

THE EMERGENCE OF INDO-ANGLIAN POETRY: AN OVERVIEWM. H. Sameni^{1,*}, F. Shahmoradi²

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ABSTRACT

The history of English language in India begins with the age of colonisation. During this time, India is annexed to the territory of British Empire and Persian language as the official language of the country is replaced by English. This paper is an attempt to overview the development of versified form of Indian writing in English from its early stages up to the present time. In this regard, the six major periods of development of poetry writing by Indian people in English are brought to the fore. The paper depicts the trend of maturity of this unique style of writing, which is frequently referred to as Indo-Anglian Poetry.

Keywords: “English,” “Indian Writing,” “Poetry”

1. INTRODUCTION

India with its vast territory has always been the cradle of different cultures, belief systems, traditions, languages and dialects. This is perhaps due to the numerous contacts and conflicts with other nations and ideas that this land has experienced in the course of its long history. The last major type of such contacts has happened at the age of colonisation in which English was established as the official language of India. Though English was firstly used as a means of cultural supremacy of the coloniser, it was later recruited as the medium of anti-colonial discourse during people’s struggle for independence. However, even after the independence, English has continued its life in the subcontinent.

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Many people have written and articulated themselves in this language and participated in the formation of a new version known as Indian writing in English. Poetry, as genre *par excellence*, not only reflects literary perspectives of Indian people, but also shows the degree of English development in this territory. This paper is an attempt to display the development of English poetry in India concisely and according to documents left from early 19th century onward.

2. History

Dwivedi in his *Indian Poetry in English (IPE)* says that Indian poetry in English, in its early stages, was referred to as sub-standard, Hobson-Jobson, Babu, Butler, Bearer, Chee-Chee, Kitchen English and the like [1]. M. K. Naik once said, “Indian poetry in English ... only occasionally poetry and only sometimes Indian having been made as English, in an uncomfortably large number of cases” [2]. Unlike Naik, V. K. Gokak in his introduction to *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Verse* and his *Studies in Indo-English Poetry* traces the development of this poetry in English and admires poets such as Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo for their contribution to the flourish and progress of poetry in English (Mishra, [3]. Highlighting the importance of the 19th century and early 20th century poets of India, Srinivasa Iyengar appreciates the assertion of Indian spiritual heritage in this poetry and calls it a contribution to “the common pool of world writing in English” [4]. This fact can be explained in terms of ‘Indianisation’ of English in the sub-continent.

Indian poetry in English, enriched by cultural and literary heritages of Pre-historical India, is unique in identity among the countries of the Commonwealth. C. R. Reddy in his foreword to Iyengar’s P.E.N. book on Indo-Anglian literature says:

Indo-Anglian literature is not essentially different in kind from Indian literature. It is a part of it, a modern facet of that glory which, commencing from the Vedas, has continued to spread its mellow light...up to the present time of Tagore, Iqbal and Aurobindo Ghose, and bids fair to expand with our and humanity’s expanding future. [5]

Developments of Indo-Anglian poetry, is often accentuated by two major divisions, namely Pre-independence poetry (1820-1947), and Post-independence poetry (1947 onward). The former is classified into five sections beginning from 1820 to 1947. These classifications have been suggested by Iyengar 2007 in his *Indian Writing in English*.

2.1. The Beginning (1820-70)

Indo-Anglian poetry begins with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31), born to an Indian mother and a Portuguese father in Calcutta. He was educated at Dhurumtollah Academy of David Drummond. In 1827 he joined the Hindu College of Calcutta as a Professor of English.

Later he turned to journalism and edited *The East India*. Derozio died prematurely of cholera and left behind his only volume of poetry *The Fakir of Jungheera and Other Poems* (1828). This was the first legacy of Indian Writing in English. He wrote in the Romantic tradition and selected man, nature, motherland and death as the subject-matter of his poems [6]. Given below is an extract from “A Walk by Moonlight” that appeared in Nair’s *Gathered Grace: An Anthology of Indian Verse in English (GGA)*. It reveals the simplicity and beauty of the Romantic spirit evident in his poetry.

