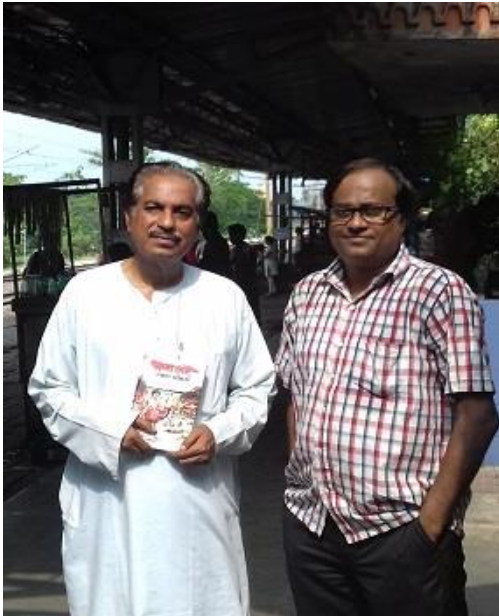


WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Towards the Cultural Banner of Bangla Dalit Literary Movement: An Interview With Nakul Mallik

Jaydeep Sarangi

Nakul Mallik was born in a low-wage family of the Namashudra caste living in a village, Gajendrapur. He is one of the pioneer Bangla Dalit activists/writers. His signal works include three biographies, a work of religious philosophy; several short story collections, a book of eight one-act plays and Manik Ratan, a story based on rural Bengal and the social situation at the time of Partition. A list of his works can be found below on pages 15-16.

Here Nakul Mallik is in conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi where he frankly narrates the growth and development of Bangla Dalit Movement. This interview took place at Tollygunj railway station, Kolkata where Jaydeep Sarangi and Nakul Mallik met for academic and organizational discussions. It was a sunny afternoon in South Kolkata.

JS: Can you tell us about your childhood?

NM: I was born on 1 November 1946, to a low-wage family of the Namashudra caste living in a village named Gajendrapur, which fell under the jurisdiction of Dumuria Police Station of Khulna District, East Bengal. Agriculture was our generational occupation. I have heard that on the sixth day following my birth, during the traditional worship of Goddess Shashti, my paternal grandmother had placed a miniature wooden hoe above my head and prayed to her with folded hands: 'O goddess! Let my grandson follow in the footsteps of his ancestors and become the skilled farmer he is destined to be. May he attain all the expertise that is needed to till the earth and harvest its fruits.' That's the environment I grew up in. My father was pro-education though, so besides taking part in agriculture, I had to pay attention to my studies. I had to go to school as well.

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Quite close to our house lay the Brahmin neighbourhood. These Brahmins would preside over various rituals and ceremonies in our community. Even if they weren't more financially affluent than us, they possessed extreme caste consciousness. A young Brahmin could accept an aged Shudra touching their feet without the slightest hesitation. When invited to a disciple's house, the Brahmins priests would cook their own meals. After finishing the meal, they would keep their leftovers on the plate for the disciples to accept as blessings in hope of good fortune. This never pricked their conscience, but when Shudra disciples were invited to a Brahmin's house, they were expected to clean up the utensils on their own once the meal was over.

Almost all of my classmates and friends were Brahmins. As companions and as classmates, I was extremely attached to them. Yet while spending time with them, I had to be very alert all the time since there were several barriers that untouchables were obligated to respect. I was not allowed to set foot anywhere near the kitchen or the temple. When everyone else was busy worshipping amidst the sound of the conch and the bells, I stood alone at a distance. I accepted the prasad with both hands outstretched, trying my best to maintain that distance.

While still a child pursuing primary education, I once asked my friend, 'What is that book covered in red cloth?' My friend's father, whom I called 'jyathamoshai', answered affectionately, 'That book is called Purohit Darpan, child. You people shouldn't touch it.'" At that age, I did not have the maturity to comprehend what 'you people' implied. It took me a long time to understand that we were untouchable because of our caste.

Whenever jyathamoshai came to our house, my father offered him a hookah after changing the water. Even then, to avoid touching his lips to the hose, he would draw the smoke indirectly by folding his hands into a tubular shape above the hose. He was keen to avoid any contact with untouchables even while smoking a hookah.

This is how I spent the first phase of my childhood. In 1957, due to political and social disturbances, we left our motherland and moved to West Bengal. We didn't have the opportunity to enlist ourselves in any camp. We took shelter for a few days in an abandoned house. My father toiled at numerous odd jobs and built a small house. I was admitted to a school but I still had to help my father at the field. I used to receive a small amount from the school as Refugee Stipend for buying books. Later on, the Scheduled Caste Stipend helped me attain higher studies.

JS: When did the Dalit awareness find you?

NM: Well, the questions revolving around untouchability had been chasing me right from childhood. Why didn't I have the right to walk freely in the abode of my closest friend with whom I shared all my good and bad days? At that time, I only knew about the relationship between Brahmins and Shudras. By the term 'Shudra', I understood only the community I was acquainted with.

After moving to West Bengal and experiencing the cosmopolitan population, I realised that the Shudras weren't a separate community. All the people belonging to the lower strata of the society were classified as Shudras – the lowest class; the Constitution put them under the category of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe. My deeper understanding of these terms

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began in 1964 when I went to study in Kolkata. During my college days, I lived at 'Banibhavan', a hostel meant for scheduled castes/tribes. Since I had all the necessary documents to testify my caste, I enjoyed government scholarships. Interacting with seniors at the hostel kept me informed about the various benefits and opportunities that the Constitution offered those belonging to Scheduled Castes/Tribes. I also learnt that if we didn't keep the Andolan (movement) alive, these benefits could be snatched away from us at any moment. To get me acquainted with the nature of the Andolan, they took me to attend different meetings and introduced me to several great, influential individuals.

Their erudite speeches brought to my knowledge the condition of the outcast and exploited section of the society. I also realised that the only way of our survival and progress was embracing the philosophy and determination of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution of India. They inspired me to pick up his first Bengali biography *Yugasrasta Ambedkar*, penned by Dr Gunadhar Barman. I focused my entire attention into reading the book. The more I read, the more I was enlightened regarding the condition of marginalised communities residing not only in Bengal but all over India. It dawned upon me that I too had a considerable amount of responsibility towards the society, duties that I could no longer ignore.

