

UGC's UPE scheme

We are happy to note that the University Grants Commission (UGC) has taken an initiative for strengthening some universities which are reputed for their teaching and research. It is stipulated that such universities (termed as 'universities with potential for excellence' (UPE)) will be given substantial support, enabling them to attain higher levels of excellence in the next 5 to 10 years. In fact, the guidelines from the UGC in this regard are very clear: '... to treat the university as a unit which, if given additional help, will be able to perform significantly better than how it is performing at present'. It seems that the UGC has in mind an overall and balanced growth and qualitative improvement of the university system and not only bringing up newer structures which normally lead to lopsided growth of a system. The knowledge generation is still done in the basic disciplines in natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, including languages and literary studies and this should be certainly encouraged.

The UGC has already identified five universities under this scheme, viz. the University of Hyderabad, University of Pune, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jadavpur University and University of Madras. We note that these universities have several reputed departments (e.g. those recognized as Centres of Advanced Studies/Departments of Special Assistance, etc.). In our opinion, these are the departments which should be strongly supported and strengthened in their identified thrust areas. Even a very

active nucleus of excellence in an otherwise dormant discipline deserves support. One lacuna in our university system is that we have not been able to consolidate and expand the existing strengths. Therefore, the human resource development (in the form of doctoral/post-doctoral fellowships/contractual as well as visiting faculty appointments) should form an important part of the UPE schemes. It is felt that the 'core' disciplines should be enriched, since all interdisciplinary as well as newly emerging areas are rooted in the former. Since funds are limited, support to the areas fashionable at a given time (such as cancer research, superconductivity studies or IT) is unwarranted. The policy makers in our country have a habit of sidetracking existing institutions/departments and erecting new structures (easy way out!). The new structures built in these emerging areas, also collapse sooner or later, since they do not have the solid foundation that the core disciplines have.

Moreover, universities instead of becoming monolithic organizations, with isolated peaks of high academic performance, should cover a broad spectrum of excellence. We do not, of course, imply that every faculty member in every department should be supported under this scheme. Instead, all those areas having a proven acumen in research and teaching should benefit from this scheme. We hope that the proposals for support under UPE are evolved in a transparent manner in consultation with the active faculty of the

university. However, this is not always done. Thus, these selected universities will nurture and nourish all the intellectual/academic talent deprived of support and sustenance because of inadequate funds and facilities.

We are given to understand that at least in the case of two universities, substantial funding (typically 70%) of Rs 30 crores each has been given to one sub-branch of life sciences. The UGC is expected to take a final decision in this matter soon and we hope that they will pay attention to the points raised here. Then only will the Indian universities have a future.

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~ 74 ka Youngest Toba Tuff

This has reference to the research communication entitled 'An occurrence of ~ 74 ka Youngest Toba Tephra from the Western Continental Margin of India' by J. N. Pattan *et al.* (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 1322-1326). The authors claim that this is the first report on the occurrence of Youngest Toba ash from the Western Continental Margin of India (WCMI; p. 1324), which is far from true. The vol-

ume of Abstracts of the International Symposium on 'Geology and Geophysics of the Indian Ocean' (GIO-1996) organized by the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) in 1996 at Goa, contains an abstract (PFS32, p. 93), entitled 'Late Quaternary Tephra in the Arabian Sea, west of the Lakshadweep and its significance' by A. Raghavan Nambiar, P. V. Sukumaran and K. S.

Adiga, wherein the authors have recorded diffused tephra layers in several sediment cores from the Arabian Sea, west of Lakshadweep and have suggested the Youngest Toba Tuff (YTT) as the possible source for the Arabian Sea Tephra (AST).

As three of the authors of the present paper are from the NIO, which organized the symposium on geology and

geophysics of the Indian Ocean, I am forced to believe that, not mentioning about the previous reference on the subject is not a simple omission, but a deliberate attempt by the authors in claiming the credit for the discovery and first report on the occurrence of YTT in WCMI. During the above-cited symposium, I had a fruitful discussion with the first author (J. N. Pattan) of the present paper on the AST, the details of which were presented in the poster session of the symposium.

Subsequent to this, in 1998, a paper entitled 'Characterization of Late Pleistocene Tephra in deep sea sediments of the Arabian Sea' by A. R. Nambiar and

P. V. Sukumaran was submitted to *Current Science* for publication. We had also followed the same methodology as that of the present authors and correlated the AST with the YTT. But to our dismay, the paper was rejected in the light of the comments – correlation with Toba eruption is too tenuous and oxygen isotope stratigraphy to be established for firm correlation – made by the referee.

Was it fair on the part of *Current Science* to deny the publication of important geological information on the basis of one referee's remarks and to later publish similar data from the same area after a period of three years?

May I take this opportunity to request the editor, *Current Science* to get the manuscripts reviewed by at least two referees/experts in the field before any paper is rejected, so that no valuable information is lost without finding a place for print.

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Pan masala: Adverse ecological consequences

Nigam *et al.* (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 1306–1309) have established carcinogenic potential of pan masala. Apart from this, the widespread use of this product has other serious repercussions on the environment, as one of the ingredients is catechol (Katha) obtained from

the tree *Acacia catechu*. Illicit felling of these trees from the forests in the catchment areas of the feeder lakes of Mumbai, in course of time, would affect the water supply to the metropolis as deforestation accelerates siltation.

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NEWS

Rajagopala Chidambaram takes over as Chairman of TIFAC

Rajagopala Chidambaram, who helped to establish research groups in the area of high-pressure physics and neutron crystallography at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai and who is known as the 'architect of Pokhran-II', now assumes charge of Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC), New Delhi, as its Chairman. Chidambaram, former Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission and Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) is an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Science, Banga-

lore, who later went on to become the Director of BARC in 1990.

Chidambaram, on taking over the mantle of Chairmanship, had an opportunity to discuss and review TIFAC's activities and meet the team at TIFAC. He appreciated the efforts of TIFAC in the three successful missions – sugar technology, fly ash and advanced composites, commending the Home-Grown Technology Programme, the Patent Facilitating Centre, Techno Market Survey Reports and the Vision 2020.

Chidambaram replaces A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, who served as the Chairman of

TIFAC during 1993–2001, being instrumental in preparing the Technology Vision 2020 reports. TIFAC now embarks on a major initiative to realize the Vision 2020 into action and would foray into projects concerning textile machinery, road construction machinery, agriculture and alternative energy technologies.

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