

# AUTHORITATIVE STATEMENTS IN KERALA TEMPLE ASTROLOGY

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*Hindu temples in Kerala regularly undergo detailed and public astrological scrutiny. While this procedure tells a lot to the public as well as to the social scientist, the specific question addressed here is: how do the astrologers' statements acquire the authority to be accepted as truth? One important aspect has to do with Sanskrit authoritative treatises, i.e. with an understanding of "tradition" and "knowledge" informed by the role of literacy. But success in establishing an accepted truth relies also heavily on rhetorical skills, and on social consensus. Proofs and arguments cannot prevent the possibility of later contestation, a possibility all the more real with present day's democratization of astrological knowledge and the multiplication of experts from "non-traditional" social backgrounds.*

**H**INDU TEMPLES PATRONIZED BY THE higher castes in Kerala undergo a detailed and public astrological scrutiny whenever unfortunate events associated with the temple are interpreted as possible consequences of divine problems, or when modifications of the shrines or of the rituals are considered. The procedure is called *dēva praśnam*,<sup>1</sup> understood as both a "question concerning the deity" and a "question put to the deity". It is part of that specific domain of astrology in India which is dedicated to the resolution of interrogations and problems (*praśnam*). It has become ubiquitous in Kerala, and of utmost importance for understanding changes in temple

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1. Transliteration follows the spelling in Malayāḷam, the main language in Kerala, even for words of Sanskrit origin. Plural forms are indicated by adding an "s". Place names are spelt according to current official Anglicized usage.

life, in contrast with other regions of India where astrology about temples mainly limits itself to the determination of auspicious times for ritual activities (*muhūrttam*).

*Dēvapraśnams* (hereafter: DP) tell a lot to the people who organize them, as they disclose each and every aspect of the temple's past, present and future. They can also say much to the social scientist. For instance, they make explicit (1) current debates about what is right and wrong in temples, (2) rituals that are deemed to possess efficacy, (3) conceptions about ritual transformations and their management, (4) the astrological logic behind the belabouring of these issues, (5) and how astrologers are able to elaborate truth and make it acceptable to the public. The present paper is focused on this latter point.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, astrologers claim to be able to determine the nature of the deity installed. This leads them sometimes to affirm that the divine presence in the temple is not the one which people for generations have thought it to be (more below). One may expect reactions. Even when the conclusions have not such a dramatic character, they are often unpalatable to many people attending the consultation. The question I would then like to address is the following: how do astrologers manage to make their point? Or, put in another way, how do their statements acquire the authority to be socially accepted as truth?

In order to try to answer this question, I will consider *dēvapraśnams* as *performances*, in which a particularly rich and complex interplay between various actions — e.g. speaking, hearing, watching, reading, computing, showing, writing — is put at the service of interpretation and argumentation. One important aspect — but not the sole one — of this interplay has to do with Sanskrit *śāstras*, “sciences, treatises”. As such, the question of authoritative statements is also (but not only) a question about a specific way to understand “tradition” and “knowledge”, which is in turn informed by the question of “literacy”. In this particular respect, DPs offer a rather intricate combination of “orality” and “literacy”, and a positive valuation of *both* oral and written activities. This point appears rather consensual for the participants themselves, while they may well differ in opinion about other factors such as the importance of genealogy.

2. For an analysis of other aspects, see Tarabout 2002 (on the human body as metaphor and index for temple problems) and 2006 (on the elaboration of the past for legitimating modifications).

This paper is organized in four sections. In the first I present a summary of the current debate on literacy in Indian knowledge traditions, with the aim to inform some aspects of DP procedures. Section two will give an outline of what DPs are like. Section three develops an analysis of the tools and skills required by the astrologers, and of the interaction with the audience that leads to the establishment of truth. Section four reflects on the tensions that may exist among the astrologers themselves, before concluding on the social, non-consensual and impermanent character of (astrological) truth.

#### THE LITERACY DEBATE AND INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS

What has been called the “literacy thesis” has substantially evolved since 1963, when it was launched by E. Havelock on Ancient Greece, and, in more general terms, by J. Goody and I. Watt (1963). In its initial stage, the thesis held that the invention of writing, especially the invention of the Greek alphabet, had far-reaching cognitive effects because it enabled the recording of discourses, their circulation and accumulation, independently of face-to-face communication. This was said to entail the development of scepticism, rationality, and historical thinking. The theory provoked an intense debate. Critics argued that literacy by itself does not necessarily provoke the emergence of scepticism, and may as well reinforce local beliefs and ritual authority (Harries 2001). It does not either automatically provide wider communication (Finnegan 1974). In other words, one of the main difficulties of the “literacy thesis” appeared to be that it was “treating writing systems as neutral technologies rather than social products” (Hiezen 1991, 227).<sup>3</sup> The theory evolved towards more cautious assertions (Goody 1968; 1987). Ancient Greece was no more privileged, the invention of writing was merely creating a “potential” without deterministic implications, and social organization and ideology were reintroduced as major determinants. The ambitions of the original cognitive thesis were thus dramatically reduced to what principally seemed “the preservative potentiality of writing” (Halverson 1992, 315). Even this last point, too, came under attack by some Indianists (among others, Frits Staal).

The debate, in fact, brought into evidence the need to avoid any dichotomy between purely oral societies and others.<sup>4</sup> Oral and written forms may coexist in a given society for long periods and “can eas-

3. See also Finnegan 1974, Halverson 1992, Daniell 1999 and Harries 2001.

4. Cf. Finnegan 1974, Daniell 1999 and Harries 2001.

ily exhibit constant and positive interaction” (Finnegan 1974, 57). In medieval Europe, for instance, while private reading was possible and practised, there was nevertheless a specific high valuation of public reading or “aurality”: “the excitement of live performance, the intensification of aesthetic experience, the social bonding, the intellectual stimulation, and the cultural affirmation available in the high-context environment of public reading were key reasons of its popularity in the Middle Ages” (Coleman 1995, 79). Similarly in the academic milieu, all the textualization “was intended to be recycled in one way or another back into the oral world in disputations or other public oral performances” (Ong 1984, 3), an observation that proves particularly salient for India as well, at least for astrological practice. In fact, Goody himself soon acknowledged that the question of the mode of transmission (oral *versus* written) should be distinguished from the continuing interplay between the oral and the written in any literate society: “while writing may replace oral interaction in certain contexts, it does not diminish the basically oral-aural nature of linguistic acts.” (Goody 1987, xii).

Scholarship on India has forwarded two very contrasting interpretations. According to one view, the birth, transmission and practice of indigenous sciences were purely oral, and writing didn’t play any of the roles claimed by the literacy thesis.<sup>5</sup> According to another view, writing is assumed to have been decisive in the development of sciences (Pingree 1988) and even of Indian civilization as such (Pollock 2006), validating crucial aspects of the literacy thesis.

It is generally agreed that the Vedic tradition, which is *śruti*, “hearing”, did consider writing to be impure, defiling, a death-like practice unsuitable for exact textual transmission. Indeed, Staal demonstrated the extraordinary ability of some Brahman communities, by contrast, to orally preserve with accuracy parts of the Vedic corpus dating more than 3000 years ago (Staal 1961; 1986; also Galewicz 2005). This general tendency to hold writing in suspicion, distrust, and even contempt, has persisted for long in a world where writing, manuscripts, and later on books, came to be neither rare nor strange (Malamoud 2002).

Whatever may have been the early development of writing in India (Pingree 1988 argues for an early date as far as omen and astronomical literature is concerned), its use for profane purposes began before the beginning of the Common Era. As far as *śruti* was concerned, there was a

5. See for instance Staal 1961, 1986 and 2006; see also Parry 1985.

strong prejudice against writing (maintained till now), but the very condemnation of writing suggests its use even in that domain, for “it makes no sense to prohibit something no one does” (Śabara, quoted by Pollock 2006, 43). Around the beginning of the Common Era, Sanskrit “was reinvented as a code for literary and political expression” (Pollock 2006, 1) and became the sole medium by which ruling elites expressed their power. Writing was at the core of the process. But much as was the case in Europe till the Renaissance, the importance of oral/aural realization was maintained: “writing thoroughly conditioned the Sanskrit literary text in both its production and its preservation. [...] at the same time, literature was something orally performed” (Pollock 2006, 87; see also 1995, 119ff.).

