



# Jayanta Mahapatra- The Poet of the Soil

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## 1. Introduction

Jayanta Mahapatra was born and educated at Cuttack, and served as a Reader in Physics at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, of which he was a former Student. He made his debut as an Indian Poet in English with the publication of his first anthology “Swayamvara and Other Poems’ (1971), “A Rain of Rites’ (1979), “Relationship’ (1980), “The False Start’ (1980) etc. He was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981. Besides, he has been contributing to a number of international literary journals, and has already begged a number of international awards. He ranks with the best of the Indo-English poets with Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan etc. both as regards to his themes and his treatment of them.

His contribution to Indo-English poetry includes the enlargement of its themes, the originality of his approach, and treatment of his themes; the felicities of word and phrase and his imagery which is sometimes of the common, familiar and every kind.

## 2. Indian English Poetry and Mahapatra

Mahapatra, like other Indian English Poets is bi-lingual, and he had been writing poetry in Oriya, his mother tongue, and his Oriya poetry also ranks very high. He has also translated into English the works of a number of noted Oriya Poets. The Poetry of Indian English suffers from the lack of genuineness and sensibility, and his language alike is considered doubtful. He often resorts to devices, both in his language, matter and manner, which may be called ‘gimmicks’ as so many attempts to “sell” Indian English Poetry abroad. Often there is distortion of syntax, and use of unusual words, phrases and imagery to startle the readers and create our impression of Indianness. As R. Parthasarthy points out, “The true poets among the Indo-Anglians seem to be those who write in English as well as in their own languages. They are poets in their own right who have something significant to say, and know how to say it both in English and their native tongue. They are not out ‘to sell’ their poetry through a skilful manipulation of words and the employment of sophisticated techniques”.

Mahapatra belongs to this small group of genuine poets. He, too, is a bi-lingual writer, the secret of whose success, lies in his not disowning his Indian inheritance and not falling a prey to what has been called a feeling of alienation. There is an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment.

## 3. Indian Sensibility

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, crocodile etc. He is really Indian, which is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa where the local and the regional is raised to the level of the universal. “Orissa landscape”, “Evening in an Orissa Village”, “Dawn at Puri” etc. are Oriya first, and therefore, Indian too. In Mahapatra’s best-work the language is English, but the sensibility is Oriya. K.A. Panikar Writes, “An Examination of the recurring images in Mahapatra’s poems reveals that he is Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. Mahapatra, a child of the Sun and the Sea, delights in invoking the God of fire and the God of water like ‘Sunburst’, ‘The Exile’, ‘The Indian Summer Poem’ and ‘The Beggar Takes its Solace’, Puri is a living character in several of these poems. The temple, the priest, the beggar, the fisherman, the crows, these rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness. ‘Taste for Tomorrow’ is a

vignette of Puri: "At Puri, the crows. The one wide street lolls out like a giant tongue, Five faceless lepers move aside as a priest passes by, and at the Street's end, The Crowds thronging the temple door".

In Another poem 'The Indian way' the woman is idealized in a typically Indian way. The lover buys her a lotus and says that he would not even touch her before marriage as he would do the other one, the whore. Thus, the double standards of male are revealed, as he would not hesitate to touch another woman. As S. Vishwanathan Points out, "the poet's sensibility is both Indian and modern, and his response to the Indian Scene is authentic of credible."

#### 4. Indian poverty and woman

Poverty, hunger and starvation have bear chronic in India and they are the most significant facets of the life of the Indian masses. They also constitute the major theme in Mahapatra's poetry. 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 many other, Indian English Poet as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra". The recurring portraits of women, point significantly. His poems 'Hunger', 'Man of His Night', deal with the exploitation of women. Consciousness of the poverty and the suffering of the Indian masses, and of woman as victims of male lust, imparts to Mahapatra's poetry a tragic-pessimistic note

Another major theme of Mahapatra's poetry is human relationship, and these relationships centre round physical love. M.K. Naik writes about it, "His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier poetry, and the social and political scene in some of the later poems."

#### 5. Political Themes

Mahapatra's later poetry shows a considerable widening of his interest to include contemporary reality in all its immense variety. His interest in politics is revealed by an early poem on Gandhi. Indian poets writing in English usually evade or avoid topics like politics, Many Indian poets in English deal with it in roundabout or indirect way; some do not like to touch it. Jayanta Mahapatra deals with it with complete success, in poems like 'The Twenty Fifth Anniversary of a Republic', 'Once the slavery of the foreign rule is gone or given up, 'things might begin to improve. An authentically is achieved without sacrificing aesthetic goals. "The new postage stamp gleams in silver and gray. It's such a thing that brings a faith on our weeks, like a sudden wind that slips under the door and stirs ,The silent papers on the desk and other objects".

#### 6. Style and Direction

Mahapatra is a sincere painstaking artist, who revises and re-revises polishes, till perfection is achieved. About his style M.K. Naik writes, "His style has an admirable colloquial ease, punctuated by thrusts of striking images. In weaker moments he is seen echoing other poets, as in the Eliotesque – 'Mornings, like pale yellow hospital lines;'; but his better work indicates a poetic voice which promises to gather strength in the years to come."

His direction is remarkable for its economy and brevity. He uses fewest possible words to express his meaning. An important as poet of his diction is the use of humanizing epithets for inanimate and non-human. Thus, he uses 'furious wrinkled wall', 'Indulgent Sunshine', 'Melting festival', etc. His use of imagery is starting by its freshness and originality. He has also made use of symbol like 'Crow', 'Water', 'Rain', 'Wisdom' etc. Mahapatra is a poet of great promise.

#### References

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