

INDIAN SCIENCE CONGRESS: SOME REFLECTIONS

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1. Historical background

Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA) is responsible for organizing Indian Science Congress every year on 3-8 January. Like many other developments, ISCA is a British legacy. It owes its origin to the foresight of two British chemists, Professors J L Simonsen and P S Macmohan. The objectives of ISCA were to advance and promote the cause of science in India by holding an annual Congress of scientific workers in India. The first Science Congress was held from January 15-17, 1917 at the premises of the Asiatic Society, Kolkatta. It was presided over by Sir Asutosh Mukerjee, the then Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University; the total number of participants was 105 and 35 papers were presented in 6 different sections, namely, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Zoology, Geology and Ethnography.

ISCA set up its office in Kolkatta, which was considered to be the hub of Indian science. Research activity during nineteenth century India was almost non-existent in Indian universities. Asiatic Society of Bengal was the first registered society to start research in the field of ethnography and linguistics. Dr Mohindar Lal Sircar founded Indian Association for Cultivation of Science (IACS) in Kolkatta, a purely private enterprise, to promote scientific research in India. It was in the laboratory of IACS; Sir CV RAMAN carried out his investigations on Raman Effect and got the Nobel Prize for India.

Indian Science Congress (ISC) has been holding its annual sessions regularly, without any break since its inception in 1914. The 34th session of ISC was held in Delhi in January 1947

and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, chaired it as its General President. Since then, it has become a tradition that Indian Prime Ministers have been chairing Science Congress sessions without fail. ISC has celebrated its Silver, Golden, Diamond and Platinum Jubilees during 1938, 1963, 1973 and 1988, respectively. ISC activities have increased manifold over the years. Since 1976, focal theme has been introduced for each ISC. From the modest beginning with 105 members in 1914, ISCA can boast of more than 15,000 members and the number of papers presented has risen to more than 1000. In terms of delegates and multifarious activities involved Indian Science Congress is termed a 'mela' in popular parlance. It is funded by Department of Science & Technology, Govt of India and the total expenditure to the state exchequer has augmented to the tune of Rs.50 crores.

2. Critical Evaluation of Indian Science Congress (ISC)

My association with Indian Science Congress is two decades old in the capacity of a life member of ISCA. I have attended half a dozen sessions of ISCA and reported my impressions in a number of critical articles published in current Science from Bangalore. In my article 'The fun of holding Indian Science Congress Melas' (Current Science, 10 May 2000, p.1052), I have recommended that ISC be organized as a Vigyan mela for the popularization of science and technology amongst Indian masses. We should have no pretensions that ISC serves any other purpose for promotion of science and technology. Some others have found similarities between Indian Science Congress and the Kumbh mela at Prayag.

I consider 87th session of ISC held at Pune as the role model for future ISC sessions. R A Mashelkar, Director General of CSIR and General President of ISCA, gave a clarion call to Indian scientists and planners to adopt a new 'panchsheel', a five point programme in the new millenium comprising child-centred education, women-centred family, human centred

development, knowledge-centred society, all leading to an 'Innovative India'. The blue print prepared by RA Mashelkar should be the guiding principle for selecting focal themes of future ISCs. Another special feature of Pune Science Congress was holding of National Children's Science Congress at the same venue for school children. There was so much enthusiasm to participate in Children's science congress that it led to gate crashing and chaos on all the days of Science Congress.

The Prime Minister of India is always invited to inaugurate the Indian Science Congress. I feel we should stop this ritual as it leads to lot of harassment of delegates by the security agencies and puts unnecessary burden on state exchequer, without serving any useful purpose. During 83rd session of ISC held at Patiala in 1996, Punjabi University had to spend Rs. 2 crores on security arrangements but PM failed to land at the venue due to intense fog. The presence of PM invites local politicians and bureaucrats of all hues and scientists also indulge in politics to gain cheap popularity. In consider it as a bane of Indian science.

The Science Congress does not cater to the needs of young researchers or junior scientists. Old guard of Indian science dominates it. The average age of science congress delegates is over 60 years and the active researchers are almost missing from the scene. Despite introduction of young scientists programme during ISCA sessions, their number remains almost negligible. Children Science Congress is limited to age group of 10-17 years and ISCA sessions attract scientists in the age group of 60-80 years. Hence the bulk of young Indian Scientists are not represented at ISCA sessions. I feel we should encourage participation of young researchers by putting them on scientific committees of ISCA.

In my view ISCA sessions should be held after every 4 years to review the status of Indian science and technology. The scientific papers should be peer reviewed and invited on the relevant theme only. Generally, any paper on any theme is acceptable at ISCA sessions.

During 82nd session held at Kolkatta in 1995, I noticed a paper with the title 'Subash Chandra Bose versus Mahatma Gandhi' listed in the proceedings of ISCA! That speaks volumes about failure of peer-review and mis-management of ISCA sessions.

The 94th Indian Science Congress will be hosted by Annamalai University, Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu, during 3-7 Jan. 2007 on the focal theme 'Planet Earth'. It is really an enigma to evaluate the contribution of ISC to promotion of science and technology in India. Despite holding regular ISC sessions since 1914, Indian science scenario is rather dismal. The number of students opting for science subjects is falling, the quality of research papers published by Indian scientists has been on the decline despite the fact that funding for science has increased manifold during the last two decades. For sake of comparison, our neighbours, for example, China, South Korea and Japan, have done extremely well in the field of science and technology during the same period. Indian scientists have done well in mission-mode projects, namely, Space and Atomic Energy, but failed to create a niche at global level in basic sciences.