

The Ghost of the Aryan

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/peddling-anti-scientific-beliefs-by-academia-must-worry-us-7755612/>

The IITs have been in the news lately for all the wrong reasons. This time it is not about the obnoxious pay packets their students have got in the institute placements. Instead, it is about much more exciting things like ghosts and steppe people invading, or rather not invading *Bharatvarsh* which have gone viral on the Internet.

First the Ghosts. The Director of an IIT posted a video on social media where he claimed he had exorcised ghosts troubling a research scholar simply by chanting mantras and espousing the wisdom of Bhagwad Gita. Given that this was in 1993, one can only imagine why the venerable expert in Artificial Intelligence decided to go public two decades later. Maybe it was the lure of instant fame that social media celebrities and “influencers” seem to be getting. When asked about it, he is reported to have said that “Ghosts exist” and that there is a lot that science cannot explain.

Then there was the issue of a calendar. IIT Kharagpur, the oldest amongst these venerable institutions, brought out its 2022 calendar. Ordinarily, these things are either harmless propaganda for the institution’s great work or contain innocuous photographs flora and fauna etc. and hence are not noteworthy. What made this particular piece of work remarkable was that it claimed to be debunking certain myths about ancient India.

The calendar is supposed to be based on research by the recently created The Center for Excellence for Indian Knowledge Systems at IIT Kharagpur which strives to do interdisciplinary research on various branches of the Indian Knowledge Systems. The areas of interest range from Indian history to advanced archaeological exploration; from Indian language systems to aesthetics systems; from Indian systems of geometry and mathematics to cosmology and positional astronomy; and from Indian constructs of ecological and working ethics, law to Indian systems of welfare economics and planning etc.

On the face of it, any such endeavor to research hitherto under-researched domains should be lauded. However, if the calendar is any indication, instead of genuine scholarship, the center seems to be more focused on fighting ideological battles.

Among the many themes which the calendar explores is the 'Rebuttal to the Aryan Invasion Myth'. It lays out "evidence" that "the myth is just not erroneous but maneuvered and widely popularised! A large scholarship is needed now to erase the misinterpretation sustained by the colonial hangover!" The claim is that the historians and archeologists have been wrong in saying that the Vedic period followed the Aryan invasion which itself was preceded by the Harappan civilization. Instead, the claim is that the Vedic era extends far into antiquity and there was simply no migration or invasion from outside the *Bharatvarsh*.

Anyone familiar with recent scholarship in the fields of paleo-genetics and DNA sequencing of existing populations would find all of this laughable. Several labs around the world have confirmed that there was indeed a migration from the Eurasian steppe into North India around 4000 years ago, around the time when archeologists believe that the Harappan civilization was in decline. All of this evidence is well documented not only in scientific literature but also in popular books like those by David Reich, Tony Joseph among others.

Why then would a center, which is supposed to carry out scientific investigation in areas related to ancient India, bring out such a blatantly un-scientific document? One can only guess the motivations of the creators of the calendar but if recent history is any guide, it seems that the idea was to provide support for the grand narrative which the government has been actively promoting namely that of the greatness and antiquity of indigenous Indian civilization. Bizarre statements by people holding important positions in the current dispensation regarding mythical scientific achievements of ancient India, rewriting of text books, active support of certain institutes and think tanks, funding of research into pseudo-scientific areas among others are part of this exercise. The capture of respectable academic institutions to serve this purpose is only the latest tactic being employed.

The case of the gentleman exorcising ghosts might be amusing but to me is not something we need to worry about. After all, the private beliefs of individuals are not something which should bother us as long as they are not imposed on others. There is no evidence to suggest that the person's irrational and anti-scientific beliefs have impacted his capabilities as a researcher or an administrator. And if people who are superstitious or hold irrational beliefs were to be excluded from important administrative posts, then a large percentage of our bureaucrats and politicians would

need to be superannuated. Even among the scientists, this dichotomy of professional and private spheres is widespread. The case of a famous scientist at a premier research institute in Mumbai throwing away food from his refrigerator after a solar eclipse is only one example of it.

The promotion of anti-scientific beliefs and the use of academia to further a particular ideological agenda are things all of us should be worried about. Replacing robust scientific theories with pseudo-science in textbooks is especially worrisome since it would have far reaching effects. The case of individuals, no matter how important, believing in ghosts, shamans or little green men can be amusing but should not be conflated with the far more insidious exercise currently in progress of using academic credentials for ideological purposes. The ghosts can take care of themselves. It is the latter which we really need to be concerned about.

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