I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Amitav Ghosh when he came to Kolkata for a conference at Ramakrishna Mission College, Narendrapur, in the month of March, 2009. Mr. Sajal Bhattacharya, who is also researching on Amitav Ghosh’s works, and I had approached him with a request to discuss certain issues related to his work. He accepted our proposal and asked us to meet him on Friday, the 13th of March, at the Tollygunge Club.

I have for convenience divided the discussion into two parts: Appendix I and Appendix II. Appendix I is about the questions pertaining to our research that we had asked Ghosh. Appendix II is specifically on *The Shadow Lines* which we had intended to later publish in an anthology of critical essays on *The Shadow Lines*. The discussion involved Mr. Amitav Ghosh (AG), Mr. Sajal Bhattacharya (SB) and myself, Mr. Sandip Ain (SA).
APPENDIX I

SB: In an e-mail correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty, dated 14/12/2000, you emphatically stated that your novels are centred on families and, in a way, writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation. So, in all your novels—right from *The Shadow Lines* to *Sea of Poppies*—we are presented with a family-nation interface. Sir, your views on this interface…

AG: I don’t think that I can add much to that. I think from my point of view it is actually quite self-evident, because one of the things that I see very much, when I look at specially English and American fiction, is that too much of it is about Englishness or Americanness in a sense, which is not the case with Indian writing. I am not just saying Indian writing in English; I don’t think it’s even true of the Bengali writings. Almost any book you pick up, any novel about England, [is like that]. Even today— I was surprised to know— while I was reading this novel about Sheffield, which was on the Bookers’ short list, there is again a constant concern with the definition of Englishness—what it means to be English. I just don’t think that even in Bengali fiction anyone is writing about ‘Baangali-yânã’ (the essence of being Bengali) or something like that.

SB: In most of the novels written in England today, there is a sort of national culture. Do you think it is the same with the Indian novels? Do they try to promote that sort of a national culture?
AG: I just don’t think that this is one of the problematics in our fiction—the definition of a national culture. When you look at these theoreticians, they are always talking about how all fiction is about identity; and basically when they are talking about identity, they are talking about nation. I think that it is a profound misreading of the work of people like me or any other Indian writer. It is a complete misunderstanding of what people are doing. They are reading their own version of a kind of literary theory, where it is not really applicable in that sense.

SB: But then, in all your novels, you have incessantly engaged yourself in the search of a trans-national space. In other words, you seem to challenge the grand narratives of the nation. Is this the way then in which an individual could be delivered from the throes of the nation?

AG: You see, I am not against the nation as an institution. I think the more I grow old, the more I realise the virtues of the nation. Let me say straightaway that I am not at all someone who is opposed to the idea of nationhood. I think the nation as an institution is a vital one and it was especially, I think, in writing *The Glass Palace* that I came to recognise that nation is not a trivial thing. It is a very important thing, because—if it’s possible to imagine—we always think of the nation as a limiting thing; but, on the contrary, if you think of the absence of the nation, what do you get instead? This is what I saw when I travelled in Burma, especially in the border areas of Burma, where the nation almost disappears and, according to our standard theories or our romantic belief, you would imagine that some sort of liberation occurs; in fact, what happens is the warlords take over—it’s much
worse. This is exactly what you are seeing in Pakistan. Have you read my *Countdown*? I clearly stated what exactly is happening today. When a nation collapses, it doesn’t fall like this all of a sudden; it drains away slowly and what are left are a few powerful institutions, like ISI and the army. The glue that joins them is what drains away. That is exactly what has happened in Pakistan. So don’t imagine that I am opposed to nationhood. If you look at our nationhood, at the borders between us and Pakistan, between us and Sri Lanka, or the border between us and Burma, or the border between us and Bangladesh—these are not trivial borders, they define the reality. What is on the other side is the real thing—it is really different and it is not different because the peoples are different, but because the institutions are different and that is basically what it is; the institutional difference is because of nationhood and this institutional difference is not a trivial difference. So I am by no means saying that the nation is not an important thing; but see, if you are writing about the nineteenth century, as I have seen, if you are writing about the long durée of time, we can’t write in the same way that a Frenchman can write or the same way that a Swede can write whose nation has persisted for two hundred, three hundred or even five hundred years. For us, how then do we write about the continuity? That institutional continuation is not there for us. For us, writing about the nineteenth century is to try and create this continuity, which means falling back inevitably on the institution of the family. But certainly, I think, it is also through the institution of the family that people experience that period. Because, if you think of what happened in India after Plassey, that is 1715 onwards, what is it that happened? In many ways, India,
like all Asian societies, has been a very conservative society. Many people would consider it a weakness, but I will consider it a strength also. We have a deeply conservative society. We have used, like any society, as a custom some notion of sovereignty, some notion of kinship. When that notion of a collective being is shattered, how do you re-constitute it? This is the thing that I see continuously when you, for example, look at the Indians in Malaysia pre-1947: no one was even saying that they were Malaysians.

