




Of Toothsticks, Dreams and Lizards: Omens in Jyotiḥśāstra, the Pāñcarātra- Saṃhitās and the Purāṇas

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Abstract: Drawing from medieval Sanskrit sources this paper examines omens in Hindu religious literature in different contexts, such as kingship, initiation, astrology and present-day worship. In each of these contexts omens are represented in a unique way and the analysis of their particular references to a variety of concepts provides a fertile ground for cultural historical research. The existing terms for ‘omen’ in Sanskrit, i.e. *nimitta*, *adbhuta*, *utpāta* and *śakuna* are outfitted with different classifications, which makes them the appropriate starting point for this investigation. The directions of the compass and the practitioner’s body provide the conceptual background for a variety of omens, such as the cries of animals, the fall of the toothstick (*dantakāṣṭha*), the throbbing of limbs, dreams, etc. Omens are not only a part of the Indian scientific discourses in the Jyotiḥśāstra, they also serve as a means for negotiating social positions and for contesting human agency by contrasting it with non-human agents. The analysis of omens represented in various sources focuses on their functional as well as on their conceptual aspects in order to come to a well-rounded understanding of the omen as a cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: divination, human body, initiation, kingship, ritual

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1. Introduction

The prediction of future events by interpreting ominous signs¹ is a widespread phenomenon of Indian cultural history with multiple facets. It is not only a part of Indian astrology, but also a part of social and religious practice. Ominous signs can be traced back into Vedic times and are integrated in the works of Kālidāsa, in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata² and are also discussed in the religious writings of the Jainas, Tantric Buddhism, Tantric Śaivism, in the Āyurveda, the Purāṇas, the religious writings of the Pāñcarātras, the Gṛhya-Sūtras and of course in Jyotiḥśāstra. Although the ubiquity of ominous signs in classical and medieval Indian Sanskrit literature is striking, this topic has not received much attention in modern research.

The existing studies embedded their investigations on omens into a specific geographic area using an ethnographic approach (Thurston 1912, Diehl 1956), focused on a single text (Kohlbrugge 1938) or a single knowledge tradition (Pingree 1981), but none of them have attempted to systematically analyse omens from various textual sources as phenomena in their own right. Based on findings in the Purāṇas,³ the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās and in the Jyotiḥśāstra, this paper provides a framework for the systematic analysis of omens in order to facilitate their placement within Indian belief and knowledge systems. A comprehensive analysis across all different areas mentioned above would require far more space. This paper therefore presents a method which connects omens to cultural patterns via in-depth and intertextual analysis, using the sources mentioned above with links to the Hindu tradition as examples, while maintaining that the method can also be applied on a larger scale.

Analysing the intertextual relations of omen sections in the Purāṇas and Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās and comparing the texts of both genres sheds

1 When referring to a single sentence, e.g. “If a dog barks in the north, there will be rain”, I use the word ‘ominous sign’, but when referring to the whole series of – in this case: dog omens –, I use ‘omen’ or ‘portent’.

2 See Kane 1962: 743ff.

3 The Agni-, the Matsya- and the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa are categorised by some scholars as encyclopedic Puranas (Kane 1962: 842, referred to by Rocher 1986: 78 Fn. 62); Hazra holds that the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa is actually a Pāñcarātra work (Hazra 1958: 216).

light on the question of how specific areas, in this case kingship and initiation, make use of omens. What does this say about the function of omens in general? Why are some omens included in one area, but are missing in another? The Purāṇas, Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās and Jyotiḥśāstras are also places of knowledge production, where omens are integrated into a network of cultural concepts. Another question this paper deals with is how a detailed study of individual omens can help to foster a deeper understanding of their conceptual structures.

One methodological goal of this study is to retain, where possible, the emic terminology inherent in the texts of the Sanskrit traditions it investigates. Following this principle reveals patterns of knowledge that anchor ominous signs in the South Asian religious landscape. These two directions – analysing the omens’ functionality by comparing them in different text-genres and analysing their structure by investigating individual omens – allows to place omens in a practical as well as in a theoretical context. This program focus on kingship, sectarianism and science made it necessary to select the Purāṇas, the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās and texts of the Jyotiḥśāstra to represent these crucial areas of social life in medieval India.

I begin with an investigation of generic terms and classifications of omens given in different sources to show how they are located within Indian astrology and what the inherent patterns connected with them are. The next part takes up omens in a larger context, focusing on multiple, partially overlapping sets of omens, which are determined by their functionality within a specific group of texts. In the Purāṇas omens are linked to rules and duties related to the king (*rājadharma*),⁴ while in the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās the omens are connected to ritual. In the Jyotiḥśāstra omens are integrated and classified within a system of general rules and archetypes, which serve as blueprints, similar to methods applied with regards to the Vedic ritual in the Paribhāṣa passages⁵ of the Śrauta-Sūtras. The third part analyses omens based on a structural background given in the Jyotiḥśāstra. By employing general cultural concepts like the body, directions, references to ritual and so-

4 For further readings on *rājadharma*, see Rangaswami Aiyangar 1941, Losch 1959 and Geslani 2018.

5 See Gonda 1977: 508.

cial positions, an analysis of omens such as the fall of the toothstick (*dantakāṣṭha*), dreams (*svapna*) and the house-lizard (*grhagodhikā/palli*) provides insights into their individual structure. The fact that an omen animal such as the house-lizard is represented as an icon for present-day worship is a curious case. It is integrated into the conceptual study of this paper in order to elucidate the development of this particular phenomenon underlining the relevance of omens even in India's contemporary religious landscape.

The texts selected for this paper are all to some extent related to the analysis of the house-lizard omen, which is presented towards the end of this paper. The connection to the Pāñcarātra is apparent by the fact that the temple in which the house-lizard became a part of worship follows the teachings of the Pāñcarātra, especially those conveyed in the Jayākhyā-Saṃhitā. The Purāṇas contain a rich collection of omens, among them animal omens, moreover they are ascribed to Vaiṣṇava teachings and served as sources for works of the Jyotiḥśāstra where they were systematically arranged. Although there is no doubt that this interconnectedness is important, it is also the engagement with the diversity of texts which shows that the methods used in this paper to analyse and contextualise omens can be successfully applied to other sources – and other phenomena of cultural historical interest. The omens mentioned in the title of this paper not only illustrate the diversity of ominous signs handed down by different traditions, but they also stand for very different ways in which omens can be represented in text and ritual, e.g. as being a part of military expeditions, as belonging to initiation ceremonies etc.

