

Grahas: The Nine Vedic Planets and their Characteristics

Overview

In this section you will be introduced to the first of the cornerstones of astrology: the planets. Developing the ability to assess planetary strength and qualities is the first step in Vedic chart interpretation. It is essential that you first learn the fundamentals of the planets, signs and houses, because all further techniques will be based on them.

Learning Objectives of this Module:

- Learn Sanskrit names and proper pronunciation of the Grahas (Planets)
- Understand and memorize Planetary Significations and Symbols
- Introduction to Planetary Deities
- Introduction to Planetary Elements and Modalities
- Understand Planetary Cabinet and other characteristics
- Learn the concept and use of Natural Benefic/Malefic Planets
- Introduction to the Quantity (Strength) and Quality (Auspiciousness) of Planetary Influence
- Understand the logic and use of Planetary Friendships
- Introduction to ways Planets can interact: Aspects
- Two Planet Combination Interpretations

Introduction

The Sanskrit word *graha* is usually translated as the English word *planet*. Sanskrit words often have many levels of meaning which give deep and profound insights. When the planets are studied, remember the full meaning of the word *graha*. *Graha* is broadly translated as "grasp," or "to grasp." In this light a planet is grasping or controlling something.

The Sanskrit term *graha* also reflects the physical understanding of what planets are. Modern astronomy believes that during the formation of the heavenly bodies within the solar system, heaps of matter accumulated into what we call planets. This is the result of a point of attraction that attracted or "grasped" matter to form these bodies. A second signification is that each planet "grasps" certain qualities and characteristics. Everything in life has been divided up and "held" by the planets.

There are many incarnations of the unborn Lord. Vishnu has incarnated as the navagrahas or planets to bestow on the living beings the results of their Karmas or actions. He assumed the auspicious form of grahas to destroy the strength of the demons, to sustain the strength of the devas, and to establish dharma. Parahara, Chapter 2, sloka 3-4.

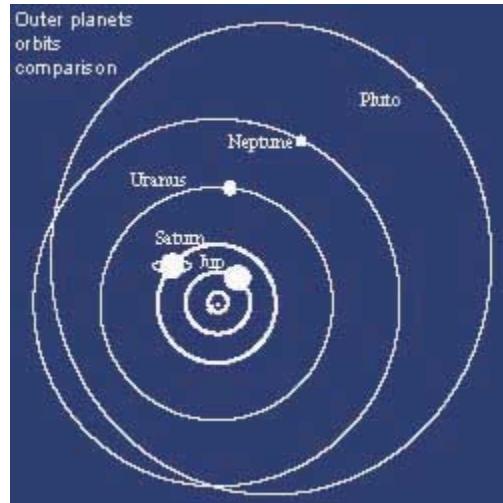
Grahas are also depicted as deities or characters in the rich mythology of Hinduism. These stories explain the nature of the universe and examine the motivations of humans, and the laws of nature. Understanding the myths of the grahas provides yet another level of knowledge that is most easily understood via metaphor.



How Many Planets?

The word planet comes from the Greek word "planetes" which means "to wander." This reflects the observation that the planets appear to wander against the backdrop of the fixed stars. Even though "grahas" can be loosely translated as "planets", these 2 words do not have an identical meaning.

Science defines the solar system as being composed of the Sun and nine planets: Mercury, Venus, the Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. These are the astronomical planets. Vedic and classical astrology (astrology as practiced in the West and Middle East prior to modern Western Astrology) do not use Uranus, Neptune or Pluto because they are not visible with the naked eye. (Some modern Vedic Astrologers do choose to use the outer planets.) Also, Vedic Astrology, as well as classical astrology considers the Sun and the Moon as grahas/planets, and sometimes these are called the luminaries to distinguish them from the other planets.



Jyotish is unique in that it places special emphasis on the Nodes of the Moon. You may recall from the Astronomy section that the Nodes are mathematical points on the ecliptic where eclipses can occur. The North Node is called Rahu, and the South Node is called Ketu. (Review eclipses in Astronomy section.)

Vedic Astrology uses the two luminaries (the Sun and the Moon), the five visible planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn) and the two lunar nodes Rahu and Ketu as the nine grahas (planets.) From now on, we shall refer to this group of "planets" with this proper Sanskrit term. When we speak of nine planets we will use the term Navagrahas (Nava means nine in Sanskrit).

