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# ATTUNED TO THE EVERYDAY

## A Conversation with Veena Das

**Interview:** David Loher, Corinne Schwaller, Anna-Lena Wolf (Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern)

### Introduction

In May 2017, Veena Das joined the second edition of «Anthropology Talks» at the University of Bern. Every two years, the Institute of Social Anthropology invites leading social and cultural anthropologists to discuss their recent work. After a series of lectures and workshops, the event concludes with an interview about the visiting scholar's work and their thoughts on the future of our discipline.

Veena Das is Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA. Before joining Johns Hopkins University in 2000, Veena Das worked at the Delhi School of Economics in India for more than three decades. Her prolific work has influenced generations of social anthropologists and researchers beyond our discipline, spanning the study of violence, poverty, gender relations, health and disease, kinship, and the state. Although Veena Das' ethnographic research has been focused on India throughout her career, her work speaks to our discipline as a whole, engaging a variety of theoretical issues and questions. Her theoretical reflections start from the experiences and everyday life of marginalized groups. Thereby, the notion of «the everyday» has become a key concept in Veena Das' work, shaping her research on violence, her thoughts on how the state shapes everyday life (Das 2006, 2014), as well as her ongoing concern with the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Das 1998). The everyday is often misread in terms of mere routine and repetition, but the concept points to something beyond the seemingly unmarked course of life. Veena Das argues that it

requires constant labor to secure the everyday, particularly with regard to most parts of the urban poor she studies and works with. In such difficult environments, the everyday is far from fixed. Rather, it is the fragile result of subjects' ongoing efforts to carve out a life under challenging circumstances.

Although always grounded in ethnography, Veena Das' work crosses disciplinary boundaries. During «Anthropology Talks», she presented her last transdisciplinary endeavor; an ongoing research project on tuberculosis treatment in India. The interdisciplinary research team, consisting of anthropologists, health economists and epidemiologists, tracks the complicated entanglements between private and public health care providers (Das et al. 2015). Similarly, her ongoing engagement with philosophy straddles disciplines that are often thought of as distinct. The edited volume «The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy» (Das et al. 2014) examines both disciplines' different epistemologies. It challenges the widespread assumption – arguably more prevalent in philosophy than in anthropology – that they depart from each other in fundamental ways. Many highlight the differences between ethnography as a discipline rooted in the concrete (social) world that pays particular attention to differences, and philosophy as a discipline that aims for abstraction and generalization. Veena Das writes across such divisions and connects fine-grained ethnographic observations and broader philosophical questions.

The following conversation with Veena Das concluded the 2017 «Anthropology Talks». In this conversation, we return to key concepts that Veena Das addressed during the lectures

and workshops. Firstly, we return to the notion of the everyday and how it shapes ethnographic fieldwork. The conversation then touches on the methodological and epistemological implications of «making the voice count» in ethnographic work. This leads to the question of the specificity of anthropological knowledge, its value in interdisciplinary research and how to respond to the ethical and political implications of differing epistemologies or «regions of reality», to use Veena Das' words. We conclude the conversation with a reflection on anthropologists' moral responsibilities in the contemporary world.

## Interview

*Anthropology Talks (AT): Your work offers quite a unique approach to our discipline. In your writing, you combine ethnography and philosophy, and you discuss methodological questions along with ethical issues. Tell us more about what it means for you to be an anthropologist?*

**Veena Das (VD):** I guess anthropology brings together a lot of contradictory impulses in me. I cannot say that my approach to anthropology is the result of a well-organised plan of action or plan of thinking. It has a character of improvisation in which a kind of dissatisfaction leads me to shift my gaze a bit from one way of seeing a phenomenon to a different angle of vision.

For a long time, when one thought about anthropology – especially in terms of how it was taught or how anthropological studies were conducted – it was through a division into domains. There was the idea that we can identify some phenomenon as coming under religion, and therefore it fell under the domain of the anthropology of religion. Similarly, something was political, defined in terms of sovereign power or authority, and so it belonged to the domain of political anthropology. And then economics was defined by the pursuit of interests or the types of markets, and therefore one sector of life was separated as economic anthropology. For me, the question was, «Are there other approaches that do not start from these divisions as if there were only one way to divide the social (to cut the cake, so to say) – and could we find a different lens through which to see the world?»

Take the example of the anthropology of the state: In some ways, the question of the state has always been present in the history of anthropology, either in the sense of assuming that the state took different forms but was necessary for securing order in society; or in the sense that the state seemed to be waiting at the threshold to make an appearance in history. You can see this impulse in examples that divided societies along the lines of state versus stateless societies in Evans-Pritchard's and Meyer Fortes' edited book «African Political Systems» (1940).

