



## **AN INTIMATE CONVERSATION WITH SUBODH SARKAR**

(An Interview)

By

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*Subodh Sarkar (born 1958, Krishnanagar) is a Bengali poet, writer and editor, and a reader in English literature at City College, Kolkata. He is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. His first book of poem was published in the late 1970s, and now he has 26 books to his credit – 20 of poems, two of translations and one travelogue on America. His poems have been translated into English, French and several Indian languages and published in several journals and anthologies. Sarkar is the editor of Bhashanagar, a Bengali culture magazine with occasional English issues. In 2010 he was appointed as the guest editor of Indian Literature, the flagship journal of Sahitya Akademi. He married Mallika Sengupta who was also a poet.*

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**Q : 1) Every poet internalizes the truth from his or her quest for life, search for life and perceptions of life and then continuously advances towards his own way of art. How will you explain the fact from your life of poems, personal life and the equation of your perception of your life? How important are your childhood and the later life in this regard?**

Answer: - Mr. Bill Gates once said “It’s not your fault to be born poor, but it is your fault to die as a poor man.” I was born in a very poor family. My father, a poor school teacher was driven away from the erstwhile East Pakistan and he fled away to settle in Krishna Nagar. We could hardly have two square meals a day. I saw my mother managing to have the remaining mounds of rice which would be left out at the bottom of the utensil after having fed all other members of our family. With a smiling face, she would say “Go to school. Study well. Get

me a good 'saree' when you get a job." But my father died a premature death due to cancer during my childhood. We, the six brothers and sisters in all became really helpless and were brought to the margin of starvation. Nobody stood by us during that period. Our relatives moved away from us. The most surprising event was that a kind of stubbornness developed in me. Didi, my elder sister managed to have a broken harmonium and would sing the songs of Rabindranath Tagore very nicely. I would often say to my Didi, "Please sing the song once again for me- 'Everyone has gone to the garden in the full moon night . " In that worse situation, the 'Geet-Bitan' of Tagore became my Bible. The Naxalite movement started in Krishnanagar during that period. We had to go across the dead bodies in order to reach the school. I saw handmade bombs in the school-bags of our class-mates. We would be rebuked by the elders as we would go to enjoy the sunset by the edge of a forest. "Never visit here. If you come, remember not to come in the evening." I was scared. But the sunset could really be enjoyed fully only in the evening. Perhaps I could not have joined the community of writers if I had not passed through such a phase of life during my childhood. Nobody advised me to write. Nobody allowed me to sit beside adorably. Being hard-pressed by poverty, when an adolescent picks up weapons in his or her hands, I picked up the 'Geet-Bitan'. During my boyhood, I could sing 500 songs without seeing the song book. My mother was very angry with me. Once in an evening I was singing the song as loudly as I could- "You came but you did not come". My song having finished, my mother who was scourging the utensils, said "You engage in tall talks when you don't have the money." I could have said to my mother had she been alive "Today I am also a Bill Gates. Could a person become a Bill Gates if the person had to struggle from the point from which I had to struggle?"

**Q) What is your opinion regarding T.S. Eliot's view that a modern poet builds a poetic world based on tradition? How far can Mr. Subodh Sarkar be considered a modern or post-modern poet on the perspective of the evolution of Bengali poetry?**

Ans:- Who am I to say that I am a modern poet? There is really nothing to be called as post-modern. I don't believe in this. The definition of modernity dates back to the days of the Mahabharata. Is Mr. T.S. Eliot as modern as Homer? Are we necessarily modern if we have cell-phones and laptops on our hands? I sometimes feel while I read the ancient texts that a 5000 year old Subodh is lying within me. He is my look alike, he has beard like me, he is sitting having put on jeans and T-shirt like me. He also talks and sends SMSs through , but the hieroglyphics is open before him. It has still not become readable. I shall call a poet 'modern' if he or she can translate the hieroglyphics. As if an electric wire passed through all the unlimited machineries of modern life- a loud laugh passes through like electric current. T.S. Eliot only wanted to say about that laugh. Sitting within unlimited machineries is what we call 'tradition'.

