

## Amitav Ghosh as a Secular Essayist

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In the preface to his second collection of essays, *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006), Amitav Ghosh explains the origin of the title—which is a quotation from “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi” (1995)—with the necessity of talking about violent situations without engendering further violence and without mythologizing violence. In Ghosh’s words, “is it possible to write about situations of violence without allowing your work to become complicit with the subject?” (Ghosh *Incendiary Circumstances* 3). The Indian author further explains that “the ‘incendiary circumstances’ of the title have been a part of the background of [his] everyday life since [his] childhood” (3). Indeed, while the scene of the boy crossing Calcutta on a school bus in *The Shadow Lines* is entirely fictional, Ghosh found himself in a difficult predicament in that same year when his mother had given shelter to a group of refugees in the garden of their house in Dhaka. It was 1964; Amitav was eight years old when an angry mob surrounded the house, throwing stones over the wall at the Hindu refugees inside (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 204-09). The boy’s father locked him up in a room at the top of the house with an armed servant. The story appears in *In an Antique Land* (1992) and “The Greatest Sorrow” (2003), in both cases highlighting how it preceded by twenty years the anti-Sikh pogrom that took place in Delhi in 1984. Even in that circumstance, Ghosh managed to escape lynching as he hid a couple of elderly Sikhs with his friend Harisen—a story related in “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi.” On 9/11, Ghosh was in Brooklyn with his son and found himself running against the crowd to pick up his daughter at school (“September 11, 2001”). Moreover, in “At Large in Burma” (1998) the author recounts how he found himself under a shell attack when he visited Karenni camps. Surely Amitav Ghosh has direct knowledge of violence.

All the events just recalled have one thing in common: religiously fuelled violence, be it Hindus against Sikhs, as in Delhi in 1984; Muslims against Hindus, as in Dhaka in 1964; or Muslims against the West, as in 9/11. Only the case of Burma is more nuanced because, while most Karennis are indeed Christians, some of them are Buddhists, like the majoritarian Bamas. The divide between the two groups is, strictly speaking, more ethnic than religious. Writing under these circumstances puts a strain on the writer who wishes to

contribute to the peace process. Ghosh responds to the challenge of such writing in three distinctive ways: with exactitude, empathic direct involvement, and secularism. Exactitude is visible in Ghosh's data collection and their deployment in his fiction and nonfiction alike; empathic direct involvement is usually obtained by placing the author himself in the picture described and keeping a low profile; secularism consists in confining the religious discourse to the private sphere, leaving the public sphere free of dogmatisms.

### Writing with Precision

Although Ghosh's essays are not academic—like those of V.S. Naipaul, Amartya Sen, or Arundhati Roy, and unlike those of Gayatri Spivak or Dipesh Chakrabarty—exactitude is the one distinctive legacy of Ghosh's academic background. Indeed, the Bengali author left off academic writing early in his career but has yet retained some typical attitudes of this genre, namely research and data collection, and data exposure in his texts, where hardly an insight is ever offered without a piece of supporting evidence. Academic writing may have been abandoned, but it was not disowned, as Ghosh included his most noticeable academic essays in his non-fiction collection, *The Imam and the Indian*.<sup>1</sup> Ghosh explained his loss of interest in academic writing in an interview with Frederick Aldama, where he alleged that “anthropology was about abstractions, the way you make people into abstractions and make them into, as it were, statistical irregularities.” In contrast, his “real interest is in the predicament of individuals” (Aldama 86-87). In a later interview with Alessandro Vescovi, Ghosh expressed a similar idea but conceded that he “liked anthropology, [he] thought anthropology was a very interesting subject and learnt an enormous amount from it” (Vescovi 131). What then is the lesson that Ghosh has brought beyond the decision to abandon academic anthropology? My contention is that it lies in his scrupulous research. Such precision is what remains of a scientific practice that is not expressed through the assessment of field observations referring to abstract theories, but thanks to meticulous archival research, data collection, and notetaking. In other words, Ghosh conducts his field or archive work like an academic, but appears wary of academic paradigms and chooses a different medium of dissemination. His research is patent even though his genre does not entail a bibliography, as in “At Large in Burma” or “Dancing in Cambodia,” both based on a considerable amount of research in fields as diverse as history, geography, literature, political science, and anthropology.

