

CHAPTER IV

The Poet As A Social Critic

And if the heart doesn't overflow with love ,
will the spirits of poetry stir out
of the walls of my bone?

(Mahapatra. Life Signs :46)

Jayanta Mahapatra may draw his images from his memories, he may contemplate on philosophical and abstract things like time or death probing into personal relationship of the self with others but he is never blind to the contemporary situation. Although he occasionally makes a journey to the historical and mythical past of Orissa telling us how his ancestors were slaughtered by the Ashokan army on the banks of river Daya and draws our attention to the incessant labour of the artisans who constructed the sun temple of Konaraka under a tyrannical king, he is sentient of and sensitive to the present scenario of Orissa and to that of the whole of India and actively reacts to it. Thus through many of his images the poet comes out as a social critic.

It is true I held up my face to the world
hoping it would pull me through
the crowds preying the old worn paths,
my morals like a scarf pulled over my head,

but each time I found the empty seat beside me
 dripping with worms and excrement ;each time
 the demands of a war ,a flood ,a murder or rape
 startled me with the salt taste of my blood.

(The False Start: 62)

Matthew Arnold in *The Study Of Poetry* says :

In poetry as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for
 such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic
 beauty, the spirit of our race will find ...as time goes on and
 as other helps fail, its consolation and stay.

(S.R.Littlewood 1960:3)

A true poet is not the one who lives secluded in an ivory tower
 sheltered away from reality in the halo of a romantic past or a
 visionary future but one who is sentient of the predicament of the
 other fellow beings. Mahapatra believes that an artist, who is
 elevated by us to the ethereal plane as a god-gifted seer, lacks the
 historical and logical relationship between the self and the world.
 Such artists tend to write without a sense of community or
 audience and produce *no* lasting literature. A writer must be
 conscious of the present social and political scenario in which he
 lives. Mahapatra's poems never give us an idealistic view of the
 world. His is always a depiction of the bleak reality around.
 Mahapatra's poems speak of poverty, starvation, prostitutes,

cripples, beggars, of 'Leper's mutilated limb' (Life Signs:8), of people who 'grow like tough coarse grass from cracked pavements' (A Father's Hours: 38), 'Fisherman's broken shacks', 'Of nameless slums' (Burden of Waves and Fruit: 17) and typical Indian scenes like that of 'a six-month old child's crawling across the dung-washed floor'(Life Signs:2). Poverty is 'huddled in there / If that's what one is looking for' (Waiting:3).

Mahapatra depicts pitiable but realistic pictures like:

A man begs for alms, sitting under an old tree

Holding his paralyzed boy with damp, awkward arms.

(A Rain of Rites:55)

There are numerous instances of literary artists taking up pen against social problems. Many literatures bear testimony of social criticism. George Orwell and Charles Dickens wrote *Animal Farm* and *A Tale of Two Cities* respectively, to express their disillusionment with society and human nature. To Matthew Arnold, poetry was the criticism of life. For Mahapatra, it is important to write with a real sense of community and audience. He himself writes with a sense of belonging to Orissa. For the poet, his native state is the 'altar' of his ancestors. It carries the 'ritual memories' of his youth, his home and his mother. The landscape of the native state forms an essential backdrop for many of his poems that have the suffering Indian lot like beggars and cripples as their

inseparable elements. The town he is born in has its festivities as well as the 'mangled lepers':

the red sun perched on the rickety limbs of the poor,
the open drains flouting the dread of disease.

The naked children crying of their swollen flesh.

(Waiting: 28)

Images of children provide a means of his identification with the place. The children depicted by Mahapatra are never the healthy or the happy ones inhabiting the imaginary world blissfully unaware of the sufferings of this world. They neither dwell in the world of innocence, nor do the fairies come to tempt them away. They are rather the 'diseased hollow-cheeked children' (Life Signs:9) marked by poverty and negligence, the 'naked children, with 'virus of pox' (A Rain of Rites:43) In *Main Temple Street, Puri*:

Children, brown as earth, continue to laugh
at cripples and mating mongrels.

