

***AJU MUKHOPADHYAY IN CONVERSATION WITH NIRENDRANATH  
CHAKRABORTY: HIGHLY CELEBRATED ELDEST POET OF BENGAL***

Talking to the nonagenarian living known eldest poet of Bengal, Sri Nirendranath Chakraborty, in the morning on 24.11.2016 at his Kolkata residence at Bangur Avenue was a remarkable experience for me. It's a 54 years' old simple house constructed and occupied at the beginning of the Project; Bangur Colony, where all the houses were of the same category; scattered here and there within the boundary. The remaining gaps were filled in as and when new constructions were made. At that time it was considered somehow, as an outskirts of the city. I visited it sometimes in my youth with friends for breathing fresh air in an open area with trees and parks. But the scene has radically changed now. The contrast seems piercing. Most of the high-rise buildings, many of them under construction, creating a deafening sound have formed a narrow lane with building materials scattered here and there, clothes hanging from windows and verandahs of the multistoried houses making a narrow constricted atmosphere creating an unknown sadness in the heart. This was where I was sitting with the poet. This is the image of a city occupied by large number of refugees from the forties of the last century with continuing influx of people not only from neighbouring States but from Bangladesh. Passage for everyone including of course the original residents of erstwhile Calcutta have been immensely restricted.

Asking about it, I was replied by the poet that faces of almost two third of the original residents in the area have been changed. Water logging position during rains having been altered towards the better many newcomers have come changing the ethnographic pattern of the area as it has happened throughout Kolkata, perhaps supported politically. Even under this condition our hosts; the poet and his daughter-in-law Mrs. Kakoli Chakraborty, who is daughter of the poet's late friend (once a famous writer and editor, Santosh Kumar Ghose), known to him from her birth, now works as his unofficial PA, were calm and quiet, non-reactive to the changes going on. I sat together with my wife at her side. She was betrothed to poet's son when four while the son was seven years old as the two friends had agreed, the poet said. With this

preliminary talks about the housing condition of the area and about his family, I came to the main idea of our visit, interviewing the poet, but instead of answering to the point the poet sometimes replied in a general way. My questions below are marked as Q and the answer is marked as A.

**Q- As a poet, writer and editor how do you compare the present condition to the past as you have seen?**

A – “Life in general is subject to changes in every moment; changes are reflected in every individual. It is natural. Change is an expected phenomenon of life. It stops with death. We don’t mind changes but for that to initiate any deliberate change with stunt is undesirable and unwanted,” he said. The poet expressed a little unease and concern at the rapid ethnographic and demographic changes going on throughout the city but he kept his cool even at his age. At the beginning of our talks he declared his age, 92 years, telling later that he is two years’ older than Mahasweta Devi and younger by one and a half year to the living fiction writer, Ramapada Chowdhury. Mahasweta Devi has recently passed away. I regret that though I have written some articles on her works which she knew and we talked over the phone, I couldn’t meet her.

**Q- How do you pass your time now as you have retired since long from the active field?**

A- “Except the old age look his health is otherwise good with some age related complications,” we were told by his daughter-in-law, Kakoli. She said that he seats daily in his desk and, the poet added that he writes too, at least something as it is his usual routine.

**Q-Who are the good poets whom you wish to recognize after Tagore?**

A – “There were many such poets like Jibanananda Das, Buddhadeb Bose, Sudhindranath Dutta, Premendra Mitra, Amiya Chakraborty, Vishnu Dey, Shakti Chattopadhyay and Sunil Gangopadhyay and there are poets still living like Sankha Ghose, Alokranjan Dasgupta, Joy Goswami, Sujato and others.”

**Q- What is your opinion about Rabindranath Tagore?**

A – “He is a support to my joys: when I see a small patch of fresh white cloud in the clear morning sky, finding the streets below drenched keeping a sign of some light shower for awhile, I remember a Tagore song filling my heart with joyous vibration; ‘Juvenile cloud’s tune has touched my mind.’

“He gives consolation in time of my grief.” Telling this he recited some lines from Tagore’s poem titled, “Bojhapoda”.

“He gives courage during my struggle for something. And the nonagenarian poet recited a good portion from Tagore’s poem, “Duhsomoy”.

**Q- What is your opinion about the Indian English Poets and Writers (Indians writing in English)?**

A– “There are some Bengali writers like Amitabh Ghosh and Upamanyu Chatterjee who writes Well.”

**Q –But there are other Indians too who write poems and fictions and essays from India.**

A – “Yes, there are many such writers. And surely English has wider scope for writing”, he agreed.

**Q – Please tell us some early stories of your life for the next generation Indians.**

A – “When I was five years my grandfather taught me numbers, drawing them by iron rod on soil and taught me to recollect mathematical calculations in rhyme as formulated by the famous mathematician from Bankura district of West Bengal, Subhankar. My grandfather was proud of his teaching and of my memory as he often said referring me that a five year old grandson might go to market, do all purchases and return with exact remaining changes in notes and coins giving all accounts, if he is sent, which no other Western school would teach a boy of that age.”

