

## Chapter III

### Non Fiction

When we talk of spatio-temporality in literature travelogue, memoirs, journalistic fiction come to the forefront. And it is no coincidence that Amitav Ghosh the sociologist cum anthropologist be interested in travel writing. As a matter of fact all his six novels are in a sense ‘travel’ oriented as he crosses time and space borders in his search for human signification beyond facts, dates, events and places. So is it *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1993). It is indeed an account of Ghosh’s visit to Cambodia in January 1993, just before the first free political elections of the post Pol pot era. Despite the fact that it was an official journey (under the aegis of the United Nations) to observe and narrate in detail the delicate transitional process from anarchism and destruction to the normalization of politics and society, it became much more than that. As Anna Nadoti in her afterword to the first Italian edition of the book pointed out that Ghosh was more interested in understanding how:

young people from the third world, idealist and democratic, had been dazzled by development and progress models that are exactly the opposite of those desirable for their own countries, being products of another cultural and technological universe, whose functioning, transposed elsewhere, far from being an instrument of development and progress, reveals itself [...] as a dream inspired by

someone else's dream, that should be broken more than cultivated  
(68)

What emerged from this encounter with a 'waste land' was an impassioned comment with one who could relate to history in a very personal way. This strand was quickly deciphered by Meenakshi Mukherjee who wrote in her review (2007):

In that provocative essay in *The New Yorker* last year, Salman Rushdie has said, 'Literature has little or nothing to do with a writer's home address'. He might see Ghosh's new book as a vindication of his claim, but to me Amitav Ghosh's home address (not the current American one, but the permanent one in India) anchors his perspective of looking at the world. What drives the Karennis to go on with their hopeless fight for a homeland? Echoes of this question resonate in different regions of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. One of the characters in *The Shadow Lines* had wondered: 'Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every piece a new name? What would it change?' In this book the author reflects in his own voice: 'All boundaries are artificial: there is no such thing as a *natural* nation, which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact.' Ghosh' original readers in *Granta*, *The Observer Magazine* and *The New Yorker* (where the essays first appeared) may not have noticed, but for the Indian reader, the author's family connections in Burma, the chance meeting at the edge of a Cambodian minefield with a Bangladeshi sergeant who had an ancestral district with Ghosh, and the encounter with a

guerrilla fighter originally called Mahinder Singh, in the forests of eastern Burma, all provide points of intersection with our history.

(Web)

Thus what emerges is a polyphonic text that simultaneously revives voices submerged in the debris of time, lost in amnesia which he excavates through this revolutionary event in a specific geographic space.

Between the two longer pieces on Cambodia and Burma, *Stories in Stone* completes Ghosh's fresco of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian society, focusing on the epiphanic value of the ancient and magnificent temple of Angkor Wat. This shorter piece, according to Prof. Mukherjee,

illustrates the kind of paradox that Ghosh can capture so succinctly— how the great twelfth-century temple, instead of Cambodia's medieval history 'becomes a symbol of the modernizing nation-state'—an icon stamped on civil and military uniforms, factory produced commodities like beer, a design on the national flag, a logo for banks and airlines. When the French 'discovered' Angkor Wat it was a functioning religious shrine, but the archaeologist restoring the temple insisted on 'separating the monument as far as possible from the untidy uses of its present day inhabitants'. The stone needed to be sanitised from local contact to be truly monumental. (Web.)

*Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* is an imaginative rendering of the complex responses of a sensitive writer. It is a pure travelogue. It presents the real picture of two South Asian countries Cambodia and Burma in their post-colonial period. It apparently defies conventional literary classification of a

travelogue. It is divided into three chapters— chapter one titled ‘Dancing in Cambodia’, chapter two titled ‘Stories in Stones’ and chapter three titled ‘At Large in Burma’. The first impression the book gives is rather misleading. It seems Ghosh is describing his travels through the two countries after they achieved independence from the colonial rulers. But when one comes to know the fact the writer’s responses make an interesting reading.

The travelogue *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* reveals the author’s perceptions about the socio-political situations in both Cambodia and Burma (Myanmar), the two countries which practised the politics of extreme isolation in the recent past. Ghosh seldom misses the historical perspective in his writings and this is also in evidence in the travelogue. He visited Cambodia in 1993. It was now a land torn apart by the despotic Pol Pot of the village where he was born. He came to know of Pol Pot’s background, the impact of his brutal regime and the significance of dance in Cambodia which was now reduced to destitution. He appreciated the tenacity with which the people held on to one of the principal elements of their culture. But even after throwing off the yokes of slavery these countries were confronted with the problems of political instability, ethnic issues, regional problems and economic crisis. D.K. Pabby (1999) remarks:

In sooth these countries are still grappling with the problematic of evolution of their distinct national identities, and the writer appears to hold a mirror to the other nation-states in the region and the continent. (275)

Ghosh visited Burma twice in 1995. In *At Large in Burma* he brings alive the contemporary events of what is now known as Myanmar. He recounts the events from the death of the great leader Aung San in 1947 to his daughter’s efforts

for the restoration of democracy there. He interviewed the Nobel Peace Laureate and travelled to the Jungle camps of the Karenni resurgent, depicting a rare word picture of their life in an eminently readable account. Shubha Tiwari (2008) says:

Amitav Ghosh has tried to comprehend Cambodia and Burma and their respective recent pasts of extreme isolation. Both the countries have been colonized earlier; both had traumatic dictatorial regimes. And both countries practised politics of complete isolation or iron curtain in recent past. (67-68)

The novel gives impetus to decolonization in its own way. It seeks to establish that the colonizer or the dictator cannot kill a people. In spite of struggles and bloodshed, civilization and culture had survived. It states that a nation lives in art and culture, not in governments. On the one hand it deals with King Sisobath's regime and culture in Cambodia, on the other it throws light on the importance of the temple of Angkorwat. It also registers the tyrannical tactics adopted by Pol Pot (Saloth Sar) who belonged to Khmer tribe living in the hilly area of remote Komp Thong Province in north-eastern Cambodia. When Pol Pot came to power in 1975, he got two million people butchered to impose his own political vision on people. Ghosh hints at the problems that arose out of France's colonization of Cambodia. On the whole we come across the episodes - King Sisobath's journey to France, the colonizer's country, glory of the temple of Angkorwat, Pol Pot's rise to Power, his cruelties imposed on people, his decline but best of all - the survival of the art of music and dance through political upheavals.

