

## **SOCIO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE POETRY OF NIRANJAN MOHANTY**

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By virtue of his eight volumes of poetry Niranjan Mohanty (1953-2008) has made a remarkable contribution to the field of Indian poetry written in English. He sings his poetry from the bone, marrow and flesh of Indian life and incorporates into it myth, legend, history, tradition, culture and social values that define his identity as a poet born and brought up in India. His poetry is a record that shows how a creative writer has to establish, consciously or unconsciously, an animating and ennobling rapport with his own place of origin. Mohanty not only resurrects the antiquity of his country but also reflects the contemporaneity with simultaneity. A keen observer of the time he lives in, he makes humble attempts to know his contemporary world, his time and clime. His poetry depicts his attempts. It essentially tries to discover the characteristics of the age in which he lives. So, the poet within him is not an isolated identity but the product of an age in which he lives and about which he writes. His picture of modern life is pervaded with the influence of his age. As a mirror of life, his poetry tries to reproduce the society around him and obviously becomes a social document. The poet tries to capture the go of the day, the turn of his nation- its moods of exultation and exhaustion, its faith and doubt, its devotion and disillusion. Thus, the dominant spirit of the age is directly and indirectly revealed in his poetry as it expresses the thoughts and sentiments of his people who are closely connected with and conditioned by the age. Nourished and nurtured by his strong sense of place and time, his poetry acquaints the readers with a very sensitive mind that vividly and vigorously reacts to the influences of the spirit of age. The artist within him keeps a vigilant eye on the society about himself, feels, enjoys and suffers like his fellow-beings. He bases his art on his personal experiences about the contemporary situation. His art is ennobled because his experiences are transfused with the imaginative sensibility of the artist. The reflection of the zeitgeist creates a new spirit for the readers. With its help they travel into the depth of the contemporary society. Thus, it becomes a sort of sociological approach, a supplementary and commentary on present history.

Mohanty's poetry offers a solemn promise of a new dawn for his motherland free of foreign yoke. He believes that India, after achievement of sovereignty i.e. in the post-colonial condition, should have changed the basis of the state itself by empowering the poor, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged, by growing tolerance of difference and diversity and by establishing all kinds of rights within a broad framework of democratic egalitarianism that does not allow any imposition of alienating western ways of thinking on the society. He wants his nation to have resistance to all forms of exploitations and oppressions, be they environmental or human. He is against the commodification of social relations. His poetry reflects his fundamental

sympathy for the subaltern, for the peasantry, for the poor and outcast. It shows his attempt to keep away from the high culture of the elite and to support subaltern culture and knowledge. Historically subaltern culture and knowledge have been considered to be of little value but Mohanty seems to accept them as enriched store house of culture and knowledge. His imaginative vision encompasses the plight of those who are at the margins of society, those whose cultural identity has suffered dislocation and uncertainty due to the crushing forces of capitalism, individualism, maldistribution, inequality and so on. In his poetry, he promises to sing about his country and the countrymen, the song being a heart-felt sympathy with the down-trodden, a deep compunction about their starvation, poverty, hunger and helplessness. The condition of his country people is present in his poetry with utmost clarity. They may be poor materially but they are not so spiritually. Despite being drowned in the throat-deep poverty they desperately try to keep the ideals of living. They labour hard to meet the economic stability but fail in their honest attempts. Mohanty wholeheartedly feels an affinity with the dispossessed lot who struggle for their existence in the post-colonial nation which came into being in 1947:

I will sing of the living:  
of my country- men who starve by day  
and dream in the night  
of catching golden deer,  
I'll sing of my people  
who always drown in another darkness (*On Touching You ... 5*).

Through the sharp poetic images Mohanty intends to paint the picture of his society suffering from poverty, hunger, corruption and petty politics:

I will sing of the poets  
who under the cosy towers  
sharpen the images of poverty,  
hunger and hunger of my people  
whose dreams have been sullied  
by the sheer game of politics  
and mud- throwing, of rioting, rotting (*On Touching You ... 6*).

His impenetrative affinity with the common men indicates that his is a passion for justice, a wide humanitarianism, a call for a new order or a change both spiritual and material. Sitting on the ivory tower for hurling the message of equality and justice is not Mohanty's aim. His aim is to come down to the common men to share their joys and sorrows with them and to express their life and living in terms of his poetry:

I will make my hands clayey  
to feel the wheel of the potter,  
the nowhere god (*On Touching You ... 6*).