Like V.S. Naipaul before him, Ghosh merges archival findings with live encounters. I have personally seen him discuss in four or five different languages with sociologists, migrants, and relief workers

about migration in Italy during the gestation of *Gun Island*, wondering at his compulsive note-taking. This is a habit that Ghosh first developed in Lataifa, where he carried out the fieldwork for his PhD dissertation. He mentions his note-taking in *In an Antique Land*, where he casually writes: “In the laughter that followed I got up to leave, for it was late now, and I had a long day’s notes to write out” (98). More recently, Ghosh published on his blog some of the notes from his North African travels in the early 1980s and his notes on the Irrawaddy expeditions at the time of the composition of *The Hungry Tide*, two decades later. The similarity between the notes taken on the two occasions testifies to Ghosh’s meticulousness even long after he shed the paradigms and the paraphernalia of academic writing—abstracts, notes, bibliographies, headings, etc.

Ghosh’s essayistic practice aims to reach a broader readership than academic writing usually does. Besides making the reading more compelling, avoiding academic paradigms allows Ghosh to focus on his real interest, the predicaments of individuals. He does not take his “informants” as exemplary but as a key to understanding their context. Such is for instance, the case, chosen almost randomly, of Ko Son, the captain of the Karenni guerrilla described in “At Large in Burma” (88 ff.). Ko Son is of Indian origin; his given name is Mahinder Singh, but he was born in Burma and calls himself a Burmese. In spite of his heritage, he feels that it is his duty to remain with the Karennis and fight the regime. Captain Ko Son is hardly a typical Karenni rebel; he would not fit in the “abstraction” of the ethnic resistance, but his figure is crucial in conveying the predicament of guerrilla soldiers.

Even in essays teeming with data, Ghosh makes an effort to imagine their importance on a personal level. “Countdown” (1988)—a kind of instant book written when India resumed nuclear experiments in 1988 and republished in a shorter version in *Incendiary Circumstances*—is a case in point. The essay begins with a journey to the testing site and an interview with the villagers who bore the brunt of living with radioactivity after the 1974 experiments. In the following section, the author imagines what would happen if a nuclear bomb like the one dropped on Hiroshima hit Delhi:

On detonation, a nuclear weapon releases a burst of high-energy X-rays. These cause the temperature in the immediate vicinity to rise very suddenly to tens of millions of degrees. The rise in temperature causes a fireball to form, which shoots outward in every direction, cooling as it expands. By the time it reaches the facades of North Block and South Block, it will probably have cooled to about 300,000 degrees—enough to kill every living thing within several hundred feet of the point of explosion. Those caught on open ground will evaporate; those shielded by the buildings’ thick walls will be incinerated. (96)

The description continues for some pages, pointing out which buildings would melt down and which might resist the wind pressure. The simulation of a nuclear explosion in Delhi is conducted with hard data, but it is offered to the reader like imaginative writing. It is interesting to compare this essay to the one written by Arundhati Roy on the same subject, “The End of Imagination” (1998). She is as critical of nuclear experiments as Ghosh, but rather than imagining what an explosion would be like, or describing what nuclear tests have meant for people who lived near the testing sites, she offers a sociopolitical interpretation of such experiments, tracing a connection between Shiv Sena and atomic bombs, and concluding that nuclear tests are in fact nationalist tests (9).

### Empathic Direct Involvement

The examples above may also provide an illustration for the second distinctive feature of Ghosh’s essayistic writings—the empathic direct involvement of the author in his narrative. As he talks about Captain Ko Son, Ghosh recounts under what circumstances he first met him, as he “sat panting on a rock.” The personal involvement is even greater as Ghosh realizes that his forebears must have been acquainted with those of this man:

I was disconcerted listening to Sonny in the flickering firelight. I was sure that our relatives had known one another once in Burma; his had chosen to stay and mine hadn’t. Except for a few years and a couple of turns of fate, each of us could have been in the other’s place. (89)

Not only does Ghosh meet his informant personally, describing the material situation in which this encounter takes place, he also imagines what their mutual ties might have been, and yet he avoids making himself too conspicuous—he listens and sometimes thinks to himself, but he hardly speaks. The conclusion is the quintessence of direct involvement: by comparing his position with the captain’s, Ghosh suggests that the latter’s predicament does not depend so much on himself as on the social context in which he lives. Thus the author achieves a double objective: on the one hand, he offers a vivid description of the Burmese guerrilla; on the other, he suggests that Ko Son is indeed typical in that the socio-political situation has made him what he is instead of an ordinary middle-class family man:

Sonny has paid a price for his decision to leave Loikaw. His girlfriend, a Burmese in Rangoon, gave up waiting for him and married someone else. In 1994 his mother died of a heart attack; Sonny found out months afterwards from a passing trader. She was, he said, the person he was closest to.

