

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ AMITAV GHOSH | AUTHOR

Poppy fields and shifting mountains

A prolific writer, Ghosh talks to Chintan Girish Modi about eco-anxiety, his passion for cooking, and Waheeda Rehman

I meet author Amitav Ghosh, 67, for a delicious lunch opposite the picturesque Bandstand Promenade in Bandra just a day after the Mumbai launch of his new book Smoke and Ashes...

"IT IS GRATIFYING TO MEET PEOPLE WHO COME AND TELL ME WHAT MY BOOKS HAVE MEANT TO THEM"

Ghosh's ancestors, who were displaced from their ancestral village in what is now Bangladesh, settled in Chhapra in the 19th century as the town in Bihar was a major trading centre for the colonial opium industry.

my children, Lila and Nayan, until they went to college. I would discourage all kinds of fast food, pizzas and hamburgers in particular.

After a good laugh, Ghosh—who has written novels like The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, Flood of Fire, Gun Island, and non-fiction books such as In an Antique Land, The Imam and the Indian,

Incendiary Circumstances, The Great Derangement and The Nutmeg's Curse—tells me that he is in the mood for a plain dosa and crisp medu vadas with piping hot sambar and coconut chutney.

myself. We realise we might need more food, so we also call for besan chillas stuffed with paneer. The order is ideal for the weather this afternoon.

What can be more rewarding for a writer than knowing that people are still reading a book like The Shadow Lines, which came out 35 years ago? Taken back, I blurt out: "Oh, wow! I was three years old then."

Taking a few sips of the masala chai placed in front of me, I tell him that The Shadow Lines was part of a course on Indian writing in English that I took in my college days. Though it was not a prescribed text, my professor loved Ghosh's writing and made us read the book.

We polish off the dosas in a few minutes, but Ghosh reserves his most appreciative words for the medu vada. "These are so good; easily the best I have had."



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

excellent," he says. I enjoy speaking with Ghosh because he is not obsessed with plugging his latest book or his stature in the literary establishment.

Because of the recent floods in Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Haryana, our conversation shifts to his recent books, Jungle Nama (a graphic novel, his first such, in collaboration with Pakistani-American artist Salman Toor) and The Living Mountain, which talk about the environmental damage caused by human actions often rooted in greed.

He says, "The intense eco-anxiety that young people are experiencing seems to be mainly a Western thing. Since childhood, they have been brought up on the promise of progress, on the idea that everything is always getting better.

He, however, was raised being told that life is hard and things will not always turn out well. When he pauses, and asks me to weigh in, I say, "The idea of karma is strongly present in our culture, isn't it? Even people who do not identify as religious seem to believe that actions will lead to consequences."

Before we delve further into existential questions, the server arrives with complimentary caramel pudding and pineapple pastry. We are quite full, but do not want to turn the offer down. The leisurely conversation concludes on a sweet note. Ghosh has to catch a flight to Goa, and his cab has arrived.

Half of gig force for full-time job, stability: Report

A half of the gig workforce surveyed is interested in full-time employment with stability a major concern among them, according to a report.

Over 50 per cent of gig workers, also known as temporary workers, who were a part of the survey, said they would eventually pursue full-time employment, according to a report by staffing firm Ciel HR Services, which was released on Friday.

The report is based on a survey of 1,200 white-collar gig workers from over 400 organisations across sectors in the country.

While gig work has gained popularity as an alternative form of employment, it appeared that a considerable number of them view it as a temporary or transitional phase in their careers, with the intention of eventually securing a permanent, full-time position, the report added.

"We are witnessing a paradigm shift in the world of work, with gig employment becoming increasingly popular among employers due to its advantages, including cost-effectiveness, scalability, and access to specialised skills.

PTI



24% workers said that lack of social security was a key challenge

A suitable choice

UTTARAN DAS GUPTA

In 1951, the newly independent Indian state conducted its first general elections, described by historian Ram Guha in India After Gandhi (2007) as "a massive act of faith with few parallels in the history of mankind".

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's government seemed to be in a tearing hurry to conduct elections as soon as the country gained freedom from British colonial rule in 1947. A new Constitution was made effective in January 1950; in March the same year, civil servant Sukumar Sen was appointed the country's first election commissioner.

Unlike Western democracies, where the right to vote was first given to landed men, India introduced universal adult franchise right away. But it also faced serious challenges: Of the 176 million Indians who could vote in 1951, 85 per cent could not read or write.

First published in 1993, A Suitable Boy is one of the longest novels written in English. In most editions, it runs to more than 1,300 pages. A short review by The Kirkus Review at the time of its first publication described it as "Fat... but fatuous."

constantly eroded our attention span; this summer, it took me much longer to re-read it. The narrative of the novel focuses less on India's first election — though Nehru is mentioned more than 200 times — and more on the selection of a husband for Lata Mehra, the youngest daughter of the formidable Mrs Rupa Mehra.

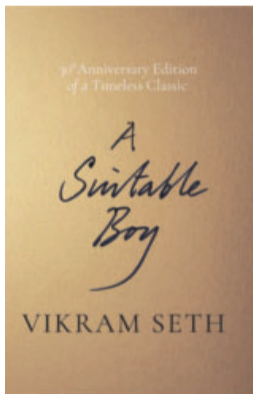
In 2020, filmmaker Mira Nair adapted the novel into a six-part series for the BBC. It sparked a controversy, with several Hindu groups describing a kiss between Lata and Kabir as an example of "love jihad", a conspiracy theory that claims that Muslim men seduce Hindu women to force them to convert to Islam.

Such comparisons, however, erode the true political potential of Seth's narrative, where large sections are devoted to Nehru's attempt to prevent India from turning into a Hindu state, represented through his constant conflict in the Congress's right wing led by the party's then president P D Tandon.

The question Seth seems to ask is what kind of a state do Indians want? Is it the Nehruvian secular and socialist state, or a feudal, casteist, exclusionary one? And what kind of freedoms can this state guarantee? Does Lata — based on Seth's mother, Justice Leila Seth, the first woman to become the chief justice of an Indian high court — get to choose a life partner beyond considerations of her religion, caste and class? Does Maan Kapoor, Pran's younger brother, get to explore his non-heteronormative sexuality? (Seth has been one of the strongest advocates of queer rights in India.)

The novel is an urgent plea for the preservation of the democratic dreams and aspirations of Lata's generations — they remain poignant even now.

The writer is a New Delhi-based writer and journalist. He teaches journalism at OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat



The 30th-anniversary edition of Vikram Seth's landmark novel A Suitable Boy is a timely reminder of India's nascent democratic aspirations

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कार्यपालक अभियंता का कार्यालय ग्रामीण विकास विशेष प्रमंडल, दुमका (rdsddumka1@gmail.com) अति अल्पकालीन ई-निविदा सूचना संख्या- RDS/D/K/M/MSGY/21/2023-24. 1. कार्य की विस्तृत विवरणी :- 2. वेबसाइट में निविदा प्रकाशन की तिथि :- 16.08.2023. 3. ई-निविदा प्राप्त की तिथि एवं समय :- दिनांक 16.08.2023 से दिनांक 23.08.2023 को अपराह्न 5:00 बजे तक।

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