

Poetry Reciting Nation (India): A Reading of Select Poems of Jayant Mahapatra

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Abstract

Jayant Mahapatra is a major poet of our time writing poetry in English from the Eastern state of Orissa. His poetic contribution recites the physical as well as mythical, historical, social, religious, spiritual and cultural landscape of his country India quite intensely; much from the perspective of a critique. He lived throughout his life in the coastal town Cuttack. The quadrangle, Puri, Konark, Cuttack and Bhubaneswar bring forth the physical landscape that shapes his psychological and emotional perspectives while dealing with the issues of his motherland and moving beyond it in his poetry. Being born in a Christian family and grown up in a Hindu majority ethos, Mahapatra has keen interest in dealing with all elements of life making a point in his poetry. The analytical approach he adopted throughout, perhaps, an impact of his professional subject and training in his poetic endeavour plays an important role in making his poetry a balanced account of his own country. This paper attempts to read a few of his poems reciting India as a nation.

Keywords: landscape, analytical approach, critique, reciting/narrating a nation

Jayant Mahapatra is a poet of his motherland, for having a varied selection of themes from the landscape of his birth. His poems vividly portray the haunting evocations of the landscape, cities, the region with an ancient culture, and intensely reflective vision of life. In this context, he can be compared with Wordsworth. His belongingness to the being of his country, his sense of being one with the tradition, culture, myths-mythology, history, religion and the rituals with many other elements, go hand in hand to earn for him an identity of his own. Bijay Kumar Das, a famous critic of Mahapatra's poetry aptly quotes Judith Wright's observation in this context,

"Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poets and novelists' imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can confidently turn to its human figures" (Das, The Poetry... 08-09).

Mahapatra seems to have fulfilled the requirements stated

by Wright. He is strongly based in his social milieu and has imbibed the cultural ethos in entirety. The quadrangle as physical landscape with all its associated mythical base, legends, history and rituals form the corpus of his poetry. K. Ayyappa Paniker marks in this context:

The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The sea sends its morning wind through them. Mahapatra a child of the sun and the sea, delights in invoking the god of fire, and the god of water in poems like 'Sunburst', 'The Exile', 'Indian Summer Poem', 'This Stranger', 'My Daughter', and 'The Beggar Takes it as Solace', Puri is a living character in several of these poems. (129)

Mahapatra's poetic journey began like many other struggling poets; expressing the emotions and sentiments of loving heart through poetry and to satiate the failure in love. But soon his poetic imagination goes beyond the personal self, reaching to the heights of his surrounding, landscape and its being. The haunting images of religion, his land, animals, people and the abstract ideas like that of silence, guilt and loneliness take charge of his conscience. It will be significant to see, how he dwells into his land of birth and possesses the same through its history, legends, myths, traditions, religion and culture with his belongingness and many contemporary issues from present life with ample examples.

Jayant Mahapatra quite often refers his land Orissa as a land of forbidding myths. The poet names one of his poems as 'Myth' and elucidates on the myth of Hinduism in his own land. The poet refers to the routine things happening at the religious places and temples. Perhaps, he is referring to the famous Lord Jagannath. He puts in the words:

Years drift sluggishly through the air,
is a chanting, the long years, an incense.
Face upon face returns to the barbed horizons
of the foggy temple; here lies
a crumpled leaf, a filthy scarlet flower
out of placeless past, on the motionless stairs.
Old brassy bells
moulded by memories, dark, unfulfilled,

to make the year come back again-
 a recurring prayer. (The Lie... 53)

The poet here refers to the rotundity of religious faith on the part of the devotees without knowing the essence. Still, they wait throughout the long year meaninglessly. These people quite often visit in crowd the "foggy temple". The poet here suggests the vagueness in the mind of the devotees about everything present around. The poet at that site finds, "a crumpled leaf and filthy scarlet flower" of no use. Other witness in the temple is the brassy bell, which is moulded by memories. The memories, of course, not sweet but, dark and unfulfilled; still the waiting continues for next celebration and the recurring prayer. Mahapatra introspects the ages long mythical custom unquestioned and unanswered. Further he opens the layer of this mythical presence in the words:

