Nāḍī Divination and Indian Astrology

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Astrology (*jyotiṣa* or *jyotiḥśāstra*) is the most prestigious and encompassing form of Indian divination. Other divinatory arts, such as auspices (*śakuna-śāstra*), chiromancy and physiognomy (*sāmudrika-śāstra*), oneiromancy (*svapna-śāstra*), geomancy (*vāstu-śāstra*) and pneumomancy (*svarodaya-śāstra*), are often subsumed under the heading of astrology and regarded as its auxiliary branches (*śākhā*).

The pride of place which is thus given to astrology is presumably due at least in part to its 'scientific' character. By this I mean not only its complexity and systematic nature, but above all its claims to objectivity; for divinatory arts vary in their degree of dependence on the diviner. The planetary positions at a person's birth may be calculated any number of times by different astrologers, with more or less identical results. A personal ability on the part of the astrologer to apply the various rules of interpretation is, admittedly, called for; but this is predominantly seen as an intellectual skill, rather than a mystical or magical one, and the rules as such are extraneous to the astrologer.

The divinatory art known as *nāḍī* reading is generally described as a form of astrology, although this designation does not apply in an equally strict sense to all branches of the art. Its power of fascination lies precisely in the supreme objectivity that it claims to achieve. In *nāḍī* reading, the role of the diviner is minimized: he is merely the mouthpiece of ancient sages or divinities who are believed to have set down in writing the details of the client's life long before the birth of either reader or client. Predictions for a client's future and answers to his or her questions are supposedly read out from pre-existent, physical texts (generally in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts).[1] These texts are not considered subject to the symbolic interpretation of the diviner, as is the case in bibliomancy (where texts of a basically non-divinatory nature, such as sacred scriptures, are used for oracular purposes).[2] On the contrary, a *nāḍī* reading is ideally so specific as to be applicable to one client only; indeed, many *nāḍī* readers claim

[1] A 'grey area' would seem to be the so-called *jīva-* ('living') *nāḍīs*, believed to be inhabited by a deity or *ṛṣi* (sage) who at the time of reading supposedly manifests the text on an otherwise blank page.

[2] For a description of Hindu bibliomantic practices, see P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Poona 1977, vol. V, pt II, pp. 811f.

that their texts supply not only the name of the person consulting the text, but even the names of his or her parents, spouse, and so forth.

The term *nāḍī* itself (also *nāḍi*, Tamil *nāṭi*) is probably derived from the Tamil verb *nāṭu* 'to enquire after, examine, look at', and all texts containing the term in its astrological sense, even when composed in Sanskrit, appear to originate in the Dravidian language area. Today, two fairly distinct forms of *nāḍī* divination can be observed in South India. The more common variety is based on a form of thumb reading, although the readings as such still maintain an astrological structure, and the texts used are generally composed in Tamil. The less common variety appears actually to be based on astrological considerations, utilizing the client's birth horoscope, and its texts are composed in Sanskrit. It is with these Sanskrit *nāḍīs* and their relation to Indian astrology generally that I am concerned here, and in particular, with three texts: the *Gurunāḍī*, *Aṃśanāḍī*, and *Dhruvanāḍī*.[3]

The authorship and transmission of these three texts are unknown, but the text-internal evidence points to an origin in or near the Kerala area, and the horoscopes discussed in the texts can be dated to a period from the late 17th to the mid-19th century. The three texts display many similarities with regard to form as well as content, and a high degree of intertextuality. Many verses found in these works also occur in a text known as *Candra-* or *Candrakalānāḍī*, *Keralanāḍī*, or *Devakerala*. All three texts are written in simple, often ungrammatical Sanskrit, and the style is highly formulaic and repetitive.

The precise relations between these works remain to be established, but the term *devakerala* seems properly to refer to a certain body of astrological teachings rather than to a single text. The *Aṃśanāḍī*, *Gurunāḍī* and *Candrakalānāḍī* all frequently describe their predictions as *pratyakṣaṃ devakeralam* 'the *devakerala* evident to perception'. The term finds its explanation in a legend of origination which states that the knowledge was originally revealed by Bṛhaspati, the priest-preceptor of the gods, to 'a certain brahmin named Acyuta in the district of Kerala'[4] – a state noted for its unique contributions to astrology.

