

In Memoriam: Mario Rutten

On 26 December 2015 Mario Rutten, professor of Comparative Sociology and Anthropology of Asia at the University of Amsterdam, passed away. Mario was well-known for his extensive and long-term research involvement in Gujarat, with a particular interest in questions of labour relations, entrepreneurship and migration. Besides India he also conducted research in Indonesia (Central Java), Malaysia (Kedah State) and London. Mario was not only an incredible researcher whose relationship with some of his informants sometimes spanned decades and involved multiple generations, but also an exceptional colleague, supervisor and friend.

Michiel Baas

Encountering Mario

Mid-2005 on a rather cold and grey day I picked up Mario from Tullamarine, Melbourne's main airport. At the time I was doing PhD research among Indian student-migrants in Melbourne and he had come to visit me in the field for a week. He had flown in from India where he had visited another PhD candidate, Ward Berenschot, who at the time was doing research on political clientelism in the capital of the state of Gujarat, Ahmedabad. By the time we got to the car Mario was already halfway several stories energetically switching between an account of the *pol* in which Ward was busy conducting fieldwork and the distinct architecture of Ward's house, and stories of the latest developments at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam among which the recruitment of a new professor of anthropology that Mario was particularly excited about. When he entered our apartment just off Chapel Street on Dandenong Road, he enthusiastically shook hands with my partner as if he were an old friend (he had in fact never met him) and buoyantly pointed at the (fold-out) couch saying: is that where I will be sleeping the coming days?

The following days Mario and I went on a whirlwind tour of the city and what I considered 'the field'; for Dutch standards unusually large campuses, suburbs that had the nightmarish quality to disappear in the horizon, and all these spaces 'in-between' where informants might be expected to hang-out. Every time we met one of my informants Mario would vigorously shoot off some questions to get down the basics, conducting the kind of 'mapping' that struck me as vaguely Indian; making sure he knew where that person was from, what his background was, might he be married, just stopping himself short of asking for his 'good' name. Meanwhile Mario would nudge me as if to say: you know all this too, right? And indeed, deftly I had noted it all down during many lengthy interviews and conversations before, making sure I knew exactly 'everything' about my informants, as Mario had pressed upon me before I left for the field.

It has now been more than ten years since I finished my fieldwork in Melbourne and have since moved onto different topics. However, in typical Mario-like fashion I remain in contact with quite a few of my informants. When I recently met up for dinner with one of them, now married, with a three year old daughter and firmly settled in one of Melbourne's inestimable suburbs, he casually inquired how 'my supervisor' was doing and if he was still asking so many questions. When I assured him that we 'anthropologists' rarely ever stop asking questions, my friend (I have long stopped thinking of him as an informant) laughed heartily, and casually asked if I still carried these silly black notebooks with me everywhere, and in which he assumed I still dexterously scribbled down everything I learned. He had no doubt I would do the same after dinner had finished.

When I read Mario's most recent book *Anthropological Encounters* (AMB publishers, 2015) I was struck by how much my own approach to research had been influenced by his dedicated, long-term involvement in his informants' lives. By means of short vignettes Mario discusses the way anthropological researchers become part of and at some point even an undeniable presence within their own research field. By the same token, spending time with informants, engaging in their daily lives and sharing worries, moments of happiness and otherwise, often has a tendency to impact the anthropologists personal life even back home as well; lives become interwoven, friendships cemented, and in some cases it almost feels like one has become family. As we learn from the first few chapters in the book, Mario considers some of his initial informants *like* family, though he admits that it is not without limitations giving his 'adopted' status (p. 2).

His 'brother' Santudas, who also dons the cover of the book, photographed next to Mario (a full head taller) somewhere in rural Gujarat, is now incontrovertibly part of Mario's family, to whom chapters are dedicated: his wife Rienke, daughter Lisa, nephew Vishal, son Daan, sister Utpala and brother Huib.

