

"Vedic Astrology"? What It Is and What It's Not

By Vic DiCara, 2012

Another interesting article on this topic can be found here: ["Vedic Astrology - Critically Examined" by Dieter Koch](#).

India developed and carefully preserved an excellent system of astrology. In the 70s it gained popularity in America and eventually throughout the world as "Vedic Astrology," perhaps riding the coat-tails of a larger explosion of interest in Indian culture and spirituality ushered in by ISKCON (the "Hare Krishnas") and similar groups like TM ("Transcendental Meditation").

Is the term "Vedic Astrology" appropriate for what is practiced under that name today?

Yes and no, because there are two different ways to define "Vedic."

- A historian or archaeologist defines it as a specific period of time, usually about 3 or 4 thousand years ago, in which four specific books bearing the name "Veda" were the basis of civilization in India.
- Others define "Vedic" as anything which pertains to the Veda and their civilization, including anything that develops with its root in the Veda.

The second definition gives a lot of leeway and can therefore stretch to admit some validity in using the term "Vedic Astrology" the way we currently do. But I believe it would be better to stop using the term in this manner because the astrology of modern India is just too significantly different from the astrology described in the Veda itself, even using an inclusive definition of the term Vedic.

Objection: "The Yajur Veda has an appendix called Vedāṅga Jyotiṣā, which translates to 'Vedic Astrology.' Therefore there is no question that it is an appropriate term."

Reply: Yes, there certainly was some form of astrology in Vedic civilization – and the essentials of it were recorded in an ancient handbook called Vedāṅga Jyotiṣā. But the astrology defined in that book simply *is not* the astrology practiced in India today. That book defines how to create calendars establishing the proper times to perform rituals. There is no hint of natal interpretation. There is no reference to signs, houses, or any of the other mainstays of modern "Vedic" astrology. Therefore I maintain that it is misleading to call today's astrology "Vedic." Just because India's astrology isn't really "Vedic" doesn't mean it's not exceedingly excellent and impressive! Why not let it be great on its own two feet and call it what it is, Indian Astrology? The term Vedic Astrology should be reserved for the system of astrology literally defined in the Veda and its direct ancillaries.

Objection: "There are many ancient Vedic scriptures defining Vedic Astrology as we practice it today. For example, the Brihat Parashara Hora Sastra."

Reply: There are certainly many excellent books which define the rules and principles by which modern Vedic Astrology operates. However these were all written in relatively recent history, and the overwhelming majority of their content has exceedingly little in common with the astrology defined in the Veda itself.

As India exchanged with the West, a Judeo-Christian concept of "just *believe*" invaded and confused how she understands and implements her own guru-disciple process. Many "gurus" now ask "disciples" to blindly and blanketly accept what they teach without asking serious questions. This attitude is anti-Vedic! The entire Vedic corpus of Upanishads is *built* of inquiry, scrutiny and analysis. If we don't think carefully and ask important questions, knowledge itself falls into disrepair.

The fact is: the books that are the basis for modern astrology in India did not exist before about a thousand years ago. Yes, that is very old, but it falls very short of being "ancient" or "Vedic." The Brhat Parashara Hora Shastra in particular did not exist before the 19th century.¹

But again, just because modern Indian astrology is not ancient *doesn't* mean it isn't awesome. Let it be awesome in its own right – as "Indian Astrology."

If today's Indian Astrology is not Vedic, what was Vedic Astrology?

Here are the most major differences between ancient and modern "Vedic Astrology:"

- Today's Vedic Astrology is primarily *personal* or "natal." We interpret birth charts for individual people. In ancient times astrologers had a much larger role as the "clock" and "calendar" for the entire society. Ancient Vedic astrology (as recorded in brief in Vedāṅga Jyotiṣā) was almost entirely concerned with creating accurate clocks and calendars for practical, agricultural, philosophical and religious use.²
- More importantly: today's Vedic Astrology is primarily based on 9 planets in 12 signs and houses.³ Ancient Vedic Astrology was not. It was primarily based on roughly 27 fixed stars (*nakṣatra*) and the manner in which the Moon moved through these stars and formed combinations (*yoga*) with the Sun and associated phases.

