

FROM THE EDITOR

LET THERE BE A MORATORIUM ON CONFERENCES

*Oh for just one more conference
For the eradication of all conferences!
-Mayakovsky.*

Now, here are extracts from the report that found the most prominent place on the front page of The Hindu of 12 January '89:

"The dominant feature of the proceedings of the 76th session of the Indian Science Congress has been the 'no show' by key speakers slated in the final programme, particularly the plenary sessions on the focal theme 'Science and technology in India: technology missions'.

"The organisational lapses and lack of commitment on the part of invited speakers had their most telling effect on the session on 'Science for peace: environment and development' on January 9, when none of the four speakers listed in the final programme showed up

"The situation prompted a foreign delegate to remark that the organisers should blacklist the 'no show' people, however eminent they were

"The last day's session which was intended to give the audience a comprehensive picture of the various missions, was a damp squib....

"None of the replacement speakers showed up.... As for the audience, there were only 25 to 30 to hear about the missions."

This is the state of affairs with Indian "intellectuals".

Such situations were not unusual at educational or literary conferences and those concerning other aspects of humanities, but had not been so nakedly marked at a Science Congress. It heralds the time when we review the whole tradition of seminars.

Delegates come in a picnic mood. Some who do not deserve to come 'manage' to be invited and remain busy attending to their real interests. A minister or some other important man comes from the capital involving a lot of expenditure for inflicting a formal sermon which serves no purpose except bringing the organiser to his good books, if the words welcoming him were more flattering than what he has heard so far. Once recently we found five political VIPs 'gracing' an inaugural function, one as the President, one as the Inaugurator, one as the Chief Guest, one as the Chief Speaker and the fifth one as the Guest of Honour. (Welcome address and conducting were done by the organisers.) Imagine the Police bandobust and allied involvement of man-power for nothing. The subject for the seminar was a bit complex one, but while three of the VIPs did nothing more than uttering some conventional kind words, the other two were keen to read out their compositions on the subject. But they had, naturally, been too busy to read the compositions earlier and hence faltered like archaeologists deciphering a Pali text. They had no need to be so dutifully scholarly for the occasion. Nobody expected that of them. The whole session claiming the greater part of the day was an essay in futility. But the quality of the sessions that followed only justified the beginning. Why this waste of time and the nation's money, now that most of the delegates can see places under other beneficent schemes like Leave Travel Concession? Homers, Shakespeares and Kalidasas were no products of literary seminars. No Darwin or Einstein is known to have emerged from a Science Congress. Every discipline has its journal and let the papers be published in them. Those who are serious will take note of them. Nobody need travel all the way to hear an occasional good paper recited badly and a lot of bad papers recited with aplomb or even good papers recited well. There may be some benefit for some in such rituals, but that is too meagre to justify organising the giant jamborees.

Let there be a moratorium on all seminars and conferences sponsored or subsidised by the Government and Universities and government-aided institutions, for ten years. Let the money saved be spent on improving the quality of education in some specific aspect of it. Let us observe how much more our science, philosophy and literature suffer on account of such a moratorium. India can afford many sufferings and this too she can take in her stride. But intellectuals — including those who have "arrived" and that is why could so unceremoniously ignore the Science Congress — deserve to be snubbed by the nation.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

A QUIZ FOR THE QUIZ-MASTER

Mr. Quiz Master of the Doordarshan, can you tell us how best to foster wrong values in the youth? It sounds to be hardly a quiz, or maybe it is an extremely easy quiz. But it seems you do not know the answer. (Or, do you? God forbid that you and your sponsors know it and are still doing what you are doing!)

One of the sure ways to fostering wrong values is to assume a very grave posture and tone and ask the students participating in your programme to name a film-star or a film, by showing him a glimpse of the latter. And if you do it along with some questions that are really serious, you are implying that not to know the name of the film-star or the film is as serious a lapse as not to know Kanchenjunga or to have been ignorant of the fact that Vyasa was the author of the Mahabharata.

How far acting in a film is an art is a different question. How far the films about which you ask are "classics" is a different question too. Also, if wisdom is lost in knowledge and knowledge is lost in information, it is not your fault. But there are information and information. A line has to be drawn between helpful and sensible information and information that is not so or of dubious value. When you examine students publicly, you have to follow a norm. You are eligible to put questions which would put to test their intellectual or at least intelligent quest. Your questions, even outside the films, rarely stimulate original thinking in the students or give them a chance to come out with their wit. The nature of your questions generally encourages and glorifies cramming. Even that is pardonable. But you have no right to set such examples which will cause the forthcoming batches of students to devote indefinite time to seeing old and new films and listen to hundreds of cassettes of rock music, under the impression that that is an exercise in achieving excellence.

All those who have mass-media at their disposal should cultivate a culture of responsibility and discretion, more so those like you involved in the audio-visual media. Kindly cultivate it, Mr. Quiz Master, and tell your sponsors, whoever they are, to try cultivate it too