



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



L to R: Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, Jaydeep Sarangi, Anurima Chanda

Writing Back: An Interview with Shyamal Kumar Pramanik

Jaydeep Sarangi and
Anurima Chanda

Shyamal Kumar Pramanik is an author on social and political values and an engaging writer of Dalit literature and movement. His works glitter with pain, angst and social good will. For him, writing is a commitment, social and political. Dalit literature is born out of ideological warfare. Pramanik is a socially committed artist with many works under his belt. All his works lead us to a better society based on justice, equality and fraternity.

His collection of Dalit poetry titled *Aguner Bornomala* was first published in 2000 in Bengali. In 2019, it was published in English as *Fiery Garland of Letters* translated by Kalyan Basu (Gangchil, Kolkata). This collection of poems is rich with military images to change the society for good. These are mainly protest poems, protest against the age-old stereotypes in the Bengali caste pyramid.

This interview was conducted via emails in the month of December 2019. We sat with the author a couple of times in a café in south Kolkata where we discussed his works and activism for the upliftment of the Dalits in Bengal.

Q. How do you read the word 'Dalit'?

A. For me, 'Dalit' refers to those people from the depressed classes who are exploited socially and economically on the basis of their birth, by the system of Manuism and Brahmanism as propagated under the Hindu religion.

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Q. What are major Dalit communities in West Bengal?

A. The major Dalit communities in West Bengal would be the Rajbangshis, the Namasudras, the Bagdi-sand the Poundras. Thereafter, comes the Bauris and the Chamars.

Q. When did the Dalits of Bengal start writing with a Dalit consciousness?

A. It has a long history. The beginning of Bengali Dalit literature can be traced back to the earliest days of Bengali language – the period of tenth to twelfth centuries. Vernacular literature was created by Dalits from the communities like Savara, Chandala, Sundi, Kapalik, Dom, etc. These literatures were mainly poetry in its rudimentary form, popularly known as the Charyapada. The Dalit poets depicted their pains and sufferings in these Charyapadas. A large part of these writings raised their voice against the Vedic religion, a distinct feature of Dalit literature, which led to the development of a distinct Dalit consciousness.

In the modern times, awareness about Dalit people started developing in Bengal from the late nineteenth century. During that period, a movement called the self-respect movement was organised among the Poundra, Namasudra, Rajbangshi and Hari communities. A literary movement was also initiated. The first Dalit literary text was *Jati Chandrika* (1887) written by Srimanta Laskar. Another important contribution to Dalit literature was *Jati-Vivek* (1891) by Benimadhab Halder. Both of them were social reformers and born in the Poundra community which is in present day South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal.

However, before talking about the Bengali Dalit Literature of today, we need to look back to Matua Sahitya under the influence of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur of the Namasudra community, one of the major Dalit communities in undivided Bengal. One must turn to rhymed Shri Shri Harililamrita based on the life of Harichand Thakur by Tarak Chandra Sarkar who belongs to the Namasudra community. This book was published in the year 1916. The poet Raicharan Biswas published *Jatiya Jagaran* (National Awakening) a volume of poetry in 1921. In these poems he pleaded for the abolition of the institution of Varna in Hindu society.

The present day Dalit literary movement in West Bengal, inspired by Dalit panthers in Maharashtra was initiated in 1976 with the establishment of 'Nabayug Sahityaand Sanskriti Parishad'. Their mouthpiece journal was *Otoeb*. Naresh Chandra Das, Sharat Baruri, and Nakul Mallik were its earlier leaders. In 1987, the first Dalit literary conference in West Bengal was held in Machlandapur, North 24 Parganas. Nakul Mallik, Harendranath Bhakta and many other eminent Dalit writers were present and a Bangiya Lekhak Parishad was established. Bimal Biswas was the President and Nakul Mallik was the Secretary of this organisation. Later on 'Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha' was established in 1992. The first President of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha was Prof. Jagabandhu Biswas and its Secretary was Amar Biswas. This organisation published its manifesto where its objectives were clearly stated: (1) to work for the prosperity of Dalit literature and culture, (2) to fight against all kinds of superstitions and inhuman social discrimination, (3) to rewrite history and cultural

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cartography which would foreground the contributions of Dalits, (4) to publish books and journals towards the realisation of the objectives, (5) to make Dalits feel self-confident, encouraging them to shake off their dependence on fate, and (6) to organize Sangities in the rural areas to make illiterate Dalits aware of their rights and duties. During this period of the Dalit literary movement in West Bengal, an attempt was made to keep pace with its all-India counterparts in other states. Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha also started publishing a quarterly literary magazine named Chaturtha Dunia.

