

Interview with Veena Das in Reflection of Colloquium “Consequences of Ethnography” (Daniela Mosaad Pěničková)

*Veena DAS (born 1945) is a world-renowned scholar in Indian anthropology. She completed her Ph.D. in 1970 and taught at the Delhi School of Economics (The University of Delhi) for more than thirty years before getting a joint appointment at the New School for Social Research (part of The New School in NY) in 1997. Since 2000 she is a member of the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University (Maryland). The areas of her specialization include the anthropology of violence, social suffering, and the state. Das's edited book *Mirrors of Violence* (1990) was one of the pioneering publications introducing the subjects of violence within anthropology of South Asia. The trilogy she edited with others, including Arthur Kleinman, opened new directions on these issues in anthropology globally. The volumes include *Social Suffering* (1997), *Violence and Subjectivity* (2000), and *Remaking a World* (2001). In 2006, she published *Life and Worlds: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, in which she presented the notion that violence (and suffering) is not an interruption of ordinary life but it is implicated in the ordinary. She has explored how the everyday life experience and the eventful experience are joined together in making the normal and the critical. Her most recent books are *Affliction: Health, Disease, and Poverty* (2015) and three co-edited volumes, *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy* (2014), *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium* (2015), and *Politics of the Urban Poor* (forthcoming).*

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Veena, if I may touch upon yesterday's colloquium, you made some critical comments about indulging in the analysis of the objective v. subjective approach in ethnographic fieldwork. Why?*

Veena Das: I think the typical kind of advocacy, as in Jonathan Stillo's paper, is that we need more doctors to become more empathetic, and I would say yes – who would doubt it? But when you have a scale of the sort of incidence of TB, like you have in India or Romania, you have to think about the main problems. There are two major and related problems here: One is that the technology is very outdated, which leads to the second one – a diagnostic delay. With TB, the sputum microscopy is only about 30 % correct. And the protocol keeps emphasizing these precise procedures: The patient has to go in the morning, in the evening, has to give three samples, etc., etc. But there *is* new technology. The Genexpert TB test gives you more precise results in a couple of hours with one sputum sample. So,

my point was that we need to focus on how to change the institutional design. In the two or three cities where we have been working with TB patients in India, in a project spearheaded by the Gates Foundation, we understood that various experts have to combine to make the Genexpert free. It still does not mean that the doctors are going to send patients immediately to diagnosis, so, along with the commodities, what we have done was also to change the structure of the consultations. Any patient with a two to three-week cough, the compounder [of project experts] have enabled to give him/her a prescription for the Genexpert TB test. And that has been recognized in the lab. So, the Genexpert test went up, not because doctors became more empathetic or began to understand better, but because the condition of possibility became easier.

I was thus saying that we have to think much more about the institutional design, especially with diseases of this kind where the numbers are massive. As for the aforementioned advocacy by Paul Farmer, which was about home visits for underprivileged people: It is so expensive that I do not see that the governments would support that. It may work with small populations but not with such large populations as in India or Romania. We need to get out of this groove and think about each kind of disease scenario differently. Going back to Jonathan's case study: The problem was the sanatorium. It really needed to be closed [chuckle]. We do not need a large sanatorium in the woods when most TB is among people in the community. We really need to reach the actual process of diagnosis on the community level and, by the way, this is something that Paul Farmer would also agree with, I think [chuckle]. These are the things you have to work with – the pharmaceutical industry to make the drugs available and cheaper. And, certainly, in places like India the structure of the provider's marketing is really a problem you have to focus on also, because patients typically get a week or two of antibiotics before they are even tested for TB. These are the kinds of structural problems and we do not need to go into the "should we be objective, should we be subjective, or, is it the patients' experience or doctors' experience that changes things", etc. If you need to get *here*, then what is the assemblage you need to put together to get there. You do not need extraordinary heroism on anybody's part. You need to identify the high notification doctors and labs and work with them. The structures you need to address are very locally specific things and you need to learn about them.

I think, also, anthropologists tend to think basically that numbers are very dehumanizing and I do not agree with that. It depends on how they are used. Occasionally they may be dehumanizing but, like for TB, if you do not have the numbers, you do not know the massiveness of the problem you are dealing with. An institutional design for treatment and intervention has to keep that dimensionality in mind, because what is doable in a small country or for a small case load is not doable in a large country or for a very large case load. Those are the considerations

I see missing in the anthropological discourse. Alongside, it did a lot to bring into the public the idea that the patient is not to be blamed, I think that *was* a great achievement. But include the numbers.