The “clerical reticence” against writing is also to be compounded by the sheer multiplicity of written texts (Colas 1997, 128). Sanskrit literary history reveals an intensive activity of copying manuscripts, of critical editions and revisions, and of innumerable commentaries (Colas 1999). Written archives could have a binding legal role (*ibid.*). Speculation about the intrinsic power of letters developed. Manuscripts became part of the iconography of some gods, and could become the object of cults (Mackenzie Brown 1986). In the field of science, training still relied on memorizing verses taught by a guru, but the whole technical literature would not have been created or preserved solely through oral means: for Pingree (1988, 638), as far as mathematics and astronomy were concerned, “the oral tradition of the ritualists and grammarians were aberrant. [...] for the greater part of Indian science, *śruti* is not really very relevant”. This author evaluated the extent number of manuscripts in India (notwithstanding all those lost) to about thirty million, “the largest body of handwritten reading material anywhere in the world” (*ibid.*), out of which some hundred thousands, corresponding to 10,000 separate works, solely correspond to mathematics, astronomy and astrology (Pingree 1978; 1981).

These written texts were to be studied under the oral guidance of a guru. However, while the accuracy of Vedic oral transmission was not meant to provide understanding of the texts so memorized (Coburn 1984), transmission of *śāstras* (“sciences, treatises”) could not have been done the same way, as *understanding* of the text was needed. As Kemper remarked for Sri Lanka, astrology as a technology can hardly be used “without being fully understood and without constituting [...] a view of the world” (Kemper 1980, 745).

Transmission of manuscripts was done within particularised intellectual “schools”, or was restricted to some families equipped with their own

libraries (Pingree 1978; 1981). In this way, the link between oral transmission and knowledge was preserved, taking advantage at the same time of the potentialities that writing provided. It was also, of course, a powerful means of social control over literacy and knowledge, as these resources were kept deliberately scarce. While the literate milieu was much wider than was at any time the strictly Vedic one, and could concern different strata of society, teaching was mostly detained by Brahmins.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, thus, the development of written culture in India relied till recently on the very same milieu that stressed the oral ideal, suggesting that orality *as a value* was an important component of the social hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

The development of printing met with similar ideological prejudice, but social control was much more difficult to enforce. It rapidly gave new opportunities to expand the sphere of literacy at an unprecedented rate, enabling the circulation of printed identical copies in a far wider circle of readers (Mattausch 1996). As the following pages will illustrate, printed texts participate in the current marked changes in the access to knowledge. But, like manuscripts, they have also to be viewed in a complex set of practices involving oral performance as well.

The question of literacy has particular relevance for Kerala since the region, besides being officially totally literate, had in the past a comparatively high level of literacy among non Brahmin castes (Gough 1968). At least from the 16th century, many Nāyars (considered *sūdras* from a Brahmin point of view but sociologically a dominant caste) were formally taught writing and some were scribes in the courts. Even members of low-status castes could have access, in some circumstances, to ritual, medical and astrological knowledge: there are medical practitioners and astrological specialists that belong to castes formerly classified as “untouchable”. At the same time, high status Nāmpūtiri Brahmins families were the main providers and repositories of written *śāstras*, while their upper strata kept alive the art of Vedic recitation with an uncompromising stress on orality. Extremes meet and interact: there is devaluation of written texts for Vedic recitation, production and transmission of written texts for sciences

6. For instance Gujarati Banias of 17th century were “proficient in reading, writing and arithmetic”, but were taught by Brahmin pedagogues (Mattausch 1996, 66).

7. On the one hand, Brahmins at the time of Independence held between 36 to 63 per cent of all government jobs in India (depending on the regions), while constituting only 3,5 per cent of the population (King 1999, 171). On the other hand, Brahmins could fight for preserving their caste privileges “over the right to use and hear chants and ritual instructions from the Vedas” in 19th century Maharashtra (Wagle 1987, 145).

within the very same caste, and wide literacy among various castes enabling their partial access to *śāstras*.

#### TEMPLE ASTROLOGY IN KERALA

Astrology in India is commonly categorised under three headings, *jātakam* (horoscopy), *muhūrttam* (determination of appropriate time for an action), and *praśnam* (answering queries).<sup>8</sup> *Praśnam*'s basic principle consists in establishing a horoscope for the time at which the query is made (complemented by the interpretation of various omens), in order to elucidate the situation and to propose recommendations. The main text currently in use in Kerala (there are many others) is a Sanskrit work composed by a Naṃpūtiri in the 17th century, the *praśnamārggam* ("The way of the queries").<sup>9</sup> It mainly deals with the resolution of private problems, but dedicates its 24th chapter (out of 32) to matters concerning deities and rulers. Only 37 verses concern the gods, out of a total of some 2500 in the whole work: *dēvapraśnam* is thus a specialised, limited adaptation of the main practice of *praśnam*, and most of the rules are transposed from the much more elaborated part on private queries.

The practice seems to be proper to Kerala where it has gained additional importance in recent times as a way to rationalize ritual management in temples. Other means such as divine possession still exist but seem to have lost ground, at least in temples patronized by the higher castes in the southern half of the state. There, DPs are frequent, nearly compulsory for any temple of importance. Significantly, "guides" have recently been published in book form in Malayāḷam,<sup>10</sup> testifying of a general public interest and of the will to publicize the procedure. I shall briefly present a general outline of its sequences.<sup>11</sup>

8. See Pingree (1981) for a presentation and history of these three branches in India.

9. On the author, cf. Sarma 1972, 66ff. For a recent edition in Malayāḷam fonts with Malayāḷam commentary, cf. Govindan 1987 and 1990. For an edition in *devanagari* with English translation and commentary, cf. Raman (1991-2). As G. Colas has shown (personal communication), the text presents various interpolations with a standard 15th century Kerala work on temple rituals, the *Tantrasamuccayam* (cf. Tarabout 2002).

10. For instance Śankaragaṇakan (1981), Uḷutravāriyar (1986), Muttusvāmi (1995 and 1996).

11. Fieldwork was done in March and April 1999. I attended four DPs (two of them

The whole process is started when some misfortune affects temple life (e.g. the death of a devotee during a procession, illnesses of temple elephants, lack of frequentation, etc.), or when a temple committee wants to proceed to some transformation to the temple premises (changing the roof, building a gateway or shops) or to the ritual routine. The committee then calls upon an astrologer, and a delegation goes to meet him<sup>12</sup> in his reception room. The astrologer notes down the time when the question is put to him so as to ascertain the corresponding rising sign, *udhaya lagna*; he notes down other usual indications, such as the position of the planets, the lunar mansion (*nakṣatram*, “star”) and the lunar day (*tithi*). He takes also particular notice of the first sound (*śabdham*) pronounced by the head of delegation, and of the latter’s spatial position in relation to the astrological chart (*rāśīcakram*, “wheel of zodiacal signs”) drawn on the wooden board lying on his office table. In South India, contrary to the North, this chart is a quadrangle divided into the twelve zodiacal signs, *rāśi*, which occupy there fixed positions and are ordered in clockwise fashion, with the first *rāśi*, Aries (*mēṭam*), situated in the East. The nearest sign to the committee’s leader place becomes the “ascendant by place” (*stithyārūḍham*), from which will be counted the 12 Houses that are the basis for astrological interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever may have been the reasons motivating the committee, the astrologer infers from the very fact that its members have come to see him that there is severe trouble in the temple. The deity is suffering or is angry, and remedy has to be provided. His aim will be to proceed to a full audit of the whole situation of the temple, including the nature of the deities present there, the state of the buildings and of the divine images, the quality of the performance of rituals and of festivals, the possible presence of ghosts or of “cruel” deities, the existence of acts of witchcraft, the purity of the precincts, the possible mismanagement by temple authorities. It is

audio-recorded), five individual *praśnams*, and three classes in *praśnam*. I interviewed eleven astrologers, some of them at length and many times, and collected twenty-two final reports. I thank all the astrologers concerned for making themselves so kindly available, as well as the many friends who helped me during this enquiry, with a special mention to L.S. Rajagopalan, erudite and cheerful guide for so many undertakings. Two papers in French have analysed aspects of *DPS* (Tarabout 2002 and 2006).

12. To the best of my knowledge, astrologers practising *DPS* are all men.

13. As is well known, Houses are usually counted from the “rising sign” (*lagna*) in horoscopy. The determination of an “ascendant by place” would not be possible in the North Indian system where *rāśis* occupy changing positions in the chart.

only incidentally, in his final conclusions that the specific question asked by the committee will be answered. In addition, the recommendations always include a usually rather long list of rituals as “remedial measures” (*parihāram*) and expiations (*prāyaścittam*), which can be very elaborate and costly.

At the time of the committee’s visit, however, the astrologer limits himself to note down a maximum of details, enabling him to make a chart of the “question” (*prchcha*) which he keeps to himself for the time being. He then decides the date for the main consultation, called the ceremony of the “eight auspicious objects” (*aṣṭamaṅgalam kriya*).<sup>14</sup> This is public, held in the temple itself a few days or weeks after the visit; the committee publicizes its date and venue in Malayāḷi newspapers.

