

## CHAPTER II

### Mapping Mahapatra

Somewhere, the urge to talk about oneself  
consumes the entire lifetime.  
There is (somewhere ) a great poem I have to write.

(Mahapatra, *A leather's Hours*: 21)

The study of images, as we have seen, is central to the understanding of poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry has a wide range of images that calls for serious study. The background of Indian English poetry and the influences at work on the poet forms a fundamental segment to the understanding of his images. Mahapatra is widely known today and shares a place amongst our leading poets. He cannot be studied in isolation. Mahapatra is keenly conscious of the predicament of modern man. His poetry accentuates a keen consciousness of cultural and sociological traditions of his native locale. My attempt here is not to delve into all the incidents of his life in order to link up the major events of his life with his outpourings. This chapter places the poet and his texts against the ethnic and literary tradition that he has inherited, and the literary influences that have worked on him giving shape to his images, making him one of our contemporary Indian poets.

If we do not relate the lines like "There's probably something good / on television tonight. /Another death?" (Dispossessed Nests: 4) with the violent movements for Khalistan, or,

The leaves of the dark tree of India  
are grasping for breath  
across the green air.

(Dispossessed Nests: 29)

with Bhopal Gas Tragedy, we cannot get the complete importation of what the poetry means and what ails the poet.

One of our weaknesses has been, especially after the New critics and structuralist semiotics, the tendency to treat individual texts as isolated, closed entities and to center our attention solely on internal structures:

The concept of intertextuality reminds us that each text exists in relation to others. In fact, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. Michel Foucault declared that: The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.... (Foucault 1974, 23)

(Daniel Chandler Semiotics for Beginners)

Eliot defined tradition in his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent* as that which,

compels a man to write not merely with his generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Eliot 1932: 49)

The study of poetry involves a study of the poet's ethnic background and tradition along with an awareness of the time frame within which he exists. Jayanta Mahapatra as a poet has made his indelible mark on the Indian English Poetry of the present decade. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademy award for poetry (1980) for his volume *Relationship*. This was the first honour of its kind given to a volume of Indian English poetry. Mahapatra, a contemporary of A.K.Ramanujan and Ezekiel took to writing late, but not without results. He has several volumes of poetry to his credit: *Close the Sky; Ten by Ten;* (1971) *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971); *A Father's Hours* (1976); *A Rain of Rites* (1976); *Waiting* (1979); *The False Start* (1980); *Relationship* (1980); *Life Signs* (1983); *Dispossessed Nests* (1986); *Selected Poems* (1987); *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988); *Temple* (1989); *A Whiteness of*

*Bone* (1992); *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* (1995); *Shadow Space* (1997); *Bare Face* (2000); *Random Descent* (2005).

Mahapatra has contributed to various national and international journals and has received several awards like Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award from Poetry Magazine Chicago (1975); Gangadhar National Award for poetry from Sambalpur University (1994); Ramakrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award (New Delhi, 1994). He held the Vaikom Mohammad Basheer Chair at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam from 1996-1997. Mahapatra has bagged the second prize in International Who's Who in Poetry Competition, London (1970) and the first prize in Scottish International Open Poetry Competition (1990). He was the invited poet at Cuirt International Poetry Festival, Ireland (1992); Poetry International, London (1992); El Consejo Nacional Para La Cultura y Las Artes, Mexico; (1994); Mingi International Museum, U.S.A (1994), ACLALS Conference, Sri Lanka (1998) Indo-Soviet Cultural Exchange USSR (1985); Asian Poets Conference Japan (1984). He has visited Malaysia, Indonesia, Phillipines, Singapore, West Germany, England and U.S.A. to give recitals to his poetry. He has been a member of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program during 1976-77. Mahapatra was initially recognized abroad before getting his deserved attention at home.

The poets who were generally included in the numerous indiscriminative and selective anthologies that published and promulgated Indian English poetry were Dom Moraes, Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, Ramanujan, Gieve Patel, Arun Kolatkar, Mehrotra, Daruwalla and Kamala Das. Prithish Nandy who published *Indian Poetry in English* (1947-1972) and *Strangertime: an Anthology of Indian Poetry in English* (1977), was one of the few to publish Mahapatra. Mahapatra who was widely published outside India in *South and West* (USA), *Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *New Letters*, *New York Quarterly*, and in *Times Literary Supplement*, was first published in India in *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (1976) edited by R.Parthasarathy and in *A Writer's Workshop Anthology* (1971) edited by Shiv.K.Kumar. Mahapatra's rapidly published volumes record his qualms, his perceptions of the self and of the outside world, often repeating the same theme from different points of view. His poetry unravels the problems of his inner self as he tries to communicate the correlation of the self with the physical and inner reality.

Although it is difficult to trace all the influences that shape a poet, Mahapatra seems to have been most influenced by Robert Bly and the American poets of late 60s and 70s in using the landscape as a means of expressing his subjective feelings. The Romantic poets had also used the external object or an object of nature as a stimulus to the deep ruminations of the self. We sometimes find

Mahapatra distantly echoing poets of the Romantic tradition like Keats or Shelley. Acquaintance with the works of William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972) helped him to build up a belief that the logic of a poem was ultimately in its inner relations rather than in its being narrative or argumentative.

