Religion and the Media

Karnataka Elections & Diviners' Predictions

Makara Jyothi is man-made: Confess Sabarimala Priests
For more than a month, Kerala has been in the grip of unprecedented protests against spiritual criminals. It all started with the arrest of Santhosh M adhavan alias Swami Amritha Chaitanya, a self-styled godman, for raping adolescent girls in his ashram. A subsequent raid in his ashram unearthed a large cache of CDs containing pornographic videos of the godman having sex with more than 23 women! (Mathrubhumi daily, Kannur, 20 May 2008). The spark generated by the arrest of Santhosh M adhavan spread like wild-fire and engulfed all kinds of quacks - godmen, astrologers, witch doctors, faith healers,... In some cases, frustrated people took the law into their hands and ransacked the ashrams. Though the police has so far not touched the mother of all spiritual frauds, M atha Amrithanandamayi, it seems she also has started feeling the heat. A second-order godman of the Amrithanandamayi M ath wrote an editorial page article in Mathrubhumi daily condemning the attack on genuine Swamis and A mmas!

The peoples’ ire against the spiritual tricksters was so strong that the Sabarimala priest for the first time came out with a confessional statement that the M akaravilakku alias M akarajyothi was man-made! In this issue, we have published a detailed report on this confessional drama.

In Karnataka, a new Bharatiya Janatha Party ministry is sworn in. Thus, for the first time, the right-wing political party has come to power on its own in a south Indian state. But the claim that there was a saffron surge in the state is not entirely correct. Congress (I), with 34.59% of votes, is still the biggest political formation in Karnataka in terms of votes polled. The vote-share of Congress (I) and Janata Dal (S) taken together is about 54% as against BJP’s 33.86%.

In our May issue, we published the challenge of Professor Narendra Nayak to diviners to forecast the results of Karnataka elections. He received entries from a wide variety of spiritual forecasters. Their performance, writes Prof. Nayak in this issue, was abysmally poor. He also writes, in a separate article, on the role of print media in instilling religious obscurantism among the people.

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Religion and the Media

Narendra Nayak

In India the print media is mostly owned by large business houses with a variety of trade and commercial interests, and they are keen to propitiate Hindu religious interests. As a reaction to the propagation of the majority viewpoint, and many times out of their own vested interests, smaller non-Hindu sections of the media promote their own religious lobbies. In an atmosphere which is vitiated by such propaganda it is very difficult for the ordinary citizen to sift fact from fiction. When there are inter-religious disturbances, the media go to town with their distorted version of the happenings, depending on whichever vested interest they represent, so adding fuel to the fire of communal passions. This naturally increases the intensity of the conflict, thereby promoting their agenda and sometimes their self-fulfilling prophecies. Usually, after a few days of mayhem order does return. Since the average citizen of India is mostly a peace-loving person, the media stokes the fires of communal passions proactively. They are kept burning with a low key program of soft communal agenda and promotion of various types of superstition. This article will deal with the manner in which the print media uses religion.

Almost every newspaper has a column on religious propaganda – even the so-called progressive ones. There are some exceptions to these like those published by some of the left front parties. The largest selling news paper in India, The Times of India, carries regularly on its editorial page, columns like the “Speaking Tree” which is a vehicle for the “thoughts” of reactionary elements of Hindu leanings while on certain days like Christmas or Eid token write ups are carried authored by those professing other religions. As the author has experienced, there is nothing pertaining to the scientific temper, Humanism of any type or rational thinking ever printed in this column. If one were to send reactions to the drivel published therein they would never be published.

Take the so-called progressive newspaper The Hindu (it has supposedly nothing to do with eponymous religion) originally started from Madras (now Chennai). It carries a regular column called ‘Religion’ which has write-ups like ‘God’s graciousness’ (loving devotion to God is an end to itself as a devotee who has reached such heights of devotion transcends all duality and exists only for His sake). Another one, ‘Karma – a binding force’ quotes Swami Paramarthananda as follows:

“The universal law of Karma is a binding factor on all human beings. This manifests itself as the joys and sorrows one experience in life as a consequence of one’s past deeds, good and bad. What is the solution for these? ... the Karma Kanda section of the Vedas suggests
ritualistic solutions for the varieties of problems mankind faces while also offering methods and skills for diagnosing them.”

