

[Astrology in the Ascendant](#)

Category : [December 1992](#)

Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1992

Astrology in the Ascendant

Yet another of Hinduism's sacred sciences is taking root in Western soil, Hindu astrology, or jyotisha, "the science of light." How enthusiastically it is being received is clear from events like the International Symposium on Vedic Astrology, held from October 2 to 5 in San Rafael, California, deemed the most important such gathering ever in the U.S.A., or perhaps anywhere outside of India.

"We are experiencing an explosion of interest," said Stephen Quong, the main organizer. Besides esoterics, the gathering focused on strategic issues vital to the development of Hindu (or Vedic) astrology in the West.

A constellation of highly respected savants from East and West lectured, taught and counseled. Most notable among them was the preeminent B.V. Raman, dean of Hindu astrology and arguably the greatest living astrologer. At 81, feeling the moment too auspicious to miss, he and Mrs. Raman traversed half the globe to energize the gathering with his lofty vision and vast knowledge and experience. He spoke of the antiquity of jyotisha, its divine origins, its superiority over later systems, its power to shed light into the normally shadowy future, hence its usefulness for adjusting karmas and guiding lives of individuals and communities. He stressed the high ethical standards demanded by this venerable science. Other lecturers - Chakrapani Ullal, Dr. Frawley, Dr. Vasant Merchant, Stephen Quong, Roy Kirkland and more - were also received with enthusiasm.

The organizers were praised for a conference that provided more than lectures; it allowed for meaningful action and follow-through. Dr. Raman chaired a lively panel discussion where it was agreed to establish an American Council of Vedic Astrology which would provide standards for training, certification and practice, including professional ethics - a welcome decree for the well-being of Hindu astrology in the West, where it faces major obstacles. To pursue the project, it was decided to hold a second symposium in 1993.

Astrology is particularly susceptible to charlatanism, Quong explained to HINDUISM TODAY, and opportunities abound for turning a quick dollar. San Francisco astrologer Pundit L.S. Trivedi added that it was easy, for example, to frighten a client for financial advantage. Love of humanity must be the overriding concern of the jyotishi, and his attitudes toward money and other worldly lures must be pure like crystal. "Otherwise," he continued, "the impurity will keep him from tapping his intuition, and he will not be competent." Not to mention the potential harm to his client, to the profession's reputation - and to himself. Shastras indicate that the unethical practitioner can absorb into himself the karmas of his clients.

Hindu astrology is traditionally transmitted through the guru-sishya (guru-disciple) system, Quong said. "Only the most spiritually astute is accepted as a disciple. He sits many years at the feet of the master and only after acquiring the knowledge, developing the psychic ability and proving the mettle of his character to the satisfaction of the guru would he be given the opportunity to practice." And, as a sishya, he would be ever responsible to his teacher for his actions, thoughts and motives. But, as Chakrapani Ullal admits, "There are no gurus in America and, in any case, Westerners are independent-minded." Without the guiding guru, what will happen to jyotisha? This critical question was but partially answered at the conference. The council to be formed would monitor the student's intellectual training. But it is not clear how it could evaluate his spirituality and integrity, or withhold accreditation on such subjective judgments as "insufficient intuition" without being challenged-or sued. Without this more subtle control, nothing would prevent future certified practitioners from being merely well educated, computer-smart chart readers rather than compassionate, truly religious, or truly Vedic, counselors.

A related issue not addressed at the conference regards the propriety of a non-Hindu practicing Hindu astrology. If the connection with the Hindu religion, its practices, beliefs, perspectives, is allowed to be partial, then it needs to be known what degree of Hinduness is sufficient. Vagueness on this point would seem to invite the mixing of jyotisha with extraneous elements, the "hodge-podge" that Dr. Raman decries.

HINDUISM TODAY spoke with one professional astrologer who is already blending parts of jyotisha with Western astrology while admittedly having no particular inclination toward Hinduism. Western and Hindu astrologies are deemed incompatible by the jyotishis in that they have different starting points in the zodiac and, more importantly, in that jyotisha is inseparable from Hindu philosophy. The information it is designed to provide can only be conveyed in terms of karma,

reincarnation, the Hindu concepts of the soul, the purpose of existence, etc.

The fact that the question of religious affiliation was not addressed implied that it is not important. But most of the astrologers interviewed thought otherwise. Dr. B. Sureshwara of Chicago, when asked whether a Hindu astrologer should be a Hindu, laughed, "Should a Catholic priest be a Christian?" Chakrapani added, "If he is not Hindu, embedded in the tradition, he will not really understand Hindu astrology. Every aspect of it is interconnected with the Hindu religion." Who then would qualify as a Hindu? Sureshwara proposed "anyone who believes as a Hindu," and Chakrapani, anyone who "sincerely loves Hinduism." Dr. Raman felt the question need not come up at all. "What matters," he said, "is genuine spirituality and ethics." The astrologers were willing to teach freely and trust that jyotisha, as it spread would of itself gradually generate the high standards that it requires. "If we are too strict, it will be difficult to spread this precious knowledge, God's greatest gift to mankind. We must live a paradox: be vigilant, yet not be shy to teach." They praised the American Vedic astrologers for their sincerity and dedication. Astrologer Pundit Navaratnam of Sri Lanka, now living in Australia said, "The certification idea is a good one. Let us go forward in confidence."

Hindu sciences have migrated before jyotisha: "Vedanta," hatha yoga, meditation, japa, ayurveda, and others. Consider their stories - hatha yoga's, for example. For decades, yoga teachers were mostly Hindus from India. They presented yoga as independent of Hinduism. Since then, the yoga schools have waxed and multiplied, and the Hindu teachers have all but vanished. So has the spiritual content and philosophical basis of the yoga of old. Yoga, blended with psychology, de-stress therapies and more, has come to mean "exercises for relaxation." Those few swamis still teaching yoga say that students have long since stopped expecting any Hindu content from yoga.

Jyotisha is now enjoying its initial bloom in the West. Newcomers are mostly deeply committed to Hinduism ("We don't want to become an offshoot," said Quong). And the Hindu elders are still involved and listened to. It would seem timely to raise these issues, and others (such as proper remuneration rates) - perhaps at the next symposium.

For information on the next symposium and tape recordings of the last, contact: Stephen Quong, Box 398, Corte Madera, CA 94976 USA, Tel: 415-383-9010.

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