WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

In Conversation with Subodh Sarkar

Jaydeep Sarangi

Subodh Sarkar's first book of poems was published in the late 1970s, and now he has 26 books to his credit – 21 of poems, two of translations and one travelogue on America. His poems have been translated into English, French and several Indian languages and published in several journals and anthologies. His important books include Kabita 78–80 *(Krishnanagar, 1980),* Ami Karo Andhakar Noi*, (Kolkata, Prativas, 2004),* Manipurer Ma *(Kolkata, Ananda Publishers, 2005),* Prem O Pipegun *(Aajkaal Prakashani, 2008),* Blasphemy *– Poetry by Subodh Sarkar and Visuals by Manas Roy (Roymans, 2014) and* Subodh Mallika Square *(Kolkata, Vikash Grantha Bhavan, 2006). Sarkar is the editor of* Bhashanagar*, a Bengali culture magazine with occasional English issues. He is the guest editor of* Indian Literature*, New Delhi. He is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award (2013). Subodh Sarkar's poems shimmer with a unique sweet touch of straightforwardness and lucidity which all together mark his poetic idioms subtle, specific and razor-sharp where the poetic corpus retains as an inviting reading discourse. Translation of his selected poems (translated, compiled and edited by Jaydeep Sarangi) is in press. Here is a sample from the upcoming volume:*

Bio Data of a Dog

Father is a German; mother lived at a lane in Entally
Weight at the time of birth: two and half pound, nick name Jeena
Ladies at home call her Fuchu, Fuchumoni, Fuchan
Deep Dark skin, no tail.

Eight pieces of beef during day time
A pot of milk at night. Now three years old
No bite on record so far.

Only a man wearing dhoti
Came begging vote.
Jeena chased him up to the road
Didn't bite, if did she, Jeena's bio data says:
Jeena would have gone mad by herself.
(Translated from Bangla by Jaydeep Sarangi)

JS: Will you share your childhood days from the memory?

SS: My childhood was not a childhood at all. It was my hungry autumn, it was my abject spring and it was a monsoon without rains. My second meal was uncertain. My father died young, he was a refugee from East Bengal (now it is Bangladesh), a refugee from the largest human migration in the world history which started in the 1940s and still it is going on. We were six members in the family with a young widow mother with a white cloth on as a Hindu ritual, as a mark of bereavement. There was no writer, no poet for me. In no way was there any ambience of poetry for me in my formative days. There was a fear of hunger, a fear that was eating up my vitals. Hunger for me at that time was a holocaust.

There was no book for me. There was no literature at home. It was quite a big family with seven members and my mother was a young widow with an extraordinary power to collect lunch and dinner for us. I really don't know how she did it. I still believe that it was a miracle that we all survived. My elder sister one day came back home with a harmonium and a book of songs. She used to sing the songs from the book with the accompaniment of the musical box. The book was torn and yellow, but this book changed my life. It was called 'Gitabitan`, the Tagore book of songs for which he could have been awarded the Nobel prize a second time.

The most awful anecdote from my childhood is an afternoon story. My mother and I went to a number of schools to beg money to raise funds for the marriage of my eldest sister. We collected some funds and we were returning home. We made a shortcut that afternoon through a deep forest. All of a sudden, a fearful man jumped down from a tree and said in Hindi (not our language), give me all that you have collected. Mom and I started running and it was a great running, I never knew before that we can run so fast. The dacoit chased us quite for some time but he gave up. It was an escape that saved two persons on the spot and a third life that waited for us at home.

JS: Do you remember your first recognition as a poet?

SS: I was at Krishnanagar Railway station with some of my schoolmates, not to board any train, but to while away time by watching busy passengers rushing in and out. A vagabond was loitering on the platform behind us, possibly looking for some food. A train was approaching the station. We took safe position, not to be jostled by passengers. All of a sudden, in a flash of a moment, the vagabond jumped before the approaching train. There was a roar followed by a silent count down. We thought he was finished, but to our utter surprise we came to find him on the second platform, eating bread from a small packet he picked up from rail lines. I looked at him through the empty space between two compartments; he looked back at me with a queer deathly smile on the corner of his lips.

