

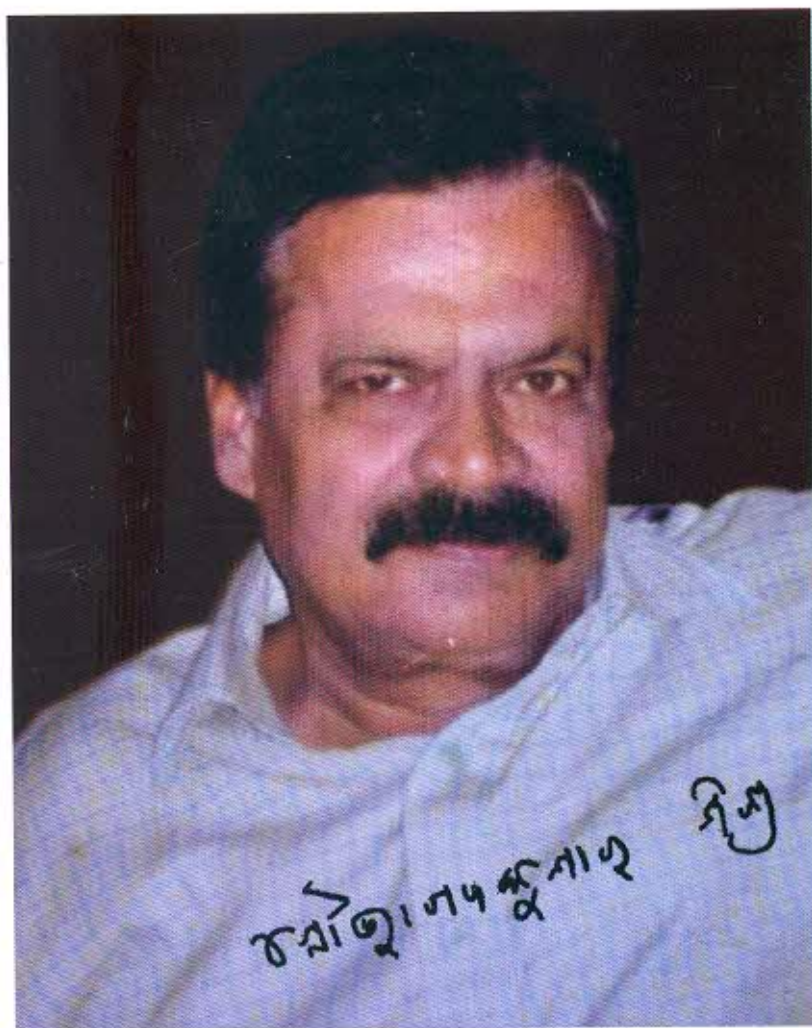
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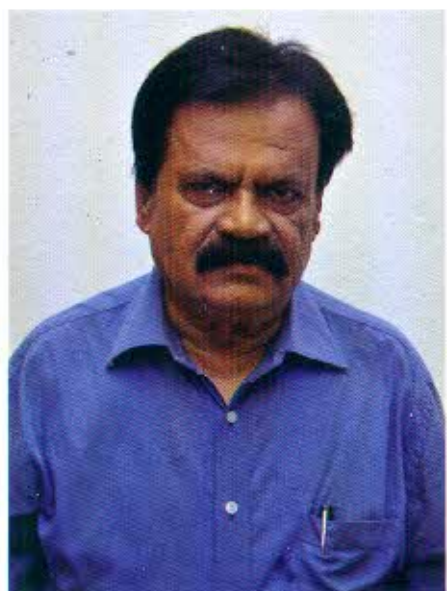


Sahitya Akademi

meet the author

Soubhagyakumar Misra





Dr Soubhagyakumar Misra is a distinguished Indian poet writing in Odia. He was born in Berhampur, Odisha in 1941. Till the age of twelve, he did not have any formal schooling. Soon after he was admitted to a High School, however, he proved himself to be a meritorious student. As a boy he was greatly interested, not in games and sports, but in classical Odisha Music. He sang traditional chhandas, champus and choupadies composed by Upendra Bhanja, Kavisurya Baladev Ratha and Gopal Krishna Pattanayak.

The beauty and artistry of those songs captured the boy's imagination and he decided to be a poet. His early writings naturally were imitative, but when, one of his teachers advised him to read some contemporary poems, he read a few and soon his diction and style became "modernized". Misra's first poem in the new style was published in the school magazine. He was excited to see his name in print.

At college Misra met the celebrated modern Odia poet Guruprasad Mohanty who had a deep impact not only on the young poet's writings but also on his personality. Mohanty introduced him to Eliot's works, especially to *The Waste Land*. To a seventeen year old, Eliot was tough, but Misra somehow loved the imagery and rhythm of the great poem. Later in his M.A. class, Misra studied the poem more rigorously and became acquainted with Eliot's poetics.

Soubhagyakumar Misra served as a Lecturer in English in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack and B.J.B College, Bhubaneswar before he left for Berhampur University. He joined Berhampur University as a Reader and then became a Professor and retired as such in 2001. Dr Misra has always enjoyed the reputation of being a very competent teacher of English and American Literature.

