Telling the Future by Shells
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DIVINE ARTS

Telling the Future by Shells

Kerala's unique form of astrological prediction

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Jyotish Surendran is in the 19th generation of a family of astrologers who trace their origins to 1237ce and the arrival of Guru Bhattathiri in the small town of Pazhoor Padipura, Kerala. Surendran is a practitioner of a specialized form of astrology, apparently founded by Bhattathiri and unique to this area of Kerala, which uses 108 shells to give advice and predict the future. Each morning Surendran does three hours of puja worship to Lord Ganesha and to Guru Bhattathiri, whose samadhi shrine (burial tomb) is within the compound. "Only after invoking his blessings will I begin my practice," Surendran explained to Hinduism Today. "There are over 4,000 books on astrology," he said, "but one may not become a complete astrologer without support from the divine power."

He follows the divination system called Ashtamangalay Prasnam, which uses 108 small conch shells specially selected, cleaned and sanctified. After reciting mantras, the shells are mixed and the first part, ganitha, or calculations, begins. Some are picked up and kept separately. They are divided into

different parts of four each, and the balance determines the zodiacal position of the visitor. According to P.R. Krishnakumar of Coimbatore, a prominent businessman and ardent follower of the system, the selection of the shells is used in conjunction with the position of the planets at the moment the person arrives (which, used alone, is the system of divination called hora). Other supplementary methods, he says, include reading of betel leaves, observation of an oil lamp and the drawing of the astrological chart's outline (rasichakra) by the client. The birth chart of the person is not required.

The astrologer begins his reading. As the person confirms the information divined, the phalabagra, predictions and remedies, are recommended. A group of astrologers consulting together can unravel complex problems. In the past, says Surendran, all the problems of a family, such as illness, wealth, and life expectancy, were revealed by this method in sessions that could last for days. However, with the advent of modernism, such a thorough guidance from the shells is today almost nonexistent, he said.

"At least 70 percent of my visitors, numbering around 15 daily except on Saturday, are Christians," Surendran said. Even parish priests come with problems faced by the churches--following the example of Hindu temple managers who consult Surendran and fellow astrologers for advice. Ten percent of his clients are Muslims. Hindus, who are supposed to be the believers in this Vedic system, are by and large moving away from it. The Christians, who do not openly admit its accuracy and brand it as superstition, privately embrace it. One famous astrologer in Chengannur, Mohanan Namboothiri, said, "As the Christians become rich, they are more and more

becoming the ardent believers of astrology. It has been proved that when they commenced their ventures at the time as suggested by me, their business flourished." O.A. Thomas, a Christian now working in the Gulf States said, "My marriage, securing an overseas job and other important events were predicted by Surendran with 99 percent accuracy."

Remedies to overcome bad times usually require worship of Lord Siva. Thomas explained that since it would be difficult for the Christians to do so, they were advised to worship St. George (patron saint of England, slayer of the dragon), keeping in mind Lord Siva. Alternatively, reports Surendran, the Christians will have a Hindu friend do the offerings on their behalf in a Hindu temple.

Even a little-known astrologer can earn an income of several thousand rupees a month, while those of some renown can earn that in a day. The new residential house of Mr. Surendran which I toured is certainly a clear indication of his earnings. His old house, which has been the center of astrology for several centuries, is going to be transformed into a museum.

Among the various methods of astrological analysis, Surendran believes the conch shell divination to be the best, be it to ascertain a family problem, a temple problem or even that of a church.

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Christians Encroach on Ancient Shrine

Panchali Hill is named after Draupadi, wife of the five Pandavas of the Mahabharata. Upon this hill in Kerala's Idukki district stood the very old remains of temple stones and deities. Local Hindu residents, mostly illiterate tribal people, told Hinduism Today that Christian encroachers removed the image of Goddess Shakti from the summit of Panchali Hill and broke into pieces footprints in stone believed to be those of the Pandavas. Now only large granite slabs of the original shrine remain, and fifteen concrete crosses have been placed from the road up to the hilltop where the Goddess was once enshrined.

According to Bhaskaran, an old man who had looked after the small sanctum in the past, the entire nearby land of several hundred acres was in the possession of a Hindu family for many years. They had rented it for cultivation from a Christian family. Then under the land reforms of the 1950s, Christians took permanent possession of all but ten acres, including the temple. Recently Christians even gained possession of half that area. Hindus living in the area--about 60 families--continue to visit the holy site and offer prayers. From the top of this hill the sacred lamp of Sabarimala can be seen.

As a result of Christian efforts, several important local landmarks have been renamed after Christian saints.

The cross construction is the work of Christian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the area in projects of organic farming, herbal and medicinal plant cultivation and other social welfare programs using funds from the government, according to Mr. Aravindakshan, president of

the temple protection committee.

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