After death of his grandfather, the poet came to Calcutta to live with his parents who had been there. He stayed first at Durgacharan Doctor Road at Taltola area of Calcutta. By the way, he said that Dr.Durgacharan was regarded as Dr. Jackson of Calcutta, so eminent he was as a

Doctor. Then the family moved to their own house at Champatala in Sealdah area of Calcutta but that was not final so they stayed at Baranagar for some time to finally settle in their new home at Bangur Avenue. His son and daughters are highly placed as Principal of college, Professor in university, Executive in Indian Statistical Institute, doing literary editing or doing responsible civil services as IAS officer under the West Bengal Government. They have been writing, editing or publishing regularly.

I can add that each member of the Chakraborty family are educationist and are sympathetic towards the cause. They are related to the world of education and now his son is entirely engaged in the world of literature. A highly cultured and educated family, they are serving the contemporary society to the extent of their capacity. When I said that I have kept a copy of his selected poems he became very glad and mentioned that his autobiographical work, *Nirabindu*, is available though no extra copy of it was with them. I mentioned one of his famous poems, “Ulanga Raja”, to which the poet and his assistant were happy again explaining the contents of it. I also mentioned about one of his poems where he indulged someone or the others to knock at his door at the dead of night or do such daring adventures, braving to say like, “What of that! Wondering, “what else could they do!”

The poet immediately remembered the incidence of writing this poem and said, “In it I made some fun!” I took the opportunity to recollecting it in memory and gave voice to my thoughts that at that time some young ones practicing literature were trying to get hold of the literary management and kind of authority in the running of the most expensive and influential Bengali paper in which Nirendranath was one of the editors. He laughed in recognition, nodding his head in acquiescence. True that based on it they flourished in life. I said that I didn’t try to join their group or any such group as such Bengali literary groups were famous for nepotism, favouritism and self-indulgence; even the so called academies and establishments awarding regional and other poets and writers are in league with such influential regional groups. I regretted that merits are not considered as the best basis of judgment. With a huff I didn’t try to be in such groups, helping and satisfying them. As I said this I observed to my satisfaction that the veteran poet and

his assistant, an experienced and retired editor of another newspaper, exchanged meaningful glances and kept quiet in acceptance of my observations. “Instead,” I said, “I diverted my media of writing to English. The other reason for this was that I didn’t remain in Bengal for long; moved to different towns and cities in India as transferred.” They kept quiet.

However, back to our conversations, when I mentioned that I was satisfied in practicing literature in English as it is a wider field of reader-writer meeting with greater opportunities of getting published throughout India as well as in many other foreign countries, getting unbiased judgment sometimes and a general recognition, both the interviewee and his companion happily declared in unison, “Very good! You have done very right!” Their confirmation was an encouragement for my decision; choosing to write in English.

I mentioned about Sahana-di commending my work on Sri Aurobindo and Nolini-da (Nolini Kanta Gupta) praising my skill for writing short stories. I said that some greats came to Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry, some of them lived there. When I mentioned about Mrinalini Devi’s suffering for becoming the wife of such a great man who was so much above a family circle, Nirendranath mentioned that C.C. Dutt, ICS, was also there among others. I said that he was once a friend but after having his Darshan after long he recognized Sri Aurobindo as God.

Nirendranath said, “Yes. Even Sri Aurobindo’s own father-in-law, Bhupal Chandra Bose, considered him as God.” He highly praised a book he read, titled *Purano Katha, Upasahar* or *Old Tales and Epilogue* by Charu Chandra Dutt. This book contains Dutt’s old friendship with Aurobindo Ghose and his meeting Sri Aurobindo at Pondicherry after long when he saw him as Krishna personified.

Happy in conversation with the poet and his personal assistant, who cared to entertain us with sweetmeat, for some time we came out to give some rest to the poet before his lunch hour.

In his long life Nirendranath has received large numbers of awards from different big and small establishments: awards or purashkars instituted in the name of outstanding writers and educationists like Tarashanker Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Vidyasagar. He received Rabindra Purashkar from the Government of West Bengal; received Sahitya Akademi award, Ananda Purashkar and Ultorath award. He received honours from such reputed organizations like Asiatic Society and the Fellowship of Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, in 2016. He has been honoured with honorary D. Litt from Calcutta University, Burdwan University and Kalyani University. He has been specially honoured during the annual Kolkata Book Fair in this year, 2017.

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### **Bio**

He has written more than two hundred Essays for books and journals besides larger numbers of features in newspapers. As an essayist he received Albert Camus Centenary Writing Award, 2013. His essays and books contain such important subjects as Sri Aurobindo (Life, Philosophy and Literature), The Mother of Pondicherry, Subhas Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Sant Kabir, Albert Camus, Saadat Hasan Manto and among the latest writers and poets he has written number of essays on Mahasweta Devi, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, Satyajit Ray, Khushwant Singh, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and others. He has written some essays specially on India like Rebirth of India and other essays and books on India. He has critiqued large numbers of contemporary poets of India besides such important subjects on Poetry as Sufi and Bhakti Poetry, Devotional Poets of Modern India, Spiritual and Mystic Poets.

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On animals he has contributed mainly to Creature Feature, Cyprus besides in some Indian journals and has written essays on Environment and Adivasi Life.

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