Assimilations: Independent Treatises on the System of Human Marks: Sāmudrikaśāstra

Already in the astrological collections and Purāṇas, the system of human marks was understood to be a part of a well-established tradition of authoritative knowledge, either Jyotiḥśāstra or Dharmaśāstra. Its emergence as an independent śāstra, however, came with the composition of autonomous treatises on the human marks, called Sāmudrikaśāstras. The date of these books and mainly pamphlets is uncertain, but we know that one of the most important Sāmudrikaśāstra, Sāmudrikatilaka, was composed in the twelfth century CE.

The independent textbooks took two distinct forms: 1. extracted and redacted chapters from Jyotiḥśāstra compilations or from Purāṇas, and 2. new formulations of the human marks, partly based on pre-existing information and partly including previously unknown information. An examination of Sāmudrikaśāstra involves a survey of its surviving literary documents.

The Literature of Sāmudrikaśāstra

With the exception of a few printed versions, the vast majority of the literature of Sāmudrikaśāstra remains in the form of unedited manuscripts. The picture of the system of human marks from the Purāṇas to the modern era, therefore, is based on information culled from the catalogues of several major collections of manuscripts in India and abroad and from a survey of select manuscripts from the large quantities available.

Since the catalogues vary considerably in the amount of information they provide about each manuscript, this survey does not claim to be comprehensive. It is, however, representative of the kinds of physiognomic literature that comes under the general heading of Sāmudikaśāstra found in different parts of India. This information allows us to present a preliminary mapping of certain trends and developments in the transmission of this literature.

Four major trends in Sāmudrikaśāstra literature can be isolated from the investigation of its literary remains:

1. emergence of regional forms of human marks
2. continuation of extraction, consolidation, and transmission from earlier sources
3. emphasis on popularising the human marks by the use of vernacular commentaries
4. importance of the Jain scholarly traditions in the preservation and transmission of the Sāmudrikaśāstras
5. emergence of a separate literature of Rekhāśāstra

The survey of these later texts begins with an overview of the manuscript traditions in India, with an emphasis on different regions and the types of manuscripts found there. This is followed by a discussion of the different kinds of independent treatises that constitute the knowledge system of Sāmudrikaśāstra and ends with a survey of the texts on the tradition of Rekhāśāstra, or Indian palmistry and pedomancy, with reference to modern-day practice.

Regional Forms of Indian Physiognomy

Works on the human marks cited in different catalogues of Sanskrit manuscripts are found in sections of Jyotihśāstra, under the title “Sāmudrika,” which most cataloguers translate as “palmistry,” or under the more general category of fortune-telling and omens.¹ The number of treatises in this śāstra in relation to others is relatively small, but nearly every catalogue contains at least one or two manuscripts dealing with the subject.²

One of the advantages of examining a significant number of manuscript collections is that it provides an opportunity to view a textual tradition in the wider context of regional distribution—not only between north and south but also between east and west. In this way, a broad geographical distribution of Sāmudrikaśāstra can be obtained.

The greatest and most diversified cluster of independent treatises on Sāmudrikaśāstra comes from the regions of north, northwest, and western India. This is not surprising since the earliest formulations found in Jyotiḥśāstra derive from the northwest and west of the subcontinent. The works from these regions cover a range of texts on the subject, including extracts from pre-existing chapters found in the Purāṇas and in early compilations of Jyotiḥśāstra. Other texts include unspecific treatises in both Sanskrit and regional languages under the

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¹ For some unknown reason, the catalogues of RORI consistently list them under Ratnaśāstra, or gemmology.
² A complete list of the manuscript-catalogues consulted occurs in alphabetical order in the bibliography. The abbreviations for each of the catalogues follow, wherever possible, those found in Pingree’s Census of the Exact Sciences in Sanskrit, and, if not in Pingree, Subhas C. Biswas, ed., Bibliographic survey of Indian manuscript catalogues (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1998).