

Report on an Indian Swami Claiming to Materialize Objects: The Value and Limitations of Field Observations

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Abstract — In India there are frequent and widely accepted claims of materializations of objects or substances which are usually associated with the activities of religious persons, such as Hindu swamis, and are sometimes reported to occur during religious ceremonies. Such claims, if substantiated, could have a major influence on the development of the studies of anomalous phenomena. This report describes an attempt to investigate the claims concerning a little known swami, Gyatri Swami. The difficulties involved in working in a religious setting are described in order to demonstrate the limitations to which this sort of research is subject. Conclusions are left as much as possible to the reader, because these claims frequently warrant no clearcut verdict. However, in the case of Gyatri Swami we reached a negative conclusion regarding his claims.

Keywords: Materialization, macro-PK, swamis, India.

Introduction

Materialization phenomena in India have been reported together with various other puzzling phenomena, such as miraculous religious conversions, unexplainable healings, profound changes of habits and attitudes in people, precognition and clairvoyance, and so-called bilocation, or people appearing physically at the same time at two widely distant locations (Babb, 1986; Chari, 1960; Haraldsson 1987; Haraldsson & Osis, 1977; Osis & Haraldsson, 1979; Yogananda, 1949).

Of all reported phenomena, some apparently of a paranormal nature and some not or doubtfully so, the materialization phenomena reported to occur in India are outstanding in several ways. First, if they are not done by trickery, they are paranormal indeed. Second, they are different from paranormal phenomena reported in Europe or North America. Some poltergeist cases suggest the occurrence of materializations, but never as voluntary acts by an agent, as they appear to be in India. Third, compared with the relatively well-established paranormal phenomena, these Indian materialization phenomena are of such a gross nature that the confirmation of their existence could considerably influence the development of parapsychology. For example, it seems difficult to accommodate materialization phenomena with observational theory, one of the likeliest candidates for an explanation of paranormal phenomena (see, e.g.,

Houtkooper, 1983). It is but a small consolation that perhaps no theory fares better. In his review of theories of psi, Stokes (1987) dismisses spontaneous paranormal phenomena as possibly having normal causes. It is therefore certainly a challenge to establish better evidence for materialization phenomena.

These materialization phenomena are reported to occur in association with religiously significant individuals, sometimes called "godmen" or "swamis." Some of these swamis are considered to be holy by their devotees, and even to be true incarnations of (a) God. This all has to be placed against the background of Hinduism, both as a religion and especially as a culture, which is difficult to grasp in all its details and shades by the Westerner who has not made a thorough study of it. Hinduism, both as religion and as culture, varies slightly from place to place, not surprising, as over a dozen different major languages are spoken in India, many with their own alphabet. Moreover, Hinduism has no central organization and is particularly open to new enterprising religious leaders and movements. Its beliefs and practices are of a confusing variety, ranging from "the veneration of trees, stones and snakes in villages scarcely out of the Stone Age to the abstract metaphysical speculations of sophisticated urban intellectuals whose attainments have been recognized by British knighthoods, Nobel prizes, and entrance into international learned societies" (Organ, 1974, p. 1).

In the course of several journeys to India, and in particular during investigations of Sathya Sai Baba (currently the best-known of Indian "godmen"), EH learned of a few other persons alleged to produce paranormal physical phenomena, mostly materializations of vibhuti (a commonly used sacred powder-like substance) or small objects. The phenomena resembled those of Sai Baba, but these persons performed their feats on a much smaller scale, both in quantity and in variety, than did Sai Baba. They were also more easily accessible than Sai Baba, since they had relatively small groups of followers around them. Hence, they seemed potential candidates for investigation and controlled observation. All of them worked in a religious setting.

The first person of this kind whom EH met was Mr. Kupanna, a retired public servant in Bangalore. His acquaintances unanimously considered him an honest and highly religious man who spent much time in meditation. He was much devoted to Sai Baba, although he had never met him or visited Puttapparti, where Sai Baba lives. Kupanna had regular religious meetings (bhajans) in his one-room apartment, where many photos of Sai Baba were hanging on the walls, some partly covered with vibhuti that was believed to have miraculously appeared on the photos, a common phenomenon reported in the Sai Baba movement (see Haraldsson, 1987, pp. 236-238). The unusual thing about Kupanna was that, when the religious meetings were over, he often found his hands containing vibhuti; sometimes they were full of vibhuti. On one occasion he showed his vibhuti-covered hands to Dr. Karlis Osis and EH at the end of a meeting.

The second person was Mrs. Revatamma, a sister of two twin singers who stayed for a long time with Sai Baba. Revatamma herself had also spent time

with Sai Baba. EH has been told by more than one witness that, during Revatamma's stay in Puttaparti and later, vibhuti would sometimes appear in her hands. Revatamma gradually drifted away from the Sai Baba movement. EH finally traced her to Madras in the late 1970s, where she had a few disciples. She was sick and died soon thereafter.

