A life in scholarship

D.D. KOSAMBI: ONE LIFE, MANY WORLDS
By Ram Ramaswamy;
Fourth Estate, ₹899

Biographies tend to simultaneously eulogise and demystify their chosen subjects; this one is a rare exception as it humanises two remarkable figures in the history of modern India — father Dharmanand and son Damodar Kosambi. Both were exceptional figures in their own right and were part of an intellectual fraternity that the late-19th-century milieu helped nurture. If one recalls men like Rahul Sankrityayan, who too experimented with Buddhism and socialism, or subsequently B.R. Ambedkar, then one is better able to appreciate the dynamics of a context wherein caste critiques, discovery of Buddhism and Marxism and exposure to the United States of America as a crucible of new ideas were compelling determinants of change.

The biography is about two lives inhabiting multiple worlds. Written with remarkable lightness of touch, it makes use of an array of material including personal correspondence and papers, some fragments of diary entries and biographical accounts written in Marathi as well as secondary material to write an extraordinary history of two remarkable individuals and of the context in which they developed their ideas of science, philosophy and politics. The biography is a testimony of the vitality and the robustness of the late-19th-century national and global intellectual milieu wherein unexpected meetings forged long-lasting passions and worked as catalysts to individual transformation. We are told, for instance, how the senior Kosambi undertook travels in India to learn Sanskrit, seek out ways to explore Buddhism, and how, subsequently, had a chance encounter with a Dutch merchant on his way to America who infused in him socialist ideas and writings. These are fascinating details that tell us a lot about both the dynamic temperament of Dharmanand as well as the richness of a living intellectual tradition that engaged seriously with Buddhism and Buddhist learning.

The case of Damodar was no less compelling. We have wonderful sketches of his stint in the US, at Harvard, where he fared badly in Physics but excelled in English and Mathematics and dabbled in a mind-boggling array of languages. Something that stands out in the lives of both father and son was an extraordinary flair for language and literature, the range of readings they engaged in, and the avidity with which they pursued their passions. Travelling across the subcontinent in search of Buddhist learning and developing an astounding range of language skills in the process, Damodar Kosambi secured academic positions in Calcutta and, subsequently, in Harvard. He took two of his children to Harvard to work on their education and it was here that the young Damodar honed his language and Mathematics



skills. Like many typical undergrads, Damodar was careless with attendance and with the course requirements and we have fascinating glimpses through his correspondence about university administration.

A major part of the book deals with Damodar Kosambi's academic writings, his interventions, and his institutional experiences. In parsing his deep interest in numismatics and material life in then India, the author identifies Kosambi's engagement with Marxism as well as his literary appreciation. These worked well in the history project that he undertook which materialised in the form of *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* and marked a paradigm shift in the understanding of antiquity and Indian history. An important and interesting detail about this project was the collaboration and support he received from Monica Felton, author, journalist and peace activist, whose friendship and association are brilliantly documented. In the same decade as Kosambi went from strength to strength in his history project, his output in Mathematics and Statistics took a back seat. From time to time, Kosambi himself reflected on his limitations, on how his Mathematics and scientific activities had lagged behind global standards. While his position at the TIFR had given him national and international status, his scientific instincts were undermined by his ideological predilections. By the 1950s, his relations with Homi Bhabha soured and he became increasingly isolated. We have references to his stubborn and dogged efforts in trying to demonstrate or critique a theorem without proof and to publish them. This compromised his reputation at TIFR; so much so that he did not get an extension of tenure.

The biography compellingly brings out in poignant detail the human element. Kosambi was an unusual personality: brilliant, temperamental and passionate about his beliefs and interests. He was committed to the cause of learning and the scientific method, to constant exploration never deterred by circumstances. He was open to new ideas and fresh explorations right through his life and it was only appropriate that he responded to Jeffrey Masson's proposal to work on Bhasa's *Avimaraka* just a year before he breathed his last.

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शुद्धि पत्र

एतद् द्वारा सूचित किया जाता है कि पेयजल एवं स्वच्छता प्रमण्डल संख्या ई–प्रोक्योरमेन्ट निविदा सूचना सं०– DWSD/Cluster/GIRIDIH-1/SBD/24/2026 जिसका PR No- 392548 (Drinking Water and Sanitation) 26-27D में प्री–बीड जाती है, जो निम्न है :–

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नोट :– (1.) निविदा की अन्य कंडिका, नियम एवं शर्तें यथावत रहेंगे। (2.) यह शुद्धि–प

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