2. Coming to terms: What is an 'omen' in Sanskrit?

2.1 Indian Astrology

Indian Astrology as represented in the Jyotiḥśāstra is generally divided into three branches (*skandhas*): the calculation of planetary movements (*tantra/gaṇita*), horoscopes (*horā/jātaka*) and divination or natural astrology (*śākhā/saṃhitā*).⁶ *Yātrā* as it is described in Purāṇas can be called a functional 'sub-genre' of natural astrology and is concerned with predic-

6 Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 1.9, Pingree 1981: i.

tions in the context of starting a journey or a king's military endeavours. The methods of future-telling applied in *yātrā* and natural astrology can be roughly divided into two groups: in one group predictions are made on the basis of cyclic and fixed occurrences such as the lunar day (*tithi*), the week-day (*vāra*), the 30th part of the day (*muhūrta*), the moon's position and the asterisms (*nakṣatra*). The other group is formed by incidents which are accidental and in a broader sense unpredictable, and which are called ominous signs – among them the throbbing of limbs, the behaviour of birds and animals, dreams etc.⁷ The earliest works on *yātrā* are the Ṭikanikayātrā, the Yogayātrā and the Bṛhadyātrā, all written by Varāhamihira in the 6th century.⁸

'Omen' does not only refer to sudden events, but also can be induced by an astrologer or priest on different occasions. Induced omens are sometimes part of an astrological 'sub-genre' called *praśna*, i.e. 'inquiry'. There, apart from creating and interpreting the horoscope, the astrologer (*vyōtiṣī*), actively induces ominous signs in order to receive answers to their client's questions⁹, mostly concerned with matters of every-day life, such as health, marriage, pregnancy and travel.

These two 'sub-genres' illustrate different 'modes' of astrological inquiry, which in practice were often carried out together. Before the king begins a *yātrā* the astrologer determines a number of factors, using *praśna* (e.g. horoscope).¹⁰ But the fact that *praśna* can also be a part of *yātrā* still allows for a conceptual division that reflects a functional separation of omens into spontaneous and induced omens, an aspect which also plays a role when we investigate the Purāṇas and the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās. Indian tradition differentiates several classes of omens based on various criteria. A brief overview will provide us with a rough framework for further investigating some of their qualities.

7 Kane 1958: 478–480, Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 2.15.

8 Pingree 1981: 107.

9 Ibid. 110.

10 Geslani 2018: 136.

2.2 Classifying omens

The medieval sources explain the existence of omens in two ways. According to the *Bṛhat-Saṃhitā*, deities cause extraordinary events when they are angry about human wrongdoings:¹¹

*apacāreṇa narāṇām upasargaḥ*¹² *pāpasañcayād bhavati* /46.2a

“A portent occurs because of the accumulation of sins by misconduct of the people.”

manujānām apacārād aparaktā devatāḥ srjanty etān /46.3a

tatpratighātāya nṛpaḥ śāntim rāṣṭre prayuñjīta /46.3b/

“Offended by the misconduct of the people, the gods cast these (portents). In order to deflect them, the king shall perform *śānti* in his kingdom.”

(*Bṛhat-Saṃhitā*)

This interpretation leaves no doubt about responsibilities. The people’s bad behaviour causes the gods to cast the omens and the king is in charge of appeasing them with rituals. Here the deities use omens to communicate. Another interpretation holds that omens are showing the possible results of actions from previous lives:

daive puruṣakāre ca dvaye siddhiḥ pratiṣṭhitā /

tatra daivam abhivyaktaṃ pauruṣaṃ paurvadehikam //

“Fate and human effort – on these two rests success. Of these, fate is the manifestation of human effort undertaken in a past life.”¹³

(*Yājñavalkyasmṛti*)

11 I follow Kern’s edition of the *Bṛhat-Saṃhitā*. See also *Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa* 2.134.5 and *Matsya-Purāṇa* 228.5, which is quoted in *Adbhutasāgara* p. 5.

12 *Upasarga* can denote both, the actual incident, as well as the sign which indicates it; the context calls for the latter. In *Böhtlingk’s and Roth’s Sanskrit-Wörterbuch* (vol. 1, p. 246) we find: “Widerwärtigkeit, Unfall, Ungemach”, but also “das Besessensein”, and “Verfinsterung (eines Gestirns)”, among other possible meanings. *Monier-Williams* (169c) is clearer: “Upa-sarga, as, m. addition; trouble, misfortune; a portent, a natural phenomenon supposed to forebode future evil, an eclipse; a disease [...]”.

13 *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.345, translation by Olivelle 2019: 111.

The quotation from the Bṛhat-Saṃhitā is shared by other sources and can therefore serve as representative for an ‘astrological’ position towards omens, while the Yājñavalkyasmṛti’s emphasis on human effort as primal cause for fate and therefore for whatever is foreboding it, may represent a more pragmatic view.¹⁴ In both cases it is possible to influence the potential outcome (*phala*) by ritual action, which, as will be shown, is linked to omens in various aspects.

2.2.1 *Utpāta*

While the Gṛhya- and Śrauta-Sūtras hardly refer to *utpāta*,¹⁵ the Purāṇas and medieval sources use this term more frequently. *Utpāta*, literally translated as ‘flying up’, describes an unusual or startling event and is generally defined as something which reverses the natural order (*prakṛti*).¹⁶ It is often divided into three kinds: *divya*, *āntarikṣa* and *bhaumya*.¹⁷

Divya (‘celestial’ or ‘brilliant’) refers to unusual conditions of planets and *nakṣatras*, eclipses and comets. *Āntarikṣa* (‘belonging to the intermediate region’) are hurricanes, unusual clouds, twilight, meteors (*ulka*), fata morganas (*gandharvanagara*), unusual rain and rainbows. Earthquakes (*bhūkampa*) and unusual events involving water bodies are called *bhaumya* (‘earthly’).¹⁸ According to the Bṛhat-Saṃhitā, *śānti*, the expiatory rite is effective for the three kinds of *utpāta* to varying degrees. While the effects of *bhaumya utpātas* are fully suspended, effects of *āntarikṣa utpātas* are merely attenuated, and *divya utpātas* can, according to Kaśyapa, not be altered, whereas according to Varāhamihira, generous gifts can prevent the predicted damage.¹⁹ Since *divya utpāta*

