

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



'Time writes its own script...' A Conversation with Sharmila Ray

Jaydeep Sarangi

Sharmila Ray is an Indian poet and non-fiction essayist writing in English, anthologised and featured in India and abroad. Her poems, short stories and non-fictional essays have appeared in various national and international magazines and journals since the late 1990s. She is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of History at City College, Kolkata. She was on the English Board of Sahitya Akademi. She was the editor of *The Journal* (Poetry Society India) and looked after a column 'Moving Hand Writes', *Times of India*, Kolkata. Currently she is the vice-president of the Intercultural Poetry Performance Library, Kolkata and a Board Member of the Poetry Society India. She writes in English and has authored nine books of poetry (listed below). She also writes on Partition and her articles have been published in *Bengal Past and Present* and *Glimpses of Partition in South Asian Fiction: A Critical Re-Interpretation*, edited by Farzana S. Ali. She has conducted poetry workshops organized by British Council, the Poetry Society of India and Sahitya Akademi. She has read her poems at various poetry festivals in India. She had been invited to International Struga Poetry Evenings in Macedonia, where she represented India, and International Poets Meet in Kerala to share the stage with Ben Okri. She was the only poet writing in English from West Bengal to participate in VAK –the first poetry biennial held in New Delhi (2017). Her poems have been translated into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Manipuri, Slovene, Hebrew and Spanish. Currently she is working on a manuscript of non-fictional essays and poetry.

The interview took place at ICCR, Kolkata during our meeting in the month of April 2018.

J.S.: This interview will have a global audience not just your Indian colleagues so could you start by telling us a little about your childhood, schooling and tertiary education?

S.R.: I was born in Calcutta (it was not Kolkata then) a city of sepia colour, a city which tugs at my heart strings so that I cannot be separated from her for a long time. In fact, Calcutta (I like to call it this way not Kolkata, because Calcutta is history, and I grew up with it) is a shadow city, chiaroscuro, a city I never left in an age defined by diaspora, exile and opportunities.

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Kolkata is like an engraving, all the glorious colours of the past and present fused and set in rich black and white.

I had a liberal atmosphere at home. My mother taught at a college and my father was a principal of an engineering college. Being an only child, I was left to find ways and means to amuse myself. I want to say, like Van Gogh, 'I am attached to the earth' and hence my reminiscences. Our house was full of books, books of my grandfather, books belonging to my uncle, and in the shadow of bookshelves, chairs and tables I started to dream of a different universe, a tantalising one. It created a cosy world for me and every night I went to bed taking this feeling like a hot water bottle, creating a comfort zone and drifting into sleep.

I went to Pratt Memorial School and English was my first language. But at home we spoke Bengali. Looking back I realise that Pratt Memorial was a good choice. It was one of those schools which aimed at holistic development. Of course exams and grades were important but there was fun and fiesta too. We had creative writing classes and each one of us were trying to write our best whether be it poetry or essay so that it could be pinned on the wall magazine. School was not only syllabus but something beyond.

Then came Presidency College, still one of the best in the state. I took history as my major. Dr Rajat Kanta Ray was simply fabulous. His lectures on the French Revolution and the Indian Freedom Struggle, I will never forget. He showed us history was not about entry and exit but about departures. And there was Ajoy Banerjee, a gem of a person. Any problem we had, any unanswered question, we would rush to him knowing that it would be solved. At Presidency the friends' circle was different. We were half baked, but then our intense conversation led to defining moments that are hard to forget. Nowhere more so than College Street the youthful vibration and energy of the metropolis pulsate. Home to Calcutta University and some great colleges and school, the footpaths on either side of the road are lined with scores of second-hand book stores, small stationers and sellers of assorted goods. It is here that I picked up my limited edition signed copy of *Serendip*, by Dom Moraes. Another addition was *Stolen Apples* by Yevgeny Yevtushenko. I was then a student of Presidency College. Just across the road from the college is the Calcutta Coffee House, a high-ceilinged two storey space, misty with cigarette smoke and constant buzz of people talking, arguing and debating. Here between insipid cups of pale brown liquid called coffee, ideas were mooted, nurtured and sometimes realised.

