
Interview

When You are in the Classroom as a Teacher, You Have No Caste, No Gender and No Class!

Raj Kumar in Conversation with Panchanan Dalai

Dr Panchanan Dalai is a poet, writer, translator, and academic. With an MA, MPhil. and PhD. from the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, he has been teaching at the Banaras Hindu University since 2005, and has research interests in the area of Diaspora, Dalit Literature, Cultural Studies, and New Literatures. He has been teaching various courses at BA MA and PhD levels such as Renaissance Studies, British Poetry, New Literatures in English, as well as Critical Theory and Research Methodology. He has two books entitled *Modernity and Provincial Writing: The Case of Manoj Das* and *Understanding Island Diaspora: Literature from the Margins* and several research articles published in books and journals.

Prof Raj Kumar (RK): Among a poet, writer, translator, and teacher, which role would you like the most and why?

Dr Panchanan Dalai (PD): I would always prefer to be a teacher. A teacher is an embodiment of all these—a poet, a writer, or a translator. Teaching entails creating, critiquing, and translating too. A modern teacher in an interdisciplinary era has to inculcate all these to be an effective and important educator. It is also true that a poet is a teacher of teachers, but that is a different idea that was true to olden times only.

RK: At present you are a Faculty member in the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi. What are your specializations for teaching and research?

PD: My MPhil was on Indian Literature and PhD on the Indian Diaspora. After joining teaching, I have been teaching students from all levels—Undergraduate, Postgraduate and PhD. So, I teach almost all genres

and subjects, say from the History of English Literature to History of Sexuality. As far as my research areas are concerned, I am into Marginal Literatures, Dalit Literature, New Literatures (Canada, Africa, Australia, etc.), and Cultural Studies. As for my method, I am quite innovative and interdisciplinary; you can see some of my teaching assignments uploaded on *academia.edu*.

RK: One of your research areas is Modern Dalit Literature. Who are the Dalit writers and poets you admire the most and why?

PD: Well, I was first introduced to Sharan Kumar Limbale, and Bama. But the list is constantly expanding now. Arjun Dangles' *Poisoned Bread* was also a great exposure, besides Om Prakash Valmiki's *Jhootan*, Akhila Naik's *Bheda*, Dalit writings of Basudev Sunani, Sanjay Bag, Pitambar Tarai, Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, Urmila Pawar's *Mother Wit*, Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, Sankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya's *Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation*, Raj Kumar's *Dalit Personal Narratives*. Manohar Mouli Biswas, Damodar More, Anil Gharai and Sanjay Bag are my favourites. They are interesting because they have perfectly yoked the realities of Dalit angst and the writerly responsibility of spreading Dalit awareness in their writings. However, I am also eagerly waiting for young Dalit writers writing in English and am sure that time is not very far.

RK: Your mother tongue is Odia. But as a poet you prefer to write in English. What are your comments on the idea of Dalit poetry written in English today?

PD: Dalit writers should not write for themselves only. Their writings should be a mirror for all the 'Othered' in other spaces too. English enables me to achieve this and connect to a wider audience.

True, oppression can be best expressed in the language of the oppressed only. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has very rightly expressed this in his *Decolonising the Mind*. But the language of subversion, assertion and recognition in today's world is English. We should let different species grow within Dalit literature! There are young scholars now who are more capable of handling English as a medium of their critical and creative expressions. Meena Kandasamy is one such example.

RK: Dalit writings are about writing a revolution: a revolution to bring an end to the oppressive caste and class structures in Indian society.

What is your opinion about the status of caste in present-day India?

PD: Yes, any form of response to oppression anywhere and any point of human history has to be revolutionary. Take the examples of Black literature, Holocaust literature, Feminist literature, etc. Dalit literature too has this spirit of revolution. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his famous book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* has categorically emphasized this important aspect saying that literature is not just for pleasure but to bring social changes.

Regarding the current caste status, I think it is still a grim and glaring reality with myriad forms of manifestations. That is why, Dalit writings have to multifariously respond towards such subtle changes (both within and outside the Dalit communities), instead of clinging to the old idea of art and aesthetics.

RK: The present-day Dalit movements are mostly in the doldrums. They are not so vibrant as they used to be in the 1980s and 90s. With education available to Dalits now Dalit consciousness has grown over the years. Dalit literature has also grown tremendously. Dalit studies like English studies and women's studies is an autonomous discipline. With several developments around them, Dalits now are in dilemma what to choose from: whether class (capitalism) or religion (conversion) or education (employment) or all these?

