

## CORRESPONDENCE

### Good Fences Make Good Neighbours\*

There has been quite a debate during the last several weeks about science in ancient India. On the one hand, unverifiable claims are being made that many of modern-day ideas, discoveries and inventions in science (e.g. stem cell biology) were already known and practised centuries and even millennia ago in India. On the other, outright dismissal of even claims where written material can be checked (*Baudhayana* and *Apastambha Sutras* in mathematics) has the danger of throwing the baby with the bathwater. The debate is worryingly turning partisan and political, and it is time that we take a perspective view of the issue.

Every civilization has been enriched over time through imagination, individual and collective thought and creativity. These have led to the blossoming of art and culture, mythology and symbolism, epics and belief systems, which have given it identity. They have also led to developments and achievements in logic, analytical thought, science and technology, which have offered human society improvement in daily life. *Cogito ergo sum*.

Imagination leading to arts and crafts, literature or mythology is often not limited to what is possible, feasible, familiar or 'natural'. Myths and epics abound in such unfettered thoughts and acts, and it is these that lend them their special character and appeal. Great poems and epics of the Indian, Greek or other ancient civilizations have captured, triggered and nurtured peoples' imagination precisely because of this feature. The *Mahabharata*, told and retold over centuries, captivates the contemporary mind and even allows for interpretation of today's events. Such poems and epics have their own grammar.

Imagination, governed by rational and logical

rules, and empiricism or heuristics, leads to developments in science and technology, making daily lives better. Science and technology have their own grammar, rules and restrictions. They do not allow, for example, creation of any material thing out of nothing. They thus define the 'natural', and the 'possible'. Town planners, mathematicians, metallurgists and architects of ancient India understood and practised this grammar as well.

Confusion and conflict arise when, for example, the symbolism of a myth or an event in an epic, which is perfectly admissible in its own context and narrative, is attempted to be in line with, and 'explained' using the grammar of science; or when what is symbolic is interpreted to be literally true. Such an attempt to 'explain' Lord Ganesa's head through the method of science demeans His Divinity, reducing Him to a mere mortal.

Myths and symbols are meant not always to be explained by science; to do so would be an unacceptable trivialization. On the other hand, they may actually inspire science towards inventions and innovations. Each has its own value, and should be respected in its own right. There need be no 'correspondence principle' between the two. Without symbolism and myths, it would be a duller world. Without science and technology, it would be a poorer world. Let us be enriched by both. But, let them not intrude on one another. As they say, good fences make good neighbours.

**D. Balasubramanian**

L.V. Prasad Eye Institute, Banjara Hills,  
Hyderabad 500 034, India  
E-mail: dbala@lvpei.org