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### Humanistic Voice of Jayanta Mahapatra

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#### *Abstract*

Mahapatra's strength lies in his profound understanding of the socio-cultural heritage of the land of Orissa from time immemorial to the present day. Since Orissa, both as a specific socio-cultural entity and a typical part of India, forms an integral part of Mahapatra's poetry. Orissa's two aspects seem to have had a dominant influence in shaping Mahapatra's poetic sensibility. Firstly, the eventful historical past; secondly, the all-pervading presence of religion with its roots buried deep in the mysterious tribal culture and the seemingly unchanging lifestyle of the Orissa in general, which is largely dependent on agriculture. Hence, Mahapatra's poetry often encounters the permanence and changelessness, which draws sustenance from age-old tradition, myths, and legends. This paper explores Mahapatra's portrayal of suffering, hunger, poverty, and exploitation of woman in his poetry.

**Keywords:** Blind Beggar, Blind Singer, Dowry, Poverty and Sexuality, and Death

#### **Introduction**

JayantaMahapatra has unshakable faith in humanistic ideals. His society reflects a refinement of these values. His time-consciousness signifies the uncertainty of living and current encounters as an endless continuation of the past into the future firmly embedded in the past. His frame of mind begins to think and register the events through his poetic path. He is leading a vortex of difficult and recalcitrant realities throughout the search for sense. The quest for viable ways to turn his misery and distress into pregnant pictures and

metaphors forms the core of Mahapatra's continued pursuit. He uses certain images and icons, such as death, darkness, history, silence, the door, etc. that are the recurring motives of his poetry. His poetry volumes are more closely connected by the recurrence of these motifs and by their thematic repetitiveness, which brings unity and meaning to Mahapatra's ways of perceiving an experience embedded either in the outside world's reality or in the inner landscape of his poetic imagination. His poetry appeals to his climate, to his socio-cultural context, to his ancient and modern past. His poem describes his forms of participation in modern culture and what is enduring and unstoppable in the infinite flow of time. His poetry portrays Orissa's socio-cultural environment by the poet's self. The language is transcending the simplistic interpretations of terms, becoming a resonant, sophisticated, and metaphorical emblem that generates new poetical stylistics. He considers that the characteristics of Orissa culture establish a way of perceiving an experience which naturally comes from a poet, to whom landscape is inseparably connected with his destiny, thus rendering the metaphorical mode in Mahapatra's image-oriented poetry.

### **Blind Beggar**

"The Indian Eye" from *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* gives a description of the problems of poetic mediation by Mahapatra. The socio-religious history of offering alms to the poor and worthy, deemed holy, in order to appreciate the poem. Beggary occurs in multiple stages and types in India. It is primarily a social evil, but we should not turn a blind eye because beggars have their moral sanctions. Legend has it that even Lord Shiva had to go in apology for plugging one of Lord Bramha's five ears. Ascetics and Sadhus live on love: the begging bowl is inseparable. Around the same time, beggary was converted by innate indolent people into a pleasant and lucrative occupation. In former times, it was not unusual for students to approach rich dealers or kings after finishing their studies in the Gurukulas, to pay their guru (Dakshina), and if the donor did not provide help, it felt horrible. May be Mahapatra relates to this ancient custom. Now the poet observes that the new society "The Indian Eye" is far from noble:

Years and years lay claim to safe paralytic tradition.

Turning sharply as if to avoid a muddy puddle,  
 While their begging hands are at you, sacred God like You.  
 Now if you part with a coin, you'd reap a solid million.  
 You are God; they cry, tear your eyes from you. (4-8)

The sympathies of the poet and his fierce rage tear him apart. Betting is now degraded by a healthy paralytic tradition. Tradition has become paralytic and has lost its once religiously embraced position, in which culture supported the intellectuals and the saints. It also reflects, ironically, the suffering of beggars who rely on charity and survive as parasites. Also, the contributors have misplaced their heart and spirit nobility. Charities are also practiced to cover up the illicit practices used to accumulate money and gain popularity. The poem "The Indian Eye" registers a corruption in the taste and commercialization of societies. Social truth is nothing more than an outward expression of its own decay. Alternatively, turn to the wall and maybe scream for rebirth and rejuvenation of our essential energy in order to maintain our spiritual correctness.

