

IT'S NOT IN YOUR STARS

New research casts aspersions on the popular divination based on sun signs, sparking off a controversy in Indian astrological circles

By Shefalee Vasudev and Neeraj Mishra

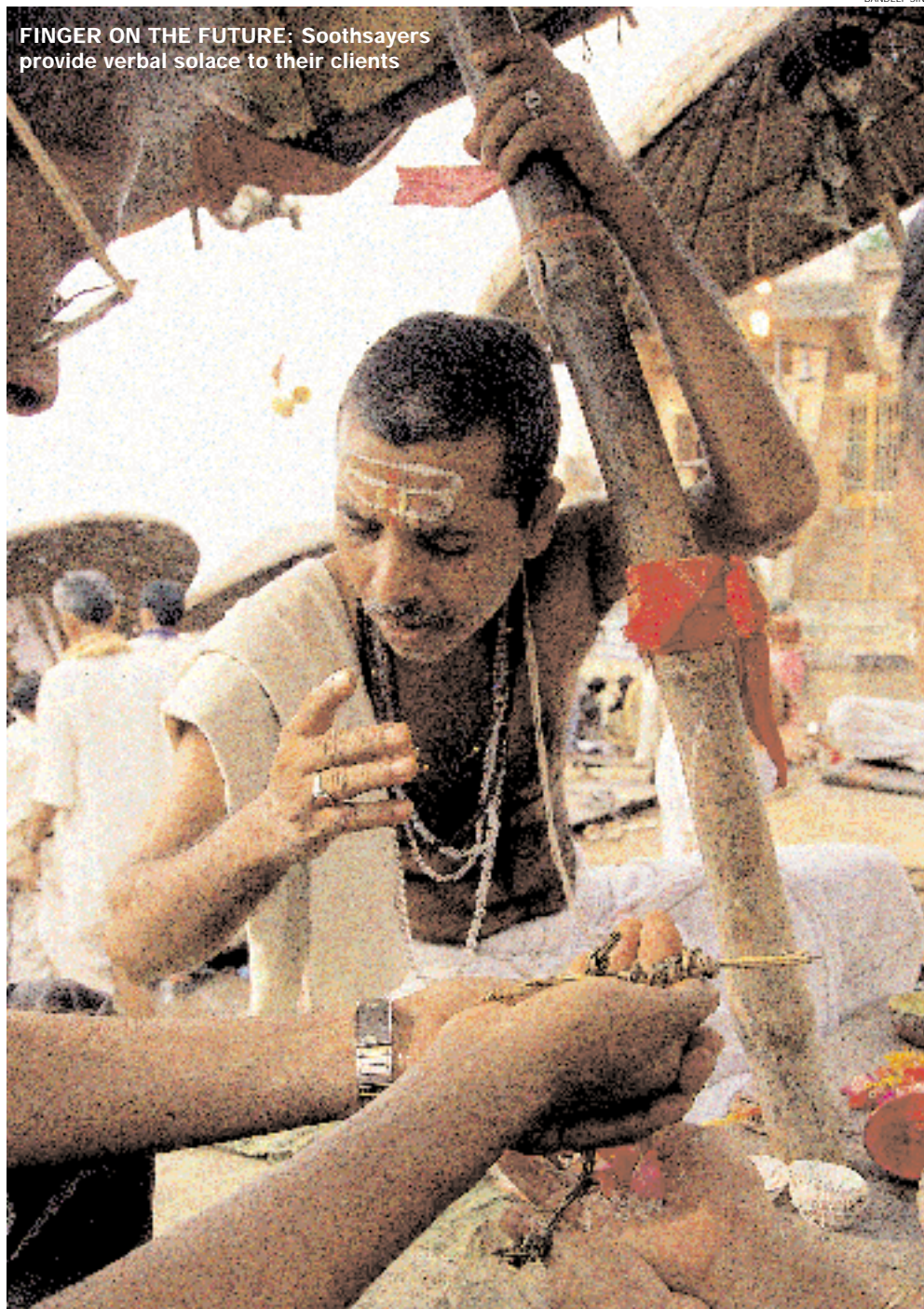
Naina Dholakia died. Just like that, while chopping cabbage. No accident, no illness, no shock. A sudden heart attack killed this 49-year-old two days after the astrologer she had been consulting for the past 18 years reassured her that she had a long, healthy and uncomplicated life ahead, that her son would soon get married and her daughter would win a prestigious academic award. None of it happened. Astrology had made life easy for Dholakia. Perhaps it also made death easy for her because her demise was not predicted.

