

History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture

NATURE AND CULTURE

Discussion Meeting

Sponsored by Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture (PHISPC)
Centre for Studies in Civilizations (CSC), Kolkata and New Delhi

5-6 May 2005, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore

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11 April 2005

Prof. Obaid Siddiqi
Molecular Biologist
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Dear Prof. Siddiqi,

As part of the Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture, being implemented by the Centre for Studies in Civilizations, Kolkata and New Delhi, under the leadership of Prof. D P Chattopadhyaya, I am organizing a Discussion Meeting on **Nature and Culture**, on **5-6 May 2005** at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

A note on the kind of questions that we would like to be considered at this meeting is enclosed. I have great pleasure in inviting you to give a talk at this meeting on a subject that is related to the theme as explained in the note.

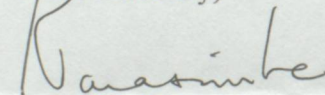
I shall be grateful if you can kindly confirm your participation.

My colleague Dr Sangeetha Menon, Convener of the Discussion Meeting, will keep in touch with regarding the arrangements for the meeting.

I look forward to hearing from you.

With regards,

Yours Sincerely,



(RODDAM NARASIMHA)

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The two words that express the theme of this Discussion Meeting have many different connotations and raise a large number of fascinating questions. Nature can be the physical environment that a human culture inhabits: the rivers and mountains and valleys and forests and deserts and islands that characterize a whole land- and seascape. Nature can also be the whole physical universe – in all its immensity (relative to the small part of it which we inhabit): not only the earth but the planets and the stars and other heavenly bodies. But nature cannot exclude man and all other life that are also parts of the same universe. So nature can also refer to the intrinsic character of individual human beings or of any collective of which they are members.

Culture must be seen as both process and product. Sociologists and anthropologists have studied culture extensively and constructed several theoretical frameworks for analysing it as a human phenomenon. Culture is influenced by the physical and experiential environment in which it lives – geography, climate, history; and in turn influences the view of nature held by the human collective that shares that culture. That collective is defined in part by geographical boundaries, religion and language, but often goes well beyond any of them. And culture expresses itself in art, literature, language, philosophy, law, science and technology.

In Indic thought nature may be *prakṛti*. *Sāṃkhya* philosophers expounded a dualism in which *prakṛti* was distinguished from *puruṣa* (spirit, man). (So perhaps the theme of the Meeting could well have been titled *Prakṛti and Puruṣa*.) But *human* nature was also expressed in *sva-bhāva*, often considered a major determinant of individual and collective history.

But in whatever senses the words are used, and whatever aspects of the subject we consider, there can be no doubt that nature and culture strongly interact with each other. It is these interactions that this Discussion meeting will explore. In particular, we wish to address the following issues.

- To what extent are Indic cultures influenced by the environment – in different parts of the country, and in India as a whole? Is there a common

thread connecting all of them that could constitute an *Indic* culture? How have similar environmental influences operated on cultures in other parts of the world?

- To what extent do Indic views of nature influence our culture, and are influenced by it? – in cosmology, astronomy, mathematics, technology, the sciences in general? What are the connections between sacred art (temples, sculptures, painting etc.) and technology (building materials, construction engineering, metallurgy, dyes)? How are Indic theories of causality – in *sāṃkhya*, *nyāya*, Buddhist, Jain and other systems of philosophy – related to other aspects of Indic culture? What role does the ancient idea of *ṛta* play in our view of the world? How have these views evolved over time, in particular as orthodox and protestant philosophies engaged in debate with each other? How do these views relate (if they do at all) to modern ideas in science and philosophy? Are they still relevant – to India, to the rest of the world? – and, whatever the answer, how and why?
- Human beings have always had an ambiguous relationship with nature. On the one hand, the forces of nature may be dreaded, loved or adored. On the other hand, to ensure human survival, the same forces may also have to be analysed, understood and coped with if not tamed or mastered. This dual relationship is ancient: Indians have traditionally worshipped nature, sought its benefits and extolled the virtues of living in harmony with it. But they have also cleared forests, built lakes and dams, conveyed water over long distances for agriculture or for civic comfort, dug out minerals and diamonds, and cast metal or experimented with chemicals for enhancing the joy of living. What are the interactions between these views of nature? Are Indians revolted by Baconian dominationism over nature, or do they practise a softer form of it?
- Is (or was) there anything unique about Indic views of nature, and if so how do they relate to Indic cultures? How closely can we trace such connections, assuming they exist? How are they different from views in other major civilizations of the world? Was (for example) the notion of beauty philosophically secondary in Indic thought (unlike in classical Greece), just as the notion of joy or bliss has been an Indic philosophical primary? Similarly, why did Indic culture award primacy to linguistics, in contrast with other major civilizations? Why did Indic mathematics place the concept of number in the forefront, rather than logic?

These are only some of the issues that arise in any consideration of the connections and interactions between nature and culture in Indic civilization. There are undoubtedly many others that are interesting and important, and it is the intention of the Discussion Meeting to identify and explore as many of them as possible, within the available material and human resources.