

Editorial

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A characteristic common to most good scientists is an openness of mind; a wannabe scientist is told and advised to cultivate these attributes. I tried an informal experiment; I told some scientists that here were facts whose authenticity is in question. First, that a certain coffee is made from beans passed through the digestive system of a monkey. Next, that in a place called Roswell, nonhuman dead bodies were found at the site where a UFO had crashed. Almost all of them strongly voiced their skepticism about one or the other irrespective of whether they had any knowledge of either. Was this skepticism genuine or was it caused by fear of ridicule? Could it be that a great scientist is set apart from an ordinary one by a natural disposition to retain that keen edge of curiosity and openness throughout her life?

It seems that belief in the ability to resolve a question provides a strong psychological impetus in actually resolving it. Soon after Faltings solved Mordell's conjecture posed many years earlier, there were solutions by other approaches like Vojta's. Fermat's last theorem was solved soon after contemporary development was connected to it even though modern developments did play a decisive role.

Perhaps, a wild imagination helps. One of the foremost contemporary mathematicians, Armand Borel, who passed away last August, writing to J K Rowling conveying his admiration of her work, hinted that the "quickness and cleverness of Indians (not just mathematicians)" may be partly due to their familiarity from their childhood with epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata "compared to which our fairy tales are no match" !

This issue features S S Pillai, one of the greatest Indian mathematicians who is not as well-known to the average Indian as Ramanujan. One reason may have been his untimely death at the peak of his career, in an air crash while on the way to spend a year at Princeton.

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