Last night -- it was a lovely night,
And I was very blest --
Shall it not be for Memory
A happy spot to rest...
There was a dance among the leaves
Rejoicing at her power,
Who robes for them of silver weaves
Within one mystic hour... [7]

Lines quoted above deals with the awakening of the poet’s soul in the lap of nature, which leaves a lasting effect in his memory.

Another important poet of this period was Kashiprosad Ghose (1809-73). He studied at the Hindu College of Calcutta till 1828. His poems were collected in a volume titled *The Shair [Minstrel]* which was published in 1830. According to Dwivedi 1980, in the heap of the utterly prosaic and the inane, the reader did find a few bright poetic phrases and lines, but on the whole his poetry abounds in conventional descriptions and tedious moralising [8]. Despair, sadness, and death formed the integral parts of his poetry, especially in poems such as “To a Young Hindu Widow,” “To a Dead Crow” and “The Shair’s Farewell Song.”

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) was another pioneering poet of the Indo-Anglian era. M. M. Dutt hailed from Bengal but migrated to Madras where he worked as the editor of an English newspaper. He was born into a Hindu family but converted to Christianity in 1843. M. M. Dutt married a European wife and worked as a professional lawyer in England.

Dutt was a follower of the Romantic poets, especially Byron and Scott, but in subject matter he borrowed from Indian history and its legends [9]. The poetry of Dutt has historical attraction rather than literary merit [10]. His works include *The Captive Ladies* (1849), a long metrical romance; *Visions of the Past*, written in blank verse form; and *Meghnad-Badh Kavya* (1861), originally written in Bengali. Lines given below are excerpts from “The Queen of Delhi:”

Methought there came a warrior-maid,

With blood-stain'd brow and sheathless blade;
 Dark was her hue, as darkest cloud,
 Which comes the Moon's fair face to shroud... [11]

The poem is a glorification of the past through the poet's dream of a Queen's bravery on the blazing pyre of her husband.

2.2. The Renaissance (1870 -1900)

This is an age of religious, spiritual and literary awakening. The time period owes much of its poetry to the sisters, Aru and Toru Dutt.

Aru Dutt (1854-74) was the gifted daughter of Govind Chunder Dutt, the poet and linguist whose family contributed much to the development of Indian poetry in English of the time. Aru has rendered poems from French into English beautifully, of which eight are included in *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields (A Sheaf)*, published in 1876.

The following extract taken from *A Sheaf* is a translation of Victor Hugo's "A Morning Serenade" by Aru Dutt. Edmund Gosse was impressed by the simplicity of diction and beauty of its rhythm:

Still barred thy doors! – The Far East glows,
 The morning wind blows fresh and free,
 Should not the hour that wakes the rose
 Awaken also thee?
 All look for thee, Love, Light, and Song...
 Was not my love made for thy soul...
 No longer sleep,
 But where art thou? [12]; [13]

The above translation, by Aru Dutt, reveals the lyrical quality of Romantic poetry.

Toru Dutt (1856-76) was the younger member of this family that once belonged to a higher caste Bengali Hindu household, but converted to Christianity. On a four-year tour of France, England, and Italy, she acquired a remarkable mastery over English and French as well as motivation to write poetry. While much of the poetry of this period is imitative of European standards and styles, Toru Dutt's themes are Indian. Her books of poetry include *A Sheaf*⁴, and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882). Sir Edmund describes her poetry as "a feverish dream of intellectual effort and imaginative production" [14]. K. S. Ramamurti adds that they are works of personal and autobiographical records of the author [15]. Lines given below are parts of Beranger's poem, "My Vocation" translated by the poet and quoted in M. K. Naik's *Perspectives on Indian Poetry in English*:

A waif on this earth,
Sick, ugly and small,
Contemned from my birth
And rejected by all,
From my lips broke a cry,
Such as anguish may wring,
Sing, – Said God in reply,
Chant poor little thing... [16]

Commenting on translations done by Toru Dutt as ‘transcreations,’ Naik is of the view that she articulates her own “nostalgia for the unceasing quest for love, freedom and beauty or the dilemmas of the self” [17]. However, the remarkable quality of the above translation is the simplicity of language with which she skilfully renders into English the intimate dialogue between the poet who is in distress and God.

