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Lunar Constellations (*Nakṣatras*) and Name Giving Tradition in Ancient India

Abstract

The present paper examines the textual evidence, mainly the late Vedic codifications of the domestic rituals *Gṛhya sūtras* and Hindu religious and legal duties *Dharma śāstras*, related to the name giving tradition in ancient India. Issues are addressed: why according to tradition a brāhmaṇa should have two names, and why one of these names should be the *nakṣatra* (lunar constellation) name? How the secret (*guhya*) stellar name was chosen? How name giving practices are related to the concept of the sacred speech in Indian religious culture? The historical and textual analysis of the Sanskrit sources, besides of the historical approach to religious studies shall be applied as the principal methodological tools. Conclusion is made that the Indian name derived from the nakṣatra was vitally connected with the of the individual and his super-personal power lying behind, and kept secret less enemies may do mischief to the man through it. The adoption of a second, secret name was assumed also for success and distinction in life.

Keywords: India, person's name, Vedic religion, lunar constellations, home rituals, astronomy, initiation, calendar

Naming a child is considered to be sacred and therefore is a very important religious practice in Hindu tradition. The habit of naming the child according to its birth star (*nakṣatra*) reaches the oldest times. Even today there is some secrecy in the Indian name-giving practice. For example, D.D. Sharma's book entitled *Panorama of Indian Anthroponomy* provides a list of the latest trends and fancies of the selection and coinage of names by different Indian castes, communities and regions.[1] Hindus very early realized the importance of naming persons and elevated the act to the position of a religious sacrament or *rite de passage* (*saṃskāras*). Hindu theologians define *saṃskāra* as a rite that prepares a person for a function by imparting new qualities and/or by removing taints. Thus *saṃskāra* is a ritualistic passing through a door or archway, hence the term *liminal* (from the Latin *limen*, "threshold") experience. The main purposes of religious sacraments, including name giving, in general lines could be summarized as: the integration of a person into the social and cosmic structures; the spiritual purification and removal of hostile influence; attraction of favorable influences; gaining the material aims and benefits; and ritualistic expression of the householder's joys, felicitations and even sorrows at the various events of life.

From the earliest period of Indian culture, speech, which may be rendered as 'the Word' has always been considered as essential, as of divine origin and has remained at its very center. Refering to the active conception of language in Indian civilisation, where speech is energy, famous scholar of Vedic studies Frits J. Stall once even remarked that, in India, "Language is not something with which you *name* something, but in general something with which you *do* something".[2] Thus, the name becomes a way of acting, kind of a spiritual power. Almost the same is pointed out by another Indologist Thomas J. Hopkins:

> Sanskrit words were not just arbitrary labels assigned to phenomena; they were the sound forms of object, actions, and attributes, related to the corresponding reality in the same way as visual forms, and different only in being perceived by the ear and not by the eye.[3]

Since Vedic times astronomical considerations have become major determinant in the timing of religious festivals and naming a child and very significant role in that has played lunar constellations.[4] The Sanskrit word *nakṣatra* ("lunar constellation", "asterism") has

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[1]   D[ipankar] D. Sharma, *Panorama of Indian anthroponomy: An historical, socio-cultural and linguistic analysis of Indian personal names*, New Delhi 2005.

[2]   See: Frits J. Stall, 'Oriental Ideas on the Origin of Language', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99 (1979), p. 9.

[3]   Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, Encino, California 1971, p. 20.

[4]   For traditional astronomical/astrological calculation of the Solar, Lunar, planetary and seasonal festival's time see: S.K. Chatterjee, *Indian Calendric System*, [no place] 1998; also Karen L. Merrey, 'The Hindu Festival Calendar', in: *Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka*, ed. Guy R. Welbon and Glenn E. Yocum, New Delhi 1982, pp. 1–26.

been used in three senses: star in general, 27 or 28 parts of Zodiac; and lunar asterism in the Zodiacal belt, which may each consist of one or more stars. The first and third are the most frequent meanings of the word in the Vedic literature. The term itself is mentioned several times in *Ṛgveda saṃhitā* (I.50.2; II.54.19; VII.8601; X.111.7; X.85.2), but more often means a star in general. While mentioning some *nakṣatra* names (Tiṣya, Maghā, Mṛgaśiras, Punarvasū, Śatabhiṣak) the *Ṛgveda* does not provide a full list of lunar constellations.[5]

