

INVESTIGATING MACRO-PK IN INDIA: SWAMI PREMANANDA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a field investigation into the ostensible macro-PK ability of Swami Premananda (a religious leader living in Southern India). Premananda claimed to be able to materialize small objects in his bare hands. A method for testing this type of claim is outlined and its rationale discussed. The authors observed Premananda producing ostensible materializations under informal conditions. Under more formal conditions, however, Premananda failed to produce any phenomena. Immediately following the removal of controls against trickery, the authors videotaped Premananda 'materializing' a small statue and vibuti. Careful analysis of this videotape reveals that Premananda could have capitalized on the investigators' lapses in attention to pick up secretly small objects from his lap and, after a short while, 'materialize' them in his hand. No direct evidence of fraud, however, was obtained during the investigation. Finally, the methods and results of this investigation are discussed, along with the ramification of this work for future research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

In his 1989 Presidential Address to the Society for Psychological Research, Ian Stevenson (1990) urged parapsychologists to investigate 'major' paranormal phenomena (i.e. phenomena that are "so gross that we require no statistics for their demonstration"—p.151). Stevenson also noted (p.158) that reports of such phenomena occur far more frequently in Asia than in the West, writing:

... the peoples of these regions still take as normal what we in the West have come to call paranormal. If I were advising a young scientist entering psychical research today, I would reverse Horace Greeley's advice to young Americans of the mid-nineteenth century and say "Go East, young man".

In line with Stevenson's advice, some parapsychologists have travelled East to investigate Indian religious leaders who claim to be able to materialize small objects (e.g. vibuti—a fine grey powder used in Hinduism—statuettes, rings and coins) in their bare hands. For example, Haraldsson and Osis (1977) report witnessing one well-known Indian religious leader (Sathya Sai Baba) producing such phenomena. In addition, Haraldsson (1987) presents a large amount of eyewitness testimony from other individuals claiming to have seen similar events.

Unfortunately, many swamis who claim macro-PK ability have been accused of fraud. For example, May and Jahagirdar (1975) filmed an Indian woman (Mrs Bengale) who apparently materializes 'kum-kum' (a red powder used in Hinduism) while an Indian deity allegedly takes possession of her during a trance state. After careful viewing of the film, May and Jahagirdar (1975) concluded that Mrs Bengale fraudulently produced the powder by quickly reaching into her sari. Haraldsson and Houtkooper (1994) outline evidence of trickery uncovered during their investigation of a relatively little known religious figure named Gyatri Swami. More recently, an Indian national

newspaper (the *Deccan Chronicle*, 23rd November 1992) claimed to possess a film showing Sathya Sai Baba employing trickery to materialize a gold chain (see Haraldsson & Wiseman, 1994).

Many researchers have recognized the importance of 'close-up' magicians (i.e. magicians who perform with small objects within a few feet of their audience) being consulted during this type of research (see, for example, Haraldsson, 1987; Hansen, 1990; Thomas, 1989; Haraldsson & Osiris, 1977). However, despite this widespread recognition, no previous study has involved a magician travelling with researchers to India to help observe, videotape and test claims of macro-PK.

In July 1993 the authors started to redress this balance. EH invited RW to join him on a field trip to India to investigate several swamis claiming macro-PK ability, whom EH had come to know in the course of earlier journeys. This work utilized one of the author's (EH) extensive experience in Indian field research, and the other author's (RW) expertise in conjuring and psychic fraud. This paper outlines our investigations into just one of these individuals, Swami Premananda (SP).

SWAMI PREMANANDA: PAST HISTORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

SP was born in Sri Lanka in 1951. During his childhood he apparently produced many miracles, including the materialization of candy and fruit. His mission as a Swami began in 1969 and was allegedly signalled by the following miracle (*His Holiness Swami Premananda Maharaj*, p. 2):—

One evening He [SP] was addressing about 200 devotees at a religious gathering at Matale when suddenly amidst the wondering gaze of all present a bright light emanated from His whole body, and all of a sudden an ochre (saffron colour) robe that was in two parts appeared on Him.

