

Cases of the Reincarnation Type in South India: Why So Few Reports?

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Abstract—Nearly 450 cases of children who claim to remember a previous life have been professionally investigated in India. With one exception, all published reports of such cases have hitherto involved children in North India, which raises the questions of whether there are similar cases in South India and whether they are underreported. This paper presents features of seven additional cases in South India. The cases were investigated primarily by means of interviews with firsthand informants for the subject's side of a case and for that of the concerned deceased person, if such a person has been identified.

The cases of South India show features similar to those of North Indian cases. The belief in reincarnation is held as strongly in South India as it is in North India, yet there is a marked disparity in terms of the ease with which cases can be found in the North compared to the South. Cases in the South may be underreported, but there is some indication that they may actually be less frequent, and the paper draws attention to this anomaly.

Keywords: reincarnation — unusual behavior — South India

Introduction

Cases of children who claim to remember previous lives (cases of the reincarnation type) have been investigated in various cultures. In recent years, nearly 2700 cases have been reported to the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia. Almost all of the cases have been investigated, and many of them have been published, by Stevenson and his associates (Mills et al., 1994; Pasricha, 1990; Pasricha and Stevenson, 1987; Stevenson, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1997; Stevenson et al., 1988). Most of the reported cases (78%) have been investigated in Asian countries, although a few cases have also been reported from Western cultures.

The subjects of these cases generally start speaking about a previous life between the ages of 2 and 4 years and stop making spontaneous references to that life between the ages of 5 and 8 years. Their statements often include the names of places and persons associated with the deceased person (or previous

personality) whose life they claim to remember, lives which more than half of the children state have been terminated violently. Examination of their claims revealed that the frequency of a violent mode of death of the previous personality was far greater than that of the general population in their respective countries.

Four features, namely, the age at first mention of a previous life; the age at which the child ceased to spontaneously talk about the previous life; the recall of the mode of death by the subjects; and the higher frequency of violent modes of death in the previous personalities, have been reported among cases from almost all cultures in which they have been investigated.

In addition, most subjects show behavioral features that correspond with the actual or expected behavior of the previous personality but that are incongruous with their present circumstances. Some of the subjects also have birthmarks or birth defects that correspond with primarily fatal and sometimes non-fatal injuries on the bodies of the concerned deceased persons (Pasricha, 1998a; Stevenson, 1997).

An analysis of 856 cases in six cultures, namely Burma (now Myanmar), India, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Thailand, and the United States (non-tribal cases), revealed that persons corresponding to the statements of subjects were identified in 576 (67%) cases (Cook et al., 1983). We refer to these cases as "solved." One third of the cases, however, remained unsolved, including many in cultures where memories of a previous life are considered desirable or are even encouraged. For example, only 32% of the cases in Sri Lanka are solved, even though most of the people of Sri Lanka believe in rebirth.

In India, where Stevenson first started his investigations in 1961, nearly 450 cases have been reported and investigated. Most of these cases came from North India; only one case, that of Mallika Arumugam, was investigated in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in Pondicherry (Stevenson, 1974). I joined Stevenson in 1973 and have investigated or participated in the investigation of over 400 of the cases, either in collaboration with or independently of Stevenson or his associates.

During the course of my investigations, I learned about a few cases from different states of South India and have investigated seven of these sufficiently to make a comparison with cases in North India. In this paper I shall present the main features of the South Indian cases, compare their features with those of a larger series reported from North India, and then review possible explanations for the different prevalence of cases in the two regions of the country.

In this paper I aim only at drawing attention to the difference in the occurrence of cases in North and South India. I shall present enough data from the cases in South India to show that in their main and subsidiary features, these cases resemble the much more numerous cases of North India. I do not address the strength or weakness of the evidence for some paranormal process in these cases. Also, for the sake of brevity only, I sometimes omit qualifying words, such as *claimed* or *presumed*, before words like memories, previous lives, and previous personalities, etc.

