

Indian Science Exhibit Sits in Limbo

Efforts are under way to locate and reassemble a scientific exhibit from India—dismantled by government agents before the public ever saw it—as a central feature of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, to be held in Vienna next August.

The exhibit, which had been sitting in a locked gallery in New Delhi for 14 months, was surreptitiously carted off one night last summer at the behest of its original sponsor, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a quasi-governmental body. It was apparently the victim of the shifting political situation resulting from the election of prime minister Morarji Desai, who defeated Indira Gandhi in March 1977. Conservative politicians evidently took offense at the tone of the exhibit, which challenged beliefs in astrology, "godmen," and traditional homeopathic medicine.

The only information about the exhibit available to *Science* is a sheaf of material sent to an American friend by P. M. Bhargava, who planned and oversaw construction of the exhibit. Bhargava is an internationally known scientist who heads the Center for Cellular and Molecular Biology at the regional research laboratory in Hyderabad.

The exhibit, designed to present "the method of science" to the general public, originated as a result of a suggestion by the then-director of NCERT to Bhargava. Largely financed by the Vazir Sultan Tobacco Co. and NCERT, it was a multimedia show featuring the efforts of scientists, engineers, artists, film-makers, and musicians. The exhibit cost about 300,000 rupees to put together but its market value outside India was estimated at \$1 million. Constructed in Hyderabad, it was moved to New Delhi in early 1977, where it was set up in a gallery of the Bal Bhavan Society, an organization devoted to studies and welfare of children. It was supposed to be opened by Prime Minister Gandhi but this became infeasible when she lost the election.

Leadership of NCERT subsequently changed and that agency withdrew its support. So the exhibit sat in the closed gallery while Bhargava went around looking for new backers and a new home for it. Then one August night 100 men with trucks appeared and carried everything away in a matter of 6 hours—very likely causing extensive damage, since to pack the exhibit properly would have required several weeks.

The new head of NCERT, S. K. Mitra, explained to the press, which gave considerable coverage to the episode, that the exhibit had been taken down because there were scientific controversies about its content. Mitra was reported as saying "a group of scientists" objected to certain displays, including a surrealist picture of a reclining nude dreaming—designed to portray the nature of tachyons, particles that travel faster than light. The "scientists," however, were not named; several prominent ones, who were, have reportedly spoken highly of the exhibit.

Several displays reportedly offended political sensibilities. One panel in the exhibit was constructed as an attack on Indian "godmen." A sadhu (religious leader) was shown materializing objects from the air and the viewer was invited to judge whether that squared with the first law of thermodynamics. The display also emphasized that "science has no high priests."

Another part of the show cast aspersions on astrology by displaying samples of varying predictions for the same week contained in different magazines, and asking how these predictions withstood scientific scrutiny. Elsewhere, the exhibit questioned whether the "method of science" was applied in the preparation and use of certain salt pills in homeopathic medicine.

Another offensive section, related to the history of science, featured Marx and Lenin as pioneers in applying scientific principles to social theories and economic planning.

The exhibit ended with a quote from the out-of-favor Mrs. Gandhi to the effect that "we want scientific thinking to destroy superstition which has darkened our lives."

Bhargava believes that NCERT moved in to snatch the exhibit when officials heard of proposals to put it on display in Vienna. An Indian scientist in this country told *Science* that the move was very likely initiated by "henchmen" eager to please Prime Minister Desai—"you know that our prime minister drinks urine," he said, a practice that falls in line with belief in homeopathic and naturopathic remedies. Bhargava is said to have met with Desai to plead for release of the exhibit, but so far no action has been taken.

The Rationalists Association of India, one of many organizations devoted to promoting "scientific temper" in the country, has gotten up in arms over the handling of the exhibit. One member wrote a letter to the Times of India complaining that the country was "sinking deeper and deeper into superstition, fatalism and religious hypocrisy." He related that one scientist had been forced to resign as vice-chancellor of Bangalore University after he asked a prominent "godman" to subject miraculous performances to a scientific probe. Last December the Rationalists Association filed a writ claiming that NCERT's dismantling of the exhibit was a violation of the Constitution. This is said to be the first legal case of its kind in the country.

The exhibit would have been the first of its kind designed to acquaint Indians with scientific thinking. The overall objective, according to Bhargava, "was to show how useful and important it is to make the method of science an integral part of one's thinking and living, and how one can use this method profitably to solve one's day-to-day problems." To a Westerner it sounds harmless enough, but the designers of the exhibit apparently underestimated the degree to which advocacy of doubt and questioning could be construed as a threat to government authority.

In Indian press accounts of the affair, a professor is quoted as explaining the government's objections: "we have no tradition of genuine doubt in our philosophy. One can either accept, reject, or remain passive, but one may not doubt or enquire. Doubt, even in the West, dates clearly only from Roger Bacon's time."

Ward Morehouse, president of the Council on International and Public Affairs in New York, was vastly impressed with the exhibit and thought it would be a great way of showing that "science has very much come of age in at least some Third World countries in the past 30 years. . . . This message, to be fully convincing, must come from the Third World itself." But whether it will come from the "world's largest democracy" is very much in question.—C.H.