

The Eastern Window

by Penny Farrow

Editor's Note: Cross ventilation produces a breath of fresh air. It is desirable in a house and even in a magazine! In this spirit, we are featuring a series of short articles designed to make some of the basic building blocks and ideas of Vedic astrology more accessible to all. We anticipate that opening the Eastern Window can clarify the complementarity between great astrological traditions.

Meet the Fascinating Wives of the Moon

What an exciting and varied life the Moon has! Every month, he gets to spend a night with each one of his 27 wives. Talk about variety being the spice of life! It's quite a feat keeping them all happy, and, truth to tell, he was almost done in by some heavy-duty jealousy — but more on that later.

The ancients had their own version of mobile devices: the relentless movement of the heavenly bodies. The *grahas* (planets) moved in ways that tirelessly created unique patterns, yet there was a fundamental order and intelligence that could be discerned through patient observation. And every night was show time.

Not surprisingly, the “star” of the show was the Moon. Master of shape-shifting and fond of playing peek-a-boo, the fast-moving Moon yielded the secrets of that underlying order more clearly than did the Sun. When the Sun moved through the zodiacal constellations, its position could be inferred but not actually seen, as the starry field is

not visible in the daytime. So, it was the Moon's recurring journey through that same circle of stars that established the zodiacal wheel that served as the basis of direct observation.

In an effort to pinpoint the daily position of the Moon, Indian astrologers noticed that the Moon passed through (or close to) smaller clusters of stars within the constellations. In the Vedas, the ancient scriptures said to be the cognitions of great seers, the Moon's movement in the heavens

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was only charted with respect to these smaller star clusters or asterisms. Their integration into the twelve *rashis* (solar signs) came later. These asterisms were known as *nakshatras*. There are sev-

eral ways to parse this word, but the most common meaning is “that which does not decay.” Though the Moon is ever changing, the *nakshatras* are ever constant.

There are 27 *nakshatras*. Just as 360° divided by 12 = 30° per *rashi*, so 360° divided by 27 = $13^\circ 20'$ per *nakshatra*. All of the *grahas* are viewed as moving against this backdrop of fixed star groups, as observed on Earth (geocentric observation).

Like the *rashis*, these smaller clusters (some only a single star) were distinct enough that they provided a way to track the average daily $13^\circ 20'$ movement of the Moon. Therefore, the notion of the Moon having 27 wives, each of whom he visited for one night every month, is a metaphor for the Moon passing through these 27 very distinct asterisms within the zodiacal wheel.

Rich meanings are gleaned from how these *nakshatras* actually look and what their Sanskrit name actually means, much as the solar signs are characterized by their shapes and symbols. The *nakshatra* Chitra is the star Spica, a single star with an apparent magnitude of 0.97, making it the brightest star that is also very close to the ecliptic (at $2^\circ 50'$ ecliptic latitude). Translations of the word *chitra* include “bright, clear, sparkling.” Referred to as a shining jewel, Chitra sits at an ecliptic longitude of 0° Libra (or 30° Virgo) and is thus widely used as the marker star in the sidereal system that points to

0° Aries — a place in the heavens that has no such distinguishing feature.

In addition to the way the star group looks and its Sanskrit name and meaning, each nakshatra is also associated with a Vedic deity. These deities are featured in a myriad of stories that provide significantly more resources for generating a portfolio of meanings. The Moon and any other graha that is influenced by proximity to these marker stars, either natively or by transit, will likely project some of these themes onto the life of the native.

Traditionally, the Moon's nakshatra was the most emphasized for descriptions of the native; indeed, even the name of the native was determined by the nakshatra that the Moon was in at birth. Every degree in the zodiac correlates with one of the nakshatras, and

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an ingenious correspondence between the nakshatras and the phonemes of the Sanskrit alphabet facilitated choosing a name that emphasized that phoneme. So, even if a birth time was not available, the chart could be erected on the basis of the native's name, which correlated to the nakshatra position of their natal Moon.

Since the condition of the Moon is such an important indicator in a Vedic chart, close examination of it is a must. A primary factor in the Moon's condition is its brightness, its phase with respect to the waxing/waning cycle. The radiance of a Full Moon (Purnima Moon) is highly auspicious, but the dark New Moon creates problems, especially affecting the primal or emotional mind



(the *manas*). How this cyclical fluctuation from New to Full and back again came to be told is one of the most charming tales of the nakshatras, so let's conclude with that story.

According to tradition, the Moon married 27 daughters of Daksha, a son of the creator Lord Brahma and a king in his own right. The Moon promised to treat each daughter fairly and do his conjugal duty by each. Two of the daughters were twins. One was named Rohini (the bright star Aldebaran in Taurus), and the other was Jyeshtha (Antares, the heart of the Scorpion). These stars, being twins, occupy exactly the same degree of ecliptic longitude — 15°55' Taurus and Scorpio, respectively — on opposite sides of the zodiac.

Jyeshtha soon noticed the Moon's great affection for her beautiful twin Rohini, even though Jyeshtha herself is equally bright and beautiful. In his defense, the Moon is exalted in Taurus and debilitated in Scorpio, so who could blame him for his partiality? However, agitated by jealousy, Jyeshtha riled

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up her other sisters, and they went en masse to their father with their grievances regarding this partiality.

Since favoritism was a violation of the Moon's promise, the law-abiding Daksha promptly cursed his son-in-law, who began to wane and die. This completely freaked out the wives who protested, "Oh, no! No! We didn't want you to kill him! Just make him treat us all equally." Daksha told them that a curse once pronounced is hard to undo and sent them to see Lord Brahma.

Off they went to see if the curse could be removed. Like the Lilac Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*, Brahma was only able to modify the curse but not remove it altogether. He told the sisters, "Yes, your husband must wane and die. However, I will bring him back to life, and he will grow and increase in luster and beauty. But he must then suffer the same fate, and so it shall be every month for all time."

The moral of the story? Be careful what you wish for!

Author's Note: Please watch for the next column, which will feature a few examples of how the nakshatras show up in the lives of some famous people.

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