SA: Silence plays a very important role in your novels. It is portrayed from different perspectives and has a positive role to play. Isn’t this portrayal different from the negative portrayal in Western epistemology? There are some exceptions in Western epistemology also; but your portrayal seems more in concurrence with Eastern metaphysics. Your comments on this, please…

AG: Even in the Western tradition there was Gnosticism and all. There was a whole idea of silence and the productivity of silence. But yes, what you are saying is right; within a sort of Greco-Roman tradition, silence does not have a value as such. But I am not looking at silence in that kind of way. To me, you know, it is a much more empirical thing. For example, if you look at 1857, the fact that all these people were rising, the fact that they had a very high degree of co-ordination actually made all those revolts possible. You know, the chapattis were moving and the bangles were moving—obviously they were not random events; yet nothing is said: there is no discourse, there is no programme. Just look at the strange way it occurred: I mean, it was almost as if it were a precluding discourse.
Silence has a very significant part to play in your portrayal of the subaltern characters, and even in characters like Phulbani. Silence as a non-verbal communication is given importance in your novels. Is there any particular method of portrayal? Or, is there any inspiration behind the manner in which it is portrayed?

My approach to it has been in terms like, say, in Bengali cinema— the way Satyajit Ray uses non-communication in so many powerful ways. Generally, within our culture, there is a valuation often on non-verbal communication. So, I think, that has also been a major kind of influence on me. Some of the most poignant moments in Satyajit Ray’s works essentially come from moments of non-communication, for example, the closing scene of Charulata. To me, it has always been very powerful. At one level, it has also been the political aspect of silence, and especially, you know, when I am writing The Calcutta Chromosome, what really interested me very much is this exhaustive march of Western knowledge— especially the sense in which the computer exhaustively wants to know about different aspects of your experience.

Another important feature of your novels is the use of memory and travel. On the one hand, memory tries to take you back to the roots; on the other hand, travel takes you away from your roots. Since you travel a lot, how do you yourself negotiate with these two aspects?
AG: Of course, I have been much interested in it, because it has been a reality of my own life. You know, at the point of time when I started writing about it, very few people were actually writing about this kind of experience. You know, to me, what I wanted to do was to represent the reality of my own existence. At that point in time, the idea of a novel had very much to do with the sense of place, the sense of rootedness— be it a Bengali novel, or an English one. The idea is that the novel is fundamentally about one place, one moment, one time. I think you’ll actually find it interesting if you explore this whole notion of placedness in the novel— how deep it is, how much it incorporates.

SA: Fokir is a very interesting character in the sense that he communicates with Piya without the help of verbal language. The way in which you gave him agency without actually trying to give him a different turn of English, is very interesting. How did you come to conceive of Fokir in this manner?

AG: You are asking me about Fokir and his silence? It was one of the most important concerns to me. When I was in the Sunderbans, I knew someone like Fokir. He was very quiet, he hardly ever spoke— which is all very interesting, you know. For me what makes the person interesting is that they resist my knowing of them in their life as well in my writing. Of course, I can make up something on Fokir, but to give him his sovereignty, to give him that inviolate space— I thought it was very important a space where I cannot go, where I don’t know— is a mammoth task. For me, the novel as a form has, in a sense, some interesting parallelism with the march of this kind of Platonic knowledge.
SB: How do you then look at the relation between history and the individual? How much is an individual forged by history?

AG: I don’t think we can make that distinction. I don’t know how you draw the line between the individual and history. The same history does not create the same individual, but that is what is interesting about it. You know hundred different individuals can exist, but the past that is often there is the same. To me, the manner in which you can distinguish between individual and history the way you did, is interesting. History stays in the background. Fiction is about characters and about individuals; and if you lose sight of that, then you will lose your readers. What can actually fiction do that history can’t do? Through fiction you can experience the place and the moment imaginatively in a way, which through history you cannot. I mean, for example, I have read in history about the battle in Northern Malaysia, but to read it on the abstract and then to look at the place, to know the rubber trees, to know what they are living through— those are completely different things.

SB: I think there has been a clear evolution in your novels from The Shadow Lines to Sea of Poppies. How do you look at this journey?

AG: The questions are in many ways similar. I am writing in a different moment in time. I could never have written Sea of Poppies at that age. I didn’t have that authority, that experience. I would never have at that age been able to say to myself that I will write this book. It is not that I didn’t have that confidence; it is a
license that you give yourself. I felt that I can do it now. Your own experience deepens and in that something is gained and something is also lost, and one has to recognise both.

