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Modernity and Antiurbanism: Imagining Cuttack in Jayanta Mahapatra's Select Odia Poems

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Abstract:

In the popular imagination of Odia people Cuttack holds a unique place. For some, it is a millennial city with its rich historical and cultural heritage, while for others, it is a city of modernity with its modern institutions shaping the history of Odisha. Between these two contrasting images of the city lies the poetic city—a city experienced, remembered and imagined by the poets. In the poetic imagination of the city, the quotidian scenes of urban existence turn into images of time, belonging, alienation, loss and desire. From the perspective of a critical insider, Jayanta Mahapatra's poems both in English and Odia language explore his relationship with Cuttack, often revealing his personal longing for childhood cityscape which has undergone a massive urban transformation. Through an analysis of two Odia poems by Jayanta Mahapatra, this paper examines the poet's response to the urban transformation of Cuttack. Hence, the study draws on the theories of modernity, modernism and antiurbanism to understand how Mahapatra's poems construct an antiurban imaginary of Cuttack. In this investigation, this study argues that Cuttack is not merely a material space but also an imagined one which is shaped by personal experience, memory and poetic representation. By using close textual analysis method, the paper posits that Mahapatra's critique of urban modernity emerges from a nostalgic longing for the lost city space where nostalgia itself becomes a mode of resistance through which he registers his protest against urban transformation. In doing so, Mahapatra not only questions the modern urban development but also urges to reevaluate human response to such urban crisis.

Keywords: City, Modernity, Modernism, Nostalgia, Memory, Cuttack, Antiurbanism.

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Introduction

Over the centuries, the city has gradually emerged as one of the most significant cultural symbols of modernity. As Gyan Prakash in the introduction to the book *The Spaces of Modern City* writes, "if modernity is a Faustian bargain to unleash human potential and subdue nature to culture, then modern cities are its most forceful and enduring expressions. The breathless intensity and the awesome power of modern life have made and remade cities across the world" (1). However, cities not only embody the narratives of progress but also stories of regression. The city which generates opportunities, aspirations and desires also creates social inequalities, anxieties and alienation. Depending on one's ideological positioning, the images of the city as a space of 'utopia,' 'dystopia' or 'ambivalence' changes. And more than anywhere else, "The city has occupied an ambivalent position in the Indian nationalist imaginary throughout the process of nation-building, often a confrontational, as well as contemplative space that signifies 'modernity' and its concurrent promise as well as ills" (Bose 36). This insight is particularly relevant to Jayanta Mahapatra's (1928-2023) two poems "Story of This City" (*Ae Saharara Katha*) and "Saw Today (*Dekhili Aji)*," which appeared in his Odia poetry anthology *Bali* (1993).[1] In these two Odia poems, Mahapatra represents an image of Cuttack which has been reshaped by the forces of urban modernity. A city where commercialisation, ecological degradation, and moral erosion have unsettled his relationship with the city. Responding to such transformations, Mahapatra questions the social and ethical consequences of urban progress and modernity. Thus, for him, Cuttack emerges not merely as a physical space but also as an emotional landscape where cultural memory and personal belonging to the city are continually reshaped. This raises two interrelated questions: How does Mahapatra's critique of modernity construct an antiurban imagery of Cuttack? And to what extent does this critique emerge from nostalgic longing for a lost cityscape?

The study first situates Cuttack within its historical and urban context, providing the background necessary to understand its representation in Mahapatra's poetry. It then establishes the theoretical framework of the city as a cultural and discursive construct, produced by the intersecting discourses of modernity, modernism and antiurbanism. It then examines how Mahapatra's poems represent Cuttack as a lived space shaped by historical memory, nostalgia and the transformations of urban modernity. Through close textual analysis, the study explores representations of commodification, moral and social degeneration, and the erosion of the city's historical and cultural identity. Finally, it considers how these representations produce an antiurban imaginary that challenges celebratory narratives of urban progress and modernity.

