

BIRTHMARKS AND CLAIMS OF PREVIOUS-LIFE MEMORIES:
I. THE CASE OF PURNIMA EKANAYAKE

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ABSTRACT

Children who speak of memories of a previous life may explain birthmarks as related to wounds inflicted upon them in the former life. In this case a girl claims to have been an incense-maker, and to have died in a traffic accident. After a location had been given an incense-maker was identified whose life corresponded to many of her statements. He had died in a traffic accident two years prior to her birth, and the post-mortem report revealed that wounds had been inflicted on him in the same area as her birthmarks.

INTRODUCTION

Birthmarks or birth defects are sometimes important features in cases of children who speak of previous-life memories, or are assumed by their family or community to be a specific personality reborn (Stevenson, **1987**). A child may explain birthmarks as resulting from wounds inflicted on it in a previous life. In his recent two-volume work on birthmark and birth defect cases Stevenson (1997a, **1997b**) gives a detailed description of **225** cases. Eleven of them are from Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka I have investigated around 60 cases of children who speak about events and persons that have been interpreted as related to a previous life (Haraldsson, **1991**; Haraldsson & Samararatne, **1999**; Mills, Haraldsson & Keil, 1994). In three instances a child made statements relating birthmarks to a previous life, or talked about accidents and injuries in a previous life which were later found to correspond, or were believed to correspond, to birthmarks on the body of a child. One of them is the case of Purnima Ekanayake that I investigated during five visits to Sri Lanka, from September 1996 to March 1999. This involved the interviewing and re-interviewing of numerous witnesses. (For details of the methodology of such an investigation, see Haraldsson, 1991 and Stevenson, **1987**).

THE CASE

Purnima was nine years old when I first met her in September 1996 at her home in Bakamuna, a small town in the Polunnaruwa district of central Sri Lanka. She was still speaking of her previous life, which is unusual at this age because most children stop doing so around the age of five or six. According to her parents she had been speaking of a previous life since she was three years old. She communicated freely with us, took great interest in our exchanges with her parents and sometimes corrected their statements (I had to use an interpreter although Purnima and her father understood some English). She seemed well adjusted and happy in her family. Her schoolbook contains only A's, and she is at the top of a class of 33. All she said was characterized by great clarity. Purnima is a beautiful and charming girl. She likes clean and beautiful dresses, her mother told me.

Soon after her birth Purnima's mother noticed a large cluster of hypopigmented birthmarks to the left of the midline of her chest, and over her lower ribs. Even then it occurred to her mother that they might be associated with injuries in a previous life.

PURNIMA'S STATEMENTS REGARDING AN ALLEGED PREVIOUS LIFE

Purnima's parents paid little attention when she started to speak of past events in 1990. It was not until early in 1993 that they took some interest in her statements and an attempt was made to check the correctness of her statements.

Regrettably, no record was made of Purnima's statements at that time. Hence it is difficult to reconstruct her original statements, and assess which of her present statements might be moulded by facts that she may have learnt after contact was established with her 'previous' family. I have listed in Table 1 all 20 statements that, according to her parents, Purnima made before the previous family was traced. These statements were collected during several interviews with her parents spread over three years. Purnima also made these statements to the author and his interpreters.

Table 1

Statements Made by Purnima (According to her Parents) Before First Contact With her Alleged Previous Family

1	I died in a traffic accident and came here.	+
2	My family was making incense and had no other job.	+
3	We were making Ambiga incense.	+
4	We were making Geta Pichcha incense.	
5	The incense factory is near a brick factory and near a pond.	+
6	First only our family worked and then two people were employed.	?
7	We had two vans.	+
8	We had a car.	+
9	I was the best manufacturer of incense sticks.	?
10	In earlier life I was married to a sister-in-law, Kusumi.	+
11	The owner of the incense factory, [I] had two wives.	+
12	My previous father was bad (present father is good).	?
13	Previous father was not a teacher as present father.	+
14	I had two younger brothers (who were better than present brothers).	+
15	My mother's name was Simona.	+
16	Simona was very fair.	-
17	I attended Rahula School.	+
18	Rahula School had a two-storied building (not like in Bakamuna).	-
19	My father said, you need not go to school, you can make money making incense.	-
20	I studied only up to 5th grade.	+

