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# Obituary

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## *Professor Dr Dietmar Rothermund: A Giant in the Domain of German South Asian History*

On the morning of 9 March 2020 Professor Dr Dietmar Rothermund, the eminent historian of South Asia and longstanding Executive Director of the South Asia Institute (SAI), died peacefully at his residence in Dossenheim near Heidelberg.

Born on 20 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 took him to India in 1960, and it was during this stay in India that he took the momentous decision to redirect his research interest towards South Asia. In 1963 Rothermund was offered the job of an academic assistant at Heidelberg University in the newly founded South Asia Institute that was established by the theologian Wilhelm Hahn, who later became Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs in Baden-Württemberg, and the historian 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 he was appointed Chair for the History of South Asia there. In 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 Südasiengespräche) as a forum for exchange between representatives of academia, the economy, politics and public affairs. As an eminent historian, he operated for many years as a very influential member of the board of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde, and likewise participated for a decade in the Indo-German Consultative Group that had been established by the German Foreign Office. Between 1997 and 2006 he headed the European Association of South Asian Studies. As early as 1988 he was elected a 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, and his impressive academic writings, he was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit in October 2011.

Dietmar Rothermund worked in the field of social, political, intellectual and economic history with enormous creativity and an impressive output. Not only his many German readers 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 have been published in English, a language that he mastered superbly, and his most important works (including first and foremost his 1986 canonical tome *A History of India*, written together with Hermann Kulke) were translated into more than a dozen foreign (including non-European) languages. Rothermund's fame as an eminent historian of South Asia has therefore a truly global dimension. His path-breaking status and unique position within German historical writing on India and South Asia is all the more surprising in view of his point of departure: as a historian of America specialising in the colonial religious history of Pennsylvania!

Apart from his astonishing productivity as a scholar – following his retirement in 2001 Professor Rothermund almost tripled his annual publication output – he was driven by an ambition to lay an institutional foundation for South Asian Studies in Germany and Europe. That he truly achieved this goal was exemplified by landmarks such as the European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, (initiated in 1966), the afore-mentioned Heidelberger Südasiens-Gespräche, the working group for Non-European History, his editorship-in-chief of *Periplus* (Yearbook of Non-European History), not to mention his leading role in both the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde as well as the Indo-German Consultative Group. Indeed, for several decades Rothermund functioned 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 he would be consulted whenever historical or current events in South Asia required 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 sensational way in which global news was often presented.

Professor Rothermund's close relation to India also had a very personal side: His Indian wife, Chitra, to whom he was married for almost 50 years, hailed from 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* (2019) includes 133 vignettes of these encounters, amongst whom Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Narasimha Rao, Zakir Husain, Manmohan Singh and Jayaprakash Narayan figure most prominently.

Professor 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 that of transcultural studies. As early as the 1990s he had established

the German Research Foundation's programme dealing with the transcultural dimensions of European expansion ('Transformationen der europäischen Expansion vom 15.-20. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zur kognitiven Interaktion von europäischen und außereuropäischen Gesellschaften'). Another example of his outstanding intellectual creativity was the international conference on 'Memories of Post-Imperial Nations' held in May 2013. Here he managed to combine current research on memorial cultures with processes of historical self-reflexivity taking place in the former colonial nations. For me personally, it was an honour to participate in this ground-breaking endeavour. Moreover, as his successor in the SAI-Chair (2002–18), I constantly benefitted from his 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. Given his natural affability and congenial personality, he was extraordinarily approachable 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. He can certainly be considered the founding father of the SAI – nobody else has served the SAI for as long as he did, and nobody else can claim to have had a greater impact on its development. Few if any other German academics have succeeded in presenting South Asia's past and present to Germans so well as to a global readership with the unique combination of passion and precision that he possessed. Those who knew and worked with Professor Rothermund will cherish his memory as an outstanding researcher, a charismatic colleague, and an incredibly amicable human being.

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