The student dissidents are now in their late twenties or early thirties. They had once aspired to become technicians and engineers, doctors and pharmacists. Those hopes are gone. They have no income to speak of, and their contacts with Thai society are few. (104)

Later on Ghosh discusses political strategies and pacifism with Sonny, adding a humane dimension to the political analysis:

I asked, "Have you ever thought of trying other political strategies?"  
"Of course," he said. "Do you think I like to get up in the morning and think of killing?" Killing someone from my own country, who is forced to fight by dictators? I would like to try other things—politics, lobbying. But the students chose me to command this regiment. I can't just leave them." (104)

Thanks to this dialogic technique, Ghosh achieves a threefold result: he can bring into the picture his commitment to non-violence along with Aung San Suu Kyi's, which he had quoted earlier; he can offer some motives behind the conflict; and he can describe the human predicament of guerrilla soldiers. Sonny's fascinating character foreshadows the creation of Arjun in *The Glass Palace* (2000), especially in his final encounter with Dinu.

In "Dancing in Cambodia" Ghosh tells the story of King Sisowath's visit to France with a Cambodian dancing troupe, how the dancers and the royal family lived in France, how the French welcomed them, and how they fascinated Auguste Rodin. Details of the story fill several pages of the narrative, apparently depicting a world long dead and gone. And yet the subsequent chapter quite unexpectedly begins:

In January 1993 I met a woman who had known both Princess Soumphady and King Sisowath. Her name was Chea Samy and she was said to be one of Cambodia's greatest dancers, a national treasure. She was also Pol Pot's sister-in-law. (5)<sup>2</sup>

With this paragraph, Ghosh includes his persona in the narrative as if to validate his tale and add a human dimension to archival research. Moreover, he deftly brings Pol Pot into the picture, using his personal encounter to bridge two moments in Cambodia's history that look light-years apart.

Also the above-mentioned description of a bomb hitting Delhi is an example of how the author brings himself into the narrative. The data about the explosion are provided by a friend, Kanti Bajpai—introduced as an expert on strategic studies and an anti-nuclear activist—who illustrates the havoc that such a device would wreak on the city. As a narrative strategy, this choice is rather interesting because Ghosh

and Bajpai were applying the same kind of calculations that another scholar from Princeton, M. V. Ramana, had brought to bear on Bombay (sic). Ghosh does not relay Ramana's findings but chooses to describe Bajpai's computations at length.

We set out on our journey through New Delhi armed with a copy of Ramana's seminal paper. Kanti wanted to apply the same calculations to New Delhi. [...] Ground zero, Kanti said, will probably lie somewhere near here: in all likelihood, between North and South Blocks (96).

Ghosh and his friend are not bending over a city map; they are actually walking through the streets. Discussing the resilience of New Delhi's iconic buildings at ground level is a way to bring the theoretical idea of a nuclear deflagration into everyday life. Besides, by pointing out that Mughal and English buildings would prove more resilient than modern skyscrapers, Ghosh inflicts a wound on the pride of Hindu nationalists—those who had celebrated Indian atomic “achievements” with great fanfare. However, unlike Arundhati Roy, Ghosh keeps a low profile and hardly mentions the politicians who promoted the test.

The empathic direct involvement typifies all of Ghosh's essayistic oeuvre—excluding his academic writings. Interestingly, unlike Arundhati Roy, the author never describes his emotions, even when directly involved in challenging situations. The reader's sympathy is sought through this emotional reticence, which invites the reader to imagine how one would feel and react in such a situation. Ghosh shares his intuitions, views, opinions, but not his feelings. *The Great Derangement*, for example, teems with autobiographical references, from Ghosh's narrow escape in North Delhi when an unprecedented cyclone hit the streets where he was taking a stroll to the reference to his elderly mother, whom he wanted to persuade to move to an area of Kolkata less prone to hydrogeological risks, but the book never gives vent to any passion.

## Secularism

While precision and direct involvement have remained distinctive hallmarks of Ghosh's non-fiction throughout his career, his secularism has undergone a delicate evolution, its contours becoming narrower. His writing has not turned more religious—certainly not more Hindu—but it has detached itself from the secular tenets of liberal rationalism, retaining only the idea of secularism as tolerance.

