

Jagdish Chandra (reincarnation case)

This is the case of the young son of a lawyer in India who, at three years of age, began talking about a previous life as the pampered son of a corrupt Brahmin official in a distant city. His father published his statements in a newspaper before verifying them. The case has been questioned by critics who suggest that it may have been fraudulently contrived by the lawyer father.

Babu Pandey and Jai Gopal

Varanasi (formerly Benares) in north-east India is a destination for pilgrims, the most important of such places along the banks of the River Ganges. Thousands visit it every year to bathe in the holy waters of the river, using *ghats* (piers with steps for the purpose of bathing). The ghats are run by *pandas*, Brahmins whose job it is to help the pilgrims in exchange for a fee, but who historically often exploited them for money. One particularly wealthy and important panda was Babu Pandey, whose young son Jai Gopal died in 1922.

Jagdish Chandra

In 1926, KKN Sahay, a lawyer by profession, was nursing his sick wife at home in Bareilly when his son Jagdish Chandra, then three years and three months old, saw a motor car (then still rare in India) and asked his father to get him one. When his father demurred, Jagdish Chandra remarked that he could get 'his' car from the house of Babuji. In response to queries he replied that Babuji lived in Benares and was 'his' father. He subsequently gave further details about the previous life he remembered.

KKN Sahay then wrote to the *Leader*, a well-known English-language newspaper of northern India, as follows:

My son, Jagdish Chandra, gives the story of his previous life in a very connected form. He gives his father's name as Babuji Pandey, place of residence Benares, describes the house of Babuji in Benares, and makes particular mention of a big gate, a sitting room, and an underground room with an iron safe fixed in one of the walls.

He also describes the courtyard in which Babuji sits in the evening. He describes that Babuji and the people who collect there drink bhang [an intoxicating drink]. Babuji has malish [massage] on his body and paints his face with powder or earth before his bath on washing his face in the morning. He describes two motor cars and one phaeton with a pair [of horses] and says that Babuji had two sons and one wife and all have died. Babuji is all alone. He also described many private and family matters.

I have no friends or relatives at Benares; my wife has never been there. I never heard before of Babuji.

I invite all gentleman who may feel interested to ascertain the truth of the story given by the boy in a scientific spirit.

Sahay also listed seven persons who had talked with Jagdish Chandra about his memories. He wrote again to the paper the following week to say he had received letters from people unknown to him in Benares identifying 'Babuji' as Babu Pandey, otherwise known as Pandit Mathura Prasad Pandey. One correspondent said he realized straight away that Jagdish Chandra was talking about Babu Pandey, who had been a client of his for some years, and that, having contacted Babu, he was in a position to confirm that almost all of the details provided by Jagdish Chandra were correct.

KKN Sahay took steps to ensure that as much as possible about the case could be verified before any contact was made with the Pandey family in Benares. To this end, he took advice from lawyer colleagues and asked them to witness the statements, while corroborations were handled by correspondence rather than personal contact. He then took his son to Benares to meet the Pandey family.

On this occasion Jagdish Chandra made some recognitions of family members, and correctly indicated the way to Babu Pandey's house through a maze of side-streets, apparently unaided. He pointed out Jai Gopal's aunt. On a subsequent day he went to meet Babu Pandey himself, who however did not speak or make any comment in his presence. On this occasion Jagdish Chandra also visited the Dash Ashwamadh Ghat (bathing pier), which he recognized from a distance; he also recognized a panda there, and appeared as to be very familiar with the place. He declined a betel leaf that was offered him by the panda, saying he could not accept one from a person of lower status to himself. He also recognized other important landmarks.

In 1927, Sahay published a detailed report of the case in a booklet.¹ In 1961, [Ian Stevenson](#) interviewed Jagdish Chandra and members of his family in Bareilly, as well as members of Pandey's family in Benares. Stevenson carried out more interviews in four follow-up visits between 1964 and 1973. He published his report of the case in the first volume of his series Cases of the Reincarnation Type in 1975.²

Jagdish Chandra's Statements

A total of 51 statements made by Jagdish Chandra as a child were recorded by KKN Sahay. Of these, 36 were written down before verification was attempted, and at least 24 were verified before the two families met; a further eleven could not be verified. Jagdish Chandra, in interviews with Stevenson and in a report written by himself, described additional details that he said he remembered about the previous life when he was a child. Some of these, also, were verified.

Many children in such cases make statements sporadically, often in response to an observation or incident. Jagdish Chandra's memories were triggered by seeing the automobile, after which he made most of his statements about the previous life within a few days. Additional memories were stimulated during the visit to Benares. Some memories, for instance that they went swimming in the Ganges daily, and

that he wore a loin cloth, were likely, but could not be verified. The most specific memories related to Babu Pandey and his wife, whom Jagdish Chandra called 'aunt'.