2.3. The Era of Political Awakening (1900-20)

This spans the great nationalist movement and the fervour it created. The spirit of the times is echoed in the phrase *Bande Mataram* [roughly translated from Hindi into English as “the salute to the country”]. Eminent poets of this period are Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, and Mohammed Iqbal. Tagore is now claimed geographically as Bengali and Iqbal as Pakistani.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is one of the greatest names in the history of modern Indian literature. His frequent visits to England and other European countries created a great deal of interest in English literature and poetry for him. Further, he was inspired by the poetry of the Romantics and poets like Blake for his affinity to mysticism, and Shelley for his myth-making poetry. Like Blake and Wordsworth, Tagore found a mystical quality in children, closeness to the divine, the immortal and the essence of true wisdom and humanity. His most famous collection of poems, *Gitanjali* won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. It dealt with spiritual devotion, namely *Bhakti*. *Gitanjali* was an account of the poet’s unsullied love and faith in the Almighty; an expression of the immortality of the human soul; and of *Maya*, the illusory nature of the world [18].

Tagore introduced the literature and culture of India in his poetry, rejuvenating the spirit of the Vedas and the Upanishads. The richness of his thought, imagery, language, symbolism and mysticism stirred many of his contemporaries and generations of writers to model after him. The following lines are extracts from “Krishnakali.”

I call her my Krishna flower, Though they call her dark in the village. I remember a cloud-laden day and a glance from her eyes, her veil trailing down at her feet, her braided hair loose on her back. Ah, you call her dark; let that be, her black gazelle eyes I have seen... I call her my Krishna flower.... [19]

The poet perceives the beauty of God in all creatures. Therefore, he compares and admires the beauty of the dark woman to that of Lord Krishna. Tagore is a multifaceted writer – poet, playwright, and novelist. He combined Indian mythical tradition and patriotic fervour in his poetry to win the admiration of great English scholars. Yeats, fond of his poetry, wrote the introduction to Tagore's *Gitanjali* and expressed his views on the beauty of his verse:

[He] wrote the most beautiful love poetry in our language; and then he said with deep emotion, words can never express what I owed at seventeen to his love poetry. After that his art grew deeper, it became religious and philosophical; all the inspiration of mankind are in his hymns. He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself... [20]. The significant works of Tagore other than *Gitanjali* include *The Gardener* (1913), *The Crescent Moon* (1913), *Stray Birds* (1917), *Lover's Gift and Crossing* (1918), *Fire Flies* (1928), and *The Child [Gora]* (1931) [21]. To this list his notable translations of Kabir's poems can be added.

Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) is another great Indian poet, playwright and spiritual leader of the last century. He spent a major part of his youth in England where he acquired the English language and learnt European literature. On his return home in 1893, he joined the freedom movement and because of his activities, was sentenced to prison. It was there that he experienced a spiritual transformation. Thereafter, he spent his life in pursuit of spiritual truth and self-realisation. His poems are influenced by modern science and, are deeply philosophical. His significant works include *Songs to Myrtilla and Other Poems* (1895), *Urvashi* (1896), *Vikramovasi* (1911), *Ahana and Other Poems* (1915), *Love and Death* (1921), *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* (1946), *Savitri* (1950–51), *Songs of Vidyapati* (1956) and *Iliad* (1957) [22].

