



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



In Conversation with  
Kapilkrishna Thakur

Jaydeep Sarangi

*Kapilkrishna Thakur is long standing Bangla Dalit activist and writer working for more than three decades. His signal books include: Ujantaleer Upokatha (historical novel), Cholechi Chaitrer Utsabee, Shoro Pathor, Kisundar Ondho (poetry), Madhumoti Onek Dur, Onno Ihudi (Stories). He has also written a seminal book on the Motua Movement in Bengal which marks his scholarship in the subject. Matua Andolan o Banglar Anunnoto Samaj is resourceful work on Matua religion and literary productions. Kapilkrishna Thakur is also attached to some important journals and magazines from West Bengal: Dalit Manan, Nikhil Bharat, Bngo Bhumi, Gana Sanskriti, Jamini Katha and Manisha. His literary corpus makes a fervent plea for a complete overhaul of society by questioning all stereotyped notions of caste and class in Bengal.*

*This interview is the fruit of a couple of long sessions in August 2017 in a coffee parlour in South Kolkata, Prince Anwar Shah Road.*

J.S.: What does Dalit Literary Movement imply?

**K.T.: In this country, Dalit Literary Movement is the most recent pan-India movement. Any movement arises from socio-political extremities and this one is no exception either. We are aware that the Dalits belong to the most cursed tier of the Indian Varna System. The burden of untouchability, coupled with the deprivation of rights, has reduced them to a state worse than that of slaves; a state where equality, democracy or basic human rights are all but redundant concepts. The Dalit Literary Movement was born alongside the equivalent political movement out of this downtrodden community's desperate urge to break free. This is what the movement means to me - the cultural struggle to free the society from that very social structure which allows the existence of this exploited class. Dalit Literature has been defined in ways starkly similar to Black Literature, and quite aptly so. Admitting it, I would still remark that a society where the Dalit as a separate class continues to exist and Dalit**

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literature remains a distinct strain for decades is not an approach that is very healthy for a democratic government. This separation is actually quite superficial, unjust even. After the Independence, democratic rule might have been officially drafted but a unified national struggle was required to practically implement it into our daily social life. Dalit Literary Movement is an attempt to bridge that gap on the part of the Dalit community. At least that is the mind-set with which I joined the movement and convinced some of my non-Dalit friends to join as well.

**Q:** When did the Bangla Dalit Literary Movement begin?

**A:** Let us take a look at history. In order to overthrow the moral codes of the Brahmin-dominated society, where a significant section had to exist as Dalits, 'Patit Pavan' Harichand Thakur (1812-1878) inspired the Matua Andolan (Matua Movement) in Bengal around the mid-nineteenth century. Several rebellious texts were written in sync with its sentiments. It is also the origin of the fight for proper education and political rights among the oppressed. It paved the way for Dr B.R. Ambedkar and P.R. Thakur's entry into the constituent assembly. I like to think of the Matua reformation as a sort of a Renaissance for the depressed Bengal. It is obviously a struggle for liberation of Dalits and other oppressed classes, which has continued uninterrupted for more than one and a half century. But characteristically, it has quite a few differences when compared with Dalit Literary Movement.

The Dalit Literary Movement in Bengal, inspired by the one in Maharashtra, was initiated in 1976 through the establishment of 'Navayug Sahitya and Sanskriti Parishad'. Their mouthpiece was the journal *Otoeb*. Nareshchandra Das, Sharat Baruri and Nakul Mallik were its earliest leaders. Later, under the motivation of Kiranchandra Brahma, acknowledgement of Ranendralal Biswas, the organisational strength of Nakul Mallik – the cooperation of Harendranath Bhakta and Pramodbaran Biswas brought about first Dalit literary gathering in Machlandpur (North 24 Paraganas) in 1987. 'Bangiya Dalit Lekhak Parishad' came into existence. In 1989, the second gathering was also held in Machlandpur. Back then, the movement revolved primarily around literature. The movement to propagate the idea of social change among the masses was initiated in 1992, after the birth of 'Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha'. Starting from 1992 in Bhaina (Nadia), prominent cultural meets like 'Sangiti' were organised annually in various parts of Bengal. This is where the attempt to tie together the entire Dalit populace began its course.

