

# Jayanta Mahapatra: In Conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi

“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 (1981).

## The Celebrated Poet

Jayanta Mahapatra (born 1928) occupies a very special place in the canon of Indian poetry in English, if not the ‘Father of Indian English poetry’. He is one of those early signal poets with whom Indian English poetry got an international face. He is a longstanding contemporary bilingual poet whose books have attracted widespread acclaim. From *Close the Sky Ten by Ten* (1971) Calcutta: Dialogue Publications to *Land* (2013) New Delhi: Authorspress, Jayanta Mahapatra has authored twenty books of English poems. His books in Odia include: *Bali (The Victim)*, *Kahibe Gotiye Katha (I’ll Tell A Story)*, *Baya Raja (The Mad Emperor)*, *Tikie Chhayee (A Little Shadow)*, *Chali (Walking)*, *Jadiba Gapatie (Even If It’s A Story)*, *Smruti Pari Kichhiti (A Small Memory)*. He was conferred the Padma Shri in 2009 by the President of India. He holds the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981. He has translated Oriya poems into English and has also edited *Chandrabhaga*, a literary magazine of high esteem. Mahapatra’s prose is an engaging discourse. He has three major prose works: *The Green Gardener*, short stories, *Door of Paper: Essay and Memoirs*, *Bhor Moitra Kanaphula* (in Odia).

Philip Salom, a contemporary Australian poet in a poem for Jayanta Mahapatra’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday (published in *Southerly*, Vol 70, November 2010), writes: “Your poems have called up Wordsworth in the readers.” Mahapatra stands tall in Indian writing in English as William Wordsworth to English literature in England ushering fresh zest for loving and joy of living.

JS: How important was your trip to the University of Iowa in the year 1976? Did your first foreign visit contribute a lot to your poetic skills?

JM: I can not deny that my six-month visit to Iowa city in the fall and winter of 1976 was a sort of turning point for my poetry. As you are aware, I began writing poetry late,

quite late, when I was in my late thirties. My friends saw it as a fitful diversion, and not the calling which I took poetry to be. So there I was, at forty, trying earnestly to be a “poet,” having abandoned my research in Physics—in quantum mechanics to be precise—and my pursuits at photography. My first two books had been received poorly by the critics in Bombay and Delhi, and this was in 1971. I was not thinking of poetry as a luxury; in fact, I devoted myself fully to writing during the years 1972 to 1975 with a passion that amazed me, and my poems started appearing in distinguished periodicals such as *Critical Quarterly*, *The Times Literary Supplement* in Britain, *Chicago Review*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *The New Republic* and *The Sewanee Review* in the US. Professor C.B. Cox wrote to me in 1974 saying that it was the first time in the existence of the CQ that Prof. Tony Dyson and he had ever accepted anything from India. Well, that was something which did make me proud. And in 1975, eleven of my poems appeared in the distinguished poetry magazine, *Poetry*, which was perhaps a sort of achievement in my work as a poet, and which went on to bring me the Jacob Glatstein Poetry Award for 1975.

These publications were noticed by Paul Engle, poet and director of the International Writing Program in Iowa, and he invited me to be the participating poet from India for 1976. It was a memorable time for me, 1975—1976, because it was coincided with the publication of my collection of poetry, *A Rain of Rites*, from the University of Georgia Press, Athens, US. And my manuscript was chosen from among the many poetry manuscripts submitted to the university by the final reader and editor, George Core, who is, and has been the editor of the oldest literary quarterly, *The Sewanee Review*, for forty years.

So 1976 found me at Iowa city, with twenty other writers from different countries. For someone who had spent his entire life in a remote corner of India, it was a challenge, both for living and writing. I’d left the warm comforts of a home, where I’d been looked after by Runu,

my wife; and was transported suddenly into an environment which was so very disparate from my own. The writers, mostly from European countries were living in a different era; their attitudes and values stunned me. Iowa, the life there, in the US, was painful in the sense that it enveloped me with loneliness that I couldn't cope with. But, it was a lesson in living, and I was a prisoner who turns toward the wall of his cell for most of the time I was there.

