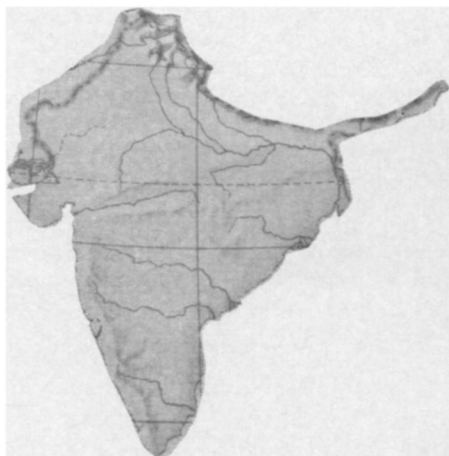


## LETTER FROM BOMBAY



# Chaotic congress

India's annual science convention has grown too big for comfort

by S. K. Ghaswala

The Indian Science Congress, an annual event, is the largest conglomeration of scientists, technologists and pseudo-scientists to assemble anywhere on the sub-continent.

The genesis of the meeting can be traced to Profs. P. S. McMahon of Canning College, Lucknow, and J. L. Simensen of Presidency College, Madras, who in 1910 conceived of forming an association of scientists to exchange views and research results. Four years later the first Sessions—as it was called—was held in the Royal Asiatic Society headquarters in Bengal, with Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, vice chancellor of Calcutta University, as president. At the first meeting, 105 scientists from all over the country met to read 35 papers in six different sections.

Since then, the congress has been held regularly every year in one or another part of the country. The 56th Sessions this year was held at the Indian Institute of Technology, Powai, about 15 miles north of Bombay.

Over 2,500 delegates attended, including 30 from foreign scientific societies. Some 1,500 papers were contributed, of which more than 500 were read in person. The original six sections have expanded to 13.

While the structure and scope of the congress has increased during half a century, there is a general feeling that the meeting has reached its breaking point and tends to become chaotic and ineffective in its scientific output.

The congress did provide the sounding board for some stimulating thinking from a few outspoken senior scientists. Prof. T. R. Seshadri, the outgoing president of the prestigious National Institute of Sciences of India, warned the Government against entrusting to any single scientist the privilege of advising it.

Without specifically referring to any individuals (such as the late Dr. S. S. Bhatnagar, the first director of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, and the late Dr. Homi Bhabha, India's first Atomic Energy Commission chairman) who have advised successive Prime Ministers in the shaping of India's scientific policy, Dr. Seshadri said, "no single individual should come to enjoy the privilege of advising the Government and taking decisions of importance merely by virtue of his position."

Many scientists participating in the Government's decision-making machinery are taking responsibilities they are not up to, Dr. Seshadri said. He recom-

mends an independent advisory body of scientists to guide the Government on scientific matters—a proposal he feels is unlikely to be accepted.

The congress also held meetings on the nation's efforts to raise food production, with 200 papers submitted on agricultural problems. A forum on Science and Economic Development focused on the upheavals caused by changing conditions in rural areas and pressures from population increase.

On the technical side, Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, chairman of India's Atomic Energy Commission, reported on research at the Physical Research Laboratory at Ahmedabad University on the measurement of the solar wind (SN: 8/31, p. 216), and barium cloud experiments (SN: 12/28, p. 643) launched from the Equatorial Launching Site in South India to study magnetic fields in space.

Despite the spotty excitement of a few sessions, the general consensus among scientists attending the congress is that it has lost its scientific rigor and virtually eroded the seriousness of scientific discussions.

The time is short, the participants excessive and the subjects to be discussed far too many. The net result is ineffectual, since the congress rarely has its advice taken by the Government either in scientific policy or in planning scientific research and education.

And the agenda doesn't include such topics as cheap housing, manpower utilization in engineering, the effects of automation on abundant labor, financing of space and nuclear research and preventing the brain drain.

Live contacts between the public, the press and the scientists have been singularly missing. At present the press coverage is largely restricted to the inaugural address given by a political or public figure, although a beginning was made in public discussion of the congress at the latest Sessions. A forum on public understanding of science, was organized and group discussions on the problems of science communications with the public were held with members of the Science Writers Association of India.

One improvement would be for the president of the Sessions to speak not only on his specialty—this year's president, Dr. A. C. Joshi of Banaras Hindu University, gave a stirring address on current problems in botany—but to try and summarize the sense of the meeting. But for this to be possible, the conclave will have to be streamlined.