INTERVIEW

Remembering Sumit Sarkar, the historian and the iconoclast

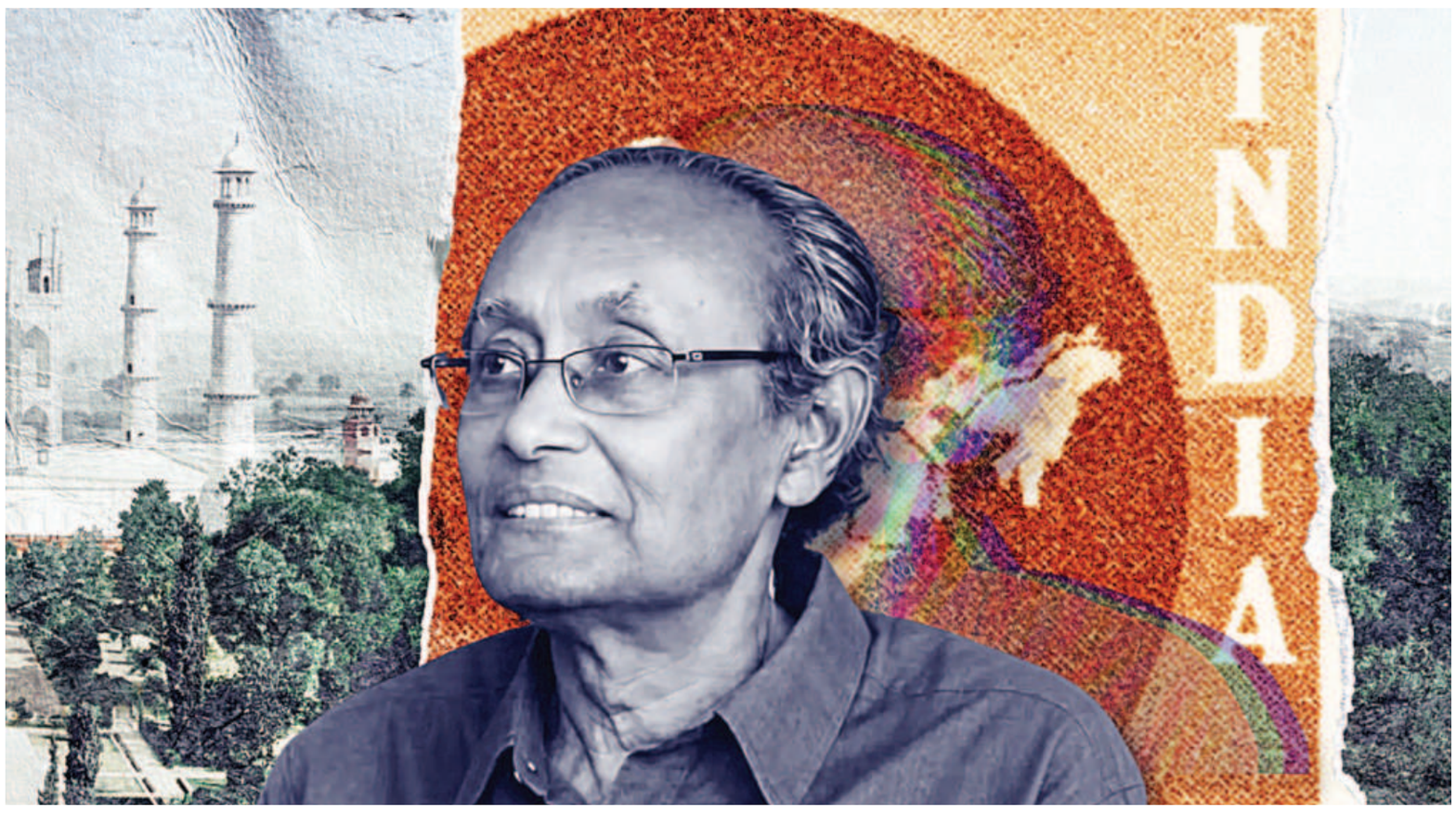


ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

SUBHORANJAN DASGUPTA

Slender, small-built and soft-spoken, Sumit Sarkar, who passed away on August 13, was a towering historian, one of the very best we have seen in recent years. Author of classics like *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903–1918* (1973), *Writing Social History* (1998), and *Modern Times: India 1880s–1950s: Environment, Economy and Culture* (Permanent Black, 2014), he guided generations of researchers and students.

