

Uttara Huddar/Sharada (reincarnation case)

One of the most intriguing and controversial reincarnation cases extant involves an educated Indian woman, Uttara Huddar, whose personality and memories abruptly changed at the age of 32 to those of a rural villager, Sharada, who had lived and died a century and a half earlier. The transformation proved temporary, but the Sharada personality continued to appear intermittently throughout Uttara's life. A striking feature of this case is the linguistic element: as 'Sharada', Uttara was unable to speak Marathi, her native language, only Bengali, which she previously knew only slightly but could now speak fluently in an archaic dialect. The investigators viewed the case as an unusual one of adult reincarnation; other parapsychologists have insisted on psychological or psychic explanations.

Investigations

The Sharada case was investigated and published independently by two researchers: the Indian psychologist VV Akolkar and reincarnation research pioneer [Ian Stevenson](#) in collaboration with [Satwant Pasricha](#) and other Indian colleagues. Though they drew from some of the same sources, including some provided by RK Sinha, who had done his own investigation of the case, Stevenson and Akolkar purposely avoided sharing information or interpretations with each other so as to investigate independently.

Stevenson learned of the case from a newspaper article dated 18 February 1975 and immediately asked colleagues in India to begin investigating. Pasricha went to Nagpur in late June to interview Uttara, her parents, her younger brother and a priest who had spoken with 'Sharada' in Bengali. On 2 July, they were able to tape-record Sharada's speech.

Stevenson enlisted the aid of reincarnation researcher and professor P Pal, who spoke Bengali. He visited the family five times between October 1975 and November 1977, and spoke to 'Sharada' during four of the visits. In May 1975, Sinha travelled to Bengal and tracked down a family whose ancestors matched 'Sharada's' statements. Stevenson and Pal later interviewed the head of that family.

Aided by Pasricha, Stevenson interviewed more than 25 people, and consulted with multiple experts, eventually devoting 81 pages of a book to a detailed account.^[1] He also co-authored with Pasricha two academic papers on the case.^[2]

Akolkar also learned about the case from a newspaper story. Having discovered the family's identity, he journeyed to Nagpur. His sources were twenty people he interviewed in Nagpur and Ahmedabad, correspondence from Uttara/Sharada and her father, Sinha's account of his researches with people in Bengal thought to be related to Sharada, information drawn from two major Indian libraries and a 150-year-old real estate deed.

Akolkar also had Uttara undergo an electroencephalogram, which yielded no abnormalities, and a Rorschach test, which yielded a suggestion of an unspecified sexual abnormality (an outcome that so enraged Uttara that she threatened to commit suicide). He published a paper on the case in 1992.^[3]

Uttara Huddar

Uttara was born in Nagpur, Maharashtra, on 14 March 1941, the second-youngest of six children.^[4] Her father, GM Huddar, was a landowner and farmer near Wardha, a smaller town near Nagpur. University-educated, he was active politically, participating in the resistance to British rule in India, for which he was imprisoned by the British for four years. He also fought against the Franco regime in the Spanish Civil War.

While pregnant with Uttara, Manorama Huddar had a recurrent dream of being bitten on the right toe by a snake. These dreams stopped when Uttara was born. As a child, Uttara had a phobia of snakes that her father described as 'severe' when she was between the ages of five and eight years.

The Huddar family spoke Marathi. Both Marathi and Bengali are major languages of India, descended from Sanskrit. However, speakers of each cannot understand the other without training. Uttara's mother said Uttara never had any trouble learning Marathi, and did not have an accent or use unusual words.

Uttara did satisfactorily in school, studying Sanskrit for several years. She also studied rudimentary Bengali, along with a friend, Priyadarshan Dinanath Pandit, who was also a Marathi speaker. She had no Bengali friends, and no Bengalis lived in the areas the family frequented. She was fascinated by Bengali people and literature, however, admiring the Bengali heroes of the resistance as her father did, and enjoying Bengali novels translated into Marathi. She preferred Bengali heroines to Marathi, saying they were more courageous and feminine. One of her brothers learned to speak Bengali for career reasons, but did not speak it with Uttara prior to the emergence of the Sharada personality.

After completing high school, Uttara studied at private school for a year, then attended Nagpur University, completing an MA in English in 1969 and a second MA in public administration in 1971. She was then hired as a part-time lecturer by the university's Department of Public Administration. Unmarried, she continued to live with her family according to Indian custom.