Nobody ever bothers about them.

(A Rain of Rites : 16).

The victims of negligence, the children are starved. Fatigued eyes of mothers linger on their children but their faces reflect back their own darkness. (Waiting :3)

Another important image of social reality that Mahapatra attends to is hunger. Like the children many others suffer from

interminable hunger. The hungry children 'stink like wet dogs , the cows are half-starved'. Hunger affects the entire country. Rain that goes on all day reminds the poet of hunger by its incessant quality.

Its rain again. Going on all day.

Like hunger, you would think this country

Has nothing but seven hundred million bellies.

(Burden of Waves and Fruit:29)

The world that Mahapatra portrays is a degenerated, suffering and sick world. There is hunger and reek and decay in the air (Life Signs:30). Darkness 'swells' as a child's belly does hunger (Burden of Waves and Fruit :31). There are also other types of hunger the poet attends to, like the hunger of the women whose passions are not reciprocated as in *The Woman Who Wanted To Be Loved*, or, the poet's own sexual hunger as in *Hunger*. *Hunger* pathetically juxtaposes the hunger for food against the hunger for sexual communion and brings out the unremitting poverty that makes a father ignore all social concerns and so called morals values and offer his fifteen-year-old daughter to the poet.

Like the children the women depicted are also the suffering ones. *These Women* presents a candid picture of the Indian household. Home is where the women toil day and night serving 'need after need' of the other family members, while they themselves have

none to vent out their problems and feelings to. They live with their heavy hearts and with an extended silence that the poet compares to the onions and herbs hung out to dry. The Indian women are quiet sufferers keeping their eyes shut to many things in life making the 'poise of a flower'. (A Rain of Rites:6) He underlines the 'humiliation', 'hunger', and ironically the "well being of a woman"

...drying herself with her only wet sari

after her bath, and her nameless solitude.

(Life Signs:25)

These suffering women are but living deads. The poet therefore says that they 'find the secret of dying/ without realizing that they are dying'. (Life Signs : 25)*The Temple* with its threefold structure: *The Hall of Dancing*; *The Hall of Offering* and *Sanctum Sanctorum: The Shrine*, suggestive of the three broad stages of a woman's life - girlhood, marriage and motherhood, deals with the plight of women. Chelammal, the protagonist is a poor, suffering and lonely woman. In *The Hall of Offerings* after she is raped and left to fate she finds that 'her father, brothers all move with the sadness of men. / They belong, but not to her'(28). The 'laxman rekha' reinforces her isolation. This isolation, however, is not her alone. For: There is no woman/who is not alone.' Each time a girl commits suicide 'she learns to chasten the vision of her own death' (30) she feels all along 'the rough noose of ownership'.

Despite the quiet toil and loneliness there is a quiet resignation and submission about the Indian women.

... she lets her husband bury his head

Between her breaths in the thick knot in her throat.

(A Whiteness of Bone: 51)

In *A Summer Night* Ramlal growls like an animal as he enters his house. Nobody knows where he goes at night, and there is a hint that he visits the wrong places. His wife is a quiet resignation. The 'sleepy wife' remains 'Silent and passive/through the act'. Her face limp loyal is compared to the ruined stone. There is satire when the poet says that after years of guilt and misdeeds, Ramlal will build a temple and gift marbles slabs to Lord Jagganath as a retribution of his sins. (Waiting :28)

Mahapatra exposes the hypocrisy and hollowness of marital relationship in poems like *A Sailboat On Occasions*, *A Postcard From Home*.

In neighboring house a woman hides her impotent hatred for her husband. (Bare Face: 48)

Poem, for Angela Elston turns on speciousness of love. In a loveless world, the poet himself is no more impervious. He admits that

My love for you is a selfish love

Wings of deception.

