

Indian Marxists lack original thinking

By Sayandeb Chowdhury

The sunlight inside the spacious atrium at Taj Bengal seemed to have been looking for him. The itinerant light, when it found RAMCHANDRA GUHA posing on a chair for a restive photographer, seemed to stand still on him for some time. The sun, obviously partial to leading lights on a clear December morning in Calcutta, set its sight on the award-winning author of *India After Gandhi* because he was the most sun-worthy man in a city that day, which once had many a leading light in its roaster. Maybe the sun mistook Guha, who did his PhD in Calcutta, researched at Centre For Studies in Social Sciences, admired Samar Sen and his *Frontier* and grew up to dislike the tendency of the Indian Communists to run away with the Marxian telos, for a Bengali. But Ramchandra belongs to Bangalore and to New Delhi, because he has his origins and residence in the former and has much of his audience and his publisher Penguin in the latter. He was in the city as part of his book tour to promote his edited anthology, *Makers Of Modern India*.

But such an anthology is fraught with tensions, because India isn't too complex a country to have been influenced by too few, nineteen to be precise, thinkers? "I was working on Gandhi a few years ago and was studying the debates he used to have with his peers. Tagore for example. Or Nehru. Then it dawned upon me that there is a string of thought that runs through two centuries of thinker activists who have influenced Indian political thought and more importantly, action. That was how work on the anthology began."

But isn't the selection biased towards activists rather than thinkers? Guha looked thoughtful. Then, sometimes in poise and sometimes in animation, even jest, he explained his case. "Any anthology has its own politics of selection, if you like, and there it is in mine too. But I had one thing in mind that I did not want only thinkers, writers and the like to collect for my anthology. So I had to leave out Vivekananda or Dayanand Saraswati. Great thinkers that they were, either they were never into political action per se or their sphere of influence is limited. Subhas Bose on the other



Prabir Bhattacharya

hand was a great political hero but he did not have any ideas worth taking note. His writings are of no consequence. On the other hand Tagore was no political activist but was too much of a giant to not include in any anthology of Indian thinkers. Again, people have been surprised to find the inclusion of less known thinkers like Hamid Dalwai and Tarabai Shinde and even Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay but I have found their writings and ideas relevant in India of today and we may know or not but many of our political debates are influenced by ideas and thoughts that they had propagated. Then, I have obvious individuals like Ambedkar, Nehru, Jinnah, Gokhale, Phule, Rammohan Roy, Syed Khan, Tilak, Rajagopalachari, Lohia, JP Narayan, Golwalkar, Verrier Elwin and of course Gandhi and Tagore."

One cannot but agree with his criteria but surely the Indian Marxists deserved a place both in terms of political action and influence. "Yes, there has already been some heat generated regarding this but my conscience here is very clear. See, the Indian Communist movement

has been a very influential movement in many parts of India, not just Bengal. In Bengal or Kerala, it found itself at the heart of the political process but even where it has been outside the political process, it has been influential, like Maharashtra. But I could not locate one individual who I could call an original Marxist thinker. And I include both EMS and MN Roy here. They interpreted Marxism for Indian readers but did not add much to it. See, Lenin took Marxism and applied it to his own vision of a proletarian revolution. Mao took Marx and re-interpreted it to justify his agrarian revolution. Indian Marxists did nothing of that sort. So communism or Marxism in India is important as a political process but not as an individual stream of thinking." Sitting in a 'Marxian' hub and in a city famous for its pretensions of originality in thinking, listening to a man who knows his mind, his validations suddenly seemed as crystal as the water on the pool that bordered the atrium of the 5-star property. "See, India has the entire Subaltern School. Great scholars. But I cannot include them. Just

like I could not include RP Dutta or Ajoy Ghosh." But doesn't he have any regrets about the list? "If there is any regret it is about not including N Vishweshwaran. He was from my part of the country and was a pioneer in applying technology for larger good, a thought that found echo in Homi Bhabha, JC Bose, PC Mahalanobis, Vikram Sarabhai to Narayanmurthy. If I have to redraw the list, I would like to include N Vishweshwaran."

