

# The 'Memory' of a Historian

## Hari Shankar Vasudevan (1952–2020)

ANIMESH GUPTA

A scholar extraordinaire in the fields of Russian and European history, Hari Shankar Vasudevan had been associated, in and outside the subcontinent, with numerous academic institutions and research centres apart from the University of Calcutta where he taught for nearly four decades. One of his students reminisces about a great teacher, whose untimely demise on account of COVID-19 on 10 May 2020 meant a great loss to the world of humanities and social sciences.

Despite being an apparently inappropriate student of HSV (as Hari Shankar Vasudevan was known to his students), I am making this attempt at writing something close to an obituary. I did not attend his European, or precisely Russian history classes or have done research on any given theme of global history under his erudite supervision. However, I still could consider myself, along with my classmates of master of arts programme in the Department of History, University of Calcutta during 2011–13, quite an exceptional (sometimes conceited too) pupil to witness him delivering lectures on modern and contemporary Indian history, an area of study he was relatively less known for. Leaving aside his expertise on Russian, European and global history, I was among those who, by the stroke of timing and fortune, got the opportunity to develop new understandings on an area of Indian history, that is, the intellectual origins and nature of planned economy in postcolonial times, on the basis of some fresh new perspectives from a scholar who happened to be an expert of non-Indian history.

I was attending the MA programme in history when Vasudevan had already spent over three decades in the department and was going for the last quarter, if his almost 40 long years of teaching career could be considered as a whole unit to count. Between August and December in 2012, he delivered a series of lectures that could have been compiled as lectures on the planned economy of India. This was a possible derivation from the fact that he simultaneously also took our Industrial Revolution classes, which he started with the references to the "Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England" delivered in 1883 by Arnold Toynbee. Involved with a handful of policymaking bodies of the union government. In retrospect, it has been a one-of-a-kind and unique experience to listening to him during

the penultimate years of the Planning Commission when we did not foresee its dissolution.

The year 2011 witnessed a marked change in the syllabus of history at the postgraduate level in the University of Calcutta, with some of the newly introduced themes of historical studies and some modifications of the old and existing ones. Among the new ones was the addition of a paper titled "Contemporary History of India," which broadly addressed, at that time, the history of postcolonial India between 1947 and 1991 (until this change, teachings on postcolonial Indian history were confined to a discreetly separate study of India's foreign policies only). One among the old modifications was the split of European history into four different papers, addressing separately the histories of France, Germany, Britain and Russia roughly between late 19th and early 20th century. At this juncture, he was among the few who could become inevitable in handling both the themes of Indian and non-Indian history with his intrinsically conceived ease in "Europeanism" and his own understanding of governance and sociology of "Indianness."

Thus, the year 2012 was surely an exceptional time in the recent past of the university, when a Russian historian (as well as an expert policy advisor) was explaining how the Nehruvian consensus became a crucial factor in determining the future of development goals in a postcolonial India—a nation which did not until then overcome the status of "a nation in making." For some of us, who were very much hopeful about the historicity of postcolonial India and later opted for further study with a special interest in this relatively uncultivated terrain of historical research, Vasudevan gradually opened up new avenues to deal with the various sources in constructing the history of postcolonial India.

Casting aside the general readings like B R Tomlinson's *The Economy of Modern India, 1860–1970* (1993) or Bipan Chandra's *India since Independence* (2007), the three principle references he wanted us to mine for information as well as for new arguments included Bhabatosh Dutta's *Indian Economic Thought Twentieth Century Perspectives, 1900–1950* (1978),

Animesh Gupta ([anicino407@gmail.com](mailto:anicino407@gmail.com)) is Junior Research Fellow, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata.

Benjamin Zachariah's *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c 1930–1950* (2004) and Vivek Chibbar's *Locked in Place: Developmental Strategy and Late Industrialisation in India* (2003). In this way, an amateur's training in handling sources from various disciplines other than history in order to develop an interdisciplinary approach, especially in writing postcolonial Indian history, started, for one could notice the range of books he referred to covers the fields of development economics, comparative sociology, along with core historical studies (in case, the one by Zachariah serves) that could fit within a limited span of comprehension of a graduate student studying postcolonial history in an Indian university.

