

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Jaydeep Sarangi at Flinders University
Adelaide, October 2017

The Bard on the Banks of Dulung Sings: Conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi

By Ruchi Singh

*Jaydeep Sarangi is a bilingual writer, academic, 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 journals and magazines both in India and abroad. He is on the editorial board of several refereed journals in different continents. Widely anthologised and reviewed as a poet and a critic on marginal writings, he has authored six poetry collections in English, the latest being Faithfully, I Wait (2017), and one in Bengali. About his poems Keki Daruwalla says, 'Jaydeep Sarangi gives a fresh paint to everyday living. "Small rivers" near tribal villages are his haunts. His language can be unorthodox, where a rock can turn into a "reckless flow", but his poems are a rewarding read, with the scent of herbs coming through the pages.'*¹ With Rob Harle (Australia), he has compiled five anthologies of poems from India and Australia. With Angana Dutta, he has transliterated and edited Surviving in My

¹Keki Daruwalla, Back Cover endorsement, *Silent Days* (2013).

World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal *to favourable reviews. Another pioneering anthology (with Usha Kishore), Home Thoughts: Poems of the British Indian Diaspora has received critical acclaim.*

Jaydeep has published many interviews with other writers in Writers in Conversation and has been a good friend and supporter of the journal. He may be reached at: jaydeepsarangī@gmail.com

This interview has been conducted via a series of e-mails in February 2018.

R.S.: We know you as an academician, a poet, a critic, an editor as well as a translator. We would love to know about Jaydeep Sarangī as a person and a teacher.

J.S.: I was brought up in a forest enclosed town, Jhargram, where my roots lie and my forefathers are buried. My father was a school teacher. I studied in different parts of the country and came in contact with sparkling personalities, genuine friends and wise men and women. I am blessed with friends since my childhood days. My academic friends and colleagues have rare care and concern for me, my efforts and commitments. I am really lucky that people find interest in me and my works in this competitive time of globalisation. My heart is full!

I am a close follower of His Highness the Dalai Lama. I have read his book *The Art of Happiness* several times and trying to understand Dalai Lama's approach to living. I have seen people practising Truth to the highest scale. This is a real rare area of my motivation! I am blessed with friends who are epitome of Indian philosophical, spiritual and religious truths. They show me the golden light for a calm and peaceful course of my mind.

Teaching makes me happy. My students are my strength.

I've worked hard on translation projects. I have translated a lot of Dalit texts from Bangla to English. No translation is complete and definite. I never judge my translation as the only way to do justice to authors. As a translator I'm aware of the fact that a translated corpus survives with possibilities and it leaves room for further works when time ticks to a new frame. With Angana Dutta I have translated and edited *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*. This book has become text/reference book for universities. I have also translated and edited *The Wheel Will Turn: Poems by Manohar Mouli Biswas*. I've worked for a translation project with International Centre for Nazrul, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Recently, my translation of Sahitya Akademi award winning author Subodh Sarkar's poems into English *Not in My Name* (2018) earned accolade worldwide.

Poetry has been my life force. It has been the substance of my imagination. Dreamers and poets are saviours of our race when society is chasing after profit, delight and cheap popularity. I am all these.

R.S.: Please tell us something about your family and your childhood.

J.S.: Childhood memory is frozen deep in the mind. My mother was not well and up to my class ten, there were hardly days when my mother could stand firmly. I had a brother –a very loving brother, Sankar. He died at an early age. So I was all alone with my father because most of the time my mother was on the bed. In the house – a big house – there was no one

to share thoughts with me – no one to play with me. I enjoyed the deep silence. But I am blessed with rare friendships. I remember my happy times with my friends.

I look back with very happy pleasant memories on my childhood, because I was very much attached to my father. I used to wait for my father to come back from his office. Cricket was my obsession. Kapildev Nikhanj was my hero. I remember how I was restless and anxious when he used to bowl, field and bat for the country. For me, he is the Renaissance man. Winning the World Cup in 1983 scripted India's rise in cricket. Now, it has become an integral part of Indian psyche.

Titas, my daughter, is a hurricane because people say I was very obedient and calm in my childhood. I had a very silent, concentrated mind. I used to get up at 5.30 in the morning. I had a very strict and disciplined childhood. I used to study without instruction from anyone around. Titas is the cynosure of our eyes – she has everything – her parents and grandparents, and playmates. She has become her father's favourite. She is a *little* naughty genius! She has already completed a huge novel in Bangla. Titas' current fascination for cricket is hereditary. Through her I revisit the child in me. Now, she is my friend and a soul - maker. For my poems, at times, she is my first reader.

My wife is an artist per excellence. Her ways of life are artistic. For her, each rain drop sings a full song. Monsoon is very special for her.

