

SAI BABA BESTS THE PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS

by

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If today Uri Geller is the star performer for parapsychologists in the West, his celebrity-counterpart in the East is the Hindu holy man Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Though credited with powers of healing, “consciousness raising” and extra-sensory perception, as well as “out-of-body projections,” the 51 year-old “miracle”-worker’s forté is “materialization,” exhibitions of which date back to his early days of local fame when he came to be worshipped as an avatar who would spit tiny gold lingams into the dust for his scrambling worshipers. Now his following is international, numbered in the hundreds of thousands, multitudes of whom make dutiful pilgrimage to Prashanti Nilayam (“the abode of highest peace which passeth understanding”), Sai Baba’s ashram in Andhra Pradesh in southern India, where cement block houses are provided for visiting dignitaries and the privileged among the upwards of 10,000 devotees who come for “merit” and with hope of receiving their Savior’s “blessing.”

Sai Baba---who seems to have his own unique edition of the Christian Scriptures---“described his ‘place’ in the world,” we are told, “to his followers on Christmas Day, 1972” when “he explained some mysterious words of Christ’s: “He who sent me among you will come again,” and he pointed to a lamb. “The lamb is just a symbol, a sign. It stands for the voice: “Ba-Ba” the announcement was of the advent of Baba. “His name will be truth,” Christ declared. “Satya” means truth. “He wears a robe of red, a blood-red robe.” Here Baba pointed to the robe he was wearing. “He will be short with a crown (of hair)” ...Christ did not declare that he would come again; he said, “He who sent me will come again.” That “Ba-Ba” is this Baba.”¹ Befitting such an extraordinary being, Sai Baba is notorious for his “unpredictable behavior... not readily

comprehended” (as when, for example, “he once allowed 200,000 people to wait in vain for his expected appearance in Bombay; he was occupied elsewhere with the ceremony for a school to be named for his mother”).²

Discouraged by none of this, the phenomenologists---the parapsychologists of the East and the West---, hot on the scent, as it were, of a miracle, have beaten a well worn path to the gates of the Sai Baba estate. Though seeming to have all the advantages in this race to authenticate the “miracles” which the south Indian “Avatar” says “are merely ‘calling cards’ or external evidence of his divinity,”³ the psychological researchers of India have not made much headway. Dr. K. Ramakrishna Rao, “India’s foremost parapsychologists” and founder of the Department of Psychology and Parapsychology at Andhra University in Sai Baba’s home State, has described the difficulty of doing scientific business with the obstreperous holy man. In a 1975 interview with Alan Vaughan, Editor of Psychic, Dr Rao---who “credits Dr. J.B. Rhine as being his mentor in developing research techniques in his three years at the Parapsychology Laboratory of Duke University in North Carolina” (and where, in 1976, Dr Rhine invited Rao “to work there as a research ‘associate’”)---observed: “I have been to see Sai Baba but I was just one of thousands in the crowd. But I do have information from people who have met him and who claim that he has produced things in a miraculous way... I have also heard people say it is all humbug. My own opinion is quite suspended... I would be interested in working with Sai Baba only if I could have an opportunity to observe him under reasonably controlled conditions. I do not see much point in just observing him do things without being able to say whether what he is doing is a genuine materialization or sleight-of-hand. Recently a number of responsible scientists (not parapsychologists) sought Baba’s cooperation to experiment with him. I do not think they had any positive response. I believe Sri Sai Baba will be doing a great service to mankind if he does

agree to cooperate with scientists by making himself available for observation and experiment. If he does not do this he will remain a controversial person; not a subject for scientific discussion, but a matter of personal faith.’⁴

Now, two years later, sensational word has exploded into popular print nationwide (in a tabloid found on most of our supermarket news-racks): two Western parapsychologists from the American Society for Psychical Research were baffled when, in Sai Baba’s presence, they witnessed (so it is said) the inexplicable phenomenon of an inset portrait vanish from a ring on the finger of one of them, presumably at their host’s command. But can we take “experts” of a Psychical Research society as our trustworthy guides to “miracles”? And, if not, what happens to skeptical criticism with its alternative suggestions of normality (not “paranormality”) when it gets in the way of what appears to be a policy of protecting the prestige of the investigation and of those backing him? What here follows may perhaps go even farther towards providing answers to these important questions than to any concerning the reality or humbug of Sai Baba’s mysterious exhibitions!

