



## Ramakanta Rath: A Great Voice in Indian Poetry

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Jitendra Nath Misra

Ramakanta Rath is the most important living poet writing in Odia. Rath's best poems are world-class, yet he has not won adequate recognition outside his native Odisha. Translation not being a properly recognised art in India, great Indian literature is difficult to access. A culture of reticence makes Odia literary voices even harder to hear. The corpus of translations from Odia, the sixth language to get "classical language" status, is meagre, and existing translations are largely mediocre.

Thus, *Radhaland and Worlds Beyond* took shape in my mind as a challenge, offering life lessons at each step of the journey. An editor must become a seeker and observer, not an admirer, working with discipline, restraint, prayer, and respect. Always reminding himself that translations must not be hagiographic, an editor must embrace the material before the poet's reputation interferes.

For example, just because *Sri Radha* became a bestseller, winning delirious female admirers, it does not make it merely a poem of love. While the female experience of love it depicts touched a chord among female readers, I figured that even poems appearing to be about love were about consciousness and personal growth. Perhaps these admiring female readers were recognising their own personalities in *Sri Radha*.

But it is not just *Sri Radha* that Rath has to offer. In his masterpiece *Sri Palataka* (Mr. Runaway) immediately following *Sri Radha*, the protagonist is rendered helpless by his mortality, even if it is claimed he is the mighty Krishna. *Sri Palataka*, a ballad filled with depth, tragedy, grandeur, and a sense of futility, oddly did not become a bestseller like *Sri Radha*.

How does one find translators who can do justice to this great poet? 23 persons were approached, works and claims had to be carefully assessed, some failed the tests of rigour and credibility. Those with good English needed help with Odia, and others with good Odia needed help with English. Several of the 13 translators commissioned are highly-accomplished award winners, and some are authors of multiple novels or works of social science and literary criticism.

Rath's persona overwhelms us with feelings of admiration but a good translator is not overawed. In that sense each translation becomes the translator's own creation. Rath not only agreed for others to translate his works but was gracious enough to comment. Clearly, his confidence in others' capability has increased over time.

Are word-by-word translations better than idiomatic ones? Answers remain inconclusive. While it was alright to take liberties with the abstract *Saptama Rutu*, translations of easier-to-understand later works needed to be closer to the original. Rath himself counselled that. After Rath's objections to drafts he saw ("this is not my poem!"<sup>1</sup>), I asked the translators to change course. The only liberty I took was to occasionally rearrange the sequence of phrases and ideas. Bilingual readers might notice the "literal" tone of some poems, but that is what Rath wanted. By its very nature a translation, even a "literal" translation, is an original work. I have doubts about poets claiming they alone possess the skills to translate their poems.

The making of *Radhaland and Worlds Beyond* remains, for me, the beginning of a journey. Rath's dense early works step through rough terrain arriving at a mellower place of reflection. Whether in earlier works, or later offerings, Rath's conclusions remain the same. Human life lies before us as final, a set piece that does not cede to us the power to change it. Things have already been decided; we are merely giving them posthumous recognition. Seeking that which lies beyond this world requires a journey beyond consciousness.

Rath's characters are a mix of everything. Between the boy "sneaking... into his own innocence" (*What Should I Wear on the Day of My Death?*, 132), to beautiful women painting collages on their breasts with sandalwood paste (*Sri Radha-5*, 21), iconoclasts ride along the journey. Goddesses burst into tears, lovers merge into a Void in deep space, nymphs smile and cry from picture frames, the air is sucked out from the Universe, flowers bend paying tribute to their fragrance, djinns speak to specks of dust, we can go on.

Rath reorders sorrow, infusing it with new meanings. Loss and futility come swirling at us like dancers at a celestial funeral. In such a “future that has perished before it was born” (*Sri Radha*- 36, 52) even Krishna is helpless: “When my time comes/ None will be left/ To give me even this [rice, and water]” (*Sri Palataka*- 36, 133-134).

Rath might have developed a melancholic temper after the violent death of his son at age four. He found a way to confront sorrow by creating art, or he might have sunk into depression, or worse. His wife Shanti’s unflinching devotion through this difficult phase requires proper recognition. Rath dedicates *Sri Radha* to “Shanti, who has never asked me for anything” (*Shantira Kebehele Kichhihele Na Magithiba Hatare*). *Sri Radha* appears to be the point of transition when Rath came to terms with his son’s death, becoming more detached.

In Rath’s world, living beings and inanimate objects cross paths as one. If fabric can be “woven from arteries and veins” (*Sri Radha*- 41, 57), “butterflies would be circling your breasts” (*By That River*- 68) too. If “shadows were waiting for the arrival of other shadows” (*A Welcome to the Guest*- 77) the narrator also experiences a “startled awakening” (*Sri Radha*- 41, 56).

Rath takes us on a ride into the worlds of lovers, clones, artists, pictures, mountains, djinns, mendicants, seekers, the terminally ill, and drifters, using common words with telling accuracy. Every book of his, each a slender work of 80 pages or less, took at least five years to compose. His legacy will be canonised in the quality of the fare, not in the dark and dishonest cacophony of the social media and the dubious world of influencers.

Rath avoided distractions focussing on what he did well. A brief foray into writing short stories was abandoned. Poetry remained the only form he remained immersed in. Even at age 90, talk of poetry, he hangs out his elongated head tortoise-like, makes a comment, and withdraws like the tortoise into his shell, appearing to compose a silence. The grandeur of silence might have helped him perform his art.

Is this arrogance? Many misunderstand Rath’s long pauses. Responses come after the conversation has moved on. But it is too late, the audience does not return to the unfinished story. Absorbing his long silence, I ask Rath how he works. “I have never believed in removing myself from the readers. I and the reader are one,”<sup>2</sup> he answers. “All my poetry is already made. Only, a divine hand guides me to put it in language.”<sup>3</sup>

In a lifetime of seeking, Ramakanta Rath found his voice in directness. He stands as a poet of and for the people. Rath rescues poetry from academic discussion and reminds us of the mysterious joys of a poem. Perhaps he will be remembered more into the future, and all praise in his lifetime must remain imperfect and incomplete. He might have already become the poet of legacy rather than merely remaining the poet of the generation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Comments on a draft he read at his home on August 5, 2023.

<sup>2</sup>Interview at his home in Bhubaneswar in 2012. See also Jitendra Nath Misra, "Poetry of Disruption," *Statesman Festival, The Statesman* (October 2012): 266-269.

<sup>3</sup>Interview at his home in Bhubaneswar in 2012.

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## Author Biography

**Jitendra Nath Misra** is Senior Fellow at the Jindal India Institute. He is a former Ambassador and Professor of Diplomatic Practice at Jindal School of International Affairs. He is the co-author and editor of *Radhaland and Worlds Beyond*.