The method of Romantic poets to begin with a projection on an image of an external object and then turn to a reflection of the self was given a new twist by these American poets. Robert Bly is said to have discovered in his *Silence in the Snowy Fields* the spirit of the American (prairie) landscape. Although considerably influenced by Spanish, Chinese, and Latin American poets, there never remained a perception of an alien culture in Bly. The American land seemed to have breathed through him. The fields and rural buildings open out into this large dimension of the human self in Bly. "We are all asleep in the outward man," Bly quotes Boehme, as an epigraph for the book, then goes on to offer poems which, taken all together, call to us, to wake up in and through the inward man. Reading Bly, one senses the need to discover the other-dimensionality of being. In his essay *The Dead World and the Live World* (1966), Robert Bly distinguishes between two kinds of poetic consciousness, that which brings 'news of the human mind' (he would have included the confessional poets in this category) and that which brings 'news of the universe'. The second kind of poetry requires that the poet go deeply inward, 'far back into the brain,'

where he is likely to find what Bly calls, 'some bad news about himself, some anguish that discursive reasoning had for a long time protected him against' (66-67). But the poets ought to continue his inward journey without break. They must penetrate much deeper than the ego and thus grow aware of the multiple beings that live within. (Dead World: 6). Finally, the poet reaches those depths where 'life inside the brain and the life outside' exist 'at the same instant' (7). The manifestation of the poem crystallizes at this point of perception, at this personal instant of instantaneous interaction between the perceiver and the perceived. This type of poetic consciousness that seeks to integrate self, others, and the cultural and physical worlds, that is sometimes called the incorporative consciousness, prevails in Mahapatra. As a result subdued anxieties, fears, desires and hopes along with landscape, myth and history surface in his poetry.

One of the basic concerns manifested in the nineteenth century literature written in almost all the languages was to come to terms with the impact of western civilization. It affected the Indian writer's sense of history, his understanding of the past, his idea of progress; in short, his total view of life. Dr.Sisir Das points out that this created a tension between the two modes of life, and of art, that could never be completely resolved as neither a total rejection of the contact nor an unconditional acceptance was possible. The tension became more intensified with the passage of time, with a

fresh understanding of our own heritage and of the nature of the foreign rule that culminated during the organized struggle of the people against the British Domination. (Sisir Das:2)

The voices that emerged after independence were influenced and excited by their appreciation of late nineteenth century and twentieth century poets like Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden. The nationalist political idiom was no longer needed. The emphasis was now on the personal desires and discontents rather than on mythological characters. With each passing decade after independence, a heightened awareness of actual Indian experience was apparent in Indian English poetry. The poets were no longer detached from real life experiences and reflected a consciousness of community life.

Modern Indian English poetry was indebted only to European poetry at the beginning of experimentation. But it gradually grew receptive to World Literature in general like to the contemporary American and South American poetry. It also extended its array of interest to include old and regional Indian Literature, Indian legends and myths. Post -independence Indian poetry began restructuring itself by incorporating themes and techniques from French experimental poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Lautreamont (1846-1870), from 20<sup>th</sup> Century modernists like Eliot and Pound, from the political poetry of

Neruda (1904-1973), and from the movements that comprised modernism in literature.

Mahapatra read as his favourites the poems of Pablo Neruda, North eastern poets like Anjum Hassan, Robin Ngangom and Desmon while he himself was influenced by the field poetry of William Carlos Williams, James Wright, Bly, Pound and by the surrealists.

The change that was apparent with our contemporary Indian poets was that they had shifted their focus from the visionary religious and hackneyed musings to the reality. One of the significant changes was the shift of focus to the poets themselves. In the autobiographical nostalgia of Dom Moraes, in the distanced reflections of Ezekiel, or the highly emotive confessions of Kamala Das, the poets were gradually creating a space for themselves and their experiences.

Mahapatra speaks on the change that was apparent:

However it was in the eighties or the early nineties that a change was seen in much of the English poetry written in India. The discerning reader no longer wanted to read merely a well-crafted poem of an Indian poet in English, a poem which could have come as well from a pen of a poet living in Britain or Australia. Neither was the poet interested only in the dry wit and

irony most Indian English poems exhibited. The prevailing poetry scene was witnessing a subtle change. Poets, younger poets, from various parts of the country were coming out with their poems; suddenly English poems were being written differently in Kerala, in the Northeast, and in my own state of Orissa. It was the native culture showing in the poem of the Indian English poet. It was poetry which eased itself from the earth the poet inhabited, nurtured and nourished by the soil and air of the place. There was a distinct sense of belonging; it couldn't be mistaken.

(Mahapatra: *The Daily Star*, January 10, 2004)

Subsequent to Mahapatra's publication in the *Writer's Workshop Anthology*, *Prithvi Nandy Anthology*, and in the *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets in India*, the reviewers were puzzled by his apparent obscurity. A review published in *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, said that Mahapatra 'focused on the subliminal private world behind the poem.' (Bruce King 2004: 86) But Mahapatra's own standpoint was unambiguous:

Many of our poets (those who live in a bureaucratic or academic world) elevate the artist to the ethereal, where we deny the connections between the self and other, separating language from social relations. We

revere this isolated human being (our artist, our poet) and treat his imagination as something he has inherited, a gift from god, as though there were no logical relationship, or historical relationship between the self and the world. We are then aware that we write without any real sense of community or audience. That is probably why the poetry of many Indian English poets fails, when these poets prefer to live abroad, exiled by his own choosing. (Mahapatra: The Hindu March 18,2001)

Having identified why contemporary Indian poetry often failed, Mahapatra goes ahead to say what he proposes to do: "Frankly, I should like to write such a poetry, a poetry which comes out of ashes of our own culture." (Ibid). This 'ash' image found early in Mahapatra contained the germ of what he expounds:

all the poetry there is in the world  
appears to rise out of the ashes.

