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Vom Paradies nicht allzu viel zu hoffen



I was born on 21 May 1961 in New Delhi, India, and was educated largely in New Delhi and Delhi, in Economics and Economic History, culminating in a Ph.D. in Economic History from the Delhi School of Economics in 1987. I began teaching at the Delhi School of Economics as a Research Associate in 1983 and went on to hold posts there as Reader and then Professor of Economic History from 1989 to 1995; these years were interspersed with brief teaching stints at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Minnesota, and the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Since 1995, I've been teaching as Directeur d'études at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. My main publications include: *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990); *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500–1700* (London, 1993); *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge, New York, 1997); *Penumbral Visions: Making Politics in Early Modern South India* (Delhi/Ann Arbor, 2001); and most relevant to the year at hand, a joint book with V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka-Period Tamilnadu* (Delhi, 1992). – Address: EHESS, 54 Boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris, France.
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Ten months is a long time, enough certainly to have almost completely transformed the youngest and most solemn of our distinguished colleagues, Henry V. Stater (or “Professor Henry”, as he is better known). Long enough too for some members of the Wiko staff to have had children, for a couple of cake-like villas to have been built on neighbouring streets, and for the situation in the Middle East to have gone from somewhat sombre to pretty much hopeless. But 2000–2001 was a short year in many respects as well, seen from the end of the temporal telescope that I sit at today. This year

in Berlin had been planned well in advance, in fact much farther in advance than most things I have done in my entire life. It was in 1997 or 1998 that David Shulman, Narayana Rao and I thought we should spend a year together in some peaceful spot, to finish a book that we had begun to plan some time before, but which was proving rather more difficult to write than our earlier joint book, *Symbols of Substance* (1992). The subject of the new book was to be the late pre-colonial historiography of South India, and after toying with other ideas and spots (Jerusalem, Paris), the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin seemed the most reasonable and practical solution. David Shulman largely negotiated the affair, he being the only one who knew the Kolleg (or for that matter Berlin) directly. Then, feeling that our project would be greatly enriched by having an Indo-Persian aspect to it, we invited our friend Muzaffar Alam to join in, which he did. So, by early October 2000, when I arrived at the Kolleg as the advance scout of the group, we already had some advantages over most of our colleagues. We knew each other well. We had at least one well-defined project, perhaps even two. And we were determined to recreate in Berlin what Narayana Rao and I had already done with partial success for a couple of weeks in Jerusalem, namely a common and convivial kitchen around which the rest of life could be organised.

The last of these had appeared oddly difficult in September. The staff of the Kolleg seemed astonished that anyone would need more than the “five hot meals a week” that the kitchen claimed it provided anyway. But a compromise arrangement was eventually made, and on my arrival one late Sunday afternoon in early October, Andrea Friedrich kindly offered me the option of flat K3 in the Weiße Villa, that allowed us to colonise what had until then been known as “Yehuda Elkana’s kitchen”, and which a sour Dutch colleague now dubbed “Little India”. Things were off to a good start by the time David Shulman and Narayana Rao arrived a few days after me; the Pakistani food-warehouse at Turmstraße had been raided for stocks and a music collection was being built up.

In a sense, the story of the year for me is the story of that kitchen, in which I sometimes felt I spent far too much time and effort. But other things were cooked (or cooked up) there besides Indian food. For instance, together with Narayana Rao’s room (N10 in the Neubau), it was the core from which we planned and executed our historiography book, which we had somehow managed to finish by the end of February 2001 (its title: *Textures of Time*), just in time for David Shulman to return to Jerusalem to teach for a semester. But it

was also the place where wide-ranging conversations were held with Narayana Rao, Muzaffar Alam and Partha Chatterjee, the last of whom arrived in Berlin belatedly, more or less in time to take over David's place, and who proved so excellent a cook that even his own wife Gouri was astonished. And it was also the place (or at least one of the places) around which several of the other Fellows gravitated for food, music and reflection: waif-like Mauricio Tenorio with his repertoire of *boleros* and *rancheros*, Navid Kermani and Katajun Amirpur combining elegant Persian melancholy with the cosmopolitan good humour of Cologne, cynic-cum-softie Philippe Burrin with his macabre reflections and observant eye, the erudite and sharp-witted Wang Hui and his wife Ying; and others too, some from the Fellows and staff of the Kolleg, but also new-found friends from Berlin. The moral of this story: don't believe anyone who tells you that five hot meals a week are enough.

Other parts of the year were more mixed. The Tuesday Colloquia could not be counted a success for the most part, with a few honourable exceptions. Attempts to liven it up intellectually or to give it some semblance of rigour had soon to be given up as pretty much hopeless. Only the biologists impressed as a group, with their thoroughly professional attitude bordering at times on that of hosts in the "Nature" channel on TV. For the rest, most Tuesdays were repetitive affairs. The same people constantly asked the same sort of questions or interrupted speakers with the regularity of Swiss cuckoo clocks. The isolation of Grunewald became burdensome after a few weeks, even if the winter was not as bad as I had expected. Eventually, with the help of Navid Kermani, Philippe Burrin and some others, I actually gained some sort of a sense of the town, the Russian bar near Savignyplatz, or the Berlin nightlife of *Cookies* and *Maria am Ostbahnhof*. Some other aspects of the year were more troubling: the burglary at the *Neubau* in May that left Narayana Rao considerably the poorer in information (his laptop was stolen) and finances being perhaps the lowest moment of the year. It would be good if the Wiko were voted the "Most User-Friendly Institution in Berlin", but surely not if the compliment comes from the German Burglars' Association.