**Q) In many poems of yours, it can be perceived by the readers that there is an attempt to represent the depth of life in a light mood and in the said life of Mikhail Bakhtin, it**

**has been represented in the most forceful way. How will you analyze this style of discourse in poems?**

Ans:- At the end of each moment of grief, each hour of suffering, each kind of failure, I can see a small container and restrained laughter is lying hidden in it. Grief is the mother of all poems- there can be no two opinions about that. I search for that container at the end of every poem. I can't bear with the tears from the eyes. I don't like a person sitting being overwhelmed with grief. Once I said to a beggar near the Taj Bengal hotel "Can't you go inside and snatch your food? What's the use of sitting in front like this?" I wrote about this in my poem "Tears from Eyes". When dangers appear on its feet at my home then I speak out to the danger "Just sit on my chair. Have tea. I shall talk to you when you cool down." The most dangerous moment for a man is his hunger or his inability to eat. Throwing away that danger under a banyan tree in my childhood, I crept in Kolkata. Reaching Kolkata, I felt that I was in a greater danger than before. Visiting Delhi, I realized the intensity of the danger was greater still. A person moves from one kind of danger to another, from one kind of wonder to another, from one type of love to another in his or her own life. Should we not laugh then? Should we leave our acts of cutting jokes? I have the habit of taking up of any serious subject in a lighter vein. I have shaken the chins of personalities from Gautam Buddha to Fidel Castro in my poems. Actually, the presence of blasphemy is more prominent in my psyche than that of a true worshipper. Perhaps for that reasons my poems are twisted, rough and chaotic.

**Q) The description of sexuality is found to be written openly in many of your poems and in some other poems there are mentions of the physical love which is favourite of the present generation. Again there are elements of satire on the duplicity and show offs of the society in some of your poems. How will you explain the value systems of the present generation and the dangers evolving out of it?**

Ans:- Should a writer have the responsibility of explaining those things? I don't think in that way when I write poems. In reality, I think about the matters that I don't write on. It takes some time to decide what to write and what not to write. Duplicity or falsehood is an important part of my life. I have much regards to those who always speaks the truth; but the persons who has inherent bad qualities, in whom there are a queer mixture of honesty and duplicity are the subject matters of my writings. There are stories and characters in my writing-as such I regret before the poems. I can't write without mentioning about the characters. It may be Mussoulini or my teacher. I shall inflict pains on him or them. I shall surely say to a evil person "You are a bad person." I don't spare even myself in that matter. I like to satirize myself. I like to hide my grief with a cap of happiness. But sometimes I feel that I should manage a revolver and shoot on my head.

**Q) As there is coexistence of black and white, light and darkness in life, so there are mixtures of polished and unpolished words in your poems. One can find an effortless yet**



**sensible use of English and Hindi words in your poems. Your dexterity in this field comes to surface through your choice of subject matters and the use of language. Again this can be said that you have freed the language geography of the Bengali poems from artificiality and widened its scope. What is your opinion about this?**

Ans:- I have no words of my own- I am a slave to the sound wave that flows and extends from a fish market to a university classroom. I have never felt ashamed of using any word till today. No word is either polished or unpolished for me. Both the words like 'Om' and 'Son of a pig' are holy words for me. A word is created from the depth of life. The words are the symbols of our feelings even though there may be good or evil things in their depths. The English and Hindi words used by me, they are found to be used randomly in the Bengali poems of today. Why should they be not used after all? Can you tell me how many Hindi words are used by an auto-wallah? There is a mosaic of Hindi, English and Bengali words in his language. How can I escape from that? Why should I escape at all ?

**Q) You have written some narrative poems which resonate with the echoes of condemnation against social exploitation. Can a poet portray the sketch of a single personality set in two different poles? Does the nectar of creativity that arise out of ceaseless struggle between inner psyche of a poet with that of the outer sphere of the society are simply beautiful or society-oriented?**

Ans:- The persons who write love poems all his or her life also have a responsibility. The question is who is responsible and to whom. I don't believe in the fact that a poet becomes a great poet once he has a sense of responsibility. There is no relationship of responsibility with writing. This question has often been raised in West Bengal and it comes even now. As a priest has a responsibility, a Communist has a responsibility, a Gandhian has a responsibility, a poet, too, has a responsibility. Why should it be considered a precondition for writing poems? When I go through a nice poem, I like to bow down my head near the feet of it. I don't question about the responsibility of the poet. The question of my consciousness that has arisen, I have a clear view that an unconscious person also can write good poems. One can write good poems without having proper knowledge of monetary policies, socialism or market policies. On the other, it is often dangerous to understand these concepts. Then the essence of a good poem evaporates. According to me, a piece of poem is as holy as a piece of white paper. There is no need to stigmatize that by showing much consciousness. We should not think that the poets are only conscious creatures in this world while others are not. A beggar is also a conscious person. Even he knows who will offer him alms and who will not. A kind of great madness is required for writing poems. One should write poems in an open mind keeping the principles of economic, social and market policies in their pockets. The more I grow up, the more I understand that composing poems is a very difficult task. The kind of craziness I had in my younger days has been replaced by philosophical undertones.

