

Vedic Astrology - critically examined

By [Dieter Koch](#)

Excerpt from the third, extended edition of Dieter Koch's book: "Kritik der astrologischen Vernunft" (Critique of Astrological Reason) [More about the author](#)
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Another interesting article on this topic can be found here: ["Vedic Astrology? What It Is and What It's Not" by Vic DiCara.](#)

Since the mid-1990s, the so-called "Vedic astrology" has experienced a remarkable boom in America and, with some delay, also in Europe. Indian Gurus and their western followers not only imported the Hindu sidereal Zodiac to the west, but also other techniques of Hindu astrology and even spiritual concepts of the Vedic culture. By designating this astrology as "Vedic", i. e. connecting it with the sacred writings of Hinduism, the Vedas, they allege that this astrology has a spiritual background, and ultimately goes back to divine revelation. Also, they tend to teach this Astrology within a guru-disciple relationship, where the authority of the teacher and tradition plays a much bigger part than in common western teaching. Accordingly, "Vedic" astrologers appear very self-confident and claim superiority of their teachings over Western astrology. In the present article, I want to critically investigate what is behind such claims.

Such questioning tends to cause strongly emotional reactions among Hindu astrologers. In fact, I put myself in the middle of a profound conflict between two cultures. Traditional Hindus believe that the Vedic culture, including Indian astrology, was revealed about 5,000 years ago by holy Indian sages in India and was from its beginning perfect, eternally valid, and holy. Thus in their opinion, culture was not developed in terms of a progressive upward development, as Westerners believe, but was established at the beginning of time by divine beings in highest perfection and since then has only deteriorated. For this reason, Hindu traditionalists tend to interpret western notions of the history of culture, which assumes that the ancients were more primitive than we are, as an insult or their greatest saints.

As a result, the original version of the present essay has led to very violent and emotional reactions on the part of Indian astrologers.^[1] My considerations were interpreted by them as an aggressive act, not only against Indian astrology, but even against the Vedic religion and Indian culture. In reality, however, my original intention was to critically examine the assertions that "Vedic" astrologers make in the west when propagating their allegedly superior methods. That I put traditional Indian doctrines in question was indeed inevitable, but not my motive. Incidentally, it should become obvious from my explanations that Vedic religion as it has been handed down in Vedic literature, has nothing to do with the so-called "Vedic astrology" as practised today. Hence it is not that I attack the Vedic religion itself, even less so as I myself am a follower of a Vedic doctrine, namely the Bhagavadgītā, or the Vedānta teachings of Kṛṣṇa.



It is not in the scope of this essay to clean up with all erroneous claims of Indian traditionalists and their western followers. I confine myself to a few key points. However, I shall add numerous and detailed footnotes in order to properly discuss the arguments raised by Indian astrologers.

"Vedic" Astrology and the Vedas

The Indians themselves traditionally do not call their astrology "Vedic", or have not done so until recently. The traditional expression is simply *jyotiṣam*, i.e. the "(science) of the lights". The term "Vedic astrology" appeared only in recent decades, with the aforementioned boom of Hindu astrology in the West.^[4] Evil tongues say that the term was invented only because "Vedic" – i.e. spiritual – astrology sells better.^[5] In the West, it was made very popular by well-known

American astrologers, e.g. David Frawley. It enjoys increasing popularity even among Indian astrologers.

The term "Vedic" is often used to express the idea that this astrology is a sacred science, which was revealed by the Rishis, the founders of Vedic wisdom, more than 5000 years ago and was handed down from generation to generation without any changes until the present day. For example, when the astrological textbook *Brhat-parāśara-horā-śāstra* claims to be a revelation by the Vedic seer *Parāśara*, it is taken at face value.^[6] In reality, however, the oldest part of this work was written only about 1400 years ago. And contrary to what one would expect considering its current popularity, it was widely unknown amongst Indian astrologers before the 1980s.^[7] The supposedly great antiquity of this work is challenged by the fact that ancient authors did not write commentaries on it and apparently did not even know of it;^[8] moreover by the fact that the Vedic scriptures themselves tell us of quite a different kind of "astrology". While Indian astrology may be "Vedic" in that it is part of today's Vedic tradition, it is in fact a lot younger than the Vedas and has many elements which were not developed in India but in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece.

The Vedas themselves, the core corpus of sacred writings of Hinduism (*śruti*), are mainly interested in the position of the moon in the 27 or 28 lunar mansions, as well as in the lunar phases, eclipses, the solstices, and the equinoxes. Planets play practically no role in the Vedas^[9], zodiac signs are completely unknown.^[10] Observations of the sky were important only for the Vedic sacrificial cult, as is expressly stated in the *Vedāṅgajyotiṣa*, the oldest textbook on astronomy and calendar calculation.^[11] It is only interested in the cycles of the Sun and Moon, whereas planets and zodiac signs play no role in it.^[12] There is no evidence for a natal horoscopy as we know it today in the Vedas.

