

## PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: ORIGINS, AND PREDOMINANT THEMES AND STYLES

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### Abstract

The British writers of verse started to write poetry on local Indian subjects towards the end of the eighteenth century. These 'Anglo-Indian' writers attempted at being 'Indian' in both style and theme. The cultural colonization of India was marked by several important events. Their early efforts by Indian poets were considered tributary to the mainstream of English literature. Henry Derozio who is credited as the first Indian poet in English vigorously sing of nation, soil and its glorious past. The first freedom struggle of 1857 caused by the made the writers more conscious and sensitive toward the situations and experiences of their own countrymen; there was an upsurge of nationalistic fervour among Indians. This spirit soon began to express itself through movements of religious, social and political reform during the period of 1857 to 1920. Tinged with nationalistic sentiments, major poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu show involvements in the contemporary political scene which was steeped in freedom movement. Their poetry is more mature than the earlier poets both thematically and stylistically. The pre-Independence poets, thus, have dealt with a variety of themes and styles; However, it often remains separated from the physical reality of India which is explored by the post-Independent poets.

**Keywords:** Pre-Independence, colonization, poetry, nationalism, freedom struggle, reality.



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The emergence of Indian writing in English has a long history which dates back to the colonial times when English used to be the language of British rulers and a few aristocratic Indians who were deeply enthralled by this language of their subjugators. Makarand Paranjape in *Indian Poetry in English* mentions the two preconditions that were to be met before Indians could write poetry in English: "First, the English language had to be sufficiently Indianized to be able to express the reality of the Indian situation; secondly, Indians had to be sufficiently Anglicized to use the English language to express themselves" (1). The first of these two conditions, the Indianization of the English language, began much before the second, the Anglicization of the Indians. With the opening up of trade after Vasco da Gama's arrival at Calicut in Kerala in 1498, several Indian words found their way into Portuguese and then into

English. It was almost another century earlier, Thomas Stephens, a Jesuit priest, was the first Englishman to dwell in India in 1579. Thomas Stephens of New College, Oxford, arrived in India on October 24, 1579. As rector of the Jesuits' College at Goa, Stephens's letters to his father are said to have quickened the desire of the English merchants for direct trade with the East. Sir William Wilson Hunter's *History of British India*, Volume I, Chapter V entitled "England's Attempt to Reach India in the Sixteenth Century, 1497-1599" records English people's initial attempt to arrive in India. Sir William Wilson Hunter was a Vice President of Royal Asiatic Society, and wrote the book by the royal permission of Queen Victoria. By the time of Father Stephens landed in Goa, a considerable body of Indo-Portuguese words was already assimilated into English. Such lexical borrowing accelerated with the increasing British presence in India after the year 1600 when the British East India Company was established by the Royal Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I.

More important than this large-scale lexical borrowing was the fact that, by the end of the eighteenth century, Englishmen in India had started to write poetry on local Indian subjects. Of these early 'Anglo-Indian' writers of verse, the most important was Sir William Jones (1746-1794). The term 'Indo-Anglian' was used to denote the literature produced by Indians in English. K. R. SrinivasaIyengar in *Indian Writing in English* says the term 'Indo-Anglian' was first used by J. H. Cousins in 1883 in *Specimen Compositions from Native Students*, a collection of essays written by Indian students in English and published in Calcutta (qtd. in Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 3). An accomplished linguist and translator, Jones's familiarity with Indian traditions is reflected in his eight hymns to Hindu deities. These poems attempt at being 'Indian' in both style and theme; in writing them, Jones demonstrated for future Indian poets that the English language could be a fit vehicle for Indian subject matter. Hence by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the prospective Indian poets in English not only inherited a language whose expressive range had been enlarged by a substantial lexical borrowing, but also which was richly amenable to Indian topics.

The second precondition, the Anglicization of Indians, began in earnest when the British became a powerful colonial power in India. This happened more than 150 years after the East India Company was chartered. In 1757 the British won the historic Battle of Plassey, which gave them control of Bengal. In 1772 they assumed the *Diwani*, or revenue administration, and in 1790, the administration of criminal justice in Bengal. Thus, it was not until the British had changed from traders to rulers that the large-scale Anglicization began.

