

MAPPING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The Paper "Mapping the Cultural Landscape of Indian English Poetry" is an attempt to critically look at the major Indian English poets starting from the early nineteenth century. The paper traces the poets and their contribution along with their cultural response to the ways in which Indian nation responds to the colonial rule and to the emergence of English as a language in India. All the major poets of the Indian English tradition are being touched upon to explore their cultural response as well as to understand the ways what trajectory Indian English poetry took in its journey of about two hundred years.

Key Words: British, Colonial, Gandhi, Indian English, New Poetry, Poetry, Post Colonial, Post-independence poets.

Indian English literature happened in India as a byproduct of the British colonial rule for about two hundred years. It can be said that Indian English, and Literature concerned with it, is a cultural impact of the colonial forces. As the British colonized other parts of the world, the spread and impact of English Language can be seen throughout the world where English language flourished in their own ways. Probably Samuel Daniel's prophecy in 16th century came true to some extent in the case of Indian English language and literature. Samuel Daniel wrote –

Who (in time) knows wither we may vent

**The treasures of our tongue? To what strange
shores**

This gain of our best glory shall be sent

T' enrich unknowing nations with our stores.

What worlds in th' yet unformed orient

May come refined with th' accents that are ours.

(Samuel Daniel, quoted in Naik, *History*, 1)

Samuel Daniel's prophecy to some extent has come true as Indian English literature today exists as a distinct identity and flourishes in the whole world. As for its title "Indian English Literature, probably it can be said that we owe this term to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar who used the term as the title of his book *Indo-Anglican Literature* in 1943. Later in the first comprehensive study of the subject, published in 1962, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar used the phrase, "Indian Writing in English." Along with the history of the term "Indian Writing in English" we also need to look at the history of the English language in India. It was the Christian Missionaries who were the early ones to introduce English language education in India. Thereafter, by 1820s, we see that all the governors of all the presidencies were inclined to English education (Elphinstone in Bombay, Thomas Munro

in Madras, and William Bentinck, in Bengal). Not only the British officers, but Indians too were eager to learn English, which can be seen from Raja Ram Mohan Roy's letter to William Bentinck asking to introduce English education. The tide turned towards English education completely when Thomas Babbington Macaulay pronounced in his famous *Minutes on Education* on 2nd February 1835 where he stated that the money invested to the education of the native should then on only be invested in educating natives in English education. Lord Bentinck, the Governor-General, immediately yielded and the history of Modern India unequivocally declared that the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone.

Raja Rammohun Roy's essay on "A Defence of Hindu Theism" (1817) may be regarded as the first original publication of significance in the history of Indian English literature. As for poetry, Cavally Venkata Ramaswami's English rendering of "Visvagunadarsana" of Arasanipala Venkatadhvarin, an early seventeenth-century Sanskrit poem, is probably the earliest (1825) book of verse in English by an Indian. The first Indian English poet of note was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31). Derozio lived in Calcutta, as a lecturer in Hindu College. He started a college association and a magazine called *The Pantheon*. In his all too brief poetic career lasting hardly half a dozen years, Derozio published two volumes of poetry: *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1828).

Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-73), another Indian English poet, was known for *The Shair of Ministrel and Other Poems* (1830). Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) began his career as an Indian English poet. In addition to some sonnets and shorter pieces, he wrote two long poems in English: *The Captive Ladie* (1849) and *Visions of the Past* (1849). The so called *Dutt Family Album* came out in 1870 surprising the poetry lovers. The *Dutt Family Album*, the only instance of a family anthology in

Indian English poetry, is a collection of 187 poems by three Dutt brothers – Govin Chunder, Hur Chunder and Greece (sic) Chunder, and their cousin, Omesh Chunder. Toru Dutt (1856-77) happens to be the first original Indian English poet. Her translation of French poets *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) is a remarkable rendering and it was appreciated by Sir Edmund Gosse. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) published posthumously shows how Keatsian in pace was the progress achieved by Toru Dutt during the last two years of her life.

Sri Aurobindo's long poetic career spanning sixty years yielded an impressive volume of verse of several kinds –lyrical, narrative, philosophical and epic. The early *Short Poems* (1890-1900) are mostly minor verse of the romantic twilight of the Eighteen Nineties, celebrating the characteristic themes of love, sorrow, death and liberty in a typically romantic style. In fact, the entire poetic career of Sri Aurobindo may be seen as a long and arduous preparation for the writing of his magnum opus, *Savitri* (the first definitive edition, 1954).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) – poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, composer, painter, thinker, educationist, nationalist and internationalist – is a great bilingual writer, and his work *Geetanjali* won him Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He is still the only Indian writer to have had that distinction. *Gitanjali* (1912) took the literary world of London by storm and was followed in quick succession by the *Gardener* (1913) and *The Crescent Moon* (1913). More collections followed *Fruit-Gathering* (1916), *Stray Birds* (1916), *Lover's Gift and Crossing* (1918) and *The Fugitive* (1921).

