
Claims of Paranormal Experiences - I: A Survey of Psi and Psi-Related Experiences

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Abstract

Claims of paranormal experiences have been reported from various cultures. a number of surveys of psychic and psi-related experiences have been published since late 19th century, mostly from the west, reporting prevalence rates between 12 per cent and 64 per cent. The present survey was conducted to determine the prevalence rate of Extra Sensory Perception (ESP) and related experiences among college students in Bangalore. From a total of 413 students selected, 328 (79%) were available for the survey between December 1985 and February 1986. Palmer's ESP questionnaire was modified and used to study the psychic experiences and related factors including opinions of the respondents toward psychical research and impact of these experiences on their lives. Findings on the latter two factors are presented in part II of this report.

About one third of the students claimed waking ESP experiences or ESP dreams, many of them reported having had such experiences more than once. Most of the findings of the present study are comparable to studies reported from other cultures.

Key words -

**Paranormal experiences,
Psychic experiences,
Psi-related experience,
Extra sensory perception (ESP),
ESP survey**

Throughout human history, in almost all the cultures and at different times some people have claimed that they can influence or perceive events at a distance without using physical modes of action or communication. Scientific investigation of such claims (known as paranormal, Psi or psychic abilities) began in the late 19th century with the founding, in 1882, of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London, England. The branch of science that emerged then is known as psychical research or parapsychology and investigates such phenomena as communication by thought transference (telepathy), perception of objects or events (clairvoyance), and foreknowledge of unexpected events (precognition), causing movement of physical objects (psychokinesis) - all without using known channels of communication or action; out of body experiences (OBEs), apparitions of the dead (or living), near death experiences (NDEs), reincarnation, poltergeist and hauntings etc.

Shortly after founding of the SPR its members conducted a census of hallucinations, what they called quasi-sensory (without any physical cause) experiences while awake [1]. Since then a number of surveys of psychic or paranormal

experiences have been reported, most of which involved preselected samples [2]. Other surveys dealt with specific experiences of different groups such as students, or persons from a particular social class [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9].

However, highly representative national surveys of psychic experiences were conducted only in America [10] and Iceland [11] using more or less similar questionnaires. Except for one [6] all these studies, however, reported figures of surveys (between 12% and 64%) without further investigating the claims.

From the surveys mentioned above it is evident that the claims of psychic experiences are fairly common in different cultures even today. Since there have been only a few studies on the prevalence rate of such experiences in India, the present study was undertaken. Realizing the importance of determining the extent of genuine psychic experiences, further investigations of the reported experiences were also aimed at, but owing to the time constraints for the study, these could not be carried out. Hence the present study also reports the experiences that the respondents claimed to have been paranormal.

The study will be reported in two parts. In part I data on psychic (psi) experiences, states of consciousness, psi-related experiences and activities related to psi, will be presented. Part II of the report will deal with the attitudes and opinions of the respondents toward psychical research and related phenomena. The relationships between psi and psi-related experiences and activities relevant to such experiences will be discussed with reference to the pertinent data from the present as well as other relevant studies.

Material and Method

Sample

The study reported here was a time bound project (M.Phil dissertation of the first author), therefore keeping in mind the accessibility and availability of students, the sample was obtained from four co-educational colleges in Bangalore (three under-graduate and one medical college). From a total of 413 students enrolled, 328 (79%) students were available when visited for the survey. The remaining 85 (21%) were absent. The data was collected over a three month period, between December 1985 and February 1986.

Characteristics of the sample

The sample consisted of 206 (63%) males and 122 (37%) females. Their age ranged between 19 and 27 years (mean age 19.9 ± 1.13 years). Majority (55%) of them were Hindus and of the remaining 123 (38%) were Christians, 16 (5%) Muslims and four (1%) belonged to other categories namely Jains (two) and Buddhist (one) and Zoroastrian (one). Four (1%) of the respondents did not indicate their religion. For the purpose of statistical analysis and comparison, non-Hindus were considered under one category. The sample was homogenous in terms of educational background. All of them had 14 years of formal education. No adequate data was available with regard to socio-economic status.

