

In memoriam

Hari Vasudevan 1952-2020

It is cruel and utterly incongruous that I have to sit down to write an obituary note on Hari Vasudevan. We were exactly the same age and for over a decade we were close colleagues in the Post Graduate Department of History in the University of Calcutta. During those years we met practically every day to discuss and debate what we were reading and teaching and also about matters concerning the administration of the History Department. I used to recall those years of comradeship with a great deal of joy but as I write this, I remember them with a profound sense of loss.

I first met Hari (for the record his full name was Hari Sankar, but he was known to everyone as Hari) when I returned to Calcutta from Oxford in 1981. I was a candidate for the post of a lecturer in the Department of History where a number of contemporaries from my undergraduate days at Presidency College were working. One of them, possibly Bhaskar Chakrabarty, introduced us after I had been selected for the post but still had not joined. It was only after I formally entered the History Department, which was then located on Hazra Road in South Calcutta that my relationship with Hari began.

Hari, by then, was firmly established in the His-

tory Department as the specialist on Russian and European history. His training as a historian had been at Cambridge University where at Christ's College he had been tutored by Quentin Skinner and Norman Stone. The latter was also his PhD supervisor. I think it was my interest in European history and the Russian Revolution that formed the meeting point between the two of us. Hari was then teaching two special papers – one on Europe from 1871 to the Second World War which he shared with Bhaskar; and the other on the history of Russia from 1861 to the Revolution. In addition, he also taught a section of a compulsory paper on the Industrial Revolution. It was a substantial teaching load which Hari bore without a word of complaint. A few weeks after my joining, Hari asked me if I would like to teach the 19th century part of the Russian history paper. I agreed because I had an interest in the growth of the Russian intelligentsia through my reading of the essays of Isaiah Berlin and the Russian novelists. Hari introduced me to other aspects of the period especially the importance of Witte's efforts to introduce modernity and capitalism in Tsarist Russia. Later, when he took leave to be at Oxford with his wife Tapati Guha Thakurta, who was then working for her D.Phil, Hari left me with the

responsibility of teaching his part of the Industrial Revolution paper, and gave me an invaluable reading list to help me. The intellectual exchanges that this co-teaching involved formed the basis of our friendship.

Hari was a dedicated teacher. The classes for the compulsory papers could be more than one hundred strong and not all the students could quite follow Hari's clipped English accent. Hari derived a unique method to solve this problem: as he lectured he would write up on the blackboard each of the points he covered. This enabled each and every student to take back something from his lectures. I admired him for this extra effort he took to help students overcome their lack of comprehension of English.

He was also committed to building up the History Department. And in this sphere what drew him most was the Seminar Library for which the UGC had given the department a generous grant. He and Bhaskar would spend hours pouring over publishers' catalogues to order books. This formed another focus of our interactions. Those days teachers (except for the professors) would share rooms. Bhaskar, Sekhar Bandopadhyay, Lakshmi Subramanian and I shared a largish but shabby room. Hari would spend most of his time in that room which was always full of laughter, banter, intellectual debate and occasionally food. In a very real sense, all of us, born in the early 1950s, grew up together in that ramshackle building that then housed the History Department.

Hari's command over Russian and French was very good. His fluency in Russian enabled him to be among the first in India to explore the archives in Russia when they were opened, briefly, during *glasnost*. He had a nuanced understanding of both Russian and European history. I remember once in a seminar at Max Mueller Bhavan, where I had drawn too facile a line joining Bismarkian authoritarianism and Hitler, he pointed out to me in his characteristically non-abrasive way the necessary distinction between illiberalism in Germany and Nazism.

The last time we had a meaningful intellectual exchange was at the beginning of 2019 when at the Kalam Literary Festival on the grounds of the Victoria Memorial, he and I had a public conversation about Jawaharlal Nehru.

That is how I would like to remember Hari: a committed teacher and an intellectual interlocutor. He was fun to laugh with and to learn from.

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