In 1972 SP established his first ashram (a religious retreat) in Matale, Sri Lanka. This community was destroyed in 1983 during ethnic disturbances and was subsequently relocated to its present site in Premananda Nagar (approximately 20 kilometres from Trichy, Southern India).

SP claims to possess many different types of macro-PK ability. His most frequent demonstrations involve the alleged regurgitation of 'lingams' (small egg-shaped stones) and the production of small objects/vibuti in his bare hands. The former phenomenon only takes place once a year (on Sivaratri night, between February and March) whilst the latter occurs throughout the year.

SP's apparent macro-PK ability has been the subject of only one formal investigation. Thomas (1989) reported filming an ostensible production of vibuti by SP when he visited England in 1985. Her analysis (undertaken with the help of a British magician, Ali Bongo) considered the various ways in which the appearance could have been faked, concluding that the film did not contain enough information to judge whether the phenomenon was genuine or fraudulent.

EH first visited SP's ashram in 1983. At this time the ashram was still officially based in Matale, but had been largely destroyed during the ethnic disturbances. In 1991 EH made a brief visit to SP's new ashram in India. During this trip EH was accompanied by Godwin Samararatne, a highly-regarded teacher of Buddhist meditation and good friend of SP. EH was able

to make some informal observations of SP. On the last day of his visit, SP allowed EH to examine his hands and film an ostensible materialization of vibuti. No firm conclusions could be drawn from this informal investigation, but the trip was a valuable precursor to the work described in the remainder of this paper, and SP promised EH to allow him a formal investigation during a later visit.

METHOD

This section outlines the procedure and the rationale of the method devised to assess SP. Each step of the method was designed to help counter the different types of trickery that could be used to fake the appearance of a small object within an apparently empty hand.¹

a) Washing SP's Hand

It is possible that the production of vibuti could be faked by someone coating his or her fingers with a certain chemical, and his or her thumb with another, such that rubbing these together would result in the formation of an ash-like substance.² For this reason it was proposed that SP's hand would be washed to remove any possible traces of chemicals that might be present.

b) Careful Examination of SP's Hand

A trickster may be able to start the demonstration by having an object concealed in his or her hand. This can be achieved in several ways. For example, magicians have invented many ways of palming small objects, including the 'classic' palm, thumb palm, back palm, front palm, finger palm and deep palm (see Waters, 1988 for descriptions of these palming techniques). These methods have been designed to ensure that the hand concealing the object appears relaxed and natural. In addition, magicians conceal small objects within flesh-coloured containers which can be easily, and effectively, concealed within the hand. These gimmicks may sound as if they would be easy to detect. In reality, they are extremely deceptive and have formed part of magicians' standard arsenal for many centuries.

For these reasons, it was proposed that SP's hand would be thoroughly inspected to ensure that it was not concealing any small objects. This examination would involve asking SP to part all his fingers and hold his hand in a fully open position. The investigator would then feel all over the hand, taking particular care to ensure that the hand contained no small objects or secret containers (e.g. false fingers, thumb-tips, etc.).

c) Preventing the Secret Transfer of an Object into the Hand

Someone might secretly transfer the object into the hand after it had been examined. Magicians have designed many simple, but effective, methods to achieve exactly this. In addition, a magician may simply take the object from

¹ This section will refer to the production of an object. It should be noted that most vibuti (including that 'materialized' by SP) can be made into a pellet (by mixing with plain water or rice water) and can then be treated as an object (see Thomas, 1989).

² It should be noted that at the time of writing the authors are unaware of the existence of any such chemicals.

some easily accessible location (e.g. the waistband of trousers, behind the lapels of a jacket, etc.) whilst observers' attention is distracted or relaxed.

