

Empathy for the Dispossessed

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Abstract: A brief history of how Geoff Davis became involved with the Adivasi Academy in Baroda and how the Chotro conferences came into being

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In our literary and academic life, we keep acquiring friends, adding more to the ones we already have, drawing and re-drawing an intangible but definitive circle of our knowing together and being together. I too have done this all along. However, the late Prof. Geoffrey Davis was just not one of the friends in the community of scholars I have known. Our joining hands to do a lot of innovative work was a result of his ability to swim across cultures and my disaffection with things academic.

I think I met him the first time in 1984 at the EACLALS conference at Sitges, Spain. during the 1980s, I was a 'regular' at the EACLALS meetings, since India did not have an active Commonwealth Literature culture as yet. But, my memory of that meeting is not very clear. In 1988, Geoff had convened a conference at Aachen, Germany, where he spent most of his academic life. I was invited to it for a plenary. This experience left me impressed by his organisational ability. In between, we had met at other places too, Austria, Hungary, Singapore. But all these meetings were casual; and I do not recall any memorable conversation having taken place between us during these conferences.

During the 1990s, Geoff hosted a conference on Literature and Activism. I left my professorship at Baroda, India, in 1996. Geoff had heard about this move from friends. He asked me to lecture at the conference. I did. It was during this conference I noticed that he was deeply respectful of activism, that his empathy for the dispossessed was genuinely deep. I also noticed that he was extremely wary of using cliched and fashionable jargon. The impression these qualities made on me was strong. A few years later, he was to attend the ACLALS Triennial in Hyderabad, India. He wrote to me asking

if he could visit me after the Hyderabad conference. He knew that I had stopped attending academic conferences and there was no chance of our meeting in Hyderabad. So, I invited him to Baroda, 1500 kms north of Hyderabad.

I am not sure if he enjoyed his visit to Baroda. On the day he was to arrive, for reasons difficult for me to know, I altogether forgot about his arrival. I was to meet him at the airport. Baroda in those days was a very small airport, only three or four flights arrived there each day; and overseas visitors were not a common sight. Geoff waited there till almost the last co-traveller had left the meeting area. The last one to leave happened to be an architect named Karan Grover, who is a living legend in the field of architecture. Grover asked Geoff if he was expecting anyone. Geoff mentioned my name. This worked. Karan Grover and I had been friends for decades and Geoff was made to feel welcome on my behalf, brought to his lodgings and, the forgetting and forgiving over, we met over dinner. The next day, I drove him in my car to the location of the Adivasi Academy (the Tribal University) that I was trying to establish in those years. This location was 90 kms east of Baroda. On the way, I talked with passion all about my plans, my dreams. He listened. He spent another day in Baroda meeting Karan and enjoyed the famous Grover wine. I was busy in my work with the tribal academy. The next morning, I drove Geoff to the airport, as he was leaving for Bombay and then to Aachen. At the airport, he asked me if I could have him visit the Adivasi Academy again for a longer time, a week or so. I said, "Why do you not come for a semester?" He was a bit puzzled by my offer, made in such a casual manner. So, I added, "Be a Fellow with us." He took that offer and returned to Baroda the following year, but for a short time. I think, it was after two more brief trips that he agreed to spend six months in Baroda.

I must explain that the Adivasi Academy is not like a university. It is a community work-station at best, with really very minimum facilities that makes for most of us what we call 'civilisation.' The 'Fellowship' had no set rules. They were made looking at the individual's ability and desire to contribute what one had promised to contribute. The 'projects' ranged from writing a book or an article, teaching music or language to children, keeping the library or museum in good order, tending a piece of agricultural land, setting up a community micro-credit group or just documenting any of these activities. When Geoff became a Fellow of the Adivasi Academy, there were three others, Brian and Eileen Coates from Limerick, Ireland and Lachman Khubchandani, a linguist from Pune, India. Eileen had accepted to help us with the Museum and Lachman was to write a book in Linguistics. I was more ambitious with Geoff. I said to him, "If you do not mind, please do nothing, only watch what goes on here and when it pleases you discuss ideas with me." He agreed. The facilities given to the Fellows included housing in Baroda and meals when they visited the Academy, 90 kms away from Baroda. All my meetings with tribals were transacted in their languages. English words were rarely heard. Only occasionally, some visitors helped Geoff with English interpretations. Geoff, I must say, braved all of this discomfort without a murmur. The impression I had formed about his deep empathy for the dispossessed became firmer. In the fifth month of his stay, I sent a word to him asking if he was available for a serious conversation. He obliged. We met in my Baroda office - the Bhasha Centre -- at 2 PM. I asked him if he would join me in imagining an