If this is the sort of thing published in a newspaper with a ‘progressive’ outlook one can imagine what the others do.

With reference to the newspapers published in Indian languages, the biases are even more blatant and their role in the spread of superstitions and communal hatred is legendary. In the state of Gujrat the newspapers belonging to a certain section incited passions and actively assisted in the Muslim genocide of 2002.

In Muslim dominated areas like the city of Hyderabad, the Urdu press (Urdu is identified with the Muslim community) has incited riots, communal hatred, and intolerance. In his hometown of Mangalore in Karnataka, the author can vouch for the role of the local and state level newspapers in pursuing a hidden communal agenda with a view to making it as communally polarized as in the state of Gujrat. The largest circulating newspaper of the region called Vijaya Karnataka was first owned by a Transport baron who later on joined the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (which was instrumental in opening up communal tensions in 1992 with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, thus unleashing communal riots in the entire country), got elected as a Member of Parliament on their ticket, resigned from that and started his own party. During his ownership, the newspaper was promoting his ideology.

The newspaper was taken over by The Times of India group - arguably the largest media group in the country - but the editorial policy did not change. The newspaper caters to all sorts of superstitions and carries columns one of which called all Muslims ‘terrorists’ and had to face their ire. One thing in common to all of the columnists is the hatred towards the forces of reason, rational and humanist thought.

In the area where I reside, the largest circulated newspaper called the Udayavani is unique in having no editorial section. This lack does not mean that it has no agenda – in that department this rag is very strong. It promotes the communal interests of one community and the upper castes in particular. It goes to great lengths to glean pearls of communal wisdom and stories of so-called miracles from everywhere. As is the usual practice, reactions to these are never carried and even if carried are heavily edited and the debate distorted to make it appear as if the forces of rational thought have been defeated.

Thanks to these, minor incidents like a Muslim vendor pricking a girl with a needle have been projected as Hindus being infected with AIDS, minor quarrels between communities projected as major riots (the resulting reactions fulfilling their own prophecies). In another case a tableau depicting a Muslim bowing before a Hindu goddess (which was part of a local legend in which there is a temple built for that goddess by a Muslim and named after him) resulted in communal riots. These resulted
in almost three days of round the clock curfew in certain areas and the loss of several dozen innocent lives. All this because the media had projected such a minor incident as a great affront to the faith of some. This has been going on for a long time and has resulted in benefit to the Hindu right who have gained a lot of political advantage. The Bharatiya Janata Party has won several seats to the legislative bodies.

One may question why voices of reason are not raised against these. The unpalatable truth is that the media is in the hands of a few powerful barons who claim to mould public opinion.

The new age guru Ravishankar who attaches two ‘Sris’ before his name (it is like being address as Mr., Mr.!) and tiles like Guruji Maharaj (Lord and Mentor Supreme) is promoted by the media as a saviour of mankind. He promotes something called art of living, probably implying that those who do not undergo his course are dead, which is a mishmash of yoga and some Hindu superstitions. All his fame has been due to the support of a section of the media and unreserved acceptance by others. Then there is one Ram Kishen Yadav, who calls himself Baba Ramdev (Father Ramdev), who claims to be a yoga expert and promises health for all and cures for every possible disease through his untested, unproved concoctions. He is almost solely a product of media hype. The success of these godmen is probably due to their publicity on TV channels, but the print media has also played a large role in promoting them.

On the other hand, rational forces within the media can find themselves harassed by the law under various obscure sections of the Indian Penal Code. When B.V. Seetaram, columnist of the Kannada newspaper, Karavali Ale, questioned the propriety of Jain ascetics going around stark naked and why that did not attract the provisions of the Indian Penal Code on nudity, he was arrested and paraded around in chains like criminals (see photo). On the personal front, when the writer of this article, who is the president of the
Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, was queried at a public meeting about the efficacy of cow’s urine as a panacea, he replied that urine of all animals whether a cow or a dog was excretory product. This was highlighted in a newspaper famous for its reactionary views. It was followed by a campaign orchestrated by that newspaper itself for about a month, attacking the statement and the person who made it with threats to prosecute him under any possible sections of the Indian Penal Code. The campaign came to an end only after a legal luminary suggested that no legal action could be taken as the author was a Hindu (despite his claims to the contrary) and that every Hindu had the right to criticize and try for the reform of his own religion!

