CHAPTER – I
INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most important Indian English poets of the post-independence era. He singlehandedly steered Indian English poetry towards modernity and ushered a new era. He was a major poet himself and was a tremendous influence on the Indian English poetry. He is one of the most anthologised poet and almost unanimously a representative poet of the post-independence era. His poetry has been a subject of critical attention and academic research. Many scholars have written about various aspects of his poetry. This research undertakes to reassess Ezekiel's poetry comprehensively.

The hypotheses of this research are as follows:

- Nissim Ezekiel is a typically Indian poet who is a part of a broad tradition of Indian English literature especially poetry.
- Ezekiel's spiritual quest is Indian and stems from Indian view of life and spirituality.
- Ezekiel is as much a poet of the spiritual quest as he is of sensual pleasure. The sensual self, the spiritual self and the social self are perfectly harmonised in Ezekiel.
- Ezekiel is a poet of the people. His poetry is about the life that he saw around. The immediate environment and day to day life in the city are his concerns.

The objectives of the present research are as follows:

- The researcher shall undertake a complete reassessment of Ezekiel's poetry.
- The research shall throw fresh light on Ezekiel's poetry.
The research shall put Ezekiel in proper perspective in the literary tradition of India.

The research shall throw light on the preoccupations of Ezekiel as a poet.

The research shall elucidate the Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry.

The research shall explain Ezekiel's poetry as composite voice of Indian sensibility.

The research shall help in understanding Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English poetry.

The research shall help in understanding the development of Indian English poetry after the independence.

Indian literature is like a vast river flowing ceaselessly and ever growing with various rivulets merging and separating from it. It’s a continuum constantly flowing assimilating newer elements along its course and still retaining essential quality which can be broadly termed as Indian literary tradition. Over the years, it has manifested itself in many forms through various languages spoken in India and thereby adding to the variety and vividness of ideas and expressions. The various languages spoken in India have a rich gamut of literary output all depicting the local flavour of the ever effervescent sub cultures and traditions.

The Indian literary tradition starts from the ancient Sanskrit literature right from the Vedic literature followed by epic literature and classical Sanskrit literature. The same tradition flows up to the contemporary litterateurs. A modern poet writing poetry in any of the Indian languages is a direct descendent of the great Sanskrit poets who composed the Vedas. Over the centuries, many new languages have taken birth in this vast subcontinent, evolved over a period of time and acquired maturity. Along with the languages there evolved literature. Similarly many languages have perished
leaving behind a vast treasure of stories and myths undecipherable to modern man. A leisurely walk in country side anywhere in India will put you face to face with many memorial stones erected in the memory of some heroic person, inscribed with language no one can now decipher. All these tell stories of someone who sacrificed her/his life for some noble cause. What this suggests is that India has a long and varied history of literary tradition that runs through many languages and many regions which all have their own unique qualities and traditions at the same time manifest something which we call Indian literature. So there are Indian literatures which together make Indian literature. To elaborate, one can think of Bhakti poetry which one finds in almost all Indian languages and evince characteristics typical of the Bhakti movement of that region. At the same time, one can find similarities and continuity of a vast tradition of Bhakti poetry which runs across these regional varieties. The Bhakti movement which originated in the south in the seventh century gradually spread across India encompassing all the regions where it flourished independently with different approaches and style. Though it intersects with the folk literatures of the different regions and various saint-poets have worshipped different gods and goddesses and espouse different philosophies ranging from dualism of Dwaita to monism of Adwaita, collectively the saint-poets are only furthering the same tradition which begins with the earliest extant Sanskrit works. Indian literature is thus a constantly flowing literary tradition with each regional literatures partaking and imparting its uniqueness. Regional literatures of different languages of India collectively make Indian literature though they are distinctly christened according to the language in which they are written.

