

**JAYDEEP SARANGI\* AND MOHINI GURAV\*\***  
**IN CONVERSATION WITH**  
**MANOHAR MOULI BISWAS**

*Manohar Mouli Biswas is the General Secretary, Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha. Born in 1943 in a remote village, his was first-generation education in very ordinary Bengali Medium village school. While in college he was a national scholar in I. Sc. Exam.(1961), B.Sc.(1963, C.U.). He retired from service as AGM, BSNL. He has authored a dozen books—book of poems-4, short story-1, book of essays such as Dalait Sahityer Digboloy, Vinnochokhe Prabandhamala, Yuktivadi Bharatbarsha : Ekti Aitijyer Sandhan, Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha. Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya was published in 2010. Bikshata Kaaler Bansi (2013) is his latest book of Bengali poems. Prior to that his selected poems have been translated into English with the title: 'Poetic Rendering As Yet Unborn'. He has taken part in different national seminars in different parts of India and read his poems. He is one of the leading dalit voicea from Bengal writing for more than three decades. His autobiography(in Bangla) has been published recently.*

1 . When did you start writing and why?

**Ans:** If I be very frank I should admit that writing is an inborn instinct pushes a human being to express his mind in his own way and style. This had happened in my case while I had been a student of class IV or V. I remember a particular day of that time while I had taken an examination of my own, if I could express the day of Ambubachi, a day of an incessant showering, a day to wetting our cultivating ground, a day to be kind hearted and soft-cornered to the crop producing mother, our mother is she the soil who can give birth to the many of promising children as we are; and that the nation need for all the times to come. It was not planned to become a writer or an author in life. It was simply an examination for the self-proving and improving only, and nothing other aims had been behind it. I had been committed to tell the sufferings of my own in my own language. The reason is very simple, as I was born in a family of illiteracy, the way I had chosen in life is to be self-improved and self-improvised. Only one thing had, in course of time, pushed me ahead to tell of the sufferings of the people as a whole in which I was born.

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

**Ans:** As we are born in the caste-graded society, high and low, in India, anyone born in the high castes does not feel anything of what it is, but while anyone is born in the low castes, and very particularly of the shudra and the ati-shudra caste faces obstacles in every step to move forward in life. This gradation started to flow in the society from an immense past, say, from the Vedic times. The Vedas itself stated the stratification of four categories of castes, such as the Brahmins, the Kshatrias, the Vaishyas and the Shudras.[Rik:10.90.12] and in the subsequent times this 'caste' was pushed forward to form the 'class' by Manu in his book of laws[10.4: "Brahmanah Kshatrio Vaishyastroyo Varnas Dwijataya"]. He had bunched the first three castes in one group and the fourth caste means the shudras, who are the larger section of the populace in the society, in another group. This stratification in the society has given the ultimate formation of the haves and have-nots, which has clamped perpetually over the heads of the shudras and ati-shudras.

What I here mean to say, the marginalization of the larger section of the people has in India been religiously institutionalized, and they can get rid of the bondage through the organizational movement. Through challenge and protest only. Through creating a new domain of culture and literature only. For that purpose we had set up the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in 1992 after the sad demise of Chuni Kotal, a tribal girl student of post graduation level in Vidyasagar University, and thence launched our literary and cultural activities to reform the society, very purposefully in the direction to eliminate disparity amongst human beings. What I personally feel, an 'institutional system' is to be challenged by the counter institutional operations. The dalit literature and cultural movement is nothing but the counter institutional operations.

3. Please give an overview of Bengali dalit movement through dalit writings.....

**Ans:** A pen is always mightier than sword. As mentioned above, Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha is an organization for the movement of literature and culture amongst the dalits in Kolkata and the rural of West Bengal, and this organization every year perform the following activities: (1). Birthday celebration of Dr. B R Ambedkar on the 14th April, preferably at the feet of the statue of Dr. B R Ambedkar at Red Road of Kolkata-1, (2). AGM of BDSS in the middle of June/July, (3). Chuni Kotal Memorial Lecture on the 16th of August every year as a day of symbolic protest against the caste-oppression, and the memorial lecture is delivered by some reputed personality, and finally, (4) the Annual Sangiti (conference) of the sanstha, for two days in rural area of Bengal, particularly on the 24-25th December of the year. This is for information that 24th Dec. is the day Mr. Naikar died and 25th is the day Dr. B R Ambedkar burnt the Manusmriti in protest in 1925.

