

BREAKING THE WALLS OF CULTURAL SILENCE

Conversation with Manohar Mouli Biswas

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Abstract: Here is a conversation with Manohar Mouli Biswas, a leading Bangla Dalit activist and writer, where he expresses his candid views about the identity of Dalit people and the historiography of caste politics in West Bengal. He also speaks about the uniqueness of Bangla Dalit literature, its similarities with Dalit writings in other Indian regional languages and the position of Dalit women writers. He is candid enough to speak about certain autobiographical elements that provided him with the impetus to be a Dalit writer. He further speaks about Bangla Dalit drama and its performances which is a marker of its acceptance amongst the viewers. He emphasises on the role of translation of Dalit literature into English to generate awareness among the larger reading public towards Dalit literary corpus.

Q. Hello! Whom would you call a Dalit? Would you consider all the oppressed of the society, irrespective of caste to be Dalits in India?

Ans. The word “Dalit” involves a general perception in its meaning. Anybody in the society, oppressed in any manner whatsoever, may be called a Dalit. I’ve no intention to deny this perception or occurrence in general and in this regard I want to specify that oppression happens in society in various forms, at times by certain activities of the ‘majority’ on the ‘minority’ people, sometimes by the mighty on the weaker, or by a rich on the poor. At times it is unleashed by a man living in the urban domain on the one who inhabits a pastoral space, or sometimes by a white on the black. All these oppressions, as I have mentioned, bear the “class” identity in them. But in Indian society caste system is prevalent and many a time the oppressions take place even on the basis of “caste” identity of an individual. Usually a person having the scheduled caste identity or the defiled caste identity, such as, very particularly, the “Shudra” or the Ati-shudra or the “untouchable” is found to be oppressed in the society, or to be the victim of atrocity because of undignified low caste identity. These people are identified as ‘Dalit’.

In order to reply to the question ‘Who is Dalit’ we may historically refer to The Simon Commission. This Commission was formed in the year 1927. Sir John Simon as the Chairman was assigned to look into the Indian social and political spectrum and on the basis of the recommendation of this commission in 1935 certain caste-groups of Indian society who due to their marginalization were entitled to enjoy the reservation facility in services and in other places provided by the Government itself, are now specifically called the Dalit-castes or “Dalits” in

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India. In Simon Commission these people were noted as “depressed classes” at that time. These are my personal observations.

Q. Do you think that the Blacks around the world are marginalized in the same way as the Dalits?

A. In my writings many a time I’ve made this point very clear that the Blacks and the Dalits suffer similar kind of discrimination, and here again in discussing the question repeat the same. One thing I specifically point out that the Afro-Americans in the soil of America (but not all the Blacks in all the countries around the world) and the Dalits all over India, both undergo the discrimination in treatment resulting in social and economic, educational and cultural marginalization in their lives. In the first case discrimination takes place due to colour of the skin of the people and in the second case discrimination takes place due to caste-identity of an individual. The first one is racial discrimination and the second one is caste discrimination. Both are similar in character. One is skin-colour identity and the other one is caste-genital or caste-locus identity. In none of the cases above an individual has control to get himself free from the shackles of it. Both are related to an individual’s birth and heredity.

Q. Do you think that the Dalits are victims of “cultural silence”?

A. This question is very vital and intrinsic one to me. To reply to it I shall go back to the question Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised in 1988 “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in the book *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. It is one general apprehension in the minds of all that the subaltern cannot speak well but, according to me, they can speak and they speak in their own tongue. Their language may be understandable to few or may not be to others, their tongue may be palatable to some or may not be to many. That does not matter. And similarly the Dalits have their own culture. It is unfortunate that nobody wants to see or enjoy that culture if the same is performed by the Dalits. But ironically if the same is performed by others it becomes highly enjoyable. This is a phenomenon what I want to call “Cultural Rigging”. This “cultural rigging” endorses the fact of “cultural silence”. We may use an Anglo-Bengali expression to explain it and that is what we call the “Nirbakaization” of Dalit culture.

