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The skies at night

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Skywalk, an initiative by INTACH Madurai, illuminates interesting stories about stars and constellations.



OF STARS AND STORIESDr. R. Venkatraman leading participants on the star-gazing exercisePHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

INTACH Madurai organized a lecture on the significance of stars and constellations. Historian Dr. R. Venkatraman explained how Indians mapped stars and understood their impact on life. He peppered his talk with scientific facts and tales from Greek and Indian mythologies.

“There is an order in the seemingly chaotic arrangement of stars and constellations,” says Dr. Venkatraman. “Most of the stars were named by the Greeks and later in the medieval period, the Arabs coined terms for them as they were seafarers and needed to study stars.” According to him, Sumerians and Egyptians were the first to discover 48 constellations initially. Today, humans know of 88 constellations in the sky.

“Indians have mapped the sky from time immemorial,” says Venkatraman. “The Tamils were traders and they depended on the stars to navigate the seas. And hence, astronomy as we see today is followed and studied ardently in the South.” Indian astronomy takes into account only 12 constellations that are present on the ecliptic path of the Sun and the Moon. “These 12 are called zodiacs. The moon passes through all these signs every year. That’s how the birth star of newborns is calculated,” says Venkatraman.

The study of Astronomy begins with the Orion constellation which is a trapezium with a band of three stars in the middle. “In Indian astronomy, Orion is called ‘ *Thiruvathirai* ’ and is associated with lord Shiva. Indians related stars with major Gods of the Hindu pantheon.” For instance, the most beautiful constellation called ‘ *Pleiades* ’ was named ‘ *Thirukarthikai* ’ and was linked with Lord Muruga.

Venkatraman says that ancient Indians named the months and the years based on the positions of celestial bodies. Even festivals were timed based on astronomical calculations. He points out Pongal as an example. The harvest festivals marks the beginning of the Sun’s journey towards the north, referred to as ‘ *Uttarayanam* ’.

Dr. R.V. Krishna Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of Physics, Thiagarajar College, elucidated the theories of atom and space and their relation to astronomy. “It’s amazing how people made astronomical calculations in the olden days. They devised days and months just based on naked-eye observations,” says Krishna Kumar. “The order of days in a week is based on the movement of planets. Astronomy is a combination of Mathematics and science.”

To take the initiative further, INTACH has planned to arrange a star gazing event later in the year.

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