Obituary

Arvind N. Das (1949–2000)

Jan Breman

Arvind N. Das is no more. He died in Amsterdam on 6 August 2000 at the far too young age of 51. He had not been in good health for some time but had underestimated, as we all did, the seriousness of the rare disease that affected him. His mind worked as usual, so why complain about bodily afflictions? They would go away again. Unhappily, however, he went instead: in his usual style, while on the move. He had reassured me only a day earlier that all was well and under control. Some pain once in a while, he conceded, and then to his chagrin he had to stop reading Romila Thapar’s latest book, and that was bad because he had promised to review it for the next issue of Biblio. ‘Arvind, you must change your way of life’, I told him. ‘And how will you do that?’ ‘Ah, we shall see’, he smiled dismissively. Only now we know that he was living on borrowed time and that his lifespan was about to be cut short.

Arvind’s career was marked by his balancing act, carried out over many years, between academia and the media. He needed academia for reflection and introspection, while the media enabled him to address a much wider audience and appealed to his urge for immediacy. Sitting in a university department or research institute soon made him restless, but as a media professional he mourned the lack of time in which to elaborate, substantiate and follow up. Consequently, he commuted between the two and networked across both. The intellectual and social capital that he built up in this way made him the ideal anchor man for Biblio, the magnificent bi-monthly review of books of which he was a founder member and which he edited from the first issue in 1996. But this brings me close to the finale, while there is so much to be said about the earlier stages of Arvind’s life and work.

What stood out above all was Arvind’s origins in rural India. ‘I come from Changel and Changel is my village’, was the last sentence of the remarkable history he wrote of the village in North Bihar which was his birthplace.1 He produced this case study as a biography. Although it had footnotes, they were not the usual archive-based footnotes of the historian, since there was an ‘absence

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of the conventional materials used by historians – that is, plentiful written records’. Rather, Arvind used ‘non-conventional sources, like undocumented oral reconstruction of popular memory’.\(^2\) He believed, indeed, that, as a historian, one does not need to spend a lot of time in archives in order to deal with the past. Changel remained his lodestar for all that came afterwards. Escaping from the mofussil (rural) hinterland must have been a liberating experience but, having arrived in Delhi for further studies, in one of the training grounds for the intellectual establishment, he returned to his milieu of origin. In the company of several of his friends, he set out to practise revolution. That episode was brief but, having surfaced from his rural field action, Arvind did not lose his identification with the land-poor and landless peasantry. He became, and remained until his untimely death, a card-carrying member of the CPI-M/L (Communist Party of India-Markist/Leninist). Arvind decided to substitute praxis for theory and started his Ph.D. project on agrarian unrest and socio-economic change in Bihar. Tracing the past was for him not an objective in itself but, as he explained in the preface to the book published several years later, ‘... an exercise in using history as a method of understanding the present’.\(^3\)

Our paths crossed when, at the request of Barun De, his supervisor at the University of Calcutta, I read his thesis as external examiner. We had met a few years earlier. Arvind’s activist days were not yet over and, as a staff member of the National Labour Institute (NLI), he used to organize rural camps to urge the abolition of bonded labour. Early in 1977, I came to one of these camps in Purnea district in the eastern part of Bihar, a member of an ILO mission, to investigate – to monitor, as I learnt to say in good policy jargon – state instructions on how to do away with agrarian bondage. In the mid-1970s, Arvind authored several articles on his involvement in that worthy but rather naïve endeavour, in the bulletin published by NLI. Labour was to remain a recurrent theme in his work. He was the co-author of an anthology on labour issues at a time when this field of study had not attracted much scholarly interest. I am told that, as a tribute to the contribution he made, the Indian Association of Labour History has decided to institute a memorial lecture in his name.

