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VP News

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Popular Science Lectures

Vigyan Prasar has been organising Popular Science Lectures every fortnight for the last six months. The lectures are meant for members of the Department of Science and Technology and Vigyan Prasar but are open to anybody interested as well. The topics generally deal with recent developments in science and technology or contemporary issues affecting the society in a significant manner. Even though the focus is to encourage younger members to deliver talks, but at times well known scientists and science communicators are also invited.

In the month of August 2001 there were two interesting talks. One was by Ms. Vinita Sharma (PSO, Science & Society division, DST) on the 9 August 2001 and the other by an eminent ecologist Dr. A. T. Dudani on the 31 August 2001. Ms. Sharma spoke on "Gender Perspective in Technology Transfer" in which she highlighted that even in certain work areas that are women centered, gadgets and implements are not being developed which may be convenient for use by women. She illustrated this fact with the help of interesting case studies.

Dr. A.T.Dudani's lecture was on "Vehicular Fuels: The Choice Before Us". Once again this was a very thought provoking lecture that focussed on workable choices and solutions before us *vis-à-vis* alternatives to the popular choices in practice. He drew comparisons between the effects of both on the environment and the economy.

The next lecture in this series would be by Dr. Biman Basu, the topic being "Should We Clone Humans?".

EDITORIAL

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Amateur Radio Meet in Delhi

A get-together of the radio amateurs in Delhi was organized by Vigyan Prasar on 12 August, 2001. 35 radio amateurs participated in the get-together. The need for disaster preparedness especially in Delhi was brought out. It was agreed to prepare a list of hams with details of equipment they possess and equipment/accessories, which they can spare at the time of urgency. Vigyan Prasar would maintain this database and also help the coordinating efforts for setting up a disaster communication network. Vigyan Prasar would write to the agencies/NGOs involved in the disaster mitigation programmes and relief operation regarding the willingness of the ham community in Delhi in extending their services in disaster management. It was felt that in an emergency situation the radio amateurs going for such type of operation have been facing the problem of installation of antenna systems. Under such situations, the availability of mobile/roof top telescopic antenna systems would be an advantage.

The problem of illegal long distance cordless telephones, causing interferences to the various radio communication services was also discussed. Shri Sahrudin, President, Amateur Radio Society of India, apprised the participants about severity of the problem. One



Radio amateurs of Delhi deliberate. Seen are a few of the participants including Shri Sahrudin, President ARSI (extreme left) and Dr. V. B. Kamble, Acting Director, Vigyan Prasar

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... think scientifically, act scientifically ... think scientifically, act scientifically ... think scientifically, act...

Child Prodigies

Tathagat Avtar Tulsı cleared his class X examination in 1996 at the age of nine, B.Sc. in 1997 at ten, and M.Sc. in 1999 in Physics with a first class at twelve from Patna University. In December 2000, before he turned fourteen, he qualified for the lectureship by clearing the National Eligibility Test conducted by CSIR / UGC. He was a member of a team of young scientists / research scholars which visited Germany last June for an interaction with Physics Nobel Laureates. According to some media reports, it appeared that he was forced to memorise a lot of Physics jargon without knowing their significance. When he returned from his sojourn in Germany, the tag of fake was attached to him by the media. Tathagat has a burning desire - fuelled by his father - to be the youngest Nobel Laureate. His father claims that Tathagat has been a result of his sustained and painstaking experiments - governed by his private science of unproven assumptions!

In any case, there is no doubt that Tathagat's academic achievements are truly remarkable. He may not have been a prodigy he is made out to be, but, he is apparently gifted with intelligence rarely matched by children of his age. A parallel but lesser known case is that of Akrit Pran Jaswal, reported in the newspapers recently. His father, an economist who wanted to study medicine himself, made a decision for Akrit. Akrit was taken to a house in Himachal Pradesh, where he could concentrate on medicine. At seven years of age, he wants to study both neurology and oncology, and find cures for all types of cancer. But, whether it is Tathagat or Akrit, one thing is clear : pushy parents parading their children as prodigies are primarily fulfilling their own needs, and that whatever the potential of the child, he / she is performing on command, as some psychiatrists opine.

As a matter of fact, there have been exceptionally gifted children in the limelight over the years, all touted as child prodigies. Take the example of Mousumi Biswas of Purulia, West Bengal, who holds the record for clearing the class X examination at the age of eight years and seven months, or eleven year old Aarti Jajoo who cleared the class XII examination conducted by the Rajasthan State Board. Or, remember the four year old Ajay Puri who has already mastered several computer software programmes? What is common with most of these children? They have someone marketing them, often their own parents, taking advantage of people's fascination with things not commonly

seen or heard. In most cases, however, it is the parent's choice which is thrust upon these gifted children, with no consideration to their special needs. Under the circumstances, not only the brittle sensitivity of a child gets hurt, but, the child may not even be able to achieve his / her true potential. One psychiatrist points out that if a child is isolated, the child will do as he / she is taught. If the child sees the same thing every moment of his / her life, the child will retain only that. It is hence imperative that parents are careful to always provide their child with a choice. However, it is a fact that some of the greatest minds in science like Thomas Alva Edison and Albert Einstein had a highly unexceptional childhood. Indeed, they had to toil hard to attain their goals. At the same time, acknowledged child prodigies like Mozart and Beethoven continued to hold forth. It is also true that a large number of child prodigies begin to fade out as they grow and turn into adults. By then, other "ordinary" children catch up with them and then the realisation that you are no better than the rest may prove to be devastating. We do hope that Tathagat and Akrit do not have to face a similar situation. Let these bright children not fade into oblivion.

Finally, let us have a look at our own children. Don't we push our children, sometimes even beyond their capacities - just the way Tathagat or Akrit are being pushed? Our goal may not be a Nobel for the child. It could be to make it to a professional course like engineering or medicine! How often do we allow a choice to our children? Aren't we doing harm than any good to them by trying to determine their lives? At eight or nine, a child must have a childhood. Later, a child must have adolescence. During the process of growth, one must pass through all the stages in a normal way. It is imperative that we refrain from stressing one dimension of personality and overlooking others consciously avoiding any hype or hoopla to get publicity. A child is emotionally unprepared to manage the limelight that falls on him / her. There is a danger a child may start identifying himself / herself from the headlines in the newspapers - and before we realise, a push may turn into a shove! Let us refrain from trying to determine the lives of our children.

□ V.B. Kamble

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