

INDIAN CASES OF THE REINCARNATION TYPE TWO GENERATIONS APART

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ABSTRACT

Thirty-six cases of the reincarnation type in India whose subjects were born before 1936 were compared with fifty-six cases whose subjects were born in 1965 or later. Fifty-four variables—of demographic data, features of the cases, and the investigation of the cases—were analyzed. Significant differences occurred between the two series in only five variables. Cases of children who claim to remember previous lives in India appear to show over many years a notable stability of their main features.

INTRODUCTION

Cases suggestive of reincarnation have been investigated in India since the 1920s. Most reports of such cases from that period were published in pamphlets, books, and newspapers. They seem to have attracted little contemporary attention. One of us (I.S.) began the systematic investigation of such cases in 1961 (Stevenson, 1966/1974). We have worked together in the investigation of cases since 1973.

While investigating later cases we took opportunities afforded of trying to meet the subjects of some of the older cases of which we had read published reports. When we found that many of the subjects of the older cases were still alive, we decided that it would be feasible to compare the features in a group of cases whose subjects had been born before 1936 with those in a group whose subjects had been born in 1965 or later.

Our investigations have shown that cases suggestive of reincarnation have some features, such as a high incidence of violent death, that recur in cases from different cultures (Stevenson, 1980). Other features, such as the incidence of claimed sex change from one incarnation to another, vary—sometimes markedly—from one culture to another (Stevenson, 1970; 1983). We wished to learn whether variations in the cases of the same country would occur over a long period of time. The median year of birth of the subjects in the earlier series was 1922 and that in the later series was 1971. The median years of birth were thus nearly fifty years, or two generations, apart.

Originally, we also had a second objective for the comparison of the two series. We hoped that by comparing cases that we had not investigated with those that we had investigated we might learn whether our methods proved to be eliciting the same sort of information that completely independent investigators had earlier obtained from similar cases. However, in the outcome, we are not in a position to emphasize this possibility. This is because in talking with the subjects and informants for the published cases we also filled in gaps of information that the earlier reporters of these cases had not obtained or had not included in their reports. In this way some of the older cases became almost as much investigated by us as they had been by the earlier reporters, and it became infeasible to

analyze the information obtained by the earlier investigators separately from that added by our own later studies of the same cases.¹

We wish to disclaim any pretension to making more than a preliminary effort in the direction of what we may call the diachronic epidemiology of reincarnation. We know almost nothing about the real incidence of cases of the reincarnation type in India—or anywhere else. One of us (S.P., with D. R. Barker) established the prevalence rate of cases (at about two per thousand) in a district of northern India (Barker & Pasricha, 1979). However, neither of the two series with which we are concerned in the present paper was collected by processes of systematic sampling; both were assembled by more or less haphazard methods. Indeed, the earlier cases were not previously assembled (as a series) at all; we put them together ourselves by collecting and analyzing published reports and adding to them some information that we obtained much later and some additional cases (from the same early period) that we studied ourselves. We cannot say to what extent either series represents all Indian cases of the reincarnation type occurring during the periods in question. On the other hand, we are not aware of any particular bias that influenced the inclusion of some cases and the exclusion of others from either series. They appear to us to be sufficiently representative of cases of the reincarnation type in India (for both periods concerned) so that we felt justified in analyzing them for differences between the two series.

PUBLISHED AND OTHER SOURCES OF PRE-1936 CASES

K. K. N. Sahay, a lawyer of Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, provided the largest group of published reports. In (probably) 1927 he printed privately a pamphlet in which he reported seven cases, including that of his own son, Jagdish Chandra (Sahay, 1927). Many years later, Jagdish Chandra made available to us unpublished reports of another five cases that had been sent to his father by informants, probably by persons who had read his pamphlet soon after its publication. Thus twelve of our cases derive from Sahay's interest in these cases.

In the late 1930s S. C. Bose made a tour through parts of northern India and investigated cases about which he had received some preliminary information. He eventually published a book about his cases (Bose, 1960), but it has never been published in English. However, we obtained a copy of a still unpublished English translation by Edward Spencer and from this derived information about seven cases that Bose had studied.

Sunderlal (1924) published reports of four cases. We found another six case reports published in a variety of newspapers, magazines, and (one case) a pamphlet; and we learned about one case from a written (unpublished) report of it sent to Professor B. L. Atreya, who made it available to us. Reports of a small number of the cases were published in more than one source, for example by both Sahay and Bose.

From the above sources we learned of thirty-one cases of which reports had been recorded (and most of them published) before 1936.

¹ One of us has published detailed reports of two of these older published cases (Stevenson, 1975). These are the cases of Jagdish Chandra and Bishen Chand Kapoor. In both these cases a later investigation added to the information available in the earlier published report of the case.

With a few exceptions these cases all occurred in the (northern) Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab.