Predictions go right or wrong. But what sustains astrology as a belief system is the irresistible temptation people have for knocking on the door of future. Right now though, there is a loud knock on the door of astrology itself. A first of its kind research done over a period of 45 years in the West with over 2,000 subjects and published in the recent issue of the *Journal of Consciousness*, attempts to prove that astrology is just guesswork. Conducted by Canadian professor of psychology Ivan Kelly and one-time Australian astrologer Dr Geoffrey Dean, the study attacks the

most popular form of astrology across the world—the sun sign-based predictions. It also disproves the core claim that human characteristics have no nature-nurture origins and are a handiwork of the influence of the sun, the moon and planets at the time of birth.

For this research which began in London in 1958, 2,000 Piscean babies were selected for a medical study. The goal was to explore whether the timing of birth affected future health and whether proximity in birth timings translated into identical personality traits. Dean and Kelly studied more than 100 different characteristics, including occupation, anxiety levels, aggressiveness, sociability, IQ levels, abilities in art, sport, mathematics and reading—all of which, astrologers claim, can be gauged from one's birth chart (*janampatri*) or is deciphered on the basis of sun signs. The researchers did not find any similarities between the "time twins".

"The test conditions could hardly have been more conducive to success but the results are uniformly negative," says Kelly. This study also found that astrologers were unable to match birth charts with the personality profiles of the randomly selected persons. Similar evidence was collected from more than 40 studies involving 700 astrologers,



FINGER ON THE FUTURE: Soothsayers provide verbal solace to their clients

BANDEEP SINGH

"Sun sign-based divination is pure humbug, not predictive astrology."

K. N. RAO, EDITOR, *JOURNAL OF ASTROLOGY*

"The sun-sign system gives an accurate insight into people's personality traits."

MA PREM USHA, TAROT READER

including some from India. "We must concede that this is the first sound research that questions astrology," says K.N. Rao, editor of *Journal of Astrology*. Rao, however, underlines that the attack is on sun sign-based western astrology.

The study could not have come at a better time. 2003 is a year that occurs every 12 years when Indian astrologers declare weddings star crossed because of Jupiter and Venus slipping into their sunken phases. Despite that, the Rs 2 crore wedding industry in India shows no signs of recoil effect. It is a clear indication that astrology is good for belief but not for practice. Not just that. Ever since a two-person committee appointed by the University Grants Commission concurred with Human Resource Development Minister Murali Manohar Joshi's proposal to introduce graduate and post-graduate science courses in Vedic astrology, it has become a controversial and yet unsettled debate. This proposal moved in 2001 had provoked great outrage. According to London's *Financial Times*, more than 100 scientists and 300 political and social scientists had protested by writing to the government.

Debates, however, haven't damped either the charm or the business of astrology which is a multi-crore rupee industry across the world. Before World War II, only 20 per cent of Europeans

believed in astrology. Today, 80 per cent read their daily horoscopes in newspapers and 60 per cent believe in their efficacy. Indian astrologers now charge between Rs 800 to Rs 1,200 for a one-hour consultation.

Since the 12 sun signs and their characteristics are universally lapped up by buyers and believers, the new research has sparked off anger, even outright dismissal in astrological circles. It has a special relevance in India because over a million soothsayers here make a living out of predicting the future. Besides, the best-known among them like Bejan Daruwalla, Veenu Sandal, Ma Prem Usha and Pt Hriday Nath are not puritans. They freely use the sun-sign method for weekly predictions. They may not agree with Kelly's research but they are answerable to the millions of people who live by their forecasts. That explains why so many Indian astrologers are critical of the study. "Even twins born within seconds of each other have different horoscopes. This study has flouted some basic rules of astrology," says Arun Bansal, who edits *Future Samachar* and runs 95 teaching centres across India.

Others too are bristling. D.S. Mathur, IAS, chief electoral officer of Madhya Pradesh and a full-time astrology student for the past 25 years, shares the sentiment. "The study did not consider

ATTACKING THE PREMISE

■ BIGGEST STUDY EVER

The longest study—spanning over 40 years—ever done in astrology, it was conducted by Canadian professor of psychology Ivan Kelly and former Australian astrologer Dr Geoffrey Dean.

■ FOCUS ON SUN-SIGNS

It attacks the most popular form of astrology in the world—the zodiac system based on the 12 sun signs, which are used to classify people into different personality types and make predictions accordingly.

■ SMART GUESSWORK

It calls astrology intelligent guesswork. Refutes claims that human personality traits are influenced by the position of the sun, the moon and planets at the time of birth which determines fate and future.

■ TIME TWINS AS SUBJECTS

2000 babies born in March 1958 were monitored for 40 years to arrive at the conclusion. The goal was to explore whether birth timings affected future health and whether "time twins" had identical traits.

■ MONITORED LIVES

More than 100 characteristics of the subjects ranging from occupation, aggressiveness, sociability, marital status, anxiety levels to abilities in art, sport, mathematics and reading were monitored.

