

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Bangla Dalit Womanist Speaks: Interview with Bengali Dalit Writer Kalyani Thakur Charal

Jaydeep Sarangi and Bidisha Pal

Kalyani Thakur Charal is a cyclonic Dalit feminist and social activist. She wants to be known as a Dalit womanist who believes that writing is an act of resistance. She has four collections of poems, one autobiography and three collections of essays. She edits a cultural magazine, Nir. Her works are translated into English and many of them are on University syllabuses.

This interview is the outcome of the meetings we have in Kolkata in last four months. The interview was originally conducted in Bangla.

Q. Why do you write?

A. I write so that I can protest. Weapons are needed in protest. My pen is my weapon. I protest through my pen. Writing gives me purgation of my pent-up angst against social oppression, age-old stereotypes and discriminations. I am a soldier armed with words. There is chemistry within a creative writer. I always find a movement of thoughts within me. My writing is my inside out in words. Dalit women write differently.

Q. What is your first writing? What was the topic?

A. I started my writing with poetry. It was a romantic poem. Love was its main theme. I don't remember its title now.

Q. Which types of book did you prefer to read in childhood? Why?

A. Not so many books were available at that time. Still I managed to read few works of Tarasankar Bandopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, and Rabindranath Tagore. I have also read some translated works and few books in English. I found pleasure in reading *Rosenberg Collection of Letters, The Diary of Anne Frank*, etc. There

were some others which I can't remember right now. I loved to read poetry always. Whenever I found works of poets like Subhas Mukhopadhyay, Purnendu Patri, Binoy Majumder I started reading those.

Q. When did the Dalit consciousness grow in you?

A. Dalit consciousness was very much there in my father. It can be said that my family is the source from where I get the consciousness. There were socially conscious people who used to come to our house at that time. My father was a *gosain* in the Matua community as well as a social worker. He was influenced by the literacy movement of Guruchand Thakur. Reading Ambedkar was a significant part of my life. He opened up windows.

Q. When did you start reading Ambedkar? How did he influence you?

A. Well, Ambedkar's books are not so easily available in this country, especially in regional language. One has to pass through many hurdles to obtain those books. I have not been able to collect all of them yet. There are in total 36-37 parts of Ambedkar's works. I have both Bengali and English versions of his books. That would sum up to 10 to 12 parts. However, I have not read those yet. Hence, there was no chance to get influenced by those.

Q. Would you like to talk about your magazine *Nir*?

A. *Nir* was published as a wall magazine. Its written form came out in the year 1993-94. The written editions of *Nir* were published as special editions. Notable themes and contents include writings of the hotel boarders, folk culture of hundred years, folk play, refugee issues, reservation system, disaster, loneliness, water crisis, short stories of aboriginal and indigenous languages such as Santhali, Oraon, Kamtapuri, Rarh, Dapno, etc, stories of the Dalit women of the later period, short essays, critical discussions on Ambedkar, abridged autobiographies and autobiographical writings. Thus there are different editions based on different contents. Besides, there is one particular edition which contains writings of Dalit women of other regional languages of India apart from Bengali. It has been 26 years now since the magazine has been running. It has wide readership.

Q. How many poetry anthologies have you published so far?

A. I have published four poetry collections so far:

- i) Dhorlei Juddho Sunischit
- ii) Je Meye Adhar Gone
- iii) Chandalinir Kabita
- iv) Chandalini Bhone

Q. What are the prime themes of your poems?

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A. The prime themes of my poem are love, nature, society, feminism and issues of women, social machinery of caste oppression, socio-political insecurities, inherited conservatism, narrow mindedness, intolerance, refugee problems, cultural extremism, and most importantly, Dalit lives.

Q. Why do you use the metaphor of ‘hot iron’ in your poems again and again? You also use a lot of military images. Why?

A. ‘Hot iron’ stands for social machinery of oppression. I also use military images to express my anger against social malpractices in my poems. I use hard-hitting words and phrases to suit into contexts. Words have infinite power.

Q. What is the context of *ChandalinirBibriti*?

A. There is a history behind the entitlement of the book *Chandalinir Bibriti*. One prominent poet Sabyasachi Deb (who also teaches at the Presidency University at present) made critical commentaries on *Chandalinir Bibriti* in the magazine *Chetana Lahar*. He wrote at the end that it was not actually a poem; rather a form of statement. Thereafter I published an anthology of essays the very next year and entitled it *Chandalinir Bibriti*. It, however, contains several speeches delivered at different places.

