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# Ranjit Guha FAHA

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1923 – 2023



Ranjit Guha FAHA, the renowned anti-colonial historian of South Asia and the founder of the series Subaltern Studies and the historiography association with it, passed away peacefully in Vienna on 28 April 2023, a few days short of his hundredth birthday. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Mechthild Guha, an anthropologist and a librarian. Guha spent the last phase of his working life as a Senior Research Fellow in the former South Asian

History Section of the Research School of Pacific Studies of the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University from 1980 to 1988. After his official retirement from this position, he remained associated with the Anthropology department in the same School till he and his wife left for Vienna, Austria – the country his wife was from – in 1999. He lived out the final years of his life in Purkersdorf, a woodsy neighborhood on the outskirts of that historic city.

Guha was born on 23 May 1923 to a landed family in the Siddhakati village of the district of Barisal in colonial Bengal. The place of his birth now belongs to Bangladesh. After some years of schooling in the village, Guha was sent off to the city of Calcutta for his high-school and higher education. The decade that saw Guha emerge as a young Bengali intellectual also turned out to be the last ten years of British rule in India. Beginning from his undergraduate years at the pre-eminent colonial educational institution, the Presidency College, Calcutta, which he joined as a student in 1938, to his postgraduate years at the University of Calcutta, from where he obtained a first-class master's degree

in history in 1946, Guha, like many other young persons (mostly men) of his time, felt drawn to the anti-colonial and egalitarian ideals of communism. He later named his teacher, the famous Marxist Bengali historian Susobhan Sarkar, as one of the most important inspirations of his student days. On completing his education, Guha joined the Communist Party of India as full-time worker in 1946.

This was a tumultuous time in Bengal and India. The Quit India movement of 1942 directed against the British had aroused strongly anticolonial sentiments in the young. Bengal had been rocked by a terrible famine in 1943 caused mainly by military mobilizations during the war. The city of Calcutta saw ghastly riots breaking out between Hindus and Muslims in 1946 over the question of the impending partition of the country into India and Pakistan in 1947. Talk about the end of British rule was in the air. It was not surprising that many Bengali intellectuals of Guha's generation would look to the idea of Communism for solutions to the problems of caste, class, and religion that had dogged modern Indian politics ever since its inception during the Raj.

In hindsight, it may be said that it was the Communist movement that first brought "the world" into Guha's life and gave him a cosmopolitan outlook. In 1947, a year after he joined it, the Party sent him to Paris as its representative to the secretariat of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. Guha spent the next six years traveling in various parts of Europe – and in China – in that capacity. It was during one of these sojourns into Poland that he met his first wife, Marta, a Polish-Jewish woman whose family had suffered in the Holocaust. They returned to India in 1953, and after a few years of teaching in various Calcutta institutions and researching the history of colonial land settlements in Bengal, Guha left for Manchester, England, in 1958 for a one-year fellowship at the University there. The person instrumental in helping Guha obtain this fellowship was the eminent social historian of Victorian Britain, Asa Briggs (later the Lord Briggs) who met Guha on a British Council-sponsored trip to India that took him to Calcutta in 1957. Guha was already admired by the city's cognoscenti as a bright, young researcher in history and had made a name for himself through his contributions to political and scholarly disputations in left-leaning magazines of Calcutta. Briggs was sufficiently impressed by Guha to recommend him for this fellowship. Guha's first marriage broke up around this time. Guha had also by then become disillusioned with the Soviet Union and the Stalinist ideologies after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.

Guha spent the next few years – into the early 1960s – holding temporary or visiting positions at the University of Manchester, Cornell University, and the University of Chicago where he struck up a life-long friendship with the famous anthropologist of South Asia, Bernard S. Cohn. Cohn would later contribute to the Subaltern Studies project and Guha pen a powerful introduction to the first anthology of Cohn’s writings, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (1987). The early 1960s also saw the publication of Guha’s first monograph, now considered a classic: *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Paris: Mouton, 1963). Guha’s important break in terms of employment at this time came when Britain built her “red brick” universities in the 1960s. Asa Briggs, who had moved to the University of Sussex in 1961 as one of its “founding fathers,” was once again instrumental in securing for Guha a permanent lectureship in the newly set-up School for African and Asian Studies there. While there is no publicly available information showing when exactly Guha joined the teaching staff of Sussex, it was probably sometime in the first half of the 1960s. He is clearly named as a member of the School in a list of teaching staff of the School of African and Asian Studies in 1966. He met his second wife Mechthild Guha (née Jungwirth) at Sussex where she came to pursue post-doctoral research in African anthropology. They got married in 1970. Guha continued in Sussex until 1980 when Professor D.A. Low, the then Vice-Chancellor of ANU and formerly Guha’s colleague and a Dean of the School of African and Asian Studies at Sussex, invited him to a fixed-term Senior Research Fellowship in the South Asian History Section of the Research School of Pacific Studies at ANU. Guha held this position until 1988. He formally retired from Sussex in 1982.