A third person was Mrs. Minu Bhowmick, a lady in Calcutta who would fall into trances and then reportedly find her hands full of vibhuti and sometimes kumkum, another substance considered sacred in Hinduism (Wiseman & Haraldsson, unpublished).

A fourth person is Swami Premananda who was born in Matale in Sri Lanka, and who in 1972 established an ashram near Tiruchirapalli in South-India. On certain religious festival days he has demonstrated alleged regurgitations of "lingams" (small religious objects made of stone) and on various occasions the production of small objects, and of vibhuti. He has been the subject of two investigations of his abilities (Thomas, 1989; Wiseman & Haraldsson, in press).

EH also came to know Gyatri Swami, who was also reputed to materialize physical objects. He seemed a possible subject for detailed observations; and the remainder of this paper is principally devoted to a report of our observations of Gyatri Swami.

Since most of these materialization phenomena are apparently produced voluntarily by the agent (the swami), the possibility of doing experiments is not excluded in principle. Therefore, on a journey to India in 1979-1980 the authors prepared for a possible experiment.

Preparations for the 1979-1980 Study in India

The preparations for the study in India that we carried out in December 1979 and January 1980 consisted of taking with us audio and video recording equipment, as well as a super 8 mm film camera, a small hand-held metal detector, photo cameras, and a few "special objects" prepared expressly for this trip. Each "special object" consisted of a closed (melted shut) glass tube containing a statuette of a well-known Indian religious figure, Gopalakrishna (the god Krishna as a baby). The experiment we had in mind would consist of the swami trying to dematerialize the statue, or to materialize something else within the glass tube, or to change the statuette in any way. Quite special about these objects was that the statuettes (1-2 cm in size) had been collected by EH during an earlier field trip in India on occasions where they were purported to have been materialized. This hardly makes a reproducible experimental condition, although some 10 statuettes were available, but the most difficult part of the experiment was of course to persuade a swami to try to alter the contents of one of these tubes. Frankly, for this fool-proof experiment we thought it unlikely that we would find a willing swami. The glass-tube test was suggested by an event observed by EH in connection with Sai Baba. A stone from a ring on Dr. Karlis Osis's finger had suddenly disappeared, the ring itself having ear-

lier been ostensibly materialized by Sai Baba (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977, pp. 43-44, 213-214).

In addition to this intended experiment, we also hoped to get some evidence for the materialization phenomena by the method usual in field research, that is, careful observations. As a further precaution against fraud, we intended to film sessions with a tripod-mounted video camera, and to examine persons and objects with a metal detector before and during sessions.

The Case of Gyatri Swami

On an earlier field trip EH had met Gyatri Swami (GS) (real name: A. Padmanabha Sharma), a Brahmin and native of Kerala. GS was rather well known in Madras for materializing idols "for worship." He travelled around the state of Tamil Nadu and performed religious services ("pujas") in the homes of well-to-do Hindu families, and he was apparently in considerable demand. (Unlike most other swamis GS had no group of devoted followers around him.) On three occasions, EH observed how GS produced, among other things, small silvery statuettes, representing Gopalakrishna and other traditional Hindu religious figures, usually by taking them out of fruits which he cut open as they were given as offerings during long-winded pujas. These observations were quite informal. Also present on one of these occasions was the late C.T.K. Chari, a retired professor of philosophy at Madras Christian College who was thoroughly familiar with the Indian psychic scene and had made several interesting contributions to parapsychological journals (Chari, 1960, 1973). On this occasion GS agreed to give to us an unopened coconut which he said might contain a metal statue. We had the coconut x-rayed before it was opened. It contained no metal.

There seemed no doubt that statues were in the fruits when GS opened them. The question was: How did they get there? GS had been rather evasive, and there was no opportunity to impose even minimal controls. In spite of that, we decided to meet GS again during our next visit to India and to try to impose stricter controls; we were determined to solve the question of how the statues got into the fruits.

At the time of our 1979 visit, Gyatri Swami was 45 years old. About 8 years earlier he had started doing materializations, according to his brother, the Supreme Court lawyer Mr. Subrahmanya Iyer of Madras.

First Meeting

On Friday, December 14, 1979, we paid a visit to Mr. Subrahmanya Iyer (SI) at his house in Georgetown, the oldest part of Madras. SI is a well-educated man who has on occasion travelled to Europe. About two or three years earlier he had become convinced of his brother's powers, when he suffered from a swelling near his eye that had to be operated upon. A few days before the planned operation his brother offered to cure him. GS stroked his eyelid with

some vibhuti, after which the swelling "became ripe" and subsequently disappeared, all in a matter of minutes.

SI told us that his brother would travel by train that night, to go to Tiruchirappalli (usually shortened to Trichy), about 300 km to the southwest, but that he expected GS to visit him briefly before his departure.