Then of course Calcutta University and PhD.

J.S.: When did you start writing poems?

S.R.: Well Jaydeep, it's really very hard to pin point a particular time. But this much I can say that from childhood written words attracted me. The smell of paper, the ink, all created a secondary world, a world that was distant and at the same time inviting. I wanted to belong. I felt in order to enter this world I had to scribble something personal. Moreover I wanted to write down quickly my observations, my feelings, because I felt if I didn't do it fast it would elude me. Perhaps, that was my entry to poetry. And let me step back here and say that I was a kid who was alone most of the time. To a substantial degree, my social life consisted of interactions with grown-ups and books. There was no television then. The journey was painfully alone. Looking back I feel my school helped because sometimes we had to write rhymes.

J.S.: If you had to pick five poets only who had a major influence on your own writing, who would these be?

S.R.: A very complex question to answer. I have no clue. I read widely both Bengali and English and English translations of other languages. I loved and still love Pablo Neruda's metaphors, Rabindranath Tagore's universalism and spirituality, Emily Dickinson's dashes, Jibanananda Das's imagery, Sylvia Plath's intense imagination. The list goes on. As a poet, I feel one must be in love with words and colours. So it is not always necessary that poetry should influence you. It can be prose too. As far as colour goes, paintings are a huge inspiration for me. I have a very visual memory. For example, poetry can be Chinese lanterns hanging from Van Gogh's pear tree or it could blur all formal representation and become words and words and take pride in a Kandinsky's canvas.

J.S.: For P.B. Shelley, 'poets ...are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society...' Do you think that quote still holds true in this age of cybermania?

S.R.: I think it does. You see with the social media the poets have a much wider readership. There are sites, online magazines and blogs where you can post your poems, your observations your protests. In spite of the fact that social networking can most of the time be frivolous and flippant. It has its uses also. One cannot deny this aspect. But what I have witnessed is that poets, sometimes, forget they are poets and have a mission. They align with the current ruling party for material gain, and as one would expect they become court poets. Their voices turn into patronising government voices. They switch sides depending who is in power. Naturally they have followers who are also supporting the poet for material gain and in this vicious circle the real cause gets submerged. Poetry matters, it is a sharp tool to thwart any muzzling of the freedom of expression. To keep this freedom in poetry alive, I believe, one needs to write, move on, even if massive buttresses in the name of priests of religion, priests of politics, priests of society bar the way. The apostles of violence resting on the power of money, force, coercion and cruelty, covered with an apparent beneficent shroud, occasionally hypnotic, have to be addressed.

J.S.: Please tell me about all your poetry collections...in fact about your journey as a poet. Am sure it must have been a fairly eventful path so far...

S.R.: When I first started writing poetry in English (meaning publishing in small nameless journals) and in Calcutta, I was a marginalised person. There was a feeling of alienation. I was never called to any poetry readings because English did not feature there. I was told that as a Bengali it is impossible to write poetry in English. The atmosphere around me was uncertain and threatened my existence as a poet. But I kept on writing, graduating to journals and magazines of importance. Mind you, there was no online thing. Internet was a dream. This was in the late part of 1980s and beginning of 1990s. But slowly things began to change around late 1990s. I started publishing poetry books and get invitation to read poems outside Calcutta and in other parts of India and much later abroad. Calcutta too started, but very slowly, I must say, to be receptive to English poetry written by Indians. Then things began

rolling and I am where I am. But in the beginning the journey was lonesome, difficult with occasional slits of light.

To date I have nine volumes of poetry.¹ Currently I am working on a manuscript of poems and non-fictional essays simultaneously.

J.S.: Could you please dwell on the notion of the self that abounds your poetry?