In spite of providing some of the ready references, the mainstay of his lectures (after a brief yet all-round covering of his subsequent discussion through a profound board work, for which he was popular and well-accepted by every student) revolved around the economic thoughts prevalent in Meiji Japan, early years of Soviet Union and the relevance of these thoughts in shaping the ideas of planned economy in India. Regarding the implementation and execution of these ideas, he used to highlight the contributions in this field by institutions like the National Planning Committee (or Planning Commission after independence), ideas like "Gandhian Socialism," "Bombay Plan" by Ardeshir Dalal and his associates, or "Peoples Plan" by M N Roy, and lastly by notable individuals like M Visveswaraiya, Nehru, Subhas Bose or in postcolonial times, by K N Raj, B R Shenoy, C N Vakil, R Balakrishnan, P C Mahalanobis and Bhabotosh Dutta himself. He said that the newly founded Delhi School of Economics (DSE) right after India's independence had a great deal of influence and providential impetus, so far as the task of contributing ideas to postcolonial Indian economic policies were concerned.

My personal stand on this opinion was further concretised when I went through two outstanding autobiographical accounts written in Bengali, namely *Aath Dasak*, or "Eight Decades," published in 1988, by Bhabotosh Dutta and *Bangalnama*, or "A Tale of an East Bengalee," published in 2007, by Tapan Raychaudhuri. The former was one of the most sought-after teachers in the

Department of Economics in Presidency College, Calcutta and produced numerous students, among whom a few served in various policymaking bodies while pursuing teaching and research career in the DSE. The latter was an eminent (economics) historian associated with the faculty of DSE since the late 1950s and subsequently became the director in the late 1960s.

Regarding the study of Chibber in developmental economy in the framework of comparative sociology, Vasudevan seemed to be very hopeful about the future of historical research on postcolonial Indian economy along this line. For Chibber meticulously covered, under the comparative analytical framework between Indian and South Korean economy, almost all the major aspects of Indian economy and its relation to the nation–state binary. This included the real intentions of the industrialists conglomerated around the Bombay Plan and thereafter during the interim government or during the oligarchy (Vasudevan used this term to define Indian public administration between 1947 and 1951), the role of the state in industrialisation as well as mitigating the labour unrest right after the independence, or the possible reasons behind the government's failure in "installing a developmental state" in postcolonial India.

Vasudevan's appraisal of Chibber's comparative framework later became partially explanatory to me when he commenced his lectures on post-war Chinese economy along the lines of Pomeranzian "Great Divergence" in his Industrial Revolution classes during the closing months of our MA programme. On the other hand, the salience of Five Year Planning being "Nehruvian" was another dominant aspect of his way to explaining this theme, albeit he was never thoroughly uncritical of the Nehruvian benign state. Gleanings on Zachariah's *Developing India* (and later on, a part of his 2011 monograph *Playing the Nation Game: The Ambiguities of Indian Nationalism*) made me realise how a teacher–student relation could complement each other's understanding of a complex and multilayered themes like state-led economic development in 20th century India.

I heard him on two other occasions in the same venue, namely the Department

of History, University of Calcutta. The first was when he was commenting further on Indian economic history and included a research student seminar under the MPhil programme in the summer of 2015. The first commentary was in the context of a presentation by one of the fellow researchers, who, during that cluster, was on his way to develop a thesis on the trends of economic history writing in Calcutta since the 1950s, with particular emphasis on the scholarly works of eminent historian Narendra Krishna Sinha. He was in his initial phase of researches, hence, yet to evolve an analytical framework to fit his study into a definite structure.

### Importance of Memory

On this ground, Vasudevan's comments eventually turned out to be as great a push factor to give his dissertation a logical direction towards a lucrative end. The audience in that seminar were mostly students from the other universities, acquainted with Vasudevan's conventional command over non-Indian history. They listened in awe to his explanation of the factors like the accessibility of imperial documents in Indian archives to the young historians after India's independence, the intellectual endeavours in the Marxist and non-Marxist circles of Calcutta academia, the changing approaches towards the economic science vis-à-vis historical researches in different parts of the world, the reason behind N K Sinha's shift in interests from political history to economic history, the way Sinha influenced his pupil to pursue research on economic history could be considered crucial and later became the building blocks of the dissertation. The fellow researcher later acknowledged Vasudevan's presence as a source of consistent influence in writing his thesis. On that day, Vasudevan's observations, along with the task of providing a possible analytical framework on the basis of his own attachments with some of the stalwart Calcutta-based economic historians, made me realise the importance of "memory" in narrating and understanding history.

His understanding of economic history as well as his interest in various themes of Indian history, let alone his very own area of European and global history, provided a

greater impetus to numerous students working on Indian history in and outside the University of Calcutta. He had always been kind enough to guide the research students, not only, in particular, those who were already under his guidance officially, but, in general, those whom he thought he could supplement intellectually, even if their covered area was far from his area of interests (that also reminds me Vasudevan's formal engagement as a research supervisor on a project related to the print culture of "Renaissance Bengal" in the 19th century during that cluster of MPhil programme of 2014–15).