The word “secular,” which comes from the Latin *saeculum* and means the lease of life allotted to humans, has acquired new meanings over time without entirely obliterating the previous ones. Historically, in the West since the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648),

secularism has entailed that the religious and political authorities must not interfere with each other. It follows that different subjects—today we would say citizens—may profess different religions without sanctions from the state. Thus, a secular state is considered tolerant in that it grants citizenship regardless of religious affiliation. While in the early seventeenth century a secular state would accept religious interference in matters such as taxation and territorial policy, in the eighteenth century the notion of secularism came to cover every state decision and political debate. Political thinkers such as John Locke (1632-1704) translated a principle born out of practice and common sense into a philosophical tenet, merging rationalism and secularism. Secularism came to be thought of as the best way to preside over both political debates and polities. Religion and public life became more distinct than ever before, with religion remaining a personal matter.

At the time of the American Declaration of Independence, religious liberals such as the Baptists or the Quakers agreed with secular liberals like Thomas Jefferson in advocating freedom of cult and non-interference between the state and religions (Roover). Consequently, the First Amendment in 1791 reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof.” The principle of a modern State—as opposed to medieval ones—being equidistant from religious confessions was turned into practice and would find enthusiastic imitators in other political cultures, such as Turkey in 1920, and India in 1947 (Copland 13). Secularism was firmly welded to the idea of modern and liberal democracy.

When the notion of secularism reached India at the time of the anti-colonial struggle, the word was heavily loaded with historical and philosophical meanings. Among the former, the idea that the Church should not interfere with the affairs of the State made little sense in India and therefore provoked little debate. More significant was the notion that all religions should be “tolerated,” although not supported by the State. This religious pluralism merged with an Indian tradition of secular tolerance, which goes back to the times of Ashoka and Akbar (Sen “Inequality” 35; Thapar). Nonetheless, secularism was mostly equated with modernity and to this day, the word “secularism” has retained a positive connotation (Kesavan 24). Even the Hindu parties that criticize the secular policy of the former governments do not attack secularism per se but accuse the adversaries of implementing a “pseudo-secularism” favoring religious minorities over Hindus (Balakrishna; Chatterjee; Sen “Secularism and Its Discontents”). As for the philosophical notions attached to the idea of secularism, they were hardly ever discussed outside intellectual circles but have been the target of non-fundamentalist liberal intellectuals like Ashis Nandy and T.N. Madan. They highlight the connection between secularism and Protestantism and blame the tyranny of rationalism that

it implies. Finally, they denounce the ideology of secularism, which often attacks religion (not only fundamentalism) from the rhetorical vantage point of modernity. Furthermore, the idea that religiosity should be restricted to the personal sphere makes little sense for Hinduism, which is often described as a way of life covering every daily activity—including, say, sports or cooking together with rituals (Franci).

Thus, thanks primarily to the influence of Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar—the chief architects of the Indian Constitution—in post-Partition India, secularism appeared to be the most viable solution to prevent communal tensions and grant equality to all Indian citizens. Indian socialists and liberals believed that a secular attitude would guarantee a peaceful transition towards modernity. Secularism became the antonym of religious animosity, and as such, it was earnestly endorsed by many young intellectuals. The primary meaning of secularism in India is tolerance and equidistance from religions; the concept is closer to religious pluralism than atheism. Indeed, while a secular Western state would behave as if the legislator were agnostic, in India, secularism came to mean that no religion should be preferred over others. Nehru thought this was a passing phase on the way to a more radical (Western) form of secularism.

According to most commentators (see, for instance, Kesavan, Madan, Nandy, Thapar), in modern India the word “secularism” carries at least two meanings. The first is also common in the West and refers to the separation of the public and religious spheres, asserting that religions should not interfere with democratic politics and should not receive state support. Here, the meaning of “secular” is the opposite of “religious” or even “irrational.” The second meaning is vaguer, and it would be vain to look it up in a dictionary. Nandy maintains that this is the “opposite of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and fanaticism” (35); Rajeev Bhargabha equates it with freedom and the protection of minorities. These two connotations, however, are not always distinct, and debates often fail to recognize this double meaning, leading to misunderstandings and misconceptions (Bhargabha). In 1972, Mushir-Ul-Haq wrote, “For the last two decades we have been discussing about secularism, yet the term remains vague and ambiguous” (quoted in De Rooer, 32); a statement confirmed twenty-three years later by M. M. Sankhdher, who wrote: “Such a commonplace concept as secularism, with which the man of the street is so familiar [...], tends to acquire the character of a riddle, a puzzle, an enigma among the intelligentsia” (quoted in De Rooer 32). In India, the meanings of the word “secular” are often unclear and ambiguous; as a result, those who defend this notion for its tolerance may feel compelled by the ongoing debate to defend its other historical meanings, often dividing a secular public identity from a private religious one. Amartya Sen, towards the



end of his essay “Secularism and its Discontents” (2006), uses the phrase “political secularism” (314). Unfortunately, he does not expound on the subject and does not oppose political to any other adjective; however, one may infer that Sen was possibly envisaging a contrast between “political” and “philosophical” secularism. In theory, supporting the former does not entail supporting the latter, but since the distinction is still unclear, the debate often considers both forms as one.