R.S.: How closely is your family associated with the Kanakdurga temple at Jhargram?

J.S.: My ancestors came from Odisha as priests for this temple at Chilkiharh. I have published an article on this temple and Sarangi family at Chilkiharh.² The Chilkiharh-Dubra area is unique for its harmonious co-existence of tribal culture and Brahmin conventions. Rivulet Dulung flows through the area and bears testimony of a rich tradition. The temple of Kanakdurga is covered in the west by a dense forest, in the east by Dulung rivulet. It's not far away from Jhargram town, only 15 km. The history of Chilkiharh is closely associated with the history of Dhalbhum. The main story revolves round a dream. Devi Mahamaya came in a dream and ordered king Gopinath to set up a temple for Her worship. Devi Mahamaya in that dream also described her idol. On the very next morning king Gopinath found two visitors who saw the same dream at night. The first idol of Devi Kanakdurga during the time of King Gopinath was made of stone. Later the idol became a gold idol. Sarangi family is the priest for the temple.

R.S.: Your latest collection of poem is titled *Faithfully, I Wait: Poems on rain, thunder and lightning at Jhargram and Beyond*. Please tell us something about this new collection.

J.S.: Poetry for me caters to the needs of historicity in post colonial time when the essentialities of 'high literature' are in question. A poet is a global citizen these days. Experience of a poet determines her or his range of subjectivity. If the experience is varied, it helps. We cannot deny the intermingling of thoughts, contexts, engagements and concepts of these poets, which make them unique. They are aware selves who can also think beyond a

² See http://www.chitrolekha.com/V2/n1/11_Kanakdurga_Temple_Medinipur.pdf.

definite territory and geographical plane. This collection of poems is about the home and the world: as Melinda Graefe puts it,

Jaydeep's poems reveal the cosmic shape of love and loving. ... The poems also take on domestic form – the shape of earthen pots, of houses, and of gardens and temples – but they never take on the cosiness of the domestic. In Jaydeep's poems, people are worldly, they lead parallel lives and travel under alien skies, and as they each pursue their natural course, they are guided home.³

This volume was ceremoniously launched at Flinders University, Adelaide in October 2017. I remember that afternoon with great intensity. For me, waiting is like the seed imagines its further growth. My poems on waiting have moved hearts. I record it carefully.

R.S.: *Faithfully I Wait* has a very strong sense of the place that is Jhargram, West Bengal. What relationship do you share with this place surrounded by forests? How does it inspire you?

J.S.: I find a soul in Jhargram. It's a deep feeling—movement in me. Let me express it through the following lines:

Let Trees of Jhargram Sing
It's like green epidemic
Green turf, green ideas
Flowing like a rivulet
Murmuring a green song of hope.

Big Sal trees live with history
In the roots.
Red soil allure ideas
Tourists break out in numbers
All small lanes lead to a forest
Green reservoir of words.

The pitch dark sky smiles through the gates
Of leaves, wondering shadows
Ragged, rickety, forlorn

Let the moon stay for the rest of the night
Let me now love.
My molested soft senses in a city
Living in debris
One night hotels

³ Melinda Graefe. Speech delivered at Launch of *Faithfully I Wait* at Flinders University, 20 October 2017.

**Far away from the forest queen – Jhargram.
My friends play games,
I make love with the green.**

R.S.: Jhargram is a tribal area. What impact it has had on you to grow up in a tribal area? Did your caste status (Brahmin) have any implications on your relationship with the tribal and the Dalits?

J.S.: Yes. I was very fortunate. My formative years become the sap of my strength. My experiences in that part of Bengal gave me eyes to see the world. I moved on. Now my tree is a full story. It has green leaves as well as the yellow ones.

A poet has a sensitive heart to feel all subtle arrivals and departures of wishes and dreams. I count them all. My friendship with Australian Indigenous writers and activists gave me support. I also learnt a lot from stalwarts of Dalit movement in India: Sharankumar Limbale, Neerav Patel, Bama, Arjun Dangle, Harish Mangalam, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin Bala and Kapilkrishna Thakur –all are my good friends. One of the aims of working on Dalit literature in India has been to reveal to the greater society, the injustice, oppression, helplessness and struggles of many of the disadvantaged populations under the social machine of stratification in India. Caste politics in India is unique and culture specific. It's an experience to work with Dalit writers! My work is my book:

**Those who built homes sculpting Dravida shores
Poor bards passing plaintively sing
Forgotten loftier history of Non-Aryan civilization.
(‘Non- Aryan’, Manohar Mouli Biswas)⁴**

R.S.: How did you become an activist for the marginalised?

