

# On the social and religious status of an Indian astrologer at the royal court

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**Abstract.** The object of this paper is to investigate the social and religious status of an astrologer at the royal court and his relation to royal priests in medieval Indian society. This paper is confined to the social and religious role of an astrologer as it was perceived by members of society, both practicing astrologers and non-astrologers. By consulting different primary sources (i.e., *jyotiḥśāstras*, *dharmaśāstras*, *purānas* and epics), one can have some appreciation of various issues regarding, for example, the conditions in which royal astrologers operated, their duties and royal supporters, the salaries they obtained, and many other similar matters of extreme importance for the location of the astrologer within the larger social panorama. The conclusion is made that in India by the Epic times, at least, the astrologer had become one of the six principal officials of the royal court and gradually assumed some of the duties of the royal priest (*purohita*). In India even the position of royal astrologer had its sanction in myth. Astrology, therefore, was considered divine in origin as well as in its subject matter. The court astrologer was considered indispensable to the king and to the welfare of the kingdom. The astrologer had enormous power and responsibility at the royal court and at every level of society. The astrologer was fulfilling his role as an *institutional authority* by providing knowledge and understanding to the royal court and society. Indian astrologers had to depend on a patronage system for their sustenance, and they seem to have exploited that system with some success.

In the early days, astrology was used to determine the fate of cities and nations. When individual horoscopes were cast, it was for the benefit of the powerful and elite members of given societies, and the purpose of these analyses was to sketch not only the career of the individual in question but also the likely consequences of this career for the community to be served. The early Greeks, however, began to concern themselves with the fate of non-elite individuals as well, and astrology itself was affected by the increasing democratisation of Greek society. The evolution of highly specialised astrological techniques permitting the casting of individual horoscopes, which occurred in the Hellenistic West between 300 and 170 B.C., had its first impact on the lower and middle class urban mob that gathered at fairs and festivals, and on the agricultural classes of the Italian countryside. The agents of this transmission were itinerant astrologers who arrived in the wake of the star-cults coming from the East. As the star-cults at first appealed only to the lower Roman strata, the astrologers also found their first clientele there. Rome's upper class was not won until the last

century of the republic, although a minimum knowledge of the various astronomical and cosmological theories had long been a part of the higher educational curriculum. (Cramer 1996, 4; 27; 47)

By contrast, Hindu astrology was concerned in its early history with rulers and royal personages and the fate of kingdoms, wars, and public enterprises. The casting of horoscopes for countries and royalty and for the determination of high and low points in their futures, a practice known as mundane astrology, was an important function of early astrologers, who might be said to have created myths of the state and to have engaged in oracular activities. But it too began to democratise itself and became a medium for all. The infusion of astronomical and astrological ideas and methods from the Hellenistic West served to enhance the position of astrology and astrologers at the royal and, later, popular levels.<sup>1</sup>

I will not discuss in this paper the theoretical status of astrology (*jyotiṣa*) among other traditional Indian sciences (*vedāṅgas*, *upavedas*), nor will I attempt to analyze the numerous arguments either *pro* or *contra* astrology which have been preserved in classical sources. From that perspective one can assert that astrology enjoyed a status similar to that of āyurvedic medicine, in the sense that both disciplines were considered natural sciences, as those sciences were understood within the larger brahmanical philosophical (Vedāntic and Sāṃkhyan) framework. Thus, this article is confined to the social and religious role of an astrologer in the royal court as it was perceived by members of society, both practicing astrologers and non-astrologers.

First, what is astrology about? With some generalisations we can say that astrology is a theory not only about the universe but about time, as well as about the causal principles operating in the universe. Second, it is a conceptualisation of the relationship between a human being and the universe: about its character, physical and mental qualities, and health or illness of mind and/or body. Third, it is a theory about the destiny of the human being, the changes and alterations his life will undergo in the course of his sojourn on the earth, and thus it also embodies a method of prediction. Fourth, it has a method of forecasting the destiny of relationships and partnerships between human agents and estimating the changes of their success. Finally, in Hindu astrology, it has a theory of past incarnations and their effects on the present life. Because it has such a comprehensive function to perform in the life of an individual and society, it is inevitable that astrology should have a multifaceted structure.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance *Yavanajātaka of Sphujidhvaja*. According to David Pingree, 'the greater part of the *Yavanajātaka* was directly transmitted (with some necessary adjustments) from Roman Egypt to Western India, and this text is one of the principle sources for the long tradition of horoscopic astrology in India' (*Yavanajātaka of Sphujidhvaja* 1978, 1: v–vi).

