

Classic Poetry Series

Jayanta Mahapatra
- poems -

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Jayanta Mahapatra(22 October 1928 -)

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the best known Indian English poets. Perhaps any discussion on Indian English Poetry is incomplete without reference to his poetical works. Physicist, bilingual poet and essayist, Jayanta Mahapatra holds the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award (1981) for Relationship. In 2009 he was awarded by Government of India with "Padmashree Award", country's most prestigious award for civilian citizen for his out standing contribution to the field of literature.

 Birth and Early Life

Jayanta Mahapatra, born on 22 October 1928 in Cuttack (India), belongs to a lower middle-class family. He had his early education at Stewart school, Cuttack . After a first class Master's Degree in Physics, he joined as a teacher in 1949 and served in different Government colleges of Orissa.□

 Later Life

All his working life, he taught physics at different colleges in Orissa. He retired in 1986. Mahapatra has authored 18 books of poems. He started writing poetry at the age of thirty-eight, quite late by normal standards. Mahapatra's tryst with the muse came rather late in life. He published his first poems in his early 40s. The publication of his first book of poems, Svayamvara and Other Poems, in 1971 was followed by the publication of Close the Sky, Ten By Ten.

His collections of poems include A Rain of Rites, Life Signs and A Whiteness of Bone. One of Mahapatra's better remembered works is the long poem Relationship, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1981. He is the first Indian English Poet to receive the honor. Besides being one of the most popular Indian poets of his generation, Mahapatra was also part of the trio of poets who laid the foundations of modern Indian English Poetry. He shared a special bond with A. K. Ramanujan, one the finest poets in the IEP tradition. Mahapatra is also different in not being a product of the Bombay school of poets. Over time, he has managed to carve a quiet, tranquil poetic voice of his own-- distinctly different from those of his contemporaries. His wordy lyricism combined with authentic Indian themes puts him in a league of his own.

His recent poetry volumes include Shadow Space, Bare Face and Random Descent. Besides poetry, he has experimented widely with myriad forms of prose. His lone published book of prose remains The Green Gardener, a collection

of short stories. A distinguished editor, Jayanta Mahapatra has been bringing out, for many years, a literary magazine, Chandrabhaga , from Cuttack . The magazine is named after Chandrabhaga, a prominent but dried-up river in Orissa.

 Vision of Poetry

"To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and my end..." declared the poet in his Award-receiving speech at the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

The clue to understand Mahapatra's poetry is given by the poet himself:

"My poems deal with the life within myself where the mind tries to find a sort of coherence from the mass of things in the world outside it."

 Awards

Second Prize International Who's Who in Poetry, London, 1970.

Jacob Glatstein Memorial Award Poetry, Chicago, 1975.

Visiting Writer International Writing Program, Iowa City 1976-77.

Cultural Award Visitor, Australia, 1978.

Japan Foundation Visitor's Award, Japan, 1980.

Sahitya Academy Award National Academy of Letters, New Delhi, 1981.

Invited Poet Asian Poets Conference, Tokyo, Japan, 1984.

Indo-Soviet Cultural Exchange Writer, USSR, 1985.

Resident Writer Centro Culturale della Fondazione Rockefeller, Bellagio, Italy, 1986.

Invited Poet University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1988.

Singapore Festival of Arts, Singapore. 1988.

New Literatures in English Conference, Justus-Liebig-Universitat, Giessen, West Germany, 1989

ACLALS Silver Jubilee Conference, Canterbury, England, 1989.

First Prize Scottish International Open Poetry Competition, 1990.

Invited Poet Poetry International, The South Bank Centre, London, England, 1992.

Cuirt International Poetry Festival, Galway, Ireland, 1992.

EI Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico. 1994

Mingei International Museum of World Folk Art, La Jolla, USA. 1994.

Gangadhar National Award For Poetry, Sambalpur University, 1994

Ramakrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award, 1994, New Delhi.

Vaikom Mohammad Basheer Chair Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 1996-

97.

Invited Poet ACLALS Conference, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1998.

Awarded Honorary Degree Doctor of Literature, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 2006.

Invited Poet Weltklang Poetry Festival, Berlin, Germany, 2006.

Bishuva Award Prajatantra Prachara Samiti, Cuttack, 2007.

Padma Shree Award India's Padma Shree Award, 2009.