How Many Planets?

As mentioned before, some systems consider celestial bodies planets and others not. Here is a table indicating which celestial bodies astronomy and the various schools of astrology consider planets:

Celestial Object	Modern Astronomy	Vedic Astrology	Classical Astrology	Western Astrology
Sun		X	X	X
Moon		X	X	X
Mercury	X	X	X	X
Venus	X	X	X	X
Earth	X			
Mars	X	X	X	X
Jupiter	X	X	X	X

Saturn	X	X	X	X
Uranus	X			X
Neptune	X			X
Pluto	X			X
Rahu/North Node		X	X	X
Ketu/South Node		X	X	

Traditional Vedic Astrology does not consider the influences of Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Some modern Vedic astrologers choose to use the outer planets. This is a fertile area for research. (See Dennis Harness' article on the outer planets)

Summary

From the proceeding we understand that the term graha has these meanings:

- A wanderer, a moving celestial body (as compared to the fixed stars)
- Something that grasps, or to hold on to
- Where matter or energy accumulates or is attached to
- Certain qualities of characteristics that each planet "holds"
- Myths that explain nature through metaphor
- Vedic Astrology uses nine grahas: the luminaries, the visible planets and the lunar nodes

Explore and Learn About Vedic Astrology

What is Vedic Astrology?

Vedic astrology is an analysis and forecasting system, based on astronomical data, that allows its practitioners to carefully assess and understand behavior, to measure the effects of the past, the influence of the present and the tendency of events to unfold in the future.

Vedic Astrology: The Ancient Knowledge of Behavior and Time from India

The oldest and most important scriptures in all of India, if not the world, are called the Vedas, a Sanskrit word meaning "knowledge. The Vedas are called "apaursheya" or beyond the realm of man and time. According to the tenets of Vedic philosophy, the Vedas were not authored but documented by seers or ancient wisemen called "rishis", who in a state of expanded awareness, cognized the mechanics of creation. Vedic Astrology comes from this ancient work (hence the use of the word Vedic). Jyotisha or Jyotish is the actual Sanskrit name for Vedic Astrology and means the "eye or light of nature". It describes the ability of an astrologer to view the mechanics of people's behavior as well as the projected cycles and outcomes of time and events.

The Fundamentals of Vedic Astrology

The fundamentals of Vedic Astrology were believed by ancient philosophers to have been instituted by Brahma, the creator. This knowledge was then passed down to various Rishis and to man. Vedic Astrology, in its current form, is thought to have been written several thousand years ago by Maharishi Parashara, although, following India's concepts of repeating time cycles, the work could have even have existed several thousand years more prior to that in oral form. Parashara's book, "Brihat Parashara Hora Shastra" is the primer on Vedic Astrology and most scholars view Parashara today as the father of mainstream Vedic Astrology.

The Purpose of Vedic Astrology

The purpose of Vedic Astrology is to avoid problems before they arise. The aphorism, "Pull weeds early" describes a major purpose of astrology. Another quote from India states, "If you want to get rid of a snake, get rid of it when it is really small". In fact, Patanjali, a famous Indian philosopher who wrote the "Yoga Sutras", stated that it was important to know how to "avoid the danger which has not yet come". A good astrologer uses the tools of Vedic Astrology to forecast the times to promote events in one's life or to pull back, recognizing the indications point to some obvious serious risk.

In the traditional Indian or Hindu culture there is a high reverence for Gurus, or enlightened Masters. The trust is so high that the word of the Guru and ancient scriptural tradition is accepted with little doubt. This tradition has predisposed Indian followers of Vedic Astrology not to inquire much into psychological matters, but to focus more on when things might or might not happen. Many Western astrologers are disposed to focus on analysis of behavior, with less emphasis on forecasting. Such is the choice of the Western, analytical world. Many modern Vedic astrologers, however, recognize a Westerner's desire to analyze and have in recent years adjusted their approach for Western clients, to include more psychological analysis, along with predictive work. All good astrological work ultimately takes into account the context and cultural variables of the client or event being considered.