Situating the City

In order to understand Mahapatra's response to urban modernity, it is necessary to situate Cuttack within the historical and geographical context. Cuttack is a thousand-year-old city located on the eastern side of the state of Odisha, surrounded by the Mahanadi river on the north and the Kathajodi river on the south. For centuries Cuttack remained the administrative, commercial as well as the cultural capital of Odisha around which modern Odia identity was formed. It was only in the year 1948 that Bhubaneswar became the capital of Odisha. Emphasising the importance of this city in the history of Odisha, Pramod Kumar Mohanty, a historian of the city, writes, "As the capital city of Odisha, Cuttack is seen as the site around which 'evolved and revolved the modern regional cultural tradition of Odisha' and more crucially so, the 'citizenry' including its middle class, constituted the 'microcosm of Colonial Odisha'" (235). As highlighted by Mohanty, it was during the colonial period especially in the "late nineteenth and the early twentieth century in particular, constituted a decisive phase in the history of colonial Odisha and Cuttack proper" (235).

During this period, Cuttack emerged as an important site of modernity with the expansion of "...schools and colleges, publications of different hues (both news and literary); several socio-cultural organisations, that is, literary and debating societies, religious associations, political formations (like Utkal Sabha, Utkal Sanmilani, etc.), marketplaces, factories, hotels, restaurants, tea and coffee stalls, boarding houses, clubs, gardens and parks..." (Mohanty 236). Although Cuttack lost its status as the provincial capital following the transfer of administrative functions to Bhubaneswar in 1949, it continued to occupy a prominent place in Odisha's urban landscape during the early postcolonial period. The city's enduring significance can be measured by the fact that it accounted for nearly 18 percent of the state's urban population in 1951 (Hassan and Daspattanayak 72). In the following decades leading up to the 1980s, the constituent areas of the city, including Cuttack City, Chowdwar Town, Jagatpur Industrial Estate, and Cuttack Industrial Estate, exemplified significant advances in industrialisation and urban development. Driven by various factors, urbanisation continued to progress rapidly, contributing to the region's emergence as one of the most developed and economically progressive urban centres in Odisha (Sahoo 7). However, the rapid urbanisation also changed the city to such an extent that it became very different from what it once was. Reflecting on these transformations in his autobiography *Pahini Rati (The Night Is Yet Over)* (2013), Jayanta Mahapatra recalls how Cuttack has undergone profound changes:

> Everything has changed—from the roads and the disappearance of hand-pulled rickshaws to the red-earth roads and the large banyan tree that once stood at the square. The memories of people struggling to carry the Dussehra *medhas*, the Muharram *tazias,* and the performances of the tiger dance also belong to a bygone era. (16)

Mahapatra's recollections reveal that the urbanisation of Cuttack not only changed its physical landscape but also led to the loss of familiar places, cultural practices, and collective memories that shaped the experience of the city. For Mahapatra, whose life and literary

imagination were deeply rooted in Cuttack, such changes acquired a personal significance. His writings reflect an intimate relationship with the city, making it an important source of his poetic imagination.

A City of One's Own

Jayanta Mahapatra who is a bilingual poet and is widely recognised as one of the unique voices in Indian English poetry was born and brought up in Cuttack where he spent most of his life. However, Mahapatra who is first to be awarded Sahitya Akademi Award for writing poetry in English, often described himself as essentially "an Oriya poet who incidentally writes in English" (Mahapatra 150). His self-description as an Odia is evident in his poetry. He has written a number of Odia poems exhibiting his love for the language, as his collections of poems in Odia include *Bali* (1993), *Kahibi Gotie Katha* (1995), *Baya Raja* (1997), *Tikie Chhayee* (2001), *Chali* (2006) and *Jadiba Gapatiayy* (2009).

His love for the land and its culture is not limited by any language as he has shown this time and again in his Odia as well as English poems. Many of his celebrated poems, including *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Bare Face* (2000), "Grandfather" (1983), "Hunger" *(*1976), *Relationship*" (1980), "Temple" (1989), and "Dawn at Puri" (1976), reflect this intimate engagement with regional history and memory. Both his Odia and English poems are deeply rooted in his lived experiences and emotional attachment to the land, culture, and people of Odisha. Among the many places that hold a significant space and shape his poetic imagination is Cuttack. Writing about the importance of Cuttack city in the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, the internationally acclaimed poet and critic Meena Alexander, who was deeply inspired by Mahapatra, writes in her book *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (1993) how Mahapatra's elegiac poetic voice was shaped by the city to which his life was so deeply anchored, "Through Jayanta, who had lived his whole life in Cuttack, I learnt to understand the poet's bond with place, learnt to

understand how the elegiac voice could gather sustenance from the landscape around, learnt, too, how to accept the ravages of time" (127).