Maybe ancient Vedic Astrologers did do natal astrology, but from what we have recorded of that period it is not likely. I have not found any reference to natal astrology in the ancient tales recorded in the Veda themselves, but I have seen many references to it in later branches of Vedic culture as recorded in the Purāṇa and Itihāsa.⁴ Ancient Vedic Astrology wasn't much about character assessments, personal advice, or predictions about career and fortune.

In Vedic literature, when we hear the astrological details of an individual, it is mostly meant to act as a "timestamp" accurately identifying their place in history, or at least on the calendar of religious and spiritual observance. By saying, "He was born when the stars were in the following position..." an author gives a time code that another astrologer at any point in history can decode and translate into whatever calendar system becomes relevant. Placing events on a historical timeline and in context of the religious calendar was indeed a primary concern for ancient Vedic astrologers.

The theory of natal astrology is that this timestamp can also be decoded to understand the destiny (*karma*) of the person born at that moment in time, so it is not that ancient Vedic Astrology has no relevance to natal interpretation. The point must be admitted, however, that natal interpretation was not the primary application of ancient Vedic Astrology. However, from the Purāṇa and similar later works we can see that natal astrology did soon become important as Vedic culture evolved.

Nine planets in twelve signs and houses, however, is *never* mentioned; not in the timestamps of ancient Vedic astrology, nor in the natal interpretations that soon gained importance.⁵ The astrological points of reference used in ancient Vedic astrology are the 27 fixed stars (*nakṣatra*), often addressed not by name but by the Vedic gods who rule them.

Case In Point: Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Astrological Timestamp

Here is Śrī Kṛṣṇa's astrological timestamp as recorded in the late Purāṇa, Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (10.3.1 & 2):

अथ सर्वगुणोपेतः कालः परमशोभनः
यर्होवाजनजन्मर्क्षं शान्तर्क्षग्रहतारकम्
दिशः प्रसेदुर्गगनं निर्मलोदुगनोदयम्

*atha sarva-guṇopetaḥ kālaḥ parama-śobhanaḥ
yarhy evājana-janmarkṣaṁ śāntarkṣa-graha-tāraḥ
diśaḥ prasedur gaganam nirmaloḍu-gaṇodayam*

"Fate became endowed with all good qualities and reached its paramount beauty in the birth-star of the unborn. All the stars were peaceful, as were the planets, stellar phenomena, and the directions - which arose in spotless array."

This mentions the "birth-star of the unborn" referring to Aldebaran (or a constellation of stars centered on Aldebaran), called Rohiṇī in Vedic Sanskrit. The deity empowering this star is Brahmā, the motherless (therefore "unborn") creator of the universe.

As you see, the *first* and *foremost* concern of ancient Vedic astrology is the "birth-star" – the *nakṣatra* occupied by the Moon. These stars are addressed in terms of the Vedic gods which empower them. Interpretive meaning in ancient Vedic astrology comes from knowing the qualities and traits of the Vedic gods who empower the fixed stars. It has nothing to do with elements, modes, planetary rulers, etc.

There is mention of direction (*diś*) and the ascendant (*udaya*), indicating that the astrology being used at the time had something similar to a house system. There is also mention of planets (*graha*) along with "stars" (*rkṣa*) and "stellar phenomena" (*tāra*), but no specific information about them is given except that they were "peaceful." Some argue that only the Sun and Moon are relevant in true Vedic Astrology, but this reference indicates to the contrary.⁶ In my opinion the Sun and (especially) the Moon were the most important factors in ancient Vedic Astrology, but other heavenly bodies need not be altogether disregarded.

But by reviewing this example, you can come to understand that *even in the late Purāṇic period* there was no reliance on specific planets in 12 signs and houses.⁷

Another description of Kṛṣṇa's astrological timestamp is in Harivaṁśa:⁸

अष्टम्यां श्रावणे मासे कृष्णपक्षे महातिथौ
रोहिण्यामर्धरात्रे च सुधांशोरुदये तथा
*aṣṭamāyāṁ śrāvaṇe māse kṛṣṇapakṣe mahātithau
rohiṇyām ardharātre ca sudhāṁśor udaye tathā*

"[Kṛṣṇa was born on] the great day: the 8th phase of waning part of the month of Śrāvaṇa. Rohiṇī arose with the Moon at midnight."

