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REF: NCCL/AHD/VKS/GEN/01/

Date: 27/09/2007

To,
Shri Manmohan Singh Ji
Hon'ble Prime Minister
Government of India
South Block, New Delhi

SUB: ISRO – the holy cow needs a new tether

Dear Prime Minister,

It gives us immense pain to convey that our renowned scientific institutions, once known for their innovation have been turning into hotbeds of politics and inefficiency despite their immense potential. ISRO is one such fine institution, which enjoyed till recently the faith of the nation and attracted young talents. But we now see the same generation as young adults leaving ISRO in droves.

It is not surprising anymore to read regularly that not a day rolls without some talented youngsters and experienced experts leave ISRO for the greener pastures. A recent statistic says that over 100 experienced experts from ISRO leave the organization every year while about 40 percent of youngsters leave ISRO in the first years of their joining. Some insiders call the organization a "young fossil". While the gloss is carefully kept on the surface, ISRO is fast becoming an organization of several structural faults covered with polished carpets.

Has anyone wondered why a satellite image of Adam's bridge, retrieved from NASA archives was shown repeatedly on our TV channels recently while referring to the Ram Sethu controversy? ISRO on regular basis secures high resolution images of the area almost every week but the nation refers to an old image of NASA archives. ISRO's archives must be either inaccessible, under-publicized or by an act of mismanagement – become irrelevant to the national purpose. At least, there has been no sincere effort on the part of our space community to give confidence to the people that our satellites have been useful.

It seems that the young scientists in ISRO do not find the strong sense of belonging and pride that a young NASA scientist finds in his work place. It is often said that money does not replace the pride of working for NASA. Nearly half of NASA's scientific force is of Indian origin. There is excitement in creating path-breaking initiatives that holds the whole world in awe. But ISRO is different and lacks that luster.

It has now mastered the art of launching the rockets and is looking at encashing it by attracting business while pioneering institutions like NASA have outsourced such operational routines to concentrate on research and enterprise that hold the world in bated breath. Making an airplane was once a high science but is now an industrial activity. Likewise, making rockets is no more an exclusive science but an industrial level activity which needs to be outsourced, so that ISRO

can move on to more exciting horizons of research that can challenge its scientists and fill pride to a success-starving nation.

It is a shame that even a few thousands of rupees look attractive to young people than the tag of ISRO. On an average, a young ISRO scientist earns about Rs. 15,000 a month while a Director level scientist earns just three times that. It is a higher shame that senior rocket scientists get so much bored that they move on to other departments like oceans or earth sciences where they do not have any expertise, but succeed in taking up positions due to their ISRO clout. The present Secretary of Department of Earth Sciences and his predecessor were both rocket scientists who left ISRO because they could not move further in a stifling system. In this way, while ISRO lost some very senior and experienced rocket scientists, the earth and ocean sciences department received totally unfit secretaries who knew nothing of the post they occupied. It is a national shame that one can lure away the ISRO scientists with a few thousand rupees of extra salary or just one level of promotion. It is more of a national shame that ISRO cannot retain its talents in-house.

Has ISRO leadership turned mediocre in spite of its illustrious beginnings and the enormous national faith reposed on this coveted organization? Perhaps yes. Insiders are frustrated by the way higher positions are distributed. There are senior scientists who grab several positions for themselves and hold on to them for years without distributing to deserving colleagues. The ISRO earth observation office, which should have been a visionary wing spearheading social transformation, has become a place of mediocrity from where talented people have fled. If positions are to be distributed, they try to ensure that they go to their favoured subordinates even if they are undeserving. Very senior people are obsessed with finding an extension for themselves repeatedly, thus blocking the progress of many deserving and visionary colleagues.

This has become common place in ISRO even at the top level. The present Chairman of ISRO, widely acknowledged to be a good scientist but a leader falling well short of the vision of his predecessors has got more extensions than any of the earlier Chairmen, only because he was close to a President of India. This has led to serious stagnation at the highest level of the organization. No other space agency on this planet has this kind of fossilizing effect on the organization.

Has the country held ISRO fully accountable to the exaggerated money, time and manpower it spends? OR is ISRO one of our society's holy cow? For this, you will need to look at its public, parliamentary and media profiles. At the public level, we all recognize NASA with space endeavours and hold ISRO at a state of lowered expectations. At the Parliamentary level, ISRO is never debated in the context of transformation of Indian society or psyche but is let off with some marginal questions asked by politically low-key members. At the media level, there are no sting operations, no inside queries, no suspicious scrutiny and no grilling of any kind. Everyone seems to think that any direct questioning might bring down the morale of the organization. But this is not true. ISRO is already an organization of low morale at all levels.

The country requires to question ISRO on a different plane. After all, the organization spends an annual budget which is bigger than some states, has plan outlay which is bigger than many leading developmental plans and has a manpower strength that is substantial and has been there for over three decades now. In the last reckoning, ISRO spent an annual fund of about 2200 crores in 2003-04, 2500 crores in 2004-05 and 3200 crores in 2005-06. The present year expenditure is likely to be in the range of 3600 crores. ISRO has been speaking of a moon mission and for over half a decade, no concrete plan has come up while even Google as a company has challenged the private organizations to make a moon mission with a short-term plan. ISRO speaks of a shuttle and nothing comes up except some internal drawings and multimedia demos. It speaks of disaster mitigation support but if you scrape off the gloss, the bareness of the programme becomes evident and the disasters have wreaked more damage in the country every year, even after ISRO has launched huge satellites and disaster management outfits.

One very appalling fact is that the ISRO has also spread itself thin and has lost the nucleus of purpose. It wants to do everything and its longterm plans often look like political manifesto. Like the Government of India wanting to run tourism hotels, ISRO has many directions that are frivolous and beyond the basic purpose for which it was created. It wants to set up village resource centres, run telemedicine programmes of connecting hospitals, establish computers at schools in a network, prepare maps of all kinds, and so on and so forth. Some of these programmes have become basic obsession to ISRO. While it is true that these are important developmental aspects of the Indian society and may need some support of the satellites launched by ISRO, they are more socio-political than being scientific and technical. Have we seen NASA doing such things? It seems ISRO leadership has lost the technology focus and has been in a politically pleasing game.

It is time that India held one of its premier institutions fully accountable to its functions, internal dynamics and the initial dream it created some decades ago and gave it a firm path to progress instead of swaying and swerving mid-course. ISRO also should introspect and hold itself accountable to the national expectations and pride. Therefore, we urge your good offices to hold this Premier institution to account by the following actions:

1. Develop a rewarding scheme for the young scientists and senior experts to retain them in the organization.
2. Stop ISRO experts from occupying highest positions of unrelated departments which often results in both ISRO and the receiving department to suffer
3. Prune ISRO's activities and budget to a level that is really necessary for a space agency and redistribute some of the unrelated functions to other departments of relevance
4. Appoint a high level committee of experts to review the plans and outlay of ISRO in order to provide it a competitive focus in which other space agencies have been making huge strides.
5. Review ISRO's functions and activities and bring a proper focus
6. Stop further extension to the Chairman of ISRO and make way for visionary senior scientists in an earnest manner, by involving the collective wisdom of an objective search committee.

We trust that you will immediately act upon these suggestions and restore to nation a pride, which is fast slipping away.

Thanking you,
Yours faithfully,

For **National Council for Civil Liberties**

V K SAXENA
PRESIDENT

c c: Shri Kapil Sibbal, Hon'ble Minister for Science & Technology, Govt. of India, New Delhi – for kind information.