The ceremony is a ritualised set of actions intended to make manifest the condition, and the will of the temple’s deity. On the said day, the astrologer together with a few other colleagues, and often with some disciples, come to the temple, enter its precincts, and sit down in the forefront of the inner shrine which is left opened during the ceremony. The committee members, ritual specialists, temple devotees and the general public, if any, watch the proceedings. A complex sequence of ritualised actions follows. An oil lamp is lighted by the *pūjāri*, who prepares also the eight auspicious objects, typically white rice, turmeric, vermilion, betel leaves with an areca nut, a new piece of cloth, a mirror, a coin or a ring in gold, and a book (often a copy of the Bhagavadgīta). The lines of a chart are drawn on the ground by the *pūjāri* or a devotee using sacred ashes,<sup>15</sup> where various *pūjās* (to protecting deities, to the planets, to the *rāśis*) are offered by a chief priest (*tantri*). A small child is then invited to lay down a gold coin in this chart, in whatever *rāśi* she may like.<sup>16</sup> This *rāśi* will become the “gold ascendant”, *svaṛṇṇārūḍham* or simply *ārūḍham*,<sup>17</sup> and will be the starting point for

14. This form of *praśnam* is called *aṣṭamaṅgalapraśnam*; the name is interpreted either by reference to the eight objects, or by reference to a divination by cowries which is also used during *DPS*.

15. There are variations. In an English guide compiled from various sources by a non-Kerala scholar (Bhat 1992), the list of eight auspicious objects is given as “lamps, mirror, gold, milk, curds, fruits, book and white cloth” (p. 77). For drawing the chart, “ashes are forbidden” (p. 81). This latter point is considered in the *praśnamārggam* (IV-13), but explicitly left undecided (testifying of a practice that may not have been uniform at the time of its composition).

16. It should be an “innocent” person. Young girls often seem to be specifically qualified, but I could also meet this requirement for a class.

17. The terminology is sometimes confusing, as *lagna*, *ārūḍham* and *rāśi* can equally

counting the 12 Houses that frame the whole interpretation. The astrologers note down the time when the child lays the gold coin, the usual astrological data (*lagna*, *tithi*, *nakṣatram*, planetary positions). They consider very carefully various elements that take an ominous character: the way the chart of ashes has been drawn, the name of the child, her birth *nakṣatram*, how she is dressed, how she behaves, as well as the direction in which the flame of the oil lamp is bending, the quality of the oil and of the wicks, the number of betel leaves that have been offered. They also compute a few parameters by using cowries (*kavaṭi*), particularly the “*praśnam* number”. The ceremony is over.

The interpretation proper follows. It takes the form of a prolonged discussion between the astrologers, and between astrologers and committee members. This discussion is public, and may take between one to seven (or more) days. It bears both on the chart and omens of the “question”, at the time of the initial visit, and on the chart and omens of the ceremony at the temple. The whole process is concluded by a written report that includes the charts, the main conclusions (but not the details of the discussion), and a list of recommendations. It is established by the chief astrologer, signed by him and by the other astrologers who certify that the decisions taken were unanimous, and given to the committee in order to be implemented (which may not always be the case).

The whole procedure is thus a complex social one, where stakes can be very high — the redefinition of the whole temple, or more commonly accusations of incompetence or malpractice against temple servants or trustees. Despite the position of expertise attributed to the astrologers, there can be contestations, so that astrologers always need to strongly substantiate their advice. They do this through various means, which we shall now examine.

#### DĒVAPRAŚNAM AS PERFORMANCE

The following pages will not elaborate on the techniques of *dēvapraśnam*,<sup>18</sup> or on the nature of the texts used by the astrologers. Rather, their purpose is to analyse the specific interactions that concur to build up authoritative statements. I will first describe the various tools and skills that are required

be employed as shortcuts for pointing to the various “ascendants” (up to six in central Kerala DPS). For clarity’s sake, I use here *lagna* only for the rising sign, *rāśi* for referring to a portion of the zodiac, and *ārūḍham* for the various “ascendants” other than the *lagna*.

18. For more information, see Tarabout 2002 and 2006.

by any astrologer, before concentrating more at length on the procedures aimed at establishing truth during a DP, which imply producing authority. I want to stress that I do not think that these procedures are necessarily *intended* to build authority (though some may be). But certainly, this is one of their *effects*.

### *Tools and skills*

Astrologers in Kerala require a few tools and skills. Emblematic of their trade are a wooden board (*palaka*) on which the lines of the quadrangular *cakram* is engraved (or drawn with chalk), as well as a bag of 108 cowries (*kavaṭi*) used for various divination procedures or, now rarely, for mathematical computation. Board and cowries are the object of a regular cult: the board is the support of *pūjās* to gods, goddesses, and astrological entities (*rāśis*, planets), while cowries are sanctified in their own right.

Additional cowries are often used for representing “planets” in the chart (one cowry for Sun, two for Moon, three for Mars, etc.), as well as special (bigger) shells or stones for representing *lagna*, *ārūḍham*, the ascendants, for Rāhu and Kētu, and for a tenth “planet”, Māndi, identified with the dangerous deity Guḷikan, “son” of Saturn.<sup>19</sup> Alternately, these astrological indications may be placed by writing the corresponding initials with a chalk in the chart, and it is of course also in this written form that the information is recorded in the final report on paper. In order to give an illustration, here is the chart of a famous (and contested) *dēvapraśnam* conducted on April 16th, 1995, by seven astrologers at the demand of the Travancore Devaswom Board, the State authority over more than 1000 temples in South Kerala. The aim of the Board was to decide about the master plan it proposed for the development of the Śabarimala temple, the focus of an annual pilgrimage that draws millions of people. The information is taken from the report, which in this case was published.<sup>20</sup>

19. “Planets” are not always so (like the sun and the moon). For simplicity’s sake, they are indicated here by their ordinary English equivalent, as are the zodiacal signs. There are close historical connections between Indian astrology and traditions in the West (Greco-Latin and Arabian), on which a wealth of scholarship has been published.

20. *Śrīśabarimala kṣētrattile aṣṭamaṅgala praśnaccārttu*, not dated (ca. 1995).

			↑ EAST				
			<i>lagna</i>				
			<i>saturn</i>				
			<i>mercury</i>				
	<i>mandi</i>		<i>sun</i>			<i>venus</i>	
			SUN MERCURY KETU			LAGNA BODY SIGN	
	(pisces) (III)	(aries) (IV)		(taurus) (V)	(gemini) (VI)		
<i>gold navamsa</i>	SATURN VENUS				MARS		<i>ketu</i>
	(aquarius) (II)				(cancer) (VII)		
<i>moon</i>	GOLD ARUDHAM						
<i>rahu</i>							
<i>mars</i>							
<i>jupiter</i>	(capricorn) (I)				(leo) (VIII)		
		JUPITER		RAHU MOON BETEL SIGN		MANDI CHATRA SIGN	
	(sagittarius) (XII)	(scorpio) (XI)		(libra) (X)	(virgo) (IX)		

- The orientation of the *cakram* is always the same, and the zodiacal signs (shown here within brackets) always at the same place: they are therefore never indicated.
- The (gold) *ārūḍham*, and not the rising sign (*lagna*), determines the first House (“I” in brackets): Houses are also never indicated.
- All the other indications appear explicitly, either marked by shells or stones, or with the initials written (this is the case here).
- Within the different *rāśis* are indicated the position of the “planets” (seven, plus Rāhu, Kētu and Māndi), of the rising sign (*lagna*), of the gold *ārūḍham*, and often, but not always, of a few other “ascendants”: some are observed “marks” put in equivalence with astronomical positions, such as the “body sign” (*spṛṣṭāṅga rāśi*, lit. “sign of the part [of the body] touched [by the child after laying down the gold coin]), or the “betel sign” (the number of leaves is correlated to a planet and to a *rāśi*). Other ones, like here the *chatra rāśi*, are obtained by combining multiple astrological parameters.
- Outside the different *rāśis* is indicated (here in italics) the position of nearly all the same elements according to the *navāṃśam* division.<sup>21</sup>

21. *Navāṃśams* correspond to the subdivision by nine of each *rāśi* (i.e. 3 1/3 degree of

Despite the richness of its information, such a chart is a mere tool for visualizing positions (which can as well be indicated by shells or stones), and does not *require* to be written except, for practical reasons, in the paper report. It is however necessarily complemented by more precise astronomical and astrological data such as exact longitudes and complex mathematical combinations of positions (*yōgas, sūtras, sphuṭas*), which are calculated from the data provided in printed almanacs before being recorded on paper. I once witnessed a Nampūtiri practitioner using cowries instead of a calculator for these computations, with amazing dexterity; to the best of my knowledge this ability seems rare nowadays. Pocket calculators are part of the basic equipment of today's astrologers. In any case, these indications are always later put into writing.

