

THE WEEK

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Dr V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai / Illustration: Hadimani

CONTROVERSY

NRI scientist fires a salvo of accusations. The CSIR fires him in return

By Soni Mishra

The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) last year launched an innovative project to woo expatriate Indian scientists. Now, the first appointment

made under the project has gone awry. American-Indian scientist Dr V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai, who was hired and fired, has raised questions about the CSIR's system and professionalism.

Ayyadurai alleged that he was removed for criticising the CSIR leadership. Council insiders, however, claimed he had bypassed rules in the way he released a report that criticised the council.

The CSIR appointed the 45-year-old scientist, who holds four degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has set up several companies, its first Outstanding Scientist and Technologist of Indian Origin (STIO) in June this year.

CSIR director-general Dr Samir K. Brahmachari, who initiated the project, reportedly made Ayyadurai a handwritten offer. He was to create and head an entity named CSIR-Tech, tasked with commercialising the CSIR's inventions.

The offer, however, was withdrawn on October 26. Ayyadurai wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, alleging that he was fired because of his critical report.

"[The 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," he wrote.

Brahmachari refuted the allegation. “Dr Shiva did not agree to the terms and conditions of the appointment as STIO and demanded an unreasonable financial package which cannot be accepted under rules,” he said. “Therefore, the offer... was withdrawn, as a reasonable period of three months had elapsed after making the offer.” He added that Ayyadurai was fired on the basis of an internal performance review.

Does that indicate that Ayyadurai’s appointment was made in a hurry? Brahmachari disagreed: “The CSIR is an organisation with established processes and procedures. In appointing Ayyadurai, these processes were followed. It is incorrect to state that the appointment was done in a hurry.”

Chapter seven of Ayyadurai’s report slammed the CSIR’s functioning. It highlighted the following issues:

Lack of professionalism

Denials

False sense of urgency

Deflections and cover-ups

Inability to let go of control and allowing hired professionals to do their jobs

Promises are not honoured

Ayyadurai alleged that “all sorts of illegal and vindictive actions were taken” within 72 hours of the report’s publication. “I never wanted any fight. I only wanted to serve India and to help the Prime Minister’s grand vision of Innovation for India,” he said. “I thought it was a great opportunity to use my skills for serving my motherland.

“I am hoping those seriously interested in seeing spin-offs taking place to realise market value and new jobs for the economy to execute or at least to review the recommendations in the draft report.” Dr Deepak Sardana, who worked with the Australian School of Business before joining the CSIR and co-authored the controversial report, too, hit out at the leadership.

“My experience at the CSIR has been very bad, and is a nightmare for a thorough professional,” he wrote to Science and Technology Minister Prithviraj Chavan on October 19. Sardana said in the letter that he took a huge cut in his income to join the CSIR. “Retrospectively, the decision I made then and the trust that I reposed in the senior leadership was misplaced,” he said. A senior scientist in the CSIR said the manner in which Ayyadurai was recruited and dismissed was improper.

“The appointment was done in a hurry. And the dismissal was also improper,” he said. “One should

not be removed for something like a report. It is against the basic spirit of science—that of democracy and openness. It is unfortunate that this kind of a thing has happened in a reputed organisation like the CSIR.”

Ian Dean, consultant, Leadership Development Programme, who was quoted extensively in the report, took Ayyadurai and Sardana to task for the manner in which the report “completely ignores achievements of the CSIR and its staff and leadership over the past 60 years”.

Dean said he deplored the report, which publicly chastised the CSIR director-general and people around him, including “the very competent joint secretary, heads of finance, vigilance, audit and research planning, and all 38 directors”.

Dean also questioned Ayyadurai and Sardana’s lack of judgment in finding ways to resolve their differences with the leadership. “Even if every assertion made in your report is factual—something which could be reasonably verified—there is simply no justification whatsoever for senior leaders to cause widespread disruption and discontent by distributing a report as you have done. You have taken an important CSIR initiative and made it personal,” he wrote to them.

Another senior scientist in the CSIR rubbished allegations that Ayyadurai was appointed hurriedly. “Chapter seven of the CSIR-Tech report criticises the CSIR for not taking decisions quickly. Now that a decision was taken and Ayyadurai was recruited, people are finding fault with that,” he said.

He criticised Ayyadurai for directly circulating the report among scientists, and not going through the proper channel. He also accused the scientist of distributing among scientists other internal content that was awaiting the Prime Minister’s approval.

Many feared that the controversy would discourage expatriate Indian scientists from joining the CSIR. But, Brahmachari was confident that his project would not be crippled. “This episode will certainly not affect the reverse brain drain to the CSIR,” he said.

Indeed, he added, many scientists have expressed their willingness to join the STIO programme, not because of the perks or the position but the intellectual environment that the CSIR offers. Said Brahmachari: “Intellectual environment and the top-class student availability have no link with business development, which Dr Shiva was exposed to.”