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There is nothing pertaining to the scientific temper, Humanism, or rational thinking ever printed in this column. If one were to send reactions to the drivel published therein they would never be published. *The Hindu* carries a regular column called ‘Religion’ which has write-ups like ‘God’s graciousness’, ‘Karma – a binding force’, etc

One has to understand the role of the media in the Indian context to know its effect and efforts to promote religion and related superstitions. Though most of my analysis had been of the Hindu right and its efforts in promoting the Hindutva (radical Hindu) agenda, one cannot discount the role of the followers of the other proselytizing religions like Islam and Christianity.

But due to the smaller number of the followers and their realization that it would better for them to be in the good books of the secular non-believers, they have toned down their attacks against most of us. Of course Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie who have chosen to launch direct attacks on their prophet are exceptions to this! The Christian

own a newspaper chain. Their utilization of the media has been mainly through the power of money and claims to empathy from Sonia Gandhi, leader of the ruling Congress Party, whose Roman Catholic origins have made the party faithful obsequious to followers of their leader’s faith. Under these circumstances it is very difficult for Humanists to make our voices heard. We are provided a platform by a very small section of the media sympathetic to us to express our point of view, and sometimes heavily edited versions of our side are also published to make a show of fair play.

(This article was first published in May 2008 issue of *International Humanist News*, the organ of International Humanist and Ethical Union. This is a slightly edited version.)
Makara Jyothi is Man-made: Priest's Confession and a Minister's Summersault

T.V. Manoj

In our January 2008 issue (See MAKARA JYOTHI – a state sponsored fraud, Bangalore Skeptic, No.1) we documented the facts behind the ‘divine light’ (rather, ‘divine fraud’) of Makara Jyothi at the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala. We reported that the fraud had been perpetrated by the authorities of Sabarimala temple with the active support of various departments of Government of Kerala (including the state police) upon the credulous devotees for decades. We narrated in detail the story of the successful attempt made by the rationalists in 1981 to expose this massive fraud. That year, the rationalists photographed the entire sequence of events leading to the very lighting of the ‘divine’ Jyothi. We also brought to the attention of our readers the expose made by the television news channel NDTV 24X7 on 11 January 2007, when its correspondent, Rajesh Ramachandran, filed a report from Ponnambalamedu itself with appropriate visuals. (The readers may recall the myth prevalent among the Sabarimala devotees that Ponnambalamedu is the abode of Lord Ayyappa and is not accessible to human beings).

Unfortunately, the reports of none of these exposes reached the teeming multitude that throng the hill shrine every season; especially those devotees belonging to the states other than Kerala. The governments (both the Left and the non-Left), with their eyes on the huge revenue brought into the state by the devotees, continued to perpetrate this fraud, season after season, year after year. Since 1982 this fraud has been committed under heavy police protection. The rationalist activists who attempted to visit the place again in 1982 and later were roughed up by the police. The lighting of the Makara Jyothi also resulted in heavy human casualties at Sabarimala itself. In 1999, for instance, 52 devotees were killed in a stampede while witnessing, to use the eminent historian Dr. Rajan Gurukkal’s pithy epithet, the “state sponsored magic”.

Priest’s confession

Now, for the first time the Sabarimala priests themselves have come out with the truth. On 28 May 2008, Kantararu
Maheswararu Thantri, the head priest of Sabarimala, said in a press statement that there was nothing divine in the “Jyothi” and that it was man-made. The immediate backdrop to this belated confession was the violent protests witnessed in Kerala against all kinds of godmen and other spiritual quacks following the recent arrest of Santhosh Madhavan alias Swami Amritachaithanya, a self-styled godman. The media, which shamelessly promoted this ‘miracle’ for all these years and refused to give any coverage to rationalists’ attempts to expose the fraud, has now started to come out with the truth.