Sri Aurobindo's poetry is largely spiritual and mystical in theme, flawless and commendable in form. He skillfully employs the quantitative metre. Given below is his poem "Revelation:"

Someone leaping from the rocks
Past me ran with wind-blown locks
Like a startled bright surmise
Visible to mortal eyes,
Just a cheek of frightened rose

That with sudden beauty glows,
Just a footstep like the wind
And a hurried glance behind,
And then nothing, as a thought
Escape the mind ere it is caught.
Someone of the heavenly rout
From behind the veil ran out. [23]

In the poem, Sri Aurobindo speaks of an inner revelation within the frame of mystical poetry. This lyric with rhyming couplets, combines the sparkling simplicity of diction and softness of musicality.

Sir Mohammed Iqbal of Lahore (1877-1938) is the third significant poet of this era. His private and public education provided him with a wide knowledge of languages, history, poetry, religion and philosophy. His early publications include, *The Knowledge of Economics* (1903), *Tarana-e-Hind [The Song of India]* (1905) containing the patriotic song – *Saare Jahan se achcha*. Iqbal spent his academic career in Europe with a B.A. degree from Trinity College at Cambridge in 1907; he qualified as a barrister from Lincoln's Inn in 1908; and gained a doctoral degree in Philosophy from Ludwig-Maximilian's University of Munich. His thesis was published later as *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*.

Iqbal's poetic works are mostly in Persian. Of the 12,000 lines of his poems, more than 7,000 are written in Persian: "Even though in sweetness Urdu is sugar / My Persian is sweeter than Hindi." In the lines quoted Hindi and Urdu are used synonymously. He believed that in Persian language he could express effectively the philosophical concepts to a wider audience. Yarshater [24] calls him a 'passionate admirer of Sufism,' who echoed and induced this vision of Islam in his poetry as a clue and a panacea for the socio-political plagues of Islamic societies.

Iqbal was a talented poet with reformist attitude. He articulated his vivacious imagination in a strong and emotive manner with complete mastery of expression. His fondness of Shiraz, located in Persia and famous for its great mystical poetry is visible in the following lines: "I am a rose from the garden of Kashmir, that earthly paradise / My heart is from the sacred shrine of Hijaz – and the melody of my song is from Shiraz" [25]. According to Iyengar, his book, *Asrar-i-Kudi* translated by R. A. Nicolson as *The Secrets of the Self*, is a synthesis of poetry and philosophy, and a symbiosis of Eastern mysticism with Western realism [26].

2.4. The Age of Gandhian Revolution (1920-47)

This is the nationalist phase in which the freedom movement in India created a climate for the entry of revolutionary ideas of European art and literature. Two notable poets of the period are Sarojini Naidu, and her brother, Harindranath Chattopadhyay.

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was born into a distinguished family in Bengal. She was an outstanding student and a graduate from the University of Madras. She joined the King's College, London and later the Girton College, Cambridge. In England, she turned to poetry and won the admiration of eminent writers, Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse.

On her return to India, Naidu participated actively in the freedom struggle and was elected President of the Indian National Congress. After Independence, Sarojini Naidu became the first woman of Governor of Uttar Pradesh. Yet, politics could not efface her reputation as a poet, social reformer, champion for the cause of women, and orator. Her delicate poems and songs earned her the title *Bharata Kokila* or *The Nightingale of India*. She has to her credit four volumes of poetry – *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917), and *The Father of the Dawn* (1961). Her poems blend impeccable form, artistic polish of matter and lyric quality of the first order [27]. The following lines are from “Palanquin-Bearers:”

Lightly, O lightly, we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string. [28]

Lines quoted above are reflections on a wedding. The bride feels sad and cries because she is separated from her family, but she is also happy because she is going to start a new life. However, despite composing poems of great merit, Sarojini Naidu's poetry is often criticised for its decadent exoticism of the Georgian style. This criticism is mostly due to the expression of romantic sentiments by the poet, instead of appealing to realistic representations.

