



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

The Rivers Within: An Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi

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Jaydeep Sarangi is a widely anthologized poet with ten collections published, the latest being, *Letters in Lower Case* (2022). A regular reviewer for poetry journals and newspapers, Jaydeep Sarangi has delivered keynote addresses and read poems in different continents and lectured on poetry and marginal studies in universities/colleges of repute. His books on poetry and Indian writings, articles and poems are archived in all major libraries and online restores in the world, including Harvard University, Oxford University, Sorbonne University, Barkley Library and University of Chicago. He is the President, *Guild of Indian English Writers, Editors and Critics* (GIEWEC) and Vice President, *EC, Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library*, Kolkata. He has been known as 'the bard of Dulung' for his poems on the rivulet Dulung and people who reside on its banks. Sarangi is Principal and professor of English at New Alipore College, Kolkata and actively spreading the wings of poetry among generations. He edits *Teesta*, a journal devoted to poetry and poetry criticism. With Rob Harle he has edited seven anthologies of poems from Australia and India which constitute a great literary link between the nations. With Amelia Walker, he has guest edited a special issue for *TEXT*, Australia. He has kindly consented to answer a few questions about himself and his output.

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E.M.: Our journal is entitled *Margins*. What does this word evoke in contemporary India?

J.S.:

'Margins' is a loaded term implying multiple angles to look at it. It means the other, underprivileged, dislocated and uprooted by force or by circumstances. As a sociological category, it refers to different marginal positions, i.e. tribal margin, working class, geographical margin, people residing in conflict zones and people with disabilities. It also refers to a social hierarchy. In India, marginalised people dwell in all places including rural, suburban, and urban areas. Let me give you an example of a recent book, *The Partition of Indian Women*, edited by Carole Rozzonelli, Alessandro Monti and Jaydeep Sarangi. It is an unusual mix of reflective articles, poems and an interview which attempt to present Indian women, portioned from the main stream of power from a variety of experiences and perspectives, based on Indian cinema and literature (fiction and poetry). With Malsawmi Jacob of Mizoram, I worked on a book, *Prose Writings from North East India* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi). The North East consists of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. If one looks at the geographical map, the region is attached to the rest of India by a narrow strip aptly called 'chicken neck' to West Bengal. With Angana Dutta, I translated a book entitled, *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* which is a text book in many universities now. Its directness of style chronicling the 'realities' of growing up in a *namashudra* (casteless Hindu) community in Khulna is an engaging discourse. For me, 'margin' is mental constructs. We must break barriers at different levels to create space for equal opportunities, equity and inclusivity.

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I strongly believe that there will be a time when we shall not troubled/thrilled with the word, 'margins'; margin will be synonymous with the centre. They will not be binaries in critical frameworks.

E.M.: You are both a poet and a scholar. Do you think the two activities influence one another?

J.S.:

Yes. It's true. Reading habits give me an access to be familiar with world poetry. I read A. D. Hope to Salvatore Quasimodo. I consider myself fortunate that I was introduced to Federico García Lorca, Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, W.B. Yeats and John Keats very early in my life. They stayed. John Keats is my heart beat I read each day. Hampstead became my dream place. Being a student of literature, it was my good fortune to read British, American, Indian, West Indian, Australian and African poets as part of the courses. Their rhythm tuned my ears. Later on, I worked on world poetry at a length. They formed my hearth.

My close associations with leading Indian English poets and critics are always a blessing. This gave me an insight into the canon. Critical knowledge, at times, is a hindrance for free flow of poetry writing.

For me, Words never sleep. They keep happening. They play a long languid game of love and longing to where other forms wait. They curl into a rare many-hued fabric of joy! As a critic, I love exploring the untold. I open the doors of words and phrases and lead myself into the heart of thoughts. My training as a scholar works as a ladder of hope in the process. Still



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now, I find the process juicy and sumptuous. My creative or critical works are the products of joy that I experience in life.

E.M.: Can you tell us more about your background and family history?