S.R.: Sometimes the notion of self is the I which is in touch with the deepest part of my being. Spirituality and mystery cohabit. It showcases the willingness to share ones completeness, the joy, the frustration of the human experience – the deep understanding and total willingness to live within this paradox. Each facet reflects the other. It is not the passive reflection of a mirror. It is a reply, a dialogue with one’s higher self, be it super conscious or god. At other times it is the death of ‘I’, end of imprisonment and the beginning of an eternal re-beginning. In today’s world which is over-articulated, criss-crossed by fundamentalism and terrorism, this becomes very relevant. This helps me to live a new grammar of life, performing a new understanding of non-violence, fighting not silence but with silence specially in the world after Holocaust and Abu Ghraib. This notion of the self is what I call ‘becoming woman’, essentially utopic, tentative and hence never cruel. Believing in wisdom and finally tender and ideas are reactions and continuous acts.

J.S.: As a practising poet, I have oftentimes grappled in tumult over the eternal verities of life. Am therefore tempted to ask you about the use of the metaphors of life and death with such aplomb in your poetry. Would you cast some light on this?

S.R.: My metaphors on death are few but on life there are many. I am an optimist. I don’t believe that in order to write poetry one has to be a child of melancholia. Life is a mystery and the more I try to unveil her, she swells and in the words of Spencer expands, touches more and more on all that we don’t know. Hidden, half-hidden, complete stories, incomplete stories, Borges’s Aleph – that is life. How can I make my readers understand without metaphors?

J.S.: Basho said, ‘A poet doesn’t make a poem, something in him naturally becomes a poem.’ Do you think this is RIGHT?

S.R.: Yes, I think Basho is right. You cannot make a poem. There has to be that ‘it factor’ which makes it happen. It’s very difficult to define. Poetry is the home we carry within us, a much denied but irrefutable home. All of a sudden we understand our melancholies, pain and friendship. We open to others’ suffering with what Levinas called infinite, absurd compassion. It is absurd for it is not based on any ratiocinative calculation of blame and responsibility. It is infinite for it engulfs the I into oblivion, at least for that moment.

J.S.: Some of your poems are rich with cultural heritage. Does that naturally come within the architectonics of your poetic creed?

¹ See list at end of interview.

S.R.: When I write I don't write in a pre-planned manner that I will introduce a mythological figure here or harp on our rich cultural heritage. The process of writing is very complex, if these things come, it comes naturally. For example I love Varanasi and whenever I go there I visit Sarnath where Gautam Buddha gave his first sermon. I enjoy the meditative atmosphere there and I wrote a poem on this place. A few lines from the poem–

**... In the landscape of Sarnath
every stone is a Buddha
and each tree a Bodhi-Briksha.
Here time writes its own script
fighting the nettles and the
algebra of ideas...**

or as in 'A Horse Idea, A Zebra Idea'–

...The horses and the zebras in the dissolving softness of expectation take me across steppes and savannah to uncharted landscape waiting for a purple midnight.

There they come face to face with unicorns and dragons smeared with glitters of a lost world and

Bacchus playing with lions, their mane plaited with vine leaves. Even Arjuna lays aside his Gandiva and inexhaustible quivers to frolic with Artemis in the wildland.

The sweet smell of burnt cedar branches make the air pleasantly thick...

It just came naturally. You see what I mean.

J.S.: your cosmopolitan world view is fresh in Indian English poetry. Please comment.

S.R.: Please Jaydeep, this I can't comment upon. This is again for critics. I see the world through my eyes which turn into a mental roof top. Around me are places and people and I try to get into their skin, their smell. In this impossible universe this is my God's window.

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

S.R.: As I have said before my themes are eclectic – anything I feel strongly about. They can range from personal domestic stories to large externalised themes. Dimly lit lantern illuminating a room – moving shadows, shadows taking form, can be my theme as would religious fundamentalism. I would certainly get mad if I had to write constantly on one particular issue and make my signature.

