

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



An Interview with Basudev
Sunani

Jaydeep Sarangi

Basudev Sunani (born in 1962 in the remote village of Maniguda, in the district of Nuapada, Odisha,) is an Oriya poet. He is the author of four collections of poetry and a recent book entitled Dalit, Capitalism and Globalisation. He represents a strong, articulate and engaged Dalit presence in the world of Oriya verse. His important works include:

- *Anek Kichhi Ghatibaar Achhi (1995)*
- *Mahula Bana (1999)*
- *Asprushya (2002)*
- *Karadi Haata (2005)*
- *Chhi (2008)*
- *Mahaatma Phule (2008)*
- *Kaaliala Ubaacha (2009)*
- *Bodha Hue Bhala Paaibaa Mote Janaa Naahin (2013)*
- *Mun Achhi Boli (2017)*
- *Dalit, Punjibaada O Bhumandalikaran (2005)*
- *Dalit Sanskrutir Itihaas (2009)*
- *Dalit Encounter (2009)*
- *Ambedkarism: A Way of Life (English) (2012)*

An Interview with Basudev Sunani. Jaydeep Sarangi.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 6 no. 2, August 2019.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

- *Padaa Podi (2013)*
- *Brahmanbad O Bharatiya Nari (2013)*
- *Baajaa (2014)*

Sunani's major awards include Muthamizh Arignar Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi Porkizhi Award 2015 (an award that is given to only one person in India in a year in the category of other Indian Language [not Tamil] with generous cash and other prizes); Odisha Sahitya Academy Award, Bhubaneswar Pustakmela Puraskaar, Nirmaata Kabitaa Puraskaar at Bhawnipatna, Basanta Muduli Puraskaar by Basant Muduli Smruti Committee, Bhadrak, Sachidaananda Kabitaa Puraskar by Adwitta Smrutee Committee, Kendrapara etc.

This interview is the fruit of our meeting at academic events. Some parts of this come out of email exchanges between us.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Would you please tell us about your childhood?

Basudev: I am from a remote village of the undivided Kalahandi District, once known for its poverty and drought over the globe, now it is coming under District Nuapada. My father was pure farmer. Our village had only primary school by that time. After completion of my fifth standard, I went to nearby village Tarbod, which is located three kilometres away from my village, to study minor standard. At least four or five students, we were going to Tarbod initially but subsequently during my seventh standard I was only student left, walking down daily with bare foot. While walking I was coming across varieties of wild animals on the way like jackal, fox etc., since the three kilometres was full of bushy forest. It was a bitter experience during my sixth standard that suddenly one day one of my teachers asked me about the Sanskrit alphabets. Earlier he had never taught us, so I was quite unaware about the alphabet. When I could not able to speak, he started beating me severely and my palm along with fingers got swollen. I still realise that pain.

During my primary career I was going with my father to the cultivating land to take care of the crop. My father used to wake up early in the morning every day and get warm from the wood fired near the temporary thatched tent and go on singing. He was singing so beautifully that I always became impressed. I silently listened to the songs. Once I could not resist my enthusiasm and asked him, 'who is the writer of the songs?' My father answered me, 'it is poets'. From that day onwards I had an understanding that poets are some extraordinary human beings, maybe having some different kind of body structure, and certainly mind. This illusion was clarified when I was reading in a Government welfare school, meant for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) student during my ninth standard. One day one of my teachers came as announced in that class room that 'a school magazine will be published. All the students are requested to contribute poetry, short stories and essays for publication in the magazine.' The announcement immediately struck my mind as contravening the statement of my father. Suddenly I stood up and replied my teacher, 'poetry is written by poets, so how can we write.' My teacher laughed at me and replied, 'if you write poetry, you can be also a poet.' From that evening I have been writing poetry, short stories, essays, novels, drama, criticism etc. This is great experience of my childhood days.

JS: Do you have any mentor?

BS: I hope my father is my first mentor and inspiration. The day to day behaviour and his inclination towards the traditional poems/songs recitation at his leisure attracted my young mind towards poetry.

JS: Do you write for social change?

BS: Oh! definitely!

I don't write literature only for the entertainment sake. I try to use my pen as weapon. I don't know how it is operating in the society and towards which direction.

Even I don't feel the need of evaluating and analysing the magnitude of the change. But I do believe in social change where the pen has got an important role to play.

JS: Would you please share a few experiences of caste stratifications in your own life?

BS: It is very much rampant till this day in my village. During my childhood I was a good student in my school. We used to drink water from the nearby pond of my village. The same pond water is also being used for the purpose of bathing of the villagers and the livestock of the village. There are, even today, different bathing sites called 'Ghaat' earmarked for different category of people like low caste, higher caste, women, etc. Unknowingly, once I had been to the 'Ghaat' of upper caste. Coincidentally at that time there was nobody bathing there. When I was about to finish my bath, an OBC upper caste man came and saw me. He humiliated and insulted me like anything for such deeds. That incidence is still alive in my mind.