Q. Many Dalit activists consider the minority communities to be Dalits. Do you agree with this view point?

A. First of all we need to understand what is Dalit activism. By Dalit activists, we understand those who have their own commitment and activities to remove the shackles of Dalitism that has eventually eventuated on them for a long time, from the days of immemorial past, and in their way of activism they need to adopt that history into their study. The historiography of caste describes it as an institution prevailing in society from the Vedic days and since this institution is seen to work against the concept of equality in human dignities and values, each of the Dalit activists should have to fight against it. In my view Dalit activism is more social than political.

Some people are also there to whom it is more political than social. Historically we know Gautam Buddha is the first one who stood against these human inequalities of caste system and he thought of bringing about equality in society. What I mean to say is that he was in favour of a casteless society. The whole of India, by and large, accepted his egalitarian humanism. Even in the postcolonial days of the country some Dalits underwent conversion to Buddhism to get rid of social discrimination. They are said to be people associated with “home-coming” status or are referred to as the “ghar-wapsi” people. The Mahars of Maharashtra and some other scheduled castes all over the country followed this path of conversion. They, though the Buddhist religious minority in the country, enjoy the Dalit status in view of their activism against the discriminations and marginalization. Now the question comes about the other religious minorities. I’ve already mentioned that the case is political and social.

Q. Would you consider a Dalit to be suffering from mental bondage?

A. It would be perhaps an unwise statement to say that the Dalits do not suffer from any mental bondage. The hatred poured on them, and the uncaring treatment and negligence that these people have been victims of since centuries, played a crucial role to make them socially, educationally, culturally and mentally retarded. This retardation might have alienated them from the mainstream in turn. Some people will be annoyed if I give a data from the Global Wealth Report, 2016 where it is told that at this moment 25.4% of total poor of the world live in India alone. The Dalits are the worst victims in this scenario. Therefore the mental bondage they suffer from is undoubtedly an unseen shackle which enchains them.

Q. Do you think that Dalit activism is essential even in the 21st century?

A.
I feel happy to say that a good number of benevolent academicians have on their own initiative taken up the cause of the Dalits, highlighted their issues and discussed those in the classrooms. A number of reputed Indian Universities and Colleges are organizing seminars and academic discussions on this particular issue. Under such a benign condition of patronization from the mainstream to look into the Dalit issues I personally feel a separate movement or activism by Dalits alone need not be taken up in this 21st century. Even then if any activism or movement becomes necessary to solve any untoward and uneven incident in the society, this democratic weapon may undoubtedly be employed. We are breaking silence!

Q. What is the place of Bangla Dalit literature in comparison to other Dalit literatures of India?

A. It’s a fact known to all that Bangla Dalit literature is not inferior in any way to any of its kind in any of the states in India. But the fact remains open to all that the Dalit literary and cultural movements started first in an organized way in the state of Maharashtra in India about seven decades ago in the later half of the fifties. This literary activity by the Dalits was in a form of a

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movement there and they are the people who first coined the word/terminology “Dalit Literature” which in the later stage became popularly known all over India as well as around the world. The people who first started the movement (at least one section of them) became more revolutionary and violent in action. They formed one wing within the fold of concerted movement “Dalit Panther” by name in 1972, where they took the social, economic and political agenda along with their writing activities. This movement then spread to Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and in other places. In Bengal the Dalit litterateurs, without taking up the name of Dalit writings, had been in the process of writing since the first decade of twentieth century. I’ve edited one book “Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya” (*Hundred Years of Bangla Dalit Literature*) in 2011 where I’ve accommodated at least 83 Dalit writers spanning from 1911-2010.

