

Classic Poetry Series

Ramakanta Rath
- poems -

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Ramakanta Rath(13 December 1934 -)

Ramakanta Rath (Oriya: ରାମକାନ୍ତ ରାଥ) is one of the most renowned modernist poets in the Oriya literature. Heavily influenced by the poets such as [T. S. Eliot](http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/) and [Ezra Pound](http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/), Rath experimented greatly with form and style.

The quest for the mystical, the riddles of life and death, the inner solitude of individual selves, and subservience to material needs and carnal desires are among this philosopher-poet's favorite themes. His poetry betrays a sense of pessimism along with counter-aesthetics, and he steadfastly refuses to put on the garb of a preacher of goodness and absolute beauty. His poetry is full of melancholy and laments the inevitability of death and the resultant feeling of futility. The poetic expressions found in his creations carry a distinct sign of symbolic annotations to spiritual and metaphysical contents of life. Often transcending beyond ordinary human capabilities, the poet reaches the higher territories of sharp intellectualism. The contents have varied from a modernist interpretation of ancient Sanskrit literature protagonist Radha in the poem "Sri Radha" to the ever-present and enthralling death-consciousness espoused in "Saptama Ritu" (The Seventh Season).

Rath was born in Cuttack, Orissa (India). He obtained his MA in English Literature from Ravenshaw College Orissa He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1957, but continued his writing career. He retired as Chief Secretary Orissa after holding several important posts in the Central Government such as Secretary to the Government of India. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1977, Saraswathi Samman in 1992, Bishuva Samman in 1990 and India's 3rd highest civilian honour, the Padma Bhushan in 2006. He was the Vice President of the Sahitya Academy of India from 1993 to 1998 and the President of the Sahitya Akademi of India from 1998 to 2003, New Delhi.

In February 2009 he was awarded a fellowship by the Central Sahitya Akademi, the fifth Oriya writer to be so honoured.

A number of his poems have been translated into English and other Indian languages.

A Request To The Dead

I offer this water to you,
my father, grandfather and great grandfather,
and to you, soldiers and generals
who fought for us and who fought against us
and who were killed by this war.

I stand here, on this battlefield,
and give this water and this rice to you—
you must be hungry and thirsty.

Ask for nothing
other than water and rice,
don't add to the long list
of things I was not able to give;
be content with this water and this rice
and return
to wherever you came from.

Consider this: the years
I have spent with you were many;
and this: it will not be long
before I join you wherever you sojourn.
Had I possessed things
other than this water and this rice,
would I have denied them to you
and asked you to return ?
Whatever I have
other than this water and this rice
are surely not appropriate offerings
for departed souls.

True, I traverse everyday of my life
with this baggage of withheld things,
but whenever I look at them
I disintegrate and cry out
with a voice that rends
the heavens
and the underworld.
Tears fill my eyes

when I make this offering
of water and rice.
I know, when my turn comes,
I shall have neither.

Look, the sun has almost set.
Now, go back to wherever you came from
with the little water and the little rice I gave you.
Look, I myself do not have
either any water or any rice.
Look, I have nothing except the few things
I didn't give
and kept with myself.

[Translated by the poet]

Ramakanta Rath

Lines Addressed To Her Non-Resident Presence

I had thought
I had forgotten you entirely.

And then, one day, I quarreled
with everyone—with wife, children,
with Government and God.
Before the quarrel ended, I walked away,
and stood near the window.
Outside the window
A moonlit fog extended
till the world's end.

You were there, draped in
Clothes made of the trees and the shrubs
on the river's banks.
A smile glimmered
on you melancholy skin.
In your eyes there was
a rain-wet paddy field that never ended.
Your uncombed hair fluttered in the wind
like leaves of sugarcane.
Your mouth, half-open and half-shut,
stood where all dialogue terminates.
Your legs rose from the dark depths of dreams.
Your body shook, and every single letter of your name
was written in the indelible ink of time past.

I knew you would leave soon.
How could you stay
Unless the time for staying came?
Wherever you go, a hand raised above shoulders
can touch the stars.
The steamer arrives every morning
to say good morning to women
who hold entire rivers in their eyes.
The earth and the outer space are one.
The eyes of eyes and the ears of ears
walk about in shaded coconut groves,
and gods and goddesses stand at your doorsteps

yearning for morsels of benediction
flowing from your meditation on yourself.

After your leave, what remains?
bare rocks, the moonlight's darkness
erasing all future,
several blood-stained years, dead soldiers
guarding unused gunpowder on the sea-bed,
and the desolate road I must walk on
till the last day of my life.

Go, then, with so few days left to me,
a change in my condition can no longer be
the subject-matter of hope.
I now have fever almost everyday,
nerves from the waist to the heels ache,
and, if I rise up without proper precaution,
I feel I am descending into some bottomless depth.
The skin is loose and dry, the weight
has fallen, maybe someday now
my breath will stop somewhere inside the lungs.
I would have notified all this to you,
but then, didn't you and I discover long ago
that news of this kind was utterly useless
both for you and for me?

