

International seminar on “Science and Spirituality: Bridges of Understanding” (21-23 November 2016)

Concept Note

“Self-transcendence, the mark of all spiritual experience, is present in the devoted passion for the pursuit of science, art, and morality.” (Dr. S. Radhakrishnan)

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious; it is the source of all true art and science.” (Albert Einstein)

Man’s search for an understanding of reality has taken several routes that also have their respective methods: science and spirituality being amongst the most significant of these in the 60 present day context. Science, and its application, technology, have brought us tools and comforts that pervade our life today. They also shape our relationship with the world. At the same time, both in the East and in the West, there is an ever growing need of humanity to find an inner meaning. There is a continuous search for refuge in spiritual traditions and practices across the world. Both, science and spirituality, endeavour to unravel the mysteries of the universe and the inner workings of matter and spirit. Common to both approaches is a quest for truth, and a fluidity which does not allow the seeker to stop at any given point. Science constantly moves towards new discoveries, and spirituality seeks ever deeper dimensions of consciousness. The scientific method, relying on empirical evidence, and spiritual practice, aiming at inner experience both share a sense of wonder at the greatness of the universe and depth of the human spirit. Just as moments of intuitive inspiration have led to some of the greatest scientific discoveries, the spiritual traditions originate from and testify to intuitive, enlightening insights. Ideally, both disciplines require a free mind - unbiased and unprejudiced (in phenomenology: epoché) - in order to approach their goal. The words of Albert Einstein on the limitations of the human condition, and the way to overcome them, are not only pertinent for both scientific and spiritual perspectives, but also seem to indicate a way towards a more inclusive and thus compassionate existence: “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Over the last century, we have seen great minds from both fields of understanding reaching out to engage with, and even embrace, each other. There is much reason to hope that *“these two are in our own days brought closely into touch with each other, so that they may aid and strengthen each other, may be found as servants in a common cause, and not as opposing and incongruous ideas.”*¹ Quantum mechanics has profoundly challenged our understanding of reality and our long held notions about the world we live in. Niels Bohr’s statement *“Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real”* seems to echo the Hindu notion of *Māyā*. And Erwin Schrödinger’s

¹Annie Besant, *Modern Science and Higher Self* (Adyar, 1915).

words “*Quantum physics thus reveals a basic oneness of the universe*” resonate well with the spiritual experience of oneness which saints and sages of East and West have so rapturously sung about since ages.

On the other side, Sri Aurobindo acknowledges how science may aid in improving our understanding of spiritual practices themselves: “*Yogic methods have something of the same relation to the customary psychological workings of man as has the scientific handling of the force of electricity or of steam to their normal operations in Nature. And they, too, like the operations of Science, are formed upon a knowledge developed and confirmed by regular experiment, practical analysis and constant result*”.²

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been leading a dialogue with scientists over the last decades, most fruitfully with neuroscience. We have to connect with this important and epoch-making dialogue. Addressing the Society of Neuroscience (Washington, DC), Dalai Lama said: “*I believe that the collaboration between neuroscience and the Buddhist contemplative tradition may shed fresh light on the vitally important question of the interface of ethics and neuroscience... Both parties in the dialogue can find the common ground of empirical observable facts of the human mind, while not falling into the temptation of reducing the framework of one discipline into that of the other...*”³

The aim of the seminar is to attempt an overcoming of opposites and dichotomies. We can live neither without science nor without spirituality, and it is a bridging of the gap between the two that will contribute to greater harmony in society. We need most importantly to remember the vision of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan: “*Progress in the realms of Science, Art, and Morality shows that self and not-self are only relatively opposed. It is the business of man to break down the opposition, and make both express the one spirit. This view restores the balance between nature and spirit, and makes life worth living.*”⁴

An International seminar on ‘Science and Spirituality: Bridges of Understanding’ was organised at IAS during 21-23 November 2016. Professor Bettina Sharda Beaumer, National Fellow, IAS was the Convener of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Chetan Singh, Director, IAS. Professor Bettina Sharda Beaumer, Convener of the seminar gave introductory remarks. The keynote address was given by Professor Partha Ghose, Fellow, National Academy of Sciences, 5, Lajpatrai Road, Mumfordganj, Allahabad delivered the keynote address.

PARTICIPANTS

- Professor Partha Ghose, Fellow, National Academy of Sciences, 5, Lajpatrai Road, Mumfordganj, Allahabad
- Professor Swami Atmapriyananda, Vice Chancellor, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Howrah, West Bengal
- Mr. Geshe Jangchup Choeden, Gaden Shartse Monastery, Mundgod, Karnataka
- Dr. Kishor Dere, Visiting Faculty, Jamia Millia Islamia University, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi

² Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 7. Pondicherry, 1999.

³ Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, *Science at the Crossroads* (Talk given in 2005).

⁴ Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, p.27 (London, 1919).

- Dr. Stephen Antony Parker, Swami Rama Saohaka, Gram Virpur Kurd Virbhadra Road, Pashulok 249203, Rishikesh UK
- Professor P. Krishna, Krishnamurti Foundation India, Rajghat Fort, Varanasi
- Professor Joy Sen, Architecture & Regional Planning, IIT Kharagpur, West Bengal
- Dr. Jitendra B. Shah, LD Institute of Indology, Near Gujarat University, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad, Gujarat
- Professor Sudhir K. Sopory, Ex Vice-Chancellor, Professor of Microbiology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
- Dr. Gopal Chandra Bhar, Ramakrishna Mission ,Vivekananda University, West Bengal
- Dr. V. Hari Narayanan, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Jodhpur
- Dr. Atul Bhatnagar, Faculty of Dental Sciences, Institute of Medical Sciences, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi
- Dr. Arpita Mitra, Fellow, IAS
- Dr. Varghese Manimala, St. Joseph Capuchin Provincialate, Kottayam, Kerala
- Ustad Bahauddin Dagar, 6/20, Rukmini, R.C. Marg, Chembur, Mumbai
- Dr. Martin Kämpchen, Tagore Fellow, IAS
- Professor Mahesh Champaklal, Fellow, IAS
- Shri Samir Banerjee, Fellow, IAS
- Professor Vijaya Shankar Varma, National Fellow, IAS