SAARC Literary Award, New Delhi, 2010

 Poetry Readings

 Outside India

University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1976

University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, 1976

University of the South, Sewanee, 1976

East West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1976

Adelaide Festival of Arts, Adelaide, 1978

P.E.N. Centre, Sydney, 1978

Australian National University, Canberra, 1978

International Poets Conference, Tokyo, 1980

Asian Poets Conference, Tokyo, 1984

Aoyama University, Tokyo, 1984

Sapporo University, Sapporo, 1984

Writers Union, Moscow, Leningrad & Lvov, USSR, 1985

Singapore Festival of Arts, Singapore, 1988

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1988

University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1988

Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, 1988

University of the Philippines, Manila City, 1988

Museong Kalinangang Pilipino, Manila, 1988

Irish Writers Centre, Dublin, Ireland, 1992

Sligo Arts Centre, The Grammar School, Sligo, 1992

The Guild Hall, Derry, 1992

WEA, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Hexham and Durham, 1992

The South Bank Centre, London, 1992

Universities of Hull and Leeds (UK), 1992

The Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado, 1994

Instituto de Cultura de Campeche, Mexico, 1994

Instituto de Cultura de Puebla, Mexico, 1994

Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, USA, 1995

Hunter College, New York, USA, 1995

University of the South, Sewanee, USA, 1995
Writers Forum, De Kalb College, Atlanta, USA, 1995
Writers Forum, St. Andrews College, Laurinburg, USA, 1995
British Council, Kandy, 1998
Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo, 1998

** In India**

Andhra University, University of Jadavpur, Calcutta University, University of Delhi, Osmania University, The Poetry Centre - Hyderabad, Visva-Bharati - Santiniketan, North East Hill University - Shillong, Tezpur University - IIT Guwahati, India International Centre - New Delhi, Bharat Bhavan - Bhopal, University of Lucknow, DAV College - Kanpur, Arts, Science & Commerce College - Durg.

A Grey Haze Over the Ricefields

A grey haze over the ricefields.
The black cow grazing with her new-born calf,
long-legged, unsteady—
or trucks going past the high road:
such things only claim
that I am looking out in search of memory,
not death. Those little kisses on our cheeks
my long-dead grandmother gave me, or
the soft dampness of my tears when
my mother did not notice me
from beyond the closed door of her youth.

Today the dangling thread stops half-way down,
where my hands cannot touch it.
It's not that I wait for judgment.
But at times I see a shadow
move slowly over these, a shadow freed
from the past and from the future,
that contains the footsteps of that childhood
so light I can only think of squirrels
slipping in and out of the mango trees.

Jayanta Mahapatra

A Missing Person

In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror

waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep

In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides

Jayanta Mahapatra

A Rain Of Rites

Sometims a rain comes
slowly across the sky, that turns
upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
before it reaches its objective.

The rain I have known and traded all this life
is thrown like kelp on the beach.
Like some shape of conscience I cannot look at,
a malignant purpose is a nun's eye.

Who was the last man on earth,
to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face? [?]
Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours
where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers.

Which still, stale air sits on an angel's wings?
What holds my rain so it's hard to overcome?

Jayanta Mahapatra

A Summer Poem

Over the sougning of the sombre wind
priests chant louder than ever;
the mouth of India opens.

Crocodiles move into deeper waters.

Mornings of heated middens
smoke under the sun.

The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon;
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres.

[Note: midden = dunghill]

Jayanta Mahapatra

Ash

The substance that stirs in my palm
could well be a dead man; no need
to show surprise at the dizzy acts of wind.
My old father sitting uncertainly three feet away

is the slow cloud against the sky:
so my heart's beating makes of me a survivor
over here where the sun quietly sets.
The ways of freeing myself:

the glittering flowers, the immensity of rain for example,
which were limited to promises once
have had the lie to themselves. And the wind,
that had made simple revelation in the leaves,

plays upon the ascetic-faced vision of waters;
and without thinking
something makes me keep close to the walls
as though I was afraid of that justice in the shadows.

Now the world passes into my eye:
the birds flutter toward rest around the tree,
the clock jerks each memory towards
the present to become a past, floating away
like ash, over the bank.

My own stirrings like the wind's
keep hoping for the solace that would be me
in my father's eyes
to pour the good years back on my;

the dead man who licks my palms
is more likely to encourage my dark intolerance
rather than turn me
toward some strangely solemn charade:

the dumb order of the myth
lined up in the life-field,
the unconcerned wind perhaps truer than the rest,

rustling the empty, bodiless grains.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Dawn At Puri

Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
It's its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed Women
Past the centers 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 faint early light catches
Faded, 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

Jayanta Mahapatra

Deaths in Orissa

Faces of tree-bark and grief
hang against God's hand in the world
that cannot lift itself up to help.
In the corners of women's eyes
the rainbow breaks against the sunrise.

