

Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry : A Mythic Mirage of Social Introspection on the Bedrock of Reality

Mr. Subho Ghosh

Visiting Professor of English, Guru Nanak Institute of Technology, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Jayanta Mahapatra's impregnation of socio-cultural backdrops that he discerns in his locale fetches him face to face with history and myth when his "self" is connoted in the act of attention. The intimacies amid the self and reality - the reality that flees but comprises self and culture form the bedrock of Mahapatra's poetry. To him, it is the investigation of myths and it is leashed with the world of art and sculpture. He keeps on his quest for a divine spirit and for charm in the relationship between man and man, and God and God, men and sculptured art. Mahapatra holds forth to have the condemnation that tradition is and continuance, it is entirety and one has to fathom the present in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present. There is a dense token of introspection in his poetry. The elementary poetry of Mahapatra is a satiric repercussion on past and current racial, religious, cultural, and societal life. The poet's attempt to extract meaning from his emotional and intellectual existence is often shown in Oriya culture. He exercises the Oriya life caught in the current of time as the impulsive millstone for his poetry.

Keywords: Indian culture, social introspection, poetry, sensibility, self-exploration, discovery

Introduction:

India, a country having a rich and profound faith in existing religious perspectives, feels the divine presence of God in every living or even non-living entity. Various religious bodies in India exemplify the multiplicity of the forms of God, yet maintaining the 'essential' feature of his being 'one'. These multiple forms of God can further be witnessed in the whole country in the form of the worshipping of various gods, goddesses, planets, trees or even stones, symbolising His own being in almost all the parts of India, which interestingly represents true Indianness. Almost every intellectual individual, including artists, poets, writers, musicians, sculptors, priests, have been inspired and influenced by this theory to such a level that all are 'taught' to inculcate and infuse this 'goodness' in their children, and to look for the positive and the divine in every living being. The soul in every individual living being is considered to be a representation of God Himself. This sense of belongingness to India has greatly influenced poets like Jayanta Mahapatra.

Caught in the Current of Time: A Study of the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

Highly serious and sincere, persevering and prolific, Jayanta Mahapatra is undoubtedly one of the few gifted contemporary Indian-English poets. Undeniably, he has made an original contribution to Indian-English poetry within a fairly short span of time. In Mahapatra's poetry, personal feelings are intensified as the poet questions the existence of the self; the other often takes the form of local society, and especially Hindu culture, ritual and spirituality, symbols and the past from which he has been alienated by his grandfather's conversion to Christianity and his own English language education. In this poetry everything is problematic, put into doubt, as Mahapatra observes his environment and listens quietly, sensitively to his inner feelings, the sources of his poetry, bringing momentary perceptions of relationships and fleeting images of contrast. The poems appear a continuous relation of aspects of the isolation, loneliness, solitude, alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is the existential dilemma of most modern literature. While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. Poverty, deprivation and prostitution recur in his verses. "All these things happen around me," he says, "I can't ignore them and write about the 'better' things of life - about the lives of the upper classes. I have got friends in the lowered stratum of society. I can be a lot more free with them than with other poets who bear such burdensome egos on their shoulders." Despite not having access to modern poetry, Mahapatra had a "strong position on languages" (Prasad, 36) that opened his eyes to the possibilities of poetry. For this, "he had been diligently nourishing and polishing over the years" (Prasad, 36). Different nuances of words "that appeared to originate from someplace beyond the words themselves" greatly affected him. And it's possible that Mahapatra's passion with words inspired him to compose poetry. He says that it "urged me on." According to Bruce King, "Mahapatra seems to have learnt a new way of utilising the exterior world to express subjective sentiments from Robert Bly, James Wright, Walt Whitman and other American poets of the late 1960s and early 1970s." (Bruce, 198)

