

TÊTE-À-TÊTE WITH  
RAMACHANDRA GUHA

Nirupama Subramaniam meets writer and historian Ramachandra Guha on the sunlit balcony of the authors lounge at the Bangla Academy during the Dhaka Lit Fest. Despite the weight of being a public intellectual and academic, there is a lightness about his presence. The author of *India before Gandhi* (Penguin; 2013) and *Patriots and Partisans* (Penguin; 2012) speaks at a fast pace, stabbing the air to make a point, as though he feels each word deeply. It is almost like listening to a story.

*You had written an essay where you had mentioned that you were not in favour of an undivided India. What do you feel now, travelling through the region?*

I am still not in favour of an undivided India but we must have good relations with our neighbours. I was very keen to come to Dhaka because of that. An Indian scholar who is widely published gets a chance to travel to Europe and America. I have been to Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and China but this is my first visit to Bangladesh. I don't normally go to many Lit Fests but I wanted to come here to meet the Bangladeshi scholars, move around, see a little bit of the country, juxtapose my historical understanding of East Bengal with what is going on here. There must be much more interaction between India and her neighbours, especially cultural.

*I have seen that people across all three countries want greater interaction but there doesn't seem to be political will to back that. Why is that?*

The problem is that there is an asymmetry in power between India and her neighbours, in terms of population, in terms of economic power. India is seen as a kind of Big Brother, which means that politically India has to make an extra gesture. But sometimes India goes the other way. I have pointed out that one of the greatest failures of our foreign policy has been India's failure to have good relations with our relatively smaller neighbours, especially Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Our relations with Pakistan and China are complicated and has its own challenges but with the smaller nations we have come across as arrogant and bullying. India has to do much more, be more proactive. Despite what is going on here with security, with the bloggers, the publisher being killed, I was very keen to come. It is even more important to be here at a time like this. I am really happy to be here.

*You had compared the two Bengals, West Bengal and East Bengal or Bangladesh sometime back. What do you feel under the present circumstances?*

They do have a better civil society here as compared to West Bengal. But there are problems. This is not as stable a democracy as India. They are still in transition. But Bangladesh is a fascinating place. I see it as much more hopeful than Pakistan.

*How do you describe the current epoch, the current times that we are going through, especially in India and South Asia? What is the historian's perspective?*

A historian's perspective is somewhat different from an ordinary citizen. It is more detached and more cynical. You know that there has never been a golden age in the past. You are sceptical of nostalgia

which is very common amongst ideologues across every religion who believed that there was some perfect society. It also makes you sceptical about utopians who want to build a perfect society in the future.

What a historian sees in the region is



Ramachandra Guha.

that there are several transformations that are simultaneously being played out, in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. First, is the National transition from being a colony of a foreign occupying power to being independent. You have formal independence but there still are other forms of colonialism, you could be economically exploited, you have no share of voice in international bodies like the UN.

The second is the deepening of democracy or the political transition. All these countries, even before colonialism were run by absolutist monarchies. Ordinary people did not have liberties to vote, to express their views, to run newspapers. Societies where political control was tightly maintained at the top are finding their voice. Two of the countries, Bangladesh and Pakistan have had military rule. Even in a democratic government like India, how authoritarian is the Prime Minister's office. Mr. Narendra Modi for example, how much power is given to the ministers, how are the ministries functioning, does he attend Parliament? So, for a polity to become fully democratic, for a nation to become fully independent, it is a slow torturous agonizing process.

The third is what I call the social transformation. In South Asia, there has been pervasive inequality. There has been class, caste and gender inequality. The two major religions of South Asia, Hinduism and Islam are extremely patriarchal,

arguably more so than perhaps Buddhism or Christianity. These religions have intellectually justified man's superiority over women. So this transition is ongoing. When you take caste, the Dalits are demanding equal rights and equal

*it happening in front of our eyes on television. Everyone has a point of view and can freely post it on the internet. In fact, there is a barrage of information, analysis and opinions. How important and relevant is the role of a historian in these times?*

Firstly a historian has a professional training which gives you a kind of detachment. For example, everyone is talking about 9/11 in 2001 and Paris in 2015 as the major terror attacks but we have forgotten the Mumbai attacks in 2008, exactly in between. I mentioned that in the plenary session of the festival. So a historian is able to compare one event against another and see the commonalities across time, across societies. Historians look at what is distinctive but I was also originally trained as a sociologist and so I can be comparative as well. It is good that there is all this active commentary but you still need someone who is more reflective and detached like a historian.

*I am sure you do have strong opinions and you have mentioned them frequently. How you balance detachment and engagement?* Yes, I do have opinions. So, there are three types of writing I indulge in. One is the newspaper article which is quick, immediate where there is something of me the scholar but there is also me the citizen, then there is the book, which is the product of three or four years of work which is much more researched and much more reflection, revision and rewriting goes into it. And in between is the 8000 word essay where you can expand on a topic. The newspaper topic is the most perishable though now everything is on the net. So here there is much more scope for your analysis to have imperfections. What is relevant today may not be relevant tomorrow. With a book you are surer ground. But this is the hazard of being a political commentator.

But there are two things that historians should not do. One is to make predictions and the other is to advise politicians. Historians advised George Bush to go to war in Iraq. Even if they were right, it is not a historian's business. The historian's job is just to lay out the social life in all its complexity so that the reader gets a deeper understanding of what's going on. Historians cannot be directing it or controlling social behaviour. Social behaviour is so unpredictable.

