

SCIENTISTS BAT FOR HOSTING VIRTUAL CONFERENCES EVEN AFTER COVID

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Scientists bat for hosting virtual conferences even after Covid. | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

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Despite 'Zoom fatigue' and the inability to simulate in-person networking with colleagues, scientists want conferences to be held virtually even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over, citing ease of attending from anywhere in the world and low carbon footprint among its many perks.

It has been a year since the American Physical Society (APS) cancelled its meeting just days before it was to begin in Denver, US, on March 2, last year due to the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The announcement triggered similar cancellations, ushering in a 'new normal' for scientists, academicians, and researchers.

According to a poll of over 900 readers of Nature magazine, a year of online research conferences has brought many benefits.

Nearly 75 per cent of survey respondents said scientific conferences should continue to be hosted virtually, or have a virtual component, even after the Covid pandemic ends.

Many researchers say that in the past year they have been able to attend more meetings than ever because they were held online.

Another biggest benefit after accessibility, the survey respondents said, was the lower carbon footprint offered by virtual meetings due to less travel involved.

Lovi Raj Gupta, Executive Dean of Science and Technology, Lovely Professional University (LPU) Punjab, said the paradigm shift during the times of COVID-19 was swaying the dialogue and interaction between researchers and scientists from "room to Zoom".

"This had a challenge of loss of expression through body language but came up with a grand opportunity of convenience, the ease of reaching out and defying the time constraints," Gupta told PTI.

"Researchers took the opportunity and began collaborating, a significant increase in the number of new special interest groups (SIG) crept up and the existing ones curated handshaking with the other SIGs," he added.

Sourav Chatterjee, Professor of Mathematics and Statistics, Stanford University, US, noted that the pandemic has impacted science and research in India more or less the same way as in other countries.

"Classes and seminars have moved online, with the usual consequences," Chatterjee, the winner of the Infosys Prize, told PTI.

He explained that the lack of face-to-face interactions maybe stressful and unnerving, but at the same time, online seminars can be accessed by a much broader audience.

The recordings are saved for posterity, Chatterjee said, which will greatly benefit everyone for years to come.

He noted that there are both pros and cons of virtual conferences and online sessions.

"Another major change is that the lack of opportunities for travel during Covid has drastically cut down the number of academic conferences," Chatterjee said.

"We certainly do not need to have as many academic or non-academic conferences in the world as we had pre-Covid because a vast number of them are just opportunities to vacation on taxpayer money," he added.

On the other hand, he said, personal interactions that happen during conferences sometimes open up new directions of research, which have been hindered due to Covid.

Arindam Ghosh, Professor, Department of Physics, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, said the suspension of international travel and visa processes have caused great anxiety and uncertainty among students and researchers looking for overseas education, employment or collaboration.

"The education system, the interaction among scientists and researchers, the modes of conferences have all undergone a massive paradigm shift. Most meetings are now taking place in online mode," Ghosh, who is also an Infosys Prize laureate, told PTI.

The Infosys Prize is an annual award given to scientists, researchers, engineers, and social scientists of Indian origin by the Infosys Science Foundation.

Ghosh noted that international conferences are adapting to include diverse time zones of speakers and participants.

However, he said while physical presence at the laboratory for experimental research is unavoidable, many labs or institutions are developing 'shift' systems.

"Theoretical research is largely being pursued from home. The online platforms are not always suitable for easy exchange of ideas, and new innovations are required," he added.

The experts believe that COVID-19 has also paved new dimensions for need-based, societal, and speedy innovations not only in India but all across the world, adding researchers and innovators from across the globe collaborated virtually to find solutions to defeat the pandemic.

"Another change in COVID-19 pandemic was the collaboration with peers and other researchers nationally and internationally," Gupta said.

"Now that the world is getting vaccinated and people will be out and about over the next few months, I expect the collaboration and camaraderie between researchers to continue," he added.

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