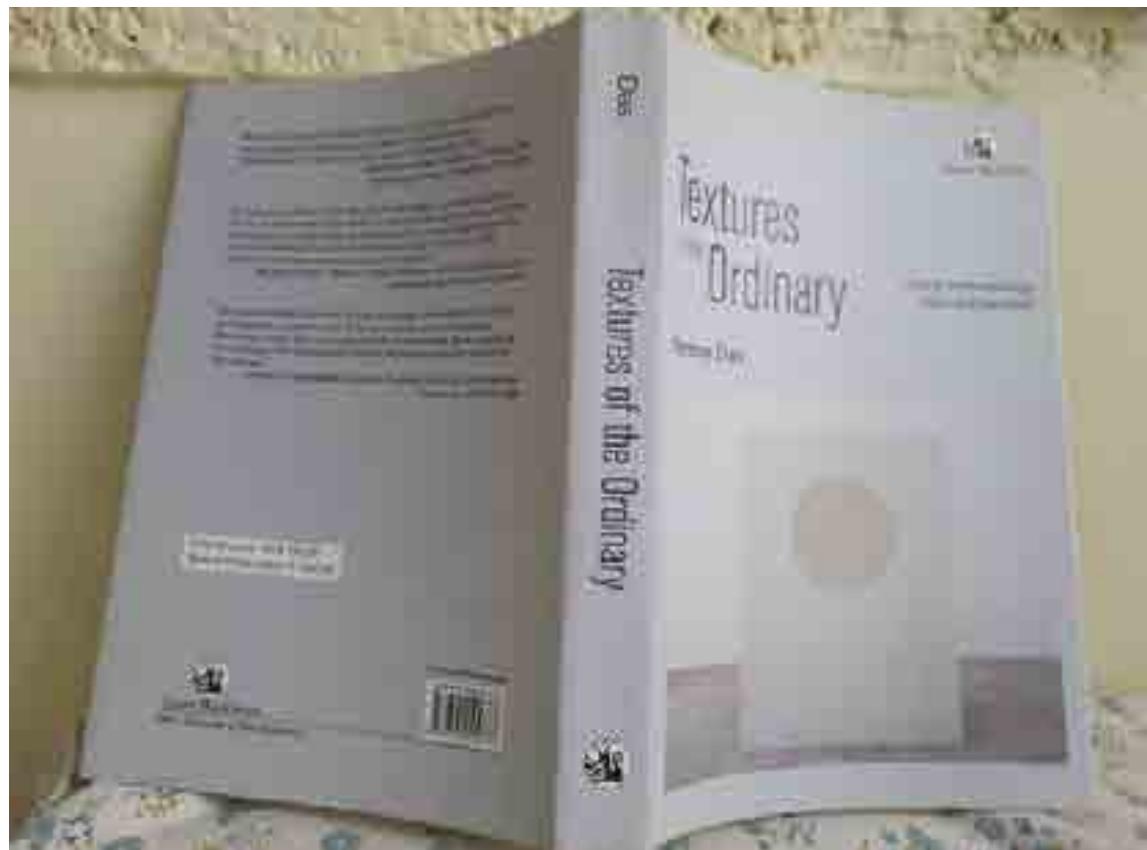


An anthropologist on moral life in a Delhi colony

Renowned scholar Veena Das reads the quotidian in the light of philosophical writings of Wittgenstein and Cavell

Veena Das | February 17, 2021

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Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology After Wittgenstein

By Veena Das

Orient BlackSwan, 410 pages, Rs 1,350

Veena Das, a well-known theorist, has launched a fascinating project: studying moral philosophy of ordinary people in their ordinary day-to-day lives, in the light of the writings of select philosophers – especially Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell. What is unique here is the

bottoms-up approach: instead of extracting generalities in tune with philosophical theories, Das does philosophy in field work itself.

'Textures of the Ordinary', then, is an amalgamation, explorations of both the barely noticed events around us as well as some of the recent chapters in ethical theories. Here is an extract from the new work:

Moral Life, Rules, Customs, and Habits

My final example for this set of issues is drawn from Khare's (1976) fine ethnography of classification of food and the remarkable way in which the materiality of food provides the ground for expression of closeness and difference in social life in India and elsewhere (see also Prasad 2007). Khare, for example, shows that in a wedding feast kin who are relatively less endowed with material wealth can be given offense by such invitations as "aaiye aap bhi bhojan kar lijiye" ("please come—you too partake of the feast") rather than "aaiye bhojan kar lijiye" ("please come and partake of the feast"). Notice that in both cases the honorific form has been used but the addition of a single word ("too") manages to offer a subtle insult that will be remembered and perhaps repaid at an appropriate time, or it might simply be swallowed if the addressee is a dependent relative of the host.