The years at ANU marked one of the most defining periods in Guha’s career when he gathered around himself a global group of younger scholars – David Arnold and David Hardiman from the UK (both did their doctoral theses with Professor Low in Sussex), Partha Chatterjee and Gautam Bhadra in Calcutta, Shahid Amin and Gyan Pandey in Delhi, and the present writer (then a Ph. D student of Professor Low’s at ANU) in Canberra – to create a series of publications entitled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on Society and History in India* published by the Oxford University Press in Delhi. Guha’s academic collaboration with some of these younger scholars had begun in the 1970s at Sussex. The first volume of *Subaltern Studies* came out in 1982 and created quite a stir in the world of South Asian history hitherto dominated by debates on nationalism. Guha created a theoretically

sophisticated and innovative framework for studying the politics of “subaltern classes” – socially subordinated groups – by drawing eclectically but creatively on different and overlapping strands of Marxism, structural anthropology, linguistics, structuralism, post-structuralism, continental philosophy, and Indian philosophies of language and grammar. Guha’s own monograph, a foundational text for Subaltern Studies, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press) was published in 1983. All this coincided with the publication of Edward Said’s classic text *Orientalism* (1978), Benedict Anderson’s critical study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1982), and Ashis Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy* (1983). Understandably, Subaltern Studies and Guha’s own master work soon came to be seen around the world as an integral part of the postcolonial scholarly rebellion in the Western, especially Anglophone, academy that was initiated in the 1980s and 90s by, among others, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy. In the Australian context, this also coincided with the rise of Cultural Studies and Indigenous history led by scholars such as Meaghan Morris, Stephen Muecke, and Henry Reynolds. Subaltern Studies was celebrated, debated, and contested all over the world. Guha was hailed as the guru and the creative mind behind this group. Guha edited the first six volumes of the series, leaving the task to his younger colleagues for the last six volumes. The collective expanded in these later years to include Gyan Prakash, Ajay Skaria, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susie Tharu, and Shail Mayaram.

Guha had no formal teaching duties at ANU except for supervising doctoral students. Among his doctoral students were Raghavendra Chattopadhyay from Calcutta and Ahmed Kamal from Dhaka. He also served, along with Professor Eugene Kamenka, as a co-supervisor for Sanjay Seth. They all turned out to be successful academics who pursued their respective careers and studies in Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. The present writer gladly accepted Guha as a mentor (along with Anthony Low) and owes much to his teaching style that was, characteristically, Socratic. Guha was also a regular presence at several seminars at ANU where his sharp, penetrating, original, and sometimes acerbic comments always livened up the proceedings. He developed some close intellectual friendships in Canberra. The present writer remembers the political theorist, the late Barry Hindess, and anthropologists, the late Roger Keesing, James J. Fox, and Christopher

Gregory, and scholars of southeast Asia, notably Anthony Milner and Craig Reynolds, as close associates of Guha.

Guha wrote his last book in English after retirement in 2002: *History and the Limit of World History* (New York: Columbia University Press). This was a grand statement about literature being a far better communicator of senses of the past in the Indian subcontinent than the European discipline of history that had come to India as a practice of the colonial state and could never erase that birthmark from its body. All Indian history of the disciplinary kind, Guha argued, was statist in inspiration and far from the everyday lives of ordinary human beings. This book thus signaled his farewell to the discipline of history that was his main preoccupation since his student days in Calcutta. He also bade goodbye to writing in English. In the last ten or fifteen years of his life, Guha wrote several books and essays in Bengali and went on to win a prestigious literary prize in Calcutta. All these books and articles focused on philosophical, and mainly existential, aspects of human life and drew on the Indian epics, modern poetry, and other literary and grammatical traditions available in Bengali and Sanskrit.

In retrospect, Guha's intellectual-academic life seems to have had four distinct phases. He began as a Communist Party activist and intellectual who was an admirer of Stalin and the Soviet Union till 1956. Disappointed with political communism, he turned to historical research that would produce a searing critique of his own class, the landed elites of rural Bengal, at the same time as it critiqued the failure of the British to produce a political economy of development in colonial Bengal. This book, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, showed an early awareness of the importance of ideas in economic history. He was clearly no votary of any kind of economic determinism, and this position he would maintain till the end of his life. In the years of *Subaltern Studies*, when he also wrote his field-defining *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, he retained his belief in the goal of human emancipation from oppression and exploitation by other humans but had no faith in the capacity of the official Communist Parties to achieve this goal. Then came his last writings in English, especially an essay called "The Small Voice of History" and the book, *History at the Limit of World History*. He seems to have lost faith in emancipatory politics and developed a deeply humanistic sense of sympathy for the everyday tales of weal and woe that filled up the lives of ordinary people without access to power and self. What concerned him most in this last phase of his work were the existential and eternal

questions of human life. He executed this final turn by making a conscious decision not to write in English anymore, and to return to Bengali, the language he always loved, and in which he has left a treasure trove for scholars of the future who may, one day, be interested in exploring the life and work of this extra-ordinary intellectual of our time.

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