

Sumit Sarkar (1939–2026)

A Life of the Mind

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Sumit Sarkar, one of India's foremost historians, passed away on 13 August 2026. Though he had been away from public engagements for almost two decades, his many publications in this period (notably, *Modern Times*, 2014; *Essays of a Lifetime*, 2018; and, most recently, his *Uncollected Writings*, compiled by Tanika Sarkar in 2025) have meant that his ideas and arguments have been available to a large world of scholars and students to read and engage with. He was an immensely prolific historian, and the earliest iterations of many of his path-breaking essays were in the *Economic & Political Weekly*, a choice many of his generation made as part of a political commitment to making scholarship available to a large reading public, without restricting it to a few within the academy. It is therefore an honour to write about him for *EPW*, as it is in keeping with the spirit of his own intellectual and political points of view.

I was never taught by Sarkar, though I did learn from him over many decades, by reading and engaging with his work, hearing him speak in scholarly and political settings, and, a few times, working alongside him. What always amazed me was how someone who was exceptionally erudite had a razor-sharp memory and a synoptic vision, could be so non-hierarchical and democratic in his interactions with peers, younger colleagues and friends. I remember this especially in the two instances when some of us worked along with him in the 1990s, once when the undergraduate history syllabus was being revised, and the other when we wrote a textbook for the Open School on Modern Indian and world histories. Both these settings involved long hours and intense discussions, and I remember Sarkar patiently steering us through these (and in the Open School instance, reading everyone's

contributions and commenting in detail) until we had arrived at a consensus. In neither case did he try to impose his will, or perspective, on the group working with him; instead, his attempt was to try and make the process as inclusive as possible.

Reimagining Modern India

I was an undergraduate when that great classic of modern Indian history, *Modern India*, was published (1982), and it was around that time that I first met him. It was clear to even a young student that this was a very different kind of history, and it changed the way we thought about both India and its "modernity." It had a formidable sweep, thematically and in regional detail, and moved seamlessly between what are seen as the big moments in the national movement, while bringing in actors and issues that had hitherto been invisible or on the margins (rebellious tribals, resisting peasants, labour unrest, communist organisations, among others). This juxtaposition challenged the rather simple, and comforting story of a unified Indian resistance to imperialism, and exposed the fault lines, fractures and power struggles within Indian society that were as, if not more, important as the anti-colonial struggle. The relevance of the many unfinished struggles for dignity or equality, or abandoned projects for rights, is what has become manifest in postcolonial India.

And in many ways, *Modern Times* (2014), while not returning to the history of the making of modern India, is a dexterous engagement with this shifting ground. I remember talking to Sarkar about *Modern Times* soon after it was published, and he said that it would not have been possible to revise *Modern India*; moreover, he was interested in the historiographical shifts that had occurred in the two decades since the

publication of *Modern India*, and preferred to focus on what he saw as the big themes in Indian history, and historiography (agriculture, labour, environment, political economy and culture). Once again, *Modern Times* is a book whose sweep is breathtaking, as is the nuance and historical detail in each chapter.

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were ones in which Sarkar wrote extensively, which is clear when one looks at the different compendia of his essays. One can see intellectual and political continuities in "Writing Social History," "Beyond Nationalist Frames," and "Essays of a Lifetime." There are questions and concerns in these essays that have been developed over a period of three to four decades, sometimes sharpened, critiqued, or simply abandoned. While the contemporary political provided the provocations, for Sarkar, history was the site for thought. An excellent example of this is that small, formidable manual for our times—*Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* (1993), co-written with Tanika Sarkar, Pradip Datta, Tapan Basu and Sambudha Sen, which perhaps is one of the best introductions to understanding Hindutva as both a historical phenomenon and political practice. While *Beyond Nationalist Frames* has polemical essays engaging the problems of the first Bharatiya Janata Party government, overall his interest lay in unpacking the complex historical phenomena that were the context for understanding the emergence of Hindutva politics. And this is where Sarkar's work is truly original, as it invites us to think about the histories of religion and politics with all its mess, contradictions, and complexities.

Going back to these essays at a time when our contemporary political is fraught and contested, and caste assertions are matched by complex forms of caste-based atrocities (including violence between proximate castes); where the Hindu right is attempting to consolidate, and forever pushing for a homogenising idea of the Hindu Rashtra; where the erasure of anything Muslim is being attempted with renewed, and predictable vigour, one is reminded of the far longer histories of what one witnesses in the present. His oeuvre also offers the possibilities of

reading the past in ways that do not homogenise caste, religion or gender—but instead read these as parts of a broken mosaic, a counter-intuitive jigsaw puzzle where pieces do not fit together and categories are not preformed and then imposed onto histories. In other words, these essays push us to re-examine the manners in which we read and write the past.

Weaving the Fragments

There is a frightening honesty in Sarkar's engagement—as though the historian Sarkar, forever in conversation with the complexity of what we find as we wade through archival scraps and crumbling texts, is saying that we need to address head-on the “contradictory” and the “complex.” Both are terms that recur in his essays. And if we try and honestly put together the contradictory and the complex, then what often emerges is the counter-intuitive. And the real challenge is not colonising the counterintuitive with presentist frames (be these issues or categories) but addressing the far tougher question: What do broken bits that do not add up, or counterintuitive suggestions from the past, say to us about how we read the present?

