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## Literature in the Age of Global Culture: Arun Dash in Conversation with Sachidananda Mohanty

[Interviewer: **Arun Dash**

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1. *Looking at the technological evolutions and rising popularity of social media in the beginning of this decade, it seems Internet holds a rare significance for any sort of literature to flourish. In such a milieu, how do you foresee the future of Online Web Journals/Magazines especially in the Indian scenario?*

It is an excellent question. In terms of the outreach and vast number of people who are given access to literature, electronic media holds a great deal of potential. At the same time, the more relevant question is: how many people are truly interested in literature? It is true that social media has become very important for a certain section, the influential middle class, of our population, particularly the youth. But I am not really sure how many of those people are really interested in literature.

It is true that social media and the forums through the World Wide Web have a great deal of potential. Second thing is that in order to make it effective, there has to be a corresponding interest and awareness in disciplines like literature. Today I feel that sufficient numbers of people in the technological and industrial society are not interested in literature. Literature is perceived as a soft option. So two things must go hand in hand – we must recreate an interest in literature among the youth.

2. *In the Hyderabad Literary Festival 2012, you along with other notable litterateurs, contributed to the session 'Translating Bharat'. Could you brief us*

*about the essence of the discussion that went on in that session, with specific reference to your part?*

I think the operative part of the rubric was not 'India'; it was not NRIs either. There are three categories that could be thought of when we think of the geographical and cultural landmass in South Asia, called India. One is of course the NRI, the Indians who leave abroad, they voluntarily make a living abroad, primarily for economic reasons; the second one is 'India', the anglicized and westernized population of our country; and the third, obviously, refers to 'Bharat' – people who primarily speak in major Indian languages. So it is not a difference in nomenclature; there is a substantial difference in the worldview itself and the way English is used primarily as a marker of success, status and hierarchy in our own society. So when we think of translating Bharat, we are not referring to 'India' and we are not referring to 'NRIs'. We are referring to those sections who speak mostly Indian languages, called the *bhasha* languages. How can these *bhasha* languages and literature be transmitted to other different languages? Translation plays a very important role through cross-cultural communication. The gathering that was there in the Hyderabad Literary Festival panel was debating those issues – what are the difficulties involved in translating from one language into English and from one Indian language into another Indian language? There were primarily three members: Jeelani Bano, who is from the Urdu literature background; I was speaking about the Oriya scene; and the third scholar Hemang Desai spoke about his knowledge of Gujarati. Each one of us was trying to highlight what would constitute the problems and each was also trying to give some answer to the problems. In brief, we were talking about the asymmetry in terms of the Indian languages and English and the kind of role, the hegemonic and domineering role that English has played, the kind of texts that are being translated and what factors determine the choice of the text for translation.

Very often these are political decisions. They are not necessarily archival or cultural. To give you one example, very few texts of from the original 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century background in Odisha have been translated into English. I have been translating the texts of Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Basant Kumari Pattanaik and Bidyut Prabha Devi. But very few people know about them. On the other hand, some communities like the Bengalis, the Malayalis, the Kannadigas and the Maharshtrians have been translating more of their own traditional literature. Similarly, Medieval poetry, very little of that kind, is being translated, for instance, Bhima Bhoi, Salabega. The present generation of young educated, in many of our states, are not aware of their cultural background. So in other words, those who are writing creatively in their own languages can do so provided they have an adequate awareness of their own linguistic, literary and cultural past. I think the need of the hour is to have cultural transactions across linguistic borders. And I feel translation can play an important role with regard to that. Whenever we talk about translation, generally people think it's translation from Indian languages into English. But very few people understand that a more important and useful role can be played in terms of translating from one regional language to another regional language. In brief, these are some of the issues that we talked about in the panel discussion that we devoted to *Translating Bharat*.

