

Obituary

Lotika Varadarajan (1934-2017)*



Dr. Lotika Varadarajan (*Lotika-di*), an ethno-historian with scholarship spanning several disciplines and an inspiration to all those who came to know her, passed away on 9th October 2017 after a brief illness, after a full and eventful life of 83 years. The loss to the worldwide community of scholars and researchers of technological and scientific traditions is great, especially as it remains impossible to slot her contributions into any narrowly defined category.

An active researcher for over five decades, Dr. Lotika Varadarajan contributed to a wide range of subjects, from trade and knowledge exchange in pre-colonial and colonial textile technology, to maritime technologies, cartography and museology to name just a few. Her studies ranged from traditional methods of weaving, dyeing and other textile processes to indigenous boat building technologies; with a special interest in oral narratives and the transmission of tradition. She worked extensively with textile working communities from across the country, from Kashmir to the Deccan, and from Gujarat to

Manipur. Her ethnographic fieldwork also focused on maritime communities in Gujarat, Lakshadweep, the Andaman and Nicobar islands, the riverine regions of Bengal, as well as with tribal communities in the Northeast. Readers of *IJHS* will remember her contribution in the making of the special issue of *IJHS* (No. 51:4, 2016), looking at the knowledge exchange between Greece, Persia, India and China during the Antiquity years. Prior to this, her major papers published by INSA, which drew wide spread interest, included the chapters on Textile Technology (Vol 1) and Pre-Industrial Indian Textiles – Technology and Central Asian Influences (Vol 2) in the themed volumes, *History of Technology in India*, Vol I and II, INSA, 2012. In addition, she edited the two volume themed publication, *Journey in Science, Technology and Culture – Indo-Portuguese Experiences*, published by INSA along with Centro de História de Além-Mar, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2005.

Dr Varadarajan was born on 28th May 1934 at Shillong in undivided Assam (now Meghalaya state). Her formal education covered many countries and continents, with a matriculation from Jesus and Mary Convent, Delhi, undergraduate study from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok and Delhi University, a Tripos followed by Post-Graduation in History from the University of Cambridge, UK and a Ph D from University of Bombay in 1965 on ‘Dupleix and Indian Politics (1740 – 1754)’. Subsequently, she was a recipient of both the UGC (1969-1971) and the ICHR (1972-1975) fellowship for her annotated translation of *Memoirs of François Martin, 1670-1694*, the first governor general of French India.

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As Homi Bhabha Fellow from 1976 – 1978, she worked on *The External Trade in Textiles of Seventeenth Century India*.

After Dr Varadarajan obtained her doctorate, she began a teaching career as a lecturer in History at Sophia College, Bombay. By 1971, she became a post graduate lecturer at the Department of History in Bombay University. However, this was short lived, as by 1975, her Homi Bhabha fellowship to work on the 'External Trade in Textiles of Seventeenth Century India', with its wide-ranging travel and documentation from many countries, initiated an interest in multi-disciplinary research. This was paralleled by her family's move to a small township on the outskirts of Vadodara in 1975, a move that allowed her innate and not easily satisfied curiosity, to take on the role of a field researcher. Here, working with members of artisanal communities, with material objects, oral sources and technological processes, she began, one step at a time, to build an understanding of the living knowledge of Indian textile traditions.

Dr Varadarajan's scholarship spanned several disciplines and was an inspiration to all those who came to know her, exploring several perspectives with the humility of a curious explorer and the expertise of a seasoned scholar. Her ability to push the limits of disciplinary boundaries brought her scholarship to the notice of many professional and scholarly bodies. Over the decades, Dr Varadarajan was driven by the belief that the subject of Indian Ethnological Heritage needs to be nourished as a serious discipline, for this would facilitate not only a better understanding of ethnicity but also of sustainable development. As a scholar of the process of transmission of tradition and technology, she recognised that traditional practitioners were the best to undertake the important task of innovation as it is they who are the most privileged to enrich collective memory. In her introduction to *Tradition and Transmission : Current trends in*

French Ethnology, the Relevance for India" (eds. L Varadarajan and D Chevalier, Aryan Books, 2003) points out the concerns which shape the discipline – vernacular tradition in material culture, relationship between biology and population genetics with ethnology, while material is distinguished from non-material in the area of cultural assets. From the earlier preoccupation with listing and mapping, there has been a shift in recent times to greater in-depth investigations on heritage. This has permitted entry into areas like oral tradition and technique.

As a researcher into 'living' practice, aiming to arrive at some understanding of traditional knowledge systems of Indian artisanal and tribal communities, Dr Lotika Varadarajan's working method evolved to bond chronological sources with material objects, technological processes, work procedures, and oral sources. In the 1983 paper, *Indian Seafaring : The Precept and Reality (Global Circle, The Journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History, Vol 5: 1, April 1983)*, she spelt out the methods of inquiry she was to carry forward and develop further in subsequent research travels. "Two categories of source material have been utilised for purposes of this enquiry. The first category is derived primarily from literary source material with some reliance on archaeological sources. The second is based on oral testimony including the corpus relating to popular religious credences. A peculiarity of tenets practiced at the folk level is the manner in which central beliefs have absorbed those emanating from a variety of other sources." This method used to understand the ambivalence around the Indian attitude towards the sea and maritime enterprise by locating the historical and mythological research at the understanding made by marine communities marked an early example of her multi-disciplinary research method.