North and South India: Two Regions of One Country

There are 27 states in India, 5 of which are in South India: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, and Tamil Nadu. The approximate total population of India in 1991 was 844 million and that of the four South Indian states from which the cases have been reported in the present article was 196 million (approximately 23% of the total population). The state of Uttar Pradesh (North India) alone, from which most of the cases have been investigated and compared with South Indian cases in the present article, consisted of 139 million persons (about 16.5% of the total population of India).

Hinduism, a religion in which reincarnation is a principal tenet, is the main religion of both North and South India. (In Kerala, however, only 60% of the population are Hindu, while Christians comprise 20% of the population and Moslems another 20% of the population.) The two regions of South and North India differ in certain socio-demographic details, for example, in their languages and literacy rates. The main language in the North is Hindi or its dialects, while there are different languages spoken in all four states of South India. Broadly, the Hindi language originated from the Indo-Aryan language Sanskrit, while the South Indian languages have derived mainly from the Dravidian language Tamil (Gazetteer of India, 1973).

The national average literacy rate in India is 52%. The literacy rates in the two regions (North and South) are markedly different. The literacy rate is above the national average in three of the four South Indian states. The literacy rate in Kerala is highest (90%), followed by the rates in Tamil Nadu (63%); Karnataka (56%) and Andhra Pradesh (44%). The literacy rate of Uttar Pradesh in the North is 42%, which is below the literacy rate of the least literate of the South Indian States, Andhra Pradesh.

Methods of Investigation

The methods of investigation essentially were interviews with several first-hand informants regarding both the subject as well as the previous personality's sides of the case. Depending upon availability and cooperation, on the subject's side of the case, I interviewed the subject, his or her parents, grandparents, siblings, and neighbors, or anyone who had heard the subject make statements directly or who had witnessed certain unusual behavior in the child at first hand. On the previous personality's side of the case, I interviewed this personality's relatives, friends, neighbors, and other persons who qualified as firsthand informants. In addition, I also examined written documents (horoscopes, birth certificates, etc.), whenever available, to check the accuracy of dates of birth. For a detailed description of methods, see Pasricha (1990) and Stevenson (1974, 1975).

Sample

The sample consisted of seven cases; four subjects of the cases came from

TABLE 1
Sex and Religion of Subjects (S) and Previous Personalities (PP)

Feature/person	S	PP
Sex		
Male	4	3
Female	3	4
Religion		
Hindu	7	5
Moslem	0	1
No information on religion	0	1

Karnataka, and one each came from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Four subjects were males and three were females. All the subjects were Hindus. With two exceptions, all subjects claimed to remember having been Hindus in their previous lives; in one case, the subject remembered the life of a Moslem; and in the other case, I was unable to learn the religion of the previous personality. Hence, there was one case of a difference of religion between the previous and the present life. Table 1 shows the gender and religion of the subjects and the previous personalities.

Main Features of South Indian Cases and Their Comparison With North Indian Cases

In this section I shall present the main characteristics of the South Indian cases and compare them with the cases from a larger series from North India (Cook et al., 1983).

As the number of cases reported in this article is small, for the purpose of comparison of features with the North Indian cases, I have treated solved and unsolved cases as one group. I have compared the features of South Indian cases with unsolved cases from North India, as most of the cases in the present group remained unsolved. As mentioned earlier, the focus of the present paper is the reporting and the features of cases, not the question of validity of the memories of previous lives. Since the number of South Indian cases is small, no statistical analysis has been done; only frequencies of features have been presented. Tables 2 and 3 show some of the important features of the South and North Indian cases. Although I mentioned in the beginning that nearly 450 cases have been investigated in India, various figures have been shown against different features in the following tables. This is the case because, for various reasons, information on different features was not available for all cases.

