

Politicization vs Social Reality in Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown*

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Abstract

Countdown is a non-fictional work written by the most ever time successful commentator of India, Amitav Ghosh which is a comprehensive account of his journeys towards Pokhran, Siachen, Pakistan and Nepal. It provides a detailed description of fatal consequences of nuclear explosion that knock out the peace, prosperity and sustainability of people. It is clear that India has done nuclear explosion in order to become a global player and especially for status-enhancement in international politics. Ghosh writes nuclearisation as "a primal stream for self-assertion". He satirically criticizes the arrogance and dominance of politics and questions their malpractices for attaining self-motives. The dreadful tales of villagers near the Pokhran area exemplified the deliberative ignorance of political leaders over long term implications of nuclear explosions. By pointing out the political game in the name of defence security, Ghosh invites readers to call for peace and prosperity out of love and not by warfare.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *Countdown*, politics, social reality, communitarianism, common good, human rights

Introduction

Nuclear proliferation refers to a quantitative and qualitative increase in nuclear weapons and their spread to various countries (Basu Rumki 140). During the Second World War, the US developed and dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The whole world was shocked for its huge devastation and its disastrous capabilities. The emergence of nuclear weapons caused a big impact on the nature of international relations later on. Other nations tried to develop nuclear weapons quickly, as it gave a great boost to national power while acting as a deterrent (Basu 140). After the US, USSR was successful in preparing nuclear weapons. Subsequently, countries such as the UK, France, China, Israel, South Africa and so on developed nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear nations became weak and defenceless. This insecurity led to further growth of nuclear weapons and the discriminatory treaties like NPT and CTBT introduced by nuclear powerful nations in order to stop the adoption of nuclear weapons by more nations became titular.

India-Pak conflict is not just part of history but an ongoing process even today. Daily we are familiar hearing the death of many soldiers at each border. India's nuclear test has been considered as one of the greatest achievements in this political milieu. In 1974, India became the sixth nuclear nation in the world. India developed nuclear weapon capability by carrying out five underground nuclear tests at Pokhran on 11 and 13 May 1998. Seventeen days later Pakistan tested nuclear devices of its own. But the fact is that the actual interest of common people and their pathetic plight has been completely neglected in the process of politicization in the name of common good. When the so-called 'Indians' enjoy the triumph of war and the success of nuclear tests, the hidden reality is missed.

Analysis

Countdown is a non-fictional work written by the most ever time successful commentator of India, Amitav Ghosh which is a comprehensive account of his journeys towards Pokhran, Siachen, Pakistan and Nepal. His conversation with various people living in these areas and his description of their grief and depressive living condition awaken the mind of readers with a question; 'why nuclearisation?' It is clear that India has done nuclear explosion in order to become a global player and especially for status-enhancement in international politics. Ghosh writes nuclearisation as "a primal stream for self-assertion". He satirically criticizes the arrogance and dominance of politics and explains they never care for the peace and prosperity of people instead they aim to attain a global status as a powerful nation. The dreadful tales of villagers near the Pokhran area exemplified the deliberative ignorance of political leaders over long term implications of nuclear explosions.

The whole of India was celebrating the success of Operation Shakti with so much pride. Now 11 May is remembered as 'National Technology Day' and we celebrate its glory believing it as a milestone in the field of defence technology. But the villagers near Pokhran were gloomy and sad about it. Because they knew they are the victims who had to suffer all the after-effects of these blasts. The theme of last year National Technology Day, the day which commemorate Nuclear Test fire, is "Science and Technology for sustainable future". Ironically, 21 years ago on this day the sustainability of the people of Pokhran was obliterated. *Countdown* provided a horrifying and awful account of long-term consequences of 1974 explosions which caused cancer, skin rashes, etc., to the villagers. In the conversations with Ghosh, they made it clear that before 1974, they never heard of a disease called 'cancer'. Thereafter most of the babies born with deformities and cancer, skin rashes and sores became common among the people. Even grasses were filled with radioactivity. Thus, animals like cow and goat also had to suffer from similar diseases. But the ironic thing is that when people there suffered from health hazards, dust at the blast area was distributed all over the country to enjoy the glory of a successful explosion. In order to shut down the voice of protesters, government officials had come up with some sums of money for compensation which never compensated their loss.

Politics has been defined as a process of interaction between politics and different components of the social system. While the liberal view of politics insists on the rights of the individual, communitarianism focuses on his duties and obligations. It seeks to restore the broken bond between the individual and society. It makes the individual realize that he owes his existence and personality to society. Instead of seeking their self-interests, they should serve their interest by serving the common interest. India has taken a communitarian perspective in the system of politics and most of the actions of government are justified under the concept of common good. Aristotle, the early proponent of this concept believed that the state exists to promote moral objectives, justice and the common good. But the idea of the common good is frequently invoked in order to focus on certain political demands, decisions or policy measures like India's nuclear explosion. Politicians became successful in making people believe that for the good of the majority, injustice against minority can be justified. Some writers like John Rawls has criticized this view stating that if the minority is made to suffer in the name of promoting the so-called general happiness, it would be against the spirit of the common good (Gaubha.546-547). The ironic statement made by a villager; "even the people who come to tell us that everything is safe won't touch our water' amply shows the depth of distress the villagers had to suffer in the name of common good".

