

CHAPTER-V

DISPOSSESSED NESTS: THE 1984 POEMS

Mahapatra's Dispossessed Nests (1986) relates the socio-political crisis in the life of India. These poems are also sub-titled as 'The poems of 1984'. The year 1984 is significant in the life of India for the Punjab Turmoil and the Bhopal Gas tragedy which predict the dark future of India. In Dispossessed Nests, the poems one after the other echo the suffering and disintegration of man in the light of these two events.

The title of the verse collection is significant. These two events made the living unberable. The life set on knives, bomb-blast and gas was decaying everyday to its utmost level. The dispossession of life was continued and which in a way was the desertion of Nests. This human desertion is the major concern of the poems. Another noticeable thing - the poems are not titled. They have only numbers. The poems one after another mark the human destruction on various planes. Hence there is no need to title the poems separately. The poems are scenes depicting one major theme, i.e., human destruction.

The book, first, entitled 'Bewildered wheatfields' deals with Punjab Turmoil and the second entitled as

'A dance of Bejewelled snakes' is about Bhopal gas tragedy. The poems under these two titles do not suck their energy from the veins of real life but they explore the theoretical contexts of the Punjab and Bhopal gas tragedy. The idea of terrorism and how it has brought fear, violence, destruction and decay in the life of the common man in Punjab has been brought out intelligently. The 'Wheat' is the major crop of Punjab, but its fields are now inhabited by dead bodies. This is the anguish of the poet. The commercial plants set for the purpose of the profit also impose tragedy in the life of common man and this is evidenced by the Bhopal Gas tragedy which has brought the endless suffering in Bhopal. When this mishap occurred thousands were gasping for breath - small, young and old met the same fate - the death. This careless act of the Multinational company is more demonic than the Tandava of Shiva. Mahapatra also underlines the corrupt political world which is responsible for the tragedy of the people. The 'Politicised region' is also a concern of Mahapatra which has brought destruction in life. These are some ideas woven in the poems to predict the 'dark future' of India. Thus the dispossession and the sense of desertion reflects in every poem.

The themes like human destruction, violence, decay, politics, suffering and disintegration are dealt

with in these poems. The human destruction can be analysed on all three levels, physical, cultural and moral. We find the destruction both on personal and impersonal level too. The destruction of man and the destruction of 'property'. This destruction leads towards dispossession and disintegration, the evils of the modern life and world. Politics is another factor to bring in the social destruction now a days. The journey of the politics from 'constructive' to 'destructive' is the anguish of Mahapatra. He depicts the ghastly attitudes of the political leaders. The causes of this destruction emerge as - the politicised religion' and 'commercialised politics', corrupt political leaders, commercial plants, lawlessness, hopeless economy of India etc.. The themes in this verse collection are elaborated in the light of these aspects.

The result of this destruction leads to confirm that the man is alone in his suffering. He has lost his spiritual struggle to react against the callous forces of corrupt socio-economic setup. The endless suffering is the destiny of the people and so is also the master current in these poems.

The poems included under the title 'Bewildered Wheatfields' depict the theme of human destruction, violence, politics, and bring to notice the 'terrorised Punjab'. The analysis of the poems is as follows.

In Punjab, the terrorists with their arms and ammunition killed so many innocent people. There the experience of the 'night of decaying bodies'. The shooting was endless and there was a pile of the dead bodies. The poet explains this social horror through the images of nature. He presents the frustration of a turbulent community as:

The dry riverbed
wrapped up in a shroud of moonlight¹

We find the poet helplessly surrendering to social horror when he sees the human suffering and killing. He smells this horror through natural elements and with anguished tone he says:

This night of the decaying bodies
of those whom I love²

He brings the sense of human destruction and decay through the images of nature. The crisis in nature is reflected here. The river bed is 'dry' and wrapped in 'shroud moonlight', the light of the stars 'ruined' one and with it the bodies are 'decaying'. The very images of the nature bring the sense of destruction and with it predict the dark future of community.

The people of Punjab who were very calm and not very serious about their lives are now experiencing the scenes of violence and destruction. The Wheatfields

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have lost their silence. The violence creeping in the life of Punjab is recorded as:

amidst bewildered wheatfields
the cool night wind snips of the skin³

Why this 'killing drama' is 'on' in Punjab? Why this attempt to dry up the river of life and hear the 'sands breathe?'.⁴ How long this hate will continue? Mahapatra's questioning tone hints at the suffering of humanity.

