

Indian Science Congress *melas*

The VIP syndrome referred to by Unnikrishnan is a legacy of the British Raj and definitely violates the democratic norms of our society. I also agree with Subir Sen² that the coterie of leaders in the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA) are responsible for creating this mess.

Here are some suggestions to improve science congress sessions:

(i) The science congress could be held once every four years, instead of every

year. This will save huge expenditure to the exchequer.

(ii) The ritual of inviting the Prime Minister and other politicians to inaugurate the science congress should be done away with.

(iii) Nobody should hold office in ISCA for more than five years at a stretch.

(iv) All papers submitted to the science congress should be subjected to peer review. This will raise the general standard and reduce the number of non-serious delegates to the congress.

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1. Unnikrishnan, M. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **84**, 484.
 2. Sen Subir, K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **84**, 969–970.
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NEWS

Linking botanic gardens of India

Set up in 1786, Kolkata's Botanic Garden, is on the tourist map. Botanic gardens such as these with a collection of 12,000 living plants and two and a half million dried species are central to the conservation theme, helping not only to save rare plants species from extinction but also lending their hand to eco-education, else a place to relax and picnic amidst the greenery. A conservation effort of medicinal and aromatic plants has also been initiated by none other than the President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam in the Moghul Gardens adjoining his Presidential palace, reiterating the importance of preservation of our indigenous plant species. Worldwide about 100,000 plants are fast disappearing from our sight. In India with about 18,000 plant varieties, 10% of the flora faces extinction.

Botanic gardens can contribute to botanical research by growing both native and

threatened species, providing habitats for wild plant varieties for their preservation, maintaining plant, seed, tissue and gene repositories and can also educate the public by creating an awareness of the importance of plants.

India is dotted with about 140 botanic gardens or similar areas for maintaining plant varieties. Mark Richardson, Botanic Garden Conservation International (BGCI), UK when asked what he felt about the Indian botanic gardens, which he had recently visited, said 'the botanic gardens of India seem to have no focus nor do they have a clear programme'. Providing this focus appears to be the *raison d'être* behind the recent launch of the 'Investing in nature (IIN)' programme in India for the conservation of threatened plants of India and establishment of an Indian Botanic Garden Network.

Launched on 6 June 2003, the IIN-India segment of the project is expected to be over by 2006, with National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow as the co-ordinating institution. Lofty initiatives are part of the claims of the project, which includes developing a database, network, website, eco-education and training activities and establishing modern methods of conservation strategies. A point worth mentioning and which may need close monitoring is that according to official sources the project 'does not involve exchange of plant material'. Funding for the whole project worldwide for eleven countries is about fifty million US dollars.

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