**Q) Many of the readers of your poems may have felt that one of the chief themes of your poems is love and unconditional love. Your poetic soul is devoted to the selfless love-that love which has got wealth of heart and warmth of life. They deal with that kind of love in which the black shadow of the materialistic world has not fallen. What is your opinion about this?**

Ans:- Let me tell you in easy terms or language that the love poem is not my cup of tea. The best of all the love poems in Bengali have already been written by Sunil Ganguly. The lover will come out of his grave to listen to ‘Nira’s poems’ composed by him. None of my poems turns out to be a true love poem. I have no regret for this. I shall feel myself rewarded when my poet stands by the threshold of a thatched household of a family in the Sunderbans, after being ravaged by a storm. If my poems are found to be lying in the pocket of a boy called Aakash Mahato, then I shall feel that I have received the Academy awards. If my poems are found to shine in the corners of the eyes of a black lady of Mathabhanga, that will be my best love poem. As I don’t read my self-composed poems, so if someone tells me to choose from, then I shall choose the ‘Nira’s poems’ by Sunil Ganguly.

**Q) In some of your poems, there is a rebellion against urbanization and there is a keen desire to preserve the rural value-system. How and why do these two-dimensional conflicts in your poems or in your mental world strike your mind?**

Ans:- Let me tell you something about my hypocrisy here. I am used to a typical urban life. If I make use of the Metro Rail service everyday, If we use cars, if we use laptops, and also use it for spread of the town, then nothing than a piece of paper will be left. I grew up in Krishna Nagar. I could reach Kolkata in about two and a half hours time. I started to write from Krishna Nagar but I would remain in Kolkata in my own imagination. The city that I landed after my first travel by air is New York City. It appeared to me while walking through the Manhattan that- ‘It is my own city. I would love to live here. Having landed my feet in London I felt that I had been in this city for long. I saw this city through the pages of Charles Dickens. Therefore, I am really an urban poet. Going to any village, I never felt that I had gone there to live. I like the villages for hardly two days. I like the shade under a banyan tree for a couple of days. But the hypocrisy is the fact that I want that the entire world should go back to the villages. There will be no video parlours, newspapers or radio there. Much in the same way as Homer once recited the poems having called in 5-6 students. Like the way the sage Valmiki once started to compose the ‘slokas’ sitting by a riverside. I do imagine taking everyone to such a place. Nobody speaks like this besides the mad ones. There are occasional stories of madness and mad characters in my poems.

**Q) One of the most memorable lines of your poem is ‘as poem is a basement of history’. There are signs of hatred and revenge against the different representative ‘entities’ of the state. In this connection, a quotable line is “Never before the police resembled as**

**much as a widow.” In the perspective of your own poetic world and the world poems, how will you analyze your poems?**

Ans:- Having twisted the ears of the police, I wrote many poems. It is easy to criticize the police-people love it. Who builds up the police? The state does it. Actually, the police are made to act as per our choice. We want that police should accept the hush money, so they accept the bribes. The police does evil work as we want them to do. We seem to forget the fact that the police have their own houses, own parents. The police are good so long as it work in my favour. The police will surely have to be considered bad by us if they go against us. The U.S.A. will be good when it will do work in our favour, when the same country will pick up your sons and daughters, then the U.S.A. is to be considered bad. The main reason behind my calling the poems as ‘a basement of history’ is that such perceptions do not have a market rate, the opinions that do not hit the headlines of the news, the symbols that are ignored by people are the subject-matters of my poems. The entire world condemned the U.S.A. when it visited Vietnam. But on that day the Jupiter laughed. It makes me laugh today to note that the Vietnamese people who came from the basement of History have spread themselves out in different parts of the U.S.A.—they are now being offered a royal treatment. Who could have thought that the historical situation would change so much within a span of thirty years? Who could have thought the persons whom the masters of America once brought from Africa in chains or as slaves would send one of them to the ‘White House’? I was taken aback when I visited Russia recently. There are many rape cases, murder-cases and snatching incidents there. People have become very greedy there. The present Russia is crowded with people with costly cell-phones, night-clubs and women with scanty dresses. Where are the next generations of the Russian writers with whose ideas we have grown up? I don’t normally consider such big incidents, my point of consideration are those small incidents and call them as ‘the basement of history’ which are normally ignored by people.

**Q) The relationship between men and women is shown to be a metaphor of an everlasting flow in your poems. The ease with which you uphold this invincible and plain truth through your artistic portrayal is really enviable. I am eager to know regarding this from you in detail.**

Ans:- I can’t simply see a woman as a woman only. I watch how she is crossing her gender. According to me, gender is a check-post, a borderline. Two guards are standing there with AK-47s in their hands. I like to see women driving cars, driving aircrafts and ruling countries very much. I like to watch a woman smoking cigarettes very much. I have never liked the idea of a stereotyped woman. I grew up along with my three elder sisters. Out of the three, two of them did not yield to poverty, on the other hand, they managed to stand in their own feet with honour and entered the world of service with dignity. I like working women—whether they are those who carry bricks on their heads or the ones who would sit before the computers. There are mentions of women of varied professions in my poems. Their

relationships with their men have also been discussed in my poems. I think that the men-women relationship is like a big mine. We can get many golden ornaments if we go inside it.

