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# Political Traditions in the Making of India

Ananya Vajpeyi



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# Political Traditions in the Making of India

ANANYA VAJPEYI

**R**amachandra Guha's anthology, *Makers of Modern India*, is important for two reasons: one, it sets up a canon of writings by India's founding figures, men as well as women; and, two, it selects such canonical founders from a vast pool of political leaders, intellectuals and artists spanning three or four generations, who collectively created the India we recognise today as our own. In both the impulse of canon-making as well as the careful activity of selection, Guha makes signal contributions. Critics have disagreed with the overall liberal temper of his canon, and with his choice of those whom he deems to be India's principal makers. But no one can deny that both these moves had never been made before in the scholarly literature, and that it was high time someone took the plunge. As with his writings in and about many other subjects – environmental studies, the history of cricket in south Asia, the history of postcolonial India, intellectual biography, accounts and critiques of Indian liberalism and Marxism – through *Makers of Modern India*, Guha has once again struck new areas of thought, new reservoirs of historical knowledge, new sources of debate and dissent in the fertile and still largely unexplored ground of modern south Asian history.

Readers, reviewers and critics have asked why this or that thinker, leader or poet was excluded from Guha's list.<sup>1</sup> He explains several omissions in his "Introduction", anticipating objections from his audiences – thus, political traditions on the far (Communist) left and the far (Hindu) right do not quite find a place. Influential politicians who were nonetheless not political thinkers of noticeable power in Guha's estimation, and conversely, interesting thinkers who did not wield political influence, are also set aside – thus Sardar Patel and Subhash Chandra Bose on the

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Makers of Modern India** edited and introduced by Ramachandra Guha (*India: Penguin/Viking*, 2010; pp x + 549, Rs 799).

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one hand, and Allama Iqbal and Aurobindo Ghosh on the other. Guha also explains what it was about those who were included that impelled him to count them in – their originality, their influence in their own time, their relevance in our time – all in Guha's own judgment, of course. At the end of the book, a fine, polemical epilogue titled "India in the World", and a rich bibliographic essay called a "Guide to Further Reading" both allow the reader to continue exploring the founding generations according to his or her own taste and curiosity.

On a few major figures though, like Maulana Azad, Guha remains silent, despite the knowledge that surely some Indians would expect him to make an appearance in such a collection. This is odd, because in one single reference, Guha describes him as "the most important Muslim in the Congress" (p 292). This description is an aside to clarify a sentence in a speech by Gandhi on Hindu-Muslim unity, delivered to the All India Congress Committee on the eve of the Quit India Movement, where Gandhi says: "Maulana Saheb is being made a target for the filthiest abuse". To explain omissions of this order, one has to imagine that if Guha did not draw the line somewhere, his book would have run into many volumes. Nationalism itself was a Noah's Ark, sheltering all types – the anthologist must exercise more discernment.

Setting aside, for the moment, the great variety of views articulated by Guha's 19 founders, two words in the book's title deserve careful consideration. One, the very notion that a person or a set of persons could "make" a country like India into

what it is. In other words, how does the term "makers" unpack; what is the theory of historical agency, human will, and of the nation as an artefact, implicit in the use of such a term? This is the first theme I will address in my essay. Two, what is the importance of "modernity" to Guha's canon; how does Guha understand "modern" India, why does he privilege it over non-modern India or Indias? Is his sense of "making" necessarily related to a certain kind of "modernity", or does he also allow for the "making" of other sorts of ideas of India? In addressing the first question, of "makers", I will refer not only to this volume, but also to what I know of Guha's earlier work, on individuals like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Verrier Elwin and B R Ambedkar (all of whom now reappear as "makers" in the new book).

In addressing the second question, of "modern India", I will again refer to a particular set of Guha's writings prior to the volume under discussion. These constitute his debate with Amartya Sen on the pages of this journal in 2005-06, on the question of tradition, modernity and the making of India.<sup>2</sup> Guha himself has acknowledged that it was the provocation of Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* (2005) that led him to compile selected writings of the founders of modern India. I hope to show, through my two-pronged approach, that Guha's anthology is not merely a collection of important writings by some of India's founders – a sourcebook. Rather, it is also an intervention in the larger and more pressing debate about what elements of the nation's past are relevant to its present, what constitutes an Indian political tradition, and how much relative weight ought to be assigned to what Guha calls the "proximate" past versus the "distant" past, in seeking the political foundations of modern India.

