Caterina Guenzi, *Le discours du destin: La pratique de l'astrologie à Bénarès*

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This large and substantial monograph by Caterina Guenzi tackles a subject central to South Asian life, which up till now has (with one or two honourable exceptions) been largely neglected by anthropologists. Contrary to what might be assumed, astrology is not relevant only to an understanding of the past or only to the description of the traditional parts of contemporary South Asian culture. Many are the stories of leading politicians and businessmen who take decisions only after consulting their astrologer. According to a journalistic study cited by Guenzi, astrology is the second-fastest expanding business in India today, after insurance. She describes returning to Benares in 2008 to find that, in a new departure, some astrologers had set up shops where they sell amulets, precious stones, jewellery, and feng shui objects imported from China.

The book is divided into three sections. The first deals with institutions: the traditional ‘discipline’ of jyotisa or astrology; the ways in which astrology is incorporated today into universities (the Banaras Hindu University syllabus is provided in an appendix); and how one becomes a professional astrologer. The second section likewise is made up of three chapters, on, respectively, divination techniques; ideas of fate, karma, and astrological conjunction; and affinal and kin relations and the ways in which people are implicated by the astrological causation of close others. The third section has two chapters: on the most common kinds of astrological affliction; and on the various methods that can be used to counteract bad conjunctures.

Guenzi relates in detail how astrology is now encouraged by the Indian government, with departments of Vedic astrology being established in numerous universities and research institutes launching studies into, for example, the efficacy of astrology in predicting cancer or heart disease (modern medicine can only diagnose the disease once it has appeared, whereas astrology, it is claimed, can tell you when it will appear and in whom).

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya established Benares Hindu University in 1916 with the aim of combining the best of Indian and Western science. Despite this, astrology ended up being taught within the department of Oriental and Religious Studies. There is an irony in today’s preferred nomenclature ‘Vedic Astrology’. As with Hinduism more generally, which pays lip service to the Vedas while actually being based on very different gods and rituals, the Vedic texts ‘made no mention of planets, signs of the zodiac, horoscopes, or other divinatory techniques used by astrologers today’ (Guenzi 2013: 101-2).

Far from withering away with increasing literacy and the expansion of tertiary education, astrology seems to have an ever greater hold on the imagination of the Indian middle class. This classed nature of astrology is one of Guenzi’s key themes. Despite the fact that
much of astrological terminology overlaps with that of spirit possession (planets ‘seize’ their victims), for status reasons the connection is largely denied or suppressed:

[...] the idea of evil planetary influence constitutes a formalized and objectivized version of certain ideas that, in the context of possession and sorcery, are formulated in terms of divine curses, attacks by spirits of the dead, or other inauspicious powers. Astrologers’ clients usually regard such explanations of bad luck and misfortune, provided by usually low-caste specialists (in Benares ojha-sokha or certain Tantrics), as ‘superstitions’ (andhavisvās). (p. 308)

Guenzi, basing herself on extended and repeated fieldwork in Benares and a much longer study of astrological texts, goes some way to showing why astrology should be such a middle-class form of knowledge and practice. In the first place, astrology has the cachet of science. It is a form of technical knowledge that requires the detailed application of empirical observations and mathematical techniques. It can be adapted for computers and is increasingly accessible by email and on the Internet. Numerous academics working in scientific fields consult Benares astrologers to find out whether they will be promoted, why their children won’t study, or what may be causing prolonged sickness in the family.

Perceived as scientific and rational, astrology is a part of the Indian or Hindu heritage that is, supposedly, forward-looking and egalitarian. All humans are the same, regardless of caste. As the Indian saying goes, the stars can make a beggar out of a king and a king out of a beggar. Furthermore, it is not just all humans who are equal in face of the stars: animals, land, houses all have their horoscopes. However, some techniques seem more generalizable than others: doing horoscopes can be taught in universities and done by computer; interpreting dreams, on the other hand, is more subjective.

