Chapter – I

The Poet and His Locale

Indian English Literature is about two hundred years old. But, to speak the truth, thoughtful Indian-English poetry began to pour in only after 1960. Today, Indian English poetry has gained a firm footing. Breaking down the shackles of conventional English poetic theme and diction, Indian-English poets have steeped in their own Indian sensibility and their consciousness of the contemporary situations and circumstances finds expression through a new Indian-English idiom and style. In Indian English Literature, it was a new kind of poetry born in the hands of a new generation of poets. The major representatives of this trend of poetry are Nissim Ezekiel, A.K Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das, Shiv K. Kumar, Keki N. Daruwalla and Jayanta Mahapatra.

Jayanta Mahapatra has occupied a significant place among the Indian poets and was the first to win the National Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry for his book *Relationship* in 1981. Essentially a teacher transformed to a creator, Mahapatra’s excellence as a poet lies in his Indian sensibility. To be more specific, his poetry captures the macroscopic India in the microcosm of Orissa, his birthplace. It is true that most of the Indian writers writing in English suffer from a sort of identity crisis and Mahapatra is no exception. His search for identity and roots finds expression in his poetry – a living record of his loyalty to his own soil. Mahapatra stands apart from the other Indian English poets in that he focuses a particular region of India on the map of Indo-Anglian poetry, celebrating the stature and criticizing the ugliness of the region which is none other than Orissa, his native land. Mahapatra tills the fertile soil of Orissa and harvests a flourishing crop. His sensibility is the outcome of his intimacy with his place and his ceaseless
preoccupation with the open earth he belongs to. He confesses his inseparable identification with his place in his poem, *Somewhere, My Man*:

A man does not mean anything.

But the place.

Sitting on the river bank throwing pebbles into the muddy current,

a man becomes the place. (*A Rain of Rites* 42)

It is a fusion between the man and the place – a trait enabling the poet to raise a local situation to a level of universal significance. In a bid to nourish the Indian milieu and ethos in his poetry, Mahapatra takes recourse to the locale, the environ and the landscape – the geographical, social and cultural background of his birthplace. While receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award, Mahapatra expressed his indebtedness to Orissa, the soil where he lives, moves and has his being:

To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keens over the great grief of the River Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konarka, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship (81-82).

Again, describing his poetry, the poet admits: These poems are just attempts of mine to hold a handful of earth to my face and let it speak (qtd. in Daruwalla 118). An Oriya first, and therefore an Indian, Orissa – a so-called backward region of India and yet the sacred land of Lord Jagannath – occupies the centre of Mahapatra’s creative consciousness. Vasant A. Shahane says: Jayanta Mahapatra’s constant preoccupation with the naked earth – the favourite places such as Jagannath Puri, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar in Orissa, and parts of Indian soil, dominates one prominent layer of his created work. His is a poetic
exploration of the earth to which he belongs as much as it equally becomes a search for
his self (145). Hence the locale occupies a predominant place in the corpus of Jayanta
Mahapatra's poetry – an urge for an idiom awakening from one's consciousness of the
self in search of an identity.

A pilgrim, 'caught in the currents of time', Mahapatra's place of worship is his
birthplace Orissa the presence of which is palpably felt in his poetry. He is sincerely
concerned with his province, its landscape, history, myth, tradition, culture and milieu.
Moreover, contemporary situation, life and living of the people of Orissa as depicted in
his poetry express his consciousness as a poet sympathizing with the problems of the
country in general and Orissa in particular. In a developing society, a major function of
the poets is to help bridge the gaps between the traditional and the modern, the urban and
the rural, the rich and the poor. Mahapatra's poetry also attempts at a synthesis of
diversities, an interweaving of the hoary tradition of his land with the materiality of
modern men, an amalgamation of the ruins of the temple with the wretchedness and
monotony of city life. His is a land of temples, hills, seashores and paddy fields on the
one hand and poverty, hunger, disease, religious rites and superstitions on the other. A
Romantic from the very core of his heart, Mahapatra sings of “the still, sad music of
humanity” (Tintern Abbey by Wordsworth, line 91). His native region Orissa is magnified
bringing into focus the backwardness, the misery and the suffering of its people. K.
Ayyappa Paniker justly speaks in his essay, “Peacocks Among Patriarchs”:

There is a remarkable poise about the way he organizes things: the
dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, rejection. The
tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other
Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra.

