

Review of: Jaydeep Sarangi and Gauri Shankar Jha, eds., *The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra*,
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‘Poetry makes nothing happen’, W.H. Auden once said famously. Despite that influential axiom from a nonetheless socially and politically engaged poet, the poetry of commitment remains alive, in India and elsewhere, and one of its primary living exponents in the subcontinent is Jayanta Mahapatra, to whose work this new volume is dedicated. Mahapatra, born in 1928 and hailing from a Christian background in Orissa, occupies a special place in the canon of Indian poetry in English, having lived in India all his life and hence remaining outside the resident vs. expatriate debate, and (as of recent years) writing both in English and in his native Oriya, thus straddling the English vs. Indian languages divide. The present volume, edited by Dr Jaydeep Sarangi of Vidyasagar University (Midnapore, West Bengal) and Dr Gauri Shankar Jha (Indira Gandhi Govt. College, Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh), brings together a multiplicity of perspectives on one of India’s foremost contemporary poets.

The volume consists of 18 pieces, individual or joint, by a total of 20 contributors, all both Indian and India-resident. Of these, one is a tribute poem, one an interview (conducted by Jaydeep Sarangi) with the poet himself, another a study of Mahapatra’s English-language short stories and another a discussion of his Oriya poetry. The remaining 14 focus on his poetic production in English: here we may note that, while Mahapatra views himself as an Oriya poet writing primarily, though not exclusively, in English, he has no qualms about the use of the English language in India, declaring in the interview with Sarangi: ‘The English we use when we move around our huge country [is] the one language we can communicate with’, and: ‘Children are more at home in English nowadays. And with inter-state marriages on the increase, English is used in homes more and more’ (189-190). Clearly, the poet does not view writing in English as an obstacle to the expression of Indianness.

Jayanta Mahapatra is beyond doubt an eloquent poet of the human and natural worlds, but the aspect of his work primarily focused on in this collection is his role as a denunciatory bard of the history of India and Orissa – history being understood as a procession of events that includes and determines the present. For the poet, Orissa is ‘the land ... where the wind keens over the grief of the river Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Kanark’ (quoted 145). These words point up his identification with both the dense cultural heritage and the day-to-day suffering of his region of India. Indeed, a keynote of this volume is Mahapatra’s dark yet complex vision of history, viewed, in terms that might recall Walter Benjamin, as a chain of oppressive events, if not catastrophes, whose spoils need urgently to be reclaimed by the victims from the smilingly triumphant victors. It would be an oversimplification to call Mahapatra’s a postcolonial perspective on history, for, as many of the book’s contributors show, his vision of oppression sweeps in the pre- and post-Raj periods too. If today’s India is seen as a ‘puppet land’ where the age-old subjection of women and the poor continues as ever, the supposedly heroic Indian past also receives short shrift. In his poem ‘Dhoulagiri’ (from *Waiting*, 1979), he denounces the massacre of the inhabitants of Kalinga, in Orissa, perpetrated under Ashoka, the emperor generally perceived as India’s great benefactor and uniter, declaring: ‘Memory has drained us/ and an ancient stone wall/ inscribed with rules/ is not what it appears./ Someone’s rotten

blood has gotten into the stone'. Here, the contributors Syamala Kallury and Anjana M. Dev comment: 'For Mahapatra, the Ashokan edicts are a constant reminder of the suffering that preceded their construction' (37). The poet thus raises his voice articulating an alternative discourse to the chorus of the victors, even declaring, in the volume *Random Descent* (2005): 'The land some love to call holy/ is not the one I want to live in', condemning the famous Orissa of the temples, of Puri and Konarak, in near-apocalyptic terms that, as T. Sai Chandra Mouli puts it in this volume, reflect his 'shock and revulsion at the ghastly happenings around' (154) – this in an India whose catastrophic history, far removed from the 'shining India' of call-centres and gleaming IT campuses, stretches from Kalinga through the colonial period to the Bhopal disaster and the wholesale betrayal of Gandhian principles once held dear.

This specific Indianness of Mahapatra's core concerns is highlighted repeatedly by the contributors. Nonetheless, it is to be noted, in literary terms as such, that where intertextuality comes into play the vast majority of the comparisons invoked are with poets not from the Indian but the British/Irish/American tradition. The *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, or contemporary Indian English poets such as Nissim Ezekiel or A.K. Ramanujan, may get a brief look-in, but the main comparative thrust, even from those scholars taking a firm anti-colonial line, aligns Mahapatra with such poets as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats or Seamus Heaney, and, notably, the Romantics – Blake, Keats, and, more than anyone else, William Wordsworth, champion of the common rural folk and listener to 'the still, sad music of humanity'. These comparisons, the Wordsworthian one above all, are indubitably valid, but it could nevertheless be asked whether a volume dedicated to the 'Indian imagination' of Jayanta Mahapatra might not usefully have paid a shade more attention to what links him to writers past and present from his own subcontinent.

This said, the passion and commitment with which the various scholars approach Mahapatra's multifaceted production are at no moment in doubt. The overall feel of the volume – and hence, of the poet's imaginative world itself – may be summed up in this formulation by the contributor Kasthuri Bai: 'Words in Mahapatra's poetry are often endowed with associative force as much as that of a stone dropped into a still pool of water causing ripples of water from the centre into which the stone fell' (120). Strong with this 'associative force', Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry remains, according to his own conception, a work-in-progress of social and spiritual criticism, by definition never-ending and unfinished: as he declares in *Random Descent*, 'I only want to renew myself' (quoted 172). This poetic process of self-renewal will, beyond all doubt, be enhanced and furthered through the Indian criticism of Mahapatra's ongoing work, as exemplified in this commendably open-ended and multidimensional introduction to the poet's achievement so far.