CORRESPONDENCE

THE NEW MINISTRY OF EARTH SCIENCES

The Union Cabinet, on 9th May, 2006, approved the creation of the Ministry of Earth Sciences and construction of the Earth Commission, purportedly to “enable an integrated approach on issues concerning water, global climatic change, environment, meteorology, seismology and related earth sciences”

The Union Cabinet has given approval “for reorganization of the Ministry of Ocean Development as Ministry of Earth Sciences” and the proposed ministry “is likely to be carved out of the Science and Technology Ministry by hiving off work related to ocean development and merging it with research institutes under the ministry, like the Indian Meteorological Department ”

Normally, the formation of the Ministry of Earth Sciences should have been a moment of rhapsody for Geological Survey of India and other earth sciences organizations of the country, but it turned out to be a sad occasion In this rather opaque decision of the Union Cabinet, what to talk of other earth sciences organizations/institutions of the country, even Geological Survey of India (GSI), the premier earth sciences organization of the country, neither finds a place in the ministry nor in the commission This is really a logic-defying, and bewildering decision of the Union Cabinet Non-inclusion of GSI in the new ministry is a conundrum and tantamount to considering Geological Survey of India as having nothing to do with earth sciences For any earth scientist, who has persevered for tens of years understanding the mother earth, this decision of the Government is uniquely anomalous as no where else on the earth, “Earth Science and Earth Systems Science” exclude the “Geological Survey and Earth Resources” organizations

There are some conspicuous contradictions in the PIB Press Release On the one hand, it says that the Ministry of Ocean Development would be re-organized as the Ministry of Earth Sciences to enable an integrated approach on issues related to earth sciences, and on the other hand, the press release says that the “destruction in the 2004 tsunami has prompted the Government to begin the process of setting up a Ministry of Earth Sciences to help in developing an early warning system for natural disasters, among other things”

If the objective of the creation of the new ministry is to enable an integrated approach on various aspects of Earth Science (water, environment, climatology, meteorology, seismology and related earth sciences), then not only GSI, but NGRI, WIHG, CGWB and even the CPCB should be brought under the Ministry of Earth Sciences, in addition to, DOD and IMD Geological Survey of India, of course, by virtue of its multifarious activities (charter of functions and responsibilities of GSI, Gazette of India, Extraordinary, 146, June 13, 2003), which include the proposed agenda of the new ministry, should be designated as the nodal organization of the Ministry of Earth Sciences

On the other hand, if the creation of the new ministry is the outcome of 2004 tsunami (PIB press release dated 9th May, 2006), and natural disasters management happens to be the main objective of the ministry, it would be in the fitness of circumstances to rechristen the new ministry as the Ministry of Disaster Management Even then, GSI could not be left out of the new ministry as the fields of its study encompass seismology, landslides, avalanches, volcanology, flood control and other environmental disasters, in addition to conventional earth sciences related themes

The approved constitution of the Ministry of Earth Sciences (DOD & IMD), has hurt the feelings of all the earth scientists serving in different organizations Particularly worst hit, however, has been the Geological Survey of India For over two decades, GSI had been legitimately demanding the status of a full-fledged scientific Department, instead of its present subordinate role within the Ministry of Mines The Ministry of Mines constituted an Expert Committee vide its resolution no 11(27)/99-M-1, dated 23rd May, 2002, to give suggestions/recommendations to the Govt of India on various issues related to the organizational and functional aspects of GSI The Committee submitted its report on 31st December, 2002, which was accepted by the Government The Committee had specifically recommended formation of the Ministry of Earth Sciences with GSI being its nodal organization The charter of responsibilities and functions of GSI, as recommended by the Expert Committee, was notified in the Gazette of India in June, 2003 Enhanced recruitment of officers of GSI was also initiated in deference to the recommendations of the Committee The Ministry of Earth Sciences, as conceived by the Committee in their report has come into existence, but paradoxically, without GSI being even peripherally related to the new ministry The Department of Ocean Development set up in 1981, would now be known as the Ministry of Earth Sciences, and
155 years old GSI, recognized by the Government as its premier earth sciences organization, would have nothing to do with the new ministry and continue to be with the Ministry of Mines.