(116-117)
Having lived in Orissa all his life, a large part of Mahapatra's poetry smacks of the Orissa scene. His authenticity and Indianness become most evident in his poems rooted in the Orissan soil. The Orissa landscape, its cultural history and background, its social life and the rites and rituals of the people of Orissa constitute the most important and significant themes of his poetry. Like many a poet, Mahapatra's poetic talent and output is, to a great extent, the outcome of his pain which remains his constant companion and encourages him to write. His alienation as an individual resulted from the fact that he was born into a Christian family in a Hindu society. He tried to cover up this alienation and bridge the gap through the use of his Hindu name. At the time of the devastating famine that struck Orissa in 1866, the poet's grandfather Chintamani Mahapatra, driven by hunger, embraced Christianity. The consequent distancing of the poet from the Hindu culture and practices and from her endearing ancient heritage was a great blow to his Christian psyche. The basic problem of alienation and identity cropping out of the hidden struggle, agony, humiliation, anger, anguish, frustration and a feeling of rootlessness in his own land, made the poet stand face to face with a torturous question:

... a bearded, saffron-robed

man asks me, firmly:

Are you a Hindoo? (A Rain of Rites 22)

The existential anguish of his wounded psyche compelled him to question his motherland Orissa – Who is he? Whether he has as much right as any other person in Orissa to be an inheritor of Orissa's rich cultural heritage? However, Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry like that of Salbeg, the 17th century devotional poet of Orissa, transcends all such barriers and through a total identification with his birth place, renews his existence:

Very few non-Hindu poets have celebrated consciously in their poetry the deposits of Hindu psyche. [...]What Mahapatra lost in his grandfather's
conversion to Christianity, perhaps has been amply compensated by his perpetual meditation on the Hindu psyche and culture revolving round the two huge eyes of Lord Jagannath. No other Christian glorifies the Orissan culture and Hindu rituals and spirituality as does Mahapatra in his poetry. (Mohanty 111)

Mahapatra no more cherishes a personal identity of his own but merges into the racial consciousness. A detailed analysis of his Orissa themes makes it clear how in the locale, the landscape, the glorious past and the poet’s inner world of consciousness are blended into an organic whole.

The Orissa landscape has a distinct presence in Mahapatra’s poetry. In the opinion of Frederic Engels, the landscape of a region has much to do with the religious faith cherished by the residents of that place. It is an extension of the poet’s physical world, the measuring scale of his life and beliefs. E.V. Ramakrishnan describes:

Among the Indian English poets writing today, Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the few who speak of Indian landscapes with the assurance of an insider. For him the Indian landscape manifests the destiny of Indians. His poems are seismograms recording the tremors of an ancient land, felt in the body of his private experience. (102-103)

The landscape of Orissa as depicted by Mahapatra in his poetry is a world of stars, sky, wind, river, waves, rain, hills, fields and trees. Still it is not simply the picture of the scenic beauty of Orissa but incorporates the physical landscape comprising the temples, ruins and a symbolic presence of the mythical past. Landscape is brought in close relation to the culture of the people. Judith Wright’s opinion is quite pertinent in this context:

Before one’s country can become an accepted background against which the poet’s and novelist’s 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. (qtd. by Kohli 54)

The golden triangle – Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Puri – constitutes Mahapatra’s locale. Not only does this green and fertile landscape lend beauty to the entire scenario but at the same time forms the background of many of his poems. Mahapatra can truly be described as a Man watching Nature without and Mind within. The Orissan landscape acts as the objective setting bringing about the mental evolution of the poet. There are certain poems, the titles of which pinpoint the poet’s total identification with the locale:

Bhubaneswar, Orissa, Main Temple Street, Puri, Indian Summer Poem, Learning to Flow Free in the Chariot Festival at Puri, A Country Festival. The coastal town Puri – the sacred place of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Orissa – and the ruins of Konark temples figure prominently in his poems. Some of the poems deal chiefly with the Orissa landscape like Dawn at Puri, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum, Evening Landscape by the River and Events. Puri is one of the four sacred places of pilgrimage of the Hindus. The place is held in high esteem and regard by the Hindu people especially the widows who earnestly desire to breathe their last at this holy place so that they can attain salvation. Dawn at Puri emerges as a realistic and interesting document of the Hindu psyche working within the Christian poet to coalesce the landscape and religious beliefs and faith of the destiny-ridden people. The endless noises of the crows, a skull lying on the holy sands, white-clad widows waiting to enter the great temple are the images speaking of the dawn at the shore of the sacred place – Puri. In spite of being a so-called ‘outsider’ in the eyes of his own fellowmen, Mahapatra identifies himself as an Indian by associating himself with the various aspects of Orissan culture:
Endless crow noises.

