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CORRESPONDENCE

Scientific information

In their article on electronic databases, Rajashekar and Sreenivasa Ravi (*Curr. Sci.*, 1994, 66, 199–212) have given a comprehensive background of facilities available for reference to literature, particularly those covering published work on specialized subjects. These are of great help to gather information on a topic particularly when it is supplemented by ready availability of earlier issues of journals. In recent years many agencies have proliferated within the country and outside which aim to assist and save work of scientists in finding much needed information and minimizing efforts needed to go through journals by providing abstracts of selected items not necessarily confined to scientific publications, nor prepared by specialists in the subjects.

An allied topic was discussed by the Heads of CSIR Libraries at a meeting held in July 1993 in Bangalore. The proceedings have been reported in the 15 September 1993 issue of the *CSIR News*. The main recommendation that emerged was that the increasing cost of journals could be avoided by individual laboratories joining in an Information Consortium under INSDOC. It was stated that this would result in considerable savings as the required information would be routed through INSDOC. For this purpose, INSDOC will receive an annual grant of Rs 1 crore to acquire journals and disseminate information not only to CSIR laboratories but other interested organizations. On payment of an initial fee the subscriber can get copies of the content pages of 30 selected journals. Similarly, under the 'abstracts service' a subscriber can pay and get abstracts from a selected journal. These facilities can be further extended to obtaining photocopies of selected papers. These suggestions appear rather disturbing with far-reaching adverse consequences in the development of the country. It is not known if the directors of research laboratories were taken into confidence while formulating the above proposals. Already the grants for research are getting diminished. Added to this is the lop-sided allotment of research grants for different subjects which has been recently pointed out by a Committee of Parliament. Many institutions no longer provide separate grants for libraries so that the dent is all the more severe for buying journals. One reads a journal not merely to scan the titles. To an active scientist each paper has a bearing on the subject of his or her interest. All pages of the journal including advertisements contribute useful information so as to keep in touch with new developments. With the kind of varied items found in journals such as *Nature*, *Science*, etc., can the mere scanning of the contents page provide intelligent information? Can an organization have adequate facilities to meet every small request, and if so at what cost and time?

No doubt the cost of scientific journals and books, published in the country and abroad has gone up as also the postage. If India is to reach the forefront of world science and technology, drastic reduction of funds for acquiring first hand information by individual scientists seems a negative approach. If this trend becomes the rule in the year 2001 our relative position in the field of science and technology will be as it was in 1901. It is too cruel to imagine that after so much of investment in science education and setting up of excellent research laboratories, a sudden reversal is being envisaged. The proposal to restrict free availability of scientific literature seems to be in keeping with the recent trend to centralize benefits that should really permeate the society.

The fashion these days is to seek collaboration even on the simplest items, e.g. soaps, detergents, soups, ice-creams and so on. There was even a project for supplying salt to Australia through a manufacturing firm in US. With a vast trained man-power specializing in science, engineering and technology, and when there are already established firms manufacturing salt, one fails to understand this logic of involving a third party. India has the third place in terms of the number of science graduates in the world. Every year many international scientific meetings are held. The benefits that accrue through such activities should be directed to promote further research. One item that deserves priority is the free availability of scientific information without depending on a third disinterested source which involves delay, unnecessary correspondence and procedural hurdles.

As an influential organ for moulding scientific thought and approach, *Current Science* should take up this subject through its columns and call for a debate amongst scientists. There are many other ways to achieve economy in foreign exchange and internal resources. At best the laboratories could be directed to refrain from buying new avoidable journals for the next few years or restrain from stepping into new activities.

Another matter of concern is the recent amendment to Section 35(1) of the Income Tax Act. Hitherto scientific societies were exempted from payment of income tax. According to the amended rule a scientific society must sponsor research to continue getting this benefit. How many societies in India and abroad sponsor research? In any case the significant increase in govern-

ment revenue as a result can only do more harm than good to scientific research in the country

The above items are worthy of examination in *Current Science* in the larger interests of country's development.

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Computer professionals/ students in USA

We must congratulate Pankaj Jalote for his painstaking efforts in carrying out the survey of Indian computer professionals/students in USA about taking up employment in India (*Curr. Sci.*, 1994, 66, 265–267). The survey gives a broad, but quantified picture of this highly professional sector of Indian experts working in US. There are, however, several questions which arise in our minds in this connection and we would welcome a response from the author or other readers.

The author says that 'there is a substantial pool of highly trained professionals in USA which can be tapped by the computer industry to alleviate the current manpower shortage and to bring in new expertise. . . .' While we agree with the second part, viz. bringing in new expertise, we are not quite sure if the US returned manpower will contribute substantially to alleviate the current manpower shortage. Isn't it better to devise ways and means to retain the excellent manpower that we graduate from the IITs and IISc? And, what is this manpower shortage, may we ask? Whose statistics are these? Why is it that for a small job of a research assistant, there are more than 150 applications from people with B. Tech. or higher degrees (of course very few or none from IIT/IISc)? Where are these jobs for highly qualified computer professionals?

A survey like this should have been accompanied by an assessment of the status of the computer industry and the job situation for skilled computer professionals in US. Is the US computer industry going through a recession? Or, is it going through a boom? Will this survey remain valid if the status changes drastically?

Our third question concerns the framing of the questionnaire and credibility of the responses. With directed questions like 'Is it necessary for the offer to be made before your return?', no wonder 75% said 'Yes'. What about the other 25%? If an offer is not necessary for their return, why have they not returned so far? There are also several other, slightly uncomfortable questions that need to be asked if we really must carry out a frank appraisal of the situation.

Does an engineer become better qualified simply by virtue of his being in the US for a few years? Why should the Indian industry give special consideration to someone simply because he is a US-based professional, unless he is outstanding and really deserves it as a professional? Does the answer to this have something to do with our colonial past? We wonder!

Many of those responding (about 46%) have not yet got hold of a green card or a secure regular job. Even so, what fraction of them would actually take the plunge to return when the crucial moment for decision comes? A survey of past experience on this may show the fraction to be negligibly small!

Even from those who return, how many would not start thinking of going back to the US as soon as the opportunity presented itself? This may be difficult to answer, but perhaps looking at past experiences may again hold a clue!

The point that we are trying to make here is: how many of those going abroad are committed to the cause of their own country? We are sure everybody is, at least to some extent, in some sentimental and emotional way. But is the commitment strong enough to take a plunge without the need of holding out an extraordinary treatment for them? If so, who prevents them?

The statement that most large computer companies in India offer exciting work, career and travel opportunities is, to say the least, a loaded one. Has the author or someone else carried out a survey of this aspect? Is our industry really doing hi-tech work?

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Amber

The Editor's comments ('In this issue' p. 393, 25 March 1994) tempted me to read the article 'Fossils in Amber' by G. O. Poinar, Jr (*Current Science*, 1994, 66, 417). It was interesting and informative. This article is timely particularly as the film *Jurassic Park* is currently being exhibited in India. It is astonishing to know that the Amber of millions of years old preserves tissue and even DNA of embedded organisms.

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Nobel's centenaries and their significance

The topmost prize in the modern world is 'The Nobel Prize'. It originated from the will of Alfred Bernhard Nobel, the Swedish chemist and industrialist on 27 November 1895. The foundation to award the prize was subsequently established in 1900 and the awarding[1, 2] of prizes started from 1901. These events anticipate their centenary in the coming years, i.e. on 27 November 1995, the years 2000 and 2001 respectively. Interestingly, the will of Nobel states that prizes have to be awarded to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind.