

BUNKUM OF VEDIC ASTROLOGY

(Bid to Destroy India's Little Remaining Science)

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Foreword by
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FOREWORD

Brahminism is a mental twist. A kink in the already crooked mind desperately trying to keep the vast indigenous people of India as slaves. Among the innumerable symptoms that abound in this mental disease called brahminism, astrology is one.

It is one of the symptoms of the deadly disease afflicting India. The disease is brahminism which today goes by the name of Hinduism. We have to cure the disease but not the symptom. If we don't correctly understand this point and go on fighting the symptoms, the brahminical forces will continue to put us on the defensive advancing all sorts of hair-splitting arguments. Many a time brahminical forces will themselves join us and exhaust us in fighting the symptoms. So, all those who are trying to attack the symptoms would do well to concentrate on killing the deadly disease — brahminism — that is killing India itself.

Early, during our days in the rationalist movement, we too got engaged in fighting such symptoms like astrology, palmistry, vegetarianism, *swadeshi*, *vastu sastra*, menace of godmen, *karma* theory, miracles and rebirth, superstitions etc. Soon we realised that when we start fighting such aberrations *vaidik* forces also joined us and finally took the lead and ran away with the credit. That is how India's "topmost" rationalists happened to be brahminical forces though brahminism and rationalism can never go together.

The author, a senior IAS officer in the Tamil Nadu Government, grew up during the sunset hours of Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy's revolutionary rationalist crusades, finally devoured by the very *vaidik* forces against which Periyar launched the movement.

Though the author is trying to cure the symptom, we welcome his contribution because it is timely since the Hindu nazi government in Delhi is trying to impose astrology (*jyotisha*) and priestly study (*karmakanda*) as subjects for university studies.

Union Education Minister Murli Manohar Joshi, a hardcore Hindu nazi, is trying to thrust astrology, Sanskrit etc. down our throats not because he does not know that they are bunkum. He knows it and yet he is doing it to keep Indians superstitious and thereby gullible so that the *vaidik* crooks will continue to rule India. While trying to destroy the scientific temper he is only performing his duty (*jati dharma*).

The Hindu nazis are trying to *hinduise* (enslave) the non-Hindu Dalits, Backward Castes and Tribals by imposing astrology as part of this brahminical conspiracy. Enslaving the original inhabitants is nothing but destroying India. Hence this tract is a timely warning against such a conspiracy.

No work is done in Hindu India without consulting the astrologer. Even the self-styled socialist, Jawaharlal Nehru, fixed the midnight "auspicious hour" for the transfer of power from the British in 1947. But all these years astrology was being encouraged unofficially but the Hindu Nazi Government in Delhi wants to give it official sanction. That is the difference.

Astrology will kill the little remaining science in Hindu India. Indian "scientists" mostly *Babus* on government pay roll are silent on the Hindu nazi rulers' move to scuttle science through astrology and such other bunkum. They are silent because most of these "scientists" belong to the same brahminical ruling class and they are more interested in promoting brahminism rather than in the health and happiness of India.

We commend the author's effort to save science and scientific temper. Parts of this paper appeared as an article in the *Hindu* dated April 10, 2001.

Bangalore

Date: Sept. 15, 2001.

V.T. Rajshekar



Vedic astrology in Indian Universities ?

"Star-gazing and astrology, forecasting lucky or unlucky events by signs, prognosticating good or evil, all these are things forbidden".

— **Gautama the Buddha.**

"You will find that astrology and all these mystical things are generally signs of a weak mind; therefore as soon as they are becoming prominent in our minds, we should see a physician, take good food and rest!".

— **Swami Vivekananda**

While delivering the Albert Einstein Memorial Lecture at New Delhi recently, the eminent British physicist, Stephen Hawking surprised everyone when he took some time out from "Black holes" and "superstrings" to debunk astrology. He said:

"The reason why most scientists don't believe in astrology is that it is not consistent with our theories which have been tested by experiment".

We are not sure if Professor Hawking had an inkling of the disconcerting news that the University Grants Commission (UGC) had decided to start departments of Vedic Astrology (*Jyotir Vigyan*) in Indian Universities from the forthcoming academic year. In any case, he deserves to be commended for his effort because the attitude of top scientists and intellectuals towards astrology is often one of detached disgust and they refuse to do battle with the quaint notions of a bygone age. This is a mistake because lay people who listen to pro-Astrology propoganda day in and day out and seldom get to "hear the other side", are likely to believe that may be there is something to Astrology. To paraphrase Edmund Burke:

"It is necessary only for knowledgeable men to do nothing for nonsense to triumph".