+ verified (14) - incorrect (3) ? indeterminate (3)

I died in a traffic accident. The first unusual statement that Purnima repeatedly made as a small child was: "People who drive over people in the street are bad persons". Sometimes she would ask her mother: "Do you not also think that persons who cause accidents are bad people?" These were the first indirect statements referring to a previous life. Purnima also made statements about a fatal accident with a big vehicle (*Zoku uahana* usually means a bus or truck). Her mother thinks that this statement first came about (or she started to pay attention to it) after a traffic accident occurred near their home. Purnima's mother was upset about the accident. Then Purnima tried to soothe her by saying: "Do not think about this accident. I came to you after such an accident." She told her mother how she closed her eyes after the accident and then she came "here". Her mother asked if she had been taken to a hospital. "No," she replied. She added: "A heap of iron was on my body".

Purnima related that after the accident she floated in the air in semi-darkness for a few days. She saw people mourning for her and crying, and saw her body up to and including the funeral. There were many people like her floating around. Then she saw some light, went there and came "here" (to Bakamuna).

My family was making incense (Ambiga and Geta Pichcha) and had no other job. Sometimes Purnima spoke of incense-making and said that she had been making Ambiga and Geta Pichcha incense. Purnima's parents thought that she might be speaking of Ambiga because a jewellery firm of that name was advertising on television. Her mother assumed she was mixing something up. They also thought that she might be speaking of Geta Pichcha as there are 'geta pichcha' flowers (a variety of jasmine) in their garden. According to her parents Purnima had also stated that members of her family as well as some outsiders were working for them making incense sticks. She used to walk around with her hands behind her back imitating how she had examined how they were doing their work. We checked the shops in Bakamuna and found only two brands of incense made in Kandy and one from India, no Ambiga or Geta Pichcha incense.

In earlier life I was married to a sister-in-law, Kusumi. Her parents inferred that she had been a man in her previous life. Further statements will be listed and discussed below.

THE SEARCH TO SOLVE THE CASE

At about the age of four Purnima saw a television programme on the famous Kelaniya temple (close to Colombo and nearly 145 miles away from Bakamuna) and said that she recognized the temple. A little later her father, who is the principal of a secondary school, and her mother, who is also a teacher, took a group of schoolchildren to Kelaniya temple, which is a major place of pilgrimage among Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Purnima had not entered school at this time, but was allowed to join the group. In Kelaniya she said that she had lived on the other side of the Kelaniya river, which flows beside the temple compound.

At one time Purnima's father allowed a friend who is a local reporter to meet Purnima, but she was shy and did not speak to him. The reporter had heard of her talking about incense-making and brought along a pack of incense. She examined it and said she could make better incense than that. More he could not get out of her, he told us.

In January 1993 a recent graduate of Kelaniya University, W. G. Sumanasiri, was appointed a teacher in Bakamuna, and he and the principal became acquainted. Sumanasiri spent his working days in Bakamuna and the weekends in Kelaniya, where he had married. They decided that Sumanasiri would make inquiries across the Kelaniya river. Sumanasiri did not meet Purnima until after his inquiries. According to Sumanasiri the principal gave him four or five items to check:-

- . She had lived on the other side of the river from Kelaniya temple.
- She had been making Ambiga and Gita Pichcha incense sticks.
- She was selling incense sticks on a bicycle.
- She had a fatal accident with a big vehicle.

The item about selling incense sticks on a bicycle was not mentioned to me by Purnima's parents until after my meeting with Sumanasiri when Purnima's father confirmed Sumanasiri's account of these four items. I have not included it in Table 1.

