

## Introduction

In his inaugural speech “A Tryst with Destiny,” to proclaim the birth of India as an independent nation and the end of British colonization, Nehru uttered the famous sentence: “At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.” With his admirable eloquence, Nehru transformed a somewhat curious fact of Indian Independence into a lyrical, even epic image. Why midnight? Why perform such a solemn and institutional event at the dead of night? Indeed, despite the evocative force of India’s awakening while the rest of the world is asleep, one cannot but note that it was midnight only in India and not, for example, in England, where it was still daytime. Few are aware of the reasons that led “Mother India,” the Indian nation, to give birth to the “Midnight’s children” of Salman Rushdie’s novel. The reasons for this choice are explained in an article written by Nehru’s first secretary, H. V. R. Iyengar, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Independence, and published in the daily newspaper *The Hindu*.<sup>1</sup>

The British Empire, represented by the viceroy Lord Mountbatten, had fixed the date for the transfer of power for August 15, 1947. Nonetheless, before accepting this date, several members of the Indian Constituent Assembly consulted a committee of astrologers to ensure that the moment was propitious, that the nation would be born under happy auspices. According to these experts, August 14 was more favorable than August 15. However, as the British government had committed to promulgating Pakistan’s independence on the fourteenth, and Lord Mountbatten was to go to Karachi that morning, it was impossible to advance the declaration. In addition, the date of August 15 had already been announced to the British Parliament. It was finally Sardar K. M. Panikkar, a historian and writer from Kerala educated at Oxford University, who suggested

the solution to the conflict between the pragmatic requirements of the British and the celestial constraints. Having demonstrated his diplomatic skills on this momentous occasion, Panikkar went on to become one of India's ambassadors after Independence. He suggested that the Constituent Assembly gather on August 14 at 11:00 p.m., but that the oath be sworn at midnight. Hence, by this chronological compromise the date set by the British was respected, but without contravening the astrological directives.

However anecdotal it may seem, this event perfectly illustrates the convergence within a single institution, the Indian Constituent Assembly, of the values of independence, modernity, and secularism embodied in the progressive leader Nehru, and the traditional Brahmanical values that stipulate the prerequisite of an astrologer's opinion in order to ensure the success of any undertaking. In this case, the creation of a nation.<sup>2</sup> This episode could be read as a discrepancy, a contradiction, between the "content" of the proclamation of Independence, promoting an enlightened and democratic India, and its "form," driven by an obscurantist India with its local "superstitions." Nehru can be seen as having ceded to the pressure exerted by some of the particularly conservative members of the Constituent Assembly. Nonetheless, looking more closely at his speech, the title to start with, one notices that India's future is not represented solely in political terms, and the idea of a transcendent destiny, determined by superior powers, is crucial to the message he addresses to the Indian people. Although any inaugural speech pronounced before a nation is necessarily rhetorical, the words Nehru chose are far from inconsequential:

At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and the grandeur of her success and her failures. Through *good and ill fortune* alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength. *We end today a period of ill fortune* and India discovers herself again. . . .

The *appointed day* has come—*the day appointed by destiny*—and India stands forth again, after long slumber and struggle, awake, vital, free and independent. The past clings on to us still in some measure and we have to do much before we redeem the pledges we have so often taken. Yet the turning point is past, and history begins anew for us, the history which we shall live and act and others will write about.

It is a *fateful moment* for us in India, for all Asia and for the world. A *new star rises*, the star of freedom in the east, a new hope comes into being, a vision long cherished materialises. May *the star never set* and that hope never be betrayed!<sup>3</sup>

British colonization is described as *a period of ill fortune*, Independence Day was *appointed by destiny*, and India's future is a *new star* rising in the east. Of course, Nehru's speech also contains numerous passages that evoke the ideas of freedom, responsibility, struggle, and work, and we are in no way contesting Nehru's secularism here by attributing an occult astrological significance to his words. Nehru was quite simply an outstanding orator who knew how to address the nation. His representation of a change of era in transcendent and fatalistic terms corresponds, on the one hand, to a diplomatic strategy—a means of not explicitly accusing the British colonizers—but also, on the other hand, to the use of a language familiar to his Indian audience. And for the latter, misfortune and suffering, just like happiness, are to be understood in the context of a vaster cosmic arrangement.

Whether they apply to a nation, an individual, or a family, the ideas of destiny, good and bad luck, days set by fate, more or less favorable periods, and stars rising in the east are central to this work. The research presented here strives to show that what occurred at the proclamation of Independence was in no way an "accident." Nehru's speech should not be read as the persistence of a vestige of superstition that would erroneously have crossed the threshold of government institutions, fortuitously slipping into India's modernity but destined to disappear with the spread of technological progress and scientific discoveries. Astrology is a scholarly tradition deeply rooted in Indian society, with particularly lively ramifications in contemporary India. This work sets out to examine the processes of adaptation, interpretation, and rewriting this Brahmanical discipline underwent in urban India at the turn of the twenty-first century, as I observed it in Banaras and over the course of repeated fieldwork carried out between 1995 and 2008. By revisiting the journey that led me to choose this subject, I will clarify the approach and the analytical perspectives developed in this work.



