

NAVAGRAHAS: THE NINE PLANETARY SYSTEM

The worship of nine planetary gods, the *navagraha*, is widespread among Hindu sects. *Nava* is translated as “nine” and *graha* as “planets,” although it etymologically means ‘one which is seized’ (Yano 381). The concept of *graha* as a heavenly body has evolved into the current nine planetary system, the *navagrahas*. First, a demon which eclipses the Sun and Moon was recognized, which was later given the name Rahu and his truncating tail, Ketu, was considered separately. Next, five planets were included in this system followed by incorporating the Sun and Moon which brought the count of celestial bodies to nine.

The nine “planets” in the system followed, in order by the days of the week, are the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, with Rahu and Ketu added as influential bodies but not lords over a weekday. The order of the planets aligning with the days of the week is thought to have originated during the third century and became widespread amongst Hindus during the following century (Yano 383). Most Sanskrit texts describing the planets in the weekday order, therefore, should be dated past the third century. By this time, it became a general, widespread and unbreakable rule that the planets were to be named in accordance with their corresponding days of the week (Pingree 251). Before this, many arranged the planets by how advantageous they were beginning with the most positive as Venus and Jupiter, the neutral planet of Mercury next, and then the unfavourable Mars and Saturn (Pingree 251). The study of the heavens (astronomy) at this point in time in India was thought of as sacrosanct among the educated classes. The celestial beings were thought of as gods and the worship of them is reflected in the Vedas (Das 197).

The nine *grahas* worshipped by the Hindus are seen as heavenly bodies that bring fortune or misfortune to people’s lives (Coleman 128). The Hindus who worship these celestial bodies

are mainly those who believe in astrological influences over their lives (Pingree 249). Within Sanskrit texts, descriptions and characters of the nine planets are given in such a way so they can be applied to the lives of those born under the planets influence (Pingree 250).

The most powerful is the Sun known as Surya or Ravi. Surya is seen as the personification of the orb of light and heat and is portrayed with a golden complexion and rays of glory surrounding his head. He will sometimes be seen as having two or four arms and holds a lotus in one hand. Some have even termed him “the lord of the lotus” (Coleman 128). Surya is complex as he is believed to be tri-form; Brahma or creation in the morning (east), Visnu or preservation at noon and Siva or destruction in the evening (west) (Coleman 129).

The next *graha* is the moon known as Candra or Soma. Candra is depicted as a young, beautiful male who has two arms, one holding a club and the other a lotus, and is generally riding an antelope drawn cart. Occasionally, the moon is depicted as a female and is then known as Candri. Candra is of the warrior caste and presides over Monday. It is believed that those born under Candra will have many friends, high distinctions and an enjoyable life (Coleman 131). The daily positions of the moon are considered the twenty-eight lunar mansions in the zodiac called *naksatra*. They are thought to be invented by Daksa and are the personification of the daughters of Daksa and the mythological wives of Candra (Coleman 131).

Mangala, or Mars, presides over Tuesday. This planet is also believed to be of the warrior caste and produced from “the sweat of Siva’s brow” (Coleman 132). Mangala is represented as red or flame-coloured with four arms, holding a trident, club, lotus and spear, while riding on a ram (Coleman 132). The disposition of Mangala is said to be fierce and those

born under him are thought to undergo great misfortunes and losses. However, to be born under him is considered to be fortunate.

Mercury is the next *graha* known by the Hindus as Budha, and rules over Wednesday. He is thought to be the son of Candra/Soma and Rohini and thus the firstborn of the Candrabans which are considered to be the “lunar race of the sovereigns” (Coleman 133). He is represented in many different ways including on a carpet, on an eagle, cart drawn by lions, mounted on a lion or mounted on a winged lion. In some depictions he is holding a sceptre and lotus and in others a scimitar, club and shield. Budha is the god of merchandise and the protector of merchants and being born under him is considered fortunate.