In 1969, I finished my studies in Kolkata and returned to my village. I took up a low-paid teaching job at the very school that I had attended and took an oath to be of service to the society. I tried to spread the knowledge and awareness I had acquired in Kolkata among the villagers. An analysis of the population revealed a number of social classes that were not included in the Constitution's list of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Their socio-economic state could not be ignored either.

I live and work in Machhlandpur, under Habra Police Station of North 24 Paraganas. In 1972, I gathered the local students, youth and intellectuals and together we founded 'Anunnato Samaj Sanstha', an apolitical social service organisation aimed at uplifting the backward classes of the society. Back then, we hadn't quite grasped what we today refer to as the Dalit consciousness. In the same year, we read articles in the newspaper regarding Maharashtra's Dalit Panther Movement, which widened our perspective. The fire of Dalit consciousness was kindled in my heart. I announced at the top of my voice that all the backward classes of the society, scheduled or not, were suffering just like the Dalits were. The only way to overthrow the exploitative Brahmanical social structure was to unite and fight tyranny together.

JS: Your first piece of writing?

NM: If you ask an artist when they put a stroke on a canvas for the first time, it would be really difficult for them to answer it. It is equally difficult for a writer to pinpoint the moment when they decided to pick up the pen. There is always the stage of preparation of the wick before the evening lamp is actually lit and for me, becoming a writer was quite beyond my imagination. Right after my birth, my grandmother had predicted that I would etch the earth with a hoe and a sickle. The idea of etching on a paper had no place in that stream of thought.

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My love for poetry was ignited at a young age when I attended a kavisangeet program. The spontaneous creation and performance of the famous folk artists Bijoy and Nishikanta Sarkar, the social commentary and satire set in poetry and music, left me awestruck. I used to wonder how they attained such expertise at something that would seem quite impossible to most. I went home and tried to compose a few rhyming verses but failed. The hands used to ploughing the tough earth felt uneasy holding a pen. The pressure even tore the paper but no poetry came out of it. Now when I look back on that moment, I realise that it wasn't supposed to work that way. Rabindranath Tagore once said, 'Whether it's a tale or poesy, it has to exist within in order to be drawn out.' This inability bothered me and I began to wonder if I would ever succeed in writing something other than answer scripts.

When in high school, I gained the affection of my Bengali teacher and my tryst with literature began. Writings of Saratchandra, Bibhutibhushan and Tarashankar prepared the base. The power of prose is no less than that of poetry after all! Poetry needed imagination whereas prose required practical experience; otherwise the text would not resemble reality closely enough, the reader would not be pleased. The first part of Saratchandra's 'Srikanta', Bibhutibhushan's 'Pather Panchali' and Tarashankar's 'DakHarkara' engaged my heart and mind. It led me to think: I was born in the same land around which all these stories have been centred. There are so many stories hidden within the lower caste communities of my village. If I could pen them down, wouldn't that make good literature too?

I sat at my desk armed with pen and paper. But I couldn't figure out where I should start, what I should write or how I should express myself. Lost in thoughts, I nearly chewed off the top of my wooden pencil but I couldn't write a single word. I started reading up once again. I asked my friends if they could write. One of them whispered in my ear about a boy who could not write stories but wrote long love letters to his lover. Apparently, his language and expression could leave anybody spellbound. I thought maybe falling in love would bring out the creativity in me but that didn't work out either. 'My fate was like a muddy ditch.' It wouldn't go so easily.

Yet I kept toiling. Sometimes I wrote a few lines. The stories started but refused to proceed. Sometimes they went quite far but I could see no ending. I would start afresh, fail to come up with anything decent and tear up the pages to bits. When I started writing something substantial, I decided to show it to the Bengali teachers. They tried to correct it but turned it into something entirely different. I couldn't find myself in it anymore. I used to write in Sadhu bhasha then; writing in conversational Bengali was still a long way off. One day, the school put up a notice announcing the publication of the school magazine. It invited students to submit their original writings. I was determined to contribute. I wanted to write a fantastic story. I began to think about what I should write.

That year, we had a heavy flood. I had witnessed how it affected the villagers. Their houses were flooded. They made elevated platforms to keep themselves and their children dry. Emergency supplies arrived bit by bit. They caught fish from the water below and cooked with extreme difficulty.

That was the real bit. The rest I painted with my imagination. Deep into the night, the sleeping baby rolled over and fell into the water. The parents, not looking at the empty bed, mistook the drowning baby's splashing for a big fish. The father thrust a weapon into the

water but in place of the fish found his own child's bleeding body. The shocked parents let out a loud wail and lost consciousness.

I named the story 'Bhranti'. I had not aced the art of writing yet. I probably did not even understand the essence of Literature. But perhaps owing to the power of the story itself, it got selected. Thus in 1964, in the South Chatra High School's magazine, my first piece of writing was published.

JS: Whose writing inspired you?

NM: I was born in Palligram. So I was naturally drawn to literature based on rural settings. I have mentioned earlier that the writings of Saratchandra, Bibhutibhushan and Tarashankar pulled me into the world of Literature. The Dalit awareness had not entered literature back then. I wished to write about the social climate and life in rural Bengal. The first magazine that I published was named 'Gram Bangla'. I wrote many stories of love and affection set in the countryside.

While studying in Kolkata, I was a witness to the Leftist movement. I had the opportunity of reading their booklets and magazines. They created a stream of independent literature that raised their progressive ideology and demands. While trying to understand it, I came across the works of Maxim Gorky, Tolstoy, Manik Bandopadhyay and Mahasweta Devi. Their writing taught me that simply writing about rural life was not enough. The story must scream of protest and rebellion; it must disclose an urge to change the society.