It is worth noticing that Cambodia made international headlines in April, 1998 after the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot had died of heart attack at the age of 72. He grew up in a well-to-do family of farmers. He had been a student of radio

electronics in Paris. His political career began in 1950. He joined the underground Communist Party and became its secretary general in 1962. After ascending the throne in 1975, he introduced several changes in the country. He set about transforming the country into his vision of an agrarian Utopia. He ordered emptying the cities, abolishing private property and religion and, setting up rural collectives. He attempted to impose ruthlessly his vision of a perfect society. In the execution of his plans, two million Cambodians lost their lives. His famous statements were: the Revolution does not recognize families. During his regime he bestowed no favours on the members of his family, not even his elder brother, Chea Samy's husband. Bill Clinton, the then President of the U.S.A. spoke over this dictator's death: "...a time to remember his murderous reign of terror and to pursue justice against other Khmer Rough leaders who share the guilt." (*The Hindustan Times*, 18 April 1998, 14) There are grounds to believe those weeks before Pol Pot's death, the U.S.A. had sought Chinese help to put Pol Pot on trial. It was reported in *The Hindu*, (April 12, 1998, p.6.).

The uproar on the death of the deposed tyrant became an international issue leading to a number of pertinent queries about his motives, politics and social engineering. The factors which were responsible for the execution of Pol Pot's policies of isolation have been highlighted in this book which may be treated as an important political document. Novy Kapadia (1999) observes: "With an astute eye for detail and in fluent prose, the author blends fact and observation to create an important work of history, sociology and politics." (238)

In the travelogue, Amitav Ghosh has sought to reconstruct the brutal social experiments carried out Pol Pot, and the troubles imposed on the ordinary people. Implicitly the writer exposes the politics of extreme isolation practised in the

recent past in the two countries, Cambodia and Burma. As an alert and conscious observer of socio-political scenario during the regime of isolation, Amitav Ghosh afforded to have a conversation with the associates of Pol Pot. This is perhaps a major device employed by the writer authentically to describe the cruelties penetrated by the despotic ruler.

The main targets of Khmer Rouge's undisguisedly racist nationalism are Vietnam and Cambodia's own Vietnamese minority. Amitav presents the sorry sight with help of dialogues. One of the Khmer Rough defectors told the United Nations officials in 1992 that Pol Pot was an unashamed racist who ordered killing of the Vietnamese at par. Ghosh describes the reactions of the defector:

As far as the Vietnamese are concerned, whenever we meet them, we must kill them whether they are militaries or civilians, because they are not ordinary civilians but soldiers disguised as civilians. We must kill them whether they are men, women or children, there is no distinction, they are enemies. (DC1)

Ghosh is out rightly opposed to any kind of terror or violence anywhere in the world. He seeks to expose the tendency of the cruel Pol Pot and his ally Khieu Samphan who held that terror is essential to the exercise of power. Khieu Samphan, the head of the state, played an active role in planning 'the mass purges of the period'. They were brutal leaders who considered terror and cruelty as a 'morally cleansing weapon'. Ghosh too agrees that this terror was an essential part not merely of their terrifying tactics but also of the moral order on which they had built their action.

A close observation of the events and episodes described in the novel would reveal the fact that Pol Pot's hero was Robespierre whose motto was :

“Terror is an emanation of virtue”. However, Pol Pot’s vision of social Utopia was shaped by his surroundings - his life with hill tribes in remote north-eastern Cambodia. As we come to know the original Khmers were self dependent in their communal living. Though two - third population of Cambodia was formed of Buddhists yet they were untainted by Buddhism. They attached no importance to money. Pol Pot focused his attention on middle-class people whenever he thought of his social engineering. It is here that Ghosh notices the uprooting of the middle-classes. The process of social engineering and the uprooting of the middle-classes was an important aspect of the Khmer Rouge revolution. Ghosh describes it as the memory of his friend Molyka, who was “a mid- level civil servant, “poised attractive woman in her early thirties, painfully soft-spoken, in the Khmer way” (7).

Now coming to the erstwhile history of Cambodia we find that the first chapter of this thought- provoking and disturbing book opens with the description of the sea journey of a King named Sisobath, a journey from Cambodia to the land of the colonizers i.e. France. Cambodia had been colonized by France. The king sets out on the journey along with his entourage of a number of fellow-travellers—princes, courtiers, officials and, most importantly a troupe of nearly a hundred classical dancers and musicians from a royal palace at Phnom Penh. The journey starts on 10 May, 1906 at two in the afternoon. Aboard a French liner called *Amiral Kersaint*, they undertake the journey as the fulfillment of a lifelong dream and desire to visit France. Ghosh describes the child like joy of the king and his group: “The king, who had been crowned two years before, had spoken of his desire to visit France, and for him, the voyage was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream.” (1)



Ghosh maintains that some of the visitors take this journey as a cherished opportunity to leave their own land to stage the first performance of Cambodian classical dance in Europe. It is to be held at the Exposition Coloniale in Marseille, an immense fairy-land of an exhibition. The theme of the performance is based on that of France's colonial possessions. Ghosh touchingly writes about the life and background of the royal dancers:

It was said that the dancers entered the palace as children and spent their lives in seclusion ever afterwards; that their lives revolved entirely around the royal family; that several were the king's mistresses and had even borne him children; that some of them had never stepped out of the palace grounds until this trip to France. (3)

The historical events as recorded further in the novel reveal that King Sisobath's eldest daughter, Princess Soumphady was the head and supervisor of the girl - folk and dancers in the palace at Phnom Penh. The royal manners and style of dress of the princess attracted and influenced highly the Marseillais crowd. As a formal courtesy, the princess too admired the dresses and hats of the French women but showed no interest in wearing them herself. The remaining story of King Sisobath and Princess Soumphady's journey to France undertaken in 1906, is told by Chea Samy, a sister-in-law of Pol Pot and a teacher at the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1993. Side by side Molyka too describes the Pol Pot's political tendencies to Amitav Ghosh.

