

The Case of Shanti Devi

by Dr. K.S. Rawat

Shanti Devi is one of the best cases of children's past life memories. It is remarkable because it was investigated by a committee of prominent men appointed by Mahatma Gandhi, who took Shanti Devi to the village of her past-life recollections.

This article is reprinted with permission from the March/April, 1997 issue of Venture Inward Magazine, the magazine of the A.R.E., (the Edgar Cayce research organization). It was written by Dr. K.S. Rawat, who is a Stevenson-style researcher based in India. Dr. Rawat welcomes comments, and is a frequent contributor to the Forum here.

People hear of many cases of reincarnation these days, but in the early 30s, information about a girl born in a little-known locality of Delhi, who claimed to remember a past life, was considered great news indeed. The girl at first was known only to the local people, but gradually news of her spread all over the country and finally all over the world. It was natural that the world should wonder about the authenticity of her story.

Shanti Devi, born in 1926, was the subject of speculation all of her life. In 1985 questions were even raised about her existence in a special issue on reincarnation in a prominent weekly English journal of India. This dismayed me that someone would raise such doubts without conducting a proper study. In February 1986, I had gone to Delhi to meet Ian Stevenson, the leading expert in reincarnation research from the University of Virginia. Dr. Stevenson had already investigated her case, so I showed him the article. A few days later I met Shanti Devi and spent about an hour and half with her. Later, I interviewed many people connected with the case at Delhi, Mathura, and Jaipurand, including Shanti Devi's relatives in this life and from her past life as Lugdi Bai. I also examined the books and articles published on Shanti Devi from time to time, besides several reports prepared on her by eminent scholars. This is her story, perhaps the most famous reincarnation case on record.

On January 18, 1902, Chaturbhuj, a resident of Mathura, was blessed with a daughter, who was named Lugdi. When Lugdi reached the age of 10, she was married to Kedarnath Chaube, a shopkeeper of the same locality. It was the second marriage for Kedarnath, as his earlier wife had died. Kedarnath Chaube owned a cloth shop in Mathura and also a branch shop at Hardwar. Lugdi was very religious and had been to several pilgrimage places at a very young age. While on one pilgrimage, she was injured in her leg for which she had to be treated, both at Mathura and later at Agra.

When Lugdi became pregnant for the first time, her child was stillborn following a Cesarean section. For her second pregnancy, the worried husband took her to the government hospital at Agra, where a son was born, again through a Cesarean on September 25, 1925. Nine days later, however, on October 4, Lugdi's condition deteriorated and she died.

One year ten months and seven days after Lugdi's death, on December 11, 1926, Babu Rang Bahadur Mathur of Chirawala Mohulla, a small locality of Delhi, was blessed with a daughter, whom they

named Shanti Devi. She was just like any other girl except that until the age of four she did not speak much. But when she started talking, she was a different girl--she talked about her "husband" and her "children."

She said that her husband was in Mathura where he owned a cloth shop and they had a son. She called herself Chaubine (Chaube's wife). The parents considered it a child's fantasy and took no notice. They got worried, however, when she talked repeatedly about it and, over time, narrated a number of incidents connected with her life in Mathura with her husband. On occasions at meals, she would say, "In my house in Mathura, I ate different kinds of sweets." Sometimes when her mother was dressing her, she would tell what type of dresses she used to wear. She mentioned three distinctive features about her husband: he was fair, had a big wart on his left cheek, and wore reading glasses. She also mentioned that her husband's shop was located in front of Dwarkadhish temple.

By this time Shanti Devi was six years old, and her parents were perplexed and worried by such statements. The girl even gave a detailed account of her death following childbirth. They consulted their family physician, who was amazed how a little girl narrated so many details of the complicated surgical procedures. The mystery, thus, continued to deepen. The parents started thinking that these memories might have been of a past life.



Shanti Devi as an adult

As the girl grew older, she persisted in asking her parents to be taken to Mathura. She, however, never mentioned her husband's name up to the age of eight or nine. It is customary in India that wives do not utter the name of their husbands. Even when specifically asked, she would blush and say that she would recognize him, if taken there, but would not say his name. One day a distant relation, Babu Bishanchand, a teacher in Ramjas High School Daryaganj in Delhi, told Shanti Devi that if she told him her husband's name, he would take her to Mathura. Lured by this offer, she whispered into his ear the name Pandit Kedarnath Chaube. Bishanchand then told her that he would arrange for the trip to Mathura after due inquiries. He wrote a letter to Pandit Kedarnath Chaube, detailing all the statements made by Shanti Devi, and asked him to visit Delhi. Kedarnath replied confirming most of her statements and suggested that one of his relatives, Pandit Kanjimal, who lived in Delhi, be allowed to meet this girl.

