Decoding cosmic origins with rays and ripples

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Science-Fest

Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad

February 12, 2026

Plan of the talk

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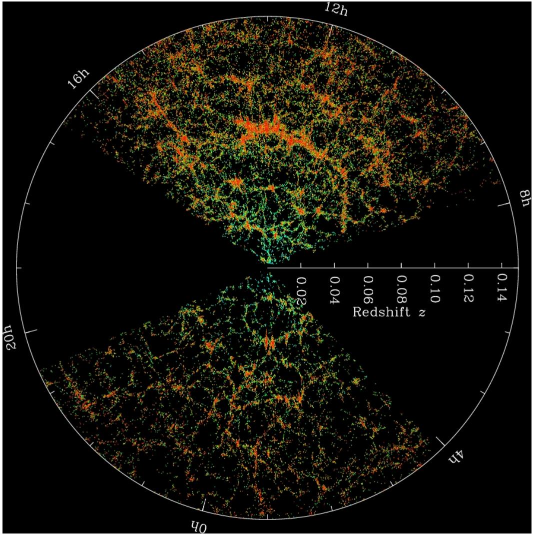
Distribution of galaxies in the universe

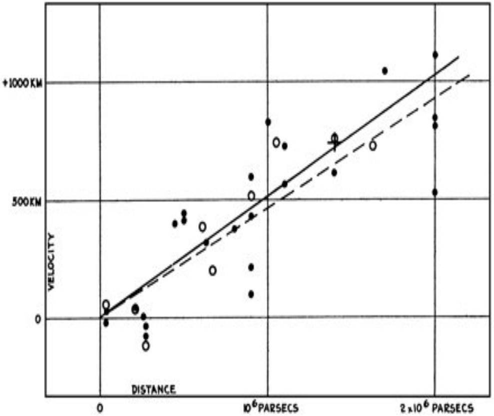


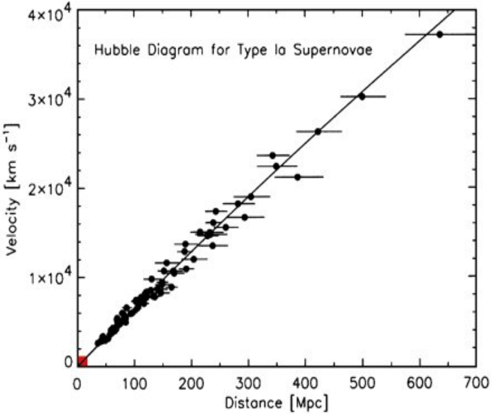
Play SDSS movie

Distribution of galaxies as observed by the Sloan Digital Sky Survey[1].

[1] Image from https://www.sdss4.org/science/.

Hubble's law



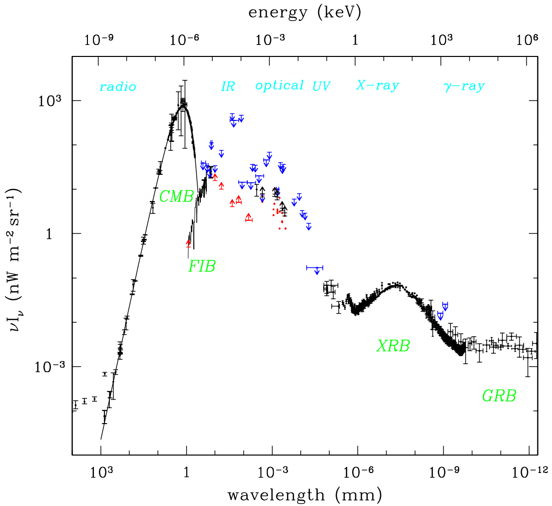


Left: Original Hubble data. The slope of the two fitted lines are about $500\ \mathrm{km/sec/Mpc}$ and $530\ \mathrm{km/sec/Mpc}$.

Right: A more recent Hubble diagram. The slope of the straight line is found to be about $72\ \mathrm{km/sec/Mpc}$. The small red region marks the span of Hubble's original diagram[2].

[2] R. Kirshner, Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA **101**, 8 (2004).

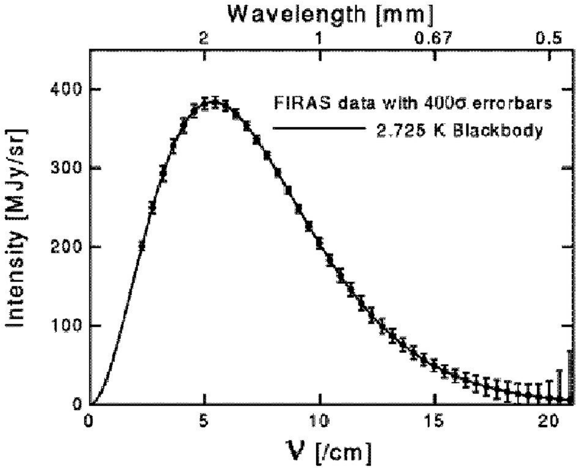
Spectrum of radiation in the universe



Spectrum of cosmological background radiation[3]. Note that the cosmic microwave background (CMB) contributes the most to the background radiation.

[3]Figure from D. Scott, arXiv:astro-ph/9912038.

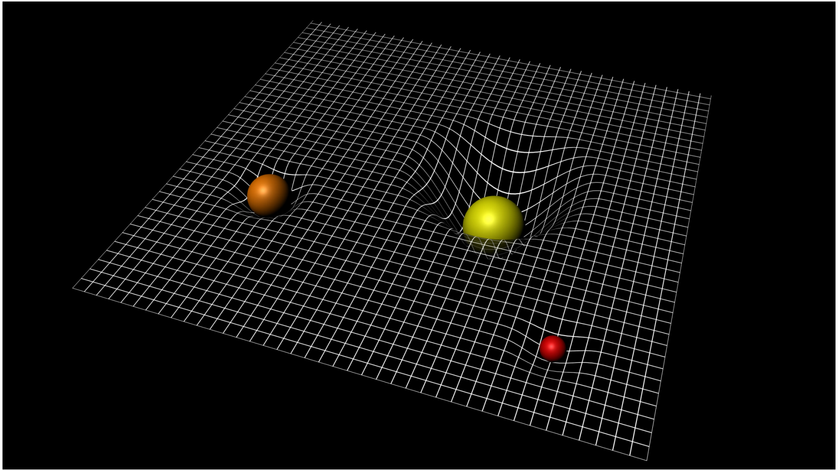
Spectrum of the CMB



Spectrum of the CMB as measured by the COBE satellite[4]. It is a perfect Planck spectrum corresponding to a temperature of 2.725° K. The error bars in the graph above have been amplified 400 times so that they can be seen!

[4]Image from http://www.astro.ucla.edu/~wright/cosmo_01.htm.

General theory of relativity and Einstein's equations

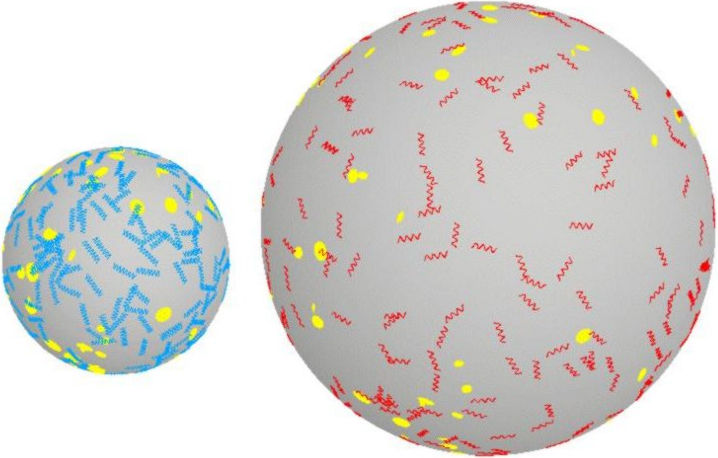


Spacetime tells matter how to move and matter tells spacetime how to curve[5]. The curvature of spacetime is related to the matter content through the Einstein's equations[6].

[5] J. A. Wheeler, *Geons, Black Holes, and Quantum Foam: A Life in Physics* (W. W. Norton, New York, 2010).

[6] Image from http://www.esa.int/spaceinimages/Images/2015/09/Spacetime_curvature.