For these reasons, it was decided that, after SP's hand had been examined, a large transparent plastic bag (measuring approximately 7 inches by 12 inches) would be placed over his hand and sealed around his wrist with an elastic band. This measure was designed to prevent SP from being able to secretly move an object into his hand after it had been examined. The bag was transparent, to allow his hand to be videotaped during the entire testing period. Obviously, the bag would be carefully examined prior to testing, in order to ensure that its sides and edges contained no cuts or holes.

d) SP Asked to Produce an Object or Vibuti in his Hand

SP would then be given as much time as he liked to produce an object, or vibuti, in the hand that had been covered by the bag.

e) Re-Examination of Bag and Hand

After an object had appeared and/or the testing was declared finished, the bag would be removed and its sides and edges re-examined for any slits or holes. Particular care would be taken at this stage, as a trickster might attempt to secretly smuggle an object into the bag when it was being removed. Such a stratagem would take advantage of the fact that the investigators might believe the testing to be over and thus relax their vigilance. SP's hand would then be re-examined as described in Stage (b) above.

Additional Points

To minimize the possibility of undetected sleight of hand, SP's other hand would not be allowed to touch the bag during any of the testing period. In addition, all the above would be clearly videotaped. This videotaping would be continuous and SP would be clearly informed that his hand should not leave the view of the camera, or be obscured by any objects or people. Such videotaping is designed to provide a permanent record of the investigation, such that people interested in the assessment need not rely solely upon the eyewitness testimony of the investigators who carried out the tests. In addition, the resulting videotape can be repeatedly reanalysed in several different ways (e.g. in slow motion, shown to expert observers such as magicians) after testing has taken place.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVESTIGATION

On 1st July 1993 the authors travelled to SP's ashram and booked a room for four nights. The authors were accompanied by Hector Samararatne (HS) and Rohana Kumara (RK). HS is the brother of Godwin Samararatne, who had earlier accompanied EH to SP. HS and RK acted as our translators. They had both assisted EH during previous field research within Sri Lanka.

The following day the authors briefly met with SP and he promised us a meeting before we left the ashram. He gave us no precise date or time.

3rd July was 'Gurupoornima' Day. This is a large birthday celebration held in honour of SP. Approximately five hundred people arrived at the ashram and took part in a special service, consisting mainly of a long speech by SP.

The authors videotaped nearly all this service (lasting approximately three hours) in the hope of recording some ostensibly paranormal phenomena. Unfortunately, SP did not produce any phenomena. However, the videotaping helped remind SP of our presence, and one of the authors (EH) presented SP with a large framed photograph that had been taken on a previous visit.

On 4th July SP met our HS and offered to see us the following morning at 8 a.m.

On 5th July, RW, EH, HS and RK arrived at SP's prayer hall at 7.45 a.m. We carefully set up our video camera and ensured that all the apparatus was ready for testing. We sat and waited. By 9 a.m. there was still no sign of SP. At 10 a.m., one of his devotees came to the hall and informed us that SP had developed a sore throat and that he would still see us today, but would not give a specific time for the appointment. We decided to wait in the hall. At 4.15 p.m. SP appeared and took part in one of the daily religious ceremonies held on the ashram. After the service SP asked the adult devotees and ourselves to move closer to him. One of the authors (RW) videotaped the meeting from this point onwards. There were two reasons for this taping. First, it seemed quite possible that SP might have suddenly produced phenomena at any moment during the meeting. Second, the videotape gave us an uninterrupted record of the conversation between ourselves and SP.

Initial Observations and Informal Testing

At 4.30 p.m., SP asked us why we had come to the ashram. EH replied that we were interested in the miracles that he could apparently produce. SP said that even if he did produce such miracles, sceptics would only explain them away as magic tricks. EH explained that we had developed a way to overcome this problem and demonstrated the 'plastic bag' method outlined above.³ Both SP and his devotees found this demonstration highly amusing. SP immediately placed the bag over his hand and spent a few minutes attempting to produce vibuti inside it. When vibuti did not appear, two events took place. First, SP stated that the bag felt "unnatural" and the build-up of moisture inside the bag impeded his ability. Second, SP asked all his devotees to leave the hall so that he might fully concentrate on our testing. The devotees left the hall at 5.30 p.m.