PUBLISHED BY FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

I wrote my first poem that night about the smile. I lost my first poem, which was highly appreciated by my friends, after reading it to them the next day. That was my first recognition, which died with the disappearance of the poem. But that smile continued to smile for last 35 years of my career as a writer. This is the smile that made me what I am today. I cannot write a single poem without remembering the smile. That smile is hunger, that smile is Asia. That smile is Africa, Latin America.

JS: Would you tell us something about the forces, conflicts and events that led you to poetry and shaped your sensibilities?

SS: I was born in Krishnanagar, a District town, known for its cultural heritage. In the mid 70s, when I was still at school, the Naxalite movement broke out which popularised a slogan, `China`s chairman is our chairman`. The Naxalites dreamt of a revolution which drew not only peasants but also the cream of the students from elite campuses. It believed in annihilation of landed gentry and land owners. Every day, on my way to school, I used to find abandoned dead body in the wood which I had to cross every morning. This is how I had to negotiate between bloodshed and books on my back.

After that, I grew up and came to the city of Kolkata with a job of a lecturer in a city college. My days in the city constantly clashed with my days in the small town. I was perennially going through the turmoil of a metamorphosis. I was walking out of my old self. This old self and the new self were thrown into a war zone which shaped out my sensibilities. And this war was a base camp for my poetry. If there is no conflict, my sensibilities get benumbed and cannot wake up for poetry.

I must say, I was a supporter of the Left, but I withdrew my support and I supported Ms. Mamata Bandopadhayay whom I have described as rescuer of the poor. I respected her mandate which came to her from the grassroots and I championed her as real Neo-Communist. Mamata defeated the 34-year regime of the communists who in the name of poor people established a reign of terror. I said I committed a sin by supporting the fakes. When I realized, I run away and I freed myself of the dead albatross hanging from my neck.

My poetry did not fall from the sky. I write only when I am dictated from within.

JS: Would you tell us how your poems get written? Do you revise a lot ?

SS: I believe if you revise a poem, then you again revise the same poem, and it goes on, and finally the poem becomes a good essay in the process.

JS: You have expressed deep indebtedness to Sunil Gangopadhyay in several places. What makes Sunil Gangopadhayay so special for you?

SS: I was too poor to buy a book, I bought his book of poems worth Rs 2 in the year 1975 when I was given 50 paisa everyday by my elder sister to eat at college canteen. When I came to Kolkata to live in a city I hardly knew, then Sunilda like a father used to hold my hand to cross the roads. Sunil was among the first who wrote to Allen Ginsberg about me as I was working on his Indian connection. That letter took me to New York City to arrive at Allen`s residence for an unending interview.

I can give you a list of good things he gave me. I can give you a list of bad things as well. A man is not judged by what he gives you. He had lot of blemishes embedded in his character; he was flesh and blood like UR Ananthamurty, but Sunilda was a saint in spite of his deep weakness for women and alcoholic beverages. He was a bad judge of characters, he allowed his enemies to praise his life and manners.

I still believe he is the last writer of Bengal, who was an ambassador of Bengali culture and literature in India, after him, it is a big zero, an enormous void.

JS: You depict your home of thoughts in Bangla that is understandable, ardently global and lucid. Do you write with any particular audience in mind?

SS: I have a variety of audience in my mind. I have been writing not for all. My poetry is read mostly by college university students. Scholars and Professors hardly enjoy poetry. I have always been scared to read out before my colleagues. But I was red with shame one evening when a renowned scholar recited one of my poems all by his heart in front of my friends, their wives and children. I rectified myself but I still believe poetry is enjoyed and loved by the youngsters and then recognised by the oldies.

JS: You have expressed concern for the survival of Bangla as a language. Somewhere in *Bhashanagar* you said, the status of Bangla had been on the edges. Why do you have this anxiety?