If it is easy to use language to insult by these subtle means, it is also possible to use forms of greeting or affirmation to cover up situations that might be fraught with the risk of loss of face for a vulnerable relative or a neighbor. The best examples of this form of behavior arise when the distinctions between gift, charity, and debt have to be signaled without being put into words. I recall going with Manjit, a quite well-off woman I describe at some length in my earlier work (Das 2007), to visit her cousin Manpreet, who lived in very strained circumstances in a one-room quarter with her adult son and his wife. Manjit knew that her cousin did not have access to much cash and also that her position within her joint family was somewhat precarious as her son's wife was not looking after her well. It was winter and Manjit would have loved to gift Manpreet a warm shawl. This was, however, a situation she could not negotiate very easily. She could have bought shawls for her sister and the daughter-in-law, but since there was no ritual occasion to warrant such a gift and since Manjit is the younger of the two, that would have been seen as flaunting her wealth. A gift only for the sister would be seen as if the sister had been complaining to her relatives about the treatment she received. So, instead Manjit thought she might just find a way of leaving some money with her cousin. When we went to her house, her

cousin insisted on sending a grandchild to get some pakoras (a savory) from the market. We prevailed on her not to get bottles of Coca-Cola (at an astronomical price) on the grounds that I suffered from diabetes but there was no avoiding the money spent on the pakoras, as Manpreet said to me, “**Manjit de ghar tusi roz khande ho—aa j garib bahan de ghar vich wi kuch kha lao**” (You eat every day in Manjit’s house—today have something in the house of this poor sister too). I responded, “**Dil amir hona chahida hai—paisa te haath di mail hai**” (The heart should be flowing with wealth—money is just the dirt of the hand). The reference to money being the dirt of the hand does not imply any opprobrium attaching to money but rather to its ephemeral character—money disappears as easily as the dirt of the hand. I also suggest that such forms of speech, noted for the absence of the specific signature of a speaker or hearer but rather addressed to one and all, do not take the imperative form. Thus, they are distinguished from rules but offer opportunities to express bits of moral wisdom that can be deployed in particular circumstances to do a variety of actions—admonish, console, or help to cover up an embarrassing situation.

As we were leaving, Manjit found a moment to tuck a wad of currency notes in her cousin’s blouse (a common place where women tuck a pouch for small amounts of cash), away from the daughter-in-law’s eyes. I do not say that this form of interaction is the only one available between more well-off relatives and poorer ones: sometimes the richer relative will accept responsibility for specific tasks—for example, fostering a child for a specific period, fixing a monthly allowance for a specific item of need such as medicine, taking responsibility for meeting the expenses of a daughter’s wedding, or agreeing to pay back a high-interest debt through the fiction that the poor relative is only borrowing money for a short period of time though it is known that despite the best of intentions the loan will not be paid back. There are different fictions maintained to save face; in some cases, for example, the child stands in a special relation to an aunt or an uncle, in other cases the facts of dependency are openly acknowledged. A common expression for such ruses is to say “**Dil rakkhan vaste udhaar keh ditta**” (In order to keep the heart I said it was a debt).

As can be imagined, maintaining these kinship obligations is not always easy, especially when the economic difference between the two sides is not all that pronounced. I describe elsewhere the case of a man called Billu who was haunted by his failure to save his brother’s life because he did not have enough resources for his treatment (Das 2010b). Often such events lead to lasting bitterness between parents and children, two brothers, or even neighbors, and become the

subject of moral reflections on the declining moral quality of “our times.” Yet, despite the fact that families in need are often left wanting more help than they can get, ethnographic and economic evidence shows that interest-free loans and gifts from kin play an important part in helping poor families to meet expenditures for catastrophic events such as a medical emergency or for fulfilling other social obligations such as the marriage of a daughter (Collins et al. 2009).

In what way might one think of the performance of these quotidian acts as constituting an “ordinary ethics”? Are the sorts of descriptions of every-day life I offer not too quotidian to qualify as forms of ethical behavior? I offer some reflections on the imagination of human action and on the moral as a dimension of everyday life rather than as a separate domain to defend my metaphor of a descent into the ordinary. I attempt to do so by recasting habit as a kind of moral action and by showing how dramatic enactments of ethical value, as in publicly performed rituals or in legal pronouncements on rules, are grounded within the normative practices of everyday life.

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