

A flop show

Highlights of 87th Indian Science Congress at Pune

by H S Virk

THE 87th session of Indian Science Congress was held at Pune from 3 to 7 January this year. It was hosted by University of Poona, Bharati Vidyapeeth and National Chemical Laboratory at Pune. Dr RA Mashelkar, Director General CSIR was the chief architect and planner of this new millennium science congress in the capacity of General President. He gave a clarion call to the nation to adopt a new path of *Panchsheel* comprising child-centered education, woman-centered family, human-centered development, knowledge-centered society, all leading to an "Innovative India". Let us hope our national and state governments adopt his *panchsutra panchsheel* in right earnest.

Indian Science Congress is generally dubbed as a 'Bengali Mela' and it is true to some extent due to historical reasons. But 87th session of Indian Science Congress turned out to be a 'Marathi Mela' in its real import. University of Poona, the venue of the science congress, turned out to be a vast sea of humanity, creating all sorts of chaos for the delegates and the general public. It took me 2 hours from the university gate to main pandal where the inaugural session was held on 3 January. Normally, I miss the inaugural sessions due to obvious reasons but this time I wanted to have this life long experience. University campus was turned into a virtual fortress because Indian Prime Minister was the Chief Guest at the opening session. After registration, all the

delegates were led through security checks at several entry points to the main pandal. Unfortunately, I carried my photo-camera in the bag, so I was turned out of the pandal unceremoniously and all my pleadings fell on the deaf ears of the security men. By the time I returned, the gates were closed due to security reasons and my dream of attending the inaugural session remained unfulfilled! The other delegates also experienced similar problems. I am of the opinion, we must get rid of this ritual that each and every Indian Science Congress is to be chaired by the Prime Minister. I causes unnecessary harassment to the general public of the city in general and the delegates in particular. In addition, it costs nearly a crore of rupees to make all arrangements with hardly any benefit to the delegates. The sooner we discard this tradition in the 21st century the better it will be for the Indian science congress.

Pune Science Congress was a high-tech affair. From the registration desk to the main pandal and the Science exhibition, information technology was introduced in full swing. But instead of efficiency and order, it created more delays and hence chaos everywhere. Computerization is desirable if it creates efficiency but most of the delegates felt harassed due to manifold checks and controls with hassles. But the hosts, especially the students of the University, were polite and helpful and the success of the Congress is due to their tireless efforts.

As usual, the Science Congress

turned out to be a rigmarole for delegates to locate venues of academic sessions in various subjects and forums. Those who were lucky to find venues felt embarrassed to find almost vacant rooms. On 5 January, I participated in panel discussion "State of Science Education in India as we step into the next Millennium". Professor A W Joshi, Head Physics Deptt of Pune University, a dedicated teacher and educationist of repute, was acting as Convener. Surprisingly, there were only 6 participants, 5 speakers and myself as discussant cum listener. The situation was not much different in other forum meetings. The much publicized ISCA Young Scientists Award presentations failed to attract senior scientists and delegates in good numbers. Only the young research scientists and judges were present.

The positive aspect of Indian Science Congress must also be highlighted. Children Science Congress was a big success and it was organised in the Chadrashekhkar Auditorium of IUCAA on 6 January. The forum "Science for School Students" did extremely well by organising popular science lectures of eminent scientists and arranging science exhibitions. The auditorium was overflowing with young school students and many thousands were kept waiting outside, due to limited seating arrangements. I met my old friend Prof H Y Mohan Ram of Delhi University who delivered an interesting lecture on 5

January on Plant Life. He motivated his young audience to floor participation.

The pandal which attracted unimaginable crowds on all the days of the Science Congress was the venue of Science and Technology Exhibition. The space allotted to exhibitors could not cope with the big rush mostly consisting of young school students and the general public. It was a pathetic sight to see young kids for hours in the queue waiting for their turn. I wish the organisers could have made better arrangements. The enthusiasm of general public was overwhelming to visit the Exhibition on Kargil put up by the Ministry of Defence. It was also a publicity stunt by the Government and it led to gate crashing of Science Congress venue.

The Cultural programmes were well organised in the evenings in the main pandal. "New Millennium Lectures" attracted a good audience and the one delivered by Jean Marie Lehn, Nobel Laureate from France, was adjudged the best of all by all and sundry. Prof E C G Sudarshan, an eminent Indian physicist, who missed the Nobel Prize by a narrow margin (some say bad luck and others call it bad politics), appreciated Lehn's lecture in the words, "It is a poetry in science". I witnessed the performance of some of our 'Sai Babas' of Indian Science, namely, Prof M G K Menon, Yash Pal and M S Swaminathan, was no match with Lehn and other Nobel Laureates who spoke.

Last but not the least, the so called "Food Village" proved to be a flop show.

IN a fax message, Dr Najeem Zaheer Khan, Secretary of Hamdard University Teachers Association, has informed that Mr Seraj Hussain has joined as new Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Hamdard to succeed Prof Allaiddin Ahmad whose term expired on 31 January last and that Jamia Hamdard University Teachers' Association has welcomed the new VC assuring him of full cooperation and expressed the hope "his appointment will usher the University into a new era of academic excellence and bring peace as well as happiness on the campus."

Mr Seraj Hussain is a young IAS officer of 1979 batch from UP Cadre and has served in various capacities. He is an MBA from a British University. ☐