



# Das' the spirit!

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**A**rchitect P K Das is an activist; as fervent an activist as an architect. His social and environmental struggles are more than mere arm-chair diversions or a public relations exercise. They arise from a deeper perception of architecture and design, not as an isolated professional exercise, but as part of a larger whole. He realises that the design sensibilities of an architect are to a great extent influenced by the lifestyle, culture and politico-economic structures of a society. He understands that for any design to be meaningful, it must

evolve from, and be in consonance with, its context. Activism is Das' way of being a part of contributing to and learning from society and its people. And, he started young.

"My introduction to JJ College was with a 6-month strike. The seniors conducted classes on the lawns. But my activism started much earlier, in school," says P K Das. Never one to observe injustice passively, he remembers having poured ink on a teacher's head, for being wrongly punished! "Luckily, my mother taught in the same school, and I got away without any serious consequences, except for

angry exchanges at home."

"So with a background of individual activism behind me, I came to Mumbai, where the circumstances matured it into intellectual activism. I realised the power of groups, and positive reaction as compared to an individual action."

Starting with trying to correct the discrimination and victimisation at the JJ College level, then to the Bombay University, it led to the creation of the Students' Action Front, fighting University corruption- a big issue in the '70s.

Das is the joint convener of the

Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti, which is a very large slum dwellers organisation in the city of Mumbai. The other conveners are actress Shabana Azmi, film-maker Anand Patwardhan, journalist Gurbir Singh and Ana Kurien. Through this organisation, P K Das, among others, has worked for the past 10 years in more than 50 slums in the city, organising them to fight for their civic rights, housing rights, health, education and all other concerns of slum life. His role as an architect-member has been his contribution towards the understanding of the government and municipal policies and guidelines, reacting to the various government announcements at different times, evolving and offering alternatives to the government policies. The organisation has extensively published their ideas about the housing policy, participated in the Afzalpurkar Committee, and expressed their position on his policy framework, organised seminars attacking certain aspects of a policy and also suggested very elaborate programmes that can be alternatively taken up and which can lead to development in the slums.

Das along with others in the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti have also done a lot of work in the earthquake affected areas of Latur and Osmanabad. Nearly 100 Nivara Hakk members, and even some slum dwellers worked there for 6 months. Besides relief work which helped establish a close relationship with the people, they undertook and successfully completed a rehabilitation housing project for the Dalits of the Kate Chincholi village, in Osmanabad district. The project is very popular among the people there, according to Das, not just because it is a good design or has beautiful structures, but because it involved an active peoples' participation at every stage of the design and construction. "So this is an important lesson for my colleagues and me: that a design can be successful if it is accepted by the people for whom it is meant; and if the people are involved and made



Above: The Das family

part and parcel of the decision-making process then their acceptance becomes an obvious corollary. I, personally learnt a lot from the people as to how they perceive their spaces and their neighbourhood," enthuses Das.

Yet, he notes, even earthquakes don't shake caste barriers...

Even in times of such trouble, the

upper classes refused to share the (TOI) relief funds with the lower castes. Eventually, the Nivara Hakk had to organise their own funds (like the proceeds of 'Tumhari Amrita', donated by Shabana Azmi and Feroz Khan) to house these people.

He now combines his zealous social activism with a successful and very hectic professional practise that sees him handle more than 40 sites spread over different parts of the country through a team of 15 junior and senior associates.

In what may seem a little ironical, his profitable practice comes from a clientele of multinationals and the rich business class, who, in a strict Marxian sense would be his adversaries in the socio-economic class struggles that he supports. But Das is a pragmatist more than a traditional Gandhian idealist. He tells me the fight is not against a class but against the oppressive feudal mentality of the class. "The fight is for raising the living standards of the poor and not for impoverishing the rich. I do not believe that to fight alongside the poor, one needs be poor himself. And surely not masquerade as one. I am no hypocrite. I come from a middle class family and see no contradiction in my simultaneous pursuit of personal

### You don't need builders or architects, to see magic...

...in the slum redevelopment schemes," says P K Das. "We just need to 'recognise' them and provide the infrastructure. The slum dwellers can build houses for themselves."

