Title	*Introduction and Reading*
Description	Opening of exhibition by Amitav Ghosh and a reading from his In an Antique Land. Introduced by Anshuman Mondal (Brunel).
Presenter(s)	Amitav Ghosh and Anshuman Mondal
Recording	http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/indian_traces/ghosh.mp3
Keywords	india, indian, exhibition, culture, glass palace, amitav ghosh, Q323, 2010-03-01, 1
Part of series	*Indian Traces in Oxford*

Anshuman Good afternoon. It's a great pleasure for me to introduce our guest of honour the distinguished writer, Amitav Ghosh. Many of you will be already familiar with his outstanding contribution to contemporary English Literature. He's the author of six highly acclaimed novels including 'The Shadow Lines', 'The Glass Palace', 'The Hungry Tide' and his most recent novel, 'Sea of Poppies' the first instalment in a projected trilogy called the Ibis Trilogy which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008.

Amitav's also a very distinguished journalist and travel writer. And his nonfiction has been gathered into two collections 'The Imam and the Indian' and 'Incendiary Circumstances'. But perhaps the most famous and justly celebrated of his non fictional work is his inimitable travelogue-cum-alternative history of Egypt, 'In an Antique Land'. That description, as many of you will know, does not even begin to do justice to this generically complex and sophisticated work.

It was here in Oxford that Amitav began the research that would eventually through a series of revisions and reworkings become 'In an Antique Land'. So he has like the others that we will hear about today left his own trace in Oxford's archive. And 'In an Antique Land' is a book that dwells on and inhabits the archive and considers the many traces left by remarkable and unremarkable people alike.

In fact the last time I was actually here at The Bodleian it was to read Amitav's PhD Thesis although he may not be thankful for that. The first of those traces that he's left in this august institution. As the germ of 'In an Antique Land' you could say that in a manner of speaking, his thesis is one of the most widely read in history. Certainly more widely read than most. And it is also in one sense the beginning of a long and very distinguished and in fact remarkable intellectual journey and I'd like to welcome you, Amitav, here on behalf of the 'Making Britain' Project to open this workshop and exhibition.

Amitav Ghosh Well thank you very much Anshuman for that very generous introduction. And thank you Elleke for inviting me here. It's really a great, great pleasure to be here. Something utterly unexpected I must say for myself. It was not... I, when I came here to study 32 years ago I would never have imagined myself opening an exhibition on Indian traces at Oxford. But, well, it's really a great pleasure and a privilege to be doing that.

You know I'm not a person who dwells very much on the past and nor am I a person who finds themselves very engaged with the lives of institutions. But after Elleke invited me I started thinking really about Oxford and thinking about being at Oxford in a way which I hadn't really ever done before. And, you know, the Oxford I came to 32 years ago which was in 1978 it was a very very different moment in Britain. In a way also not so different perhaps because it was a time of economic crisis in Britain. There was a sense of horizons closing. There was a very uncertain sort of political leadership. There was a deep sense of gloom in the country. It was a time when 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy' was being serialised on television and I remember it was so exciting. Every week we'd go to our telly hall and sit in the Junior Com-, in the Common Room I forget whether it was JCR or MCR or whatever. And we'd sit there and watch this thing and it was such a sort of elegy to a kind of declining Imperial project and so on.

So it was at that kind of moment. And I'd also come from an India which could not have been more different than India is today. It was just after the emergency, after Indira Gandhi's emergency. And that had for me and my generation who were in college in India at that time a deeply profoundly radicalising effect. And I was actually working in a newspaper throughout the emergency which was '75/'76 and I was working for the Indian Express which was the only opposition newspaper. So I was very much involved in sort of politics in Delhi and so on.

But it so happened that I applied for a scholarship. I should not have got that scholarship it was called the Inlack Scholarship. They took eight people every year and I was tenth on the list, you know. So... but somehow it happened that two people dropped out so suddenly one day I wake up and I learn I'm going off to Oxford.

