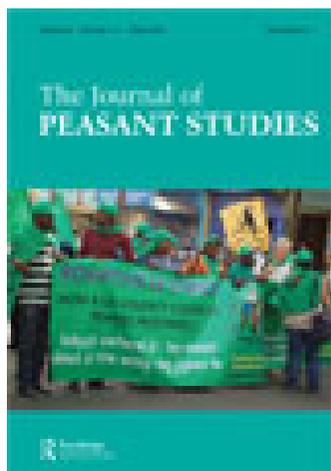


This article was downloaded by: [14.139.114.18]

On: 29 May 2015, At: 03:17

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:  
1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,  
London W1T 3JH, UK



## The Journal of Peasant Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjps20>

### Remembering Arvind Narayan das (1948-2000)

Manish K. Thakur <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Lecturer, Department of Sociology , Goa University , Goa, 403206, India

Published online: 05 Feb 2008.

To cite this article: Manish K. Thakur (2001) Remembering Arvind Narayan das (1948-2000), The Journal of Peasant Studies, 28:2, 187-190, DOI:

[10.1080/03066150108438771](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150108438771)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150108438771>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other

liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## Obituary

# Remembering Arvind Narayan Das (1948–2000)

MANISH K. THAKUR

The untimely demise of Arvind Narayan Das, a long-time member of the Editorial Advisory Board of and contributor to *The Journal of Peasant Studies* [Das, 1982, 1987], has somehow escaped the attention of the academic world in India. Even a prestigious Indian publication like the *Economic and Political Weekly* took almost two months to carry an obituary. This has surprised many of its regular readers, as Arvind Das had been a regular contributor to its pages since the mid-1970s. His writings may not have added theoretical weight to the then-raging 'mode of production' debate, but they certainly shaped the social sensitivities of post-Naxalite university-going Indian youth. They were the only windows on the 'killing fields' of Bihar through which members of India's metropolitan intelligentsia could look, and sympathize with or lament about, depending on their political proclivities.

One wonders whether this indifference to Arvind, someone with 'one foot in academia and a toehold in journalism', is an oversight or a deliberate strategy to exclude this 'dilettante academic' from the *sanctum sanctorum* of high academia, and thus to deter future gate-crashers. It is true that he was not a 'pure' academic in the sense of being a full-time one, but then he was not wholly external to such institutions either, a point conceded even by purist academics. This was not merely in terms of his institutional affiliations, which were many – the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies (Patna), the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (Noida), the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (Pune), the Centre for Social Studies (Surat), the Public Enterprises Centre for Continuing Education (Delhi), the Asian Development Research Institute (Patna), the Centre for Asian Studies (Amsterdam), and the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague) – but also in terms of quality and character of his published output. For purposes of clarity, one can discern

---

Manish Kumar Thakur, Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Goa University, Goa-403206, India.

*The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.28, No.2, January 2001, pp.187–190

PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

three distinct academic fields to which Arvind Das made significant contributions: political economy, agrarian sociology, and social history.

The political economy of India had always been the abiding concern of Arvind. At a time when neo-classical economics seemed to have turned its back on classical political economy, he was one of the rare few who remained consistent in their advocacy of a need for critical engagement with the political economy of the Indian state. Proclamations about the 'end of ideology' and the 'end of history' did not dilute his intellectual commitment to probe the class character of the Indian state. Despite not being a sociologist by training, he nevertheless utilized effectively in his writings the major theoretical insights of political sociology. The latter, however, was to be deeply rooted in politico-economic concerns, as he believed that 'facile political sociology fails unless it is enriched by recourse to political economy' [Das, 1994: 213]. Arvind remained firm in his conviction that republican values would stay empty in Indian society as long as the state refused to move in the direction of substantive equality. For him, equity and social justice had to be the corner-stones of democratic nation-building in India.

It was Arvind's commitment to these core values that lay behind his call for 'another republic'. According to him [Das, 1994: 246], 'the alternative [= another republic] lies in the formation of an India based on equity – social, economic, political, federal, and gender-based. It calls for a constitution on truly republican principles – deeper and more multi-dimensional than mere formal democracy, an India where even the poor matter as citizens of an autonomous republic.' Unlike his numerous radical friends, however, he was not totally dismissive of the gains achieved by bourgeois parliamentary politics. '[D]espite changes in form', he wrote [Das, 1994: 220], 'a basic continuity in post-colonial Indian parliamentary politics has been maintained through the strands of pluralism, populism, secularism and social democracy'. This was indeed a fine tribute to the virtues of democracy, coming as it did from an erstwhile Naxalite.

Agrarian change was a predominant motif in Arvind's interests, not just in his academic writings but also in the form of a life-long commitment at the level of praxis. His most valuable published output concerned the field of agrarian sociology. Through numerous research papers and books, therefore, he sustained the view that the process of agrarian transformation in India had been achieved more as a result of the fighting spirit of the Indian peasant than as a legislative gift from the Indian ruling elite. '[T]he principal motive force of change, such as it has been', he pointed out [Das, 1983: 227], 'has come from the peasantry itself, albeit through halting, sporadic and sometimes even blundering actions. Any interpretation of agrarian change primarily as an elite sponsored land reform amounts therefore to chasing the shadow without trying to grasp the substance.' The

focus of many of his major contributions [*Das*, 1979, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a] was on the dynamics of 'agrarian change from above and below'. Even though his own sympathies lay with changes brought about from below, he did not fail to appreciate the incremental gains made through conventional political means. His faith in the great transformative potential of the Indian peasantry, however, remained unshaken.