(Burden of Waves and Fruit:58)

Mahapatra's world is a place where women toil to make both ends meet. The downtrodden 'soot-hued women' who toil through the day and return home after a days long labour are an invariable part of *Dusk*. A girl runs after her home-bound cow at sunset. The women return carrying their sickle. The poet watches a pregnant woman sweep the litter in the streets. The image turns 'The knot of pain' inside the empathetic poet. (Bare Face:45)

In *The Morning* -J we read of

The sweeper girl walking by
The can of human excrement
Cradled
In her frail arm.

(Waiting: 1)

Her arm is 'Trail' due to malnutrition. One of the major causes of suffering is poverty, the failure to provide for oneself and one's family even the basic necessities of food and shelter. The poet speaks of starvation due to extreme poverty in poems like *Deaths in Orissa*. In *Bare Face XIX*:

..the children of Kalahandi breathe in their dreams
in their interminable starvation sleep.

(Bare Face:78)

In *Death Of A Nameless Girl In Bhopal, December 1984*, referring to a death by poison gas the poet says that death by poison gas is a

new feature while we are quite acquainted with death by starvation:

there has always been starvation here ,man;

yes, we are used to it.

(A Whiteness of Bone:45)

In *Requiem XX* the poet attends to the growing poverty and misery that makes it impossible to judge whether we are progressing or actually regressing. Every year we have national holidays. Seething leper colonies seem to grow every year. We generally ignore the thought of what an underprivileged lives for. They are compared to ghosts walking in the villages wearing worn out clothes having lost their children before they are born. (Bare Face :79)

Like his empathy with the poor and downtrodden, the poet's attitude to the prostitutes who recur frequently in his poems is one of compassion and understanding. They are the wronged women who take to the profession out of poverty and hunger. This is a profession by which they earn their pitiable living and therefore these women beg for the darkness *of* the night.

In *Village Evening*, as Ahalya goes back to bed, there is

A guilty look on her face

Her promise to feed her son

Morning milk-curd another faraway dream.

(Shadow Space:31)

A lost cloud is compared to an old whore (The False Start:33) The prostitutes figure as professionals, like 'Kamala, the three-rupee whore from my mother's remote village' (A Father's Hours: 30). They take to their work with professional approach as shown in *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. *Hunger* shows how the need for food in a starving family undermines all other considerations.

The woman's world is one of misery. Yashoda arranges for her fourteen year old daughter's abortion, (Dispossessed Nests:55) and Draupadi drags her body into the night.(58)

The present world has lost the tenderness of love :

Now a man knows only two ways

For dealing with a stray woman

He rapes her

And he kills her.

(Dispossessed Nests:33)

The poet's was a generation that paid homage to Gandhi and Tagore saw in mother Dostoevsky's shadow but now the war was ended and ushered in 'the new beginning of the curse of beggardom'.(Shadow Space: 17) There are 'Homeless beggars' seen everywhere on Indian streets (A Father's Hours :24). *The Beggar Takes It As Solace* is a poem on a beggar's fiddling with a coin and his dream :

he sees people everywhere

the future
getting paid.

(Waiting :48)

It is a world of beggars and cripples and lepers. 'Five faceless lepers move aside' (Waiting:6) and 'A legless cripple/Clutters up the wide temple street.' (Waiting: 14) Some of his Indian scenes Mahapatra attends to are typical and have a changeless quality about them:

here sits my man
in the doorway of a dunged street,
beside his ailing mother, (ARain of Rites: 58)

The hour Svill not move'. It holds him now as it held his father. The same tradition, the same blind following of customs goes on generation after generation. Large group of 'stony women' sit through the day in front of a shrine Svaiting to be cured'. (A Rain of Rites: 15) Despite all her strict observations, all her meticulous fasting on festival days, not touching fish every Monday and Saturday, and returning from temple with vermilion roaring on her throat, the thirteen-year-old girl dies of tetanus. Mentioning her religious **observances the poet comments: What superstition!** (Burden of Waves and Fruit:29)