The situation is similar in later Vedic texts like the great Mahābhārata epic, which relates us the story of an apocalyptic war in Indian prehistory. This epic contains numerous calendrical and astronomical details, it tells us in which lunar month certain events took place, in which lunar mansion and phase the moon was and whether there was an eclipse. More rarely, positions of planets are given. However, zodiac signs, ascendants or other elements of today's "Vedic astrology" are never mentioned.^[13]

Also revealing are the details of the astrological "birth chart" of Kṛṣṇa that are found in the Harivaṃśa and in some Purāṇa texts. Tradition interprets the texts in such a way, that Kṛṣṇa was born in the month of Śrāvaṇa during the rainy season at midnight in the eighth night after full moon, so was born during the waning half-moon with the moon in the lunar mansion of Rohiṇī (in sidereal Taurus).^[14] It seems that the texts are not interested at all in zodiac signs and the exact positions of the planets. Kṛṣṇa's ascendant becomes apparent only incidentally: because the waning half-moon at midnight was rising in the east. But there is no reason to believe that the ascendant was of interest as such, as it is not expressly mentioned.^[15] Kṛṣṇa's birth chart does not even prove that natal horoscopy was known. His birth is rather treated as a mundane event that was important for the history of the world.



The other great epic of India, the Rāmāyaṇa, does not contain any clue to astrology as we know it either, at least not in its original form. Some versions of it give astrological information about the birth of Rāma: The Moon and Jupiter were rising in Cancer, and five planets were in their exaltations or domiciles. However, this information does not belong to the original epic. It only appears in versions of the northern recension, and the critical edition of the epic only quotes it in the critical apparatus.^[16] Thus, it can not

be considered a valid reference for an original Vedic astrology. In fact, it is based on the Hellenistic tradition of astrology.

Passages in the Purāṇas that mention zodiac signs also have to be dated to the Hellenistic epoch. Most of these passages tell us that the solstices are at the beginning of Capricorn and Cancer and the equinoxes at the beginning of Aries and Libra. If it is assumed that ancient Indian astrology used a sidereal zodiac, then these statements can be dated astronomically because of the precession of the equinox. They must have been written between 200 and 600 CE, depending on the assumed position of the initial point of sidereal Aries (i.e. depending on the assumed *ayanāṁśa*).^[17] If one wants to date the texts earlier, one has to assume either that current definitions of the sidereal zodiac (i.e. *ayanāṁśas* used in current Hindu astrology) are completely wrong or that the texts are based on the tropical zodiac, in which the vernal point is at the beginning of Aries for *all* epochs. However, as all these texts assume the beginning of Aries at the beginning of the lunar mansion *Āśvinī*, which is sidereal by definition, even the assumption of a tropical zodiac does not allow us to date the texts much earlier.

The same holds true for other astronomical and astrological texts that mention the zodiac signs and take the equinoxes and solstices at the beginning of the cardinal signs. Among these are texts by *Varāhamihira* and *Āryabhaṭa*, the *Sūryasiddhānta*, the *Yavanajataka* and a text titled *Gargasamhitā*.^[18] All these texts belong to the first centuries CE, in spite of the unrealistic early dates assigned to them by “Vedic” astrologers.^[19]

Another point that deserves attention: Today’s “Vedic” astrology and calendar calculation are purely sidereal, i.e. they ignore the seasons, equinoxes, and solstices. In contrast, the Vedic texts attribute great importance to the seasons-based tropical year and its cardinal points. ^[20] Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 6.7.1.18 says that the year is based on the seasons.^[21] According to Āitareyabrāhmaṇa 18.18, the summer solstice is the midpoint of the year. The text describes a method for determining the date of the solstice by Sun observations.^[22] From Kauṣītakiabrāhmaṇa 19.3 we learn that the winter solstice ideally occurred on the new moon of the month of Māgha. On both solstices sacrifices were offered to the gods.^[23] The oldest astronomical text book of India, *Vedāṅgajyotiṣa* 5ff., teaches that the beginning of the month of Māgha ideally coincides with the winter solstice and a new moon at the beginning of the lunar mansion *Dhniṣṭhā*.

Today’s Vedic tradition ignores all these statements, with grotesque consequences. They do not celebrate the “northward path” (*uttarāyanam*) of the Sun on its correct date around 21 December, but in mid-January on the day of the Sun’s ingress into sidereal Capricorn (*makarasaṃkrāntiḥ*). Nowadays, the month of Māgha falls into January and February and has nothing to do with the solstice anymore. As a result, from the point of view ancient Vedic religion, all religious holidays, rituals, and sacrifices that are bound to a calendar date are celebrated on “wrong” days. This is actually a catastrophe, because the rituals must be performed on their correct dates in order to become efficient. Some Indian scholars, such as Avtar Krishen Kaul and Darshaney Lokesh, are well aware of this problem and fight for a tropical reform of the Vedic calendar.^[24]

