

## RATIONAL MINISTER

A few days ago, the newspapers carried a picture on their front pages of the Honorable Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Dr. Sanjay Paswan with two cobras coiled around his neck. He had just demonstrated a walk on fire in front of about 2000 people gathered in Patna to take part in a gathering of tribal healers, shamans and other “witch doctors”.

The newspapers, especially the English language ones went to town with this display of “irrationalism” by a high functionary of the State. Editorials, either of the sarcastic or the sermonizing variety appeared in almost all newspapers. Interestingly, the Minister, instead of being defensive about his actions, was at his combative best. “This is all futuristic science and hence needs promotion by the state, media and civil society” he retorted. And as the Minister of HRD, he intends to start two institutes to research into these practices. These institutes will prepare a data bank of different types of healing practitioners in Bihar, have a website and build a team of teachers for those aspiring to learn the practices.

The whole episode is of course deplorable. As many commentators have pointed out, like his “boss”, Dr. Murlī Manohar Joshi who doesn’t tire of repeating that all the scientific knowledge is contained in the Vedas and has introduced courses in Karmakand at some Universities, Dr. Paswan now wants to include exorcism in the school and University syllabi. In fact, he is all set to prepare a national directory of all the ojhas and roadside peddlers to harness their combined powers of healing!

This would be farcical if it was not so tragic. As one editorial rightly pointed out, what the Minister believes in or does in his private capacity is his business. But to let such mumbo-jumbo influence decisions in the public sphere is not only wrong but dangerous. And that too in a Ministry like HRD where the power of setting the agenda for the future generations rests. Enough damage has been done by one maverick and this country can ill afford another such person hell bent on pushing his pet agenda into the school books and hence the minds of innocent children.

All this is accepted by almost everyone who professes to have a scientific temper. But there is another vital point that is missing in this debate on state sponsorship of superstitions and conduct of Ministers. And that is a comparison of this behavior with other “acceptable” behavior by our public figures.

A few years ago I went to a conference on Particle Physics at Chennai that was to be inaugurated by an eminent scientist who had by then become a top-level scientific bureaucrat. The conference was inaugurated by lighting a lamp in front of a statue of Goddess Sarasvati and some hymns were sung in her glory. When some of us objected to this display of religiosity at a scientific meet, we were told that this is a part of our composite culture and we were being Western in deploring such acts!

This is not an isolated incident. Almost all public functions have similar displays of ritualism by top functionaries of the State. The idea is that this is not religion one is glorifying but rather our “culture”. Why is it that there are no editorials or web commentaries censuring such behavior? How is it that this kind of public display is acceptable? Surely, such displays are equally objectionable if one applies the test of

scientific temper and rationalism. How is it that “our culture” is being defined as one that is possibly totally alien to a majority of our population? I am talking here of the vast majority of the tribals, dalits and others who are outside the Brahminical fold. Surely they make up a majority of this country as Ms. Mayawati never tires of reminding us?

This vast majority holds a belief system in which tribal healing, exorcism and other such superstitious tripe is important. But this is at odds with our ideas of scientific temper while starting a scientific conference with Sarasvati Vandana is acceptable. Surely there is something wrong in all of this.

In 1976, Article 51-A was added to our constitution with the infamous 42 Amendment. One of the fundamental duties of the Indian citizen, the article instructs is “ To develop the scientific temper, humanism and spirit of inquiry and reform in our citizens”. Public servants, irrespective of their personal beliefs are expected to display scientific temper in their actions. We need to condemn glorification of superstition, irrationalism and use of public money to promote such ideas. What we don't need are double standards that ignore one kind of unscientific behavior and condemn another kind, just because it is unfamiliar.