

'The Indian university system is in a state of absolute crisis'

Learning disability

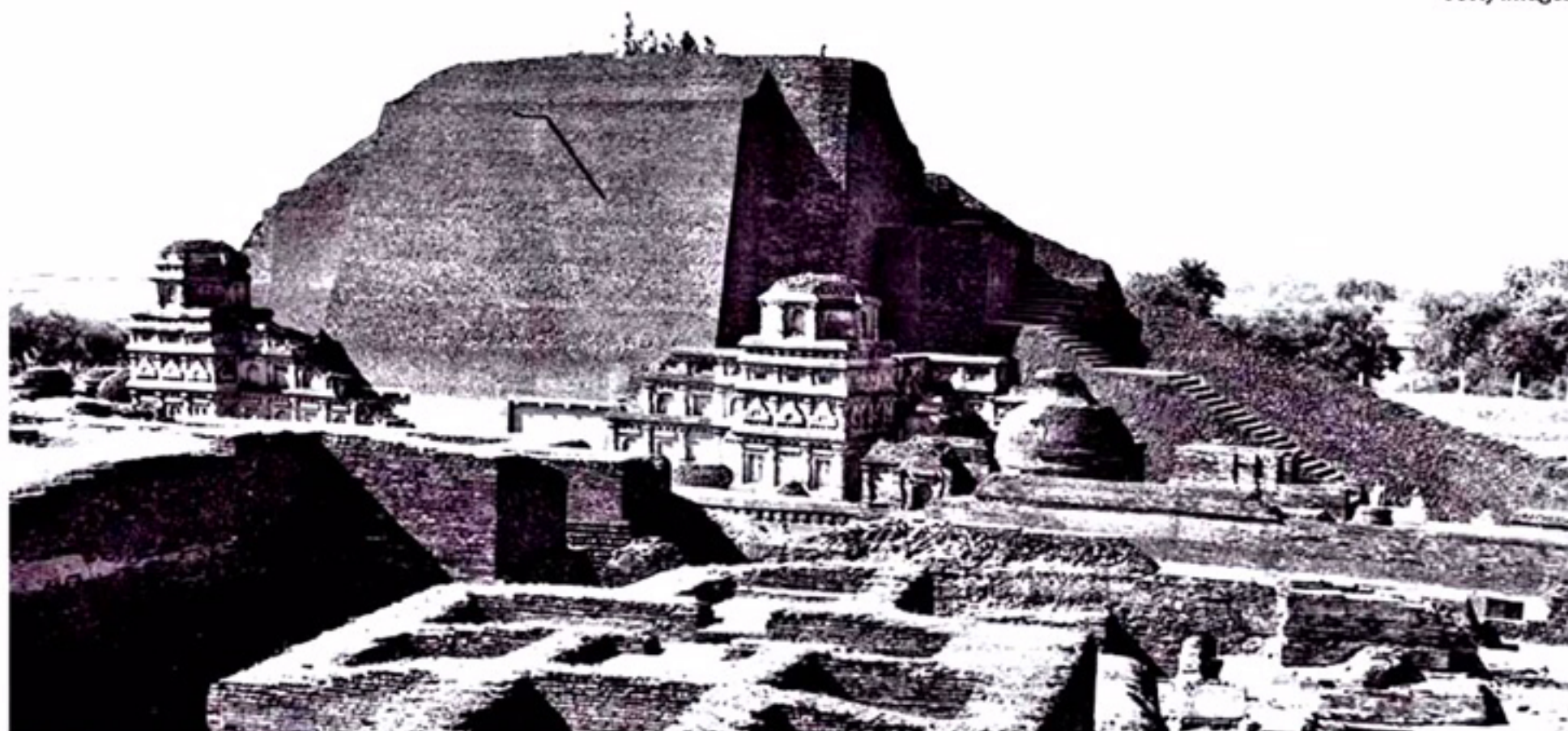
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Veena Das, the eminent anthropologist, has through her academic career been engrossed in a wide canvas of issues, including sectarian violence, medical anthropology, everyday life, ethics, poverty and philosophical and literary traditions. After teaching at the Delhi School of Economics (DSE) for 32 years, she went abroad to join the anthropology department of John Hopkins University where she is currently the Kreiger-Eisenhower Chair for Anthropology. An established figure in Indian anthropology, Das was in Delhi recently for the launch of *Wording the World*, Veena Das and Scenes of Inheritance. Published by Orient BlackSwan, the book is a collection of essays by some of her students showing how they have critically taken her teaching forward. She spoke to **Mannika Chopra** on the place for Sanskrit in contemporary thought, the crisis facing academic institutions and the absence of an intellectual movement.

