



“An organisation for Dalits was my vision”: An interview with Manoranjan Byapari

Interview by

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Manoranjan Byapari, a vibrant personality in the realm of Bangla Dalit literature, never had a formal education; he started to read at the age of twenty four when he was in prison. A sudden encounter with Mahasweta Devi, who came to sit on his rickshaw, helped Byapari to start his journey as a writer. He is highly acclaimed for his autobiography *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2014) which was translated by Sipra Mukherjee as *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2018). Currently, he has about twenty books to his credit and has won over sixty awards including The Hindu Literary Prize, the Writer of the Year, Bangla Academy etc. Mr. Byapari, now is the chairman of Dalit Sahitya Academy in Bengal. Moreover, recently he has also been elected as an MLA from Balagarh Assembly Constituency in West Bengal legislative Assembly Elections 2021.

This interview was originally conducted in Bangla during Manoranjan Byapari's visit to Ravindra Bhavan, Payradanga, Nadia on 7th February 2021. I heartily thank Manoranjan Byapari for answering all the queries.

Question: Tell me about yourself. About Manoranjan Byapari, the writer and Manoranjan Byapri, the man.

Manoranjan Byapari: First of all, there is a mistake in the question. I have been called a writer, but I am a *Lekhowari*. The way of my life is messy and random. I wake up in the morning and run for a while, else the sugar holds me. Then, I write for some time. After that, I eat and take rest. If there is any meeting or seminar in the evening, I have to go out. I cannot write regularly. Only once in my life, I got a chance. A gentleman took responsibility of my rice and pulses for the period. It was a precondition that in those three years, I would have to finish writing a novel sitting in his office. I used to write from 8 am to 8 pm. I wrote two books in that





one year. These two books are *Matua Ek Mukti Sena* (2014) (Matua is a Liberation Army) and *Je Kotha Itibritte Nei* (2018) (That which is not in My Autobiography). Now I write when I get time. Since the establishment of Dalit Sahitya Academy, my time for creative writing has been greatly reduced. I have found that I can reach to my target audience much faster and more actively by saying it directly than through writing. Many people do not read or cannot read. But, I can get my message reach to people quickly by communicating through speech.

Q. What message do you want to communicate?

MB: My writings, my speeches, jail journey, my political beliefs, behind everything only one aim was there and it is still the same today- it is to destroy this Brahminical society. If we cannot build a new society, we want to create at least a space on which people can stand equally.

Q: How your prison days shaped your writing?

MB: When I was in prison. I met a person in jail who used to believe in Socrates. Socrates was such a person who asked so called wise people questions in the streets which they could not answer. So it was his game. He used to say that Socrates is my 'Guru' (Master).

He became a prisoner because of cheating. He used to find the weaknesses in men. You need brain to be a cheater. He used to sit near the window and looked at the outside of the jail. The National Library could be seen from the window of the cell. He told me to look the outside of the jail and asked me "what did you see?" After looking, I said that I could not see anything. Then he pointed out that we have three eyes. The third one is the mind's eye which should be sharpened. One needs to see the unseen. If one can do it, he will win over the whole world. So, that was an eye opener for me. He taught me how to read and write.

When I got out of jail, I decided to pull rickshaw for my survival. But books became my habit. I asked Mahasweta Devi, who one day sat on my rickshaw, what the word "Jijibisha" means? She informed me that the word means survival. After that I published one of my writings in a journal of Mahasweta Devi, named "Bartika" and she got interested in my writing and in this way my career started as a writer.

Q. Why do you write?

MB: I write, because I cannot to kill. A woman with a 3-4 years old daughter is working for food. Some rogue people, while waiting for the mother to leave the house, entered the house, raped the girl and brutally killed her. In Maharashtra, a girl was stabbed to death with 27 needles in her vagina and they enjoyed the ordeal. If, I could find all these evil people, I would kill them. A thirsty man walking on the road, he saw that there was a well and a bucket. So, he drew water



from the well and drank the water. Only because of this, that person was beaten on his palm with red hot rod. I want to kill them mercilessly if I get a chance. But I cannot. So I write.

Q. What is your view on Dalit literature?

MB: Dalit literature is the written form of our social thinking, and a form of activism. He who cannot read, there is no need to force him to learn to read books. But he can hear the story and become aware. Literature is the subject of the educated people; to us it is an instrument to make people aware of the whole society. We need Dalit literature in order to make people conscious and to claim equality.

Singing our sorrows is not our literature. Our literature is the literature of protest and resistance. Fire will come out. We want food, clothing, shelter, medical care and respect. We want equal rights and for this my pen will roll and they become my subject for writing.

