

## CHAPTER-II

### JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

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Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the most renowned and familiar Indian poets writing in English. Born in Cuttack in 1928 and educated at Stewart School and Revenshaw College, Cuttack and Science College, Patana, he is a remarkable poet from Orissa. At present he lives in Cuttack where he is a Reader in Physics at Revenshaw College. He, like many other Indian poets writing in English, is bilingual. Before treading in English he had been writing in Oriya. Writing about his background he emphasizes his upbringing in 'a small narrow community'<sup>1</sup> and his birth in a lower middle class. His father was a School Inspector. His childhood days were spent under the strict supervision of his mother. She did not allow him any freedom. This made him run away from the house twice but he came back. He puts it as 'cowardliness'<sup>2</sup> and confesses that he can't 'deny it'.<sup>3</sup> He took lessons in English from British School Master. But he has been more profited by the expansive reading of the novels of 'Ballantyne, Burrough and Hoggard'.<sup>4</sup> In the School, Mathematics and Physics attracted his attention and dominated his intellectual and professional horizons and later trained him as a physicist. In a way, he was too far away 'from the academic world of English Literature'.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this non-literary background, he began writing in

English at the age of thirty-eight.

Oriyas are proud of two eyes and two temples - two huge round eyes of Lord Jagannatha and two temples at 'Konaraka' and 'Puri'. The temple at Konarak epitomizes austere aestheticism and the latter sanctifies the sky of experiences. Under the 'inspiring aegis of the two temples'<sup>6</sup> Mahapatra started writing poetry in English. Mahapatra's poetic sensibility is fostered on Oriyan landscape which encompasses within it the racial and cultural consciousness of its people and their gods and goddesses and the history of civilization which has risen and fallen like a 'Stupa',<sup>7</sup> a pillar of past glory, and of present decay. These phases are recorded in his poetry and he reacts to them. Mahapatra's major poetry is an ironic reflection of religious, cultural and social life of the past and the present. The Oriyan culture generally presents the poet's emotional and intellectual life and his desire to draw meaning out of them. 'He makes the Oriyan life the emotional grist to his poetic mill'.<sup>8</sup>

Mahapatra began to write poetry around the age of forty, and as if to make up for the late start, he has published ten books of verse in the space of fifteen years. He has published more regularly in some of the best journals in the west. His poems have been published in Critical Quarterly (Manchester), The Malahat Review (Victoria), Meanjin Quarterly (Melbourne),

Poetry (Chicago), Hudson Review, Kenyan Review, Sewanee Review. Along with these Western Journals, his poems also have appeared in Indian Journals, viz.: The Journal of Indian Writing in English (Culbarga), The Literary Half-Yearly, Indian Horizons, Indian Literature, Chandrabhaga (Cuttack) and the Times Literary Supplement. He also edited a special Indian issue of poetry for south and west and co-edited a literary Journal Gray Book. Presently, he edits Chandrabhaga, a magazine of new writing from India and acts as a poetry editor of The Telegraph.

He attended the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa, the U.S.A., in 1976 as a visiting writer from India. He read his own poetry at the Adelaide Festival of Arts, 1978. In 1978, Mahapatra was named Australia's Cultural Award Visitor. He was awarded the Jacob Glastein Memorial Award Instituted by Poetry (Chicago 1975) and the 1981 National Academy of Letters Award. In 1981, he was honoured by Sahitya Akademi Award.

So far, he has twelve collections to his credit. His works include: Close the Sky Ten by Ten (Dialogue, Calcutta, 1971), Svayamvara and other poems (Writer's Workshop, Calcutta, 1971), A Father's Hours (United Writers, Calcutta, 1976), A Rain of Rites (University of Georgia press, Athens, 1976), Waiting (Samkaleen Prakashan, Delhi, 1979), The False Start (Clearing

House, Bombay, 1980), Relationship (Greenfield Review press, N.Y., 1980), Life Signs (Oxford University press, Delhi, 1983), Dispossessed Nests: The 1984 poems (Nirala publication, Jaipur, 1986), Selected Poems (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 1987), Burden of Waves and Fruit (Three Continents press, Washington D.C., 1988), Temple (Sydney: Dangroo press) and A Whiteness of Bone (Viking Publication, New Delhi, 1992).

Mahapatra has translated Oriyan poetry into English. It includes: Countermeasures (1973), by Soubhagya Mishra Kumar, Wings of the Past (1976), by Jadanath Das Mahapatra, Songs of Kubja and other poems (1981), by Sitakant Mahapatra.

Mahapatra's prose is found in Tales from Fakirmohan, True Tales of Travel and Adventure, and Orissa.

