

## **Dr. Ian Stevenson: A Multifaceted Personality**

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My association with Dr. Ian Stevenson goes back to October 1973, and I have known him ever since, as a mentor, a guide, a friend, a scientist, and above all a good human being.

### **My First Meeting with Dr. Stevenson**

During the silver-jubilee conference of the Indian Psychiatric Society that was held in Chandigarh in December 1972, a senior Indian psychiatrist with whom Dr. Stevenson had corresponded told me about Dr. Stevenson's work on reincarnation. Because of my background in science, I was quite skeptical about such cases, about which I had read only in the newspapers. Subsequently, however, during another meeting in 1973, the same professor informed me that Dr. Stevenson was coming to India and that I could meet him if I wished.

I was employed in Chandigarh (about 250 kilometers north of Delhi) and came to Delhi to meet Dr. Stevenson for the first time in October 1973. He was staying at Hotel Janpath, where he often stayed when he came to Delhi. Dr. Stevenson was not in his room, and the late Dr. Jamuna Prasad (a close associate of Dr. Stevenson) was waiting for him in the lounge. I thus met Dr. Prasad for the first time, and since I had never met Dr. Stevenson before, Dr. Prasad offered to introduce me to him. Finally we all met, had lunch, and immediately went to see a few cases of the reincarnation type known to Dr. Stevenson. These were the cases of Gopal Gupta (Stevenson, 1975: 70–106) and Pushpa (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1977). He took me to these cases to introduce me to "actual" cases, and he allowed me to interview the family of the previous personality for the case of Pushpa and the mother of Gopal Gupta. Since this was the first time I was meeting and interviewing informants for cases, I first acted as an interpreter for Dr. Stevenson and then asked my own questions, for which he gave me a free hand. That was a good learning experience for me in understanding his research. Since I had not participated in the investigation of these two cases from the beginning, I could not yet form a judgment about the cases, but I was definitely impressed by his approach to investigating them.

After the initial two-day meeting with Dr. Stevenson, and before I returned to Chandigarh, he suggested that I study a few cases with one of his associates, but independently of him, which I did in December 1973. I went with Dr. L. P. Mehrotra, an associate of Dr. Prasad. During this trip, we faced many

difficulties, mainly because we had fewer hours for work and long, sometimes even arduous, journeys. We had to walk for several kilometers across fields to the interior of villages and had frequent taxi breakdowns, all of which resulted in frustration as we got little or no information by the end of the day. (The road conditions have tremendously improved since then.) In spite of the hardships, however, I began to like the work after I had investigated a few cases, particularly that of Manju Sharma (Pasricha, 1990/2006), who was about four years old at that time. I found quite a few strong features in her case and decided to investigate it further. That was, in a way, a turning point for me in deciding to take up full-time research of reincarnation-type cases.

### **My Subsequent Years of Research and Associated Memories of Dr. Stevenson**

In October 1974 Dr. Stevenson returned to India, bringing with him a student from the USA, John Russell, and he invited me to join them for the entire trip in India of about four weeks, an invitation I accepted. We were also joined by Dr. Mehrotra for this trip. We investigated quite a few new cases and interviewed informants on both sides of the cases, that of the subject (the child who claimed to remember a previous life) and that of the previous personality (the deceased person whose life the subject claimed to remember). This trip gave me good hands-on experience, and also a long period of close interaction with Dr. Stevenson both as a scientist-teacher and as a person. My experience in the field work and in getting to know Dr. Stevenson personally eventually helped me to decide on my future career in this field. During the first part of this trip, Dr. Stevenson, Dr. Mehrotra, John Russell, and I all went to see a case, the informants for whom lived in the interior of a village. We went as far as the cab could take us and then came to a point from where one had to either walk or go by bicycle. Dr. Stevenson “ordered” John Russell and me to stay by the cab; perhaps out of concern he did not want to subject us to unnecessary hardship or discomfort at the beginning of the trip. He hired two bicycles for himself and Dr. Mehrotra, and they went on to the village to interview the informants. When they returned, both looked tired, but I could see a glitter of success in Dr. Stevenson’s eyes. Throughout the trip (and my subsequent trips with him), he treated us all with equal affection and respect; I observed no hierarchical division in his dealings with us.