Two other tools help considerably astrological practice, and are systematically consulted: a clock, and a calendar or, better, an almanac (*pañcāṅgam*), providing for each day all the basic astronomical data. A quite comprehensive one (more than 130 pages) is for instance published yearly by the Travancore Devaswom Board and is widely circulated, but there are many others available on the market. These published tables are of course crucial to the astrologer and constitute the only real link between astronomy and astrology, as today's astrologers are not astronomers. It had been for long the main task of former astronomers to compute them (Pingree 1978, 364), and as Kemper (1980) remarked for Sinhala astrology, they are at the textual center of astrological knowledge, together with the set of rules for their interpretation.

All these tools would be perfectly useless without the skills to make sense of them. These skills are acquired through the tuitions of a guru, by assisting him and by attending DPs, and consist of a lot of verses carefully memorized, and of the intuition necessary for thinking of them timely. As a matter of fact, the number of possible combinations of astrological parameters is such that choices are largely open and give the practitioner much latitude in interpretation: training is then indispensable for mastering the art of matching interpretative possibilities with a given situation. As for the texts themselves, they are to be learnt by heart, and comprise not only the *praśnam* treatises but also reference texts such as Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*,<sup>22</sup> as well as (in principle) grammatical treatises on Sanskrit language, the importance of which will appear later. Most of these texts

the zodiacal belt), and are themselves named after the 12 *rāśis*.

22. A 6th century, widely circulated treatise.

are now published, but their study is necessarily through an oral instruction, either by a guru or, nowadays, by attending astrological classes.

The importance of oral transmission, textual memorization, and non-verbal training (compare Yano 2006), is thus obviously central to the practice. At the same time, one cannot be but impressed by the omnipresence of written (and, for some, printed) documents and indications, by the eagerness with which attending disciples fill in the pre-printed pages of their book-note with data coming out of the proceedings, or by the need to provide the temple's committee with a detailed written report.<sup>23</sup> Writing does not suffer here the kind of ideological devaluation that is so often extrapolated from the *vaidika* tradition to the whole of "Hindu culture". That a positive value is even given to writing appears also from the following brief anecdote. Commenting on this very DP that concluded about the mistaken identity of the main deity, one of the participant astrologers assured me that the original *tantri*, the chief priest who had consecrated the deity in former times, could not have made a mistake. The fault was necessarily with subsequent *pūjāris* who did not perform the proper rituals. However, he said, the *tantri* was somehow at fault because he had not recorded in writing the rules of the *pūjā* in order to avoid such erring. Therefore it had been decided during the DP that the new *tantri* to be appointed would record these specifications and hand them over to the *pūjāri*. And the mantra of the real deity would be displayed in writing on the shrine's wall so that devotees could do the correct recitation (C. Visvanathan, 22 March 1999). The insistence on the recording capacity and on the authority of the written word cannot be clearer. It confirms the central importance given to various tools that have been enumerated (note-books, books, almanacs, reports, etc.), and is more generally crucial to current astrological practice throughout India (compare Pugh 1981, 24ff.; Guenzi 2004).

At the same time, interpretative skills derive from oral/aural practice, and determine the capacity to establish truth. The discussion that follows the ceremony of the eight auspicious objects provides striking examples of rhetoric virtuosity combined with an insistent display of visible and recorded proofs.

23. The final report parallels the "prescription" that astrologers very often give to their clients at the end of the consultation — much as would be the case with a medical practitioner.

*The discussion: piling up proofs*

The discussion (*carcca*) can be held in the temple or in its vicinity. The astrologers sit together on one side, the public (committee members and devotees) sitting in front of them or on three sides. The attendance may vary, from a few committee delegates to a large participation.

Astrologers differ in opinions about the necessity of this discussion. One astrologer, D. Iyer, who conducted the DP concluding about the deity's mistaken identity, held that the elements gathered at the time of the delegation's visit were enough for diagnosing the problems and the remedial measures. For him, the subsequent public ceremony and discussion were largely "a show", which committees had to organise as they had "a commitment to the public" (D. Iyer, 1 April 1999). The general opinion, however, considers that the discussion is absolutely necessary for truth to emerge. In principle at least, the discussion is conceived as a *disputatio* between astrologers exchanging contradictory arguments. What astrologers in the Thrissur area of Kerala evoked as being characteristic of the "old way", for instance, is a discussion that could go on for days. Astrologers would be putting questions to others who would in their turn respond, everybody making reference to Sanskrit *ślokas* found in *śāstras*, with the chief astrologer — called *ācārya*, "spiritual master" — arbitrating the scholarly dispute. As one astrologer explained, a single astrologer, if not endowed with some kind of divine quality, can make mistakes. The discussion is intended to limit the risks. This is why the meeting is like a "court of law, bringing different meanings [of the *ślokas*] to the place, discussing, and then coming to conclusions." However, discussions now may not be as lengthy as they were before: "this is not to say that the old way is not correct. But [nowadays] nobody has got time" (V. Raghavan Nair, 10 April 1999).

The four discussions I could witness did not exactly follow the model of a contradictory debate among astrologers. In three of them, the chief astrologer engaged in a monolog, domineering completely the situation and interrupting himself occasionally only for checking technical points with the other astrologers. The fourth one ended after a few hours by deciding to conduct later a new DP again. This was indeed the result of a debate, but contestation did not come from within the invited astrologers. It came from some devotees, who happened to be the astrologers who had conducted a previous DP in the same temple and were not consulted for the present one: they strongly objected to the proceedings on technical grounds, relying on appropriate *ślokas*. The dispute was then between

this group and the temple committee, and what the *ācārya* of the DP did arbitrate with commendable serenity had little to do with a *disputatio* of the “old way”.

Interactions between astrologers, and between astrologers and the public, are therefore not expected to be always easy. Astrologers have not only to find the truth, but also to make their point. For both purposes, they look for proofs. Proofs in a DP pertain to two orders of phenomena. One is normative knowledge, as embodied in the *ślokas* given by masters of yore. The other is made by all the ominous signs recorded at the time of the *praśnam*.

At each step of the interpretation *ślokas* are first chanted and then commented in order to substantiate a view. They are explicitly said to be *pramāṇas*, “norms, authorities, truths”, a popular use of the word which accords well with what Parry (1985, 204) says about Banarasi Brahmins’ relations to *śāstras*: “the *shastrik* elements are *pramanik* (‘proven’), eternally valid and binding on all Hindus”.<sup>24</sup> Following a widespread tendency in Indian traditions of knowledge, where *śāstras* have a fundamentally normative dimension (Pollock 1985), astrologers prefer to discuss their meaning rather than their validity. In the “old way”, particularly, the scholarly dispute is supposed to be through and about *ślokas* in order to reach a “correct way of thinking” (U. Kurup, 8 April 1999). Therefore, it does not only concern astrological rules, but also the grammatical rules necessary for understanding astrological rules. This grammatical knowledge is crucial as some astrological *ślokas* have different meanings — up to 16, according to some — which depend on context and opinion: “this is a wonder of Sanskrit language”, as V. Raghavan Nair put it once, and therefore “in *dēvapraśnam* all this is coming under discussion to determine what is applicable to the situation” (10 April 1999). Attending a *praśnam* of the “old way” was thus a wonderful occasion for learning, as experts had to use “all the *ślokas* studied from childhood”, astrologer U. Kurup said; but now “modernists use less than 50 *ślokas*” (8 April 1999).

I was unfortunately unable to witness such famed grammatical contests, as controversy among astrologers was nearly inexistent in the few cases I observed. But they might still be performed for DPs in the bigger temples. Nevertheless, even in the cases I could attend, *ślokas* were

24. There is, however, no philosophical consensus on this understanding of *pramāṇas* (see for instance Perrett 1999, 317ff.).

indeed constantly recited by the chief astrologer for calling attention to specific astrological combinations and providing their correct interpretation. During a three days DP witnessed in Thrissur, the astrologer recited more than 200 Sanskrit *ślokas*, some of them on very general considerations about temples and gods, others quite technical on astral configurations; he sometimes (but not always) explained in Malayālam the verses, applied it to the given situation or elaborated an *ex tempore* improvisation on the theme, before proceeding to the next *śloka*. More generally, Sanskrit verses are a constant articulation in the step-by-step development of the discourse, as well as a proof of the scientific character of the deductions — all the more since generally nobody in the audience, except fellow astrologers, can understand the *ślokas* nor is even familiar with this linguistic register.