So it was kind of, the whole thing was kind of like a fairytale really it was kind of a like a mysterious thing that happens to you and you don't really expect it to happen. Because I had no intention of being an academic. What I really wanted was to travel because I'd been reading Nipal especially but also James Baldwin so many other writers with this deep sort of interest and passion and it seemed to me that I wanted to do what Nipal had done and go and see the world and be in a lot of different places and so on. And in those days if you were a young Indian you know the chances of your being allowed to travel were very very little. I mean the only reason Indians left was to become koolies or something somewhere. So no one was going to give you a Visa.

The only way you could leave was if you – through academics, you know. So it was in this hopeful sense that I applied for this scholarship really just wanting to travel. And there I was. I ended up at Oxford and I remember waking up on Manor Road and listening to Undergraduates, drunken Undergraduates walk passed late at night laughing and thinking "My god is this really happening to me?" And it was incredibly exciting.

But, you know, it was also incredibly unexpected. It was – the things every aspect of my experience here was in some way deeply unexpected. I had come from a Delhi University which was and I think still probably is an incredibly vibrant place. It was a very very vibrant place intellectually. There were these intense political engagements but also there were these wonderful, absolutely inspirational teachers, some of whom are today the great names in world academics Veena Das, J P S `[[Oberoyd 0:07:46]]`, Tan Chung, these were amazing people you know. And it's a strange thing about Indian institutions everything is wrong with them I mean really they should not exist and our Ministers of Education are always telling us how terrible they are and so on. And yet, you know, I've never been to universities anywhere which are as exciting as some of our universities. It's one of the bizarre paradoxes.

I was in Mauritius recently and there was this wonderful university with all the buildings looking absolutely perfect and you could see that everything happened on time. It was not at all like our Indian university and yet the moment you're in it you know that you know the one thing you can't provide on order really is a kind of intellectual vibrancy which comes out – I don't know from what. I really don't know and it's a mystery to me. Because it certainly doesn't... it didn't come altogether from the teaching but it came from something.

And so I arrived at Oxford and like everyone of my generation my head was just fizzing with ideas and thoughts and theories and thinking and books and so on. And I expected that, you know, at Oxford the fizz would grow even fizzier so to speak, you know that I was coming to this great bubbling sort of fountainhead of intellectual energy. Well that certainly was an unexpected thing because I had the experience that I realise is now an almost universal experience of the Indian student which is that you arrive at a place and you find that you're incredibly over prepared. You've read everything that they've read and then you don't know how to kill your time, you know.

So I was entered in a course called a Diploma for Social Anthropology. That was thought somehow the appropriate thing for me to do. It was a one year course in Anthropology. And there I was and everything that they were teaching really I had sort of read and knew more or less already. So it was a very curious thing you know because I sat there in the classes sometimes thinking you know I really can't be such a smart Alec and keep saying "Well you know but you've got this wrong and..." That kind of thing which you're always tempted to do and which in India, you know as a teacher later when I taught in India I realised this and your students are always going to come at you like that and you've just go to give it back to them. And it's sometimes a very adverse area of relationship. But that's not how it worked over here, you know you had to be quite quiet and so on.

I remember an encounter with the teacher, he shall remain unnamed but he wanted me to read something about, you know some really sort of dull anthropology of the '50s, Meyer Fortes something which I had actually already read. And when he suggested you know my heart absolutely fell and I thought "Oh my god I've got to read all this stuff about kinship among the Tallensi." Which I already had to do. So I, you know rebellion bubbled up in me as it has in so many Indians before me and I said to my – I said to him "You know I really don't want to read that. What I want to read is... I want to read Foucault, I want to read `[[Bashala 0:10:58]]`, I want to read Adorno. I want to read all that." And you know he was a very calm man and he looked at me and he looked away and he looked at me and he said "Ahhh as I was saying." So it was back to Meyer Fortes and the Tallensi.

And so you know I sort of soldiered on and there you are. The other thing that was really surprising and I think it will be surprising in the context of today's England as well. And it was certainly an incredible surprise for I think my generation of students when we came was the racism. I mean this was as I said a very different moment it was a moment of economic contraction, it was a moment of deep political uncertainty but it's really hard to explain today, you know, how pervasive this racism was. It was like the water you swam in. I mean the incidents were, they happened so regularly that at a certain point you just didn't keep any tally of it.

