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A Genius of Many Parts, and a Few Warts

By: A.R. Venkatachalapathy

D.D. Kosambi was a polymath genius-mathematician, historian, numismatist, archaeologist-whose brilliance was inseparable from his volatile temperament and who eventually retreated into a concealed alter ego. His flaws were the price of his extraordinary versatility.

In February 1999, I went to Pune to attend a cultural studies workshop. But I had another agenda. It was to be a double pilgrimage: paying a visit to the dwellings of two geniuses, Pudumaippithan and D.D. Kosambi (DDK).

Young and full of enthusiasm, I was a teacher at the fledgling Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli. My edition of the uncollected writings of great Tamil writer Pudumaippithan (1906-1948) had just appeared. Pudumaippithan had spent nearly a year in Pune towards the end of his life. While working hard on the script of *Rajamukti*, a film by popular Tamil star M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, he was afflicted with acute tuberculosis, and died prematurely. From the rooms of Rubab Mansions (near Deccan Cinema) on Jangli Maharaj Road, he scrawled many a poignant letter to his friends. I went looking for Rubab Mansions.

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Luckily, a friend put me in touch with R.P. Nene, a younger associate of DDK. I had struck two mangoes with one stone, as the Tamil saying goes. While the search for Pudumaippithan's lodgings proved futile, the second objective was more than fulfilled. The Goan-style bungalow built by DDK's father, Dharmamand, that Ram Ramaswamy mentions in this splendid biography still stood on Bhandarkar Road.

The overgrown garden was strewn with microliths and other archaeological artefacts. Inside the home, on the shelves, were rows of whodunnits-I distinctly remember seeing Perry Mason novels. (The great Italian microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg would have been pleased.) This, however, was not the first time I set eyes on DDK's books.

In the late 1980s, my search for Pablo Neruda's poems had taken me to the Jawaharlal Nehru University Library where DDK's rich collection of books was stacked. (The 4,000-odd books, heavily annotated by the owner, are now dispersed and lost for the most part.) I remember holding his autographed copy of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862)-appropriate considering how intertwined the lives of father and son, Dharamamand and Damodar, were.

DDK's acid tongue and sarcastic (and self-deprecating) pen have spun much oral lore. The lack of anecdotes being one of the few shortcomings of this deeply researched and engagingly written book, here is one that Nene recounted in his own quiet manner. On one occasion, Nene had called on DDK without informing him earlier. After finishing some business regarding the peace movement, DDK, while seeing him off, warned Nene to call beforehand the next time he came. While he believed in peace, his dog (seen arguing with him in an excellent photograph included in this book) did not!

Writings on Kosambi

Since his death 60 years ago, a steady stream of DDK's uncollected and collected writings has been published, adding to his aura. If at least two substantial memorial volumes were published after his death, from about the time of his birth centenary, there have been further publications by and about him. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, who had earlier edited DDK's essays on numismatics for the Indian Council for Historical Research, compiled a large volume of his collected essays (*Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, Oxford University Press, 2002).

