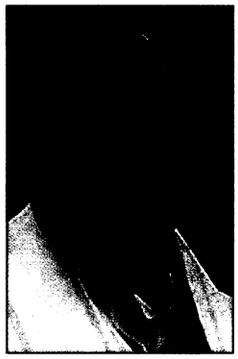
INDIA

Physicist Gets Science, Education Posts

NEW DELHI, INDIA—India's new prime minister has named a former physics professor and senior party official to oversee the twin posts of science and technology and human resources, which includes higher education. The appointment of Murli Manohar Joshi as a Cabinet-ranked minister is seen as a hopeful sign that the new government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was sworn in last week, is prepared to boost the sagging fortunes of academic research.

"For once, a person who understands science and higher education will be at the helm of affairs," says Laxman Singh Kothari, a theoretical physicist and former head of the physics department at the University of Delhi. "Joshi was an active researcher and a highly regarded teacher." Indian universities have suffered steep budget cuts over the past several years, along with diminishing enrollment in the sciences as students seek more lucrative fields.



"We will assert more robustly India's national interests and create a world order ... free of exploitation."
—M. M. Joshi

Joshi, 64, is an atomic spectroscopist who taught at the University of Allahabad for more than 30 years before retiring in 1994. He is one of the leaders of the Bhartiya Janata Party, the Hindu nationalist party that captured a plurality of seats in this month's general election and formed a coalition government. His appointment is likely the first time that a Cabinet-rank minister has held the science and technology portfolio.

In brief comments to the media after his appointment, the new minister says that India's elite university-based research centers should receive enough funding "to compete with any international institution." In a bid to raise educational achievement for women, whose literacy rate is half that of men, he has promised an "all-out effort to make education free for girls [through the] college level, including professional courses of study." Joshi is also likely to oppose global agreements on product patents and intellectual property rights, such as those spelled out by the World Trade Organization. During the recent campaign, Joshi explained that "we will assert more robustly India's national interests and hope to create a world order which is more equitable, humane, and free of exploitation."

As a scientist and political heavyweight within his party, Joshi is also expected to be an influential voice in the government's nuclear weapons policy. Vajpayee has already announced his intention to review that policy with the option of making nuclear weapons an integral part of the country's national defense.

–Pallava Bagla

Pallava Bagla is based in New Delhi.

CHINA

Chemist to Lead New Science Ministry

BEIJING—The Chinese government has established a new Ministry of Science and Technology and promoted a polymer chemist, Zhu Lilan, to head it. Zhu, 59, is one of only two women in the group of 29 ministers approved last week by the National People's Congress, the country's top legislative body.

The science ministry was created as part of a governmentwide reorganization that axed or merged 11 of the 40 ministries and commissions that make up the State Council, which serves as a Cabinet led by newly elected Premier Zhu Rongji. The Congress also promoted another scientist, physicist Zhou Guangzhao, former president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), to a top position as its vice chair.

Zhu Lilan had been vice minister of the State Science and Technology Commission (SSTC), which forms the basis of the new ministry, since 1986. (Song Jian, the longtime head of the SSTC, was elected vice chair of the advisory Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.) Educated in the former Soviet Union, with graduate training in the former West Germany, Zhu managed a high-profile SSTC program to strengthen China's ability in applied science and technology.

The effort, begun in 1986 and called Project 863, covers 17 topics in seven fields. Zhu directly monitored five of the seven—biotechnology, information, automation, energy, and new materials—and is credited by researchers for nurturing such successful projects as a simpler and more effective technique for rice breeding that uses two, rather than three, hybrid lines; a fast neutron reactor for cancer therapy; and computer-integrated manufacturing systems.

CHINA FEATURES/XINHUA

Step up. Zhu Lilan gets top job at new ministry.

"She is outstanding in both scientific research and management," says chemist Qian Wenyuan, her mentor and a CAS member. "She worked with me in the CAS Institute of Chemistry for 25 years [from 1961 to 1986] and excelled in high polymer physics and chemistry." Her organizational talent, he adds, led him to recommend her as his successor as institute director when he retired in the early 1980s.

Details are scarce on the role of the new ministry and its relationship to other scientific departments and academic institutions, but it is widely expected that the ministry will set policy and coordinate budgets for the whole of science and technology. A report to the Congress by Li Peng, former premier and now chair of the legislature, suggests that its main missions will be to advance technology; promote the commercialization of research achievements, with an emphasis on information technology; enhance collaboration among government institutions, universities, and companies; and foster basic research in strategic fields.

The creation of the ministry reflects the government's emphasis on science and technology, which Premier Rongji calls "the current administration's top concern." And scientists such as Qian Wenyuan believe that Zhu is well prepared to meet the challenge. "She is a scientist herself, with much experience in academic research," says Qian. "She can understand and communicate with scientists easily. And she is someone who puts a premium on high speed and efficiency. I think she will perform her new mission well."

–Xiong Lei

Xiong Lei writes for China Features *in Beijing.*