Sometime after that, I was introduced to the ideology of Babasaheb Ambedkar. I read the biography of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. It exposed me to an entirely different world altogether. I learnt that the Marxist ideology was aimed at a classless society whereas Babasaheb's ideology was aimed at a casteless society. Dr Ambedkar had said: 'Abolition of economic equality does not guarantee abolition of the class system. As long as we don't ward off social inequality, a classless society cannot be established. True social equality cannot be achieved that way.'

Literature would have to draw attention to this inequality and raise awareness among the masses. Privileged upper-class writers could not be expected to write for this purpose. The ostracised and marginalised people must pick up the pen themselves. They must write about the caste discrimination that plagues the whole country. They must voice their protest. They must show the path to a better society through their writing.

It is true that Mahasweta Devi had addressed caste discrimination in many of her works. She had a lot of sympathy towards marginalised communities, but not much empathy.

Poet Raicharan Biswas paved the way for Dalit Literature. He expressed his progressive ideas in the anthology *Jatiya Jagaran*. It was released just four years after the publication of Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita, in 1921. Later on, I was inspired by the works of Saratchandra Majumdar, Kartik Chandra Mallik, Sushma Maitra, Ranajit Kumar Sikdar, Professor Naresh Chandra Das, Manimandal and Mahitosh Biswas, who focussed on the Dalits.

In 1972, it was us who researched the progress of the Bengali Dalit literature following Maharashtra's Dalit Panther Movement. We studied translations of Marathi Dalit literature and adopted their characteristics.

In 1987, at the Dalit Sahitya gathering in Machlandpur, Harendranath Bhakta read out his essay 'Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha'.

Today, Dalit literature has come a long way. The writers, predecessors as well as successors, whose greatness I find inspirational are Dr Anil Ranjan Biswas, Anil Krishna Mallik, Anil Sarkar, Professor Jagadbandhu Biswas, Prof. Achintya Biswas, Swapan Biswas, Dr Pashupati Mahato, Chinmay Roy, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Jatin Bala, Brajendra Nath Mallik, Nitish Biswas, Dr Upendra Nath Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari, Jagdish Chandra Mondal, Shanti Ranjan Biswas, Nani Gopal Biswas, Krishnaprasad Mondal, Jatin Bagchi, Jatindra Mohan Majumdar, Bimal Biswas, Gauranga Sarkar, Tulsi Charan Mondal, Sunil Kumar Das, Amal Kumar Mondal, Sukriti Ranjan Biswas, Amar Biswas, Gopal Biswas, Badal Sarkar, Parimal Baidya, Raju Das, Dhurjoti Naskar, Bimalendu Haldar, Dilip Gayen, Pijush Gayen, Kiranmayi Talukdar, Kalyani Thakur, Manju Bala, Puspa Bairagya, Manjusree Biswas, Sujata Biswas, Smritikana Howladar, Harendra Nath Bhakta, Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, Samarendra Nath Baidya and Subir Ranjan Haldar.

JS: Who are Dalits?

NM: After the caste-based social system of India had gone through manifold evolutions, the word Dalit came into full use in the first half of the past seven decades, though a researched material has been found in the second Aakar book of Matua theological and literary text namely Sri Sri Guruchand Charit. In the book, which is written by Acharya Mahananda Halder and was published in 1943, Rajarshi Guruchand Thakur advises his disciples:

those who are downfallen and downtrodden in Bengal
they only have the king as their friend.

These downfallen and downtrodden were called untouchables or low-born in ancient history, whom Gandhiji has called 'harijan'. In the pre-independent era of India these people were sometimes called Depressed classes, sometimes Oppressed classes, or sometimes Downtrodden people, they are called Backward classes. In 1932 after the Puna treaty between Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar it was decided that a list was needed to be prepared as to determine which communities will be benefited under the reservation quota. In 1935 after a populace survey based on social, economical and educational backwardness a list was prepared based on community. Those who are included in that list are called Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Baba Saheb Ambedkar has kept provisions for reservations in the Indian Constitution for these classes of the list in respect of education, job and election. This list has amplified from 1935 onwards.

In article no. 340 of the Indian Constitution it is said that the President can appoint an autonomous commission in order to enquire if there are any other backward classes who are in need of the reservation system apart from Tapsil class (Scheduled Castes), sub-class or adivasi (Scheduled Tribes). According to this article the first commission for the development of backward classes was appointed under Nehru government in 1953; Kaka Kalleker was the chairperson of this commission. The recommendations of this commission were not effective. In the year 1977, during the Janata government, the second commission

was made on 20 December 1978. The chairperson of this commission was the former MP Bindheshwari Prasad Mandal, a man belonging to the backward classes of Bihar. On 12th December 1980, the report of this commission was published; but before that Janata government fell and Indira government rose to power. Again that report was not actualised. After the sudden demise of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister. He, also, refused to take the responsibility of actualising Mandal commission. Later in 1990 the Prime Minister, from the Jatiya Morcha government, Biswanath Pratap Singh announced to partially implement the report of Mandal Commission. There will be 27% reservation for 52% backward classes of the country.

One thing is to be noted – list of Tapsil classes, adivasi and backward classes varies in different provinces. Tapsil class of one province may not be regarded so in a different province, which is the case with Bandhali refugees of the country.

Mandal commission has named the other backward classes apart from Tapsil class and adivasi as Other Backward Classes or O.B.C.

During the effectiveness of Mandal Commission the number of Tapsil class in West Bengal was 59; the number of Tapsil sub-class or adivasi was 39; and the number of O.B.C was 177.

Later these numbers of the classes have changed.

Currently, the Tapsil classes, sub-classes (adivasi) and other backward classes in India are included under 'Dalit Samaj'.

JS: - When did the Dalit consciousness in Bengali literature come into being?

NM: If Dalit consciousness refers to the self-consciousness of the downtrodden people then the texts of Matua Aakartests – SriSriHarileelamrita and Sri SriGuruchandCharit – are the harbingers. Anti-Brahminist texts inspire Dalit consciousness. The writer of *Leelamrita Poet RasarajTarak Chandra Sarkar* was himself the pathfinder of Kavigaan, a kind of song-tournament. The singers of this kind of tournament had promoted the idea of social reformation through the lyricism of rhymed verse. The successor of Sri Tarak Chandra Sarkar, such as Poet Haribar, Manohar, Rajendranath Sarkar, Vijay Sarkar, Nishikanta Sarkar, had also done the similar. Through songs, momentary debate and discussions they stringently criticised Brahminism. These songs were, at first, oral literature, and were not available in written form; they were created in the moment of the debate.