In this kaleidoscopic tradition of Indian literature, one more hue was added after the British came to India and brought with them English. The British rule in
India brought the Indians in close contact with the English and other European literatures. The long colonial rule and consequent interaction with the western world changed Indian society in a major way. In the initial years the British did not interfere with the social and cultural life of India. But gradually they realised the need for western education in India. The famous Macaulay Minutes in 1835 paved the way for English education in India. An act was passed which declared that educational funds of the British government would be utilized for imparting western education in India and that medium of instruction would be English. In 1844, English became the official language of administration and people with knowledge of English were given preference for government employment. Universities were started in the then Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was one of the first graduates of Calcutta University.

It was during these decades of the nineteenth century that India was awakening from the intellectual slumber of centuries. The interaction with the British colonial masters breathed fresh air in the intellectual environment of the country. K. R Srinivasa Iyengar aptly observes:

The introduction of – the infiltration – of Western culture, the study of English literature, the adoption of Western scientific techniques, although they gave a jolt to India’s traditional life, although they generated a good many wrong movements served us nobly by shocking us into a new awareness, a sense of urgency, a flair for practicality, and an alertness in thought and action. The long dormant intellectual and critical impulse was quickened into sudden life, a new efflorescence was visible everywhere and the reawakening Indian spirit went forth to meet the violent challenge of the values of modern science and the civilization of the West (29).
Literary influence from the west changed the matter and manner of literary creation. Most regional language literatures of India changed rapidly under the western influence. The poets and writers were experimenting with newer genres and prose was gaining popularity. Literature was gradually becoming more and more secular as against the medieval Bhakti poetry which was basically religious and social concerns were gaining foreground. Writers were showing more concerns for the society and an age of reformation had started. The leading sentiments of the time were nationalism, social reform and revivalism. Writers and poets across India in various regional languages were voicing the concerns of the common man adopting the newer literary forms suitable for this.

The nineteenth century may be regarded as the renaissance in India. Though Indian renaissance was not preceded by a dark middle age as it was the case with European renaissance, there was certainly a sudden surge in creative, critical and intellectual activity in the country. There was a penchant for scientific thought and fervour for ideals of liberty and equality. Printing press, though arrived in India in the sixteenth century, became quite widespread in the late eighteenth century and printing in vernacular languages gave a boost to writing in vernacular languages and caused an upsurge in the reading population. India had awakened to the world and there was already a desire to reverberate the vibrations from around the world. Vibrations from abroad inspired many and many were just mimicking whatever was western. There was another strand also equally strong which prided in reviving the ancient glory of India and which rejected the western influence. The western idea of a nation state appealed to Indians which led to growing nationalism and patriotism and a strong opposition against the colonial rule. The opposite strand, equally powerful was that of universalism which was founded on the principle that though there was no political
unity in India, there was a cultural unity. The proponents of this ideology advocated that the western idea of a nation with one language, one people and one political rule was alien to India and it represented a Eurocentric view. Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, etc were the powerful voices of this form of universalism that had its roots in religion and culture of ancient India. However, it would be pertinent here to note that even they were products of the western education and Ram Mohan Roy was a strong proponent of western education. However, whatever the ideological stand, a strong reformist zeal and growing nationalism were common elements of all regional language literatures of the nineteenth century.

The influence of the colonial rule manifested in one more significant way. India got one more language to add to her rich repertoire of languages. English was the language of the ruling people and hence soon acquired a special status and influence which it still enjoys. It was the language of the administration, education, courts, and elite intellectual discourse. The stage was now ripe for it to become the language of creative expression. Many Indians living in India and in Britain had already started writing in English though in the beginning it was for non-creative purposes. The first book to be written in English by an Indian was *Travels of Dean Mohomet* by Sake Dean Mahomet. The book was published in England in 1793. As the title suggests, the books is a travelogue and is autobiographical in nature. It is written in epistolary style with letters addressed to an imaginary friend.

