

**BANGALORE LITERATURE FESTIVAL** Ram Guha dazzles, Modi is debated, mythology is dissected and book lovers rejoice

# 'I see a growing thirst among youth for Indian non-fiction'

Ramachandra Guha is one of India's best known historians. His scholarly works have the narrative pace of fiction and have made history 'cool' and accessible. Guha spoke to STOI about Gandhi, Nehru and the rise of non-fiction

Shrabonti Bagchi | TNN

**India After Gandhi, and now Gandhi Before India. Why is Gandhi so central to your historical writing?**

Gandhi Before India — though the title may seem a little playful, referencing my own earlier work *India After Gandhi*, it is an entirely accurate title. The book explores Gandhi's early life, his upbringing in Gujarat, his education and work in the diaspora, and ends with his return to India in 1915. I've had a very long-standing interest in Gandhi, and Gandhi has always been a point of reference for me — whether I'm writing on politics or history or environmentalism or cricket.

**Gandhi, in cricket?**

Yes, of course! My book *A Corner of a Foreign Field* is really a social history of cricket; it often takes a look at the communal and caste politics of cricket. And how do you do that without bringing in Gandhi or his philosophy? In fact, he also played a role in the history of the cricketer Palwankar Baloo, a Dalit cricketer who faced discrimination in Indian cricket because of his



**LITERATI BROWSES:** A crowd of book-lovers browse through some of the offerings at the Bangalore Literature Festival, in between events ranging from discussions on cricket to speeches on historiography

caste. Gandhi took up his case, and Baloo went on to have a career in politics. So yes, Gandhi has always been a point of reference for me in all public debates.

**When you were researching India After Gandhi, was there any character that took you by surprise or that didn't quite fit the mould he or she has been cast in all along?**

There were so many; there were surprises in every chapter. There's Sukumar Sen, the first chief elec-

tion commissioner of free India. He put a framework in place that is still followed, 60 years later. There's Sardar Tarlok Singh, who rehabilitated people dislocated by Partition in the Punjab — a humongous task. It was his job to allot the land vacated by Muslims who had left for Pakistan to Hindu and Sikh refugees who had come in from West Punjab. And then there are the less well-known aspects of well-known figures like Nehru's last peace effort and his efforts to get Sheikh Abdullah released (who was

accused of conspiracy against the state and sentenced to an 11-year term in 1953 in the infamous Kashmir Conspiracy Case). We can speculate if Nehru had not died when he did, if we would have not had a Kashmir problem.

**Do we need more historians who can engage with readers the way you do through your books, and why don't we have more of such writers?**

Actually, that's not true. We have

some first-rate historians, and I'm proud to say that I belong to a generation of top-class historians — and not just historians but top-class political scientists and economists. There are people like Nayanjot Lahiri, whose *Finding Forgotten Cities* is a great work of history, anthropology and archaeology and Sanjay Subramanyam, who has written an authoritative book on Vasco de Gama. And you can't say that these books are difficult to read! There's Partha Chatterjee, whose book *A Princely Imposter* often reads like a dramatic historical thriller about a man who is taken for a royal who died years ago, and who came to be at the centre of one of the most extraordinary legal cases in Indian history.

Why don't we hear more about these people? Well, one part of it is that the media often selectively filters the names it writes about. But, yes, to be honest, some of these scholars are also reclusive. They are difficult. Would they come to a literature festival and talk about themselves? Probably not. Some may even want to distance themselves from such events.

**Do you see a growing interest in non-fiction written in India among Indian readers?**

Certainly. Often, many authors don't reach a wider audience because publishers are predisposed to think of these books as academic publications, without realizing that they tell a good story. I see a growing thirst among young readers for good Indian non-fiction. This also has to do with the fact that more young Indians have larger disposable incomes today, and more and more readers are going to look for good non-fiction. When I was young, I was too poor to buy books. But my son can set aside a certain sum every month to buy books with. Twenty years ago I could not have made a living as a writer.



**EYES STRAIGHT:** The charismatic and divisive Gujarat CM was the subject of one of the most animated discussions at the festival

## The Modi-fication of development

Shrabonti Bagchi & GS Kumar | TNN

In a first-hand demonstration of how any debate revolving around Gujarat, its development model and its deeply polarizing chief minister Narendra Modi can get shrill and divisive, a panel discussion at the Bangalore Literature Festival turned into a verbal free-for-all on Saturday night.

Defying stereotypes that the Bangalore audience is a polite, tame beast, the large crowd thronging BLF's Lawn Bagh turned the venue into an arena, speaking over the panelists and the moderators, heckling and booing, and cheering and clapping loudly as their opinions were echoed on stage.

The debate itself revolved around questions that are voiced almost every day on social media. Is Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi the poster boy of Hindutva? Is the country moving away from being a socialist democratic republic and heading towards creating a Hindutva government? Which was worse — 1984 or 2002? Has the fake encounter case involving Ishrat Jahan and others been played up as a ploy to detract from the Gujarat government?

The panel, which consisted of Madhu Kishwar, editor of *Manushi*; Kingshuk Nag, resident editor, TOI-Hyderabad; journalist Sidharth Bhatia, and Hartosh Singh Bal, an editor with Open magazine, was moderated by political analyst Veeraraghav TM, and was mandated to cover the question "Is economic development a garb for hard-right politics? The Gujarat model."

One can say that with a topic like that, the debate could hardly have gone any other way than it did, but several interesting points were raised by the panelists.