14 For the positions of Manu and Kauṭilya towards ‘fate’ compared to Varāhamihira’s see Geslani 2018: 130.

15 Only Kauṣītaka-Gṛhya-Sūtra 3.9.2, see also Kane 1962: 741.

16 Bṛhat-Saṃhitā: 46.1: (...) *teṣāṃ saṃkṣepo ’yaṃ prakṛter anyatvam utpātaḥ*. In the Adbhutasāgara p. 5: *yaḥ prakṛtivyiparyāsaḥ sarvaḥ saṃkṣepataḥ sa utpātaḥ* (...) and Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 64, I 2: *prakṛter anyathābhāvo yatra yatropajāyate, tatra tatrāpi jānīyāt sarvam utpātalakṣaṇam* (see also Kane 1962: 742).

17 Matsya-Purāṇa 229.6–9, Agni-Purāṇa 263.12–13, Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 46.2b; 4–5.

18 Kane 1962: 745.

19 Ibid. 746.

is the most powerful one, it has an eightfold effect: it affects the king himself, his son, his wealth, his means of transport (such as horses and elephants), the capital, the queen, the priest, and his people.²⁰ This list suggests that the *divya utpāta* is in a way most relevant for the king, which implies that the dimension of the omen corresponds to the social status of the person it affects. Another term, which clearly denotes a negative omen, is *vaikṛtya*. This term, just like *utpāta*, conveys the idea that whatever is unusual is most probably a foreboding of a negative event.

2.2.2 *Adbhuta*

The origin of this term is rather obscure: while Monier-Williams suggests that it might be a corrupted form of *ati-bhūta*, meaning “exceeding that which is”,²¹ Tsuji holds that it could be derived from \sqrt{dabh} – *dabhnoti*, *dabhati* ‘to injure, deceive’, or from \sqrt{dbhu} *, cf. *dabhra* ‘little, small, deficient’, suggesting it could be equated to Hittite *te-pu-* ‘petit, negligible’.²² In the Ṛgveda *adbhuta* means ‘wonderful’ referring to the gods, but also to the future.²³ *Adbhuta* is paraphrased in Yāska’s Nirukta as *a-bhūta*, indicating something which has not happened before.²⁴ The Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 67, which is titled “Adbhutaśānti”, relates seven kinds of *adbhuta* to different deities: Indra, Varuṇa, Yama, Agni, Kubera, Viṣṇu and Vāyu.²⁵ In the Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 57 and 62, too, earthquakes are ascribed to different deities,²⁶ linking for example smoke without fire to Agni and rainbows at night to Indra, which suggests a strong overlap with *utpāta*. As will be shown later, the connection with deities and their specific realms opens up different schemes of qualities attributed to them.

20 Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 46.7; Matsya-Purāṇa 229.12–13.

21 Monier-Williams 1872: 19a, entry “*adbhuta*”; Boehtlingk 1855: 131.

22 Tsuji 1968: 176.

23 Kane 1962: 741.

24 Nirukta 1.6.; Adbhutasāgara p. 4: *tatra vṛddhagarga / abhūtapūrva yat pūrvaṃ yat pūrvaṃ jāyate ’nyathā / tad adbhutam iti proktaṃ naimittam syān nimittajam //*.

25 Kane 1962: 741.

26 Kohlbrugge 1938: 20–33.

2.2.3 Śakuna

In *śakuna* we find the most specific description of a group of omens. The word *śakuna*, which in the Ṛgveda²⁷ is used for a specific kind of bird or ominous bird, became a generic term denoting various kinds of animal omens. Here the aforementioned definition of reversing the natural order is applied, too: if, for example, wild animals enter a settlement, or if domestic ones are found in wilderness, this qualifies as ominous. Terms like *ruta* (cry of animals) and *ceṣṭitā* (behaviour/movement of animals) are also frequently used to describe animals as ominous and are subsumed under *śakuna*. Binaries like wild vs. domestic, diurnal vs. nocturnal, etc. often play an important role in these omens.

2.2.4 Nimitta

Nimitta is defined in the Amarakośa as “cause or prognostic sign”.²⁸ Whereas *utpāta* generally denotes an unlucky omen, *nimitta* is usually neutral, unless it is specified as *durnimitta*, *nirnimitta* or *aśubha nimitta*.²⁹ It is also the most common term used for ominous signs in the Pāncarātra-Saṃhitās, but *nimitta* associates neither with a specific set of omens, nor has it a fixed definition. The fact that unseen phenomena or a reversal of some sort is not included in their definition, opens this term up for more subtle kinds of omens. Another term similarly neutral and frequently used to describe something as ominous is the term *lakṣaṇa*.³⁰

2.3 Summary: demarcation and fuzzy boundaries

What *utpāta*, *adbhuta* and *śakuna* have in common is that they are spontaneous. They encompass unusual, incidental events, which just happen by chance and which therefore are different from actively investigating the stars, planets and other phenomena in search for answers. *Nimitta* can also denote omens which are actively induced by a person looking

27 Ibid.: 804.

28 Ibid.: 743.

29 E.g. Parama-Saṃhitā 9.43.

30 Although Monier-Williams even presents a positive connotation: “a lucky mark, favourable sign” (Monier-Williams 1872: 857b).

for answers. These are in this sense closer to the calculations and observations of the stars and horoscopes conducted by ‘classical’ astrology. *Utpāta*, *adbhuta*, *śakuna* and *nimitta* are too broad to provide a frame for ‘sharper’ distinctions. At times they even merely denote something is an ‘omen’ in a general sense. Especially *utpāta* and *adbhuta* are used synonymously in the Purāṇas without any noticeable differentiation. Nevertheless these four terms can be used to indicate how omens are conceptualised in a text. Since these terms demarcate different domains, such as unusual natural phenomena in connection with deities (*adbhuta*) or in connection with the three worlds (*utpāta*), the behaviour of animals (*śakuna*) and omens which fit none of these description (*nimitta*), they tell us more about a text’s narrative on omens than about the nature of the omens themselves. Moreover these references link omens to a larger context of cultural significance. Categorising natural disasters and irregularities according to deities and the three worlds makes *utpāta* and *adbhuta* an interesting point of departure for further investigating the concept of nature (*prakṛti*) and its normative implications. These categorisations define the ‘normal’ by describing what is ‘abnormal’ and suggest a link of these phenomena to the moral judgement of human behaviour.³¹