A meeting with Kanjimal was arranged, during which Shanti Devi recognized him as her husband's cousin. She gave some details about her house in Mathura and informed him of the location where she had buried some money. When asked whether she could go by herself from the railway station to her house in Mathura, she replied in the affirmative, if they would take her there.

Kanjimal was so impressed that he went to Mathura to persuade Kedarnath to visit Delhi. Kedarnath came to Delhi on November 12, 1935, with Lugdi's son Navneet Lal and his present wife. They went to Rang Bahadur's house the next day. To mislead Shanti Devi, Kanjimal introduced Kedarnath as the latter's elder brother. Shanti Devi blushed and stood on one side. Someone asked why she was blushing in front of her husband's elder brother. Shanti said in a low firm voice, "No, he is not my husband's brother. He is my husband himself." Then she addressed her mother, "Didn't I tell you that he is fair and he has a wart on the left side cheek near his ear?"

She then asked her mother to prepare meals for the guests. When the mother asked what should she prepare, she said that he was fond of stuffed potato parathas and pumpkin squash. Kedarnath was dumbfounded as these were his favorite dishes. Then Kedarnath asked whether she could tell them anything unusual to establish full faith in her. Shanti replied, "Yes, there is a well in the courtyard of our house, where I used to take my bath."

Shanti was emotionally overwhelmed on seeing Navneet, the son in her previous life. Tears welled in her eyes when she hugged him. She asked her mother to bring all her toys and give them to Navneet. But she was too excited to wait for her mother to act and ran to bring them. Kedarnath asked her how she had recognized Navneet as her son, when she had seen him only once as an infant before she died. Shanti explained that her son was a part of her soul and the soul is able to easily recognize this fact.

After dinner, Shanti asked Kedarnath, "Why did you marry her?" referring to his present wife. "Had we not decided that you will not remarry?" Kedarnath had no reply.

During his stay at Delhi, Kedarnath found Shanti Devi's behavior similar to that of Lugdi in many ways. Before retiring for the night, he asked to be allowed to talk with her alone and later said that he was fully convinced that Shanti Devi was his wife Lugdi Bai because there were many things she had mentioned which no one except Lugdi could have known.

Shanti Devi became upset before Kedarnath's return to Mathura on November 15. She begged to be allowed to go to Mathura with him but her parents refused.

Her story spread all over the country through the media and many intellectuals got interested in it. When Mahatma Gandhi heard about it, he called Shanti Devi, talked to her, and then requested her to stay in his ashram. (When I interviewed Shanti Devi in 1986, she still remembered the incident.)

Gandhi appointed a committee of 15 prominent people, including parliamentarians, national leaders, and members from the media, to study the case. The committee persuaded her parents to allow her to accompany them to Mathura. They left by rail with Shanti Devi on November 24, 1935. The committee's report describes some of what happened:

"As the train approached Mathura, she became flushed with joy and remarked that by the time they reach Mathura the doors of the temple of Dwarkadhish would be closed. Her exact language was, 'Mandir ke pat band ho jayenge,' so typically used in Mathura.

"The first incident which attracted our attention on reaching Mathura happened on the platform itself. The girl was in L. Deshbandhu's arms. He had hardly gone 15 paces when an older man, wearing a typical Mathura dress, whom she had never met before, came in front of her, mixed in the small crowd, and paused for a while. She was asked whether she could recognize him. His presence reacted so quickly on her that she at once came down from Mr. Gupta's lap and touched the stranger's feet with deep veneration and stood aside. On inquiring, she whispered in L.

Deshbandhu's ear that the person was her 'Jeth' (older brother of her husband). All this was so spontaneous and natural that it left everybody stunned with surprise. The man was Babu Ram Chaubey, who was really the elder brother of Kedarnath Chaubey."

The committee members took her in a tonga, instructing the driver to follow her directions. On the way she described the changes that had taken place since her time, which were all correct. She recognized some of the important landmarks which she had mentioned earlier without having been there.