At a time when India should be giving a special thrust to study and research in Information Technology, Biotechnology and other frontier areas, the UGC has taken a giant leap backwards by advocating the "fiction science" of Astrology. This, in a country where one of the fundamental duties of citizens as per the Constitution is "to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of reform". It is just a question of time before other fringe beliefs and superstitions — palmistry, dowsing, witchcraft, ghost-busting, channelling, to name only a few — launch a campaign to get themselves taught as "science" in our schools and colleges and, in due course, crowd out genuine science. History is replete with instances where secular and rational thought bowed to mystical and irrational beliefs leading to the decline and fall of thriving societies. We can't afford another.

Arguments against astrology

So what is wrong with Astrology? Why does the scientific mainstream treat it with derision? I would like to reproduce the scientific arguments against Astrology for the benefit of the wise men of the UGC.

Lack of consensus: Astrology, with its apparatus of fascinating symbols, mysterious charts and abstruse calculations, is based on the principle that a person's character and destiny can be understood from the positions of the Sun, the Moon and the planets at the moment of birth, using a chart called the "horoscope". Horoscopes have been developed not only for individuals, but also for nations, companies, political parties, sports teams and even domestic pets. There are a number of schools of Astrology, most of them disagreeing on some of the fundamental tenets of their craft, and all of them supported only by anecdotal evidence of the most unreliable kind. Even after thousands of years of gathering data and

refining their study, astrologers are nowhere near arriving at a consensus. Just read the Astrology columns of ten different newspapers and magazines or have your horoscope prepared by ten different astrologers and you will most likely get ten different interpretations.

Geocentric model: It is shocking to say the least, but astrologers haven't caught on to the fact that Earth is not the centre of the Universe. They still ply their trade based on the pre-Copernican, geocentric model of the Universe. As Stephen Hawking stressed in his lecture:

"When it was discovered that Earth was not the centre of the Universe, Astrology became impossible".

Missing planets: When Astrology was first invented, only five planets were known besides Earth — Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn — and these were visible to the naked eye. Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were discovered with the aid of telescopes in 1781, 1846 and 1930 respectively. Surely all the horoscopes done before 1930 should have been incorrect since the astrologers before that time were missing out on the influence of at least one planet in their calculations. Even today, only some of the astrologers use the three outer planets, others don't. Why didn't the inaccuracies in early horoscopes lead astrologers to deduce the presence of Uranus, Neptune and Pluto long before astronomers discovered them? According to "noted" astrologer, Linda Goodman, a planet doesn't have any influence until it is discovered.

The ability to derive, test and verify predictions is one of the most important characteristics of science. Based on the observed irregularities in the orbits of Uranus and Neptune, astronomers had predicted the existence of a "new" outer planet in each case long before it was actually identified

through observation, and had also predicted accurately just where in the sky it could be found.

More missing bodies: We know that there are thousands of asteroids, hundreds of comets and dozens of satellites in our solar system, but these "serious" astrologers do not factor them into their calculations. Recently astronomers have discovered more than 50 extra-solar planets. We know that there are billions of stars in our Milky Way galaxy and there are billions of other galaxies, besides strange objects such as pulsars, quasars and black holes. No astrologer could ever hope to finish a horoscope that took the influences of all these celestial bodies into consideration.

The argument that all these bodies are "too far away to influence us" cannot be accepted because astrological influences do not depend on distance at all. For example, it makes no difference to Astrology whether Mars is on the same side of the Sun as Earth or on the opposite side — although the distance between Mars and earth is seven times greater in the latter case. Astrological influences are also independent of the size, mass, composition, temperature, rotation or any other physical characteristic of the planets or stars — just what one would expect from a pseudo-scientific system.

Imaginary planets: Our homegrown Vedic Astrology has the distinction of incorporating two imaginary planets, *Rahu* and *Ketu*, into the astrological charts. Initially, *Rahu* and *Ketu* were supposed to be two heavenly serpents that tried to swallow the Sun and the Moon on certain dates causing the eclipses. Later, astrologers "refined" the concept by stating that *Rahu* and *Ketu* were "dark planets" invisible to us but influencing our actions and our destiny. Can a system based on such wrong assumptions be accurate? Yet thousands of people

regulate their activities — travel, marriage, religious functions among others — according to *Rahu Kala* and *Gulika Kala*.

Need for precession: Astronomers have long known of a phenomenon called "*precession of equinoxes*", by which the axis of the Earth rotates on itself, taking about 25,000 years to complete one rotation. The assignment of certain dates to certain signs of the Zodiac (e.g. Aries from March 21 to April 19) was made about 2,000 years ago and remains unchanged ever since. During these 2000 years, the axis of the Earth has rotated by about 30 degrees. This means that the correspondences between the 12 signs of the Zodiac and their assigned dates are not correct any longer: There is a difference of almost one complete Zodiac sign. So if you were born between March 21 and April 19, you are not really an Aries, but a Pisces. Even today, only a few astrologers take "precession" into account; most of them continue to cast horoscopes and make predictions for the wrong signs.