Later written literature came from the downtrodden people. Writers first concentrated on publishing papers and magazines. Through those papers poems, essays, stories, belles-lettres were published. Making journals like 'NamaahshudraSuhird', 'NamahshudraHitaishi', 'Pataka', 'Jagaran', 'Adikar', their livelihood, many powerful authors came to the fore. Among them Charan poet Raicharan Biswas, Jaladhar Biswas, Sharat Chandra Majumdar, Kartik Chandra Mallik, Anil Ranjan Biswas are important. Though it cannot be claimed that they represent the all the characteristics of Dalit-literature, many a time a protest against Barahminism is notable. Through the passage of time this very literature evolved in different names, and gave birth to different literary community.

In 1975 Nabayug Sahitya O Sanagkirti Parisad (meaning Association of Literature and Culture of the New Era) was established, and their preamble 'Atayeb' was published; in 1979

Karnafuli, Subarnarekha, Tista, Sundarban (K-S-T-S) Sahitya and Sangaskriti Sangstha was established; in 1981 in West Bengal the movement of honourable Kashiramji began and in 1984 weekly journal *Bahujannayak* was published; in 1985 through the acts of poet Basanta Mandal *Ekalavya* journal was published. In 1986 monthly literary magazine *Adal Badal* was published, editor was Vimal Biswas.

A number of talented authors came in the forefront through these magazines, such as Ranajit Kumar Sikadar, Naresh Chandra Das, Anil Krishna Mallick, Surendranath Sikdar, Agni Kumar Mistri, Manoranjan Vaishnab, Basanta Kumar Mandal, Chinmay Roy, Nakul Mallick, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kapil Krishna Thakur, PramodBaran Biswas, Harendranath Samaddar, Nanigopal Biswas, Narendra Nath Das, Pramod Biswas, Sipra Biswas, Shantiranjana Biswas, RanendraLal Biswas, Shefali Sarkar and many more.

But we could not decide what the literature that was created for the new concepts of social reformation should be named. At first we thought the literature for creating a new era, that is 'Nabayug Sahitya', at times we thought 'Gana Sahitya' or 'Jana Sahitya'; later thought 'Bahujan Sahitya'. But then we thought that how about 'Ekalavya Sahitya'. But none of the names match to the philosophy behind our thought.

Maharashtra is the very alter of social revolution. But paper and magazines of West Bengal do not print any news from there. And why will they? Bengal nourishes Brahminism. Why will they publish criticism of the upper-caste?

In 1972, when a cultural organisation named 'Dalit Panther' declared revolution through their writing, this news could not be hidden. Later when a English journal named *Dalit Voice*, edited by V.T. Rajshekhar, came in our hands, we started revering and loving the name 'Dalit'.

On 18 and 19 April 1987, the first Dalit literary convention was held in West Bengal through my efforts and through the support of Ranendra Lal Biswas, 'Bangia Dalit Lekhak Parishad' (meaning Association of Benagli Dalit Writers) was established, whose preamble was 'Dalit Kantha'. In 1992 Bengal Dalit literary institution was established whose preamble is 'Chaturtha Dunia'.

JS: Names of journals and papers related to Dalit?

A. If we consider the periodicals of Dalit society, then 1908 can be considered as the beginning. In that year, through the efforts of Rajarshi Guruchand Thakur, first journal of Dalit society was published: *Namahshudra Suhird* (monthly). From then through the long hundred years various magazines and periodicals were published in the Dalit society. Some of them were long-term, some of them lived shortly and were lost in time. Though I do not think that at the inception of the journals there were any Dalit consciousness among the publishers, there was strong sense of nationalism. We are not able to collect the names of all the journals and magazines till date. Those journals that played an integral part in social reformation, among them *Namahshudra Surhid*, *Namahshudra Hitaishi*, *Pataka*, *Jagaran*, *Shudra Sakha*, *Adhikar* (Rasiklaal Biswas), *Bengal Herald*, *Prachar*, *Sadhak*, require special mention.

We can assume 1970 as the beginning of the era of Dalit freedom movement of the periodicals. From this year the eminent pro-Ambedkar writer Ranajit Kumar Sikdar started

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the fortnightly journal *Republican*. From then those journals which played a social role, many among them are closed:

Bharatbani – Fortnightly– Dr Paramananda Halder
Atma Nirikhshan – Fortnightly – Dr Gunadhar Barman
Sangshaptak – Fortnightly – Dr Dilip Kumar Halder
BahujanNayak – Weekly –Mahendra Nath Talukdar
Nikhl Bharat– Weekly – Birendra Nath Biswas
Paan– Monthly – Mani Mandal
Neel Akash – Monthly –Sukriti Ranjan Biswas
Eklavya – Quarterly - Basant Kumar Mandal

In the history of Bengali Dalit literature *Adal Badal* is an honoured name. Edited by Bimal Biswas, the monthly journal *Adal Badal* was published for 30 years consecutively. After retiring from his work, the social worker Bimal Biswas has set a rare example in the field of literary creation and journal editing. Owing to the physical disability of the editor, the journal is temporarily closed now.