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) won recognition in England much earlier in life. Her first volume of poetry, *The Golden Threshold* (1905) was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* ((1917). Meanwhile, social reform and the freedom struggle had begun increasingly claiming her energies, and thereafter she wrote poetry rarely. Her collected poems appeared in *The Sceptred Flute* (1946). *Feather of the Dawn*, a small collection of lyrics written in 1927, was published posthumously in 1961

Among other writers of verse may be mentioned Raj Lakshi Debi (*The Hindu Wife*, 1876), Jitendra Mohun Tagore (*Flights of Fancy*, 1881), T. Ramakrishna (*Tales of Ind and Other Poems*, 1896); Nizamat Jung (*Sonnets*, 1917; *Islamic Poems*, 1935; *Poems*, 1954), A.M. Modi (*Spring Blossoms* 1919); Ananda Acharya (*Snow-Birds*, 1919; *Arctic Swallows*, 1927; *Samadhi Poems*, 1956); Roby Dutta (*Echoes from East and West*, 1909; *Poems*, 1915); R.B. Paymaster (*Navroziana*, 1917); P. Seshadri (*Sonnets*, 1914; *Champak Leaves*, 1923; *In the Temple of Truth*, 1925); A.F. Khabardar (*The Silken Tassel*, 1918); N.V. Thadani (*The Triumph of Delhi*, 1916; *Krishna's Flute*, 1919; *He Walked Alone*, 1948); and M.B. Pithawalla (*Sacred Sparks*, 1920; *Links with the Past*, 1933).

M. K. Naik calls the period of Indian English literature from 1920 to 1947 as "The Gandhian Whirlwind." The entire period of nearly three decades of the Gandhian age was one of far-reaching changes not only in the political scene but in practically all areas of Indian life. The poetry of Gandhian Age (1920-1947) did not produce any great voices except the production of it by earlier poets Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu.

M.K. Naik calls the period 1947 and after as "The Asoka Pillar." In the 1950s, school of Indian poets decided to avoid the Romantic tradition, just to write verse more in tune with the age. The chief poets of the school include Dilip Kumar Roy (*Eyes of Light*, 1948), Themis (*Poems*, 1952), Romen (*The Goden Apocalypse*, 1953), Prithvi Singh Nahar (*The Winds of Silence*, 1954), Prithvindra N. Mukherjee (*A Rose-Bud's Song*, 1959) and V. Madhusudan Reddy (*Sapphires of Solitude*, 1960), the verse of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in *Tryst with the Divine* (1974), *Mycrocosmographia Poetica* (1976) and *Leaves form a Log* (1979) and that of V.K. Gokak in *Song of Life and Other Poems* (1947). Their most characteristic note is one of quiet and sometimes insightful rumination. Among other writers of romantic verse may be mentioned Adi K. Sett (*The Light Above the Clouds*, 1948; *Rain in My Heart*, 1954), B.D. Sastri (*Tears of Faith*, 1950), K.R.R. Sastri (*Gathered Flowers*, 1956), Barjor Paymaster (*The Last Farewell*,

1960); Trilok Chandra (*A Hundred and One Flowers*, 1961); Rai Vyas (*Jai Hind*, 1961); and P.V.B. Sharma (*Morning Buds*, 1964).

By the fifties, the "new poetry" had already made its appearance. In 1958, P. Lal and his associates founded the Writers Workshop in Calcutta. The workshop manifesto described the school as consisting of a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writings and transcreation. According to Shiv K. Kumar the 1950s had already declared independence for the Indian English writers. It was evidenced by a distinct change of attitude in our creative writers. He writes, "The new poets want poetry to be authentic, intensely personal, and written in a language shorn of clichés and verbosity. A poem, for them, must be a skillfully structured artifact of both image and emotion, thought and feeling." (Kumar, *Language*, 2)

The post-independence poets appealed for the individual voices in our age of democracy. The first of the "new" poets to publish a collection was Nissim Ezekiel, easily one of the most notable post-Independence Indian English writers of verse. His *A Time to Change* appeared in 1952, to be followed by *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976). Towards the end of the fifties, Dom Moraes (1938-), the first of the "new" poets to win recognition in England, appeared on the scene His first book won the Hawthornden Prize in 1958. Son of Frank Moraes, the well-known Indian journalist, Dom Moraes lived in England for many years, having adopted British citizenship in 1961. Shiv K. Kumar observes, "What is truly distinctive about post-Independence poetry is that it allows irony to play freely around all facets of human experience – social, religious, moral or political." (Kumar, *Language*, 5)