Ghosh is informed that after the death of King Sisobath in 1927, his son Monivong ascended the throne. His mistress Luk Khum Meak was his most favourite queen. During the regime of King Sisobath, Princess Soumphady used to be the head and supervisor of the girl folk in the palace of Phnom Penh. Now

Monivong's queen Luk Khum Meak was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the girls and dancers. The queen employed her relatives in the palace. One of her young relatives married Chea Samy. Chea Samy's husband was the elder brother of Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) who was at that time only six. Pol Pot was the future terror god of Cambodia. However, Chea Samy appreciates the behaviour of Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) when he was a child and lived with her in the early years of her married life. She says: "He was a very good boy, she said at last, emphatically. In all the years he lived with me, he never gave me any trouble." (13)

The mid-level civil servant Molyka's family was a part of the social group which was hardest hit by the Khmer Rouge revolution. When she was thirteen, she was evacuated with her whole family to a labour camp in the province of Kompong Thom. Separated from other members of her family, she was sent to work in a fishing village on "Cambodia's immense fresh water lake, the Tonle Sap." (9) She continued to work as a servant and nurse maid for a family of fisherfolk and returned to Phnom Penh in 1979 when the Vietnamese overran the Khmer Rouge. Ten out of Molyka's family of fourteen had been killed. Ghosh takes up this particular example to generalize the misery of the urban middle-class people and writes:

City people by definition, they are herded into rural work camps; the institutions and forms of knowledge that sustained them were abolished - the judicial system was dismantled, the practice of formal medicine was discontinued, schools and colleges were shut down, banks and credits were done away with, indeed the very institution of money, and even the exchange of goods and services, was banned. (10)

Ghosh makes queries about Pol Pot's plans and is informed that Pol Pot targeted the middle - class because he realized that it is the middle class that moulds public opinion and shapes the societal mind. He wanted to eliminate those who could prove fatal to the execution of his plans. Ghosh states: "Cambodia's was not a civil war in the same sense as Somalia's or the former Yugoslavia's, fought over the fetishism of all difference : it was experiment in the reinvention of society." (10) Ghosh feels sad to hear that the majority of the middle-class people were tortured by the despotic ruler for no fault on their part. He maintains:

No regime in history had ever before made so systematic an attack on the middle -class. Yet if the experiment was proof of any thing at all, it was ultimately of the indestructibility of the middle - class, of its extraordinary tenacity and resilience; its capacity to preserve its form of knowledge and expression through the most extreme kinds of adversity. (13)

Ghosh observes that it was a well - planned, systematic and sustained attack on the middle class. To convey his impressions in an emphatic manner, he converses with those people who mention their family history. Chea Samy tells him that she and her husband, like everyone else, were compelled to go to serve a village of old people. The Khmer Rouge loyalists alongwith new converts were made to work in rice fields. Ghosh describes the miserable plight of Chea Samy:

Chea Samy was working in a communal kitchen at the time, cooking and washing dishes late that year, some party workers stuck a poster on the walls of the kitchen: they said it was the picture of their leader, Pol Pot. She knew who it was the moment she set the eyes on the picture.

That was how she discovered that the leader of the terrifying inscrutable 'Organization' Angkar that ruled their lives, was none other than little Saloth Sar (Pol Pot). (14)

The Vietnamese broke Cambodia in 1979 rendering it like shattered state. However, it was in the post - revolution period that the Ministry of Culture endeavoured to trace the trained classical dancers and surviving teachers who could revive Cambodia's ancient culture. One of the surviving dancers described the plight of the dancers:

I was like a smoker who gives up smoking..... I would dream of dance when I was alone or at night. You could get through the day because of the hard work. It was the nights that were really difficult; we would lie awake wondering who was going to be called out next.

*That Was When I would Dance, in my head.* (17)

Amitav describes his reactions to the trying circumstances under which Chea Samy had lived. She had entered the palace to join the girl folk. Now after long, this widowed lady is required to contribute to the revival of Cambodia's art and culture. Ghosh writes:

Like everyone around her, Chea Samy too had started all over again - at the age of sixty, with her health shattered by the years of famine and hard labour. Working with quiet, dogged persistence, she and a handful of other dancers and musicians slowly brought together a ragged, half-starved bunch of orphans and castaways, and with the discipline of their long, rigorous years of training, they began to resurrect the art that Princess Soumphady and Luk Khum Meak had passed on to them in that long- ago world, when King Sisobath

reigned. Out of the ruins around them, they began to create the means of denying Pol Pot his victory. (18)

Ghosh adopts flash-back style to highlight various problems which Cambodia was confronted with. He describes the grim spectacle of Cambodia's colonization by France, and the rise of Pol Pot. He also brings to lime light the activities of the Khmer Rouge tribes who tried Guerrilla war strategies and attacked Vietnamese. He gives an account of the movements and activities of Norodom Sihanouk, Minister Thiounn and his grandson Thiounn Mumm, Pol Pot and his brother Loth Sieri, King Sisovath, Son Sann, Hun Sen, Khieu Samphan and Rodin who represent various social or political groups. With the help of this group of characters we can understand the complexity of social, cultural, political and economic problems. However, socio-cultural traditions of music and dance proved to be the turning points in the national politics. D.K. Pabby interprets Ghosh's treatment of these issues and says:

In spite of all the political turmoil and chaotic-anarchic situations, one thing that kept the spirit of the 'nation' alive in Cambodia is its rich cultural heritage of music and dance. This becomes evident from the vivid description of the cultural festival that was held in Phnom Penh in 1988 amidst the destruction of social, economic, cultural and political fabric of the country. (227)

Ghosh's description of the festival day is interesting and delightful. Some foreigners were also present in Phnom Penh. The response of the local people to the dance performance was very excellent. In spite of the critical situation the country was facing, the number of audiences was more than expectation. Ghosh writes:

But people flocked to the theatre the day the festival began. Onesta Carpene, a Catholic relief worker from Italy was one of the handful of foreigners then living in Phnom Penh. She was astonished at the response: the city was in a shamble; there was debris everywhere, spilling out of the houses on to the pavement, the streets were jammed with pillaged cars, there was no money and very little food— ‘I could not believe that in a situation like that people would be thinking of music and dance.’ (52)

Ghosh maintains that the adverse circumstances could not create any obstacle in the way of the visitors. He writes:

But still they came pouring in, and the theatre was filled far beyond its capacity... when the first musicians came on stage, she (a relief worker) heard sobs all around her. Then, when the dancers appeared, in their shabby, hastily-made costumes, suddenly, everyone was crying, old people, young people, soldiers, children – ‘you could have sailed out of there is a boat’... They could not stop crying; people wept through the entire length of the performance. It was a kind of rebirth: a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living. (63)

One can observe that in several touching passages, Ghosh seeks to explain the power of womanhood. He also gives the message of the worth of the old people who are ‘living reservoirs of the past’. They are living tradition. We may call them with honour, the solid foundation of the structure of a grand cultural building, on which we stand and jump, and more so try to look at the sky. In hard times, they

provide us fortitude and strength. Shubha Tiwari interprets Ghosh's views on the historical events discussed in the novel and says:

The social and political history of Cambodia from 1906 to 1993 has been narrated with an added human dimension. Both the dates are important. In 1906 Cambodian performers went to Europe for showing their native skills. These native skills will, in future, give them strength to live and dream. 1993 is the year when finally under the auspices of the UN's Transitional Authority of Cambodia, country-wide elections were held. (77)

The second chapter titled 'Stories in Stones' seeks to highlight the importance of an old temple 'Angkor Wat' which is said to belong to twelfth century cultural design. It represents the cultural life of the said century. It also reveals the ethos of the country. It is 'A Monument to the Power of the Story'. Many stories are carved on the elegant structure. It is said to be the largest single religious edifice in the world. It is a symbol of the romance of lost civilization and ancient glory. Ghosh describes it figuratively:

This is true in a perfectly literal sense : with every step a visitor takes in this immense twelfth-century Cambodia temple he finds himself moving counters in a gigantic abacus of story telling. [...] The setting is Mt. Meru, the sacred mountain of ancient Indian myth, whose seven carefully graded tiers provide the blue print for the temple's form. The cast is the entire pantheon of gods, deities, sages and prophets with which that cosmos is peopled. (54)

Diving deep into the past glory of the temple of Angkor Wat, Ghosh says that people from remote places used to visit it but now their curiosity seems to

have finished since in religious context it has lost its earlier charm for them. He also observes that the temple now serves as a symbol of modernity to the Cambodians. However, it is an important cultural remain for them. Ghosh finds it now only as a symbol of modernity and writes:

Angkor Wat is, for example, undisputedly a temple, yet it never figures in anything to do with religion, or indeed in any context that might be called 'traditional' or old-fashioned. Its likeness appears instead on certain factory- produced commodities, like beer; it is stamped on uniforms, civil and military; it figures on the logos of large corporations, like banks; indeed, the erstwhile Kampuchea Airlines even succeeded in transforming this most earth - bound of structures into a symbol of flight, by lending it a pair of wings. (56)

Exploring the theme of resurgence in this chapter, the novelist shows that in the course of time, the architectural wonder became a unifying symbol for the Cambodians including politicians of different ideologies such as Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann and Pol Pot. However, this five towered image of Angkor Wat is not a symbol of religious unity, though Buddhism is the dominant religion of the majority of the Cambodians. Novy Kapadia remarks:

... Angkor Wat is not as the Golden Temple at Amritsar is to the Sikhs or the mosques at Mecca and Madina are to the Muslims, or St. Peters Church at the Vatican to the Roman Catholics, a Symbol of spiritual faith and renewal. (286)

Ghosh is also an anthropologist. He came to know of the legend of the sudden discovery of Angkor Wat by the nineteenth century French explorer Henri Mohout. Several myths are inscribed upon the temple. This too is one of them. The



writer also approached the Indian archeologists to find out the fact about the myth. He comments on its background story.

The story is a familiar one for in this century many other parts of the world have seen their present being technologically and symbolically superseded by the relics of their past. But in Cambodia the process went further than elsewhere. For an entire generation of Cambodians, including politicians as different in ideology as Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann and Pol Pot. Angkor Wat became a symbol of the modernizing nation-state. It became the opposite of itself: an icon that represented a break with the past— a token of the country's belonging, not within the medieval, but rather the contemporary world. Thus the beer, banks, airlines and of course, flays. (60)

A close study of the travelogue reveals that Ghosh has sought to establish the importance of the temple of Angkor Wat as a national pride to the Cambodians. They think that the temple is a mark of identification of the Cambodian culture. It has survived the ravages of time brought out by French colonialism and dominance. It is a bridge between the ancient and the modern culture.

Ghosh makes use of history and politics in his novels. It seems to be a familiar territory to him. He has sought to merge the past into the present besides blending together history, politics, anthropology, philology, sociology and religion. He make no escape from the present. He seems to believe that the study of the past is a preparation for facing the present day problems. K.C. Belliappa (1996) writes: "... an excursion into the past is no escape from the present, but a coming to grips with the present realities of living." (65)

Ghosh lays stress on the significance of a work of art which aims at keeping the emotional integrity of a nation intact. He uses music, dance and sculpture as symbols of the resurgence of Cambodia. By these identities, the world takes notice of this small nation ravaged for centuries by imperialism and later in 1970's by American fighter planes and troops as a result of Vietnam war. He endeavours to show that the images of Angkor Wat "appear to be omnipresent". (56) He also seeks to establish the importance of harmony, goodwill and understanding. Novy Kapadia remarks:

Ghosh uses the technique of juxtaposing the medieval and modern worlds of the twelfth and twentieth centuries in two different civilizations of India and Egypt, with their diverse cultures of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. Through this clever fictional discourse, Ghosh illustrates the need for human understanding and religious tolerance, which he considers as imperative in a world full of strife due to religious obscurantism and fanaticism. (287)

The novel is a sensitive insight into postcolonial experience and politics of isolation and violence. The second chapter is only of eleven pages but it reveals an important political message. The writer skillfully knits myths, legends and local stories to show the paradox about the temple of Angkor Wat. He uses the narrative technique of a story told by a monk to recall the glory of the renowned temple.