3. Contextualising omens: their function in the Purāṇas and the Pāñcarātra

When looking at sources on omens in medieval religious literature, what catches the eye is that the Purāṇas and the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās have very specific preferences when it comes to the question what kinds of omens they describe. To show this I compare passages on omens in different Purāṇas and then in different Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās in the following section. This allows me to identify two different ‘sets’ of omens, one which is specific to the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās and the other specific to the Purāṇas. Driven by the fact that both genres not only limit themselves to describing certain kinds of omens, but also put them into a specialised context, it is clear that their specificity is motivated by a genre-specific

31 See *Adbhutasāgara* p. 5: *atīlobhād asatyād vā nāstikyād vāpy adharmataḥ / narā-pacārān niyatam upasargāḥ prajāyate //*

functionality. This section will also shed some light on how associating omens with different deities and the three worlds mentioned above may have developed into a means of categorisation.

3.1 Purāṇas

Compared to the other Purāṇas, the Matsya- and Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa are those that deal with omens in the greatest detail and therefore I will use their passages as sources for my analysis.³² The omen passages are partially identical or at least very similar in these two Purāṇas³³ and can be roughly divided into two sections in both of them. The first section³⁴ is ascribed to Garga,³⁵ while section two³⁶ is taught by Matsya/Puṣkara. The omens described individually in the first section are: anomalies in idols (*arcāvikāra*), of fire (*agnivaiḥṛtya*), of trees (*vṛkṣotpāta*), of rain (*vṛṣṭivaiḥṛtya*), of water bodies (*salilāśayavaiḥṛtya*), of birth (*prasavavaiḥṛtya*), of tools, utensils etc. (*upaskaravaiḥṛtya*) and of animals (*mṛgapakṣinavaiḥṛtya*). Before dedicating whole chapters to those individual omens, which would be defined above in 2.2 as *utpāta/adbhuta*, the first section is introduced by two chapters, one on *śāntis*, and one which serves as a summary of and an introduction to *adbhutas* themselves. Since for the Purāṇas *utpāta/adbhuta* is inseparably connected with *śānti*, the expiatory ritual for bad omens, a short look on how the Purāṇas are dealing with *śānti* will provide some useful insights.

After relating the three worlds to three kinds of *śānti* (*antarikṣa – abhayā, divya – saumyā* and *bhaumya*³⁷ – *amṛtā*), *śāntis* bearing the names of deities as well as *ṛṣis*³⁸ are connected to specific *adbhutas*. Each *śānti*,

32 Since the omen section in the Agni-Purāṇa roughly consists of the same content as the other two Purāṇas, only in reduced form, it is not included in this analysis. For a detailed comparison see Losch 1959: 231–234.

33 Numbers of chapters in this section refer to those in the Matsya-Purāṇa, if not mentioned otherwise. Corresponding chapters in the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa will be given in footnotes.

34 Matsya-Purāṇa 228–238, Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa 133–144.

35 For further readings on Garga see Geslani et al. 2017.

36 Matsya-Purāṇa 239–243, Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa 163–164.

37 *Bhaumya* is only in Viṣṇudharmottara 2.133.3.

38 Matsya-Purāṇa 228.13: *bhārgavī*; ibid. 228.17: *āṅgirasī*.

apart from averting the negative portent it is associated with, is also connected with specific benefits. The links of *śāntis* to the three worlds, as well as to different deities and *ṛṣis* exist side by side in the Purāṇas since there is no sign that the three associated *śāntis* are treated any different than the other *śāntis*. That for the Purāṇas neither the three worlds, nor a specific set of deities serve as an exclusive means for categorising *adbhutas* is also underlined by the chapter which follows the one on *śāntis* and which introduces *adbhutas*. Although Garga explains that the deities are sending the omens, other agents like celestial women and celestial spies can cause them as well.

Although neither the three worlds, nor the association of portents and *śāntis* to deities allows to combine omens into larger units and give them family names, an additional look at *śāntis* foregrounds the more practical side. The correlation of omens to the three worlds tells the astrologer how bad the situation is and how much time is left to counteract. The identity of the deity that has caused the omen is obviously relevant, because it indicates to the astrologer which *śānti* has to be performed. Here, instead of a merely theoretical order we encounter a practical guideline for choosing the right ritual at the right time.

After a short interlude of one chapter in the Matsya-Purāṇa which describes planet worship (*grahayajña*) and a longer interlude in the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa of 20 chapters dealing with various topics, like the king's enemies, Indra's banner etc., the second section in both Purāṇas deals with omens in *yātrā*. While both Purāṇas share an almost identical first section, their sections on *yātrā* are different. Chapters on the throbbing of limbs (*dehaspandana*) and dreams (*svapna*) found in the Matsya-Purāṇa are completely absent in the second *khaṇḍa* of the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa, but are dealt with in chapters 37–39 and 46 of the first *khaṇḍa* within the narrative of a story which tells the fight between Rāma and the demon king Sālva and therefore exemplifies a king's *yātrā*, although the omens are described in much lesser detail than in the relevant chapters of the Matsya-Purāṇa.

The two Purāṇas are very consistent in the way omens are described and categorised. Also consistent is the two-fold division between omens which require a *śānti* ritual and omens which are related to *yātrā*. It is the king's duty as head of the state to ward off any negative result prognosticated by ominous signs by performing the required *śānti* ritual as well

as to order and start a *yātrā* according to the prognostications. These two areas form the centre of the omen passages in the Purāṇas and their way of narrating omens in general. It also has been shown that for the Purāṇas the attribution of omens to the three worlds and their connection with deities is not a means in itself to organise different *adbhutas*, but may rather serve as a practical guideline.

Two features of the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa are particularly interesting: it contains chapters describing various omens within the narrative of a story in a style more reminiscent of an epic. It also includes a chapter about the forms of the sacrificial fire (*agnirūpa*), which is missing in the other Purāṇas, but which can be found in the Parama-Saṃhitā of the Pāñcarātra.

