

Survival of the species

Balaram's editorial¹ mentions Martin Rees, Britain's astronomer-royal, who suggested in a recent book that the human species has a good chance of becoming extinct by the end of the 21st century, hastened by 'science and technology'. Assuming that the premature demise of our species is not a welcome prospect, one needs to clarify that science and technology should not be implicated in being intrinsically dangerous to our survival. Of course, the deliberate effort to conduct life-threatening research or build even more deadly weapons of death is excepted. The leader in R&D in the field of weapons of mass destruction is USA, not North Korea or Iran. Iraq's 'threat' has also been seen to be an utter fabrication by the leaders of the US and UK. The US government has declared that it will be in the forefront of developing advanced nuclear weapons called 'bunker busters'. The American budget for making wars has reached \$ 400 billion (greater than the combined defence budgets of the nations in the rest of the world) under President Bush. For example, the US deployed anti-tank weapons

and shells coated with depleted uranium in its recent 'wars', leaving a devastating legacy for the people of Yugoslavia and Iraq. If there is any country that comes closest to making Rees's prophecy come true, it is USA. With only 5% of the earth's population, it consumes 25% of the world's energy. It is the single largest polluter of our environment. Insatiable greed together with incorrigible self-righteousness have become hallmarks of American culture. Their endless and excessive demands for greater comforts and conveniences fuel the destruction of rainforests and the exploitation and impoverishment of the people worldwide. The present reality dictates that the US political-military establishment will roll over any country that dares to challenge its monopoly-capitalistic interpretation of what the world should be. Can this headlong rush to deplete the world's scarce resources and destroy its rich biodiversity be halted? Only a concerted and united effort by the people in the rest of the world (given that most of the leaders are corrupt or have been co-opted) to oppose vigorously uni-

lateral US plans for the future can begin to stop the rot and save the future. It is up to conscientious, courageous and humanitarian scientists (including scientists from India) to provide leadership with clear facts and cogent analyses in the face of the relentless American juggernaut. They must speak truth to unbridled American power and refuse to work (including directly, in research funded by US agencies and multinational corporations) on the deadly mission of its leaders. They must also empower people to oppose their own sychophantic and servile administrations that act willy-nilly at the behest of American corporations and government.

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1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **85**, 5-6.
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How 'national' or 'international' are symposia and conferences?

Symposia and conferences are not only the meeting points for scientists but also serve as springboards for young researchers who can present the audience with their originality and creative talent for research. These are also platforms for exchange of information and academic interaction that may fetch challenging positions to the deserving through personal contacts with illustrious scientists who may happen to attend such meetings. But, of late, this very essence has been defeated. The research projects are peer-reviewed and screened by an expert committee before being granted. A research paper is reviewed by experts in standard

journals. But there is none to judge the worth of the meetings being convened. The organizers conveniently call the meetings 'national' or even 'international', whereas often the participants are all from within a state. It has been painfully recorded in the pages of *Current Science* that in India, the cost of a good paper is very high. It is really appalling to see 'the state of affairs' regarding the symposia. The self-financing colleges, by virtue of their comfortable financial status, have started hosting 'international' conferences. They usually charge exorbitantly for registration and research scholars attend such conferences simply to get certifica-

tes of participation. Perhaps, it is time an accreditation status is accorded to such meetings also. Many non-stipendiary scholars spend their precious resources in attending such meetings unaware that these certificates will neither add any merit to their curriculum vitae nor further their knowledge in the field.

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