The everyday news bulletin on TV brings the news of the shot-dead people, in Punjab. The poet wishes something good on 'TV tonight'. But the report covers nothing but deaths of innocent people. The poet contemplates on this social violence and asks when this wilderness will end. Mahapatra feels that it will get a full stop but everyday death confirms its continuity. Therefore the hope for 'something good'⁵ on the television tonight proves futile.

In Punjab, even the eyes of mask are imparting fear. 'The petticoat stirred'⁶ in the wind exposes the buried horror of the long and supreme knives. The dead bodies cast out are looking for the head. The pale moonlight is like a white cloth in the death's land. This brings to notice the madness of violence and heinous killings. The dance of violence and destruction is at its apex here. It seems that the land of

Punjab is the land of debris.

The images from the world of violence like 'trembling of purple', 'the torso', 'a roll of smoke' and the images from the world of nature like pale moonlight, 'death's wild land' wind bring out the sense of violence and decay.

The world of nature is rendered in the context of the 'human destruction' as:

Sultry july
the grasses of the dead
are growing fast⁷

The image of 'sultry july' indicates the 'hot atmosphere' and with it there is a hot atmosphere of 'dead bodies' too. The dead bodies multiply fast. The fear of death creeps in intensely as the terrorist activities increase.

The terrorist activities were started to bring in total disintegration in Punjab. Not only the social institution but the familial life was also crushed under the thumb of terrorists. Many times the family members meet the same fate - the death. Even the children. It shocks us when the chief of the family is killed and the small girl becomes the victim of the terrorist world. The poet expresses his anguish about it as -

When did she
get used to the world?
she
frightens us⁸

recording the threat of violence.

Living as a humanbeing on the land of Punjab seems to be a type of crime. Common people are worried to be alive. The humane attitudes of the land are replaced by beastly attitudes. To be human is the subject of hate. The qualities of 'humane' can be appreciated in dream only. The poet points out the social fear as:

To be human
is to see in a dream perhaps⁹

There is refrain of hate about 'to be alive' in his mind. But when he sees the rain-fall, he feels that the senseless refrain of hate will change into 'the amazement to be alive'. The poet's hope for the positive attitude of life is fully reflected here.

The poet narrates the episode of hijacking and brings out how hijacking is emerging as national addict of violence today. He explains the hijacking of Flight 405 to Lahore very ironically. The humane behaviour of the terrorist generates confidence in passengers. But at last, the evil in the terrorist gets hold of the passengers. The major cause behind the hijacking is 'Khalistan'. Like the well trained protesters the terrorist would shout 'Long Live Khalistan' and attack passengers with their bullets. All this is associated with social violence and criminality and results further

in disintegration - geographical, social and cultural. The poet further points out the irony that the daughters of the victimised parents are eager to listen to the hijacking anecdotes from their mothers. The poet observes it as:

The vermilion on the woman's forehead
ripples in the dark. Her kid daughter wants
her favourite hijacking anecdote narrated again
to lull her to sleep¹⁰

The fear of the terrorists enters in the 'world of children'.

It all indicates that the man is all alone to combat with the vices of socio-political set-up. The suffering of humanity due to terrorist activities is the subject of this poem. It also indicates how in the name of Khalistan the life of the common man in Punjab is put under the dark shadows of fear. The uproar of the terrorism and the meek acceptance of it by the common man is unending. Terrorism adds to the sufferings of the common man, who is already fed up with his lot and role, in a country like India.

The land of Punjab accustomed to the 'Curfew', 'Ambulance', 'impatient', 'darkness', 'doorbell', 'death' etc.. They are the things one nourishes hatred for. The anguished tone of the poet is directed towards political and administrative set-up in Punjab. He records

his observation as:

In the city of the round-the-clock
curfew, and the white trucks
painted AMBULANCE fighting
my thought in the sun¹¹

The deformed humanity is the concern of Mahapatra here.