He paused to think about something and then his grey eyes sharpened behind his rimless glasses. "On second thoughts about the Indian communists, I have a feeling that had Bhagat Singh lived long, given what he was reading at that young age and the direction his thinking was taking him and if he could have put them into words, maybe, just maybe, we could have had an original Marxist thinker in India. But there is too much of it here."

Talking about democracy, India did not have a doctrine to follow unlike the US. The founding fathers of American democracy had written extensively on what it means to be America and

American. But nothing of that sort exists in India. As a historian and political writer does Guha find the Indian political establishment sensitive enough to its legacy of thought? "Not at all. I don't find them reading enough to know what India is all about. Since Indira Gandhi, none of the Indian leaders seem to know beyond the usual and the trivial. The days of Nehru or JP are well and truly over. What is alarming is not just the lack of knowledge but also historical awareness. That troubles me no end."

Guha himself has attracted some attention because of the genre-busting style of his writing. He has straddled ecological history, environmentalism, cricket and now, modern India with equal ease, charm and rigour. What next? "I am done with cricket. I won't write another book on cricket because I have said what I have wanted to on cricket. Environmentalism is one area which I may return to." Does he find his studies in ecology and Elwin, Chipko and other green movements more relevant now in the worldwide debates on climate change? "Surely. In fact globally there is an effort to promote indigenous green movements. And why just climate change, Chipko and Elwin are relevant even to address the Naxalite issue, given that the future of the tribal population is central to the debate on Naxalism."

Guha has also perfected the art of marrying academic rigour and scholarship with writing for a general readership. Does he realise that he has created a niche here? "Well, I am glad if you say so, but yes, I have always tried to make issues readable and realisable from the point of view of the general readership. I do my own research. That helps me a lot to keep the rigour intact. As far as the academic ghetto is concerned, in the US and elsewhere in the West, a lot of foreign policy, social and economic issues are addressed best not by academics but by journalists. Or writers. India has great fiction writers. But nothing comparable in non-fiction, except a few, like say, Ashish Nandy."

It was time to take leave. An audience is waiting for him. He may have to sign a few copies of his anthology and may have to give out a few autographs. He is after all the rockstar of Indian intelligentsia and according to *Foreign Policy* magazine, one of the outstanding hundred public intellectuals in the world. And may be also a future maker of Modern India.

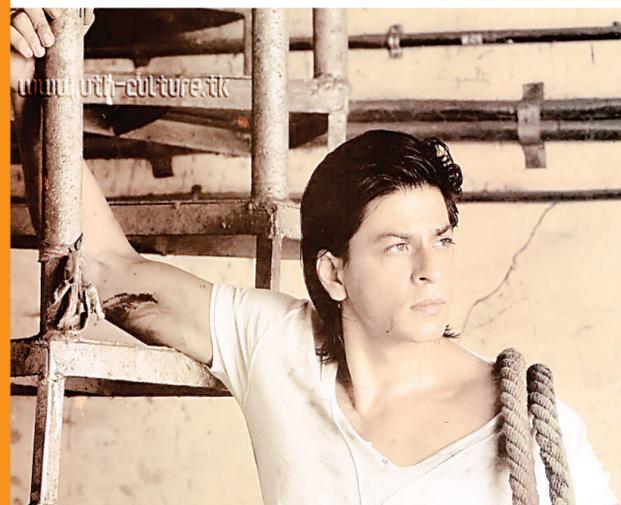
newsmakers



Sachin the superhero

India has a new superhero. His name is Sachin Ramesh Tendulkar. Yes you heard it right. It's him. But wasn't he always a superhero? Wasn't he always a short man who stood tallest among mortals? Yes he was. His appetite for runs was unequalled. His fitness is unquestionable. His dedication is beyond compare. But till few days ago, when he had the only double century in the history of the game's one-day format and 49 test centuries, he also had the record of a mediocre captain and had not won India a cricket world cup. Feats that together made him a mortal with a high achievement quotient. But not anymore. There is a thin but definitive line between achievement of the highest order and singular feat of greatness and last Sunday at Centurion, Sachin crossed that line forever. If and since a batsman's primary job is to get runs, he has got lots and lots of them for himself and for India. But nothing matches 50 test centuries with anything. Perhaps Viv Richards beats him in flair, Gavaskar had the technique of a king, Lara on a good day is more entertaining, and there is a Hayden, a Ponting, a Flower, a Crowe. But put them

all together and that small man from Bandra stands way above them in glory and achievement. That matters. In a country where one millimeter success breeds ten feet of publicity Sachin is a true character. He has this remarkable balance and integrity that is the stuff of idols. Can we have the first Sachin graphic novel please?



