

Grow a head from within

In his hard-hitting editorial 'Requiem for a missing generation' (*Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **83**, 1297–1298), Balaram has rightly deplored the diatribe expressed in a recent 'News Focus' piece published in *Science* (2002, **298**, 733) that puts the onus on the inadequacy of Indian scientists in terms of substance and accomplishment for the recent recruitment of scientists from foreign countries to head some flagship laboratories of our country. However, similar deplorable practices almost routinely followed in many of our national laboratories go unnoticed, where the rightful claims of many competent and deserving senior, internal candidates for the top job are ignored in favour of fancy choices from outside institutions, often leading to disastrous consequences. It is a shame that in many of our national laboratories, the second line of leaders is not found suitable to fill up the top posts in their own organization. One of the factors could be the long tenure of many directors that, like in political leadership,

makes it difficult for the second rank to share responsibility, to grow or assume power, making it largely a one-man show. Also, like in politics, extended stay in power by a single person (party) leads to stagnation in terms of growth as well as in ideas. However, to inject new ideas into a system it is not always necessary to bring in directors from outside. Induction of fresh ideas should be encouraged and given priority during recruitment at lower levels. In an ideal situation, the job of the heads of the institutes should be largely ceremonial. Their responsibilities should be to identify and recruit talented individuals, encourage them to perform, build, support and maintain adequate infrastructure facilities, and to create an atmosphere conducive for carrying out quality research in their institute. If a scientist is found to be extremely talented in research, he/she should be left undisturbed with minimum administrative work to concentrate and devote most of his/her time in research work as long as

possible. A top job leaves neither enough time nor energy to undertake any serious research activity. A person should be made head of an institute at such an age that he/she can be in that post for only one term or less before superannuating, so that there will not be any dearth of equally competent people in the same organization for the top job. In fact, some of the best laboratories in our country have been lucky to always have home-grown people as their directors. This has led to the continuation of quality research in these institutes, undisturbed for decades. If such steps are followed, selection of new directors will become a routine job.

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Missing generation: Icons for Indian science

This has reference to Balaram's thought-provoking editorials on the topics 'Requiem for a missing generation' (*Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **83**, 1297–1298) and 'Chemistry: In search of icons' (*ibid*, 2002, **83**, 1177–1178).

It is amusing to read the comments (*Science*, 2002, **298**, 733) of senior scientists aged 60–75 years, about the 'absence of science leaders in India' among scientists in the age group of 45–55 years! Though the scientists of the 'missing generation', who are 'arrogantly dismissed by the senior scientists', do not have forum like *Science* to air their opinion, there is a view prevalent among young scientists (aged 35–55 years!)

trained in top laboratories of the world, that some of these senior academic scientists could not achieve much in science because they became administrators when they were at their prime in their academic careers.

Though there have not been important scientific achievements by the academic scientists in India in recent years, there have been several achievements in mission-oriented research and development in India, e.g. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam (Space), M. S. Swaminathan (Agriculture) and V. Kurien (Dairy Development) that helped India achieve self-reliance in the field of space, agriculture and dairy development. Scientists who have helped

in this effort already become 'icons' to young scientists and general public in India. Hence, the need of the hour for Indian science is to look for more such 'icons' to solve challenging problems of relevance to India through their research and development efforts.

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