Mahapatra's *Relationship* from 1980 provides unequivocal proof of this. Mahapatra was far more affected by the poetry of Walt Whitman, who wrote: "I am huge, I hold multitudes," as the lyrical sequence of twelve pieces that makes up the book's epigraph *Relationship* demonstrates much like Whitman "Mahapatra has a sense of place and places things where they belong. Whitman's poetic techniques, such as the cataloguing of minutiae, the bare-chested depiction of the self, and the repeated allusions to locations, birds, animals, trees, rivers, and seasons, have been internalised by him." (Ramakrishnan, 103) As the quest for roots is a prominent trend in modern Indian English Poetry like R.Parthasarathi's poem *Home Coming*. Similarly Mahapatra's *Relationship* draws upon a wide variety of material connected with Orissa's landscape, myth, history and culture. He looks at Orissa's past and is pained to find its contrast with the present. With a nostalgic mind he recalls the panorama of Orissa's heroic past and realizes that this past, to which the river Daya was a witness, has become only a myth. Once a heroic and militant race, it is now no more than a mere memory, for, its successors proved to be unworthy of keeping the glory of their ancestors afloat and drifted away from their ideals. The present reality to which the river Daya was a witness is the sad consequence of a decline in not only our past heroism and valour but in our perennial values of life. He writes:

“It is hard to tell now

What happened to the anxious skies
How the age-old proud stones
Lost their strength and fell
And how the waters of Day
Stank with the bodies of my ancestors
My eyes close now
Because of the fears that moves my skin.”

Mahapatra presents contemporary life in order to learn the anguish and predicament of modern man. He relates the past with the present. The past is brought alive for a moment of ‘broken empires’ and ‘of vanquished dynasties’. This nostalgic harking back to the past overwhelms the poet.

“Now I stand among the ruins,

Waiting for the cry of a night bird
From the river's far side
To drift through my weariness
Listening to the voices of my friends.
With the smells of the rancid fat of the past.”

(Relationship)

The poet now standing among these ruins, drifts through his weariness, listening to the voices of his friends and ‘writing poems’ with the smell of ‘the rancid fat of the past’. The present would be better understood, appreciated and endured in the light of the past and one would learn how to live from other people’s lives. Mahapatra’s conception of man’s relation to what he perceives brings him face to face with history and myth when his ‘self’ is discovered in the act of attention. The interaction between ‘self’ and reality - the reality that eludes but includes man-form the bedrock of Mahapatra’s poetry, which, for him, is the exploration of myths and it is linked with the world of art and sculpture. Hence, he continues his quest for an ‘essence divine’ and for ‘grace’ in relationship between man and man, man and god and god, men and sculptured art. Mahapatra seems to have the conviction that tradition is a continuity and one has to understand the present in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present. In an article published in the *Literary Criterion*, he writes: “Relationship is a product of dreams; has the mundane speak of the demands of a pilgrimage, threatened by the living Oriya past, by raging hunger and a persistent sexuality. In brief, we can say that there is in the thematic framework of Relationship something which appears to be a fine blend of myth and vision.”

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry revolves around India and its culture. The landscapes and myths of Orissa form a major part of his poetry as he is naturally affected by them due to his birth and childhood spent in Orissa. What is noteworthy in his poetry is that he doesn’t try to create Indianness in the mention of traditional Indian images of tigers, snakes, snakes-charmers, jugglers, crocodiles etc., but he is sensibly Indian. This sensibility and maturity is best seen in his poems about Orissa, where he creates the level of universalism by dealing extensively with the local and regional themes. Poems like *Orissa Landscapes*, *Evening in an Orissa village*, *The Orissa Poems*, *Dawn at Puri* etc., are Oriyan first in treatment of the content and nature, and so they are Indian eventually. Hardly any other poet can form poetry with such an equal

validity. In his poetry, the language is, of course, English, but not the sensibility. It is purely Indian. K.A. Panikar justifies, “An examination of the recurring images in his poems reveals that he is Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The eastern sea sends its morning wind through them. He, as a child of the sun and the sea, finds delight in invoking the god of fire and the god of water in poems like *Sunburst*, *The Beggar Takes It as Solace*, *The Exile*, *India Summer Poems*, *This stranger*, *My daughter*..... Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The theme of poverty, hunger and starvation which characterise the lot of the Indian poor constitute a major part of Mahapatra’s poetry. S. Viswanathan aptly mentions, “Mahapatra’s sensibility is both Indian and modern and his response to the scene is authentic and credible. The rendering of Indian Vignettes, whether it is of a village landscape as in “village” or that of a city or town street scene as in *Main Temple street*, *Puri*, *Dawn at Puri*, or *Sunburst*, is invariably authentic.