The third and the last section of the novel is "At Large in Burma". The title seems to imply a struggle for freedom in Burma. In it Ghosh has made an attempt to explore the history of his 'roots'. He heard the story of other countries,

particularly of the places where his parents and relatives had lived and which they visited before the birth of the Republic of India in 1947. He writes thus:

To me, the most intriguing of these stories were those that my family carried out of Burma. I suspect that this was partly because Burma had become a kind of lost world in the early 60s. When I was old enough to listen to my relatives' stories. It was in 1962 that General Ne Win, the man who would be Burma's longtime dictator, seized power in a coup. Almost immediately, he slammed the shutters and switched off the lights: Burma became the dark house of the neighbourhood, huddled behind an impenetrable, overgrown fence. It was to remain shuttered for almost three decades. (65)

Ghosh employs the linear narrative technique to portray the fight for democracy in Burma. He alludes to the clash between two social forces—the forces of orthodoxy and status quo, represented by State Law and Order Restoration Council and, the forces of change seeking democracy. The latter was led by Nobel Peace-prize-winner, Aung San Kyi and her followers. She launched peaceful non-resistance movements to achieve and restore democracy and civil liberties. However, there were house arrests and mass arrests. Suu Kyi's predicament of house arrest created stir in the political activities. Ghosh deals with it as postmodern dilemma, and writes:

In the postmodern world, politics is everywhere a matter of symbols, and the truth is that Suu Kyi is her own greatest political asset. It is only because Burma's 1988 democracy movement had a symbol, personified in Suu Kyi, that the world remembers it and continues to exert pressure on the current regime (military junta).

Otherwise, the world would almost certainly have forgotten Burma's slain and dispersed democrats just as quickly as it has forgotten many others like them in the past. (83)

Ghosh observes political activities and tactics from close quarters. He finds duplicacy in word and deed on the part of the political leaders and rulers. They dictate rules for upholding the values of democracy, advocate freedom of speech and liberty but practically they are supporters of dictatorial attitude. Actually speaking, Ghosh learnt much about Burma through the tales told by his elders when he was a child, more so by his aunt, and uncle known as 'Prince'. He too describes the story in the manner he was told:

Like many Indians, I grew up on stories of other countries : places my parents and relatives had lived in or visited before the birth of the Republic of India in 1947. To me the most intriguing of these stories were those that my family carried out of Burma. (65)

In an artistic manner Ghosh tries to expose that the blemishes of Burma have rendered her, after fifty years, one of the ten least developed nations of the world. According to a report, the country has misused civil liberties. With the assassination of Aung San on 19 July, 1947, there has been a marked decline in her civil values. It was held that Aung San was a renowned and established leader of the country who boldly championed the cause of independence for the country. Another famous human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winning person Suu Kyi underwent a long house arrest in Rangoon. Besides this, since it attained political independence in 1948, it witnessed civil wars, communist uprisings, military coups and frequent clashes among minority groups. Though Buddhists form two-third of the country's population yet during colonial rule, the British

rulers favoured minority groups over the ethnic Burmans. Surprisingly, the British Burma Army was formed largely of the units such as a Karen Rifles and the Kachin Rifles. The result of this policy was civil war. Ghosh gives a vivid account of the civil strife and political situation:

It takes a military dictator to believe that symbols are inert and can be manipulated at will. Forty years after his assassination, Aung San had his revenge. In a strange, secular reincarnation, his daughter, Suu Kyi came back to haunt those who had sought to make use of his death. In 1988, when Burma's decades of discontent culminated in an anti-military uprising, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged from obscurity as one of the country's most powerful voices, the personification of Burma's democratic resistance to military rule.

(74)

Ghosh has dealt with several political motives as well as other crucial aspects of contemporary politics. He has also tried to raise the position and role of minorities in a decolonized, newly-independent country. As the writer has referred to, the Karen army had been fighting against dire odds for fifty years:

Many regarded the war against SLORC as a direct continuation of the war against the Japanese. Some Karenni families had been at war for three generations, and many of their fighters had spent their entire lives in refugee camps. (92)

However, the writer avoids making any comments on the contemporary political situation. Neither does he glorify nor condemn the efforts made by the ethnic minority against the ruling Burmans. He only demands of the reader to think

over the question: how ethnic minorities can be accommodated in a multi-cultural democracy?

Suu Kyi's non-confrontist struggle signifies peaceful resistance to the rule of the Military Junta. In her public meetings at her residence in the University Avenue, there are questions from the public on the issues ranging from food and health to politics and literature, Burma's military rulers have been able to hold on so long to power inspite of Suu Kyi's mass appeal and mass base. Burma's 'observer status at the ASEAN' seems to be an endorsement of the military regime. But Suu Kyi's approach is Gandhian. Equipped with much needed moral strength to weigh things objectively, she says:

I don't quite understand why one talks about constructive engagement as being such a problem. Each government has its own policy, and we accept that this is the policy of the ASEAN nations. I sometimes think that this problem is made out to be much bigger than it really is.... Just because (these governments) have decided on a policy of constructive engagement, there is no need for us to think of them as our enemies. I don't think this is a case of us and them.

