

Nonsense in Indian Science. Dilip M. Salwi. Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., A-149 Main Vikas Marg, Delhi 110 092, India. 1998. 124 pp. Price: Rs 125.

That a review of a book should be reviewed in turn is unusual. And the fact that the original review appeared in *Nature* – no less – and that the ‘review of the review’ appeared in *Current Science* – no less – is even more so. It was therefore a delightful surprise to lay my hands on the book, in the British Council library in Delhi (which is again unusual, since the library’s policy is to stock British publications almost exclusively), just as I was looking for something interesting to read on a journey. However, less than an hour into the journey and I was already done with the book, wondering what men of stature could possibly have seen in this haphazard collection of paragraphs that they decided to lavish on that collection precious journal space and their time.

A book that prints an apology in the place normally devoted to a preface suggests humility, if nothing else. The apology goes on to say: ‘there is no such thing as “Indian science” or “Australian science” or for that matter “Western science”. Science is science – the country where it is practised does not matter. In this book, “Indian science” refers to the typical cultural practices followed by Indian scientists’. The author then adds that his ‘nine years of observing, noting and studying the behaviour and practices followed by Indian scientists in their labs and outside’ would be more than fulfilled if this book inspires anyone to revamp the present system of scientific research. The book’s purpose is stated plainly enough: ‘It is a fun book. I have tried to pose the various problems and malaises that afflict Indian science by portraying them in a satirical manner. I hope through this style people at large and authorities in particular would become aware of them and do something concrete.’

However, instead of the promised satirical portrayal of problems, what meets the reader is a catalogue of grouses – nepotism, mediocre performance, sloth, indifference, avarice, to name a few – that are exclusive neither to India nor to its science. And what we get in place of

witty satire is bland text excessively peppered with exclamation marks and interspersed with pointless and awkward cartoons. Whereas R. K. Laxman was incisive and brilliant in his *Science Smiles*, the present book is pedestrian in approach, sloppy in organization, and run-of-the-mill in expression. In vain does the reader look for the biting humour as seen, for example, in the passage in C. Northcote Parkinson’s *In-laws and Outlaws* on why journals proliferate, where the punchline reads: ‘... whose work is original only in grammar and punctuation.’

The following two items are typical and well-suited to convey the flavour of the book. They have been reproduced exactly as they appear in the original, with all the exclamation marks retained.

Power is Knowledge!

If a carcass is needed to stir up the people, I will donate mine. *Everiste Galois*.

“Knowledge is power” was uttered by that great scientist and statesman Benjamin Franklin. But, perhaps, he had not seen the manner in which scientific organizations and labs in India are handled. Had he seen that he might have uttered the reverse of it, i.e., “Power is knowledge”!

In fact, these three words express all those things for which Indian labs and organizations stand. These are the places where power rules the roost; where power forces knowledge to lie low; where knowledge stoops before power; etc.!

Permit for Reading!

Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise. *Thomas Gray*

If you want to enter the portals of a library of a research institute, you need to have a permit as though scientists are doing something secret inside it! It is a crime to be there without the permit! You must first identify yourself and establish your credentials before it is issued to you.

Thereafter, even if you tear off pages from books and journals, it is none of their business! Just ensure that the tranquility of the library, the librarian and the library attendants is not disturbed!

Salwi writes with insider knowledge. His forays into the world of Indian science have served him well in choosing the topics but he has failed to develop and organize them. The book would have been particularly well-served by anecdotes, making it more concrete, realistic, and interesting. After all, for such a practised writer, it would have been easy enough to recount actual incidents after dressing them up to

‘protect the guilty’. But the author did not choose to do so, presumably out of a misplaced preference for anonymity. The result is a particularly bland presentation, with no details at all, that reads more like the anonymous denouncements that turn up often enough in any large establishment, scientific or otherwise, than the lively prose of an accomplished writer.

If the text shows a failure to develop the topics, the table of contents (which runs to six pages – remarkable for a 124-page book with illustrations), shows up the quirky organization of the book. The book is a collection of 155 headings, under each of which appear one or more paragraphs, similar to the representative sample reproduced earlier. These headings are presented under 14 major categories, somewhat like the chapters of a book. In some chapters, such text is subdivided further into several sections; in some, it is not further divided at all; in some others, the organization is peculiar: there is a chapter title all right but instead of subdividing the contents of the chapter into two or more groups, all of it appears under yet another category, and it is not clear how that category fits into the overall organization of the chapter. (For instance, all the three sections in a chapter titled ‘Bureaucratic juggling’ are grouped under only one heading, namely ‘Hunting for Funds’, indicating that hunting for funds is one form of bureaucratic juggling: but what are the others, if any?) To me, such arrangement shows want of care in organizing the book. Even this semblance of a structure breaks down on closer scrutiny when you begin to look for logic: Why are the chapters arranged in the given order? On what basis have the 155 headings been distributed among the chapters? The inescapable conclusion is that the book is simply a collection of headings, each one fleshed out with one quotation and variable amount of text ranging from as few as 4 lines to as many as 70 or so.

When you consider that headings are set out in large type, with generous space all around, it is clear that they serve as padding. Add to that the space taken up by the quotations and the cartoons, and you wonder whether the matter was enough to make even a booklet, let alone a full-length book.

