

ROB HARLE IN CONVERSATION WITH JAYDEEP SARANGI

By Rob Harle

Q Hi Jaydeep thanks for talking with us. This interview will have a global audience not just your Indian colleagues so could we start by you telling us a little about your childhood, schooling and tertiary education?

J.S.: It's very interesting! Childhood is a carefree phase for a man's life. I had a brother...very loving brother, Sankar. He died at an early age. But I was blessed with some rare friendships. In the house...a big house... there was no one to share thoughts with me...no one to play with me. But I enjoyed that deep silence. My father introduced me to the world of books. I started reading them. They helped me to develop my own world. However, there were a number of good friends in the neighbourhood as Sourav, Surojit, Supriyo and Rajib. We used to spend long times together. I remember my happy times with them. I penned my first poem in English when I was in class II. It was for my school magazine at Vidyasagar Banibhavan Primary School, Jhargram. Fragrance of the red soil basin seeped deep into me. I inhaled that rich tradition throughout my childhood. My father was my idol. My mother was very sick. Things became sweeter later on. The journey that I had in my childhood, I look back with very fond memory because I was very much attached to my father. I used to wait for my father to come back from his office. And of course, I used to listen to cricket matches enthusiastically. My playmates thought I too had a good prospect in playing cricket as an all-rounder. They treated me as a fast bowler who could also bat! Kapil Dev who revolutionised Indian cricket was my childhood idol. I read a lot of books related to cricket even when I was in the upper primary or so. Autobiographies of distinguished personalities inspired me a great deal. The most important thing for a writer to develop is a sense of his own journey: image by image, thought by thought.

Q You seem to balance your time easily between writing poetry, being a family man, working in the academy, editing journals and travelling to conferences and book launches. Is that an accurate assessment and do you ever wish you could sit on the bank of a river and just write poetry?

J.S.: Life demands so many things from a man. My family supports me so much that I find free space to work for my own. My wife has a creative soul. My parents engage me intellectually. My daughter paints my house of thought with her brushes of imagination. I live in the city of Kolkata and buzz around it. But, the city never appeared in my dream. Dulong, a small rivulet in my hometown, is the river of my mind. Its forests, rich cultural history and folk tradition pull me to its banks again and again. Jhramgram is a charming small forest enclosed town. This environment helped me mould myself significantly. People I encountered are always worth remembering. I never came across a person who could damage my day dreams. It was a happy trajectory.

Q You have a strong need to educate and also give a voice to those, who for whatever reasons (lack of education, poverty, marginalisation), cannot get their stories told. Do you know of any specific reasons you care about this?

J.S.: I don't know. I was born in a place rich with tribes and their tradition. I started my career in teaching college students where half of the class were first generation learners. It was through mutual learning I engaged myself in the matter. I found enormous potential in them. I taught there for ten years and this was a happy phase for me. All happened without my conscious efforts.

I was a Programme Officer of National Service Scheme (N.S.S.) at Seva Bharati Mahavidyalaya, Vidyasagar University for three years. I was fortunate to visit tribal villages with my dear students. There I came in contact with Indian rural masses smarting under dire poverty. Later on, I was also selected as the best Programme Officer, N.S.S. for Calcutta University in the year 2012. While teaching in Kolkata I continued working with N.S.S. This gave me an opportunity to visit slums of the city. I got fresh ideas for social work from soul makers in Kolkata..

I read Dr B.R. Ambedkar in my formative years and became his active supporter for cause of the betterment of the voiceless and the oppressed, particularly under the caste system in India. The tragic suicide of Chuni Kotal, a tribal post graduate student of the Vidyasagar University for caste discrimination in the year 1992 moved me. Working on/with Dalit writers for more than a decade has given me chances to get acquainted with the causes for the oppressed.

Q I understand you organised the very first Dalit (Untouchable) literary academic convention in Kolkata, which resulted in you receiving death threats. To put yourself in this situation indicates serious commitment to the cause. Did that conference, and your other activities in this area result in positive outcomes for the Dalit specifically, and for enriching Indian literature generally? How are things now?

