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Chapter 3:
Religious Uncertainty, Astrology and the Courts in South India[1]
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As one of the multiple techniques intended to rationalize decision-making by reducing uncertainty, astrology is regularly sought after in India. A widely shared assumption is that important decisions as well as our day-to-day affairs are part of a general, divine order which, though not immediately perceptible, can be deciphered with the appropriate tools. An astrologer's advice is needed for choosing a spouse, for timing the beginning of an action and for solving a variety of problems. However, interpreting the divine order and deciding the best path of action may prove to be tricky, so that doubts linger everywhere, in the astrologer's own mind as well as in his client's. Astrologers are therefore cautious about the proofs they require and the reasoning they follow (see Vernant *et al*. 1974; also Homola, this volume).

The present chapter describes how such doubts may be expressed, manipulated and tentatively dispelled in the context of an astrological practice dealing with Hindu temples in Kerala, on the south-western coast of India. This practice is called *deva prasnam*,[2] 'divine query'. I present its main characteristics before detailing the process by which astrologers try to clear their own doubts as well as those of their clients – a process which some astrologers like to

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[1] This chapter is a product of the ANR programme 'Just-India: A Joint Programme on Justice and Governance in India and South Asia' (http://just-india.net) funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR-08-GOUV-064).
[2] The transcription of technical terms follows the spelling in Malayalam, 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 Anglicized usage.

compare, rather superficially, to a trial in a court. However, astrologers may fail to manage the situation to the satisfaction of their clients: this leads in some cases to accusations against them before an actual law court. The last part of the chapter evokes some cases in which astrology has been involved in trials in Kerala. I suggest that while the procedures in the astrological and judicial contexts may show some superficial similarities, a judgment is enforceable whereas an astrological opinion is not; it can therefore be endlessly questioned. Doubts in astrology are never completely dispelled and their perpetuation depends not so much on the possible failure of the **/p. 60/** astrologers to impress on their audience the rationality of their procedures and of their statements, as on particular interests and expectations.

Temple Astrology in Kerala

Hindu astrology comprises three main branches: birth horoscope (*jatakam*), determination of favourable moments (*muhurttam*) and resolution of questions (*prasnam*). The practice we are concerned with belongs to the third category (for more detailed accounts, see Bhat 1992; Tarabout 2002, 2006, 2007).[3]

Temple astrological consultations are organized in Kerala when devotees want to improve the temple buildings or the ceremonies, or when there is the perception that past unfortunate events point to a divine imbalance. Trustees of the temple committee call an astrologer or visit him in order to formulate their questions.[4] The timing of this first encounter has much relevance for the astrologer, who draws the horoscope of the moment; it gives nearly all the clues for understanding the temple's effective problems according to some practitioners. Indeed, the question put by the temple's committee is seen by the astrologer as a distress signal sent by the temple's main deity, even when the question is about improvements. In all cases, the astrologer proceeds to an exhaustive audit of the temple situation. Who

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[3] I rely on ethnographic material gathered during fieldworks in Kerala in 1991, 1994 and 1999. I am particularly indebted to the astrologers consulted for sparing their time in order to satisfy my curiosity, and to my friends N. Rajasekharan Nair, K.P.C. Anujan Bhattattiripad and L.S. Rajagopalan for their constant support.
[4] I will refer to an astrologer by using 'he' or 'his' as, to the best of my knowledge, all the astrologers involved in *deva prasnam* are men.

are the deities residing there (sometimes the consultation discloses that their identity has been mistaken or that some were forgotten)? What is the past history of the shrines (the astrologers may go back several hundred years)? What are the causes of present-day misfortune (usually pollution by ghosts)? What is the current state of ritual practice (quite often, the priest's ability is questioned)? How does it fare economically (astrologers may point to mismanagement)? And, eventually, how may the temple prosper in future (astrologers recommend ritual solutions, and eventually answer the question put to them by the committee)?

After this first meeting, the astrologer decides with the committee when and how to hold the main session of the *deva prasnam*, which will be a public event in the temple itself and may last from one to seven or more days; it is often advertised in local newspapers. During this session, the astrologer leads a team of his colleagues and is accompanied by some students in astrology. They all come at the appointed time to the temple, enter its precincts and sit down in front of the inner shrine whose door is left open so that the god or the goddess may directly observe the proceedings. The temple committee and the rest of the audience dispose themselves around them. A complex sequence of ritualized acts follows **/p. 61/** that lasts a few hours, of which every detail takes an ominous importance. This is called the 'ceremony of the eight auspicious objects' (*ashtamamgalam kriya*). It is a set of actions intended to make manifest the condition and the will of the temple's main deity: an oil lamp is lit by the priest who also prepares the eight auspicious objects (typically white rice, turmeric, vermillion, 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 *Bhagavad Gita*); an astrological chart is drawn on the ground with sacred ashes and a cult is offered there; a small child is then invited to lay down a gold coin in this chart. The astrologers note the time when the child lays down the gold coin, as well as the usual astrological data (rising sign, lunar day, lunar mansion, planetary positions) which enable them to calculate the horoscope of the moment. Besides, the way the chart has been drawn, the name of the child, her native lunar mansion, how she is dressed, how she behaves, in which zodiacal sign she has put the gold coin, the position of the coin (face upward or downward), 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, all these elements are charged with significance and play a major role in the interpretation.