Mario's extended family

Mario first met Santudas in 1983 when he was conducting fieldwork for his MA degree in sociology among large farmers in the Kheda District of Gujarat. The research would subsequently give impetus to his PhD research as he realized that although there were "numerous references to the aspect of economic diversification among the upper stratum of rural society in India," there had "hardly been any systematic research" on the subject.¹ It would lead him to undertake a study on what he would later label 'capitalist entrepreneurs' (large farmers and rural industrialists) for which he undertook fieldwork in two villages in Central Gujarat (1986-1987). Shantudas A. Patel's family² was one of two who assisted him with the research at the time. While the family was relatively well-off, with a good amount of irrigated land, a tile factory and a potato trading business to which a cold storage unit was added at some point, substantial losses in the potato trade early 2000 started weakening their financial condition. Unable to get credit to buy cement, production in the tile factory declined and by 2011 there was hardly any production at all. Mario offered to lend the family money, but this was flatly refused. To Santudas, Mario is his brother and he had said: "I will not take money from you, we have known each other for 30 years already and I do not want to jeopardise our relationship by borrowing money from you." (p. 12)

The fraternal bond also becomes apparent in day-to-day relations. While Mario tries to convince Santudas to reduce his liquor intake (he likes to drink whiskey in large quantities, as do most men in the village so it appears), Santudas makes



Above: Mario Rutten, in the 'field'.

Below: Still from the 'globalization in mirror images' project.

sure that Mario, who he considers his *younger* brother, cleans his room, dresses properly and is home before dark. The amount of familiarity and closeness that exists between Mario and some of his informants would also surprise his daughter Lisa when she accompanied Mario on a visit to Gujarat a few years ago. During this visit Santudas was turning 63 and Mario had brought him streamers, flags and other party decorations from the Netherlands. Dryly she had observed: "Here you have plenty of time for family and you even like going to weddings and ceremonies, yet in the Netherlands you sometimes do not even like dealing with birthdays of family members." (ibid)

Doing things differently

In the next section Mario reflects on his encounters with migrants from India, some of whom are directly related to the families he studies in Gujarat, and who initially came to London as international students. It is a topic he would also turn into a well-received documentary film titled *Living Like a Common Man* (2011) together with Isabelle Mackay and Sanderien Verstappen, the latter one of Mario PhD students and co-author of several publications with Mario. The project is in a way exemplary for Mario's passionate approach to research as well as his interest in disseminating results and insights in such a way that it does not only cater to an academic audience. As such he would often forego the idea of a 'high impact factor', so much de rigueur when it comes to academic publications these days, and opt for a more inclusive approach that would invite the opinions and observations of those outside academia. A project that he describes in the chapter on his (actual biological) brother and professional photographer, Huib, was executed in this spirit as well. The goal was to make visible that globalization doesn't just concern western influences in India, but that increasingly Indian influences in the Dutch social-cultural



Colleague-supervisor-friend



landscape can be felt as well. The pictures were beamed onto the glass front of the ARCAM building – the Amsterdam Center for Architecture – at night as part of a city-wide India-themed festival in 2008, inviting passer-by's to develop an alternative perspective to globalization and their own place in the world. Four of the pictures were also enlarged and hung up in the Common Room of 'Het Spinhuis', the 17th century building that until recently was the home of the department of sociology and anthropology in Amsterdam.

It was at this building that I would meet Mario on a bright and sunny summery day in 2014 for the last time. Sitting on an old wooden bench next to the entrance of the 'Spinhuis' we would watch colleagues enter and exit the building, some carrying boxes, as it was what had come to be marked the final day of sociology and anthropology at this location; the department was moving out of the building and to a new faculty building on the east side of town. It was the end of an era but also the start of a new beginning and Mario, at the time chair of the anthropology department, was closely involved in documenting the process, by means of a documentary film, together with students and colleagues.

Nursing a mug of tea Mario inquired about my recent research projects and publications, but it wasn't the place or time to go into much detail with a sound system being tested, former colleagues and students arriving on beaten-up bicycles, and a general somewhat celebratory atmosphere in the air, though thick with *saudade* and the distinct feeling that a somewhat elusive something would soon be lost forever. It is not easy to think of that moment in the summer sun, music drifting through the open doors into the courtyard, the first bottles of beer being opened, as the final one we would talk, but at the same time it is a happy memory: in habitual energetic and occasionally somewhat enigmatic fashion Mario was in

Above:
The filmmakers from left to right: Sanderien Verstappen, Mario Rutten and Isabelle Makay

Below:
Still from the 'globalization in mirror images' project.

conversation not just with me but with many arriving and departing at the same time, endlessly curious about what was going on, boisterously full of questions, and vivaciously full of plans; documentaries to make, publications to finish, and ideas for future research to share. Sure, the move was not ideal, the old building would be missed, but it also presented new opportunities and, in a sense, life would go on.

