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REVISITING ODISHA IN READING TIME: SECULARISM, IMAGERY AND  
EMBRACEMENT IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POEMS

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Abstract

Poetry is an 'expression of life' commonly heard in the words of Jayanta Mahapatra. India's one of the greatest poets, deeply rooted in Odisha connects with millions of readers through his personal experience narrated in the form of poetry. Odisha is not a geographical location, but an emotion for Mahapatra, bringing a healing touch. Few selected poems set the mood of painful memories, a historical backdrop with modern-day emotions in the native land of Odisha. The study looks at how Jayanta Mahapatra's poems can be read as striking a balance between nature and humans. His innovative bent of mind, progressive thoughts, and artistic exhibition are infused with stark realities represented in *Dhauri*, *Taste for Tomorrow*, *Dawn at Puri*, and *The Captive Air at Chandipur Sea*. Jayanta Mahapatra is the poet of the 'common man and a writer for all time and space. Mahapatra mainly bases his poems on Odisha. From nature to different art forms, Mahapatra's Odisha presents itself with a wide range of emotions. He is known for his poems on the common man, commonplace, heritage, culture, and social discipline which allured the human mind of the then period. This article revisits Mahapatra's works and through them tries to bring out nature and human interaction.

Keywords: religion, culture, nature, egalitarian, embracement, faith

Introduction

India, is a land of unforgettable history, painful memories, and destructive battles with progressive strokes of time crawling into a land of enamour. The Indian subcontinent is diversified with a confluence of different religions, couture, language, traditions, customs, and cultures. The subcontinent is rich in terms of music, craft, art, architecture, religion, music, dance, mythology, flora, and fauna which are diversified yet with secular philosophy and understanding. In the twenty-first century, each state of India has its tale

to tell, its own culture, tradition, language, literature, and customs to follow. The tales to tell and to be told for generations are governed by ancient historical battles, identities, traditions, customs, and beliefs that are under constant substantiation with social reality. Indian history is rich and diversified having various religious groups, Sikhs, Islam, Christians, Hindus, Jainism, and Buddhism (Chelliah, 2018). However, the subcontinent has never failed to recognize the heritage, culture, music, dance, food, and languages it caters to amidst diverse faiths. The various religious groups hold strong roots of culture aligned

with history engraved from ancient times. India's history encountered brutal, butchered, and horrifying time and space but serves several millennia old that brings its citizens pride and joy. A country with such rich diversification unified as a nation is incredible. Such an incredible Indian state Odisha becomes a place of great historical, cultural, and literary significance in the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra (1928- present).

Mahapatra, born on 22 October 1928, in Cuttack, Odisha, India has won Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi for his great literary works. Mahapatra is known for his poems on the common man, commonplace, heritage, culture, and social discipline that allured the human mind of the contemporary period. Some of his poems *like Dhauli, Taste for Tomorrow, Dawn at Puri, and The Captive Air at Chandipur Sea* interrogate between life and livelihood, war and peace, death and life, and happiness and loneliness. His selected poem stands true to Indian background and history. Along with the composition of poems with lucidity and great themes, Mahapatra connects readers to the larger world of life with moral and cultural significance. The themes discussed will help readers to encounter historical and modern time relationships with nature, the self, and the external world. Mahapatra sets place and time with a 'tale to tell' that binds the reader's consciousness to question history and its relevance, self, and identity, Indian heritage and culture, social dogmas, and rigidity. The study attempts to identify the historical contours and exemplify the tradition of poetry in the field of literature that is unique to Mahapatra. The aim is to explore the Indian milieu, language, landscape, tradition, environment, culture, and mindscape with an eye of acceptance and embracement.

Odisha: Strong, fierce and secular

"Civilizations have arisen in other parts of the world. In ancient and modern times, wonderful ideas have been carried forward from one race to another...But mark you, my friends, it has been always with the blast of war trumpets and the march of embattled cohorts. Each idea had to be soaked in a deluge of blood..... Each word of power had to be

followed by the groans of millions, by the wails of orphans, by the tears of widows. This, many other nations have taught, but India has for thousands of years peacefully existed. Here activity prevailed when even Greece did not exist... Even earlier, when history has no record, and tradition dares not peer into the gloom of that intense past, even until now, idea after idea has marched out from her, but every word has been spoken with a blessing behind it and peace before it. We, of all nations of the world, have never been a conquering race, and that blessing is on our head, and therefore we live....!"- Swami Vivekananda (Indian Philosopher)