(All The Poetry There Is)

While dealing with Indian English literature, we find that much of it today, is an expression of cultural and linguistic zones that divide India. The poets who employ English as their medium of expression, which like ancient Sanskrit, is nobody's mother tongue but is generally associated with the elite, come from the different

communities of India and likewise their literature very often reflect a distinct regional colour.

This is the place  
 where I was born .1  
 know it  
 well. It is home.

( Ezekiel : After Reading a Prediction)

What gives a poet a sense of belonging to a particular country or region, a sense of being rooted in the soil, is his identification with the particular place and the ethnic group. W.B. Yeats had made it explicit in his *Under Ben Bulbin*:

Manytimes man lives and dies  
 Between his two eternities,  
 that of race and that of soul,  
 And ancient Ireland knew it all.

A poet's identity is not only a private and personal upbringing, his response to landscape, his consciousness of the culture and tradition of the ethnic group with which he identifies himself make up his inimitable identity. Judith Wright Kohli has made a significant observation in this respect :

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 turn to its human figures.

(Basavaraj Naikar2003: 88)

The search for regional and linguistic identity in Indian poetry has become an essential characteristic today. This is a continuation and implementation of cultural decolonization that has inspired India since its independence. It is a celebration of India's pluralism. Texts in the various regional languages that pour out throughout India, and also the Indian English texts that have, as we have seen, by now become specifically and occasionally consciously Indian, are sometimes interdependent and interrelated, at the same time they are a part of the history of the community that has produced them. There is no song of India' says Mahapatra in *Song Of The River*. For no literature can be representative of the cultural locus of the whole of India. Jayanta Mahapatra believes that there are many different Indias. Orissa is one India, Bengal is another, Maharashtra, Kerala, Kashmir all are different Indias. It is easier to identify and judge a poet against the backdrop of his particular locale than to try to place him in the milieu of the entire nation. The very concept of India as a unified geographical territory is not a solid one. The tribal girl Bhanumati

in Bibhutibhusan's Bengali novel *Aranyak* (1938) tells the narrator that she doesn't know where Bharatvarsha is located. The India of Ashoka, that of Akbar, that which the British ruled and that which we now live in are not one and identical. States are constantly being formed and political boundaries renewed. In addition to the instable geo-political boundary, there is diversity in population. Eventually religion and language become the chief factors of communal identity.

Jayanta Mahapatra insists that he should be considered as an Oriya poet who writes in English:

Orissa is my land, my roots are there and my people.  
But my training was in English. I'm comfortable with English so I began writing in English .I didn't write with a western audience in mind or to make a name for myself .I wrote because it was easy for me to write in English. But I still consider myself to be an Oriya poet. (Shormishtha Panja 2001 :26)

Mahapatra's identification with Orissa is sincere and complete. He says:

A man does not mean anything.

But the place.

Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles

into the muddy current,  
a man becomes the place.

(Somewhere, My Man)

Many of his poems bear the unmistakable stamp of Orissa. He refers to 'The noble proud Konaraka of the soul' early in his third volume of poetry. In *A Rain of Rites* we have such poems as *Main Temple Street Puri*, *Dawn at Puri*. In *Waiting* he turns again and again to Orissa. Poems titled *Bhubaneswar*, *Orissa*, *Konaraka*, *Dhaulagiri* crowd the volume. Poems such as *The Temple Road Puri*, *The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore*, *The Captive Air of Chandipur on Sea*, *Rains in Orissa*, *Shapes by the Daya*, *In an Orissa Village*, *Deaths in Orissa* in *Bare Face*, *Watching Tribal Dances in an Orissa Village*, *Living in Orissa*, *Landscape* and *A Hint of Grief* illustrate his preoccupation with Orissa.

Previously known as Udra desh and later as Utkal and Kalinga, Orissa finds mention in the Adiparva, Bhismaparva, Sabhaparva and Banaprava of Mahabharat so also in the conquest of Kama. Kalinga King Srutayu is said to have assisted the Kauravas in Mahabharat. Recorded history of Orissa, however, begins with the great war of Kalinga in 260 BC, where the Magadha King Ashoka had given up violence and accepted Buddhism. Mahapatra records the sufferings of those slain in the war, the sufferings that still ring within him:

the measure of Ashoka's suffering

does not appear enough .The place of his pain peers  
lamentably

from among the pains of the dead.

(Dhaulagiri)

While writing this poem Mahapatra had felt, as he says in the interview with Sumanyu Sathpathy, (Shormistha Panja :31) that he was back in 261B.C. watching the massacre. The memory of his ancestors slaughtered by Ashoka's army on the banks of river Daya haunts him again in *Burden of Waves and Fruit*.

Here

where we discover we don't have to look  
for victories. My hands and eye overwhelm,  
and this scarred land stares up with such hatred  
that it makes one cry out as if under a blow.

(Shapes by the Daya)

Orissa the ruins of Konarak and Puri, the river Daya  
where king Ashoka converted to Buddhism after the  
bloodbath of a pyrrhic victory are eloquent and are  
participants in the racial experience of the poet.

(C.L.L.Jayaprada 1994: 86.)

Mahapatra similarly draws on the myth of Konaraka. The myth of twelve hundred artisans working day and night under a ruthless emperor is accessed with sympathy. Legend goes that a twelve-

year-old boy was finally able to fix the crowning stone of the Sun Temple at Konarak, which twelve hundred artisans after repeated attempts could not. The wonder boy then jumped from the top of the temple and committed suicide to save the name and honour of his father:

as the twelve hundred builders of my hoped -for triumph  
 overcome the humility all along the journey  
 and avidly prepare to claim recognition  
 for that noble, proud Konaraka of the soul.