As long as there was no Ministry of Earth Sciences, GSI being in the Ministry of Mines was perhaps justified. However, in view of the creation of the Ministry of Earth Sciences, the continuation of GSI in the Ministry of Mines defies all logic.

Firstly, the Expert Committee Report, accepted by the Government, clearly mentions that the Ministry of Mines should be rechristened as the Ministry of Earth Sciences and the status of GSI be elevated to that of the nodal organization of the said ministry. When once such a ministry was created, no matter by rechristening the Department of Ocean Development, the prestigious and premier earth sciences organization of the country could not have been left out of its purview defying all logic.

Secondly, GSI has nothing greatly to do with mining and is not involved even in exploratory mining, which is taken up by MECL and IBM. As a matter of fact, GSI is the odd-one-out in the Ministry of Mines and rightfully belongs to the Ministry of Earth Sciences, when once it has come into existence.

Thirdly, if the main objective of the formation of the Ministry of Earth Sciences is disaster management, as indirectly implied in the PIB Press Release, where does GSI lack in such studies compared to DOD and IMD? The seismological studies in India were initiated by GSI (Oldham, 1897), and till date GSI has brought out 15 publications on all the major disastrous earthquakes that have struck India since 1988 (Bihar-Nepal earthquake, 20th August, 1988, GSI Spl Pub no 31). GSI has also published the Seismotectonic Atlas of India in 2000 (Spl Pub no 59). Studies on earthquakes from the earliest recorded times to 1934 are contained in numerous Memoirs and unpublished reports of GSI. On any scale, the contributions that GSI has made to the field of palaeoseismology, seismology and seismotectonics are by no means less significant than those made by IMD, “the principle Government agency in all matters relating to meteorology and seismology”.

As a matter of fact, IMD as the nodal agency for seismology-related studies is controversial in itself. In USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France and Russia, respective geological survey organizations are responsible for seismological studies. When and under what circumstances this job was assigned to IMD, would make an interesting study.

Natural disasters are not confined to earthquakes and tsunamis triggered by them. GSI is the nodal agency for the studies of landslides and is also involved in the studies or avalanches in collaboration with Snow and Avalanche Studies Establishment (SASE, DRDO, Ministry of Defence). GSI is also engaged in the study of natural hazards of other kinds as part of its Environmental Studies Programme Earthquake Geology, Landslides Hazards Zonation and Environmental Geology Divisions function at all the regional levels, with monitoring cells at the Central Headquarters.

Lastly, it could be rather embarrassing to explain at international fora as to how GSI is kept outside the Ministry of Earth Sciences in our country. Going by simple logic, having the Ministry of Earth Sciences without Geological Survey of India is akin to Ministry of Finance without RBI, the Department of Atomic Energy without BARC, the Ministry of Defence without DRDO, the Ministry of Space without ISRO and the Ministry of Petroleum without ONGC.

As the Ministry of Earth Sciences envisages to develop an integrated approach on issues concerning water, global climatic changes, environment, meteorology, seismology and related earth sciences, it should include, in addition to GSI, DOD and IMD, Departments/Organizations, such as NGRI, WHG, CGWB and may be even CPCB. Then only we can think of having a real integrated approach towards all the problems related to Earth Science and Earth Systems Science.

It is the need of the hour that transcending all the barriers, geologists, geophysicists and geochemists, belonging to Government Departments, Research Organizations and Academic Institutions, come together on this issue of the creation and composition of the Ministry of Earth Sciences. Letters and representations must be sent to the President and Prime Minister at individual and organizational levels, and also on behalf of associations, requesting the government to reexamine its decision to exclude GSI and other Earth Sciences organizations/Institutions from the Ministry of Earth Sciences. Eminent scientists, academicians, both serving and emeritus, Fellows of Academies of Sciences and retired earth scientists ought to play their role in expressing their views without fear or favour in the larger interest in this regard. Earth scientists of GSI, NGRI, WHG and CGWB may approach the Government through their associations or individual representations routed through proper channel. Our togetherness on this issue would definitely make the Government reconsider its decision and would be in the best interest of Earth Sciences and the country.

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