There are premature deaths all around. Here a 'a rickshaw puller/collapses with exhaustion /on the hot edge of the road'

(Waiting:42), a frail girl dies of tuberculosis (60), a 75 year old judge leaps to death (60-61) but the clinging to religious customs continues. It seems a hopeless devotion. For all the prayers and penance men undertake, god remains inaccessible. In his poem, a wasted man stretching out in hospital bed is juxtaposed against five children crying for slices of watermelon which is further set against 'the atrocious innocence of Jagganath /in his sheltered shrine'. (Burden of Waves and Fruit: 40) In *Widow* the widow who is placed in a dreadful surrounding by fate and more by the customs and conventions of the society has in a corner of her tiny room a stone icon Sveary with vermilion/in an exotic drapery of hopes' (Shadow Space:20). The poet uses the epithet 'stone' to emphasize rigid pitiless qualities of the persona we call god.

We all want to find the man who can rise out of his rite

And yet we are the ones who'll never let ourselves out.

(A Rain of Rites:58)

Lessons of justice, fables of good deeds, arcades of peace are 'metallic clicks *of* words' carrying no meaning. They are chanted through generations represented by the poet's father and his father's father. They are repeated by 'shaven priests', by 'government ministers'. These are word that are 'played', and resound in a country where men commit murder in the name of mercy. (Life Signs: 15)

The suffering villages weigh on the poet's mind.

It is not that I do not like to see their lot improved
that which has taken years of doing of education, medicine.

(A Father's Hours: 23)

But the poet is totally disillusioned. He is sceptical about the country's freedom. In *Freedom* he depicts old widows and dying men cherishing their freedom by bowing to prayers from time to time while the children scream With desire for freedom to transform the world /Without even laying the hands on it'. The picture he depicts has nothing to cherish about, not even hope. The poet's is a generation that feels the generation gap increase the unreliability between parents and children.

We are careful to say nothing now

To our children that might displease

Or provoke them (Of Independence Day)

The attitude of the youth have changed considerably. They back away from 'us', that is, from the poet's age group, 'suspicious as shadows', their antagonism has grown 'cruelly with the years.'
(Father's Hours :28)

Politics and vigilance have entered the personal relationships:

We have become stiff and cautious with each other

As this country is with the US and USSR.

(A Whiteness of Bone:63)

The city images are associated with dust, chaos, darkness and gloom:

the sad voice of the earth is crouched in the city's chaos
 the fluttering flag doesn't remember anything further than
 that
 a light ventured out into the world and was lost
 and the last hours of memory hold only darkness.

(Bare Face:20)

Many *of* his poems speak 'Of the drained silence of starvation'. (Bare Face:30), of the woman and the child in a remote village, who 'never had even a little rice/for their one daily meal these fifty years.' (34) This is what our freedom has given us. The talks of 'social injustice and democracy' has failed:

No believer has given up his life for freedom
 There is merely caution in those words
 Weak sentiment and history
 In which country's leaders like to drown us.

(Shadow Space: 17)

The poet is annoyed with the big talks of socialism. Communism does not fascinate him either.

At times in the dark the mongrel of socialism
 Wails into dreams of sleeping millions,
 Smoke of useless burning tastes sickly on the tongue
 And children struggle with their last summers

Like young communists bent with the weight of India
A startled sun on the cold embers of their eyes.

