



Prof. Surya Kant

(15th December 1949 – 19th March 2023)

*jātasya hi dhruvo mṛityur dhruvaṁ janma
mṛitasya cha tasmād aparihārye 'rthe na tvaṁ
śhochitum arhasi*

Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 2, Verse 27

Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable. (Trans.)

When Professor Debendra Nayak asked me to write an obituary of Surya Kant, Professor (Retd.), former Chairperson, Department of Geography, Panjab University, Chandigarh, and Senior Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, I began to reflect on capturing a person's persona in absentia. It is as much about a person present at every meaningful academic activity in his present academic world as one who remained till his last breath rooted in his rural moorings and strong extended family values, a person imbued with deep gratitude,

sagacious, committed, a man of integrity, and academic rigour. As a human being, he made his life meaningful by being human.

Over the years, he had developed a Beingful approach, engaged fully in doing while anchored in his being to achieve internal and external wholeness. In most of his academic endeavours, he led himself effectively but through ambiguity, always inspiring and empowering others. The most recent was his herculean effort at reviving the journal Population Geography a lead element of the Association of Population Geographers of India, started in 1978 by Professor G.S. Gosal at the Department of Geography, Panjab University Chandigarh. As its editor since 2019, he completely revamped the journal. Still, as destiny ordained, it was for others to see it flourish in its New Avatar. In my frequent conversations with him, whenever an occasion arose, I found him speaking highly of the Department and his ever gratitude

to his mentor Professor Gopal Krishan for shaping his thought process. His deep sense of reverence to GK, as Gopal Krishan is fondly known, made him, along with Nina Singh, Jagdish Singh, and A. B. Mukerji, edit *Reinventing Regional Development, a festschrift in honour of Professor Gopal Krishan* in 2004. Again, he published another title *Geography, Development, Public Policy-Select Essays of Gopal Krishan*, in 2015 (edited with Nina Singh), to mark the Platinum Jubilee of his mentor.

Surya Kant's research was intensive and bore academic rigour. This, coupled with a humble nature, earned him respect in academia and friends. Special honours were the natural outcome. He was President of the Indian National Cartographic Association (INCA), Headquartered in Hyderabad, 2011; Senior Vice President of Indian National Cartographic Association (INCA), Headquartered in Hyderabad, 2010; Vice President Indian Institute of Geographers, Pune, 2007- 2009, and 2012-14; and Vice President (NW Region), National Association of Geographers, India (NAGI), 2007-2008. He was elected as the President of the Indian Institute of Geographers, Pune for the year 2017.

His visits to Hungary under the Indo-Hungarian Cultural Exchange Program in 2004 to deliver invited lectures at the Universities of Pécs, Debrecen, Szeged, and Szombathely and again as Visiting Professor at Asia Centre, School of Geography, University of Pecs, Hungary in 2008 were in recognition of his research.

Surya Kant was an avid reader. He had a rich collection of books, reports, journals, and atlases in his library at home, ranging from classics to the most recently published on the economy, politics, society, history, and geography, particularly in India. After he had

departed, his family was keen that the reading material go to some appropriate institution/organization/university where people could use it well. While sorting the material, I found more than 3000 such readings. His Department at Chandigarh took up a good part. At least ten packets containing books had yet to be opened. Some books were received after he had passed away. Such was his passion. A true lover of books.

Born to a farming family, Sh. Aman Singh and Smt. Saroopi Devi, in village Fugana, District Muzaffarnagar (UP), on December 15, 1949, Surya Kant was brought up in a joint family. His formal education journey generally coincided with the growth of the country's educational infrastructure. His family had a strong zeal to educate him, so at every upscaling of the educational level - primary, middle, secondary, and senior secondary—he attended schools in different villages based on academic availability. Specifically, he passed his Primary school at the Government school in village Fugana, middle from the Government School, village Kheda, and high school in 1965 from Gathwala Jat Higher Secondary School, village Kharar, and senior secondary in 1967 from S.K Jain Inter College, Khatauli. He obtained his Bachelor's from S.D College, Muzaffarnagar, Meerut University (1969). Surya Kant then moved to Benares Hindu University to pursue his Master's degree in Geography. He studied when the luminary of Indian geography, the famous Ram Lochan Singh, was on the Chair.

Immediately after that, he joined as a lecturer in Geography at his alma mater, Sanatan Dharm College, Muzaffarnagar (UP), and served two sessions: July 1971 to June 1972 and November 1974 to April 1975.

Surya Kant's stint at Panjab University began as a student obtaining his MPhil degree

in 1979 and his doctorate in 1987, specialising in Administrative Geography, then a newly developed field pioneered in India by his mentor. Surya Kant produced an outstanding thesis in this field as his doctoral student.

The book Administrative Geography of India, published by Rawat Publications, Jaipur, in 1988, remains widely referenced by scholars working in this field. Administrative geography remained a leitmotif in scores of articles published by Surya Kant in journals of repute, national and international. His other research interests included regional development with special reference to India, population studies, population-environment-development nexus, urbanization, and GIS. For the last decade and a half, he had been working on the social transformation of Dalits in India to reveal the heterogeneity among the largely homogenous considered scheduled castes.

He joined as faculty in 1989 and worked until 2015, including the re-employment period. He taught MA/MPhil/Disaster Management classes and a PG Diploma in Remote Sensing and GIS to generations of students at Panjab University. Surya Kant served as the Chairman of the Department from 2005 till 2008. Earlier, he had served as a lecturer in Geography at the Birla Institute of Scientific Research, Jaipur, from April 1986 to December 1988.

Professor Surya Kant spent much of his life in Chandigarh, from January 1989 until he left this material world. He was no ordinary person. His family always provided home comfort and guidance to his extended family's children, who would come to Chandigarh for education and stay with them for years. His spouse deserves special accolades for providing a platform for educating the next generation of relatives, a rare quality seen these days.

Surya Kant left for his heavenly abode on March 19, 2023, leaving behind his spouse, Smt. Santosh, son Ritesh, and daughters Reshma and Kavita. His children are all happily married and well-settled. He was a loving and devoted husband to his wife and a great uncle to his nieces and nephews.

Surya Kant will be remembered as a man of strong commitment, wide sympathies, and unselfish enthusiasm by family, friends, students, and research collaborators alike. He influenced and inspired through written words and perhaps even more through personal conversations, lectures, meetings with visiting researchers, and seminars and conferences. His students and colleagues can testify to the intellectual brilliance that always surrounded him.

I pay my deepest homage to this kind soul who always carried concern and care for me.

Nina Singh

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