The earliest text, *Taittīriya saṃhitā* (IV.4.10.1–3) gives the names of twenty-seven nakṣatras in sequence and of the presiding deity of each; this information with further mythological references is found also in two passages of the *Taittīriya brāhmaṇa* (I.5 and III.1.4–5). The other early lists of *nakṣatras* are those of the *Atharvaveda* (XIX.7,2–5) *Kāṭhaka saṃhitā* (XXXIX.13) and *Maitrāyaṇī saṃhitā* (II.13,20). The nakṣatras are named after a prominent star or asterism in the respective portion of the Zodiac, but these names differ in the various lists.[6] In this list, which is always in Vedic literature headed by the Kṛttikās (the Pleiades) in the East and enumerated to Apaharaṇī, each *nakṣatra* is associated with a ruling deity, gender, food and number of *muhūrtas* in the unequal-space *nakṣatra* system. Besides of Vedic sources, the list of *nakṣatras*, number of stars and presiding deities is provided in some mytho-historical chronicles, *Purāṇas* (*Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa* I.83.13–21; I.88.4–7) and early divinational encyclopedia *Bṛhat saṃhitā* of Varāhamihira (5th CE). What is important - that almost all of the Indian names of nakṣatra are significant or have ancient legends connected with them. The *nakṣatras* were closely concerned not merely in a religious rite called *nakṣatreṣṭi*, but they were of prime importance in the so called *śrauta* (public) rituals, for example, consecration of the sacred fires (*Agnyādhāna*).

All prognostications in very early Vedic times were based on *nakṣatras* either of birth or on *nakṣatras* deemed auspicious (*puṇya*) or inauspicious (*pāpa*). To regard the time when the Moon conjoins with a particular *nakṣatra* as propitious or unpropitious for performing certain acts was an ancient custom in India. Eventually a separate science developed that

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[5]   Hermann Grassmann in his *Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda* has provided a list of 10 instances of *nakṣatra* names mentioned in *Ṛgveda*: VI.67.6; VII.81.2; VII.86.1; X.84.13; X.111.7; X.156.4; I.50.2; X.68.11; III.54.19; X.85.2. See: Hermann Grassmann, *Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda*, Delhi 1999, pp. 704–705.

[6]   A more detailed comparative table of *naksatras* mentioned in early Vedic texts is given by Pandurang V. Kane in his *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Poona 1994, vol. V, part 1, pp. 501–504. P.V. Kane in his study divides the history of astrological and astronomical literature in Sanskrit into three slightly overlapping periods. According to him, the first period is that of the Vedic *Saṃhitās* and the *Brāhmaṇas* from the mists of antiquity to about 800 BCE. The second period is represented by the *Vedāṅga Jyotiṣa*, the *Śrauta, Gṛhya* and *Dharma sūtras*, *Manu, Yājñavalkya* and *Garga smṛtis*, Jaina works like *Sūryaprajñapti* and ended about the 3rd century CE. The third period begins at the commencement of the Common era and is represented by the works called *Siddhānta* and gave rise to the works of Aryabhaṭa (born 476 CE), of Varāhamihira (born about 475 to 550 CE), Brahmagupta (born in 598 CE) and so on. (p. 484.) However, he totally ignored the evident influence which astrological methods of Greeks and Arabs/Persians made on Indian astrosciences. See, for instance: Audrius Beinorius, 'On the Intercourse between Indian and the Arabic / Persian Astrology', *British Archeological Reports: Stars and Stones: Voyages in Archaeoastronomy and Cultural Astronomy*, ed. F. Pimenta, N. Ribeiro, F. Silva, N. Campion, A Joaquinito and L. Tirapicos, Oxford 2015, pp. 130–136.

used this notion of auspicious and inauspicious time-units, in combination with omens and planetary conjunctions (*yogas*), to establish the correct time for initiating various kinds of actions. This is the science of *muhūrta* corresponding to Hellenistic catarchic (electional) astrology.[7] In Indian treatises on catarchic astrology great importance is given to deciding the time for performing the religious sacraments (*saṃskāras*) and other ritual acts, and this aspect of *muhūrta* strongly influenced, many treatises of socio-religious normatives (*dharmaśāstras*) which are entirely or partially devoted to this kind of prediction.