Also interesting to note: According to current Indian astrology the zodiac begins with Aries and the lunar mansion *Āśvinī*. But in Vedic texts, lists of the lunar mansions always start with *Kṛttikā*, which corresponds to the Pleiades in sidereal Taurus. Besides, *Kṛttikā* is the most often mentioned lunar mansion in the Vedas, whereas *Āśvinī* hardly ever appears. The reason for this prominence of *Kṛttikā* in the Vedas lies in the fact that, in ancient times, approximately from 2500 BC on, the vernal equinox was located in this lunar motion.^[25] In astronomical and astrological texts of Late Antiquity, the lunar mansion *Āśvinī* (and Aries) became the starting point of the ecliptic, and the reason was, again, that the vernal equinox by that time had moved on into this lunar mansion. The equinoxes and solstices were placed at the beginnings of Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn.^[26] Incidentally, the vernal point has since crossed the whole lunar mansion of *Revatī* and is currently in *Uttarabhādrā*. Nowadays’ “Vedic” astrology therefore works with a zodiac that was defined by the equinoctial points of more than 1500 years ago and never updated.

From all this it becomes clear that even though we do not know much about the “astrology” of the Vedic period, it must have been radically different from so-called “Vedic” astrology as we know it today.

The spiritual claim of “Vedic” astrology

The spiritual claim of “Vedic” astrology also deserves a note. From the point of view of Vedānta, i.e. of spiritual liberation (*mokṣaḥ*), astrology is completely irrelevant. Kṛṣṇa never says in the *Bhagavadgītā* that astrology be required to attain to spiritual liberation. According to him, the path to liberation consists *in acting without aiming at the fruits of one’s actions, where every action is conceived as a sacrifice to God*. Indian astrology, as we know it today, is mainly used for clarification of worldly matters, aiming at earthly happiness. The same purpose is served by Vedic rituals, according to the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG 2.42ff.). Perhaps one can practise astrology like any other activity in a spiritual attitude. But those who seek liberation must go beyond astrological issues and follow the teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā* and the Upanishads. Even when it comes to achieving earthly happiness in Vedic texts, astrology is never mentioned. At best, it is stated what sacrifices and religious ceremonies should be performed on which calendar dates or during which position of the Sun or the Moon.

Vedic literature only rarely mentions astrology, and its reputation seems to have been rather dubious. According to the “Laws of Manu”, people who earn their living through astrology are to be considered impure and are not allowed to attend Vedic rituals.^[27] Similar statements can be found in the teachings of Bhīṣma, the great hero of the *Mahābhārata* epic.^[28] Indian astrologers, for whom these texts are spiritual authority, usually explain that Manu’s statement is not directed against astrology as such, but only against astrologers who demand a fee for their services. They believe that taking money is allowed if the customer gives it as a present (*dakṣinā*). Others believe that Manu and Bhīṣma do not refer to astrologers who take money, but to charlatans who do not have an adequate astrological education.^[29] However, the texts themselves do not give any such explanations, and they may well be interpreted in such a way that they reject astrology completely. In fact, this is the view held by some Indian scholars.^[30] However, we do not really know what kind of astrology these texts refer to, especially as “Vedic” astrology as we know it today did not exist at the time when these texts were written.

However that may be, that does not mean that Vedic literature reject all kind of astrology. Kṛṣṇa himself recommends to fix the beginning of the war on the new moon in the lunar mansion *Jyeṣṭhā* because *Jyeṣṭhā* is ruled by the king of gods, Indra.^[31] And in the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth book, the epic reports inauspicious heavenly omens that occurred shortly before the great battle: eclipses, a clustering of planets, meteors, etc.^[31a] It has to be noted, however, that all this is not comparable to an individual astrological fortune telling. Rather it can be compared to astrology in ancient Mesopotamia, where the momentary celestial configuration was used to draw conclusions about the fate of the country. Such conclusions were based not only on the observation of celestial bodies, but also other natural phenomena, as cloud formations, animal behaviour, flowing behaviour of rivers, etc. Moreover, there is a chapter in the epic which gives information about what kind of gift should be made in each lunar mansion, while the Moon is passing it, and what goal could be achieved thereby.^[32] Another chapter explains, in which lunar mansion ancestral rites should be performed, and what would be the benefit of it.^[33] But all this does not correspond to “Vedic” predictive horoscopy as we know it today. No hero of the great epic ever goes to an astrologer for a counselling or fortune telling, no matter how serious his life problems may be.



The zodiac was imported from the West

The question of whether or not the signs of the zodiac appear in Vedic literature plays a very important role for “Vedic” astrologers, especially for Indians. The idea that the zodiac signs and other elements of astrology were imported from the Hellenistic world to India, is totally unacceptable to them, and they try at all costs to prove that, conversely, Hellenistic astrology originated from India and was a gift from the Holy Sages who revealed the Vedas.

However, there can be no doubt in which direction the influence went. The development of the zodiac in Mesopotamia and Greece is well attested by written sources. We find in Mesopotamia from the 3rd Millennium BCE on representations of zodiacal constellations and reference to them in cuneiform texts. The most obvious example is the Sumerian myth of Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven (Taurus). Pictorial representations often show the bull with seven points above the neck, representing the Pleiades. In other depictions the Pleiades appear in the neck of the bull in the form of an ear of corn.^[34] The cuneiform astronomical text *Epinnu* (mul.apin) lists 17 constellations along the ecliptic, among which most of the 12 zodiacal constellations known today.^[35] Greek astronomers took over at least some of these constellations even before 500 BC. Attic vases show Hercules fighting the Cretan Bull, who, like his Mesopotamian prototype, has in his neck the ears of corn that stand for the Pleiades;^[36] or they show Hercules’s battle with the Hydra and the Crab (= Cancer)^[37] and with the Nemean lion (= Leo)^[38].