However, it didn’t take much time before poetry was attempted in English. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio is the first Indian English poet. He was a Eurasian of Portuguese origin. Derozio had an eventful brief life but he displays remarkable skill and ingenuity in his poetry. Educated at Drummond’s academy in Calcutta, he was initiated into the world of English literature very early in his life. He started writing
poetry very early in his life and his love for poetry brought him to the notice of Dr. John Grant of Calcutta who helped him to become a teacher of English literature in the Hindu college at the age of eighteen though he had little formal education.

This phase of his life was the most important period of his life. His love for his students is reflected in his poetry. With his youthful enthusiasm and revolutionary ideas he influenced the young students immensely. He encouraged free thinking and debate among his students. The discussions and debates went way beyond the college hours and ignited the minds of young students who became members of the Academic Association he had set up. His unorthodox ideas and his flamboyant behavior irked many. The orthodox Hindus, the Christian missionaries, and even the colonial dispensation equally felt threatened and Derozio was forced to resign from the college. In the remaining months of his life after he left the Hindu college till he died he continued to write poetry and edit journals. The eventful and promising life came to an abrupt end on December 23, 1831 when he was barely 22 years old.

Derozio’s poetry evinces strong influence of the English romantic poets in style and content. One finds echoes of sensuousness of the romantic poets in Derozio’s poetry. His minute observation and depiction of nature and his patriotic zeal are reminiscent of the romantic poets. What was uncommon for a Eurasian like Derozio was his love for India and his love finds patriotic expression in his poetry. One could hear muted depiction of the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity of the French revolution in his poetry. Though many of his poems are puerile and lack the maturity and practice, he shows occasional sparks of genuine poetry especially when he writes about India. In his poem To My Native Land he rues the sorry state of his mother land:
My country! In thy days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
and worshipped as a deity thou wast—
Where is thy glory, where the reverence now?
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,
And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou,
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee
Save the sad story of thy misery!
Well—let me dive into the depths of time
And bring from out the ages, that have rolled
A few small fragments of these wrecks sublime
Which human eye may never more behold
And let the guerdon of my labour be,

My fallen country! One kind wish for thee! (allpoetry.com)

Derozio’s patriotic poems surprise us for their earnestness and honest emotions especially because most people of his class were only too eager to show their affinity to the colonial powers, obviously for practical reasons. In yet another poem *The Harp of India* he laments the pitiable plight of his country:

Why hang’st thou lonely on yon withered bough?
Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;
Thy music once was sweet — who hears it now?
Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?
Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;
Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,
Like ruined monument on desert plain. (allpoetry.com)

Derozio excels in his shorter poems. For instance, his sonnet *To the Students of the Hindu College* is touching because of its warmth of emotion and personal touch:
Expanding like the petals of young flowers,
    I watch the gentle opening of your minds,
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
    Your intellectual energies and powers,
That stretch (like young birds in soft summer hours)
    Their wings to try their strength. O! How the winds
Of circumstance, and freshening April showers
    Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds
Of new perceptions shed their influence;
    And how you worship truth’s omnipotence!
What joyance rains upon me, when I see
    Fame in the mirror
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain,
    And then I feel I have not lived in vain. (vle.du.ac.in)

Here also one hears echoes of romantic poets and influence of English poets is felt clearly. The reference to April showers reminds one of Chaucer’s famous line about the sweet showers of April though the weather in Calcutta does not have showers in April. However, barring such occasional glimmer of good poetry, much of his poetry is mediocre. Sometimes the readers do not find the thought convincing enough to be treated in poetry and the images do not have the spark of originality. For instance, in his poem *A Walk by Moonlight*, one finds him to be a very mediocre poet versifying his incoherent thoughts in a language that is far from poetic with images that do not seem lively:

Last night - it was a lovely night,
And I was very blest -
Shall it not be for Memory
A happy spot to rest?
Yes; there are in the backward past
Soft hours to which we turn -
Hours which, at distance, mildly shine,
Shine on, but never burn.

