

Jaydeep Sarangi Interviews Aju Mukhopadhyay

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J.S.: Please let us know about your childhood?

A.M: I was born in a joint family in north Kolkata and grew up with all brothers and sisters, of the same parents and cousins. North Kolkata was then the centre or heart of Kolkata. Swami Vivekananda's house was in our neighbourhood, Tagore house too was quite near; Calcutta University and Metropolitan Institution (main), founded by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, was also in our neighbourhood where I studied. There were at least 35 to 40 members of our family including the helping hands and dependents. None of us received exclusive treatment from our elders; eating the common food, going to school on foot, many of us sleeping in the same room, this was the usual norm. The whole surrounding was crowded. I was born during the Second World War. I have faint remembrance of a fearful atmosphere prevailing during the communal

riot culminating to the horrible Calcutta massacre in 1946. There was stray bombing by the Japanese in our neighbourhood.

Our pecuniary condition was not very good. Suffice it to say that we struggled to grow up in all respects of life. As the time was passing I became aware of our condition of living. Though at a very early age, 17 years, I had to be engaged in service after passing the School Final, I continued my studies in the night shifts of the Vidyasagar College, Rabindra Bharati University and Calcutta University.

J.S.: When did you start writing poetry?

A.M.: It was during my teens in my mother tongue, Bangla. They were written in small exercise book; remained unpublished and finally lost sight of. My poems began to be published very infrequently, like on the occasion of the marriage of one of my uncles, in a souvenir published on the occasion of some dramatic performance of our cultural organization, and in a little magazine published from north Bengal. Gradually we published our own little magazines, I edited two short story magazines and my poems began to be published. I published two books of poems in Bangla but that became possible after quite some years. My first published booklet was a collection of short stories.

J.S.: Do you have any mentor?

A.M.: Frankly speaking, I have none to mention in particular. Tagore was with us at every step so his indirect influence we cannot deny. And ever since I found myself engaged in studying Sri Aurobindo in my youth I was drawn to his philosophy and poetry, particularly Savitri. But still now as I write, I do not feel any direct influence of his poems though his philosophy and ideas percolate through my being spontaneously, may be some lines of his poems remain in my subconscious sheath. They may do their work but nothing influences me directly. That way it may be that Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth or even Walter de la Mere touch my heart and mind though it is not that I regularly read them. Poems on Nature and environment and rants, poems in favour of the fallen adivasi or against social injustice certainly inflame my emotion to write but the expressions are my own like my other poems of purely subjective experiences.

J.S.: How would you define a poem? How is it different from a prose?

A. M: Good poetry must be a synthetic product of thoughts, ideas, dreams and visions grasped intuitively. Imagery, symbolism, subtle ornaments make the poetry enjoyable; pleasant to hear, beautiful to see. Whatever the force that dominates a poem a unique creation gives ananda. I do not think that efforts to write poetry to make propaganda of any sort, to make loud publicity in favour of religious belief or arguing through gross words make any poetry. Any sentiment may be expressed through poetry but that must be free from the crude utterances. Prose poems are acceptable but in my view poetry must have rhythm, even an inner rhythm and there is no wrong in rhyming though it may not be made compulsory. Poems rhymed are the natural products in their usual form. And poetry must contain pithy sayings in any form. Ideas vague or without carrying any clear meaning are examples of inappropriate poetry.

J.S.: What are your important collections?

A.M: I have two books of poems in Bangla. The seven books of poems in English are: *The Witness Tree, In Celebration of Nature, The Paper Boat, Insect's Nest and Other Poems, Aju Mukhopadhyay's Poems on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Short Verse Vast Universe and Short Verse Delight*. Besides poetry I write biography, non-fiction and fictions. I have a total number of 16 books published in English and I hope four more books will be published this year.

J.S.: Do you consider writing as a social engagement?