Ghosh’s initial enthusiasm about secularism is not unique to his generation. Talking about non-academic essayists, V.S. Naipaul has been writing in much the same vein without ever trying to disrupt Western epistemology. The Trinidadian writer addresses Hinduism and Islamism with the same critical detachment. Such attitude is particularly evident in Naipaul’s Indian trilogy (*An Area of Darkness*, 1964; *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, 1976; and *A Million Mutinies*, 1990) and his lengthy essays on the sociology of Islam (*Among the Believers*, 1981; and *Beyond Belief*, 1980). Naipaul never felt personally responsible for the construction of Indianness after Independence; his position was that of an observer rather than someone involved in the process. This has allowed for an insightful, if cynical, critique of the modern Indian state. His secularism was philosophical rather than political, epistemological rather than ethical. At the other end of the spectrum, Arundhati Roy writes passionately with the sole purpose of indicting social injustice. She considers secularism a value *per se* and utilizes it to offer ethical judgments. This is the case with her controversial essay “The Doctor and the Saint: The Gandhi-Ambedkar Debate” (2014), where she openly accuses Gandhi of racism (in South Africa) and of hindering social progress in India. Unlike Ghosh, Roy often holds actual people accountable for the evil she denounces, which often implicates her in lawsuits. The most popular contemporary Indian essayist is probably Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. His bestseller, *The Argumentative Indian* (2006), advocates that India has had a long tradition of secular debates and that it should be valued as a resource. His position is both political and philosophical. Amitav Ghosh wrote in a vein not dissimilar from Sen’s until he turned to the climate crisis.

Amitav Ghosh has never espoused secularism to the point of criticizing any religion, but he certainly believes in secularism as a way to prevent communalism and fanaticism. In other words, he has always been in favor of political secularism, but his position on philosophical secularism has been more nuanced and subject to change. We can distinguish at least two phases: in his essays preceding *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh also accepted the rationalism that provides the basis for secularism, while this rationalism is questioned in *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh appears as a champion of secularism in two essays of his that deal with fanaticism—“The

Fundamentalist Challenge” (1995) and “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi.” In the latter, Ghosh claims that he had not been an “uncritical admirer” of Mrs. Gandhi, but her death brought to mind some of “her qualities that were taken for granted: her fortitude, her dignity, her physical courage, her endurance” (189). Such qualities are arguably linked to her unwavering public secularism. Indeed, it was Indira Gandhi who added the word “secular” to the Indian Constitution in 1976, when the Indian “sovereign democratic republic” became the Indian “sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic.” According to an anecdote that gained wide circulation in the 1980s, Indira Gandhi had been warned of the dubious reliability of her Sikh bodyguards. Someone even recommended replacing them with non-Sikhs masked as Sikhs, but the Prime Minister refused alleging that, as the leader of a secular country, she could not show public distrust in the Sikhs as a group. Ghosh himself took a similar risk when he decided to join a demonstration that peacefully confronted the rioters in Delhi. According to his chronicle, they faced a crowd of thugs armed with bicycle chains and iron rods and were bracing for the worst when

suddenly all women in our group—and the women made up more than half of the group’s numbers—stepped out and surrounded the men; their saris and kameezes became thin, fluttering barrier, a wall around us. They turned to face the approaching men, challenging them, daring them to attack.

The thugs took a few more steps toward us and then faltered, confused. A moment later, they were gone. (199)

This daring act of defiance clearly testifies to a commitment to secularism as tolerance. The demonstration was not upholding one party against another, but a world picture of secular non-violence against fundamentalist violence.

Ghosh’s secularism also surfaces in *In an Antique Land*. Here, the young anthropologist is often questioned and sometimes teased by the inhabitants of Lataifa on account of his Hinduism. Ghosh appears unable to define his position and tries desperately to change the subject. One exchange with Ustaz Mustafa is worth quoting:

*‘I was born a Hindu,’ I said reluctantly, for if I had a religious identity at all it was largely by default.*

There was a long silence during which I tried hard to think of an arresting opening line that would lead the conversation towards some bucolic, agricultural subject. But the moment passed, and in a troubled voice Ustaz Mustafa said: ‘What is this “Hinduki” thing? I have heard of it before and I don’t understand it. If it is not Christianity nor Judaism nor Islam what can it be? Who are its prophets?’

