

OBITUARIES

Stephen Fuchs SVD (1908–2000)
Founder of the Institute of Indian Culture



DR. STEPHEN FUCHS SVD, well-known among anthropologists, folklorists, and other social scientists, passed away peacefully on 17 January 2000 at St. Gabriel, Mödling, Austria. The last few years of his long life he spent at the missionary seminary of the Society of the Divine Word in Mödling. He was buried at the seminary's small cemetery where his mentor, Wilhelm Schmidt, also rests.

Though Dr. Fuchs spent his last days in Austria, his country of birth, he had lived more than sixty years in India, where he dedicated himself to scholarly activities. He first came to India as a young missionary in 1934 and later committed his life to researching the cultures of India's *dalit* (untouchables) and tribal peoples. He was the founder and longtime director of the Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai. During his lifetime he was associated with several academic institutions, including the Anthropos Institute, sponsored by the Society of the Divine Word. As a personal friend and *Landsmann* of Dr. Matthias Eder, the first editor of *Asian Folklore Studies*, Dr. Fuchs was a strong supporter of this journals from its early years.

Born on 30 April 1908 at Bruck an der Mur, a town of Styria, Austria, he joined the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) after *Matura* in 1927. After his philosophical studies at Sankt Augustin near Bonn, Germany, he returned to Austria where he pursued theological studies at St. Gabriel. There he encountered Prof. Wilhelm Schmidt SVD, the founder of *Anthropos* and of the Culture-historical School of Ethnology, who introduced Dr. Fuchs to anthropology. The encounter motivated Fuchs to dedicate the rest of his life to scholarly pursuits in anthropology.

After his ordination in 1934, Fuchs was sent to Indore, a city of Madhya Pradesh in central India, where the Society of the Divine Word had begun to work in 1932. He spent his first years learning the local dialects, Hindi, and English. These languages were the foundation for his later anthropological work. The *dalit* and tribal cultures of India held a deep fascination for Fuchs, and like Wilhelm Schmidt, he was convinced of the need to collect

historical material about simple people throughout the world in order to understand humanity. His commitment developed into a veritable love affair with India and her rich tribal and *dalit* heritage.

Fuchs began his research by studying the socio-cultural life of the Chamar, an untouchable caste with a large population in central India. He was attracted by their rich culture and published his first article in *Anthropos* (1937) on their marriage, customs, and festivals. Not limiting his interest to the untouchables, he also studied tribal communities in central India. Repeatedly, he stayed for a couple of weeks or a month with the Korku, collecting information on their customs, festivals, and religious beliefs. He had a particular interest in learning and studying their language because although it belongs to the Munda family of languages no other ethnic group in the area speaks a Munda language.

During the Second World War, his activities came to a temporary halt. Due to the hostilities between Britain and Nazi Germany, Fuchs was interned by the British government as an enemy, along with all German missionaries in camps in the cities of Ahmednagar, Deolali, and Dehradun. But he made good use of the enforced free time to reflect on observations and notes he had collected earlier on the customs and beliefs of the Nimar Balahis. The fruit of this work was the exhaustive and path-breaking study *The Children of Hari: A Study of the Nimar Balahis in the Central Provinces of India*, which was published 1950 in Vienna.

In 1945, when it was discovered that Fuchs was Austrian, he was released from internment, and again took up his work among the tribals, particularly the Gonds and Baigas of Mandla District, Madhya Pradesh. He also continued to visit the Korku and got interested in the Bhumia tribes of the Mandla District in whose villages he repeatedly spent long periods from 1945 onwards.

In the spring of 1948, Fuchs returned to Austria where he took up studies for a Ph.D. in Ethnology and Indology at the University of Vienna. Thanks to his earlier studies, a mass of field material he had brought to Vienna from India, and to numerous ethnographic articles already published, Fuchs was able to write a dissertation and acquire a Ph.D. degree in the short period of two years. He was awarded a Doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1950 for his study of the horse sacrifice, an important sacrificial ritual of the Bhumias (a branch of the Baiga tribe). In the dissertation he showed the connection between this ritual and the Ashva Medha horse sacrifice of the Aryans.

After his return to India in 1950, Fuchs helped to establish the Department of Anthropology at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. Between 1950 and 1954 he worked at the college as Lecturer in Cultural Anthropology, but

he did not feel comfortable as a teacher. He felt this work took too much of his valuable time and hindered him from doing what he really cherished: fieldwork. Subsequently, he gave up his teaching assignment and began to concentrate entirely on his research.

Fuchs had already conceived the idea of founding an Indian research institute by 1947. He intended the institute to be a branch of the Anthropos Institute that was founded in 1925 by Wilhelm Schmidt at Mödling, and to invite members of other scientific disciplines to collaborate in comprehensive research on different aspects of Indian life, culture, religion, and language. His dream came true in 1950 when he founded, along with Fr. Matthias Hermans SVD, the Indian Branch of the Anthropos Institute, Bombay. Originally located at Bandra, a suburb of central Bombay, the Institute was renamed in 1967 as "Institute of Indian Culture." In 1976, the Institute and the valuable library Fuchs had built-up over many years were moved to spacious locations in Andheri, a suburb of northwest Bombay. After its establishment, Fuchs conducted his research and writing from this Institute, maintaining a pace equalled only by a very few.

In his research, Fuchs covered a wide range of groups located in different areas: the Balahis, Gonds, and Bhumias of Eastern Mandla; the Bhils and Bhilalas of Madhya Pradesh; the Korku and the Sweeper caste of Nimar District; the Sweeper caste in the Melghat District of Madhya Pradesh and in Maharashtra; the Chamar caste of Varanasi and of the Ballia District of Uttar Pradesh, etc. The result of this research is impressive: ten books and many papers and articles in learned journals.

In addition to his research, Fuchs was also involved in other academic pursuits. He delivered a series of lectures at various seminaries because he felt that the Indian students should be conscious of their own culture in order to be prepared for their future work. Between 1961 and 1962, he was in the Philippines at the University of San Carlos, Cebu City, lecturing as Visiting Professor of Anthropology and Indian Philosophy. He attended numerous seminars, conferences, and anthropological meetings, many of which concerned the study of tribals in India. He contributed to *Anthropos* and other journals, and was on the editorial board of *Asian Folklore Studies*.

During his last years in India, Fuchs spent most of his time in the Institute in Mumbai working on his field materials and writing articles. Surrounded by books and papers, he would spend long evening hours in his office hammering on his old black typewriter. When he had to return to Austria in 1996 for reasons of health, it was a difficult time for him to depart from the country where he had spent 63 years of his life. As long as his eyes permitted, he continued to read and write.

The Austrian Government honored him with a medal in 1998 for his

scientific work. On 14 November 1999 he was awarded the Golden Doctor Diploma (50 years after his doctorate), particularly in recognition of his contribution to the field of Indian Anthropology. The document said he “gained the highest merits for the ethnology of India” (*qui de ethnologia Indiae optime meritus est*). The merits of Fuch’s works were also acknowledged in 1997 when the University of Mumbai recognized the Institute of Indian Culture as a Postgraduate Research Centre in Anthropology and Sociology.

Stephen Fuchs has been a source of inspiration to a large number of scholars who have undertaken research on the marginalized people of India. In appreciation of his contributions to Indian anthropology, the director of the Institute of Indian Culture (S. M. Michael) has edited two Festschrifts, *Anthropology as a Historical Science: Essays in Honor of Stephen Fuchs* and *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*. To us who are entrusted with continuing his work, his legacy remains. The finest tribute we can pay to his memory is to uphold his vision and to meet squarely the challenges we have to face in translating his vision into reality in the new millennium.

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