

Indian court supports astrology as a university science subject

Ram Kumar
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A High Court decision in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh in late April speaks volumes about the way in which the Indian education system and society as a whole is being subjected to the nationalist prejudices and backward superstitions of Hindu extremists under the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government.

The court rejected a writ filed by noted molecular biologist Dr P.M. Bharghawa and two others challenging the introduction of *Jyotir Vigyan* or Vedic astrology as a science subject in Indian universities. The controversy has been raging since a two-person committee appointed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) produced a report in January recommending the funding of graduate and post-graduate (BSc and MSc) courses in astrology. A circular was sent out to universities in February calling for applications to establish courses for this academic year.

The proposal's chief architect is Human Resources Minister Murali Manohar Joshi. While academically Joshi is a physics professor, politically he is a longstanding member of the Hindu fundamentalist Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) which promotes Hindu exclusiveness under the banner of "one nation, one religion, and one culture—Hindutva". Joshi was one of the BJP leaders responsible for the communal campaign that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Uttar Pradesh in 1991. Speaking at a conference last December, he urged scientists to study Sanskrit and Indian philosophy, declaring that modern science was "inconclusive and therefore unreliable".

Over the last three years since the BJP come to power, the government has stacked the University Grants Commission (UGC) and other academic bodies with its own appointees. UGC chairman, Professor Hari

Gautam, who is known as a BJP supporter, made the decision last year to set up the committee to report on the possibility of establishing astrology courses, and has been vociferous in its defence. Gautam claimed that Nobel Prize winning Indian scientist C.V. Raman had stated that astrology was a science—an assertion that was immediately condemned as a lie by Raman's family members and associates.

Like its European counterpart, Vedic astrology claims to be able to make predictions based on the position of astronomical objects. To the Sun, the Moon and five planets visible to the naked eye, the Indian version adds two imaginary planets—Raahu and Kedhu. According to Hindu mythology, solar and lunar eclipses occur when mythical invisible serpents—Raahu and Kedhu—swallow the Sun and Moon. Such is the "science" that the BJP and RSS insist be given university accreditation.

The decision to introduce and fund astrology courses provoked immediate outrage from scientists and others. According to the *Financial Times*, more than 100 scientists and 300 political and social scientists have protested in writing to the Indian government. Their letters cite the comments of renowned astrophysicist, Jayanth Narikar, who declared that "[the] elevation of astrology to that of a subject taught in the universities would take India backwards towards medieval times".

Dr. Bharghawa filed a writ of mandamus, asking the High Court of Andhra Pradesh to rule the introduction of astrology courses as illegal and unconstitutional. He commented: "Astrology has never been regarded and could never be regarded as a science. Under article 51 of the constitution one of the fundamental duties of the citizen was to develop a scientific temper. The action of the UGC, far from creating a scientific temper, would on the contrary strengthen superstition. The tax payers' money should not be used for such purposes when

India does not have sufficient funds even for such basic human necessities as safe drinking water, basic sanitation, basic health, elementary education, roads, etc.”

In rejecting the writ, the court evaded the main issues. Firstly, the presiding judge argued that as no final decision had been made he could not interfere in the UGC’s decision-making processes. Secondly, he quoted from the second edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, published in the first half of the 19th century, which was ambiguous on the scientific nature of astrology. The opinion of experts differ and change from time to time, he concluded. Being ill-equipped regarding such matters, the court would exercise “the doctrine of self-restraint” and leave the issue to the UGC expert committee—that is, to the very people advocating astrology courses.

Under the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, similar and equally reactionary revisions are taking place in other areas of education and culture. The school history syllabus is being changed to effectively eliminate the 300 years from 1600 to 1900 when Muslim Mugal rulers and the British dominated the Indian subcontinent. From now on, students in junior high school will learn about “ancient Indian history and the impacts of its culture on the world” while older students will examine India in the 20th century.

Moreover, the BJP and RSS want to rewrite the history of the Indian independence struggle against the British to omit the open collaboration of Hindu chauvinist organisations such as the Hindu Maha Sabha with the colonial rulers. The Hindu fanatic who murdered Mahatma Gandhi was a member of the RSS, which claimed at the time that Gandhi was betraying Hindus.

To enforce its communal view of history, the BJP has already removed the noted historian Romilla Tharpar from an information and broadcasting service board, replaced 18 scholars on the Indian Council of Historic Research (ICHR) with BJP supporters, and blocked the publication of “Towards Freedom”—historical documents from the independence struggle edited by K.N. Panikar and Sumit Sirkar.

In the sphere of culture, the NDA government, working in collaboration with the BJP state government in Uttar Pradesh, prevented the shooting of the film

Water by Indian-born Canadian director Deepa Mehta, dealing with the plight of Hindu widows in Varanasi in the 1930s. It has also sought to censor paintings and art exhibitions it claims to be offensive to Hindu sensibilities.

The imposition of the Hindu extremist agenda on Indian society serves a definite political purpose. As the NDA government implements economic policies that are having a devastating impact of the living standards of the working class and sections of the middle class, it is seeking to divert the growing resentment and hostility into the dead-end of communal and caste politics. It is the same principle that the British colonial rulers exploited—Divide and Rule. There is no other reason for spending millions of rupees elevating astrological superstition to the status of a science while 40 percent of the population remains illiterate more than half a century after independence.



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