

India, Democracy and Nuclearization: Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown*

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Abstract

By dealing with anecdotes, interviews, field surveys, the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer Amitav Ghosh in his non-fiction *Countdown* (2010) offers a bitter critique of India's engagement in the experimental nuclear explosion in 1998 which the then statesmen calculated as 'harmless icons of empowerment'. Such an attempt to be designated as a 'global player' in the worldwide power game has been criticized by Ghosh as nothing but a 'primal scream for self-assertion'. The content of the book, being tossed between argument and counter-argument, empowerment and conflagration, projects the then government's involvement in the nuclear game as nothing relevant to the nation but 'personal aggrandizement' at the mammoth sacrifices of citizens. Ghosh in his socio-political narrative captures the ironies and paradoxes that the largest democratic country in the world, i.e., India, keeps itself busy with nuclearization while the leaders of the democracy are ignoring the simple facts that could give basic necessities to the people of the nation. This article will engage in an academic discussion on India's 'vaulting ambition' of nuclearization and its futile effects on democracy – a word that celebrates the notions of 'for the people', 'by the people' and 'of the people'.

Key Words: India, Democracy, Amitav Ghosh, Nuclearization

The Sahitya Academy award-winning writer Amitav Ghosh in his field-survey-based non-fiction *Countdown* (2010) offers a bitter critique of India's engagement in the experimental nuclear explosion in 1974 (Indian Gandhi era) and in 1998 (Atal Bihari Bajpayee era) which the then statesmen calculated as 'harmless icons of empowerment'. Such an attempt to be designated as a 'global player' in the worldwide power game has been criticized by Ghosh as nothing but a 'primal scream for self-assertion'. The content of the book, being tossed between argument and counter-argument, empowerment and conflagration, projects the then government's involvement in the nuclear game as nothing relevant to the nation but 'personal aggrandizement' at the cost of the day-to-day mammoth sacrifices of citizens. This article will engage in an academic discussion on India's 'vaulting ambition' of nuclearization and its futile effects on democracy – a word that celebrates the notions of 'for the people', 'by the people' and 'of the people'. Ghosh in his socio-political narrative captures the ironies and paradoxes that the largest democratic country in the world, i.e., India, keeps itself busy with nuclearization while the leaders of the democracy are ignoring the simple facts that could give basic necessities to the people of the nation. Taking recourse to E.M. Forster's parameters of democracy in his book *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951), this article will try to map democracy prevalent in India vis-à-vis nuclearization. Ghosh's *Countdown* serves as a critical examination of the nuclearization phenomenon, particularly in the context of South Asia. Ghosh's exploration of nuclear power

transcends mere technical discourse, delving into the socio-political ramifications and ethical dilemmas posed by nuclear armament. This essay argues that Ghosh's narrative not only critiques the proliferation of nuclear weapons but also underscores the urgent need for a reevaluation of nuclear power as a means of national security and energy production. At the heart of Ghosh's argument is the paradox of nuclear power: while it is heralded as a symbol of technological advancement and national pride, it simultaneously embodies existential threats to humanity. Ghosh posits that the pursuit of nuclear capabilities, particularly in countries like India and Pakistan, is driven by a complex interplay of historical grievances, national identity, and geopolitical strategy. This duality is evident in Ghosh's analysis of the 1998 nuclear tests conducted by India, which he frames not merely as a demonstration of military prowess but as a manifestation of deep-seated anxieties stemming from colonial legacies and regional rivalries.

In the essay titled "What I believe" from the abovementioned book, Forster, against the backdrop of World War I and the social unrest, says that 'love' and 'loyalty' to an individual can 'run counter' to the claims of the state.¹ He tries to indicate that people give their consent to the government voluntarily. Forster gives 'two cheers for democracy' because it admits variety and it permits criticism: "... two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three." For that reason, another social critic, Bernard Crick, in his book *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction* (2009) observes the same type of statement: "... democracy is what the Greeks meant by 'polity' or simply political rule, a system that allows for compromises to be made between ever present conflicts of values and of interests ... so *two cheers for democracy, not three*" (92-3, emphasis added). In this way, Forster gives importance to democratic values. For example, the first and foremost value of Democracy is freedom of an individual. He makes a distinction between 'public space' and 'private space'. The only purpose of making a distinction between 'public space' and 'private space' in Democracy is to highlight that the value of individuals' freedom should not be compartmentalized between 'zones of freedom' and of 'restricted freedoms. Another value that fundamentally differentiates the democratic form of government from all other forms is that people choose/elect their representatives and every individual citizen living in the territorial boundaries of a nation-state has an equal right to participate in the election of the representatives. Another merit of Democracy is the tolerance to hear different opinions and options. Moreover, Democracy is based on the basic human values like freedom, equality and the consent of the governed.²

