

Interview: Jaydeep Sarangi in Conversation with Jatin Bala: An Account of Refugee Dalit Life

Jatin Bala was born on 5th May 1949 in Jessore district of East Bengal. He had faced the violence of Bengal partition in every sense. Crossing over the borders with his family, he spent years shuttling between refugee camps under appalling conditions in West Bengal. He graduated from the University of Calcutta with Bengali Honours in 1970, completed his Masters in Bengali in 1972 and did his B.Ed. in 1975. From his youth, Bala has been active in social service and literary productions. He has made important literary contributions to Bengali Dalit Literature and Refugee Literature. His autobiography *Shikor Cheera Jibon* (Uprooted Life) was published in 2010. He has been one of the editors of the following periodicals since the 1970s — *Ashukh, Balmiki, Mushayera, Chhiyanobbui, Choturtho Duniya, Nikhil Bharat, etc.* He has won literary awards as *Nitish Smriti Sahitya Purashkar, Dabdaho Sahityo Potrika Puroshkar, Kobi Nikhilesh Sahitya Purroshkar, Sahittik Moni Mondal Smriti Puroshkar, etc.*

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JS: What does the word ‘Dalit’ mean to you?

JB: The word Dalit has been etymologically derived from the word ‘dalan’ which according to standard Bengali dictionary means repression, control, defeat, trampling. Dalit thus signifies one who has been repressed, crushed, persecuted, harassed and dominated. Going beyond the strict dictionary meaning, we realize that Dalit also stands for one has been forcefully refused the chanced to grow and in whom lethargy has been deliberately induced. This process naturally involves torture, plunder, rape, murder and persistent ill treatment. And when the perpetrator of it all is not an individual but a group or the social system or the religious machinery, then the process acquires more sinister dimensions and has far reaching impact. Centuries of oppression unleashed in the caste, creed, religion oriented social system of India has led to an inhuman social divide that persists till date.

In other words, Dalit does not signify a particular caste but stands for an awareness of the everyday lived experiences of those human beings belonging to the lowest strata of caste

hierarchy. A knowledge of social sciences helps to understand the root of such prejudiced social behaviour, which is played out through an irrational policy of denial and resistance and culminates in social upheaval. Dalit literature intends to articulate this social, cultural, political and religious oppression perpetrated in this country and emblemizes a fight against untouchability and the resultant socio-economic divide. Awareness of this oppression does not simply manifest itself in torrid descriptions of Dalit life. Rather, it attempts to derive out of these experiences a new value system that would help Dalits to carve out a new social reality. The pain and oppression faced by Dalits has hitherto not found a place in works of literature as the authors themselves have had no first-hand experience of it. Propelled by an awareness of injustice meted out to them, Dalit literary artists are now giving an expression to their experiences aesthetically with the promise of social change, with the hope of making the new generation of Dalits more conscious of their rights. Thus, Dalit literature is more of literary movement of Dalit liberation, a tool for generating a new value system that will bring about social change.

The Dalit litterateurs come from a particular segment of society and have grown up experiencing the hard realities of life. Their works naturally embody realistically different incidents, events, situations and circumstances of Dalit life, projects the injustice meted out to them by the social and temporal milieu. This portrayal is prompted partly by their aesthetic sensibility and to an extent, by their personal intentions of creating a casteless society, of fostering their philosophy of life, and generating awareness about Dalit condition. If Dalit litterateurs are able to generate a certain degree of awareness, then their social responsibility is duly accomplished. The creator and the created merge in their attempt to create a new value system that will hold the key to an impending social revolution. This is what being Dalit means to me.

JS: Would you describe yourself as a Bengali Dalit author?

JB: Of course, I consider myself an author of Bengali Dalit literature. I have always dedicated my creative energies to Bengali Dalit literature, it's my social obligation.

JS: Does Bengali Dalit literature share any common features with Dalit literatures across India?