Additional Cases Added by Us to the Earlier Series

In addition to the thirty-one cases mentioned above, we investigated another thirteen cases dating from the earlier period of which reports had never been recorded or published. We learned about these cases from informants for more modern cases that we were investigating, and we investigated them also as opportunities afforded.

Cases Excluded from the Pre-1936 Series

From the total of forty-four cases identified as potentially belonging in the earlier series we eliminated eight cases. The information published or otherwise obtainable for them was insufficient to warrant including them in the series to be compared with the later (post-1965) series that we investigated entirely by ourselves and usually close in time to the development of the cases. After this elimination we had thirty-six cases with usable data. However, even among these cases numerous gaps in the information remained despite our efforts to fill these. We shall refer to this series as the 'earlier series'.

SOURCES OF THE LATER INVESTIGATED SERIES

This series consisted of 56 Indian cases entirely investigated by ourselves. The subjects of these cases were all born in 1965 or later. Like the cases of the earlier series these later cases nearly all occurred in the (northern) Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab.

We shall refer to this series as the 'later series'.

METHODS OF INQUIRY, INVESTIGATION, AND ANALYSIS

Searching for the Subjects and Informants of the Earlier Series

Some of the published reports gave sufficient information for easy tracing of the subject of a case, if he was still living. However, other reports gave only the name of a village or that of a quarter in a town. It sometimes became difficult and time-consuming to trace the subject or informants for such a case. Fortunately, most of the cases had been fairly well-known and remembered in their communities. Probably the contemporaneous investigation and publication of a report of a case tended to fix it in the memories of local inhabitants. When we reached the area in which a case had occurred we would sometimes find a person who had vaguely heard about it and he or she would refer us on to someone better informed or even to a firsthand informant for the case.

Among the thirty-one cases that had been recorded or published we found the subject or at least one firsthand informant for twenty-four cases. Among the seven cases in which we failed to do this, four cases dated from the early years of this century and persons remembering the cases had probably died by the time we made our inquiries. Among the twenty-four cases for which we succeeded in tracing living informants, ten of the subjects had died. The remaining subjects were alive and, although most had forgotten the previous lives they said they had remembered when young children, all cooperated freely with our inquiries and helped us to fill the gaps in relevant information about their cases.

Despite our success in tracing an informant (or more than one) for most of the cases in the earlier series, we were still unable to obtain as much information about them as we could for the later series. Important informants had often died, and those still living sometimes did not remember details.

Methods of Investigation and Additional Information Obtained

One of us has elsewhere described the principal methods we have used in investigating cases of the reincarnation type (Stevenson, 1966/1974; 1975). The interview was the principal instrument of investigation, and the informants were all, with rare exceptions, firsthand observers of what they reported. We made particular efforts to check the published report of a case against the memories of living informants. However, they were recalling events that had happened many years earlier, and when discrepancies occurred, we did not necessarily accuse the first reporters of being inaccurate.

Our methods emphasize independent verification of the subject's statements with the family of the deceased person concerned. (We usually refer to this person as the 'previous personality' of a case.)

The earlier investigators were by no means unaware of the relative values of different types of evidence in these cases; and for three of the cases someone had made a written record of the subject's statements before they were verified. However, some of the other reports were casual and journalistic. Moreover, the earlier investigators often failed to appreciate the importance of some kinds of details that now interest us. For example, many of them noted the early age at which the subjects of most of these cases start speaking about a previous life; but few noted (or recorded) the almost universal fading of apparent memories of previous lives between the ages of about five and eight. (They probably did not visit the subject's family after the first investigation when the subject was still a young child). Also, since the early reporters did not think of analyzing the recurrent features of a large series of cases they tended to report features of interest to themselves that might not interest the reporter of another case in another community. For example, some of them recorded the interval between the death of the deceased person concerned in a case and the subject's birth, but others did not; however, we have always sought this information, because we are interested in learning the length of this interval in a large series of cases. The unevenness in the original collection of data and in our own later success in filling gaps entails that data on many variables are missing for some cases and we have no case (in the earlier series) for which there is no missing data.

Methods of Analysis

We have developed a codebook for the coding of the 61 variables of the cases that have seemed to us most important. (Several of these variables, such as the country of the subject's birth, were not relevant to the present analysis and we compared only 54 variables). Data from the field notes and any pertinent documents were entered in the codebooks. If an assistant entered the values in the codebook, one of us always checked the entries before approving it for the analysis.

Data from the codebooks were then entered into a computer from which we obtained counts and appropriate statistical analyses. Scalar variables of the two

series were compared with the median test giving Fisher's exact P. Variables recorded as either 'present' or 'absent' were analyzed by the chi-square test, appropriate correction being made when low frequency in a cell indicated the need for this.

Principal Features of the Two Series Compared

The variables we compared fell into three groups. The first group consisted of demographic features, such as the socioeconomic statuses of the two families concerned in a case.