### **Astrologer and *purohita* at the royal court**

From the earliest times in India, the position of royal astrologer had its sanction in myth. According to the *Mahābhārata*, the ṛṣi Garga himself was the astrologer of King Vena (*Mahābhārata* XII.59.117). This did not mean that other court officials were not acquainted with *jyotiṣa*. Other leading state officials or their family members are known to have studied or written about *jyotiṣa*, notably under the Calukyas (Pingree 1981, 121). Other than the royal astrologer, the official most likely to be acquainted with the subject was the king's family priest, *purohita*. The *Parīśiṣṭa* of *Atharvaveda* mentions the ritual of the pacification of the planets (*grahaśānti*) as one of the duties of the *purohita* (*Parīśiṣṭas of the Atharvaveda* 4.6.4). The Kauṭīliya's *Arthaśāstra* (IX.4) is not in favour of too much reliance on astrology, but the same work (V.3.) mentions the *kārtāntika* (seer), *naimittika* (reader of omens), and *mauhūrtika* (astrologer) on the list of royal officials of the sixth class earning an annual salary of 1000 silver coins. Kauṭīliya states that the king should have a *purohita* who is versed in the six *aṅgas* and in divine portents (*Arthaśāstra of Kauṭīliya* I. 9) The *Yājñavalkya smṛti* requires the king's *purohita* to be proficient in astrology because the rise and fall of kings depends on it (*Yājñavalkya smṛti* II.307.313).

That the *purohita* should be versed in astrology is not surprising. Many of the ritualistic responsibilities of the *purohita* had to be coordinated with the proper time and astrological conditions. Besides, it is not unusual that the duties of priest and astrologer should be attended to by a single individual. In the Christian West, astrology was very much a part of ecclesiastic calendrical texts. Indeed, in the late Middle Ages, friars were more given to astrology than almost any other class of men. Even popes were prone to use astrologers or study the art themselves (Thorndike 1923–1958, 1: 676).

In India by the Epic times, at least, the astrologer had become an official of the royal court. The astrologer is undoubtedly one of the six principal officers to which Nārada refers when he speaks of the king's need for loyal advisors (*Mahābhārata* II.5.13). The active patronage of astrologers by the ruling classes in India has its parallels in other countries as well. In Hellenistic times, both great rulers and lesser princes retained court astrologers. These astrologers possessed considerable power, often the very life of influential noblemen, or even of members of the imperial family, depended on the interpretation of their horoscopes by the emperor's astrological advisors (Cramer 1996, 13; 82). In China, for instance, for more than two millennia, astrologers were in state service, organised in a special government department, the Astronomical Directorate or Bureau. The office of imperial astrologer, who went by many names over the course of dynasties, was important and hereditary, and pos-

sessed a considerable staff (Schafer 1977, 12–3).<sup>2</sup> In Babylonia, the heads of the astrological profession possessed a high rank and position in the social hierarchy. The office of chief astrologer was again hereditary (Thompson 1900, 2: Introduction).<sup>3</sup>

As a body of social and psychological knowledge, astral divination developed both out of interests in prediction and control, and under the impetus of expedient social interests. In very ancient times, Indian rulers acquired their legitimacy by claiming a divine connection, for example: descent from the Sun, Moon or Jupiter. The very first task for astrologers in the past was to establish such divine sanction for the rulers. 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. Not by chance, this tradition was also actively cultivated by the patronage of the powerful *māhārājas*. The rulers, particularly Rudradāman I (130–160 AD), and the court astronomers and astrologers in the realm of the Western Kṣatrapas were seminal in the introduction of Hellenistic astrology. Following the Western Kṣatrapas, the Imperial Guptas were instrumental in furthering the spread of the imported knowledge. Candragupta II (ca. 380–414) played a crucial role in stimulating the advancement of this traditional science in the early history of the dynasty (Pingree 1959).

Despite the *purohita*'s knowledge of astrology, the astrologer was an indispensable advisor to the king. In the *Pariśiṣṭas of the Atharvaveda* (51.4.3), both the *daivajña* and *purohita* are cited in connection with the protection of the kingdom. The astrologer is also mentioned separately in connection with the king. In his *History of Dharmaśāstra*, P.V. Kane shows how one of the royal officers was called *sāṃvatsara*, or *sāṃvatsarika*, often styled *jyautiṣika*, *daivajña*, *mauhūrtika*, *kārtāntika*, etc., although sometimes these designations are applied to different classes of astrologers (Kane 1994, 3: 126). The early *Gautamadharmasūtra* (2.2.15) suggests that the king respected those who had devoted thought to the portents of fate (*daivopātacintakāḥ*). According to the *Bṛhat saṃhitā* (2.9), a king without an astrologer blunders along his way like a blind man. The *Viṣṇu smṛti* requires the king to depend on an astrologer for all matters.<sup>4</sup> The *Kāmandakīyanītisāra* (4.33) and *Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa* (II.4.5–16) also prescribe reliance on an astrologer. The *Yājñavalkya smṛti* (1.307) holds that the rise and

