

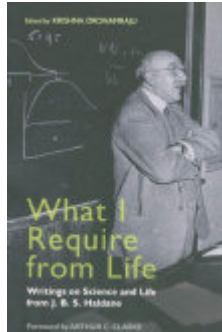
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Polymath who shared the fun of science

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Compilation of selected popular essays of one of the scientific giants of the 20th century



WHAT I REQUIRE FROM LIFE — Writings on Science and Life from J. B. S. Haldane: Edited by Krishna Dronamraju; Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jaisingh Road, New Delhi-110001. \$ 29.95.

British by birth and Indian by choice, J. B. S. Haldane is known mainly as one of the founders of modern evolutionary theory. He could also write wittily and knowledgeably — as he does here — on astronomy, bird song, bee dance, handedness, floods and memory. He was a prodigious populariser of science. First-time readers of Haldane will be struck by the range, simple language and direct style of these pieces, as also by the odd — and often provocative — twists that they contain. Most will learn a great many facts that are new to them.

Broad in scope

He churned out a large number of essays on science for the general public. They were staggeringly broad in scope. A single essay could cover the fascination of astronomy and the ease with which it could be practised, the measurement of astronomical distances, the temperatures of the stars and how the story of Trishanku may have originated. Haldane was a scientist of the highest class and possessed a breadth of knowledge in the sciences that is rarely seen. But he did not have a degree in science. He obtained an “honour’s” in the classics and became a Marxist with the ability to quote at will from the literature of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit — besides English.

The first 37 pieces in this splendid book come from his British period and were written between 1937 and 1950 for the communist party newspaper *The Daily Worker*. He immigrated later to India with his wife because both felt drawn by the (now largely abandoned) Nehruvian enterprise. The last 20 pieces, all published in *The Hindu*, date

from his Indian period (1957-64). The themes covered in the two lots are not different in any striking way. But there is an Indian tilt in the second half. There is much about India that he is fond of and much that dismays him. He points out how bureaucratic ways have overtaken our institutions of higher learning by saying “Indian readers would do well to remember that Srinivasa Ramanujan, India’s greatest mathematician since Aryabhata, had no degree and would thus be disqualified from teaching in an Indian University were he alive today.”

Scientific method

An aim behind his popular writings was to share the fun of science (besides wanting to make money, he said). He wanted to prove that it can address everyday questions. In a larger sense, he wanted to show that science is a part of human culture. Today that aim has receded. Science is increasingly an arcane and privileged activity. It gets constantly mixed up with technology and looks less and less comprehensible to the lay person. Haldane invested a huge amount of effort into communicating the ideas of science. That was because he believed in the importance of a certain attitude of mind that was and remains under threat in many countries including ours.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of a person about whose contributions Haldane wrote a lot, namely Charles Darwin. Darwin showed that the living world can be understood by framing hypotheses, making observations, carrying out experiments and analysing the results with the help of logic and reason—in short, by the scientific method. There are many ways to characterise the scientific method, one of them being that it is a form of rational thinking. Haldane was a tireless supporter of rationality.

But not everyone seems to be convinced that it is a good thing. Some years ago newspapers carried the report that our space scientists had got a replica of the rocket that they were about to launch blessed at a temple. Apparently the procedure is now standard practice before a launch. Perhaps such actions soothe the minds of the people involved, at least of those who participate of their own will. Whether there is an effect on the rockets and satellites is open to question. One may well wonder what Haldane’s reaction to this may have been.

Requirements

So what did Haldane require from life? His list of demands includes work “and a decent wage for my work”; freedom of speech (with protection from the law of libel); health; friendship and adventure. There are other things that “I desire but do not demand.” They range from “a motor car and a daily bath” to “the desire to see capitalism overthrown and the workers in power.” Typically of Haldane, the essay ends with the unexpected: “Supplementary to my requirements of life are my requirements of death.” He wanted to die like Socrates, while fit and in good humour. When close to death, he regretted that the doctors had not been honest about the seriousness of his condition. He had not felt in any hurry to complete the work that he had planned to do. Part of that work would surely have involved writing a few more delightful essays like these.

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