Following a nuclear test in 1974, the Government of India on 11th May 1998 tested five nuclear devices at a village called Khetoloi, nearly thirty miles from Pokhran. A man born and brought up in this very village, Manohar Joshi, who witnessed both events as a boy and subsequently as a grown-up man incidentally became "the first journalist in the world to learn of the test" (Ghosh 4): "On the afternoon of 11 may, he was preparing for his siesta when the ground began to shake, almost throwing him off his cot. He knew at once that this was no earthquake: this was a more powerful jolt than that of 1974. He recognized it for what it was and called his paper immediately." (Ghosh 3-4) Through the remembrance of things past, it is important to note how Joshi's narrative becomes heavily influenced by a traumatic feeling: "At about two-thirty there

was a tremendous shaking in the ground and a booming noise. They saw a great cloud of dust and black-and-white smoke shooting skywards in the distance. Cracks opened up in the walls of some of their houses. Some of them had built underground tanks, emptying them of water.” (Ghosh 5) Such a recurring sense of traumatic event and the feeling of trauma can be read in what the cultural critic Cathy Caruth terms ‘traumatic explorations in memory’.³ Before 1974 the fatal diseases like cancer were unknown in this part of the country. But after the test, diseases like cancer, skin rashes, etc., came to be a prominent issue here. In addition to that, there are further additions of strangeness not to beauty but to ugliness: “Since 1974, he said, some twenty children had been born with deformities in the limbs. Cows had developed tumours in their udders. Calves were born blind, and with their tongues and eyes attached to the wrong parts of their faces. No one had heard of such things before.” (Ghosh 6) Vis-à-vis such aftermath of deformities and abnormalities, the span of 25 years (1974 - 1998) becomes not a good advertisement for Democracy as the villagers began to believe that the only people who were benefited from these tests were ‘the politicians’, otherwise this nuclearization offered ‘no benefits to anyone else in the country’ (Ghosh 5); the situation becomes intolerable when one hears that the outsiders ‘never want to drink our water’ (Ghosh 6). The notion of caste/outcaste is a major problem in India and the Government has no intention to bombard that prevalent mental disease of casteism; rather they are busy in making another bomb that will intensify the politics of untouchability.

In his lecture titled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), the Victorian prose writer Thomas Carlyle rubbished democracy as a ‘rule of the sheep’. Almost a hundred years later, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the UK House of Commons in 1947 termed Democracy as the worst form of government. In spite of treating Democracy as not the ideal form of government, Forster values it because it is ‘less hateful’ than other contemporary forms of government; he accepts the fact that the democratic form of government is better than aristocracy or monarchy.⁴ In Ghosh’s narration, the ideal sense of Democracy is cabined, cribbed and confined – the villagers essentially become scapegoats in the hands of the politicians. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they become the veritable prisoners of a free country; they do not even have a hospital in the village. A reading of history shows us that the Partition was in fact traumatic and now the politicians of a so-called democratic country celebrate a division within the nation.⁵ The microcosmic Khetoloi and the macrocosmic India do not represent/echo each other. What is traumatic for the villagers becomes a mammoth celebration in the other parts of the country in the name of ‘nuclear euphoria’ (Ghosh 2). It is quite paradoxical that under the smug surface of nation and nationalism, the symbolic significance of empowering the nation is guided by status-driven, not *status quo*-driven.⁶ Ghosh's critique extends to the ethical implications of nuclearization. He argues that the normalization of nuclear weapons within national defense strategies fosters a culture of militarization that undermines diplomatic efforts and exacerbates tensions. The author draws attention to the moral responsibilities of nations that possess nuclear capabilities, emphasizing that the potential for catastrophic consequences necessitates a reevaluation of their role in international relations. This perspective aligns with the broader discourse on nuclear ethics, which challenges the notion that nuclear deterrence can be a viable strategy for ensuring peace.

