A temblor from ancient Indian treasure trove?

By Abhay Vaidya

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PUNE: Ancient Indians invented zero. Sanskrit is the world's most 'scientific' language. Ayurveda experts claim they have cures for many diseases allopathy is still struggling to find answers for. Here is another one that should make people sit up and take notice of the wisdom of an old civilisation: predicting earthquakes.

A model to predict earthquakes, developed by a California-based scholar of Chinese origin, uses the concept of "earthquake clouds", something that has been dealt with in detail in the 32nd chapter of Varahamihira's *Brihat Samhita*.

The greatness of philosopher, mathematician and astronomer Varahamihira (505-587 AD) is widely acknowledged. The Ujjain-born scholar was one of the Navaratnas in the court of King Vikramaditya Chandragupta II. His works, *Pancha-Siddhantika* (The Five Astronomical Canons) and *Brihat Samhita* (The Great Compilation), are considered seminal texts on ancient Indian astronomy and astrology.

Now, maybe it's time to look at his work more closely.

S N Bhavsar, a Vedic scholar associated with the Physics Department at the Pune University, is drawing the scientific community's attention to the elaborate references to earthquakes, their causes and predictability in *Brihat Samhita*.

What has astonished scientists and Vedic scholars

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here and has renewed interest in the *Brihat Samhita*, are references to unusual "earthquake clouds" as precursor to earthquakes.

The 32nd chapter of the manuscript is devoted to signs of earthquakes and correlates earthquakes with cosmic and planetary influences, underground water and undersea activities, unusual cloud formations, and the abnormal behaviour of animals.

"I find it rather odd that the description of earthquake clouds in *Brihat Samhita* matches the observations made by Zhonghao Shaou at the Earthquake Prediction Centre in Pasadena, California," said B D Kulkarni, head of the National Chemical Laboratory's Chemical Engineering Division.

Over the last ten years, Zhonghao Shou, a retired chemist based near Caltech in California, has been using satellite imagery and other scientific tools to fine-tune his theory of "earthquake clouds" as precursors to earthquakes. Shou who is attracting scientific attention, but is yet to be accepted by the scientific community, says he has predicted 39 quakes since 1990.

Shou has a website (http://members.nbci.com /EQPrediction) and says that ancient Chinese and Italians also tried to predict earthquakes on the basis of peculiarly-shaped clouds.

According to Shou, earthquake clouds are formed when underground water is converted into water vapour by the heat generated in the epicentric area of a fault rock, which is undergoing constant stress and friction.

When this vapour escapes to the surface and rises through the atmosphere, it forms a cloud. "The shape of the gap and surface current may endow the cloud with a special configuration like a snake, a wave, a feather, or a lantern, which will be able to be distinguished from weather clouds," says Zhou.

Zhou says that earthquake prediction is possible by identifying such clouds as "an earthquake generally occurs within 49 days of the first appearance of the cloud".

As Bhavsar pointed out, Varahamihira, too, speaks of unusual cloud formations, a week before the occurrence of an earthquake.

Varahamihira categorises earthquakes into different kinds and says that the indications of one particular kind will appear in the form of unusual cloud formations a week before its occurrence: "Its indications appearing a week before are the following: Huge clouds resembling blue lily, bees and collyrium in colour, rumbling pleasantly, and shining with flashes of lightning, will pour down slender lines of water resembling sharp clouds. An earthquake of this circle will kill those that are dependent on the seas and rivers; and it will lead to excessive rains."

These observations are available in the English translation of the two-volume *Brihat Samhita* with the original Sanskrit texts, exhaustive notes and literary comments by M Ramakrishna Bhat. The book has been published by the Delhi-based Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

"Please do not treat these observations as gibberish and trash it as some Indian scientists are prone to do," Bhavsar urged. He said it was painful to Vedic scholars when ancient Indian knowledge was discarded as nonsense by some.

"What needs to be acknowledged," he said, "is that 1500 years ago a celebrated astronomer-astrologer-mathematician sought to study earthquakes on the Indian subcontinent. He drew correlations between terrestrial earth, the atmosphere and planetary influences. He described earth as a mass floating on water and spoke of unusual cloud formations and abnormal animal behaviour as precursors to earthquakes."

"All in all, this should be accepted as nothing but astounding."

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