Arvind Das went for a short stint to Pune. His idea to join the Gokhale Institute, for a while at least, seems to me to have been homage to D.D. Kosambi, whose work he greatly admired. The Kosambi Research Institute for Scientific Investigations into Society, KRISIS for short, which Arvind founded, was his tongue-in-cheek way of saying that, however transformative colonialism may have been in shaping modernity, a longue durée vision such as expressed by the eminent historian was crucial to any comprehension of all that had gone into the formation of the Indian nation. Tracing the remote past was necessary in order to come to terms with more recent shifts in the framework of society. This perspective ultimately led him to produce and direct, for educational purposes, a

\(^2\) See p. 1 of the JPS article and the Preface to the CASP version.
multi-part television documentary: *India Invented: An Exploration of Culture and Civilization in Historical Outline*. The serialized parts take one on a grand tour around the sub-continent, in which one sees Arvind as commentator: standing under imperial portals, popping out of caves and walking around ruins. Still relatively young, and eager, he addresses his audience earnestly, dwelling on *ancien régime* with a text that reads as a frontal assault on bigotry, fundamentalism and authoritarian rule then and now. It is a passionate plea in which he voices subaltern views for religious tolerance, cultural diversity and acceptance of social variation as basic ingredients of the national heritage. I was able to recognize several sites that we had visited together. He kept his promise to show me around the state that, for him, was symbolic of the Third World at large. In our trip to the Republic of Bihar he included many items that sustained his preoccupation, as well as his fascination, with this ‘backwater’: engagements with well-meaning bureaucrats in Patna, Ashok’s pillar, the Buddhist monuments in Gaya restored with Japanese money, and secretive meetings with his still underground comrades-in-arms.

Arvind needed to go back to his roots as well as to distance himself periodically from his home milieu to contextualize his work on Bihar adequately in a wider setting of time and space. As Fellow of the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and at the Institute of Development Economics in Tokyo, Professor at the Centre for Social Studies in Surat, Distinguished Visiting/Revisiting Fellow of the Centre for Asian Studies in Amsterdam, he took time off to read and write at leisure. During these interludes Arvind produced most of the 11 books that he authored or edited and numerous articles. To retreat into an academic study and to be close to a library certainly added to his comfort, but he could do without them and still deliver forcefully and eloquently. I have often marvelled at the ease with which he wrote, sitting in a crowded room and meeting the deadline for his editorials in *The Times of India*, constantly bothered by bosses or *peons* who wanted his instant and total attention for this, that or the other. Rather than showing annoyance at such interruptions, it seemed to be the kind of ambience that suited his restless personality. In addition to his many other talents, Arvind was a generous man and a gifted listener. He was not at all egocentric or doctrinaire, but he was, one must say, somewhat mischievous and with an anarchistic streak. In discussions, my friend took care to clarify his own preferences, but he was always willing to consider arguments contrary to his point of view if they were well-grounded in empirical evidence and presented in a proper analytical framework. He never tired of swimming against the tide of conventional wisdom and arrogant policies, although puzzled as to why more people did not share in his campaign.

Arvind was a Changel boy, but his travels made him a global citizen. No, on second thoughts, he was a global citizen and that is why he travelled. To far-away places? Only in a way, because, wherever he went, he was surrounded by friends and colleagues who shared his ideas and ideals. Global–local, history–sociology, praxis–theory, academia–media: in Arvind’s perception all these labels were not mutually exclusive. Rather than separating them in his work and writ-
ings, he sought linkages between them. That would undoubtedly have been his agenda for the culture section of Economic and Political Weekly, for which he had agreed to take responsibility. He looked forward eagerly to a closer association with that prestigious weekly, to which he had contributed many articles in recent years. Arvind passed away so suddenly and unexpectedly that loose ends are inevitable, pledges he made without being able to honour them. One of his good intentions, and he had many, was to spend more time at the Asian Development Research Institute that he had founded: in Patna, of course. In addition to securing for Biblio more financial support, he used his last stay in Amsterdam to make arrangements for a conference to be held at ADRI early next year.

My colleagues and I extend our sincere sympathy to Arvind’s wife, daughter and parents in their dreadful loss. It fell to me to break the news of Arvind’s death to his family. His father, who had come from Changel to Delhi, found it difficult to accept that his son had passed away, saying, in a dignified manner, that for five generations of his family an older son had never died before his father. Arvind would have appreciated that sense of historicity.