

From Wheels to Stalls :

Jaydeep Sarangi in Conversation with Manoranjan Byapari

A rickshaw-puller thirty years ago, **Manoranjan Byapari** learnt Bangla alphabets in Prison at the age of 24. He had no formal education. Oppressed at several levels and lived a life very differently. He received national acclaim after a translation of his essay “Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?” by Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee was published in volume XLII of Economic and Political Weekly, 13 October 2007. Byapari is now the proud owner of nine novels and more than hundred stories, the latest being the first volume of his autobiographical novel, "Itibritte Chandal Jiban"(2012). "Itibritte Chandal Jiban" is by far the first autobiographical novel by a Bengali dalit writer. The story is a thrilling and blood chilling discourse!

JS : Would you like to share your childhood memories with us ?

MB : I don't know the exact year as my mother could not specifically mention the date of my birth. My days of hardship started since birth. I was probably born in the year 1950. I came from Barishal, Bangladesh to West Bengal at the age of three. I was in Bankura, Shiromanipur Refugee camp for nearly seven years, since I was three years old. Suddenly one day, the dole given by the government to the refugee camp was stopped by the Government, and the family was compelled to move out to the Ghutiyari Sharif, Gholadoltala Refugee Camp, South 24 Paraganas. My parents lived there till 1969. In 1964 I left home at the age of fourteen in order to

earn a living for my family. I went to New Jalpaiguri and worked in a tea stall. Then I moved on to Assam, Lucknow, Delhi and Allahabad. In 1969 me and my family (my parents, two brothers, two sisters) moved to Jadavpur, Kolkata. In 1971 we moved to Dandakaranya, Paralkot. I shifted to Kolkata in 1973 while my parents kept living in Paralkot for sometime more. In the same year I took up rickshaw-pulling as my occupation near Jadavpur railway station. Both my parents were illiterate. We had no dream for a better tomorrow.

J.S. : When did you go to jail ?

M.B. : In 1975 I was involved in hooliganism in the Jadavpur area. I was arrested and convicted under sections 148, 149 and 307 of the Indian Penal code. I was in jail for two years from 1975 – 1977. A chain of experiences there influenced significantly in my life.

There I met a man who claimed to have turned mad reading Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya's '*Charitrahin*'. It immensely surprised me. I came across various other characters who deeply influenced me. Hearing the sections under which I was imprisoned, one inmate told me that it could amount up to ten years of imprisonment with toil. He went further to suggest that I became literate, so that the tasks assigned by the authorities won't be as dreadful as those assigned to illiterate ones!

The possibility of such long years of imprisonment intimidates me, I expressed my concern to one under trial prisoner saying that I could not imagine how would I spend so many years in the prison, when life was proving to be so boring and frustrating already! In response he pointed out to a banyan sapling on the wall of National Library (whose adjoining Campus was visible from our jail) and asserted : if that sapling could draw its nutrients from those concrete walls, then it is possible to absorb life from within this apparently dismal jail campus too ! One only needs to

search it out !! He then went on to sing the glories of education, which can give life to humans even in most deadening situations – he would share stories of how a character accepted voluntary isolation for years in lieu of a great amount of money, but then he started reading, and how learning helped him out of maddening loneliness, and how he was emancipated to the extent of deliberately breaking the terms of the challenge by leaving the confinement a day before the stipulated time would end and thereby forgoing the prize money, as he had experienced that knowledge had enriched him far more than that awaiting money ever can! All this ignited in me the hunger to learn.

This was a paradigm shift for me! From then on the prison-met started teaching me Bengali alphabets and I practiced them with twigs on the dust and chalk on the floors! In those days they used to buy blood from willing donors. I used to sell my blood for Rs 20/- and buy pen and paper with that. I was in three jails in a span of two years time : Alipore Special Jail, Central Jail and Presidency Jail.

J.S. : What did you do after coming out of jail?

I started pulling rickshaw and rough days followed. One day a lady got on my rickshaw. As I pulled the rickshaw through the streets, I asked her the meaning of the Bengali word “*jijibisha*”. The lady was taken aback and asked me wherefrom I got this word. When I mentioned the source, the lady was surprised to learn that I read ! She then revealed her own identity as **Mahasweta Devi** !! I was awestruck! I immediately pulled out the copy of her book that I was reading from under the passenger’s seat to show her. It was *Agnigarbha*. She offered me to write for her journal *Bartika*.

J.S. : What was Mahasweta Devi’s influence on your life?

M.B.: For me Mahasweta Devi is the creator of rebel characters in her Literature of Revolt. She helped my creativity bloom. My literary career started with my first article getting published in *Bartika* in 1981. It was a very special achievement for me. I remain her affectionate ‘Madan’.

J.S. : What did you write?

M.B.: I started writing Bengali essays, prose and novels. I could not write poems probably because I lacked the faculty of imagination, and hence poetic words to express my thoughts.

J.S. : What were your pseudonyms and why did you use them?

M.B.: Madan, Jijibisha, Kalidash Kathak, and Arun Mitra.

J.S.: Do you want to convey some particular message through your writings?

M.B.: Of course! The social set up that I have lived through is miserable. It must be reformed and made livable with dignity. Humans must become active social reformers.

J.S.: Why did you publish ‘*Itibritte Chandal Jibon*’, the autobiographical novel?

M.B.: The life that I have lived must be shared with many. I have come back from the jaws of death many times. Recently again I was fighting death, and I had a strong feeling that my life-story must be documented in print, or else it will be lost with me. It’s important for people to know that someone survived in such horrid conditions. My writings represent all those people who continue to live in such inhuman circumstances.

