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Basudhara Roy

'Winter of things flow': Poetry, Nature and the Nurture of the Soul. An Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi

Jaydeep Sarangi, a widely anthologised bilingual Indian poet, editor and academic, is dubbed as 'bard on the banks of the Dulung'. Sarangi has nine published poetry collections to his credit and is on the editorial boards of different journals featuring poetry and articles on poetry like *Mascara Literary Review*, *Transnational Literature* (Australia), *Setu* (USA), *Geetanjali and Beyond* (Scotland) *Teesta*, *WEC*, *IJML* (India). He has authored seven critical books on poetry and has edited special issues on poetry for reputed journals in India and abroad. With Amelia Walker he has guest-edited a special volume for *TEXT* (Australia). Among his recent awards are the *Setu Award of Excellence*, 2019 (Petersburg, USA) and *Sufi Literary Award* (2020). He is a Professor of English and principal at New Alipore College, Kolkata¹.

Basudhara Roy You stand poised in the midst of a vibrant academic and creative life. For more than two decades now, you have been actively juggling research, criticism, translation and writing along with important administrative responsibilities. How do these multiple engagements play out in your everyday life and how does poetry interact with them all?

Jaydeep Sarangi I was brought up in a forest enclosed town, Jhargram, where my roots lie. I have been blessed, since my childhood days, with wonderful friends who have consistently brought out the best in me. My fellow academics and colleagues evince rare care, faith and concern for my various administrative, academic and creative commitments. I consider myself really fortunate that in this competitive era of globalization, there are genuine people who take interest in me and my work. I have been a close follower of *His Highness*, the Dalai Lama and have derived abiding inspiration from his book *The Art of Happiness*. I have seen people committed to the highest scale of Truth in various fields of life, have had the fortune of intellectually engaging with souls who epitomise Indian philosophical, spiritual and religious values, and all this has perennially constituted the stream of my motivation! I have learned from them the act of nurturing the golden light of the soul for a calm and peaceful course of mind and this has helped me do more justice to all roles that life has brought my way.

I have heartily enjoyed and benefitted from my teaching career spanning both the extreme rural and urban parts of West Bengal. My heart is full! Administrative posts are chairs to cater services to as many people as one can with an honest heart and a broad smile.

¹ More information about him is available on his website <https://jaydeepsarangi.in/>.

I attempt to use the spiritual and social laws of communication to bring myself into radiant union with the Higher Power through a collective coexistence. I always believe that there is enormous power and energy in every human relationship. Channelling that to activity is important. I'm blessed that everyone around me has always been supportive and that most administrative tasks have been accomplished by happy, democratic collaborations.

When it comes to writing, both creative and academic, I live a disciplined writing life. I don't carry my baggage of office anxieties to my writing desk. At times when I am down under metro-city numbness, this disciplined writing sustains me. For me, the job of the poet consists of placing those objects of the visible world which have become invisible due to the glue of habit, in an unusual position which strikes the soul and gives them a force. Poetry has been my door, both for entry and exit into a fuller life. It has been the substance of my imagination and the repertoire of my values. In a world given mostly to the pursuit of profit, delight and cheap popularity, poets stand out as saviours of our race.

My commitment to translation almost parallels my commitment to poetry. I believe that worthy literature should be accessible to as many readers as possible and therefore translating Bengali writers into English has been a project very close to my heart. No translation, in my opinion, is complete and definite and I do not consider my translation of a piece as the only way to do justice to its author. But a translative attempt is always a beginning towards ensuring the longevity of a work. As a translator, I am keenly aware of the fact that a translated corpus survives with possibilities and it leaves room for further translation when time ticks to a new frame. With Angana Dutta, I have translated and edited *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* which has become a valuable text/reference book for universities. I have translated and edited *The Wheel Will Turn: Poems by Manohar Mouli Biswas*. I have worked with Anurima Chanda on a translation of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's *Untouchable and Other Poems*. I've collaborated on a translation project with the International Centre for Nazrul, Dhaka, Bangladesh. The product is a refreshing read. Recently, my translation of the Sahitya Akademi award-winning author, Subodh Sarkar's poems into English *Not in My Name* has garnered a lot of appreciation from poet and scholar-friends.

