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**Humanism and Social Consciousness in Swabhaba Kavi Gangadhar Meher's Poetry: A Critical Appraisal**

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**Abstract**

Gangadhar Meher, popularly known as Swabhaba Kabi (the Poet of Nature), occupies a significant place in bhakti literature for his profound humanism and deep social consciousness. Rooted in rural life and indigenous culture, Meher's poetry reflects the lived realities of common people—their sufferings, aspirations, moral values, and spiritual resilience. This paper examines how Gangadhar Meher's poetic vision transcends mere romanticisation of nature to articulate a compassionate concern for humanity and social harmony. His poems foreground themes such as poverty, social inequality, dignity of labour, and ethical responsibility, thereby revealing a strong humanistic impulse grounded in empathy and moral idealism.

The study further explores how Meher's humanism is closely intertwined with Indian philosophical thought, particularly the ideals of bhakti, compassion, and universal brotherhood. Without overt political rhetoric, his poetry subtly critiques social injustice and advocates moral reform through spiritual awakening and humane values. By employing simple language, folk imagery, and realistic portrayal of rural society, Meher establishes an emotional connection with the marginalized and voiceless sections of society.

Through a close textual analysis of select poems, this paper argues that Gangadhar Meher emerges not only as a nature poet but also as a socially committed humanist whose literary legacy continues to inspire ethical awareness and social responsibility. His poetry remains relevant in contemporary times as a gentle yet powerful voice advocating humanity, harmony, and social justice.

**Keywords:** humanist, Swabhaba Kabi, bhakti, bhakti, folk imagery, ecofeminist**Introduction**

Gangadhar Meher (1862–1924), one of the most celebrated poets in Odia literature, is widely known as Swabhaba Kabi - the poet of nature. While his poetry is often admired for

its lyrical beauty and vivid portrayal of the natural world, a deeper reading reveals a strong current of humanism and social consciousness running through his works. Deeply rooted in the rural life of Odisha, Meher's poetic vision reflects the struggles, emotions, and moral values of common people, particularly those belonging to marginalized and agrarian communities.

Humanism in Gangadhar Meher's poetry is marked by compassion, empathy, and a profound respect for human dignity. His poems portray human beings not as abstract entities but as living participants in a socio-cultural environment shaped by poverty, inequality, faith, and labour. Unlike many romantic poets who idealize nature in isolation, Meher presents nature as intimately connected with human life, suffering, and moral growth. This interrelationship enables him to voice concern for social realities such as economic hardship, social injustice, and the erosion of ethical values.

Meher's social consciousness is neither militant nor overtly political; rather, it is expressed through a subtle moral and spiritual framework influenced by Indian philosophical traditions, particularly bhakti ideals of devotion, humility, and universal brotherhood. By employing simple language, folk imagery, and realistic rural settings, he gives voice to the silent masses and advocates a humane and harmonious social order. Thus, Gangadhar Meher emerges not merely as a poet of nature, but as a sensitive humanist whose poetry serves as a moral mirror of society and remains relevant in addressing contemporary social concerns.

Swabhaba Kavi Gangadhar Meher holds a unique place in Odia literature as a "poet of nature" whose work is deeply anchored in humanism and a profound social consciousness. Despite his humble background as a weaver with limited formal education, his poetry transcends mythological retelling to address the universal human condition and the ethical fabric of society.

#### **Humanism: The Elevation of the Individual**

Meher's humanism is most visible in how he reimagines classical characters, stripping away their "god-like" distance to reveal their internal emotional struggles and resilience.

Sita is a woman who possesses moral independence. Her decision to accompany Rama into exile is not an act of blind obedience but a conscious assertion of her dignity and marital equality. She refuses the comfort of palace life, choosing instead the path of hardship as an expression of self-respect and agency. This choice establishes her as an empowered individual rather than a submissive follower.

The title *Tapaswini* (the woman of penance) itself signifies Sita's spiritual empowerment. Her endurance, patience, and inner discipline transform suffering into a form of strength. Sita's power does not lie in physical dominance but in her unwavering moral

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courage and spiritual resilience. Through tapasya, she asserts her identity and autonomy, turning adversity into self-realization.

Meher's Sita is not silent in the face of injustice. Though dignified and restrained, she questions social norms and patriarchal judgments that subject women to trials and suspicion. Her suffering becomes a critique of male-dominated moral codes. By presenting Sita as ethically superior to those who doubt her purity, Meher elevates her as a moral authority within the epic narrative.

Unlike modern notions of empowerment rooted in rebellion, Meher presents empowerment as inner strength, self-awareness, and moral integrity. Sita's empowerment lies in her ability to uphold truth and dignity without bitterness or hatred. This redefinition aligns with Meher's humanistic and spiritual philosophy, making Sita a timeless model of empowered womanhood.