Taittīriya saṃhitā	**Atharvaveda**	**Meaning**	**Deity (according to *Ṛgveda jyotiṣa* 5–26. and *Yajurveda jyotiṣa* 36.40)**
1. *Kṛttikā* (pl.)	*Kṛttikās* (pl.)	cutters (?) knife (?)	Agni
2. *Rohiṇī*	*Rohiṇī*	ruddy	Prajāpati
3. *Mṛgaśirṣa*	*Mṛgaśiras*	deer's head	Soma
4. *Ardrā*	*Ardrā*	moist, wet	Rudra
5. *Punarvasū* (dual)	*Punarvasū* (dual)	two that are good again	Aditi
6. *Tiṣya*	*Puṣya*	auspicious, nourishing	Bṛhaspati
7. *Aśreṣās* (pl.)	*Aśleṣās*	entwiners	Sarpā
8. *Maghās* (pl.)	*Maghās*	mighty ones	Pitara
9. *Phalgunyau* (dual)	*Phalgunyau* (dual)	---	Bhaga
10. *Phalgunyau* (dual)	---	---	Aryaman
11. *Hasta*	*Hasta*	hand	Savitṛ
12. *Citrā*	*Citrā*	brilliant	Tvaṣṭā
13. *Svātī*	*Svāti*	sword	Vāyu
14. *Viśākhe* (dual)	*Viśākhe* (dual)	two with spreading branches	Indrāgni
15. *Anurādhā*	*Anurādhā*	success	Mitra
16. *Rohiṇī*	*Jyeṣṭhā*	ruddy, eldest	Indra
17. *Vicṛtau* (dual)	*Mūla*	two releasers, root	Nirṛti
18. *Aṣāḍhās* (pl.)	*Pūrvā Aṣāḍhās* (pl.)	unsubdued	Āpah
19. *Aṣāḍhās* (pl.)	*Uttarā Aṣāḍhās* (pl.)	unsubdued	Viśvedevā
20. ---	*Abhijit*	conquering	---
21. *Śroṇā*	*Śravaṇa*	lame, ear	Viṣṇu
22. *Śraviṣṭhā*	*Śraviṣṭhās* (pl.)	most famous	Vasu
23. *Śatabhiṣaj*	*Śatabhiṣaj*	having 100 physicians	Varuṇa
24. *Proṣṭhapadās* (pl.)	*Proṣṭhapadā*	having ox feet	Ajaikapāda
25. *Proṣṭhapadās* (pl.)	*Proṣṭhapadā*	having ox feet	Ahirbudhnya
26. *Revatī*	*Revatī*	wealthy	Pūṣan
27. *Aśvayujau* (dual)	*Aśvayujau* (dual)	two horsemen	Aśvinī
28. *Apabharaṇis* (pl.)	*Bharaṇyas* (pl.)	bearers	Yama

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[7]   David Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and mathematical literature*, Wiesbaden 1981, p. 101.

The *nakṣatra* calendar constitutes a very likely case of adaptation by the Vedic Aryans of a Harappan cultural trait involving astrology. There is no mention of the lunar asterisms of this calendar in the Iranian sources, nor in the early parts of the *Ṛgveda*. The first clear references to the *nakṣatra* calendar are in the late *Ṛgvedic* marriage hymn (RV 10.85.2;13). The *nakṣatra* calendar, then, was probably not brought into India by the Vedic Aryans.

In *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* (VIII.80.9), invocation to god Indra, we read "when you give us a fourth name connected with the [performance of] sacrifice we long for it, immediately afterwards you became our lord". The famous exegete Sāyaṇa (14th century CE) in his extensive commentaries on *Ṛgveda* explains these four names thus: one derived from the nakṣatra at birth, the second a secret name, the third a publicly known one and the fourth an epithet like *Somayājī* (due to one is having performed a *Soma* sacrifice). The practice of giving three names is in accordance with the recommendation of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (VI.41.3.9): "therefore when a son is born [the father] should bestow on him a name, thereby he drives away the evil (*pāpman*) that might attach to the boy; [the father gives] even a second, even a third [name]". In the same text after recommending the consecration of fires (*agnyādhāna*) on the constellation *Phalgunī* it is said that they are the nakṣatras presided over by Indra, that Arjuna is the secret name (*guhya-nāma*) of Indra and that the *Phalgunī* stars are called *Arjunis* in an indirect (or esoteric) way. Even *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* briefly describes secret name giving ceremony, telling that a secret name is a Veda: "Then he [father] gives him a name: 'you are Veda', that is his secret name" (*athāsya nāma karoti vedo 'sīti, tad asyaitad guhyam eva nāma bhavati* – VI.4.26).

The earliest systematic expositions of ancient Indian name-giving sacraments (*nāmakaraṇa*) contain the *Gṛhya sūtras*, the domestic rules, treating the rites of passage, connected with simple offerings into the domestic fire, and dated roughly 500 BCE.[8] The *Gṛhya sūtras* of *Āgniveṣya, Hiraṇyakeśin* and *Bhāradvāja*, all belonging to the *Taittīriya* school, prescribe that two names should be given at the rite of name-giving. They specify that the second name should be the *nakṣatra* name and that one of these two names should be kept secret while the other one should be used when addressing the person.[9] In *Jaiminīya Gṛhya sūtras* (1.9: 8,8) the specifications concerning the name giver in the name-giving ceremony include the rule that the name should be formed after the *nakṣatra* (of the child's birth – *anunakṣatram*), after the deity (presiding over the birth *nakṣatra* – *anudaivatam*), or after the names (current in the child's family – *anunāma*). That the deity meant is indeed the deity presiding over the child's birth asterism (e.g. name Āgneya for one who was born under Kṛttikā asterism) is suggested by the ritual context. In *Jaiminīya Gṛhya sūtras* it is prescribed that in the name giving ritual and on the birthdays of the boy, the father should make a sacrificial libation of ghee to

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[8]   More on domestic rituals see: Jan Gonda, *The Ritual Sūtras*, Wiesbaden 1977.

