

Colloquium

The sociality of scientific practice and knowledge

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The public understanding of science oscillates between two polar images of science: as being deeply related to the intellectual capacities of the individual while at the same time recognizing that it is a social good, something to be valued as a social practice. In the Indian case, this has led to a great privilege to the idea of science ranging from viewing scientific temper as a constitutional duty to the priority given to science education across educational systems. The emphasis on particular forms of individual skill based on scientific practice has also led to a narrow understanding of merit which has had a deep impact on our society. At the same time, any talk of the social aspects of scientific practice, including the ways by which the values of the larger society enter into the values of scientific organizations, has been publicly denounced as being critical of science and hence being anti-science. Related to this is the argument that even if social practices are part of science, scientific knowledge does not reflect, nor can be dependent on, these social factors. These beliefs about science are patently false. More worryingly, they are used to insulate science from social accountability of any kind. Not only does this denial of the sociality of science lead to the problematic use of science in society but it has also contributed to the sorry state of scientific practice in India today. However, when scientists do reluctantly acknowledge the social, they decouple it from scientific knowledge and place the social into the people who do science and not in the activity of 'science' itself. Part of the reason for doing this is the difficulty in conceptualizing the social. In this talk, I will discuss some notions of the idea of the social and its essential relation to the concept of the natural. I will then explore how the ideas and values of the social (including those associated with class, caste and gender) have always been, and continue to be, an essential part of the everyday social of scientific practice as well as the scientific knowledge that is produced in them.

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2:30 PM (Tea/Coffee at 2:00 PM)

Auditorium, TIFR-H