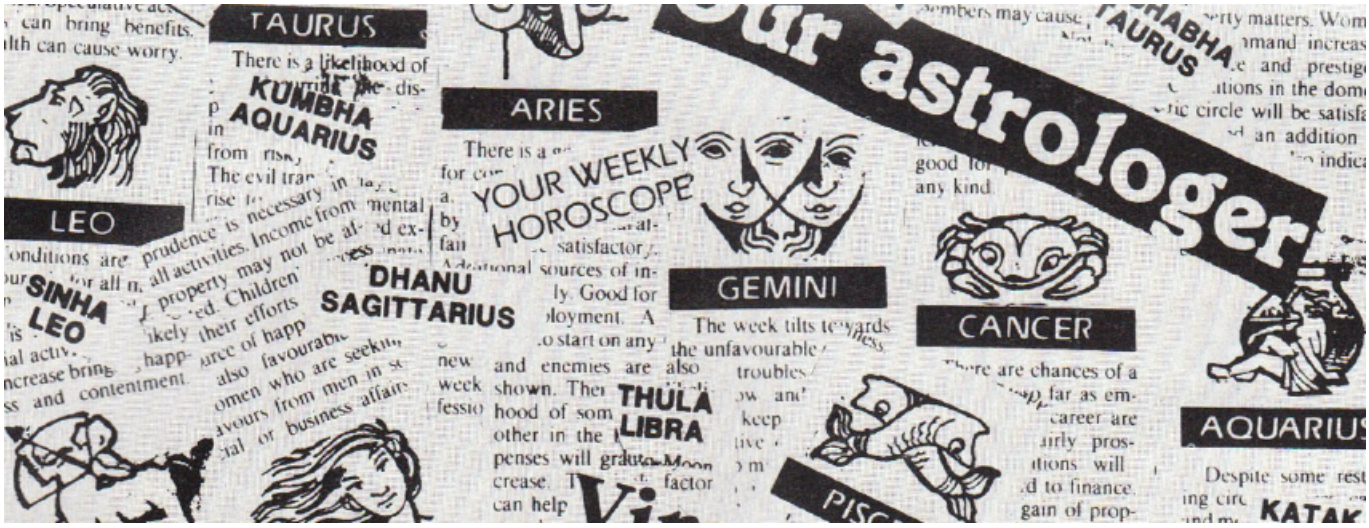
Your Signs in the Stars

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Star-crossed lovers in Sri Lanka are less likely to be plagued by a Montague and Capulet style family vendetta than by actually having their stars at cross purposes. There was the instance when a handsome lad began making hesitant advances to this pretty young thing. It was against their strict family code to find their own life partners but they hoped that both being Hindu Tamils and belonging to the same caste would go a long way in wiping away any parental frowns of displeasure. But they had forgotten their stars.

When their horoscopes, cast at birth, were pulled out by the parents and compared by an astrologer, he pronounced them incompatible. Alas for the two lovers who had struck up quite a lively correspondence too.

But, all was well when the girl promptly offered her best friend – also of marriageable age and seeking a mate – to her erstwhile lover. This time, the horoscopes tallied and, the fellow not being exceedingly finicky, they were soon married. Girlfriend No. 1 also wedded a matching horoscope, unearthed from replies to an advertisement in the ‘bridegroom wanted’ columns. And so, they all lived happily ever after.

This tale reveals the extent to which astrology pervades the lives of Sri Lankans. Sacrifices will be made if need be, no matter how heart-wrenching or mind-boggling. A deep, unquestioning and often irrational faith in what the stars and planets portend is very much a part of the daily lives of most of the island's people. It has little to do with religion, with both the majority community Sinhalese Buddhists being as much staunch believers as the minority Tamil Hindus. Christians, for whom their catechism strictly forbids any such dependence on the supernatural, surreptitiously have the horoscopes of their offspring drawn up too. For cultural influences such as this transcend religious and communal barriers in this small country. It is also somehow satisfying to have the foreknowledge that this child will bring good fortune to the household and the one will be a bright student and while the third may be somewhat sickly the regular performance of this or that pooja (religious rite) will set that aright.

That omniscient personage, the astrologer, holds sway over practically every important rung of a person's life, beginning at birth . Many of the landed gentry have their particular family seer who serves all branches of the household. When a baby is born, the attendant nurse or midwife duty notes the exact time of birth. With this, the parent· rushes to his or her favourite star-gazer who usually establishes his credibility by proclaiming if the newborn is a boy or girl. With a correct guess, it i smooth sailing for him as he sets about plotting the child' 'lagna' or star. The stars with different Sinhala and Tamil names, are equivalent to the 12 signs of the zodiac but they do not correspond to the dates that the Western system sets out.

Then the astrologer gives a series of first letters which are to be used in selecting a name for the child. One out of the several he suggests, he says, will wield the best influence on the child. But if the parents can come up with nothing but a tongue-twister with that particular letter, then they can take their pick of the others I beneficial but still serviceable.

The astrologer also gives them the horoscope chart showing the planetary positions at the time of birth. This chart usually serves a person throughout his life with various astrologers reading it for him as and when he wants it. If they beg to differ in their predictions, as it sometimes turns out, then it is up to the client to reconcile them for himself. The readings themselves cost varying amounts, with detailed interpretations painstakingly written out by the astrologer in an exercise book costing much more than a short one of a few pages. In it will be such stimulating pieces of foresight as when the person will get married, whether or not he will go

abroad whether he will own a house, how many children he will have, what kind of profession he is likely to pursue – all this information can be asked for and had a birth too.

Some soothsayers have also struck a rich vein answering readers' queries – mainly centring around marriage and career – in newspaper columns. Although they do it gratis, the invaluable free advertisement they get is fully worth it. Of course, all newspapers have the regulation. What your stars foretell column usually giving your lucky colour and number for the day. This daily guide is strictly adhered to by some people although they might be less keen if they knew that much columns are likely to be written by the least busy reporter on the news desk that day rather than by an accredited astrologer. Not all astrologers are good at keeping to newspapers deadlines.

Besides birth and marriage, astrologers are also in heavy demand for events like inaugurating a business venture, opening a shop, concluding an important business deal or as happened recently even taking the presidential oath. New President Ranasinghe Premadasa was followed accepting tradition in consulting astrologers for the nekath (the auspicious time) to take his oath of office as well as to move into his official residence, the Janadhipathi Mandiraya. He is not alone. Another parliamentary veteran is known to carry his horoscope in his pocket for quick verifications. Almost all Buddhists and Hindu weddings take place on these good days and on such days hotels usually do a roaring business renting out their halls and catering for the occasion.

Perhaps in a country like Sri Lanka where psychiatrists can be counted on the fingers of one hand astrologers fill the gap. They can provide much needed solace in a crisis and if they fail in some way, despair can be kept at bay by questioning the authenticity of that particular practitioner rather than the craft. Something you can always do with God. In fact, many people here would not agree with Shakespeare's dictum that the fault lies in us and not in our stars what with karma and all that. Seeking answers in the astral plane can breed a fatalism that is able to calmly face the slings and arrows of fortune. Another story is not out of place here.

A woman was maddened with grief when her only son died in an accident in Europe where he had gone to study. Her disbelief on hearing the tragic news was all the more because his horoscope had specifically said that at 24 – the age at which he had died – his life would blossom. Soon after the obsequies were over, she went to another astrologer more in an effort to revive her shaken faith that anything else.

She told him the story and asked him how the horoscope could have been so erroneous. Replied the man: Well, the other astrologer was not wrong. Your son has indeed gone on to better things. In the next world. For isn’t death a release? And the woman came away in peace.