When the ceremony of the eight auspicious objects is complete, the interpretation proper begins. It takes the form of a prolonged discussion between astrologers, and between the astrologers and the audience, with little ritualization; it may last several days. A written report (between ten to fifty pages) is drafted at the end of the procedure by the main astrologer. It is countersigned by each member of his team and given to the temple committee.

The whole process is thus a complex social interaction in which stakes can run very high: the sheer cost of ritual remedial measures recommended by the astrologers runs above 100,000 Indian Rupees, and possible modifications of the buildings may cost much more. Besides, astrologers often harshly criticize temple employees, which may lead to their dismissal. a *deva prasnam* is therefore also an exercise in power and astrologers have recourse to a variety of arguments in order to make their point. A major claim in this respect is to operate scientifically.

Astrology as a Science

Astrologers insist that astrological statements can be, and are, empirically verified. Some astrologers whom I met had had a background in science: for instance, one was a former university professor in chemistry; another was working in a space research centre. Others were retired officers from various administrative departments. They were all well-educated people who asserted that, at first, they were skeptics. They became convinced of astrology's reliability when predictions made to them, or to which they were witnesses, were revealed to be stunningly true – there was an element of awe in their narratives. It works, they said, and this is because astrology is a science.

/p. 62/ The claim to be a science is often accepted in India and received official recognition by the Indian Government in 2001, at a time when Hindu nationalists were in power: it was made an academic discipline taught in some universities, despite the controversy that erupted (the classification as a science is thus an important political stake). Astrology appears therefore much more rational than other procedures of divination which may still be active, and better adapted

to the current evolutions in society. When I pointed out to an astrologer the increasing number of *deva prasnams* organized in Kerala (by comparison with the early 1980s when I did my first fieldwork), he agreed and explained that this was so because 'there is more interest in science' (Shanmugam Master, 12 April 1999). Here, 'science' refers to two domains, astronomy and Sanskrit verses. Astronomy and mathematics provide undisputable data. Normative verses in Sanskrit provide the rules for judging the situation.

It is only recently that astronomy and astrology have become distinguished and astrology relies on this past equivalence to establish nowadays its status as a science. As an astrologer insisted, astrology is 'not about predicting the future as many people believe' but about calculating the position of the planets and studying their effects on our lives:[5] it is the 'calculation when something happens and how' (Narayana Sharma, 24 March 1999). For a *deva prasnam* two different horoscopes are established, one at the time of the first call by the temple committee, the other at the time of the ceremony of the eight auspicious objects. For each horoscope the exact longitudes of the 'planets' are computed, generally by extrapolating from published almanacs and by using pocket calculators or, rarely nowadays, cowries. These published tables constitute a major link between astronomy and astrology and it has been for long the main task of former astronomers to compute them (Pingree 1978: 364). Astrological calculation takes also into account many factors other than the planetary positions: the lunar day (*tithi*), the lunar mansion (*naksatram*), the rising zodiacal sign (according to a sidereal reckoning) and various subdivisions of the zodiac. These are complemented by complex mathematical combinations of relative positions, conjunctions, binds or oppositions, and are carefully mentioned in the final written report given to the committee.

While the use of astronomy and mathematics is part of the very logic of astrology, its display contributes to impressing on the audience the image of a science validated by modern technologies, as most interlocutors were keen to underline; the use of computers and astrological software is publicly advertised by some practitioners for private consultations (though not for *deva prasnams*). This seems to

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[5] Indian astrology recognizes nine main 'planets': the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and the ascending and descending nodes of the moon. There are also a few 'subsidiary planets'.

lead to a kind of hypertrophy in mathematical speculations as much so-called astrological data used in temple consultations does not correspond to any effective physical reality and appears to be mere computed derivations from **/p. 63/** first-level data. Moreover, *deva prasnams* even operate a conversion of omens into astronomical data.