As a Bengali journal in the Dalit society, *Nibhik Sambad*, edited by Nakul Mallick, has run a long way but has now become irregular. The journals which are published regularly published are:

Monthly journals

Editor

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Adhikar | Gouranga Sarkar |
| 2. Pathasanket | Dr Asim Bala |
| 3. Adhijan Katha | Koustav Mandal |
| 4. GanaMukti | Dilip Kumar Tikadar |
| 5. Shudra Samachar | Anup Kumar Mandal |
| 6. Samaj Chetana | Dr Tapan Kumar Sarkar |
| 7. Dakhin ChabbishPargana | Paresh Sarkar |

Quarterly journals

Editor

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 8. Atayeb | Nanigopal Sikdar |
| 9. Chaturtha Duniya | Amar Biswas |
| 10. Dalit Kantha | Nakul Mallick |
| 11. Akhan Takhan | Manju Bala |
| 12. Nir Ritupatra | Kalyani Thakur |
| 13. Aikatan Gabesanapatra | Nitish Biswas |
| 14. Dalit Manan | Kapil Krishna Thakur |
| 15. Matua Darpan | Santosh Kumar Barui |
| 16. Pundru O Poundro | Dhurjati Naskar |
| 17. Poundra Samachar | Dilip Guin |
| 18. Nimna Gangey Sundarban Sanskritipatra | Bimalendu Haldar |

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19. Atma Shakti
20. Dweep Bangla
21. Binay
22. Yamini Katha
23. Chetana Lahar
24. HarichandSeba Sangha Patrika

Pradip Mandal
Ashok Kumar Pandy
Nirmal Kumar Mandal
Sunil Krishna Mandal
Ananta Achrya
Badal Krishna Sarkar

JS: Is Dalit writing revolution?

NM: Revolution is the cardinal feature of Dalit literature. Dalit literature cannot be created just by describing some stories and incidents based on Dalit society. Dalit literature marks a responsibility of social reformation; otherwise it will fall under other general literature. The main responsibility of Dalit literature is to represent some ideas of social reformation through literature. Dalit writers must be conscious about this. The literature which helps to form a mass-consciousness about the inequality, divisions and extortions prevailing in Indian social structure, is Dalit literature.

There will be strong protest against the social extortion and deprivation, therefore it will not be an exaggeration to call it Protest literature. Writers must also engage in social structure deeply, they must be a part of protests and resistances. A Dalit writer cannot fulfil his responsibility by just theoretical protest. The honourable Dr Anil Ranjan Biswas has said,

Dalit literature is defined as the literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits, for the Dalits. Three prepositions of, for, by are important. It means that a Dalit writer must be a part of Dalit society. Literature written by someone belonging to other caste cannot be called Dalit literature, because those writers may have sympathy for the Dalit society, but cannot have empathy. Even after this which is important to mention is that Dalit writer must be social literary worker.

Dr. Biswas has said, 'Finally, writers themselves should join the Dalit liberation movement, they should be active participants in the struggle for freedom.' It means that a Dalit writer must be an activist. The writer must be an active social worker who is involved in the protests with people by being saturated in the social structure. In other words we can say that a Dalit writer must be a writer and a fighter. The renowned Marathi writer Arjun Dangle has said,

Dalit literature is a revolution ... Dalit literature protests against oppression and extortion and demands social and economic justice ... Dalit literature and revolution cannot be separated. Unless and until social structure changes and extortion remains, creation of Dalit literature is inevitable.

Dalit writers must protest incessantly through literature against Manuism (ideas of Manu), radicalism and feudalism and attempt to form a healthy democracy and a society devoid of oppression and extortion.

Lastly, the aim of Dalit writers must be the actualisation of the dream of Babasaheb Ambedkar,

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We want that liberated India where each and every human have equal rights irrespective of castes, class and religion; where there is no social oppression, where untouchability is considered as a sin and people are not abhorred for their birth and human qualities are the main parameters of judgement.

JS: When did Dalit literary movement begin in Bengal?

NM: As I have discussed, earlier the birth of Dalit consciousness in Bengal is contemporary with the spread and popularising of **Matua** religion. **Matua** literature cannot be separated from Dalit literature. Though there are some dissimilarities between them with regard to their characteristics, they are complimentary to each other. Very eminent researchers of **Matua** religion and literature – Dr Nityananda Halder, Dr Nandadulal Mohant, Dr Virat Bairagya, Santosh Kumar Barui, Dr Puspa Bairagya, Srimat Mrinal Gosai – they also acknowledge this. The Aakar book of Matua religion Sri Sri Harileelamrita was published in Bengali year of 1323, and English year of 1917, Sri Sri Guruchand Charit was published in Bengali year 1350, and English year of 1943. It took 60 years for the ideals of Matua literature to evolve in Dalit literary consciousness.

In 1975 we, the new writers of the age, decided that we would not go with the flow, and would not cling to the popular casteist concepts of literature. We decided to represent the ideas of Thakur Guruchand and Babasaheb Ambedkar, that we promote through our discussions in various meetings. Stories, poems, essays, dramas or novels can be written based on the oppressions and deprivations of the downtrodden people of society. We, who are the writers from the downtrodden class, will commence a new era in literature with regard to a variety of subjects. From these thoughts we established 'NabayugSahitya O SankritiParishad', the preamble of which was 'Atayeb'. We want to leave behind the old ideas and concepts and want to start on the new path 'Atayeb' (meaning 'henceforth') ...

Many writers, poets, researchers have come to the fore through 'Atayeb', who strongly write against Brahminism or Manuism; they published many books and journals about this.

Till then we did not know about the different strand of Marathi literature based on the ideologies of BabasahebAmbedkar. Students from the Siddhart College, established by Dr Ambedkar, formed 'SiddhartSahitya Sangha', students from Milind College of Ourangabad formed 'Milind SahityaParishad'. Later 'Maharastra Dalit Sahitya Sangha' was formed. In 1958, through the efforts of this organisation, the first assembly of Dalit writers was held in Mumbai. Through the evolution of Marathi literature in 1972 and through the 'Dalit Panther' movement Dalit writers' associations were established, the main organisers of this were the potential writers and thinkers like Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, J.V. Power, Baburao Bagul, Bandhumadhav.

It is very unfortunate that Dalit society does not have an all-India newspaper or channel. It took 22 years for the news of literary movement of Maharashtra to reach Bengal. In 1972 we first came to know the word Dalit in association with literature. The upper-caste culture, society or government could not suppress Dalit writers in Maharashtra, as they did in West Bengal. The casteist writers of our state protested that literature cannot be Dalit. The idea of Dalit is invalid in West Bengal.

