

In Memoriam

Professor Virendra Nath Misra

Requiescat in pace

Eminent archaeologist of international repute, Professor Virendra Nath Misra, passed away on 31 October 2015 in Pune at the age of 80.

Hailing from District Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, he did his under-graduation from Agra University and post-graduation from Lucknow University (1957) in Anthropology.

During this period, Professor Misra, along with his classmate J.S. Bhandari, carried out field work, collecting data on social and economic organization among the tribal communities like *Gond*, *Kharwar*, *Cheros* and *Korwa* in the village of Jharo in Dudhi tehsil of Mirzapur (now Sonbhadra) district (U.P.). He completed his Ph.D in Prehistoric Archaeology under the supervision of Professor H.D. Sankalia from Poona University in 1962.

He taught Anthropology in Lucknow University as Lecturer, Assistant Professor (1957-62) and Professor (1983-84); Prehistoric Archaeology as Lecturer and Reader in Poona University (1951-81) and as Professor in Deccan College Post-Graduate & Research Institute, Pune (1981-2000). He became Joint-Director (1986-1990) and Director of Deccan College Post-Graduate & Research Institute, Pune (deemed to be a University) in 1990-2000.

Professor Misra specialized in the study of prehistory and excavated rock shelters at Bhimbetka, District Raisen in Madhya Pradesh from 1972-1977, collaborating with Dr V.S. Wakankar and Dr S.K. Arya, Vikram University (M.P.) and Dr Sussane Haas from the Museum for Völkerkune, Basel, Switzerland (1974-75). This was for the first time that these cave/rock shelters of Madhya Pradesh, with spectacular rock art, were excavated. Bhimbetka rock shelters have thick habitational deposits and they show a continuous cultural sequence from the terminal stage of Acheulian tradition to the Mesolithic culture. The site is now declared as a UNESCO Heritage Site, and is well known for its wealth of prehistoric and early historic paintings.

Professor Misra had also excavated many Palaeolithic/Mesolithic sites in Madhya Pradesh; Jayal, Didwana, Chhajoli, Singi Talav, Indola-ki-Dhani (Palaeolithic sites), Tilwara, Bagor (Mesolithic sites), and Balathal (Chalcolithic and Early Historic Site) in Rajasthan. Two important excavated Mesolithic sites at Tilwara and Bagor in Rajasthan, provided evidence for the process of

acculturation in this area during prehistoric period. He explored vast areas in the basin of Gambhiri and Berach rivers in Chittaurgarh, eastern Rajasthan, and the areas near river Luni in western Rajasthan. Not only did he look for the prehistoric remains, but also studied the exposed geological deposits along these rivers and successfully reconstructed the past climatic conditions in the area. He also explored sites in Gujarat, Maharashtra and western Uttar Pradesh and mapped more than hundred prehistoric and early historic sites in the region.

His early training in Anthropology and his awareness of the importance of ethnographic analogy in the interpretation of prehistoric data in archaeology amply reflects in his research papers. While excavating in Didwana (Rajasthan), he studied the hunting-gathering community of the *Van Vagris*, till then not known from gazetteers and census reports. He collected data on hunting techniques and technology, social organization and religion of the tribe. He also studied tribes of *Pardhi* and *Kuchbandhiya* in Madhya Pradesh, *Kanjars* in Uttar Pradesh and *Bhil*, *Banjara*, *Kalbelia* in Rajasthan. He was especially interested in the funerary structures and associated rituals of the *Maria Gond*, a hunting-gathering-agricultural community of Bastar district, Madhya Pradesh (now in Chhattisgarh).

Professor Misra authored and edited 6 books, as well as over 110 papers in journals and collected works. Many of these seminal works brought new information from archaeological sites and provided an overview of the archaeological information gathered from the respective region. His memory of archeological facts that he had unearthed decades before was spectacular. He learned many languages - Hindi (Allahabad), Sanskrit (Banaras), French, German and Russian (Poona). Being fluent in both Hindi and Marathi, he has written more than 30 popular articles in these languages.

