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PSYCHIC BULL IN INDIA
A search for the miraculous

Ah, Mother India! Land of excitement, adventure, spirituality, mysticism and psychic bull.

I had met dozens of purported psychics during my research trip to India, but this one was the heaviest yet—over a ton of Brahma bull pacing sedately in the courtyard, supposedly under the telepathic direction of his owner and trainer. The gaudy colors and pungent odors swirled around us as the gaily bedecked bull made a slow but direct beeline towards one of the terrified children hanging about the edges of the crowd. With a firm but gentle nudge, the bull nosed the child before him into giving up the large white envelope.

My colleague, Professor Jahagirdar, took the envelope from the child and carefully wrote the number 93 on its outside, this being the number he had called out earlier to the trainer. The trainer smiled and my colleague called out another number. Closing his eyes, the trainer appeared to concentrate and the bull began to pace around the crowd again. Eventually, he nudged yet another person into giving up another envelope to the traveling parapsychologists.

After ten envelopes had been chosen by the psychic bull in this fashion, and their supposed numbers written on each, the contents of each were removed before the whirring camera and compared with the guesses. “Hmmm...” I said to myself, staring thoughtfully at the matching rows of numbers, “ten out of ten isn’t bad.”

Unfortunately, there was one slight problem with the experiment, a technical quibble that made the entire business worthless from a western scientific viewpoint—the trainer had insisted on seeing the contents of the sealed envelopes before he would attempt to telepathically direct the bull. While this might have been a legitimate request based upon his need to visualize exactly each number as written, it did mean that we had to tear open each of the...
Clockwise, from top: The Bombay Shadow Astrologer’s shingle, the Shadow Astrologer in his Bombay office, the prophetic leaf, the psychic bull in action, and center, Master “P” who sees through blindfolds.

Dr. E. C. May is a physicist-parapsychologist and research consultant at Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, CA. Isaac Bonevits is a freelance writer on psychic and occult topics.

carefully sealed envelopes in order to let him look at the way each of the numbers was written. Although we put each slip of paper back into an envelope and mixed the envelopes up fairly well among the crowd, this abrupt changing of the conditions of the experiment (which we thought the trainer had agreed upon beforehand) invalidated most of the data received.

Was the bull (and/or the trainer) really psychic? We will probably never know for sure. Like so many other psychics in India, the bull had refused to fit into our western techniques of psychic research. Indeed, during my entire stay in India (from August 4, 1974 to March 6, 1975) I was unable to find a single psychic, whether street fakir or holy guru, who was able or willing to fit into my scientific framework.

I had gone to India with the best of intentions and highest of hopes. After all, “everyone knows” that psychics are revered over there, that “supernatural” events are commonplace, that the entire atmosphere of the culture is supportive to local miracle workers. All this I found to be true—far, far too true.
My background study for the trip had included a reading of all the professional psychical journals on psychic phenomena in India, from 1895 to date. Almost all the evidence presented in those articles was anecdotal in nature, rather than experimental, a fact which should have given me some warning. For over a year before the trip was planned to start, I kept in contact with an old friend and physics colleague, Dr. S. Ganghadharan, I saved up over five thousand dollars in cash and bought an impressive array of photographic and recording equipment, as well as some electronic testing equipment that I seldom ever received an opportunity to employ. In short, I had everything the traveling parapsychological tourist should have needed.

My research objectives were simple and (I thought) conservative. My first decision had been to avoid well-known psychics and gurus. This was because of the highly developed organizations surrounding them, which rather tend to prevent outsiders from getting access to the "superstars." I also wanted to avoid the "superstar ego-investent" problem, which I felt might tempt the psychics to "bend" the rules a little during the experiments.

I wanted to deal with the "ordinary" people and the psychics among them. Indeed, the majority of my contacts were with the educated middle-class, and therefore English speaking, Indians. These may not have been "ordinary" in a sociological or economic sense, but they weren't "professionally spiritual" either.

Another decision had been to avoid statistical studies entirely. That sort of thing can be done in any lab back home, so why travel 15,000 miles? Anyway, I figured that since I was going to be dealing with the common folk, rather than captive university students (the usual subject population back home), I probably wouldn't have been able to get them to stand still for the long, boring hours and endless repetition so necessary to the statistical approach.

