

Brhat Samhitā by Varāhmihira: An Analysis and contents

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Varāhmihira was one of the greatest astrologers of ancient India. Belonging to the 6th century CE of the Gupta Age, he composed numerous texts on astrology and allied subjects. Among his notable works is the *Brhatsamhitā*, which is an extraordinary treatise not just on astrology but also on other subjects – from architecture to agriculture, from meteorology to physiognomy, from economics to dental hygiene. The *Brhatsamhitā* is a work on the *samhitā* branch. It consists of 106 chapters with a total of nearly 4000 *Ślokas*. The subject deals with the effect of movements of planets and natural phenomena on human life, geography, characteristics of Khādyā, *Aṅgavidyā* (Sāmudrika) architecture, iconography, auspicious and inauspicious characteristics of men and animals, omens, manufacture of cosmetics *Vṛkṣāyurveda* (plant pathology) science of precious stones etc. The text describes a chapter in praise of women. *Brhat Samhitā* used by people as an encyclopedia. A critical study of this work is very important from the point of view of our cultural history. It shows the range and wide sweep of *Varāhmihira*'s mind.

The term *samhitā* means a collection. As such it cannot be an original work. Its business is to condense many *śāstras*. It should, therefore, include details of many subjects found in varied works. The *samhitā* as astrological work, is nothing but an encyclopedia of astrological and other subjects of human interest. It contains astrology with many scientific topics and other subjects in which human beings have an abiding faith. Hence, the *samhitā* can rightly be termed a work of social science. For, social science should have reference to and explanation of almost all aspects of social life and those that have a human appeal too. The structure of the *samhitā* is such that it gives ample scope for the exhibition of the poetic genius and artistic talents of the author. For, to state a simple fact the author uses poetic language in figures and hyperbole while describing Agastya.¹ When we go through this work, we are reminded of Homeric² similes and the linguistic elegance and charm of Vālmīki, Vyāsa, Bhāsa and Kālidāsa.

Whatever subjects the author takes up for description whether it is eclipse, planetary movements, rainfall, cloud, architecture, water-divination or some other topics he discusses the same with thoroughness and mastery based on the knowledge of ancient texts and *Śāstras*.

Varāha had several predecessors in the field of *samhitā*, whom he mentions by name, viz.

Garga, Parāśara, Kāśyapa, Ṛṣiputra, Devala, Bṛhaspati, Nandīśvara etc. He shows great regard for ancient sages. In every chapter he mentions the authorities on the topic to be

discussed. Whenever he differs from their views, he gives his own reason for it. His knowledge is really encyclopedic. For, like the *Mahābhārata* there is no subject that he has not discussed in his magnum opus. The subjects may broadly be classified under the following heads: Astronomy, Geography, Flora, Meteorology, Portents, Agriculture and Economics, Politics, Physiognomy, Engineering, Botany, Industries, Zoology, Erotics, Gemology, Hygiene, Augurus and Stellar lore.

Now I am going to divide the contents of text on the basis of important areas where it has created an impact:

1. Astrology and Astronomy in the *Brhat Samhitā*

Varāhmihira was primarily an astrologer, and half of the content of *Brhat Samhitā* is about astrology and astronomy. In the translation (Iyer, 1884), the text has been divided into two sections, the first containing highly technical information about the subject, while the second is a collection of all sorts of subjects. The first section, comprising 47 chapters is aimed at professional astrologers who will understand and appreciate the detailed descriptions on planets, their positions and their respective ramifications. He begins the section by describing the characteristics of the ideal astrologer. The author then goes on to display his deep, self-generated knowledge of celestial bodies and planetary movements. He was the first to describe many astronomical phenomena such as equinoxes, solstices, eclipses, comets, meteors and even sun spots – which are now scientifically-established phenomena.

Varāhmihira devotes several chapters on predictive astrology, based on the position of planets, bodily characteristics (*aṅgavidyā*: chapter 51), and omens. These predictions pertain to natural phenomena and the general health, welfare and prosperity of people – both royalty and laymen. There are also some chapters devoted to auspicious days and times pertaining to birth, weddings, travel, etc. as well as ways of charting calendar periods.

James Mchugh in his unique book '*Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*' points out how *Varāhmihira* used smells for prognostication. In three seemingly disconnected passages, *Varāhmihira* tells us a man's fortunes depending on the smell of his semen.³

The common manner of practice of Hindu astrology as we know it today, owes a great deal to *Varāhmihira*'s masterful treatise. Dreyer says what *Varāhmihira* did for *jyotiṣ* is similar to what Ptolemy did for Greek astronomy and astrology. He summarized all the astronomical and astrological knowledge available in India in a series of definitive books. And his

¹V. Subrahmanya Sastri and M. Ramakrishna Bhat, *Varahmihira's Brihat Samhita* (Trans.), V.B. Soobbiah and sons, Bangalore, 1946, pp. 146-47

²Ibid, pp. 147-48

³James McHugh, '*Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*', Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 81

methodical approach gave *jyotiṣ* its scientific status and influenced generations of practitioners in this field.⁴

