

THE IYENGAR-KIRTI CASE  
An Apparitional Case of the Bystander Type

by Erlendur Haraldsson

ABSTRACT

A case of 'crisis apparition' is reported in which a seriously ill physician has a visual and auditory hallucination of the grandfather of a young colleague who is present at her sickbed. In the hallucination the old man urges the physician to tell her colleague to go to their joint home immediately. When the colleague telephones home at the repeated request of the percipient, she learns that the old man had died unexpectedly a few minutes earlier. Statements made by several persons involved in this case are described and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers and Podmore 1886) cases of crisis apparitions have been of considerable interest to psychical researchers because of their possible relevance for the question of survival (Stevenson 1982). A number of such cases have been published in the parapsychological literature (Myers 1903, Rhine 1957, Tyrrell 1953) and the case to be presented here merits a published report because of some unusual features and the number of witnesses (four) that were involved. The case was brought to my attention when I was conducting a survey of deathbed-visions in India in 1972 together with Dr. Karlis Osis.

When interviewing medical personnel at the Irwin Hospital in Delhi, a medical intern, Miss (now Dr.) Suman Kirti (later lecturer at MLB Medical College in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh) related to me the case of a crisis apparition that had occurred in her presence to her teacher. Doctor Bhanu Iyengar, lecturer in the Department of Pathology of the Maulana Azad Medical College, Delhi, to which the Irwin Hospital is connected. The case had occurred in March or April 1968.

I interviewed Miss Kirti on Nov. 10th 1972 and Doctor Iyengar some two weeks later. They were interviewed separately and they agreed on the essential details of the case, which had occurred four years earlier, and had deeply impressed both of them. During a second visit to India in 1973 I interviewed Doctor Iyengar's mother, Mrs. T. Iyengar. Dr. Osis joined me in that interview. Iyengar's mother had also been present when the case occurred. Kirti's grandmother, Mrs. Sumitra Devi Mithal, who was involved in the case, had then moved to Calcutta and could not be reached. I interviewed Kirti's mother, Mrs. S. Jain, at her home in Delhi in January 1976. A draft of this paper was mailed to Iyengar and Kirti in 1980 who then made minor additions and changes which were incorporated into the paper.

STATEMENTS OF THE INFORMANTS

*Statements Made by Kirti*

I will first record what Miss Kirti reported to me. At the time the case occurred Dr. Iyengar, Kirti's teacher and personal friend, was hospitalized in a nursing home (private hospital) in New Delhi because of complications arising after

childbirth (severe puerperal sepsis). Up to noon that day Kirti had been working in the Irwin Hospital but had a free afternoon. Instead of going home as she was used to, she went to the nursing home to spend the afternoon at the bedside of her friend Iyengar. Iyengar's mother, Mrs. T. Iyengar, was also there. Dr. Iyengar was very sick, though not in danger of death, and with considerable fever; so after some greetings both women sat silent at her bedside.

After some while Iyengar suddenly turned somewhat excitedly to Kirti and asked her to go home to her grandparents. Kirti had for a long time been living with her grandparents since her parents, who were in the diplomatic service, were at that time living in Africa. Kirti answered that she had come to spend the whole afternoon with her and she refused to go. There were some arguments between them, and Iyengar kept insisting that Kirti should go home or at least telephone her home. To pacify Iyengar, at around 4.30 Kirti finally agreed to make a call to her home. Her uncle, Anand Krishna, who happened to be visiting there, came to the phone and told her that Kirti's grandfather had passed away at four o'clock. Her grandfather had appeared in good health. His death was completely unexpected and Kirti had expected him to come and pick her up later that afternoon.

Iyengar then described to the two women the following incident: As she was lying in bed silent and drowsy, she suddenly saw Kirti's grandfather standing at the further end of her bed. (She had only seen Kirti's grandfather two or three times before, when she had happened to pick up Kirti on her way to or from work, and on one occasion when he, with Kirti, made a brief visit to Iyengar). He appeared excited and said to her: "Would you not send my child home?". By that Iyengar understood Kirti, who lived with her grandparents.

Iyengar's first reaction was that she was hallucinating because of high fever. She therefore rolled to the other side of her bed and expected the hallucination to disappear. But the old man appeared again in front of her and indicated with his eager countenance that she should send Kirti home. In this way the grandfather appeared two or three times. Impressed by this apparition Iyengar decided to ask Kirti to go home.

In my notes of my 1972 interview with Kirti I read that Iyengar had immediately told her of her hallucination. In Kirti's reply to my letter in September 1980 when I sent her a draft of this paper, she stated, however, that it was not until 'much later' that she learnt about Iyengar's vision, and then it was related to her by Iyengar's mother.

