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HUMANISM AND JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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ABSTRACT

Mahapatra’s poetry has numerous instances where he repudiates god. Man always searches for a solution to the human misery from the physical environment, as his social and political theories evidence it. The solutions he arrives at base on man’s experiences in the environment. But all his solutions yield him only temporary joy. After sitting for a long time, one wants the joy of walk. ‘Winter’ seems precious in summer. Hence, a scientist that Jayanta Mahapatra is, leaves no stone unturned, even the spiritual. What can not be felt with the senses be felt with the heart. Mahapatra’s endeavour even for the spiritual is for the emanation of the mankind from misery. But quest seems to be divested of the essential belief that man and god are essentially one.

He does not even believe that his writing poetry is going to solve the problems. But he cannot desist with it. He continues to perform his duty with the hope of striking the right chord that can promise the eternal notes of joy. By all assessment, humanism and human values and human concerns weigh much in Mahapatra’s poetry. When he dwells into the essentials of the Indian philosophy, he has on his back the misery of the mankind only. Even if it is not ‘spirituality’, certainly Mahapatra is alive to the fact that human misery is mitigated by certain values of the spirit and soul such as love, universal brotherhood, treating everybody on equal terms etc.

“What should a poem be? Or a poetry book be? I still don’t know, even after 25 years of continuous thinking, day after day. For me, each poem has been a painful struggle, each poem has been an exploration, of an idea or a subject; which I thought would hopefully shine with coherence and truth when I was writing the poem. Unfortunately it has not been so”¹

The rueful proclamation of Jayanta Mahapatra stays true to all human endeavours. One can only harp on an idea, but the experience shows that it can never be deduced to a logical end, for each attempt, like the ‘poem’ of Jayanta Mahapatra, to quote his own words

... .. Stares out

uneasily from the top of its cage.
It has become
a faint shadow of its former self.
It has not been able
to find its way out²

The long tale of human civilization reads like a big struggle of man to hold his own against the scourges of antagonistic forces of existence. It is always a struggle to lead a life of security and comfort. The first man when he found himself sufficiently secure against natural forces, turned his attention to ways he could find relief from stress and strain. Initially sports and as his mental faculties grew, song, dance and drama and then adventures in various forms of literature took the centre stage of all human endeavours. It requires no exceptional

state of wisdom to gather the clue that all these activities had on their back a thorough inspection, introspection and a logical thinking. Man was always at the centre of everything or measure of everything.

There were as usual the notes of discord man is famous for, which turned 'violent' and left people limbless and lifeless too. The initial 'anarchy' first went into the hands of one who is powerful and followed suit all other ruling systems. Every system, devised with much hope, turned out to be as bad as the other and proved only 'a faint shadow of its former self'. But still, in spite of the incessant search for a painless Eden meeting not much success, it is not wanting in humane intentions.

While the Indian epics, despite having gods and goddesses as their central characters, stay down to earth, the Greek epics allow divine interventions to disrupt the natural sequence of action, through a device later came to be called as *deus ex machina* and contrive a solution to an insoluble problem.

Before the beginning of the 16 century, the Renaissance humanists toed the moral-rhetorical literature of the ancient tradition to bring about the transformation of the individual and the society based on the models of Cicero and Seneca.

Modern humanism stands for religion of humanity and OS Guinness explains that the word 'humanist' means only a concern for humanity and this modern secular Humanism grew, with the development of an important split between reason and religion. Notwithstanding there being many variants of humanism with tags like 'Scientific', 'ethical', 'democratic', 'religious', and 'Marxist' etc, "'humanism', with no adjectives such as 'secular', is a comprehensive life stance that upholds human reason, ethics, and justice, and rejects supernaturalism, pseudoscience and superstition.

In the present scenario, 'Humanism' is an articulation of the rights that can be legitimately claimed by societies while, to all appearance 'ancient philosophy and literature' seem to uphold 'theoretical humanism' by supplementing such axioms as those that form the staple of human life, it is now 'practical humanism'. Literature is replete with instances of striking a humanist note.

Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayana inspired by Gandhi and his ideals made it a mission to champion the cause of the underdog. Raju in Narayan's *The Guide* expresses humanistic concerns encompassing a love for all life in the following lines:

"If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly? For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort, for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested ... It was no more than a supplication to the heaven to send down rain and save humanity"⁸

Nissim Ezekiel too gives his humanistic concerns an implicit yet manifestly clear expression in the following lines:

I have made my commitments now
This is one; to stay where I am
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.³

All forms of literature – religious, historical or others all are humanist for the simple reason that they have the story of man only and whatever man does is always accompanied by a 'self interest'

The 'modern humanism' is practical in its approach in that it seeks give nourishment to the hungry belly. Whether it is Indian writing in English, including diasporic and immigrant literature, American Literature, colonial and post-colonial writings and feminist texts, the advent of post-structuralism and post modern era right from the late 1960s and 1970s of the last century to these days of early twenty first century are only various prototypes of humanism.

Indian poetry without bar reflects on humanistic concerns and Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry devoutly obliges the mood. And the method of his poetry disallows any light for it is denied a sense of order and meaning in life. It is all a result of the intellectual disorder set off by clash of various theories mutually antagonistic, despite aiming at building a world free of all evils. The two

great wars had discredited the political and social systems upon which people relied. The rise and the ultimate failure of communism and other events like the Great Depression and its aftermath gave a severe jolt to man's confidence in the scheme of things including God spelling in a harrowing predicament for humanity and the modern civilization.

Jayanta Mahapatra, like a true humanist, tries to explore the truth by placing himself in the midst of the ruins of the temples, traditions, rites, rituals, superstitions, beliefs, attended with all their ugliness and the seamy other side of modern life and recording his responses to it. His displeasure with god is ever present in his poetry. He says:

On the dusty street the colour of shorn scalp

there are things moving all the time
and yet nothing seem 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.⁴

His attitude to be moved into satiric posers, if only now and then, is revealed in the last lines. The unspring scenes of the street and the injuries dormant for the moment and ready to be aroused any moment make him think of god who is 'silent' in spite of having been in control of everything. The prayers are never fulfilled.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry, does not subscribe to the belief in existence of a supernatural or some higher authority. He makes his scorn tellingly evident in a great number of contexts in his poems.

'Dawn at Puri' too reflects the poet's disenchantment with practices such as that 'confine' the white-clad widowed women, if his expression "Their austere eyes/stare like those caught in a net"¹⁶ is any indication. Their stare, more than any austerity, is reflective of the hopelessness, and gloom at their joyless world.

Jayanta Mahapatra examines every event with the humanistic eye, not allowing his classical learning or his knowledge in the myth and legend to colour his outlook. His examination is accompanied by an incessant spirit of questioning aimed only at making a steady advance towards the truth. He only considers the options, not only in the present but also in the past in all its different shapes such as history, myth, rite, ritual, traditions, superstitions, beliefs, religious and other social practices, etc. The 'present' reality repels him into the supposedly cool haven of the past. It also is as smooth and magnificent as the mountains lying far off. The past too was not unfamiliar to cruelties, gunsmoke, smouldering flesh, groans and cries of the people. The existence in the present is an equally painful journey through the dense jungles ridden with endless stones and many threats. The 'life' on the earth wear no trace of real life. Here in the following lines, Jayanta Mahapatra's caustic comments reveal the irony of life.

and where the grotesque dawn of
wilderness wood
becomes a conceiver of life, nothing else,
as I continue walking back and forth⁵

His scientific mind does not allow him to believe in either god or sorcery for making things happen. He believes in making human effort to achieve anything. He sounds firm about his decisions in the scenario heightening ones humanistic concerns:

And I don't want to be a beggar
unwillingly caught up
in the middle of the crowd.