<sup>2</sup> For more on astrology and divination in China, see Richard J. Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society*, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1991; Shigeru Nakayama, 'Characteristics of Chinese Astrology', *Isis* 57, 4 (1966): 442–54; Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> See also Franchesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *Viṣṇu smṛti* 3.75: *rājā ca sarva kāryeṣu sāṃvatsarā dhīnaṅ syāt*.

fall of kings depend on the influence of planets. The *Viṣṇu smṛti* (3.75), in speaking of the *sāṃvatsara*, the state astrologer who gradually assumed some of the duties of the *purohita*, requires: ‘The king should depend on the astrologer in all matters’ (*rājā ca sarvakāryeṣu sāṃvatsarādhanah syāt*). The importance of the astrologer for the king is nowhere more explicitly and vehemently asserted than in the Varāhamihira’s *Brhat saṃhitā* (2.6; 8–10) as he cites the sage Garga:

The king who does not honour a scholar of horoscopy (*horā*) and astronomy (*gaṇita*) who is versed in all the branches and subdivisions comes to ruin. As the night without a light, as the sky without the sun, so is a king without an astrologer; he is like the blind man who wanders on the road. If there were no astrologer, the hours, lunar days, stars, seasons, and half-years would all be confused. Therefore a wise and eminent astrologer should be consulted by a king who desires victory, fame, good fortune, pleasures, and health.<sup>5</sup>

The respect given to the astrologer is further suggested by epigraphical evidence of a land grant made by Rātnadeva II to an astronomer for correctly predicting a total lunar eclipse (Mirashi 1933, 161). The astrologer was so well ensconced at the royal court that *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* (253.26–7) assigns him a house appropriate to his profession, as it also does for the preceptor, physician, minister and priest. According to *Yājñavalkya smṛti*, one desirous of prosperity; of removing evil or calamities; of rainfall, long life, and bodily health; and of performing magic rites against enemies and others should perform a sacrifice to the planets (*Yājñavalkya smṛti* 1.294–5).

Chapter 67 of the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* describes how King Uttama, Svāyamībhava Manu’s grandson, was told by his *daivajña purohita* or *trikārajña purohita* about his unhappy married life being caused by the following adverse planetary influence at the time of his marriage:

The Sun, Mars and Saturn looked on the king, and Venus and Jupiter looked on his wife. The Moon was favourable to him and Mercury to the queen. These two groups of planets being mutually hostile (*parasparavipakṣau*) have been exceedingly adverse to the king. (*The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 67.26–7; see also Desai 1979)

The evil result of these planets on the married life of the king was to such an extent that though he loved his wife wholeheartedly, she hated him.

<sup>5</sup> *Rṣi* Garga was probably among the earliest known Indian astrologers. He founded the Ujjain school of astrology–astronomy, where around 25 B.C. he composed the *Gārgīya jyotiṣa* (or *Garga saṃhitā*), which is probably the earliest major work on Indian astrology and astronomy. This is an extensive work—existing manuscripts contain approximately 6500 ślokas. Much of the Varāhamihira’s *Brhat saṃhitā* have been modelled—in both form and content—upon the *Gārgīya jyotiṣa*. A number of lines and ślokas from Garga have also been incorporated within the *Parīśiṣṭas* of the *Atharvaveda*, and Utpala (AD 966) in his commentaries on the works of Varāhamihira cites some 960 lines from Garga. His name is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* (9.36.14–7; 13.18.25–6) and other puranic sources (e.g. the *Matsya purāṇa*). Edition and translation of *Gārgīya jyotiṣa* is still an urgent necessity. For more on Garga and his *Gārgīya jyotiṣa*, see *The Yuga Purāṇa* 1986.

A king traditionally had two brāhmaṇa ritualists with special knowledge of signs: the *purohita* (royal priest) and *sāmvatsara* (royal astrologer). Every day the royal priest examined the sacrificial fire of the palace for signs and was also supposed to look into the king's dreams for signs. Every month he was to carry out, by way of his priest and astrologer, the worship of the image (*pūja*) of the sun, moon, and planets (*grahas*), and lunar asterisms (*nakṣatras*). On virtually all occasions, the king and his ritualists looked for auspicious and, especially, inauspicious signs. Among various omens, celestial ones were considered potentially the most dangerous. According to *Viṣṇudharmottara purāna*:

A double sun in the sky indicates an increase for Kṣatriyas; a double moon, increase for the Brāhmaṇas; more than that, however, cosmic retraction is indicated. When the orb of the sun or the moon is red at sunrise or sunset and there are no clouds in the sky, it is a sign of great danger. When the moon is dark brown and ugly as it leaves the lunar mansion of one's birth, one should recognize that disaster awaits. When Rāhu delays his appearance or appears for too long, the oppression of subjects by disease, famine, and thieves is to be pointed to. (I.85.29b–33a)