And some of these but yesternight
Across my path were thrown,
Which made my heart so very light,
I think it could have flown. (allpoetry.com)

There is nothing in these lines that attracts our mind like good poetry does. Neither the matter nor the manner has anything to make it poetry and we feel that the poet is just using words which do not serve any purpose. Again one can see very mediocre poetry in the following lines:

I had been out to see a friend
With whom I others saw:
Like minds to like minds ever tend -
An universal law.

And when we were returning home,
'Come who will walk with me,
A little way', I said, and lo!
I straight was joined by three:

Three whom I loved - two had high thoughts
And were, in age, my peers;
And one was young, but oh! endeared
The poet says he was joined by three of his friends in his moonlight stroll, but one never knows why the poet mentions his friends who walked with him. It does not serve any purpose in the poem except that the poet could use “we” instead of “I”. Even if the experience is intensely personal, the poet fails miserably to render that experience into poetry:

The moon stood silent in the sky,
And looked upon our earth:
The clouds divided, passing by,
In homage to her worth.

There was a dance among the leaves
Rejoicing at her power,
Who robes for them of silver weaves
Within one mystic hour.

There was a song among the winds,
Hymning her influence -
That low-breathed minstrelsy which binds
The soul to thought intense.

And there was something in the night
That with its magic wound us;
For we - oh! we not only saw,
But felt the moonlight around us. (allpoetry.com)
The moon, the clouds, the wind, the leaves dancing in the air, and the moonlight which the poet not just sees but feels all around them does not transcend the sphere of experience to become poetry. Even in the last stanza, the poet struggles to create genuine poetry out of his expression and it acquires almost a mock epic dimension utterly unintended by the poet:

Oh! in such moments can I crush
The grass beneath my feet?
Ah no; the grass has then a voice,
Its heart - I hear it beat. (allpoetry.com)

His longer narrative poem *The Fakir of Jungheera* is a tale of unsuccessful love of a Brahmin widow, Nuleeni, and a Fakir who is an outlaw who saves Nuleeni when she was to be sacrificed on the funeral pyre of her husband. Nuleeni gets a brief lease of life before her she and her paramour die after a fight between her relatives and the Fakir. The poem evinces good use of different metres and the narration is fast pacing echoing Byron’s strong influence on the poet and the social reformer in the poet surfacing intermittently. On the whole Derozio is, in the words of M. K. Naik, ‘a poet of slender actual achievement’ (25) and ‘remains a writer of sadly unfulfilled promise’ (25).

A more disappointing poet of the era is Kashiprasad Ghosh who enjoys the credit of being the first Indian English poet of pure Indian blood. His *The Shair or Minstrel and other Poems* appeared in 1830. Ghosh studied prosody on the advice of his British teacher and read aloud English poetry in a regular and measured tone which accustomed his ear to English intonation. His poetry show remarkable ease in versification but lack poetic imagination and authentic emotions. Ghosh can take the credit for introducing Indian material in Indian English poetry by way of subject matter and images but that does not compensate for the lack of poetical talent. *The*
Shair narrates the story of a lover whose beloved dies and who throws himself in the sea in grief. Ghosh has good command over versification but images and metaphors are conventional drawn from Bengali and Sanskrit poetry. His poem To a Dead Craw is a beautiful example of technical virtuosity devoid of sensibility essential to poetry. The thought remains at the level of the physical and actual and does not rise to the level of poetical and universal:

Now lifeless on the earth, cold, bare,
Devoid alike of joy and care,
The offals of my meal no more
Attract thee as they did before.
There's rubbish scattered round thee, but
Thy heart is still, thine eyes are shut.
No more that blunt yet useful beak
From carcases thy food can seek,
Or catch the young unheeding mouse,
Which from the flooring of my house
Urged by its hapless luck, would stray
And bask beneath the solar ray. (GT 59)

Among other names of equal insignificance are Rajnarain Dutt, Shoshee Chunder Dutt and Hur Chunder Dutt who unsuccessfully tried their hands at poetry.