Q. What is unique about Bangla Dalit literature?

A. Dalit literature as I’ve told earlier is mainly based on the phenomenon of caste discrimination and atrocities associated thereto. The history of Bengal is bit different from that of the other places due to some reasons. These reasons might have given uniqueness to Bangla Dalit literature. We know that the kings of the Pala Dynasty who were Buddhist by religion and who were disbelievers in the caste system hailed from the lower strata of society and had ruled Bengal for about more than four hundred years from 750-1155 A.D. During their days Bangla literature became popular by the contributions of 84 Siddha poets, popularly, known as Charya poets. Out of 84 Siddhas, we know 43 poets hailed from the marginal castes. Many of them told of their own social life. And secondly, Bengal had suffered Partition in 1947 and in the refugee camps after Partition the stringency of caste system was stark. Thirdly, the Communist Party of India was formed in 1920 and they had ruled West Bengal for 34 years continuously. During the Left-Rule, very unusually, a mass massacre of Dalits happened in Marchjhappi. All these incidents have contributed something unique in nature, something complete in realization, something counterproductive and innovative in the dalit movement and resistance. These sufferings have given birth to literary works by Bangla Dalit writers.

Q. What are the points of similarities between Bangla Dalit literature and Dalit literatures in other regional languages of India?

A. The most common feature found in case of Dalit literature irrespective of whichever Indian regional language it is written exhibits the application of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s thought and philosophy. The aim is to build the society in new form in this postcolonial phase. Dalits are seen to raise voices of protest against torture unleashed upon them in each of the states. This is the most common thing among all Dalit writings in each of the Indian languages. In West Bengal Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha was formed in 1992 to launch a movement after the sad demise of Chuni Kotal, a tribal girl who committed suicide under the severe caste discrimination while she was studying M.Sc. in Vidyasagar University of Medinipur. Though abit late in comparison with other states but it was a good start. Another mass massacre of Dalits happened in the same state in Marichjhappi in 1979 and a good amount of literary creation took place at that time. These kinds of incidents are seen to happen in other places also, such as, an atrocity happened on Dalit

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people in Karamchedu village of coastal Andhra Pradesh in 1985 where 6 Dalits were brutally killed and 3 women were raped. This Karamchedu incident gave a jerk to Telugu Dalit writings. Similarly in Kannada DSS (Dalit Sangharsh Samity) got its shape in 1974 to launch protest against the sufferings and atrocities on the Dalits. In the state of Tamil Nadu the incident of mass massacre on Dalits happened in the village of Kilvenmani in 1968. Maharashtra which is called to pioneer this movement had formed The Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in 1956 which had organized its first conference in 1958 in Bombay. This year Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha is celebrating the Silver Jubilee Sangiti (conference) on 24-25th of December in the Ambedkar Mission of Hridayapur in North 24 Parganas district.

Q. What is your take on Dalit women? Are they doubly marginalized?

A. Dalit women are compelled to undergo two kinds of marginalization at a time, one is due to their birth in lower castes and the other one is the sex/gender marginalization. Naturally they are marginalized doubly and it is related to their birth. Unfortunately none has his or her own control as per the choice of his or her birth is concerned.

Q. Would you give us some idea about Bangla Dalit women writers?

A. The women of undivided Bengal had shown some prominence in the field of social, political and literary activity in the eighteenth century. In Bengal the “Chowar Vidroha” happened just after losing independence to the British/East India Company in 1757. It first started in 1760. In the later phase of it the leadership was given by Rani Shiromoni, a Dalit woman who was put into the jail of Fort William in 1799. Perhaps, she was the first Indian woman who became captive in the British jail and she died in 1816. A Dalit woman writer named Sulochana was born in the Namashudra (at that time their name was Chandal) caste in 1776 in the village of Thakurkona of Mymensingh district and she wrote a book of poems (kavya) named “Sri Sri Gopini Kirtan”. Another woman, born into washer-man community in the village Shaltora of the Bankura district was Rami Dhopani who wrote a number of Vaishnavite poems as she was a close associate of Sahajia Chandidas. Her pseudonym was Ramtara. Presently there are a number of Dalit women writers and poets who are writing and are involved in social movements. Some of them are Kalyani Thakur Charal, Smritikana Howlader, Manju Bala, Kiran Talukdar, Sushama Moitra Sarkar, Lily Halder, etc.