Going back to the Jonathan's research, here is the TB sanatorium so it seemed the obvious thing to begin the work in the TB sanatorium. But if you change the object of the study and say: "Let's see what are the numbers of TB or TB drugs consumed in the community", or "let's contrast it with a community clinic, do a community survey rather than a survey in the asylum or sanatorium", you may be in a better position. You may get then a different scenario of "where is TB". We think that the object for studying in medical anthropology is the clinic or the center, but you could argue quite the opposite. In the work I have done I also ended up getting to the clinic in several cases, but only through previous work in the community.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *You have been engrossed in the study of violence and social suffering since the 80s, edited books such as Violence and Subjectivity (2000) or Anthropology in the Margins of the State (2004) and so on. Has there been any approach shift since you started exploring social suffering until today?*

Veena Das: Problems have been emerging – through them you discover your own blind spots. Incidentally, it is not just the 80s. I did my work on the Partition (the partition of India in 1947) in the 70s, but I did not think at that time it was about violence or social suffering. I am saying that in my book that I thought I was doing a normal sort of kinship study. Only later I began to realize that when I was asking common interview questions, it led to those topics. Inormally do not do long interviews, sometimes I do surveys, but a lot of my work is just by being in the community doing participant observation, which is what I was doing in the 70s. Things in my work would kind of swell up and I did not realize until later that the narratives were related to this underlying complexity of violence, which was not immediately visible but definitely there. They were in the forms of talks, fights, tensions within the families, and they were not overtly attributed to the Partition but enfolded in itself these kinds of notions.

The one big question that was there from the very start was: *When and how do you become conscious of things?* Due to experiencing events such as Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, and in a way I was right in the middle of the scene of violence, I was able to discern different kinds of moments in the unfolding of violence. Obviously, what data it was possible to collect then was obviously not possible to collect for the Partition, but after 1984 I became very curious about the actual texture of relations in the slum areas because, while there was some killing that happened in the upper-class neighborhoods, most of it happened in the slums. I got interested in what the life in the slums was. Yes, some of the deaths had to do with the political riots, but many had other reasons. So, you get many other stories enfolded

into it. It is the particular moment of joining of events and everyday life that began to fascinate me. I began to ask questions like: “What are the textures of life? How is violence folded into them? Or, how does it inform relationships when no overt event has taken place?”

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *As an author, have you also gone through the stages discussed in the colloquium yesterday – being overwhelmed by suffering one explores in the field, inability to objectify or write about the violence experienced through the lives of your research participants?*

Veena Das: I do not think of writing as the most important moment for me. I do write because I feel compelled to write. At the same time, if I never published anything it would not matter very much to me. Now, I am not advocating that as a general thing [chuckle], but subjectively, writing is very painful regardless of the topic. Because you want to have fidelity in anthropology, you want to have fidelity in and to the people about which you communicate the subject matter. That is a very big question for me: Would they recognize themselves in what I write? Which is why I have these discussion groups in the ISERDD Institute I founded in Delhi, trying to share pieces of my writing, not in any dramatic way, you know. I have a stable group of colleagues in the Institute who are, with one exception, only Hindi speakers, some went through pretty poor schooling system and so on, but they have intense curiosity. In the process of training them in particular projects, and they have managed a wide variety of pretty difficult projects with the World Bank and other institutions, I am learning. They are not content in the thinking “We will do the survey and we just give you the data”, but they are very actively involved in what the research and findings are. The same often happens in the community. In the slums, the population is very heterogeneous in what they can do to survive, getting water, electricity, or they extensively comment on the political situation and so on. So, for me the anthropological colleagues are very important but they are one community. There are other communities who are as important.

When we talk about *being overwhelmed*. An overwhelming knowledge, what that means for me is that research and work can be overwhelming for me personally, of course, but in the community, there is a sense of conditioning the overwhelming knowledge, I call it an inordinate knowledge. These are things that you cannot face up to. Partly people have to learn not to see things, because it can be dangerous to see certain things, but partly you get habituated to particular forms of cruelty or violence. That is what I think about in association with being overwhelmed.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Was it shocking for you as a researcher when you started your work in the slums in the 90s?*

Veena Das: Well, I did not grow up in a slum, but I grew up in a pretty poor household. In the family people would be displaced by the Partition, I mean I was just a small baby but my parents went through that. We had lots of debts because of these things, so yes, it was not exactly like in the slums but it was not very high or upper class either.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Once you started research in the slums, do you feel like you also got habituated to violence and suffering? Have you felt sadness for the families you study?*

