

INTERVIEW

Converging Ideas of Dalit and Australian Aborigine Literatures: From a Conversation with Manohar Mouli Biswas

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Manohar Mouli Biswas is an eminent Bangla Dalit writer and a literary activist. Biswas is born into an untouchable Namasudra caste in 1943 in a small village named Dakshin Matiargati in Purba Banga (East Bengal). His writings in Bengali along with his translated works in English occupy an important place in Dalit literature. Both his fictional and non-fictional works depict the sorrows and sufferings of the oppressed Dalit people in the casteist Indian society. I feel blessed to have had several chances to meet him, talk to him and have his guidance in my study of subaltern literature of India. Following is a part of a long conversation I was privileged to have with him at his residence in Kolkata.

UR: Good afternoon sir. Can you please share your ruminations on Dalit literature?

MB: *Good afternoon. Yes.*

UR: Sir, I have read your poems, articles, books. They are an important contribution to Bengali Dalit literature specially your *Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (Hundred Years of Bengali Dalit Literature). Do you consider yourself a Dalit writer?

MB: *Yes, I am a Dalit writer and inspiration is from within- my life. Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya states that we, Dalit writers can speak and answer the rhetorical question of Spivak.*

UR: Is there any inspiration?

MB: *My life, everything I write what I feel/felt, see/saw throughout my life. My book Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya is an anthology of Dalit writings – poems, short stories, excerpts of Dalit life stories and novels. It is like the popular Poisoned Bread of Arjun Dangale.*

UR: Your *Dalit Sahityer Digbalay, Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* (An Outline of Dalit Literature), *Vinno chokhe Prabandhamala* (Essays from an Alternative Perspectives) and selected poems translated into English like *Poetic Rendering as Yet Unborn, Bikshata Kaaler Bansi, The Wheel Will Turn* add a nuanced and different perspective. Is it correct?

MB: *Different you may call, but it is a mirror where we look ourselves- our history and help others find reality of the marginalized fourth world. By the way I have been editing a bi-monthly literary magazine titled 'Dalit Mirror' in English for more than a decade.*

UR: *Dalit Mirror*, would you please tell me about the periodical?

MB: *As I have told, it is a literary bimonthly periodical published in English by Chaturtha Dunia publication house, Kolkata. I am honoured to be the editor of the periodical. It is a literary endeavour of an editorial board consisting of a group of Dalit writers from Kolkata and Agartala and it urges to have a look in the thoughts and aspirations of Dalits 'through this mirror of their own' and look beyond established archival sources.*

UR: What is the idea behind publishing it in English?

MB: *About English language I may argue for ensuring greater cultural visibility and also translation of Dalit texts into English are doing better in bringing them within postcolonial discourse. Again Dalit literature is not only pan-Indian phenomenon now, it is a world phenomenon.*

UR: Postcolonial discourse... and how it is?

MB: *We feel, suffer and continue to experience internal colonialism. Oppressed by the upper caste Brahmins. But we are fighting, resisting and you may quote 'writing back'.*

UR: What is your opinion on Dalit Aesthetics? Can there be what is known as Dalit Aesthetics?

MB: *Yes, we have aesthetics of rejection and revolution motivated by our lived experience.*

UR: Is it as Limbale defines in terms of Dalit consciousness? An alternative aesthetic?

MR: *The pleasure giving literature of higher caste writers have a separate aesthetics and we don't want to replace that. The aesthetics of conventional literature is based on the theory of*

'Sattiyam, Sivam Sundaram.' But in our writing Sundaram/beautiful is only Sattiyam/ bare truth. Dalit literature has the aesthetics of antithesis.

UR: 'Aesthetics of antithesis'- can you please explain it?

MB: Here by the term 'antithesis' I mean the concepts that are in opposition and contrast to the natural or established ones. If the tradition of Indian literature is Vedic symphony, Dalit literature is its cacophony. It is aesthetics of assonance within the dissonance. I have tried to make it clear in my essay 'Dalit Sahityer Nandantatava'ⁱ (Aesthetic of Dalit Literature).

UR: In reference to your *Dalit Sahityer Nandantatva*, I remember you presented the ideas of sympathy and empathy in the light of writings by non- Dalit writers on Dalit issues and Dalit writers. Do you consider the writings of Maheswata Devi and of many non-Dalits as Dalit literature?

MB: Yes, all these come under the rubric of Dalit writings. Mahasweta Devi's writings portray sufferings, pain and resistance of oppressed community of Bengal and Jharkhand. I also remember Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* where he refers to the incident of Marichjhapi, the killing of Bengal Dalits under left regime. These writings share a common thread and broaden the area of Dalit literature.

UR: Is there any distinction between the writings by Dalit writers and non-Dalit writers on Dalit issues?