In its Journal for January 1977, the American Society for Psychical Research published a report by Erlendur Haraldsson and Karlis Osis, “The Appearance and Disappearance of Objects in the Presence of Sri Sathya Sai Baba.”⁵ Dr Osis, formerly entered on the “Staff” list as the Society’s “Director of Research” (none now so listed), is described as “Chester F. Carlson Research Fellow.” He and Haraldsson, during visits to India in 1973 and 1975 “met with Sai Baba several times,” while Haraldsson (“E.H.”) “made another visit to India in January, 1976, for further observations and interviews with Sai Baba.” This research was partly financed “through the A.S.P.R.’s James Kidd inheritance fund,” which the Society was awarded over many competing petitioners after court hearings of wide notoriety several years ago.

During eleven interviews the two investigators had with Sai Baba, they saw him “spontaneously display a number of the same phenomena for which he has become famous in India.” They report having “made some 20 observations of ostensibly paranormal appearances of objects in his hand. None of these occurred under controlled conditions and we were not able to examine him physically or to take other necessary precautions. Therefore, at this stage we obviously do not have sufficient grounds for accepting the claims made about the genuineness of the reported phenomena.” Nevertheless, in raising “some hypothetical normal explanations for the incidents we observed,” Haraldsson and Osis reject all as “unreasonable and not worth further discussion” except for the theory of the concealment of objects on his person and their subsequent production “by sleight-of-hand”---after which, in reference to the “most impressive incident we personally observed,” they conclude that even “the sleight-of-hand hypothesis seems inapplicable...”

This “most impressive incident” was “the disappearance of the enamel picture of Sai Baba from K.O.’s ring. The sleight-of-hand hypothesis seems inapplicable because Sai Baba’s hands, or those of potential accomplices, never came near the ring during the incident.” They also “consulted a professional magician living in New York”—“recommended to us as one of the most knowledgeable magicians in the world”---who “viewed a movie on Sai Baba and discussed our observations of objects appearing and disappearing. He was certain that he could by his magician’s art duplicate all the cases he saw on the film. However, he considered the ring incident to be beyond the skills of magicians.” Their conclusion is that, “We do not have a reasonable normal explanation for this disappearance.”

It was to offer, just such a needed “reasonable normal explanation for this disappearance” that the writer, in a letter of March 22, 1977, submitted to the Editor of The Journal of The

American Society for Psychical Research a critical analysis, the content of which substantially here follows. The possibility suggested is one which, it seems obvious, did not arise in the minds of the reporting witnesses---otherwise they would have been obliged to discuss and eliminate it from consideration, had they been able to do so.

1. In the first place, we are told that the “large gold ring” in question was one “that Sai Baba had presented to K.O. during our first visit” and after their host had “waved his hand in a typical manner” (a “typical manner” being described as with “palm down, in small circular movements that lasted two or three seconds”). From this gift, we must assume that Sai Baba had it within his capacity to provide a second, one which would pass superficial examination as being indistinguishable from the first gold ring. However, as a basis for doubt, any such suspicion of duplication would have been diminished---intentionally or otherwise---when, at their third interview, Sai Baba “asked K.O. if he wanted the picture back” (after it had vanished from its ring during their second visit); and, upon being told he did, and after receiving the pictureless ring, Sai Baba took it in his hand and made it too disappear, replacing it---after some manipulation---with still another and “different” ring (first exhibited when he opened his closed hand, showing the new one bore an “enamel picture... like the one that had been framed in the first ring”).

The A.S.P.R. reporters tell of “Production of objects apparently in response to a specific situation or on the direct demand of the visitor. We encountered many witnesses who testified as to such occurrences: the appearance of statuettes of a deity on request, a ring with the picture of a visitor’s favorite deity, etc.” And they quote the opinion of their magician consultant “that if Sai Baba does produce objects upon demand, this-would be a feat no magician could duplicate.” But, we note, in this case of their own experience, the declaration as to what was wanted was

prompted by a leading question (a “steer”); and even after it was made clear the ring-owner was relinquishing the ring with the expectation of not merely getting “the picture back” but of getting the picture back within the ring, and the ring itself back too, the “demand” was thwarted.

Elsewhere, we find Sai Baba himself saying, “I shall tell you why I give these rings, talismans, and rosaries; it is to make the bond between me and those to whom they are given. When calamity befalls them, the article comes to me in a flash and returns in a flash, taking from me the remedial grace of protection. That grace is available to all who call on me in any name or form...”⁶ Dr. Osis might enter this boast under the heading of “instantaneous teleportation”---but, obviously, the replacing of the portrait within the same ring “in a flash”, while the ring was still on its owner’s finger, was too much for Sai Baba! (Of course, at any time after the picture’s disappearance, he might have taken the empty ring from Dr. Osis and, with “a typical wave” of his hand, have handed back the original ring with its inset portrait, but would not that have immediately provoked suspicion that twin rings were being juggled, one with and one without a portrait?)

