

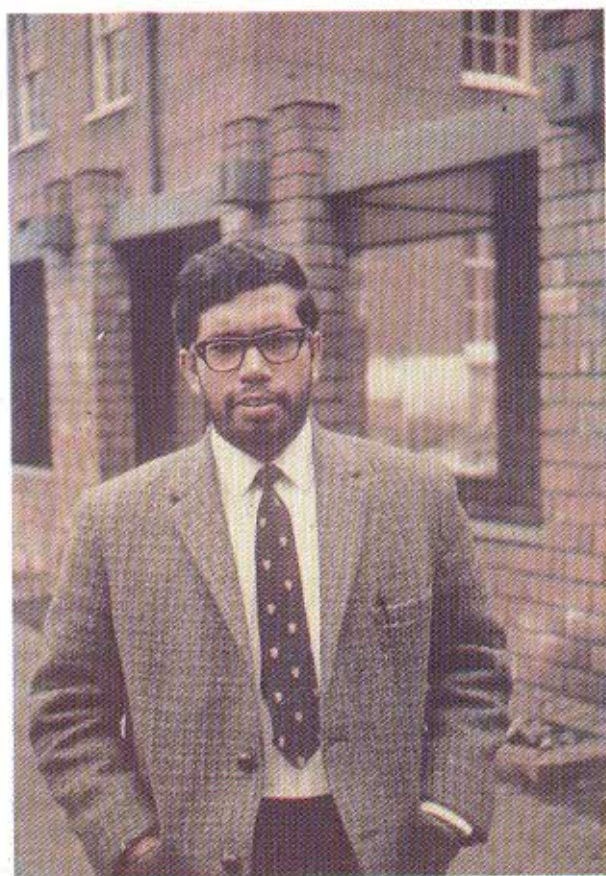
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Sahitya Akademi

meet the author

Sitakant Mahapatra





Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award from Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, 1974

When Sitakant Mahapatra published his first anthology of poems in 1963, *Dipti O' Dyuti* (The Glow and the Illumination) discerning critics immediately noticed a new voice, very much in the tradition of Oriya poetry with its intricate mix of metaphysical pessimism and lyrical intensity and at the same time profoundly down to earth and using a language that had the distinct flavour of the soil. Mahapatra's second anthology *Ashatapadi* (Eight Steps-1967), a collection of eight long poems delineating the progress of the protagonist from total nihilism to an assertion of hope and the consolation of living was indeed a tour de force. It was hailed as giving a new direction to Oriya poetry for its profound use of archetypes, images and symbols. It won the State Sahitya Akademi Award. The third anthology *Sabdar Akash* won the Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 when Mahapatra was thirty seven. The Award made a mention of the competent use of myth in a modern context and the intense flavour of the folk idiom. He has won, besides the above, the prestigious Sarala Award, the Orissa Council of Culture Award, the Kumaran Asan Poetry Award and the Soviet Land Nehru Award. The Third World Hindi Conference also gave him an Award in 1983.

Mahapatra has, by now, published 10 anthologies of his poems, the latest being *Pheri Asibara Bela* (The Time to Return-1991). A comprehensive selection from all the ten anthologies has also been published in 1992.

Mahapatra was born on 17th September, 1937 in village Mahanga. It is a village perched on the bank of the river Chitrotapala which is a branch of the turbulent Mahanadi. The river recurs as a persistent reality in his poetry. After matriculating from the local High school, he graduated from Ravenshaw College in 1957 in History Honours and did his M.A. in Political Science from Allahabad University in 1959. He had a brilliant academic career, always standing first in the University.

He left University teaching in 1961 to join the Indian Administrative Service and has held several responsible positions both in the State Government and Government of India. He has been a fellow in the University of Cambridge (1968-69) and in the University of Harvard (1987-88). He was also on a two-year sabbatical on a Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 1975-77 studying the modernisation process of the tribal societies in Eastern India. A Doctorate in Social Anthropology he has translated and edited nine anthologies of the oral poetry



With K.V. Puttappa



With William Golding, 1987

of the Indian tribes. In 1985 he was invited to deliver the Keynote Address in the Lester Pearson Centre for Development Studies in the University of Dalhousie, Canada. He chaired a session in the 10th World Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in 1978.