(Burden of Waves and Fruit :22)

The images of India that the poet draws are never the cheerful ones. *Freedom* has a powerful image of the country's body floating down somewhere on the river, half sunk. Here women and children go without food. *Saving Ourselves* has grimaces on India's drawn face with pain 'of the shadows from the fallen tree of our the country will settle down 'pale' and 'Svorn' and 'hungry'. (Burden of Waves and Fruit:34). The country is still wavering ,

Moving from plan to plan ,
From government to government,
Unable to make up its mind
To light a lamp or do anything sensible

(Bare Face :48)

Despite all the pain and suffering this is

..the country from which you cannot cut yourself loose;

(Life Signs: 15)

Freedom has really given us nothing of the cherished dreams. There is noose in the hand of freedom we have earned (Bare Face :79). The poet speaks of the political corruption as one of the causes of the country's suffering. *Freedom* has the image of

'bloodied light of sunsets' clinging to 'the tall white columns of parliament house.' (Bare Face:34). "We try to find out where our lives have brought us', says Mahapatra. (Dispossessed Nests:45)

The country's leaders Swait for a sign/ and a future this present will not enable us/to live in.' The poet's own state of Orissa is littered. The 'malarial lanes' are spattered with excreta and dung. The market place stinks of 'rotting tomatoes', 'fish scales', 'bananas' and 'piss'. The 'hard -eyed' young whores

frequent the empty space behind the local cinema
by the town hall where corrupt politicians still
go on delivering their pre-election speeches .

(Life Signs: 23)

Nobody cares of others misfortunes today; the least of all do the political leaders who are our elected representatives. The victims of *Bhopal Gas Tragedy* are drawn out like vinged insects' pulled out from the earth after rain. Of government inability and political failure '... we must never/ question and must pretend not^to know.'
(Dispossessed Nests:45)

Political corruption, however, is not the only factor contributing to the misery. There is cruelty inherent in human nature. Gandhi who spoke of non-violence was shot dead and India suffers from his unrealized dreams.

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

Everytime I look into the old man's eyes,
He calmly hands my promise back to me.

(A Whiteness of Bone: 50).

The poet's land seems unredeemable. In *Pain*, The dark tree that stands over the fields of the poet's blood has failed to leaf and bud. Wrecked by fissures Gandhi's dreams can no longer be realized. Disappointed, the poet laments: 'Land, our land, there is so much land between us now.'

The poet laments that he has been in love with the world a little too much, taking his place for granted, reconstructing a secret mental landscape like the 'redeeming monument of Gandhi' in the India of his 'illusive glass'. He fondly remembers Indira Gandhi who rendered invaluable service to the country but was assassinated like Gandhi. The significance of the past and the sacrifice of our ancestors are lost upon us.

In *30th January, 1982: A Story*, the day of Gandhi's assassination has Amarbabu and Shambabu smiling at one another as they choose their 'choice cuts' of meat hanging from hook in marketplace. It brings out the indifference of the average men to major national incidents. It is also ironic that the day of assassination of the father of non-violence should be celebrated by

butchering of innocent goats. We have seen how images of slaughtered goats serve to bring out the brutality of human nature. In *A Monsoon Day Fable*, the eyes of the cows being led for slaughter haunts the poet, for they 'reveal the true nature o^ man' (Life Signs: 41)

Mahapatra chronicles vicious incidents as the rape and killing of Laxmi (Burden of Waves and Fruit: 17), or the burning of a father and his two sons just because they belonged to different faith (Bare Face: 50). In the poem the sunset is likened to an abandoned bloodstain. *Morning Signs* brings out both the brutality of man and the failure of justice. Before the morning paper arrives the poet knows what the headlines will be—that Lata's rapists and killers are set free 'for that's how it has always been.' (Life Signs: 47)

This is a world where death strides on , yet men are intolerable to one another, viciously killing others. He takes up his pen against many such incidents of violence in the country. *Winds of Spring* is on the brutal massacre of women and children in the paddy fields of Nellie, Assam. *Progress* is triggered by an incident of violence after an Australian missionary and his young sons were burnt alive in Orissa on the night of January 22, 1999. *Temple* is a reworking of the Putana myth set off by the suicide of an octogenarian couple Ramanujam (eighty- five) and Chelammal (eighty). The poem ends

with another news item, that of a twelve-year-old girl being gang raped and murdered implying that suffering continues.

