

## Study Material for Degree III (Hons.), English, Paper-VII

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### POEM: DAWN AT PURI

#### POET: JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

In the poem, **Dawn at Puri** Jayanta Mahapatra describes religious significance of the holy city of Puri, which is situated in Orissa. At the same time, he also reveals the reality of the place by depicting the disparity present in the pious and religious land of Puri. The city is known for the famous Temple of Lord Jagannath, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The land of Puri is, thus, a sacred place for the Hindus. It is among the four Dhams or religious centres of India. The place has spiritual values attached to it. The place is also significant for the famous chariot festival, held annually. Many people visit this place to pay respect to the deity. The symbols and images used in the poem very perfectly describe the disparity present in the city. The use of irony, contrast and comparison add effectiveness to the description. He describes the hollowness of the sacred rites and rituals. .

Jayanta Mahapatra whose poetic sensibility is deeply rooted in the land of Orissa is a major voice in Indian English Literature. He was born in 1928, in Cuttack. He was a teacher of Physics at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. He began to write poetry late but published a number of poems that established him as an eminent poet. Some of the famous works are *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, Rain of Rites, Relationship, Temple, Life Signs, Waiting, The False Start* and many others. He was given The Sahitya Academy Award in 1981 for his poetic volume *Relationship*. He was the first Indian English poet to receive this award. He also received the prestigious Padma Shri award in 2009. In his poems, he deals with the problems of human suffering resulting in forms of hunger, starvation and poverty. He is also sensitive and sympathetic to see the pathetic condition of women. He also writes on darkness, death and loneliness. His reference to places like-Puri, Cuttack, Bhubaneshwar and Konark definitely reveals his sense of culture and tradition and also his effort to integrate with Indian society, its ethos and cultures. His poems are also an expression of his struggle for identity.

The poem, **Dawn at Puri** consists of eighteen lines, divided into six stanzas. Each stanza therefore has three lines. In these lines poet gives a picture of suffering and sorrow of which there seems to be no respite. The poem begins with the description of cremation ground. It is believed that Puri is a place of salvation. It is the 'Gateway to Heaven' or 'Swargdwar'. Hence, it is the desire of every Hindu to be cremated here. The opening lines of the poem, '*Endless crow noises*' is a suggestive image of the cremation ground. This is visual as well as an auditory image. The continuous noise made due to the cawing of the crows indicates the presence of dead body. As the poet is moving on the beach of Puri, which happens to be a cremation ground, there he finds a '*skull*' lying on the sand. The images of 'crow' and 'skull' create a perfect atmosphere of cremation ground. The unburnt skull also reminds him of the

deprived lot who are victims of abject poverty, hunger and numerous difficulties. The image of '*skull in the holy sands*' is an ironical portrayal of Puri, the place of worship and reverence. Further, the combination of the opposite images reveals the disparity. The concrete image '*skull*' and abstract image '*holy*' contribute to the description of the miserable situation.

*White-clad widowed Women  
past the centres of their lives  
are waiting to enter the Great Temple*

In the above lines, the poet describes the plight and sufferings of the widow women in India. They are badly treated and disrespected. After the death of their husbands they are forced to wear white saris and live a simple life. It is thought that once their husbands are dead their lives become insignificant for them. They are believed to have passed the '*centre of their lives*'. The centre of life can be related to their husbands or to their own prime time of youthful days that have passed. The '*white-clad widowed women*' signifies the rigid rituals and customs imposed upon them. They become victims of such atrocious tradition. These women wait to enter the temple to get a glimpse of the deity.

*Their austere eyes  
stare like those caught in a net  
hanging by the dawn's shinning strands of faith.*

The women are like helpless creatures caught in the net where they are anxiously waiting for their liberation. Their '*austere eyes*' symbolise their life devoid of any worldly desire and interest. They have no joy or pleasure in life. Their pitiable condition and sadness are obviously expressed through their eyes. In spite of the misery and suffering in which they are forced to live, their only hope lies in religious faith. The word 'dawn' in the line '*The dawn's shinning strands of faith*' symbolises hope. Due to faith they live and sustain in such a pathetic and inhuman condition. They are hopeful for their redemption. They will be liberated from the bondage and sufferings.

*The frail early light catches  
ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another  
a mass of crouched faces without name.*

The image of '*leprous shells leaning against one another*' used by the poet in the above stanza draws another image of intense suffering. The image stands in sharp contrast to the religious sanctity of Puri. Their miserable state due to wounds and disease make them helpless. The beggars suffer due to poverty. They stand in dim light of morning and beg depending upon mercy of others. Their anonymity adds to their misery. The hollowness of religious rituals and truth of grim poverty has been perfectly described. The images like '*ruined*', '*crouched faces*' '*without name*' are suggestive of lost identity, decadence,

disease, rejection, death and loneliness. They are like '*leprous shell*'. This conveys the attitude of negligence shown to them.

*and suddenly breaks out of my hide  
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre  
that fills my aging mother.*

The distress of prevailing incongruity in the land of Puri keeps increasing in the poem. The poet expresses his emotional feeling of distress for the suffering of women and poor on one hand and also ruminates on significance of the performance of religious ritual. However, a certain realisation comes to the poet's mind. The poet watches a solitary funeral pyre burning in the cremation ground. The '*smoky blaze*' gives a spurt to his hidden thought. He is immediately reminded of his mother's last wish of being cremated at Puri, as it is the 'moksha dwar', or ultimate path of salvation. His mother, like every Hindu, has faith in the religious rituals and hence, desired to be cremated at the auspicious land of Puri. The lines quoted below very effectively portray the twist and turn of thought in poet's mind. As he is reminded of his mother's last wish he seems to acknowledge her faith in the religious ritual.

*her last wish to be cremated here  
twisting uncertainly like light  
on the shifting sands*

The image of light twisting uncertainly on the shifting sand depicts the sudden change of thought in the poet's mind.

Mahapatra has written a number of poems on Puri, a sacred place for Hindus. The poems, *Dawn at Puri, Temple Road, Puri and Taste for Tomorrow* are some of them. Jayanta Mahapatra has very effectively explored the reality of the place in these poems.

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