"India wants change, that much is certain. And whoever portrays himself as the change gets to the limelight. A few years ago, it was Anna Hazare,

but he was not adequate. People are disturbed by the current scenario, and now that Modi has succeeded in representing himself as the change, people are ready to embrace him," said Kingshuk Nag. "But it must be remembered that Modi is Hindutva's poster boy, and his agenda is to set up Hindu Rashtra in India."

Disagreeing with this, Kishwar stated that during Modi's rule, Gujarat has been largely riot-free and has seen "unprecedented development" and that Modi has paid much-needed attention to the "social sector, agriculture, small scale industries and the corporate sector". She said Muslims in Gujarat were in favour of Modi, and that he represented, in fact, "a depolarization of political thought".

Refuting this, Hartosh Singh Bal pointed out that while urban poverty on the whole is lower than the national average in Gujarat, poverty among urban Muslims in Gujarat is higher than the average across India. "Muslims vote for the BJP for much the same reasons that Sikhs vote for the Congress, although they detest it. Because of lack of choice," he added.

Sticking to the stated agenda of the debate, Bhatia pointed out that "right-wing politics and performance are always linked". "These messages of development are going out to a particular section of society that operate around a certain sphere who consume media voraciously, who form about 10% to 15% of society. They are socially conservative and they are in this constant echo chamber of 'development'. They think they have found their messiah."

This section had a large representation on the grounds of Velankani Park — but contrary to what might have been expected, the cheers and boos were reserved almost equally for both sides of the most intense debate of the day.

## Amitabh chaalisa in Kolkata

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bestselling author Ashwin Sanghi has created a niche for himself riding on Indian history and myth to craft fast-paced contemporary thrillers. His books, such as *Chanakya's Chant* or *The Krishna Key*, often pick up from where little known and controversial factoids surrounding mythological figures leave off, and have proved to be a hit with audiences hungry for Dan Brown-style thrillers that are rooted in Indian mythology.

A self-confessed conspiracy theorist, Sanghi freely admits that story and plotting are of paramount interest to him. "I grew up reading books where the pages sort of turned themselves. I love sensational news channels, where you have strange and bizarre news stories about alien abductions and the like," says Sanghi.

That kind of trippy stuff

aside, research is important to Sanghi, and he says the overlap between history and mythology has always been the zone where his stories are located. "Did Krishna really exist? Did he live as a mortal man? Those kind of questions really excite me... the zone between history and myth and how I can connect it to contemporary patterns," he says, rounding off by telling one of those off-beat stories he likes. "I was in Kolkata for a book launch, and I went to this really unique temple. It was a temple dedicated to Amitabh Bachchan. There was an idol, aarti and garlanding. A priest came in twice a day to perform puja and read from an Amitabh *Chaalisa*. This really happens," says Sanghi. "Now, say 200 years later, people come across this *Chaalisa*. Will they or won't they believe that Amitabh Bachchan was a god? I like to think of our myths like that."

## Indians just love spectacles

Rohith B R | TNN

Do we really love cricket? The answer is "No", said Boria Majumdar, sports commentator. "We Indians love spectacles more than cricket. Otherwise, despite the IPL fixing saga, there wouldn't have been 70,000 people watching the IPL final in the stadiums — and millions in front of the TV."

When Boria made this statement, there was a good round of applause from the packed audience. He was moderating a discussion, "Is Corruption a Way of Life in Indian Sport?" Debating the issue at the Bangalore Literature Festival on Saturday were Vikas Singh (TOI-Delhi resident editor), Hakimuddin Habibulla (Oly swimmer) and Reeth Abraham (Arjuna awardee).

All panelists agreed that sportspersons should come together and fight for good governance in sports; great players should speak out



**IT'S SHOWTIME:** Millions of Indians tuned in for the heady mix of sport and spectacle that the IPL promised

when bad things were happening around. Else, sports had a lot to lose.

Vikas said media coverage on corruption-related issues is largely driven by public interest. "Public should participate through social media and other forums to keep the discussions (alive) on bad things in sports. We should not let

these things fade away as time passes on. There's also need for 'good' corporates to chip in to clean the system," he said.

Reeth said it hurts her that many athletes have to go in second-class transportation to big events and have to contend with last-minute reservations. "I don't want my child to suffer this.

People with passion have to take over sports. In the last few years of struggle, we have learnt that it is possible for the athletic community to take on people like Suresh Kalmadi and others," she said.

Hakim said corruption is never one-sided and there have been compromises done by athletes as well. "The complex web of the corporate-political world has systematically employed methods to divide and rule the athletic community. We should empower the public with the right to information with the help of technology, about the sporting world," he said. Even as the panelists were battling, the audience was keen to bowl too. A member of the audience asked the panel what a cricket fan should do when bad things were happening all around. Reeth had a piece of advice for the fan: "Stop watching cricket for some time. Take a break," she retorted.

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### CORRIGENDUM

**National Overseas Scholarship for  
Minority Students 2013-14**  
In the Notification dated : 28.09.2013 the last date for submission of National Overseas Scholarship applications was given as 25.09.2013. This date is corrected as 25.10.2013.  
Sd/- Director, Directorate of Minorities, Bangalore

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### CORRIGENDUM

Invitation of Financial Bids, which were to be opened on 27.09.2013 for sale of 2,00,000 MT wheat to empanelled parties under OMSS (D) has been deferred to 03.10.2013 at 14.00 hrs and the floor price has been revised to Rs. 1576.00 per quintal (taxes extra). Other terms & conditions will remain same.

GENERAL MANAGER (R)