

NO PSEUDOSCIENCE, PLEASE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is India's premier national institute for improving access to education. Recently, IGNOU launched a degree course in astrology. This obsession with astrology is not a new phenomenon in a country which recently sent [a spacecraft in orbit around Mars](#). A similar decision was taken by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government in 2001, which was withdrawn after widespread opposition. In this context, all the citizens of this country who are concerned about the status of education and the role of scientific temperament in education need to take a stance about this decision.

Let us start by examining what is covered by the IGNOU syllabus. Even a casual look at the syllabus gives us an understanding of the unscientific nature of the course. The syllabus includes the study of horoscopes, which are determined by the state of different planets at the time of our birth and which apparently impact all the things that we do throughout our life. It also includes how to decide on an auspicious time for initiating a specific task. It claims to train its students in how to nullify the ill effects occurring due to specific problems in their horoscope. The range of problems for which astrology can offer solutions has no limit. It provides solutions on when one needs to apply for a job to ensure a good result to even determining the time a nation has to take a decision to start a war!

A seesaw of science and pseudoscience

Let us try and evaluate the three basic assumptions of astrology on which this syllabus is based. The first assumption is that the planets around us in the universe have a continuous effect on human life. The second assumption is that the result depends on the time of birth of the person and the third assumption is that the future of a person depends on all this and can be changed by solutions offered by an astrologer.

Let us now look at the main objections by astronomy (the science of the universe) to these assumptions. As per astrology, nine *Navagrahas* affect our lives. All of us know that four of these *Navagrahas* are not even *grahas* (planets). The sun is not a planet but a star. The moon is the natural satellite of the earth. Rahu and Ketu, which are claimed to be the most dangerous planets in astrology, are not even planets but points of intersection of the paths of the sun and the moon. The Milky Way, in which the sun and solar system are included, has countless stars other than the sun. It is not very difficult to appreciate how unscientific and potentially dangerous it will be to allow something like astrology as a mainstream course.

Next, let us look at the time of birth. The nature of a horoscope is dependent on the time of one's birth. And the time of birth used for this purpose by astrology is the time when the baby takes the first breath outside the mother's womb. Modern science tells us that the baby is actually born when the sperm and ovum come together to form the embryo, and it grows for the next nine months through different stages. How do all these *Navagrahas* not have any impact on the baby when it is inside the mother's womb and start affecting it only when it comes out? Astrologers have no answer. It is a simple observation that thousands of children are born in the world every second and their futures are not the same. What will be in their horoscope when a human being gives birth to a baby, say, on the moon or Mars tomorrow? The most serious effect of depending on astrology is that it takes human agency out of our lives.

The science teaching and rationality India needs

While we are on the path to astrology, Elon Musk, an American businessman, has started a project to humanise Mars under the SpaceX mission. The robotic rovers sent by NASA to Mars are collecting information and sending it back to earth. Stephen Hawking stated that the search for a habitable planet like earth in the universe should be the priority of astronomical research. Against this background, one needs to learn to differentiate between astrology, which is a pseudo-science, and astrophysics, which is a robust scientific discipline. Astrology exploits the vulnerability of the human mind while people face uncertainty. On the other hand, astrophysics depends on the core scientific principles of precise observations, hypothesis, experimentation and results based on all these. In an era where pseudoscience has started becoming the new normal, it's our responsibility as citizens to oppose such decisions and demand the withdrawal of such a course.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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