Shortly after SI mentioned a visit by GS, GS himself entered the room, accompanied by two or three other persons. GS is a stockily built man, about 1.6 meters in height, which is by no means unusual in India. He has rather irregularly placed teeth. He was clothed in a long rose shirt and a white dhoti, the Indian equivalent of trousers. After greeting him, we continued our conversation with SI, who told a somewhat long and tall story (about a lawyer who meets his fate in hell, but who talks himself out of it). After this, we made an appointment with GS, for the following Sunday (December 16) in Trichy at the house of a professor of Tamil, the language spoken in that part of India. GS referred to a religious ceremony that was to take place in Trichy, and we were free to attend it.

Then, on leaving, as if shaking hands with us, GS handed us both some small objects: EH received a large elongated rudraksha (a rough kernel of a fruit) and JMH a smaller rudraksha and a small stone statue of the god Ganesh (the elephant god, associated with "good luck and strength"). This was done while giving the impression of materialization, but GS left without our questioning him extensively on the source of these objects. Moreover, language was a problem, as GS speaks almost no English.

Sunday December 16th

The next day we took the train to Trichy and made an appointment with Mr. C. Thirumeni, professor and head of the Department of Tamil at the National College at Trichy, for the following day (December 16) at 9:30 a.m., to attend a puja.

When we arrived at the house of Professor Thirumeni, we found a crowd of not fewer than 40 people, in a room about 5 meters wide and 6 meters long. The room was lit by sparse daylight from one side, while on the other side a 150-watt light bulb was hanging from the ceiling and a fluorescent tube was on the wall. Lighting conditions were therefore rather poor. Among the people present were Professor Thirumeni, his brother (a professor of Botany), and the head of the college, who is a professor of Economics. There were also three or four Brahmin monks, chanting mantras (religious formulas) and performing some religious ceremonies.

GS was already present and he greeted us. We were taken to the side and shown by members of the family a coconut cut in half with a golden statue of the god Ganesh in it, and we were told that GS had opened it that morning. JMH was given a silvery statue of Krishna by GS. Then we had to find a place for ourselves in the crowded room, and we chose a place on the floor at the side

of where some trays with fruit (apples and oranges), a watermelon, and some pots with flowers had been placed on the floor. We were told that the fruit had been bought by our hosts in the market the day before, although some were brought by other people present. Among the people present were family members, acquaintances, and neighbors, as is customary when a puja is held.

While we were finding a place for ourselves on the floor, setting up the video camera, and trying to do something about the electric lighting, GS sat himself on the floor almost under the video camera, so that we had to move it back a little. GS sat during the puja about 2 meters away from us both, JMH standing behind the video camera on GS's left, while EH was sitting on the floor more in front, but also on the left side of GS. GS started his part of the religious ceremony by cutting some oranges. He usually took them in his hand, squeezed them somewhat, and then took a knife and cut into them. Most often he made just one cut and then, placing both thumbs in the cut, broke the fruit open; but sometimes he made a few cuts. Statues appeared from virtually all of the fruits.

Meanwhile the videotape was running. GS opened a large watermelon. He did this by placing the fruit before him and making some cuts into the fruit in various directions. Finally he cut a substantial section out of the fruit. A silvery statue appeared to be in it; it looked as though it was merged with the flesh of the fruit. GS cut the fruit fully open and picked out a large silvery statue about 12 cm in height and width and about 5-7 cm thick.

Everything went smoothly. After some time, EH asked GS to hand him a fruit while it was still unopened. GS was apparently in good spirits and offered EH an orange and indicated, by handing EH the knife that he was holding, that EH was to open the fruit himself. EH first examined the orange from all sides and showed it to the video camera. He squeezed it a little to see whether any juice would come out; none did, and the fruit looked immaculate. Then he applied the knife, and as he cut only about 2 cm in it, he hit something hard. Breaking the orange open in swami-fashion (both thumbs in the cut), he found a silvery statue of the ape-god Hanuman! During this, EH was holding the fruit by himself, GS was about 1 meter away, out of hand reach, and nobody else came near.

Most of the numerous fruits in front of GS were oranges and apples, with a few bananas. Most of them contained one statue of a silvery metal; a very few contained two statues or no statue. Somewhat later during this ceremony, a couple of people attracted the attention of JMH, asking him to give to GS an apple which they had brought. The apple, certainly a good-looking specimen, was handed to GS in due time. This time the process was more difficult. GS banged the apple on the floor, kneaded it, and made a small cut in it; but finally he opened it, and a statue (representing Mahalakshmi) came out. This apple, like the others, was opened from the upper side (that is, the side opposite where the stalk was). Both this apple, with the statue, and the orange opened by EH were collected by us for later examination.

