

Ashtamangala Deva Prasna

by Shyamasundara Dasa ACBSP

On the morning of July 23, 1982 I found myself outside a Durga temple on the outskirts of Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, South India. I was gathered with six of the most learned astrologers of the area, including my teacher Krishnan Potti, an author (in Malayalam) of over a dozen books on astrology, to do Ashtamangala Deva Prasna.

The setting was lush with many fruit-bearing coconut and banana trees as well as the heady and intoxicating aroma of Champaka and Jasmine flowers. Incense wafted in the breeze outside as everyone in attendance: the temple managers, brahmanas, pujari, and local congregation waited for the astrologers to begin the Ashtamangala Deva Prasna (hence forth ADP), a specialty of what could be called the Kerala school of astrology. Ashtamangala is a method of numerology and Deva Prasna is a special kind of Prasna specifically dealing with temple matters. Both are explained in that encyclopedic treatise Prasna Marga (the path of horary astrology). However, as I was soon to discover, successful ADP required more than knowledge of these two subjects. Success depended on a thorough knowledge of all the principles of Prasna Marga , plus a high degree of intelligence, great powers of observation, and keen intuition stemming from spiritual practices and an austere, pure lifestyle. Because the subject of Prasna was a temple and the presiding devata, only the very best astrologers were called upon to conduct the Prasna. By having several scholarly astrologers present it was expected that mistakes would be minimized, and that what one astrologer might miss another would pick up on.

This was not my first ADP. On my previous stay of 18 months, in 1977-78, I had begun my study of astrology in Hyderabad and was then asked to take it up as my full-time service to my guru. I had first began to study Prasna in this, my second, sojourn in India (1980-83). I had been studying Jataka (natal astrology) in Calcutta with Harihar Majumdar, a leading, elderly, scholar and the author of Hindu Science of the Future (as well as many books in Bengali). I strongly desired to become a well rounded astrologer and I knew from my studies that there were six limbs to astrology, not just Jataka, but unfortunately I had found no astrologers in North India who knew Prasna. I knew, from my reading, that Prasna and other branches of astrology were well preserved in South India. Thus after I finished my studies with my teacher and gave him his daksina (donation for teaching me) I headed south to Bangalore in May of 1981 armed with a letter of introduction from Y. Keshava Menon (president of the Calcutta astrological association and regular contributor

to The Astrological Magazine) to Dr. B.V. Raman.

I had just read Dr. Raman's translation of Prasna Marga and I hoped that he would be able to guide me to a good teacher of this art. Dr. Raman kindly consented to see me but threw a wet blanket on my dreams by telling me that it would be practically impossible for me to find a good teacher of Prasna. (Good scholars of astrology are rare," he said, "of these, those that could teach were rarer still; and of these, those who had time to teach a neophyte like me were even more rare. And out of all of these astrologers one who could speak English was the rarest of them all.")

I was undaunted and determined to prove him wrong but I soon found that he had not spoken lightly. Eventually, after many months of tireless searching and meeting countless astrologers I finally found two sources for in-depth knowledge of Prasna: a family of Jain astrologers in Bangalore headed by the late B.G. Sasikantha Jain, who practiced Bhrgu Prasna. And Krishnan Potti the scholar of Prasna Marga . Convincing Sasikantha Jain to teach me took me over 10 months, but that's another story. And while Krishnan Potti readily agreed to teach me there was a little problem, actually two: he lived in a very beautiful, but rather remote, hilly area, outside of Trivandrum with no access by bus or taxi; and he didn't speak English. The first problem I solved by learning to drive a motor-cycle. A simple feat you may think but considering that there are practically no enforceable traffic laws in India and that road obstacles include, but are not limited to: chickens, hogs, dogs, camels, asses, goats, cows, buffaloes and the occasional elephant (and their dung, chicken dung is no problem but I once ran into a soccer-ball sized lump of elephant dung, at twilight, at about 30 mph, it was like hitting a big lump of grease, I'm lucky to be alive), what to speak of throngs of people, buses, lorries (big trucks), cars, plus terrible road conditions, etc. Going for my astrology lessons meant to take my life in my own hands and I would fervently pray to Lord Nrsimhadeva for protection. The second problem was a bit more tricky. He didn't speak English and I didn't know Malayalam, the language of Kerala. However, though no Sanskrit scholar, I had a rather large Sanskrit vocabulary from studying Bhagavad-gita, Srimad-Bhagavatam and other Vedic literatures; ayurveda and of course my in-depth study of astrology in India. I found that as long as we spoke in Sanskrit about astrology I could readily follow what was being said and thus I passed more than a year studying with Krishnan Potti.