In his paper 'Kings and Omens', Ronald Inden rightly argues that auspicious and inauspicious signs and acts are to be understood as features of a world consisting of a hierarchy of masters, lordships, and overlordships, all of which were supposed to have emanated from an absolute overlord of the cosmos. Natural events occurred in India because the gods in charge of the various departments of nature thought they should happen and made them happen; lesser beings or entities were continually made or caused to act on the command of higher ones. It was a necessity, thus, that a science of natural events such as auspicious and inauspicious signs should emerge in this world. As he clearly puts it: 'Because the king includes the people and country of his kingdom within his persona, every portent that appears in his kingdom, no matter where, is also a warning for him. And every calamity that occurs in it, no matter who is directly affected, is also a catastrophe for the king. This is why the king, above all others, was concerned with omens in ancient and medieval India' (Inden 1985, 35). According to the sage Garga, all portents are divided into three classes, depending on their place of occurrence:

Irregularities (*vaiṅṛta*) relating to the planets, sun, moon, comets and eclipses and stars (*ṛkṣa*) are classed as celestial (*divya*). Attend me with regard to those of the atmosphere (*antarikṣa*). A shower of meteors (*ulkāpāta*), a red glow on the horizon (*diśām dāha*), a halo around the sun or moon, the City of Celestial Musicians (*gandharva nagara*), and irregular rain, such things in this world are designated as atmospheric. Those arising with respect to a mobile or stable creature of the earth, an earthquake originating in the earth, or an unnatural phenomena relating to bodies of water are called terrestrial. (Utpala's commentary on *Bṛhat saṃhitā* 45.1–7)

Celestial portents and omens could signal disaster not only for a king and his country, but for an entire quarter of the earth, that is, for the entire empire. In order to prevent the disaster it portended, the king was supposed to determine which lord was responsible for the omen and perform an auspicious ritual of the *śānti* type.<sup>6</sup> It involved the honouring (*pūja*) of a properly installed image of the divine lord or planet which had caused the prodigy to occur, praise him with appropriate mantras, and offer tribute, *bali*, consisting of food and other articles favoured by him and resembling him in form and substance. It always included a *homa*, oblations of ghee into a fire—the mouth of the gods—which were carried by smoke to the sky-dwelling gods and stars.

One of the most valued privileges of the purohitas was the right of publishing the Hindu almanac. Thus a purohita was sometimes called a *pañcāṅgi* or one who has charge of the *pañcāṅgam*. J.A. Dubois, who worked as a missionary in south India from 1792 to 1823, in his work *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, gives a comparatively recent account of the astrologer's duties at the royal court. He says,

There is no one in high position who has not one or more purohitas living in his palace. They go every morning and with ludicrous gravity announce to the princes, to the state elephants and to his idols, each in their turn all that is written in the almanac relating to that particular day. Should the prince wish to hunt, walk or receive visits from strangers, and the perspicacity of the purohita discovers in his infallible book that this in an unpropitious moment, the chase, the walk or the visit is postponed. In large temples, a purohita is specially retained to read to the idols every morning the predictions for that day contained in the almanac. (Dubois 1906, 135–6)

In the theistic discourses of the Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas, kings were those manifestations of Viṣṇu or devotees of Śiva who were supposed to bring about the well-being of the countries they ruled. Idols are mentioned here because the deities were often regarded as kings or emperors.

It is well known that most of the royal charters issued by ancient and medieval Indian rulers often bear dates with astronomical details, which were no doubt supplied by the court astrologer. Contemporary versification of such dates reveals that in a large number of cases they are irregular. The reason for this irregularity in royal documents could have been that in some cases the court astrologer had occasion to fabricate an auspicious moment when really there was none. This was hardly difficult for him to do as the king and most of his courtiers were blessedly ignorant of astronomy and had to depend entirely on the astrologer for the determination of an

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<sup>6</sup> The Ātharvanic text *Śāntikalpa* is probably the oldest text prescribing *grahaśānti* as a pacificatory rite for the repulsion of evil caused by angry planets. For more on *śānti* rituals, see Kshirsagar 2002, ch. 4: *Grahaśānti*, 132–55.

appropriate moment for a particular undertaking, and the court astrologer might have been bribed by anyone concerned with the results of determination.

Ronal Inden in another relevant paper, 'Changes in The Vedic Priesthood', analyses the significant changes in the Indian priesthood that put the astrologer at the head of the new priesthood. He shows how during the third and fourth centuries a new form of astronomy gained hegemony in India. Before that time there were certainly astronomers or astrologers, and the *jyotiḥśāstra* was an important 'limb' (*aṅga*) of the Veda. This older astronomy, however, was basically lunar in its orientation. The *Kalpasūtras* and the *Arthaśāstra* used a calendar (*pañcāṅga*) that adhered to a lunar year of 354 days, with lunar months that ended on the day of the full moon. The new astronomy of the *Siddhāntas*, appropriated from the Near East, was primarily solar. It also focused on the movements of the planets. The calendar that the solar astronomers made hegemonic was luni-solar, adopting the tropical year of 365 days, the zodiac, and lunar months that end on the day of the new moon, and it also introduced the seven-day week.