And as time went by, it also became clear that life at the Wiko did not always render one more efficient. The lack of books to browse on the shelf proved irksome, and as for books in "exotic" languages, one could more or less write off library access to them here. For those of us not endowed with perfect tunnel vision, spirits began to flag about halfway through, as the quality of the Kolleg's red wine

too began to deteriorate. The week came to be oriented around the often depressing prospect of the Tuesday Colloquium, which in my case at least was happily counterbalanced by the two hours that preceded it: Eva Hund's German lesson. Here was one activity that I could count – despite myself – as a clear success, for Eva proved that a surprising combination of moral authority and appeals to the ego can transform a lazy student into a sort of linguistic sponge. True, we did not follow the dictum that Alec Niculescu wisely provided early in the year: “We are not here to say good things in stupid German, but stupid things in good German.” But we did run the gamut from Kafka to Loriot, without ever getting as far as Clausewitz (the preserve of Group C). And the improvement was not in German alone. Somewhat surprisingly, my spoken Spanish took wings under the tutelage of Mauricio, while Mlle. Boucher's vigilant eye even made my limping written French somewhat more respectable than it had been.

The second writing project that I had planned to finish, namely a book on Indo-Persian travel accounts with Muzaffar Alam, turned out to be far harder to concentrate on than the first. There was the fact that Muzaffar had to return to India between December and May, reducing our time together to two quite short stints. Even after he returned, a number of small diversions, minor travels, silly deadlines, all seemed to come in the way. The months of May and June were largely spent in a state of uneasy guilt, while awaiting the spring and the sunshine that played hide-and-seek with us. Even Philippe Burrin's warnings that sunshine would not be an unmixed blessing in Berlin (on account of what he called the threat of the “furry Germans”) could not deter one from feeling that we had a right to at least a semblance of summer. With the weather refusing to cooperate, we had to find other means to cheer ourselves up. Muzaffar and I turned to the Persian *masnawi* of Nal and Daman by the Mughal court poet Faizi Fayyazi to convince ourselves that Love was still an end worth pursuing. This had some unexpected consequences for Muzaffar Alam, as zealous colleagues in his home university began to spread rumours that he was now working on “sex in medieval India”, rumours that we hope will improve his future reputation.

It was about this time that I re-encountered a verse written by Nabokov's imagined poet John Shade in *Pale Fire* that seemed oddly apposite (I cite it here in the original and the German translation of Uwe Friesel, which a visiting friend picked up for 5 DM on Unter den Linden).

Hielt es das Institut für weise, vielleicht
 Vom Paradies nicht allzu viel zu hoffen:
 Wie, wenn für den Neuankömmling niemand da ist
 Zur Begrüßung, kein Empfang, auch keine
 Unterweisung? Wie, wenn in grenzenlose Leere
 Du stürztest, ohne Orientierung?
 Die Geisteskräfte abgebaut, völlig allein,
 Die Pflichten unerfüllt, deine Verzweiflung unbekannt.

The Institute assumed it might be wise
 Not to expect too much of paradise:
 What if there's nobody to say hullo
 To the newcomer, no reception, no
 Indoctrination? What if you're tossed
 Into a boundless void, your bearings lost?
 Your spirit stripped and utterly alone,
 Your task unfinished, your despair unknown.

Neither such reflections, nor the practical advice of Narayana Rao, nor even the tireless social ministrations of Navid Kermani had entirely convinced me by my fortieth birthday (celebrated quietly on a brief visit to Oxford and again more riotously at the Wiko) that what awaited me was not the prospect of decline.

Still, the year left some good things behind. I met some warm and genuinely interesting new people, most of whom will hopefully remain friends over the long term. Little by little, I acquired a modicum of familiarity with the city from Roseneck to Ostkreuz, and even a sort of taste for it. Conversations with Turkish and Persian taxi drivers became more and more complex and interesting. There were even some truly pleasurable moments, whether at the ping-pong table (for example, the rare occasions when I beat Wang Hui), or the hilarious party for ex-Fellow Shahid Amin, or the late evening when Muzaffar and Partha eventually burst into song. At least at those moments, in a frame of mind like that of Jack Nicholson in a film of the late 1990s, it seemed that this might be about “as good as it gets”. Here then is what I can tell about the year. The truth is that the best and worst of it cannot be told in a text such as this one. For that, future scholars may have to look up the underground journal that was founded, and for a time flourished, this year: namely the *Cilaka-palukulu*, or “Parrot-talk”. But by now, it may well have become a collectors’ item.