At about 24 Uttara felt the urge to marry, and pursued Priyadarshan Dinanath Pandit. He was not interested, however, and Uttara begged his father either to compel him to marry her or arrange for him to be married to someone else so that she could have closure. When, shortly after, the father died, she again tried to persuade Priyadarshan to marry her, but he remained uninterested. Tormented, she decided to throw herself entirely into spiritual life.^[5]

Uttara's health was normal until her twenties, when she developed asthma, a gynecological illness whose exact nature was not specified to researchers, and a skin disease that was likely eczema. Starting in 1970, JR Joshi (not his real name), a

homeopathic physician, began treating her on an outpatient basis. Dissatisfied with her progress, he admitted her to his private clinic-cum-ashram in late 1973.

The first time Joshi touched her, Uttara felt inexplicably that his touch was familiar, and from then on she was drawn to him, in her own words, 'like an iron particle to a magnet'.^[6] She shared her writings of the time with Akolkar, who quoted them copiously in his paper. They are poetic and shot through with high emotion and spiritual tension; they also contain a sense that something is about to happen to her.

After a meditation session conducted by a visiting yogi, Uttara's behaviour began to change. She alternated between periods of excitability and silence and on one occasion wandered away from the hospital in search of 'a place where she thought she belonged'. She also began speaking Bengali, and changed her attire to the Bengali style. During these spells she began behaving more towards Joshi as a wife toward a husband than a patient toward a doctor, and later would say that he was her husband reincarnated. Joshi had no past-life memories himself. In one incident Uttara, in her Bengali aspect, burst into a room where he was eating with a female assistant and berated him, after which he asked her parents to take her home.

Baffled by Uttara's new ability to speak Bengali, and her corresponding inability to speak her native Marathi, the family sought help from Bengali speakers. Through them she now identified herself as 'Sharada' and gave many details about her life in several Bengali villages, the nearest of which was about 540 miles away from Nagpur. After some weeks Uttara's normal personality returned, and she remembered nothing of what had happened. But 'Sharada' began emerging intermittently, sometimes just for a few days and sometimes for longer than a month. This was still happening thirty years later, although by this time the 'Sharada' phases were brief, occurred not more than once a year, and did not really affect her life.^[7]

Statements and Verifications

Over the course of many interviews, 'Sharada' told her life story. Her ancestors had settled in a place named Kestopur; her grandfather had moved to Bansberia, one of seven villages that were together named Saptagram. She was born in Burdwan, Bengal, on Janmashtami Day in the month of Bhadrapad (August-September). Her father was a priest at a nearby temple. When she was two months old, her mother died. Her father remarried, but Sharada was raised by her aunt and uncle by marriage, who had no children of their own. She was taught to read and write by her father's cousin.

When she was seven, her aunt arranged for her to marry her husband's nephew, Vishwanath Mukopadhaya, an Ayurvedic physician. He and Sharada lived for two years with his parents, but his father opposed the marriage, leading to quarrels. The younger couple eventually moved out. Her father died when she was eighteen. The family moved back and forth between Khulna District, which was then part of Bengal but is now part of Bangladesh, and Saptagram.

Sharada suffered two miscarriages and then became pregnant a third time. When she was five months pregnant, she travelled by cart from Shivapur, where she was then living, to Saptagram, leaving her husband at home. She left her diamond nose-ring and 125 rupees in a cupboard for fear of bandits. While staying with her aunt in Saptagram, she wrote her husband asking him to take her on a pilgrimage to thank the goddess Tara Devi for a safely-completed pregnancy. But less than two months into the visit, she was bitten on the right toe by a snake while picking flowers. She recalled being carried on a litter or palanquin and then losing consciousness.

'Sharada' in Uttara's body did not remember dying, or anything else, between losing consciousness and awakening in the body of Uttara in Nagpur. When Pasricha questioned her about this, she said 'she came walking in search of her husband'.^[8]

'Sharada' gave the names of her father, mother, stepmother, her father's cousin who had taught her to write, the husband of the aunt she'd been staying with when she'd been bitten by the snake, her husband and her husband's father. She also mentioned several place names.

