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Report

Equinox 2024: The 4th Annual International Conference

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The Centre for Research (CFR), Maitreyi College, University of Delhi, under the aegis of *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis* and IQAC, organised the fourth three-day Annual International Conference 'Equinox 2024', from September 4th to 6th, 2024. The theme was "Systems of Knowledge in India: Moving towards Self-Reliance." The principal of Maitreyi College, Prof. Haritma Chopra, was the coordinator of the conference, and Dr. Gopi Devdutt Tripathy, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Dr. Pinkey Bajaj Gandhi, Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry, Dr. Brototi Roy, and Dr. Meena Yadav, Associate Professors, Department of Zoology, Maitreyi College, were the convenors.

The conference explored the idea of India's pursuit of self-reliance through an engagement with its diverse systems of knowledge. Though these are comprised of both written classical intellectual traditions and oral and local cultural traditions of knowledge, the latter are relatively marginalised and considered lesser than the written traditions due to various, social, political and historical factors. By inviting discussions on integrating and valuing all the rich plethora of knowledge systems and cultural practices in India, Equinox 2024 provided a platform to empirically and theoretically engage with plural ways of knowing and living in India.

The inaugural session commenced with the traditional lamp lighting ceremony and a rendition of Maitreyi College's Kulgeet and the University of Delhi's Kulgeet. Principal, Prof. Haritma Chopra felicitated the distinguished guests, including Chief Guest Prof. Yogesh Singh (Vice Chancellor, University of Delhi), Guest of Honour Prof. Bhushan Patwardhan (National Research Professor in Ayush, Former Vice-Chairman, UGC; Distinguished Professor, Pune University), Ms. Indu Ramchandani (Former Editor, Encyclopedia Britannica), Prof. Vijaya Lakshmi Singh (Chairperson, Governing Body), and Ms. Preeti Dogra (Member, Governing Body). In her address, Prof. Chopra emphasised the importance of knowledge creation for self-reliance, rather than material self-sufficiency. Dr. Gopi Devdutt Tripathy elaborated on the conference's objective, exploring whether there is one exclusive, overarching Indian system of knowledge.

The highlight of the day was the official release of the book, "*Genome to Om: The Evolving Journey from Modern Science to Meta science*" authored by Prof. Bhushan Patwardhan and Ms Indu Ramchandani. The book was released by Prof. Yogesh Singh. The authors shared insights into the book's transformative vision of integrating science with spirituality. Prof. Singh focused on the importance of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) for self-reliance, highlighting key excerpts from the book and the author's contributions. Prof. Vijay Laxmi Singh, Chairperson of the Governing Body, Maitreyi college, also shared her perspective on the significance of the book. The session concluded with a captivating Bharat Natyam fusion performance by Swaroopa Utgi Classical Dance Co. (SUCDC) accompanied by the

background score composed and sung by renowned musician Shankar Mahadevan. The formal vote of thanks was delivered by Dr. Pinky Bajaj Gandhi.

Technical Session 1 of Equinox 2024, was a panel discussion of the book, "*Genome to Om: The Evolving Journey from Modern Science to Meta science*", which explored the connection between science, spirituality, and philosophy, emphasising the importance of consciousness and self-awareness. The discussion was moderated by Prof. Balaganapathi Devarakonda, ICCR Chair for Indology & Gandhian Studies, The University of West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, and Professor and Former Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi. He initiated the discussion by introducing the book, which he noted, explores the transition from realm of modern science to meta science, from the genome to Om, integrating insights from science, philosophy, and spirituality. The panellists included Dr. Rabinarayan Acharya, Director General, Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS); Dr. Jayant Deopujari, Chairperson, National Commission for Indian System of Medicine (NCISM); Dr. Rajiv Kumar, Former Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog; Dr. Shashikala Wanjari, Vice Chancellor, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA); Dr. Tanuja Nesari, Director, All India Institute of Ayurveda, New Delhi; and Dr. Virendra Kumar Malhotra, Former Member Secretary of Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

The panelists explored how ancient Indian wisdom, like Ayurveda and spiritual teachings, can offer ethical and sustainable solutions for modern challenges. This aligned with the larger theme of Indian knowledge systems and self-reliance, showing how India's rich heritage can be integrated with modern science to foster a future built on sustainable, indigenous knowledge. The session concluded with a short address from the authors of the book. This was followed by students' feedback session in which many students including Barkha Gogoi (Sociology Honours, 3rd year), Mishty Kaushik (Political Science Honours, 2nd Year) and Nikhita Awasthi (Botany Honours, 3rd Year), shared their takeaways from the session.