[Translated by the poet]

Ramakanta Rath

Murder On The Agenda

I know there is blood on my hands.
I further know my hands will be stained
with much further blood.
But to stand amidst the crowd
and throw bouquets on tyrants
was not my intention of coming here.

They will die someday. So will I.
And therefore, the restlessness of the night of unceasing rains
instills its wildness
into each of my days and each of my nights.
My life, clearly, is contingent on their death.
I shall no doubt die of the shame
of continuing to live unless they die quickly.

Unless they die quickly,
how shall I explain to the moon
the reason why my laughter has become a grimace ?
How shall I explain to that faraway woman
the reason why I turned into a stone?

If they kill me, they will surely manufacture a legend
to prove to people
that my death had become so necessary
that, as soon as I fell, voices in the sky
spoke, loudly and clearly,
their thanksgiving for the assassins.
Whether people believe them or do not
is for them an irrelevant matter.
They have never cared to understand
why citizens of this country pray everyday
that this life of theirs should be the very last
on this planet.

If, on the contrary, I kill them
it will be unnecessary to think up a story.
Even their own widows, in the course of their lament,
will never, never incite their children
to avenge the murder of their fathers.

And as soon as they die, I too shall go away.
But where? I have absolutely no idea.
Maybe that woman's face would lead me on like a star
to some place where the sword I had carried
to kill myself
would at once begin preparing itself
for someone else's murder.

[Translated by the poet]

Ramakanta Rath

Sriradha: Part - 19

Come, take half
of the remainder of my life,
but fill every moment
of the half that is mine
with your infatuation.
Was the bargain unfair?
Then leave me with a single moment
and take away the rest of my life,
but like the sky,
fill the whole space
above that moment.

No, not like the sky.
Come closer and become the cloud
over my past, present and future
so that, when I touched myself,
I would touch the monsoon of your body.
Your sighs would breathe
the gale spewed by the despair
of a distant ocean
and, when I smile
and touch myself,
the gale would cease.

My lifetime,
unconcerned with its nearing death,
would everyday renew its pilgrimage
to the early years of your youth.
You would exist as a mass of blue
carved by my command,
or as the blue total
of all my known, partly known
and unknown desires.
Since I always dress in blue,
you too must be blue.
How can you have any other colour when
it would break my heart
if you had in colour other than blue?

Was the bargain unfair?
Then come, take away
even that single moment.
But do not bend down, look straight
into my eyes.
Meet there the impudent traveller
who has passed through hell after hell
and, at the end of the very last hell,
stands under a kadamba tree
and awaits your coming.

[Translated by the poet]

Ramakanta Rath

Sriradha: Part - 58

You are the fragrance of rocks,
the lamentation of each flower,
the unbearable heat of the moon,
the icy coolness of the blazing sun,
the language of my letters to myself,
the smile with which all despair is borne,
the millenniums of waiting without a wink of sleep,
the ultimate futility of all rebellion,
the exquisite idol made of aspirations,
the green yesterdays of deserts,
the monsoon in an apparel of leaves and flowers,
the illuminated pathway from the clay to the farthest planet,
the fantastic time that's half-day and half-night,
the eternity of the sea's brief silence,
the solace-filled conclusion of incomplete dreams,
the dishevelled moment of waking up with a start,
the reluctant star in the sky brightening at dawn,
the unspoken sentences at farewell,
the restless wind sentenced to solitary confinement,
the body of fog seated on a throne,
the reflection asleep on the river's abysmal bed,
the undiscovered mine of the most precious jewels,
the outlines of lunacy engraved on space, and
the untold story of lightning.

You have, my dearest, always suffered
all my inadequacies with a smile.

I know I am not destined to bring you back once you've left.
All I can do hereafter, till the last day of my life,
is to collect the fragments of what you are
and try to piece them together.

[Translated by the poet]

Ramakanta Rath

The Soldier In Exile

Sometimes I wish I should return,
throw this body to the ground before the judges
installed in all the marketplaces of my country,
and tell them, come, hang it
on your gallows of prefabricated words.

Sometimes I wish I should stop hiding among rocks,
and feeding on the sunlight and on the wind,
sail across the ocean's nights and days.
I would then unload all my bones
into the arms of the soil smiling at my homecoming
and tell it I have no further part
in its future.

I however hesitate.

The shores of my country would be inaccessible
with stones dislodged by vengeance and counter-vengeance
and with putrid weeds of mangled interpretations,
all its green and proud forests would have been burnt
by loud proclamations of conquests that never occurred,
its body bleeding,
its railways and roadways and harbours shattered,
encampments of imported mercenaries
all along the banks of its moist eyes.

All this notwithstanding,
I sometimes wish I should return,
but some other times I do not wish I should return.
Sometimes it seems all my love is a moon
rising every evening and setting every dawn
in the sky above wherever I exist.

Sometimes, however, I wish I should return.

[Translated by the poet]

Ramakanta Rath