They were never violent incidents but you know you remember that was the time of the skinheads and the British National Party and so on. So even though the possibility of violence was always in the air, you very rarely heard of actual violence. It was usually just name calling. I mean just today I was remembering as we came past, you know Manor Road, just walking down there, you know a car would stop, someone would roll down a window and shout "Wog go home." That was the usual kind of thing, you know. But it would also happen in other circumstances, on

trains and things.

It often happened in dealing with you know the service people, post offices and dining room staff. But the curious thing was, looking back on it, that it – there were many such incidents also in the colleges. I remember in my year there was this – a woman studying Political Science, she was at New College and there was matriculation you know. And she, so all the colleges are there, I don't know if it's still the same ritual or whatever as far as I remember all the colleges sit there. And she was at New College and she got up to go and get her thing and she was wearing a sari and I think we wore gown over our clothes or whatever. And she was walking off to get it and quite clearly someone from her college shouted and said something like "Wog go home." Or something like that.

And the curious thing was that, you know, we all just ignored this, everyone just ignored it. She I think just checked in her gait for like one second and then went on. But there were other such incidents you know rooms were broken into, there would be vandalism so it was – I'm telling you this in a spirit almost of recounting science fiction because certainly I know that almost ten years later when I visited England it was completely changed. And of course England today is completely changed. But that was the world that we lived in at that point.

And it does make you think of what was it like for, you know these Indians whose traces we're seeing. I'm sure that they never faced anything like this because they were not there in sufficient numbers. Even when I was here there were only about 30 Indian, Indian's you know there were Indians from Britain and Indians from America but Indians from India were very few in number may be 20 to 30.

But you know there was also – even more than that sort of these incidents of racism there was a profound sense of otherness often, you know which is another thing which has completely disappeared. I remember a very close friend – someone who became a very close friend, a very brilliant Englishman who actually has now settled in India you know. Well I won't tell you his name either but the first day I met him it was in this Institute of Social Anthropology and we just exchanged a few words. And he was this incredibly generous sweet natured person and he said "Well come and have lunch with me." So I said "Sure." He was at that time living a little outside Oxford. He was looking after an old professor of the Classics E R Dodds, whom some of you will know from the Greeks and the Irrational.

So we started bicycling. And he was bicycling very very slowly. So after a while I said to him I said "Why are you bicycling so slowly?" And he said "Well you know I just wasn't sure that you'd ever seen a bicycle before." You know it was such an amazing thing. I mean – and he remains to this day one of my dearest friends you know. So what can you say I mean there was an incredible sort of amount of sort of cultural negotiation and it was a constant thing. And in many ways it was a very exhilarating thing. And you know as I speak of all this racism and the ugliness and so on I want to say again that you know despite or perhaps because of all this we all, certainly I enjoyed myself enormously. It was just very exhilarating you know, it was socially very, very… So it was socially very exhilarating. So you know it was… That's what I mean by saying it was so unexpected because you come expecting a great fountainhead of ideas but what you get is a great fountainhead of parties, you know. And that was what was fun. You know that was what was really enjoyable I mean I went to parties all the time, I drank lots of beer and the most wonderful thing I mean you would sit in the pub and have your tutorial and it was just so much fun.

And a the same time, this sense of being slightly at or considerably at an angle to the university we're in meant that it quickened your senses and it was somehow very invigorating.

And it makes me realise also that most of us who were here we were certainly in Indian terms from middle and upper middle class backgrounds so we were not accustomed to this. I mean it's not that racism and you know other kinds of class hostilities and so on don't exist in India, that's far from the case it exists everywhere. But it was not what we were accustomed to. Our world in Delhi we knew it, we were accustomed to that or in Bombay or Calcutta or wherever. So when you begin to experience these things at a personal level it has a deeply radicalising effect, you know. And I think it did with many of us it had this very powerfully radicalising effect.

So it was a radicalisation that sometimes pushes you to the left and sometimes to the right. And that's what I see now when I look at my generation, you know my cohort who went through Oxford. Some remain very much on the left and some have become very much to the right. And it's a curious thing it's as if it removes the middle ground, you know that's what's interesting in a way about that particular experience.

