

Interview

*Dr. Gitanjali Chawla and Dr. Aarati Mujumdar
in conversation with Professor Raj Kumar*

As I wait for Professor Raj Kumar to get me a cup of coffee in his verdant office at the Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi, I notice a book on his table. The book is Akhila Naik's Bheda, the first Odia Dalit novel translated by the professor himself. The dedication to the book, "For my daughter Ishita, a stranger to caste discrimination" leaves me intrigued. I ask him to explain what being Dalit meant to him, and how his daughter, far removed from his roots in Kalahandi, Odisha was a "stranger to caste discrimination." What followed left my cup of coffee cold as both of us engaged in the dynamics of his being a Dalit Professor.

GC: For you Sir, education is the way to emancipation. You have come a long way from Kalahandi (now Nuapada) to Delhi. Both literally and metaphorically, this journey must have been fraught with several challenges?

RK: It was a huge leap for me, coming from an illiterate family, I happened to be the first-generation literate from my community, i.e. the first one to have passed matriculation, I did my B.A. and then M.A. from Sambhalpur University. Thereafter I came to JNU (Delhi) in 1991 for my M.Phil. There were too many problems. The first being financial, I was struggling to settle down, besieged by hostel fees, tuition fees, living expenses and there was no money coming from home, so I started giving tuitions. Basically, I am a self-dependent person. Over the years, I did very well, but it was a struggle even at the academic front. My post-graduation syllabus stopped at the modern era, we did not know about post modernism, post structuralism, etc. It was only when I came to JNU that I realized that we did not know much about the current fields of research. It was not a burden, but then it was definitely difficult for me to participate in classroom discussions. I had to really work hard, sometimes 16-18 hours to catch up with

my classmates. Delhi gave me lots of opportunities, not just in terms of academics but in everything. The culture in JNU, the kind of books available, the people around me; this was also the time we formed the United Dalit Students Forum in JNU and I was chosen as the first member. Though the journey was difficult but there were several opportunities that I availed to grow further, and today I am a Professor of English at Delhi University. A lot of credit goes to my early environment and the support that I got from many of my teachers, classmates and friends.

GC: Language Proficiency must have bothered you at some point in time?

RK: Yes, as far as English pronunciation was concerned, definitely. It was very different because in schools and colleges from where I came, teachers never taught us how to pronounce a particular word. So, it was self-learning, I must tell you the way we tried to learn, it went on for years, to utter a particular word in a particular form. I always tell my students even today that I am not from a Public School. It took time. Even today, I am learning new words, their meaning and pronunciation. Language learning is a lifelong process.

GC: With the baggage of caste comes a degree of self-consciousness. Do you think one can ever get rid of that baggage of self-consciousness?

RK: No, that will always be there. Actually, somewhere at the back, it will never go, no matter how much you may try to drive it out, it will never go.

GC: Is it desirable that it goes?

RK: No, it is not.

GC: You have a different vantage point!

RK: Yes, we talk of heterogeneity, plurality, diversity, I don't think it is desirable that everything will be the [*sic*] one and the same, mono culture, mono language.

GC: I went through the introduction to *Bheda*, not just here, but in several articles as well. You write that socio-economic background is partly responsible for the situation the Dalit communities are in today. Could you talk about some of the initiatives taken by the government and other institutions like DU and JNU to bring about inclusiveness in society?

RK: As far as the role of the government is concerned, it is through reservations mainly and some projects. Affirmative action in the form of reservations is definitely very useful. Though implementing agencies are not really trying to implement it effectively over the years. The spirit of Indian society is essentially casteist, even DU and JNU are casteist. The spirit of Indian society is growing

and will continue to do so. This will of course change over the years. More and more people from backward communities are coming forward, are participative. Even at the University level there are changes, there is progress.

GC: There are changes, but this is academia, [which is] allegedly progressive. Yet do you think that casteism is deep rooted, even in central universities such as DU and JNU.

RK: Yes, this is academia! There are two ways one can understand caste. We as academia try to be radical in the public space, whenever there is a lecture, workshop, seminar or a conference, we talk about the radicalization of some of the spheres of Indian life. But when it comes to the private and the personal, we try to stick to our own customs, rigid rules, family traditions. That is why many non-brahmanical leaders like Ambedkar and others tried to point out that it is the practice, practices actually that follow and not the theory. One is the idea, the idea could be radical, could be revolutionary, but what is important is how to put the ideas into practice. As Ambedkar stated, “outcaste is a product of the caste system”, and finally annihilation of caste will be there only when there are inter-caste marriages and that is not happening and that is why Dalit writers ask the final question, “Will you give in marriage your daughter to my son?” I don’t think Indian society is ready to accept that.

