

“Someone like Ashoka the Great will be born again to set up a casteless society”: An Interview with Manohar Mouli Biswas

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ABSTRACT

Manohar Mouli Biswas (born 3 October 1943) is a long-time Dalit activist and writer from West Bengal, president of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, and vice-president of West Bengal Dalit Sahitya Academy. In this conversation with Mahitosh Mandal, conducted over email and face to face, Mr Biswas talks in-depth about his views on Dalit identity, casteism and the current state and future of anticaste politics in West Bengal, drawing on his lived experiences of casteism and anticaste activism, as well as his literary practice and membership of two important Dalit literary establishments. He also comments on religious conversion among Dalits in the current wave of saffronisation of India. The interview is supplemented by a select bibliography of Manohar Mouli Biswas.

KEYWORDS: *Dalit, Dalit literature, casteism, anticaste activism, Buddhism, conversion*

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Mahitosh Mandal (MM): Jai Bhim, Manohar-da! You are an inspiration to many of us who are engaged in anticaste activism. It is my absolute pleasure to interview you for *All About Ambedkar: A Journal on Theory and Praxis*. Who, according to you, is a 'Dalit'? Are all 'scheduled castes' Dalits? Or is Dalit an anticaste political consciousness that certain sections of scheduled castes develop, internalise, identify with, and assert? Can anyone other than the former Untouchables be a Dalit, that is, anyone who does not hail from a scheduled caste background but is experiencing oppression and exploitation—caste-based or other?

Manohar Mouli Biswas (MMB): I interpret the term 'Dalit' in my own fashion, without going into the historicity of it. In my view, anyone severely marginalised in the domain of social pursuit of prestige, or [consistently trapped by] economic impoverishment and the cultural tragedy of backwardness, that is, groups with poor representation in education and literary spaces, due to being placed on the lowermost rung in the Hindu caste system, is a Dalit. A large number of sub-castes and groups fall into these categories. They all are now known as 'scheduled castes' as per our national constitution. In this respect, all scheduled castes are Dalits.

'Dalitality' in that sense is about developing and internalising an anticaste political consciousness to enable assertion of a Dalit's future upliftment in a positive direction, although there are also some exceptions to this. Regarding Dalit politics in India, we can mention, for example, the BSP [Bahujan Samaj Party] and their shadow organisation BAMCEF [The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation], which are now politically well-established all over India. Their main challenge, I think, is to organise Dalit political workers to rid us of our subjugation under the prevailing nationwide caste hierarchies. Another example is the 1937 election when Jogendra Mandal who belonged to a scheduled caste category from Perojpur contested the unreserved Parliamentary seat of Barisal and defeated his opponent, the Congress candidate Saral Dutta who came from a *zamindar* family, by an overwhelming margin. Jogendra Mandal was a devoted follower of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, and he was instrumental in ensuring Dr Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly from Bengal.

All former 'untouchables' are seen to identify themselves as Dalit, but all the Shudras have not been equally 'untouchable' all the time. For instance, in Bengal, and even all over India, over time, a socially upward mobility movement has been taking place. As a result, a section of Shudras in Bengal began to deny their Dalitality, claiming they had developed socially, culturally, educationally, and economically, as for example, the Kayasthas and the Baidyas. They had been granted the status of *Jal-chal*, which means that Brahmins could accept water from their hand. They were non-Dalits but they suffered from caste hatred. So, previously, they had been Shudras, but now they are [part of] the ruling class. And rest of the Untouchables were considered as *Jal-achal*, meaning water from their hands was not drinkable.

No one belonging to the Dalit or Shudra categories of Hinduism can be alienated from the suffering of caste hatred. In this context, one should keep in mind that in Bengal there are no other castes except Brahmins, Shudras and Atishudras.

MM: As you are aware, there is a popular perception that there is no casteism in Bengal. How would you respond to such a claim?

MMB: The communists are largely responsible for such misconceptions. The Communist Party of India was first formed in Moscow in 1920 by some Bhadrakol Bengali students who went there for higher education. In this sense, we can say that Bengal pioneered the communist movement in India. This communist movement is a class-based struggle and not a caste-based one, and in Bengal, the communists explained 'class' to be the real problem of society bypassing the fact that it is 'caste' that is detrimental to the progress of India. Practically speaking, these communists misguided people by brushing the problem of caste under the carpet by teaching that caste is the superstructure of society and would automatically fade away. This is, I think, a misconception about the mechanism, genesis, and development of the caste system of the Hindus.