The second group related to the main features of the cases. These included such items as the age of the subject's first speaking about the previous life and the age when he ceased to speak about it spontaneously; the principal content of his statements and related behavior; the mode of death in the previous life and the interval between that death and the subject's birth.

The third group of variables related to the investigation of the case, particularly to the thoroughness of its investigation.²

RESULTS

Among the fifty-four variables compared, significant differences (at $p = .05$ or less) between the two series occurred in only five variables, and we will mention and comment on each of these briefly.

Greater Thoroughness of Investigation in the Later Series

It was not surprising that the cases we investigated entirely by ourselves were studied more thoroughly than the earlier series ($p = .003$). As we have said, the earlier investigators did not inquire about many details that interested us, and they often did not make the independent verifications of the subject's statements that we emphasize.

Previous Personality Identified More Often in Earlier Series

The difference between the series in this variable was marginal ($p = .049$). We cannot know to what extent the earlier investigators selected cases they would study. However, they did in one way or another record and usually publish the cases they studied. It is possible that with publication in view they gave more attention to cases having verifiable features (usually called by us 'solved cases') than to those without such features ('unsolved cases'). We, on the other hand, cast our net more widely and sought to study unsolved cases as well as solved ones that came to our attention.

Violent Death More Frequent in Later Series than in Earlier Series

The previous personality died violently in 44 per cent of the earlier series and in 72 per cent of the later series ($p = .0245$). This difference may have arisen from the inclusion of more unsolved cases in the later series than in the earlier series. For reasons we do not understand series of unsolved cases have a higher

² Interested readers may obtain further information about the variables analyzed from our earlier papers (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1979; Cook et al., 1983). We will furnish upon request a copy of the codebook listing all the variables analyzed.

incidence of violent death than series of solved cases. With others, we have published data showing this in larger series of cases (from seven cultures, including India) and we offered possible explanations (Cook *et al.*, 1983).

First Communication and First Speech about the Previous Life at Older Ages in the Earlier Series

For this comparison exact $P = .019$ (one-tailed). Some of the subjects of these cases manifest a phobia related to the previous life or try to express something about it with gestures before they can speak. We distinguish these preverbal communications from those with speech, which usually come later. Probably the earlier investigators did not concern themselves with this distinction. Also, they may have noted only the child's age when speaking most volubly about the previous life (or even the age when they met the child) without inquiring about when the child *first* communicated or spoke about the previous life. If so, this would lead to their recording later ages (median: 74 months) for these features than our informants—more carefully questioned—gave for the subjects of the later series (median: 27 months). It is also possible that a true difference has occurred over the years in the ages at which children first communicate and speak about previous lives in India.

Important Features in Which the Two Series Showed No Differences

We list below the more important features of the cases in which we found no differences between the two series:

1. Demographic Variables

- Sexes of the subjects (earlier series: 58 per cent males/42 per cent females; later series: 61 per cent males/39 per cent females).
- Socioeconomic status of the families concerned.
- Size (population) of the communities involved.

2. Main Features of the Cases

- Subject's mention of the previous personality's name (earlier series: 91 per cent; later series: 86 per cent).
- Subject's mention of the previous personality's mode of death (earlier series: 74 per cent; later series: 76 per cent).
- Subject's having a phobia related to the mode of death (earlier series: 40 per cent; later series: 45 per cent).
- Interval (in months) between previous personality's death and subject's birth (earlier series: median 12.5; later series: median 14.5).
- Age (in months) when subject stopped speaking spontaneously about the previous life (earlier series: median 78; later series: 72).
- Geographical distances between families concerned.
- Frequency of relationship or prior acquaintance between families concerned (earlier series: 46 per cent had been acquainted; later series: 68 per cent had been acquainted; this comparison approached significance).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have already emphasized that both the earlier and the later series of cases were assembled and collected from *reported* cases and not from systematically sampled populations. Accordingly, both series are subject to the sampling errors to which nonrandom reporting may lead. However, accepted as two series of reported cases, they show a remarkable stability over two generations in the phenomenon of children claiming to remember previous lives in India. We admit to being mildly surprised ourselves by the paucity of differences between the two series of cases; they are nearly identical in their main features.

There are still a small number of persons who think that children who claim to remember previous lives should be regarded as victims of some psychopathology, perhaps akin to multiple personality. (This interpretation in no way addresses the substantial evidence of paranormal processes occurring in many of the cases; but we shall not press that point here). Since manifestations of psychopathology are notoriously susceptible to social influences and change over periods of time—witness the virtual disappearance in the West of *la grande hystérie* within two generations—we regard the stability that we found in the features of cases of the reincarnation type in India as disfavoring a psychopathological interpretation of the cases. This stability contributes a small amount of evidence—additional to that from other analyses—indicating that cases of the reincarnation type derive from some fundamentally nonpathological though unusual process.

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