[9]   dve nāmanī kuryad; vijñāyate ca tasmād dvināma brāhmaṇo 'rdhuka īti; nakṣatra nāma dvitīyam syāt; anyatarad guhyaṃ syād, anyatarenainam āmantrayeran – *Taittīriya Saṃhitā*, 4:3.1.3.

the nakṣatra, to the deity of the nakṣatra and to the *tithi* – the lunar day of the boy's birth.[10] The *Āpastamba gṛhya sūtra* (VI.15.1–3 and 8–11) similarly prescribes that on the birth of a son the father indicates the nakṣatra name which is kept secret (*nakṣatranām ca nirdiśati, tad rahasyaṃ bhavati*). The *Hiraṇyakeśi gṛhya sūtra* (II.4.13) gives some explanation: "For it is known, therefore, a brāhmaṇa who has two names has success".

In the whole of the Vedic literature hundreds of names occur, but there is hardly any name of the teacher or well-known person derived directly from *nakṣatra*. It appears therefore that in ancient times the *nakṣatra* name was really a secret name and so we do not find it mentioned in most of the Vedic texts. Gradually however names derived from *nakṣatras* became very common and ceased to be used as secret names. Several centuries preceding the Common era, names derived from nakṣatras were very prominent. The famous Indian grammarian Pāṇini, who is generally assumed to have lived in the 5th century BCE, in his *Aṣṭādhyāyī* ("Eight Chapters" – treatise on Sanskrit grammar) gives elaborate rules concerning the formation of proper names from the names of the asterisms, explicitly mentioning several of them himself. He says that names of males are derived from Śraviṣṭhā, Phalgunī, Anurādhā, Svāti, Tiṣya, Punarvasu, Hasta, Aṣāḍhā and Bahulā (i.e. Kṛttikā) without adding any termination in the sense of "born on". (Pāṇini, 4.3.34–37; 8.23.100).[11] We do have some known examples: in the *Junāgaḍh* inscription of ruler Rudradāman (150 CE) we are told the brother-in-law of Maurya king Candragupta was vaiśya named Puṣyagupta. This is a name derived from the nakṣatra Puṣya and used in the 4th century BCE. We know that the founder of Suṅga dynasty was Senāpati Puṣyamitra. The *Mālavikāgnimitra* also mentions him and so does grammarian Patañjali in his commentaries on Pāṇini (3.2.123)

There are also some interesting examples of Buddhist names derived from nakṣatras. We have well-known Pāli name of a monk Moggaliputra Tissa from the early Buddhist period, in which a family (*gotra*) and nakṣatra name (*Tiṣya*) are both combined. A wandering monk (*parivrājaka*) Poṭṭhapāda (asterism Proṣṭhapāda) occurs in *Dīgha Nikāya* (I.187; III.1). In the Sāñci inscriptions of the 3rd century BCE we have such names as Asāḍa (from Aṣāḍhā), Phaguna (from Phalgunī), Svātiguta (from Svāti), Pusarakhita (from Puṣya). In the Palitana plate of king Dhruvasena I (dated about 529 CE) there is a brāhmaṇa named Viśākha. In the plates of king Śivarāja (dated 602 CE) we find such names as Puṣyasvāmi, Rohiṇīsvāmi, Jyeṣṭasvāmi, and Revatisvāmi.[12]

At the same time, the orthodox Brahmanism disapproved the astral names for the girl. For instance, one of the most influential *Dharmaśāstra* text (a genre of Sanskrit texts that refers to the Indic branch of learning, pertaining to *dharma* – Hindu religious and legal duties, dated around 200 BCE), *Manu smṛti* recommends that "one should

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[10] kumārayajñeṣu ca nakṣatram nakṣatradaivatam tithim iti yajate – *Jaiminīya Gṛhya sūtra*, 1.9:8.9.

[11] See: V.S. Agrawala, *India as known to Pāṇini*, Varanasi 1963, 183f; 189f. Also: Bhat M. Ramakrishna, 'Astrological Elements in Pāṇini', in: *MM Professor Kuppuswami Sastri Birth Centenary Commemoration Volume*, Part 2, Madras 1985, pp. 199–208.

[12] See more such examples collected by Pandurang V. Kane, 'Naming a Child or a Person', *The Indian Historical Quarterly* XIV, 2 (1938), pp. 236–237.

not marry a girl who bears a name which is the name of nakṣatra, a tree, a river…" (III.9). A similar opinion is expressed in the *Kāmasūtra* (III.1.12), *Āpastamba Gṛhyasūtra* (I.3.12–13), *Baudhāyana Gṛhyaśeṣasūtra* (II.3.5), and the *Āgniveśya Gṛhyasūtra* (I.6.1). This is indeed a highly curious and significant contradiction. The most probable reason seems to be that such names were common among the non-Aryan peoples with whom the Aryans were not willing to form matrimonial relations. And Brahmanic lawgivers, including *Manu smṛti*, expressly forbade the marriage of a man of the higher castes with a girl named after constellations, as it was taken to indicate aboriginal parentage. In course of time the Aryans themselves adopted the native convention which became quite common. Asko Parpola might be correct by suggesting, that the inclusion of girls with names denoting low castes and foreign tribes in the list of disapproved brides indeed speaks strongly for a pre-Vedic, non-Aryan Indian origin of the nakṣatra names.

