

REACTIONS TO AND AN ASSESSMENT OF A VIDEOTAPE ON SATHYA SAI BABA

by ERLENDUR HARALDSSON and RICHARD WISEMAN

ABSTRACT

Sai Baba has a prolific history of performing a variety of ostensible psychic feats. A recent claim of 'exposure' was published in the *Deccan Chronicle*. A careful analysis of the film involved reveals a hand movement which led to the allegation and would have given Sai Baba the opportunity to use sleight-of-hand. Whether he did so or not cannot be firmly determined by examining the film. There is need to distinguish carefully between allegation and proof of trickery. The paper discusses the difficulties encountered by researchers wishing to assess psychic claimants on the basis of filmed evidence.

A great deal of early psychical research was concerned with individuals claiming to manifest directly observable psychic phenomena. However, by the middle of this century most parapsychologists, particularly in the English-speaking countries, had almost completely refocused their attention away from such phenomena, instead concentrating on trying to establish experimental evidence for psi by running studies on 'undistinguished' subjects, in well-controlled procedures and requiring statistics to evaluate significance (Rush, 1986; Stevenson, 1990).

There may have been valid reasons for this shift but that does not change the fact that the study of psychic claimants could prove vitally important for parapsychology. It has also been argued (see Braude, 1986) that, like many other human abilities (e.g. creativity), psychic ability may best be studied *in extremis*, and in the environment in which it naturally occurs. Or, as Karlis Osis once remarked, "When we have a full flame, why only study the sparks?"

The 'full flame' Dr Osis was referring to was Sai Baba, whom he met along with the first author in 1973. About no contemporary individual has there been such abundance of claims of paranormal experiences, physical as well as mental, as in the case of Sathya Sai Baba (Haraldsson, 1987; Murphet, 1971). Only two parapsychologists, the first author and Dr Osis, have bothered to attempt to investigate the claims about Sai Baba (Haraldsson & Osis, 1977; Osis & Haraldsson, 1979). There are three relevant studies concerning other Hindu swamis who are also reported to materialize objects, although not nearly as frequently as Sathya Sai Baba. In 1979 the first author and J. M. Houtkooper investigated Gyatri Swami (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1994). On a recent trip to India the authors investigated or observed three persons who were claiming macro-PK ability, two of them working in a religious setting; Swami Premananda (Wiseman & Haraldsson, 1995) and Minu Bhowmick. Swami Premananda was the subject of an interesting study conducted by Thomas (1989) during Swami Premananda's visit to England some years ago.

SATHYA SAI BABA : BACKGROUND

Sai Baba was born in 1926 and has a prolific history of performing ostensible psychic feats that stretches over half a century (Haraldsson, 1987; 1988). Sai Baba has also become the most prominent contemporary religious leader in India and his movement has grown immensely both within India and in many other countries. In the process he has increasingly become of interest to sociologists, scholars of religion and anthropologists (Babb, 1983; 1986; 1987; Bassuk, 1987; Klass, 1991; Lee, 1982; Sharma, 1986; Swallow, 1982; Taylor, 1987).

Sai Baba's success as a religious leader is due, in part, to his ability to produce a variety of ostensible psychic phenomena, which are readily reported by numerous witnesses who meet Sai Baba. These include readings of people's private lives and problems, apparitional experiences of Sai Baba in distant places, healings, light phenomena and, most frequently of all, materializations of single small objects (e.g. ornaments, sweets, etc.) and even rare productions of whole meals for groups of people (Haraldsson & Osis, 1977; Osis & Haraldsson, 1979). Some of these phenomena resemble the miracles described in the New Testament. The paranormal feats Sai Baba is reported to perform seem to surpass anything claimed about any modern psychic. As Jerome Clark (1988) stated in a review of the first author's book on Sai Baba (Haraldsson, 1988):—

... they make the fierce controversy over whether Uri Geller bends spoons by psychokinesis or sleight-of-hand no more than a frivolous exercise.