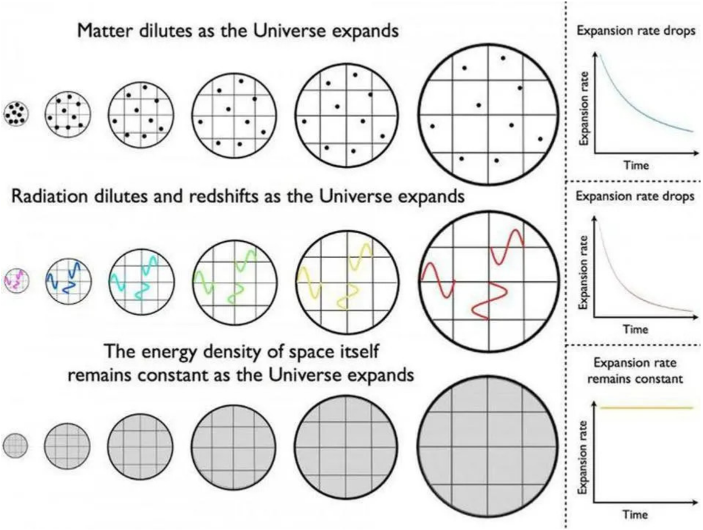
Expanding universe and cosmological redshift



Two-dimensional analogy for the expanding universe[7]. The yellow blobs on the expanding balloon denote the galaxies. The distance between the galaxies grows and the wavelengths of the photons shift from blue to red as the universe expands.

[7] Image from http://www.astro.ucla.edu/~wright/balloon0.html.

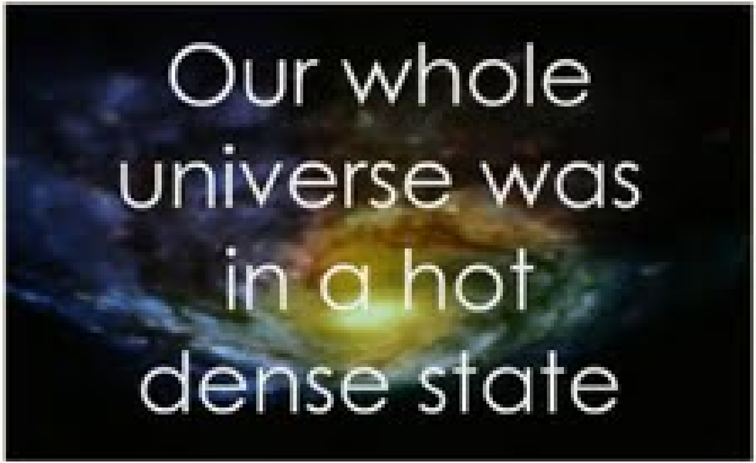
Evolution of energy densities in the universe



Evolution of energy densities in the universe[8].

[8] Image from https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2021/08/25/how-small-was-the-universe-at-the-start-of-the-big-bang/.

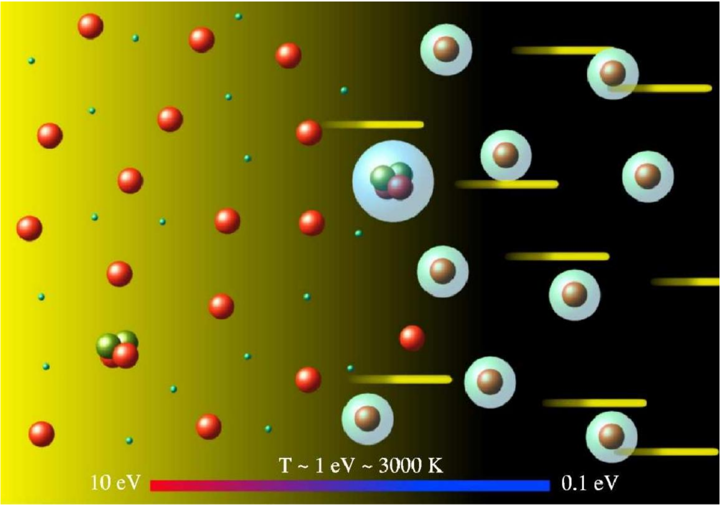
Big bang model seems popular!



Current view of the universe, encapsulated in the hot big bang model, seems popular. The above image is a screen grab from the theme song of the recent American sitcom 'The Big Bang Theory'[9]!

[9]See http://www.cbs.com/shows/big_bang_theory/.

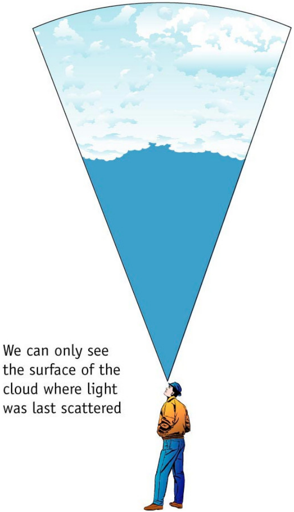
Decoupling of matter and radiation[10]

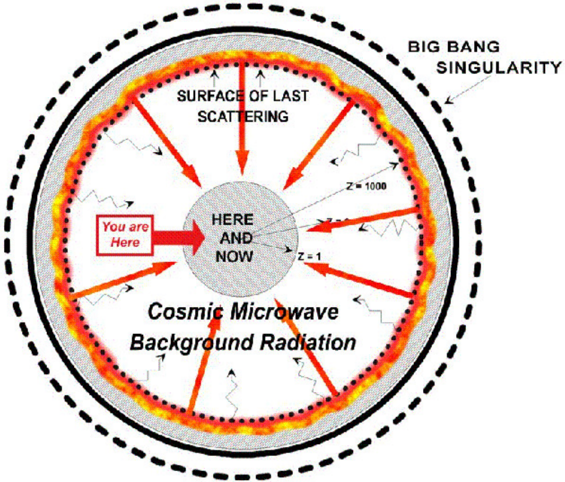


Matter and radiation cease to interact at a temperature of about $T \simeq 3000^\circ\ \mathrm{K}$, which corresponds to a redshift of about $z \simeq 1000$.

[10] Image from W. H. Kinney, arXiv:astro-ph/0301448v2.

Surface of last scattering and the free streaming of CMB photons

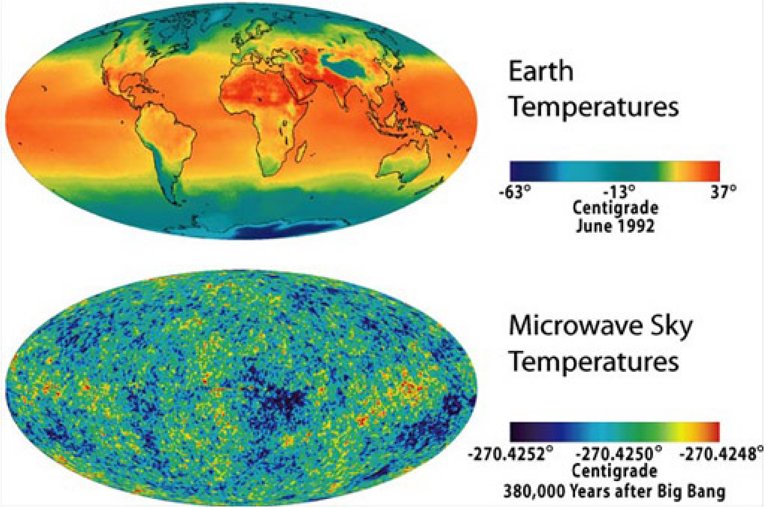




CMB photons stream to us freely from the surface of last scattering[11].

[11] Image from http://planck.caltech.edu/epo/epo-cmbDiscovery4.html.