In Tapaswini, Sita transcends her epic identity to become a symbol of all suffering yet resilient women. Her pain reflects the injustice faced by women in society, while her endurance and self-respect inspire resistance through moral strength. Meher thus universalizes Sita's character, making her relevant beyond mythological confines.

Gangadhar Meher's Tapaswini presents Sita as an empowered woman whose strength flows from moral autonomy, spiritual resilience, and ethical authority. By reimagining Sita not as a silent victim but as a conscious agent of dignity and truth, Meher offers a progressive and humanistic vision of womanhood. Sita's empowerment in Tapaswini lies not in defiance but in her unwavering commitment to self-respect, making her a powerful and enduring figure in Indian literary tradition. In his masterpiece Tapaswini, Sita is not merely a "damsel in distress" or a silent victim of Rama's abandonment. Meher portrays her as a woman of immense inner strength and spiritual fortitude. Her endurance in the forest is presented as a human triumph of character rather than a divine play.

**Empathy for the "Ordinary":** He bridged the gap between the "extraordinary" status of royalty and the "ordinary" emotions of common people. His characters, even when drawn from the Ramayana or Mahabharata, exhibit very human traits of doubt, motherly affection (Ayodhya Drusya), and moral conflict.

**The "Milk of Human Kindness":** His poems, such as Madhumaya, celebrate the inherent goodness of the world and urge humans to rise above their petty follies to realize a higher, more compassionate self.

#### **Social Consciousness: Reform and Justice**

Meher was not just a romantic or a mystic; he was acutely aware of the social ills of his time. His poetry often served as a mirror to society, advocating for reform and dignity for the marginalized.

**Dignity of Labor:** Coming from a weaver family, he wrote *Krishaka Sangita* (Songs of the Farmer). These poems celebrate the toil of the peasantry with humor and empathy, placing the worker at the center of the social structure.

**Satire on Social Hypocrisy:** In his collection *Arghyathali*, Meher uses sharp irony to criticize the "guardians of religion" and the vanity of the wealthy. In poems like *Garba* (Pride), he mocks human ego and the superficiality of social status.

**Upliftment of the Weaver Community:** Beyond his verses, Meher was a social activist who founded conferences to propose reforms for the weaver community, reflecting a life where his literary "social consciousness" was matched by real-world action.

**Patriotism and Anti-Colonialism:** His work *Bharati Bhabana* stands as a song of protest against British rule, demonstrating his commitment to the national cause and the freedom of his people.

Gangadhar Meher was deeply disturbed by the social evils prevalent in contemporary society, such as caste discrimination, economic exploitation, superstition, and the suffering of the poor. His poems portray the pain of the marginalized sections of society - peasants, labourers, and the underprivileged - highlighting the imbalance between the rich and the poor. Unlike revolutionary poets, Meher adopted a moral and emotional appeal rather than a confrontational tone to awaken social responsibility.

### **Humanism and Compassion**

Humanism forms the core of Meher's social vision. His poetry is imbued with sympathy for humanity and faith in moral goodness. He believed that all human beings are bound by a common thread of compassion and dignity. This humanitarian outlook is evident in poems such as *Tapaswini* and *Pranaya Ballari*, where individual suffering becomes a reflection of collective social failure. Meher's concern was not limited to any particular class; instead, he advocated universal love and understanding.

### **Social Justice and Equality**

Social justice is a recurring theme in Meher's poetry. He condemned injustice, oppression, and indifference towards human suffering. Though not overtly political, his poetry questions the ethical foundations of an unjust social order. Meher believed that true justice emerges from moral awareness, where individuals recognize their duties toward others. His ideal society is one based on equality, cooperation, and mutual respect.

### **Role of Moral and Spiritual Values**

Gangadhar Meher's social consciousness is deeply rooted in Indian spiritual philosophy. He believed that social reform must begin with self-purification and moral discipline. His poetry emphasizes values such as truth, sacrifice, humility, and service to humanity. In this sense, his social vision aligns closely with the ideals later popularized by thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda.

Nature as a Social Symbol

Nature in Meher's poetry is not merely decorative but often serves as a symbolic mirror of social life. The harmony and balance in nature contrast sharply with human greed and injustice. Through natural imagery, Meher subtly critiques social disorder and urges humanity to return to a life of simplicity and harmony.

Meher's poetry stands as a remarkable blend of social consciousness, humanism, and moral idealism. His gentle yet profound critique of social injustice, combined with his emphasis on ethical reform, makes his work timeless. Though primarily known as a poet of nature, Gangadhar Meher emerges equally as a poet of social awareness, whose vision of a just and compassionate society remains relevant in the contemporary world.