When Sinha travelled to Saptagram in May 1975, his inquiries eventually led to Satinath Chattopadhaya, who lived in Bansberia, and possessed a genealogy of male ancestors extending back to the early nineteenth century. This included the name that Sharada had given for her father. Sinha copied all the names and relationships of men whom Sharada could have known, and returned to Nagpur to quiz her. Without telling her that he had the genealogy, he asked her for the names of her male relatives, then checked her answers against it. She named Sharada's great-great-grandfather, grandfather, father, brothers and uncle, and revealed another uncle's name to Professor Pal later. All these names appear on the genealogy, related to each other as she had specified, with the exception of one brother. His existence was established by a real-estate deed dated 1827.

Unfortunately, since only males had been recorded, Sharada's name does not itself appear. The name of her husband and father-in-law remain unverified, as Stevenson was unable to access historical records in Bangladesh. Sharada said that every male name in her birth family ended with 'nath' because one boy of the family had been initiated into the Nath order of monks. This tradition continues in the family.

Sharada also recalled geographical facts and details about temples and other buildings that were correct, and were highly unlikely to be known by anyone not local. Stevenson lists 24 such verified statements.^[9]

Akolkar, who assumes Sharada died as a result of the snake-bite, calculated that her 24-year lifespan must have either been from 1805 to 1829 or 1807 to 1831.^[10] Interestingly, another member of the Chattopadhaya family told Akolkar that in the time of his great-grandmother, a woman of the family had died of snakebite.^[11]

Behaviours

Uttara would transform into Sharada most often on the eighth day of the waxing or waning of the moon, the day on which she said she both was born and suffered the likely-fatal snake bite. A witness described the changeover thus:

Visiting the toilet; returning from it in a state of exhaustion and disorientation with pallor in the face; lying on the bed for quite some time, as though in a stupor. ... After a while behaving as though she has found herself in a strange house and among strangers; taking a head bath with cold water; then putting vermilion in the parting of her hair; dressing up in a Bengali way, draping only a sari and covering her head with the sari.^[12]

Unlike Uttara, who dressed in the style of an unmarried Maratha woman, Sharada dressed in the style of a married Bengali woman, covering her head with her sari. She would cover her shoulders with a shawl and go barefoot when going out, as early nineteenth-century Bengali women did. She wore her hair loose instead of in a bun as did Uttara, and anointed the part according to the Bengali style described above.

Observers noticed differences between Uttara's and Sharada's gestures, gaits, manners and personalities. Sharada appeared to be more shy and meek. She was friendly only with Bengali men, and would not let Uttara's father or brother touch her. She bathed in cold water rather than warm. She was more religious than Uttara, and worshipped Durga instead of Ganesh. Her wish to adhere to Bengali customs and eat Bengali dishes revealed an extensive knowledge of both.

Conversely, modern technology was unfamiliar to Sharada. She demonstrated complete ignorance of trains, cars, electricity (she wouldn't touch a light-switch), gas stoves, telephones, closed fountain pens, glass bottles, wristwatches and tape recorders (she would say there was an evil spirit or witch inside the box).

Sharada's responsive [xenoglossy](#) – her ability to carry on a conversation in a language she had not learned to that degree – was attested to by eight different Bengali-speaking witnesses who had conversations with her. She muttered in Bengali while sleeping, and spoke it even when awakened with a splash of cold water.^[13] She could identify the different Bengali dialects of people she spoke with.

^[14]

P Pal noted that, unlike modern Bengali, her Bengali lacked English loan-words. It included more Sanskrit words and also archaic words, features typical of nineteenth-century Bengali.

However, two other informants, one of them a trained Bengali linguist, listened to tape-recordings of Sharada's speech and had less generous views of her ability, saying she did not sound like a native speaker. Stevenson wrote in response that he was more inclined to credit those witnesses who spoke with Sharada at length than those who had just heard recordings, one of which was quite short.

Sharada could also write Bengali script. Akolkar includes two samples of her writing in his paper on the case.^[15]

Various people attempted to speak to Sharada in Marathi, Hindi and English, all spoken by Uttara, and found her unable to understand. When she was Uttara, they experimented with slipping Bengali words into Marathi conversations, and she did not understand them.