The uptake of this new knowledge brought with it other changes. The new astrologers (*sāmvatsara*) not only introduced rites of planetary worship and pacification, they also involved themselves with new rites for the permanent installation of images of the gods. These rites over the next few centuries displaced the older śrauta religion and liturgy from the centre of the Indian stage.<sup>7</sup> The *Pariśiṣṭas* of the *Atharvaveda* were composed during this period of change and specified the days of the annual rites in such a way that they could be taken to adhere to either the old or new calendar. 'The association of the Atharvans with Śiva, who had a special relationship to the moon, overlord of medicinal herbs (*oṣadhi*) and the lunar asterisms (*nakṣatra*), both major concerns in the *Atharvaveda*, and the night could hardly have inspired much enthusiasm for solar astronomy' (Inden 1992, 570). The new astronomical knowledge was subordinated to the old one; Śiva came to be the god of the moon and the *Atharvaveda*, and Viṣṇu came to be the god of the sun and planets and, indirectly, of the triple Veda. The fifth chapter of *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭhas* (5.1.3–4) lists the royal officers, beginnings with the *purohita* (after whom comes the *mantrin*) and ending with the physician (*vaidya*) and the astrologer (*daivajña*), who come after the keeper of stores (*bhāṇḍāgāra-pati*).

An important term connected with the specific principles of Indian astrology is *daiva*. Primarily meaning the interpretation of various signs,<sup>8</sup> this word also means fate or destiny, and in this sense it is connected with astrology in *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭhas*:

<sup>7</sup> For those changes, see Krishna 1977.

<sup>8</sup> See Bhaṭṭotpalā's commentary on *Bṛhat saṃhitā* 45.3.



Fate (*daivam*) is paramount, human effort is only a pretext. By unfathomable fate one can conquer the earth. Between fate and human effort, fate is superior; therefore the king should specially worship fate. Also, the king should always keep an astrologer (*sāmvatsara*) and a priest (*purohita*)—the two who know fate and rites—and maintain them like royalty. A king without an astrologer is like a boy without a father. (II.2.2–4)

Since *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭhas* contain seeds of Tantric astrology, it is very possible that the basis of the developed form of that school of astrology is a somewhat fatalistic view in the sense of trying to cooperate with fate. In the *Yājñavalkya smṛti* (I.313), an astrologer is called a *daivajña*, ‘one who knows fate’. This may be interpreted to mean that astrologers were credited with the ability to predict what fate would bring, irrespective of any theory of fate. The same text contains some interesting verses on karma and fate:

The outworking of karma occurs through fate and human effort, where fate is the manifestation of one’s human effort in a previous life. Some think that things happen by fate (*daivāt*) or by intrinsic nature (*svabhāvāt*) or because of time or human effort. The wise believe that it is by the combination (*samyoge*) of all these. Just as a chariot cannot move on one wheel, so fate is ineffective without human effort. (*Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭhas* I.349–351)

Thus astrologers, if they could not achieve omniscience, or indeed the total power to control afforded by magic, attempted to mediate between the two poles of fate and free will in such a manner as afforded them maximum power.

One of the greatest Jyotiṣa writers of ancient India indeed was Varāhamihira. Varāhamihira, the son of Adityadāsa (slave of the Sun) was a Maga Brāhmaṇa—that is, descendent of one of those Persian Zoroastrians who entered India toward the beginning of the Christian era. It has been suggested that he was connected with the Aulikara court at Dāsapura (modern Mandasor) and in particular with Yaśodharman, who is known to have been ruling in Śaṃvat 589 = A.D. 532, though according to D. Pingree no definitive assertion can be made with regard to this hypothesis (Pingree 1959). Varāhamihira’s fairly numerous writings on the subject, and especially his cultural encyclopaedia, *Br̥hat saṃhitā* truly depict the exuberant life, spirit and culture of the Gupta age, justifiably treated as the classical age of early Indian history.<sup>9</sup>

In his *Br̥hat saṃhitā* (chapter 48), Varāhamihira calls for a king to appoint both astrologer and royal priest for the performance of the Bath of Prosperity, which could be performed on the occasion of a ceremonial bath into kingship. In this rite the

<sup>9</sup> More on Varāhamihira see Shastri 1991. It is crucial to realize, that the *Br̥hat saṃhitā* does not relate solely to Varāhamihira era, as author himself states that it is a compilation from earlier sources. On the basis of the identity and date of these earlier texts, D. Pingree hypothesizes that it is probably more relevant to the culture of India from the third century B.C. to the second century A.D. than to the times in which Varāhamihira actually lived during the sixth century. See Pingree 1974, 487.