The very existence of man is threatened by the
endless bomb-blast. Life itself is a nest but it is
totally shattered and the very possession is questioned.
The current socio-political system is responsible for
this scene. The agonies of dispossession continue.
He observes it as:

This is the last explosion
we hope
and wait

How we wonder
in the mind's expanding nova
the dispossessed nests¹²

The dominance of antisocial elements is responsible
for the dispossession of man in Punjab. The series
of bomb-blast leads to destruction and dispossession
of man on social, moral and cultural level. Every explo-
sion marks the dispossession and disintegration of
men in the country. The psychological and material
dispossession also figures in these poems.

The land of Punjab is the land of suffering
humanity. The socio-political systems have brought

this fate to the people. We find the administrative system careless about the suffering of widows whose husbands were shot-dead by terrorists. A lonely woman is standing in the queue for her sustenance allowance. This brings out the callousness of the Government that compels widows in queue for sustenance allowance. Mahapatra records the anguish of a widow as:

the voice of the lonely woman
standing in the queue for her sustenance allowance
(her husband shot dead by terrorists last month) -
a voice which the roar
of the Minister's jet cuts short¹³

It is the duty of the Government to support the people who become the victims of antisocial elements. In Punjab, the fate of widows is tragic one. They have to struggle for sustenance allowance by standing in the queue. This is more heart rending and wretched one. The poet points out that the agonised minds of widows are made more agonised by the political decisions. The evil nature of the administrative set-up and its callousness is recorded here.

How 'living' is unbearable for the old in Punjab finds expression in

And the old man whom I call father
slowly opens his mouth to swallow
the spoonfuls of glucose being fed to him
I have been watching him lie in his bed
for over two years now¹⁴

The 'living' for old and widows is worthless. It seems that they are gasping for breath, they are on the brink of death. The picture of the old, disabled, supportless people affected by the horrors of terrorism rampant in Punjab then drawn by the poet well defines 'Punjab' of the time.

The families as well as the Government officials are the victims of Militants' acts. Disintegration of the land is the chief purpose of the terrorist. The process of disintegration is on both the levels - mental and material. The life is deshaped and is all the time under the threat of destruction. The poet brings out the reality about the land and says:

No dreams blow in the unlocked skull¹⁵

The environ of dream is totally dark and is inhabited by the world of violence.

Then follows the violent scenario in Amritsar. The horror of supreme knives is the reality in the city. The shadows of violence follow the life in the land. He puts it as:

Only shadows
Pick up the reigns of reality in Amritsar
Shadows
of long and supreme knives¹⁶

The poet makes an ironical comment on the political

world. The leaders are more sensitive about past History which is lifeless but turn deaf ear to the unrest and suffering of common man in Punjab. Their suffering turns out to be a pet topic for casual discussion-moods of the people and the administrators.

the calendar hatches India's history
a lifeless story
chewed on by the vultures of the country's leaders¹⁷

It is ironic that the shadows of death are roaming on the land and the political leaders are more interested in chewing the India's past history. Their negligence about the people are reality is the concern of Mahapatra.

Silence pervades the poems in this collection. It is horrible, frightening. It nonplusses the readers. It seems that to express something eluding in the mind, Mahapatra uses the word 'silence'. The word 'silence' has different connotations. The violence in the land of Punjab creates 'silence' in the land. Here in 'silence' there is an indefinite expansion of fear and the threat imposed on life. The silence is the metaphor of suffering. He records his observation as:

For silence is the only evidence
left behind, strange solace
for mankind¹⁸

Mahapatra comments on today's **MAHARAJA GURU NANAK DEVI UNIVERSITY** mentality
which has evilsome attitude towards a stray woman.

The houses of such women become victims of male sexuality. The male force operates here as a rape and its apex is achieved through the murder of such a woman. The Indian culture and tradition which talks in high pitch about Indian woman is thus degenerated by evilsome and beastly forces. The status of woman is thus degraded. The social anguish is recorded as:

Now a man knows only two ways
for dealing with stray woman:
he rapes her
and he kills her¹⁹

The lawlessness in society and the suffering of female is again a major concern of Mahapatra.

Mahapatra brings to notice the stark reality of the political world. The political leaders have lost their sensibility for social life. It has festered into the 'hard knots of meanness'. The image of leaders and their behaviour gets recorded as:

The tall dark mountains burying their faces
in the false snow to stifle their laughter²⁰

Further in the same poem the poet recalls the 'distant pinpoints of light' as mythic battles, angry gods and the heroism of Hanuman that constitute Indian culture. What have we achieved? In an ironic tone, the poet says that 'the false world of leaders' is what we have

attained so far.

