

CURRENT SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

Staying home

Much discussion has been generated by the denial of visas to prominent members of the atomic energy establishment and the decision of the US Department of Energy (which runs the American nuclear programme) to send home a few Indian scientists working at their institutions. A section of our scientists and politicians seem to have been particularly incensed by this knee jerk reaction to the nuclear bomb tests. The fact that Germany and the UK may have followed suit, in black-listing Indian nuclear scientists, appears to have sent a shiver down the spines of many, for whom the practice of science necessarily involves extensive travelling abroad. The strident criticism that has followed the visa denials invariably points to the importance of unrestricted travel by scientists to conferences (a principle repeatedly, but selectively, stressed in the past by the International Council of Scientific Unions). But in the cacophony of opinions that have been expressed, some questions do not seem to have been asked loudly enough. How important is foreign travel to the practice of science in India? Is it really necessary or useful for some scientists to always be abroad, attending one conference after another? Must important scientists, engaged in critical research in establishment like defence and atomic energy, have to travel abroad to attend conferences and meetings, to which researchers in academic institutions have little chance of going? Do important government scientists necessarily have to wear two hats – one covering their primary responsibility, while the other provides academic respectability?

Young researchers who attend international scientific congresses are usually inspired and enthused by the quality of work presented. In smaller meetings and workshops they are often exposed to new concepts and techniques and often, more importantly, a different style of doing science. This exposure frequently reveals, with alarming clarity, the vast difference in the nature of research done at home and in the advanced countries. Nevertheless, the realization that a gulf exists is very important in shaping attitudes towards research. Serious scientists with established research programmes also benefit from 'sabbaticals', which often bring them back home in an excited state, from which most relax rather rapidly. 'Senior' researchers also use international con-

ferences to enhance their 'academic contacts' and to bring themselves closer to recent developments. Ironically, many of the 'regulars' on the conference circuit do little to keep themselves abreast, when at home. Continual visits abroad often hid an inability to formulate and develop research problems at home. Unfortunately, government agencies cater to this affliction by providing travel support. The plethora of agreements with foreign governments now provides a range of binational programmes, which are another source of easy travel money. Surprisingly, this urge for travel to conferences abroad persists despite the recent candid confession by a prominent scientist: 'Even if I am invited to deliver a lecture at an international research conference, I am made to feel like an outsider or am aware that I have been invited to satisfy a condition that someone from a developing country be included for the conference...'. (Padmanaban, G., *Science*, 1998, **281**, 75).

The visa denials do not seem to have affected the majority of Indian students, whose career goal is often to settle into suitable positions in the West. The great Indian middle class dream of emigrating to America, Europe or even Australia does not seem to be threatened by the nuclear aftermath. Only a relatively small section of Indian scientists seems to be affected. However, their positions and prominence have ensured a public impression that travel restrictions will have an important impact, suggesting that the inability of a few to travel to countries of their choice is a major issue. The scientific community in India is large and a substantial (but silent) majority does not travel frequently abroad. In many instances visa restrictions may indeed be a blessing in disguise; forcing some researchers to stay where they are, compelling them to focus their energies on their own problems, instead of perennially moving around the globe. Collaborations and transfer of materials and ideas between academic laboratories around the world still remain largely unrestricted by governments; personal chemistry is often the only impediment. Modern communications ensure that face to face meetings are often unnecessary. It is time to make a virtue of staying at home.

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