

CORRESPONDENCE

An unscientific way to bury astrology

I am disturbed by a recent editorial of *Current Science* (2000, **79**, 1139–1140) in which, there is an unreasonable comparison between the removal of references to evolution in the teaching curriculum by Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) and the efforts by the Government of India (and of the UGC) to introduce teaching astrology and palmistry in the Indian universities. The decision by the KSBE to remove evolution from the curriculum is indeed a myopic attempt to curtail the freedom of the students to gain access to certain form of knowledge and hence undoubtedly calls for an unambiguous condemnation by the scientific community. But that of introducing astrology and palmistry into the university curriculum in India cannot be equated to this. In fact it creates a window of opportunity to the willing students to learn certain body of information that was for a longtime unavailable to many. Steps taken by KSBE are perhaps driven by religious motivation to cleanse the culture through education, at the cost of blocking the freedom of the students to gain access to certain accumulated knowledge. On the contrary, 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. In this sense, this initiative, should be viewed as an open-ended opportunity offered to access the scientific worth, logical basis and social relevance if any, of these subjects that are perhaps dying due to neglect by guardians of the new schools of knowledge. 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.

Let us ask ourselves – how many hours have been spent in assessing the truth or otherwise of these areas? I recall a talk by C. R. Rao in Jawaharlal Nehru Auditorium at Bangalore in which he brought out a strong correlation between the life span and length of the life line in a reasonably large set of the human samples. Similarly it has

been shown that ‘Among 3,458 soldiers, Jupiter is to be found 703 times, either rising or culminating when they were born. Chance predicts this should be 572. The odds here: one million to one’ (Gauquelin, Michel, Sphere of Influence, *Psychology Today*, Britain, October 1975, pp. 22–27; Reprinted in *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, New York Press, State University, Albany, 1990). While it is true that such few and occasional examples that are not well examined do not make a strong case for astrology and palmistry, I am also not aware of equally strong data sets to reject the claims made by these subjects. In fact there is a strong defense by the proponents of astrology that certain areas of science are providing strong evidence for astrological principles and that in this sense ‘scientists are undercover astrologers’ and ‘intellectual land grabbers’ of a territory belonging to astrology (Vaughan, V., 1996, The acceptance of astrology in the real world: Revival or revisionism? *The Mountain Astrologer* (Dec). Revised version at <http://www.onereed.com/articles/revise.html>; Vaughan, V., 1998, Debunking the debunkers: Lessons to be learned. *The Mountain Astrologer* (August/September, complete version at: <http://www.onereed.com/articles/debunk.html>). It is true that commonsense and logic of science as being practiced now do go against these subjects but science itself is best evidence to demonstrate that what is immediately obvious and commonsensical may not be always true. In this sense opposing these areas merely because they do not have their rooting in the soil where the present day science has emerged from, is not perhaps a good mannerism of science. Thus if, as called for by the editor, the scientific committee opposes the introduction of these subjects in the curriculum, it would perhaps expose the hidden fundamentalism of the scientists in trying to safeguard their own façade and beliefs as much as the religious lots have been doing.

The *Current Science* editorial calls for a strong opposition to the introduction of these subjects just as American Association for the Advancement of

Science (AAAS), has committed to oppose the decision by the KSEB. But we need to emulate AAAS in its spirit of fighting for providing the opportunity to the students to learn, be it evolution or theology or any such subject. I do not think AAAS would stand up to oppose introduction of Vedic science as a subject by any university. Similarly, there are several scientists in the western universities working hard to evaluate the sense and nonsense of astrology (example see Kelly, I. W., *Modern Astrology: A critique*, *Psychological Reports*, 1997, **81**, 1035–1066; Kelly, I. W., Why Astrology does not work. *Psychological Report*, 1998, **82**, 527–546). AAAS does not intervene in their freedom. Doesn’t it appear that the initiative of our government speaks much more of its openness than some of us *the scientists*?

One of the strong reasons used by the ‘rationalists’ for opposing the introduction of astrology and palmistry is that it is non-scientific. Even considering that it is unscientific (which I am not sure has been scientifically proven beyond doubt), why should anyone hesitate to study astrology? Is history scientific? Are art and literature scientific? But have we not readily accepted them in our curriculum? I do not understand how a chapter on European history would be much more useful to a student in India than understanding his father’s routine comments on his horoscope. With an understanding of how good and/or bad the art of writing the horoscope is, he would be better placed to ward off the psychological pressures he has to face every day due to his horoscope. One of my close colleagues has an extra ‘a’ than usual in his name added by his father due to numeric and astrological reasons. It is a pity that he does not know and hence cannot explain to others the logical and/or illogical basis of including this plasmid in his name.

Astrology and palmistry are also bodies of information. The question is whether it is a body of sensible knowledge? But when a body of information has grown it could not have on random steps. It should be on issues of certain equations or regulations or thumb-rules.

CORRESPONDENCE

Tracking the history hidden in these should be an exciting exercise in itself for souls that love challenges. If studying arts and literature have a social relevance then so does studying the astrology and palmistry; and perhaps much beyond. There are greater benefits that the historians of science might derive in understanding the ethos, the patterns of thinking and profiles of the logic (or illogic) used in constructing these subjects that have survived for long and are as pervading across cultures of the world as the idea of *God* is. A serious examination of the case sheet of the survival of these memes would perhaps help in understanding the evolution of the faculty of logic itself in the human mind as we evolved continuously in diverse cultures. In this sense, serious studies on these subjects would be as important as perhaps the social psychology is. After all 'Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises' (Samuel Butler, *Life*).

Maybe we would have thrown away even social psychology had it been suggested by the bodies that govern us and not by our own colleagues. We need to be less arrogant when we discuss the initiatives that emerge from the ill-famed bodies such as the state and religion. Besides there is an unfortunate development in the attitude of the scientists in India which I think is very unscientific: If any one, be it a politician or common man or even a scientist urges the need to indulge in studies that have a base in Indian heritage, or Indus history and Hindu origin (please note the continuum I have resorted to in usage of these words), he is labelled as irrational, fundamentalist, and the idea proposed by him unworthy of pursuing by any considerations. While these scientists take pride in citing Greek philosophers' erroneous belief about the origin of life and view it as an honest attempt in pursuit of truth, any such philosophical expression drawn from the Indian canvas is straightaway re-

jected as an useless rambling and immediately buried behind them; I think these ideas at least deserve a post mortem examination to assess how useless they are. Certainly these areas may not be as worthy as that of reading a sonnet from Shakespeare but at least more worthy than reading some history of a distant geographic domain that 'records the names of the royal bastards, but cannot tell us the origin of wheat' (Jean Henri Fabre). I wish to learn both about the bastards and their horoscopes. And if ever written I also wish to know how these horoscopes fared or failed.

K. N. GANESHAIAH

*University of Agricultural Sciences,
Department of Plant Genetics and
Breeding,
GKVK, Bangalore 560 065, India
Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced
Scientific Research,
Jakkur, Bangalore 560 064, India
e-mail: kng@vsnl.com*