Mahapatra's poetic career began at a very late stage in his life. His first volume of poems started appearing only in the 1970s. This period, as critics like E.V. Ramakrishnan and Syamsundar Padihari have observed, is marked with the emergence of modernist movement in Indian literature. As Ramakrishnan writes, "...the period between 1950 and 1970, marked the beginning of modernist writing in the major literary traditions of India" (129). Padihari places Mahapatra's poetry as "closer to the modernist movement of the first half of the last century with its open-ended form and reliance on recurring symbols to provide coherence to non-linear, fragmented structures" (Padihari 169).

Modernity, Modernism and Antiurban Imagination

It is imperative to distinguish modernity from modernism before there is any discussion on its relation to antiurban imagination. Here, modernity refers to the historical and social transformations associated with urban development, commercialisation, technological change, and altered ways of living. Modernism, by contrast, refers to the literary and artistic responses to the instability, alienation, and contradictions associated with modern life. In Mahapatra's poems, the transformations of urban modernity are explored through modernist poetic techniques. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of urban decline, the poems convey their critique through fragmented perceptions, symbolic imagery, silences, and unresolved questions.

Modernism was not merely a literary or artistic movement but a cultural response to the profound transformations brought about by industrialisation, urbanisation, and technological advancement (Childs 20). The rapid growth of cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries altered everyday life through new forms of labour, mobility, communication, and

social interaction, and these changes demanded new modes of representation. As a result, the modern city became both the material condition and the imaginative catalyst of modernist aesthetics. As Bart Keunen observes, "…many modernist writers strove to reassemble the fragmented city experience through their art" (277).

The relationship between modernity and modernism becomes clearer when modernism is understood in its historical context. Modernist writers and artists perceived the city as a space of intensity, fragmentation, and simultaneity. The crowded streets, mechanised rhythms, and fleeting encounters of urban life disrupted traditional notions of time, coherence, and identity which led modernists to experiment with form, narrative, and language. Techniques such as stream of consciousness, montage, and discontinuous imagery mirror the sensory overload and fractured experience of metropolitan existence (*The Spaces of the Modern City* 1). In this sense, modernism can be read as an attempt to render the lived reality of the modern city. As Gyan Prakash argues in the introduction to *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*:

> Modernism was a uniquely metropolitan phenomenon. Emerging from the tumultuous changes of the twentieth century, modernism represented the high-culture expressions of the city. As writers, poets, artists, architects, and filmmakers breathed the air of rapidly changing and growing cities, they were exhilarated by the new urban experience. For poets and novelists, the street appeared as the magical stage for the enactment of modern life. They found the chaotic energy of the traffic and the maelstrom of the crowd awe-inspiring. (3)

At the same time, the relationship between the city and modernism is marked by deep ambivalence. While the city symbolised progress, freedom, and creative possibility, it also generated feelings of alienation, anonymity, and moral dislocation. Modernist texts frequently register anxiety about the loss of community, the erosion of tradition, and the reduction of

human life to mechanical routine. Thus, the modern city appears in modernist literature both as a site of exhilaration and as a space of crisis.

Ultimately, modernism and the city are mutually constitutive- the city shaped modernist forms and sensibilities, while modernism provided new ways of seeing, interpreting, and critiquing urban life. The modern city, with its contradictions and complexities, stands as one of the defining forces behind modernist thought and expression. As Michael H. Whitworth, in his book *Modernism,* writes, "The city is the location where the more visible signs of modernity were to be found in the highest concentration..." (181). Whitworth's understanding of city as a site of modernity directs our attention to the transformative changes that industrial and technological revolution brought about in the city as well as how the city provided the necessary space for such transformation. These transformations not only generated narratives of progress, prosperity and modern civilisation but also narratives of corruption, depredation, violence and fear. While Whitworth portrays the positive transformative possibilities of modernity on the city, critics like Michael J. Thompson have drawn our attention to its darker consequences.

