

**MARTIN GANSTEN. *Patterns of Destiny. Hindu Nāḍī Astrology***

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Two decades ago in his masterpiece, a survey of Sanskrit astrological literature, the savant of Indian astral sciences, Professor David Pingree has briefly remarked about the *nāḍī* genre in general: “It would be not possible to close this discussion of the literature on *jātaka* without reference to one of the most notorious texts of this genre, which has had numerous offshoots. This is the vast collection of thousands of potential horoscopes assembled under the name *Bhṛgu-saṁhitā*, and presented in the form of a dialogue between Bhṛgu and Śukra [...] The manuscript copies all originate in North India, where some extraordinarily diligent fellow compiled it. A similar collection found in South India is the mammoth *Saptarṣi nāḍī* in Tamil”.<sup>1</sup> Earlier this kind of divinatory literature has also been mentioned in passing by a famous Indian scholar P. V. Kane: “Before closing this brief account of Indian astrology I must in a few words advert to a work called *Bhṛgusaṁhitā* in Sanskrit which is supposed to contain numberless horoscopes with descriptions of persons born on the twelve *rāśis* from Meṣa onwards, references to the deeds of such persons in previous lives, the horoscope with the positions of the several planets, the important happenings in each person’s present life from the year of his birth to his death. Persons who profess to have in their possession the *Bhṛgusaṁhitā* are generally averse to showing the whole work to any one, but read those possession and people feel often amazed of the accounts about themselves which read out to them. There is much deception in this.”<sup>2</sup>

Even a cursory perusal of various *nāḍī* texts shows that they often contain different and at times mutually incompatible or contradictory notions on various astrologically relevant subjects. However, no historical or textual studies were done on astrological *nāḍī* genre before.

Overall, traditional astrology and divination is an important, but often overlooked area of research. Academia is still suffering from embarrassment about taking serious interest in history of astrology and other traditional divination systems. Despite the efforts of classical

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<sup>1</sup> David Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature. A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 6, fasc. 4, ed. by Jan Gonda, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1981, p. 96f.

<sup>2</sup> P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Bombay, Government Oriental Series, 6 Volumes, 1930–1962, vol. V, Part I, p. 634.

philologists and historians of religion and science, such as H. Kern, A. Weber, H.-G. Thibaut, and David Pingree since the end of the nineteenth century to preserve and to publish the long-neglected astrological Sanskrit texts and emphasize their autonomous conceptual value, the astrological texts and astrological practices are still largely ignored by mainstream Western Indologists.

We have had many Sanskrit astrological works in reliable transmission for a fairly long time. But, it may be asked, have these works been read in the proper light, in particular with respect to their furthering the principles of astrological science? Many astrological texts cannot be used uncritically as a description of India in any particular period as it is clear that many texts are a compilation from earlier texts, some of which were probably originally composed in the fifth or fourth century B.C. when Mesopotamian omen literature has been adapted for Indian use. Commenting the study *India as seen in The Brhatsamhitā of Varāhamihira* by A. M. Shastri, David Pingree rightly remarked that it is imperative that everyone attempting the analysis of description of India as seen in astrological texts would undertake to establish first of all the source and date of each part of those texts.<sup>3</sup>

And recently this first study fills the gap in the field. Written as a doctoral dissertation and published as volume 17 in the series of *Lund Studies in History of Religions*, the study of Martin Gansten is the first attempt in the Indological and religious studies to look at the mysterious Indian tradition of astrological *nāḍī* divination. The study is divided into six chapters and three major sections, the two latter of which are based on historical-textual analysis of the original Sanskrit sources. The study is supplemented also with bibliography, glossary, and index.

As the author himself points out in the introduction, his original intention for this study was to focus exclusively on the theory and practice of *nāḍī* divination, as evinced in a certain group of Sanskrit *nāḍī* texts. Very soon it became evident to him, that the examination and understanding of those texts presupposes an understanding of classical Hindu astrology, in its technical aspect as well as its relation to the larger Hindu worldview. As he points out rightly, no scholarly reliable and readably available introductory text on the actual synthesis and methodology of Hindu astrology existed (except, perhaps, the single study, that of H.-G. Tüerstig<sup>4</sup>).

