

***POET AND HIS WORLD:***

***A LONG LITERARY INTERVIEW WITH SUJAN BHATTACHARYYA***

**by Kiriti Sengupta**

As I was conducting interviews, and translating some Bengali poetry into English for *The Reciting Pens* (published by Inner Child Press, Limited, U.S.A. ISBN: 978-0615861869), I was hugely influenced by one of my contributing poets, Joya Mitra, an award winning novelist from Calcutta. Joya had been closely associated with the Naxalite movement during the '70s, and was imprisoned for a period of four and one-half years for her political works. Let me put down an excerpt: "The Naxalite movement spanned the middle of the '60s until the middle of the '70s, in India and other countries. It was mainly composed of urban youths, who disavowed the existing social and traditional values. They wanted to bring about changes in the society by eliminating 'class enemies.' The objective of this movement was to hand over the land-rights to the farmers. Their chief slogan was: 'Chairman Mao of China is our Chairman.' On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1967, a police officer was shot dead by a group of rebel farmers at a remote hamlet named Naxalbari, in West Bengal, India. In retaliation the government opened fire, killing seven tribal women and children. The term 'Naxalite' refers to this Naxalbari movement." [Ref: *The Reciting Pens*, pg no. 19]

Since the time I had worked with Joya Mitra, I have wanted to work with some other authors, who have been closely related with the Naxalite movement. I know Sujan Bhattacharyya, a prolific writer. He is a bilingual writer-poet-translator. Sujan's poems have been published in: *Anthology on Nelson Mandela, World Healing: World Peace*, published by Inner Child Press, limited (U.S.A.) and in *Jora Sanko – The Joined Bridge*, an anthology of select poems (in

English-language) by the Bengali poets of the world, published by The Poetry Society Of India, Gurgaon (ed. Madan G Gandhi & Kiriti Sengupta). He has authored two Bengali poetry books, one Bengali story book. His recent poetic drama *Krishna-Andhar* (narrative of The *Mahabharata* in the light of modern days) has been a considerable contribution towards contemporary Bengali literature.

Here is the long interview with him:

**Kiriti Sengupta:** Hello, Sujan-da! Thank you so much for accepting my request for an interview. Hope all is fine with you and yours. I won't kill your time much, and I would like to start the interview right now. May I, please?

**Sujan Bhattacharyya:** Nothing kills time Kiriti, if and only if we do want to get the message that it delivers. Okay, let us proceed.

**Kiriti:** When did you join politics, and why did you opt for the Naxalite movement?

**Sujan:** At the very onset I must clear a point. What is normally meant by Naxal movement? It occurred from 1967 until February, 1972. I was a kid then. I joined in 1983, when the entire movement had lost its momentum and was looking out for some new orientation. I left political activities in 1988, and the situation was almost the same. I mentioned this only to avoid any kind of hero-worship, which I am incompetent of. Kiriti, the term politics is quite confusing. Do you believe that anyone being a social being can avoid politics in its true essence? I don't believe this

way. At the most we can decide that whether we would take active part in politics or not. I came off a family having a left political bias. Naturally I had that inclination from the childhood.

The locality of Barasat where I have had spent my days was a Naxalite-prone area since the onset of the movement. I did not know the history of Naxalbari, but the advent of the seventies made me experience some queer things that a child could possibly never forget. Kiriti, I know that your medical books stress that before the age of five one cannot have his memories shaped. You know, I laugh at it. It is the environment makes your memory and keeps its trail. You won't believe this: in those days a boy of five years had to come out of his bed in the midnight to be asked a few questions by the policemen. All these made the Naxalites the heroes of my childhood, and with time they all were sent to jail or to a destiny not known. But the impression remained. The general election of 1977 brought a drastic change in the environment. I was a student of seventh grade then and I became a member of a budding drama unit. The experience that I had gathered there developed my mental orientation towards the vastness of people and to rely on their power. And my course was determined. As the youngest performer I was asked to take part in a very insignificant role in the "Release the Political Prisoners" campaign of the late seventies that also developed me further.

In the meantime the surviving heroes of my childhood were all released, and I realized that none can be the embodiment of an idea. I started nurturing the notion that we should search for the idea that turns a common man a hero. In 1983 as I got admitted to Jadavpur University I came in contact with some senior students whom I found to be inviting, and I got along naturally with them.