Regrettably, Sai Baba has never yielded to requests for him to participate in controlled experimental testing of his apparent abilities. As a result the evidence supporting his phenomena consists of informal observations, a wealth of eyewitness testimony, and films/videotapes when he is seen producing allegedly paranormal physical phenomena (see Haraldsson & Osis, 1977; Osis & Haraldsson, 1979; Haraldsson, 1987).⁴Sai Baba's phenomena occur (perhaps as often as 15-20 times per day) in the course of his interactions with people, in public as well as in private, and, as far as the physical phenomena are concerned, they are always in the form of gifts to those present. Sai Baba spends much time in the public eye, as his day is mostly spent meeting people in small groups or individually. Hence a very large number of people have witnessed his phenomena.

Some individuals have suggested that Sai Baba's phenomena are fake. For example, a well-known magician, Milbourne Christopher (1979, pp.114-116) notes that these phenomena read like magic tricks, but admits that he has not personally observed Sai Baba. Also, B. Premanand (an Indian magician sceptical of psychic phenomena) believes that all 'Godmen' are frauds, and has published various methods which could be used to produce this type of phenomenon fraudulently (Jones, 1992). There have been some further accusations of fraud (Beyerstein, 1990) but no direct evidence of trickery.

Many attempts have been made to discover more direct evidence of trickery. Osis and Haraldsson, as well as an investigative committee chaired by Dr Narasimhaiah (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bangalore) failed to get Sai Baba's co-operation for a controlled investigation. Through a national

controversy that followed in the Indian media, the committee examined over a thousand letters received from the public relating to Sai Baba. None contained any substantive evidence of fraud (Haraldsson, 1987).

Although Sai Baba's phenomena often sound like magic tricks (Hansen, 1987), various arguments have been proposed to support the notion that Sai Baba may not engage in trickery. Some are listed below.

1 Over the last five decades Sai Baba has had many close associates, who inevitably should know if fraud is taking place. They had access to Sai Baba's living quarters, and took care of his personal belongings. If Sai Baba is receiving large supplies of objects for the alleged materializations of objects (perhaps as many as ten to twenty every day), he would have to store them in his residence and his associates should know about them, as well as those who produce them and transport them to Puttaparti. The turnover of Sai Baba's associates has been large over the past 45-50 years, since most of them have been either young men, who would later marry, take up some occupation and leave the ashram, or retired persons who for natural reasons would also not stay long with Sai Baba. A few of those close associates have turned their back on Sai Baba and left his movement. The first author (Haraldsson, 1987) has interviewed these persons at length. All reported that they were as baffled by the phenomena the day they left Baba's ashram as the first day they observed them. None reported having observed fraud of any kind, although they readily criticized some other aspects of Sai Baba's life or teaching.

2 One Indian magician, Dr Fanibunda, who has received an award from the International Brotherhood of Magicians for his accomplishments (for more details see *Linking Ring* 34 (9)—November 1954), has had ample opportunity to observe Sai Baba closely and has also filmed him extensively. He reports that he quickly became convinced that the phenomena are genuine and rejects the sleight-of-hand hypothesis.

3 Apparently Sai Baba sometimes produces objects in response to specific situations, on demand, or, for example, fruits out of season and not locally available, or rare objects. Sometimes in group audiences Sai Baba may, for example, produce an amount of sweets onto the palm of someone's hand. He then distributes all the sweets until they are finished. Then a new person comes along who was not seen by Sai Baba, or was absent, and asks for a piece. Sai Baba then produces more of the same thing. Haraldsson and Osis observed such an incident.

4 After being outdoors for hours Sai Baba is reported to produce steaming-hot foods, so hot that those present find them hard to hold. He does this dressed, as always in the hot Indian climate, in one thin robe, which, when there is a breeze, falls rather tight to his body. He also seems to produce his phenomena with the same ease and frequency whether he is in his interview room, travelling in a car or an aeroplane, or when he is somewhere outdoors on a journey.

5 The steady stream of phenomena has been a source of endless amazement to those around Sai Baba, who include a number of highly qualified Indian scientists, such as Dr S. Bhagwantam, Director of the prestigious Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, Dr V. K. Gokak, former Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University, and Dr D. K. Banerjee, former head of the chemistry

department of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. These gentlemen observed Sai Baba closely over a period of many years, and became convinced of the genuineness of the phenomena.

