CURBING FAKE AND FALSE SCIENCE NEWS VITAL:

Indian Science Communication Congress

G. Mahesh

FAKE and false science news making way into the mainstream and social media is a cause of serious concern. The spread of such undesirable information and the ways and means to address the growing menace were discussed and debated strongly at the 18th Indian Science Communication Congress (ISCC-2018) organised by CSIR-National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources (NISCAIR) on 21-22 December 2018. The theme of the science communication congress was “200 Years of Science Journalism in India”.

In the inaugural session, tracing the history of science journalism and science communication in the country, Prof. Manoj Kumar Patairiya, Director, CSIR-NISCAIR said that science journalism in the country has come a long way since the first monthly magazine Digdarshan came into being in 1818. The magazine published science articles in English, Hindi and Bengali.

Delivering the keynote address, Dr Arvind Mishra, Secretary, Indian Science Fiction Writers’ Association said that there should be more science communication in Indian languages. He also touched upon the need for ‘barefoot’ science communication that should focus on science communication at the grassroots and rural levels.

Dr R.K. Bhandari, the guest of honour and Chairman, Forum on Disaster Mitigation, Indian National Academy of Engineering spoke about documenting disasters and communicating the same. He said that we should not lose any opportunity to learn from disasters and should work on using the learnings to limit or prevent future disasters.

A book, Malpa Landslide Disasters published by CSIR-NISCAIR was released on the occasion.

Prof. V.L. Dharurkar, Vice Chancellor, Tripura Central University was the chief guest of the inaugural function and Dr Narendra K. Sehgal, UNESCO-Kalinga Prize Winner for Science Popularisation chaired the inaugural function.
Following the inaugural function, there was a panel discussion on “Vigyan Patrakarita: Kal, Aaj aur Kal”. Prof. M. Sai Baba, Principal Scientist, Energy and Environment Program & Science Communication, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru chaired the panel discussion. In his opening remarks, Prof. Sai Baba pointed out that there is more need for science communicators today than ever in the past. A number of panellists spoke about various aspects of the past, present and the future of science communication.

Dr B.K. Tyagi, Scientist & Registrar, Vigyan Prasar mentioned that the risks associated with technologies should be communicated. Dr I. Arul Aram, Professor of Media Studies, Anna University, Chennai, spoke about introducing a course on science and technology communication at Anna University. Shri Abhay S. Rajput, Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune expressed concern about pseudoscience stories appearing in the mass media. Ms Lipsa Panda, Researcher at CSIR-IGIB expressed her view that scientists can become good science communicators as well. She also stressed on communicating science through animations and infographics.

Prof. A.P. Singh, Vice-Chairman, ISCOS, Lucknow opined that a policy document is required on how to communicate science to the masses. Shri R.S. Ahirwar, Senior Principal Scientist, CSIR-AMPRI, Bhopal stated that there is a need to have more programmes like JIGYASA where scientists and school students can interact with each other.

Following the panel discussion, there were three scientific sessions where a number of papers were presented. The topics of the three sessions were, “From Science Journalism to Science Communication – Taking Science to the People”, “Communicating Science for Sustainable Development” and “Communicating Science through Digital and Print Media”. The sessions were chaired by eminent science communicators such as Prof. K.G. Suresh, Director-General, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Dr Jagdish Chander, Scientist G, Department of Science and Technology, Dr Shamblu Nath Singh, Director, School of Journalism and New Media Studies, IGNOU, Dr. Deepika Bhaskar, Delhi University, Dr Nisha Mendiratta, Head, NCSTC, Department of Science and Technology, and Dr Prabhakar Ingle, Head, Publication and Science Communication, CSIR-NCL.

The final round table and summing up session was on the topic “Has Science Journalism Come of Age in India – A Critical Analysis”. The Guest of Honour, Shri Jayant Sahasrabuddhe, Organising Secretary, Vijhana Bharati said that science communicators have to play a key role in communicating Indian science to the masses. Dr Nakul Parashar, Director, Vigyan Prasar also graced the concluding session as a Guest of Honour. Also speaking at the concluding session, Prof. Krishan Lal, Co-Chair, IAP for Science, The Global Network of Science Academies, Immediate Past President, The Association of Academies and Societies of Sciences of Asia (AASSA) said time has come to raise our science magazines and science journals to the international level.
Prof. (Dr) Manoj Kumar Patairaya, Director, CSIR-NISCAIR summed-up the recommendations of the Indian Science Communication Congress 2018 as follows:

1. There is a need to impart critical appraisal skills to researchers to help them identify and filter fake news. The Congress expresses concern about fake and false science news making their way into the media and emphasizes that ensuring authenticity of information should be paramount for science journalists and science communicators.

2. Artificial Intelligence can play an important role in science communication in the future.

3. There is more innovation required in science communication. Demonstration of scientific concepts can help in easily communicating science, especially among students.

4. It was shown that some regional newspapers like The Morung Express cover more science news than national newspapers.

5. Evidence based research as well as evidence based communication is necessary for furthering science communication in India.

6. Science communication should bring about behavioural change among the masses by making them scientifically aware.

7. Science communication has been able to contribute to mitigation efforts in crop burning, pesticide and fertilizer overuse.

8. Radio will continue to play a vital role in science communication along with the print, social and audio-visual media.

9. There should be concerted efforts amongst all stakeholders to enhance coordinated communication between scientists and journalists. There should also be more interactions between scientists and students.

10. There is a need for a policy document on how science should be communicated to the masses.

11. Science communication should effectively be used to popularise technologies and help the scientists in taking their technologies from the laboratories to the market.

12. There is a need for more courses and programmes in science and technology communication so that a large pool of science journalists and science communicators can be created. This should be a national responsibility.

13. Surveys in public understanding of science are necessary to gauge status of scientific literacy in the country.

14. There is a need to organise community driven science fairs in the country to promote science communication and scientific temper.

15. Grafting folk, traditional, tribal and electronic media remains a challenge today and there is a need to converge these for effective science communication.

About 150 science communicators, researchers, scientists, science enthusiasts and students participated in the event. The Indian Science Writers’ Association (ISWA), Society for Information Science (SIS) and Indian Science Communication Society (ISCOS) were the academic partners of the Indian Science Communication Congress 2018.

Dr G. Mahesh is Senior Principal Scientist, CSIR-NISCAIR