So, in a way, I wanted to disturb the assumption that if you are studying the state you would go and study the officials, the bureaucrats, and the parliament. Or, if you wanted to study questions of health and disease, then the clinic was the right place to locate your ethnography. And if you want to study law, then the court is the natural place for understanding judicial processes. But anthropology need not work with these assumptions. And it is time to displace these kinds of formulations that unduly restrict our methods and constrain our theoretical imagination.

*AT: The notion of «the everyday» is a key concept in your work. What do you try to grasp with it?*

**VD:** There are many anthropologists who misread my understanding of everyday life. Many of them will concede that the everyday is very important, but then they fall back on the idea that the everyday is banal, purely a modality of routine and repetition. What I have tried to show is that routine and repetition are indeed very important to everyday life, but these very routines and repetitions contain many more potentialities that reveal the uncanny character of everyday life – that it is both homely and unhomely, a site of danger and a site of security.

There is a certain uncanniness to the ordinary. I characterised the knowledge that circulates in the everyday as «poisonous knowledge». This is different from the sense that many large threats loom before us, such as the threat of a global nuclear war or climate change, because on the small scale of the family or neighbourhood such large threats secrete poisons that carry more than a threat about the future – they become threatening in the present. But why should anthropology be interested in this uncanniness of the ordinary? And what does it illuminate for us? It is related to the precariousness of life but also to the ability to repair and to build life in the very spaces of devastation once again. The question of how to secure the ordinary is very important to those with whom I was working in the field. They cannot take everyday life for granted and I find a lot of affinity with them, because I also see a lot of violence in their everyday lives that I labour to capture in terms that are commensurate with its everyday character.

And there is a second aspect: We live in societies where violence is routinely practiced – for example in the form of torture. Even in democratic societies torture is practised, either in response to so-called extraordinary threats to security, or it is outsourced to authoritarian regimes in which normal legal safeguards might be absent. So, the interesting thing for me is to ask: How do we inhabit the world in relation to this overwhelming or inordinate knowledge? Sometimes one finds people – ordinary people, writers, activists, academics, who are wounded by this knowledge. They do not necessar-

ily express this woundedness with a specialised vocabulary. But their mode of being shows their awareness of the world in which things such as torture are possible. In my work, I find that I simply cannot turn away from this knowledge.

This does not mean that I have some fatal attraction to sorrow and suffering, but I do not see a separation between what is said to be good and what is said to be bad. I see them as interconnected in the everyday in the sense that sometimes good intentions produce terrible outcomes. To study suffering is not simply to cultivate virtues such as empathy but to cultivate a certain capacity to diagnose these features of our lives. Sometimes reading the work of those who have involved themselves in understanding the darker side of our lives is therapeutic as it allows us to think about what makes life sustainable for some in the face of such suffering.

*AT: How does this notion of the everyday shape the way you conduct ethnographic research?*

**VD:** I really feel anchored in the world by the mode of ethnography I do. It makes me feel that I am in this world: You are on earth and there is no escape from it. I want the pressure of the empirical, I don't want to escape into some thought experiments, even though I admire those who can clarify concepts through this mode of working. I love philosophy, but I cannot escape to philosophy. Derrida says he cannot escape from philosophy and Cavell says, «You cannot escape to philosophy.» I belong with Cavell in this regard. In fieldwork, we replicate what we do in everyday life. And so, I do not draw a sharp distinction between fieldwork and everyday life. There are other researchers who approach things differently. Take for example Marilyn Strathern, whose work I admire greatly. She has argued that in the life of the anthropologist, there are phases of fieldwork on the one hand, and phases back home in which we are disconnected from the field (see Strathern 1987). You come home from the field and then you write for an audience that is different from the people with whom you were engaged during fieldwork.

I do not imagine myself as writing for a different audience. When I write, I suppose that somebody from my fieldwork is my audience. If not now, then maybe in the future. I ask myself, «If my companions in the field were to read this, will they think that I have been true to what they have told me, true even in a partial way to what their lives are about?» This does not mean that I will not engage in criticism of what I see. But it is important for me to ask, «Will they recognise that criticism as something of their world, something they can receive?» Not that they necessarily agree with me but that they can receive it as somehow pertinent. This is why I present

my work not only at conferences and in an academic environment but also in slums where I work. People there have asked me, «So what did you find out about us? We would like to listen to what you have to say.» Sometimes, when you talk about your work to them, they recognise it and sometimes they say, «Oh, I never really thought about that.» Sometimes, it is a very small fact that they have not thought of before.

