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Jhargram: Heart of Poet's Existence

Ruchi Singh

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Zakir Husain Delhi College
University of Delhi
New Delhi, India

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Abstract: In my paper titled 'Jhargram: Heart of Poet's Existence' I have explored the physical, social and cultural elements of Jhargram and its relationship with the poet Jaydeep Sarangi as expressed in his collection of poems *Faithfully, I Wait: Poems on rain, thunder and lightning at Jhargram and Beyond*. This relationship between the poet and his native place has been analysed to determine the effects of Jhargram and its environment on the psychology of the poet, its contribution in the formation of his individual and collective identity, and the poet's attachment with his native place.

Keywords: Jhargram, Identity, Topography, Existence.

Mapping of place and situating the self in it has been a recurrent theme in literary works across the world and over the ages. In literature we find prolific accounts of places, fictional as well as real. 'The Wessex' of Thomas Hardy, 'London' of Charles Dickens, 'Dublin' of Joyce, 'Lake District' of Wordsworth, 'America' of Walt Whitman, 'St.Lucia' of Derek Walcott, 'Ireland' of Seamus Heaney, 'Malgudi' of R.K.Narayan, 'Kashmir' of Aga Shahid Ali, 'Bombay' of Nissim Ezekiel, 'Orissa' of Jayanta Mahapatra are all textual maps of places imbued with physical, sensory, and emotional details evoking photographic impression of the flora and fauna, its culture and



tradition, and other facts known only to the original inhabitants of the place. In the act of creating/recreating these places the writers have engaged in a generative act of constructing the self thereby acknowledging that a place plays a significant role in shaping and defining an individual's identity and the way that identity is defined by others. Literary theories like postcolonialism and ecocriticism also investigate the intersections of place and individuals in various contexts and examine the continuous connection between the land and the people who inhabit it, most importantly the natives, thereby offering important insights into the relationship between person and place.

To this illustrious group of writers belongs Jaydeep Sarangi, a contemporary Indian poet from West Bengal, India. An academician by profession, Sarangi is a renowned poet, a translator and a critic. To his credit are many edited books on Postcolonial literature and Australian literature along with his remarkable contribution to Indian literature. He is on the editing board of many prestigious national and international journals. Apart from being a passionate academician, an accomplished writer and a gregarious person, Sarangi is also an activist whose contribution to Dalit literary movement and Bangla Dalit literature cannot go unnoticed.

As a critic, Jaydeep Sarangi has edited and authored thirty-one books on different literary genres. Some of his remarkable works are, *Raja Rao: The Master and His Moves* (2008), *Indian Novels in English: A Sociolinguistic Study* (2005), *Jayanta Mahapatra: Joy Of Living And Loving In His Poetry* (2011), *Indian English Poetry: Identity Representation And Authenticity* (2011), *Exploration in Australian Literature* (2011), *Subaltern Speaks: Selected Essays on Sharankumar Limbale* (2015), *Diasporic Literature in English* (2016), *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* (co-edited with Sharankumar Limbale (2018), His upcoming book is a translation of Subodh Sarkar's poems *Not in My Name*.

Jaydeep Sarangi established his career as a poet with his collection of poems titled *From Dulong To Beas: Flow of the Soul* published in 2012. It was no looking back from there and now he



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has eminent presence in the galaxy of Indian poets writing in English. His poetic works are his collections of poems namely, *Silent Days* (2013), *A Door – Somewhere* (2014), *The Wall and Other Poems* (2015), *To Whom I Return Each Day* (2017) and *Faithfully, I Wait* (2017). *Laal Palasher Renu* is the only collection of poems in his mother tongue Bengali.

