

Can the Mind Survive beyond Death? In Pursuit of Scientific Evidence by Satwant K. Pasricha. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 2008. 527 pp. \$52 (hardcover, 2 vols.). ISBN 9788186622933.

Satwant Pasricha is a psychologist in India who began working with Ian Stevenson in 1974 on cases of children who report memories of previous lives. After training under Stevenson, she became his collaborator and then an independent researcher. She also had successes in clinical psychology. In 2009, she completed a long tenure as Professor of Clinical Psychology at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in Bangalore, and her book notes that she is the only person in India with training in both clinical psychology and parapsychology.

Parapsychology is the focus here, as the title would suggest. This two-volume set is divided into 22 chapters, each consisting of a previously published article, with Pasricha being sole author or lead author of 17 of them. (Full disclosure: I am one of four authors of one paper.) Though most deal with what are called cases of the reincarnation type, related areas such as near-death experiences (NDEs) are addressed as well.

In the three chapters on near-death experiences, Pasricha (along with Stevenson in one) shows the cross-cultural similarities as well as cross-cultural differences in reports of NDEs. One difference between those in India and those in the West is that the Indian ones are all what Stevenson termed “bureaucratic bungling cases,” in which the ill person reports being taken by messengers to a man or woman who looks over a book or papers and determines that the wrong person has been sent for. As an example, the man with the book in one case says in a rage to the messengers: “I had asked you to bring Vasudev the gardener. Our garden is drying up. You have brought Vasudev the student” (p. 402). In a large survey, Pasricha found that 62% of the individuals in India who were reported to have died but survived said they had had NDEs, far above the percentage in American surveys. She points out that all but one of the Indian

subjects had their experiences at home, as opposed to the classic American ones that occur in hospitals when patients are revived after their hearts briefly stop. Though this raises the question of whether the Indian subjects were actually at the point of death as opposed to being merely ill, it is not clear how much difference that makes. Stevenson, Cook, and McClean-Rice (1989–1990) examined the medical records of 40 American patients who had reported NDEs and found that 22 seemed to have had no life-threatening condition. Owens, Cook, and Stevenson (1990) compared the NDE reports of those close to death versus those who were not and found few differences, except that those who really were close to death were more likely to report an enhanced perception of light and enhanced cognitive powers.

Though the differences in NDEs across cultures may strengthen the opinions of those who think NDEs are psychological creations, they weaken the case for a biological explanation. After proposing a neurological mechanism for how the dying mind might produce a tunnel-like visual experience, Blackmore (1993) tried to say that Indian reports of NDEs included tunnel experiences, even though they did not. In a paper that Pasricha was a coauthor of but which is not included in the book (Kellehear, Stevenson, Pasricha, and Cook., 1994), the authors correctly took her to task for this. Of course, a tunnel experience is only reported by a minority of American subjects as well, so their importance may be overstated at times. All in all, Pasricha's documentation of Indian NDEs is an important contribution to the field.

While all this book's chapters deal in some way with the question in its title, some of the more interesting ones do so only indirectly. Chapter 11 examines why so few cases of past-life memories are reported in South India even though they seem practically ubiquitous in North India. Pasricha presents seven cases from South India that reveal features similar to those to the north, but these represent a paltry set compared with the nearly 450 cases she notes in North India. Barker and Pasricha (1979) found a prevalence rate of 2.2 cases per thousand inhabitants in Uttar Pradesh in North India. While no systematic survey has been conducted in South India, when Pasricha used the opportunity during a systematic survey of near-death experiences (included in the book) to inquire about past-life memories, she did not hear about a single case. She explores reasons for a disparity in prevalence rates between the two regions. She notes that Hinduism is the majority religion in both, though subtle differences exist in some of the beliefs and practices. She also suggests that differences in education and literacy rates (higher in South India) or childrearing practices may contribute to the disparity, but she is unable to reach any definite conclusion. I wonder if genetics may play a role, both in differences in various regions of a country as well as in differences across cultures.

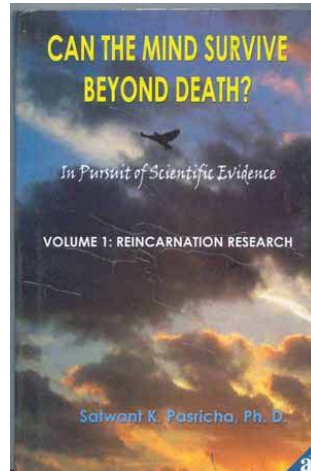
Another chapter that does not focus precisely on the question of the title

is one on cases found to involve deception or self-deception. Written by Stevenson, Pasricha, and Godwin Samararatne, it tells some interesting stories, including that of a Turkish boy who was named Kenedi when he was born in 1965 to a father who admired John Kennedy immensely. Though his few statements about Kennedy's life only involved information well-known generally—that he was President Kennedy, that he lived in America, was married, had two children, and was rich—the boy became fully convinced that he had been the president and remained convinced at least until he was interviewed at age 20. Another case, which Stevenson helped expose, was a complete fabrication, concocted out of whole cloth by a journalist and published in the magazine *Fate*. The deception cases all serve as cautions against accepting claims too credulously and as evidence that researchers do not approach the cases already convinced of their legitimacy.