J.S.: I think it goes back to the year 2002 when I started working on marginalized writers because I came across with certain good corpus of marginal discourse from Maharashtra and Gujarat through my academic friends. Immediately, I could trace a sound militant body of discourse from West Bengal. I edited the Dalit writings of Bangla in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Literature* from Kerala long ago and that was my first engagement with the Bengali Dalit writers writing for quite some time. It came out from Kerala and it became an engagement for me.

Now, it has become a mission in life. To be with them, to shoulder pains with them, or maybe it is a sphere through which I can go back to our roots. I do not know why I am engaged with it but I am happy that I work with the Dalit writers of India. I find them fascinating. I am not afraid to face the truth. And I am not afraid to unfold their truth in whatever small and humble way I can. So, now it has become a commitment – a journey we will travel together. I am happy to announce that there is a sound corpus of Bengali Dalit Literature and it exists with authority.

⁴Manohar Mouli Biswas, ‘Non- Aryan’, *TWWT* translated by Angana Dutta.

R.S.: Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days?

J.S.: Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so he is. Poetry means a lot of things to a lot of people. Emily Dickinson said, 'If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry;' It is the chiselled marble of language through which emotions are expressed. For me, writing poetry is like grasping at the wind. I like Jayanta Mahapatra's famous comment, 'poetry has to be witness', in his recent essay published in 'Indian Literature.' I write poems because I feel happy after writing.

R.S.: When you write the *Foreword* for a poetry collection, how do you feel?

J.S.: At times, reading is redolent with a hurried system of questions and answers:

Words have ceased to arrive
at your doorsteps, as they used to.
(*Sea Dreams*, Bibhu Padhi)

It's an enriching experience. I learn in the process. Recently, I have written the *Foreword* for three collections: *Four Gardens and other poems* by Malsawmi Jacob, *White Paper* by Sharankumar Limbale and *Half Moon* by Reshma Ramesh. Malsawmi is from Mizoram, Limbale is a reputed Dalit author from Maharashtra and Reshma is fresh voice from Bangalore. I enjoy these varied mosaics. Poetry as a genre of creativity embodies our ideas, dreams, hopes, sorrows and wishes and reaffirms our faith in humanity as it reflects the varied shades of our life. Indians have always held poetry in high regard, from Kalidasa to Rabindranath Tagore and Henry Derozio to Mamang Dai. I unbutton poems word by word. I drink *amitra*.

R.S.: What are your enduring themes; issues and concerns that pre-occupy you?

J.S.: Ha ha ha.... I have poems on ruins which are the trace of something that has vanished and is chained to its own past. The ruin gives absence, so to speak, a material dwelling: a rock-solid and skeleton site that embodies an enigmatic sense that the world is also porous, volatile, uncanny, insubstantial and non-negotiable. I write on small daily acts: *the small things keep happening*.

I write what I see with my eyes. Common men and women are important for my works. Sometimes I write for social change. I have poems on savours of the land. Sometimes my hometown becomes the source of inspiration. Small rivers attract me. Rivers run in me. The Himalayas allure me like mathematics for the stars. Small villages are life-line for a country like India. I inhale fresh ideas when I write. I pulsate with the sob of the rose plucked off its stem. I hear the rain drops kissing the ground. Ideas come and go. It's never pre-planned.

R.S.: Images of borders and boundaries recur in your poems. Would you like to elucidate the use of these images?

J.S.: The Partition of India forced many families to immigrate to India and take shelter in refugee camps. The history of India is influenced by the refugees and policies related to the refugees. Government, both the state and the central, have varied responses to 'owning' the

refugees. The rules also varies as Government changes. I worked closely with a couple of refugee writers from West Bengal. These writers gave me different perspectives to re-read partition history. Recently, my volume of short stories by a refugee writer, Jatin Bala, is out, *Stories of Social Awakening* (2017). International borders are walls as well as doors. Professor Antonia Navarro-Tejero of Spain wrote an insightful Foreword for the book.

R.S.: Tell us about the importance of the river Dulung in your poetic journey.

J.S.: My choice is deliberate, because as a post-colonial critic my engagement with marginal discourse, I like to celebrate the small and local. If we look into the geographical territory, the big rivers are celebrated and respected widely. We have so many things to say. But rivulets and small rivers should be celebrated in a manner to engage oneself with rural India. And the temples near the river Dulung like Kanak Durga Temple in Chilikigarh, the tribal culture associated with the river, I found everything very engaging and I wanted to transmute what I have experienced with the big reading community through this global language. So, Dulung is the metaphor of celebration of the local in a global tongue. It's a brand.

R.S.: Niranjan Mohanty, Jayanta Mahapatra, and Bibhu Padhi – they are three Indian English poets with whom you are personally acquainted. How did they influence you?