Q. What is your community identity?

A. I was born in the Poundra Community.

Q. Will you please talk about the literary history of your community?

A. The literary history of the Poundra Community begins during the late nineteenth century. As already mentioned, Srimanta Laskar's *Jati Chandrika*, a book of poetry about the caste system, was among the first texts written. It was published in 1887. Another text was *Jati-Vivek* (1891) by Benimadhab Halder, a social reformer and writer. The most remarkable social reformer and writer during this period was Raicharan Sardar (1876-1942). Two of his remarkable books are (1) *Poundrakshatriya Samasya* (The Problem of Poundrakshatriya) and (2) *Diner Atmakahini Ba Satya Pariksha*. The second one is an autobiography of his life and the first autobiography in the history of Dalit literature. This book was published in 1959 after a long period of his death. Raicharan Sardar also published a literary magazine named *Bratyakshatriya Bandhab* in 1910 from Diamond Harbour, a sub-divisional town in South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal.

Mahendranath Karan (1886-1928) was an extraordinary historian, freedom fighter and author. In 1919 he published *A Short History and Ethnology of the Cultivating Pods*. Thereafter he published *Samajrenu*, a book of poetry in 1925. Among his most notable books would be *Khejuri Bandar* (Khejuri Port) (1927), a book of history about Khejuri port which was situated beside the bank of river Hooghly in East Midnapore during the Mughal period. He also wrote *Banglar Jati Samasya* (The Problem of the Caste System in Bengal), *Durvikyera Gaan* (The Songs of Famine), and other such works.

Manindranath Mondal (1880-1943) was also a remarkable social worker, freedom fighter and writer among the Poundra Community. He was born in Kasharia village in East Midnapore district. He wrote *Aroti* (A book of poetry), *Bangiya Janasangha* (A book of essays), *Bhabaghure* (drama) etc. After independence, many writers among the Poundra Communities have contributed a lot in Dalit literature. The remarkable names are Narottam Halder, Basant Kumar Mondal, Bimalendu Halder, Panchanan Das, Dhurjati Naskar, Krishnakali Mondal, Debabrata Naskar, Paresh Sarkar, Sanat Kumar Naskar, Suranjan Midday, Pradip Kumar Barman, Prasad Mondal, Utpalendu Mondal and many others. The remarkable writer in this period was Basant Kumar Mondal. He was a follower of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and an activist in the field of Dalit literature. He was a poet, story writer, dramatist. He wrote *Dhibarkanya* (Daughter of Fisherman), *Amar Maa* (My Mother), *Sadhu*

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Dakat (Saint Robber) and many other books. Bimalendu Halder was a notable story writer and essayist. His remarkable works are *Akash Mati Mon* (Sky Soil Mind), *Labanakta* (Salted). All are Dalit stories.

The first magazine that contributed to the literary movement among the Pundra Community was *Bratyakshatriya Bandhab* (1910), edited by Raicharan Sardar. Thereafter, a series of other magazines were published namely *Pratigya* (1918) edited by Bhabasindhu Laskar and Mahendranath Karan, *Poundrakshatriya Samachar* (1924) edited by Kshirod Chandra Kayal, *Dipti* (1930) edited by Digambar Sahityaratna, *Sangha* (1935) edited by Rajendranath Sarkar, and *Poundrakshatriya* (1938) edited by Rajendranath Sarkar, Patiram Roy and Kunjabehari Roy. After independence, *Poundrakshatriya Bandhab* (1951) and *Samajdarshan* (1970) came to become the most noted literary magazines of the Pundra Community. Thereafter, more magazines were published like *Eklabya* by Basanta Kumar Mondal, *Nimnagangeya Sanskritipatra* by Bimalendu Halder, *Jatar Deul* by Dhurjati Naskar, *Ganga-Bhagirathi* by Paresh Sarkar.

Q. How did it differ from other Dalit communities of Bengal? Is there any at all?

A. The Dalit movement started in Bengal around the nineteenth century. Many Dalit communities such as the Namasudras in East Bengal under the leadership of Harichand Thakur (1812-1878) and Guruchand Thakur (1847-1937), the Pundras in South Bengal under the leadership of Benimadhab Halder (1858-1923) and Raicharan Sardar (1876-1942), the Rajbangshis in North Bengal under the leadership of Panchanan Barma (1866-1935), started a social movement for the upliftment of their communities. This is called the 'Self-Respect Movement'. At the same time, the literary movement also started among the different Dalit communities. At present, there is no difference among the Dalit communities in their social and literary movements.

