1. On what basis have you chosen the themes of your novels?

I am first and foremost interested in the cause. That is why I want to write novels. Themes develop as I get deeper on the subject. So are the characters created. You will note from my novels that they were chosen to speak against injustice, human suffering and the pain that comes to us from life and living.

2. How did your stay in New York and your travel in several countries contribute to your growth as a writer?

Very much so. I consider myself an internationalist. I learn everyday and more than the usual in a sense because I circle round the globe frequently and meet different people of cultural, social and economic backgrounds. I am in a way fortunate to be able to do this.

3. How did you first get published?

A House Full of People was my first novel. It was also the best selling novel and has been critically acclaimed. I gave it to the publisher who published other important writers in Bengal. He accepted without any reservation.

4. What are the formative influences on you as a writer?

I have been writing on the subject of economic development and subjects of my profession. Never thought of writing a novel. So there was no literary influence in my formative years. It came when I was in my mid-forties. I was influenced by Gandhian truth and the Buddha's teachings.

5. Isabelle Burns, in her review on Sands of Time, quotes you saying that you have been influenced by various authors -- Russian, Japanese, British, American and Indian. Could you specify a few?

I read all types of literature which appeals to my taste and interest. Among writers I admire are Kawabata, Marquos, Tolstoy, Faulkner. I appreciate and like reading Howard Fast, Hemmingway, Saul Bellow, Naruda, Sarat Chandra, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (My grandfather wrote his biography), Octavio Paz. The list goes on and on.

6. What kind of influence has Mulk Raj Anand exerted on you as a novelist?

A great deal, I admired his writing from Untouchable onwards. He is my friend. I share his views, respect his dedication and commitment. Being with him, talking to him is an inspiration for me.

7. How do you begin a novel? Do you have elaborate notes before you start a novel?

I think in the following order: (A) cause (B) title (C) theme. I do not make outlines and plan the characters excessively. Ideas develop as I go along. No, I do not prepare elaborate notes before starting a novel. In my most recent work I had done this because it required a lot of factual research.

8. When you begin to work on a short story or a novel, do you have a complete idea of the plot, the incidents, and the characters?

No, I do not. I create the characters I think of what will suit best to support my cause. Incidents follow, plots develop.

9. Is it crucial to you to have a working title before you begin a work of art?

Absolutely. It sums up at the beginning what I want to write about and why I want to write that particular novel.

10. What ignites your inspiration? Could you give some specific instances?

Cause, cause, cause. Examples: I deeply believe in family. Togetherness is my obsession. So I wrote A House Full of People describing the cause of disintegration of joint families in India. (This is true in all parts of the world). A Gift of Love is about a motherless child's search for love (It is not a sex novel). Outcast is on evils of caste system -- not only brahmins discriminating against the sudras but the lower castes against each other. And so in everyone of my novels you will see the cause.

11. What are the main sources of your plots and characters? Do they have any bearing on real incidents and persons?

Fiction is a human document. For me, unless it has some bearing on real life, it cannot be taken seriously as a work of creation. Expressing it is the power of art. My source is
always real life people. They are everywhere. Characters are carved out of them.

12. Did you sometimes create characters, incidents and situations without a first hand experience, particularly while drawing them on rural Bengal?

I always create characters of my own. They are not autobiographical but they come out of experience of real people whether it is about rural Bengal, London, Paris, Rome or Reo de Janeiro.

13. Chaman Nahal declares as follows:

Though my own five novels were published in the 70's and later, I consider myself as part of the second group of writers, by age and thematic involvements.

By 'the second group of writers' he means the novelists of the fifties and the sixties.

To which generation of Indian novelists in English do you belong? How?

Of all generations. A Gift of Love shows passion for sex. Blackstone shows passion for justice. I am a part of every generation in my writings.

14. Your novels like The Tamarind Tree, Outcast, and Blackstone deal with contemporary socio-economic problems which are of great topical importance. Do you think that these novels run the risk of becoming dated?

No. A real creation can never be dated. It becomes a historical document apart from remaining a work of art.

15. How do you look upon your perceptions of rural behaviour in view of your urban background?

I am one and the same person. One day I am a farmer, next day I am a revolutionary, third day I am a wanderer. I travel wherever my eyes take me. I sit and eat with anyone who accepts me.

16. Although you write from America about rural India, your novels have a ring of authenticity. How do you account for their authenticity?

A writer's third eye. My father said to me after hearing
about writing on rural Bengal: "you have never lived in a village. How can you write about rural Bengal?" After reading The Tamarind Tree, he said, "My hats off to you". The message in this novel is Gandhi's words: "Go back to the villages." I may not have lived in a village but my eyes were open as I walked for hours and hours on the village roads.

17. Do you feel easier in giving sketches of life abroad or in giving sketches of Indian life?

It is all the same to me. I feel completely at home everywhere.

18. While Candles and Roses shows areas of divergence of Eastern and Western values, Portrait on the Roof shows areas of convergence of Eastern and Western values. How do you look at these two sets of values? Have you personally felt a conflict of these values in your long life on foreign soil?

I have seen conflict of values all the time. I have never experienced it myself as I consider myself as a part of the world culture. I am first and foremost an Indian. I saw from the eye of an Indian that it was sacred not to abandon the wife in Candles and Roses. Portrait on the Roof was not breaking any heart except the parents' disappointment. Social changes are strong everywhere. By unifying two cultures I was sending a message that we would have to get adjusted to in the changing world.

