

# Gnanatilleka Baddewithana (reincarnation case)

The reincarnation case of Gnanatilleka Baddewithana was the first of its kind to be investigated and publicized in Sri Lanka. It is also notable as one of several in which the child's statements about a previous life were written down before attempts were made to identify it.

## Investigations

HSS Nissanka, a scholar and journalist in Sri Lanka, published a series of articles in *Silumina*, a national newspaper, on the subject of reincarnation. When readers wrote to ask him why, if reincarnation were real, there were no cases in Sri Lanka of people remembering a past life, he requested that anyone with knowledge of such cases should contact him, and several did so. He chose the case of Gnanatilleka Baddewithana, being the closest to the city of Kandy, where he lived. He began the investigation on 1 November 1960, at which time the girl was four years old.

When interviewing Gnanatilleka and other informants, Nissanka ensured the presence of prominent local individuals as credible witnesses: a city mayor, a well-known monk and scholar, lawyers, psychologists, professors and teachers. A news photographer was generally also present. He tape-recorded and carefully noted everything said by informants. He also established his own investigative procedures, such as introducing people the girl might have known in her previous life in controlled conditions, and carefully recording her reactions. Thus a thorough record exists of what the girl remembered, prior to the identification of the past-life person.

Seeking explanations other than reincarnation, Nissanka and his team looked carefully for prior connections between the two families, but found none through which Gnanatilleka's knowledge could have been conveyed. Both families, he writes, had clearly been reluctant about the investigation at first, indicating that they were not conspiring to gain publicity. Gnanatilleka showed no signs of mental illness, spirit possession, psychic ability or any paranormal knowledge other than that of Tillekeratne's life; she also referred to it in the first person rather than in the third person.

As the investigation progressed, Nissanka wrote a series of newspaper stories about it. Later he wrote a book, which was published in English in 2001 and contains partial transcripts, correspondence, and translations of official documents.<sup>[1]</sup> The original records of the case are now held at the University of Virginia's [Division of Perceptual Studies](#).

Pre-eminent reincarnation researcher [Ian Stevenson](#) learned about the case while working on another similar case in Sri Lanka. By this time, the person that Gnanatilleka remembered having been had been identified, but Stevenson approached the investigation independently, without having seen Nissanka's notes or heard his tapes. In 1961, he travelled to three municipalities in Sri Lanka to interview Gnanatilleka, members of her family and the family of the previous person, and others. He also corresponded with the renowned Buddhist monk and scholar who was present throughout Nissanka's investigation, the Venerable Piyadassi Thera. Stevenson published his case report in his book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*,<sup>[2]</sup> adding important details to Nissanka's investigation.

## Tillekeratne

Gallage Turin Tillekeratne, known as Tillekeratne, was born 20 January 1941 in Talawakele, Sri

Lanka, and died 9 November 1954. He had six sisters and two brothers. He attended Sri Pada College (a high school), travelling there by train with his brother and his sister Gunalatha, whom he called *nangi* (younger sister), although she was actually older. Characteristics noted by his mother included a concern for tidiness, also a love of flowers and drawing; she said he used paint boxes, made artificial flowers of crepe paper, and would mend clothes rather than throwing them away. If his mother moved to hit his sisters, he would beg her to hit him instead, and would comfort her, sobbing, if his father hurt her. Sometimes he would join his sisters in painting his nails. He had made a pilgrimage to a mountain called Adam's Peak, and was once present in the crowd when the young Queen Elizabeth II passed by in a train during a visit to Sri Lanka.

Tillekeratne's death at the age of thirteen was officially attributed to 'cardiac failure due to acute nephritis'. However, an impact trauma preceded it: According to the family, a hard leather cricket ball struck his leg while he was playing at school.

## Gnanatilleka

Gnanatilleka Baddewithana was born 14 February 1956 in Hedunawewa-Dihintalawa, a remote hamlet in Sri Lanka's central mountains. Her father was a small-scale rice farmer who also sometimes worked on tea plantations.

In response to Nissanka's call for cases, a neighbour of Gnanatilleka's wrote him that the girl had said that she had lived in a house in a town named Talawakele (about 22 miles distant) with her parents and a sister. Nissanka travelled to her home village with Piyadassi and a teacher as witnesses for his first interviews with Gnanatilleka and her family.

