Pradeep R. Mehendiratta (1933-2022)

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I just learned of the passing of Dr. Pradeep R. Mehendiratta the long-time Director-General of the American Institute of Indian Studies in New Delhi. Like many scholars who were participants in AIIS programs and administration, I have many fond personal memories of Pradeep. I have received permission from Professor Ralph Nicholas to reproduce his obituary notice that was published on the AIIS web site.

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AIIS Mourns the Loss of its Former Director-General Pradeep R. Mehendiratta

Pradeep R. Mehendiratta, 1933-2022

It is with great sadness that we announce that Pradeep R. Mehendiratta, for many years the Director-General of AIIS, a person who did so much for the Institute and for generations of American scholars in India, left us on January 28th, 2022. He had tested positive for COVID-19 and was hospitalized with pneumonia. He was born in Lodhran, in Multan District, now in Pakistan, in about 1933 (he did not know his actual birthday).

In 1947, when he was about 14 years old, with only his mother, he migrated to India, and to the life of hardship of so many refugees. His intelligence and ambition lifted him from railway porter to higher education, and to a job as a government clerk.

While the AIIS headquarters was in Pune the regional office in Delhi became...
increasingly important because of the need for liaison with the Government of India. In about 1964 Pradeep began working for the late David Mandelbaum, then AIIS Senior Fellow in Delhi, as a secretary. Mandelbaum was largely away from Delhi for his research and Pradeep was charged with increasing responsibilities. During this time Pradeep began to establish connections in the government ministries that provided approvals for research by foreign scholars, their visas, and income tax exemptions. Those of us who worked closely with Pradeep over these many years will recall how he knew every clerk and peon in those ministry offices, and how he was warmly received by the people who controlled access to the Joint Secretaries and the Secretaries on whose desks our files lay.

After the Government of India ruled that there would be no more foreign Resident Director of AIIS, the increasing responsibility for the AIIS that Pradeep bore was accompanied by a succession of titles. Conscious of the peculiar nature of AIIS as an organization created by and run by academic people, Pradeep undertook a Ph.D. program in higher education administration, comparing Indian and American approaches. Writing a dissertation amidst his heavy administrative responsibility is a testimonial to his character and determination. He received his Ph.D. in 1983. However, shortly afterward he was felled by a heart attack. He offered to resign his position. Then President Edward Dimock declined to accept his resignation, and he was soon back to work. Pradeep’s immense personal charm and warm hospitality made friends for AIIS among both Indian and American officials and contributed in no small measure to the Institute’s welfare and smooth functioning.

Pradeep boarded Pan Am flight 73 for the US in September 1986 intending to participate in the AIIS Executive Committee meeting. During its stopover in Karachi the plane was hijacked. Pakistani security forces stormed the plane; 43 passengers and flight attendant were killed. Pradeep made a dramatic escape, jumping from a wing of the plane. He broke a leg and injured his back. He was hospitalized in Karachi and returned to India for recuperation.

Pradeep was indomitable. He went back to work, and in 1993 the Executive Committee designated him Director General and Vice President, some 30 years after he had begun working as a clerk for AIIS. Thanks to his initiative the splendid AIIS headquarters building in Gurugram was created and a new building was erected at D-31 Defence Colony. In January 2005 he stepped down as Director General, but he did not stop working for AIIS, especially on behalf of the Center for Art and Archaeology.
Every fellow and officer of AIIS owes a great debt to Pradeep. We join his wife Santosh, his son Deepak, his daughter Purnima, and all of their families, in mourning.

Ralph W. Nicholas
AIIS past president (2002-2010) and current trustee at large