

CHAPTER-IV
LIFE SIGNS: A CRITICISM OF LIFE

The Social Aspect of the poems included in Life Signs presents itself in variegated shades, colours and contours. Mahapatra's intellectual and emotional response to Cuttack landscape gets its expression when he deals with social reality. He observes suffering and pain in the society around and studies the dehumanization of man in it and tries to define it. The issues like prostitution, starvation, meaningless religious activities, rape, exploitation of women labourers, drought and human suffering constitute these poems. But one is constantly aware of the ironical tone that runs underneath them.

The women in order to earn their livelihood, engage themselves in repairing and making roads in Cuttack. They have to work hard under the hot eye of the sky, sweating all over their bodies. Such a painful sight makes its impression on the poet's mind - It sharply wails -

Even in the bright sun
This was a world I did not know¹

Irony is the constant attendant of the poet. His attempt to introspect is also an attempt to satirize and mock his society. The sufferings of working women occupy

major portion of the poems of Mahapatra. This is noticeable every now and then. The -

Sweat smell
of woman walking quietly by
with a market basket of bananas on
her head²

points out the hopeless economy of India, sucking their marrow. Prostitution is a great social evil. While pointing out how love is degraded to debased nature of sex, he comments on wild nature of male sensuality. The dryness and futility of an intercourse with a prostitute come alive in -

The plump whore he has just left
has brazenly gone to work on
a new customer³

Prostitution is a way of life for the ill-fated women and they have to stick up to it for-ever. Prostitution is the child of their suffering and they have to nurse it, rely on it for their existence's sake. The rape of fourteen year old girl by a priest's son behind the temple and the cruel rape of the same girl by four constables further suggests the corrupting influences in the administrative set up and defines the corruption rampant in the country -

her father found her at the police station
assaulted over and over again by four
policemen⁴

The corrupt administrative set-up and lawlessness figure in another poem. It is a custom of this society to set killers and rapists free. This and many such other social vices are now becoming the signs of life. The everyday paper is full of such signs.

Before the morning paper comes I know
that Lata's rapists and killers
have been set free⁵

The poet is very much conscious of the diseased world, and the signs of such a world are close at his hand.

On a grieving pout of earth footprints
of diseased hollow-cheeked children⁶

The Cuttack landscape provides the signs of starvation and poverty too. The Government's inability to provide bread is also hinted at. But the people continue to live nostalgically further remembering the tales of the age-old myths. The horrors and realities around make a sensitive person aware of his position and his being helpless in the face of such circumstances and hence question follows -

Here is my world, and it makes me
dream as a child
yet why do I wear myself out
feeling for the girls who die
before their breasts are swollen
with milk⁷

The year after year, the same social scene haunts Cuttack. Its landscape pointing at the degenerated moral values well represented by the oft-seen pictures around. Of course, irony is the constant attendant of Mahapatra everywhere. The moral and social horrors pervading the life are depicted with a great ironic insight - aiming the shafts at irresponsible representatives of the society as in -

Along river banks splattered with excreta and dung in the crowded market square among rotting tomatoes fish-scales and the moist warm odour-of bananas and piss passing by the big-breasted hard-eyed young whores who frequent the empty silent space behind the local cinema by the Town Hall where corrupt politicians still go on delivering their pre-election speeches⁸

Mahapatra has so many querries to make about the fruitfulness of religious activities being conducted throughout this country. Human suffering receives no remedies through the constant devotion of the God in the temples. But centuries together the same yearning for the God, the same heartfelt worship continues undefied. Mahapatra is puzzled by this human tendency and so makes a sharp ironical comment in -

tamed temple god, this river
sluggish centuries curled away from its bone⁹

With sea, the pictures of fishermen also come alive

In his poetry, Mahapatra is aware of the poor, helpless life of the fishermen. He points it out in the context of the fruitlessness of the religious practices. He sees the temple and broken huts of fishermen and comments that temples are weak and dreamy to mitigate social evil like poverty. Here he challenges the religious activities, practices and the power of the god and points out the ruins in life.