*AT: Can you give us an example of how your findings were received by the people you engage with in your fieldwork?*

**VD:** For instance, once I gave a paper for some local leaders and NGOs – I mean the very localised NGOs that do not have any global connections, national presence or experts with English language skills but which have sprung up to meet specific local needs such as representing the neighbourhood in a court case. In the paper I presented to them in Hindi, I showed that school dropouts in that community were related to the order of siblings. Afterwards, they began to think about it and said to me, «Oh, you know, this is an important point, because it shows that even in the same family different children might be treated differently. We had never thought about giving support to these children until now, but we want to talk to the government school about this.»

All this is related to my conviction that thinking and living are not opposed to each other. Moreover, writing is not the only way in which anthropological knowledge spreads. I do not understand why oral lectures and conversations in the field should not be regarded as anthropological knowledge production and circulation although much of this may not be published in the end.

*AT: This brings us to another aspect you discussed in the keynote to «Anthropology Talks»: You emphasised that anthropology is about «making the voice count». What does this mean for anthropologists methodologically and epistemologically?*

**VD:** My idea is to distinguish between what gives words life and how, on the other hand, a person can lose touch of his or her own words or lose what relation she has to her voice. The question of finding some way to make your voice count is also a question of being able to convey what is important to you. To give you an example: In the keynote lecture, I spoke about this woman who called her husband by his name. Telling me this fact could be a simple indicative statement, a report, but I sensed that it referred to something else, because its affective charge was different. It revealed the character of the relationship between this woman and her husband, and that a decisive event occurred, encapsulated in her breaking the taboo in Hindu society not to address your husband by his name (see also Das 2015). It shows that there are always aspects in the

speech of our interlocutors in the field that are not immediately apparent. Such a statement is a signal that something else is happening in her life. So, when this woman says to me with a meaningful look, «I call my husband by his name», I have to ask myself, «Is this addressed to me specifically? And what does it mean to say that this is addressed to me? How shall I follow it up?» Here, what I bring to the conversation is a response as a second person and not simply a third person, part of the general public to whom a statement might be made. As anthropologists, we often become the second person in interactions in the field.

There are, however, situations in which you need a third person perspective. For instance, sometimes it is very important for us to know about the dimensionality of a problem. For example, there is a difference between estimates that five thousand people or five million people have a particular disease. It is important to consider what kind of approach is appropriate for what kind of situation. While a third person perspective might be important for certain purposes, it is not the only perspective. The second person perspective, however, does not mean to occasionally pick a little quotation from someone and use it as an example for a theoretical point you have already arrived at. I try really hard to show the full geography of an argument or events that take place in the field. I am not satisfied by saying, «Oh, now I've got this woman to comment on this, so I've got her voice.» I need to get a sense of what exactly it means in the context of this person's life, in her milieu, in her relationship to others or in relation to her past. It is never a purely linguistic analysis that we deal with.

*AT: We have already been discussing what makes anthropological epistemologies distinctive. In interdisciplinary contexts, anthropology is often challenged to legitimate its insistence on the importance of knowledge from the second person perspective – to take up your notion. As a researcher who has repeatedly worked in interdisciplinary contexts – think for example of your research on global health interventions – how do you try to bridge these different epistemologies?*

**VD:** The philosophers I work best with are those who really think of philosophy as worldly. That does not mean they want to become anthropologists, because they are not seeking to become someone other than a philosopher. But they are interested in the question of how to receive a problem from the world. And if you think of how to receive a problem from the world, then anthropology is important for them. Because in some ways it shows that philosophical problems are problems which arise in the normal texture of life. But they have to be open to thinking that these guys sitting in the slum in Delhi could be philosophising in certain kind of ways. Sure, it is not the same way they philosophise. But they can recognise it as

part of the same kind of curiosity about the world, which is a curiosity to entertain problems for which we do not have solutions. To my great luck, I found friendship with philosophers who are very open to these modes of thinking.

And of course, everybody has to work really hard with each other. I hope I do not speak of philosophy as if it were easy to assimilate in my work. Sometimes, what looks like four lines in one of my essays might have taken me six months to figure out. There are texts that have been companions for life.

