



Remembering Hari Vasudevan

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Hari Sankar Vasudevan (1952-2020), a recent victim of the corona virus was a person the city of Calcutta could boast of. He was a renowned historian, famed teacher of European history, one of the chief experts of Russia and Central Asia. What is not widely known is that he was a skilled administrator. The better part of his more-than-four-decades long career was spent at the Department of History, Calcutta University. He had also taught at Ramjas College in Delhi early in his career and at the Jamia Millia Islamia later on. He also served as the Director of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), and presided over an NCERT committee for textbook revision for social sciences. What is remarkable is that

these achievements were a result of his credibility, and not the result of any political affiliations. Above all, Vasudevan was an exceptional man – ever-smiling, warm hearted, kind, affectionate, liberal and wise.

Raised in a Malayali family, Vasudevan had a deep faith in Lord of Guruvayur that he carried till the very last days of his life. Having spent his childhood and youth in the newly independent country of Kenya, Vasudevan went on to Cambridge for his higher education, where he pursued his doctoral research on the history of local government in 19th century Russia. Through his long exposure to European culture during his formative years in Kenya (among White settlers), Vasudevan

internalised a European value system. Hence, in spite of having spent over four decades in Calcutta upon his return, he remained a pukka Sahib to quite a few people.

Vasudevan the historian, was not really known on account of his first work, his doctoral thesis. He returned to India and joined the History Department of Calcutta University in 1978, and took the teaching of European (especially Russian) history to new heights. His command over Latin, French, German and Russian helped him give a new dimension to the pedagogy of intellectual history and the history of industrialisation. Towards the end of the 1980, India watched with bated breath as its closest ally in the international arena, the Soviet Union being gripped by an existential crisis. Vasudevan began to write about domestic politics in the USSR in newspapers and periodicals – thereby firmly establishing himself as an astute observer of Russian history and politics.

As times changed, the Soviet archives were thrown open, Vasudevan, with the support of two of his colleagues, went on to bring out from the Asiatic Society of Bengal, two volumes of documents and correspondence

dealing with Russia's relations with India and Indian politicians for the period 1917-47. Around the same time, when the Government of India sent a Ministry of Commerce delegation to resume trading relations with post-Soviet Russia, Vasudevan was chosen as a member of the delegation. This experience inspired him to write *Shadows of Substance*, a history of Indo-Russian relations after 1991. But it was the story of Afanasii Nikitin, the 15th century Russian traveller who came to India, that was perhaps the longest running project undertaken by him. Written over a period of at least fifteen years, it was also perhaps the project dearest to him.

He also had a deep interest in Central Asia, which gained a fuller dimension during 2007-11, when he became the Director of MAKAIAS. Vasudevan teamed up with a liberal academic committee to give the researchers a sense of autonomy that enhanced the quality of scholarship and publications under his leadership. Thereafter, I have heard many employees of the Institute saying that Vasudevan's tenure marked the golden age for MAKAIAS.

Returning from MAKAIAS in the last

years of his career at the Calcutta University, Vasudevan focused on Area Studies and foreign policy studies, and began to look to India's East. In the last decade of his life, he read extensively about China and Myanmar, and was instrumental in the creation of a bridge between Calcutta University and the University of Dagon in Myanmar.

Hari Vasudevan could have gone to teach and research in any part of the world if he wanted. But except for responding to the call of his dear friend Mushirul Hasan and going to Delhi for a brief period of three years, Vasudevan grew his roots in Calcutta. He got married to the renowned historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta and became a Calcuttan. Needless to say, Calcutta also accepted him as its own. Having worked for long in Calcutta, Hari had a keen interest in the history of the city as well. To be honest, despite being born in the city, I have learnt much about my own city from Vasudevan. What comes foremost to my mind is the lens through which he saw the city. Once driving past the Park Street crossing, he told me that this was the nerve-centre of the intellectual edifice of power in colonial times – with Asiatic society to one side (the seat of studies

about India's pre-colonial past), the Indian Museum on the other, right next to the Anthropological Survey of India and the Geological Survey of India. The very ideas that would later prove to be central to the idea of Indian civilisation and Indian nationalism were conceptualised within the premises of those very institutions.

As a colleague, Vasudevan was a treasure. Every year, he assumed the responsibility of collecting funds in order to tip the bearers and the sweepers working at the history department before the Puja vacation. The day any of his colleagues would assume the headship of the department, Hari would invariably go about distributing sweets to everyone working in the department. He would individually engage each of his colleagues about their research should they be willing, and would happily advise them should they not mind. Chatting with Hari for half an hour was as good as reading three books for me.

The doors of his office were always open for his students. Approached with a question, he replied with a smile and encouraged further questions. Once a student embarked

on research, Hari treated him/her virtually as a colleague, and would offer a cup of tea or coffee (even though he often preferred to drink hot chocolate). A large number of the students at the Calcutta University would find it difficult to follow Hari's impeccable English. Hence from very early days as a teacher, Hari used to use the board (first the blackboard and then the whiteboard) extensively, so that even the weakest student in the class would be able to follow at least the very basics of his lecture.

Even after retirement in 2017, Vasudevan never really stopped his academic journey. After serving two years as a UGC Emeritus Professor at his home department, Vasudevan joined the Observer Research Foundation at Kolkata as a consultant, in what turned out to be the last year of his life. At ORF-K, Vasudevan successfully combined his life-long interest in Russia and Indo-Russia relations with his new-found interest in China. The idea that he had just begun to explore involved Russian desire to tap the mineral and other resources in its Far East, and how India and China are participating in that venture in their own ways. Just before succumbing to Covid-19, he also began to closely

reflect on the nature of responses from all around him, and those from the larger world to the pandemic.

All his life, Vasudevan had been a cosmopolitan man with a global perspective. The devotee of Lord of Guruvayur, who chose to settle down with his "Euroapean" values in the city of Calcutta, was keenly perceptive of global currents and the differential impacts these had on local situations. His collaboration with the renowned scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on a project called "Radiating Globalities" towards the final years largely encapsulated his globalist vision after the experience of a lifetime. The intellectual horizon of the Calcutta academia has shrunk a little with the passing away of this man with his extremely curious mind.