

INDIAN SCIENCE CONGRESS

The Indian Science Congress has just been concluded in Lucknow. A huge jamboree, With the Prime Minister inaugurating it and thousands of scientists listening to the noble platitudes being spouted by a few “notable” worthies of Indian Scientific establishment and the scientific bureaucracy. An annual ritual which must surely rank amongst the most non-productive meetings of science.

One look at the agenda or program of the Science Congress will convince anyone that nothing meaningful can ever be achieved in such a broad ranging meeting. There are physicists, biologists, technologists, health professionals, geologists and every other kind of scientist present. In the 4 days, there are plenary talks by the same geriatric scientific dons and bureaucrats. Then there are other sessions where people give 10 minute presentations of their work.

Who are the people who attend the Science Congress? Apart from the “big shots”, there are literally thousands of science workers from all over the country. There are science teachers from small provincial universities for whom this is the only opportunity to meet other workers and interact with them. But given the diffused focus and the customary chaos which accompanies these kind of mega gatherings, most of these scientists take the opportunity to see the city and do their shopping! For most of them, it is a holiday for which they can be reimbursed by their respective institutions. After all, while the scientific elite in this country jet sets to conferences globally (on the exchequer’s expense) , the poor physics teacher from Satna can only get to the Science Congress!

So what can be done to make such a mammoth meeting more fruitful? The best thing to do is to junk it! The whole exercise is futile. It is meaningless to have a common meeting for so many diverse disciplines of science. Yes, there are similar meetings held in other countries too. But nowhere is the focus so diffuse and the platform used by a set of scientific bureaucrats to hog the limelight.

What should be done is to spend the resources in organizing many smaller and more focused meetings. These could be discipline specific or even region specific. And because these meetings would be small, they could potentially be more productive. These will also provide an opportunity to the vast numbers of scientific workers to develop collaborations and informal networks with other workers in their fields. Such collaborations could prove very useful especially in the resource poor environment that most workers work in. Sharing of relevant information and even hardware could be a real possibility once such networks develop. And most importantly, the scientists would be spared the long, boring and repetitive talks by our scientific/bureaucratic elite!

We have the distinction of having possibly the second largest human resource base in science and technology. Yet, the quality of our science is pathetic. By and large, the scientists are demotivated by lack of infrastructure, a creative environment and genuine appreciation of their work. We need to encourage the huge numbers of scientific workers who work in smaller institutions to be more active in their fields. Closing down the Indian Science Congress and replacing it with smaller, regional or even state level meetings (with inputs from their more fortunate brethren working in bigger institutions) may provide some hope in the otherwise bleak scenario of Indian Science.

