

Shiva-Sumitra

This is the case of a young Indian woman, Sumitra Singh, who appeared to die and then revived, but having apparently lost all awareness of her former personality, and now showing the knowledge, behaviours and personality traits of a quite different woman, Shiva, who had died by violence two months earlier. On visiting Shiva's family, Sumitra made accurate recognitions of family members, relating to each in the appropriate manner for Shiva. The family accepted Sumitra as Shiva in a different body, and she retained the new identity for the rest of her life. This highly unusual case was investigated by multiple researchers, and has been interpreted variously as one of reincarnation, possession, or both.



Shiva Tripathi

Shiva Tripathi was born on 24 October 1962 to a family of the Brahmin caste. Her father, Ram Siya Tripathi, was a college lecturer. Shiva grew up in the city of Etawah and graduated from college with a BA in home economics. At age eighteen, she entered into an arranged marriage with Chhedi Lal, and moved in with his family in the small town of Dibiyapur, according to Indian custom. The couple had two sons nicknamed Rinku and Tinku.

There was considerable animosity between Shiva and her in-laws. The researchers who first investigated the case speculated that the in-laws were irritated by Shiva's superior education and more urbane manners.^[1] However an Indian psychologist, Parmeshwar Dayal, who also investigated the case, wrote that Shiva's family by marriage considered her dowry insufficient, and often complained about this verbally and in letters.^[2] Whatever the cause, the quarrel came to a head in late May 1985, when Shiva's in-laws forbade her to attend an exam (or according to a different source, the wedding of a member of her birth family). On the evening of May 18, Shiva's maternal uncle by marriage visited the family and was told by a tearful Shiva that her mother-in-law and one of her sisters-in-law had beaten her. He tried to calm matters, to no avail.

The next morning, the uncle heard that Shiva's dead body had been found on railway tracks at a nearby station. Her in-laws said she had thrown herself in front of a train. Reincarnation researcher [Ian Stevenson](#) and his colleagues interviewed the uncle and four other people who said they had seen her body on the morning of 19 May, prior to cremation. When discovered, it had been lying between the two rails, and was intact except for an injury to the head. According to Shiva's sister Uma, she and her husband were the first to see the body: she said 'the head was bashed and the brains were showing, almost like pulp'.^[3]

The uncle requested that cremation be delayed until Shiva's father could be brought, but while he was travelling to fetch Ram Siya Tripathi, the in-laws obtained permission from local authorities to cremate Shiva's body, expediting the burning by adding fuel oil. There were rumours in Dibiyapur that people had seen Shiva's in-laws carrying her to the railway station under cover of darkness.

By the time Tripathi arrived at Dibiyapur, his daughter's corpse was ashes and bone. He reported the death to police, who began an inquiry. Shiva's husband and father-in-law were arrested but then

released for lack of evidence. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law went into hiding for some months, and were arrested when they returned in 1986. Eventually they too were released due to lack of evidence. Several newspapers ran stories about the death and the murder accusation.

Sumitra Singh

Sumitra was born around 1968, the daughter of a male native of Angad ka Nagla in Etawah District. The family was of the Thakur (warrior/landlord) caste, one level below the Brahmin caste. Her mother died when she was eleven; earlier she was often separated from one or both parents, and lived for eight years with an older cousin in a neighbouring district. Sumitra never attended school but was taught rudimentary reading and writing by the cousin, who had attended school only for a year or two.

When Sumitra was thirteen, her family arranged a marriage with Jagdish Singh of the village of Sharifpura, and moved in with his family. Just as her father had been, her husband was often absent, sometimes for months at a time, pursuing employment in Delhi. After three years of marriage, she gave birth to a boy in December 1984.

A month or two later, Sumitra began having episodes of loss of consciousness, or trance, in which her eyes would roll upward and she would clench her teeth. These events varied in duration from a few minutes to a full day. Sometimes she would say afterwards that she had been possessed by the goddess Santoshi Mata, of whom she was a devotee. On two occasions she was apparently possessed briefly by communicating personalities, one a Sharifpura woman who had drowned herself in a well, the other a man from another part of India. Her family sought the aid of local healers, to no avail.

On about 16 July 1985, Sumitra predicted that she would die three days later. On 19 July, after an unexplained fever, she lost consciousness and appeared to die. Eyewitnesses agreed that her respiration and pulse stopped and her face drained of blood for at least five minutes. But as her family members began mourning her, she came back to life. Her identity appeared to have completely changed. She now called herself Shiva Tripathi.

