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Amitav Ghosh's Countdown: A Travelogue into the Heart of South Asia's Nuclear Summer

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh, a man of versatile genius, ranks with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. His fame rests on his sharp and penetrating sensitivity in depicting the human travelogue at microcosmic as well as epic scale. Ghosh's training as an anthropologist has been an important formative factor in his books. Travelling comes naturally to him. As such much of what he has written is travel based but this is a pure travelogue by him. Present paper is an attempt at exploring the Pokhran Psyche from the point of view of South Asia's nuclear summer. 'Countdown', a travelogue deals with a panorama of things – the author's visit to Pokhran, Pakistan and Siachen; his conversation with many people in India – their grief and sorrow, their horrendous and horrifying experience regarding the nuclear explosion; the compulsions behind South Asia Nuclearisation; a mild satire on the arrogance and dominance of politics which seldom cares for the peace and prosperity of the people and above all, the social, political, economic and religious drawbacks of Pakistan.

Keywords- *Travelogue, Nuclearisation, Contemplation, Anthropologist, Anecdote, Polemicist*

Introduction

Travel Book, Guide, Account and Record all these can be called travel writing. Some of these have relation more to history than to literature. These are extremely valuable in spite of not having high literary values. A travelogue is a literary work which unfolds the revelation of the writer's feelings, personality, imaginativeness and fine turns of expression. Nowadays all travel writing is included in the term Travelogue. KM George, the compiler and editor of the 'Encyclopedia of Indian Literature' included several entries from different languages under the head Travelogue. Broadly speaking Travel Essays may be just occasional pieces of writing of a comparatively transitory or ephemeral nature with no claim to literary value. Literary historians did not seem to be inclined to include travel writing

as a genre or form of literature, both in our country and in the West. Some travelogues easily stand out as remarkable literary achievement.

Journey is a metaphor widely used in all literatures. It is used as a literary device in scriptures, epics and widely read literary artifacts. Travel is used in satire as in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver Travels* or a means of conveying information in an interesting manner or Joseph Addison's creation of a *Citizen of the World*, are cases in point. There is a whole genre in English Fiction well received as the Picaresque Novel. Writers who produced travel accounts and travel-writing are from a variety of professions, temperaments, ages and climes. They have been adventurers, explorers, diplomats, scholars, missionaries, professionals like doctors and clergymen or just travel enthusiasts. Travel writings have linkages with History, Exploration and Adventure in its non-literary exposition and in its literary exposition with Autobiography and experience-related personality revelation.

Journalism and travel together yielded travel journalism, a special category wherein journalists travel and produce works with their intrinsic journalistic flair – from the point of a journalist. Sometimes as in Graham Greenes' *Lawless Roads* or his *Journey without Maps*, the writer's personality and the journalistic presentation of facts are brilliantly presented. Travel as a literary mode and an adjunct in literary writing is evidenced in literatures of almost all languages.

Travel accounts as literature are widely varied. There is no homogeneity in this form though it is surely a genre. The purpose of writing may vary from writer to writer and from time to time. A historical study of various travel texts help us to understand our history as well as the personality of the individual travel writers, their attitude towards the life of the people they traveled among.

In tone and temper, the book 'Countdown' reminds us of the thought-provoking contemplation of Arundhati Roy in her book, 'The End of Imagination' – a book which exhibits a harsh irony at the nuclearisation of India in particular and the whole world in general. Some of the words and phrases, images and symbols are so deftly used that the form itself suggests the sense. The real beauty of the book lies in its simplicity of language and the sobriety of thought which cannot help but jerk and jolt the average reader. Girish Karnad in *The Indian Express*, rightly opines:

Ghosh stands out for his sensitive and resonant use of language. One is continually brought up short by a felicitous turn of phrase or by the dazzling appositeness of a word ...Ghosh uses to great effect a matrix of multiple points of view in which memory, mythology and history freely interpret. (*The Indian Express*)

He describes himself as a traveler interested in men, places and scenery. Travel is man's primordial quest to expand his awareness into realization. He has the travel writer's infallible eye for the quirk that lays bare the soul of people. And it really exhibits in 'Countdown'.

Ghosh justified the writing of 'Countdown' as an obligation he felt to tell the truth. And the truth, as he discovered in the telling, is not just stranger, but for a more horrific than any fiction a writer could imagine, "I had always imagined that a nuclear blast war a kind of apocalypse, beyond which no existence could be contemplated. Like many Indians the image that I had subconsciously associated with this eventuality was that of parlay – the mythological chaos the end of the world. Listening to Kanti that day, as we drove around New Delhi, I realized that I, like most people had been seduced into thinking of nuclear weapons in symbolic and mystic ways."

This travelogue of Ghosh is born out of a conviction. The thought content of this book is mightily. He has been true to his ideas, true to himself. He does not shun away from commenting on politics, wars, economy and other worldly affairs. He has not been very diplomatic. Indeed, he gives a graphic description of the gruesome events that followed the nuclear explosion of Pokhran.

Visit to Pokhran Nuclear Site left an indelible mark on Amitav Ghosh that spontaneously he wrote 'Countdown'. The book opens with the apocalyptic vision of the nuclear explosion tested at the Pokhran site on 11 May 1998 where the author, Ghosh, travelled some three months later. He openly satirizes the celebration held to celebrate the great day. Even the Prime Minister is not left unscathed by Ghosh:

On 15 May, four days after the test [...] a celebration was organized on the crater left by the blasts. The Prime Minister was photographed standing on the crater, ruin, throwing flowers into the pit. It was as though this were one of the crowning achievements of his life. (Ghosh)

But on the other hand, the people living around the nuclear test site were not jolly and jocund; rather, they were sad and gloomy. Manohar Joshi, one of the first journalists to know about the tests, says:

In the years after 1974 there was so much illness here that people didn't have money to buy pills. We had never heard of Cancer before in this area. But people began to get cancer after test. There were strange skin diseases. People used to scratch themselves all the time. (Ghosh)

It is so tragic to learn how politicians, be it in 1974 or 1998, for their selfish interests, play with the lives of people. As King Lear says, "What flies to wanton boys, are we to gods. They kill us for their sport." But according to Ghosh, "India's nuclear programme is like minting false coins to purchase 'World-wide influence.'"