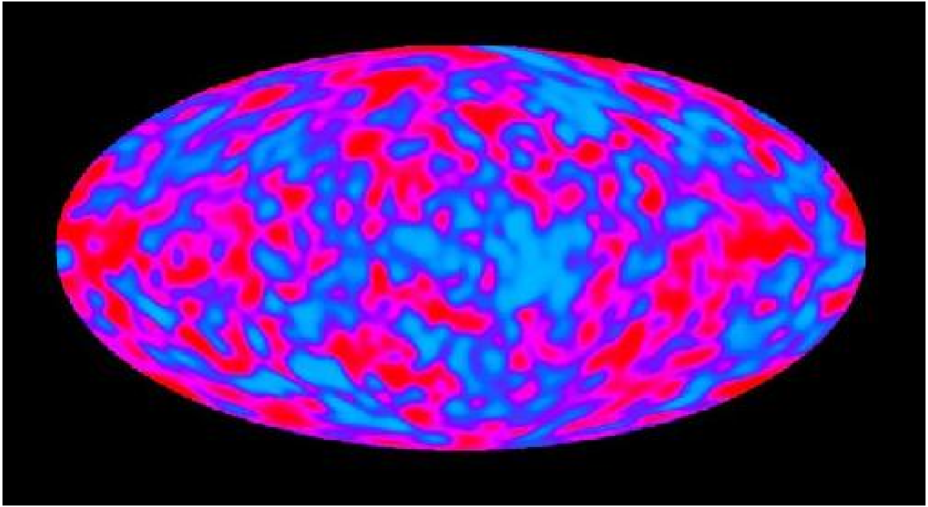
Projecting the surface of last scattering



As the surface of the Earth is often illustrated, the temperature of the CMB on the surface of last scattering can be projected on to a plane using the Mollweide projection[12].

[12] Image from http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/Astro/planckcmb.html.

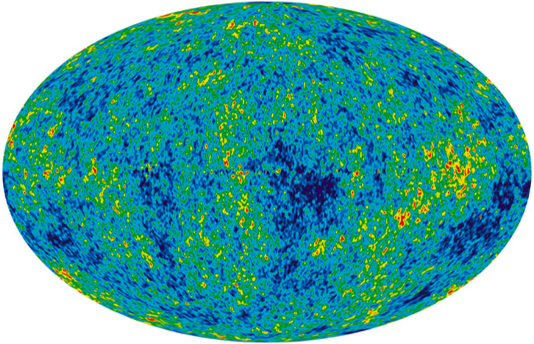
Anisotropies in the CMB

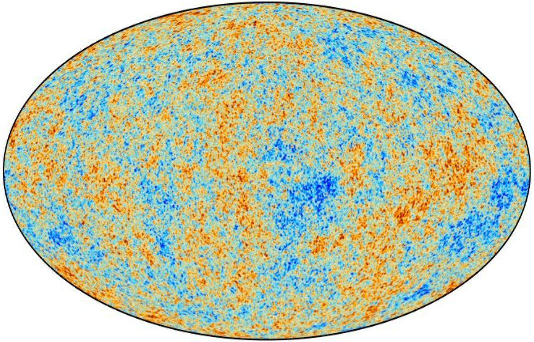


The fluctuations in the temperature of the CMB as seen by COBE[13]. The CMB turns out to be isotropic to one part in 10^5.

[13] Image from http://aether.lbl.gov/www/projects/cobe/COBE_Home/DMR_Images.html.

Anisotropies in the CMB as seen by WMAP and Planck





Left: All-sky map of the anisotropies in the CMB created from nine years of Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) data[14].

Right: CMB intensity map derived from the joint analysis of Planck, WMAP, and $408\,\mathrm{MHz}$ observations[15]. The above images show temperature variations (as color differences) of the order of $200\,\mu\mathrm{K}$.

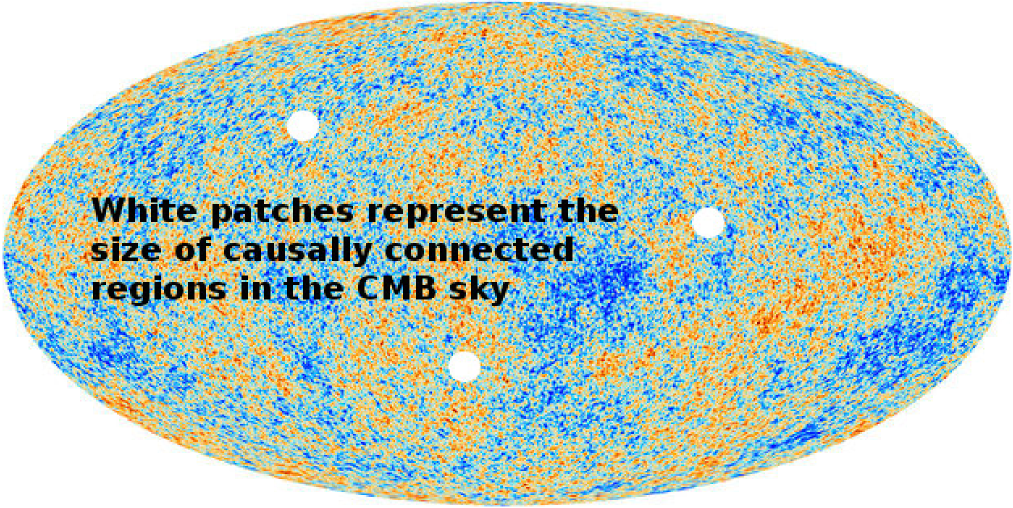
Play Planck movie

[14] Image from http://wmap.gsfc.nasa.gov/media/121238/index.html.

[15] P. A. R. Ade *et al.*, arXiv:1502.01582 [astro-ph.CO].

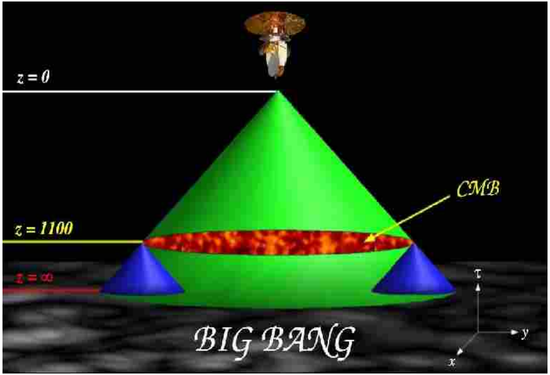
Plan of the talk

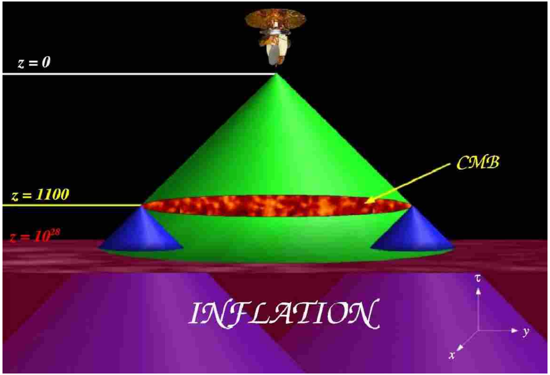
Horizon problem



The radiation from the CMB arriving at us from regions separated by more than the Hubble radius at the surface of last scattering, which subtends an angle of about 1° today, could not have interacted before decoupling.

Resolution of the horizon problem in the inflationary scenario

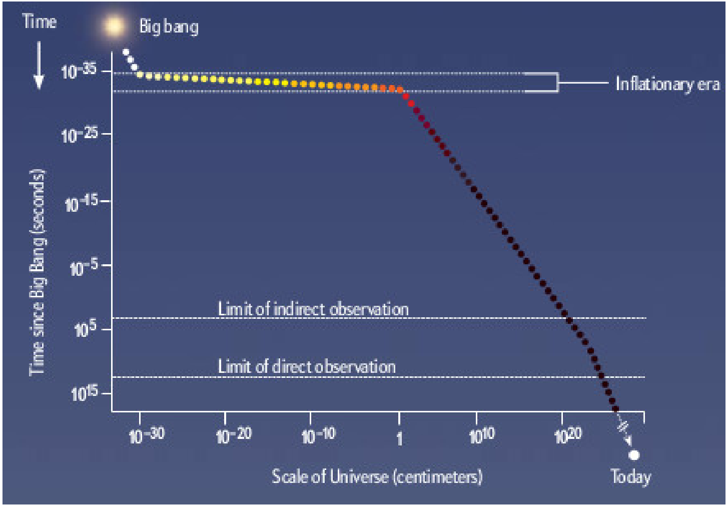




Another illustration of the horizon problem (on the left), and an illustration of its resolution (on the right) through an early and sufficiently long epoch of inflation[16].