A close examination of the influences working on Mahapatra's poetry reveals that in 1968 when Mahapatra started writing poetry, his poetic stuff was just an admixture of a few different types of poems that had been incorporated in his 'School literature texts'.<sup>9</sup> Till the first attempt at poetry writing, he had not read any contemporary poetry. He was totally aloof from the world of poetry. He emphatically states that he was 'trained to be a physicist'.<sup>10</sup> About his later attraction for English poetry, he writes that he was

'veered away from physics in a way'<sup>11</sup> and had made his debut by publishing a few poems. It seems that his study and teaching of physics might have excited his sense, and this is very clear when he writes "Maybe my study of physics has come to polarize my thinking".<sup>12</sup> This is clearly evidenced in his poetry which is full of scientific imagery. There is a scientific discipline in his poetry. Though Mahapatra had not any access to contemporary poetry, he had a 'strong stand on language'<sup>13</sup> which introduced him to the horizons of poetry. For this "he had been scrupulously nurturing and polishing through the years".<sup>14</sup> He was really moved by different shades of words 'that seemed to come from somewhere beyond the words themselves'.<sup>15</sup> And perhaps, it was this fascination for language that moved Mahapatra to write poems. He writes: it 'urged me on'.<sup>16</sup> As a bilingual poet, he has translated a lot of Oriya poetry into English. This act of translation has brought to fruition his own poetry in living English. Though Mahapatra's early poetry lacks influence of any literary trend or future, his later poetry claims a wider kinship with Latin American poets. Bruce King observes that "Mahapatra appears to have learned from Robert Bly, James Wright, Walt Whitman and other American poets of the late 60's and early 70's, a new means of using the external world to present subjective feelings".<sup>17</sup>

Mahapatra's Relationship (1980) is a clear evidence

of this. As the epigraph to his book Relationship which is a poetic sequence of twelve sections shows, Mahapatra was much more moved by the poetry of Walt Whitman who wrote: "I am large, I contain multitudes". Like Whitman, "Mahapatra has a geographical imagination for positioning things in their locale. He has internalised some of the poetic strategies of Whitman, such as cataloguing of details, the uninhibited presentation of the naked self and frequent references to places, birds, animals, trees, rivers and seasons".<sup>18</sup> As an Indian writer in English, Mahapatra does not emulate the ways of other poets, nor is he influenced by any contemporary poets. His is a fresh ride in the field of poetry.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic career began rather late in comparison with his contemporaries. He discovered poetry at the age of forty. Upto this stage, the act of writing a poem was totally unknown to him. Added to this were two significant factors that went against his writings. First, he was old enough not to be getting ideas about those mushy qualities generally associated with a subject like love which almost all poets begin with and secondly, he had been trained in a science discipline and had been immersed in the teaching of physics for a long time. So here he was at a sort of crossroads, facing an impossible problem in his life. On such a background he made debut with poetry. His friends and colleagues

smiled at him for his act of writing poems. Mahapatra says: "I saw the unmistakable leer in their eyes, and felt fairly miserable. For me, certainly poetry was not the plaything they thought I was dabbling with. It was real for me, very real".<sup>19</sup>

In order to test himself as a poet, he sent out poems to various journals. But rejections were much more numerous than the few acceptances. His efforts were in all probability directed towards something new, a 'Modernity' in his poetry. Mahapatra says, "Undeniable I did want to write poems that would be different from those that still stuck to my mind from my school days".<sup>20</sup> But the strong stand on language - a language he had been scrupulously nurturing and polishing through the years, 'urged him on'.<sup>21</sup> So, with some degree of indiscriminate and stupid boldness, he began to make a poem. His first poem entitled as 'I hear My Fingers Sadly Touching an Ivory Key', he mentions the responses received from sources. Indian critics were not ready to accept this as poem. But the poem was accepted for publication and subsequently published in Chicago Review. He says, "I was trying to create differently".<sup>22</sup> And thus the feeling that this poetry was different from what was being written here at that time was strengthened by letters of rejection from established poets and editors. In such circumstances, he set to composing poems breathlessly.

