

# Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

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Winter November, 2012

## CSDS diary

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# CSDS diary

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ONE afternoon in early October 2011, I contemplated a small plaque above the verandah of the single-floor building I was about to enter. The date on it read '1947'. The bungalow housing the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies has existed since the year India became independent; in 2013, the Centre itself completes 50 years. I went into my office a year ago, and had the instant sense that after years of miserable exile, I had come home.

In the past year that I have gone to the Centre almost every day, sometimes even on weekends, I have often wondered what makes the place feel so relaxed and so energetic, so welcoming and so enabling at the same time. Of course there is the company of talented colleagues, the excitement of eminent visitors, the ongoing intellectual projects to keep the mind engaged, and the knowledge of a legacy of two generations of the most interesting and important Indian scholars who created and built the Centre over five decades. But really, what makes the place hospitable and reassuring, I

have figured out, is the constant presence of two things: one, lore about the past—both of Indian social science and of the Centre itself, and two, an intricate ecology of non-academic and support staff, as well as the materiality of 29, Rajpur Road.

If anything sets CSDS apart from many other institutions of equal or perhaps even greater scholarly excellence, in India or anywhere, it is the fact that those who work there love to tell stories. Every Friday at lunch, at every seminar and meeting, during chance conversations in offices and corridors, during smoke-breaks and tea-breaks, at the annual faculty retreat, on walks and in cars, you find people telling stories. Stories about how things used to be, how it all began, who was brought in from the blue, who fought with everyone and left abruptly, how the Centre's fortunes rose and fell in tandem with the larger political climate and global intellectual fashions, how social movements of different eras affected the careers of Centre faculty, how influential theories were launched

into the wider world by small groups sitting right there in the very same building, how things almost fell apart from time to time, how the character of the institution changed with the gradual inclusion of younger faculty, women scholars and a large roster of visiting fellows...

**T**he narratives have an interlocking, looping, continuous and unending character, so that no matter when in the story one happens to come on board, the feeling of having stepped into a self-contained universe – a magical realm that the Indo-Persians called a ‘*tilism*’ – is at once unmistakable and exhilarating. The Centre approximates the convergence of an innovative laboratory and a raucous joint family. Many who enter the Centre do not leave; many who passed through it are never quite forgotten; it morphs into newer *avatars* and yet always remains recognizable as its own quintessential self. As CSDS enters its fiftieth year, the collective tendency to narrate the past, present and future of the institution is, of course, reaching a crescendo. One is lucky to be able to witness this extraordinary outpouring of accounts that provide an unparalleled history of the social sciences in India and South Asia, from the very nerve-centre of the debates that shaped a variety of disciplines in the Indian context.

The second factor that makes CSDS truly unique is its human and physical environment. On any given day, unhurried rhythms of seriousness and levity, eating and drinking, gathering and dispersing, lunch and tea, work and gossip, arriving and leaving, all carry on with such regularity and such variation that the week feels like an elaborate dance. Cups of tea at noon and 2:00 pm and 4:00 pm. The plants are watered and the cars are cleaned in the late afternoon. In the early summer, the raw mangoes are shaken

down from the tree in the front courtyard in the hundreds, and gathered and distributed to all who wish to make pickles and preserves. In the early spring, the chrysanthemums are displayed in bright arrays of flowerpots. Chandeliers of yellow laburnums (*amaltas*) festoon the driveway for months. In the monsoon, the occasional thunderstorm leaves the garden looking like a tropical jungle, complete with broken branches, smashed pots, and wind-torn creepers.

**I**n cold weather, Friday lunch is on the sunny lawns. In the heat, we never leave our desks. Once a year, the air-conditioners are serviced; once a year, heaters are dusted and fitted-out. A colleague one is looking for to ask a question might be up for a three hour conversation or might have gone overseas for the next three months. In the library, all the staff – sans the help of computerized catalogues, mind you – not only know whether a book is owned or not, but also exactly which shelf to find it on, or whose office to retrieve it from. The Sarai basement offers filter coffee, cable television and Hindi and English newspapers, as well as unexpected discussions with the most amazing people (a disproportionate number of them either freelance artists or professional translators), at almost any time of day or night.