His poem entitled "Ritual" depicts the funeral rites that his family observes after his grandmother's death. It shows how on that occasion his family washer-woman, Nidhi and family barber, Boi *bhai* perform their duties which have been traditionally allotted to them by the society. The poem seems to reflect the poet's sincerity in recognizing the identities of these poor people who enthusiastically and selflessly render service to the society. In this reminiscent poem the poet remembers them and explores his relationship with these friends of society. Thus he tries to show that the people belonging to the lower strata of the society also contribute much to the social affairs and they are also integrally related to the vital organs of the society. In the sixth

“Prayer” one can notice the heightened revelation of the poet’s desire to work for the alleviation of the sufferings of his people. Here he is seen to request Lord Jagannatha to come down from His throne and to direct and deploy him in the social works. The poet’s sympathy with the victims is remarkably impressive. He intends to dedicate himself for feeding those who die of hunger after flood, bloodshed or drought. He entreats Lord to peel off his skin and to prepare warm garments with that for the naked children sleeping helplessly on the streets. For the treatment of the ailing and disabled countrymen he promises to donate his blood, eyes and bones.

Failure of the post-colonial state to deliver the benefits to the people as were promised at the start of the march of the newly independent nation, a tale of broken promises finds an echo in his poems:

I will sing of my leaders  
who lead their ways to the light  
but take the country into the dark  
where endless cries are heard and only  
the ravenous eyes flounder about (*On Touching You ... 5*).

What the poet wants for his country is the constructive and successful statesmanship the lack of which he laments. His “Of Independence Day”, a poem based on social concern, gives a poetic description of how the Indians now celebrate the august day. The tri-colour flag flies in the air and a million people participate in the program. The sky appears cloudless and all the faces seem to be doubtless. The flower-like children bloom on Mother India’s brave bosom. The speeches, slogans and hymns after the customary inauguration of the program all refer to the glorious history behind the day. Here Mohanty indirectly points to the typical Indian culture of ritualizing the heroic past and heritage of the country. He wants to suggest that such pomp does not suit the present state of the country, which suffers from multiple social, political and economic inadequacies. The joyous celebration of the day is placed in stark contrast with the helplessness of the starving beggars and lepers and the havoc caused by murder, malice and bloodshed that loom large in the country during the whole year:

Last year’s murder is a tiger  
roaming in the clumsy groves of history,  
staring everywhere, gnarling its teeth  
with a cold malice.

Last year’s dripping blood  
is now a dear drink,

...

Sweets gleam on the hands of school children,  
beggars in rags wait for coins.  
And a long procession of lepers (*On Touching You ... 27-28*).

Mohanty conveys that the theoretical celebration of such auspicious occasions is not enough. What the present state of the country badly needs is the practical execution of the historic ideals that can fulfill the present demands of the nation. A citizen of independent India, the poet expects an upgraded and enriched scenario in the society. For him, after the independence, the prosperity, if any, is not at all up to the mark. Rather, the country is gradually going astray in multiple aspects. Long decades have passed after independence. Yet the plight of her people is still unbearably multiplying .He laments:

... the hospitals healing no diseases,  
houses unhousing love, eyes shedding blood,  
and nowhere the heart is hospitable, ... (*On Touching You ...* 43)

Mohanty is pained to see the social misery. He earnestly prays to Lord Jagannatha for the remedy of the social problems. He gets helplessly frustrated. This frustration gives birth to an ambivalent mood in him and he swings in doubt and devotion with regard to the Lord:

I see an aura of incompetence around you.  
You look so unheroic, so trite, so feeble  
before the vast sea of people who work

sleep and dance, who build bridges,  
buildings sky-high, ...

...  
They do or die, they run or fly.  
They drive or live, break houses or hive.  
They drill or steal, they feel, heal and kill

(*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 35)

The toiling countrymen do not find any amelioration of their situation under the dispensation of indigenous rulers. While expressing his grave concern about the society to the Lord, the poet makes a direct charge regarding His callousness about the sad fate of the Indian riff-raff. He reminds Him of the unflinching faith and devotion of the people who live for Him, work for Him and worship Him in reverence. Indian people instinctively seek solace from their God more so now as they find themselves in quagmire of corruption and inefficiency in the corridors of power. The poet becomes doubtful about the Lord's activity and wants to know what He has done in return for their welfare:

They do so much for you, so many things for you.  
What do you do for them? Where's your lofty magic?  
Every moment so many die of hunger!  
So many die of accidents! So many die of  
riotous violence even in the temple !  
What do you do for them, even in silence?