‘It’s not like that,’ I said. ‘*There aren’t any prophets...*’ (47; emphasis added)

Here Ghosh is speaking to his readers—the educated world elite—but his reported speech is intended for the *fellaheens*. In both cases, he chooses his words very carefully, avoiding any “monolithic dichotomy” (De Capitani) between himself and *fellaheens*, and himself and his non-secular readers. So he says that he “was born a Hindu” to Ustaz Mustafa and that his religious identity is “largely by default” to his educated readers. He deftly avoids any reference to spirituality, let alone worship. Ghosh flatly refuses to discuss Hinduism or, for that matter, even secularism. His answer that there are no Hindu prophets is technically correct, but it is not precise when it comes to discussing it with the *fellaheens*; Ghosh might have argued that Hinduism recognizes *gurus* and *rishis*, who wrote holy books. He could have underlined the analogies between Hinduism and Islam, could have spoken about *sufi* mystics and the bhakti tradition. But he preferred that his public persona would not engage in theological discussions, and he appears loath even to assume a secular stance publicly. This ambiguity is evident in “The Imam and the Indian” and more generally in *In an Antique Land*.

Ghosh’s secular stance and refusal to engage in religious debates determine the failure of his encounter with the Imam, recounted both in *In an Antique Land* and in “The Imam and the Indian.” According to what he says in these texts, he became interested in the Imam because of his popularity and because he practised traditional medicine. While the curiosity to meet a popular man may be human as well as anthropological, the interest in his medical art is merely professional. Ghosh wants to hear about traditional medicine to add data to his dissertation, not to be cured of something nor to improve his medical knowledge. From the start, his attitude is entirely rationalistic and secular. Ghosh acknowledges this in “The Imam and the Indian”—but not in *In an Antique Land*—admitting that he had “inflicted” (1) himself upon the Imam, which could explain what happened later. While the Imam positively declines to discuss traditional medicine, which, he admits, no one ever wants anymore, he challenges Ghosh to defend Hinduism, which “the Indian” refuses to do—possibly for similar reasons. Eventually, they end up contending about whose country has the most lethal weapons. Ghosh famously commented that he and the Imam felt like “delegates from two superseded civilisations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence” (236). The comment that follows, however, is even more poignant. Ghosh seems to realize that the dialogue between himself and the Imam was made impossible by their endorsement of Western paradigms:

the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences. We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible

to speak, as Ben Yiju or his Slave, or any one of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done: of things that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development. (236-37; emphasis added)

Young Ghosh was not ready to negotiate with the Imam because the language of negotiation that his Indian education had given him was that of secularism, which the Imam rejects or ignores. However, to Ghosh renouncing secularism would have meant renouncing the one tool that had provided a shared basis for discussion between Hindus and Muslims in India after the Partition, and that had allowed him to discuss on equal terms with his teachers at Oxford. Clearly, he was not ready to do it. Ghosh therefore blames Western rationalism and Western colonial policy, just as he had earlier blamed the Arabic language for its inability to explain the rationale behind cremation.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, at that point, his attitude towards secularism and religion was not completely established.

In “The Fundamentalist Challenge,” Ghosh seems to distance himself from an antireligious (philosophical) interpretation of secularism while retaining the idea of religious tolerance (political). The essay begins by acknowledging different standpoints on religion:

With the benefit of hindsight, I am ever more astonished by the degree to which, over the course of this century, religion has been reinvented as its own antithesis. At much the same time that one stream within modernism created a *straw version of religion as a cloak of benighted ignorance* that had to be destroyed with the weapons of literary, artistic, and scientific progressivism, another stream within this same movement created a no less fantastic version of religion as a *bulwark against the dehumanisation of contemporary life*. (268; emphasis added)

Ghosh, while proclaiming his equidistance, seems more willing to accept religion as such a “bulwark,” and he would even accept a religious state if it were not for the past negative experiences:

In principle, it is not unreasonable that a population should have the right to live under religious law, with the proper democratic safeguards. But in practice, in contemporary societies, when such laws are instituted, they almost invariably become instruments of majoritarian domination. (277)

However, Ghosh contends, the fault lies not with religions themselves, which he considers inherently positive, but with an appropriation of religious identity on the part of nationalist and supremacist parties. In this essay, Ghosh explains that fundamentalism and nationalism have very little to do with religion as such:

the rhetoric of religious extremism is everywhere centered on issues that would have been regarded as profane, or worldly, or

largely secular, a few generations ago: issues of state power, control of the bureaucracy, school curricula, the army, the law courts, banks, and other such institutions.

