

Rao gets project facts wrong

FROM DINESH C SHARMA

Jaipur, Jan. 7: The Prime Minister, Mr P. V. Narasimha Rao's reference to a giant radio telescope has upset scientists here.

While inaugurating the 81st session of the Indian Science Congress, Mr Rao spoke about the "monuments of technological glory" in Rajasthan and went on to give modern examples. Referring to Sawai Jai Singh's contributions to Indian astronomy, the Prime Minister said, "This is not just a bygone tradition. On the western edge of Rajasthan, Indian radio astronomers are presently building a radio telescope — the Giant Meter-wave Radio Telescope (GMRT) — which, I am told, will be one of the most powerful of its kind in the world."

Mr Rao went on to speak about the telescope's 45-metre diameter dishes. By using wire mesh and not solid metal in a distinctive Indian design, the scientists not only cut costs but also exemplified adaptability, he said.

Senior scientists present at the ceremony were shocked as no such project is underway in Rajasthan. Instead, all the Prime Minister's details tallied with the GMRT project in Pune.

Dr Govind Swarup, an eminent radio astronomer who is heading the prestigious GMRT project, said later that "it could be possible only if the boundaries of Rajasthan have been extended

upto Pune," since Mr Rao was obviously referring to the Pune project. Another scientist said that the *faux pas* showed that Mr Rao's speech writers were ignorant both of Indian science and geography.

Inquiries from official sources revealed an oversight could have led to the mistake. The speech writers had drawn heavily from the December 16, 1993, issue of *Nature* which carried a cover story on science in India.

That had a separate report on the GMRT project at Pune. Written by editor John Maddox, it opened with "On the western edge of the Rajasthan desert, on a site 80 km north of Pune, Indian radio astronomers are building a radio telescope that will be the most powerful of its kind in the world."

The Prime Minister, in effect, only extended *Nature's* error. However, the science magazine could not be contacted immediately for an explanation.

Real facts: In a special lecture at the Science Congress, Dr Govind Swarup spoke at length on the GMRT project. The telescope will consist of 30 parabolic wire mesh dishes of 45-metre diameter each in a Y-shaped configuration. Most of its design and material inputs are indigenous. The national project is being coordinated by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.