Though he lived in a remote area away from the city he had a steady stream of people who would show up for his advice. I wasn't his only student, he had several including a policeman, but I was special because I was a foreigner who had come so far, had taken up the Vedic lifestyle and was struggling so hard

to learn astrology. We handled all kinds of Prasnas but ADPs were special because these Prasnas necessitated that several scholarly astrologers gather at a venue away from their normal place of practice. Aside from this, ADPs required the use of nimitta (omens) and other special procedures that we shall presently describe. Because the ADPs involved many persons aside from my astrology guru the discussions were all in Malayalam, thus I arranged for a translator to accompany me for this day long affair, for I knew it would take up the whole morning and most of the afternoon with a break for lunch.

What follows is directly from my notes of that day (I urge all students of Prasna to keep notes and records of all Prasnas they do, I still keep notes). It would be impossible for me to include everything that was said and done in the (approximately) seven hour period necessary to conduct the Ashtamangala Deva Prasna, however we hope that the reader will be able to appreciate the mystical nature of the experience which, even for many students of Vedic astrology, will seem to border on magical . Countless experiences like this destroyed in my mind the mechanistic world view of modern science and permanently established the Vedic, God-centered, world view of Krsna Consciousness. As astrologers we are sometimes bound up in thinking that everything revolves around symbols drawn on a piece of paper. This limiting paradigm is shattered when we realize that everything in existence is a message from Sri Krsna if we only knew how to read them. An astrologer must always keep his eyes and ears open and be prepared to read everything that is happening during a crucial moment such as a Prasna.

The Ashtamangala Deva Prasna Begins

To begin the Ashtamangala Deva Prasna the astrologers first prepared a small, clean area of land and tidied it up and then covered it with a layer of raw rice. The questioners were asked to adorn it with a ghee lamp, white flowers and other ornaments as well as offerings such as Tambula (Pan leaves and Betel nut) that the congregation of the temple offered. They then performed puja (worship) with devotion on all the articles that would be used in the process of divination and meditated on their istadevatas (personal patron deity) for the ability to predict correctly.

The astrologers then called on an official of the temple with little or no knowledge of astrology to come forward. They showed him a diagram of the zodiac as it is drawn in typical South Indian style and ask him to duplicate it on the prepared ground. Using a stick he carefully prepared the diagram by first drawing the Western line, then the Southern line, then Eastern and finally the Northern line. (In Prasna the directions of the diagram are such:

the side that has Aries and Taurus is East, Cancer and Leo is South, Libra and Scorpio is West, and Capricorn and Aquarius is North).

The pandits noted down very carefully the order that he drew them. One stated that because the priest drew the Western line first it was a highly inauspicious omen indicating that diseases (or general harm) would increase. And this was made worse because he had drawn the other lines in a counter clockwise order which indicated many serious obstacles ahead. In general these two things were looked upon as unfavorable omens. They then looked for any irregularities in the way the lines were drawn, that is, if they were thick or thin, broken, etc. But none were observed.

