

## 97th Indian Science Congress\*

The 97th Indian Science Congress was held recently at the University of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram. An annual event, the Congress brings together almost 6000 of the 20,000 members of the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA) from different parts of the country and outside for a few days in early January. This is the third year that the Children's Science Congress was held in parallel with the main event. That too has attracted close to 3500 children from different parts of the country, most of whom were selected by special competitions to present their projects. An otherwise run down and relatively underfunded campus was given a new lease of life. Organizing an event of this scale is not easy and it was the joint effort of the University of Kerala and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), which has a large presence in the city and has pulled this off with considerable panache.

The ISCA was started by two British chemists working in India, P. S. MacMahon and J. L. Simonsen with the aims of advancing, promoting and popularizing science in India, publishing journals and proceedings, and to hold an annual meeting along the lines of the British Association of Advancement of Science. The first Congress was held during 15–17 January 1914 in the Asiatic Society building in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). A total of 105 scientists from India and abroad attended this meeting and 35 papers were presented in six sections – botany, chemistry, ethnography, geology, physics and zoology. Over the years, the Association has grown and undergone some notable changes. Now there are 14 sections ranging from agriculture and forestry sciences to new biology, and information and communication science and technology. Inviting foreign scientists to attend the Congress is now a routine affair with the Nobel Laureates Roger

Tsien and John C. Mather attending this one. Additionally the ISCA has established ties with several foreign science academies. There is now a focal theme to each Congress – this year's being 'Science and technology challenges of 21st century – national perspective'. There is also an attempt to translate the recommendations made by ISCA into policy during the course of the following year.

In the 97th Congress there were discussions in the areas of space, biomedical research, climate and the environment, science communication, nanotechnology and education, biotechnology, and a focused look at the state of Indian universities. These were in addition to the papers and posters presented at the various sections. The children's posters and projects were exhibited at a special venue and they had a separate tent to conduct their activities. Rukkaiya Tabasum, a student of class 8th from a government school in Jharkhand explained very clearly in Hindi, her project on finding out the reasons behind the death of the vulture population in India especially in her state. Her findings pointed to the overuse of pesticides like DDT and the drug diclofenac used on cattle that remains in carcasses vultures feed on. While Rukkaiya was not clear about what she wanted to do when she grew up, her passion for the environment was clear. Many children came from remote parts of the country and belonged to ordinary backgrounds. They were taken on a trip to view a rocket launch at the Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching station and also visit the Space Museum in addition to the Pride of India exhibition set up at the conference venue itself. It was clear that the children thought that this was a very good trip and they also managed to make friends from other parts of the country.

What are the implications of holding a conference of this magnitude in a small town like Thiruvananthapuram? Will this lead to a revival of the university here? From the discussions on the problems

and prospects facing Indian universities that seems difficult. At present 80% of the funds from the government are channeled to the elite IITs, IISc and the central universities leaving the state universities and colleges that cater to about 80% of the population in an impoverished state. This added to poor teaching staff, lack of infrastructure, rigid and ancient Acts and Statutes governing universities, and the resistance to change by the academic and administrative staff of these institutions only complicates matters. A. Jayakrishnan (Vice Chancellor, Kerala University) explained that a new Materials Research Center was being planned along with ISRO on the campus of the university while the Kerala Government has announced the start of the Erudite Program aimed to bring Nobel Laureates and academics of a similar calibre to the university for a few weeks to interact with faculty and students. While the panelists comprising vice chancellors had not given much thought to the issue of women in universities especially in senior positions, the outgoing General Secretary of the ISCA, Ashok Saxena announced that a woman, Geeta Bali (Vice Chancellor, Women's University, Bijapur) has been elected President of the ISCA for the year 2012. They were also discussing the idea of holding a women scientists' conference along with the main conference in future.

The long lines queuing up to get inside the Pride of India exhibition is testimony to the fact that the ordinary citizens of Thiruvananthapuram will remember the 97th Science Congress under the Presidentship of G. Madhavan Nair (former Chairperson, ISRO) for a long time to come. The vision of MacMahon and Simonsen has come a long way.

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