(112)

Ghosh finds Suu Kyi a staunch follower of Gandhiji and his policies of truth and non-violence. She is an optimist. She is a leader committed wholeheartedly to the ideals of peace. She wants to achieve her goal by adopting fair and noble means, however, delayed these may be. She declares: "I have always told you... that we will win. ... that we will establish a democracy in Burma and I stand by that. But as to when, I cannot predict. I've always said that to you." (113-114)

Ghosh highlights the marginalization of an Indian migrant in the Burmese civil war. Ko Sonny, whose real name was Mahinder Singh was the commander of a regiment with Karenni insurgents. As regards his family, it had been settled in Burma for three generations. He was an enthusiastic idealist. When he was a student of physics in the University of Rangoon, he stood and struggled for the cause of Karenni and other minority students and went to jail on this account. Evidently Ghosh proves Ko Sonny as a fighter for a social cause though misfortunes chase him everywhere. Novy Kapadia observes: “The human cost of insurgency is cleverly shown by Amitav Ghosh in this gripping narrative. Ghosh shows that all boundaries are artificial.” (293)

*Dancing in Cambodia* may be considered, in a sense, as a “choral work” in which past and present merge together from a variety of focal points. *At Large in Burma* is dominated, apart from the section dedicated to the nationalist struggle of Karenni ethnic minority, by two charismatic figures, able to express the paradigm of post-colonial Burma: the hero of the independence war and the hero of the “second struggle for national independence” (Ghosh 76)

In the context of India’s nuclear explosion test on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1998 followed by the Pakistani tests, many were the critical responses that explored the *raison d’être* and the consequences of the traumatic event. Like a concerned Indian journalist Ghosh too made a trip to the site in order to understand the motivation behind and the consequences thereafter. The visit Ghosh made to the location of test was three months after and the outcome essay *Countdown* (1998) comprises the information he collected and the interviews he took with the people of Pokharan. What emerges is a very impassioned, humanistic account touched with irony and satire. In a true to his ethos vein, Ghosh traverses many generic

boundaries, experimenting with form and structure and it becomes difficult to pin him down as an anthropologist or a journalist. This dilemma is evident in all his writings, whether fiction or non-fiction. As he himself comments in another context:

I would like to think of the notes that follow as an impressionistic contribution to a yet uninvited discipline—the ethnography of international peacekeeping. Or, in other words, an anthropology of the future. (Ghosh, 2006)

The spatio-temporal crossovers and dislocations can be seen clearly in the way the essay is structured. Dwelling primarily on the analysis of the destruction in and around Pokharan Ghosh retraces it back to the nuclear explosion of 1974 and in positing a comparison he explores the advocacy of the nuclear programme and contrasts it with the expectation of the people in general. He comments on the pain and despair of the then Defence Minister, George Fernandes, who was against the very act of nuclearization. In an extension to this Ghosh makes a detailed survey of India's critical borders in Kashmir and Siachen and gathers the responses of the army personnel there about the explosion. He also tries to assess the Pakistani point of view and the resultant relations between the two countries—India and Pakistan. What then distils forth is a very clear statement of the fact that the bomb culture is a disaster in terms of its economic repercussions, and humanistic consequences. What Amartya Sen was to say in 2001 in 'India and Bomb' was already predicted by Ghosh.

As Ghosh explicitly puts it: "The only people who benefit from these tests are the politicians... They bring no benefits to anyone else in the country." Ram Vilas Paswan too had said the same:



And this in a country where ordinary citizens don't have food to eat. Where villages are being washed away by flood. Where prices are touching the skies. Of the country's six hundred thousand villages, one-third don't have arrangements for safe drinking water. Fifty per cent of our people live below the poverty line. For the price of a single battle tank we could open one hundred primary schools. But what we do instead is that every year we spend thirty-five thousand crores of rupees on armaments." (quoted in Ghosh, 1999:20)

Even the villagers of Pokharan were devastated.

We had never heard of cancer before in this area. But people began to get cancer after the test. There were strange skin diseases. People used to scratch themselves all the time. There were sores on their skin... (Ghosh, 1999: 8)

During his visit to Pokharan Ghosh spoke to Manohar Joshi, a thirty-six-year-old man who had grown up in Pokharan and had been twelve in 1974, when Indira Gandhi's government had first tested a nuclear device in the region. Since that time many of his friends had contracted cancer and other physical problems. Near Pokharan is the old palace of Bikaner. While touring it and musing upon past glories, Ghosh recognises that "this was what the nuclearists wanted: to sign treaties, to be pictured with the world's powerful, to hang portraits on their walls, to become ancestors. On the bomb they had pinned their hopes of bringing it all back" (13). Such grand schemes of raising the nation's international profile came from K. Subrahmanyam, who was among those in India who looked at how the Soviet Union and the United States had avoided using their weapons and who had concluded that they were purely symbols. But Ghosh describes Subrahmanyam's

followers as a new sect: “the bomb-cult/” he writes, “represents the uprising of those who find themselves being pushed back from this table [of national and international power]: it is the rebellion of the rebelled-against, the insurrection of an elite” (18). As Shubha Tiwari elaborates upon Ghosh’s mindset that these tricks are nothing but post colonialism of the perverted order. The fifty years of unfulfilled promises, the frustration of not being able to realise potential, the growing corruption—all these find a temporary atonement in such exercises. We can take a cricket match as a fine analogy. Defeat Pakistan and all the ills of this country vanish into a momentary euphoria. But nuclear testing is no cricket match. It is a very costly and more dangerous ploy to build our lost self-respect and nationalistic mood. Whereas the Prime Minister, Shri Atal Behari was rejoicing in his so-called achievement by throwing flowers into the pit of the crater and distributing sweets the rupee fell to a historic low, the stock market plunged to an all-time low and prices soared.

In his meeting with George Fernandes Ghosh is further disillusioned. Ghosh describes him as having been the country’s most prominent campaigner against human rights violations by the army. He later surprisingly helped the BJP come to power, despite their opposition to the secularism enshrined in India’s constitution. Fernandes was the one who had approved the tests of 11 May. This fact, coupled with Ghosh’s meeting with several other former idealists, forced him to ask the question: “How had matters come to such a pass that reasonable people could argue that the country needed to risk annihilation in order to repair the damage sustained by its self-esteem?” (30) The question has been asked by many in India and elsewhere who know that weapons that are invented are typically, in the course of nations, used. In Fernandes’ view, the crisis was due to the colonial

mentality that India still embraced, and the replacement of true political parties with the rise of “castes and groups gathered around individuals . . . powerful sectional and regional interests [that] have prevented the formation of stable governments over the last few years” (46). Ghosh recognised that he was dealing with an intelligent man, but he wondered how he could cooperate in such a venture.