The cultural colonization of India was marked by several crucial events. In 1780 India's first newspaper, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, was published in English. In 1792 Charles Grant, an enlightened civil servant of the East India Company, suggested a scheme of establishing several English schools to educate the Indians. The British parliament, later, directed the East India Company to finance such new schools. Raja Rammohun Roy championed in a series of petitions submitted to Lord Amherst demanding the introduction of a system of education embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy with other useful sciences.

In 1817, the Hindu College, which later became Presidency College, the premier educational institution of Bengal, was founded. More significantly, in 1835, Macaulay in his famous Minute, laid the foundations of the modern Indian educational system, with his decision to promote European science and literatures among Indians through the medium of the English language. The result was that English became in India, as later in other British colonies, a passport to privilege.

A study of the social and cultural contexts of Indian poetry in English reveals several important insights into its origins. Indian poetry in English began in Bengal, the province in which the British first gained a stronghold. In addition, this poetry was largely an urban phenomenon, centred in Calcutta (now Kolkata). In fact, for the first fifty years, it was confined entirely to a few Bengali families who were residents of the city. Then, gradually it moved to other urban centres such as Madras (now Chennai) and Bombay (now Mumbai); even today, Indian poetry in English remains largely urban. Moreover, because English was an elite language in India, Indian poets in English came from the upper classes and castes.

When Indians first began to write poetry in English, they were outnumbered by Englishmen who also wrote poetry on Indian subjects. Hence, poetry by Indians was not distinguished from that of the British in India, or Anglo-Indians as they were called. Indeed, because India was a part of the British Empire, Indian poets in English were not given a separate national identity; their early efforts were considered tributary to the mainstream of English literature. The term 'Anglo-Indian' literature came to include not just the work of English on Indian themes, but also of Eurasians and 'native' Indians in English. The first collection of such poetry was published in a 46 page supplement to what was probably one of the first textbooks of English literature anywhere in the world, David Lester Richardson's monumental *Selections from the British Poets from the Time of Chaucer to the Present Day with Biographical and Critical Notices* (1840). Richardson's selection of "British-Indian" poetry

includes poems by Derozio and Kasiprasad Ghose (qtd. in Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 3). The first substantial scholarly work on Anglo-Indian literature was Edward Farley Oaten's *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature*, published in 1908. Oaten's primary concern was with English poets such as Jones, Edwin Arnold, and Rudyard Kipling; he made only passing references to Indian poets in English.

With India's independence from Britain and the withdrawal of the British from India, Anglo-Indian literature in the sense of literature written by the English in India, more or less came to an end. On the other hand, literature by Indians in English increased, gradually evolving an indigenous tradition for itself. Such a declaration of literary independence is reflected in the first attempts by Indian critics to argue for a special identity for Indian literature in English. This approach was propounded in the 1930s and 1940s by Indian critics who were influenced by the freedom struggle. The most influential among these was K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, whose *Indo-Anglian Literature* (1943) was the first book-length discussion of this literature as a distinct, independent field of study.

The first published work of Indian writing in English was *The Account of the Jains* (1808) written by Cavelly Venkata Boriah, a translation of the several accounts the author received about the history of the Jains from Jain priests. The first original writing came from Raja Rammohun Roy whose *A Defence of Hinduism* was published in 1817. Apart from the English writings which appeared in prose, the earliest attempt in the field of poetry was by Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami, the elder brother of Cavelly Venkata Boriah, whose translation of Arasanipala Venkatadhvarin's *Viswagunadarsana* was "probably the first literary translation into English by an Indian to enter print in 1825" (Pollock 219). However, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) is credited as the first Indian poet in English who brought out two volumes in verse – *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Memorial Tale and Other Poems* (1828), which demonstrates his strong affinity with Byron. M. K. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* says that his shorter pieces like "To India – My Native Land", "The Harp of India" and "To the Pupils of Hindu College" have "an unmistakable authenticity of patriotic utterance which stamps Derozio as an Indian English poet who is truly a son of the soil" (23). His poems vigorously sing of nation, soil and its glorious past. In this context M. K. Naik further states:

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Derozio's verse is its burning patriotic zeal, somewhat surprising in a Eurasian at a time when the average

representative of his class normally tended to repudiate his Indian blood, and identify himself with the white man, for eminently practical reasons. (*Indian English Poetry* 10)

Indian myths and legends, too, find its first authentic mention in Derozio's poetry. Poems like "Chandra's Beams", "Highest Himalay" and "Ganga's Roll," distinctly manifest his zeal and skilful handling of theme and subject.

In 1830 Kasiprasad Ghose brought out *The Shair or Minstrel and Other Poems* claiming to be the "first Hindu who has ventured to publish a volume of English verse" (qtd. in Nair, *Three Indo-Anglian Poets* 15), either because he was unaware of the publication of *Poems* by Derozio, a fellow poet of Calcutta, three years earlier or, more probably because his definition of a Hindu did not include Derozio. Kasiprasad Ghose was an author of pure Indian blood. Being less original and more an imitator, His poetry was modelled on the Romantic and Neo-classical poets. M. K. Naik opines:

Kashiprasad Ghose seems to intimate by turns the stylized love-lyrics of the Cavalier poets, the moralizing note in neo-classical poetry and the British romantics, his 'Shair' being obviously Scott's 'minstrel' in an Indian garb, slightly dishevelled as a result of the arduous voyage across the seas. (*A History* 24)

But Ghose, apart from these influences, has his little yet peculiar contribution in the sense that he presented the Indian scene replete with Indian customs and rituals, and thus paved way for the generation to come in rendering Indian English poetry open to a more mature phase.

A new note of distinguishable merit was struck by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) who, however, being a Bengali started his career as an Indian English poet. His received acknowledgement by his two long narrative poems namely *The Captive Ladie* and *Visions of the Past*. Both came in the same year, 1849. His mastery over the use of octosyllabic verse is based on the romantic models that he followed, namely Scott and Byron. Dutt has written the latter poem in Miltonic blank verse and simultaneously handles the Christian theme of the temptation and fall and redemption of Man. Thus Dutt, too, remained confined merely to imitate the British models without injecting much from his original domain. M. K. Naik affirms: "in spite of his command of English and his sense of rhythm, Dutt's English poetry hardly rises above the level of derivative, if technically accomplished, verse" (*A History* 25).

After the great mutiny of 1857 regarded by many as the first war of Independence, and the atrocities heaped upon the revolutionaries, there was an upsurge of nationalistic fervour among Indians. There is a remarkable and perceptible difference between the poetry written before and after the first freedom struggle of 1857. It made the writers more conscious and sensitive toward the situations and experiences of their own countrymen. Now they were in a constant search to attain an authentic artistic utterance to voice the general attitude of anti-establishment. It heralded a new dawn, as Percival Spear writes:

There was born from the middle stratum of society a new integrated all-India class with varied background but a common foreground of knowledge, ideas and values. . . . It was a dynamic minority. It had a sense of unity, of purpose, and of hope. It was the newborn soul of modern India. In time it was to infuse the whole of India with its spirit. (291)

This spirit soon began to express itself through movements of religious, social and political reform. The period 1857 to 1920 witnessed the inception of various remarkable institutions which led India and its citizens on the path of enlightenment. The establishment of Brahmo Samaj as early as 1828, attributed to Raja Rammohan Roy, was done with the aim to uplift the masses from the slumber of ignorance by educating them about their rights and status. A similar movement, then, was followed by the establishment of Arya Samaj in 1857 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. M. K. Naik says that “this was an attempt to revive Hinduism in the pristine purity of the Vedic age. Repudiation of puritanism and polytheism, rejection of the hereditary caste system and revival of proselytization were its chief doctrines” (*A History* 31).