2. Meteorology and allied subjects in the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*

Because planetary activity and climate are connected, *Varāhamihira's Bṛhat Saṃhitā* deals with the subjects like meteorology, hydrology and seismology. The importance of rain in an agriculture-driven economy, has been underlined in this text. Chapters 21 to 31 are devoted to rain and other natural phenomena. He writes on rain, on Yogas like Rohinī and Svāti, on winds, cloud formations, earthquakes, rainbows, dust storms and thunder bolts among other things. Rain gauging was an important function of the ancient Indian astrologer. He writes several verses describing the colors of the sky, shapes of clouds, the positions of *nakṣtras*, the growth of vegetation, behavior of animals, the nature of lightning and thunder and associated rainfall patterns. Interestingly, *Varāhamihira* not only talks about rainfall and resulting crop production but also comments on the rise and fall of prices of crops with that.

Varāhamihira describes the general geography of the region and also devotes an entire chapter to seismic activity and earthquakes. He classifies earthquakes by way of *nakṣtra* time and gives many natural indicators predicting quakes and some mythological reasons for their occurrence.

There is another remarkable chapter on 'the exploration of water springs' (chapter 54), where *Varāhamihira* explains how to trace underwater sources based on geographical pointers. He mentions different kinds of plants, reptiles, insects and other creatures as well as soil markers for groundwater sources. Elaborate studies have been undertaken by contemporary scholars on this aspect and science has surely corroborated the accuracy of many of the parameters described by the great ancient scientist.

3. Architecture in the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*

Four expansive chapters in the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* deal with the science and craft of architecture. Chapter 53 is on House Building, Chapter 56 on Temples, Chapter 57 on Durable Cements, Chapter 58 on Temple Images and Chapter 60 On the fixing of images in Temples. These chapters, along with other *Śilpa* texts form the basis of *Vastuśilpa* and *Vastuśāstra* as we understand them today.

Varāhamihira describes some detail about the kinds and dimensions of houses to be built by certain classes of people. He also expertly comments upon the technical aspect of cement mixtures and other masonic techniques. But in the context of temple architecture, religious sculpture and iconography the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* has received a lot of importance. The *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* lists 20 types of temples ranging from one to twelve storey high.⁵ The text also lists at least 56 design requirements in temple construction.

For example: "The Garbhagriha or the inner apartment shall be half as broad as the breadth of the temple and walls shall be raised all round. The breadth of the entrance to the

garbhagriha shall be a fourth of the breadth of the room and its height shall be twice the breadth." (Chapter 56, verse 12).⁶

There are similar detailed descriptions about the central and ancillary icons in a temple – whether Hindu or Buddhist and as well as sacred rules related to their installation.

Varāhamihira explained and compared important tenets in *Vāstuvidyā* and elements of mythology and architecture. His 81-square grid became a popular layout plan, with each grid accorded to a particular deity. The *Vāstupurūṣh* concept, as explained in his book, is still observed in the field of *Vāstusāstra*. These helped in the creation of blueprints not just for the builder but also for the priest. Installations rites of mortar and god were dealt with equally by the *Varāhamihira*. Along with *Mānaśārā* and *Śilpa Ratnā*, the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* became an important source book for architectural guidelines in the ancient to medieval periods.

4. Environment in the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*

Varāhamihira shows an exceptional knowledge of the environment in his treatise. In his chapter on the exploration of water springs, he lists a number of positive and negative bio indicators that point to or show the existence of groundwater at that point. In this exhaustive floral and faunal discussion related to the clues on water divination, *Varāhamihira* lists the number of plants, reptiles, insects, other creatures and other valuable insights on the biodiversity, climatic and soil conditions of the period.

The *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* also has a separate chapter on plants and animals. Chapter 29 is devoted to Flowers and Plants, in which he indicates and interprets what the growth patterns of certain plants and flowers means. He enumerates in great detail the kinds of plants that should or should not be planted next to each other and the distance to be maintained between them. Plant nutrition and disease has also been discussed upon. Mention of grafting, pruning and fertilizing techniques indicates the incredibly deep knowledge of *Varāhamihira* on the matters of gardening and plant life.

The Chapters 61 through 67 describe briefly on the features of animals like dogs, roosters, turtles, goats, horses and elephants. *Varāhamihira* also provides an account on exceptional behaviors of animals in the section of omens, and between chapters 89 and 94, he explains the omens thereof. Chapter 55 also deals about the gardening.

5. Gemology in the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*

Gems and jewels are first mentioned in the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* in the astrological context.⁷ The text makes a mention of at least 22 types of jewels⁸, including diamonds, sapphires, rubies, beryls, amethysts, corals, moon-gems, etc. There are independent chapters (81 to 84) devoted to diamonds, pearls, rubies, and emeralds. It gives various parameters, some of which are used even by modern Indian gemologists. These chapters elaborate the sources of these gems and their quality. The author describes the size, shape, clarity, purity, weight and even prices of some of these gems.

