

In Memoriam: Arvind Das (1945–2000)

I was in the Netherlands and indeed at the hospital with his wife, Manoshi, and daughter, Piya, one year ago when Arvind Das, founder-editor of *Biblio*, died. Just one or two months previously I had seen him at the Amsterdam launch, in the Labour History Museum, of *Down and Out: Labouring Under Global Capitalism*, a book of photos by Ravi Agarwal, the text of which was co-authored with his longtime friend and collaborator, that one-man industry of Indian labor studies, Jan Breman. This book had been recently featured in an issue of *Biblio* (Vol. 5, Nos 1–2, 2000) that also carried Arvind's review of a new Oxford *Book of Work* (Das 2000)!

Yet neither the obituaries in *Biblio* nor the Memorial Lecture on labor rights (Vol. 6, Nos. 1–2), mention Arvind's early and continuing interest in labor history. I have particular reasons to both remember and remind. The reason for remembrance is our joint organization, twenty years ago, of a workshop on "Trade Unions and the Labouring Poor in the Third World" (TULP3W), which gave rise to a book called *The Worker and the Working Class* (Das, Nilakant, and Dubey, 1983). The reason for the reminder is that, twenty years later, the issues raised at that marginal event are moving, if slowly and unevenly, to the centre of labor politics and labor studies in India, the Third World, and internationally (Seminar 1995, Shramik Pratisthan 1999, Ewing & Sibley 2000, Noronha 2000, *Socialist Register* 2001).

One year before the TULP3W workshop, Arvind guest-edited a special issue on India of my *Newsletter of International Labour Studies* (Das 1980). This twenty-eight-page resource guide reminded at least the Western left of something it had forgotten since Indian Independence, that India is one of the major reserves of both world labor and labor studies. It also revealed the breadth of Arvind's knowledge, his pluralistic leftism and his journalistic capacities. His own *Newsletter* contribution on the new labor studies being carried out in India, mostly by those inspired by the non-party Marxism of the 1968 generation, led to the New Delhi event.

In organizing the workshop we were joined by Fernando Rojas from Colombia. Attending were numerous, mostly young labor researchers from India. I recall Nirmal Sengupta, K. P. Kannan, Rukmini Rao, Manoshi Mitra, Kalpana Ram, and Dilip Simeon, but there were also many others. We were joined by Zillah Branco from Portugal, Issa Shivji from Tanzania, Rhoda Reddock from Trinidad, various Dutch academics and solidarity activists and something of a (red) star, Henryk Szlajfer, then associated with the Solidarnosc labor movement in Communist Poland. Indian urban and rural labor organizers and activists dropped in and out. So did the young New Delhi socialist feminists. Though internationalism was not yet seriously on the agenda (the Indian New Left being then more in solidarity with Poland and Central America than Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or Bangladesh), this was an internationalist event. The

inspiration for this Workshop can be found in the extended collection it gave rise to:

We suggest that a re-conceptualisation and re-examination of the role of organized labour and its relations with other labouring people in peripheral capitalist societies is required by a crisis in labour's strategies, its organisational forms and theories concerning these. (Das, Rojas and Waterman 1983:3)

We three coordinators were influenced by the newest libertarian Marxism: that of the Italian Workers' Autonomy school. Workers' Autonomy continued the labor-centered vision of classical Marxism, but then subversively stretched the concept of labor and worker till it spread to and, unfortunately, actually engulfed both the whole of society and all social protest. Still, with twenty years of hindsight, parts of the argument stands up quite respectably:

The break with the traditional equations: factory workers = proletariat = working-class (or working-class core) has major implications for an understanding of the structure and struggles of working classes. Given that capital rules by differentiation of wealth and power, creating hierarchies and oppositions amongst the working classes, we cannot assume that the traditional factory proletariat provides the base for advanced class consciousness . . . The mass movements for peace and human rights, against imperialism, racism, sexism, and bourgeois ideological hegemony, the pollution in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to come from working-classes not structured by the factories: from intellectuals and students, blacks, women, and peasants. This does not mean, conversely, that we can assume that these provide the base and model. (Das, Rojas and Waterman 1983:6)

The workshop itself was catholic in nature, not to say eclectic, disorganized, or conflictive. It was intended to give rise to a related research project on India, involving at least Arvind and myself. But Arvind and I had a huge row in front of the appalled participants. I think each of us was expecting the other to take the lead in the Workshop and Project. And my own capacities were already stretched by a major crisis—personal and professional if not political. The project was put on the back burner, although years later it actually got a funding award from the Indian Council of Social Science Research. By that time unfortunately both Arvind and I were committed elsewhere.