J.S.: Do you believe we are still following a parasitical relationship with the American/Anglo/French intellectual discourse in India?

S.R.: There is no harm in following this discourse minus 'parasitical' as long as we can assimilate and form our own discourse. The problem is with some professors of English at

college and university level. They tend to become rigid refusing to accept hybridity. They are stuck with the prefix 'post': postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism ... as Homi K. Bhabha has said. Your next question and my answer, perhaps, makes it more clear.

J.S.: How do you assess the Indian Writing in English or IWE?

S.R.: Lots of changes have taken place. The poets register a definite shift highlighting style and sensibility. They no longer model themselves on first-generation Indian English writers such as A.K.Ramanujam, Nissim Ezekiel nor do they limit their readings to a standard English Literature menu consisting of Keats, Shelley, Yeats, Auden, Eliot. Globalisation has benefitted literature if not economy. Hart Crane, Pessoa, Adrienne Rich, Dom Moraes, to name a few, are familiar names. The poets feel no obligation to prove their Indianness, thus freeing themselves from the burden that hampered the growth of earlier generation of post-colonial Indian poets in English. Plural inheritances, inclusion, exclusion, the collage of daily life, geopolitical locale and their position on the borderlines of nation-space have made their poems richer. Experiments with ghazals and dohas along with sonnets and ballads have added a fresh dimension. Indian writing in English has come a long way and I believe have carved a niche for itself.

J.S.: Within this emerging tradition of writing in English in a multi-lingual India, where do you place your writing? Is it more India-centric primarily meant for the middle-class Indian readers? Or, pandering for the Western audiences hungry for stereotyped images sanctioned by their culture looking for the despotic, sentimental, superstitious, poor oriental other?

S.R.: That is for critics to say. Most of the poems are deeply rooted in the ordinary day to day living but reaches out to that which is subterranean, which lies beyond the obvious. Here each emotion is important. My search has been to trace these vibrating emotions the borderline of which is beyond reflections and where life appears sun-bathed and sun-bleached, ephemeral and fleeting. I can say that when I write neither the orient nor the occident reader appears before me. I write because it is a compulsion, to showcase picture frames of my feelings, my responses, the world within and the universe without. I do not have any agendas when I write. It's spontaneous. I firmly believe pre-planned ideas like India-centric, Euro-centric etc. throttle creative writing, especially poetry.

J.S.: Why do you write in English?

S.R.: Why are you asking me this question? Isn't English an Indian language? Jaydeep, don't you think that it's time we dropped this question? Whatever I will voice has been voiced before. English is the language I am comfortable with, the language I write, inhabit and wish to share. But like most Indians I am multilingual, I have a working knowledge of two languages and these reshape my poetry. When are we going to get out of this mindset that a Bengali must write in Bengali and a Gujrati in Gujrati. We have so many famous poets who write in languages other than the mother tongue. For example Sahitya Akademi Award winner Jayant Parmar, a Gujrati who writes in Urdu, or Poornima, a Konkonese poet writing in Kannada. It is when someone writes in English this question pops up. Possibly a post-colonial hang-up.

J.S.: How much of real India is visible in your creative writings?

S.R.: Please explain what you mean by real India? The habitat of each poet is different and that structures his or her creative writing and in the process becomes his or her world. I believe real India is a vague term. If by real India you mean 'Indianness', I think it is a straightjacket that we must throw it away, the sooner the better. For 'Indianness' is something deep and spontaneous and language (whichever it is) is the tool of expression. 'Indianness' is not a fashion you consciously try to achieve. Moreover, you have to be over-imaginative to have more than eight volumes of poetry based on imaginary India. Believe me I am not so gifted.

J.S.: What is your take on recent anthologies of poems?

S.R.: Well, sometimes they are well anthologised. But most of the time they aren't, specially if they are coming out from a well-known publication house. They lack the initiative to search and bring forward new good poets. So what happens is old wine in a new bottle.