Fisherman's broken shacks by the river
let even starlight slip out
from their weak roofs
A temple stands frail and still
in the distance, as though lost in reverie¹⁰

The Desire,¹¹ a reflective poem defines the essence of existence, in the context of the God, the religion, the river and the futile efforts of man to get at something meaningful. It also points out the futility of the human endeavours to make his 'Waiting' significant.

In his another poem Autumn¹² the signs of ruins like old broken temple, the dry river bed, the snakes around the broken walls of the temple, hint at the present day social evils like rioting and murdering taken very lightly by the society are trying to establish themselves as present day order of life.

The Solar Eclipse is a natural phenomenon, but the Indians observe fast on that day. He comments on this blind religious belief

and its social implication. The solar eclipse described in the poem offers the 'new image' of night for the animals like hyena. This new image of the night is the night of the superstition that has baffled the Indians for centuries together.

What only these men would let come
through precious paschal fast, dire superstition¹³

Starvation and hunger are the issues of social discrimination and inequality. The Asian countries are haunted most by it and the human suffering is at its apex. The country and its politicians respond to this grave situation in a stranger-like way and hence the deaths and diseases are in full progress on the earth and in the country like India. They are the all-time evils of the universe and hence 'hyenas are aware of the dying countryside around them'.¹⁴ Mahapatra is conscious of the diseased and disfigured world around him. He has much to say about the world of lapers. They are generally seen squatting on stone steps of ghats and the temples. They are social outcasts, hence their sad plight. And this is the world, a part of the social world which Mahapatra fails to know even in the bright sun

the mangled lapers will shuffle along
going home
their helpless looks¹⁵

The political scene of the country is responsible for

the tragic realities that encircle the common man. Mahapatra finds that we are living in highly politicised era today. He records the political threat in -

The day stands like a mature prime-minister¹⁶

Mahapatra thinks that the country insults itself through the high sounding speeches of its representatives. Corruption, pretence, deception, infidelity, lawlessness, superstition all weave a snare in which a country is mercilessly drawn. This awareness engenders silence in the poet

I pick up the morning newspaper and see
how a nation goes on insulting itself
with its own web of rhetoric¹⁷

When he records his observation about a whore house that unmistakably appears in the poem 'Morning Signs'¹⁸ he comments on the beast-like male sensuality there in it. The poem also records other signs of the morning which aim at defining the disordered, disjoined social atmosphere. The morning signs are not pleasant ones; they are painful, nasty, disgusting. The poem 'In the Fields of Desolate Rice'¹⁹ depicts ruinous aspect of social life. It describes the 'desolate rice field' as well as 'desolate social field'. It is a comment on the sad plight of the people and the country groping in unabated darkness of uncertainty. When Mahapatra

talks about Cuttack his tone is bitter and painful. His is an attempt to understand social dilemma of the land and the place of common man in it. This land of Cuttack is contaminated by twentieth century diseases like corruption, dishonesty, and disintegration and here Mahapatra is very much serious about the politicians. Politics must come as a remedy of the social evils and problems but as a native when he sees the life around feels more ashamed to see politics put to abuse. He describes it as ..

by the Town Hall where corrupt politicians still go on delivering their pre-election speeches²⁰

There is nothing when we see women holding knives in their hands but the connotation of this is totally different from that when the brave women were fighting against enemy to restore peace and welfare of people. The historical image of women is totally changed now. We find Naxal girls today with knives in their hands to restore their own identity and interest. Mahapatra brings out this historical change in women. This horrible and evilsome tendency he describes as

Why am I hurt still by the look
in the hand of that graceful Naxal girl
who appeared out of nowhere that winter
holding a knife as old as history?²¹

Mahapatra is a very sensitive person. His anguish that

life of an individual man is like an island and at all levels man is alone, and lonely is noteworthy. His condition is like that of old ruins. And that is only because, people fail to understand the meaning of the words the living.