**Q:** What were the various modes of propagation of ideas that were adopted in the Bengali Dalit Literary Movement?

**A:** To make sure that the ideas were propagated, or perhaps rethought as well, discussion panels, music, drama (including street play and audio play), kavigaan, paintings, street marches bearing tableaux, poetry meets, essay contests, recitation contests, debates, art contests were encouraged – no stone was left unturned, no medium unexplored. At that time, an event titled 'Lekhak-Shilpi-Samajkarmider Mukhomukhi' became very popular. The

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aim was to present before the audience the ideas of social workers, the obstacles they faced and the experience of overcoming those obstacles, the literary agenda of Dalit authors and artists, their role in the formation of new moral codes; presented in a conversational style, this was meant to appeal to and inspire the masses. Apart from this, groups of Dalit authors and artists would travel from village to village encouraging the masses to carry out funeral rites and weddings without involving priests. Demonstrations and discussions were carried out to explain the importance of the establishment of a society that was free from superstitions as well as the tyrannical Brahmanic social codes. This is how the Dalit Literary Movement made sure its ideas reached the grass-root level.

Q: Who set the trail?

A: Swapan Biswas, Amar Biswas and Dr Jagadbandhu Biswas played an important role in the establishment of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha. But after that, most of the planning and execution was left to us. In fact, I was the one who acquired the stall 'Chaturtha Duniya' at College Street's Bhabani Dutta Lane with the help of Rangalal Kundu.

It became our primary den. Amar Biswas, Achintya Biswas, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Shyamal Pramanik, Gopal Biswas and Manju Balawere the ones who initially took care of the responsibilities. Later on, Dhurjoti Naskar, Bimalendu Haldar, Sunil Bawri, Nakul Mallik and Pushpa Bairagya joined the work. Swapan Biswas, Dr Pashupati Prasad Mahato, Mondal Hembram, Dr Birat Bairagya and Sukritiranjana Biswas were prominent speakers. Kavigaan is Bengal's most popular mass medium. In 1978, in a contest organised by UNESCO in Delhi, Kavigaan won the title of India's best mass medium. The man behind this victory was none other than the popular folk artist Surendranath Sarkar. He kept taking part in Kavigaan, discussions and marches as long as age permitted him. Apart from him, there was Anil Mallik. His spontaneous songs and poems could light up any gathering. Keeping in mind the power of drama as a medium, several plays were also written around this time. In the field of drama, initially Subir Das and later Raju Das and Prangobinda Biswas played crucial roles. Raju Das and his co-artists would gauge the audience and put up spontaneous acts. Moving on to music, Manisha Biswas and Smritikana Howladar are the names that specifically come to mind. Afterwards, the likes of Dr Anil Ranjan Biswas, Usharanjan Majumdar, Ranendralal Biswas, Gunadhar Barman, former Vice-Chancellor Dr Santosh Sarkar and Dr Basudeb Barman – also, Dr Manoranjan Sarkar, Nitish Biswas and of course, Tripura's Education Minister and poet, Anil Sarkar – have helped the movement reach new heights.

Q: What connection does it have with the Matua Andolan?

A: As I have already mentioned, Matua Andolan paved the way for the freedom of Dalits. The regional Matua leadership contributed to the political success of Jogendranath Mondal, patron-in-chief of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Many of the people who lent pace to the Dalit Literary Movements were products of the Matua Andolan. They were already initiated into the struggle, Dalit Literary Movement provided them another platform. But some of the top

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leaders in the newly-formed Dalit Sahitya Sangstha were, for some reason, not that aware of the Matua Andolan. Partition, refugee life or influence of a non-Dalit guru may have been some of the reasons. I took the responsibility of tying the ends together. I wrote 'Matua Andolan o Banglar Anunnoto Samaj' in 1994. My aim was to refresh the forgotten history. It worked really well. In 1996, on the 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of Guruchand Thakur, we were able to publish a special edition of 'Chaturtha Duniya' and also arrange an annual gathering at Thakurnagar, the epicentre of Matua Andolan, to get the edition released by the most important member of the Matua Mahasangha. So there arose a possibility of a link being established between the two movements. But the lack of enthusiasm among the followers of Ambedkar regarding the Matuas, and to add to that the latter's distrust of the former, became an obstacle in the process. Hence, the Dalit Literary Movement could not reach its expected peak in Bengal. In the present, many of those holding the topmost positions in the Matua Mahasangha have set up allegiances with different opposing political forums, further complicating the situation.