*Have you made any predictions?*

One prediction I made which so far has been correct was that Rahul Gandhi cannot revive the Congress. It is an easy prediction to make and many people did realize it but I made it about four years ago. But unpredictable things happen and if he is able to lead the congress to victory next time, I will have egg on my face!

**A historian's perspective is somewhat different from an ordinary citizen. It is more detached and more cynical.**

opportunities. Many of them are getting it. You have Dalits who are lawyers, Professors, doctors. But at the same time, there has been pushback from the upper castes.

When it comes to gender, women in Asia are also facing pushback, especially from Muslim orthodoxy. In Dhaka, in the past two days that I have been here, I have seen more women in public spaces but in Lahore, you will see very few women out and most of them are in *burkhas*. In India we are seeing increasing violence against women. Whenever a subordinate class or gender asserts its rights, there will be a pushback. So the transition is difficult, complicated and painful and it may take decades even centuries for this to take place. But we have to go through with it.

*I can see the advantage of having that overall perspective. We are living in an age where everyone has access to history, we see*

TWO POEMS BY  
BIMAL GUHA

TRANSLATED FROM  
THE BENGALI:  
KABIR CHOWDHURY

## RAVENS

Why have the ravens gathered over my head? The ominous day stretches its shadow in the corner of my room, the shrill cries of the ravens sound all morning, please tell me how can I drive the ravens away?

A dull sun breaks through The chinks of the clouds. Suddenly a summer storm breaks out scattering the rays of the sun, and the ominous day stretches its shadow in the corner of my room. Please tell me how can I drive the ravens away?

A war-horse prances within my breast, I stumble, struck by his sharp hooves. And as I look up at the sky I see soldiers of the dark clouds march in pairs. Please tell me how can I drive the ravens away?

At this untimely hour there is a procession of ravens on my roof-top. I hear inside my head the shrill cries of the ravens. Isn't there any friend who can come and stand by me at this hour? Isn't there anyone who can stretch his hands and take me into his arms as a dear friend of his? Please tell me how can I drive the ravens away?

## AGAINST WAR

War is a sky shattering fierce roar of clouds, quick footsteps full of tearful wails, a terrible terrible thing! We have taken our stand against all wars.

War is a clever ruse of antagonistic states, fiery words full of fierce anger, a follow-up of revenge, loud cries. War is a terrible terrible thing! We have taken our stand against all wars.

War is arrogant display of muscle with no principle. It often begins with a false show of friendship. It is full of bombs cocktails atomic explosions smoke bullets from machineguns destruction of all human values burning down the home of one's neighbour. War is a terrible terrible thing! We have taken our stand against all wars.

## Undergraduate poem comes to light

## JOE TREASURE

In 1811, Percy Bysshe Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing a pamphlet promoting atheism. This wasn't his first offence. A few months earlier, a seditious poem of his had been published anonymously with the title *On the Existing State of Things*. For two centuries, all copies were thought to have been destroyed. Now one has been acquired by the Bodleian Library.

A newly discovered poem by Shelley is literary news. A few commentators have also been excited by the way its radicalism resonates in our own times. A reference to a victim of imperial expansion, who "... in the blushing face of day/ His wife, his child, sees sternly torn away; /Yet dares not to revenge, while war's dread roar/ Floats, in long echoing, on the blood-stain'ed shore" spoke to some of Syrian refugees and, specifically, of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach. Such images haunt us, and it doesn't take much to bring them to mind.

When it comes to human suffering, there's no question that 18-year-old Shelley's heart was in the right place. He was in favour of "peace, love, and concord" and opposed to tyranny. None of this is surprising. More interesting are the ways in which the poem fails.

Written in heroic couplets, it harks back



Portrait of Shelley (1819) by Amelia Curran.

to the style that dominated English poetry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The more brilliant exponents of the form shaped it into a perfect vehicle for satirical argument. Alexander Pope's couplets are crafted so that every word counts and the music of metre and rhyme seem effortless. In his *Essay on Man* he describes humankind as "Created half to rise, and half to fall;/Great lord of all

things, yet a prey to all;/Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled;/The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!"

What in Pope's hands seem easy, other notable writers failed to achieve. Samuel Johnson, celebrated for his prose more than for his verse, began his poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (based on Juvenal's Tenth Satire) like this: "Let Observation with extensive view/ Survey Mankind from China to Peru." Coleridge would later expose the emptiness of this couplet, by rewriting it: "Let observation with extensive observation observe mankind extensively."

With his friend Wordsworth, Coleridge was engaged in revolutionising poetry, writing about the lives of ordinary people in accessible language and using verse forms drawn from oral tradition.

It's puzzling, then, to see Shelley, a young radical of the next generation, reaching back to a form fashionable in the previous century to make his radical statement, and importing with it a lofty tone and a weakness for abstraction.

Nothing here suggests that its author would go on to produce a poem such as *Ozymandias*, which says more in 14 lines about the destruction of tyranny than *On the Existing State of Things* manages in 172. And it does nothing to stave off a time when Percy Bysshe might be referred to as "husband of the visionary novelist, Mary Shelley".

“বিবেকের তীক্ষ্ণ দংশন সহ্য করতে না পেরেই তারাশঙ্করের ১৯৭১ বইটি লেখা, পড়তে শুরু করলে শেষ না করে থামা যাবে না।”

—হাসান আজিজুল হক



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