The interpretation of omens is an essential part of the procedure. Omens are called *nimittams*, 'marks', 'causes'; an astrologer aptly translated this as 'witnesses' (Krishnan Nair, 5 April 1999). The list of such possible witnesses is endless and includes signs occurring in or around the temple (a cat crossing the ceremony's space, the crowing of a crow), befalling the astrologer (events in his family, persons he met while coming to the temple) or deliberately produced during the ceremony of the eight auspicious objects (the quality of the oil used for filling the lamp, the stability of the flame, its direction, the quality of the betel leaves prepared and so on). Not all these omens are converted into astronomical data and many are directly interpreted according to widely shared assumptions. Such signs during a *deva prasnam* are considered to be sent by the temple deity in order to make known its condition and its wishes and thus 'prevent [the astrologer] from foolishness' (V. Raghavan Nair, 10 April 1999); they are used in a cumulative way for cross-checking other data and are perceived to be part of the rationality of the procedure.

However, some of these signs become 'astronomized' and transformed into longitudes. For instance, the spatial position of the spokesperson of the temple delegation who meets the astrologer the first time indicates a zodiacal sign and produces an 'ascendant', which becomes astronomical datum computed with the others. Similarly, during the ceremony at the temple, the gold coin put by the child on the zodiacal chart drawn on the ground makes for a 'gold ascendant' determining the first out of the twelve zodiacal Houses framing the whole interpretative process: it will be the main ascendant taken into consideration. There are many other examples: the part of the body touched by the child after laying down the gold coin is put into equivalence with a zodiacal sign; the number of betel leaves prepared is put into equivalence with a planet, with a zodiacal sign and with a House; the astrologer draws cowries to determine a '*prasnam* number' which is put into equivalence with a planet in a given position. As soon as these omens are translated into celestial data, they are submitted to similar computations applying to astronomical data and

thus enter the domain of scientific validity of astronomy and mathematics.

All the data require rules for interpreting it. These rules are couched in Sanskrit verses found in treatises (*sastra*, science, treatise), whose authority is not really questioned by most people in India (these verses are also generally not understood) and which are equated with scientific laws. When dealing with questions related to temples, astrologers in Kerala rely on various written sources, most notably on a Sanskrit treatise written around 1650, the 'Path of the Questions' (*Prasnamarggam*; for an English rendition see Raman 1992, 1996). These Sanskrit rules are considered to be *pramanas*, 'norms, authorities, truths, proofs'. As one author puts it, *sastras* 'are pramanik ('proven'), eternally valid and binding on all Hindus' (Parry 1985: 204; see also Pollock 1985). The same word, *pramana*, may also qualify a deed or a document submitted before a court of **/p. 64/** law as evidence. However, in an astrological context, Sanskrit verses are 'proofs' in a normative sense, rather more like laws or precedents in judicial reasoning than facts or documents submitted. The difficulty is to find the correct applicable rule for a given situation, and to understand it appropriately.

After the ceremonial part of the *deva prasnam* the astrologers hold a lengthy discussion with the temple committee and other devotees during which the interpretation is elaborated step by step. In one temple consultation I observed, which lasted for three days, the chief astrologer quoted and commented on more than two hundred Sanskrit verses. The commentary bears on the proper meaning to be attributed to the verse and involves therefore a discussion about the grammatical rules necessary for understanding the astrological quotations. Sanskrit verses may well have different meanings, up to sixteen according to one astrologer, and the correct choice depends on context and opinion: 'this is a wonder of Sanskrit language … in *deva prasnam* all this is coming under discussion to determine what is applicable to the situation' (V. Raghavan, 10 April 1999).

Astrologers' Uncertainties

Data in an astrological consultation is super-abundant. from the zodiacal position of planets to minute events in the environment, the world is a mass of proliferating signs; but signs of what? While

observations are not objects of contestation, their meanings are, and working them out is an operation fraught with hesitations and doubts. Sanskrit rules for interpreting are very numerous. According to one astrologer, there exist more than 400,000 manuscripts of astrology so that it is 'a most complicated science', much more than medicine which has only to manage the human body: 'no wonder if it goes wrong' (Raghavan Nair, 10 April 1999). Interpreting the data requires experience, intuition, caution and divine protection. However confident they may be in their own skills astrologers are aware that they may err in their statements; the procedure is devised so as to limit risks.

The lengthy public debate that follows the ceremonial part of a *deva prasnam* is called *carcca*, 'deliberation, reflection, recollection, debate'. It is this process that enables the astrologers to reach a 'correct way of thinking', to clear their own doubts as well as to convince their audience. as one astrologer explained, a single astrologer, if not endowed with some kind of divine quality, can make mistakes. The collective discussion is intended to 'extract' the results through a debate, thus limiting the risks. This is why the meeting is like a 'court of law, bringing different meanings [of the verses] to the place, discussing, and then coming to conclusions' (Raghavan Nair, 10 April 1999). During this debate, the astrologers detect which planetary relationships are most significant and which are not; which Sanskrit verse should be applied in this case and which not; and what is their correct meaning in the particular context. Data ('witnesses') is patiently sifted one by one, and put into correspondence with appropriate Sanskrit verses, *pramanas* ('proofs'), so that a pattern emerges.