Academic and author Subhoranjan Dasgupta, who knew Sarkar closely, draws on their conversations over the years to explore his views on Hindutva's reading of history, the discipline of history, his relationship with subaltern historians and his book *Modern Times: India 1880s–1950s: Environment, Economy and Culture.*

Why did the then HRD Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, block the publication of the sixth volume of the *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1946* (2007) series, a project of the Indian Council of Historical Research, in 2000? You had prepared and edited this volume with meticulous care.

Because it questioned and challenged the Hindutva project of history, theorised first by Veer Savarkar in his pathbreaking *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923) and then, more virulently, by Guru Golwalkar in *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939). This volume, suppressed by the BJP regime, not only underlined the distance that had existed between the Sangh Parivar and our struggle for freedom (though this unpalatable truth was no longer a secret) but also exposed the close understanding that had bound together the colonial rulers and the Saffron Family. The volume was released in 2004 when the Congress returned to power after winning the election.

Could you please pinpoint the primary traits of this Hindutva project of history?

First, the imposition of the thesis that the Punyabhumi (Holy Land) and Pitribhumi (Fatherland) of Bharat, Savarkar employed these two Sanskrit terms, were reserved for Hindus only. That is, Muslims and Christians were, by birth, aliens and outsiders. Second, the Muslim invaders destroyed the glory, grandeur and harmony of ancient Sanatani Bharat, which embodied the very apex of human civilisation and culture. Third, all possible measures have to be implemented to construct a "Hindu" nation where the main adversaries, Muslims and Christians, will have to survive as second-class citizens. Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS supremo, labelled the project of a "Hindu nation" as "non-negotiable" a few months ago. This carefully charted programme regards history as something narrowly unilinear, exclusionary to the extreme and hostile, nourished as it is by hatred and consequent violence. Hindutvadis seek a return to the age of kings and queens, not to humankind.

I need to stress that the Hindutva project of history goes all out to justify its aberration by invoking the tempting principle of nationalism. We have to be very careful here. The 'nationalism' of the Sangh Parivar is intrinsically different from the other nationalism, which was anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in origin and, moreover, redemptive in essence. It is sustained by the indispensable attachment to and love for the marginalised human being. Gandhi, Nehru and Rabindranath, in particular, wedded this essentially human dimension, not sectarian at all, to our configuration of the nation. Recall Rabindranath's masterly novel *Ghore Baire* (1916) and his superb essay "Nationalism" in this context. I myself have drawn on their thoughts and placed the human being, united to race, religion or colour, at the very centre of my concern in books like *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Postmodernism, Hindu Nationalism, History* (IU Press, 2002) and in other texts.

30 years had rendered the work dated, and revising it seemed futile. My own historical perspective had also changed, prompting a new text. You yourself concentrate on creative expression. So, I think you will appreciate my chapters on "Languages and Literatures" as well as "Visual and Performing Arts". Even the very title of the book carries a creative undertone which everyone will recognise.

But the genuine study of history and its epistemic nature are nurtured by totally different impulses?

Obviously. When we reflect on the real worth of history, we travel beyond these petty religious, racial and even conscripted nationalist frames. We champion many histories, including those of Dalits, subalterns, the environment, gender, art and faith. In other words, we propose a stimulating multitude of narratives instead of a black-and-white, mythical account crafted by Hindutva and chained from all sides.

You endorsed the history of the subalterns initially, but later opposed it. How would you evaluate this conflict, this drastic change in your attitude?

First, I recall the attachment. When I visited Oxford for a year in 1976-77, I interacted with the historians of the Subaltern School, Professor Ranajit Guha in particular, who was reverentially called 'Pope' by his associates. My discussions with him at his home in Sussex were really inspiring. In fact, once or twice, we conversed the whole night on the subject of Indian peasantry. He was fascinating. Well, I became one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies Collective.

But then later, I shall not go into names, some illustrious members categorically criticised the Enlightenment, the nation-state and secularism. Indeed, they came to link this critical trend with uncomfortable assessments which, at times, came perilously close to the worldview of Hindutva. Sadhvi Ritambhara, for instance, was presented as the bearer of 'subaltern consciousness'.

As a result, their 'history from below' turned out to be markedly different from my 'history from below', which I had explored in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (1973). Here, I endeavoured to go beyond the engagement of the bourgeois elite and include plebeians as well as peasants as protagonists of history. I simply rejected the top-down, privileged or typical nationalist narration which ignores the majority struggling down below.

I have clearly elaborated the reason for my "drastic change", as you put it, in my essay "Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies" that appeared in *Writing Social History* (1997) and, to a lesser extent, in "The Fascism of Sangh Parivar" in *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India* (2016), edited by Jairus Banaji.

