

Swarnlata Mishra (reincarnation case)

Swarnlata Tiwari (née Mishra) is an Indian woman who, as a girl, remembered many facts and people from her previous life, and whose former home was identified purely from her description, written down before her memories were verified. She also performed dances accompanied by songs in a language she had never learned, apparently remembered from a second, intermediate past life.

Swarnlata Mishra

Swarnlata (sometimes spelled Swarnalata) was born on 2 March 1948 in Shahpur, in northern India. When she was three, her father ML Mishra, an administrative assistant, took her on a trip. As they passed through the city of Katni, she asked the driver to make a turn to 'my house'. When they stopped in the city for tea, she said they could get much better tea at 'her house' nearby. These were the first statements Swarnlata made suggesting she remembered a past life.

About two years later, Swarnlata apparently displayed recitative [xenoglossy](#); she began performing dances, first for her mother and then for others, while also singing in a foreign language she had never had the opportunity to learn. During the next few years, Swarnlata began telling others, mostly her brothers and sisters but sometimes also her parents, about her memories as a member of the Pathak family in Katni.

The Mishra family, having moved to another town, happened to meet the wife of a professor named R Agnihotri, who was from Katni, in July 1958. When Swarnlata heard about this, she asked to see the woman, and on doing so said she had known her in her previous life. Swarnlata's father began writing down her statements in September 1958 when she was ten, providing a written record of her memories prior to contact with the former family.

The two families never lived in communities less than a hundred miles apart, and their locations have different dialects and accents. Both firmly denied they had ever met, and the first contact between the Mishra family and anyone who had known Swarnlata's previous incarnation was with Mrs Agnihotri, long after the girl had made many statements.

Investigations

In March 1959, HN Banerjee of the Department of Parapsychology at the University of Rajasthan spent two days investigating the case in Chhatarpur, where the Mishra family then lived, creating an additional written record of Swarnlata's memories prior to contact between the families. Banerjee then went to Katni to try to find her former family. He had noted nine statements she made about the house in which she lived; in Katni, he found a house that matched this description, inhabited by a family named Pathak. A daughter of the family, Biya, had died in 1939, aged about forty. Banerjee found that the facts of her life corresponded closely with Swarnlata's statements.

In the summer of 1959, the families exchanged visits, with several of Biya's family and in-laws visiting Chhatarpur, and the Mishras visiting Katni and then the nearby towns of Maihar and Tiloni, where Biya had spent her married life and had died. ML Mishra made notes of Swarnlata's recognitions of people and places during both visits.

In the summer of 1961, preeminent reincarnation researcher [Ian Stevenson](#) investigated the case for four days. He interviewed Swarnlata, her father and her uncle in Chhatarpur, then interviewed Biya's three brothers, three sisters-in-law, son and nephew in Katni and surrounds. Stevenson also obtained extensive notes from a third investigation in 1963 by his research assistant P Pal, notes by Banerjee, and correspondence with others familiar with the case including Mrs Agnihotri. Stevenson published the case in his 1966 book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.^{[1](#)}

Statements and Recognitions Related to Biya

About her former house, Swarnlata said:

- It was white.
- The house had four stuccoed rooms but other parts were unfinished.
- The doors were black and fitted with iron bars.
- The front floor was made of stone slabs.
- The family owned a car (rare in the area at the time).
- A girls' school was located behind the house.
- A railway line could be seen from the house.
- Lime furnaces could be seen from the house.

These details were all true of the house as it had been when Biya had lived in it, prior to subsequent renovations, and were verified by Stevenson.

Swarnlata made some errors with names, but they were generally near-misses, as with her son Murli Pandey, whose name she thought was Krishna, of which Murli is a diminutive. Her own past-life first name she first gave as Kamlesh, then as Biya; later she explained that Kamlesh had been her name in a life between that of Biya and her current one.

On the first visit to Swarnlata by members of the Pathak family, they went out of their way not to aid her in recognizing him, but rather to hinder her so as to test the strength of her knowledge.

Biya's brother Hari Prasad Pathak arrived first, unannounced, concealing his identity. Swarnlata named him incorrectly first as 'Hira Lal Pathak', but recognized him as her younger brother and correctly called him by the pet name Biya had used, 'Babu'.

Next, Biya's widower Chintamani Pandey and her son Murli arrived in Chhatarpur, and arranged to meet Swarnlata accompanied by nine other men, some of whom Biya had known and some of whom she had not. When she came to Chintamani Pandey, she said she knew him from Katni, and assumed the bashful manner of

Hindu wives in the presence of their husbands. She also recognized him among a group of men in a forty-year-old photograph.

