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Astrology and rituals in India – with special references to the Muhūrtacintāmaṇi

Abstract – Astrology played an important role in India since the Vedic period. Out of the many elements of astrology I would like to focus on the muhūrta and its significance in rituals. In the old texts, the muhūrta is a time unit of 1/30 of a day, there being 15 muhūrtas of day and 15 muhūrtas of night, each with its own name. In ritual texts, the muhūrta is mentioned in the context of good or bad moment for sacrificial rites. The word muhūrta gained a general meaning after the establishment of the five elements (pañcāṅga) of the calendar, namely, the nakṣatra (lunar mansion), tithi (lunar day), karaṇa (half of tithi), yoga (based on the sum of solar and lunar longitudes), and vāra (weekday). Astrologers were expected to foretell auspicious and inauspicious muhūrta based on the combination of all the time units beginning with the year, namely, the half-year, season, month, half-month and the pañcāṅga elements. The planetary weekday was a new element of astrology introduced from the west with the 12 rāśis (zodiacal signs) and the 12 bhāvas (houses). These new elements contributed to the further sophistication of the muhūrta theory. From the beginning of the second millennium CE, texts dealing exclusively with muhūrta appear and begin to form a new genre of astrological literature, muhūrta-śāstra.

The most popular text of this genre is the Muhūrtacintāmaṇi composed by Rāma in 1600 CE. This text was commented upon by the author himself, and it was only three years later (1603 CE) that Rama's nephew Govinda wrote a very detailed and useful commentary called Pīyūśadhsadhārā which contains numerous and valuable citations from astrological as well as dharmasāstra texts. In my presentation, I would like to show the structure of the Muhūrtacintāmaṇi and discuss the chapters on rituals.