JB: Yes, Bengali Dalit literature has many commonalities with Dalit literatures of different parts of India. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has brought about a revolutionary change in the outlook of Dalits in course of his life's struggle. The most remarkable outcome of this changed Dalit outlook is the birth of Dalit literature. Dalit literature has made them aware of the way Dalits have borne generational bondage, silently accepted the injustice meted out to them and left them seething in anger. A spirit of protest has made its way into the hearts of Dalits, who now intend to uproot the traditional social institutions. The practice of untouchability is a blemish on humanity and education alone can strike at its roots. Education awakens the unconscious mind and this in turn generates a degree of awareness in life. And this awareness permeates Dalit literature.

Dr. B R Ambedkar, a Dalit, was born in Maharashtra. Marathi Dalit Literature was born as a result of Dr. B R Ambedkar's monumental struggle and his emphasis on education. This Marathi Dalit consciousness crossed linguistic boundaries and made its way into Tamil, Telegu, Kannad, Gujarati and Bengali languages. Bengali Dalit literature is a part of pan Indian Dalit literatures as a spirit of protest unites them.

JS: What is the aim of Dalit literature?

JB: Progressive literature has shoved aside the four fold varna system prevalent in India since ancient times, impelled by the desire of attacking the capitalist economy that has grown in recent times. But it is impossible to sustain an equal social order without destroying the fabric of caste system. Dalit literature has grown out of this realization. It is a widely accepted fact that progressive authors from higher castes have not adequately raised their voice against atrocities of caste. Social persecution and economic exploitation is no doubt harmful but humiliation meted out to human beings for belonging to the lowest strata of caste system, leaves a scar way deeper. Dalit literature is revolutionary attempt, a conscious protest against this hatred and humiliation. It stands for the hopes and aspirations of the exploited many, who now seek a change. Dalit literature aims to completely overthrow the established feudal Brahmanic value system and create in its place a casteless society

If Progressive literature movement aims at the projection of a socialist order, then the appeal of Dalit literature lies in its remarkable life force, in the portrayal of the Dalit way of life,

their painful lived experiences, the denials they face, the resistance they offer and in the creation of an ideology. If one has to fight against the established social order, then an alternate value system pertaining to the Dalit way of life must first be decided upon. This in turn necessitates a paradigm shift – a cultural revolution. Hence, the aim of Dalit literature movement is to facilitate Dalit liberation. Another associated aim of Dalit literature is the creation of a literary circle that will nurture younger talent and train them to work for Dalit liberation. They will usher in a casteless society with one united race inhabiting it – the Indians.

JS: Does your work embody social struggle?

JB: I write about the life that I have lived for all these years, of the experiences of my life. Most of the characters appearing in my stories and novels are people I have met at some point or the other. Their pain and their sorrow, the problems in their day to day life, their attempt to bring about social uplift happens to be the subject matter of my works.

There are two different worlds in our country India. One inhabited by the higher castes and the other withered half in which the helpless untouchables are to be found. The Dalits of India are by far the most exploited, persecuted and neglected. They are Dalits in every aspect of life, be it political, social, economic or cultural. Dalit literature is not experimentation on perspective. It has brought about a pioneering change in our mental landscape, an innovative aesthetic sensibility, a new philosophy, a projection of elements not hitherto found in literature.

Again, literature is the finest manifestation of the subtle sensibilities of mankind. It has always played a significant role in bringing about a paradigm shift in society. It is an undeniable fact that Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* influenced greatly the course of the French Revolution. Similarly, in attempting to overthrow the institutions of a feudal Brahmanic society, the role played by Dalit literature cannot be overlooked. Every conscious citizen of India is aware of the way Dalit literature movement has silently and peacefully tried to pave the way for the creation of a society where caste creed religion will have no role to play. And it involves rigorous struggle. It is this social struggle that figures in the world of my short stories and novels.

JS: When did you start writing?

