

1. "Chemical Elements in The New Age", by D.V. Jahagirdar, N.B.T., 1994, Rs. 31/.
2. "Narcotic Drugs", by Anil Aggrawal, N.B.T. , 1995, Rs. 46/.
3. " It Happened Tomorrow", edited by Bal Phondke, N.B.T., 1993, Rs. 55/.
4. "Space Today", by Mohan Sundara Rajan, N.B.T., 1987, Rs. 40/
5. "You and Your Health", edited by V.N. Bhave, N.S. Deodhar and S.V. Bhave, N.B.T., 1993, Rs. 67/.

Popular science has never been a very popular subject with Indian authors or publishers. This despite the fact they we claim to have the second largest scientific personpower. The bleak scenario changed with the publishing of many popular science titles by the National Book Trust. These titles, written by Indians, are by and large well produced and very affordable though the quality of writing has been somewhat uneven. The books under review are all part of their popular science series.

" **Chemical Elements in the New Age**" is a short discussion on some of the chemical elements which are finding increasing use in many applications. It starts with a brief history of the study of chemical elements followed by a description of the properties of many of the common elements. The discussion is very sketchy and basically lists the properties and the uses of the natural elements. The same is repeated for many of the rarer elements and also the man made elements. Historical anecdotes and interesting trivia are interspersed throughout. There is however a very serious lacuna; very little attempt is made to get across the excitement of the field to the curious reader . The beauty and elegance of the periodic table and the predictive power of the classification is one of the major achievements of modern chemistry. None of that is found here, instead what one gets is a condensation of facts which can be looked up in any good encyclopaedia.

Dug abuse counts as one of the most serious problems facing our society today. What was once thought to be a "curse of affluence" is striking us with a vengeance. "**Narcotic Drugs**" is a very useful and informative book about the many drugs of abuse; from the old favourite opium to the recent synthetic hallucinogenic chemicals. Of interest are also the miscellany of hallucinogenic drugs from various parts of the world and their role in various ancient cultures. Written by an expert in forensic medicine, the book discusses in detail the chemistry of all the major drugs, their effects on the body and many other facts related to them. The style is very readable with many interesting stories from history thrown in. (For instance, Stevenson wrote his famous "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" while undergoing cocaine therapy for his tuberculosis in a sanatorium!) The book has a very helpful bibliography for the interested reader to follow up.

Though the first science fiction story in India was written by J.C. Bose in 1897, science fiction as a genre never really developed in our country. Apart from isolated attempts in Marathi and Bengali, science fiction never really caught the imagination of the writers or even the readers. The situation changed in the seventies when many Marathi authors, including J.V. Narlikar started writing in periodicals and newspapers. There was a similar proliferation in Bengali though on a smaller scale than Marathi. "**It Happened Tomorrow**" is a collection of 19 science fiction stories from various Indian languages. The book has an excellent preface by the editor, Bal Phondke, himself a good science fiction writer and well known popularizer. He traces the evolution of the genre from the time of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and its growth in India. An interesting point made by the editor is that paradoxically, Kerala with its high literacy and bibliophile tradition, did not see a development of Malayalam science fiction.

Expectedly, the majority of the stories are from Marathi, though there are contributions from Bengali, Tamil, Kannada , Oriya, Hindi and even English. The stories themselves are quite enjoyable and creative and the authors display an amazing degree of originality in their ideas. I particularly liked the contributions of Narlikar, Phondke, Mukul Sharma and D. Mewari.

"**Space Today**", is an attempt to introduce the multifarious aspects of space technology to the lay reader. The genesis of the idea that human beings could free themselves from the attractive pull of the earth has a long history. There is a brief discussion of the various scientific ideas that ultimately made possible the flight of human beings into space. This discussion , though interesting is far too sketchy to be of any use to the lay reader, though there are interesting bits of information. For instance, Tipu Sultan used rockets against the British in the battle of Srirangapatna in 1792! Most of the book is a compendium facts on satellites and their uses in remote sensing, communications, weather forecasting and even military applica-

tions. There is a reasonably detailed, though uncritical discussion of the Indian space programme. The last section is devoted to some of the outstanding problems in astrophysics and cosmology. Again, the author falters by being too brief to be useful to anyone but the expert. There is a useful glossary but no bibliography.

For a country which produces more doctors than nurses, the state of our health care system is dismal. The growing tendency towards specialisation and curative rather than preventive health care, has not helped matters. A beginning can be made to counter this tendency by educating the people on basic issues relating to their bodies and their health. **"You and Your Health"** is an attempt to reach the lay reader with information about physical and mental health. Edited by a team of practising doctors and teachers, the book contains articles by many health professionals on a variety of topics. From the basis of modern medicine to basic anatomy and physiology, from common ailments to the role of community health programmes, a diverse range of topics are covered. Unfortunately, the style is sometimes pedantic and not very reader friendly. There are many typographical errors and the illustrations somewhat overdone (surely an illustration on the "use of a handkerchief" is superfluous) Comparing it with a similar book "Where there is no doctor" (published by VHAI) this book is certainly below standard.

Reading these and other books published by NBT on popular science, one is struck by the lack of a new and novel approach to the subject. Most of the books (these titles included) are basically a bunch of facts put together in an abysmally unimaginative way. How are these then going to excite the young curious minds (assuming that the young students are the primary target audience) about the mysteries and wonders of science? NBT is certainly doing pioneering work in making Indian popular science available at affordable prices. The challenge is now open to our scientists and popularisers.