

Near-Death Experiences in India

A Preliminary Report

SATWANT PASRICHA, Ph.D.,¹ AND IAN STEVENSON, M.D.²

The authors report some features of 16 cases of near-death experiences that they investigated in India. After presenting brief accounts of four such experiences, the authors describe and discuss features in which the Indian cases differ from a larger sample of American cases. They note that some of these features seem to be culture-bound, but they caution against accepting this observation as adequate evidence that the cases derive only from culture-bound beliefs. Some differences may derive from the effects of a person's beliefs on what actually does happen after death, and some different features may, on closer examination, be found to be basically similar in nature if not in detail.

Although individual near-death experiences (NDEs) have been reported from India (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977), China (Becker, 1981), and Melanesia (Counts, 1983), there has been no systematic comparison of the features of cases observed in the West with those observed in another culture. We offer the present report as a contribution toward such a comparison. Although we can report data from only 16 Indian cases, they will suffice to show differences between some of the features of cases from India and those reported in the West, principally the United States (Greyson and Stevenson, 1980; Moody, 1975; Noyes and Kletti, 1976; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982).

Sources of Data

We have not yet searched systematically for cases of NDEs in India, but have investigated only cases that came to our attention incidentally during the course of studies of cases of the reincarnation type. In this way we have obtained reports of 18 cases of NDEs in India. We eliminated from our study two of these cases on the grounds that the data for them were too scanty to be included in an analysis and comparison with other cases. Of the remaining 16 cases, we interviewed the subject in 10 and a firsthand informant in

five. We admitted the 16th case into the series because the informant, although a secondhand witness, had learned about the case within a day, or a few days at most, of its occurrence from his wife, who had learned about the experience from the subject herself. (Of the six subjects not interviewed firsthand, three had died by the time of our interviews and three were otherwise unavailable.) For four cases we interviewed both the subject and at least one other informant.

All the subjects were Hindi-speaking persons of northern India from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Eleven were males and five were females. For 14 cases we learned an exact or reasonably approximate age of the subjects at the time of their experience; the median age was 35 years. The median interval between the NDE's occurrence and our first investigation of the case was approximately 14 years. Our interviews with the subjects and other informants for the cases consisted mainly of recording the principal remembered events of the experience as narrated by the subject or other informant. Afterward we asked questions about details, and we tried to obtain corroboration for the subject's illness and previous account of his or her experience from whatever other informants we could interview. We did not, however, ask the Indian subjects to fill out the detailed questionnaire (Greyson and Stevenson, 1980) that we have used with many Western subjects of NDE cases. (It would be necessary to shorten and modify this questionnaire before using it in India.) Furthermore, the additional questions asked of the Indian subjects and other informants (after they had given a spontaneous narrative of the experience) mainly focused on the circumstances of the experience, such as the subject's physical condition, and we did not systematically ask questions about the content of the experience. Our information about content is, therefore, more complete for most of our American cases than for the Indian ones.

¹ Department of Clinical Psychology, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore, India.

² Department of Behavioral Medicine and Psychiatry, Box 152, Medical Center, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia 22908. Send reprint requests to Dr. Stevenson.

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We compared the main features of the Indian cases with those of a group of American subjects who said that they had approached death and survived. This group consisted of 78 subjects whose cases have been previously analyzed (Greyson and Stevenson, 1980). For two computations we were able to add an additional 28 cases, the data for which have not otherwise been analyzed.

Because of the lesser amount of data available for the Indian cases, we shall confine our comparison of the two groups to several features in which they show definite differences, such as the experient's claim to have seen his or her physical body during the experience, the persons (human or otherworldly) encountered by the experient during the NDE, the ostensible reason for the experient's recovery (instead of dying), the manner of his or her return to the physical body, and the appearance of physical marks on the body of the experient after the NDE.

We shall next present four reports of Indian NDEs and then summarize the main features in which this series of Indian cases differs from those of the United States.

