Chapter - IV
His Social Concern

Keeping in mind the role of a poet, Jayanta Mahapatra creates such poetry that is capable of liberating both the poet and the reader from the eddies of life. In an article published in ‘The Hindu’ (18 March 2001), Mahapatra, skilfully dealt with the question of the definition of true poetry as one that acquires “a sense of relation between self and other, the inner and outer world, the personal and social worlds” (IX). The poet who only sees reality around him is not an all-embracing poet. Hence in a developing society, the function of a poet is to minimize the gap between the concepts of the traditional and the modern, the urban and the rural, the privileged and the poor. Mahapatra’s poetic career also marks a trend, a development towards an increased social relevance. In an endeavour to respond to these ideas, his poetic exploration continues from the private to the public, from the regional to the national. The departure in his attempt to highlight an integral and not a fragmentary view of contemporary experience, elucidates his true concern about the national and cultural tensions to which he can never turn either indifferent or complacent. His love and concern for the society make him embrace the world, a contact which raises furore and compels him to utter:

All the poetry there is in the world

appears to rise out of the ashes. (*A Whiteness of Bone 9*)

Mahapatra has promises to keep to his own self and society to create good poetry that would speak of and to the real world:

Poetry, I whisper, seeing a picture

of twenty persons gunned down without reason:

their crime, that they were merely in the way. (*A Whiteness of Bone 9*)
Mahapatra designs poetry out of a contemporary situation. He confronts everyday actualities with the perception of a scientist and sketches it with the impartiality of a truthful artist. Like Nissim Ezekiel, he attempts to identify himself with the contemporary society and thus gain confidence to speak to his countrymen in their situation, calling forth their participation. It is a desperate endeavour to keep the image of the country alive, even at the face of the varied problems she suffers from: This country lives, on its image (A Whiteness of Bone 63). The lines of Mahapatra’s poem have pledged of speaking of the damage that the milieu does to the insight of his poetry:

Perhaps the lines of my poem
will be lame for a long time,
losing their fight against
the pain of the screaming, frightened girl
in Kosovo, or kicking vainly
at the anger of a boy on the West Bank.
Or because they have been unable
to bear the weight
of years of poverty in this land. (Bare Face 43)

With the world not as it should be, even poetry is rendered incapable of providing either him or his countrymen any conscientious solace:

You have to check whether poetry
really becomes a cry for protecting man. (Bare Face 46)

The immense barrenness of the beloved country tortures the mind of the sensitive poet, who fails to make any sense out of it. In an annual conference of Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, held at Bhubaneswar, Jayanta Mahapatra, in his keynote address, spoke about a poet’s “bad heart”, the bad heart of his own:
Poetry makes me write poems with a bad heart. I don't know what that exactly means, but it is the heart that makes one turn secretly into someone – a leader or loser perhaps – pushing one to choose values, attitudes, and to do the not-so-obvious; *(Haritham 8)*

Mahapatra’s social concern keeps itself alive in the poems dealing with the problems of poverty, political betrayals, the carelessness and complacency of the privileged, aimless aims, a vague future resting on people who have taken to falsities, discarding the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. The haunting memory of the major historical losses suffered by India, like Gandhi’s death from the bullet of a Hindu nationalist extremist, fills the poet with an acute sense of loss. Burdened with a painful awareness of his past, the poet seeks reconciliation with the troublesome history:

Today, where history is,

it is as if the events were never real. *(Bare Face 60)*

His melancholy, blended with irony, sounds loud when he proclaims that the advanced and cultured world, we claim to reside in, is a shameless negation of all that Gandhi epitomized:

What you have left behind are

faded pictures on bare office walls. A day

every year as a national holiday.

Growing, seething leper colonies.

Especially for us

the thought to ignore

what the underprivileged live for. *(Bare Face 79)*

Mahatma Gandhi is represented as a forsaken hero whose principle of ‘ahimsa’ no longer inspires the countrymen, whose sacrifice for the sake of the country's freedom is
lost upon us. The blood-dipped freedom struggle, the memory of which is still fresh in
the poet’s mind, has brought about, in the last fifty years, the freedom to experience
grinding disappointments, freedom revealed in the rise and fall of the bare chest of hunger
and destitution:

Here, old widows and dying men
cherish their freedom,

... the woman and her child
in that remote village in the hills
who never had even a little rice
for their one daily meal these fifty years. (*Bare Face* 34)