Some time after this, GS turned to a bucket-size pot with water, hitherto covered by a brass tray. He said that the water was "sea water," and he started

to take out of the water conches, sea shells that are spiral-formed like the shells of snails. We were both handed some of the conches and invited to taste the water in them, which was definitely salty. We were told that what was special about these conches was their form: that of a left-handed spiral, whereas the vast majority of conches are of the right-handed variety. We were further told that these left-handed conches are regarded as sacred in India. In particular, there is a traditional image of the god Vishnu in which he is pictured blowing on such a conch. The left-handed conches were said to be rare in nature and therefore regarded as priceless. Often they are owned by temples.

About 8 of these sizeable (hand-sized or even bigger) conches were taken out of the water and put on a tray with the collection of statues. After the conches, several more statues of various sizes were also taken out of the water. Among these was a large statuette of Gopalakrishna, similar to a piece EH has at his home, obtained during one of his earlier visits to India.

After this, GS turned his attention to another, similar pot with water, but one covered with flowers. GS put his hands into the water and took out several necklaces, called *jappamalas*. These have a religious function (like rosaries) and contain five different kinds of precious stones. The tray (about 40 cm wide) on which all the pieces were collected was now quite full, with 40-50 statues, the conches, and the necklaces.

Some people brought in a tin vessel, covered with a lid and about 15 cm in diameter and some 8-10 cm high, of the type that is commonly used (in India) for storing food. GS took this and held it for a little while, mentioning that it was full of water and that he would take conches out of it. Then he opened it and took out 6 or 7 white conches, smaller than the ones obtained earlier but also of the left-handed type. Both EH and JMH were handed one and told to taste the water; the water was salty. JMH considered the conch handed to him as a gift and put it in his pocket.

Some minutes passed, while the Brahmins sang mantras. Then EH asked the professor of Botany, Mr. Srinivasan, to show GS one of the glass tubes and to ask him to make the statue that is in it disappear, or to put something more in it, or to change it in any way. As we mentioned earlier, the glass tube contained a small (1-2 cm) statue of Gopalakrishna, obtained from GS on an earlier visit. Mr. Srinivasan handed the glass tube to GS, telling him something. (We were later told that he said that the statue had been kept in the glass tube for 2 years to make sure it was genuine and would not disappear!) GS took the glass tube in his hand for some time and returned it to us, smiling; but it was unchanged.

Some speeches were then made by Mr. Srinivasan, by EH, and by the head of the college, followed by some remarks by GS, translated by Mr. Srinivasan. Afterward the meeting started to dissolve; some people left, and some remained talking with each other. GS left and went into another room; but as he was leaving the house, we asked him where we could meet him next. He replied that he would be at the house of a Mr. Venugopal that same afternoon, and that the next morning a *puja* would be held at the house of a Mr. Jagannathan. After that he might travel to Kerala, farther to the southwest.

Some Notes Made After the Puja of December 16th

During the puja at Professor Thirumeni's house, we were given some information by our host, his brother, and some other guests. Also present was a journalist, Mr. Ramanarasu, who was a correspondent of a newspaper, *The Hindu*. We learned that GS performed a public function at the Plaza Theater, each day of his stay in Trichy, from 1 to 4 in the afternoon. GS is a native of Malabar, Kerala, and Professor Thirumeni had known him for about 5 or 6 months.

It should be told how JMH came into the possession of a small left-handed—and therefore rare—conch. As we mentioned earlier, he had put it in his pocket, wrapped in a paper handkerchief, regarding it as a gift. However, that was not the end of the story. When GS divided the statues and other objects some argument arose, apparently because something was missing. Someone pointed to JMH, and another person, interpreting for GS, asked whether JMH had a conch. He replied yes and took it out of his pocket, showing the precious object to them. JMH conveyed, perhaps a bit awkwardly, his impression that this had been a gift. All right, said GS, perhaps to avoid embarrassment, and so the specimen stayed in JMH's possession. (We will return later to our subsequent findings about this conch.)

After we returned to our hotel, we reviewed what we had experienced that day. Definite conclusions were hard to draw, but we had observed quite a few unusual things. Foremost was the case of the orange opened by EH, the two halves of which were there to examine. This orange looked undamaged before it was opened, and after it was examined nobody touched it except EH, who had opened it. It therefore seemed to have been, before being opened, an ostensible paranormal object! However, this orange, like many or maybe all of the others, had loose skin, somewhat like a mandarin, so that there was some room in it. Furthermore, we discovered in both halves a few small tears, opposite the place where EH had cut it. Therefore, although the origin of these tears was unclear, they were suggestive of the statue having been pushed in. The skin could have returned to its original position without discoloration, since the time span between the insertion of the statue and our examination would have been short. Moreover, the flesh of the fruit had not been seriously damaged, so that no juice would have dripped out during its squeezing. Therefore, convincing as it might have seemed, the case of the orange was not beyond suspicion.