Age of Subjects at First Mention of the Previous Life

The subjects of South Indian cases started speaking about a previous life, on average, at the age of 2½ years. The mean age of the subjects was 30 months (range = 21–36 months); the mean age was 39 months (range = 12–120

TABLE 2
Age (Months) of Subjects at Beginning and Ceasing to Speak about Previous Life

Feature/region	South India			North India		
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Range	<i>N</i>	Mean	Range
First spoke of PL	7	30	21–36	72	39	12–120
Stopped talking of PL	7	72	60–79	29	81	30–150

months) in the North Indian cases. That is, the subjects in both groups, on average, started talking about a previous life between the ages of 2 and 4 years.

Age of Discontinuing Talk About the Previous Life

Information regarding how long the subjects continued to talk about a previous life was available for three cases; two of the subjects stopped talking about the previous life between the ages of 5 and 6 years (60 and 72 months), while the third subject was still talking about the previous life until the age of about 6½ years. The subjects of North Indian cases stopped talking about the previous life, on average, by 81 months (range = 30–150 months) of age. In other words, the subjects of cases in North and South India stopped talking about previous lives between the ages of 5 and 8 years.

Both of the above features (namely, age of first mention about a previous life and age at which subject ceased to talk about the previous life) in both the regions of India are features that have been found in every culture in which the cases have been investigated; we refer to these features as “universal features.”

Ratio of Solved and Unsolved Cases

In two of the seven (29%) cases, a deceased person corresponding to the child’s statements was identified; as I mentioned earlier, we call these cases “solved cases.” However, a majority (71%) of the cases remained unsolved;

TABLE 3
Other Features of South Indian and North Indian Cases

Feature/region	South India			North India		
	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i>	%
Solved cases	7	2	29	266	204	77
PP’s name mentioned	7	2	29	57	32	56
PP’s MoD mentioned	7	4	57	59	47	80
Violent MoD (actual or claimed)	4	3	75	47	40	85

Note: *N* refers to the total number of cases for which information about a particular feature was available and *n* refers to the number of cases in which that feature was present.

that is, no deceased person could be found who matched the subject's statements. The number of solved cases in the North Indian group was 77%, which is a much higher proportion than was noted in the South Indian cases. However, the cases in South India are too few to permit any conclusions.

Of the two solved cases in South India, one subject (Radhika) was thought to be the reincarnation of her own paternal grandmother. The other subject (Padmavathi) remembered a life in a place about 365 kilometers away from the place in which she was born. The two families concerned in the latter case belonged to different castes and did not know each other prior to the development of the case.

Mode of Death of Previous Personality and Its Mention by the Subject

The mode of death (MoD), violent or natural, was mentioned far less frequently in the South Indian cases than in the North Indian cases. Only four (57%) of the subjects of South Indian cases, two of which were solved and the other two of which unsolved, mentioned a MoD in the previous life, whereas 47 (80%) of the 59 subjects of North Indian cases mentioned it.

Two subjects in the unsolved cases recalled a violent (accidental) MoD, while in both of the solved cases, the previous personalities died of unnatural causes. In one case the previous personality had died of drowning, and the previous personality in the other case had died a premature death (during childbirth).

The feature of higher frequency of a violent MoD in the previous personalities was far higher in both the South Indian as well as North Indian cases than it was in the general population (7%–8%).

Mention of Name of Previous Personality by the Subject

Only two (28.5%) of the subjects in the present seven-case study mentioned the name of the previous personality, and both of these cases remained unsolved. In 32 (56%) of 57 unsolved North Indian cases, the subjects mentioned the names of the previous personalities. However, mention of the names alone, in the absence of other specific details, such as the names of the places and persons associated with the previous lives, is not sufficient to identify the correct previous personality (Cook et al., 1983).

Unusual Behavioral Features of South Indian Cases

In addition to the universal features displayed by the South Indian subjects, all seven of the subjects showed behavioral features that corresponded well with their statements about previous lives but that were considered by their parents or other informants to be unusual based on the subject's present circumstances. Some of the subjects displayed more than one of the types of unusual behaviors that are frequently seen in the North Indian cases also. These included a precocious interest in sex; behavior appropriate for the opposite sex

or behavior appropriate for a subject of a different religion; unusual dietary habits; phobias; special interests and talents.

