

STUDIES ON THE PARANORMAL- 2: FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS ON THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE ANCIENT INDIAN OLA (PALM) LEAF ('NADI') HOROSCOPES AND THE QUESTION OF 'FREE-WILL' versus 'DETERMINISM'

INTRODUCTION

A previous paper in this journal (Arseculeratne 1998/9. *Studies on the Paranormal: The Indian ola leaf horoscopes and the ideas of karma and reincarnation*) described the phenomenon of the ancient Indian ola (palm) leaf horoscopes – their history, selection and identification of a subject's leaf, and the reading of the leaf. These leaf writings in ancient Tamil are claimed to be hundreds of years old, and are thought to have been written by Indian sages (or by their astrological pupils as tutorial exercises) and recovered from Hindu temples, mainly in South India. Fourteen case studies from readings provided in 4 centres, 2 in Sri Lanka and 2 in South India were included to illustrate this phenomenon. The readers in Sri Lanka are South Indian Tamils, in temporary residence in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city. One of them had worked for forty years in this country before his demise.

The selection of a leaf as 'belonging' to an individual is done through the subject's thumb prints which are claimed to bear codes also contained in the leaves. The subject's past was invariably described with startling accuracy, while, in some readings, the future as predicted on the leaf was also accurate for many years, though in a few cases, they were not always borne out as accurate by subsequent events. Reasons for this discrepancy were discussed. It was also pointed out that these leaf readings differed from contemporary, conventional 'mundane' astrological readings made off a chart, constructed on the basis of the time and place of birth, giving the planetary distribution in the subject's native chart of the zodiac at the time of birth. The latter readings seldom make the impressive statement of facts relating to the subject (e.g. names of the subject, of parents and of family members) with personal details concerning the subject (e.g. his religion, and place of birth, profession, ill-health, number of children and their progress) as described in the leaf readings.

The following possibilities of fraud or other bases that might underlie spurious 'readings' were considered in our attempts to 'falsify' (in Karl Popper's sense) the idea that these leaf readings are authentic writings:

1. *Fraudulent ascertainment* by the reader of the history and personal data relating to the subject, (through reference to computerised or documented state records pertaining to the subject, or questioning of the subject's relatives) during the interval (which could be many days) between supplying of the thumb print and the selection of the corresponding leaf. This type of fraud was excluded on the grounds that no personal information, including the full name and address which could have been used in such fraud, was given by the subjects to the leaf-readers. In some cases, the readings were made on leaves selected within 1 or 2 hours (which would have not given sufficient time for such fraudulent ascertainment of data) of supplying of the thumb prints; moreover correct readings were obtained by persons who had never visited that centre before and on occasions the subjects were Sri Lankans who visited the Indian centres for the first time.
2. '*Fishing out*' of information from the subject by discreet questioning of the subject by the reader, under the guise of needing such data to confirm the identity of the leaf. Subjects, whose cases were discussed in the previous article, carefully avoided giving of information on which a spurious reading could have been built.
3. *Construction of a horoscope*. If the reader is a competent astrologer, he could make a chart at the time of reading and provide the subject with a conventional reading on the basis of his 'instant' chart. This seemed improbable because the time of birth, which is critical for the construction of a conventional Indian astrological chart, is not supplied by the subject for the search of his/her leaf; only the thumb prints, birth date and a name for reference are supplied; the name need not be the real name of the subject or even the complete name, and it is given for the 'calling-up' of the subject for the reading. 'Mundane', conventional astrological horoscopes, according to the Eastern system of astrology, are made on the basis of the place, date and, crucially, the time of birth. Because these (except the date of birth and place) are not given to the reader, the possibility of an instant construction of a chart by the reader is remote.

4. *Guesses and inferences.* In addition to facts which were on the leaf, extrapolation to other facts through guesses and inferences are possible; the latter facts would then not be documented on the leaf. Guessing of names would be difficult or impossible.
5. *Telepathy.* This was excluded because some readings were made after the initial providing of the thumb print in the absence of the subject (Case No. 15 described below) while the readings were recorded on an audio-tape. In addition, in other cases, correct facts read off the leaf were unknown to the subject at the time of reading.