The astrologers then called on any young child not conversant with astrology who was recently bathed and well dressed to come forward. The adults pushed a child forward, the astrologers directed the child to worship the ghee lamp and other divinatory paraphernalia with flowers. They then placed in the child's right hand a piece of gold, along with flowers, water, sandal wood paste and aksata (rice mixed with turmeric). The child was then instructed to go around the Cakra of the zodiac and then stand near it facing east. In the mean time the questioner, the person who had called this convocation of astrologers, was instructed to be meditating on God to reveal His will. All the astrologers then reflected on the problems of the querist and repeated their mantras, and the one astrologer who would do the Ashtamangala was touching his cowry shells. At the end they asked the child to deposit the gold in any one of the signs that had previously been drawn by the priest. The child placed the handful in the square designating Virgo.

It should be noted that the above two processes, that of drawing the Cakra and choosing the Arudha Lagna, would be impossible using the North Indian format for drawing a chart. The North Indian format is based on houses not signs. For this and other reasons we recommend to students to use strictly the South Indian format, which evidence suggests is the original Vedic format. There is evidence to suggest that the North Indian format was introduced by Muslim conquerors who dominated North India for nearly 800 years.

This Swarna Lagna (gold ascendant), as it is also known, became the Arudha Lagna for the ADP. The Arudha Lagna is, as we have seen, chosen through a divinatory omen process directed by the will of Sri Krsna, much in the same way as other well known methods of divination such as Tarot and the I Ching. There are other ways of finding the Arudha Lagna, such as noting which part of the body the questioner is touching, the letter of the first sound they make, what spot on the ground (of an imaginary zodiac projected onto the ground) they are standing on when asking the question, etc. The exact time the Swarna

lagna was chosen was noted as 8:45 AM, thus the Udaya Lagna, the Lagna based on time, was Leo. The planetary positions at the time were fixed and the chart filled in with all the planets including Mandi, who is very significant in Kerala astrology and South India in general, but not much used in the North (planetary positions found at the end).

It should also be noted that there are some authors who never use Mandi in their practice of astrology but have put forward academic arguments concerning the proper way of calculating Mandi. Most modern computer programs that I have seen adopt these methods of calculation. However, when I wrote the Jyotish Vedic Program for Matrix Software, back in 1987, I used an algorithm that duplicated the methods of Prasna Marga and the Kerala tradition as I saw it practiced. This seemed more logical to me because these astrologers actually use Mandi on a daily basis, Mandi is not an academic abstraction to them.

The exact degree of the Arudha lagna was calculated by noting the degree of the Udaya Lagna. Since the Udaya Lagna was 12LE13 thus the degree of the Arudha Lagna would be 12VI13. Therefore the Arudha navamsa would then be the fourth navamsa corresponding to Cancer.

The position of the Swarna Lagna was then examined. The piece of gold was located in the middle of the square designating Virgo, however it was face down, on top of the aksata and flowers, it was also tilted and slanted toward the South. The astrologers declared this to be another bad omen indicative of death and other evils (if it actually meant death would have to be judged according to the whole picture).

While the Swarna Lagna was being chosen the head astrologer of the group, Krishnan Potti, did the first part of the Ashtamangala. This requires a little explanation; a major instrument for divination in Kerala are cowry shells which have been specially selected, cleaned, sanctified (generally by chanting of mantras and bathing in the waters of the Ganges or other sacred rivers) and used only for divination. In less complex types of Prasna, that is other than Deva Prasna, the Arudha lagna is often found by manipulation of the cowries alone. For divination 108 cowries are used. To do the first part of the Ashtamangala the astrologer first touches the cowries while meditating on his mantra and asking for spiritual guidance. Then the astrologer arbitrarily divides the shells into three piles, one to his left, one in front of him and one to the right. After examining the Swarna Lagna Krishnan Potti did the second part of the Ashtamangala by going to each pile of cowries and counting off multiples of eight (ashta) and keeping the remainder, if the remainder is zero then let it be eight. You will now have a three digit number in which no

digit is greater than eight. The digits represent past, present and future respectfully from left to right. 1=Sun, 2=Mars, 3=Jupiter, 4=Mercury, 5=Venus, 6=Saturn, 7=Moon, 8=Rahu. (This is simplified, they also represent other things as well.) Odd numbers are considered good, even numbers bad. The Ashtamangala number that was obtained for the Prasna was 8 3 1 ruled by Rahu, Jupiter and the Sun respectfully. Though it seemed clear to me that 831 indicated that the past was bad, the present and future looked good. However the assembled scholars claimed that this was not actually the case. They said that because the numbers were in a descending order from left to right this indicated that the past was good, the present was bad and the future would be worse. Other parts of the reading seemed to confirm this observation on their part.

