them in your computer library; you don't have to be constantly sweeping out maggots and all that. I welcome the age of the electronic book.

What's the last Bangla book you read?

I often read in Bangla on and off. I think I lat read Sunil Gangapadya's Shey Shomoy. I am a very big admirer of Sunil's work.

But there is a problem, if you call it so. How do you recreate the way certain figures in history, say Michael Madhusudan Dutt, used to talk? Here we are talking about a person's speech, his own way of talking.

He is writing historical fiction, just the way I write. Do I know that the King of Burma has said what I have said that he said? Of course not, you make it up.

So, to what extent can you make things up?

You can do this to whatever extent you like, it's a fiction, your reader has to know it's a fiction. I do not know if you have read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 'August 1914', there is a wonderful, incredibly powerful passage 60/70 pages long which is the Tsar thinking about the revolution that is on his doorstep. That's one of great marvellous passages of fiction. I mean, did Shakespeare know what the Henry the IV thought? Did Shakespeare know what Julius Caesar thought? Of course not. He made it up.

JM Coetzee tried to imagine the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky in his 'The Master of Petersburg'. So, should we call it fiction or a fictional autobiography?

It should be fiction. Even if you are writing in first person does not mean that it has be called an autobiography.

You have said something that has struck me as interesting, you have said, while referring to people who ask you about your books, that you used to think in this way then, now you don't.

What I was trying to say is that, when you are writing a book, you have to enter a particular state of mind, because you create a style for the book, you create a mindset within which the book happens, you build a house, you live inside that house and that house becomes your book. And once you finish, you are outside the house, you can't really speak as if you are still inside the house and still remember every bit of its architecture. To write a book you have to create a very specific mindset. When I finish writing a book, I always feel that I am behind it, I have done it, I move onto something else, it's on public domain now.

So you believe in a disjunction between the writer and the text, the way Deconstructionists think.

That's right, yes. You should read the book in terms of the book and not read it against the background of the writer necessarily.

So, a text creates its own paradigm of power.

Exactly.

Of the writers you have read lately who do like the most?

The most interesting is a young boy called Ali Shetti, his book has not come out yet, it will be out in later this year, a really wonderful book about Pakistan, I think its going to be a striking book. Then, I really tend to pick up books at random. The books that are sent to me, I read. Just recently I read a book by a Bengali boy, it was in English, called Amitabh Bagchi. The book is called Above Average, it's about the IITs, Indian Institute of Technologies, excellent book. Then I read a very wonderful book by a woman called Anjum Hassan, its about Shillong and life in Shillong. So, there are so many, you come across them all the time. Another book, written by, again, a Bengali boy, Sudip Chakrabarty, called Tin Fish, I really liked it. There is such a wealth of talent coming out; it's one of the great things about just being in India or South Asia now. The bookshops are filled with books that I want to read.

Do you think South Asia is losing its secular character, becoming a dangerous place in which to live?

No, I don't think so. I think its true that in some way the sort of secularism, it's not certainly as secular as we would like to see, I don't think the secular character is vanishing either. I think someone was telling me yesterday that in South Asia we are secular for the 364 days of the year and on the 365th day something awful happens and its true, when these things happen they are very devastating, very awful, and very dangerous. In India we have a kind of Hindu fanatical party which is becoming very dangerous, similarly we have Muslim fundamentalist parties which are very threatening and dangerous. I think the great majority of the South Asians remain tolerant to each other's beliefs. See, when we speak of secularism in South Asia, we speak of something very specific; it's not secular in the Western sense necessarily, where there is a religion-science kind of divide, I don't think that's what we are talking about, we are talking about a spirit of multi-culturism, a sort of spirit of pluralism, and it's far from there. There are pockets in India when this spirit is under threat, but I would say, the overall situation is different. If you watch any Indian television, you will notice that young people are so much interested in bread and butter issues, there are so much interested in making money, for one, which is fairly a secular pursuit. They are interested in films, in dancing, in clothes, in fashion, it has a downside too, but I think it has broadened the area of mutual tolerance. ■