Hunger brings out the role of poverty in brutalising sexual relationships. The complex theme of hunger at three levels is treated in a simple way. As Ayyappa Paniker observes, the simplicity and strength of this poem has made it one of the great peaks of Indian poetry in English. This poem is a touching story of the daughter of a poor fisherman who allows his daughter to become a whore to keep starvation at bay. Mahapatra symbolises such victims of society. He claims that the poem is based on a true incident and asserts that it could easily have happened to him or anybody for that matter on the poverty – ridden sands of Gopalpur – on – sea. Mahapatra proudly proclaims that the landscape of Gopalpur chose him in his poem. The poem carefully preserves the state of mind of the fisherman and the protagonist.

“I heard him say: My daughter, she’s just turned fifteen...
Feel her. I’ll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
The sky fell on me, and a father’s exhausted wile.
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.
She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.” (Hunger)

The poem *Dhauri* is elegiac in tone and speculation in style. The images of the foxes gnawing at the limp genitals of the soldiers is a powerful evocation of the limitations of male sexual power. Grandfather has certain parallels with hunger. In *Hunger*, the fisher man is forced to do what his conscience would hardly permit him to initiate his daughter into prostitution. His conscience pricks him every time he lures customers for his fifteen-year-old daughter by throwing away words carelessly. The Hunger and starvation left no alternative to life except by converting to Christianity, which thousands of others too had done. It was the triumph of the body over the spirit. For Mahapatra, individual identity is the chief negotiating factor in the exploration of an emotional response to reality. Extreme poverty and hunger, which engenders violence, is the thematic thrust of the poem as poverty is universal. There is, however, no explicit critique of the political scenario where vast disparities exist between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, where all protest against the existing social order and are brutally crushed. Mahapatra dreams of an equitable world order as he listens to the faraway wailing of Hyeres as aware of the dying countryside around them for the people are tortured by hunger. It has been an age old phenomenon the tale has been told again and again; it has now assumed mythical proportions. In his poems, Mahapatra talks of hunger

that has been the fate of men down the ages. The alternative is prostitution, military conquest, conversion and bloody revolutions. But the hunger persists, this is the cause of the poet's pain and anguish.

“Afterwards when the wars of Kalinga were over,
the fallow fields of Dhauli
hid the blood-spilt butchered bodies. (originally ‘red-smeared voiceless bodies’)

As the earth
burrowed into their dead hunger
with its merciless worms, (was ‘tortured worms’)
guided the foxes to their limp genitals.

Years later, the evening wind,
trembling the glazed waters of the River Daya,
keens in the rock edicts the vain word,
like the voiceless cicadas of night: (was ‘shuttered silence, an air:’)

the measure of Ashoka's suffering
does not appear enough.
The place of his pain peers lamentably
from among the pains of the dead.” (Dhauli)

There is a profound sign of introspection in his poetry. The poet has tried to create a symbol establishing a deep thematic relationship between the inner world with the outer world. *Dawn at Puri* which is the representation of his own native place, is a poem of faith and doubt stranded on the vast seashore of Puri marking the funeral pyre burning, the black crows crowing, the holy skull lying on the sands, the widows queued up to the enter the great temple and the leper scrambling as nameless figures. Crows hunger, scarcity, heat, dust and thirst, depravity and trouble. Nothing is certain here, everything but temporary and transitory. Mainly Puri on sea is represented as a real lively character in his poetry. Temple, priest, beggar, fisherman, now all these material truths have become accelerated in his inner consciousness, that they are gradually converted into intellectual symbols and images in the heart.