Unfortunately, even while reluctantly coming out with the facts, the temple priest tried to further befuddle the public and the devotees rather than to clarify the issues. The tantr in his press statement says that the devotees confused Makra Jyothi with Makara Vilakku, and that Makara Jyothi is a star that appears on the sky whereas Makara Vialkku is man-made. What has been called Makara Jyothi is in fact Makara Vilakku, which is man-made whereas Makara Jyothi is a star appearing in the sky, which is still a miracle! Confused? That precisely is what they want. Confound the devotees, retain the flock and rake in more money.

There has never been any confusion so far, not only among the devotees but among the Sabarimal authorities too. All the books and reports published by the Sabarimala authorities themselves unequivocally claimed that this "miraculous" light indeed was Makara Jyothi. The media - print, radio, and television - have always referred to this flicker of light as Makara Jyothi. The term Makara Vilakku has generally been used to refer to the whole festival being celebrated in Sabarimala in the month of, as per Malayalam calendar, Makaram. In Malayalam, the Makara Jyothi also is sometimes called Makara Vilakku. But there never was any confusion as to what Makarajyothi was, until the priest came out with the press statement. Do a 'google' search on Makarajyothi and it will directly take you to this "miracle".

The question to be asked in this context is why the temple authorities did not earlier clarify for the benefit of devotees the difference between the ‘real’ Makara Jyothi and the so-called Makara Vilakku. Why this sudden realization now? The answer is the priests, the Dewaswom Board, and the government can continue to assert that the Makara Jyothi is still a miracle, though they now will be pointing to a different direction, towards a star! It is you, the devotees, who made the mistake and we, the authorities, are pristine innocent! You, fools, now look at the star, a miracle and continue to fill our coffers!
The complicity of media

The media do not fare better. While lambasting the government for misleading the devotees for years, the media do not bother to devote even a line for self-criticism. Don’t the media have a responsibility to explain to their readers why they had not sent their investigate reporters to unearth this monumental fraud? Don’t they have a duty to inform their readers why they had blacked out all these years well documented exposes made by the rationalists? Is it not a simple truth that it was with the active support of the media that this fraud has grown into gargantuan proportions that it is today?

The media not only refuse to admit their complicity in perpetuating the fraud, but continue to parrot the absurd claims made by the temple authorities. The New Indian Express, for instance, states in their editorial that, to quote, “two more connected events still evade scientific explanation: Just before the Vilakku appears a star rises in the sky and a kite hovers over the temple!” (See NIE, dated 29.05.2008). The truth is there is no miracle in these. The star that the editorial refers to, can be seen not only from Sabarimala but from elsewhere too. It does not appear just on the day of Makarajyothi, it is always there. As to the hovering of a kite, kites are a common species of birds abundant in these parts and they are normally attracted by filth for which Sabarimala is notorious. Moreover, kites can easily be tamed (the readers may note that kites are very efficiently used in falconry in the Middle East) and hence it is always possible for the temple authorities to release a trained kite right on time for the devotees to shout hysterically “Swamiye Saranamayyppa”!

Minister’s Summersault

The most pathetic statements came from G.Sudhakaran, the state Minister for temple affairs and a CPI (M) MLA. He not only repeated the statements made by the temple priest to deliberately befuddle the people, but gave his own justification for the perpetration of the fraud – “Makarajyothi and Makaravilakku are not the same things, the later of which is man-made. Religion could not be subjected to rational analysis and our government did not want to go with the rationalists on this issue” (Mathrubhumi daily, Kannur edition, 29.05.2008). It is this same gentleman who told NDTV just a little more than a year before that, to quote, "nobody has examined it, government never inquired into it, we are not planning to inquire into that because that is related to the faith of devotees for hundreds of years” (see the transcripts reproduced in this issue of Bangalore Skeptic).

How has the minister suddenly got enlightened about the human-hand behind the “miracle” which “nobody has ever examined”? Why did he feign ignorance about sending a posse of policemen by his own government to guard the creation of this fraud by employees of various government departments, including his own, on a land owned by the government? What is in this fraud that takes it beyond the purview of a rational scrutiny as the minister claims? Can we be faulted if we suspect a collusion between the priest and the ministry in giving a press statement deliberately to confuse and continue to defraud millions of people?
FOLLOW UP

Election Results and Diviners' Predictions

Narendra Nayak

As usual, when elections do happen, all the predictors of the future have a hay day.