But what is the book all about? The title tells you little. The copy on the inside flap tells you that the book is 'essentially meant to be a fun book, but it subtly aims to wake up the reader to the harsh realities of Indian science'. As you begin reading the book, you realize that it is written in the 'rant mode', a litany of woes that beset Indian science: lack of teamwork, nepotism, mindless bureaucracy, lack of commitment, As I mentioned, the list runs to 155 points. Everyone who has served India's science establishment would agree with Salwi's list. But so would everyone who has served India's bureaucracy. The point is that these are the ills that are not unique to Indian science. Just as a scientist who wants to measure air pollution would distinguish between the 'background' level of pollution and that attributable to such specific sources as thermal power stations, we need to know what are the ills that are unique to Indian science. But *Nonsense in Indian Science* fails to tell us. Secondly, it restricts Indian science only to that carried out in state-funded laboratories, ignoring the pioneering contributions of many who worked on their own or were supported by entities other than the state. Science flourishes in this mode even now. Thirdly, in painting Indian science with such a broad brush, the author does injustice to the many who continue to serve Indian science despite crippling odds (though he dedicates the book 'to all those genuine scientists who are suffering due to organized scientific research'). Lastly, in one sweeping statement, he rubbishes all Indian women scientists: 'They (women scientists) simply want some pocket money for their upkeep and to buy sarees till their marriage – and sometimes even after their marriage! . . . they are often not ambitious in the sense that they are willing to yield their credit in research to their guides or bosses! Besides, which Indian scientist wouldn't like a pleasant face or female charm in his otherwise cut and dry, often monotonous, workaday scientific research? Women are therefore preferred in all laboratories!'

That such blatant chauvinism made it past the editor is perhaps less surprising, given the numerous infelicities of expression that the book is riddled with.

Despite the high esteem that scientists enjoy (a recent survey by the *Times of India* reported that scientists scored well on such counts as honesty and respect for the profession), the book is a missed opportunity: the author chose a subject that needs a book to itself, was well-qualified to write one, and selected a 'treatment' that would have proved effective; the publisher was committed enough to publish the book despite what in all probability is only a small market. In doing so, both have done a service to India's science community. If the book prompts at least a few out of the thousands who make up India's science community, and those who administer it, to write at length about what ails Indian science and, more important, how to cure it of those ills – in a style not ponderous and abstract, nor acrimonious and self-centred, but lively and entertaining – the book will have served some purpose.

YATEENDRA JOSHI

A 44/2 SFS Flats,
New Delhi 110 017, India

Sandal and its Products. A. M. Radomiljac, H. S. Ananthapadmanabho, R. M. Welbourn and K. Satyanarayana Rao (eds). Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, GPO Box 1571, Canberra ACT2601, Proceedings No. 84. 1998. 203 pp. Price not mentioned.

This is a collection of papers presented at an International Seminar held on 18 and 19 December 1997 at Bangalore, organized by the Institute of Wood Science and Technology, Bangalore and the Karnataka State Forest Department.

Sandalwood (technically the dead, heartwood) and its fragrant oil are two exquisite gifts from the orient to the world. Mysore has been historically associated with the sandal perfumes, agarbathies, carvings and soaps. The paste of sandalwood is used in religious ceremonies and in medicine. Sandalwood (*Santalum album*) is a rather unimpressive small tree (15–29 m high) that occurs wild in India in the regions adjoining Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

According to some authors sandal is native to India. Others believe that it was introduced from Timor Islands.

A book has to be judged on the basis of its contents and also in comparison with works published recently on the subject. An earlier publication on sandal, edited by Srinivasan *et al.* (1992) has covered aspects such as history, distribution, morphology, soil, silviculture, physiology, chemistry and utilization, diseases and pests, tree improvement, production, export and management. Whereas it is an excellent compilation with a historical perspective, it concentrates entirely on sandalwood in India.

Sandal and its Products has a much wider canvas and deals with 16 species of *Santalum*, distributed in India, Australia, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia and South Pacific Islands (as depicted in the frontispiece of the volume). If properly utilized on a sustainable basis, sandal has the potential to contribute significantly to rural economies of several countries in the Asia Pacific region. The objectives of the seminar were to bring together the current knowledge on silviculture, propagation, genetics, management of pests and diseases, biotechnology, utilization and importantly to identify the most crucial problems and constraints and recognize research needs and pinpoint priorities and suggest collaborative programmes.

The volume contains 51 articles – some highly technical and original, others general and review type. The editors have grouped them under 5 broad heads for convenience. The status of sandalwood in India has been assessed briefly and strategies for development of sandalwood in farm industry for sustainable utilization by the craftsmen have been outlined.

Among the various species of the genus, *S. album* is the principal source of wood and oil. It is a root parasite (has over 200 hosts) and occurs in forests as well as along fences in cultivated fields and in urban areas. The species is self-incompatible but sets a copious amount of seeds, disseminated by birds attracted by the sweet pulp in the berries. Recognizing the value of sandal as a generator of employment, and revenue (including foreign exchange), Karnataka has declared it as a government tree.