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Yet my mind was illuminated in Dalit consciousness. Through various newspapers and journals I came to know about the ideas, characteristics and actions of the Dalit Panther movement. I thought, why should we lag behind? Then I was a school teacher with a very low salary, therefore unable to undertake any huge responsibility. There was a very selfless man in our society, whose charity and generosity was known to all, he was the great Ranendra Laal Biswas. One day I told him I wished to convene a conference. He assured me. I was, then, in a responsible position in an under-developed social organisation, my associate was Ganesh Chandra Mandal. I also told him about my plans, and he assured me that he will fulfil all the responsibilities to make the conference structurally successful. I included him as well as the convener of the Dalit literary convention.

On 15 March 1987, an advertisement was published in the newspaper Dainik Bartaman; apart from that invitation cards were also distributed. At Ambedkar Primary School, situated in Natun Palli near the Machlandapur railway station at North 24 pargana, in the evening of Saturday 18 April to the morning of Sunday 19 April 1987, the first Bengal Dalit Literary Convention was held.

The contemporary writers of the Nabayug Sahitya O Sankriti Parishad or the successors, all were invited. Though the characteristics and ideas of Dalit literature were vague to many writers, yet by attending they inspired me. More than 100 people attended the two-day convention, but only 42 of them signed in – many local people did not sign in. Arrangements for their lodging and food were made by the under-developed organisation.

Three sessions were held in two days. Each session had different chairperson and chief guest. Almost every writer and poet recited their own writing. The first Bengali essay on Dalit literature in this conference was 'Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha' (meaning Synopsis of Dalit Literature) which read by Harendra Nath Bhakta.

The remarkable literary persons who were present at the convention are Kiran Chandra Brahma, Ranendra Laal Biswas, Harendra Nath Samadder, Surendra Nath Sikder, Nanigopal Das, Bimal Kanti Biswas, Jatindra Mohan Majumder, Mahitosh Biswas, Krishna Prasad Mandal, Sukumar Das, Mani Mandal, Nitya Ranjan Sen, Bhuban Das, Sujata Biswas, Chinmay Roy, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Pramod Baran Biswas, Sukriti Ranjan Biswas, Ananta Brahma, Dulal Chandra Sarkar and many others.

On the last day of the convention felicitation was given to writer Kiran Chandra Brahma and Bhuban Das.

The news of the convention was published in *Aajkal* newspaper on 19 May 1987.

JS: What are the main weapons of Dalit freedom movement?

NM: The first weapon of Dalit freedom movement is publishing journals and books. All the news of this movement reaches to the greater audience through Kavigaan, the song tournament. The melodious voice, way of talking, momentary stichomythic discussions of the folk-poets have the power to attract its audience. Kavigaan is a very strong medium of promoting. At present the folk-poets who are devotedly fulfilling this duty from the Dalit society are poet Surendra Nath Sarkar, Srinibas Sarkar, Amulya Ratan Sarkar, Asim Sarkar, Mano Ranjan Sarkar, Uttam Sarkar.

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Dalit society has its own theatre group. Mainly through dramatising the stories of Dalit writers, socially sympathetic players, under the dextrous directions, presents drama in various places of both villages and cities. Through these plays people come to know of the pathetic condition of social deprivation, extortion and oppression; and they discovered the way to freedom. Of those who have played an integral role through drama, Raja Das, PranGovinda Biswas and Harshabardhan Chowdhury require special mention.

Today a part of the young generation film the stories of struggle of the Dalit written by the Dalit writers through the help of videography or through the advanced cinematographic camera; they make short films or cassettes and circulates them among the masses at a very low price; sometimes they project them through televisions at some meetings or programs. In today's time there is laptop in many households through which many things can be watched or can be heard.

Though the plan of making films is a bit costly, among those who have come forward to fulfil their social responsibility, Nikhil Chandra Mallick, Samudra Biswas, and Sudip Mridha are important names.

There are many artists who themselves write and compose very awakening songs. They encourage the audience through their songs in many programs. Of these, Manisha Biswas and Smritikana Halder require special mention.

At present there are many Matua and pro-Ambedkarist meetings and conferences held in different parts of our country. Almost every day somewhere or the other such meetings are held. At those meeting eminent writers, social workers, teachers, professors of Dalit society try to illuminate and encourage people in Dalit freedom movement through various researched speeches.

JS: Who are the main personalities of Dalit literary movement in Bengal?

NM: In 1987, I first thought of Dalit literary movement in Bengal. The eminent social worker Ranendra Laal Biswas supported my ideas and plans. I was, then, in a responsible position of a social development organisation of Machlandapur; Ganesh Mandal was my associate. He helped me in the entire arrangements of the conference. Kiran Cahndra Brahma, the experienced teacher, writer and a wise thinker, was the advisor of all the social workers. His precious advice led us to the right path. My friend cum brother Harendra Nath Bhakta and Pramod Baran Biswas have helped me in every possible way.

The important persons who were present at the Dalit literary conference, were BimalKanti Biswas, Dr Mahitosh Biswas, Professor Mani Mandal, Krishna Prasad Mandal, Sukumar Das, Harendra Nath Sammader, Surendra Nath Sikder, Nanigopal Das, Jatindra Mohan Majumder, Chinmoy Roy, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kapil Krishna Thakur, SukritiRanjan Biswas, Harendra Nath Bhakta, PramodBaran Biswas and many others.

Those who later supported this movement and encouraged me are Anil Ranjan Biswas, Dr Manoranjan Sarkar, Professor Jagatbandhu Biswas, Dr Gunadhar Barman, Basanta Kumar Mandal, Birendra Nath Biswas, Ranajit Kumar Sikder, Professor Naresh Chandra Das, Mahendra Nath Talukder, Sunil Kumar Thakur, Anil Krishna Mallick, Dhurjuti Nasker, Amal Kumar Mandal and many others.

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JS: - What is the role of women in Dalit freedom Movement?

NM: In the Dalit freedom movement erudite women have played an integral role which will be forever written in golden words on the pages of history.