J.S.:

I'm genetically Odiya, coming from Odisha, as a priest for the Kanakdurga Temple at Chilkigarh, nearly three hundred and fifty years ago. Here is the link to an article I wrote on my family tree and our ancestral relationship with Chilkigrah: https://www.chitrolekha.com/V2/n1/11_Kanakdurga_Temple_Medinipur.pdf

My links with Chilkigarh are genetic and academic. I'm an insider as well as an outsider. Situated on the bank of the rivulet Dulung, forest enclosed Chilkigarh is unique for its harmonious coexistence of tribal culture and Bramhin settlement and their cultural legacy. Famous for its forest cover and an ancient temple dedicated to Goddess Durga, is a small village. Demography of Chilkigarh involves a heterogeneous population; people of different communities have been living here for ages. All of them maintained their unique cultural nuances and it became a melting pot of cultures. I was born in a forest enclosed town of West Bengal, Jhargram. Jhargram has a magical charm for me. Its red soil, its forest, people here and its festivals are sap of my vitality. My father was a school teacher. I learnt my life-lessons mostly from him. I lost my brother too early in my life whom I miss in lonely nights. My mother, wife and my daughter are constant support for my works. Cricket was an important part of my making. It continued even in the hostel days at universities. My days in Hyderabad instilled many a subtle element in me. I came in contact with some great teachers. They taught me the



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fact how teaching could be an art form. I enjoyed teaching with my heart's content. My wife, Sutapa is my first reader for many of my poems. She is a teacher at Kapgari. My daughter has keen interest in literatures.

I feel myself fortune to take the first official class for the post graduate students of the Department of English of Sadhu Ramchand Murmu University of Jhargram when my home town got a State University. Within a busy schedule in Kolkata, I still go there and take few classes. I return to Jhargram as someone returns to her/his mother.

E.M.: As a poet and artist, what prompts you to compose? Can you share your sources of inspiration with us?

J.S.:

My choice of writing is deliberate because, as a post-colonial critic engaged with marginal discourse, I like to celebrate the small and local. India is an ethnological wonderland. Threads of Indian ways of life and society are the reservoir of poetic inspiration. Creativity is an aroma of human heart. Aroma has no colour or creed. So, regarding language, I do not have problem with my second language English and I don't see any problem with my first language either, which is like my mother's milk – Bangla. I am fortunate I can read Bangla which is an amazing reservoir of literature. How can I forget reading Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Prothom Alo* (*First Light*)? I am happy that I can use both the languages together as a product of typical Indian society. Knowing many languages help. I have so many things to say. Rivers are my vital dose for living and writing. Small rivers are sap of my existence. People call me, 'Bard on the banks of Dulung' for writings (obsessions?) about Dulung and people living nearby. The temple near



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the river Dulong – Kanak Durga Temple in Chilkigarh, the tribal culture associated with the river, I find everything very engaging and I feel an innate urge to transmute what I have experience. Dulong, for me, is the metaphor of celebration of the local. I think I always carry my land and people as inspiration. Old buildings, relics of the past, folklores and heritage sights haunt me. I'm at home with matters related to ancestors. I read Pablo Neruda and Giorgos Seferis in translation. I return to poetry each day. I'm blessed with genuine friendships since my childhood days. All are in my folders of love and longing. I like Jayanta Mahapatra's famous comment, "...poetry has to be witness" in his essay published in *Indian Literature*. I write poems because I feel happy after writing.

There are hours when meditative inwardness engulfs me. I reach at an ecstasy. That heightened space prompts me to write. I have been associated with a few social projects and some of the projects have given me strength to return to my soul's space. I have seen people practicing Truth to the highest scale. I call them Goddess. They are my temple, churches and mosques.

E.M.: Can you expand on your experience with marginalized groups, such as the Dalits?

J.S.:

I do not know why I am engaged with it but I am happy that I work with the Dalit writers of India. I find them fascinating. I am not afraid to face the truth. I am not afraid to unfold their truth in whatever small and humble way I can. Now it has become a commitment – a journey we travel together. I am happy to announce that there is a sound corpus of Dalit Literature and it exists with authority.



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I learnt a lot from stalwarts of Dalit movement in India: Sharankumar Limbale, Neerav Patel, Bama, Arjun Dangle, Harish Mangalam, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Palanimuthu Sivakami, JatinBala and Kapilkrishna Thakur – all are my good friends. 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 an opportunity to work with Dalit writers! My work is my book.

I've worked on literatures from the North East India. The history of Dalit literature in India is uniquely long, heterogeneous and multi-stratified. The political, cultural, linguistic and sociological forces that shaped the narratives of Dalit writing were never one-dimensional, constant and consistent for the various geographical and cultural regions within the country. My recently published translation, *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* (2022) is dedicated to dedicated to all people, all over the world, displaced and uprooted by force or by circumstances.