Why did you thoroughly reconstruct your old *Modern India* (1983) and write the new narrative *Modern Times: India 1880s–1950s: Environment, Economy and Culture?*

30 years had rendered the work dated, and revising it seemed futile. My own historical perspective had also changed, prompting a new text. You yourself concentrate on creative expression. So, I think you will appreciate my chapters on "Languages and Literatures" as well as "Visual and Performing Arts". Even the very title of the book carries a creative undertone which everyone will recognise. I borrowed the title from that evergreen film by Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times* (1936).

Subhoranjan Dasgupta *is an academic and author.*

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

'Jan Morris': A life in the shadow of empire

Review of 'Jan Morris: A Life' (Faber & Faber, 2026) by Sara Wheeler

THEODORE GRIFFIN

"I'd have been a better writer if I weren't so self-obsessed," mused the elderly Jan Morris from her windswept Welsh home. But Morris had an exemplary career in books—she gave firsthand accounts of Venice, Everest, and her own sex-change, earning her numerous awards and canonisation in London's National Portrait Gallery. Often dismissed as an apologist for the empire, Morris was an enduring figurehead of a different generation of British travel writers. Sara Wheeler's masterful new biography does justice to the Forrest Gumpian Morris, who seemed to be present at every age-defining event. Wheeler wasn't wrong when she wrote that Morris "was the 20th century."

Long before Morris became Jan in a headline gripping sex-change, she was born James in the 1920s, shortly after the British Empire had reached its territorial apogee. James enjoyed a middle-class childhood cushioned from the worst of the '29 financial crisis, in a village overlooking the Bristol Channel, a waterway that linked the bustling imperial port to the Atlantic. The young Morris would watch the ships with longing; they represented the triumphs of empire and the exuberance of capitalism and its machines, morally dry themes that would reappear across the writer's future work.

Before long, the second world war began. After a solid education at elite British institutions, Morris joined the British army. He finished training shortly after peace was declared, but there was still much for a young British soldier to do on the European continent. It was ravaged by war and the fallen regimes' states were left without administration. The task fell on the Allies, who were already engaged in the paranoid jostling that would become the Cold War. Morris was sent to Venice and Trieste; the two cities he would eventually write his best travel books on.

From Trieste, Morris's regiment was sent to Palestine, where the British Mandate was mismanaging an emerging ethnic conflict in a series of characteristic imperial blunders that brought the ire of both the Jews and Arabs. Despite Morris's admiration for the perceived "splendour" of the British Empire, its actions under the Mandate was a shocking failure, he would later write.