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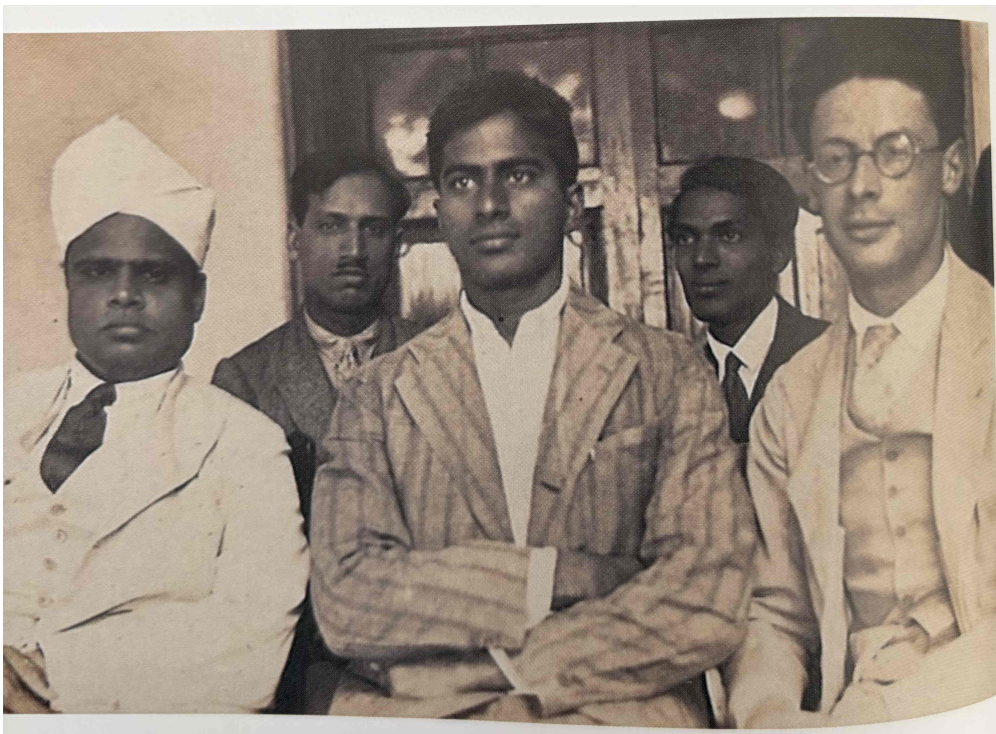
Meera Kosambi, DDK's daughter and a pioneering feminist scholar and sociologist in her own right, in enabling more work on DDK, also added to the work of future scholars. Being DDK's daughter was burden enough. But in practically resurrecting her grandfather,

Dharmanand Kosambi, a pioneer in the modern revival of Buddhism (and, one may add, an early student of Marxism) in India, she perhaps made it worse for herself, as I could see in my interactions with her. Ramaswamy has a whole chapter on Dharmanand. Rich though it is, the chapter does not quite sit well in the book as it barely addresses the relationship between the two. One hopes, however, that there will soon be a biography of the father as well by Ramaswamy himself.

Ram Ramaswamy, a distinguished scientist and educationist, had earlier whetted our appetite with his compilation of DDK's mathematical writings (*D.D. Kosambi: Selected Works in Mathematics and Statistics*, Springer, 2017) and the publication of DDK's searingly honest intellectual autobiography, *Adventure into the Unknown* (Three Essays Collective, 2016). With this excellent biography, he has now gone for the kill.

The Genius

DDK was more than a pathbreaking historian (if that was not enough). His self-image, as outlined in the author's note to *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, went like this: "... best known as a mathematician, but endowed with a truly Renaissance versatility. His formula for chromosome distance occupies a central place in classical genetics. His work on coins makes numismatics an exact science. An unrivalled collection of microliths, the discovery of a Brahmi inscription at Karle, and of a remarkable number of megaliths with rock-engraving form substantial contributions to archaeology. His edition of the poetry of Bhratrihari and of the oldest known Sanskrit anthology are landmarks in Indian text-criticism." Left out of this note are his contributions to the peace movement, the championing of solar energy over nuclear, and arguments for small dams against big ones.



At the height of the Red Scare (venturing to America during the Joseph McCarthy era) and the Cold War, DDK wore Marxism on his sleeve. While he wavered during the Lysenko affair (the Soviet state's promotion of Trofim Lysenko's pseudoscientific theories that rejected Mendelian genetics and led to the suppression of genuine biological research), he was disillusioned by the Soviet invasion of Hungary (1956).

Commitment to ideology notwithstanding, he ridiculed party apparatchiks as "OM" (Official Marxists), famously putting down the leading light of the Communist Party of India, S.A. Dange, with the words: "Marxism is not a substitute for thinking, but a tool of analysis which must be used, with a certain amount of skill and understanding, upon the proper material. Interlarding groundless conjectures with quotations from Engels [and Marx] does not suffice." (Interestingly, DDK, perhaps influenced by his father, seems to have had a deep reverence for M.K. Gandhi.)

A Personality of Angularities

DDK's influence went even beyond his already wide interests. DDK makes mention of his own "disagreeable personality", but that hardly prevented him winning acolytes that included personalities as diverse as Kumar Shahani, Sunil Janah, Jeffrey Masson, and Satish Dhawan. (Ramaswamy has now promised a volume of memoirs by his friends and acquaintances. Hopefully, he will edit his correspondence for publication as well.) Two very different books, an ecological history of India by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (*This Fissured Land*) and an *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (edited by Asish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willeman)-published at about the same time in the early 1990s-were dedicated to him.