■ COMPARING BIRTH CHARTS

It reverse-checked the process by asking astrologers to make birth charts according to characteristics. None matched with personalities. Forty similar studies involving 700 astrologers corroborated this.

prarabdha (loosely understood as destiny),” he says. *Prarabdha* is the accumulation of karma in previous lives, which leaves an imprint on one’s birth chart. “It is the interpretation of horoscopes that is important,” adds Mathur, author of *Predictive Astrology*.

Oscho disciple and popular Tarot reader Ma Prem Usha, however, defends the sun-sign method. “The psycho-physical human characteristics based on the 12 zodiac signs are very accurate,” she says. Though the 12 signs are the most user-friendly way of making sense of everyday astrology, soothsayers admit that they work well only when combined with other divination styles or with hair-splitting analysis. “Tarot combines astrology, numerology, symbology and the occult, that is why it gives maximum insight,” says Usha.

Fusion predictive methods may sell like hotcakes, but when it comes to defending themselves, Indian experts take refuge in the original treatise *Brihat Parashar Hora Shastra*, written by Rishi Parashar, which influenced ancient Vedic astrology. V.S. Lovlekar, a retired engineer who now runs an astrology school in Bhopal, points out that while western astrology focuses on personalities, traits and relationships with the emphasis on the Sun, in India it is a planetary tool for far-reaching insights into a person’s ancestral history, past, present and future.

Sun signs or horoscopes, it is forecasts which fascinate people and push the business of astrology. Their inexplicable mystery lies in the way they swing from being absolutely correct to

being totally wrong. Smita Gokhale, a 26-year-old legal apprentice, says that her wedding, its date and time were fixed because her horoscope “matched” perfectly with that of her husband. But on the third night of this star-blessed wedding she found that her husband was already married, had a daughter and that this marriage was “arranged” because his first wife had been paralysed after a spinal injury.

While Gokhale is cynical, Rajan Naik is confused. An astrologer told him

pretative skill, a strong intuition and insight to be read correctly,” says Rao.

Since Indian astrologers have mixed and matched the sun signs with other divination methods, pure Vedic astrology is at threat. People now treat it as a religion of convenience with a pick and choose attitude. Moreover, the recycled menus of Tarot, I-ching, the occult, palmistry, forehead reading, tantra and mantra now play musical chairs with planetary astrology. If one method doesn’t work, people junk it to

try something else. This makes both belief and rationality expressions of fickle personal moods. Besides, verbal solace from someone with a finger on the future has great benefits because most astrologers are people with good communication skills.

“If these convincing skills of astrologers are channelised to transform public opinion, it can make a big difference,” says Delhi-based scientist Gauhar Raza. He feels that astrology, being a saleable part of Brand India, has a big global market. But in these days of global competition, Raza questions the wisdom of setting up an institute of palmistry instead of science and technology. Like renowned

astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar, who had said that “the elevation of astrology to that of a university subject would take India backwards towards medieval times”.

The crux of the matter is not whether astrology is right or wrong but whether it should be allowed to influence national and personal consciousness to the extent it does. It is perhaps time to ask why the mistakes of astrologers are overlooked while those of doctors or soldiers are condemned. ■

MIS-TAKES

Science or guesswork? The jury is out on astrology with the bold predictions of some of the high-profile astrologers—who have made accurate predictions earlier—going completely wrong.



BEJAN DARUWALLA
Among world’s top 1,000 astrologers

PREDICTION: After June 24, 2003, all terrorist activities against India will stop. Kashmir issue will be resolved by 2003 in a tripartite manner.

STATUS: The recent twin blasts in Mumbai and incidents of violence in Kashmir proved him wrong.



ARATI CHAKRABORTY
Numerologist, calligraphist

PREDICTION: In 1999, she predicted that Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s Government would last for only two years and the next general elections would be held in 2001.

STATUS: This is the fourth year of Vajpayee’s Government and still there is no sign of its collapse.



P. KHURANA
Renowned Chandigarh-based astrologer

PREDICTION: Said in 1998 that the next prime minister would be a Leo whose name would begin with M or T. He also said that Vajpayee had no chance and that the Congress would cobble up a coalition which would last till October 27, 2000.

STATUS: Vajpayee is the PM and the Congress is in the Opposition.



AMRITLAL
Kolkata-based astrologer who predicted Indira’s assassination

PREDICTION: In 1999 he said that neither Vajpayee nor Sonia Gandhi would be the next prime minister and that the new government at the Centre would be a Congress-led coalition.

STATUS: Vajpayee is heading the BJP-led coalition, while the Congress failed to form a broad-based alliance.

that he would die in an accident on his 25th birthday. Curiously, Naik met with a serious car accident on his 25th birthday. The car turned turtle, fell into a ditch and got smashed but Naik escaped unhurt. “But how did I have that near-fatal accident on my 25th birthday of all days in the calendar?” he asks, still bewildered four years later.

Such bewilderment is in order. After all, a horoscope is an infinitely complex chart, full of macro and micro details. “It needs mathematical accuracy, inter-