Some examples of this mode of history writing lie at the heart of what might be called his “social history” essays (the ones on Ramakrishna—“Kaliyuga, Bhakti, Chakri: Ramakrishna and His Times”; “Vidyasagar and Brahmanical Society” and the wonderful essay on a village scandal, “The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur”). Written between the late 1980s and late 1990s, these offer radically different ways of thinking caste, religion, manifestations of gender, “mentalities,” production and circulation of cultural texts, and the making of different publics, among much else. And even as I abstract these from the essays as the thematic one might wish to think with, I am aware of the injustice being done to what was stitched together with patience, taking care not to let analytical categories overwhelm the subtleties that layered these histories.

In his readings of the lives and times of Ramakrishna or Vidyasagar, or of the extraordinary Prasanna Chandal, we are invited to think about, among other

matters—both the nuances of the lives of poor Brahmins in 19th-century Bengal and the manners in which “the Dalit” was an internally differentiated category. Alongside, it explored the tensions between the rural countryside and the city, and the social universes that different castes could inhabit in the rural, particularly those who had embraced a more exploratory lifestyle that was permitted by popular religious practice. Sarkar returns to, and builds on, many of the kinds of themes that emerge in the “Kalki Avatar” essay, like the homoerotics of popular religious life and practice; the many meanings of madness or the figure of the *pagal* (the madman) as a trope to understand ecstatic religion; and the ability of love for the divine to free one from kinship, codes, conventions and inhibitions. Yet that essay also has a subtle discussion of the politics of caste inversion, ritual murder and possible ways to think of this; internal differences between Dalit subcastes; bodily violations that included stripping, nudity and rape.

We also get a glimpse of a late 19th-century history of criminal law. This reconstruction also alerts us to what is striking about Sarkar's manner of engaging the “social,” which involved combining the analytics of a certain moment of European and British social history writing (as one sees through the world of the footnote—from Raphael Samuel, Carlo Ginzburg, Peter Burke, Robert

Darnton, the Annales school, among others), with an interest in the lives of the ordinary people, popular culture, mentalities and feelings. However, I would suggest that his work is characterised by the ability to sift through the minutiae of the official archive and the ability to transform, with extraordinary originality, an obscure pamphlet into an analytical mosaic that brings into the same frame characters, practices and theoretical insights. His work inaugurated a new moment of historical writing that could engage simultaneously the personal, the philosophical and the analytical.

Identity and History

Alongside, much of this body of Sarkar's writing shows a deep sensitivity to questions of caste and gender, even if these categories are not necessarily interrogated in manners that are more familiar in recent feminist or caste studies, literature. This is combined with an extraordinary concern for the drudges of professional society—the clerks and the unsuccessful *bhadralok*—whose personal or work-related crises nudged them increasingly in the direction of seeking solace in religion. Sarkar constantly reworked “social history,” interpellating it with questions and interpretative methodologies that originated in analyses of affect or mentalities, power, and practices of critical reading. This makes the social a site of infinite and

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continuous contestations, be they of culture, power, or identities.

Finally, I want to look at the work of someone from the New Left in Britain who parted ways with it—Stuart Hall, whose formidable body of thought could very easily be read alongside Sarkar's own enterprise. Among the earliest theorists thinking about "identity," Hall resolutely refused to see identity as a "thing" to be "found" in the past, but as a project for the future. As Hall said, "But what this 'detour through its pasts' does is enable us, through culture, to produce ourselves anew, as new kinds of subjects." In Sarkar's return to thinking Bengal via a layered Namasudra subjectivity (in the essay, "One or Many Histories? Identity Formations in Late Colonial Bengal"), we have a powerful revisionist impulse that critically engages existing historiography, including his own, on Bengal—fronting the reasons, and new writing that provoked such a rethinking, while exploring the making of Namasudra/Dalit counterpublics and a new "political." In his own words,

In my presentation of data from Bengal ... I have tried to emphasise the many interruptions, shifting, multiple appropriations across "levels," identity formations that never really get fully stabilised but remain in danger of disruption through intersections with each other. Solidarities of nation, religious community, caste, class, gender—none of these can be taken as given or inevitable constants, nor can they be arranged, a priori, in any unchanging, determinate hierarchy of relative importance or attraction.

An Inspiring Teacher

For a renowned scholar and much respected teacher, Sarkar was an extremely unassuming and egalitarian person. I remember vividly his presence in anti-communal groups and protests of the 1990s and early 2000s, where he participated alongside those who were much younger, or perhaps even his students. His quietness was that of a self-assured person, who was perfectly comfortable in his own skin. As I think back over these last many decades, many images of Sarkar flood my mind, but one that I will never forget is of his daily practice

of going after classes to work at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, where he could be seen several times in week, lost in reading. We have lost a great historian, but his work and ideals remain as constants that one can but try and emulate.

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