Another important name is Michael Madhusudan Dutt who turned to Bengali for creative expression after dabbling with English for some time. His English works which include some sonnets, shorter pieces and two long poems viz. The Captive Ladie (1849) and Visions of the Past (1849) and some prose work fail to impress the readers. He translated two plays from Bengali, Razia, the Empress of Inde (1858) and Sermista (1859). M. K Naik says about Michael Madhusudan Dutt, “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” (26). There are many instances where Dutt borrows words, phrases, images, metaphors from English romantic poets. ‘Cedar’d Lebanon’ from Keats’ The Eve of St. Agnes appears in Dutt’s Introductory Sonnet to Visions of the Past or “pillowed on their breast” is derived from Keats’ sonnet Bright Star where Keats wrote “Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breasts”. Dutt also uses foreign mythology even when he is writing about Indian themes. The use of such exotic imagery with reference to subjects which are primarily Indian looks unconvincing and unnatural. After this brief flirting with English language, Dutt turned afterwards to Bengali for writing where he achieved significant height and proved to be an epoch making writer. Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s shift from English to Bengali is symbolic of the change that was taking place in the social and political space of India.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a marked change in the social political environment of the country. The 1857 revolution brought a change in people’s perception of the colonial rulers. Even those who thought of the colonial rule as a boon for the country were now sceptical of the intentions and impact of the British occupation of India. The factors leading to the change in the relationship between the two races were many and sundry. M. K. Naik says:

The Evangelical revival in England, the social and educational reforms of the 1830s, the advent of the steamships during the 1840s, and the changes made in the system of recruitment to Company service in the 1850s ushered in totally changed attitudes. (31)

Among the Indians the fruits of the university education were now ready to be harvested the seeds of which were sown by Raja Ram Mohan Roy a generation earlier. A sudden surge of nationalism was palpable throughout the country and
obviously enough Bengal was leading the nation. There was a growing pride in everything Indian, at the same time indigenous culture, languages, art forms, myths were gaining prominence. Many writers who started their careers by writing in English were switching over to Bengali and other regional languages. It was the period of assertion of indigenous identity. Bengali which was subjugated to low status of the language of the slaves and lower uneducated class earlier turned into a weapon of asserting the Bengali identity and this idealism for the mother tongue made it increasingly more and more widespread among the elites and intellectuals and not just acceptable but respectable.

The first notable work of poetry after the great revolt of 1857, *The Dutt Family Album*, appeared in 1870 and does not show any sign of the changes happening in India. This family anthology contains poems of The Dutts – Govin Chunder, Hur Chunder and Greece [sic] Chunder, and their cousin, Omesh Chunder – all descendents of Rosmoy Dutt had converted to Christianity and their poetry in the anthology appear little more than incompetent mimicry of the British romantic poetry. Even when they write about India or Indian myths or history, they draw inspiration from the English masters and lack authenticity of genuine feelings. Equally derivative and imitative is the work of Ram Sharma who wrote under the pseudonym Nobo Kissen Ghose.

The first authentic voice in Indian English poetry emerges with Toru Dutt. Though born a Hindu, she was baptised along with the other members of her family when she was six. She learnt English very early in life and spent a year in France and three years in England. The younger Toru shows her veneration for the west and longs to be there again after she returned to India. She considers England to be her home. The sight of a steamship evokes a desire in her to jump aboard ‘homeward bound’
steamship. During the last years of her life before she succumbed to tuberculosis she started studying Sanskrit which changed her considerably. Toru Dutt marks an important stage in the development of Indian English poetry. The earlier poets were still stuck with the nineteenth century style of poetry in terms of deployment of language, use of imagery and treatment of theme or subject matter. Toru Dutt shows remarkable ability to use language to convey the ethos of the time. She is in this sense the harbinger of the modern Indian English poetry. The ethos of the time, the spirit of the period finds a suitable expression in her poetry. Her poems like *Our Casuarina Tree* and *Baugmaree* are undoubtedly the finest poems written till then in Indian English poetry and among the best so far. Earlier poets used Indian mythology and Indian cultural symbols but they looked like plants grafted on alien land but in Toru Dutt they spring from the well of life with an authenticity. In her poem *Lakshman*, when Sita chides Lakshman for not going to his brother’ help, Lakshman’s reluctance is captured in authentic Indian idiom:

In going hence I disregard
The plainest orders of my chief,
A deed for me, - a soldier, - hard
And deeply painful, but thy grief
And language, wild and wrong, allow
No other course. Mine be the crime,
And mine alone. - but oh, do thou
Think better of me from this time.

Here with an arrow, lo, I trace
A magic circle ere I leave,
No evil thing within this space
May come to harm thee or to grieve.
Step not, for aught, across the line,
Whatever thou mayst see or hear,
So shalt thou balk the bad design
Of every enemy I fear. (GT 101-02)

Or, again, in *Our Casuarina Tree*, the emotion and the expression are genuine and come naturally:

But not because of its magnificence

Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:

Beneath it we have played; though years may roll,

O sweet companions, loved with love intense,

For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear. (GT 97)

Toru Dutt shows remarkable dexterity and the poem grows with a structure of its own. The reader can see the transition from personal to universal with the tree turning into a symbol of childhood memories. The images come naturally to Toru Dutt and the poem flows into an effortless cadence. Toru Dutt’s poetry shows a simplicity that emerges from the innocent faith in the Indian mythology and that succeeds where deliberate art would have failed.

Another important name in the history of Indian English poetry is Rabindranath Tagore who, though a noble laureate, wrote primarily in Bengali and later translated his poems into English. His presence gave credibility to Indian English poetry and enthused the generations of poet to aspire to make a dent in the sphere of world poetry through English. Tagore was a multifarious personality and looks larger than life when one looks at his achievements in various fields. He was a poet, dramatist, novelist, painter and musician. He was an educationist and social reformer. He was a philosopher and critic of life and literature. He even had occasional but
Tagore’s poetry is a worthy representation of the best poetic tradition of India in general and Bengal in particular. He is in a sense in the line of great saint poets who wrote devotional poetry but here we find a modern romantic sensibility singing the glory of the ultimate divine power. His poetry reflects the romanticism and mysticism in a soft mellifluous voice. *Gitanjali* came like a fresh breath for world poetry and the poets and critics of the west were swept off their feet by the sheer novelty and freshness of subject and style. He was a mystic poet singing the glory of the almighty and exploring the human and divine love. Tagore’s greatest achievement was that he could catch the original Bengali rhythm in his translation effortlessly so much so that his English translations appear to be original English compositions. He had technical virtuosity and mastery over English metres.

The first half of the twentieth century has a couple of other names also, apart from Rabindranath Tagore, worth mentioning for their poetic achievements. These include Shri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, and Sarojini Naidu. Among these three, Shri Aurobindo shows merit in terms of literary achievement but his name is remembered more for his spiritual stature rather than his stature as a poet. Aurobindo’s poetry has evoked mixed response from various critics. While most of western commentators have been sympathetic in their assessment of Aurobindo, most Indian commentators have not been that much sympathetic. He has been criticised for being verbose, superficial, imitative and unauthentic in terms of experience. Even
those who have showered lavish praise for Aurobindo have mostly praised him for his metaphysics. Aurobindo’s poetry is truly epic and achieves a synthesis of the great traditions of the east as well as west. He has most successfully proved that even in the fractured and dehumanizing age of modern society, an epic of truly epic stature can be written. However, his poetry is still imitative and relies heavily on the western tradition of poetry and falls short of inventing an idiom suitable to express the contemporary Indian ethos.

