Astrology and Muslims some glimpses from pre – Islamic period

Dr. Asad Ahmed
Associate professor
Department of History, Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa College,
University of Delhi, Delhi-110007

Abstract: Through astrology is forbidden in Islam, it was a subject of deep curiousity / anxiety among Muslims since time immemorial Muslim kings & elites took deep interest in it and patronized various astronomers/astrologis from time to time . This articles gives an interesting insight into the subject which relatively lesser known facts.

The interaction between Brahmanism and Islam or rather followers of Islam dates back to the Abbasid khalifas. The astronomical text of Brahmagupta and the medical treatises of Charak and Susruta were translated into Arabic into the Abbasid Period[1]. It would be interesting to examine how for the realization of the magnitude of the magnitude of Greek influence on Indian astronomy led to the promulgation of the religious tenets which, according to Pingree, were responsible for the reserved attitude of the Hindu scholars towards the later Muslim astronomical treatises.[2]

There were at least five leading astronomers during the 8th century. One of them, Ya'qub al-Fazari, brought an educated Hindu, Manka, to the court of al-

Mansur. It was al-Fazari's son who translated the Siddhanta, and who constructed the first astrolabe[3]. Al-Tusi also synthesized Greek and Hindu mathematics, resulting in the formation of spherical trigonometry in his Shakl al-Qatta[4]. The great jurist Abu Hanifah supported astronomy. The astronomer al-Kashi was one of his followers. The extreme attitude of another reputed jurist, Imam Shafi'I (fl. 8th Century C.E.), who was against scholasticism was later modified by Imam Nawawi and the celebrated Al-Ghazali. It is worth nothing that Al-Ghazali[5] (d. 1111 C.E.) attitude was somewhat ambivalent. In his Tahafut al-Falasifah [Incoherence of the Philosophers], he maintained[6]. Abu Mashar Balkhi (d. 585 A.D.), a famous astronomer of Iran, who stayed for ten long years at Benares to learn astronomy. The cipher and the science of Arithmetic, he said, originated from India, and the inventor was a Brahmin named Asa-and that is why the Persian word for figure 'Hindsa' is a combination of 'Hind' and 'Asa'.

The Muslims, particularly the 'Arab scholars felt very much impressed with the achievements made by India in astronomical and celestial sciences. Ya'qubi (d. 900 A.D.) claims that the earliest book complied on astronomy was Brahama Sapt Sidhant, which was written[7]). He is of opinion that the learned discussions on astronomy and astrology by the Greeks and the Iranians owe also very much to this book[8].

Literary evidence shows that a delegation from Sind visited the court of Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (A.D. 753-774) at Baghdad in 154/771 or 156/773, and presented an Indian astronomical work, most probably Brahmasphutasiddhanta by Brahmagupta, composed in A.D. 628. It was translated into Arabic, by the order of the Caliph, by Ya'qub bin Tariq (d. A.D. 796) and Ibrahim aI-Fazari (d. A.D. 796 or 806) and exercised influence on Arabic astronomy.

Most probably the two earliest Arab authors whose works discuss some elements of Indian astronomy are al-Fazari and Ya'qub bin Tariq. Their translation of the Brahmasputasiddhanta in its complete form is probably lost, but several fragments have been published[9]. The two works, entitled Zij al-Sindhind (astronomical tables) and al-Jami' wa al-Tafriq bi Hisab al-Hind contain Indian elements. Zij al-Sindhind of al-Khwarizmi (d.c. A.D. 850) also exhibits elements of Indian astronomy. Al-Ya'qhbi's (d. 284/867) Ta'rikh and Al-Mas'udi's (d. 345/956) Muruj al-Dhahab and Kitab al-Tanbih wa al-Ishraf record the history of the culture and civilization of the different nations of antiquity including that of India. Among the civilized nation of the world, Al Masudi mentions the Persians, the Chaldeans, the Greeks , the Egyptians, the Turks, the Indians and the Chinese[10]. Firdaws al-Hikmah of 'All bin Rabhan al-Tabari (d. C. A.D. 850) has one full chapter on the Ayurveda[11], and al-Hawi of Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Zakariya al-Razi, published in 22 volumes from Hyderabad, frequently refers to Ayurvedic works. Such references, though not too frequent, are also found in the well-known at-Qanun fi' al-Tibb of Ibn Sina or Avicenna (c. A.D. 980—1037) and other works on Arab medicine.