Nakṣatranāma was of importance in the performance of Vedic sacrifices. The *Vedāṅga jyotiṣa* of *Ṛgveda* (verses 25–28) tells that in sacrifices the sacrificer is to bear a name derived from the name of the presiding deity of his nakṣatra. However, it seems that during the Vedic period the influence of the nakṣatras was not considered as ritually significant as in later periods. For example, though *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* recognizes the efficacy of certain nakṣatras for the timing of *agnyādheya* fires (II.1.2.1–11), another verse warns that timing one's sacrifices by the nakṣatras, rather than by the moon, is like attempting to "…enter a stronghold, when the gate is closed"[13].

A. Parpola's reseach on the Indus civilization and its script examines in detail the textual evidence relating to the astral proper names in India. He suggest, that astrology and astronomy occupied an important position in the Harappan religion and that Indus people had astral proper names.[14] The Indus script used in the northwester parts of the Indian subcontinent 2500–1800 BCE was forgotten soon after the collapse of the Harappan civilization. These are by far the oldest written documents surviving on the Indian subcontinent. The Harappan trade contacts with the Near East developed gradually and continued over many centuries. And it seems that such an intercourse exerted a considerable cultural influence upon the Indus civilization at large.[15] The texts engraved in Indus seals are likely to contain matters closely similar to the texts carved on the Mesopotamian seals at that time, which consist mainly of proper names and occupation titles. Most of the ancient Mesopotamian proper names are theophoric, that is, they include names of deities as their components, for example: 'servant of the Enlil', 'Enlil is great', 'Enlil is hero', and so on. In ancient Mesopotamia the star was the foremost symbol of divinity: in the cuneiform texts, for example, the pictogram of 'star' was regularly written in front of every divine name.

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[13] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, translated by Julius Eggeling according to the text of the Mādhandina School, 5 vol., SBE, Varanasi 1963, XI.1.1.1–3.

[14] Asko Parpola, 'Astral Proper Names in India: An Analysis of the oldest sources, with argumentation for an ultimately Harappan origin', *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 53 (1989), pp. 1–53.

[15] See: Asko Parpola, 'New correspondences between Harappan and Near Eastern glyptic art', *South Asian Archeology*, ed. B.A. Allchin, Cambridge 1981, pp. 178–195.

In the literary evidence the planetary gods do not clearly emerge before the end of the Vedic period, but this does not prove that they could not have had a long prehistory in India. According to Parpola, in personal names, different signs in a seals from Mohenjo-Daro might represent the planets of the natal horoscope. Also other astrological, astronomical or mythological relationships between the different planets may be involved as well. For example, as relations between Jupiter and Venus are described in *Mahābhārata*, or Mars and Mercury in *Rāmāyaṇa*. Both the Vedic and the Hindu religions know dual and even triadic deities.[16] In the Indian seals of the historical period, there are several name derived from the names of stars. As it is shown by K.K. Thaplyal, these include Dhruva 'firm, pole-star' (5 seals); Puṣya, the sixth nakṣatra (4 seals); Rohiṇī, the second nakṣatra; Revatī, the 26th nakṣatra; (names of ladies): Dhruva-devī and Dhruva-svāminī, 'lady, having the pole-star as her deity'.[17]

That the Harappans practiced astronomy indicates the orientation of the streets of the Indus cities according to the cardinal directions, because such an orientation is not possible without astronomical observation. As ancient sources display, in the Vedic ritual, these orientation methods were needed especially in constructing the elaborate fire altars built of bricks.[18]

On the other hand, astronomical evidence dates the nakṣatra calendar to about 2300 BCE. Thus the path plotted by the the lunar marking stars in the sky is closest to the celestrial horizon of the 24th century BCE Secondly, the first asterism of the nakṣatra calendar is the Pleiades (*Kṛttikā*) whose heliacal rise marked the beginning of the year at the vernal equinox in 2400 BCE.[19] This astronomical dating of the calendar coincides with the peak of the Indus civilization, which, like other early urban cultures, needed Luni-solar time reconing and, therefore, must have devised a star calendar.

> The Religion of the later Vedic texts is in many respects strikingly different from that of the oldest Ṛgvedic hymns in the 'family books'. The presence and absence of references to the lunar marking stars is just one of these differences. It seems to me that the radical change in the Vedic religion at this juncture is due to the mingling of Ṛgvedic Aryans with an earlier wave of Aryan speakers. The later in turn seems to have become Indianized previously by going through a similar acculturation process, in which they fused together with the Harappans.[20]

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[16] See: Jan Gonda, *The dual deities in the religion of the Veda*, Amsterdam 1974.

