

In Search of Transcendence: An Interview with Ranajit Guha

Interview (in Bengali) with Ranajit Guha (RG), 2 February 2010, at his home in Purkersdorf (near Vienna), Austria

A Summary Report

Interviewer: Milinda Banerjee (MB), PhD Researcher, Cluster of Excellence “Asia & Europe”, supervisor: Prof. Dr. Gita Dharampal-Frick, Dept. of History, SAI Heidelberg University

One of the most celebrated historians of modern India, Ranajit Guha, the founder of the Subaltern Studies Collective, is also a brilliantly original thinker. In this interview, he speaks about his recent turn, as graphed out in his Bengali-language works, towards an explicitly philosophical approach in the conceptualization of self-other relations. He relates this to his previous more historically situated English-language oeuvre and grounds the philosophical turn in his attempt to engage with the notion of transcendence, particularly as articulated in Indian metaphysics. The impression that the interviewer was left with was of a man who, in his project to relate popular conceptions of radicalism with transcendental ideals of moral-religious justice, and European notions of the working of the transcendental Geist in immanent time with Indian discourses on the self's striving to reach out to the Other in a quest for perfection, has been engaging with some of the most compelling themes of modern Indian intellectual history. The genealogy of these themes dates back certainly to the intertwining of religious reform and democratic-socialist ideals in the trajectory of Indian nationalism (Rammohun, Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhi, to mention just a few exemplars), but perhaps can be traced back even earlier to precolonial devotional movements and discourses of political-social uplift and inner-worldly soteriology. The text below paraphrases the main issues raised.

MB: Could you explain the reason for your recent turn away from writing in English to writing in Bengali, and for the shift towards a very explicit philosophy-oriented approach in these Bengali works?

RG: I have always loved the Bengali language, and the poet Rabindranath Tagore has been an enormous influence on me, not only because of his genius, which everyone would admit, but also because of his worldview. I therefore felt the need to write in Bengali, and engage with Bengali language and literature.

MB: Have you always been so ideologically churned by Tagore and by Bengali literary culture, or is it something which has become important in your mature years?

RG: I had engaged with these in my youth as well, though these issues then were not so apparently visible. Rather, what I felt more explicitly was my passion for social justice for the poor, and Marxism was therefore attractive. Coming from a *khas taluqdar*¹ family of Barisal in East Bengal, I had witnessed the structure of *zamindar-praja*² relations in rural society, which left a profound impression on me. In my student days at Presidency College, Calcutta, I became a Marxist, and a member of the Communist Party. In the late 1940s, I spent a considerable part of time in Europe involved in Communist Party work. However, I also gradually started getting alienated from doctrinaire Communist Party Marxism. Experiences of the USSR's handling of the political situation in Eastern

¹ A class of landlords who were technically not zamindars, but who, like zamindars, paid revenue directly to the State in colonial Bengal.

² The Permanent Settlement of 1793 bestowed property rights on land in Bengal to a class of people termed the zamindars. Below the zamindars were their 'prajas' or 'subjects' who cultivated their land and paid them rent.

Europe, disenchantment with the Communist Party of India's internal factional squabbles for power, and finally the Soviet invasion of Hungary, made me decide to leave the Communist Party. Later, I became something of a Naxal intellectual. I still consider myself to have been inspired by Charu Mazumdar's³ ideas which, I think, contain a lot of validity. But Charu Mazumdar and his followers were weak in organizational capability, which resulted in the movement being crushed. I have elsewhere condemned the role of some intellectuals in Indira Gandhi's period who supported her moves to crush the revolt and praised many of her activities, for instance, the running of trains on time during the Emergency.

The doctrinaire Marxism of the Indian Communist Party was poor in appreciation of real Marxist philosophy. They had a very simplistic understanding of Marxism and most of them had not read the original books. The disenchantment with this doctrinaire Marxism provoked me to explore the philosophical complexities of Marx, which in turn led me to Hegel. Hegel has tremendously inspired me.

MB: But you have critiqued Hegel in your History at the Limit of World-History?

RG: I have critiqued certain specific elements in the Hegelian worldview, and specifically the Eurocentric elements which were common to others of his age. But Hegel's notion of the Geist, and the theme of *uttaran*⁴ embedded in that, remains crucial. The ability to create a better self, a better social self, is very important.