### **Blind Singer**

JayantaMahapatra invests his icons in several ways by compressing the pictures even when coping with a particular situation, as for instance, a beggar on a train, which in every part of India is sufficiently normal. A blind beggar's wretched misery in a wobbly train with a range of densely arranged images enhances his tragic state without the slightest melodramatic aspect in "Blind Singer in a Train," "Between successive halts of the guzzling train, / this bamboo-stabled man," (1-2). The illustration here reveals clearly an everlasting feeling of hopelessness that represents the tragic irony of men's situation in a cruel and unkind world. First of all the man is a blind physical state for which he is not accountable. Lost vision limited him tonight and without his bamboo stick, he could not go anywhere. He is now trapped like a tree in his night, and will never get out of the foggy shadow. A blind man's everyday support is his bamboo stick and he increasingly depends on it. JayantaMahapatra has invented the current composite word "bamboo-stabled man," This means that the individual with a cane feels more stable and his pain is nothing other than an animal bound to a stable position. The animal's well-being depends on whether its owner is kind or not. A beggar has been

impaired twice because he is at the hands of his fellow men and the philanthropic; sympathy and generosity are not seen everywhere. He has to try to locate a kind guy amid thousands of angry people who turn their cultivated heads away from the sight of a suitable beggar. This is an example of image firmness, JayantaMahapatra's favorite technique. This image is taken in the second stroke, where a passing train, a cake, a tap of optimism of the disappearing bar is tenderly heard. It is not the dream lost, but the same stick that ties the person who is blind is gone. The primordial morning sun is running about so that they appear into the eyes fantastically – a little pox donation. They have always stripped away light and all it represents, and that is their dream, as their pox-hollowed eyes stare sadly into an empty future:

Then the ponderous song evokes. To turn  
cultured heads away is the standard  
procedure of the undamaged, who can only hear  
the bones' blind beggary and feel the  
embarrassed  
contraction of superfluous substance. (11-15)

Culture representatives, orators, great-growing politicians engaged in fiery debates about all facets of human society are doing just theological castes and turning their heads when presented with a real dilemma, because never endured the pain of living a horrible and desperate existence. They are unchanged. A blind beggar's burden of life-long despair therefore lies beyond the experience of cultured officials, who are supposed to direct and mold the future of the country. Thus, the complexities of social actions are expressed in his poetry, which point a finger at oneself, without becoming clear. The most critical thing is to ask him: Am I not partially to blame for all this? By the way, this issue often aims at the reader asking him for a truthful answer. The poetry of JayantaMahapatra leaves without offering his replies or remedies. Mahapatra prevents the risks of a propagandist strategy, saving his poetry from oversimplifying logistical reduction. This appears to be Mahapatra's most important attribute in general. It is notable that irony and satire, which are the Indian English poet's staple diet, play an insignificant role in Mahapatra's poetry.

### **Dowry**

In his recent poetry volumes that we get to see some glimpses of Mahapatra's ironic mode at certain social issues when the morale of society as a whole is at its nadir as seen in the poems "In The Autumn Valleys of the Mahanadi" and "Learning for Ourselves", both taken from *A Whiteness of Bone*:

Even if another death is planned, it doesn't  
bother  
the sun or the government. Just someone's voice  
stranger than any other one had heard before and  
as though  
one has ceased mourning much too soon and  
knows  
it, with the tossing of branches in the languid air.  
(19-23)

and

Last year on the bend of the Debi river  
the rape of a young girl  
shocked us like ripe mangoes  
dropping from the bare trees in winter.  
Last year her murder and dismemberment. (1-5)

Here Mahapatra relates to the appalling and disgraceful societal evil that bridal bridegroom creates through greedy lawyers to secure further dowry. The dowry deaths are growing, sadly being the current equivalent to the similarly barbaric and shameful scheme of the Sati of the past, under which a widow has always been forcibly put on her dead husband's funeral pyre. A mum's heart is still listening to the pitiful cries of the child burned to death, and of course, sleep eludes her as she is overcrowded with sorrow, and the mother's horrified throat swells in the excruciating recollection of her daughter's cruel destiny. But who cares? But who cares? Judicial and government custodians actually should not bother, even as more comparable offences are conducted against helpless women. In their utter dependence on facts, the judiciary is rarely effective in getting the wrong culprits to book. The crafty guilty then lacks all fear of oppression and is becoming more and more barbarous in inventing new forms of mercilessly smashing all civilized ideals beneath the dead weight of their egoism and corruption.

