



IN MEMORIAM

Damodar SarDesai
Professor of History
UC Los Angeles
1931-2016

Professor Damodar R. SarDesai was indeed a much-loved and widely respected Professor at UCLA for nearly half a century until he fully retired in 2011. He was an Emeritus Professor of History “on recall” for over a decade. As the dozens of student evaluations attest in the “Bruin Boardwalk”, he was highly appreciated by the student community; accolades such as “the best professor I had”, or “the best professor at UCLA” were not uncommon. For years on end, this Professor of South and Southeast Asian history and of the British Empire had to close the course registration at 300 -350 students.

Professor SarDesai joined UCLA as a graduate student in 1961. He received a Ph.D. in History at UCLA and joined its faculty as Assistant Professor in 1966. He advanced to the Associate Professorship and Full Professorship by 1977. Thereafter, he served the Department of History for periods of time as its Vice-Chair and Chair. He introduced Southeast Asian Studies as a field at UCLA, and then went on to strengthen UCLA’s program in South and Southeast Asian Studies as its coordinator for fourteen years. In the early nineties, he built UC’s India Studies Program as part of the Education Abroad Program. In 1998, he was recalled to hold the newly endowed Chair in Pre-modern Indian History. As Emeritus Professor of History, SarDesai served on UCLA’s Research Council and taught in the Summer Session until 2011.

In the days of the Vietnam War, Professor SarDesai’s classes would be flooded by students who would want to know about that country. He taught Vietnam during those times of controversy and conflict while there were so many student protests on campus. Many of them appreciated Professor SarDesai’s consistent presentation of that deadly

conflict as an expression of the nationalist rather than communist goals of the largely peasant communities of Vietnam. SarDesai wrote prolifically on the subject including a book that went into four editions (*Vietnam: Past and Present*). A reviewer in the *Pacific Historical Review* once said that if the book were available to the policy-makers in the Foggy Bottom area in the sixties, “there would perhaps be no Vietnam War!”

Professor SarDesai's scholarly output includes 17 books on South and Southeast Asia, ranging from diplomatic history and economic history to nationalism and imperialism. One of them is currently in the seventh edition (*Southeast Asia: Past and Present*) and another in the fourth (*Vietnam: Past and Present*), and some books have been translated into Spanish, Chinese and Khmer. He has numerous articles published in various international journals, and has also served on the advisory boards of many of these journals. His research and writing were generously supported by major funding agencies such as the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Institute of Indian Studies and UCLA. He was honored with numerous fellowships, and in 1979, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (FRHS), London, which followed the publication of his book *British Trade and Expansion in Southeast Asia, 1830-1914*.

From 1993 to 1995, Professor SarDesai was the first Director of the University of California's Education Abroad Program in New Delhi. He was President of the prestigious (formerly Royal) Asiatic Society of Bombay for a decade (1989-1999). It was no surprise that when the Doshi Chair in Pre-Modern Indian History was endowed at UCLA in 1998, Professor SarDesai was requested to be its first holder. In 1999, Dr. SarDesai was instrumental in raising a quarter of a million dollars from the Indian-American community in Southern California to endow the Sardar Patel Award at UCLA. The award is given annually by UCLA's Center for India and South Asia to the best doctoral dissertation on any aspect of modern India, completed that year at a University in the United States. In 2005, the Yadunandan Center for India Studies at California State University, Long Beach conferred on him a Lifetime Achievement Award and instituted an annual Damodar R. SarDesai Prize for the best lesson plan on India (bringing India into the World History curriculum) by a middle or high school teacher in California's schools.

In 1982, the Indian state of Maharashtra honored him as a freedom-fighter for his vital contribution to the Goa freedom movement and in 2007, the government of Goa bestowed on him the Global Goan Award for his achievements over a lifetime. During his long academic career, he addressed a long list of conferences and academic audiences in a score of universities in India and Southeast Asia. The prestigious Association for Asian Studies (Pacific Coast) held a special panel on Nationalism and Imperialism in his honor at which his former students contributed their papers.

Dr. SarDesai believed in taking the advanced scholarship in his favorite fields to the general public. He used his chairmanship of the South and Southeast Asian Studies at UCLA (14 years) and the Doshi Chair (five years) to organize more than a dozen national and international conferences on a variety of topics ranging from “India and the Nuclear Question,” “The Kashmir Problem,” to “Indian-Americans : Heritage and Destiny,” and

“Ayurveda as a System of Medicine”. In addition to well-known scholars, the events attracted three to four hundred enlightened individuals mostly but not exclusively from the Indian-American community in southern California.

Prof. SarDesai’s expertise and “out of the ordinary” approach made him a fairly frequent guest on radio and television, thanks to UCLA’s Public Relations Department who were approached by major media outlets for an expert on India or Southeast Asia. He was often interviewed by all three national TV channels when a major event impacting South and Southeast Asia occurred- when Goa was freed from Portuguese colonial rule, when Winston Churchill passed away, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated, for a documentary on Ho Chi Minh, and many more.

In 2015, Professor SarDesai’s former graduate students, now well-recognized scholars in their own right, produced a festschrift in his honor titled "Nationalism and Imperialism in South and Southeast Asia- Essays presented to Damodar R. SarDesai" edited by Dr. Arnold Kaminsky and Dr. Roger Long. It is a token of their love and appreciation for a man who devoted his life to the field of South and Southeast Asian Studies, cared deeply about his students, and engaged the community in dialogue and discussion. He will be remembered and missed by those whose lives were changed for the better by his kindness, good humor, generosity, and intelligence.