

## **OBITUARY**

### ***Ghaus Ansari, 1929-2012***

It is with a sense of deep and sad loss that last July I received the news that Professor Ghaus Ansari had passed away.

Professor Ansari was particularly known to the academic community as the founding chairman of the IUAES Commission on Urban Anthropology (CUA), which he led between 1982 and 2006. The numerous messages of heartfelt condolences that we received testify to his legacy, as a scholar and as a person. Many CUA members remember him as a keen scholar, a gentleman and an inspiration, especially to younger researchers who, having attended the Commission's meetings, decided to embrace urban studies.

With the Commission on Urban Anthropology Ghaus Ansari founded one of the most active commissions of the IUAES. The growth and thriving of the Commission are clear indication of his foresight and intellectual acumen. It was Ghaus who, on his return from the 1978 ICAES Congress in New Delhi, wrote to Cyril Belshaw (then President of the IUAES), mentioning the lack of interest of the anthropological community in the new and dynamic field of urban anthropology and suggesting the establishment of a specific Commission under the aegis of the IUAES. Belshaw enthusiastically supported the idea and invited him to coordinate the preparatory work for the organization of this new Commission. The CUA was founded in 1982 in Vienna following the first International Seminar on Urban Anthropology. The seminar was attended by 15 participants, representing 10 countries: Austria, Canada, Egypt, India, Japan, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the USA and Venezuela. The proceedings were published in 1983 in a volume titled *Town Talk. The Dynamics of Urban Anthropology*, which Ansari co-edited with Peter Nas. Today, the CUA membership spans 51 countries world-wide.

I first met Ghaus in 1996, when I participated in an international seminar co-organized by the CUA and the Department of Anthropology at University College London. Thus, I began to follow the activity of the Commission. When, in 2003, I was invited to serve as co-chair of the CUA, I accepted what I knew would be a demanding task because of Ghaus's active leadership and unrelenting commitment to move the Commission forward, to expand, as he wrote in the Foreword to the Commission's Handbook that was published on occasion of the CUA Silver Jubilee in 2007, 'its academic involvement and commitment to

exploring news strands of urban anthropological research worldwide'. Although over the past 10 years, for health reasons, Ghaus was unable to attend the Commission's conferences, he has offered throughout invaluable guidance and support in the fulfilment of my new role. Our collaboration has been marked by shared views not only on the CUA many activities but also on such strategic issues as the future of the Commission, its organization and the need to maintain a high academic standard. Both in our conversations and in our correspondence Ghaus reiterated his confidence that the Commission was moving in the right direction, acquiring renewed vitality both academically and organizationally, and achieving success at every conference.

Ghaus' active interest in the activity of the Commission continued after his retirement as chair of the CUA in 2006, sharing his experience with the new leadership, that is, Fernando Monge (new chair) and I (continuing co-chair). As, in 2010, I took over as chair, we remained in constant communication. Ghaus' enthusiasm and encouragement remained high until the very last moment.

Ghaus's professional approach and personal relationships were in a sense influenced by his childhood experience of life and of the evolving political events in India. As a young boy growing up in Lucknow, he became interested in the intricacies of life and politics at a very young age. His intellectual curiosity and social commitment led him to become involved in a radio station to which he contributed with stories, poems and plays for children. When his short story 'Sunflower' was eventually accepted for publication, he felt encouraged to write for several children's magazines and became a well-known Urdu writer for children. At that time (about 1943-44), Ghaus also regularly visited the *Lucknow Coffee House*, the meeting place of the city's intellectuals. He was an ardent follower of the Congress Party and as a young man joined their rallies and marches. The events of that time marked the early phase of his political involvement. Ghaus Ansari describes these experiences in his autobiography, titled *'Umr-i rafta*, written in Urdu and published in 2002.

After attending Lucknow University in 1952, Ghaus was admitted to study anthropology as an undergraduate at London University. Having completed his training, he held several teaching and research positions in various universities across the world. During his teaching career, Ghaus introduced courses in urban anthropology and stimulated debate and research in this field. His experience of different places such as London, Paris, Bagdad, Kuwait, Spain and Vienna - where he retired as Professor Emeritus - strengthened his interest in comparative analysis and his multidisciplinary approach to urban studies. Such an

approach is reflected many of his publications, such as, to mention just a few, *Recent trends in cultural anthropology*, published in 1972 and the co-authored book *City and society*, published in 1985.

It would be fitting, I believe, to pay tribute to such an inspiring founder of the Commission and honour him best by building on the work he has done to make the CUA such a thriving community of scholars.

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