Our quarterly literary organ is 'Chaturtha Dunia'[ fourth world] which has been/ is been publishing the writings of the dalits about the dalits since 1994, and the name of the shop is also Chaturtha Dunia what the we-people have set up in Kolkata book-market at address stall 22, Bhabani Dutta Lane, Kolkata-73. It is interesting that the name of the shop is same with the name of magazine. At present there are about hundred dalit writers who have contributed/ are being contributing in the different genres of literature, such as novel, short stories, poetries, dramas, essays and autobiographies. Very recently I've compiled a book titled "Shatobarsher

Bangla Dalit Sahitya” where I’ve accommodated 83 dalit writers covering all the genres of literature mentioned above.

**4.**Do you have any manifesto?

**Ans:** Yes, we do have the manifestos. In this regard I shall recall my memory while I attended The First All India Dalit Writers Conference held on the 8- 10th October,1987 in Hyderabad. Where we could have had meeting with some of the reputed dalit writers of middle and western India such as Daya Pawar, Professor Arun Kamble, Professor Yashwant Manohar, Waman Nimbalkar, Devanoora Mahadev, etc. If I talk to you about our manifestos, yes, of course, we are having the manifestos in general as well as in case of our movement in Bengal in addition to, which very simply aims at a casteless and classless society, based on human values, justice, equality and fraternity. Keeping in mind that ‘Dalit as the one who is socially and economically oppressed’. The dalit writers are compelled first to fight for a right place in the society and secondly a due place in the world of literature. They have to wage a double battle. They have to create a literature projecting real aspiration of the dalits and portray faithfully the battle which they are waging against exploitation, social and economical. The literature they create shall not only be the source of inspiration for the oppressed people but also an instrument which ignites consciousness and courage.

If we go on summing up the manifestos, it shall be as following: (i)The writer shall hold the torch of liberation and participate in peoples’ movements of liberation. (ii) On social front, the dalits are against the caste-ism, communalism, fundamentalism and all kinds of inequality based on birth and sex. (iii) On economic front, the dalits are against feudalism and capitalism. (iv) On political front, the dalits are against imperialism and fascism. (v) We aim at emancipation of dalits from social, economic, political and cultural exploitation. (vi) We use literature as weapon for cultural revolution. We adopt the original peoples form of arts. (vii) Our program is to demolish cultural hegemony prevailing in the country. And (viii) Our aim is to open the doors of learning and culture to oppressed people and to blow up oppressive culture.

**5.** With what intentions did you start your journal, DALIT MIRROR?

**Ans:** The very visibility factor of our state activity/performance in the field literature, so far it is in our own mother tongue, it remains limited within the state itself unless the same is transformed into international vocabulary. And with this intention in mind I had started to edit DALIT MIRROR(little magazine) in English for getting our dalit literary and cultural movement spread all over the country. As English is an international language it has facilitated to spread the movement of the marginalized people of Bengal globally even.

**6.** Dr. Ambedkar is a towering personality in the case of movement of social change in India. Which one of his movement has influenced you more?

**Ans:** I’ve been very much shocked to hear a question from you how much I’ve gone through Dr. Ambedkar’s Writings and Speeches and now I see that you changed the question. Yes, I confess I’ve gone through his writings and speeches between the lines. And perhaps his height and magnitude is so magnanimous he is not comparable to any one. He is a pioneering man to bring

about a social change topsy-turvy. I've been very much influenced by the ways and means he had put forward in his book 'Annihilation of Castes' to eliminate caste discrimination in Indian society.

7. What are the objectives of your movement for social justice?

**Ans:** The aims and objectives what are written in the constitution of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha are as following: Art.3.(a) To promote dalit literature and culture. (b) To shun blind-faith, superstition, unscientific and inhuman social inequality and injustice as also to preach and spread the message of equality, liberty and fraternity through literature and performing arts. (c) To give due regards and recognition to Dalit Writers and Poets, Reporters, Artists, Craftsman, Musicians and Singers. To institute different awards after the name of great Dalit-Champions and to offer those awards to eligible and renowned Dalits who have contributed in the field of literature, arts, culture etc. (d) To establish library and data-banking in order to help the writers. (e) To collect, retrieve and rewrite the lost culture, tradition and history to the dalits and to publish books, journals, etc. (f) To remove illiteracy, spread of education through traditional and non-traditional ways. (g) To help the poor but meritorious dalit students in the form of stipends, book-grants, scholarships, etc. (h) To publish or cause to be published books, journals, newspapers aimed at liberating the dalits. (i) To try to reach the illiterate rural dalits through the audio-visual media i.e. performing arts and make them conscious of their rights and duties and to liberate them from the age-old social injustices, superstitions and slavery which they are subjected to in the name of religion and destiny.