As one ploughs through poetry of Jaydeep Sarangi, one finds that almost all his collections are imbued with the strong presence of place to which his latest collection of poems *Faithfully, I Wait: Poems on rain, thunder and lightning at Jhargram and Beyond* is not an exception. Sarangi is in the league of writers who have the genius to enliven and immortalise the place that have become synonymous with their creators. A constant presence in the poet's internal life, Jhargram is a small district in the state of West Bengal, India. This place is an ideal destination for people who love forests. The fascinating ancient temples, royal palaces, and folk tunes and rhythms make this place irresistible. Jhargram shares borders with the State of Orissa on the South and on the West with the Jharkhand State. As we go through the poems in the collection *Faithfully, I Wait: Poems on rain, thunder and lightning at Jhargram and Beyond*, we immediately grasp the intimate bond the poet shares with his ancestral as well as birth place Jhargram. Jaydeep Sarangi's ancestors migrated from Orissa and settled in Jhargram ages ago. The poet himself was born in Jhargram and his entire childhood was spent there. His ancestors had served as the priests of the main temple at Jhargram. It was here that he lost his brother and went through the pain of struggling with his ailing mother. He made some everlasting childhood bonds of friendship at Jhargram. His parents continue to stay at Jhargram, his wife Sutapa works at a government college in the town and her dear daughter studies here. The rock solid bond with the place determines the extent of his rootedness and is much stronger than is visible in his poetry.

The forest enclosed town Jhargram is specific to Sarangi's poems charting dynamic relationships with people and its environment. The poet's personal affection and interest in his native place is the underlying force that drives him to write on his ancestral town famous for its wooded beauty and topography. In my paper titled 'Jhargram: Heart of Poet's Existence' I have explored the physical, social and cultural elements of Jhargram and its relationship with the poet



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Jaydeep Sarangi as expressed in his collection of poems *Faithfully, I Wait: Poems on rain, thunder and lightning at Jhargram and Beyond*. This relationship between the poet and his native place has been analysed to determine the effects of Jhargram and its environment on the psychology of the poet, its contribution in the formation of his individual and collective identity, and the poet's attachment with his native place.

Amongst many other factors that contribute to the formation of an identity place plays a vital role in conceptualization of the individual self. The constant sense of being associated with a place instills a sense of rootedness in an individual. The socio-cultural processes, physical attributes of the place and its people all contribute in shaping the identity of a person. Place and identity are inextricably bound to one another in Sarangi's poems. His poems explore the intervention of place in reproduction of individual as well as collective identity. Jhargram is the treasure house of varied dimensions of the tribal community the Santhals, their collective priorities, the skills of their implementation and the philosophies that inform them. Besides the tribal culture, Jhargram also encompasses the rural Bengali traditions, customs festivals and values. The place is witness to the amalgamation of diverse cultures of the tribals, Bengali and the Oriya. Santali and Bangla are the languages spoken here. It is this camaraderie and fellowship that forms the basis of strong community experiences which informs the poet's personality. There is belongingness and feeling of brotherhood in his village where "days end peacefully" (Sarangi 7). It is here that people are gratified with their ethnic culture, worship nature and where "Mind is free" (17). People in Jhargram "plant the trees of brotherhood," form "peninsulas of peace" and "home of hearts." (17). His people, the tribals and other village folks not only make promises but also keep those promises, they live by them, their promises are more than just words. Jhargram is a land of love where every moment is drowned in joy and cheers, smiles and laughter, caring and sharing where "No heartbreak is overlooked" (16). Individuals like Sarangi who share have tenacious affiliations with their place also exhibit unflinching sense of community cohesion. They maintain their ties to the local place and community because they feel that they belong there. Such individuals willingly contribute to their local place. The poet's awareness with the life of the tribals who are outside the



caste system of the Indian caste hierarchy has also affected his decision to become an activist fighting for the upliftment of the oppressed. The poet sings about the tribals and dalits of his village, the marginalised communities.

The poet also acknowledges the contribution of attributes of local communities in shaping his personal identity. He writes, “My laurels are made of forest leaves” (7) and everything good in the poet is a reflection of the village of Jhargram as he says “My roots lie, the kindly one live”(7). Jhargram represents the collective force of the community, the forest, temple, Dulung, consolidated in the poet. The Kanakdurga temple speaks of the past, the history of the people of Jhargram. In the poem ‘Lump on my back’, the poet tells us about how his morality is formed by this forest enclosed town. The identity of the poet is rooted in the memory of his hometown and its community. Jhargram is the place “where everything ends in love” (8). Personal experiences associated with a place and its people are a part of one’s being. As the poet confesses that without his past he is like a semicolon, punctuated and incomplete (30). He gives expression to the everyday connection an individual has with his place and local spaces which give meaning to his life in the present. The memories and values of these places are a continuous source of bliss amidst the din of the city and hopeful future.

