TRIBUTE

Amalendu Guha: A Tribute

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya*

The death of Professor Amalendu Guha on May 7, 2015, marks the end of an era for several reasons. He belonged to a generation of Marxist intellectuals who changed perspectives radically for people around them and for the generation that followed. These intellectuals spoke up for the poor and oppressed in our country, they fought for civil rights and freedoms, and they challenged the traditionally oriented view of our society in past and present times. It cannot be said that they succeeded in the political arena, but they left a mark on the mind and culture of our people. Despite many adversities, they showed a moral courage to stand up for the values they cherished. In this day and age, however, one finds most intellectuals unwilling to make the commitment to a life of struggle and sacrifice that Guha and some of his peers did. That is why his death marks the end of an era.

Further, Guha was one of those around whom there developed an invisible college, so to speak. Many historians learned from him, though they were never formally his students in any institution. In present times one does not find such bonds of guru-shishya relationship, because, I imagine, a business-like relationship is the order of the day even in the world of learning.

There is a third aspect of Professor Guha's life that marks him apart. He was a loner: ploughing a lonely furrow, he broke new ground in research in the economic history of the North East, unaided by any university and unacknowledged at that time by the establishment that ruled the world of scholars. He bravely faced the loneliness of being a pioneer as well as exclusion from employment in the universities of Gauhati and Calcutta as a communist and a political suspect. Occasionally it was also said of him that he faced isolation for other reasons as well, being not only a marked man as a communist, but also being perceived as an ethnic "outsider."

* Chairman, Indian Council for Historical Research (2007-11), Vice-Chancellor, Visva-Bharati University (1991-5), and Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (1972-2005).

Towards the end of his life, however, he received the acclaim he deserved. I appreciate this opportunity to pay my humble tribute to Professor Amalendu Guha, whom I have admired for decades.

It is important to try to understand the formative factors that moulded the intellectual interests and academic pursuits as well as the socio-political outlook of Professor Amalendu Guha. In the first place, his location and his life experience in Assam was a major factor. Guha's range of interest and knowledge of Indian society and economy was very wide because of his location in a part of the country where different forms of production relations existed. These ranged from the pre-feudal stage to advanced production in the sub-Himalayan highlands, and from slash-and-burn cultivation to settled agriculture. There was petty commodity production among self-cultivating peasants in the Brahmaputra valley, artisanal production was best preserved in its pre-capitalist form in the Assam hills and plains, and advanced forms of capitalist production under foreign capitalist auspices in the tea plantations. Thus, a whole range of different stages, or forms, of production relations were to be found in Assam, as if designed to offer to an observer a cross-section of economic history. Guha's familiarity with this socio-economic scene provided him, I believe, a unique perspective. Thus there was an organic relationship between his life experience and personal observations and the academic research in economic history that he undertook. Very few historians in India had the advantage Amalendu Guha enjoyed in this regard, particularly in respect of understanding agrarian history.

The second formative influence was the political climate of the 1940s and 1950s in eastern India when Guha, as a young man, was deciding the trajectory of his life. The growth of the Left as a political force was preceded by the development of Communist ideology by Soumyendranath Tagore, Muzaffar Ahmad, M. N. Roy, and others in Bengal and Assam. Young Amalendu was attracted to the Communist Party of India. He joined the Assam unit of the All India Students Federation in 1939, when he was 15 years of age, a high school student. From that it was an easy transition to membership of the Communist Party of India in 1943. Although he formally terminated his membership of the Party around 1965, he continued to be an active participant in the Left movement in Bengal and Assam. In fact, his position at the time of the India-China border conflict in 1962 led to his arrest under the Preventive Detention Act. Along with fifty other prominent Left intellectuals, Guha was in jail, first in Guwahati and then in Berhampur in Odisha, for about six months. That apart, he had continual interaction with Left labour leaders in the tea plantations, in particular with his life-long friend Sanat Bose.

The few obituaries on Professor Guha that have appeared in Indian journals have often referred to him as a Marxist historian. Let us recall that at one time being a Marxist historian often meant the denial of job opportunities in the universities. To be known as a Marxist was tantamount to carrying a flag, and its bearers paid a price for so doing. Guha did not get a job in the Universities of Gauhati and Calcutta

in spite of his qualifications and publications. Guha willingly paid that price and an important part of his academic life, from 1948 to 1965, was spent in Darrang College, Tezpur. However, exclusion from the higher levels of the universities did not prevent Guha from launching into the research that eventually earned him national recognition. It was not academic recognition so much as engagement with socio-political issues that drove Guha's intellectual life. His interpretation of the history of North East India from a Marxist perspective deeply influenced generations of students who never saw him as a university Professor.