According to Pliny the Elder, *Historiae Naturae* II.6, the zodiac signs were introduced by Cleostratos of Tenedos, who lived around 500 BCE. Euctemon mentions at least the constellations Scorpio and Cancer in his *parapegma*.^[39] Callippus, who wrote in the 4th century BCE, mentioned in his *parapegma* all signs of the zodiac.

In cuneiform texts of the 5th Century BCE also appears the mathematical zodiac of 12 equal signs of 30° each.^[40] This zodiac was used in the mathematical theories of planetary orbits and in ephemeris calculation, which began to be developed at this time. From the beginning, it was also used by astrologer, who had to work daily with ephemerides.^[41] It is not exactly known, when the zodiac of 12 equal-sized imaginary signs came to the Greeks. Maybe, Euctemon used it already in the 5th century BCE.^[42] The concept of an equal zodiac was clearly known to the astronomers Eudoxus and Aratus, who lived in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. The Babylonian astrologer *Berosus*, who lived in the 4th and 3rd century BCE and wrote in Greek, might have used an equal zodiac as well, as did his Babylonian colleagues.^[43]

Coming back to India, there is no such history of the zodiac to be found in ancient texts or artefacts. Although in Vedic times the year was divided into 12 months and was defined with the help of celestial observations, the signs of the zodiac or zodiacal constellations are unknown to the Vedic texts. It is only in the first centuries CE that the mathematical zodiac of 12 equal signs is attested in India. Even then, however, the zodiacal star constellations are not known. It is obvious that the zodiac signs were not developed in India, but were only taken over and projected onto the existing system of 12 months and 27 lunar mansions.

It follows that in the first centuries CE, astrologers and astronomers from the Hellenistic western world brought their knowledge to India and triggered a development that took the Indian sciences of the sky to new heights. Not that the Indians threw away all their traditional knowledge and took over Greek science as it was. Rather, they created a fusion of ancient Indian knowledge with Greek-Babylonian and Greek-Egyptian teachings. E.g., the 27 sidereal lunar mansions of Vedic astronomy were merged with the Greek twelve-part zodiac, in such a way that the beginning of Aries coincided with the beginning of the lunar mansion Āśvinī. Besides the zodiac and its subdivisions, astrological houses, the dignities system, and other methods were taken over, which play an important role in today’s Indian astrology.



Unfortunately, representatives of Indian astrology cannot accept these facts because they want to see “Vedic” astrology as an original part of Vedic religion, which they consider as perfect, absolute and universal from its very beginning. However, ancient Indian authorities expressly confirm Greek impact on Indian astrology. The oldest astrological textbook in Sanskrit that knows the zodiac is the *Yavanajātaka* (“Nativity according to the Greeks”) by Sphujidhvaja, who lived in the first centuries CE. According to its own statement, this textbook goes back to a Greek source.^[44] In reality, however, the text is rather an amalgamate of Indian and Greek elements, thus seems to have been written in India, although under the influence of Hellenistic astrological doctrines. The authors Varāhamihira (6th century AD) and Kalyāṇavarman (800 AD) also refer to Greek astrologers with great respect and even reverence.^[45] The assertion made by some Indian scholars that the word *yavana* allegedly does not refer to Greeks, but rather to an Indian tribe of Vedic tradition, is wrong. Although the term *yavana* does not always denote “Greek”, its application to Greek-speaking people is well attested.^[46] But above all, a lot of Greek astrological terminology can be found in the said Indian writers, including the Greek names of the zodiac signs.^[47]

Precession and zodiac in India

As has been said already, Indian texts from Late Antiquity that first mention the signs of the zodiac assume the solstices and equinoxes at the beginnings of the sign of Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn. As such a definition of the zodiac is valid only for a tropical zodiac, whereas “Vedic” astrology works with a sidereal zodiac, the question arises as to how the problem of the zodiac and precession has been “solved” in India.

