The Alien Factor
No evidence to support the Myth

By JAYANT V. NARLIKAR

IN 1991 I had a conversation with Carl Sagan when he visited Delhi for the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture and the subject of extra-terrestrial intelligent beings inevitably came up. When I asked the question it was a resounding "no". Despite many reports of so-called alien visitations in exotic spacecrafts, he asked why has no one produced any object, big or small, that has come in the last few years and is outside the terrestrial environment.

Although the scientific community is divided on the issue of whether we are alone in the universe (The Times of India, July 3), most share Sagan's scepticism. Why?

What about the UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) that are reported and even glorified in the media from time to time? What about the sightings of such objects, where the abductees claim to have been to the moon or Mars? Are they not evidence of something else? Is it not possible that the earth was inhabited by aliens long time ago? Let us briefly examine these through the critical visors of the scientists to understand why they remain unconvinced.

Media Publicity

Since June 24, 1947, when Kenneth Arnold, a 32-year-old U.S. businessman piloting his own plane near Mt Rainier in the state of Washington, reported seeing nine shining silver discs flying in a line, the sightings of UFOs have been receiving media publicity. There are also claims now and then that the U.S. Air Force, NASA and other official organisations know of where mysterious powers are believed to be at work? Or, what about the highly readable accounts by many authors claiming that the earth was inhabited by the aliens long time ago? Let us briefly examine these through the critical visors of the scientists to understand why they remain unconvinced.

The Arnold case was investigated in 1948 under Project Sign by the U.S. Air Force. Similar investigations were carried out later under Project Grudge in 1949, and project Blue Book initiated in 1952. The latter was wound up in 1969. The Rand Corporation was also asked by the U.S. Air Force to investigate UFO cases on its behalf. Many UFO cases are or have been investigated by other organisations and also private individuals. The curious may like to read a book, "UFOs: skin deep explained" by Philip Klass to see how the alien hypothesis gets debunked by scientific probes each time.

Instead, the following more mundane explanations emerge. Like mirages on the ground there are optical illusions in space and these create the impression of a UFO. A common illusion is provided by planet Venus near the horizon: it has been mis-

has not gained as much publicity or popularity as the original accounts. The lay reader likes to read about mysteries, about the uncanny and feels let down when told that it is all commonplace. Try telling a Hercule Poirot fan that the murder did not take place at all; or a Sherlock Holmes buff that there was no hound in the Hound of the Baskervilles! But the serious difference between these two cases is that the Poirot and Holmes were imaginary characters whereas the triangle incidents are made out to be real.

And, as for the frequency of strange disappearances, statistics show that the triangle area is no different from any other part of the world where ships and planes are lost without trace through accidents. As pointed out by one of the protagonists of the Bermuda Triangle, is that Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes were imaginary characters whereas the triangle incidents are made out to be real.

Popular Literature

There is another class of popular literature that seeks to make a persuasive case that we are not the first intelligent inhabitants of the earth. Starting from folklore about gods and other superhuman species, many authors have drawn evidence from ancient relics in South America, Egypt, India and other parts of the world that technologically advanced civilisations of alien nature once ruled this planet. They were wiped out by some natural catastrophe as the dinosaurs were. Or, there may be other reasons why that high technology has not survived to this day.

Judging by the questions I am asked on this topic the typical reader of such accounts accepts them uncritically. I have myself found them absorbing to read but they stop short of providing that germ of hard science that might have lent them credibility. The authors and readers of such stories, however, seem to think that rather than the burden of proof lying on the narrators of such accounts the burden of disproving them lies on the scientific community.

Scientists have other more pressing matters on their agenda. To the extent that they have investigated they are found to be hyped as in the cases of the Bermuda Triangle or marred by defects in deductive reasoning. To sum up, then, the notion that aliens are here, are already here, or they visit us now and then are fascinating to speculate on and read about, they might even be true, but to date there is no hard scientific evidence for them.