TWO INVESTIGATIONS OF OSTE NSIBLE MACRO-PK IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Two individuals in India who claimed to be able to materialize small objects were investigated. The first claimant, Minu Bhowmick, produced ostensible materializations but did not allow herself to be searched prior to these productions nor to be closely observed as they occurred. Circumstantial evidence suggested that the materializations could have been the result of simple sleight-of-hand. The second claimant, Dr AB, succeeded, under informal conditions, in making vibhuti-like powder appear on two framed pictures of Indian deities.

In July 1993 the authors travelled to India to investigate individuals claiming to be able to materialize small objects (e.g. statuettes, rings and vibhuti, a fine-grained powder-like substance) in their bare hands. During EH's many field trips to India in the 70s and 80s he came across a few individuals — most of them working in a religious setting — who claimed to materialize objects or produce other macro-psychokinetic effects, or were reported to do so by their followers. The first two of these field trips (in 1973 and 1975) were a joint project of Karlis Osis and EH (Haraldsson & Osis, 1977; Osis & Haraldsson, 1976; 1979). They, and later EH alone, made informal observations of these individuals (most of whom have since died): Dadaji (actual name Amiyou Roy Chaudry), Mr Kupanna and Ms Ravaliti Veeramani. In some cases it was obvious that the phenomena were fraudulent; in others it was not.

In 1979 EH and J. M. Houtkooper visited India to investigate these persons — who might by comparison to Sathya Sai Baba (Haraldsson, 1987) be referred to as 'mini-babas'. The result of their main investigation has been published (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1994). Chari (1960; 1973) and Rao (1994) have also reported interesting observations and investigations of psychic claimants in India.

The present work describes the second major attempt to investigate the 'mini-babas'. EH's numerous contacts and extensive experience in field research in India and RW's expertise in conjuring and psychic fraud (see, for example, Wiseman & Morris, 1995) seemed a fruitful blend for a successful investigation. The results of two of these investigations have already been reported in this Journal (Wiseman & Haraldsson, 1995; Haraldsson & Wiseman, 1995). What follows comprises observations of two individuals claiming macro-PK ability: Mrs Minu Bhowmick and Dr AB (pseudonym).

MINU BHOWMICK

Mrs Minu Bhowmick (MB) claims that the voice of Sai Baba speaks through her whilst she is in a trance state (her claims are rejected by the Sai Baba movement), and that she can materialize vibhuti (a grey powder), kum-kum (a red powder) and small metal statues.

In 1976 EH carried out a formal investigation of MB in the home of a Mr Banarjee (a retired chartered accountant and acquaintance of EH). Mr
Banarjee had never met MB and had no links with her group. EH searched and sealed one of the rooms in Mr Banarjee's home. EH instructed two women critical of MB to undress her and search carefully through her clothing, long hair, etc. (but they did not examine bodily orifices). MB was then left alone in the testing room. After a few minutes MB was heard to fall to the floor. EH opened the door and found MB apparently unconscious, with vibhuti and kum-kum scattered around her. MB's right hand held a 3-inch statue of Gopala Krishna.

The authors visited MB during their recent trip. Within a few minutes of our arrival MB apparently fell into a trance and lay on the floor. Unfortunately, there were many other people crowded into the room in MB's small apartment — making both filming and accurate observation impossible. When the authors could observe MB they saw that her hands contained both vibhuti and a metal statue (approximately 6 in x 1½ in). We had not examined MB before this materialization nor observed her as she fell to the floor. For these reasons it was not possible to determine the validity of these ostensible materializations.

Twenty minutes later MB fell into a second trance and again lay on the floor with her hands clasped together. MB then opened her hands and showed that they contained a small metal statue. This time the entire episode had been videotaped. Analysis of the videotape showed that as MB rolled from an upright sitting position into a lying position her right hand reached into the upper part of her sari. She then lay down with her arms stretched out in front of her. Her two hands were clasped together and MB did not show them empty before 'producing' the small statue. It is therefore possible that MB simply removed the statue as she fell to the floor.

The authors asked MB if it would be possible to undertake some controlled testing. MB said that Sai Baba had spoken to her (via trance communication) but had failed to give his permission for such testing. After approximately an hour of unsuccessful negotiation the authors left and asked MB to try to obtain Sai Baba's blessing for controlled testing.

The following day MB telephoned the authors and explained that she would like to arrange a second meeting.

As soon as EH stepped into her apartment, MB opened her hand to show that it contained red kum-kum. MB had not been searched (or even observed) prior to this production and thus this could not be regarded as evidential. Whilst seated next to RW, MB placed her hand within her sari. When her hand emerged it was cupped and contained a small pool of nectar. Quickly, she threw herself onto the floor and apparently fell into a trance. The authors explained that the demonstration could not be regarded as evidential because, once again, her hand had not been examined before the 'production'. MB then firmly stated that she would not allow any further investigation.

Dr AB

Prior to our visit to Calcutta, our hosts (Mr Nandkishore Jalan and Dr B. Shamsukha, old friends of EH) kindly arranged for Dr AB to travel from New Delhi and meet us, which he did the day after we arrived. AB has a Ph.D. in physics from the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, and has also studied at Imperial College of Science and Technology in London. He currently
teaches quantum physics at an Indian college. He became interested in meditation a few years ago and became a committed meditator. Not long ago vibhuti started to appear occasionally in his hands, and on framed pictures near him, when he meditated. According to AB, he kept this a secret from all but close members of his family, but had told his friend Dr. B. Shamsukha about it, and he persuaded him to come and meet us in Calcutta.

