

Friday, Sep 10, 2021

Books / Roll Call Of The Luminaries

# Roll Call Of The Luminaries



Every graduate course prescribes a book of essays. This book deserves to be there.



M.S. Gill +  
29 December 2003

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I once chanced upon Churchill's Great Contemporaries. I read the essays again and again, always with profit and pleasure. Churchill's prose and his perceptive observation of the great and famous, whom he saw at close range, surprised and educated me anew at each reading. I have read Guha's book with equal fascination. His compact, yet loaded essays on a variety of people who have had an impact on the subcontinent kept me riveted. The obvious political figures—Nehru, Rajagopalachari and Vajpayee—have a surprising companion, B.P. Koirala. Nirad Babu figures in a fun essay on the coconut men of Bengal. Then there are the shy, modest Indians, the salt of the land, the counterpoise to the political figures, but no less valuable, Chandi Prasad Batt, Anil Aggarwal, Dharma Kumar, Shivaram Karanth and Sujit Mukerjee. Guha, of course, has to slip in something on cricket. After reading his essay on C.L.R. James I simply have to read Beyond a Boundary.

Written in easy, limpid prose, each essay is the result of intense research and labour, all lightly moulded into beautifully balanced figures. Being Dharma Kumar's nephew thrice over, he is of course a liberal, and therefore his judgements are finely balanced and shot through with humaneness. Rajagopalachari was of course right on the Partition, the atom bomb and many other issues. Guha is generous to Nehru, in apportioning blame for the coolness between them, and the loss to the country thereof. I, for one, never understood why Rajagopalachari was denied the Presidency. Even today, the larger share of political goodies always falls in the North's plate. In the case of Bengal, the decline was not only due to the shift of the national capital to Delhi, but also the marginalising of C.R. Das by the Mahatma and friends. In fact, Subhas Bose did not unwisely leave the Congress. He was seen off by the same group. The Mahatma was, after all, a finely-tuned political man. On the midnight celebrations of 50 years of Independence, sitting in the Central Hall, what struck me as the turn of the wheel of history was the fact

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when we heard, for the first time, the emphatic voice of Subhas.

The essay on Koirala is an education. To me, Koirala is one man who took as intimate and effective a part in our freedom struggle as in his own. I now understand the deep ties between the senior leaders of the two countries, and yet we have had cool relations. Guha narrates the story of Krishna Menon casually asking the Nepalese premier to go with him to the New York airport to receive Nehru. More often than not, we have been an insensitive, arrogant neighbour. I went to Nepal when I was CEC, and I met everyone from the late king downwards. They simply want us to sit as two equals at the table.

The gentle essay on C.P. Batt, the Chipko man, should be essential reading for every Indian. There was not just one Gandhi in India. There have been many, and more come up every day. Mother Teresa, yes, but has anyone cared to look at the work of Bhagat Puran Singh? How many more there must be across the country. Dharma Kumar comes across as one of a tapestry of the finest Indians who sustain this land. A dedicated teacher, generous to students with her time, energy and resources, Isaiah Berlin's liberal in the finest sense, always fighting for worthy and unpopular causes. These are the true heroes. When their number diminishes, this will be an arid land.

Every graduate course prescribes a book of essays. This book deserves to be there, both for its easy, elegant style, as for its informed, balanced writing, laced with gentle humour, on the great and good of our land.

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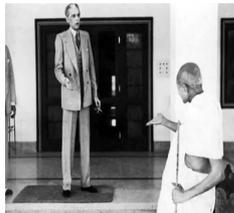


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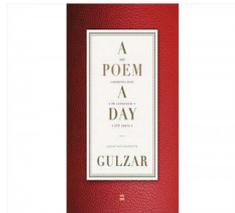
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party on BJP members and supporters as their key poll issue, a senior leader of the BJP's state unit said. Tibrewal had contested the March-April 2021 assembly general election from Entally constituency in Kolkata but lost by a massive margin of 58,257 votes.

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