Q. What prompted you to be a writer? How would you like to identify yourself- a writer or specifically a Dalit writer?

A. I had to suffer dire poverty in my childhood, and perhaps it happened due to my birth in the untouchable Namashudra caste. None of my forefathers had got the privilege to go to school. I’ve seen the pains suffered by these illiterate masses and the humiliation faced by them. I’ve no shame to say that I’m a first generation learner in my family. Naturally all the pains pent up within my heart had forced me to become a writer. And I’m very glad to say that I’m born a Dalit, I know the Dalits well and I write about the Dalits, sometimes about the non-Dalits. It is now the people’s choice whether they call me a writer or a Dalit writer whatever they like.

Q. Do your childhood experiences have any bearing upon your decision to be a Dalit writer?

A. Of course. I always feel that personal experiences work as impetus to elicit the urge to write. My childhood experiences (as I've told in my autobiography) have supplied me the materials to write. If you call me a Dalit writer then I will say yes, in my childhood I had been a child-labourer in the agricultural field with my poor parents. I was born into a marshy area of south Bengal nearer to the Sunderban in the district of Khulna. Though born to illiterate parents every time I got their support and encouragement to get at least some education in life.

Q. Can you please explain your choice of diction in your writings?

A. It is perhaps something sad to see that in the field of our education, particularly, in our academic courses nothing has been accommodated in the syllabi to let the society know about where we people have been born. Then is it so that we want to see only the brighter and glamorous aspects of the country and desire to be ignorant about the Dalits who have been Dalitized in society centuries after centuries? Shall we not tell our students how poverty has engulfed our society? What I want to assert is that let us frame our own diction of literature to tell the truth of the country.

Q. What is the response of “mainstream” writers to your literary works?

A. The literary works, whatever little I've done, have all got very good response from the mainstream writers and you will be surprised to note that my autobiography which has been translated into English has been well appreciated both in home and abroad.

Q. Do you consider translation as an important tool to make people aware of Dalit literature?

A. Dalit litterateurs generally write in their mother tongue. Unless it is translated in international language they cannot reach out to other people beyond the barriers of regional language. Translation, particularly in English, has brought Dalit literature into global visibility.

Q. Recently your autobiography has been translated into English. What is your response to that?

A. My autobiography was initially written in Bengali and it got good response from Bangla readership. It was well reviewed in the highly circulated Bengali daily newspaper the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 28.11.2015. And as soon as it was translated into English it reached the global readership. The English version has been widely reviewed in different reputed journals/magazines, such as *EPW*, *The Daily News* of Sri Lanka, *Indian Literature* (a Bimonthly of Indian Sahitya Akademy), *South Asian Research* of London, *Transnational Literature published* from Adelaide, Australia, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* (Sage publication), New Delhi, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, *France* etc. Positive vibes from different parts of the world overwhelmed me.

Q. Do you notice any difference in the mindset of present readers of Dalit literature in comparison to earlier readers?

A. Dalit literature is a very newly developed phenomenon and it has reached the global readership. The mindset of the earlier readers was that the Dalits cannot create any literature. Now, at this moment the temperament of the readers regarding Dalit literature has undergone a significant change. They have no hesitation to accept the ground reality of the Dalits in society.

Q. What do you think is the future of Dalit literature in India?

A. As long as patriarchy will exist in society, the sex/gender discrimination shall exist. Similarly, I understand, as long as caste system will prevail in society hatred related to caste and discrimination as a consequence of it will exist. And this will prompt the composition of Dalit literature. As time is a path-maker of newer kind of discrimination and deprivation, Dalit literature will also march ahead as a protest to these social curses contributing to literature in newer form and shape.

