

# An Evening With Prof. Jatindra Mohan Mohanty, Sahitya Akademi Winner for 2003

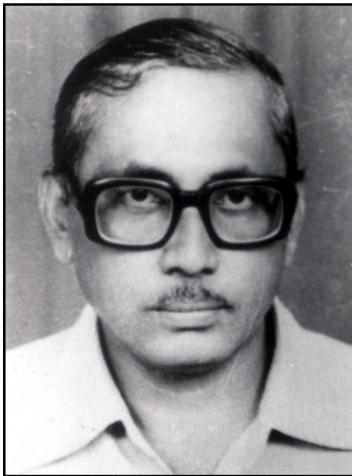
*Dr. Nishamani Kar*

Prof. Jatindra Mohan Mohanty, an erudite scholar and a foremost literary critic, is a dominant voice in the post-independent Oriya literature. Considering the influence he has exercised over a whole phase of creative and critical activities, he has a place in the larger world of Indian letters. Being moulded in the critical canons and scholarship of F.R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks, he is averse to the contemporary search for 'the pigeon-hole of theorizing'; he makes a plea for contextuality in literary studies.

He simply believes in examination and evaluation and, therefore, his utterances are sharp, focussed and seminal. His major works in English related to language and literature are *Bibliography of Indian Literature in English Translation* (1984), *There Where Trees Flower* (1987), *Into Another Intensity* (1989), *Madhusudan Rao* (1996), *Along the Stream* (1999), *Land Beautiful (On Orissan Culture)* (ed.) (2001) and *Tradition and Creativity (Essays on Oriya Literature)* (2003).

Prof. Mohanty has been actively associated with various academic programmes.

He was formerly Professor of English, Utkal University and at different periods member of the Executive Board of Central Sahitya Akademi, member of the Advisory Bodies of CIIL (Manas Gangotri, Karnataka) and CIEFL (Hyderabad) and member of the UGC Panel on English and Foreign languages and member, National Committee of Raja Ram Mohan Ray Library Foundation. His life is dedicated to literature and scholarly pursuit. Right now he is engrossed with the compilation and editing of *Oriya Sahitya Sambhar* (Anthology of Oriya Literature) - a seven volume work in Oriya which would anthologize the complete gamut of Oriya literature.



There is a good deal of critical caution in Prof. Mohanty's approach and a degree of humility that gives him an unobtrusive value in relation to a whole phase of literature. His five decade long dedication to scholarly pursuit has been recognized by all and sundry belonging to the higher echelons of Oriya and also Indian society. Recently, he has been chosen for the Central Sahitya Akadmi Award, 2003 for his work *Surya Snata* (The Sun Bathed) - a critical

work on Oriya poetry and some representative Oriya poets.

In order to share Prof. Mohanty's views on 'Oriya language and literature - its present and future', an interview session was arranged by his writer-friend Mr. Priyabrata Das and we (myself and my poet-friend Mr. Guru Kalyana Mohapatra) met him at his residence (Bhaka Madhu Nagar, Gandamunda, Bhubaneswar) on December 26, 2003. The chilly winter-evening was an occasion for soul-searching for both of us (even for the whole Oriya milieu, in a way) as Prof. Mohanty in a somewhat reflective trance revealed his variegated experiences and also suggested the ways and means so as to safeguard the interests of Oriya language and literature in the years to come. Some excerpts :

Q. Sir, Congratulations ! It is a general impression that Central Sahitya Akademi has belatedly chosen you for the Award; How do you feel ?

A. Thank you. It's O.K. In the history of the Akademi Award for Oriya it is for the first time the award is given for literary criticism, I'm happy about it. Further, I don't mind for the timing. My work has already been recognized.

Q. Your book *Surya Snata* has been chosen for the Award. Please tell us something about the said book.

A. *Surya Snata* is a collection of essays on the new experiments in Modern Oriya Poetry during the last fifty years. The basic purpose behind such a collection is to enthuse the present-day readers towards Oriya poetry. Further, the contemporary intelligentsia can have a grasp of my critical perspective and go ahead with their understanding of our poetry.

Q. You had been in the Executive Board of Sahitya Akademi for a decade (1983-93). Do you feel the Award be given on any individual work or should it be on the assessment of one's life-time involvement / work ?

