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Unpopular opinion: Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies writers were 'caste-blind', says section of experts

They covered tribal and Dalit movements and yet never delved into issues of identity and autonomy, told DTE



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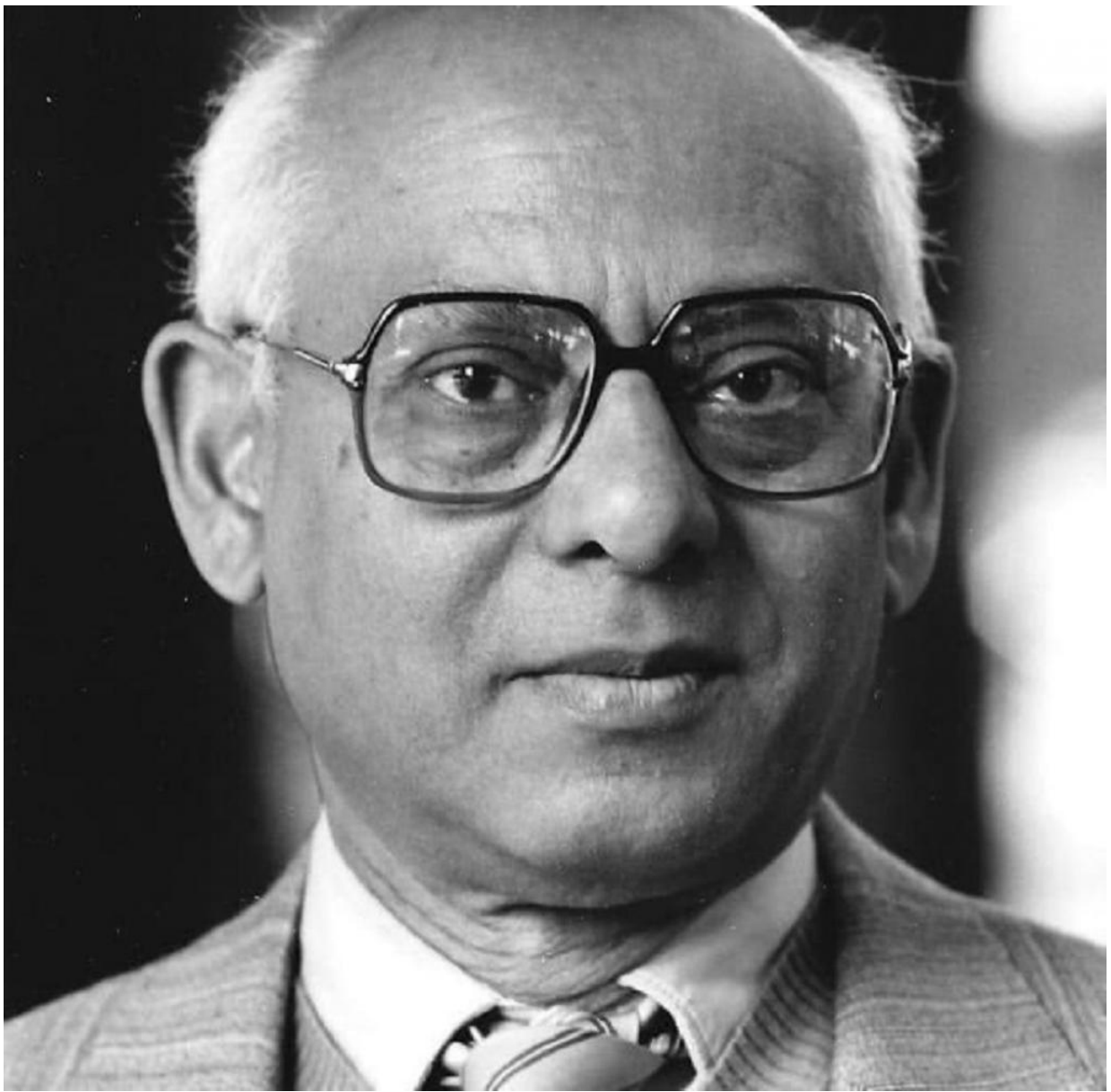


Photo: @ProfDilipmandal / Twitter

It is over a week since renowned historian Ranajit Guha passed away in Vienna on April 28, 2023, just a month before turning 100. Guha is credited with starting the school of 'Subaltern studies' about the stories of groups who have historically been at the lowest rungs of society. However, a section of experts *Down To Earth (DTE)* spoke to is of the opinion that Guha and other writers who wrote such historiography neglected the elephant in the room: Caste.

