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Whiz Kid from MIT Duels Indian Scientific Bureaucracy

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NEW DELHI (HT): An Indian-American scientist, academic and entrepreneur hired to work with the 67-year-old Council of Scientific and Industrial Research has written to the Prime Minister, saying he was fired for criticising the leadership of India's largest scientific organisation.

"[CSIR] is attempting to remove me [in] reaction to my addressing well-known, intrinsic leadership issues during the course of my professional duties to serve the cause of Indian Science and Innovation," said Shiva Ayyadurai in an October 30 letter, a copy of which is with the Hindustan Times.

Ayyadurai, 45, holds four scientific degrees from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, US, and has created multiple companies over the course of his career, including one of the world's earliest email systems. He's won some of the US's top awards for innovators.

Samir Brahmachari, director general of CSIR, said Ayyadurai was terminated because he was a "financial mismatch".

"He was demanding too much salary," said Brahmachari. "Everyone told me I was pampering him because he came from abroad."

In June 2009, Ayyadurai was in India on a Fulbright scholarship when Brahmachari invited him to join the organisation under the Scientist and Technologist of Indian Origin program (STIO). Ayyadurai's offer was withdrawn on October 26.

Under CSIR's guidelines for the STIO program, the salary ranges from Rs 37,400 to Rs 67,000.

Ayyadurai did not sign the original offer but replied asking for more money, said K Jayakumar, Joint Secretary for Administration at CSIR. A CSIR official, requesting anonymity, said Ayyadurai had asked for Rs 6 lakh.

"These Indian-Americans who come back, are they here to help us or exploit us?" said Brahmachari. According to an original handwritten job description, Ayyadurai was to create a structure for CSIR-Tech, a company that would work with CSIR scientists to spin off their inventions into money-making products.

Founded in 1942, CSIR awards more PhDs and files more patents than any other R&D facility in the nation, but it has historically struggled with turning those patents into revenue earners.

Over the past 10 years, CSIR laboratories have been granted 5,014 patents in India and abroad. The money earned from these patents was Rs.36.80 crore, but the cost of filing them was much higher -- Rs. 228.64 crore -- according to official figures obtained by Hindustan Times through the Right to Information Act.

For the next four months, Ayyadurai criss-crossed the nation, visiting almost all of CSIR's 42 laboratories and speaking with thousands of its more than 4,000 scientists, he says in the letter.

Together with a colleague, Deepak Sardana, he produced a 47-page report called CSIR-Tech: Path Forward.

The two businessmen highlighted 12 technologies developed by CSIR laboratories, in fields as diverse as robotics and traditional healing, which had the potential to be worth "billions of dollars" as commercial products.

When contacted by HT, Ayyadurai said many of these technologies are better than anything currently available in the world, but CSIR has not capitalised on them.

But the controversy began when he shared Chapter Seven of the report, "Challenges". The section described Ayyadurai's difficulties with CSIR leadership at length, and also said the organisation suffers from a "lack of professionalism" and that some scientists feel a "loss of faith in leadership".

The final report went out on October 19 to thousands of scientists throughout the CSIR network. Ayyadurai says he received hundreds of emails and phone calls from CSIR researchers.

One of those scientists was P M Bhargava, founder of CSIR's Hyderabad-based Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology.

"It was a very honest report, and so I had to respond," said Bhargava. "He has captured exactly the challenges within this organisation." Bhargava worked for CSIR for more than two decades. Bhargava said he has also written a letter to the PMO on Ayyadurai's behalf.

Several scientists also took issue with the report. Rajesh Gokhale, director of the Delhi-based Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, a CSIR lab, wrote in an email to HT that Ayyadurai's report was "highly unprofessional" and "full of personal reporting".

Ayyadurai and Sardana planned to follow the report with a videoconference, open to all scientists, about how to spin off a technology into a product.

Three days before the videoconference was to take place, on October 23, both men received orders from the Joint Secretary's office, forbidding them from having any further contact with the scientists and directors of CSIR. Ayyadurai's office email stopped functioning.

Brahmachari said Ayyadurai's email privileges were revoked and his offer withdrawn because he violated CSIR and Government of India Code of Conduct regulations. A law passed in 2000 forbids employees from using email to spread "annoying" or "slandering" messages, and Ayyadurai's report could fall under this category if a judge feels that Chapter 7 was unduly harsh. CSIR leadership said it is unlikely Ayyadurai can continue in his current role in light of his rule-breaking. "I hired him because I thought he could bring energy to the organisation," said Brahmachari. "But he behaved with low integrity by breaking the rules."