The candidates, their well wishers and anyone else worth their salt flock to the soothsayers- to find out their fate and the auspicious time for the filing of nominations etc. So, in order to give an opportunity to these people to show the efficacy of their so called sciences of prophecy the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations gave an opportunity to all interested to forecast the results of the Karnataka Vidhan Sabha elections to be held in the month of May,2008.

An award of Rs.1,000,000 was announced for those who could predict correctly the results. The award would go as Rs.200,000 each to five entries which would be correct within the error limits of ±10%. If more than 5 such entries were received the said amount would be equally divided among the winners. Time was given up to the date of counting for the receipt of entries. Some of questions were quite general while the most were very specific like the total number of votes some important candidates would poll.

Altogether 140 entries were received. Due to errors committed by some of the moffusil papers, a good number of incomplete ones were also received. These had treated the prediction challenge as a sort of quiz with the prizes, while it was actually intended to be an opportunity to forecast election results by supernatural methods. However, these entries were not rejected but were treated separately as non serious ones. Such were 83 in number. Those with a serious attempt to predict the results by any possible methods were the rest.

Method of Evaluation

The evaluation method was very simple; each right answer was awarded one mark. The margin of error was allowed at ±10%. Though it was specified that ranges were not acceptable, they too were taken into account if they lay within this margin. The prize would be awarded to the entries which would have at least 21 marks out of 25. The contestants were also asked to indicate the method by which the predictions were made. This question got the most interesting of the responses. Some relied on horoscopes prayers, insight. One stated that he had a special method of touching water while asking the questions and would give the answers by the vibrations. Another stated that he had prayed for 2 hours to Allah before writing down the answers. One had cast the horoscope of the state of Karnataka and had come his conclusions all of which unfortunately were false and he could get no marks! Another from Mandya had sent his entry based on his experience in politics as his wife happened to be a vice chair person of a village panchayath.

Diviners' Performance

The highest marks were obtained by non astrologers who relied upon the newspaper forecasts and the TV channel exit polls to come to their conclusions .Ms.Sujatha from Dharwar got the highest number of right answers that is 9 out of 25. However this falls short by less than 50% of the required number of right answers to be eligible for the award. Her predictions
were based on the past performances of the parties and the candidates. Similarly the two entries which were awarded 8 marks each were based on factors other than the supernatural! Only one of them admits that he had checked the predictions of the astrologers along with all the surveys conducted by the media.

By contrast most of those who relied upon their extra sensory powers of prediction did miserably. The highest number of right answers was 4 out of 25 and most of them got 2 or 3 marks because of their political leanings towards the Bharathiya Janatha Party! This party seemed to have the maximum support among the astrologers as well as the others. Among those who got zeros who were about 30 in number all predicted a win for a non BJP party. The same was the case with those who had one mark only. The final results were as follows for the whole group without classifying the senders into categories:

33 - zero.18-one,42 - two,19- three,15-four,6 – five , 4- six ,two got eight answers right while only got nine correct.

We regret that it is not possible to contact the individuals who have sent their entries and request them to check the copies of their entries with the results available in the media. My Rs. 1,000,000 remains with me to be the award for predicting the results of the next election!

(The questionnaire along with the terms and conditions was published in our May 2008 issue)

...but Astrology Works!

(Here is an astrological analysis of your, the receiver of this issue of Bangalore Skeptic, Sun Sign. Extreme care is taken to precisely & scientifically analyse your birth chart. A program is inbuilt in this issue of Bangalore Skeptic. The moment you open this page, the program detects which Sun Sign you were born in and then analyse your personality!)

You have a need for other people to like and admire you, and yet you tend to be critical of yourself. While you have some personality weaknesses you are generally able to compensate for them. You have considerable unused capacity that you have not turned to your advantage. Disciplined and self-controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside. At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. You also pride yourself as an independent thinker; and do not accept others’ statements without satisfactory proof. But you have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, and sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be rather unrealistic.
Sabarimala miracle claims disputed
NDTV Correspondent, Thursday, January 11, 2007 (Ponnambalamedu)

Makaravilakku or the festival of divine light at Sabarimala draws the second largest number of pilgrims in the country. Devotees say the appearance of the light three times is a miracle but some say it is a set up.