[16] Images from W. Kinney, astro-ph/0301448.

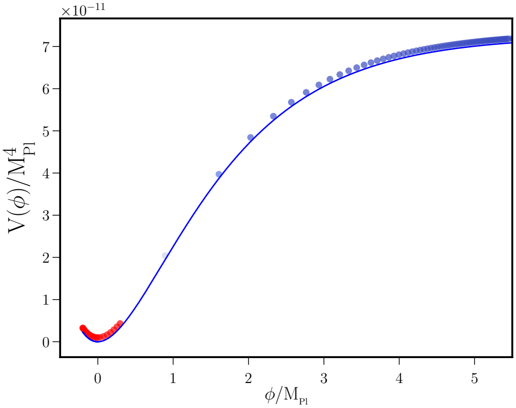
Time and duration of inflation

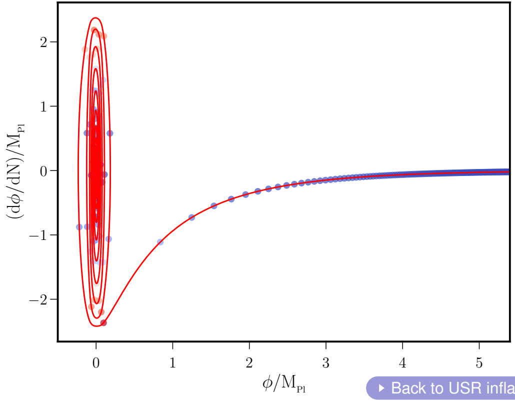


Inflation—a brief period of accelerated expansion—is expected to have taken place during the very early stages of the universe[17].

[17] Image from P. J. Steinhardt, Sci. Am. **304**, 18 (2011).

Inflationary attractor



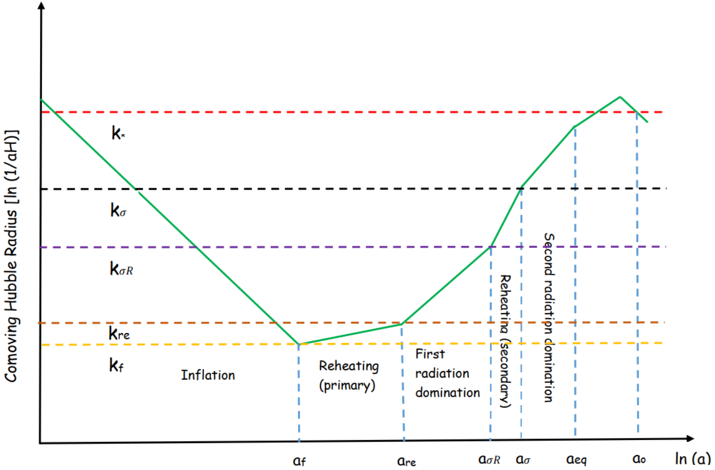


Back to USR inflation

Evolution of the scalar field in the popular Starobinsky model, which leads to slow roll inflation, is indicated (as circles, in blue and red) at regular intervals of time (on the left). Illustration of the behavior of the scalar field in phase space (on the right)[18].

[18] Figure from H. V. Ragavendra, *Observational imprints of non-trivial inflationary dynamics over large and small, scales*, Ph.D. Thesis, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai, India (2022).

Behavior of the comoving wave number and Hubble radius



Behavior of the comoving wave number k (horizontal lines in different colors) and the comoving Hubble radius $d_{\mathrm{H}}/a = (a\,H)^{-1}$ (in green) across different epochs[19].

Back to reheating
Back to formation of PBHs

[19] Md. R. Haque, D. Maity, T. Paul and L. Sriramkumar, Phys. Rev. D **104**, 063513 (2021).

Generation of the primordial fluctuations

It is the quantum fluctuations associated with the scalar fields driving inflation which are responsible for the origin of the perturbations. These perturbations are amplified during the inflationary epoch, which leave their imprints as anisotropies in the CMB[20].

Play movie

[20] Movie from https://wmap.gsfc.nasa.gov/resources/animconcepts.html.

Describing the primordial perturbations

While comparing with the observations, for convenience, one often uses the following power law, template scalar and the tensor spectra[21]:

$$\mathcal{P}_{\rm S}(k) = A_{\rm S}\,\left(\frac{k}{k_\ast}\right)^{n_{\rm S}-1}, \qquad \mathcal{P}_{\rm T}(k) = A_{\rm T}\,\left(\frac{k}{k_\ast}\right)^{n_{\rm T}},$$

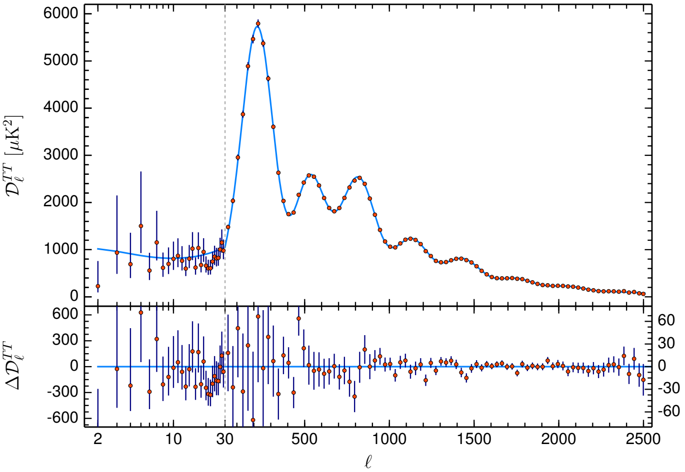
where $A_{\rm S}$ and $A_{\rm T}$ denote the scalar and tensor amplitudes, $k_\ast$ represents the so-called pivot scale at which the amplitudes are quoted, while the spectral indices $n_{\rm S}$ and $n_{\rm T}$ are assumed to be constant.

The tensor-to-scalar ratio r is defined as

$$r(k) = \frac{\mathcal{P}_{\rm T}(k)}{\mathcal{P}_{\rm S}(k)}.$$

[21] See, for instance, L. Sriramkumar, Curr. Sci. **97**, 868 (2009).

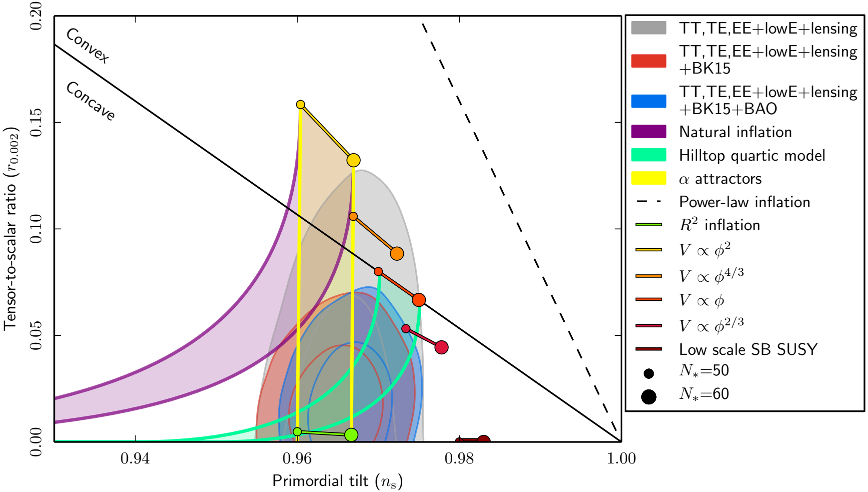
CMB angular power spectrum from Planck



The CMB TT angular power spectrum from the Planck 2018 data (red dots with error bars) and the best fit ΛCDM model with a power law primordial spectrum (solid blue curve)[22]

[22] Planck Collaboration (N. Aghanim *et al.*), Astron. Astrophys. **641**, A6 (2020).