### **Nature as a Social Companion**

In the poetry of Swabhaba Kabi Gangadhar Meher, Nature is never a mere backdrop or a decorative setting; it is a sentient social entity that actively participates in the human experience. Meher's "social companionship" with nature is most profoundly explored in his masterpiece, *Tapaswini*, where the natural world becomes the primary support system for an exiled and socially rejected Sita.

#### **1. Nature as an Emotional Confidant**

In the poetry of Gangadhar Meher, nature serves as an emotional confidant, providing comfort, understanding, and emotional release. It listens without judgment, consoles without words, and reflects the poet's inner life with profound sensitivity. Thus, nature becomes an intimate companion, strengthening Meher's emotional and spiritual connection with the world around him.

His vision on nature possesses a human-like consciousness that reacts to social injustice. When Sita is abandoned by society, the natural world becomes her "alternate society."

**The Sympathetic Wild:** In *Tapaswini*, when Sita weeps, the forest animals -traditionally seen as "wild" - demonstrate more empathy than the "*civilized*" citizens of Ayodhya.

**Active Mourning:** Meher describes trees "standing still like stone" in shock and deer "halting their feeding" as if sharing in her grief. This elevates nature from a passive environment to a social witness that validates human suffering.

#### **2. Nature as a Surrogate Family**

Meher often portrays nature as a maternal or paternal figure that steps in when human institutions fail.

**The Motherly *Tamasa*:** The River Tamasa is personified as a motherly figure waiting with "open arms" (waves) to receive *Sita*.

**The "Nightingale" as a Messenger:** Birds and breeze do not just exist; they perform social duties. They act as messengers of hope or "nurses" who soothe the psychological wounds of the protagonist.

In Gangadhar Meher's poetry, nature is not merely a backdrop but a substitute family that nurtures, consoles, teaches, and accompanies him throughout life. It provides emotional security, moral guidance, and spiritual fulfillment in ways that human relationships often fail to do. Thus, nature becomes Meher's enduring companion and caregiver - an ever-present surrogate family that shapes both his poetic vision and his philosophy of life.

### **3. The Democratic Spirit of the Natural World**

While human society is often depicted as hierarchical and judgmental, Meher presents Nature as a perfectly egalitarian society.

**Krushaka Sangita:** In his poems for farmers, he uses the changing seasons and the fertility of the soil as symbols of a "just" social order where hard work is rewarded, contrasting with the exploitative social structures of the time.

**Moral Education:** Meher believed that the "beautiful nature is adequate to educate man." He saw the natural world as a teacher of social values - patience, resilience, and unselfish service.

In Meher's work, Nature is not just a backdrop but a conscious entity that sympathizes with human suffering. This "Ecofeminist" approach - linking the exploitation of women with the sanctuary of nature - is a hallmark of his social vision. When Sita weeps in Tapaswini, the forest "laments" with her, suggesting a universal bond between all living things that ignores social hierarchies.

Gangadhar Meher's portrayal of the natural world embodies a democratic spirit marked by equality, coexistence, and moral justice. Nature, in his poetry, emerges as an ideal society—free from discrimination and exploitation—offering a powerful lesson to humanity. Through this vision, Meher elevates nature from a poetic subject to a symbol of social and ethical democracy.

### **Conclusion**

Gangadhar Meher's poetry stands as a powerful synthesis of humanism and social consciousness, rooted in compassion, moral integrity, and spiritual idealism. Though celebrated primarily as a poet of nature, Meher transcends mere aestheticism by using poetry as a medium to voice concern for human suffering and social injustice. His deep sympathy for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed reflects a profound faith in the dignity and equality of all human beings.

Meher's humanism is not confrontational or political in tone; rather, it is ethical and spiritual, emphasizing inner transformation as the foundation of social reform. By presenting nature as a model of harmony, equality, and democratic coexistence, he implicitly critiques social divisions and moral decay in human society. His poetry urges individuals to cultivate values such as compassion, selflessness, and social responsibility.

In essence, Gangadhar Meher emerges as a poet of moral awakening, whose vision of a just and humane society remains relevant across time. His poetry continues to inspire readers to reflect on social responsibility, human dignity, and the enduring power of ethical living, thus securing his place as a significant humanist voice in Indian literature

Thus, Meher's eclectic philosophy blends idealism, naturalism, nationalism, and humanism, influencing Odia literature profoundly while inspiring social progress without direct political activism. His legacy endures in institutions like *Gangadhar Meher University* and annual poetry awards. Through personified nature and ethical narratives, his poetry remains a call for enlightened, unified human society.

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