Sumanasiri was accompanied by his brother-in-law, Tony Serasinghe Modalige, who is a native of Kelaniya, and another local person. They parked their car at the temple, and took the hand-driven ferry across the river as it was some distance to the next bridge. They inquired if there were incense-makers in the area. This area is like a spread-out town, but in between there are fields and village-like clusters of houses. In this area they found three incense-makers, all small family businesses. One of them named his brands Ambiga and Geta Pichcha. The owner was L. A. Wijisiri. His brother-in-law and associate, Jinadasa Perera, had died in an accident with a bus as he was bringing incense to the market on a bicycle in September 1985. This was about two years prior to Purnima's birth. Wijisiri's and Jinadasa's home and factory had been 2.4 miles from the ferry and 5–10 minutes' walking distance from the Kelaniya river.

Sumanasiri's visit to the Wijisiri family was very brief. He informed Purnima's father about his findings. A week or two later Purnima, her parents, Sumanasiri and his brother-in-law made an unannounced visit to the Wijisiri family in Angoda. Before going to Angoda they spent a night at Sumanasiri's home in Kelaniya. There, according to her mother, Purnima whispered in her ear: "This incense dealer [she] had two wives. This is a secret. Don't give them my address. They might trouble me".

Wijisiri's Account of Purnima's First Visit to Angoda

When the group came to Wijisiri's house he was not in but arrived a short while later. Wijisiri's two daughters were in the house and Purnima met them first. When Wijisiri came walking towards the house Purnima told those around her: "This is Wijisiri; he is coming; he is my brother-in-law". He heard her say this just as he was entering the house. When Purnima said that she had come to see her brother-in-law and sister, he was puzzled and did not realize that she was talking about a previous life. Wijisiri wanted to send them away, saying that those they were asking for were not here. Then, when he thought about it and the little girl started to ask about various kinds of packets and such things, only then was he inclined to believe her story. She alone spoke; no

one else said anything. This is how Wijisiri remembered her visit. This account was confirmed by Purnima's father.

Table 2

Chronology of the Case of Purnima Ekanayake

4 April 1949	Jinadasa Perera is born.
9 April 1985	Jinadasa dies in bus accident in Nugegoda.
24 August 1987	Purnima Ekanayake is born in Bakamuna.
1990	Purnima starts speaking of a previous life at the age of 2% to 3 years.
March 1993	Sumanasiri makes inquiries in Kelaniya/Angoda and meets the family of Jinadasa.
April 1993	Purnima's first visit to Jinadasa's family. Her birthmarks correspond to J's injuries. She is accepted as Jinadasa reborn.
29 August 1993	Article on the case appears in the newspaper <i>Diuaina</i> .
September 1996	EH's first investigation of the case.

Purnima said to Wijisiri that she used to sell these incense sticks. She asked: "Have you changed the outer cover of the packets?" Wijisiri used to change the colour and design every two years or so. She seemed to realize that the packets looked different from the time Jinadasa was working with Wijisiri. Then she talked about the various packets, and about an accident Wijisiri had many years ago (since that time he has been unable to bend his knee). Also that Jinadasa [she] had applied medicine to his knee after the accident. She asked about Jinadasa's friends, such as Somasiri and Padmasiri. Padmasiri is Wijisiri's brother and had gone with him on business on the day Jinadasa met with his accident. They had left home together and had then split up and gone to different places. She mentioned their names. These were the things that convinced Wijisiri.

Purnima also asked about her mother and her (Jinadasa's) previous sister, who is Wijisiri's wife. The sister was abroad working in Saudi Arabia, and the mother was absent at her ancestral home. Purnima expressed concern when she learnt that the mother had gone alone to a distant place. Wijisiri's family was still confused. Then Purnima showed her birthmark. She said: "This is the mark I received when I was hit by a bus". Purnima also mentioned the place of Jinadasa's accident, Nugegoda, which is near Angoda, and said that they had moved their home and factory to a different location within Angoda from the time she was with them, which was correct.

From Wijisiri's family we learnt that Jinadasa had in fact had two wives. After several years of living together he had disagreements with his first wife (Wijisiri's sister). He went to south Sri Lanka to sell incense sticks, became acquainted with a lady by the name of Nanda, and left his former family. In the town of Weligama he lived for five years with Nanda and produced incense with a friend, M. Somasiri, who gave us valuable information. (Jinadasa legally married neither of his 'wives'. According to Sinhalese tradition a man and woman who live together are referred to as husband and wife.) During a visit to Colombo Jinadasa learnt of Wijisiri's accident, which left him bed-ridden for

several months. He then went to Angoda to help. A few days later he met with his accident.