( Performance)

This racial consciousness continues in *Konaraka*:

and inside me  
 is the boy I found,  
 tracked by stone,  
 the ceremony finished,  
 his thin cry  
 pointing at my life. (Konaraka)

As his racial memory haunts him he takes us to the ancient harbour of Chilika and Chandipur to the cemetery at Balasore.

"You can't separate yourself from history or myth." says Mahapatra.(Panja: 31) Muslim and Maratha invaders had economically despoiled Orissa during the reign of Jahangir. (1605-1627). It was under the rule of Mughals till 1751 and then under

the Marathas till 1803 when the British occupied it. The British later split up Orissa into several parts and merged it with the neighbouring States. In 1905, Bengal was devastatingly divided by the British rulers for, what they said, administrative purposes, into a Hindu West including present day Bihar and Orissa and a predominantly Muslim East including Assam. Hindu-Muslim conflict at once came to the forefront. As a result of a strong and violent agitation the British finally united the East and West Bengal in 1912 but made Bihar and Orissa a separate province merging Bihar with Orissa in 1914. Cuttack, Puri and Balasore now represented Orissa instead of the vast empire of Kalinga of the past. Demands for a separate state emerged and continued until, following the recommendation of Odenail Committee, Orissa gained her statehood on April 1st, 1936. Neighbouring feudatory states and zamindars joined in to make its statehood complete with Gajapati Krishna Chandra Narayan Dev as the first Prime-minister in 1937 and Sir John Austin Haback as the Governor.

Born in 1928 Mahapatra was too young to feel this communal zeal. The Second World War had begun when he was in school. Air base was set up beyond the town, the daily newspaper brought in news of war. The Japanese had advanced into Burma. The defeated British army retreated. The poet's uncle who was in the Indian army was declared lost. The Mahapatra family shared the anguish with many others suffering similar losses in the country. Blackout

was imposed in the town, shelters for air raids were erected. There was a scarcity of the essential commodities and for a time the poet's family like many others had to exist on rice and molasses. What affected him most was the poverty that hit Orissa. Poverty stricken men whimpered and suffered from epileptic fits. There were blind boys and girls with eyes hollowed by pox. There were cripples, threatening lepers and beggars all around the town. All these recur in his poems as images. Even after twenty-five years of Indian Republic, 'The destitutes everywhere' remain his 'sense of guilt.' (The Twentyfifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975)

But he was still young and therefore sought a habitual escape from reality into the world of imagination that seemed to offer him some relief :

...for the boy of fourteen the state of the world is of lesser significance than his personal needs. A moment comes when one has seen enough of all that gloom that one must try to get away from it all; which is what I probably did, burying myself in the world of books - seeking new authors and discovering the nuances of a language I had been taught to love. The romantic worlds of Walter Scott, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Rider Haggard offered me escape enough. (Mahapatra: 140)

What was he escaping from? Was it only the horror the war had left behind? He ran away from his home thrice. The home located at the end of a huddle of houses with clay walls and thatched roof surrounded by tall deodars and palms that filled him with fear; the home where he had a lonely childhood, an abnormal relationship with his mother, with his father mostly away, the insecure eldest having to shoulder odd responsibilities. Mahapatra never seems to have got along with his mother having disagreements every now and then with this

... indefinable mother who merely  
sits around not knowing what to do,

(Song of the Past)

Mahapatra slipped into dreams and self-pity as a means of escape from the unfavourable surroundings:

sitting for hours long on the roof of our house, my hands clasped around my knees, watching the pale moon come in with a handful of light that failed to reach the deep corners of my existence. (Mahapatra: 39)

He absorbed the entire atmosphere, the trees, the darkness, the lonely woman, the moon and later transformed them into dominant metaphors in his poetry:

like the trees around my house settling back into place  
and the moon running white among the clouds.

(Performance).

Childhood occupies an important place in Mahapatra's poetry. Many of his poems are a looking back to the unforgettable past that he tries to reconstruct never in the golden halo of angel infancy, but in a contemplation of what it had actually been.

there is a past which moves over  
the magic slopes and hamlets of the mind,  
whose breath measures the purpose of our lives.

(The Rising)

The uncovering of his childhood exposes old sores and anxieties but seldom offers relief:

as in the man I had to be ,while still a boy,  
in my mother's house when father was away  
Yet what is there lives  
in the secret hollows of the old belief,

( Something Spreading Itself)

"I always feel alone," confesses Mahapatra, " alone when I'm with my family or a part of a crowd. There's a chasm inside which can never be bridged." Says the poet. (Panja 2001: 31)

Mahapatra feels alienated like many other Indian English poets by the choice of the language in which he wrote. With Dom Mores he

shared the troubled and insecure childhood, and like Ezekiel, who belonged to a Bene-Israel family which migrated to India generations back, or like Gieve Patel who was a Parsi, Mahapatra felt that he was somehow alienated from the core of Indian ethos. He was born into a Christian family in a predominantly Hindu locality. The conversion of his grandfather was one of the factors that had affected him like his insecure childhood, and the social milieu.

One of Mahapatra's prized possessions is his grandfather's diary which records the family history of embracing Christianity, a diary that had turned yellow with time when his father handed it over to him.

The yellowed diary's notes whisper in vernacular.

They sound the forgotten posture,

The cramped cry that forces me to hear that voice.

Now I stumble in your black-paged wake.