About his mode of writing, his poems were different from the contemporary. He "was not writing the kind of poems in which meaning was stated clearly, explicitly, and that this poetry did not have a sharp focus was what the critic had in mind when he commented on my work. In other words, this poetry had no flat statement".<sup>23</sup> Mahapatra says "What I was perhaps trying to do, was to put together images and symbols so that the reader would draw the implicit connections for himself."<sup>24</sup> This approach to the writing of poetry goes to make the poem mysterious, even obscure. And hence the response of critics and readers is "It is hard to read the poems of Mahapatra". Mahapatra is happy to accept these allegations and admit that "obscurity has been label applied to much of my work. However, one feels that if this type of poem has an appeal, then it does contain the seeds of the poem's own interpretation".<sup>25</sup>

Can such a poetry have a readership? Mahapatra says, "Today I write because I cannot do without it. And I feel happier if my own people understand my work - which sorrily, they don't. But Indian readers are warm today in their responses".<sup>26</sup>

Such a background, Mahapatra came into prominence with his first verse collection Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (1971) which contains forty-nine poems of uneven length and varying tone and subject matter, registers

Mahapatra's initial immaturity. Bruce King remarks "'Close the Sky, Ten by Ten' is significant of the nature of Mahapatra's early work in which experiment with form, language, image, sound prevails over emotion".<sup>27</sup> Although most of the pieces in this first volume strike us rather immature, his is 'a commendable capacity to mould the language like clay'. It is certainly 'one of the basis of the poet'.<sup>28</sup> Mahapatra's second volume Svaymvara and Other Poems (1971) having thirty-three poems, is, like the preceding one only experimental. It like the earlier volume also shows his shaky attempts at shaping words and phrases to 'make' (rather than create) poems. Most of the poems in this volume are misty, inconherent and inconclusive. Nevertheless, one comes across two good poems - 'Blind Singer in a Train' and 'Faith' that reveal the promise Mahapatra fulfils in his later volumes.

From these two verse collections, it seems that Mahapatra has evolved his 'poetics' largely on his own as an intellectual act. But the new change came in mid '70s. Mahapatra poetry began to lose its appearance of being contrived. Bruce King remarks: 'It became more co-ordinated, less choppy, rhythmically much better candenced, its phrases and sentences close to normal syntax, less a product of a mind constructing obscure arguments'.<sup>29</sup> About the themes, Bruce King remarks 'its concerns and themes remained private moments of

illumination, despair, guilt, desire and other momentary fluctuations of feeling and insight arising within the mind, they were presented as the result of speculation on external stimuli, particularly the landscape and environment of Cuttack where Mahapatra was raised and lives'.<sup>30</sup>

In A Rain of Rites (1976) Mahapatra has no doubt, taken a startling leap forward. It is certainly a mature volume of very high order and embodies some of the finest and memorable poems. It has received lavish praises from critics abroad and has established Mahapatra as one of the major Indian English poets writing today. Dick Alien remarks, "The poetry of A Rain of Rites is that of a man taking up a stance against or within mysteries, sensitive to the moods of days and years. ... The imagery throughout the poetry is sometimes surrealistic, often questioning. ... The book is mainly one to be absorbed as a whole, read quietly".<sup>31</sup> His fourth volume A Father's Hours (1976) contains only four poems as 'Performance', 'Levels', 'The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975' and 'Assassin', in which Mahapatra's sensibility towards contemporary reality gets sharpened. In the twenty-section poem, 'The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975', Mahapatra makes an ambitious attempt to present the contemporary socio-political reality. Mahapatra himself admits that "I think I have not been wholly successful

because of my tentative approach to things".<sup>32</sup> The poet's sharp sense of irony and satire is unmistakably noticed in the poems.

Waiting (1979), consisting of forty-six poems, exhibits the same characteristics of Mahapatra as noticeable in his third volume, A Rain of Rites. The pieces in this volume, like some in his other volumes, are set in Orissa and portray with sharp sensitivity and striking detail the commonplaces of the public and the private, denoting the ubiquitous reality in India. The earth, the stone, the river, the forest, the temple, the priest, the leper, the whore, the sweeper, the shopkeeper, the animal, light, blood, pain, desire, and death constitute a composite world, revealing Mahapatra's intimate knowledge about the religious rituals, myths, metaphysics, superstitions and beliefs operative in the local life of Orissa. Bruce King remarks 'Although Waiting echoes such English writers as Thomas Gray, Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot, Mahapatra's poetry is unusual. Perhaps there are sources in the Indian languages, but the nearest 'English' model I know is early Dylan Thomas where apparently surrealist techniques are used to explore through contradictions the inner world of the speaker and his relationship to his past, family, sexuality, nature and time, within a world where living is dying and the womb is seen leading to the tomb. While Thomas

uses Christian symbolism to suggest analogies between the sufferings of the self and the Christ story, Mahapatra, in Waiting, uses Indian, especially Hindu, symbols to examine the self, often producing irony, sadness and guilt'.<sup>33</sup>

The False Start (1980) the sixth volume of Mahapatra, comprises forty-three poems. This volume is related to the poet's life both in India and abroad, to his friends and people, to his land and beyond. Once again, unfolding the poet's inverted sensibility and his characteristic hermit-like meditateness. It denotes a marked progress as well as mellowing of his poetic abilities.