BR Your first collection of poems, *From Dulung to Beas*, was re-launched in January this year. Considering that you wanted to update the past in the present, would you tell us why you felt an updated edition of your debut collection necessary and how has your understanding of poetry matured over the years?

JS As you know, we cannot do anything if people around us and the Good Angels don't support us. I am fortunate that all good powers help me when I work. My family, friends and relatives are my constant company. I believe in the principle: develop friendships and enhance existing relationships with co-workers, family and friends. We all live in an unfathomable sea of infinite riches. The world within is the creative power and we must channel this power to productivity. Friends inspire me to work more. My academic and poet-friends spur me on to write more!

Regarding my first book, *From Dulung to Beas*, as both poet and critic, I wanted to have a deeper look at it. In it, my choice of location/subject is deliberate because as a post-colonial

critic my engagement has chiefly been with marginal discourses. I believe in the virtue of celebrating the small and the local. If we look into geography, the big rivers are celebrated and respected widely. The world has so many things to say about them. However, rivulets and small rivers have gone largely ignored. In order to celebrate rural India, it is these smaller springs of water and wisdom that should be celebrated. In the river Dulung, in the Kanak Durga Temple in Chilkigarh located by the river and in the tribal culture associated with the river, I found something very vital both poetically and spiritually. I wanted to transmute what I have experienced with the big reading community through the global English language. Dulung and Beas are the metaphors of the celebration of the local in a global tongue. They constitute a postcolonial brand. On a personal note, Beas has always been the river of my dreams. It has been the cherished springhead of my thoughts since I looked upon it for the first time nearly three decades ago. It was love at first sight and the love has only grown with the years.

Dulung and Beas have been ever-kind to me. I updated this book of poems after ten years with my ageing eyes and with, I hope, a wiser heart. Every revisiting is a gain and I hope the book too has benefitted from this revisiting as much as I have.

BR You have a staggering nine poetry collections to your credit. How would you look back upon this journey? Could you reflect on the themes that are closest to your heart?

JS A well-crafted poem records a unique experience of the world where the poet takes us on a pleasure-ride into the dark embrace of eternal silence, seeking a place in the lyric order of things while words weave themselves into the necessary lines. I feel that night lamps wait in fear of losing their sight. I embrace that aspect of uncertainty and fuzzy zones between arrivals and departures in my poems. Poetry is pre-eminently the art of language. The poet organises the vast complex web of communication which keeps our social life going. Poetry heals the pains of suffering and the dirt of modern living. It is the honest expression of joy in living and loving. The world today is a far more self-conscious place than it was in the days of Alexander Pope. Poetry gives man hope for a better tomorrow. In poetry, the small things keep happening. I write about the land and its people. Rivers are in me. I flow with the rhythm they have.

I know that my poems are loaded with issues in me. My poetic self is a part of the chain of activities around me, my company and my engagements. I write of life, ageing, places, people, and this vast natural world which is our first and last home. In the endorsement to my latest book of poems, *Heart Raining the Light* (2020), Krysia Jopek, author of *Hourglass Studies* and Founding Editor of *Diaphanous Micro* says, "Jaydeep Sarang's poems amalgamate arresting imagery with illogical, yet poetically logical, shifts in their provocatively-dense poetic space[s]. He is a poet to be reckoned with as the reader directly experiences his pithy, rich poems' poetics in the process of writing and erasing their indeterminate, plethora of meaning[s]"². Cameron Hindrum lives, writes and works in Tasmania, Australia. Since 2003

² <https://jaydeepsarangi.in/poet/> (consulted on 3/05/21).

he has coordinated the annual Tasmanian Poetry Festival and his observation on my poetry runs thus, "Jaydeep Sarangi's poems are finely crafted moments, and take us towards that compelling intersection of the conversational and the metaphysical. Breathe them in deeply, and be rewarded". Much-admired contemporary poets like Mamang Dai, Keki Daruwalla, Bibhu Padhi, Jayanta Mahapatra, Lakshmi Kannan and Dennis Haskell have endorsed my many poetry collections and their observations on my art have shaped my work significantly. Positive vibes from knowledgeable quarters show us different things under new shades. Here goes one of my recent unpublished poems:

Evening

The day is too quiet
 all are happy with daily living except
 a slow evening without speaking to anyone
 I never mind when
 occasional thoughts remain to be taken
 a friendship with unexpressed sorrow.
 I can neither see you nor hear you
 only winter of things flow
 at the wheel of flying to and fro.
 Where do we send our thoughts?
 I am too feeble
 to write about the evening.
 I choose to call it a night
 a space without sound and fury
 only sleep, deep sleep and forgetting.