I had just arrived in Banaras; it was 1995. I had decided to spend five months in this town to carry out my first fieldwork: the subject was not

yet clearly defined. I did not speak a word of Hindi and having spent a few weeks there on an earlier visit to India, I was both intrigued and terrified. The recent reading of *Banaras: City of Light* by Diana Eck and *Death in Banaras* by Jonathan Parry had reinforced my contradictory feelings. These two monographs, when read close together, are a good illustration of the combination of light and death, purity and corruption, spirituality and pragmatism that makes the reputation of Banaras.

While I was considering how I could carry out my survey on a subject as vast as arranged marriages and personhood in Banaras (a subject I finally abandoned), noticing my worry and confusion, the family I was staying with—Christians from Kerala—advised me not to waste my time on futile questions and to go and consult an astrologer. This would ensure the successful outcome of my studies and my good health in the coming months. They invited me to join them when they next visited the astrologer to have him calculate their newborn baby's horoscope. With no inkling that the meeting with an astrologer could “actually” influence the direction my studies would take, I accepted their invitation, thinking this recreational hiatus would at least bring me some relief and momentarily distract me from the “real” issues of ethnographic research.

Brahmanand Colony, a fairly upmarket residential area in the south of Banaras, is taking shape in the zone to the west of the Durga temple.<sup>4</sup> Gyanvati Pandey sees her clients in one of the two rooms of the flat she occupies with her mother, two brothers, her younger sister, and paternal grandfather on the first floor of a three-story cement building. When we arrived, Gyanvati's brother signaled to us to wait outside on the veranda, as his sister was busy with other clients. Half an hour later we were invited into the room. Her face almost completely hidden behind a shawl that covered her head, with an ease born of practice, this twenty-five-year-old woman rolled and unrolled the two long scrolls covered in diagrams and numerals that made up the horoscope of the couple that had come to consult her. Gyanvati indicated we should sit (on the floor, like everyone else, as there was no furniture in the room), and she continued her consultation. The sick eighty-three-year-old grandfather, *dādāji*, lying beside her on a mattress, muttered *mantras* (sacred formulae) incessantly, while Gyanvati's youngest sister, Madhu, came and went, serving tea and biscuits. The brother, Manesh, chatted with the people waiting their turn outside and, from time to time, entered the room to inform his sister of a client's arrival or departure.

About twenty minutes later, when she had finished with the couple, Gyanvati finally addressed my hosts, in Hindi as she spoke no English. She asked them who I was and where I came from. When she heard I was Italian, her eyes lit up. She left the room to return a few moments later with a photograph showing an Indian man, with a moustache, standing at the entrance to Gardaland, an amusement park located near Lake Garda, in Italy. Surprised and amused by this photo, I later discovered that the gentleman was Gyanvati's father, Murlidhar Pandey. In Banaras he had met some people from Bergamo who were passionate about astrology and, a few years before, they had invited him to give classes and hold astrological consultations in Northern Italy.

Murlidhar Pandey was a Shakadvipi (*Śākadvīpīya*) Brahmin, descended from nine generations of astrologers. He had left his village in the Rohtas district of Bihar to study philosophy and astrology at the Sanskrit University in Banaras (*Sampūrṇānanda Saṃskṛta Viśvavidyālaya*) and at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). After obtaining two master's degrees in philosophy and a PhD in astrology, he was employed as an astrologer at the Banaras Hindu University hospital and was paid by the Central Government in Delhi. As a tenured astrologer, Murlidhar Pandey not only held consultations at the hospital, he also carried out a clinical study called "Study on the Astrological Basis of Cardiorespiratory Diseases with Special Reference to Diagnosis, Prognosis, and Prevention." As he was highly reputed as a medical astrologer, Murlidhar Pandey often traveled to Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay (and of course, to Italy) for consultations. During these trips, his wife stayed behind in Banaras with the three youngest children, while the two eldest daughters accompanied him to cook his meals and take care of his other household arrangements. Over the course of these travels, Gyanvati, the second daughter, who was less occupied with household activities than her older sister, developed an interest in astrology, which she cultivated by helping her father prepare the horoscopes. When her father suddenly died in 1992, she knew how to calculate horoscopes and she joined Sanskrit University in Banaras to obtain a master's degree (*ācārya*) in astrology (*jyotiṣa*). Nonetheless, her inexperience, her youth, and most probably the fact that she was a woman did not allow her to replace her father in the government job he occupied at the hospital, and the position was terminated. Gyanvati began to hold consultations at home and her income was the family's only source of income, supplemented by her father's pension.