J.S.: My engagement with Dalit literature, at the initial stage, was primarily restricted to English translations of Dalit literary texts written in many Indian vernacular languages other than Bangla (Bengali). It became my passion to move deep into this human literature and I was more into literary activism for their cause. Ambedkar's slogan "Educate, agitate, organize" inspired me. Meena Kandasamy's work *Touch*, ignited me. I'm into translations of Dalit writings into English more than ever before these days. The success story of *The Wheel Will Turn* (2014) has inspired me to take up a further couple of projects. Meanwhile, I have edited two issues on marginal literature for 'Muse India', a leading e-magazine from India. I've also edited a couple of books on literature of resistance. I've delivered talks/lectures on Dalit literature at different places. "Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?" by Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee published in volume XLII of Economic and Political Weekly, 13 October 2007 was an eye-opener for me and many others in Bengal. Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography "*Itibritte Chandal Jiban*" is a clarion call to observe the structures of Indian social set ups and people from multiple subaltern perspectives – set ups that are usually heavily represented by the more privileged social groups. I read a few published autobiographies of significance in the recent years that have been consciously written as tools of Bengali dalit literary movement are Dr. Manoranjan Sarkar's *Ekjon Daliter Atmakatha* (2000), Jatin Bala's *Shikor Chhera Jiban* (2010), Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2012), Gopal Hira's *Chhinnamool Jibaner Itihaser Rooprekha o Prashangik*

Anubhuti (2012) and Jagabandhu Biswas' *Smritir Pata Theke* (2014). Mentionable here is also the biography of Sripada Das, *Adhyapak Sri Sripada Das: Son of a Street Cobbler* (4th ed, 2014). All these gave me strength to translate and edit (with Anagana Dutta) *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*(2015) which has been reviewed favourably in many leading journals in the world like *EPW*, *Biblio*, *South Asia Research* (London), *Indian Literature*, *Voice of the Dalit* (Sage Publication), *The Book Review*, etc. Professor Sekhar Bandopadhyay has written the *Foreword* for the book where he has touched upon some relevant critical parameters like the Bhadrolok tradition in Bengal and the identity politics among the dalits from within and around.

I think things are changing in different quarters. It's a long walk to a lighted discourse!

Q: If you had to pick five writers only who had a major influence on your own writing, who would these be?

J.S.: Very difficult. My life is seen as in multiples. So many people contributed to form me as a writer. To mention a few of them....I read almost all poems by two stalwarts - Pablo Neruda and John Keats. I'm shaped by close interactions and readings of eminent poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, Niranjana Mohanty, Bibhu Padhi , Keki N Daruwalla , Usha Kishore, Bashabi Fraser, Robert Deluty, Rob Harle and Catherine Cole . Their company helped me to form my ideas. My close association and long friendship with Dalit writers like Sharankumar Limbale, Bama Faustina, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Harish Mangalam, Neerav Patel, Manoranjan Byapari and Kalyani Thakur enriched my understanding of Dalit literary productions as a counter cultural movement.

Q: I'm going to ask you the same question you have asked others. For P.B. Shelley, "poets ...are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society..." Do you think that quote still holds true in this age of cybermania?

J.S.: I strongly believe that art/literature is a fundamental force in formation of civil society. It holds the base and superstructures that are built on this. Literary movements have the

potential of restructuring social institutions, if sufficiently explored. For example Dalit literature in India is not simply literature. It's a movement. Working on Dalit literature is activism because it contributes towards restructuring the age old casteist mentalities that perpetuate caste based oppressions.

Q In a recent review of the anthology *Poetry Connections: Poems From Australia & India*, Rushdie was quoted, "A poet's work ... to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start argument, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep." Do you agree with Rushdie's statement?

J.S.: *Poetry Connections* (Ed.Tamaso Lonsdale) is an amazing anthology of poets from India and Australia. It contains a vibrant introduction mapping recent trends in poetry in Australia and India. I'm amazed by the profound love and dedication shown by the poets from Nimbin, NSW. For me, Nimbin is a dream place where pens speak and the ink is never dried. I'm glad that I am part of this anthology. For me poetry is a happening thing. It moves hearts. And once hearts are inspired, much of the inspiration can fuel action. I do agree to Rushdie's statement. Poetry plays multiple powerful roles. It moves hearts! With you, Rob ...we are sailing well. So far, we have jointly edited four anthologies which are available on line and the publisher: Cyberwit.net . The latest one *Searching For the Sublime : Poems from Australia and India* (2016) feature nine Australian and nine Indian poets of repute

Q: You've been to Australia several times – what is the main attraction and/or purpose for these visits?

J.S.: Australia is one of my favourite destinations. I always think of that vast land as my second home where my good friends and relatives live. My engagements are professional and more than that. I've worked for projects with Margaret Allen, Tamaso Lonsdale, Paul Sharrad, Dennis Haskell, Bruce Bennet, Rob Harle, Jonathan Hill, Bill Ashcroft, Michelle Cahill, Philip Salom and many other noble souls. I always love to connect with them again. I didn't face any discomfort with anyone there. This bond is longstanding. I remember Philip Salom's poem for Jayanta Mahapatra's 80th birthday(published in *Southerly*, Vol 70,Nov., 2010) Philip writes, "Your poems have called up Wordsworth in the readers(.) It reflects his