New beginnings

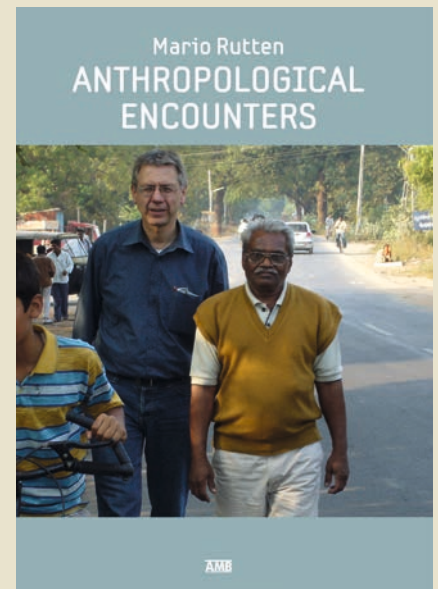
Ever since we learned that Mario did not have long to live he would frequently and often unexpectedly come up in conversations at conferences and otherwise across the globe. Having dinner with a friend in Brasilia in December 2015 I remarked that he must have heard that Mario wasn't doing well, news which hadn't reached him but which shook him visibly. Mario had been his thesis supervisor and he fondly recalled the many discussions he had had with him about oddities such as 'non-western sociology', a field of inquiry which was still taught in Amsterdam, and which he as a Brazilian could never quite reconcile himself with. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that when *Anthropological Encounters* was launched in November, in both a Dutch and English edition, with a riveting speech by Mario himself, over two hundred people were in attendance.

Mario was a true inspiration, a force of life who departed way too soon. He will not only be remembered for being an inspiring academic, with a very distinct vision and opinion about scholarly research and the academic profession, but also because he was a true friend to many. It resonates throughout the book I have discussed here and so it does through much of his other work. Characterized by long-standing and intimate relations with his informants his work was quintessentially the product of asking questions and, once answered, asking even more questions. Students will immensely appreciate *Anthropological Encounters* for the down to earth-ness that percolates through the pages, making visible, legible and understandable what anthropology and in broader sense the academic world is, or perhaps ought to be, about. Colleagues and friends will undoubtedly return to it to reconnect with what Mario stood for and what made him such a great colleague, supervisor and, ultimately, friend.

Michiel Baas

References

- 1 *Capitalist Entrepreneurs & Economic Diversification. Social Profile of Large Farmers and Rural Industrialists in Central Gujarat, India.* Academisch Proefschrift/Academic dissertation, defended 24-06-1991, p. ix. Later published as: *Farms and Factories; Social Profile of Large Farmers and Rural Industrialists in Central Gujarat, India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 2 Shantudas was spelled with an 'h' in the dissertation.



Key publications

Books:

- (2015) *Anthropological Encounters / Antropologische Ontmoetingen.* Amsterdam: AMB.
- (2007) "Leuke Vakantie Gehad?": *Verhalen over Antropologisch Veldwerk* ("You had a Nice Holiday?" Stories about Anthropological Fieldwork). Amsterdam: Aksant Publishers.
- (2004) *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia.* With Srilata Ravi and Beng-Lan Goh (eds.) Singapore: ISEAS Publications/Leiden: IIAS publishers.
- (2003) *Rural Capitalists in Asia: A Comparative Analysis on India, Indonesia, and Malaysia.* London: Routledge Curzon.
- (1997) *Small Business Entrepreneurs in Asia and Europe; Towards a Comparative Perspective.* With Carol Upadhya (eds.) Delhi: Sage Publications.
- (1995) *Farms and Factories; Social Profile of Large Farmers and Rural Industrialists in Central Gujarat, India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- (1991) *Capitalist Entrepreneurs and Economic Diversification; Social Profile of Large Farmers and Rural Industrialists in Central Gujarat, India.* PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.

Recent articles:

- (2015) Beyond the metropolis—Regional globalisation and town development in India: an introduction. *South Asia: journal of South Asian studies* 38 (2): 216-229. Co-authored with Tim Scrase, Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase & Trent Brown.
- (2015) A Global Town in Central Gujarat, India: Rural-Urban Connections and International Migration. *South Asia: journal of South Asian studies* 38 (2): 230-245. Co-authored with Sanderien Verstappen.
- (2015) Reflections on Migration through Film: Screening of an Anthropological Documentary on Indian Youth in London. *Visual Anthropology* 28 (5):398-421. Co-authored with Sanderien Verstappen.

Documentary:

- (2014) *Afscheid van het Spinhuis - Farewell Spinhuis.* Available here: <https://vimeo.com/142370692>
- (2011) Documentary *Living Like a Common Man* by Sanderien Verstappen, Mario Rutten and Isabelle Makay. More information: <https://sites.google.com/site/livinglikeacommonman>

