

Rakesh Gaur (reincarnation case)

This child reincarnation case from India was investigated together by two researchers, one of whom thought it was best interpreted as reincarnation, while the second attributed it to parents coaching the boy to validate their reincarnationist belief system. The case report has become an important source in sceptical commentary about reincarnation research.



Subject and Previous Person

Bithal Das

Bithal Das was born in the small city of Tonk in north-eastern India in 1922. In his youth he lived with his older brother Ram Bilas in Bombay, working as a carpenter and chauffeur. From age twenty, Bithal Das worked as a carpenter until he began suffering from weakness and was ordered by his doctor to rest. As a teen he married a Tonk girl named Radha and they had four children who survived past infancy.

Bithal Das was said to be very calm, very religious and skilled as a carpenter and mechanic, but he was not well-off financially. He did electrical work on the side but was never formerly employed as an electrician.

On 15 August 1955, during India's rainy season, Bithal Das was alone at home, and attempted to unblock a backed-up drain in the courtyard with an iron rod. It touched a live electrical wire, killing him instantly. He was 34.

Rakesh Gaur

Rakesh Gaur was born on 15 March 1969 in the town of Fateh Nagar in north-eastern India. He was the fifth of six children of SN Gaur, a middle manager in the Indian Post Office and his wife Shanti Devi, who were of the Brahmin (highest) caste. At a little more than five years old, Rakesh began to tell his parents about a past life. He said he had been a member of the carpenter caste in the Chhippa neighbourhood of Tonk, which is about 225 km north-west of the town of Kankroli, where the Gaur family lived. He said he had been married to a woman named Keshar, and had been electrocuted. According to some of the informants, he mentioned the name Bithal Das. He was interested in carpentry and repeatedly asked to be taken to Tonk.

In the summer of 1976, a bus driver from Tonk, Chhittarji, happened to stop in Kankroli. He said Rakesh recognized him and gave him sufficient detail his previous life for him to identify it. When Chhittarji returned to Tonk, he told the family of Bithal Das that Bithal had been reborn in Kankroli. Meanwhile, SN Gaur wrote to the Tonk Electricity Board asking if any employee of the carpenter caste had been electrocuted, but received no reply.

In October 1976 SN Gaur took Rakesh to Tonk. There are differing versions of how the visit transpired, but the essentials are as follows. Rakesh at one time pointed to an electrical pole and said he had died while repairing it. Father and son went to the post office to enlist the staff's help in finding Rakesh's former family. A group set out to find their house, accompanied by a growing crowd of curious onlookers, but Rakesh seemed to have difficulty. One elderly person recalled that a

carpenter named Bithal Das had been electrocuted in 1955. As they returned to the post office, Rakesh spotted and recognized Bithal Das's son. Radha, his widow, met Rakesh at the post office and he identified her. SN Gaur finally took the boy home at about 1.30 am without them having visited his former house.

Two days later, Bithal Das's son, Bhanwar Lal, visited Rakesh in Kankroli. Bithal Das's brother, daughter and son-in-law all visited a little while later.

The Investigation

Overview

Rakesh's case was investigated by [Satwant Pasricha](#) and David Read Barker for a total of seven days between November 1976 and November 1978, after they learned about it in a newspaper account. They followed the methodology of [Ian Stevenson](#), pioneer of [reincarnation](#) research, performing repeated, independent interviews with as many first-hand informants as possible and collecting all relevant documents. The only departure was that they visited the family of the previous person before that of the subject rather than vice versa, due to their travel schedule. In Tonk they interviewed and then re-interviewed Bhanwar Lal, Radha and Radha's younger sister Ladha; in Kankroli they interviewed Rakesh and his parents. Later they interviewed Chhittarji and those staff members of the Tonk post office and Electricity Board who had been present during Rakesh's first visit to Tonk. They also interviewed Bithal Das's brother in another town. Pasricha continued investigating during a further visit to Tonk in March 1979, interviewing a few new informants.

The researchers ascertained that because there was no regular exchange of goods or people between Tonk and Kankroli and no informants were aware of any prior contact between the two families, they cannot have been in contact before Rakesh began to relate his memories.

Pasricha and Barker co-authored a paper in 1981^[1] in which they stated that the investigation was incomplete, as they differed in their interpretations of discrepancies in the testimony, and hoped to gain additional information. Pasricha published a second paper^[2] in 1983 in which she made further arguments in favour of a reincarnationist interpretation of the case.

Rakesh's Statements

In addition to those statements mentioned above, Rakesh stated correctly that he had two children (by which, following local custom, he meant sons), that his house was made of unbaked bricks, that there was a big well near his house from which the family drew water, and that his family was very poor. He told his father that he did not know how long ago he had died, but he had been 35 years old.