Astrology, fate, and *karman*

In order to understand the *nāḍī* texts, we must first examine some fundamental, if often only implied, principles of Indian astrology generally. Astrology is primarily a descriptive, secondarily a prescriptive art. In its descriptive aspect, it attempts to analyze and interpret the qualities inherent in a given moment of time, such as a birth

[3] The copies of these texts used are *devanāgarī* transcripts made from *grantha* originals, the *Gurunāḍī* and *Aṃśanāḍī* MSS being located in the Oriental Research Institute, Mysore, the *Dhruvanāḍī* in the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Chennai.

[4] This legend occurs at the very beginning of the *Gurunāḍī*.

or the asking of a question: indeed, *kālajña* 'knower of time' is a common Sanskrit word for 'astrologer'. In the astrological view of things, the development and destined end of anything is inherent in the beginning, like a full-grown tree in a seed. Once the qualities of a particular point in time have been understood, therefore, the future of anything begun at that moment – such as the unfolding of a human life or the answer to a question – may be predicted.

In its prescriptive aspect, astrology advises on how to make the best use of time by undertaking or refraining from particular actions, but also on how to mitigate the ill-effects of evil periods by acts of *śānti*: propitiation or pacification. This dual role of astrology obviously presupposes both an element of determinism or predictability and a certain measure of freedom to act on the part of the individual. If the future were absolutely undetermined, there could be no question of predicting it, and astrology, like all forms of divination, would lose its *raison d'être*. If, on the other hand, the future were absolutely predetermined, there could be no question of advising one or the other course of action, or of mitigating an evil fate. Insofar as the promotion of human happiness is considered the proper concern of any branch of knowledge, astrology would therefore be meaningless; and indeed the art has been criticized on such grounds.[5]

In classical Indian thought, however, the coexistence (in varying proportions) of fate and free will is generally taken for granted, and both are subsumed under the concept of action or *karman*. What we experience as fate (*daiva*) in this lifetime is simply the result of our own effort (*puruṣakāra*) performed out of free will in previous lifetimes. The fruition of past acts is thus inextricably linked to the performance of present acts, and all concrete life events are formed by a combination of the two. This view is made explicit in a number of traditional metaphors: as a cart will not move on a single wheel, or fire not be produced from a single kindling-stick, so fate and human effort are both necessary for the production of an event.

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[5] The fatalist argument is rehearsed and refuted by 17th-century astrologer Balabhadra in his *Horāratna* (*Hora Ratnam*, text and transl. R. Santhanam, New Delhi 1995), introductory chapter, verse 35 (my translation, reading *duḥkhe na* for *duḥkhena*):

avaśyaṃbhāvibhāvānāṃ pratīkāro bhaved yadi /
tadā duḥkhe na bādhyeran nalarāmayudhiṣṭhirāḥ //

[...] tathā ca jyotiṣasmṛtyāveditajātakādiphalanirūpaṇasya vaiyarthyaṃ bhāsata iti cen naivaṃ karmaṇāṃ hi vaicitryaṃ kānicid dṛḍhamūlāni kānicic chithilamūlāni /

'[Objection:] If states that will inevitably occur could be counteracted, then Nala, Rāma, and Yudhiṣṭhira would not have been confined to misery. [...] [Reply:] And if [you say] that this shows the futility of the delineation of results by birth horoscopy, etc., as laid down in astrological texts, [then we say:] not so, for actions are manifold, some being firm-rooted (*dṛḍha-mūla*) and others, loose-rooted (*śithila-mūla*).'