In *Dispossessed Nests* the poet depicts India as a land of lost values crumbling under terrorism. The volume is a wail of a sensitive man tormented by the world shattered by violence. It portrays a world where all the compassion of human heart has dried up. The riverbed is dry. It is wrapped up in a 'shroud of moonlight'. Darkness has descended on the land. It is a night of 'decaying bodies'. The poet employs natural imagery to depict the chaos the country has immersed into. The chief events of the book are the Punjab unrest that killed thousands of innocent people in a fanatic attempt to establish a land of the Sikhs, with the 'Kapurs shouting Long Live Khalistan /alongwith the terrorists', and the gas leakage in Union Carbide factory in Bhopal that took thousands of innocent lives. The poet hopes for something positive, but death's devastation continues:

There is probably something good
on television tonight.

Another death. (*Dispossessed Nests*:17)

The violence and resulting deaths in Punjab results in '*Bewildered Wheatfields*' the first section of the volume, and the deaths in Bhopal, which form the remaining section, is '*A Dance of Bejeweled Snakes*' where he quotes Pablo Neruda's lines as an epigraph:

'Come and see the blood in the streets.

Come and see

the blood in the streets.

Come and see the blood

in the streets !'

The volume has the image of India as a dark tree grasping for breath in green air. The cruelty and violence around makes the poet articulate that his country makes him more embarrassed than lonely. (Burden of Waves and Fruit:32) Hurt by all that he sees around him, he says, 'its no use talking about my land'.

Sometimes his social concern ignores all geographic boundaries to encompass the entire human lot. *The Lost Children of America*, for instance, depicts the predicament of the young Americans who come to India in search of peace and meander their way into oblivion. Starvation in Somalia disturbs the poet, as does starvation in Kalahandi. In *A Country* the poet's unease embraces the whole of Asia where hunger 'keeps growing from Turkey to Cambodia ' (Life Signs: 29)

Mahapatra not only chronicles desolate scenes, he probes into the characters offering a study of the Indian psyche. *Afternoons* is set in a characteristic Indian ambience where palaces have fallen to ruins and piss dries on deserted walls. We are given a brief analysis of the fat shopkeeper who looks at the 'two big- arsed'

women, who enter his shop for four kilos of rice, with 'nude hunger' in his eyes and fans himself in a stupor of dreams. In *Events* the young Rotarian's speech on American enterprise in the conference room of YMCA and his complementary pride fall unreal against the bleak reality of the 'town's dusty street', the smoke of funeral pyre on riverbank, the hard labour of rickshaw puller, and the rape.

Poets need certain seclusion for his art, but this does not detach Mahapatra from the events occurring around. He actively responds to the events of the world for he is but one of them.

In my room

With the shut barred windows where I work,

I am one of them, listening to the radio each day.

(Burden of Waves and Fruit: 29)

The poet who has chronicled all the sufferings and sorrows of this world has the fate of his poem 'hanging like an old calendar on a nail on his conscience's walls' (Bare Face: 38)

For sense of right and wrong pinches him when he sees the poverty and suffering around:

The destitutes everywhere are still my sense of guilt.

(A Father's Hours:20)

In an expose the poet elucidates this sense of guilt:

Is this sense of guilt intensely felt, especially for one who lives in a country like ours where almost half the people are hungry and impoverished? Feelings like these, waxing and waning in the blur of the mind, help in focusing on oneself, placing the person at some point of time and meaning. And poetry, the process of writing it, does just that. The reasons are all there. They are there because man is able to think. Or simply because man has this hidden core of a conscience which he finds he cannot entirely subjugate or ignore.