Moment of conception or Moment of birth: Biology teaches us that a person's personality traits and physical characteristics are determined by one's genetic endowment inherited from both parents at the moment of conception — not the moment of birth — and that these can be modified by environmental influences which take place after birth. This has a solid foundation both in theory and experiment. But if astrologers are to be believed, personality traits and physical characteristics are correlated with one's horoscope, which uses only the moment of birth as datum. Isn't it time we discarded the astrological horoscope and switched over to making a "genetic horoscope" of a child at the time of its birth and started matching the genetic horoscopes of the bride and bridegroom before marriage?

Problems with "time": The issue of "moment of birth" poses several problems. How does one precisely determine the time

of birth, when birth is not an instantaneous process? What did astrologers do before the invention of clocks and other accurate time-measuring devices? Which time should astrologers use — the local time or the Standard time? Shouldn't astrologers make allowances for light-time relativity — as astronomers do — while locating the celestial bodies? We know that light travels at a finite velocity of about 3 lakh kilometres per second. The position of the Sun as we see it is actually its position about eight minutes ago since light takes that much time to travel from the Sun to the Earth. Similarly, there is a time difference of six minutes between the real and apparent positions of Venus. This principle is applicable in varying degrees to the other planets and all the stars of the Zodiacal constellations, making the astrological charts out of date by anything from a few minutes to millions of years.

Lack of mechanism: Astrologers' favourite argument in support of their craft goes like this:

"Human beings begin life in an amniotic sea and our body is 70% water. If the sun and the Moon can cause tides, then surely they can affect a human being as well".

The problem with this argument is that it is one thing to cause tides and quite another to affect our personality, physical features and destiny. In their book, *Astrology: True or False?* Roger Culver and Philip Ianna have shown that the gravitational pull exercised on a new-born child by the mother is 20 times greater than that exercised by Mars and six times that by Saturn.

Testing astrological predictions

The electromagnetic energy from a 200 watts bulb in the delivery room is much greater than that from the Moon and all the planets put together. Thus the only two long-range forces known to science — gravitational and electromagnetic — are found to be far too weak to have any influence on

human infants. After all these years, astrologers are still unable to explain the "mechanism" by which the positions of the Sun, the Moon and the planets at the moment of birth are "imprinted" on the infant.

Even if we give astrologers the benefit of doubt and accept that astrological influences fall outside the domain of our current understanding of the Universe, we are entitled to ask the purely empirical question: "Does astrology work?" The answer is "no". Many carefully conducted statistical tests of astrological predictions have shown that there are no astrological influences on personality traits and physical characteristics, and that astrologers really can't predict anything at better than chance rates. Let us consider a few well-known studies:

- ◆ Astrologers commonly claim that a couple's "compatibility" is determined largely by their Sun signs. Bernard Silverman looked at the records of 2,978 married couples and 478 divorced couples. If Sun signs have influence on marriage or divorce, then pairs with incompatible Sun signs should be over-represented among divorced couples and under-represented among married couples. But the study showed that this was not the case.
- ◆ John McGarvey examined the birthdays of 16,634 scientists in the *American Men of Science* and 6,475 entries in the *Who's Who in American Politics* and found no basis for the assertion that occupations tend to predominate under certain Sun signs. That is, members of these two occupations were no more or less likely to be born under one Sun sign than another.
- ◆ Roger Culver and Philip Ianna have done detailed

statistical studies of 60 occupations, 35 physical characteristics, 42 medical disorders and 26 personality traits and found that they are not influenced by Sun signs. They also tracked the published predictions of well-known astrologers and astrological magazines for five years and found that out of the 3,011 specific predictions, only 338 came to pass — a success rate of only 11%.

- ◆ Conclusive evidence that there is no empirical support for the tall claims of astrologers comes from a well designed, double blind test done with 28 astrologers and more than a hundred volunteers by Shawn Carlson. Its results were published in the prestigious British science journal, *Nature* in December, 1985 (Vol.318, p.413). This study was unique in the sense that it enlisted the cooperation of a "respected" astrological organization, and the astrologers involved approved its design and procedures in advance. In this study, the subjects were unable to correctly choose the interpretation of their own horoscope, out of the interpretations of three horoscopes given to them, at a rate above chance ($33 \frac{1}{3}$ %). At the same time, professional astrologers were also unable to match the horoscope of a subject with the correct personality profile, out of three personality profiles given to them, at a rate higher than chance ($33 \frac{1}{3}$ %).

Quacks blamed: Astrologers' way out of the collapsing superstructure of their "science" is the age-old refrain: "the stars only impel, they do not compel". In other words, cosmic influences can be overridden by one's free will. If Astrology were really a science, any physical law developed from

empirical results should hold up at all times, and not just when astrologers deem it convenient.