Did Purnima say anything that was incorrect and that did not fit Jinadasa's life? She had said that two vans and a car had belonged to her (Jinadasa). This was a family business so in a way this was correct but formally the vehicles had belonged to Wijisiri. This is the essence of Wijisiri's account of his first meeting with Purnima.

We had been told that Purnima had recognized an old co-worker, Somasiri. He told us that he had come to see her at her first visit. He stood there among a group of people. Then she pointed to him and said: "This is my friend". When Purnima's father asked who that man was, she answered: "This is Somasiri, my friend". Apparently she also recognised Jinadasa's younger sister, G. Violet. She and Somasiri told us that she had pointed to her and said: "This is my younger sister". These were the only names that Somasiri and Violet heard her say during the first visit.

Purnima's Knowledge of Incense-Making

It occurred to us to ask Purnima if she knew how incense is made. Yes, she said and gave us a detailed reply. There are two ways to make it. One uses cow dung, the other is from ash from firewood (charcoal). A paste is made, and then a thin stick is cut from bamboo and some gum is applied to the bamboo stick. Then the stick is rolled over the paste and then something is applied to obtain a nice smell. As far as she can remember they made their incense from charcoal powder. What is charcoal made from and how is it produced? "When firewood is burnt you get charcoal."

We asked Purnima's parents if they knew how incense was made. The father had heard that it was made from cow-dung, but this was the first time he had heard that it could be made from firewood. Her mother knew even less. Godwin, my interpreter, had never heard how incense was made. We later asked Wijisiri to describe to us and show us how they make their incense. Wijisiri did it the way that Purnima had described.

Further Verification of Purnima's Statements

Of the 20 statements listed in Table 1, 14 fit the life of Jinadasa (1-5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13-15, 17, 20), three are indeterminate (6, 9, 12) and three statements (16, 18, 19) are incorrect.

Let us first consider the incorrect items. Jinadasa had attended Rahula School, as we learnt independently from his mother and younger sister. However, our inquiries revealed that this school did not have a two-storied building until the 1980s. It is correct according to his family that Jinadasa attended school only up to 5th grade. However, he was doing odd jobs for a few years until his sister married Wijisiri. Then he took up incense-making, and two years later 'married' Wijisiri's sister. Hence the statement that Jinadasa's father had told him to leave school to earn money by making incense cannot be true. The statement that Jinadasa's mother was very fair is not true now, and it seems unlikely that she was earlier.

Some of the correct items have already been described. Regarding item 5: there is a pond within 200 yards of Jinadasa's old residence. The old factory,

which was some 100–150 yards down the road, had been demolished and close to it, a neighbour told us, there had been a kiln (brick-making facility), and another kiln is still close by. Item 13: Jinadasa's father had been a poor farmer (hence not a teacher). Item 14: Jinadasa had indeed had two younger brothers (and two sisters).

The indeterminate items: Items 9 and 12 (best maker of incense sticks, and his father was a bad man) we had no way to check. Item 6: first our family worked, then two people were employed. This was primarily a family business but soon they employed people who worked in the factory or in their homes. We could not ascertain when exactly they started to employ people, but gradually up to 30 persons came to work for them in the time of Jinadasa, who was an industrious and popular man.

Most specific are items 3 and 4, stating that the family was making the brands Ambiga and Geta Pichcha. According to Wijisiri this is correct and they showed us packages of both brands. Since the time of Jinadasa the family has started to make two additional brands.

After the two families met Purnima made some interesting intimate statements about his life with his first wife that she could hardly have learnt from anyone. Unfortunately we saw no way of verifying them.