Case Reports

The Case of Vasudev Pandey

We interviewed the subject, Vasudev Pandey, in 1975 and again in 1976. He was born in 1921 and had nearly died in his home, of what he described as "paratyphoid disease," when he was about 10 years old. Vasudev had been considered dead and his body had actually been taken to the cremation ground. However, some indications of life aroused attention, and Vasudev was removed to the hospital where doctors tried to revive him, using "injections," with eventual success. He remained unconscious for 3 days and then became able to describe the following experience (as narrated to us in 1975):

"Two persons caught me and took me with them. I felt tired after walking some distance; they started to drag me. My feet became useless. Then there was a man sitting up. He looked dreadful and was all black. He was not wearing any clothes. He said in a rage [to the attendants who had brought Vasudev] 'I had asked you to bring Vasudev the gardener. Our garden is drying up. You have brought Vasudev the student.' When I regained consciousness, Vasudev the gardener was standing in front of me [apparently in the crowd of family and servants who had gathered around the bed of the ostensibly dead Vasudev]. He was hale and hearty. People started teasing him saying, 'Now it is your turn.' He seemed to sleep well in the night, but the next morning he was dead."

In reply to questions about details, Vasudev said that the "black man" had a club and used foul lan-

guage. Vasudev identified him with Yamraj, the Hindu god of the dead. He said that he was "brought back" by the same two men who had taken him to Yamraj in the first place. Vasudev's mother (who had died before the time of our interviews) had been a pious woman who read scriptures that included descriptions of Yamraj. Vasudev, even as a young boy before his NDE, was quite familiar with Yamraj.

The Case of Durga Jatav

We interviewed Durga Jatav, a man approximately 50 years old, in November 1979 and again 3 months later. About 30 years before, he had been ill for several weeks, suffering from what had been diagnosed as typhoid. When his body "became cold" for a couple of hours, his family thought he had died. He revived, however, and on the third day following this he told his family he had been taken to another place by 10 people. He had tried to escape, but they had then cut off his legs at the knees to prevent his escape. He was taken to a place where there were tables and chairs and 40 or 50 people sitting. He recognized no one. They looked at his "papers," saw that his name was not on their list, and said, "Why have you brought him here? Take him back." To this Durga had replied, "How can I go back? I don't have feet." He was then shown several pairs of legs, he recognized his own, and they were somehow reattached. He was then sent back with the instructions not to "stretch" (bend?) his knees so that they could mend. (Durga's older sister, whom we interviewed, corroborated his account of his apparent death and revival.)

Durga's sister and a neighbor noticed, a few days after he revived, that marks had appeared on his knees; there had previously been no such marks there. These folds, or deep fissures, in the skin on the front of Durga's knees were still visible in 1979. There was no bleeding or pain in the knees other than the discomfort engendered by Durga's following the "instructions" to keep his knees in a fixed position. X-ray photographs that we had taken in 1981 showed no abnormality below the surface of the skin.

Durga had not heard of such experiences before his own NDE. He did not see his physical body from some other position in space. He said that afterward the experience seemed like a dream; nevertheless, he claimed that it had strengthened his faith in God.

One informant for this case (the headman of the village where Durga lived) said that at the time of Durga's experience another person by the same name had died in Agra (about 30 km away); however, neither Durga nor his older sister were able to confirm this statement.

*The Case of Chhajju Bania*³

We interviewed Chhajju Bania in 1981, at which time he was about 40 years old. His NDE had occurred some 6 years earlier. He became ill with fever, and his condition deteriorated until he was thought to have died and his relatives began preparing his body for cremation. However, he revived, and he gave the following account of his experience as he remembered it afterward:

"Four black messengers came and held me. I asked, 'Where are you taking me?' They took me and seated me near the god. My body had become small. There was an old lady sitting there. She had a pen in her hand, and the clerks had a heap of books in front of them. I was summoned. . . . One of the clerks said, 'We don't need Chhajju Bania (trader). We had asked for Chhajju Kumhar (potter). Push him back and bring the other man. He [meaning Chhajju Bania] has some life remaining.' I asked the clerks to give me some work to do, but not to send me back. Yamraj was there sitting on a high chair with a white beard and wearing yellow clothes. He asked me, 'What do you want?' I told him that I wanted to stay there. He asked me to extend my hand. I don't remember whether he gave me something or not. Then I was pushed down [and revived]."