On the other side, for example, there is my work on tuberculosis, where I am collaborating with many different researchers. This work has clearly definable puzzles. The question is not a general one on how to reconcile economics or public health with anthropology. We rather focus on specific sets of problems. We start with a specific finding or we have specific numbers and these do not make sense. As a detective might, we ask what sense can we make of this clue. For example, we looked at why doctors asked patients with tuberculosis to go and get a GeneXpert test. While we normally assume that a superior technology will make earlier technologies obsolete, here we find that a new technology is simply added to existing ones. For instance, along with GeneXpert they will ask the patient to get a microscopic smear test or an ESR test (erythrocyte sedimentation rate) or a chest x-ray. What we have understood through the fieldwork in Patna is that doctors simply do not trust the institutions they work with. Any single result is not seen as trustworthy, both because they know that laboratories often work with poor quality assays or incompetent lab technicians, and because their clinical judgment may be at odds with the test results. This kind of insight would not have been discovered through a questionnaire, because they are never going to say this explicitly. But this is an ethnographic issue. So then we ask, «What if we throw this ethnographic finding back to the economist?» We might ask, «Can an economic experiment be devised which will be able to separate one kind of variable – say, trust deficit – versus other variables – say, financial cuts that the doctor is receiving from the lab?»

Sometimes, there are issues that need to be resolved, but I think there are also issues of epistemology which we cannot solve. But we can live with these different epistemologies, because there are very specific issues at stake, not general commitments to quantitative versus qualitative research. We do work with each other to say, «How can we find ways to find a good enough answer?»

*AT: In a way, this issue of the different epistemologies is related to Kirsten Hastrup's argument in «Getting it Right» (2004). She asks how we can reclaim anthropological authority in a post-positivist*

*era. She argues that rather than thinking about truth, we should ask how to establish anthropological authority in a time where we no longer believe in finding the truth «out there».*

**VD:** I agree with that formulation to some extent. I do not believe in finding the truth as if it was a substantive good out there. But this does not mean that I do not believe in questions of gathering more evidence. I will not (nor does Hastrup) jettison the question of evidence. The evidence we had in Bhopal did not stand up to the hierarchy of evidence, which by present standards would be a double-blind trial. Can that be just labelled as positivism? For me, this is not a question of positivist versus interpretive stances toward research. I do not dislike positivism as a matter of fact. I think that it is a serious philosophy and has its place. And we do not do ourselves a favour by simply saying that this or that is «just positivist reasoning» and that is the end of the matter.

That is why I said in one of my lectures here in Bern: It does matter that there are two and a half to five million tuberculosis patients in the private health sector in India about whom we know very little. It is a worse situation than if there were one hundred or one hundred thousand patients in the private sector. But we have to say *why* it matters, and why these numbers are important. Numbers will not matter for everything. Sometimes one cannot generate accurate numbers. Even this number of five million tuberculosis patients in the private health sector is a best estimate, given the circumstances, because we do not know more accurately how many patients remain undiagnosed. In their research on tuberculosis, Nimalan Arinaminpathy (2016) and his colleagues estimated the number of patients based on the number of drugs sold per week. But we do not know whether these drugs were given for use over three months or over six months. This means we can deduce a range between two million and five million patients. We are entitled to say that this is the kind of scenario in India with massive tuberculosis being treated in the private sector and this scenario is sufficiently different from a scenario with hundred thousand patients. It is good enough evidence to seriously work on getting the cooperation of doctors in the private sector and acknowledging the limits of government-run DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment Short Course) outreach. So, the question is where exactitude is required, and what kind of exactitude. I am keenly aware of the need for some trustworthy numbers for many kinds of problems. But there are questions that require more toleration of ambiguity, of blurred edges – a question like: «Under what circumstances is health more important to people than freedom to pursue a passion?»

So, I contest the idea that only one kind of knowledge has legitimacy. For instance, when people distrust your research because you describe a single case in great depth but cannot

present many similar incidents, I have to ask when and under what conditions does it matter that we are able to measure something and when is it that some other value than that of measurement becomes important? If the only problems that mattered were those in which we could measure and count, then many important questions would disappear from our radar.

This raises the issue of responsibility in a non-juridical sense or obligation in a non-contractual sense. I find what is important for me is to receive criticism. I listen carefully when someone says that a double-blind trial was not done on this issue, so the results are not trustable. Then I might respond that the problem might not be conducive to a double-blind trial, but if the problem is important then what will make you trust another method? Or, given the urgency of the issue (as in Bhopal) what will enable us to take action? So that is why I keep using the term «regions of reality». I do not think that there is a solid reality that can be grasped with all its edges but rather that there are different regions of the real.

I have a picture of knowledge as constantly open to different points of view and open to certain kinds of criticisms which may come from those that we do not like or by using methods we do not like, but I think it is very important to remember that our attention to errors, mistakes, blind spots, where and how we fail, is as important as our temporary successes (and they are always temporary).