GC: Not yet Not now!

RK: Yes, not yet, the incidents of honour killings are evidence of this fact. Indian society is slowly changing, but I don’t think a day will come when caste will go away or completely vanish from this country.

GC: You can’t imagine a casteless India! And also, perhaps what is disturbing is that these honour killings are not very far from mainstream centres, urban educated academic centres, allegedly radical and progressive?

RK: We have seen it in DU and JNU as well. In various spheres, whether it is in appointments or selections or promotions. Even JNU, which is believed to be the most radical, is also casteist. There are many examples where caste elements are working, it is part of the system and unless and until people try to bring changes within, nothing will change. It is the “castes of mind”. Nicholas Dirks talks about the “castes of mind”.

GC: Could you suggest some other measures that could be taken to bring the marginalized communities to the mainstream?

RK: Academics must bring caste in discussion. The first and foremost thing that

we have to do as part of larger society is to bring the discursive practices in various forums, maybe by offering courses. There is no full paper yet in Delhi University on Dalit literature, so we as academia must find space where we can actually discuss issues related to caste. We cannot avoid bringing this discussion into classrooms, which we are now doing. We have now been able to give some part of the UG syllabus to what we call Dalit literature. There is very little of it in M.A. though. In the department, I offer 4 M.Phil. courses on literary aspects of caste, besides, I have 6-7 Ph.D. students working on Dalit literature of different languages. We cannot maybe bring actual changes by giving money to the poor and that kind of thing. Activism has its own place but, since we have space, discursive space we can actually try to bring in different kinds of discussion. It is only with Jotiba Phule that caste began to be discussed publically, but it was Ambedkar who made it an all India Phenomenon. We cannot avoid caste. Secondly, we can write articles, books, contribute to magazines and implement some of the pedagogical practices

GC: How can pedagogy play an important role?

RK: Pedagogy shows how it is not one kind of approach but how diverse and different approaches could be available to a text. And since we are teachers and every year if even one or two students understand the complexities, we have made a difference. It is important to make students aware of caste linked issues since they are the change agents. They are the future citizens of India, they are the ones who are going to build India.

GC: True, changing one mindset is more important than how many first divisions we have churned out.

RK: I am happy to share that from my course, a Brahmin girl and a Dalit boy from UP got married recently despite the fact that their families were very orthodox and traditional; and moreover, they said that they were inspired by my course so there are examples that are coming. Discussions bring in some space from which change can occur.

GC: Heartening indeed! In one of your articles on Dalit literature in Odia, you mention that Odia Dalits are by far the most oppressed of all. Until now, why haven't these voices been more vocal than the communities in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh or Gujarat?

RK: Yes, in the same article I mentioned that the existential condition of Odia Dalits is responsible for their oppression. Dalit population in Odisha constitutes nearly 18 per cent of the total population, but they are marginal to the core, because economically they have to totally depend on the masters. They cannot

revolt since they have to compromise for their livelihood. Secondly, we have Lord Jagannath, a pan Odia God, also an Indian phenomenon. Odia culture is dominated by the Jagannath Culture. Lord Jagannath was initially a tribal God belonging to the Savara tribe. But later the Savara God was hinduized and brahmanized by the Vaishnavas and seen as the 10th avatar of Vishnu. See how Hinduism works, any kind of protesting voice is appropriated or subsumed, and Odisha is rich in protesting voices. Buddha had a dominant presence from 7th century AD onwards. We had Buddhist Siddhas, saints who wrote protest poems condemning caste; and then again from 15th century onwards, we had Sarala Das who was a shudramuni; and then Panchasakha and Bhima Bhoi, a tribal poet in the 19th century; Phule's contemporary, who also protested against Hinduism, and then in 1970s we find some reference to caste by early Odia Dalit poets. But it is only after 1990s when Ambedkar's writings and speeches were published and the V.P. Singh Government declared "Social Justice and Empowerment" on the birth centenary of Ambedkar; it is only then people understood what is called "Dalit Consciousness". We now have full-fledged Odia Dalit Literature. My next book is on Odia Dalit Literature. There were always protests which were suppressed by dominant forces. Besides, Dalits in Odisha were too marginal to command that kind of force. It was their existential condition that prevented them from being very vocal and secondly there were no Dalit leaders like Ambedkar. There were few minor leaders who were coopted by Congress and were actually congress party workers.

GC: What reasons can be attributed to the fact that many Odia authors are not being included in the English curriculum of University departments and colleges?