/p. 65/ Cross-checking is done in various, complementary ways. One is to tap the knowledge of the audience, which is regularly interrogated. In one instance, astrologers tried to put a name on a ghost whose presence could be deduced from the data; it was the ghost of a man addicted to drinking who had perished by drowning. Somebody in the audience suggested the name of a former president of the temple committee, who had drowned, implying thus that he may have had some liking for the bottle. Someone else immediately protested: this could not be correct as the president had been a good man. He asked the astrologers to be more precise, and the latter now found that the deceased had actually died 'in connection with fire'. The name of another person meeting this updated information was then proposed

from the audience, to the satisfaction of all present (M. Kutty, 12 april 1999).

Interactions between the astrologers and the audience thus alternate calculations, articulating rules, making guesses about past or present events, and checking these prognoses in an interrogative form in order to get a confirmation or 'to put names'. This possibility of checking astrological guesses is seen as a great strength: if a testimony from the audience disproves a guess, the astrologers make another try till it fits with the experience of the devotees. Whether guesses are confirmed or challenged by the audience, it helps the astrologers to progressively narrow their diagnosis. One astrologer (Shanmugam Master) compared the process to that of a mechanic listening to a noise in an engine and eliminating one after another its possible causes: making wrong guesses and having them invalidated is part of a dialogical process that helps to get at the final conclusions (see Zeitlyn 1990; Wilce 2001; Guenzi 2013: 158ff.; see also Garfinkel 1967 who analysed such kinds of interaction – in a different context – from an ethnomethodological perspective).

Sanskrit verses, astronomical computation, accumulation of omens and cross checking may, however, not suffice to reach foolproof conclusions. The procedure recognizes this risk and includes verifications. At regular intervals, for each important statement and for concluding the whole of the discussion, astrologers proceed to a divination test called *ozhivu nokki*, literally 'looking for cessation' – that is, looking for remedies and checking that the problem is over. Having in mind a specific question (Is this conclusion correct? Is the deity satisfied?), the astrologer draws cowries; the resulting number gives an astrological position, itself providing a positive or a negative answer to the question. It is a ritualized way to express and remove possible doubts about the results reached at each step during the debate; at the end of the *deva prasnam* it signals its satisfactory conclusion. These verifications are required by the procedure and are performed whenever needed by the astrologers, quite independently of the explicit reactions of the audience: the astrologers act as if anticipating a doubt about a given statement, while the audience may not have expressed anything of the sort (see Berti, this volume). This is, for instance, the statement made about the last, concluding *ozhivu nokki* in the 1998 report from Thalakkottukkara temple:

> If things are done as mentioned above, will the faults and suffering be removed? And will the divine presence of the Goddess increase? And will there be prosperity and will the people connected with the temple prosper? Is there any sign for it? To know that, praying for the blessings of Jupiter, when it was 4.30 p.m. the 24th in the month of Gemini, 1173 (Malayalam era), the *ozhivu* was seen in Cancer: so it is seen that it is good.

'Praying for the blessings of Jupiter', which the astrologer does just before drawing the cowries in the *ozhivu nokki* process, points to the fact that while astrology claims to be a science, it is explicitly said to be a divine one. Divine intervention is systematic, as its very action produces the signs in need of understanding by the astrologers. Quite naturally, the latter are keen to insist that mistakes can only be averted through God's grace. Knowledge has to be complemented by divine blessings and the astrologer himself has to acquire some divine quality, hence one of his appellations, *devajnyan*, 'one who knows the divine' (Raghavan Nair, 10 April 1999). Other astrologers express the same idea: '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 … We have to meditate' (Subrahmania 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 you to determine appropriate positions' (N. Sharma, 24 March 1999).

Astrologers often appear with their bodies covered with devotional marks, and the whole procedure is imbued with ritual. Some cults are dedicated to deities presiding over the planets and to presiding deities in astrology (gods Siva and Subrahmanyam); others are directed towards the deities of the temple under scrutiny. 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 down of the gold coin associates the mantras and prayers of the whole audience; finally, reports always include propitiating hymns. The whole logic of the *deva prasnam* is placed under the gods' will and actions and the ultimate verification, the *ozhivu nokki*, is the direct manifestation of the temple

deity's approval or disapproval: astrologers have to rely on a divine signal for concluding that there is no more room for doubting.