Tracing the history of antiurban sentiment in the 19th century, Thompson, in his introduction to the book *Fleeing the City: Studies in the Culture and Politics of Antiurbanism*, writes that the rise of modernity led to the formation of Country and City binary as well as the association of the city with "corruption" and the country with "authenticity" (3). He argues that since modernity was closely intertwined with urbanism, "the reaction against modernity would increasingly become associated with the antiurban impulse" (3). The expansion of industrial capitalism, accompanied by urbanisation, population growth, and immigration, challenged traditional conceptions of community, family, ethnicity, and social relationships. According to Thompson, while rural life was associated with familial and religious bonds, urban life increasingly appeared to weaken these traditional ties and alienate individuals from

forms of belonging perceived as authentic (3). His argument suggests that antiurban sentiment emerged "partly" from anxieties about the social and cultural disruptions brought about by modernity. It is "partly" because, according to Thompson, antiurbanism is not simply an emotional reaction to physical transformations of the modern urban space; rather, it is a form of human consciousness which has been shaped by urbanisation. As he argues "urbanization of consciousness has given rise, historically as well as today, to an *antiurbanized* consciousness" through which "cities and urban life more broadly are to be uniformly feared" (Thompson 1).

Thompson's formulation is particularly useful for understanding literary responses to the modern city where dissatisfaction with urban modernity does not necessarily entail an idealised return to rural life. Rather, the city itself may become the site through which the failures and contradictions of modernity are exposed. Mahapatra's urban poetry can be read within this broader antiurban sensibility. His poems express a deep aversion to the alienation, commodification, and moral and ecological degradation associated with urban modernity. Although Mahapatra's poems evoke premodern Cuttack as an alternative or idealised space, this evocation is not intended as an escape into the past. Rather, it serves as a means of critiquing the social, moral, and ecological transformations brought about by urban modernity, as his critique remains firmly located within the city, turning the urban landscape into a site of interrogation.

Antiurban imagination in Mahapatra's poems

In Mahapatra's urban poems, we see such an aversion to urban modernity. Although these antiurban sentiments in his poems result in a longing for a landscape unaffected by modernity, it also constructs an alternative vision of the city from which the transformations and contradictions of urban modernity can be critically examined. In his poem "Story of This

City,*"* Mahapatra offers a powerful and unsettling critique of capitalist urban modernity by exposing the moral, ecological, and emotional decay that accompanies a city driven by commerce and survival. Rejecting celebratory narratives of urban progress, the poem foregrounds a city emptied of history, compassion, and spiritual meaning. The poem's opening line "Don't tell me the story of this city/ My city is mysterious" signifies a resistance to the dominant narratives of urban life and insists on confronting the city's present reality (Mahapatra 39). The word "story" ordinarily suggests a sequence of events that can be narrated and understood, but the speaker refuses such a narrative. Further the expression city is "mysterious" complicates its representation. The city is familiar enough to be claimed as "my city," yet its present condition has become difficult to comprehend. This tension between intimacy and estrangement is characteristic of the modernist experience. The city remains an object of personal attachment, but the transformations it undergoes make it increasingly unfamiliar to the very person who identifies with it. The possessive "my" suggests belonging, whereas the refusal to tell its story signals a breakdown in the relationship between experience and representation. The speaker cannot simply narrate the city because its present reality resists the meanings through which it was previously understood.

Revealing the harsh reality of Modern Cuttack, Mahapatra from the very beginning of the poem writes, *"*This is a city of selling and buying" (Mahapatra 39). By naming the city simply as a place of commerce, the poem criticises capitalist modernity by associating it not with creativity or cultural vitality but with relentless economic exchange. This reduction of urban life to transactional relationships can be understood through Lindsay Rebecca Starck's discussion of Emile Durkheim's theory of "anomie." Drawing on Durkheim, Starck observes that "as society develops, it breaks down—causing individuals to suffer from anomie, the collective unease that stems from the dissolution of social structure and order. Capitalism in modernity was both impersonal and disorienting, substituting 'temporary transactions' in place

of the 'sustained human relations' that would counteract the effects of anomie" (qtd. in Starck 12). Starck's formulation illuminates Mahapatra's depiction of Cuttack as a space where economic exchange increasingly displaces enduring human relationships.