deep gratitude for another great poet from a different continent. Jayanta Mahapatra is an inspiration for many of us in India. India-Australia connections run deep. The land and its culture have inspired much of my poetic creations. The visits have inspired me to initiate and participate in a number of collaborative projects. A recent one was *Poetic Connections – Poems from Australia and India* edited by Tamaso Lonsdale. In a review (published in “Muse India”, Jan.-Feb 2014) of the work Shernaz Wadia says, "Editor Tamaso Lonsdale has brought together the work of poets from two different cultures. Their words breathe life into their lovely compositions and become conversations on a new page of the book that is the world. I call this collection of poems "Manjari" - Sanskrit word for a spray of flowers because Tamaso has gifted us a fragrant bouquet of forty-eight poems, eight each of six poets..." There are many more such projects as *Building Bridges: Poems from India and Australia* (2013).

Cricket is another thread of connection. It connects minds. Due to I.P.L. Australian cricketers are almost Indianised. They have become household names in India. It's a long and happy story...I also wish one day in near future I'll visit your beautiful town : Nimbin, NSW. It's a place in my mind.

Q: Poets can now publish their work on the Internet (websites, blogs, online journals and so on). Do you think this ease of publication, often without peer or editorial review, encourages a lowering in the quality of poetry?

J.S.: Life is ever changing. We must embrace the trajectory of advancement. Websites, blogs, online journals and so on create space for easy accessibility. There are so many fascinating online journals and blogs. We also refer to them for purpose of research. I consider it a blessing. Quality is an inherent property. Internet publishing is a physical parameter. How can one depend on the other?

Q Training may be beneficial to honing a poet's skills but it is my belief that without passion (or deep serious commitment) no amount of training will produce a really good poet, do you agree with this?

J.S.: I also think so. Involvement into the making of a poem is important. Feelings are precious. Images depend on how one feels. For me, writing poetry is an inroad to the mind.

Q Basho said, "A poet doesn't make a poem, something in him naturally becomes a poem." Do you think is correct?

J.S.: I think self-learning is important. Poets form their own style out of their reading and familiarity. A poem is a spontaneous affair, no doubt, but for me, production depends on training or engagement with poetry. Do we learn without imitation? One forms his style gradually. But it happens so imperceptibly that one can't notice it. A poem is not always born as finished a product. I demand working on it to shape it as the poet desires so. It remains incomplete in completeness.

Q As you know I've had quite a lot of dealings with India recently, scholars, students, publishers, editors and writers. Without exception I've found the respect, courtesy and old fashioned "good manners" between Indians, and between Indians and myself to be refreshing, encouraging and simply delightful. Do you find this to be the case with more polite interactions, generally speaking, than say with Westerners?

J.S. I think writers have a soft heart. Tender thoughts visit their bosom. I'm blessed with noble friendships. India presents unity in diversity. It also teaches us how to be tolerant across cultures. I'm equally amazed by the overwhelming polite interactions by my overseas friends. I always learn professionalism and 'gentlemanliness' from my communication with them. I can never forget the amount of help I received from the western scholarship during my formative years as a critic and scholar. Dora Sales, Christopher Rollason, Robert Young, Bill Ashcroft, Paul Sharrad, Margaret Allen, Esterino Adami, Alessandro Monti, J.O. Perry, Patrycja Austin and are among a few from the long list. My plate is full. I bow my head down to all these noble souls.

Q. Would you tell us how your poems get written? Do you revise a lot?

J.S.: A poem comes like a flash. There is no predictable pregnancy before its birth. It's sudden and there is an element of surprise in its formation. There is always a feeling of happiness associated with its production. It's like a spring in a deep forest. You discover it and enjoy its sweet run. There may be a context that ignites the wings of imagination. A specific language follows this lighted spell. It can never be uniform in pattern and thought. It is produced out of a moment of ecstasy and excitement. An educated mind is always evolving. My idiom is in a state of rapid swing. I'm committed to its changing facets. I come back to some poems and revise them. Some remain as they are born.

Q. What type of audience do you write for?

J.S.: I don't write for a particular set of audience. It's an open discourse. It is for my countrymen and the whole reading world. I think poems breaks the corridor of geographical maps and horizons. I'll be glad if my poems communicate my feelings and tradition in a global language to reach out to the vast reading world. It's a private as well as a public enterprise. My poem 'Bilingual Bard' in *Silent Days* talks about my linguistic choice. My latest collection, *The Wall and Other Poems* (2015) is about the Partition of Bengal and its impact on people.

Q You haven't mentioned your own previous book *A Door Somewhere?* does this also have a partly activist theme?

J.S.: I like this book. There are poems on subaltern themes. This collection was released in Rzeszów University, Poland ceremoniously in the summer 2014.