After this the ghee lamp was lit and the flame was observed to lean toward the South, this was again declared to be an evil omen. Just then one of the astrologers stated that the deity must have been moved at least twice before being established in the present temple. The temple managers replied that this was true and wanted to know why he had said that? The astrologer said this was so because he had noted that the ghee lamp had been placed near the worship area but then picked up and moved twice before the Prasna started.

The astrologers then examined the Tambula (Pan leaves) that was offered for worship. These Tambula represent the 12 houses of the Deva Prasna chart and the conditions of these houses can be determined by the condition of the leaves. Before we interpret the meaning of the leaves we will take opportunity to give, in synopsis, the special meaning of the 12 houses in Deva Prasna:

- 1: Temple building, murti (likeness of the deity), and divine presence of the deity in the murti.
- 2: Wealth, income, temple treasures and guardians.
- 3: The naivedya (offerings made) and servants.
- 4: All buildings and land connected with the temple as well temple vehicles.
- 5: Murti and divine presence (again).
- 6: Pollution of the temple, enemies and thieves.
- 7: The people (congregation) and deity ornaments.
- 8: Divine presence, offerings, servants, and good and evil matters.

9: Nature of the temple authorities and the state of merit and piety.

10: Daily ceremonies (puja), special festivals and devalakas (persons involved in making garlands, and performance of musical entertainment, etc.)

11: Piety, merit, prosperity and income.

12: Nature of the priests, expenditure and waste.

In this case since there were only three Pan leaves (only the first three houses of the Deva Prasna chart could be examined by this method. The first representing the lagna had marks and cuts thus things have not been good up till now. The second was smaller than the others and had cuts, thus there were financial problems. The third was in much better shape so it declared those who served the temple were capable of doing good.)

The number of leaves were now used to determine the Tambula Lagna which is arrived at by the following formula $(T \times 10 + 1)/7$ where T is the number of Tambulas. Since $T=3$ when we substitute we get a remainder of three which represents Mars in the normal order of planets. Since Mars is in Libra this becomes the Tambula Lagna. Mars itself indicates that there have been strife and conflicts, and because it is Mars in Libra they deduced that the deity of the temple was the goddess Kali. Now that the preliminaries were over the readings and predictions based on the planetary positions started.

Since Rahu ruled over the first Ashtamangala number and he was in the 10th with Venus one astrologer declared that the temple must have been towards the East of the present place in a location occupied by a naga (special race of serpent gods endowed with mystical powers and often irritable). This was admitted by the temple mangers.

Since Mars had only just transited into Libra one astrologer dared to say that in the past there must have been an accidental fire in the temple. Affirmative was the response. They were now on a roll.

Another astrologer pointed out that Rahu and Venus in the 10th also indicated that someone must have died from poison nearby and the ghost was still lingering in the vicinity. We were told that in the past a child had taken poison and died in the compound.

It should be noted that up to this time we were not informed why the ADP was taking place, of course we could surmise there was trouble but had no details.

But as the ADP proceeded the details started to come out. At this point the original question of the querist is finally revealed by the astrologers. One astrologer said that because Saturn is in the Arudha Lagna they want to know why has Durga devi (goddess of the material world) left the temple? The people agree that indeed, this is their question. The reason she has left, the astrologers say, is because the rules of conduct were not properly observed: entry into the temple of impure people such as person's who had a recent death in their family or women during their period, etc.

Since the Arudha Lagna is Virgo it was deduced that the land is owned by the ladies of the family by special arrangement. This was also confirmed to be true.