3.2 Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās

Among the Pāñcarātra texts the Jayākhyā,³⁹ the Kapiñjala⁴⁰ and the Parama-Saṃhitā⁴¹ contain the most extensive passages on omens, which makes them especially suitable for this analysis. Since the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās are mostly concerned with topics related to their rituals it may seem obvious that ‘their’ omens are located within their own ritual complex. It is now the question what kinds of omens are applied, how they are contextualised and how this specific ‘set’ compares to the one in the Purāṇas.

39 It was composed between 600 and 850 CE (K.V. Rajan 1967–68: 79f. referred to by Rastelli 1999: 27 and Gonda 1977: 54). The Jayākhyā-Saṃhitā is already mentioned in Utpalavaiṣṇava’s Spandapradīpikā (10th century) and is, together with the Sātvata- and Pauṣkara-Saṃhitā, one of the “three gems” (*ratnatraya*), also known as *mūlaveda* (Rastelli 1999: 24).

40 The Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā is not mentioned in Vedāntadeśika’s Pāñcarātrarakṣā (Schrader 1973: 20) and the only other Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitā referring to it is the Viṣṇu-Saṃhitā (ibid.: 7), which suggests that it is a later text. While not claiming to belong to the 108 Saṃhitās, it calls itself a compilation (*sāra*) of the relevant topics (ibid.: 24).

41 The Parama-Saṃhitā is first quoted in Yāmuna’s Āgamaprāmānya. It is one of the older Pāñcarātra texts (Schrader 1973: 23).

While all three texts describe the throw of the toothstick (*dantakāṣṭha*)⁴² and dreams (*svapna*),⁴³ the Jayākhya-Saṃhitā omits the description of the fire omen (*agnirūpa*) which is contained in the Parama- and Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā. That the Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā is rather a compilation than a ritual handbook (see footnote 40) is underlined by the fact that it mentions a number of omens like water bubbles and the course of an arrow, which may have been added for the sake of completeness. During the initiation (*dīkṣā*) as an important rite of passage the observation of omens seems to be particularly common. Especially *svapna*⁴⁴ and the throw of the toothstick have a fixed place in the procedure of this ritual. After making the *maṇḍala* and offering ghee into the fire, the initiand is given cooked food. He then is made to clean his teeth with the toothstick⁴⁵ and has to sleep in the *cakra-maṇḍala*.⁴⁶ For the observation of dreams other occasions are mentioned. When a temple is consecrated (*sthāpane*), when one is dealing with important people (*puruṣeṣu mahatṣu*) and if one observes anomalies (*vikāreṣu*) one also should observe one's dreams.⁴⁷ The observation of the *agnirūpa* is not specifically mentioned for the *dīkṣā* but is described as common for fire-offerings in general.⁴⁸

In all three texts we find that omens are linked with *dīkṣā* and either the *sādhaka*⁴⁹ or the guru is addressed. Predictions are made from the throw of the toothstick (*dantakāṣṭha*), the sacrificial fire (*agnirūpa*) and dreams (*svapna*). Together they form a set, cut out for the ritual purposes

42 Jayākhya-Saṃhitā 16.189–195; Parama-Saṃhitā 9.3–10; Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā 6.23b–24.

43 Jayākhya-Saṃhitā 16.207–215a; Parama-Saṃhitā 9.13–34a; Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā 6.25–28.

44 Parama-Saṃhitā 8.39: *vāsudevena saṃspr̥śya svāpayed darbhasaṃstare / cakṣuṣī rūpamantreṇa saṃspr̥śya svapnasiddhaye* // Having touched him with the Vāsu-deva-Mantra he (the *ācārya*) shall make him (the initiand) sleep on a bed of *darbha*-grass / having touched his eyes with the *rūpa-mantra* in order to receive a dream //.

45 Parama-Saṃhitā 8.37.

46 Parama-Saṃhitā 8.78–82.

47 Parama-Saṃhitā 9.33b–34a.

48 Parama-Saṃhitā 9.34b.

49 The *sādhaka* is the third of four stages in initiation for the Pāñcarātras (Rastelli 1999: 148).

of the Pāncarātras. The omens in this set are more static than those mentioned in the Purāṇas and they are, at least the *dantakāṣṭha* and the *agnirūpa*, not spontaneous, but induced omens. This could explain why *utpātas* and *adbhutas* are mostly absent in the Pāncarātra texts, except in the Viśvāmitra-Saṃhitā 19.4, where *utpāta* is mentioned once and the Ahirbudhnya-Saṃhitā describes *svapna* as a sign of a magical attack against the king,⁵⁰ which may indicate some fluidity between Purāṇas and Pāncarātra-texts. In general the omens represented in the Jayākhyā-, Parama- and Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā are embedded in the controlled environment of the ritual, where liminality and ritual purity play a crucial role.

After this short overview over the sections on omens in relevant text of the Purāṇas and Pāncarātra, a comparison of the sections on *agnirūpa* in the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa⁵¹ and in the Parama-Saṃhitā⁵² shall

50 Schrader 1973: 149.

51 Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa 2.20.1–6: *puṣkara uvāca / pradakṣiṇāvartaśikhas taptajāmbūnadaprabhaḥ / rathaughameghanirghoṣo vidhūmaś ca hutāśanaḥ /1/ anulomasugandhaś ca svastikākārasannibhaḥ / vardhamānākṛtiś caiva nandyāvartanibhas tathā /2/ prasannārcir mahājvālah sphuliṅgarahito hitaḥ / svāhāvamāne jvalanaḥ svayaṃ devamukhaṃ haviḥ /3/ yadā bhuṅkte mahābhāga tadā rājño hitaṃ bhavet / haviṣas tu yadā vahnir na syāt simisimāyitam /4/ na varjeyuś ca madhyena mārjāramṛgapakṣiṇaḥ / pipilikāś ca dharmajña tadā bhūyāj jayī nṛpaḥ /5/ muktāhāramṛṇālābhe vahnau rājñāṃ jayo bhavet / tathaiva ca jayaṃ brūyāt prastarasya pradāyini /6/*