E.M.: How does the experience you relate in *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* resonate with so many other refugees across the world?

J.S.:

Dalit aesthetics is never a postulation of beauty as the basic value of human life in an equation of truth with beauty. It's rather an urgent voice of struggle against the age-old socio-political-cultural stratifications and power structures of Indian society. Jatin Bala was born in Jossore (now in Bangladesh) in the year 1949 and migrated to India in 1954. Partition of India forced



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his family to immigrate to India, and take shelter in refugee camps. Refugee, a politically sensitive term, has political as well as sociological connotations in contemporary world society. The history of India has been considerably influenced by refugees and policies related to them. The Governments, both in the state and at the centre, have adopted varied policies for 'owning' the refugees. While refugees have always wrested for stability and rootedness, low caste refugees have struggled harder being doubly disadvantaged – almost predictably they have been victims of the worst infringement of human rights and cultural riggings. In the autobiography the Septic wound bleeds. There are occasions for social resistance. This compelling autobiography by Jatin Bala exposes the iniquities of caste and class during the Partition of 1947 in Bengal. A refugee child growing up in a tent, his long struggle for a life of dignity is doubly hard when culturally fixed by a Dalit identity. In the book a seed sprouts with hope too.

Refugee literatures are literatures of social awakening. I consider them as an important body of 'conflict literature' written from different backgrounds, a must for reading for social change for a better tomorrow.

E.M.: Talking about the imagery in your poems, borders, boundaries abound, but also natural images, that appease the reader. Could you comment on that?

J.S.:

I read poetry every day. Images come to me as loan and love. My experiments with truth, history and legends give me an insight into border discourses. 'Door' is a recurrent image. I believe that walls can be turned into doors to create a borderless society. I read a lot of partition



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literature written in different places. History is a corridor of thoughts. I like to travel. For me, more we travel, more we learn. The Himalayas are my wonderland. Images come automatically like leaves to plants. Many Bengali language poets also help me to construct images. Stitching them into a fabric is a challenge. I share a poem with you,

Soul Spaces

Over my piercing eyes desire
is called for, again and again

Talking to you is my desire
dancing near the old canal at Jhargram

I celebrate my daughter's feats
taking a special *biryani* for home

As the summer rain sails over me
my desire makes me of its own

The silent waters of the Ganges
carrying the light of my silent eyes

Delayed is my mind's full moon,
someone calls me to meet in deep dark

Darkness has a voice, mysterious caller tones
You call; my desire has an evening, our moods mate

A long day signs off waiting for your
mood to return and celebrate the best in the world
Unbound from cultural images, meetings
her free spirit with a trident and a sword



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Bright blue, standing on Shiva she
keeps time, the dark mother of the land

As she moves in dense forest of life
my heart is taken on loan, undefined.

E.M.: What's next? Any plans for the future?

J.S.:

Living is always longing for something. I (with Basudhara Roy as co-editor) submitted an anthology to Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, *Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map*. It's an anthology of poems by twenty leading poets writing in English. I hope it will act as a map maker. With Zinia Mitra, I've been working for a translation project. It's the translation of a fiery Dalit anthology, *Chandalinir Kabita* (Poems by a Chandalini) by Kalyani Thakur Charal. I also have a plan for a critical book on Dalit Aesthetics.

E.M.: Well, best of luck, Jaydeep! And thank you!

Bio-bibliographical note

Elisabetta Marino is Associate Professor of English literature at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" and head of "Asia and the West" research centre. She is the author of four monographs: a volume on the figure of Tamerlane in British and American literature (2000); an introduction to British Bangladeshi literature (2005); a study on the relationship between Mary Shelley and Italy (2011); an analysis of the Romantic dramas on a mythological subject (2016). In 2006 she published the first Italian translation of poems by Maria Mazziotti Gillan. Between 2001 and 2023 she has edited/co-edited twelve collections of essays (three more are forthcoming) and a Special Forum of Journal of Transnational American Studies (2012). In 2022,



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she translated *Parkwater*, a Victorian novel by Ellen Wood, for the first time into Italian. She co-edited a special issue of *De-Genere. Journal of Postcolonial, Literary and Gender Studies* (2022), and is currently acting as guest editor for a special issue of *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* focused on Italian American material culture.

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