Relationship (1980), which won Mahapatra the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award of 1981, is a clear landmark, indicating that he has marched a long distance from Close the Sky, Ten by Ten. Indubitably, it is a great work which explores with remarkable symphonic effects his unbreakable 'relationship' with rich religion, culture, rituals, traditions and mythos of Orissa and, above all, with the primordial shaping influences that Konarka has exercised on him, unfolding the various stages of his own individuality. Resolved into twelve sections, this long poem, a significant corollary of his critical piety and his commendable capacity to confront and interrogate the challenges and the deficiencies of all



the traditions, rituals and myths that have shaped his psyche, engendering in him a terrible sense of deprivation and defencelessness in the face of the overwhelming presence of the past, is indisputably his profoundly serious attempt at experimental meditation on his origins and his sacred ties with Orissa. In an article in The Literary Criterion, Mahapatra says "'Relationship' is a product of dreams has made me speak of the demands of a pilgrimage - a pilgrimage threatened by the living Oriya past, by nagging hunger and persistent sexuality".<sup>34</sup>

A fact worth noticing about the more recent poems of Jayanta Mahapatra is that they appear to reveal an increasing concern on the part of the poet with contemporary reality with all its political connotations. From the preoccupation with timeless myths he has extended his range of interest to include reality, still glimmering in the light of reason, not yet metamorphosed into myth.

Life Signs (1983), is nothing but a 'criticism of Life'. The Cuttack scene comes vibrantly alive in 'Life Signs'. The poems are more direct and there is mute irony. After writing 'The False Start' and having established Relationship, it is appropriate that Life Signs should follow. Mahapatra brings to notice that socio-political set-up in Cuttack is responsible to make the Life Signs colourless. Every poem is a social document and comes on various planes. Reviewing Life Signs in

Kunappi (University of Aarhus), John Barnie says: "Life Signs is not nihilistic like the work of Philip Larkin where, in the end, nothing is of value. ... The differences between the two poets (Wordsworth and Mahapatra) are profound, yet in one sense at least the comparison is just, for few poets in our country have evoked 'The still, sad music of humanity' so movingly as Mahapatra.

In Dispossessed Nests (1986), the poet is more and more direct about the contemporary socio-political reality. Mahapatra deals more effectively with subjects like the Punjab turmoil and the Bhopal gas tragedy. The suffering and loneliness of an individual in the socio-political set-up is the major concern of these poems. The new social threats directed towards the life of common are listed here. The poet also underlines that the individual has lost his spiritual struggle to make two hands with the reality.

His recent verse collection Temple (1989) and A Whiteness of Bone (1992) are about the predicament of man in the modern world. We find the seeds of socio-political concerns in his early verse collection, viz., Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, A Father's Hours. No Indian poet has handled the political subjects as has Mahapatra.

When we study the themes developed in Mahapatra's

poetry, a chain of subjects ranging from landscape of the country to international problems are seen. He has an open mind and perhaps a willing ear in choosing the themes for his poetry.

In his early two verse collections love, marriage, private sex, parenthood these themes are handled in the poems. He admits that he started as a love poet.

As one moves from Mahapatra's early to later poetry, one notices a change in the treatment of themes. After sounding the depths of love, he anchors his thoughts in many other modes of living, and studies at large the intricacies of life which make it whole. He identifies himself with his roots and past and upholds the complexities of a sensitive and timebound man: his alienation, his suffering, his growing sense of frustration while aging fast, his perpetual fear of death and the inevitable triumph of time over him. His awareness of the contemporary situations - social, religious and political - find convincing expression in his later poetry. The poet of love turns to be a poet of life. This shift in attitude to life unfailingly sets up a deep sense of continuity between his early and later poetry.

After Rain of Rites he is more and more social. Social concerns predominate his poetry. As a man from the land of temples, many poems have context of rituals, priests, crows, lapers. In all these contexts his attempt

is to understand man. His poems develop a dialogue between ancient rituals and modern sensibility. He makes an ironic slant on the growing hypocrisy around the religious activities. Religion has not provided any antidote to human suffering. The Indian religions are steeped in ritual, which appears meaningless to Mahapatra. Hence 'Religion' is the theme of many poems of Mahapatra. In Rain of Rites, Waiting, Life Signs the major concern is of religious activities and human suffering behind it.