For his part, Murli insisted to Swarnlata for an entire 24 hours that he was not Murli but rather someone else, and also tried to pass off an accomplice whom Biya had not known as Biya's other son, Naresh. Swarnlata passed both these tests, firmly maintaining that she was correct.

On visiting Katni, Maihar and Tiloni, Swarnlata correctly recognized three more brothers of Biya, in their correct birth order, as well as two sisters-in-law, a family servant, a couple who were friends of the family, and a betel-nut seller whom she picked out of a crowd. She also recognized a cowherd who had worked for the family despite one of Biya's brothers telling her that the cowherd had died.

Swarnlata inquired about a tree she remembered that had been cut down, a parapet on the house in which Biya had lived in Maihar that had been removed, and about a family friend not wearing glasses, as he had when Biya had known him. Shown two hats and asked which one her father wore, she answered correctly that he had worn neither but rather a turban, an unusual head covering for the place and era. She recalled that one of Biya's sisters-in-law had died before Biya did, correctly identified Biya's room in the Maihar house, and correctly pointed out a road to a river used for bathing.

Asked to identify people Biya had known out of a crowd of about forty, she correctly picked out Biya's father's cousin, her brother-in-law's wife, and a midwife whom she addressed the way Biya had. In Tiloni, she identified the room in which Biya had died, and noticed that a verandah that had existed when Biya was alive was now gone.

Visiting the city of Jabalpur in 1959, Swarnlata recognized Biya's nephew, calling him his pet name 'Baboo' as Biya had, and a third sister-in-law. Returning to Maihar in 1960, she recognized Biya's other son, Naresh, despite Murli's testing her by insisting he was not Naresh, but another man named Bhola.

When one of Biya's brothers tested her by saying she had lost her teeth, Swarnlata insisted that she had had gold fillings in her front teeth. The Pathak brothers could not remember this and had to consult with their wives, who confirmed that this was true.

Swarnlata correctly remembered two obscure incidents from Biya's life: that she had attended a wedding with Mrs Agnihotri and they had had difficulty finding a latrine, which was confirmed by Mrs Agnihotri; and that her husband took money from her cash box, something only known to the two of them, which he confirmed. There was a discrepancy in the amount, which could be due to memory error on either of their parts: he recalled it to have been one thousand rupees and Swarnlata, twelve hundred.

Swarnlata showed some confusion about Biya's death: She said she had suffered pain in her throat and died of a throat disease, but in fact she had been successfully treated for the throat ailment but died a few months later of heart disease. She

named the doctor who had treated Biya as SC Bhabrat of Jabalpur, whereas Murli recalled he was SE Barat of Jabalpur.

Behaviours Reminiscent of Biya

Swarnlata's father noticed that while Swarnlata behaved as a child when she was with her birth-family, when she was with the Pathak family she behaved as an older sister to brothers who were forty or more years older than she. With them she engaged in the Hindu custom of *rahki*, in which sisters and brothers annually exchange gifts, and one brother was angry at her for missing it one year. Biya's brothers all accepted Swarnlata so completely as Biya's reincarnation that they said since she had been in their family for forty years and in the Mishra family for only ten, they had greater claim on her.

Swarnlata varied her behaviour toward Biya's sons, depending on whom they were with: reserved when with parents or elders of the Mishra family, but informal in a motherly way in the presence of just her former sons.

Swarnlata was emotional about her previous family, becoming tearful on meeting and parting, or sometimes even when thinking about them, yet also remained loyal to the Mishra family.

Swarnlata's Other Past Life

Swarnlata made fragmentary statements about another past life, which she said she lived between the death of Biya and her current-life birth. She said her name had been Kamlesh, she had lived in the city Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, and had died at the age of nine, to be reborn as Swarnlata. Some of her statements on the geography of the Sylhet area were found accurate, but she gave too little information to identify the previous person, and verification efforts also were hampered by the difficulties of travelling to Bangladesh.

Swarnlata said the song/dances she knew she had learned in this intermediate life from a friend in Sylhet. The language of the lyrics was identified as Bengali by P Pal, and Sylhet is in a Bengali-speaking region. Swarnlata had lived her entire life among Hindi speakers. Pal, a native of Bengal, identified two of the songs as poems by the renowned Indian writer Rabindrath Tagore, with some of the words altered, corrupted or missing. Visiting an educational institute founded by Tagore, Pal watched a performance of one of these songs, and noticed that the music was 'very much the same' as what Swarnlata sang and that she danced in a style taught at the institute.