The second occasion was the felicitation of Binoy Bhusan Chaudhuri in January 2017, with the publication of a commemorative volume in his honour in the Alipore Campus of the University of Calcutta. This event was also graced by some of Vasudevan's own personal recollections and his understanding of Indian economic history that he developed in and around some of his finest former colleagues in the department over the course of time. There, I listened to him, narrating how he first arrived in Calcutta in the late 1970s and started to get acquainted with the intellectual traditions of the Bengali academia or academia predominantly influenced by the Bengali world view (of which Chaudhuri was a valuable part).

Other important aspects, he emphasised, were the socio-psychological facets of the Calcutta public life in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and how the city intellectuals were trying to make their mark in various forms of *addas* and discussions during those days, sometimes even in a quite radical manner (the latter seemed to be a new and unique experience for him, especially after his arrival from the intellectual circles of Cambridge). Being nostalgic about those productive moments he spent with Chaudhuri in the form of debates and discussions on comparative analysis of agrarian economy and agrarian class structure in Tsarist Russia and colonial India, the audience listened to an expert of Russian history paying his tribute to an institution and individual of Indian economic history. To me, it was once again a reconfirmation of the inevitability of "memory" as well as of

comparative analysis in developing a historical narrative.

On the level of virtual database in relative permanence, any intellectual layperson from any discipline could encounter the wit and insights that Vasudevan used to possess in the arena of Indian history by simply surfing the Calcutta Literary Meet webpage on YouTube. Among the top results is his participation in a panel discussion with one of the eminent South Asianist, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, right after the publication of *Nehru* by the latter in 2019 within the ambit of the Oxford India Short Introductions series. Keeping in mind the general inquisitiveness and relatively lower degree of command of an audience over academic discourses or debates in historical studies, Vasudevan appeared very humble in his attempt at elaborating and deepening Mukherjee's predilection that history also qualifies for a public discipline so far as the historical consciousness in everyday life is concerned, especially in the present age of social media through which the distortion of historical facts and interpretations have reached a very obnoxious level.

Under these circumstances, he engaged Mukherjee, in a very tranquil and explicitly eloquent manner, with various complex debates around themes like Nehru and nationalism in India, the position of present-day historians between the Cambridge and subaltern histories, Nehru's relative isolation from a majority within the Congress, the relation between Nehru and various marginalised sections of Indian society, especially the Dalits, and above all, India's partition and subsequent nation-building process in postcolonial times. This ensured that those intellectual laypersons sitting in front of them could actively participate in the discussion. The themes he addressed and made the author speak on during the panel once again attested his wide range of readings on Indian history from the perspective of a scholar, teacher and a policy advisor over the last four decades. In other words, it was no less interesting to listen to Vasudevan than Mukherjee on that occasion.

For the last one year, the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata was another institution (among others) where Vasudevan

frequented. On 3 March 2020, the Consul General of Japan in Kolkata, Taga Masayuki, was the invited speaker at MAKAIAS for a talk on Japan and its economic ties with India, where Vasudevan remained present among other dignitaries. It happened to be his last visit to an institution, which, under his administrative authority as the director, had acquired the status of being a household name in social science circles throughout India during his tenure around 2007–11.

### Last Visit

Following the Consul-General's speech, he was asked to share some of his thoughts and observations on India–Japan bilateral relation. What he delivered for the next 10 to 15 minutes was a blend of Indian history and foreign policy; historical perspective became evident while highlighting the long tie between Japan and India since the days of revolutionaries like Rashbehari Bose or Japan's educational and intellectual exchanges with Tagore's Shantiniketan; approaches of India's foreign policy prevailed while dealing with the structural changes of Indian economy, based on Japanese collaboration in post-liberalisation era. In the Q & A session, I drew the attention of the Consul-General to some of the unique features of East Asian industrialisation in the post-war era, along the argumentative line of Kenneth Pomernanz, another theme of history I learnt under Vasudevan in the winter of 2012–13. Before leaving, he said to me, "You've got a nice memory, man!"

On that day, I never thought I would have to cherish, after a couple of months, some "nice memor(ies)" around this man in order to pay a posthumous homage.

In the recent past, Vasudevan's further intervention into the domain of Indian history resulted into the publication of two critically acclaimed research articles, namely "Communism in India," compiled in *The Cambridge History of Communism: Part-II—Becoming Global, Becoming National* (2017) and "India and the October Revolution: Nationalist Revolutionaries, Bolshevik Power and Lord Curzon's Nightmare," compiled in *The Global Impact of Russia's Great War and Revolution, Book 2: The Wider Arc of Revolution, Part 2* (2019).