

CONVERSATION WITH SUBODH SARKAR

By Jaydeep Sarangi

J.S.: Hello! Who are the writers inspired you in your formative days?

My second meal was uncertain in my young days. My father, who was a poor school teacher, died a pre-mature death. We were six members in the family with a young widow mother with a white cloth on as a Hindu ritual, as a mark of bereavement. There was no writer, no poet for me. In no way, there was any ambience of poetry for me in my formative days. There was a fear of hunger, a fear that was eating up my vitals.

Hunger for me at that time was a holocaust.

But a paradox was born in my life. I picked up a soiled book from footpath; the book was called *Gitabitan*, a collection of Tagore songs. I started reading the pages of the book, and I gradually realized the energy of the book which cleaned up the toxin of fear from my mind, the fear of hunger.

J.S.: Do you remember your first recognition as a poet?

I was at Krishnanagar Railway station with some of my schoolmates, not to board any train, but to while away time by watching busy passengers rushing in and out. A Vagabond was loitering on the platform behind us, possibly looking for some food. A train was approaching the station. We took safe position, not to be jostled by passengers. All of a sudden, in a flash of a moment, the vagabond jumped before the approaching train. There was a roar followed by a silent count down. We thought he was finished, but to our utter surprise we came to find him on the second platform, eating bread from a small packet he picked up from rail lines. I looked at him through the empty space between two compartments; he looked back at me with a queer deathly smile on the corner of his lips.

I wrote my first poem that night about the smile. I lost my first poem after reading it to my friends next day, which was highly appreciated by my friends. That was my first recognition which died with the disappearance of the poem. But that smile continued to smile for last 35

years of my career as a writer. This is the smile that made me what I am today. I cannot write a single poem without remembering the smile. That smile is hunger, that smile is Asia. That smile is Africa, Latin America.

J.S.: Would you tell us something about the forces, conflicts and events that led you to poetry and shaped your sensibilities?

Firstly, I was born in Krishnanagar, a District town, hundred kilometres away from Kolkata. In the mid 70s, when I was still at school, the Naxalite movement broke out which popularized a slogan, `Chaina`s chairman is our chairman`. The Naxalites dreamt of a revolution which drew not only peasants but also the cream students from elite campuses. It believed in annihilation of landed gentry and land owners. Every day, on my way to school, I used to find abandoned dead body in the wood which I had to cross every morning. This is how I had to negotiate between bloodshed and books on my back.

Secondly, I grew up and came to the city of Kolkata with a job of a lecturer in a city college. My days in the city constantly clashed with my days in the small town. I was perennially going through the turmoil of a metamorphosis. I was walking out of my old self. This old self and the new self were thrown into a war zone which shaped out my sensibilities. And this war was a base camp for my poetry. If there is no conflict, my sensibilities get benumbed and cannot wake up for poetry.

Thirdly, fourthly, fifthly and finally, I was a supporter of the Left, but I withdrew my support and I supported Mamata Bandopadhyay whom I have described as rescuer of the poor and I respected her mandate which came to her from the grassroots and I championed her as real Neo-Communist. Mamata defeated the 34 year regime of the fake communists who in the name of poor people established a reign of terror. I said I committed a sin by supporting the fakes, when I realized I run away and I freed myself of the dead albatross hanging from my neck. My poetry did not fall from the sky. I write only when I am dictated from within.

J.S.: Would you tell us how your poems get written? Do you revise a lot ?

I believe if you revise a poem, then you again revise the same poem, and it goes on , and finally the poem becomes a good essay in the process.

J.S.: You have expressed deep indebtedness to Sunil Gangopadhyay in several places. What makes Sunil Gangopadhyay so special for you?

I was too poor to buy a book, I bought his book of poems worth Rs 2 in the year 1975 when I was given 50 paisa everyday by my elder sister to eat at college canteen. When I came to Kolkata to live in a city I hardly knew, then Sunilda like a father used to hold my hand to cross the roads. Sunil was among the first who wrote to Allen Ginsberg about me as I was working on his Indian connection. That letter took me to New York City to arrive at Allen`s residence for an unending interview.

I can give you a list of good things he gave me. I can give you a list of bad things as well. A man is not judged by what he gives you. He had lot of blemishes embedded in his character; he was flesh and blood like UR Ananthamurty, but Sunilda was a saint in spite of his deep weakness for women and alcoholic beverages. He was a bad judge of characters, he allowed his enemies to praise his life and manners.

I still believe he is the last writer of Bengal, who was an ambassador of Bengali culture and literature in India, after him, it is a big zero, an enormous void.

J.S.: You depict your home of thoughts in Bangla that is understandable, soothingly global and lucid. Do you write for any particular audience in mind?

I have a variety of audience in my mind. I have been writing not for all. My Poetry is read mostly by college university students. Scholars and Professors hardly enjoy poetry. I have always been scared to read out before my colleagues. But I was red with shame one evening when a renowned scholar recited one of my poems all by his heart in front of my friends, their wives and children. I rectified myself but I still believe poetry is enjoyed and loved by the youngsters and then recognized by the oldies.

JS: Is there a message in your works?

MESSAGE in a poem may be a pain in the arse. Putting message in the cup you are drinking from has not been a good practice. You are not a saint, you are a poet, you may cry, but you have no tears. If you philosophise your poetry, then philosophy will reign, and poetry will go.

When I write a poem, I have no agenda except my sensibilities. I obey my heart, I listen to my skin, I support my ears, I hear what I cannot say.