After showing me her father's photograph, Gyanvati noted the details of my birth and those of my hosts' newborn baby and told us to come back a week later. As I found the price of a complete horoscope too high—one thousand rupees<sup>5</sup>—just for the amusement this astrological excursus would provide me, I asked her to prepare a simplified birth chart for two hundred rupees. So the following week I received my astrological birth chart with its "guidelines": Jupiter (*Guru*) in a very strong position (*prabal*) favored studies, but I had a marriage *yog* (astral combination) for 1996 or 1998, after which I was to spontaneously abandon my studies to dedicate myself to family life. In any event, I had to procure a gold ring with a seven-carat *gomed* (hessonite) to be worn for the first time on a Wednesday, between 1:00 p.m. and 3:30 p.m., on the middle finger of my left hand. Gyanvati gave me the prescription written on letterhead that read:

Gyanvati Pandey  
Sanskrit Sahityacharya & Jeotishacharya<sup>6</sup>  
Life Member of Indian Red-Cross Society

D/o Late Dr. Murlidhar Pandey<sup>7</sup>  
World Renowned Astrologer  
MA (Philosophy)  
PhD (Astrology and Human Destiny)  
CENTRAL COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN AYURVEDA &  
SIDHA  
DEPT. OF KAYACHIKITSA INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL  
SCIENCES  
S.S. HOSPITAL, FACULTY OF AYURVEDA  
BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY  
VARANASI (UP)

Contact for:  
Mental and Emotional Problems, Nervous Troubles, Psychophysical and  
Chronic Diseases, Conflict of Married Life,  
Education of Abnormal Children,  
Service and Business, Your Personal Matters, and  
Effective Planet Stones

Gyanvati was one of Banaras's few women astrologers. As one can see from her letterhead, her authority as an astrologer was based on her father's legacy. Nonetheless, if the father had not died, and the family had not needed the money, Gyanvati would probably never have become a professional astrologer. She would have been married much earlier than the age of twenty-nine, which was very late according to Indian standards. And after her marriage, her life would have been entirely dedicated to "domestic concerns" (as she had in fact predicted for me and as had actually happened, in her case, after the age of twenty-nine). For all these reasons, Gyanvati used to repeat that she did not want to marry, as she was afraid that she would have to give up her occupation and her studies.

Gyanvati saw her profession of astrologer both as a family tradition she was proud to continue and as a personal vocation, as she was the only one of the five children who was passionate about studying, astrology in particular. In addition, she told me that because of the planetary configurations present in her horoscope, her father had predicted she would become an astrologer and had always encouraged her to pursue her studies in this field.

While pursuing the family tradition, this young astrologer also wanted to assert her autonomy from her father's work in the field of "medical astrology": she wanted to specialize in women's reproductive health. She planned to do a doctorate at Banaras Hindu University, focusing on a study of the astral configurations that affect the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, delivery, and other gynecological questions.

A few weeks after my first meeting with Gyanvati, the room where she had received us as clients was to become my bedroom. I had in fact thought of going to live with Gyanvati's family when I discovered that they belonged to the caste that, for different reasons, had become the object of my fieldwork. They were Shakadvipi (*Śākadvīpīya*) Brahmins, a community of Brahmins of Iranian origin, traditionally associated with the cult of the Sun (*Sūrya*) and the occupations of astrologer (*jyotiṣī*), Ayurvedic doctor (*vaidya*), and tantric priest (*tāntrika*).<sup>8</sup>

The close cohabitation with the family placed me in the situation of participating observer, rather than that of observing participant, as required by anthropological methodology. Indeed, it was less by observation than by practice that I came to understand that this family's daily life was punctuated by astrological norms that dictated what is "auspicious"

(*śubh*) and what is “inauspicious” (*aśubh*). For Gyanvati, I was not just a “disciple”; I was also her “younger sister,” which made me a receptacle for constant behavioral advice. With the benevolence of an older sister and the authority of a teacher, Gyanvati instructed me in the color of the clothing I should wear depending on the day of the week—white on Monday, the day of the Moon; red on Tuesday, the day of Mars, and so forth—the time at which I should leave the house for an interview to go well, the direction in which my feet should point when I did my astrology homework, the appropriate day to leave on a train journey, and so on. Respecting Gyanvati’s rules, although impatiently at times, allowed me to understand that astrology concerns every aspect of daily life and regulates every type of human behavior.

As a result of this fieldwork experience, I began to see astrology less as an esoteric or spiritual knowledge, as one tends to in the West, than as a highly pragmatic thought system, anchored in daily life and clearly focused on the resolution of concrete problems. Similarly, Gyanvati and her father’s positions within Banarsi society,<sup>9</sup> their university degrees (MA and PhD) in astrology, and the post of astrologer at a public hospital proved that the profession of astrologer in Banaras plays a decisive role in the functioning of the society.<sup>10</sup>

### Approaching Astrology: Standpoints

In societies in which divination is not, as it is in our own, considered a marginal, even aberrant phenomenon, where it constitutes a normal, regular, often even obligatory procedure, . . . Divinatory rationality in these civilizations does not form a separate sector, an isolated mentality, contrasted with modes of reasoning that regulate the practice of law, administration, politics, medicine, or daily life; it is coherently included in the entire body of social thought and, in its intellectual processes, it observes similar norms, just as the seer’s status in the functional hierarchy seems very closely linked with those other social agents responsible for collective life.

—Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*

My anthropological interest in the work of astrologers took shape after I realized that, in India, astrology enjoys institutional recognition and is not a marginal system of thought. In Banaras, astrology is taught at two



universities, as well as at the thirty-odd Sanskrit colleges in the town. Hindus systematically seek an astrologer's opinion before they arrange a marriage, perform a ritual, build a house, or buy a piece of land. In addition, when they face economic or professional difficulties, family conflicts, health problems, or when it comes to any major decision, for example, concerning the children's education, financial investments, travel, or career, both Hindus and Muslims alike often seek advice from an astrologer.

To apply Jean-Pierre Vernant's words to the context of Banaras, one can say that in this town of North India, following astrological recommendations is "a normal, regular, often even obligatory procedure," particularly for the Hindus, and astrological thought "is coherently included in the entire body of social thought and in its intellectual processes." Astrological rationality does not constitute "a separate sector, an isolated mentality," and the status of astrologer "in the functional hierarchy seems very closely linked with those other social agents responsible for collective life."<sup>11</sup>

With regard to the interaction of astrology with other types of knowledge, to start with one can note that *jyotiṣa*—the textual tradition in Sanskrit literature dealing with astronomy, astrology, and divination—is recognized as a valid and useful knowledge system by the representatives of religious orthodoxy, that is to say, the Brahmins. Hence, there has been no rupture in the Hindu world between religion and astrology: astrology is a constitutive part of every Brahmin priest's (*purohit*) intellectual background. The dates for performing rituals and celebrating Hindu religious festivals are calculated on the basis of astrological principles. In addition, the interpenetration of astrology and religion seems obvious as the planets are fully recognized deities in the Hindu pantheon; they are worshipped through propitiatory and appeasement rituals and their anthropomorphic images are present in numerous temples both in North and South India.

Second, it is important to note that in the Brahmanical tradition, over the centuries, there has been no epistemological break between "astronomy" (*ganita*) and "astrology" (*phalita jyotiṣa*, *horā*), between scientific theory on the one hand and divinatory or predictive speculation on the other. Both these approaches to the study of the stars are seen, even today, as two branches of the same knowledge, *jyotiṣa*, the science that studies "celestial light" (*jyotis*), including as well other types of divination such as the interpretation of omens (*sambhitā*).

Third, astrology plays a crucial role as auxiliary knowledge for other applied sciences like ritual, architecture, agronomy, or Ayurvedic medicine. *Jyotiṣa* serves to establish the "auspicious moments" (*muhūrta*) that ensure

the success of activities such as performing a ritual, constructing a house, starting the harvest, or beginning medical treatment.

Nonetheless, astrology is not only an integral part of “traditional” Brahmanical culture. In contemporary India it remains an important feature of the lifestyle of the urban middle class and elite who see themselves as the representatives of “modernity.” In Banaras, as elsewhere in the country, the most voracious consumers of horoscopes are civil servants and their families, businessmen, politicians, celebrities (Bollywood actors, cricket players, et al.), university professors, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and computer engineers. Astrology is particularly appreciated in these circles. It guides the decision-making process in the daily lives of well-off urban families in matters of career, travel, financial investment, identifying matrimonial partners, choice of schools for children, and so forth. It is also seen as knowledge that is more scientific in nature than religion. It combines seamlessly with technological and computer innovations, tablets and smartphones, viewed as expressions of “modernity” in today’s India. Because horoscopes are based on mathematical operations and can be calculated using software, and astrological services can be accessed by the internet in India, as well as the United States or Australia, it is seen as an innovative type of knowledge, both global and cosmopolitan, highly emblematic of the modernity of the contemporary world.

Today, astrology is taught at several Indian universities alongside Sanskrit studies, history, and philosophy as well as physics, engineering, and statistics. With its polymorphous epistemological status that allows it to hover between religion and science, in Banaras astrology seems to be flourishing. Indeed, it is seen as a discipline capable of reconciling scientific rationalism and religious devotion, empirical observation of natural phenomena and the appeasement of supernatural beings, technological innovation and the celebration of ancient rites, pragmatic management of daily problems and conformity with a transcendent order.<sup>12</sup>

The institutional recognition of astrology in India today may be startling, since the validity of this discipline was widely rejected in the West. On the one hand, ecclesiastical dogma condemned astrology as a pagan belief, connected to magic and incompatible with the principle of free choice and divine omnipotence, and on the other, astrology was deemed contradictory to the development of the modern scientific paradigm. From the seventeenth century onward, in the West, astrology was expelled from every institutional field and mainly confined to esoteric and

occult circles.<sup>13</sup> The comparative perspective proves particularly pertinent in this area because Western astrology and Hindu astrology share a common theoretical matrix, Greco-Babylonian astrology, which developed and metabolized in different ways in each of these civilizations.

Today, in the West, astrology is not considered an *intellectually* legitimate subject. It represents a marginal and “superstitious” belief that cannot be taught at universities as it is considered antinomic to the principles of philosophical and scientific rationality, which form the basis of our “paradigms of thought.”<sup>14</sup> It is confined to horoscopes in newspapers, social conversations around the qualities and shortcomings of the signs of the zodiac, or to the personal “business” astrologers, who are generally seen as charlatans, indulge in.