(Grandfather)

Orissa was struck by a terrible famine in the year 1866. The English, who were the rulers then had made sincere efforts to help the suffering. There was no food available and men starved to death. Hunger made them eat tamarind leaves, unknown roots and tubers. Typhoid and cholera took the shape of an epidemic. Thousands died. There were none to cremate the dead. Jackals

and vultures devoured the corpses. Mahapatra's grandfather, starving to a state of collapse, had managed to stagger into a mercy camp of the Christian missionaries in Cuttack. They gave him life but bargained his religion.

Dead, empty trees stood by the dragging river  
 past your weakened body, flailing against your sleep.  
 You thought of the way the jackals moved, to move.  
 Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle  
 In the cold mean nights of your belly ? Did you see  
 Your own death? Watch it tear at your cries,  
 Break them into fits of hard unnatural laughter?  
 How old were you? Hunted ,you turned coward and ran,  
 the real animal in you plunging through your bone,  
 You left your family behind ,the buried things,  
 the precious clod that praised the quality of a god.

(Ibid)

His grandmother too was similarly fated. A bullock cart carrying twelve children headed for conversion at the same camp. A girl amongst them had escaped and Mahapatra's grandmother was forcibly taken to fill in the place. Mahapatra grew up between two worlds, to use his own phrase from *Old Palaces*, 'in a limbo of things'. The home that followed rigid Christian conventions and the Hindu world outside with its festivals and rituals:

I was at the center of it all; trying to communicate with both, and probably becoming myself incommunicable as a result through the years. (Mahapatra: 142)

Mahapatra was bullied in his school and, sensitive as he was, he suffered from a trauma that had made a deep impression on him making him aloof. The estrangement continued into his university life :

Besides the differences in language, I experienced a huge cultural gap .I also realized painfully that I would have been subjected to unnecessary ridicule from other students in those lodgings had they known I was Christian, (ibid)

But in time, as is usual, a sense of spiritual union grew and the Hindu festivals became, as he says, a part of his university life. He could reiterate with Ramanujan:

I must seek and will find

My particular hell only in my hindu mind.

(Ramanujan: 34)

There is an array of Hindu religious images in his poetry, idols of gods temples, temple bells and priests. It is noteworthy that we do not find so much *of* Christian religious connotations in his poetry. Mahapatra's brother, as the poet says, is a faithful Christian and a leader of a local community. But Mahapatra could

not become one. He has always been 'conscious of his grandfather's cry tearing the air'. (Mahapatra: 142)

Despite his preoccupation with Hinduism as an inseparable part of his life he feels that he has never been accepted into the system. He remains an outsider watching the blind faith, the customs and rituals in a wish to share with them their tradition but often finds himself a misfit amongst the crowd:

Somewhere in this air

a small grief burns at the feet of an ikon.

(Nightfall)

He grows acutely aware of it when it is Christmas. In a poem satirically titled *Brothers* appearing in *Bare Face* Mahapatra records a vain endeavour to bridge the disparate Hindu mind and the Christian mind:

Today no one I know has died in our street;

when I go out I will meet the same people again

and act with the same polite formality

as we did when they first spoke to me ;

the carefully kept distance between us

starts shaking its head.

That and a little more is what I know.

Or what I think I know.

Can't one give himself to a different faith

if only he has faith in himself and his own?

I wonder if I am naive enough for that  
 Our rites have become burdens  
 given to us like curses upon our souls,  
 and hope has become God, difficult to see.  
 But it is Christmas and there in the street  
 are children so young they must dream of it .

The assassination of Gandhi on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948 had imparted a tragic glory to the life of this undaunted leader. It turned into an image of a lonely hero glorious in tragic struggle whose representation urged a guilt of patricide. The incident stimulated hundreds of elegies and dirges in prose and verse like those of Dinu Bhai Pant's, Buddhihari Singh Ramkar's or Harivanshrai Bacchan's and Ananta Patnaik's. Jibanananda Das registers this transformation:

Look  
 how an old man  
 travels forward  
 from one road to the other  
 from the edge of time  
 to the heart of time  
 to discover the Truth.

(Jibanananda Das :Satti Tatar Timir )

Mahapatra had his share in the emotional outburst that had flooded the country, 'Sve have burst open his blood', he laments.

(Close the Sky, Ten by Ten). He creates his own icon of Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi as a lonely old man, an abandoned leader is one of the important images that recur in Mahapatra:

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (Eliot 18-25)

In the interview with Sumanyu Satpathy, Mahapatra says that his poetic psyche is composed of the strong oral tradition imbibed from Oriya poetry. His rhythm is not an English rhythm but that which he has absorbed from Oriya songs. The rhythm, he says, exists in his blood. The use of refrain and repetition of a word or a phrase that was the technique of the oral tradition, however, has few instances in Mahapatra as in :

My love of gold nose-rings and laughing earrings,  
of towering ruins of stone panting in the dark,  
of loyal lions guarding the diamond navels of shrines,  
of amber breasts and secret armpits  
of cries and the soft of thighs,  
and of the old emptiness of my own destiny;

(Relationship :18)

or in *Summer Afternoons* :

It is my own presence today  
that hardens  
the trees and their fruit,  
the light of another year  
that splinters on the hard floor of this year,  
the light in the eyes of children  
that haunts the broken toys in their sleep.

He rarely uses this well known technique, used by the writers of Psalms and later revived by the Liverpool Poets in the 1960s, to impart a bardic quality to his lines. His is rather an incessant experimentation with form, diction, syntax and punctuation and a turning on unexpected epithets and oxymoron.