During both of my initial trips with him, I found in Dr. Stevenson an excellent teacher, a scrupulous researcher, and a kind person who preferred to work diligently rather than talk about his work. He was extremely polite, humble, and unassuming; I did not realize that he occupied such a high position at the University of Virginia until I went there in 1976.

Apart from his personal attributes, I found his techniques highly scientific and the investigations quite interesting and challenging – so much so that I gave up my job at Chandigarh to delve deeper into the subject. At the end of our 1974 trip, he had encouraged me to enroll for the Ph.D. program, which I did. I had had good training with him and was convinced about the authenticity of some of

the cases that we had investigated during the 1974 trip, as well as some that I had investigated in December 1973 without him. Between 1974 and 1979, therefore, I began investigating cases independently to replicate his research; these cases formed the basis for my Ph.D. dissertation. Since it was a replication study of Dr. Stevenson's work, he did not participate in the investigation of most of my cases. He was, however, concerned both about my personal safety during field trips and about reliability in the data collection. With both of these aspects of the investigation in mind, he asked Dr. Prasad to arrange for some of his colleagues to accompany me on field trips. As a good scientist, he did not want to influence my investigations in any way, but as a responsible and good human being he did not want to put me in any danger. I was both impressed by his scientific fervor and touched by his genuine human concern for my safety. After I submitted my dissertation, I collaborated with Dr. Stevenson almost until the end of his life. His academic assistance and generous financial support for my research, through the University of Virginia, helped tremendously toward my personal and professional growth, for which I shall always remember him with gratitude.

When I began the investigations, most of our cases came from the villages, and I was new to the village settings and customs. Sometime informants would come to us and offer to give information about the subject or the previous personality. When we asked about their relationship with the person concerned, they would say something like: "I am his uncle," or "I am his brother." On further probing, we would learn that they were not related by blood but that they belonged to the same village and were, say, like a brother of the subject's father or were a close friend of the subject's previous personality. This was not to deceive us; it is a common practice in Indian villages for friends to introduce themselves in terms such as "brother" or "sister". Over the years we learned quite a few such expressions together. Dr. Stevenson was always eager to learn new things and put them into practice, mostly seriously, but sometimes jovially. For example, once when we were visiting Dr. Prasad, Dr. Stevenson asked him to arrange for one or two of his colleagues to accompany me when Dr. Stevenson or his associates from the USA were not available to tour with me. He told Dr. Prasad: "You see, I am her academic uncle, and we should take responsibility to help her in data collection." In showing a genuine concern for me, he aptly applied his recently acquired knowledge about Indian relationships. Over the years as we worked together, I found myself growing closer to my "academic uncle," and I must confess that I became much more close to him than even my own father or uncles.

I remember that sometimes during our long taxi rides he used to tell me, "I would not mind sleeping on a bed of nails if I could get a perfect, or near perfect, case," and I had seen him several times putting up with physical discomfort for the sake of getting information about the cases. On several occasions, to conserve time and energy from long taxi rides, we would spend a night in the public guest houses, which did not even have adequate basic amenities. I do not think a professor from the USA (or any country for that matter) would have liked to stay there more than once; but Dr. Stevenson's quest was different, and this

research seemed to be his mission in life. I never heard him complaining about any discomforts.

I have had the good fortune of closely working with him for nearly three decades; he came to India (often on his way to or from Burma and Sri Lanka), sometimes twice a year, until October 2002. He worked tirelessly on these trips for nearly 16–18 hours a day and seven days a week. After we returned in the late evenings from the field work, I would suddenly wake up in the night and hear non-stop the sound of his typewriter in the next or opposite room in the hotel. He would work on the notes until late at night and would be ready the next morning with a long list of questions for our informants. I think his training in psychiatry and his personal attributes enabled him to win over the confidence of most informants. He was gentle in his approach and extremely careful in formulating or asking questions. Earlier in his career he had written a book on psychiatric interviewing (Stevenson, 1960/1971), and he applied those techniques while investigating cases of the reincarnation type, as well as other cases involving paranormal experiences.