“At Puri the crows
The one wide street
Lolls out like a giant tongue
Five faceless lepers move aside
As a priest passes by
And at the street's end
The crowd thronging the temple door;
A huge holy flower
Swaying in the wind
Of greater reasons.” (*Taste for Tomorrow*)

One can conveniently find a continual rehearsal of dramatizing a human yearning for the possibilities of the dying process of a famous Hindu myth, “*The Dance of Shiva*”. The origin of this myth is directly proportional to the Indian Hindu way of living life, a basis on which temples are founded in India, and in Orissa in particular. The poet directly faces this whole procedure, confronts its dying process in the life of common men and women in Orissa. Considering the progressive intentionality of his poetic language; a marked, varied intensity and range of themes – temples, whorehouses, nature, and love, elements of the poet’s consciousness to the dying process can be felt. Here, the Hindu myth is shattered, but it’s not a symbol of continuity or a development of thought from his mind’s hiding places to generative redemption; and, this is his dedication and devotion to the modern condition of human loss, not a flaw. So, this proves him to be the most intense of Indian poets writing in English and sometimes at par with the European poets, who are fanatical about modernistic instinct for man’s limitations, his philosophy, economics and culture, myth, and thought, to a worldwide human dilemma.

Apart from Indianness, Jayanta is a poet of human relationship and raises his situations from the regional to universal. He has employed imagery and epithets, symbols etc to present the human conditions, which are not only the conditions of India but of the whole world. Love does not have any existence in today’s life. Only burning passion is involved. The woman becomes the victim of the commercial, passionate instinct of exploitation. Her freedom is affected. She has to put up with everything after becoming a wife. She maintains a mechanical life. She neither has emotion nor any interest. Only a fatigued, tired, exhausted and tasteless life is her world. As if she herself is a mechanical creation, though a wife, but a prostitute on the other hand. She is forbidden to see her face in the mirror. In Mahapatra’s poetry the human relationship centres round man-woman relationship. The portrait of woman reoccurs in his poetry and the stress has been laid in presenting woman as the sufferer. In *India Summer Poems*, he presents the gloomy state of a woman:

‘The good wife
lies in my bed through
the long afternoon
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres
In the darkened room
A woman can’t find her
Reflection in the mirror.” (India Summer Poems)

Engaged in love, the husband and the wife avoid the summer heat and float in the dreamland. It is a nice way to remain fresh and unexhausted even though outside the room there blows a severely hot wind carrying the burning intensity of funeral pyres. The poet gives a hint about two types of heat—the one outside the room due to the strongest sun-rays and the other in the married couple inside the room.

Since, ‘Love’ and ‘passion’ in Mahapatra’s poetry are chiefly opposite to that of Ezekiel, Kamala Das and Shiv K.Kumar. There is no deficiency of feeling in Ezekiel’s sceptical style; there is the sick mentality in the poetry of Kamala Das and lack of feeling of a unique soul in Shiv K.Kumar’s poetry. In Mahapatra’s poetic canvas of human relationship it is the women’s voice of silent sufferings that finds expression in his

pen. Women stand out as the sufferer in many of his poems. Hardship of women, their tolerance is one of his major thematic concerns. He fosters a great reverence for women who are archetypal images of suffering and sacrifice. He anchors his faith in their struggle. Through them he criticizes the social order that renders them exploited and deprived. In *The Whorehouse in the Calcutta Street* readers are invited to know the women in the whorehouse. We are nostalgically reminded of the past of these women, their 'looked after children', and their 'home' awaiting their return in 'eager darkness.' They are victims of a 'great conspiracy'. Even the political issues have always been the most enticing themes for many Indian English poets, but they evade straightforwardness and honesty, only few have shown courage to touch them with a barge – pole. Indo-Anglian poetry is often criticised for this failure or lack of 'bravery', not for its out-dated diction or uncertain rhythms, as assumed by critics and readers. The body becomes absolute. He fails to be involved in the sexual act. Rather, the identity of a generous humanism and firm social consciousness are found.