Q. Why did you give such a title like *Chandalinir Kabita* to your poetry anthology?

A. There is not any such particular reason for the entitlement of *Chandalinir Kabita*. The name owes its origin in the word *Chandal*. I have used the title ‘Chandalini’ in many of my writings, especially in the entitlement of the essays.

Q. You have written in the preface of *Chandalinir Kabita* that you want to be a successor of ‘Dombinipad’ and ‘Shabaripad’. Why so?

A. Bengali literature owes its origin in *Charyapadas* and those who were involved in writing *Charyapadas* were all lower-caste people such as Dombini who belonged to the *Dom* (the corpse-handler) community, Sabari who belonged to the *Sabar* (the tribe whose livelihood depends on the forest) community as the very name suggests. Likewise there were people like Bhushuku, Kahnapa and many others. It is a surprising fact that the people were able to write literature of such high standard yet their successors have remained illiterate. The proponents of the *Varna* system or caste system not only drove them out of the mainstream society but also reduced them to an indigenous race. They were robbed of all things. The history of the Marathi literature shows how the upper-caste people threw all the songs of the Marathi poet Tukaram into the river. But, it is indeed surprising how the successors of such great literary personas are kept illiterate for thousand years. Those untouchable people got opportunities to step into education by the aid of Guruchand Thakur. Being one of the

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untouchable communities I have also been educated and hence, I also wish to write like such remarkable writers. They are my inspiration indeed.

Q. Please share a few words about your autobiography?

A. My autobiography generally narrates the life of a child who is born and brought up in any Dalit village. This is not my autobiography only but a collective narration of the autobiographies of all Dalit women of our society. It's a collective discourse of a society.

Q. Few words about your father...

A. My father was a feminist as well. He never discriminated between a son and a daughter. At that time men of the village used to beat their wives after returning home from work or whenever there was any quarrel between the husband and the wife. My father brought such a man home and was about to kill him almost. The man got a lesson and from then he never again beat his wife. My father used to do little such things. He used to say, 'Anyone can do social work.' It was similar to Ambedkar's saying 'Pay back to the society.' My father said, 'If you have no money you can also help by seeking from others. You can admit someone to hospital.' He used to collect money for someone's daughter's marriage. If someone's father died he used to collect money for funeral, if anyone was not able to buy books he helped. He did whatever he could do with his limited efforts.

Q. Have you read any of the work of the Tamil Dalit writer Bama?

A. Yes, I have read a bit of her works. I have also published the translated versions of Bama's interview and some of her short stories in *Nir*. She is radical Dalit feminist. Her *Karukku* is trend setting narrative.

Q. Is there Dalit literature in Bengal? Since when?

A. Yes, obviously. Earlier, there was the oral tradition of literature. *Kabigaan*, however, still persists. Besides there were literary forms like *Rayani*, *Balaki*, *Ashtok*, *Gajan*, etc. Those were all composed and sung orally by men. *Matua Sahitya* or Matua literature can be considered as a form of Bengali Dalit literature as it also talks about the history and upliftment of the Dalits in Bengal. It is more than one hundred years old.

Q. Put some light on Chuni Kotal and her significance in the Dalit literary movement of Bengal.

A. Chuni Kotal was a student of Vidyasagar University of West Bengal. She was also a promising poet. She belonged to the Sabar community. But, she had to commit suicide unfortunately in the year 1992 at a very tender age owing to caste discriminations. Her death was an influencing factor for initiating the Dalit literary movement and setting up the *Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha* or The Literary Association of Bengali Dalits.

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A glimpse of Chuni Kotal's life can be found in 2 or 3 pages which can fondly be called a memoir. It was published in the magazine *Sundar*. I re-published it in *Nir* few years back.

Q. Why are there not many female Dalit writers in Bengal compared to other states?

A. It is because of the mainstream writers who tempt them and dissuade them from Dalit consciousness. Literacy and education have reached to the Dalit girls much later. Hence, writing books is, moreover, a far distant thing for them. Let alone the women, even the menfolk of the *Muchi, Methor, Dom, Hari, Bagdi, Bauri* communities have not yet been able to speak about their society or to write their autobiographies. Neither they have been literate that much, nor have been conscious enough. There are yet no such books like *Joothan* and *Murdayia* that have been written in Bengal. There are some writers among the *Namasudra, Poundrakshatriya, and Rajbanshi* community here in Bengal but a larger group of Dalit writers have yet to be formed in Bengal.