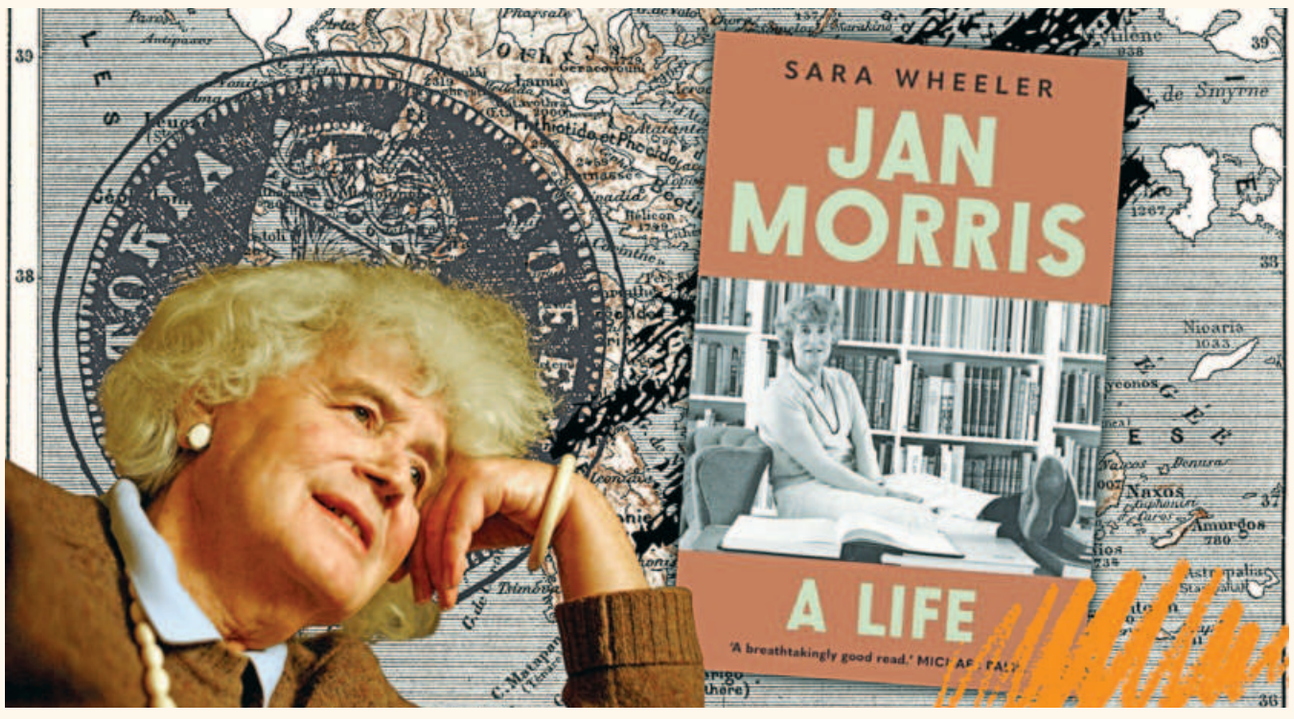


ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

After military service, Morris decided to embark on a career in journalism, securing a position at the *Times*, where he came to be seen as a promising young reporter. Journalism gave Morris access to the world. He reported from Cairo to Everest—where he was the first to break the news of its first successful summit. With growing attention from publishers, these years precipitated his career as a writer.

While he nursed a maturing career in foreign correspondence, Morris took his family to Venice—"where the Orient began." The resulting travel book, *Venice* (first published in 1960), is widely regarded as one of the best travel books ever written. More would follow, on the United States, the Hashemites, and the World Bank, none achieving the same success that Venice did.

Yet Morris was privately tormented by the sensation that he was born the wrong gender. He had been gobbling harmful hormone altering drugs that changed his body in increasingly visible ways. Appearing at his son's school cricket matches began to be an embarrassment. A peaceful home in Wales offered some respite, but his desire to change sex grew ever stronger. There was a famous surgeon performing such procedures in Casablanca, Morocco. It would not be without its risks, but for Morris, the alternative was suicide. Recovering from the surgery in a private Casablanca hospital, Morris, now writing as Jan, began her memoir of the experience. *Conundrum: An Extraordinary Narrative of Transsexualism* (1974) would eventually become a founding classic of trans literature.

The world's press was inevitably shocked and intrigued by Morris's sex-change. Appearing on British television, Jan was humiliated by an unrelenting host who asked vulgar questions and dismissed her as a "man who has eaten a great many pills."

Meanwhile, Morris was working on a trilogy of history books on the British Empire. Despite her (his) outward radicalism, *Pax Britannica* (1968) was a deeply conservative work. Imperialism had its faults, she admitted, but it was a "blessing to the world at large." Nonetheless, the work has remained a respected classic. Even left-wing journalist and historian Sathnam Sanghera, author of *Empireland* (Vikin, 2021), described *Pax* as the "one book" to understand the British Empire.

Was Morris really an apologist for empire? It often seemed so. But the truth was more ambiguous. She found the pomp and grandeur of empire attractive. For Morris, nostalgia for a lost childhood also played into her rose-tinted view of imperialism. She claimed to be against the principle of empire but called herself an "aesthetic imperialist" who liked the "beauty of scale" it offered. Needless to say, this is a lazy position—bells and whistles could never justify the atrocities at Amritsar or the Bengal Famine. But Morris, like many British travel writers of her generation and before, was a product of colonial attitudes that aspired to grand sweeping gestures and swashbuckling adventure. In their excitement, they were unwilling to see its true cost.

Morris was ultimately an old school optimist who embraced technology and liked machines. All the same, Morris lamented the homogenisation of world culture, often declaring that everywhere is starting to look the same. It's a shame that she couldn't more explicitly condemn the west she represented as responsible.

Sara Wheeler's work is unromantic and often exposes the uglier sides of Morris's character: her ego, her difficult relationship with many of her children, as well as her sometimes superficiality. But the enduring impression Wheeler's book provides the reader, recounting a non-stop showreel of adventure, is amazement. "What a life," one of Morris's obituaries exclaimed. It's difficult to disagree: Morris simply went everywhere. If you desire an amusing journey through the Helter-skelter 20th century, look no further than *Jan Morris: A Life.*

Theodore Griffin, *a student of philosophy, languages, and politics, splits his time between France and Scotland.*