



This blue monkey is more than what it appears to be. At the back of the simian is a yellow lever, which, when pulled causes the monkey to clap and stick its tongue out. Rs 10.

OPINION by Shyam Bhat

Rahu will get you

"Come in, come in. Sit down," the astrologer said, his eyes hidden by the reflection of sunlight on his glasses.

I was here to test a long standing hypothesis of mine - that astrologers were psychotherapists in another form, providing comfort and solace to those who sought them out.

To test the hypothesis, I thought it best that I observe the interaction dispassionately, and so I had roped in a friend, Anita, to be the subject of the reading.

The astrologer asked Anita for her date and time of birth, then opened a booklet and looked at it for a few seconds.

"Swathi nakshatra, Mesha rashi," he announced, then said, "You have foreign travel in your horoscope." He looked at her expectantly, and she felt obliged to respond. "Yes, but I just moved back to India." He shook his head. "Your jataka says that you will find your fortune abroad, not in India. Anyway, you want to start a business, some business, no?"

My friend nodded. "Have you thought about having children?"

"I already have 2 children," Anita replied.

He peered at the horoscope. "Yes, yes, 2 small children," as if implying that he had only now read the fine print in her horoscope about her kids.

"They are very intelligent, and they will have a good life. Very good, very good. And you have

decided to live in India?"

"Yes."

"Okay, that is alright. Until 2010, don't invest any money, you can do a teaching job..."

As he spoke, I studied his technique. He spoke in generalities, sprinkled with a few specifics. I noticed the casual way in which he glanced at Anita. He was face-reading, I thought, interpreting expressions, dress, accent, demeanour to make intelligent guesses about her life, and her state of mind. Finally, after half an hour, he stopped.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked. Anita shook her head.

Not too bad, I thought, reflecting on the session. In his ability to foster rapport with the client, the man was almost as skilled as many trained psychotherapists.

There seemed to be a pattern: First, he complimented Anita on her strengths and her achievements. Next, having won her confidence, he dispensed sage, if generic, advice. "Everything will be fine, just work hard, and don't worry. You are born into a good family, you have good Karma, have confidence in yourself."

So this, I thought, is how Bangalore survives with only 50 psychiatrists and a few hundred trained psychotherapists and counsellors, for 7 million people. Astrologers, aura healers, chakra balancers, and all new age interpretations of ancient Indian spiritual traditions - in a

sense, they were self-trained counsellors, psychotherapists, helping people cope with stress.

But then, the astrologer paused and looked at Anita with a grave expression on his face.

He pointed to a circle on the horoscope.

"Rahu," he said. Rahu the demon, whose severed head, according to Hindu mythology, devours light, and plunges life into darkness, chaos, and confusion.

"What does that mean?" Anita asked.

"For the next 6 months, nothing will work out in your life because of the shadow of Rahu." He paused.

"What to do about it?" Anita asked. She seemed a little shaken by this revelation.

The astrologer half closed his eyes. "No problem, ma. You just wear a special taveez, an amulet that I will make specially for you. Wear it with bhakti, with faith, for 40 days, and everything will be alright.

Rahu will be appeased and you will be successful and happy."

"How much for the amulet?" I asked.

He opened his booklet and wrote some numbers on a paper, as if to suggest that even the price of the amulet was indicated by the planets.

"7500 rupees," he said.

"7500 rupees?"

"Yes, don't do it if you don't want to, I am not forcing you to. But if you wear it, within 40 days everything will be good."

"That's a lot of money," Anita said. "I don't think I want it."

His expression darkened. He looked down at the horoscope and shook his head.

"Your wish, ma. But Rahu is here, I am not saying, your horoscope is saying. Within 2 weeks you will come and tell me you are in trouble, I guarantee it, 100%."

This was a shakedown if ever I saw one. A protection racket, the astrologer threatening us with cosmic retribution, no less, if we did not buy the amulet.

He was Tony Soprano, and Rahu was his capo, and they were saying, 'Pay up or else...'

Anita decided to take her chances, and we left the place after parting with Rs250 for the reading.

As I drove through the streets of Bangalore, I became aware of the number of signboards advertising the services of astrologers, all lying in wait for their next customer. Give me money so I can protect you from Rahu, they seemed to be saying. It was an offer almost too good to refuse.