Q. Can you please talk about some works of prominent Bengali Dalit female writers?

A. Yes, there are writers like Manju Bala, Smritikana Howladar, Lily Halder, Kanan Boral, Alokanda Roy, Pallabi Mondal, Pranita Roy, Sanju Sikder, Meruna Murmu, Lakshmi Mandi, Ayesha Khatun, Juthika Pandey, Pushpa Bairagya and so on.

Q. What would you like to call yourself? A Dalit feminist or a Dalit womanist?

A. I would like to call myself a Dalit womanist. It is more inclusive a term to justify my identity in the context of race, colour, gender and caste. My relation with the others is what I am. All Dalit woman writers are eco feminists. Like them, I too find close bond with the land, forest, trees, etc. Some of my works are earth narratives. Feminism is a top-heavy term.

Q. You are an iconoclast and a trend setter in many ways. What do you say?

A. The aim of my writing is to build the society in new form in this postcolonial phase. Now Dalits are seen to raise voices of protest against torture unleashed upon them in each of the states. I write about Precarity, Marginality and Dispossession. I am a simple Dalit lady who writes. I never compromise with bourgeois values.

Q. Can Dalit women write beyond the selves?

A. Yes, obviously they can. But Dalit literature draws out the realism and realistic aspects of life. Dalit poetry carries a different dimension going beyond Dalit autobiographies. Besides, a special part of Dalit literature or rather Dalit autobiography is that it manifests the history and condition of a particular community which is indeed a topic of anthropological study. Apart from this Dalit literature speaks about the history, realism, and the stalwarts' struggling sustenance and constructive bend of mind within a community, thus it becomes an

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instrument for social upliftment. Those who live at the upper stratum of the society are not aware of the Dalit history. Besides, there is no written testimony. Hence, autobiography or writing about the self becomes a testimony of Dalit lives in general. Readers must read my works beyond personal narratives too. These are social narratives in spirit.

Q. What is the role of difference between a Dalit mother and a high caste Hindu mother?

A. Dalit people are engaged in productivity all the time contrary to the traditional *Varna* (casteist) Hindu people. A Dalit mother is also a part of these activities. The children of Dalit families are parts of Dalit economy. My autobiography has depicted these things to some extent. I have observed difference in the work pattern between my own mother and my friends' mothers who were all *Varna* Hindus. The mothers of agricultural families spend a lot of time in the winnowing of the produced crops. *Varna* Hindu mothers never experience such a thing and so there is no similarity of work experience between them. Members of the families who are involved in working with leather and things made of leather, who are involved with making earthen pots and containers are all part of the production somehow or other. As *Varna* Hindu people are not engaged with such kinds of production related occupation, so there is a basic difference which can be observed between the work of a Dalit mother and a traditional *Varna* Hindu mother. Dalit mother speaks differently. Her language is different. Therefore, many Dalit writers have written essays and stories on 'mother'. They have less control over the social environment. Control over marriage and fertility decisions make them way apart from the high caste Hindu mothers.

Q. What is the role of a Dalit woman in her community?

A. No society can develop and uplift without women. Dalit society is no exception. Besides, until Dalit women become conscious, neither Dalit community can develop nor the true scenario of Dalit society can arrest attention of the public. There is no historical data of the Dalit women taking active parts in politics. The little we get is shown as a part of the reservation system. This is one form of discrimination. A group of people has thus been made to lag behind; the women have not even been noticed. When there have been discussions regarding the development of caste a parallel discussion has taken place regarding gender development. But gender issues have always been suppressed under caste because of the verbose words of the upper caste women. The rude reality of Dalit woman is their suffering at multiple dimensions at the intersection of caste and gender. They are often pushed into bonded labour, sex slavery and trafficking. With mass education and awareness drives from the government and NGOs things are changing fast and fair for good.