J.S.: What's the poetry scene in Kolkata?

S.R.: You mean in general terms? Kolkata may not have much economic prowess but the literary, specially the poetry, scene is vibrant and throbbing both in case of regional language, that is Bengali, and English. There are many journals and poetry magazines that abound and poetry readings both formal and informal that take place in book stores, coffee bars and auditoriums. Recently Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library (a registered organisation) was launched and housed inside Indian Council of Cultural Relations (a central government organisation). This is a platform for creative minds of all languages and first of its kind in India, modelled on the Scottish Poetry and Performance Library. Besides this, there are many poetry organisations in Bengali, English, Hindi and Urdu languages which further the cause of poetry. There are also Literary Festivals and a regional branch of Sahitya Akademi (National Akademi of Letters) which gives impetus to poets, poetry and translation of poetry from one language to the other.

J.S. : What according to you, is unique about poets from Kolkata?

S.R.: Kolkata poets are not snooty. They are warm and embracing. The young generation is our future.

J.S.: Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days? Does it pay?

S.R.: Your question itself answers. I love to. It is the only thing I can do. If it is immediate limelight, power, position and money that one wants then one should try his or her hand at other things not poetry. For me poetry is a voyage, there is no destination, no goal. I might stumble, I might fall and then again get up and resume the journey. There may be times when I would want to get out of it. But at the end of the day if a single line makes me feel worthy then I think I am blessed. As Fernando Pessoa said, 'the man who wants will never achieve, because he loses himself in wanting.' I fully agree. Poetry gives me the energy to go on, makes me feel that all is not bad in this world in spite of it being ridden by violence,

repression, domination of global economy and the struggle of marginalised classes and castes, gender and religion. Poetry is something so internal, so subtle that it brings change without the headlines.

J.S.: What new poems are coming from your pen? And what is your message for young poets like us?

S.R.: They are varied. Sometimes, personal and sometimes, protest poems. Actually it's very difficult to categorise. I write what comes to me at that point of time. The poem I have given here called 'The Written Word', I myself don't know how to categorise it. I really can't figure out. The more I try to do, the more muddled I get. I want to write poems that are capable of making some dent in the reader's mind.

I have no message except that they should go on writing no matter what, and not to sell their conscience for immediate gains.

J.S.: Please will you share with me one of your recent poems?

THE WRITTEN WORD

I have smelled the alphabets in my childhood,
each with a distinct flavour, made them cursive
and froze them in my memory stamped
with my signature.

Like a sculptor my fingers created
slanting A, upright B, narrow C and
joined them to form word-landscape.
In the word kitchen, my fingers like a master chef
combined words, soaked them in joys of black ink,
moments and prophecies and then in the
half light of early morning they became
tall grasses, barefoot walking, rain on the sea...

Now exiled from earth by the virtual,
the written word sits crouched holding
a piece of antediluvian world
amid the impersonal sound of
texting, tapping, typing.

Jaydeep Sarangi is a bilingual poet, translator and academic anchored in Kolkata. He is an authority on Indian English poetry with several books and seminal articles to his credit. He reviews poetry for reputed journals and widely travelled as an invited poet-scholar. At present, he is the Secretary, Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library in Kolkata. He is also the Vice-President of Guild of Indian English Writers Editors and Critics.

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Poetry books by Sharmila Ray:

Earth Me and You (Granthalaya, Kolkata, 1996)

A Day With Rini (Poetry And Art, 1998)

Violet Heart Strings (Poetry And Art, 1999)

Down Salt Water (Poets Foundation, Kolkata, 1999)

Living Other Lives (Minerva Press, New Delhi, Mumbai, London, 2004)

It's Fantasy, It's Reality (Punaschya, Kolkata, 2010)

With Salt And Brine (Yeti Publishers, Calicut, 2013)

Windows (Blank Rune Press, Australia, 2016)

Scrawls And Scribbles (Hawakal Publishers, Kolkata, 2016)