If the flame turns right, possessing the brilliance of pure gold, [sounding like] a thundering flood of chariots and being without smoke, /1/ following the natural direction, possessing a pleasant scent, with a form similar to a Svastikā, Vardhamāna, or Nandyāvarta (?), /2/ a clear flame, burning strongly without sparks, is right. If during the “*svāhā*” the burning offering itself /3/ enjoys the flame (*devamukha*), O excellent one, then there is well-being for the king. The offering and the fire should not tremble /4/ and neither cats, nor wild animals, birds or ants should pass through its centre, you expert of the Dharma, then the king will be victorious. /5/ Refraining from taking food at a fire, which annihilates obligation (?), begets victory for the kings. Similarly victory shall be predicted for the provider of the sacrificial grass. /6/

52 Parama-Saṃhitā 9.34cd–38ab: *agnikārye ca yady agnir vinā yatnena dīpyate /34cd/ śikhābhir ujalantībhir vartate vā pradakṣiṇam / hr̥dyam vā visrjed gandhaṃ rūpaṃ vā sumanoharam /35/ sampadas tasya vardhante sādhakasya na saṃśayaḥ / yadi homārtham ānīto naśyed vahnir akāraṇāt /36/ vipadas tasya jāyante sādhakasya na saṃśayaḥ / visrjed viṣṇuliṅgaṃ vā durgandham vā hutāśanam /37/ yadi vā na pradīpyeta prasavyaṃ vā na tac chubham /38ab/*

give an impression how the two different genres deal with the ‘same’ kind of prediction in their unique ways.

In the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa the description of the signs of the sacrificial fire is limited to the positive ones that promise the king’s victory. Since we can infer that victory means defeating an enemy, it is safe to say that for the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa *agnirūpa* is a part of *yātrā* and the *rājadharmā*. The structure, too, is different from the Parama-Saṃhitā. There, after describing qualities, which forebode prosperity for the *sādhaka*, the negative ones are listed. This is a common pattern in the omen sections of the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās.

The Parama-Saṃhitā describes which signs indicate a positive and which a negative result, whereas the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa distinguishes between the presence of a positive sign and the absence of a negative sign (e.g.: “if not x, then it is good”) and thus avoids even mentioning a possible defeat of the king. In its description the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa is more detailed than the Parama-Saṃhitā. Where the Parama-Saṃhitā merely suggests that the fire should have a pleasant form, the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa explicitly names the different auspicious forms for the fire.

In the context of the Pāñcarātra the observation of the fire has developed in a different direction, away from the question about the king’s victory over his enemies, which has been the driving force behind the description of *agnirūpa* as it is found in the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa. Instead the inquiry is about the well-being and potential dangers in different areas of the individual’s life, which puts it in line with a more modern approach to the inquiry of omens.

If at the *agnikārya* the fire is kindled effortlessly /34cd/ or turns to the right with blazing flames, or produces a pleasant scent or [has] a lovely form, /35/ [then,] the Sādhaka’s wealth increases without a doubt. If a fire brought for the sacrifice burns out without reason, /36/ [then,] without a doubt, misfortune occurs for the Sādhaka. If the fire produces signs of Viṣṇu (?) or a bad smell, /37/ or if it does not shine, or [turns] to the left, it is not good. /38ab/

4. Getting behind function: the conceptual aspects of omens

4.1 Abstraction and universality in the Jyotiḥśāstra

So far this paper has engaged with the questions of what categories and terms are used for the description of omens in Indian Sanskrit tradition and how omens are represented in relevant texts of the Purāṇas and the Pāñcarātra, determining their specific perspective on omens as functional and as being integrated into a ritual context. For obvious reasons the functional aspects of omens as determined in the Purāṇas and the Pāñcarātra-Saṃhitās can hardly be applied to the Jyotiḥśāstra in the same manner if the focus should remain on the social and religious significance of omens. The classifications applied in the texts of the Jyotiḥśāstra are not driven by functionality, but by attempts to provide a typology of omens as an integral part of the astrological knowledge tradition.

In the Bṛhat-Saṃhitā and in works like the Adbhutasāgara⁵³ and the Śakunārṇava⁵⁴ we find what is merely listed or embedded in stories by the Purāṇas, collected and reworked in a more systematic manner, containing general rules of application similar to those found in the ritual *sūtras*. The two following examples display the level of abstraction applied to form groups of omens in the Bṛhat-Saṃhitā:

*kākadvayasyāpi samānam etat
phalaṃ yad uktaṃ rutaceṣṭitādyaiḥ /
patatriṇo 'nye 'pi yathaiva kāko
vanyāḥ śvavac coparidaṃṣtriṇo ye //*

“The aforementioned result [for a single crow] is the same for two crows regarding the cry, movement etc. Other birds too are [to be treated] like the crow, just like wild, tusked animals are similar to dogs.”⁵⁵

53 Composed by Ballālasena in 1168, completed by his son Lakṣmaṇasena in 1200 (Pingree 1981: 78).

54 Also called Vasantarājaśakuna, composed in 1090 by Vasantarāja (Pingree 1981: 76).

55 Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 95.57.

Here the crow and the dog are clearly defined as archetypes for other animals, which means that only the interpretation of the crow's behaviour has to be described, which then can be applied to any other kind of bird. That the crow omens serve as a blueprint for those of other birds can be intuitively understood, but what qualifies the omens indicated by dogs to be representative of those indicated by wild, tusked animals is a different question.

*dinmaṇḍale 'bhyantaravāhyabhāge
phalāni vinyād grhagodhikāyāḥ /*

“The results of the house-lizard can be inferred [from its position] in the circle of the directions (*dinmaṇḍala*) within the quarters or in the spokes (...).”⁵⁶

Here instead of employing an archetype as equivalent like in the aforementioned example, a general scheme based on directions valid for all *śakunas* is used to identify the results for a specific omen, in this case: the house-lizard. Both examples show how large groups of omens, which otherwise would have to be dealt with at length, are described by simple rules of abstraction. Since abstraction is a common method of Indian astrologers in medieval times to aim for a certain degree of universality, it is justified to follow their example by analysing the conceptual background of omens.

In order to map out the tangible world, omens are layered with different concepts, forming a nexus of relations, which then can be interpreted to determine possible results. The three universal concepts which are also applied in predictions made from omens are that of time, directions and the body. While these concepts are extensively dealt with on an abstract level in other areas of Indian astrology, it is undeniable that they also play an important role in the field of omens. But in this context they are generally dealt with in a more practical fashion.

