

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Geek Nation – How Indian Science is Taking Over the World.** Angela Saini. Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH (South Asian Edition by Hachette India). 2011. vii + 280 pp. Price: Rs 499/UK £20.

A London-based science journalist of Indian parentage, Angela Saini, describes her journey in search of ‘geeks’ in India.



Angela Saini, the author of *Geek Nation* in conversation with *Current Science* on 14 April 2011, a day before her book release in Bangalore

*Having been born and brought up in London what made you interested in Indian science?*

I am a science journalist and I have covered stories all around the world. In the science journalism community, China and India are the big nations to watch at the moment because of the increase in the number of publications that are coming out.

*The definition of ‘Geek’ is very much different from what you have projected in your book...*

Geek used to be a pejorative term and perhaps the dictionary definition still is. But there is a Geek Venn diagram to show what it is defined as. In the diagram one circle is intelligence; other is

In the beginning she is disappointed as she comes across burnt out students, eventually discovering what she is looking for. The book outlines the science and technology scenario in India in a lucid fashion, weaving it with related events in the past. There are chapters on Open Source Drug Discovery project, the controversial Lavasa city project, genetically engineered crops, the mind-reading

passion and third is social ineptitude. ‘Geekyness’ is a combination of passion and intelligence. You can be geeky about lots of things; it is a positive term now. We think of people like Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates as geeks and they are positive icons. In India there are people like Narayana Murthy and Nandan Nilekani who we aspire to be like.

*So what makes you believe that ‘Indian science is taking over the world’?*

The sub-title is less of a statement of fact than as much a statement of ambition on the part of the Indian Government, scientists and engineers. I don’t think India is a scientific superpower yet. Looking at publications and patterns it will be impossible to say that because the output is small. The number of scientists and engineers graduating, the reversing brain drain, the inward foreign investment in R&D, the domestic growth in R&D and the government’s commitment to double investment in R&D, are all the ingredients of a science superpower in the making and if it continues on that trajectory then we will see India joining, perhaps in a decade or two, the league of countries like Japan, Germany and the US.

*You have not included statistics in your book that would concretely suggest Indian science is growing... or according to the sub-title ‘taking over’...*

I have written that based on the publication records in the last few years. This is not a book about facts and figures. This book is about giving readers a glimpse of the lives of the scientists who are trying to change science and engineering in India. I didn’t want it to be a tech-heavy book or full of statistics because that would make it less

machine, information technology industry and space. The controversial topics are dealt with care, as both positives and scepticism surrounding them are presented in a balanced way. Scientists, says Saini, are not the primary targets of the narrative. The sub-title is somewhat misleading; it was revealed during the book release that it is the outcome of the publisher’s promotion tactics!

accessible to the ordinary reader. I do mention in the book that in 2008, scientific publications were 53% more than in each of the five years that went before.

*You write that Indian citizens are science hungry. If they really were, our science supplements would not have died over the years and public would have wanted more of science in the national newspapers ...*

In the week or so that I have been touring India lots of people have agreed that Indians are pretty science hungry; they love academics. Half a million kids are sitting the joint entrance exams for the IITs, which shows the love for engineering. I did a school tour the other day and I asked the kids in the audience ‘how many of you want to be scientists?’, and a third of the school put their hands up. India is famous for producing good scientists, not just for within the country but exporting them and some of the world’s most wonderful innovations have been produced by Indian scientists.

*How does your book stand out from other books in the popular science category?*

There isn’t really a broad accessible book on Indian science. Because there is so little science journalism in India, it is bit of a mystery what goes on in the laboratories or what goes on in the research institutes and IT companies. I wanted to avail that a bit and give people a glimpse of what is inspirational and exciting. I wanted to give readers a taste of what’s going on.

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The remaining part of the interview is available at <http://www.ias.ac.in/currsci/25july2011/230a.pdf>.