The stairs seem endless,
 lifelong,
 and those peaks too, Annapurna, Dhaulagiri;
 uncertain, impressive as gods
 I dare not go
 into the dark, dank sanctum
 where the myth shifts
 swiftly from hand to hand, eye to eye. (53)

The poet here records the permanence of the myth in the minds of the devotees about God. Everything present adds into the suspense of the being of the mystery in the name of God. The endless stairs, the mountain peaks and Annapurna and Dhaulagiri turn into gods. He is afraid of all these things so dare not enter into the dark sanctum of the temple. This tradition perhaps, has given birth to the mythical nature of religious faith. The last two lines, "as a bearded, saffron-robed/ man asks me, firmly: / Are you a Hindu?" (53), puzzled him. The poem remarkably points out the mythical nature of Hinduism, its Gods and everything around, when it is about faith.

Myth in Mahapatra's poetry is not restricted to religion only, but it enters into the history turned tradition. He takes notice of the wrong customs from the society and comments in his poem "Tradition". He begins by referring to the mythical presence of the rivers Ganga and Jamuna. They have become symbols of plight for those who have met misfortune. The poet writes:

red leper group
 sifting lives
 between the rivers
 ganga and Jamuna
 grief of loins
 dragged

by leonine faces
 etch the dust
 walk walk
 the long miles
 of mother/ merging to live
 every depth
 of mother my country
 conceals
 the water-line
 a green cry. (Dispossessed... 18)

The poet here compares the life of lepers with the life of the symbolic rivers of his motherland India. Perhaps he suggests the pathos in the lives of both. Even in casual talk, Indians refer Ganga and Jamuna symbolically to relate to the pathetic situation around. Further, the poet points remarkably, the mythical tradition existing around and acknowledges as a part of the same in the words:

Acknowledging
 the father inside
 with the throb
 of kettle drums
 the cymbals clashing
 to his wild
 hands of nakedness
 the white prayer
 of a demure jasmine
 that drops dead
 each morning
 like the good widow
 fitted
 to a male pyre. (19)

Mahapatra through these lines exposes the age-old myth of Sati in the Indian tradition. No doubt, he criticises this tradition, even after being a man of tradition. He compares Indian women with the Jasmine flowers offered to God every day. Suddenly after devotional prayer and offering, the Jasmine is ruined every day in the temple. Same way, in the Indian Hindu tradition; women used to compel for sacrificing their lives on the pyre of their husbands. The poet calls it "the white prayer". White colour has symbolic meaning in Indian context. The colour stands for peace and sacrilege both. The widows also dress themselves in white cloths; so white prayer. In short, through this and many other poems, Mahapatra opens up vistas of mythical references from his land; at times appreciating and criticising remarkably.

Mahapatra focuses on the four major cities of Orissa and makes into a quadrangle out of Puri, Konark, Cuttack and Bhubaneswar through his poetry. His dealing with these

places does not make him a regionalist. Rather, the quadrangle drawn symbolically represents the socio-cultural ethos of India in its true colours. His *Waiting* (1979) brings a galaxy of poems stressing the often-used imagery by the poet. "Taste for Tomorrow" is one such poem, describes the mystic happenings daily in Puri of Lord Jagannath. Puri is known for crows, one wide street, priests and the faceless lepers. All these symbols appear in many of his poems written about the famous Jagannath Puri. The poet organizes these symbols in sequence to demystify the myth of faith 'swaying in the wind of greater reasons':

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:
 a huge holy flower
 swaying in the wind of greater reasons. (06)

In Hindu philosophy, crows are significant to satisfy the desires of the dead soul (Pinda dan). Puri is the dearest destination for the devotees. They dream for death in Puri and get cremated at the same place hence, many crows in Puri, symbolising Hindu myth of fulfilling the desire of the dead. The wide temple street at Puri is referred as the giant tongue lolling out. This is with reference to the myth of Kali in Indian mythology. Goddess Kali is the symbol of power and enrichment through feminine gender. The wide street compared with the lolling tongue of Kali after victory over the demons suggests the tremendous faith in power (goddess). The lepers always present at the temple door, reminding devotees their indebtedness towards god for being blessed. Besides, being the age of science and technology (reason), a huge crowd throng daily at the temple door in Puri. Perhaps, the poet addresses this huge crowd as a huge flower swaying in the wind of greater reason, is a great mystery.