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

MB: Since the time of Charyapad, the people of the lower castes have expressed their displeasure against this caste system in India. I once worked as a cook. I cooked in a marriage ceremony, food was good, everyone ate and praised, but the son-in-law of that house recognised that I was actually a Namasudra. There was another person was with me named, Dukhe. He was also from lower caste. We did not get a single penny for cooking the food in that marriage ceremony, rather we were humiliated. The pain that I did not get the money for my work, only because of my birth. At that time, I was not physically well and have been suffering from tremendous back pain. Due to that I lost my job and there was no money. My only hope was from the remuneration of cooking. And I was denied that. Can a Non-Dalit writer write about this pain of mine? Has he (a non-dalit writer) suffered from the same experience? Only those who have suffered such pain can explain.

Dalit Sahitya and Dalit Sahitya Academy is only for the Dalits. But being a mere member of Dalit society doesn't mean that your writings are a part Dalit literature. The poet Binay Majumdar is a Dalit by birth, but his poetry has nothing to do with Dalit life. We are not calling him a Dalit poet.

Q. What is your view on Brahmanism?

MB: Everyone deserves equal opportunity. Brahmanism does not accept this. Any other country does not have this caste system. But this is also true; many Brahmins in our Hindu society do not follow Brahmanism. In our fight against caste system, we have got so many Brahmin friends also by our side.





Q. What is the role of Mahasweta Devi in your career as a writer?

MB: The role of Mahasweta Devi towards me is that, she taught me how to write. This is true. She published one of my writings also. But later, she did not help me. If she did, then my fight would have been much easier. She could have published my writing in any magazine. Or if she told some publisher, they would have printed my book. But she did not. But even though she didn't help, she gave me the start. If the apple didn't fall near Newton, he could not have been a scientist; likewise without Mahasweta Devi, I also couldn't have been a writer.

After my article was published in "Bartika", people could not believe that it was written by someone who never went to school. Readers started asking for my writings and I got acquainted with the readers. It helped a lot. From a hateful and humiliated life, people's attitude changed towards me after the publication of my writings. They started talking to me with respect.

Q. Whose writings inspired you the most? How those books helped you to become a writer?

MB: I got inspiration from four writers. I learned a lot from them and then added something of my own, from my own life and tried to write whatever I can.

The first is of course Mahasweta Devi; I have taken the wrath, the wrath equal to the indestructible wrath of the Sun. Such passion come only when you have love for the Dalit and oppressed people of the country. The very next is Binay Mukhopadhyay. I have learnt how to use words – words that have multidimensional meaning. How to combine one word with another. In Mukhopadhyay's writing the whole narrative becomes a poem. I have learnt the use of heart from Samaresh Basu. He was a large hearted man and his writings reflect that large heartedness. He poured so much love on each character of his narrative. I have learnt oblique view from Shrilal Shukla's writings. How to see a thing from the opposite direction. Shukla speaks one thing but means something other. For example, if I say, a boy is very good at studying and that's why he has been in the same class for three years. What does that actually mean? I have learnt that kind of satire from him.

Q. Tell us something about your writing style.

MB: I write about my life – it's full of fact, less fantasy. It is less aesthetic and that become the style of my writing. This is the reason; there is no similarity of my writings with other writers. Through my writing, I want to convey my message to my readers. I don't need circumlocutory difficult words. Before holding the pen, I always remember why I should take the toil of writing.





For me, there is no need to write if I do not want to communicate with my readers about my life and the sufferings of life. I don't feel the urge to write romantic literature, other writers have written a lot. I write in my own way, in my own style, to my own goal.

Q. What was the reaction of the people at the beginning of your writing career?

MB: My writings were not published in the beginning just because I am a Dalit. That's why later when I sent my writing with my name as "Madan Dutta", it was published: interesting – isn't it? Although, I didn't receive money for this publication. I have been always inspired by a small group of readers. Unless and until my writings were translated into English, there was that small group of readers. Nowadays, that scenario is totally different.

Q. Whose philosophy influenced you most?

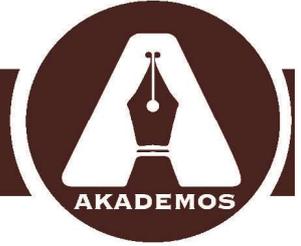
MB: Without the philosophy of Babasaheb Ambedkar, no dalit writing is possible. So, of course it is Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule. We have to learn from them. It is unfortunate that Ambedkarism has failed in India – but his philosophy will not die. It will inspire so many people from different socio-cultural background. Marxism also has failed in India.

The mistake of Marxism was that it failed to acknowledge the casteism that exists in social structure of India. It presumes that those who are born upper castes only possess the quality of leadership. But this is not the case. In case of Ambedkarite philosophy, it stresses on and given importance to the issues of social respect of people, but not to the economic aspect. We want equal rights in terms of respect as well as equality in economic terms. They did not give much importance to it. We have to fight against the Brahmanism. We have to fight against capitalism, patriarchy. So, not one particular –ism is important; if you want, you can use all – Ambedkarism, Gandhism, Marxism – whatever.

Q. Do you think that Bangla Dalit literature can take the shape of a movement like that happened in Maharashtra or in Uttar Pradesh?