Investigations

This case was first investigated by Stevenson and fellow reincarnation researcher [Satwant Pasricha](#) independently, having been brought to their attention in October 1985, when each was sent a newspaper article about it. Their principal method was to interview people who had witnessed Sumitra's apparent death and subsequent transformation, and members of Shiva's family. Pasricha carried out a series of interviews in November 1985. In February and March 1986, Stevenson, Pasricha and a third researcher, Nicholas McClean-Rice, re-interviewed most of the same informants as well as numerous others in Sharifpura, Angad ka Nagla and four other towns and villages in neighbouring districts. In November 1986, February 1987 and October 1987, Stevenson and Pasricha interviewed informants who had not been interviewed before to confirm that the two families had not had previous contact. Pasricha acted as interpreter and took notes in Hindi, while Stevenson and McClean-Rice took notes in English. Some tape recordings were also made.

The researchers also studied newspaper reports of Shiva's death and the murder allegation, and viewed the photos of Shiva's family members whom Sumitra had correctly identified, despite not having known them as Sumitra before the transformation.^[4]

Psychologist Parmeshwar Dayal carried out an investigation concurrently and presented it at a conference in India in March 1987. As well as interviewing Sumitra and the families, Dayal asked people who knew her well to complete a psychological questionnaire, and performed a Rorschach

test on Sumitra herself; he also had a handwriting analysis performed on three letters, two written by Shiva and another said to have been written by Sumitra following the transformation.^[5]

Two later attempts at follow-up investigations were made, but in both cases Sumitra and her husband Jagdish Singh could not be contacted. In 2009, [Antonia Mills](#) and Kuldip Dhiman learned from the Singh family in Sharifpur that Sumitra had died in 1998 and Jagdish in 2008. Mills and Dhiman were able to obtain two previous unpublished letters written by Shiva and by Sumitra after her changeover; they also interviewed Shiva's parents, sister, brother and other relatives, Shiva's husband, son and mother-in-law, and Sumitra's brother-in-law, sister-in-law and other associates. The purpose of this follow-up investigation was to reassess the case, learn whether Sumitra had continued to identify as Shiva, and compare the case with other cases both of possession and reincarnation. Mills and Dhiman also revisited Dayal's handwriting comparison in the light of the two newly-found letters. They published their findings in 2011.^[6]

The Transformation

As Sumitra's father recounts in a [BBC film documentary](#) on Stevenson's research,^[7] when Sumitra awakened she appeared not to recognize her surroundings or the people around her. She spoke very little for a day, then began saying that her name was Shiva and she had been murdered by her in-laws in Dibiyapur. She wanted nothing to do with Sumitra's husband and infant son, but wanted to be taken to see Shiva's two children. She stated many details about Shiva and her life that the researchers learned from relatives who had been witness to the statements.

Sumitra's family told interviewers that at this time they had known nothing of a woman named Shiva who had died in Dibiyapur. They first thought that Sumitra had gone insane, then that she was possessed, so they made no attempt to verify the stated facts. According to Dayal, because she was deemed possessed, she was 'cruelly tortured continuously for a long period by *Ohjas* (exorcists or spirit healers) for redemption and cure'.^[8] It was to no avail; she remained in the Shiva persona, apart from a brief re-emergence of Sumitra when she 'became confused for a few hours and seemed to resume her ordinary personality'^[9] in the autumn of 1986.

Intermission Period

Dayal noted that Shiva, once awakened in the body of Sumitra, claimed to have had memories from the [intermission](#) between Shiva's death and her awakening. Sumitra's father told Dayal that she had told him she had been brought before Lord Yama, the Hindu god of death. She saw people with their feet turned backward being punished according to their karma, some being whipped, some being thrown into boiling water. The goddess Santoshi Mata came to her aid, hiding her under the plank on which Yama sat, and feeding her. After some days Sumitra begged for mercy from Yama, who agreed to send her back for seven years.^[10]

Separation Between the Families

Stevenson and his colleagues were careful to ascertain that the two families had not been in contact prior to these events. Dibiyapur and Sharifpura are about 60 miles apart. Shiva's family likewise maintained that they had known nothing of Sumitra's family prior to the events. As well as being geographically separated, the two families were of different castes and educational levels, and followed very different lifestyles, one urban and professional, the other rural and agricultural.