The 2008 publication "*Of Fibre and Loom: The Indian Tradition*", is the product of a collaborative work between a designer – weaver

and an ethno-historian on its appearance excited ethnographers as well as textile historians. Adopting the approach that loom, fabric and costume were to be studied as cross-cultural artefacts, necessarily leads to an examination of the correlation between ecology, language and culture. Making it possible to see how Indian weaving traditions played a significant role in the contouring of indigenous knowledge systems. Besides, it also shaped methods of technological refinement and transmission of skill, while the processes themselves help to determine the parameters within which factors such as creativity and articulation of innovation operate. Placing the technology, its processes and products against a historical background, the multi-disciplinary research closely knits the connections between loom technologies, the variety of fibres used, the end product and the end user.

Drawn from a vast and diverse seascape, at first glance a considerable regional deviation exists across the wide world of water from the shores of East Africa to the eastern limits of the Pacific. The paper, "The Contours of Seafaring the Indo-Pacific region in pre-Columbian times" (*India-Mexico: Similarities and Encounters Throughout History*. ICCR/ Macmillan, New Delhi 2003), draws upon information from several sources – ethnological, scientific, socio-technical, art-historical data and oral testimony. Consequently, formulating and examining traditional maritime knowledge in terms of patterns of cognition, work practices and transmission of skill, makes it possible to see similarity and congruence between the traditional knowledge systems across a wide geography. Admiral Paris, French naval engineer and archivist, discovered this for himself, and wrote in 1841 in *Essai sur la construction navale des peuples extra-européens*, how the coir-sewn west coast *pattamar* were a culturally selective solution better able to surmount the stresses and strains of heavy seas and known hydrographical and

meteorological conditions. Dr Lotika Varadarajan indicated more such examples to re-assess local community knowledge that evolved in response to specific needs and indicate a need for interdisciplinary analysis to reassess the quality of indigenous systems.

Whether in the islands of Polynesia, Micronesia or Lakshadweep, the use of zenith stars to sail down latitude formed another area of confluence. The eight point wind compass and thirty two point star compasses from Polynesia and Micronesia had comparable with those from the islands off the Indian coast. Pole star elevation in the Carolinas of the Pacific was either simply estimated by the eye, or measured by finger span of an extended star. This calls to mind similar finger and stick measurements of local sailors in the Indian Ocean, which the Portuguese called *polegada* and *lance* respectively. A study of these living traditions is directly relevant to understand the aspect of integration of Indian Ocean navigation methods into Portuguese instrumentation, which in turn was the backdrop to further refinement, development and evolution until they formed the basis of European navigational instrumentation in the pre-Industrial Revolution era.

As is apparent from the preceding paragraphs, Dr Lotika Varadarajan's research interests were closely linked to the idea of artisanal and community knowledge and its transmission across time and space. Connecting codified observations and knowledge of community artisanal and craft traditions, with oral memory and lived practice, her interactions with various scholars of myriad disciplines and her own penchant for stringing diverse thought processes and perspectives have led to over sixty four articles and ten books (one 4 volume set), with two more currently in print. These range from textile processes to boat building technologies; from trade to transmission of tradition, this wide canvas was an extension of her intensive research project

supported at various times by INSA, CSIR (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research), NISTADS (National Institute of Science, Technology and Development Studies) and Development Commissioner Handicrafts, Ministry of Culture. She was invited to the membership of many learned associations, beginning from the Asiatic Society of Mumbai (1976) and the Heras Institute of the University of Mumbai (1981), to the Société Asiatique, Paris (1981), the Royal Asiatic Society, London (1988), the Centre International d'Étude des Textiles Anciens, (CIETA), Lyon (1998) and the Academia de Marinha, Section of Maritime History, Lisbon (2001). In addition, she was also a member of the Academic Council of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (1986-88), and a Member of the Advisory Committee of the Centre for Community Knowledge, Ambedkar University Delhi (2012-2017). She was also selected as a Tagore National Fellow at the National Museum, New Delhi (2013-15).

Uncovering and sharing data and information, she made friends and admirers as she travelled from Northeast India to the Andaman's,

Lakshadweep and Indonesia, to Portugal, Italy and Greece, to the USSR, South America, Southeast Asia and Australia. She wore her scholarship and international renown lightly, but was never casual about scholarship itself. Nothing annoyed her more than superficial generalisations unbacked by research and fact, and *Lotika-di* could be a fierce and articulate critic when she felt one was going astray. As mentioned earlier, Dr Lotika Varadarajan was also actively engaged with institutions that worked towards the sustainability and reorientation of India's artisans and their traditions. She joined hands with others in 1984 as a founder member of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage), and was a member of the Advisory Committee for Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles. In these and other ways, she continued to draw attention to the fate of those knowledge holders of an oral tradition transmitted within increasingly marginalised groups and communities, and left behind in the rush to modernisation. For her, to sacrifice craft traditions at the altar of modernity was tantamount to adding yet another dimension to the poverty of the mind.

APPENDIX 1: BOOKS PUBLISHED

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APPENDIX 2 : PUBLISHED PAPERS

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