As a Marxist, Arvind had always been sensitive to the force and dynamics of history, rather than of a History. However, unlike many orthodox Marxists, he gradually came to develop a healthy scepticism about grand histories. To be fair to him, his class approach remained undiluted [*Das*, 1984a, 1984b], even though his historiographical concerns changed. This made it possible for him to engage in a brief flirtation with Subaltern Studies [*Das*, 1983a], and the subsequent influences of E.P. Thompson, and others, saw him flowering as a fully-fledged social historian, the result being a veritable little classic 'Changel' [*Das*, 1996 – also 1986, 1987]. This is the most sensitive portrayal of an Indian village to have been written since the earlier classic by Srinivas [1976]. In this book, which brilliantly combines history and biography, Arvind is at his creative best, and his narrative moves freely while imbibing insights from the major social science disciplines. It is the type of 'sociological imagination' which C. Wright Mills advocated a long time ago in his book of the same title.

These academic interests notwithstanding, he had an almost primeval concern with his home state, Bihar [*Das*, 1979, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1987, 1992, 1996]. Concern is perhaps the wrong word, since for him Bihar was a near-obsession, and in a way he was Bihar's alter ego. The latter is evident in his view that 'Bihar is not only the second biggest state of the Republic, it also occupies the space where the very heart of India is located'. This hyperbole, however, should not mislead one into believing that Arvind was a regionalist at best, and at worst parochial. Neither was he an advocate of a 'sons of the soil' form of agrarianism. Much rather, for him Bihar was quite simply the laboratory case where the Indian republic had to prove its worth. Till his last days, he remained loyal to the cause of Bihar, because he was loyal to the cause of the Indian republic. Most emphatically, his was not a public relations exercise to boost the image of his home state. Arvind's periodic and well-researched interventions were designed, therefore, not to create a benign image of Bihari society but rather to set the record straight on its political dynamics. At another level, Bihar served as a test case to enable him to grapple with and conceptually disentangle the caste/class nexus in a concrete situation. Even when the established political left had somehow reconciled itself to the enduring primacy of caste, he never got tired of advocating a popular mobilization against both the BJP–Samata combine and the Congress–RJD alliance.

Despite having made his mark as a metropolitan intellectual, Arvind Das remained attached to his rural-mofussil origins. It is this sense of attachment which resonates in, endows with empathy, and gives life to his 'biography of a village' [Das, 1996]. There is no doubt that, in view of his connections with the CPI (ML), he consciously produced 'committed literature' à la Jean-Paul Sartre. But it is a tribute to his intellectual probity that he could combine social sensitivity, earthiness, Sartre, Gramsci, and much more, without becoming deracinated or compromising on political action. While most of the committed intellectuals of his generation became cynical after a few brushes with the romance of revolution and returned to quotidian life, his was by contrast a long-lasting political engagement with the cause of radical movements.

Arvind did indeed wash his hands off the Naxalite misadventure, but his radicalism nevertheless remained intact. His powerful writing exposed the many paradoxes of Bihari society: poverty and para-banking, corruption and caste, mafia and mass killings. He imaginatively analysed its numerous ailments and umpteen possibilities. The very fact that someone like him, who had all the ingredients of a yuppie, came to develop a trenchant critique of Indian yuppiedom, and struggled for equity and justice, infuses the rest of us with hope. To remember Arvind, therefore, is to renew one's pledge to the core republican values he always stood by and fought for.

#### REFERENCES

- Das, Arvind N., 1979, *Does Bihar Show the Way? Apathy, Agitation and Alternatives in an Unchanging State*, Calcutta: Reseach India Publications.
- Das, Arvind N., 1982, *Agrarian Movements in India: Studies in 20th Century Bihar*, London: Frank Cass.
- Das, Arvind N., 1983a, 'Agrarian Change from Above and Below: Bihar 1947-78', in Guha (ed.) [1983].
- Das, Arvind N., 1983b, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Change in Bihar, 1900-1980*, Delhi: Manohar.
- Das, Arvind N., 1984a, 'Class in Itself, Class for Itself: Social Articulation in Bihar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.19, No.17.
- Das, Arvind N., 1984b, 'The Indian Working Class: Relations of Production and Reproduction', in Das, Nilkant and Dube (eds.) [1984].
- Das, Arvind N., 1986, *The Longue Duree: Continuity and Change in Changel: Historiography of an Indian Village from the 18th Century Towards the 21st Century*, Rotterdam: Erasmus University.
- Das, Arvind N., 1987, 'Changel: Three Centuries of an Indian Village', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.15, No.1.
- Das, Arvind N., 1992, *The Republic of Bihar*, Delhi: Penguin.
- Das, Arvind N., 1994, *India Invented: A Nation in the Making* (Second Revised and Enlarged Edition), Delhi: Manohar.
- Das, Arvind N., 1996, *Changel: Biography of a Village*, Delhi: Penguin.
- Das, Arvind N. and V. Nilkant (eds.), 1979, *Agrarian Relations in India*, Delhi: Manohar.
- Das, Arvind N., Nilkant, V. and P.S. Dube (eds.), 1984, *The Worker and the Working Class*, New Delhi: Public Enterprises Centre for Continuing Education.
- Guha, Ranajit (ed.), 1983, *Subaltern Studies II*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Srinivas, M.N., 1976, *The Remembered Village*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.