India is progressing and pacing with challenges set by time without letting its secular vision be altered. The secular philosophy seemed to grow with King Ashoka, the great Mauryan ruler. However, secularism was just an idea or a notion or a belief then but gradually with the concept developed from historical roots the term came into practice under George Jacob Holyoake, a British Reformer (Nash, David). Secularism as a notion is to interpret life-based human affairs over letting religion control the material world. With constant developments of such a notion, Holyoake established and derived principles allowing human affairs to govern with rationality governing social, economic, and political affairs without recourse to religion (Yelle, 2022). Such establishments do not negate religion as insignificant or temporal but not as a governing doctrine over material concerns and affairs.

The term 'secularism' was alien to the opponents and defenders but grew largely from the nineteenth century. For example, each dynasty and kingdom performing its power on the Indian soil influenced the atmosphere, culture, language, philosophy, and literature of the subcontinent, unique on its own. Each dynasty had its opponent, with a shared belief to rule over India but dissimilarities in terms of language, taste, culture, religion, and beliefs. The growth of the Mauryan Kingdom brought cotton and silk textiles, ancient mythology, handwork, great architecture, jewellery, and costumes to India. Certainly, the tales of different dynasties before and of Mauryan rule have been documented in the forms of manuscripts,

poetry, oral poetry, and inscriptions. One such great inscribed tale of Ashoka can be found in the corners of present-day Orissa/Odisha. With the finesse of rivalry, weapons, war place, culture, skilled armies, and people, Orissa has stood strong and fierce at warring battles. The state with its rich heritage has been able to teach generations after generations of India's rich history.

The rich heritage and multicultural roots in modern times could not have originated if people began to estrange themselves from the religious tradition that their lineage would follow. Each tradition and culture have threads of socio-religious; socio-economic, and socio-political factors with foundations of hope to survive with peace and not alienness. Ashoka, after the Kalinga war, embraced democratic and egalitarian notions similar to modern-day Indian culture or thought. Traveling back to the times of Devanayam Priyadarshi, or the King Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire developed the concept of dhamma. Being a follower of Buddhism, he led to the promotion and created a pan-Indian political and religious entity. Ashoka hailed to be India's famous emperor preaching on Dhamma was not only significant in India but slowly reaching out to the world. Buddhism grew farthest from his contours of reign to the Himalayan regions and Sri Lanka which spread the message and teachings of the Buddha. The relevance of Ashoka's Dhamma stands significant even today as it focuses on peace and harmony in society. With religion being the supreme governor of every aspect of society, people in modern times need to practice the principle of ahimsa and show respect and tolerance to every religion and faith (Yelle, 2022).

The Indian poet who received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980, Jayanta Mahapatra published fourteen collections of poems in English and several great publications in Oriya and Bengali. He is known to be an Orissa poet writing in English, influenced by the city for its history, culture, tradition, and language. He also loved the language English which became his primary language for poetry and short stories traveling from the contours of India and abroad. Mahapatra has a keen interest in cultural situations interlocked with social reality. His works demonstrate social, cultural, and political

reality with higher cultural, aesthetic, and cosmopolitan activities. Some of his selected poems like *Dhauri*, *Taste for Tomorrow*, and *Dawn at Puri* and *the Captive Air of Chandipur Sea* stand out with prosaic use of the English language, articulating Orissa's experiences in poetry. The selected poems are short yet live to Orissa's thoughts, place, experience, and events with voice and reality. Readers are allured by its simplicity, historical relevance, and facts, the reality of diverse alienations, and the chaos of absurd cultural and religious mixing.

*Dhauri*, a poem, allows the reader to revive the battles of Ashoka and his popular state ideology, beliefs, and kingly norms that have set him as the pantheon of global religion of the and now. Dhauri is a place of historical and religious significance that is situated near the river Daya. Daya is around 8 km south of Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha. On the historical part, Dhauri is known for the great Kalinga War. Odisha was known as the Kalinga country that was conquered by the great emperor, Ashoka. The Kalinga war taught him the lessons of life as he was unable to bear the remorse and loss of the people who remained defeated. Such emotions grew from his greater recognition of mankind. Unlike any other emperor in Indian history, he remains famous because of his teachings from his armed conquests. It was after this war that he devoted himself to Buddhism and adopted it, and to spread it, he developed 'dhamma' that will allow him to serve his subjects with knowledge of humanity. Dhauri of Odisha witnessed huge bloodshed of war but has relevance to the thinking of Buddhism that allowed Ashoka's people to overcome the misery of war and presume peace and quality.