J.S.: All three are great poets. Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the major Indian English poets the country has ever produced. He created his own idiom. Bibhu Padhi is an interesting person; loving caring man with great poetic skills. I am fascinated by his thoughts and engaging discourse. Niranjan Mohanty died quite early in life and that was a personal loss to me and the personal loss to each member of the poetic community.

They are the three titans of Indian English poetry. What I really like is that they have created their own space in the eastern part of India. They have showed that Indian English poetry is not only the exercise of metro cities but also relatively smaller places like Cuttack, Bhubaneshwar, and Berhampur (Odisha). So relatively smaller towns produce great poets and they hold the canon of Indian English Poetry. They are my longstanding support, sap of my poetic energy. I miss Niranjan Da a lot. He was a great man, great soul and a great poet. I got the poetic idiom from these poets.

R.S.: You write poems in Bengali and English. With which language do you feel most comfortable while composing poems?

J.S.: It is a very interesting question because if we look into Indian English poets, there are so many that I can remember who have talked about the linguistic dilemma they come across. In this context, I refer to Niranjan Mohanty's poem where he refers to his language as half Odisan and half English. I may also refer to Kamala Das' poem 'An Introduction' which rightly sets the linguistic diversities of our country.

I write with the language I am comfortable with. I write with the language that has the flavour of myself. My writing is roaring like a lion, or twittering like a bird. When a bird chirps nobody asks, 'Are you comfortable with the language?' So I write with the language that I have. Regarding acceptability, appropriateness and grammaticality, we can debate. But I am

comfortable with what I am engaged in. This anxiety is over. Now I experience a metaphor of conquest.

Multicultural India is ethnological wonderland. Threads of Indian ways of life and society are the reservoir of poetic inspiration. Creativity is an aroma of human heart. Aroma has no colour or creed. So, regarding language, I do not have problem with my second language English and I don't see any problem with my first language which is like my mother's milk - Bangla. I am fortunate I can read Bangla which is an amazing reservoir of literature. How can I forget Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Prothom Alo (First Light)*? I am happy that I can use both the languages together as a bilingual product of typical Indian society.

R.S.: Any advice for the budding poets of the country?

J.S.: Writing is a responsibility; aesthetic and social.

Poetry is the stranger within oneself, a shy lover!

I think one should read the traditional stuff as well as unconventional stuff because who knows any pattern can touch a poet to the maximum, not only in English poetry, but also in regional languages.

India is so richly diverse and regional literatures are potent, sound and very competent. At the same time, one should read translations into English, like Greek translations into English. I would recommend Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca and George Safaris. Who can forget the style of Nicanor Segundo Parra, the Chilean poet? One should cultivate the habit of reading, and rhythm. Reading and rhythm should tune the ears to perfection.

As for myself, I am grateful to Jayanta Mahapatra, Bibhu Padhi, Niranjan Mohanty, Keki N Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, Lakshmi Kannan, Tabish Khair, Mamang Dai, Usha Kishore, Bashabi Fraser, Sanjukta Dasgupta and all other contemporary Indian English poets I am associated with. I read new poetry from Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Latin America in English as well as in translation. So, my only suggestion is to read more, learn more, adapt more, tune ears and then come to writing. There is a poetic door in the heart of man. We need to turn the keys to open it.

R.S.: Do you have any particular audience in mind while you write poetry?

J.S.: I write for all who love poetry. Through my poems I reach out to a moment of poetic freedom. I enjoy this blessed state of freedom and creativity. That's all. I never try to understand what is happening with poetry I write.

R.S. : Will you please tell us about your recent works and projects?

J.S.: My article on Dalit Feminism, 'Metaphors of Conquest: Towards the Aesthetics of Dalit Feminism through Select Texts and Contexts' is just out from a reputed journal published by SAGE. My article entitled, 'The Mind Illumined: Tagore's Radical Reflections on Home and the Nation in Ghare Baire' has been accepted for publication in *Geetanjali and Beyond*, Scotland. My book *Indian Novels in English: Texts, Contexts and Language* (Foreword by John Thieme) is in press. With Zinia Mitra and some other friends/colleagues, I am editing a special journal of poetry: *Teesta*. I am also guest editing a special issue for *Muse India* (issue 82), Aroma of

the Heart – Poetry by Youth < The Age of 30. I am working on a book of poems in Bangla. Recently, we have established Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library at ICCR, Kolkata developing the idea of The Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. Our objective is to bring poetry at the heart of the nation. Things are moving fine and fair.

R.S.: Keep up writing poems, sir! Thank you for sparing time for this interview.

J.S.: Who other than the poets will cry the cry of the dropping leaves? My leaves are green and fresh. Enjoyed giving this interview. Thank you, Ruchi!



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