Nobel thought: red tape stifling talent

PRASUN CHAUDHURI

Jan. 4: India has taken huge strides in the field of science and technology over the past two decades and has the potential to be a global leader, but what holds back the country is its bureaucracy, Nobel laureate David Jonathan Gross said in Calcutta today.

"Most educational and scientific institutes are still governed by civil servants. Similar groups of officials regulate post offices. Everything is so centralised and inflexible. Also, there is political influence over science," Gross, recipient of the 2004 Nobel for physics, said during his keynote speech at the 15th anniversary of the Dr Moni Bhaumik Educational Foundation at Taj Bengal.

Gross is as enamoured of Calcutta as he is fascinated by the country's rich pool of young talent. "I love this city and I am happy to be a part of a brilliant initiative that has been nurturing brilliant young minds into successful scientists, engineers or doctors," he said of the foundation.

This is Gross's fourth visit to the city since 1994. "And I have seen how the country as well as the city has changed in the 23 years," he said.

But bureaucracy in India, he rued, hadn't changed in all these years. "Otherwise, the country can easily surpass China in the field of science in a decade or so. Unlike in China, India has a culture of science education; it has 200-year-old educational institutes with a rich legacy of science; scientists like Raman, Bose, Saha, Ramanujan and Chandrasekhar, and a vibrant democracy."

On Bhaumik, a Bengali-born American physicist and philanthropist, Gross said: "Mani rose out of poverty and innovated the excimer laser that has benefited hundreds of thousands of people across the world, including me. Thanks to his work, I recently got my cataract operated and was back on my feet within a few days."

The Dr Moni Bhaumik Educational Foundation, founded in 1999, aims to help the underprivileged through education. Some of those nurtured by the foundation shared their stories. Tapan Samanta, a gynaecologist at a government hospital in Egra, Midnapore, recounted: "I was struggling for two meals a day. After my plus two, I had to drop out and I became a rickshaw-puller. This scholarship made what I am," he recounted. In the past 15 years, the foundation has supported 150 meritorious students. "As a developing country, India needs talents from poor families to be nurtured into assets to lift the economy," Bhaumik said.

But red tape has come in the way of his dream to create an International Centre for Advanced Research in Calcutta in collaboration with his alma mater, IIT Kharagpur. "I haven't been able to get ahead for the last six years," he said.

He had founded the Mani L. Bhaumik Institute for Theoretical Physics at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), within six months.