Q: Could you name some of your works which can be categorised as Dalit Literature?

A: I have composed several poems arising out of Dalit consciousness, several stories and essays too. To name a few poems, 'Cholechi Choitrer Utsabey', 'Shoro Pathor', 'Ki Shundor Ondho' etc. have found their place in various anthologies. My stories have been published in collections like 'Madhumati Onek Dur', 'Onyolhudi', 'Swapner Dwitiyo Meru' and so on. The story documenting the pains of Dalit life titled 'Dukhiram Mondal-erUpakhyan' was adapted into cinema by Films Division of India in 1996. Also, I must mention my novel 'Ujaantolir Upakatha', inspired by the lives of the rebellious Dalits, which was awarded the Adwaita Mallabarman Smriti Puraskar by the Government of Tripura. I have also written a few one-act plays, audio plays and some songs for the Andolan.

Q: When did the thought of a Dalit movement strike you?

A: When the icon of Bengali Dalit Andolan, the great Jogendranath Mondal, became a part of the CPM coalition and was elected as a candidate for Bongaon Loksabha, he visited our house a few times. Back then, I was a student of the eighth standard. I attended two gatherings with him and even marched for him a few times. Later, another respected leader, Birendranath Biswas, took me to a rebellion of refugees. A major section of the Bengali refugees were Dalits. Birendranath also introduced Nakul Mallik to the liberation movement. Hence, we remained a part of it. It was Nakul Mallik, after he cut ties with the left-wing, who turned my attention to Dalit Andolan.

There were a lot of socio-political events taking place at that point, which brought us face to face with several questions. For instance, it was difficult to accept the 'Morichjhapi' destruction at the hands of the same left-wing cadres who had set up hundreds of refugee colonies. The victory of left-wing in the post-emergency state government and panchayat system could be ascribed to the support of the poverty-stricken Dalits. When the Dalit

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candidate Kanti Biswas was elected as the Education Minister, his own party began raising issues – ‘So now a Dalit is to take the responsibility of education in the State’? At the time, the leading party was against the idea of job security. Even though the scheduled castes had somewhat managed to equal the majority economically by the aid of vested land and wage hikes, socially their standing remained stagnant. Hence, the thought of their social uplift occupied my mind. Despite siding with the left-wing on political and economic matters, I began to feel that it was my duty to play some role in the Dalit liberation movement in order to bring about some social change. I attended the first Dalit literary meet in Machlandpur in 1987. I was assigned the role of assistant editor in the Bangiya Dalit Lekhak Parishad. When the Banga Dalit Sahitya Sangstha was formed in 1992, I became a part of that too.

Q: What ideas of Ambedkar appeal to you?

A: The dissolution of caste system and establishment of social equality of course. Manu’s ideology<sup>1</sup> is the biggest threat to equality and democracy. Our political structure is democratic, but social structure is still inclined towards Manu’s ideas. Take a look at how ‘Khaap Panchayats’ disrespect the Constitution. The reservation policy is nothing but a safeguard for Dalits; the reason behind the attacks on it can be traced back to the Manu extremists who are threatened by the idea of Dalits gaining power. Apparently, there is no caste system anymore, but the moral codes are still branded onto people’s minds. Babasaheb drew our attention to this truth. On 25 November 1949, he reminded the country of the duty to wipe away the mental barriers. Apart from this, his learned opinion on various matters and his research on Indian society, culture and economy continue to inspire me and direct me on my path.

Q: Could you name a few magazines and journals that focus on the Dalit consciousness?