The facts, obtained by mechanisms 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 would, of course, not be written on the leaf; hence the confirmatory test done as reported in this paper was to confirm or dispute (“falsify”) the question whether the ‘correct’ facts were really written on the leaf..

The accurate predictive capacity of the leaf-readings, which sometimes spanned a period of ten or more years, indicated that mechanisms 1 and 2 at least were not operative, and that they were genuine astrological readings.

Evidence given in the earlier report, supporting the tentative conclusion that the readings were made from a script actually written on the leaf, included the following:

- (1) On repetition of the readings, sometimes months later, the facts and their sequence were approximately 80% and 75% respectively, in correspondence. Translational or interpretational variations might have accounted for the short-fall from 100%.
- (2) The report also stated that in two cases, the subjects, both Tamil professionals who were familiar with the Tamil language’s script, and who were also familiar with these leaves, read the names of either themselves or their family members on their respective leaves, indicating that indeed the readings given were made off a script which was documented on their leaves.

Another case (No. 15) further supports the view that these readings are made from a script written on the leaves. The subject obtained the reading of the first, general chapter which correctly stated facts about himself. The reader then

suggested that the reading be continued on the next day as it was now late in the evening. On the next day the original reader gave the leaf to *another reader* who re-read the first chapter that was read on the previous day: *the second day's reading of the first chapter was identical with that given on the first day*, suggesting that the readings were made off a script actually written on the leaf.

Yet, despite the remarkably accurate statements and predictions, and evidence summarised above for the fact that the readings were based on a script that was really written on the leaf, Professor Ian P. Stevenson (Division of Personality Studies, Department of Psychiatric Medicine, University of Virginia, USA) stated (personal communication to SNA, 1999):

I believe that it would be difficult to persuade an editor (and reader) of a scientific journal that the correct statements made by a reader of ola leaves were not the result of a combination of paranormal cognition, guesses and inference.

Stevenson then suggested a final test of the authenticity of the leaf readings:

To show that these correct statements were written in ancient Tamil one would need to have photographs of the Tamil text together with translations by an expert on the Tamil language. Moreover, the photographed text should be that of the correct statements.

Further, Stevenson pointed out that:

Such a demonstration would be a remarkable event. I do not doubt that it would have extraordinary reverberations in philosophy, science and religion.

This report describes this test done by one of the authors (SS) of this paper, in a centre in Chennai, South India, in February 2002.

RESULTS

(The significant facts relevant to this paper are italicised)

In February 2002, SS called at a centre in Chennai, South India, which he had not visited before; nor had he met its readers before. He gave his right thumb print at 8 am, with his first name, the shortened version *Sidha*, used by his friends. *After about an hour* SS was called in for the reading. Several leaves were

unsuccessfully tried for his father's name. Another bundle of leaves was then brought in. Midway through this bundle, the reader asked, "Is your father's name *Sambandan*?" SS replied 'yes' as *Sambandan* is his father's surname *which was not given earlier to the reader*. The reader then asked, "Is your mother's name *Saraswathy*?" SS confirmed it, though he had not supplied it earlier. He then asked, "Is your name *Sidheswara*?" SS again agreed, although he had not given his full name earlier. "Is your wife's name *Sosapin*?" (Figure), and on being told "yes" by SS, the reader then said "This is your leaf". His wife's name too was not supplied to the reader earlier. He then went out for about *five minutes* to call in a scribe for audio-recording and the writing out of the reading.

The first, general chapter, containing the personal and family details, was read. The reader readily agreed to show SS the leaf and script and to allow SS to photograph it. *The most decipherable name was SS's wife's name which was an English name*. Her real name is "Josephine". There is no letter "j" in the Tamil language, and when present it is a borrowing from Sanskrit. The letter "s" is substituted for "j". (Professor C. Sivagnanasunderam, novelist in Tamil, 2002, personal communication); hence "So-sa-pin" instead of "Jo-sa-pin". The letters "So" were similar to the modern Tamil with which SS was familiar. The second syllable "Sa" in the Figure, is under the point of the pen. The "Sa" too was decipherable to one familiar with modern Tamil. The third syllable "pin" differed slightly from that in modern Tamil. The other sentences and words (other than names) in the text were difficult for SS to decipher. The facts in the rest of this first chapter, the past and up to the present, too, were accurate.

