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SCIENTIFIC TEMPER : AN ISSUE ABOVE IDEOLOGIES

'..... Science and Sensibility is a compilation of articles and letters on scientific temper, carried mainly by two magazines, Mainstream and Secular Democracy, during 1981–82. Each article is reviewed by the compiler, Dr. K.V. Subbaram, who is a professor of Physics, prominent science activist, and poet.

The book begins with A Statement on the Scientific Temper prepared and signed in 1981 by several dozen eminent public persons led by P.N. Haksar (former Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi), Dr. Raja Ramanna (former Secretary, Atomic Energy Commission) and Dr. P.M. Bhargava (reputed microbiologist). The signatories come from diverse backgrounds (within the English-speaking elite circle) – there are scientists, social scientists, policy-makers and social workers.

Hardly any of them are experts in the methodology / philosophy of science. They have various individual concerns as reflected in their respective subsequent articles included in the book. The Statement (or the Manifesto, as we shall refer to it) underlines the importance of propagating scientific temper among the masses in making a resurgent India. It makes a strong plea for inculcating a spirit of enquiry and questioning of the existing order. It also points out that a systematic and planned utilization of our technological capabilities (and human faculties in general) to solve our national problems is not possible in the absence of scientific temper. It explains that scientific temper is not just knowledge of scientific facts nor rationalism but an outlook and process leading to an ordered understanding of man and his environment. However, when it lays down four attributes of scientific temper, the above broad and universal approach to scientific temper gives way to an exclusive emphasis on a particular knowledge-system, viz. the method of science.

In particular, it proclaims the doctrine that one must question whatever is incompatible with science-generated knowledge. Further, values like equality of human beings and distributive justice are somehow sought to be made parts of scientific temper. Elements of western ideologies are also imported into the Manifesto when it sees the human being solely as the 'maker of destiny' (underplaying the 'spectator' aspect). It ends by not only condemning superstitions and irrational ways of making decisions, but also lamenting havans and yajnas, 'irrational health practices' and 'food fads'. At one point, Nandy's sharp criticism of the Manifesto itself becomes the centre of the debate. He examines each line of the Manifesto (and reads between the lines) and brings out hidden connotations rather loudly (and uncharitably). He appears reasonable when he asserts that, in social matters and even in material ones, the scientist's decision may not be unquestionable.

But then he goes further and associates science with war and destruction. He even charges that the Manifesto's plea "for the fullest use of science in everyday life and in every aspect of human behaviour from ethics to politics and economics" is a call for the destruction of all spontaneity, rebellion, and wisdom. However, the subsequent injunctions issued by Subbaram and several others, to worship science like a god that can never be