A skull on the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed women
past the centres of their lives
are waiting to enter the Great Temple.

Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net,
hanging by the dawn’s shining strands of faith.

The frail early light catches
ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another,
a mass of crouched faces without names,

and suddenly breaks out of my hide
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre
that fills my aging mother:

her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands. (A Rain of Rites 28)

Being aware of his environment and firm roots in the orthodox cultural convention, the poem abounds in local details. The poet ironically presents the incongruities in the Indian
landscape, how an unconscious religious zeal dominates the throbbing pulse of the people of Orissa. The innocent people with all their devotion believe that Puri is the gateway to Heaven. In a footnote to the poem, the poet describes the setting where a part of the sea beach is used as a burning ghat known as ‘Swargadwara’. This desire of taking refuge on the holy sand of Puri confirms the intensity of the bondage between an individual and his religion and culture. But on the contrary, the poet also hints at the fact that it is a tragic sort of existence of man. In the opinion of K. Ayyappa Paniker, the various characters making their presence in the Puri poems like the temple, the priest, the beggars, the lepers and the crows rise before us in all their objective reality and concreteness and then slowly transform themselves, almost imperceptibly, into monument-like images and symbols. With the help of a simile, the poet describes the vague consciousness ruling the superstitious human minds, aiming at neither clarity nor any evolution. Just as a fish stares vacantly after falling a victim to the fisherman’s net, similarly the religion-ridden widows caught in the nets of faith stare blankly with eyes full of despair and devoid of any confidence, lost in the darkness of overwhelming unconsciousness. The poet describes the lepers taking resort to begging at the gates of the Puri temple. These nameless, faceless entities symbolically represent the transformation of the abstract human consciousness from cosmic matter, their physical injuries reminding the poet of the spiritual injuries corroding the human soul. Watching the ‘sullen’ pyre filling his mother’s body, the poet is remembered how her ‘aging’ mother, like any pious Hindu, cherished the ‘last wish’ to be cremated at Puri. Thus the ‘empty’ country, though tortured by utter penury and destitution, cannot sever the link with the religious faith flowing deep within the vein, which rather sustains itself as the only ray of hope and consolation.
Taste for Tomorrow, another significant Puri poem, forecasts the future awaiting the people of India. It is Mahapatra’s subjective approach which is the key to success to all such poems. Rabindra K. Swain rightly observes:

This element of subjectivity helped him to relate himself to his milieu and landscape in a delicate way never done before in Indian English poetry. The exploration of the inner self is intricately woven with his childhood experiences as much as with the Oriya fairy tales, myths and legends and the great Indian epics. Along with these sources close to his locale, [...] it is the Oriya sensibility as well as the lyrical quality of traditional Oriya poetry which provides charm and grace to his poetry. The tight-knit family life, the rites and rituals associated with the cyclic agricultural seasons, the rich tradition of arts and crafts and an easy, quiet pace of life are some of the major Orissan elements that recur in terms of imagery, metaphor and symbol. (14)

Hence, Puri comes alive with the appearance of people like priests, cripples and crows – all of which are part and parcel of the Indian milieu. Short but logical in structure, Taste for Tomorrow, is an imagist poem where the poet, through eloquent images, mocks at the sights of the sacred town, criticizing the squalid, seamy aspects lying hidden deep within:

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. (Waiting 6)

The hard reality finds a metaphoric representation through symbols like the ‘crows’. As in Ted Hughes, for Mahapatra too, crows are associated with evil, sin, guilt and destruction. The ‘giant’ deserted street of Puri is, as if, the devout Mother, the Goddess Kali, stretching out her loving arms towards the devotees to heal their wounds, both physical and spiritual. What marks the poem out of the lot is the operation of mythic consciousness and a Tantric design to transform the objective matters of everyday reality to mythical symbols. The myth of Kali along with all her Tantric ritualistic connotations may sound odd in the context of Puri scene and Lord Jagannath. But Mahapatra actually hints at the integration of varied Hindu religious cults – an idea cropping out of his awareness of the culture of Jagannath as well as of the Indian throb: Unity in Diversity. The ‘huge holy flower’ depicts the invulnerable human devotion associated with Puri which sways with uncertainty because the divinity of the devotees is questionable and demands a reasonable clarification. For, the sacredness of the place is unable to wash away the label of ‘untouchables’ from the destiny of the ‘faceless’ lepers who are considered to be born-sinners and need to reverently move to one side as a priest, a so-called holy man, or any healthy human being passes by, lest their shadow falls on the way.

