

BOOK REVIEW

**Democrats and Dissenters (2017) by Ramachandra Guha,
Penguin Random House, India, pp 345**

Upholding democracy, in its truest sense, is challenging, especially in a third-world country like India, which is a land of differences and disparity. Since independence, the leaders have tried to maintain plurality within India's political structure. The efforts have in recent years been eroded to make way for a country that is governed by religious chauvinists. The collection of sixteen essays in Guha's book is an exploration of democracy in the current socio-political scenario of the country. The book is divided into two parts - Part 1, titled "Politics and Society", traces the path of the decline of the Indian National Congress, freedom of expression, and the scope of conserving plurality within the democratic structure of the country. The essays are highly anecdotal about his experiences gathered in different parts of India and the neighboring South Asian states. Part 2 of the book - "Ideologies and Intellectuals", takes a more reflective and critical turn, where he criticizes and compares intellectuals like - Eric Hobsbawm, André Bételle, and Amartya Sen.

Democrats and Dissenters starts with Guha's disappointment with the current state of the Congress party in India. Why should one expect more from Congress than any other political party in India? His frustration stems from the party's historical significance in the freedom struggle of India, the leaders whose visions sustained a democratic structure in post-independent India's chaotic diversity. Guha writes -

This was the party that led the movement for freedom, the party that united India and brought people of different religions and languages into a single political project. Its finest leaders were not confined by national boundaries, they had a universalist vision. And they were men and women of high personal integrity.¹

He takes the then-Congress Party's vision and achievements to a global stage and compares them to that of Britain's Liberal Party, Germany's Social Democratic

¹ Guha, Ramachandra, *Democrats and Dissenters*, Penguin Random House, 2016, Haryana, pp. 3-4.

Party, and the Democratic Party in the United States. Guha highly focuses on the role of Gandhi in the Indian National Congress's endeavors towards building the party as a more inclusive organization and breaking the much-criticized language hierarchy by operating in vernaculars. The party formed provincial committees that operated in regional languages such as - Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Oriya, and so on. It is he who brought the national independence movement to the grassroots level, his dress and lifestyle gave an impetus to his efforts. Even though Gandhi's role in the Indian freedom movement is undeniable, his ideologies regarding issues of women and the Dalits remain questionable, which Guha ignores in his essays. While mentioning the many forgotten leaders of the Congress party, Guha especially mentions Kumaraswamy Kamaraj. A party that has been driven by the very ideology of Rabindranath Tagore - the spirit of the west, and nation of the west, the former being the promotion of freedom, equality, and scientific advancement by the West, and the latter is the West's role as an oppressor, saw a massive decline in upholding its lineage. Guha alludes to Indira Gandhi's role in this decline when she was elected as the Prime Minister. He throws light on Indira Gandhi's choice of the cadre of advisors belonging predominantly to the community of Kashmiri Pandits, which can no way be overlooked as an unintentional coincidence. Under her, the Congress was once again divided into two factions, and the faction led by her was acknowledged as the real Congress party. However, with the declaration of Emergency of 1975, Indira Gandhi's actions those were gradually leading to the demolition of the democratic structure within the Congress, and subsequently, the state reached its peak. With Indira Gandhi's ascend to the throne, and Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and (now) Rahul Gandhi, the party has become a family organization and shifted from a decentralized to a centralized power set-up. The first essay "The Long Life and Lingering Death of the Indian National Congress" extensively focuses on the decline of leadership over the years, one of the reasons being the omission of other leaders apart from the ones belonging to the Nehru family. The political party is still highly dependent on the Nehru-Gandhis. Ramchandra Guha unapologetically and, needless to mention, justly attacks the leadership qualities of Rahul Gandhi.

"We live in a deeply divided and intensely politicised society. It is hard, if not impossible, for writers to escape into an imaginary world of their own. They... find themselves compelled to engage in political and social debates. But? they

must never ally themselves with a political party, still less a particular politician. I am also uncomfortable with rendering history or politics or public affairs a zero-sum game, whereby one is mandated to choose one party on a particular dispute. In a contest of greater and lesser evils, there is no need to take sides"²

Guha analyses the eight threats to freedom of speech in India, and one of them is the inclination or identification of artists or writers to a single political party, or even in some cases a politician. During the reign of every political party, writers or artists have been banned, hence, giving a huge blow to the freedom of expression. The other threats mentioned by him are -

- Retention of archaic colonial laws
- The partial judiciary which harasses, and therefore, curtails the freedom of artists and writers
- The rise of identity politics
- The role of the police force in harassing artists, writers, comedians, or anyone criticizing the existing government
- “Pusillaminy” and “mendacity” of the politicians³
- Dependency of media on government expression
- Dependency of media on commercial advertisements

The essays are neatly interlinked with one another bound by the thread of democracy. In one of the essays Guha delves into the famous debate on democracy between Nehru and Jayprakash Narayan. The debate is a mention worthy phenomenon in the history of Indian political discourse, as well as in this academic piece discussing Guha’s book bears the same reasons. The debate is not a mere rebuttal between two political leaders with different views, but a passionate, well-read, and well-understood dialogue on democracy. Such dialogues, absent from today’s politics, are politically productive. The two different interpretations and concerns about democracy remain relevant even in

² Guha, Ramachandra, *Democrats and Dissenters*, Penguin Random House, 2016, Haryana, pp 260-61.