Following Mahapatra's avowal a little probing into Oriya poetic tradition will perhaps reveal the influences that contoured his poetic mind.

The oral tradition that Mahapatra speaks of as the origin of Oriya poetry, as that of Bengali and Assamese, can be traced back to the Charya songs. Charya songs were the religious verses of Sahajasidhas, a sect of Mahayana Buddhism. The earliest Oriya literature to be traced is the 12<sup>th</sup> century palm- leaf chronicles of Jagganath temple. The Jagganath cult is unique to Orissa and Mahapatra's poetry sometimes refers to 'the limbless One/ at Puri' (A Summer Night), to the Hindu pilgrimage where the widows wish to be cremated (Dawn at Puri), and to the temple with 'huge doors'. (The Temple Road, Puri)

In Bengal the poems of Jayadev steadily developed towards a doctrine of faith and love towards a personal deity in human form. Poet Jayadev, whose Sanskrit work *Geetgovinda* had long influenced Bengali literature, is often supposed to be an Oriya himself, born in a district of Puri. After Charya pada period many of the texts are not traceable except those of Chautishas and Sisurveda. The fifth century saw the appearance of a multi-volume epic, the Oriya *Mahabharat* by Sarala Das. After Sarala Das there was a steady evolution of religious songs variously known as Bhajana, Janana, Studi, Guhari, ali, prathana, kirtan etc. comparable to padavali and baul songs of Bengal. Oriya literature upto 1500 AD mainly consisted of religious poems and prose pieces with gods and goddesses as their main theme. The Jagannatha Dasa Period that stretches till the year 1700 begins

with the writings of Shri Chaitanya whose Vaishnava influence brought in a new advancement in Oriya literature. Balarama Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, Yasovanta, Ananta and Acyutananda were its main exponents. The composers of this period mainly translated, modified, or replicated Sanskrit literature. The two poets Radhanath Roy and Madhusudan Rao along with the novelist Fakir Mohan Senapati are credited with the birth of modern Oriya literature. Just as Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) is the classic progenitor of the modern Bengali poetry in the conventional sense, Radhanath Roy (1848-1908) is customarily regarded as the first modern Oriya poet. Madhusudan Rao added another thread to this modernity. His was a deep and personal voice in quest of spiritual union with the divine. Between the period from Radhanath and Madhusudan upto the thirties and the forties two eloquent literary groups came into existence: the Sabujas and the Satyabadis. The Satyabadi group, including Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das and Godabarish Mishra was founded on nationalism. They tried to voice the national tradition by a kind of cultural renaissance. They sought to restore the legends, the myths and ballads, the folk-tales that were fundamental to the Oriya social tradition in a kind of Celtic revival. As it happens with all patriotic poetry, their vision remained limited by nationalism. The Oriya Sabuja poetry (Baikunthanath Patnaik) \was to a great extent poor shadow of Tagore's mysticism' (Sitakant:3).

Satchidananda Rautroy was the precursor of 'neo-modernity' in Oriya poetry. A romantic revolutionary, he experimented with the variety of poetic techniques. As Mahapatra has acknowledged, no major Oriya poet remains wholly uninfluenced by Rautroy. Nutan Kabita published by Guruprasad Mohanty and Bhanuji Rao (1955) created a literary sensation. The school of poetry of Sochi Rautroy consisted of poets like Sitakant, Soubhagya, Rajendra, Dipak Mishra, Harihar Mishra, Haraprasad Das, Kamalakant Lenka, J. P. Das, Pratibha Satpathy, Sourindra Barik, who have all contributed to Oriya poetry, a tradition that Mahapatra claims to have absorbed. Jayanta Mahapatra, having turned bi-lingual, falls amongst the emergent voices of Oriya poetry.

We might find in Mahapatra's English poems a little of the folk qualities of Sarala Das. He might have adopted from Oriya literature the interest in the landscape of Orissa, its culture, tradition and the unique Jagganth cult. But despite his regional predisposition there is much that speaks of English influence in him.

Mahapatra was himself fascinated by the English language. But the beginnings of his love for English had stemmed from a personal reason. He studied in Stewart European school run by a British missionary. He suffered from an inferiority complex as the other students came to school in horse carriages and motorcars.

The Mahapatras were underprivileged. When he was regularly harassed by the other students in school for being meek and timid and felt the lumber of insecure lonely childhood at home, his British headmaster was the only one to raise him to the platform of commendation. Mahapatra excelled in studies. "But was it at this point in my life that my love and respect for all things English began to grow?" Mahapatra reflects in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography*, "Or was it a part of my conditioning?" (Mahapatra: 137)

Srinivasa Iyenger tells us that tradition is infused into individual consciousness:

No true poet can escape tradition. For all our yesterdays are involved in the poet's deeper consciousness and no true poet can escape the pressure of the present for he is in it and of it and the best he can do is to relate the immediate present to the living past... (Iyenger 2002: 641-42)

Jayanata Mahapatra was aware of the experimental poetry that began in the pens of Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Mehrotra, Kolatkar, Nandy, Chitre and other such poets, some of whom he had translated. But, as Bruce King points out : "... it is less likely that there was a direct influence rather than a parallel evolution." (King 2004:163)

When we speak of modernism we do not constrain it to a single movement in a single field. It is rather the sum total of all the movements in arts and literature that brings in the radical modernist stance. Among the significant movements are Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism.