Indian zodiacal astrology was initially neither purely sidereal nor purely tropical. Rather, the sources show the same contradictory attitude as Vettius Valens, in that they thought sidereally and tropically at the same time and made links between stars and the seasons. The oldest text of Greek-inspired Indian astrology, the mentioned *Yavanajātakam* by Sphujidhvaja, in its last chapter fixes the cardinal points of the year at the beginnings of the signs of Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn^[48] and has the sun traverse all signs within 365,2303 days. This year length is closer to the tropical (365.2422) than the sidereal year (365.2564) and was most probably determined by observation of the solstices and equinoxes.^[49] However, in the first chapter, the *Yavanajātaka* fixes the zodiac signs at the lunar mansions, and thus interprets them as sidereal.^[50] How can this contradiction be resolved? Is the text not fully consistent in itself and do the different parts not form an original unity? Or could it be that Sphujidhvaja defines the lunar mansions tropically? Or is the text just not aware that it combines a sidereal world view with tropical ephemerides? Most probably the latter answer is correct. Sphujidhvaja does not mention precession, and therefore we have to draw the conclusion that he is unaware of this phenomenon. Other old works from the Greek-inspired era, the so-called *Siddhantas*, are also not fully aware of precession and the related problems. The *Sūryasiddhānta*, the main work of ancient Indian astronomy, also suffers from the tropical-sidereal contradiction. It fixes the zodiac at the cardinal points of the tropical year^[51] and at the same time at the lunar mansions.^[52] But unlike the *Yavanajātakam*, the *Sūryasiddhānta* teaches sidereal, not tropical, ephemerides. A brief passage about precession seems to be an interpolation.^[53] Precession is never used in any astronomical calculation of this work. One could say the *Sūryasiddhānta* intends a tropical view but *in practice* is a sidereal system.

It was only around the year 500 CE that Indian sky watchers began to notice the precession of the equinoxes. *Varāhamihira* notes that, according to ancient sources, the summer solstice was in the middle of the lunar mansion Āśleṣā (23°20' Cancer) whereas in his own time it was at the beginning of Cancer.^[54] Now, this formulation seems to insinuate that Varāhamihira already opted for a sidereal definition of the zodiac. In fact, we find in this text the first timid attempt to untie the zodiac from the cardinal points of the year. Varāhamihira explicitly says that

the summer solstice is not precisely at the beginning of Cancer, but a little bit earlier.^[55] However, he does not give any reasons why he gives preference to the sidereal zodiac. Similar to Hellenistic astrologers, Varāhamihira does not discuss the sidereal-tropical problem. Why? Did he not know how to treat it?^[56]

Āryabhaṭa I, who lived around 500 AD, also was aware of the precession. However, it seems that he was unable to decide whether the zodiac had to be regarded as a tropical or a sidereal thing. In the 4th chapter of his famous textbook *Āryabhaṭīyam*, he characterises the signs Aries to Virgo as “northern” and the others as “southern” – a statement that is correct only in the tropical zodiac. He further says that, besides the Sun, the Moon, the planets, and the lunar nodes, the fixed stars (*tārāḥ*) also move along the ecliptic. Such a motion of the fixed stars only exists if the tropical zodiac is taken as the fixed reference system.^[57] However, the algorithms used by Āryabhaṭa to calculate the positions of the Sun, the Moon, and the planets are *sidereal*, and he does *not* say that one have to add the precession (i.e. an *Ayanāṃśa*) to these positions. In practice, therefore, Āryabhaṭa seems to be a siderealist. A proper discussion of the problem does not appear in his texts either, and the reason for this may lie in the fact that the time was not ripe, because the exact value of the precession was not known yet or astronomers of his time did not know how to treat the problem. The solution for this difficult problem was not too urgent either in that time, because the two zodiacs roughly coincided.

Also later, when Indian astronomy had progressed further and the speed of precession was roughly known, astrologers did not discuss the question whether a sidereal or the tropical zodiac should be used. They decided to use sidereal zodiacs, but did not give a reason for it. The famous astronomer and astrologer *Manjula*, who lived in the early 10th century and authored an important astronomical work titled *Laghumānasa*, abides by the sidereal zodiac, and the same goes for all those after him who worked with his methods.^[58] Even today, after the introduction of modern astronomical techniques from the West, Indian astrology abides by the sidereal zodiac.



However, the question concerning the sidereal and the tropical zodiac did not have the same urgency in India as it had in Europe. Astronomically, the sidereal Aries point has nothing special about it. There is nothing in this area of the sky that would give it prominence over all other points on the ecliptic, not even an eye-catching bright star. Ancient Indian astronomy, however, believed that this point in the sky was extremely prominent in that it played an important part in the history of the universe. For, at the end of every great age or *yugam*, it was believed, all planets would come together to this point and form an exact conjunction. The last such great conjunction was assumed at the beginning of the *kaliyuga*, on 17/18 February 3102 BCE. Moreover, the precession cycle according to an ancient theory begins on the same date and at the sidereal zero point of Aries. According to the *Sūryasiddhānta*, the vernal equinox oscillates around the sidereal Aries point in a cycle of 7200 years, with a maximum elongation of 27° (so-called *trepidation theory*).^[59] Thus, according to this theory, the vernal equinox oscillates back and forth between 27° Aries and 3° Pisces in the sidereal zodiac. In the Kaliyuga year 3102 BC, the vernal point would have been in conjunction with the Sun, the Moon and all planets at the sidereal Aries point. Then it would have entered into Aries, after a period of 3600 years, in 499 AD, again returned to the zero point and then entered Pisces.^[60]

Now, according to modern astronomy, these ideas based on the *trepidation* model of precession are wrong. There was no such great conjunction on 17/18 February 3102 BCE, and this date has no historical significance at all.^[61] Moreover, the vernal equinox does not oscillate forward and backward about some fixed point on the ecliptic, but around the entire zodiac and at a fairly constant speed. Still, it has to be noted that the theory of *trepidation* explains why the sidereal zodiac made sense to Indian astrologers. They considered the motion of the equinoxes as a cycle of minor importance in the great age. Hence the idea of a sidereal zodiac must have been more convincing to ancient astrologers than a tropical zodiac.