2. We may accept the authors’ bare statement that the original picture (“in color of Sai Baba”) was indeed an “enameled picture” (presumably enamel-on-metal), one of “about 2 cm long and 1½ cm wide,” securely “fixed in the ring” by “four little notches that protruded over it from the circular golden frame” so that it would have been necessary “to break the picture in the ring” to remove it. Even if one or two of the enclosing notches were sufficiently malleable to permit removing the picture with out much force and damage, it would have been unlikely this would have been done during the “interview” of their “second visit” when in fact “the picture disappeared.” What would be of greater probability---if we hypothesize fraud---is that [sometimes] prior to the sitting for this interview, the original ring with its enameled picture was

taken by one of Sai Baba's "accomplices" (assuming he had need of any; and, as a precaution, Haraldsson and Osis ought to have prudently considered everyone around them, not previously and personally known by them to be uninterested, as---to borrow their own phrase---"potential accomplices") and surreptitiously exchanged for a similar ring but with the picture painted or "enameled" on thin wax. (Are there not Indian artisans skilled in preparing painted wax images for religious purposes?)

One can only guess as to when opportunity for such substitution was present. If our investigators were stopping in a guest house on the Sai Baba estate or at a nearby hostel frequented by Sai Baba's followers and served by attendants of his cult ("potential accomplices"), secret substitution might have been made at most any time of day or night just before the "second interview" or visit. The facsimile portrait being discovered as one of wax, it but to practically eliminate any possibility of it would have been most prudent for "the switch" to have been made by a Sai Baba confederate masquerading as a devotee visiting the premises of the interview at the time of this "second visit", one who, with apparent enthusiasm for the previous "miracle" of the ring's initial appearance, asked to examine it closely and made the necessary exchange by sleight-of-hand when obligingly handed the original ring by Dr. Osis for a moment of reverent fondling. (It is a common practice among Sai Baba devotees to "share" these so-called talismanic "materializations" with others who "care to hold them" for the opportunity of receiving the "remedial grace" their holy touch is supposed to provide.⁷ It is, of course, too late in the day to receive any assurance that the original ring was never removed from K.O.'s finger from the moment first put on until the "disappearance" of "the picture." With no foresight whatsoever of the critical part it was to play in a second, unanticipated "miracle," its owner could have had no reluctance towards permitting the original ring to be freely examined

by strangers in his presence.

3. Assuming the investigators had taken the trouble necessary to actually verify their evident belief that the original picture was one of enamel-on-metal, no such opportunity (or need) for a second verification of construction was likely between the time now suggested for surreptitious exchange. And the subsequent “disappearance” of picture. Up to the instant of the “vanishing act,” those present (including E.H.) naturally would see the (substituted) ring with its picture on K.O.’s finger and have no reason to suspect it was not the original obtained at the earlier interview. All that would be necessary to make the painted wax disappear would be to bring near it any inconspicuous object hot enough to melt away the wax, e.g., a lighted cigarette or a lighted rod of stick-incense (such as Indians burn in the presence of holy beings). An opaque oval of wax of the dimensions cited may be melted away in such a manner within 3 or 4 seconds, without any heat being felt on the underside of a thin knife blade holding the wax, as the writer has ascertained by experiment; and any residue would drop away (or could be blown away under the mask of a cough, while no odor of burning wax could be detected in incense-laden atmosphere), to go unnoticed during the subsequent search for a “missing” oval of colored, enameled metal (“We looked for it on the floor, but no trace of it could be found”).

4. All that we are told of the immediate circumstances attending the “picture’s” disappearance, suggests the ease with which, such a “vanishing act” could have been perpetrated, undetected. It was at a critical moment when the full attention of both Haraldsson and Osis (“we”) were directed away from the vicinity of the ring and, instead, riveted intently upon Sai Baba (sitting before and above them, as they “sat cross-legged on the floor”). Just then they seem to have been concentrating all their faculties upon persuading the Hindu guru to submit to truly scientific experiment, the chief object---we must suppose---of their visit (“...when

we tried to persuade Sai Baba to participate in some controlled experiments, he seemed to become impatient and said to K.O., ‘Look at your ring.’ The picture had disappeared from it”). Moreover, “K.O. had his hands on his hands on his thighs”---at least during most of this interval, we can assume---so that an “accomplice” would have had ample opportunity to unobtrusively accomplish the “miracle” in the required few seconds of inattention while Haraldsson and Osis were engrossed in their crucial conversation with Sai Baba. The prudent reader, of course, will not be persuaded that anyone knows on which hand Dr. Osis was then wearing the ring---much less than it can be truthfully said that someone then sat here and someone else there (there being a number of Sai Baba’s followers also present and seated with them). Psychologically, one would expect some distortion of memory to follow on the excitement of discovery and the ensuing commotion during search for the missing “enamel” picture. Quite rightly, when “the picture” could not be found---whether dissolved by heat or occult power---, “Sai Baba somewhat teasingly remarked, ‘This was my experiment.’”

