

Why I do not discourage my students from "wasting" their time with the "theatre"?

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There is wisdom in turning as often as possible from the familiar to the unfamiliar: it keeps the mind nimble, it kills prejudice, and it fosters humor.

- George Santayana, philosopher (1863-1952)

□□□□□□□□ Modern science is a rather complicated business. While understanding it is difficult enough, practicing it as a researcher is far more so. Those of us in India or other developing countries who try to contribute to the creation of new scientific knowledge are up against enormous odds. This is something that the general public fails to appreciate when it laments at the missing Indian names in annual lists of Nobel prizes. Firstly, the edifice of scientific knowledge upon which we are attempting to build further, is almost entirely a western creation and we need to fathom it more or less as outsiders. Secondly, the apparatus for creating new scientific knowledge is becoming increasingly sophisticated and expensive, making us hopelessly out-of-date, on a daily basis. Nevertheless we may occasionally hope to add a bit of our own new contribution here and there, if we carefully watch the frontiers of knowledge and locate less crowded and less fashionable corners at the interface of knowledge and ignorance.

□□□□□□□□ But to compete with the best western institutions, well endowed with long traditions of scientific work and with mammoth material resources, and do better than them, is another matter altogether. For this we certainly need some clever strategies indeed, because we need to leapfrog ahead of the best research groups around the world. How do we do that? One way would be to have very different and novel perspectives on the topics of our research. In other words, rather than simply try to run faster

than others on the same track, we need to find different and better tracks. An inevitable feature of modern science is the increasing specialization of scientists and the consequent narrowing of the knowledge domains of individual scientists. In such a situation, the road to rapid progress usually consists of taking for granted the validity of all or most prior knowledge and proceed to build on it. Both because of narrow limits of their knowledge and because of the fast pace of modern scientific research, most researchers have neither the ability nor the inclination to question the fundamental assumptions of their disciplines. In other words, most people attempt to make rapid progress by quickly climbing to top of an existing building and add another floor, rather than sit and worry about whether the foundation is strong enough.

□□□□□□□□ But those who have the ability and courage to question the fundamentals of their disciplines and overturn much previous work are the ones who are most likely to hit the jackpot. Some may possess the required courage but ability to question the fundamentals of one's discipline, is harder to come by. It needs a new and different way of approaching the same problems that everyone else is grappling with. And that is where the opening quote from George Santayana becomes relevant. Not only do frequent visits to unfamiliar [intellectual territory] keep the mind nimble and kill prejudice, as Santayana rightly observes, but I may add that they foster creativity and induce self criticism. For this reason I encourage, indeed insist that, my students cultivate a broad and abiding interest in very diverse and disparate realms of creative human endeavours. In recent years, I have had the good fortune of being able to institutionalise such encouragement, in the form of the Centre for Contemporary Studies.



The Centre for Contemporary Studies, IISc □

□ □ □ □ □ Photo: Thresiamma Varghese

□□□□□□□□ Through the Centre for Contemporary Studies, a relatively new experiment at the Indian Institute of Science, I have endeavoured to bring to the Institute some of the best practitioners of different disciplines in the human sciences, such as philosophy, sociology, economics, law, literature, poetry, art, music, cinema etc. - all disciplines completely unrepresented at the Institute. These scholars, drawn from all over the world, visit and lecture at the Institute and some are in residence for periods ranging from a few days to several months. Students (and faculty and staff of the Institute as well as a number of people from other institutes in Bangalore) attend these lectures. The aim of this experiment is to forge useful and meaningful interaction between the natural sciences and human sciences with special focus on understanding the diverse research methodologies of different disciplines and create opportunities to rethink the foundations of our own disciplines. In my experience, the opportunity to criticise the methodological foundation of another discipline is the first step to begin to

re-examine the foundation of one's own discipline.

□□□□□□□□ Since my students routinely and actively participate in these events, I am hardly surprised that a group of them have now spent weeks in organizing a national panel discussion on globalization and the Indian regional theatre. I wish them luck and believe that this and other similar experiences will broaden their intellectual horizons and equip them with the courage and ability to think "out of the box", in everything that they do in life.



Tea prior to a talk at The Centre for Contemporary Studies, IISc

(Prof. R. Gadagkar, Ramchandra Guha, Prof. U. R. Ananthamurthy are seen in the photograph, right to left) □

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