

Vedic astrology

This is in response to the correspondence by K. N. Ganeshaiah (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 719–720). To start with, the title of the correspondence is totally misappropriate. The issue being debated by the scientists is NOT whether vedic astrology should be given a burial or be allowed to thrive wherever it is at present; the issue is whether or not the UGC should introduce vedic astrology as a science course in its curricula. The question is of giving or not giving vedic astrology an official recognition as being a valid scientific branch of knowledge, by bringing it into the mainstream of education in the country.

The author argues that teaching astrology in the universities will offer an opportunity to the students to acquire information that was for a long time unavailable to many. I believe that it is the prime responsibility of an apex educational body like the UGC to verify the correctness of the information that it proposes to impart to the students. This is extremely important in this particular case, as the whole aim of this course seems to foresee the future and advise the (gullible) people of this country about the course of action that they should take with regard to the important events in their life. This has been categorically stated by the UGC Chairperson who says, 'Every one is interested in knowing about what the future holds for them and there are plenty of jyotishis in the country. So we want to produce professionals to secure the confidence and faith of people' (*Indian Express*, Bhubaneswar edn, 30 March 2001).

Ganeshaiah has argued that as we teach history, arts and literature which are not scientific, why not astrology which has not even been proved to be unscientific? The comparison is totally irrelevant, since by teaching these subjects the UGC is not aiming at giving licenses to the students of these subjects to influence the course of action of the public based on what Napoleon had done or what Picasso had painted or what Shakespeare had written in *Hamlet*. These branches of education try to make students more knowledgeable, which helps to enrich their

lives by widening their intellectual horizons.

It may be worthwhile to research into the foundations and the validity of vedic astrology. However, as pointed out by M. G. K. Menon (*Indian Express*, Bhubaneswar edn, 2 April 2001), it should be done as part of history of mathematics and science.

In the absence of any proven scientific validity of vedic astrology, believing in it is having blind faith. By granting it the status of a science subject, the UGC is making a systematic effort to make the people of the country superstitious. If the UGC succeeds in this endeavour, the day will not be far off when the present Indian Administrative Services will be replaced by Indian Astrological Services, the job of its officers being to advise the government in their decision making, based on the position of the planets rather than on the basis of the merits and demerits of the issue in question.

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K. N. Ganeshaiah¹ has strongly pleaded the case of introduction of astrology and palmistry as a subject in the Indian Universities. His main plea is that astrology and palmistry are also bodies of information and it will be an exciting exercise to track the history hidden in these disciplines. 'Before we hit the last nails on the coffins of these subjects, we need to consider the possibilities of salvaging anything that may be of worth, from these areas', pleads Ganeshaiah.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has prepared guidelines for setting up of departments of vedic astrology. The objectives of the academic programme are described as follows:

'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.

Starting of the courses in Vedic astrology in the 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, Vastushastra, Meteorological Studies, Agriculture Science, Space Science, etc'.

The intentions of the lobby behind the introduction of this subject are suspect in the eyes of scientists and non-scientists alike. According to Jayant V. Narlikar², 'Astrology has been subject to scientific tests many times and each time it has failed. Only this fact is not sufficiently publicized. Research journals have reported how controlled experiments were performed but failed to prove anything in favour of astrology or horoscopes'.

Yash Pal, in his article³ 'Vedic astrology in universities' has mocked at the idea of introducing this new subject by UGC. Let me sum up his view-point: 'Setting up, almost like religious seminars, separate departments (Astrology & Palmistry) protected from other sensible ways of thinking would be a horrible mistake. Heaven knows we already have surfeit of dross floating around our country. We also have enough evidence in our world as to where such pursuits might end. Let us desist. I hope no self-respecting university would ask to start such a department'.

In a national seminar on History of science organized by INSA in October 2000, some of the firebrand proponents of the Vedic science argued that even quantum ideas are borrowed from the Vedas! I know that a number of Indians still believe that European nations developed 'Science and technology' after Max Mueller translated Vedic texts from Sanskrit into German language. Once M. N. Saha was also confronted by a lawyer friend that his theory of thermal ionization already existed in the Vedas! When Saha asked for the exact

reference in the Vedas, his friend failed to provide any.

In our own country during 15th century, Guru Nanak, the prophet of Sikh religion, rejected the Vedic astrology by his scientific argument⁴: 'Units of Indian time, viz. *ghari*, *pahar*, *thiti*, *var*, *mah* (month), and change of seasons are related with the motion of one Sun. By God's grace, all days and months are beneficial for human kind'.

We are proud of our rich heritage but that does not mean we put the clock of Indian education in the reverse gear.

1. Ganeshaiah, K. N., *Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 719–720.
2. Narlikar, J. V., *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 10 April 2001.
3. Yash Pal, *The Science Tribune*, Chandigarh, 12 April 2001.

4. Guru Nanak, in *Ad Guru Granth*, SGPC, Amritsar, pp. 12 and 136.

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This is with reference to the correspondence of Rajesh Kochhar (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 721–722). In the last paragraph he writes, 'Curiously, of the Society fellows since elected, B. P. Pal is the only one who was not a fellow of INSA'. However, in the list of past Presidents as shown in the *Year Book* of INSA, Pal was the President from 1975 to 1976 and he handed over the position to me in the following year.

The name of M. S. Narasimhan is also missing from the list of fellows.

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I have read with interest the article by Rajesh Kochhar (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **80**, 721–722). Table 1, prepared with the help of Govind Swarup and Nicholas Boross-Toby (Royal Society) (as indicated in the acknowledgement) lists the names of 39 fellows, their profession and year of election. Not many would know that Ardaseer Cursetjee (Wadia) was the first Indian Fellow to be elected in 1841. However, I would like to point out that, within the short space of 1

page, the article contains an omission, factual errors and several spelling mistakes, all of which could easily have been avoided with a little care on the part of the author.

1. The name of the mathematician Narasimhan, Mudumbai Seshachalu, elected in 1996 (presently in Trieste, Italy) is missing from the table.
2. The full name of Sir J. C. Bose according to INSA records is Jagadish Chandra Bose. The name as given by the author appears in the *Royal Society Memoirs*.
3. The year of birth of S. S. Bhatnagar is given as 1895. In the *Biographical Memoirs of INSA*, 1970, vol. 2, T. R. Seshadri has mentioned his date of birth as 21 February 1894. However, the *Biographical Notes of Fellows of the INSA* (Golden Jubilee Compendium 1984 and the Diamond Jubilee Compendium 1994) give the year of his birth as 1884.
4. Mahalanobis, Prasanta Chander should read Mahalanobis, Prasanta Chandra.
5. M. S. Swaminathan's full name as given in the *Year Book* of the Royal Society 2000 is Swaminathan, Monkombu Sambasivan.
6. Obaid Siddiqui should be spelt Obaid Siddiqi.

7. C. Gopalan's name should read Gopalan, Coluthur.
8. C. Seshadri's name should read Seshadri, Conjeeveram Srirangachari.
9. The author says that 21 Indian Fellows of the Royal Society are alive, 3 of whom are in USA. My latest information is that G. S. Khush (Khush, Gurudev Singh) does not live in USA, but is the Principal Plant Breeder and Head of the Division of Plant Breeding, Genetics and Biochemistry at the International Rice Research Institute, Philippines.
10. On what basis has the author made the statement, 'Curiously, of the Society fellows since elected, B. P. Pal is the only one who was not a fellow of INSA'? Pal, an outstanding agricultural scientist, was very closely associated with INSA. He was elected Fellow in 1946 and has held almost every important office in the Academy (Treasurer, Secretary, Vice-President) and President (1975–76).

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