Charles Baudlaire's *Les Fleurs du Mai* (1857) is sometimes considered as the first specimen of modern poetry. Some however prefer to trace it to Edgar Allen Poe and even to Walt Whitman. Paul Verlaine was one of the first to declare that the profound originality of Charles Baudlaire is to represent effectively and essentially the modern man. Baudlaire whom T.S. Eliot has called 'the greatest exemplar of modern poetry in any language', was a poet of the city. He does not describe city in his poems glorifying its sights and sounds. The prostitutes, demons, robbers, swindlers, beggars, and other urban types parade through his poems. The description of urban scenes with their bleak realities and characters became a prototype of the modernist ethos with Baudlaire:

From the chimney here and there smoke curled above  
The harlots, with mascars around their eyes  
Slept open-mouthed, in silly sluggishness;  
The beggar-women, dragging scraggy breasts,

Blew on their coals and hands, against the frost.

( Baudlaire: The Crepscule du matin, Les Fleurs du Mai)

Mahapatra, who did not remain uninfluenced by the movements that attempted to replace and redefine human existence under post-war changed conditions, has a pageant of the urban types in many of his poems :

Neighbours: the newly -rich silversmith, the vegetable- seller  
a pasty-faced schoolteacher. And Kamala, the three-rupee -  
whore

from my mother's remote village with an old, hard tradition.

(A Father's Hours XIV)

Or,

... the eyes of youth whose fears

lurch about the doorways of their homes.

The prostitutes are younger this year:

At the police station they're careless to give reasons

For being what they are.

And the older women careful enough not to show their years.

(A Father's Hours II)

This city where we hear the hissing of the kitchen, the screech of the playhouse, the swindlers, sluts, robbers and hordes, is sometimes interpretive of Baudelaire's mental process:

Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood

Nothing has budged! New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings,

Old neighbourhoods are allegorical for me

And my dear memories are heavier than stone.

(Baudlaire: The Swan)

Mahapatra's landscape too is interpretive of his mood often helping him to alleviate his sufferings:

I would forget the causes of suffering, mine and others,

To justify my evening's spirit,

(Evening)

In the city a poet lives his precocious existence in a physical listlessness and mental languor. Loneliness is his punishment for an unknown sin. Amongst the other decisive books that radically changed the modern man's attitude to life and interpretation of nature are Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*' (1905), Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Baudlaire's *Les Fleurs du Mai* is the archetype of modern consciousness that closes within it the awareness of urban anguish. In his *Preface* Baudlaire has documented the sinfulness of human condition, unhesitatingly accepting the darker side of the human nature :

Folly and error, sin and avarice

Work on our bodies, occupy our thoughts.

(Preface: Les Fleurs du Mai)

Mahapatra admits that to write realistic poetry, cultivating the relationship between the social and the personal, results in a self-consciousness that involves the 'loss of moral poise'. (King:86) This 'moral poise' was something that was disregarded as the modern poets accepted the darker side of human nature:

In my dreams I fondle Kamala's brazen breasts

(A Father's Hours XV)

Jean Moreas (1856-1910) published his manifesto of symbolism in *La Figaro* in September, 1886. The major exponents of this movement were Charles Baudlaire, Stephen Mallrame, Paul Verlaine and Jean Arthur Rimbaud. Its influence was felt in England in the works of W.B.Yeats and T.S. Eliot who in turn influenced much of modern Indian poetry. The Imagist movement, which is often regarded as an advance on French Symbolism, began in England in the first quarter of twentieth century under the leadership of Ezra Pound (1885-1972). The others involved were T.E.Hulme (1883-1917) Wyndham Lewis, Amy Lowell (1874-1925), Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961) and Harriet Monroe (1860-1936). An Imagist poetry sought to use the image as the center of the poetic expression, seizing the image in its keen and bare essence. Such a poem tends to be short, with lines of short length, avoiding abstractions and treating images with hard and clear precision.

Some of Mahapatra's poems like *Indian Summer Poem*, *A Missing Person* and *Dawn at Puri* are Imagist poetry. *Indian Summer Poem* is a short lyric with a succession of vivid and concrete pictures that do not help to develop any specific theme. Only the title of the poem gives us a clue to the theme that Mahapatra is describing an Indian summer afternoon. We are expected visualize the Indian summer on the basis of these cluster of images:

Crocodiles move into deeper waters.

Mornings of heated middens  
smoke under the sun.

The good wife  
lies in my bed  
through the long afternoon;

(A Rain of Rites)

*Dawn at Puri* depicts a scene on the sandy beach at Puri with a similar string of images:

Endless crow noises  
A skull on the holy sands  
tilts its empty country towards hunger.  
White -clad widowed women  
past the centers of their lives  
are waiting to enter the Great Temple.

(Ibid)

In *A Missing Person*, there is a woman placed in front of the mirror with a burning oil lamp in her hand. The flame quivers. What bewilders the readers is that this lady with the lamp cannot see her reflection in the mirror. We are told that these 'yellow drunken' flames know where her lonely body hides. The successive images make it an Imagist poem but we also find in the poem distinct influences of Surrealism.

The two decades that separated the World Wars (1920s and 1930s) saw the rise of Surrealism as a movement in art and literature in Europe. The term first used by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) was 'super-realism' meaning a world of connotations that transcends the mundane world. Andre Breton's first manifesto of Surrealism (1924) recommended that the mind be liberated from the chain of logic and reason.

