Seminars on biodiversity – do they inspire people?

'India is one of the mega-biodiversity nations of the world' or 'we should protect the environment' are common lines that may be heard in seminars and workshops inside any university and more specifically in the life sciences, ecology and environmental science departments. Long presentations on biodiversity and wildlife do not really mean that the university community is concerned about the environment. What measures the success of such seminars/workshops is the contribution made by the faculty and students after attending these events. Not all can go to the Western Ghats or the Eastern Himalayas to study biodiversity, but one can try to avoid spoiling the local environment.

Seminars and workshops highlight new areas of research, but do little to inspire participants to switch to environment-friendly ways in their daily lives. These events which emphasize on protecting the environment often themselves degrade it, using plastic cups for tea, polythene bags for carrying articles and plastic file bags. Every year, workshops and conferences on biodiversity and environment worth millions of rupees are organized with emphasis on endangered species, but do less to inspire students. As a result, research is taken up for the purpose of publications and for obtaining degrees.

People are concerned about the endangered species but fail to address the local environmental issues. Also, some experts on environmental issues themselves can be seen driving their cars over short distances, for instance, inside a university campus. Such an activity not only discourages cycling and use of mass public transport inside a university campus, but also results in unjustified use of resources. The amount of fuel consumed by one person driving a private vehicle can be utilized more efficiently. The practice of cycling by senior faculty members inside a university may help save fuel, and may also inspire students to cycle or use public transport. Seniors in the field should set examples for the younger generation to follow their footsteps by adopting eco-friendly methods in their day-to-day activities.

Though aware, people lack the urge to protect the environment. Concerns towards the environment remain confined to event venues as discussions. Lights and fans left turned on in empty classrooms and open taps in toilets are a common sight. Trees are felled and land is cleared around departments devoted to environment and ecological sciences. Nobody is heard protesting or demanding replanting of trees. Thus, conferences on ecology and environmental science serve as a platform for identification of endangered species but do not address the local environmental problems.

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Where are quality teachers for higher education?

Recently, Katiyar[1] has written an exhaustive editorial on the higher education scenario in India. It is evident that all is not well with the system. There is a proposal for getting up a 'National Commission for Higher Education and Research' in India. In an interview cited in Katiyar[1], C. N. R. Rao has correctly mentioned that 'just setting up a commission will not help'. The shortage of qualified teachers in colleges and universities has resulted in 30–50% vacant faculty positions. For better research work, well-educated scientists are essential. To achieve this goal motivated teachers are a must, who can impart subtle scientific training to their students. The manner in which the quality of our intake is diminishing, soon universities shall be compelled to appoint teachers of poor calibre. Such an unfortunate scenario shall be harmful in generating quality scientific manpower. Sangode[2] expresses 'urgency to recruit more researchers instead of discriminating them in the initial level'. This approach of unrestricted mushrooming is fraught with danger. A junior, mediocre scientist of today in a research institution is going to occupy a senior position tomorrow. Theoretically his/her promotion may be barred, but our experience has demonstrated that due to some considerations, most of them do get promoted. Imagine what scientific leadership quality they can demonstrate over their junior staff.

Yashpal (cited in ref. 1) remarks that IITs have become undergraduate factories. So what if the students are of excellent quality. We need scientific and technical manpower. Their contribution in our national scenario shall, undoubtedly, be much more than of other poor-quality outputs from elsewhere. What we urgently need is that IITs start a special programme to enrol their undergraduates, via the route of postgraduation, so that they get suitable training for filling the faculty positions for our needy universities and colleges. Their jobs with suitable salary must be secured by the Ministry.

Finally, it may not be inappropriate, if the name of the Ministry of Human Resource Development be reverted to Ministry of Education, with top-class academicians steering the Ministry.

1. Katiyar, S. S., *Everyman's Science*, December 2010–January 2011, vol. XLV, No. 5, pp. 262–268.
2. Sangode, S. J., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **101**, 986–987.

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