An extensive discussion of these arguments, pro and contra, the strengths and weaknesses of each of them, is beyond the scope of this paper, but the reader may be referred to an earlier work of the first author (Haraldsson, 1988).

However, if Sai Baba's phenomena are fraudulent, why, after so many years of their being constantly observed, and frequently filmed, has no firm evidence of trickery emerged? Three explanations seem possible.

First, Hansen (1987; 1990) has noted that observers of such phenomena often possess almost no expertise in 'close-up' conjuring (i.e. magic performed with small objects such as coins and playing cards within a few feet of the audience), and as a result may have failed to detect potential evidence of fraud. Indeed, many researchers have recognized the importance of 'close-up' magicians' being consulted during this type of research (see, for example, Hansen, 1987, pp.185-186; Thomas, 1989, p.385; Haraldsson, 1987, pp.212-213). It was for this reason that the first author invited the second author (a psychologist and close-up magician) to join him on a recent trip to India. Contrasting Hansen's explanation is the testimony of Fanibunda, who is a very skilled magician.

Second, many of the films of Sai Baba have been taken and edited by Sai Baba devotees (for example, films by Richard Bock). The films available on the market are usually heavily edited such that it is quite impossible to judge the evidential nature of the phenomena in question. It seems possible that any films which do show potential evidence of trickery are simply not released, or that the portions in question are edited out before distribution. On the other hand, professional film crews and curious visitors have filmed Sai Baba extensively, as has the first author, and none of these persons has come forward with evidence suggesting fraud. Until recently guests at Puttaparti were free to film Sai Baba as much as they wanted when he appeared in public. For reasons of crowding and security this is no longer possible.

Third, it is also possible that the phenomena produced by Sai Baba are genuine and that he has not been caught cheating simply because he does not cheat.

THE ACCUSATION

In November 1992 an Indian newspaper claimed to possess film footage clearly showing Sai Baba fraudulently 'materializing' a gold chain. This claim, if valid, would represent the first time that strong evidence of fraud has surfaced. For this reason, the authors decided to try to obtain a copy of this film footage during a visit to India in July 1993.

On Sai Baba's birthday, 23rd November 1992, the *Deccan Chronicle* (an English daily newspaper of Hyderabad) published a story with the front-page headline: "DD TAPE UNVEILS BABA 'MAGIC' ". In the article it is claimed that a film taken by the Indian Television (Doordarshan, or DD) at a large function in Hyderabad on 29th August 1992 showed Sai Baba secretly taking a gold chain from the hand of an assistant, swirling his hand, and producing the chain in his usual 'miraculous' way. The paper claimed that the 'secret'

exchange of the chain occurred as the assistant handed Sai Baba a 'memento' (a large cup standing on a square wooden base), which was then presented to the architect of the hall.

This event apparently took place at the inauguration of a large festival hall in the presence of the Indian Prime Minister, Mr P. V. Narasimha Rao, the Speaker of the Indian Parliament, Mr Shivraj Patil, and several other dignitaries. The *Deccan Chronicle* reported that the Indian Television had deputed four camera teams to "cover the massive function". Furthermore the paper stated that at the Hyderabad Doordarshan (the local branch of the Indian State Television) "all efforts are being made at the highest levels to destroy every shred of evidence that such a tape ever existed". This accusation was later denied by the director of the Indian Television.

The *Deccan Chronicle* printed five blurred photographs of individual frames from the tape with the following captions:—

1. Sathya Sai Baba receiving the memento to be presented [to the architect of the building] from his personal assistant.
2. At the same time he slips his right hand under the memento and
3. Takes the gold chain from his personal assistant.
4. The Baba swirls his hand, and 'produces' the gold chain.

In the article it is further stated:—

A source said the tape showed the faithful personal assistant of the Baba, while handing over the memento to him, was hesitating initially and then slowly passed on the chain into the hands of the Baba. Then, just after presenting the memento to the architect, the Baba quickly passed it into his right hand and closed the fist. In the succeeding frames, DD officials saw the Baba raising his fist and waving it in thin air.