Q. Please share your views on Dalit movement in Bengal.

A. The first Dalit movement in Bengal was pioneered by Harichand Thakur. He introduced the 'Matua Movement'. It is not only a religious movement but also social and cultural movement. After Harichand Thakur, his son Guruchand Thakur took over the leadership of this movement. His followers were Viswadeb Das, Purnachandra Mallik, Prasanta Kumar Das, Mukunda Behari Mallik, Rasiklal Biswas and other personalities. The first literary magazine, *Namasudra Suhridwas*, published from Orakandi in 1907 from the Faridpur district and edited by Surendranath Thakur, son of Guruchand Thakur. Later on, *Bratyakshatriya Bandhab*, an important literary magazine edited by Raicharan Sardar, a social reformer and writer of the Pundra Community, was published from Diamond Harbour in South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. Another important Dalit magazine, *Pataka* was published from Kolkata in 1914. A crucial contribution to Dalit literature in the early twentieth century was *Jatiya Jagaran* (National Awakening), a volume of poetry by Raicharan Biswas, published in 1921. In these poems, he pleads for the abolition of the institution of Varna within the Hindu society. In 1943, *Jagaran*, in the vernacular language, and *People's Herald*, in English,

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were published under the patronage of Jogendranath Mondal. Though both the magazines became the mouthpiece of 'Bangla Tapasili Federation' a political Dalit organisation, a distinct Dalit literary consciousness was also found there.

After independence, the Dalit movement in Bengal underwent a setback because of the partition of Bengal. The Namasudra community mostly lived in East Bengal. After partition of Bengal, a large portion of their population moved to West Bengal and other places in India as refugees. They took a leading part in the Dalit movement before independence. The Rajbangshi leader Panchanan Barma died in 1935 and the Pundra leader Anukul Chandra Naskar died in 1947. These leaders had contributed a lot to the Dalit movement in Bengal.

In 1980s a Dalit political and cultural consciousness was seen developing in West Bengal. Though their political movement was not achieved, the cultural movement continued developing slowly after the establishment of 'Bangiya Lekhak Parishad' in 1987 and 'Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha' in 1992. Many Dalit writers such as Manohar Mouli Biswas, Achintya Biswas, Kapilkrishna Thakur, Bimalendu Halder, Jatin Bala and others got together and organized the Dalit literary movement.

Q. Is it a political movement?

A. Before the independence of India, the Dalit political movement in Bengal was organised by Jogendranath Mondal and his followers. The magazines *Jagaran* and *People's Herald* emerged as their mouthpieces. After the independence of India and the partition of Bengal, in 1980s Dalit movement in West Bengal was organised again. However, the cultural movement among the Dalits was not connected with any political banner though some Dalit writers were supporters of BSP.

Q. Why is it not as strong as in Maharashtra or Gujarat?

A. I think, the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and Gujarat was stronger than Bengal because Jyotirao Phule (1827-1891) and Dr B.R. Ambedkar had organised so many Dalit movements there. Maharashtra was their birth place. The word 'Dalit' was first used by Jyotirao Phule. His progressive ideas and thereafter the intellectual leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar were instrumental in realising a distinctly different Dalit identity in opposition to the casteist Varna system of Hinduism. Dr B.R. Ambedkar is a great thinker and his ideas helped spread a lot of motivation. Further, the term 'Dalit literature' was used in 1958 when the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha was held in Mumbai. Baburao Bagul (1930-2008) was the pioneer of modern Dalit writings. Further, Dalit Panthers was established in Maharashtra in the year 1972 which created a history in Dalit movement and literature.

However, in Bengal, the idea of Dalit as a whole was absent. In Bengal, despite the large number of people from the lower castes, a unity was lacking. Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, belonging to the Namasudra community, organised their movement mainly with the Namasudra community. Similarly Panchanan Barma belonging to the Rajbangshi community, organised his movement with the Rajbangshi community. The Pundra leaders Benimadhab Halder and Raicharan Sardar also confined their movement

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within the Poudra community. The Dalit consciousness developed in Bengal after the establishment of 'Bangla Tapasili Federation' where Jogendranath Mondal had an important role to play. It was a political movement. Jogendranath Mondal was a follower of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. After independence, the Dalit literary movement first started in Maharashtra. Then it spread to Gujarat and the other states. In West Bengal, the Dalit literary movement started after the establishment of the 'Dalit Panthers' in Maharashtra. It is a late phenomenon here and therefore not strong as in Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Q. Are you an active member of any Dalit association?

