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Science Festivals in India

Increasing Impact, Expanding Reach

AS a form of public engagement, science festivals have been increasingly gaining ground in recent years, rapidly expanding in size and numbers worldwide. Science festivals engage the public with contemporary science issues and research, affording the scientifically inclined visitors opportunities to interact with scientists, researchers, and science administrators and the general public and families to encounter and participate in varied science engagement activities and also witness some of the latest research and development happening in different fields. The biggest and most significant impact is on the young visitors though.



There have been some studies to gauge the impact and reach of science festivals. Eric Jensen and Nicola Buckley write in their paper “Why people attend science festivals: Interests, motivations and self-reported benefits of public engagement with research” (*Public Understanding of Science*, 23(5), October 2012) that, “the most significant self-reported impact of attending a science festival is the development of increased interest in and curiosity about new areas of scientific knowledge within a socially stimulating and enjoyable setting”.

A comparative study of US science festivals (Science Festival Alliance, 2012), found that “interaction with science professionals during festival events is the strongest predictor of better outcomes for attendees”. Encouragingly, the study found that science festivals are not being looked upon as mere fun outings. Visitors also looked forward to informal interactions with active scientific researchers, gaining insights into how science works and participating in critical discussions on scientific issues.

In recent years, in India too science festivals have been introduced and are being actively promoted – both by the government and non-government bodies. The events have evoked perceptible enthusiasm among several sections of the society as evidenced by large-scale participation over the years. Perhaps there is now a need to conduct studies to gauge the impact and the opportunities such science festivals are creating among various stakeholders. The studies might throw up new and innovative ideas, indicate components of science festivals that are more popular and need to be strengthened, or suggest modifications in other components.

Since event design is the key, in some parts of the world new research is using Bluetooth technology to track visitor behaviour in closed and open spaces; biometrics and mobile eye tracking data is being used to understand engagement with and reactions to exhibits. Studies and research are also being conducted to glean understanding about clustering & placement of booths/kiosks and events for maximum impact & learning of visitors.



In a culturally and linguistically diverse country like India, research could also help identify social groups that have not found inclusion in science festivals so far – perhaps due to geographic reasons or language barriers. Further, there is also a need to evaluate the benefits to other stakeholders such as sponsors, exhibitors, scientists, host institutions, and other partners and incorporate their feedback.

Hasan Jawaid Khan

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For Editorial Queries: Ph.: 91-011-25848702; Email: sr@niscpr.res.in.res.in; Fax: 91-011-25847062

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