

## Ramachandra Guha

### Sporting Encounters



Ramachandra Guha, born in 1958 in Dehra Dun in Northern India. Studied economics and cricket in Delhi (1974-79) and sociology and Marxism in Calcutta (1980-85). Academic appointments: Yale University (1986-87); Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore (1987-88); Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi (1988-91); Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (1991-94). Books: *The Unquiet Woods* (Oxford University Press, 1989), *Wickets in the East* (Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Spin and Other Turns* (Penguin India, 1994); and, with Madhav Gadgil, *This Fissured Land* (University of California Press, 1992) and *Ecology and Equity* (Routledge, 1995). — Address: 22 A Brunton Road, Bangalore 560025, India.

In the year preceding my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had decided to quit academics to become an independent writer. Berlin marked the precise turning-point in my career; for I arrived in the city a tenured radical, but left a freelance liberal. The Kolleg was, so to speak, the waiting room in the junction where I changed trains; a splendid waiting room, indeed.

First, the conversations. Some of these were around the dining table, spurred by the fine food and wine; others, no less memorable, took place in more mundane places. Somehow, the ones I remember best were about heroes I shared with other Fellows. With Hans Medick, by the lake, I on my way home and he on his way to work, discussing the heritage of our friend and teacher, E. P. Thompson; with Chris Gregory, in the corridor, exchanging notes on the radical historian Ranajit Guha, founder of the Subaltern Studies School; and with Karl Meyer, in the 119 bus, assessing the relative merits of books on George Orwell by Raymond Williams and George Woodcock.

Second, the facilities. The warmth of the Kolleg staff, their cheerfulness and readiness to help, are truly exceptional; to my knowledge, unmatched by any other institution of its kind. Scholars from Western Europe or the United States might take the infrastructure of the Kolleg for granted (being accustomed to the same in their home universities); but for this Indian they were no less consequential. Indeed, the access to

a fax machine, computer and printer, and the extraordinarily resourceful library staff, helped me put together a book I had no idea of beginning (let alone completing) when I came to Berlin. Entitled *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, this book is in collaboration with Professor Juan Martinez Alier of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The book will contain a dozen essays on environmental ideas and movements, unified by a shared analytical approach ("political ecology") but diverse in their location and range of illustrative example. The essays I wrote deal with South Asia and North America, those by Juan with Europe and Latin America; only Africa, of the major continents, is outside our purview. That the project got off the ground at all is owed solely to the facilities of the Kolleg. When Juan came up with the idea, he was in Barcelona and I in New Delhi; by the time I started working on it, I had moved to Berlin and he to Quito. Through the fax and the computer we were able to exchange drafts of essays, revise them and then go about the necessary business of writing proposals and contacting publishers. The book shall be published by Earthscan in 1996; in a South Asian edition by the Oxford University Press, and we hope in German and Spanish translations thereafter.

My main project at the Kolleg, however, was a biography of Verrier Elwin (1902-64), the anthropologist and spokesman for India's tribal people. Elwin was an Oxford-educated missionary who joined Gandhi, then left him to work among tribals. He was an ethnographer, folklorist, novelist, and above all propagandist for his tribals (among whom he lived and in time twice married). Elwin was a colourful and controversial character whose life and work can illuminate contemporary debates on "cultural encounters". I had written an early, first draft before I came, and while at the Kolleg made fair progress in turning it into a manuscript more worthy of publication. In this I was helped by Chris Gregory (himself an ethnographer of Indian tribals), by Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac, and especially by Nicholas Boyle, who taught me a great deal about the biographer's craft.

When the time came for me to plan my *Dienstags-Colloquium* (scheduled for May) I was torn between speaking on Elwin or on ecology. Then one evening in March, I met Hans Medick by the telephone booth on the corner of Erdener Straße. I told him of my predicament. "Why don't you dump both and speak on cricket instead", urged our micro-historian; "you can thus illuminate the centres of Indian history *from the edge*". Spring was in the air, and I knew that at least two German sociologists (Norbert Elias being the other one) had expressed in print their fascination for this most English of games. But till that conversation, I had kept my work (social history) and my passion (cricket writing) in

strictly separate compartments. With Hans Medick's encouragement I began bringing them together, speaking at my colloquium on the politics of cricket in colonial India. The talk called forth a laconic grunt of approval from our Syrian philosopher and simultaneous chuckles from our Czech architect and our Polish constitutionalist (larger-than-life both); a reception that has encouraged me to plan a book on the subject.

My *practical* experience with sport at the Kolleg started early and disastrously, when the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar invited me to a game of ping-pong. He gave me twenty years in age, and an average of five points per game. Convinced this was a fluke, I challenged him again, and again, with marginally better results (eight or ten points to his twenty one). Convinced I would end on Dr. Kakar's couch, I consulted Wolf Lepenies. He consoled me with these words: "Fifteen years ago, when Sudhir and I were Fellows at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, we played tennis every day. The only time I beat him was when he was jet-lagged, having just come back from Paris." Forewarned is forearmed. Sudhir went home to Delhi over Christmas; on his return, I was waiting at Tegel. Refusing his offer of a taxi, I dragged him through busses 109 and 119 to the table in the basement of the Kolleg. The story ended happily (as these ones always do); I won easily, and honour was restored. Whoever thought the Rector of the Wissenschaftskolleg had academic duties alone?