

Sumit Sarkar brought ordinary people, their experiences into history books

TRIBUTE

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I did not have the good fortune of being taught by Sumit Sarkar. But like every (conscientious) modern Indian historian, I have indeed been 'taught' by him. His classic, *Modern India*, modestly described as a 'textbook', is perhaps the most well-thumbed of my many books. Here, along with colonial masters and nationalist leaders, peasants, workers, and ordinary people sprang from its pages.

This was no simple inclusion: it was a conceptual break, altering our understanding of Indian history in profound ways, acknowledging the lives and actions of millions, even their failures, as the true basis on which to understand our past. But political leaders, their actions, and the periodisations familiar to students of histo-

ry could not be dispensed with altogether. Therefore, the book, despite its emphasis on the novel breakthroughs of a 'history from below', was sandwiched 'between the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the achievement of independence in 1947', since those 60 years 'witnessed perhaps the greatest transition in our country's long history'. In one memorable sentence, he signalled the many unfulfilled promises of Indian nationalism: thus, the Mahatma succeeded in 'drawing in the masses, while at the same time keeping mass activity strictly pegged down to certain forms predetermined by the leader.'

Let me not dwell on the gaping hole that Sarkar's demise had left among historians, and focus instead on the riches he has left us. His book, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, on Bengal's (first) partition of 1905, and the nationalist

movement that it spawned, was full of methodological innovations, using plays, novels, newspapers, pamphlets, in addition to the more familiar colonial archive. These materials led him to ask questions that often led to ambiguous or unsatisfactory answers. Educated unemployment and rising prices surely fuelled the anger against the Bengal partition. But the pride-inducing victory of a little 'eastern' nation, Japan, over a powerful 'western' neighbour, Russia, – the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 – also played its part, despite a relative ignorance in India of emerging critiques of imperialism elsewhere.

Sarkar also asked himself: how could a Swadeshi editorial in the *Bande Mataram* praise, in the same breath, both the labour movement and the caste system, the latter for having had 'the true socialistic aim of keeping awake in ev-



Legacy unmatched: Historian Sumit Sarkar passed away on August 13. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ery class of society a sense of duty to it'? Or, as he would ask later, what drew upper caste men to revolutionary terrorism in Bengal, and why has that memory endured longer than those of tribal or lower caste participants?

He was among the earliest of historians to unpack how 'Hindu' nationalism gradually became 'common sense', with consequences up to this day.

Sarkar's task was to break out of the economic determinism and narrow

positivism that was the hallmark of Marxist scholarship at the time. But the work remains unsurpassed, since it upholds the protocols of historical research, the verifiability of evidence, and as he said, 'the constant knowledge that my conclusions remain open to revision and change'. Would a revised *Modern India*, that more correctly reflects the scholarship of the last four decades – as many regions, social groups, practices, and events have found

their historians – be at all possible in our times? How were material conditions and cultural forms to be integrated within a structured totality?

His Marxism did not come in the way of engaging with what Ranajit Guha has called the oldest (and richest) archive in India: religion. He read religion, but not as a believer; not to denigrate but to connect the celestial world to its earthly presence in meaningful ways.

In fact, Marxism enabled his interest in the 19th-century mystic (and rustic) Hindu thinker Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and the petty-bourgeois, clerical ambience within which he operated, which gave his philosophy its force and material influence, especially among the emerging, well-read, urban middle class. That contradiction needed to be explained. Sarkar linked the belated entry of clock-time into India, and the

disciplinary mechanisms it generated, to the slavery of clerical labour, which paved the way for the reception of Ramakrishna.

On RSS and Left

Sarkar showed us the true meaning of engaged scholarship: when India was stunned in 1992 by the shock troops of the BJP and RSS that brought down the Babri Masjid, Sarkar and his colleagues produced a short but vital book called *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*. It was the first serious historical reconstruction (based also on sensitive fieldwork) of what the RSS had become, the most formidable force on the Indian political firmament. Certainly the young people who have today given us a ray of hope should place this book at the top of their reading lists.

Sarkar, in both his writing and his political positions, was unafraid to confront the official Left and its surrender to global cap-

ital, as at Nandigram and Singur. He would have been the first to admit that proletarians have not been the grave diggers of capitalism, though he welcomed historians who showed renewed interest in labour and working class history.

I was personally honoured when this remarkable historian included me in his review of five such books. But more striking was his intellectual openness: his choices 'provincialised' Bengal, by acknowledging the worlds and questions that lay well beyond it – Kanpur, Jamshedpur, KGF, Bombay, the railway works.

At a time when 'everyone' is a historian, and we are being trained in thinking of history only as 'pride' in the past, we will miss complex thinkers like Sarkar even more, for his passing no doubt signals the end of an era.

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