Vedic Astrology is not fatalistic

It is also important to know that good Vedic astrologers are not fatalistic, but point to useful and actionable indications or probabilities that certain behaviors might emerge or that specific events could take place over time. In spite of the debate about whether we have free will or not, it is important to know that the effects seen in an astrological chart are not required to happen as they stand. A motivated, sincere person, under the competent guidance of an experienced Vedic astrologer, or other self-improvement mentors, can make effective changes in their lives. Nature is basically benevolent and changes can be made for the better.

Tools to Improve

Vedic astrology is linked to other Vedic systems, such as Ayurveda for health, Vastu for dwellings (like Feng Shui) and other philosophies. Vedic Astrology is part of a holistic, integrated knowledge system and its effects can be bolstered by interoperating with its "sister" sciences. The Vedic Astrology system is kind in that not only is a person told what might happen, but they are presented a list of potential remedies or corrective actions to offset the quantity and quality of karmas that are returning to them, as seen in the birth chart. After all, it is held that the natal chart is a list of the karmas or previous actions that we have brought into this life. The chart, called a Janma Kundali in India, represents our starting point in this life and where our pluses and minuses lie throughout our lives. These fortifying practices, which should only be accepted from very qualified Vedic astrologers, include such measures as gemstones, mantras, balancing rituals called yagyas, and small acts, called Shantis, used to propitiate or soothe the impact associated with unfavorable planetary positions.

Vedic Astrology is Star Based or Sidereal --- Western is Season Based or Tropical

It is important to know that Vedic astrological calculations are different from what most of us have seen in the Western systems. Vedic Astrology is sidereal or based in reference to the stars. All its calculations are constantly adjusted for a back slipping motion of the earth called precession. The earth's axial spin retards or moves back about one degree or one day every 72 years, in relationship to a fixed star. The astronomy of the sky that you observe each night in our modern times is nearly matched to the zodiac constellations used in Vedic Astrology calculations.

In Western astrology, the planetary positions presented in their Zodiac do not represent today's astronomical positions. They tend to focus more on the seasons as markers of time. The Tropical zodiac remains unchanged from what was seen in the skies almost 2000 years ago by the ancient Greeks, Egyptians and Babylonians. The two systems are about 23 days apart (called the

"ayanamsa") from where they mark the first point of the sign of Aries, which is the start of the circle of the zodiac (you have to start a circle somewhere). Again, this is due to that slow precessed, backward slipping of the earth. What this means, astrologically, that unless you were born somewhere between the 15th and 20th of the month, your Sun sign will most likely move back one sign in Vedic Astrology.

Beyond the Birth Chart: An Abundance of Tools for Analysis and Forecasting

The astrology of India is known for the quantity and quality of its analytical and forecasting tools. Most beginners are amazed to find not only the basic natal chart called the "rasi", but also a chart system employing 27 signs of the Moon, called the "nakshatras". There is an additional set of birth charts called the "shodasavargas" which give the practitioner of Vedic Astrology 15 extra charts to examine. The most famous of these is the "Navamsa", which is analyzed carefully for marriage matching and to uncover more subtle aspects of a person's nature. The most widely recognized Vedic forecasting tool is called the "Vimshottari Dasa" system which can track the karmic influences promised by planet in a chart out to a span of 120 years, with each planet ruling a specific period of a person's life. There are many other techniques, too numerous to mention in this small introduction. In fact one would be hard pressed to be bored in the study of Vedic Astrology with its magnitude of techniques and practices and its links to Vedic philosophy and the development of consciousness.

Qualified Vedic Astrologers and the American College of Vedic Astrology

With the rapid advance of Vedic Astrology in the West and its growing market appeal, there are many beginners of Vedic Astrology who are looking to expand their knowledge and abilities in this ancient science of time. One of the goals of the American College of Vedic Astrology is to provide sound learning resources to enable students to become competent practitioners of Vedic Astrology. With the coming availability of online classes for Vedic Astrology, the number of knowledgeable and skilled astrologers should increase many fold. In ancient India, a town was considered blessed that had a resident astrologer. With the reach of the Internet and the convenience and accessibility of online learning, the knowledge of Vedic Astrology should be able to reach every corner of the globe.