The issue is not of housing, but of recognising. "If I don't recognise you as a journalist, then you can't do half as good a job, since I won't really give you any facts," he says, giving me an analogy. "People have always built for themselves, upto now. They don't need architects, or builders, or developers..." The exploited only need an opportunity."

The slum dwellers are far more aware of their rights and are ready to fight discrimination, than the tribals, who are marginalised from the villages, has been his personal experience.

## A case for democracy for all...spaces and people

"Where else will a casual labourer be able to walk with his arm around his wife, than at Juhu beach?" "In other cities, even the maidans don't allow this kind of freedom. Democracy has always been a prerogative of the upper classes."

"In this city, where a couple may not even have the space to talk or make love in their one-room tenements, all they can use are these spaces. So, my fight for these waterfronts is not only on the environmental, but also on the social front."

growth and material success along with my activist struggles for the economic rights of the poor and the oppressed."

So, despite the accoutrements of a personal-professional and a casual-chic dressing sense, there is no denying the genuineness of his involvement in the socio-economic struggles as part of movements that fight for the democratic and economic rights of the downtrodden.

Has he ever been an armchair activist? "I have rarely observed and not responded," says Das, "except in the few years when I just set up my own practice. Even then, I always kept myself informed about what was going on."

And the people have never resented him for this? "They have seen that even I have been through tough times, without really giving up the struggle."

"There are advantages to being successful, and being an activist. The ease with which I can get into Sachivalaya, in my Maruti 1000, to fight for them, convinces the slum dwellers of my commitment. And they don't grudge me my affluence."

But he also admits that it is extremely difficult and mentally exhausting to adjust to this duality- "at 3 pm, I may be at a meeting with the president of a multinational, discussing the finishes of an expensive interior planned for his corporate office, and at 5pm the same evening, I may be meeting the representatives of a slum settlement and working out the way to ward off a municipal demolition

drive against their settlement or some such matter."

At the same time, he's very clear that 'a client is a client is a client.'

"Everyone has the right to choose. Whether it be a client like Reliance, or an earthquake housing project, the slides, models, drawings to explain the idea are the same." Because of this, he says, "even when we made mistakes, the villagers of Chincholi Kate forgave us, because we had worked with them throughout. The process was as much theirs as ours."

But in some sense, activism and struggle have always been a part of Das' personal-professional life which charts a gradual upward climb.

He comes from a middle class family in Bhubaneswar where he

did his schooling. His father was a government officer and his mother, a professor. "We lived well, we had enough money but we weren't rich people," he tells me a little nostalgically. Even as a student at the JJ College of Architecture in Mumbai, Das was an active participant in the students' movement, an independent member in the Students' Action Front. They successfully spearheaded the students' agitation against fee rise and victimisation. He was also involved in the students movement against a very old, orthodox and stagnant faculty in JJ. And despite the attempts to victimise him because of all this, he cleared the final year with a higher second division, mainly because of the fact that his thesis (a direct experience submission), was very favourably assessed by an external jury. The thesis related their (Das' classmates- Vikas Boray, Charles Bhudapati and Das himself) experiences at reconstructing a tribal village for a category of adivasis who were called the Katkaris, in a village near Alibagh. The three of them had taken upon themselves the task of managing, conducting and successfully implementing a self-help housing project for the Saral Katkaris during the Emergency under Prime Minister

## Being a small town-boy helps...

Das' introduction to self-help housing was the Jafarbaba slum redevelopment project at Bandra, as a 4th year student, working with D G Parab and S K Das.

The next one was the tribal housing at Alibagh, which formed his thesis. In both cases, he realised the importance of interacting with the people, finding out their needs, their aspirations... "That's where having an inferiority about coming from a small town helped. I found out that I was more comfortable with a lot of people, rather than being the sole leader. It's lonely being alone in a big city. So, I made a lot of friends from different colleges, during the students' movement. And this love of interacting, listening to other views, rather than just ordering everyone, worked well in these projects."

"And through these, I came to believe that 'Housing is a part of political consciousness.'