4.2 Directions

The throw of the toothstick which, as described above, is a common omen in the context of the Pāñcarātra ritual, is used to indicate a result by its fall in one of the eight directions: a twig is used as toothstick and

⁵⁶ Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 88.47a.

it can be taken from different kinds of trees. While the Parama-Saṃhitā⁵⁷ only forbids using bent or knotted twigs, the Bṛhat-Saṃhitā⁵⁸ also forbids split or withered ones. The latter also ascribes positive results to different types of wood, whereas the Parama-Saṃhitā⁵⁹ simply lists which types are recommended for toothsticks. The Jayākhyā-Saṃhitā⁶⁰ prescribes different lengths for the toothstick used by the guru, brahmins, women and children. First the twig is chewed on one end, which after it becomes fibrous is used for cleaning the teeth. Then it is rinsed with water and thrown on the ground. Depending on the direction in which it falls, different events can be predicted. Also the flames of the sacrificial fire (*agnirūpa*)⁶¹ and of the lamp (*dīpajvāla*)⁶² create different results, depending on the directions they turn towards. Directions can even play a role in dreams where, for example, going to the south indicates death. That the directions generally imply different results can be described as one underlying concept in the interpretation of omens. Spatial orientation concerning ominous signs is mostly related to the eight directions commonly referred to by the western compass, but other divisions e.g. into 32 quarters are also possible.⁶³ The circle of the horizon, with its division into 32 quarters, links the directions to specific domains, professions or social positions and objects, e.g. an ominous sound in the quarter of the *mālākāra* (garland-maker) creates a result connected with this domain or profession.

Almost any scheme can be applied to the directions, mapping out all possible aspects of social life. Deities,⁶⁴ male and female gender,⁶⁵ different kinds of females,⁶⁶ social positions or professions bearing special

57 Parama-Saṃhitā 9.4.

58 Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 85.2.

59 Parama-Saṃhitā 9.3.

60 Jayākhyā-Saṃhitā 16.189cd–190ab.

61 Parama-Saṃhitā 9.34ff.

62 Kapiñjala-Saṃhitā 6.20, Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 84.

63 Bṛhat-Saṃhitā 86: 29–34.

64 Ibid.: 89.75–77.

65 Ibid.: 86.80.

66 Ibid.: 86.79.

significance are just a few examples for possible areas to be associated with directions.

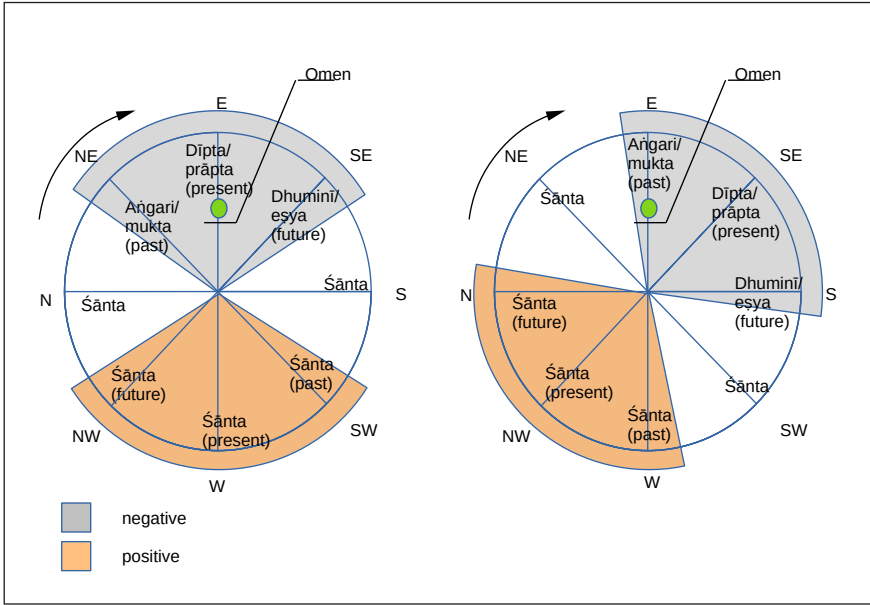
4.3 Time and directions

While, as we have seen, for some omens, like the toothstick, only the direction in which it falls is taken into account, the result of other omens such as the sound made by the house-lizard, which would be categorised as *śakuna*, has to be determined by both the time and the area in which it occurs. A common unit used for time in combination with omens is the *yāma* or its synonym the *prahara*. The 24-hour day is divided into eight *yāmas* (one *yāma* = three hours) and sometimes sunrise, sunset and high noon are also added and bear special significance.

In dream omens the *yāma*, during which the person has the dream, is often used to determine when the prognosticated result will occur.⁶⁷ The *yāma*'s positioning within the compass and therefore the combination of spatial with temporal units is relevant for the respective prediction of an omen's result. With each *yāma* the division of positive results in past, present and future rotates through each direction. After the eighth *yāma* the circle is completed. As an example: if a lizard cries in the first *yāma* in the east, the indicated result is negative in the present, while in the second *yāma* it indicates a negative result in the past (see the figure below).

In chapter 17 of Vasantarāja's *Śakunārṇava* we find a detailed description of the directions and their indications for the house-lizard. At different times of the day the cry of the house-lizard coming from the eight directions creates a different result. The description starts with the sunrise in the eastern direction and lists for each of the eight *yāmas* – four for the day, four for the night – the indicated result before moving on to the south-east and so on, until all eight *yāmas* for all eight directions are completed. This list does not divide the results into past, present and future, as it is done in the *Bṛhat-Saṃhitā*, and is therefore more concrete and easier to handle, although its means of description is less elegant.

67 See e.g. *Parama-Saṃhitā* 9.13b–14, *Matsya-Purāṇa* 242.17b–19.



4.4 The body

Various ominous signs are related to the human or anthropomorphic body or figure. Dream omens (*svapna*) are often closely related to the body and we can distinguish some of them in particular:

- Dreams in which the body is smeared with various substances or is bathed in them, e.g. in blood or mud.
- Dreams in which the person consumes different substances, e.g. raw or cooked flesh, milk, yoghurt, soil, alcohol, etc.
- Dreams in which the person experiences severe bodily modification, e.g. grass or a tree growing out of the navel, having multiple heads or arms, having their head or limbs chopped off.⁶⁸

The substances in a) and b) bear a specific significance, which determines if a dream omen is good or bad.