J.S.: What could be the back ground of the poems, ‘Sari’?

This is the poem I wrote 24 years ago when Jyoti Basu, the then Communist Chief Minister of Bengal made a terrible comment on the Dhantala Rape case, he said, ‘o rakom hoyei thake’ (it happens like that, nothing serious). I was terribly shocked by the comment, but I could not write down the poem to infuriate the Left intellectuals. I took a metaphor of a window woman and wrote this rape poem as protest, and Communist Party of India thought the poem was about the sufferings of a young widow woman, not about the Dhantala case.

J.S.: Is there any specific significance of the title, ‘Mother of Manipur’?

Mothers of Manipur ` I wrote after the mothers came down to the streets, they stood up nude in front of the Assam Rifles Headquarters in Imphal as a protest against the draconian law empowering the Indian Army to shoot and rape, if so they desire.

J.S.: Will you accept a tag “socially committed poet”?

Please don’t describe me with such a trash. I like to be called `Free`. We can debate and discuss next time—`Is there any poet who can be called Free?`

J.S.: Can a subaltern speak? If he speaks, can he retain his position as the subaltern?

Prof Gayatry Spivak wrote this seminal essay 40 year ago. Now the counter question is raised: the subaltern spoke , but is it heard

J.S.: How will you conceptualise aborigine /Maori/dalit writings these days, in the after-months of so called democratisation of life/society?

Three important things have happened in Indian Literature in the last 30 years. Dalit is number one, English number two, and thirdly women.

Dalit literature is now hot cake in India and abroad. There has been a red carpet welcome to the writers writing in English from India. Feminist literature in India still occupies a large territory of Indian literature.

Dalit poets and fiction writers have great potential like the Black American writers in America, aboriginal writers in Australia and elsewhere.

J.S.: Will poetry travel in the age of cyber mania?

Face book poems are the worst poems I have ever come across. Online web magazines are the future magazines for our posterity. But for us, it is too early to accept. Mania is a sickness, it will go. Those who are celebrated in print, they will never turn around for web journals.

J.S.: Publishers often consider publishing collection of poems as a commercial suicide. How do you view this?

Publishers wait for good poets who sell well. Publishers are afraid of those good poets who do not sell. This is a business world we can hardly escape. There are some publishers who glorify their status by publishing poetry books without good returns. But I feel embarrassed when I see my book is a loss for a publisher. I made them smile whenever I met them.

J.S.: You are a distinguished poet and editor. Do you consider there would be any difference between a native English poet and a bilingual/trilingual poet from India?

Now we smartly call them Indian English poets. Arun Kolatkor was a great bilingual poet. Jayanta Mahapatra was a pioneer in Indian English poetry, he has recently written some poems in Oriya, his mother tongue, but i think he will be remembered as an Indian poet writing in English from India. Jayantada knows Bengali pretty well, if he writes in Bengali tomorrow, he will be called a trilingual poet. But I think, it is not time for us to become

Chaucer who wrote in Latin, French and finally English. The difference between a native English poet and a bilingual poet is a big difference—one writes only in English, the other writes in two languages.

J.S.: Will you tell us about your experiences as the editor of *Indian Literature*, a bi-monthly journal published by the central Sahitya Academy, New Delhi?

I joined *Indian Literature* first in 2010 as Editor on the basis on lien from my college in Kolkata. I could not continue as my wife, Mallika Sengupta, a celebrated poet in Bengal passed away. Currently I took the charge again as a Guest editor working online from Kolkata with a fortnight visit to my Delhi office, checking and verifying the plan and design of the journal physically. I thank Sahitya Akademi for choosing me for the second time. I have an unquenchable thirst for Indian literature in 24 languages and in oral tradition and also in dialects. India as a basin of literature in Asia is an enigma for me, and this journal is a way for me to explore India in a variety of literatures being written down every moment in every corner of the country. I am honoured and privileged that I am able to read India everyday through translations coming to my inbox for *Indian Literature*. This is the only magazine that is the literary connect in India.

J.S.: Thank you, Subodh da!

Bio

Jaydeep Sarangi

With Angana Dutta, Jaydeep Sarangi has translated and edited Manohar Mouli Biswas's *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* (2015). He has also recently edited *The Wheel Will Turn: Poems by Manohar Mouli Biswas* and has been working on a book on the stories of the refugee dalit writer, Jatin Bala. Sarangi is also involved in a translation project with International Centre for Nazrul, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is on the editorial board of several refereed journals in different continents and has acted as a peer reviewer for the *Journal of Language and Cultural Education* (Slovakia), a double-blind peer reviewed journal. He edits *New Fiction Journal* (ISSN 0978 – 6863) and is one of the Editors

of *Writers Editors Critics*. Sarangi has been anthologized as a poet in many national and international anthologies, including *The Dance of the Peacock*, Hidden Book Press, Canada, 2013, and *World Poetry Year Book*, The Earth Culture Press, China, 2013. He is the founder Vice President of the Kerala-based Guild of Indian English Writers Editors and Critics. Currently, he is a senior faculty member at Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College(Calcutta University),Kolkata,India. He can be reached at: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com

Subodh Sarkar

Subodh Sarkar's first book of poem was published in the late 1970s, and now he has 26 books to his credit – 20 of poems, two of translations and one travelogue on America. His poems have been translated into English, French and several Indian languages and published in several journals and anthologies. Sarkar is the editor of Bhashanagar, a Bengali culture magazine with occasional English issues. He is the guest editor of Indian Literature, New Delhi. He is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award.