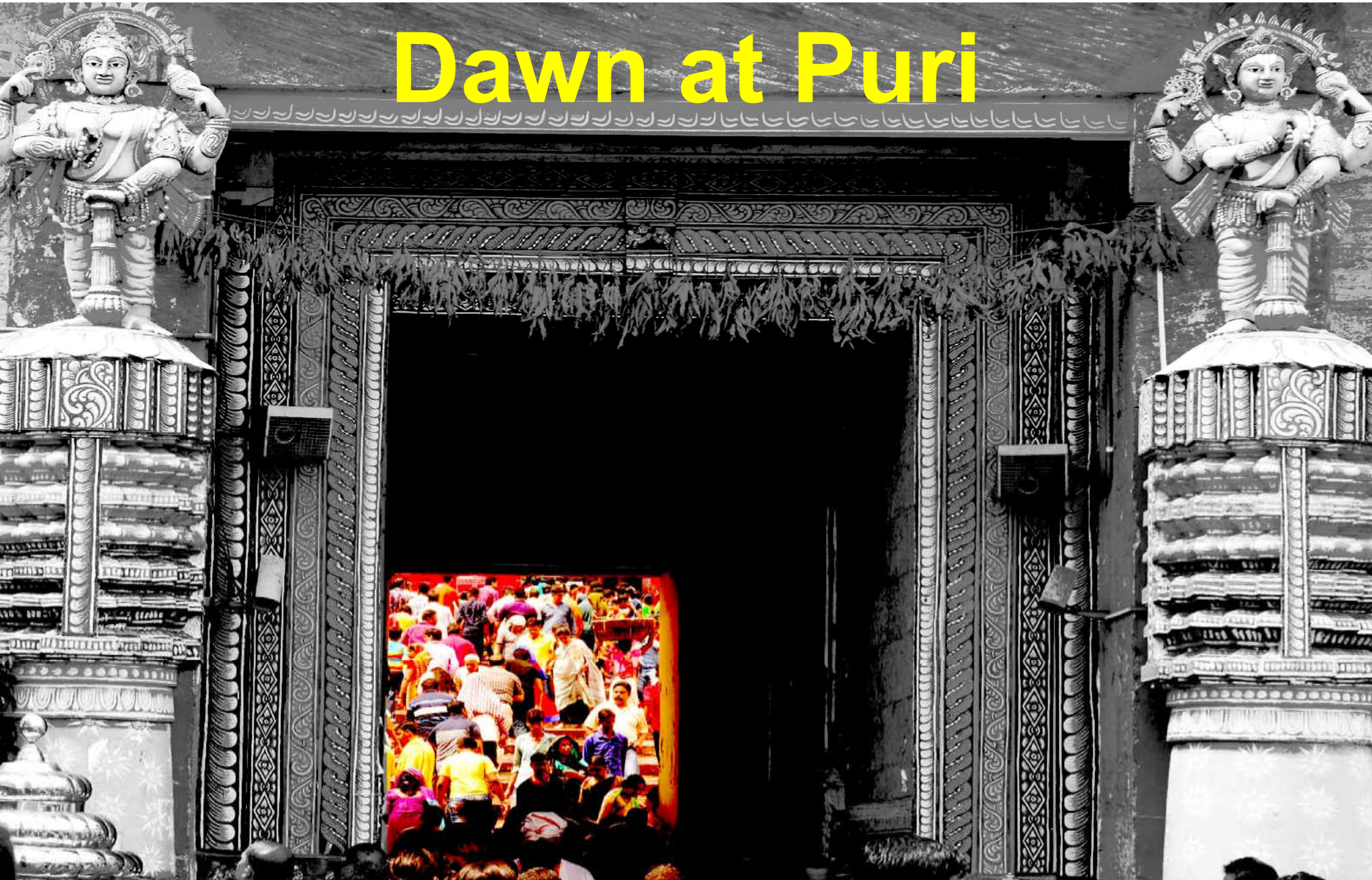


Dawn at Puri



Introduction

"Dawn at Puri" by Jayanta Mahapatra is a poem about his favourite pre-occupation – the intricate blend of human suffering and faith.

Orissa we know is known as the Temple State.

Puri is the epitome of such a description.

As the home of Lord Jagannatha, Puri has remained the most favoured destination of the devout.

Here however, the poet does not take us to the temple.

He stops at the beach – at Swargadwar – the crematorium of Puri.