I want the graveyard to flower without its corpses,
and the sunlit street
to shine without its shadows

I want the flames to warm the empty heart
of love, not burn a city with pitiable hatred.
I don't want to sit bent over a page
to reflect in it my griefs⁶

'Living in Orissa', refers to the evil system of 'Devadasis', a kind of prostitution flourished by the side of temples, expressing his scorn for the system.

Some one goes on dancing
at the doors of indifferent temples,
carrying pain in an eyeless face.⁷

He does not mince words to let out his angst, be it god or the government. Hereunder is an example from his poem 'About my favourite things'.

There was nothing to remind me of the other earth,

seven hundred miles away, frightfully unfamiliar, of six of a family screaming aloud in a flaming shack, as they slowly burnt to death, simply because they had another faith. And of that thing called God they could wall up in marble and gold leaf but never own in the million-windowed city.

By the middle of next year this poor village of kushabara will be one among my memories, but the present suffices Indefinable, like life, with the government wrong, the thinking wrong, the world wrong.⁸

He also refers to the great calamity that struck in 'Diviseema', a village in the neighbourly Andhra Pradesh in the poem 'Story at the start of 1978'

All 'isms' whether those of the East or the West only are a consequence of the quest for understanding the man and the world. Man is now bludgeoned with several theories and yet remains bereft of comfort.

The poet is later sure that ones redemption does not hinge on sitting in the cocoon of his own past, his own loneliness and fears, rather lie in embracing everything he has known, the past with the present and the present with the personal self with the other selves. He says:

My walk along the trembling of the stone
Seems loftier still: to the flashing tendril
From the fugitive root, the throat of stone
Choked with the many truths of eternal sleepers⁹

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry reads like a tale suffused with an endless concern and sympathy for humanity. He takes people into so much confidence that he does not resort to doubting their essential humanity and he never doubts their capacity to redeem themselves. Mahapatra only gently raises the issues without ever assuming any

authoritative tone. He never makes pronouncements. They are only friendly suggestions. Mahapatra's poetry defies any linear, logical sequence of narration, the prime reason being that he does not follow scientific methods to arrive at the point of study. So his poetry is not a single idea or emotion but a set of ideas and emotions recollected in disarray, which often strike him surpassing all barriers of time, place and reason. Like a true humanist he does not believe in any scientific method and his scepticism about the perfection of all though only aims at delivering the maximum good to the society. In all, he is as human in his conduct as the say of the Bible – "Love thine neighbour, as thy love thineself". He prefers as much respect as it is due to a human.

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A Brief Bio of Corresponding author

Dr. B Venu gopala rao, Reader (Associate Professor) of English, has been with M R college English department for the past 22 years. He has his MA from Andhra University and M Phil from Sri Venkateswara University, and has been awarded Ph.D for the thesis entitled 'The Earth and its Finer Spirit as the Soul- A Reading in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra', which sees Mahapatra in the Indian light. Born into a family of teachers, he has very early developed a taste for writing and won several prizes in essay writings etc even as a student, including one at the state level. He had regularly

published in Indian Express, and he now publishes in Journals and newspapers like Contemporary Vibes, Academic Research, The Hans India and an introductory article for the anthology of poetry of Dr.C.M.M.Rao. Aritcles like 'Gurajada's Greatness' published in The Hans India, an article with the title 'A Dream to Redeem- Poetry of V.Prathima' and an article in The Hans India introducing a Violin maestro Sri Dwaram Durga Prasada Rao, whom he interviewed for a few hours are a few that he holds dear to his heart. He translated Telugu poetry with the title ' Rendu Bhagalu' of V.Prathima with the financial assistance of U.G.C under minor research project head. He mostly writes in association with Dr.B.Ramakrishna Rao, a retired professor, A.U., in The Hans India. His other interest is music and relishes singing in concerts.