Given the scope allowed for the interplay of fate and free will, and therefore for prediction as well as prescription, *karman* thus offers an excellent theoretical model to support the practice of astrology; and from the earliest Sanskrit astrological texts on, the art is indeed interwoven with the concept of *karman*. In the words of Mīnarāja, writing in the early 4th century, 'even as a lamp [reveals] objects in utter darkness, this science reveals the edict [i.e., fate] which, carrying the impact of previous action, was inscribed on [man's] forehead by the Creator.'[6]

Śānti, the act of propitiating or pacifying an angry or malevolent deity, is discussed in both astrological and non-astrological works. It may be seen as atonement (*prāyaścitta*) in reverse: by undertaking atonement for a known offence (whether of omission or commission), the performer hopes to avoid or mitigate any future retribution. The practice of *prāyaścitta* therefore presupposes an awareness of sin committed, for which retribution is expected. This practice generally comprises such acts as recitations of sacred texts, physical austerities, oblations, fasting, and donations.[7] The performance of *śānti*, while taking basically the same forms, is meant to avert an existing or imminent misfortune, which in accordance with *karman* theory is believed to result from some unknown sin previously committed. Thus, while the rationale of *prāyaścitta* is the anticipation of a future effect (suffering) from a past or present cause (sin), the individual undertaking *śānti* deduces the existence of a prior cause from the observation of a present or impending effect.

In astrology, this anticipation of misfortune is based on the astrological chart. The particular forms of *śānti* to be chosen, including the deity or deities to whom ritual worship is directed, are likewise astrologically determined. Frequently, the recipients of propitiatory worship are the planetary deities themselves; but various texts also give lists of correlations between the planets and the greater Hindu pantheon, so that horoscopic afflictions to any planet may be counteracted by worship of the corresponding major deity. In a similar vein, donating valuables which by symbolic correspondences fall under the jurisdiction of a given planet may alleviate the affliction.

The elevation of the planets to the status of deities receiving propitiatory worship does raise the question of whether they are seen as mere signs – like dreams, facial features, or the movements of birds and beasts in other divinatory systems – or as active causes of the effects they signify in the horoscope. For practical purposes,

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[6] *Vṛddhayavanajātaka* 1.3 (*Mīnarājaviracitaṃ Vṛddhayavanajātakam*, ed. D. Pingree, Baroda 1976):

yā pūrvakarmaprabhavasya dhātrī dhātrā lalāṭe likhitā praśastiḥ /
tāṃ śāstram etat prakaṭaṃ vidhatte dīpo yathā vastu ghane 'ndhakāre //

The image of karmically determined destiny as written by God on a person's forehead is still widespread.

[7] *Gautamadharmasūtra* 19.11 (*The Institutes of Gautama*, ed. A.F. Stenzler, London 1876): *tasya niṣkrayaṇāni japas tapo homa upavāso dānam*.

however, the question is of little importance: even God, who 'writes the destiny of men on their foreheads', does so only in accordance with their previous actions or *karman*.

Nāḍī astrology: patterns of destiny

Unlike mainstream Sanskrit astrological works, which are, as a rule, concerned exclusively with universal principles, the *nāḍī* texts consist almost entirely of the delineation of individual horoscopes. The readings vary in regard to length and amount of detail; but most conform to a standardized pattern or structure, and almost every reading begins with the unique feature which has given *nāḍī* astrology its name: the *nāḍī* into which the native of the horoscope was born.

A *nāḍī* in this sense is also called an *aṃśa* or 'part'. It is a division of each zodiacal sign into 150 parts, each bearing a particular name. The texts do not state how these parts are calculated; obviously such knowledge is presupposed in the reader.[8] Birth in a given *aṃśa* is explicitly linked to certain basic destiny patterns, particularly, but not exclusively, relating to the circumstances of birth and early life. These patterns are further modified according to whether birth is in the 'former half' or 'latter half' of an *aṃśa*: for instance, if the early demise of a parent is indicated, the former half of the *aṃśa* may be fatal to the father, while the latter would be so to the mother; etc. Within each *aṃśa* there is also a division known as *kāla* 'time', which is generally related to the native's caste or religious community.

After stating these details, the reading typically goes on to describe the horoscopic placements, superimposing the common considerations of astrology on the fixed destiny pattern of the *aṃśa*. The place of birth is described: whether in a small or large village or a town; near a river, the sea, or a forest; in the vicinity of a temple of Śiva or Viṣṇu; in the ancestral home of the mother or father; etc. The direction of the street (east-west or north-south) and that faced by the house are often stated, as is the intensity of labour pains, and possible danger to mother or child.