[17] Kiran K. Thaplyal, *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals*, Lucknow 1972, pp. 284f.

[18] For the Vedic orientation method, see: Michio Yano 'Knowledge of astronomy in Sanskrit texts of architecture. Orientation methods in the *Īśānaśivagurudeva-paddhati*', *Indo-Iranian Journal* 29 (1986), pp. 17–29.

[19] See: Jean Filliozat, 'Notes d'astronomie ancienne de l'Iran et de l'Inde (I, II, et III)', *Journal Asiatique* 250 (1960), pp. 325–350.

[20] Asko Parpola, 'Astral Proper Names in India: An Analysis of the oldest sources, with argumentation for an ultimately Harappan origin', *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 53 (1989), p. 12.

Probably in this process of successive borrowing, astrological beliefs and practices went together with astronomy. Among the adopted practices may well have been the habit of naming the child according to its birth star.

A. Parpola suggests, that, the custom of deriving the public name given at the name-giving ceremony from the deity presiding over the birth star may be assumed to have came to the Vedic tradition together with the custom of giving astral names, which in turn, obviously was adopted together with the nakṣatra calendar.[21]

A number of nakṣatra names actually found among hundreds of proper names in Vedic texts is rather small. Planetary names can be found even in Vedic texts, though they are still rarer than nakṣatra names. Such are the names derived from Sūrya (the Sun), Rāhu (the ascending lunar node), Budha (Mercury), Soma, Chandra (the Moon). The late *Gṛhya sūtras* of the *Vaikhānasas* is the only which speaks of the planets in connection with the birth ritual. According to this text, the father should ascertain the position of the planets in the horoscope of the very moment when the tip of the nose emerges from the womb, and he should carefully examine the good and evil, so that he can increase the years of the child provided with those qualities.

In modern time we find Indian people named after the name of dominant Hindu deities, e.g. Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śaṅkara, Kṛṣṇa, etc. But ancient works do not show that that was the usage in those days. In the Vedic literature we hardly find any individual name which is the same as the names of the Vedic gods, Mitra, Indra, Pūṣan, etc. Certainly, there are some exceptions. So we have such names as Indrota ("protected by Indra") or Indradyumna ("under Indra's aegis"), but we have in the Vedic literature no human being who is named just Indra. When the practice of giving names of gods to human beings arose it is difficult to day, however it could not have been much earlier than the first few centuries of the Common era.

Thus, nakṣatra name was a name derived from the name of nakṣatra under child was born, or from its presiding deity. If a child was born under constellation Aśvinī, he was named Aśvinīkūmara, if under Rohiṇī, Rohiṇīkūmara etc. Another method of naming the child after the constellation was also current. The letters of the Sanskrit alphabets are believed to be presided over by different constellations. As there are fifty-two letters and only twenty-seven nakṣatra, each constellation has more than one letter under its influence. Each of 27 nakṣatras is divided into four parts (*pādas*) and to each pāda of the nakṣatra a specific letter is assigned. The first letter of the child's name should begin with one of the letters ruled over by a particular asterism. A child who was born under Aśvinī, which presides over the letters chū-che-cho-lā was named Chūdāmani, Chedīśa, Choleśa or Lakṣmaṇa according to the different steps of the constellations.[22]

The one more mode of naming was based on the deity of the month (*cāndra*) in which the child was born. According to Varahāmihira's (a famous Indian astronomer

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[21] Ibidem, p. 24.

[22] See: Raj Bali Pandey, *Hindu Saṃskāras. Socio-Religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments*, Delhi 1969, p. 82.

and astrologer of the 6th century CE) *Bṛhat saṃhitā*, the names of the deities of months beginning from Mārgaśīrṣa are Kṛṣṇa, Ananta, Achyuta, Chakrī, Vaikuṇṭha, Janārdana, Upendra, Yajñapuruṣa, Vāsudeva, Hari, Yogīśa and Puṇḍarīka.[23] The above names are all of Vaiṣṇava sect and they originated much later than the Sūtra period.