The Technical Session 2 on the theme "*Medical Epistemes*" was chaired by Prof. Ritu Priya Mehrotra (Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU). It began with a talk by Prof. Harish Naraindas (Visiting Professor, Ashoka University, and Honorary Professor Shiv Nadar University). His talk, titled "*Gynaecologists, Grandmothers, and Anthropologists: The Spectre of Sushruta at the Patient's Bedside,*" was an exploration of the intersection of folk knowledge and medicinal practices, challenging the presumptions about these traditions. Prof. Naraindas shared anecdotes from his ethnographic research on the '*punsavan and seemanthonnayana samskaras*' performed in Tamil Nadu households. He critically examined the idea of dismissing such practices as rituals, as they are epistemologically and ontologically grounded, and in some cases, can even be seen as medical procedures. Prof. Naraindas emphasised the importance of avoiding the categorisation of these practices as vernacular traditions in opposition to classical knowledge. He cautioned against reducing what grandmothers do to mere ritual or folk knowledge, as we understand it today. He concluded by urging the audience to think about the distinctions between written corpus and oral traditions, as well as distinctions between ritual and medical procedure.

The second speaker of the technical session 2, Prof. V. Sujatha from the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, JNU, presented her paper titled "*The Ecology of Cognition: Embedded and Professional Knowledge in Indigenous Medicine*". In her paper, Prof. Sujatha shed light on lesser known but crucial aspects of Indian traditional medicine, the concept of medical pluralism, particularly focusing on the production, organisation, and distribution of medical knowledge. She began by discussing the decolonisation of knowledge, highlighting that the history of medical knowledge is non-linear and multi-structured, with multiple streams or genres of knowledge evolving through layers within a diverse ecology. Prof. Sujatha explored the binary relationship between medicine and society, emphasising the

asymmetrical relationship between experts or professionals and the layperson, often a passive recipient. Further, she elaborated on the continuum of medical knowledge, which spans from oral traditions and medical lore to embedded practices, textual or codified knowledge, and professional training.

Prof. Sujatha also highlighted the social inequalities in terms of health practices and accessibility, noting how women often serve as repositories of traditional knowledge that is rarely found among formal authors. She discussed how caste and occupational groups face unequal access to professional medicine. Despite the diversity in methods, she pointed out a larger unity in the principles shared across these varying approaches. In conclusion, she outlined the transformations in indigenous medical knowledge during the 20th century, future challenges, such as the laboratory-centered validation of biomedicine, changes in college-based education, and the sustainability concerns related to the mass production of herbal medicines.

This was followed by a poster session and five parallel oral presentation sessions, in which students and faculty members presented their papers.

On the second day of Equinox 2024, Technical Session 4 on the theme '*History and Philosophy of Science*' was chaired by Prof. Bal Ram Singh, President, Institute of Advanced Sciences, Massachusetts, USA. The speakers for the session were Prof. David Scharf, Department of Physics, Maharishi International University, Lancaster, Massachusetts, USA and Dr. Shoma Choudhary Lahiri, Department of Sociology, St. Xaviers College, Kolkata.

Prof. Scharf's insightful talk, "*Physics and Consciousness*," explored the link between our inner world and the universe. Drawing on ancient wisdom and quantum physics, he delved into the complex nature of consciousness. Our reality, he explained, has multiple layers, with five sheaths surrounding the core of pure consciousness or *atma*. This challenges the idea that consciousness arises from matter; instead, consciousness is all-encompassing and the material realm is only a small part of it. Interestingly, our current understanding of the universe accounts for only 4% of its matter and energy, leaving 96% i.e. dark matter and energy shrouded in mystery. Theories like Quantum Field Theory and String Theory may already offer tantalizing glimpses into this hidden realm. Prof. Scharf's presentation led the audience to ponder the possibility of a more interconnected reality than previously believed- with a permeable wall between the realms of the material & non-material, the spiritual & the concrete. Also, by understanding more deeply the vastness and mystery of the universe, the briefness of the individual human experience is put in perspective.