Another topic almost invariably brought up at the beginning of a reading is the number of brothers and, secondarily, sisters: whether elder or younger, long-lived or not. The financial and professional status of brothers, and marital status of sisters, are typically discussed, and the trouble of childlessness is occasionally mentioned.

In detailing the ascendant or rising sign, the *nāḍīs* often mention three different times for which the chart may be cast. The first is the moment of birth, at which the

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[8] I am not aware of any contemporary *nāḍī* reader who claims to make use of the *aṃśas*, but modern Hindu astrologers have speculated on the nature of these divisions. While some assume them to be equal 1/150 parts of a zodiacal sign, each part comprising 0°12′ of arc (see R. Santhanam, *Deva Keralam (Chandra Kala Nadi)*, bk I, New Delhi 1992, pp. v ff.), others have argued that they represent a 'consolidation' of the classical *ṣoḍaśavargas* or sixteen divisions of a sign, which, if superimposed upon each other, create a matrix of 150 parts varying in arc from 0°01′40″ to 0°30′00″ (see S. K. Bhagat, *Golden Key to Unfold Nadi Granthas*, Bombay 1990, pp. 1 ff.).

infant leaves the body of the squatting mother and 'falls on to the ground' (*bhūpatana*); but there is also the moment when the head first becomes visible in the birth canal (*śirodarśana*), as well as the moment of impregnation (*ādhāna*). However, these latter two are rarely used for interpretative purposes.

The structure of the delineation is partly thematic, partly chronological, often commencing with a description of the father, the happiness the native will derive from him, and his time of death. A similar but briefer and even more stereotyped description of the mother then follows, typically emphasizing her devotion to her husband, her dutiful efforts to secure the increase of the family, and her liberal dispensing of food. Longer readings may include similar sketches of the native's brothers and sisters before moving on to his (or, very occasionally, her) own life.

In contrast to modern 'astro-psychological' consultations, the *nāḍīs* tend rather to slur over the native's childhood, merely stating – in standard phrasing and without fear of contradiction – that in spite of various childhood illnesses, he happily reached adulthood. The narrations of adult life are more detailed and individualized, though similar in focus: marriage and childbirth, income and livelihood, status and profession are topics of universal interest. The astrological argumentation presented is generally quite superficial, and there is no sharp dividing line between results related to *aṃśa* and to planetary positions.

As in mainstream Hindu astrology, important life events are timed using astrological time-cycles (*daśā*) as well as the 'transits' (*gocara*) or continuous movements of the planets in relation to their natal placements. This latter technique is rather more emphasized in the *nāḍī* texts than in standard works, with particular attention paid to the slow-moving Saturn and Jupiter for evil and good events, respectively. Again, the reasoning presented is often simple, not to say simplistic.

The results of time-cycles are also related to the birth *aṃśa*, and the sequence of these periods, along with the transits of Saturn and Jupiter, provide the chronological framework of the narrative. This narrative ends with the prognostication of the native's death, typically to the very day – the only event other than birth to be stated with such precision. This date is based on a supposed 'maximum longevity' (*paramāyus*) which may, however, be cut short by 'untimely death' (*apamṛtyu*) at certain critical times. Such and other misfortunes should be averted by the performance of *śānti*, propitiation, which is a frequently recurring subject in the *nāḍī* texts.

The objects of such propitiatory worship may be the afflicting planets themselves or deities of the greater Hindu pantheon, but may also include the brahmins (who are 'gods on earth') and deceased ancestors – particularly when their displeasure is thought to cause childlessness. Among the planets, the dreaded Saturn is the one most often propitiated. The methods of *śānti* comprise various practices such as ritual worship (*pūjā*), recitation of *mantras* or sacred texts (*japa*), fasting, pilgrimage and sacred baths, and, above all, donations.