Q. Please enlighten us about the *Matua* religion.

A. There are some hard hitting realistic aspects of *Matua* religion. That which attracts us inside the religion is obviously the instrument of social change. The proponent of *Matua*

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religion Guruchand Thakur started preaching the religion in 1812; it was such a time when what he said was contrary to the prevalent norms of the society. Contrariness inspires a particular community people to fight back when they are on the verge of doom. When the people who are placed at the lower stratum of the hierarchical ladder were considering Hindu religion as baser and vile than animal instincts, Matua religion emerged as a form of protest. The nineteenth century is fondly known as the Renaissance. Many great personalities were born in that century to reform the society. They have been mentioned in the history. Unfortunately, there is not any single mention of Guruchand Thakur and Harichand Thakur in those historical records.

Q. How did the ideology of the Matua religion act as an inspiration for your writing?

A. When we learned to write we felt the accountability that the person who showed the way to such illiterate, hapless people, inspired them to proceed into the field of economy and education, writing about them is my moral duty. There are many songs in the Matua community which are like treasures of Bengali literature and culture but the historians never felt the need to write a single line on those. The very untouchable mindset of the Bengalis lies in the very fact and it is written in pen and paper records. Now things are changing.

There is a special provision in the Matua religion where it is said that women should be paid respect. Not only that, when polygamy in the Hindu religion was on the verge of making the women devoid of self-respect, Harichand Thakur started preaching the concept of *Ek Nari Brahamachari* (or 'One woman as life partner is the Brahamachari').

When the *Vaishnava Sahajiya* sect became indolent and started begging to earn their living, Harichand Thakur spoke about the work culture at that very time:

Koribe garhasthya dhormo loye nijo nari
Grihe theke-nyashi, banprosthi, Brahamachari
[You will spend the family life with your woman

You will observe the life of a sage, thus becoming the Banprasithi and Brahamachari]

When the caste pyramid is based on division of work started in Indian society, Harichand Thakur joined another occupation. It can be termed as 'occupational mobility'. When the work will be divided in such manner equality will come then only. No work is small. When the priest will start to regard the profession of a sweeper equal to his, the discrimination will lessen then and there. Hindu religion believes in caste hierarchy, hence, they do not want to transform the vertical structure of the society into a hierarchical one because it will curb their dominance. To get liberation from it both Harichand and Guruchand Thakur advised the people to get educated. Possess the royal power. He spoke in a very simple language-

Khao ba na khao tate dukkho nai
Chele meye sikhha dao ei ami chai
[Nothing to be sad whether you can eat or can't

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Educate your children, that's what I want]

For possessing the royal power he said –

*Je hatir raja nei
Se jati taja noy*
[The race which has no king
It is not strong enough]

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar also spoke in the same tone: 'Educate, Agitate, Organize.'

Q. Is poetry a part of social movement?

A. I never think that much while writing. If any social incident provokes me I start writing on that. It's a call from within. For me, poets are social activists. They are law givers.

Q. What are you writing at present?

A. I am writing poems at present. I am also trying to write essays off and on.

Q. Please tell us about the translation process of your works.

A. My works have been translated in a scattered way. This includes some poems and some short stories. Some people have taken the remaining books for translation; but, they have not yet been able to complete the process. The autobiography, however, has not been given to any publisher yet. Delhi University took it for translation. The rest who have taken my books teach at different colleges and universities.

Q. Could you please share with us a poem that represent you as a poet?

A. OK. Here it goes...

My grandfather was prohibited
From stepping into the tol premises.
My father became literate
Using palm leaf and ink of charcoal
After a long struggle.

My mother visited Durga bari
With cow dung on her left hand
To paste the place where she was standing.

Oh! God! Cowdung is holier

Than the touch of a Dalit!

My genteel colleagues enjoy
Using abusive terms –
Chamar, Charal and dom – daily!

They have forgotten
That these terms are names
of different castes and communities.

With all these
I'll have to remember
There is no Dalit in Bengal!
Dalits are everywhere in the world
NOT HERE!
Caste discrimination exists everywhere
NOT HERE!

They throttle our throat,
Train us to say –
We are all equal, no caste stratification here.

By trickery
They are taking away
Provisions for reservation after one generation.

They force us and say,
'If you claim reservations in the private sector
We shall erase your father's name from your memory.
Repeat
We need no more.
We've got everything.'

This poem is taken from Thakur's collection, *Chandalinir Kobita* (2011). Translated from Bangla by Jaydeep Sarangi.

Glossary:

tol: Sanskrit primary school

Durga bari: A house where an idol of Goddess Durga is installed.

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Chamar, Charal and dom: Three professions considered outcastes in different parts of India.

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