A few days later SS called at a *different centre*, also in Chennai, South India, which dealt with these leaf horoscopes. SS had not visited this centre before nor had he known its readers. SS showed a reader at this centre, the photograph of the leaf which was read at the first centre and which contained accurate facts relating to SS. This reader (at the second centre) read, slowly, "So-sa-pin". He also read SS's father's name, SS's name, and his mother's name with ease.

The reader at the first centre did not give the leaf to SS as it was claimed that another person's horoscope might be on the reverse. It should be stated that on a previous occasion in a different centre in South India, SS was given his leaf after an accurate reading.

The results of this test were communicated to Prof. Stevenson who first suggested the test. He then posed the possibility of the reader having had access to the 'facts' telepathically or by 'normal' guesses, and then written these 'facts' out on an old (blank) leaf. This would have meant that the reader left the room where the client was, spent some time to write out a 'new' leaf with the 'facts' that he telepathically retrieved, and brought it back and read the same. This was not the case as after the client (SS) sat with the reader, the latter went out of the room during the reading *for approximately a minute and only once*, to answer a telephone call. Moreover, he left the leaf which had the correct facts on the table while he was away from the room for this brief period; it was during this period that SS photographed the writing on the leaf; above all, *the reader did not bring any other leaf when he returned*. The etching on a palm leaf is a tedious process with a metal stylus, more time consuming than writing on paper. The etching then has to be blackened with soot (carbon powder), and the excess soot rubbed off from the leaf with oil. *It is unlikely that the 'new' writing could have been made by the reader during his one-minute absence from the room, apart from the fact that he did not bring back with him another leaf, the putative fraudulent leaf.*

A further refutation of the suggestion that data could have been obtained telepathically from the subject, arises from a case (No. 16) in which the subject, having had a reading of a few chapters, requested that the readings of the further chapters be recorded in her absence on a later date. These subsequent chapters had been read by the reader and recorded as requested by the subject, and were also found to be correct. Since the subject was not present at the latter readings, a telepathic process for retrieval of this data is probably unlikely.

DISCUSSION

Supplementary to the anecdotal and personal evidence recorded in our first (1998/9) and in the current paper, the test prescribed by Stevenson and the results accruing from it described in this paper, apparently demonstrated that the readings were made off a script actually written on the leaf.

An attempt will be made to have one of these ola leaves, in the possession of SS, carbon-dated. Even if the test reveals that the leaf is indeed centuries old, it could be construed that, as Stevenson hypothesised, the reading could have been made off a 'new' instant script made on an old blank leaf, from data retrieved by the reader, telepathically. However, the cogent evidence described in the preceding paragraphs relating to SS, that the correct leaf was not recently-written on blank

fraudulent leaf, appears to us to be strong enough to discount Stevenson's explanation and to regard these leaf horoscopes as authentic.

One of the Indian readers resident in Sri Lanka, when confronted with this 'telepathic' explanation of the accuracy of the leaf readings, replied: "*If I can get all the correct information from a subject, telepathically, I do not need to dabble with ola leaves*". Indeed other practitioners of the paranormal do indeed provide clients with verbal astrological and perhaps numerological and telepathic readings (Sinhala - *nimittas*) which are accurate.

Epistemology in the East and West

Paranormal practices are firmly embedded in the South Asian culture. Eastern epistemology is perhaps of a wider scope in South Asia than in the West: for example, in Buddhism.

...the Buddha urged his followers to strive to go beyond faith in rebirth and to verify it through extrasensory capacities which, he claimed, one could cultivate by practising meditational techniques. In this sense, Buddhist ethics, and the whole of Buddhist epistemology that underlies it, are as empirical and as amenable to scientific method as is Western ethics, or even more so since sense-perception in Buddhism (as in most other Eastern epistemologies) is far broader than that defined and accepted in the West". (Hall, 1987)

Determinism

The implication of the result of our investigation that, at least, the major events in a person's life, are 'determined', again raises the perennial questions of 'free will' *versus* 'determinism' (this matter was briefly touched upon in the 1998/9 paper) and of 'moral responsibility' in decision-making through 'free-will'. Ayer (1965) wrote: "It seems that if we are to retain this idea of moral responsibility, we must either show that men can be held responsible for actions which they do not do freely, or else find some way of reconciling determinism with the freedom of the will".