Likewise, rape is another ferocious act, mostly unpunished. In analogy, terror, sorrow, helplessness, guilt, suffering, and the pain from a rape survivor are strongly expressed: "the trembling in the eyes of cows we see / being led meekly to the town's slaughterhouse" (77-78): the distress of the cow ends at the slaughterhouse, yet a rape victim is doomed to live with the stigma which is worse than met with death. Our general apathy, callousness, and the lack of our willingness to be moved by the weight of human suffering that abounds in our culture are extremely disturbing. Mahapatra laments the senselessness which has sunk into human life "has ceased mourning much too soon." Moreover, Mahapatra in "The Lost Children of America," once more refers to another related disgraceful event:

In the Hanuman Temple last night  
 the priest's pomaded jean-clad son  
 raped the squint-eyed fourteen-year fisher girl  
 on the cracked stone platform behind the shrine  
 and this morning (119-123)

Hanuman, being the eternally celebrated Deity, is nothing more ironic than the abuse by the son of a fisherman in the temple. He turned modern and deviated from his anticipated conventional position and piety. A fishing girl belongs to a low caste in social hierarchy, who is injured by a high caste man to whom the priest's son belongs. Even the police station, where security is required, is not better than the sinister shrine, is a cruel refinement of irony. Thus, the poor girl must endure a similar ordeal by four police officers, the so-called defenders of law and order, to transgress her caste. In the surprising and disgraceful incident, Mahapatra manages the mood by not enabling the poem to be reduced to a slogan of outrage or advertising, which could easily instigate the mob's hysteria. The irony of Mahapatra is not pungent remark or a statement, and is never cutting, bitter or sharp; it never borders on the sarcasm or is humorous. The irony of Mahapatra's poetry is continually muted, much like a private whisper that leads often to self-inspection, movement against itself, reflecting both as man and poet on one's failures and weaknesses. Moreover, it does not act as a planned medicinal dose offered to help a vast number of the sick system, nor does the irony of the individual who went astray, in the fashion of a spirited missionary, mend his ways so that bad does not reach him. So we still see Mahapatra himself, whether satirical or not, in the middle of his poems. "A Missing

Person," "Hunger," "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street," "30th January 1982: A Story", and "The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975" are the classic examples of Mahapatra's poetry as social reform. Simultaneously, the poems lead to the realization of human predicament entrapped in the complex web of social pressures, which act as severe constraints on the choices open to an individual to lead his life following his personal preferences. Thus, an individual's freedom is crippled and is made subservient to the demands of social pressures that dictate his fate. Mahapatra's humanistic voice becomes sad and sober, when he deals mostly with women's issues. He feels deeply for the plight of an Indian woman who bears the burden of her womanhood in the utter loneliness, helplessness, humiliation, deprivation, and often deplorable degradation. In "Hunger," Mahapatra depicts one such incidence:

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.

The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,  
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words  
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.

.....

I heard him say: my daughter, she's just turned fifteen...  
Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.  
The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wile.  
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber  
she opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,  
the other one, fish slithering, turning inside. (1-21)

### **Poverty and Sexuality**

Poverty and sexuality play havoc in men and women's lives, rendering them sub-human: a dad prostitutes his wife, barely out of her adolescents and casually calls a prospective client, which is the most surprising. The extreme poverty which led the fishermen to "trailing his nets and his nerves" (3), suggesting his troubled psychological state of mind, where an irresolvable dispute takes place. The fisherman is impatient and nervous; he might be compelled to sell his daughter for the first time. Perhaps he cannot reconcile himself with the bitter fact, and his helplessness testifies to the discomfort of his atrocious act. However, the dad advises the fisherman to warn the consumer that the girl is harsh. The line emphasizes that she is only a little girl, "she is just turned fifteen" (16). In addition, the dad's worry is documented in these lines: "Feel her. I will be

