

A rare combination of talents and virtues

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We have lost to Covid-19 a fine historian of Russia and Europe, a gifted institution builder, and a person of exceptional warmth and goodness. Hari Vasudevan took his undergraduate and doctoral degrees respectively in modern European and Russian history from Cambridge in the early 1970s, taught at the University of Calcutta, had a stint at the Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, headed the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDSK), both in Kolkata, contributed to social science pedagogy and text books at the The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), gave his time and expertise to sundry government committees, and frequently travelled to the centres of scholarship in the USSR / Russia, Europe and America. In the midst of all these commitments he regularly attended seminars and delivered lectures at various universities and research institutes all over India, but especially in West Bengal. However busy he was, he never failed to find the time and the psychological resources to be a loyal friend and an exemplary family man to all the three generations, both immediate and extended. This was a rare combination of talents and virtues, and it required an insidious and treacherous virus to remove from our midst one of the best amongst us.

Hari's early research was on the local self-government institutions, known as the *zemstvo*, in the Tver province of late Imperial Russia, the period from the late 19th century up to the Revolutions of 1917. Russian history does not attract interest in India except for the ideological battlegrounds of Leninism and Stalinism. The *zemstvo* was very remote from these famed obsessions, although they had generated much passion and angst in the years before 1917. The *zemstvo* attracted people of a "progressive" bent of mind, schoolteachers, doctors and nurses, agronomists, statisticians, geographers and folklorists, and all those devoted to the ways of life, the arts and crafts, and the aesthetic of the "people", usually congruent with the peasantry. In Indian history we would recognise them instantly as those engaged in Gandhian constructive work, Nehruvian community development projects, the cottage industries so lovingly nurtured by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and others, literacy campaigns, environmental protection and similar NGO commitments. They were liberal and socialist, democratic, earnest and peaceable, neither revolutionary nor engaged in partisan politics; but the conservative establishment was venomous, with the emperor, Nicholas II, once gratuitously dismissing their good work as "small deeds" and their ideals as "senseless dreams" because it was feared that the *zemstvo* was the first step to the "crowning of the edifice", the parliament at the centre. Their dedicated work of several decades laid the foundations for Soviet developmental successes in the 1920s, whether in literacy, health or agricultural science. Their thrust toward democracy and

autonomy made them suspect in the eyes of the Soviet establishment, and they were brusquely integrated into the centralising Soviet state and anathematised for their autonomous NGO style. The subject was vitally important, even if unpromising and unexciting to the non-specialist. Hari's thesis was not eventually published as India was (and is) bereft of academic libraries on Russian (and European) history even in English, and he was for many years unable to visit Russia. He did manage however to publish at least articles on this topic in academic collections; but they are not known in India, though familiar to specialists in Europe, America and Russia.

Hari had a special reason to choose the province of Tver, just north of Moscow. A merchant of that town, Afanasii Nikitin by name, travelled to India in the 15th century and left an account of his voyage. As may be expected, the story of his adventures has been drained to its diplomatic lees by the Indian and Soviet states to uncover the "ancient ties" between the two countries. On the face of it Nikitin was not the right person to promote Indo-Soviet attachment any more than Katherine Mayo could have improved relations between India and the Anglo-American world. One of Nikitin's nuggets about India reads thus: "The people are all black and evil and all their women are shameless; everywhere there is quackery and theft and deceit

and poison in which the well-to-do are mired." Yet it inspired the Indo-Soviet collaborative film venture, *Pardesi*, in 1957. Not surprisingly, that intrepid merchant attracted Hari too.

In somewhat 19th century fashion, Hari accompanied a team of doughty explorers to travel the same route as Afanasii Nikitin did, resulting in both a film and a book on the subject. The film is forgettable and has been duly forgotten, instead of being the fascinating documentary that it otherwise might have been. The principal paymaster was the Government of India, and nothing that Hari said or did could mitigate its passion for propaganda. Instead of medieval archaeology, architecture and historical artefacts and analyses of that Russian Marco Polo, all of which Hari was uniquely well-positioned to present, we are offered such aesthetic treasures as the Indian embassy's cultural centres in provincial Russian towns. The book,¹ however, told the story the film failed to do, of the historical past of the various communities en route, their situation today, and the Indian footprint in these regions. It is both an academic introduction to this mysterious figure and a travelogue, recounting the experiences of the team as they traversed the varied cultures of Russia, Orthodox, Islamic, and Buddhist, with goodly remnants of the communist all the way, and then further through Turkey and Iran on to India.

While he dipped into various other subjects, Hari's researches yielded a monograph on Indo-Russian trade and military co-operation in the decade after 1991.² It was a period of extreme turbulence in Russia and dramatic shifts in India; and while the Russian military-industrial complex and Indian defence retained their priority in Indo-Russian relations, the Indian private sector was able to make an entry into a country that had known nothing but the public sector. It is a pity that he was not able to follow up with another monograph for the decade up to the crisis years of 2008 and beyond. However, he pursued his studies of contemporary affairs, publishing often in the press, and always bringing to them his depth of historical knowledge and sound mastery of the primary sources.

Hari then turned to building an academic institution, the MAKAIAS, between 2007 and 2011. It was one of the innumerable somnolent, dysfunctional institutes that dot India's research landscape, poorly conceived, unfocused in its aims, under-funded, and doling out academic charity, with a remit extending from the Mediterranean to the Pacific and from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean. But he turned it round into a vibrant body, supported fellows who published monographs on Central Asia, and organised regular seminars of high quality by bringing together remarkable scholars from Siberia and Moscow, the Central Asian Republics, Turkey, and other centres which nurture scholarship on Eurasia. The languages of these seminars were both Russian and English; but as a courtesy to those who did not speak English, Hari would introduce the seminar in his excellent Russian before turning to English. (He was equally fluent in French). Several of these seminars culminated in published volumes of the proceedings. He likewise fully encouraged research and seminars on other parts of Asia also, and he pursued initiatives on subjects like maritime history and the Bay of Bengal, although they did not come to fruition. In between, in 2005, he found time to contribute to the National Curriculum Framework, working closely with Krishna Kumar and the NCERT to devise syllabi for the teaching of the social sciences and further to compose text books in his own discipline of history. His sound academic judgement and sense of balance served him well in that storm centre of swirling ideological debates. On retiring from Calcutta University, Hari became president of the governing body of the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata in 2018, where he would have acquitted himself with the same distinction that he had brought to his tenure at the MAKAIAS. But that was not to be, and the IDSK, the city of Calcutta, and the rest of the academic community in India have lost so much by his premature death. ■

REFERENCES:

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