Every Makar Sakranthi at 6.30 pm the summit of a hill opposite the Ayyappa temple lights up. Government broadcasters Doordarshan and All India Radio cover the annual event live. The divine light or Makarajyothi draws a million devotees according to the Devaswom Board, which runs the temple management. Pilgrims stream in from several states, some of them hold on to vantage positions for several days to witness the event.

"A light appears on the hill, it's a miraculous thing and that is why pilgrims are coming," says the President of Tranvancore Devaswom Board Raman Nair.

Not a miracle

A former employee of the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) Shivananda claims the light is not a miracle. "When I got transferred to the Pampa division of KSEB near Sabarimala, I got an opportunity to actually see this light being lit in 1981," he said. "A Devaswom Board assistant engineer Karunakaran Nair, two policemen and two labourers had come there. They had one or two kilograms of camphor and an aluminium vessel. The light was lit by a KSEB driver VR Gopinathan Nair," Shivananda explains. This version of the light is widely known in Kerala but rarely discussed.

Devasnom Minister G Sudhakaran says, "nobody has examined it, government never inquired into it, we are not planning to inquire into that because that is related to the faith of devotees for hundreds of years." "As far as the temple is concerned as far as the belief is concerned it is not good for the government to inquire " Sudhakaran said.

But as the pilgrims increased in the mid-eighties the enterprise drew in more personnel and resources including a large contingent of police making it harder to conceal. Till the early 1980s igniting the light was confined to a small group of KSEB employees who helped the Devaswom Board.

Another former KSEB employee says, "when I went there in 1986, the police had completely cordoned off the area. They let in only a few people whom they knew well. Officials from Devaswom Board lit the light".

Closely guarded site

A forest road runs from Vandi Periyar, 100 kms from Kottayam. Of Kochu Pampa, midway to Sabarigiri hydel project a mud track goes inside the reserve forest. The forest department closely guards the road. The key to a barricade on the road is with the nearest forest check post a couple of kilometers away. The forest department reportedly opens the barricade and lets Dewasom and police officials into Ponnambalamedu where the miracle is set up.

"Makarajyoti is the biggest ritualistic fraud in the country which has disastrous social and ecological impact," Dr PM Rajan Gurukkal, director of the School of Social Sciences said. "On that day many people remain in vulnerable positions unmindful of the danger to see the state sponsored magic. The core of the whole activity is commerce. It generates a lot of money and a miracle attracts a lot of people".

In 1999 a stampede among pilgrims gathered to see the light left 52 people dead."


The visuals can be accessed at:

Confessions: Divine light is man-made

Express News Service
Thiruvananthapuram, May 28

The ripples created by the movement against cheating of the credulous by fake godmen in Kerala have reached Lord Ayyappa’s abode of Sabarimala too. The phenomenon known as Makara Vilakku, the light appearing in the thick jungles of Ponnambalamedu, some distance away from Sabarimala, had for long been flouted as divine by vested interests. Lakhs converge to see the flare that flashes thrice to mark the auspicious moment of Makara Samkranthi.

But the truth has now been revealed by the government, the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Sabarimala Thanthri family. The explanation is that Makara Vilakku and Makara Jyothi are entirely different. While Makara Jyothi is a star appearing in the sky, Makara Vilakku is man-made. But the revelation may trigger another controversy over deceiving millions of devotees over the years by those in the know. Taking a cue from the statement of Sabarimala head priest Kantararu Maheswararu Thanthri on Tuesday regarding Makara Vilakku and Makara Jyothi, Devaswom Minister G. Sudhakaran and TDB president C K Guptan confessed on Wednesday that Makara Vilakku had been man-made.

“There is no doubt that Makara Vilakku is a man-made phenomenon. But the government can’t do anything to stop it. It may pave the way for communal tension in the state”, said G Sudhakaran.

Guptan also said the lighting of Makara Vilakku can’t be prevented. “The TDB has no role in lighting Makara Vilakku. It is happening on a premise far away from the temple which is under the administration of Devaswom Board. TDB has never given any publicity to Makara Vilakku by terming it a miracle”, said Guptan.