Q. How crucial is the role of Bangla Dalit literature in shaping the history of Dalit literature in India?

A. The backbone of Dalit literature is Dalit consciousness. Every mind wants to cling to the known and the familiar. So is the case with Dalit writers. The Dalits of Bengal had shown an unparalleled history towards this direction of self-consciousness in the year 1872-73. During that time in some parts of south-central Bengal (Faridpur, Khulna, Barishal etc.) the Namashudras, then called Chandals, had given a call for “General Strike” refusing to render services to the houses of the landlords and the affluent. This consciousness worked against those who had developed their mental setup to regularly hate and dishonour these people. [Ref: The 1873 Movement for Dignity and Equality before Law]. This particular incident, I feel, marks a crucial role in Bangla Dalit activism shaping the consciousness of all the Dalits of the country and contributing to the growth and development of Indian Dalit literature. How can we forget the historical consciousness expressed by Kapilkrishna Thakur in *Ujantali Upakatha* (The Lore of Ujantali) and short stories of Sunil Kumar Das, Jatin Bala and Manoranjan Byapari and poems by Kalyani Thakur?

Q. Will you tell us about your mother?

A. Everyone perhaps shares a feeling of pride to talk about his/her mother, at least I do. My mother was nice, peace-loving and sincere housewife, very simple in character. She didn't know how to quarrel with anyone. I was born in a joint family of my father and great uncle. Both my mother and great aunt would do all sorts of manual labour at home needed for an agriculturist impoverished family. I've already told you that I'm the first-generation learner in my family. Sometimes it would happen that while I would go to school in the morning my mother would fail to prepare any food for me and so I would go to school without taking any food. In the afternoon while I would come back home I would see she was also fasting for me. After I came back home

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she would feed me and then she would eat. So long she was alive she was the “living goddess” to me and even after her death in 1996 I bow in front of her photograph to get her blessings in any crisis of life.

I’m very proud of my wife also as she loved and respected my mother as her own mother. My mother hailed from an extremely rural background and even after shifting to an urban locale as Calcutta she would speak in her own dialects with anybody whosoever would come across her.

Q. Your autobiography is male dominated. Why are you silent about women in your family?

A. I started my autobiography with the depiction of my mother and great aunt and by giving descriptions about how they carried out the daily manual jobs. In the occasion of community festivals also the readers come across some women characters. The society in which I was born is of course a male dominated one, but the women in our society would enjoy their own freedom, would get respect and justice in an equal manner. In this context I remember one incident that I referred to in my autobiography. It was about the husband who had misbehaved with his wife and later begged pardon to her in the village “salisisabha”.

Q. What is the role of literary activism in Dalit Freedom Movement?

A. Literary activism, I believe, is a mighty weapon to rouse the unity and solidarity amongst the Dalits. When the writers, I mean the Dalit writers, take out a procession in the street in the morning of the second day of their Sangiti(Annual Conference) it brings their voices united together by uttering the slogans like “What we want? We, the Dalit writers, want freedom. We want freedom” or, “What is our sword? Our pen is our sword to fight. Fight, Fight, Fight;” etc. It generates the concerted efforts to remove the shackles of marginalization that hover upon us.

Q. Do you think a literary association and forum can reform a society from caste stratification?

A. It is a very difficult question to reply. You know the religious history of this country. Gautam Buddha was born into the Hindu-fold in ancient India. He wanted to introduce certain reforms into Hinduism by removing the caste stratification which he realized was against egalitarianism. This caste stratification has got its root in the Vedic scriptures and that is the reason why many a man thinks that Hinduism will not exist if caste stratification is not there. Naturally Buddha’s reformation of Hinduism was not accepted and ultimately his preaching became a separate religion. Many of the Dalits have opted for conversion to Buddhism and many of the Dalits who are Hindus by birth have got their faith and mental allegiance to Buddhism. Dalit writers want to set up casteless and classless egalitarian society. It is encouraging to see they are getting support from the intellectuals, scholars, academicians and many other broad-minded people of the society.