A: I have already named *Otoeb*. In 1991, *Jagoran* emerged. In 1993, *Ajker Eklavya* was started, which used to be distributed under the editorial supervision of Basant Mondal as *Eklavya*. The publication of Nakul Mallik’s *Dalit Kantha* began in 1994 along with Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha’s mouthpiece *Chaturtha Duniya*. Apart from all these, I must mention Bangla Dalit Lekhak committee’s mouthpiece *Dalit Manan*, *Atma Nirikshan* (edited by Gunadhar Barman), *Adal Badal* (edited by Bimal Biswas), *Bahujan Darpan* (edited by Pradip Roy), *Neer* (edited by Kalyani Thakur), *Ekhon Tokhon* (edited by Manju Bala), *Adhikar* (edited by Gourango Sarkar), *Palalik Shila* (edited by Arun Majhi), *Loya Shuruj* (edited by Narayan Mahato), *Pundra-Poundra Bandhob* (edited by Dhurjoti Naskar), *Nil Akash* (edited by Sukriti Biswas), *Chetana Lahar* (edited by Ananta Acharya) and *Path Sanket* (edited by Ashim Bala).

Q: Why is Bangla Dalit Andolan not as tight-knit as that of Maharashtra?

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<sup>1</sup> In Hinduism, Manu is considered as the first man.

**A: Everyone is too busy with themselves. We lack leaders who evade self-promotion, possess foresight and are dependable. Secondly, the idea that one cannot be a part of the Andolan if they are not associated with a certain political party has prevented the Dalits from working together. Here, reaching political targets is given more importance than bringing about social change.**

**Q: Can the Dalit consciousness find expression in a non-Dalit mind?**

**A: I believe it can. In fact, Debesh Roy's 'Barishal-erJogen Mondal' and Jyotiprakash Chattopadhyay's 'Manusher Rong' are two great examples of it. It is true that they did not have the first-hand experience of exploitation or the pain of untouchability, but they have shown that it is possible to go a long way if one possesses genuine urge to change the society and harbours deep sympathy towards their fellow beings. We could also consider Rabindranath Tagore's protest through 'Chandalika' –**

**‘যেআমাকেপাঠালোএইঅপমানেরঅন্ধকারে  
পূজিবনা, পূজিবনাসেইদেবতারেপূজিবনা।  
কেনদেবফুল’ কেনদেবফুল, কেনদেবফুলআমিতারে-  
যেআমারেচিরজীবনরেখেদিলএইধিক্কারে’**

**He who has sent me unto this darkness of humiliation  
I shall not worship, I shall not worship that God  
Why should I offer flowers, why should I offer flowers,  
Why should I offer flowers to Him  
Who has imprisoned me forever in this mortification?).**

**This versifies the revolt of any aware Dalit towards the Brahmanic gods. Rabindranath Tagore did not seem to have any trouble tapping that emotion. But at the same time, it is unreasonable to expect from them either the diverse depiction of Dalit experience or a minutely accurate social picture.**

**Q: You have visited Orakandi. Please tell us something about your experience.**

**A: A wonderful village among vast expanses of marshy land. It is situated in Gopalgunj, Bangladesh. Six months of the year, it was impossible to reach it without a boat; in the drier months, one had to walk all the way. Though currently, high pitch roads have been built. It was in this village that 'Patit Pavan' Harichand Thakur initiated the Matua Andolan more 150 years back; inspired people to give up the practice of 'diksha' and Brahmin worship. He wanted to wipe out inequality and exploitation from the society. He established schools to spread education. His son Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937) followed his footsteps. He set the trail for a mass education movement by setting up numerous schools for the oppressed. The ads we see today about 'Swachh Bharat' shows an initiative that had already been**

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undertaken by him 125 years ago. 110 years ago, he erected 'Matrimangal' (Maternity and Childcare Unit) in a place dominated by water and jungles that showed no promise to many others. He started teacher training centres, high schools and made arrangements to provide child delivery training to widows to make them independent. He did it all with the support of Dr C.S. Mead, Baptist missionary from Australia.

He did not stop there. In 1908, he published *Namashudra Suhrid* journal to improve their way of thinking. He inspired the untouchables in their political struggles, created job opportunities and showed them a different life. He had introduced a fresh lease of life into a dying community and filled them with strength and courage; some of the ones he had motivated would later on lead movements for equal rights. Those notable souls led the Dalit liberation movement in different parts of India. To this day, every year on the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur, nearly 15-20 lakh people gather in this very village. For them, it is nothing short of a pilgrimage.

Q: 'Dalits do not write good historical novels' – What is your say on the matter?