Veena Das: Sure, but that is like a condition of life, it is not like now I am happy, now I am sad. Because I am not constantly dwelling on the sadness, neither are the people in the slums. It is not like the people, because of their lives in this milieu of violence, have no capacity for pleasure. That is not true.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *If we take the case of the abducted daughter you presented yesterday, there was a great deal of disturbing violence involved, what effect does it have on you as a researcher?*

Veena Das: Yes, absolutely, horrific violence, but as for the effect I quite disagreed with David Mosse yesterday, who is a great anthropologist and I have a great respect for his work, but I do not agree that it is in a spirit of mourning that all [key] texts [about suffering] are written. I think there is a swirl of effects. There can be an absolute exhilaration, mourning, sadness, you know, a sheer joy on the contrary.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Sheer joy? In the aftermath of (exploring) violence?*

Veena Das: Yes. That gets to my point. It is not like there is violence and then there is the aftermath. For me, that is not the story. The story is that these things are steep, sometime their density goes up, sometimes it goes down, sometimes they configure into producing something else, sometimes it is there but we do not see it. It is the heterogeneity that I find fascinating as an ethnographer. But it does affect me. I can have a great time with the people in the slums, they have a great sense of humor. They have a great deal of irony about the national politics and there is obviously a lot of sadness and grief.

You know the things that are very simple to do, like sending your daughter to school, or that your daughter is doing well in school, can become a major source of contentment in the slums. I have a book called *Affliction* that came out in 2015 where I talk about these things. Now I am trying to finish this next book called *Textures of the Ordinary* (forthcoming) and the example I describe is this girl who is brilliant and really likes to go to school and work. But the father is illiterate. There is a very interesting way in which the parental generation can end up having certain

envy of the child. We do not often recognize it, but [for the parent] this is a child that can do things that I [the parent] can never do. And that combines with the fact that they live in the area in which some girls have eloped, and overall, there is a sense of danger around [being able to protect] girls. There was a period between 10–12 years of her age when she was just mercilessly beaten up by her father. In this period anything that she did was taken as a sign of defiance and even sickness. And you know, the neighborhood often stepped in, the family ended up taking her to various places thinking that she was possessed by a ghost, eventually settling on a particular psychiatric diagnosis, so she was then prescribed lithium, which seemingly helped some. After she finished school, and she was one of the three kids in her class who got the first division, most failed, I was helping her to get into college and I took her to a café. We were talking and asked her “So, how are you now?” she was like “Aunt, it was my father who was ill”. And she used a beautiful word in Hindu meaning “I began to believe in the cult of hope. It is not that I was ill”. She did finish her college and got decent work, even if not as a teacher as she wanted. The interesting thing was that all these fights with the father happened to her but when her younger sister reached this age, when the family was deciding if to send her to school, these [negative] energies were exhausted. The family was quite proud of the younger daughter to go to college. The older sister opened the door for her siblings. So, seemingly simple thing like “we should send girls to school” are not so simple in some places in Delhi. But there has been a dramatic increase in girls going to school lately. What is fascinating to me is the fact that they can struggle over that in the way this girl did and that these desires very ordinary in another context become very extraordinary in the context in which she lives.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *The norm for schooling in the US may be very extraordinary in Delhi, then?*

Veena Das: Yes, but I am not even comparing it to any international standard. These are others in India who go to school quite easily, their parents supporting them, they see these images on TV, so they know this is happening elsewhere [in the country]: Women go to school, but in poor neighborhoods this is not so.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *When did you come to the US?*

Veena Das: I had taught in the Delhi university for at least thirty years, I think. We came to the New School for Social Research in 1997 and at that time I was doing half time in New School and half time in the Delhi and then, in 2000 I think, I came full time to Johns Hopkins. I never made like a decision to come to the US, it just happened very contingently. With the New School, I could do one semester then go back to India and the next year again. So, I did not have to be away all year. But eventually the Delhi university would not let me continue the arrangement

and at Johns Hopkins they wanted me to be really committed. In addition, there were family matters. My husband needed heart surgery and at the time it was quite cumbersome to get the medication needed in India, so as long as I was in the US for a semester I could arrange that. Eventually the kids came. So, it was never a big decision, and I am not even sure that I would not go back in a three-year time or so. We have a house in Delhi.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Still, you have lived in the US for decades, do you feel like your approach as a researcher has been affected by the different social environment?*