Mahapatra tries to see today's political leaders through the image of Mahatma Gandhi. Is it that what Gandhi had given to the country and politics is the fate of today's political leaders? Yes, Gandhi had given a lot of good for future generation. Formerly the issue was freedom and status of India. Now the self-centred nature of political leaders and how they have degenerated the trends of Gandhi's way is what we have at our disposal. With an elegiac tone, Mahapatra writes:

We had read so much about you, about freedom
was everything you did
Gandhiji, only an act you put on for posterity?
with India, our India, barely worth raping?²¹

The moral decay in politics is the concern of Mahapatra here.

Mahapatra also underlines the mute suffering of common man and his predicament in the country. Due to corrupt socio-economic set-up and the inability of common man to react against it, his condition like that of one floating in the sky of his own suffering, completely lost in the state of mental inertia where you 'nurse the sickness of fear'. After the harsh experience of socio-economic set up the condition of the commoner is -



I know I have been in love with the world
a little too much, taken my own place
for granted and become the secret landscape²²

The common man loses the fire of a spiritual struggle
and sadness deposits. This anguish is recorded as:

the pigeons of my town
must fly and perch on the unspoken sadness
of the bronze statue
decapitated once in sudden redness²³

A mad unrest is cropping up in the society against
the corrupt political scene. The unrest of the people
is directed towards 'Delhi'. The 'deep sigh' of the
revengful mouth is going to shake politicians' dust
Delhi. The poet feels that now it is time to check
the evil shades that are challenging the common man's
identity - and this will be achieved by breaking the
moral restraints of country's adolescence. The poet
points out that the helpless social life is in the
hands of politicians. The anguish regarding it finds
expression -

For this is the hour of the deep sigh
that shakes the politicians' dust of Delhi²⁴

The poet contemplates the past and labels it as a 'bastard
past'. Today's evil tendencies are the 'pack' of our
past. The sense of guilt occupies his mind. He underlines

it as -

... rapist behaviour in our prehistoric pack²⁵

For political parties 'unity' is more important than the 'good' of their country. This dimension of politics is not new to the social life. They come to power to do good for the people, but -

How false they seem, even to themselves²⁶

The satiric comment is to bring out the hollowness and the futility of political world and its future.

The mute suffering of humanity and its utter helplessness against the social evils bring to our notice the fragmented social set-up of the country. The very domestic life is threatened by the administrative and terrorist forces. This is the land of debris. The poet gives expression to it as follows:

The huge siren hangs over acres of empty streets
where a child looks across its dead mother
into his face, its all-white emptiness echoing²⁷

The king would fight in the past time, to expand the boundaries of state and Dharma. But today, the concept of Dharma is diseased one, totally oriented to self-interest of community or group. Mahapatra labels the 'politicised religion of today as:

an enormous
pathological
dram of Dharma²⁸

The 'politicised religion' is the 'Dharma' in Punjab and has brought the evil fate of the people.

The major concern of Mahapatra in the first section of this verse collection is the Punjab Turmoil. The themes of suffering, decay, destruction, violence develop in the light of Terrorism and politics here. This collection is an insightful comment on the indisciplined, dis-integrated, distorted picture of the country.

'A dance of Bejewelled snakes' deals with human suffering brought by commercial plants and politics. Human destruction is the major theme here. The Bhopal gas-tragedy is a major event in the recent history of India. Mahapatra mentions some lines of pablo Neruda to underline the tragedy of humanity to realise the huge suffering around. The analysis of the poems is as follows.

The Bhopal gas-tragedy took place on 3rd December 1984. The cover photograph of 'India Today' of 31st December 1984 of Gas victimised people inspired the poet. The cover photograph was of a small girl Leela, aged five, daughter of Dayaram of Chola Kenchi, Bhopal, who died of gas poisoning. This was victim number 569. This offers Mahapatra a straight-forward probe into

the mind of Leela's father. While recording the reaction of the father, he says, it was hard for the Dayaram to realise the death of his daughter by the poisonous gas. The condition of the Dayaram - a father - is recorded as:

... his half-waking mind
trying fruitlessly to drain the sea of his reality²⁹

The poet uses the image of fish to bring out the tragic condition of man. Just like the fish caught in the net the people were trapped by the gas. And thus their gracefully rising was snapped. Leela wouldn't have dreamed herself? The poet dreamt of Leela's eyes filled with pains like 'sails filling the wind'. The world of innocence was thus confronted with the world experience. The agonies of a father and daughter recorded here has a reaction of social reality. These are the representative agonies.