Nothing but the paddy's twisted throat
exposed on the crippled bleak earth,
nothing but impotence in lowered eyes,
nothing but the tightening of the muscles
in Bhagyabati's neck which her outcaste mother
would herself have liked to throttle to death,
nothing but the cries of shriveled women
cracking against the bloodied altar of Man,
nothing but the moment of fear
when they need a God who can do them some good.

Oh I am a poet who barks like a dog.
Open the window, I say, so I can breathe.
Let not my memory be like a tiger in ambush.
But there is this dangerously alive body
and only a baton or knife can tear it apart.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Dhauri

Afterwards when the wars of Kalinga were over,
the fallow fields of Dhauri
hid the blood-spilt butchered bodies. [originally 'red-smearred voiceless bodies']

As the earth
burrowed into their dead hunger
with its merciless worms, [was 'tortured worms']
guided the foxes to their limp genitals.

Years later, the evening wind,
trembling the glazed waters of the River Daya,
keens in the rock edicts the vain word,
like the voiceless cicadas of night: [was 'shuttered silence, an air:']

the measure of Ashoka's suffering
does not appear enough.
The place of his pain peers lamentably
from among the pains of the dead.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Freedom

At times, as I watch,
it seems as though my country's body
floats down somewhere on the river.

Left alone, I grow into
a half-disembodied bamboo,
its lower part sunk
into itself on the bank.

Here, old widows and dying men
cherish their freedom,
bowing time after time in obstinate prayers.

While children scream
with this desire for freedom
to transform the world
without even laying hands on it.

In my blindness, at times I fear
I'd wander back to either of them.
In order for me not to lose face,
it is necessary for me to be alone.

Not to meet the woman and her child
in that remote village in the hills
who never had even a little rice
for their one daily meal these fifty years.

And not to see the uncaught, bloodied light
of sunsets cling to the tall white columns
of Parliament House.

In the new temple man has built nearby,
the priest is the one who knows freedom,
while God hides in the dark like an alien.

And each day I keep looking for the light
shadows find excuses to keep.

Trying to find the only freedom I know,
the freedom of the body when it's alone.

The freedom of the silent shale, the moonless coal,
the beds of streams of the sleeping god.

I keep the ashes away,
try not to wear them on my forehead.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Genesis

The apple sits on an old examination bed
in the world's foyer.

The stony silence of the men staring hard
crosses the line of sanity.

Why do I think of this,
drowning in the depth of lost time?

Maybe nothing came from anything,
a long drawn-out yawn from nowhere.

Maybe my mother's soul set the apple free,
making it roll down the road.

And I look for the same sense of stillness,
hoping it will heal me.

The myth has its head stuck in the fork of a tree.
And the spirits of knowledge won't let it pass.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Grandfather

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 back in your black-paged wake.

No uneasy stir of cloud
darkened the white skies of your day; the silence
of dust grazed in the long afterniin sun, ruling
the cracked fallow earth, ate into the laughter of your flesh.

For you it was the hardest question of all.
Dead, empty tress 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 unnatural laughter?

How old were you? Hunted, you turned coward and ran,
the real animal in you plunigng through your bone.
You left your family behind, the buried things,
the precious clod that praised the quality of a god.

The impersihable that swung your broken body,
turned it inside out? What did faith matter?
What Hindu world so ancient and true for you to hold?
Uneasily you dreamed toward the center of your web.

The separate life let you survive, while perhaps
the one you left wept in the blur of your heart.
Now in a night of sleep and taunting rain
My son and I speak of that famine nameless as snow.

A conscience of years is between us. He is young.
The whirls of glory are breaking down for him before me.
Does he think of the past as a loss we have lived, our own?
Out of silence we look back now at what we do not know.

There is a dawn waiting beside us, whose signs
are a hundred odd years away from you, Grandfather.
You are an invisible piece on a board
Whose move has made our children grow, to know us,

carrying us deep where our voices lapse into silence.
We wish we knew you more.
We wish we knew what it was to be, against dying,
to know the dignity

that had to be earned dangerously,
your last chance that was blindly terrifying, so unfair.
We wish we had not to wake up with our smiles
in the middle of some social order.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Her Hand

The little girl's hand is made of darkness
How will I hold it?

