

Star Struck



Spirits enwr his body to speak your future or help you find a lost object. Photo courtesy: Thilak Seneviratne



A Buddhist priest reads from the ola leaves when setting auspicious dates for weddings, ceremonies and religious occasions. Photo courtesy: Thilak Seneviratne

Sri Lanka is hurtling through an unprecedented phase of development. Multi-story buildings rise toward the sky overnight. Free trade zones expand. Foreign investment is pouring in. Business thrives. Gone is the lazy-paced Lanka of the past.

But amid the hustle and bustle, Sri Lanka is still an island where life is a mosaic of mysterious beliefs and exotic rituals, and the ancient science of astrology, as old as civilization, still holds sway a powerful influence in affairs of state and in the life of its citizens.

Even before the arrival of the Aryan Prince Vijaya, founder of the Sinhala race from India around 500 BC, the island was inhabited by an intelligent people who studied the stars. There are many tales about Ravana, the most famous of the legendary monarchs of Lankapura. He was the ten-headed demon king who kidnapped Sita, wife of the Indian prince Rama, and started an epic war chronicled in the Ramayana. His ten heads signify ten supreme skills of which he was master; among other things, he is supposed to have been skilled in astronomy, which at that time was intermixed with astrology.

There has been a resurgence in the West of interest in the ancient science of

astrology recently, but for the majority of Westerners it is still myth and fantasy. Not so for Sri Lankans-for them, astrology is a way of life. It plays a significant role in their lives, literally from the cradle to the grave and, whenever possible, the Sri Lankan will try to arrange his or her life so that it fits snugly into an auspicious slot.

Robert Knox, a seventeenth century English sailor who was a reluctant guest of the King of Kandy for twenty years before he escaped and returned to England, wrote the first book on Ceylon in English titled A Historical Relation of Ceylon. It became a best seller translated into three languages. In this book, Knox described the Sri Lankan skill in astrology.

“They who have understanding in astronomy, and practice it, are the priests of the highest order, of which the present King’s father was. But the common sort of astronomers are the weavers. These men can certainly foretell eclipses of the Sun and Moon. They make almanacs that last a month. They are written upon a tallipat leaf, a little above a foot long, and two fingers broad. In them are told the age of the Moon, and the good seasons to begin to plough and sow or to go on a journey, to take any work in hand. On this precise time they will be sure to sprinkle their first seed.

“These astronomers, or rather astrologers, are skillful in the knowledge of the stars and planets. By which they pretend to foretell all things concerning the health and recovery of sick persons; also concerning the fate of children born, about which the parents do presently consult them. When a person is sick, he carries to these men his Nativity, upon perusal of which they tell his destiny. These also direct fit times to begin journeys, or other undertakings. They are likewise consulted concerning marriages by looking upon the man and women’s nativity.”

That was in the mid-seventeenth century and the modern Sri Lankan still follows his fortune in the stars.

For believers, the vagaries of life -one’s state of mind, talent, human relationships, health, longevity and every event in life -are a manifestations of what the horoscope foretells. There is an auspicious time for setting out on journeys. for business deals, to go prospecting for gems, for laying foundation stones -for everything. in fact.

One of Sri Lanka’s leading astrologers, Colvin D. Senaratne. says that at least 90

percent of the population conduct the major affairs of their lives upon astrological guidance. "You will find," he says, "that among the most avid followers of astrology are politicians. They tend to frequent astrologers who are known for their ability to interpret what the planets -the lagna - hold for them."

Legend says that the reason that former Prime Minister Sri John Kotalawala was not a political success was that he refused to consult astrologers for guidance.

Colvin Senaratne comes from a family of Ayurvedic doctors, skilled in traditional medicine. In the course of studying of the ancient sacred languages of Sanskrit and Pali, he was persuaded by his teacher monks to take an interest in astrology. Since then he has gone far in his medical and astrological studies and sees a definite link between the two spheres. He is now the editor of the Iranama, a popular astrological weekly, and people from all walks of life come to consult him.

"This is a way of life with us," he says, "And who are we to scoff at the knowledge passed down to us from time of the Vedas?"

