

## Obituary



Professor S.K. Gupta  
(11 November 1947–10 September, 2001)

The closing year of the last millennium and the opening year of the new one proved to be disastrous to the two premier institutions of learning and research—Indian Institute of Advanced Study and H.P. University—as well as to the entire intellectual community of Shimla. In 2000–2001 we lost two great teachers, scholars and humanists, Professor Jaidev and Professor S.K. Gupta. A void has been created in the intellectual life of the town which is hard to fill in the foreseeable future. It is a quirk of fate that *Summerhill: IIAS Review* in its two consecutive issues should carry the obituaries of these two gentlemen-scholars.

Whenever I think of Professor S.K. Gupta, a number of images over an extended space and time flit across my mind. One thing though is common to all these images, and that is the restlessness of his spirit. He was a man who was always in a hurry. No sooner did he go to bed than he was impatient to rise. Or, whenever we went out for a walk, he would soon be ahead of us all. Or, when he was at his computer, his fingers could be seen dancing on the keyboard to finish the job at hand sooner than he could. Or, when we lunched or dined together, he would be the first one to finish. About five years ago, our two families were holidaying together in the eastern part of the country. At Puri, out of eight of us, he was the first to rush into the sea and play with the waves, leaving behind even the children. This pattern of being in a hurry was repeated in the final act of his life. He died, as it were, in a hurry. No one, not even his wife, had any clue whatsoever even an hour before his death on that fateful day of 10 September that he would die so suddenly.

Professor Gupta was a self-made man in the true sense of the term. He started as a clerk at the young age of 19, simultaneously pursuing his higher studies through evening classes. He joined the H.P. University in 1972 as a lecturer and by dint of sheer hard work, sincerity, commitment and dedication, and rose to the position of the Vice-Chancellor of the university. During this period of about more than two and a half decades, he held a number of academic and administrative positions—Director, Correspondence Courses, Professor and Head, Dept. of History, Fellow, IAS and the founder Director of the Institute of Tribal Studies, H.P. University. He was also on the governing bodies of the ICSSR and IIAS.

My association with Professor Gupta dates back to 1973 when I joined the Correspondence Courses as a lecturer in English. I distinctly recollect the period of the early eighties when Professor Gupta was working on his Ph.D. dissertation. During that period of his career he had this habit of writing very long, convoluted sentences. Before showing his chapters to his supervisor, Professor S.R. Mehrotra, he would invariably ask me to read them. Whenever I suggested that he change the structure of a particular sentence, or write two sentences instead of one, or use this phrase/word/expression instead of that, he would sometimes agree, though usually after much argumentation as well as consultation of dictionaries and other books, and at others, totally disagree. But this is not terribly important. What is more telling is that from that time onwards he began to internalize any new expressions/words/phrases and this tendency finally culminated in his acquiring a faculty whereby he learnt to 'feel' the beauty of the medium of expression. I think this was symptomatic of his process of growth. He had indeed an infinite capacity for learning, and of course, learning with a difference.

During 1996 Professor Gupta, along with four other teachers, including me, were also associated with the World Bank Project, DPEP. We visited the interior parts of four districts—Lahaul Spiti, Kullu, Chamba and Sirmour—and conducted FGDs with the village functionaries in as many as 48 remote, almost inaccessible villages. The entire exercise was a tiring, nerve-racking

experience. But Professor Gupta's cheerfulness, zeal, leadership and exemplary conduct inspired and sustained us. Professor Gupta would work on the plan for the following day's itinerary. In the morning he would be the first one to rise and by the time we woke up, he would have prepared a consolidated report on the basis of the ones prepared by us the previous night. Although he was the Director of the project and leader of the group, he worked much more than we did. We lovingly called him the 'commander'. It was because of his hard work and single-minded devotion that the four-volume report was prepared and submitted in a record time of two months.

His leadership qualities were reflected on a wider canvas during his brief tenure of two and a half years as the Vice-Chancellor. During this period the University functioned on a different plane altogether. There was something feverish, something uncanny about the activities with which the departments hummed and the administration worked and 'moved'. And he himself was a notch above the normal, a notch above the mundane, a notch above the ordinary.

Though his chosen field of specialization was Modern India, the entire Indian history was within his ken. His books: *The Scheduled Castes in Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence as a Political Power*; *Man, Society and Nature*; and *Tribal Development: Appraisal and Alternatives* have been widely acclaimed by historians, sociologists and political scientists alike. His last love was historiography, or to be more precise, Indian historiography. His monograph, *The Prejudiced Past: Rewriting Indian History, Some Reflections on Concept* (1999) seeks to dismantle different Procrustean models—Western, Marxist, Christian, etc.—used by historians to reconstruct the Indian past and cogently makes up a case in favour of an indigenous model that must take into account the peculiar nature of the Indian past.

Professor Gupta often said, "Luck smiles on you not more than you do deserve; nor do you get anything before the time, that is before you are ripe for it." I think 'luck' and 'time' were euphemisms for hard work in Professor Gupta's lexicon.

V.P. Sharma