The light in the hall was now becoming quite dim and so we all decided to move to an area behind the hall that was better lit. SP allowed us to place a bag over his hand and attempted to produce vibuti. Again, he was unsuccessful. SP claimed that the presence of the bag felt unnatural and that the camera distracted him. Throughout all this time SP was extremely co-operative, and noted "I never say no; I want to try" and "I want to do this, to make you happy". In addition, he kept his hand relatively stationary to help ensure that it was in the frame of the camera, and seemed eager to ensure that each part of the method had been properly completed. At one stage, he removed the top part of his robe and all the chains around his neck, in order to help minimize any suspicions that they might contain hidden objects. No phenomena were produced during this session.

³ The authors took twelve bags on their trip. These were all kept in a locked container both prior to, and directly following, testing.

At 5.50 p.m., the light had become too dim for videotaping and so we decided to move outside the hall. Again, SP attempted to produce vibuti inside the bag, but failed.

At this point, the authors decided to have a short break. The camera was switched off. The authors posed for photographs (see 'Analysis of the Polaroid Photograph' below) and local devotees asked SP to bless some cloth. Soon after this, SP produced some vibuti in his left hand.⁴ Unfortunately, the camera did not record this production; neither of the authors had his full attention towards SP. It was, therefore, impossible to judge the validity of this phenomenon. However, when the vibuti appeared, RW turned on the camera and EH washed SP's hand and placed it inside one of the bags. Again SP attempted to produce vibuti and again he failed.

Finally, SP stated that he would have one last attempt under formal conditions. He stated that in order to help concentrate his mind he would return to his house and meditate for a short while. In addition, he would hold the session in a location that seemed most natural, namely a small room (which SP used for giving spiritual advice) that was located directly behind the prayer hall. SP also arranged that the session should take place whilst a religious ceremony was being held in the main part of the hall. To help videoing, SP asked one of his devotees to fetch a video light that was housed on the ashram. Finally, SP had complained that the moisture building up was also a distraction. To help overcome this problem, the authors decided that the bag used for testing would be regularly changed.

SP then left the authors, who started to prepare for this final part of the investigation.

Controlled Testing

The authors entered the area behind the main prayer hall and set up the video camera and light. RW checked several bags to ensure that they had not been tampered with but found nothing suspicious. These bags had been kept in a locked case that remained with the authors throughout the testing period.

At approximately 7.30 p.m., SP entered and declared that he was ready for the final session. In addition, a religious ceremony had been arranged and was about to take place in the main hall. SP seated himself in his 'office' area and asked us to sit directly in front of him. After a few minutes of quiet meditation, SP indicated that he was ready and that testing should begin.

Table 1 gives a moment-by-moment description of our resulting videotape. For all this testing SP was naked from the waist upwards. After this videotaping, SP called his devotees to the area behind the prayer hall and informally produced some additional vibuti. However, this production occurred under uncontrolled conditions and thus possessed no evidential value.

Close analysis of the videotape reveals that SP succeeded in producing a small statue and vibuti under *informal* conditions, but could not produce such materializations under controlled conditions. It also reveals that before the production of both the statue and the vibuti, SP's hand moves to his lap, and out of sight of the camera. In addition, when emerging from his lap SP's hand was held in a semi-closed position and was not shown to be empty before an

⁴ See Thomas (1989) for a chemical analysis of the vibuti produced by Swami Premananda.