Manipulating Doubt

Quite often, the conclusions reached by the astrologers may prove surprising or distasteful to some committee members. The *deva prasnam* may reveal that the committee is mismanaging the affairs of the temple; that there is misappropriation or corruption; that the ritual servants are incompetent; that some shrines have to be eliminated; that some ritual practices must be discontinued, others encouraged; that new deities have to be installed; and that the presiding deity of the temple is **/p. 67/** not, actually, the one devotees believe to be there but some other god or goddess. Conveying this kind of news to the audience requires skilful management of procedure.

Guessing past and present events and situations deemed to be unknown to them is a skill astrologers are expected to display regularly. They should not visit or know the temple beforehand. It is solely through the computation of astronomical data and omens that they should deduce the disposition of all the shrines, the kind of divine image which may be inside the sanctums, the ritual service which is performed and all the characteristics of the temple's routine. They may even be able to discover features hitherto unnoticed by all. For instance, a *deva prasnam* in a Ganesh temple revealed 'the presence of female divinity in the idol', a fact later confirmed by direct examination as '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). Many narratives of this kind circulate and come as strong supports for establishing astrology's validity and an astrologer's particular expertise. We shall see below that such revelations, when overworked, may conversely fuel suspicion about an astrologer's integrity.

The scientific style astrologers profess, and the authority attributed to Sanskrit treatises, make it difficult for the audience to openly question statements during the debate. When astrologers pile up observations one upon another and succeed in bouncing from wrong guesses to admittedly accurate ones, they see themselves as following a 'foolproof' demonstration which should be able to convince their audience on rational grounds. However, *deva prasnam*

is also to be seen as a performance involving sophisticated rhetorical skills.

The diagnosis is exposed very gradually (though the astrologer may have reached the conclusions in his mind long before) through various, seemingly disparate arguments narrowing in on the conclusion. Moreover, astrologers systematically depict a catastrophic image of the situation. In all *deva prasnams* temples appear full of pollution and of ghostly presences or unwanted cruel deities; the divine power of the place is about to be lost; rituals are not properly observed; there is mismanagement; gods are suffering. If nothing is done, dilapidation is sure to happen; the gods will go away; misfortune will befall the people of the area. This is not unlike the FUD marketing strategy in which one tries to create Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt in the mind of would-be consumers in order to promote one's own product:[6] indeed, astrologers propose all the required ritual reparations and expiations for restoring the temple to prosperity and the people to happiness.

For instance, in a *deva prasnam* held at the Mettukkada Kamakshi temple in 1999, the astrologers revealed that the goddess Kamakshi, giving her name to the /**p. 68**/ temple, was no longer present and had been replaced by the goddess Rajarajesvari. In order to overcome the visible reluctance of the audience confronted with this change of their main deity's identity, the astrologers displayed a wide range of tactics. They repeatedly referred to inescapable astronomical data, recited Sanskrit verse after verse and insisted upon the presence of ghosts and the coming calamities. Here is a short excerpt:

> (About the goddess) 'The presence of god: the situation is one of adversity. The sign of the Balance is a sacred sign, but it is also a defective sign.'
> (About ghosts) 'Mars comes in the sign of Venus … there is an installation of deity here which is inappropriate to the temple, it is the ghost of a Brahman.'[7]

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[6] While this strategy in itself (scaremongering) might be as old as commerce, 'FUD' as an acronym was specifically coined during the 1970s in reference to the computer market. It is said to have been practised on a large scale first by IBM, then by Microsoft and others. As commentator Roger Irwin (1998) put it, giving a few illuminating examples, 'the overall message is "Hey, it could be risky going down that road, stick with us"'.

[7] In many Kerala temples, a Brahmarakshasa (which I translate here as 'Brahmin ghost'), a terrifying creature, may be installed as guardian deity. However, some

(About calamities) 'The Lord of the Vth House is not the only planet standing in the VIIth. Moon; Saturn and Venus are also standing in the VIIth. If Moon and Venus get bound with Saturn and also get the sight of Mars, the downfall or extinction of women is the result. Quarrels of this kind will arise among worshippers also.' (Mettukkada temple, 1999)

Astrologers thus manipulate doubt, willingly or not, trying to create fear and uncertainty in the minds of their audience in order to disarm possible contestation of their other statements, and to emphasize the risks to which people would be subjected, were they not to follow the proposed remedial measures.

Suspected Astrologers

With all their knowledge and rhetorical skills, astrologers might nevertheless be suspected of being 'counterfeited coins', as one of them put it. Criticism is harsh between astrologers themselves as each is eager to distinguish himself from the others. They and their clients insist on a few values so as to decide between a good and a bad astrologer.

