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**A TETE-A-TETE WITH MANU S. PILLAI, ACCLAIMED AUTHOR AND  
HISTORIAN  
(AN INTERVIEW)**

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**About Reviewer:**

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**About the interviewee:**

A winner of the 2017 Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, Manu Pillai's critically acclaimed essays and writings—based on different periods in history – has made him one of the leading authors in contemporary Indian writing. He is best known for his books like *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*, *Rebel Sultans: The Deccan from Khilji to Shivaji*, *The Courtesan, the Mahatma & the Italian Brahmin: Tales from Indian History* and *False Allies: India's Maharajahs in the Age of Ravi Varma*. His work explores the hitherto unknown and less-travelled routes of Indian history. Written over six years and researched in three continents, Manu Pillai's first book, *The Ivory Throne* won the 2016 Tata Lit Live Prize for best first work of non-fiction and the 2017 Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar. Formerly Chief of Staff to Dr. Shashi Tharoor, he has in the past worked at the House of Lords in Britain, and with the BBC on their *Incarnations* history series. He also holds a Ph.D. in history from the King's College London.

**An Interview:**

**Srijita:** Which period of Indian history fascinates you the most and why?

**Manu S. Pillai:** I am most intrigued by the modern period, particularly the colonial era. We often think of colonialism as a simple matter of foreigners conquering our land. But colonialism had deeper dynamics—it colonized our *minds* also, and still afflicts the way we think, how we approach our own past, culture, traditions, and so on. That makes it many-layered affair, with remarkably intricate dynamics.

**Srijita:** What was the role of women in India's colonial history? Were there any women who have changed the course of our history?

**Manu S. Pillai:** There were many who did. Take Savitribai Phule, for example: in the mid-nineteenth century she set up schools for girls and for "untouchables". She was physically



attacked but refused to give up. And all this starting from the age of seventeen. It was an extraordinary achievement, and it paved the way for whole generations.

**Srijita:** Before we delve further into the discussion, I have a much more burning question-- how were you in history in school? Did you score the highest always?

**Manu S. Pillai:** Haha, no I don't think I scored the highest, but I did well enough. Most kids in school hated history; I found it engrossing. But this might have been because I was reading not just textbooks, but also well-written histories outside the curriculum.

**Srijita:** Do you think historical and narrative non-fiction is having its moment in Indian publishing?

**Manu S. Pillai:** Yes, that seems to be the case, in terms of both public interest and sales.

**Srijita:** What was the most startling or interesting discovery you made while researching about the life of Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, for '*The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*' ?

**Manu S. Pillai:** I was quite intrigued by her life arc: queen of several million people by 5, fighting corruption at court in her late teens, ruling by the time she was 30, out of power before 40, cornered by her own family thereafter, and renouncing that world and embracing life as an "ordinary" citizen in her 60s. Most people, once they have tasted power, find it intoxicating; it is not easy to give up. But she moved on. That left me both puzzled and curious.

**Srijita:** What has been your most treasured experience in your writing journey?

**Manu S. Pillai:** There have been many. But nothing beats the thrill of discovering a new document or diary or letter that no historian before has cited or seen; details that nobody has found. Bringing fresh material to light, often literally, is great fun.

**Srijita:** How difficult is it to write about history that needs to always be factually correct?

**Manu S. Pillai:** There are clear facts, such as India having become free in 1947. But then there is also *interpreting* those facts. *How* did we become free? Was it the mass movement led by the Congress? Did World War II hasten the process? How much did personalities matter? It is over such questions that debate occurs, even if the core facts are indisputable.

**Srijita:** What kind of books did you read as a child? Any book you read recently that you really liked? And what can we expect next from your table?

**Manu S. Pillai:** I am working on a book. But I'll speak more about it when it is complete. As a child I read a great deal of everything: comics, little mystery novels, heavier works such as by Charles Dickens. My sister and I would also have Malayalam stories read out to us, which opened up an altogether different world. As for a recent book I liked: I'd say Akash Singh Rathore's new biography of B.R. Ambedkar. The "Father of the Constitution" is humanized here, in a way that is rare in most studies on the man.

**Srijita:** Any message for the aspiring writers?

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**Manu S. Pillai:** Writing is like any other profession: you must keep at it to get better. It requires diligence, discipline, and commitment. But for all that, it is also a source of great pleasure. Very few of us are privileged to do what we love for a living; but this also means the pressure, in terms of “making it work” is higher, as is the necessity to do your best. But it can be done.



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