Precocious Interest in Sex

Two of the subjects showed a precocious interest in sex. Santosh, the subject of an unsolved case in Tamil Nadu, remembered having died in a vehicular accident. His family reported that from a very young age he used to get attracted to plump and fair-complexioned women. He would pinch them on the waist if it the waist was bare. One of the subject's aunts was fair, and he preferred to sleep with her when she visited the family. When sent to school, Santosh would sit with the girls and asked his teacher to bare her breasts. His parents were so embarrassed about his behavior that they had to take him out of the school for a year, and later they had to send him to another school. Furthermore, Santosh refused to wear underwear at night, although none of his siblings ever refused to wear it. While lying down with his grandmother, he would touch her private parts and showed a tendency to masturbate. His mother was sure that Santosh did not have a chance to witness anyone in such sexual activities. Since the corresponding previous personality could not be identified in his case, I can not say what connection, if any, Santosh's precocious sexual behavior had with the few statements he made about a previous life. It is certain, however, that it was unusual in his family and that he had had no obvious model.

Another subject, Sunil (a boy of Karnataka), used to become excited at the mention of word "marriage" and became shy when he spoke about his wife of the previous life. While sleeping with his mother, his behavior suggested that he wanted to have sex with her. This behavior compelled his mother to consult a clinical psychologist available at the place in which she was working. She was sure that the subject had had no opportunity to watch anyone engaged in sexual activity.

Like many of the North Indian cases, in both of these cases, the previous personalities were said to have died young in vehicular accidents. This means that they were in the age group of maximal sexual vigor.

Behavior Appropriate for the Opposite Sex

There was one case of a subject who had experienced a sex change. The subject of this case, Suresh from Kerala, remembered having been a female in the previous life. As he started speaking about a previous life, he insisted on wearing girls' clothes and also demanded earrings and other ornaments. He did this so often that his sister, who was 10 years older than he was, bought him a pair of earrings; he wore his sister's frocks and skirts for a few months. I met Suresh when he was 25 years old; he did not have any imaged memories of the previous life (except for a few vague ones). He had adjusted to his anatomical sex but still wished that he were a girl. The feature of sex change has been reported in other investigated cases in North India (Pasricha, 1990; Stevenson, 1975).

Unusual Dietary Habits

Three subjects had unusual preferences for food. One subject of a solved case, Padmavathi of Andhra Pradesh, was a Vaishya by caste (third in the hierarchy of the Indian caste system). She remembered having been a Brahmin (highest in the caste hierarchy) in the previous life. From a very young age, even before she could speak, the subject displayed certain habits expected of orthodox Brahmins. For example, she used to cry and resist eating meat when her mother tried to feed it to her; she protested so much that her mother had to reduce the frequency of cooking meat, even for herself, from once a month to once in 2 or 3 months. When she started to eat by herself, Padmavathi used to clean the place and sprinkle water around her plate before eating her meals. This was a Brahmin ritual that no one else observed in her family. Orthodox Brahmins are vegetarians; they are also well known to be fastidious, compared with members of other castes, about cleanliness.

A second subject, Anuradha (of Karnataka), who was born into a Hindu family, remembered the life of a Moslem who lived in Kashmir, where apples are grown in abundance. She was fond of apples from a very young age and would pick up only apples out of the many fruits offered to her. She also insisted on eating mutton every day, which her family provided. As this case remained unsolved, I can not say for sure that it derived from her previous life, but it is congruous with her claimed life of a Moslem. Her parents, however, ate chicken, which Anuradha never liked.

In a third case, the subject, Radhika, like the previous personality, disliked rasam, which is a kind of soup, prepared and served with meals at least once a day in every South Indian household. Radhika's paternal grandmother, with whom she was identified, also disliked rasam. All other family members ate rasam every day.