The poem records the heart rending suffering, the helpless surrender of man to reality.

The commercial plant is one of the evils to bring in human destruction and tragedy. But the poet when he sees around he finds the very social set-up and the anti-social elements have cast their evil shadows on the mass. He lists it as - 'feudal landlord', 'bejewelled snakes', 'iron bars' etc.. These elements are directed

to bring suffering and destructions of man and nation. Everyday the social, moral and cultural decay is on increase. Directly or indirectly the social life becomes the victim of 'bejewelled snakes' and suffers a lot., Here the sense of social evil is brought in the form of natural elements like wind and rainwater.

Strange is the place to which you never belong
But somewhere among the crowd you are there
Young men stand in the crossroads, suddenly taller
without fear³⁰

The poet meditates on the conditions of man shaped by the current socio-political set-up. After independence what sort of life the people of India have achieved? The very socio-political, religious, moral and cultural decay of nation makes the poet contemplate on 'to find out where our lives have brought us'.³¹ The poet is very much ashamed of the country's 'present' and the miserable condition of man. He says the present 'will not enable us to live in'. The diseased life force and the suffering through it is vital concern of Mahapatra.

The poet is very much critical about the country's future being shaped by the politics. His comments on the politics of the country are ironical. The poems, one after another mark the degenerated aspects of politics. He is very much serious about the values in politics

but there values are being devalued in the present set-up. Politics is the 'feel' of society but it has lost this graceful side and indulged in dark activities. The poet records one aspect of this politics:

... the sinister shadow
of the minister with the dark power of his government
in the merciful sun³²

Such is the politics centered around the self-interest. In the very daylight, the politics is operating its evil tendencies. The moral decay of politics is underlined here. The young are excited to shape this political world. Today, the corrupt politics is the evil fruit of society and in such circumstances we have to hope for well-being of the people and the country. Here the ministers are not for well-being of the people. The very human dignity and morality are darkened by the political considerations. Today's political scene is a type of ordeal for the future generations.

The anti-social elements and politics are sucking the marrow of life. In this sense the leaves of the dark tree of India are gasping for 'breath'. Everyday this darkness is depositing and the attempt is to be 'alive'. The sense of isolation is the product of the present political atmosphere. The life-style has lost vitality and vigour. People desire for the revival in social and political world and expect wellbeing

from administration. The poet realises this in the "hum of silent, shut-in machinery".³³ The poems develop the theme of decay - social, moral and even cultural.

Through the socio-political set up the poet probes into the collective unconscious of India. He records the violence, destruction and decay. His mind makes a search through the images of nature in the world of violence. The hatred for man and his victimization is a common feature of politics today.

The darkness has lived long enough
for its nights to overcome its victims³⁴

He underlines the social darkness and with it the theme of violence and decay.

In poem 33, the poet handles the social issue of abortion. The illegal untimely pregnancy has become a custom in society today. The world of medicine has made it common. A lady viz. Yashoda, from a poor family is arranging for the second abortion of her fourteen-year daughter. The poet asks her 'why do you need a family Yeshoda?. This element of immorality has eclipsed the social life. Yeshoda is the representative of all such women who accept the abortion as a common thing. The very purpose of living and the value of domestic life is challenged here. The theme of moral decay is well developed here.

The curfew in social life imposed by antisocial elements, the moral and social crisis, violence and politics are the causes of human suffering. The various turns in politics and how it is harmful to social life is the concern of Mahapatra. The poems about politics bring out the corrupt social aspects in the most vivid way here.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Mahapatra, Jayanta. Dispossessed Nests: The 1984 Poems (Jaipur: Nirala Publication, 1986). All references are to this edition of the text.

- 1 Dispossessed Nests, p. 14
- 2 Ibid.
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- 5 Ibid., p. 17.
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- 7 Ibid., p. 19.
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- 10 Ibid., p. 21.
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