



## Pre – Independence Indian English Poetry

### KEYWORDS

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The phenomenon of writing in English is the result of India's political, social and cultural encounter with the West, chiefly with Britain. The introduction of English education in India caused a tremendous ferment in life and literature of Indian people. A world of new ideas was opened to them through the portals of English literature. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, educated Indians responded to western thought and literature. They critically examined the foundations of their own society and culture and formulated proposals for social and religious reform. Their efforts found expression both in English and Indian languages. The first sign of this was found in writing of English verse by Indians. Indian English poetry which is now nearly one hundred and eighty years old can be divided into two phases-

1. Pre – Independence period
2. Post – Independence period

India's freedom from the colonial rule in 1947 is a demarcating line between the two phases of Indian English literature in terms of matter and manner of writing.

A study of the social and cultural contexts of Indian poetry in English reveals several important insights into its origins. The cultural colonization of India was officialized with the charter of Queen Victoria in 1832. English came to be regarded as the official language and many Indians accepted it as the medium of expression. The study of English classics was prompted. From the mainstream of English literature emerged the new types of writing known as 'Anglo – Indian' and 'Indo – Anglian'. It was Indian in sensibility and content and English in language. There is an impressive list of poets who wrote during the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The early Indian English poets came from the upper class because English was an elite language. In addition this poetry was largely an urban phenomenon, centred in Calcutta.

The publication of Henry Derozio's first volume titled 'Poems' in 1827 is generally accepted as the formal beginnings of Indian poetry in English. As a teacher of English in Hindu college, Calcutta, he inspired a number of young Indians with love of the English language and English literature. V. K. Gokak observes, "The first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the period of incubation for Indo-Anglian poetry and Derozio was the moving spirit then." The publication of Indian poetry in English by poets like Kashiprasad Ghosh, Goroob Churn Dutt, Raj Narain Dutt, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Shoshree Chunder Dutt assumed prominence during the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These poets were followed by Romesh Chunder Dutt, Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. These poets cultivated a proficiency in English language and their output was prolific.

Pre – Independence Indian English writing was the outcome of the cross – fertilization of two cultures – Indian and English. English came to India as the representative of bourgeois culture, art and democracy. It introduced modern literary forms of the Indian people. This brought about a veritable renaissance

in India. The writers in India began to assimilate a new consciousness and new literary forms for nearly a century. Yet their identity as genuine writers and scope of their writing in English remained debated issues. Makarand Paranjape notes, "When Indians first began to write poetry in English, they were outnumbered by Englishmen who also wrote poetry on Indian subjects..... 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 main stream of English literature." Many of the modern Indo – English critics consider the Pre-Independence Indian poets in English "derivative", "imitative", "romantics". R. Parthasarthy observes, "In examining the phenomenon of Indian verse in English, one comes up first of all against the paradox that it did not exist seriously before the withdrawal of the British from India." However, the fact remains that the pre – independence phase has to be considered a vital platform that led to the development of the poetic spirit of India in English.

Indian English poetry was born under a romantic star. It was highly influenced by the poetry of the English romantics like Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly and Byron. It began with verse-romances and lyrics written in the romantic vein.

Toru Dutt's poems are the best case in the point. For example, the following lines from her poem 'The Lotus'.

Love came to flora asking for a flower  
That would of flowers be undisputed queen  
The lily and the rose, long long had been  
Rivals for that high honour

Genuine lyric poetry and lyrical narrative poetry were attempted with enthusiasm in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Toru Dutt's 'Ancient Ballads' (1882), Manmohan Ghose's 'Love Song and Elegies(1898)' Shri Aurobindo's 'Songs to Myrtilla' (1895) and Sarojini Naidu's 'The Golden Threshold' (1905) are the publications reflecting the love of romantic art. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 'The Captive Lady' is a poetical romance in the manner of Scott and Byron. Manmohan Ghose's melancholy strain in the following line echoes Keats':

"I see the roses in her grave  
They make my sad heart bleed  
I see the daisies shine like stars  
And is she earth indeed?"

Kashiprasad Ghose shows his love for conventional description. In one of his poem he describes the moon thus:

Region of bliss  
Irradiate gem of night  
Soothe of sorrows  
Orb of gentle light

Most of the Pre-Independence Indian poets in English lived and wrote when the Indian freedom struggle had become a deep-rooted nationalistic upsurge. In the words of P.K.J.

Kuroki "the pre-independence Indian poetry in English was the voice of the contemporary Indian time-spirit". Sri Aurobindo wrote that it was an "attempt of a re-awakened national spirit to find a new impulse for self expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding". Derrozio's sonnets 'The Harp of India', 'To India- My Native Land', 'My Country in the Day of Glory Past' express his ardent love for Indianism:

"My country! In thy day of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow'  
And worshipped as a deity thou wast.  
Where is the glory, where that reverence now?"

Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekanand, Sri Aurobindo and Sri Sarojini Naidu were the prominent poets who revealed the soul of India to the west through their poetry.

Indian English literature is founded on well-established traditions. The mystical tradition, the humanistic tradition and the socialistic traditions are the main creative impulses. Following the tradition of saint-poetry, Swami Vivekanand, Swami Ramtirth, Sri Aurobindo wrote poetry which is soaked in India's mysticism and spiritualism. The 'inner imaginative pleasure' is provided by the poet-philosopher Sri Aurobindo in 'The Golden Light',

'The golden light came down into my brain  
And the grey rooms of mind sun-touched became  
A bright reply to wisdom's occult plane,  
A calm illumination and a flame'

Tagore saw the world as imbued with the glory of God. His most celebrated work 'Gitanjali' contains prose poems which are on the very ancient themes of man's worship of God.

"This is my prayer to thee, my lord-strike, strike at the root of  
my penury in my heart.  
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.....  
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love."

The Indian Renaissance and Reformation Movement glorifying man, finds its accented expression in Tagore's poetry:

"He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in Sun and in Shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil."

Pre-independence Indian poetry in English had poetic styles of its own. The English language was sufficiently Indianized to be able to express the reality of the Indian situation. At the same time the Pre-Independence poets cultivated proficiency to express themselves in English. The colloquial and conversational style was cultivated by R.C .Dutt, the simple and transparent style of Toru Dutt, the jeweled and sophisticated style of Sarojini Naidu, the picturesque style of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya have remained the excellent examples of the Anglicization of Indian poets of pre-independence phase.