MM: Bengal has about 60 different scheduled castes and they experience different kinds of caste-based discrimination. How would you categorise and differentiate the

discriminations faced by them, for example, by the Namasudras, Poundras, and Rajbanshis?

MMB: Namasudras, Poundras, and Rajbanshis are the three major scheduled castes in the state of West Bengal. All of them are predominantly endogamous in character and this is self-regulated by each caste. That is, the people of one caste cannot marry into another caste and one caste does not usually have any blood relation with another caste. As a matter of fact, each caste forms a small nation itself. In other words, we can say that caste creates a nation within the nation. Due to this heinous social system, Indians have failed to integrate, because of which each scheduled caste faces different deprivations and discriminations. The solution would be for these castes to build blood relations with each other, thus making possible an integrated and casteless society.

MM: Tell us briefly about your own experiences of caste-based discrimination.

MMB: I experienced a horrible form of caste-based discrimination in 1968 when I joined as a trainee at the Department of Telecommunication in Nagpur [in the state of Maharashtra]. On the first day, and in the first period, when the lecturer came into the class, all of us stood up and wished him, “Good Morning, Sir!”, and he replied, “Good morning to all. Please sit down.” Then there was pin-drop silence. We were an all-India batch and students had come from different states—Punjab, Karnataka, Bihar, West Bengal, and so on. And then, the first question the teacher put to the class was, “Who amongst you are scheduled castes, stand up please!” I was ashamed but I stood up and also stated my name. The teacher responded mockingly by referring to reserved category candidates, “You are all lucky sons of the soil.”

I can mention another small incident. The electronics teacher would take classes successively for five days, and then at the end of the week, we would have a test on what he had taught. In one such test, I scored 6/10 and a Brahmin friend of mine, who had also taken the same test with me, scored 9/10. I compared our answer sheets and the two scripts were identical, even in terms of language. I approached the teacher, who was sitting in his room, and tried to show him both the answer scripts but he refused to see them. Instead, he told me, “You belong to the reserved category of students and should be happy with lower marks. This score will not hamper anything for you.”

MM: Let me move from life to literature. How would you define Dalit literature? What are some of its characteristics? Can Dalit literature be written by non-Dalits? How is Dalit literature different from non-Dalit literature?

MMB: Dalit literature may be defined as a form of introspection by Dalits, that is, the self-expression of their historic suffering due to their misfortunes under a caste society. Dalit literature advocates for an equal society, free from caste-based prejudice and discrimination. It is a form of protest against the curse of cruelty, hatred, rebuke and dishonour associated with a caste-hierarchical society. Dalit literature disobeys the kinds of superiority-inferiority that the caste system tries to impose on our society. So it can be broadly described as literature evolving out of caste-based suffering, hatred, dishonour and neglect.

No non-Dalit can produce Dalit literature. The reason is very simple. A person's caste is related to birth. When a non-Dalit writes about the sufferings or pains experienced by a Dalit she draws on her imagination and whatever she writes, she writes out of sympathy. But Dalits refuse to be anyone's object of sympathy and pity and so when a Dalit writes about the Dalits, his writing is derived from his own real sufferings and experiences. He does not need the help of imagination and consequently, his writing is not a product of sympathy. It is simply an empathetic and genuine piece of creation.

MM: When and why did you start writing? What kind of works do you write, and what is the ultimate purpose of your writing?

MMB: After the completion of my departmental training at Nagpur I came back to Kolkata, and whatever I have written since then is all about marginalised people and Dalits. The ultimate purpose of my writing is to bring about the social changes that are necessary for a human society to live in peace and to progress.

I developed a habit of writing both in verse and prose every early when I was a student in class III or IV at my village primary school. At that time I would try to describe, in my own language, the beauty of the sky at the time of rainfall or the magnificence of the setting sun. I believe that I have always had a creative mind, but in

my childhood, I experienced dire poverty, about which I have written in my autobiography. Moreover, the human mind is inherently sensitive. In my childhood, whenever someone from another caste, particularly, from the 'superior' castes, would call me a *chanral* (Chandal), I would not react due to my lack of knowledge about the abusive term. But [as I mentioned earlier], after my graduation in pure sciences, I secured the job of engineering supervisor in the Department of Telecommunication and was sent to their Nagpur Training Centre for a four-month training course. Very soon after starting the course, I came across an article in an English daily newspaper about the Dalit literature movement in Maharashtra. It had a tremendous impact on my mind and my heart. I realised that similar kinds of caste sufferings were experienced there as in West Bengal, and I asked myself: Why don't we too revolt categorically, at least by creating anticaste literature?