From the above follows: The sidereal zero point makes sense only on the basis of ancient Indian astronomical theories that are erroneous according to modern astronomy:

- on the basis of the theory of *trepidation*, according to which the vernal point swings around the sidereal zero point with an amplitude of 27°, and
- based on the idea that at the end or beginning of each great age all planets and the vernal point form a great conjunction exactly at the sidereal zero point.

After modern astronomy has shown that these two traditional teachings are not correct, the validity of the sidereal zodiac is seriously challenged. The sidereal zodiac has no sensible definition anymore.

Ayanāṃśa – or where exactly does the sidereal zodiac begin?

The weakest point of so-called “Vedic” astrology is that it cannot say where exactly the sidereal zodiac has its zero point. This question is of central importance because without a well-founded zero point there can be no correct positions of the planets in zodiac signs, lunar mansions, and other subdivisions of the ecliptic. And without these there can be no correct astrological chart interpretations and predictions. Again, the history of “Vedic” astrology can show us how serious and unsolved this problem is.

The sidereal zodiac can be defined by its difference to the tropical zodiac, i.e. by the angular distance between the vernal equinox and the sidereal Aries point. This distance is called the *Ayanāṃśa* (“part of path”). Nowadays most Indian astrologers use the so-called Lahiri *Ayanāṃśa*, which was introduced as a standard in 1956 on the occasion of the Indian calendar reform. It is named after the Calcuttan astronomer and astrologer Nirmala Chandra Lahiri, who was a member of the Reform Committee. This standard is mandatory not only for astrology but also for astronomical ephemerides and almanacs and calendars published in India. The calendar is affected because the months of the Hindu calendar are bound to the sign ingresses of the sun in the sidereal zodiac. Before the reform, India had more than 30 different local calendars that used different methods to calculate the dates of important religious holidays. The new standard ensures that these holidays are celebrated on the same day in all regions of India.^[62]

The Lahiri *Ayanāṃśa* is defined as having the initial point of sidereal Aries and the lunar mansion *Aśvinī* exactly opposite the star *Citrā* (= *Spica*, α *Virginis*), with *Citrā* itself exactly in the middle of the lunar mansion to which it has lent its name. This *Ayanāṃśa* had the value 0 in the year 285 AD; in this year the sidereal Lahiri zodiac and the tropical zodiac coincided with each other.^[63]

Where did this sidereal zodiac that was fixed at the star *Spica* originate? In ancient Indian sources, unfortunately, it is not clearly attested. The fundamental work of ancient Indian astronomy, the *Sūryasiddhānta*, unfortunately makes contradictory statements about the starting point of the zodiac. While it assumes the star *Spica* at 0° *Libra*^[64], the positions it gives for other stars are in blatant contradiction. And elsewhere it seems to assume the starting point of all planetary cycles and the origin of the zodiac at the star *Revatī* (ζ *Piscium*).^[65] thereby indicating a difference from the Lahiri zodiac by almost 4°. In other words, the sidereal positions of the planets in a natal chart have an uncertainty of several degrees. Hence, it is not without reason that the introduction of the Lahiri standard has led to bitter quarrels. For “Vedic” astrology with its claims of high accuracy, an inaccuracy of this dimension is obviously intolerable.

So when and by whom was the Lahiri zodiac invented? It seems that Lahiri was inspired by the astronomy historian S. B. Dikshit, who in the late 19th century wrote an important book on the history of Indian astronomy. Dikshit came to the conclusion that, given the prominence that Vedic religion gave to the cardinal points of the tropical year, the Indian calendar should be reformed and no longer be based on the sidereal, but on the tropical zodiac. However, if such a reform could not be brought about due to the rigid conservatism of contemporary Vedic culture, one should choose the Ayanāṁśa in such a way that the sidereal zero point was in opposition to Spica, because this would be in accordance with the zodiac of the 16th century astronomer Ganeśa Daivajña.^[66] In Indian sources, the Lahiri Ayanāṁśa or zodiac apparently cannot be traced further back. However, it is interesting that all extant Hellenistic and Babylonian horoscopes are based on a zodiac that has the star Spica at 0° Libra.^[67] This may be a mere coincidence, for there is no evidence that there was an unbroken tradition in India that worked with this zodiac. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that the Lahiri zodiac was brought to India by the Greeks and that it was known there at least for some time.