When a child is born, the first thing the parents do is get a horoscope cast for him or her. This is prepared by an astrologer specialized in this subject, the cornerstone of which is the positions of the sun, moon, planets and constellations at the exact time of birth. Their influence on the newborn child is deduced from the characteristic of the celestial bodies in their particular aspects to each other. The chart and the interpretation is inscribed on an ola parchment. This is the blueprint of the child and therefore precious. The parent waits in thumb-biting anxiety to the astrologer's finished product for the child born at an auspicious time brings good fortune and prosperity to the entire household.

Take, for instance, the routine events from birth to maturity of the average Sri Lankan child. He has his first meal of rice at an auspicious time fixed by the family astrologer who is as important as the family doctor. His first haircut, too, is an auspicious event. The lock of hair will be carefully kept for posterity. Akuru Igenima, the learning of the alphabet, takes place at an auspicious time. This is a joyful event, because even the humblest Sri Lankans treasure education.

A girl child has her ears pierced (you've guessed it) at an auspicious time. When a young maiden attains puberty, she is welcomed to womenhcxxi through a beautiful bathing ceremony, fixed for an auspicious time. She is bathed with water purified and perfumed with jasmine flowers which signifies that she has

blossomed into full womanhood. After this, the maiden must smash a coconut on the ground. It is a good omen if the two halves fall with the inner core facing upwards. Her father then invokes blessings upon her so that she will be fertile.

Then comes one of the most significant event in life - marriage. The matchmaker who played an indispensable role in the old days is now being replaced by the newspapers. Open any Sunday newspaper and you will find an astounding number of columns advertising marriage proposals. These make interesting reading.

Traditions die hard in Sri Lanka and most marriages are still arranged by the parents. It is absolutely crucial that the horoscope of the prospective bride and groom 'match'. If they don't, the matter is dropped like a hot kokis.

Called porondum belima, the compatibility test covers the entire gamut of human characteristics including the mental, emotional and physical disposition which is indispensable for marital harmony. There is also a special test to prove that the couple will be on the same sexual wave length.

There is a properly appointed time for every action - when the young man visits his betrothed for the first time, leaving for the wedding, the actual marriage ritual, leaving for their honeymoon, and so on.

Sri Lanka still has a predominantly agrarian economy. Rice is the staple diet and the cultivation process is almost a sacrament. The fertility rites are performed as they were two thousand years ago, although modern technology is slowly altering the perspective. Yet, ploughing the field, sowing the seed, harvesting, and threshing the paddy is all done at the astrologically correct time.

In the old days, warriors went to battle and commoners went to an audience with the king at an auspicious hour. Kala Sampathi Jaya Yoga is the tongue-twisting name of this auspicious hour. Building and moving into a new house is another time for astrological guidance. The foundation stone is laid at the right time. The lintel and the main beam is fixed at an auspicious time. When moving into the house, a pot of milk is boiled in the centre of the house until it overflows, symbolizing the milk and honey the household would in future presumably enjoy. This is the house-warming ceremony. It is followed by an all-night, sixteen hour holy incantation recitation ceremony by a dozen Buddhist priests. There are astute and level-headed businessmen who will not strike an important deal if it is

not an auspicious time.

Newspapers roll off the press at an auspicious time. And would you believe it, Hotel Ceylon InterContinental was opened at a chosen hour. In fact, even the renovations were started at a good time. So was the new Grindlays Bank. Most of the Free Trade Zone factories were opened at times named by astrologers. Politicians hand in nomination papers on the astrologer's advice, and Cabinets have always been sworn in after such consultation.

Newspapers, almanacs, manuals large and small, all cater to the millions of astrology believers throughout the island. But as in many other fields, there are different schools of thought on this subject and there are quacks and fakes and con-men who deceive the gullible. Among them, however, there are undoubtedly a few masters, sane men who have studied it as a science and whose predictions have come true with uncanny accuracy. In Sri Lanka, astrology will continue to wield its power as long as there are planets in the universe and believers on earth.



Dr. Kingsley Gunatilleke. a well-known palmist, reads from a carbon print of your palms. Photo courtesy: Thilak Seneviratne



By studying your palm, Mr. Dhanapala Rajapakse can read your life story. Photo courtesy: Thilak Seneviratne