This criticism becomes even stronger when the speaker contrasts the city's past, "We once told stories of ancient ships," with its present condition, where "what remains now is calculation— / calculations of survival" (Mahapatra 39). This shift in culture from a city remembered through ancient maritime glories to a mere city of calculation reflects a gradual degradation of the city in the eyes of the speaker. According to legends, merchants once sailed to Java and Bali for trade from the coast of the Mahanadi River. To commemorate this maritime tradition, people celebrate Bali Yatra by floating miniature boats on the river, a ritual observed on Kartika Purnima, which falls in October or November every year. In Cuttack, the festival draws large crowds to the banks of the Mahanadi, where people gather to celebrate the historic voyages and commercial links between Odisha and Southeast Asia (Mishra 991). Hence, he critiques capitalist modernity as a system that reduces human life to economic logic.

The poem's most disturbing moment occurs when the speaker asks, "What does my city sell these days?" The answer reveals the city's complete ethical collapse: "Some bodies, / some hearts, / some souls." In this modern marketplace, human beings become commodities stripped of dignity and reduced to objects of exchange. The inclusion of "alcohol, opium, cannabis" further underscores the city's dependence on intoxication—not merely as escape, but as "the means / to keep oneself alive" (Mahapatra 39). Modern urban life is thus portrayed as spiritually unbearable, requiring constant numbing to endure. Further, the speaker goes on to write "I see nothing today. / Nor do I receive any answer," suggesting a breakdown of communication between the individual and the urban environment (Mahapatra 39). The city is no longer responsive or meaningful; it merely "dances in some unknown hunger" (Mahapatra 39). This hunger is never satisfied, symbolising the endless desire and consumption that drive modern

urban existence without offering fulfillment. Here alienation and silence dominate the speaker's experience of the city.

The poem deepens its critique by personifying time itself as wounded and violated: "I see only / the face of time: / someone has gouged out its eyes" (Mahapatra 39). The abstract concept of "time" acquires a face, but this face is mutilated. The image of gouged-out eyes suggests the destruction of vision, knowledge, and the ability to recognise the world. The smell of "burnt wounds" introduces a disturbing sensory dimension, making historical change appear not as gradual improvement but as violent injury. The image is modernist in its transformation of an abstract historical crisis into a grotesque bodily figure. Rather than offering a panoramic description of the city, the poem presents fragments of a damaged face. The reader encounters the city through disjointed images of injury, silence, hunger, and loss. These fragments convey a reality that no longer appears whole or harmonious.

The destruction of natural resources reinforces this sense of loss: "The two rivers are buried in sand," and there is "Neither the murmur of water / nor the sound of banyan leaves falling" (Mahapatra 40). The silencing of two rivers here alludes to both the Mahanadi and the Kathajodi, whose diminished presence in the poetic landscape evokes the ecological degradation of Cuttack. Similarly, the absence of the sound of falling banyan leaves suggests the disappearance of the natural elements that once shaped the city's sensory and lived experience. This marks the destructive force of capitalist urban modernity. In the eyes of ecological Marxists, the capitalist mode of production which prioritises maximisation of profit over environmental sustainability is responsible for all kinds of ecological crisis. Further, they emphasise capitalism "has made the relationship not only between bourgeoisie and proletariat but also between man and ecology worse" (Zhiyan Li 214).

One of the poem's most haunting images appears when the speaker describes the rivers as "the two dried breasts of my city" (Mahapatra 40). This metaphor evokes a city incapable of nurturing its inhabitants, drained of life-giving resources. Even the river, traditionally a symbol of continuity and sustenance, looks back at the speaker "in fear," suggesting a reversal of human–nature relations where nature itself becomes vulnerable under modern exploitation.

The poem concludes by questioning the possibility of moral or spiritual life within such a city: "And its heart? / What is a heart / in a city of selling and buying?" (Mahapatra 40). The city's heart exists "under a mountain of sin," trapped in "nameless fear." Prayer and repentance lose meaning in a world governed entirely by exchange value. Urban modernity here is exposed as a condition that erodes ethical consciousness and renders spiritual reflection hollow. Further, the "mountain of sin" suggests accumulated wrongdoing, but the identity of the guilty remains unspecified. This unresolved ending is important marker of a modernist poem as the poem does not offer a final moral explanation or a clear path towards restoration. Its questions remain unanswered, leaving the reader within the uncertainty experienced by the speaker. The absence of resolution becomes part of the poem's meaning. The form of the poem too reinforces this crisis through free verse, short lines, repetition, abrupt pauses, and unanswered questions.