Chhajju told us that he later learned that a person called Chhajju Kumhar had died at about the same time that he (Chhajju Bania) revived. He said that his behavior had changed following his NDE, particularly in the direction of his becoming more honest.

Chhajju's wife, Saroj, remembered her husband's experience, but her account (to us) of what he told her about the NDE differed in some details from his statement. For example, she said he had told her (after reviving) that at the place to which the four men had taken him there "was a man with a beard with lots of papers in front of him" (not an old lady). The bearded man said, "His [Chhajju's] papers are not here." After further checking through the papers, the bearded man said, "It is not his turn. Bring Chhajju Kori [a weaver]" (not Chhajju Kumhar). Other discrepancies between the two accounts concerned unimportant details. Saroj remembered her husband telling her that he had not wanted to leave "there" and that he had been "pushed down" before he revived.

The Case of Mangal Singh

We interviewed the subject, Mangal Singh, in March 1983 when he was 79 years old. He described his NDE, which had occurred approximately 5 or 6 years earlier. Unlike most subjects who have had

NDEs, he was not ill at the time or at any rate did not consider himself to be so. He gave the following description of his experience:

"I was lying down on a cot when two people came, lifted me up, and took me along. I heard a hissing sound, but I couldn't see anything. Then I came to a gate. There was grass, and the ground seemed to be sloping. A man was there, and he reprimanded the men who had brought me: 'Why have you brought the wrong person? Why have you not brought the man you had been sent for?' The two men [who had brought Mangal] ran away, and the senior man said, 'You go back.' Suddenly I saw two big pots of boiling water, although there was no fire, no firewood, and no fireplace. Then the man pushed me with his hand and said, 'You had better hurry up and go back.' When he touched me, I suddenly became aware of how hot his hand was. Then I realized why the pots were boiling. The heat was coming from his hands. Suddenly I regained consciousness, and I had a severe burning sensation in my left arm."

The area developed the appearance of a boil. Mangal showed it to a doctor, who applied some ointment. The area healed within 3 days but left a residual mark on the left arm, which we examined.

In response to our questions, Mangal said that he thought that he might have been sleeping at the time of the experience, but he was not sure of this. He was unable to describe the appearance of the persons figuring in the experience. It seemed to be less visual than auditory and tactile. He did remember that the senior "official" had picked up a *lathi* (heavy Indian staff) with which he intended to beat the lesser "employees" before they ran away. Another person had died in the locality at or about the time he revived, but Mangal and his family made no inquiries about the suddenness of this person's death and did not even learn his name.

Comparison of Features of Indian and American NDEs

The foregoing reports are typical of NDE cases that we have studied in India. The subject does not view his or her physical body, as do many subjects of American NDE cases. Instead the subject is taken in hand by "messengers" and brought before a man or woman who is often described as having a book or papers that he or she consults. A mistake is discovered. The wrong person has been "sent for," and this person is then brought back by the messengers to his or her terrestrial life; or the subject is "pushed down" and revives. The error supposedly made is often a slight one, so that a person of the same given name but a different caste, or someone living in a different but nearby village, should have died and been brought instead of the subject of the NDE. In six of our cases

³ The word *bania* indicates the subcaste of the subject, that of traders and businessmen. He is thus distinguished from persons of other subcastes who have the same given name, such as Chhajju Kumhar (a potter).

the informants said that another "correct" person (corresponding to the subject's information from the "next world") did, in fact, die at about the time the subject revived; but we have not verified these deaths ourselves.

In contrast, subjects of American NDEs usually give no reason (in psychological terms) for their recovery; if they do give one they may say that they revived because they decided to return of their own accord, often because of love for living members of their family. Sometimes they are "sent back" by deceased persons who tell them their "time has not yet come." Indian subjects sometimes report meeting relatives and friends in the "other realm" in which they find themselves, but these persons have nothing to do or say about the prematurity of the subject's death and a need for him or her to continue living. Thus the idea of prematurity of death or "your time has not yet come" occurs in the cases of both cultures; but the persons involved in sending the experient "back to life" differ.