#### *Statements Made By Iyengar*

When I interviewed Iyengar she told me that she had been hospitalized for 21 days at the end of March and early April 1968. After giving birth to a baby she had developed an infection with high fever and became seriously ill. When the incident occurred, Kirti had been sitting in Iyengar's hospital room. She had been off duty that Saturday afternoon and was spending it with Iyengar because of her sickness. Iyengar was lying drowsy in her bed when she suddenly saw Kirti's grandfather standing at the foot of her bed. He was saying: 'Won't you send my child home?'. At first Iyengar did not tell Kirti about this, but simply urged her to go home to her grandfather. They had a bit of an argument over this, so Iyengar said: 'At least you must call him up'. This Kirti did but when she

came back she told us her grandfather had just passed away, and then she rushed home. Her grandfather had died some 5 or 10 minutes earlier. Or about the time that Iyengar saw him.

Next when Kirti visited Iyengar she asked her why she had been so irritated and so insisted that she should go home. Then Iyengar told her about her experience of seeing Kirti's grandfather.

Kirti's grandfather actually had appeared two or three times. When he came first, Iyengar rolled over to the other side of her bed but then he also appeared there. Iyengar wondered whether she was dreaming or hallucinating, so it was not until she saw him for the third time that she asked Kirti to go. The grandfather looked very real. At first Iyengar thought he was really there, but when she noticed that Kirti and her mother did not see him, she thought she was imagining his presence. He was wearing his usual clothes and spectacles. Iyengar saw him only a few seconds each time. For that reason she thought he was not real.

Iyengar related that she had only seen the grandfather once before, when he came to pick Kirti up at Iyengar's home. When the case occurred Kirti was a medical student in her second last year. Iyengar and Kirti came to know one another in the hospital and had become close friends. Kirti's grandfather used to come to the hospital to pick Kirti up after work and take her home. Iyengar had expected the grandfather to pick Kirti up at the nursing home later on the day of the incident.

This was the first and only time that Iyengar had had hallucinatory experience or any psychical experience. Two weeks after this incident she had recovered from her illness.

In 1980 I also mailed a draft of this paper to Dr. Iyengar, who replied that my report of the incident was correct as far as she could remember. In response to a question she wrote that she had told her mother about her experience in the evening of the day it occurred.

#### Statements Made By Mrs. T. Iyengar

Mrs. T. Iyengar, Dr. Iyengar's mother, who had been sitting with Kirti at Iyengar's bedside, remembered the incident well but had no further details to add.

#### *Other Pertinent Evidence*

As mentioned above. Kirti's grandmother, Mrs. Sumitra Devi Mithal, had moved from Delhi when I wanted to meet her during a visit to India in 1976. However, I was able to meet Kirti's mother, Mrs. S. Jain, who told me that Kirti had written to her parents immediately after the death of her grandfather and described her memorable experience at Iyengar's bedside. This letter, unfortunately, no longer existed. Furthermore, Kirti's grandmother had told Mrs. Jain, that Kirti had phoned her up just after her husband had passed over.

#### DISCUSSION

All three persons present testified that the death of Kirti's grandfather coincided with Iyengar's urging Kirti to go home. The fact that Iyengar did not reveal her apparitional experience to anyone until after Kirti had learned of her

grandfather's death, is the weakest link in the case. This weakness is mitigated by Iyengar's behavior, her sudden change from silent drowsiness to excitement and 'irritation', as Iyengar termed it, when she urged Kirti to go home, and—when Kirti refused—her insistence that she make a phone call to her grandparents.

This case falls into the rare category of so-called bystander cases (for examples see Gurney et al. 1886, Vol. 2. pp. 61, 162–164, 256 and Rhine 1957 p. 39). The outstanding feature of such cases is that the person to whom the agent seems to have come, or with whom the agent wants primarily to communicate, does not see the apparition but a mere bystander does.

Instead of entering into a lengthy discussion of this interesting case—and assuming tentatively that the case is basically authentic—I will only point out three rather unusual features. First, the apparitional experience occurred to someone who barely knew the appearer. Second, the percipient, Iyengar, seemed to act as an intermediary, even rather unwillingly, between the appearer and Kirti. He wanted her to go home, we may guess, to help and console his wife. Third, the fact that the grandfather appeared repeatedly (two or three times) till Iyengar reacted to his wishes, seems rather difficult to explain without assuming a purposeful action by the appearer.

If we may tentatively assume an active role of the appearer, one might guess that he used Iyengar, who was in a drowsy state with a high fever, to bring his message to Kirti, perhaps because Iyengar was in a mental state that may facilitate the occurrence of a hallucination. If that is truly the case, it would have been easier to produce an apparitional experience in Iyengar than in Kirti. Be that as it may, this case forces us to consider the importance of the agent's activity in at least some cases of crisis apparitions.

*Department of Psychology  
University of Iceland  
Reykjavik, Iceland*

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