A poet of protest, Jayanta Mahapatra is conscious of the fact that his poetry should
adhere to life, without which it would simply be a senseless luxury. Rooted in earth, his
poems have the structure of social narration, drawing vitality from current realities. It
need not be argued that the hunger in the belly incites cruelty manifested in such
incredible pictures as that of the trading of innocent children by their starving parents in
the drought-affected districts of Orissa. It is the story of the abhorrence of present day
existence, the life of hollow men in an arid land. The worn-out face of India’ (*Shadow
Space* 26) comprising hungry disabled children, disowned widows and aged men, smacks
of existential absurdism. In such a land, the ‘talk of freedom,/ freedom from want, social
injustice and greed’ die out in the ‘futile protest’ of ‘our thousands of hands’ announcing
‘the beginning of the curse of beggarmom’ (*Shadow Space* 16). The cognizance that ‘you
know you cannot see the right things’ leads the poet to a grief-stricken world with ‘the
giant cut-outs of politicians/ adept at catching their own smiles, / the world’s future in
World Bank loans/ and in the enormous eyes of Somalia’s children’ (*Shadow Space* 14).
Mahapatra's concern is not simply constrained to India but involves the agony of the entire human race. A poet has to exhibit unwavering courage in discovering the existential truth of human condition and appertain to it with a sympathetic concern. In search for solutions to the delicate situations of the society at the present moment – the appalling and bleak prospects, showing no ray of hope – Jayanta Mahapatra's photographic eye for detail probes into this mysterious world we all inhabit, trying to extract social meaning out of it. We can at least hope that such social poems might change things better in people's lives. Hence the hungry wolves of the society come out with a bloody gush in Mahapatra's poetry. His ironic observations on the contemporary situation find expression in the situational poems. The present-day scenario of our country is one of political commotion, unending cataclysm, that has torn the country into fragments – the violence and bloodshed in the province of Punjab forming everyday headlines in the newspaper, the innumerable deaths owing to gas-leakage at the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the consequent riot in Delhi, the self immolation of students in tongues of fire in protest against the implementation of the caste law – all of which create, in the poet's mind, a feeling of anxiety. Mahapatra's poetry catalogues such stains on India's recent past, wounds, which have not yet healed and are therefore still hurting. His response to the tragedy at Bhopal is one of 'rage and fear':

Night is where slavish stars move,
where darkened roads grip the heart
in dumb cries of rage and fear. (A Whiteness of Bone 44)

The 'darkened roads' have clutched the poet from all sides rendering him 'dumb'. But one has to restore balance. So despite the fact that 'the earth beneath is cold', 'one falls back on the idea of happiness' with the help of words in a desperate bid of 'weaving
sunrise’ out of ‘a lost ray’. Mahapatra retaliates to the vile craze of student unrest, when eight students chose the most painful form of death in trying to immolate themselves by fire in various towns of India on 2nd October 1990 – Mahatma Gandhi’s birth anniversary. The irony of the date of occurrence of this tragic incident, makes the poet feel sorry for his countrymen who have not only forgotten the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, but also demoted him to the ‘tragic sign of an uncertain, misled glory’ (*A Whiteness of Bone* 65).

The ‘sons and daughters’ ‘adorned with the sunshine of youth’ and ‘hearts consumed with purpose’ ‘burn in tongues of fire’ sacrificing their lives ‘like festive ritual lamps’. But is this a worthwhile sacrifice and will their lamps of life be able to light up ‘the face of the desolate country of black sorrows’?

‘The agonising screams of boys and girls’ make the poet ‘neither sad nor angry’, only ‘worn’ ‘at their chosen way of leaving the world’, on a day which has been rendered ‘lean and naked/ like the old man I saw once years ago’ – Mahatma Gandhi – who chiselled India’s freedom. Gandhiji, for whom Mahapatra nourished love and respect in his heart, right from the days of his youth when the poet used to attend his prayer meetings at Patna, had exerted a lasting impression on his mind. Thus the grim present reminds him time and again of Gandhi, and what does the great leader get back from us in return – a mechanical performance of rituals on his birthday with red roses for Gandhi, without putting into practice his principles:

- the sunlight now lying like a sterile skin
- across his polished black tombstone at Rajghat.
- Those roses tremble in the Prime Minister’s hands now
- as he steps carefully toward
- the bitten marble of silent years. (*A Whiteness of Bone* 65)

The poet’s discomfiture, owing to the recent disturbances in India, makes him lament
what has become of his country. With profuse crevices emerging in the canvas of the country, it is Gandhi, his ideals and promise to keep up the glory of India, which can inspire confidence in the hearts of the people:

The photograph of Gandhi in the new airport lounge
is more than forty years old.