3. *The rich Indian literatures have quite a few classics and works of art, written in our own languages. But the readership and popularity of such classics and works of art at the national and international level has been abysmally low and the efforts to popularize them seem to be insignificant. In this scenario, do you think translation of these works into English would give our literature better exposure? Could you share your thoughts on this?*

Well, I have spoken about some of these aspects in my previous answer. The question is: translating these great literatures of the past into English – would they necessarily give an encouragement for better understanding of our past in the contemporary context. Now, if you think of the English speaking audience in our country, who constitute what you call the intellectual community, to that extent, of course, it is useful. But the whole point is: why should intellectuals be confined to only the English knowing? There are many in our towns and villages who are also very well-read and they are culturally very literate. It is possible that they do not have the kind of English knowledge that we expect them to have. But lot of wisdom of traditional and cultural significance can be found among native Indian elites. So I would say that translating our own texts into English – English as a window to the world, English as a means of communication across linguistic barriers, English that serves the role of taking our own great cultural tradition and heritage to the outside world – to that extent, English will play an important role. But I would argue, as Gulzar, Pavan K. Verma and U. R. Ananthamurthy do we need to translate more from one Indian language to another Indian language. Very often, we are not even aware of each other. Neighbours are not aware of each other. During the late 19th and early 20th century, we had people like Sailabala Das and Malati Choudhury who came from Bengal to Odisha. Sarala Devi and my mother Bidyut Prabha Devi had read many of the Bengali texts. Today, we find that despite advanced communication and Internet, very few people from the respective states read each other's texts. They are very much confined to themselves. This is a paradoxical aspect of our cultural situation – I think this should change. Oriyas are not reading Bengali literature and Bengalis are not reading Oriya literature, and there are very few journals which really devote pages to translating texts from the neighbouring regions. Let us first know about neighbouring regions before we know about those from far-off. Even if you ask well-informed Oriya thinkers or writers, you will be surprised as to how very few people have read Bengali texts, Hindi texts or Telugu texts. There is hardly any interaction between Telugu literature and Oriya literature although we happen to be neighbours and many districts of our own state are bilingual, like Paralakhemundi, Berhampur, Ganjaam and Gajapati. You will agree that this in itself is very ironical, this is unfortunate. I think there should be a greater degree of cultural transactions across the regional barriers and translation can play an important role in this regard.

4. *The younger generation of Indian English writers have seen quite a bit of success in selling their fiction (novels or short story collections) to the present day readers. But Indian English poetry seems to have fallen behind in the readership race. What can be done to increase the readership of the English poetry in India?*

It is true that in terms of the genres, novel has an upper hand over other genres like drama and poetry. And it is understandable. Because of all the literary genres, novel, as DH Lawrence says, is one 'bright book of life'. It is primarily a medium that really reaches out to people at all levels. It deals with social experience of individuals whereas poetry is largely a forum which is more reflective and subjective. It is very good for self-reflection. So that is understandable. Besides, there are very few takers for poetry, because poetry basically deals with compressed language, vocabulary, syntax, idioms and metaphors. Those are not very easy to grasp and in today's industrial age, we are not talking about students in university circle who read poetry as an academic exercise, we are talking about a forum, a genre of literature which has wide appeal for people because they love it, not because they are compelled to read it in the classroom. There's a difference between the two. So poetry – British, American and Indian poetry – is being read in the classroom context in universities - that is fine, because publishers definitely don't really publish for the students, they publish for a wider audience. There was a time in the 90s when major publishing houses like Orient Longman, Penguin India and Oxford University Press brought out poetry collections, but over a period in time, publishers found that poetry collections don't sell. So they stopped publishing poetry collections altogether.