astrologer is more important than the priest. The astrologer interprets the fire for omens; otherwise he is simply present, presumably as the silent, all knowing supervisor of the rite. In another of his texts, *Yogayātrā* (2.9), Varāhamihira places the *daivajña* at the head of those—*daivajña*, *mantrī*, *suhṛd*, and *āpta*—whose words the king should heed and claims that the king who carries out the orders (*vāk*) of the astrologer (*bhagaṇavid*) attains the overlordship of every domain (*sakalamaṇḍalādhipatya*) (*Yogayātrā* 17.10). ‘Yet Varāhamihira’, as R. Inden states, ‘does not seem actually to place the astrologer over the priest; and he assumes that some other officiant that is an adept in one of the religious orders would also be appointed by the king to act as the priest (*sthāpaka*, ‘establisher’) in the rite of image installation’ (Inden 1992, 571). Not only should the *sāṃvatsara* be expert in the newer aspects of solar astronomy, he should also be in ‘learned in *sāntika* and *pauṣṭika* [rites], enchantment (*abhicāra*), and bathing lore (*snānavidyā*)’ (*Bṛhat saṃhitā* 2.3). The text also asserts that he should also be ‘occupied with the image worship of the gods, vows, and fasts (*vibudhārcana vratapovāsānirata*)’ (*Bṛhat saṃhitā* 2.3).

It seems that *Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa* relied heavily on Varāhamihira. After enumerating the qualifications of the astrologer, the *Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa* has the king state these words to the astrologer in the course of completing his appointment:

Just as the gods have fire (*agni*) as their source (*mukha*), so subjects have a king as their source; moreover, just as mantras are the source of fire, so are astrologers of kings. You are my mother and father, guide (*deśika*), and preceptor; what is caused by the gods and what is caused by men is ever to be known by you. O knower of everything, well-being to you, my kingdom belongs equally to us both. (*Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa* II.4.12–4)

What was the relationship of the astrologer to the royal priest according to *Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa*? Regarding the royal priest it states: ‘Ever devoted to the commands of the astrologer, he should perform the periodic, occasional, and optional rites of the king’ (II.5.6). Although the king should not ordinarily abandon either his astrologer or priest, the *Viṣṇudharmottara* provides one exception: ‘But a priest who is opposed (*viruddha*) to the astrologer should be abandoned by the king; otherwise the priest is like the mother and father of the king’ (II.5.9–10). The superiority of the astrologer is also to be seen in the division of the labour between the two. As Ronald Inden has shown, by and large the royal priest performed the rites and those portions of rites that used Vedic mantras and dealt with remedies and injuries and honouring lesser gods while the astrologer performed those rites or portions of rites that used newer Puranic mantras and were concerned with the relationship of the celebrant to Viṣṇu.

The king is also enjoined to choose for his *purohita* and *mantrin* men who have been suggested by the *sāṃvatsara*. Clearly the court astrologer was considered indispensable to the king and to the welfare of the kingdom.

It is noteworthy to mention in this context that in astrological sources the social position of astrologer is indicated also by the traditional correspondence of the planets with members of a royal court, whose positions depend not only on their natures, but also on the order of their houses. This is probably the oldest known description of this kind of correspondence from *Yavanajātaka* (I.116–21):

One finds that the Sun and the Moon are king, Mars a general, Mercury a prince, Jupiter and Venus advisors and Saturn a slave. These categories apply on Earth. Jupiter is the caste-lord of Brāhmaṇas, and so is Venus; Mars and the Sun are the caste-lords of Kṣatriyas; Mercury and the Moon of Vaiśyas; and Saturn of śūdras. When the planets are victorious, so are their castes; but when they shattered, their castes also are shattered and their qualities are commingled. . . . Father, mother, brother, wife, relative, son and slave of the natives; such are the natures (respectively) of Mercury, the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, and Saturn.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in *Yavanajātaka* we have such planetary identifications:

Planets	Castes	Royalties	Family members	Zodiacal signs ( <i>rāśis</i> )	Guṇas
Saturn	Śūdras	slave	slave	Capricorn, Aquarius	tamas
Jupiter	Brāhmaṇas	advisor	relative	Sagittarius, Pisces	sattva
Mars	Kṣatriyas	general	brother	Scorpio, Aries	sattva
Sun	Kṣatriyas	king	father	Leo	sattva
Venus	Brāhmaṇas	advisor	wife	Libra, Taurus	rajas
Mercury	Vaiśyas	prince	son	Virgo, Gemini	changeable
Moon	Vaiśyas	queen	mother	Cancer	rajas

As is stated in many astrotexs, Jupiter (Bṛhaspati, Guru) is the ruler of astrology and thus has an elected position in the royal court and society as advisor of the king belonging to the caste of brāhmaṇas and has the status of relative in family. It must be remembered that Jupiter in ancient Indian mythology is the instructor of the Devas; that is why it is also called a Guru.