Author and journalist Dilip Mandal set the ball rolling. In a tweet on April 29, he noted that Guha spearheaded a tradition of doing subaltern studies in South Asia, without considering caste and anti-caste struggles.

"It is worth noting that the Subaltern Studies gate-kept the field, shutting the doors for SC/ST/OBC academicians who wished to contribute to subaltern studies in universities in the Western world," Mandal continued.



"As a result, historical accounts produced by the group may not include figures such as Phule, Savitri, Sahu, Ambedkar, Mangu Ram, Acchutananda, Ayannakali, Narayana Guru, Jogendra Nath Mandal, Justice Party, Periyar, and others, as these historians were mostly based in the Western academia and excluded all historians born in subaltern communities," Mandal said.

Down To Earth spoke to other domain experts about Mandal's tweet. They were in agreement about the thrust of his argument.

"Ranjit Guha was phenomenal. (But) one underside I cannot fathom is how he missed the identity question and perspectives from Dalit or Adivasi communities. Maybe the baggage of class studies was still a barrier that obstructed these perspectives to take hold. I may be criticised by many but this is my gut feeling about Guha," N Paul Divakar, convenor of The Global Forum of Communities discriminated on Work and Descent, said.

Sanjay Basu Mullick, director of Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Aandolan, agreed.

"I broadly subscribe to the views of Divakar and Mandal. Guha's and Subaltern Studies writers' contributions and efforts cannot be undermined. Subaltern Studies writers shone a light on small instances which otherwise were overlooked by most historians. Lots of ingredients of history writing emerged from such studies," he said.

But, Mullick pointed out, the problem lay with Ranajit Guha himself.

"In his very first book, where he introduced the whole idea of subaltern studies, he also mentioned Jharkhand or the Chota Nagpur Plateau. That is an area of my immediate interest. He made the same mistake as the one by left historians," according to Mullick.

Guha, Mullick noted, said the (Adivasi) revolts in colonial India were 'peasant movements'. Similarly, the Naxalbari Movement many years later was also termed as a peasant movement.

"Naxalbari was, in fact, a tribal response to agrarian exploitation. Identity was not at the surface, yes. But it was a tribal expression of protest against their exploitation. Ranajit Guha and subaltern studies covered tribal and Dalit movements and yet never delved into issues of identity and autonomy," Mullick stated.

Virginius Xaxa, a former Professor of Sociology at Delhi School of Economics too stressed on the question of identity.

“Ranajit Guha’s contribution is important, without a doubt. But there remains an ambiguity of sorts in his writings. My own reading of his very first book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* is that Guha uses ‘peasant’ as an occupational category. A peasant is one who works the land to produce food with labour of his own and of his family. If you look at this from an Adivasi perspective, there is a lot of difference between Adivasi and non-Adivasi peasants which is because of culture, social organisation and values,” he told *DTE*.

Also, the bulk of Guha’s writings on peasant insurgencies in colonial India derived heavily from the stories of tribal rebellions be they those of the Santhals or of Birsa Munda.

“The use of ‘peasant’ conceals the distinctiveness of the Adivasis’ struggle,” Xaxa added.

Mandal had echoed these thoughts when he had remarked at the end of his tweet that “unlike some Gramscian scholars who emphasised the importance of studying subaltern history, Guha’s approach focused on the cultural and ideological aspects of subalternity”.

Prominent Dalit rights activist, author and political theorist Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd was more direct in his critique of Guha and subaltern studies.

“This group, headed by Guha, used the Italian term ‘subaltern’ denoting the lowest of society, mostly working classes and peasants. They did some good writing about peasants and their role in Indian nationalism. But they were completely caste-blind,” he told *DTE*

California, he said, was on the verge of banning caste. The US State’s Senate committee passed a bill on April 26 that seeks to explicitly ban caste discrimination.

Nobody gained that kind of insight from western universities and South Asian centres on caste, said Shepherd. “It is the Dalit organisations, the works of Ambedkar, Phule, my own and other works which have educated Westerners about caste,” he added.

There are a huge number of people who are part of subaltern studies departments globally. But whom did they educate about India? I don’t think any white or black individuals learnt anything new about India from them, the author of *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* said.

“In my view, it is another elite, Bhadrak history which never touched the basic issue of graded inequality and human untouchability. They (Guha and others) included Gandhi, Nehru and Bose in these studies but nothing on Ambedkar even as a scholar. It was basically a Bengal-centred project on peasant revolts based on Gramsci and Mao’s understanding of peasant revolts,” Shepherd noted.

Caste and untouchability are the real subaltern issues, he concluded.

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