Every time I look into the old man's eyes,
he calmly hands my promise back to me.

Land, our land,
there is so much land between us now. (A Whiteness of Bone 50)

Every year on fifteenth August the poet's scar deepens. The fifteenth of August, India's 'Independence day', is now no better than a mere national holiday, bereft of both honour and pride which 'has gone its way with empty hands'. No matter how cheap and meaningless has been the projection of our country before the world, she should be upholding the stance of impartiality and objectivity in the international sphere – an ironic observation of which becomes evident in the poet's ingenious political remark:

We have become stiff and cautious with each other
as this country is with the US and the USSR. (A Whiteness of Bone 63)

Today human relationship has been contaminated by selfishness, pettiness and greed. Conscious of the split of the world into separate blocks, Mahapatra cannot help expressing his concern about the hostility of the countries against one another. The poet's feeling of patriotism comes as a solace to mend the unpleasant image of his country, 'the flipped coin of life's meaning'. By way of a positive approach to life and living, standing 'in the middle of nowhere', he wishes to wipe off the bruises affecting the beauty of his motherland. With great adoration Mahapatra remembers an outstanding political personality of the recent past – Mrs. Indira Gandhi – who had delivered extremely useful
service to the country but fallen a victim to an assassin’s bullet. The tragic assassination of Mrs. Gandhi makes us stand face to face with the vast magnitude of problems besetting us, the challenge of which we will have to accept confidently. The sacrifice of the lady, like that of Mahatma Gandhi, should not go in vain but rather unite us to keep intact our integrity:

   For a second I see Indira Gandhi
   looking wistfully at her garden.
   As I near the edge of the flowers,
   I realize she's dead too,
   and that my young friend
   sprawled across the day
   is so full of heroism. (A Whiteness of Bone 57)

   The poet is bruised at heart because of the sufferings of the people. The cry, which emerges from the heart of Jayanta Mahapatra for the people suffering owing to the country's turbulence, is a continuous scream in the psyche of today's India. Some major events in that socially and politically traumatic year, 1984, grinded our country to a wilderness of dispossessed nests. Responding to the mood of the time, he condemns the barbaric madness arising out of the continuous seesaw conflict between the Sikh extremists and the police, central and regional politicians and the Indian army, the violence of assassinations like that of Indira Gandhi, industrial accidents like the Union Carbide at Bhopal, as well as the banes of a speedy modernization in the form of a continued widespread destitution along with sexual and family violence. Our country is in the evil embrace of chaos, loss, confusion and anguish, a panicky situation where ‘things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned’ (qtd.
from W.B.Yeats' *The Second Coming*). Mahapatra describes violence and loss of humanity:

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Around
a slender waist
a petticoat stirs
in the wind,
looking absurd,
the torso
looking about
for its missing head. (Dispossessed Nests 18)
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Trying to legitimize such unpleasant experiences, the bewildered inhabitants of this modern world feel ‘how humane the terrorists were’ and surely ‘something good too/ had come out of it’. Similar to the Bhopal tragedy is the Chernobyl disaster where ‘the rainwater/ tries to wash the stained earth clean’ and ‘a wind of rage points to its goal/ and shatters the moment like a bomb’ (Dispossessed Nests 43). With the smell of burning leaves emitted from the deadly dance of bejewelled snakes in Bhopal and the flashing of the knife and gun as a result of the politico-religious violence in Punjab, continues social turpitude. The poet refers to the spate of dowry deaths bringing disgrace upon our country’s honour:

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somewhere the wind carries the ash
of a woman's burning flesh toward a man's

dead mind. (Dispossessed Nests 43)
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Jayanta Mahapatra is of the opinion that it is through a poem, ‘a testament on the page’, that a poet performs his responsibility towards life. T .S. Eliot had said that the poet in ‘turning his experience into words’, ‘turns blood into ink’. Mahapatra is endowed
with the honest desire to be true to his experience of the varied complications and challenges of life, a vitality which can burst forth only from the depths of one's own being. It is this quality of Mahapatra which enables him to get to the root of truth and apprehend the present along with anticipating the future. Hence Mahapatra's poetry is a homogeneous blend of the objective essence of the phenomenon of day-to-day common experience and the poet's subjective perception of it expressed through an essentially human language. The society inhabited by the poet is one, shred with political and economic disorders, something which creates great embarrassment within him. He is shocked by the disease and successive unnatural, premature deaths, which corrode India, a representative of the countries of the Third World. Man's inhumanity to man has become a common affair which makes the poet feel ill at ease. The brutal massacre of women and children that took place in the paddy fields at Nellie, Assam on February 18th, 1983, overthrows all possibilities of a happy and peaceful life:

Winds in the fields of uneven ground
-growing wilder where the fleeing children of Nellie
-watch the moon shudder and drop somewhere behind
-the points of their bare screams
-shaking on their mothers' slashed stomachs (Burden of Waves and Fruit 10)

The sensitive poet feels that the well-fed in the society have exploited human misery, superstition and helplessness of people to their own material advantage, even degrading religion to the level of an object of sale and purchase. Perhaps Shiraishi in Tokyo is able to perceive that in a society like ours the colourful and high sounding religious practices have not been able to provide an effective and adequate antidote to human poverty and suffering. In this futile civilization, the loud proclamations of progress end up in disease and hunger – the diseased without a roof and the hungry without food:
beyond, in the wet street, a leper's mutilated hands flow over
his love, without a trace of horror –
the sticky warm mouth of an unknown child starts to wet
for the banana in my hand... (Burden of Waves and Fruit 29-30)

The poet's concern for the undeserved suffering of the poor and wretched teeming our
social strata need not be repeated. The poet's anguish at the society's ill health, which he
tries to pass on to his readers, is itself a positive step towards redemption.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry presents a catalogue of some annoying signs of life in
a country, which is a fellow-sufferer of the Third World countries, where hunger, disease,
poverty, immorality and corruption are ever-chasing terrors, from which it is difficult to
escape. It is this acute hunger which brings premature death, morality is sold, turns
women into prostitutes and drives a graceful Naxal girl ferocious. The discouraging story
about his people is that, even the manacle of poverty cannot detach them from their age-old
credence in their gods – who dispassionately feed upon the sweat and stamina of the
poor people, remaining mute to the massive national suffering:

A banner of pale human skin
fluttered on top of the temple of Jagannath. (Life Signs 21)

If we accept Keki N. Daruwalla’s concept of a modern poet, Jayanta Mahapatra’s
poetry approximates to the demands of the present-day world and brings into play a
modern sensibility in confronting the confusion, bewilderment and disillusion of the
times; he is a poet who is touched by both the reality around him – drought, famine,
plague, disease, exploitation as well as the reality within, namely loss of faith and the
disintegration of the modern consciousness. The contemporary reality and its social
contours are his main concerns. The poet's reflections on an incident of the past, of his
native land, is manifested through his visit to a cemetery, though deserted at present, yet
conveying a historical event of great significance. A good number of British lives were lost on account of the outbreak of cholera at Balasore and the dead bodies were buried in the graves, which later became a cemetery. He does not want to disturb history because it is a tragedy of 'a hundred and fifty years ago' with the cemetery transformed to an 'alienated decay' by the lapse of time. What he is concerned with are the premature deaths of the young persons who lie buried there, their lives crushed under the paws of this cruel epidemic, menacing the survival of thousands in our country and bringing about ruin and destruction. Even today, many young people die, for one cause or another and it is the drooping away of the flowers at the formative stage which deeply moves the poet's heart:

It is the cholera still, death's sickly trickle,  
that plagues the sleepy shacks beyond this hump of earth.

moving easily, swiftly, with quick power  
through both past and present, the increasing young  
into the final bone, wearying all truth with ruin. *(The False Start 71)*

Mahapatra's social concern brings not only the present but also the past within its purview. His acrimonious criticism of India's economy becomes eloquent in such descriptions as 'Each year ... /../.../ more/ naked children, the virus of pox' *(A Rain of Rites 43)*, a poverty-stricken fisherman, with his 'exhausted wile' convincing a sex-hungry customer with the words 'my daughter, she's just turned fifteen.../ Feel her...' inside the 'palm fronds. ...shack' *(A Rain of Rites 44)* or 'the sweet-sweat smell' of a woman-pedlar in the scorching sun '...walking quietly by/ with a market basket of bananas on her head /The slender neck, the earth-colour of her throat' *(Life Signs 43)*. Mahapatra highlights a crucial contemporary social reality where the untouchables are
still disrespected and rejected, inspite of Gandhi's plea for a loving treatment towards them. His concern for the weaker section of the society, the down-trodden and the suffering masses is revealed when he contrasts the image of a sweeper girl with that of a well-to-do woman:

The sweeper-girl walking by,
the can of human excrement
    cradled
    in her frail arm.

