

# Preservation of rice strains

SIR — K. S. Jayaraman's article, "India set to end 'gene robbery'" (*Nature* 370, 587; 1994) ends by saying: "India has also taken steps recently to get back some of the materials it has already lost. Two months ago, the International Rice Research Institute [IRRI] in Manila in the Philippines agreed to return to India 5,000 accessions of traditional rice strains from Assam state, which were taken away by the institute in the 1960s."

This is simply a repeat of allegations of "gene robbery" by IRRI made in an article in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* on 23 March 1986. One month after the article appeared, the Rice Research Workers of India were reported to have "unanimously condemned such gross distortion of facts in the article at their annual meeting in Faizabad", and in its issue of 29 June 1986 *Illustrated Weekly* published a four-page rebuttal of the accusations by Dr M. S. Swaminathan, then director general of IRRI.

The traditional rice strains were not "taken away" by IRRI in the sense that they were removed arbitrarily or illegally. These rice strains, or germplasm, known as the Assam Rice Collection and containing more than 5,000 traditional rice cultivars, were collected 30 years ago in Assam and sent by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research for safekeeping at the IRRI genebank in Los Baños, Philippines, precisely to preserve the diversity of the rice gene pool.

"The collection included native diversity in rice available at that time in remote areas, providing valuable genes for resistance to some serious insect pests", said Dr R. S. Rana, director of India's National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources, in a letter to IRRI, requesting that the institute duplicate the collection and send it to India because, he said, much of the original collection is no longer available because of "deterioration or loss".

The collection in IRRI's Genetic Resources Center rice genebank is a duplicate of the original Assam Rice Collection. Beginning in August, about 50 kg of the Assam rice seeds will be sent to India in two batches representing more than 5,000 accessions.

The IRRI rice genebank holds in trust more than 80,000 different samples of rice varieties and wild species of rice from all over the rice-growing world. Since 1973, more than 740,000 packets of rice seeds have been distributed, free of charge, to rice scientists worldwide for use in research.

Rice seeds from many countries have contributed useful traits to modern rice varieties, such as early maturity, resistance to diseases and pests and tolerance for salinity, flooding and submergence,

which have benefited mostly Asian countries.

IRRI has repatriated seeds to several countries, including the Philippines and Sri Lanka. In one case the institute helped to reintroduce to Cambodia rice seeds that had disappeared during the long civil war in that country. The lost varieties, collected in the early 1970s in Cambodia and stored in IRRI's rice genebank, are once again being grown extensively in that country. IRRI last month repatriated to Indonesia and Thailand 416 and 392 samples respectively.

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## Combating AIDS

SIR — Is it really true, as you say, that "the message about the dangers of AIDS is not getting through"<sup>1</sup>? Numerous studies, even among disadvantaged groups<sup>2,3</sup>, show that knowledge about transmission routes is very high, but there is a hard core of people familiar to clinicians (perhaps 35 per cent of the total population at risk), who may resist counselling<sup>4</sup> in spite of their best endeavours or fail to modify their risky behaviour<sup>5</sup>. The most successful approach so far seems to be small group therapy<sup>5,6</sup> bearing a surprising resemblance to Alcoholics Anonymous groups.

Although the present situation may tempt us to despair, this may be historically unwise. After all, 70 years ago, the orthodox medical opinion similarly was that what we now call alcoholism was utterly incurable.

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2. Stall, R. *et al Med. Anthropol. Quart (New Ser.)* 4, 115–128 (1990).
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## Not predisposed

SIR — Under the heading "A predisposition to astronomy" (*Nature* 368, 800; 1994), you say: "Astronomy in Mexico was well established when, in 650 AD Maya, Zapotec and Theotihuacán

astronomer-priests met at the hilltop observatory of Xochicalco, Morelas, to synchronize their sundials. This Mesoamerican Calendrical Convention is arguably the first scientific conference on record — the poster session is still carved into the base of the pyramid."

An examination of the base and other parts of the pyramid shows no description of a convention nor of a poster session. Nothing indicates that a calendar was synchronized in Xochicalco (Mexico) nor in Copan (Honduras), nor elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

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## Alas, poor Yorick

SIR — The account by Michael Fitzgerald and David Berman (*Nature* 368, 92; 1994) of the illness of my cousin Yorick Smythies is completely erroneous. He did not suffer from paranoid schizophrenia as they claim he did. From information I received from Yorick himself and from his wife it is clear that his original symptom was depression for which his doctor unfortunately prescribed amphetamines to which Yorick became addicted (as commonly happened) and subsequently he developed a wholly iatrogenic chronic paranoid amphetamine psychosis.

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## TV's disservice to science

SIR — I wholeheartedly agree with your criticism of the BBC's appalling 'Heretic' series, but I feel that the independent television companies do an even greater disservice to science, engineering and the enquiring mind among the young in Britain when they broadcast a series of advertisements suggesting that it is "sad" (a word the young construe somewhat differently from those over 30) to want to know how the "widget" in a can of beer works.

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