The streetlamps hang like decapitated heads
Blood opens that terrible door between us

The wide mouth of the country is clamped in pain
while its body writhes on its bed of nails

This little girl has just her raped body
for me to reach her

The weight of my guilt is unable
to overcome my resistance to hug her

Jayanta Mahapatra

Hunger

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.
The fisherman said: Will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

I followed him across the sprawling sands,
my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.
Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in.
Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed at the froth
his old nets had only dragged up from the seas.

In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like a wound.
The wind was I, and the days and nights before.
Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the shack
an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls.
Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind.

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

Jayanta Mahapatra

Main Temple Street

Children, brown as earth, continue to laugh away
at cripples and mating mongrels.
Nobody ever bothers about them.

The temple points to unending rhythm.

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.

Injuries drowsy with the heat.

And that sky there,
claimed by inviolable authority,
hanging on to its crutches of silence.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Myth

Years drift sluggishly through the air,
is a chanting, the long years, an incense.
Face upon face returns to the barbed horizons
of the foggy temple; here lies
a crumpled leaf, a filthy scarlet flower
out of placeless pasts, on the motionless stairs.

Old brassy bells

moulded by memories, dark, unfulfilled,
to make the year come back again
a recurring prayer.

The stairs seem endless,

lifelong,

and those peaks too, Annapurna, Dhaulagiri;
uncertain, impressive as gods.

I dare not go

into the dark, dank sanctum
where the myth shifts
swiftly from hand to hand, eye to eye.

The dried, sacrificed

flowers smile at me. I have become;

a diamond in my eye.

Vague grieving years pit against the distant peaks
like a dying butterfly

as a bearded, saffron-robed

man asks me, firmly:

Are you a Hindoo?

Jayanta Mahapatra

Of that Love

Of that love, of that mile
walked together in the rain,
only a weariness remains.

I am that stranger now
my mirror holds to me;
the moment's silence
hardly moves across the glass.
I pity myself in another's guise.

And no one's back here, no one
I can recognize, and from my side
I see nothing. Years have passed
since I sat with you, watching
the sky grow lonelier with cloudlessness,
waiting for your body to make it lived in.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Sanskrit

Awaken them; they are knobs of sound
that seem to melt and crumple up
like some jellyfish of tropical seas,
torn from sleep with a hand lined by prophecies.
Listen hard; their male, gaunt world sprawls the page
like rows of tree trunks reeking in the smoke
of ages, the branches glazed and dead
as though longing to make up with the sky,
but having lost touch with themselves
were unable to find themselves, hold meaning.

And yet, down the steps into the water at Varanasi,
where the lifeless bodies seem to grow human,
the shaggy heads of word-buds move back and forth
between the harsh castanets of the rain
and the noiseless feathers of summer -
aware that their syllables' overwhelming silence
would not escape the hearers now, and which
must remain that mysterious divine path
guarded by drifts of queer, quivering banyans:
a language of clogs over cobbles, casting
its uncertain spell, trembling sadly into mist.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Sickles

Dust seems in no hurry now, sailing
the air. A ten-year-old girl
runs after her home-bound cows
through the ingenious sunset hour,
glancing briefly as we pass by
but gives no sign that she has seen us.

The day's last light
surprises us, leaving everyone
suddenly on an endless, desolate shore.
And a small desire to make love then.
Women returning home from fields of ripe grain
carry sickles in their tired hands.
The cut paddies cling to their quiet perches.

How little I understand myself,
among children who are mothers already
before the floods come, wetting the reeds on the shore;
among women desired, even as we are
indifferent to happenings by which they are possessed.

How the sickles shimmer with the reds of sunset
hidden in the twilight of their veins

Jayanta Mahapatra

Summer

Not yet.
Under the mango tree
The cold ash of a deserted fire.

Who needs the future?

A ten-year-old girl
combs her mother's hair,
where crows of rivalries
are quietly nesting.

The home will never
be hers.

In a corner of her mind
a living green mango
drops softly to earth.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Taste For Tomorrow

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 streets end
the crowds thronging the temple door:
a huge holy flower
swaying in the wind of greater reasons.

