

CURRENT SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

Popularizing science

Every year, National Science Day is celebrated on February 28, marking the anniversary of the announcement of the discovery of the Raman effect in 1928. Customarily, public lectures are held all over the country on scientific topics, ostensibly with the aim of promoting a greater awareness of science amongst the general public. Indeed, in recent times, popularization of science has burgeoned into a flourishing (although heavily subsidized) industry. The science departments of the central government and the Science Academies vie with one another in promoting new schemes for the wide dissemination of science; some of which have proved reasonably popular. The state governments are not far behind. Fledgling state academies and state awards for popularization abound everywhere. The ever ubiquitous committees have sprouted all over; although generally moribund, these groups surface every year in February. Towards whom is this popularization fervour directed? The answers vary. To one school of thought, the targets of these popularization drives are the lay public, young and old in a continuing effort to spread 'scientific temper' (a phrase immortalized by Jawaharlal Nehru), amongst a populace beset by ancient traditions and superstitions. These drives, largely restricted to urban centres, have had a limited general impact. To a second school, the targets of popularization are entirely different. This group believes that diminishing interest in science as a career is resulting in a drying up of talent entering institutions of higher education. Postgraduate courses in the universities and Ph D programmes at our most prestigious institutions appear to have difficulty in maintaining even

minimum standards for entry, with serious consequences for our research enterprise. The appropriate targets of science promotion drives according to this alternative school of thought would be high school and college students, in an attempt to stem the flow away from science courses.

Should there not be a third target – politicians, bureaucrats and industrialists who need to be enlisted in the cause of developing science in India into a flourishing and useful activity? The last few years have seen frozen budgets for scientific institutions, diminishing support for research projects in what appears to be a concerted move to divest government of its responsibility towards higher education in science and basic research. Ironically, this year Science Day coincided with the presentation of the budget (albeit interim) in Parliament. Who will lobby for the cause of science in India, wherever it matters? Should not the Academies and scientific societies focus on the deteriorating infrastructure for the practice of science and its dissemination? The infrequency of notable Indian contributions to world science, the failure of many large projects to deliver tangible results and the absence of credible peer review within the scientific community have undoubtedly influenced public perception. Reducing support for science will hardly solve the problems that we face. There is no doubt that science needs popularization. Unfortunately there seem to be a multiplicity of targets, while both gunners and ammunition appear limited.

P. Balaram