Kitab al-Fihrist of Ibn al-Nadim (d. A.D. 385/995), a bio-bibliographical work, gives a list of twelve Sanskrit books, dealing with Ayurveda, translated into Arabic. Ibn al-Nadim records the names of Manka and Ibn Dhan who translated Sanskrit works into Arabic an mentions fourteen other Indian astronomers, astrologers and physicians with titles of some of their works. Abu al-Qasim Qadi a'id al-Andalusi's (d. 462/1070) Tabaqat al-Umam is the first world history of science containing one (the first) substantial chapter on Indian science and culture[12]. Al-Biruni's (d. 442/1050) Kitab al-Hind, al-Qanun al-Mas'udi, al-Athar al-Baqiyah and other works are important as they contain useful and near accurate

information about Indian astronomy, mathematics, geography, astrology and other sciences not found elsewhere. There are two biographical dictionaries Ta'rikh al-Hukama' of al-Qifti (d. 646/1248), which notice Indian scientists[13], and 'Uyun al-Anba' fi Tabaqat al-Atibba' by Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah (d. 668/1270), which contains one full chapter entitled "Atibba' al-Hind," on India vayds[14] (physicians). Mention should also be made here of the two Works of Yaqut al-Hamavi (A.D. 1179-1227), namely Mu'jam al-Udaba', the first biographical dictionary and Mu'jam al-Buldan, the first geographical dictionary. An Arabic translation by Al-Tamimi, of the Pahlai Zij-i Shatro-Ayar contained Indian astronomical elements as testified by al-Biruni. The well-known work drugs entitled Kitab al-Anbiya 'an Haqa'iq al-Adwiyah by the pharmacologist Abu Mansur Muwaffaq bin 'Ali of Heart contains information derived from Indian medical works[15].

There are several other scientists especially astronomers and mathematicians of Arabic and Persian origin, such as Habash ibn Hasib (d. 300/912), Maslamah al-Majriti (d. 462/1070), Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi (d. 272/886), Kushyar bin Labban al-Jili (d. First half of the 5th/11th century), al-Uqlidisi (d. 341/952—53) and others, who give information about Indian astronomy and mathematics.

Sanskrit works especially on astronomy mathematics and medicine, were translated into Persian by the Muslims in medieval India. Several Zijes (astronomical tables) compiled in and outside India and other Arabic and Persian astronomic works were also translated into Sanskrit.

A compendium of general medicine, the Majmu'ah-I Diya'I, was written in Persian by Hakim Diya' Muhammad (d. c. A.D. 1336-37) in 737/1336. He was the court physician of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq. One of the characteristics of this work is that it discusses how astronomy and astrology can be used for the treatment of diseases[16]. It is a continuation of Majmu-ah-i Shamsiyah, written

earlier by Shams al-Din Mustawfi, which was a translation of an Ayurvedic work. This book is an important source for the history of medicine in pre-Mughal India. The historian Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah, known as Firishtah (d. 1033/1624), wrote a book Dastur al-Atibba' or Ikhtiyarat-i Qasimi in A.D. 1590 which contains some Ayurvedic element[17].

A word about the popularity of astrology among the ruling elite of the Sultanate of Delhi may be added. The early writers who came from Khurasan and central Asian lands to India do not seem to have been sceptical about the scope of the influence of stars on the earth and its inhabitants, although it was contrary to the teachings of Islam. The ulema (orthodox scholars) considered it blasphemous impertinence. Unlike them, the elite, both in central Asia and India, patronized the astrologers. The astronomers practiced astrology in order to earn their livelihood. They prepared astrological tables and horoscopes. It may also be recalled that astrology has already become an integral part of astronomy in central Asia long before the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate through Buddhist influences. For example, Hasan Nizami who came from Nishapur, Delhi during the reign of Sultan Qutbuddin Aibek (AD 1206-10) and wrote the historical work, Taj- al Mathir, mentions the Zodaic, the seven planets and the constellation of the stars, displaying his faith in the roles of the stars and planets over man's destiny. Sadid U'ddin Muhammad Awfi, the Bukhara born immigrant calls Nizam-al Mulk Junaidi Sahib-i Qiran (fortunate one born at the time of the meeting of two auspicious stars). [18]

The statement of Shams Siraj Afif in the defense of astronomy and astrology is worth quoting because it tends to show that the Islamic orthodoxy was opposed even to the intellectual pursuit of astronomy. Afif writes : "Astronomy is one of the fourteen science known to the scholars. But its study has been forbidden by the

prophet (of Islam). The ulema (orthodox scholars) also disapprove of it. It is, however, permissible to know the rules, concerning the shadow of the sun and that in a particular month in what degree of what sign of the Zodaic the sun would be, the hours of the short night and the long night and when it(the night) turned into the day". [19]

Ziauddin Barani provides us clues about the interaction and co-operation between the Hindu and Muslim astronomers. According to him, there was considerable observation and experiment. He also tells us that many Hindu and Muslim astronomers were held in great favour, owing to their fame. "The elites of Delhi", says he "could not start any work or undertake any project without considering the astronomer even the wives of Sultan Alauddin Khalji patronized them". [20]

Amir Khusrau's interest in astronomy seems to have encouraged him to gain familiarity with the achievement made by Hindus in scientific fields during ancient times. Extolling their achievements, he say that physics, mathematics, astronomy and divination of the past and the future were known to Hindus. Then he says that he got conversant with the subtleties of their sciences to some extent.[98]

Khusrau devoted a whole sub-head to the learning of the Brahmans and spoke highly of them. Though there are men of letters in other countries, nowhere is wisdom or philosophy better written than in India[99]. The Brahman of India is such a learned man that, as far as knowledge and learning are concerned, he has far excelled Aristotle (one of the three greatest Greek philosophers). All natural sciences, Mathematics and Geography originated in India. Khusrau is proud of proclaiming to his contemporaries as well as to posterity:-

Kin taraf az har taraf-e ahl-i-hunar,

Dar talab-e 'ilmo-hunar karda guzar.