The implication from this paper's finding that major events are pre-determined will inevitably engender strong opposition from those who are

confronted with the possibility of determinism. The primary purpose of this investigation, however, was to test the authenticity of the ola leaf horoscopes and not to attempt to resolve, if that is at all possible, the debate on 'free-will' *versus* 'determinism'. However, some comments, might seem to be necessary on this problem of 'determinism'.

Consider the following (real) example. The selection of medicine as a career by a Sri Lankan subject A was based on his liking the subject, and the examples of relatives who were successful doctors. He later turned to academic medicine and research, through interest in experimentation, long before his undergraduate medical work began. His choice of a medical career was thus seemingly, in conventional terms, a free choice made of his 'free-will'. His ola leaf read 36 years later in South India stated that the subject will qualify in medicine and will give instruction in medicine to others, and that he will have two higher degrees (which indeed he had acquired). If, as demonstrated here, these leaf readings are authentic, and were written decades or more probably centuries before, then his choice of a medical career was, in this sense, determined. Further determinants that underlay his choice of medicine were the examples of his relatives and his prior conditioning, through his reading of books on scientific discovery and experimentation. Thus, his choice of medicine as a career, though seemingly made through his 'free-will' was in reality 'determined'. Searle's (1984) question is topical: "Is it ever true to say of a human being that he could have done otherwise?... Is all behaviour determined by such psychological compulsions?" Searle answers the second question negatively. If this debate is intractable to resolution, could at least the compromise of "compatibilism" (Searle 1984) give us any relief, though Searle thought it was an inadequate solution to the problem?

One of the criteria on which the operation of 'free-will' is claimed to rest is the availability of alternatives which a subject could choose from in a given action. His choice of one option is then regarded as reflecting his 'free-will' in making that choice while it remains a *possibility* that he could have made a different choice (see Searle 1984 for a discussion of this topic, p. 98). But the fact is that he did make the choice he made (the '*factual*'); the existence of '*counter-factuals*' i.e. the alternatives, is a philosophical problem which will not be discussed here.

If indeed the idea of 'free-will' is delusory and that determinants of many kinds operate in the making of a choice, then there appears to be a parallel in the derivation of conclusions from observations and formulation of theories in science. This relates to the question of 'objectivity'. As Grinnel (1987) states, "In any event,

the observer can look at the scene in a multitude of ways, each of which involves different hypotheses regarding what he/she sees. Therefore, it has been suggested that an observer imposes a particular meaning on a scene according to his/her interest and interpretation of what is going on.... The point to be emphasised is that, in large part, an observer's previous knowledge and experience determine what aspects of a scene will be interesting to the observer". In discussing some ideas of the philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, Jones (1989) wrote: "This leads him to the controversial conclusion that competing theories are equally reasonable alternatives, with one being eliminated in favour of another only as a result of subjective choice. 'What remains are aesthetic judgements, judgements of taste, metaphysical prejudices, religious desires, in short, what remains are our subjective wishes'".

Some comments (italicised) of the philosopher A.J.Ayer (1965) are also apposite to this discussion. "*For it is not always the case that when a man believes that he has acted freely we are in fact able to account for his action in causal terms*"

The possibility that Subject A's choice of medicine was determined by the circumstances described above, might here be considered.

"A determinist would say that we should be able to account for it if we had more knowledge of the circumstances, and had been able to discover the appropriate natural laws. But until those discoveries have been made, this remains only a pious hope".

Although the palm leaf readings indicate that his choice of a medical career was determined, the 'natural laws' and the mechanism underlying such determinism, as well as of the leaf writings themselves, are of course unknown.

Finally, as Ayer (1965) wrote: "But now we must ask how it is that I come to make my choice. Either it is an accident that I choose to act as I do or it is not. If it is an accident, then it is merely a matter of chance that I did not choose otherwise;.... But if it is not an accident that I choose to do one thing rather than another, then there is some causal explanation of my choice: and in that case we are led back to determinism".. This appears to be the challenging situation that the palm leaf horoscopes have confronted us with.