And for that reason, a short but very comprehensible outline of the foundation of classical Hindu astrology on which the *nāḍī* system rests and its relations to Hindu thought generally is given in the fourth chapter. Being more technical, this chapter gives also a brief account of methods used for casting and reading of a Hindu horoscope, examining and synthesizing the main methods as they were developed by the late 17th century. Using in his analysis the main classical astrological texts (*Yavanajātaka* of Sphujidhvaja, *Brhājātaka* and *Brhatsamhitā* of

<sup>3</sup> David Pingree, "Review of *India as seen in The Brhatsamhitā of Varāhamihira*, by Ajay Mitra Shastri", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 94:4, 1974, p. 487.

<sup>4</sup> H.-G. Tüerstig, *Jyotisa: Das System der indischen Astrologie*, Wiesbaden, 1980.

Varāhamihira, *Horāsāra* of Pṛthuyāśas, *Upadeśa Sūtra* of Jaimini, *Bṛhatpārāśarāhorāsāstra*, *Sārāvalī* of Kalyāṇavarman, *Phaladīpikā* of Mantreśvara, *Jātaka Pārijāta* of Śrī Daivajña Vaidyanātha, and many other), the author, however, has paid a particular regard to the *Bṛhatpārāśarāhorāsāstra*, because of its encyclopedic nature and authority among practitioners.

The second chapter is written in the form of descriptive anthropological methodology and is based on an account of the author's personal experience of communication with some contemporary *nāḍī* astrologers in South India. This section, poetically entitled "Thumbing across South India", is grounded not on the texts themselves, but rather on the entire thumb reading situations, including the description of astrological readers themselves, their physical surroundings and other contextual circumstances. The method of this section is being described "as one of participant observation; it aims at a description of the ritual use of *nāḍī* texts as seen through the eyes of a client, and related in narrative form" (p. 10). This is perhaps the most fascinating part of the book revealing how the principles of *nāḍī* astrology are in use by divination practices of present days in some South Indian areas.

Relation between divination, free will and destiny is discussed in the third chapter, which is perhaps most interesting from the point of view religious study. It deals with the ideological framework of Hindu astrology and attempts to capture the general tenor of Hindu thinking on the issues central to divination. It is impossible to separate astrology from divination, though it is not explicitly presented as such by the authors of the treatises, its source of information is the divine heavenly bodies. It is now universally accepted that ancient science cannot be separated from its ethical and philosophical background. Astrology, like another religious activity, is closely implicated in cultural, social, even political, activity; indeed, it is an integral part of it. According to Evan M. Zuesse, "Divination, as an art or practice of discovering the personal, human significance of future, or more commonly, present or past events, is a preoccupation with the import of events and specific methods to discover it, and are found in almost all cultures"<sup>5</sup>. What distinguishes India is the survival of the practice of divination on a large scale. It is popular not only with peasants but also with the urban population making use of astrology on all the important occasions in their life. From their childhood the Hindus grow up in an astrological climate, their minds filled up with long list of auspicious and inauspicious signs and sights. Thus, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter Gansten discusses such topics as a concept of *karman* and its uses in astrological conceptual framework, atonement and propitiation, the question of causality and, finally reveals the religious status of the astrologer.

From Gupta times onwards astrology emerged as an important factor in the religious life of the Indian people. That astrology has a religious dimension is quite evident from many social and religious texts. Varāhamihira said the astrologer should worship deities and follow

<sup>5</sup> Evan M. Zuesse, "Divination", *Encyclopedia of Religions*, vol. 4, 1987, pp. 375–382.

religious vows and fasting (*Bṛhatsamhitā* II.3). Mantreśvara expresses another belief which is also found today: “To one who is non-violent, self-controlled, who has gained wealth justly and continually follows religious observances, the *grahas* always show favour”. (*Phala Dīpika* XXVI.50) Thus the birth-time and its associated planetary configurations fulfill the karmic process, which links the person’s present lifetime to his previous lifetimes.