Then we had the watermelon to consider. However, we had not examined it before it was opened, and so a hole in its underside would have gone unnoticed, had it been prepared beforehand.

The case of the apple, handed by JMH to GS, was also suspicious. Most of the apples were banged on the floor before they were opened. This usually took place away from us, to GS's right. This particular apple gave him difficulty; that was clear from the expression on his face. He banged it several times on the floor and squeezed it a few times, and then, as if not entirely satisfied, he

opened it somewhat reluctantly. Inside was a small statue of Mahalakshmi, about 4 cm high and 1-1.5 cm wide.

Then we also had the small conch. We later learned its biological name and whether its type is really rare. There seemed to be such a quantity of them!

What happened to our glass tube is perhaps typical of swamis like GS: he looked at it, smiled, and did nothing. This may have been because of the wrongly translated instructions to him: We did not want the statuette in it preserved, we wanted GS to make it disappear. However, after this, our chances of getting GS to do something with a glass tube seemed not good.

After reviewing the events of the puja, we tried to make an appointment with Mr. R. Venugopal for the same afternoon and learned that for some reason the puja at his house had been cancelled. (We later met him in friendly circumstances and found him to be just as reserved about, but interested in, GS as we were.) We concentrated therefore on preparing for the puja to be held at the house of Mr. Jagannathan on the following morning.

Mr. Venugopal, a retired supervising engineer of the public works department, directed us to a Mr. T. N. Sundaran Rajan, an electrical engineer, who was most helpful in obtaining some electric lighting for the following morning. He had some acquaintances or relatives who had earlier received left-handed conches from GS, and he took us to the homes of a couple of these people, where we were in a most friendly manner shown some of these conches. Some of them measured about 15-20 cm; they were indeed of the left-handed type and were very much treasured by their owners.

Monday December 17th

The puja was to take place at the house of Mr. P. G. Jagannathan, B.Sc., commandant of the paramilitary police forces, whose looks reflected his occupation. He is a big, strong, and sharp man, used to commanding people around him. We visited his house on Sunday night to look at the physical layout and acquaint ourselves with our hosts. Mrs. Jagannathan is an impressive woman, leaving little doubt as to who is in command in her house.

As agreed with the Jagannathans, we arrived at their house on Monday at 9 a.m., since the puja was to start at 10 a.m., and we wanted to prepare things better than we had the day before. Thus we had time to arrange lighting conditions, which were better than the day before, to set up the video camera, and to test the fruits that were to be the offerings at the puja. These fruits (a large watermelon, oranges, apples, and bananas) all looked undamaged, and our metal detector did not react to them. The fruits had been bought by our hosts. The room was about 5 meters wide and 8 meters long. One long wall had a couple of doors to a garden and a number of high-placed windows.

A number of people were present: our host, his wife, their daughter (who was an ex-movie star), and her husband, Mr. Viyakumar (who, we were told, was a movie star at the time). At about 9:30, three or four Brahmin monks

started a ceremony at one end of the room, chanting and burning herbs, while the fruits were placed in the other half of the room, where the ceremony by GS was to take place. A number of visitors arrived, but the room, although full, did not become as crowded with people as that of the day before.

We had planned on this occasion to control GS upon his arrival and to see whether he had any objects with him. As he arrived, several things did not go according to our plan: He was accompanied by a relative (a nephew, we were told by some, an uncle according to others), and he had three bags with him, about 40 cm by 15 cm and 30 cm high. There was no question of our controlling him, because he quickly disappeared upstairs to the puja room. (This is a place common in Indian houses. It may be a room, or just a part of a room, that is devoted to worship and contains pictures and statues of saints and deities.) As we waited for GS to reappear (what could we do?), his relative put the big watermelon on a platter and went upstairs with it. A few minutes later he came down with the fruit. A large section had been cut out, with a silver statue sitting in it. This was shown as a revelation to all those present, but it was not at all to our liking as far as conditions were concerned.

A little later GS entered the room, slipped between the people present, went toward the video camera, and sat down just in front of it, with his back more or less turned towards it. We were not able to place the camera in a better position, but we cranked it up as far as possible so that it looked over GS's shoulder. The distance from the camera to his hands was about 2 meters. JMH was standing behind the camera, against the wall, while EH sat on the floor on the other side of GS. Mr. and Mrs. Jagannathan sat down 2-3 meters away, in front of GS. A little while later, at the request of EH, Mr. Jagannathan sat down close behind EH and GS, so that our host could have a better view, but this happened 5-10 minutes after the puja had started.

Coming down from the puja room upstairs, GS had brought with him a metal vase or bucket full of flowers. As the ceremony began, some more fruits were brought in (which we had not examined before), as well as some baskets full of flowers and strings with flowers (many flowers with their stalks cut off, threaded on a length of thin black string). We did not know where all these came from, but someone told us later that some had been brought by GS's relative and some perhaps by other people. Again, the situation was getting out of control.