Like the poem *"Story of This City,"* which offers a pessimistic vision of urban modernity by portraying Cuttack as a space of commodification, ecological ruin, and moral exhaustion, the poem "Saw Today" offers a sombre and deeply critical reflection on urban modernity, presenting the contemporary city as a space of ecological destruction, historical amnesia, and emotional exhaustion. The poem opens with the speaker witnessing "great preparations / for a new seven-storey building" in his "old city," immediately framing urban development as intrusive rather than progressive (Mahapatra 41). The emphasis on preparation rather than completion suggests a city perpetually under construction, caught in a restless cycle of growth that disregards its tradition and natural life.

This restless process of development is not portrayed as creative but as destructive force which wreaks havoc on the natural environment of the city. The speaker senses that "a small voice / rising from the soil / was suddenly evaporated/ in the darkness of night," implying that urban modernity silences the subtle presences of nature, memory, and history embedded in the land (Mahapatra 41). Development here functions as an erasure which replaces rootedness with emptiness and darkness. The poem explicitly foregrounds ecological violence through the image of severed trees. By asking "what do the roots/ of decapitated trees desire?", the speaker exposes the moral blindness of modern urban planning, which destroys life while refusing to acknowledge its consequences (Mahapatra 41). The unanswered question suggests that the city has lost its capacity for ethical listening.

Urban modernity in the poem is also marked by pervasive anxiety. The city's atmosphere is one "where only human dread reigns," indicating that fear, rather than hope or community, governs modern urban existence (Mahapatra 41). The speaker's repeated questions lead to resignation, revealing a loss of faith in dialogue within a system driven by power and speed. One of the poem's most powerful critiques of modernity appears in its metaphor of violated peace. Progress is imagined not as enlightenment but as an animalistic force that destroys intimacy and rest. The city's erasure of sleep, night, and calm signals a modern life governed by relentless productivity and violence against the human spirit.

> We have forgotten peace—
> that peace which, like a woman,
> would rather commit suicide
> than be raped
> by the animal called progress. (Mahapatra 41)

In response to these brutal effects of modernity, the speaker situates himself as an "old-fashioned man/ I wish to climb ancient mountains—/ Kapilas, Saptasajya," aligning his sensibility with landscapes untouched by urban aggression (Mahapatra 42). His longing for ancient mountains signifies a desire to reconnect with places that carry historical, cultural, and spiritual significance.

Kapilas and Saptasajya are hills in Dhenkanal district of Odisha, nearly sixty kilometres from Cuttack city. Kapilas is known for its Shiva temple, while Saptasajya is associated with religious legends and the Ramayana. By invoking these places, the speaker turns towards a landscape that represents an enduring connection with tradition, spirituality, and nature which stand in stark opposition to the city's mechanised ethos. His desire to climb these ancient mountains, therefore, reflects an impulse to seek an alternative to the conditions of modern urban life, offering a point of contrast from which its dislocations can be critically examined. As Stephen Legg argues, "nostalgia can actually be radically critical," since "a melancholic relation to the past could in fact represent a refusal to accept dominant narratives" (488).

The speaker's self-identification as "old-fashioned" similarly signals his refusal to embrace the values of a modern world defined by urban aggression and mechanical progress. His desire to return to the "ancient" thus becomes a way of imagining continuity, harmony, and a deeper relationship with place—values that modernity appears to have disrupted. In this sense, nostalgia functions as a form of resistance: by invoking an older landscape and way of being, the speaker implicitly questions the assumption that modernisation necessarily represents human progress. Reflecting on this troubled relationship between the forces of modernity and nostalgia, Peter Fritzsche writes, "Nostalgia stalks modernity as an unwelcome double, a familiar symptom of unease in the face of political and economic transformation, plain evidence also for the persistent inability to acknowledge the destruction of tradition or to work with the materials of the present" (62).