In 1946 Babasaheb Mbedkar become the candidate of Constituent Assembly election. The support of at least five members of regional Law Commission was required to win the election. The pro-casteist political leaders of the entire country formed an alliance, and determined that no member of regional Law Commission will vote for Dr Ambedkar. They would not let him enter the Constituent Assembly at any cost. Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel, an all-India political leader, declared that no elected member of Congress would vote for him. The situation became so dire that there was very little chance of Dr Ambedkar winning in his own state of Maharashtra.

In this situation of need, the leader of east-Bengal Tapsil society, the magnanimous Jogendra Nath Mandal promised that Bengal Tapsils would be very proud to be the driving force of Dr Ambedkar's win in the election of Constituent Assembly. In the undivided Bengal, Jogendra Nath had a very strong hold. According to his directions the young generation of the Tapsil society went door to door of the members of the Law Commission to seek support for Dr Ambedkar. Some great women were part of that young society of Tapsil who went door to door and begged for vote. Among them Santosh Kumari Talukder, Dr Swarnalata Hajra (Majumder), Sushama Maitra, Beena Samaddar, Pritilata Halder are important names to mention.

When the result of the election was declared it was seen that Dr Ambedkar won the election with more votes (of six members of Law Commission) than required and entered in the Constituent Assembly. Later he became the chairman of the committee to draft the Constitution, for which the entire country is indebted to him.

After the freedom of India many selfless women engaged in social work. Some of them remained unmarried and devoted themselves to social work; some of them become the helper of their husband in social reformation; some of them earned their own money and gave that to social development, some were teachers, some were political leaders. Some important names among them are Hemlata Mandal, Hiranyaprabha Samadder, Usha Rani Samajpati, Puspa Roy, Ashalata Majumder, Kanika Biswas, Renu Sikder, Bithika Sarkar, Snadhya Mandal, Pritilata Mondal.

JS: Who are the most prominent women authors in Dalit Literature?

NM: Instead of woman writing Dalit literature, if we consider Dalit women writing literature, my research might take me far back in the past. In *Maimansingha Gitika* compiled by Dinesh Chandra Sen, we find Sulochana's 'Gopini Kirtan'. The poet has identified herself as belonging to the lower classes:

*Don't shun be because I am a chandalini
Let me fall to your feet, my only prayer.*

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She was born in 1776 and passed away in 1866. Twenty years before her death, poet Rasaraj Tarak Chandra Sarkar was born. The origin of Dalit Literature can be traced back to the Kavi Sangeet which he composed. We don't find any essence of Dalit literature in Sulochana's work, instead it has more in common with the Padabali strand. But she had to be brought into the picture although her identification with the Dalit community was more of a burden for her than a cause for rebellion.

Among folk poets, I have found two women poets, Sandhya Sarkar and poet Uma Sarkar. They did not leave us with any substantial creative matter.

The first woman writer to pave the path was Sushma Maitra (Sarkar). Numerous pieces written by her have been published in prestigious magazines and journals. Her poems, stories, essays and biographies have caught the eye of many. Kironmoyee Talukdar and Puspa Bairagya are known for their research-backed writing. Kalyani Thakur and Manju Bala have earned critical acclaim for their writing in multiple genre. Shefali Sarkar too, has explored almost every genre. Sujata Biswas and Kanan Boral write for numerous magazines and have published their independent anthologies as well. Juthika Pandey deserves mention for her skills in writing and her efforts in publishing magazines and journals. Manisha Biswas and Smritikana Howladar have attained expertise in writing songs and rhymes. Smritikana can write excellent verse in regional languages. Manjushree Biswas wrote an autobiography *Jiban Katha*. It is not just an autobiography but a seminal work which paints in detail perhaps the entire history of the Dalit community.

JS: Could you please name the works of Dalit Literature which you have written so far?

NM: After I grasped the consciousness of the Dalit existence, I have cautiously penned down my strongest feelings regarding the matter in each and every work. I have explored every genre other than poetry. I have a soft spot for short stories. When I began my experiment with Literature, I had written a few general stories. After that, I haven't written one line which is not involved with Dalit literature. Even the love stories that I write have to deal with the pain of social evils like untouchability. Each and every piece that I write, regardless of genre or plot, deals with social inequality and points the way towards true freedom from all the ills of the caste system.

1. *Bhabna Chinta (Prose)*
2. *Mukta Chinta (Prose)*
3. *Bibidha Chinta (Prose)*
4. *Swaraniya Jara (Biography)*
5. *Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (Biography)*
6. *Babasaheb Ambedkar (Biography)*
7. *Thakur Harichand Guruchand O Matua Bhabadarsha (Religious Philosophy)*
8. *Sadharan Golpo (Short Story Collection)*
9. *Premer Golpo (Short Story Collection)*
10. *Andolaner Golpo (Short Story Collection)*
11. *Anupam Golpo (Short Story Collection)*
12. *Nirbachito Golpo (Short Story Collection)*

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13. *Khoma Nei (A story based on the mass murder at Marichjhapi)*
14. *Manik Ratan (A story based on rural Bengal and the social situation at the time of Partition)*
15. *Bhajahari Shikdarer Pralap (A social commentary criticising the social, cultural and political atmosphere)*
16. *Natyaguchha (Eight one-act plays)*

JS: Why isn't the Bengali Dalit Literary Movement as unified as that of Maharashtra?

NM: The scope of this topic is too vast. If I start discussing it, I will end up writing a long essay. It's not possible to explain all of it, but let me try and explain my own opinion on the matter.

The extremity of caste discrimination that Maharashtra faced was never present in Bengal. We did not have to roam with bells around our necks. The kind of torture that Dalits in Maharashtra were subjected to is beyond the imagination of Bengali Dalits. In Bengal, ideas of Manu and other such Brahmanic beliefs created several restrictions in the daily life of Dalits. We had to follow several rules and regulations regarding religious rituals. We were denied entry in temples. Perhaps in some regions these practices are still alive. We were not even allowed to drink from all water bodies, but I would still say that Bengali Dalits could overcome many of these challenges eventually and they still continue to fight for their rights. The privileged classes were not really enthusiastic about our education, but at least they could not stop us from attaining it.