[...]

There is also much evidence to show that as the concerns of the major religions have grown more and more sociological, their doctrines and institutions have also increasingly converged. Yet while we speak of doctrine, we are still within a domain that is recognisably religious. But the truth is that in those areas of the world that are currently beset by religious turmoil, we very rarely hear anyone speak of doctrine or faith. (Ghosh, "Fundamentalist Challenge" 271)

Moreover, Ghosh contends, the language of religious hatred does not belong to the spiritual domain; it is the language of "more incendiary sources, the language of quantity, of numbers, of statistics" (271)—in short, the language of rationalism, whereby majorities have always tried to thwart the rights of minorities. The essay ends on an ambiguous note which criticizes modernity while offering religions a chance: we must be prepared to contend with religions that have become more sociological than spiritual, but we can hope that this is just a passing phase:

Still, I, for one, have swum too long in pre-postmodernist currents to accept that some part of the effort that human culture has so long invested in matters of the spirit will not, somehow, survive. (286)

Eventually, Ghosh seems to consider religions a world heritage that should be somehow protected. One might say that he is so secular that he cannot bring himself to uphold secularism over religions, or one can argue that Ghosh's secularism is typically Indian: it does not reject religions but, on the contrary, is tolerant and values religious diversity. The subject of religion, however, remains fraught, as Ghosh admits in an interview with Anshuman Mondal in 2010. The scholar observed that Ghosh's work appears more sympathetic to religion, especially in its popular forms, than that of many of his "peers and contemporaries." Amitav Ghosh begins his answer in a very trenchant way, but eventually articulates the same thought expressed at the end of "The Fundamentalist Challenge":

It's interesting that you ask that question because, at this particular moment in time, I feel incredibly hostile to religion. We're living at a time when our world is being torn apart by these things which are not religion itself, but some sort of politicised version of a religious belief. But, on the other hand, I grew up in a family of very believing people and I can't ignore that fact. No one who lives in India, no one who has any real connection with India, can ignore that sort of religious feeling. In fact, I don't know if you would even call it religion—it's just a powerful sense of there being something other than the material world that surrounds you. (Boehmer and Mondal 35)

In his question, Mondal suggests that this sympathy for religions may be a residue of Ghosh's anthropological training, but the novelist does not follow this cue. On the contrary, he connects his sensibility to something beyond the material world through his Indian heritage. Thus he distinguishes between religion, which he now regards as a dangerous sociological construct, and anti-materialism, which was once a component of religion and which he regards as positive. Ghosh's decision to offer his own poetic version of the legend of Bon Bibi in his recent *Jungle Nama* (2021) is consistent with the interest in popular religion pointed out by Mondal.

However, before returning to the Sundarbans, Ghosh worked at length on the Opium Wars, developing the conviction that Western rationalism and the Enlightenment provided the basis for colonialism and racism, an idea further elaborated in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2022). Furthermore, his research on the origin of the carbon economy and the mentality behind the denial of climate change led him to distrust rationalism and the secularism it has brought about. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh criticizes the document that has come out of the Paris agreement because it fails to address the deeper causes of climate change. Indeed, the writer contends, that document is still imbued with rationalism and colonial rapacity. The underlying idea is that climate change may be overcome with an unwarranted technological effort rather than by calling for a change in our attitudes towards the planet; climate justice is never mentioned. By contrast, Ghosh praises another document published the same year—Pope Francis's "*Laudato si'*." The encyclical letter stands out for its concreteness and ability to address the behaviours and mentalities behind climate change. The book closes on the hopeful note that religions may be able to mobilize more people and resources than secular activists.

Appreciation of *Laudato si'*—also reiterated in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2022)—is not the only departure from secularism in *The Great Derangement*. Consistent with his critique of materialism, throughout his essay on climate change Ghosh often hints at non-rationalistic and non-secular approaches to nature. Ghosh does not openly endorse antiseccularism but suggests that non-human entities must be able to communicate with the human mind:

Can the timing of this renewed recognition be mere coincidence, or is the synchronicity an indication that there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought? And if that were so, could it not also be said that the *earth has itself intervened to revise those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being?* (31; our emphasis)

This possibility, Ghosh further adds, is uncanny, but it is not the most striking way in which climate change challenges Enlightenment ideas.