MB: Is, or was, this concern shared by others in the Subaltern Studies Collective, or mainly by you, since the theme of transcendence or uplift would be negatively viewed from the poststructural or "postmodern" perspectives of your younger contemporaries, especially due to the present-day suspicion about all grand narratives?

RG: I think I am somewhat unique in having faith in the theme of *uttaran* or transcendence. It would be wrong to view, as some scholars have done, the Hegelian transcendence or movement of the Geist as something which operates narrowly and in a deterministic manner through immanent human history. Rather, the stages Hegel describes in the movement of the Geist should be seen as ideal types, exemplars, not narrowly in the form of actual human societies. In a related manner, Heidegger's phenomenological approach has also left a deep impression on me. I consider both Being and Becoming to be important. Kant and Nietzsche have also deeply influenced me. Through Heidegger I have also approached Thomas Aquinas. Among the Greeks, I consider Aristotle to be more important than Plato in showing this appreciation of the phenomenological totality.

For me, intellectual history, the history of ideas, is very important. My first work was on the intellectual origins of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, something to which I have returned in a recent Bengali book. My *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* also worked on these ideas from archival sources. I emphasize philosophy, but a philosophy which is worked out through the primary sources by the historian such as through the archival records which help us trace peasant mentality. What animates my earlier as well as later works is concern for the philosophical implications of the search for perfection. Man is imperfect, but he searches always for perfection. Sometimes he does this by trying to conquer and destroy and take away things from nature and from others. Sometimes, he tries to achieve perfection by creating new things. So when he sees that birds can fly, and fish can live under water, but he himself cannot do these things, he feels inspired to create planes and submarines. This search for perfection also animates man's desire for justice. For me, this has been a prime object of study, to study the norms of transcendental justice embedded in human be-

³ The foremost intellectual and political leader of the 'ultra-left' Naxalite movement which erupted in West Bengal in the late 1960s, spread to the rest of the India, and continues to be the founding moment of the Maoist peasant insurgency of the present day.

⁴ A Bengali word meaning going beyond, with emphasis on the notion of transcendence rather than improvement or betterment

ings, which manifests in peasant insurgency, in popular religion, and so on. The notion of justice present in popular religion has always moved me immensely. This theme of perfection again animates the quest for upliftment, *uttaran*, for going beyond one's self.

MB: Is this ambiguity about the search for perfection, which both tries to destroy the Other and to reach out and embrace the Other, related to your understanding of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic?

RG: Yes, and the quest to understand this dialectic has always moved me. I was delighted to find a quotation from a Buddhist text which frames this dialectic, and which I used as the opening quotation for *Elementary Aspects*.

MB: Do you believe in God, since recognition of such a figure seems important if one believes in the possibility of transcendence?

RG: More important than the question whether I believe in the *existence* of God or not, is the question whether I believe in the *concept* of God. I do believe in the concept, and I think that this belief is essential because it prompts man to go beyond himself and search for justice and perfection, to seek and to create what he does not find in this world.

It is to study this quest that I have also engaged with Indian philosophy, with thinkers like Bhartrihari, Abhinavagupta and Shankaracharya. Indian philosophy has always dwelt on this theme. Modern Indians, however, to their detriment, have neglected this extremely rich heritage of Indian philosophy. In my recent works, writing in Bengali, and using Indian philosophy, I want to remind people of the need to go back to these concepts. Specifically, the theme of self-other relations has become very important, and explicitly articulated, in these works. The going beyond one's self, the ability to take on new selves, to reach the Other, to transcend: these are issues which, I think, are particularly visible in the realm of literature, whether in Tagore or in later Bengali poets. Literature offers insights, and modern Indian writers have been able to achieve new directions, which have neither been so articulated by the discipline of history nor by historians. By going into Indian literature and philosophy, these insights can be recovered, and also be made ready for use by new generations of scholars with eyes less jaded than those of their predecessors. The German idealist philosophy of Kant and Hegel also articulate these concerns which were earlier expressed in Indian philosophy. Talking about these things might require the usage of a certain conceptual language which may appear difficult to some. But I have always written to express myself, to satisfy myself, and not with an immediate audience in mind for whom I must dilute things.

I have formally signed a contract to donate, after my death, all my private papers and books to the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna. These contain materials, including letters exchanged between me and other Subaltern Studies scholars, which are absolutely essential for the writing of a history of the Subaltern Studies Collective, a school which, I think, has made the most original contribution to historiography on India in recent years. If scholars from Heidelberg University come and work on these in future, that would be very good.