The status of “irrational belief” attributed to astrology is established both by the exact sciences and by the social sciences. In what concerns the former, we have only to mention the statement signed by 186 scientists, eighteen of whom were Nobel Prize winners, published in 1975 in the magazine *The Humanist*. In this statement, astrology is defined as a “belief based on magic and superstition” that contributes “to the growth of irrationalism and obscurantism,” as it is “simply a mistake to imagine that the forces exerted by stars and planets at the moment of birth can in any way shape our futures. . . . Neither is it true that the position of distant heavenly bodies make certain days or periods more favourable to particular kinds of action, or that the sign under which one was born determines one’s compatibility or incompatibility with other people.”<sup>15</sup> Social sciences also see astrology as an irrational belief.<sup>16</sup> According to the definition T. W. Adorno provides in his essay *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* (1994), dedicated to analyzing the content of the astrological column in the *Los Angeles Times*, astrology is a “pseudo-rational belief,” an irrational belief that contains a semblance of rationality or a “secondary superstition,” where the occult, as such, plays only a marginal role, but one that is objectified and socialized.

Given the epistemological status astrology enjoys within the dominant paradigm of contemporary Western thought, it is “normal” and “rational” for a researcher in the exact or social sciences to afford it little credit. This does not mean there are no researchers or academics who believe in astrology, but merely that scholarly institutions (research laboratories, universities, higher education establishments) do not recognize it as “*legitimate knowledge*,” and to state in a scientific publication that astrology is true

and valid would be reprehended.<sup>17</sup> My research falls within this paradigm of thought, to the extent that I do not afford astrology the status of a subject endowed with scientific and universal truth, and I do not believe in astrology myself.

Nonetheless, I would like to clarify that this statement is not made as a deontological precaution. The very fact that I do not believe in astrology played a fundamental role in the choice of this research subject. Indeed, my interest in a study of astrology in Banaras did not develop *despite* my lack of personal belief, but precisely *because* I did not believe in it and have always considered it “normal” not to believe in astrology. What led me to approach a study of astrology in India was the desire to try to understand how a subject that plays a secondary role within the Western intellectual paradigm, and is considered a “belief” with no rational foundation, can be seen as rational within another paradigm of thought where it enjoys such high institutional status that it is taught at schools and universities. So, what interests us here is not how true astrology is in itself but the value of the truth this knowledge is invested with within a certain society. In this work, astrology is seen neither as an irrational belief, nor as a superstition, but as a field of “knowledge,” and we will try to understand the meaning and rationality of this knowledge in the context within which it is practiced.

### Astrology in South Asia: The Current State of Research

Although treatises on horoscopes and divination represent a very prolific area of Sanskrit literature, and the importance of astrology in Indian society is well known to every specialist of the region, astrology has long occupied a marginal position in South Asian studies. In part, this marginality can be attributed to the interstitial position astrology occupies as a subject. Its empirical foundation is too weak to set it among the “sciences” like astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, or the natural sciences. Because its theological, ritual, or devotional aspects are only optional, it is not recognized as a full-fledged religious subject. Its language is too scholarly and technical to arouse the interest of anthropologists, too abstract to be seen as an applied science like medicine, law, or architecture, and too arid and dogmatic to be appreciated by specialists of literary and philosophical studies. Hence astrology does not easily fit into the academic disciplinary

divisions that exist within the human and social sciences.<sup>18</sup> So although popular works on “Indian,” “Hindu,” or “Vedic” astrology, for enthusiasts or practitioners, continue to proliferate and represent an important proportion of the sales in Indian, European, and American bookshops, there are still very few studies that provide a historical or anthropological view on astrological practices in the past or today.<sup>19</sup>

Indian astronomy, on the contrary, has always been clearly and univocally affiliated to the disciplinary field of the “sciences.” Because of the ideological issues related to the dating of Indian celestial observations—their antiquity could invalidate the date of Creation established in the Bible—India’s astronomy was the focus of fervent Orientalist debates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>20</sup> During the colonial period, Indian astronomy received special attention as, for the British administration, the teaching and transmission of scientific knowledge was one of the privileged instruments of government of the colonized nation. In an attempt to discover whether the Indians were more or less skilled in a science comparable but of course inferior to that known to the Europeans, the publication and translation of astronomical treatises (*siddhānta*) were strongly encouraged, not only by the European Orientalists but also by Indian scholars involved in projects of intellectual cooperation.<sup>21</sup> The interest in these treatises continued into the postcolonial period, a time when the history of astronomy was fully recognized as a part of the Indian nation’s scientific heritage, and it continues to be of lasting interest to historians of science from all horizons as is evident in the regular publication of reference works in this area.<sup>22</sup>

