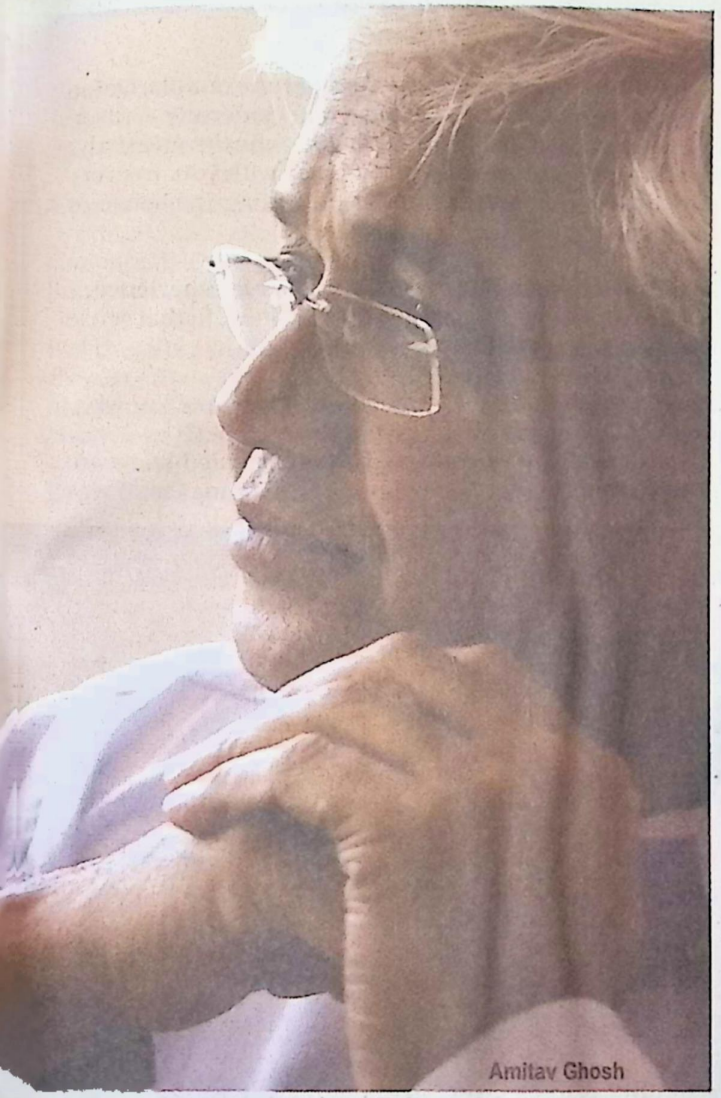

Amitav Ghosh

Will you tell us a little about your novel The Sea of the Poppies?

It's a book that starts in the 19th century, and it follows the history of three or four families over a period of time, it follows a few characters, the inter-relationships, the interactions over an extended period of time.

In a broader sense the tale of the lascars, which the book is about, is essentially the history of colonisation.

I think its much more than that. South Asia is a great nautical region, you know. It's a history that we have forgotten. We have lost the whole nautical tradition that we once had, we no longer think of ourselves as nautical people. And especially in India shipping has suffered terribly since independence. Once upon a time it was possible to travel to India all the way in boats in steamers, there was a very busy, thriving coastal trade, but since independence, because in India everything is based so much on Delhi, which is very far inland, our coastal shipping has died away, there is no shipping left on the Ganga, there is no shipping left on any of our major rivers. Once upon a time these rivers were alive with shipping, now very rarely do you see a ship on the Ganga.

Should I put it this way, you are reclaiming a part of history that is forgotten?

I think you can certainly say that, it's part of history that I do want to reclaim, because a whole tradition of sea that we had has been lost. It needs to be reclaimed.

History is central to the art of fiction...we see you try to interpret and reinterpret history both at a personal and social level.

Again it varies from writer to writer, but I would say how important is history for me. It is enormously important to me; it is always very basic to my work, I am very interested in it; my books are built around it. History is absolutely fundamental to my work.

I have found in Naipaul's The Magic Seeds that the first textual history of the sub-continent has been written by a White school inspector for schoolchildren.

I am a great admirer of Mr Naipaul but I don't think very much of his scholarship. But I have to say I don't know what he is talking about because there has been history, there were Rajotaranganies, written in the 10th/11th century, there were all the traditions of Ain-e-Akbari, there were so many histories, how can he say that there was no history in India.

But because of colonisation we have to resort to, say, Royal Albert Museum or the British Museum to know about ourselves. Our history is, in a way, lost, forgotten.

You are right. I think the history of the last 200 years has been defaced largely, because of it we have to reclaim a lot of it from the colonial archive. That certainly is true. But there has been a long tradition of writing history in South Asia. So many histories have been written--The Akbarnama, The Jahangirnama, especially the Buddhist tradition, it's very historically informed. I suppose what Naipaul means is that the first contemporary or modern history in the sense of a school text of history was written by a school inspector. Who else is going to write school texts but a schoolteacher or a school inspector?

In The Hungry Tide we see you portray the role of individuals in myth and history. Why does it, as a theme, dominate your work so much?

Because myth is fiction and I am a writer of fiction. Myth is, in a way, like a novel. These are inventions about lives, about societies; they interest me because they are