Apart from the papers and discussions, there were many moments to be treasured at the Workshop, as when Henryk declared his preference for meeting bonded laborers at the Mehrauli stone quarries or in meeting railway union leader George Fernandes, (who did not anyway understand how a “Marxist regime” could be opposed by a Marxist). And then, again, of Henryk, as a *Machista-Leninista*, being taken to the cleaners and hung out to dry by the local socialist-feminists, whose delight in so doing suggested a greater familiarity with his arguments than he with theirs. Henryk later took a unique Solidarnosc speaking tour, though any subversive effect he might have had on Old Left India may

take more than one generation to become visible. Waqar ul Ahad, a devoted, broad-minded, anti-patriarchal, Communist unionist-cum-community activist, later guided a number of us around the factories and Mazdoor Nagar, a self-managed urban settlement, in Jaipur. The foreign Workshop participants also revolted against my puritan regime, taking a day off (with Arvind's non-puritan support) to visit the Taj Mahal, a memory treasured at least by them. Amrita Chhachhi, who later co-edited a keynote collection on women and labour in the South (Chhachhi & Pittin 1996) and Paul Kurian (another promising labor researcher whose early death we all much regretted) introduced me to Shankar Guha Niyogi (born 1943, assassinated 1991), leader of the kind of worker-peasant-tribal coalition on which we were then (and more now are) pinning our hopes (Sadgopal & Bahdur 1993). In the place we gave for communications and culture, particularly the audio-visual, we also revealed our awareness that, in seriously modern times, the labor movement also had to be involved increasingly (or again) in culture and communication as well as organization.

The pluralistic, path-breaking, eclectic and artisanal nature of the event itself, which included other visitors from the traditional left party-unions, can be judged from the book. It was produced, non-commercially, in double-column format, greatly increasing the stretch of its 274 pages. My copy, though hard-bound and carefully handled, began to fall to pieces within months. The cover, typical Arvind, had a background of Indian workers attending a demonstration, surmounted by an inset containing not women beedi-makers or Kerala fisherfolk, but Charlie Chaplin+Machine from *Modern Times*. We can no longer ask him what this was intended to represent. Arvind would probably have stated quite cheerfully that he did not know. A Cosmopolitan as well as an Indian Nationalist, Bihar Regionalist, Jharkand Autonomist, and Internationalist, he seems to have been also an *avant la lettre* producer of postmodern pastiche. Arvind's own contribution to the book was on "The Indian Working Class: Relations of Production and Reproduction". This was a substantial critique of political and academic studies of labor (left and right) in India, largely inspired by Edward Thompson's cultural, process-oriented and self-creative notion of the working-class. Arvind ended with these words:

[M]ost important of all, the movements and class actions of the workers themselves are refuting the artificial, ideological or otherwise, dichotomisation and even conceptual and political fragmentation of the working class. There is need only to look around and see. (Das 1983:178)

Although this working-class may still be in the making in India, his words were an encouragement to the new labor researchers who were already emerging. My own contribution to the collection was actually an incomplete article, in which an announced Section Six is missing—a literal shortcoming, either unnoticed or ignored by the book's editors. It was a piece of deconstruction (then called ideological critique) which addressed itself to Lenin and "the alliance of the working class and the peasantry." This was the title of a Soviet (i.e., post-Tsarist, pre-

Russian) collection of the same name. Insofar as my piece was intended to show that (1) there was no Leninist theory of this alliance, as distinguished from pragmatic and shifting strategies; (2) the one alliance referred over time to three very different national or international socio-political relationships; (3) that the Russian peasantry might have been proletarianised more by Lenin than by “the development of capitalism in Russia”; and (4) that Lenin used three different sets of terms in stratifying the peasantry, well, for Arvind this would have recommended the piece for publication, despite the missing section. He liked mischief. Much flowed or followed from this Workshop, as attested by some of the references below. And one more thing. The book was dedicated, in bold condensed sanserif,

for
 PETER WATERMAN
 In Solidarity

Typical Arvind.

Now, *Down and Out* did not really work for me. It is certainly highly informative, undermining assumptions and prejudices and giving a multi-dimensional view of the laboring poor in India. But many of the fascinating photos are too small to tell their own story. They are also in color, and as a young Asian woman student/activist recently remarked to me, after having seen *Workers*, the black and white work of Brazilian photographer, Sebastião Salgado (1993. See also, <http://www.nytimes.com/specials/salgado/photos/>), “they should be in black and white.” The text critiques globalization and development strategies and celebrates the dignity of the suffering. But this is, surely, a post-1989 (Berlin Wall) rather than a post-1999 (Battle of Seattle) vision:

It is a gloomy scenario, one of exclusion of a large section of the people from the fruits of productivity to which they contribute. And yet, not only work but life itself must go on and dignity and hope, protest and resistance . . . The forms of such assertion may not be dramatic, they may not be based on collective solidarity, they may have a mundane everyday quality, their locus may be the habitat, the home, the locality; the resisters and protestors may relate to each other as neighbours rather than as co-workers—nevertheless, protests and resistance go on and mobilization and organization are carried out in different ways . . . (Bremen, Das and Agarwal 2000).