J.S.: How much literary value is embedded in your writing?

M.B.: I don't know. It's up to the readers and academic experts to decide!

J.S.: Do you want the tag of a 'Dalit writer'?

M.B.: I'm a Dalit by birth. My literature is to be judged neutrally, without any preconceived estimation.

J.S.: Why do you write about '*Chandal Jibon*'?

M.B. : I'm a Chandal (outcaste) in two ways : a chandal by birth, and *krodha chandal* (having the tremendous rage of a chandal)!

J.S. : Is there a rebel spirit in your writing?

M.B. : Yes. The present society is not benevolent for the masses. Exploitation rules. I am hopeful of a new society which can provide sufficient justice, food, clothing, medical service for all. My literary characters resemble me.

J.S.: What is the condition of your workplace?

M.B. : I face enormous difficulties in my workplace because of my identity of a writer. My thoughts don't match with theirs'. My colleagues often hurl abusive terms at me and create nuisance in the workplace.

J.S.: What are your comments about Prof Meenakshi Mukherjee who was so important in your life?



M.B.: Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee's contribution to *Economic and Political Weekly* (2007), where she voices my works, remains a milestone in my life. She propagated my name and works all over India and in alien shores. Through her article, many realised for the first time that there are Dalit writings even in Bengali.

J.S.: Who are the academicians who worked substantially on you?

M.B.: I am extremely grateful to Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee, Prof. Tutun Mukherjee, Dr. Sayantan Dasgupta and you, Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi for working on me and my writings. I also pay my gratitude to my publishers Manoj Bandopadhyay (Publisher, Priyo Shilpa, Kolkata) and Mr Pranab Chakraborty (Antul Bantul Prakashani, Burdwan).

J.S.: Can literature change society?

M.B.: Yes. It can direct the course of society. It can also inspire many people.

J.S.: What has helped you forgive oppressors of your life?

M.B.: I would like to thank them all. They all have contributed a lot. Their poison has turned out to be *amrit*. All their fruits were benevolent.

J.S.: How do you feel having journeyed from a rickshaw puller to an established writer?

M.B.: People like you love me so much! I take inspiration from all of you. I'm happy. But my struggle is still on. I've tasted, but have still a long way to go.

J.S. : What is your message for the youth?

M.B. :Do not fall in the trap of consumerism! They should be aware of Indian traditions and value system. They are the future of our society.

J.S.: Which writers and personalities have influenced you?

M.B.: I read many Bengali and Hindi writers, and some translated English and Russian works. I like Srilal Shukla for his critical eye and Jajabar for his linguistic choice . I'm a great fan of Mahaswetadevi and have imbibed her rage. My heart has expanded after reading Samaresh Basu and I admire Shankar Guha Neogi for his leadership quality. The *adivasis* have taught me honesty and simplicity.

J.S. What is your immediate wish?

M.B.: Only to write... and write. Nothing more. If my meals become more secure, I can write even more. I want space and time to write. I'll remain grateful if someone can help me in this.

J.S.: Thank you Dada! We all are with you and wish that you soar higher and higher.

M.B. : Thank you for everything!

About the Interviewer:

Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi,(Professor,Dept. of English,Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College ,University of Calcuta,WB) is a poet-academic, and the author of a number of significant publications (**including twenty eight books**) on postcolonial issues, Indian writing in English, Australian literature and linguistics and ELT in reputed journals/magazines in India and abroad. His



doctoral thesis *Indian Novels in English: A Sociolinguistic Study* (pub. 2004) has been reviewed as a welcome contribution to post-colonial studies in different journals including, *Revista de Lenguas para Fines Especificos* (Spain). His articles have appeared in journals like *Across Cover*, *DOST* (The Department of Oriental Studies, University of Turin (Italy)), *Percorsi di Flessibilita Dell’Indian English*, *Hindusthani Innovator*, *Indian Literature*, *Atlantic Literary Review*, *The Visvabharati Quarterly*, *Glimpses* (Ontario, Canada), *Litcritt*, *The Commonwealth Review*, *Contemporary Vibes*, *Labyrinth 'Muse India'* and *'Summer Hill*. His important books include: *The Indian Imagination Of Jayanta Mahapatra* (Hardcover - 2006) ,*Raja Rao The Master & His Moves* (Hardcover - 2007) ,*Indian Legendary Writers In English* (2009) ,*Australian Literature: Identity Rep.& Belonging* (Hardcover – 2007),*The Voice Of India* (2009), *Presentation of Postcolonialism: New Orientations* (back cover comments by Prof. Jasbir Jain and Prof. Bruce Bennet) ,*Basavaraj Naikar: Trends and Techniques* and *Writing as Resistance: Literature of Emancipation* (New Delhi:2011)---a book devoted to dalit writings in India. He has been taken on the editorial/advisory board of thirteen international journals like *Mascara Literary Review* (Australia), *Virtuoso*(Hyderabad),*Cavalcade* (Nigeria), *Pegasus* (Agra), *The Okigbo Review* (Nigeria), *Unheard Melody* , *Parnassus* (RaeBareilly) *Prosopisia* (Ajmer), *Labyrinth*(Gwalior),*Indian Journal of World Literature and Culture* (Bhubaneswar), *IJPCL* (Kerala), *Scholastic International Journal of Language and Literature* (Chennai) and *Reflections* (Tezu). He is the **Vice-President, Guild of Indian English Writers ,Editors and Critics.**

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