BR As a poet, how does the writing process manifest itself to you? Who have been your models in poetry? As an Indian writing in English, do you feel a necessity to uphold your Indianness in your art?

JS I believe there is absolutely no anxiety of upholding my Indianness. No user of English, in my opinion, should carry this anxiety anymore. I am a bilingual writer. I write in English because I feel confident in using the language for creative expression. It is as spontaneous and honest as prayers to an Indian yogi. My writing is inevitably shaped by my reading. I read a lot. There is hardly a day when I don't read poems. I have many models, some poets being close to the head while a few others are close to the heart. The sensuous mystique, John Keats is my favourite. There is always a charm of magic casements in his poems. Reading him is akin to participating in a festival of senses. I read a lot of Pablo Neruda, Geogios Sefaris, Salvatore Quasimodo, Nicanor Parra, Walt Whitman, Robert Browning, Philip Larkin, P. B. Shelley, T. S. Eliot, Emile Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, Nissim Ezekiel, Keki Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, Niranjana Mohanty, Meena Kandasamy, Kath Walker, A. D. Hope and many other poets during my formative years. Bibhu Padhi has always been a very special poet for me. I read a lot of poetry from the North East of India. Robin S.

Ngangom, Malsawmi Jacob and Mamang Dai are good poet friends. With Rob Harle, I have edited seven anthologies of poetry from Australia and India which brought me in touch with many Australian and Indian poets who are confident and ardent soul makers. I get back to them regularly. I read a lot of Bengali poets too, from Rabindranath Tagore to Srijato. The mosaic is varied and lucrative. I read a lot of poems by poets from different Dalit communities written for social change. What a rich reservoir of poetry! I am fortunate that I can read and write in Bengali.

BR Could you throw light upon your writing space and writing schedule? How does poetry travel from your imagination to your page?

JS I write whenever I get time. There is no particular schedule. But I come to it for a couple of hours every day religiously. Early morning freshness suits me for writing and reading. Thoughts are very important. Sometimes, thoughts stay for a while. Sometimes, they play truant and must be caught at the moment. For poetry, reading again and again helps. Ears are very important. Ears often wait for a particular word. The process is natural. But it comes and goes. There are times when I need revisions. I think a poem is never definite. I keep adding to my poems in time and space.

BR Your poetry, one notes, is intensely alive to a sense of place and placedness. You turn increasingly towards the local for your poetic subject, attempting to summon 'the world' to 'home' rather than vice-versa. What would you say to that?

JS For me, native place is where 'friends play games'. My poetry creates a sense of connectedness to the land, history and people. I write for the people whom I have known since my childhood days. Jhargram is known for its rich and composite tribal culture. Many villages here exhibit a rare tradition of tribal art. I carry my place and its people everywhere and my poetry, too, undoubtedly locates itself in their lives. There is an article I can share with you that throws light on my poetic engagements with place: "Land and Links: Poetic Connections between Kolkata/Jhargram and Canberra by Jaydeep Sarangi and Shane Strange" published in Indian-Australian exchanges through collaborative poetic inquiry³.

Truthfully speaking, home is the place we return to, both in life and art. We stitch a home with threads of dreams and role relationships. The windows may have broken hinges, but homing is very important in this unhomely world where things fall apart. In my poetry, I always endeavour to return home to my native Jhargram and its green corridor of smiles and singing birds on the roof overhead, far from the city's dust and heat.

BR Though you have travelled much of the world and continue to spend more of your days in Kolkata, the City of Joy and your City of Work and Duty, your poetry remains consistently watermarked by the landscape and culture of your native town, Jhargram. What, in your

³ *TEXT, Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, 60, 24, 2 (October): <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue60/Sarangi&Strange.pdf> (consulted on 3/05/2021).

opinion, makes living in Jhargram distinct from the experience of living elsewhere and in what ways does it fuel your poetic sensibility?