Tools used

John Palmer's ESP survey questionnaire was obtained from the University of Virginia (where it was initially developed and used in 1974) and was modified for the present study. The original ESP survey questionnaire consists of 46 items, many of which contain several subparts. Sixteen items deal with demographic features and 28 items with ESP and related experiences (for each item the subjects are required to answer affirmatively if they had that particular experience). One item concerns the awareness of the respondents, regarding ESP research work at the University of Virginia, and the final item deals with willingness of the respondent to answer further questions in future. The items are

classified into the following six categories:

I A.

Psi experiences:

These include waking ESP experiences, ESP dreams, being an 'agent' for someone else's ESP experiences, and poltergeist activity (RSPK).

I B.

Psi-related experiences:

These include out-of-body experiences (OBEs), apparitions, communications with the dead, hauntings, 'memories' of a previous life time, Deja Vu experiences and aura vision. Supplementary questions explored possible psychic elements in some of these experiences.

II.

Altered states of consciousness:

These include dreams (in terms of vividness and recall), lucid dreams and mystical experiences. However, the distinction between categories I B and II is not very sharp.

III.

Activities related to psi:

These include meditation, use of hallucinogenic drugs, analysis of one's dreams and seeking the services of a psychic.

IV.

Attitudes related to psi:

This category includes attitudes toward astrology, survival of death, reincarnation and the value of parapsychological research.

V.

Demographic details:

These include sex, race, age, birth order, Marital Status, political ideology, religious denominations, religiosity, level of education, occupation and family income.

VI.

The effect of psychic experiences on the respondents' lives:

These include their attitudes, their life decisions and whether such experiences had ever saved them or someone else from a crisis or tragedy.

The original questionnaire was modified to suit objectives of the present investigation. Twenty two items out of 28 items of Palmer's questionnaire on ESP and related aspects and the item on willingness to answer further questions were retained. Hence there were 23 items in this section of the questionnaire. Appropriate modifications were made in the section on demographic details.

A pilot study was conducted on a group of 22 subjects in order to try out the modified questionnaire, before administering it to the sample selected. Necessary changes were introduced, some of the items were rephrased, and were rearranged. Some more questions were added to identify cases with ESP experiences for later investigations. Space was provided for additional information to get further details for verification of the claims. However, since it was a time bound study (as already mentioned) the reported experiences could not be verified.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the subjects in groups of 20-25 (except on one occasion when it was administered to a group of 34 students). Appropriate seating arrangements were made to discourage discussions. The meaning of ESP and related terms and the purpose of survey were explained. An effort was made to minimize anxiety in respondents. They were requested to answer questions honestly. Confidentiality of information obtained was assured. Clarifications were made as and when sought by the respondents. At the end, the subjects were requested to check if they had answered all the questions.

Results

The answers obtained from 328 respondents were computer analysed. Frequency distribution and percentages were obtained for all the items. The sample size (N) varied from question to question due to non-responders. In tables I and II figures in column n refer to the presence of an experience.

Palmer [10] conducted an extensive community survey in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA using random sampling techniques. Haraldson and his colleagues [11] conducted a nation wide survey in Iceland. Both these studies used the same ESP questionnaire (dealing with different types of ESP experiences) as was used for the study reported here. Other studies [8], [9] have reported only specific experiences like OBES or premonitions. Therefore the results of the present study will be discussed with appropriate data from Palmer's and Haraldson's studies, as well as other studies for whichever item, comparable data is available.

A. Psychic experiences

Waking ESP, ESP dreams and ESP agency were included in this category and data concerning these experiences are listed in table I.

Table I - Claims of Psi and Psi-related Experiences

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Note: Sample size varies from question to question due to non-responders

Waking ESP. The question regarding this aspect assessed how many respondents ever had what they considered to be an ESP experience while in the waking state i.e., if they ever had while awake. a strong feeling, impression, or 'vision' that a previously unexpected event had happened, was happening or was going to happen and learned later that they were right. Such an experience was reported by 94 (29%) respondents. Of those who have responded to this item, a majority (81%) of them reported having had more than one such experience.