Professor Misra, with his colleagues, established the Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quaternary Studies (ISPQS) in 1975, to promote research in prehistory and started an international research journal, *Man and Environment*, in 1977. He edited the journal from its inception till his death. His contributions to the discipline ceased only with his last breath.

Professor Misra was the recipient of many prestigious awards and fellowships, both in India and abroad for his contributions to prehistory. Madhya Pradesh government awarded him the prestigious V.S. Wakankar Award for his significant contributions in reconstructing India's prehistoric past. Professor Misra became member and fellow of more than 12 learned societies. He participated in over fifty national and international conferences in India and delivered lectures in universities and other academic institutions in Sri Lanka (1969, 1990); Bangladesh (1986, 1994); Philippines (1985); Thailand (1994); Indonesia (1990); Japan (1987); Australia (1971, 1977); Israel (1970); Greece (1979); Italy (1970, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1997); France (1970, 1976,

1982, 1990, 1992); Germany (1970); United Kingdom (1970, 1990, 1991, 1995); Netherlands (1970, 1999); Denmark (1970, 1985); Finland (1993); Czechoslovakia (1970); United States of America (1973, 1984, 1985, 1992); Canada (1983); Egypt (1979); Ethiopia (1982); and South Africa (1998). Needless to say, he was known for his breadth and depth of knowledge about the rise and development of prehistoric cultures in India and over the world. He was truly a world-experienced prehistorian.

Professor Misra, an anthropologist turned into an archaeologist, believed that enormous diversity in societies in the world - biological, cultural, social, linguistic and religious - could be satisfactorily explained through the help of archaeological data. His passion for the big picture was liberating. He valued the integration of archaeology with anthropology and believed in the inter-connectedness of peoples and ideas.

On a personal note, I will always cherish the memories of my interactions with Professor Misra. He took a keen interest in my work when I was a research scholar and later when I started teaching. Although I was not his student, he was always ready with words of encouragement and advice. I am sure, we, in the study of Indian prehistory and archaeology, will miss this great scholar. His demise has left an enormous void.

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Professor Pradipta Kishore Das

In addition to being an anthropologist, that too a physical anthropologist working on molecular genetics, Professor P. K. Das, who died on 5 June 2016, was also deeply religious. Although I did not know much about his *pūjā* and prayer schedule, he told me that he had dedicated himself to the service (*sevā*) of the 'mother goddess' (*devī*). As a result of his long-term devotion to the goddess and austere practices, he claimed to be blessed with the power to predict the future happenings of people, whosoever approached him with queries that seemed to be beyond the realm of human control.

With Professor Kishore K. Basa, he visited my residence in April 2008. After a brief conversation about the teaching of anthropology in South Asian universities, the topic of our talk deflected to occultism and augury. At that time, Professor Das revealed his unflinching commitment to religion and mysticism; and when he shared with us (my wife and I) his ability to make predictions, which had descended upon him because of the divine grace, we requested him to intervene in resolving one of our worries.

Professor Das went into a state of inwardness, his eyes closed, his lips moving inaudibly, his right arm raised, his fingers moving up and down, at moments he seemed to be counting, adding and subtracting, and trying to write in air. He would repeat this action a couple of times. Although he was in that state for not more than a couple of minutes, it seemed as if he was practicing that for hours and hours. Time stilled; an eerie quietude prevailed in the room; we were all waiting for him to step out of that gripping state. He eventually emerged from this, made a prediction, advising us, especially my wife, to pay daily reverence to her favourite goddess.

Today, when he is not with us, I am fondly recalling those moments of 2008. Many of my friends know this, for I have shared it with them, but for those who do not know I want them to know that the auspicious events of September 2011 in our life confirmed Professor Das's prediction. Since one of my interests is in comparative religion and mysticism, I often interacted with Professor Das whenever I had an occasion to meet him and was immensely touched by his simplicity and straightforwardness. He did not see any paradox between his research on the bio-genetic material and his own ritual practices, which endowed upon him the divine compassion and blessings, and he was quite open about sharing it with his friends without any embarrassment as one would have expected people to be when they are talking about their religious commitments. That scientists do not have faith in religion was an erroneous belief for him.

