

Seminar SAW

Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in the ancient world, 2015-2016

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Historical approaches to ancient mathematics and astral sciences in the early modern period

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The sense of history in Indian astronomical texts

Abstract – Until recently, the usual story that has been told about premodern Indian historiography is one of failure, of the lack of an independent genre that corresponded to what one finds in Greek or in Chinese. Recent work has suggested that there are, nevertheless, Indian texts that display a recognizably historiographical orientation, especially in the early modern period.

When it comes to the Indian astral sciences, the pluralist and interpenetrated profile of the discipline - aware of its connection to astral sciences outside India; not tied to a single human founder and his 'root' text; and in competition in the later period with a rival tradition expressed in Arabic and Persian - appears to have given rise to a distinctive use of historical writing.

I shall examine an early (6th Century) doxographical work, Varāhamihira's account of five astronomical schools of thought that preceded him, and consider the nature of the historiographical dimension that is present there. I shall then turn to a number of relatively less known works by early modern authors, among them Nityānanda's Sarvasiddhāntarāja, where an historical account is used to justify borrowing principles and techniques from the rival, Persianate astronomers.