Behavior Appropriate for a Different Religion

As mentioned above, Anuradha, whose family members were Hindus, remembered having been a Moslem in a previous life. Around the age of 2½ years, she used to assume the posture of saying Namaz (Moslem prayers), and if taken near the Hindu shrine at home, she would blow out the lamp, showing her dislike for the Hindu way of worship. When Anuradha started to write, she would write from right to left, as is the convention with the Arabic and Persian scripts.

Phobias

Anuradha also had a phobia of water from the age of 2-½ years on. She remembered having drowned in her (unverified) previous life. Her mother had to force her to take a bath. The phobia continued until Anuradha was 9 years old. Her mother wished her to learn to swim, but she refused to do this. Phobia is another common feature among North Indian cases.

Other Unusual Behavior

Another subject, Hemant (of Karnataka), displayed unusual knowledge about a hookah and its functioning. Once he had to present an item for an exhibition at his school. His parents bought him a small pipe used for making bubbles with soap solution. He said, "I will make a 'gurgurhi' (small chimney of a hookah). I used to smoke a hookah." He then described where water is put in the hookah and how it is used for smoking. His mother said that she did not know anything about a hookah or its operation. He also showed interest in the type of clothing favored in Rajasthan, or Gujrat, two states in North India.

Radhika, mentioned earlier because of her unusual dislike of rasam, showed other behavior that reminded her family of her grandmother. For example, both Radhika and her grandmother seemed to be unusually strong-willed persons. Both had beautiful voices and a talent for vocal music. Both were particular in their choices about good saris (Indian dress).

All of the above unusual behavioral features have been reported among the solved and/or unsolved North Indian cases (Cook et al., 1983; Pasricha, 1990, 1996, 1998b; Stevenson, 1974, 1975, 1991, 1997).

Lesser Prevalence or Underreporting? A Conundrum

The preceding sections of this paper show that the cases in South India resemble those in North India in their main features, such as statements about a previous life, and in their subsidiary features, such as precocious interest in sex, behavior appropriate for the opposite sex or for a different religion, unusual dietary habits, phobias, special interests and talents, etc., behaviors that are unusual in the families of the subjects. Nevertheless, a remarkable disparity exists between the large number of cases learned about in North India and the few in South India. Does this disparity simply represent an underreporting or an artifact in South India?

In the late 1970s, a colleague and I conducted a survey of cases of the reincarnation type in a district of North India (near Agra, in the state of Uttar Pradesh) (Barker and Pasricha, 1979). We found a prevalence rate of 2.2 cases per thousand inhabitants. No comparable survey has been conducted in South India, and we do not know the prevalence of cases there.

Other evidence, however, leads me to believe that a real difference in the prevalence of the cases between the two regions exists. During a systematic survey of near-death experiences in Karnataka (Pasricha, 1993, 1995), I used the opportunity to inquire about cases of the reincarnation type and, in this manner, did not learn of even one case. In contrast, Stevenson and I have had assistants engaged in scouting for cases in different states of North India, and these assistants have easily learned about numerous cases there. Thus, there is a suggestion that there may be significantly fewer cases in South India.

If the prevalence rate differs in the two regions, what could be the reason for this disparity? Formal adherence to the dominant religion cannot be a factor,

because Hinduism is the religion of the majority of the inhabitants in both regions. Beneath the recognized observances of religious forms, however, some subtle differences of beliefs and practices may influence the occurrence of the cases. For example *Ramlila*, the play depicting characters from Ramayana (implying rebirth), is played every year, during the festival of Dussehra, all over North India, whereas no such practice is followed in South India. In addition, differences in education and literacy rate, child-rearing practices, and rituals and ceremonies concerning birth and death might perhaps be contributing to the underreporting of cases from South India.

At present we have no understanding of the causes of the difference in the occurrence or reporting of cases between the two regions. The problem may be solved by social psychologists. I hope the publication of this report of the anomalous distribution of the cases in India will attract the attention of other scholars and scientists with regard to this problem and will stimulate further inquiries to resolve it.

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