

IIT Delhi hosts Henry Ford Chair

IIT Delhi signed an MOU on 18 March this year with the US-based Ford Motor Company to establish the 'Henry Ford Chair for Biomechanics and Transportation Safety'. The Ford Motor Company has made a grant of US \$140,000 for establishing this Chair. The grant will be invested in the corpus fund of IIT Delhi. The interest from the grant will support the Chair and will meet

academic and research expenses.

The Transportation Research and Injury Prevention Programme (TRIIPP) at IIT Delhi is already actively involved in a programme which it runs in close collaboration with government agencies and industry leaders. This programme focuses on issues specific to the conditions prevailing in India for enabling people to travel safely; and also to do so

without causing injury or health hazards to users and others.

Through this alliance with IIT Delhi, Ford sees a partner with considerable experience in transport safety. The Ford Chair will strengthen work in the area of vehicle crash modelling with special emphasis on crashes with pedestrians, motorcyclists and bicyclists and biomechanical analysis of injuries to road users.

Seminar on 'science and the media'

How much of the intriguing research that goes on behind gleaming ivory towers of our scientific institutions has really managed to percolate into the minds of the public at large? When a senior scientist was confronted with these questions, he replied, 'Sure, we'd love to communicate our research findings to the layman but who has the time to decode the technical jargon into simple terms? And those "pesky journalists" simply can't tell the difference between 'terminal differentiation and terminator genes...'. For their part, several honourable members of the fourth estate frown upon the reluctance of scientists to assist the former in translating 'scientific gobbledegook' into simpler terms. And so there continues to be a mysterious generation gap between scientists, the press and the man on the street. That is, his failure to 'generate' interest among the public towards good science. Something clearly needs to be done to mitigate this yawning gap.

On 1st and 2nd March 1999, a seminar on 'science and the media', was held at the Inter University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), Pune, to address this very issue. Several eminent scientists and media persons graced the occasion bringing forth a vivid collage of thoughts through the lively interactive sessions.

At the inaugural session of the seminar, Jayant V. Narlikar (Director, IUCAA), one of the country's most dedicated communicators of science, alluded to the interactive 'triangle model', that held science at its apex and with scientists and the society teamed up at the base. He further related that science, through its technological in-

ventions, controlled society. Society, on the other hand, controlled science through politics and commerce. Since each was inter-dependent on the other, there was a pressing need for scientists to communicate science to the public. However, he warned, in the all pervading atmosphere where scientists needed to 'publish or perish', publicizing their science should be done with caution and without hype.

In his hard-hitting lecture punctuated with wry humour, Rajesh Kochhar (Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bangalore) said '... In India, it is relatively easy to get research grants from the government. And yet the irony is that many scientists feel that they do not owe anything to the average tax-paying citizen...'. On its part, was the media upholding the right kind of objectives, and sending socially relevant messages to the public? M. M. Chaudhuri, a scientist-turned-science communicator on TV, opined that it certainly was not doing so. He was quick to add that in a country where illiteracy was a major problem, there was a need to change the attitudes of the public by ushering in an era of 'education through entertainment' ('edu-tainment').

Several participants in the seminar were sceptical over the role of science in mass communication. B. Ramachandran, a scientist-turned-science writer from *The Hindu* group of publications, wondered out loud 'Who needs science journalism?' 'After all', he said, 'when the total R&D investment in the country remains less than 1% GDP, and a mere 3 to 4% of Indian newspapers cater to science journalism, who needs science anyway?'

White bouquets and brickbats were generously being exchanged between

everyone and no one in particular, Dilip Salwi (freelance science writer) suggested the idea of starting 'Science Media Centres' in the country. Media consultants employed by the centres could decode scientific data passed on by scientists into simple terms understandable by journalists. This would reduce any error that could seep in while communicating complex scientific phenomena to the public. In this manner, communication between scientists and the public could be polished and further streamlined to perfection.

Many scientists fervently believe that science is universal, and scientists in India and abroad are one large happy family. While that may be a pleasant thought in itself, it is sad to note that there is an increasing trend among Indian newspapers to simply lift articles from as many foreign-based science publications as possible. Does this mean that Indian science is a dying profession? In the failure to project Indian science in a proper and responsible manner among the public and the media, with whom does the fault lie? So can we (as Ramachandran suggested), simply press 'control-alt-delete' and start all over again?

The seminar on 'science and the media' succeeded in creating a 'big bang' of ideas, mooted by both scientists as well as science communicators all over India. But unless concrete measures are taken to improve channels of communication, all our collective efforts in educating the public about scientific endeavours carried out within these shores will merely end with a 'small sigh'.

K. Manjula, *Deccan Herald*, 75, M. G. Road, Bangalore 560 001, India