A. No, there is no problem, if the individual works are assessed and the Award is given accordingly. But for a life-time achievement separate awards should be given. If I remember correctly, during my active association with the Akademi, we proposed to launch such Awards to be given by the Regional Centres. But that could not be worked out.

Q. Yours is an effort spanning about five decades. We are really interested to know about your 'salad days'. Would you throw some light on it ?

A. Yes, it started way back in 50s. I along with a group of young scholars did some serious work then. We published a critical journal entitled *Prajna*, which, in fact, remained instrumental in providing a launching pad for many, most of whom are now established literary figures of the state.

Q. Would you elaborate on *Prajna* a little ?

A. Well, the publication of *Prajna* was a historical necessity. To be precise, it was a reaction against the establishment. We tried to capture the nuances of the varieties of experience and, for that matter, many a new and promising writer got a platform. Eventually, *Prajna* created the occasion for serious scholarly discourse to be pursued with an open mind.

Q. Is a writer truly free ?

A. Of course, he should have a free and open mind, before he claims his own share of

freedom on the world of human affairs. But once his convictions are formed, he must be free to speak out without fear or favour. In *Prajna* we stressed on such a paradigm.

Q. What about the journals published now ?

A. The Journals now are somewhat limited in their approach. Most of the editors (even writers) do not possess the abiding vision, the capacity to view the world detachedly with an intense and impersonal emotion. The journals these days do not carry much critical sense. They publish essays mostly related to subject elaboration of impressionistic type but neglect the different aspects of language, the organisation of the thought process and also the context. In fact, there is no original insight into life. May be, literature today is drifted away from life.

Q. Whom do you keep responsible for such a trend ?

A. Well, everyone is responsible. Paradoxically enough, the youngsters show a pervasive disinterest in anything and every thing. I don't want to go into details. Reading or writing, especially in our setting, is no more a preoccupation. No serious work has yet been done on Upendra Bhanja or Kabi Surya or Gopal Krishna. There is no understanding no analysis, no critical sense. There is no occasion for sharpening the sensibility (Panse). Literature, as I feel, warrants a serious involvement. Anybody pursuing a literary career must not only have the aesthetic sense, he should also have the complete control over language. But in our curriculum we stress more on the functional aspect of language and do little for the promotion of aesthetic approach. The outcome, therefore, haunts us often. It is no doubt a global phenomenon.

Q. Ok Sir, Amidst the encircling gloom there is a source of light in our Universities - the citadels of learning. To be precise, in our Universities in recent years some fundamental research works are pursued, many theses are written - how do you look at it ?

A. (With a smile) of course, it's a good sign. I'm happy about it in the sense we get a lot of information atleast compiled together. Let's not go for the critical vision, we would be disillusioned. But we must recognise the perseverance to collect data. May be, a serious scholar can work on them in future and lend his critical understanding into it. He can finally draw some meaningful conclusions.

Q. Will you now share your views on the present-day creative writing in Orissa ?

A. It's nice to come across a number of interesting poems and fictions at least within the last couple of decades. There is a lot of creative work going on in different genres.

Q. But, the impression goes that we have fallen behind in the realm of fiction - writing; how do you react to such a proposition ?

A. No, no, it's a wrong proposition, a misguided impression. After 1930, about 2000 novels have been written in Oriya. The only problem is we have not accounted for it. I'm really shocked that there is no record, no annotated Bibliography. No systematic work in such direction is pursued either.

Q. What is to be done then ?

A. I feel a detailed history of Oriya literature in Oriya should be written. If possible it must be taken up by University departments.

Even the State Akademi can take upon itself the only of such a stupendous task. In my personal level I'm also doing something in this direction.

Q. Will you please elaborate ?

A. (With graceful reluctance) O.K. my effort aims at writing and publishing a complete Anthology of Oriya literature. I have been working for the last 10 to 12 years and three volumes (with the titles : *Ancient Oriya Poetry*, *Modern Oriya Poetry*, *Modern Oriya Drama*) have been published by now and four other volumes (*Medieval Oriya Poetry*, *Early Oriya Drama*, *Oriya Prose*, *Oriya Short Story*) are on the verge of completion and are expected to be completed by March, 2004. However, the whole set of seven volumes will be the companion volume to the History of Oriya literature.