Professor Das was born on 9 November 1952. His father was an officer of the Orissa Administrative Service. Professor Das earned all his degrees – B.Sc. (Hons.), M.Sc., and Ph.D. – from Utkal University, Bhubaneswar. In post-graduation, he obtained the first position, for which he was awarded a gold medal. His doctoral thesis, since his specialization was in physical anthropology, was evaluated by eminent scholars, such as Professors J.V. Neel and K.C. Malhotra. Alongside working on his Ph.D. thesis, Professor Das worked on a project (from 1976 to 1980) on genetic variation among the Southern Mundari-speaking people of Orissa, and then on food system (from 1980 to 1983). He also undertook a four-month study of bio-mass survey of forest zones of Simlipal, Mayurbhanj.

Professor Das started his career as a teacher of anthropology on 11 April 1984 in Khallikote College, Berhampur. On 20 March 1986, he shifted to a teaching position in the Post-Graduate Department of Anthropology at Utkal University. In 1993, he became a reader, and then from 1996, for a period of sixteen years, he occupied the CSIR-Kalinga J.B.S. Haldane Chair in the Anthropology Department of Utkal University. For the entire duration that he was in Bhubaneswar, he worked on the areas of health and nutrition; human genetics; molecular anthropology; bio-cultural aspects of tuberculosis, diabetes and hypertension; and the epidemiology of cancer and cerebral palsy. He completed a large number of projects, the prominent being on the nutritional status of the Bondo Highlanders, population biology of caste and tribal communities, bio-social study of leprosy, bio-cultural study of Type-II Diabetes and the epidemiology of oral cancer. The reports of these projects, some of which have been published as articles, are a clear example that Professor Das pursued an integrated anthropology. He never disregarded in his studies the role of culture in conditioning the impact of biological variables. Professor Das successfully supervised six doctoral and twenty-eight M.Phil. dissertations.

Professor Das made significant contributions to anthropological knowledge. He identified the ALDH2 gene among the Bondo Highlanders, and the studies of Mt DNA, Y haplotype, STR allele of the populations of Santal and Brahmin were also attempted. He developed modules on DNA extraction and analysis. He also prepared a glossary of anthropological terms and concepts. The Human Genome Laboratory at Utkal's anthropology department was set up under his initiative. For three consecutive terms, he looked after the Special Assistance Programme (SAP) of the University Grants Commission (UGC) at his department, and it was because of his unstinted efforts that his department flourished as the Centre of Advanced Study. On several occasions in his career, he was engaged in 'modernizing' the syllabi of anthropology at different levels of the degree programmes. Those who were with him in these committees remember him as an intelligent and congenial person, who always thought of the totality of anthropology rather than his own research interests.

From 1999 to 2001, Professor Das was the head of the Utkal anthropology department. He was the Coordinator of SAP-UGC from 1996 to 2008, and the Chairman of the Board of Studies in Anthropology in his university from 1999 to 2001. He was the Sectional President of the Anthropology and Archaeology Section of the Indian Science Congress in 2002. In 2001, he received the Indo-French Cultural Exchange Award. He was a Member of the National Advisory Committee of the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI); a Member of the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Human Genetics*; a reviewer of several peer-reviewed national and international journals; a subject expert to review the SAP of the UGC in different universities; a Member of the Sub-committee on Bio-Medical Anthropology of the ASI; a Member of the National Advisory Board on International Symposium on Thalassemia; and a Member of the Editorial Board of *The Tribal Tribune*. He delivered several talks at different august bodies, the prominent being at the Pasture Institute, Paris, and Max Planck Institute, Germany, and the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. He attended several international conferences and collaborated in many national and international projects, an important one being the molecular analysis of South Indian populations with the University of Utah, U.S.A. In collaboration with the National Genographic Project, he worked on the genomic diversity of the people of Orissa. These researches led him to publish articles in national and international journals, many of which are oft-consulted.