MB: The literature enriches and nourishes the movement, and the movement enriches and nourishes the literature. Though Bangla Dalit literature is not a proper movement, but it is very important as literature. It makes people aware and it is this awareness that we want initially. It will take its own course.

Q. Why the Dalit Movement did not take a proper shape in Bangla? What was the reason? Though dalit writings in Bengal was of very early origin, yet.



MB: The emergence of the Dalit assertion and Dalit consciousness, in today's sense of the term, formulated by the people of Bengal only after Maharashtra. Even Ambedkar has a close association with the Dalits of Bengal. He was elected from Bengal. Then why there is no movement here? Why did we go backwards?

The reason is partition. The partition of the country was pre-planned. The English had imagined it beforehand. Whatever may be the cause of partition, whatever conspiracy was there for partition- one thing I must point out that as a consequence of the partition, our power (Unity of the Dalit community) was greatly reduced. In the united Bengal, Ambedkar was an icon of the Dalit community. With Ambedkar in front, the whole India was going towards a new direction and the people from all sections of Bengal was a strong supporter of him. Ambedkar was deliberately defeated to prevent him from attending the constituent assembly. And Jogendra Nath Mandal, helped him to re-elect from Bengal and sent him to the Constituent Assembly.

When Bengal was divided, if it was made for Hindus and Muslims, then Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, Dinajpur; they are Muslim inhabited areas, they would have gone to Bangladesh. On the other hand, Barisal, Khulna, Jossore, Faridpur are Hindu inhabited areas; they will come to West Bengal. But why did the opposite happen?

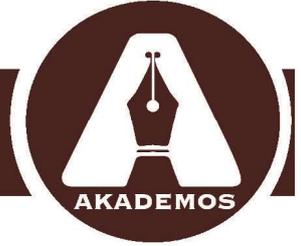
When our people came here, what they did? Dandakaranya, Andaman – Nicobar. Each village is away from 20-25 miles. A great super power was torn apart. What do we eat? How to live? How do we raise the children? They went crazy in this thought. Somehow, after fighting a lot, today they have found a little soil under their feet. Now again NRC, CAA are being brought in. We are asked for papers of 70 years ago. The new government want to demolish Indian constitution. Winning in our vote, they are saying we are not the citizens of India.

The Dalits of Bengal was engrossed in their struggle of life. How can they write literature at that time? That is why Bangla Dalit literature was not a movement. But considering the present political scenario, I am hopeful; it should take the form of a movement.

Q. In that case, do you think Bengali Dalit literature needs to be driven into a political direction?

MB: Politics is associated with policy which is practiced in the society. It's not something alien or something special. Earlier there were kings to rule us, now there are netas. The only difference is we can choose who will exploit us in the name of ruling. So our writings do have political direction to make people aware about what is going on.

Q. From 90s onward, Dalit literature, especially in Maharashtra, has been treated as a counter discourse. Is there any such vision in Bengali Dalit Movement? What is the vision of Dalit Sahitya Academy?



MB: The work of literature is to awaken the people of the society. I consider it should be the main course – not a counter discourse. Dalit Sahitya Academy has come up with this idea to highlight the writings of Dalit writers. Mamata Banerjee has made Dalit Sahitya Academy for us and it has given the Dalit people a chance to speak. We have got many Brahmins also by our side in the fight.

Today to safeguard the Dalit life, we have to stand against the Brahmanism. We must stand against RSS and their philosophy. If anyone calls it politics, then it is politics.

Q. Bangla Dalit Sahitya Academy, How are you trying to see the word “Bangla”, as a language or as a Geographical location?

MB: To say Bangla, we mean both the Banglas (West Bengal and Bangladesh). That is a big identity for all of us. We are proud to call ourselves ‘Bangali’. It’s a different feeling. They have fought for their language. Therefore, the language and area that uses the language is our focus.

Q. Earlier, your writings were anti-institutional. Today when, you are the head of an organisation funded by the current state government, how would the person Manoranjan Byapari evaluate the writer Manoranjan Byapari?

MB: I am still anti-institutional. An organisation for Dalits was my vision – it will be in nature an anti-institutional organisation. I want to strengthen it, because iron cuts the iron. I fought a fight alone and came here. If my fight inspires hundred people and they want to join us, then we will definitely accept them. Because there are billions of people who are against us. Now Brahmanism has taken the form of Capitalism. The goal of Brahmanism is to rule people and exploit them. Capitalism does the same. So if we have to fight against them, then we also need some institutions. I consider Dalit Sahitya Academy will go towards that direction. It was my goal- personal goal as well as goal as a writer. I will continue to fight with my pen.

ⁱ The Bangla word *Lekhowar* is Byapari’s own coinage, signifies unprivileged, uncouth and unhallowed writer. As in the verb play becomes player, the Bangla verb, Lekh (to write) becomes lekhowar (writer). *Lekhowar* is not a standard Bangla word. It connotes the subject position of a Dalit writer.