

INK AND RESILIENCE: UNDERSTANDING DALIT BANGLA NARRATIVES

RUCHI SINGH

Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India
ruchigibusingh@outlook.com

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Interviews with Bangla Dalit Authors, published by New Alipore College Publishing, Kolkata, is a collection of interviews conducted by Jaydeep Sarangi. The contents of the book include an introduction and insightful conversations with Manohar Mouli Biswas, Nakul Mallik, Kapilkrishna Thakur, Jatin Bala, Kalyani Thakur Charal, and Manoranjan Byapari. The title of the book serves as an apt introduction, drawing attention to the collection's emphasis on the narratives of Bangla Dalit authors. The book serves as a testament to Bangla Dalit writers' narratives, viewpoints, and journeys, highlighting their linguistic and social identity. These conversations vividly paint the landscape of growth and development of the Bangla Dalit movement. This compilation features literary voices from a specific linguistic category of the Dalit community, which holds significance for multiple compelling reasons. Interviews serve as a dual narrative—both personal and collective. Each interview in this collection narrates the individual experience, triumphs, and perspectives. Simultaneously, they stitch together a broader fabric of caste struggles and the unified relentless efforts of the Bangla Dalit writers to establish and expand Dalit literature in Bengal.

Interviews with literary writers are a repository of information for readers, scholars, and students alike. These conversations provide a window into the authors' creative process and the evolution of their ideas; unveil the historical, social, and cultural contexts woven into their works; throw light on the personal background that fuels their narratives; serve as a platform for promoting their work; and help to build a connection between the authors and their readers. Each interview in the

book serves this purpose as it provides a glimpse into the personal narratives and how they intersect with their literary works. Biswas' emphasis on writing as an inborn instinct; Malik's return to his village as a teacher to empower the backward communities; Thakur's acknowledgment of non-Dalit expressions of Dalit consciousness challenging the notion that only Dalits can portray Dalit experiences; Bala's advocacy for including Dalit literature in university syllabi for a comprehensive understanding of society; Charal identifying herself as a "Dalit womanist", her observation on the limited involvement of Dalit women in literature and politics of Bengal, and her efforts to represent the collective narrative of Dalit women; Byapari's message to the youth emphasizes steering clear of consumerism, urging them to embrace Indian traditions and values while advocating for social reform- all these diverse perspectives offered by these individuals represent personal struggles, aspirations, and advocacies within the realm of Dalit experiences in Bengal.

Simultaneously, these interviews contribute substantially to the collective narrative of Dalits in Bengal. Collectively, these conversations emphasize the transformative potential of Dalit literature, portraying it as a potent tool for social reformation and a vehicle for raising Dalit consciousness. Noteworthy within these dialogues is the delineation of the instrumental role of organizations, such as the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, Navayug Sahitya and Sanskriti Parishad, Anunnato Samaj Sanstha among others in advancing Dalit literature and culture across urban Kolkata and rural West Bengal. Additionally, the discussions underscore the significance of movements like Matua Andolan in propagating the idea of social change among the masses, positioning Matua religion as a driving force for the social rejuvenation of the depressed classes in Bengal. Moreover, the interviews throw light on the significant role played by various literary platforms including journals and magazines, such as *Chaturtha Dunia*, and a corresponding bookstore in Kolkata; *Dalit Mirror*, an English magazine, to globally disseminate Bengal's marginalized movements; the cultural magazine *Nir* edited by Charal that spotlights Dalit women narratives, while challenging the dominance of literary circles. The significance of cultural programs featuring Dalit expressions through theatre, music, debates and discussions, art exhibitions, street marches bearing tableaux, paintings, essay contests, and poetry recitations, serve as a powerful conduit for social dialogue and propagation of Dalit narratives. *Kavigaan* programs considered India's best mass medium, are social commentary and satire set in poetry and music.

The interviews also emphasize the importance of self-narratives by Dalit writers in addressing caste structures. Dalit autobiography manifests the history and condition of the Dalit community in confronting caste structures, portraying it as a significant anthropological subject. They all acknowledge the influence of Marathi Dalit literature and movements on Bangla Dalit literature. Some interviewees underscored the fragmentation within the Bangla Dalit movement, citing political allegiances as a barrier to unified action. They lament that, unlike the more cohesive movement in Maharashtra, the Bangla Dalit Andolan faces challenges due to individual preoccupations.

One overlooked historical truth that gets highlighted in these interviews is that the partition of Bengal inflicted the deepest tragedy upon the Bengali Dalits. The major section of Bengali refugees were Dalits, particularly the Namashudras. The Partition of Bengal had significant consequences for the Dalits. It led to an abrupt division of the social customs and cultural traditions of the Namasudras, their language, and their way of life. As a direct result, the Namashudras were scattered across the subcontinent. This fallout is vividly portrayed in the autobiographical narratives of Biswas, Mallik, Bala, and Byapari, who recount their harrowing experiences in refugee camps in their interviews.

Another interesting aspect is the use of the English language to give the interview. While some conversations are translated from Bengali to English others are originally in English. English has historically been perceived as a language associated with the elite or privileged classes. However, in contemporary contexts, Dalits and various marginalized communities across India have also engaged with and learned English. Some Dalits have embraced English as a means of empowerment, education, and access to broader opportunities, challenging the traditional association of English solely with the elite. Many Dalits from marginalized communities might communicate in English even if their grammar or structure is not conventionally considered accurate. This use of English, despite potential grammatical errors, serves as a tool for communication and expression, enabling them to participate in various spheres where English is used, challenging linguistic barriers and stereotypes. The case in point is Biswas' interview that he gave in English and Sarangi decided to keep it as it is without editing.

Sarangi says that the book aims to contribute to the understanding and appreciation of Dalit literature's resistance against casteist structures and its impact on cultural spaces, hoping to inspire interest among scholars and readers. These interviews enrich our understanding and appreciation of literary writers, offering a glimpse into the minds and lives that breathe life onto the pages. The book gives first-hand information on Dalit authors in Bengal and shatters the assumption regarding the subaltern's (in)ability to speak and/or be heard. It provides a historical and sociocultural context, revealing how social changes, historical events, and cultural movements have influenced the Dalit literary movement in Bengal. This book stands as an invaluable contribution to the understanding and appreciation of how Bangla Dalit literature influences caste structures and stimulates academic discourse.

WORKS CITED

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RUCHI SINGH is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India