In various religious contexts the human body is related to deities and specifically to deities residing over specific body parts. This is the case

⁶⁸ E.g. in *Matsya-Purāṇa* 242.22: *drumatṛṇodbhavo nābhau tathaiva bahubāhutā, tathaiva bahu śīrṣatvaṃ phalitodbhava eva ca.*

in *nyāsa*, where deities are ritually ‘applied’ on the body by the use of specific mantras, as described e.g. in the *Jayākhyā-Saṃhitā*.⁶⁹ Another example is the *Vāstu-Śāstra*, which is concerned with topics revolving around house-building. There the *vāstupuruṣa*⁷⁰ is pinned to the ground by various deities, each one holding a specific body part. That it is not only the body as a whole which can hold significance for the interpretation of omens, but different parts of the body, is a common feature among a variety of omens, like pimples (*piṭakalakṣaṇa*),⁷¹ the throbbing of limbs (*spandana*)⁷² and the fall of the house-lizard (*pallīpatana*). In case of these three omens the right side of the body is seen as positive and the left side as negative. Often this relation is reversed for women. In all these omens are related to the human body. The description begins with the head and ends with the feet. While the body parts listed are basically the same for each omen, there are also differences. The results ascribed to the different body parts differ from omen to omen, too: for each omen the emphasis on specific areas of the body is slightly different, e.g. in *spandana* the area of the eyes is much more prominent than in *piṭakalakṣaṇa*.

In the *Muhūrtamārtaṇḍa*⁷³ the house-lizard no longer indicates future events by crying from different directions, but by falling on a person’s body, whereby the different body parts touched by the lizard indicate different results. This type of omen is, unlike *śakuna*, limited to the house-lizard and the chameleon, as the title of this passage, *pallī-saraṭha-prakarāṇa*, indicates. The lizard and the chameleon form a pair: the fall of the house-lizard indicates future events congruent to those indicated by the chameleon climbing upwards (*saraṭha-prarohaṇa*). The same combination of *pallīpatana* and *saraṭha-prarohaṇa* is described briefly in the *Dharmasindhu*.⁷⁴

Based on the dates of the texts dealing with *pallīpatana* I argue that there is an actual conceptual change, and that the methodical prediction of future events by differentiating the possible areas of a person’s body that can come into contact with a house-lizard because it falls on that

69 Rastelli 1999: 140.

70 *Bṛhat-Saṃhitā* 53.44–54.

71 *Ibid.*: 52.

72 *Matsya-Purāṇa* 241, *Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa* 1.46.

73 Composed by Nārāyaṇa Daivajña in 1571.

74 Composed in 1790 by Kāśinātha Upādhyāya (Rocher (ed.) 1986: 278).

person is a later development. While Vasantarāja describes the house-lizard in the fashion of a typical *śakuna*, determining future events from sound, *yāma* and direction, the Muhūrtamārtaṇḍa uses its contact with different body parts for prediction.

4.5 “Evolution” of an omen

Ritual actions to ward off any potential negative result indicated by the touch of the house-lizard have considerably changed over time. An extensive list of remedies is provided in the Dharmasindhu.⁷⁵ The person touched by a house-lizard or chameleon shall take a bath, drink the five products of the cow (*pañcagavya*) and observe clarified butter (*ājyam avalokya*). Offering an image of the lizard or chameleon and dressed in red, the person shall worship Rudra in a vessel (*kalaśa*), recite the Mṛtyum-jaya-Mantra, offer 108 or 1008 pieces of sesame into a fire fuelled by 108 pieces of Khadira wood uttering the Vyāhṛtis, perform the Sviṣṭakṛt sacrifice, ritually sprinkle water (*abhiṣeka*) and shall donate gold, clothes and sesame. The offering of a lizard figure on such an occasion has also been described by early-20th-century anthropologist Edgar Thurston:

“Sometimes a silver lizard is offered at temples, to counteract the evils which would result from a lizard falling on some unlucky part of the body, such as the kudumi (hair knot) of a female. The lizard, associated with the name of Siva, is regarded as sacred. It is never intentionally killed, and, if accidentally hurt or killed, an image of it in gold or silver is presented by high caste Hindus to a Siva temple.”⁷⁶

The Varadarāja-temple in Kāñcīpuram in Tamil Nadu functions as a specialised institution, where touching a gold-coloured metal plate, which depicts a lizard with a sun and a moon with a small silver lizard, is said to have the power to remove the negative results of the contact with a house-lizard and even to grant *mokṣa*.⁷⁷ This, to my present knowledge,

⁷⁵ Rocher 1986: 278, Kane 1962: 792.

⁷⁶ Thurston 1912: 162.

⁷⁷ See: <https://www.astroved.com/articles/lizards-falling-on-the-head> (retrieved 27.11.2021); <https://astrolaabh.in/article/lizard-falling-body-parts/> (retrieved 27.11.2021).

is so far the only example where an omen has “evolved” from being a part of a larger category, in this case *śakuna* with directions as underlying concept, over *pallipatana*, where the body is used to discern future results to being depicted as an icon in a temple.

5. Conclusion

Omens are deeply rooted in the Indian tradition and as the medieval sources have shown, being present in rituals of kingship, religious initiation and science, they have permeated important areas of every-day life. Even today omens play a role in temple worship and it remains an ongoing task to document and analyse their relevance both in textual as well as in material sources. A closer look into the structure of ominous signs in Indian religious literature reveals how tightly they are connected with different modes of perceiving and organising the tangible world. A comparative and in-depth study can contribute to a further understanding of this important part of Indian religious culture. Functionality and connections with social structures, normative patterns attributed to deities, directions and every-day objects form a tightly knit network loading omens with meaning. Omens continue to operate as an integral part of astrology, complementing what is cyclic and calculable by providing an access to otherwise chaotic and unpredictable phenomena and making them meaningful. The combination of general rules and the wealth of specific information which is conveyed in the descriptions of omens allow us to get an idea how people in medieval India perceived and structured their environment. As the close environment is full of signs which have to be read and interpreted, nature itself becomes the equivalent of a text, by which human action can be judged and guided. More than being a means to allow the individual for a pleasant life, and to detect and avoid potential dangers, omens can function as active signifiers for negotiating human agency.

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