MM: What are some of your representative works?

MMB: I have the social commitment to awaken Dalit communities about the [roots] of their poverty, illiteracy, social backwardness and the caste hatred they suffer. No other person except Dr B. R. Ambedkar has so truly and deeply looked into the tragedies of life they [continue to] experience. Dr Ambedkar advocated their causes in the Constitution of the country to provide them relief from the tragedy. In my life, I have tried to establish Dalit literature in human society as the canonical literature of India's marginalised peoples. I have written more than a dozen books, including my autobiography *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* and a book of short stories, *Deshvāg o viswāyon: parājito mānusher galpo* [Partition and Globalisation: Stories of the Defeated People]. My critical and analytic works range from *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic, Theory and Movements: Through the Lens of Ambedkarism* to *Dalit sāhityer ruparekhā* [An Outline of Dalit literature].

MM: You are a founding member and president of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha [Bengali Dalit Literary Organisation] or BDSS. We know that BDSS was set up against the backdrop of the suicide of Chuni Kotal (1965-1992). Approximately, how many works

has your organisation published so far? How, according to you, has BDSS contributed to the anticaste struggle? How much work is left to do?

MMB: Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, or BDSS, was set up in 1992 after the tragic immolation of Chuni Kotal, a tribal woman who was pursuing her Master's degree at Vidyasagar University [in Midnapore, West Bengal]. It happened due to her experience of caste hatred inside and outside the classroom. BDSS has over one hundred life members, and started publishing the Dalit literary journal *Chaturtha Dunia* after recognising the ground reality: that no publisher in the Kolkata book market was willing to publish Dalit writings. So BDSS set up their own publishing house and a book shop "Chaturtha Dunia" at stall number 22 in Bhabani Dutta Lane, Kolkata 700073. So far 42 issues of the journal have been published and it is ironical that some well-reputed publishers have started publishing our books now. *Chaturtha Dunia* has published over two thousand books, written by more than one hundred Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan writers. The first three editors of *Chaturtha Dunia* were from a scheduled caste, a scheduled tribe and 'other backward class' [OBC] backgrounds, and thus it has become a platform for bringing these communities together.

Ideologically, BDSS has engaged in anticaste movements and literary activism since its inception and much has been achieved so far. But plenty of work is yet to be done.

MM: Tell us briefly about your anticaste activism.

MMB: Dalit literature is always associated with literary activism, and our organisation, BDSS, contributes to anticaste movements whenever and wherever they happen in West Bengal. In 1990, when the Viswanath Pratap Singh government tried to introduce the reservation policy for the OBCs, there were strong objections from different groups within the caste hierarchies. At that time, BDSS, along with other organisations, organised a protest rally on the streets of Kolkata. It was attended by about 15,000 people and led by Santosh Rana.

Our Dalit litterateurs might have inherited the spirit of activism, anticasteism, and secularism from the Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra. The 'panther' organisation was formed on 9 July 1972 under the tile-roofed house of Namdeo Dhasal in a *basti* [slum]

in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, and others gave the lead. Dalit litterateurs, I wholeheartedly believe, are secular in character. After the sad demise of Rohith Verma at the University of Hyderabad, BDSS took out a procession on College Street and organised a meeting at College Square in Kolkata. We also organise the annual Chuni Kotal Memorial Lecture on her death anniversary on 16 August. The lectures address the subject of casteless society, and academic scholars and social activists are invited to the event, which is held in various locations in West Bengal. As of now, 26 memorial lectures have been delivered.

In addition, BDSS organises an annual *sangeeti* (Buddhist term for ‘conference’) on 24 and 25 December, in various districts of West Bengal. The event aims to sensitise people regarding anticasteism and also tries to amplify the everyday issues faced by Dalits. One of the achievements of BDSS in this respect is the conversion of Pakuhata High School in Malda into Pakuhata College for the educational upliftment of the local rural populations of Malda, Bamongola, and Habibpur, which are predominantly made up of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

MM: Dalit women are the worst victims of the caste system. How would you define their victimisation? Why do you think they continue to be victimised?