- The lunar month (*māsa*) was Śrāvaṇa (usually a mid to late summer month, but it is a lunar month, and so is not absolutely locked in to the seasonal / solar calendar)⁹
- The lunar trend (*pakṣa*) was waning (*kṛṣṇa-pakṣa*).
- The lunar phase (*tithi*) was "8" – which means a half moon.
- The *nakṣatra* occupied by the Moon was Rohiṇī.
- The time: Midnight, at moonrise

Modern astrologers look at this and find nothing to interpret, but those well versed in Vedic symbolism could indeed deliver significant interpretations from this, especially if we examine the conditions or look to other texts¹⁰ and discover that the combined positions of the Sun and Moon formed a yoga called Harṣa, which indicates being "ready, willing and able to enjoy."

In the entire Vedic library there is almost never a description of horoscopes in terms of planets in signs and houses. Such things are found only in highly interpolated texts or in relatively recent commentaries and works.¹¹ The 27 fixed stars and their deities are the actual backbone of interpretive work in ancient and pre-classical Vedic Astrology.

If modern "Vedic Astrology" doesn't primarily come from the Vedas, where does it come from?

India has undoubtedly developed an extremely excellent system of astrology, but she did not do it in absolute isolation from the rest of Planet Earth. *By no means* is that a denigration of the glory of India! In fact, it *highlights* her glory. One of the most glorious things about India and Vedic culture, in fact, is its openness to plurality. India has a unique ability to very carefully maintain very old traditions while simultaneously being open, plural and inclusive. Hinduism itself attests to this. It is a harmonious plurality of very different religions, sciences and philosophies. It has the oldest roots of any modern culture, and in many ways is the most attractive and vibrant spiritual and philosophical culture in the world even today. For as long as we have historical records, India has had open borders and has especially welcomed philosophical and scientific exchange with other cultures. If we consider the Puranic description of how the Vedas came into their current form we see that it involved many different people working together over hundreds or thousands of years.¹² The truly Indian and Vedic way is to embrace knowledge from *wherever* it comes, and to allow it to develop, evolve and blossom.

Thus the astrologers of ancient India mingled with the astrologers of other ancient cultures. Modern "Vedic Astrology" is a child born from this. From the west came an elaborate method of interpretively using the 12 divisions of the Sun's path over the ecliptic.¹³ Indians took this into their pre-existing framework which had always been sidereal, being as it was all about the 27 fixed stars, and so Indian eventually developed a sidereal conception of the 12 signs.¹⁴ Similarly they acquired various techniques and principles for using these 12 signs interpretively with 9 planets, including the concepts of dignity, subdivisions of signs (*arṁśa*), aspects between planets, and chronological phases (*daśā*).

There is no intelligent doubt about this because:

- We have no definition of 12 signs and houses etc for interpretive purposes in any ancient Vedic text.
- We see that the nomenclature and in some cases even the chart diagram structure is clearly an obvious import from Persian and Greek sources.¹⁵

Indians are an extremely smart, scientific, intuitive and artistic people. Schools attributed to Jaimini and Parashara developed elaborate and amazingly useful interpretive systems incorporating what they gained from their exchanges with other astrological cultures. The astrology of modern India is very relevant to anyone who wants to become thoroughly learned and capable as an astrologer, because it represents what

such a highly skilled people have developed after taking the best parts of astrological culture they gathered from the rest of the world, and linking it to their own rich astrological, philosophical, and spiritual background.

Still, you may, like me, find it even *more* enlightening and beneficial to seek the very *roots* of the ancient Vedic system itself. I feel that the *real* jewel of Vedic astrology lies in deeply understanding the Vedic deities who empower the 27 fixed stars of the undoubtedly ancient Vedic sky.¹⁶ Gaining that symbolic foundation will take you on a grand adventure through the Veda, Purāṇa and Mahābhārata. Then you could explore how phases and solar angles combine with the Moon (and perhaps other planets) in these stars to provide a rich and useful interpretive resource for natal and non-natal application.

What Does Indian Astrology Uniquely Offer to the International Astrological Community?

