Continuing Saga of Asia’s Marginalized

Flood of Fire
By Amitav Ghosh
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Reviewed by Salil Tripathi

FIVE MONTHS before it won independence in August 1947, India hosted a conference in New Delhi that brought together leaders from Indonesia, Tibet, Burma, Malaya, Israel, Palestine and other Asian countries. World War II had ended, and with it the colonial era would be soon to end. A new Asia would rise, rediscovering its voice.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who would become India’s first prime minister a few months later, said at the conference: “Asia is again finding herself … one of the notable consequences of the European domination of Asia has been the isolation of the countries of Asia from one another … Today this isolation is breaking down … This conference is significant as an expression of that deeper urge of the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted … In this conference and in this work there are no leaders and no followers. All countries of Asia have to meet together in a common task.”

The spirit persisted in Bandung, Indonesia, a decade later, and it found form as the Non-Aligned Movement. Neither siding with the Communist Bloc, nor finding common cause with the capitalist democracies, the Non-Aligned countries (which would include African and Latin American countries) thought they would forge their own third way. Neither right nor left; neither east nor west — that was the aspiration. But in fact, the non-aligned movement became a talking shop usually taking the pro-Soviet line. In Asia, the Vietnam War created its own dynamic, and Southeast Asian countries worried about the spread of communism allied with the United States and formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), accepting the American security umbrella and investment in return for getting access to American and western markets as they exported their way out of poverty. India, among the standard-bearers of non-alignment, and often pro-Soviet, remained outside the frame.

India and Southeast Asia — and by extension, East Asia — had ceased to look at the world with the same lens. It was only in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War that India deregulated its economy. Then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao toured Southeast Asia. I was a reporter in Singapore in those years and remember Rao trying to recapture Nehruvian magic by speaking of commonalities. But the region was marching to a different tune, aligning itself more closely across the Pacific with the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also wooed the region, trying to reignite the flame under the Look East policy. But if the region is looking towards India more warmly, it has less to do with Indian overtures or its economic potential and more to do with the region’s desire to balance the influence of China.

Amid this geopolitical wayang kulit, as the Indonesian dance of shadow-puppetry is called, what is being forgotten are India’s older links with Asia. Indeed those go back to India’s oldest links with Asia. Indeed those go back to India’s biggest export to the region, the spread of Buddhism, even as the proportion of Buddhists in India has continued to decline. As of the 2011 census, there are 8.4 million Buddhists in India, about 0.7 percent of the population. But it is not only that; Islam came to Southeast Asia via seafaring traders from India, and many countries in the region have exceptional architecture, some going back a thousand years, of Hindu and Buddhist temples — Prambanan, Borobudur and Balinese temples in Indonesia, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and many other temples inspired by Indic influences in Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Sanskrit epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are understood, appreciated, and loved in this region; the dances, arts and sculpture of the region are shaped by the stories of Rama and Sita. Early last century, Indians reached out to China too — a physician called Dwarkanath Kotnis went to China during the Sino-Japanese war and pro-
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back-breaking work, and refusing to assimilate. And Indians built the ships in which the empire’s traders came to ports and subjugated local rulers. Indians produced the opium that kept China hooked on the drug, leading to its humiliation. Those are unpleasant stories. That is not the past of which Indians like to be reminded. But those stories are part of the lived experiences for many in East Asia. And it has now taken Amitav Ghosh, one of India’s most important storytellers, to turn his gaze on Indians in India’s “near abroad.” With Flood of Fire, Ghosh has brought to an end the Ibis trilogy, which began seven years ago with Sea of Poppies and continued with River of Smoke in 2011. The trilogy is Ghosh’s most ambitious project — together, the three novels add up to 1,592 pages.

The trilogy continues his long fascination with the marginal character — not the man at the top of the pyramid, nor the man in whose memory the pyramid is being built, but the many men and women who toil to build that pyramid. Some of his characters look at history from the bottom up; others are privileged but yet they must struggle; and in so doing they provide a rare glimpse into the lives of individuals who are affected by history. Ghosh’s characters are not kings who build empires; they are the soldiers and traders, widows and mistresses who are footnotes in history — if they are remembered at all — but their collective stories become history.