But I think it's also very true that this was a period when I look back now it was before the moment of identity politics. So certainly for me and for many people that I knew you never conflated your personal experience with your idea of what a place is, you know. So for me the fact that someone might say, you know, "Go home wog." You've experienced this once or twice doesn't mean that you think that all of England is like that, you know. It was possible for one to make this complete distinction. So I went hitchhiking around England once and it was incredibly exciting I mean on one day I remember in Devon, in rural Devon I got about six rides and of those six rides every single person had spent over ten years in India, you know they were mainly older people but... And they would invite me home to stay here. It's a kind of story that English people tell about India you know I mean you go there, everyone's feeding you and saying "Stay in my house."

So Britain has changed a lot since then and it's been very very, it's been amazing to watch this transformation. To watch the ways in which, you know, England has really effected some kind of – a transition if you like. But I think it's... the transformation is not only on the British side. The transformation is also on the Indian side. You know as an Indian when you step out in the world today and I say this particularly to the younger people here who won't have known the experiences that we went through so much. But as an Indian when you step into the world today the world is a very different place and it's different not because of you but because India itself displaces more water. It's because India itself commands more respect, you know. And that is really a very very significant change in the ways in which we step out in the... you know in the world now.

But I want to come back also to the academic aspect of my experience for a minute. I said before that, you know, in terms of reading and so on we were certainly abreast of what was happening here but what was very important for me personally was that the Institute of Social Anthropology had a couple of figures who could relate very well to my own particular interests. And I realise now that this was in a way a kind of miraculous thing because I was not at all academically inclined really, that was not where my interests lay, that was not my project as such. But Anthropology at Oxford historically had this kind of literary foundation. There was Evans Pritchard here who really saw himself as a writer, more as a writer than as a social scientist. In fact it was never thought of as a social science at least in the Oxford of those days.

And I was very very fortunate in that I encountered two professors there Peter and Godfrey `[[Leonhard 0:21:42]]` who had both been students of F R Leavis. So they were basically literary people and they recognised in me that you know my own ambitions were much more in the literary direction than in the social scientific direction. And they really nurtured this and encouraged this. And now when I look back and I think this was perhaps the only place in the

world that I could've done what I did really because any other place, you know I would've left after a year or two with some other sort of degree. But they really did persuade me to stay round and to do a PhD. And my DPhil I did it literally in two and a half years because my funding was going to run out and that really lit a fire under me so I had to sit and do it.

But it was a wonderful thing and Peter Leonhard was my supervisor and I still remember to this day all our meetings with him were at the King's Arms. Not this King's Arms there was another King's Arms way down near Banbury. And we would always meet in the pub. And one day just as I was starting my work I thought well I must talk to him about what books I should read and what bibliography. I mean isn't that what you're meant to do when you're a graduate student. So I said to him I said "Peter do you want to suggest a bibliography or something?" And he looked at me and he raised his eyebrows and he said, "You know I hope you don't think that I'm going to be a guru kind of person to you." And that was literally the last academic conversation we ever had.

So you know it was because really, it was because of Peter, it was because of Godfrey and it was because of the peculiar ethos of the Institute of Social Anthropology in that period. An ethos that I cannot imagine exists today or would've existed at any other moment in the history of that particular discipline. It was because of that that I was able to go Egypt, I was able to write my thesis and so on. And that was for me a genuinely life changing event because being in this village in Egypt it was this incredibly powerful experience for me and ultimately I had to write this book 'In an Antique Land' to get it out of my head.

Well I want to also talk a little bit about you know the cohort of Indians I was with at Oxford because I think specially looking back on this traces of Indians at Oxford thing it made me think about this very much. In a way my generation must have been the last to see really the leftovers of a kind of 19th Century Indian relationship with Oxford so let me explain that. In the past the Indians who came to Oxbridge were in a way willy nilly sort of anglophiles you know. They were aspiring to higher positions within the Raj or they were from traditional Indian elites and...or they were from poor families, the entire village had saved money so that they could go and get a degree and join the civil services and make their way up.

