



Research Paper

“Everyone is born equal, then why there is discrimination in the Society”: An interview with Manohar Mouli Biswas

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Manohar Mouli Biswas is a stalwart in the Dalit literary domain and his contribution to the Dalit literature, particularly in Bangla Dalit literature is of immeasurable value. His autobiography *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* (2015) is a significant contribution in the field of Bangla Dalit literature. Biswas has written both prose and poetry. His collection of poetry are *Ora Amar Kobita* (They are my poem) (1985), *Bibikto Uthone Ghor* (My House in the Separated Countryard) (1991), *Poetic Rendering as Yet Unborn* (2010), *The Wheel will Turn* (2014) and others. The collection of his short story *Krishna Mrittikar Manush* (Man of Black Soil) was published in 1988. *Dalit Sahiter Digboloy* (All-around of Dalit Literature) (1992), *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* (The outline of Dalit literature) (2007) are some of the significant pieces of writings in the field of Dalit literature. Biswas has played a major role in carrying forward the Dalit literature in Bangla. Biswas along with Shyamal Kumar Paramanik edited the book *Shatabarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (Hundred Years' Bangla Dalit Literature) (2011) that covers a span of one hundred years' Dalit literature in Bangla from 1911 to 2010.

This interview was originally conducted in Bangla at Manohar Mouli Biswas's residence in Kolkata on 2nd April 2022. I heartily thank Manohar Mouli Biswas for answering all my queries.

Question: First of all, I would like to know Manohar Mouli Biswas as a Dalit writer.

Manhar Mouli Biswas: First let me say that I entered the world of education from one of the most marginalized places in the society. After studying, I naturally felt that the marginalization that I saw, the suffering of people, and the hardships that my family members suffered was immense. It created a big story in my life which was needed to be revealed. After my education, I was employed in the Department of Telecommunication in the all-India sector towards the end of the 1960s. I moved to Nagpur, Maharashtra on the basis of that job. While staying in Nagpur, I noticed that the papers there, especially the English papers were publishing articles on Dalit writings in Maharashtra. So that was the turning point. The term 'Dalit', people who are oppressed, marginalized by the Indian caste system, also caught my attention. The initiative and effort of the Dalit writers inspired me that can't we the Bengalis do a similar movement? Keeping that in mind, we started the movement of Dalit literature herein Bengal and by holding small meetings in various places we created a connection with isolated writers' group. We started writing in a magazine called "Otoeb". In 1992, a girl student of the Anthropology Department of Vidyasagar University, Chuni Kotal had to commit suicide because of the caste discrimination. She also had a good relationship with Mahasweta Devi, a famous writer at that time. She also protested the death of Chuni Kotal. We have also repeatedly protested at Vidyasagar University's main campus that this teacher should be removed from service. Keeping the incident in our mind, we created an organization called Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in 1992 to spread the Dalit literary movement among the people of Bengal following the model of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. The Dalit Sahitya Sangstha was created in order to expand the united struggle to stand against the oppression. We organize district conference of Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in almost every district of West Bengal. We organize two-day events on 24th and 25th December to remember Periyar Ramaswamy, a revolutionary Dalit community person who died on 24th December and on 25th December to celebrate the anniversary of burning of *Manusmriti* by Ambedkar.

I have been a soldier of the West Bengal Dalit Movement since its inception and sometimes serving as general secretary. We set up a small book stall in College Street, Kolkata and named it "Chaturtha Duniya" (the fourth world). We got many people with us who accepted our movement and supported us. We Dalit people have been protesting against the social system, caste system of this country and will continue to do so till it ends. Thus, Dalit literature and its movement started in Bengal. I came in contact with several Dalit writers from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamilnadu due to my all-India transferable job. After establishing a relationship with them,

I felt that Bangla Dalit literature failed to reach out at pan-Indian perspective due to lack of translation. So, I started publishing an English magazine named “Dalit Mirror” from 1996 to project what is being written in Bengal and published 17 issues of “Dalit Mirror”.