Some of the details included:

- 'A soldier stood outside the gate.' Babu Pandey employed guards armed with heavy batons, who might have been posted at the gate.
- 'There was marble flooring in the house.' Some upstairs rooms in Babu Pandey's residence had elegant marble flooring in a check pattern.
- 'Babu Pandey's wife was called Chachi. She wore gold ornaments on her wrists and ears, and cooked, and made bread. She had a long veil, and had pockmarks on her face.' Chachi means aunt. In an extended family a child may hear his cousins calling his mother 'aunt' and get into the habit of doing likewise. The other details were also confirmed.
- 'His brother was called Jai Mangal. He died of poisoning.' It was suspected that Jai Gopal's brother Jai Mangal had been accidentally poisoned, but this was not certain.
- 'There were no daughters.' Jai Gopal's two younger sisters were born after Jai Gopal died.
- 'Babu Pandey had a car.' In fact Babu owned no cars, but one was available to borrow or hire if Jai Gopal felt like a drive.
- 'Babu Pandey had a phateon and a pair of horses, also an ekka, a horse drawn car. He wore gold rings on his fingers, received pilgrims in the big hall of the house.' All confirmed as true.
- 'There is a ghat called Dash Ashwamadh.' Dash Ashwamadh is one of the more prominent ghats in Benares.
- 'Babu Pandey was fond of wrestling and they had their own *akhara* (a small arena for wrestling)'. Stevenson observed the *akhara* situated in front of the house.
- 'Babu Pandey painted his face with ashes or clay in the morning and sat in the courtyard in the evenings.' An informant confirmed that he 'smeared his face with ashes after washing it every day'. Another said he sat outside the house for an hour in the evenings.

Jagdish Chandra's memory claims came to the attention of the law and he gave a statement before a magistrate in Barielly on 28 July 1926, before his first visit to Benares. Sahay included a verbatim transcript in Hindi, which was translated for Stevenson. In his deposition, Jagdish Chandra gave his name as Jai Gopal, revealing the strength of his identification with Babu Pandey's son. His testimony included many other details about Jai Gopal's life which were subsequently verified.

Jagdish Chandra's Behaviours

Jagdish Chandra demonstrated behaviour that was unusual for a child of the Kayastha caste, but normal for a Brahmin. For instance, he insisted on being allowed to eat before other members of the family (it was the custom to invite Brahmins to start the meal first and orthodox Brahmins expect such deference when eating with members of other castes). He refused to eat with non-Hindus or to eat anything that had been prepared by them. He also showed an emphatically

hostile attitude towards all men with beards. This could have been related to the dislike of Muslims on the part of orthodox Brahmins.

With regard to diet, Jagdish Chandra was fond of sweets, especially rabri – a favourite of Brahmins and especially of pandas in Benares – and showed an appropriate dislike of salty foods, garlic, onions, eggs and meat.

Jagdish Chandra's memories were triggered by the sight of the car. Jai Gopal seems to have been pampered by his father and made to understand his high station as the son of a senior Brahmin official. Jagdish Chandra later said that Jai Gopal's mother had confirmed to him that whenever the boy wanted to go for a drive, a car was sent for and he was driven around. Jagdish Chandra himself recalled as a small child having had an intense longing for a car, and it was this that seems to have stimulated the flow of memories of the previous life. The attachment to cars persisted into later life.

Jagdish Chandra felt rebuffed and hurt by the lack of interest shown in him by Babu Pandey's family while that man was alive. However, he continued to be interested in them, and visited Benares again when he was fourteen (although he did not then enter the house or meet anyone) and again when he was 26. By this time, Babu Pandey had died (he died in 1933-4) but his two wives, one of whom was Jai Gopal's mother, and Jai Gopal's two younger sisters received him affectionately. Afterwards he continued to visit the family often and was welcomed by them.

Babu Pandey's Actions

Babu Pandey proved uncooperative during Jagdish Chandra's visit to his house. One reason may have been a fear that the boy's family might use the claim of his being his son reborn to extract money from him. This would have been unlikely, however, as KKN Sahay was a well-to-do lawyer and considered to be of high moral character. A more likely reason was that Jagdish Chandra revealed criminal incidents in Babu's past. One of these was later described to Stevenson as the murder of a pilgrim for his money and the disposal of the body in a disused well. Babu's concern would have been compounded by the interest taken in the case by the magistrate. To have accepted Jagdish Chandra's claim would have been to risk his publicly exposing the murder; to refuse to accept it, despite the impressive accuracy of details, might have invited suspicion leading to further investigation and discovery of the crime. Hence Babu's decision to remain silent.

