

Astrology at the Mughal Court
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Abstract

Astrology has played an important part in the Muslim world since the middle of the 8th century A.D. Most probably, the need to understand and imitate astrological texts from the Sasanid Empire and Greek antiquity was crucial in initiating the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. Later on, both in the Arabo-Latin as well as in the Sanskrit-Persian translation movement astrology played a major role, too.

The desire to know the future and to acquire information about the hidden was widespread in all strata of society. The sources are however more or less silent about the use of astrology on a popular level and mostly reflect the situation at court. Astrology was amply used by rulers and kings, but no other dynasty made such extensive use of astrological advices and predictions as the Mughal rulers. Historiographic works of the Mughal Empire abound with remarks on the omnipresence of astrologers and their activities at court. The emperor who is best-known for his astrological background was Humayun who is often depicted with a pair of compasses in his hand. Later rulers seem to have had less knowledge of astrology, but astrologers belonged to their retinue and were consulted for even minor decisions.

Astrology was in Mughal time part of a whole set of occult practices dedicated to enhance the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty. The ruler was cosmologically distinguished and able to dominate the forces of nature – that's at least the picture designed in sources as the Akbarnama in which astrology and cosmology are used to emphasize the ruler's outstanding position. Investigating the role of astrology, we thus have to distinguish between two levels: the function of astrology in the sources, and its actual use in Mughal time.

Astrology was of great importance in almost all Muslim Empires. At least from Abbasid times on, astrologers were present at court. The different divisions of astrology – individual as well as mundane astrology, nativities, elections and interrogations – were carried out and played an important part in the daily life of the people as well as the rulers. Huge compendia on all kinds of astrological knowledge, partly translated from Greek or Pahlavi, and partly written by Muslim authors who further developed the heritage they took over from antiquity testify to the vast use of astrology all over the Muslim World.

In India, the astrological lore was not only influenced by the Arabic and Persian heritage, but also by the Indian, mostly Sanskrit tradition. Already during the Sultanate period, astrological treatises like the Brihat Samhita were translated from Sanskrit into Persian. Such translations were initiated and supported by the rulers; however, it is highly probably that not only at court, but also in the daily life of ordinary people, astrology played an important part.

Unfortunately, our sources usually do not pay much attention to ordinary people and their life. We are thus fortunate to have at least one miniature painting from the period of Akbar showing activities of daily life: the scenario is a market place, with a melon-vendor, a money changer and a seller of dry fruit offering their services.¹ The center of the painting is however taken by an astrologer sitting under a huge canopy, with three assistants at his sides, and a long queue of women from diverse social backgrounds standing in line before him. An astrolabe, a huge book and three well-filled moneybags complete the scenario. This painting is, of course, not a rendering of a real historical setting; it is rather filled with stereotypes of behavior patterns. It shows us an astrologer and his clients as they were conceived of by the painter: a greedy man, and women of diverse ethnic backgrounds assembled to ask him for advice.

The majority of other paintings of astrologers show them in a courtly context, most often, in birth scenarios. The mother has just given birth, the new-born baby is somewhere in the room, and close by, either in a room below the birth chamber, or outside the inner palace, the astrologers are waiting to take the ascendant at the right moment, immediately after the birth of the prince.² These paintings are as well stereotype representations of princely births; however, they correspond to descriptions in the sources. Existing horoscopes of Mughal princes support the assumption that astrologers were indeed asked to prepare a horoscope after a prince's birth. An interesting detail of the images deserves further attention: usually, astrologers in courtly scenarios do not work alone, but in team, and in some cases, their diverse ethnic background is emphasized in the paintings by showing people with different skin colors and diverse clothes. We can thus conclude that in the graphic representation of astrologers and their clients, ethnic diversity has been a common stereotype.

Turning from miniature paintings to historiography, we easily recognize that astrology plays an important part in the depiction of early Mughal rulers. That's to say, in the

¹ Goswamy and Fischer 1987, 126-127, Nr. 58.

² See e.g. Wade 1998, figures 53 and 54 (the birth of Prince Salim), figure 55 (rejoicing at Fatehpur Sikri on the birth of Akbar's second son); Welch 1978, plate 16 (the birth of a prince).

historiographical sources especially on Humāyūn and Akbar, astrology is often mentioned. It is thus worthwhile to ask which roles astrology fulfils in the narratological setting of early Mughal historiography, and to contrast this with the factual evidence we have on the “real” importance of astrology during that period, the latter being much more difficult to grasp.

The best examples for the use of astrology in historiography are contained in the Akbar-nāma by Abū l-Faẓl. They are given in the description of Akbar’s birth, in the prognostications which are related to his nativities, and in Humāyūn’s reaction on the horoscope. All three passages are highly construed episodes meant to single out Akbar’s pre-ordained superiority as well as his outstanding personality and fate.

