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What's happening at the Centre for Contemporaries Studies and Why?

Our world is changing rapidly and in complex, unpredictable ways. This brings with it many benefits but also many new and complex problems. It seems obvious that scientists and other intellectuals and scholars should help in dealing with our changed circumstances and solving the new and complex problems. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult as the community of intelligentsia is unable to cope with the pace of change and is ill equipped to deal with the many new problems and challenges. It is clear that completely new paradigms will be required but a major difficulty in creating useful new paradigms is that intellectual knowledge is compartmentalised into water-tight disciplines. And yet, most of the challenges we face today require that we break these boundaries and simultaneously utilize the knowledge base and methodology of different disciplines. While disciplinary boundaries are difficult to bridge at all levels, perhaps the most difficult gap is to bridge between the natural sciences and human sciences (taken to include social sciences, humanities, literature and art etc.). The natural sciences and human sciences have developed largely independent of each other and have perfected their own respective research methodologies, working philosophies and even day-to-day languages. This makes it almost impossible for experts in different disciplines to understand or even speak to each other at a professional level.

As a result of this, experts in different disciplines work within the boundaries of their own discipline and seldom attempt to cross over into other disciplines. Quite often experts from the natural and human sciences display extreme scepticism about the validity of each others methodologies and the ability of each other to understand, let alone solve, the practical problems facing society today. And yet, it is easy to see that this situation needs to be changed. Consider some of the major challenges that we face today the causes and consequences of climate change, the need to achieve equitable and sustainable development, the need to reverse the loss of the worlds biodiversity and cultural diversity, the urgent need to understand and mitigate ethnic and cultural conflict. A very little reflection will convince us that every one of these challenges will inevitably require that we draw on expertise both from natural and human sciences. What, if anything, can we do about this?

I have initiated a small effort that might help overcome this situation, at the Centre for Contemporary Studies (CCS) in IISc. CCS has set itself the task of bringing to the campus of IISc some of the best practitioners of different disciplines in the human sciences. Philosophy, sociology, economics, law, literature, poetry, art, music, cinema

are all being represented in this experiment. These scholars, drawn from all over the world, visit and lecture at IISc and many are in residence for periods ranging from a few days to several months. Students registered for various courses in IISc (and also at other institutes in Bangalore) are the main targets in this endeavour. My experience with this programme so far has been very positive. I have found that very useful and meaningful interaction is possible between the natural sciences and human sciences provided the focus is on understanding the respective research methodologies. Indeed it has been my experience that such interaction provides an opportunity to question and rethink the fundamental foundations of our disciplines. Often the opportunity to criticise the methodological foundation of another discipline leads to a re-examination of the foundation of ones own discipline. In addition to the lectures and discussions with individual visiting scholars, CCS organises, once in two years, a one semester course entitled Production of Knowledge in the Natural and Social Sciences which provides an even more explicit opportunity to compare and contrast the modes of knowledge production in a whole range of disciplines straddling across the natural and human sciences.

I extend a warm invitation to all students of IISc (and also faculty and staff) to participate in the various activities of CCS and indeed, to suggest new activities that we might organize in the future. For more information about CCS, please visit: <http://ces.iisc.ernet.in/hpg/ragh/ccs/Welcome.html>

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