international 'non-conference' for looking at the world through the perspective of the indigenous. He said, "I cannot promise, but I will try." Our conversation continued for several hours and, probably, both of us had a reasonably good idea of what all needed to be avoided in making our idea of conference a completely rooted to the ground. I proposed the name 'chotro' (a shared platform), he consented to it with great enthusiasm. Next morning, I found him at Bhasha. He had a 'Call for Chotro' ready with him. I made several calls to various offices and individuals in Delhi to finalise the material arrangements for the First Chotro. That afternoon, Geoff sat at the computer and sent out close to a 150 emails. Before he left Baroda, we were fully involved in putting together the unusual conference.

He made one visit to India before the conference was held in Delhi in January 2008. We met in Delhi. I had to combine some of my other works with the work related to Chotro. One of these involved a visit to the Prime Minister's office. He was a bit shocked when I told him that after sorting out the conference related arrangements for stay and local transportation, I would be going to the PM's office and that he was welcome to join me. Years later, I have heard him narrating this anecdote to friends over a glass of wine. The Delhi Chotro was the first one. We put together several more in subsequent years and worked on the conference volumes, meeting in several countries. Geoff became a frequent visitor to India, to Baroda, and also to my home and my family. I am not aware if we shared an ideology. In a way, all of us in the field of literature have a varying degree of progressive outlook on life and society. But, what clicked between Geoff and me is something else, and that is his immense patience with me and his ability to cope with surprises and shocks, which could not be avoided considering my involvement in several social causes. John Keats, speaking of William Shakespeare's 'genius' used the term 'negative capability' -- the ability to live amidst uncertainties. The mutual recognition of this negative capability brought us together for undertaking unconventional kinds of work, serious though not strictly academic.

What role did Geoff take as collaborator in co-organising Chotro and in working with the Adivasi communities? When we thought of creating the Chotro non-conferences, we had no funding support. We had no sponsors, no funds for international travel. Bhasha Centre was not a full-scale 'institution' till then. Besides, 'Indigenous Studies' was not an accepted field of academic work. We were not sure if any self-respecting publisher would accept to publish the proceedings. Therefore, in all of these matters, we shared responsibility. But, generally speaking, he dealt with the overseas participants and I handled the Indian issues, material and academic. I accepted to identify publishers, negotiate with them, do the necessary correspondence, Geoff focused on copy editing the texts. But, this division of work was not sanctimonious. Either of us was free to cross over, and even required to do so, looking at each other's convenience. Never forget that Geoff had his other major obligations and academic projects, and I had mine. We had no desire to claim credit for the work we were doing. It was born out of our desire to create a legitimate space for the voice of the Indigenous.

The works we co-edited include *Indigeneity*, edited by G. N. Devy, Geoffrey Davis and K. K. Chakravarty, Orient Blackswan, 2009; *Voice and Memory*, edited by G. N. Devy,

Geoffrey Davis and K. K. Chakravarty, Orient Blackswan, 2009; *Performing Identities*, edited by G. N. Devy, Geoffrey Davis and K. K. Chakravarty, Routledge 2012; *Knowing Differently*, edited by G. N. Devy, Geoffrey Davis and K. K. Chakravarty, Routledge 2013; *Narrating Nomadism*, edited by G. N. Devy, Geoffrey Davis and K. K. Chakravarty, Routledge 2014; *The Language of Loss of the Indigenous*, edited by G. N. Devy & Geoffrey Davis, Routledge 2016.

These six volumes resulted out of our joint work. Another series of five volumes, published by Routledge, is on its way under the titled *Key Concepts in Indigenous Studies*. Thus, our collaboration produced 11 excellent volumes published by world class publishing houses. They total 5000 printed pages and form a body of scholarly literature covering many aspects of the Indigenous people from all continents.

All of this is quite outside the enormous amount of scholarly and organisation work that Prof. Davis did.

It was a great good fortune for me to have known him and to have worked together. I cherish the memory of my association with him and deeply mourn his not being on this side of the mysterious divide

Bionote: Ganesh Devy, former Professor at the Maharaja sayajirao University of Baroda, founder of the Bhasha Research Centre, Baroda, and the Adivasi Academy, Tejgadh, is a literary scholar and cultural activist. He is Chair of the People's Linguistic Survey of India and Chief Editor of the series of 50 volumes produced by the PLSI. Since 2015 he has been leading the Indian writers' resistance to fascism movement, *Dakshinayana (Going South)*.