Traditionally is held, that planetary forces sustain an unfolding of fate throughout the lifetime of the person. Astrological counseling helps the client to understand relationships among various factors in his personal situation, and as part of this process, it provides a temporal framework for developments in his life. According to the anthropologist Judy F. Pugh, “Fate is manifested in the general features of the person’s physical and psychical constitution and socio-familiar relationships, which together articulate a whole panoply of life-experiences, including, among many others, experiences associated with health and disease, family crises, and economic circumstances”.<sup>6</sup> In this ‘astrological hermeneutics’ in which the astrologer and the client are involved, the ‘final’ patterns of relationships among planets, kinsmen, body parts, karmic actions, etc. are not charged by the monological projections of the astrologer and his astrology but by a discourse that is designed as a dialogue, or even a polylogue. As Gansten comes to conclusion, “while diagnosis and prognosis, or the descriptive aspect of astrology, refer to the effects of accumulated actions from past lives and their current maturation (*prārabdha-saṃcita-karman*), commonly equated with *daiva* ‘fate, destiny’, its prescriptive aspect relates to actions of the present life (*kriyamāṇa-karman*), known by contrast as *puruṣakāra* ‘human effort’ (P.191). In this way, teachings on *karman* really “serve as a means of legitimizing astrology”.

The most important part of this book consists of some excerpts from Sanskrit texts and translations of *Gurunāḍī*, *Aṃśanāḍī* and *Dhruvanāḍī*, as given in the final 6<sup>th</sup> chapter. Chapter 5, while locating and dating those texts, thematically discusses the form, content of his textual source material and general world-view that appears “to be a mainstream *smārta* one, with few distinguishing characteristics: the ‘great tradition’ of classical and pre-modern Hinduism” (p. 127). The author draws our attention to the fact that the language of these texts (*Gurunāḍī*, *Aṃśanāḍī*, *Dhruvanāḍī*) deviates from the classical Sanskrit both phonologically, morphologically and syntactically. He remarks that their transmission and authorship are unknown, however they display a higher degree of intertextuality representing a common school or style of astrology, *devakerala*.

The *nāḍī* tradition deviates from the mainstream Hindu astrology and also from orthodox teachings on *karman*, because is based on a conception of a limited number of predefinable, basic “patterns of destiny”, to one of which every human being is necessarily born. The author reveals that while *nāḍī* reading is commonly perceived as a form of horoscopic astrology,

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<sup>6</sup> Judy F. Pugh, “Astrology and Fate: the Hindu and Muslim Experience”, *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, ed. by Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 35.

most current practitioners do not base their interpretations on the client's natal horoscope, but rather on a method of thumb reading. Not accidentally, the author supports the idea of Tamil / Dravidian origin of the term *nāḍī* itself (the verb *nāṭu* 'to enquire after, to examine, to look at'; the noun *nāṭam* 'examination, investigation, astrology'), because all texts containing the term in its astrological sense, even when composed in Sanskrit, originate in the Dravidian language area.

These texts, datable by the astronomical information they contain to the 18th and 19th centuries, deal entirely with the interpretation of natal horoscopes, and as Gansten guesses, originate in Dravidian language area. Many of them may be seen as representing a common school or style of astrology, known as *devakerala*, and in current use are not only carefully guarded by their readers, but also are objects of veneration and even ritual worship. There is, in fact, a large number of South Indian *nāḍī* texts in existence, in Sanskrit as well as Dravidian languages, applicable to one client only. Indeed, many *nāḍī* readers claim that their texts supply not only the name of the person consulting the texts, but even those of his or her parents, spouse, etc.

Being based on a very limited sources, Martin Gansten's study claims to be a 'modest beginning' in the research of the vast field of *nāḍī* astrology hitherto neglected by western scholarship. And this modest beginning undoubtedly brings us closer to the fascinating world of the most mysterious branch of the Indian divinatory practices and gives a hope that other studies in this neglected field of traditional Indian culture will soon appear.