The scientific basis of astrology is also perceived to lie in the astronomical and mathematical basis of its speculations. References to astronomy and mathematics are in obvious display in almanacs, in the pocket calculators that nowadays enable one to calculate exact longitudes, and in the technical vocabulary that is associated with these computations. I do not mean to say that these computations and this vocabulary are not needed within the logic of astrology, but merely that one “side-effect” is to give an immediate and visible impression of exact science validated by modern technologies — a fact underlined by all interlocutors. Indeed, there is even a kind of hypertrophy of mathematical speculations, as many astrological parameters are “derived” combinations of “first-level” data: the *chatra* ascendant, for instance, is determined by counting as many *rāśi* from the *vīthi rāśi* (itself a “derived” *rāśi* related to the position of Sun) as there are *rāśis* separating the *lagna* from the *ārūḍham*. The “reality” of such data is therefore largely computational (the same may be said of the *navāṃśa* positioning of planets, of complex parameters like *sūtras*, *yōgas*, etc.). In line with this strong commitment to computation, there is also a process which may be called the “astronomization” of omens. The spatial position of the chief of the delegation at the time of the “question”, or the laying of the gold coin, are examples of an action by human actors that gets converted into an astronomical data — a *rāśi*, determining the first House. There are many examples: the part of the body touched by the child after laying the gold coin is put into equivalence with a *rāśi*; the number of betel leaves is put into equivalence with a planet, with a *rāśi* and with a House; the “*praśnam* number” drawn by using cowries consists in fact in three numbers, each put into equivalence with a planet. As soon as the omens enter thus the astrological chart, they are in turn

submitted to various computations: in a way, from the domain of omens, they are made to enter the domain of scientific validity of astronomy and mathematics.

Not all omens get “astronomized” and many retain their “commonsensical” quality, that is, they partake of widely shared assumptions about the meaning of some events: the crowing of crows, the presence of *sumaṅgalis* (married women blessed by a son and a living husband), meeting a widow, the irruption of a cat,<sup>25</sup> the directions of the oil lamp’s flames, the quality of the betel leaves, the quality of breath of the astrologer, any impurities that may be found, etc. The list is nearly endless. Considerable developments are accorded to omens in astrological treatises so that, while in Western practice divination and astrology tend to be considered as separate categories, in India they are mutually integrated. Omens are direct, unmediated indications. In the case of DPs they are sent by the temple’s deity in order to make known its grievances. They mark the deity’s will and “prevent [the astrologer] from foolishness” (V. Raghavan Nair, 10 April 1999): they are thus perceived as being very much part of the rationality of the procedure. And they fit well with the overall obsession for the cross-checking of data that characterizes DPs. Omens are always used in association with other parameters, contributing to their interpretation. Since the procedure is thought to be fraught with the risk of making mistakes as the result of the action of adversary forces (ghosts, evil deities), which are part of the problem to be solved, as many and as diverse “proofs” as possible are accumulated and cross-checked so as to reach a truth that will then become inescapable.<sup>26</sup>

Cross-checking is done in different, complementary ways. One is to ask the audience. A typical anecdote will illustrate this aspect. It was told to me by Mr. M. Kutty, secretary of the *dēvasvam* of the important Tiruvambadi temple in Thrissur. A few years ago, during a DP conducted in that temple, astrologers tried to put a name on a *prētam* (unsatisfied spirit of a dead person) haunting the premises and found from their data that it was the ghost of a man addicted to drinking. Somebody in the assistance suggested the name of a former President of the *dēvasvam* who had some liking for it, “a habit only, not a vice”. M. Kutty immediately protested that this could not be correct, he had been a good man, “magnificent, munificent even”. He

25. This happened in a DP which I witnessed. The crossing of the temple premises by a “red” cat was immediately consigned as a “fiery” *dōṣam* (“defect, trouble”).

26. For similar observations about Banarasi astrologers, see Guenzi 2004, 127ff.

asked the astrologers to be more precise, and they found that the man had died in connection with fire. Then M. Kutty suggested the name of another person who could better qualify, to the satisfaction of all present (M. Kutty, 12 April 1999).

This kind of interaction which provides the possibility to combine (and thus verify) astrological predictions with narratives of the concerned people is in line with a systematic procedure adopted by astrologers, which is both a methodological and an ethical posture. It consists in “predicting the known”. The astrologer should not be familiar beforehand with the temple (except when he is “attached” to it), and should not go there before the *praśnam*, nor should he examine it directly at that time. All what he has to say about the temple has to emerge out of astrological data and *nimit-tams*. For instance, he may predict that the temple is one of a goddess, that it includes such and such shrines and deities — all things that the devotees know and that anybody visiting the temple would find out, but that the astrologer has to discover solely from planets and omens. This proves to be an extremely effective way of publicly demonstrating the accuracy of the method used in DPS, and the astrologer’s expertise. Indeed, astrologers themselves underline that this is a wonderful property of the procedure. And, as we have seen one example above, it applies as well to predictions about the past, when “planetary indications enable to discover past events, and some elderly person who knows all about this is able to confirm: this possibility to check is marvellous” (Nambiyar Sir, 2 April 1999).

Thus, verbal exchange between astrologers and consultants often takes the form of a series of predictions made by the former, to which the latter answers with cursory approval or disapproval, or by putting names and histories on the schemata proposed. One astrologer (Shanmugham Master) compared the process to a mechanic hearing a noise in the engine and eliminating one after one the possible causes: the possibility to make (and get invalidated) wrong predictions is legitimate in the *praśnam* logic. Astrology is an always winning game: wrong predictions are just tests helping one to reach the truth, and they do not really diminish an astrologer’s prestige, provided he knows how to put the questions, while good predictions are successes, truths, and contribute to his good repute.

*Ślokas*, astronomical references, mathematics, omens, and cross-checks, may however not suffice to reach fool-proof conclusions. Therefore the latter are still again and again tested during the course of a DP through a divination procedure called *olivu nōkki*, “remedy looking”. Having in mind a specific question to be answered (“is this conclusion correct?”, “is the deity satisfied?”), the astrologer draws cowries, their number pointing to a *rāśi*

to which is compared the position of Guru (Jupiter), giving a positive or a negative answer to the question. This is done systematically and taken as final proof for each submitted conclusion.

*An art of persuasion*

In order to have a glimpse of the way proofs are unfolded in the course of the discussion, let us take as example the DP conducted by D. Iyer on March 21st, 1999, in a small temple of Thiruvananthapuram, where he found that the main deity was not the one everybody thought it was. The temple was known as a temple of the goddess Kāmākṣi. The astrologer discovered from his data that the effective divine presence (*sānnidhyam*) was that of the goddess Rājarājeśvari. As can well be imagined, convincing the committee and the devotees needed a skilful management of the situation. The case in itself, though not frequent, is not extraordinary: an explicit and foremost aim of DPs is to ascertain the *sānnidhyam*.<sup>27</sup> In the present situation, at least, the audience remained little receptive for quite a while, and D. Iyer and his colleagues had to display some eloquence and a lot of proofs. With their fingers, they repeatedly pointed to show everybody the written chart and the inscribed position of planets; they recited *ślokas* after *ślokas*; they opened a book and read aloud the characteristics of the new identity discovered, just to make them plain.

The sequence of arguments could appear to be following somewhat a zigzag line, as the subject of the goddess was taken up, then left for commenting upon ghosts and various calamities, then taken up again, then left for the ghosts and calamities, then taken up again, etc. (I witnessed a similar “tactic” used by D. Iyer during a consultation for a private client, when he constantly shifted from one topic — business — to the other — marriage). Here are a few very short excerpts, respecting the sequential order:

(about the goddess) “The presence of god: the situation is one of adversity. Balance [in that case the *ārūḍham rāṣi* of the gold coin] is a sacred sign, but it is also a defective sign.”

27. It usually confirms the existing situation, or may add nuance. During the renovation ceremony of a 350-years old Gaṇapati temple, a DP “revealed the presence of female divinity in the idol”, concluding that it was “Vallabha Gaṇapati”. As the report goes, what had been seen in the stars was later confirmed by direct examination: “a faint but distinctly visible carving of a feminine picture was noticed on the back of the idol” (*The Hindu*, online edition, 24 June 2005).

(about ghosts and deity) “Mars became *ārūḍham* there. There is not only the sight of Saturn; Sun, the Lord of the House of Guḷikan stands in the 6th House like the Lord of the 11th House and is making contact with the 6th House. In the 11th House, the Lord of the 6th is causing slothfulness. The chief defect here is the relations with phantoms or ghosts, which in turn are connected with the installation of the deity.”