## Statements

Nissanka tabulated 61 statements by Gnanatilleka about Tillekeratne's life that she could not have been expected to know, the majority of which were verified as true by Tillekeratne's family or other associates. They included:

- The previous person saw Queen Elizabeth II during a state visit (an event two years prior to her birth); the Queen had travelled by train.
- He visited Adam's Peak.
- He travelled to school by train with his older sister.
- He had joined her sisters in painting his nails.
- He made flowers out of paper.
- He had been a boy.
- The 'Talawakele mother' had bought firewood (the word for 'bought' was the one used by Tillekeratne's family).
- The Buddha in the temple in Talawakele was very big (this statement was made prior to her first visit to Talawakele).
- There were no coconut trees in Talawakele (the climate was different due to elevation)..
- The 'Talawakele mother' made patties.
- The Talawakele parents were separated.
- His father worked the tea plantations.
- In addition, there were many correct details about the town of Talawakele, including descriptions of the temple and post office.

Stevenson created a tabulation with 34 statements and recognitions, many of which, although not all, were the same as those Nissanka had recorded.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Recognitions

Nissanka's first two trips to Talawakele to find Gnanatilleka's previous family proved fruitless; one lead turned out to be false, and many families objected to being quizzed about a child who had died. Undaunted, Nissanka arranged for her to visit Talawakele.

As they drove into the town, though, the four-year-old girl began recognizing aspects of the surroundings. She pointed out that certain houses were missing (they had been demolished). Nissanka drove her throughout the town to see if she would recognize the neighbourhood in which she had lived. She did not, but she was thrilled to see the temple. From there, Nissanka was able to trace a man who said Gnanatilleka's memories closely matched the circumstances of his young brother-in-law, Tillakeratne.

Nissanka tried to take Gnanatilleka to meet her past-life family, but was frustrated by the presence of crowds of onlookers. However, he did manage to interview Tillekeratne's mother and sister.

Gnanatilleka was then tested at her home by three teachers from Talawakele, only one of whom Tillekeratne had known. Each asked her if she knew him: she answered correctly that she known just one, DV Sumathipala, and climbed into his lap. She then moved him to tears by re-enacting part of a story he had been teaching Tillekeratne shortly before his death. She also accurately described the layout of the school in Hatton, a town she had never visited.

## Behaviours

As a very young child, Gnanatilleka begged so much to be taken to Talawakele that her older brother eventually agreed, which was how her descriptions of the town were first verified. She had been distraught by rumours that the woman found dead in her own village had been from Talawakele, and only the visit with her brother could calm her.

Nissanka found that Tillekeratne's beloved teacher, DV Sumathipala, could comfort Gnanatilleka more effectively when she was distressed than could her own parents.

Her reactions to his family members corresponded with his relationships with them. For instance, on her first meeting with the family she reacted angrily to the presence of one of his brothers, refusing to let him hold her. The parents revealed that this brother and Tillekeratne had always had a hostile relationship.

Both Tillekeratne and Gnanatilleka liked the colour blue and preferred to dress in it.

Stevenson noted that Tillekeratne and Gnanatilleka were both strongly religious.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Family Recognitions

Gnanatilleka met her former family on 18 December 1960. She was taken to an upstairs room at an inn in Talawakele so that she would be unable to see anyone until they entered. Nissanka was accompanied by 26 other assistants/witnesses, many of them notables.

Somewhat tired and bored by this time, Gnanatilleka brightened up when Tillekeratne's mother entered the room, and threw her arms around her saying, 'Talawakele mother'. Tillekeratne's family and associates entered singly, with the exception of two groups of three, and the girl was asked each time if she knew the person. She identified each person correctly. When someone was brought in whom Tillekeratne had not known, she answered correctly that she did not know the person. She recognized Tillekeratne's parents, all of his siblings who were introduced to her, including a sister

whom she addressed in the same style that Tillekeratne had, and two family friends.

Gnanatilleka was then invited to visit the houses of Tillekeratne's mother, three married sisters and aunt, and greeted them all with a gesture used by Sri Lankans to greet people they know well.

## Cause of Tillekeratne's Death

Analysing the family's responses, Nissanka and his associates noted their unease when asked about the cause of death, in contrast to their forthcoming manner in all other respects. They claimed he had been struck on the leg by a cricket ball prior to the illness from which he died, but this was not recalled by any former school, classmates or teachers, and it did not seem a likely cause to Nissanka.

Gnanatilleka's own description of what led to Tillekeratne's death was rather less innocuous: 'Talawakele mother hit her as she sat eating her meal at home. She fell off the chair and hit the floor'.

