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## “I Write to Relieve the Pain of My Life”: An interview with Jatin Bala

**Asish Kumar**  
**Ph.D. Research Scholar,**  
**Dept. of English,**  
**Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University.**

Jatin Bala (1949 -) is a revolutionary Dalit voice in Bangla. He is one of them who was the worst victims of the partition of India. Initially he started his career as a teacher and later he joined The West Bengal Government's Youth Welfare Department as an Officer. Then he took the retirement from his service and as a dedicated soul he has been giving all his time to his creative writing. He has twenty-three books to his credit and also published an autobiography titled *Shikarchhera Jiban: Udbastu Daliter Dalil* (2018) translated by Mandakini Bhattacharya and Jaydeep Sarangi as *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee remembers* (2022).

Jatin Bala was born in 1949 at Parhiyali, Jessore, presently situated in Bangladesh. He lost his mother in 1950 and his father also died in 1953. Since then, he became an orphan and the struggles of his life started from his very childhood. He had to spend his childhood amid utmost poverty, sorrows and sufferings. After experiencing and escaping the violent communal riots in the East Pakistan (Presently Bangladesh) in 1953, Bala left the land and migrated to India in the year 1954 with his brothers.

This interview was originally conducted in Bangla at Jatin Bala's residence in Kolkata on December 26, 2022. I heartily thank Jatin Bala for answering all my queries.

**Question. First of all, I would like to know Jatin Bala as a man and Jatin Bala as a Dalit writer.**

**Jatin Bala:** My name is Jatindranath Bala and with this name I completed my B.A. in Bengali Honours from Dinabandhu Mahavidyalaya in 1970 and Master's degree from Calcutta University in 1972. Then I did my B.Ed in 1975 and worked as a school teacher for three years. Then, I worked as an officer rank employee in West Bengal Govt. and then took retirement in 2009 after 32 years of service in Government of West Bengal.

Now my identity is, I am a Dalit writer, people know me as Jatin Bala. I write to relieve the pain of my life and it started from my camp life. I could not write when I faced that pain. When I was in my third year in college, I published a short story called *Fatna*, a very famous short story and since 2012, it has been taught at Jadavpur University. My writing career started from my college life, though after completing college, I couldn't write anything for ten years when my wife died suddenly. I raised my two children. Already 23 of my books have been published. It includes short stories, novels, poetry books, my autobiography.

I am a Dalit writer and also, I am a refugee. I was 5-6 years old when I left the country (east Pakistan, Presently Bangladesh) due to direct riots. My mother died when I was one and half years old and my father died when I was at 4. This is the riots of 1953. First, we came to Bangaon almost like a beggar and from there to Sealdah and other camps. I visited three camps –Kunti Camp, Bandarhati Camp and Balagarh Camp. I have written the experiences of these three camps in the first part of my autobiography titled *Sikarhchhera Jiban (A Life Uprooted)* and the second part deals with how I completed my master's degree. That is a very painful story of my life.

Primarily I am a Dalit and a refugee. These two lives are the subject of my writing. I am not just a Dalit writer; I am also a Dalit activist. I write on the issues of the Dalits with the goal of emancipation of Dalit people. Whatever I write, the emancipation of Dalits is my focus.

**Q. When did you enter the world of writing?**

**JB:** I have been involved in Dalit movement of Bengal since 2002. Before that, a short story of mine came out from Bankura. Manohar Mouli Biswas and Kapil Krishna Thakur also wrote in the same volume. My writing reaches them and seeing my title - Bala, which is the title of a Sutra, they contacted me. Then I joined Chaturtha Duniya and took lifetime membership of it. From there I published my story book. What struck me after engaging in Dalit literary and cultural movement was that there was no book on the philosophy of being Dalit. Many people then helped me and I published the book *Dalit Sahitya Andolan* in 2002 which focuses on both experience of being a Dalit and positioning the literature written by a Dalit.

**Q. Why do you write under pen names?**

**JB:** Because, I was a government officer, and being so there was obligations. I can't write anything directly under that name. That's why I started writing under the pseudonym if it is at all be called as pseudonym.

**Q. What are the problems that you have encountered in your writing career?**

**JB:** As a Dalit writer and as a human being, I have faced formidable obstacles. In many places I was not even recognized as a human being. I have no roots in this country. No one ever wanted to give me a place. I had to go through many obstacles. These books that have come out are self-published. Now Gangchil, a printing house, is printing many Dalit writings and the house is followed by many other publications. But, in the beginning, no one even touched our writings. Bengal was not ready to accept anything which may be called as Dalit writing. I have had to go through different hurdles in every moment of my life.