He is one of the Indian poets to be translated into most European languages. There have been 8 anthologies of his poems in English translation. The latest, *Death of Krishna and Other Poems*, a selection from thirty years of his poetry was published by Rupa recently. Anthologies of his poetry have also been published in French, German, Swedish, Danish and Romanian. Such an anthology in Spanish is awaiting publication. The translations have been noticed for their rich imagery, the powerful use of folk idiom and a vivid, rugged language that stands out for its vitality even under the inevitable limitations of translation. His translated anthologies are available in Hindi (eight anthologies), Bengali, Urdu (two) and Malayalam (two). They have also been done into most other Indian languages. He has four anthologies of literary essays in Oriya and several anthologies of such essays in English. His "creative, poet's style" has attracted critical

attention and has also won him the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for prose.

Mahapatra has a rich and varied experience of life and poetry. Well-versed in the traditions of modern poetry in the West he has equally deep perception of the Oriya poetic tradition. He has elsewhere criticised the "pale reflections" of western literary critical modes and poetic idioms. Instead he has sought to find the true roots of tradition, but not as an impossible return to the past but as a reinterpretation of traditions. Jagannath Das, the poet of Oriya Bhagavat and Bhima Bhoi, the blind tribal poet of Orissa have been, according to his own statement, the most profound influences on him.

The cultural and physical landscape of his State, Orissa come out clear in his poetry and they give it a quality of intensity with their life-rhythms.

Thus the depth of perception of the Indian and Oriya poetic tradition, along with the best that has been written in poetry in the West and his deep association with the tribal way of life have moulded a sensibility which is complex and deep.

Mahapatra has said somewhere that he is aware of the limitations of poetry in our times but also knows that it is our only hope, our only consolation. Towards the human destiny of pain,



In Struga Poetry Festival

poetry gives us the benefit of celebrating life knowing all the while of its impermanence. Indeed poetry for him is a question of sensibility. It is the soul of civilization and the hall mark of our struggle with Time. To him poetry, like all art, is what time does to man. He has grown from strength to strength in refining his use of language. The range of his poetry is vast and it embraces large canvasses stretching all the way from history and mythology to intense single moments of deep meditation on living.

The most impressive quality of his poetry is an intense and agonising awareness of the intimate relationship between I and "the other". Often the reader may recognise only a pattern of interior monologues, as though the poet is engaged in soliloquies. But if we listen to the music beneath the surface of the words, many voices slowly emerge. The apparent loneliness of the "I" is joined by soft whispers, distant voices of memories and silent forebodings — signals that often betray the hidden presence of other selves either within the poet's own dark consciousness or outside in the imagined world created with words.

The important thing to note is the skill with which the poems grasp the suffering of the whole world and turn self-knowledge into compassion. His is a poetry of intense quests, located at the intersection of time and timelessness. The suffering, loneliness and anguish of existence take him not to fruitless despair but the supreme need to experientially grasp the roots of disharmony in our being. He believes in the task and the possibility of poetry to create an alternative reality and seeks in the dungheap of human history the possibility of the small but deep-rooted joy of human existence. Indeed the protagonist in his poetry is the helpless everyman who struggles through life without a chance, never giving up hope, even when stuck upto his neck in mud.

Erik Stinus in his Introduction to the Danish translation of Sri Mahapatra's poetry had this to say:

"His poems are, at the same time, troubled and calm, full of both pathos and cheerfulness. Love and the fear of death are close neighbours and the dream nearly as real as historical reality. Despite the juxtaposition of



With Namwar Singh, U.R. Anantha Murthy, G.C. Narang and S.C. Dube at Shimla, 1969



At Erlangeu, Germany

conflicting experiences and questionings each poem seems to be one complete symbol, one action. What it prescribes for itself is a journey towards a listening to things, to the other, to the others. And that is no mean aim for poetry."

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