In 1962, a neighbour of Gnanatilleka reported that he was present on one occasion with her and Tillekeratne's mother, and took the opportunity to ask the latter how her son died. She started to describe how he was hit by a cricket ball, at which Gnanatilleka burst out angrily, 'Mother, you are lying! That's not how I died, I fell off a chair ... and now you're lying about it!' Nissanka noted that the disease had been present prior to the incident, and that Tillekeratne's mother could not be blamed for his death, but that it was understandable that the family would wish to conceal the true circumstances.

Stevenson independently noted an observation by Gnanatilleka's parents that the girl was afraid of doctors and hospitals, also of climbing up on anything from which she might fall.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Later Development

Stevenson learned from a correspondent that by the age of six, Gnanatilleka had ceased speaking spontaneously of her past life.<sup>[6]</sup> However, when he made a follow-up visit four years later, she claimed to remember the past life still, and gave answers that suggested this was true. On a further visit when she was fifteen she said the past-life memories were fading but that she retained a few, notably those concerning Tillekeratne's experiences at school. Contact between the two families had lessened.<sup>[7]</sup>

Stevenson asked Gnanatilleka and her family why she had gone to them to be reborn. They related that, at age five, she had said that she remembered, as Tillekeratne, being fascinated at seeing her present older brother, DA Baddewithana, dancing on the occasion of the Queen's visit. DA Baddewithana confirmed that he had danced in Talawakele on that occasion.<sup>[8]</sup>

Lora, a classmate of Tillekeratne, had never met Gnanatilleka, so Stevenson set up a recognition test with Lora and a friend. Despite fading memories, Gnanatilleka was able to recognize Lora and say she knew her from Talawakele, though she got the name slightly wrong, saying 'Dora'.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Criticism and Controversy

Gnanatilleka and her memories attracted considerable media attention in Sri Lanka.<sup>[10]</sup> The story was picked up by English-language papers, the government radio station, and eventually by media in India, England and other countries. Nissanka and Piyadassi were invited to lecture about the case at universities and other venues in Sri Lanka.

Objections to the publicity were expressed by orthodox Buddhists, who felt that reincarnation did not need to be proven, Christians who persuaded school libraries to ban the book (until the Buddhists protested and it was brought back), and Marxists, who felt resources should be used to tackle starvation rather than past lives. Nissanka heard that critics were visiting residents of Talawakele to caution them against co-operating with the investigation. The husband of one of Tillekeratne's sisters accused Nissanka of publishing lies, and promised to reveal the 'real truth' about Tillekeratne's death if Nissanka would consent to meet him. The sister then wrote to Nissanka saying that her husband had physically abused her and abandoned his family.

Abraham T Koor, a Sri Lankan skeptic, attempted to debunk the case in a 1980 book,<sup>[1]</sup> based on an investigation by HSD Senaratne, a member of the Sri Lanka Rationalist Association. He made assertions that are variously speculative, contradicted by the facts or lack explanatory power. For instance, he derides as worthless non-specific statements such as 'I had a mother' and 'I went to school', although such statements were neither recorded nor presented as evidence by Nissanka and Stevenson. Also, Koor repeatedly objects to Gnanatilleka answering 'improper' questions in a way that seems to confirm the reincarnation hypothesis, declaring she can only have done so through being coached, in effect accusing the investigators of collaborating in fraud.

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## Literature

Koor, A.T. (1980). *Gods, Demons and Spirits*. Bombay: Jaico Publishing House.

Nissanka, H.S.S. (2001). *The Girl Who Was Reborn: A Case Study Suggestive of Reincarnation*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: S Godage.

Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (2nd ed., rev.). Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: University Press of Virginia.

## References

### Footnotes

- 1.^ Nissanka (2001). All information in this and the following four sections is taken from this work except where otherwise noted.
- 2.^ Stevenson (1974), 131-49.
- 3.^ Stevenson (1974), 136-41.
- 4.^ Stevenson (1974), 144.
- 5.^ Stevenson (1974), 145.
- 6.^ Stevenson (1974), 142.
- 7.^ Stevenson (1974), 147.
- 8.^ Stevenson (1974), 147-48.
- 9.^ Stevenson (1974), 148.
- 10.^ Nissanka (2001), 126.
- 11.^ Koor (1980), 139-48. Thanks to Vitor Moura Visoni for assistance with this section.