### Astrologer and the royal patronage

Indian astrologers had to depend on a patronage system for their sustenance like craftsmen, artists, and other professionals, and they seem to have exploited that system with some success.<sup>11</sup> The patronage of astrologers existed at all levels of Hindu

<sup>10</sup> In this aspect the *Yavanajātaka* is followed by Varāhamihira (*Bṛhajjātaka* 2.1 and *Laghujātaka* 2.3), Parāśara (*Pūrvakaṇḍa* 2.4–5), Kalyāṇavarman (4.7), Guṇākara (2,1), the *Sūryajātaka*, and Vaidyanātha (2.2.). According to Pingree, most of these identifications are of Greek origin, similar to those given by Petosiris, Nechepso, Teucer, Dorotheus, Valens, and others.

<sup>11</sup> A similar situation existed in Islamic society. George Saliba suggests that members of a major segment of medieval Islamic society, namely the Shiites, were especially attracted to astrological predictions, probably as a part of foreign, Greek sciences. See Saliba 2004, 341–63.

society in the first millennium A.D., if not earlier. And such patronage continued unabated throughout India in the second millennium. Epigraphical evidence suggests that the office of village astrologer, as well as of court astrologer, was an institution recognised by the state during Hindu rule. A copper-plate inscription dated 1565 records that certain individuals petitioned an agent of Vijayanagara King Rāmadeva Mahārāya for perpetual rights to the office of *jyotiṣa* which their family, belonging to the Saṅṭe-Bennūr *śīme* in Uccaṅge *veṅṭhi*, had enjoyed for generations. The request was granted, stipulating that all dues and rights attached to the office would be enjoyed by the family and its descendants (Sircar 1952, 344–5). The Brāhmanical family name Joṣī (Sanskrit *jyotiṣin*) found in various parts of India seems to speak of royal recognition for the families of astrologers. Similarly, the family name Praharāja (Sanskrit *prahara rāja*) found amongst Oriya Brāhmaṇas was originally a royal title conferred on an astrologer by a king (ibid. 345). Astrologers had an exceptional position at the court of the Mahārāja of Bīkāner, Anūpaṣiṃha (died 1698), who collected a distinguished library of 10,000 manuscripts on *jyotiṣa* and related areas of *dharma*.<sup>12</sup> Several courts of Rājasthān in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (and into the nineteenth century in some cases), maintained *jyotiṣīs*, many of whom were not only involved in the copying and preservation of manuscripts, but also became well-known authors of the new texts.

Royal patronage of astrologers, however, was by no means limited to the Hindu states. In fact, Muslim civilization had been introduced to Hindu astrology long before the invasions of Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century. The earliest recorded Indo-Arab intellectual contact occurred in A.D. 771 when a Hindu astronomer and mathematician reached Baghdād with the Sanskrit astronomical works of Brahmagupta (born 598 A.D.), *Brahmasphuṭa siddhānta* and *Khaṇḍakhādya*.<sup>13</sup> As contact between the two cultures increased, Hindu astrology and palmistry received considerable attention in Baghdād; many titles translated from Sanskrit have been preserved on these subjects (Ikram 1969, 15–6). These infusions of Hindu astronomical and astrological knowledge resulted in eventual patronage of and dependence upon Hindu astrologers by Muslim rulers in India. The *Tarikh-i Khan Jahan Lodi* of Nīʾamatu-lla records that Buhlul Lodi, after capturing Delhi in 1451, seated himself

<sup>12</sup> In the immense project called *Census of the Exact Sciences in Sanskrit*, David Pingree provided a preliminary explanation and organisation of the vast amount of Sanskrit and Sanskrit-influenced literature devoted to astronomy, mathematics, astrology and divination together with brief bibliographical information concerning the treatises and their authors. This work provides evidence of the high royal position of many astrologers at Indian courts. See Pingree 1970–94.

<sup>13</sup> Brahmagupta was a resident of Bhīllamāla, the village situated on the northern border of Gujarat at the time when King Vyāghramukha of the Cāpa (Cāvoṭaka) dynasty was ruling the country. See more in Dikshit 1981, 80–1.

on the imperial throne at the moment judged auspicious by experienced brāhmaṇas and astrologers (Elliot 1964, 5: 77).