Dr. Shoma Choudhary Lahiri, meanwhile, spoke on "*Democratizing Science: The People's Science Movement and the Pandemic*," emphasising the vital importance of public engagement with science. To rebuild trust and credibility, she argued that science must be made more inclusive and accessible. This requires shifting the traditional research process to involve citizens in the design, data collection, and dissemination of scientific findings. According to her, by doing so, science can be harnessed to address pressing social issues and promote collective well-being.

Underscoring the role of people's science movements in popularising a scientific temperament among common citizens, Dr. Lahiri talked about the People's Science Movement which emerged in Kerala in the 1960s, bringing up the example *Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad* (KSSP). The KSSP serves as a compelling blueprint for the democratisation of science, with interventions spanning the realms of education, environment etc. This pioneering initiative brought together scientists, educators, writers, and community members to "take science to the masses," conveying the perspective of science as political.

Dr. Lahiri envisioned a multi-level movement, leveraging grassroots partnerships, awareness campaigns, and policy-level interventions to create a culture of scientific literacy and critical thinking. Her talk left attendees with a clear message: science thrives when it engages the public. By fostering inclusive research, collaboration, and scientific literacy, we can unlock more effective solutions, informed decision-making, and social progress. This aspect proved particularly useful during the pandemic.

Technical Session 5, themed "*Man and Nature*," was chaired by Dr. Rashi Bhargava, Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Meghalaya, who introduced the two speakers for the session: Mr. Madhu Ramnath, affiliated with the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme Asia, and Prof. Vishvajit Pandya from DA-IICT, Gandhinagar.

Mr. Ramnath began his talk on the topic of "*Language in understanding wild forest foods*" by subtly changing the title to "*Understanding the forest through wild foods*," drawing from his experiences living with the *Dhurwa* community in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. He started with the defining wild forest food, noting that it has become a trendy topic in the past decade, and discussed the problems associated with the commercialisation of wild forest foods. His focus was on how indigenous communities approach the procurement of wild food differently from the scientific methods of validation. Mr. Ramnath broke down the generic concept of hunting and gathering into various components, highlighting 24 action verbs related to specific foods commonly used by the *Dhurwa* community. He explained that these verbs reflect the community's way of "experiencing" the forest, including both physical interaction and emotional counterpart. This offers a subjective lens for understanding the forest, which contrasts with the objectivity of scientific taxonomy. While wild foods are becoming popular as "superfoods," for most indigenous communities, they are consumed on daily basis and are vital for their livelihood. This insight could help re-think our approach to forest management and conservation, offering a perspective that is not only relevant for local communities but also useful for shaping state and national policy.

Dr. Neeraj Kumar continued the session, discussing Prof. Vishvajit Pandya's paper, "*Talking Trees, Silent Forest: Notions of Relationality in the Forest Cosmologies of the Andaman Islands*." Based on ethnographic fieldwork among the Ongee and Jarawa tribes, the paper explored their responses to state-imposed horticultural or plantation work in their forest reserves. Although the administration's official policy aims to protect the islands and its vulnerable populations (classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, or PVTGs), there remains a persistent lack of understanding of the Onge and Jarawa as thinking human beings with unique cultural ties to the forest. The Onge and Jarawa, who have traditionally lived as hunter-gatherers, resist transitioning to settled cultivation within their reserves. According to Prof. Pandya's findings, this reluctance stems from a deep belief that such work disrupts the forest's natural balance. The tribes view the forest as a sentient being, a collective formed by with all its components—humans, plants, animals, and spirits that have spiritual significance, mutually dependent and sustaining each other. They believe the forest has its own autonomous life and should not be reshaped or disrupted by external forces. This worldview challenges administrative efforts to introduce plantation work, as it is perceived as not just a physical disruption but a spiritual and relational one. The paper highlights the importance of understanding indigenous knowledge systems and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to conservation and development. It argues for policies that respect the cultural and ecological significance of the forest to the Andamanese communities.