Q. Who is then the source of inspiration behind such a mission ?

A. It's no doubt a mission and I pursue it for my seer love of it. Sometime back/thought of doing something concrete and significant for my language (you may call it, mother tongue) and that zeal enthused me to go ahead with the task. Initially, it was a bit tough and, at times, disheartening. But now it has been a part of my daily routine and I enjoy doing it.

Q. How do you look at the future of Oriya language and literature ?

A. The future of Oriya language and literature is very bright. I don't find any room for pessimism. I'm very optimistic.

Q. (Interrupting) We are really thrilled to come across the optimistic note, especially from

a serious scholar like you. But they say, 'Oriya is a dying language'.

A. No, that can't be. We have a long history spanning about 600 years. We have produced some unique creative pieces. We have today a number of poets, short-story writers and dramatists with international acclaim. Of course, I admit that something is desired to be realised in some spheres.

Q. Will you recount on a few such steps / initiatives to be adopted for the growth of our language and literature ?

A. Yes, I have charted out a clear cut programme. First of all, there should be a total survey of Oriya language, a dictionary (with detailed illustration and usage) has to be compiled. Dialects should be brought to the main fold. The writers should make it a point to participate in all levels of social life and they must frequently resort to the use of regional variation of Oriya language in their writings. For example, Nityananda Mohapatra has used the language of the common village folk in his novel *Hida Mati* (Soil from the Boundary Ridge) or Dinanath Pathy has made use of the typical words from Ganjam in his novel *poonarnaba* (The Rejuvenated). Similarly, Balaram Patnaik in *Jagannath Swami* (Lord Jagannath) has adopted the typical Puri dialect and Surendra Mishra in *padatika* (The way farer) has taken recourse to the language spoken by the common folk in their day to-day lives.

Q. But what about the words which are lost because of the lack of use in common parlance ?

A. Yes, I have my own plars about such a lapse. Old writers must be revived. The words which are on the verge of being lost into

oblivion must be brought back. The present-day writers have a definite and significant role to play. (Being serious) we should also accept change. There must be a conscious effort to accept change without defacing the traditional values or canons. It is indeed a time for evaluation, may be, introspection. I'm hopeful about the future. There is no question of being despirited.

**Q. Any message for the budding writers / critics -**

- a. (With a soft chuckle) I want only a greater degree of seriousness. Why not we organise workshops/Round Tables where the young and the elderly, the novice and the professional must participate and react to the works of an established writer, may be from our literature or from any literature including English. This will act like a miracle. Through such an interaction the budding writer must learn how to organise, how "to express in worlds of beauty and power". They can also get a chance to sharpen their sensibility and increase their mastery over language... I feel there is always the scope for growth, for innovation. In literature as also in life.

**A Brief Life Sketch :**

- Date of Birth - August 03, 1932  
 Place of Birth - Shyama sundarpur, Dist. : Kendrapada, Orissa  
 Parents - Late Jagamohan Mohanty,  
               Late Shradha Devi  
 Present Address - 1573, Madhuban Sarani,  
                     Bhaktamadhu Nagar,  
                     Gandamunda, Bhubaneswar-30

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Wife                          | - Prof. (Dr) Bijoy Laxmi Mohanty - also a writer and critic  |
| Sons & Daughters -<br>-in-law | Sambit & Ritu<br>Sambuddha & Susmita   |
| Daughters & Sons -<br>-in-law | Swati & Laxmi Nrusingha<br>Prasad Namita & Subhasis  |
| Positions held                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prof. of English, Utkal University, Vanivihar, (Retd.- 1992)</li> <li>- Executive Member, Central Sahitya Akademi (1983-93)<br/>Editor, <i>Indian Literature</i></li> <li>- Member, Advisory Board, CIEFL, Hyderabad.</li> <li>- Member, Advisory Board, CIIL, Manas Gangotri, Karnataka.</li> <li>- Member, UGC Panel on English &amp; Foreign Languages</li> <li>- Member, Central Committee, Raja Rammohan Ray Library Foundation.</li> <li>- Co-Editor, <i>Bhubaneswar Review</i> a literary journal of repute</li> </ul> |
| Publications                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More than 20 titles in Oriyas &amp; 08 in English (publishers - OUP, Mac Millan, Orient Longman, Sahitya Akademi, CIIL etc.)</li> <li>- about 250 essays/papers/Forewords published in international, national and state level journals.</li> </ul>   |

---

Dr. Nishamani Kar is a faculty member in the Department of English, P.N. College, Khurda.