Ghosh silently probes the despair that is evident in Fernandes’s speeches. This despair in Fernandes’s voice is possibly rooted in the corruption rampant within the leadership of the country. It is ironical to find that even the Defence Minister is despaired at the personal aggrandisement of the leadership and its consequent fallout. Is it out of despair or a search for self-esteem or failures in other fronts that led the leadership to the nuclear tests? Does Fernandes’s decision involve his own personal vanity to be somebody at the table of power, or is it the issue of confrontation with China and Pakistan, or is it vying with the European powers that have prompted such a turnabout in his views. Ghosh ironically sums up “Evidently the cult of the bomb, like all millenarian movements, was as much a product of despair as of hope.” (Ghosh 1999. 159)

In Pakistan he discovers that the people there share their views with their Indian counterparts. He says:

‘I wanted to hear them for myself. What I heard instead was for the most part a strange mixture of psycholozing, grandiose fantasy and cynicism, allied with the deliberate conjuring up of illusory threats

and imaginary fears. The truth is that India's nuclear program is status driven, not threat driven [...]. In Pakistan's case too the motivation behind the nuclear program [...] is parity with India. That the leaders of these two countries should be willing to run the risk of nuclear accidents, war and economic breakdown in order to indulge these confused ambitions is itself a sign that some essential element in the social compact has broken down: that there is no longer any commensurability between the desires of the rulers and the well being of the ruled. The pursuit of nuclear weapons in sub-continent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the targets the rulers have in mind for these weapons are, in the end, none other than their own people.' (106)

As Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the leader of the Jam-iat-e-Islami, the principal religious party in Pakistan, tells Ghosh, "When a nation feels that it is likely to be defeated it can do anything to spare itself the shame" (55). Ghosh meets with Asma Jahangir, Pakistan's leading human rights lawyer, and is greatly impressed. "So far as I am concerned," he writes, "Asma Jahangir ranks with Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi as a figure of moral authority and an embodiment of courage" (58}. She was most distressed by the influence of the Taliban in Pakistan and she speaks in stark and graphic terms of her confrontations with them in the courts. "I think," she tells him, "anyone who proposes orthodox Islam in Pakistan is actually strengthening the hands of the [BJP]. . . in the sense that fanaticism here brings fanaticism in India" (69). Both she and Qazi Hussain Ahmed, though opposed on some issues, indicted the ruling classes in Pakistan as looking out for their own interests rather than those of the nation. She also makes an interesting observation of national self-

conceptions: “India wants to push a perception of South Asian identity,” (72) she tells Ghosh. “Pakistan [on the other hand] wants a South Asian identity and yet does not want it. It wants to leave the door open to an identity as a Middle Eastern country” (77).

On his return from Pakistan, Ghosh visits the Wagah border post and comments on the ritual of lowering the flags at sundown. He describes it as a series of complicated drill manoeuvres, strutting preening and stamping their feet like anxious roosters . . . sublimely comic” (85), a “precisely performed staging of a parodic enmity, produced by unseen regimes... as though we were in one of those cartoon-film situations where a train filled with looney-tune characters is heading towards a precipice .- a chasm that is clearly visible to the audience and concealed only from the protagonists” (87-88).

Ghosh rightly ends *Countdown* by trying to foretell the doom that is awaiting us, if we go on pursuing the aggressive nuclear policies. With Kanti Bajpai and Gautam Bhatia, Ghosh assesses the immense damage that can happen as an aftermath of the blast in New Delhi, Bombay Lahore or Karachi; with almost an apocalyptic vision he concludes: “The pursuit of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the targets the rulers have in mind for these weapons are, in the end, none other than their own people” (106).

*The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* is a collection of eighteen prose pieces of various lengths and on a wide variety of subjects, previously published in journals. The earliest was written in 1985, and the most recent was published in 2002. Ghosh suggests that “the first five narratives. . . were all written in short and intensely focused periods of concentration” (vii). Thus, the piece that gives this collection its overall title, “The Imam and the Indian,” was published in *Granta* in

1986. Tibetan Dinner” came out in 1988, also in *Granta*. *Granta* published the next essay, “Four Corners” in 1988 set at the intersection of four western American states New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah.

The next one, “An Egyptian in Baghdad” appeared in *Granta* in 1990. It was written in the wake of a deeply disturbing visit to Egypt, shortly before the Gulf War. “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi” was published in *The New Yorker* in 1995, “written in the period between *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace*” (vii). The next three pieces began as book reviews “but metamorphosed into something less easily defined” (viii): “The Human Comedy in Cairo: a Review of the Work of Naguib Mahfouz” appeared in *The New Republic* in 1990. The next two pieces in the collection “are based on chapters of the thesis for which [he] was awarded a D.Phil (PhD) in Social Anthropology by Oxford University in 1982” (viii). “The Relations of Envy”, published in *Ethnology* in 1984, is an anthropological study of “the evil eye”. “Categories of Labour and the Orientation of the Fellaḥ Economy” appeared in an anthology entitled *The Diversity of the Muslim Community*, edited by Ahmed al-Shahi in 1987. “The Slave of MS. H.6” appeared in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 7, in 1992. The next five essays began as lectures. The journal *Public Culture* was subsequently published in “The Diaspora in Indian Culture” in 1990.

“The Global Reservation” was a Plenary Address at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Cultural Anthropology in 1993, and was subsequently published in *Cultural Anthropology* the following year. “The Fundamentalist Challenge” was published in the *Wilson Quarterly* in 1995. “The March of the Novel Through History” was published in *Kunapipi* and in *The Kenyon Review* in 1998, and it won a Pushcart Prize the following year. The translation of one of Tagore’s stories,

*Kshudito Pashan*, was published in *Desh* in 1998. “The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness” was the Neelan Thiruchelvam Memorial; Lecture for 2001. *Civil Lines* published “The Hunger of Stones” in 1995. Excerpts from “The Ghat of the Only World” were published in *The Nation* in 2002. This was written in memory of a close friend, the poet Agha Shahid Ali, who died on 8 December 2002.

