So, what would you say is the way forward for science in the Indian context?

I gave a TEDx talk in IIT Bombay on what we call vernacular science. If you look at vernacular architecture, it is something that is functional. Similarly, vernacular science is about the delivery of material answers.

I think what science does is that it claims to study reality. But most of reality is socially administered, and so we need to treat this kind of reality also as a part of science.

Vernacular science looks at immediate material questions and tries to apply the methods of science to that. Material questions like, “Why did the well dry up? What was the system of extraction of layers to dig the well?”

So it’s really a science that worries about the delivery of all of these real-life questions. You should know that if you buy cornflakes, and it comes from Kanpur, what are the social and economic conditions that made Kanpur the manufacturing hub and why not where you live? So what this vernacular word is really saying science should be more of functional. An interesting example is a student had knee injury, and he was hurting, and he got an MRI and doctor suggested an operation. But did he just say okay? No. He relied on an uncle’s advice on whether to do it or not.

So, I think even the consumption of science needs a cultural third party to make it acceptable; otherwise, it’s not going to be acceptable.

There is a rising argument for medical pluralism, one that integrates local health knowledge systems into the public health paradigm. Is this something that pure science could be ready for?

Whether a kaadha (homemade medicinal decoction) works (which I take), or tulsi prevents congestion (which also I take), from a ‘scientific’ point of view is an unnecessary dichotomy, I feel. If it works, it works.

Let me just rewind: I think there are two parts to science. One is whether something works; then the second thing is whether we know the reason why it works. This separation of whether it works or not, from whether we can explain, is a very important step, which even Western science took a long time to understand.

For example, in the 1800s, one particular surgeon in Europe noticed that washing hands [before surgery] actually helped reduce mortality, but he had no explanation for it. And the senior surgeons pooh-poohed it and said that’s not true. But then, after some 30-40 years, bacteria were discovered, and they found that actually [he was right].

So, scientists also have to accept that there are many things that we don't know, and it’s still holds true. Scientists work empirically and sometimes we say okay, let’s park it, carry on, and maybe later on we will find out the ‘why’.

The ‘why’ or the explanation is very cultural.

How do I explain a body is quite different for different people or for different cultures. For example, in Japan, when they point to the self or ‘me’, they always point to the nose because they think that my breath is me. While Indians point to their heart when they say ‘mein’…