(*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 36)

He makes a complaint against the Lord that though He can see everything, He does not see the demoralized and degenerate state of his society. In a suspicious mood he is about to believe that had He seen into the misery of the victims living in the society, He would have taken steps to restore their lives. In an utter despair the poet questions the Lord:

Why should I pray ?  
Leave me to myself, oh my maimed Lord,  
come what may.  
What use this prayer ?  
What use is this obsolete coin ?  
What profit in this anomalous devotion  
to a snake-bellied, thick-skinned  
stone-oriented Lord, who seeing sees not,  
listening listens not ... ? (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 42)

Now he finds no profit in the prayers which cannot regenerate the society that has been drowned in the mud of misery, debauchery, hypocrisy and corruption. He seems to conclude sorrowfully that his prayers are not adequate for taking away the burden of predicaments. He regrets that they are just capable of allotting death to his people. The confused and baffled poet gropes for the cause and remedy of the debility and degeneration of his society:

Oh Lord of the universe,

...

what's the cause and remedy  
of our woes ? (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 45)

Mohanty deals with the absolutely minute details of the present society. For him, no sensitive being can live and thrive meaningfully in the existing situation of the society. He expresses his anguish over the fact that humanness has been devalued in the situation and so is the fate of humans. He is at pains to witness the gradual price rise of the essential commodities and unscrupulous commodification of human beings:

Prices of everything go up, oh Lord!  
Brinjal, cauliflower, cabbage;  
sugar, kerosene, diesel, petrol

disappear from the market.  
Tuition fees for children rise high.  
Chicken or mutton become matters of dream

for the pavement dwellers.  
Perhaps, the price of human flesh  
has become cheaper here ... (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 126)

The poet imagines that people's resistance can put an end to the ills which plague their lives. His poetry tries to reflect the post-colonial resistance to all sorts of exploitations that result from comparative poverty or powerlessness – from the appropriation of natural resources, to unjust prices for commodities and crops. The daily reports of the hellish occurrences in the social, moral, political and economic purviews of his country mortify his sensitive mind. The poet informs the Lord of the sad events:

Do you know the story  
that winds through the windows  
of Punjab? Do you have a T.V?

Only last night an old woman  
breathlessly showed the tip of her misery :  
five gun-men, their faces shrouded

by a pool of darkness rushed in  
and rounded off every feeble hand  
that could hoist any resistance,

and tasted the warmth  
of the grand daughter,

whose frantic attempt to cry freely

was silenced by the anger  
of the bayonet's blood-scented thud.

Oh where is another hell? (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 55)

Mohanty is sympathetically aware of the calamities and disasters that add fuel to the sufferings of his society. He conspicuously presents before the Lord the most agonizing picture of poverty and hunger in Kalahandi that passes through famine. On behalf of the victims, he prays to Lord Jagannatha for the rejuvenation of Kalahandi:

Sobs of hungry children

darken the face of Kalahandi.  
Tears trickle down the embankments  
of love when the father, fatigued

and frightened, sells away  
the only daughter merely to know that  
her tongue feels the taste of bread.

Cracked the fields, the eyes of cows  
moistened. At the heart of the hearth  
a cat sleeps. Farmers migrate

to the city of steel. Like rotten  
bamboos in a village pool, the women.

Oh Lord! save my countrymen (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 56).

The poet is appalled to see the nadir of parental affection and love vis-à-vis abject poverty which forces the father to sell his children who can no longer repress the pangs of their hunger. He is also aggrieved to witness the trauma experienced by the farmers who are uprooted from their hearth and home and find no other alternative than to march towards the slums of the big cities to live the life of refugee or migrant in an impoverished landless limbo. He earnestly dreams of an emancipation for his countrymen from this crisis and prays to Lord for a power of resistance that can protect the sufferers from their plight.

The poet observes with dismay the rise of the divisive forces like religious fundamentalism which have eaten into the vitals of the newly independent nation. He laments the decay of the spirit of solidarity among all sections of people in his country, the spirit which, in pre-independence period, gloriously guided the countrymen to wage united national struggle. The darkest event in the history of the post-colonial India, the destruction of the Baburi Mosque and the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in December, 1992 is the most mortifying example of a Hindu-Muslim riot based on religious intolerance. Mohanty is extremely shocked at the Ayodhya massacre. He expresses his heart-felt agony for the victims who went to Ayodhya to build a temple for Rama. He protests through prayer against the wrath and vengeance that destroyed the innocent and religious devotees and hates this barbaric violence that disrupted

peace and blackened his nation's glory. He is ashamed to belong to this hell. He repeatedly asks the Lord:

Is it my country, oh Lord? Are these people,  
my own ? Is it my hearth and home, O Lord ?  
Was I born here to witness this ignominy?

Do I write poems to see my countrymen  
fall ? Do I write my prayers to see them  
bleed on briars ? Tell me Lord, what else is misery!