Scholars have long discussed how the doctrine of karma, emphasizing the individual’s responsibility for their own fate, can coexist with the influence of the stars. Astrologers have an answer: what the stars reveal is precisely the hidden and otherwise unknowable effects of karma. At the same time, the stars (just like karma) are not a purely individual affair. One person’s horoscope may interact with another’s, in particular when they are married. A wife’s good horoscope can cause her husband’s business to prosper. A wife’s bad horoscope can cause it to fail. In a fascinating chapter, entitled ‘Les liaisons dangereuses’, Guenzi shows the extent to which family members depend on, and are affected by, each other’s horoscopes. If the son has a bad planetary conjunction, not only will he die, but he may cause the death of his mother. If one’s husband or wife is mangalik, i.e., has Mars in the ascendant, it will harm their partner. Aishwarya Rai, the movie superstar, is supposed to have had this ‘fault’ (dos) in her stars and there was considerable media speculation that the family of her husband-to-be, Abhishek Bachchan, carried out numerous rituals to counteract the potential negative effects on their son and themselves. As with all other characteristics, the ‘fault’ of being mangalik can be counterbalanced in the marriage market by other qualities, as well as counteracted using ritual.

One of the strengths of Guenzi’s monograph is the detailed transcription of actual interactions with astrologers. Some of these show the client disagreeing quite fundamentally with the diagnosis of the astrologer. For example, the client insists that there is no evidence for what the astrologer claims (that the daughter in question will be married in a couple of months, not in two and a half years; or that she is very poor in her studies, not highly successful, as the astrologer insists). To this the astrologer always has an answer: that the horoscope cannot be that of the person in question: either the time,
or even year, of birth is wrongly reported (Indians often manipulate their date of birth for a number of reasons); or that the person was swapped at birth, so that they are not who they are thought to be. But the horoscope itself cannot lie.

Guenzi’s work constitutes a substantial achievement, the result of fifteen years’ study and research. It is lucidly and attractively written, well laid out, ethnographically convincing, informed by extensive reading of astrological literature in Sanskrit and Hindi, and refreshingly devoid of pretentious theorizing. Guenzi describes the different types of astrologer she encountered in Benares, and provides a mass of subtly contextualized material on their work and clientele. Her book will be a fundamental reference for any future work in the field.

There are two areas—one to do with the presentation of the ethnography, the other to do with the analysis—where I was left wanting more. Although Guenzi and her assistant Sunita Singh filmed and analysed many actual consultations with fifty astrologers, we are given no systematic data on the nature of the cases, the clients, the diagnoses, or the treatments revealed by this corpus. Although she lived with astrologers, she at no point conveys a rounded picture of what role astrology plays in the everyday life of the astrologers themselves. Despite the numerous nuggets, short extracts, of actual consultations, nowhere do we have a rounded picture of a client and how astrology solved (or did not solve) their problems. By restricting herself to learned astrologers, *strictu sensu*, and excluding all the other healers (Tantrics, *ojha*, *maulvi*, *jharpukhe vaidyas*) who also deal with misfortune, she perhaps deprived herself of the opportunity to say something more encompassing about the Indian (or at least Banarasi) attitude to misfortune.

On the more analytical side, she does not attempt to contribute to the literature on rationality and relativism. She never tries to wrestle with the question of what it feels like to believe, or half-believe, in astrological causation, whether as astrologer or as client. Although she states at the outset that she does not believe in astrology, and that is precisely the reason why she wanted to study it, nowhere does she discuss whether this ever became a source of tension with her informants, who must have come to know, eventually, that she did not share their faith in the techniques by which they earned their living and defined their identity. She discusses her ‘positionality’, as the current Anglophone jargon has it, briefly, but then reverts to an Olympian objectivism for the rest of her account.

In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard (1937: 475-8) famously noted that he had run the affairs of his household in Zandeland according to the dictates of local oracles and declared it to be as good a method as any other for taking day-to-day decisions. He, however, listed twenty-two reasons why the Azande do not lose faith in their oracles, despite the fact that they frequently come up with results or answers that are contradicted by reality. In *Le discours du destin* we are given in fragments some of the methods by which astrologers’ pronouncements are protected from falsification, but Guenzi seems not to be interested in analysing astrology as a system of belief in this way, despite claiming that her aim is to understand it as a form of knowledge with its own meaning and rationality ‘in the context in which it is practised’ (Guenzi 2013: 27).

This, I hope, is Guenzi’s first work on the subject, not the last, since she evidently has far more material than she has been able to include in even this sizeable monograph. She also clearly demonstrates how fruitful the combination of classical Indology and anthropology—advocated by Louis Dumont and so unfashionable in most anthropology of
South Asia today—can be. I look forward to future publications that may address those aspects and those questions that she was not able to tackle in this book.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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