The office of Jyotiṣarāja or Joṣirāya, the Hindu astrologer at the Mughal Court, goes back to the time of Akbar; for an unnamed Jyotik Rāy cast the horoscope of Akbar's birth (15 October 1542), during his reign, according to the Indian method, while Maulānā Cānd cast it for Humāyūn (Pingree 1997, 92). There continued to be a Jyotik Rāy at the Mughal court during the reigns of Akbar and Jahāngīr. During most of the time that Akbar ruled, he was probably Nīlakaṇṭha. It is known that Paramānanda held the office of Imperial Jyotiṣarāja for a time under Jahāngīr and a few years later was succeeded by Keśavaśarman, the son of Kaṃharaśarman, a member of the family of Kāyakubja brāhmaṇas residing in Kālīñjara. Pingree mentions no references to a Jyotiṣarāja during the reigns of Shāh Jahān and Aurangzīb; but of course this silence does not prove the disappearance of the imperial office (Pingree 1997, 93). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mughal patronage of Sanskrit works on *jyotiṣa* was extremely generous (Pingree 1981, 121). Even Akbar's own general and finance minister, Todar Mal, composed a *saukhya* on *jyotiṣa* (Lingat 1973, 120).

During the Pāla dynasty, which ruled Bengal from the eighth to the twelfth century, *grahavipras*, notably from the sub-caste of sun-worshipping ṣākadvīpa brāhmaṇas, were prominent at court, not only as astrologers, but as ministers and advisors.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the fall of the last Hindu dynasty in Bengal seems to have been heralded by court astrologers. The *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, a thirteenth century work by Minhaj-us-Siraj, records the Lakṣmaṇasena, the last Sena king of Bengal, was advised by his astrologers and counsellors to flee the country before the advent of the approaching Muslim forces. It had been foretold, they said, that Bengal would be subjugated by the Turks. Although the king was at first resistant to the idea, he was ultimately forced to flee Nadia in a hasty and undignified fashion (Minhaj-us-Siraj 1881, 1: 556). One apologist for the king had suggested that the astrologers were in cahoots with Muhammad-i-Bakhtyar, the general who conquered Lakṣmaṇasena's territory. And there seems to be precedent for such betrayal: the *Matsya purāṇa* (214.94–5) prescribes that spies should assume the garb of astrologers. Later Muslim rulers of Bengal also heavily relied upon astrological practitioners.

## Conclusions

Astrologers who occupied official positions at the court presumably devoted full time to the practice of their craft. Others who were not lucky enough to occupy such posts

<sup>14</sup> Nagendra Nath Vasu, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Kayastha Kanda*, Vol. 1, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1914–33, 149–51. Cit. from Friedman 1986, 150–1.

did not refrain from performing other odd jobs in order to sustain themselves. There were also those who practiced astrology as a hobby as they derived their income from elsewhere. Nevertheless, in later times there was an undeniable respect for astrological insight and true counsel. The astrologer had enormous power and responsibility at the royal court and at every level of society. In very ancient times, Indian rulers acquired their legitimacy by claiming a divine connection, for example: descent from the Sun, Moon or Jupiter. The very first task for astrologers in the past was to establish such divine sanction for the rulers. In India by Epic times, at least, the astrologer had become one of the six principal officials of the royal court and gradually assumed some of the duties of the royal priest (*purohita*). One of the most valued privileges of the *purohitas* was the right of publishing the Hindu almanac. Clearly the court astrologer was considered indispensable to the king and to the welfare of the kingdom. Looking from the astrological perspective, the planet Jupiter (Bṛhaspati, Guru) is the ruler of astrology and thus has an elected position in the royal court and society as advisor of the king belonging to the caste of *brāhmaṇas* and having the status of relative in the family. The astrologer fulfilled his role as an ‘institutional authority’ by providing knowledge and understanding to the royal court, and society. All human life is lived symbolically and in conformity with various theories, mythologies and ideologies, so the ready availability of a symbolic statement about one’s own life, containing both explicit and implicit structures that denote continuity with other areas of symbolic life such as religion, medicine, and human relationships, seems a credible and worthwhile exercise. Astrologers were credited with the ability to predict what fate would bring, irrespective of any theory of fate. We find that the professional astrologer was intimately associated with Indian social and cultural life and this influence has possibly not died out totally even at the present time. He cast the nativities for newborn members of the royal family; he pointed out auspicious and inauspicious days by calculating the positions of heavenly bodies; he pursued the profession of *gaṇatkāra* or astronomical calculator.

Not accidentally, 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. While talking about Greek civilization, George Sarton once remarked that Greek astrology was the fruit of Greek rationalism, and it received some kind of justification from the notion of the cosmos, which is so well arranged that no part is independent of the other parts and the whole (Sarton 1959, 165).<sup>15</sup> Exactly the same could properly

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<sup>15</sup> A similar position is expressed by Neugebauer: ‘Compared with the background of religion, magic and mysticism, the fundamental doctrines of astrology are pure science’ (Neugebauer 1969, 171).

be said about the Indian cultural context. Acceptance of astrology as a learned and scientific study was the common, if not the normal, attitude to it, and it is not an accident that the greatest of the Indian astronomers (Brahmagupta, Varāhimiḥira) were also astrologers. Considered as divine in origin as well as in its subject matter, astrology fascinated many of the best minds of the time because it provided a total vision of reality, uniting the macrocosm to the human microcosm.

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