
The book under review portrays the relationship between science and culture in India between two World Wars and in the post-World War II period examining the nature and consequences of the interaction between the two against the backdrop of India’s history. India was a British colony at the time but it was then fighting to be free. In this, while science and culture were used as tools by both the rulers and the ruled, Indian culture and scientific tradition came in direct conflict with those of the West. Though this was inevitable and from the beginning manifested itself in myriad ways, it entered a crucial phase between the World Wars when it became subtle, articulate and decisive. The focus of the book under review is on the organization of scientific research and the associated practices and fields of inquiry in such sectors as agriculture, industry, public health and transport and communication, especially in the context of the aftermath of the World War II and in the wake of the Cold War and subsequently the rise and dominance of the imperialist forces in influencing and shaping scientific research in specific directions across the continents. Against this backdrop, Jagdish N. Sinha examines the developments where science played a crucial role: an Anglo-American tussle for dominance in the region, the clash between capitalism and socialism, and the entry of neo-colonialism triggering Cold War in Asia. And, particularly this aspect reflects the comparative nature of this work. This comparative nature refers to sociological analysis that involves comparison of social processes between nation-states, or across different types of society. The author approaches the problem from two vantage points – seeking similarity across different countries and cultures and at the same time foregrounding the variance.

The author presents the argument in the form of seven chapters. The chapters show interpenetration among science, empire and war (captured in Chapters I, II and III). Practising sciences through the surveys, energy, defence and operational research, and basic sciences and fundamental research and the subsequent institutionalization of scientific research in the aftermath of the World War II is captured well in Chapter IV. However, the analysis does not reflect upon the changing conceptualization of relations between basic and applied sciences. The distinction between basic
and applied sciences is not rigid but porous which is well recognized by the community of sociologists of science worldwide. Perhaps, the framework that the author adopts does not allow him to critically engage in the nitty-gritty of such subtleties. The role of science in nation building and subsequently for national reconstruction and organization of science having implications for science policy in India is highlighted in Chapters V and VI. The author specifically draws upon the work of Shiv Visvanathan’s ethnographic delineation of a CSIR laboratory (Organizing for Science: The Making of an Industrial Research Laboratory, 1985). The author also examines the factors contributing to a shift from science-for-its-own-sake to the production of scientific knowledge that has an immediate utilitarian value affecting the worldviews, meanings, values, interests, attitudes and the corresponding actions of the scientific community that one can empirically observe.

The major indigenous discourse on the subject came from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who was one of the chief architects of India’s path to decolonization. Ironically, while the British succumbed to the politico-ideological adroitness of Gandhi, the latter found himself virtually alone in his cultural confrontation with the West. True, he was able to wrest freedom from the imperialists, but he could not wish away their science and technology which had by then the votaries in India too; in the turmoil, the Indian culture was left in a lurch. Gandhi evaluated Western science and technology in the light of India’s traditional heritage and value systems; but on the one hand, for Indians like Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya and the Tatas, Western capitalism and industrialization offered an alternative model for progress. Jawaharlal Nehru and Meghnad Saha, on the other, advocated for the Soviet model. It is another matter what Nehru achieved in the post-Independence India led to state-led capitalism, not the Soviet model of industrialization and socialism. The World War II played a decisive role in sorting out this ideological tangle just before India became politically free. Ultimately, it ensured victory of Western science and technology over the indigenous sciences and arts of the country, leaving an upsetting effect on her culture. The consequences have remained a perpetual problem since then and yet to be solved.

The initial evaluation of Western science as a knowledge system in relation to the Indian culture influenced the perspectives on modern science and technology that the Indian intelligentsia developed. One can infer two paradigms of thought as to the question of the implantation of modern