According to Chhittarji, Rakesh introduced him to his father, saying 'this is Chittar', and also said he had two children named Bhanwar and Babu. Other informants recalling this recognition reported that Rakesh said that in his past life he had taught Chhittarji how to drive, which Chhittarji confirmed was true.

Bithal Das's son Bhanwar Lal recounted that when he first spoke to Rakesh, the boy wrongly named himself as Arun, but said correctly, 'when I died there was no one home', and 'I kept 1,500 rupees in the house'. He also spontaneously and correctly gave details about Bithal Das's house and its surroundings, and said, 'when I lived in Bombay I used to get green saris for your mother'. This conversation convinced Bhanwar Lal that Rakesh was indeed his father reborn.

Rakesh's Behaviours

According to SN Gaur, Rakesh would sometimes wake up at 1 or 2 am during the rainy season, worried that his house would collapse.

A carpenter in Kankroli told the investigators that Rakesh would talk about his previous life often when he visited to play in the carpenter's shop, and instruct the carpenters there on how to use tools. He told them that he had been killed by electrocution working on an electrical pole.

In the two years following Rakesh's first visit to Tonk, the two families became close, repeatedly visiting each other, as Bithal Das's kin became increasingly convinced that Rakesh was his reincarnation. In the spring of 1977, Rakesh and his father attended the wedding of Bithal Das's granddaughter.

The Report

Barker's Interpretation

In his portion of the discussion section of their joint paper, Barker opines that the case was not one of reincarnation but rather social construction, in keeping with the Indian belief in reincarnation. As three informants said that Rakesh had identified himself as Bithal Das before visiting Tonk and three said he had not, and the group did not go to the house of Bithal Das until an elderly resident said a man of that name had died of electrocution, Barker concludes that Rakesh did not speak the name 'Bithal Das' before the visit. Barker argues that the name was first mentioned by the elderly resident of Tonk and the family, friends and onlookers seized onto the idea and unwittingly coached Rakesh to play along, which he did to please them. Barker notes that discrepancies in the accounts seemed to disappear as soon as the two families were acquainted. However he admits that the recognition of Chhittarji and statements made to Chhittarji seem to defy this interpretation.

Pasricha's Interpretation

In her comment, Pasricha acknowledges the errors and discrepancies in Rakesh's statements, including the place of death, but notes that they are only 'slightly more numerous' than average for other cases she has studied, and also that if one informant says a subject made a statement and another says he did not, their testimony is not discrepant unless they are referring to a particular instance when both were present. She notes that investigators must be careful to distinguish true contradictions from variations in unimportant details.

Pasricha then itemizes statements reported to have been spoken by Rakesh prior to visiting Tonk which contributed to the identification. Both SN Gaur and Chhittarji said that Rakesh had said his name had been Bithal Das. Although Gaur's letter to the Electricity Board had been thrown away, one Board employee recalled it had mentioned the name Bithal Das and a second employee remembered that it had included a name, though he could not remember what it was. Various witnesses said that Rakesh had said he had been a carpenter of Tonk, had been married with two sons, had died of electrocution at the age of 35, and had had a 'big well' near his house. Chhittarji said Rakesh told him he recalled teaching Chhittarji to drive, that he had two sons named Bhanwar Lal and Babu, and that he had hidden 1,500 rupees at his house. All these statements were correct for Bithal Das. Rakesh's apparently erroneous concern about flooding collapsing his unbaked-brick house actually did apply to a second house in which Bithal had lived and owned at the time of his death.

Pasricha goes on to show that Bithal Das's family could not have been in a position to furnish Rakesh information during the first visit because they did not properly meet. Rakesh included details about the interior of Bithal Das's house that he recalled to Bhanwar Lal; Pasricha verified these herself. Of

27 statements made before Rakesh could have been provided with the information, only four were incorrect. Pasricha attributes the length of time spent in futile search for Bithal Das's house and family to inadvertent misdirection, including Rakesh naming the wrong neighbourhood, and to the twenty years that had passed since Bithal Das's death. She attributes the discrepancies disappearing after the families met to mutual smoothing out of errors.

Since Rakesh's father credited his son with strong ESP, Pasricha stops short of concluding that his case is one of reincarnation. However, she maintains that the evidence defies any normal explanation.

Pasricha's Second Report

In 1979 and 1980 Pasricha revisited many of the case informants already interviewed, as well as some new ones, hoping to reach greater certainty with regard to what Rakesh had said before and during the meeting in Tonk. However, she met with limited success.

Pasricha tried a thought experiment, following a case in which the child subject did not identify the previous person, but Ian Stevenson nevertheless succeeded in doing so.^[3] She started from Barker's assertion that Rakesh had never mentioned the name 'Bithal Das' before visiting Tonk, considering whether the identification could have been made without Rakesh having provided the name.