**Kiriti:** Political involvement essentially influences the mind frame. May I ask you, how did it affect your day to day life?

**Sujan:** Political activities demand your spontaneous involvement from the core of your heart. I think the dream of a changed world makes everything around you changed. Firstly it changes your priorities and your vision. Naturally, the day to day life that I was acquainted with got changed. I lost my usual routine, even the habitual food practices. With the passage of time my childhood friends began to avoid me, even my love. My academic career was lost, but I must say that my parents never prevented me from these activities. What they regularly advised was to continue with my studies as well.

**Kiriti:** It is said that the Naxalites love to argue over trivial issues. Well, I don't intend to ask you whether you concur with this notion, but I'm interested to know the capacity you had served and contributed to the overall movement.

**Sujan:** Kiriti, whether a question is trivial or not depends upon the perspective as well as the personal standpoint of an observer. For instance, we are accustomed with the lavish Puja festivals in West Bengal, even when the aftershock of a flood is not completely over. What is more important? The festive nights or the relief camps? You'll take up the issue according to your personal priority. To the question of capacity, I humbly submit, I had been an ardent servant of the people. To which status of organizational hierarchy someone belongs is irrelevant. The one and only consideration is the personalization of the ideology he/she bears.

Now about the contribution part! I tell you an incident. It was a village near Panagarh (in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal). A peasant's gathering was organized. Someone sang a mass-song with the words like "The paddy I grow in this field will go to the Landholder's granary tomorrow." I was sitting beside an elderly peasant with a withered face and almost an

abominable feature. Suddenly he began to weep. I asked him, “Uncle, what’s the matter?” “He is singing my life, my boy,” he replied. That was the scenario in a nutshell, and if that be true, a person like me, who left the movement, cannot say much about his own contribution. I tried to serve the people to the best of my capacity, faith and sincerity. I was not able to carry on with my mission, however.

**Kiriti:** Over the ages politics has influenced the world-literature. Could you, please, tell me your story?

**Sujan:** I am a reader with unlimited appetite. I believe that a strong theoretical foundation is extremely important. Emotion plays a vital role, but it must be acquired with objective realization. No idea comes from the heaven, but it germinates in the real life environment. Theorization is an abstraction of the scenario and literature is its creative reflection. What my political life made to develop in me was the complete departure from the theory of ‘art for art’s sake’. To be honest, my literary activity started with my political life. As a social being I wish to share my views with others. A speech, however profound it might be, is instantaneous and short-spanned, but literature is the condensed form of expression that has wider scope with much impact. This realization inspired me to take up my pen. I set out as a dramatist and subsequently moved to essays, stories and poems.

As I have told you that my writing was initially a product of a necessity, so I hate to forget my budding period. The association of people in true sense with their agonies and warmth of life taught me something special. They were and they are my true teachers. I have tried to portray their lives, their experiences, and their own struggle. Kiriti, I strongly believe that in broader terms, people are of two categories. The first group, which is much broader, primarily thrives to settle their hunger, while the other roams with hunger of their mind.

**Kiriti:** Why did you quit the Naxalite movement? And do you repent on your decision?

**Sujan:** I lost my tenacity, and I do confess it freely. I do not want to cover this with any other propositions. A word like ‘repentance’ may soften the situation. I had been to some special kind of life practice, and now I belong to a different one. You may say that like others dipped in the mud I am not observing the sludge, but I am trying to have a look at the sky above.

**Kiriti:** I would like to hear some piece from your latest works. Could you, please, read out a poem?

**Sujan:** Let me read one of my latest poems under the title, “The Auction.”

*The day-breaking hunger spreads its radiant tongue in the sky.*

*In the magical signal, there wakes up the siren*

*And the auction bell is rung.*

*The bell rings in the weary mountain slope,*

*Under the soil extended touching the edge of ocean*

*And in the unveiled roots of a non-sleeping tree*

*Which makes shivering the sense of innocent humility.*

*In the incessant call surpassing the horizon*

*Are sold out the air, soil and water*

*The final clearance stamp is cast on the bodies of*

*Modest grasses, vagrant animals and desired birds.*

*In a most unbiased obsession the auctioneer makes entry*

*In the list, one after another,*

*Of all the bugs, starving rocks and migratory birds.*

*The official hammer strikes the table,*

*Claps are all around in glittering eyes;*

*A small scratch on a paper*

*And is sold out that destitute land –*

*To all the dejected folk which stands as the native land.*

**Kiriti:** Wonderful, Sujan-da! Even in this poem you have delivered some subtle message that reflects your social stand. Please elaborate.