*AT: Then, what is an anthropologist's responsibility in today's world?*

**VD:** I have personally been involved in a lot of political projects, not because I had some abstract idea that justice is important or truth is important, but because I could not have *not done* anything. I understand when people say that this does not offer a standard of how we should act. But I think there are no pre-given standards of how to act. We cannot know in advance what a situation might ask of us. I see my role as a modest one. This means that I do my best to make available to others what I have understood in order to think further. I believe in democracies. While I cherish expert knowledge for different reasons, I think that my role is to contribute knowledge in the public domain, not to tell people what they should do. Then it is up to the people to use this knowledge or not. If they are not going to take it into account, then I do have an obligation to ask them why they do not consider these issues as relevant. But ultimately, it is not we, the academics and experts, who make revolutions or bring about change in slow and sustained ways. Often academics and, even more, university administrators, have an exaggerated idea of themselves.

Pessimist though I am, my sense is that we should make our knowledge available to ordinary people, so that they have something new to add to their own understanding of things. And I may join their projects but with a full understanding that something may work eventually or it may not work. And sometimes, people have different points of view as well. I do not have a monopoly over thinking or even imagining that I always know the right answer. All of this can only be worked out through actual political engagements, but then one has to face up to the fact that there might be quite a difference between the urgency to act and the time required to secure a good enough answer – not to mention the fact that we should also be able to ask questions for which no sure answer will be possible.

*AT: This brings us back to the beginning of this conversation. Anthropology is not only a scientific endeavour but also a personal engagement with the world or a matter of connectedness, as you mentioned in the keynote lecture.*

**VD:** Connectedness is of course very important here. I do often ask myself why I cannot stop myself from acting sometimes, even when I know that success is not possible. At times, this has also meant that I am led into dangerous situations, for instance in 1984 when I was in the middle of these killers giving evidence against them as many others had also done and much more bravely.<sup>1</sup> At that time, it was interesting for me to see how many people put themselves at risk. But now I sometimes worry that this feeling of connectedness is actually lost. In India, the news reports are full of awful things these days. There are reports of brutal public rapes or the slaughter of a Muslim family who was accused of eating beef. I remember Gandhi's words in «Hind Swaraj»<sup>2</sup> where he asked, «What will you do when you want to protect the cow but the Muslims do not?» And he said that he will try to persuade them, but if they are not persuaded, he will say that the matter is beyond his competence.

For me, this is what I think about the question of connectedness on the one hand and the question of how we limit ourselves on the other hand. Because I have to remember that other people who I disagree with also think they are acting according to their moral convictions. For instance, the ones who are saying that we should throw all these refugees out, they are also saying it according to their conviction to protect their society. I do not agree with them and I will not stop criticising them. I do feel that my work is in some ways to point out this connectedness and to speak out on these things,

but I will participate in them to a limited extent, rather than being judgemental about those whose worlds I do not fully understand. I think that what is at stake here is a question of how to be morally engaged without moral profundity or self-righteousness. This is what anthropology is actually about and good at, in my opinion. But this is also a stance that anthropology is about to lose. Eventually, what I care about is to make things available for people to take up issues on their own terms. And if they do take it up, I will be connected to them by virtue of the fact that they have taken this project up and maybe – in the end – they are more competent or better placed to deal with things than I am, which may lead those they address to think differently.

Sometimes I think, even if I can change only one person's way of thinking, then I did change something. This is also why I love teaching. Not because I have more knowledge that I can impart. But there is something fantastic about seeing a student evolving and finding his or her own way of taking up certain questions or ways of thinking which are very dear to me. Sometimes, I say to them that this is not the way to pursue this problem, but this is not so much about my authority as my experience.

Some very well-meaning and brilliant people say that we need to contest the authority of experts in a world dominated by quantitative methods. But it is not easy to determine what is equivalent or commensurate with what. I have shown in my work that sometimes it is the minutia of words, gestures and acts of care performed as part of everyday life that stand up to the worst horrors, acts that are completely incommensurable with that horror. We should rather give up the notion of the authority we might wield as experts and instead think of how we can be with others to communicate our pictures of the world to each other. We do have some knowledge as anthropologists, which I think is important. And we need to be able to place it in a way in which others can also receive it as we receive a lot from others – but for that we need to be attentive, attuned to the unfolding of events in a worldly way.

<sup>1</sup> Veena Das refers to her fieldwork during the anti-Sikh riots that followed the murder of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi's pamphlet «Hind Swara» was first published in 1909. The first English translation was published in 1910 by Phoenix publishers. Gandhi himself translated the term «swaraj» as «home rule» or «self-rule». Accordingly, by «Hind Swara», Gandhi refers to India's self-rule (see also Parel 1997).

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