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The Indian Science Congress

The annual Science Congress is politically the most visible scientific meeting in India. Held in the first week of January each year, the Science Congress derives much of its importance from the presence of the Prime Minister at the inaugural session. This is one meeting where the widely disparate segments of the scientific community come together at a common forum. On the one hand most of policy makers and agency heads are present. On the other, there are large numbers of attendees from universities and colleges across the country. The science component of this annual affair is, however, remarkably limited, with most sessions thinly attended. In these days of increasingly specialized meetings, the Science Congress has inevitably become an academically irrelevant exercise. A large section of India's active, practising scientists are unrepresented at the Science Congress, where greater crowds are to be found outside the meeting halls. This issue of *Current Science* carries the text of the Presidential Address delivered by P. Rama Rao at the most recent Congress held at Hyderabad in January 1998 (page 418). Rama Rao paints a detailed picture of the growth of science and technology in India over the last fifty years. He provides an analysis of

the growth of S&T expenditure and draws attention to the 'emerging pressures' as a consequence of globalization.

The activities at the Congress form the theme of a detailed report by Arunachalam (page 397), who pointedly draws attention to the differing perceptions on the state of science in India, at the inaugural session. The author's comment that the character of the Congress has changed over the years, with the leadership having passed into the hands of science administrators, echoes a general feeling that academic research in Universities no longer occupies pride of place in our scientific scene.

To place the Science Congress in a proper historical perspective, we reproduce (page 480) major excerpts from the Presidential address delivered by J. L. Simonsen at the Congress held in Calcutta, in January 1928. Simonsen presents an account of the early days of the Science Congress, having been responsible for its birth in 1914. Many recent attempts to describe conditions in our Universities seem to echo Simonsen's analysis presented 70 years ago. For example, he says: '...I feel compelled to say that, with few exceptions the degree standard has been considerably lowered during the last few years. In my opinion, the blame does not lie with those actually engaged

in teaching. The recent University Acts have placed far too much power in the hands of laymen.' Simonsen argues that 'the main difficulty which confronts most teachers is the large number of students, the majority of whom enter for their collegiate career not with a desire to acquire knowledge or wisdom, but to gain a degree which is a stepping stone to government employ'.

In a thoughtful aside, Simonsen quotes Cowper in making a distinction between knowledge and wisdom

Knowledge and Wisdom, far from
being one,
Have oftimes no connection.
Knowledge dwells
In heads replete with thoughts
of other men;
Wisdom in minds attentive to
their own.
Knowledge is proud, that he has
learnt so much;
Wisdom is humble that he knows
no more.

The latter part of Simonsen's address emphasizes his own field of interest, the study of natural products an area that is making a major comeback today.

The Science Congress has undoubtedly played a key role in the history of Indian Science. Like many other institutions in our country, its role and purpose seem to have blurred with time.

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