Forster cautiously welcomes Democracy. According to him, democracy has two merits. Firstly, in Democracy, the individual is important; in that sense, it is better than any authoritarian regime. Then he emphasizes its literal meaning. Literally, Democracy signifies 'the rule of the people' (the word democracy is derived from the Greek root 'demos' which means the people; 'cracy' stands for 'rule' or 'government'). The American President Abraham Lincoln's definition of Democracy (delivered at Gattysberg, November, 1863) is very close to its literal meaning that Democracy is the government 'of the people', 'by the people' and 'for the people'. Democracy as a form of government implies that the ultimate authority of government is vested in the common people so that the public policy is made to conform to the will of the people and to serve the interests of the people. So, Forster rightly says that people are the most important in a democratic structure. Unlike a feudal state, an authoritarian state, or a meritocratic state, Democracy does not divide its citizens into the polarity of 'bosses' and the 'bossed'. In this state all individuals get equal state and equal rights because Democracy, according to Janaki Srinivasan's essay titled "Democracy", is "both a method to arrive at collective decisions and a set of values and behaviour with which people approach decision making" (Bhargava and Acharya 107). But unfortunately, standing against the ideal notion of Democracy, the approach of people of the village Khetoloi falls prey to the politicians' vanity of nuclear wishes. The proliferation of traumatic and horrific experiences does not justify the politicians' projection of nuclearization as 'crowning achievements' (Ghosh 2) that offer a 'great power status' (Ghosh 7). The ideal notion of Democracy, where state interference is not to be desired, falls flat in Khetoloi/India.⁷

In contemporary political theory, a key idea is that of deliberative democracy. It is believed that people's preferences and interests are formed independently and the political process only negotiates between the conflicting interests. Deliberation reinvents a participatory model of Democracy and the key idea is that of a dialogue. Through open participation and unlimited discourse, a better argument emerges. But we do not find any scope for deliberation or open participation in Khetoloi: "In the past ... the villagers had always tried to co-operate with the government. They hadn't publicized their complaints and they'd been careful when talking to the press. 'But now we are fed up. What benefits do we get from these tests? We don't even have a hospital here – all we've got is a health centre with one nurse.'" (Ghosh 6) Further, the villagers "refused to accept the money they were offered and demanded more." (Ghosh 5) Words like 'demand', 'negotiation' seem to have no sound in this part of a democratic country. After 11th May 1998, Pakistan also tested a nuclear device on 28 May of that very year. The obvious question is whether we are advancing towards mutual destruction. A warning from the eminent author and social activist Arundhati Roy in her oft-cited essay "The End of Imagination" comes easily to our mind: "But let's not forget that the stakes we're playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. The end of our children and our children's children." (n. pag)⁸ The other side of the coin has some other logic, as it is evident from Ghosh's conversation with K. Subrahmanyam whom Ghosh calls 'the strategic mastermind behind India's nuclear policies' (Ghosh 7): "The international system of security has been progressively brought under a global nuclear order that provides for the hegemony of the five nuclear weapons powers.

India wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order.” (Ghosh 8) India since its inception and emergence as a democratic country has faced so many problems. Even today, at the very core of day-to-day life, there are so many basic problems like poverty, unemployment, communal violence and many more. Ignoring all these issues which are directly related to everyday life, the ‘democratic’ government keeps itself busy in playing the nuclear game, which, according to Arundhati Roy, is “the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man’s challenge to God” (n. pag). Vis-à-vis such attempt of Man’s second disobedience to God, we find a world of trauma and terror.⁹ It is quite clear from this statement that the members of Parliament are busy in playing a self-destructive game that has no sense of introspection or self-assessment. Standing against this backdrop, another merit of the Forsterian definition of Democracy is that Democracy ‘allows criticism’; it encourages free discussion and free discourse which is necessary for the emergence of the truth. So he gives his faith to the parliament; according to him, “I believe in parliament ... it is a Talking Shop”. Parliament plays an important role in the liberal representative Democracy, where different people of the different regions raise their voices. These different or contradictory voices are reconciled in the ‘Talking Shop’ and finally the official decision is taken for the interest of all. Not only in India but also in other South Asian countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, Democracy seems not to be interested in becoming a ‘talking shop’. Surprisingly enough, the voices of the villagers are not echoed in the parliament.¹⁰