In the paper resulting from this subsequent work,^[4] Pasricha notes that all informants agreed Rakesh made three correct statements about Bithal Das's life before visiting Tonk: (1) he had lived there; (2) he had been a carpenter; and (3) he had been electrocuted. She considered whether all three facts could have been true for any other person.

First, she undertook to learn how frequent electrocutions were in Tonk, with the assistance of Stevenson, who inquired in a letter to the city's Chief Medical Officer, and so learned that 0.88 people on average died of electrocution per year. From this, she estimated that some twelve had died of electrocution between 1955 and 1969, although likely no more than three would have been employees of the Electricity Board. Matching that to the death rate of the town (taking into probable account underreporting), Pasricha calculated that there was a less than 1 in 1,500 chance that Rakesh was referring to a deceased person other than Bithal Das, and thus it did not make much difference whether he mentioned the name prior to visiting Tonk.

In her concluding remarks, Pasricha acknowledges that assumptions underlie her calculations, but points out that even if more solid evidence were provided, such as a written record of Rakesh's early statements, sceptics would still find ways to negate it.

Criticisms

The late parapsychology writer [D. Scott Rogo](#) states in a 1985 book^[5] that Barker's critical approach was based on that of a lawyer, Champe Ransom, whom Stevenson hired to help analyse his reincarnation cases, and who became sceptical of them. According to Rogo, Ransom wrote a report stating his objections, which Stevenson asked him not to publish.^[6] Rogo was unable to obtain this report but states he was told about it by a colleague whom he does not name.

Ransom, Rogo writes, divided the child's statements up into two categories: those which he could know by normal means and those which he could not. He noticed that the informants seemed much more certain of what the child said in the former category than in the latter. Barker's interpretation of the case as social construction was, according to Rogo, based on this, and Rogo goes on to say that investigator bias is the reason Stevenson found and published so many apparently strong cases.^[7]

On the Rakesh Gaur case, Rogo outlines and quotes part of Barker's interpretation, then does the same with Pasricha's. He credits Pasricha with making a 'slightly' stronger case, somewhat vindicating Stevenson's work, but insists that the interpretation of reincarnation cases rests on the 'biases and predilections of the investigator'. The fact of Pasricha's and Barker's disagreement, he writes, gives 'an idea of the confusion that may have existed in many of Stevenson's cases', and notes that cultural variations in the features of reincarnation cases point to cultural construction, as argued by the philosopher CTK Chari.^[8]

Reincarnation critic [Paul Edwards](#) makes a harsh evaluation of the case, drawing from Barker's view, in a 1996 book.^[9] Similar to Rogo, he accuses Stevenson of suppressing dissenting views, using Rogo as a source but without citing specific works – though the person he claims Stevenson was trying to silence was Barker, not Ransom. Rogo had apparently claimed that Stevenson was in the habit of threatening lawsuits so as to silence doubters, something which Stevenson flatly and repeatedly denied. Exchanges between Rogo and Stevenson appeared in the January and October 1986 issues of the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*.^[10]

Edwards offers no evidence for the veracity of Rogo's charges but notes that, despite this purported pressure, Barker did publish his views twice, including in the paper co-authored with Pasricha. Edwards' evaluation of the case is short and contemptuous, likening Rakesh's recognitions to scenes in a popular movie in which an impostor is 'recognized' by people to whom he has already been introduced. Edwards writes that he assumes the reader will find Barker's conclusion 'vastly more reasonable' than Pasricha's.^[11]

Reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) observes that Edwards makes no mention of Pasricha's counter-arguments to Barker's interpretation or her later findings, including the observation that Bithal Das could likely have been identified as the previous person purely on the three statements all informants agreed upon. Matlock also notes that Edwards omits the fact that when Rakesh first recognized Chhittarji, he gave him sufficient identifying information for Chhittarji to notify Bithal Das's family.^[12]

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Literature

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Pasricha & Barker (1981). All information in the previous two and following four sections of this article are drawn from this work.
- 2.^ Pasricha (1983).
- 3.^ Stevenson (1977), 203.
- 4.^ Pasricha (1983).
- 5.^ Rogo (1985).
- 6.^ Stevenson (1986a, 237) took issue with the idea that he had tried to suppress Ransom's report, which he had commissioned. In fact, Stevenson said, he had encouraged Ransom to share his comments, asking only that he include Stevenson's response when he did so.
- 7.^ Rogo (1985), 79.
- 8.^ Rogo (1985), 83.
- 9.^ Edwards (1996).
- 10.^ Rogo (1986) replied to Stevenson's (1986a) comments on Rogo's book, followed by a final rejoinder from Stevenson (1986b).
- 11.^ Edwards (1996), 264.
- 12.^ Matlock (2019), 115.