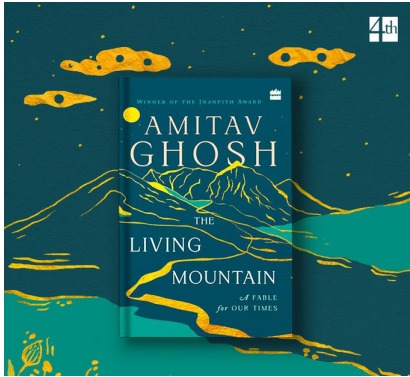


## Book Review

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### ***The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times***



Cover photo credit: Fourth Estate; HarperCollins Publishers, India (2022)

*The Living Mountain* by Amitav Ghosh  
(Fourth Estate: an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers India 2022)

*Reviewed by Ms Ipshita Mitra, freelance writer, who is pursuing a PhD in Gender and Development Studies*

From the devastating Assam floods to the tragic earthquake that recently hit south-east Afghanistan—claiming the lives of 155 children and leaving many homeless or orphaned, as per the report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)<sup>1</sup>—it is evident that Nature’s wrath shall consume all. Both the rich and the poor; powerful and the powerless face the risk of losing it all to the great crisis of climate change. Amidst death, despair, and drudgery, the humankind stands at the edge of a bottomless pit as time to make amends seems to be slipping away.

Speaking about the “Summary for Policymakers of the IPCC (Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change) Working Group III Report, Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change”, which was approved on April 4, 2022, by 195 member governments, Dr Hoesung Lee, IPCC Chair said, “We are at a crossroads. The decisions we make now can secure a liveable future. We have the tools and know-how required to limit warming.”<sup>2</sup>

Action is a critical need of the hour. In this context, author Amitav Ghosh’s latest offering, *The Living Mountain* comes as a wake-up call, albeit in the guise of a fable. The sooner we put a stop to the destructive and unchecked anthropogenic activities, the better, warns the 2018 Jnanpith Award recipient through a beautifully woven parable on planetary crisis. Published by Fourth Estate (an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers), *The Living Mountain* reaches out with a desperate plea urging the humankind to not turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the revolts and cries of nature. The Age of the Anthropocene, as deftly explained by the author, cannot thrive on the pillage of natural resources—be it our mountains, valleys, or rivers. What is taken away from nature must be dutifully returned as well.

### **Invaders versus Protectors**

In this fable for our times, the invaders are called ‘Anthropoi’, who embark on an expedition to a lush valley, which is known far and wide for its ‘miraculous gifts’. This ‘Valley’ is home to the ‘Magic Tree’ and ‘Mahaparbat’—the ‘Great Mountain’. Truth be told, the curious and shrewd Anthropoi, masquerading as researchers and ordinary traders are on a mission. They want to navigate deeper into the Great Mountain to unearth its riches. However, early on in the story,

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<sup>1</sup> ANI. 28 June 2022. “Tragic quake in south-east Afghanistan kills 155 children: UN Report.” Details available at <[https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/tragic-quake-in-south-east-afghanistan-kills-155-children-un-report-122062800175\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/tragic-quake-in-south-east-afghanistan-kills-155-children-un-report-122062800175_1.html)>

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). April 4, 2022. “IPCC Press Release.” Details available at <[https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2022/04/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGIII\\_PressRelease\\_English.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2022/04/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_PressRelease_English.pdf)>

the readers and the characters are reminded about the ‘Law of the Valley’, which is—*never set foot on the slopes of the revered mountain*. That is why, the Valley People pledge to tell stories, dance, and sing in celebration, while keeping a ‘safe distance’ from the ‘living’ mountain that sustains life in the cluster of villages surrounding it.

However, doomsday is not far behind.

### ‘Cycle of Tribulation’

On the fateful day, the Adepts—the most skilled women—who often claimed that the Great Mountain spoke to them through ‘the soles of their feet’ while they danced and got lost in a trance, announce, “*A cycle of time has ended, and another one has begun: the Cycle of Tribulation*”.

