Science amidst religion: The politics of knowledge

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The recent controversy over the Sethusamudram project once again underscores the conflicting postures that religion and science assume in a culture vitiated by opportunistic politics. In giving its opinion, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) seemed to act like any professional body of scientists in validating knowledge claims according to the canons of scientific knowledge. However, the offshoots of its pronouncements speak volumes of our misplaced priorities and in certain ways undermine the legitimacy of scientific institutions. In this sordid affair, the very 'politics of knowledge' escaped our attention, although the opportunism of various political parties was widely noticed.

The interface between science and religion has been the focus of many a discourse in the past as well. While some use science to scrutinize religion and deflate religious claims, the proponents of religious 'truth' do not lag behind to project religion as essentially in harmony with science. The religious enthusiasts discover either 'science in religion' or 'religion in science'. The argument for 'intelligent design' voiced in Dover, USA, illustrates reading religion in science, whereas the search for scientific truths in the *Vedas* as attempted in certain quarters, is an instance of reading science in religion. In this whole process of 'knowledge production', the advocates of scientific knowledge as well as the defenders of religious wisdom do disservice to both science and religion. How are then we to understand these two very different enterprises: science and religion?

Science enables us to gather knowledge about the world and provides a knowledge system that is open to new ideas, sometimes even giving up earlier accounts in the light of new evidence. Religion on the other hand, refers to a system of values which resist any modification or rejection, and takes pride in the eternal values that it seeks. Thus, scientific knowledge is counted as the epitome of rationality, while the religious values that one cherishes are explained away as merely an article of faith. Quite often, doubts regarding the 'truth' or even the plausibility of religious beliefs germinate from our seemingly rational appraisal of religious notions. Thus, the religiously inclined tell us not to subject religion to the test of reason; rather they exhort us to surrender to the dictates of faith. The Sethusamudram episode unfortunately reinforces this dichotomy and insulates religion as a matter of faith alone, devoid of any rationality. Understanding the nature of religious beliefs in this manner, institutes a sharp boundary between the realms of faith and reason, whereas even in the practice of science, faith has a significant role[1]. We tend to banish reason while invoking faith to ground religious beliefs and it becomes handy to those who want to promote a retrogressive politics of knowledge by appealing to protect 'faith' that is under threat from science or its propeller, namely 'rationality'.

Those who conceive faith and reason as antithetical to each other seem to think that unless they keep these two apart, it is impossible to defend religious beliefs in the era of science and technology. Apparently, it becomes imperative for them to argue for faith alone as constituting the domain of religion. However, faith devoid of reason degenerates into dogmatism and fundamentalism. Any belief solely based on faith, for that very reason, is immune to criticism. Thus, we need to give reason its proper due, even in religion. This does not mean that we have to subject religious beliefs to the scrutiny of science. That certainly would justify the attempt at reading religion in science or vice versa, as the defenders of religious wisdom would seek a level playing field! Rather, I would resort to the metaphor of 'language-game', as described by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein[2], in clarifying the nature of language and meaning, to understand science and religion. Just like any game, rules constitute and govern language. Each game has its own set of rules and we play the game according to its specific rules. For instance, though both soccer and basketball are games we play with a ball, the rules of the former are not acceptable in the latter. Similarly, what counts as evidence of scientific rationality need not be the evidence for rationally holding a religious belief. It is a wasteful exercise to look for scientific compatibility as far as religious beliefs are concerned, as the rules of the two are entirely different. Searching the rationality of a religious belief should make us ponder why certain deeds or objects are sacred. Relegating rationality in religion would only help camouflage the belief as non-negotiable matter of faith. The necessity of rationality along with faith in religious beliefs is felt even more in the present political milieu where, in the name of religion, we inflict immense violence on each other.

Our priority in approaching a scientific institution regarding Sethusamudram should have been to assess whether the project has any ecological consequences[3] that outweigh the expected economic gains. The ASI was ploughing the desert in ascertaining the historicity of religious claims. Rules of a religious language do not put high premium on facts. At the same time we should not throw away the developmental opportunities that the project offers. What we require is an approach that enriches the collective existence and for that, we cannot compromise on the quality of the environment. The Sethusamudram controversy projects a 'politics of knowledge' that claims allegiance to either faith or reason at the cost of both. Sadly, such one-sided allegiances often blind our ecological vision.

1. Rameau, P. and Louime, C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2007, **93**, 1481–1482.
2. Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958.
3. Kathal, P. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2005, **89**, 1082–1083.

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