

Editorial

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The study of history, including history of science, is fraught with dangers of misinterpretations of facts. Often national pride and racial prejudice tend to add flavours to the otherwise mundane facts of history. The current debate raging in our country over some aspects of ancient Indian history is a case in point. As practitioners of science, we too must be aware of these thorny issues as they affect our perspective of who first did what and how. An article in this issue on the Babylonian roots of the Pythagorean triples sets some records straight in this regard. It also puts the Indian contribution to the discovery of zero in proper perspective.

In this issue, we highlight the life and works of S Minakshisundaram, a mathematician of repute from the first half of the twentieth century. He belongs to a small group of people who under difficult circumstances kept the mathematical tradition alive in India at that time. There were two main centres of mathematical research then – Calcutta and Madras. We have earlier featured one of the stars of the Calcutta school – P C Mahalanobis. Minakshisundaram belongs to the other school, which had a tremendous impact on the continuation of mathematical research later in this country, as chronicled in an article on the life and achievements of Minakshisundaram in this issue.

We also have a couple of articles on the winners of the Nobel Prizes in physics this year. An article on Wilhelm Ostwald, the Nobel Laureate in Chemistry in 1909, describes his pioneering work on physical chemistry. An interesting article on the Rijke tube explains how to build it easily in a laboratory and do experiments with it. Objects and lifeforms which are small often turn out to offer more interesting clues than expected from their apparent insignificant sizes. An article on lichens sheds light on the importance of this tiny lifeform. Two articles in astrophysics also highlight some tiny objects in space – meteors and dust grains – which offer important information about the constituents of the cosmos.