The names of seven-day of week (*vārā*) were introduced into India with the Hellenistic astrology and is not attested in Vedic texts. References to the lunar months are definitely found in the Vedas; but an explicit mention of a solar months is not found anywhere in them. Nowhere in the Vedic literature the word *tithi* in the sense of the 30th part of the lunar month or the time required by the moon to gain 12 degree of longitude of the sun, is mentioned.[24]

The ritual of name giving was (and still is) an important family event, requiring new clothes, an auspicious spatial orientation for the ceremony, the bestowing of a consecrated gold object on the child, and anointing, participation of the priest and/or astrologer. Careful attention is given to the number of syllables in the selected name – an even number for boys, odd for girls.[25] Regarding the time of name giving ceremony R.B. Pandey is of opinion that the secret name was given on the birth day.[26] But according to most of *Gṛhya sūtras*, the name giving ceremony was performed on the tenth or the twelfth day after the birth of child with the single exception of the secret name which was given on the birth-day. *Manu smṛti* (II.30) also says it may be performed on the 10th or 12th day after birth or on an auspicious lunar day (*tithi*), *muhūrta* and nakṣatra thereafter. But according to astrological works even these dates were to be postponed if there was any natural abnormality or lack of religious propriety, for instance, during the passage of the sun from one zodiac to another (*saṃkrāntī*), eclipse, etc.

However, according to the *Brāhmaṇas*, the twelve months (*māsa*) that constituted a year had two sorts of names. One set was as follows: Mādhu-Mādhava (Phālguna-Caitra), Śuci-Śukra (Vaiśākha-Jyaiṣṭha), Nabhas-Nabhasya (Āṣāḍha-Śrāvaṇa), Īsa-Ūrja (Bhādra-Aśvina), Sakasa-Sahasya (Kārttika-Agrahāyaṇa), Tapas-Tapasya (Pauṣa-Māgha). (*Taittīriya Saṃhitā* IV.4.11.1) Another set of names is based on a principle that prevails even to this date. It concerned with naming each month after a particular nakṣatra with which the moon is in conjunction on the full moon day of the month and thus the names probably go back to the time when the moon originally began with the full moon, however, since the time of Alexander invasion the Indians looked upon the bright half of the moon as the first half. The months were named after 12 *nakṣatras* followed in each case by the term *Pūrvamāsah* ('the *tithi* on which the month ends'): Mṛgaśīrṣa, Puṣya, Maghā, Phalguna, Citrā, Viśākhe, Jyeṣṭhā, Āṣāḍha, Śrāvaṇa, Proṣṭhapadā, Aśvayu,

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[23] *Bṛhat-saṃhitā with Bhaṭṭotpalas Vivṛti*, ed. Sudhakara Dvivedi, Benares 1895–1897, vol. I–II.

[24] On a seven-day week names, see, Robert Sewell, Sankara B. Dikshit, *The Indian Calendar*, London 1896, p. 2.

[25] Most of the article Louis H. Gray, 'Names (Indo-European)', in: *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, Edinburgh 1917, vol. IX, pp. 162–167 deals with Hindu name giving ceremonies.

[26] Raj Bali Pandey, *Hindu Saṃskāras. Socio-Religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments*, Delhi 1969, p. 82.

Kṛttikā.[27] At that time names of the months began with Mṛgaśirṣa and not with Citrā as in modern times.

According to *Āśvalāyana sūtra*, the secret name was called *abhivādanīya* ("deserving respectful salutation") and was to be known to the parents only till the boy passes *upanayana* initiation (that means the second, spiritual birth – *dvijja*). The later astrological works, like that of *Rājamārtaṇḍa* of Bhojarāja (lived in 11th century), associated different kinds of merits of an auspicious time for performance of the *upanayana saṃskāra* with different months from Māgha to Āṣāḍha:

> A boy whose *upanayana* is performed in the month of Māgha becomes wealthy, in the month of Phālguna intelligent, in Chaitra talented and well-versed in the Vedas, in Vaiśākha provided with all kinds of enjoyments, in Jyeṣṭha wise and great, and in Āṣāḍha a great conqueror of enemies and famous pandit (scholar).[28]

Generally the bright half of the moon was preferred and *upanayana* took place when the sun was in the northern hemisphere, but in the case of the vaiśya children, its southern course was also prescribed.[29] The *Khādira gṛhya* (II.4.12) lays down also, that in the *upanayana* (the sacret second birth ceremony) rites,

> the pupil who has been asked by the teacher 'what is thy name' should declare a name derived from the name of deity or a nakṣatra, which he is to use while bowing to his teacher with the words 'I am so and so...'.

Conclusions

As humans, we dwell in an equivocal world, for we belong to both nature and culture, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has pointed out. It is through rites of passage that we are able to contemplate, to formulate and to reformulate, our ambivalent condition of animal and human. Arnold Van Gennep in his fundamental study "Rites of passage" states that such rites serve not only to publicly acknowledge the transition from one educational, social or spiritual status to another, but more fundamentally, to facilitate within the individual and bring about such a transformation in the first place. In so doing, the individual acquires knowledge, which can be religious, social, political and economic in nature. The individual also acquires a strong sense of self-identity and self-worth relative

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[27] Law Narendra Nath, 'Astronomical Evidence on the Age of the Ṛgveda', *Indian Historical Quarterly* XXVII, 1 (1961), p. 109.

[28] Quoted from: Pandurang V. Kane, 'Passages from Rājamārtaṇḍa on Tithis, Vratas and Utsavas', *Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 36 (1956), pp. 306–339.