Shahrukh above all else

"I am the origin and original of what I do. I am the truth and lie of what I do. I am the goodness and the badness of what I do." No this sweeping pronouncement is not from *The Bible* or *Quran* or *Bhagwad-Gita*. This comes from none other than Shah Rukh Khan! Media lovingly calls him the Badshah; it seems he has taken the trappings of the title a tad too seriously. Sovereigns often styled themselves as zill-ul-Allah, which means the shadow of god. This divine connection was employed to justify the sovereign's terrestrial claims of taxes and territories. Now what exactly is Khan demanding? The star had only two releases this year, and could not triumph in the Khan-race in Bollywood, with Aamir and Salman delivering bigger hits than him. So is this a boastful cry from someone whose empire is declining? Not entirely. Two big-budget films from Khan, *Ra.One* and *Don Part II* are releasing next year. After lying low for some-time, the superstar wanted to create a pre-release look-who-is-back stir with these lofty comments, for sure. And for loyal fans, they always thought he was god! Did we hear you say man is mortal? Nope, not he.

IIM (Rajnikant)

First let us look at pieces of Rajini-lore. Michael Jordan once dared to challenge our very own superstar Rajinikanth. "I can spin a ball on my finger for over two hours. Can you?" was his wager. To this Rajinikanth said, "Ignorant fool! How do you think the earth spins?" It is also said that once Rajinikanth stared at the sun for hours — then the sun blinked. Coming to his latest film, *Endhiran/Robot*, the claim was that the number of stars on the film's review was an indication of what Rajinikanth thinks of the reviewer's effort. But those who laugh at such faux idolatry will now surely stop doing so.

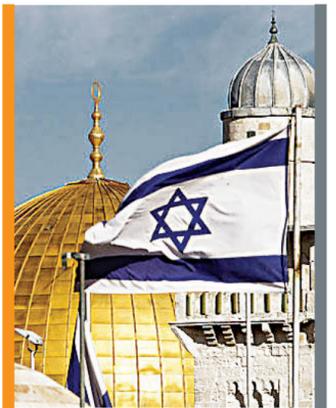


Because students at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad would now have to learn about the enigma that is Rajinikanth to get their coveted degree. You may doubt the veracity of the rest, but not the last. The IIM is introducing the Rajini phenomenon as part of its course 'Contemporary film industry: A business perspective'. Besides understanding *Endhiran's* success, the course will also analyse Rajini's 1998 blockbuster *Muthu*, which was a rage in Japan as *Muthu Odu Maharaja*, or *Muthu: The Dancing Maharaja*. Famous Tamil producer Kandaswamy Bharathan who passed out of IIM in 1978 said, tongue firmly in cheek, "The course content reflects improvement based on what is happening in the industry. There is a need for professional managers who understand

the dynamics of film production". Now what can the geeks at IIM do with Rajini! He is an epitome of the power of the irrational, the magical and the mythical! No logic of management, organisational principle and marketing strategies can explain him. For as we know, when God is overawed and flabbergasted, He says: Oh My Rajinikanth!

Only us

Digvijay Singh, the Congress leader, while speaking at the Congress plenary session on Sunday compared the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's attitude towards Muslims with that of the Nazis towards the Jews. He said the Sangh motto is to capture power by targeting and exterminating Muslims under the garb of furthering nationalism. At this, Israel took offence. A terse, one-sentence statement from the Israeli embassy reads: "In response to the enquiries from the press, the Embassy wishes to stress without entering the political debate that no comparison can be made with the Nazi Holocaust in which six million Jews were massacred solely because they were Jews." Post World War II, the Israeli state has always employed an



inflationary rhetoric of victimhood to further its aggressive foreign policies. By claiming an 'exceptional' status for Holocaust, they nullify attempts to correlate the event with other such malicious maneuverings in modern politics and contemporary history. No matter how many Palestinians are killed, they are the eternal Holocaust victims. No comparison, no parallel, no ifs and buts. Period!

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