friend and colleague Guido Pontecorvo.

On completion, he had come to the United States for his post-doctoral experience with Al Garen, arriving about a year earlier.

He had just arrived in New York with Paul and Jean Margolin, who had brought him from Cold Spring Harbor to introduce him to the big city.

They brought him to meet me at Rockefeller University, where I was an Associate Professor, working in the laboratory of Rollin Hotchkiss. The meeting was stunning. It felt as though we had known each other forever, as if we were long separated brothers. We forgot the people who had brought him and started to talk, losing awareness of time and the surroundings. They left, telling us that they would come back to pick us up in several hours.

We talked and talked, about work, about ourselves: it was thrilling. After some hours we came to talking about the future. I asked him what his hopes and dreams were, when he finished his post-doctoral experience. It soon became clear that what he really wanted was to go back to India to introduce the new discipline of molecular biology to the Indian academia and to the future biologists of India. But, he worried, the establishment biologists would be hostile.

He was afraid that the traditional faculties would be unwilling to accept either him or his mission. I admired his ambition but understood his reservations and came back with the proposal that he return to India and join a physics department. Physicists, I suggested, would appreciate and be excited by his work and otherwise not interfere. 'How can I do that', he responded, 'I am not a physicist'.

I thought for a moment and came back with, 'Perhaps I can help'. Leo Szilard was a close friend, and I remembered that he had known Indian physicists in Great Britain. I thought that he might be prepared to seek their assistance. Would you ask him to help, Obaid asked.

Whereupon I picked up my phone and called Szilard at his hotel in Washington DC. With the appropriate introduction and recommendations, I made the proposal. He agreed with enthusiasm and suggested that he could write to Homi Bhabha. You all know the end of this story. Obaid heard from Homi Bhabha in several weeks, and before long there was a proposal on the table to invite Obaid to join the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research in Bombay to establish a unit within TIFR dedicated to research in biology.

For me it was a most gratifying outcome of my extremely rewarding meeting with the man who became my lifelong friend and colleague, Obaid Siddiqi.

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