Stevenson checked for other ways Swarnlata could have learned the pieces. He noted that she had never been observed to learn them by practice, as would be required for the degree of skill she had in performing them, nor had had chances to see them on television or at the cinema, or learn them from her parents, siblings or any friends of the family.

Later Development

By 1961, when Swarnlata was thirteen, she no longer spoke spontaneously about her past lives but, by Stevenson's observation, her memories were not fading as had those of most other children he had studied. He opines that this might have been due to 'the complete tolerance and acceptance of her experiences by members of her previous family ... In contrast to the families of some of the other children, they did nothing to suppress Swarnlata's statements or her participation, when opportunity afforded, in friendships with the Pathak family'.[2](#)

Though he corresponded with Swarnlata from 1961 on, Stevenson did not visit her again until 1971, when she was 23. She had earned an MSc with distinction in botany and was hoping for the opportunity to complete a PhD. She told Stevenson she had forgotten nothing of her past lives. In a letter written later, she recounted:

Letters or persons coming to me from Katni make me remember events of the previous life [there]. Sometimes when I sing the songs of life at Sylhet, I remember the environment of that place ... When I am absorbed in either of the past lives I forget the existence of the present life, but this is only for a short while and I again return to the present circumstances ... When I desire to have a particular thing that I do not have then in my mind the [related] event of the past life creeps in and thus I am satisfied that I did have this particular thing in my previous life ... In short, environment is the greatest factor to remember the past lives (*sic*).[3](#)

Swarnlata could still remember the three Bengali song/dances well enough to perform them, as she did for Stevenson. Her father avowed that she rendered them precisely as she had as a child. Interestingly, she could not remember the lyrics without doing the dances, or vice-versa. Her xenoglossy was recitative only; she could not converse in Bengali with Pal, nor translate the words to Hindi.

Swarnlata continued to visit the Pathaks and participate in the annual *rakhi* ceremony. She had a premonitory dream shortly before Biya's oldest brother died, and while mourning him in Katni, found that 'all the events of the past life were fresh to me'.[4](#)

On 27 May 1973, Swarnlata married DP Tiwari, who would eventually become a municipal commissioner in the city of Indore, where the couple were residing when later interviewed by reincarnation researcher Kirti Swaroop Rawat. Swarnlata was working as a college lecturer. For most children who remember past lives, the memories fade between the ages of five and eight, but Swarnlata said she only stopped regaining fresh past-life memories at the age of 25, and even in her sixties retained 'faint' memories because she was still in contact with her past-life family. She still faithfully observed the brother-sister ritual of 'rakhi' with her past-life brothers, and shared their joys and sorrows. Rawat writes: 'She informed me that she feels she belongs to the family of the past life when she is among them, while when she is with those of the present life, she thinks that the latter are her family. She is able to live a well-adjusted life at both places'. Now elderly, Swarnlata claimed to still know the Bengali songs she had apparently learned in her past-life as Kamlesh, and performed one upon Rawat's request.[5](#)

Other Family Members' Past-Life Memories

During Stevenson's visit in 1971, Swarnlata's father told him that several other members of the family also remembered past lives, which he had not mentioned to Stevenson earlier so as not to distract him from working on Swarnlata's case. Of his eight children, Mishra said, six had past-life memories, though none of the other five gave nearly as much detail as Swarnlata. In fact, he was so tired of hearing about their past lives that he stopped his daughter Snehlata from telling the family what she remembered. The other four children, however, all recalled lives as people related to their father or mother in some way. Their father and two other family members of his generation also had past-life memories. Stevenson concluded that he could have spent several days in Chhatarpur studying cases solely in the Mishra family.

KM Wehrstein

Literature

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Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (2nd ed., rev.). [1st ed. 1966, *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research* 26, 1-361.] Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: University Press of Virginia.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Stevenson (1974), 67-91. All information in this article is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- [2](#). Stevenson (1974), 80.
- [3](#). Cited in Stevenson (1974), 89. Bracketed words are added by him.
- [4](#). Cited in Stevenson (1974), 90. Note: Stevenson lists Swarnlata as one of a 'tiny handful' of children he studied who demonstrated ESP. Among them are Swarnlata, [Shamlinie Prema](#), [Gnanatilleka Baddewithana](#), Nirankar Bhatnagar, and [Ratana Wongsombat](#) (Stevenson, 1997, 1140 n5).
- [5](#). Rawat (2019).