

Dr. Ramachandra Guha

A historian and a biographer

Dr. Ramachandra Guha (born 1958) is a famous Indian writer whose research interests have included environmental, social, political and cricket history. He is also a columnist for the newspapers The Telegraph, Khaleej Times and The Hindustan Times. He is a fellow of the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. Dr. Guha has taught at the Universities of Stanford and Yale, held the Arne' Naess Chair at the University of Oslo, and been the Indo-American Community Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley. His books cover a wide range of themes including a global history of environmentalism, the biography of an anthropologist-activist, a social history of Indian cricket, and a social history of Himalayan peasants. Dr. Guha's books and essays have been translated into more than twenty languages.

The Past and Future of the Environmental Movement in India

19th October 2010

Speaking to a large audience, Dr. Guha gave a broad perspective on Environmental Movements in India. He began the lecture with historical accounts of early environmental movements during the times of Mahatma Gandhi and in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. He addressed the conflict between the "development agenda" and the "environmental agenda" in this age of open market economy. In this context, he touched upon how the environmentalists are losing ground and are increasingly being perceived as a stumbling block for economic progress. Finally, he called upon the environmentalists to adopt a more "middle ground" to have a larger impact.

CONVERSATIONS

Excerpts from an interview with Dr. Guha by Reema Mittal

63 years and India is doing great as a democracy but at the same time serious issues are confronting her today. Where do you rate Indian democracy in the world?

Well, I believe that any society, individual, community or nation should judge itself against its own values and norms. From that point of view India has done moderately

well if we look at the Indian constitution, the visions of the founders of India, etc. In my book 'Makers of Modern India' I argue that we have 50% democracy. We have free press, freedom of movement, free and fair elections but our institutions are corrupt and function in a suboptimal manner. There are criminals in politics, there is increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, casteism and female foeticide are still practised. It is a hard and painful struggle to build an inclusive and democratic society and I would say we are stumbling towards it.

In the name of development, a lot of reforms have taken place but in some strange way they have served the purposes of the elite only and the interests of a large chunk of the population have been ignored. What is your take on it?

I do not agree that privatization and liberalization have caused any damage. Think of the difficulty of innovation and employment generation under the public sector behemoth and you will see that we needed to liberalize. The problems that exist today are not the result of development but of the failure of state governments. They failed in providing equal job opportunities, education and health facilities; in controlling the environment impact of economic activities. The State governments are corrupt and give licenses to favorite industrialists. Naxalism, also, is a product of the States' failure and not of the market.

So in a way democracy has failed.

I would say it hasn't failed but has functioned suboptimally. Laws are in place but not implemented. We are in Kanpur on the banks of the Ganga and in spite of the existence of laws preventing the pollution of the Ganga, there are chemical plants which are very much functional and continue polluting the Ganga. The market is meant to increase productivity and employment and the State has to ensure that increased productivity is fairly distributed and doesn't damage the environment.

Displacement of tribals is a big issue today. On the one hand we have Rahul Gandhi standing up for their interests in Orissa just like Verrier Elwin who believed in minimal interference in the lives of tribals, whereas, on the other hand, there is a group in favor of Vedanta that feels that tribals need development else they will live in misery.

Well, privatization and liberalization has helped India in sectors like software where skilled workforce is required. See what has happened to Bangalore. But it has hurt India in sectors where raw materials have been extracted at a high rate. Most of the tribals live in areas that are rich in raw materials. Again the State is to be blamed for it because

although there are laws like Schedule 5 that allow tribals to become stakeholders in all projects yet since tribals are powerless minorities, unlike Dalits who are better organized, they tend to get exploited. Every citizen should have access to basic health and educational facilities and employment opportunities. Short sighted exploitation of materials is not good.

And, yes, Verrier Elwin later agreed to providing education to tribals. But, yes, we should not impose any curriculum on them. Education should take into consideration their culture and interests.

Complete interview can be accessed at: <http://www.iitk.ac.in/drpg/anreport.htm>