Other chapters focus on cases that provide more compelling evidence of survival. One describes children in India born with birthmarks or birth defects that appear to match wounds suffered by the deceased individual whose life the child is thought to remember. Though Pasricha focuses rightly on the marks and defects, I would have liked to have heard more about the statements some of the children made. Deepak Babu Misra and Ramniri Jatav both apparently gave names and locations matching the previous lives of strangers some distance away, and it would be helpful to know how well the history of their statements could be documented.

Pasricha concludes with papers, both having Stevenson as first author, covering two of the most remarkable and perplexing cases ever to appear in the literature. The first is that of Uttara Huddar, a woman who at the age of 32 suddenly displayed a new personality. This personality did not recognize Uttara's family or friends and could not speak Marathi, Uttara's native language. Instead, she spoke what was eventually understood to be Bengali, which Uttara did not know. She called herself Sharanda and seemed to come from another time, as she showed a lack of familiarity with any tools, appliances, or vehicles developed after the industrial revolution. Sharanda stayed "in control" for several weeks. Uttara then returned to her normal personality, but Sharanda continued to emerge intermittently.

In addition to discussing various locations in Bengal, Sharanda gave the names of a number of family members, and these were eventually traced to a



family that lived in West Bengal in the early nineteenth century. The names and relationships that she gave for her father and six other male members of the family all matched a male genealogy of the family that was discovered. The genealogy had been published in a Bengali magazine with a local circulation, but as Uttara had never visited that state, the authors were confident she had never seen it.

Regarding Sharanda's ability to speak Bengali, Uttara and her family said she had never learned it. One of the authors' associates, Professor Pal, had four long talks with Sharanda in Bengali, and he and five other native Bengali speakers all agreed that despite some imperfections in her speech, she had a solid command of the language. Stevenson (1984) later gave new details in a subsequent report. He noted that Uttara had been accused of having learned Bengali in school, though the evidence for that was meager. He had also asked a linguist to listen to two recordings made of Sharanda speaking and singing. The linguist said that her accent was non-native Bengali, and, based on the recordings, he did not hear indications of archaic speech that others had heard in conversation with her. Was this a case of possession by a Bengali spirit using the imperfect instrument of a woman who had never spoken Bengali, or was it a very strange case of dissociation, in which a woman, as in examples of multiple personality disorder, suddenly took on the identification and behaviors of a different person, in this case somehow even displaying knowledge she seemingly could not have acquired in her life?

The last case in the book involves a young woman named Sumitra who experienced possible seizure episodes and then seemed to die during one of them. As her family began grieving and preparing for her funeral, she revived and, after a period of confusion, said that her name was Shiva and that she had been murdered by her in-laws in a place called Dibiyapur, some 55 km away. She rejected her husband and her child and asked to be taken to Shiva's two children. She gave many details that were found to correspond to the life of one Shiva Divedi, who was unknown to Sumitra's family and who had died violently (how and at whose hand was unclear, though her in-laws were under considerable suspicion) in Dibiyapur two months before Sumitra's transformation. Sumitra/Shiva was initially unable to recognize her own family and friends around her but later recognized 23 people from Shiva's life either in person or in photographs. Her transformation also included changes in her behavior, from "that of a simple village girl to that of a moderately well-educated woman of higher caste and more urban manners, who could now read and write Hindi fluently" (p. 474). Except for a period of a few hours that occurred a year after her transformation, Sumitra/Shiva had remained Shiva constantly for two years when the investigation was completed.

Pasricha began that investigation a month after Sumitra/Shiva first met a

member of Shiva's family, her father. She and Stevenson ultimately interviewed 24 members of the two families, along with 29 other individuals for background information. Unless the case is an elaborate fraud perpetrated by a large number of people for no apparent purpose, Pasricha and Stevenson certainly seem to have documented a case of possession. Of this, they write: "Although we do not dogmatically assert that this is the correct interpretation of this case, we believe much of the evidence makes it the most plausible one" (p. 500).

Other chapters cover topics such as the role parental guidance may play in the cases, phobias that some subjects show toward the mode of death of the previous individual, cases in which no deceased person is found who matches the details given by the child, and cases in which the child appears to remember a life of someone who practiced a different religion. All the chapters are interesting, and with Pasricha's clear and concise writing, easily enjoyed by any general reader with an interest in these topics. Though the book does not provide a definitive answer to the question of whether the mind can survive beyond death, it gives much food for thought. And it does provide definitive evidence of Pasricha's contribution to the field, both as Stevenson's colleague and as a very accomplished researcher in her own right.

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