History shows however that both sidereal zodiacs mentioned above are chosen completely at random. As has been stated, all astrological and astronomical works of late antiquity state that the initial points of the cardinal signs of the zodiac coincide with the cardinal points of the year. Now, as these works were not all written in the same year, it follows that, relative to sphere of the fixed stars, all these works chose the initial points of their zodiacs at different places. Moreover, it has been stated that the most ancient Indian textbook of horoscopy, the Yavanajātakam, teaches that the zodiac is fixed at the cardinal points of the year and at the same time also at the lunar mansions. This work was probably written in the 2nd century CE.^[68] Its zodiac should therefore differ from the Lahiri zodiac by up to 2°, from the Sūryasiddhānta zodiac by even 4° or 5°. And with regard to the Sūryasiddhānta, it has already been stated that its sidereal Aries point was fixed in 500 AD at the vernal equinoctial point of that epoch. *Now, if the sidereal zero point is defined by the position of the vernal equinox in an ancient epoch, it becomes clear how arbitrary its definition is. How could it be a reliable fundament for astrology?*

Also, it should have become clear that the idea of some romantics that Indian astrology as we know it is based on millennia-old scientific experience is completely mistaken. We have seen that Indian astrology has undergone several changes since Vedic times, one of which only took place in the 20th century: The calendar reform of 1956 made the Lahiri ayanāṁśa the astrological standard.

The Role of the Zodiac in Indian Astrology



Let us close the article with a few considerations from the point of view of a western astrologer!

As has been shown, there are strong arguments against the claim of Vedic astrologers that the validity of the sidereal zodiac has been corroborated over thousands of years of practice in India: The sidereal zodiac has been used in India for less than 2000 years. Its exact starting point, which is controversial, was not chosen based on astrological experience, but due to the position of the vernal equinox at some point in late antiquity. Besides, I have not mentioned yet that the ephemeris calculation of ancient and medieval India contained massive errors, depending on the epoch and local tradition. Moreover, the correct calculation of the ascendant for a birth chart was anything but trivial. Considering all these facts it is hard to explain how a particular sidereal zodiac could have been corroborated by experience. And it is out of question that it could have proved to be better than the tropical zodiac, because the tropical-sidereal issue was never even discussed in India.

The tropical-sidereal problem becomes even more complicated by the fact that the sidereal zodiac is used in a quite different way in Indian astrology than the tropical zodiac in western astrology. Traditional Indian astrology is extremely focused on fate prediction and character compatibility (for weddings) and not so much on psychological character interpretation, as taught in the West. Unlike Europeans and Americans, Indians do not ask each other about their Sun sign, but rather about the lunar mansion of their natal moon. Here, a western astrologer may suspect that the lack of psychological interpretation of the Sun sign in India could be caused by the fact that it just does not work with the sidereal zodiac; or that the relevance of the tropical zodiac was not discovered in India because Hindu astrology is not particularly interested in character interpretation. In any case, the particular way of using the zodiac cannot be ignored in deciding which of the two zodiacs is correct. Western solar astrology, which is based on the tropical zodiac, is in no way challenged by eastern sidereal lunar astrology.

Very instructive is Rafael Gil Brand's investigation in his "plea for the sidereal zodiac"^[69], where he examines which of the two zodiac fits with some birth charts of famous personalities. Gil Brand opts for the sidereal zodiac, and his argumentation seems somehow stringent. However, I notice that he does not have his focus on the interpretation of the zodiacal signs, but rather the astrological dignities. On the other hand, when I look at the Sun signs I would prefer the tropical zodiac with each of Gil Brand's examples. In my opinion, Muhammad Ali's ascendant in sidereal Cancer is not as convincing as the ascendant in tropical Leo ("I am the greatest!"). For the father of psychoanalysis, I would clearly prefer an ascendant in tropical Scorpio and the Sun in tropical Taurus over a sidereal Libra ascendant and Aries sun. With Hitler the tropical Taurus Sun (territorial thinking, nationalism) holds at least as good as a sidereal Aries Sun. With Bill Gates and his Microsoft monster I would also rather opt for a Sun in tropical Scorpio than in sidereal Libra.^[70]

Thus, Gil Brand does not try to show the advantages of the sidereal zodiac straight-forward by means of the interpretation of zodiac signs, but by showing how the choice of the zodiac "proves" itself by means of *secondary* ramifications that appear during the chart interpretation. He is not really interested in the signs, but rather in the rulers of the ascendant and the houses as well as the dignities of the various factors of interpretation. However, one may well argue that this approach to the question of the zodiacs is very indirect. Proceeding like this, Gil Brand has "proven" many things at once: the sidereal zodiac, the system of rulers and dignities, and also the Indian house system^[71]. In my opinion, the interpretation of zodiac signs would be a more straight-forward method to examine the correctness of a zodiac. Does the interpretation of zodiac signs only work with the tropical, not with the sidereal, zodiac?

In some modern Indian textbooks the interpretation of zodiac signs is not treated at all, obviously because it is not given any importance. However, where it is treated, we will find that it massively differs from western interpretation. A little guessing game may illustrate this difference: I quote the description of a zodiac sign from a modern Indian textbook, and the reader may try to guess to which sign it is. I choose the book *Fundamentals of Astrology* by Ramakrishna Bhat (20th century), a very distinguished Indian astrologer and scholar. The description reads:

"He will be intelligent, virtuous, will command his relatives, be proud, troubled by fire and wind, talkative, of strong body, with a few children, will have connections with many women, be an astrologer, prompt, happy, of low income, learned, having secret sons, knower of many languages, always in company and receiving wealth from a king."