The top brass panicked on seeing the graphic images being played out on the video monitors. Then, according to highly reliable sources . . . all copies of the tape were "destroyed". A master tape is believed to have been sealed off and stored in the archives of the DD. The sources believed that too would be destroyed in the course of time.

PUBLIC REACTION

A visit to India in July 1993 gave the authors an opportunity to investigate this claim of fraudulent exposure. In Hyderabad we met the executive editor of the *Deccan Chronicle*, Mr P. N. V. Nair, who supplied us with more information about the incident and helped us obtain a copy of the well-guarded tape. This was achieved, in part, by the first author agreeing to be interviewed by the *Deccan Chronicle*. The resulting article did not correctly reflect the views of EH and distorted some of his statements.

According to Mr Nair the *Deccan Chronicle* received some two hundred readers' letters regarding their story. It published 28 letters, 18 of which were complimentary about the article and 10 were not.

The complimentary letters fell into the following categories. First, some were congratulating the *Deccan Chronicle* on possessing the strength of will to publish the information—the same letters often condemned the DD for not broadcasting the footage in question. For example on 25th November Mr S. Sanjeevi wrote:—

Hats off to your bold expose . . . Once again the *Deccan Chronicle* has proved

itself to be a straightforward newspaper. You have succeeded where the DD has failed morally.

Second, many of the letters were supportive of the exposé but maintained that people should still have respect for the spiritual advice given by Sai Baba. For example, on 25th November B. V. Rao noted:—

No doubt the Baba is a great philosopher and philanthropist doing yeoman service, but he need not perform fake miracles to attract people. Such actions will only make him unpopular.

Finally, many of the letters stressed that it was unfortunate that so many government officials were in attendance at the event in question. For example, on 25th November S. K. Kumar wrote:—

The accolades and patronage that he [SB] receives from the President of India, the Prime Minister and scores of top politicians speak volumes of the superstitions that the VIPs practise. This is a lesson that they should learn and stop fooling around with public funds, wasting it on visiting Godmen.

The letters attacking the article fell into the following categories. First, some accepted the accusation of cheating, but felt that Sai Baba should not have been exposed because of the good work that he carries out in the community. For example, on 25th November K. S. Rao noted:—

His [SB's] only care has been for the people . . . If Baba has employed a mild deception to give the semblance of supernatural power where there was none, it has not harmed anybody. So, why do you seek to destroy this one small light in the otherwise sordid world of politicians, goondas and newspapers seeking sensationalism?

Second, others felt that the attack was unfair because SB did not actually claim that he had materialized this particular chain from thin air. For example, on 29th November B. V. R. K. Theerthulu wrote:—

A great man must be excused for a small mistake. If the Baba had pronounced that he would create a gold chain out of thin air, then one would look for the hows and whys. If the Baba had not specifically said that he would be doing so, then the rest is the handiwork of the press to malign the Baba.

Third, some writers noted that the article had failed to expose Sai Baba because it did not account for the many other miracles which he is alleged to have produced. For example, on 26th November Capt. L. N. Rammath noted:—

I feel it is needless to recount here the scores of benevolent miracles, graced by Baba on many of us, in the war zone and in peace areas, within and without India, far away from Baba's physical presence.

One letter not published by the newspaper was written by D. S. Rao of Secunderabad on 24th November. It brought a counter-allegation of fraud. He suggested that the suspicious handling of the memento between Sai Baba and his assistant was merely due to the excessive weight of the memento. Furthermore he stated that the film "did not show even an IOTA of what is claimed", namely that Sai Baba is taking the necklace from his personal assistant. Secondly, D. S. Rao speculated that it was no accident that the tape was so blurred and suggested that the photographs used by the newspaper may have been deliberately blurred to allow a false accusation to be sustained, and the film may have been the result of careful editing and mixing.

This letter was not published by the *Deccan Chronicle* (the authors found it in a file shown to them by the editor), and as a result D. S. Rao wrote to the

Indian Press Council (letter dated 5th December 1992) complaining of unfair coverage and defaming of Sai Baba. The *Deccan Chronicle* was acquitted of unfair reporting as it was found by the Indian Press Council to have published views from both sides. Hence Rao's letter was not published and his complaint not upheld.