History has always been a guiding force behind the poetic creation of Mahapatra. History of a place, nation or some historical events, appear expressing contextual things meaningfully and commenting upon the issues taken by the poet in his piece of poems. His "Dhauri" is one such poem, where the poet opens up historical event of war took place during the period of Ashoka, the legendary king from ancient India. The poet refers to the event underlining the pains of the same even, after a longer period. He puts his emotions through the words:

Afterwards,
 when the wars of Kalinga were over,
 the fallow fields of Dhauri
 hid the red-smearred voiceless bodies.
 As the earth
 burrowed into their dead hunger
 with its tortured worms,
 guided the foxes to their limp genitals.
 (The Lie... 18)

The poet in the above lines refers to the bloodshed in the Kalinga war, happened due to Asoka. He sorrowfully states the post war happenings in Dhauri. The fallow fields of Dhauri hid the red-smearred dead bodies of the innocent people, who died for no fault of their own. The poet is sympathetic towards the dead and at the same time condemns the venomous act of the emperor Ashoka. His changed behaviour after the bloodshed is criticised comparing with the foxes. The poet further voices, the meaninglessness of the words on rock edicts by the emperor and his grief for the dead is in vain according to him. In the end, the poet opines, Asoka's suffering is the suffering of the ruling class and that never makes a sense while expressing the agony of the common dead for no fault. Mahapatra puts it through the lines:

Years later, the evening wind,
 trembling the glazed waters of the river Daya,
 keens in the rock edicts the vain word,
 shuttered silence, an air:
 the measure of Asoka's suffering
 does not appear enough.
 The place of his pain peers lamentably
 from among the pains of the dead. (ibid)

Mahapatra, unlike his contemporaries, deals with religion (Hinduism) from a distance. This may be, due to his Christian faith. A sort of nausea could be seen always in his approach towards religious faith of Hinduism. This could be because of his not being a part of the same. One cannot evaluate faith objectively being a part of the same. "The Stones" is one such poem, an attack on the tradition of worshiping stone Gods in Hinduism. The poet sarcastically comments and accuses these stones being the hurdle on the way of purpose in human life. He blames men for being afraid of silences in the words:

We will let them live
 because they are those shadows of ours
 which will not leave us,
 because we are afraid of the silences they hold,
 and because we want ourselves to know
 we haven't lost our minds
 (The Lie...136)

The poet marks the hollowness in the minds of people. They live under some fear and always needed support from outside. Often, it is offered by these stones (Gods) in plenty around. This psychological and mental inertia is seen in every man adhering faith in stone Gods. Mahapatra being a rational man, attempts to correct the behaviour of people in the matters of religion and faith.

Thus, Poetry of Jayant Mahapatra recites and exhibits his strong relationship with the land of land of his birth. The physical landscape of Orissa and eventually of India with countless temples, its dried rivers, the paddy fields, the psyche with historical and cultural residues of a country, the mythical implications, traditions, rituals, rites, Lord Jagannath with all its associations and the prominent contemporary issues like poverty, hunger, exploitation, corruption, prostitution and deaths appear vividly in the poems of Mahapatra (could refer to very few here).

Mahapatra's poetry is a voyage within and voyage without. His mental landscape with the physical landscape of India is reflected through his poetry. His continuous search for his roots, his honesty and sincerity towards the issues concerned to his motherland, appear in crowd through the poems selected for this reading. He never hesitates while attacking the false traditions in his time and exhibits his anguish against the bizarre set-up of the society. The Orissan Gods, rituals, rites, prayers,

priests, lepers, beggars, farmers and widows with girls weave the cob-web of his poetic recitation. Myth plays a pivotal role in the poems of Mahapatra studied. Like his approach in case of religion, while dealing with the mythical tradition he portrays both; the darker and brighter side of myth. He never appears to be interested in glorifying the myths he uses in variety.

In short, Mahapatra throughout his poetic compositions keeps reciting his nation (India) like a responsible elderly son of a family. He leaves no stone unturned through his worries, complaints, critiques, analysis, expositions and corrections of the evils (of all kinds) around in the Indian society.

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