

# CONNECT

WITH THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE

## Crystallography:

Its history through  
its tools

## Centre for Contemporary

**Studies:** A case  
for humanities

## George Smoot:

Astrophysicist and  
Nobel laureate



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# THE CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES



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*The Centre for Contemporary Studies (CCS) is a unique initiative in the human sciences at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc). It is chaired by Raghavendra Gadagkar, also a professor at the Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES). He spoke to **CONNECT** about the Centre's history, its activities and also how it contributes to an institute focused on the natural sciences and engineering*

**KARTHIK RAMASWAMY**

## THE BIRTH

About ten years ago, Raghavendra Gadagkar received a message from Goverdhan Mehta, the then Director of the Institute, who asked Gadagkar to meet him immediately. At that time, Gadagkar was away in Germany at the Institute for Advanced Study (where he has been a Permanent Fellow for the last fourteen years). He went to meet Mehta the day he arrived back in Bangalore. He recalls the conversation vividly. "Mehta told me, 'We have made a decision. There will be a

Centre for Contemporary Studies. And you will be its Chairman.' He added, 'You have no choice.' In response, I told him that I did not want a choice. And that I will be very happy to take this up."

CCS was created when the erstwhile Centre for Theoretical Studies (CTS) was bifurcated into two separate centres — CCS and the Centre for High Energy Physics. CTS was meant to bring in social sciences and humanities into IISc, but its focus had shifted to research in high-energy physics. So the Institute's administration decided



BITASTA DAS

Raghavendra Gadagkar, Chairperson of CCS

on the bifurcation and a new centre dedicated to the study of humanities and social sciences was born, one that had an opportunity to revisit the original mandate of CTS.

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**NEW HOME IN AN OLD BUILDING**

The building where CCS is housed has an old world warmth about it. It is after all one of the oldest buildings on campus. Sitting comfortably among trees of varying shades of green and a neatly trimmed lawn, the white building is adorned by a red Mangalore-tiled roof; its doors and window frames, made of mature hard wood, are painted chocolate brown. It maybe ageing, but it is ageing well.

A few years ago, this quaint

building served as the office of the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR). When JNCASR moved out of this building, there were not many takers for it, because it was not “modern” enough for them. “So I jumped at the chance and we occupied it,” says Gadagkar, referring to how CCS moved into its new home from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research building where it was then housed. The building has a long history,

having once served as the IISc Gymkhana (Mahatma Gandhi is supposed to have come here when he visited IISc). It was also where the Centre’s predecessor, CTS, was originally established.

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*“So I jumped at the chance and we occupied it”*

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**HUMANITIES IN A SCIENCE INSTITUTE**

When asked about the scope of the Centre, Gadagkar is quick to say, “The universe minus IISc.” CCS prides itself on not having rigid boundaries. Its visitors come from many fields of human endeavor — social sciences, humanities, arts, literature, philosophy, music, law, films... the list is impressive. Gadagkar is convinced that such a centre is essential in an Institute dedicated to the natural sciences. He argues that scientists are so specialized in their disciplines that they have



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lost the ability to comprehend what people in other fields do and how they do it. And that he believes is a great shame. He continues, “The other problem is that people look down upon what they do not understand.” Gadagkar believes that by exposing faculty and students at the Institute to how researchers in other fields approach problems and generate knowledge, they can look at their own research problem in a different light. He thinks that the least this exposure would do is to make our criticisms of others’ fields more informed and constructive. CCS, thus, provides an ideal platform for the Institute community to engage with scholars from disciplines outside the natural sciences.

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*“The other problem is that people look down upon what they do not understand”*

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## FACULTY

The Centre has three Associate faculty — HN Chanakya (Chief Research Scientist, Centre for Sustainable Technologies), Rudra Pratap (Chair, Centre for Nano Science and Engineering) and S Ramakrishnan (Chair, Division of Chemical Sciences). Chanakya, who is interested in understanding sustainable development from different perspectives, also teaches an undergraduate humanities course on the subject.

The Centre, however, relies more on its Visiting faculty to create a



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Associate Faculty at CCS (from left to right): HN Chanakya (Chief Research Scientist, Center for Sustainable Technologies), Rudra Pratap (Chair, Center for Nano Science and Engineering) and S Ramakrishnan (Chair, Division of Chemical Sciences)

rich multi-disciplinary learning environment. Scholars from many different fields of social sciences, arts and humanities come to the Centre for varying periods of time, ranging from a few days to a few months. They have complete freedom to choose what they want to work on. “CCS develops its character through its visitors,” explains Gadagkar.