Although in Sanskrit literature, astronomy, astrology, and divination are in fact three branches of a same discipline, *jyotiṣa*, few authors have approached a study of the astral discipline in its totality, attributing equal importance to divinatory content as to mathematical and scientific data.<sup>23</sup> The contribution made by David Edwin Pingree, the historian of science, has been invaluable in this area. Seeking to respect the holistic nature of the discipline, he produced a monumental review and critical edition of the astrological and divinatory manuscripts, thus laying the groundwork for a new field of study.<sup>24</sup> Despite the mine of materials his research reveals, and the stimulating questions it raises, one can regret that few philological and historical works have since contributed to illuminating the innumerable areas of the history of astral sciences that remain unknown. Pingree’s approach is, in fact, that of a historian of science who, with his

vast erudition, examines the process of transmission of astral literature not only within the Indian tradition but also between the Indian and the Babylonian, Greek, Latin, Persian, and Arabic worlds. Nonetheless, one could approach the Indian corpus from other analytical standpoints. To take one example, the question of the connections and conceptual exchanges between astronomy, astrology, and divination remains largely unexplored (how were these branches articulated at a theoretical level and when, how, and why would Brahmin pandits specialize in one or the other?). Although Pingree describes over one hundred thousand manuscripts, we still know too little about the social identity of their authors, the conditions under which they were produced, and the practical use they were put to.<sup>25</sup> Some significant progress in this huge field of study was recently made by Christopher Minkowski, Michio Yano, Bill Mak, Marko Geslani, Martin Gansten, and Kenneth Zysk. Because of their publications, one may hope that new generations of scholars interested in the history of Indian astrology and divination will come in the next decades.

Art historians who have studied the iconographic representations of the planetary deities have made an important contribution to the study of exchanges between astrology and other fields of knowledge in India.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, from the first centuries of our era onward, the planets described in the treatises on horoscopy have been progressively included in the Hindu pantheon to become gods in their own right that are to be appeased and propitiated. Through an analysis of epic and ritual literature describing the planetary deities and their worship, as well as their sculpted representations in temples, these studies reveal how astrological ideas were assimilated and translated into ritual and devotional practices.

As a subject that plays a major role in the life of the Hindus, astrology has also aroused the interest of anthropologists, although ethnographic studies in this area are surprisingly rare, particularly given the visibility of this social phenomenon. One notes that it is only very late, around the 1980s, with the publication of works of Steven Kemper, Judy Pugh, and R. S. Perinbanayagam<sup>27</sup> that astrology comes to be considered a subject worth studying in the field of South Asian anthropology. These studies are noteworthy as they lift astrology out of the field of “superstition” and bring it into the domain of culture. Nonetheless, their ethnographic description is not as thick as one would expect. The analysis of astral cosmology is mainly approached from a symbolic and disembodied anthropological perspective, in which the work of the astrologer in local society

is only briefly touched upon. Since then, apart from the studies by Karin Kapadia and Gilles Tarabout that usefully examine certain astrological practices in Tamil and Kerala society, respectively, the state of research has not evolved as much as one could have hoped given the wealth of South Asian material available.<sup>28</sup> Most anthropological studies dealing with astrology in the Indian world are concerned with the structure of the Hindu calendar that regulates the festivals and activities that punctuate the year.<sup>29</sup> But the social and professional identity of astrologers, the usage horoscopes are put to, the manner in which consultations are conducted, the cult of the planets, the use of precious stones for therapeutic purposes, and many other features, have been little investigated.<sup>30</sup> Although certainly still partial and imperfect, the research presented here is an attempt to fill these gaps, in the hope that other studies in different regions of India will complete the data and analyses gathered here and provide other perspectives on them.

In this work, astrology is apprehended as a knowledge that is *practiced*. The theory of astrology, as described in Sanskrit and Hindi literature, thus interests us to the extent that it becomes a *discourse* that enables the orientation of choices and is translated into *acts* that seek to resolve concrete issues. This approach will allow us to see how astrologers adapt ideas and techniques based on canonical theoretical treatises to the complexity of life in contemporary urban India.

### Astrology in Banaras: In the Field

Banaras, today officially known as Vārāṇasī, is a town with about 1,200,000 inhabitants located on the banks of the Ganges River in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. A quintessential pilgrimage site, the town of the God Śiva, where Hindus from the whole country go to die in order to obtain liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of reincarnations, Banaras is said to have remained perpetually in *satya yuga*, the primordial golden age. Thus, the constant traffic jams, daily power cuts, roads destroyed by the monsoon, air and water pollution, and acts of extortion committed by the Brahmin priests when they conduct religious acts are so many tests for a devotee, whether inhabitant or pilgrim, who considers this holy town immune to the effects of *kali yuga*, the degenerate era of the contemporary world.<sup>31</sup> As the ethnologist who carries out fieldwork is also to some

extent motivated by a form of devotion, I will now try to describe my own *yātrā*, or pilgrimage, to meet astrologers in Banaras.