A. I am an active member of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha right from the very beginning of its establishment. At present I am the Vice-President of this organisation. I am also the Joint Secretary of Bangla Dalit Lekhak Silpi Sangha.

Q. What are your goals as an activist/writer?

A. As an activist of the Dalit movement, I have a dream to annihilate the caste system in India. I also wish to establish equality and fraternity among Indians irrespective of their caste and religion. As a writer, my aim is to create a space for my writings within the larger domain of Indian literature.

Q. Can a non-Dalit write about Dalit experience?

A. A non-Dalit can obviously write about Dalit experiences but a non-Dalit cannot reach into the depth of the Dalit experiences. The Dalits have been targeted for humiliation and oppression by the system of caste and Varna through the ages. This has led to their extreme poverty, exploitation, oppression and dehumanisation not only on the personal level but also on the level of cultural excellence and creativity. This is a lived experience that might not be available to a non-Dalit. A non-Dalit writer might write out of mere sympathy towards the Dalits, but mere sympathy cannot produce revolutionary Dalit literature.

Q. It is a common belief that there is no caste in Bengal. What is your opinion?

A. It is not true. Caste system is very much present here. If you observe the political and cultural sphere, you will see that 10% upper caste people, mainly the Brahmins, the Kayasthas and the Baidya are dominating 90% of these areas. Socially, the lower caste people are being humiliated and economically most of the lower caste people are living below the poverty line.

Q. What are your views about translation of Dalit texts? How important is it?

A. It is very important to translate Dalit texts into different language especially in English language. Vernacular language has limited reach. If Dalit texts are translated, it can be spread to a wider readership at both the national and international level.

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Q. How are translating Dalit texts different from other texts?

A. Truly enough, translating Dalit texts is quite different from other texts. Dalit literature is a new phenomenon in the history of literature. This literature presents the suffering, revolts, negation, ethnic discovery, and agony of untouchability. Since times immemorial, Dalits have been deprived of human rights. The literature becomes a space for exposing these truths. Therefore, the cultural is deeply tied up with the political in the case of Dalit literature. Its translations too, need to serve a twofold purpose of not just getting across the literary but also the political.

Q. Since Dalit writing is an act of resistance, the translator has added responsibility while translating these texts. Often there is a lot of mistrust seen when a non-Dalit translator translates a Dalit text. How can such mistrust be transcended?

A. It depends on the translator. The translator must be honest to his/her work and should try to be true to the original text as much as possible. Indeed, the translator in this case, has additional responsibility while translating these texts.

Q. How did you go about selecting poems for the collection *Fiery Garland of Letters*? Did you want them to be about a particular kind of Dalit experiences?

A. The poems that I selected for this collection were done keeping in mind the Dalit consciousness. The poems are based on my overall experiences and not on a particular kind of Dalit experience.

Q. Dalit texts are found in various forms and formats like autobiographies, stories, novels etc. Why did you choose to write poetry? Any inspiration?

A. I write stories, novels and poetry. But honestly, I like writing poetry the most. To me, it flows from the innermost depths of my heart. I was born in a remote village in South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. In my boyhood days, I used to observe that the senior-most people in my village would frequently recite folk rhymes, which was reflective of the community's pains and sufferings. This stayed back with me and later on served as an inspiration to write my own poetry.

Q. Do you write for a particular kind of audience?

A. No, I do not write for a particular kind of audience. I write for everybody.

Q. Do you think Dalit writing has reached the mainstream or there is more to be done?

A. Dalit writing has reached the mainstream, but mainly in the Marathi and Gujarati language. If it has to be placed within the overall context of Indian literature, much more is left to be done.

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Jaydeep Sarangi is Setu Award of Excellence 2019 winning poet, translator, academic and interviewer. He is an expert on marginal studies, mainly Dalit discourse in India. Sarangi has several books and articles on Dalit writers and activists from India. At present, he is Principal of New Alipore College, Kolkata. He edits an international journal for poetry, Teesta. With Rob Harle, New South Wales he has edited six anthologies of poetry from India and Australia.

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