One is ancestry. There are in Kerala families (mostly but not only Brahmin ones) famed for the astrological practice of their members. Claims to a good ancestry in astrology are important and are noticeable in ordinary discussions ('this astrologer belongs to a traditional family of astrologers'), in newspaper reports or in the presentation of books on astrology. According to this discourse, ancestry provides a better education and knowledge in astrology as well as an efficient mantra transmitted from a forefather. As one such astrologer claimed, it **/p. 69/** is necessary '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' (Subrahmania Sharma, 4 April 1999). Astrologers who are newcomers, on the contrary, challenge this claim and underline the necessity to democratize astrological practice – in line

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astrologers with a reformist agenda (as is the case in the above example) consider these subordinate deities as unwelcome and recommend getting rid of them (Tarabout 2001).

with the ubiquitous development of astrology courses offered today to interested people in the context of important sociological changes taking place (see Kemper 1980 for Sri Lanka).

Another debate among astrologers bears on the opposition between the 'old way', giving full expansion to the chanting of Sanskrit verses and focusing on astronomical data, and the 'modern way' in which omens are prominent and where the recitation of verses is given less importance. According to 'traditionalists', modernists care more for superficial aspects of *deva prasnam* and rely on cheap tricks to get the audience on their side – such as trying to create fear in their minds.

Astrologers are sometimes suspected of working hand in hand with the ritual specialists who will be in charge of implementing the remedial measures recommended at the conclusion of the *deva prasnam*. Their ethical repute is therefore of great importance (see Budniok, this volume, for a similar preoccupation among judges). Refusing to be paid in a contractual relationship is praised, while being forced to accept gifts is indicative of the highest ethics. Besides, the role of the guru does not limit itself to imparting training and a mantra to his disciples; it is also to develop an ethical discourse.

However, despite all the precautions taken for selecting an astrologer of renowned expertise and high ethics, despite the supposedly foolproof system of data interpretation, the conclusions reached during a *deva prasnam* do not necessarily go unchallenged. Contestation does not aim at the logic of astrology in general; it targets practitioners. This could happen during the procedure itself: in a case I observed, some local astrologers among the devotees strongly objected to what an invited team of astrologers was doing and eventually obtained the cancellation of the *deva prasnam*. This, however, is rare, and contestation usually develops after the consultation. For instance, in implicit disapproval, temple committees do not always implement the astrologer's recommendations and the repetition of *deva prasnams* in some temples, year after year, suggests dissatisfaction with the conclusions of previous consultations. In some rare cases, there can be an outspoken outcry leading to a court petition.

Astrologers in Court

Before examining how astrologers fare in court, it is necessary to recall that, since British times, the judiciary in India has been involved in temple affairs. This was in order to 'protect' temple rituals through a rationalized management of economic and human resources (Presler 1987). As a matter of fact, courts today regulate all the administrative aspects of temple life and rituals, down to the minutest details. **/p. 70/** This involvement of courts in (Hindu) ritual matters is more regular and important than a reading of the secular Constitution of India would suggest. This is not necessarily because judges are keen to interfere in religious matters (though some may be), but because there is just no other authority to which litigants may turn in the case of Hinduism.

In this context, *deva prasnams* may be treated as evidence in a trial or be the very object of an accusation. Two cases concerning the Sabarimala temple will serve as illustrations. Sabarimala temple is a major centre of pilgrimage in Kerala, drawing millions of pilgrims and receiving a huge income. It has been for years a locus of confrontation between the state of Kerala (which manages it through the Travancore Devaswom Board), the senior ritual authorities (called *tantri*), the royal family of Pandalam who are the traditional 'protectors' of the temple, feminist movements (women are barred from participating in the pilgrimage, except for young girls and ladies over 50), Hindu rightist movements and environmentalists (the temple is in the midst of a protected forest in the hilly part of the state).

In a series of cases questioning the entry of those women who are said to be barred from the temple, the Kerala High Court quoted *deva prasnams* in support of its decision confirming the ban. For instance, in 1991, respondents were the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Government of Kerala, which had allowed women to celebrate the first rice-feeding ceremonies of their children at the temple, though not during the three main pilgrimage seasons. The Indian Federation of Women Lawyers and a Hindu militant organization were also permitted to participate in the proceedings.[8] In his decision in favour of the petitioner, the judge underlined that the duty of the Travancore Devaswom Board was 'to arrange for the conduct of daily worship and

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[8] *S. Mahendran* v. *The Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board, Thiruvananthapuram And Ors.*, 5 April 1991 [AIR 1993 Ker 42].

ceremonies and of the festivals in every temple according to its usage … In other words, the Board has a statutory duty to enforce the usage prevalent in the temple'. A *deva prasnam* – he wrote – had revealed that the god (Ayyappa, in an ascetic form) 'does not like young ladies entering the precincts of the temple'. In a rather ambiguous way, much commented upon in the local press at the time, the judge ruled that:

> If the wish of Lord Ayyappa as revealed in the Devaprasnam conducted at the temple is to prohibit woman of a particular age group from worshipping in the temple, the same has to be honoured and followed by the worshippers and the temple authorities. The Board has a duty to implement the astrological findings and prediction on Devaprasnam. The board has therefore no power to act against that report which will be virtually disregarding the wishes of the deity revealed in the prasnam.

