A Giant in the Domain of German South Asian History

On the morning of March 9th Professor Dr. Dietmar Rothermund, the eminent historian of South Asia and longstanding Executive Director of the South Asia Institute, passed away peacefully at his residence in Dossenheim near Heidelberg.

Born on 20th January 1933 in Kassel, and thus only a few days before the seizure of power by the German National Socialists, Dietmar Rothermund grew up in a country ravaged by fascism and war. During the early 1950s he studied History and Philosophy at the universities of Marburg and Munich. In 1956 he was awarded a Fulbright-Scholarship to study at the University of Pennsylvania and it was here that he completed his doctorate in 1959 with a dissertation on Pennsylvania in colonial times. What followed must be understood as serendipity: A stipend from the German Research Foundation brought him to India in 1960 and it was during this stay in India that he took the momentous decision to direct his research interest towards South Asia. In 1963 Dietmar Rothermund was offered the job of an academic assistant at Heidelberg University in the newly founded South Asia Institute that was established following the recommendation of Werner Conze. In 1968 he completed his Habilitation with a monograph that became a standard work entitled *Die politische Willensbildung in Indien, 1900–1960*; and shortly afterwards Rothermund was appointed Chair for the History of South Asia. In the subsequent years the foci of his academic work dealt with the history of political ideas in India, the agrarian system during the colonial epoch, the life and achievements of Mahatma Gandhi, and last but not least, Indian economic history.
In 1991 Dietmar Rothermund initiated the Heidelberg South Asian Talks (Heidelberger Südasien-gespräche) as a form of exchange between representatives of academia, the economy, politics and public affairs. As an eminent historian, Rothermund functioned for many years as a very influential member of the board of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde and participated for ten years in the Indo-German Consultative Group that had been established by the German Foreign Office. Between 1997 and 2006 Dietmar Rothermund headed the European Association of South Asian Studies. As early as 1988 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in London; in 1994 he received the Hemchandra Raychaudhury Gold Medal of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta (India) and in 2011 the Rabindranath Tagore-Cultural Award of the Indo-German Society.

In view of his exceptional contribution to the South Asia Institute, his successful endeavour towards the advancement and transmission of knowledge on India and South Asia in Germany as well as his impressive academic writings, Dietmar Rothermund was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit in October 2011.

Professor Rothermund has worked in the field of social, political, intellectual and economic history with enormous creativity and an impressive output. Not only his German readership but also international scholars have profited from his magnanimous contribution: roughly 45 monographs, some 30 edited volumes and almost 200 academic articles. The international aspect of his impact is particularly significant since almost half of his writings has been published in English, a language that he mastered superbly, and his most important works (of which, first and foremost, his canonical tome “A History of India” written together with Hermann Kulke) were translated into more than a dozen foreign (including non-European) languages. Dietmar Rothermund’s fame as an eminent historian of South Asia has therefore a truly global dimension. His path-breaking status and unique position within the German historiography of India and South Asia is all the more surprising in view of his point of departure: as an American historian who dealt in his above mentioned dissertation from 1959 with the colonial religious history of Pennsylvania!

Apart from his astonishing productivity as a scholar – since his retirement in 2001 Rothermund almost tripled his annual publication score – he was driven by an ambition to lay an institutional foundation for South Asian Studies in Germany and Europe. This goal he truly achieved as exemplified by milestones such as the European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, (initiated in 1966), the already mentioned Heidelberger Südasien-Gespräche, the working group for Non-European History, or as editor in chief of Periplus, the yearbook of Non-European History, not to mention his leading role in both the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde as well as in the Indo-German Consultative Group. Indeed for several decades Dietmar Rothermund was functioning as a kind of „one-man political think-tank“ in the realm of political and academic exchange between Germany and India. Until shortly before his death he continued to offer his profound insights and vast knowledge to a general public via the news media. For decades Dietmar Rothermund was approached whenever historical or current events in South Asia needed a sober and detailed analysis and his numerous contributions by way of newspaper articles or radio interviews provided a most welcome balanced perspective that stood in stark contrast to the loud and sensational way in which global news was often presented.

Rothermund’s close relation to India also had a very personal side: His Indian wife, Chitra, with whom he was married for almost 50 years, originated in Maharashtra; all their three children
have Indian names. During his regular and mostly yearly visits to India, he was able to establish many close and enduring friendships with an impressive number of influential South Asians. His recently published book *My Encounters in India* (Primus Books 2019) includes 133 vignettes of these encounters, amongst whom Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Narasimha Rao, Zakir Husain, Manmohan Singh und Jayaprakash Narayan figure most prominently.

Dietmar Rothermund combined a solid analytical approach of traditional scholarship with a unique blend of creativity and intellectual versatility that attracted younger academics in large numbers. As such he can also be considered as a *spiritus rector* of the most recent research field, namely the field of transcultural studies. As early as the 1990s he had established the German Research Foundation program dealing with the transcultural dimensions of European expansion (named „Transformationen der europäischen Expansion vom 15.-20. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zur kognitiven Interaktion von europäischen und außereuropäischen Gesellschaften“). Another example for his outstanding intellectual creativity was the international conference conducted in May 2013 on *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations*. Here he managed to combine current research on memorial cultures with processes of historical self-reflexivity in the former colonial nations. For me personally, it was an honour to participate in this ground-breaking endeavour. Also as his successor in the SAI-Chair (2002-2018) I constantly benefitted from Dietmar Rothermund’s generosity and his impressive „elder statesmanship“.

It does not come as a surprise that for decades the SAI was known as „Dietmar’s Institute“, and this was the case not only in India but was also a well-known „fact“ among Heidelberg’s taxi drivers, for whom the geographical location of the Institute (until 2019 in the campus Neuenheimer Feld) was easy to find, thanks to Professor Rothermund being one of their most frequent customers. Indeed, given his natural affability and congenial personality, he was extraordinarily approachable to and genuinely interested in interacting with persons from all walks of life, despite the fact that he belonged to the elite circle of recipients of the coveted Federal Cross of Merit in 2011.

Our esteemed colleague Dietmar Rothermund can certainly be considered the founding father of the SAI – nobody else has served the SAI as long as he did, and nobody else can claim to have had a greater impact on its development. There is no comparable German academic who has succeeded in presenting South Asia’s past and present to a German as well as to a global readership with a unique combination of passion and precision that he alone possessed. Dietmar Rothermund is truly a giant on whose shoulders we, colleagues, researchers and students at the SAI, stand and continue to harvest the rich fruits of his stimulating and inspirational work. The South Asia Institute will preserve a most cherished memory of Dietmar Rothermund as an outstanding researcher, a charismatic colleague and an incredibly amicable human being.

Professor Dr. Gita Dharampal (retired successor to Prof. Rothermund),
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