From the beginning of the ceremony, GS was not acting as smoothly as he had the day before. With some difficulty he opened fruits, but they did not always have statues in them. However, from one orange he removed four small statues of green translucent stone. Other fruits also delivered more than one statue, some of them of stone, some of metal. But they were sometimes obtained after much kneading and obvious effort on the part of GS. He occasionally put two oranges on top of each other and pushed them together. EH tried the metal detector on some fruits before GS handled them and sometimes just before he cut them. On at least one occasion, he got a reaction from a fruit out of which a statue was obtained a moment later, as GS cut it open.

The puja continued in this way for about half an hour. As mentioned, Mr. Ja-

gannathan had seated himself next to GS. Shortly after, there was a peculiar event observed by JMH to which we will return later. The atmosphere was different from the day before: The persons present were modern Indians and more critical; they adhered to the traditional religion, but perhaps not so much as a part of their daily lives. Typical of the somewhat critical atmosphere was that, after about 20 minutes, Professor A. Krishnan, who teaches mechanical engineering at the Regional Engineering College in Trichy, attempted to start a discussion with JMH on the laws of nature, conservation of mass and energy, and so on. During his monologue, or shortly after it, Mr. Jagannathan stood up and left the room.

Soon afterward, GS indicated that he had finished, and he also left the room. Mrs. Jagannathan then asked us to come upstairs because her husband was furious with GS. EH went up first, meeting GS, Mr. Jagannathan, and Mr. Viyakumar. The situation was unclear, except that the commandant felt that GS had been cheating him. The situation became further aggravated when EH wanted to put the metal detector on one of the bags GS was holding. GS was unwilling to let EH do this, but the metal detector was nevertheless held close to the bag. A very clear reaction occurred, and Mr. Jagannathan then opened the bag; it contained a still considerable number of statues. GS was questioned about the statues in his bags, and he replied: "I got them yesterday."

JMH then came upstairs, as did Mr. Jagannathan's wife and daughter. Most of the discussion was in Tamil, and the commandant was tight-lipped. The confusion increased when Professor Krishnan started discussing with GS the laws of nature! The situation was resolved by letting GS finish the formal ceremony, and he did that. After that, the meeting dissolved fairly rapidly. Before GS left, EH got in a word with him, and GS said that he would be in Madras 2 days later.

Aftermath of the Puja of December 17th

We were left with the members of the Jagannathan family, under less than happy circumstances. Without committing ourselves to an opinion, we tried to learn from them what they had observed. It seemed clear that Mr. Jagannathan believed he had been cheated. However, in all the excitement nobody gave us a straightforward answer to our repeated question concerning what precisely had been observed and by whom. We were left only with opinions. Mr. Jagannathan's wife and daughter were most outspoken:

"He takes them [the statues] from the flower basket and pushes them in."

"When you touched the vessel, it rattled; it was obviously full of idols."

"If it were only my mother and myself, we would have accepted it as real."

"You cannot do that in the house of a police officer."

"You could see it with the banana, he is clumsy, he did not even learn to trick properly."

"It is obvious, he has arranged everything."

"This is child's play."

"Just to impress."

[Addressed to GS:] "We are not blaming you, but you should not make a fool out of us."

Mr. Jagannathan had a few interesting things to say. First, he said that he would never have had this puja in his house had it not been for his wife. Furthermore, he thought that GS had some genuine powers, but used trickery for most of his performance. He or somebody else remarked that the shells, produced the day before, were no trick.

However, what is trickery? Mr. Jagannathan thought that GS might have used what we call "teleportation" and thereby displaced the statues from his bags in the puja room to the inside of the fruits he was handling. An interesting hypothesis!

Moreover, we learned that, before the puja started, GS had been alone in the puja room for 10 minutes. The bags, which definitely contained some statues and some fruits, were brought in by his relative.

What Professor Krishnan had to say is perhaps enlightening: "I am a Hindu, but I am a materialist. Mysticism and trickery are not necessary for piety."

A Phenomenon during the Puja of December 17th Observed by JMH

As we mentioned earlier, about 2 minutes after Mr. Jagannathan sat down next to EH, a peculiar event occurred. GS's handling of the fruit varied. He cut many fruits into pieces, without getting anything out of them. Sometimes he took half oranges, placed one piece on top of the other, sprinkled flowers over them, and kneaded the pieces together with the flowers. Now and then he opened a whole fruit, but the occasions on which he got a statue out were sparse. By this time his lap was full of flowers.

On this occasion, GS was kneading an orange together with the flowers and the strings with flowers that were in his lap. When he cut this fruit and broke it open, there was a metal statue inside, but a black thread was entangled in it. To be precise, it was a piece of the string or thread on which flowers were strung, going from below the orange, into the orange, around the neck of the statue, and back down to the underside of the orange. (A sketch of the situation as JMH saw it was drawn a day later by JMH; see Figure 1.)