Despite the shift here to a more-hopeful note, and echoes of the TU&LP3W Workshop (including reference to *Modern Times!*), the work expresses outrage and pity rather than identification or solidarity.

A more satisfactory view is represented, indeed re-presented, in contributions to the *Socialist Register 2001* (Panitch & Leys 2000). This provides a brilliant widescreen vision of the world’s working-classes (plural) under globaliza-

tion. Two complementary pieces on India, a long one by Barbara Harris-White/Nandini Gooptu (2000) and a short one by Rohini Hensman (2000), pick up the torch lit in New Delhi, 1981, a torch they may not know or remember, even if the earlier-mentioned item lists works by a number of Workshop participants. Complementary to these is the piece on Indian worker rights under globalization, presented as the first Arvind Das Memorial Lecturer by Jairus Banaji (2001). I note, in all three cases, that where, in 1980, our focus was largely on class formation and autonomy, with little if any mention of democracy, here it is in good part on democracy, in terms of labor rights or even parliamentary elections as self-empowering (cf. John & Chenoy 1996, Ewing & Sibley 2000). And a good thing too for working people, if not for romantic socialists trying to recruit them to a utopia either out of date or out of sight. (Not that Arvind had any problem with utopias, as witness his approving reference to Marx's in the earlier-mentioned book review).

H-W&G's piece bears comparison with our rough-hewn essays of the early 1980s. Although addressed to "unorganised labour" in India, this actually means addressed to labor and its organizations in general, since only seven percent are in the "organized sector," and only half of these are unionized. Here a parenthesis is necessary. (You'll enjoy this one, Arvind).

I was at an "informal" or "alternative" international trade union solidarity event in Johannesburg in 1999, at which the Indian working class was "represented" by seriously aged leaders (I am myself a mere sixty-five) of shrinking but still surviving Indian Communist unions as well as one or two more youthful and independent unionists. At a certain point the Indian participants walked out, as if they were a state delegation to a meeting of the United Nations. This was in protest at a Hong Kong-based and British NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) solidarity activist "interfering in the internal affairs" not of India but of China. They had earlier been upset at a photo display of women workers incinerated in a toy factory fire in "socialist" China (though apparently they had no such a problem with photos of those incinerated in a factory fire in "neo-colonial" Thailand). Insofar as interference in the internal affairs of other countries would seem to be one definition of labor internationalism, I was appalled. For while they were taking this stand in the name of "the Indian working-class," but behaving in nation-state diplomatic mode, I was trying to work out, from the *Shramik Pratisthan* book, that the Communist union center which published it could not represent more than five percent of the Indian working classes. It seems I erred on the upward side by about four percent. I was equally appalled, it must be said, that this supposedly alternative conference then made public apology to the Indian delegation for a breach of some earlier agreed protocol, as little representative of international solidarity as the Indian delegation was of the Indian working-classes.

But back to the actual working people of India. The contributions to SR2001 focus on the ninety-three percent. And, with twenty extra years of wisdom behind them, they deepen our early attempts to surpass (our own) workerism, arguing that workers in the petty-commodity sector can organize and strengthen

themselves through the construction of cooperatives and through increasing electoral participation and struggle for relevant human and labor (not only wage-earner or union) rights, nationally and internationally. The scenario, in India as elsewhere, is sobering, but not necessarily gloomy. It is simply that any labor movement relevant to a globalized and informatized capitalism is going to have to treat unions as just one contributor to labor organization, struggle, and collective-identity formation, that is going to take a whole gamut of forms. This is strongly implied by other SR2001 articles, whether from a struggling Brazil, a devastated Russia or a “flexibilized” New York City.

It is also beginning to be understood by the left union centers in India themselves, though one has to doubt they have the necessary capacity for self-transformation. The left unions in India have, after all, been involved in self-criticism on such issues since the early 1980s (Waterman 1982:466–7). A publication I was given in Johannesburg was the outcome of a 1999 seminar in Mumbai. It was a sobering self-assessment, recognized the declining representativity of unions even within the formal sector, and declared that:

The Seminar is equally unanimous and emphatic that unification of the movement must bring within its ambit, on a basis of equality, organizations and groups working among the informal segments of the economy, thereby creating a large and powerful force representative of all toiling people in the country. (Shramik Pratishtan 1999:135. My emphasis—PW)

Reflecting on this hypothetical potential, it does seem to me that it might be worthwhile republishing (with a new introduction) the book Arvind co-edited after the TULP3W Workshop. Not only as a gesture to him as an individual, but as a reminder to new generations and sectors of the labor movement about where and when a new breadth and sobriety began. Solidarity needs to be expressed not only synchronically and horizontally with other worlds of labor and labor in other worlds, but also diachronically and historically with forebears; Not only to pay homage but to learn from misunderstandings and mistakes. In the meantime, and until this happens (and just in case it doesn't) this reminiscence and reflection is

for
MANOSHI AND PIYA
In Solidarity

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