SA: Do you feel that there is a sort of tension prevalent in your novels as to how much can be ‘communicated through language’ and how much can be ‘communicated in language’, using the distinction in terms of Walter Benjamin’s ideas on language?

AG: It is interesting that you say that. I suppose, in a sense, our linguistic experience as Indians is rather similar to that of Central Europeans— they too have a multi-lingual world; but if you ask me, this is really the special thing that Indian writing in English brings to English— the idea of a much fractured linguistic inheritance. In a way it makes the writing more difficult, and in a way it makes it much richer. I never look at it as a limitation. I look at it as something enormously productive— the fact that when I look at something, three words or four words immediately come to me. There is this constant interference in my head of words and languages.

SB: Coming to language, one thing that has attracted the attention of the readers is your extensive use of Bhojpuri words without giving the corresponding English word. How would different readers from different linguistic backgrounds come to terms with these words?
AG: Some of it will be apparent to you as a Bengali. The Bhojpuri stuff would not be immediately available. So, in my book, there is something that would elude everyone unless they have exactly my own linguistic background. I like the sense of playing with these words. When we read Tolstoy, for example, we never knew the meaning of the word ‘caviar’. We never have seen these things, but that didn’t stop us from enjoying it. At some level, if you think of all the children’s books—I sometime think, you know, “pottage shrimp”—till this day I do not know what it means.
I would love to know your thoughts about the title, how it came to you and the many associations it had for you. Some of these are, of course, richly developed in the novel itself, but I wonder what you might add and whether Conrad has had a particular significance for you.

You know that it’s a very curious thing that *The Shadow Lines* was not my initial title. I had many other titles. It was one of the books with which I really had a hard time with the title and then a friend suggested this. I was basically trying to think of something which would suggest a notion of a very shadowy line of distinction; and then, you know, we have shadows, we have lines—so it sort of came about like that. *The Shadow Line* is one of the stories of Conrad that I really like, but it didn’t come from that at all. It actually has no connection with Conrad—it’s purely a coincidence. So *The Shadow Lines* was actually, to me, the most prosaic possible title, because I was thinking of a title that would suggest something very shadowy. One of the alternative titles I had for it, which was actually my favorite for a long time, was the mirror work border. That is the title I really like, because I like the sense of mirroring. But I didn’t use the term simply
because I thought later Rushdie published a collection of essays which had something to do with the mirror.

**SA:** The legend of Tristan and Isolde comes to occupy a central position in the novel, as the greatest story within so many other stories. Your comments please.

**AG:** The reason why the Tristan and Isolde story initially appealed to me was because it was a very powerful story and also a story which is very much about people who are from completely different places— crossing the seas, you know— and who, in fact, in the process of crossing the sea also doom themselves. In some ways I always felt that it was a very good story— the most interesting of the European legends and it was in that sense that it came to play very much an important part in the book.

**SA:** How relevant do you think are such legends to the literature of today? What impact do they have on readers of differing backgrounds?

**AG:** I think they are enormously relevant. If you look at some of the most popular ones— I mean, if you look at even the computer games that my sons plays, you will find many of them are built around legendary figures like Tristan. Tristan and Isolde was recently also made into a movie. Again, if you think of the whole Star War series, so much of it is actually built upon myth and legends that would never fade away. They are profoundly at the back of our minds and in some very strange ways, you know, the enemy of myths and legends was the realist novels— the middle class novels, the bourgeois novels, where so much is written about
domestic places. With the internet and with the new ways of reading that has come into being since then, I think the metaphoric has re-entered the collective consciousness in a very big way.

SA: It appealed to the middle class all the more…

AG: Yes, I don’t think that the middle class had never really lost it, but in some ways it was overtaken by the bourgeois aspect of story-telling, which had penetrated very deeply.

SA: How did the fascinating and eerie character of Tridib come to you? At times he almost seems to come from a short story of Jorge Luis Borges’s, almost a species unto himself like “Funes the Memorious”. Yet he is also quite humane and concrete, enmeshed in particular times and desires. If you could speak a little about the origins and associations this character had in your mind?

AG: You know Borges’s story was very important as well as interesting to me, as was Calvino. So there was no doubt that Borges, Calvino and so on were in the background when I was writing the book. But no; Tridib didn’t come from any conscious character— no, not at all. Tridib was actually very much based upon people I knew. Not particularly any one person, but there was, as often with the characters of the novel, elements of different people coming together.

SA: Did Tridib emerge from the tall-tale Bengali narrative tradition like that of Premendra Mitra’s Ghana da?
AG: No, not at all. It is nothing like that. You know, like all of us, we had cousins who were great ‘guliaths’* (laughs). It was really founded more on the ‘guliath’ character. I had a cousin who was a champion ‘guliath’ (laughs). It actually comes very much from that. It actually does not have such an exalted lineage at all. I think in every Bengali’s background, there is one ‘guliath’ (laughs). It formed a very interesting aspect of our past.