During some of the lengthier Sharada phases, Uttara would become incapacitated, unable to speak and care for herself, and sometimes unable to swallow. Three witnesses noticed her tongue and the inside of her mouth sometimes became black. On one occasion her lips and tongue became blue and her eyes closed as if she were intoxicated. She pointed toward her toe and said 'A king cobra has bitten me', and a black mark was observed on the toe. She appeared to be reliving the symptoms of a venomous snake bite.^[16]

Criticisms and Alternative Theories

Psychological Motivations, Dissociation, Super-Psi

Critics have challenged Stevenson's assertion that the Sharada case is one of genuine responsive xenoglossy and, as such, represents possible evidence of survival of bodily death. Some argue that it can instead be accounted for in terms of dissociative identity disorder (DID), previously termed 'multiple personality disorder' (MPD).

Investigators themselves acknowledge that certain features support such a view. As Stevenson notes, Uttara and Sharada appeared to all who met them both to be two different personalities, distinctive in appearance and behaviour as well as language, and were unaware of each other except through being told by others, as is typical of people with DID. Uttara's childhood phobia of snakes, a recurrent childhood dream of a husband arriving on a pony and caressing her, and her appreciation for the Bengali heroines of Bengali novels could all fit with this hypothesis.^[17]

Stevenson argues, however, that DID cannot explain responsive xenoglossy: Linguistic fluency is a skill that can be acquired only through practice, and there was no point in Uttara's life when she could have practiced enough to attain the degree of proficiency Sharada showed.^[18] Pasricha adds that in cases of DID, a secondary personality generally presents as living in the same time and place as the original personality, not 150 years earlier and 540 miles away.^[19] For his part, Akolkar notes that Uttara was mentally normal in her capacity for honest introspection, managing the realities of her life and taking every setback as a challenge in her spiritual journey.^[20]

Some critics take issue with Stevenson's assessment of Sharada's command of Bengali. Sarah G Thomason criticizes his tendency to prefer the testimony of those Bengali-speakers and experts who found Sharada's knowledge of Bengali to be surprisingly extensive, over those who considered it to be unnatural and hesitant, as would be the case with a person who had learned it as a second language. She further complains that Stevenson provides too little evidence of Sharada's command of Bengali to allow an independent assessment.^[21] Thomason's critique has been faulted by reincarnation research specialists, for instance that it ignores the opinions of those Bengali-speakers who conversed with Sharada for hours.^[22]

Philosopher Stephen Braude has proposed that the Sharada case can be explained by a combination of dissociation, the functioning of psi, or '[super-psi](#)', and a latent linguistic ability akin to abilities that emerge in dissociative states. In his book *Immortal Remains*, he makes the case that Stevenson and other parapsychologists have failed sufficiently to explore purely psychological motivations on the part of subjects such as Uttara. He speculates that, 'by developing an alter-like entity (Sharada), Uttara could express and experience emotional and physical urges she could not reasonably expect to satisfy as Uttara', also that 'the alter identity (or ego state) would allow Uttara to feel as if she (that is, Uttara) had become "spiritual" in the sense of transcending the physical and emotional needs manifested by Sharada'.

Braude accepts that there may be a paranormal element in the exhibition by Uttara of xenoglossy, but contends that this should be seen in terms of the unconscious operation of psychic functions on her part. He argues that this would facilitate a task that would be impossible by normal means, such as learning a language without practice, especially if, as in this case, the person already had some basic knowledge of it. He suggests that we lack true measures for language proficiency or even skill itself: Every child has natural abilities that are suppressed by cultural forces such as 'the mind-numbing ordinariness and stupidity of teachers'.^[23]

Reincarnation researcher [James G Matlock](#) disputes Braude's supposition that Sharada's ability to speak an archaic dialect of Bengali is possible through super-psi by noting that no supporting evidence of such ability is offered.^[24] He also contends that to analyze Uttara's psychology alone, as if it were separate from Sharada's, is a misguided approach. 'If Sharada is reincarnated in Uttara, she is a part of Uttara', he writes. 'Sharada's psychological needs have become Uttara's'.^[25]

Philosopher David Ray Griffin follows Braude in hypothesizing the presence of super-psi and in seeking psychological motivations on the part of Uttara. Griffin interprets this as a case of 'retroprehensive inclusion', the psychic act of reaching back retrocognitively to find a genuine personality from the past, and adopt it as part of one's own, along with all its skills and abilities, in order to satisfy some psychological need.