back soon, your bus leaves at nine" (17). "Hunger" is a fundamentally human text that includes the stifled screams of innocent victims, who are quickly subject to conditions motivated by horrible hunger to become objects to fulfill the hunger of the flesh. Between the two pangs of starvation, these wretched men and women lose all human integrity to exist as mere shadows dragging from one day to the next their unparalleled burdensome existence, becoming resigned to their inhuman fates without ever seeing better dawn. Unfortunately, thousands of men and women are doomed to live this sickening life. In this sense, the protagonist is also a victim of poverty, i.e. his innate desire, which obliges him to pursue comfort in a poor fisherman's ramshackle hut. The protagonist is still dilemmatic on whether to continue or escape. His spiritual world is severely falling upon him. He thinks that the sky fell on me" (18) and knows that "hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in" (8). However, he follows the fishermen, unwilling to keep himself back, and inside the shack" (13), two hunger hits each other as intense and persuasive as the other. The protagonist and the girl both are hungry: they both lose: the protagonist loses his spiritual conviction, and the girl loses his chastity. Above all, human integrity is the first victim of this phase, which tears down reverence for oneself. It is no less damaging and dangerous to the individual being than a suicide attempt. "The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street" reads more like a sequel to "Hunger" but less successful than "Hunger." Nevertheless, the open world of prostitutes, the protagonist's moral hesitancy, frustrations, and the same inviting business-like tone tempt the protagonist to continue to be the essence of this poem. The protagonist thinks that he can "learn something more about women" (29) in the whorehouse. In contrast, the prostitute goes about playing the tricks of her trade, which is "an old, hard tradition" (30) and "does what she thinks proper to please" (30) the customer without being moved by any feelings. For her, every new customer means only more business. The whore cannot afford to have any emotional involvement either with the customer or with the act. That is why she is impatient and hurries the customer through the act of sex-"Hurry, will you? Let me go" (41). The sex-act becomes unsatisfying because the whore offers her body as aware and not her heart. She tricks the customer into a quick orgasm, and the protagonist walks out of the house more frustrated, disappointed, and ashamed of himself: "the statue of the man within / you've believed in throughout the years / come back to



you, a disobeying toy" (32-34). In an interview with ArunaLudra, Mahapatra asserts:

My poems deal with my place, my people, my people. . . much of the writing I'm doing right now, more or less deals with the socio-political processes that have been happening in our country. So I would say that I'm beginning to talk about things that concern me-about the Punjab problem, about poverty in my part of the country which remains as it was 45 years ago, about continuing sexuality that bugs our people. (54)

This clearly shows the shift Mahapatra's later poetry has been taken from a highly subjective personal world towards articulating most people's problems. However, it is important to note that Mahapatra depicts the baneful social realities with a high degree of objectivity, which guards him against cheap sentimentalism. In "30th January 1982: A Story," Mahapatra indirectly alludes to the heinous crime of murdering the father of our nation Mahatma Gandhi on the 30th January 1948. In the decades that followed the assassination, little has changed in the attitude of the people who have remained passive, selfish, and petty in their thinking and deeds. No sacrifice is too great for such people, and the martyr's blood has not redeemed the country. Unfortunately, the "heritage of blood" (30) has been forgotten, and we have become heirs to our selfishness without any concern either for the nation or our fellow human beings. Can there be a greater than this? The poet comments that our politicians are busy erecting monuments to the dead perhaps in the hope of themselves being remembered by such similar acts in the future in "The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic 1975":

There are new statues on the crossroads, newer dead,  
That are visible from far and wide.

The twenty-five-year-old-republic celebrations  
Entertain:

I paint my front gate in shiny aluminium  
And walk past it, to wait for the ceremonial parade.  
The bright winter light plays upon the silent statues  
Of the dead.

The destitute are still my sense of guilt. (1-9)

The country is so full of such public demonstrations of our feigned respect for the dead that there is hardly any place to turn without stumbling upon one another place to turn without stumbling upon one or another monument. But nobody cares

for the poor and down-trodden. Their plight has remained unchanged even after four decades of independence. This is the true, unhappy state of affairs in our country, for which very large, our politicians are to blame.