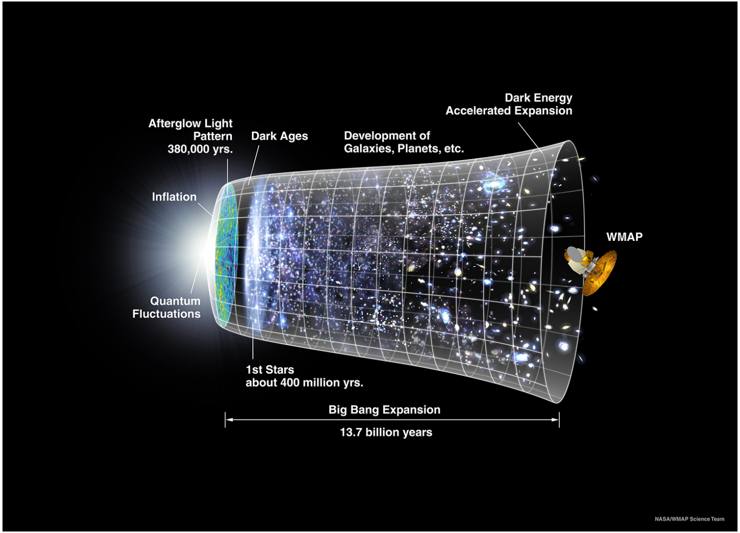
Performance of inflationary models in the n_s-r plane



Joint constraints on n_s and $r_{0.002}$ from Planck in combination with other data sets, compared to the theoretical predictions of some of the popular inflationary models[23].

[23] Planck Collaboration (Y. Akrami *et al.*), Astron. Astrophys. **641**, A10 (2020).

Timeline of the universe



Observations of GWs

A pictorial timeline of the universe[24].

[24] See http://wmap.gsfc.nasa.gov/media/060915/060915_CMB_Timeline150.jpg.

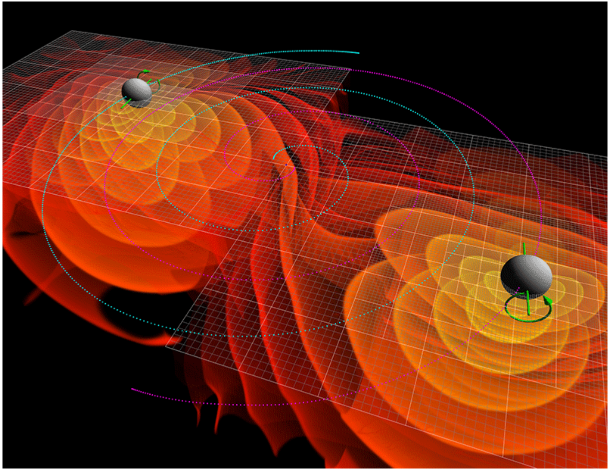
Plan of the talk

Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO)

Views of LIGO at Hanford (on the left) and at Livingston (on the right). These observatories are essentially Michelson-Morley interferometers with rather long arms (of length about 4 km) that are extremely sensitive to the smallest disturbances of the mirrors[25].

[25] Images from https://www.advancedligo.mit.edu/summary.html.

GWs from merging binary black holes

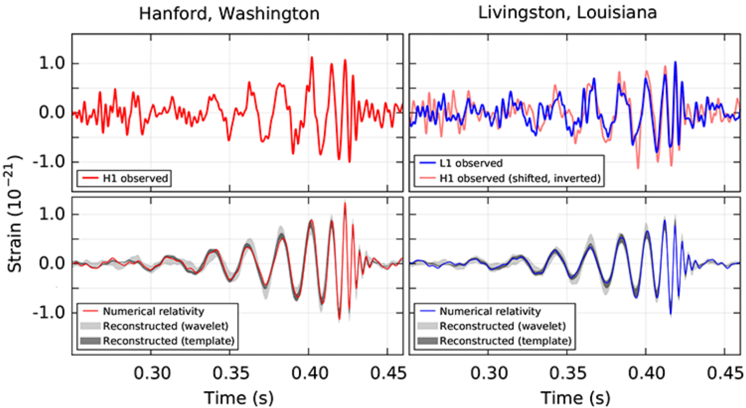


Numerical simulations of the GWs emitted by the coalescence of two black holes. The orange contours represent the amplitude of the GWs and the blue lines represent the orbits of the black holes (BHs)[26].

▸ Play coalescence of BHs movie

[26] Image from E. Berti, Physics **9**, 17 (2016).

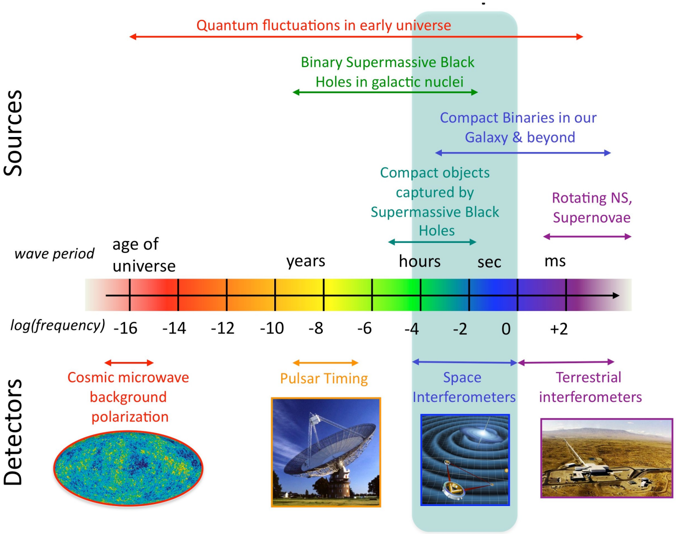
First observation of the merger of binary BHs



On September 14, 2015, similar signals were observed in both of LIGO's interferometers. The top panels show the measured signal in the Hanford (top left) and Livingston (top right) detectors. The bottom panels show the expected signal produced by the merger of two BHs, based on numerical simulations[27].

[27] Figure from B. P. Abbott *et al.*, Phys. Rev. Lett. **116**, 061102 (2016).

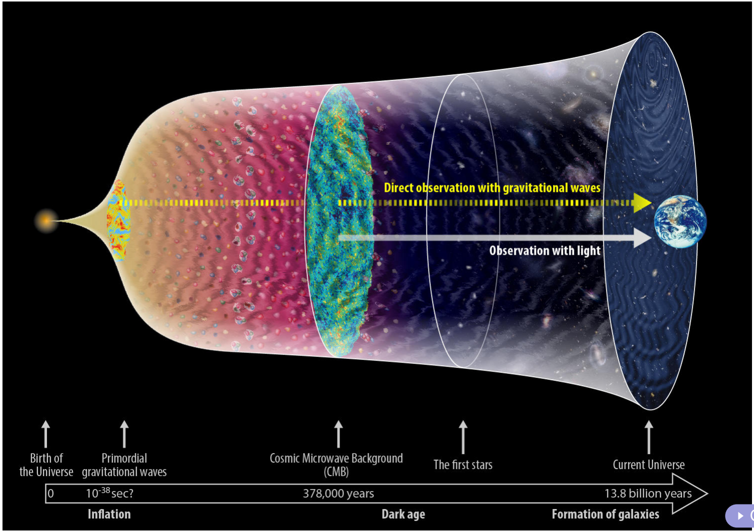
Sources and spectral range of GWs



Different sources of GWs and corresponding detectors[28].

[28] J. B. Hartle, *Gravity: An Introduction to Einstein's General Relativity* (Pearson Education, Delhi, 2003).

Probing the primordial universe through GWs



▸ Observations of EM waves

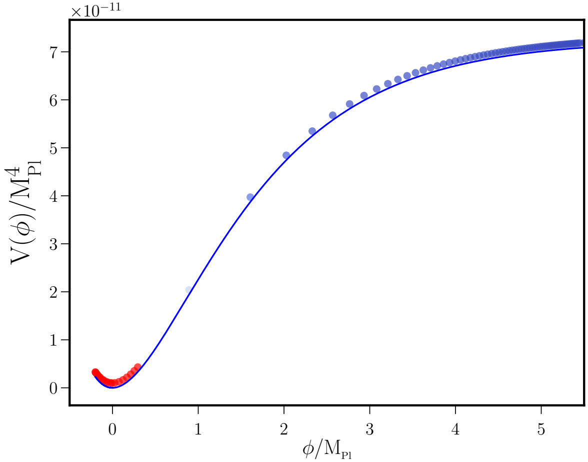
GWs provide a unique window to probe the primordial universe[29].

[29] Image from https://gwpo.nao.ac.jp/en/gallery/000061.html.