This was not the first time that EH had heard such a claim. On previous trips he had met a few people, in particular Mr. Kupanna, a retired public servant in Bangalore, Ms. Ravalti Veeramani of Madras, and Mr. N. S. Sethuramon, a wealthy industrialist, all of whom have since died, who reported that vibhuti appeared near them or in their hands when they were practising meditation. Osis and EH observed the phenomenon many years ago when a photograph they had brought with them and which remained under their constant observation, with no one else touching it, gathered a few specks of whitish vibhuti or dust. This occurred in a small room during a bhajan (psalm-singing) session conducted by Mr. Kupanna. Because of the very small amount that gathered on the photograph, the results were considered ambiguous. No further investigation was conducted and Mr. Kupanna died soon afterwards. Previously Osis and EH had been told by Dr. B. K. Bhattacharya, then head of the Department of Chemistry at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, that he with a colleague had observed a similar incident with Mr. Kupanna.

The authors first asked AB to demonstrate his ability when they met him at lunch on 16th July. He declined to do it at that time. Later that day the authors were asked to speak at a conference hosted by the Institute for Survival and Rebirth Research (Director Dr. B. Shamsukha). At the conclusion of our talks the conference organizer asked AB to come forward and attempt to demonstrate his ability. AB gave a long address on Indian philosophy and quantum physics and then unwrapped two large (8in x 10½in) framed pictures of an Indian saint and a deity (Guru Nanak and Lord Shiva). Each picture consisted of a print under thick glass surrounded by an aluminium frame. These pictures were given to the authors (and other members of the audience) for examination. On inspection both seemed to be normal. EH wiped the pictures with a handkerchief to be sure that no substance resided on the glass or the frames. They were then handed back to AB, who stood them upright on two chairs. The authors closely watched the pictures and AB as he sat cross-legged on the floor approximately six feet in front of the chairs. The audience sat further away behind him. AB started to meditate and the assembled crowd were asked to help concentrate on the pictures.

After approximately ten minutes AB ceased meditating. The authors were invited to pick up the pictures and re-examine them, which they did. A few spots of greyish vibhuti-like powder were clearly present on the frames of both pictures, enough to make a thumb look greyish when stroked over the frame. No powder was visible on the surfaces of the glass. These spots of powder were particularly visible on the top parts of the frames, where they stood up like bristles.

The following morning the authors arranged for AB to visit our hotel. To our disappointment he could not be persuaded to repeat the previous day's demonstration. He said he had already meditated in the morning, was in a
light mood and was going shopping before leaving Calcutta that day. AB kindly gave RW one of the pictures used during his demonstration and departed. We left Calcutta the same afternoon.

There are two main ways in which the appearance of the vibhuti could have been fabricated.

First, a small amount of powder may have been smeared on the frame (e.g. as it was positioned on the chairs). The authors observed AB as he placed the frames on the chairs and did not see anything suspicious. The demonstration took us by surprise and we had left our video camera in the hotel. Thus we were unable to take full advantage of the opportunity that AB gave us.

Second, a chemical may have reacted with the aluminium to produce a small amount of powder. This hypothesis was raised when RW lectured to a group of Indian magicians in Calcutta. RW took the picture along to the group and described what had happened. The magicians suggested that this effect could be obtained by treating the aluminium frame with mercuric chloride. Upon returning to Britain, RW took the frame to the University of Hertfordshire’s Chemistry Department. A small portion of the frame was treated with concentrated mercuric chloride and after initial failure some whitish dust appeared on the frame which did look like the material AB produced, but it did not stand out from the frame in the same way.

Banerjee (1999) has suggested that the powder could be produced by lactic acid reacting with moisture. To test this hypothesis RW took the frame to the University’s Biosciences Department. Lactic acid was applied to the frame, but failed to react either with the aluminium or with moisture or air. A third set of hypotheses came from the chemists who carried out the mercuric chloride testing. They suggested that sodium hydroxide (caustic soda) or hydrochloric acid might react with the aluminium to produce a white powder (sodium aluminate or aluminium trichloride). Both these chemicals stained the surface of the frame and did indeed produce a small amount of powder. However, again this powder did not stand out from the frame.

Discussion

The second claimant (AB) succeeded in making vibhuti-like powder appear on two aluminium frames under informal conditions. The vibhuti may have got onto the frames as they were being placed on their chair. However, we did not observe that. The phenomena may have been produced by the secret application of a chemical to the frames, which again we did not observe. In the circumstances, this appearance of vibhuti-like powder on two aluminium frames, under our constant surveillance, was the most puzzling observation we made during our tour.

AB’s demonstration occurred under informal conditions. However, no limitations were imposed upon us by AB, and we were free to examine whatever we wanted. In contrast to the case with MB, the problems were caused not by lighting and moisture levels (the demonstration took place in a large well-lit hall) but rather by the suddenness of the event and the social circumstances under which it happened. Hence, the authors had not thought through an adequate test procedure nor had they brought a video camera to record the event. Finally, the authors had little control or, rather, failed to
impose sufficient control, over the demonstration as it was organized and
carried out by AB, who, we must add, was very co-operative. Apparently AB
chose the position of the chairs on which the frames were placed (directly
below a large fan), and the order in which people (including himself) handled
the pictures, but this, however, seemed accidental.

When investigators are caught unprepared, flaws are likely to occur. In retro-
spect, we should have (and could have) examined the pictures immediately
after they were placed on the chairs and before AB started meditating, and
we should have collected a sample of the very fine-grained substance we later
found on the frames. EH thought of doing so but realized that we had no
small container for a sample of this kind and no appropriate tool to collect
such small quantities. The fact that RW managed to acquire one of the pictures
used during the demonstration allowed the authors to assess retrospectively
some possible normal (i.e. non-psi) explanations for the phenomena.

The appearance of a powder-like substance on the frames as AB meditated
was the most interesting event of our tour, and remains to be investigated
further in future research with AB, which could resolve the question whether
these effects are normal or paranormal.

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