In another poem, "Summer," Mahapatra depicts a young girl of ten, combing her mother's hair- a common enough scene in any Indian house-hold- to reflect on the "impression of vastness" life holds for the two of them, suggesting their inevitable but natural separation. "A ten-years old girl / combs her mother's hair, / where crows of rivalries" (5-7). When the suitable time comes, the daughter will begin to lead her own life, and when that happens, the daughter and the mother will meet on equal footing, the daughter having attained the status of womanhood fully. In our social customs and rituals, marriage has a very significant role. A daughter is considered truly belonging to the family into which she eventually marries, and her parents must protect and guard her till such time. Viewed from this angle, "the home will never / be hers" (10-11) assumes rich overtones suggestive of our cultural heritage. We may also note a faint tone of sadness that the house in which daughters are born and brought up with love, care, and affection is only a temporary dwelling and that they have to create their own homes often among total strangers in equally new surroundings. At the same time, her future life attractions offer such excitements that a daughter looks forward to it despite her probable apprehensions about the uncertainties of that life. Therefore, Mahapatra says: "In a corner of her mind / A living green mango / Drops softly to Earth. (12-14). Mahapatra lines clearly indicate the enticing love charms of a happy wedding that remains a beloved girl's fantasy. This is the celebration of life-forces embodied in every desire of the young people's souls, exploding in the freshness of their thriving youth with life energies. Nature is such a sly conspirator that it captures the unknown young, and a living green mango drops softly to earth," and then a miraculous change takes place in young people's mind and bodies to rapidly ready them for the joys and struggles of a new existence. The disappointingly simplistic lines of Mahapatra indicate a whole spectrum of normal emotions to the standards and the culture of our social existence. Indeed, Mahapatra succeeds in universalizing a human condition without striving to do so intentionally. His poem is truly a symbol for passion in all its infinite and realistic possibilities.

## Death

Death is another frequent and prevailing topic in the literary universe of Mahapatra. We must take careful note of the handling of death because it is unconventional because the poet does not celebrate death or condemn it as anything to avoid. While death terror expresses itself on certain occasions, it is never viewed as anti-existence, or even a way to avoid the dreariness of life. Death brings value to life, for the beauty of life will not be felt in the absence of it. Unrelieved gloom, shadows and inertia seem to rule Mahapatra's universe, where light slowly arrives without brightening the environment. In reality, darkness has a lot of psychological significance for Mahapatra as he grew up in the dreadful obscurity of a house of his sad childhood surrounded by large deodars which inculcated strange fears in him. The memory of his disagreeable and uncooperative mother, traveling with an oil lamp in her hand in this house's oppressive gloom, just aggravated her concerns more. The anonymity thus became Mahapatra's early childhood fixation, which projected his poetry like a neurotic addiction, symbolizing the terror of unknowns, insecurity, an incarceration sensation and various other negative feelings. In "Iron," for example, Mahapatra says: "A pain for the slight light at dawn / assails me; dark earth, / behind me still follows the darkness" (7-9). This pervading darkness makes the poet acutely aware of himself, his limitations, frustrations, and failures. Mahapatra can see through darkness into the abysmal corners of his soul wherein lie the dreams, aspirations, and dark designs of unexplained guilt, fear, and inherent sexuality.

Mahapatra's poetry reflects, throughout, this swinging pendulum of his emotions: darkness represents the unfulfilled man, yet it is only darkness he wants because it throws light on what he has lost both as a poet and a man. The projection of this despair is, of course, significantly, without self-pity. However, because of the contrasting emotions, darkness remains unmediated, or its mediation takes place only at the level of imagination. Darkness thus becomes Mahapatra's meditative ground, which directs him to look inward, the way people often see, closing their eyes in a mood of deep contemplation or prayer, focusing their whole attention on one single aspect of their meditation. Mahapatra offers a wide spectrum of darkness for introspection, providing diverse points

of view. This is the reason why Mahapatra's poetry does not have one single dominant mood, motif, or theme.

All great artists have tried to enrich life by giving meaning and purpose to the existence of man. Mahapatra has tried to do the same in his poetry through his encounter with the past, the past of the once glorious Orissa. Mahapatra strongly believes that man is a link in the time continuum, and the present is only a fleeting moment and becomes, before one realizes, a moment of the past. Hence, this past is an inseparable part of our lives. In "The Rising," Mahapatra says: "There is a past which moves over / The magic slopes and hamlets of the mind, / Whose breath measures the purpose of our lives" (1-3).

### Conclusion

The strongly philosophic essence of JayantaMahapatra's articulation of reality thus makes his poetry vague and refined in several respects. Mahapatra never plays the position of a prophet, giving out his verdict from a high chair; he leaves it to the reader to come to his conclusions. The philosophy of life of Mahapatra may be summarized as his constant efforts to understand the unintelligible in nature. This may undoubtedly seem like a paradox, but in Mahapatra there must coexist opposites, contradictions and highly paradoxical perspectives and perceptions. Mahapatra often depicts the intrinsic confusion and predicament of human existence. This perception is anxious, vague and often extremely imaginative for Mahapatra. Therefore the meaning of his literary test in the core of human being is similarly elusive and difficult to comprehend.

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