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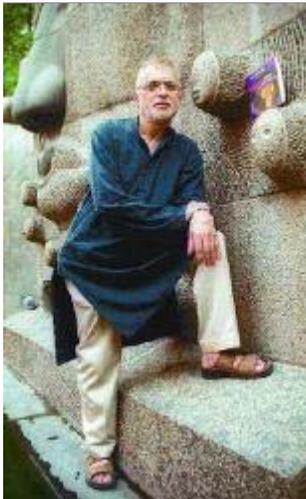
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THE NOVEL FACTS

He is a physicist by training, a writer by vocation. He declares that belief in the supernatural can only harm society; he has a touching faith in the virtues of Capitalism. With Farrukh Dhondy, whose latest book was recently released in New Delhi, fact and fiction don't always run parallel, finds ANJANA RAJAN...



FARRUKH DHONDY whose latest book, "Adultery and Other Stories" published by India Research Press has just been released in New Delhi, has first hand experience of balancing acts. With his long years in the U.K., he straddles two cultures with the ease of the rationalist he declares himself to be. "I believe that the South Asian population of England is very permanent. They cling with great tenacity to the parts and reflections of their culture. But by and large it doesn't affect England. Recently there has been a lot of talk about Bollywood and Bombay Dreamz, but only the NRIs and Indian tourists go there. The English population doesn't know and doesn't care," says the writer whose increasing association with Bollywood crossover scripts - he is currently working on "American Daylight" - has led to his dividing his time between London and Mumbai. "What has made a difference is the creeping settlement of people into British life. It's a fact that the Gujarati and Punjabi girls do better at academics than any other group. "

So society is being affected, since a new set of professionals is coming up. The other way the South Asian population is making its mark in Britain is in the "antagonism to British life". Sweepingly he says, "I would say the vast majority side with Al Qaeda, Afghanistan and Iraq against any policy the British Government or the population

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would have. Some of them are openly against the British Government. Still they can't be called anything but British."

He refuses to concede that there is any racism against Asians in the job markets of the U.K. "You want to see racism, you go to Bombay. You want to see racism, you go to France," he declares, adding that Indians are over-represented in the professions. "The only people who are suffering are the Mirpuris and the Bangladeshis. Gujaratis, Punjabis and the `OACs' - other Asian castes - are everywhere," he quips.

Such one-liners and his affability make Dhondy, despite his blatant views, his scant regard for the political correct, hard to dislike. The columnist known for his hard-hitting writings against militant as well as orthodox Islam, believes that any "belief in the supernatural leads to cruelty and burning at the stake". If it sounds as if, in his Islam bashing, he is dividing the world into `them' and `us', he declares, "If you commit acts of terror, you become `them' for me."

It is not acts of protest he has any problems with, but the manner of protest. Violence, or fatwas to kill `heretics' are not acceptable. "You want to burn 100 books, go ahead," he says, adding, "Buy them first." And on second thoughts, "No, buy a thousand! Buy 10,000!"



TIME FOR ADULTERY: Farrukh Dhondy in the Capital for the release of his book.

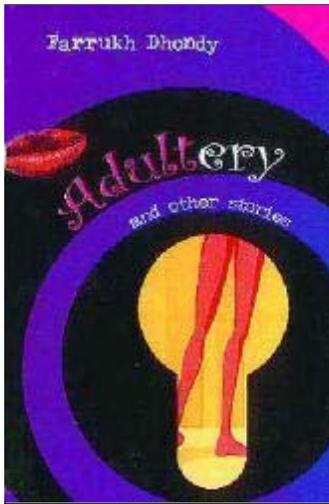
That brings us to his latest book, which contains a novella - "Adultery" - and four short stories. On its provocative cover design and title, he protests, "I didn't draw the cover. But I promise you it's not dirty stories!"

Be that as it may - since the definition of obscenity can vary wildly from person to person - the stories reflect Dhondy's experience in India and Britain. Born into a Parsi family, Dhondy grew up in Pune, where he went to school and college. "Not an elite college, but one with a lot of lafangas and taporis, so I became a lafanga and tapori myself, but it had academic standards and we had teachers and professors whom I still respect. I worked hard." This earned him a scholarship to study physics at Cambridge University. Later he switched to studying English. "Then I got fed up with being a professional student."

Painting houses to earn a living - he is quick to point out the alarming but brief-lived analogy with Adolf Hitler - he got an opportunity to teach in London's schools. "It was a tough baptism. I had to learn the ways and language. I got completely absorbed in it

for 10 years."

But he enjoyed it so much that he gave up a job offer from the Atomic Energy Commission. But the laws and logic of physics give him the deepest comfort, and he explains, "A reaction to poverty and superstition turned me into an anti-religious rationalist."



But Dhondy's brand of philosophy is not as rational at face value as it is to him. While asserting that Sufism "would have been a great modernising, spiritual force, but Arab (Wahabi) Islam wiped it out, and it's the Wahabis who have the petrol," he yet insists that no spiritual creed can regenerate the world, and professes a disbelief in belief itself. While conceding that Sufism is a highly spiritual force, yet he feels that Sufism too cannot "sustain modern life".

What can? "Capitalism, democracy, a recapturing of history and culture."

He elaborates, "Feudal structures of making wealth are cruel." His characters may suffer the ravages of unemployment and the cynical domination of the corporate society, but Farrukh Dhondy finds Capitalism a source of enlightened attitudes to living, like emancipation of women, etc. If this is not a touching proof of faith, what is? But there is more: "The closest country to socialism today is America," he declares, since the growth of private enterprise leads to the "possibility of the withering away of the State".

One thing is certain in these views that bristle with debating points. Farrukh Dhondy can only function in a society where he is free to express his ideas. "Adultery is what adults do," goes a line in his novella. Do it or write it, only a free world gives them the options.

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