

Revamping Olympiad movement

The article by Bakhtaver S. Mahajan on 'Biology Olympiad programme in India' (*Curr. Sci.*, 2000, **79**, 1058–1061) has given a succinct report on the Biology Olympiad programme in which India participated for the first time. It is heartening to note that each of the four students constituting the Indian team won a medal in the 11th International Biology Olympiad (IBO) held at Anatolya, Turkey. With thirty-eight countries participating in this event, to have secured silver and bronze medals is by all standards a creditable achievement. Following India's participation in Physics and Chemistry Olympiads, it was belatedly decided in February to participate in the IBO. There had not been sufficient time to organize it better. Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education (HBCSE) as the nodal agency, has conferred the best attention possible to annexe the coveted top positions. The toppers selected under the National Talent Scheme, twenty-five of them, were chosen for special training camps at HBCSE and the top four from this group made it to the IBO. The process of selection for subsequent participation, as outlined by Mahajan in his article, reflects objectivity and unbiased approach to selection; merit alone was the sole criterion.

Based on the experience of the previous group of participants, Mahajan in his article has provided valuable insights and suggestions for further improvement, and these cover areas such as curricular content, laboratory work and pedagogy to be adopted. Whether the country wins awards and medals in future is not the focus of the Olympiad, but it is the quality of the biology package we offer in our schools which now comes under scrutiny. There is no denial of the fact that course content and syllabi followed in our schools should be comparable with international standards and that our students should be

trained in laboratory techniques of classical and modern biology. It is the need of the hour that we have to expose them to the latest areas of development in biology.

The role of biology teachers in this regard is very crucial, since they mould the young minds and enthuse them with an avid thirst for the subject and motivate the best among them to soar high. Therefore, the teachers of biology should come together to remedy the situation and suggest ways of revamping the curriculum. The situation prevalent in the country is that the talented and enterprising among students do not seem inclined to choose careers in biology. Though this situation has not reached alarming proportions; it has to be critically studied. Instead of blaming any one factor for this malady, teaching of biology could be made more challenging, attractive and absorbing.

There is also a lack of awareness among students on the availability of brighter prospects and avenues in biology. In this regard parents also do not offer a supportive role. Rarely do students from schools get an opportunity to meet scientists or get exposed to research endeavours that are taking place in national laboratories. Ignorance which arises from this lack of communication is also commonly seen among the educational administrators of the schools. It often happens, as in this case, that even Principals and Headmasters of prestigious schools were hardly aware of the Olympiad scheme in biology. In a vast country such as ours, talents are not confined to the schools situated in the urban and metropolitan cities only. The urban–rural divide is so strong that vital information on national and international contests does not reach the schools of rural India. This stark imbalance has to be dealt with first. It is consoling to note that some state governments such as Tamil Nadu, through

their novel programme known as 'Young scientists programme' are striving to spot the most talented from among rural students (VIII and IX standard) and impart training to enhance their cognitive and learning abilities, together with a training in rigorous scientific methodology, during summer vacations. Efforts such as these, which are now operating in almost all districts of the state, have energized the talented students to pledge themselves to a committed academic and scientific pursuit in future. These programmes are organized and run by eminent professors of reputed colleges and the state government through its State Council for Science and Technology generously funds them. If these were to be continued till the school final, there would be lasting benefit because of sustained interest and commitment. There could also be a tie-up of this programme with National Science Examination in biology. This model evolved by Tamil Nadu in favour of the rural students could be emulated by other states, so that students from rural areas in the country are also drawn to the mainstream.

At a time when fundamental sciences are at a low ebb, the science Olympiads are bound to usher in a whiff of new enthusiasm. The first Biology Olympiad in which India participated has shown clearly that our students lack competence in laboratory skills. Above all, the teachers should be trained so as to empower students according to the changed exigencies. To make the student participation broad-based, there needs to be an effective way of communicating the information.

S. JOHN BRITTO

*Department of Botany,
St. Joseph's College,
Tiruchirapalli 620 002, India
e-mail: britto@sjctni.edu*