MB: There is difference in the writings of Dalits and non-Dalits. Non Dalits are devoid of self-experiences, they can be sympathetic and their descriptions can be authentic too. It is said that only 'ash knows the experience of burning'. The words of non-Dalits do have love, sympathy and feelings for the lower castes. But rather than sympathy, empathy is imperative in Dalit literature and that is found in Dalit voices. When characters and writers are from the same soil and the characters share the lived experiences of the writers- literature turns to be real, that is true aesthetics that I have talked about.

UR: Sounds interesting, can you kindly elaborate it?

MB: Better I tell you the story of Adwaita Malla Barman, a writer and a fisherman's son. After finishing the manuscript of his *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (*Titas, the Name of a River*), the time honoured novel of Bengali Dalit literature, Barman went to meet Subodh Chowdhury, the owner of Puthigar publication house. Prof. Chowdhury was impressed but had certain reservations as

Manik Bandopadhyaya's Padma Nadir's Majhi (based on a similar theme of river and its Dalit fishermen) was extremely popular during that time. The answer that Barmangave to Prof. Chowdhury's doubt is the response to your query. He says: "Dear Subodhda, Manik Bandopadhyaya is a great artist, a master artist, but he is a son of Brahmin and a romantic. But I am the son of a fisherman." It is clear from his answer that imagination or sympathy can create something but empathy can create a distinctive form of art.

UR: In 1991 Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha started a Bengali quarterly named *Chaturtha Duniya* or *The Fourth World*. Why is it named so?

MB: *Chaturtha Duniya* was established under the editorship of Achintya Biswas, Mandal Hembram, Susanta Jana and me. We had objectives before us; rather Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha had objectives to eradicate all kinds of superstitions and inhuman social discrimination.

UR: What is fourth world?

MB: *Chaturtha Duniya* brings the stories of *Chaturtha Varna*- the fourth varnaⁱⁱ- the Shudras. The objective was to rewrite history and demolish cultural hegemony of Brahminical tradition by revisiting contributions of early Dalit writers such as Thakur Harichand, Raicharan Biswas to name a few and present the writings by the current crop of Dalit writers.

UR: Your stories, poems and essays consider Dalit as an umbrella term which includes untouchables, minorities, tribals.

MB: *Yes, I feel it should be considered so and it should go beyond the country, beyond the continent and bring all oppressed people to a common platform, like blacks of America, Australian Aborigines, etc. irrespective of caste, race, class or creed.*

UR: The relationship of Dalit writing with Black movement and Black literature is well - discussed and thoroughly researched. You have also talked about Australian Aborigines; do you find any similarity between Dalit and Australian Aboriginal literatures? Any comment on this topic may guide me further in my comparative study of these two literatures.

MB: *At the outset there are some differences, like we, Dalits are not racially different from the majority of Indians and we are not forced to adopt the language, culture and religion of the majority as they are.*

UR: And about similarities?

MB: *But to be precise, are we the owners of our culture and history? Do we have the power to determine our rights? Like them, for centuries we are denied equal share in the development of our nation.*

UR: But are caste and race similar? And what about the impact of colonization?

MB: *Yes, similar in kind and practice. Regarding colonization, we too face colonization in terms of culture and we are colonized internally whereas Australian Aborigines are colonized externally.*

UR: Are they marginalized in similar ways?

MB: *Australian Aborigines are termed as 'fringe dwellers' and the lower caste Dalit people of India have always inhabited the fringes of mainstream society, always at hand to be exploited. Like Australian Aborigines, Indian Dalits have lost their lands, languages, liberty and identity to the caste Hindus. Both are marginalized.*

UR: Now what about the reaction or 'writing back'?

MB: *Both respond instinctively to their lost myths, very often orally in the form of storytelling or Jalsa reflecting on their emotional bonding with the community and its mythical history. We both are writing to revive our identities from White-self-contrived myths and the Vedas and the Manusmriti. Dalit and Australian Aboriginal literatures are the products of an awareness of social commitment.*

UR: There are severe problems faced by Aboriginal Literature regarding publication. Cheryl Buchanan, the Aboriginal woman single-handedly published Lionel Fogarty's volume of verse, *Kargun*, because no publisher wanted to touch such 'political material.' Local and regional Aboriginal community publications like the North Queensland *Message Stick* or the *Kimberley Land Council Newsletter* and *Magabala Books*. Australian Aborigines published their own writings for their own readers. Do you have the same story?

MB: *We were rejected in earlier days. Why was the publication house Chaturtha Duniya established? I wandered with my poems, essays and autobiography but none bothered to listen, no one published and finally Chaturtha Duniya came into force.*

UR: From the analysis of the writings of Dalit literature and Aboriginal literature, we notice that both literatures basically are in the form of autobiographical writings or life stories. You also

wrote an autobiography soon to be published in English. What is the reason behind such profusion of autobiographies?

MB: *Yes, these are lived experiences. We have stories of our communities where we are trying to discover our identities and are struggles to present the counter narratives to subvert the artificial norms. Australian Aboriginal writers like David Unaipon, Glenyse Ward, Sally Morgan, Kim Scott also portrayed their lived experiences of subjugation, the pain and sufferings of stolen generation. They are trying to discover true identity lost in the contrived stories of western hegemony.*

UR: How do you view Dalit autobiographies?