A.M: Though writing is a synthetic product of mind-heart-brain-emotion and may be something more, varying in degrees according to the individuals; in its pure aspect it is devoid of anything else but expression, often seeking to communicate. But man cannot avoid his social self, his duties and responsibilities towards fellow humans and society. As a modern man is the product of a mix of cultures and social practices, he often comes across situations which call for his views, ideas and ideals to be reflected in his writings. Though not purely a social engagement as it is with other professionals, a responsible writer's work reflects the society in many aspects. Some are aggressively social in their feelings and works as they work with political or other purposes, writing with an objective view point, with a motive. Subjective expressions too often have concern for man which may not be as a social being only. There are some entertainers, jokers or part timers in literature but they too relate to man and his society. A pure work of literature like art in communion with Nature or God may be rare examples of excellent creation

without concern for human society, but often such works are not the only creations of such a writer. It is not impossible that writing may be without any social engagement but man of society do not ignore his surroundings.

J.S.: Your poems often reflect crisis of identity. Why is it so?

A.M.: This is often an intellectual pose of a modern man. I cannot deny that a modern man is a complex product of the age, often puzzled with his existence. I cannot deny that it may seem to have happened somewhere in my poetry too, but I try to be clear in my way of expression though somewhere my poems may be so synthetic, mixed with some other-worldly influences that they seem to be so. I am not the one who sees the universe through the spectacles of others. I look at the world and me differently at different times exactly as they seem to me.

J.S.: Is bi-lingualism a virtue in the postcolonial world?

A.M.: What you mean to impress upon the mind by the word postcolonial is that English has remained with us and gaining strength day by day alongside the regional languages in such a vast country as India with so many languages. Yes, it is an added weapon with a modern writer. More the languages he knows better it is for his overall expression. English gaining the strength of a lingua franca among the educated Indians help the Indian English writers to get more readers, to further progress in his writing with the help of his mother tongue, giving spontaneous company to him.

J.S.: Did you ever think of editing an anthology of poems from your part of India?

A.M.: I edited some short little magazines in the past. Recently I have edited the Indian edition of an American ezine as a guest editor. Though I prefer writing more than editing to utilise my time more for pure creation than for the other things, editing is not foreign to me. A representative anthology of poems is always a very difficult job. If proper opportunity with necessary help comes, perhaps I will not deny.

J.S.: Are you satisfied with Indian academic canon?

A.M.: I am not member of any such faculty, so I do not have a thorough experience about it. But from the news gathered all around one may easily guess what type of pressure and push is made

by powerful political clout, misusing the democratic structure, to establish their rules in educational institutions like universities, I. I. Ts and other specialized teaching organizations. The situation does not always give birth to happiness.

J.S.: Do you write in Indian English?

A.M.: I do write in Indian English.

J.S.: Who are the promising poets (in English) from your part of the country?

A.M.: I am not sure for I do not know all the poets here (Chennai-A.P.-Pondicherry area), may not know some good poets as I have not come across such poets. Of those I see often and know, who are living, I may readily name T. Vasudeva Reddy and Syed Ameeruddin. But there may be more.

J.S.: Do you see any change in form and contents in Indian English Poetry in last 40 years?

A.M.: The changes are not quite significant; may be the tendency to rhyming is again gaining some ground.

J.S.: You have books on Sri Aurobindo. When did you start working on this great poet-seer?

A.M.: I began writing on and translating Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in Bangla from sometime in the seventies of the last century. I have books on them in both Bangla and English. I have written his life and philosophy. My latest forthcoming book on him is titled, "The World of Sri Aurobindo's Creative Literature."

J.S.: Do you think Aurobindo's philosophy relevant even in this age of moral degradation?

A.M.: In all aspects of human civilisation growth and decay have been historically confirmed. Sri Aurobindo defines it as the result of the evolution of consciousness which, he says, moves in a zigzag way. The existence, struggle, extinction, revival and growth; all are the results of our ever growing consciousness; a progressive evolution of consciousness. The ever optimist Sri Aurobindo believes that man is growing progressively but the growth is extremely slow. If he collaborates in the divine plan of progression, surrendering to the divine Will, the enemies within him will be won. He will gain back his Svarajya. Once man is master of himself he will not

struggle through competition, will not find the world an essential field of dialectical struggle but progress through peace and harmony, in collaboration with man and Nature as with the Divine. No violent struggle has so far succeeded; rise and fall is the ever occurring phenomenon. Winning himself man may win over all enemies to his progress. By this process man will gradually reach the divine consciousness, advancing towards “The Life Divine.” All material struggles have been futile though it continues ad infinitum. Man may try the other route with faith for his non-faith has not helped him. In this some have achieved. This is what Sri Aurobindo advises, expects from man.