**Q. Please tell us about your camp life experience.**

**JB:** When I was in the camp, I used to cut grass and sold it in the farm, bought rice and took it home. Later I was in the business of making combs and that was how I pursued my studies. As I was a good student in school, I got a stipend and I did not have to pay school fees. I had no place to stay while studying. Once I decided I will commit suicide. But I had a great passion for reading books. I read a book and after reading I realized that why shall I die? I will fight. My family didn't want me to study. They were angry whenever they heard this. Later I thought at least I will get the stipend money if I take the admission in higher studies. So, I took admission in a college and later a teacher inspired me to take honours in Bengali. When I got a chance to pursue honours course, I realized that I don't have money to meet both ends. Bangaon College helped me in every possible way and I was the only student who passed out from that batch with honours. Then I took the admission to the Master's Degree to get the stipend. It was a very sad story. I used to give tuitions at that phase of my life.

**Q. Your autobiography has been translated and published by Sahitya Akademi. How did you get to this place?**

**JB:** My book contains short stories titled *Stories of Social Awakening* edited by Jaydeep Sarangi, received a lot of positive response. Students from Jadavpur translated these stories in an

international workshop under the guidance of Sayantan Dasgupta. After this book became successful, Jaydeep Babu said that he will translate my autobiography *Shikarh Chhera Jiban* as *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee remembers*, as I heard. This book will be translated into 18 Indian languages.

**Q. Would you consider yourself marginalized? What hinders you in what way?**

**JB:** Oppression comes in many forms. Firstly, I am a Dalit person. There are financial constraints. I am a poor man and I am a refugee. All of these factors marginalized me.

**Q. What is the role of Ambedkar in your life?**

**JB:** Initially, I did not know much about Ambedkar. But later on, while working as a Dalit activist, I found that without Ambedkar Dalit literature is not possible. I came to know the word Dalit around the year 2000, but I have been familiar with the discrimination in the society since birth. The word Dalit has been around since the 1960s but I came to know the word much later.

**Q. When do you write?**

**JB:** I write as I feel the need to write. There are some special moments when I feel it is the moment. I can't make time to write every day. My writing is the outcome of my life's experience.

**Q. So far you have published twenty-three books. Where did you get the ideas for these writings?**

**JB:** My writings are a form of protest against the discrimination done towards the Dalits and I write to relieve the pain of my struggle. Words are our weapons. Our weapon is our writing, our pen. I also have a book which I have named *Amar Shabdoi Shanito Astra*.

**Q. Who are Dalits according to you?**

**JB:** Today SC, ST, OBCs are the Dalits. Earlier they were called Sudras. Later Britishers called them Depressed Classes and then they further divided them into various categories - ST, ST, OBC and minority. As a result of the consciousness that arose due to the arrival of the Britishers, some intellectual writers and artists of the Dalit people realized that if we are divided, we will never be liberated. So, Dalit is a combination of all of these. It is like an umbrella.

**Q. What is Dalit literature according to you?**

**JB:** According to me the literature of Dalit liberation is Dalit literature. Dalit literature must be written by Dalit people and for the emancipation of Dalits. Dalit literature is written for Dalit awareness. There is a thirst for liberation in Dalit literature.

**Q. What is your view on Dalit Autobiography? Why did you write your autobiography?**

**JB:** Dalit autobiographies must have five characteristics: suffering, revolt, ethnic discovery and recreation.

If I can tell people the difficulty that I have faced in life, and I still survived then many people will be able to stand in life by reading my autobiography. If I can survive so hard, then why can't others? When I used to work in the fields in village, many people started their studies after seeing me passing the college. I am writing this book to inspire the people of my society and so that nothing like this happens to Dalit people, so that people understand the real truth.

**Q. If you say something about your book of poetry titled *Jibaner Naam Jantrana*.**

**JB:** The book was published in 1970. It is a book of poetry. I try to express these aspects of my Dalit life and refugee life through poetry so that I can relieve my pain and suffering. I have presented them in this book through poetry. Basically, my poetry books are written to relieve the pain of my life. They were written at different times.

**Q. What was the inspiration of your book *Amriter Jiban Kotha*?**

**JB:** *Amriter Jiban Kotha* is written on partition. Many of the stories that happened before partition were heard later in the camp and these short stories were written through imagination. The materialist Matua movement emerged based on reality. It is anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu conception. “*Ved vidhi na mani, na mani bahman*” based on this I have written this book it is a materialistic concept, philosophy.

**Q. What is the context of your book *Nil Dheu Periy*e?**

**JB:** This book is a tragic story of how a refugee came to this country and a boy passed school.

**Q. Tell us about your upcoming book.**

**JB:** I have submitted a book to Dalit Sahitya Academy titled *Dalit Muktir Sondhane* (In search of Dalit liberation). It will come out from there and I'm working on the third part of my Autobiography. I'm also writing a novel on the people who came to India after Partition and are scattered in different parts of the country like Dandakaranya, Maharashtra and other places.