A study of any place encompasses an investigation of its physical features which include the natural and built environment. Natural environment includes every living and non-living thing which occurs naturally while built in environment consists of all that is man-made. Two very prominent physical features of environment in Sarangi’s collection of poems, one natural and one built environment, are the river Dulung and the Kanakdurga temple, respectively. The poem ‘Dulong’ is about the passage of time. The small rivers remind the poet of the death, the life that moves on leaving behind the footprints of the ancestors and those who have died. It is in the land of river Dulung that the poet belongs. His past and present can be known here. The poet says that the tradition of and his roots in rural Bengal become the sap of his poetic zeal. He sings of small rivers and life associated with them as that is his poetic passion. The river Dulong takes a natural course of life remaining untouched by the artificial changes. It has maintained its originality, unblemished



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by the city life. It is on the banks of this river that people live a happy life in their happy abodes. The river is also a witness to many stories of the past and the present generations. The old temple Kanakdurga is a witness to the poet's wavering life of childhood. In it are preserved the childhood memories of the poet (7). The poem 'Temple Kanakdurga' traces the journey of the poet from the forest to the city, the forest representing the unconscious and the city the conscious self of the poet. The temple is situated in the midst of Nature through the dense Jamboni forest, also called Kanak Aranya. The forest is also known as the 'Gateway of Bengal' because it is located in the border area between West Bengal and Jharkhand. The temple is a symbol of energy and power. The temple is situated in Chilkigarh which has a mixed culture of Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand. Kanak means gold, the idol in the temple is made up of gold. Sarangi's ancestors had served as main priests of the temple. There is also a medicinal plant garden in the forest. The forest drives the poet and his senses revel in it. The forest lane and the journey through the forest paints its picture on the mind. The wilderness is a strong force that drives the poet's sensibilities. The murmur of the rivulet flowing through the forest makes him nostalgic of the years spent in the green woods. The experience is so exhilarating, it is difficult to contain it and "breathing stops" (32). The rivulet is a witness to many stories, several births. The rivulet prompts us to recall Alfred Tennyson's 'The Brook' that represents permanence of Nature and transient human life for "For men may come and men may go, But I go on forever." The poet is reminded of the peace of the land and its people and he also prays for the continuation of this peaceful life in the forest land. There is history in every tree planted in Jhargram and the forest, they form a lovely company, small birds twitter here, which are rarely to be seen in the city, "Red soil has its charm, deep morning hues." (42). These locations in Jhargram are subjects of deep affection and bond for the poet. These natural and built places in Jhargram promote restoration of the emotional self of the poet enlivening the spirit. They have a therapeutic value and restorative qualities.

A strong affinity with a place also creates awareness for ecological system making people sensitive towards environmental issues. The poem 'Living Green' from the collection reflects the poet's concern with environment issues. The epigraph of the poem "The poetry of earth is never



dead” (63) is the first line of John Keats poem ‘On the Grasshopper and the Cricket’. Keats, an admirer of sensuous beauty, finds nature pleasant in all its seasons. He conjures up the images from the physical world and its natural surroundings. Poetry on nature never cease to exist. There will always be someone to appreciate something from the world of Nature. The sound of grasshopper in summers and cricket in winters reminds that Nature will always express itself in different forms. Remembering Keats, the poet mourns the destruction of the ecological system of the world-fading greens and drying rivers. The poem is a call for letting earth breathe by saving nature and its inhabitants, the trees, the rivers and the oceans thereby save dreams for the future generations. His poems highlight not only his attitude towards nature but they also force its readers to contemplate on the contemporary ecological problems and bio disaster across the globe, particularly India. Sarangi’s poetry contributes to consciousness raising in construction of nature and saving the natural surroundings, seeking to increase awareness. He feels this urge to protect the land because he finds himself to be a caretaker of nature (14).