I expected to find a great deal of exciting phenomena, so my attitude was definitely one of positive (if wary) support. I planned to simply travel around India, avoiding the famous ashrams and gurus, searching out local psychics and having them do simple experiments for me. This is what I actually did, more or less, spending countless hours of time and miles of tape and film with over a dozen psychics. The results of my efforts consisted of (a) a couple of obvious frauds, (b) a couple of quite possibly genuine psychics, and (c) a large number of purported psychics we may never be able to adequately judge. The major discovery I made was that Western techniques of parapsychological research are totally inappropriate to field work in India (and probably other Third World cultures as well).

Perhaps the most outrageous fraud was the person known to me as the "Madras Materializer."" During one of my visits to Madras, a friend of a friend told me about a man who was supposedly able to do "materializations." After some confusion, an appointment was set in the morning for a meeting with an afternoon demonstration. When we first entered the house, we were led immediately to the puja (worship) room for a brief moment of prayer. This is a common custom in many parts of India and usually the guests are offered ritual food or prasad afterwards.

There were seven or eight people sitting about the living room when we returned from puja, and a large bowl of oranges (prasad I assumed) on the table. The Madras Materializer took one of the oranges as if to offer it to me, but instead held it in his palm and began chanting aum. In a moment, he took a knife and cut off the top of the orange, revealing a small lead statuette of a Hindu deity inside. This caught me completely off guard since as part of the arrangements I had been promised that I would be allowed to photograph and tape the proceedings.

Quickly I set up the necessary equipment and then began to examine the oranges. Two of them had small (½ inch diameter) round holes cut in the bottom through which I could see the bases of similar statuettes. I placed these two oranges aside and asked if we could use the remaining two, which appeared intact. At this point bedlam broke loose. Everyone began talking at once in Tamil (local language of Tamil Nadu State). A later translation of the tape indicated that the holes were supposedly due to the materialization of all the statuettes at once, and that the Materializer only did three at a time, and would do no more that day.

I am willing to call this an obvious case of fraud for several reasons. First, the subject had plenty of time to prepare the oranges. Second, the holes were perfect circles and more than sufficiently large to insert any of the small statues. Third, the oranges were not distorted or split in any fashion, so that the holes could not have been caused by a sudden expansion of the oranges, as "explained" by the Materializer. Last, since it is my policy never to reveal my belief that fraud is in progress during the course of an experiment (I had placed the tampered oranges aside quietly, as if I had not noticed anything wrong with them), the Madras Materializer—thinking that I was impressed by him—made it a point to inquire repeatedly when I was going to take him back to America to do further experiments, a prospect he seemed quite eager to experience. Although it is always dangerous to generalize from a single experiment, either positively or negatively, still I would say that this experiment was the most likely example of fraud that I observed.

Clear observations and judgments of fraud however require a clear concept of reality, a philosophical feat that became increasingly difficult the longer I stayed in India. The Hindus have had a belief for thousands of years that is now, under different wording, becoming quite fashionable among my colleagues in the field of nuclear physics. This is the belief that the universe is so complex, and its processes so subtle, that our gross senses pick up such a tiny fraction of reality, that the very concept of reality we use on a day-to-day level is so inaccurate as to be downright wrong—illusion, maya. The concept of maya does not, contrary to popular impressions in the West, imply the nonexistence of a physical universe, merely the impossibility of fallible humans ever getting an accurate picture of it.

These perceptual difficulties became increasingly significant the longer I stayed in India. A good case in point was that of a woman in Bombay, "Mrs. B.," who not only had a reputation as a particularly spiritual person but who was also supposedly able to materialize or teleport large quantities of a red sacred powder called kumkum (used usually for anointing sacred pictures, statues, people, etc.). Prof. Jahagirdar informed me that he had worked with her on several occasions and that he thought her materializations quite likely to be
One welcome bit of news was that she had been photographed in action before a team of Italian scientists; and that she had no objections to coming to Jahagirdar’s apartment and being filmed under studio conditions. Although we would not be allowed to insult a person of her spiritual reputation by searching her, she did agree to washing her hands (in which the kumkum was supposed to appear) and to raising the top part of her sari above her elbows. As our witnesses we had, in addition to Jahagirdar and myself, several university professors and their wives.

Before Mrs. B. arrived, Professor Jahagirdar explained in detail to me just what we were expected to see and warned me to have my camera ready the instant she walked through the door. Since this was to be a religious experience as much as a parapsychological experiment, a number of ritual preparations were made. Finally she arrived with a small group, including a Hindu holy man.

After a short while, Mrs. B. began to meditate in silence, the stillness of the room being broken only by the typical Bombay street noises filtering in. When five minutes had passed, the priest began to chant in Sanskrit, requesting the goddess who was her patron to possess Mrs. B. (It was only when possessed by her patron goddess that Mrs. B. was said to be able to teleport the kumkum, materializing it upon her hands.) As my camera began rolling, Mrs. B. stood up shaking, then convulsed upwards and to the left, her hand reaching up behind her and away from the lens. After some moments of tussling with the top of her sari, she produced the first handful of kumkum, which she deposited into a plate held by Jahagirdar. She then filled the plate with several handfuls of powder scooped from the front of her sari. Seating herself once again and coming out of her trance, she asked for a glass of water. At this point the room was filled with ritual concerning the spiritual event of materialization. It had clearly been an emotional experience for all concerned.

After most of the ceremonies were over, I decided to interview all the spectators one at a time and alone in the next room, before telling them my own impressions. There was a consensus among the observers that the first handful of kumkum had materialized in Mrs. B.’s hand before she had touched her sari, although all agreed that the following handfuls came from her sari. The interesting point here is that I had clearly seen her take the first handful from the top part of her sari, so immediately we have a perceptual conflict. When the film was developed, it was obvious that the camera lens saw the same thing that I did.

There are a number of ways in which this conflict may be resolved. What is most significant is not whether Mrs. B. is a fraud or not, but rather the marked differences of perception among sophisticated scientific observers. We in the West are tempted to believe our technological tools and to say that cameras do not lie, since they are supposedly impervious to cultural and religious biases. Yet, to a very large degree, most of us implicitly believe in a consensus reality. There is certainly no question that the observers, except for myself, “saw” a genuine case of materialization and would certainly testify to it in court. Remember that I was not dealing with superstitious and ignorant farmers, but with men and women as well educated and intelligent as those of any other university community, western or eastern. So which should I believe in this instance?

Another instance of perceptual conflict occurred during an interview with the “Bombay Shadow Astrologer” – so called because he takes measurements of clients’ shadows and uses these to erect their horoscopes. This unique technique of his, which is related to western astrological traditions of astrological/physiological relationships, was fascinating enough, but I had also learned that he had access to one of India’s famous “leaf libraries.”

It is a tradition in India that there exist one or more collections of books or leaves, each of which contains information about the past, present and future lives of every human ever born. If guided by a competent psychic to the correct leaf (the B.S.A. used his horoscopes as indicators), it is supposedly possible to get an accurate reading of one’s life experiences. It is entirely possible that the leaves, which are preserved by a gold covering, serve merely as focusing devices, much as some psychics use crystal balls or Tarot cards, and that the same leaf may

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be used for several people by the same psychic.

Professor Jahagirdar and I were told that there were ten tons of these leaves in the basement of the B.S.A.'s house and that we would be able to photograph them the second day of our interview. Upon our arrival that day, however, we were told that only on an auspicious occasion was it possible to photograph them. It was not an auspicious occasion.

Although this was disappointing, we continued the interview we had begun the day before, in a curious three language translation process. Professor Jahagirdar understands Gujarathi, but does not speak it, though he does speak Hindi and English. The Shadow Astrologer, for his part, understands Hindi, but does not speak it, his tongue being Gujarathi. Thus I spoke English to Jahagirdar, he spoke Hindi to the psychic, who replied in Gujarathi, which was translated into English for me by Jahagirdar. This was another example of a difficulty with field work in India, for there are dozens of major languages and scores of minor ones on the subcontinent. I was, to say the least, extremely grateful for the excellent translation services of Professor Jahagirdar.

My interest in the B.S.A.'s astrological techniques had to be set aside for reasons of time and expense. He wanted five hundred dollars for a shadow horoscope reading. Instead, he would do a reading for me from a divinatory leaf chosen at random by me from a special pile he kept on his desk for this purpose. After I had chosen one, he began to read the leaf for nearly ten minutes, providing me with mostly trivial generalities, easily based on his observations at the moment. At the end of this reading, I photographed the leaf, thanked him profusely for the interview and left. Once outside, I expressed some disappointment to Professor Jahagirdar about the reading.

It is at this point that the spirit of maya reared its confusing head. For in all honesty Jahagirdar claimed to have been reading over the psychic's shoulder, seeing the leaf written in Sanskrit, and making sure that the translation was correct. Yet I had perceived the leaf to be written in the language I had been told it would be in, Malayalam—a language that neither Jahagirdar nor I can speak or read. A mildly defensive Jahagirdar reminded me that I had photographed the leaf in question, and that the photo lab would settle the question once and for all. It was a nice idea while it lasted.

The photograph shows a close-up of a section of the leaf in question. Not only is it not in Sanskrit, but to date we have been unable to find anyone who can translate it at all. It is definitely not a form of Malayalam that anyone can recognize. It is probably not even a language.

The point of this discussion is not the credibility of the Bombay Shadow Astrologer, but rather the example of a disagreement concerning first-hand viewing of a given experiment. In all good faith, Professor Jahagirdar described what he had seen. Yet his description of the language of the leaf disagrees with my own perceptions and those of the camera as well. It would be wrong to say that the professor has fallen into any special kind of trap, for from the psychic's position, the perceived language of the leaf was totally irrelevant to the reading. And Jahagirdar, as President of the Bombay Society for Psychical Research and as a Professor of Philosophy, is one of the astute and cautious observers of psychic experiments that I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

Most scientists doing research into either psychic or nuclear phenomena pay lip service now to the idea that each of us perceives with a tremendous amount of emotional, intellectual and cultural conditioning filtering our efforts. But after seeing numerous cases of the sort outlined above, my own lip service has vanished, and this principle has become part of a fundamental belief system for me.

There were a few psychics I met in India who may very well have been genuine, two of whom I'll discuss as examples of the evaluation difficulties I experienced even when dealing with seemingly positive results.

In Bangalore, my colleague Dr. Nangenda told me of a young boy, "Master P.," with whom he had worked in the past. The claim was that the boy could "see" while blindfolded. I visited Master P. on two occasions, two months apart, to stage and film experiments. On the first experiment I randomly selected one of four envelopes containing complex mathematical equations. The contents were to be removed and used as a target for Master P. After his father had blindfolded him with large coins, a layer of cotton and a scarf, with extra cotton inserted alongside the nose, Master P. was to trace over with a pencil whatever he saw in front of him on the paper. During the first sequence he was able to do this with no difficulty.

During our second visit, we were able to determine that the boy could not "see" anything above an angle of 30 degrees from straight along his nose. In fact, he was unable to "see" when a piece of paper was taped to the outside of his scarf. For the filmed portion of the experiment we used surgical tape to seal along his nose and to keep the felt pockets (with coins inside) snugly in place over his eyes. Cotton was placed over this arrangement and a final scarf was tied about everything. This time the target picture was a simple Greek letter Omega. But Master P. had great difficulty, even with quite a bit of prompting from his father, in finding and then tracing the target.

I have chosen this case to discuss since there were numerous indications during the experiments that the boy might just be genuine, even though we also had some indication that he could have been merely peeking down the side of his nose. After all, the blindfold trick is one of the most common stage magic stunts around the world. Yet I believe that it would be useful to examine this boy further, ideally in a lab without the presence of his anxious father. Plans to do this and to accomplish a more controlled series of tests are in the making at present.

In the city of New Delhi lives a woman, "Mrs. L.," who has been a medium for the last ten years. Her story is that she was saved from a demon spawned illness by the last minute intervention of the Lord Krishna, who then promised that He would always be with her for the rest of her life.

Over the years her mediumship has taken different forms. At first she worked through the Indian equivalent of a Ouija board. Not only did she answer questions put to her, but she also composed songs and poems supposedly taken from deceased Indian and western masters. In recent years, she has dispensed with the board all together and now does direct psychism, by merely closing her eyes. There are a number of personal qualities that lead me to believe that she is most likely a genuine medium. Although she does
receive a great deal of money for a three-day week of psychic service to her community, she was “instructed” by Krishna to donate all of it for social service and charity. She in fact does exactly that. Also, she told me that her elaborate puja room is mostly to meet the expectation of her customers, rather than to serve any useful function in her mediumship. She needs only to close her eyes and “things come to her,” even as she walks about the house doing housework.

She did do a sitting for me, but I asked, instead of a personal question, a professional one—I wanted to know to whom, where and when I should go in order to have a successful research trip in India. During the sitting she told me that in January I should go for two days to the southern tip of India, where I would meet a young man who would be of help in this research.

Since I had planned to be in that part of the country anyway, in January I decided to take two days off and sit about on the beach, this being one of my favorite spots in India. During this stay at the cape, I went to visit the elderly President of the local college. It was during this conversation that I learned of a young visiting scientist from the Indian Institute of Science who was also interested in psychic phenomena. It was then that I met Dr. Nagendra from Banglore. We became great friends and he was of tremendous service in the research for the rest of my journey.

Was this just an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy? Or did Mrs. L. have access to some paranormal source of information? I may never know, but she is remembered as one of the most likely psychics to have been genuine during my trip.

By this time one might get the idea that India is an impossible waste of time for psychic researchers. Nothing could be further from the truth. India is definitely a place that researchers should plan on visiting frequently, but their approaches are going to have to be tailored to the country and its cultures. Both the difficulties and the advantages of psychic research in India are multiple.

The all-pervasive supernaturalism and the courtesy towards psychics so characteristic of India produces a psychological atmosphere of support for local psychics that can only be termed “absolute.” There is a complete lack of the “objective/subjective” dualism so vital to western religion and science, which makes scientific verification and evaluation impossible and—to the Indians—irrelevant.

Furthermore, every psychic in India is “superstar,” and has the ego-investment problem. For psychiatry is considered a sign of holiness in India, and thus there is tremendous social status for the holder. This means that the average psychic in India has a great deal of temptation that his or her western counterpart is seldom faced with.

The prophetic leaf, seen by one observer to be in Sanskrit, by another to be in Malayalam, turned out to be in no known language whatever.

“Fraud” questions can drive one crazy, for like witch doctors, shamans, priests and magicians everywhere, the village psychic often feels that it is perfectly moral to mix outright fraud with genuine psychic powers. This is because she or he believes that anything which impresses the minds of the audience will put them in a more receptive attitude to produce and allow real psychic phenomena to occur; they believe that the real purpose of psychism is to support religious truths, not to score points with scientists; and, of course, all is maya anyways, so what does it matter?

Naturally, or supernaturally, this makes it somewhat difficult to set up western-style experiments, where verification and repeatability are vital. These problems occur whenever one wants to experiment on psychism that is based on religious beliefs. Witnesses often disagree with each other and the recording equipment as to what actually occurred in any given experiment and, as we have seen, this differing often occurs with those who are educated and scientifically trained, as well as with the illiterate. In theory, one could get around this problem by ignoring the philosophical contradictions and merely getting a “sufficient” number of recording devices onto the scene of any experiment, and practice the rudeness traditional among western researchers such as stripping, searching and x-raying the subjects.

But you can’t get away with this kind of behavior in India. Rudeness to psychics is liable to get you assaulted, and few of them would stand for having a dozen cameras and microphones pointed at them all at once, while they were trying to concentrate. Psychics in India are strong and tempermental artists. They have no need, emotional or economic, to prove their “authenticity” to western scientists. Thus, they feel free to change the experimental conditions to suit their momentary emotional state. Often it is impossible to determine whether this last minute changing of the rules is to avoid conditions that are too rigid to permit the intuitive impulses to flow, or because the conditions are too rigid to permit planned cheating.

My post-hoc analysis (or “20-20 hindsight”) tells me that my time and my money were not ill-spent in India. On the contrary, while I may have learned little about the psychics there, I did learn a tremendous amount about researchers in Third World countries, and this is data that will be valuable to others in the future. Western scientists have become far too used to being the powerful ones in the psychic-research relationship, able to manipulate their “subjects” as they willed. But outside of the western cultures, this “power trip” is often reversed—and if we wish to study “wild” psychics rather than the “tame” ones we are used to, we are going to have to adapt our methods to their conditions, rather than arrogantly demanding that they adapt to ours. Probably the best arrangement is for the psychics to become researchers and to join as active equal partners in the research process, rather than being either the manipulators or the manipulates.

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