In their samples, Haraldsson [11] reported 27 per cent, and Palmer [10] reported 39 per cent waking ESP experiences among their subjects, which is closer to the present findings. However, Kohr [7] reported a higher percentage (63%) but his respondents represented an atypical population. All of his subjects were members of the Association for Research and Enlightenment.

ESP dreams. The respondents were required to answer affirmatively if, they ever had a rather clear and specific dream which matched in detail an event which occurred before, during or after their dream which they did not know about or did not expect at the time of the dream. At least one such experience

was reported by 123 (39%) respondents. ESP dream was the most commonly claimed ESP experience. Eighty-six per cent of those who claimed to have had ESP dreams, reported to have had more than one such experience.

Results of Palmer's [10] (33%) and Haraldsson's [11] (36%) studies are similar to the present finding. ESP agency. The question regarding this aspect determined whether respondents believed that they had even been the object of someone else's ESP experience. The respondents were asked if they were ever told by someone that he/she had a dream, a vision or definite feeling in which he/she seemed to get information about an event involving the respondent which he/she could not have gotten in any 'normal' or conventional way. Sixty one (19%) respondents answered this question affirmatively and more than half of them (59%) reported having had more than one such experience.

Twenty per cent of Palmer's sample claimed to have had such an experience.

B. Psi-related experiences

Table I shows data regarding psi-related experiences.

Out-of-body experiences. This referred to an experience in which a person felt that he was located 'out side of' or 'away from' his physical body. That is, he had the feeling that his consciousness, mind, or centre of awareness was at a different place than his physical body. At least one such experience was claimed by 42 (13%) of the respondents. About 70 per cent of them reported to having had more than one such experience.

Different surveys provide different figures on the proportion of OBEs ranging between eight per cent [11] and 50 per cent [7]. Percentages reported by Blackmore [9] (12%) and Palmer [10] (25%) fell in between this range.

Apparitions: Apparitions refer to experiences where a person while awake gets a vivid impression of seeing, hearing, or being touched by another being, and this impression is not due to any external, physical or natural cause. (These experiences do not include experiences of religious figures). Such an experience was reported by 45 (14%) respondents. Majority of these experiences were auditory (69%) followed by tactile (67%) and visual (62%) modalities. Nearly 36 per cent of the apparitions reported by the respondents involved their family members. Eighty five per cent of the respondents had had more than one such experience.

Palmer's [10] study revealed somewhat similar results (17%). Most of the experiences reported by his group were auditory or tactile. The SPR census [1] reported occurrence of apparitions in 13 per cent of their respondents, most of which were visual in nature.

Communication with the dead. Respondents were asked if they had ever communicated with the dead or believed that they had been controlled or 'possessed' by a spirit. Thirteen respondents (4%) reported to have had some kind of communication with the deceased. Five (39%) had either heard or seen a 'spirit', six (48%) reported having received paranormal communications from the deceased and three (23%) reported that the spirit had communicated through them in a language not normally known to them.

Palmer [10] reported similar findings (5%), in Haraldsson's [11] study, the frequency reported was much higher (56%), and the possible explanation offered by him is that 'spiritualism' has a strong footing in Iceland.

Hauntings. The question asked was whether the respondents had ever lived in a house believed to be 'haunted' . An affirmative response was given by 31 (10%) respondents. They claimed to have either

lived or stayed in a haunted house.

Eight per cent of Palmer's [10] respondents reported having lived in a haunted house whereas it was reported in 18 per cent among respondents of Haraldsson's [11] study and 14 per cent among Kohr's [7] study.

Past life memories. Twenty respondents (6%) claimed to have had what seemed to be a 'memory' of a previous life time (i.e. reincarnation). Fifteen (75%) of the respondents reported to have had more than one such experience; and 13 (65%) of them reported having had such memories in dreams.

Palmer's [10] results revealed that nine per cent of his respondents claimed memories of a past life. Other studies reported, as low as two per cent and as high as 62 per cent [7].

Deja Vu. The respondents were asked if they had ever had the strong feeling or impression that they had been in some place or in the same situation before, even though, they had never actually been there before or were experiencing the event for the first time in 'real life'. This question was answered affirmatively by 168 (53%) respondents. Eighty six per cent of them reported having had more than one such experience.

