

Hari Sankar Vasudevan (1952-2020)

A cruel sentence.

Every morning when I rinse dishes to put them in the dishwasher I am reminded of him. He was indeed an “eminent historian,” as all the obits say. And yes, we resonated in our imaginative activism, the projects together that took us to Chandernagar, then to Princeton, again and again to New York, to Dakar, and to China.

Two weeks before he died, he said to us – our core group for “rethinking globality” – on a Skype call, “last year this time, we were in China.” And I said, “We will go again.” It was a grand project. I cannot forget eating together at the Kunming Sofitel, and I haven’t yet finished the book he bought himself and me. We agreed that it wasn’t the mystery story that we had hoped for. I am thinking of Zao Bole, at Kunming University, to whom Hari introduced me.



Vasudevan with Spivak Appointment Letter



Vasudevan with Chinese group



Vasudevan at seminar in China

There had been a complaint from colleagues in Nepal that South Asian Studies were still dominated by India studies. And Hari, who was an expert in pre-Soviet, Soviet-, and post-Soviet Russia, proposed a Himalayan Studies that was amazing and we were moving forward on it. There are Himalayan Studies in the catalogues of other universities, but our project was different in that we were convinced that we would learn how to describe globality, revising again and again, as we did our work – this last conviction contributed by our colleague Charles Armstrong.

We were planning to go as a group to Guatemala on this project, and the time before last I was in Calcutta, he asked me “why Guatemala?” I immediately picked up the phone and gave him as good an answer as I could, and he was satisfied. Right from our first meeting – fifteen years ago? – I felt the intellectual excitement, and I learned more from him than I can say. He gave two extraordinary lectures for Columbia, the first on Nikitin, before the book was published, and the other on “Working from Moscow, Living Anywhere” on November 13th, 2019. Our project together, with the brilliant title provided by Lakshmi Subramanian: “Old Histories and New Geographies,” is testimony to how well we worked together.

And yet, I am also reminded of him as I rinse my dishes in the morning. Because Hari was also the only other person, apart from my sister, and Farida Akhter in Bangladesh, who could help me with packing and, in Calcutta, making tea. He typically offered to

help as I washed my dishes (no dishwasher there), and I typically said “no, Hari, this is for me.” And so, there he is for me, every morning. Our last exchange of emails was when he told me he had the virus, and finally Moinak Biswas said he was going to hospital. I wrote him a text message, although I was pretty sure he wouldn’t open his cell phone there: “Absolutely get well,” was the subject line.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gcspiv@gmail.com

May 4, 1:08 p.m.

Dear Hari,

I hear from Moinak that you're in hospital. I have no idea if you're reading email. Follow every rule. Boris Johnson kept insisting on oxygen so that they didn't have to put him on a ventilator. Just passing this on.

If you're writing email, keep me posted.

All my support and good vibes and love,

GL

GL was his nickname for me: “Great lady.” And on May 1, he called me: “Hippocrata.”

Hari Vasudevan <hsv123@gmail.com>

Fri, May 1, 10:38
AM

to me

Dear GL,

Tantalizing.

By the way doctor prescribed the same AB you suggested, O modern Hippocrata (Voc., Sing. Adjusted for Fem OK? You would know better)

Best,
Hari

Of course, there was no answer to my final email. The next thing I knew was a WhatsApp from Moinak: “We lost Hari.”

He was a deeply engaged Secretary of a small committee running some small schools. He pestered us about holding AGM-s and the last one we held was on March 5, in my niece’s empty apartment in Ballygunge. When we unearthed the document with the members’ signatures, Hari literally ran out to get it photocopied at the 24-hour xerox machines at the Law College close to my abode, as the wonderful pro-bono lawyer advisor for our committee told us while Hari was gone. He came back, we finished the meeting, eating and drinking tea crazily, the only one who took sugar (not Hari) drinking

his with bhapasandesh from Kalna which a friend had provided some days ago, because I had no sugar. You get the picture.

We finished. Hari had to leave. I hugged him. And that was it.

Naveen asked for a tribute. And I insist this is one.

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