The third formative influence in Amalendu Guha's intellectual life was the new wave of interest and research in the economic history of India that began in the 1960s. Political decolonisation in south Asian countries and the agenda of economic development of the post-colonial states, particularly the efforts we know broadly as planning and public-sector initiatives, brought into focus the historical issues of underdevelopment in colonial times. Hence a new interest arose in India in the economic history of British India. The focus of interest was the colonial economy, although that term was considered questionable by the academic establishment: for example, when a course of studies entitled "Colonial Economy in India" was offered in 1973 at the newly founded Jawaharlal Nehru University, the very concept of "colonial economy" was questioned by the authorities of the day in the universities of Delhi and Calcutta. Their *ex cathedra* judgements were ignored. In course of time the volume and quality of research by historians like Amalendu Guha established colonial economy as a field of study. Guha contributed to the field through his doctoral work (in 1959-1962) at the Indian School of International Studies, New Delhi, and his post-doctoral research at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics in Pune, where he was a Research Fellow and Reader (1965-73). When the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), was established, Guha was one of the first to be invited to join the faculty. Although the Centre did not have at that time any formal course leading to a degree, Guha attracted a legion of young researchers and professional colleagues in the 1980s. I particularly recall his kind comments when I delivered the annual Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar lecture at that Centre.

Guha's writings in these years, in the form of Occasional Papers of CSSSC, need to be collected and reprinted.

In these institutions and while visiting the Delhi School of Economics intermittently, Guha contributed to three major segments of economic history of the colonial period. The first of these areas was the agrarian history of Assam. Guha's early research, that is, in the 1950s and 1960s, was on peasant rebellions, slavery in pre-colonial Assam, land rights and social clashes in late mediaeval Assam, Ahom migration, and the rice economy of mediaeval Assam. Secondly, he focused on the rise of foreign and national capitalist enterprise in Assam, the colonisation of Assam, the origins of Parsi entrepreneurship in western India, the raw cotton trade in Bombay Presidency in the nineteenth century, de-industrialisation and indigenous textile manufacture,

the formation of the working class in Assam tea plantations, and similar themes. Apart from numerous papers, two contributions stand out: *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, published in 1977, and *Mediaeval and Early Colonial Assam*, published in 1991. Guha's research on early twentieth century Afghanistan was also pioneering.

The third aspect of his intellectual life was a creative engagement with the social and political life of the common people in Assam through poetry. This engagement was evident in the academic research we have cited above, but its poetic expression also demands our attention. In fact, Guha's earliest writings were probably in the form of poetry. According to his reminiscences, when he was 14 years old a friend put in his hands the well-known ballad written by Pablo Neruda and translated from Spanish under the title "Let the Rail Splitters Awake." Neruda was a favourite poet of Left intellectuals in those days and the radical spirit in his poetry inspired Guha to write poems on the life-struggle of the people of Assam. When Guha was 16 years old he wrote a long ballad entitled "Luit Parer Gatha," or "The Ballad of Lohit Country," Lohit or Luit being the local name for the Brahmaputra River. This poem and some others that he wrote in the next five years in Bengali were collected and published in 1955. Five years later he published a collection of Assamese poems entitled *Tomaloi* (1960). Five editions of the latter publication have been published and I understand that it is considered to be an important text in the history of Assamese literature. He did not publish any poetry after 1960, but there remained in his attitude and his conversations something of the romantic revolutionary.

Finally, what was the legacy that the historian Professor Amalendu Guha left behind? First, he showed in his own work how to avoid vacuous theory-mongering through the reproduction or imitation of contemporary Western Marxist writings. He aimed at the empirical validation of Marxian positions on certain issues, and, contrary to the habit of his colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s, carefully eschewed the regurgitation of Althusser or Gadamer or the most recent article in *New Left Review*. To take one example, he provided an innovative explanation of the connection between the material basis of production and socio-economic relationships in his study of the introduction of rice cultivation by the Ahoms and the growth of feudal relationships in Assam. It was an original contribution to the Marxian discourse on the transition to feudalism. Or again, consider his argument about de-industrialisation. Instead of taking for granted that the intrusion of industrial capitalism into colonial India *ipso facto* meant the destruction of indigenous textile industry, he diligently reconstructed the data on the supply of raw material, i.e., raw cotton, in order quantitatively to establish de-industrialisation. In combining the best of conventional empirical methodology with a Marxian interpretation, Guha showed the way, although there were not many "Marxist" historians who followed him. Secondly, Guha developed and advanced the Marxian interpretation of cultural history and the history of ideas. This was exemplified by his interpretation of a major social movement like the Moamoria Rebellion, which was traditionally interpreted in terms of religious

ideas of neo-Vaishnavism. Guha proposed that the crux of the matter was peasant resistance and uprising. Again, on the culturalist explanation of the rise of the Parsi entrepreneurs proposed by the Weberians, Guha took a critical Marxian position: the attribution of a value system and ethnically transmitted cultural propensities, he argued, were not really the factors that explain the rise of Parsi enterprise. On the idea of nationhood, Guha's writings in the 1980s brings to bear the Marxian approach to the issue of pan-Indian and regional nationalism. It has often been said that on that question he was influenced too much by Stalin's position on the nationality question. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that, in 1979-80, Guha brought Marxian analysis to bear on the question of nationality and chauvinism. Finally, it seems that while he was commonly regarded a part of the "progressive" intelligentsia, Guha took care to preserve an identity of his own, in declining to merge into the "nationalist" school or into the subaltern school that some of his colleagues at the CSSSC promoted. He chose to be a loner. That choice made by Guha is a significant indicator of his judgement of the nature of the middle class intelligentsia he was a part of and yet distant from.