

INSA: new initiatives and concerns*

The Indian National Science Academy (INSA), New Delhi which is currently in its Platinum Jubilee year, has maintained its eminence and dignity all these years. The Fellowship of INSA is highly cherished. The Academy enjoys considerable prestige. This prestige needs to be converted into influence. INSA is in the process of setting up a Science Policy Study Cell. The Academy needs to strengthen its role as a think-tank in the service of the nation on science-related issues. INSA is also in the process of establishing an archive. We can understand the present and plan for the future only in the context of the past. Thirdly, we would like to establish an electronic hub of science information at INSA. We do not wish to solely hold large quantities of information. But we need to have links with all major depositories of science-related information in the country. This is in consonance with the general philosophy of an Academy. The Academy is not a major implementer or executor of policies and programmes. It is a catalyst and a beacon that guides.

The Platinum Jubilee is also an occasion to take stock of ourselves and to introspect. Indian science has done the country proud. It has served society in myriad ways. Perhaps one example of such service is the green revolution. In my youth, the Indian condition used to be described as ship-to-mouth existence. The green revolution changed all that. The green revolution was made possible through a magnificent collaboration involving scientists, the political leader-

ship, the bureaucracy and the great Indian farmer. Our success in the pharmaceutical industry is based on our strength in organic chemistry. Our biotechnology effort is in the take-off mode. Then, there are the great strides we have made in the nuclear, space and defence efforts. These technological achievements are based on home-grown science. Yet in the global scenario, I believe that Indian science is in crisis. During the period when the Academy celebrated its Golden Jubilee, India used to be described as a superpower in Third World science. This is no longer true. There are many reasons for this situation. I would like to highlight today two of them. One has to do with the structure of Indian science, which is now unequal to the tasks of modern scientific research. The Prime Minister, in his first address to the Science Congress after taking office, specifically referred to the twin problems of bureaucracy and hierarchy. Autonomy of scientific institutions and agencies is another area which needs close attention. The scientific output of India results from the efforts of tens of thousands scientists across the country and it is important to involve them in consultative processes. In order to unleash the creative potential of Indian science, we need a vibrant, resilient and sensitive system which is less bureaucratic, less hierarchical, more autonomous and more participatory. I am conscious of the heroic efforts of many of our distinguished colleagues in the Government and elsewhere towards the realization of this objective. INSA, and I as its President, look forward to working closely with them and others concerned in this effort, with our own specific inputs.

Another major concern is in relation to higher education and the university sector. We are aware of the keen interest of

the Government and others concerned in this area. The three science academies have together circulated a draft document on the contents of higher education which could form a basis, along with other inputs, for further discussions. We also hope to be able to address the structure of education in due course. Thus, the science academies are bracing themselves to become effective participants in the discourse on higher education in the country.

We are living through exciting times. In the Councils of the World, including those on science, India is taken very seriously. In the country, problems as well as opportunities abound. I am confident that the scientific community would rise to meet the challenges and to make use of the opportunities. Science and technology constitute a pre-eminent tool to enhance the well-being of people. Science is also a way of life, an approach to problems and a celebration of excellence. Promotion of excellence is a hallmark of a healthy civilization. This civilizational aspect of science is of paramount importance. In addition to helping the material welfare of the human kind, science also helps lead us into that heaven of freedom, to quote the poet in part,

‘Where the mind is without fear and the
head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;

Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way into the dreary desert
sand of dead habit’.

*Based on the welcome address and introductory remarks on the occasion of the inauguration of the Platinum Jubilee events of the Indian National Science Academy by the Prime Minister at New Delhi on 10 January 2009.

M. Vijayan, Molecular Biophysics Unit, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012, India.
e-mail: president@insa.nic.in