19. Your prominent women characters -- Zarina, Shirley, Mohamaya, Teresa, Pramila and Kabita -- are paragons of virtue. When compared to them, the corresponding men characters -- Ashoke (Zarina), Sukumal Ghosh (Shirley), Biren (Mohamaya), Dilip (Teresa), Samar (Pramila), Mrinal (Kabita) -- are weak-minded, wavering and lack sound judgement. Could you explain such condescending portrayal of men characters? Do you believe in woman's superiority of judgement over man's in forming human relationships?

It never meant to be condescending. I am sorry if that is the impression created in the reader's mind. I make the woman character stronger in contrast. They are the underprivileged. They are my cause. I do not believe in the superiority of men on women. My women characters try to highlight they ought not to be neglected.

20. Do you think Kalapathor in Blackstone is an improved, matured version of Sambal in Outcast?

Yes, indeed.
21. Which are your favourite characters and why?

A Gift of Love -- Shirley, a prostitute, is just as much a woman, mother, sister, nothing less because of her profession. Society does not feel guilty for their exploitation. Kalapathor -- honest, courageous, committed. Ghonu -- Street Corner Boys -- no care for fame or fortune. Monique -- dignity, grace and understanding. I can go on and on.

22. You have attempted the techniques of mixing up of points of view -- the expositary method, the dramatic method and the subjective method -- sporadically in almost all your novels. But you have not made adequate use of this technique. As a result, there is more concern for the story than for the technical aspects of story-telling. How do you account for it?

I pay less importance to technique (form vs. substance -- I prefer substance). I do not follow the technique which comes out of courses in creative writing.

23. Betty Kelen rightly points out that your strongest literary quality is your' ability to assemble, in the right order, objects, sounds, colours, manners, details of speech, dress and behaviour -- all the props that are needed to raise before the mind's eye image, atmosphere and character.' C. Hart Schaff also praises your 'magical ability to fuse the documentary approach with that of the story-teller.' Could you throw light on this particular aspect of the writer in you?

I am an observer. I care for human beings. I am interested in every person on the earth. So I look at their motives more closely.

24. Do you think that there is a need for Indian English?

Yes, of course. Very much so. I am an internationalist. I treat English as an international language. No one would have known about my writing if it was not in English language. I refuse to be edited by Western editors. (Perhaps fifty percent change to suit publisher's taste and sales). I could have been published again and again in the West if I agreed to conform to their style. What about other Indians who are not in the same privileged position as myself? I stand for Indian English. If there is a readership for its acceptance, it is fine. If not, well .... I do not wish to be judged by the West for my merit.
25. At times your use of English language is not in keeping with the nature, upbringing and refinement of character. This can be seen glaringly in Blackstone where the illiterate protagonist speaks polished, verbose language. How do you account for this inadequacy?

It is done with a purpose. Do you wish to call it a technique? I do it again and again as you say.

26. With the notable exception of A Gift of Love, you deliberately seem to exercise restraint in depicting sex quite unlike contemporary writers like Khushwant Singh and Shasti Brata. Could you explain the reason for this?

I am not amused by sex as a literary subject. I tried to describe England after the Second World War as it was.

27. You believe that every author has a message to convey. Vinanti Sarkar quotes you saying:

> I prefer to have one or two people understand and appreciate my message than masses of best-seller readers who really do not read or comprehend the meaning within the pages of a book.

What exactly is your message?

Each novel has a distinct message. You must have noticed it. Depending upon the cause which motivates me to write, the message comes through, I hope.

28. Your novels, despite their happy or unhappy ending, have an undercurrent of affirmation of life. Is it a part of your message?

You have said it correctly.

29. Do you write your novels with any social purpose like Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Battacharya?

Not really. That is why I have not accepted having been described as a sociological novelist.

30. What is your vision of life?

Kindness, fairness, justice. I do not wish to be the cause of unhappiness of another person. I want to give more than I receive. My vision is that no one should have to go hungry.
31. Do you think that your novels have a 'pattern' and 'rhythm' of their own?

I am not sure critiques can answer that. I do not think of them consciously.

32. Do you read the fiction of contemporary Indian writers in English? What are your impressions about them?

I read Indian novels all the time. I have read most of the works of Indian writing in English. Indian fiction in English has a great future. Midnight's Children opened the vistas for the new generation of writers. Amitav Ghosh, Upamun Chatterjee, Sashi Tharoor are a few notable followers of Salman Rushdi.

33. Have you ever learned anything from reading criticism about your work? Do the reviews please or annoy you, or do you pay too little an attention to them for that?

To be honest, I pay very little attention to them. Yes, I say once again. If just one person understands what I am trying to say I am fulfilled.

34. A reviewer has called you an 'economist who is romanticist.' Betty Kelen says that your novels, "if one must name a genre, would have to be placed in the 'comedy of errors' category, and as such can be read with amusement." How do you react to these assessments?

My writing, by and large, is not a comedy of errors. It has to be read for more than amusement. The book she reviewed might have fallen in that category but my writing, in general, is not.

35. How do you estimate your achievement as a novelist?

Very modest. Mulk Raj Anand told me once: "Romen, if only you get published in the West, you will be known as one of the most important Indian novelists." Other writers have said the same thing. My own feeling is that as an Indian I prefer to be known in my own country.