The poet conjures up sensory images that combine sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, imagination, purpose and anticipation. Though the poet resides in Kolkatta, away from his ancestral place Jhargram, nevertheless his synaesthetic associations with the place remain intense. Whenever the poet visits Jhargam, its smell and feel restore the spirit of homecoming. Myriads of sensorial elements in his poems allow the readers to feel, see, and hear the same experience as the poet has conceived enabling the reader to associate with Jhargram through enhanced poetic images of the place. The poems create haptic, olfactory, auditory, and visual images generating sensory landscapes. Sarangi describes the flora and fauna of Jhargram, its colours, its flame. In the poem ‘For My Ancestors’, the poet paints a calm, beautiful and peaceful picture of his native place. He cherishes the smell and taste of the food and rice cooked in earthen pots. He sleeps in the mud houses, on beds without bed sheets, which smell fresh with the fragrance of white jasmine. This is not uncomfortable rather the “human wall collapse” (17) here and the poet slips into a peaceful sleep. The fresh smell of woods and the forest after rain mesmerises him (17). It was in this ‘red



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soil' that the seeds were planted by the poets father. The rain is so fresh in his mind that it reminds him of his first love Jhargram even when in Calcutta (41). This red soil is the poets first love.

Sarangi's strong attachment with this small forest enclosed town Jhargram juxtaposes the warmth of community living with the stress of dense urban living. The life in city is opposed to the life in the poet's ancestral village. The cramped spaces, dividing walls, betrayal, disloyalty are a part of everyday life of the city in which he now lives. He has gradually become a part of this urban milieu but he is yet apart from it in his sensibilities, thoughts and views and he waits "faithfully" for his mind and heart to be stirred, his senses to go wild, for the heart brimming with exuberance and excitement of the sense, emotional outburst, flooded with thoughts, ideas and words. He is reminded of the sweet and sour memories of the past, where every small thing has life of its own, a story of its own. The poet still holds onto the values of the past, the culture in which he has grown up, the love and camaraderie he learnt growing up in his Jhargram. These values are like police patrolling that keep him in control in his city life. This system is at odds with the morality of the city life. In his Jhargram no policing is necessary to install law and order, it comes naturally. The human system of love and warmth flows through him (45). He still finds himself not in conformity with the city life where it is a technical existence life divided by caste, religion, class, people following structure made up of hierarchy amongst human beings. The people of Jhargram are "My people", "My blood" (47) which represents the sameness of culture and values and heart, they are leaves of the same tree. The poet yearns "for a sweet home else where" (51) close to nature where inhabitants have a mission to live a peaceful life. It is the thoughts of and visits to his ancestral place, the temple Kanakdurga, a walk on the shores of Dulung and through the Jhamboni forest that brew a storm of feelings in his heart and jolt the mind, the words ready to be penned as poetry. These are moments that the poet faithfully waits for, that inspire him, motivate him, stir him up, awaken his senses, enlighten his mind all these and more lead to creativity and results in poetry. Life in a small town village is not manipulated, relationships are not based on give and take policy.



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A place to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties provides a profound centre of human existence and is part of the complex processes through which individuals and groups define themselves. Jhargram is the soul of Sarangi's collection of poems. Mapping Jhargram by rendering the topographical details, its natural and constructed landscapes, reproducing its synaesthetic impression, invoking the cosmological and spiritual life of Jhargram, Sarangi fervently affixes himself to a place of his inner being. The poems render the poet's emotional and psychological engagement with his ancestral place. This place gives meaning and substance to the poet's life experiences and relationships. It fulfils his emotional needs as well as enable the poet to develop and maintain his identity. Wherever he may go, wherever his place of residence be, Jhargram is the spirit that abides in him-his heart and soul. It is fundamental to his existence, an anchor for his personal and cultural identity that gives significance to his life. Jaydeep Sarangi's poems colour local and small things in life. At the same time, he goes beyond definite territory and geographical plane revealing the human emotions of love and sympathy. We await more such collections of poems brimming with intensity and passion.

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