
From Jawaharlal Nehru’s evocative “temples of modern India” dedication to the grotesque jubilation following Pokahran II, science has always played an important role in the way independent India has defined itself: a nation which is trying to use that ultimate symbol of modernity to take, what it thinks is its rightful place among the “developed” nations. A nation recognized not for its snake charmers but for its intercontinental missiles. “Another Reason” is an admirable study of this relationship between science and the nation.

This obsessive desire to measure and to define “progress” in scientific terms, whether it is the amount of power produced or the number of steel plants is not a post independent phenomenon as this book shows clearly. The process started with the British in the nineteenth century. The equation of science with progress and a universal truth was very much a part of the colonial ideology. Of course, it helped that science also served as an instrument of consolidating the empire.

In the beginning were the exhibitions. Local exhibitions started in the 1840s in India largely in preparation of the 1851 Great Exhibition at London. These exhibitions were primarily meant to familiarize the peasants and artisans with new technologies and techniques. Over time, these events became hugely popular and were held in a majority of the districts. The Calcutta International Exhibition in 1883 attracted over a million visitors!

Together with the museums that were being established around the same time, these exhibitions were a first introduction of the “natives” to the classification and utilitarian aspects of science. Apart from this, they also were a place for the colonial power to get the wealth of specimens that India offered for the scientific project: a variety of tribes, artifacts and languages.

Not surprisingly, the cultural authority accorded to the scientific method by the colonists led the Western educated native elite to take up the popularization of science in a big way. The Asiatic Society of Bengal was already in existence but the late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of scientific and cultural organizations to promote scientific culture. The Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, Behar Scientific Society, Aligarh Scientific Society were all holding public lectures and publishing tracts on scientific topics. The efforts of the local intelligentsia to propagate a scientific outlook are very well described in this book. It seems odd that a hundred years ago, when literacy and education was restricted to a very small set of the populace, the elite at least made an effort to disseminate what they thought were liberating ideas. Contrast this to our own times where one can discern no such inclination among the educated class. Our own scientists and technologists would rather give a talk in Berlin rather than take the trouble of delivering a public lecture in Bihar. The situation in scientific journalism is no better. The amount of column inches devoted to science is about a tenth of that devoted to what the stars of tinsel town are wearing. There are almost no programs on science, which are worth watching or hearing on the electronic media.

An interesting result of the elite taking up the propagation of science was the increased interest in our own religious and philosophical texts. There was an attempt to reread and interpret the ancient texts in light of the scientific knowledge to establish parallels with modern day science. Several scholars highlighted the advances in ancient Indian Chemistry, Ayurved and astronomy among other disciplines.

Gyan Prakash’s book is an excellent study on the evolution of the scientific project in India in colonial times. It is not a history of science, in the sense that it does not catalogue or analyze the various scientific disciplines. Rather it is the story of “science’s history as a sign of Indian modernity”. The main concern of the author is “to identify science’s functioning as culture and
power". In this he succeeds brilliantly. His case is well argued and illustrated with many examples that make for very interesting reading. In fact, in my opinion, his description of the various Indian responses to science is the most interesting part of the book. The book is detailed and yet eminently readable (though how one wishes that the social scientists find a suitable synonym of the word "discourse" which is a bit overused. picking up any random page in the book, one is certain to encounter this one word!)

Reading this book one is left with a depressing thought. The hegemonising influence of science and technology in India seems to be overstated. Even with the educated, science and scientific culture seems to be at best an add-on to their deep rooted ideology. Whether it is the Rahu Kaalam or Godmen producing Seiko watches, we still have a long way to go before scientific culture becomes a way of life. If after almost two hundred years of science this is the state of affairs, then the prospect for the future is not very bright.