I mean, in fact, I mean the Raj was a really tough place for Indians to manage so this was one of the ways in which they could. But today's Indian student is much more a product of meritocracy and much later connected with the traditional elites. It's one of the most – to me the most invigorating things in India that the traditional elites their influences has almost completely dissipated especially in Southern India. And you really see this kind of real sort of metocratic energy that's unleashed within these educational institutions. And I think it's one of the most exciting things to see in today's India.

But my generation was kind of `[[interstitial 0:25:19]]`. Of about 30 Indian Indians who were then I'd say about half were from traditional elite families and they were squarely in the sort of Nehru tradition, you know. Of that – of the 30 there were at least 5 who were definitely going to be Prime Minister, you know they'd decided they were going to be Prime Minister or President or Law Minister or something.

Then there were – the rest were actually squarely from the meritocracy and I would say that I was in more in that stream than in the other having made my way here through that. But this made for a very very interesting mix, you know. The meritocratic types who were often technocratic, I mean they were in Mathematics or Economics and so on they got sick of Oxford very quickly, you know especially the Economists, I don't know why because they were sort of like major number crunchers and they couldn't find people to crunch numbers with them. And

they almost left – they left en mass for America as soon as they could.

But the others hung around and it was really interesting. I mean you'd see them, you know, literally jockeying for position. Already positioning themselves in relation to each other and to their future ambitions. But it's a sign of how much India has changed that. In fact none of them have really been able to make it anywhere really high in politics though some of them are actually fairly high up in the political world but more of them tended to veer off in the end towards journalism.

And then there were some and I think must be absolutely the last – ours must have been absolutely the last of that dwindling breed for whom being from Oxford, being an Oxonian was itself a career, you know. That was your career when you went back to India that, you know, I'm from Oxford. And you could see how in the 19th Century this must have been a major career with major returns and it's extraordinary to this day I meet these guys who I know for a fact were dreadfully unhappy at Oxford, they had no friends, they'd go back to India all the time. And now all the time they're talking about how much they loved cheese and pork and this and that. And it's an amazing set of things to see.

It becomes as you see – Oxford became as it were their social capital. And it's, you know, some people really parlayed it to very great advantage. For me, I must say Oxford was an interlude. It was an enormously enriching experience. It was an enormously enabling experience and in as much as I went to Egypt it was also a sort of life altering experience in the way that it has been for Indians of earlier generations. But it also made me think very much about this experience. And it was much later, especially when I went to write about Cambodia that I'd really began to think about it very very hard. And I realise now that this particular platform, this platform of the third world student in this foreign circumstance it's one of the critical forums of the 20th Century.

You know this was where a very large part of 20th Century experience was formed. If you think of Pol Pot you know he'd become radicalised at the Sorbonne, Khieu Samphan his classmate, a slightly older classmate. They get these ideas, then they go back and then they effect this kind of really radical transformation, genocidal transformation of Cambodia.

You know but that's just one example but – ah you know from the Indian aspect you have Nehru on the one hand but you also have `[[Sobaj Bose 0:29:20]]` you have `[[?? 0:29:22]]` so it's a very unpredictable thing. It's not that people go to Oxford and become as it were anglicised which is what people thought it's... I think what this experience does is more that it pushes you towards extremes, you know it pushes you towards the extremes of say `[[?? 0:29:38]]` or Sobaj Bose, you know. And that in itself I think is something that is a very curious thing and something that really deserves long term study.

For myself I must say that having seen this, having this process of how shall I say being pushed towards extremes which happens I think only within this particular kind of ex patriot circumstance where in a way you don't have to watch the reality of your words or the reality of what your words might achieve in your own setting. But you do have the licence to as it were go off at the deep end, you know.

So the interesting thing today is that India finds itself in the very, in the same position `[[JNU 0:30:28]]`, the Nepali Maoists were formed in JNU, you know and it's so interesting to see how they themselves are sort of in some way re-enacting these earlier traces. I mean you see them in one sense they feel this sort of close connection with India but that close connection also becomes the foundation often for a very deep hostility and a very deep sense of `[[asentiment`

0:30:58]] if you like.

Anyway I've gone on for quite a long time so I'll stop there. Thank you very much.