Since the publication of our first paper in 1998/9, a commentary "*Nadi Astrology (an overview)*", appeared in *The Times of Astrology*, New Delhi, January 2002. (see also <http://www.sanskritonline.com/nadi/History.htm>) Some facts in the *Times of Astrology*, which are supplementary to those in the 1998/9 paper are quoted *verbatim* in italics below, followed by our comments:

-Leaves were found "lying idle" in the Vaitheeswarankoil (South India) around the 13th century.

-Translations from Sanskrit were made into Tamil and Telugu.

-Only about 40% of persons are likely to get their leaves. (This implies that several million leaves should be available).

The author then posed some questions, some of which are answered in our present and the preceding articles.

"Are they actually reading what was written on the leaves?" This is the central question which the present article has apparently answered.

"Why don't nadi readers give your leaf to you, if it really belongs to you?" Indeed one of us (SS) had his leaf given to him after the reading in a South Indian centre.

"Can you read what is written there?" "Will they show it to you?" The present article has answered these two questions.

"Is it possible to do any research at all in this field?" The scientific approach to research on these leaf horoscopes was also discussed in the 1998/9 paper. A more general discussion "The scientific approach to research on the paranormal" was written (by SNA) in *Trends in Rebirth Research, Proceedings of an International Symposium, 2001*, N. Senanayake ed., Peradeniya, Sarvodaya Viswalekha Press.

"Are there other aspects, natural calamities, political set ups, wars, countries etc. written also nadi granthas (sic) other than about persons and if so why don't they publish it beforehand?" Yes in Case No. 10 (Arseculeratne 1998/9), the *nadi* reading referred to political events in Sri Lanka, 7 years into the future.

Why cannot the nadi readers tell the exact names of the wife/husband before marriage, but can tell the names (of) after marriage?" In Case No. 7 (Arseculeratne 1998/9) the *nadi* reading had given the name of the girl the subject would marry. It is of great interest that the girl he married had a different name but it was the case that the name specified by the reading was indeed the family name, to which an

original name had been changed decades before this reading and before the subject's marriage to the girl. The name change was known only after his marriage.

Topics for Future Research.

"Whether we or the experts in linguistics can read the same and understand?"
 "Whether there is any script at all in the leaves?" These two questions have been answered in the present article.

A statement on the origins of these leaf writings is from the introduction in a leaf reading obtained by a Sri Lankan in India in the 1930s:

"Stanza I- These are horoscopes written down by Agasthya Muni in his discourses to his disciple Machakendran:- 'I had known the Shastras as dictated by Narayinal Goddess Parvathi wife of Narayanan to Nandi Devar [the Bull God that is the medium of Hindu worship of Shiva] and I am telling same to you. If you find in the palms of a male, the lines known as

adukku visiri sakkara
 iratti yoga sangu paali
 irai ligithamsam

he will be born in the race that sprang up in Ceylon through Buddhism in the capital town or near about".

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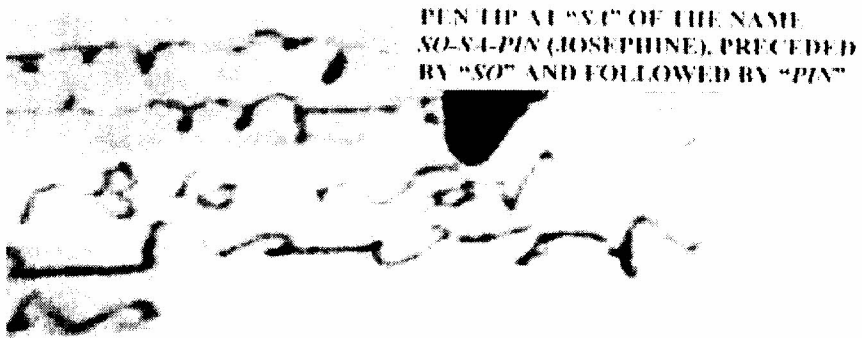


Fig 1