

The Power of the Stars

Astrology and Divination in the Traditional Indian Society

Research >
South Asia

Love of astrology and divination is not a trait peculiar to Indian culture. What distinguishes India is the large-scale survival of such practices. Sanskrit astrological texts bear testimony to the profound and illustrious culture of Indian divination traditions in ancient times. Regarded as an obscure subject in the general field of ancient science, astrology is, incorrectly, relegated to the margins, while it should, instead, be considered in relation to other ancient 'scientific' disciplines.

By Audrius Beinorius

Astrology is India's richest and most vital tradition: some 100,000 manuscripts covering various aspects of Indian astral sciences (lit. *jyotiṣaśāstra*) exist worldwide. Since the end of the nineteenth century, classical philologists and historians of Indian religion and science, such as H. Kern, A. Weber, and H.-G. Thibaut, have made efforts to preserve and publish long-neglected Sanskrit astrological texts, emphasizing their autonomous value. Arguably, only science historians have ever bothered to look at astrological practice, yet even they have limited their interest to contemporary mathematics or astronomy, and clearly remain a long way from putting astrology in its proper social or intellectual context (Pingree 1997). The importance of medieval astrological texts in understanding the history of culture and ideas is more fully appreciated today, mainly due to David Pingree's historical studies and his immense project, *Census of the Exact Sciences in Sanskrit*.

Yet, many questions arise: how can we explain astrology's large-scale survival and even its persistent proliferation? What was its role in traditional society and within ancient bodies of knowledge? Why did and does astrology appeal to educated Indians? This paper briefly discusses these questions, emphasizing some methodological and hermeneutical considerations.

For a long period the notion of 'pseudo-sciences' has hindered historical and contextual investigation into phenomena like astrology and other forms of divination. According to Richard Lemay, we cannot 'understand medieval attitudes toward astrology by

applying to this science our contemporary paradigm (to use Kuhn's convenient term)' as this '...seems to foreclose in advance all avenues leading to the medieval mind, to its structural framework, and to the contents of its own different paradigm' (Lemay 1987:58). Only a hermeneutical approach can lay bare the key concepts that supported ancient science. Such an approach can also reveal the overall structure of ideas constructed with these concepts, the local modes of cultural transmission of knowledge, methods of social control, and the nature of the cultural norms, that shaped the traditional epistemic field.

In the traditional Indian context, astrology formed an indispensable and intimate part of traditional science and cosmology. It appealed to educated Indians precisely because it was a rational system, or could be made to look like one. With reference to Greek civilization, G. Sarton once remarked that Greek astrology was the fruit of Greek rationalism, and received some kind of justification from the notion of cosmos, which is so arranged that no part is independent of the other parts and the whole.

The same can be said about the Indian cultural context. Acceptance of astrology as a learned and scientific study was a common attitude, if not the norm, hence the greatest Indian astronomers (Varāhamihira, Brahmagupta) were also astrologers. Both origin and subject matter of astrology were considered to be divine and astrology fascinated many of the greatest minds because it provided a total vision of reality, uniting the macrocosm with the human microcosm. It was due to the interest in prediction

and control as well as to the belief that divination could be socially beneficial, that divination developed as a body of social and psychological knowledge.

Ancient applied science

In very ancient times, Indian rulers acquired their legitimacy by claiming a divine connection, for example descent from the Sun, Moon, or Jupiter. Hence the very first task for astrologers in the past was to establish such divine sanction for the rulers. The *Yājñavalkya smṛiti* (1:307) holds that the rise and fall of kings depends on the influence of planets, therefore a king should rely on his astrologers. Most of the royal charters issued by ancient and medieval Indian rulers bear dates with astronomical details, which were no doubt supplied by the court astrologer. It is not by chance that this tradition was also actively cultivated by the patronage of the powerful Mahārājas.

One may wonder why astrology was, and still is, so widely used. Perhaps because it provides a tangible, visible template for predicting one's fate. Traditionally it is thought that a person's karma has caused him to be born at a time when the horoscope would lead to his fortunate or unfortunate condition. Hindus believe that heavenly bodies – the planets (*graha*), constellations (*rāśi*), and asterisms (*nakṣatra*) – have a divine influence on the earth and on individual people. These planetary effects are commonly considered as the fruits of karma.

In the words of Judy F. Pugh, 'These celestial forces begin to influence the person from the time of conception and birth. Hindu astrology offers schematizations of the influence of planets on the developing embryo and stresses the importance of birth time as the key point through which karma is made visible and hence future actions and circumstances are made known' (Pugh 1986:135). In that sense, astrology as an applied science reflects popular understanding of the manifestations of fate in the experiences of everyday life, and justifies itself as inspiring a healthy religious and social attitude. Karma teachings serve as a means of legitimizing the application of astrology in religious and social practices.

Like most ancient Indian disciplines, astrology is traditionally believed to consist of eternally valid knowledge with eternally fixed contents and unchanging rules. Astrologers were always referring to ancient divine revelation of astrological knowledge, and they indulged in a free improvisation on certain themes. Like the other Indian *śāstras* (traditional disciplines), astrology was preserved within families of practitioners, and members of each such family would remain faithful over many generations to a particular group of texts and would generally not be interested in educating outsiders or in making innovations in their traditional learning.

Street astrologer and palmist at work, Chennai.



Both photos by Audrius Beinorius

Different knowledge structures

Generally speaking, rather than taking astrology's irrationality as given, it is more fruitful to consider how grounds for belief in prediction and divination in the ancient world differed from our own and the way in which their different ordering of knowledge might be related to a different social, cultural, and even political context. As T.S. Barton has rightly pointed out, 'Ancient astrology offers a contrasting case to our organization of knowledge, illustrating the artificial, historically specific nature of boundaries between knowledge and pseudo-knowledge, intellectual discipline and technical craft, science, and mysticism' (Barton 1994:30). It seems that if and where historical astrology is human-centred, this will not pertain to astronomical or mathematical science, but rather to psychology and social science. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that much in India that currently goes under the name of Indian astrological scholarship in fact merely serves as a vehicle for the propagation of nationalist ideas on the one hand or of escapist and utopian notions on the other. The revival of so called 'traditional Indian medicine' is a case in point.

As Gyan Prakash has shown, in late-nineteenth-century British India, the Hindu intelligentsia began to canonize a body of contemporary scientific knowledge, in particular ancient Indian texts and traditions (Prakash 1999:88). The definition of classical texts as scientific was crucial in this process because this gave justification to their status as the embodiment of eternal and universal laws. The Western-educated intelligentsia felt impelled to reinterpret classical astrological texts and by casting the texts in the language of the Western scientific discourse, they construed a body of indigenous scientific traditions consistent with Western science. As a result, we often find that current astrological concepts are uncritically projected into earlier times, in accordance with the notion that no actual evolution can have taken place. It is for this reason that the claim of astrological practice to be 'scientific' is

still very strong in its contemporary Indian context.

In my opinion, unless one examines the basic Indian astrological treatises in their fullest social and intellectual contexts, as far as practically possible, it is impossible to give a reasonable and accurate answer to the question what traditional Indians think of astrology. The vast-scale text-critical and hermeneutical examinations of those treatises that I propose, are significant for the study of ancient Indian culture and also for understanding contemporary religious practices and beliefs. <

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Pandit Dr Ashish Bhattacharya (Calcutta) representing a more sophisticated astrological tradition, validating itself by the use of ancient astrological texts and nourished mainly by the *guru-śiṣya* (teacher-disciple) system.