

Veena Das

Doctor of Science

Durham Cathedral, 27 June 2018

Anthropology is often referred to as philosophy with the people in. Professor Veena Das has connected fine-grained ethnographic observations with broader philosophical questions which show us how we make our lives habitable in the face of precarious conditions. To Veena Das, anthropology is not only a scientific endeavour but also a matter of connectedness, a personal engagement with the world. What has animated her unparalleled contribution to Anthropology is how to prepare ourselves to receive knowledge that stands somewhat outside our received templates - call it the knowledge of the other. Her scholarship within Anthropology has travelled widely examining in the process rituals, myths, violence, state, language, sexuality, law, public health not as separate domains but how they are intertwined with each other in the everyday.

In her late twenties she wrote her seminal book *Structure and Cognition* (1977) which examined 13th and 19th century textual practices through which innovations and claims to new status is made. Her turn to the Anthropology of violence occurs as a responsiveness to a crisis. In 1984 the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguard and as a result there followed violent reprisal attacks on various Sikh communities in India. These events were captured by Veena Das in her moving and memorable books *Mirrors of Violence* (1990). In her second single-authored book *Critical Events* (1995) she addressed the role of the state and the sexual violation during the horrific violence of the Partition of India of 1947, the Bhopal disaster and the limits of toxic tort litigation, and other events that marked important transitions in the formation of the state and the contestation over its sovereign power. These accounts were brought to the surface by communities among whom she was working, in the aftermath of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. In due course she bravely testified against the perpetrators of these riots. She has changed our understanding of the Anthropology of Violence through three ground-breaking collaborative publications: *Social Suffering; Violence and Subjectivity; and Remaking a World*. She brought into conversation Indian texts and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in her fabulous book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (forward by recently deceased philosopher Stanley Cavell). It provides a

critique of the dominant theories of trauma and tells us to understand the social relations of lives lived in the shadows of state violence. Her recent book *Affliction* uses qualitative and quantitative data and explores illness among the urban poor. Primarily an interdisciplinary exercise with doctors, economists and public health scholars, through it she has made anthropology attend to contemporary problems. In all her work till date she has made concepts from texts and ethnography to be understood theoretically. And in all these conceptual framings her autobiography has constantly entered the ethnographic texture of the ordinary.

Veena was born in Lahore (now in Pakistan) and her family was displaced as well as experienced a deep loss of close family members as a result of Partition of India. Growing up in Delhi's Model Basti from the age of 8 she fondly remembers riding her bike and discovering the pleasure of a library. Even though she was in a context of relative poverty with limited means, growing up in post-nationalist and independent India she had the support of aspirational male family members, teachers and institutions. Her brother reminded her: 'Do you want to be the kind of person who is looked at by others or who looks out at the world?' She got a scholarship and was educated at Lady Irwin School, followed by Indraprastha College of which she is a distinguished Alumni. In 1967 she joined as a lecturer in Delhi School of Economics where she finished her Phd and taught till 1997 before moving to New School of Research in New York and then to Johns Hopkins University in 2000 in Baltimore where she is the Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology and Professor of Humanities. Along the way her teachers and interlocutors were noted Indian sociologists like MN Srinivas, Andre Beteille, AM Shah, JPS Uberoi; anthropologists in SOAS like Adrian Mayer, Audrey Cantlie, and Christopher Davis and over 50 graduate students among whom she is a much-loved teacher, collaborator and friend. She has had numerous honours: visiting professorships at Sorbonne, Manchester University; awarded the Anders Retzius Gold Medal of the Swedish Society of Anthropology, and Nesim Habib prize of the University of Geneva; a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the Academy of Scientists from Developing Countries and various other honorary doctorates and fellowships. Her work has been the subject of readers, edited collections as well as art and dance performances on pain.

All her work, since the 1970s has shown us the limits of the Western "canon" and is an exemplary illustration of what we refer to today as decolonising the curriculum. *Structure and Cognition* (1977) was a response to the limited idea of understanding

Indian societies through the frameworks of purity and pollution. Instead it showed the Indian historical legacy of mythologies, texts and scriptures which was part of the everyday and ordinary lives. The intensities of life and death observed in the context of myths, rituals and in expressions of the everyday comes full circle in *Life and Words* which shows the intimacy of language with death. Das's legacy endures in the conceptualisation of the bureaucratic practices of the state through the role of social workers when engaging with women and children affected by sexual violence during conflict. This shows the intimate relationship between care and violence. Yet violence in her writing is folded, exists as fragments, poisonous knowledge which show the ongoing, fragile efforts to carve out a life under challenging circumstances, where the everyday is a site of danger and security. As she (Das 2000:205) reminds us:

How have women taken the noxious signs of violation and reoccupied them through the work of domestication, ritualization and re-narration? The zone of the everyday had to be recovered by reoccupying the very signs of injury that marked her so that continuity could be shaped in that very space of devastation.

As all curious students of anthropology will tell you – and there are many here – what anthropology is really good at is how to be morally engaged with the world with humility and without self-righteousness. Here Veena Das's scholarship of the textures of words, gestures and acts of care performed as part of everyday life that stand up to the worst horrors shows us a way to inhabit this world.

Chancellor, I present to you Professor Veena Das to receive the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

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