

INDIAN OBSERVATORIES IN THE TIMES OF VON HUMBOLDT

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The picture that emerges of India five to three thousand years ago, from evidence through the Archaeological excavations and Sanskrit scriptures, is that it had a highly developed civilization with a high level of attainment in science and technology as also in Arts, particularly in metallurgy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and architecture. The main purposes of astronomy were working out a calendar (Panchang), fixing dates of seasons, religious and other festivals, casting horoscopes for marriages and other purposes, like .meeting administrative requirements and for use in navigation and calculation of time. The ancient seers must have had great observational powers to study the stars very closely. There were no observatories in the present sense of that concept. There was extensive dissemination and exchange of Arts and Science between India and other countries, particularly South Asia, Japan, China and Western Asia in the medieval times. It was during the times of the Moghuls that establishment of observatories was initiated and during the time of Raja Jaisingh II of Jaipur (1718-1734) observatories were established at Ujjain, Varanasi, Mathura, Jaipur and Delhi. The last three are not operational now. The Timuride emperors at Delhi boasted of a famous astronomer among their collateral ancestors, Ulugh Beg! Dr. Hunter took many astronomical observations, while Colonel Hodgson, the Surveyor General of India from 1821 to 1827, took a series of transit observations at Calcutta. The King of Oudh established an observatory at Lucknow, which had a mural circle of six feet, an eight feet transit and an equatorial by Troughton and Simms. Major Wilcox assumed charge later, but after his death the King of Oudh abolished the observatory in 1848. Its records perished and the instruments were destroyed by the mutineers. The Madras Observatory was founded in the days of Sir Thomas Munro and its work was especially significant because the Great Trigonometrical Survey depended on the meridian passing through it. The Madras series of observations commenced in 1787, and the observatory building was erected in 1792. Several significant observations were made at this observatory by very distinguished astronomers. In 1836, Raja Ravi Verma, Raja of Travancore authorized John Caldecott to construct an observatory at Trivandrum and later John Allan brought set of good instruments and took geomagnetic observations. The Colaba Observatory took over recording of magnetic observations when the Simla Observatory discontinued it after 1845.