The authentic spirit of Orissa becomes evident in poems like Learning to Flow Free in the Chariot Festival at Puri which refers to the famous Car Festival of Lord
Jagannath at Puri. It is a gathering of a huge crowd pulling the cars. Amidst the hue and cry of a sea of people, the poet, like the lost children in the huge gatherings, loses his identity and his emotional involvement in the Festival brings about his redemption. Once again the spiritual loss of man is hinted at but with a positive outlook the poet describes the joy overflowing the atmosphere bringing about their spiritual awakening:

spiders of light linger like cores of blessings;

watching, my body soon splits open like a cob of corn. (Waiting 32)

The tropical landscape of Orissa is again portrayed in the poems like Main Temple Street, Puri or The Temple Road, Puri. The former juxtaposes the oppressive past and the static present, pointing out how ‘Children, brown as earth, continue to laugh / at cripples and mating mongrels’. History hangs heavy on the back of the poet and the present is an existence of tormenting boredom:

On the dusty street the colour of shorn scalp

there are things moving all the time

and yet nothing seems to go away from sight. (A Rain of Rites 16)

The other poem describes the ‘stream of common men’ walking on the road to the temple with ‘the sacred beads in their hands’. Their devotional intensity cleanses them of their follies as the Lord’s inaudible message reaches the ears of the inarticulate worshippers. They undergo a strange experience and get spiritually uplifted becoming more tolerant, humble and strong:

Later,

as the shrine’s skeins of light

slowly close their eyes,

something reaching into them

from that place they learn to bear: (Waiting 29)
The innocent, God-fearing Oriya people continue to suffer day after day, throughout their life, while the sun and the rain and the earth continue with weaving stories of their own. In this context mention may also be made of poems dealing with the process of worship of devotees lost in a mood of contemplation while praying. In Ikons, the poet clarifies through a footnote how the ‘Linga’ in a Shiva temple, prepared of black polished stone becomes the phallic symbol of fertility. Sun Worshippers Bathing portrays the worshippers in the temple who, after taking a bath in the river, offer prayers to the God facing the rising sun and chanting ‘mantras’. The poem lays bare the doubts and misgivings in the poet’s mind regarding ‘the words of ridiculous centuries’, and his divided state is best described as:

Believing and not believing.

catched

in the world’s evenings. (Waiting 36)

Orissa is the land of his birth sharing the beauty of both a unique agricultural landscape and numerous temples, monuments and their ruins, all of which go into the shaping of his imagination and poetry. The poem Strike Your Secret Earth bears testimony to his involvement in earth:

Play with your earth, let it

not sicken you with its vile taste,

with the rage of its gaunt dry deserts,

Strike your earth deep, friend,

for you alone can distort the poetry of time (Waiting 60-63)
The inner realities of the poet’s mind find reflection in the locale and the landscape indeed becomes vital to the understanding of Mahapatra’s poetry. V.A. Shahane explains this involvement thus:

The preoccupation of Jayanta Mahapatra’s sensibility with the ‘Earth’ is almost continual, though it takes various shapes and forms in relation to the elements which are co-existensive with it as well as with the ancient beliefs, of tradition, myth and symbol, which man, all through the ages, has woven round it and his existence. (145)

The poet’s understanding of and identification with his birthplace is described in *A Summer Night*:

This is the town where I was born; here, with others, year after year I celebrate the joyous festivals, in the whine of the cripple and the mangled leper I see the power of people holding their ground, the mystery of the gold of charity. (*Waiting* 27)

The poem *Bhubaneswar* recalls and celebrates, through evocative topographical images the lost glory of Orissan culture. The poet brings into contrast two sets of images: One, the ruins of the temple symbolizing the heroic Oriya past lost in oblivion and yet ideals of beauty; two, the filthy and monotonous urban life depicting the dilemma, alienation and existential anguish of modern man in an irreligious milieu:

Easy on the eye, the ruins of temples everywhere defeat the tale of memory and dream, caught as spiders in the dawn’s afflicted light: this mining of time where stones have been lost and won to reappear inside our separate births. (*Waiting* 8)
Dhaulagiri ponders over a grievous phase of Indian history. Dhaulagiri is the name of a rock near Bhubaneswar, famous for the idol of Lord Buddha as well as the rock edicts and inscriptions adorning the place. The climactic Kalinga War fought by Ashoka flooded the river Daya with the blood of the people of Kalinga, the ancient name of Orissa. This shocking scene of bloodshed made the victorious king renounce violence and warfare, accepting Buddhism. It is the poet’s sincere effort to sketch the heroic Oriya past:

Afterwards,
when the wars of Kalinga were over,
the fallow fields of Dhauli
hid the red-smeared voiceless bodies

the measure of Ashoka’s suffering
does not appear enough.
The place of his pain peers lamentably
from among the pains of the dead. (Waiting 24)

Orissa, the holy land for the Hindus, is the location of not only the great temple of Jagannath in Puri and the Lingaraja temple in Bhubaneswar but also the great Sun temple at Konark built during the thirteenth century A.D. Illustrating the effect of such a sacred land on the essence of Mahapatra’s poetry, V.A. Shahane comments:

The myths and rituals associated with these numerous temples, for instance, [...] the myths of the Sun associated with the Sun Temple at Konarak and the famous erotic postures of men and women engaged in close physical embrace – and the other myths of Shiva, the great god in whose honour so many temples have been built by his followers – the
Shaivites – have pervasively affected the creative sensibility of Jayanta Mahapatra [...]. (147-148)

The poet’s racial consciousness coupled with his scholarly understanding of Hindu myths and rituals makes the poet probe deep into the Oriya psyche resulting in the composition of poems like *Ceremony, Myth, A Ritual, Samsara. Myth*, the most ambitious among the lot, invokes the spirit of the ritual and initiates an encounter between ancient religious rituals and modern sensibility. The poem tries to bring about a mythical association of the snow-capped mountain peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulgiri with the Hindu gods. It is the constant working of a mythic process in the midst of the temple, the priest, the chanting, the incense, the bells and the god where flowers which were offered get transformed into diamond and the sacrificial ritual within the poet’s mind makes him equate those flowers with the sacrificing ‘devadasis’ of the temples. The ritualistic transformation of the crumpled leaf into a diamond evokes the tantric design and symbolizes the metamorphosis of the poet himself:

I dare not go

into the dark, dank sanctum

where the myth shifts

swiftly from hand to hand, eye to eye. (A Rain of Rites 22)

An acute sense of reality inspires the sensitive poet to compose poems unveiling the contemporary realities of Orissa, dealing with the day-to-day physical world of his native place, the people, incidents and matters that arrest his attention. The other contemporaneous aspects touched upon are the priest, the leper, the whore, the sweeper, the shopkeeper, the hippies, the bull and what not. They are living documents of starvation, destitution, hunger, disease, corruption, violence, indiscipline and at times
there are natural calamities afflicting his land. The crisis of hunger and penury enveloping
his people finds expression in A Country:

Wherever I try to live,
in pious penitence at Puri
or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary
my reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow

like socialism.

And not understanding myself,
not understanding you,

like the still strange shapes of hills in the distance,

I, too, listen to the faraway wailing of hyenas

aware of the dying countryside around them,
tortured by hunger and the reek of decay in the air

after the age-old myths have been told all over again. (Life Signs 29-30)

A realistic Cuttack scene describes four women labourers mending a road at two

o’ clock in the hot summer afternoon – a sight quite common in the provincial towns. The

pangs of the destitute women are described in the poems like Again, One Day, Walking

by the River:

A tar drum smoulders in front of the judge’s house

as four women workers rub the hot tar

onto the pitted face of the road.

It is two in the afternoon, and

the heat of yesterday still clings to the old walls

like harsh salt on the skin. (Life Signs 39)
A very dark picture of the slums is presented in *Slum*. The poet feels for the poverty-stricken slum dwellers and his sympathy with them becomes evident when he describes how some of the women have to resort to prostitution in order to be able to survive:

Your madness catches me:

scarred shacks, where nights begin,

and full orange fires

so dreadful on women’s faces.

... .

