

# Ramchandra Guh

Historian and Author

'I am a liberal who vigorously defends the middle ground'

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**Historian and author Ramchandra Guha believes in defending the middle ground as it is core need for a country as complex, as large and as diverse as India.**

**What does the word spirituality mean to you?**

Nothing at all.

**What if someone had never heard that word?**

I am a sociologist telling a story. I deal with specifics. I am not a philosopher so I can understand religion or faith, but spirituality I cannot understand and it means nothing to me. It is a meaningless term.

**In India everybody uses this word all the time...**

Not me, not this Indian ! And I have never used it in anything I have ever written. I can make sense of religion, of forms of worship, of prayer, of ideas about the supernatural. But spirituality is one of those utterly meaningless, pointless words. It should be abolished from the English language.

### **What about faith and religion?**

There are two things: personal faith and religion which I don't discuss; and as a sociologist and historian of a country with such intense sentiments and feelings, I am obliged to study them.

### **When looking at one's life and how it unfolds...**

I don't look at my life in that way. My life is irrelevant. I am a minor figure. I am not obsessed with my life or my spiritual journey. I am curious about the society I live in. But my life is inconsequential. It doesn't matter.

### **Is this curiosity for the society you live in what led you to become a sociologist and historian?**

That kind of thing happens, and you don't know how it happens - contingent factors, accidents and so on. For me, it was an accident. I was studying economics and wasn't very good at it. I stumbled upon the work of a wonderfully evocative anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, an Englishman who had lived with the tribal people of India. I got interested in him.

Anthropology is a much more human discipline than economics, with its interest in people's culture, conflicts etc. So I moved in that direction. I stumbled upon it, whereas my childhood dream like many boys in India had been to become a famous cricket player.

### **Did you stumble in those anthropological studies on some interesting shamanic beliefs or practices?**

Not really. I studied it only through the life of this man, as he wrote about shamanism, but not first hand. He lived in tribal areas in Madhya Pradesh from the 1930s to the 1950s, at a time those tribes were still relatively isolated: roads had not penetrated, the market economy had not penetrated, radio and television had not penetrated. So he was able to study different aspects of their life and culture. So my work was through his eyes. I was intrigued to understand what attracted an Englishman who had studied in Oxford to come and spend time with tribals in India. So I went there, but more to follow his steps. I wasn't doing original anthropological work myself.

### **So you didn't imbibe by osmosis his interest in religion?**

He came from a deeply religious tradition and was interested in matters of faith. His father was a bishop and he first came to India as a missionary.

For me, I am interested in religion in a sociological sense, not in a philosophical or metaphysical sense. I am interested in how it is organized, how religions deal with each other - India as a multi-religious nation-state, how is this very difficult project negotiated? Europe is facing the issue of Muslim immigration but we have had those questions for a much longer time. How do different religions treat each other in India? How within the Hindu tradition do people worshipping different gods treat each other? Those are the things that interest me.

### **You had a Marxist phase -**

Yes, but it was very brief, just a year or a year and a half.

### **I thought it might have shaped you?**

It shaped me to some extent, but not that much, and it's really a long time ago.

**When you choose topics to write on, is the impact you have on readers important ?**

I am simply curious about certain topics, I am interested in them, so I do some research and write about them. I am completely detached from the impact it might have and have no clue about what it might be. But I do try to do two, three things with my writing.

First, I try to do original research, as a historian for instance, finding fresh and new material, new sources that nobody has seen, shedding fresh light, even on old problems.

The second thing is that I must try and communicate accessibly, so that anyone can read and understand it, not just using jargon for scholars and writing for my peers.

And third thing, I must have a certain consistency. I shouldn't go with the wind.

I write vigorously. I call myself a moderate polemicist. My views are moderate. I am actually middle of the road. Normally polemicists are either extreme right or extreme left. I am a liberal who defends the middle ground. Because India is so complex, so large, so diverse, it needs accommodation and compromise. It needs a middle ground. It doesn't need extreme solutions. It doesn't need the Maoists types, and it doesn't need the Hindutva types. So I defend that. That's my political or social philosophy.

But what impact it can have ? Who can judge ? It is totally unpredictable. I may think of some essays as brilliant and they are ignored, while others which do not seem that good have a huge impact. So you should never write for impact. One must write as a craftsman. Do a good, detailed, skillful job and present it ! As a writer, the art of presentation is equally important. How you craft an essay, a book, a narrative, how you draw the reader in - those are the important things. Some books may do well, others may not, that is fine. I am not writing for the market. I write about things that engage me and that I want to probe deeper.

**When facing challenges or difficult times, where do you find your energy, your anchor?**

That is part of life ! I guess I would find consolation in family and friends. When I am upset or disconsolate, those are my anchors. The closest I come to a personal activity, is listening to Indian classical music. It makes me contemplative and relaxed.

**When synchronicities happen, do you look at it as a larger orchestration or as mere probabilities?**

You are right all kinds of strange things and coincidences happen. But I don't see them as a sign or a symbol. I don't think about it.

**It never made you think that certain things may be predestined in life?**

Look, it may be. I have an open mind on that. I am not an atheist, and I am not a blind believer either. But I am so caught up with daily life, work, and family, that I don't reflect on those things very much. Luck and chance play a huge role. Why should I say that things are meant to be ? Life may be absurd, there is such a possibility. Or there may be a larger meaning to it all, but maybe I have too mundane and humdrum of a mind to go there and think about it all.

**If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?**

I don't think about it at all. I don't say it is all bogus. I just don't think about it. It is just not part of my way of being.

**What is your idea of happiness?**

I don't think of this. These are not things I think of because they are not in my control. These questions never strike me. I don't know what happiness means. I do my work and I slog away – I don't know if it is happiness or a way to kill time.