The moment of birth is thus described as follows:

One of the strange things, which happened shortly before the appearance of the light of good fortune was the following: before this auspicious moment, nature required to give birth. Maulana Chand, the astrologer, who, by royal order, was present at the threshold of chastity to determine and to appoint the ascendant, became agitated [and said]: “Just now, the moment is inauspicious. However, in a few hours, an auspicious moment will arrive such as happens only once in 1,000 years. I wish the birth could be delayed!” The people present at the assembly made light of this, [saying]: “What benefit is there in this? These things cannot be chosen!” At that instant, the requirement ceased. To some extent, his (i.e., Maulana Chand’s) mind was put at ease with the inauspicious moment’s passing. (...)

And when the chosen moment was coming close, the Maulana became anxious that this moment should not pass. The intimates of the holy haram let him know: “Her majesty of the most eminent cradle has found some rest after much labor and is sleeping. It would not be appropriate to waken her. Whatever the incomparable God in His will has decreed will happen.” While they were talking in this way, a violent pain awoke her majesty Maryam Makani. And at that auspicious moment, this peerless jewel of the caliphate whose fortune is awake appeared.³

In this passage, divine intervention and astral determination are diligently interwoven. The stars – in this case the ascendant – are ascribed a decisive role for the fate of human beings, but supernatural intervention can influence the moment of birth and thus help the native to be born under the most propitious astral constellation. The role of astrologer is that of an alerter and adviser, he is the expert who knows the consequences of specific constellations, but is helpless with regard to changing the events. This role is reserved for God, who obviously has decreed that Akbar should be born in the most auspicious moment and therefore first stops the birth process, and then prompts it. The reference to a time period of 1,000 years clearly point to the millennial aspirations of Akbar: he is a millennial ruler, whose simile only appears once in a thousand years.

The narration about Akbar and his outstanding horoscope does however not stop here, but continues with a report about his father and his reaction on the horoscope. Humāyūn, who was

³ Abū’l-Faẓl ‘Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I, 18–19. Engl. trans Beveridge I, 56–57; engl. trans. Thackston I 65-67.

an expert on astrology himself, immediately understood the significance of this horoscope and looked at it again and again:⁴

People close to his majesty Jahānbānī Jannat Ashiyānī (=Humāyūn), whose outer and inner being was adorned with rightness and propriety, were heard saying that when his majesty Jahānbānī Jannat Ashiyānī looked at the horoscopes with the auspicious ascendants and studied them, it sometimes happened that in the retirement of his private rooms, with the doors closed, he fell to dancing out of sheer affection and moved in circles out of emotion. (...)

Repeatedly, he explained to those worthy of his speech that with regard to some sublime matters, the ascendant of this luminary of good fortune is several degrees better than the ascendant of the Lord of conjunctions, as is evident to those who look closely at the tables of astrological rules. And if one compares these two precious documents of bliss and weighs the shares (‘aṭiyāt) of the planets and the auspicious <effects> of the upper planets against each other with careful consideration, one finds out which information is contained in that horoscope of the lord of conjunction, and about what these holy horoscopes give information.

Two points are of specific significance here: first, Humāyūn’s well-known expertise in astrology is used in this passage to turn him into a herald of his son’s coming glory. His role is thus reduced to being the father of a famous son and to knowing and proclaiming his son’s future relevance. The second important point is the comparison between Timur and Akbar and their respective horoscopes: Timur, the Lord of conjunctions, was considered the Mughal dynasty’s predecessor; he was important for legitimacy and famous for his privileged ascendant. By declaring Akbar’s ascendant superior to that of Timur, his destiny, fate and importance were simultaneously superordinated to that of Timur. He was thus turned into the new point of reference for the dynasty – for astrological reasons!

Finally, the horoscope respectively the horoscopes of Akbar are included in the text and fill about 20 pages in the Persian edition of the Akbar-nāma.⁵ While they do not contain elaborate calculations, but only indications of the planetary positions at the moment of birth and the houses, they include extensive predictions on the native’s later accomplishments. The horoscopes were done according to four different methods, in between them, one based on Indian astrological calculations, and one according to Greek methods and based on Ulugh Beg’s astronomical tables. It is possible to correlate some of the different predictions with specific developments in Akbar’s live. Here again, astrology is therefore used to suggest that Akbar’s policies were predestined by his ascendant. His deeds and activities are consequently described as instigated by superior forces.⁶

Since the entire Akbar-nāma is meant to underline Akbar’s superiority and his outstanding achievements,⁷ the use of astrology is only one element in the narratological arrangement of the book. It helps in linking the ruler to the superior world and attributing to him an elevated

⁴ Abū’l-Faḏl ‘Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I, 41–43. Engl. trans. Beveridge: I, 119–24; Engl. trans. Thackston I, 143–45.