In Table 1 we have summarized the frequency of different features in the Indian cases and in the American ones. A blank space means that we did not learn of any instance of the pertinent item. Among the Indian cases particularly, the item might have oc-

curred without our learning about it because, as stated earlier, our information from the Indian cases derived almost exclusively from spontaneous narrations without systematic questions about items not mentioned.

Additional Relevant Information

Yamraj, the king of the dead, is a well-known figure of Hindu mythology and current Hinduism. So are his messengers, called Yamdoots, and the "man with the book," Chitragupta.⁴ Chitragupta's book is conceived as containing a record of all of a person's deeds during the life just ended; judgments from the record determine the assignment of the deceased to heaven or hell until the time for his or her next incarnation. It can be safely assumed that all Indians are familiar with these beings, just as we can assume that nearly everyone in the West has some familiarity with Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and at least a few of the prominent Christian saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi.

We are not familiar with any Western NDE case in which the subject revived or was "sent back" because of a mistake in the identity of the person "sent for" by the denizens of the "other realm." However, cases of this type have occurred in other countries of Asia besides India. Alabaster (1871/1972) reported a case of the "mistaken identity" type in 19th-century Thailand, and one of us (I. S.) received an account of a closely similar case that was narrated in Anatolia to Reşat Bayer, who worked for many years with I. S. in Turkey.

Cases of the mistaken identity type appear to occur in relation to the beliefs of the experient, independently of his or her location at the time of the NDE. For example, one of our Indian subjects had a typical mistaken identity type of NDE while he was in Rome. On the other hand, Western persons who have become imbued with Indian religious beliefs may have an NDE showing the influence of the Indian culture. Osiris and Haraldsson (1977, p. 181) mentioned, without giving details, the case of a Swedish missionary in India who had an NDE that included the feature of mistaken identity. In another case, reported by Sandweiss (1975, pp. 102-103), an American disciple of Sai Baba (a well-known holy man of south India) had an NDE with one feature often found in Indian cases—that of reading the record of the person's life. The person who had this experience almost died while staying in a hotel in Madras. According to his account later, he found himself (while supposedly dead) stand-

TABLE 1
Comparison of Frequency of Features of Indian and American NDE Cases

Feature	Indian Cases (N = 16)	American Cases (N = 78)
Saw own physical body		51 (65%)
Taken to "other realm" by messengers	12 (75%)	
Saw deceased acquaintances	4 (25%)	12 (15%)
Saw "beings of light" or religious figures	12 (75%)	41 (53%)
Passed to "man with book"	8 (50%)	
Reviewed own life; "panoramic memory"		21 (27%)
Sent back because of mistake; subject not "scheduled" to die yet	10 (62%)	
Another person said to be due to die instead of subject	7 (44%)	
Apparently revived through thought of loved living persons or for other reasons and own volition	1 (6%)	21 (20%) ^a
Sent back by a loved one or an unknown figure, but not because of a mistake		15 (14%) ^a
Brought back from "other realm" by messengers	13 (81%)	
Residual marks on physical body after NDE	4 (25%)	

^a In the computations for these figures a larger number of American cases (N = 106) was used.

⁴ Hindu scriptural literature contains numerous references to Yamraj, the god of death, to his messengers (Yamdoots), and "the man with the book" (Chitragupta). Reasonably accessible references to accounts of them include Hazra (1940/1975), Moor (1809/1968), Walker (1968), and Wilkins (1882/1978).

ing in a large hall in a "Court of Justice"; Sai Baba was with him. The records of the patient's previous lives were called for; "armloads of scrolls" were brought and read at length. At the end of the reading Sai Baba asked the judge to allow the subject to continue living (under Sai Baba's aegis) in order "to complete my mission of spreading the truth." The judge agreed and the subject then, reluctantly, left the realm where this scene had occurred and returned to his body. Unlike the Indian subjects of our cases (and like many American subjects), this man saw his physical body (as from a position outside it) just before he regained consciousness.