The first and second essay signalled the writing of his *The Shadow Lines* and *In An Antique Land*. In “Tibetan Dinner” he recalls his visit to a restaurant in Delhi as a student and it is here that he first talks of displacement. “Everyone who went there got drunk. You couldn’t help doing *so* - it was hard to be in the presence of so terrible a displacement. (16)

Though he is a student when he apparently projects this interpretation on the life of the serving woman at the Delhi restaurant, his inclusion of the story in this collection of essays tells us a good deal, perhaps, about what becomes a recurring theme in Ghosh’s various writings: the “fate” of the migrant in today’s world - the migrant intellectual like himself, but even more heartfelt, the fate of the migrant worker in many cultures. “When I next caught the monk’s eye,” he continues:

. . . his smile seemed a little guilty: the hospitality of a poor nation must have seemed dispensable compared to the charity of a rich one. Or perhaps he was merely bewildered. It cannot be easy to celebrate the commodification of one’s own suffering

“Four Corners” takes up the desert region of the US, a popular tourist destination famous for its scenic beauty and Native American history. Ghosh plays on this latter theme, and overlays one of his insistent themes: the notion of borders.

Tourists, after all, call this “four corners” because they are told that four states meet in this lunar landscape - though the demarcation is completely invisible and, thus, is as good a reminder for Ghosh as any that *all* borders, finally, are arbitrary. “ [The tourists] will be back early next morning: the cars and RVs [recreational vehicles] start arriving soon after dawn, their occupants eager to absorb what they can of the magic of the spectacle of two straight lines intersecting” (23). The intersection of space and time fascinates Ghosh again and again in his books. Thus, here, spatially: the four corners, imagined borders between these states; temporally: between Navajos and US colonisers.

*An Egyptian in Baghdad* describes his return to a village where he had lived for ten years referred to as Nashawy in his later writings on Egypt – He rediscovered that many of friends had been trapped on the shores of the Red Sea. He notes that “this piece was to become the basis of the epilogue of *In An Antique Land*” (viii), so it makes an interesting study of how a writer works, how he moves from an early “draft” of sections of a novel, to the finished work. At the end of the essay, he records that:

. . .there were more than a dozen of us in the room now. We were crowded around the television set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. But there was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the pages of the epic exodus. (45)

But in the “novel” he writes: “Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History” (*In An Antique Land*: 353). The “epic exodus” is sharpened into the more strikingly thematic notion of history’s anonymous subalterns, the many individuals whose lives are simply not recorded by the powerful. “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”



provides a powerful account of the riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination.

"The targets," writes Ghosh,

. . . were primarily young Sikhs. They were dragged out, beaten up and then burnt alive. Fires were everywhere; it was the day's motif. Throughout the city, Sikh houses were being looted and then set on fire, often with their occupants still inside ... Over the next few days, some twenty-five hundred people died in Delhi alone. Thousands more died in other cities. ... Entire neighbourhoods were gutted; tens of thousands of people were left homeless. (51-52)

Ghosh records that the one memory that stands out most clearly from that time was the moment when it seemed inevitable that he would be attacked because he was in a group of Hindus protecting their Sikh neighbours. He has many wisely observant things to say in this essay about multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies like India, but he finally turns his attention to the responsibilities of those who record such events. What he says is important to note, beyond the spectacle of the violence, is "the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another" (61). The importance of these riots on Ghosh's own decisions as a writer is seen especially in his move from *The Circle of Reason* to *The Shadow Lines* which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Again "The Human Comedy in Cairo" tells us how Ghosh is fascinated by "countries like Egypt and India - old civilisations, trying hard to undo their supersession in the q^ modern world" (64). As we have seen, this is partially the theme of *Countdown*, and is surely at the heart of *In An Antique Land*. Regarding Mahfouz's winning the Nobel Prize, Ghosh writes that:

... for a prize of such power, the ordinary standards of judgement that apply to books are held in suspension. What matters is that the writer's work be adequately canonical, which is to say, massive, serious, and somehow a part of 'world literature.' If Mahfouz won on these counts, his was the victory of the decathlete, achieved by a slow accumulation of points rather than by a spectacular show of brilliance in a single event. (65).

According to him "*The Baburnama* is the autobiography of India's first Mughal emperor. . . and it is one of the true marvels of the medieval world. . . . the first and until recent times the only true autobiography in Islamic literature" (90). In "Fellah Economy" Ghosh describes the social relationships at the heart of a community of fellahin, and remarks that:

The structure of labour in this community is a means of both resisting and appropriating some of the forms of relationship which have come to be synonymous with 'modernity,' and that finally, the system as a whole constitutes a commentary on the very nature of social relations. (136)

The article was Ghosh's way of "working out why in this instance, verbs denoting certain calibrations of social relationship superseded verbs that referred to technical acts - an order of precedence that was directly contrary to [his] expectations" (ix). Readers who persevere with these scholarly pieces will discern that, "despite the difference in form and diction, they share with [his] fiction certain characteristic subjects and concerns: most notably [his] interest in *patterns of work* in various societies. It was during [his] stay in Egypt that [he] learnt that even the most mundane forms of labour can embody an entire metaphysic - a

discovery that was to have a profound influence on [his] novels *The Circle of Reason* and *The Glass Palace*” (x).

In “The Diaspora in India Culture” Ghosh writes that “the modern Indian diaspora. . . now represents an important force in world culture [and] is increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent. ... To my mind there are no finer writers writing in the English language today than VS. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and A. K. Ramanujan” (243). These are comments that should be kept in mind when we consider Ghosh’s placement as an Indian Writing in English, in chapter six. He marvels at “the State’s sensitivity to the writing of the diaspora” (244) and provocatively asserts that “the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination” (247). The role of the migrant intellectual in the imagining of the nation (and the writer as imagined by the nation) clearly vexes him. On the one hand, “the institutional relationships between [modern India and its diasporic population], when they exist at all, are all mediated through Britain” (245). On the other hand, “the opinions of the diaspora are so significant to India: it is that part of itself which is both hostage and representative in the world outside - it is the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself.” (250)

*The Imam and the Indian* is not a unified work, since it consists of essays written over a couple of decades, but it offers a fascinating overview of the many topics that emerges in the fiction that was being written – as if by Ghosh’s other hand – while he worked on these prose pieces.

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