Q. Please tell us something about your life before and after partition when you were child.

MMB: The country was partitioned in my childhood. I was born in 1943. That is, when I was four years old. There was discussion at home that the country will be partitioned. There will be a separate country for Hindus and a separate country for the Muslims. Hindus will not stay in the country where we live, Hindus will go to Hindustan. But nobody cared about the marginal people who may have very small land to cultivate or other means of livelihood. Some of them were fishermen, farmers and others. where will they go? When the country was partitioned, some people tried to come to India, but many people stayed there due to poverty. They do not find the reason why the country is partitioned. To be honest, they were not communal; they did not suffer from the poison of communalism. After learning that Hindus cannot stay in East Pakistan, once my father came to India, but didn't like the place and went back to East Pakistan. I started my education in East Pakistan and I believe I was a good student. In class five scholarship examinations, I stood first in Khulna-Jessore range. In 1961, I passed the ISC examination from Bagerhat Prafullachandra College but then there was a severe disaster in Bangladesh. In such a situation, I came to West Bengal and I went to my relatives and I saw that they were in some kind of dire poverty, so it was almost impossible for me to study staying in their place. I remember I took twenty rupees from a relative and took admission in college. At first, I studied physics there but later realized that it was not possible for me to buy those costly books. So I joined the pass course in 1963 and I passed in B.Sc Pure Science from Calcutta University. Those college days were terrible days in my life. I used to live in one of distant relative's home; they used to earn daily wages, they didn't get food themselves, how could they manage me? It was almost a miracle for me to pass from that miserable life and in 1963 I joined as a school teacher of Mathematics and then I could manage my own daily expenses then applied for an all-India job and after getting an all-India level job I moved to Nagpur.

Q. When did you start writing?

MMB: I feel writing is an inherent quality of mine because when I was studying in the school in class two-three, I used to write poetry. An impulse used to work within me. I used to try with a pen to write the description of the rain. I used to try to see how those plants in nature are standing still. If I can describe it and I tried to describe it in my own words in my childhood and when I was in school, I wrote for a new magazine there and also in college. If these all count, I started writing poetry since my childhood.

Q. When this writing got converted into Dalit writing?

MMB: I experienced division and discrimination in the society at very early age. After growing up, I understood the reason; I realized that the Brahminical state system does not think about equality. It will keep a particular group of people happy and educate them. Those culprits have forced many people into torture and want to live happily and peacefully by exploiting them. So, all these thoughts and realization about the society forced me to write the poetry that I referred to earlier that I used to try to describe the rain, I used to describe the plants, and I used to describe how the wet crow is sitting on the branch of the tree. But as I grew older, the beauty of nature goes away, replaced by the plight of people. I try to find the root of such exploitation and discrimination. All my six books of essays, for instance one of essays for example *Asprisser Diary* (Diary of an Untouchable) shows the pain of the untouchables and that is the subject of my writing.

Q. What message do you convey through your writing?

MMB: The message I provide through my writing is that everyone is born equal, then why there is discrimination in the society? The social system and very particularly the caste system of Hindu society is the root cause of the discrimination. It has become a mechanism to make the lower castes people a servile class. The caste system in Hindu society is made in such shrewd way that marks some people as untouchables and send them out of the society. Those upper caste dominating people have sent the lower caste people under oppression and by exploiting them they are living a happy life. These lower caste people, the hardship of them, to find the root cause of people's suppression preoccupying my thought and through my writing I try to portray their life.

Q. What were the barriers that you faced in your career as a Dalit writer?

MMB: Many people think Bengali society is a very open-minded society in which probably everyone is treated equally. A terrible misconception. I feel the pain of the Dalits and why they remain in such plight. Kolkata book market is probably the biggest book market in Asia and there are thousands of publishers there. Yet, I went door to door with my book to publish. Some publishers directly asked my name. As soon as they know my name, they can understand whether this person is an upper caste or not and they rejected my book. There was no publisher at that time at least in Kolkata market to publish the writings of the Dalits. Then we made an

organization named Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha, keeping in mind the literature of Black writers in America, how they depicted their suffering and pain. The Black writers in America were treated with a lot of generosity. Compared to the Dalits, we also saw the history of Aborigine writers in Australia who opened their own shops and published books from there because no publisher of the mainstream publishing house published their writings. It is the same story in our case. We set up Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha with a publishing counter “Chaturtha Duniya” as our own and reclaimed our own space. We opened a small shop on College Street. We eight writers bought that shop for ten thousand rupees at that time and since then all our books have come out from “Chaturtha Duniya”. Later, after seeing the sale of our books, two book companies and different publishers expressed their desire to publish our books. Sales of our books are high. People want to know about the marginal writers. At present publishers are interested in publishing our books. But we don't go to those publishers for publishing our books. We ourselves publish our books.

Q. Whose writings inspired you the most? What is the role of Ambedkar in your life?

MMB: It was no doubt Ambedkar whose writings have shaped my thoughts. I thoroughly discussed this in one of my books titled *An interpretation of Dalit literature aesthetic theory and movement through the lens of Ambedkarism*. In fact, Dalit literature is not possible without the understanding of Ambedkar and Jyotibha Phule.

