

## THE BEST SNAKE OIL TAXPAYER MONEY CAN BUY?

The UGC draft curriculum for Mathematics announced in August 2025, has kicked up a minor storm in some circles. More than 1000 mathematics researchers and teachers (500+ faculty, 200+ PhD students, 100+ postdocs) signed a petition asking for its withdrawal and the formation of a new committee to redesign the curriculum. This has shocked people who had never seen more than three mathematicians agreeing on anything non-mathematical, except on the most trivial and blindingly obvious assertions.

Which ought to suggest to all thinking blobs of Carbon atoms that the proposition of the petition must also be trivial and obvious: The draft curriculum is really really bad.

While there has been no response from the UGC to the petition, the previous chair of the UGC, Professor Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar, wrote an article in *The Indian Express* (26/Sep), and gave an interview to *The Education Times* (2/Oct), defending against some of the criticisms and misunderstanding the rest.

Much of what he wrote has already been debunked in an article by Mahan Mj of TIFR (*The Indian Express*, 2nd Oct) and in another article by Ziya Uddin, Luckshay Batra, Satpal Singh, Aradhana Narang, Palak Goel and Himanshu Upreti of BML Munjal university (Policy circle, 2nd Oct).

What did he defend and/or misunderstand?

- ➡ Says “Isolated errors in a few references” in response to the plethora of non-existent reference books created out of thin air by the committee, presumably using AI tools such as chatGPT. He does not seem bothered by questions of ethics and expertise of the committee in not even cross-checking what they propose.
- ➡ The “Kaala Ganana” course is described as “well-designed”. This course prescribes 15 out of 60 hours on components of the Panchanga. But apparently it is wrong to point that out, as that would be ignoring the “deeper promise of the Mathematics that sits underneath” (paraphrased lightly). From his interview, we learn that this deeper promise is “modular arithmetic”, which means that after December we return to January, and one hour after 12 o’ clock it is 1 o’ clock. While that may have shaken the worldview of many a U.K.G. student, a first undergraduate course in algebra teaches far more general and abstract forms of addition and multiplication.
- ➡ In the interview, he claims that “Sutra-based Arithmetic or Algebra trains fast factorisation and number sense”. All that the Sutra based courses do is promote rote learning (ironically, of facts which they have seen in greater generality and with proofs!). Look at the Sutra based Arithmetic teaching addition and multiplication of fractions (covered in 6th standard!) and Sutra based algebra teaching formulas for solutions to linear equations in one and two variables (9th standard NCERT book has it already!).
- ➡ This is a category of error that permeates large chunks of Professor Kumar’s article and interview: inability to distinguish between high school and undergraduate levels. This leads him to charge like Don Quixote in defence of the place value system (for some reason he

thinks it is the “decimal” system that is great) by quoting Laplace We know these things, as do class XII students (fortunately, as their curriculum was designed by a good committee).

In keeping with modern habits of healthy consumption, Professor Kumar serves many word salads. “Contemporary Mathematics, paired with historical and civilisational literacy, trains comparative reasoning”. “When HEIs use the UGC’s LOCF to teach modern Mathematics well, and then ask students to test claims from classical sources with today’s tools, they create graduates who reason across traditions and time”... Can we ask for examples? What claim from what classical source does the curriculum propose to test with what tool of today?

But enough said. One expects the chair or ex-chair of UGC to defend against media criticism that they may consider unfair or uniformed. But when so many experts in the field have said that the curriculum is not sound, why does Professor Jagadish Kumar, who is not a mathematician or mathematics teacher, presume to know better?

In the interview, Professor Kumar asks critics to come to the table. This is confusing, because his article claims that his opinions are his personal views, but this call appears to suggest that he is in charge? Even if that were so, the call is strange because the petition with 900+ signatures was sent to the chair of the UGC on 17th September, and no private reply or public acknowledgment has come from them. The guests are at the table, only the host is missing!

For the bystanders who are confused by this fracas and only desire good education for their children, let us say this. The signatories include 20 Bhatnagar prize winners in mathematics, and numerous other highly respected and knowledgeable people in the field. None of them gains anything personal by getting this curriculum withdrawn. They are not commenting on the general state of the world politics or matters removed from their professional expertise. Ignoring their opinion on this issue will lead to a generation of students who will learn too late that their own country’s leading agency for university education sold them snake oil and left them unprepared and unemployable.