The familiar old whore on the road

splits open in the sugary dusk,

her tired breasts trailing me everywhere:

where the jackals find the rotting carcass (*The False Start* 29)

*Bazaar, 5 p.m.* deals with a vivid picture of a bazaar in the evening, presenting Mahapatra’s undiluted Oriya sensibility. It is a terrifying setting of human existence in an Orissa bazaar – mean, shabby and stinking – which has every scope of shifting the locale from Cuttack to any other region in India. Scorched in the extreme heat wave, the organs of the rickshaw puller’s heart stop functioning – a horrifying picture of the merciless march of Time at the cost of any evolution of mankind at the consciousness level. A realistic picture of the day-to-day materialistic world is presented with a captivating local colour in the poems like *The Morning-I* and *The Morning-II*. Mahapatra tries to bring about a balance between the paradoxes of life. The first poem gives a moving description of a sweeper girl in an ordinary morning in Cuttack:

The sweeper-girl walking by,

the can of human excrement

cradled

in her frail arm (*Waiting1*)
This real life picture of an outcast sweeper girl is juxtaposed with another usual picture drawn in *The Morning –II*:

A starkly naked Jain monk
calmly walks down the determined road.

Centuries beyond his body
support his sacrosanct instant. *(Waiting 2)*

Both the sweeper girl and the Jain monk representing two extreme and contrary strata of society, are ‘determined’ to walk past the obstacles of life, through their own chosen paths, without getting distracted by the worldly dirt or temptations. Yet another description of morning in *The Faith* presenting local details and making a clinical comparison of morning with hospital linen, lays bare the sickness of his native land as well of the entire country:

In these indistinguishable mornings
like pale-yellow hospital linen,
a legless cripple
clutters up the wide temple street,
the quiet early light crouched in his palms. *(Waiting 14)*

Mahapatra feels intensely the hunger for bread in Orissa which also befits the decaying, rotting landscape of Cuttack. *Hunger* is an authentic and universal picturisation of the horrifying hunger becoming a commonplace of human living. Regarding this down-to-earth documentation, Mahapatra observes, “The poem is based on a true incident; it could easily have happened to me on the poverty-ridden sands of Gopalpur-on-Sea. […] The landscape of Gopalpur chose me, and my poem. To face perhaps my inner self, to see my own debasement, to realise my utter helplessness against the
stubborn starvation light of my country” (Mahapatra 20). The penury of the fisherman-father compels him to let his teenage daughter succumb to prostitution for survival:

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. (A Rain of Rites 44)

Mahapatra cherishes an uncompromising idea regarding the whores abounding the streets of his locale – women wronged driven by hunger compelled to take up this profession of putting their ‘cold as rubber’ bodies on sale. They are no more than professionals as Kamala, ‘the three-rupee-whore’ in A Father’s Hours characterized by a brazen matter-of-factness:

In my dreams when I fondle Kamala’s brazen breasts

my hands encounter the blind flowers at a desecrated tomb. (A Father’s Hours 31)

The brazenness of the whores and their passionless attitude also get expression in The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street:

...like a door, her words close behind:

“Hurry, will you? Let me go,”

and her lonely breath thrashed against your kind. (A Rain of Rites 18)

Having lived in Cuttack all his life, the poet can smell the rotting air of the city’s very existential milieu. The landscape draws the picture of the physical and moral decay engulfing Cuttack along with the entire world. The Lost Children of America describes the Western hippies wandering on the ‘dusty malarial lanes of Cuttack’. The poet actually draws in the form of a landscape, the realistic humanscape symbolizing poverty and the arid human ideas:
Here

in the dusty malarial lanes

of Cuttack where years have slowly lost their secrets

they wander

in these lanes nicked by intrigue and rain

and the unseen hands of gods

in front of a garish temple of the simian Hanuman

along river banks splattered with excreta and dung

in the crowded market square among rotting tomatoes

fish-scales and the moist warm odour of bananas and piss

passing by the big-breasted, hard-eyed young whores

who frequent the empty space behind the local cinema

by the Town Hall where corrupt politicians still

go on delivering their pre-election speeches

and on the high road above the towns burning-ground

from which gluttonous tan smoke floats up

in the breeze, smacking of scorched marrow and doubt. *(Life Signs 23)*

The poet is rooted in this very soil which makes him ask:

What can drive me from these mean, sordid alleys

where I live? *(Life Signs 26)*

*The Tattooed Taste* describes the helplessness of an old man who has no other way of earning his living other than selling the disability of his crippled son:

In the cold main road of my rain-smothered town

a man begs for alms, sitting under an old tree

holding his paralysed boy with damp, awkward arms. *(A Rain of Rites 55)*
A poem like *Blind Singer in a Train* once again unveils the stark reality of the existent state of beings in his motherland:

Between successive halts of the guzzling train,
this bamboo-stabled man, rooted
to his night, flutters stone wings as he faces
the clash of silver, the prim dawn-light
rushing past his pox-hollowed eyes. (*Svayamvara and Other Poems* 33)

Mahapatra is a realist who views life and the varied emotions and mysteries related to it against the backdrop of the landscape of Orissa. Poems like *Of A Dawn* and *An Evening by the River* bear testimony to the fact. A line quoted from the first describes:

This dawn is different from others, yet
it is no different. It hides a long nakedness. (*Burden of Waves and Fruit* 33)

The burden of the poet’s consciousness makes him handle the poems in such a way that the calm serenity of the landscape strips the society off the mask of civilization, laying bare their irreligiosity, inhumanity and corruption. For the poet, the landscape of his native place often mirrors the past glory and the dead ancestors. *Evening Landscape by the River* and *The Captive Air of Chandipur-on-Sea* focus the lost world through a lively depiction of fishermen:

The cries of fishermen come drifting through the spray,
music of what the world has lost. (*Life Signs* 1)

*Evening Landscape by the River* depicts familiar rural scenes as might have often been witnessed by the poet sharing a rural background with many a reader:

Fishermen’s broken shacks by the river

In a hut a six-month-old child awakes

and crawls across the dung-washed floor (*Life Signs* 2)
Many a time the private moments of desire, despair, guilt and illumination, torturing the poet's mind, find reflection in the landscape of his locale, as evident in the poems like *Dawn, A Twilight Poem, An October Morning* etc. It is an undeniable fact that Mahapatra is indeed a child of the sun and the sea washing the Orissan shores. *Orissa Landscapes, The Orissa Poems, Evening in an Orissa Village, This Stranger, My Daughter, The Beggar Takes it as Solace* reveal that he is from the very core of his heart an Oriya poet incidentally writing in English. Mahapatra's famous rain poems like *A Rain of Rites, Rain Sense, A Rain, Four Rain Poems* work out his ideas concerning sin and expiation owing to his deep-seated connection with his sacred birthplace. Rain links the earth and the sky, washing away and purifying all that is evil endowing the rain-washed things with purity and transparency. It is the rain which adds to the fertility and beauty of his land, Orissa. Rain brings about the reality of seasons as well as the cyclic changes washing the wet and fertile landscape of Orissa. Once again the poet's regional leaning, his preoccupation with the Orissan landscape reveals itself in his description of the autumnal scene:

Time has turned round
and cut off the joys of possession
close against the skin. It is autumn.

The rice is still wet in the Orissa fields. *(Shadow Space 12)*

The locale has also a great bearing on Mahapatra's award-winning book *Relationship*. Centering round a monumental historical ruin, the poem is indeed a deliberate attempt on the part of the poet to connect himself with his self and with the land of Orissa both in time and beyond it. Such a bold effort gains realization in the "objective correlative" of the stones, walls and sculptures of the Sun Temple of Konarka. The title aptly reveals the poet's sincere efforts to establish a strong relationship with the rich religion, culture, rituals, traditions and myths of Orissa and a humble confession on
his part unfolding the unquestionable influence exerted by Konarka in the shaping of his personality. The poet meditates on his origins and his sacred ties with Orissa and at the same time questions the authority of the past revealing historical truths, religious myths, legends and folk-lore. The poet tries to locate his ultimate roots in the primaeval stones of the Sun Temple at Konark where the lost glory and heritage lay hidden. Hence it is a merging of the voices of Konark, Puri and Bhubaneswar, all united into a single symphony.