Q. When do you think that you come to the lime light?

MMB: I am still not very confident that I have made a place in the reading community. But gradually the readership grew. I have given lectures in many universities like Delhi University, Presidency University, Jadavpur University, Hyderabad University. I think all these are responsible for my identity as a Dalit writer.

Q. How do you see the Dalit Sahitya Academy that has recently been established?

MMB: Dalit Sahitya Academy has been established by Mamata Banerjee and generously funded by West Bengal Govt. I am a part of it and its chairman Manoranjan Byapari is like my brother. I hope the academy will turn down the Brahminical supremacy and project Dalits and their lives.

Q. Who are Dalits according to you?

MMB: Dalits in India are currently Scheduled Caste people. They are Dalits and it also has a historical place. The Simon Commission came to India in 1928. When the Simon Commission came, they did the social studies of India and after doing that they saw that people were terribly marginalized here due to the caste system and they commented that marginalized people should be uplifted. And they should be given reservation facility for their own improvement. Simon Commission published the list of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, they also gave the reservation in politics as well as in education for admissions in schools and colleges. Many people think that they were given the reservation by the current government, but they were given by the British and based on the Simon Commission. The People who are enjoying The Reservation Facility in the society they are the Dalits. Now that phenomenon has become a little bigger. It has become big in the sense tribal people are enjoying facilities now even the other backward communities are also enjoying the reservation facilities, and that's why this place has become a little bigger but in the real sense the word Dalit that we are talking about of Dalit literature movement that was translation of what Simon Commission called the Depressed Classes and the first translation was done by Gangadhar Pantwane, a professor of Aurangabad University, who wrote the first called the Depressed Classes as Dalit in the journal called “Ashmita Darshan”. Nowadays we read many definitions where everyone is included as Dalit even if I go to Sharankumar Limbale or Dalit Panther Movement there, they write that any people who are economically backward or suppressed community are also considered as Dalit.

Q. What is your view on Dalit literature?

MMB: It's the creation of the dalits, focused by Dalit themselves in their own perspectives.

Q. Do you think non-Dalit writers can write Dalit literature?

MMB: One can be sympathetic but can't be empathetic. So sympathetic writings cannot be considered as Dalit writing. I don't think non-Dalit writers can write Dalit literature. For instance, Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* cannot be termed as Dalit literature. I would say it won't be because Manik Bandyopadhyay didn't take a boat to the Padma River and he doesn't know how those boatmen live. What can be written through imagination is sympathetic, it is not empathetic. It may be close to the reality, but it doesn't touch the reality.

Q. What is the position of Bengali Dalit literature in India's Dalit literature now?

MMB: If we judge the status of Bengali Dalit literature as a whole, then even if the name Dalit literature is not given, the writings of Dalit in Bangla began since long ago. You may not have seen my book *Sataborsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya*. I have written about 100 Dalit writers from 1911 to 2010 and the Dalit literature during the Pala reign, if the Charyapad is taken, it says "Nagar Bahire dombi Tohari Kuriya/ Soh Sohjo Brahman Naria." So according to that Brahmins do not go to the house of a Sudra, if they go their caste will die. So, the caste-based system in Charyapad was written by the poets during the Pala kingdom, thousands of years ago. From that point of view, even if it was not called Dalit literature, but Dalit people wrote their own words during that time also.

Q. Why do you think we find comparatively less number of Dalit writers in West Bengal than that of Maharashtra?

MMB: We get relatively less but actually some people here still have a lot of indifference about Dalit identity and they don't write as a Dalit. Here about Dalit identity, if we take Advaita Mallavarman's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (Titas is the name of a River). He wrote about the Dalits but at that time this term Dalit Literature was not there. But now uncountable Dalit writings are coming.

Q. What is your reaction towards the translation of your book?

MMB: I am satisfied by the translator and my English book *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*. Those who translated were very skilled and tried to understand each word first and then worked on it. I am satisfied with my translated works. At least for my books I can say.

Q. If you say something about your upcoming books?

MMB: Recently I submitted a manuscript to Dalit Sahitya Academy. I have submitted many articles; probably twenty of them will be published as a book. From Dalit Sahitya Academy because they promised me that they would publish my book, so I submitted the essays that I had and some wonderful essays are there. Revolutionary all articles but when will it come out let's see. I named that book *Dalit Sahitya Sangskriti Naribad O Bostubad*. By 'boostubad' (materialism) I have worked on materialism and charbak which no one has done.