⁴ Ronnie Gale Dreyer, 'Vedic Astrology: A Guide to the Fundamentals of Jyotiṣh', Weiser Books, 1997, p. 20

⁵ Subhash Kak, Space and Cosmology in the Hindu Temple, (Paper presented at Vaastu Kaushal: International Symposium on Science and Technology in Ancient Indian Monuments, New Delhi, November 16-17, 2002), p. 2 [Sourced from <http://www.ece.lsu.edu/kak/Time2.pdf>]

⁶ V. Subrahmanya Sastri and M. Ramakrishna Bhat, *Varāhamihira's Bṛhat Saṃhitā* (Trans.), V.B. Soobbiah and sons, Bangalore, 1946, pp. 495-96

⁷ Ernst Wilhelm (Trans.), *Graha Sutras*, Kala Occult Publishers, 2006, p. 248

⁸ Sailendra Nath Sen, 'Ancient Indian History and Civilization', New Age International, 1999, p. 240

He also recommends the kinds of gems to be worn by people of different castes. Jewels were used not just for ornamentation, but also for astrological reasons like protection against evil. Pearls seem to have been popular in the Gupta Age, as *Varāhamihira* describes many kinds of pearls and pearl necklaces: ranging from one-string necklaces to 1008-stringed ones.⁹ These notes offer valuable insights on not just the technical points of gemology, but also their uses in astrology and the prevalent trade practices in that industry.

At the core of *Varāhamihira's* recommendation of gemstones in astrology lies a concern for human welfare. This feature is almost a constant through the *Brhat Samhitā* and this is what has made attraction by the writer to generations of readers.

6. The Human Condition in *Brhat Samhitā*

Speaking of human welfare, a considerable part of the *Brhat Samhitā* deals with this aspect. It speaks about an interesting and non-technical content of the text, which attracts to the lay reader. Human condition is universal after all. Spread over the second part of the treatise, *Varāhamihira* devotes many chapters for describing people of the society. *Brhat Samhitā* has chapters 68, 69, 70 which deal on the features of laymen and women and of *Mahāpuruṣas* or great men. The chapter on *Aṅgavidyā* and its contents has already been mentioned above. Further, there are chapters on 'In Praise of Women' (74), 'Amicability' (75) and 'Sexual Union' (78).

These chapters describe every desirable and undesirable attribute. *Varāhamihira* makes a clue to the reader that the prosperity or adversity to be expected on the basis of all body parts – from the hair on the head to the toes on the feet. In addition to physical features, he also comments upon the subject's complexion, voice, strength, height, weight, and gait among other things. He also classifies and describes people according to their dispositions and this may be considered among the earliest personality types in a psychological context. He is pleasantly pro-women in the chapter 'In Praise of Women', which can be seen in the following verse:

"In no world has Brahma created a gem superior to women, whose speech, sight, touch, thought provoke pleasurable sensations. Such a gem in the shape of a woman is the fruit of a person's good deeds, and from such a gem a person obtains both sons and pleasure. A woman therefore resembles the goddess of wealth in a family, and must be treated with respect, and all her wants must be satisfied." (chapter. 74, verse 4)¹⁰

However, the truth of a patriarchal society reflects in the subsequent chapter on sexual union, where the 'good wife' archetype is firmly established in subordination. Moral ideals are introduced in the chapter on 'Amicability', while the ideals of physical pleasure and marital life in 'Sexual Union'.

7. Miscellaneous subjects in the *Brhat Samhitā*

This category includes a lot of varied subjects, ranging from trade commodities (chapter 41), to pimples (chapter 52), from umbrellas (chapter 73) to spermatic drugs (chapter 76), and from 'Cots and Seats' (chapter 79) to perfume mixtures

(chapter 80). When a grand astrologer chooses to include lamps and toothbrushes in his magnum opus, it comes across as strange, but there is a lot to be read between the lines regarding the society that *Varāhamihira* lived in. These miscellaneous subjects open a window to the social life of the period, pointing especially at the opulence of the Golden Age. It also shows how the great scholar could write with equal ease on matters great and small, without losing his poetic elegance.

But most importantly, *Varāhamihira's Brhat Samhitā* shows how scientific, secular treatises can be humane. Unlike Western thought, where science is all about cold objectivity, this treatise is laced with concern for the human condition. It reflects the Indian belief in the interconnectedness of all things.

The *Brhat Samhitā* is truly the magnum opus¹¹ of *Varāhamihira* – the great 6th century CE scholar. He deals with a number of subjects in this encyclopedic treatise and provides knowledge from all important parts of life for future generations. Scholars and laymen get benefit from the study of this text, for it has both – scientific and literary merit.

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⁹Ibid

¹⁰V. Subrahmanya Sastri and M. Ramakrishna Bhat, *Varahmihira's Brihat Samhita* (Trans.), V.B. Soobbiah and sons, Bangalore, 1946, pp. 592-93

¹¹Ibid, p. iii