

Encyclopaedia of Indian Scientists: From Ancient to Contemporary, by Anjana Chattopadhyay, Reliance Publishing House, Rs. 395/ (1995).

This is a biographical reference work on about 1800 scientists of India. Almost all fields of science and technology are covered. The lives and achievements of these scientists from ancient times to the present day are listed in this book.

There is almost nothing positive that one can say about this work. Contrary to what the jacket claims, the information is not the latest available. For instance, in the entry on J.V.Narlikar, it is not mentioned that he has been the founder-director of the Inter University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) for the last many years. The entries on the scientists are brief, missing out on certain important things like the year of death. In many cases, the information is simply wrong. For example, it is inconceivable that the famous mathematician Ramanujan could be born in 1927 and receive his BA degree from Cambridge in 1916! Or that the famous crystallographer Sivaramakrishna Chandrasekhar was ever a professor of theoretical astrophysics at the University of Chicago (it was his namesake the Nobel laureate Subramanyam. Chandrasekhar). There also seems to be at least one person who has two different entries! (Prof. Govind Swarup of GMRT).

The choice of scientists and technologists is of course the prerogative of the author. Nevertheless, the choices should follow some logic. For instance, the logic of including the famous medieval astronomer Ulugh Beg of Samarkand is not clear. It could be argued that he had a lot of influence on Jai Singh but then this fact is not mentioned at all in the write-up. There is no index apart from a simple alphabetical one, which seems redundant in a book where entries are arranged alphabetical! There is no effort to cross reference by either subject or period, which would be very useful. The illustrations are so atrocious that they should have been best left out.

A biographical reference is an important tool for researchers. It is imperative for it to be scrupulously correct and up to date. If anything, this book does not give the impression being either. There are innumerable typographical mistakes which are irritating. It will be useful if the publishers come out with a revised edition in which more care is taken about the information provided.

Science: The Living Adventure, . The Meaning of Science", by V.S. Ravi, Manohar Publishers, Rs. 125/., (1995).

Contrary to the impression conveyed by the title of the book, the book itself is a collection of essays on science. The avowed purpose of the essays (as stated in the Preface) is to bridge the gap that exists among the "beneficiaries of science and technology" about the contributions in "unravelling the mysteries of nature and controlling the environment" by our scientists.

The author, a serving bureaucrat, has chosen to write on a very wide range of topics. The subjects covered range from astronomy and cosmology to the foundations of quantum mechanics, from the ergonomic design of a comfortable chair to the overrating of the Nobel prize in sciences. The essays are written in a very readable style with many literary quotations and are free of technical jargon.

Having said this, one must express a sense of disappointment at reading them. Though the topics covered by the author are eclectic, they are by no means pedestrian. Indeed, some of them are at the frontiers of research in their disciplines. For instance, the debate of whether a computer or rather the current generation of Artificial Intelligence programs are "conscious" or not is a matter of great debate among computer and cognitive scientists. To reduce all the dimensions of the debate to a short piece and then "conclude" that we do not have conscious computers is certainly doing the whole subject injustice. Or for that matter the essay on "Is the Universe one living entity" makes no mention of the Gaia hypothesis or the work of Lynn Margullis.

The author fails to convey either the complexity or the excitement of the various fields. He seems content with broad generalizations and random pieces of information. These by themselves are entertaining but in my opinion, have a very limited use. The idea that in explaining a difficult concept from science, without the use of its natural language (mathematics or highly technical jargon), one must necessarily trivialize it is in my opinion an erroneous one. The best popular science writers have successfully simplified complex subjects without losing the excitement associated with the subject.

Some of the essays are by and large précis of works of other science writers like K.C. Cole and I. Asimov. Strangely enough, though these authors are quoted extensively, there is no bibliography or a list of

references which the interested reader can use to follow up on the subject. There are also several typographical mistakes like “LED (Light Emitting Decode)’ instead of a Light Emitting Diode, or Heisenber instead of Heisenberg.

The cover of the book mentions another book on Astronomy by the author. Though it is indeed remarkable that a so called “lay-person” is interested enough in science to write about it, one must add that the efforts, noteworthy as they are fall very much short of expectations.