

## What Stephen Hawking didn't say

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The annual Indian Science Congress is not usually a place where original, path-breaking research is discussed. However, in the last few years, it seems to be a forum where some amazing, indeed jaw dropping claims are made. At the 105<sup>th</sup> session of the Congress, the Honourable Minister for Science & Technology claimed that "Every modern achievement is a continuation of our ancient scientific achievement. Hawking had also said that our Vedas might have a theory superior to Einstein's Law  $E=mc^2$ ".

It of course didn't matter one bit that the recently deceased cosmologist, Stephen Hawking had said no such thing, a fact stressed by the trustees of his estate subsequently. But misquoting the most well-known scientist of our age is not the most significant thing about this episode. What is more significant is that these kinds of claims, about our traditional scriptures, more importantly, the Hindu scriptures being the fount of all of modern science are routinely being made by the people at the helm of affairs.

A few years ago, no less a person than the Prime Minister asserted that ancient Indians developed IVF and the Minister for Science & Technology informed the Science Congress that ancient Indians had discovered what is known as Pythagoras's theorem. These are astonishing statements- especially since they come from the representatives of the state. And they should make us worry.

One has to make a distinction between private and public pronouncements and actions. Privately, whether the Honourable Prime Minister or Dr. Harsh Vardhan believe in *Rahu Kaalam* is their own business. There are plenty of people in the country who believe in a lot of mumbo-jumbo. But when policy makers, in their official capacity, make such statements we should think about the ramifications.

Leaving aside the constitutional mandate "to develop the scientific temper, humanism and spirit of inquiry and reforms", it also doesn't bode well for scientific research in our country if the policy makers hold such views. This will invariably reflect in the priorities in funding towards certain kinds of research which could hardly be called science.

There are several examples that this process is already under way. In 2017, several government departments, including the DST, CSIR and IIT, Delhi initiated a project, 'Scientific Validation and Research on *Panchgavya* (SVAROP)'. *Panchgavya*, for the uninitiated, is a medicinal preparation made from five products from the cow-urine, milk, curd, ghee and dung. The source of Dr. Harshvardhan's quote on Hawking's endorsement of the Vedas being a source of modern science was an organisation, "Institute for Scientific

Research on the Vedas". This organisation has been recognised as a Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation by Dept. of Scientific & Industrial Research. These are not isolated instances- there are many such outfits which are now being funded by the DST and other government agencies. And clearly since the overall kitty for scientific research has not grown significantly in the last few years (in fact, in real terms it has come down), it follows that such funding has come at the expense of other scientific research institutions.

The impact of official endorsement of such antediluvian and revisionist views is not just in starving genuine science of resources. It does not portend well for our future generations. We now have a government where Mr. Satyapal Singh, a Minister can openly claim that there is no scientific basis for the Theory of Evolution. Hitherto, the intellectual and ideological focus of the current dispensation was only on "correcting" the "liberal" bias in the social sciences taught in our schools. One shudders to think what will happen when Messers Harshvardhan and Singh and others of their ideological ilk start focussing on the sciences.

This is not in the realm of the impossible- in the most technologically and scientifically advanced nation in the world, religious activists have for years been trying (and partially succeeded) to change the school science curriculum to teach creationism in tandem with evolution. If the current dispensation has its way, we would be ensuring that our future generations would be total misfits in an increasingly scientific and technological world of the future- a thought which should alarm all of us.

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