JB: You see I've had to see the darker side of life since childhood. Just think of it – a boy, just about four and a half years of age, walking into a refugee camp in India with his brothers, having

lost both parents to the violence of partition. I was uprooted, I was a Dalit – simply to survive I had to work as a farmhand in a field, very hard work. The rest of my childhood years and early youth, from 1954 to 1963, I spent in the dimly lit tents of the refugee camps in Hoogly district – Kunti Transit Camp, Bhandarhati Work Side Camp, Balagarh camp. Life at a refugee camp was not easy and added to it was the physical abuse that was meted out to a child labour. The day I had fallen to the ground with a head load of hay, I had sworn that I would educate myself and that was the day I wrote my first letters. The pain and helplessness of living in a refugee camp worsened in the coming years. I have had to come to terms with tremendous humiliation and pain that it kind of became my food for thought, prompted me to put it down in words. My literary career began in 1974 but there has been a period of inactivity of almost ten years when my wife passed away.

JS: What kind of work is *My Uprooted Life*?

JB: *My Uprooted Life* is a work of history from below, a portrayal of refugee life. No one had ever chosen to write about the experiences of Dalits, who were the worst victims of Partition of India. From 1954 to 1963, I have lived in three refugee camps one after another – Kunti Transit Camp, Bhandarhati Work Side Camp, Balagarh Refugee Camp. The day to day realities of life at a refugee camp has been revealed in this novel. In this regard, my autobiographical novel is an unparalleled contribution. The Partition of India has left seething wounds that bleed to this day. The destruction wrought out by Partition is still relevant as crores of people living in the Indian subcontinent bear the scar. As their representative, I've tried to fulfill my social obligation.

The different phases and stages in the evolution of Indian subaltern Studies describing the endless struggle in the Dalit way of life, finds a faithful reflection in this novel of mine. As a matter of fact, the universality of any work of art lies in the way it can project realistically the different facets of the life of the times. And this realistic portrayal is made possible by the aesthetic sensibility of the creative artist which is born out of his life's experiences, his social awareness and his philosophy of life. The endless strife, the eternal struggle, the day to day resistance, the hopes and aspirations of millions of Dalits who are creating history anew, have found an expression in this autobiographical novel of mine.

Memoirs are a new area in Indian Dalit literature movement. It has never been so avidly read and discussed in any literature of the world. In certain languages, memoirs are recognized as

a work of literature but it has gained popularity more as a social document. But Dalit memoirs are qualitatively very different from these. Indian Dalit litterateurs have used their memoir as a primary tool of expression. Hence, their memoirs have become fiercely personal record of injustice meted out to them. The life lived by the creative artist thus becomes the sole subject of creation. My autobiography *My Uprooted Life* belongs to this tradition of Dalit memoirs. It's contribution is as unique as that of Ananda Yadav's *Zombi*, Daya Pawar's *Baluta* and P I Sonakamble's *Athavaninche Pakshi*.

JS: Have you been influenced by any specific community or individual?

JB: I have seen my house set on fire right before my eyes. To save our lives, we hid behind thickets all night. Everything we owned had been looted by rioters. Reduced to indigence, we crossed the border on foot and took shelter in a refugee camp of the Government of India. It was the most painful experience. We, the uprooted Dalits, were the worst victims of Partition. The violence of Partition has left an indelible impression on me, then an orphan child who had lost both parents in the course of the last few days. When the Government of India decided that it would no longer maintain the Bhandarhati Workside Camp, government agents unleashed ruthless torture on unarmed helpless refugees. I have seen it all. With the wounds of partition still seething in my heart, I was rendered homeless again. I also happen to witness the camp at Bhandarhati being demolished to the ground but how can I wipe off the horrifying memories of the bygone days. It has become a part of me and I'll carry it around till my death. The ill treatment meted out in three refugee camps, one after another, haunts me to this day. I somehow feel that the trauma of displacement of crores of human beings have compelled me to write the novel *My Uprooted Life*.

My dear friend, a self educated man and an eminent writer, Manoranjan Byapari has described painstakingly the harsh reality of Dalit life in *A Chandal's Life*. In this, he has given priority to the events and incidents of his personal life. In contrast, in *My Uprooted Llife*, the individual family exists in the background while descriptions and analysis of life at three refugee camps is given preeminence. The different incidents that shocked me while living in these refugee camps have directly made its way to the pages of my novel. I've mentioned earlier that I'd witnessed helpless refugees being tortured when Bahandarhati Workside Camp was to be shut down and its inmates were to be sent to other refugee camps. I have written about it. There

were some who did not want to go out of Bengal to be rehabilitated at the Balagarh camp at Dandakaranya and demanded that the government give them a cash compensation for it. Hoping that their demand will be met, the refugees embarked on hunger strike and I got directly involved in it. Even this is to be found in the fictional world of *My Uprooted Life*. Naturally my autobiographical novel stands out for being more of realistic portraiture of the larger Dalit condition than a projection of the plight of an individual Dalit.

