



# JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY- A MIRAGE OF SOCIAL INTROSPECTION ON THE BEDROCK OF MYTH AND REALITY

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## Abstract:

Jayanta Mahapatra's conception of socio-cultural perspectives that he realizes in his locale brings him face to face with history and myth when his "self" is exposed in the act of attention. The relations between self and reality - the reality that eludes but includes self and culture form the bedrock of Mahapatra's poetry. To him, it is the investigation of myths and it is coupled with the world of art and sculpture. He continues his search for a divine spirit and for grace in relationship between man and man, and god and god, men and sculptured art.

Mahapatra seems to have the conviction that tradition is continuity and one has to understand the present in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present. There is a deep sign of introspection in his poetry. The primary poetry of Mahapatra is an ironic reflection on past and current religious, cultural, and social life. The poet's attempt to extract meaning from his emotional and intellectual existence is often shown in Oriya culture. He uses Oriya life as the emotional millstone for his poetry.

**Keywords:** Indian culture, Oriya culture, poetry, sensibility, self-exploration, self-discovery.

**Introduction:**

India, a country having a rich and profound faith in existing religious perspective, 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, symbolizing 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.

His poetry, which is chock full of scientific imagery, amply demonstrates this. His poetry exhibits a scientific discipline. Despite not having access to modern poetry, Mahapatra had a "strong position on languages" (Tenor; June 1978, p. 36) that opened his eyes to the possibilities of poetry. For this, "he had been diligently nourishing and polishing over the years" (Tenor; June 1978, p. 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." He has translated a lot of Oriya poetry into English as a bilingual poet. His own poetry in contemporary English has come to fullness as a result of this translation. Mahapatra's early poetry is uninfluenced by any literary movement, while his later work asserts a closer affinity with writers from Latin America. 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." (King Bruce; 1992, p. 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 internalized by him ". (Ramakrishnan, E. V.; 1986, p. 103) Mahapatra, an Indian author who writes in English, neither imitates nor is inspired by other current poets in his craft.

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'. Puri is a living character in several of these poems.

The theme of poverty, hunger and starvation which characterize 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 an authentic."

'Hunger' brings out the role of poverty in brutalizing the sexual relationship. 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 touching story of the daughter of a poor fisherman who allows his daughter to become a whore to keep starvation at bay. Mahapatra's symbolizes with such a 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 Gopalapur – 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.

'A country' is one of Mahapatra's more overtly political poems in which he suggests that suffering is universal, no matter what the social or the political order may be. This poem is replete with socio-economic and socio-political under tones. Extreme poverty and hunger, which engenders violence, is the thematic thrust of the poem as poverty is universal.

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 initiate his daughter into prostitution. His conscience pricks him every time he lures customer 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 exists between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, where all protests against the exiting social order and 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 for tortured by hunger. It has been 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.

Dawan at Puri 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.

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.

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. "The Whorehouse in the Calcutta Street" readers are invited to know the women in the whorehouse. We are nostalgically reminded the past of these women, their 'looked after children', and their 'home' awaiting their return in 'eager darkness.' They are victim of a 'great conspiracy'.

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. Jayanta Mahapatra, on the other hand, tries to remain truthful in facing and fighting this challenge in poems like "The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic."

### **A fresh ride in the field of poetry:**

He sent poetry to numerous periodicals as a way of testing his abilities as a poet. However, there were far more rejections than acceptances. Most likely, his efforts were focused on achieving a "Modernity" in his poetry. Undoubtedly, I wanted to produce poetry that were distinct from the ones that were still fresh in my consciousness from my school days, Mahapatra claims. (Ramakrishnan, E.V.; 1986, p. 36) However, the firm stance on language, which he had painstakingly cultivated and polished over the years, "urged him on." (Ramakrishnan, E.V.; 1986, p. 36) So, with a certain amount of indiscriminacy and foolish bravery, he started writing a poem. In his debut poem, "I hear My Fingers Sadly Touching an Ivory Key," he discusses the reactions he had from different people. The Indian reviewers were hesitant to recognize this as a poetry. The poem,

however, was approved for publication and later appeared in Chicago Review. I was attempting to build differently, he claims. (Ramakrishnan, E.V.; 1986, p. 36) As a result, letters of rejection from renowned poets and editors served to reinforce the notion that this poetry was distinct from what was being published in this country at the time. In such a situation, he began writing poetry frantically.

His 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, E.V.; 1986, p. 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 are 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, E.V.; 1986, p. 38)

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* (1971), 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 the most of the writing in this first book comes off as quite childish, he has a great ability to mould words like clay. It is unquestionably "one of the foundations of the poet." 91 (Prasad, M.; 1986)

The thirty-three poems in Mahapatra's second collection, *Svaymvara and Other Poems* (1971), 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 are 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* (1980), 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.

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. His finest poems, such as "Hunger1," "The Whorehouse on Calcutta Street," and "A Missing Person," all from *A Rain of Rites*, highlight these topics. 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 desire 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* (1980), a 12-part epic poem, the author engages with the 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 (1983). 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 (1986). 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 sociopolitical 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 realization 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.

He is threatened by the 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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