A: The people who make such comments are those who believe that only stories of kings and other privileged people should be told in historical novels. I don't find it so surprising. A greater history lies beyond the boundaries of elite history. How many people have explored it? Previously, it was believed that Dalits could not even write novels. Now they cannot say that anymore. In the near future, Dalit writers will produce good historical novels too. Sharat Majumdar's *Ashit Dhalir Gor* has been published. Can anyone debate the fact that Adwaita Mallabarman's *Titas Ekti Nodir Naam* is a document of social history? Samarendra Baidya's *Pitrigan* has also been successful in portraying truths. Most of the main characters of the second part of my novel *Ujaantolir Upakatha* are real and there is sufficient evidence to prove it. Now just because the tale does not revolve around famous personalities, one might remark that it is non-historical, but how will they deny that this is real history for one part of Bengal? Hence, I firmly disagree with the statement.

Q: Who are your favourite Dalit writers?

A: In poetry, Anil Sarkar, Achintya Biswas, Shyamal Pramanik and Manohar Mouli Biswas. For short stories, Nakul Mallik, Kumar Rana, Manoranjan Byapari, Bimalendu Haldar, Jatin Bala and Sunil Bawri. Among novelists, Harishankar Jaldas and Samarendra Baidya. Among essayists, Anilranjan Biswas. Apart from them, Dhurjoti Naskar, Kalyani Thakur, Manju Bala, Raju Das, Gautam Ali, Nikhilesh Roy and several others have caught my attention.

Q: Please tell us something about your childhood.

A: We are victims of caste divisions in the name of freedom. I entered the country only five months old, in the arms of my mother. Kaksa Transit Camp was my refuge. Lost my elder brother in the camp. My mother contracted terminal illness and suffered an untimely death.

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Displaced from roots, my father left the camp to try and earn a living in the foreign land. Denied the company of both parents, my childhood revolved around my baby sister at my maternal uncle's place in a poverty-stricken environment. We had to change homes and schools numerous times. During a severe food shortage, my father sent us to my paternal grandfather and uncle in East Bengal. We returned to him again. My childhood was spent in such severe unrest.

Q: Why do Dalit writers want to write about themselves?

A: All writers want to write about themselves. Literature is nothing but an artistic expression of our deepest and innermost experiences. You are probably asking me why Dalit writers are more inclined towards autobiographies. Two reasons: (i) They want to warn the world about the outcome of a strict Brahmanic society, and want change to come as soon as possible (ii) They find the writings of mainstream authors very one-sided, they cannot find any relation of those works to the world they have known and experienced. Perhaps this is why autobiography is their preferred genre.

Q: Which message of a particular community you try to uphold in *Ujantilir Upokatha*?

A: The saga of the Namashudra community has been narrated in the novel. This community is the second largest among Bengalis and largest among the disadvantaged classes. They were not untouchable in the ancient times. They had a lot of political power. How such a community got reduced to this state is not that well known. A major section of the community later converted to Islam. The rest continued their struggle for education and development in order to win back their lost social standing. Right at that point, Partition came like a bolt from the blue sky, destroying all their efforts. Using the façade of an individual, I have tried to express the tragedy of an ever-struggling community. By encountering and internalising a multitude of characters, the masses slowly rise to the ideal.

Q: Why does water pervade the novel?

A: Water pervades not only the novel, but the earth too. This is the purest imagery of the river-born Bangladesh. Titas Ekti Nadir Naam, Padmanadir Majhi, Keyapatar Nouka – water is all-pervading. The way people have built their lives around the deep waters, developed civilisations and given birth to a unique culture – why it doesn't already get much coverage in Bengali literature is beyond me!

Q: What is the reason behind the use of the quotations before every chapter?

A: The lines have been quoted from songs, rhymes, proverbs and poetry popular in and pertaining to the geographical scope of the novel. I have tried to use them as preludes to the chapters. They not only reflect the cultural identity, creativity and emotions of the

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community, but also echo the main strains within the chapter. Because I was always more interested in the community as a whole rather than the individual, the mode of expression was adopted accordingly.

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*This interview conducted in Bangla and was translated into English by **Titas Biswas** (pictured left). Titas is a Post-Graduate in English from the University of Calcutta.*

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