

## SAW Seminar: Mathematical practices in the context of the astral sciences

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*Numerical Physiognomy in Ancient India*

**Abstract:** As early as the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* in first century BCE, numerical physiognomy was an integral part of the literature pertaining to the human marks (*puruṣa-strīlakṣaṇa*). Its principal purpose appears to have been as an aid in the memory of the different parts of the body and their characteristics and is another example of the Indian penchant for counting and enumeration (*saṃkhya*). An upper limit of 100 was placed on the parts, so that over the course of time, different ways of counting the individual parts emerged to arrive at the ideal number.

At first, there were two systems of enumeration: a non-fixed and a fixed number of body parts. The former seems to have come first, since as early as the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, a non-fixed number of parts is enumerated as a means to distinguish the king Rāma from his brother, Lakṣmaṇa. Here the non-fixed number of parts occurs in random order, with the numbers 3 and 4 predominating, e.g., 3 fixed, 3 pendulous, ..., 4 lines, ... 14 in equal 2, ..., 5 smooth, ..., 10 lotus like. Another version occurs in Garga, where fewer parts occur, but the individual parts are listed, thus providing a more comprehensive version.

The system of fixed number of parts is much more regular in all versions from Garga onwards, all of which revolve around the numbers 31, 32, and 33 in 7 characteristic categories. The number 33 is the earliest and most prominent, followed by 31. An early Buddhist version of a fixed number of body parts records 32 marks of the Buddha. However, the method of enumeration in the Buddhist and Brahmanic sources are entirely different.

This paper, therefore, will explore the presentation of numerical physiognomy from its first recorded account in the epic, through the early *Jyotiṣa* texts and the later *Purāṇas* with an eye towards understanding the ways in which the different parts of the body were counted to come up with an ideal number of 100.