

Obituaries

ARVIND NARAYAN DAS (1948–2000)

Arvind Narayan Das died August 6, 2000 in Amsterdam. He was 51 and is survived by his wife Manoshi Mitra, also a historian, and his daughter Srijana, a student at the University of Cambridge. Das was a patient of chronic asthma and was en route to London for further diagnosis and treatment when he was stricken at the Schipol Airport on July 21. His death has been attributed to pulmonary hypertension.

Arvind was from the state of Bihar in Gangetic North India, an association he bore proudly in both a personal and professional sense until the day of his death. The son of a Bihar Civil Servant, Arvind was born September 6, 1948 and educated at the St. Xavier's School in Patna, then at St. Stephen's College and Delhi University for his B.A. and M.A. degrees respectively. He was awarded the Ph.D. in History in 1981 by the University of Calcutta.

Das worked frequently abroad, lecturing and writing in Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Japan, where he had been a fellow at the Institute for Developing Economies in Tokyo. His most frequent home away from home was the Centre for Asian Studies of the University of Amsterdam where he did much of his writing and where several of his books were published. In the circumstances, his death in Amsterdam at the University hospital introduces a painful symmetry to his living and his dying.

Among his occasional visits to the United States was one in May, 1997 when he participated in the symposium on Power, Agrarian Structure, and Peasant Mobilization in Modern India at the University of Virginia. His presentation on that occasion, titled "Swami and Friends: Sahajanand Saraswati and Those Who Refuse To Let the Past of Bihar's Peasant Movements Become History," was a wide-ranging survey of peasant activism in twentieth century India. That range of issues was the primary focus of Das's scholarship, combined with an especially sensitive portrayal of his native Bihar, and more specifically of his north Bihar village. His 1996 representation of that place, *Changel: The Biography of a Village* (New Delhi: Penguin), will certainly stand as one of Das's more enduring contributions to our understanding of the social and political qualities of rural India and rural Bihar. It is a semi-autobiographical reflection of a late twentieth century historian, personalizing the lived experience of his home place in the riverine basin of north Bihar, over time up to the present.

If Bihar is a place that seems remote to most non-Indians, Das was unrelenting in his critique of the meanings most urban intellectuals attached to what was or was not happening there. These observers were portrayed by Das in his many op-ed essays in the Indian press as "the chattering classes," who knew less about Bihar, with its population of 100 million, than they did about Kosovo, Chechnya, or Sierra Leone. In an effort to bring a more subtle understanding to the experience of India's second largest state, Das organized an international conference on "Bihar in the World, and the World in Bihar," which convened at Patna, the state capital, December 16–19, 1997, under the sponsorship of the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) of Patna and the European Science Foundation of Paris. The volume emerging from that conference, edited by Arvind Das, will be published by Manohar Publishers of New Delhi.

Arvind Das was a man of many parts. Beyond the ten books which he either wrote or edited, he was in every sense an activist and a publicist representing in every way he could the unrepresented of the civil society that was India in the late twentieth century. He did this in his early preacademic years as an underground activist of radical agrarian politics in the Purnea district of North Bihar, through the literacy, folk music, and other NGO functions of an agency like ADRI, the fluid use of his journalistic pen, or the use of his purse in support of political causes he considered most potent in the interests of justice and decency, most often of the rural poor.

In 1992 he would write that "it is only when academics address the immediacies around them, directly or metaphorically, that their work becomes useful. Similarly," Das argued, "worthwhile journalism may or may not be 'literature in a hurry' but in any event it should not have the pretensions of 'research at breakneck speed.'" This is advice Arvind Das followed in virtually everything he wrote and did, straddling in the process the academy and the public domain of journalism and social activism. In India, he would perform these roles either as faculty or fellow at an impressive number of institutions, including the Gokhale Institute of Economics and Politics at Pune (1972–74), the A. N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna (1974–75), the National Labour Institute, New Delhi (1975–78), the Public Enterprises Centre for Continuing Education, New Delhi (1978–84), the Centre for Social Studies, Surat (1984–86), and the Centre for the Development of Instructional Technology. From 1988 to 1995 Das was Senior Editor for Research of *The Times of India* in New Delhi.

From 1995 he served as director of the Asia Pacific Communications Associates in New Delhi, and in 1996 was a founding editor of *Biblio: A Review of Books* published by APCA. *Biblio*: quickly became the model review journal of India and one of the finest anywhere. At the time of his death, Arvind Das continued as editor of *Biblio*:, director of APCA, and chairman of ADRI. He was also writer and director of *India Invented: An Exploration of Culture and Civilization in Historical Outline*, a thirteen-part video recording produced in 1999 by APCA, initially for Doordarshan, i.e., Indian television. This multivolume recording attempts to construct a visual montage of India's history and culture through the eyes of Arvind Das and others of India's most insightful historians. It has become an especially fruitful teaching tool across a range of disciplines.

We have lost a friend and a colleague of vast energy and extraordinary intellectual and political vitality. He will be missed not only in India, but in the world beyond Parna and Delhi. We will especially miss the decency he brought to his work and to all of his associations, just as we will miss the insights of the human condition he conveyed in everything he wrote.

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