Lek ba tahsil-e hikam bahre sharaf,

Barahman az Hind na shud heech taraf[100].

Scholars come to India from all over the world to learn its arts and sciences. But Brahman never went out of India to acquire any knowledge. He did not consider it necessary to go out to improve upon his worth of learning or to seek judgment on it. This is also an apt commentary of an Indian of the early medieval period on his modern countrymen who almost adore foreign degrees and timidly look towards West, for inspiration, guidance and approval, in their pursuits of Arts, Literatures and Sciences. Intellectual superiority was the strongest point today!

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2. David Pingree, Muslim Astronomy in Sanskrit (Journal for the history of Arabic science, vol II. 2), pp. 315-330.
3. Bernard R. Goldstein, The making of astronomy in Early Islam (Nuncius vol. I, pt. 2, 1986), pp. 79-92.
4. H.J.L Winter, Formative influences in Islamic Science (Archives Internaonales d'historie des sciences), vol. xxxii (1953), p. 188.
5. M.A.M Khan, "The Muslim theories of education during the middle ages," Islamic culture, vol. XVIII (1944), pp. 418-433.
6. W.M Watt, the faith and practice of AL-Ghazzali(lndon, 1953), pp. 34-35.
7. Tarikhi-I Yaqubi, Vol. p. 92
8. Ibid., p. 105

9. This was written to travel from Bandar Abbas and Basra upto any port of India. See M.S Khan, "Impact of Islam on Medieval Bengal," (Islamic Culture, vol LIX, no.3 (July, 1985), p. 170.
10. M.S Khan, "Arabic and Persian source material for the history of science in medieval India (presented at the seminar on "Source Materials in History of Science in India", held under the Asiatic society of Calcutta, 15th Jan, 1986). Published in Islamic Culture (April-July, Nos. 2-3, 1988,fn. 10.)
11. Edited by M.Z Siddiqi (Berlin, 1928), pp. 557-600.
12. K.S. Khan, "An eleventh century Hispano-Arabic source for Ancient Indian Sciences and Culture ," H.K Sherwani felicitation Volume, ed. P.M. Joshi and M.A Nayeem (Hyderabad, 1975), pp. 357-89.
13. For a general introduction to this first dictionary of scientific biography, see M.S. Khan, The Ta'rikh al-Hukama of AL-Qiffti," Hamdard Islamicus, vol, vi, no.4 (Karachi, 1983), pp. 85-96.
14. For details see M.S Khan, " An Arabic Source For the History of Ancient Indian Medicine," Indian Jouranal of Science, vol. xvi, no. 1 (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 47-56.
15. D.M Bose et al., A Concise History of History of Science in History (INSA, New Delhi, 1971), p.47 (henceforth referred to as Concise History).
16. M.Z. Siddiqui, "Unani Tibb in India," Concise History, p. 270; C.A Storey, Persian Literature, vol. ii, part 2 (1971),p. 323; Bibliography, p. 55.

17. M.Z. Siddiqui, Arabic and Persian Medical Literature (Calcutta, 1959), pp. 109-10.

18. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui 'The Origin and Growth of Islamicate Historiography in India: Anaylsis of the 13th century Indo-Persians Historian's approach to the foundation of Muslim in South Asian Subcontinent (Journal of Objective Studies, New Delhi, nos. 1-2, July to October, 1989, pp.65-88)

19. Shams Siraj Afif, Tarikh-i- Firoz Shahi, Bib Ind, 1891, p258.

Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi, Calcutta Bib Ind.,1862, p.112

20. Nuh Sipihr, ed. Mohammad Wahid Mirza, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1950, pp,162-3, also 224-6, for the horoscopes drawn by him.

21. Nuh siphir, p. 162

22. Ibid., p167

Dr. Asad Ahmed hails from an illustrations family of Ghazipur (UP) he graduated & postgraduted from Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) his area of interest is medieval Indian History his teaching experience is about thirty years. He has taught History at four Colleges (namely Dyal Singh, Zakhir Husain, Deshbandhu & SGTB khalsa College) Since 1992 . Currently , he is an Associate Professor in the department of History , SGTB Khalsa College , University of Delhi. Dr. Asad Ahmed has authored two books and various articles. He has authored 2 books and various articles. He has guided many students in their M.phil/Ph.d

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