SS: Bengali is spoken not only in India`s Bengal, Tripura, Assam but also in Bangladesh. Bengali speakers are estimated as 250 million people spread all over the world. It has been accorded the fifth rank in the list of the ten top languages in the world. I am proud of my language not because of its rank but for its immense possibilities as a creative language. My concern for Bengali is born out of an anxiety that the young city people are not interested in Bengali, they don't read Bengali, they don't want to speak Bengali, and they don't want to hear, either. They read English, sing in Hindi. A language is carried forward from generation to generation through young speakers. I have a deep concern if the young elite continue to speak English, then we have another colonialism, and this time not from outside but from inside. I have a war with these neo-colonialists. Bengali intelligentsia have had a great tradition of Bi-culture which allowed Bengali elite to be the masters of two languages – Bengali and English. But now it seems to have been the extreme cultural hegemony of one language. Young people from school level and college level have to be conscious of the legacy of the language. It is great news that the Government of West Bengal has decided to introduce Bengali as one of the three languages to be taught in school from one to ten levels. In the hills where Bengali is hardly spoken can be introduced as optional language.

JS: Is there a message in your works?

SS: MESSAGE in a poem may be a pain in the arse. Putting message in the cup you are drinking from has not been a good practice. You are not a saint, you are a poet, you may cry, but you have no tears. If you philosophise your poetry, then philosophy will reign, and poetry will go. When I write a poem, I have no agenda except my sensibilities. I obey my heart, I listen to my skin, I support my ears, I hear what I cannot say.

JS: Will you please tell us about the back ground of the poem, 'Sari'?

SS: This is the poem I wrote 24 years ago when Mr Jyoti Basu, the then Communist Chief Minister of Bengal made a terrible comment on the Dhantala Rape case, he said, `o rakom hoyei thake` (it happens like that, nothing serious). I was terribly shocked by the comment, but I could not write down the poem to infuriate the Left intellectuals. I took a metaphor of a widow woman and wrote this rape poem as protest, and Communist Party of India thought the poem was about the sufferings of a young widow woman, not about the Dhantala case.

JS: Is there any specific significance of the title, 'Mother of Manipur'?

SS: 'Mothers of Manipur' I wrote after the mothers came down to the streets, they stood up nude in front of the Assam Rifles Headquarters in Imphal as a protest against the draconian law empowering the Indian Army to shoot and rape, if so they desire.

JS: Will you accept a tag 'socially committed poet'?

SS: Please don't describe me with such a trash. I like to be called `Free`. We can debate and discuss next time – 'Is there any poet who can be called Free? `

JS: Can a subaltern speak? If he speaks, can he retain his position as the subaltern?

SS: Prof. Gayatry Spivak wrote this seminal essay 40 year ago. Now the counter question is raised: the subaltern spoke , but is it heard?

JS: How will you see Dalit writings these days?

SS: Three important things have happened in Indian Literature in the last 30 years. Dalit is number one, English number two, and thirdly women.

Dalit literature is now hot cake in India and abroad. Dalit writers engage us with a fascinating discourse. I read these writings with keen interest. There has been a red carpet welcome to the writers writing in English from India. Feminist literature in India still occupies a large territory of Indian literature.

Dalit poets and fiction writers have great potential like the Black American writers in America, Aboriginal writers in Australia and elsewhere.

In Conversation with Subodh Sarkar. Jaydeep Sarangi.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 4 no. 2, August 2017.
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

PUBLISHED BY FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

JS: Will poetry travel in the age of cyber mania?

SS: Face book poems are the worst poems I have ever come across. Online (web) magazines are the future magazines for our posterity. But for us, it is too early to accept. Mania is a sickness, it will go. Those who are celebrated in print, they will never turn around for web journals. Young generation is taking up poetry seriously. It's a good sign.

JS: Publishers often consider publishing collection of poems as a commercial suicide. How do you view this?

SS: Publishers wait for good poets who sell well. Publishers are afraid of those good poets who do not sell. This is a business world we can hardly escape. There are some publishers who glorify their status by publishing poetry books without good returns. But I feel embarrassed when I see my book is a loss for a publisher. I made them smile whenever I met them.

