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IN MEMORIAM

G. V. DESANI

Govindas Vishnoodas Desani, journalist, public speaker, novelist, and professor of philosophy, was a pioneer of a modern, or postmodern, Indian sensibility. Opposed to Gandhi's noncoöperation policy during World War II, Desani was at once a champion of Eastern ideas and a critic of religious practices. His novel, *All About H. Hatterr* (1948), is a classic of the Indo-Anglian genre. There and in the prose poem *Hali*, he uses colloquialisms of both London and Delhi to achieve melodies in a passionate voice, drawing on the symbolisms of two cultures.

Born in Nairobi in 1909, and raised in India, Desani traveled on his own to England at the young age of eighteen where he was recognized as a prodigy and granted a readership at the British Museum. In his twenties, he returned to India as a correspondent for the *Times of India*, Reuters, and the Associated Press. Desani lectured in the employ of the Bombay, Baroda, and Central India Railway on the antiquities of Rajputana, Ajmer, and Delhi. Traveling throughout the Subcontinent as a journalist but often styling himself as a seeker of religious truth, he encountered gurus and fakirs in their own settings and on their own terms, gathering experience that would inform his fiction. Back in England during the war, he was a lecturer and BBC broadcaster. After publishing *Hatterr* in 1948 to immediate acclaim (in a week the book went into a second printing), Desani again returned to India in the fifties, becoming, in the following decade, a provocative cultural commentator for a popular newspaper magazine. Desani immigrated to the U.S. in 1968 to teach Eastern religion and philosophy. He taught at UT as a lecturer in the spring of 1967-68 and 1968-69, and was appointed professor of philosophy at in the spring of 1970.* He retired and became professor emeritus in 1978. G.V. Desani died in Dallas, November 15, 2001.

Desani was an autodidact who reports running away from school as a youth three times, reaching England while still a minor. Fortunate in having his talent recognized by George Lansbury, leader of the Labor Party, the teenager spent a privileged year in the British Museum, with access to the world's greatest collection of Indian art. Desani returned to India to make his own way as a correspondent for London newspapers. Other opportunities opened and he began a career as a lecturer known for a style both entertaining and eloquent. During World War II, Desani was tapped for service as an adult educator and employed by the British Armed Forces and the Imperial Institute among several distinguished government and private institutions. Speaking to overflowing audiences in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, and other venues, he gave talks simultaneously broadcast to thousands of troops stationed in Britain. Literary critic Anthony Burgess writes in a preface to a revised edition of *Hatterr* in 1972 that he remembers Desani's oratory showing "in live speech the vitality of the British rhetorical tradition—brilliant in Burke and Macaulay, decadent in Churchill, now dead." In marked contrast to Gandhi in India and to Nehru who acceded to Gandhi's moral authority joining him to urge Indians not to help the British war effort,

Desani encouraged Hindus like everyone else to resist German and Japanese enslavement.

Desani wrote *Hatterr* during and immediately after the war, and garnered international fame as well as sufficient royalties to allow him to pursue his own interests. He returned to India and Burma in the fifties, and often for hours secluded himself for meditation. Again he sought out the proficient in Eastern spirituality, traveling as far as Japan for instruction in a Buddhist meditation technique. Though he published the poem *Hali* in 1952 and occasionally lectured, Desani was mostly silent about this latest round of *sadhana*. When he returned to journalism in the sixties, we see complex reactions, however, and encounter an opinionated man. He has practically become one of the seven sages immortalized in *Hatterr*. Polymath in regular, lengthy contributions to the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Desani ranged over the foibles of the Foreign Ministry, hooliganism on Holi, merits and demerits of English books and Hindi movies, Nehru's economic policies, and commercialism being imported from the US. He also contributed short fictional pieces, some of the best of which are republished in *Hali and Collected Stories* (1991). His writing is always lively.

In 1968, Desani, approaching sixty, came to the U.S. invited by The University of Texas as part of an Exchange Visitor Program, and joined the faculty in Austin. He taught one course per semester for eleven years. In 1981, he was visiting professor at Boston University. In the seventies, Desani was a voice on campus for calm, non-ideological analysis amidst the tumult of generational conflict and the anti-war movement, teaching courses on yoga and Eastern mysticism. He remained opposed to Gandhism then current in the U.S. Professor Desani was much beloved by his students and a wider community in Texas. Rotund, white-haired, handsome, and cheerful, he defied the stereotype of the morose ascetic. Colleagues remember his superb Indian cuisine. He was also a sophisticated gem collector. As a philosopher, Desani was a skeptic in a venerable tradition of Buddhist anti-intellectualism maintained by some of the most intellectual of writers in the long history of Eastern ideas. His lectures had such titles as "How Is the Inexpressible to be Expressed?" and "Down with Philosophy!"

Novelists who acknowledge a debt to Desani include Salmon Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh writes that *Hatterr* employs at once "a profoundly resourceful defence of certain non-Western spiritual and metaphysical ideas" and "a technique of evasion through which Desani questions and undermines the presuppositions of a certain kind of totalizing modernity." Reissued in 1970 and again in 1972 with a preface by Anthony Burgess and a new chapter, *All About H. Hatterr* seems to be something of a cult object among a generation of Indian writers. T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster praised it when the first edition came out in 1948. Burgess pronounces its speech "Whole Language . . . not pure English; it is, like the English of Shakespeare, Joyce and Kipling, gloriously impure." In a review in *Time*, Christopher Portersfield says that *Hatterr* is "one of those genuine literary rarities, the lost-and-found masterpiece."

*dates amended May 21, 2003.

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<signed>

Larry R. Faulkner, President
The University of Texas at Austin

<signed>

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Ignacio Angelelli (chair) and Stephen Phillips.

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