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CORRESPONDENCE

Decline in research in Indian universities

Sushil Kumar *et al.* (*Curr. Sci.* 1998, 74, 20–24) have made a shocking revelation about the decline in the frontline research activity in the Indian universities. I have highlighted the dismal state of affairs in my article 'What ails Indian Science' submitted to *Current Science*. Being associated with CSIR during 1990–95 as an expert on Physics panel for selection of SRFs and RAs, I fully endorse the conclusions drawn by the authors based on the available database.

It is surprising that while the number of NET-qualified candidates has increased steadily by 5.2% in 1995–96 over the figures of 1991–92, there is an overall steady decline in the number of candidates opting for research career in science and technology. The figures are mind-boggling, i.e. 54% drop in interest of post-graduates for doctoral studies in physical sciences and 28% in medicine and engineering during the same period. The worst hit is the discipline of earth sciences where the decline of interest is sudden and frightening.

The authors have analysed the reasons for the decline of interest in scientific research among the young graduates in

India due to (i) scarcity of job opportunities in the universities and research organizations, and (ii) liberalization of Indian economy, creating more avenues of employment in trade and marketing sectors.

What strategies should be evolved to stem this decline? The authors leave this question open for discussion. I wonder why this problem has not rattled the brains of big-wigs of Indian science! Abdus Salam, Nobel Laureate, has analysed this problem of India and Pakistan in his book *Ideals and Realities* (World Scientific, 1995) as follows: (i) The very poor quality of science education at all levels, (ii) higher grades and better facilities for civil service (IAS) bureaucrats, and (iii) the tradition of building advanced centres of research outside the university system.

In our own university, during the last fifteen years the strength of science faculty has increased three-fold but the per capita research output has dropped to one third of its level in 1982. The quality of research has deteriorated as there are no incentives for research. Due to sudden expansion in the university,

the number of science departments has grown from 4 to 16 during the last 15 years, the infrastructure facilities have decreased drastically. There is a wide disparity between the grades of research staff and the teaching faculty. A NET-qualified lecturer gets nearly three times more salary than a JRF with the same qualification. Hence most of the NET-qualified candidates opt out of the research stream. All our toppers in M Sc either compete for the most coveted IAS examination or seek admission to MBA or MCA professional courses for better job opportunities.

In my view, this down-hill slide will continue in future and the 'Vision India 2020' projected by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam (*The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 23 February 1998) will get distorted unless our science planners review the situation in light of the facts presented by the authors.

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NEWS

Science Congress 1997–98

Come January, scientists of India assemble for the annual meet of the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA), never mind if some of them decry it and even suggest scrapping it. Over the years, the Congress has acquired the unenviable reputation of a 'mela', and it was time someone took it upon oneself to regain

for the Congress its original purpose of a meeting where current developments are discussed in an interdisciplinary setting and a forum is provided for evolving policy directions. In all fairness, I must say that P. Rama Rao, the general president of ISCA, has tried his best to do just that.

The 85th session of ISCA, held at the sprawling campus of the Osmania University, Hyderabad, during 3–7 January was attended by about 3700 Indian and 75 foreign delegates. Among those attending the congress were an amateur inventor from Pune who seems to have met a number of scientific celebrities, a