JS Yes! My poems are about me and my surroundings! The City of Joy comes as a living force in my poetic lines. My familiar faces in Kolkata create an honest space for me and my poetic impulse. I often relate myself with the suffering lots of the red soil (in the Western part of the state). All streams from different sources make me write. I write, I flow. In Jhargram, however, I find a soul absent elsewhere. Jhargram is a district in the Southern part of West Bengal known for its dense forest and rain, old temples, and royal palaces. As my native place as also because of its rich natural beauty, its landscape evokes a deep movement of feelings in me. Let me express it through the following lines:

Let Trees of Jhargram Sing

It's like green epidemic
Green turf, green ideas
Flowing like a rivulet
Murmuring a green song of hope (unpublished).

The poet prepares for an art of creating imaginary gardens with the help of images and symbols drawn from variegated sources. I do the same under the influence of Jhargram's calm and charm.

BR Your poetic self is largely sustained by its proximity to nature. One finds a sense of unhurriedness about your writing. There seems to be a switch in many of your poems from chronological or clock time to earth-time. Could you comment on this eco-consciousness in your poetry and mention in what ways it fulfils you?

JS Nature is our bed where we sleep and get up every day. It's a source of happiness and a harbour of different shades of moods. We ride on those moods. I admire the great Romantics for their preoccupation with nature. Rivers, mountains, fields, forests and leaf gatherers make notes in a symphony – rising, falling, diverging and coalescing for eternity. The return to nature, I find, is like returning to one's mother, to arms where one can always be assured of rest and peace. Many of my poems are landscape poems. I see a river always flowing, brimming happily. Snow-capped mountains are smiling every day. Human hearts can take their happiness from these perennial images in nature as they attempt to move ahead. The life of a poet is an endless journey. It involves the responsibility of uniting the varied dimensions of experience to bring to readers new ideas on life and living. The poet must look both within and beyond clock-time to understand its value and demolish its myths. My poetic eyes try to bring happiness to the mind by returning to nature's rhythms. I try to knit a dreamy yarn around me, its fibre being Nature: "Every evening I learn/ many things in these big *sal* trees/ There is a poem/ for each one of them/ all homeward birds, after the day's toil/ I follow them close, green after green"⁴.

⁴ Jaydeep Sarangi. 2019. *Heart Raining the Light*. Allahabad: Cyberwit.net, 3.

BR It is difficult to ignore in your poetry a deep empathy with the cause of the Dalits. I understand that much of it may stem from your academic championing of Dalit writing. However, empathy is a profound emotion and the presence of it in your writing is an indication of a committed engagement with the life and world of the Dalits. Would you share your experiences with us?

JS My formative years of engagement with the Dalit community has become the sap of my strength. My experiences in that part of Bengal gave me eyes to see, understand and intuit the world as I moved on in life. Now my tree is a full story. It has green as well as yellow leaves. A poet has a sensitive heart to feel all subtle arrivals and departures of wishes and dreams. I count them all. My friendship with several Australian Indigenous writers and activists also gave me a good insight and support into marginality discourse.

I had the opportunity to learn valuably from stalwarts of the Dalit movement in India: Sharankumar Limbale, Bama, Neerav Patel, Arjun Dangle, Harish Mangalam, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin Bala and Kapil Krishna Thakur, all good friends of mine. One of the aims of working on Dalit literature in India has been to reveal to the greater society, the injustice, oppression, helplessness and struggles of many of the disadvantaged populations under the social machine of stratification in India. Caste politics in India is unique and culture specific. It's a powerful experience to work with Dalit writers! My work is my book. I chant for those who build homes sculpting Dravida shores. I stand for courageous bards singing plaintively the forgotten lofty histories of the Non-Aryan civilization.

I think my interest in Dalit literature goes back to the year 2002 when I started working on marginalised writers because I came across a grand corpus of marginal discourse from Maharashtra and Gujarat through my academic friends. Immediately, I could trace a sound militant body of discourse from West Bengal. I edited the Dalit writings of Bangla in *the Journal of Literature and Aesthetics* from Kerala long ago and that was my first engagement with the Bengali Dalit writers writing for quite some time. It came out from Kerala and it became an engagement for me. Now, it has become a mission of my life to be with them and shoulder their pains. It is also, perhaps, a sphere through which I can go back to my cultural roots. I find Dalit writing very potent and fascinating. I am not afraid to face the truth it places before the world and I am not afraid to unfold their truth in whatever small and humble way I can. So, now it has become a commitment – a journey we will travel together. I am happy to tell you that a sound corpus of Bengali Dalit Literature exists today with considerable academic authority. I, myself, have interviewed most of the Dalit writers I know and have published these interviews in seminal journals in Australia, India, Slovenia, Romania, Spain and Italy. I am confident that these interviews have had far-reaching academic impact and that many scholars, drawn by them, have taken up projects on Dalit Studies.