Your academic career began as a scholar of Sanskrit but then you turned towards the study of sociology and anthropology. You still closely research Sanskrit texts, but why do you feel that the study of this language is limited in India? Yes, I did my undergraduation in Sanskrit and then went on to study sociology at the DSE and then teach. I continue to work on Sanskrit texts and recently I have been reading Anandvardhan's *Dhavanilyalok*. It seems to me that studying Sanskrit today has become a negative thing. I think people forget that till the 18th century Sanskrit was part of the philosophy department and not of Indology. When however it was considered to be part of Indology, it became divorced from questions of philosophy; questions about history and to say what conceptual formations can we actually find in these texts. Academics like, Gayatri Spivak, Arindam Chakravarty and Sheldon Pollack are looking into these aspects but these are all academics located abroad. And that's something that we really need to think about. When you speak of Sanskrit we say things like, oh you know, this is Hindutva. But it's not about making the Bhagwad Gita compulsory reading in schools or something like that. We need to have the apparatus through which larger questions can seriously be engaged and I don't see that investment being made.

Is the political milieu hampering a serious study of Sanskrit?

A lot of things are hampering it. Part of it is that it is simply making claims that it reflects the glory of Indian heritage which goes along with an absolute disinterest in how to make it a part of our contemporary understanding of major issues. There are people doing it from a historical viewpoint but they are located abroad. So what we really need to say is that, here is a set of scholars, we are willing to put them together, we are willing to put money and really see that they have the apparatus to study. There are some people who say that all Sanskrit traditions were great and that was our Hindu tradition. But you don't really know whose tradition that was. We need to get that conversation started.



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What was the background of the book that was just launched?

It was my student Roma Chatterjee, now a DSE professor, who thought of it. She had this interesting idea to ask some of my students and some younger colleagues not to write essays in honour of Veena Das but ask them how they received her work critically. And what you have in this book is a vast geographical range — articles on Palestine, Baltimore, India, and Latin America. Even though a lot of them are my students, I would say that it is an extraordinary book because it doesn't take a given trajectory. There are 21 essays and there is no one theme or a school of thought. What I like is that you have a certain kind of openness; a certain attentiveness to the way lives are lived.

Q & A



Veena Das

What do you think about the state of the Indian university system?

I think it is in an absolute crisis. Part of that is related to the fact that some people can dictate what they think is good research even though they have nothing to do with research. And the other part is internal. We have to think what kind of cutting-edge research are we producing. And I think that has gone down. And it's gone down not only in India but all over. A certain kind of mediocrity is coming through in the UK and the US because for one, the same model that is applied for measuring success in the sciences and technology is also the same one that is being applied for the humanities and social sciences. And that really doesn't work. And the other fact is the increase of administrators in academic institutions which in

the US alone is amazing. In comparison, at least 75 per cent of the teaching is done by ad hoc teachers!

In India, I don't think anyone has bothered to think what the role of public universities should be, given that there is such a lot of privatisation. In the US, at the time when the university system was flourishing, they were community colleges, agricultural colleges, which were not competing with Harvard or Yale, but were doing important work in their own right both in making access to higher education available and also creating a certain kind of knowledge base that people at different levels responded to. In India that never happened.

Is there then a lack of new ideas and research here as compared to China?

I find a lot of courageous work being done in my discipline here. But there is a suspicion of what one can call 'professionalisation' — that very often the ability to say that we are the good guys overrides the demands for securing your claims. Which is why, in a way, this has led to a decline in the number of good research publications. If one looks at, say, top research journals, I think that at one time India and China were at the same level but I do think now China has moved far ahead.

The other example is that of Singapore which had ordinary universities till it decided that it wanted to become a city of premier universities. They were not scared to say that they will get scholars from anywhere. If they are able to sustain it they will be in a position to do something new. China decided to do this more selectively so they outlined some universities where only top research would happen. I see in India completely contradictory demands being made on the same institute. For the same institute you will say that you must be on top of the research pyramid but you must also be UNDERTAKING social equity but without showing any concern as to how that aspect would be sustainable.