While the discomforts of modernity evoke nostalgia in the speaker, they simultaneously embolden politicians and government officials to arrogantly "stretch their hands toward the sky," oblivious to the ecological devastation wrought by their exercise of authority (Mahapatra 42). As the speaker writes:

Silently, I watch
today's politicians
and government officers
stretch their hands toward the sky. (Mahapatra 42)

Further, the ecological consequences of urban modernity are poignantly captured in the image of birds fleeing toward the last traces of shelter. Their vulnerability in the face of restless modernisation mirrors the precarious survival of nature within the modern city.

...small birds fly away
toward the shade
of the last remaining leaves. (Mahapatra 42)

As the poem moves toward its conclusion, the city becomes an overwhelming soundscape of traffic, processions, and a frenetic pace of life. Against this noise, the speaker searches not for progress but for time itself—time that could restore memory, ancestry, and a sense of belonging. "Amid the noise of traffic, / the roar of processions, / the new Japani pace of life," the speaker has lost the sense of connectivity with the land he was once familiar with. Hence, he again becomes nostalgic:

I search only for time—
to bring my dead father
and grandfather,

to stand once more

in our lost, dream-filled courtyard. (Mahapatra 43)

Here the poem moves from an account of collective loss to the personal loss of the speaker. Further through the image of the lost courtyard, the speaker imagines a premodern urban space rooted in intimacy, imagination, and continuity. However, he is also aware that the recovery of this lost world is impossible therefore he is trying to reconstruct his past through memory. Here, Peter Fritzsche's understanding of nostalgia as a response to modernity becomes particularly relevant. Nostalgia can serve as a coping mechanism through which individuals seek to preserve their sense of belonging to a place that has increasingly become a source of alienation.

As Fritzsche quoting Marshall Berman writes, "Nostalgia typically illustrates the incapacity of contemporaries; it takes the measure of the distance people have fallen short in their efforts to make themselves 'at home in a constantly changing world" (qtd. in Fritzsche 62). Thus, the lost courtyard represents precisely that sense of being 'at home' which the modern city can no longer provide. In "Saw Today," urban modernity is thus exposed as a destructive force that alienates humans from nature, memory, and themselves. The poem resists narratives of development and progress by foregrounding loss, silence, and ethical unease, offering instead a deeply personal and ecological critique of the modern city.

Conclusion

"Saw Today" and "Story of This City" reveal how Cuttack becomes, in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic imagination, not merely a material space but an emotional and cultural landscape shaped by personal memory, belonging, and loss. Through images of commodification, ecological degradation, moral erosion, and the desire to reconnect with an older landscape, the poems register the transformations that have altered the speaker's

relationship with the city. These representations construct an antiurban imaginary of Cuttack that challenges celebratory narratives of urban progress and modernity. The city's material transformation is thus inseparable from the erosion of the cultural, ethical, and emotional associations through which it acquires meaning. Mahapatra's poems bring into focus the tension between Cuttack's place as a city of historical and cultural significance and its contemporary existence as a space increasingly shaped by commercial interests and the disruptive consequences of urban modernity.

Mahapatra's critique of urban modernity emerges, therefore, from a nostalgic longing for the cityscape that has been transformed by urbanisation. However, this nostalgia is not simply an idealisation of the past or an attempt to escape the present. Rather, it becomes a mode of resistance through which the poet questions the social, moral, and ecological costs of urban transformation. His evocation of an older landscape and a deeper relationship with place offers a critical perspective from which the assumptions underlying modern urban progress can be reconsidered. Although the poems express an aversion to aspects of contemporary urban life, they do not necessarily reject the city itself; instead, they mourn the erosion of the relationships, values, and memories that have historically made Cuttack meaningful to its inhabitants. By foregrounding the tensions between development and belonging, material progress and ethical well-being, the poems invite a reconsideration of what constitutes a meaningful urban life. Mahapatra's poetic engagement with Cuttack thus demonstrates how nostalgia can become a critical response to modernity, keeping open the possibility of imagining a more humane, ecologically sensitive, and historically conscious relationship between the city and its inhabitants.

Note

[1] All translations from the Odia poems discussed in this article are my own.

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