



# SAMIT basu

by- Samhita Arni

Thank God for Dictaphones. In this Dark Age, when elephant headed Gods rarely drop out of heaven to assist in the composition of epic works with meticulous transcriptions, dictaphones are much appreciated. Especially when you're a dim-witted hack, interviewing a perspicacious mind like Samit Basu. He's the author of the first Indian fantasy novels *The Simoquin Prophecies* and *The Manticore's Secret*. His third book will be released by Penguin in December. He's done what I wanted to do, before I even thought of it. I'm insanely jealous.

“It's not like I'm saying Ram is gay or whatever  
– which would have been a little silly.”

(Admittedly, this eye-catching quote is out of context: I have asked him if anyone has taken issue with his use of Indian mythology.)

“There was never any question of religious zealots coming to kill me,” he continues, “because there are only indirect references to myths. For me, myths were the first stories I read. They really have been nothing but stories. I've never thought or pondered on what myths are. If anything, I'd say *The Simoquin Prophecies* more than the other two books is defining stereotypes and doing away with them, and therefore you couldn't do any better than myths because those define stereotypes.”

I like him, despite myself. He likes bad guys. “They are just more fun.”

“And less annoying.” I add. “What characters do you find annoying in Indian mythology?”

“Most of them. Nearly everyone in the Ramayana.”





"Yes! Yes. So sickly sweet and so ideal..."

"All those four brothers – horrible. Sita's a bit of a wuss." I am ecstatic. I've always felt that Sita has been a bit of a burden to the women's movement, and it's refreshing to hear an Indian man agree.

"Everyone's annoying, except the Rakshas. Really, Ravana is pretty cool. I think the world would be a much better place if those guys had won."

What would have happened if they had won?

**“Genuine cultural diversity and tolerance. Magic. Free sex. Interesting architecture. Talking birds. I mean, it's just so much cooler. Less of this whole sickening family values crap.”**

It sounds rather like his novels. "You feel very sorry, for say, a Shatrughan, or a Nakul and a Sahadev. Poor bastards, you know. They're complete sidekicks, they're like Aqua-man in the justice league, right. If they had been on the other side, they would have been eaten. They would have been lunch. So we wouldn't have had to listen to them go on and on, whenever they got their bit piece. If a good storyteller had been behind that...then, things would have been different."

I offer an alternative reason. Perhaps the fault lies in the simplistic good-versus-evil way we interpret the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Perhaps it could have been much more complex. This complexity is lost in the way we see things today. He thinks differently. "I think the problem is this compulsive desire to reinterpret myths to fit in with current systems, current values of thinking and so on, and sanitize the bits that don't really fit in with conventional 'what-should-good-boys-and-good-girls-know' thinking that permeates everything else. Because, you know, the *Vedas* are dirty."

Fun and dirty, I think to myself.

**“All the old myths actually – Greek, Egyptian, Indian, Native American – they're really dirty. In Egyptian mythology the universe is created through masturbation.”**

"Really!!" I interject, "I never knew that."

He's laughing now. "By a god whose name is incidentally the Bengali word for penis," He adds.

What is the Bengali word for penis?

"A nickname for the word penis. Which is Nunu."

That is interesting. That is really interesting. This conversation has struck me as a bit risqué, and possibly blasphemous to some. I remember a conversation that I had ten years ago with an editor of a reputed Indian publishing house, who had taken issue with a controversial comment I had made about Krishna. This was after the whole Salman Rushdie fiasco, and she was wary of inviting unwarranted attention. So I ask.

"There's so much to do and there's also this fear that when you do it, right wing fanatics will attack you and break your house. That hasn't happened to you."

"It won't happen," He confidently asserts. "There's really very little that is controversial in it. I don't think that English books in India are something that any right wing organization is going to take much interest in, because it's simply too small."

You think?



"Look at the numbers. I mean, okay, if Vikram Seth writes a book..."

"Or Salman Rushdie writes it....," I add.

"Yeah, yeah, those guys do something and the New York Times writes about it underlining the connections: then there will be a problem. But you have to be a star already. On a millions scale."

I cut him off. "So you think that when Salman Rushdie wrote the Satanic Verses – was it blown out because of who he is, or what he actually wrote? Maybe in some ways what he actually

wrote was asking for controversy."

"I think it was a reaction to the fair rule response in the West. And that wasn't an Indian thing. That was the Ayatollah guy. I don't really know enough about the situation. But if you look at what happened to Orhan Pamuk for instance, you know, that's a whole different ballgame. You have some guy getting called up because he kissed some teacher's hand – let's not even go there, the whole Shilpa Shetty thing – forget that, that's crazy. But I am talking about fiction that's not changing the world or anything – that's just going under the radar."

It's almost impossible for me to take notes, he talks fast, with so many colorful gestures, adding nuance to his words. I pose my next question. "Do you think writing is a self-indulgent exercise?"

"It's hugely self-indulgent. There's very little that's more ego-centric than writing."

I think it was Derrida who called writing a form of masturbation.

"Pretty much," Basu responds. So do self-indulgent writers read their reviews?



“Pointing out that this book has many similarities with the LOTR – yes, you idiot!”

"I read my reviews with great interest. A couple of them I take very seriously. But these are mostly reviewers whose other reviews of books I take seriously and admire, therefore take seriously. It helps that most reviewers haven't read fantasy ever."