The ethnographical material presented here was gathered over the course of several field studies conducted in Banaras between 1999 and 2008.<sup>32</sup> During these visits, we mainly used three methods of data collection: questionnaires and interviews; observation, recording and transcription of astrological consultation sessions; translation of texts in Sanskrit or Hindi dealing with astrological theory, the cult of the planets, and other divinatory techniques.<sup>33</sup>

When referring to the means used to collect ethnographic material (apart from the textual works), the use of the pronoun “we” is not merely rhetorical. Sunita was my constant companion. Seated silently and attentively amid the clients in astrologers’ offices, looking very “professional” with our notebooks, tape recorder, and video camera, we were sometimes overcome by fits of giggles, brought on by a joke about the astrologer’s new hairstyle whispered into the other’s ear, or because we suddenly realized, at the same instant, in the middle of an interview, that I had worn my *kurtā* back to front. We spent hours on our bicycles, stuck in traffic jams under the scorching sun, trying to wriggle out from between the scooters, rickshaws, small school buses, roasted peanut vendors, herds of buffalos, and carts of vegetables, both of us exhausted at the idea of having to cross the city to meet an astrologer whose address we had but who may not be at home when we got there. We ate huge dosas (rice pancakes) together at Kerala Café, or went to the confectionery shop, Ksheer Sagar, for a bowl of saffron and pistachio yogurt to restore ourselves after a few hours spent standing in front of the Saturn temple or in the alleys in the center of the town filled with hordes of pilgrims. We spent mornings sitting at the foot of a tree on the green Banaras Hindu University campus, just beside the Astrology Department, noting the details of the interview we had conducted with a professor or a researcher at the department. We spent whole nights locked in a room, in front of a computer taking advantage of the electricity, to continue the transcriptions of the videos of the astrological consultation sessions, interrupting our work every now and then to listen to and sing the latest Bollywood hit. We spent days at Ayurvedic, homeopathic, or “allopathic” doctors’ offices to try to discover whether, beyond the *pūjā* and precious stones the astrologers had advised, there was another way to cure my raging fever or the abscess that made my leg swell up. For the “fieldwork” we were always together, Sunita and I. Born



the same year, a few months apart, at opposite ends of the world—one in Milan, the other in Banaras—we met at the age of twenty-two in Banaras. We worked together for over ten years, sharing not only the difficulties and satisfactions of the fieldwork but also a warm friendship that filled everything I learned in India over those years with meaning. (Nonetheless, I am obviously entirely responsible for any errors or omissions related to the development of the data gathered over the course of the fieldwork.)

We met with about fifty astrologers (*jyotiṣī*), only two of whom were women, and asked them to fill in a questionnaire on their family and socio-professional identity.<sup>34</sup> The qualitative study, however, was carried out using a limited sample of about a dozen astrologers whose professional practice we followed more closely.<sup>35</sup> The method we adopted when working with these astrologers mainly consisted of recording their astrological consultation sessions—usually with a video camera, sometimes a tape recorder—transcribing the content and seeking further details on each case. We then asked the astrologer to clarify the astrological diagnosis, the client's situation, or the type of remedy prescribed. Sometimes we also contacted and visited the clients, whose addresses we obtained from the astrologers.

Among the fifty astrologers we met, the criterion that dictated our choice of those whose professional practice we wanted to follow closely and regularly was the number of their clientele. An affluent clientele was a particularly significant element for us, as it provided a guarantee of the social legitimacy these professionals enjoyed, as well as allowing us to observe astrologers who were constantly active and at work. As the focus of our survey was not astrological theory in itself but its practice, we concentrated on specialists appreciated for their skill and professional expertise, rather than those renowned for their theoretical knowledge and recognized as famous scholars by a limited circle of cultivated Brahmins.

Another criterion that led us to focus our study on certain astrologers rather than others was, quite pragmatically, the astrologers' attitude to our presence in their consulting rooms. The astrologer needed to be completely at ease with our filming the consultations and had to be available to answer our questions about the cases we recorded. Certain astrologers seemed to be very distrustful and our "curiosity" made them uncomfortable, while others reacted enthusiastically to the idea of being filmed and interviewed throughout their professional day. They enjoyed taking the time to explain all the details of the case we had witnessed.

Our work was evidently facilitated by this latter attitude, and it is mainly this group that is represented in this book. Beyond their natural generosity, these astrologers' willingness to welcome us into their consultation rooms was probably also motivated by the fact that a Westerner with a video camera, filming divinatory declarations, confers a certain prestige and international brilliance upon an astrologer in the eyes of his clients. Nonetheless, this availability also reveals the good faith with which these professionals carry out their work and, moreover, their confidence in the value of their services. Our gaze was a constant examination and judgment of the "truth" of the diagnoses formulated, and the "efficacy" of the treatments prescribed. Accepting our filming of the consultations and our analysis of the contents of the recordings implied that we would possibly have proof of the astrologer's incompetence or dishonesty. But this thought does not seem to ever have crossed the minds of the professionals with whom we worked.