Q. Tell us about your connection to the Red soil which allures you and your fascination for the rivers ?

J.S. My soil and people associated to it are important in my writings. Some of my poems in *From Dulong to Beas* (2012) are located in Jhargram and its scenic surroundings - the red soil and green forests where the saviours of history live in close proximity with nature. Small

rivers are my inspiration, the sap of energy and tradition. My writing poems is an act of celebration of the small but beautiful. My ancestral house is situated near the banks of a rivulet, Dulung. I remember visiting the rivulet and playing on its banks. Now it is a creative escape for me from the maddening metro city rush and impersonality in daily acts where time is sold out for demanding meetings and engagements.

Q. You mentioned earlier *The Wheel Will Turn* has inspired you to get involved in a few more projects, is one of these the book you are currently editing on Manohar Mouli Biswas. Care to give us a brief synopsis of this forthcoming book?

J.S.: *Yes!*

“The Wheel Will Turn: Poems by Manohar Mouli Biswas, edited by Jaydeep Sarangi and published by Cybernet, Allahabad is a unique collection and a fresh addition to the volumes of writings produced in the field of dalit literature. It is also different as it comes from the eastern part of India and by a pioneer and powerful writer, Manohar Mouli Biswas. Biswas is a spokesperson of Bangla Dalit Literature and eminent writer too. It is a collection of 52 poems written over a period of six decades by the poet. The poems have been translated by a talented team of translators including Angana Dutta, Bhaswati Ghosh, Joyjit Sarangi, Madhumita Majumdar, Mohini Gurav, Sangita Sany, Sanjukta Dasgupta and Sutapa Chudhuri. The comprehensive Introduction by Kalyan Das provides a solid background to the book.” Says, Anand Mahanand in *Muse India*.

Q One final question - your all recent books of poems have had excellent reviews and contains some exceptionally good poems. When can we look forward to your next personal volume of poetry?

J.S. *Silent Days*(2013)was released in Perth, Australia.
The title poem engulfs my moments of ecstasy:

“I learnt that each small thing has a life
Of its own, its own way(.)”

I thank Dr. Dennis Haskell for giving me a grand platform for launching the book in the University of Western Australia. It got favourable reviews in different continents. Things moved fast. Thank you, Rob for the cover art of all five collections. You are an amazing artist.

A writer and his writing evolve and there is no end to it. I think my best poem is still to be born. I write poems for that pleasing moment when I can write my best poem. It's an unending game. Ideas stream in. I'm working for my seventh volume of poems.

Q Jaydeep, thank you so much for your time.

J.S. Thank you, Rob! You engaged me. Warm wishes for all your noble deeds!

Bio

Rob Harle is a writer, editor, artist and reviewer - born in Sydney Australia, August 1948. Writing work includes poetry, short fiction stories, academic essays, and reviews of scholarly books, journals and papers. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, books and he has three volumes of his own poetry published – *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996) and *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012). *Winds Of Infinity* (2016) Recent poetry has been published in numerous anthologies and literary journals: Just a few examples -*Rupkatha Journal* (Kolkata); *Beyond The Rainbow* (Nimbin); *Poetic Connections Anthology*; *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*; *Rhyme With Reason Anthology*; *Asian Signature*; *Muse India*; *Voices Across The Ocean Anthology*; *Episteme Journal*; *Indo-Australian Anthology of Short Fiction*. *LIRJELL Journal*; *Homeward Bound Anthology*; *Voices Across Generations Anthology*; *World Poetry Yearbook*; *Temptations*; *Taj Mahal Review*; *Setu Magazine*; *Searching For The Sublime, Anthology*. His past art practice was sculpture, then digital-computer art both for the web and print. His giclée images have been exhibited widely and featured both in, and as the covers, of various literary journals and anthologies.

Formal studies include Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Literature and Psychotherapy - his thesis concerned Freud's notion of the subconscious and its relationship with Surrealist poetry. Rob's main concern has been to explore and document the radical changes technology is bringing about. He coined the term *technoMetamorphosis* to describe this. This past concern is now moving

Episteme: an online interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary & multi-cultural journal

Bharat College of Arts and Commerce, Badlapur, MMR, India

Volume 5, Issue 3

December 2016

towards helping to restore our abandoned metaphysical and spiritual modes of being through literature, especially poetry.

*He is currently a member of: Leonardo Book Review Panel. Manuscript reviewer for Leonardo Journal (UK & USA). Advising Editor for the Journal of Trans-technology Research, (UK); **Member of Editorial Board for:** Phenomenal Literature, (India); International Journal on Multicultural Literature (India); LIRJELL, (Lingayas University, India); Ars Artium (India); Iris (India); Daath Voyage (India). Setu Magazine (USA). Poetcrit (India). Ad Litteram (India). Full Publications, Reviews and selected writings are available from: www.robharle.com Artwork from: www.robharle.com/retro*