After retiring from Utkal, Professor Das joined on 21 April 2013 as professor and head of the Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development at Guru Ghasi Das Vishvavidyalaya at Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh). There he was also the Coordinator of the Centre for Endangered Languages. With indefatigable efforts he continued to build up the Bilaspur department, although he was passing through a bad patch of illness. With his indomitable energy and hard work, he tried to transcend his ailment and make a memorable contribution to two departments.

In his personal life, he set up an example of how science and religion could be profitably combined, how the hitherto unknown and untapped sources of energy and liveliness could be explored, and how with an open mind one should approach the mysteries of the universe. Those who knew him personally were touched by his humility, wit and humour, and the love he had for all in the world. He will always be remembered in the fraternity of anthropologists.

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Professor Sameera Maiti

Dr. Sameera Maiti was a professor of anthropology at Sikkim University, a Central University, which she had joined on 30 June 2014, after having served the Department of Anthropology at the University of Lucknow as a lecturer for many years. At the time of her sad demise, which happened on 29 March 2016 in Lucknow after a long battle with cancer, she was also the Head of her Department and the Dean of Human Sciences. Born in Nagpur on 1 November 1972, she did her M.A. in anthropology from the University of Lucknow, topping the list of the successful candidates, for which she was awarded a Gold Medal.

After her post-graduation, she started her study for a doctoral thesis in the University of Lucknow, choosing for her fieldwork the community of the Tharu in Lakhimpur Kheri (Uttar Pradesh). For her dissertation titled 'A Study of Arts and Crafts among the Tharu Tribe of Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh', she had her viva-voce examination on 3 July 2001, and I happened to be her examiner. That was the first time I met her. I distinctly remember her succinct and intelligent replies to the questions that were asked in the reports by her other examiners. Her work was impressive, covering the study of art and craft forms, an area which is not enthusiastically pursued in contemporary anthropology. Unlike many of her colleagues, immediately after she was granted a Ph.D., she started revising the portions of her thesis, incorporating the comments of her examiners, and converted it into a book that the Northern Book Centre of New Delhi published in 2004, under the title *The Tharu: Their Arts and Crafts*. This was her first major publication, and was well received by the fraternity of scholars. It received encouraging reviews in several journals. Before that in 1998, she had won the Young Scientist Award by the Indian Science Congress Association.

Professor Maiti received many honours in her life. She was the National Fellow in Arts, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Sangeet Natak Academy, Government of India, from 2003 to 2005. She spent the years 2004-5 as the Charles Wallace Visiting Fellow at Queen's University at Belfast. At the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, she was a National Associate in 2010. She went to the University of Oxford as a Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellow from 2011 to 2012. She was Assistant Secretary, Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, Lucknow, and Associate Editor, *The Eastern Anthropologist*.

In the short span of her post-Ph.D. career, Professor Maiti contributed significantly to scholarship in social anthropology. Her writing impresses its readers with its clarity, commitment to the universal values, challenges to the dominant, oppressive systems of governance, and careful use of empirical

facts. Although she is famously known for her research work on the Tharu, she also carried out a piece of fieldwork among the Karen, a lesser known community, the villages of which are found in Mayabunder *tehsil* of North Andaman. In addition, she also conducted a study of domestic violence and the episodes of violence inflicted by partners. Her article on violence on women during pregnancy, published in *Sociological Bulletin* (63[3], 2014), based on the data collected from villages in Uttar Pradesh, was one of most sensitive portrayals of the predicaments of rural women.