Table 1

Brief Descriptions of the Events Shown in the Authors' Videotape of SP

- 0 secs: SP extends his left arm and hand horizontally towards EH. [SP chose to use his left hand throughout testing.]
- 5 secs: EH carefully washes, and examines, both sides of SP's LH.
- 35 secs: SP's LH is then dried and the bucket of water moved away. The hand remains open, outstretched, in shot and away from the body for all of this period.
- 40 secs: EH then shows both sides of one of the plastic bags to the camera.
- 45 secs: The bag is shown to be empty and then placed upon SP's outstretched LH. This bag is then sealed around SP's wrist with an elastic band.
- 1 min 5 secs: SP is asked to revolve his LH slowly to show that there is no vibuti or objects in the bag.
- 1 min 20 secs: SP then spends a few moments attempting to produce vibuti with his LH. This mainly involves rubbing the fingers and thumb of his LH. Neither SP's wrist nor his arm is rotated during this time (i.e. the palm of the hand is continuously facing the camera). No vibuti is produced in the bag.
- 2 mins: EH removes this first bag. SP's LH remains outstretched, in camera shot, and does not approach his body.
- 2 mins 10 secs: Due to moisture build-up in the first bag, EH decides to replace the bag. A second bag is shown to the camera and placed over SP's LH.
- 2 mins 25 secs: Again, SP slowly revolves his LH, showing both sides of the hand.
- 2 mins 45 secs: SP again rubs the thumb and fingers of his LH together in an attempt to produce vibuti. Again, neither the wrist nor the arm is rotated. No vibuti is produced. The bag is removed.
- 2 mins 55 secs: SP states that his ability is not working.
- 2 mins 57 secs: SP lifts his LH up to indicate that the testing is finished.
- 2 mins 58 secs: SP's LH falls into his lap (out of sight of the camera).
- 3 mins: SP's LH lifts from lap and back into the view of the camera. The second, third and fourth fingers of the hand are clenched into a fist. His first finger is pointing directly outwards. SP points to EH's hand.
- 3 mins 6 secs: EH holds out his RH, palm up. SP places his (still closed) LH on top of EH's RH. SP starts to make a rubbing movement with his closed fist.
- 3 mins 30 secs: SP opens LH to reveal a small metal statue of a lingam. This is left in EH's RH as SP's LH moves away.
- 3 mins 36 secs: SP states that in EH's hand the power is "working".
- 3 mins 41 secs: SP's LH again moves to his lap, and again out of shot of the camera. SP looks directly at the camera and smiles.
- 3 mins 43 secs: SP's LH emerges from lap, with its back towards the camera. EH takes the hand and places it, with his own RH, into a plastic bag.
- 3 mins 59 secs: HS places a rubber band over the bag, thus sealing it to the wrists of both SP and EH.
- 4 mins 6 secs: SP starts to produce vibuti inside the bag. The vibuti is falling onto EH's RH.
- 4 mins 25 secs: EH asks SP to open his LH up and show its palm to the camera.
- 4 mins 30 secs: SP opens his hand and shows the palm.
- 4 mins 37 secs: The band is removed. SP and EH remove their hands from the bag.
- 4 mins 47 secs: SP lifts his RH from his lap and starts to produce a stream of vibuti. This stream continues until 4 mins 48.45 secs.
- 4 mins 50 secs: SP indicates that the session has finished and that filming should cease. The video light is turned off and filming stops.

apparent materialization occurred. Such data are consistent with SP's secretly taking various objects from his lap before they are apparently 'produced'. However, it should be clearly noted that the videotape reveals no direct evidence of fraud (i.e. the videotape does not contain glimpses of any objects in his lap or hand before they are 'materialized').

Analysis of the Polaroid Photograph

As noted above, during a break from testing, a devotee used our Polaroid camera to take an instant photograph of SP, RW, EH, HS and RK. The resulting photograph showed the group surrounded by a thin line of purple light. In addition, two small purple dots of light emerged over the heads of both SP and RW. Some of the devotees on the ashram felt that this was a demonstration of SP's psychic ability. The following two Polaroid pictures taken by the authors (neither of which featured SP) also contained purple markings. Upon returning to Britain, RW took the film to the head laboratories of Polaroid Corporation. RW was informed⁵ that the code number printed on the back of the photograph revealed that the film was approximately eighteen months outside of date. As a result it seemed quite likely that the chemicals contained in the photograph had deteriorated and caused the effect described above. RW was assured that many other customers had also returned photographs showing exactly the same phenomenon (i.e. purple lines streaked across their films).

DISCUSSION

The investigation represents one of the very few times that the macro-PK ability of an Indian swami has been examined under controlled conditions. This section will discuss some of the factors involved in this investigation and its ramifications for future work of this type.