May 11, 1998, the day Pokhran shook the world a second time, prompted mountains of newsprint. But the long-term implications of the nuclear explosions carried out first by India and then Pakistan - as indeed the real impulses that pushed the finger on the trigger - were largely ignored. And

this is where the novelist in Ghosh shines. His portrait of Defense Minister George Fernandes' is insightful. He hops on to helicopters while the post-Pokhran seemingly guilt-ridden minister tours Ladakh and Siachen. And in the long conversations that continue in Fernandes' south block office, Ghosh exposes the contradictions of the former trade unionist and the despondency beneath his effervescence, "He had spent a lifetime in politics and the system had spun him around until what he did and what he believed no longer had the remotest connection, what had prevailed finally was vanity, the sheer vanity of power". (Ghosh)

In his slim but not slight book-an amplified version of an article he did for the New Yorker magazine - Ghosh sets out to answer for himself the critical question: why did we really do it? The other question he examines in his quirky and at times ambling journey through a post-nuclear India and Pakistan is: would the explosions lead to nuclear deterrence or were the two countries heading towards mutual destruction? What did the explosions augur?

Countdown's answers are chilling. Nuclear bombs were status-enhancing: India could finally become a 'global player'. It was, as Ghosh writes, 'a primal scream for self-assertion'. Equally chilling is the difference in how the two countries perceive their nouveau nuclear status. While nuclear-bombs appear to be 'harmless icons of empowerment' for many Indian experts, their Pakistani counterparts fear a nuclear conflagration.

Ghosh is not playing polemicist: while his instincts have him on the side of the anti-nuclear, he starts out with an open mind. The novelist was in New York when the tests were carried out. The finger-wagging against India by countries already comfortable under their nuclear umbrellas made him 'put my own beliefs on nuclear matters aside' and see for himself the 'arguments' of both countries.

Ghosh begins, astutely enough, at the Pokhran site itself. There is a gripping tale by the villagers of the 1998 nuclear tests - and a horrifying account of the long-term consequences of the 1974 blasts, which caused cancers, rashes and natal deformities. His work 'Countdown' (1999) is a short piece of non-fiction, which questions the wisdom of politicians in following nuclear programmes in the subcontinent. He warns of the dangerous consequences of pursuing pro-nuclear policies.

Ghosh crosses the border and meets people in Pakistan, he finds starker belligerence there. In his interview, the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, very readily expresses the possibility of a nuclear war Ghosh says:

In India I met very few people including anti-nuclear activists - who believe that a nuclear war might actually occur in the sub-continent. In Pakistan the opposite was to

be. Almost everyone I met thought that nuclear war almost certainly lay ahead, somewhere down the road. (Ghosh)

Ghosh quotes a member of a group called international physicians for the prevention of nuclear war. "In the event of a nuclear explosion [...] the ones who will be alive will be jealous of the dead ones."

Ghosh cites the opinions of scientists like Raja Ramanna on the impact of a nuclear holocaust. It is indeed terrifying to imagine the destruction that such an explosion will cause in densely populated cities like Mumbai, Karachi, Delhi and Lahore. Ghosh also meets liberal activists in Pakistan like Asma Jahangir. She also feels that the two countries are engaged in an unnecessary and imaginary race. She rightly feels that the policies of the two countries are irrational and adhoc. There is lots of false propaganda. She almost sounds desperate in her hope, "I think once you break the barriers of disinformation, people's own instincts are what we have to depend on. I feel hopeful."

For Ghosh, as for any thinking Indian, India-Pakistan relations have always been intriguing. He wanted to have a first-hand experience of the people's expression. 'Countdown' is a deeply psychologically revealing analysis of the attitudes that lead to extreme animosity, abhorrence and suspicion between these two neighboring countries.

'Countdown' is partly a result of these journeys, and conversations with many hundreds of people in India, Pakistan and Nepal. In its descriptions the book is haunting and evocative; and its analyses of the compulsions behind South Asia's nuclearisation and the implications of this, are profound, deeply disturbing and, ultimately, chilling. Ghosh concludes the book with the following observation, "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."

'Countdown' is different from many other essays against the nuclearisation of South Asia in that it attempts to connect the conflict between countries to the conflict within them. And although the conflict within countries is more complex than a straight-forward face-off between the elite and the masses, each of them a monolithic and monochromatic body of population, the crucial core of Ghosh's argument remains: that the nuclearisation of the Indian sub-continent has been carried out despite, and in fact against, the will of the majority of its people.

Amitav Ghosh's tract at once fits into this tradition of anti-nuclearisation writings from South Asia, exemplified by the writings by such illustrious peace protagonists as Mahatma Gandhi, Eqbal Ahmed, Rajni Kothari, Amartya Sen, Beena Sarwar, Zafarullah Khan, M. Ramana and Arundhati Roy, and extends this tradition as well. Ghosh's approach to the issue at hand is neither purely programmatic nor purely polemical. Instead, his training as a social anthropologist prompts him to

travel to his field of inquiry the Indian subcontinent - in search of answers to the question of the need for the bomb in the region. The book, with its mix of anecdote, interviews and reflections, is almost like an account of a voyage into the psyche of the two countries, and its politicians.

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