

Astrology and science

Thanks to Panchapakesan¹, the topic about belief in astrology has come alive again. Topics such as astrology and the existence of God are debated quite unscientifically. Such topics are more of a sentimental matter than a matter of scientific discussion.

Being involved in the study of precious stones², many people, including scientists frequently seek my advice regarding the 'stone' to be worn for averting a particular misfortune or ailment; or to 'please' a particular God or wrongly positioned 'planet' in their horoscopes, whose effect is malicious to their progress. We, in the modern times, know what planets are and what electromagnetic waves are. Even today, many of us believe that rays of the sun pass through a stone worn on the body, enter the body passing through the skin to modify/nullify the malignant effect of the (mischievous?) planet. The concept of 'navratnas' that evolved centuries ago is even today deep-rooted in our minds. In fact, the 'navratnas' are called by the names of their 'ruling-planets', e.g. the blue-sapphire (neelam) as the 'Sani' or 'Sani-ka-nung' (blue-sapphire from Myanmar

in gemstone trade is called the 'Burmese Sani'; the one from Sri Lanka the 'Ceyloni Sani'; similarly the 'African Sani' and so on) and the yellow-sapphire (pucrai/pushyaraga) as the 'Guru' or 'Guru-ka-nung'! If it is true that the stones have an 'effect', why wear an exorbitantly expensive natural stone, which is seldom free from flaws, and almost always infected with defects? For the last century stones have been synthesized by man in the laboratory, which are pure and flawless and with all the structural, physical and optical properties of stones (mineral) formed in nature. These are far less expensive, often to the tune of over 1 : 1000!

Under this discussion three categories can be recognized: (i) those who believe, (ii) those who disbelieve, and (iii) those who are unconcerned.

It is true that astrology is unscientific, at least for those who do not believe in it. I being a 'non-believer' vehemently used to argue against the belief in astrology and wearing stones for astrological purposes. Nevertheless, of late, I have a feeling that believing in astrology should not be

discouraged and condemned, as it has a tremendous psychological effect on the mind, which in turn brings a person solace and the positive effect of psychology is capable of curing a disease. After all, most ailments are psychological rather than physical. It is the worry of some type or the other that takes a heavy toll on a person's health and behaviour. Here, we are dealing with the human mind, not science as such. If a 'blind belief' can bring joy to a person, should we not welcome it? Similarly, the belief in God brings solace to a 'believer'. Is being 'unscientific' a bliss?

1. Panchapakesan, N., *Curr. Sci.*, 2006, **91**, 14–15.
2. Karanth, R. V., *Geol. Soc. India Memoir No. 45*, 2000, pp. 406.

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Academic ethics

I am grateful to Jyoti Bhojwani for her letter entitled 'Ethics in scientific research'¹. Until her letter was published, I was under the impression that only Woo-Suk Hwang of South Korea was responsible for faking the now discredited work on stem-cell research that was published in *Nature*. But thanks to Bhojwani's letter, I came to know about Gerald Schatten of the University of Pittsburgh.

The URL <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/02/10/AR2006021001842.html> contains a pretty damning indictment of Schatten's highly dubious role in the entire matter. The report, prepared by a panel of the University of Pittsburgh, concluded that Schatten was guilty only of 'research misbehavior' (whatever that means). He is said to have accepted 'the title of senior author' of one of the two papers that are now discredited, and also received at least US\$ 40,000 in personal remuneration. He is also said to

have 'sought the media limelight' and to have 'accepted much of the fame and career benefits, without taking the responsibility expected of a senior collaborator'.

Please forgive me for being so dense, but I cannot understand how anyone can 'accept' the title of senior author. In the world that most of us inhabit, one has to *earn* that title, not have it conferred by a grateful co-conspirator in crime. The only sensible interpretation is that Schatten simply allowed his name to be put as the first author on a paper with which he had nothing do. For all this, the University of Pittsburgh's committee could accuse him only of 'misbehaviour'.

I can conclude only that the University of Pittsburgh was scared of the inevitable lawsuits that would follow if Schatten had been dismissed outright for what is clearly a serious breach of academic ethics. The Dean of the School of Medicine is also said to have been in a dilemma, be-

cause it was he who had recruited Schatten and 'showered Schatten with millions of dollars in research resources'. So he has let things ride.

Perhaps we Indians need to keep such incidents in mind when we get lectures from across the seas about the deplorable lack of ethics in Indian science. It appears that we have nothing to teach the Schattens of this world.

1. Bhojwani, Jyoti, *Curr. Sci.*, 2006, **90**, 1307.

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