In striking contrast to standard texts, the *nāḍīs* occasionally prescribe donations to the astrologer himself, alone or in conjunction with worship of the planetary deities. The astrologer of the *nāḍī* texts thus functions as a two-way representative of the planets: firstly, in acting as their mouthpiece by delineating the results of *karman* made manifest through planetary positions; and secondly, in accepting, on behalf of the planets, worship meant to remedy undesirable results.

This doctrine of *karman* and its corollary rebirth, which as seen above presents a middle way between fatalism and indeterminism, is upheld explicitly as well as implicitly, and a sense of continuity between lifetimes is sometimes very concretely expressed, as when an illness in the present lifetime is said to have begun in the previous one. In discussing rebirth, the *nāḍīs* also occasionally touch upon soteriological aspects by predicting final liberation within a certain number of lifetimes. More often, however, it is merely asserted that the native will 'attain a good world' after death. Only very rarely is someone said to be destined for a less pleasant location.[9]

Conclusion

Like medicine, astrology is concerned with diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription. The object diagnosed is the particular point in space-time at which anything begins, e.g., the birth of a human being. From the qualities inherent in this point the latent promise of events to come may be read; the projection of such events in time constitutes the prognosis. Finally, prescription relates to the counteraction of undesirable future events by ritual means (*śānti*), or to the commencement of undertakings at auspicious times. This division of the art, allowing for a high degree of predictability as well as for a certain measure of individual freedom, makes it excellently suited for accomodation in a worldview dominated by the concept of *karman*. Teachings on *karman* thus serve as a means of legitimizing astrology; and once this connection is made, the practice of astrological divination will in its turn serve to uphold the authority of the *karman* theory.

The concept of fixed life patterns inherent in minute divisions of the zodiac itself seems to be, practically speaking, unique to *nāḍī* astrology. A similar idea – the *myriogenesis* doctrine – is outlined by 4th century Roman astrologer Firmicus Maternus in his *Mathesis*;[10] but to my knowledge, no horoscope interpretations actually purporting to be based on this doctrine have been recorded.

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[9] E.g., in a reading for a *śūdra* given in the *Aṃśanāḍī*:

vyayeśe kaluṣāṃśasthe vyaye pāpayutekṣite /dehānte narakaṃ yāti gurunāḍīṣu vistaret //

'When the ruler of the twelfth house is in *kaluṣāṃśa*, and the twelfth house is joined [and] aspected by malefics, at the end of the body he goes to hell. One should refer to the *Gurunāḍī* for details.'

[10] *Matheseos Libri VIII*, published as *Ancient Astrology: Theory and Practice*, transl. J.R. Bram, New Jersey 1975.

Apart from its uniqueness as a divinatory approach, the *nāḍī* or *aṃśa* doctrine has implications of definite interest for the study of Hindu views on human freedom and the operations of *karman*. As every human being is necessarily born into some particular *aṃśa*, the number of which is limited, and as each *aṃśa* corresponds to a basic destiny or event pattern, it follows that the number of possible human *curricula vitae* is likewise limited. There are only so many basic plots, as it were; and although the plot inherent in each *aṃśa* may vary in detail, the number of possible variations is still finite. We thus see in this doctrine the perhaps greatest deviation of *nāḍī* authors from mainstream Hindu orthodoxy: a view of *karman* and rebirth not as an infinitely variable flux, but rather in the nature of a flow chart in which movement, though voluntary, takes place from one pre-defined square to the next. It is not the view of the religious moralist, emphasizing the dimension of free will and the possibility of moral choice, but rather a view suited to the concerns of a diviner, intent on 'decoding impersonal patterns of reality'[11] by means of 'predictable, ordable processes'.[12]

[11] E.M. Zuesse, 'Divination' in M. Eliade (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, New York 1987, p. 375. Zuesse is speaking of what he terms 'wisdom divination', as opposed to intuitive or possession divination.

[12] 'Like science, divination is concerned with natural phenomena and predictable, ordable processes; but like religion, it relies heavily on faith and presupposes some sort of personal connection with the constantly unfolding but mysterious patterns of cosmic change.' R.J. Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society*, Boulder & Chicago 1991, p. 283.