The astrologers agree that since Mars is the mahabadaka and Jupiter is the samanyabadaka for Virgo (Raman, 1980 pp. 545-547) are in the 2nd house and since Ketu is in Virgo navamsa, this same Virgo being the Arudha Lagna, then some other person must have also died. This dead person (along with poisoned child) having no shelter came to this temple and have contaminated the place. The temple managers admit that indeed another person did die, a family member died nearby by a fall from a tree.

The astrologers continue that since Jupiter is the badaka conjoined with Mars significator of land, and this same Jupiter is aspecting Venus then the land the temple is on was previously owned and that now a ghost of a fallen brahmana is haunting the place. They also claim that from the symptoms they conclude that Bhadrakali, the ferocious form of Durga, has also manifested and is covering over Durga. The temple managers have to remove Bhadrakali and leave only Durga.

After examining all the houses of the Deva Prasna the astrologers concluded that because of Ketu in the 4th and 4th lord Jupiter afflicted, the temple should be reconstructed. That conclude that some theft has taken place. And that the decorations in the temple are non-existent. And that the affliction to 10th and 12th house indicate much improvement necessary in regards to the priestly functioning in the temple. They also recommend on the basis of the condition of the 8th house that they should make special offering and worship to pacify the deity.

Several questions are asked regarding what exactly should be done to pacify the deity and remove Bhadrakali. Suggestions for remedies were proposed. To determine if a proposed suggestion would work the astrologers would consult the cowries for a yes or no answer. After posing the question and the proposed solution Krishnan Potti would meditate and then take a handful of cowries.

Then counting off multiples of twelve he would arrive at a number, if the remainder was zero then it was considered to be 12. This number represented a new Arudha Lagna, if Jupiter was found to be in a trine or quadrant from this new Arudha Lagna the answer was "yes" (otherwise it was "no"). In this way for several hours various strategies were tried to find a solution to the temple's problems.

As we have seen from this one example the system of Vedic Prasna as preserved in Kerala is a very powerful method. To master it requires a lot of hard work, training and above all faith in Sri Krsna. Great faith is necessary because we are conditioned to think in a mechanistic way, we must go beyond that and understand that from a spiritual perspective everything in conscious and is being controlled by God. The process of divination allows us to carry on a dialog with God through apparently inanimate objects or chance occurrences. This dialog can only be accomplished if we train and purify our intelligence, mind and senses, through study of appropriate texts; as well as a sattvika, brahminical and pure lifestyle based on the teachings of the Vedas.

Planetary Positions (Lahiri ayanamsa)

July 23, 1982, at 8:45 AM, IST, Trivandrum, India, 76E55, 08N29

Rasi	Navamsa
Arudha Lagna	12VI13 AR
Udaya Lagna	12LE13 CA
Sun	06CA21 LE
Moon	08LE44 GE
Mars	00LI08 LI
Mercury	03CA46 LE
Jupiter	07LI46 SA
Venus	09GE21 SA
Saturn	22VI52 CA
Rahu	19GE39 PI
Ketu	19SA39 VI
Mandi	12LE17 CA

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The author:

Shyamasundara Dasa has been a disciple of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada since 1976. He began his study of Vedic astrology in 1977 and spent 5 years in India studying several branches of astrology with masters of the subject. Shyamasundara Dasa is a pioneer of Vedic astrology in the West. In 1979 he completed the first Vedic astrology software. In 1983 he wrote the first Vaisnava (Vedic) lunar calendar computer program which has become the official calendar for ISKCON (International Society for Krsna Consciousness) worldwide. His 3rd generation astrology software was published by Matrix Software in 1988 under the title Jyotish Vedic Astrology program. It was the number one program for many years and used by most of today's Vedic astrologers. In 1987 he organized the 3rd annual Vedic Astrology conference sponsored by Matrix software. In 1996 he completed writing a series of courses for the Vedic astrology syllabus of the Florida Vedic College (FVC). The FVC is recognized by the state of Florida (and thus the whole USA and the world) as a degree granting institution. The FVC is the only institution of higher learning in the West offering degree courses in Vedic astrology.