"Afterwards when the wars of Kalinga were over,

The fallow fields of Dhauri

Hid the red-smeared voiceless bodies"

Dhauri, Jayanta Mahapatra

Dhauri witnessed the great violence amidst the 'red smeared voiceless bodies', laying down on the Indian grounds, grieving for peace and happiness of the soul. The land seemed to have gulped the dead bodies one by one. Even today the land

laments over those dead bodies much like Ashoka on the pains of being dead. Even the wind that blows trembles with fear and pain as it passes the place, a choked evening similar to the 'sullen solitary pyre' from Mahapatra's Dawn at Puri. The second line of the fifth stanza 'into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre' resembles the great war of Kalinga where the locals were arranging huge pyres for the dead. Those solitary dead bodies fleshed by foxes and worms were sullen, bloody, and solitary as an individual. Similarly, in his poem, *Taste for Tomorrow*, "the one wide street lolls out like a giant tongue" appears to side with the "earth burrowed into their dead hunger", mercilessly waiting for those decaying people to be swallowed. Kalinga did bring a new side to military conquest and end the empire-building of bloodshed. Kalinga had great skilled people with unity, peace, and happiness among tribal and Brahmins. The northern part of Kalinga (Utkala) was known for skilled people channeled for traveling and trading the navy when India had strong trade relations with South-East Asia (Hunter 2020). Not only did the skilled people develop routes, and navy channels but also several ports that established strong trading across the region to the offshore.

No war in the history of India is as important either for its intensity or for its results as the Kalinga war of Ashoka. No wars in the annals of human history have changed the heart of the victor from one of wanton cruelty to that of exemplary piety as this one. From its fathomless womb, the history of the world may find out only a few wars to its credit which may be equal to this war and not a single one that would be greater than this (Nanda, Dharanidhar 2021). The political history of mankind is a history of wars and no war has ended with so successful a mission of peace for the entire war-torn humanity as the war of Kalinga.

The aftermath of Kalinga allowed Ashoka to end the war of conquest that led to the loss of lives and remorse. He considered killing hundreds and thousands of people in the name of conquest and expansion as a sin. He believed in equality and in making a peaceful Indian society which he discarded destruction in the name of war and embraced 'Dhamma'. As per the Ashokan edict, his remorse is

well inscribed and the reason being the death of 150,000 people who died in saving Kalinga equivalent to the Ashokan army who gave up lives for their honorable king. Even after the annexation of Kalinga, Ashoka remained disturbed which prompted the great emperor to embrace a life of peace, equality, and non-violence. He was a changed man who believed in the acceptance and embracement of all people. Instead of laying faith in empire-ing, he began to embrace victory through dharma with harmony, and prosperity among all his citizens. Ashoka states in the Rock Edict XII that a warrior can only conquest when is governed by piety, truth, wisdom, and virtue. A warrior so fierce and powerful had undergone an emotional shift, who transformed into a preacher of 'dhamma' establishing a unique place in the history of Odisha, India, and the world (Sahu, 2019). The practice of embracement and self-acceptance with a vision of truth and equality made him a true humanist. Ashokan's teaching and orientation stand significant towards the welfare of his people, and the kingdom of his time and now.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Priyadarji, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes). After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dharma, a love for the Dharma, and instruction in Dharma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas.

The concept of Dhamma and his faith in Buddhism was not an imposition on others. He kept his people with peace and independence as he believed that if he imposed people to believe in what he does it would not be true to his religious sect and understanding. A man of immeasurable intellect, understanding, devotion, dedication, love, and care made he is generous and globally acclaimed. Unlike rulers of his time, he remained compassionate and grounded even having high ideals for himself like royal hunt, traveling, hunting for unique stones and treasures, and so on. What made him stand out in the history of India is his idea of building a secular country. Such ideas were fused with peace, equality,

and initiation of an egalitarian society where people could live together on the idea of dharma and action over religious divisions. It reminds us of a leader like Ashoka, towards both social and political unification. Power and political rule being ignorant over strands of secularism have bridged a gap between various religion-cultural sects (Modood et al. 2021). Unification alone cannot be possible until the leader can embrace a peace message across various regions of the nation and the world. Therefore, the idea of India being Secular travels back to the time of Buddhism. With Ashoka, Indian religious and cultural identification began to grow with no dominant form of community rule over others but living in a secular India with growths of trade, state policy, crafts, architecture, and so on.