At the nearby Civil Lines metro station, most cycle rickshaw drivers know both the Centre and individual Centre staff, so that one never even has to say: Please drive me to such-and-such address. The *pan-wallah* two doors down on Rajpur Road has been there for 43 years of the Centre’s 50-year life, and knows the exact preferences and poisons of each of his CSDS patrons, so that transactions, free of the tedium of ordering or cash payment, can focus purely on the exchange of idle chit-chat and refresh-

ing banter. Some Centre faculty accounts with Pandit Vijay Shankar Chaurasia, of Jaunpur, the doyen of this tiny but booming establishment, have been running continuously for decades. Ashis Nandy smokes a pipe, which means a separate supply of tobacco leaves from other places, but otherwise the Chaurasia monopoly of Centre business is unquestioned.

Similar are the monopolies of the maker of kebabs, the supplier of Chinese food, the caterer of South Indian vegetarian meals, the neighbourhood guesthouses and banks, the beer-and-rum procurer, the furniture-maker and upholsterer, the carpenter, the painter, the plumber, the electrician, the insurance agent, the tent-and-table arranger, the Centre driver, the security staff, the fixer for expired driving licenses and passports... Everyone, it seems, has been with the Centre from time immemorial. When the manager of the bank across the street on Underhill Road was retiring, he came to the Centre for one last Friday lunch. He had known each faculty member’s precise salary for years; he was sent off with solemnity and sadness.

**T**he recent death, in Kolkata, of a former librarian brought the entire Centre together for a condolence meeting in the library. The deceased gentleman was remembered; stories, inevitably, told of how he came to join the Centre and later retire from it; some of his close friends in the staff broke down and cried; a small quarrel broke out over the question of the role played by certain members of the dead man’s family in caring or failing to care for him during his last illness; and newbies like me learned that he had in fact started his career at the Centre as a Naxalite on-the-run who was almost arrested one day in the National Archives, some time in the late 1960s. I hardly knew him, but it was impossi-

ble not to mourn his loss, so obviously felt by many in the room, to this small, tightly-knit community.

**I**t may be argued that this kind of intimate institutional culture is anachronistic and unsustainable, and possibly even somewhat ‘unprofessional’, to use the American term. I would disagree. Rather, I would say that this degree of civility and this complexity of human relationships are both absolutely necessary for the intellectual life to flourish as it has at the Centre from its very inception. People who do not care for one another cannot care for the health of their shared institution. Centre denizens have been there for one another through marriages and divorces, weddings and births, deaths and retirements, the illness of children and the passing of parents, long unremarkable days of scholarly labour and brilliant moments of genuine inspiration, bitter ideological disagreement and extended, productive partnerships. During lively and sometimes acrimonious lunchtime conversations, each member speaks his or her mind freely; yet elders retain certain prerogatives, and younger folks enjoy certain indulgences. Many pairs of teachers and students populate the faculty, a quality that invests any chance discussion with a long pre-history and possibly an even longer after-life, and lends it an emotional charge that for me at least, deepens the value of every exchange.

Most of my colleagues write newspaper columns, and serve on a variety of government appointed committees dealing with cultural, educational, economic and other kinds of policy. Sometimes, for example during state or national elections, so many of them have to be on television at the same time, that TV vans of different channels line the street outside, and competing arrays of microphones and cameras have to set up in multiple lo-

cations on campus. Researchers, writers, activists, political leaders, journalists and pundits come by the Centre to make their arguments and defend their positions, share their findings and advocate their causes – they are treated with enthusiasm if they earn it, else with a skepticism that makes no allowances for fame. But CSDS retains its stature as a touchstone for new ideas wherever they may be hatched, whoever their authors might be.

**T**he Centre as a body remains thoroughly committed to and deeply engaged with public life. Yet each day, away from the noise of the city and the demands of family life, the cares of the world and the pressures of politics, we come into this space, this small unpretentious precinct, this single-storeyed building that is protected by law and cannot be broken down, modified or rebuilt anew, this green garden, this web of mostly unobtrusive companionship, and think undisturbed about the things we need to think about, immerse ourselves in the texts we love, write the books we are meant to write, and converse intermittently with one another in a way that suggests continuity, dependability, trust. I have experienced repeatedly the luxury of simply walking over to a colleague who is an expert on a topic one might be worrying about, and substituting what would have been hours or days of painstaking research with a few minutes of informative talk that answers one’s question right away.

But you have no students, outsiders complain; but this is an ivory tower, they cry. Wrong. In the scheme of things, I arrived but yesterday, and yet I find myself hoping that this very special and beloved institution will live another 50 years as it has done already – a great tree, rooted blossomer, that shades and shelters the delicate creature that is the life of the mind.