As they neared the house, she got down from the tonga and noticed an elderly person in the crowd. She immediately bowed to him and told others that he was her father-in-law, and truly it was so. When she reached the front of her house, she went in without any hesitation and was able to locate her bedroom. She also recognized many items of hers. She was tested by being asked where the "jajroo" (lavatory) was, and she told where it was. She was asked what was meant by "katora." She correctly said that it meant paratha (a type of fried pancake). Both words are prevalent only in the Chaubes of Mathura and no outsider would normally know of them.

Shanti then asked to be taken to her other house where she had lived with Kedarnath for several years. She guided the driver there without any difficulty. One of the committee members, Pandit Neki Ram Sharma, asked her about the well of which she had talked in Delhi. She ran in one direction; but, not finding a well there, she was confused. Even then she said with some conviction that there was a well there. Kedarnath removed a stone at that spot and, sure enough, they found a well. As for the buried money, Shanti Devi took the party to the second floor and showed them a spot where they found a flower pot but no money. The girl, however, insisted that the money was there. Kedarnath later confessed that he had taken out the money after Lugdi's death.

When she was taken to her parents' home, where at first she identified her aunt as her mother, but soon corrected her mistake, she went to sit in her lap. She also recognized her father. The mother and daughter wept openly at their meeting. It was a scene which moved everybody there.

Shanti Devi was then taken to Dwarkadhish temple and to other places she had talked of earlier and almost all her statements were verified to be correct.

The publication of the committee's report attracted worldwide attention. Many learned personalities, including saints, parapsychologists, and philosophers came to study the case, some in support and some as critics trying to prove it a hoax.

I met Shanti Devi, first in February 1986 and then in December 1987, and interviewed her in detail about her past-life memories and her recollections at Mathura. I also interviewed her younger brother, Viresh Narain Mathur, who had accompanied her to Mathura on her first visit. Then I went to Mathura and asked her various relatives to describe when Shanti Devi first visited them at the age of nine. I also interrogated a close friend of Kedarnath who gave me some explicit information about the way Kedarnath became convinced that Shanti was actually his wife in her past life.

Lugdi's brother told me that Shanti Devi, after seeing some women there, remembered her old friends and inquired about them. Similarly, Lugdi's sister informed me that Shanti Devi told a number of womenfolk about Lugdi having lent them some money, which they accepted as true. Shanti's emotional reactions on meeting relatives from her previous life were very significant. The manner in which she burst into tears on meeting the parents of her past life moved everyone present there. The committee mentioned in their report that it was a blessing that the past lives are

forgotten. They felt that by bringing Shanti Devi to Mathura they had taken a big responsibility, and we had to forcibly separate her from the parents she had in the previous life.

During my investigations, a friend of Kedarnath, 72-year-old Pandit Ramnath Chaube, told me of a very significant event, which I confirmed from other sources. When Kedarnath was in Delhi to meet Shanti Devi, he stayed at Pandit Ramnath Chaube's place for one night. Everyone had gone to retire, and only Kedarnath, his wife, his son Navneet, and Shanti were in the room; Navneet was fast asleep. Kedarnath asked Shanti that when she was suffering from arthritis and could not get up, how did she become pregnant. She described the whole process of intercourse with him, which left Kedarnath in no doubt that Shanti was his wife Lugdi in her previous life.

When I mentioned this incident to Shanti Devi during my interview with her, she said, "Yes, that is what fully convinced him."

Shanti Devi's case is also significant for the fact that it is one of the most thoroughly investigated cases, studied by hundreds of researchers, critics, scholars, saints, and eminent public figures from all parts of India and abroad from the mid-1930s on.

One critic, Sture Lonnerstrand, when he heard of this case, came all the way from Sweden to expose the "fake," as he thought it to be, but after investigation wrote, "This is the only fully explained and proven case of reincarnation there has been." I don't agree completely with Lonnerstrand--there are many more cases just as amazing as this one.

I close my story of Shanti Devi with the remarks of Dr. Ian Stevenson, leading authority on reincarnation, who said: "I also interviewed Shanti Devi, her father, and other pertinent witnesses, including Kedarnath, the husband claimed in her previous life. My research indicates that she made at least 24 statements of her memories that matched the verified facts."

If not proof, it is certainly strongly suggestive of reincarnation.