The Partition of India has been particularly tragic for the Namasudras. The Partition of a country does not simply mean political or geographical division. It has far reaching impact. It has led to an abrupt division of the social customs and cultural traditions of the Namasudras, their language and their way of life. As direct fallout of Partition, Namasudras are now scattered all over the subcontinent. The problems they faced, the resistance they offered, the way they were grief stricken figures in the pages of my novel.

It is the story of the times in which I have grown older, of the plight of the larger community to which I belong. It is still relevant as many Namasudras, victims of Partition, are homeless to this day (*My Uprooted Life*, pg 36). My life and social reality have influenced greatly the course of my work.

JS: Why do we get to see glimpses of refugee life in your works?

JB: Dr. Sarangi, I have spent a protracted period of time in three refugee camps. Those camps may well have been demolished but horrifying memories of those days still haunt me. I will carry it with me forever. That's why you find it in my creative writing.

JS: Do you support Dr. B. R Ambedkar's social revolution?

JB: Yes, I whole heartedly support Dr. B R Ambedkar's social revolution. An organized and revolutionary attempt to bring about a paradigm shift in social, economic and political spheres has led to the birth of Dalit literature. It is inextricably linked to the hopes and aspirations of those human beings who are victims of an inhuman social, economic and cultural exploitation meted out to them as untouchables. The significance of the role played by Dalit literature or the importance of Dalit studies as a discipline cannot be assessed from the view point of an educationist or a litterateur alone. It needs to be evaluated on the basis of infrastructures made available to Dalits. Both Buddha and Mahatma Phule had protested against atrocities of caste

system. Their teachings are an inspiration for Dalits till date. But if we are to neutrally judge the historical birth of a new protest literature, then it is Ambedkar who stands out as the proponent. His dedication, his attitude towards life, his uncompromising struggle to acquire what rightly belonged to him, is inspiring. He has made it clear that this should be the aim of every Dalit. Dr. B R Ambedkar's philosophy of life thus continues to be the source of inspiration for all Dalit writers. I am an unflinching supporter of Dr. B R Ambedkar's social revolution.

JS: What are the other novels you have written?

JB: I am more into poetry, short stories, well researched non fictional prose articles. So, I have not written too many novels. Besides, until recently I was holding an important government office. It left me with little time to pursue my literary dream. My life, too, was not easy. In all, I have authored three novels. Two have been published in book form and one has been serialized in a Bengali periodical. I still have material that is to be put together as novels but I am yet to get down to it.

JS: Why is Dalit literature not a part of university syllabus? What, do you think, should be done in this regard?

JB: Caste based atrocities are perpetrated so subtly in Bengal that it is hardly discernable. In different states of India, Dalits are being tortured and killed in the open but Dalit studies have been welcomed into the university syllabus. A very different social consciousness permeates Bengal and as a result Dalit literature does not figure in the syllabus. As a matter of fact, the Bengal Academy has not yet constituted an award to recognize the contributions of Bengali Dalit litterateurs.

There are different castes and creeds in India and their cultures and traditions are very different. Literature is a mirror of social reality. If society at large has to be made aware of the social and cultural traditions of the Dalits, then Dalit literature has to find a place in university syllabus. As traditional literature has so far confined itself to brahmanic values prevalent in society, Dalit literature has been, naturally, excluded from university curriculum.

