

Editorial

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What is the role of the scientific community in upholding human rights and protecting the freedom of the individual? Are they responsible for the moral fibre of a nation? Should they speak out when the situation demands it, whatever be the price they have to pay? History is replete with incidents when scientific men of eminence have kept quiet and turned a blind eye during emergencies. But there are also instances when they have stood up for a rightful cause.

One such instance is that of the “Goettinger Sieben” – or the “Seven from Goettingen”. The Goettnger Sieben were a group of professors of the Georg-August University of Goettingen, who, in 1837, protested against the curtailment of the rights of the people and the annulment of the constitution in the Kingdom of Hanover. They were dismissed from the University and some of them were even forced to leave the country.

The seven professors were: Albrecht (Law), Dahlmann (History), Ewald (Oriental Studies), Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm (German Literature, famous as the authors of Grimm’s Fairy Tales), Gervinus (History of Literature) and Weber (Physics).

In the Kingdom of Hanover, a constitution was introduced in 1833 that gave the people basic rights and restricted the power of the monarch. However, in 1837, Ernst August I who ascended the throne did away with the constitution and the basic rights of citizens in order to have absolute power. The “Goettinger Sieben” rebelled against this action by sending a “protest letter” to the monarch.

The outcome was tragic. On 12th December 1837, Ernst August I dismissed the seven professors and ordered three of them – Dahlmann, J Grimm and Gervinus – to leave the country.



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Fortunately, the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who was sympathetic to political refugees, gave them shelter. This action of the professors had a stirring effect on the general public who showed solidarity with the professors and even paid their salaries from their own contributions. In fact, the professors had only written one letter to the King. It was the student community that took up the action and circulated innumerable copies of the letter throughout the country. It was clear that the action started by the professors had become a people's movement. They could no longer be suppressed by laws and ordinances.

The protest action spread through the country and generated a liberal movement. At the National Convention in Frankfurt in 1848, J Grimm had a place of honour along with Albrecht and Gervinus. Even then it took five years for the professors to get a position at a University. Only Ewald, who came from Goettingen and Weber, who was a friend of Gauss, returned to the University of Goettingen. The University suffered for a long time due to the ill effects of the action of the monarch. For a number of years professors of repute refused to accept positions at the University.

The intervention of the seven professors was the cornerstone of the fight of the people for emancipation. How can the scientists of today play a role in improving the moral atmosphere of the country? In the recent past, a letter by a group of eminent scientists on scientific temper is worthy of mention here. The letter written recently by well-known atomic scientists protesting the Indo U.S. Nuclear agreement was also significant. Similarly, the recent statement by the 67 members of the Inter Academy Panel representing the world's national science academies on the teaching of evolution is also noteworthy. Scientists have more than one responsibility – they should not only do good science, but they should also be model citizens and watchdogs of the society.