'You fall back against her in the dumb light,
Trying to learn something more about women
While she does what she thinks proper to please you,
The sweet, the little things, the imagined,
Until the statue of the man within
You've believed in rhroughout the years
Comes back to you, a disobeying toy.
And the walls you wanted to pull down,
Mirror only of things mortal, and passing by:
Like a girl holding on to your wide wildness
As though it were real, as the recurring voice
Tone the membrane of your half-woken mind
When like a door, her works close behind:
"Hurry, will you? Let me go,"
and her lonely breath thrash against your kind." (The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street)

Jayanta Mahapatra, on the other hand, is completely vanquished by the mismanagement, disorder, uncertainty and instability in Indian politics and by the pathetic condition of the common man in India. He has presented the ruined state of the Indian environment and poverty in an artistic way in the form of a satire of contemporary socialism and of its leaders and tries to remain truthful in facing and fighting this challenge in his poem on "*The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic of India*."

"Do we want to feel the ground
give way beneath us?
This is a barren world that has been.
Prowling round my room,
Epidemics in the poisoned air,
Dusty streets stretching away
Like disgruntled socialists." (The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic of India)

A Fresh Mount of Jayanta Mahapatra in the Arena of Poetry: The Poet of the Soil

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry differed from others written at the time in terms of style. He "The critic was referring to the fact that I wasn't producing poems in which the message was made absolutely obvious and that this poetry lacked a clear focus. In other words, there was nothing declarative in this poetry." In order for the reader to make the implicit connections for himself, Mahapatra adds, "What I was possibly attempting to do was to weave together pictures and symbols." (Ramakrishnan, 38) This method of composing poetry contributes to the poem's mysticism and even obscurity. As a result, readers and reviewers agree that Mahapatra's poetry is challenging to read. Mahapatra is pleased to acknowledge these accusations and says "Many of my works have received the label of obscurity. The seeds of the poem's own interpretation, however, seem to be there if this kind of poetry has any appeal." (Ramakrishnan, 38) Even a background like this reveals Mahapatra's early immaturity. Mahapatra rose to fame with his first book of poetry, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, which has forty-nine poems of varied lengths, tones, and subjects. According to Bruce King, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* is representative of Mahapatra's early work in that experimentation with form, language, image, and sound takes precedence over emotion. Despite the fact that most of the writing in this first book comes off as quite childish, Mahapatra has a great ability to mould words like clay. It is unquestionably "one of the foundations of the poet." (Prasad, 96)

The thirty-three poems in Mahapatra's second collection, *Swayamvara and Other Poems*, are all experimental, much like the first. Similar to the prior book, it also demonstrates his clumsy efforts to shape words and phrases to "produce" poetry rather than really writing them. The majority of the poetry in this collection is hazy, illogical, and unsatisfying. However, there are two fine poems that show the promise Mahapatra keeps in his later volumes: *Blind Singer in a Train* and *Faith*. According to these two collections of poems, Mahapatra seems to have developed his "poetics" mainly on his own as an intellectual endeavour. But the mid-1970s saw a fresh transformation. Mahapatra poetry started to look less manufactured. It became more coordinated, less choppy, rhythmically much better cadenced, with phrases and sentences that were closer to typical grammar and less the result of a mind creating complex arguments, according to Bruce King. Regarding the themes, Bruce King says, "They were presented as the result of speculation on external stimuli, particularly the landscape and environment of Cuttack where Mahapatra was raised." Its concerns and themes remained private moments of illumination, despair, guilt, desire and other momentary fluctuations of feeling and insight arising within the mind.

Mahapatra's sixth collection, *The False Start*, has forty-three poems. The poet's life in India and abroad, his friends and fellow citizens, his own country, and other places are all discussed in this book. revealing the poet's inverted sensibility and his recognizable hermit-like meditateness once again. It indicates both a noticeable improvement and a mellowing of his lyrical skills. Love, marriage, interracial relations, and children are all subjects that are covered in his first two books of poetry in verse. He acknowledges that at first, he wrote love poems. The way subjects are handled changes when one reads poetry from Mahapatra's later works. After exploring the depths of love, he grounds his views in a variety of different lifestyle choices and analyses broadly the complexities of life that give it meaning. He maintains the nuances of a sensitive and time-bound man, including his estrangement, anguish, rising feeling of frustration as he ages quickly, his dread of death, and the final victory of time over him. His mature poetry convincingly expresses his understanding of the social, religious, and political realities of the day. The lover's poet transforms into a poet of life. His earlier and later poems are inextricably linked by this change in perspective on life. Specially, he is becoming more sociable after reading *Rain of Rites*. His poetry focuses