Harindranath Chattopadhyay (1898-1990) was another eminent poet and O'Donnell describes him as “a fiery revolutionary and most versatile individual... both poet and actor. In the period before partition he was acclaimed as the most prolific Indo-Anglian writer.” [29] The lines quoted below are from his “Imagery.”

He has fashioned the stars and the moon to the music
Of innermost-flowering joy and desire,

He has tried his own love for himself through the ages
 By flooding his limbs with unquenchable fire
 Of creation that dances and bubbles and flutters
 In peacocks, in seas, and the hearts of the birds.... [30]

These lines reveal the core idea of many schools of mysticism, namely the concept of unity in diversity. However, Chattopadhyay's poetry like that of other practitioners of this period is immersed in romantic sentiments, strong individual emotions and follows a similar choice of diction and prosodic patterns. Most of the poems exhibit patriotic feeling through the poet's description of the beauty of his country.

2.5. Poetry after 1947: The Era of Independence

This was the period of partition of the subcontinent into two nations of India and Pakistan. The momentous freedom of Indian people was followed by trouble, disturbance and violence. Less than a year after Independence, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated and life's standards were lowered. According to O'Donnell 1984, the devastating effects of partition in the year of independence destroyed poetry instead of producing a flood of verse in jubilation [31]. Poets of this era were followers of Sri Aurobindo in outlook, choice of diction and form, and themes [32]. K. D. Sethna is an outstanding poet of this era and his collections include *Artist Love* (1925), *The Secret Splendour* (1941), and *The Adventure of the Apocalypse* (1949) [33]. Lines below are extracts from a lyric named as "Tree of Time" from *The Quest Eternal*:

I am a tree of time, a swaying shadow,
 With one sole branch lit by eternity...
 All of my dark save this song-fruitful hand.
 There the large splendour tunes my blood and makes
 Fragrance deathless ecstasy out flower.... [34]

The pervasive mysticism can be detected in this short passage.

Brajendranath Seal and Sri Ananda Acharya were other eminent poets who belonged to the same generation. The following lines taken from Acharya's "The Witness," speaks of the spiritual concepts of Indian mythology.

I am the witness who dwelleth in the soul of all.
 I listen to thy prayer, I hear the song of thy heart,
 I lie in the hidden light of the temple of thy thought.
 Though knowest me not – nor do the gods who wake thy senses and thy mind.... [35]

The continuing spirit of mysticism is evident in the given lines. However, this trend changed subsequently.

2.6. Post – Independence Era (Post 1947)

By the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the Romantic and Victorian fashion exploited by Indian poets had lost their sheen. Eminent figures of the new generation of poets, inspired by modernism, were Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, A. K. Ramanujan, followed by P. Lal, Keshav Malik, Pritish Nandy and others. Kamala Das is an outstanding figure of this time. “My Grandmother’s House” appeared in *Summer in Calcutta* depict Das’ emotional attachment to her grandmother.

There is a house now far away where once
I received love.... That woman died...
...I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved... [36]

Das embraces the first beams of pure love and affection from her, in the absence of paternal love.

3. CONCLUSION

From the mid-19th century onwards, Indian poets begin to write in English. This English is considered by many literary figures as sub-standard; neither good English, nor entirely Indian. In the subsequent years, this version of English undergoes more development, and famous figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, and Mohammed Iqbal emerge on the stage of Anglo-Indian poetry. A significant feature of this poetry is that it targets and reins in the freedom of individuals. In addition, there are various cases of contribution of this poetry to the nationalist movement for independence. Articulation of Indian mythology and quests for spirituality is another thematic characteristic of this poetry. On the other hand, a negative point of this poetry may be explained in terms of slim and slight contribution of women writers. This could be elucidated in terms of partial access of women to education and the fact that literature belonged to the higher classes of society. Moreover, art for this limited number of women writers was only a social statement and not a committed passion to raise issues affecting both the writer and the reader. In more recent decades, the use of English by writers of both sexes has remarkably increased and a great number of women and men from all classes of society articulate themselves in this language.

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