Jayanta Mahapatra

The Captive Air Of Chandipur-On-Sea

Day after day the drunk sea at Chandipur
spits out the gauze wings of shells along the beach
and rumples the thin air behind the sands.
Who can tell of the songs of this sea that go on
to baffle and double the space around our lives?
Or of smells paralysed through the centuries,
of deltas hard and white that stretched once
to lure the feet of women bidding their men goodbye?
Or of salt and light that dark and provocative eyes
demanded, their shoulders drooping like lotuses
in the noonday sun?

And what is it now that scatters the tide
in the shadow of this proud watercourse?
The ridicule of the dead?
Sussurant sails still whisper
legends on the horizon: who are you,
occupant of the silent sigh of the conch?
The ground seems only a memory now, a torn breath,
and as we wait for the tide to flood the mudflats
the song that reaches our ears is just our own.
The cries of fishermen come drifting through the spray,
music of what the world has lost.

Jayanta Mahapatra

The Indian Way

The long, dying silence of the rain
over the hills
opens one's touch,
a feeling for the soul's substance,
as for the opal neck
spiralling the inside of a shell.

We keep calm; the voices move.
Buy you the morning's lotus.

We would return again and again
to the movement
that is neither forward nor backward,
making us
stop moving, without regret.

You know:
I will not touch you, like _that
until our wedding night.

Jayanta Mahapatra

The Moon Moments

The faint starlight rolls restlessly on the mat.

Those women talking outside have clouds passing across their eyes.

Always there is a moon that is taking me somewhere.

Why does one room invariably lead into other room?

We, opening in time our vague doors,

convinced that our minds lead to something never allowed before,

sit down hurt under the trees, feeding it simply because

it is there, as the wind does, blowing against the tree.

Yet time is not clairvoyant,

and if it has the answer to our lives, proud

in its possession of that potential which can change our natures,

beating the visions of childhood out of us,

the socialism and the love,

until we remain awkwardly swung to the great north of honour.

What humility is that which will not let me reveal the real?

What shameful secret lies hidden in the shadows of my moon?

All these years; our demands no longer hurt our eyes.

How can I stop the life I lead within myself-

The startled, pleading question in my hands lying in my lap

while the gods go by, triumphant, in the sacked city at midnight?

Jayanta Mahapatra

The Vase

The strong south wind hits our faces again,
it's October;
sunsets are fiery red
and the waters of wells are clear already-
there we are, under the mango tree,
in the old house, amid the drift of things,
the vase on the bookcase
with shadows of swifts reeling round it,
and we don't know whether we are alone any more.

But each day
we watch the swifts come and go,
watch the still-slender, teasing whore
who shuffles down the crowded road and finds out
that the middle-aged man surreptitiously following her
is only listening to the slowing sounds
of his own heart; and we sit and long
for the child who left in 'seventy-three,
and behave like our bitch that catches a scent
and sniffs about in the air.

We look around today and the day after tomorrow,
remembering those who caught us like irrigation-canals
across the dry nights in the distant countryside,
and remembering, suddenly, someone
who once envied us and our bodies
so impudent, glistening with rain.

Ah, this voice I hear now,
what answer do I owe you?
The tree trembles in the wind,
the house where we once made love
now weakens at the knees. And all the time
that gathered into those moments
fills the grave of the vast vase with dust.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Traveler

Every evening
the bells of the temple close by
rest their easy weight on the bones;
it's time again to wonder
what I'll do with what I learn.
A warm vapor rises
from the darkening earth like a hope.
Somewhere, inside a room,
a girl is dying in her mother's arms.
Elsewhere, someone
revenges himself for his broken life.
I look at people. At my little misery.
Beyond, at a jasmine's sad sweet smile.
Movement here has purpose:
It is not cold and tired.
The deer chasing the new growth of grass.
The drum thumping against the sky.
The woman with her knees drawn to her chest.
And the wind that deceives itself
it has tellingly carried the scream of the girl
who is dying in her mother's arms.□
My knowledge and my time
fail to quiet to night
unlike the flutter of birds.
I try to wear this weight lightly.
But the weight of the unknown buries me.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Twilight

An orange flare
lights the pale panes of the hospital
in a final wish of daylight.
It's not yet dark.

In the children's ward
under a mother's face
the dead, always so young.
Water startles in the river's throat.

Its cry:
a plea to share in its curse?

Somewhere, this twilight shall fall
and hide the whiteness of jasmines about to bloom.

Newly-lit lamps
in the houses across the street
make me look out at the wet August evening
that holds up the vast unknown
in such small delicate hands.

Jayanta Mahapatra