What is most frustrating to the informed student of the history of Psychical Research, in cases such as this, is to see reports of ambiguous experiences prepared and published (and, as this one, quickly taken up and exploited in the sensational press) without any appreciation or discussion of the pitfalls that are as prevalent today in reportorial methodology as they were a hundred years ago in this field; and to see scarce resources wasted on such ineffectual undertakings (expenditure which, in this instance, might have been avoided by determining beforehand whether Sai Baba would or would not submit to “some controlled experiments”). Parapsychologists would do far better at much less expense by spending more time studying and re-examining the voluminous available records of past cases---thereby trying to first establish productive investigative guide-lines (of which little is ever said), so as to avoid repeating the

errors and shortcomings of past generations of researchers and reporters, profiting from their earlier sad experiences. Unfortunately, each succeeding generation of psychical researchers, in the exuberance of naive enthusiasm, thinks itself wiser than its forbears and at last on the threshold of a “great breakthrough,” having little patience with the lessons of the past.

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Subsequently, the writer's critique was acknowledged by letter of the A.S.P.R. Editor, Laura A. Dale, who has served in one or another influential capacity as an officer of the Society for many years. Promise was made that the letter---“in which you discuss a possible normal explanation for the disappearance of Sai Baba’s picture from Dr. Osis’ ring”---would be discussed “with several members of the Publications Committee,” and that, “I will let you know whether or not we can accept it for publication.”

Fifteen days later the Editor again wrote, and at some length, announcing that “members of the Publications Committee... feel as I do, that it is unsuitable for publication in the Journal.” She objected that the letter of criticism “fails to meet” the necessary “criteria” of dealing with the subject in “an objective fashion” or of offering “reasonable alternative hypotheses...” In place of giving any indication as to how or why the rejected analysis was more subjective or less reasonable than the Haraldsson-Osis report itself, the A.S.I.R. Editor saw fit to try and bury the criticism under ridicule and impudent satire: “You take the authors of the Sai Baba report to task because your ‘wax’ hypothesis ‘did not arise’ in their minds. Of course it didn’t---nor did X-number of other imaginative hypotheses which one could put forward to explain the phenomenon in normal terms. (My own pet candidate for an even more colorful explanation than yours for the disappearance of the picture is that it was made of colored bird seed, and while K.O. was attentively watching Sai Baba a tiny, highly trained hummingbird flew down and ate

it!).”

Meanwhile, alas! The public and the uninformed dues-paying members of America’s most prestigious society for the investigation of “psychic phenomena,” will continue to imagine that its editor, officers, Publications Committee, investigators and reporters are seriously dedicated to the fair and even-handed treatment of both sides of opinion, the pro-and-con of the controversial subjects with which they are pledged to deal.

¹ Berkman, Randy, “Sai Baba: The Holy Man and the Psychiatrist” (a review), Yoga Journal, May-June 1977, p. 58.

² Loc. cit.

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ Vaughan, Alan, “Interview: K. Ramarishna Rao, Ph.D.,” Psychic, September-October 1976, pp. 48-50.

⁵ Haraldsson, Erlendur, and Osis, Karlis, “The Appearance and Disappearance of Objects in the Presence of Sri Sathya Sai Baba,” The Journal of The American Society for Psychical Research, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 33-43.

⁶ Warren, Sharon, “Sai Baba and a Journey of the Spirit,” Yoga Journal, May-June 1977, p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20. A candid photograph accompanying the Warren article clearly reveals Sai Baba’s extraordinary “crown (of hair)”, worn “Afro”-style---most uncustomary for a Hindu. As if to refute the suspicion that Sai Baba may use his clothing to conceal objects intended for “materialization,” Haraldsson and Osis offer five paragraphs---but give not so much as one full sentence to the admitted “rumors” which “suggested... even his hair” as one of the possible “hiding places” (though they claim to have “watched his hands very closely and could not see him take anything from... or reach toward his bushy hair...” One does not find it easy to believe that all during “11 interviews” Sai Baba not once touched or even reached “toward” his “bushy hair”!). While E.H. and K.O. appear to consider it as the least likely “hiding place” (“even his hair”), one recalls the belief of authorities in one notorious case that even a .45 automatic pistol was concealed in an “Afro” and smuggled past prison guards. As Martin Gardner tells us, “To this day, concealing small objects in the hair is a common practice of East Indian psychics who specialize in ‘materializations.’ The hidden object is palmed under cover of a casual brushing of the hair with the hand, then the object is produced as if it came from another world” (The Humanist, May/June 1977, p. 32).