The Thanthri, in a statement issued through his grandson Rahul Eswar on Tuesday, said that Makra Vilakku is a custom started by the tribes at Ponnambalamedu, the abode of Sastha. Legend has it that Lord Parasuram lighted the lamp and started the light worship there.

Referring to the controversies, the thanthri said those were kicked off by the misconception of people who had mistaken Makra Vilakku as Makara Jyothi. The thanthri had asked everyone to realize the truth and not to drag the temple and ‘Dharma Sastha’ into controversies.

The New Indian Express, Kozhikode, 29 May, 2008

Snuffing out the flame of faith

(Editorial – The New Indian Express [Kerala Editions], 29 May 2008)

It has finally been certified that the famed Makara Vilakku at Kerala’s Sabarimala hill shrine, hitherto considered a heavenly miracle, is only a man-lit phenomenon. Two authorities – patron pontiff Kandararu Maheswararu and Minister for Temple affairs G Sudhakaran - have confirmed that there isn’t anything godly behind the mystery flame that flickers thrice on the first of Makaram month every year sending millions into frenzy. The time of this revelation couldn’t have been better as it comes at a time when Kerala is witnessing a wave of protests against anything with even a light tinge of superstition. But the statement on Makara Vilakku, one of the most public secrets in Kerala, deserves praise not because it’s the last fort of superstition to crumble, but for the honesty with which the Government has owned up
its involvement in the event. It has been widely alleged, especially by rationalists and atheists, that the event is nothing but a spiritual hoax sponsored by successive governments to add devotional value to the first of Makaram. (Several bids by rationalists to unearth the mystery were brutally crushed by police and forest department guards.)

According to Sabarimala lore, it was on this day that Lord Aykyappa, after leading a successful war against the demon Mahisasuran, merged with Sastha idol in the hill shrine to give birth to the Dharma Sastha myth. It’s also said that tribals who were harassed by the demon did an arathi from a hillock opposite the shrine to celebrate the victory of good over evil to give birth to the Makara Vilakku myth, which attracts the largest congregation of devotees year after year.

Sabarimala today attracts pilgrims even from Maharashtra with the first of Makaram hosting at least five million pilgrims who watch the miracle flame appearing thrice in the deep forests opposite the shrine. But two more connected events still evade scientific explanation: Just before the Vilakku appears a star rises in the sky and a kite hovers over the temple! But a democratic Government, having admitted how millions of people were being misled by a practice under its patronage, owes a more sensible explanation for orphaning a philosophy and hurting true devotees. Would tendering an apology and ending its patronage to the event assuage some of the sentiments?

(The New Indian Express, Calicut, 29 May, 2008)

When Predictions were Challenged

Aabha Raveendran

(Deccan Herald, Bangalore, May 2008)

The astrologers failed miserably once again. Neither could they make more than 4 correct predictions, nor could they win the Rs.10 lakh price money offered by Dr Narendra Nayak.

Pre-election period is always a busy season for soothsayers and astrologers in our country. The candidates, their well wishers and anyone else worth their salt flock to the soothsayers to find out their fate, the auspicious time for the filing of nominations and seeking blessings and suggestions for better results.

The Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA) headed by Dr Nayak found the elections the right opportunity to test those people who claim to possess supernatural powers. They have been challenging the astrologers for the past several years by inviting their predictions regarding key results of the elections. This year too, they were challenged to forecast the results of the Karnataka Vidhan Sabha elections and interestingly the results were not different from the previous years.

The challenge was to make 25 predictions that include the name and party of the person who will become the next chief minister of Karnataka and the number of votes that some major candidates will poll in some of the important constituencies.

A margin of error of ±10% was allowed in case of the number of votes, though ranges were not accepted. There were around 200 entries from all over Karnataka, both from astrologers and non-astrologers. And finally, the non-astrologers who gave up to 9 right answers turned out better predictors than the astrologers who could manage only up to 4 right answers. Dr Narendra Nayak points out that most astrologers were staunch BJP supporters, the reason why they earned 2 to 3 marks. Finally, one Ms Sujatha from Dharwad (9 marks), KR Chandrashekara and ML Anand (8 marks each) topped the list, but failed to win prize as they couldn’t answer even 50 per cent of the queries.
**The method**

Even interesting were the methods adopted by the contestants in making the predictions. Some relied on horoscopes, prayers and insight. One stated that he had a special method of touching water while asking the questions and water would give the answers by means of vibrations. Another person who used a pendulum to make predictions got 4 marks.