There were definitely flowers on both ends of the black thread. As GS discovered this, he quickly removed the thread and showed the statue to the public. In a rather loud voice, he spoke some words which sounded to us like "Lakshmi nashul ha."

Upon later viewing the videotape, we could see this event, which happened quickly, take place, although the black thread was too thin to be visible to the video camera. This was clearly an event that should not have happened if this had been a genuine materialization phenomenon.

A Meeting at the Plaza Theater

During the afternoon of Monday December 17, we decided (after all, as we were after materialization phenomena, what amount of trickery should deter

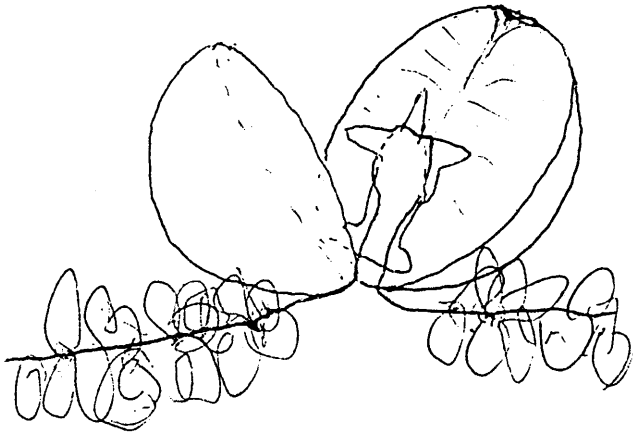


Fig. 1. Flower string entangled in a statue "materialized" by Gyatri Swami. (Sketch by JMH)

us?) to go to the public function that GS held every afternoon at or near the Plaza Theater. We found GS at this theater, in a half-enclosed space, with 15-20 people attending. GS was opening oranges, but immediately he beckoned to us to come and sit close to him. We were photographed with him. He opened some oranges that were in front of him. Sometimes he was handed a fruit by someone in the audience, but we did not see him opening one of those. One large orange was found to contain a rather large statue, but there was little conclusive to be said about this. We found an acquaintance in the audience, and we asked her to buy some oranges nearby. When we offered these fruits to GS, he gestured that this meeting was over. As to when and where to meet him next, he said that he would be in Madras in one or two days and not in Trichy the following morning, as he had told us earlier that day. He said that he also had an appointment with Mr. Viyakumar to hold a puja on December 23 or 24 in Madras.

Further Dealings with Gyatri Swami

Why chase after GS anymore? In view of the possibility of at least some genuine phenomena, we made many inquiries about the statues. In a shop, "Kairali," on Mount Road in Madras, we were told that the statues we had were not of genuine silver (which had risen dramatically in price during the preceding months), but of a look-alike, "white metal." If we were interested, the shopkeepers knew producers who could supply us with thousands of such items (although they were not familiar with these particular statues); and the more we would buy, the cheaper they would be. This was not what we were after. However, a few days later, in one of the small streets near the Mylapore temple, we finally found a shop selling statues that looked very similar to those of GS. A source for the statues was thus no problem. Moreover, the shop

owner told us that these statues can be obtained from Kerala; and GS is from Kerala.

One further meeting with GS took place in Madras on December 22. The puja at Mr. Viyakumar's house appeared to have been called off, and so this time we met in the house of a Mr. Mayan, who was an advertisement designer and a person close to GS, to whom people turned who requested GS's pujas. We learned that GS could only materialize objects on special occasions, such as during pujas and after praying. During the coming month, GS was to be busy preparing for the wedding of his son. We asked him when would be a good time to visit him the following year, and he replied evasively that he might be in the Himalayas then!

Later, on December 28, we again met with GS's brother, Mr. Subrahmanya Iyer. He presented no clearcut view on the materialization phenomena, as he is a lawyer, but he received us in a very hospitable manner.

Inquiries about Left-handed Conches

As we mentioned earlier, we had been told that left-handed conches, which are considered sacred in India, are extremely rare. We had also heard from an acquaintance that GS was selling these highly auspicious conches for 5,000 rupees each (a lot of money, considering wages in India—in buying power equal to perhaps \$2,000-\$3,000 US). We therefore made some inquiries in an attempt to learn for ourselves how unusual the left-handed conch which we had in our possession really is.

A visit to the Zoological Survey of India in Madras brought us to the marine biologist Dr. A. K. Naghabhushanam. He was most enthusiastic when he saw our conch. However, although he is a marine biologist, he warned us that he is not an expert on molluscs. When he learned that we were travelling to Calcutta, he advised us to consult there Dr. N. V. Subba Rao, who is in charge of the Molluscan Division of the Zoological Survey of India.

