

CURRENT SCIENCE

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Popularization of science is gaining popularity

To generate public awareness on the given issue of S&T, for quite sometime now, we have been observing a number of days with usual enthusiasm and gaiety averaging three a month!

This 'day syndrome' is primarily characterized by a suitable theme, the message(s) and organization of seminars, symposia, exhibitions, popular lectures and get-togethers with brain-storming sessions. The general public, however, get an excellent opportunity through 'open houses' to peep inside our institutions. For a change, for example this year on the occasion of the National Science Day (February 28), the Department of Posts has issued a one-rupee postal stamp to commemorate the Golden Jubilee (1942-92) of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

If one looks at the current scenario of popularization of science in our country, things look much healthier. More so, from the year 1987 onwards, the movement is gaining momentum, witnessing three major events, viz. the First National Science Day (28 February), the nationwide S&T communication event, the BJV - the Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha (2nd October-7th November) and the institution of five, now being three, national awards for science popularization, viz. (i) National Award for Science Popularization (Rs 100,000), (ii) National Award for Best S&T Coverage in the Mass Media (Rs 50,000), and (iii) National Award for Science Popularization among Children (Rs 50,000). Added to these, the biennial Indira Gandhi Prize (Rs 10,000) for Popularization of Science, instituted in 1986, by the Delhi-based Indian National Science Academy is another national honour in the field.

What could be the best proof than that after a gap of 28 years, an Indian scientist Narender K. Sehgal, Joint-Adviser, National Council for Science and Technology Communication, NCSTC and Romania's Radu Iftimovici, Director, Institute of Virology were jointly awarded the 1991 Kalinga Prize for the popularization of science. Jagjit Singh was, however, the first Indian to get this Prize way back in 1963. Among the past awardees have been well-known personalities including a few Nobel-prize winners. Established by UNESCO in 1951, the Kalinga Prize is an annual international award of £1000, based on a grant to UNESCO from B. Patnaik, Founder and Chairman of the Kalinga Foundation Trust.

Insofar as the coverage of S&T is concerned, the scenario is fast changing. Look at the electronic media, for instance, the ongoing 144-part weekly-radio serial on 'Human Evolution' being broadcast nationwide from 84 AIR stations in 18 languages is quite popular. This project, a joint venture of the NCSTC and AIR, is the longest ever radio science serial produced in the world. Similarly, Radio-DATE (Drug, Alcohol, Tobacco Education), broadcast from 84 radio stations in 30 episodes in 16 languages during 8th April to 28th October 1990 has been fairly successful. Even the variety of popular science programmes broadcast in English and major Indian languages from various science cells of AIR stations have shown qualitative and quantitative improvement over the years. The ongoing weekly 30 minutes science magazine TV serial 'Turning Point' has indeed been a turning point for Door-darshan.

Even in the case of print media, things are improving though at a slow pace. Besides the occasional write ups on weekends in the magazine sections of various newspapers, English dailies like the *Deccan Herald* (Monday), *The Hindu* (Wednesday), *The Pioneer* (Friday), *The Economic Times* (Saturday), etc., bring out an exclusive weekly science page/section/supplement - an uncommon fare in our Hindi and language newspapers. Similarly, the fortnightly pages on Environment (Thursday) and Health (Saturday) of *The Pioneer*, and the weekly Development News (Wednesday) and Lifeline (Saturday) of *Indian Express* are impregnated with information.

As regards the popular science magazines, several new indigenous ventures like the *Srishti*, *Down To Earth*, *Medi-news*, *Our Health Nutrition & Environment* and *Horizons* have all started last year. Of these, the fortnightly *Down To Earth* is certainly picking up. Popular science magazines like the *Science Reporter*, *Vigyan Pragati*, *Science Ki Dunta*, a couple of titles from the National Research Development Corporation and other agencies continue to be popular amongst masses. Whereas science feature services like the PTI Science Service, PID (Publications & Information Directorate of the CSIR) Features, Energy Environment Group (EEG) Features, Perfect Health Features, *Srote* (Hindi features in S&T), etc., continue to expand their clientele.

Results of relatively new experiments like the popular science wall newspapers such as the *Vigyan Anveshan Sandesh* (of CSIR) and *Aas Paas* (EEG) have shown encouraging results.

Popular science book series of the CSIR's Golden Jubilee Series, National

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Book Trust, Children Book Trust, National Council of Educational Research & Training, NCSTC, etc. at nominal prices written by content experts in popular style is indeed a healthy development.

In another significant landmark, the Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao inaugurated the National Science Centre, (NSC) in New Delhi on 9 January 1992. Built at a cost of Rs 15 crores, NSC is said to be one of the finest in the world and the largest in Asia. The interactive nature gives it distinction and the visitors to this museum easily have their curiosity aroused. The year 1992 also

witnessed a nationwide S&T communication-cum-literacy event, the *Bharat Jan Gyan Vigyan Jatha (BJGVJ)* – a grand unification of two *Jathas*, viz. *BJVJ* (1987) and *Bharat Jan Gyan Jatha* (1990).

At the NGO level, the Indian Science Writers' Association (ISWA), the national body of science communicators, held its first ever National Convention on 12–13 February 1993. While assuring full support to ISWA for popularization of science in his meeting on 15 March 1993, Hon'ble Minister of State for S&T, P. R. Kumarmangalam welcomed the demand of ISWA for a National

Science Communication Policy, a major recommendation of the ISWA Convention. On 14 May the foundation day of the ISWA has been celebrated as the First National S&T Communication Day with 'Industrial R&D Communication' as the theme for the year 1993.

All said and done, the need of the hour is to set up the much awaited National Media Centre for S&T Information like the Quick Access Information System of CSIR for Mass Media.

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Some suggestions for *Current Science*

I just received the copy of *Current Science* with Prof. Peters' obituary. The article is well printed. Thanks. May I be allowed to make one or two personal comments on *Current Science* which is in my opinion one of the best edited and artistically finished scientific journals. Firstly it is necessary to train someone who can keep up the standards

for a long long time in the future, when most of us are gone.

I notice the issue has good overall scientific coverage, but few technical notes. These are important for the growth of the journal. Why can we not insist that each of the major institutions in India, e.g. TIFR, PRL, IISc, RRI, CCMB and many other institutions

make a commitment to publish at least one technical note per month in *Current Science*.

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OPINION

What ails Indian academics?

P. Narayanan

Divergent opinions and remedial measures have been expressed in this journal on how to save Indian science. There appeared also a special section on 'Science and technology in the post-liberalization era', wherein many issues in science and technology have been the topics of discussion.

Compared to pre-Independence era, there are now many well-established institutions/research centres and there are better opportunities to student as well as academic communities to avail the opportunities, incentives, rewards and recognitions. The objectives of the establishments are also broad-based.

However, the collective achievements in science and technology, humanities, social sciences and all other fields seem to have fallen short of our own minimum expectations. China seems to have done better than us in utilizing her resources and human potential to record commendable achievements in science and technology, health care, population control and alleviation of poverty of her populace. We seem to have lost the initiative, fervour and earnestness that existed in the academic arena in the pre-Independence era (circa 1900–1940). So, where, how and why did we go wrong?

Comparison of the development of

institutions in our country with similar institutions of other countries would be of help to underscore the basic issues. As a case study—the oldest universities established by the British were to serve as degree-conferring institutions to serve the administrative and other needs of the British Raj. Stanford University, comparatively younger than these universities, started and functioned with similar objectives. But, after the Second World War, the management of the Stanford University transplanted the 'egg heads' of New York to expand its activities (Columbia University was its model). Stanford, among other things,