Based on ancient Hindu religious and philosophical thought, there also emerged another similar movement known as Theosophical Society founded in New York. It was a blend of the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Pythagoras and Plato, ancient Egyptian thought and early Christianity. On the other hand, among these whirling movements principally devoted to religious reforms emerged Ramakrishna Mission named after Swami Ramakrishna (1836-86) and led under the dynamic leadership of Swami Vivekananda. It instilled a new sense of confidence in the countrymen.

Fired with a patriotic zeal some Indians like Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda took to reawakening the nationalistic spirit among countrymen to repudiate the false notion of British superiority and to assert the glorious past of India. While on the other hand, there were others who were swayed by the British pelf and power and pledged themselves

to the English. Not only were they attracted to their political or social positions, but most of them proselytized themselves to Christianity also. To this period and group belong the Dutts—Govind Chander, Hur Chander, Girish Chander, Umesh Chander, Toru and Aru – and Manmohan Ghose who was the elder brother of Sri Aurobindo. *The Dutt Family Album* (1870) comprising poems by the members of the Dutt family recently converted to Christianity betray their slavish attitude to everything that was British. Another poet Nobo Kissen Ghose known as Ram Sharma (1837-1918), on the other hand, wrote with some genuineness and authenticity and can be considered as the first mystic poet of Indian English poetry. His volumes include *Willow Drops*, *The Last Day: A Poem* and *Miscellaneous Poems*. His poetry, however, hangs between two extremes — at the one end he shows admiration for the British rulers while on the other he praises nationalists like Swami Vivekananda. Ram Sharma was extremely overpowered by the love for the West to the extent of expressing his responses to the Indian experiences through the myths of the West.

Besides a few other poets of lesser repute, the achievements of Romesh Chander Dutt (1848-1909), a nephew of Govind Chander Dutt, and Manmohan Ghose (1869-1924) are also quite significant. Romesh Chander's output lies mainly in his translation of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in English. Manmohan Ghose is considered to be the most talented of these poets. His poetry is a product of his cultural alienation which stifled his interest in India owing to his education in England. His works include *Primavera* (which was published in collaboration with Stephen Phillips, Lawrence Binyon, and Arthur Cripps), *Love Songs and Elegies*, *Songs of Love and Death* and *Orphic Mysteries and Immortal Eve*.

Toru Dutt (1856-77), the younger cousin of Romesh Chander and the youngest daughter of Govind Chander Dutt was the most gifted poet of this phase. A tender hearted girl that she was, her poetic output would have been rare had she only been allotted a little longer span of life. Like Ram Sharma's, hers also was a similar attitude of ambivalence towards Britain and loved the British ways yet she had a penchant for the Indian mythology. It is a very curious fact that though she was a Christian convert, she had deep love for Indian legends and classics. She has extensively exploited some of the native myths and legends in her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, which was posthumously published in 1882. M. K. Naik's *A History of Indian English Literature* makes an evaluation of her:

What is most impressive about Toru Dutt's poetry is its virtually total freedom from imitation (in contrast with Kashiprasad Ghose and M. M. Dutt) at an age

when most writers are in their artistic swaddling clothes. . . . Her best work has the qualities of a quiet strength, of deep emotion held under artistic restraint and acute awareness of the abiding values of Indian life. (40-41)

The later phase of pre-Independence poetry includes the grand names like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu who were entirely different from their predecessors in that their poetry is more mature than the earlier poets both thematically and stylistically. Tinged with nationalistic sentiments, they show some involvement in the contemporary political scene which was steeped in freedom movement. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was basically a Bangalee poet but his own translation of *Gitanjali* won him the coveted Nobel Prize in 1913. It was followed by *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Stray Birds* and *The Fugitive*. The poetic collection *Gitanjali* is just like a string of holy beads that chants the name of the Divine One with such rhythm and cadence that it seems to be a single whole without any joint. About *Gitanjali*, M. K. Naik writes in his *A History of English Literature*:

The central theme of *Gitanjali*, Tagore's finest achievement in English verse, is devotion and its motto is, 'I am here to sing thee songs.' (Poem no. XV). These songs, firmly rooted in ancient Indian tradition of Indian saint poetry, yet reveal a highly personal quest for the divine, characterized by a great variety of moods and approaches. (60)

Tagore feels ecstatic experience of the divine and gives expression to this blissful state in his utterances in the form of songs; he sees God in verse number 78 as "unbroken perfection" (*Gitanjali* 73) and endeavoured to express his glory in mystical terms.