⁵ Abū’l-Faḏl ‘Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I, 23–43; engl. trans. Beveridge: I, 69–128; engl. trans. Thackston I, 81–137.

⁶ Orthmann 2005, passim.

⁷ Historiographical concepts and narrative strategies in the *Akbar-nāma* are described in detail in Conermann, *Historiographie als Sinnstiftung*, 159–73.

rank. At the same time, it creates a hierarchical difference between him and his father: Humāyūn was only an expert in observation and interpretation, in this regard, similar to Maulānā Chānd, the astrologer present at Akbar's birth. Akbar in contrast does not need to be an expert, but is himself blessed by the stars – to such an extent that even his father thankfully recognizes his superiority.

Turning from narratological representation to the “real” importance of astrology, the situation becomes more difficult to assess. We are again mostly dependent on historiographical sources, miniature paintings, and, to a certain extent, architecture.

Let's start our investigation with Humāyūn, the second Mughal emperor. His interest in astrology, numerology and all kinds of occult sciences is emphasized again and again in the sources. On one of the dynastic miniature paintings showing Timur, Bābur and Humāyūn, he is depicted with a pair of compasses in his hands.⁸ We furthermore know that Humāyūn died by falling down the steps from his library. It is less known, but still explicitly said in the sources that he had come to its roof to observe a Venus transit, and that he wanted to use this opportunity for promotions in rank of his officers.⁹ It is therefore highly probably that he considered the specific astral constellation of that evening auspicious for this undertaking.

A more elaborate use of astrology and cosmology for self-representation can be deduced from his strange inventions and constructions, especially his round carpet as well as his double-walled tent. The carpet consisted of eleven concentric circles, with the two elements water and earth in the middle, and the Atlas sphere at the outer edge. The central circles were attributed to the seven planets, and were colored accordingly: the circle of Mars in red, the circle of the sun in gold, etc. The spheres were meant to be occupied by people gathering for the emperor's meeting (majlis): everybody was supposed to sit in the sphere corresponding to his occupation and ethnic or social belonging.¹⁰ Similar assignments of people were done with regard to the emperor's functionaries and servants, who were attributed to the four elements fire, water, earth and water.¹¹ The emperor therefore seems to have had a liking for cosmological correlations. His penchant for astrology is even more obvious in the construction of a double-walled tent, consisting of an outer cover in white, and an inner tarpaulin in colour, probably, blue. This inner tarpaulin was divided into twelve sections representing the twelve zodiacal signs, and was pierced. The small holes were arranged in the shape of the constellations and represented the fixed stars in the sky. The tent was thus a mobile representation of the sphere of the fixed stars and the Atlas sphere, the two outmost spheres of the cosmos.¹² It resembled round drawings of the horoscope, like the famous horoscope of Iskender Sultan.¹³ When Humāyūn was sitting in this tent, he was thus sitting

⁸ Goswamy and Fischer 1987, 90-91, Nr. 40.

⁹ Abū'l-Faẓl 'Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I, 363.

¹⁰ Khwāndamīr, *Qānūn-i Humāyūnī* 110 ff; also Abū'l-Faẓl 'Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I 361. See also Orthmann 2011, 204.

¹¹ Khwāndamīr, *Qānūn-i Humāyūnī* 48 ff; also Abū'l-Faẓl 'Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I 359f.

¹² Khwāndamīr, *Qānūn-i Humāyūnī* 68-70; also Abū'l-Faẓl 'Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I 361. See also Orthmann 2011, 204-5.

¹³ The Welcome Institute Library, Ms Persian 13, London. See also e.g. Caiozzo 2005.

under the representation of a horoscope. By placing the round carpet inside the tent, a complete cosmic model was created.

We furthermore learn that Humāyūn had constructed a palace with seven rooms, each of them dedicated to one of the planets and decorated correspondingly. According to Firishta, Humāyūn hold his audience on every day of the week in the room dedicated to that day's ruling planet (Sunday being attributed to the sun, Monday to the Moon, etc.) and dealt with affairs related to it, while both the ruler as well as the people attending were dressed in that planet's color.¹⁴ Moreover, the emperor imitated the daily and annual course of the sun by showing himself like the rising sun in the Daršana ceremony at morning¹⁵ and by performing specific activities at Nourūz.¹⁶

Humāyūn's interest in astrology and occult sciences is furthermore obvious in the *Jawahir al-'ulūm-i Humāyūnī*, a huge encyclopedia written for the emperor, which contains rather lengthy parts on all kinds of occult sciences.¹⁷ He was furthermore on intimate terms with Shaikh Phūl and his brother Muḥammad Ghauth Gwāliyārī, two Sufi Shaikhs from the Shaṭṭāriyya who were inter alia famous for their invocations of the planets.¹⁸ All these indications confirm that Humāyūn took a deep interest in astrology, and that astrology was promoted and supported during his reign.