Nostalgically remembering the heroic Oriya past – the glory and the heroic feat exhibited by our ancestors during Ashoka’s Kalinga campaign of which the river Daya remains a witness – the poet laments the fact that the successors have drifted away from the ideals of their ancestors and proved their unworthiness of keeping up their pride. The picture of Kalinga as a maritime nation is lost in the stinking alleys of Cuttack. Bringing about a sharp contrast between the past and the present, the great Barabati Fort at Cuttack, now reduced to no more than a symbol of ‘vanquished dynasties’, resembles only the abominations and degradation in the values of life in our time. The agony of the poet finds expression in:

It is hard to tell now
what opened the anxious skies,
how the age-old proud stones
lost their strength and fell,
and how the waters of the Daya
stank with the bodies of my ancestors;
my eyes close now
because of the fear that moves my skin: (Relationship 14)
The poet desires to revitalize this lost glory by taking recourse to the myths of Orissa, the overwhelming sculptures, the ‘gandharvas’ and ‘apsaras’ all of which symbolize the mystery of life and death:

Once again one must sit back and bury the face

in this earth of the forbidding myth, (Relationship 9)

The inner landscape constantly interacts with the outer landscape. Influenced by the landscape of Orissa, the poet observes the annual migrating birds, which in response to the seasonal and climatic changes come all the way from far north Siberia to the warm waters of Chilka, a beautiful lake in Orissa. The poet’s suffering lies in the fact that while the birds and the animals are able to react naturally to the seasons of the year, he is incapable of doing so, cut off as he is from the heroic traditions of his ancestors. The stones of the temple remind him of a guilt-ridden past, to which he bids farewell: Fear of my guilt, I bid you farewell. (Relationship 38)

Ultimately, Mahapatra’s pilgrimage to the living Oriya past to realize the present comes full circle through the realization that he needs to surrender to the altar of his origins wherein rests the infinite myths of his race and the unceasing rhythm and zest of life:

I know I can never come alive

if I refuse to consecrate at the altar of my origins (Relationship 18)

The induction of myth and tradition continues in Temple based on the Hindu beliefs of ‘karma’ and ‘shakti’. Prefixed and suffixed by two burning newspaper reports, it is a poem concerning the plight of Indian women and the beastly men responsible for it. The uneventful life of Chellamal depicts the endless human suffering emerging out of the destitute condition of mankind. Mahapatra makes use of the ‘Putana’ myth to symbolize
the concept of 'shakti' infused in the protagonist's struggle of life. The creation of such poetry is the result of Mahapatra's oneness with his soil.

Mahapatra's Orissa-centric contemplation – the local colour – continues to colour the locale even in his most recent volumes. His flight over the Orissan soil on the wings of historical cum traditional past and grappling present becomes best evident in the course of his watching tribal dances in an Orissa village:

All moments break on the dance's shore.
Moments of ages past, of the power from the earth,
of shadows of tree and quartz,
of the drained silence of starvation

so certain tomorrow and the day after. (Bare Face 30)

The melody in the dance and culture of his land and people has shaped his very sensibility. The past and the present of Mahapatra's locale – 'the land some love to call holy' (Random Descent 70) – converge in the 'crumpled old villages', 'desolate paddy fields', 'history', 'dead river' and 'defeating distances of hunger' (Random Descent 19-20). The ravaging Orissa famine of 1866 still continues in the starving men posing a sharp contrast to a contemporary 'Indian dream', and the truth lies in the fact that 'It is a pity you cannot see what we see' (Random Descent 35). In a bid to 'repair' the todays and tomorrows, the poet has to probe into the yesterdays: ...I will / only (to) collect yesterdays without their dark nights (Random Descent 67). The present is the picture of 'another/ orphan girl, another maimed man,/ another ruined country', as history has been allowed to stale out and the 'proud blood' (Random Descent 68) get rotten in the stones of ancient edifices. 'History is without its time' whose glory needs to be recovered and reestablished – 'We will always let the stones live' (Random Descent 47).
A study of the poet and his locale establishes the fact that there lies an inseparable relationship between the poet and his place along with the people. Mahapatra is a home-bound pilgrim undertaking a pilgrimage in search of his roots and identity, flowing effortlessly like the river through the sal and deodar jungles of the myth, tradition, culture, heritage, history and milieu of his birthplace Orissa. His acknowledgement of the fact comes in the following lines of the poem *Way of the River*:

I am the water in my father’s eyes.

I am the slow flow that takes me gently down.

Has its darker depths taught me already

the art of disguise, its strange necessity? (*Waiting* 11)

The poet’s sense of belonging to his place is expressed when he says: "[…] A writer should become the place he comes from" (Raghavan 59). Thus the poet’s keen awareness of his place makes him pale into the place and through a subjective consciousness views and appreciates the objective setting of his birthplace and locale – Orissa. His sense of Indianness is very much conspicuous here.
Works Cited


