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Need for a 'Science Media Centre'

Imagine a situation where elite and moneyed people at large do not know what microwaves are and how harmful they are but continue to buy and use microwave ovens just because they are available and are the 'in thing'. Imagine another situation where the common man does not know that petrol contains a toxic metal, lead, which is released during combustion by vehicles and he inhales it on the roads. Imagine another situation where rural people do not know that freely available solar energy can be utilized to cook food, heat water, sterilize agriculture produce and generate electricity. The first situation would lead to the extensive buying of the so-called latest technology of microwave oven which has long been controversial in the West because of health and safety reasons. The second situation would lead to rise in various respiratory and heart diseases among the common man whether he drives a vehicle or not. The third situation would lead to the under-utilization of solar energy, which a country like India has in abundance and cannot afford to ignore because she is bogged down by power problems. Although presumed to be 'imaginary', all these situations are fast becoming real in India, or for that matter would become real in any country where people at large are illiterate about science and its implications but at the same time want to avail its benefits. Carl Sagan had put it succinctly, 'It is suicidal to create a society dependent upon science and technology in which hardly anybody knows anything about science and technology.'

Indeed, one wonders whether we are all lemmings heading for the sea! We are so much carried away by the prevailing corruption, indifference and unethical practices followed by people in power. Science and technology has been

slowly and stealthily making inroads into our lives, thanks to the liberalization policy of the Government! Luxurious cars, fancy two-wheelers, giant trucks and tankers, smart computers, xerox and fax machines, mobile phones and pagers, nicely packed soaps, detergents, junk foods and drinks, have suddenly become omnipresent in cities, towns and villages. In other words, science and technology is entering our lives in an unprecedented manner – and is likely to do so on a larger scale in the days to come – without anybody giving a single thought to its implications in a society that does not know or care to know science. The consequences are likely to be suicidal as Carl Sagan has said. There are already reports of rise of various diseases, both physiological and psychological, among the Indian population due to the rising pollution, money chase habits and fast and mechanical life-style. Then there are wrong societal priorities given to various issues, mismanagement of people and resources, environmental backlash, and so on.

Most of the present malaise bedeviling the society can be traced to the lack of science literacy and its intellectual consequence, scientific temper. How does one educate society about science and its implications in day-to-day life? Of course, through the various media. 'Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions', said Marshall McLuhan, the media expert, 'The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act and perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change.' But a careful look at the media in the country shows a considerable apathy towards science. Except for a few features in the major dailies, TV and radio programmes, and

a few stray reports on scientific developments in the West, science does not figure as much as sports or for that matter economics in the various media. Does the onus lie on the mediemen or scientists and science communicators? It is the same egg or chick story. On one hand, the mediemen claim that they do not get proper and well-presented stories on science. On the other hand, scientists and science communicators claim that the mediemen are not interested in science and want only sensational stories which make headlines.

No doubt, there are media people who have bias against science coverage in their newspapers for various reasons. First of all, during schooling they themselves had often become a victim of science due to improper teaching and had therefore developed a scare about the subject. This scare has led them to believe that people at large are scared about science and are therefore not interested in science. Secondly, they do not get well-presented stories on science because skilled communicators in science are still a rarity. Again, this lacuna among scientists could be traced to their schooling when communication is the least expected skill from a science student. Scientists are therefore often shy and uncommunicative! In fact, they glorify their non-communicativeness and look down upon anybody who tries to communicate science to the masses!

How does one break this vicious circle which has roots in improper schooling? Obviously, by having regular meetings and exchange of views between mediemen, scientists and science communicators. There is, therefore, a strong need for a 'Science Media Centre' in the country where scientists, science communicators and mediemen could meet and see eye to eye. In addition to bringing them

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together for a free exchange of scientific information and a harmonious relationship for a balanced and humane growth of the society, the Centre should have an up-to-date data bank on Indian scientists, scientific bodies, associations, institutes and organizations. It should also be able

to provide any medianan an easy access to information on the latest developments in science in the country and abroad, guide and assist him in contacting scientists and providing him background material on any topic of his interest. Besides, it also should be a training

ground for scientists in the art of communication in various media.

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Swarnajayanti fellowships

An announcement calling for research grants from scientists in the age group of 30 to 40 years under the Swarnajayanti Fellowships sponsored by Department of Science and Technology was advertised in the 25 August issue of *Current Science*. In the first week of September I received a letter from DST enclosing a copy of the same advertisement and urging me to submit an application in this category. After examining the format of the proposal and the fact that it was announced as part of the celebrations marking 50 years of India's independence, it became clear to me that major research projects in the frontier and cutting edge areas of science and technology were to be submitted. As a matter of fact, the screening for the successful applicants is planned through a two-tier review system.

In any research project the applicant would like to propose his/her best and most innovative ideas. The writing of a new and major research project is done in stages, from the evolution of the idea to the development of a concrete work plan. This is an arduous, time-consuming

and responsible job for the applicant. This is further heightened in this case because the Swarnajayanti Fellowship scheme is so prestigious. Given this background, I was somewhat puzzled to note that there was hardly any time allowed for the writing of the project. As per the announcement, the documents must reach DST by 15 September 1997. I am unable to understand how a detailed project report can be drafted, finalized and forwarded to DST in less than two weeks.

The DST-sponsored research projects are publicly funded and it is important that they are implemented in a manner so as to maximally benefit a large and diverse group of scientists. In my opinion, the DST has not allowed sufficient time for the dissemination of information to the large body of scientists. In such a scenario, the tendency would be to submit hastily 'pasted' research proposals in order to make it prior to the deadline. This is not in the interest of a correct scientific attitude and the development of a high quality research base in our country. In any system of open competition,

not only must an equal opportunity be provided to all the contenders but it must also appear to be so to everyone concerned. The procedure for the submission of Swarnajayanti Fellowship applications must appear to be fair and open to the large body of committed and dedicated scientists in this country. The urgency and haste with which applications have been called for makes people suspicious. In such a scenario, any further action by the DST will also be called into question, with charges of nepotism, favouritism, high-handedness, etc. being levelled, whether or not any of these aspects were intended. I urge the DST to kindly extend the deadline for the submission of grants in this category, say up to 31 December 1997. This will give sufficient time to the eligible scientists to submit detailed and rigorous research proposals in the thrust areas.

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Medical research in India

Poverty, unhygienic living conditions and over population are chiefly responsible for infectious diseases and malnutrition in India. Environmental chemicals are also responsible for health hazard in our country. Keeping this in mind, several scientists, all over the country, have been working on prevention and control of these national health problems. This fact is evident from the research findings of

Indian scientists who were honoured by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recently. The research works of 14 out of 19 scientists who received ICMR awards, are directly related to national health problems. These are (1) safe, effective and reversible male contraceptive, (2) fertility-regulating vaccines, (3) immuno-diagnosis of leprosy and designing of subunit vaccines, (4)

development of simple procedures for the isolation of *M. tuberculosis*, (5) immunogenetic basis of susceptibility to leprosy and pulmonary tuberculosis, (6) molecular evaluation of Japanese Encephalitis viruses, (7) insecticide-impregnated bed-nets for malaria control, (8) molecular biology of malaria parasite, (9) malaria vaccine development, (10) malnutrition and infectious diseases with relevance to