Inevitably, within a few years, the Anthropoi launch a ferocious attack on the peaceful Valley with an army and a stock of lethal weapons. Cowed down by the physical strength and business acumen of the Anthropoi, the hapless villagers submit to the demands of their new masters.

In no time, the wisdom of the ‘Elderpeople’ and the indigenous knowledge of the community—once the protectors of the Great Mountain—are dismissed as unscientific, irrational, and useless. With the onslaught of the Anthropoi, the sustainable and traditional ways of living are given up. New guardians are appointed in place of the Elderpeople and omnipotent Adepts. Women, who were the actual custodians of knowledge and skill in the Valley, are usurped by men. Folklore, songs, dances, and celebrations around the Great Mountain slowly begin to be replaced by skirmishes, murders, and assaults in a bid to reach the top of the mountain. The ‘modern’, pragmatic Anthropoi are revealed as nothing but colonizers who have only one agenda—plunder the riches of the Valley and rip open the Great Mountain so as to loot its valuable minerals, metals, and other goods. The allegorical significance of Ghosh’s story is hard to miss. The

project of globalization thrives precisely on such principles of exploitation and extortion.

### ‘Keep a Distance’

From being upholders of environmental protection and ecological sustenance, the Valley People are eventually reduced to being encroachers, guided by the Anthropoi’s insatiable hunger and unbridled ambition. Influenced by the Anthropoi’s zeal to reach the Great Mountain’s ‘cloud-wrapped summit’, the Valley dwellers forget about their pledge to the sacred mountain and end up violating the sacred law of keeping a ‘distance’. As boundaries get breached, catastrophic repercussions ensue. Reeling under the weight of too many climbers, the Great Mountain begins to roar and tremble. Avalanches and mudslides sweep away everything as the final collapse inches closer.

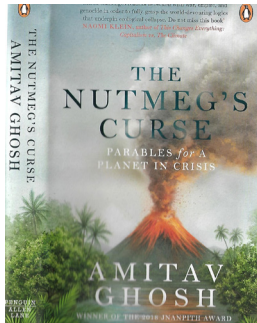
Finally, an Adept comes to the rescue. She reminds us of the forgotten *pledge*—the *law* of the Valley.

Commenting on the latest IPCC Assessment report, IPCC Working Group III Co-Chair, Jim Skea had said, “Climate change is the result of more than a century of unsustainable energy and land use, lifestyles, and patterns of consumption and production.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, climate action must be done on a war footing. If we do not curb the escalating rates of carbon emissions, rising pollution levels, and depleting forest cover soon, life on planet Earth will come to a premature end.

Nature is a living being. In the slow death of nature lies the hand of the Anthropoi, that is *us*, the humankind. Let us take on the role of nurturers instead of murderers. Let us listen to the shaking earth beneath our feet; let us not neglect the warning signs. The human is certainly not at the centre of this universe—a fact we must all respectfully reconcile with. Nature is our centre and let it remain so. Protect it, preserve it, and most importantly, make a promise to keep a *distance* from it!

<sup>3</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). April 4, 2022. IPCC Press Release. Details available at <[https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2022/04/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGIII\\_PressRelease\\_English.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2022/04/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_PressRelease_English.pdf)>

## ***The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis***



*The Nutmeg's Curse* by Amitav Ghosh  
(Penguin Random House India 2021)

Reviewed by Dr Rina Mukherji. She is an independent journalist with more than 27 years of experience. She holds a doctorate in African Studies and has several media and academic awards to her credit.

In recent years, deforestation in the Amazon rainforests has been a matter of much concern. With deforestation currently at 18%, scientists and environmentalists fear that the Amazon will soon reach its tipping point, wherein it cannot manage to rejuvenate itself.

The need to feed a growing population worldwide has seen a rapid decline of leaf tree cover in the Amazon, which stretches over 1.4 billion acres spanning Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Guyana, Surinam, Bolivia, Venezuela and French Guiana, and is home to a staggering 40,000 species of plants, 2400 species of fish, and 370 reptilian species, besides being the last refuge of harpy eagles, pink river dolphins, pygmy marmosets, and thousands of birds and butterflies. The 2.6 million square miles spanned by the Amazon basin covers 40% of South America and is also home to several indigenous communities. The 90–140 billion tonnes of carbon which the Amazon rainforests contain helps stabilize local and global climate.

