



Towards the true spirit of science

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(MainsGS2: Achievements of Indians in Science & Technology; Indigenization of Technology and Developing New Technology.)

Context:

- The Government is organising a Science Week, 'Vigyan Sarvatra Pujiyate', as a prelude to National Science Day on February 28 that commemorates Sir C.V. Raman's discovery on light scattering.
- The programme appears to have been designed to make youth proud about India's scientific achievements.

Dissent is the soul of science:

- Science is a mosaic of partial and conflicting visions but there is one common element in these visions.
- The common element is rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the locally prevailing culture, Western or Eastern as the case may be.
- The vision of science is not specifically Western as it is no more Western than it is Arab or Indian or Japanese or Chinese because Arabs and Indians and Japanese and Chinese had a big share in the development of modern science.

Intellectual rebellion:

- Science is universal as there is nothing like Indian, American or Chinese science.
- Science was initially nurtured through exchanges of ideas that moved like merchandise between distant places over the ancient trade routes.

- Considering evidence-based modern science as an intellectual rebellion or as a form of dissent against social constraints.
- For example, the Islamic and the European renaissance of science of the Middle Ages, or the reawakening in India around the 19th century that formed the background for the independence struggle.

Promote free spirit:

- For Indian scientists of those days, science was a double rebellion, against English domination as well as the fatalistic ethos of Hinduism.
- This rebellious spirit led to a resurgence of science in India in the pre-Independence days and Sir C.V. Raman's discovery cannot be seen independent of the social reformism of those days.
- But in recent times, the spectre of conformism that was lying low in our collective consciousness has now returned with a vengeance, and academic freedom is now under greater pressure to tow the official line than ever before.
- If science must excel it needs to promote free spirit without seeing it as a threat to establishment of all kinds, whether it upends a long-standing scientific idea, or it questions the received political wisdom or irrationality.

Obsession with hierarchy:

- Science is an alliance of free spirits in all cultures rebelling against the local tyranny that each culture imposes on its children.
- The great scientists like Einstein, Galileo Galilei and Nicolaus Copernicus took a firm stand against the prevalent wisdom despite their religiosity.
- The ecology of dominant conformist traits is intertwined with group identity that determines the attitude towards our superiors and subordinates.
- Sudhir Kakar and Katharina Kakar in their book, *The Indians: Portrait of A People*, trace this culture of conformism to our childhood as a reflection of our obsession with hierarchy that spills over to institutional setups.

Collective self:

- The Indian family landscape is patriarchal and our children are sensitised to a collective self; thus, we grow with a loss of self and learn to subsume our worth as an individual.
- An Indian is thus culturally tuned to uphold the family's integrity, religion, caste and/or regional identity rather than her individual strengths.
- Such societies with patriarchal moorings automatically generate conditions for authoritarian rule, generating an ambience of fear that may not be conducive for path-breaking enquiries.

Unleashing transformative power:

- R.A. Mashelkar, the former Director-General of the CSIR, said that tradition-bound countries such as India need to free themselves from the cultural chains of the past to foster original thinking.
- But the cultural shifts are not easy to accomplish, particularly in a tradition bound society; thus, scientists have a special duty to foster a free and unfettered intellectual ambience by actively engaging in the transformation of values both within and outside workplaces.
- A fundamental challenge is how to strengthen the social democratic norms within the institutes, representative of Indian diversity and plurality.
- Thus, National Science Day should offer forums where freewheeling discussion of such themes are organised, epitomising the true spirit of science and unleashing its tremendous transformative power.

Conclusion:

The National Science Day event should be used to celebrate the true spirit of science that defies all types of intellectual curtailments, thus promoting critical thinking in our academic centres.