Another commonly touted excuse is that it is the "quacks" who are giving Astrology a bad name and that "genuine" astrologers can usually give "accurate" interpretations of a horoscope.

In my opinion, a discipline that is so demonstrably unscientific cannot possibly have any "genuine" practitioners. The problem of quackery is common to all professions and the correct solution is to have a central body which will prescribe standards and give accreditation to genuine practitioners. Why can't astrologers do the same?

The psychological basis of belief

In spite of all its logical, theoretical and empirical shortcomings, how does Astrology continue to fascinate the general public, many of whom scrupulously regulate their daily activities based on astrological forecasts? Francesco Guicciardini (1483 - 1540), a papal advisor, observed very correctly:

"How happy are the astrologers if they tell one truth to a hundred lies, while other people lose all credibility if they tell one lie to a hundred truths".

The psychological underpinnings of Astrology are not difficult to seek. There is an everlasting desire in all of us to know what the future holds in store. In an uncertain world, most of us long for the comfort of having guidance in making decisions. It gives a heady feeling to be told that our personal character and destiny are tied up with the stars. It is also convenient to blame our failures on cosmic events that are beyond our control. As William Shakespeare states in *King Lear* in his inimitable style:

"This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune — often the surfeit of our own behaviour

— we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars: as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and traitors by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star."

Predictions that fail: The main support for Astrology is in the form of anecdotes and testimonials from "satisfied customers". But such evidence is generally unreliable because of what is termed the "fallacy of personal validation". It hinges on the selective nature of human memory by which the "hits" are recorded and the "misses" are forgotten. Francis Bacon made this point more than four centuries ago in his *Novum Organum - I*.

"Such is the way of all superstitions, whether in astrology, dreams, omens, divine judgments or the like, wherein men, having a delight in such vanities, mark the events where they are fulfilled, but where they fail, though this happen much oftener, neglect and pass them by".

As one would expect, astrologers also tend to give wide publicity to their few lucky strikes and conveniently gloss over the innumerable predictions that did not come to pass.

Cap that fits every head: Astrologers avoid making specific predictions as far as possible and have perfected the art of making vague and general predictions that can apply to anyone. This is known as the "Barnum principle", after P.T. Barnum, who made the perceptive observation:

"There is a sucker born every minute".

Studies have shown that people will use selective thinking to make any astrological chart they are given fit their pre-conceived notions about themselves. Some years ago, Michel Gauquelin sent the horoscope of Dr. Marcel Petoit, one of the worst mass murderers in French history, to 150 people and

asked how well it fit them and 94% of the subjects said they were accurately portrayed in the horoscope and 90% said that their friends and relatives shared this judgment. Those who follow newspaper or magazine columns on Astrology seldom pause to ask how the same prediction (usually 2 or 3 lines) can apply to $1/12$ of the world population, i.e. to about 500 million people coming under each of the 12 signs of the Zodiac. The predictions are supposed to apply whether the reader is an Indian politician or a Japanese stockbroker or a Mexican doctor or a Nigerian farmer. Thus, a horoscope is like stretch socks which can be made to fit any size.

Need for concerted action

In 1975, 186 leading scientists of the world including 19 Nobel Prize winners (S. Chandrashekar, Sir Francis Crick, Sir Peter Medawar, Paul Samuelson, Linus Pauling among others) published an open letter in *The Humanist* magazine outlining their objections to Astrology. They stated:

"One would imagine, in this day of widespread enlightenment and education, that it would be unnecessary to debunk beliefs based on magic and superstition. Yet acceptance of Astrology pervades modern society. We are especially disturbed by the continued uncritical dissemination of astrological charts, forecasts and horoscopes by media and by otherwise reputable newspapers, magazines and book publishers. This can only contribute to the growth of irrationalism and obscurantism. We believe that the time has come to challenge directly and forcefully, the pretentious claims of astrological charlatans".

I would suggest that Indian scientists and intellectuals must make a similar public statement explaining why Astrology is bunk and the dangers inherent in UGC conferring an aura of respectability upon it by making it an academic discipline.

The legal opinion must also be explored. The UGC which is

funded by taxpayers' money and lacks sufficient funds even to provide for regular academic disciplines, cannot disregard international and national mainstream scientific opinion and squander public money by funding the study of a pseudo-science.

It is unfortunate that, so far, the protests by the Indian scientific community have been rather muted and have failed to generate sufficient heat or light. Compare this with the manner in which the scientific community in the USA took up cudgels in the 1980s against the "equal time" demand from religious bigots for teaching "scientific creationism" in schools alongside Darwinian Evolution Theory. There was a bitter court battle and the scientists won.

Our scientists and intellectuals must play a more active role in mobilizing public opinion against UGC's attempt to get superstition taught as science in our Universities. What is at stake is the prestige and credibility of Indian science and our education system.



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