His reflections upon the relationship between humans and non-human entities have clarified Ghosh's attitude towards secularism. He accepts some of its connotations—tolerance and distrust for politically driven religion—but refuses both radical secularism and the rationalism that engendered it. He welcomes secularism when it entails a plurality of religious views or acts as a censor of fundamentalism, but he refuses it when it coincides with a materialistic approach to the world, especially the natural one. By materialistic, I refer to the capitalistic notion that the earth is inert and there to be exploited by the human species. With the benefit of hindsight, this distinction, although somehow blurred, can be traced back to his earlier essays and can be described as a characteristic of Ghosh's thought.

### Conclusive Remarks

Although Naipaul's non-fiction set a much-valued example for young Amitav Ghosh, the latter has downplayed Naipaul's rationalism to fit a more humane and empathic dimension. Indeed, Amitav Ghosh wrote in a vein not dissimilar from Amartya Sen's until he turned to the climate crisis. Reflection on this subject has pushed Ghosh to disavow rationalism and secularism and to comprehend vitalistic insights coming from different parts of the world. He never subscribes to the elites' religion but rather to the vitalism of those who are closer to the earth and therefore know it best.<sup>4</sup> *The Great Derangement*—written after a lifetime of speculations on Western epistemologies that informed novels like *The Calcutta Chromosome* (Vescovi; Garofalo) and *The Hungry Tide* (Vescovi; Amitav Ghosh)—contains a stark critique of Western epistemology and science, which have departed from humanistic speculation and turned to the logic of capital and profit. This departure is consistent with a Benthamite philosophy, which was initiated by the Enlightenment. The latter has sharply divided sentient humans from the rest of the universe, giving the former a right to exploit the latter—and sometimes other races as well. Ghosh challenges the notion that humans are the only sentient beings and that empirical rationalist science is the only way to knowledge. On the contrary, both in his fiction and nonfiction since *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh upholds shamanic and religious approaches to the mystery of nature. In particular, in *The Nutmeg's Curse* and his recent fable *The Living Mountain* (2022), Ghosh defends supernatural approaches as a key to understanding and respecting nature, as it appears clear that Western greedy secular rationalism has brought about an unprecedented catastrophe. Ghosh turns to the shamanic, non-rationalistic understanding of the relationship with the earth, made of respect and humility (*Nutmeg's Curse* 242)—something the votaries of progress and upper-class religions entirely lack. Thus, in *Nutmeg's*

*Curse*, he writes extensively about the overlooked resources of traditional wisdom. Here is an example:

[T]here can be no doubt that experts and scientists have a great deal to offer, and it would clearly be self-defeating to suggest that they have no role to play in confronting a crisis that science has itself, in no small part, been responsible for creating. But it would be similarly self-defeating to reject the political ideas of someone like Davi Kopenawa [a Brazilian ecologist shaman to whom Ghosh devotes several pages] merely because they are not founded on the mechanistic paradigms of official modernity, and may therefore offer the temptation (to those who subscribe to linear conceptions of time) to brush them aside as “primitivist” or “romantic” or “atavistic.” But the planetary crisis has done away with those linear conceptions of time; it is evident today that humanity is in an era where many different axes of time interpenetrate and exist alongside each other. Thus Kopenawa, like many others who are actively resisting the onslaught of extractive industries in remote forests, may in many ways be more “advanced” in his understanding of the planetary crisis than an academic in a tranquil Western university town (228-9).

Never before had Ghosh disowned the epistemology of rationalism and secularism so vocally.

#### Notes

1. I am referring to “The Relations of Envy in an Egyptian Village,” “The Slave of the MS. H.6,” “Categories of Labour and the Orientation of Fella Economy,” and “The Global Reservation: Notes toward an Ethnography of International Peacekeeping” all included in *The Imam and the Indian*.

2. In the version of “Dancing in Cambodia” published in *Incendiary Circumstances* the text is slightly different: “I only (sic) once met someone who had known both Princess Soumphadi and King Sisowath. Her name was Chea Samy, and she was said to be one of the greatest dancers in Cambodia, a national treasure. She was Pol Pot’s sister-in-law” (228).

3. “My heart sank: this was a question I encountered almost daily, and since I had not succeeded in finding a word such as ‘cremate’ in Arabic, I knew I would have to give my assent to the term that Khamees had used: the verb ‘to burn’, which was the word for what happened to firewood and straw and the eternally damned” (*In An Antique Land*, p. 168).

4. His appreciation of Pope Francis may look like an exception, but in fact Ghosh never praises or defends Roman Catholicism, he focuses only on the environmental commitment of the pontiff.



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