## Historiography

The historiography of colonial and modern India currently supports two principal methods: that of the subaltern studies school, and another, which has no formal name, but could well be called the "intellectual history" school. In the latter school, it becomes possible to study the

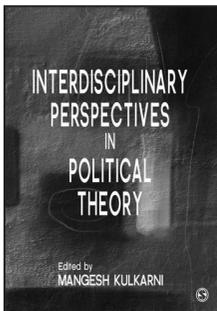
texts and the institutions that so profoundly shaped Indian history for the entire duration of the Crown Raj, say, between 1857 and 1947. But inasmuch as both texts and institutions in this period had human authors, this type of historiography is often centred round the lives, actions and writings of individuals. These very individuals, at a modest count numbering in the hundreds, Indians as well as a few Britons, may be considered to comprise the founding generations of modern India. *Makers of Modern India* is not out and out a work of history. However, to the extent that a certain approach to the writing of history is implicit in a project of selection and compilation of this order, and to the extent that Guha not only introduces the entire volume, but also introduces each of his 19 makers, sometimes more than once each, this work definitely belongs to the school I am calling intellectual history.

The understanding of historical agency that undergirds intellectual history in India privileges brilliant, charismatic individuals over classes, groups or collectivities: thus Gandhi over millions of his satyagrahi followers, Tagore over the discerning

readers of his poems, novels and essays, Nehru over the tireless political workers of the Indian National Congress, Syed Ahmed Khan over the diligent students at his university in Aligarh, Ambedkar over the thousands of former untouchables he converted to neo-Buddhism, and so on. As Guha explains, this is not entirely unjustified, nor can we dismiss this approach as elitist, because colonial India in fact had an extraordinary number of such thinkers and doers whose contributions had a tremendous impact on the overall climate of ideas as well as on the course of historical events leading up to independence. But *Makers of Modern India* primarily presents to us significant and/or representative articulations – writings and speeches – of the founders, with a certain amount of prefatory historical and biographical context; it is not full-fledged intellectual history, critical and analytical, in the way of say, Sudipta Kaviraj's *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (1995), or even Guha's own extensive, detailed and elegant Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore's three essays titled *Nationalism* (2009 [1917]).

Unless one is to launch into an extended comparison and contrast between subaltern studies and intellectual history – it is not too difficult to basically accept that the agency of individual actors can and did fashion, to a very large extent, both the full range of anti-colonial movements throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the creation of the nation state (in 1947) followed by the republic (in 1950), of India. More difficult, however, is the problem of past and present in our construction of a political tradition or traditions for this new India. Guha himself is not unaware of the difficulty, which is why he cleared the ground, so to speak, for *Makers of Modern India* first, through an extensive back-and-forth with Amartya Sen about five years ago here in the EPW, as well as through his own magisterial *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (2007). Later Sunil Khilnani also joined the Sen versus Guha debate, with his lucid and persuasive essay "Democracy and Its Indian Pasts", included in a festschrift for Amartya Sen, 2009.<sup>3</sup> The three-cornered conversation, though rigorous and vigorous, somehow lacks the bite of a real

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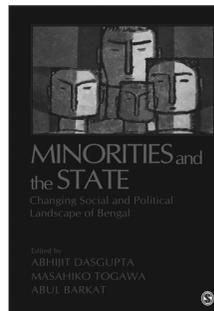
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disagreement, perhaps because the deep premises of democratic, liberal, rational and secular commitments are so genuinely shared between the debaters, and all three, one way or the other, are modernists when it comes to their expertise as historians.

### 'Homo Indicus'

The problem before any student of political thought in modern India – and to Sen, Guha, Khilnani, and Kaviraj above, we must add Ranajit Guha, Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Rajeev Bhargava, Uday Mehta, and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, among others – is this: What is the relationship between the various political traditions available on the subcontinent in pre-modernity, and the set of political ideas that helped Indians to end colonial rule and inaugurate the life of their nation as a secular democracy? Who, in other words, to borrow Guha's witty phrase, is "Homo Indicus"? Scholarship in the last three decades or so has already tried to determine the relationship between modern western political thought and its Indian counterpart, especially since colonialism helped mediate that relationship in ways that are well documented and by now also well understood. But the genealogy of the modern in the premodern within India's political traditions remains, still, quite unclear and confounding.