The legal construction of an 'existing usage' is noteworthy. As a matter of fact, women had actually been admitted in the temple for more than ten years outside **/p. 71/** the pilgrimage season, on a small scale though not in secrecy. This usage had necessarily received – at least tacitly – the permission of the chief authority on rituals of the Sabarimala temple, its *tantri*, who, we may assume, had to respond to a general evolution in society. The *deva prasnam* took a more rigid, conservative stance, but its conclusions were mere recommendations which, as we have seen, remained open to uncertainties despite all the precautions taken.

By contrast, the judgment transformed the 'existing usage', as it became construed by the judge, into a court ruling. Instead of the more or less fluid situation that astrological consultations usually allow in practice, the judgment substituted an enforceable order. It was no more by 'past usage' that women of a certain age were discouraged to go to the temple; it was by a decision of justice that it became prohibited to do so. A police force had to ensure they would not come. By endorsing the *deva prasnam*'s conclusion, the judgment made it law. A judicial decision can be contested in its validity or justice, as seems to be frequently the case in India where appeals to higher jurisdictions are nearly systematic, but it cannot be doubted in the sense that, until a new court judgement overturns the first, there is no uncertainty as to what should be done.

In the second example, also related to the Sabarimala temple, a *deva prasnam* became the very object of contestation before the High Court of Kochi. The consultation was held in 2006 at Sabarimala, following a fire in a building in 2003 and, in 2004, the rejection of a divine movable image by an elephant which had to bear it during a procession: these were two indications pointing to trouble at the divine level. The *deva prasnam* was performed by a team of twenty-one astrologers under the leadership of the famous Parappanangadi Unnikrishna Panicker, a high-profile astrologer consulted by the President of Sri Lanka, two Chief Ministers of regional states in India and numerous politicians, businessmen and cinema stars. The final report of this consultation criticized the *tantri* of the temple, made proposals that irked the Pandalam royal family and gave a free hand to the Travancore Devaswom Board to install a rope-way for pilgrims in the protected forest area. Opposition was immediate from various quarters. The *tantri* announced he would not implement the recommendations; the royal family petitioned the High Court, claiming the *deva prasnam* was invalid as it attacked its fundamental rights and asking for the organization of a new one. While the *tantri* was soon disqualified on other grounds (he was framed by the police in 'immoral company'), the case developed in another, unforeseeable direction.

One of the revelations of the *deva prasnam* had been that the divine image had been defiled years ago by the direct touch of a woman who, according to the ban, should not have entered the precincts of the temple at all. As soon as this statement was made public, an actress from the neighbouring state of Karnataka, Jayamala, expressed her deep repentance: she had been the involuntary culprit, eighteen years before. However, this rather sensational proof of the chief astrologer's clairvoyance soon became a burden for him as it was discovered that he personally knew the actress. This created the suspicion that the so-called revelation had been pre-arranged and that there had been a conspiracy. The astrologer was publicly /**p. 72**/ accused of having entered into an agreement with the actress and with the Travancore Devaswom Board, and a police inquiry was started. Seeing this, the astrologer petitioned the Kerala High Court in 2009 so as to be granted anticipatory bail (a legal procedure for being bailed out if an official case were to be registered later on).

The text of the petition presented by Panicker is worth looking at, as it expresses the accusation's doubts about the *deva prasnam*,

and, as a defence, the reaffirmation by the astrologer of his own high ethics. First the position of the accusation against the astrologer is stated:

> It is alleged that after the Devaprasnam, the petitioner (*i.e.* Panicker) revealed that a lady had touched the idol of Lord ayyappa. It is well known that women above the age of 10 and below 50 are not permitted to enter into the Sabarimala temple. The prosecution case is that the petitioner was aware that a cine actress by name Jayamala had entered into the sanctum sanctorum at Sabarimala temple and had touched the idol of Lord Ayyappa. It is alleged that the petitioner hatched a conspiracy with the other accused persons and revealed the same after the Devaprasnam with the aim of making fame and money. It is also alleged that with the help of the second accused, the petitioner contacted the cine actress Jayamala over mobile phone and instigated her to reveal the fact and to express regret and repentance … According to the prosecution, all these things were done for creating an impression among the public that the petitioner is a person who could unearth certain events in the Devaprasnam. It was with the aim of gaining fame and money.