However, some information was available in the newspaper reports about Shiva's suspected murder. Stevenson and his colleagues were careful to compare her statements to these articles in order to

identify information given by her that they did not contain.^[11]

Verified Statements

Stevenson and his colleagues counted nineteen correct statements from Sumitra that were not given in any newspaper report. These showed apparent paranormal knowledge of:

- a particular yellow sari that Shiva had owned
- a watch she had owned, and the box in which it was kept in the Tripathi home before she married and moved out
- the order in which Shiva's maternal uncles were born
- a pet name for Shiva used by her family
- the names of two schools where Shiva had studied
- the pet names of Shiva's two children
- the names of two friends
- the names of Shiva's two brothers, two of her sisters, two of her maternal uncles, a maternal aunt by marriage and a nephew

Contact and Recognitions

While visiting Dibiyapur, Shiva's father Ram Siya Tripathi heard a rumour that his deceased daughter had possessed a girl in Sharifpura. However, it was some three months before he visited Sharifpura, on 20 October 1985, having first had an associate check the story; he was further delayed by monsoon rainfall. Sumitra wept when they met, although it cannot be claimed that she recognized him since she had been told he was Shiva's father.

Tripathi now showed Sumitra some pictures in a photograph album. She correctly identified all six family members in a photograph that had been taken eighteen years earlier: Shiva's parents, grandmother, brother, sister, and Shiva herself. She recognized all five of the Tripathi children shown in another picture, and Shiva's mother, brother and maternal aunt in a third. Upon seeing a photo of Shiva's young son Tinku, Sumitra began to cry and asked where Tinku and Rinku were. Upon seeing a photo of Shiva's sister-in-law, she said, 'this is Rama Kanti, who hit me with a brick'. This statement convinced Tripathi entirely that Sumitra was his daughter returned. Of seventeen people in eight photographs, she identified twelve without hesitation and three with some hesitation, failing to recognize only two.

Stevenson and colleagues counted as twelve the number of friends and relatives of Shiva that Sumitra recognized without prompting or other cues. They included:

- Shiva's maternal uncle by marriage (recognized on the second attempt)
- Shiva's mother, recognized on Sumitra's visit to Etawah (Tripathi attempted to confuse her by saying her mother was in a group of women near the house, but Sumitra declared she was not there, found her inside the house and embraced her in tears, as both Shiva's parents describe in the [documentary](#).^[12])
- a second maternal uncle
- a third maternal uncle, who had grown a beard after Shiva's death, whom she identified by name as soon as he spoke, recognizing his voice
- Shiva's nephew
- Shiva's sister
- a friend from Shiva's youth, whom Shiva had not seen in the eight years prior to her death, whom she happened to meet in a different town, and whom she addressed as 'Jiji', meaning 'sister', a form used by close female friends in India

In total, Sumitra recognized 23 of Shiva's relatives and friends either in person, in photographs, or both.

Conversely, Sumitra was no longer able to recognize people in her own family: her husband, her nine-month-old son, her in-laws, her father when he visited, the cousin she had lived with for eight years, and the cousin's husband. She was also confused about places, commenting when told of a field that was used as a latrine, 'We have a latrine inside the house', which was true of both homes in which Shiva had lived.

Behaviours

Sumitra's [behaviours](#) changed markedly after her transformation, being appropriate to a high-caste, educated woman – Shiva had been a Brahmin with a university degree – and not at all that of the rural village family Sumitra had been born into. In the [documentary](#), Pasricha noted that Sumitra now wore her sari in a more dignified way and wore sandals instead of going barefoot.^[13] Sumitra also became an early riser, as Shiva had been.

Sumitra now refused to respond unless she was addressed as Shiva. She also became more formal in the way she addressed other people, including her husband and his parents. On the grounds of her higher caste, she behaved snobbishly towards her in-laws, even asking her husband to wash his plates and utensils while they were visiting a Brahmin home, since he was of a lower caste, whereas she was not.. She refused to participate in an important Hindu ritual in which a sister ties a string around her brother's wrist, despite her brother begging her to do so.

Sumitra refused at first to be intimate with her husband or acknowledge her baby son, claiming he was a product of Jagdish's previous marriage. Eventually, however, she accepted the roles of wife and mother, while still insisting she was Shiva. She is reported to have said 'If I look after this child, God will take care of them [Shiva's children]. If I neglect this child, would God not punish me?'

Literacy Levels

Prior to her transformation, Sumitra's level of literacy was rudimentary. She had never attended school and was taught only a little reading and writing by a cousin who herself had only one year of primary schooling: she was said variously to have been unable to write at all, or at best to write the occasional letter. Her husband said she wrote 'a very little, like a child in kindergarten'.^[14] In contrast, Shiva had written frequently to her birth family following her marriage. After the transformation, Sumitra's ability to read and write improved strikingly. Stevenson and his colleagues wrote, 'We observed her in both these activities and found her able to read and write Hindi with great facility.' Her letter-writing became frequent, and she often wrote to the Tripathi family, just as Shiva had.^[15]

During Mills's and Dhiman's investigation, Ram Siya Tripathi had copies made of his collection of letters, articles and other memorabilia of Shiva. The collection included Dayal's 1988 paper, along with five letters, two previously-unpublished – a total of four letters written by Shiva and one by Sumitra post-transformation. In their 2011 case report, Mills and Dhiman provided Dhiman's English translations.^[16]

In her letters to her parents following her marriage, Shiva wrote frequently that she missed them, expressed concerns about not having enough time to visit or write them or study for her BA, asked to be kept posted on how her sister and friends were doing in their studies, and shared news. The latest-dated letter, written five months before her death, reveals distress: 'Every night I get scared in my dreams and sometimes I wake up screaming.'