Griffin suggested that Uttara perhaps was motivated by unrequited love and a desperate desire to fulfill her womanhood. As to why she chose the personality of Sharada, he cites such elements as her fascination with the Bengali language and people, her admiration of Bengali women, her desire to marry a doctor (since Sharada had married a doctor) and her snake phobia, which would have been psychically ingrained from her mother's dream when she was in the womb.^[26] Matlock notes, however, that Griffin ultimately gave up retroprehensive inclusion as an explanation for reincarnation cases in favour of reincarnation,^[27] suggesting that he possibly revised his interpretation of this case.

Possession

The Sharada case has features typical of a case of possession, in which a discarnate being takes over a person's body. Pasricha notes that certain other features make it unlike typical reincarnation cases:

- the advanced age at which the past life emerged^[28]
- the trance-like state Uttara would enter at the start of a Sharada phase
- the way the persona would completely take over
- the length of time between the end of the past life and the start of the current one, some 110 years^[29]

As Griffin points out, the case is unlike both possession and reincarnation cases in that Sharada apparently has no knowledge of having died.^[30]

Akolkar questions the likelihood of a woman being possessed by a discarnate entity from so far away and so long before, and notes that three characteristics of typical possession cases are missing:

- The deceased person is usually someone the subject knows or knows about.
- The subject shows other signs of mental illness, such as schizophrenia or hysteria.
- The subject's motivation is usually obvious.^[31]

Akolkar adds that, in possession cases, the possessing entity is generally aware of itself as being separate from the possessed, and knows its reasons for possessing. None of these apply to Sharada, who was not at all aware of Uttara until she learned second-hand.^[32]

Stevenson likewise argues that this is a case of reincarnation with unusual features. Sharada's father once asked her, on Stevenson's request, what she did when not manifesting. She answered, laughing, 'I am here all the time'.^[33] He notes also the presence of related behaviours in childhood and youth, such the snake phobia and the fascination with things Bengali, is a feature of reincarnation cases.^[34] Akolkar contends that Sharada was in Uttara from the start as suggested by the childhood behavioural signs, living in 'the deepest stratum of Uttara's personality'.^[35]

Matlock concurs that the Sharada case is one of reincarnation with unusual features. He argues that the unusual features are partly due to the fact that the Sharada personality began to manifest in adulthood, when Uttara was 32.^[36]

KM Wehrstein

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Stevenson (1984), 73-153.
2. ^ Stevenson & Pasricha (1979, 1980).
3. ^ Akolkar (1992).
4. ^ All information for this section and the following two sections (Statements and Verifications; Behaviours) is drawn from Stevenson (1984) except where otherwise noted.
5. ^ Akolkar (1992), 217. Akolkar refers to Priyadarshan Dinanath as 'F'.
6. ^ Akolkar (1992), 217. Akolkar refers to Joshi as 'Dr Z'.
7. ^ Tucker (2013), 28.
8. ^ Pasricha (1990), 254.
9. ^ Stevenson (1984), 95-98, Table 5.
10. ^ Akolkar (1992), 239-240.
11. ^ Akolkar (1992), 240.
12. ^ Akolkar (1992), 224.
13. ^ Akolkar (1992), 210.
14. ^ Akolkar (1992), 211.
15. ^ Akolkar (1992), 223, Fig. 1; 230, Fig. 2.
16. ^ For commentary on the apparent reliving of traumatic symptoms, see Stevenson (1984), 112 n25.
17. ^ Stevenson (1984), 147.
18. ^ Stevenson (1984), 147.
19. ^ Pasricha (1990), 255.
20. ^ Akolkar (1992), 241.
21. ^ Thomason (1995).
22. ^ Matlock (2019), 213.
23. ^ Braude (2003), 114-27.

24. ^ Matlock (2019), 213.
25. ^ Matlock (2019), 213.
26. ^ Griffin (1997), 180.
27. ^ Matlock (2019), 118.
28. ^ Though Stevenson notes that such cases are not unheard of (1984), 149.
29. ^ Pasricha (1990), 255.
30. ^ Griffin (1997), 179.
31. ^ Akolkar (1992), 243.
32. ^ Akolkar (1992), 244.
33. ^ Stevenson (1984), 148.
34. ^ Stevenson (1984), 149.
35. ^ Akolkar (1992), 245.
36. ^ Matlock (2019).