However, the writing part of my existence had come to life. Besides coming in contact with American poets like Robert Bly who visited us, and Stephen Spender from the UK, sharing the space and interacting with these writers was exciting. It gave me a unique opportunity to place and judge my own writing with the work of others—there was Otto Orban, the well-known poet from Hungary, Kazuko Shiraishi from Japan, Dario from Colombia, Nazli Eray from Turkey, Danorto from Indonesia and Fred Viebahn from Germany, to name a few. And it wasn't only that comparisons of work were possible; the act of living together added a new dimension to the whole programme. May be we were a little like survivors thrown together on a desert island, I couldn't say! But the outcome of it all was that I could, subsequently, grow out of my own poetry, of myself; and build other influences into mine—again a difficult thing to do, because one has to limit these outside influences when one is writing one's own. In that way one doesn't know whether one is successful or not—I mean improving on one's work from imbibing the poetry of others. The main outcome of such visits is that one learns a lot from interactions and discussions with other poets. But how far does all this go into the making of one's own poetry is difficult to say.

JS: Would you please share with us your experiences when you gave readings at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1978?

JM: My participation at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1978 could be thought of as a kind of extension to the Iowa Writing Programme. But the two countries, on first feel, were so different! May be because I was a guest of the Australian Government, a Cultural Award visitor, alongwith two other Asian writers, that made the one-month visit to Australia a memorable one! But I am digressing. We were programmed into two sessions at Adelaide, my Asian visitor friends, the poet Sapardi Djoko Damono from Indonesia and Celso Carunungan from the Philippines—so it was more of a formal event—but I read my poetry alongside Margaret Atwood of Canada, Galway Kinnell of the United States, to name two poets. The Adelaide festival is a grand happening,

there are participants from almost everywhere, so the formal ambience somehow pushes you aside. And poetry readings are just one of the things that make up the Festival. But all the same, it's a matter of feeling the poetry and writing of people from other countries.

And of oneself. Because once again, you kind of measure, consciously or subconsciously, the writing processes of various people. This is significant. You realise you don't live in a vacuum. And ultimately, you have to look into yourself and your own poetry. To improve your own.

JS: Which Australian writers did you meet there?

JM: Well, the Adelaide festival got over in four days and the Australian itinerary was so perfectly arranged that it gave me time and opportunities to stay at four cities—besides Adelaide, there was Melbourne, Sydney and Perth and I spent almost a week in each. I've left out Canberra, where I spent unforgettable time because I could meet and talk with A.D. Hope, the doyen of Australian poets. I'll speak about this later.

I was scheduled to give readings of my poetry at the P.E.N. Centres in Melbourne and Sydney. Then in Perth too. Both, discovering the vast unending Australian outback, and feeling the genuine affection and humanness of poets like Alec Hope, are moments in my life that sustain me still.

I remember my meetings with poets like Syd Harrex, Phil Salom and Brian Turner—and these developed into friendships that obviously still matter in my life. Phil Salom recently published a poem in the *Southerly*, which he had so kindly written for my 80<sup>th</sup> birth day. Touching in deed. Quite touching. I enclose a copy. Being with other poets is a refreshing experience, and I am so glad I could. You learn a lot by being with them. It was kind of my hosts to take me over to meet a few Aborigine writers; I distinctly remember the Aborigine poet Jack Davis's handshake; warm and brave exuding the smells of ferns and wombats. And of the far reaching Australian earth.

But I can go on talking about these writers I met, and remember them even today. Nostalgic, very much.

JS: Any significant event during your visit to Australia in the late 1970s that you still remember?

JM: Meeting with A.D. Hope, especially in his warm home in Canberra, and with his charming wife, Penelope, is an unforgettable happening in my life. The man's humility was amazing, it humbled me. It was a lesson. I wrote a sort of editorial piece on him in the magazine I was editing—*Chandrabhaga*, and I'd like you to read what I had said. This appeared in the journal in 1979.

