

D.D KOSHAMBI: A HISTORIAN (PART-1)

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D.D. KOSHAMBI(1907-1966)



INTRODUCTION

- ▶ **Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi** (31 July 1907 – 29 June 1966) was an Indian versatile genius with interests in not only history but also in mathematics, statistics, philology, and genetics. He contributed to genetics by introducing the *Kosambi map function*. In statistics, he was the first person to develop orthogonal infinite series expressions for stochastic processes via the Kosambi–Karhunen–Loève theorem. He is also well known for his work on numismatics and for

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compiling critical editions of ancient Sanskrit texts.

- ▶ His father, Dharmananda Damodar Kosambi, had studied ancient Indian texts with a particular emphasis on Buddhism and its literature in the Pali language. Damodar Kosambi emulated him by developing a keen interest in his country's ancient history. He was also a Marxist historian specialising in ancient India who employed the historical materialist approach in his work.

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- ▶ He is particularly known for his classic work *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*. He is described as "the patriarch of the Marxist school of Indian historiography". Kosambi was critical of the policies of then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, which, according to him, promoted capitalism in the guise of democratic socialism. He was an enthusiast of the Chinese revolution and its ideals, and, in addition, a leading activist in the World Peace Movement.

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- ▶ Born at Kosben in Goa, then under the rule of the Portuguese colonialists, Damodar Kosambi was brought up in a family known for its rigorous standards of learning and social behaviour. He had inherited from his father, the renowned Buddhist scholar Dharmanand Kosambi, an insatiable spirit of inquiry, a love of wandering and a sharp, versatile intellect, which took him quickly ahead of his co-workers and gave his views a rare sense of originality. After some schooling in India, his father, who had accepted a teaching assignment at Harvard (USA), took him to the Cambridge latin

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School, where as a boy of eleven he dedicated himself to a student's hard life until after about eight years we see him emerging as a brilliant young graduate of the Harvard University in Mathematics, History and Languages. On returning to India he worked for a few years at the Banaras Hindu University and then at the Aligarh Muslim University before he decided to settle down in Poona in 1932 as Professor of Mathematics at the Fergusson College--a college known for its pioneering services in the field of national education and where his father has taught

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for many years and laid the foundations of Buddhist Studies in western India. It was during the crucial period of fourteen years he spent at this college, which be in lighter vein characterized as "Rama's exile into the wilderness", that Professor Kosambi carried on an incessant struggle for mastery in various fields of knowledge and laid the foundations of his greatness as a scholar and a thinker . Endowed with a powerful and far-reaching imagination and an outstanding mathematical ability, Kosambi, who had concentrated his mind almost exclusively upon mathematical research up to 1939, was gradually led to use his abstract

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methods for obtaining new results in various branches of social sciences. He began by applying statistical methods to Indian numismatics. He was seen weighing with the utmost precision and unremitting zeal thousands of punch-marked coins obtained from different museums in the country and thrashing out his data until he could establish their chronological sequence, forward convincing arguments regarding the economic conditions under which they could have been minted, and discover facts about the dynastic history of the pre-Mauryan period, based upon a wide study of the

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ancient literary sources and his new metrological findings. The more he examined the productive spirit working behind the panorama of Indian history, the more charmed he was by the manifold aspects of Indian. culture, the past as well as the present. While giving mathematical precision to his ideas in the various branches of humanities, he turned almost instinctively to his Sanskrit inheritance. His frank and scholarly estimate of Bhartrhari's aphorisms and later of Vidyakara's anthology, *Subhasitaratnakosa*, was a standing testimony to his versatile genius and quick mastery of the latest advances in literary criticism. In these and other Indological studies covering a wide



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range of subjects from the Vedic and the Epic to the classical literature of India he owed as much to Sukthankar's prolegomena to the critical edition of the *Mahabharata* as to the most modern standards of criticism in the West. Being deeply preoccupied with the entire field of knowledge as it were, it was no wonder that his mathematical lectures in the Fergusson College seemed to go well over the heads of the postgraduate candidates. That as a result of this

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Kosambi had to leave the college ought to open our eyes to the dangers involved in our borrowing an examination-ridden system and uninspiring standards of education in this country. The width of his comprehension and his penetrating researches, however, had been making their mark among the scientific circles of India and abroad. It was not long before he was offered the Chair for Mathematics in the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research of Bombay in 1946, which he held for the next sixteen years.

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The new position offered him opportunities of developing closer contacts with scholars of his own calibre all over the world and of meeting his financial responsibilities better than before. Kosambi, however, could not relish the conditions under which he had to work. Living in his own house in the BORI Colony, Poona, he had to march every morning to the railway station and make the "Deccan Queen" his second home in order to attend to his duties in Bombay. Besides, a man of his temperament, solely dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and social enlightenment, was entitled, he

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thought, to a freedom of thought and action, such as we hardly expect to meet with in an emergent society struggling for its economic independence. All the same, he was able now not only to give a final shape to some of his earlier studies, but also to launch upon new orientations in the fields of Biology, Ethnology, Archaeology and Prehistory.

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And every now and then we see him turning back from his study of the social sciences to the development of his research in the comparatively abstract or pure fields of science: the last book he sent out for publication dealt with Prime Numbers. His last major work, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical*

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- ▶ *Outline* (London, 1965) , which has now come to be translated into several European and Asian languages, set the seal of recognition on his vast erudition, his ability to discover basic motives of human civilization and his brilliant powers of exposition.

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- ▶ It is not for us to estimate the scientific advances made by Professor Kosambi in the fields of Genetics, Statistics and Mathematics or the part played by him in various other spheres of activity, e.g., in his capacity as Member of the World Peace Council visiting the socialist countries of the East and the West. pursuits.

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- ▶ He believed in the Marxist method of interpreting and changing the human society, but did not hesitate to revise the data of Marx himself in the light of modern research. As an independent thinker with a passionate devotion to scientific research, he seemed to be almost exclusively preoccupied with his own intellectual pursuits. All the same, he was able now not only to give a final shape to some of his earlier studies, but




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- ▶ As such, he was sometimes accused of brusqueness and intolerance, but he had obviously no use, nor time for all the sophistications of our normal social life, nor could he afford to waste his energies on empty rituals and ceremonies, except for treating them as objects of his anthropological studies. And yet, whenever he found some time to relax, his childlike simplicity and sparkling wit were most refreshing even to those who were nearest to him and he spread laughter and sunshine around him.

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Towards his friends he was generous to a fault, his inner life was marked by an unmistakable streak of asceticism, while his ethical standards were unusually high and severe. Professor D. D. Kosambi deserves to be remembered as one of the highly gifted and versatile scientific workers and indefatigable scholars of modern India for whom a relentless search for the highest human values was the only natural way of life.

(To be continued)