

After a lifetime loving India, historian Digby breathes

SWETA DUTTA

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IT WAS only appropriate that he breathed his last just 500 metres away from the graves of Amir Khusrau and Nizamuddin Auliya, for Prof Simon Digby was no less a Sufi.

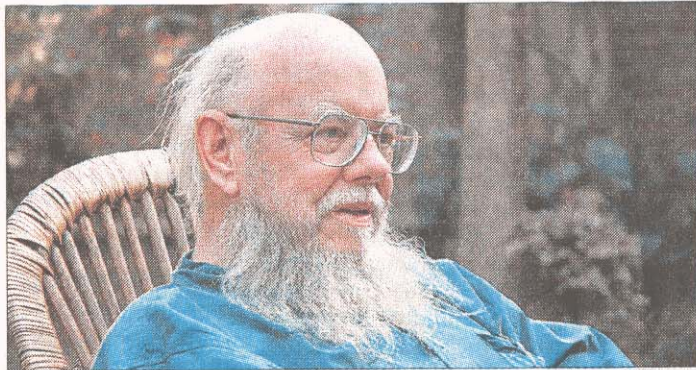
A noted scholar of medieval Indian history, Prof Digby lost his brief battle with pancreatic cancer on Sunday. He passed away on Sunday at his rented flat in Nizamuddin West — he was 79.

Even in his last days, Digby did not let go of his scholarly pursuits. Despite having nothing to do with a young 30-something scholar's research paper on Kashmir, he

painstakingly leafed through the study.

For Digby, this was yet another winter in India; that part of the year when he deserted his Jersey (UK) home to live, travel, study and photograph India.

Born in 1932 in Jabalpur, Digby's association with India can be traced to his lineage: his grandfather William Digby was with the Indian Civil Services and, together with R C Dutt, critiqued the new economic policies in the late 19th Century. Even after his father migrated to England, Digby kept returning, living briefly in Delhi University and travelling across the country, picking up languages, coins, manu-



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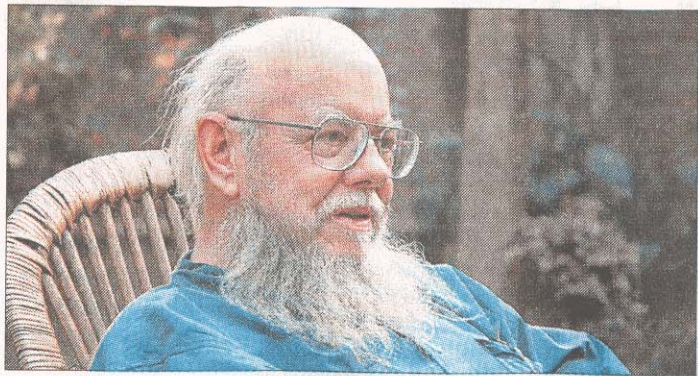
his driver to pull out his Ambassador and drive down to Lhasa. That year, he called me from Kulu during Dussehra, then decided to travel to Diu, and after a month I heard from him while he was in Kushinagar and then in Gorakhpur, collecting manuscripts.

"He knew Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Nepali well."

Martand Singh, chairman of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH)-UK, told *Newsline*, "According to his will, he wished to be cremated and his ashes immersed in running water. We are waiting for his close friend Richard Harris to arrive before the last rites are performed."

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Amin said it would be appropriate if the cremation is held in Lodhi crematorium, close to the tombs of Khusrau and Nizamuddin Auliya, as a tribute to the Sufi scholar.

Salman Haider, India’s former High Commissioner to UK, recalled: “I got to know Simon through my daughter, who did her DPhil thesis under him. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on December 28. When I called him a week ago, he was quite unsentimental: he said, ‘I am dying’.

“He had no close relatives, but a chosen group of friends.”

A former fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, and former assistant keeper in the Department of East-

ern Art, Ashmolean Museum, Digby was the foremost British scholar of pre-Mughal India, who wrote several foundational essays on Indo-Persian Sufism and contributed to *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 1*. His books, *War-horse and elephant in the Delhi Sultanate: a study of military supplies*, *Wonder Tales in India* and papers *Sufis and soldiers in Aurangzeb’s Deccan* and *Qalandars and Related Groups* are considered path-breaking.

Digby was invited on behalf of INTACH (UK) to deliver a lecture on “The Runaway Mughal Prince” at the India International Centre next month.