Sumitra's letter was written to Tripathi about five months after she reawakened as Shiva. The handwriting is hurried, less tidy and with far more words crossed out. The tone is desperate. She wrote repeatedly, 'I don't like it here,' pleaded to be taken away, avowed that she was indeed Shiva, and even wrote, 'God is bad as he has dumped me here.' Dhiman assessed the writing ability of Sumitra in this letter as at least Grade 10.

Mills and Dhiman note that the way Sumitra signed her letter and the expressed sentiments of missing her family bear similarities to Shiva's letter-writing habits and style.

In Ian Stevenson's assessment, although Sumitra's level of literacy had increased significantly, it still fell somewhat short of Shiva's. Commenting on this, Stevenson compared the situation to 'a master pianist sitting down to play a broken-down piano. It wouldn't sound the same as a highly-tuned piano. You have to allow for the new instrument.'^[17]

Sumitra's Later Life

Interviewed by Mills and Dhiman,^[18] Sumitra's family members in Sharifpur all reported that Sumitra remained 'Shiva' to the end of her life, a period of thirteen years. According to Jagdish Singh's younger brother Arjun, their mother 'did feel odd about it, but later she got used to it'.

For their part, Tripathi family members concurred that Sumitra had retained the persona of Shiva as long as they retained contact with her, up until 1988, and that it was somewhat hard for them. Three of Shiva's siblings all said independently, 'You see the body, not the soul.' Her sister Uma added that Sumitra 'loved me the same way... only the face was different'.

Ram Siya Tripathi recalled that Sumitra was saddened to find herself in a strange body. He said she would 'point to a blemish on her foot and some marks on her face and tell him that these marks remind her that "this body is not mine." ' At first the Tripathis welcomed Sumitra and Jagdish into the family, finding Jagdish a job in Etawah. But due partly to the social stigma of a man living with his wife's parents, and partly to Jagdish's difficulty retaining employment, the couple returned to Sharifpur, and the Tripathis slowly distanced themselves from them. They were not aware that Sumitra had passed away until Dhiman told them, and were saddened at the loss of their '*dharma* daughter', that is, she who had returned due to cosmic justice.

During a visit to Dibiyapur, Mills and Dhiman learned that Shiva's sons Tinku and Rinku, now in their teens, had no memory of their mother. Rinku was being raised by his paternal aunt, the person suspected of killing Shiva.

Possession, Reincarnation or Both?

Journalist Tom Shroder remarked that, while subjects in others cases investigated by Stevenson seemed entirely sane, 'with Sumitra, you had something that looked almost like multiple-personality disorder'. He was particularly puzzled about the episode in which 'Shiva', occupying the body of Sumitra, gave way for a short time to the original 'Sumitra'. How could this be, if Sumitra had in fact died?

The similarity and consistency of the other cases we had studied, and, in a way, their simplicity, contributed to the feeling that they could be real, part of the natural order of things... By contrast, the account of Sumitra's possession and personality shifts had a disturbing illogic about it, a taint of body-snatching.^[19]

Stevenson created a typology of possession and reincarnation, ranging from partial temporary

possession to complete temporary possession to complete permanent possession after birth to reincarnation.^[20] Of course, he could not be certain whether Sumitra's experiencing of herself as Shiva would turn out to be temporary or permanent until she died; only when Mills and Dhiman confirmed her death could the condition be considered permanent.

Reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) coined the term '[replacement reincarnation](#)' for cases in which one spirit replaces another permanently without the body dying, such as Sumitra's. Matlock notes that the replacement usually happens after an (often severe) illness, and that only two age ranges have been observed so far: up to age three, most commonly, and more rarely, as with Sumitra, in the teen years.^[21]

Mills and Dhiman examined Sumitra's case in the context both of possession cases and reincarnation cases. They note that the duration of a possession can last from a short time to many years, so that for Sumitra to have experienced herself as Shiva for thirteen years is not implausible.^[22] They observe that while typical reincarnation cases often feature [birthmarks or birth defects](#) that echo wounds or injuries sustained by the previous person, this tends not to happen with possession cases, presumably because the body is already formed.^[23] Following her transformation, Sumitra showed no birthmark reminiscent of the fatal wound to Shiva's head.