Roy’s assertive statement [“India’s nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people.” (n. pag)] has the potential to reclassify and revivify the accessibility of the government and the governance in a Democracy. India’s taking part in nuclearization is nothing for the people but to engage in ‘a power to intimidate’ (Ghosh 8); the enemies make the sense of Democracy a futile one. Due to the ‘increasing fragmentation of Indian politics and the resulting parliamentary crises’ (Ghosh 34), the concept and benefits of democracy have failed. In a sense, Democracy, paradoxically, becomes for the politics, by the politics and of the politics! Vis-à-vis Ghosh’s portrayal of the democratic policy-making parliament, we cannot give any cheers for democracy. India started nuclear testing in 1974 and its Silver Jubilee in the year 1998 is nothing but a journey towards the decline of Democracy.

Ghosh’s exploration of nuclear power as an energy source reveals another layer of complexity. While nuclear energy is often promoted as a solution to the pressing challenges of climate change and energy security, Ghosh highlights the inherent risks associated with nuclear technology, including environmental degradation and the potential for catastrophic accidents. He argues that the prioritization of nuclear energy over alternative renewable sources reflects a failure to engage with the broader implications of energy policy. This critique is particularly salient in the context of global climate negotiations, where the reliance on nuclear power is often presented as a panacea without adequate consideration of its long-term consequences. Thus, Ghosh’s *Countdown* serves as a profound commentary on the multifaceted nature of nuclearization. By interrogating the motivations behind nuclear armament and the ethical dilemmas it engenders, Ghosh calls for a critical reassessment of nuclear power’s role in contemporary society, which

may also be read in terms of what A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in the Introduction to his autobiography *Wings of Fire* (1999) terms “successes and setbacks of the science establishment in modern India” (xv). His work challenges readers to confront the paradoxes of nuclear technology and to advocate for a future that prioritizes peace, sustainability, and ethical responsibility over militarization and fear.

Notes:

1. I have discussed at length E.M. Forster’s conception of Democracy in my co-edited book *Non-Fictional Prose: Aspects and Prospects* (Avenel Press, 2013).
2. For the academic discussion on Democracy, one may go through - Frank Cunningham’s *Theories of Democracy* (Routledge, 2002), Anne Phillips’ *Engendering Democracy* (Polity Press, 1991), Robert Dahl’s *Democracy and Its Critics* (Yale University Press, 1989), R. Harrison’s *Democracy* (Routledge, 1994) and David Held’s *Prospects of Democracy: North, South, East, West* (Polity Press, 1993).
3. Cathy Caruth is a famous name in the field of Trauma Studies. She is widely famous for her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and for her editing venture *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
4. In the essay titled “Democracy”, Janaki Srinivasan observes: “A democratic decision is one that takes into account and reflects the wishes of the people who come under the purview of that decision.” (Bhargava and Acharya 107)
5. Such critical, marginalized situation of a native within his/her own country has been discussed in *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Minnesota Press, 1974) by George Manuel and Michael Posluns.
6. At this critical juncture, it would be appropriate to mention that Samuel P. Huntington’s widely discussed thesis *The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of World Order* (Simon and Schuster, 1996) asserts that, in the 21st century, the conflict between the world’s major civilizations would lead to warfare and international disorder.
7. In his book titled *Democracy: Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Open University Press, 1994), Anthony Arblaster thinks that in any Democracy power and authority are ultimately invested by the people of the state.
8. The idea of the parallel reading between Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy I have got from Sandip Ain’s essay “The Cult of the Bomb: Amitav Ghosh’s Countdown” (Choudhury 154-63), an essay that discusses the ‘grim reality of the situation’ (Choudhury 156) vis-à-vis India’s nuclearization.
9. As we find in John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*, Man’s ‘first disobedience’ was to eat the forbidden fruit.
10. The similar concern has been expressed by the British transitional poet Thomas Gray in his 1751 poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”: “Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast / The little tyrant of his fields withstood; / Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest, / Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.”



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