The regent of the planet Jupiter and preceptor of the gods, called their *guru*, is Brhaspati. He is of the Brahmin caste and rules Thursday. He is depicted in a golden or deep yellow hue, sitting on a horse holding a stick, lotus and his beads (Coleman 133). Hindus are in strict worship of him and believe it is fortunate to be born under him.

The planet Venus and the god Sukra, comes next. He is Brahmin as well and is the preceptor or *guru* of the ‘giants’ and is held in great esteem within Hinduism (Coleman 134). Sukra presides over Friday and is thought to be the son or grandson of Brghu. He is depicted as middle aged with a white complexion and is mounted in a variety of ways including on a camel or an animal resembling a rat or a horse and is holding a large ring, stick, beads, lotus or sometimes a bow and arrows (Coleman 134). Being born under Sukra is said to bring great fortunes such as the gift of the power of omniscience and blessings of life which include many wives.

Sani, the planet Saturn, presides over Saturday. He is of the Sudra caste and is depicted as a dark, old, ugly and lame with long hair, nails and teeth and an evil disposition. He is usually clothed in black, mounted on a black vulture, raven or elephant holding a sword, arrows and two daggers in his hands (Coleman 134). To be born under him is considered unfortunate as the tribulations of life are attributed to Sani's influence and wickedness (Coleman 134). Ceremonies held in worship of him are often just to appease him so no bad will come to those partaking in the ceremony.

Varuna, the planet Neptune, is the Hindu god of waters and regent of the west side of Earth. He is illustrated as a four armed light skinned man riding a sea animal with a rope in one hand and a club in another (Coleman 135). He is worshipped daily as one of the regents of the earth, especially by those who fish the lakes in Bengal before they go out. People also often repeat his name in times of drought to obtain rain (Coleman 135). It is believed that his heaven was formed by Viswakarma and is 800 miles in circumference. Varuna and his wife, Varuni, are said to reside there seated on a throne of diamonds while they are attended by others (Coleman 135).

The next, and last of the *navagrahas* are Rahu and Ketu. Rahu is thought to be the son or grandson of Kasyapa and is the planet of the "ascending node" (Coleman 134). He is often worshipped to avert evil spirits, nasty diseases, earthquakes and other unfortunate events, and especially during an eclipse (Coleman 135). He is portrayed in numerous ways including being mounted on a lion, flying dragon, an owl and a tortoise and sometimes with a spear in his hand. As well, Rahu is generally portrayed without a head as it is thought to belong to the other part of him, Ketu. Ketu is the planet of "descending node" (Coleman 135) and is described as sitting on

a vulture or as a head on the back of a frog. Ketu is thought to be Rahu's tail by some while others believe Ketu to be comets (Yano 383).

The *navagrahas* represent more than just a system of astrology within Hinduism, but a belief system that alters how the believers live from the moment of birth. With the seven planets of varying fortune residing over each weekday, the timing of events is essential. Within this study of the heavens has come a deeper understanding of the surrounding universe early on in Indian culture, as can be seen through further research, such as in Das' *Scope and Development of Indian Astronomy* as well as in articles by Pingree (such as *Representation of the Planets in Indian Astronomy* and *Indian Planetary Images and the Tradition of Astral Magic*). The magnitude of worship of the *grahas* is certainly rooted deep within Hindu practices as people strive to achieve the ultimate fortunes that each day offers in this life.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

- Coleman, Charles (1995) *The Mythology of the Hindus*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
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- Pingree, David (1965) "Representation of the Planets in Indian Astrology." *Indo-Iranian Journal*. Vol. 8. pp. 249-267.
- _____ (1989) "Indian Planetary Images and the Tradition of Astral Magic." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. Vol. 52. pp. 1-13.
- Yano, Michio (2005) "Calendar, Astrology, and Astronomy." In *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*. Gavin Flood (ed.). Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing. pp. 376-392.

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navagraha>

<http://www.webonautics.com/mythology/navagraha.html>

http://www.hindunet.org/god/planet_deities

<http://www.hindunet.com/multimedia/digiprayers/navagraha/>

<http://www.sanskrit.org/www/Hindu%20Primer/navagrahas.html>

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