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EDITORIAL

The astrology fallout

The generally placid academic science community in India has been stirred into unprecedented ferment. The catalyst for this transformation is a letter that emanates from the University Grants Commission (UGC). A missive, dated 23 February 2001, conveys to India's numerous universities, the decision that 'there is an urgent need to rejuvenate the science of Vedic astrology in India'. The UGC, which has considered a proposal to set up departments of Vedic astrology since last summer, feels that such a move would allow 'all this scientific knowledge to reach society at large' and might even 'provide opportunities to get this important science exported to the world'. The Commission approved the plan to set up a few departments of Vedic astrology in Indian universities, which 'would provide exclusive teaching and training in the subject leading to certificate, diploma, undergraduate, post-graduate and Ph D degrees'. As is customary, an 'expert committee' was formed to formulate the guidelines; the UGC then approved the new 'Jyotir Vigyan' courses.

Universities are to bid for starting these new courses and the UGC has decided that 'the syllabus for the courses shall be sent to the selected universities'. The new departments will have Professors, Readers, Lecturers, Library Attendants and Computer Operators; the last clearly indicating that there will be additional employment opportunities in academia for the products of the innumerable 'computer schools' that abound in our cities. The UGC has also suggested a possible 'non-recurring' budget of Rs 6 lakhs for an 'observatory' and Rs 5 lakhs for a 'computer lab and horoscope bank', in these carefully chosen departments.

The UGC's objectives are clearly and succinctly stated (although at times, inelegantly): '*Vedic astrology is not only one of the main subjects of our traditional and classical knowledge, but this is the discipline which lets us know the events happening in human life and in the universe on time scale. The distinguishing feature of this subject is that it makes us familiar with time, its nature and feature and its effects on human life and other events and that way it helps us to manage and make optimal utilization of time. It is a common feature that despite best methods adopted for estimation, the events happen in different ways and add to worries, tensions and frustration in life. Here, Vedic astrology can help us see the unforeseen, it being the subject dealing with the time. Starting of the courses in Vedic*

astrology in universities will not only impart the knowledge of this subject to the people, but will also add a new dimension for research in the fields of Hindu-Mathematics, Vaastushastra, Meteorological Studies, Agriculture Science, Space Science, etc.' In addition to training new generations of astrologers (although this is not explicitly stated), the UGC hopes that '*beneficiaries of these courses would be students, teachers, professionals from modern streams like doctors, architects, marketing, financial, economic and political analysts*'. Undoubtedly, after careful reflection, the UGC has recognized the importance of predicting the future, accurately, and identified the professions most likely to benefit from the advance of astrology.

The UGC's assertion that astrology, specifically, 'Vedic astrology', is a science has stirred a hornets' nest. When I did refer, somewhat unkindly, to the impending plan of the UGC, in these columns a few months ago (*Curr. Sci.*, 2000, **79**, 1139–1140), there was little by way of encouraging response. I was sharply (and justifiably) reminded that my views were a result of ignorance (Sarma, V. V. S., *Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 115–116). The opponents of Vedic astrology courses can easily be confounded with the charge: 'But you know nothing about the *Vedas* – you do not even know Sanskrit'; an almost unchallengeable appeal to an apparently glorious past. Another spirited attack suggested that the 'initiative by the UGC and the government of India to introduce new courses clearly represents an open-minded attitude for the perusal of the unexplored domains of a body of knowledge, accumulated at a time when the present practice of the science had not taken its roots' (Ganeshiah, K. N., *Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 719–720). But, the UGC's unambiguously worded circular appears to have acted as a wake-up call. The newspapers, magazines and even our Correspondence columns are now full of the astrology controversy. The central issue is whether astrology courses, Vedic or otherwise, should be taught in the science faculty of our universities. Parenthetically, it is worth noting that some institutions, Madurai Kamaraj University amongst them, already have courses on astrology. It is quite possible that if astrology were introduced in the arts and humanities faculties, there may have been less of an outcry. Scientists of diverse persuasions are convinced that astrology has no scientific basis. Indeed, faculty from the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics has suggested that 'if Vedic astro-

logy is to be promoted as a subject relevant to our heritage, it could be included as part of ancient Indian studies, rather than projecting it as Vigyan (science)'.

One of the redeeming features of the astrology debate is that it appears to have brought widely disparate groups of scientists together; even the pro- and anti-nuclear physicists seem united in their opposition to the UGC's move. Academies have, of course, been notably silent; but for years now they have struck a Faustian bargain with government agencies, seemingly unable to even elect Presidents, who do not hold high administrative office. Despite the groundswell of protest from the scientific community, the UGC circular reflects the Commission's view that astrology is, in fact, a science. After all, the funds for an 'observatory' imply that astrology faculty will vie with their astronomy colleagues for a glimpse of the planets and the stars. The linking of 'computer labs' and 'horoscope banks' is an unmistakable sign that the Commission is convinced that robust algorithms exist, which link our times of birth to our futures. The Andhra Pradesh High Court, while dismissing a writ petition against the UGC's decision is reported to have felt that 'the Courts, ill-equipped as regards such matters, must adopt the doctrine of self-restraint and leave such matters in the hands of the expert committee' (*The Hindu*, 5 May 2001, p. 11).

Were there no members of the UGC who disagreed with the stated objectives of the astrology programme? Is the UGC so devoid of inputs from the scientific community that such a circular could be issued? Or is it that silence is the expedient path in such committees? The discussions in the popular press have degenerated into a slanging match between the vocal adherents of astrology on the one hand and science on the other. It is, however, an inescapable fact

of life in India that astrologers of all hues have a substantial following. Superstition extends to every walk of life and governments often bend to the dictates of astrologers and soothsayers. Astrology has been here for centuries. Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence that the positions of planets and the time of birth do not dictate the course of human affairs, astrology will be with us in the foreseeable future. The present battle is not between astrology and science. Rather, it is between the UGC, which is charged with the responsibility of fostering higher education and the scientific community. Even amongst scientists there are those who adopt an idealistic stance – the defenders of a policy of 'openness', which makes any subject a worthwhile topic of investigation. These advocates must remember that astrology as a subject of research, its history and social consequences as topics for study, can still be legitimately pursued within the portals of our universities. The real question is, must we train a new generation of astrologers in a formal sense, legitimizing the discipline as a science and even contemplate 'export'? Will these new departments be staffed by scholars who pore through ancient texts or will they be designed to produce 'diploma holders', who are now licensed to predict our futures and earn a living? The UGC's circular clearly suggests the latter. The UGC's view that astrology needs to be promoted as a science in our universities is an unnecessary and pointless 'initiative', which will further erode the credibility of our institutions. It is possible to rewrite history; it may even be possible to rewrite the history of science; but it may be well nigh impossible to completely rewrite science.

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