Discussion

We have already stated that we offer the present paper as a preliminary report of research that we hope to extend in India and the United States, especially with prospective studies of NDEs. We shall, therefore, offer here only a brief discussion and few conclusions.

Since we have not conducted a survey of Indian NDE cases in a randomly selected population, we cannot say how frequently such cases occur in India or how representative the cases we studied are of all such cases in India. We learned about most of our Indian NDE cases from an informant for a reincarnation-type case or from a member of a crowd watching us. (Strangers coming into an Indian village, especially Westerners, nearly always attract a crowd of bystanders who observe the interviews.) Such persons would sometimes ask, "Are you people also interested in persons who die and recover?" When we said that we were, the informant would tell us about the NDE case or direct us to someone who could. We do not think our hearing about the NDE cases in this way led to an important bias in the selection of the NDE cases. That we were able in such a casual manner to collect data on as many cases as we did within a few years suggests that NDEs may be fairly common in India.

In a review of the various explanations for NDEs put forward by different investigators, Greyson (1983) wisely emphasized that several interpretations at different levels of process and content are not necessarily incompatible with each other. For example, in studying a particular case it is logical to consider both a physical factor as immediately causative of the experience and a paranormal element in the content of the experience. We agree with Greyson, and we think it especially important at this early stage in the study of NDEs to avoid reductionist and simplistic interpretations of their contents.

The marked differences in the features of Indian and American NDE cases (small as our sample of

Indian cases is) may lead some readers to regard these differences as confirming the view that the contents of NDEs are nothing but expressions of culture-bound beliefs. We should remember, however, that if we survive death and live in an after-death realm, we should expect to find variations in that world, just as we find them in the different parts of the familiar world of the living. A traveler to Delhi encounters dark-skinned immigration officials, who in many respects behave differently from the lighter skinned immigration officials another traveler may meet when arriving in London or New York. Yet we do not say that the descriptions of the first traveler are "real" and those of the second "unreal." In the same way, there may be different receptionists and different modes of reception in the "next world" after death. They may differ for persons of different cultures. We are by no means the first persons to suggest that an after-death realm would have features influenced by the ideas, including beliefs and expectations, of living persons (Evans-Wentz, 1927/1960).

The feature prominent in Indian NDE cases of "messengers" who are seemingly sent to bring away a person about to die may seem strange and even incongruous to many Western readers. This difficulty may be reduced by remembering that in Western cases of apparitions (Gurney *et al.*, 1886) and telepathic impressions (Stevenson, 1970) a message seems to be communicated to a living person from another one who is dying or has just died. We can say that in these instances the agent has "sent a message to," or even "sent for," a person he or she loved and whom he or she needed in that crisis. We should not exclude the possibility that a person undergoing the crisis of dying could "send for" not only other living persons, but persons who have themselves died earlier. If we survive death, it would be entirely appropriate for us to be met at that crisis by other persons. Many Indian and American NDE cases show this feature of "being met" by a discarnate person, although they differ in the type of discarnate person described as meeting the dying person. For Americans this is usually a deceased relative or friend; for Indians it is usually the messengers (Yamdoots) of the god of death. The variations in the persons of the "next world" do not weigh against (or for) their reality. However, arguments bearing on this point must derive from other evidence not provided in the present paper.

Conclusions

As far as a small sample can show, Indian and American NDEs resemble each other in some respects but differ in others. Subjects of Indian NDEs do not report seeing their own physical body during the NDE,

although American subjects usually do. Subjects of Indian NDEs frequently report being taken to the after-death realm by functionaries who then discover that a mistake has been made and send the person back, whereupon he or she revives. In contrast, American subjects, if they say anything at all about why they revived, mention meeting deceased family members who told them to go back or say they came back because of ties of love and duty with living persons.

The differences in the NDE experiences correspond to different prevailing ideas about life after death in India and the United States. However, this does not warrant our saying that the content of NDEs derives solely from the beliefs of the experiencers.

More systematic studies of a larger sample of Indian patients should permit firmer and additional conclusions.

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