Sex, hunger, starvation have been chronic in India and they are the most significant facets of the life of the Indian masses. They also constitute a major theme in Mahapatra's poetry. These themes are brought out in his best poems as in 'Hunger', 'The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street', 'A Missing Person', all are from A Rain of Rites. Consciousness of the poverty and the suffering of the Indian masses, and of women as victims of male lust in a male-dominated society imparts to Mahapatra's poetry a tragic-pessimistic tone. As K.A. Panikar points out "... the poet's dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, rejection. The tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayant Mahapatra".

Mahapatra has handled the theme of sex in a way different from the traditional one. He finds moral in

sex. There is a type of self-understanding. His treatment of sex well explains in his best poem 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street'. K.A. Panikar writes, "There is a moral anguish here which has been absent for a long time in Indian poetry in English. Mahapatra's presentation of love as a moral presence in a sex-haunted world avoids the usual sentimental blabber. Here is an art that has justified itself by providing the exact contour of the inner self. In the process of that self-understanding lies the way to an integration. This is a totally new insight".<sup>35</sup>

His Relationship (1980), an epic poem of twelve parts, makes a dialogue with the Orisa's past culture, history and myth. It is a spiritual quest in the past and thus to realise roots in it. Mahapatra is a converted Christian and hence his condition is just like insider-outsider while exploring into the Hindu culture and history. The sense of the past gets keener in Relationship.

The poet explores the theme of the past tradition and his relationship with it. For him, the past is specific as the past of his land and his people. The past is seen in the spires of temples and the ikons, the ritual worships and festivals, the legends and the myths of the land. The Orissa landscape, the temples at Puri or Konarka and their ruins convey a sense of ageing and of the

passage of inexorable time. The historical details about the land and its people are deftly interlaced with the description of the environment which makes us feel the weight of the past and the tradition. Mahapatra remarked in his speech made on the eve of his accepting the Sahitya Akademi Award, "To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which lie my beginning and end ... I acknowledge my debt and relationship". In an interview, he has reiterated his allegiance and remarked that Orissa has been the base for his poetry and that "Orissa has been a most pleasant and painful experience for me".<sup>36</sup> The main theme of his contemplation seems to be the disparity between the Orissa that was, and the Orissa that is. The past grandeur of Orissa has to be recreated from the ruined architecture and his legacy of the past haunts him and puzzles him.

The poet sculpts the relevant details of the land, historical and cultural, to shape an icon of the past as:-

the cruelties  
of ruthless emperors who carved peaceful edicts  
on blood-red rock,  
...  
and the initiation into the mystery of peace;  
the sailing ships of those maritime ancestors  
who have vanished in the black Bay without a trace,<sup>37</sup>

The theme of suffering gets its apex in Life Signs (1983). Mahapatra is more direct to social realities in the Cuttack landscape. He records the suffering of the man through the hands of rituals, poverty, sex, hunger, drought, immorality, administration. These poems can be studied as the 'criticism of life'. His is a painful experience about the Cuttack land.

The social and political scene dominates in his Dispossessed Nests (1986). Mahapatra's awareness of the contemporary situations finds convincing expression in this verse collection. Again the suffering of man in the hands of socio-political set-up is the theme of these poems. The betrayal of political leaders, threat of Multi-National companies, Terrorism these elements have darkened the social life and the common man is alone in his suffering. This realisation is sharpened in Dispossessed Nests.

In most of Mahapatra's poems silence is a theme. In his poems, he perpetually tries to exploit fully the unique communicative value of silence. In a way, silence - admittedly symbolic of the elusive - is a recurring theme in most of his poems. And Mahapatra himself explains to the interviewer, N. Raghavan, what silence means in his poetry. He observes,

*Silence is a sort of idea in my work,  
which may come as a revelation, and perhaps*

it will come ... as a result of living simply - not aggressively - and the mind begins to flow like water. Or perhaps silence is an opposite pole to this: I mean there's always something eluding one in life - and that something I have never been able to find, even in whatever I can call my own - like a wife or son ... let me call that my silence.<sup>38</sup>

After studying the themes of his poems, one notices that his themes are varied. He is more aware of the intricacies of life. Through his poems he does not propagate any philosophy of life but he is conscious about the dignity of man. His modern sensibility is directed to restore the dignity of man.

The showyness, immorality, corruption, lawlessness, pose threat to the old values and that makes him uneasy.

Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian, but he does not create the impression of Indianness by bringing in such traditional items as tigers, snakes, snake-charmers, jugglers, crocodiles etc.. He is really Indian, because he does not consciously try to be Indian and thus is able to avoid many a hackneyed cliché and posture. His Indianness is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa, where the local and regional is raised to the level of the universal. In Mahapatra's work, 'the language is English, but the sensibility is Indian' (and not only

the subject matter) is Oriya'<sup>39</sup>.

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