Unlike his elder brother Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was a hardcore nationalist who had deep love for India and aspired to its freedom. His intellectual development has four milestones— patriot, poet, yogi, seer — which form at once his strength and weakness. Comprising twelve books, his *magnum opus*, *Savitri* is a poem of staggering dimensions. Iyengar in *Indian Writing in English* compares this deeply philosophical Hindu epic with Dante's masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*:

In a sense, *Savitri* is *The Life Divine* turned into poetry even as the *Divine Comedy* is Catholic theology and the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas given a poetic body. Nevertheless, it needs to be reiterated that *Savitri* and the *Divine Comedy* are significant poetry, not mere philosophy or theology dressed up in poetical fripperies. (205)



Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was an equally talented poet whose artistic gifts clashed with her political involvement. Before participating in social activities, she had brought out her first volume *The Golden Threshold* which was followed by *The Birth of Time*, *The Broken Wing*, and the collected poems, *The Sceptered Flute*. Her finest lyrics have a perfect structure and a rare craftsmanship. However, since her diction and imagery are derived from conventional romantic sources, her work appears to be irretrievably outdated by the parameters of modern poetics. Her contribution lies in giving an authentic Indian English utterance marvellously tuned to the composite Indian ethos marked by the splendours of native scenario. Her younger brother Harindra Nath Chattopadhyaya wrote more prolifically as his poetic span expands for seven decades. His collections include *The Feast of Youth*, *The Magic Tree*, *Spring in Winter* and *Virgins and Vineyards*.

The pre-Independence poets, thus, have dealt with a variety of themes and styles. While Derozio used a derivative and romantic style, Romesh Chander Dutt had a narrative style, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's was an epic one, Toru Dutt's simple and transparent while Tagore used prose-poem style, Manmohan Ghose imitated the style of the decadents of the naughty Nineties, Sri Aurobindo dealt with a somewhat obscure and *Mantrik* style, Naidu's technique is sophisticated and figurative.

A notable characteristic of Indian poetry in English is its possession of an extremely high national content. A partial explanation of the strong Indian presence in pre-Independence Indian poetry in English is that the poetry is a body of literature whose creation has the rising tide of nationalism that preceded Independence as its backdrop. Many of the poets were personally involved in the freedom movement: Tagore lent a poetic dimension to the struggle in Bengal through his active though intermittent leadership; Aurobindo was a nationalist revolutionary before he became the recluse of Pondicherry; Naidu was a very important woman leader of the Congress. Besides, the use of the English language seems to heighten the user's awareness of his Indian identity

An analysis of the Indian element in pre-Independence Indian poetry in English reveals that it is often removed from the physical reality of India. The word 'physical' is used in a rather wide sense here: it includes the geographical, the social and the economic aspects. The poets either failed to gather sufficient experience of the physical reality of the country, or failed to translate the experience into poetry, or worse still, failed to do both. Derozio died in his early twenties before he could develop sufficient contact with the actuality around him and so did

Toru Dutt. It would be only a minor exaggeration to say that the early Aurobindo was a decadent who cared little for terrestrial reality, the later Aurobindo a mystic who cared even less. Naidu did take Edmund Gosse's famous advice seriously: her poetry is very much about the land, its history and mythology, its vegetation and animal life, its people, their customs and festivals; but there is a dreamlike air about the India that her poetry presents. Product of an upper middle class family background, Naidu was hopelessly out of touch with the physical reality of India, especially the life of the lower classes.

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