Now to answer your question pointedly, I would say that there would be greater interest in poetry, provided we create an interest in poetry. Books will sell provided we generate an interest in that particular genre. You will find that there are more people who are trying to be poets than people who are willing to be readers of poetry. This is a very contradictory and paradoxical phenomenon. Because somehow the idea that 'I can become a poet' has a wide appeal – the whole idea of poetry, the iconic role of a poet, seem to enjoy a perennial appeal. Because a poet is a rebel. A poet is somebody who is trying to have conversation with the self. A poet is somebody who is reflecting his own deeper personal experiences in language. That's something which is seen in Sappho, Illiad, Valmiki and Vyasa. And more so in the industrial capitalist society where there is so much of alienation, individuals are trying to deal with loneliness, sorrow, longing and separation and related issues of life which are deeply personal. From that point of view, I think there is no other genre which is more suitable for dealing with these issues of life than poetry. It's paradoxical that in the industry-capitalistic context, where great interest should be in poetry, very few people seem to be interested in this domain. Why then are people not interested in reading poetry? I think the answer is there has to be greater interest in language. In modern day context, there is insufficient awareness of what language really represents. Our language teaching itself is also very flawed. If for example, students from their early age are taught the value of language, that language is a very subtle mean of communication and our deeper experiences can be communicated through language, then I think, in due course, individuals irrespective of the profession they are in, will be greatly drawn towards poetry. Here I think *poetry societies* can play an important role.

5. *In your writing career so far, you have successfully ventured into diverse areas and touched upon a number of genre of writing. Which of the genre that you write in has given you more freedom to unleash your creativity and how?*

There are two genres which have deeply appealed to me, and they are also considered very important in the present cultural context. One I would cite is biography. Literary biography as a genre has greatly appealed to me. We are very intrigued by the lives of individuals and their destinies: why certain things happen to certain individuals? And I am particularly interested in the lives of the writers, those writers who are generally marginalized. That's where archival research comes in. I am interested in the past, those writers who were very distinguished in the past and yet are completely forgotten today. So for last fifteen years or so, I have been doing a lot of research into the cultural past of our state, Odisha. I began to do this in the *Lost Tradition: Early Women's Writing in Orissa 1898-1950*, Sage Publications, 2005. Women are generally not mentioned, literally not mentioned in the history of literature in Oriya or other languages. Their experience has clearly been marginalized. I was very curious to know as to how they lived and in what circumstances they wrote, why is that they have been completely forgotten today. They functioned against great odds. It was not an easy life that they lived. The literary women were in a domestic setting, so I call them *literary domestics*, without any pejorative connotation regarding domesticity. I was curious to see in what circumstances the women wrote, whether they discarded family life in order to write. Today there is greater choice with women. But in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for writers like Sarala Devi, Bidyut Prabha Devi, Pratibha Ray and Kuntala Kumari Sabat, that option was not there.

I was greatly interested in the biography and I had always been interested in the biographies of great western writers like Vladimir Nabokov, D H Lawrence, Joseph Conrad and others. A general biographer cannot necessarily excel in doing a literary biography. In order to write a literary biography, there has to be an in-depth knowledge of literature. You require knowledge of various kinds – you require knowledge of literature, you require knowledge of history, you require knowledge of education, you require knowledge of other disciplines – to be able to write a good literary biography.

The second category that I have been interested in is the cultural history of India's past. The latest book that I have worked on - it has taken me almost five years – is called *The Tale of My Exile by Barindra Kumar Ghose*, who was the younger brother of Sri Aurobindo Ghose. Barindra was a revolutionary who was sentenced to death in the Alipore Bomb case. Upon appeal, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and he was then sent to Andaman's cellular jail. He wrote his account and this account was supposed to be lost. The project I did was to recover this text. So much of the archival work which is being done, deals with the retrieval of our cultural memory. Why is cultural memory so important? Cultural memory is important for defining our individual and community identity. If we don't have a memory, then we are completely disoriented. You find that a lot of alienation takes place because there is a loss of our memory. This loss of memory has been created by the peculiar kind of