Plan of the talk

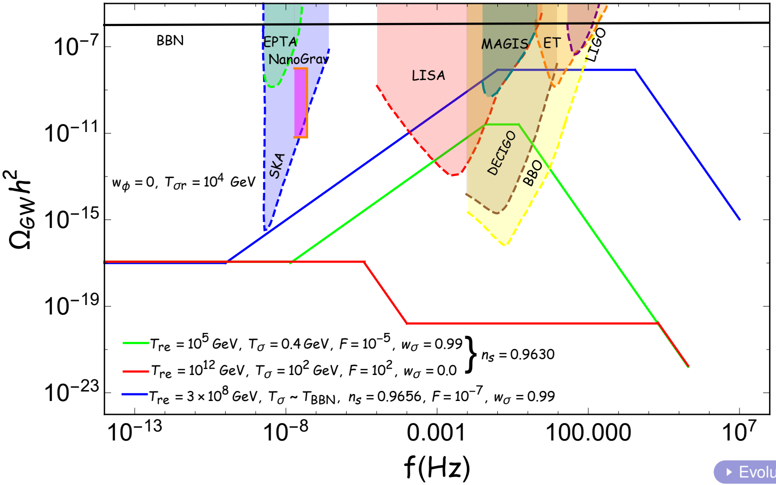
1. Standard model of cosmology
2. Inflationary scenario and constraints from the CMB
3. GWs provide a new window to the universe
4. **Generation of GWs in the early universe**
5. Observations by the PTAs and the stochastic GW background
6. Outlook

Evolution of the scalar field in an inflationary potential



The evolution of the scalar field in the so-called Starobinsky model has been indicated (as circles, in blue and red) at regular intervals of time. Inflation is terminated as the field approaches the bottom of the potential (near the light blue dot). Thereafter, the field oscillates at the bottom of the potential (indicated by the red dots).

Effects on $\Omega_{\mathrm{GW}}(f)$ due to late time entropy production

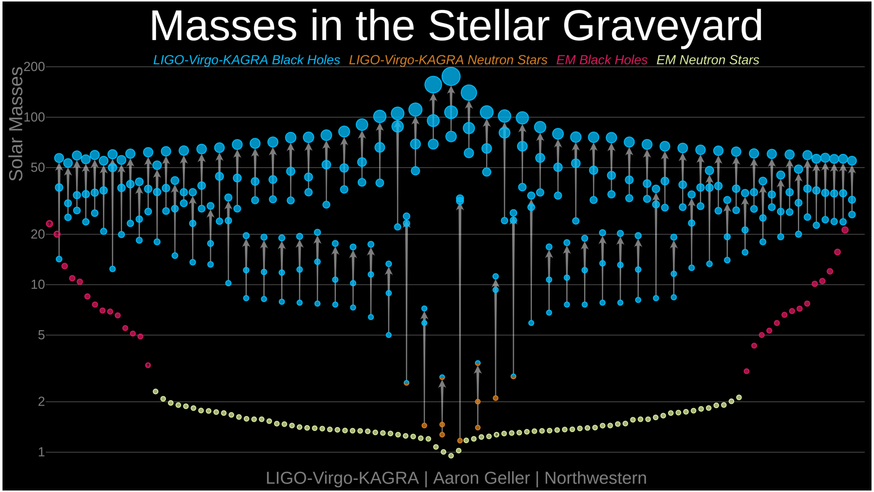


Evolution of comoving lengths

The dimensionless spectral energy density of primary GWs observed today $\Omega_{\mathrm{GW}}(f)$ has been plotted in a scenario involving late time production of entropy[30].

[30] Md. R. Haque, D. Maity, T. Paul and L. Sriramkumar, Phys. Rev. D **104**, 063513 (2021).

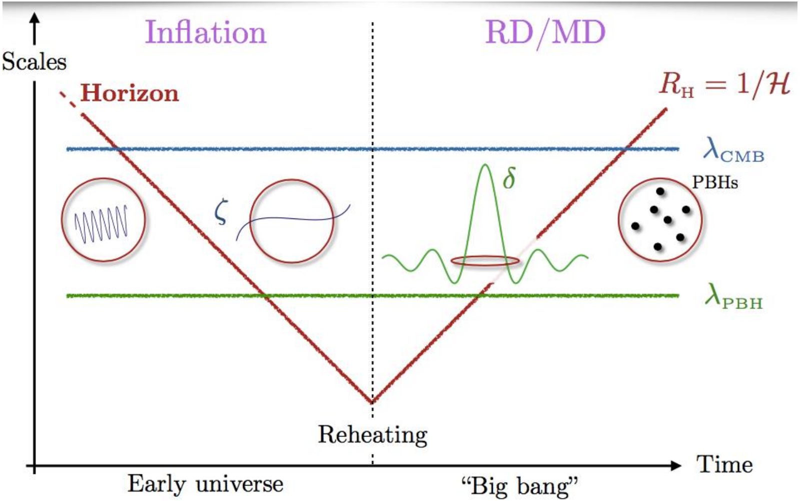
Coalescence of compact binaries observed by LIGO



The third GW Transient Catalog of mergers involving black holes and neutron stars observed by the LIGO-Virgo-KAGRA collaboration[31].

[31] Image from https://www.ligo.caltech.edu/LA/image/ligo20211107a.

Formation of BHs in the early universe

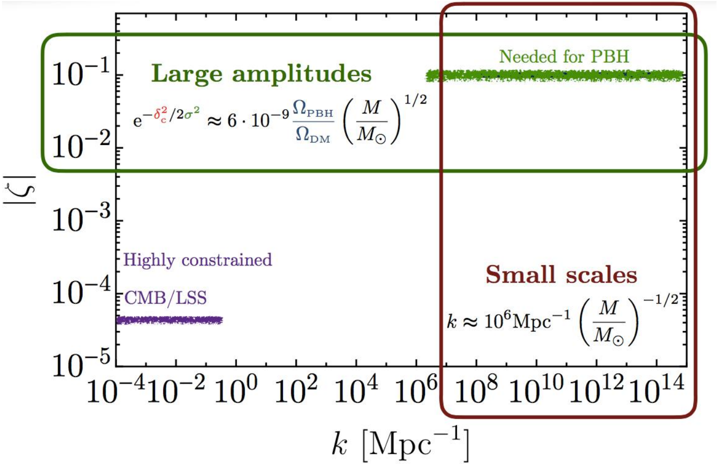


BHs can form when perturbations with significant amplitudes reenter the Hubble radius during the radiation dominated epoch[32].

Evolution of comoving lengths

[32] Figure from G. Franciolini, arXiv:2110.06815 [astro-ph.CO].

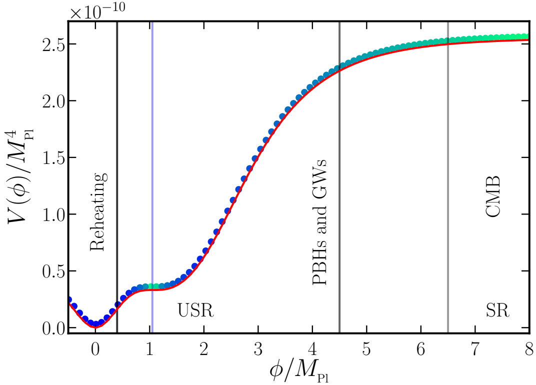
Amplitude required to form significant number of PBHs

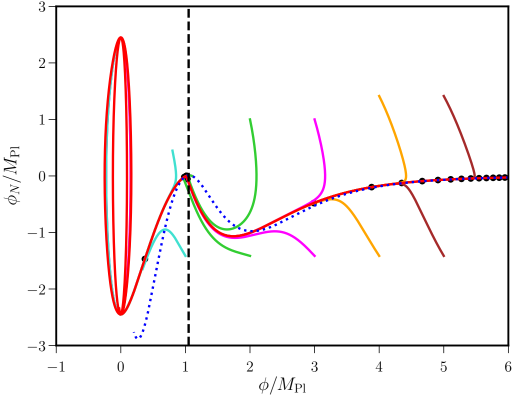


In order to form significant number of primordial black holes (PBHs), the amplitude of the perturbations on small scales has to be large enough such that the dimensionless amplitude of the scalar perturbation is close to unity[33].