This is also a holy place since Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is said to have disappeared from here.

Stanza 1

endless crow
dises

skull in the
holy sands

ts its empty
country towards
unger.

- The crow in Hindu mythology refers to the ancestors is connected to the funeral rites.
- Hence the reference of the crow in the first line presents the image of death from the very beginning and stresses on the fact that the poem is not one of faith but of death and wasting away.
- Like the crow the skull mentioned in the 2nd line also reinforces the idea of death.
- The skull indicates an incompletely burnt corpse.
- It is the symbol of a body that still lingers even after life has ebbed away from it.
- The word 'holy' is ironical since the skull is beyond all such considerations.
- Also to be holy one needs to completely burn a dead body – which has not been done in this case.



Stanza 1 ... continued

The word 'country' has a telescopic effect.

From / through the skull the poet has seen the country and the vision is similar.

The country, like the skull is empty – devoid of all meaning and significance / importance.

The poet is also hungry. The tilt of the skull refers to the act of pointing at. This [hunger] is the strongest image found in the poems of Mahapatra.

This world is the world of hunger that has to be satisfied somehow.

The combined effect of emptiness and hunger nullifies all echoes of the place that the poet might have had for the poet.

Stanza ... 2

White-clad
widowed
women

ast the
nters of
eir lives

re waiting
enter the
reat Temple

- **White** is the colour of sacrifice and purity in Indian mythology.
- The mention of the widows is inevitably connected to the death of their husbands – their freedom from patriarchy. Unfortunately the 'skull' remains unburnt. It is a reminder of the vestige of control that still monitors their life.
- Perhaps the poet wants to say that their widowhood has decentered their lives. It may also be that their husbands had been the 'centers' of their lives. But the absence of a husband does not automatically mean freedom for them.
- They are now locating an alternative object for their surrender: the temple.
- But significantly, they do not enter. They only wait.

Widows



Stanza ... 3

their austere
eyes

are like
those caught
in a net

hanging by
the dawn's
fading
strands of
faith.

- The eyes of the widows are supposed to be 'austere': 'hard'
- But these eyes only betray their helplessness.
- The poet uses a simile.
- He compares the eyes of the widows caught in the net of life with the fish caught in the net of the fisherman.
- Both of them are past help. Hence they can only 'stare'.
- Yet they try to present their helplessness as mark of their faith and repose this faith on god.
- But their faith is actually the net that has trapped them and has forced them to lead this helpless life.
- We understand that the poet does not view the faith of these women with kindness. He is ironical in his observation.



Stanza ... 4

... fail early
... catches

... ined,
... rous shells
... aning
... ainst one
... other,

... mass of
... ouched
... ces without
... mes,

- The image of the widows is being superimposed onto another image: the image of beggars [perhaps afflicted by leprosy] sitting outside the temple doors because:

A] they are not allowed entry into the temple.

B] they are not interested in god. God is only the object to sketch a living.

- The beggars also remind us of the dead sea-shells heaped on to one another.
- We thus get another image of death in this stanza.
- These people are identified only in their mass. They do not have any individual entity.

Mass of Crouched Faces without Names



Stanza ... 5

and suddenly
breaks out of
my hide

to the smoky
haze of a
solitary
pyre

that fills my
aging mother:

- The word 'hide' refers to the skin of the animals. It is considered to be thick and insensitive.
- The poet has evidently forgotten the last wish of his mother. Therefore he refers to his skin as 'hide'.
- The smoke coming out of a single pyre burning at a crematorium reminds him of the last wish of his mother.
- The 'solitary pyre' is the symbol of loneliness which his mother had evidently been a victim of.
- We also notice that the image of the widows is replaced by the image of the 'aging mother' of the poet.
- Evidently both the images present a single human being.
- Like the widows, the mother of the poet was also helpless.

Stanza ... 6

er last wish to
e cremated
ere

twisting
ncertainly like

ght
n the shifting
nds

- The word 'twisting' refers to a complicated posture
- The last wish of the mother has now taken a twisted form in the mind of the poet.
- Both the smoke coming from the pyre and the light falling on the shifting sand on the edge of the sea are 'twisted'.
- It refers to an enlightenment which has arrived on him quite suddenly and has twisted his thoughts into a new shape.
- By not keeping the last wish of his mother he has wronged her and this feeling comes to him as he sees the widows in the early light of dawn.
- His mother, like those widows were helpless and uncentered. She also died that way: uncared for and unwept.