education that we go through. We are completely removed from our own context. You will notice that many people give up their own languages: the tribals are giving up their languages; the people who have come from regional background are consciously giving up their regional languages in favour of some kind of pan-Indian English. But English is an alien tongue. English doesn't give us an access to our past. But by consciously giving up their own languages, people are putting their back against our own cultural traditions. The idea that one should be advocating is not monolingualism or the hegemony of English language. *It should be bilingualism if not multilingualism.* So by the retrieval of our own cultural past, we will be able to establish connections with our own self and we can define our own identity much better, which is why I devoted five years of my time doing this book. It has required a great deal of knowledge of *a*) incarceration narrative (prison narrative), *b*) the history of the penal colonies, because Andaman is not the only island where the British or the colonial powers had the colony. They had penal colonies also in Malaysia, in Gyana. Others also had their penal colonies. What has been the history of these penal colonies, and in what circumstances people were sent there? What kind of narratives and accounts have they left? What is the significance of those narratives in the present context? Because the history, the past, should speak to us. It is not, as TS Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' says, the 'pastness' of the past but its presence. If the past can speak to us in a relevant and contemporary fashion, then those past narratives are of great benefit. Otherwise they have only museum value. What I have in mind is something living; it is not something dead, which is found only in the archives or in the museums in an inanimate manner.

6. *What has been the toughest criticism given to you as an author? What has been the best?*

A paradoxical fact is that an activity in which I have spent less effort, like newspaper articles, has fetched a greater amount of recognition to me than the serious work that I have carried out over the years. Some people even take pride in telling me that I am a journalist! And I am quite amused. Because the journalistic writings do not really take too much of my time. You get disproportionate amount of recognition because of the newspaper forum in which you are writing. Newspapers are a very important kind of forum I do agree. But to my mind, the more lasting contribution that I have made is in the field of research books that I have produced. A research book of the 'cultural kind', because, I am no longer doing work of the 'literary' kind, in the narrow sense of the term, a work which can be described as cultural studies project. Satisfaction comes when a book is finished. I am not a woman or a mother, so I cannot describe to you about the creative satisfaction of giving birth to a child, but I think the experience is analogous to giving birth to a child.

7. *Is there anything you would like to share with the prospective Indian English litterateurs?*

Well, I am not very much enamoured of those writers who write in English and are disconnected from our own linguistic and cultural past or present. I don't think much of those writers who are seeking publicity or recognition abroad through the media or television. Since your question is with regard to the people who are writing in English, I would say: do write but do remain connected with our own multi-cultural reality. If you are connected to our own regional past and present, and our multiple tradition, if we can speak in a language which is lucid and language which is organic, as opposed to the language which is stylized, which is not creative, which is jargon-ridden, which creates satisfaction for the esoteric literati but cannot really reach out to the large number of readers, then those books and those writings are not of great importance to me. One might get lot of name and fame. But their work will not have lasting value, because, ultimately, whether one likes or not, the touchstone that we have to think of, or the criterion that we have to think of, is wide popular appeal. There has been a tendency to really run down popularity as if popularity is a bad thing. Yes, popularity in certain cases may not really be indicative of the quality of the work, like in a cheap detective novel, romance stories.

If I write something that most of the people cannot even read and cannot comprehend, then what could be my contribution as a writer? You think of Shakespeare, you think of D. H. Lawrence, you think of Emile Zola, you think of Tolstoy, or Thomas Man for example, or Gopinath Mohanty, Shivashankar Pillai, and U. R. Ananthamurthy – all of them are read in large numbers. So I think outreach is very important. Very often we blame the people, the readers. We say 'they are stupid, they are foolish, they are not intelligent' but 'I am a man of genius, and I will be read in future'. That's not correct. I think one doesn't have to dilute in order to reach out to the lowest common denominator. One will be able to really reach out to a wide number of people, provided one remains rooted, as I said, to one's linguistic and pluralistic tradition, which are very organic, and which are rooted to our own soil. So even if you write in English, my suggestion is that, you have to be rooted to our own soil and that is possible only if you have knowledge of our own linguistic and cultural heritage. Very few people are doing that, because they are thinking of the fastest way to get name and fame, and to my mind, that will not have lasting value.