[33] Figure credit G. Franciolini.

Single-field models admitting ultra slow roll inflation



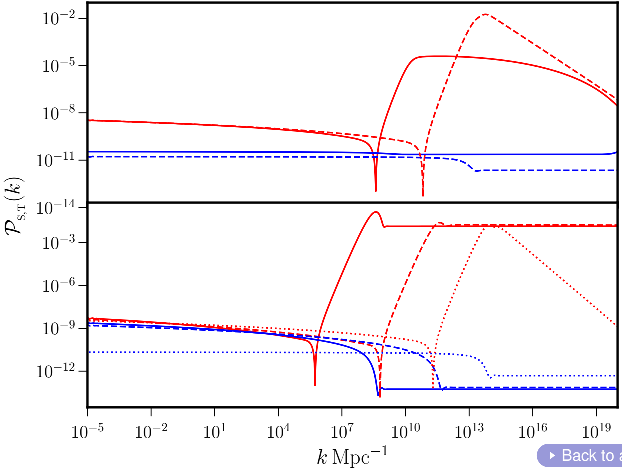


Inflationary attractor

Potentials which contain a point of inflection lead to ultra slow roll (USR) inflation[34].

[34] See, for example, C. Germani and T. Prokopec, Phys. Dark Univ. **18**, 6 (2017);
I. Dalianis, A. Kehagias and G. Tringas, JCAP **01**, 037 (2019).
Figures credits, H. V. Ragavendra and S. Maity.

Power spectra in models permitting USR inflation

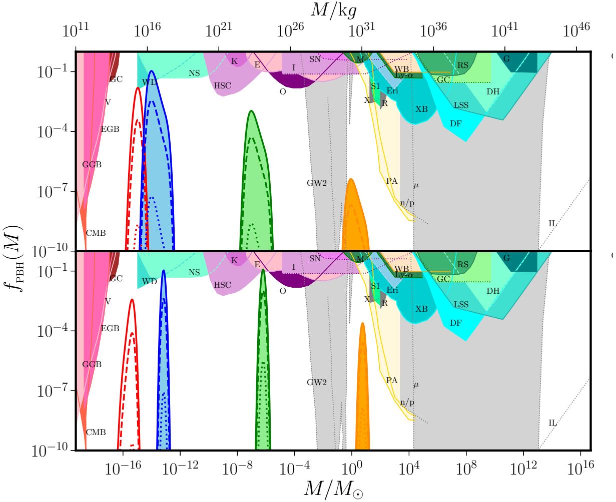


Back to analytical form of the power spectrum

Scalar (in red) and the tensor (in blue) power spectra arising in different single-field models that permit a period of USR inflation[35].

[35] H. V. Ragavendra, P. Saha, L. Sriramkumar and J. Silk, Phys. Rev. D **103**, 083510 (2021);
Also see H. V. Ragavendra and L. Sriramkumar, Galaxies **11**, 34 (2023).

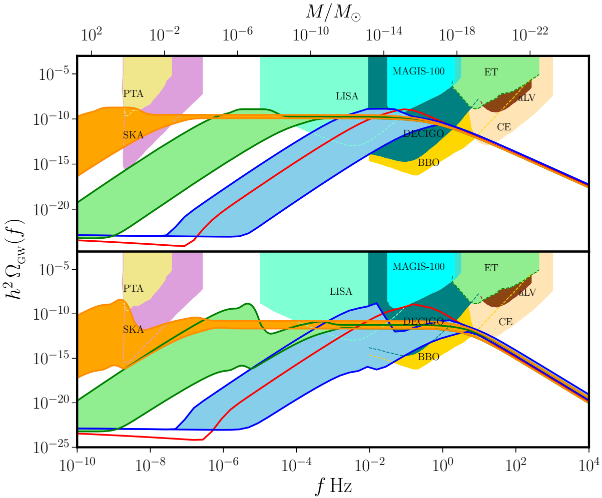
$f_{\rm PBH}(M)$ in models permitting USR inflation



The fraction of PBHs contributing to the dark matter density today $f_{\rm PBH}(M)$ has been plotted for different models and scenarios of interest[36].

[36] H. V. Ragavendra, P. Saha, L. Sriramkumar and J. Silk, Phys. Rev. D **103**, 083510 (2021).

$\Omega_{\rm GW}(f)$ in models permitting USR inflation

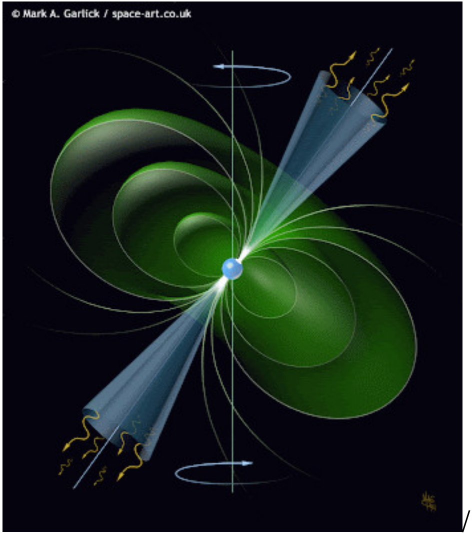


The dimensionless spectral energy density of secondary GWs $\Omega_{\rm GW}(f)$ observed today has been plotted in models leading to an epoch of ultra slow roll inflation[37].

[37] H. V. Ragavendra, P. Saha, L. Sriramkumar and J. Silk, Phys. Rev. D **103**, 083510 (2021).

Plan of the talk

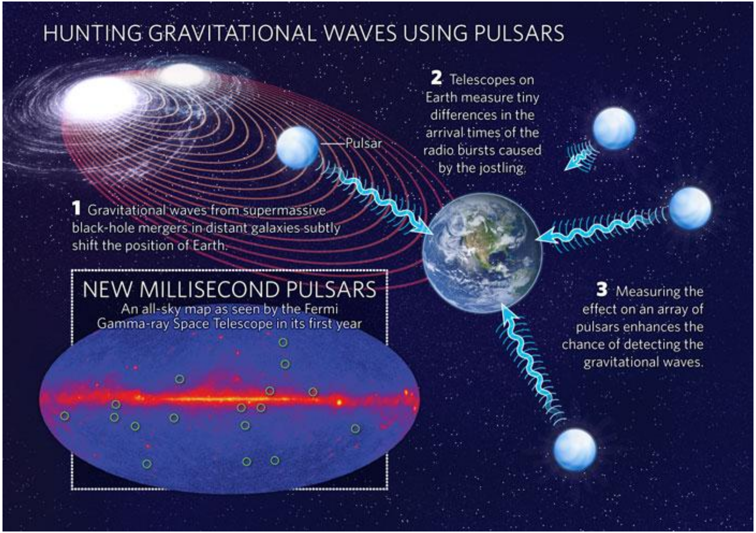
Pulsars



Pulsars are dense and rotating neutron stars that emit regular beams of light[38].

[38] Image from https://dmr-astronomersclub.blogspot.com/2012/07/what-is-pulsar.html.

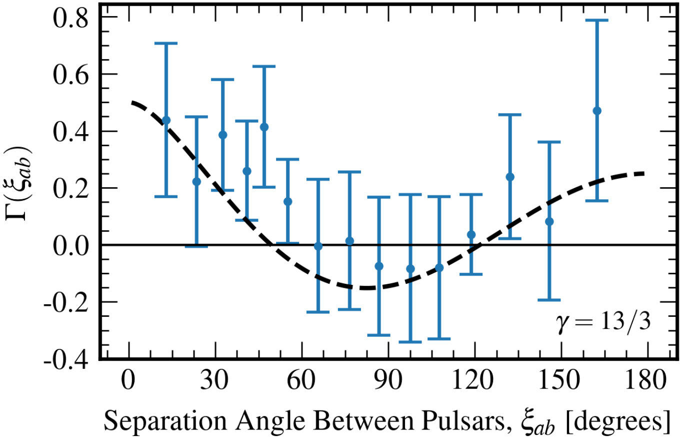
Pulsar timing arrays (PTAs)



The PTAs monitor an array of millisecond pulsars[39].

[39] See https://ipta.github.io/mock_data_challenge/.