MB: *As I have said, Limbale, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama and many Bengali Dalit writers such as Raicharan Sardar, Sripada Das, Manoranjan Sarkar etc. all try to subvert the contrived stories of upper caste hegemony. Both literatures show the process of transformation from personal stories to community stories. My autobiography 'Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki' is the life struggle of survival of anamashudra child through poverty, sickness, malnutrition and oppression.*

UR: What is your opinion on Australian Aboriginal poems? Do you find any similarity with Dalit poems?

MB: *I would like to mention another aspect here, Aboriginal poets like Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) and Kevin Gilbert were popular, but they were denounced by White academicians in early days. Their poetry was looked down upon as inferior, repetitive and temporal as we faced here.*

UR: Colonial White literature of Australia through their stereotypical and derogatory presentation of Aborigines managed to create racial prejudice against them. Did Indian classical literature play a similar role in the subjugation of Dalits?

MB: *Dalits have also been projected in a very derogatory manner in the great network of Aryan history, culture and scriptures. Historically the caste system is a socio-cultural menace of Hinduism. The religious scriptures permeate and perpetuate the binary divisions or binary relationships just like Aborigines. The Rigveda describes Non-Aryan indigenous aborigines as Dasas, Asuras, Danavas and Daityas. Even ancient literatures talk about Antaja- the term refers to the untouchables who had no place in Varna system. Look at some Dalit characters in our*

mythologies or classical literatures, like Karna, Eklavya, Hidimba, Ghatotkach etc. you will find the same prejudice for they were stereotyped, marginalized and misrepresented as others.

UR: Aboriginal writers (like Colin Johnson in *Long Live Sandawara*) are attempting to fill the ‘cultural void with positive images’. Have Dalit writers attempted to recover any positive images from the derogatory representation of Dalits?

MB: *All Dalit writers are trying to demolish the myth of divine origin of caste hierarchy and rewriting myths glorifying our mythical heroes. We question the very basis of these myths. We glorify the heroic qualities of Abhiraj, Kirat, Shambooka and also the devotion of Eklavya, Sabari and others. I myself have tried to rewrite these mythical characters like Eklavya, Hidimba, Ghatotkach etc.*

UR: Do both the literatures bear the characteristics of Subaltern studies?

MB: *As you have talked about Subaltern studies, I can say, we unearth the silent truths that lie buried in Savarna literature. For example, Vashistha, the famous guru of Ram Chandra had married Arundhati, the daughter of a Chandala or Vedvyas’s mother was the daughter of a fisherman. It is also in their literature. If Sandawara’s character is recreated in Aboriginal literature, we have also recreated a large number of Dalit characters that you can call ‘positive images’. You may read some of my writings in this regard, such as Ghatotkach and Hidimba: A Dialogue, Valmiki, Jatau’s Telling a Tale, Phoolan Devi etc.*

UR: Do you believe Dalits to be subalterns? Please elaborate.

MB: *Perhaps you know my book of poems- Poetic Rendering as Yet Unborn is dedicated to the subalterns from Home and Abroad. To me, the term subaltern used by the elite class historians implies the class identity rather than caste, particularly in the scenario of West Bengal. But now it is not applied only to the ‘disenfranchised’ and subjugated peasants in Indian society but includes numerous subordinated groups such as lower castes, women, poor Muslims, rural labor force etc. The understanding of hegemony and subordination is necessary for Dalit consciousness and it is present in Dalit writings from its very inception. Like the workings subaltern historians especially in retrieving traces of subaltern lives and experiences, Dalit literary writings engage with the task of examining Dalit lives and experiences. Our literature resists hegemonic voices and re-presents subaltern experiences. Limbale, Bama, Omprakash*

Valmiki and many others retrieve the fragments and create characters in order to voice the subaltern people's predicament.

UR: So you think these writers are the voice of the voiceless? Then what about Gayathri Spivak's apprehension regarding the success of the attempts being made by subaltern subjects to gain voice? Or can the subaltern Dalit speak?

MB: *Yes, subalterns can speak and all Dalits are doing so remarkably well. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question is- Can the subaltern speak? We the Dalits of Bengal – the subaltern, we speak, yes we can speak; we speak for ourselves in our own language, and in our own way which may be different from the elites. My books, in the line of many Dalit writers of India, Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha, Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya (Hundred Years of Bengali Dalit Literature) traced the voice of Dalit writers of Bengal and showed that they have already answered the rhetorical question of Spivak clearly through poems, short stories, life stories and novels.*

UR: Thank you very much sir.

MB: *Thank you.*

Endnotes:

ⁱ A beautiful and informed essay on Dalit aesthetics is from his Bangla book of essays *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* forwarded by Maheswata Devi.

ⁱⁱ The idea Chaturtha Dunia is elaborated in Biswas's edited volume *Shatobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (2011).