(about ghosts) “Mars comes in the sign of Venus [...] there is an installation of deity here which is inappropriate to the temple, it is Brahmarakṣassu [ghost of a Brahman, very often installed as guardian deity in high caste temples of Kerala].”

(about calamities) “The Lord of the 5th House is not the only planet standing in the 7th. Moon, Saturn and Venus are also standing in the 7th. If Moon and Venus get the *yōga* of Saturn and also get the sight of Mars, the downfall or the extinction of woman is the result. Quarrels of this kind will arise among the worshippers also.”

(about ghosts) “As regards Kētu standing in the sign of Saturn, it has the indication of ghosts.”

(about the goddess, after wondering if it could be Kāḷi) “It found pleasure in ornaments and other matters. Even though she is wearing blood cloths, she is not Bhadrakāḷi.”

(about ghosts) “When circumstances and evil character changed [an allusion to a reconstruction of the past according to which “primitive gods” were worshipped, then abandoned] Bramarakṣassu came along. So it caused injury to other gods also. This is to get rid of.”

(about the goddess) “If we think about the presence of god, the question is how to install the Dēvi [...] As Moon is related to Venus, it is in the shape of Rājarājeśvari. It has an amorous demeanour. Circumstances have shown us a goddess of pious characteristics.”

After much more elaboration, astrologers presented themselves as helpless: facts were facts, they couldn't be altered, nobody could do anything about this. It *was* Rājarājeśvari. This specific identification was confirmed by the divination with cowries. The change in deities was also confirmed by an omen: D. Iyer himself, due to birth pollution in his family, had been unable to conduct the ceremony in the temple and had to be represented by another astrologer; “the change of astrologers indicates the deity is not the proper one”. Eventually, the overall consultation and the remedial measures were fully confirmed by a series of divinations by cowries.

The progressive disclosure of truth by circling and focusing more and more on the final conclusion, adding proofs one upon the other, is com-

plemented by a few rhetorical devices such as, for instance, depicting a catastrophic image of the situation (which may well reflect the opinion of astrologers). Here is again D. Iyer, speaking during the same DP:

“Now I shall tell about the activity of the child. Name is Gauri [the “pale one”], *nakṣatram* is Bharāṇi, colour of dress is red and black mingled. The child did correctly what it was asked to do. When the child placed the *rāśi* her face turned pale. The touch of the finger [on her body] was on Gemini. With folded hands she stood facing north. She placed the *rāśi* moving her left foot backwards. The gold coin was not in the middle, it was looking downwards. It is seen that the decay began from some time past, that it has reached its zenith now, that it is moving towards ruin. Even though gold was placed in a good *rāśi*, it faced downwards. The present stage is Mars. The planet standing in the *ārūḍham* is Mars. The sight of Saturn is there. Then why was the gold lost? This indicates not only decline but also total destruction.”

Temples in DPs appear full of pollution, full of ghostly presences or unwanted cruel deities. The power (*śakti*) of the place is about to be lost. Rituals are not properly observed. There is mismanagement. Committee members are fighting each others. Gods are suffering and, as a consequence, people all around suffer. However, the astrologer makes the point, calamities in the temple will happily disappear with the remedial measures which he proposes.

Such a suffering, furthermore, results from human mistakes and directly implicates temple people. Astrologers appear, at least implicitly, in the role of investigators and prosecutors, a position that contributes to reinforce the dissymmetry of their relationship with the committee members and the public. A great number of *nimittams* — all the main ones — are the outcome of actions by committee members or devotees: the first sound of the query, the position of delegation, how the *cakram* with ashes was drawn, what the child has done, how was the lamp lighted, in what condition were the eight auspicious objects, what was the number and condition of the betel leaves, etc. This means that committee members and devotees are directly, bodily involved in all the shortcomings that may be noticed by the astrologers. *Pūjāris*, in particular, are very often the target of the astrologers’ criticism and are regularly accused to be negligent and ignorant, in line with devaluating stereotypes circulating widely. But they are not the only ones to get the astrologers’ disparaging comments, and the judgement of the astrologers on other people, as well as the way to act it out, may be quite severe.

In the DP conducted by D. Iyer, a part of the discussion investigated the sentences uttered by the committee members. At the time of the “question”, the head of the delegation started by saying *ñān*, “I”: the first sound is *ñ(a)*, which is eunuch and refers to Mars, pointing to severe problems. Then the phrasing of the query was *namukku iviṭe dēviye eññane iruttaṇam, etra dēviye iruttaṇam* (“How may we install here the/a Goddess, and how many Goddesses?”). This created a big laugh among astrologers, as the sentence could be taken as meaning that there was previously no Goddess — an additional proof of her change of identity. The phrasing was considered significant, and the way it was acted out was very effective: the astrologers laughed openly at such stupidity, while the attending committee members were reduced to silence. Later, in the same discussion, D. Iyer put to scrutiny the condition of the betel leaves, each one corresponding with a House. He took each leaf, one after one, holding them by the tip of his fingers and letting them lamentably hang down, with a somewhat disgusted expression on his face: the mimicry was so expressive that it was clear, before he said anything, that the general state of affairs was decidedly not good (1st leaf, “there is disease”; 2nd, “the situation is one devoid of affluence”; 3rd, “a situation devoid of prosperity and abundance”; etc.). As leaves had been carefully selected by committee members before being given to the astrologer, the disheartening comments bore also indirectly on their own personal ability to maintain the purity and the prosperity of the place. The audience kept very silent.

The efficacy of the elaboration of a truth that may be accepted despite being unpalatable is then the outcome of a complex interaction between astrologers and their public. Authoritative statements are built through an intricate interplay of written and oral techniques that combine for building up simultaneously proofs and asymmetrical relationships. Sanskrit grammar and mathematics, astronomy and omens, normative rules and observation, prediction and cross-checking, all are invoked for elaborating the interpretation. Such efficacy takes flesh in the “dramaturgy” of the performance, in the interactions with the audience and in the rhetorical devices that are employed throughout the demonstration, and which contribute in their own right in transforming a conclusion into a socially accepted truth.

Astrologers, however, do not speak all with one voice. They disagree on a number of points, which are of relevance for understanding how they themselves see their practice.

## OUTSIDE THE PERFORMANCE

Astrologers caution about the need to be aware of “counterfeited coins”. As a disciple of astrologer Shanmugham Master told me, one should stick to only one guru in which one has full confidence. Confidence may be inspired by various qualities. One, of course, is the sheer virtuosity with which real masters effortlessly manage with the tools and skills that their students so painstakingly try to acquire. Another is the ethical repute: some astrologers, like D. Iyer, are known to never accept a payment, but only small gifts, with reluctance. Such a disinterest for money is indicative of high spiritual qualities, which contribute to make them “good” astrologers in the sense of experts, as opposed to shams. To be esteemed by disciples or clients, however, is not the same as to be esteemed by competing colleagues. One way to understand the kind of criticism that astrologers address to others is to return to the opposition made between the “old way” and the “modernists”.

Astrologer U. Kurup from Thrissur, for instance, disapproves of the “modern way” though he himself practises it. It is vulgar. It gives too much importance to *nimittams* and to betel examination, by contrast with former grammatical disputes. Compared with the only interesting question that is at the core of DPs, the determination of the nature of the deity, “common people take interest in trivial things: how to conduct the festival, can we take seven elephants [in the procession], how to collect money, how to attract people, how to make a good entrance arch, can we have fire-works [at festival’s time], are there problems of uncleanliness”. Moreover, modern DPs are easy to perform as it is always possible to say for all the temples that there is pollution, that the *pūjāri* doesn’t do his work properly, that he uses improper mantras, that the deity’s image has defects or is damaged, that committee members are quarrelling, etc. As a consequence, astrologers nowadays prescribe a lot of remedial measures, but nothing changes: efficacy is not there. Only the “old way” brought actual fruits with a discussion of minimum three days. “Modernists misguide people”. However, people are quite satisfied! (U. Kurup, 8 April 1999).

This discourse exposes a series of criticisms about the procedure as they may find expression in the frame of the logic of astrology. They are couched in terms of decay from a past when such defects did not exist. This perception of change may be at least partly overemphasized (is there really the equivalent of a “*nimittam* turn”? Omens are prominently in evidence in all astrological treatises), but is stated by U. Kurup to occur also at the textual level. Many *ślokas* used, for instance in the case of the examination of betel leaves, are not found in treatises. Indeed, there is a regular activity of

compilation and elaboration of *ślokas*: in Thiruvananthapuram, astrologer K.Nair claimed to have just completed a full treatise about betel scrutiny. In any case, the “modern way” appears to be successful with the public, not only because everybody “is busy”. About his colleague V. Raghavan Nair whom he considered as someone practicing “the modern view”, U. Kurup stressed that he uses few *prāmaṇas* [i.e. *ślokas*] but gives the conclusions so as to be understood by the common people, “exposing secrets of the family in a direct and simple way” (id.).