Several aspects of the method of testing (using the sealed plastic bag) devised for this investigation worked well. It was simple to execute, did not involve the transportation of bulky or delicate apparatus and could be carried out in surroundings that had few amenities. In addition, the authors realized that it was important to gain SP's co-operation during testing and took several steps to help achieve this aim. On our arrival, EH presented SP with a large photograph that had been taken on a previous visit. In addition, the brother of one member of our team (HS) was a very good friend and respected colleague of SP. It is also important, however, to acknowledge the contribution made by SP himself. SP seemed to understand the need for controlled testing. He appreciated that our own observations were not sufficient and that it was necessary to introduce conditions that minimized the possibility of fraud. This understanding, combined with SP's natural enthusiasm, ensured both his full co-operation and his giving a large amount of time over to testing.

The method, did, however, have its limitations. Although SP seemed to approve of the method, he found the bag slightly unnatural and uncomfortable. In addition, the build-up of moisture in the bag impeded videotaping. Also, various pragmatic considerations limited the way in which the testing was

⁵ Our thanks to Stan Wise of the Polaroid Corporation for providing the information discussed in this section.

carried out. For example, the authors would have liked to have used at least two cameras for videotaping (at different angles and distances from SP) but financial constraints meant that only one camera was available.

SP provided us with an opportunity for both informal observation and formal testing.

During informal sessions, SP did not produce any materializations within the plastic bag, but did produce some vibuti when the bag was not on his hand. The evidential nature of this production could not be assessed, due to the informal conditions under which it occurred. This was due, in part, to the investigators' relaxing their attention, and turning off the camera, seconds before this materialization. There are various interpretations that can be put on these events. The relaxation of attention and production of phenomena may have been totally unrelated. Alternatively, the relaxation may have caused the phenomena if it represents a psi-conductive scenario, or if a fraudulent claimant is waiting for such conditions before attempting any trickery. Future investigators should take account of these possibilities. This could include, for example, researchers pretending to relax their attention or turning off a camera whilst, in reality, maintaining close vigilance and surreptitiously continuing filming. Indeed, the authors recommend that these types of investigations are continuously filmed to help record any unexpected, and unanticipated, events which may occur.

During formal testing SP did not produce any phenomena. It could be argued that the conditions imposed upon SP prevented psi phenomena. However, when assessing this notion it is important to realize that the authors took great care to understand fully and incorporate any complaints that SP had concerning our method. For example, at one stage he stated that the commotion surrounding the informal testing (i.e. the presence of the camera and devotees, etc.) was unnatural and prevented him from concentrating on his abilities. In addition, he found the build-up of moisture inside the bag uncomfortable. Both of these problems were taken into account in the design of the final controlled test. This test took place directly after SP had meditated and in a situation that was free of distractions. Also, the bag used for testing was regularly changed to prevent the build-up of moisture.

Immediately following formal testing (and when the bag had been removed from his hand) the authors obtained videotape of SP producing a small statue and vibuti. An analysis of the videotape reveals that before the production of both the statue and the vibuti, SP's hand moves to his lap and out of sight of the camera. In addition, when emerging from his lap SP's hand was never shown to be empty before an apparent materialization occurred. Such data are consistent with SP's secretly taking various objects from his lap before they are apparently 'produced'. However, it should be clearly noted that no direct evidence of fraud was uncovered during this investigation. It is hoped that future investigations of SP will be able to utilize additional controls (i.e. several cameras, SP's being searched before testing and undergoing testing in clothes provided by the investigators) to help provide additional data relating to the validity of his psychic claims.

Finally, a Polaroid photograph of SP and the investigators showed a thin purple 'aura' surrounding the group. Polaroid suggested that this was most

probably caused by the film's being out of date and noted that it was a common problem with their product.

In short, our investigation provided no evidence of macro-PK ability. The only phenomena that occurred did so under informal conditions. Analysis of the videotaped demonstrations is consistent with SP's capitalizing on the investigators' lapse in attention to pick up small objects secretly from his lap and, after a short while, 'materialize' them in his hand. However, no direct evidence of fraud was obtained during the investigation. Finally, the methods used during the investigation (both to prevent possible trickery and to gain SP's co-operation) proved highly successful and it is hoped that these methods may be of help to future investigators who wish to research further the validity of ostensible macro-PK in field settings.

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