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PRESS RELEASE

FESTIVAL OF LETTERS 2017

Samvatsar Lecture

By Ramachandra Guha

On The Craft of Historical Biography

February 23, 2017

“Why do historians stay away from biographies?” - Ramchandra Guha

Sahitya Akademi’s annual Samvatsar Lecture for the year 2017 was delivered by Dr Ramachandra Guha, eminent scholar and historian at the Rabindra Bhavan Lawns on the evening of February 23, 2017. Samvatsar Lecture is an annual lecture delivered by a distinguished writer and a creative thinker who has a thorough understanding of Indian literature. These lectures may reflect a deep concern for values and should open up new vistas of thinking regarding a literary movement, a current literary trend, some original thinking about a great writer or a great classic or a new path in literary criticism or literary creation.

Dr K. Sreenivasarao, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, welcomed the guest speaker and introduced him to audience. Dr Ramachandra Guha spoke about why Indians, especially Indian historians shy away from writing a historical biography and also about the art of writing a biography.

Brief excerpts from his lecture: “Historical Biography is that part of history more allied to literature than any other parts of history. History oscillates between social sciences and literature. Why do historians stay away from biographies? First is the burden of religious inheritance. Religions such as Hinduism are inimical to writing a biography due to its inherent belief system based on karma and rebirth. The second reason is scholarly inheritance, especially Marxism since Marxism diminishes the importance of the individual. The third reason is history’s tilt towards social sciences though history began as a branch of literature. The fourth reason is Indians’ indifference to record keeping. The archives in the country, central and state, are in complete disarray. The fifth reason why Indians are diffident on writing biographies is the fear of giving offense to eminent individual. The sixth reason is biography is a challenging literary form. The seventh reason is writing of biography requires writers and scholars to suppress their own egos and write about another writer with equally a big ego. These are the reasons why historical biography never took off in a big way in India. The following are four central tenets of writing a biography: a) the secondary characters are critical to the story b) the biographer must look for sources emanating from places other than the central character c) the biographer should not anticipate and d) the biographer should not be deterred even if there exists already a comprehensive biography.”

Dr Guha described how the Verrier Elwin’s life and works transformed him and his critical outlook. He illustrated the challenges of writing a biography through his attempts to write a biography of Verrier Elwin. He observed that while historical biography is an underdeveloped field and challenging, young scholars should tell their stories since historical biography in India is on the rise and in the coming years we are likely to see more number of historical biographies. A brief interactive session took place after the lecture and Dr K. Sreenivasarao thanked Dr Ramachandra Guha for accepting Akademi’s invitation and delivering a fabulous lecture.

On the morning of 23 February 2017, a programme devoted to young writers of India, Yuva Sahiti was inaugurated by distinguished Tamil writer Sri B. Jeyamohan.

Sd/-

(K. Sreenivasarao)
Secretary