MMB: I have always supported the feminist movement. After the sad murder of Phoolan Devi, *Chaturtha Dunia* published a special issue on the sacrosanct and vigorous protest she had launched in her life. Phoolan Devi was a Dalit woman and was forcibly kidnapped from her house by twenty-two dacoits of the Thakur caste, who were flagrant oppressors of the scheduled castes. What did Phoolan Devi do? She formed a dacoit team and became their leader. For her courage and excellence in the profession, she earned fame as ‘Bandit Queen’. One night, she took her revenge by entering the Thakur village and shooting 21 of them. Dalit women are doubly oppressed—for being women and for being Dalits.

MM: Recently the government of West Bengal established Dalit Sahitya Academy. While Dalits have welcomed it, many have been critical of it. Taslima Nasrin, for example, mocked this move by the government and argued that there is no need to have

a separate literary organisation for the Dalits. She even made fun of the idea of ‘Dalit literature.’ Many others have criticised it as a political move to win the scheduled castes’ votes. How would you respond to such criticisms?

MMB: The West Bengal Dalit Sahitya Academy is a praiseworthy move by the government of West Bengal. It is a positive gesture to uplift the Dalits, not only for the expansion of their literary activities but also for extending solidarities for their organisational abilities. Does Taslima Nasrin know the history of the Muslim Sahitya Samaj which was formed at the University of Dhaka in 1926 for the spread of literary culture among the Muslims? She displayed ignorance about social reality even though she is a well-known public intellectual and activist.

I am not a sceptic by nature and view Dalit Sahitya Academy as a positive gesture. And as you already know, I have been elected as vice-president.

MM: There is a dangerous saffronisation increasingly devouring India. This has visibly worsened the condition of Dalits, tribals, and minorities. The right-wing government has also been insisting on implementing policies such as the NRC [National Register of Citizens of India], CAA [Citizen Amendment Act], and CAB [Citizen Amendment Bill]. What are your views on saffronisation and the concerned laws and policies? Also, in this context, is conversion to Buddhism a way out for Dalits of our time? Would you recommend conversion?

MMB: I personally feel that NRC, CCA, and CAB have been designed for the political saffronisation of the country.

Conversion to Buddhism might enable Dalits to shed off Hindu caste hierarchies and escape casteist abuse. But, this will turn us into a religious minority of this country and add to our suffering in the political sphere. Hence, conversion—at least individual conversion or conversion of a few—may not be the solution. Only if huge groups of people from scheduled castes and tribes—which together form 30% of the country’s population—and others convert then a real transformation can happen. Otherwise, like Chandragupta Maurya (321-297 BCE), one can remain an undeclared Buddhist and a declared Hindu. We must note, though, that Buddhism is very effective and remember that the relatively less frequency of caste atrocities in Bengal is not due to the 34 years

of Communist Party of India rule here but due to 405 years of Buddhist rule by the Pal dynasty (750–1155 AD).

MM: History has witnessed several anticaste movements and many legal strategies to prevent casteism have been adopted. However, casteism is exponentially on the rise and caste is far from being annihilated. In today's India, every ten minutes a crime is committed against a Dalit, and eight Dalit women are sexually abused every day. In such a situation, do you think casteism shall ever come to an end? Do we need to rethink anticaste politics and develop new strategies?

MMB: The anticaste movements we have witnessed so far have neither happened nationwide nor evolved into an effective agenda and policy for the Government of India. People coming from the lowermost strata of the caste hierarchy clearly want the abolition of the caste system but the beneficiaries of the system are always in favour of maintaining the same as is. Although many legal strategies to prevent casteism have been adopted and although in the eyes of law all are said to be equal, the cries of the appellants do not find fairness in justice. Unless a true cultural revolution occurs, which can change the mindset of caste Hindus, they will never be capable of compassion. The day the national parliament, as well as the government, is adorned with a majority of Ambedkarites, the wave of social change may take another praiseworthy colour which will reduce the shades of sadness among the margins.

I firmly believe that somebody like Ashoka the Great will be born again to bless the soil of India and to set up a casteless society.

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