Veena Das: I have a very, very rich intellectual community in Delhi with whom I stay in close contact, and I have very good colleagues and friends in the US. So, for me the move was not one between two very different intellectual environments. There is one important difference and that is the fact that in the US I could get students who could travel outside the country for fieldwork. In India I had one, actually, two students who worked outside India, they worked in the Netherlands and then I had one student who worked in Nepal, one in Bangladesh, and one in Lebanon, that was it. Very few overall, because the structure of resources was such. This is different in the US where working with lots of students who do research in very different places is no problem. And, actually, that *has been* very important for me.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *International scholars who come to the US often talk about providing an intellectual bridge between their home societies and North America. Would you relate to that?*

Veena Das: No. I am not a very aspirational person, so wherever I am, I find opportunity there, and they [different places] all have some interesting things to offer. If I had stayed in Delhi, who knows? But I would have probably got much more politically involved because the situation continued to deteriorate in terms of political interference in Indian universities. I do not know what it would have meant in terms of preserving the lives of my students if I had stayed and done that. I think it would have been a very big challenge, in fact. I would love to see how I would have acted out of that, it would have been a big test.

The big difference in the US was that Johns Hopkins supported my research in the slums for several years when I just started it. I had ten neighborhoods and resources for collecting very good data in them. But other than that, I do not see, for instance, many major differences between lives of university teachers in North America and India. As a college teacher in India you can live quite a comfortable life, but I am also a person who would not need a great deal of [material] resources [chuckle].

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Mainstream literature and media portray Europe and North America as societies with quite a secure living, juxtaposing these localities to the rest of the world – including India. What do you think about this?*

Veena Das: I think the secure living in the US is quite a myth. For example, I have a couple of papers out about my work with African American families with girls who have been diagnosed with HIV, you know, that was very difficult to write about. And even in Western Europe, it always depends where your eye is. If I lived in Denmark, I am sure I would be very interested why there is this kind of disquiet around refugees, or Muslim communities, etc. And not just in Denmark. It just isn't an ordinary thing to hate Muslims and there is such an increase in that... In that sense, I think Foucault was really prescient when he talked about the figure of the *dangerous individual*, someone who had not committed a crime but who was allegedly *likely to commit a crime*. I mean, the structure of that feeling is not new, in a sense it might have been focused on something else earlier and it is focused on the Muslims now. This is a really important area of concern.

It is located not in the everyday experiences but in the imaginary reality of these “very dangerous” individuals and in the idea that the social order is about to be completely disrupted by them. On one level, it is the power of rumor. Like I presented yesterday, these groups of Hindu men who think of Muslims as completely inflexible, hard-headed, cruel-hearted, while, either they have very little experience of Muslims, or their experience is not that [far] off. But they create an illusion, which is precisely a flight from the everyday experience. A rumor. And a rumor is infectious.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *You mentioned that sometimes it is necessary, or convenient, not to see certain things, like in the case of the initial police investigation of the young girl's abduction. However, when one points out these things, writes about them, as you do, do you ever worry about your own safety?*

Veena Das: Well, I have gotten all kinds of threats over the years, but those are not directly connected to the fieldwork in the slums. I rarely have a sense of myself in the field. It might happen that I feel that this may endanger somebody and *then* I am *very careful* what I write and how I write it.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *So you never worried about yourself as an author, wom-an activist or politically engaged woman?*

Veena Das: Yes, the one time I really worried was in 1984 when the children were small, my eldest son was just finishing elementary school and they were all involved, with some other kids, in a camp I organized for refugees, which was a problem for many local interest groups. A guy pointed out to me “You know, you may not worry about yourself, but what about your children?” I realized then that

he was right, I was not able to protect them if anything happened. But as a family we always had a sense that it is very important to be able to aid, to be, ehm, *truthful* is the word that comes to my mind. But I do not want to make it into a very dramatic thing – I just think we learned how to deal with these things without getting too paranoid about it.

It is not that I never get scared, but in proportion to what I see, it is very little that endangers me. But there are real dangerous situations that we may face, long-term sometimes, and then you have to learn how to accommodate that. I do not believe in foolishly going and risking my life, you know, going about one's fieldwork carelessly. Russel made a great statement: "If you have your head cut off, your thinking capacity is considerably reduced" [chuckle]. But, seriously, when I am doing something, I am doing it in a way that is sustainable, not heroically earning fame for a reckless article or report that I get out of when I am finished with work but people have to carry on with that. I put a lot of deliberation into that. The most important thing is what I said: I tend to see the proportion of what I and people around me have to deal with.

Daniela Mosaad Pěničková: *Thank you for the interview, Veena. Enjoy the rest of your visit in Prague.*

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Veena Das

veenadas@jhu.edu

Department of Anthropology
Johns Hopkins University
<https://anthropology.jhu.edu>