A similar ideal is expressed by astrologers in the Southern part of Kerala, but in terms of a regional difference. N. Sharma, for instance, a *tantri*-cum-astrologer who participated in the DP conducted by D. Iyer, explained that it was true that “in the North” they chanted a lot of *ślokas*. Here (in Thiruvananthapuram), “we know of course the *ślokas*”, but astrologers prefer that ordinary people may follow the discussion and the conclusion, so that “there is less chanting of poems” [*ślokas*] and less duration (N. Sharma, 24 March 1999). Beyond the duration of the DP and the chanting of *ślokas*, the question is thus the need nowadays, for astrologers, to be understood by the public. It might correspond to a sociological change in patronage: temple patrons in the past were often Nampūtiris or royal lineages, while in present times they are “commoners” associated in trusts. Astrologers, however, do not engage themselves all in the same way in such a “democratisation” process.

One of its staunchest advocates is D. Iyer. He is an elderly, sophisticated Tamil Brahman from Thiruvananthapuram, and has been a university professor in Chemistry and Physics before retiring and taking to a full time practice of astrology. He may be described as both a newcomer and a “reformist”.<sup>28</sup> Speaking about knowledge, in general, and astrological knowledge in particular, he explained that it should not be the property of some individuals, but that it should widely circulate (22 April 1999). He exclaimed once: “Everything belongs to the community!” (29 April 1999). He was in fact quite virulent about the claim of some Brahman families to remain as the sole depositors of knowledge. His criticism aimed in particular at Nampūtiris, whose claims to be the only ones to detain expertise in ritual matters was not to be believed: this was only “to exploit poor people”. The socialist slogan should be applied: “Stop all exploitation!” This was the true *dharma*. The exclusivity claims by families of *tantris* should be abolished

28. “Reformist” is my word and should not imply a deliberate rupture with “tradition”, as he most probably sees himself as somebody trying to return to original truths that subsequent superstitions have veiled — a standard attitude in India in relation to sciences and the past, coherent with long-standing epistemological presuppositions.

(id.). Such a strong stand is exceptional, and may be related to the fact that D. Iyer had a guru from Ārya Samāj. It may also be understood as a claim to legitimacy of his own position as astrologer, as he does not belong to a family of astrologers and came late to the study of astrology. Moreover, as a Tamil Brahman, he is not part of the ritual establishment of Kerala where most of the *tantri* rights on temples (at least for all the important ones) are preserved by specific Nāmpūtiri families.

In a mirror-like fashion, this is also how we can understand veiled allusions made by astrologer S. Sharma, also a Tamil Brahman of Thiruvananthapuram but belonging to a family where astrology has been practised for generations. He first criticized D. IYER for having conducted the DP mentioned despite the fact that he was under restrictions of pollution (a critique made as well by other astrologers in Thiruvananthapuram, who seemed to have been well informed of the matter). He then explained “it is not in one day, or in one week, or in one year, that it is possible to master astrological science”. When he was himself eighteen, he used to go in libraries to read palm-leaves manuscripts. He was educated in astrology by his father and grand-father, who were great exponents (21 March 1999). According to him, an astrologer has “to study a lot of books, it is not possible to master in one birth. [...] We have to study the text, and we have to get experience, and we have to observe everything in our surroundings. In my case we have that from ancestry, we have got a particular mantra” (4 April 1999).

I did not have the opportunity to interview Nāmpūtiri practitioners. Together with some families of Tamil Brahmans (like S. Sharma), they are the ones who have a long ancestry in astrology in Kerala.<sup>29</sup> Hence I have to rely on partial information. Claims to ancestry in astrology are still certainly important, and can be found in ordinary discussions (“this astrologer belongs to a traditional family of astrologers”), in newspapers’ reports or in the presentation of books’ authors (Śankaragaṇakan, 1981). Many reputed astrologers belong to such families, and I met a few. But this strikingly contrasts with the amazing number of newcomers today. Among the eleven astrologers I talked to, there was D. Iyer, a retired university professor, an employee of the Spatial Centre in Thiruvananthapuram, a retired executive officer of the Kerala State Electricity Board, a retired executive officer of a lignite company, a retired senior officer

29. With the exception of a low-status caste of Kerala astrologers. But to the best of my knowledge they do not participate in DPs.

in the Government Department of Education, a retired full-time political militant, a retired Railway superintendent, and a retired high school teacher. None did belong to a “traditional” family of astrologers, and many had come late to astrology, first as an “interest”, then as a full-time activity. I also had the occasion to meet two persons working in a tuition institution in astrology, the Jyotisha Parishad in Thrissur: both were newcomers and had taken recently to this profession. This is also in line with the ubiquitous development of astrology courses that are offered to “interested” people. It suggests that there is an important sociological transformation currently taking place (something noticed also for Sri Lanka by Kemper 1980). In this perspective, D. Iyer may be seen as just one example of a more general democratisation of astrological practice in Kerala, while the hold that certain families may have had on its transmission is being shattered. This seems true also in terms of caste: today’s practitioners do not belong solely to the different Brahman sub castes, but may be members of any of the castes of local “good” status. A few of them belong also to the toddy-tapper caste that was formerly below the line of untouchability.

This dissemination of astrological knowledge and practice may be related to various factors: the development of education; the availability of printed treatises and information, the circulation of which cannot be controlled as was the case with manuscripts kept in families; the availability of money due to employment in the Gulf countries; and the increase in temple buildings, temple rituals, and general consumption of symbolic goods that this money enables. Astrology takes its share in this evolution, and appears as a profession both prestigious and promising. At the same time, its claimed rationality is pronouncedly attractive. As Shanmugham Master put it when speaking about the greater number of DPS nowadays, “there is more interest in science” (12 April 1999).

The circulation of printed books and the multiplication of newcomers of all strata of society, some of them partly self-taught, pave the way for some heterogeneity in astrological truths. Here again, D. Iyer exemplifies in his idiosyncratic way what is mostly for the time being a mere potentiality. All astrologers in Kerala, “newcomers” as well as members of families of astrologers, share some views about ritual matters, for instance regarding the importance of Māndi-Guḷikan, propitiated for averting evil and considered foremost for elucidating *praśnams*, or regarding ghosts such as Brahmarakṣassu, installed as guardians in many high caste temples. By contrast, D. Iyer regarded all this as mere superstitions, nay, as abominations. He considered that the book by

Śankaragaṇakan was doing much harm “because of all the nonsense printed”, in particular the story of Guḷikan that ends it: “such things are horrible” (29 March 1999). For similar reasons, he considered that the most used treatise on rituals, the *tantrasamuccayam*, was “one of the worst compilations, it shows how badly a book can be written” (id.). He did apply his conceptions in the DPs he conducted, with the result that some ancestors disappeared from temple precincts, being reclassified as ghosts (Tarabout 2001).<sup>30</sup> However, D. Iyer was alone in his opinions, though his disciples would never challenge him on his decisions (“it is his opinion” would merely say one of them). But the very current process of democratisation of astrology entails the possibility of a diversification of astrologers’ opinions according to their own philosophical and religious thinking — and therefore a diversification of the possible truths they may discover and impose in a DP.

Books may be able to break former monopolies of ancestry or to open to possible religious diversity. Their importance in astrological practice, however, is rather consensual. Both S. Sharma and D. Iyer, as different as they could be, had their small office room crowded with accumulated books (compare Guenzi 2004). That knowledge is fixed in books (or, for traditional Naṃpūtiri families, in manuscripts) is not open to debate. In contrast to the transmission of Vedic texts or of mantras, and at variance with the training in āgamic texts currently found in Tamil Nadu (Fuller 2001), oral transmission does not so much concern here memorization *per se*, or intonation, than the necessity to understand the texts.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, memorization is required. The dynamics of the discussion preclude any reading during the *séance*, except in very exceptional circumstances: for instance this was done for making obvious the correctness of Rājarājeśvari identification when one of the astrologers read aloud the corresponding verse in a book, adding thus a supplementary proof

30. DPs certainly cannot be said to always develop reformist views. On the contrary, there are instances when the recommendation is to return to practices that had been abolished due to the action of reformist movements (for instance hook-swinging — see *India Today*, Kerala Edition, 7 April 2004).