THE INVESTIGATION

The authors have carried out a careful analysis of the tape supplied by Mr Nair. Sai Baba is seen standing on the podium of the hall. Several people are seated at the back of the podium, facing the audience. A large and apparently fairly heavy memento (probably about eighteen inches square at its base) is brought by an assistant, Mr Radhakrishna Menon (RM). The memento, held with four hands by Sai Baba and RM, is handed over to the architect who designed the building, Mr R. Chakrapani.

Immediately after he receives it, Sai Baba makes a circular sweeping movement with his right hand, in which appears suddenly a gold-coloured ornament, or necklace, which he places around the neck of Mr Chakrapani. This whole sequence of events takes about 17 seconds (see Table 1).

To assess the possibility of sleight-of-hand it is important to study two crucial moments on the videotape. The first is when Sai Baba puts his hands under the memento apparently to support its weight. There is a moment of hesitation as the weight is shifted, during which Sai Baba's left hand and RM's right hand touch, or nearly touch. At this moment the necklace could have changed hands from RM to Sai Baba.

The other crucial moment is when Sai Baba lets go of the memento, places his right hand under the memento, and possibly touches his left hand. At this moment Sai Baba could have shifted the necklace from his left to his right hand.

In the *Deccan Chronicle* it is stated that Sai Baba "takes the gold chain from his personal assistant". However, this definitely cannot be seen on the tape. The chain is not seen until it appears at the end of the swirling circular movement of Sai Baba's right hand.

The meeting and touching of Sai Baba's and the assistant's hands would have given the assistant an opportunity to pass an object into Sai Baba's hand. The question is, however, did such a transfer take place? The tape does not contain enough information to assess this question with any certainty. If such transfer did not occur there needs to be another explanation for why Sai Baba moved his hand over to his assistant's hand. Was it to help him support the heavy memento until it was safely in the hands of the architect, or was there some other reason? We can only guess.

The *Deccan Chronicle* did not report anyone present at the function on 29th August observing fraud. In a brief phone conversation with the authors the architect rejected any discussion of the incident.

The Quality of the Videotape

The quality and resolution of the tape leaves much to be desired and limits the inferences that can be drawn from it. The second author took the videotape to a company which specializes in investigating corporate fraud. This

Table 1

Sequences of Movements with Timings as Seen on the Videotape

- 0 sec Sai Baba (SB) waves to the public and walks to the right. Radhakrishna Menon (RM) enters from the right, facing left, holding the memento (weight 3-10 kg?) in both hands. RM turns towards the camera.
- 3 sec SB puts both hands under the memento, his left hand being close by or touching the right hand of RM. There is a slight awkward movement of SB's hands (not of RM's); this movement lasts no longer than 0.4 sec.
- 9 sec SB stoops down a little, making a beckoning movement towards the architect, R. Chakrapani (RC).
- 10 sec RC walks towards SB and touches the memento.
- 11 sec RM and SB loosen their grip on the memento, leaving it in the hands of RC.
- 12 sec As they do so, SB moves his right hand, which is closest to the camera, under the memento, possibly touching his left hand. SB moves his right hand, which is half closed, to his left.
- 14 sec SB makes two and a half wide round-sweeping movements with his right hand. In the middle of the final sweep something appears out of his hand.
- 17 sec This is a necklace, which SB adorns RC with.

company possesses some of the world's best equipment designed to enhance poor-quality videotape.

The technician kindly offered to enhance the videotape in question. The videotape was run through a real-time Snell & Wilcox 'Kudos Noise Reducer'. This machine carries out three operations. First, it removes via 'recursive filters' the random 'noise' on the tape caused by repeated copying. Second, it improves the 'graininess' of the video by 'median filters' and finally it enhances any edges on the video through 'edge enhancement filters'. After all of this the video is certainly easier to watch, and did not contain much of the random 'noise' present on the copy that the authors have of the original tape. However, the resulting tape still did not reveal further information about the incident. In short, the reason for Sai Baba's hand movements still appears unclear and open to various interpretations, but the tape contained no firm evidence of fraud.

The company also analysed several still frames taken from the video. These were scanned into a computer and run through an 'Improve' image processing system (developed by the Home Office in Britain). Again, the images were enhanced via 'median filters' and certain areas of the frames were enlarged. The resulting photographs show the crucial moment as Sai Baba's hands touch under the memento, but do not reveal any further information.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Sai Baba film/videotape has illustrated the difficulties encountered by researchers wishing to assess psychic claimants on the basis of filmed or taped evidence.

First, such material is often recorded under less-than-ideal conditions. This is often due to the people involved in filming having a completely different agenda from researchers. The Doordarshan film crew were sent to cover an event, not to assess Sai Baba's alleged materializations.

Second, film crews (especially those involved in covering news items) have to edit their footage over a short period and often quickly dispose of the original unedited footage. Such editing can severely limit the inferences that can be drawn from the resulting film. Footage of Sai Baba (and perhaps his personal assistant) before and after the above episode could have provided valuable information. It may, for example, have shown the assistant secretly taking the chain from his pocket, and carefully positioning it under the memento. Alternatively, it may have shown Sai Baba having problems holding the weight of the mementoes previous to the incident discussed above. The former scenario would have provided further evidence for the 'fraud' hypothesis, the latter for the 'non-fraud' hypothesis.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, the quality of the film footage is rarely good enough for it to be stated unequivocally that a certain event is, or is not, due to trickery. This can be the case for many reasons. The information needed to assess accurately a fraud hypothesis is often occluded on the film and/or occurs off-camera. In the present example the viewer ideally needed to see exactly what happens under the memento as it is handed to Sai Baba. The angle at which the event was filmed means that the happenings under the memento are occluded. This problem can be particularly difficult to overcome, especially if a skilled trickster is able to see the position of the camera and execute his or her sleight-of-hand in such a way as to prevent accurate recording of any trickery. Information on a film may also be blurred. Such blurring might be due to the attempted filming of rapid events, or multiple copying of the tape leading to poor picture quality. This latter problem certainly occurred in the present example, and may have been exacerbated by technicians constantly replaying (and therefore helping to degenerate) the part of the tape containing the incident in question.

The brief video recording contains a hand movement of Sai Baba's which is open to different interpretations and hence looks suspect to some (to a greater or lesser degree) and not to others. It would have given Sai Baba an opportunity to receive an object from the hand of his assistant, especially if the latter had some skill in handing over an object of this kind and size. Whether he did so or not cannot be seen on the tape. The statement made by the *Deccan Chronicle* that Sai Baba "takes the gold chain from his assistant" is not corroborated by the tape nor by the picture they print. Though it looks suspicious, it offers no unequivocal evidence of fraud.

We are told that the *Deccan Chronicle* article echoed through much of the Indian press, apparently without any additional journalist viewing the videotape. The news of Sai Baba's 'exposure' also spread abroad, especially among groups of sceptics who circulated the news of the 'exposure' without examining the tape (Fragell, 1993). One well-known British daily newspaper (*The Independent*) carried the following description of the incident (McGirk, 1994):—

An Indian state television team last year recorded Mr Rao's last visit to Sai Baba's ashram, in which the guru made a gold watch materialise from nowhere. The prime minister was understandably impressed. But when the film was played back, slow-motion, in the editing room, it revealed that the guru's 'miracle' was a tawdry sleight-of-hand. Senior directors at Doordarshan, the state television network, suppressed the film clip for fear of angering the prime minister's favourite godman.

This is a clear example of how a videotape containing a scene where sleight-of-hand *may* have occurred can become an allegation that trickery has in fact taken place (besides getting other facts wrong). This is then interpreted as an exposure, and is echoed unverified by the media. Recently Stevenson (1992) has wisely stressed the need for researchers to distinguish carefully between allegations of cheating and proof of cheating.

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*Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie
und Psychohygiene*

D-79104 Freiburg i. Br., Eichhalde 12, GERMANY

ERLENDUR HARALDSSON

Psychology Division

University of Hertfordshire

College Lane, Hatfield AL10 9AB

RICHARD WISEMAN

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