PD: It should be all these and beyond. Dalit life is intersected with all these aspects of a society. If all Dalit writers individually respond to their respective problems and situations, together their writings, as Dalit writings, would be a body of heterogeneous response to Dalit conditions. This 'heteroglossic' and 'carnivalist' approach would strengthen Dalit consciousness and Dalit epistemologies taking examples from the ground realities.

RK: It is generally known that Dalit writers and poets basically write in plain and simple language, the language of everyday life. They also evoke several mythical figures: Baliraja, Ekalavya, Sabari et al—to mention a few. By using these mythical characters Dalit writers and poets are not only reinterpreting Indian myths, they are also rewriting Indian history. Do you want to make any comments on the use of Dalit myths?

PD: Dalit language is not plain and simple anymore. In fact, the language of Dalit writers from West Bengal and Odisha are equally robust like that

of their mainstream writers. Pitambar Tarai, Anil Gharai, Manoranjan Byapari and Sanjay Bag are the best examples. The ordinariness of Dalit language was a linguistic myth created by the mainstream, but now best challenged by such Dalit writers.

As for your second observation, you are right. Myth matters in demystifying many caste mysteries. Moreover, the Dalit uprising is not only political but cultural too; and I think the latter is more appropriate. Because, irrespective of political/constitutional guarantees, there still exists atrocious cultural discrimination of Dalits. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution has won the battle often; for example, the Irish Revolution and Indian Freedom Struggle, etc.

RK: How essential is it for a Dalit writer to read literature from other languages, other regions and other countries?

PD: It is very essential for a Dalit writer to read literature from other languages, other regions and other countries. It is a self-depreciatory to outrightly reject or ignore other writings. I think this would be literary casteism again. In fact, all marginal literatures/new literatures acknowledge the necessity of imbibing, comparing, and contrasting with other literatures. So why shouldn't Dalit literature learn from other literatures too? Dalit writers have to shake off certain traditional ideas such as avoiding other literatures. It is not correct, both ethically and logically. Remember, you have to dive into the water to hunt a shark!

RK: Who in Dalit literature do you admire and why?

PD: The theorists I like are: Gail Omvedt, Gopal Guru, Manohar Mouli Biswas, to name a few. But I admire Gopal Guru the most for his innovative, critical concepts and rich intellectualism.

RK: Dalit art is as important as Dalit literature to spread the messages of Dalit freedom. How do Dalit folk art, music, song, film, etc. contribute to the larger Dalit movements?

PD: All these are called Dalit cultural capitalism. For long, this capital was never used in Dalit movements. The blacks used their black art as part of the cultural crusade against the whites; this should have happened with the Dalits as well. Dalit consciousness and the Dalit movement rely as much on Dalit literature as on Dalit cultural capitals; in fact, they are two sides of the same coin. It certainly serves as an area of creative competition to assert Dalit visibility and equality.

RK: Now that Dalit Studies are an established discipline all over India and abroad, please comment on the various pedagogical practices for teaching Dalit writings.

PD: I think there should be a shared platform for teachers to formulate more effective and impressive Dalit curriculum. They should share various pedagogic ideas and experiences from across the globe. Literatures in various forms and from various disciplines such as politics, sociology, human rights, even science, etc., should also be included in the Dalit syllabus. Teachers should also compare and contrast Dalit writings with other mainstream writings while teaching. And remember, when you are in the classroom as a teacher, you have no caste, no gender and no class!

RK: What is the future of Dalit literature?

PD: The future of Dalit literature is certainly bright, but Dalit literature will not remain the same as most Dalit scholars and critics presume it to be. The embers will definitely be there, but its flames would be of different shades and shapes.

RK: Thank you so much for the interview.

Raj Kumar is Professor and Head in the Department of English, Delhi University. His research areas include autobiographical studies, Dalit literature, Indian writing in English, Odia literature and post-colonial studies. A reputed translator from Odia into English, his books, Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity and Dalit Literature and Criticism by Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi in 2010 and 2019 respectively and English translation of Akhila Naik's Bheda, the first Odia Dalit novel, 2017 (Oxford University Press, Delhi) have been well received.

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