BR Working within the broad post-colonial and post-modern literary / critical paradigm, as an academic and commentator, how do you view these dominant strands in English Studies in the Indian metropolitan universities of the first decades of the New Millennium?

JS Things are changing fast. Writers from the margins have emerged as a vital and significant literary force. Many universities have included new writings and papers on contemporary translation in their syllabi and students are taking up projects in new and challenging areas. For example, Dalit writing is taught at different universities today and it is good to see it properly represented. Bangla Dalit Writing and Literature from the North-East are yet to be included through a structural form. There are really quality works from these literary bodies. Manoranjan Byapari's *Itebritte Chandal Jiban* is a fascinating confessional autobiography. It should be translated and marketed widely. It should be available for the common masses of countrymen. I would like to see a Translators' Association and its active role in the near future. Some colleges and Universities have made useful changes in teaching and learning to cope with the current demands of students. Academic committees and Board of Studies of the universities should go for need-based literature courses and they should include or invite experts who have knowledge in designing new types of courses. I like to see a great change in academic governance in the Indian metropolitan universities in the days to come! Literature, if anything, should be inclusive and widely representative of its essential inclusiveness.

BR As a poet and critic, how do you look at the scenario of English poetry in India today?

JS English Poetry in India has become a significant self-sustaining tradition with ever-growing international readership and academic curiosity. The contemporary poets in English have earned their recognition through sheer merit and resourcefulness without an expiry date. They have wide readership across the globe as they reflect their private and universal links with the world. Some are writing about borders, blurring borders, hybrid space, angst of oppression, travels, social issues, which make them unique and amazing. The list of New Indian poets in English is a huge one. College and school students are writing fantastic poetry. The Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library in Kolkata has done a fabulous job of bringing poetry to the heart of the nation. The anxiety of acceptance and appropriation in the context of English poetry is a matter of the remote past now. Indian poets, today, are confident, blunt, bold and intelligent and there is no end of good and authentic anthologies to endorse the fact. They are writing from different backgrounds, time zones, linguistic-contact zones and cultural contexts with the result that Indian poets of the present generation are unique soul makers on several planes. They have great control over myths and legends, language, choice of words and cadence. I believe it's time to reject the nomenclature 'Indian Poetry in English' and call it 'English Poetry from India'.

BR Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days?

JS Man is made by his beliefs and volitions. As he believes, so he is. Poetry is a lot of things to a lot of people. Emily Dickinson said, "If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry"⁵. It is the chiseled marble of language through

⁵ Emily Dickinson. 1971. *Selected Letters* (ed. by Thomas H. Johnson) Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 208.

which emotions are expressed. For me, writing poetry is like grasping at the wind ... I like Jayanta Mahapatra's famous comment, "poetry has to be witness" in his recent essay published in *Indian Literature*⁶. I write poems because I feel happy after writing. I call upon Lazarus keeping the mind shining gold:

Lazarus is Calling

Dark night is closer,
 calling, calling from the trees
 Night owls are crying
 ominous is dancing in the branches
 Of slow time, night unfolds
 its ranges of stories, night's acts.
 All dead voices lying ice cold
 are up with night's song.
 Night's mysteries are awake
 after a long cold sleep.
 Foul smells hard, ghostly
 bodies decaying flesh.
 One uncouth face conjures up,
 other unshaped faces, deep dark.
 Only the hooded eyes
 strange sounds of murmur. Callings.
 Nobody is awake, at this dead hour
 only a child's shrill cry. Hags' hooting.
 Spirits of the dead have a night out, refugee
 camps are dim. All are waiting
 for an appointment with the unknown⁷.

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⁶ Jayanta Mahapatra. 2020. *Indian Literature*, 315 (March-April): 47.

⁷ Jaydeep Sarangi. 2019. *Heart Raining the Light*. Allahabad: Cyberwit.net, 3.