

Editorial

Rajaram Nityananda, Chief Editor

The discovery of our place in our own galaxy deserves to be as well-known to students as the corresponding account for our own solar system, in which Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler played their roles. Strangely, it was harder to learn about our own galaxy than others which are much further away. The problem is of course our location in a disc, with the view obscured by dust grains of carbon and silica – pretty much as in Delhi, perhaps.



Email:
rajaram.nityananda@gmail.com

We also are viewing movement from a moving platform (a problem which Kepler also faced). Read on for details of how these problems were overcome early in the twentieth century by the Dutch astronomer J H Oort with both inspiration and perspiration. The latter is an important part of observational astronomy. Systematic patterns sometimes emerge only after a large volume of data has been collected, corrected, and interpreted – the inspiration lies in the choice of model, as simple as possible but not simpler.

How did a small country like the Netherlands become such a powerhouse in astronomy? An unbroken tradition is surely part of it – Oort learnt much from Kapteyn whose model of the galaxy he consigned to history. Perhaps smallness actually helps – witness the triumphs in their time of the West Indies and Sri Lanka in cricket. Small size can make for cohesion and a sense of identity, but also openness. The Dutch are good at languages – they could read everyone's papers and often chose to write in English. Legend has it that Oort himself stood up on one occasion and lectured in fluent French – until a companion reminded him that he was in the United States! Finally, let us recount an incident from the time when all the European astronomy journals (including the *B.A.N* reproduced in our Classics section) were merged. The English, of course, declined – but requested tongue-in-cheek that the Dutch papers be printed in a separate section. Coming from their rivals across the water, a compliment indeed!