The Indian writer who writes about the Diaspora typically ends up writing about the Indian in America or Britain. The novelists are from the middle class and their parents often professional, and they usually write about their own class. Ghosh is an anthropologist and has studied at fine universities, but he steps outside the experience that privilege offers to reimagine the lives of the people that social scientists describe as subalterns, i.e. someone of a lower status, a marginal man or woman. In An Antique Land (1993), set in Egypt, was about an Indian slave known only by a number — MS H.6. He also writes about places where Indians have gone, but whose experiences have not been written about — a cetologist researching dolphins in Cambodia and the Sundarbans in The Hungry Tide (2004), a trader in Mandalay and Rangoon in The Glass Palace (2000) and the search for an uncomfortable past in what became Bangladesh in The Shadow Lines (1988).

With the Ibis trilogy, Ghosh writes about disparate lives brought together by unusual circumstances, follows their unlikely stories and tries to weave together the strands that eventually connect the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea. The Ibis is a large ship that had set sail from India in 1838 with a random group of passengers that included convicts and the desperate seeking better fortunes beyond India. These are people who want to leave behind their uncomfortable past. There is a woman who has fled from the prospect of her certain death — the funeral pyre of her dead husband — where she was meant to commit sati; a land-owner who has fallen on hard times and is now a prisoner; and others keen to get a second chance. It isn’t only Indians who populate the novel — there are Americans and French, British of course, and the Chinese, and Ghosh makes full use of his curiosity, and shows his sharp ear for words and peculiarities of language, imitating the intonations and inflections of accents and dialects, as well as the cultural straitjackets that restrain behavior in the early-Victorian age. (Queen Victoria ascended to the British throne the year before Ibis left India’s shores).

The East India Company is supremely confident; its fresh-faced officers rule continent-sized countries with a sense of superiority and arrogance that is grating. Speaking of free markets, the company actually is a vast monopoly, which believes in prospering not due to any hidden hand of Adam Smith, but professing to pursue the Darwinian logic of survival of the fittest, manipulating the markets by extracting promises and ensuring monopolies.

Ghosh exposes imperialism’s underbelly in two ways — he lets the ruling class behave as it would. He does not mock them; he portrays them with their pomposity and self-righteousness intact, like a cameraman recording evidence. Second, he shows how their imperial project was possible because of tens of thousands of accomplices — the Indians who became soldiers, sepoys, money-lenders, opium growers, shipbuilders, traders, brokers and administrators. They were the empire’s humble obedient servants.

The Opium Wars started when a weak China tried to but could not prevent the East India Company from selling opium to the Chinese, addicting them. The opium was grown in India. It was brought to China in ships, some of which were built or owned by Indians, with Indian traders, brokers and financiers acting as middlemen all along the way. And to enforce those rights, Indian soldiers defended the East India Company’s assets.

Many of the trilogy’s characters with which readers are now familiar return in Flood of Fire, providing a sense of continuity. The brother of Deeti, who fled the funeral pyre, is Kesri Singh, an East India Company soldier who ends up fighting in China. His brother has joined the Mughal Emperor’s army in Delhi. Zachary Reid, an American sailor who was disgraced in a trial and is now rebuilding his reputation and life is back as well, working as a carpenter. Shirleen, a Parsi widow in Bombay, is a strong woman almost from a different era, keen to find out how her husband has died in Hong Kong, and determined to defy custom and seek her rightful share of his wealth, only to confront a different reality. Neel, the land-
owner who had to serve time is now a translator in China. Indeed, Ghosh writes, “the bond of the Ibis was like a living thing, endowed with the power to reach out from the past to override the volition of those who were enmeshed in it.”

For the petty criminal in Penang roughed up by a Sikh policeman, the poor Thai farmer whose debts rose because of complicated interest rates charged by the Indian moneylender, the Chinese mother who saw her husband in an opium-induced trance and the nationalist Burmese fighting the British who had to face an Indian soldier on the battlefield, the Indian in Asia was not welcome. The faith the Indians brought, the temples Indian civilization inspired, the epics India gave the region, the aesthetic impulse the encounter with India stirred — all pale into insignificance.

Imperfect though they are, the Indians Ghosh portrays are as much victims as they are perpetrators. No nationality, nor any civilization should have to bear the burden of past sins committed in its name. Transferring guilt across generations keeps us imprisoned. But understanding those events, and swimming through those currents helps us figure out what drove people to act the way they did. It enhances our understanding of our time. Those stories are scattered in footnotes of history; they need to be seen together if we are to make sense of the whole.

Ghosh has used his training as an anthropologist and academic to assemble the data and create characters that can carry that past on their shoulders. They suffer and they may not always succeed. But they help us understand the past, and why the ties that bind are also ties that are often frayed. It lets a new generation to re-examine what had happened. It lets a society explore the commonalities that Nehru spoke about so eloquently nearly seven decades ago.

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