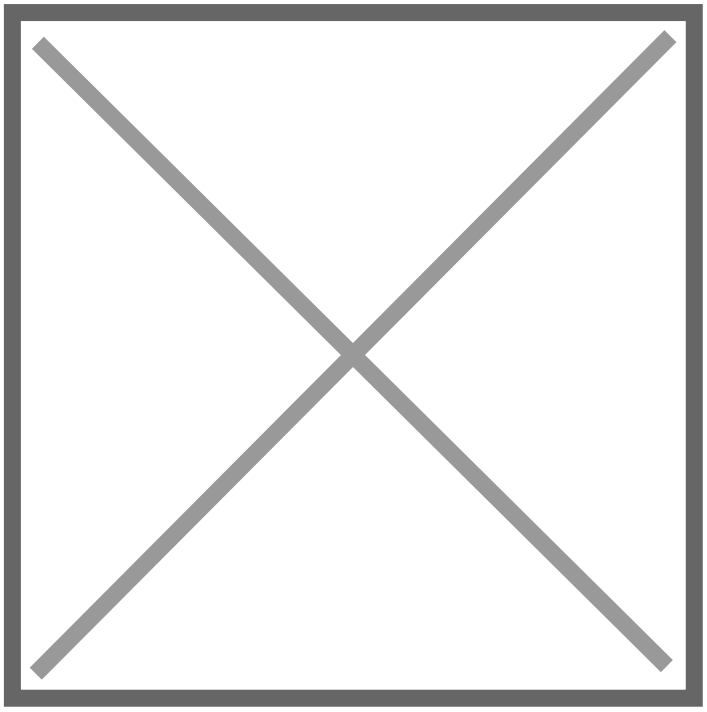
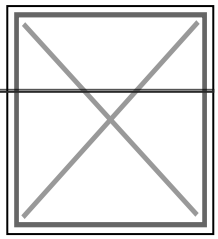
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After the successful sequencing of the Human Genome, a follow-up and equally, and if not more, important international collaborative project has started to develop the "HapMap". The HapMap will attempt to portray the common patterns of human DNA sequence, which could become a key resource for researchers trying to locate different genes affecting health, disease and responses to drugs and environmental factor.

It is certainly another prestigious project. What is surprising from an Indian viewpoint is that our country is not part of this momentous scientific venture. Only researchers from the US, UK, Japan and Nigeria are part of the project. The omission is all the more glaring because Indian researchers were part of the Human Genome project. Who is to blame? Can we wash our sins away, blaming the rest of the world for wrongly keeping India out? Certainly, not. The fault mainly lies with the vast science and technology set-up in the Indian government, which prides itself on the fact that the system has enabled the country to become the third largest reservoir of scientific talent in the world.

India has everything going for it to become part of this prestigious project. The human and financial resources will not be a constraint for India. And India is endowed with rich diversity in ethnic profile. Yet, the HapMap will be based on the genetic profiling of a small sample of 270 people from the Yoruba tribe in Ibadan Nigeria; 45 unrelated Japanese individuals in Tokyo, Japan; 45 Han Chinese people from Beijing; and 30 samples collected by the Centre d'Etude du Polymorphisme Humain (CEPH), France. The data will be made available free to the public later. However, India's large pool of genetic researchers could have benefited immensely with exposure of modern techniques as part of the project.

But the nation's scientific leadership is strangely silent on this. The episode is similar to that last April when Indian researchers missed the bus during the global race to map the dreaded Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) genome. No one in this country takes the responsibility for gearing up the nation to anticipate such major developments and gain valuable research experience. The plethora of scientific agencies makes it easy to diffuse the ownership of any major research initiative. A senior scientist has justified India's non-participation in the HapMap project with the remark that the nation has the capability to take part in huge international projects but the projects have to be evaluated for relevance to India. What a lame excuse!

This is the country, which has been investing its precious resources to develop a Hyper Plane (a pet project of President APJ Abdul Kalam when he was the Scientific Advisor to the Defense Minister). We are also planning to land an Indian spacecraft

and if possible an astronaut on the Moon, long after the human fascination for our nearest space neighbor has dwindled. At the same time, our country does not have the resources to buy enough planes for our national airlines, Air India. As a result, three-fourths of three million outbound Indians are dependent on foreign airlines for their globe-trotting business and pleasure jaunts. These examples illustrate the fact that our scientific leadership did not deem it serious to participate in a project which would have benefited millions of Indian with appropriate health care solutions early through HapMap.