We met Dr. Subba Rao in Calcutta a few days later. After studying our conch, he reported that it is of a species that is found in the coastal waters of the U.S.A. and is quite common in Florida. Moreover, in this species (*Busycon Perversum*, or *Busycon Contrarium*) the left-handed or sinistral variety is the most common, although the right-handed or dextral form is also found. He referred us to a book by R. Tucker Abbott (1974) entitled *American Sea Shells*.

After we returned from India to Holland, we visited Dr. Coomans, conservator of the Institute for Zoological Taxonomy of the University of Amsterdam. He confirmed what Dr. Subba Rao had told us and showed us distinct specimens, both of *Busycon Contrarium* and of the Indian conch, *Turbinella Pyrum*. The left-handed variety of the latter is very rare indeed, and is treasured by the Indians as particularly sacred and therefore priceless. Indeed, worth their weight in gold! (The specimen Dr. Coomans showed us is of the right-handed form.)

But there is an additional detail. Dutch seafarers of the 16th century learned

about the high value of left-handed sea shells in India. Some of them also discovered that on the coasts of America, left-handed sea shells were quite common. A trade was therefore set up between Florida and India, and this flourished quite a while, until the market was spoiled.

To our surprise, Dr. Coomans told us that if we wanted to see a real sacred left-handed Indian conch, we should go to the Royal Tropical Museum in Amsterdam, a walking distance away. So we went there. A couple of left-handed specimens of *Turbinella Pyrum* were on display, one of them beautified by gold bands. How these specimens came there, we do not know. We were satisfied at this point.

As promised, we wrote about our findings to Mr. Subrahmanya Iyer, asking for a comment from himself or his brother. We received no reply.

Conclusions on Gyatri Swami

We started with high hopes for observing a genuine materialization phenomenon with GS, but we ended disappointed. We had had five less than satisfactory—and even highly suspicious—encounters with GS. We have good evidence that he cheated on some occasions with the pulling of statues from fruits, both from our own observation on one occasion, corroborated by the videotape, and from the outspoken reaction from the Jagannathan family, who had nothing to gain by a scandal. Moreover, the left-handed conches turned out to be not rare at all, but rather likely to have been imported from America.

What if some phenomena are genuine, and others are not? There is room for eternal doubt, but we have little to support it. The large watermelon GS opened on the first day could have been prepared; we cannot be sure about that. The best case we have is then the orange opened by EH, which at first looked undamaged. The explanation of unnoticed damage is, however, too likely, given the lighting conditions and the cursoriness of the inspection, to give any weight to the subsequent presence of a statue in the fruit. Also, as we mentioned, we did later find some small tears in this orange.

The last we heard of GS was in the summer of 1993, when EH was touring India with Richard Wiseman. GS appeared still in considerable demand, going around performing his pujas. Richard Wiseman, himself a close-up magician as well as a psychologist, met him (EH did not expect that GS would be willing to receive him). GS produced a few objects for RW, who described his performance as pathetic. GS looked quite old, and his skills had clearly deteriorated.

Discussion

The rationale for this investigation of Gyatri Swami was that he claimed to materialize objects, and that he appeared to be willing to be investigated under controlled conditions. During the same trip we also investigated another even less known swami, Sai Balu, (since deceased), but we did not achieve more than one brief demonstration during a single interview with him. These at-

tempts have to be seen against the background of the claims made by Sathya Sai Baba (Haraldsson, 1987; Haraldsson and Osis, 1977; Haraldsson and Wiseman, unpublished) and the multitude of persons who have observed him. In the case of Sai Baba there exists an abundance of repeated observations of innumerable witnesses during half a century, and of a variety of physical phenomena, that still seem not satisfactorily explained. Our conclusion on the claims by Gyatri Swami is negative, but, in our view, there is insufficient ground for generalizing this conclusion to Sai Baba.

For future investigations of such claims, there are some things to be learned. First, it seems to be essential for the investigators to build up some kind of relationship to some of the persons in the setting of such a field investigation. This involves in the case of the Indian swamis, trying to observe them, for instance, during a religious ceremony. Though the people involved have been very tolerant in our experience, the investigator is limited in his role, being more or less that of one of the exotic paraphernalia at the ceremony.

Moreover, in the kind of setting where we conducted our investigation, the scientific observer is distracted by ongoings of an unexpected nature and of unknown significance. The pious attitude of those attending a religious ceremony, emphasizes that the intruding observer, must be careful not to be rude, while at the same time keeping an objective, open-minded, and vigilant attitude.

To make meaningful observations, there appear to be really no other options for the investigator than to observe the purported phenomena rather unobtrusively with the cooperation of the people involved. Acquaintance with basic conjuring methods is important, and so is the necessity of being able to make repeated observations, for then the observer can more easily find suspect movements or events and concentrate on observing them as they are repeated.

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