The Technical Session 6 held on 5th September, 2024, featured Ms Swati Dave discussing "*Mathematical Practices in the Regional Language Schools of Pre-Colonial India*." Ms. Dave highlighted the significance of Tinnai schools in Tamil Nadu, which provided practical

education in Tamil and utilised experiential learning methods. These schools emphasised community-based education, contrasting with modern rote learning. The discussion underscored the potential benefits of integrating traditional practices into contemporary education, reflecting a move towards greater self-reliance in educational methodologies.

In Technical Session 7, held on the third day of Equinox 2024, Prof. Sudhir Lall, Head, Kalakosa Division, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), spoke on the interrelationship between *Sanskrit and Society*, emphasising the inseparability of language and culture. Through the story of Maitreyi from the "*Brihadaranyak Upanishad*," he highlighted how the pursuit of self-knowledge is central to Indian knowledge systems, passed down through Sanskrit. The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* and the flexibility of Sanskrit as a language reinforce its role in shaping societal values and preserving ancient wisdom. Sanskrit's resilience, evidenced in its role in transmitting timeless principles like *Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha*, underscores its importance in maintaining India's cultural heritage. Taking into consideration, the broader theme of Equinox 2024, this session reflected how this system of knowledge, preserved through languages like Sanskrit, contribute towards cultural self-reliance, ensuring that ancient wisdom remains relevant and continues to guide contemporary thought and societal development.

The second half of the session 7 was an interactive one. Ms. Fouzia Dastango, an acclaimed Dastangoi artist, performed "*Dialects of Delhi*," exploring the fading dialects of Old Delhi, including "*Begumati Zubaan*," "*Karkhandari Zubaan*," "*Naain ki Boli*," and "*Dhoban ki Boli*." These dialects, once spoken in the bylanes of the Walled City, reflected social structures and cultural identities. "*Begumati Zubaan*," spoken by women in the zenana, offered insights into their daily lives and thoughts. Ms. Fouzia was concerned with the revival of disappearing dialects. She urged students to reconnect with their linguistic roots, and emphasised that dialects are not merely about communication but have to do with cultural history and identity of a community. Her performance, especially on "*Begumati Zubaan*," highlighted role of language in providing a sense of social belonging and in the preservation of culture. Preservation of language/dialects implies the preservation of the cultures embedded within them. Ms. Fouzia's session brought to mind the work of the renowned French anthropologist Levi Strauss's understanding of the relationship between language, culture and society. As these dialects fade, the culture they represent also disappears, making it essential to preserve them as a link to heritage. Through her performance, Ms. Fouzia demonstrated how language bridges cultural gaps and keeps traditions alive.

Equinox 2024, concluded with a valedictory session, on September 6, 2024, which began with the traditional lamp-lighting ceremony. The Chief guest was Prof. Anu Aggarwal, Treasurer, Governing Body and Professor, Department of Operational Research, Delhi University, and Dr. Preeti Dogra, member of the Governing Body of Maitreyi College, was a special invitee. Prof. Aggarwal, in her address, stressed that "self-reliance is the ownership of one's identity," and that the idea of the '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' was the basis of the development of India. She highlighted the contribution of India, globally, in the areas of research, space, and technology. The session concluded with the announcement of the winners of the oral and poster presentations, and a vote of thanks by Ms Nupur Chawla from the department of English.

The conference highlighted the intellectual and cultural richness of the systems of knowledge in India, which serve as a wellspring of inspiration across multiple disciplines. An important question which was brought up during the conference was whether there is an exclusive, overarching system of thinking which can be classified as Indian. Through the numerous sessions held over the three-day conference, it became clear that the distinctiveness of India lay in the multiplicity of modes of thought and practice. Further, that these systems of

knowledge comprise both oral and written traditions. The multiplicity of oral and vernacular traditions, with their own unique perspectives and practices, are an integral part of the country's systems of knowledge. What is significant is that these diverse elements don't exist in isolation, they intersect and influence each other, creating a dynamic and holistic body of knowledge. The Conference succeeded in bringing forth the point that ancient does not equate to obsolete. Age-old systems of knowledge can be as relevant today as they were in the past, and can provide a window for people to understand their roots, and why they live the way they do.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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