The Centre also hosts lectures almost every week. They are open to not just the Institute community, but the public as well. In the first half of their lectures, speakers typically focus on educating the audience about their disciplines — what they do and how they do what they do. The second half is focused on their own contribution to their field. These talks have been so successful that they have spawned a semester-long course called “Production of Knowledge”, open to anyone interested; some institutions even use it for credit.

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*“CCS develops its character through its visitors”*

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## UNDERGRADUATE COURSES

CCS has another important responsibility — it runs the humanities courses for the undergraduate (UG) programme at IISc. UG students take courses offered by CCS in six out of their eight semesters, thus making the humanities an integral part of their curriculum. Most courses are taught by the Visiting faculty. The Centre also has an Instructor in Bitasta Das. She currently teaches a course about the diversity of folk arts in India. Besides teaching, Das plays a crucial role in the day-to-day coordination of the Centre’s activities.

The course work for UG students at IISc in the humanities section comprises two sets of courses: *foundation* courses that are offered in the first three semesters, followed by *advanced* courses offered in the fourth, fifth and sixth semesters. The three *foundation* courses offered are: “Ways of Knowing”, a course about how knowledge is produced in different disciplines; “Ways of Seeing”, a course about how what we know is communicated



CURRENT VISITING FACULTY AT CCS

MOHAMMED ROSHAN



**Uday Balakrishnan** is a former member of the Indian Postal Service and has served as the Registrar of IISc. He teaches an *advanced* UG course in which students are introduced to the functioning of the Indian Government, both in theory and practice.

MAHESHWARI SATHESH



**Tejaswini Niranjana** is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bengaluru, besides being a Visiting Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. She has been actively involved with CCS since its inception and has helped design its curriculum.

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**Rajan Gurukkal**, a former Vice Chancellor of MG University at Kottayam, is a social scientist, historian and writer. He also teaches in the “Production of Knowledge” course offered by the Centre.

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A journalist with vast experience as a writer and an editor, **Amrita Shah** has also written a biography of Vikram Sarabhai. She has previously taught in the “Production of Knowledge” course and is currently teaching an *advanced* course on science journalism.

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Also a Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, **SV Srinivas** has been associated with the development of the *foundation* courses. With a background in English literature, Srinivas has been studying the link between popular culture and politics.

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**Srinivas Raghavendra** is an economist at the National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland. A macroeconomic theorist, Raghavendra is currently interested in how the modern financial sector impacts the macroeconomy.



in different disciplines; and “Ways of Doing”, a course about how to bring scholarship in different disciplines to bear on the solution to real-life problems. The *advanced* courses provide the students with more freedom as they explore subjects as diverse as “Science Journalism”, “Governance” and “Mapping India through its Folk Arts”.

The goal of these courses, according to Gadagkar, is not to teach humanities as a set of disciplines, but to teach the social context in which science is done. Elaborating further, he says, “While there are universal facts that science reveals, the context too is important. Starting from the choice of the problem all the way to how exactly you proceed is hugely context-dependent which we cannot ignore. Therefore, instead of first learning science and then being told that it is context-dependent,



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Bitasta Das is an Instructor and coordinates many of the Centre's activities

we want our students to learn science in the social context in which it happens. In fact, I think science should never be taught outside this context.”

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*“Therefore, instead of first learning science and then being told that it is context-dependent, we want our students to learn science in the social context in which it happens”*

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performing a play for the Institute community as their final exam. Called “Photograph 51”, it is the story of how the structure of DNA was discovered and Rosalind Franklin’s contribution to this vital discovery. Through the play, the students tried to understand the sociology and the politics of science at the time of the discovery.

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*“For us, it is not science versus humanities; it is not science and humanities; it is science sitting on top of humanities”*

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“You can see how being part of this play would motivate the students to study what Watson and Crick achieved,” says Gadagkar. “For us, it is not science versus humanities; it is not science and humanities; it is science sitting on top of humanities,” he concludes.



UTKARSH VIJAY

A Dollu Kunita performance from Das' class



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