Several prominent "new" poets appeared, and the earliest of whom was P. Lal. Born in the Punjab, Purushottam Lal migrated to Calcutta with his parents at the age of one. Educated in this city, Lal taught English there. His verse collections include

The Parrot's Death (1960), "*Change!*" *They Said* (1966), *Draupadi and Jayadratha* (1967), *Yakshi from Didarganj* (1969), *The Man of Dharma* (1974) and *Calcutta* (1977). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1977. He has also published creative translations of *The Bhagawad Gita* (1965), *The Dhammapada* (1967) and *Ghalib's Love Poems* (1971).

Adil Jussawalla's first book of verse, *Land's End* (1962) contains poems written in England and some parts of Europe. Unlike Dom Moraes, Jussawalla chose to return to India after a sojourn of more than dozen years in England and has since published another collection *Missing Person* (1974). The exile's return, his recapitulation of his foreign experience, his reaction to his native scene and his continued quest for self-knowledge form the chief themes of *Missing Person*.

The most outstanding poet of the sixties is easily A.K. Ramanujan another exile who, unlike Jussawalla, has not chosen to return, and continues to teach Dravidian Linguistics at the University of Chicago. His first volume, *The Striders* (1966) won a Poetry Book Society recommendation. *Relations* followed in 1971. He has also translated into English poetry in Tamil and Kannada in *The Interior Landscape* (1967) and *Speaking of Siva* (1972) respectively. Most of A. K. Ramanujan's poems are on Hindu life, Brahmin community, Tamil culture and superstitions. A fellow Tamil and an artist equally urgently concerned with his native heritage is R. Parthasarathy. However, Parthasarathy's love affairs with English and England were not fruitful. Parthasarathy returned to his first love and published *Rough Passage* (1977).

Gieve Patel's first book, *Poems* appeared in 1966, and his second, *How Do you Withstand, Body* in 1976. A member of the small Parsi community, Patel is an outsider like Ezekiel and is equally conscious of the fact but this has not produced a feeling of rootlessness. In contrast to Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra writes a poetry in which the image is all-dominant. He is the author of *Bharatmata: a Prayer* (1966), *Woodcuts on Papers* (1967), *Pomes/Poems/Poemas* (1971), and *Nine Enclosures* (1976). Saleem Peeradina writes, "His "Bharatmata"

– in spite of the section on poetry which I think is irrelevant to the area the rest of the poem covers – is an important contemporary document." (Peeradina, *Indian Poetry*, x)

The Nineteen Seventies witnessed the arrival of Keki Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra and Arun Kolatkar. Keki Daruwalla, one of the most substantial of modern Indian English poets, has so far published *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971) and *Crossing of Rivers* (1976). Shiv K. Kumar is a senior academician who published his first volume *Articulate Silences* (1970) when on the threshold of fifty. This was followed by *Cobwebs in the Sun* (1974), *Subterfuges* (1976) and *Woodpeckers* (1979). His work reveals a mastery of both the confessional mode and ironic comment. Jayanta Mahapatra began his career with *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971) and has since published *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *Relationship* (1980, Sahitya Akademi Award, 1981) and *The False Start* (1980). Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissa scene and the Jangannatha Temple at Puri figures quite often in it. His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems.

Arun Kolatkar is that rare phenomenon among modern Indian English poets – a bilingual poet, writing both in English and Marathi. His shorter poems in English are still uncollected, but his long poem, *Jejuri* appeared in 1976 and won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. The poem *Jejuri* suggests a quest motif. M.K. Naik adds "*Jejuri* is hardly an Indian Waste Land (as some of its admirers seem to claim), since it lacks both the impressive social and religious dimensions and the complexity of that modern classic, but it is certainly an experiment in a fruitful direction." (Naik, *History*, 218) Amar Nath Dwivedi, born in 1943 and educated at the University of Allahabad, has been teaching graduate and postgraduate classes since 1965, presently at the University of Allahabad, where he is a Professor in English. He is a well-known critic and poet in English. He has published, to date, a dozen

books of literary criticism, three books of translation from Hindi into English, and five books of poetry plus a few new poems in English.

Thus Indian English Poetry has traversed a very intense poetic territory to establish itself as a genre which has made Indian culture got represented in it in a fashion making the Indian nation be proud of these poets as well as giving birth to a distinct Indian English language which proudly stands in the linguistic map of the world.

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