JS: You are a distinguished poet and editor. Do you consider there would be any difference between a native English poet and a bilingual/trilingual poet from India?

SS: We smartly call them Indian English poets. Arun Kolatkor was a great bilingual poet. Jayanta Mahapatra was a pioneer in Indian English poetry, he has recently written some poems in Oriya, his mother tongue, but I think he will be remembered as an Indian poet writing in English from India. Jayantada knows Bengali pretty well, if he writes in Bengali tomorrow, he will be called a trilingual poet. But I think, it is not time for us to become Chaucer who wrote in Latin, French and finally English. The difference between a native English poet and a bilingual poet is a big difference – one writes only in English, the other writes in two languages.

JS: Will you tell us about your experiences as the editor of *Indian Literature*, a bi-monthly journal published by the central Sahitya Academy, New Delhi?

SS: I joined *Indian Literature* first in 2010 as Editor on the basis on deputation from my college in Kolkata. I could not continue as my wife, Mallika Sengupta, a celebrated poet in Bengal passed away. Currently I have taken charge again as a guest editor working online from Kolkata with a fortnight visit to my Delhi office, checking and verifying the plan and design of the journal physically. I thank Sahitya Akademi for choosing me for the second time. I have an unquenchable thirst for Indian literature in 24 languages and in oral tradition and also in dialects. India as a basin of literature in Asia is an enigma for me, and this journal is a way for me to explore India in a variety of literatures being written down every moment in every corner of the country. I am honoured and privileged that I am able to read India everyday through translations coming to my inbox for *Indian Literature*. This is the only magazine that is the literary connect in India.

JS: How about the mushrooming of the Literary Festivals in India these days? Is it a help or hindrance?

SS: India is now a hotbed of literary festivals. Every city in India is now hosting a festival. It has nothing to do with the standard of literature, it is a great fun for the people those who write, speak and publish. Every festival has an eye to rope in a star from Bombay or from any other film industry. That's a hullabaloo to get attention by default. Lot of corporate support, media support, private support as well as public support. Writers are already tired of attending festivals especially in the months from October to March. Help or hindrance? I have no idea. I met lot of good writers in the festivals then I forgot them as they also forgot me. Sometimes, you meet someone you don't know well but after a month you get a great invitation letter maybe from Egypt or from Taiwan. Not bad if you have a letter to visit a beautiful country and you earn that right by reciting two/three poems.

JS: What can be the role of translation in the present context? Do you think that translation is transfer of power, from one language to another?

SS: Translation is the visa to a language in which you do not exist. Whenever I find my poems translated in a foreign language I feel I have a reason to be elated, I realise that my poem gets another life in another language. It's a big thing. Translation, in its own manner of being in existence, is a power. *Gitanjali,* the book which earned us the first Nobel Prize in Asia, was a bare minimum of translation but it enlightened Europe about the poetry and philosophy of the Indian subcontinent. The role of the translator is as significant as that of an ambassador. Europe cannot be Europe without the translation of Homer and Sophocles. India, till date, remains unknown in India without translation.

Jaydeep Sarangi *is a bilingual writer, editor, interviewer, translator and author of a number of significant publications on Postcolonial issues, Indian Writing in English, Australian Literature, Marginal literatures and Creative Writing in reputed journals/magazines worldwide. He is on the editorial board of several refereed journals in different continents. Widely anthologised and reviewed as a poet and a critic, he has authored five poetry collections in English and one in Bengali. With Rob Harle (Australia), he has edited five anthologies of poems from India and Australia. With Angana Dutta, he has transliterated and edited* Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal *(2015) which has been reviewed favourably in many leading journals in the world. He has delivered keynote, plenary and invited speeches on Indian poetry, Postcolonial literature and Dalit literary movements in different continents. He has recently edited* Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal *(2017). He may be reached at: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com*

In Conversation with Subodh Sarkar. Jaydeep Sarangi.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 4 no. 2, August 2017.
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/