Those who are positioned at the higher echelons of society, who are responsible for the perpetuation of established social values, are unaware of the realities of human life. Describing themselves as progressive and modernists, they are catering through literature anything but true

social reality. The life lived by Dalits in Bengal in particular and in India at large, is very different from the way it is portrayed in modern Bengali literature. It is a make belief world. In modern Bengali literature, nothing has ever been written about the problems in the life of Dalits and about how it can be taken care of. Whatever has been written is a view from above, from a distance, without in depth knowledge of their life. It captures the sympathy and empathy of the middle class as if they are going out of their way to create space for Dalit literature. Thus, modern Bengali literature focuses on the life of a selected few and this militates against the very spirit of democracy. How many modern Bengali authors even try to portray realistically the Dalit way of life in their poems, short stories, novels and plays?

So, I appeal to the universities of India to include Dalit literature and dalit studies in its syllabus. Or else a part of our social history will remain forever unexplored. Literature mirrors social reality and if one is to be aware of society as a whole, then Dalit literature has to be included in the syllabus. Besides, it is their democratic right of every citizen to know society in its entirety and no one should deprive them. Hence, I appeal once again to include Dalit literature in university syllabus across India.

JS: What, according to you is the future of Dalit literature?

JB: Dalit literature movement will continue till such time when a paradigm shift is brought about in the present social system which is divided along caste, religious and cultural lines. The next generation of Dalits would be more conscious of their rights and hence would launch a more fatal offensive. Meanwhile new talents would come forward who would enrich the Dalit literature movement in a variety of ways. The effect of sustained attacks on traditional institutions has begun to show in Dalit mentality which is reflected in Dalit literatures across India. Besides, the frontiers of Dalit literatures are growing steadily. Dalit experiences are being written about in different languages of the country. Thus, Dalit literature has a bright future ahead, beckoning participants to contribute and enrich the Dalit literature movement.

JS: Would you like to say anything about modern Bengali literature?

JB: Dalit literature movement has had its share of opposition. The non-Dalit group of authors has, as expected, always opposed the growth of Dalit literature. Again, the lack of awareness among Dalit authors, the high degree of illiteracy and the lack of unity among Dalits at large

have contributed as negatively to the development of Dalit literature. Besides, as Dalit literature does not get adequate media coverage, many potential authors do not get to see the light of day. There are some who have still managed to go beyond the narrow confines of traditional literature and tried to give a realistic expression of the Dalit way of life. In fact, that is the true test of Dalit literature.

Those who actively contribute to Dalit literature are Dalits by birth. Two such literary artists who write literature from the perspective of the Dalits are Manoranjan Byapari and myself, Jatin Bala.

Manoranjan Byapari is an eminent writer and a self educated man. He, too, has lived in refugee camps. At some later point in life, he has earned a living as a rickshaw puller. His autobiographical novel has found wide acclaim.

As for me, I have lived in three refugee camps since the age of four and a half, silently witnessed great atrocities of caste, worked as a farm hand in fields to feed myself, studied in the railway platform. *My Uprooted Life* is the first volume of my memoirs. The experiences of the later years are more horrifying.

Unlike the two of us, litterateurs dedicated to Dalit literature have not come up. I hope that in years to come individuals with great life experiences and armed with a subtle aesthetic sensibility will come forward to enrich Dalit literature. Recently, a Bengali periodical, 'Dalit Voice' had published a list of a hundred and fifty Dalit writers. However, most of them are those who simply contribute regularly to Dalit magazines but lack dedication to Dalit literature and in depth knowledge of Dalit studies. As a result, the anthology that is published is qualitatively of a low literary merit. Many potentially good authors are staying away from Dalit literature movement while those who are actively participating are not very dedicated to it. The light of consciousness has not penetrated their vision. I just hope that the coming years will bring about a positive change.

JS: Who are the critics of Dalit literature?

JB: Dalit literature does not have a body of well informed critics. Here again, it has suffered greatly. In recent times, non-Dalit intelligentsia has written certain articles about Manoranjan Byapari's memoir and at the time of the publishing of my 'Dalit Literature Movement', there had been some discussions on it. But quantitatively, it's very low. The only literary circle that has

developed in the course of the last twenty years is one led by the efforts of Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi. He has brought Dalit literature to the forefront. I congratulate you, Dr.Sarangi. Please continue working for Dalit Litertaure.

JS: Thank you! May your pen write more...

(Translated by Suranajana Banerjee, Research Scholar, University of Calcutta, Kolkata)