J.S.: Do you have any poem on Aurobindo?

A. M.: I have written poems on him and on the Mother from time to time. I collected my poems on them and published titled, “Aju Mukhopadhyay’s Poems on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother” in 2009. On him I have some nine poems in this collection. I give below one of the poems if you please,

Sri Aurobindo

‘God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep

For man shall not know the coming till its hour

And belief shall be not till the work is done’-

said Sri Aurobindo in his epic poem Savitri.

The voice of truth in the seer poet Sri Aurobindo was heard

As he was a lotus born in mud, away from the mundane scene,

The cascading Supramental light like the golden swan

Touching the sky kept its foot on earth fixed.

Like a tree he was peaceful, unhurried and calm with perseverance

Among the thousand resounding words his existence was silence

In his body sat the God, his face revealed the eternity

Out of intense love for men he sat away from humanity.

Small fries in shallow water and surface-gazers

were lost in the depth of his fathomless water.

J.S.: Are you familiar with contemporary Bengali writers?

A.M.: Though I am not regularly reading them, I surely know most of them who have made some remarkable contributions in literature. I have written on some who have not left us for too long, like Rabindranath Tagore, Nolini Kanta Gupta, Achinta Kumar Sengupta, Bibhubhushan Bandopadhyay, Satyajit Ray. I am now writing on Mahasweta Devi.

J.S.: What is Indian English Literature, according to you?

A.M.: Indian English Literature is more than 200 years old. I have written essays on it. The English language written by Indians may be termed as Indian English. At the beginning most of such writers were brought up in U.K. and wrote almost their English like the present day second generation Indian origin writers, settled in England and America. They have been writing in English regularly in tune with their host country. Their orientation in the language was and is different; their language is akin to the nation in which their guardians settled. Yet when they write on India or Indian theme, even write on other themes, their mind remaining Indian, their subject in most cases and ideas remain Indian; their language is Indian English.

Though Indian writers writing in English are scattered at many places in the globe; in and out of India, their mental makeup and thought process, at least up to a few generations to come, are likely to be Indian, at least of those who create literature on Indian subjects, partly or entirely. But they do not include writers of foreign origin settled in India and writing on Indian subjects.

The poets and writers of Indian origin, living anywhere in the globe, may be called Indian English writers or poets.

It would be very relevant to hear Raja Rao, one of the pioneers of Indian English fiction writers: “English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up like Sanskrit or Persian was before but not our emotional make-up. We are instinctively bilingual. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the larger world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.” (From the foreword of his first novel, *Kanthapura*)

J.S.: What are your enduring themes; issues and concerns that pre-occupy you constantly?

A.M.: India certainly occupies my mind mostly though when I go for writing on Environment, Nature, Ecology or Adivasi, my work may cover the whole globe. My recent poetry is on the Arctic Sea and the Sundarbans. I feel attacked when I hear the news of rampant corruption, cheating, moral degradation and turpitude, of utter misuse of democracy by those who manage to get votes as the upholders of democracy. India’s degradation is my degradation. Can I stop as a silent witness? And my work contains many other things, ideas and problems, in essays, fictions and biographical writings.

J.S.: Within this emerging tradition of writing in English in a multi-lingual India, where do you place your writing? Is it more India-centric primarily meant for the middle-class Indian readers? Or, pandering for the Western audiences hungry for stereotyped images sanctioned by their culture looking for the despotic, sentimental, superstitious, poor oriental other?

A.M.: About the contents of my writings I have just said. I being an Indian English writer I may write on any country but usually India remains at the centre of my thought. I do not see only some economic class as my audience or readers. I wish and aim at all conscientious English knowing readers as my target group, which include speakers of the other languages too, through translation. I wish to communicate and to have contact with all sympathetic readers anywhere.