Aurobindo’s constant preoccupation is with the eternal struggle of man between the world of reality and appearance, between matter and spirit, between the good and evil, between the overshadowing presence of death and man’s capacity for redemption. For him aesthetic pleasure is a result of a harmonious unity between beauty and truth so much so that they are synonymous and inseparable. Aurobindo defines poetry as ‘the mantra of the Real’ (19). He elaborately suggests:

The Mantra, poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality, is only possible when three highest intensities of poetic speech meet and become indissolubly one, a highest intensity of rhythmic movement, a highest intensity of verbal form and thought-substance, of style, and a highest intensity of the soul’s vision of truth (19).

The poet, according to Aurobindo, sees the highest form of Reality, the Saccidanand vision of unity in the nature of things.

In his essay The Future of Poetry (1954), Aurobindo elaborates his views about poetry. For him all poetry is divinely creative. Just as the mantras of the Vedas express the creative power of the Divine, every poet writing in any language partakes this quality. It is an expression of the creative power of the Divine. All great poetry is a manifestation of the same creative power of the Divine. Following ideas from Mathew Arnold’s Study of Poetry, Aurobindo grades poetry according to its level of
inspiration and poetic perfection. The best poetry for him, like Mathew Arnold, is a mediator that bridges the gap between the spiritual and material, between the truth of spirit and the truth of life. He writes:

Poetry and art most of all our powers can help to bring this truth home to the mind of man with an illumining and catholic force, for while philosophy may lose itself in abstractions and religion turn to an intolerant otherworldliness and asceticism, poetry and art are born mediators between the material and the concrete, the spirit and life. This mediation between the truth of spirit and the truth of life will be one of the chief functions of the poetry of the future.

(223)

In the classical Sanskrit language, the word *Kavi* meant any verse maker who wrote poetry but in Vedic Sanskrit, the word always meant the poet-seer. The poet as a seer is an essential quality for Aurobindo. Poetry is inspired word for him that expresses the highest truth.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya was a versatile personality. He was a poet, dramatist, singer, songwriter, Member of the Parliament and actor all rolled into one. He was the younger brother of the famous poet Sarojini Naidu. He wrote poetry in English as well as Hindi and wrote lyrics for films also. His song *rail gaadi* from the movie *Aashirvad* filmed on famous actor Ashok Kumar became very famous. He also wrote a play titled *Tukaram* based on the life of the famous saint poet of the name from Maharashtra. Chattopadhyaya was a prolific poet and his works include *The Feast of Youth* (1918), *The Magic Tree* (1922), *Poems and Plays* (1927), *Strange Journey* (1936), *The Dark Well* (1939), *Edgeways and the Saint* (1946), *Spring in Winter* (1956), * Masks and Farewells* (1951), *Virgins and Vineyards* (1967), and *Life and Myself* (1948). A deeply spiritual vein flows through his poems and echoes of Indian mysticism are heard in his poetry. He often talks about birth, death,
reincarnation and the self and the sense of self. His famous poem *Noon* is a beautiful example of a delicate sensibility at work and is a good example of the originality of his work:

The noon a mystic dog with paws of fire
Runs through the sky in ecstasy of drouth
Licking the earth with tongue of golden flame
Set in a burning mouth. (*GT* 194)

The imagery of a dog to describe the summer noon is very artfully sustained and the picture of a typical Indian noon with scorching heat is depicted. Such vivid images as ‘tongue of golden flame’ (*GT* 194) and ‘burning mouth’ (*GT* 194) authentically visualize the Indian summer. In the next lines also he surprises with such phrases as ‘barks of light’ (*GT* 194), ‘silver chain’(*GT* 194) and ‘sleeps among the hills’(*GT* 194).

