

India out of global science

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Even as the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus continues its relentless infectious march in many parts of the world, the scientific world has something to cheer about. In the true scientific spirit, teams of scientists from 12 top research centers around world put aside all their work and tried to solve the mystery behind the virus which hit the global headlines in early March. There was a friendly race among them and the 20-person team at the Smith Genome Science Center in Vancouver, Canada, emerged the winner on April 15 when they announced the sequence of the nearly 30,000 genes that make up the virus. An equally acclaimed team at the Center for Disease Control in the US was a close second, announcing a similar breakthrough two days later. The Canadian team had slogged for three straight weeks living in their laboratory to make the breakthrough announcement at 4 am. In normal times, such a project would have easily taken a few years to complete.

The world has acclaimed the stupendous achievement which would hopefully pave the way for the development of diagnostic kits in a few months. And the availability of such kits would certainly help the health care authorities around the world to control the spread of the disease with quick diagnosis. Hopefully, drug companies too would do their bit by developing medicines quickly based on the information provided by the gene mappers.

Based on some technicalities, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared India a SARS-free country even though a dozen cases of infection have been reported here. A team of scientists at the Institute of Genomics and Integrated Biology (IGIB), New Delhi, have contributed to the global effort by developing a software that can detect the active mechanisms of the SARS virus. Ranbaxy had offered its facilities to test the samples. The top two designated national laboratories had done confirmatory tests on suspected infectious samples with amazing speed. However, these were the only significant contributions from the much-acclaimed Indian scientific community which takes pride in claiming the status of the third largest in the world in size.

Amazingly, however, not one Indian team was part of the global group that took part in the SARS gene hunt. This was certainly not a project which required any major funding. The samples from infected persons were available. Almost all the facilities required for this scientific endeavor were readily available in the country. Yet, there was not even a single national program to study the virus in our country which is always under the threat of some disease or the other. Where were our scientists? Where were our leaders in this moment of need? Why were we caught napping? As a nation, we have lost a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate our scientific and technological leadership even as we make desperate attempts to integrate ourselves into the global mainstream. We have lost the scientific race temporarily.

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