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Author of several collections of poetry Soubhagyakumar Misra shot into fame in the 1970s as an authentic poetic voice in Odia literature. His readers never failed to note the sincerity of his utterances, and looked upon him as one of the leading figures in Odia poetry. Over the years he has perfected a style that is at once simple and complex, which his followers have tried to imitate without much success.

Atmanepadi, his first collection of poems, was published in 1965 and was followed by *Madhya-padalopi* in 1970. In one of the

poems of the latter collection, the poet announces that his world is now much larger than what it was before. In fact the world depicted in his poetry is full of people, animals, birds, and inanimate objects, which are transformed into images of lasting beauty:

- (a) Three months after, again,
The bony consciousness
Leaps like a new-born
heifer in the sun...
("Three Months After")
- (b) Your village
A bit of flesh
At the tip of the
River's bayonet...
("Near the Tamarind Tree")
- (c) The last sun stopped near him
For a moment,
Put off all the lights and left
Like the watchman
Of an empty bungalow...
("Picnic at Taptapani")

In his later works, there are several pieces which contain only a series of images each and the poet establishes no link between them. The reader is left with the task of deciphering their meaning. Moreover, short narratives, comprising very ordinary incidents, are incorporated into many of his poems. Ultimately, the narratives assume an unanticipated significance. The narrator remains a detached observer throughout.

This method invests Misra's language with a certain

degree of concreteness and familiarity and as such the poems are eminently accessible. In a poem called "Genda", the Odia *Bhagabata* and several other images, are put together, rather playfully. Misra often understates his serious concerns as a poet and he treats the poem as a play of words. He pokes fun at himself and at all his experiences.

If one asks him what his themes are, Soubhagya Misra would invariably smile and say that he does not write essays, he writes poems. It often appears that the most important theme of his poetry is poetry itself. But he is no aesthete. In his third and fourth collections of poems, *Nai Panhara* (A Swim in the River, 1973) and *Andha Mahumachhi* (The Blind Bee, 1977), the title poems propose the theme of total immersion in experience. The speaker in the first poem says, "What else is left on the land?"



With a showcase of awards



With his wife

Come, let's jump into the river waters". The second poem urges the bee to suck honey from everything, from flowers as well as from leprous wounds, for honey is to be found everywhere. Good and bad, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong etc are philosophical categories which are summarily rejected by the poet. Moreover, the two poems in question are replete with images of suffering:

Insane old father wakes and
falls asleep
and wakes again.

In the thick mist of his obscene
shouts,
mother grows older and older
still,
wiping tears with the corner of
hersaree.

("Andha Mahumachhi")

And I realize that after a while
all of us will fall asleep, and sleek
time
will crawl across like a snake by
our feet.

The buds on the nearby plants
will blossom forth into multi-
petaled flowers,

and a number of flickering
lanterns
will look all about the empty
fields
for the white horse and its rider,
the blind zemindar missing
for several centuries.

("Andha Mahumachhi")

Since our search for truth will have to be continued for ever, the only source of solace for us is the immediate present, with all its pain and suffering. Sukadeva Jena is waiting for his death; Bhanumati for her bus; the speaker in "Group Photo" tries to revive his past through a group photo but fails to recognize his own face.

Soubhagya Misra's poetry does not say that suffering is the last word, the only reality for us to grapple with, although a profoundly tragic sense of life permeates the entire body of his work. Neither is he a poet of overt affirmation. If at all a message is to be extracted from him, it is this: Live life to the fullest. He will say this again with a smile, with a note of irony in his voice, though.



In an award function

III

The poet's awards and honours include Jhankar Purashkar (1971), Vishuba Milana Purashkar (1975), Jeevana Ranga Samman (1977), Odisha Sahitya Akademi Purashkar (1979) Honorary Fellow-in-Writing at Iowa University, USA (1983), Central Sahitya Akademi Award (1986), Telugu University Foundation Day Samman, Hyderabad (1987), Kavitayan Samman (1987), Jeevana Ranga Silver Jubilee Samman (1992), Governors' Plaque of Honour (Odisha State Council of Culture, 1993), Senior Fellow (Department of Culture, Government of India, 1993), Ankur Sahitya Parishad Pratibha Samman (1995), Government Science College, Chatrapur, Silver Jubilee Samman (1995), Pathani Samanta Sahitya Samman (1997), Sindhuurmi Sahitya Samman (2000), Rourkela

Steel Plant Samman (2002), Kavi Kalahansa Gopalkrishna Samman (2003), Sochi Rout Roy Sahitya Samman (Bhubaneswar Pustak Mela, 2006), Sahitya Bharati Samman (2008), Vishuba Purashkar (2010), and Think Odisha Leadership Award for Literature (The Times of India), 2012. He was appointed as the first Writer-in-Residence of Ravenshaw University in 2010. He was on the Advisory Board of Odisha Sahitya Akademi, Central Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust.

Misra has participated in a number of national and international literary programmes such as Valmiki World Poetry Festival, New Delhi (1985), Vagartha World Poetry Festival, Bhopal (1989), Kavita-1993, New Delhi (1993), Medinipur Kavita Uschhab, Medinipur (2000), etc.

He has represented India and Odisha (so far the only Odia) at Iowa University, USA, on the International Writing Programme. He has also participated in a Kavisandhi programme organized by the Central Sahitya Akademi in 2001.

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Delivering lecture in a seminar