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Rana Dasgupta The state we're in

He just won the Windham-Campbell prize, for a book about Delhi that he wrote 11 years ago. The award comes at just the right time, Dasgupta says – as he was tussling with the writer's place in a world of AI (and with a book on the failure of the nation-state that he's spent over 10 years writing)

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Tussling with a new book about the failure of the nation-state, British writer Rana Dasgupta, 53, was feeling like anything but a winner, when he got the call telling him that he had in fact won the 2025 Windham-Campbell prize for non-fiction.

"It was a complete surprise," he says. Capital: A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi (2014) was released 11 years ago. This acknowledgement of his body of work came at the right time, he says. A time when he was wrestling with whether there was anything human left about the very act of writing, in an age of artificial intelligence. How does he feel about his human endeavours now? What is his next book, After Nations, about? Excerpts from an interview.

Well, congratulations. The prize came as quite a surprise?

I had no words at the very beginning. I was completely unprepared.

I haven't published a book in 11 years. I've spent most of the last decade writing another book, which has been very difficult and has taken me completely away from the public eye.

In this long period of time, I had moments of despair. "Can I finish this? Did I start something that's just mad?"

When you get a call like this in the middle of that process, and my book's still several months from coming out, it's very reassuring. I think more than any kind of intense joy or pleasure, it's a much quieter, deeper sort of reassurance, that you're doing the right thing.

Did you need for that reassurance have anything to do with AI?

Writers are experiencing a new kind of terror, which is: What about this is human anymore?

In that respect, I think this is quite a fascinating moment. We might be the last generation that wins these sorts of prizes. We are now engaging with a new set of questions, which come from the fundamental idea of: What am I doing that could never be replicated by machines? Which, of course, is a question no one had to ask until very recently.

You were born in Canterbury, studied at Oxford, lived in New York. What led to Delhi?

I was working in public relations in New York, which I was quite good at because it's basically about telling stories. But I take stories very seriously, and I did not like the ones I was telling there.

On the weekends, I started writing the book that became Tokyo Cancelled. And there came a point when I thought: I really can't do this job anymore. I was in love with someone who lived in Delhi. I thought, let me go there and see if I can write.

I thought I would just go for three months, because I wanted to return to my beloved New York. But I stayed for 17 years.

Why a non-fiction book, after two novels?

It was obvious from the beginning that the reality of Delhi was extraordinary. I thought, there's no point in me fictionalising this because people will think I made it up.

In the years I capture in Capital, which included the Commonwealth Games of 2010, there was really this sense of shock in Delhi. The whole city had gone down and enormous slums were

cleared violently. Then there was also that terrible rape and murder (the 2012 Nirbhaya case) that just took people's imaginations to the worst places that one could imagine. It was all so raw.

I wanted readers to sit with that reality.

The international press loved talking about the new generations of urban Indians with their iPhones and cappuccinos, and I wanted to tell people that it's much crazier than that. When you transition in a short amount of time from one system to another, it's much more turbulent.

By systems you mean the shift to hyper-capitalism, which is also what the book became about? What can you tell us about your next one, After Nations, which builds on that critique?

Capital came out in 2014, which was, of course, the year that Narendra Modi was elected prime minister in India. In 2016, Donald Trump was elected in the US. And Britain exited the EU.

Because I was moving a lot between the different places where these things were happening – I was still living in India, but teaching at Brown University, and my parents were in the UK – I started wondering, what kind of global transitions are influencing all these places in similar ways?

Then Boris Johnson became prime minister in the UK, in 2019. And people said, oh they're clowns, this person is ridiculous. And yet, behind the scenes, these clowns were changing political systems in all kinds of ways.

After Nations came out of this. It came out of the question I was faced with at that time, which was: Is it possible we're going through a transition, not in the history of the US or UK or India, but in the system of nation-states as a whole?

After Nations essentially argues that the nation-system has, in fact, reached a sort of crisis, and that all our hopes that our national governments can save us and continue to protect us in the ways we thought they might... well, they might not be able to do that anymore. And we might need to think very differently about politics.

Is Big Tech part of the problem? You liken Big Tech to the East India Company...

America and Britain have always tied their destiny to big companies.

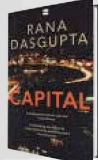
The East India Company contributed to British income, and the state was itself a shareholder. Yet the Company was also a big threat to the state. Its financial crisis of the 1770s, which had everything to do with its violent destruction of the Bengal economy, hurt the state too.

Today, I think we have a parallel situation in the US. The state has become extremely dependent on Silicon Valley, at a time when it is terrified of losing technological leadership to China.

It's no coincidence that Donald Trump's administration would have a key figure from the tech world making decisions about the future of America, the American state, its democracy.

But Silicon Valley is increasingly not playing ball with the state. There are quite anti-democratic ideas emerging from parts of Silicon Valley, and from people like Elon Musk. What does this do to the people's need to protect their own rights and freedoms?

I just returned home from the US, and it feels absolutely chaotic there right now. It looks like Trump is siding with a very small group of elites, driving people onto the streets, and we don't know where all this can lead. But it's definitely a huge crisis for the nation-state.



WATCH: Rana Dasgupta talk about belonging, the pros of AI, and Delhi's nouveau-riche



READ: An excerpt from Capital

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LITERATURE PRIZES

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LIFESTYLE

The best seats in the world

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In mega-stadiums now being built around the world, new formats are emerging: rooftop gardens, walkways, cafes, timber exteriors

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Tooning in

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At basketball games and Grand Slam matches, players are getting animated makeovers. Parallel live feeds are wooing a younger, multi-tasking audience. See how it works, and why

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They loom over Earth at all times, yet we barely understand them. Why are clouds still so hard to predict? And what's finally changing in the skies? Take a look



Dasgupta, 53, was born in Canterbury, studied at Oxford, and worked in public relations in New York, before switching to writing full-time. His first novel, Tokyo Cancelled (2005), was a take on the Canterbury Tales, told through the stories of 13 passengers stuck at an airport.

2 Solo (2009), his next, was a saga of the 20th and 21st centuries, told from the perspective of a day-dreaming 102-year-old Bulgarian man.

He has now won the Windham-Campbell award, administered by Yale University for Capital: A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi (2014).

3 This non-fiction work contains intimate accounts of their lives, told to Dasgupta by people across socio-economic classes, in the rapidly globalising Delhi of the early Aughts. Dasgupta wrote it while in Delhi, where he lived for 17 years. He now lives in France.