**Q) A poem and its ideology is integrally related. Have your ideologies as a person influenced your poems? How far do you think that an ideology have widened or compressed the poetic world of a poet?**

Ans:- It is good to have an ideology. Everything feels empty without this. It makes us feel that there is no support, it also makes us feel that our feet are not on the ground. But it should not be considered as be all and end all. My ideology is my own. There is no use to blow the trumpet on this. It is better to leave an ideology if it destroys the essence of poetry. Why can't a person leave his ideology if someone else can hoodwink immortality for the sake of poems. I shall give more marks to those poets who had thought of not to attempt to write some poems due to the presence of an ideology, can write poems having kept that ideology aside. I shall not award marks to the 'fundamentalists'. The problem with an ideology is that it does not know how to honour another ideology. Why shall I not be able to call them good poems if those are written by others beyond my notions of an ideology? I don't like to adorn the poems with ornaments. I have never tried to clad a poem with a 'Benarasi saree'. This does not necessarily mean that I shall not tell them good poems if they are decorated by anyone. A bare bodied person clad with a towel looks as attractive as 'suited-booted' Amitabh Bachchan.

**Q) You have been devoted to the art, literature and philosophies of the East and the West for long. That is why the references to Derrida, Foucault, Kafka, Camus and Lorca are used with ease in many of your poems. Where can you find the similarities and the differences between the philosophy of life and the poetic philosophy of the Indian and the Western poets?**

Ans:- One of the faults of my poems is the fact that I more global than local. Among all my contemporaries and my followers, it is in my poems that one can find the mentions of America, Israel, Iraq, China and Afghanistan more than anyone else. It is also true that I have been writing a collection of poems on Gujarat. According to me, the countries need not be geographically separated. They are not separate entities. Recently I wrote a book of poems on Delhi. I live myself within an entire human life. Many people do like me. My entire world is spread out from my toothpaste to my laptop—and I am an ordinary citizen of that world. I get equal shocks and feel the hurt-burn if some untoward incident takes place either in Lalgarh or in Guatemala. The friend from New Jersey who rings me up daily is a part of my family, I get the impression of grief at my residence in Tollygunj area if there is any grievous incident in his family. A human life is no longer attached to a country only. Therefore, to say it in a very simple and natural way, despite the fact that my poems are written in Bengali, but they have the audacity to cross the threshold or barriers of a language.



**Q) You are an Editor of a well established journal called ‘Indian Literature’ of Sahitya Academy’ right now. How will you analyze the importance of translated versions of the texts in the context of the spread of Indian literature and for bringing Indian literature closer to the world literature?**

Ans:- This is one of the dreams I have. Translation is a big dream. Poems cannot be translated by anyone without a dream. It was due to the dream of Mr. Budhdhadeb Basu that even Baudelaire could be converted into a Bengali poet. As there are many signs of glory in the forehead of Indian literature, in the same way, it is really shocking not to find very good translated versions of books from one language into another. We get the translated texts from all over India for our journal ‘Indian Literature’. We select some of them and publish them. In recent times, some kind of awareness has been growing. It was not there earlier. The Sahitya Academy has a dominant role in the matter of translations. In recent times, there is a growing trend of discussion regarding Indian literature even in the Western world. It has been observed that the world famous publishers like Penguin Books are coming forward to publish the translated texts. But there is a dearth of good translators and the good translators of poems are very rarely found. Jibanananda Das was fortunate enough to get a high profile translator like Mr. Clinton. B. Ceily.

**Q) How will you look into the increasing aggression of English language and the problems of the Indian languages arising out of it as a poet in Bengali?**

Ans:- Books written in English are the tools to dominate the dynamics of power, it has become easier to catch the market if the books are written in English. On the other hand, the students of IITs have put aside their tools and they are trying their hands on writing books. I have heard that Mr. Chetan Bhagat has a good market share. Will it be such that people will start writing in English only leaving aside the languages like Bengali, Assamese and Marathi etc. Are those days coming near? I am afraid. The Indian languages are so rich that the writers in English will not be able to imagine. Salmon Rushdie is my favorite writer but I don’t consider him a sensible person when he said and wrote that best literature from India is being written in English. I have condemned it; I will never forgive him for selling this idea to the west. If Indian literatures are properly translated, India will win. But I don’t think my dream is coming true. The post colonial writings we championed as ‘empire writes back’ in India are now hungrily eating up the vitals of Indian literatures in languages. We are in the war with English. After 30 years India will be Ireland. Do we know any Irish writer writing in Irish Gaelic? None of our children will read Bengali. Amitava Ghosh will survive in the world as a Bengali writer, not Sunil Gangopadhyay.

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