The figures obtained by Palmer [10] and Kohr [7] were much higher (88% and 83 % respectively) than the present findings on this feature.

C. Altered States of Consciousness

Data concerning this aspect is given in table II

Table II - Claims of Experiences and Activities Relevant to Psi

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Dreams. Two questions related to dreams were asked. The first one elicited information on recall of dreams, which read as follows: "Do you generally remember your dreams?" and "How often do you remember them?" Two hundred and sixty (79%) respondents reported that they could recall their dreams. Twenty per cent of them claimed that they could recall their dreams almost every night, while 35 per cent stated that they recalled their dreams once a week or more.

The second question dealt with lucid dreams which is phrased as 'a special sort of dream in which you knew during the dream that you were dreaming and felt that you possessed all your waking faculties'. This experience was reported by 152 (48%) of the respondents.

Palmer's [10] survey figures are somewhat different. Recall of dreams was reported by 67 per cent of his respondents and lucid dreams were reported in 71 per cent (29 per cent of which said they had such dreams more often than 'rarely'). Haraldsson's [11] study does not report these details.

Mystical experiences. The survey revealed that 43 (14%) of the respondents claimed to have had a profound and deeply moving 'spiritual', 'mystical' or 'transcendental' experience. Sixty-seven per cent of those claiming a mystical experience stated they had more than one such experience.

Palmer's survey revealed higher results (35%), about three quarters of which said they had had more than one such experience.

D. Activities Relevant to Psi Experiences

These include visits to psychics, practice of meditation and use of mind expanding drugs. The findings are given in table II.

Visits to psychics. Respondents were asked whether they had 'ever seriously sought information, help

or guidance' from a 'medium, clairvoyant, or psychic', 'palm reader', 'astrologer' or 'faith (or psychic) healer'. Fifty-five (18%) answered this question affirmatively. Seventy-eight per cent of these respondents had visited the psychics more than once; and 58 per cent had sought more than one psychic, 31 per cent had acted upon the advice given. It is interesting to note that little over half (53%) of the respondents who sought such help felt that, their visit to the psychics was helpful; 42 per cent felt it was not helpful and two per cent felt it was even 'harmful'.

Three per cent of Palmer's [10] survey sample had sought a psychic. However, more respondents had acted upon advice in Palmer's study than in the present survey. In Haraldsson's study majority (41%) had attended mediumistic seances and a large number (83%) had found it helpful. According to Haraldsson [11], this is so because there are more spiritistic practices and beliefs in Iceland.

Meditation. Respondents were asked whether they had ever practiced meditation-in the sense of a 'formal technique of stilling the mind'. The question was answered affirmatively by 67 (21%) respondents. Ninety-one per cent of them had to be practicing it between six months to five years, and seven per cent for over a five year period. A majority (78%) of them felt it was helpful, 16 per cent felt it was not helpful and three per cent felt it was harmful.

Palmer's [10] survey results reveal that only nine per cent of the respondents had reported to having been practising meditation. Fifty-six per cent of them were practising it between six months to five years, and 44 per cent for less than six months. Eighty-two per cent felt it was helpful to them but none of them thought it to be harmful.

Mind expanding drugs: The question asked was whether the respondents had 'ever used mind expanding drugs or medicines', and if so, whether they had had any psi-related experiences while under their influence. Thirty-four (11%) respondents answered this question affirmatively claiming that they have used drugs. Eighteen per cent of these respondents claimed that only a few of their psi experiences had occurred while under the influence of drugs. A majority (79%) of them denied any such experiences. However one (3%) respondent reported that all his psi experiences occurred while under the influence of drugs.

Palmer [10] in his survey found that 32 per cent had reported having used drugs. Twenty eight per cent of them claimed to have had psi experiences when under the influence of drugs.

The above findings suggest that a number of respondents considered themselves to have had paranormal experiences either while awake (30%) or in dreams (39%). Most of them reported having had such experiences more than once. Since the study was conducted on a small sample of respondents the findings cannot be generalized.

The interpretation of the psi-related experiences and activities will be presented in part II of the paper, in which relation-ship of paranormal experiences to these features and impact of psi experiences on the opinions and attitudes of the respondents will be discussed.

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