[29] *Pāraskara Gṛhya sūtra* II.2; *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya sūtra* I.19.

to other social groupings, and consequently, gains an enhanced self-esteem supportive of others. As such, rites of passage facilitate: 1. educational, social, psychological and/or spiritual transformations of all types; 2. the acquisition of new knowledge, status, and identity; and 3. the public acknowledgment of the transition.[30] Van Gennep has interpreted birth rituals as signifying the separation of the infant from the world of the dead (or the not-living) and his aggregation to that of the living.

There is particular power in names, because they both participate in the reality named and give definition and identity to that reality. That is, name and named exist in a mutual relationship in which the power of the former is shared with the being of the latter. Being without name has a very marginal status in the world of phenomena, thus naming activities are central to human symbolic and communicative processes. As Frederick M. Denny says: "To be human is to name, and be named, and thereby to possess full being and the ability to relate to the world in meaningful ways."[31] It was common to nearly all religious practices that in order to communicate with a deity one must know its name. Knowledge of a divine name gives the knower both power and an avenue of communication with its source.

Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw was probably the first systematic scholar of religion who paid an attention to the sacred function of the names in world religions. He stated, that name is no mere specification, but rather an actuality expressed in a word. In the name is reflected experienced will, but experienced power also. Power is authenticated and assigned a name. The name assigns to power and will a definite form and some settled content, and is therefore by no means any abstraction. Quite the contrary: it is not simply essential, but is also concrete and even corporeal. According to van der Leeuw: "The title is rather a compromise between individuality and power, an intermediary between the special form of bearer and the super-personal power which he carries"[32].

The Indian name derived from the *nakṣatra* was vitally connected with the of the individual and his super-personal power lying behind, and kept secret less enemies may do mischief to the man through it. The important reason for this secrecy is the protection of the owner of the name against sorcery, since the name is used as a means of controlling its owner. In the Vedic magic (*abhicāra*), the knowledge of the name is equivalent to the power over the respective thing or person (*Atharvaveda Saṃhitā* VII.12.2; XIX.48.6). The more names a person has, the more secure he or she is from evil and harm. The adoption of a second, secret name is assumed also for success and distinction in life.

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[30] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (trans.) M.B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffee, London 1960.

[31] Frederick Mathewson Denny, 'Name and naming', in: *Encyclopedia of Religions* (Second edition), ed. Lindsay Jones, New York 2005, vol. IX, pp. 6406–6412. For example, traditional Christian teaching holds that unbaptized children who die go to limbo. They have no clearly defined status because they have been given no name by the proper ceremonial means. The act of christening during baptism renders a new life human in the religio-cultural sense, which is more significant than mere biological humanness.

[32] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, (trans.) J.E. Turner, New York 1963, vol. I, p. 155.

Almost in all traditional societies the link between a name and the person or thing denominated was considered not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but real and substantial bond which unites the two in such a way magic may be wrought on a man just as easily through his name as through his hair, his nails, or any other material part of his person. According to James Frazer such tradition of tabooed personal names is a reflection of contagious magic that is based on the principle of contagion or on the law of contact.[33]

While language in India was almost never conceived as separate from the oral word, the power of transformation inherent in sacred sound continued to operate in ways that were true to accept canons of execution yet remained mysterious in its inability to be described, classified, or defined by common consensus. According to Guy L.Beck, "Sacred sound, in theory and practice, indeed forms a 'central mystery' of the Hindu tradition and functions as a common thread connecting a number of outwardly different sectors within it. As the Hindu experience of the divine is shown to be fundamentally sonic, or oral/aural, the theological position of sacred sound constitutes a kind of *mysterium magnum* of Hinduism".[34] What is essential is not what is physically pronounced, but what these sounds are taken as representing in terms of the phonological structure of our language. So, the actual teachings in Indian education are mainly phonetic rather than semantic and it makes clear the sense of the sacred words or mantras and gives meaning to what otherwise could appear as mindless repetition and recitation. The oral dimension of language has been aptly highlighted by other Western scholar of Hinduism studies, Thomas B. Coburn. He stressed:

> Holy words have been operative in human history. [...] The way that they have found their way into human lives is not through the eye, but through the ear; Hindus have affirmed that the holiness of the Word is intrinsic, and that one participates in it, not by understanding but by hearing and reciting it.[35]

Thus, the secret name giving ritual has been treated in ancient India as necessary procedure for removing the bodily taints or defects transmitted from parents, for unfolding the latent capacities of man for development and as being the outward symbols or signs of the inner change which would fit human beings for corporate life and tended to confer a certain status on those who underwent it.

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[33] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, London 1995, pp. 242–246.

[34] Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology. Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, Delhi 1995, p. 3.

[35] Thomas B. Coburn, 'Scripture in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52,3 (1984), p. 437.

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