I wonder why most Indian reviewers haven't read much fantasy. There's a strong tradition of magic realism in contemporary Indian writing, and mythology inspires many writers such as Girish Karnad and Irawati Karve. But there hasn't been an Indian epic-style fantasy adventure. So there's nothing an Indian reviewer can compare him to.

"Besides the *Lord of the Rings*, which was fifty years ago. So pointing out that this book has many similarities with the LOTR – yes, you idiot!" He exclaims.

It must have been difficult to get published, especially when there is no indigenous tradition of Indian SF/fantasy. But Harry Potter helped, according to Basu.

"Potter broke Indian publishing records in English. And obviously my publishers aren't going to say that we are publishing your book because Potter has sold well. But I suspect that was the reason. I'd like to think of myself as somebody that has been a huge pioneer in taking the torch forward." He's poking fun at himself. "It's difficult. You know." He adds dramatically, assuming the pose of the brave vanguard, valiantly holding the torch forward.

I like his self-deprecating humour. He's modest and honest.

"I'm nowhere in that league of writers

who sway audiences in New York with their work and so on. It's a very sad reason, because publishers in the West say you are an Indian, why are you writing fantasy, write about India."

This leads me to ask him what he thinks is the difference between Indian writers in English and Indian languages.

He thinks. I have to push to get the following answer. "The essential difference between Indians writing in English and those in Indian languages is that those writing in English are writing for a global audience. They are, essentially at the forefront. They deal with global concerns, concerns of Indians living abroad – their own reality. The subject matter is going to be radically different from someone writing in a regional language, setting their story in a city where that



language is spoken, reflecting issues specific to that city and language – that's obviously going to be different. Then you have our writer stars. Mostly, they are people who write in English. That is simply a business thing. There are obviously more news sources around the world quoting them. And they earn dollars."

It's a tough life being a writer, I can say, having held a plethora of jobs in the last year in television, film, and now I'm working for a magazine. Some of these jobs have been...rather difficult. I remember one job where I left because of the head office's persistent demands that I get a new haircut, skimpier clothing and wear more make-up. Has he had any difficult experiences?

"TV Writing. There was a show called the *Great Indian Comedy Show*. I wrote a few skits for that. Now when they came out, not only were they in Hindi – which was fair, because the show was in Hindi – but all the jokes had

changed. And, I didn't find them funny. I basically don't find that show funny. Maybe one or two minutes in a half hour show. Which was a bit sad. But it was okay, I wasn't credited and I was getting paid."

He wasn't even credited! My deep, buried, former filmmaking self is outraged at this travesty.

"I didn't even watch the show even, so I might have been credited. But I don't think I was. I might have been. I didn't even want it."

But now his writing assignments are far more exciting; like working on the *Devi* series for Virgin comics.

"It's very interesting working for them. A writer is just a part of a team. It's more like being a scriptwriter for a movie, where your editor is your director, and your writer – as the poor guy doing the work – has a say in the process. Once you get used to a particular process of writing,

you figure this is how I am going to work, then having people say 'change this' is always hugely frustrating.

There are endless fights – amicable fights – but they are fairly endless. Ultimately you reach a point where everyone is minimally dissatisfied."

What's more difficult for a writer – collaborating or thinking visually?

"I tend to think visually anyway. Just the process of collaborating – it's very difficult. But I think this is good training to write movie scripts at some stage. It's like Kung-fu."

Like Kung Fu? What DOES he mean?

He makes dramatic Kung Fu gestures, waving his hands about and almost knocking over his coffee.

"Kung Fu... Master kind of thing. But it's a very interesting process. You learn to write in a completely different voice from the one you would use as a writer."

“Writing men is very easy.  
Writing women takes a little bit of time.”

Really? My feminist hackles rise. "Well, it doesn't really. But at some point you start worrying about whether this woman sounds like a woman."

Or she's more like a man?

"Yes."

That's interesting. "Can you give us a brief snippet of what we are to expect in the third book?"

"Oh, many deaths. Epic, brutally violent war scenes."

He seems to be turning cliché and catering to the oh-so-fashionable need for violence He laughs. "To my need for violence," he clarifies.

"Are you a Tarantino fan?"

"Yes, I am. And readers of my blog will

finally find out what the duck of destiny actually is."

Ooh. Yes.

"It's an idea for the third book that I wanted to write right away, but couldn't. So I put it as my blog name because I liked the idea."

"Is it a Steel-bunz kind of thing?" Steel-Bunz is an incredible and wonderful assassin-rabbit. I'm secretly in love with Steel-Bunz.

"Well, kind of."

"Is he going to be the next Silver Dagger?"

"It's interesting you..." He starts smiling. I think my love for Steel-Bunz has overwhelmed him. "No I'm not going to tell you," he admonishes. "But Steel-Bunz makes a key appearance."

Is he the rabbit in the beginning of *The Simoquin Prophecies*? Or is that another rabbit? "No no, that's just a pussy rabbit. Steel Bunz would have killed everyone and effectively not let the book happen at all. You've seen *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*?"

"Yes, yes." But I can already say I have no idea what he's talking about. "Steel-Bunz," he emphatically declares. "When I wrote Steel-Bunz I thought I was only referencing *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Since then I've read about six or seven works of comics and books where there's been a killer rabbit."

Basu's next real-life epic adventure takes him to Hollywood, where he collaborates (on some mysterious and top-secret project that he refuses to talk about) with veteran Monty Python member Terry Gilliam. Wow. I am *so* jealous.