(Panja2001: 7)

'For poetry, the world lives far away,' says his *The Trail Of Poetry*. 'Let it raise you right where you belong' appeals the poet. He turns our attention to the street, where an old pregnant woman sweeps the litter; to the last laugh of horror of a paralytic who swallows insecticide. You have to check whether poetry/really becomes a cry for protecting man' says Mahapatra. (Bare Face: 36) But the truth is that a poet can only helplessly depict. The poem's 'voice is thin' A poem cannot even strongly protest, and the poet cries out: Oh I am a poet who barks like a dog.

(A Whiteness of Bone: 31)

In *For Days Together* the poems are 'blank'. They are compared to his rich friends who move around in expensive cars who are least sensitive to the sufferings around. *The Rage In Those Young Eyes*,

for instance, is on the hanging of African poet - activist Benjamin Moloise that had provoked angry reactions worldwide. Mahapatra feels a deep pain but then he knows that it will serve no ultimate purpose.

Perhaps the rage in those young eyes of yours
will never serve any purpose, great or small

But, whatever little his contribution may be it cannot be ignored.

In *Someone In My Room* the poet thinks of himself in relation to Jack Mapanje Malawal and is unsure of the force of his poetry. (Shadow Space: 79).

Mahapatra links his poetry to words like ineffectiveness, impotency, futility.

In *The Tame Ending* a poem is like a lost child weeping near a lamp post, not reassured by the coin that a passer-by thrusts into its fists. In *Postcard form Home* the restlessness of the poet is evident when he says that a poet he is wrapped in restless shadows, and hurries through the 'morgue of his words'. The poet cannot bring any change to the society and guilt pursues again:

I shut my eyes and remain in the guilt of sleep.(Waiting:32)

For a poet is not and cannot be a social reformer. But poets must be responsible. They must bring into focus the miseries, the corruption around. In this vein the poet writes:

..if the poets inner voice matters,it seems but natural that he would write about those things which appear unfair to him. It is the poet again who will talk about injustice and cruelty and greed in a society in which he lives, hoping in his heart of hearts that these would be taken care of. Certainly one cannot place the poet in the category of a social reformer; but there can be no denying the fact that he would like to see a just and fair society come in existence, to see the smile appear on the face of every destitute child on the street, on every man, woman and animal on this earth he inhabits. (Panja 2001:17)

Speaking of the poem titled *Deaths in Orissa* he says that it was a result of his *periodic visits to the starvation - fields of Kalahandi*, "this might not be a good poem. But it came out of my own experience. And was an honest attempt of mine." (Mahapatra: Sunday, March 18, 2001)

For the poet it is the compassion for others that forms the most essential component of a poem and contributes to the making of a good poetry. The art of crafting or diction, although crucial to a poem, comes later:

Poetry has always been responsible to life. By this, one means that a poet is first of all responsible to his or her own conscience, otherwise he or she cannot be called poet. And

maybe, the other factors necessary to the makings of a good poet, will only come later. These may ordinarily imply the craft, or the language the poet will use with skill in his poems. But somehow, these appear as frills in a poem, that is already full with feeling, because the poem would have already done what it was meant to do ;in other words, touch another human being, before one came to notice the other qualities of the poem. (Panja 2001:7)

Like Nissim Ezekiel, Mahapatra has written many situational poems. Many of these characteristic Indian conditions work out to be ironical observations on contemporary situations. Contemporary reality not only appeals to the poet but it also helps him to explicate and understand life. Mahapatra justifies the poet's concern with the contemporary situation:

What relevance does the archaic art form have to contemporary society? If ours would have been a more tolerant better world than what is today, then poetry would have not need to justify itself beyond the sheer splendour of its existence. (Mahapatra,The Daily Star :Jan 10,2004]

ihapatra's observations on social reality make his heart swell with pity,

love and compassion that are the essential virtues of Christianity.
His poetry echoes the wailing note of Juno in Sean O' Casey's *Juno
and the Paycock*:

Sacred heart o' Jesus
take away our hearts o' stone
and give us hearts o' flesh!
Take away this murdherin' hate,
An' give us Thine own eternal love!