Again, subsequently three tube wells were installed in my village. One was installed in our locality. Most of the upper caste people used this tube well for nasty activity. When, this tube becomes non-functional due to certain reasons, we depended on the tube well located in the upper caste area. Then they played a lot. They did not allow touching the handle of tube well. Our people go and stand from a distance. Someone would come and show mercy by pouring water from distance. Lot of law suits and police interference has happened due to such acts. Many quarrels, village meeting has been made between two communities for touching the tube well by lower caste, etc.

Though I was good student in my class I was not allowed to sit in the front row of the school. Again, we were not allowed to worship Ganesh and Saraswati during puja in the school days.

There are numbers of examples regarding caste stratification in the village and even I am facing today in life in the urban city in different form. How much I can narrate? Someone will lose patient or feel bored.

JS: Many of your works deal with caste, gender and sexuality. Do you have any propaganda behind uplifting these themes?

BS: Initially during my early career of writing I was not aware about the facts of caste hierarchy and social discrimination. I was thinking that these are common happenings and caste is created by God or some kind of thing. Even it was not known to me that there should

be protest or some should react on the issue. Gradually it came to my mind. The unfortunate state of affairs was that, though I was a student of SC/ST Welfare School I was not knowing the meaning of Scheduled Caste and Tribe, the scope and meaning of reservation etc.

Since, there was acute poverty in my village; I was thinking why people become so poor. Even the situation was such that at least 70% village people do not eat in the night and go to bed without food, such was the situation. I was very much reactive against poverty and therefore I have written numbers of poems on it. The critics were evaluating me as a progressive poet.

But when I realised the caste factors, social discrimination, Brahmanism and Ambedkarism after 1997, my orientation of writing took different direction. How can you say this progress of writing is propaganda? Rather, I considered that unconsciously I have written a lot which, perhaps I should not have. Whatever now I am writing is the creation of my own thinking and creativity.

JS: Tell us about your first volume of poems?

BS: My first poetry collection was *Anek Kichi Ghatibar Achhi* ('Many things to be happened'). It was published in the year 1995. The poetry is all about poverty, migration, starvation and protest and many more things. This volume was released in one of the remote and finest place called Tusura of Bolangir District by the members of Bidhu Bhusan Sahitya Sansad, Tusura. Really, I am thankful to all the members of Bidhu Bhusan Sahitya Sansad.

JS: What are your major works?

BS: I have written poetry, essays, short stories, novels and even drama. I consider the book on the Cultural History of Dalit is one of my major works. It took me about 11 years for completion since the book was on the findings of the field work, having 600 pages.

Another book I have edited is *Odia Dalit Literature*. It also took at least three years for compilation. Then, my novel *Papa Podi*, which is based on the real incidence of the merciless burning of a Dalit village on 21 January 2012 by the upper caste people.

JS: How do you view Oriya poetry today?

BS: If you look to the history of Odial literature, great poets like Sarala Das, Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Bhima Boi and even modern poet like Sachi Routray have contributed a world class literature. In the contemporary situation the literature is not so encouraging. In most of the instances, particularly in the content of the literary work, common people are missing and mystics are finding places in literature. Except few, many writers are not very much critical about the social problems, people's movements, progressive thought and marginalised sections. This is happening so because most of the writers represent from the oppressing class and caste.

JS: You have a brilliant poem called Satyabhama. Why does Satyabhama hide her face in her hands?

BS: Satyabhama is a reality. In fact all the characters of my poetry, stories, novels are real characters. Even, I try to put the real names of the characters in poetry also and Satyabhama is an example.

For me Satyabhama is relationship, it is childhood memories, it's about the empowerment, social bonding and compulsion, a glimpse of contemporary politics, and many more. May be, from her side, it is a realization of her same childhood in the school days, so that Satyabhama might have hide her face.

JS: Did you meet Jayanta Mahapatra who is one of the major Indian English poets these days?

BS: Jayanta Mahapatra, the great poet is one of my favourite personalities. Yah! in the recent past there was an International Chandrabhaga poetry festival. Jayanta Mahapatra had a special poetry session and coincidentally me too. He narrated many things during his deliberation apart from poetry which we enjoyed a lot.

It is Jayanta Mahapatra who for the first time translated one of my poems from my first poetry collection long back and the same poetry was published in the journal of Sahitya Academy *Indian Literature*.

JS: 'Sunani's poetry leaves us with questions,' says a reviewer. Do you think there are deep rooted reasons behind this remark?