mostly on social issues. As a native of the temple-building region, my poetry often refers to rites, priests, crows, and lepers. His goal in each of these situations is to comprehend man. His poetry creates a conversation between traditional rites and contemporary sensibilities. On the rising hypocrisy surrounding religious activity, he takes a sarcastic stance. There is no religious cure for human misery. Mahapatra finds the ritualistic nature of Indian faiths to be pointless. So, 'Religion' is a common topic in Mahapatra's poetry. The main focus of *Rain of Rites*, *Waiting*, and *Life Signs* is on religious practices and the agony that goes along with them. The most important aspects of the lives of the Indian people are sex, hunger, and famine, all of which are pervasive in that country. They are a significant topic in Mahapatra's poetry as well. Mahapatra's poetry has a tragic-pessimistic tone because of awareness of the poverty and suffering of the Indian people as well as women's status as desired victims in a culture where males are dominant. K. A. Panikar makes clear "... the view of sorrow, loss, depression, and rejection is the poet's main focus. Other Indian poets who write in English do not appear to exhibit the tragic awareness in Jayant Mahapatra's work in such a distressing way."

In his *Relationship*, a twelve-part epic poem, the author engages with Orisa's ancient culture, history, and myth. It is a spiritual journey to recognize roots in the past. Mahapatra converted to Christianity, therefore he is seeing Hindu culture and history from the perspective of an outsider. In a relationship, the feeling of the past becomes more acute. In *Life Signs*, the concept of pain reaches its pinnacle. Mahapatra speaks more directly to the socioeconomic realities of the environment of Cuttack. He chronicles the man's suffering at the hands of rituals, abject poverty, sex, starvation, famine, drought, immorality, and government. These poems may be examined as "life critique". His encounter with the Cuttack land was terrible. His *Dispossessed Nests* are dominated by the social and political landscape. In this collection of verses, Mahapatra's grasp of modern events is convincingly shown. Once again, the focus of these poems is the agony caused by socio political structures to man. Political leaders' treachery and the danger from multinational corporations, the social life has become gloomier due to terrorism, and the average person now suffers in isolation. In *Dispossessed Nests*, this realisation is even more acute. His subjects are diverse, as can be seen by looking at the themes of his poetry. He has a greater understanding of life's complexities. He does not advance any particular way of life via his writings, but he is aware of the value of the human being. His contemporary sensibility strives to restore human dignity. Aboveall, Jayanta Mahapatra is threatened by showiness, immortality, corruption, anarchy, and danger to traditional values. Mahapatra's sensibility is fundamentally Indian, yet he avoids giving off an Indian vibe by using exotic animals like tigers, snakes, snake charmers, jugglers, crocodiles, etc. Because he does not intentionally strive to be Indian, he is able to sidestep numerous tired clichés and postures, proving that he is in fact Indian. His poetry on Orissa, where the local and specific, are elevated to the level of the universal, finest display his Indianness.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it may be said that Mahapatra as a modern writer tries to lay emphasis on subjective memory and inversely but truly speaking, he tries to connect man with his contemporary world. He considered poetry as "craft" which appears to be complex because of its language of allusiveness. His poetry is essentially 'poetry of self-exploration' for in his opinion, the process of writing is nothing but self-exploration and self-discovery. He uses symbols, images, myths, metaphor and similes to bring out rich

and effective poetic vision. Finally, despite being a man of science and his global voyages and experiences gained there, Jayanta Mahapatra has a deeply felt love for his own motherland, which he has presented in the forms of unique Indian imagery, symbolism and diction, and has created a niche for himself in the whole English literature.

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