And then, you should remember that you are able to meet many other people beside writers and poets. One cannot deny that admirers of your poetry play a memorable role in your life. It feels so good to be admired. That's the naked fact. And thinking wildly, I would say that such responses of fans and listeners of your poetry mean a great deal more than awards and prizes. It's the human quality that emerges. I've been lucky that way, you know. I have read in places across the world and have experienced it so vividly that it takes on the shape of an adventure. Believe me when I say that poetry readings have brought me closer to people I'd never known before, when a kind of pleasure as well as pain fuels this dormant flame of doubt inside you. It is so fulfilling when a line you've written touches another; then you can feel that the world you live in is in a way yours. I've not forgotten those occasions when listeners walked out of my readings with tears in their eyes.

JS: Who are the important reviewers of your books and poems in the early part of your career as a poet?

JM: I wish you hadn't asked this question. The reviews appeared forty years ago, and that's a fairly long time to remember things. And the reviewers too. Frankly, one only falls back upon the positive reviews, it is basic human behaviour, I guess; and when these were published in foreign periodicals, and all by renowned American poets and critics, I was delighted. This was after *A Rain of Rites* appeared from the University of Georgia Press, US, in 1976. Vernon Young praised my work in *The Hudson Review*, and later Emily Grosholz reviewed both *Relationship* and *The False Start* in the same New York journal. *Poetry* (Chicago) published a review of my books and it was done by the poet Dick Allen. I seem to mix up things today. But these were comments on my early work.

In contrast, the reviews in India weren't good, they were pale and listless. My first two books fared badly, Nissim Ezekiel and Adil Jussawalla, both poets and critics, seemed indifferent. But editors like C.B. Cox and George Core spoke about my work in the *Critical Quarterly* and *The Sewanee Review*, and my poetry began to appear regularly in these two journals. Even today, it's a measure of confidence when an editor supports you.

There have been other reviews too, Bruce King, John Oliver Perry, Ronald Bayes and Gary Corseri to name some. And in India, my later poetry has been rated well—that's all I can say.

JS: What, according to you, is a "good" poem?

JM: It's hard for me to say. A good poem is a movement

in life; and a "good" poem will always try to reach the condition of music. Plainly speaking, it takes you from the level you are in to a higher plane, like music.

JS: Will poetry travel in the age of cyber mania?

JM: I can't say. I still use a manual typewriter and communicate by ordinary mail.

JS: Do you have facebook account?

JM: No. I don't own a computer.

JS: Nowadays you write in Odia more than in English. Why is this shift?

JM: No specific reason for writing in Odia. I suppose ultimately language doesn't matter. I wanted to be known as an Odia poet. And I found there are lots of things I could do easily in my mother tongue than in English. I find it all a little exciting, using both Odia and English. I've just completed my autobiography in Odia, and the feedback has been favourable. Writing is a search of some kind, and I don't care much about style or craft when I write. This human search is what my poetry is all about. And I am happy to go on doing that.

JS: How is our idol, Jayanta da in the silent house at Tinkonia Bagicha?

JM: Fine.

Between one day and another, there is one day and another.

JS: What are the books/articles you read these days?

JM: Books, yes, they move me. I've read a lot these last few months: *2666* by Roberto Bolaño, *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell, *Desert* by J. M. G. Le Clézio, *The Hunger Angel* by Herta Muller, *The Stone Raft* by José de Sousa Saramago to name a few.

There's a greatness I found in these works, a light held high for me to see.

JS: Is there a spiritual growth in you as many Indians feel when they become "senior" and experienced?

JM: I don't know. I don't think I have had any "spiritual growth" what so ever. The aim of art is to make one grow about of himself, to embrace a larger tenderness. And compassion. Perhaps, this is what "goodness" is all about, I can't say. Or spiritual growth.

JS: Thank you, Jayanta da! You are the source of inspiration for generations! I remain grateful to you. Never let your pen dry! Wishes...