Not a joke: This is Bhat's complete description of the ascendant in the sidereal sign of *Cancer*!^[72] And the description of the Sun in Cancer is even shorter:

"He will be poor, sharp, doing other's work and be tired and constantly going on tiresome journeys."^[73]

The briefness and disorder in the text are symptomatic of the low importance that is given to the interpretation of zodiac signs in India. Also, it is striking how much such descriptions differ from the Western understanding of the tropical Cancer.

Other descriptions of zodiac signs which are closer western ones can be found, e.g., with B. V. Raman, one of the most important Indian astrologers of the 20th century. Here, the sign of Cancer is recognisable to western astrologers:

"They are sympathetic but moral cowardice will be present. They will be much attached to their children and family."[\[74\]](#)

This description may have been influenced by ancient Indian texts or by modern Western astrology. However, even with Raman we find glaring differences from western descriptions of the signs. E.g. about sidereal Scorpio he writes:

"They are good correspondents and invite friendship from among people throughout the world. They can become expert musicians if they care to practise that art. They are proficient in fine arts, dancing and the like and no doubt they have a philosophic disposition. They set at naught conventional habits and customs. They vehemently uphold their own views but nevertheless will not clash with those holding opposite ones."[\[74a\]](#)

Does this not rather sound like Sagittarius? Now, knowing that sidereal Scorpio in our days is largely in the area of tropical Sagittarius, a western astrologer will not be very surprised. Most probably, he will draw the conclusion that Raman could not avoid the effects of the tropical zodiac signs and that the qualities of the tropical zodiac signs shine through even in sidereal astrology, as soon as it endeavours to describe them. Or can it be explained by the fact that Raman was familiar with Western tropical astrology and was influenced by it? In any case, this phenomenon seems to appear with several other zodiac signs, too. To Sagittarius Raman attributes qualities that in Western astrology are attributed to Capricorn:

"They are somewhat conventional and sometimes businesslike also. They are prompt and uphold conservative views. ... They hate all external show. They are God-fearing, honest, humble and free from hypocrisy. ... They generally exercise control over their food and drinks but in regard to their relationship with the opposite sex restraint is called for."[\[74b\]](#)

And Capricorn is given some qualities of Aquarius:

"They are possessed of sympathy, generosity and philanthropy and take great interest in literature, science and education. ... Depending upon the disposition of the 9th house they can become philosophically minded or develop social consciousness."[\[74c\]](#)

It becomes apparent that the descriptions given by Raman of the zodiac signs partly agree with western descriptions, but partly contain qualities of the subsequent signs. The same phenomenon can also be found with other western representatives of Vedic astrology, e.g. in a series of articles by Kenneth Johnson in *The Mountain Astrologer*.[\[75\]](#)

It seems as if, with the advance of precession, the sidereal signs changed their meaning, in accordance with the *tropical* signs that were in the same area of the sky. In this respect the "experience" of Hindu astrology seems to support rather the tropical than the sidereal zodiac. Incidentally, the same phenomenon can be already be found with the late antique author Satyācārya: Gemini gets properties of Cancer ("fickle", "low intelligence", "anxious", "not very active"), Cancer is given Leo qualities ("haughty and inflated", "significant work abroad", "will have power over others"), Leo Virgo qualities ("severe, capable, hard-working").[\[76\]](#) Thus it seems that already in late antiquity the sidereal signs began to take over the qualities of the tropical signs that began to superimpose themselves over them.[\[77\]](#)

From all this it should have become obvious that if modern astrologers read a natal chart with a Western understanding of the zodiac signs but with a Hindu sidereal zodiac, this is not an old tradition but a fairly recent invention, and also a European-American one rather than an Indian one.

Astrologers are a very practical people. Many of them shy away from theoretical questions or consider "theories" in general as something unrealistic that has nothing to do with real life. Even if their ideas obviously make no sense they will not easily abandon them but may respond with statements like: "But practice shows that it works ..." Also so-called "Vedic" astrologers quite irrationally refuse to accept the above facts. They insist blindly on the venerable age of the astrological tradition, on their personal practical experience, and on the authority of their gurus.

Is such "practical experience" to be taken seriously? I would strongly advise against it. "Vedic" astrologers consider themselves (or their tradition) far superior to western astrologers when it comes to astrological forecast. But such claims do not stand a serious test. With forecasts for Indian or American presidential elections, "Vedic" astrologers fail as often as Western astrologers.[\[79\]](#) Also as regards the question of the correct the zodiac in natal horoscopy, whoever loudly refers to his "experience" should be distrusted. As long as no statistical proof of astrology has gained general recognition, astrologers should talk about their "experiences" with due caution and modesty. Also, for anyone who truly seeks knowledge it is not recommended to treat differing views with disinterest or to limit one's interest only to teaching the enlightened knowledge of one's own tradition. Unfortunately, astrologers and astrology schools – not only the Vedic – tend to such sect-like behaviour.