Committee Work In Lieu Of Science

By J.V. NARLIKAR

IN the seventies I had occasion to call on a distinguished scientist who was the director of a research institute. While I was waiting for my appointment in his outer office, I noticed on his PA's desk what seemed a veritable tree of rubber stamps. I asked the PA what this contraption was. He explained that the different rubber stamps related to the many different offices his boss was holding and the stamp under his name would signify the capacity under which his correspondence was conducted. The wealth of fruit hanging from this particular tree explained why my appointment had been difficult to obtain, for the director was rarely available at his institute. In fact, as I subsequently discovered, his deputies on many occasions could catch hold of him for administrative decisions only at the airport.

One can understand that in the early days of our independence there were very few front-ranking scientists available to give shape to the newly-emerging scientific infrastructure and so these few Bhabhas and Bhatnagars had to shoulder many responsibilities. The natural expectation was that as our scientific manpower grew there would be more brains available to bear the burden. As the above incident shows, however, the situation had worsened during the quarter century that followed and is no better as we approach the half-century mark. The scientific infrastructure has grown steadily and remorselessly as per Parkinson's law and the burden still rests on the shoulders of comparatively few.

Research Quality

Let me hasten to add that I make a distinction here between the R & D part of science and the bureaucratic structure for its management. A nation's advancement in science and technology is judged not by the enormity of its bureaucratic structure but by the quality and span of its research and development. It is undeniable that the growth of the latter demands some growth of the former but there is cause for worry if the former overtakes and overshadows the latter.

Take an example illustrating this last point. A leading science academy awards medals and prizes in recognition of distinguished scientific work. The awardee is invited to deliver a lecture. There have been occasions when the turn-out of scientists for these lectures was very poor and to avoid embarrassment the academy had to ask its staff to fill the empty seats. In contrast the campus of the academy is full of scientists from all over India when many of its committees meet in April to discharge their business. The reason is that for the administrative work of its committees the academy is able to pay the travel expenses of its members but it cannot do so for the award lectures. Thus, ironically, scientists flock to their premier academy to discharge administrative matters but are noticeably absent when there are lectures on science. To some extent the academy has solved this problem by arranging the award lectures in scientific institutions in the region where the awardee resides.

Advisory Council

In the late eighties the science advisory council to the Prime Minister had worried about the need for planning for science and technology and had discussed ways of streamlining the S & T infrastructure. The exercise, however, has not been carried further.

There are many temptations and compulsions which draw a scientist of any merit away from his or her laboratory or teaching. Let us look at some of them: the directorship of an institution or vice-chancellorship of a university, an executive or advisory role in a government department, membership of governing boards or management committees of other institutions or universities, etc. Then there are the national academies. Whereas most countries have one, we have three, all with their councils and strings of committees. There are peer review committees set up by the funding agencies, selection committees for posts, examiners' committees and what not. Every year countless conferences and symposia are held all over the country, which require national and scientific organisation committees. The list goes on and on.

Of course, these commitments take the scientist away from his or her academic work on a Bharat Darshan. Only the die-hard traveller and the tourism department will agree that travelling is fun. You have to brave the uncertain airline schedules and worry about their safety factor. Trains are no different, with unpredictable delays, stone-throwing and accidents (including driverless roller-coaster rides). But the surprising fact is that so many of our top scientists are always on the move. The question is: Is this the best use of their time, talent and training?

Other Uses

For what it is worth, my answer is a resounding "no," at least in my own respect. I have other uses for my three "T"s which, I believe, may be more useful to others and more satisfying to me. I agree that it is not easy to refuse invitations to serve on committees and I cannot boast of a hundred per cent success. My performance is not more than 95 per cent. That is, I am serving on five per cent of all the bodies that have asked me to be associated with them. My defence for avoiding committees rests on three counts. First, I am able to devote more time to my own institution and to my own family. Secondly, as has been rightly said, committees waste hours in arriving at their minutes; I can devote those hours to more creative and intellectual pursuits. And finally, by avoiding the rigours and frustrations of travel, I continue to remain mentally and physically healthy.

Those of my scientist colleagues who serve on so many bodies may well have valid reasons for being so associated. The reasons usually are one of the following: My position *ex-officio* requires my presence /If I don't participate, then the younger people in my area will suffer by neglect/The subject is passing through a critical phase and as one of the leaders in the field it is my duty to influence the decision-making/In the interest of future government support for science I must serve on the (relevant) government body/If the (academy) does not have active scientists (like me) serving on its committees it will be a disaster/... and so on and so forth.

Not Denying

I am not denying the validity of any of these reasons or their compulsions as felt by the individual scientist. Nevertheless I cannot resist posing a few questions. If India has the third largest scientific manpower, then why are so many activities being off-loaded on to the shoulders of so few? Can we not streamline science management and have it shared by a larger cross-section of the community? If even the political parties are talking about the principle of "one person, one post" in their hierarchies, can't scientists think of a "one person, one hat" principle? Must a distinguished scientist feel compelled to accept more assignments than he or she can do justice to? Or, is our value judgment such that a scientist does not feel important unless associated with too many managerial assignments?

Having been critical of the present system, let me make a constructive and practical suggestion. In this age of fast communication, committees do not have to meet face to face under one roof. An exchange of views can take place and executive decisions reached faster and cheaper by electronic mail. It is possible for scientists to "talk" via e-mail. Video- conferencing is also on the horizon. Let us save time and money by switching to these modes. By expanding the e-mail network we can involve more scientists in the decision-making process and lighten the burden of the select few.

While the present mode continues, however, let me bask in masterly inactivity on the committees front. Which is why whenever I receive a message that one of those few meetings that I am forced to attend has been cancelled, I go back to my childhood and recall the joy felt whenever a school holiday was unexpectedly announced.