Q. Are you satisfied with translation of your works?

A. No one can deny the Sun rising!

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My autobiography “Amar Bhubane Ami BencheThaki”(Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal, Samya) which has been written in Bengali using my regional dialects in many a place and which is very difficult to translate into other language, has been translated and edited by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi into English. The way they have accomplished the job has satisfied me. I’m contented with their work and the same has been published by a reputed publisher of Calcutta. Earlier in this interview I have mentioned that the translated work has got lot of appreciation from home and abroad. A number of reputed university teachers and researchers have taken part to translate my poems into English. There are two volumes of poems: “Poetic Rendering As Yet Unborn” and “The Wheel Will Turn”. I’m really thankful to the contributors and the editors who have done the job because of their love for me.

Q. Is/was there anything like Dalit sishu sahitya or literature/magazine written for Dalit children in Bengal?

A. In Bengali there is a nice saying: “Ghumiye Ache Sishur Pita Sab SishuderAntare”. It means, “Father of child lay asleep into the mind of each of all the children”. If we talk of the Dalit sishu sahitya in Bengal it simply mentions them who are habitually writing rhymes (in Bengali we call Charakar) depicting the Dalit life suitably understandable to all the children including the Dalit children. The children generally recite their rhymes in different cultural programme. Very prominent of these rhyme-writers are Bimal Biswas, editor of Adal Badal Patrika, Amar Biswas, editor Chaturtha Dunia Patrika, Nani Gopal Sikdar, editor Ataeb Patrika, Sadhan Naskar, Kalipada Mani, Smritikana Howlader, Srimati Kiran Talukder, etc. all of whom chose regional language as their medium of writing. This use of the regional language makes them the special of subaltern speaking.

And in Bengali a number of autobiographies have been written by the writers such as Manohar Mouli Biswas, JatinBala, RaicharanSardar, Baby Halder, Manotanjan Sarkar, Sripada Das, Jagabandhu Biswas, Sunil Krishna Mandal, Bibhutu Bhusan Biswas, Anil Ranjan Biswas, etc. who have drawn their childhood as if the Dalitsishusahitya assumes the embodiment from these writings. We know in most of the times the simplicity of the children surpasses the wisdom of the elders. And so we may keep it in mind, though the movement of Dalit literature and culture is related to injustices and discriminations they suffer, Dalitsishus (children) sahitya tells many serious things through the simplicity of their own.

Q. How strong is Bangla Dalit drama? Did you perform any role?

A. In the movement of Dalit literature and culture the role of drama is undoubtedly very important. This is audio-visual media able to cut permanent impressions in the minds of all. Plays are performed during the annual conference of Bangla Dalit SahityaSanstha. Raju Das, Prangobinda Biswas, Harshabardhan Choudhury, etc. are the best performers. They have written lot of plays which have helped the movement to march ahead. I’ve never performed any role but one of my writing “Hidimba-Ghatotkoch Sanglap” has been performed by Raju Das and his wife Namita Das in many a place and it has earned lot of appreciations. One theatre group of Shyambazar, Kolkata, under the direction of Bharganath Bhattacharjya staged this Hidimba-Ghatotkoch Sanglap as a commercial show for several nights in a hall in Kolkata. It has been

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translated into English by Professor Ipshita Chanda, and the same I have come to know, has been performed in the Durga Puja festival in London by some Bengali artists there and earned appreciations from the public abroad.

Q. Is your movement Kolkata based?

A. This is not at all limited to Kolkata only. At least in a dozen of districts of West Bengal we have noticed the performances organized by the local artists and activists irrespective of caste and creed by the Dalit writers. As for reference I remember in 18th Sangiti of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha which held at the village Charanpur in the district Burdwan on 24-25th December 2009, the “Chowar Vidraha” written by Sunil Kumar Das was staged. The Twentieth Sangiti which had held on 25-26th December, 2011 in the village Kalai Beria, Chatna, district of Bankura the same drama was also staged there. We are trying hard to reach out everywhere.

JS: Thank you, Manohar-da! You are our inspiration. Your indomitable spirit and deeds will live for generations.