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## The Science Congress

*Students of science, as well as others, who may have anything to do with the holding of conferences for the discussion of scientific subjects, will find ample food for thought in the rather outspoken reflections of the Professor, who had attended the Madras session of the Indian Science Congress.*

By J. B. S. Haldane

THE Madras Science Congress is over. As I am going to say some unpleasant things, I want to begin by recording my thanks, first to Mr. M. Jivanandam, a student of chemistry who looked after me with very great efficiency, secondly to Mr. Shiva Kumar, who conducted me to Mahabalipuram, on behalf of the Government Tourist Agency, and finally to several little boys of the fishing village on Mylapore beach. They hoped, no doubt, for paise, of which they got very few. But they found that an aged European was quite an amusing playmate, and could swim nearly as well as they. They were just learning to ride on my back in the surf when the congress came to an end.

At such a congress there are presidential addresses and popular lectures. These are what are reported in the Press. They are of very little interest to scientists. I gave one of them myself, which was mainly based on published work which is or should be well known to all serious students of evolution. Then there are special lectures, again containing little or nothing not previously published. I went to several of these, on subjects of which I knew rather little.

Most of the time of the Congress is taken up with sectional meetings where original work done in India is described. Brief summaries of each paper are available. I had marked a number of papers in which I thought that I might be interested. But I was only able to attend one, for a very

simple reason. There was no time table in any section, and it was quite impossible to find out when any given paper would be read. Indian scientists complain that foreign delegates do not attend the sectional meetings. They would do so if they knew what they were going to listen to. I was particularly interested in papers with some bearing on agriculture, especially on plant and animal breeding, and the choice of plants for different kinds of soil and climate. There was a section on agricultural sciences. But papers of interest from this point of view were also read in sections of statistics, chemistry, geology and geography, botany, zoology, medicine and veterinary science, and physiology. To be sure of hearing them all, I should have to have attended eight of the thirteen sections. Not being Krishna, I cannot be in even two places at once.

In fact I missed most of the papers which I wished to hear. I came in the hope of meeting young men and women, to some of whom I could have offered assistance, and for one or two of whom I might conceivably have found posts. In most cases I did not meet them. I am quite aware that it is hard to arrange a programme, because some people do not turn up to read their papers. But this difficulty is not peculiar to India. It occurs at every international scientific congress.

At a well-organised congress the following procedure is adopted. A provisional programme is drawn up. Any deviations from it are reported both on notice boards outside the sectional meeting rooms, and on a central notice board. Outside each section a

number is hung up giving the number of the paper being read at the moment. The cost of such notice boards would have been much less than that of the flags, garlands, and other ornaments, which were provided for our delectation. Six years ago, at Calcutta, some at least of these things were done. Unless they are done in future the Science Congress has little value. It would be better to have meetings of chemists, zoologists, and so on in different cities, where adequate lecture rooms would be available.

Even when I found one of the young men or women whom I wished to meet, discussion was difficult. I was continually interrupted by autograph hunters. No scientist has any excuse for collecting autographs. There are far more interesting things to collect, including plants, animals, and minerals. I found time to collect a plant of considerable interest, and to make notes on poultry. The autograph hunters could have done the same, and would have done so had they been genuinely interested in science.

The worst case of anti-scientific snobbery occurred at an official reception. I was discussing a technical matter with a junior colleague when a minor official tried to separate us, stating that important scientists were expected to shake hands with a certain V.I.P. I told him that any scientist doing important work was an important man. Six years ago I met the supreme example of such snobbery in Madras when my wife and I wished to look at some poultry to which our guide, an alleged biologist, objected, saying "These hens are not interesting, they only belong to poor

men." It had not apparently struck him that most of the livestock of India belongs to poor men and that if nobody takes an interest in them, some of the poor men will die. Perhaps, however, owing to the spread of equalitarian ideas, they will no longer accept their fate meekly, and some rich men will die too.

I am sorry to make all these complaints against the inhabitants of a city so hospitable as Madras. As for the food, I can only say that an intelligent tiger visiting Madras for a week would certainly become a vegetarian. Cookery is not as great an art as sculpture or poetry; but it is an art, and Madras is near the centre of one of the three areas in the world where it is most highly developed. The other two are in France and Italy, and somewhere in China, I do not yet know just where.

I know that some of the other foreign visitors agreed with me that the Congress would have been of far greater value had we been able to attend those papers to which we wished to listen. One added that there were too many papers concerned with points of detail. I noticed that one worker presented eight papers. I think a smaller number might have sufficed.

These visitors may have been too polite to tell their hosts what they thought of the arrangements. They will not be too polite to criticise them on return to their native lands; and this criticism will harm the reputation of Indian science, although it is in fact a criticism of administrative organisation, and not of scientific work. The labour devoted to one evening's entertainment would have made the Congress far more valuable scientifically, and a far better advertisement of India. There were a number of other administrative failures, which lowered the efficiency of the Congress; but they were much less important.

If the organisers of future Congresses will concentrate on the dissemination of scientific information, and not on ceremonies and entertainments, people who are more interested in such affairs than in science may cease to attend the Congresses. But some of my Indian colleagues who are genuinely interested in science, and were not present at Madras, will begin to attend them regularly. This will make for the advancement of science in India.