In carrying out the afore objectives we are committed to do all such other things as may be deemed incidental and conducive to the attachment of the above mentioned objects.

8. Is there a recorded history of dalit movements in Bengal?

**Ans:** The history what remains in a oral form perishes soon. Anything in writing is permanent. In the annual general body meeting which generally held in the middle of June/July every year, the general secretary of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha submits the annual activity report of the sanstha in writing. It enumerates the movement of the sanstha throughout the year. In the Sangiti which generally held on the 24-25th of Dec. every year the sanstha itself produces in writing the program-schedules to be carried out/observed during these two days, that is also a written document. Since it's a couple of decade old movement, naturally, the history of it has been recorded in different books, leaflets, pamphlets etc. published so far. Since I've been deeply associated with this movement from the time of it outset I've two books on the history of Dalit Literature and its Movement. (1) Dalit Sahityer Digboly ( The Horizon of Dalit Literature) and (2) Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha (An Outline of Dalit Literature).

9. Is it kolkata centric?

**Ans:** As the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha is spread all over West Bengal covering almost all the districts of the state, it is immaterial to say that it has a pan-Bengal character with office address in Kolkata.

**10.** Did you organize deputations, slogans, street theaters, etc in order to claim for justice and equality?

**Ans:** As said earlier, Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha observes its two days Annual Sangiti ( in Buddhist literature sangiti means conference) every year on 24-25th of Dec. and in the morning of the 2nd day of our annual sangiti (25th Dec) we take out procession in the street on the various demands. And it is for your information the theatre, drama, songs, extempore lectures, debates on various contemporary topics are held in the said function.

**11.** Who are important dalit activists from your state and how far are they influenced by other dalit activists from other states ?

**Ans:** I'm not liking to mention any name in this regard. Activism is not an individual programme. It is nothing but the concerted efforts of the members. This much I can tell that the movement of dalit literature and culture is a pan- national one in the basic character. Their aims and objectives are almost same all over India. [No more comment].

**12 .** Could you tell us something about "Poisoned Bread " by Arjun Dangle?

**Ans:** Perhaps you are aware of the fact that "Poisoned Bread" is a book of modern Marathi dalit literature, edited by Arjun Dangle and published from Orient Longman in the year 1992. As soon as the book was available , people globally came to know about the Marathi Dalit literature. And I took initiative to immediately translate Arjun Dangle's short story into Bengali and the same was published in Chaturtha Dunia in some of its issue.

I mention hereto even, Mr. H.P.Gedam, librarian in the department of Marathi and Mr. G. Kumarappa, librarian in the department of Kanada, of national library of Kolkata happened to be friend to me, and with their help I've translated some of the writings (poetry, short story) of dalit writers such as Yashwant Manohar, Arun Kamble, Daya Pawar, Siddhalingaia, Devanoora Mahadev, Adam Gondabi, etc. into Bengali and published from time to time.

**13.** Tell us about your translated work in English.

**Ans:** I've translated some poems of Bengali dalit poets such as Kalyani Thakur, Manju Bala, Debashis Mandal, Sukanta Mandal, etc. into English and a short story of Sunil Kumar Das also into English and published in Dalit Mirror.

**14.** Don't you desire to get all your work translated so that globally people can be inspired by your writings and shoulder and share the responsibility of emancipating the Dalits?

**Ans:** I don't believe in it because of the fact the state-level people do not recognize me, then how can globally I be? and I'm also not sure about it, if I'm a so big writer as you are telling/thinking of. Why shall I go to desire a thing which is not feasible at all? And you are perhaps knowing, no publisher in Kolkata, even come forward in state-level to publish our books. Therefore, it's not my desire to become known globally; but the desire of some translator/ publisher may come forward if they deem it fit and have any passion for a dalit writer like me.

15. Can we call your writings as part of literary vehement?

**Ans:** It's not at all known to me. Perhaps it's better known to you. If I want to beat my own drum then I should agree to you. But if I do the same it will simply cry in air like a balloon. I believe the critics are best authority to testify to the statement.