Her first book provides an in-depth documentation of the arts and crafts of the Tharu. Including a large number of photographs and line drawings in her book, Professor Maiti took up the questions of preservation of the indigenous arts and crafts forms and the possibility of their marketing, especially against the backdrop of the metropolitan interest in ethnic objects, so that the monetary profits could go to the authors of these creations. Central to her work was the question of how people could be helped. In two of her articles, namely 'A comparative study of demographic features of the Tharu tribals of Uttarakhand of U.P. (India) (*South Asian Anthropologist*, 11 [2011])', and 'Empowering women to improve their quality of life: Effects of economic developmental measures on the Tharu women of Uttarakhand' (*Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, 50 [2015]), Professor Maiti showed that the sex ratio among the Tharu was 1015 women to 1000 men. This further supported her conclusion that the status of women among the Tharu was much higher than it was the case with upper caste Hindu families. The birth of the female child was as much an occasion of ritual celebration and feasting as was that of the boys. An important observation was that the Tharu had been selective about picking up the cultural practices of the neighbouring communities; they have included Hindu gods and goddesses among their pantheon, but not the ways that create gender asymmetry.

In her papers, Professor Maiti emphasized the value of the concepts of well-being and the quality of life. Of particular attention in her work was the significance of sanitation. In the first paper cited above, she wrote: "...toilet within the residential area is the most important factor for a good quality of life with respect to health and sanitation. It is also an important factor in protection of women's modesty and safety, given that several crimes are committed against them when they are on their way to or coming from after answering nature's call." She wrote this in 2011, and since then, we have been reading of an umpteen number of cases where women are sexually assaulted on way to the 'field' in early morning or late evening hours. The need to have toilets built within the residential premises has been variously emphasized keeping the aspects of 'safety and modesty' as Professor Maiti had observed. In this article, she also spoke of the value of mobile phones in seeking health care in critical moments.

One of Professor Maiti's papers was presented in a Conference in 2007 at the Queen's University at Belfast, shortly after she finished her term therein.

This paper was later published in Maruška Svašek's edited volume titled *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects. Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions* (2012, Berghahn, Oxford). Professor Maiti's article dealt with the loss of traditional skills among the young generation of the Karen and the endless worries of the elders who are envisioning their future culture to be completely bereft of the priceless traditions which were divinely created and diligently carried forward by their ancestors.

The Karen migrated to their present location from Burma (Myanmar), bringing with them their traditional intellectual wealth which helped them, as the older generation says, maintain psychological balance and harmony, vouchsafing their wellbeing. When Professor Maiti spoke to them they unequivocally blamed their descendants to be the 'victims of modernity'. The elders passed through the pangs of anxiety and fear about future. Professor Maiti's article reminded me of several cases of acculturation, especially of Lauriston Sharp's study of the Yir Yoront of Coleman River (Queensland, Australia). An interesting aspect of Professor Maiti's study was that she tried to relate the fright of the elderly Karen with physiological changes in their bodies, such as increased heart rate, high blood pressure, etc., evincing the impact of an integrated anthropology on her thinking.

Professor Maiti was an excellent person, ever smiling, jovial, and exemplarily cooperative. I fondly remember meeting her in Gangtok on 25 April 2016 when her Department had organized a seminar on the cultural heritage of Sikkim. She wanted me to deliver the Keynote Address. When I expressed my inability to do so as my knowledge of Sikkimese culture was scanty, she suggested that I could speak on the theoretical aspects of cultural heritage and preservation, which I did. The seminar, all those who attended would vouch for it, was one of the best organized, with Professor Maiti taking active interest in everything, and trying to quell the anxiety that had surfaced because of the great Nepal earthquake on that day, the impact of which felt in the capital town of Sikkim.

Professor Maiti was very popular with her students. They all remember her fondly. One of her students, a civil servant, dedicated her award to Professor Maiti, which she got from the Prime Minister in April 2016 for implementing the agenda of the Swachh Bharat Mission in West Sikkim. Another student who went to study Tankha paintings in Sikkim recorded his indebtedness to Professor Maiti for superbly guiding him. The School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University (Belfast) wrote in its Newsletter of April 2016: "She [Professor Maiti] was loved by all anthropology staff."

Professor Maiti was an asset to the editorial team of *The Eastern Anthropologist*, and her absence will always be felt.

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