Then the astrologer's defence is presented:

> The petitioner states that he is an ardent devotee of Lord Ayyappa. He claims that he is an astrologer of an international repute. He also states that he has conducted … [*deva prasnams*] in various temples in India and abroad. Twenty one astrologers participated in the Devaprasnam and the findings were given after the conclusion of the Devaprasnam and all the astrologers were unanimous on the conclusions. The petitioner states that he has acted bonafide in the matter and the allegations made by the prosecution were denied.[9]

Concluding Remarks

The practice of *deva prasnam* aims at helping people decide about temple affairs in a world perceived as uncertain. This is especially the case when deities are concerned, since their relations with their devotees are construed as ambiguous, **/p. 73/** polyvalent and

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[9] *Unnikrishna Panicker* v. *State of Kerala*, 16 June 2009, High Court of Kerala, bail appl. no. 3249 of 2009.

largely unpredictable. However, astrology is not necessarily equipped to fully dispel the doubts of all clients. While claiming to be a science, it is also avowedly a divine one. The astrologers' expertise, in their own words, ultimately depends on God's grace – which puts them back at square one. True, astrologers try to minimize the risks by accumulating data, applying 'proven' rules, cross-checking with the audience, trying to reach a collective consensus through a public debate and ritually expressing doubt and its divine resolution. Nevertheless, even if the astrologers, through these techniques of doubting, succeed in dispelling the uncertainty that could exist in their minds, it may not be so easily the case with their audience.

As a matter of fact, the scope of a *deva prasnam* is quite ambitious in its exhaustive scrutiny of a temple's situation, an ambition often incongruent with the kinds of questions posed to the astrologers. Can we change the orientation of the shrine? Build some shops? Buy a new elephant? Explain an accident during a procession? The statements issued during the *deva prasnam* are often quite far from these preoccupations and potentially difficult for the temple committees and the devotees to accept. In addition to their scientific stand, astrologers must also develop rhetorical proficiency, creating and manipulating doubt among their public in order to win their approval. The good reputation of the astrologer is crucial in this game as his clients will a priori be inclined to have confidence in his statements. It is also at stake each time. Making stunning guesses which are later empirically verified is a key to building fame. However, as the last example shows, it may conversely lead to accusations of malpractice. Indeed, there is a counter-discourse running in India about astrologers, depicting them as unscrupulous shams easily corrupted and engaged in mafia-like agreements with ritual specialists, whom they recommend in the remedial measures suggested in the *deva prasnams*. Astrology per se can also be questioned by some intellectuals, but the more widespread criticism bears on the astrologers themselves. In this respect, in the last case, it is highly significant that critics were less bent on pointing out errors in the procedure than on questioning the morality of the chief astrologer.

Comparison with the judicial process shows some similarities as the purpose of both situations is to extract a hidden 'truth' out of a mass of confused and uncertain data. More specifically, the debate during the *deva prasnam*, explicitly compared to a debate in court (though there is neither prosecution nor defence), displays series of

Sanskrit verses whose normative character is not unlike that of laws; they are used in a rather similar manner. However, the astrological 'judgment' is an expert opinion, not a judicial decision, and compares more directly with medical expertise or scientific investigation in its techniques for manipulating and eliminating doubts. It is a consultation, not a trial, and it provides advice and remedies, not enforceable law. This makes for a radical difference between the regimes of truth in these two situations: contrary to a judge's decision which can be appealed against only by following strict and limited procedures framed by the judicial institution, astrological statements may be endlessly questioned. If clients **/p. 74/** are dissatisfied with recommendations they may not implement them; if they are dissatisfied with an astrologer they may turn to another. In this sense, astrological conclusions always remain open to doubts and to further social negotiation.

Seen as an exercise in power, astrological consultations illustrate well the conflict existing between a largely unquestioned procedure for establishing truths and the tensions of social life. Astrological statements may convince clients only up to a certain point, whatever the data displayed, the rhetoric involved and the procedure approved by the gods. When devotees do not implement recommendations, repeat *deva prasnams* one after the other or sue an astrologer before a court, they seem to be reacting as if their expectations have not been fulfilled. There might be no consensus: feminist associations and Hindu right militants were clearly on opposite sides in the 1991 case already mentioned, in which the judge's decision took a *deva prasnam* as evidence for confirming the entry ban to Sabarimala for some women: the capacity to contest or not an astrological statement appears thus dependent on social tensions and local power relationships. As such, doubt is not solely a cognitive process or a tool within a more or less ritualized process: it also depends on social expectations and on the actual capacity to impose them.

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