That Mahapatra was specially influenced by surrealism is evident in the essay published in *The Literary Criterion* (xv, no, 1,1980, pg.27—36). In the essay he speaks of a poet's mental landscape, a world made of his personal desires and anguish, of his secret allusions, a world that is spaced by the poet's personal life with 'a constantly changing alignment between dream and reality '. What he says is in tune with the Andre Breton's Surrealist manifesto (A lecture given in Brussels on 1st June 1934 at a public meeting organized by the Belgian Surrealists, and issued as a pamphlet

immediately afterwards). Breton expounded in her speech that a great poem takes us aboard on a sort of journey or a voyage through symbols and allusions, and takes us beyond the human conditions.

The associational poetry with its emphasis on guilt, sex, ambition, childhood memories, amorous experiences was a component of the Confessional poetry began in America during the early 1950s. The confessional mode is found in Ezekiel's poetry who constantly alluded to his personal life. Kamala Das wrote self-revelatory confessional poems. Recent poets like de Souza, Shetty and Silgado are skillful craftsmen composing poems with suggestive confessional understatements. Strongly allied to the confessional mode is the kind of obscure and surreal poetry that Mahapatra writes. Possibly the influence of the 'open field' poetry of Robert Bly and James Wright has strong hold on him. Mahapatra sometimes begins with an observation of the natural world that rapidly gives way to obscure personal associations of guilt, failure, childhood memories, hope and desires that finds fulfillment in the private visionary world. Although this kind of poetry involves lesser self-revelations than the confessional mode, it displays similar fluctuation of moods. It turns on unanticipated imagery that sometimes results in the difficulty that Mahapatra readers confront. It appears to be attending to the self more than the confessional mode does, using fantasy to explore the areas of the

self that men generally repress or are reluctant to display.

Mahapatra acknowledges the intricacy his readers faced:

When the 'confessional' poetry of the sixties in America (markedly) gave way to a new 'surrealism' it evidenced a new ambiguity—not what the lay or common reader could follow, not something he had come to regard as poetry through the years. Generally speaking, today's poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a whole, leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning or argument from them. Thus the reader is left to find out his own meaning from the poem; this, I admit painfully, is true of much of the poetry I have written. If contemporary life is no longer what it was, twenty-five years back, can one expect the same content, the same form, the same substance from contemporary poems? (King 2004: 86)

Besides the experimentation, frankness, the sense of immediacy and self-revelation apparent in modern Indian English poetry it shows a growing interest in the long poem. The long form is an attempt to overcome the isolated fragmented vision of the short poems, to come closer to the experience of reading classical epic. R. Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*, records the alienation and desire for regeneration into cultural tradition. Kolatkar's *Jejuri*

gives an account of the incongruity between legend and actuality. Daruwalla's *The Waterfront* sequence records the poet's desire of reunion with tradition from which he feels alienated. Mahapatra has also tried his hand at the long form in *Relationship* that won him Sahitya Akademi Annual award in 1981. Mahapatra here combines history, myth and vision to achieve something beyond the scrappy experiences. Orissa's historic past is evoked with a sense of pride that blends with the myths of the land that have, through the generations, served to shape the lives of its people. He turns to his nautical ancestors who brought glory to the state, to Cuttack, which has the Barabati Fort, to the temples where the important gods and goddesses are worshipped and to the myth of the sun temple that is the seat of the sun god. But soon a sense of reality overrides the poet as he moves away from these stories of the past to the contemporary anguish of modern man.

Romanticism had placed the personality of the poet at the core of poetry. T.S. Eliot insisted on the surrender of the poet's individuality to tradition and the need for depersonalization. Many of the poems of the Romantic tradition invited the reader to identify the protagonist with the poet himself as in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805; revised 1850) or in Keat's *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819). One of the issues that contemporary criticism is concerned with, is the identification of the voice that speaks in the poems, or more precisely, the relationship between the empirical self of the author

and the self that appears as the speaking voice in the work, that is, the persona. In Mahapatra the protagonist can usually be identified with the poet. Besides, he often retreats into his habitual romantic sadness and often unconsciously echoes Keats, Shelley or even Eliot.

I know the wind must sway the leaves again  
 The throat of the bird in that invisible tree  
 Must choke with the callings of my life

(A Father's Hours:IV)

The lines distantly echo Keats' *To a Nightingale*. Here the poet remains chorded with life while his father becomes a sod. Similarly, we are strongly reminded of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* when we read in *Assassins*:

Like huge banyan trees, standing on the sides of the road  
 Before daybreak, like ghosts, goaded by the invisible wind,  
 Like dark figures rising slowly from under  
 Dead leaves or tired newspapers.

Ajit Khullar points out that Eliotian images specifically pervades Mahapatra's lines on loneliness:

...on an October afternoon when he sees 'the secret coves on the naked beach/charred by old fires and littered with picnic paper and empty bottles.' Such images as 'a galvanometer needle/between the zero and the hundred of gloom' and 'shameless fevers whose

viruses tear the skin like paper' are all Eliotian. (Ajit Khullar 2001:195)

Although Mahapatra's poetic persona is usually at the center of the poem he does not meddle with the incidents or the scenes described, but maintains the stance of the distanced and estranged spectator. However, he is never the invisible playful persona that we have come to associate with post-modernist authors. Like a modernist poet his prime focus is on the subjective memory and the inner self rather than on the materialistic surroundings, but he shares the contemporary concern for the predicament of modern man. Meherotra's anti-art and iconoclastic leanings have often led to contentless writings. Mahapatra's poetry is never contentless. He can say with Joshi's Billy Biswas that the meaning of life lies not 'in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark messy labyrinths of the soul that languish for ever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun.'(Arun Joshi: 2)

Mahapatra's poetry reveals a desperate quest for meaning in the individual stipulation.