Stevenson's Analysis

Stevenson suggests that the status of Jagdish Chandra's father, an educated man and a lawyer, argues against an interpretation of this case as a fraudulent contrivance. The fact that KKN Sahay published details of the case and allowed colleagues to interrogate his son before seeking verifications of his memories would have made the deceit all the harder to maintain. It is difficult also to conceive that a member of the Kayastha caste would drill his child in the habits and manners of Brahmins.

The great distance between Bareilly and Benares (some 500 km), the separation of the two families by caste and the close surveillance of Jagdish Chandra as a young child all argue against the possibility that he might have picked up the detailed information he learned about Babu Pandey and his family without someone being aware of this.

Jagdish Chandra's elder brother told Stevenson that the boy talked less of the previous life after his first visit to Benares and by the age of seven had stopped speaking spontaneously about it. In Stevenson's follow-up visits, however, Jagdish Chandra himself said that his memories remained clear and had not faded. He had only ceased speaking about them.

Nicol's Critique

In a review of the book in which Stevenson's report of Jagdish Chandra's case appeared, J Fraser Nicol speculated that Jagdish Chandra could have learned about Jai Gopal from his own parents or from a family servant.³ Stevenson responded that if this were so, it would not account for Jagdish Chandra's behavioural identification with Jai Gopal.⁴

In a rejoinder, Nicol clarified that he was going further than proposing that Jagdish Chandra had overheard something about Jai Gopal; he was suggesting that 'he could have been tutored by his father K. K. N. Sahay, or even by his mother'. He asserted that Jagdish Chandra's testimony before the magistrate was so fluent that it seemed to have been coached.⁵ This led Stevenson to provide more details about Sahay's activities, making the fraud claim seem highly implausible. He deplored 'extremes of incredulity' such as those demonstrated by Nicol.⁶ Nicol responded with more innuendo and concluded by throwing back at Stevenson his acknowledgement that despite his best efforts to get at the truth, he had no doubt that he was sometimes in error.⁷

Sceptical philosopher [Paul Edwards](#) embraced Nicol's logic in his book, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*.⁸ He advanced an elaborate theory of how the case was concocted, even while admitting this to be wholly conjectural:

The following scenario seems to me a far better explanation of events than any reincarnationist assumption. At the age of three Jagdish made some innocent remarks which the father twisted into reincarnation memories. The cousin and her husband who were living in Benares and whose existence Sahay had tried to hide⁹ supplied him with information about a person who had died at the appropriate time. This was Jai Gopal, and Jagdish before long came to believe what his father told him, that he had lived before as Gopal in Benares. The father then began his publicity campaign, terminating in the triumphant journey to Benares.¹⁰

'None of this is farfetched if Nicol is right in his assumption that Jagdish's statement to the magistrate had been learned by heart', Edwards contends. 'Needless to say', he admits, nevertheless, 'I have no means of knowing whether the scenario just sketched approximates what actually happened.'¹¹

Reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) points out that Edwards appears to have based his judgement solely on Nicol's book review. Had Edwards read either Sahay's or Stevenson's case reports, he would have learned amongst other things that this case is one of the exceptions to the rule about the fading of memories by late childhood, which Edwards considered a problematical feature of all reincarnation cases.¹² Jagdish Chandra, who was born in 1920, told Stevenson in 1969 that he still had clear memories of Jai Gopal's life.¹³ This case is one of but a handful of Stevenson's cases with written records made before memory claims were verified,¹⁴ no doubt one of the reasons sceptics are so keen to undermine it.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- ¹ Sahay (1927).
- ² Stevenson (1975). The present article is based on Stevenson's account.

- [3.](#) Nicol (1976), 14-15.
- [4.](#) Stevenson (1977a). Edwards (1996, 256 n11) claims that Stevenson 'never replied to' Nicol's review, whereas this letter was the first entry in two exchanges about it.
- [5.](#) Nicol (1977a), 19.
- [6.](#) Stevenson (1977b).
- [7.](#) Nicol (1977b).
- [8.](#) Edwards (1996), 256-58.
- [9.](#) Sahay (1927, 2) stated in his report that he had 'no friends or relatives at Benares'. This was only partly true. Although his cousin had died by this time, her husband was still living, and KKN Sahay and Jagdish Chandra stayed with them when they visited Benares (Stevenson, 1977b, 2001 n19). Stevenson apparently never thought to probe this discrepancy and provides no clear reason for it.
- [10.](#) Edwards (1996), 258.
- [11.](#) Edwards (1996), 258.
- [12.](#) Edwards (1996), 255.
- [13.](#) Matlock (2023), citing Stevenson (1975, 172).
- [14.](#) Stevenson (2001), 155.