Sen wants above all to be wary of the Hindu Right's claim about the overwhelming importance of the ancient past and of Hindu traditions alone, to the exclusion of later periods in history and other religious and cultural influences in the making of modern India. Guha wonders as to the relevance of the "distant" traditions – the pacifism of Ashoka, the religious experimentation of Akbar, for example – when the "proximate" traditions – Nehru's liberal democracy, Ambedkar's constitutionalism – obviously carried the day at the time of the Republic's founding. He chides Sen for being "anachronistic" in attributing democratic, multicultural and secular values to premodern texts, thinkers and institutions. I call Guha's the "who's in, who's out" argument.

Khilnani is more concerned with the lack of continuity, coherence, connection and self-consciousness in India's political

traditions over the centuries – what I call the "mind-the-gap" argument. Sen's retort is that we ought to maintain our "positional objectivity" at all times, and employ "practical reason" when choosing the elements of our past knowledge practices and argumentative traditions that strengthen our normative aspirations in the present. This is why, for example, Sen himself concentrates on evidence of the rationalist and scientific temper, atheist and materialist strands of thinking, and attempts to promote non-violence, peace and inter-religious tolerance in premodern political contexts. These inheritances empower and enrich a certain humane and progressive idea of India, and are therefore to be embraced.

In truth, certain characteristics of India's intellectual history, especially in the domain of political thought, cannot be argued away – they must be treated as features, not bugs. These include the almost constant contradiction between intellectual heterodoxy and social orthodoxy, identified by Kaviraj; the fact that "equality" and "inequality" were, in the premodern world, understood not through the language of politics but through the language of transcendence (a point most recently and effectively made by Pratap Mehta); and the even more extraordinary fact that political power was, in many important instances and across vast regions of geopolitical space, propagated through the strength of poetic language and not the force of arms, as shown by Sheldon Pollock.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the differences between vernacular traditions, classical and non-elite traditions, literate and oral traditions, etc, long ago identified by the late A K Ramanujan, add such a degree of fragmentation to the historical record, that we may never be able to map the political in its entirety before colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

### Tradition and Modernity

Such peculiar characteristics of how the political was conceived and practised in India's premodern past are very hard to reconcile with Indian politics as we understand it today, after colonialism. Nor can the discontinuities and silences that worry us be wished away. Hannah Arendt bookends the western political tradition with Plato in the beginning and Marx

at the end: in India we simply cannot construct such a series.<sup>6</sup> Added to these concerns, are the problems highlighted most poignantly by the subaltern studies theorists – the failure of revolution, the incompleteness of modernity, the derivative nature of political thought in India. One possible way out of this impasse is to shift the locus of our enquiry, away from sovereignty, and towards the self, when we write the history of swaraj – political liberty as the ligature of self and sovereignty – in modern India.

For in examining the sources of the self for the founders of modern India – the very men and women placed in a canon of modern political thought by Guha – we are able to find the subterranean ways in which tradition informs modernity, the past retains its presence, and our modern thinkers creatively assess, interpret, absorb and reject their intellectual inheritances to carve out an original path towards an unanticipated future. Now that the history of the meanings and springs of political sovereignty (*raj*) in modern India has argued itself into a corner, the time may have come to move our attention to the hitherto poorly-understood history of political selfhood (*swa*) in this nation that stands at the junction of Indic and western, colonial and precolonial, elite and subaltern, self-aware and happenstance political traditions. In this endeavour, we could do no better than use as our guide the intelligent, handy and robust volume we have received from Ramachandra Guha – a book that will be used and contested for years to come.

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Ananya Vajpeyi ([ananya.vajpeyi@gmail.com](mailto:ananya.vajpeyi@gmail.com)) teaches South Asian History at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her book, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* is forthcoming from Harvard University Press (2012).

### NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Nakul Krishna, "The Raft on Our Backs" in *The Caravan* magazine, March 2011: 92-96; Patrick French, "League of Extraordinary Gentlemen", *Outlook* magazine, 15 November 2010.
- 2 "Arguments with Sen: Arguments about India", Ramachandra Guha, *Economic & Political Weekly* Vol 40, No 41, 8-14 October 2005, 4420-25. "Our Past and Our Present", Amartya Sen, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 41, No 47, 25 November 2006, 4877-86.

