

## 'Alien Rains' of Kerala Not So Alien after All

Since January 2006, news headlines the world over have advanced the claim that extraterrestrial microbes rained down on India. Even the cover of the *New Scientist* read "Alien Rain" (March 4, 2006). What is the basis for such an extraordinary claim? The reports claim that microscopic particles that colored monsoon rains in Kerala, India, between

July and September 2001 have defied all efforts to identify them. But since 2003, two scientists, Godfrey Louis and Santhosh Kumar, believe they've solved the mystery: the particles are extraterrestrial (ET) cells released into the rains from a meteor explosion.

Could this be the first evidence of ET life? Not so fast! It turns out that the government of India had commissioned a study of the colored rain. Within two weeks of the first colored rain, *The*

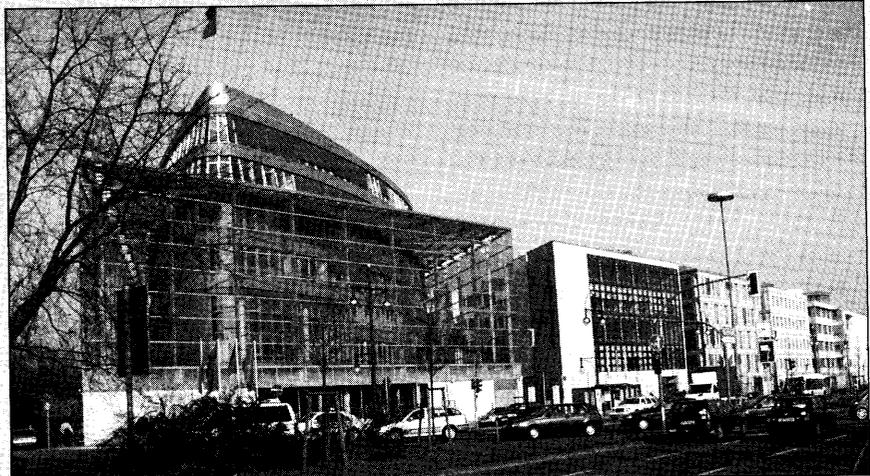
*Indian Express* reported (on August 6, 2001) that the Center for Earth Science Studies (CESS) and the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (TBGRI) had determined that the rains were colored by some kind of spore. Then in November of 2001, commissioned by the government of India, the CESS and TBGRI issued a report concluding that the spores coloring the rain had been grown in culture and were from an aerial algae of the *Trentepohlia* genus that grows

## A Swedish Professorship in Parapsychology

When the Danish margarine manufacturer Poul Thorsen died in 1962, he had recently bequeathed a large sum of money for a professorship in parapsychology and hypnology. The universities of Stockholm and Copenhagen declined the offer. Lund University in southern Sweden accepted it. However, two persons were entitled to an allowance from the same fund. Therefore, the donation could not be used until the last of them had passed away, in 2001.

In May 2003 Lund University announced a professorship in "psychology, including parapsychology and hypnology." From the thirty applicants the University selected an American, Etzel Cardeña, who was appointed to the position in June 2005 and took office on September 1. The choice was controversial since none of the three members of the expert evaluation committee ranked Cardeña first. Cardeña is primarily known as a researcher in theoretical hypnology, and has published very little within the field of parapsychology. Cardeña is apparently the only professor in parapsychology in Europe.

A few days after his appointment, Cardeña was interviewed in *Aftonbladet*, a major Swedish daily. In the interview,



Lund University

he said that paranormal phenomena (including telepathy, precognition, and telekinesis) have been demonstrated in a large number of controlled studies.

In reply, two Swedish skeptics (Sven Ove Hansson and Dan Larhammar) and two parapsychologists (Jan Dalkvist and Joakim Westerlund) wrote a joint article in which they pointed out that Cardeña's statements did not accurately reflect the state of knowledge in the field of his professorship. Cardeña replied, claiming that he had been misquoted, but without retracting the central claim that paranormal phenomena have been scientifically demonstrated.

Last September 1 Cardeña was briefly interviewed on a national evening news broadcast. Referring to attempts to influence random number generators by paranormal means he said that "there are a number of well-controlled experimental studies where people have replicated what seems to be something like this happening."

As yet, Cardeña has held this office only for a few months. It remains to be seen what directions his academic activities will take.

—Jesper Jerkert and Sven Ove Hansson

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