*(Prayers To Lord Jagannatha 109)*

Sometimes the poet recollects the blood curdling incidents of the past of his country to warn the present countrymen. Through his prayers he fervently appeals to his people not to proceed a further step towards bloodshed and murder. He refers to the assassination of Gandhiji who had sacrificed his life for the weal and prosperity of the nation. He is ashamed to mention that the similar murderous activities are still being committed in his country. He alludes to the contemporary events brought about by the assassins. The assassination of Rajib Gandhi serving as the Prime Minister of the nation is a painful example of such contemporary events. The poet tries to point to the deadloss caused in the nation by the terroistic activities. He interrogates in his prayer:

Is the blood of a naked fakir  
not enough to satiate the hunger  
of bullets and bayonets ?  
Is the debauchery not enough  
to shatter and scatter the human frame  
by planting a suicidal bomb? *(Prayers To Lord Jagannatha 110)*

The life of M.K. Gandhi symbolizes a successful political and cultural campaign against the British Rule. He worked for the reformation of Indian society. A man of simplicity, honesty, humanity and holiness, Gandhiji spent his life like an austere fakir and dedicated himself for the survival of his countrymen. His theory and practice are still capable of working as a resistance to our present day plight. Mohanty calls up his selfless love and sacrifice for the nation and mourns his terrible death in the poem "Gandhi" where the protagonist, Gandhiji prays to God:

They only needed  
my blood's still breath;  
and I flooded them  
with my love.  
O' lord of the universe  
save them *(Oh! This Bloody Game 72)*.

By presenting the situations that evoke pathos he implores the contemporary society to rectify and remould itself with the learning and experiences that can be drawn from the past. The poet tries to remind the present Indians of the unalloyed holiness and noble heritage of their country and thus, earnestly urges them to restore those values, ideals, and qualities that can revive India again and uplift her to the state of peace and prosperity. He goes on making a series

of questions before Lord and they indicate his sensitivity about the present situation of his country as well as the emotional intensity of his earnest desire for her restoration:

How can I eat when the tale  
of our defeat bears no end ?  
Is the breaking of temple or mosque  
the insignia of our victory ?  
Is killing men, women, children  
the almanac of our bravery ?  
Does the pride of our race  
lie in loot, larceny, lewdness ?  
Does the glory of my tricolour  
rest in the sordid legacy  
of lacerating other's ecstasy? (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 112)

The social affairs around the poet worry him with such an extremity that he cannot mindfully pray to the Lord. He confesses his inability in his prayers. In the suffocating air of riot and rottenness he cannot breathe for a moment. His love for his country and countrymen is sincere and cordial. He wants a happy and prosperous world for his countrymen. But the spectacle of the contemporary world around him assails his being, his existence as a human being. It gives birth to his resentment and shame. He tells about his experience:

It's not dust alone that assails  
my eyes. Blood or flood of tears  
blinds too : Tiananmen Square  
or terror – frozen Punjab.

I've stopped watching the T.V.  
and listening to the radio;  
for they always sting me  
with invisible questions:  
what place is this I'm living in ?  
What air is this I'm breathing in? (*Life Lines* 59)

In abhorrence the poet wraps his ears and eyes with palms so that he cannot see and hear anything of the polluted world. He gets disgusted with his traumatic experiences. Gradually he becomes alone and keeps himself isolated from the existing scenario. When the poet can no more bear the burden of shame and degradation of his country, he, out of chagrin, wishes a total disruption from the degenerate world:

When the night's numbness  
lends me a little strength, I wish  
I could roll this world into a paper ball  
and throw it away from my heart's huddled window  
(*Life Lines* 59).

The poet is also strongly aggressive with regard to those who are directly and indirectly accountable for the sufferings of the victims. He wakes up to the present state of affairs and resolves to galumph through poetry towards the enemies of his society with a view to bringing a complete reformation:

... a tiger roams about the thick jungle of my body.



And I realize, I'm not different from the tiger  
(*On Touching You ...* 43).

The object of his witty and satiric exposure of the underhand corruption in the society is highly constructive. His keen observation is microscopic in its nature. In his poetry the priests, the devotees, the ministers, the doctors, the terrorists all have been satirized. He humorously ridicules their follies and foibles and tries to bring about a reform in the individual in particular and in the society as a whole. The following lines evidence his satiric exposition:

The priest in the temple smells of  
garlic and gin. The minister crows  
on mountains of money.  
The doctor goes tipsy on his table  
where the etherized patient  
dreams of meeting angels ... (*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 43)

However, the poet feels that through an amicable union among the countrymen the country can rise above all sorts of misery and unhappiness. He prays to Lord for that fraternity among the countrymen. He admits that this fraternal relationship can be built only through love's profusion. He also strongly believes that if the Lord binds the countrymen with the single rope of love, they will together surrender to Him and get united to bring back the hoary stability. The following lines express his strong confidence:

Oh my lackadaisical Lord!  
lambast me, if my countrymen refuse  
to lacinate their hearts with love's profusion.  
(*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 112)

Mohanty prays for all people who live in the society, the corrupt and the pure, the good and the evil. He hopes Lord Jagannatha will forgive all and allow them to touch His gracious feet and wash whatever black has stuck to their faces. He mumbles in his prayers:

let all be happy,  
let all forms of happiness be ours, oh Lord  
(*Prayers To Lord Jagannatha* 125)

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