my grief
is to endure the words of the living
those men
who became more distant every day
whose bodies have been torn apart
and face one another now
indecently, like old ruins²

PERSONAL ASPECT

The personal, historical and cultural past dominates a large portion of the poetry of Mahapatra. This looking back into the past is a type of quest for his roots, accomplished on the ironical plane. The poet expresses his deep concern for the lost glory of the sea. He contemplates the wretched condition of the sea at Chandipur and is nostalgically reminded of its glory. The sea smell scatters in his mind and takes him to the past. It tells of the songs that are to 'baffle' and double the space around our lives. It also tells about the women bidding good-bye to their men. The music and glory at Chandipur sea is now lost, and hence a matter of great regret for the poet. The fishermen's

songs were once the glorious music, now the fishermen only cry and that is harsh and unpleasant to the ears. He expresses his anguish as -

stretched arms to clutch the silence of my being²⁴

His contemplation over his ancestors and their activities is an attempt to understand the vicious cycle of life. He traces their life force and cry through old and ruined artifacts. His memories like that of firefly stinging him, makes him more serious and personal. He accepts the evolution of the present through the past and hence asserts it as -

How our hands return, the shadows²⁵

Many times the poet is caught in the childhood memories. He tries to trace the 'Life Signs'²⁶ he has got from his father. He wants to escape from his father's beliefs but in reality he has met the spectre of belief. And hence the fact is that he is the true son of his father echoing his voice 'wearily from bone to bone'. Mahapatra recalls his grandfather and traces his life. It is an attempt to search himself, he says,

You are an invisible piece on a board
whose move has made our children grow, to know us²⁷

Driven by hunger, the poet's grandfather, Chintamani Mahapatra embraced Christianity during the devastating

famine that struck Orissa in 1866. With a sense of agony and disgust, the poet directs his volley of question to his grandfather. The poet rightly asks

What did faith matter?
What Hindu world so ancient and true
for you to hold?

Through natural objects, he traces the voices of his dead grandfather. The past memories present the conflict between the two life forces, one of the grandfather and the other of the young grand-son.

The weary thump
of my dead grandfather's heart
following me
where the wind breaks water²⁸

Like Kamala Das's grandmother, Jayanta Mahapatra's grandfather is a dominant figure in his family poems. His personal observation underlines hollowness of human nature based totally on utility-value. He describes cows entering in a slaughter-house, at dawn, their feet slipping, dim eyes, wet and glue face. All this disturbs him through the nights. Mahapatra records his reaction in an ironic way as:

My observation is limited to process
of my falling
and neither the law of falling
bodies²⁹

In the area of love, Mahapatra's angle is different from that of Ezekiel and Kamala Das. His love poems are never loaded with overwhelming passions and gross sensuousness. His love poems are mixture of the two: ecstasy in love and the imminent fear of being separated. He presents his love experience on various planes. His feelings at the loss of love and the fact of ageing is recorded as:

Of that love, of that mile
walked together in the rain
only a weariness remains
...
I pity myself in another's guise³⁰

In the month of June, with the new rain love longing disturbs him. But his ageing body does not give any response. He feels lonely. He wails -

the smell of what the rotting rice
of my season discards³¹

The poet is very much conscious of the old-age. He feels, his ageing flesh is losing the sense of life he has delivered in his poems. This anguish he expresses as:

I, unable to arm myself in my room
to stare into each of my years I had
quietly lost ... my ageing flesh
betraying the philosophy my poems seemed
to profess³²

The baser instinct of love which is based on bodily pleasure makes poet uneasy. He finds, in Cuttack, middle-aged man following young whore; and in the distant countryside there is same corruption of flesh marching undefied. He cannot get any answer for this. He feels that his love also has lost its dignity and has become weak. He expresses it as:

the house where we once made love
now weakens at the knees³⁴

Mahapatra is very much conscious of the past. The memories of ancestors make him uneasy. His mind attempts to give voice to the cries of dead. It seems that he wants to know the meaning of 'Life Signs' hidden in their lives. Though the world is powerless one, now.