31. The role of a guru in the transmission of knowledge is not at the front of astrologers’ claims to expertise. Some were occasionally mentioned to me, and publications may detail their names for a given author. But I hardly find in my notes any development about their role as can be met for instance about musicians (not to speak of members of devotional groups). Transmission of knowledge for traditional families is done within the family, while newcomers attend tuition courses or frequent a few masters, rarely confining themselves to a single one.

to the conclusion. More commonly, “everything should be in the head”. But books, whether in physical form or in the head, do not suffice. All astrologers add that textual knowledge has to be complemented by divine blessings. For V. Raghavan Nair, there are hundred of thousands of books, so that “it is a most complicated science, no wonder if it goes wrong”; therefore, the protection and inspiration by gurus and gods is necessary, the astrologer himself has to acquire some divine quality (hence his other name, *dēvajñan* — 10 April 1999). This is also what others underline: “See, mastering the textbook is essential, but we should have meditated on a particular deity always. Only the help of that particular deity will give you intuition. Only through intuition can one say things properly” (S. Sharma, 4 April 1999); “You need god’s blessings for choosing between different rules. Good practice and unconditional surrender to the subject and to God enable to determine appropriate positions” (N. Sharma, 24 March 1999).

Not only do astrologers often appear themselves covered with devotional marks, but the whole procedure of the *praśnam* is imbued with ritual. There are various cults to the tools, the planets and the signs; ritual purity is required; the astrologer meditates and recites mantras for a long time before the start of the ceremony; the drawing of cowries is always done while murmuring a mantra; the laying of the gold coin associates mantras and prayers of the whole audience; reports always include propitiating *stōtrams*. Moreover, the whole logic of the process is placed under the gods’ will and actions: they send signs. Astrology is a science, but a divine one, and mistakes are averted through god’s grace. Where astrologers differ, then, is about the source of this divine blessing. Is it necessary to belong to an astrologers’ family for obtaining the appropriate mantra? Or is it enough to surrender unconditionally to God, a devotional path open to all? This is an old alternative in India. As printing and tuition courses have enabled virtually anybody to become an astrologer, there are clearly tensions regarding what exactly ancestry means. But it should be remarked that in spite of these tensions, newcomers, even of comparatively low ritual status, get full recognition in the context of DPS and may conduct them as chief astrologer, while a Naṃpūtiri from an astrologers’ family may act as his assistant. Authority in the (astrological) *sāstras* has effectively become an ambition opened to most castes.

## CONCLUSION

Authoritative statements in Kerala temple astrology result from a complex interactive process. There is a widespread consensus on the scientific character of astrology<sup>32</sup> as combining astronomy, mathematics, and Sanskrit authoritative treatises. In this respect, written sources are at the core of all the astrological expertise, be they *śāstras* or printed almanacs. As such, there is no felt opposition between orality and writing. However, DPs are effectively live performances, in which memorization and discursive skills are absolutely crucial. There is debate among experts and consensual final judgment. These skills help in bringing the conclusions of the astrologers to the public, i.e. an hyper-technical complexity, *ślokas* in a language that is generally not understood, condescending explanations, scrutiny of temple staff and committee, accusations of malpractice in ritual and management that meet with stereotypes. In addition there is systematic recourse to cross-checking procedures and to tangible proofs (including charts, book-notes or printed books).

In spite of this accumulation of proofs and arguments, doubts may persist *after* a DP, though they may not necessarily have been expressed during the discussion. There are a few indications of this. Firstly, astrologers are quite critical among themselves, for reasons that often pertain to sociological changes, and can voice their disagreement in various contexts (U. Kurup mentioned to me the case of a temple where a DP had changed the deity, but was explicitly contradicted by a later DP which reinstated the deity in its former self). Secondly, reputations may go up and down due to reasons which are difficult to ascertain, but in which may play the degree of consensus reached about an astrologer's conclusions. Thirdly, the committee may not always implement all the measures recommended; I could not check for the DPs which I witnessed, but there are many reported cases of partial or "delayed" implementation. Fourthly, the frequency of DPs in some temples is such that their repetition may point towards an implicit dissatisfaction of the committee with the preceding DP's conclusions, and towards the hope to obtain a better deal while abiding by the rationality of the procedure. And lastly, there are instances of outspoken outcry after a DP, which get publicized in newspapers. One concerned the 1995 DP about the Śabarimala temple, the chart of which has been provided above. While

32. This does not mean there is unanimity in Kerala: Christians, officially at least, denounce astrology as superstition, as did also intellectuals when a Union Government of the Hindu right introduced University courses in astrology.

the report enumerated the usual weak points (“the *pūjāri* and his assistants have to serve the Lord with greater devotion”) and stressed the need for a greater respect of purity rules, two conclusions came under attack. One was that it confirmed the interdiction to enter the temple made to women aged between 10 and 50 years: this was criticized by associations taking the case to the High Court of Kochi, which upheld the DP. The other was that it allowed the project of developing a heliport, which was criticized by orthodox people and environmentalists alike, who suggested that astrologers participating in this DP had been prevailed upon by the Travancore Devaswom Board.<sup>33</sup>

Doubts and contestations do not aim at the logic of the *dēvapraśnam*, but at particular conclusions and particular practitioners. Building up truths in this context is an unending process. Despite scholarly knowledge, painstaking precautions and remarkable skills, despite the deep respect shown to astrologers, the authoritativeness of astrological statements in DPs is never fully assured because the procedure is unwittingly totally sensitive to the social surroundings. Dissatisfaction may develop and push the temple committee to go once more through the whole procedure — ascertaining again and again the truth.

33. The exceptionally high stakes that the Sabarimala temple represents in Kerala society has made it an arena for recurrent disputes. The last one concerned a DP conducted in June 2006, immediately contested by the temple’s main ritual authority and becoming a new High Court case decided in October of the same year; see for instance <http://www.nerve.in/news:25350018366>

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1. Dēvapraśnam in Thiruvananthapuram, 21 March 1999. In the foreground on the right, the board with cowries, and on the left the chart drawn with ashes in which a pūjā has been performed by a tantrī (in the middle). In the background, disciples noting down data.



2. Dēvapraśnam in Thrissur, 11-13 April 1999. A Nampūtiri “churns” cowries before making a draw. On the board, planets are indicated by additional cowries and shells.

അഥവാചനം-മുദ്രാതിലിഖ്യാനന		
4	- 08	- 18 ലഗ്നം:
2	- 01	- 35 സൂര്യ:
2	- 23	- 10 ചന്ദ്ര:
10	- 21	- 37 ക്ഷുഭ:
01	- 27	- 00 ബുധ:
0	- 29	- 14 ശുഭ:
01	- 26	- 36 ശുക്ര:
8	- 05	- 52 മന്ദ:
10	- 24	- 37 നവ:
4	- 24	- 37 ശിവ:
3	- 29	- 49 മാന:
11	- 01	- 18 (നിസ്ഫലം)
01	- 02	- 53 ചന്ദ്രനം:
11	- 27	- 30 ചന്ദ്രനം:
1	- 11	- 24 ചന്ദ്രനം:
2	- 05	- 09 ഭദ്ര:
0	- 00	- 18 മൂല:
0	- 16	- 51 സൂര്യകാന്തിനം:

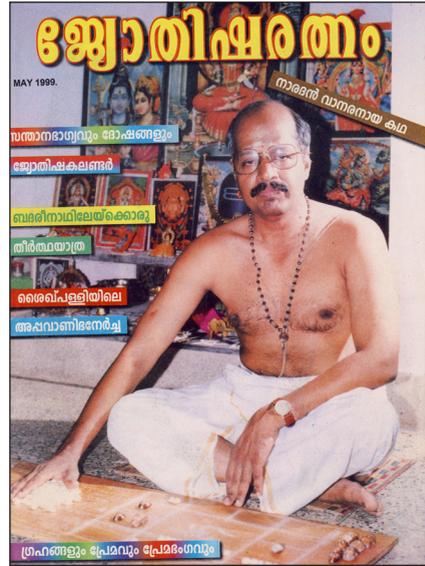
മാ	ച	മ	മ
ആ	ഗ	ബുധ	രച
കു	ശു	ശു	മാ
		ശു	ശു
ശു	മാ		ബു

ശിവ ര

3. Example of longitudes and chart indications preserved in a final report. Page 2 of the 13 pages report for a dēvapraśnam performed in 1988 at the Airanikkulam main temple.



4. D. Iyer is commenting on a betel leaf. Thiruvanthapuram, 21 March 1999.



5. Cover of an astrological Malayalam publication (*Jyōtiṣaratnam*, “The Jewel of Astrology”). The confidence-inspiring portrait is of a Tamil Brahman belonging to a family of astrologers.



6. The chief astrologer, a Nampūtiri Brahman from a family of astrologers, is praying as the very proceedings get contested by astrologers (mainly “newcomer” Nāyars) in the audience. Thiruvananthapuram, 5 April 1999.