I learned a great deal from him during our travels. During train journeys and taxi rides, he would bring a huge bag full of articles or books to read and update himself with the latest developments. In the mornings when the light was sufficient he would read something new, and while returning from the trip late in the evenings, when he could not read, he would share his knowledge with me and other colleagues with us. In spite of being a giant scholar himself, he was always ready to learn from others irrespective of their age. He would not hesitate to ask when he wanted to learn or correct his knowledge about India; and when he wanted to share with me information about other countries or when I wanted to learn new things, he would explain in detail and very patiently.

As a co-author I also benefited a great deal from him. He was a perfectionist in every sense of the term and always did a flawless job, beginning with data collection, to searching for relevant literature, to writing and revising articles and books until he was convinced that there were no plausible errors left.

Eventually, he wanted to concentrate more on his writings and spend less time on field investigations. From time to time he appointed others at the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia to come to India to work with me and thus help him reduce his visits. But I think he was addicted to investigating cases, and he was always keen to learn about better or stronger cases. Beginning in the late 1980s, he would tell me, “This is my last trip, unless we find a case of the century.” In spite of saying this repeatedly, he returned several times. In the mid-1990s he made a few trips to investigate or to help me in the evaluation of cases of birthmarks and birth defects in the subjects. His last few trips lasted for one to two weeks as he was becoming physically weak (mentally he was as agile as ever). His trip of October 2002 unfortunately turned out to be really his last trip to India. However, we continued to communicate with each other whenever something about the cases or related matters came up.

Now a few more lines about my observation of his performance in different roles. I feel proud – and I think I am correct in saying – that of all his associates

I had the opportunity to spend the most time with him on field investigations. Hence I can claim to have known him well, both as a scientist and as a human being. I have enumerated some of his qualities as a scientist, and I am sure his other colleagues too will highlight, and perhaps better than me, his scientific fervor and achievements. Therefore I will focus now on his other qualities.

Apart from being a scientist and a scholar, he had a charismatic personality and the qualities of a saint. He was kind, generous, and affectionate, which is why everyone who came in contact with him thought that Stevenson belonged to him/her. His kindness was not restricted to human beings only; he was equally sensitive toward animals. I had often seen him walking with full enthusiasm and a smile on his face alongside the Tongas (horse carts) or bullock carts, even on uneven pavements and for long distances, so as not to put undue strain on the animals. A few times he even pushed the bullock carts when they were stuck in the mud.

I can go on writing about him but space limits have to be kept in mind. My long association with him brings many pleasant memories and a sense of pride that I knew and worked with such a great person so closely. It also gives me lot of pain to accept that he is no more. But such persons never die, and he has become immortal through his monumental contributions to the field of parapsychology in general and reincarnation in particular.

To sum up, I suppose his research was his mission and humanity was his religion; he was an ocean of humanity. His qualities are best described by the words beginning with the letter "C." He was a scientist and an exemplary human being who had the **courage** to venture into an unconventional field. He had the **curiosity** and **competence** of a first-rate scientist and could **communicate** his ideas and theories with utmost **clarity**. He had a **charismatic** personality of substance and bore a **character** that endeared him to all his associates and whoever interacted with him. He was **compassionate**, and he had the **conviction** and **confidence** in himself and his work that led him to stand out among conventional as well as conservative scientists. In his death, I have lost a mentor, a guide, and a friend. My only regret is that in spite of having done pioneer work in an unconventional area, he has not received the kind of recognition he deserved.

Our true tribute to him would be to carry forward the research that he so painstakingly made scientifically credible with the hope that generous grants would be bestowed for us to continue his work.

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