[* ‘Guliath’ or ‘gulbaaj’ is the Bengali colloquial word for a person who has a habit of telling incredibly tall tales without the intention of harming anyone.]

SA: *The Shadow Lines* seems to be a male bildungsroman with a charged female presence.

AG: That is exactly what it is. It is a fairly accurate description.

SA: Well, but still there is a very powerful female presence, specially the character of Tham’ma…

AG: The character of Tham’ma is not in any sense founded upon anyone that I knew in my family; especially my own grandma was not at all like her. There were people like that. I mean we do know of these characters who were involved in terrorist movements in those days and who also fetishized terrorism. Again I wouldn’t say that it was at all a conscious kind of thing. It is very much from the nature of our own background.

SA: Can you illuminate us more about the mysterious character of Francesca Halevy? Is there any particular source or inspiration for her character?
AG: Frankly, I cannot even remember her (laughs). I think that it was probably a kind of amalgam of Francesca da Rimini of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* and Judah HaLevi, the famous medieval Jewish poet.

SA: In "The Greatest Sorrow" which appears in *Incendiary Circumstances*, you have written that the growth of the manuscript of this novel followed an exactly opposite pattern to the growth of *The Circle of Reason*, explicating the growth pattern with that of a sapling planted in the soil. This is quite a striking image, and I feel the second pattern of growth pops up in little other ways in the later novels, for example, in *The Glass Palace* and its concern with silence and suppressed histories. Is there a way, then, that *The Shadow Lines* represents a root system underlying all or many of your novels? Would you ever foresee the possibility of writing more works according to this pattern of downward growth? Or do you ever feel the pull of this other pattern as you write now?

AG: What I was trying to say in that essay is that the riot of 1984 for me was a starting point for the novel, *The Shadow Lines*. The riots of 1984 happened when I was finishing *The Circle of Reason*, but they had a very profound influence on me. I didn’t want to write about the riots in a direct way and it made me start thinking about riots and all the social violence that surrounded me; and it was exactly like the way I describe it in the book. It is the same way in which I remember the riots in Dhaka. It has never been spoken about in our family. It has never been mentioned.
SA: So, while writing about the riot and the harsh realities of Partition, was silence a preparation? Most of the writers were somehow avoiding writing about the Partition and riots.

AG: I myself have very ambiguous feeling about that, because I think some things should be forgotten and must be forgotten and needs to be forgotten for the possibility of a future. For example, say these trials that the international criminal courts are instituting, the genocide trials in Cambodia—I mean, no Cambodian wants it. It was the foreigners who were the impulse behind it, because within a society we sometimes need that space to heal. If you keep digging up all the terrible things that happened in the past and get caught in that cycle of violence, you can’t move forward. Sometimes things need to be forgotten. For example, today in Calcutta if all the ‘Baangaals’** were here and say “We were tortured and we lost this and that”, can you imagine the sort of anger that would be generated? It would be impossible to think of any kind of collective future. So in this sense I do feel that ‘silence’ is a good thing. I am not decrying, you know.

[** those people whose origin is in East Bengal, (now Bangladesh)]

SA: How do you manage to make your work speak to audiences that do not have any real experience with India, or Pakistan, or Bangladesh?

AG: I don’t think people think about it like that. The moment you start thinking about communicating with audiences, the impulse in your work goes away. If you write about something truthfully, honestly, with as much care and attention as you can, it communicates itself. I mean I read Melville without knowing anything about
whaling. In fact, that is why I read Melville. It is interesting how Melville writes about whaling.

**SA:** The banality of comprehending the riots in terms of silence, as you speak of it in the *The Shadow Lines*, has taken a cruder and more impersonal shape in the face of the recent terrorist activities that threatens the world today. In the light of 09/11 and 26/11, how do you look back at *The Shadow Lines*?

**AG:** No, the only thing that I can say in relation to that is that I realize now that in so many ways my works have been addressing issues which were not really very much within the public consciousness— You know, these issues of terrorism, of certain kinds of communal violence, of social violence. So when 9/11 happened and 26/11 happened, I only had a haunting feeling that I have been living in this all my life, I have been watching this all my life. The thing had come to me. On 9/11 my daughter was in school, you know. She was in the classroom. After that I went to get her from the school. It is just one mile from the twin towers and she literally saw the twin towers fall, she saw the planes fly into the tower; and then I went to get her. It was all chaos. It was dark and the people were coming across the breeze with dust on their faces and I went down— and there she was! I said to her, “What happened?” And she said to me, “Where were you? I saw it all through the window of my history class.” You know, it was such a strange and eerie thing that she said that. In a way that’s how I felt: I have been sitting at this window all my life and watching all these come to be.