Purnima's Birthmarks

We have already mentioned that Purnima was born with prominent birthmarks on her lower chest, left of the midline (see photo). Her mother noticed them when she was bathing Purnima as baby. Then in a light-hearted way she said to her husband that these marks might be the result of an accident in a previous life. However, it was only when they met Jinadasa's family that the birthmarks became significant. Prior to the contact with that family Purnima never spoke about details of her injuries nor do her parents remember her associating her birthmarks with her accident. It was not until



Purnima's visit to Angoda that she said that the bus's tyres had run over her chest, and pointed across the left side of her chest where she has her birthmarks. Someone in Wijisiri's family then mentioned that Jinadasa had been injured on the left side of his trunk. Purnima's birthmarks were at the same location. Then the case was considered confirmed by both families.

Jinadasa died immediately of the accident. His brother Chandradasa was called into the mortuary to identify his brother and so was his sister. Chandradasa told us he saw massive injuries from the lower ribs on the left side and up and obliquely across the body, caused by the wheel of the bus as it ran over Jinadasa's body. Sitriyavati, his sister, identified Jinadasa from his face. His body had by then been covered by a sheet.

None of the persons involved in this case had seen the post-mortem report. After obtaining permission from the Magistrates' Court of Gangodavilla, which handled Jinadasa's case, we obtained the post-mortem report from the physician, Dr Kariyawasam, who conducted the examination. It gives a detailed description and a sketch of the injuries. They had been massive, particularly on the left side of the chest, where several ribs had been broken.

The post-mortem report thus describes the internal injuries:-

1. Fracture of the ribs, 1 and 2, 8, 9, and 10, laterally on the left. 1 to 5 anteriorly and 6 anteriorly and laterally, and 7 laterally. 8 and 9 anteriorly and posteriorly, 10 and 11 anteriorly.
2. The liver was ruptured.
3. The spleen was ruptured.
4. Lungs were penetrated by broken ribs.

Externally there was a "grazed abrasion 23" x 10" running obliquely from the right shoulder across the chest to the (left) lower abdomen". There were lesser injuries on the legs and face.

DISCUSSION

First, let me summarize the strong points of this case. The locations of the two families were far apart, and the two families were complete strangers. A third party succeeded in finding the person that matched Purnima's statements. Fourteen of seventeen statements that could be checked were found to match the life of Jinadasa, who had died two years before Purnima was born. Purnima's cluster of birthmarks was found to fall within an area of fatal injuries suffered by Jinadasa. Her birthmarks are on the left side of the chest, where most of the ribs broke, and where he is likely to have felt most pain. Also, there is some evidence of knowledge of incense-making that is highly unusual for a child, and which Purnima explains as stemming from her previous life.

This is a good example of a case with different characteristics that fall into a pattern and must be viewed as a whole: memories, birthmarks and, perhaps, how-to-do knowledge. Overall, one can state that the case of Purnima Ekanayake is of unusual quality.

The principal weakness of the case is the fact that no record was made of Purnima's statements before the case was 'solved', which occurred three years before the author started his investigation.

This case has some features that are uncommon among Sri Lankan cases. Purnima speaks of memories of a life between death and birth that the author has found only in the case of Duminda Ratnayake (Haraldsson, 1991; Haraldsson & Samararatne, 1999). Purnima's memories have lasted much longer than they generally do. Purnima still spoke freely of her previous life at the age of ten. Purnima's case also has some more common or typical features. Purnima started to speak of her memories at a very early age, and spoke persistently about them. One aspect of her memories was reflected in her play.

Finally, Purnima displays prominently some characteristics that my formal psychological studies have shown to distinguish children speaking of previous-life memories from ordinary children (Haraldsson, 1997; Haraldsson, Fowler & Mahendra, submitted). She is highly gifted, has excellent vocabulary and memory, shows some tendency for dissociation, and is less suggestible than most children. She is a demanding child for her parents, is argumentative and independent-minded, wants to be perfect, is much concerned with neatness and cleanliness, and at times is hot-tempered and boastful; in short a vivid and memorable personality.

In a further article I hope to present a second birthmark case, that of Chatura Karunaratne. It does not have the principal weakness of this case, as Chatura's statements were recorded by three independent witnesses before a matching previous personality was found. The reader will certainly ask, Can the facts of these cases be seen as evidence of genuine memories of a previous life? In the forthcoming paper I will attempt to express my thoughts on that difficult question.

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Birthmarks and Claims of Previous-Life Memories

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