

# Real Historians series



*"I think we are discovering on a daily basis in 2022 why history matters in the world! We can only really come to terms with the present if we have a richer and fuller understanding of the past. The history that we are taught often has glaring omissions and silences. How can little known or 'forgotten' narratives change our knowledge of both the past and the present? That is a critical question for me."*

- Dr Diya Gupta



**Dr Diya Gupta**, Past and Present Postdoctoral Fellow: Race, Ethnicity and Equality in History, The Royal Historical Society and the Institute of Historical Research

## What was your education?

I am a student of literature who came into history by accident! I grew up in India, and received a BA and MA in English Literature from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, before coming to the University of Cambridge to read for a Second BA in English Studies and an MPhil in Criticism and Culture. I then took a rather long break from academia, for about seven years, and did other things. I worked in academic publishing, was a freelance journalist and writer, wrote proposals for philanthropic donors, and volunteered as an English teacher 3,700 metres high in the Indian Himalayas, in Spiti Valley. In 2015, I started my PhD on a literary and cultural history of India in the Second World War at King's College London, which I completed in 2019.

## What is your occupation?

From October 2020 onwards, I have been Past and Present Postdoctoral Fellow: Race, Ethnicity and Equality in History at the Royal Historical Society and the Institute of Historical Research in London. This means that I get to do my own research, which involves a lot of writing for my book manuscript at the moment! I also run a popular blog series at the Royal Historical Society called 'Writing Race', and work with other historians on ways of making history more accessible, diverse and inclusive.

## What do you love about history?

For me, my love for history is combined with my love for language and literature. I am fascinated by how people made sense of the world, and the times they were living in, through their writing. I am also drawn to photographs and paintings from the past, and how we might understand them in relation to the written word.



## **Why does history matter in the world?**

I think we are discovering on a daily basis in 2022 why history matters in the world! We can only really come to terms with the present if we have a richer and fuller understanding of the past. The history that we are taught often has glaring omissions and silences. How can little known or ‘forgotten’ narratives change our knowledge of both the past and the present? That is a critical question for me.

## **What piece of work are you most proud of and why?**

In 2019, along with a colleague at King’s College London, I designed and delivered a series of workshops called ‘Teaching Empire and War’ for British schoolchildren between the ages of 15 and 18. Here, we focused on the lives of people of colour, both men and women, during the First and Second World Wars, and the memory of these wars. This is the best teaching experience I have ever had! The students were so engaged and receptive in all the workshops. The resources we used in class now live here: <https://teachingempireandwar.wordpress.com>. Please do take a look!

## **What do you think is most important for students to learn about in class today?**

I’m a big believer in students starting to nurture their curiosity and developing their critical thinking skills from a young age. History is not just about facts and figures, or the reign of kings and queens – although these can be interesting too. It is also very much about the life and times of ordinary people, like you and me. So little of the past actually makes it into our textbooks! It would be great if students started thinking as they studied their prescribed texts – whose history are we talking about? What might be missing or excluded from here? How can I find out more?

## **Do you think there are any individuals or periods in time that you think should be studied or given more time to?**

Yes, absolutely! I think that the everyday histories of and perspectives on race, migration and empire should be much more integrated into what we teach and study. Focusing on these topics in school does not only make the subject meaningful and relevant to students of colour but broadens the definition of British history itself. It is for all of us to understand better the complexities of the world we inhabit. I also think we should be highlighting the voices of those who have been marginalised in history, as much as we can, and not just speaking on their behalf.



## What would you say to students thinking about taking their history studies further?

I would say – what a great idea! Taking your history studies further deserves serious consideration. There are some wonderful history undergraduate programmes out there that you can look into, along with financial support that you can access. And there are other, more hands-on ways of developing your skills too. Could you participate in a local or community history project, for example? Take a look at the Historical Association's website for more information: <https://www.history.org.uk/student>.

## If you could go back in time, where would you take yourself and why?

Good question! For me, this would be India in the early 1940s, during the Second World War, which is what I'm currently writing about. If I were in India at that point in time, I would see soldiers from Britain, along with West Africans and East Africans, and Indian soldiers too temporarily living in cities like Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the east as they waited to be sent to the Burma front. I would see how they interacted with local people, and what new relationships were being forged. I would also witness Indian anti-colonialists and nationalists out on the streets, urging the British to quit India. The early 1940s was a troubled and tumultuous time for India, but I would find being a first-hand witness to it rather exciting.

## Which historical site in the UK is your favourite and why?

This might seem completely different to all my other answers, but I actually really enjoy visiting stone circles in the UK. They are usually located in such beautiful places, and I like thinking that I'm looking at a view similar to the one that those who built these stone circles would

Mystic Stonehenge in England, Europe. (c) Shutterstock / TeamDAF



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have looked at too, thousands of years ago. It feels as though I am seeing through their eyes. Many stone circles had a funerary purpose, and to me, that highlights how people in the past were trying to grapple with the same issues we are today – life and death, love and loss.

I also think about the fact that the stones have endured while the people have not. It makes me consider what I might want to leave behind in the world for others to remember me by.

**Find out more about the Royal Historical Society:**  
<https://royalhistsoc.org>

**Find out more about Institute of Historical Research:**  
<https://www.history.ac.uk>

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