Kalinga being a watershed moment for present-day Odisha became a bitter lesson for generations to arrive enduring legacies, battles, literature, language, heritage, and culture; rich and primitive. The land of Odisha is not any geographical location predominantly with primitive population but a history that remains engraved in minds. The human mind is capable of moral and social advancement following equality, welfare, socio-economic development, embracement, and civilized administration. Ashoka's rule, therefore, laid significance to Odisha's art and architecture, language and literature, civilized administration, and constant concern for the welfare of the populace. In alliance with Mahapatra's selected poems, the great ruler, Ashoka, and unforgettable war, Kalinga sets a trace of stories that sets the tone for Mahapatra to narrate and write for all generations to come.

Acceptance and imagery: Mahapatra's poetic emancipation and independence

The Indian poet, Mahapatra received global acclamation and recognition for his brevity and sharpness infused with artistic excellence. The vocabulary of the award-winning poet sets the reader amidst a tone of belonging in each of the poems. Besides, his poetry does not only capture emotions but acts as travel accounts and an expression of life that remains untold. The narrow roads, breeze, calm wind, birds and animals, culture, and art of Odisha allow Mahapatra's readers to

travel with history and modern times simultaneously. The selected poems are emotions in the game of words. They have been silent protests and an eye-opener for many. Here's sharing the legendary poet's life, lessons, and conversations with poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra's *Dhuli*, *Dawn at Puri*, *The Captive Air at Chandipur Sea*, and *Taste for Tomorrow* become a travel account that allows readers to recall the emotion with subtleties of language, a tradition of poetry that will inspire generations. The rhythm, emotion, and simplicity allow readers to travel to places of Orissa that hold rich cultural and architectural, and historical history, a place of pride. The Indo-English poet, Jayanta Mahapatra appropriately states the indigenous tradition with the rich cultural heritage that Orissa holds.

*Dhuli* not only allows readers to entangle with the historical relevance of Ashoka as a ruler and his transgression from a warrior to a preacher but also sets a contradiction between war and unexpected explosion. Here, war is the intention that Ashoka had before the disastrous end and death of 150,000 people while the unexpected explosion refers to Ashoka's realization of a Kingdom that sets people free from death, war, trauma, and bloodshed but peace and harmony. Kalinga had a profound influence on Ashoka despite being one of the powerful rulers, existentially suffering from killing and bloodshed, shedding prevailing norms of Kingship to Buddhism, and being confessedly productive. The feelings of pain and trauma set in 'the place of his pain peers lamentably' of alienation, exile, and complaints 'from among the pains of the dead'. The ironic stance in the last stanza sets the modern writing tone and tradition.

In *Dawn at Puri*, the title of the poem denotes a place in Odisha, named Puri. It is a famous tourist spot in Orissa, India. The great Jagannath Temple attracts visitors across the nation and the globe. Temple like Kalinga (present-day Orissa) has rich historical significance. The Jagannath Temple is a well-known sacred temple for all Hindus where Lord Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra are worshipped. During the monsoon season, tourism is at its peak for the famous Rath Yatra. The poem sets the reader with religious culture and beliefs. Lord Jagannath is

a form of Sri Krishna and is based on traditional facts and stories, Raja Indradyumna, a Malava king, commissioned the great Jagannath temple. The temple remains a sacred place attracting thousands of pilgrims and tourists across the globe. Orissa being one of the cities close to Mahapatra, *Dawn at Puri* similarly becomes one of his famous poems that received national recognition. The poem is filled with exuberance and pictorial presentations of certain situations around the temple. On one hand, it is the pilgrims with austere eyes gather around Jagannath Temple before sunrise and endures happiness and peace. On the other hand, there is turmoil and hopelessness in present-day India. The use of images like "shells" helps the reader to compare the lonely and hopeless state of the widows standing in juxtaposition to the pilgrims with belongingness:

"White-clad widowed women  
Past the centers of their lives  
Are waiting to enter the Great Temple"  
Jayanta Mahapatra, *Dawn at Puri*, lines 5-7

The life of the widow can be represented with shells that lay on the seashore crimped and lonely. Both the widows and shells set the tone of loneliness and hopelessness in rural India. The "sullen solitary pyre" creates an atmosphere of loss and pain similar to the 'red-smeared voiceless bodies' from *Dhauri*. The pyre sets a mood of pain in the mind of the poet's mother who becomes aware of her mortality and wishes to get buried beside the sacred temple.