**Sujan:** I think this poem is simple and without any poetic ornament, and it needs no clarification. As congenital inheritance we are given our access to patriotism, the love for our country and people. Remember it is not a trivial matter as you have mentioned earlier. It's our pride, our most-precious treasure. Patriotism is not a feeling to be shown only on special days. You must feel the pain at each single incident that slaps the heritage, however small it may be. If you consider that what I recited was a poem, then it should be left to the readers to get the essence. Too many explanations kill a poem, you know it very well.

**Kiriti:** What would be your advice to the aspiring authors, who are yet to be published?

**Sujan:** Firstly, some insight about the objective of the writing. Is it for pleasure or something else? This self-questioning will pave the way. I started writing with some mission, I told you, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. Secondly, to be a good author, one must be a meticulous reader with introspection. It generates ideas as well as trains to attain the desired skill. Thirdly, each word that you spell out is derived from the society. So get to it closely, observe its motion minutely both in the microscopic and macroscopic spectra. It helps the author to testify his/her creations. Fourthly, all creations must have some bearing upon the society. So decide what you are to say. It is the inner content that makes a creation live. The mastery over the form is also essential, for it carries the content to the readers and creates catharsis. Hence, one must constantly try to develop his skill and select a form appropriate to the concerned content. And lastly, an aspiring author is never totally satisfied with his/her writings, and if this be the case the author is dead!



**Kiriti:** This is my last question to you: In today's world of chick lit, do you think literature of political relevance holds any merit?

**Sujan:** Kiriti, literature all over the known history of civilization are broadly of two categories. One is classical and the other is popular. All the classical creations represent the-then society to the most perfect abstraction. And most of them also embrace political perspective as well. What would you say about the *Mahabharata*? The basic story-line of it is the political contradiction of the society of that period. A great creation always finds a being in its true condition and naturally cannot ignore the political situation. And this series starting from the *Mahabharata* to *Animal Farm* of George Orwell, from *Spartacus* of Howard Fast to *Ninety Three* of Hugo is so great, so potent, and so profound that you cannot defy this. I think, your question has some significance in another perspective. There are a few kinds of literature that are politically motivated and born out of political aspiration. But to be termed as literature, one should qualify to the standards of aesthetics. Otherwise a handbill may claim the stature of literature. If such a creation passes the standards, I'm not allergic to it. I tell you, once the anti-communist literary propagandist creations jumbled the market. No one probably remembers those now. Equally time has dejected numerous pro-communist creations excepting *How The Steel Was Tempered*, *The Caucasian Chalk- Circle*, or *Mother*. Hence, the question of relevance stands relative.

**Kiriti:** Thank you so much, Sujan-da. I'm grateful to you for giving me time, and I wish you all the best in your future literary enterprises.

**Sujan:** Thanks to you, Kiriti.

**Bio:**

Kiriti Sengupta is a bilingual poet and translator in both Bengali and English. He is the author of the bestselling title, *My Glass Of Wine*, a novelette based on autobiographic poetry. Kiriti's other works include: *Aay Na* (Bengali book on free verses), *My Dazzling Bards* (literary critique), *The Reciting Pens* (interviews of three published Bengali poets along with translations of a few of their poems), *The Unheard I* (literary nonfiction), and *Desirous Water* (poems by Sumita Nandy, contributed as the translator). His poetry has appeared in several e-zines, *Tajmahal Review*, *The Hans India*, *Kritya*, and in international anthologies – *Heavens Above: Poetry Below* (Canada), and *Twist of Fate* (U.S.A.). His short stories (creative) have been published in *Labyrinth*, and an article on *Research Scholar*. Details of his account can be accessed at [www.kiritisengupta.com](http://www.kiritisengupta.com)