There are many obstacles, but I think the greatest barrier to Indian astrology being a truly monumental blessing on the world is that the translations of its authoritative and classical works into English are atrocious. To be successful, such works would require excellence in Sanskrit, English, communication, and astrology; but the authors who have published translations thus far rarely have expertise in even one of these areas. Books written in English on Vedic astrology by modern authors are fluff in comparison to the classics. At best they lack scholarship and depth. The very few exceptions to this rule are almost always dry or poorly worded. However, I am confident that if we turn more attention towards Indian astrology, the quality of its understanding and presentation will dramatically improve.

I would like to close this article by sharing with you what I personally feel are excellent parts of Indian Astrology worthy of deep exploration. My list will proceed towards what I feel are the most important things Indian Astrology has to offer humanity.

Multiple Timing Systems

The *vimśottarī daśā* ("120-year Phases") is a popular and useful system of timing events. The downside of being popular is that there is lots of misinformation about it. Still, its potential as a timing technique is profound. There are also more than a dozen other similar systems to explore in Brhat Parashara Hora. That book also offers a unique way of interpreting transits, called *aṣṭaka-varga*, which certainly appears to be worth a careful exploration. India has also preserved the techniques of Persian solar returns very carefully, and any student of Persian astrology and solar returns would be happy to avail themselves of it.

Subdivisions of Signs

India's focus on sign-subdivisions expanded into a very impressive and well developed school of interpretive techniques. In addition to other roles played by the subdivisions, each one can stand as a chart within the main chart, pertaining to a specific house and area of life.

Aspects by Degree and Planet

The Brhat Parashara Hora's method of calculating degree *and* planet-specific aspects is outstanding. Each planet has a different "vision" of the sky, with unique lines of sight that fade in and out of focus gradually from degree to degree.

Planetary Potency Formulae

The Brhat Parashara Hora Shastra's method of *ṣaḍ-bāla* using more than a dozen factors to determine how forceful a planet is in a nativity is outstanding and of great practical merit. The effects of potent planets are more dominant and profound than the effects of impotent planets.

Degree-Specific Dignity

Classical dignity depends largely upon the relationship between the "host and guest" (the planets who own and occupy a sign, respectively). Indian Astrology has an unchanging baseline of relationships between the various planets, modified on a case-by-case basis by the current planetary positions. The baseline interplanetary relationships are fascinating and reveal much about the planets themselves. It is supplemented with rich Indian mythology, too.

Further, in classical India, dignity is not solely based on the primary zodiac sign but on several *sub-divisions* of the sign. In the Indian System a planet in a sign can have up to 150 different dignity-affecting placements, depending on its degree and minute! The Brhat Parashara Hora provides an excellent mathematical formula for calculating dignity across many subdivisions.

Complete System of Lunar-centric Sidereal Astrology

I personally feel that the relatively unknown kernel of indigenous Vedic astrology is at least equal in worth to all the astrological schools that developed in India, combined. Awaiting our discovery and exploration is a rich and deep array of 27 gods in 27 fixed stars, each with an extensive mythology imparting interpretive import.

Corollary to these stars is an eloquent system of finely measuring and interpreting lunar phases. Indian thoughts on relationship compatibility and electional astrology are rooted in these 27 stars and – though very poorly presented to the world thus far – are very worthy of exploration.

Essentially the 27 Vedic stars open a doorway to a completely "new" non-zodiacal system of astrology!

Spiritual Framework

I believe that the *greatest* blessing India offers to astrology is not directly astrological. India's unparalleled metaphysical refinements present a philosophical foundation for astrology that is extremely sublime, empowering, real, and deep.

The Vedic understanding of *karma* as a marriage of freewill and fate puts a resounding resolution on debates concerning this topic. Essentially, human beings are "adults" of the universe and are therefore held responsible for their free choices. Responsibility for the use of our freedoms is what generates inescapable fate. The vast plethora of extremely well developed spiritual and moral paths developed in India and recorded in Vedic literature provides practical tools by which an individual can stop fighting with their fate – embrace it as the loving correction and reward of their universal mother and take firmer grasp of their freewill, liberating themselves from habitual responses that perpetuate the wheel of destiny.

Closing

For whatever reason your gaze may turn to India, may the goddess Śrī Rādhā bless your endeavor with its ultimate fruit. Hare Kṛṣṇa.

Read Vic DiCara's book:

