

## ABOUT POLTERGEISTS

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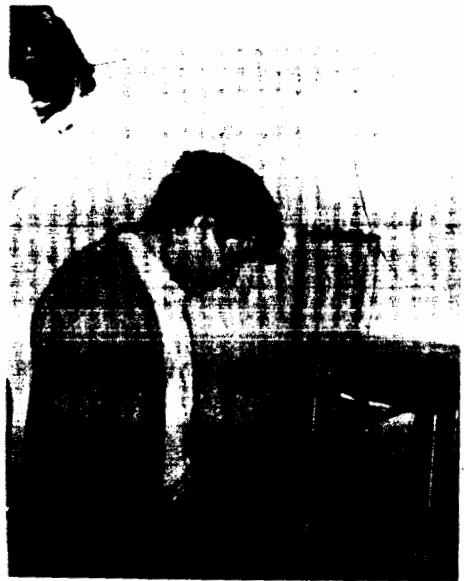
Every so often you read in the paper about people who are being very much disturbed by curious happenings in their home. Plates are falling off shelves, knickknacks are flying around, pieces of furniture topple over when nobody could have pushed them. Such events seem impossible — yet they happen. They are called "poltergeist" phenomena. Poltergeists don't usually go on for long, maybe only a week or two, perhaps as long as a few months. But while they are "in residence," they can be very upsetting to the lives of the people in the house.

### The difference between poltergeists and hauntings

The word poltergeist literally means "noisy (or rattling) spirit." Though the phenomena are not necessarily connected with a discarnate person coming back from the next world, one reason they are interesting to parapsychologists is that they do touch on the question of personal survival. People often believe that the events are caused by "spirits." It's true that it is easy to think so; the knocks and thumps sometimes sound as if somebody is knocking on the door to come in. But we must not assume this is so, though it's an important question not to be taken lightly.

The term RSPK, meaning Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis, has been introduced as a name for such phenomena; this helps avoid the assumption that ghosts or spirits are necessarily responsible. Poltergeists, as we have said, are usually of fairly short duration; they appear and disappear suddenly. In hauntings there may also be noises, movements of objects, etc.; but these are usually less frequent than with poltergeists. Hauntings usually last over a longer period of time. Also, as a general rule, there seems to be no (living) person around whom hauntings revolve. But it's been found that poltergeists usually appear in the vicinity of certain persons; when this "center" person is absent, the happenings abate or disappear. This person is usually in some sort of tense mental state; disturbed, maybe very much dissatisfied with life. Most such "centers" have been young people, but not all. There is apt to be some upset family or other interpersonal situation: maybe an adolescent wishes he could get away from a difficult home life, or an office boy doesn't get along with his boss. In accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries (poltergeists have been recorded in most countries, for hundreds of years) servant girls in remote country houses in Great Britain were sometimes apparently such poltergeist centers.

Why are poltergeist studies valuable to the researcher? Of course the parapsychologist who is in pursuit of a poltergeist has to go to the place where it is in action and make his field studies on location. He usually can't impose all the precautions and controls that are possible in laboratory work. Poltergeist studies are not for the person who wants a neat and well-controlled research design; you never know what is going to happen. But RSPK effects can provide a rich source of material. They are strong, massive, dramatic, abundant. In this respect they are in great contrast to lab tests, where PK effects are usually very small and where only small objects such as dice are involved — not (as sometimes happens in RSPK) large pieces of furniture. RSPK often shows violent motion and the flying objects may move in extraordinary patterns.



*JULIO, the "agent" of Miami Disturbances, being tested for PK by John Stump, PRF Research Associate (at FRNM, Durham, N.C.).*

### An interdisciplinary study

It's not only parapsychologists who are interested in these strange phenomena. In fact we could say that the significant part of the story is not so much the accounts of flying objects, etc., as it is the interpretations of the occurrences by people in other professions who were willing to look at the data. We have found that when, having "cornered" the poltergeist, we begin to ask how and why these goings-on are taking place, we must talk to people in psychiatry, electronics, engineering, etc. We want to explore the relationship of RSPK to other parts of nature's matrix — to see, for instance, how this form of PK fits in with our knowledge of psychology. Discoveries of such relationships can lead to a better understanding of man's interaction with the world around him.

### Tests

Poltergeist investigators use many kinds of tests. Some are psychological — for instance:

*Personality tests*, scanning the psychological make-up of all the persons involved. As we have said, there are often pathological conditions in the agent's personality or in the interpersonal family situation.

*Intelligence tests*: One reason for giving these is that a person who turns out to have a very low IQ is less likely to have been able to carry out complex tricks: to install, use and conceal devices in such a way that the people observing could not detect them.

Other tests are mechanical, electronic or electrical, using modern technology and instrumentation to rule out not only fraud but natural causes which might explain the noises and movements: for instance any shifting of the house's foundations, or movements of the earth.

In a German poltergeist case studied by Dr. Hans Bender (see NEWSLETTER #4) electric lamps exploded in

a lawyer's office, and there were unexplained effects on telephones, electric relays and safety switches. A team from Freiburg installed a voltage meter, which seemed to indicate abnormal upswings in the wall current during the phenomena. They reported that the unusual recordings were due to a psychokinetic effect on the voltage meter itself. They also set up a "light curtain": a crisscross of infrared rays acting as a surveillance device to detect the motion of any object crossing it and to trigger an automatic camera. In the "Miami Disturbances" case, objects in a packing house kept falling or even "flying" off the shelves. The investigators made detailed charts showing the position of these objects when they fell, and how far they were at that moment from Julio, a shipping clerk who was presumably the "agent." It was found on analyzing these charts that the farther away from him the objects were, the fewer moved off the shelves. (2, Ch. 9, "The Miami Poltergeist.")

#### On meeting poltergeists

If you should hear of a poltergeist in your neighborhood, you may be helpful yourself in investigating it. You should

prepare yourself by reading the literature, however. It would be a good idea to contact professional parapsychologists, preferably before your investigation. The Psychological Research Foundation, Duke Station, Durham, N. C. 27706, is interested in poltergeists, and will alert a local field reporter if they cannot send an investigator. You might become such a field reporter. Try to prevent publicity, at least till a study has been made. Time and publicity are both dangers to field investigations. For detailed suggestions, see 2, pages 180-190.

#### References

1. Owen, A.R.G. *CAN WE EXPLAIN THE POLTERGEIST?* N.Y.: Garrett Publications, 1964.
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4. Stevenson, Ian. "Are Poltergeists Living or Are They Dead?" *Jour. ASPR*, July 1972.

### FIELD RESEARCH IN INDIA

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James Kidd left a substantial legacy for research on evidence of a soul which might "leave the body at death." The ASPR reformulated the problem in scientific terms and has followed through with vigorous research projects. The last portion of the Kidd fund has now been used, for field research in India by two psychologists, Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson and myself. We had found previously that out-of-body projections of outstanding swamis were said to be collectively seen by several observers. (See NEWSLETTERS #19, 24.) Such apparitions might remain for a considerable time, talk, handle objects, and even leave things behind after suddenly vanishing. They obviously are important for understanding human existence and what happens at death.

On our ten-week Indian trip early this year, we concentrated on Sathya Sai Baba, who is said to be an avatar (god-man) and to have 6 million followers, and also on Dadaji (Elder Brother), who is well known in Northern India. We interviewed the swamis, observed them in interaction with their devotees, and tried to verify as much information as possible in the time we had.

Gathering evidence was not unlike a court-case procedure; we interviewed and questioned every witness we could get hold of. We had to scout for them all over the huge territory of the Indian subcontinent. All kinds of people, we found, had witnessed the phenomena in question: housewives, engineers, bankers, judges, physicians, seasoned research scientists, Western-trained professors, leading industrialists, as well as small shopkeepers and schoolboys. Most of them speak good English, but we also needed interpreters for a bewildering variety of languages: Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati. In one OBE case we found eight witnesses of an apparition of Sai Baba: his "in-body" whereabouts were documented some 300 miles away. Four witnesses testified to seeing an apparition of Dadaji while he was visiting 500 miles away; we also interviewed his host.

At times the OBE apparition is reported as engaging in rescue missions, preventing accidents, frightening away burglars or healing the hopelessly ill. Such reports were of course not our own first-hand observations; at times it was hard to believe our ears. For instance, seven witnesses even told us about the swami's disappearing altogether and reappearing somewhere else! We personally had opportunities, however, to observe closely the inexplicable appearance and disappearance of objects in the presence of Sai Baba. At the time we did not see anything that suggested trickery. But this is still unfinished business, requiring further evidence from instrumented research.

We have packed all this information into 51 cassette recordings, which will now be transcribed and analyzed. And analyze we must. Some witnesses are clear and consistent, others have foggy memories; some stick to their version in spite of our efforts to shake their story by suggestions; some waver and may in fact be exaggerating. On the whole, however, we feel we have a good-quality crop of data.

One of the basic criteria in case studies, developed by Myers and his successors, is: that all cases run true to type and fall into certain natural groups. Atypical cases are discarded: for instance any reports of apparitions which chatter on and on. Another such atypical case we heard about involved the apparition of a dead man. It borrowed somebody's jacket, went off with it, and left it on the deceased's own grave!

Judged by proper British standards, our Indian cases are provocatively atypical. However, they seem to have internal consistencies of their own. They may—in fact—cluster in natural groups typical of Indian god-men, even though unheard-of in London or New York. The various atypical cases may be that they enrich our knowledge of something like the order of the universe. Indian tradition seems to offer a great deal more than the West can learn—by carefully applying the right scientific method.