A window
is thrown open to the street.
Some woman's derisive look
    falls from the cool shadows. (*Waiting 1*)

The picture evinces a humanist as well as a Marxist outlook, pleading for a classless society. It is a society where women's lack of individuation is reinforced by their blind unshakable faith in Hindu religion. They are 'caught in a net' (*A Rain of Rites 28*) of mindless faith, superstition and ignorance, reducing them to 'a large group of stony women in front of a shrine' (*A Rain of Rites 15*). They are the pawns in a deterministic natural order whose destiny is to wait 'for what the world will only let her do' (*A Rain of Rites 1*). On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his republic in 1975, Mahapatra is out to anatomize the accomplishments of the country after twenty-five years of her republic formation. But the inference drawn is a baffling picture of a wronged country, buried under darkness and disappointment. An awareness of the contemporary life in his own country enables him to sense the nerves of his time. He is keen to understand 'What is wrong with my country?' (*A Father's Hours 27*) and ends up with a catalogue of images.
depicting India's lamentable state at present – 'a barren world' abounding in 'dusty streets', 'epidemics in the poisoned air', 'disgruntled socialists', 'prostitutes', 'gangsters and spies represent a characteristic vision of the world', 'a solitary child', 'the cold rancor of Hindu and Muslim' and 'statues of the great dead'. If these be the chief features characterizing the Republic of India, then they are nothing but a mockery of progress, which the poet feels shy to perceive:

. . . Through half-shut eyes

I see the countryside melt away in the rain, (A Father's Hours 36)

Mahapatra is still hopeful that the pure rain water will surely bring purgation to the country, giving her back the lost place of glory.

In this irreligious milieu, the steering of fake religiosity has come to the hands of the imposters, reducing God to a nonentity:

In the new temple man has built nearby,
the priest is the one who knows freedom,
while God hides in the dark like an alien. (Random Descent 32-33)

Freedom, in the real sense, is therefore a far cry for the common man. It is like losing yet another Kalinga war, centuries later, with a glaring difference. The earlier defeat was carved out in proud letters with blood of the valiant ancestors in the pages of history while the present defeat is a shameful show of loss without resistance:

Could pretense ever save one? (Random Descent 39)

This land, where 'mutilation limb by limb' is a common affair, is not his own:

Today the land of shrines and temples
offers its troubled tombs of blood,
when I don't want to write my poem, (Random Descent 70)

The poet's sensitivity and compassion can best be revealed thus:
I only want to renew myself
like this old river’s quiet
that has emerged victorious
over a hundred layers of religion
in the airlessness of the dead. (Random Descent 70)

The poet, who can only state the truth, sternly believes that the phoenix-like renewal of the past will come about from nowhere but the ashes of the dead, the quiet of the perpetual old river, the bosom of his culture and ethos wherein the poet’s very being lies.

In fact, Jayanta Mahapatra finds himself placed in a world which seems to be out of tune, a society where insensitive men enact hell, a situation where good intentions fatally miscarry. But he is empowered with the god-like ability to rebuild his palace on the ruins of a society, which has unfortunately gone astray. His love and concern for his society and the welfare of his fellow beings has not dried up, as are the words of his poetry to express them. He takes up the mammoth task of functioning as the cultural ambassador of his country, her honour and glory and put up a tough combat against all odds to retain it at any cost. He is confident that his poetry would never fail to reflect the contemporary social reality and create a unifying sense which would renovate present-day existence to a position of excellence. Speaking of his own writing, Gabriel Garcia Marquez in an interview to the 'Paris Review' (Winter 1981, Vol. 82, 58) said “Sooner or later people believe writers than the government”. The same confidence is to be noticed about the strength of words that Jayanta Mahapatra employs to deal and heal his society.

His credence on his competence becomes evident when he utters:

I have . . .

. . .

scribbled on relationships

89
scribbled on Hiroshima
the ovens of Auschwitz
scribbled on Gandhi
and Harold Wilson
and President Nixon
scribbled on cold rifles
bombs and grenades
pretences and trifles (Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, poem no.47)

But all scribbling is sure to prove worthwhile with his final ‘scribbling on a tree/ the
tender smile of sunrise’ – the dream to be part of a happy, peaceful and contented society.
Mahapatra, Jayanta. “Piercing the Rocks: Silence to Poetry”. Haritham, Kottayam, No.8, 1, 1997