Over our months of assiduous participation in the consultations, for some astrologers we became an integral part of their professional team. Along with the ritual specialists, the secretary, the tea boy, and all the staff that gravitate toward the astrologer, there were also the two ethnographers, one with a video camera, the other with a sound recorder and a notebook. A significant development in this respect is the fact that when my last fieldwork was coming to an end, the astrologer Shree Kanth Shastri asked Sunita to become his assistant. Although Sunita has no specific training in astrology, her familiarity with the astrologer's daily work and her ability to develop empathetic relationships with the clients led the astrologer to ask her to continue to be a part of his professional team, and to learn the profession of astrologer.

When astrologers allowed us to film the consultations, the clients, for their part, never seemed uncomfortable with our presence in the consultation room and they rarely asked us about our work (what seemed to interest them more was to discover whether we were married or single women, or whether I knew Sonia Gandhi). Dialogues between clients and astrologers are not designed as a private and confidential interaction, and most astrological consultations are public sessions that everyone can attend.

Divinatory sessions are very rarely one-to-one discussions. Generally people go to an astrologer as a group: the husband and wife, with or without the children, a parent and a child, a brother and sister, an uncle and his nephew, two or three friends, and so on. During a consultation,

it is normally the “companion” who questions the astrologer while the owner of the horoscope, or the person who is having his hand read, just listens, as if there were a sort of modesty involved in the revelation of a destiny. In addition, the owner of the horoscope is often not even present at the consultation and it is close family or friends who ask about his destiny on his behalf. As we will see in many examples throughout this study, women most often go to see the astrologer with the horoscopes of different members of the family, to ask for advice for their children or husbands. Women and men represent a more or less equal proportion of the astrologer’s clients, but the women who go generally do so to show the horoscope of someone close to them. On this subject, one astrologer said, “Hindustani women have this quality (*gun*), they always want their children to follow the right path, the husband to do the right thing, family members to do the right thing, that’s why they go to the astrologer, because they want to know what should or should not be done.” Astrology is a means by which women try to enhance their power of intervention in the family situation.

With regard to the social background of astrologers’ clients, to start with one must distinguish between those who consult an astrologer on a regular basis, for all kinds of problems, and those who only consult on an occasional basis, for specific reasons. The first category includes families belonging to the middle and upper classes, generally living in urban areas. They have every newborn baby’s horoscope calculated and they go to an astrologer regularly to resolve problems or make choices. These clients generally have a high level of education (high school diploma or university degrees) and do not necessarily live in Banaras: they are often families who come from other urban centers in North India, or large Indian metropolises, specifically to consult one of the sacred town’s astrologers.

In the second category we find poor or low-caste families, who live in Banaras or the surrounding villages and who do not have a horoscope. This type of client uses astrological consultation only in specific circumstances, for example, when they have to arrange a marriage or plan to buy a piece of land. When dealing with this type of client, astrologers use methods of divination other than the horoscope, for example, reading the almanac or geomancy. For common problems and everyday difficulties, these poorer families usually consult an “exorcist” (*ojhā, sokhā*) or a “sorcerer” (*tantr-mantr*) instead of an astrologer. These practitioners, who generally belong to the lower castes (particularly the exorcists), attribute

their clients' misfortunes to malevolent ghosts (*bhūt-pret*) and acts of sorcery (*tonā-toṭkā*) rather than to planetary influences.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, the distinction between different categories of specialists and the distinction between the two categories of clients is in no way rigid. Like exorcists and sorcerers, most astrologers use “tantric” treatments: remedies that are supposed to be efficacious thanks to the supernatural powers (*siddhi*) the specialist who prepares them possesses. They are very economical in comparison to other astrological services and are hence often requested by the poorest families, who may consult an astrologer solely for this type of remedy. Although the more specifically astrological services—reading the horoscope or the hand, identifying “auspicious moments” to undertake new enterprises, prescribing precious stones, and so on—are hence the prerogative of middle- or upper-class clients, astrologers are nonetheless frequently consulted by a poor and low-caste clientele, for whom the diagnostic part of the consultation is greatly reduced and the astrologer's intervention generally consists of preparing a tantric remedy.

This study focuses on professionals who define themselves as *jyotiṣī*. They display this title at the entrance to their office or their home, or on their visiting card, and are recognized as such by their clients. In Banaras, there are some practitioners, generally Brahmins, who have a hybrid identity between astrologer, exorcist, sorcerer, or tantric specialist and who combine a very imperfect notion of astrology with ghost possession, sorcery, and tantric remedies. Over the course of our fieldwork, on several occasions we followed the work carried out by some of these specialists, but we finally decided not to include them in the reflections that make up this study, as their usage of astrological knowledge is very limited. A more fundamental reason for their exclusion was because their clients do not address them as *jyotiṣī*, “astrologer,” nor do these specialists claim this professional identity.

In this research we describe methods and techniques commonly employed by the *jyotiṣīs* of Banaras to diagnose and resolve problems. Although individual astrologers may prefer some divinatory techniques or treatments over others, according to our survey, there are no salient differences that may point to the existence of separate “schools” in the way of exercising the profession of astrologer.

All the Banarsi astrologers included in this study are Hindus. Actually, we did not choose to restrict this survey to Hindu professionals, but during the fieldwork we realized that there were no Muslim professional