

## Astrology and science

We scientists from the scientific/academic community in the so-called 'elite' institutes have once again shown our customary apathy in not coming forth to preempt the UGC's attempt to start courses in vaastushastra and astrology. Despite several newspaper reports and a clarion call given by P. Balaram in his excellent editorial (*Curr. Sci.*, 2000, **79**, 1139–1140) we were too apathetic (timid?) to challenge the UGC on this issue. The scientists in these so-called elite institutes do not really have to depend on the support of the UGC and there is no reason for their timidity! Recently some scientists have been registering strong protests. But alas, it may be too late now. The UGC has actually passed a resolution giving legitimacy to such courses and many universities may well be forced to start them in July. Some of the scientists at the Indian Statistical Institute have written a letter of protest to the UGC. We urge academicians at other institutes to follow suit.

Instead of trying to start courses in astrology, etc. which will surely take us back to the dark ages, our educators should perhaps think of having a course on 'Indian heritage', designed so as to salute the wonderful contributions that we have inherited from *all* the different communities in India in the fields of music, art, mathematics, *astronomy* (not astrology!), etc. and also what has been passed on to us by the many tribal communities who have peopled this land for centuries.

We do not want to waste our time nor the readers', in rebutting point by point the long rambling letter by K. N. Ganeshiah (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 719–720). We think serious scientists should spend time on serious science rather than responding to such letters! Since he has unnecessarily dragged in the name of the great Indian statistician C. R. Rao, we can perhaps cite other anecdotes to establish that C. R. Rao has no belief in astrology. We suggest that our scientific colleague Ganeshiah look at the excellent book by S. Balachandra Rao (*Astrology, Believe It or Not*, Nava Karnataka Press), where he describes and then proceeds to debunk this pseudo-science and ends with a quote of Swami Vivekananda. 'Let stars come, what harm is

there? If a star disturbs my life, it would not be worth a cent'. Finally we would like to add that two of our great scientists of yesteryear, Meghnad Saha and C. V. Raman had expressed utter contempt for this pseudo-science.

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This is in response to K. N. Ganeshiah's letter published in *Current Science* (2001, **80**, 719–720). It is indisputable that we should have freedom of speech and free access to knowledge. After all, that is the premise on which science functions and its remarkable self-correcting power originates. However, scientific work is not arbitrary. At any given time in the history of science, there are definitive problems which are lurking in the minds of experts that are about to find expression. That is why it is legitimately claimed that if the great Rutherford was not in the scientific arena, atomic physics would perhaps have been delayed at the most by an year! It is not to deny that there are no blind alleys or cul-de-sacs in science. However, it is possible to identify problems that are either totally outside the scope of science or outright meaningless. Investing public money or resource on activities that go

completely against well-established science is indeed very unwise and wasteful.

I once knew an individual who had blisters all over the body – a probable consequence of infrequent baths and malnutrition. He went away to get a 'treatment' for his skin problem. I learnt that the treatment consisted of pasting the entire body with the waste removed from the intestines of slaughtered goats! It is possible that this treatment was effective. However, I doubt if any self-respecting scientist will undertake a statistical analysis of the efficacy of such treatments. Similar comments hold for many activities that are commonplace, including astrology and palmistry.

Funding agencies in India, in their unfortunate generous moments, have supported 'Pseudo science' projects such as effect of music on plants and geomagnetism and human health, with disastrous consequences. It is not lack of open mindedness or intolerance that prompts us to criticize allocation of resources, manpower and monetary, for astrology or palmistry. The opposition is based on sane scientific sense. If a 'guru' claims that he could levitate, the evidence he provides should exceed the totality of experience of countless experiments that have been carried out since Newton! In north Karnataka, a black magic called 'Banamathi' is a source of terror. It does not make sense to initiate a scientific study of Banamathi as a means of destroying people and homes, although the social psychology that provides fertile ground for such black magic could indeed be scientifically investigated.

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In an article published in *Current Science* (2001, **80**, 719–720) K. N. Ganeshiah pleads that astrology and palmistry should be allowed into university curricula. The title of the article 'An unscientific way to bury astrology' hints that he