"... The smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre  
That fills my aging mother:  
Her last wish to be cremated here"  
Jayanta Mahapatra, *Dawn at Puri*, lines 14-16

Significantly, the poem stands in juxtaposition to the poem *Dhauri*, where the armies of Ashoka were happy to shed their lives in was similar to the poet's mother who wishes to die and lay buried in her native land. In both poems, the pain of death is represented both as deep and unbroken and relinquished and real.

The *Captive Air at Chandipur Sea* explores a beach located in Odisha that captivates pilgrims, tourists, and visitors with its calm sea breeze and

wind. The 'shell' here can be set with wings to play amidst the thin air of Chandipur beach. The shells remain silent and ignorant and live for a longer period witnessing the people who come to visit Chandipur beach. They not only witness them but have stretched tales to tell of different spaces and times. Mahapatra's excellence in these poems lies in brevity, theme, and Odisha's landscape and culture. The poems are short but rich with Odisha's cultural history and background that allures readers with nature, Indian social problems, historical relevance, heritage, and remembrance. However, all the themes help to probe the human mind and question right and wrong. In all the poems the similarities are binaries like loss and hope, dejection and rejection, worship and dogmas, peace and turmoil, and others. The reader's consciousness works with precision and moral anguish that in modern times is absent. With his skill and subtlety, his poems set a tradition of poetry for generations excelling in calculated acceptance based on moral, cultural, and social beliefs (Joshi, 2019).

In each poem, Mahapatra operates within Odisha, expressing his emotions and personal experiences with an obvious multitude of melancholy, happiness, expectation, rejoicing, and memory. The poems enlighten and encircle history and modern times enriching our understanding of time and space within a particular geographical-cultural faith. Along with Mahapatra, the reader can engage with a poetic pursuit towards an everyday phenomenon infused with traces of history, re(told) and loud. The earnest celebration of the landscape and mindscape of Odisha is a unified modernist persona, reigning sequence of ancient and modern events, unseen passages of nature with abstract modes of human experience. The poetry unifies the reader and poet with endless conversation and interrogation envisioning Odisha's laden land.

### Conclusion

Jayanta Mahapatra is therefore a poet of the 'common man who is celebrated for his innovative, progressive tone and themes of modern India. Along with stark realities, facts, history, geography, rituals, and great heritage, he exhibits to generations and modern readers Odisha's religious cultural diversity,

atmosphere, and significance with adroitness. The poems not only celebrate the land of great Indian history, religious unraveling, and sacred performances but tales of structural inequalities of India allowing readers to embrace all faith, culture and tradition, and an egalitarian attitude. Mahapatra's poetry unravels many facets of post-colonialism as haunting the past, searching for identity and roots. With all four poems, he sets a tone of Indianness bringing pride and joy, and belongingness infused with emotions in his poetry relentlessly. His symbols, imagery, and figures of speech stand evocative and suggestive not only as his linguistic versatility but as a tradition of literature to follow-"*I fell in love with English. I played with words, turning them over and over again until they were heavy with meaning.*" All his poems are deeply rooted in Indian ethos that sets a secular and egalitarian emotion among its readers. Along with Indianness, there is an aura of embracement and humanism as the reader travels through nostalgic glories of Kalinga, the Ashokan edicts, The Jagannath Temple and enslaved compatriots, the Chandipur beach, and others. Jayanta Mahapatra remains true to Indian land and discovered poems for the common man that have their tales to tell. The relevance of the study remains true to Indian heritage, Indian culture, Indian literature, and social reality. The poetry of Mahapatra is the receptacle of varied perspectives of Odisha and India at large with the themes and ideas stemming from India's State, the Indian milieu.

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