Turning to the reign of Akbar, we find multiple references in the sources to his use of elections, that is, the astrological determination of the right moment for the beginning of an enterprise like the foundation of a fortress, the beginning of a war etc. Astrologers belonged to the court not only of the emperor, but also of important *manṣabdārs* like 'Abd ar-Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān.¹⁹ Similar to his father, Akbar was dressed in the colour of the dominant planet of the day,²⁰ and administered imperial affairs during the week in harmony with the dominant planet, too, reserving e.g. Thursday for discussions with learned people.²¹

The roof of his *daulat-khāna-yi khāṣṣ* was shaped in the form of a typical square horoscope. When Akbar was sitting on the round platform in that building, he was consequently sitting under a representation of a horoscope, reproducing in this the position of his father in the latter's cosmic tent.²² Akbar also imitated the daily and annual course of the sun.²³

In spite of all this interest in cosmic relations and astrology, the number of astrological texts produced during the reign of Akbar seems to be rather low. A preliminary survey shows that

¹⁴ Khwāndamīr, *Qānūn-i Humāyūnī* 72-77; Abū'l-Faẓl 'Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* I 361; Firishta, *Ta'riḫ-i Firishta* I, 397.

¹⁵ Khwāndamīr, *Qānūn-i Humāyūnī* 72-73.

¹⁶ Khwāndamīr, *Qānūn-i Humāyūnī* 95-96; see also Orthmann 2011, 207-8.

¹⁷ An overview of the chapters in this encyclopaedia is provided by Taṣbiḥī 1356/1977.

¹⁸ See Ernst 2008; Orthmann 2017.

¹⁹ E.g. Farīd ad-Dīn (Nihāvandī, *Ma'āthīr-i Raḥīmī* III 9-17), Shaikh Ṭabīb (Nihāvandī, *Ma'āthīr-i Raḥīmī* III 62), Muḥammad Riẓā (Nihāvandī, *Ma'āthīr-i Raḥīmī* III 1674-75).

²⁰ Badā'ūnī, 'Abd ul-Qādir: *Muntakhab at-tawārīkh* II, 261.

²¹ Badā'ūnī, 'Abd ul-Qādir: *Muntakhab at-tawārīkh* II, 255.

²² Orthmann 2011, 210-12 + figure 11.5 (p. 215).

²³ Franke 2005, 224-31.

more texts were written in Sanskrit than in Persian.²⁴ Horoscopes were quite often prepared according to Indian and Greek methods, testifying to a deep interest in both sources of knowledge.²⁵ Cooperation between Hindu and Muslim astrologers therefore obviously was not only a topos shown on miniature paintings, but a daily reality. In the field of astral magic, one of the most outstanding oeuvres is the illuminated version of the chapter on the invocation of the degrees of the zodiac from Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī's *sirr al-maktūm*, currently hold at Rampur.²⁶ The chapter which is related to Ṭomṭom al-Hindī is devoted to talismanic practices and astral magic. The great care and effort executed in that book testify to the prevailing importance of such practices during the reign of Akbar. Maybe, the attribution of this chapter to Indian lore increased its interest for Akbar, since it seemingly was a perfect example of an early adaptation of Indian traditions into Islamic and Persian texts.

To sum up: Astrology and astral magic were quite important during the time of Humāyūn and Akbar. Many practices which we better know from the period of Akbar existed already under his father and were (only) further developed by him. Astral magic, especially the invocation of planets or the degrees of the zodiac, was also well-known and enjoyed great popularity. Besides the prospect of dominating supernatural powers, the aspect of synthesis and amalgamation between Indian and Persian traditions fostered the rulers' interest in the astral sciences, since it fitted quite well into his general policies of *ṣulḥ-i kull*. As Corinne Lefèvre asserts, the Mughal Empire was characterized by a combination of occult practices and strong tendencies towards rationality. I would not consider these two trends as antagonistic, but rather deem astrology a somehow rational science, since it was rooted in natural philosophy and therefore more scientific than e.g. religion. The deep interest in astrology therefore expresses in my opinion the wish to make use of a worldview based on natural philosophy and acceptable to all, and the propensity to astral magic testifies to the desire to dominate and control the natural forces.

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²⁴ In Marshall 1967, Nr 1320, 1398 (i-iv), 1442 (vii) are astrological treatises written in Sanskrit during the time of Akbar; 1518 (iv) is in mixed Sanskrit and Persian.

²⁵ E.G. the horoscope of Akbar himself, the one of Prince Salīm (Abū’l-Faẓl ‘Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* II, 345-47; Prince Murād (Abū’l-Faẓl ‘Allāmī, *Akbar-nāma* II, 353-55).

²⁶ Khandalavala 1969; Vesel 2002-3, esp. 167.

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