³ The two adjectives have been used by Guha in his essay while discussing the role of politicians in the threat to freedom of expression

the contemporary political scenario. "... such debates do not take place any more, at least not among full-time politicians. No politician now alive can think or write or speak in an original or even interesting fashion about the direction Indian society and politics is or should be taking. The discussion of what Narayan, in his letter to Nehru, had called 'dispassionate political principles' has now been left to the scholars."⁴ he writes.

Guha's chapter on Adivasis is a brilliant insight into the social, economic, and political negligence faced by the tribal groups in India. They still remain the "unacknowledged victims of seven decades of democratic development", as Guha puts it. He draws a comparison between the tribal communities and the Dalits in the domain of politics, where tribals do not get any representation in the decision-making process, securing their position in the lowest strata of society. Dalits, and religious minority groups, Muslims, have had some representation, if not fair, in the administrative system. These communities are muted and exploited incessantly without any intervention. Where lies their democratic privilege then? His exposition of the condition of the Adivasis makes us question the success of India's democracy, and how the system lacks inclusivity. The unacknowledged position also comes from distorted or no representation of these communities in mainstream media. They continue to remain the "other", the subaltern in this hierarchy. In his personal anecdote, Guha refers to China's minority community and his exploration of Tulon (communal buildings in the village) as an "element of subaltern counter-narrative".

In the second part of the book, Guha criticizes Amartya Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* for anachronistically seeing secularism and pluralist tolerance in India's ancient history and characters such as Ashoka and Akbar in one of the book's noteworthy essays. He warns of the hazards of such a historicist appeal, which might wind up supporting claims by the Hindu Right to 'traditions' that are not always progressive. Guha would much rather root his desire for secular tolerance in India's Constitution and the nationalist movement's prominent personalities such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Azad. Critics are of the opinion that "He could well have included Sen's combative yet unsatisfactory response, which came a year later if only to share a great exchange in which Guha clearly comes out on top.

⁴ Guha, Ramachandra, *Democrats and Dissenters*, Penguin Random House, 2016, Haryana.

Someday, one hopes, he expands on his differences with Sen, much as the latter did with Rawls, in his book, ‘The Idea of Justice.’”⁵

There are two complementary arguments put forth by Guha which can be read in reference to his criticism of Amartya Sen. According to Guha, Dharma Kumar's research established that contrary to popular belief the position of the Mughals were not as celebratory as they were believed to be, taxing their subjects far more harshly than the British ever did. His view on Andre Beteille begins with an intriguing parallel to Amartya Sen. But Guha's position on André Beteille has been criticized and contested. Sankaran Krishna, while exploring his essay on André Beteille, writes, “ Guha's not even raising the question of how Beteille's location within a Brahmin household might have skewed his ethnographic findings about Thanjavur village society is striking. It is reminiscent of the sort of myopia displayed by M.N. Srinivas (another of Guha's heroes), who begrudgingly acknowledged that his own status as a Brahmin might have influenced his understanding of caste society in southern India or his view on reservations or his much-vaunted theory of Sanskritisation only when the British anthropologist Edmund Leach called him out on it. As always, caste privilege is rarely acknowledged or explicitly spoken of: it constitutes the invisible normal of our middle-class habitus.”

Guha's concluding chapter mourns the lack of a conservative intellectual heritage in contemporary India, blaming it mostly on the right wing's lack of intellectual prowess. His contempt for Hindu fundamentalism and their scholarly incapacity has been mentioned in the previous essays as well, on multiple occasions.

At a time when democracy in our country has become like “two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner”⁶, Guha's book helps answer a number of unanswered questions. Guha's fluid, unadorned, and reflective writing style makes the book intellectually affordable to the mass. It serves as a brilliant

⁵ “A wistful look at India's intellectuals”, The Hindu Business Line, 12 Aug 2023, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/books/a-wistful-look-at-indias-intellectuals/article9285749.ece>

This is cited from a review written by Uday Balakrishnan of Ramachandra Guha's book *Democrats and Dissenters*.

⁶ Bovard, James. *Lost Rights: The destruction of American Liberty*

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expository of the democratic structure of India, what should have been, and how can the situation be improved. He studies the Indian democracy placing it in the wider and global sphere, drawing comparisons with its neighboring South Asian nations.

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