BS: Yes, definitely there may be deep rooted reasons behind, I don't know. I always try to highlight some social issues in my poetry. Maybe it gives some insights to the readers which compels some readers to seriously think about it.

Another reason may be, the people are very superficial and they don't take the social issue seriously. Once somebody tries to visualise the reality, there emerge many questions. Perhaps this may be the reason but it is better known to readers and critics.

JS: What is the latest situation of Dalit Movement in Orissa?

BS: In Odisha Dalit movement is not organised. People have become conscious and they are fighting in their own way but the organised tone is not visible. Also there are different banners under which people are congregating but the result is not seen to the expected amount. There are lots of issues of Dalit but these are not properly handled. The typical thing is most of the so-called educated Dalit do not try to be involved in the movement, not even try to exercise their mind on the issues. The uneducated or less educated Dalit have very much tried to make their presence in the movement, out of great emotions. It so happens that they are not being accepted by the mass of their community. Since they lack the presentation and orientation of an issue from different point of views they do not get success to be a leader. Strong leadership is required to streamline the movement.

JS: Your works question and reject the very structures of patriarchy – heterosexual, polygamous marriage, family and the village council of elders. How did you get this zeal for activism?

BS: If you look to the Dalit culture as a whole there is no patriarchal structure. Dalit woman is not dominated in the society and family. She plays an important role in mobilising and management of the family. This I have seen from my own family. When my mother was alive she was worshipping our family deity first and then other male members of the family go and pay respect to the deity. This particular job has been taken over by my elder sister-in-law. In all kind of decisions making they take equal part. There are so many instances and cultural practices in the Dalit community where woman play major role. This kind of situations I have learnt from my community and family.

Again, widow marriage is not at all a problem in our community. Similarly, when a woman is not compatible with her husband she has the right to divorce and get married with other male.

Absolutely the male dominance is not seen in the Dalit community which might have motivated me. But the present scenario is little bit different. Most of the elite or so-called educated Dalits have been adopting the upper-caste culture and thereby defying their own important culture.

JS: Who are significant Dalit Feminist writers in your state now?

BS: As such there is no remarkable and prominent Dalit feminist writer in Odisha. However some women, viz Anjubala Jena, Supriya Mallick, Sandhya Rani Bhoi, Jyotshan Rani Bhoi etc are involved themselves in writing of poetry and short stories where the women's issues are very much visible.

JS: Do you believe that stereotypes produce stereotypes? Can those age-old stereotypes be crushed by the power of words?

BS: I don't believe that stereotype produces stereotypes. Through creative minds and original thoughts the stereotype can be changed or it can be given to the new dimension. In literature it can certainly be crushed by words. Starting from Buddha to Dr Ambedkar they have broken down the tradition and age-old stereotype thoughts and have enlightened the society.

Of course words have that power.

JS: Social movements are a type of group action. They are large, sometimes informal, groupings of individuals or organisations which focus on specific political or social issues. In other words, they carry out, resist or undo a social change. Do you consider your role as part of social movement?

BS: Definitely I consider so. It is not that all will do same kind of work. Social movement is a collection of different activities and therefore everyone has to be involved themselves in a different way. As far as possible, I try to utilize my pen and words in the process of social movement.

JS: Today, the four social movement stages are known as:

- 1 Emergence,
- 2 Coalescence,

3 Bureaucratistion, and
4 Decline.

Where does the Dalit movement in India figure now among these four stages?

BS: Honestly speaking I am not exposed or well convergent with the categorisation of the four stages of theory. However, as I observe, the consciousness levels among the people of the deprived category are increasing. Nowadays they are, to some extent, capable of raising their voice against injustice, discrimination, untouchability and other issues, even though no one is listening to their voice.

JS: Are you familiar with Dalit Movements in other states?

BS: Yes, I am familiar with the movement of other States in India.

JS: Do you believe in the principle, 'Educate, Agitate and Organise'?

BS: Yes, I do believe in this principle. Perhaps that is the one and only suitable formula for the present time given by Dr B.R. Ambedkar through which either a person or a group of people or a community can succeed in the social transformation movement to establish an egalitarian society.

JS: What are your current projects?

BS: Domb community is one of the primitive communities in India. They have their own culture, tradition and language. The language spoken by Domb community has its own originality but till date this language has not yet able to draw the attention of the upper caste linguist. They have not even taken a small step to document this language. I am planning to do something on the Domb language in this year.

JS: Any immediate wish?

BS: If I can write poetry, novel and essays!



Jaydeep Sarangi is a professor of English and principal, New Alipore College (University of Calcutta), Kolkata. He is a poet with eight volumes and a relentless activist of Dalit studies. He is an important link between India Australia poetic links with six collaborative anthologies of Indo Australian poetry.
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