The discrimination in Bengal is not something you can see. It's something that must be felt. The upper classes do not speak of their disgust towards us, they carry it within. The positions of power are held mostly by these upper classes. The Constitution thinks of us, but it is not a living entity. Those in power must implement the policies. But if they have no regard for us, how will these policies be implemented? The privileged will never want us to be on the same level as them. To continue exercising their power over us, they will try to make sure we remain backward.

The government of West Bengal does not maintain clean records of how many jobs were allotted to SC/ST candidates through reservation and how many were denied of this right. The government cannot produce this data. Despite the Constitution offering numerous benefits to the lower classes, very few can actually avail them.

The Partition has placed some of the toughest obstacles in the path of progress for Dalits. Having lost all their property and valuables, they were forced to scatter all over the country. On the eve of Independence, we were promised security. But no arrangements were made for our accommodation and livelihood. The refugees were all dependent on agriculture. They could not grow crops on the dry, stony soil. They could not even arrange two square meals a day. The same refugee had to experience the struggle in multiple places, trying to adjust to the new places and facing diverse problems every time. Their children were denied the right to learn their own mother tongue. They were denied the Constitutional protection for SC/ST since the list of castes that are to be scheduled vary from state to state. They were not only denied protection, but also basic citizenship rights. For the sake of

survival, they began to follow different political parties where they were practically treated as slaves.

The scenario in Bengal was not any different. The leftists promised to uphold the interests of the Dalits. Later when the Left Front came to power, the Dalit movement was nipped in the bud by their gunshots at Marichjhapi, Sundarbans. Congress watched silently, without any protest or intervention. Even such a tragic incident was not enough to unify the vast community of Bengali Dalits to form an independent political party. The possibility of Bengal's own Republican or Bahujan Samaj Party was destroyed by the lack of unity among Dalits in Bengal.

While the Dalits in Bengal are scattered, those in Maharashtra stand united. They hold the power to form their own political party and organise vast social movements backed by this unity. Their self-respect is dear to them. Despite the torture that was inflicted on them, they refused to be slaves to the privileged. They have citizenship rights. Their foundation is strong. The government cannot intimidate them; instead, they are taken seriously. Hence, they can build up a social movement under a single banner.

Dalits in Bengal, having lost their possessions, are still dependent on others. Most of them have lost the power of independent thought and the will to fight. They are still hanging on to the ideas of the privileged classes, whose thought neither endorses political independence of Dalits nor leaves space for their literature. Bengal's privileged intellectuals vehemently oppose the Dalit Literary Movement. Every political body that comes to power makes sure they don't provide any support to the movement. Instead, they try to check its progress.

The biggest problem for the movement of the Dalits is that they don't have their own medium to promote their ideas. They have to depend on biased media for the publicity of any meeting or event. They only do as much as they can without harming their own interests.

The Dalit writers in Maharashtra have received recognition and aid from the government. They have been honoured and awarded as well. They even exercise a bit of influence when it comes to the use of media. The situation of the Dalit intellectuals in Bengal is drastically different from those of Maharashtra. That is why we cannot stand united.

JS: What do you think is the future of the Bengali Dalit Literary Movement?

NM: I have believed this for the longest time: it is not possible to bring any massive social or political change in the society without a cultural revolution. This movement is aimed at raising awareness and igniting the consciousness of the masses. If this is not achieved, the masses will not feel the urge to rebel for any cause. The most ideal way to achieve this consciousness is by spreading ideas through poetry, music, theatre, seminars, discussions, magazines and journals. The role of cultural movements in triggering social change is undeniable; there is no better way.

We must remember how Literature steered the direction of India's struggle for freedom. Bankimchandra's novel *Anandamath* created a ripple in the society with its chant of 'Vande Mataram'. Dinabandhu Mitra's play 'Nil Darpan', Nabinchandra Sen's 'Polashir Juddho, Mukunda Das's Swadeshi folk-theatre and music and songs by Rabindranath, Nazrul, Dwijendranath, Atul Prasad and Rajanikanta fuelled the movement for Independence.

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From thirty years before the Left Front came to power in Bengal, Leftist intellectuals have been composing progressive literature. They have conducted seminars, open meetings and street plays to acquaint the masses with the Marxist ideology. Associations of progressive writers, Little Theatre, group theatre and folk-theatre have helped spread Marxist ideas and beliefs.

In Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, Ambedkar's philosophy has played a huge role in welcoming socio-political changes. South India was also swept by the ideas of Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy. In each of these cases, cultural revolution was an important weapon for mass movement. In 1972, Maharashtra's Dalit Panther Writers' Association organised a movement which opened up a new path for all of India. Twenty years before that, the students of Siddharth College brought out 'Siddharth Sahitya Sangha' to spread awareness. We could never deny the fact that the initiative by Dalit Panthers affected the entire country and that their magazines, stories, poems and novels inspired people to fight for their rights.

The same principle applies to Bengal as well. Bengal too has started responding to the situation since 1975, especially through Nabayug Sahitya and Sanskriti Parishad. Numerous authors and artists have emerged in the 42 years that followed. Their talent and their powerful voices have found expression in various magazines, journals, short stories, poetry and essays.

There is only one issue which has proven to be a major hurdle in the growth and development of the Bengali Dalit literary movement, and that is the lack of translation. We are unable to read the Dalit literature of writers from other states since they are written in regional languages, the same reason why they are unable to read ours. Once Dalit literature is steadily translated and circulated, the unification of Dalit movements across India could be possible.

The few texts from other parts of India that we have been able to read and research have revealed that Bengali Dalit literature is in no way lagging behind. We have some excellent poetry, short stories and essays. Theatre is not really at par yet, but I won't hesitate to conclude that the present-day Bengali Dalit literature is capable of providing strict competition globally.

In West Bengal, Dalit literature does not receive much support from the government. Biased media prefers to ignore this strand of literature and on top of that, privileged intellectuals never fail to criticise or taunt our efforts.

Yet, I strongly believe that Ambedkar's ideology will take its ground and root in Bengal, aided by the Bengali Dalit literary movement. The caste-ridden society and its stagnant political system will soon be driven by change. Babasaheb Ambedkar's ideas will finally yield their fruit.

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