RK: Yes, we now have one or two, like Basudev Sunani's poem 'Prayer' is there. There is Jayant Mahapatra, who is also an Odia, but not a Dalit poet. It actually depends on who are framing the syllabus. One has to know which writers must be included because most of the writings in Indian languages are not available in English. That is why people may not know, for example, Basudev Sunani's poetry. We are going to publish Dalit writings from Eastern India, a combination of Odia, Bengali, Ahamia, to be published by OUP very soon. Unless these works are available in translation, teachers in Delhi University will not be aware of them, unless they are Odia themselves. Translation plays a major role in tracing the kind of writing that comes from a particular region.

GC: Many of the works written by early women poets were militant, aggressive and more focused on issues related to collective identity. How are Dalit women's voices different today?

RK: There is a trajectory, when Dalit women started writing, whether it was Bama, or Sivakami in Tamil, or Baby Kamble in Marathi, Supriya Malik in Odia or others in Telugu, Bengali, etc. Dalit literature was earlier written mostly by men, who were the first to get educated. When women started writing, they wrote both about the community and also about women themselves, i.e. the private space; for example, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is a critique of how patriarchy exists within the Dalit community. Sivakami, a Tamil novelist is very critical of how a Dalit leader becomes a sex-addict in *The Grip of Change*. He seduces not only Dalit women but also women from the upper castes. This kind of critique is very rare, but now there are ample Dalit women voices who, not only critique, but give new direction to Dalit movement. Earlier it was male dominated, but now women are forcing the Dalit leadership to reconsider Dalit women issues, so there is a big change. For example, Sivakami's two novels, *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women*, Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* and then there is Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, and interestingly in Akhila Naik's book *Bheda*, there is a chapter called "Mastrani" and this is his longest chapter out of seven chapters. This is a man who is trying to write from a Dalit's women's point of view.

GC: Today, with the emergence of well-informed Dalit thinkers, commentators, etc., and the literature that is subsequently produced, would this literature represent class consciousness or would it get reduced to autonomous reflection and self-action resulting in the creation of new socio-cultural identities?

RK: The term Dalit has to be actually defined properly; because originally Dalit was a term that used to refer to ex-untouchables, so there is a caste characteristic. When the Dalit Panthers movement started, the founder members like Namdeo Dhasal, a Marxist, included class within caste. For Namdeo, Dalit is a combination of both caste and class, whereby he included industrial workers, agricultural workers, women of all categories and ex-untouchables. After Dalit Panthers in 1970s, we had writers like Kancha Ilaiah in the 1990s, who used the word "Bahujan", a term used earlier by Phule. When Kancha Ilaiah uses the term, "Bahujan", he refers to SC, ST, OBC and minorities and amongst minorities particularly those who have converted from Hinduism to other religions like Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, Dalit Sikhs, Dalit Buddhists, etc. And unless and until they all come together, change is not possible. So, for a political reason, a larger unity is feasible. When we now talk about Dalit literature, it is not just about class but a fusion of caste and class, whereby the idea of what we call "Dalit consciousness" works. It comes from the Ambedkarite movement, Dalit consciousness has to be a combination of both. Caste is static, class is dynamic.

Once a Dalit, always a Dalit and once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin. Class can change, one can be a rich Dalit but socially, [one] will remain a Dalit nevertheless. Mayawati will always be considered as a Dalit Chief Minister; we [currently] have a Dalit President. Dalit will always be a prefix. Shyamlal has written an autobiography, the *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*, so even amongst higher classes, Dalit will always be prefixed.

GC: In March 2017, a prominent Ambedkarite, Dr. Kiravale was murdered in Kolhapur. Do you feel that his oratory skills were considered a threat in propagating the Ambedkar ideology through which more and more people were converging to the Centre?

RK: Orality travels far and wide, and since Dalit communities all over India are not fully literate, that is why orality works. Oral literature is very rich; it attracts people's attention. For example, in Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring*, the idea of orality is potent. Rao talks about, how Yellanna, the first generation of Dalit activists bring Dalit consciousness to villages through their performances. Orality is dynamic, but there is always a problem with orality as it is never documented; but at one level, there is popularity, people are attracted to it, music and dance are a part of it and Dalit communities all over India are very musical. Definitely, this is a threat to the upper classes as there is mobilization. Change is slow and gradual but [I] am hopeful that there will be a difference.

GC: On behalf of Dr. Aarati Mujundar and myself, thank you so much Professor Raj Kumar, for sparing not just your valuable time but also your views on the subject. Your passion and knowledge is truly inspirational. I am positive that this interview will motivate several young researchers to pursue Dalit studies.

*Questions for this interview were framed by Dr. Aarati Mujundar

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