Ashes cool in the dying fire
a breath of wind flaps up from
a past phosphorescence³⁵

and he finds his self in it. Mahapatra realises that he cannot restore the 'Life Signs' of his father that freshly and in the course of time they are going to lose their colour and meaning. Hence there is going to be an unhappy separation between son and father and he articulates it as:

the river's roots: colourless monsoon
eaten away by what has drifted between us³⁶

Mahapatra finds his roots in the land of Cuttack and the people of it. He inherits the racial, cultural, religious and social background of Cuttack. And thus he becomes one with the people and declares that:

the cry of whole clan of people of my back
works through him³⁷

The Cuttack landscape constitutes the hunger, starvation and social evils on various planes. Here we find hunger-stricken people living on the faith that myths will bring pleasure in their life. Mahapatra feels that this is not a fit place to live in. With an ironical stance, he asks

what can drive me from these mean, sordid alleys
where I live?³⁸

Mahapatra is very much conscious of time. He finds that his life is stretched on the canvas of time, and accepts that his body is the victim of it. A sense of ageing is inevitable. He puts it as:

I pick up the clock and wind it. I pick up
tomorrow and peer into it. And see
the still body of mine lying in the middle of it³⁹

Mahapatra's love experience is not romantic, or delightful. Now he is aged one and his inability to express love is followed by fear. In the rainy season, with the new rain, longing of love disturbs him. But his

anguish is like:

It is June: heavy with the new rain
I am unable to lift even my hand
to slap my own cheek
For I dare not speak of love⁴⁰

Literature is the only medium to appreciate life at large. The words come from life; life throbs in literature.

When all else has failed
the poems' words are perhaps justified.⁴¹

A criticism of life in 'Life Signs' brings to notice the human suffering at large without any comment but the ironic treatment of the content discloses the truth behind it and the new experience of life.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Mahapatra, Jayanta. Life Signs (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985). All references are to this edition of the text.

- 1 "Again, One Day, Waiting by the River", p. 39.
- 2 "An Impotent Poem", p. 43.
- 3 "Man of His Nights", p. 18.
- 4 "The Lost Children of America", p. 26.
- 5 "Morning Signs", p. 47.
- 6 "The Cannon", p. 9.
- 7 "A Country", p. 29.
- 8 "The Lost Children of America", p. 23.
- 9 "Dead River", p. 6.
- 10 "Evening Landscape by the River", p. 2.
- 11 "Desire", p. 7.
- 12 "Autumn", p. 11.
- 13 "Total Solar Eclipse", p. 21.
- 14 "A Country", p. 30.
- 15 "Again, One Day, Walking by the River, p. 39.
- 16 "A Monsoon Day Fable", p. 41.
- 17 Ibid., p. 42.
- 18 "Morning Signs", p. 47.
- 19 "In the Fields of Desolate Rice", p. 48.
- 20 "The Lost Children of America", p. 23.
- 21 "A Country", p. 29.
- 22 "The Quality of Runs", p. 15.

- 23 "The Captive Air of Chandipur on sea", p. 1.
24 "Desire", p. 7.
25 "Firefly", p. 10.
26 "Life Signs", p. 12.
27 "Grandfather", p. 20.
28 "River", p. 28.
29 "A Monsoonday Fable", p. 41.
30 "Of That Love", p. 36.
31 "June", p. 40.
32 "Will A Poem of Mine Be the Only Answer?",
p. 45.
33 "Lost", p. 30.
34 "The Vase", p. 31.
35 "Firefly", p. 10.
36 "Life Signs", p. 12.
37 "The Quality of Ruins", p. 15.
38 "The Lost Children of America", p. 26.
39 "Last Night The Poem", p. 34.
40 "June", p. 42.
41 "Last Night The Poem", p. 34.