The Super-Psi Hypothesis

In mediumship cases, a communicator who provides information known only to family and friends is often considered to have given evidence of his or her survival of death. However, in at least some cases, such 'veridical' information might have been gained by the medium from the sitters, by a telepathic process, giving the spurious appearance of survival.

This so-called '[super-psi hypothesis](#)' can also be invoked in cases of the reincarnation-possession type. Philosopher Stephen Braude suggests it may apply in the Shiva-Sumitra case. For instance, he points out that every time Sumitra was asked if she recognized a person, someone was present who knew the answer, making telepathic transfer among the living a plausible alternative to reincarnation or possession.

But in that case, what would the underlying motivation have been? Braude suggests that Sumitra might have constructed the Shiva personality psychically to achieve one or both of two possible objectives: a promotion in caste and/or increased attention from her husband, which she presumably yearned for after a childhood history of frequent abandonment, especially by male figures.^[24]

Braude also questions why, if Sumitra was genuinely Shiva, she did not move back in with her birth family and continue her relationship with her two infant sons.^[25] As for her increased literacy, he argues this can be explained by 'latent faculties' that have been observed to emerge in cases of dissociative identity disorder.^[26]

However, Braude concedes that the consistency of Sumitra's ability to recognize individuals known to Shiva exceeds that of the best psychics. He also points to the 'crippling complexity' that tends to weaken the force of super-psi as an explanation.

Responding to earlier statements by Braude of these ideas, Mills and Dhiman argue that evidence in reincarnation and possession cases convinces not just in terms of abilities or knowledge of facts, but 'the full embodiment and enactment of personality characteristics'. It was this, they contend, that persuaded Shiva's relatives that Sumitra had indeed become Shiva.^[27] They also point out that Sumitra demonstrated no psychic ability, in contrast to mediums, who can apparently psychically contact any number of beings both living and dead. Furthermore, even though she had experienced

short-term possessions by other spirits, she remained Shiva, never becoming Sumitra again except momentarily.^[28] They conclude that the case is ‘one of the strongest indicating that survival after bodily death can occur’.^[29]

But as Shroder points out, it remains mysterious that Sumitra’s original persona reappeared for a short time two years after Shiva’s emergence, just once. Did she return and reclaim her body momentarily? Did her soul remain in the body, latent, and only come out at that time? The truth may never be known.

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Stevenson, Pasricha & McClean-Rice (1989). All information in this article is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- 2.^ Dayal (1988), 57.
- 3.^ Mills & Dhiman, 157.
- 4.^ Stevenson, Pasricha & McClean-Rice (1989), 84.
- 5.^ Dayal, 60-61. See Annexure on page 77 for the handwriting analysis.
- 6.^ Mills & Dhiman, 146.
- 7.^ Interview begins at 7:30.
- 8.^ Dayal (1988), 58.
- 9.^ Stevenson, Pasricha & McClean-Rice (1989), 89.
- 10.^ Dayal, 60.
- 11.^ Stevenson, Pasricha & McClean-Rice (1989), 87.
- 12.^ Begins at 11:38.

- 13.^ Comment begins at 9:20. See [here](#) for more information on intercaste reincarnations.
- 14.^ Stevenson, Pasricha, & McClean-Rice (1989), 87.
- 15.^ Stevenson, Pasricha, & McClean-Rice (1989), 97.
- 16.^ One of the letters, designated X3 by Dayal, is said to have been written by Sumitra based on the post-marked date of December 1986. However, Mills and Dhiman determined, in part by an earlier handwritten date and in part by the fact that it had been posted from Dibiyapur, where Sumitra had never gone, that it had been written by Shiva prior to her death and mailed much later. See Mills & Dhiman (2011), 162.
- 17.^ Quoted in Shroder (1999), 203.
- 18.^ Mills & Dhiman (2011), 152-60. All information in this section is drawn from this source.
- 19.^ Shroder (1999), 202).
- 20.^ Stevenson (1974), 374.
- 21.^ Matlock (2019), 175-76.
- 22.^ Mills & Dhiman (2011), 176.
- 23.^ Mills & Dhiman (2011), 177.
- 24.^ Braude (2003), 202.
- 25.^ Braude (2003), 203.
- 26.^ Braude (2003), 205.
- 27.^ Mills & Dhiman (2011), 181.
- 28.^ Mills & Dhiman (2011), 182.
- 29.^ Mills & Dhiman (2011), 184.