

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 76 Number 6

25 March 1999

EDITORIAL

Strategic follies

Two recent news items should bring good cheer to the scientists in the laboratories of the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO). First is the enhanced pay given to DRDO scientists 'keeping in view the role played by them in the development of high technology and systems for strategic applications'. This special pay hike has been approved 'taking all relevant factors into account and in order to attract, retain, inspire and motivate scientists to give their best contributions'. The second announces the institution of a set of handsome annual awards for development of defence-related technologies. While the pay increases appear to be restricted to the DRDO, the awards will also go to their partners; often organizations like the DAE or academic institutions. These measures act as a shot in the arm for military S&T and underscore the extraordinary emphasis that is currently being placed on the development of defence-related 'strategic' research programmes.

The encouragement given to defence science can be contrasted with the apparently wilful neglect of the health sector, where major organizations like the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the few national medical centres like the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) languish under the control of the Health Ministry. Ironically even as the DRDO bonuses were being announced, the AIIMS faculty was agitating for better pay scales. What indeed is strategic science? Should not diseases caused by invisible pathogenic organisms like malaria, tuberculosis, hepatitis and AIDS be viewed as great threats to national security? The plague scare of a few years ago highlights the fragile nature of our public health systems and underscores the havoc that can be caused by an epidemic, real or imagined. Biomedical research in the advanced countries is experiencing an unprecedented boom; public and political support ensuring that basic advances in biological sciences are indeed applied to the most important problems that affect human health. In our surroundings however, there is an inadequate appreciation of the many manifestations of 'strategic science'.

Many areas of science in India are handicapped today by inadequate support, both financial and moral. Nowhere is the problem more starkly presented than in the decline (and fall) of the science departments of the ma-

ior universities. It is in fact from many of these struggling institutions that the 'strategic scientists' of the future will emerge. Some years ago the decline of the university science system was discussed and debated in the hope that improvements are possible. Today even that measure of optimism is absent. The fact that even an organization like the Indian Science Congress has invariably been presided over in recent times by a prominent science administrator from Delhi, emphasizes that science as practised in academia no longer appears relevant or appealing even in a large gathering of 'scientists'. Focal themes at the Congress seem to reflect political compulsions, which invariably demand projections of unachievable social relevance. It is not surprising that much of what transpires at the Congress is simply not science.

In the mindless euphoria that marked the aftermath of Pokhran II, there was even talk of the development of a 'military-industrial complex'. In this scenario, technological advances (with attendant fall out in the civilian sector) would be fuelled by 'strategic requirements'. Unfortunately, no prescription for technological advance is likely to be successful if we ignore the relentless erosion in the base of the scientific enterprise. The Fifth Pay Commission boosted salaries of teachers and scientists dramatically enhancing the salary bills and depleting the coffers of already resource-starved institutions. The motivation for the pay hikes was of course, the insatiable demands of a bloated and unproductive, but immensely powerful bureaucracy. All sectors of course necessarily follow suit, with administrators carefully seeing that every pay commission enhances disparities, which then become an endless bone of contention. By the time the ripples and controversies of one Pay Commission subside, it is time to start the whole process again. The fall out from the selective acceptance of the Fifth Pay Commission's report may be eventually even more far reaching than that from the nuclear explosions. One lesson is however, clear. While there appears to be some limited appreciation for what constitutes 'strategic science' there is in fact no clear strategy for promoting science.

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