Yet, large-scale deforestation, especially in recent times, has seen rapid depletion of its tree cover, either for food production, hydroelectric projects or for soya plantations. Areas where canopy cover was reduced below 70%, saw a rise in daytime land surface temperature by 0.44 degree centigrade, while areas of severe deforestation warming as much as 1.5 degrees centigrade, especially during the dry season. But is such destruction only recent? Amitav Ghosh tells us it is not so, in his latest book—*The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. In fact, he points out, it has been an ongoing process over several centuries, starting with the colonial conquest of the East Indies, and the New World, when the life-sustaining environs of indigenous communities were wiped out by West Europeans in their greed for profit.

Ghosh recreates the historical background of the Bandanese Nutmeg islands in Indonesia, where, in their greed to monopolize the spice trade, Dutch colonialists massacred the indigenous people of the Banda islands in 1621, driving the survivors away from their island home. The scenario was similar to what was done to the indigenous tribes of North America half way across the world, where forests were decimated, settlements burnt down, and cattle seized to snatch the land, and settle European communities. The greed of the colonialists looked upon the Earth as an inanimate object to be exploited, rather than a living, breathing entity, which the natives revered. This “modern” West European model of development and civilization which came to be adopted for “terraforming” since colonial times continues to be followed worldwide to this day. This is the major cause of the planetary crisis, which is now plaguing us today, Ghosh feels. To conquer the land, colonialists unleashed biological warfare using pathogens, and a bio-political warfare, wherein an entire environmental web that sustained a population was destroyed. In making his point, Ghosh brings forth his extensive research to tell us how British colonialists used smallpox-infected

blankets as gifts to trigger epidemics in Ohio and other parts of North America to decimate entire native Indian populations. More than physical warfare, cattle, forests, wild animals and crops growing on native lands were destroyed. This would bring indigenous populations to the brink of starvation, and eventually, death.

In India, too, in spite of the existence of the Forest Rights Act, the rights of indigenous communities are seldom acknowledged. This has resulted in widening of the rich–poor gap, and hence, more casualties due to the climate crisis, especially in richer parts of the world. On the other hand, wherever neoliberalism has been ignored in favour of a more equitable society, casualties from climate-related disasters, including COVID-19, have been fewer and far between.

Inequity, Ghosh feels, is the main reason for the present climate crisis. If we are to address climate change, it is important that we address inequity in our midst. This can be done if we return back to the wisdom of our ancients, and the indigenous peoples of the world, who looked upon the Earth as a living spirit -or Gaia. Citing the fatalities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Hurricane Maria of 2017, Ghosh tells us of how the worst-affected where nations like the US, and Puerto Rico, where inequity rules. On the other hand, Senegal and other poor African nations came out much better during the pandemic, while Cuba, a nation much poorer otherwise, suffered very few casualties during Hurricane Maria.

Ghosh also goes on to explain the occurrence of the “Little Ice Age” in the past, as having corresponded to the time when colonialists set foot in the New World, and went on to wipe off native Indians from their land. Recent research, he points out, suggests that so many Amerindians perished in the 16th and 17th centuries—estimates varying between 70% and 95% of the population, that vast tracts of land once used to grow food reverted to forests. This sudden burgeoning of greenery, hence, produced a reverse greenhouse effect.

Examples in the book abound on how barbarous rampages by the colonialists—whether Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British or Belgian—decimated entire landscapes in the new and old worlds, and gradually brought us to the state we are in today.

The book moves back and forth to note how each massacre—in the Caribbeans, in Phoenix, in the Banda islands of the Malukas (Indonesia), is not too different from the other. Drawing on exhaustive references, Ghosh makes his case for listening to the voices of Nature to stem our descent into climate chaos. For this, he prescribes a sustainable lifestyle based on prudent consumption to combat climate change, as was done by Japan during the Little Ice Age.

The book is a must-read for all those who care for the planet, and are looking for the right solutions to fight climate change in this time and age.