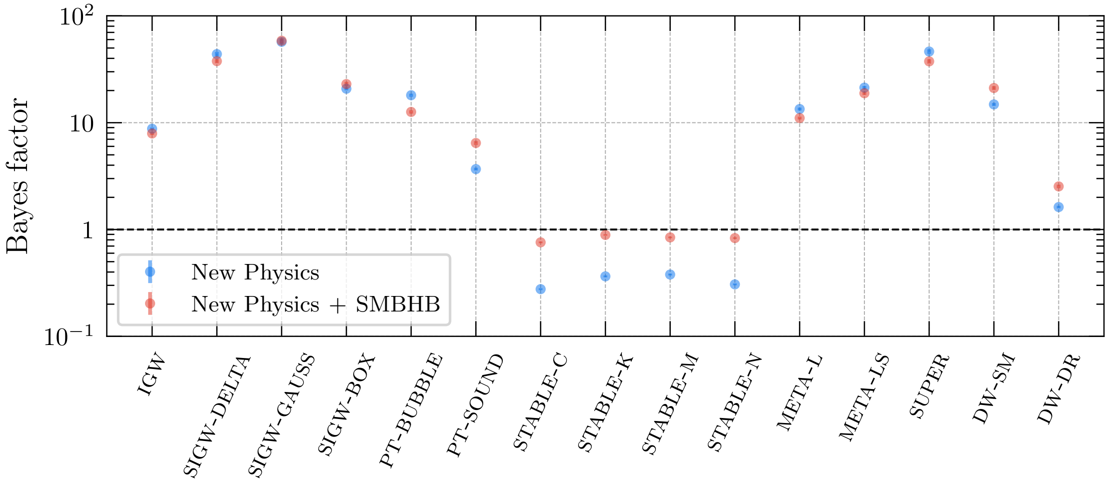
Hellings-Downs curve



The inter-pulsar correlations measured from 2,211 distinct pairings in the 67-pulsar array of the NANOGrav 15-year data. The dashed black line shows the Hellings-Downs correlation pattern[40].

[40] NANOGrav Collaboration (G. Agazie *et al.*), Astrophys. J. Lett. **951**, 1 (2023).

Stochastic GW background observed by pulsar timing arrays (PTAs)



The Bayesian evidence for a variety of astrophysical and cosmological sources for the stochastic GW background suggested by the observations of the PTAs[41].

[41] NANOGrav Collaboration (G. Agazie *et al.*), Astrophys. J. Lett. **951**, 1 (2023).

Shape of the inflationary scalar power spectrum

We assume that the inflationary scalar power spectrum is given by[42]

$$\mathcal{P}_{\mathrm{S}}(k) = A_{\mathrm{S}} \left(\frac{k}{k_*}\right)^{n_{\mathrm{S}}-1} + A_0 \begin{cases} \left(\dfrac{k}{k_{\mathrm{peak}}}\right)^4 & k \leq k_{\mathrm{peak}}, \\ \left(\dfrac{k}{k_{\mathrm{peak}}}\right)^{n_0} & k \geq k_{\mathrm{peak}}, \end{cases}$$

where A_{S} and n_{S} are the amplitude and spectral index of the power spectrum at the CMB pivot scale of $k_* = 0.05\,\mathrm{Mpc}^{-1}$.

▸ Power spectra in USR inflation

We set the reheating temperature to the rather low value of $T_{\mathrm{re}} = 50\,\mathrm{MeV}$.

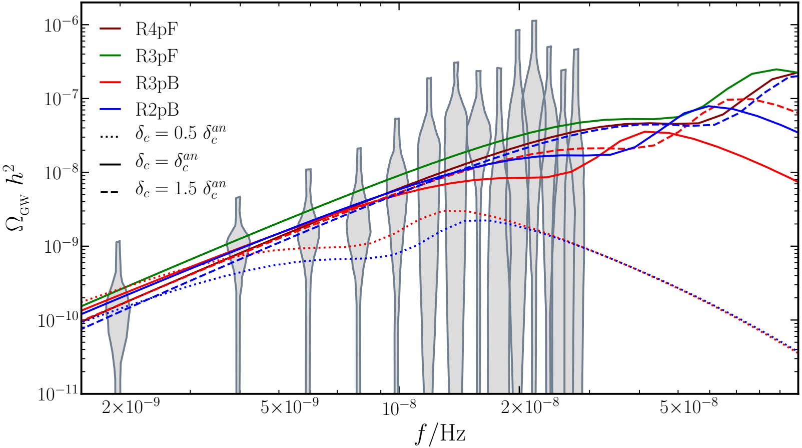
We shall assume that the threshold value of the density contrast for the formation of PBHs is given by[43]:

$$\delta_{\mathrm{c}}^{\mathrm{an}} = \frac{3\,(1 + w_{\mathrm{re}})}{5 + 3\,w_{\mathrm{re}}}\,\sin^2\left(\frac{\pi\,\sqrt{w_{\mathrm{re}}}}{1 + 3\,w_{\mathrm{re}}}\right).$$

[42] For other forms of spectra, see G. Domènech, S. Pi, A. Wang and J. Wang, arXiv:2402.18965 [astro-ph.CO].

[43] In this context, see T. Harada, C.-M. Yoo, and K. Kohri, Phys. Rev. D **88**, 084051 (2013).

Generation of secondary GWs during the epoch of reheating

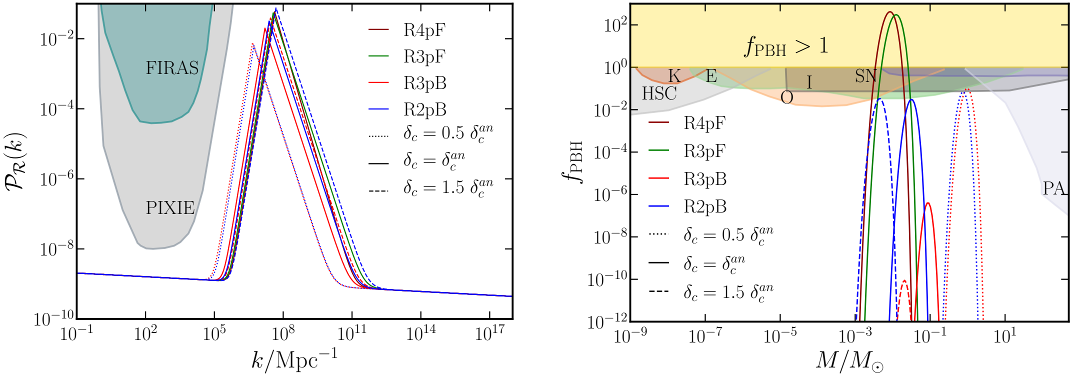


Epoch of reheating

The dimensionless spectral energy density of the secondary GWs today $\Omega_{\rm GW}(f)$ is plotted for a given reheating temperature and the best-fit values of the parameters in the different models[44].

[44] S. Maity, N. Bhaumik, Md. R. Haque, D. Maity and L. Sriramkumar, JCAP **01**, 118 (2025).

Power spectra and the extent of PBHs formed



Scalar power spectra (on the left) and the extent of PBHs formed (on the right). We have assumed a specific reheating temperature and have plotted the fraction of PBHs that constitute the dark matter density today, viz. $f_{\rm PBH}(M)$, for the best-fit values of the parameters in the different models[45].

[45] S. Maity, N. Bhaumik, Md. R. Haque, D. Maity and L. Sriramkumar, JCAP **01**, 118 (2025).

Plan of the talk

Outlook

- The increasingly precise observations of the CMB by future missions such as Lite-BIRD (Light satellite for the studies of B-mode polarization and Inflation from cosmic background Radiation Detection), Primordial Inflation Explorer (PIXIE) and Exploring Cosmic History and Origin (ECHO, a proposed Indian effort) can be expected to help us improve the current constraints on the primordial correlations.
- The observations by LIGO are a culmination of almost fifty years of effort to detect GWs. They have opened up a new window to observe the universe.
- The observations by the PTAs and their possible implications for the stochastic GW background offer a wonderful opportunity to understand the physics operating in the early universe.
- Over the coming decades, GW observatories such as the Laser Interferometer Space Antenna, Einstein Telescope and Cosmic Explorer, can be expected to provide us with an unhindered view of the primordial universe.

Thank you for your attention