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Apart from his arthritis (there is a whole chapter on this; if DDK was intellectually arrogant, physically he was rather vulnerable), DDK complained most about the lack of sources to write Indian history. He should have tried writing biographies of Indians! DDK himself would not share private details as they would no longer remain private (a comment he made to a publisher).

DDK's many angularities came in the way of forging personal relations, and therefore he took recourse to extensive (and expensive) airmail correspondence with numerous interlocutors in America and Europe. Readers of the Harvard Indologist Daniel Ingall's memoir would be familiar with the richness (and literary value) of DDK's mails, typed from margin to margin on aerogrammes.

As Indian historians know from experience, documents survive better in foreign repositories. Further, though much of his personal collection was lost in the devastating 1961 Pune floods, a lot did survive, including at least one diary. Ramaswamy has doggedly tracked these sources across the world, and put them to good use.

The genius with the famously Beethovenian scowl who emerges from this landmark biography is an even more complicated figure than one had imagined. As the son of the first academic of South Asian descent to be appointed to Harvard University, DDK was educated in Boston. After dabbling in engineering, he settled down to mathematics, winning the respect of his Harvard teachers. After brief stints at Benares and Aligarh, he spent over a decade at Fergusson College, Pune. The Fergusson years were the most prolific-with 55 articles and two books-and his publications in mathematics earned him an international reputation.

But his mercurial temperament and brusqueness led to his ouster from Fergusson. When asked to attend the portrait unveiling ceremony of the head of his department, he had quipped that he would prefer to hang the original.

At TIFR

At this time, DDK came to Homi Jehangir Bhabha's notice, who appointed him as the first faculty member of the newly founded Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR). After the initial years, when there was much bonhomie between Bhabha and Baba (as DDK was generally referred to by friends), the relationship soured.

The book concludes with a chapter that makes for sad reading. In the last years of his life, DDK created an alter ego for himself ... going to great lengths to conceal his real identity.

With DDK "spreading himself too thin" and his extensive political activities, he was humiliated and dismissed in 1962. To make matters worse, one of the 20th century's greatest Indian intellectuals failed to win the national professorship that he coveted, and was without a job or income for a while. And this in a country where tens of thousands of teachers draw fat salaries for doing practically nothing.

But it was during his tenure at TIFR that DDK produced the paradigm-shifting *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Popular Book Depot, 1956). The biography devotes a chapter to its making, aptly titling it a "magnum opus". Completely new, at least to this reviewer, is DDK's relationship with Monica Felton-a British peace activist and biographer-who seems to have read and commented extensively on the original manuscript. Felton (1906-1970) was the original dedicatee of *An Introduction* until it was removed in the posthumously published second edition.

Waterloo

Ramaswamy quotes extensively from the correspondence-for about two years the two exchanged at least one letter a week, though not a single one from DDK survives. A whole chapter is devoted to Felton, though he does so without naming the relationship, instead

suggesting that there is "enough subtext for the discerning reader to gauge [its] nature". Was it platonic or was it something more? It feels strange to imagine DDK being moved by gentle emotions and non-intellectual passions.

But even as his reputation as a historian soared, DDK met with what Ramaswamy calls his Waterloo. In a desperate bid to reclaim his reputation as a serious mathematician, DDK published, against the best advice of his peers and friends, what he claimed was a proof of the Riemann Hypothesis.

Ramaswamy addresses this fiasco in a balanced manner, without undue empathy. DDK never recovered from this debacle. All humans are flawed; perhaps geniuses especially so. The tragedy does not seem to have ended with this. The book concludes with a chapter that makes for sad reading. In the last years of his life, DDK created an alter ego for himself, with the name of Sven Ducray, going to great lengths to conceal his real identity.

Genius is a package. One cannot pick and choose. Ramaswamy wonders if "[DDK] had been more disciplined, ... the world of learning would have been somewhat poorer". Reading this admirable biography, one would tend to agree.

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