Yet another person is a strong believer in star power. One contestant stated that he had prayed for 2 hours to Allah before writing down the answers. Another contestant went as far as casting a horoscope of the state of Karnataka. All his predictions were false.

Even non-astrologers had interesting reasons to predict. A contestant from Mandya had sent his entry based on his experience in politics and his wife happened to be vice chairperson of a village panchayat. However, most of them relied upon the past performance of the parties, candidates and newspaper reports to frame their predictions. Only one of them admits that he had checked the predictions of the astrologers along with all the surveys conducted by the media.

**Entries**

Many contestants had sent their entries only because of the monetary attractions. Many of them had either a daughter to marry off or a child with a very serious illness and had hence enclosed a letter demanding the first prize on humanitarian basis. But none of them fared well in the business at hand. An interesting entry was in the form of 10 astrological magazines packed together, signifying that they will provide answer to all the questions. Another entry was in Tamil. There were a lot of non-serious entries, thanks to some newspapers who publicized the contest as some quiz elections. Some even sent entries with the BJP emblem stuck on the cards.

**Late Claim**

A late entry, actually a claim, came a day after the results were announced. It was from one Ashok SB from Shimoga claiming that he did not know about the contest, but the predictions he had made and got published in the daily ‘Navika’ has turned out to be right and hence he deserves the offered prize money. Though his answers were right, there were only 5 of the questions answered, Dr Nayak observed, despite the fact that it was a late entry.
“Skepticism or debunking often received the bad rap reserved for activities – like garbage disposal – that absolutely must be done for a safe and sane life, but seem either unglamorous or unworthy of overt celebration”, says the late Stephen Jay Gould, evolutionary biologist and Marxist in his foreword to the book featured here – Why People Believe Weird Things written by Michael Shermer.

Dr. Michael Shermer is a well-known US skeptic and the publisher of Skeptic magazine (www.skeptic.com). He also writes a regular column for Scientific American, an Indian edition (Scientific American India) of which is brought out by the India Today group of publications. Dr. Shermer has written a number of books on skepticism – How we believe, The Borderlands of Science, Why People Believe Weird Things and Science Friction, to name a few.

Why People Believe Weird Things is perhaps his most popular book. First published in 1997, the book deals with a wide range of topics – theoretical explorations of the idea of skepticism, psychic powers of Edgar Cayce, near-death experiences, Objectivist cult of Ayn Rand, evolution and creationism, Holocaust deniers and essays on “Why people (& smart ones) believe weird things?”. The book contains 18 chapters, which are grouped into five sections – Science and Skepticism, Pseudoscience and Superstition, Evolution and Creationism, History and Pseudohistory, and Hope springs Eternal. The title of the book is taken from the penultimate chapter titled Why Do People Believe Weird Things?

Dr Shermer says that "most of us most of the time come to our beliefs for a variety of reasons having little to do with empirical evidence and logical reasoning. Rather, such variables as genetic predispositions, parental predilections, sibling influences, peer pressures, educational experiences, and life impressions all shape the personality preferences and emotional inclinations that, in conjunctions with numerous social and cultural influences, lead us to make certain belief choices. Rarely do any of us sit down before a table of facts, weigh them pro and con, and choose the most logical and rational belief, regardless of what we previously believed. Instead, the facts of the world come to us through the colored filters of the theories, hypotheses, hunches, biases, and prejudices we have accumulated through our lifetime. We then sort through the body of data and select those most confirming what we already believe, and ignore or rationalize away those that are disconfirming.”(Page 284)

"Smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrive at for non-smart reasons”, Dr Shermer concludes.

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Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay. The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark.*

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."
- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.
- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.
- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.
- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.
- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise)—not just most of them.
- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.
- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.
Believe nothing
Merely because you have been told it
Or because it is traditional
Or because you yourself have imagined it
Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher
But whatever, after due examination and analysis
You find to be conducive to the good, the benefit,
The welfare of all beings
that doctrine believe and cling to
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha