

# THE APPEARANCE AND DISAPPEARANCE OF OBJECTS IN THE PRESENCE OF SRI SATHYA SAI BABA

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## ABSTRACT

During three field trips to India to study claims suggestive of psi-phenomena the investigators were able to observe at close range some unexplained occurrences which took place in the presence of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Although no conclusions can be reached on the phenomena observed and described in this account because they occurred under informal conditions, it seemed worth while to report the events because of the challenge they offer to carry out further studies of this well-known Indian religious leader under well-controlled experimental conditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Ostensibly paranormal appearances and disappearances of objects have been reported in various cultures. The phenomenon consists of an object appearing or disappearing in circumstances where no physical cause of the event can be detected. In cases where paranormal creation of the object is assumed, the process is usually referred to as "materialization". When an already existing object is "brought" by paranormal means from one place to another without visible means of travel, the phenomenon is called "teleportation" and the object is referred to as an "apport." Teleportation is said to occur in poltergeist cases (Bender, 1969; Owen, 1964; Roll, 1974). Materializations of human forms have been reported in the presence of mediums (Carrington, 1954; Hannesson, 1924; Richet, 1923; Schrenck-Notzing, 1920). Indian popular literature describes appearances of inanimate objects, usually amulets made of precious materials and said to have magical properties such as providing protective contact with a guru (Yogananda, 1969).

The appearance and disappearance of objects is of course one of the favorite illusions created by stage magicians. With the help of astonishing dexterity, diversion of attention, and some gadgetry, objects have "appeared" and "disappeared" on the magic show stage without any detection of the tricks of the trade by the audience. Enterprising showmen throughout recorded history have produced "spirits" and "demons" in religious settings in their claim to demonstrate "supernatural" phenomena.

On close scrutiny the bulk of the claims for materialization and teleportation have been explained in quite natural (and sometimes entertaining) ways (Carrington, 1920). Nevertheless, there are a few reports which keep the question open, e.g., Crookes' (1874) report on Florence Cook and D.D. Home, and the reports on Rudi Schneider by Lord Hope (1933) and Schrenck-Notzing (1920). More recently, Eisenbud's (1967) observations of Ted Serios suggest some kind of materialization interfering with light in photographic and television process.

In spite of considerable research done in this area by psychical researchers early in this century, claims of materialization and allied phenomena have generally been frowned upon and rejected by nearly all present-day parapsychologists (Eisenbud, 1975). We too shared this point of view and did not give serious consideration to such phenomena until our encounters with Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

Sathya Sai Baba, age 51, is a religious leader who has a large following and lives in the State of Andhra Pradesh in southern India. He is not only credited by his followers and many others with a variety of psychokinetic powers (such as materializations, teleportations, and healings) but also with various forms of extrasensory perception and out-of-body projections collectively perceived. Several popular books have already been published about him, all of which deal in part with his paranormal phenomena (Kasturi, 1973-4; Murphet, 1971; Sandweiss, 1975; Schulman, 1971). We first encountered reports of these phenomena when researching deathbed visions in India in 1972-73.

During two subsequent visits to India in late 1973 and early 1975 we met with Sai Baba several times and also had lengthy interviews with a number of persons, including Indian research scientists, who had observed or experienced psychic phenomena of various kinds which they attributed to him. E.H. made another visit to India in January, 1976, for further observations and interviews with Sai Baba. In a series of interviews, we had the opportunity to discuss these matters with Sai Baba himself and to observe him in action. He speaks English but often prefers to use an interpreter. He tends to belittle the significance of his own psychic phenomena, calling them "small items," and he repeatedly stresses the importance of spiritual and ethical issues. Our bid for formal experiments was rejected with the comment that he would only use his paranormal powers for religious purposes such as helping his devotees when they are in dire need or for invoking faith in hitherto agnostic persons, but never for purely demonstrative purposes. During the 11 interviews we had with Sai Baba, however, he did spontaneously display a number of the same phenomena for which he has become famous in India.

Interviews with Sai Baba are generally not prearranged. People who want to meet him - usually several hundred - gather outside his residence in the ashram. Twice a day he makes his rounds for a short while and chooses those he wants to see. Many wait for weeks in vain and are never granted an interview either in a group or in private. Sai Baba's interview room, where most of the phenomena we are

reporting occurred, is bare, with concrete walls and floor and without carpets or any decorations. The only furniture in the room was one armchair. During our interviews we all sat crosslegged on the floor. The number of persons present with Sai Baba varied from only E.H. and K.O. to about nine persons. We observed some 21 appearances and disappearances of objects at close range, but none under controlled conditions. We shall describe four instances of these phenomena and then attempt a very tentative evaluation of their genuineness.

## THE INCIDENTS

### 1. Appearance of a "Rudraksha"

The first of these phenomena concerns the possibly paranormal appearance of a "rudraksha," which is similar to an acorn, about an inch in diameter, and with a fine texture like an apricot stone. First Sai Baba presented us both with some "vibuti" (holy ash, which is probably comparable symbolically to bread and wine in Christianity). He gave us the vibuti after a typical wave of his right hand, palm down, in small circular movements that lasted two or three seconds. After a short discussion he presented one of us (K.O.) with a large gold ring<sup>[3]</sup>, again after having waved his hand in a typical manner.

While we were arguing with Sai Baba about the value of science and controlled experimentation, he turned the discussion to his favorite topic, the spiritual life, which in his view should be as "grown together" with ordinary daily life as a "double rudraksha." We did not understand this term nor could the interpreter translate it. Sai Baba seemed to make several efforts to make its meaning clear to us until he gave up and with some signs of impatience closed his fist and waved his hand. he then opened his palm and showed us a double rudraksha, which we are told by Indian botanists is a rare specimen in nature like a twin orange or twin apple.

We observed Sai Baba closely all the time we sat on the floor. After we had admired the rudraksha, Sai Baba took it back in his hand and, turning to E.H., said he wanted to give him a present. He enclosed the rudraksha between both his hands, blew on it, and opened his hands toward E.H. In his palm we again saw a double rudraksha, but it now had a golden ornamental shield on each side of it. These shields were about an inch in diameter and held together by golden chains on both sides. On top of the shield was a golden cross with a small ruby affixed to it. Behind the cross was an opening so that this ornament<sup>[4]</sup> could be hung on a chain and worn around the neck. Many, but not all, of the ornaments which Sai Baba presents to people are said to be made of precious metals and stones.

Sai Baba wears a one-piece robe with sleeves that reach his wrists. We watched his hands very closely and could not see him take anything from his sleeves or reach toward his bushy hair, clothing, or any other hiding place.

It was not possible for us to examine Sai Baba's clothing. On one occasion, however, we had an opportunity to examine two robes he had worn. He reportedly always wears robes of the same sort and when they start to wear out he gives them away. The two we examined contained no pockets of any kind or any signs of magician's paraphernalia having been attached.

We became acquainted with a former professor of chemistry in Bangalore, Dr. D.K.Banerji. One day Sai Baba visited him and his wife unexpectedly and "produced" some objects for them, as he does almost everywhere he goes. As he retired for the night in their house, he asked Mrs. Banerji to wash his robe, which she did. On this occasion she, Dr. Banerji, and a colleague of his, Dr. P.K. Bhattacharya (doctorate in chemistry from Illinois), carefully examined Sai Baba's robe and found that it had no pockets. Dr. Banerji was formerly the director of the Department of Organic Chemistry at the All India Institute of Science, which is a leading research institute in India. These three persons reported this incident to us during two independent interviews.

In an interview during his third visit to Sai Baba, E.H. repeatedly saw the sun shine through Sai Baba's thin, silken sleeves as he was sitting on a chair approximately five to six feet away from him. The late afternoon sun was shining through the window of the interview room where a few people were sitting on the floor around him. Most of the interview was spent on a discussion. But Sai Baba also produced a few objects which he gave to those present. As Sai Baba was sitting on a chair his arms were approximately at the head-level of those sitting on the floor close to him. The sun shining through Sai Baba's sleeves did not reveal any shadows that might indicate the presence of hidden objects. Sitting that close to Sai Baba, E.H. could several times see up his sleeve, which appeared to be empty.

## **2. DISAPPEARANCE OF A PICTURE FROM K.O.'S RING**

This episode concerns the gold ring that Sai Baba had presented to K.O. during our first visit. This ring had a large enameled picture in color of Sai Baba encased in it. The picture was of oval shape, about 2 cm long and 1 1/2 cm wide, and was framed by the ring. The edges of the ring above and below the enameled picture, together with four little notches that protruded over it from the circular golden frame, kept it fixed in the ring. Thus the picture was set as firmly in the ring as if it and the ring were one solid article.

In an interview during our second visit then 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. We looked for it on the floor, but no trace of it could be found. The frame and the notches that should have held the picture were undamaged; we examined them afterwards with a magnifying glass. For the picture to have fallen out of the frame, it would have been necessary to bend at least one of the notches and probably

also to bend the frame at some point, but neither had been done. Another alternative would have been to break the picture in the ring so that it would fall out in pieces.

When Sai Baba made us aware of the picture's absence we were sitting on the floor about five or six feet away from him. We had not shaken hands when we entered the room and he did not reach out to us or touch us. As we sat cross-legged on the floor, K.O. had his hands on his thighs and E.H. had noticed the picture in the ring during the interview and before this incident occurred. E.H.'s first reaction was that the picture had suddenly become transparent. Two persons, Dr. D.Sabnani from Hong Kong and Mrs. L.Hirdaramani from Ceylon, whom we had met for the first time during the interview, certified that they had observed the large golden ring with Sai Baba's picture on K.O.'s left hand before the picture disappeared. When the picture could not be found, Sai Baba Somewhat teasingly remarked, "This was my experiment."

During our next interview, which took place two days later, Sai baba asked K.O. if he wanted the picture back, to which K.O. replied that he did. On Sai Baba's demand, K.O. gave him the ring which he took in his hand and asked, "Do you want the same picture or a different one?" "The same," K.O. replied. Sai Baba then closed his fingers around the ring in his palm, brought it to about six inches from his mouth, blew at it lightly, and then stretching his hand toward us, opened it. In it was a ring. The enameled picture was like the one that had been framed in the first ring; the ring itself, however, was different. The first incident, the disappearance of the picture, was obviously more evidential than was its reappearance, about which there is not much we can say.

### **3. RING AND NECKLACE FOR Mr. AND Mrs. KRYSTAL**

During the aforementioned interview we observed an interesting phenomenon. A lawyer from Los Angeles and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Krystal, were present with us. Their 33rd wedding anniversary was around that day and Sai Baba seemed to be happy about the occasion. He waved his hand and as he opened his fist we saw a golden ring. He handed it to Mrs. Krystal, telling her to put it on one of her husband's fingers, as is customary for the bride to do at a traditional Indian wedding. Sai Baba's open hand was still stretched out in the air without having touched his clothing or any object. We watched closely. Immediately thereafter Sai Baba waved his hand again for two or three seconds, turned palm down, and quickly closed it. His arm was approximately horizontal to the ground, which was not a position favorable for slipping something out of his sleeve by means of gravity. We observed at close range as Sai Baba loosened the grip of his fist so that he could hold a large, bulky necklace in his hand. Its double length was about 20 to 29 inches and it contained a variety of different kinds of stones interspaced by small golden pieces. Attached to it was a picture of Sai Baba surrounded by a golden rosette frame about two inches in diameter. This necklace was presented to Mrs. Krystal.

## **4. APPEARANCE OF VIBUTI (HOLY ASH)**

The fourth incident of possible materialization that we observed and will report upon here occurred in the open. We sat cross-legged on the ground in a long line of people as Sai Baba walked by. He stopped in front of Professor Hasra, a friend of Dr. Banerji, whom we mentioned above. Professor Hasra was sitting second to the left of K.O. and third from E.H. Sai Baba waved his right hand. As we were sitting on the ground and he was standing, his hand was slightly above the level of our eyes.

His palm was open and turned downwards, and his fingers were stretched out as he waved his hand in a few quick, small circles. As he did this, we observed a gray substance appearing close to his palm. This substance appeared just below and at his palm, and Sai Baba seemed to grasp it into his fist with a quick downward movement of his hand as if to prevent it from falling to the ground. K.O., who sat slightly closer to Sai Baba than did E.H. observed that this material first appeared entirely in the form of granules, like very rough-grained sand. Sai Baba then poured the granules into the palms of Drs. Hasra and Banerji and most of them disintegrated into amorphous ash which they smeared on their foreheads. The point is that the granules were very fragile and would have lost their structure if produced by the magician's art of quick movements ("the hand is faster than the eye") which were invisible to us. When K.O. first saw the vibuti (holy ash), the granules were intact. This ostensible materialization of vibuti is a frequent occurrence and Sai Baba produces it several times as he walks among the crowd. We observed many such incidents, but only this one at so short a distance.

## **DISCUSSION**

The alleged paranormal appearance and disappearance of objects has been a tough problem for psychical research in the sense that observations are rarely permitted under conditions which would exclude all possible normal causes. We were prepared to make instrumented observations with movie cameras and small sealed or locked enclosures wherein we hoped the objects would appear. Unfortunately, we were told not to use these in Sai Baba's interview room. We filmed him outdoors, waving his hand and producing holy ash, but not at close enough range for decisive analysis. All we have are observations made under semi-spontaneous conditions. Therefore, all our conclusions have to be extremely tentative.

Let us spell out some hypothetical normal explanations for the incidents we observed:

1. We might have been in altered states of consciousness, like mass hypnosis, and have responded to skillful suggestion techniques by "seeing" what was not there and overlooking actual, observable events. For example, the late Carl Vett

(personal communication) explained his observations of the Indian rope trick in this way. We are both psychologists and can state with confidence that we did not undergo any altered states during our interviews with Sai Baba. We were very much on our guard at all times. Moreover, the objects produced (the double rudraksha and the gold ring with the enamel picture) are still in our possession.

2. The objects might have been provided by an accomplice in the interview room. This is not possible because objects also appeared when we were alone in the room with Sai Baba. Moreover, the seating positions often excluded such a possibility, e.g., when he was seated at some distance from the other persons. Those present were visitors who varied from interview to interview. Only at our first visit in 1973 was an interpreter used who was also an "officebearer" of Sai Baba's organization.

3. The interview room might have contained concealed devices which somehow ejected the objects we observed. The room was barren of anything which could be so used. Sai Baba usually sat cross-legged on the concrete floor out of reach of any possible containers, such as a shopping bag on a windowsill, in which packages of vibuti or other small objects might be concealed. The place where he sat varied from interview to interview, and he was not positioned at one particular spot when the incidents occurred. He also produced objects outdoors and in a private room.

4. Sai Baba might have concealed the objects on his person and produced them by sleight-of-hand. We heard rumors about this possibility which suggested hiding places such as the sleeves of his robe, hidden pockets, and even his hair. However, we found no one who could offer firsthand observations or who could name someone who had made firsthand observations supporting this hypothesis.

We consider hypothesis 1-3 to be unreasonable and not worth further discussion. However, the sleight-of-hand hypothesis needs careful consideration because magicians do make objects seem to appear and disappear by this method.

Now back to our experiences with Sai baba. We 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. It must also be stated that under the given conditions we were not able to detect any evidence of fraud.

Consideration of the following points leads us to regard Sai Baba's phenomena as possibly paranormal:

1. Lengthy history without clear detection of fraud. According to those who have had a long association with Sai Baba, the seemingly paranormal flow of objects

has lasted for some 40 years, or since his childhood. Most of the persons we met who had had even just one meeting with him reported having observed some ostensible materialization phenomena. We did not meet anyone who claimed personal observations indicative of Sai Baba having produced the objects by normal means.

2. Reports of the occurrence of other psi-phenomena, such as ESP over distance, giving messages in dreams, healing, out-of-body projections collectively perceived, and PK of heavy objects.

3. Variety of circumstances in which objects appear: during private interviews, while traveling in a car, outdoors in the presence of crowds, in private homes, etc. Almost every time we saw Sai Baba, in public or in private, objects were produced.

4. 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.

5. Reported production of large objects, e.g., a bowl the size of a dinner plate, and a basket of sweets 20 inches in diameter.

6. Production of objects at a distance from Sai Baba, such as prayer beads appearing on the windshield of a car being driven along an open country road, holy ash appearing on Sai Baba's pictures (observed by two senior research scientists), fruit appearing directly in the visitor's hand, etc.

7. Several prominent scientists in India have had the opportunity of observing Sai Baba extensively and have become convinced about the genuineness of the phenomena. Among them is Dr. S. Bhagwantam, former director of the All India Institute of Science (the most prestigious scientific institute in India) and a prominent nuclear physicist in India. We have already mentioned Dr. D.K. Banerji and Dr. P.K. Bhattacharya in the Department of Chemistry at the All India Institute of Science in Bangalore. We can also mention Dr. K. Venkatesan of the same institute who has worked in research at M.I.T. and Stanford University. Further we can mention Dr. V.K. Gokak, a former president of Bangalore University. We have met all these men, and they told us of a number of phenomena that they had observed in a variety of circumstances.

Of special interest, of course, is the wearing apparel in which objects might be concealed. Sai Baba wears a robe with sleeves of about the same length and width as those of our Western jackets. This garment is buttoned from the neck down, about the length of the sternum bone, and does not have any other openings or pockets that we could see; it is all one piece down to his ankles. As stated above, we had the opportunity of examining one of his discarded robes and found no pockets, slings, suspicious seam corners, or any other hiding places in it.

Another point brought out by several witnesses was that the kinds of things Sai Baba produces, for instance ash, would soil his robe if they were concealed in it. We saw him produce ash as many as four times during one appearance. After each production his hands were dirty with ash, but neither we nor the witnesses we interviewed ever detected ash on his clothes. Sometimes the ash was produced in large quantities - two palms held together filled with ash, as witnessed by a college teacher and her psychologist husband. Among other things produced were Indian sweets and foods cooked in butter, which would certainly soil anything they contacted. One of us (E.H.) observed the production of oil, and a medical doctor who was formerly a faculty member at a medical school observed amrita, also a liquid, coming out of Sai Baba's hands.

We consulted a professional magician living in New York, Douglas Henning, who has given sophisticated performances in large cities in several countries. He was recommended to us as one of the most knowledgeable magicians in the world. He 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. He also said that if Sai Baba does produce objects upon demand, this would be a feat no magician could duplicate.

We also interviewed a British-trained Indian dental surgeon, Dr. Eruch Fanibunda, who is an amateur magician and has written two books on magic. He has taken motion pictures of Sai Baba and traveled with him, but has not observed any magician's tricks.

The most impressive incident we personally observed 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. We do not have a reasonable normal explanation for this disappearance.

We realize that without adequate experimental conditions the evidence will never be conclusive. However, it seems to us that the variety and richness of the phenomena associated with Sai Baba may provide unique research opportunities for both Western and Indian scientists.

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[2] This research was financed through the A.S.P.R.'s James Kidd inheritance fund and by an anonymous donor in Iceland to whom we are grateful.

[3] A goldsmith later examined this ring and found that it is made of gold. It was appraised at \$100.

[4] A goldsmith later examined this ornament and found that it contains 22-carat gold. Its value was appraised at \$80. The small ruby was examined by the Gem Testing Laboratory of the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Because of the closed setting behind the stone it was not possible to determine whether it is a natural or a synthetic ruby. A botanist's microscopic examination of the rudraksha showed it to be a genuine example of its species.

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