Smiling Buddha of 1974 and Operation Shakti of 1998 had been etched in history as two turning points in India's scientific progress. The then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced that nuclear bomb tests definitely help to prevent nuclear threats and blackmails in future. Moreover, it placed India in the elite club of nuclear nations, and it is a watershed moment for the colonized minds. Nuclear explosion that led to the death of thousands of people in Japan ironically stands for world peace. And in the process, the peace and prosperity of minority getting lost have been completely ignored.

Today 'human rights' has become an important aspect of civic life. Human rights are those rights to which all human beings, per se are entitled and can lay claims upon in society. The politics of human rights intervention is a debated topic. Until recent decades, it was taken for granted that government behaviour towards its own citizens falls within the purview of domestic jurisdiction. But after the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, International agencies like the UN and NGO's follow a new concept of 'crimes against humanity'. The concept states that if the defensive actions cause negative impacts on the lives of citizens even if it is done by the order of superiors in the political or military hierarchy, they held accountable by the world community and humanitarian crisis can be questioned (Basu 349). But Countdown exhibits that international laws exist only for the namesake. Except for certain sanctions put by nuclear power nations, nobody questioned the humanitarian crisis caused by Pokhran nuclear tests.

Ghosh's encounter with some Indian soldiers at Siachen made it clear that the military has

a minimum role in the nuclear process. India-Pak-China conflict at Siachen is one of the greatest regional threats India face since independence. Ghosh explains the total cost of Siachen conflict is probably the same as that of nuclear programmes of India and Pakistan combined together. Further, he states that "if the money spent on the glacier were to be divided up and handed out to the people of India and Pakistan, every household in both countries would be able to go out and buy a new cooking stove or a bicycle (30)." But the fact is that politicians become stingy in the allocation and distribution of necessary resources to people rather they focus on spending infinite money for national security and prestige. 1992 agreement between India and Pakistan reached a simultaneous disengagement from Siachen. But it was violated by India itself as diplomats get the instruction of top politicians that 'a retreat from Siachen will look bad in an election year (30)'. Many elections came and went thereafter, leaving the soldiers still at their posts. Ghosh's conversations with soldiers at Siachen confirm that nobody actually wants a solution either on the issue of disengagement from each border or the issue of daily bloodshed. Because then political leaders can't come up with attacks and surgical strikes to gain the attention and liking of people.

Politicization in the name of India-Pak conflict is motivated mainly by concerns for policy as well as to satisfy demands for patronage. This study of politicization provides insight into the fundamental tension between Indian and Pakistan politics. Even after achieving a fully functioning democratic structure, both the countries fail to leave their colonial legacy in their administrative system. It is important to note that politicization in administration mainly by political actors is not to gain efficiency or to increase effectiveness but in order to use the measures for political and personal gains. When Ghosh was in Pakistan, he came to hear about the announcement made by the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif about his intention of amending the constitution of Pakistan to replace the current legal system with Shari'a, the corpus of Islamic law. Later, Ghosh's encounter with Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the leader of the Jam'at-e-Islami provided a hidden intention behind this move. The government was weak and suffering with economic and political crisis. At this point, they had to divert the attention of people and had to gain more powers.

"the Prime Minister wants still more powers. These are all corrupt people. What they've done is loot and pillage and that's what they're still busy doing...They've done this only to divert attention" (Ghosh 41).

Politicization of religion is a risky and highly perilous aspect. The intrusion of religion and religious orthodoxy into the politics of Pakistan is considered an extreme threat in the opinion of Asma Jahangir, Pakistan's leading human rights lawyer. She states that, "fanaticism here (Pakistan) brings fanaticism in India (53)". She also made a comment that anyone who proposes orthodox Islam in Pakistan is actually strengthening the hands of orthodox religious parties in India.

The main issue identified by Ghosh is that 'the political leadership has refused to break out

of its colonial mould (33).¹ They allowed the administrative structure of colonial rule that designed to oppress, exploit and suppress people to remain as such. The colonial mind stayed on and the only difference is that British rule has been alternated by politicians. *Countdown* pointed out many malpractices done by both Indian and Pakistan political leaders which must be annihilated for the real peace and prosperity of people as well as nation. Ghosh reminds us that it is high time to get away from the politicization especially on administration and policy matters. He further reminds the fellow citizens the need of resolving the issues peacefully rather than by using violence.

Work Cited

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