16. What is the role of Chaturtha Duniya in this literary movement?

**Ans:** Literature is the powerful instrument to change an individual as well as the society. While the planning was done to remove the uneven of the caste- divided society, we thought of bringing out a magazine like Chaturtha Dunia to make the people conscious of the evils of the caste system in society. To consolidate people in favor of the movement. We assumed that the victims shall raise their voice vehemently. The writers of this magazine are mostly dalits and are all vociferous. What I can tell to you the Chaturtha Dunia so far has issued 34 numbers/volumes and some of which have been well appreciated by the common readers. This magazine is the mouth-piece of our movement.

17. How about your autobiography?

**Ans:** I have taken very long time to write my autobiography, but it is not a big volume. It is only 128 pages. Only the portion of my childhood, the days how I had been in school from a poor joint family, the phenomenon what the untouchables are to undergo in village life, the illiterate parents how do they think of the education of their children and very particularly the ways and means of their passing the day-to-day life throughout the year I've depicted. My autobiography named "Aamaar Bhubane Aami Benche Thaki" [ My World: My Own Space]which has been just out to light very recently and I'm getting good response from the readers. This autobiography is nothing but the life of a child-labor who had worked in the agricultural field along with his poor and illiterate parents. The hardship of a particular caste-group people, say Namashudras and who had been previously called 'Chandals' during the times of my forefathers and who had been living in the rural marshy localities and mainly living on the agriculture are shown here. It's story how they have been marginalized economically and socially in their life and their struggle to move forward.

18. Tell us something more about your Nagpur service career and how it has helped you ?

**Ans:** Prior to mid of sixties I had no knowledge of dalit literature. At the fag end of sixties I had been to Nagpur for some months to undergo some trainings of the telecommunication department and at that time I came to know first about the dalit literature and its movements, which the Marathi dalit scholars had started to do since 1956, the year of death of Dr. B R Ambedkar. I'd gone through an article in the daily newspaper in this regard, had encouraged me lot and enshrined a thought of doing the similar kind of writing and movement in West Bengal also. I started to make contact with Marathi writers and ultimately I had been succeeded while I had been back to Kolkata and came in contact with H.P.Gedam, a Mahar in caste, and the assistant librarian in the department of Marathi language of National library, Kolkata.

**19.** How far are you associated with the other Dalit activists and writers ?

**Ans:** Activism and writing both the things I've taken with equal importance in life, and as I'm at present the president of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha I cannot keep myself away from the activism. Once while I was in Mumbai, I had met with Professor Arun Kamble in the university campus and had a long talk with him. I had a meeting with Arjun Dangle also. One day I had been at the residence of Daya Pawar and talked to him.

**20.** What is your advise to the contemporary Dalit writers ?

**Ans:** Sorry, I'm none to advise. I can only discuss the matter with anybody else, and after discussion I may suggest if they seek anything from me.

**21.** Tell us more about your favourite dalit writers.

**Ans:** It's a very big grey area to choose the favorite writers. I would like to mention the name of Adwaita Malla Barman for his precious novel "Titas Ekti Nadir Naam"[A River Called Titas] which is an unparallel classic in Bengali literature. The writer was born in the Malo (fisherman) caste. He has drawn the picture of his caste people in a nice fashion with great passion. Only one incident from the life of this writer I here mention. He was born in a very poor family. Naturally what happened just after passing the Matriculation examination he was searching a job and he joined a big publishing house of Kolkata as a proof-reader.

You all are aware of the fact that that Pearl Buck, the American writer living in China had written his great novel The Good Earth for which he was awarded the Nobel in the year 1938. Adwaita Malla Barma had purchased a copy of the book and had gone through it. Out of his great feeling he had written a big personal letter to Pearl Buck. His letter is titled as "Bharater Chiti Pearl Buck- ke". What did he tell in the letter? He had addressed her(Pearl Buck) as Didi(sister) and had invited her to come over to India and to see the depth of poverty the Malos are suffering. And the poverty of the Malos is more than what the writer has told of a farmer family in China.

**22.** What are your future plans ?

**Ans:** Poverty is a thing helps to nip the flower in buds. Yes, in this regard I refer to Mr. Mala Barman who had invited Pearl Buck to come to India and see the poverty the Indian Dalits are suffering, and suffering even after six decades of the national independence of the country. We cannot make the plan well because of the financial insolvency involved. However we shall try tooth and nail to run the shop of Chaturtha Dunia and carry forward the movement once started through Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha.

Thank you sir for sparing your precious time. Best wishes for your future endeavours.