Another poem *Shaper Shaped* is yet another exquisite poem by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. The poem is about the poet’s inward journey from being to becoming. It’s a journey to total self-effacement. The ego of the doer is effaced completely and the poet now enjoys the serene joy of becoming. It is unquestioning submission to the divine will and to rejoice in it. In the last lines of each stanza, the poet says he has ceased to ‘the potter’, ‘the poet’, ‘the fashioner of swords’, ‘the dreamer’ and learned instead to become ‘the clay’, ‘the poem’, ‘the sword’ and ‘the dream’:

In days gone by I used to be
A potter who would feel
His fingers mould the yielding clay
To patterns on his wheel;
But now, through wisdom lately won,
That pride has gone away,
I have ceased to be the potter
And have learned to be the clay.

In other days I used to be
A poet through whose pen
Innumerable songs would come
To win the hearts of men;
But now, through new-got knowledge
Which I hadn't had so long,
I have ceased to be the poet
And have learned to be the song. (GT 198)

The poem has a very good structure and the poet builds the crescendo through gradual repetition of the same thought. And the last stanza reveals the theme of total self-effacement before the supreme almighty. It seems Harindranath Chattopadhyaya reflects Dante’s famous line ‘E’n la sua volontade è nostra pace’.

The first half of the twentieth century saw a melodious voice, Sarojini Naidu, who won the sobriquet of the Nightingale of India for her lyrical poetry. Sarojini Naidu started writing poetry from a very early age and her father published her juvenile compositions in 1896 but her reputation primarily rests on her subsequent volumes: *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring* (1912), and *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and Destiny 1915-16* (1917). Her daughter published a fourth volume posthumously *A Feather of the Dawn* in 1961 which contained poems written after 1920. The four volumes contain poems which are more or less similar in form and content and reveal a poetic sensibility which remains the same. The poems depict idealistic picture of Indian myths and
legends and rather unreal picture of rural and city life. Patriotism runs constantly through her poetry almost to the extent of veneration for the country. Women and womanhood figure prominently in her poetry and her concern for the women can be seen in her depiction of mythical characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti, and Savitri. The misery of a woman’s life is reflected in her poem The Pardah Nashin where Sarojini says:

Time lifts the curtain unawares,
And Sorrow looks into her face . . .
Who shall prevent the subtle years,
Or shield a woman's eyes from tears? (GT 149)

But she is also aware of the bliss of the domestic woman who takes satisfaction in the duties of her married life. The tender emotions of women at different stages of life are aptly captured in the poem titled The Bangle Sellers. She describes the several stages of a woman’s life as she progresses from maiden to newly married to mature woman who has ‘journeyed through life midway’(allpoetry.com). Her love poems reveal a sensitive woman who faces the strong pulls between her love of poetry and the draining strain of domestic duties and political career. The picture of woman that emerges from her poems is that of a strong woman who is neither shy nor afraid of asserting her femininity:

My proud soul shall be unforgiven
For a passionate sin it will never repent,
And I shall be doomed, O Love, and driven
And hurled from Heaven’s high battlement...

My outlawed spirit shall crave no pardon. (BW 103)
In her poem *The Poet to Death* she asks death to wait awhile because she has not lived her life fully. The poem shows her desire to live her life fully experiencing the pleasures and pain of ordinary life. Sarojini Naidu’s preoccupation with the ordinary is evident from the fact that she has written poems on the ordinary professionals and laymen who engage in manual work. Her poems like *The Indian Weaver, The Snake Charmer, The Bangle Seller, Indian Weavers, The Palanquin Bearer, Street Cries* etc. are about the various people engaged in Indian crafts and manual work. This preoccupation with the ordinary life of the time marks a significant change in Indian English literature. Indian English literature and poetry was coming closer to home and slowly its imitative nature was giving way to authenticity of emotions and ingenuity of expression. Though it was still too early for Indian English poetry to come of age and assert its individuality, it had embarked on its journey to acquiring authentic Indianness in terms of subject matter, style and diction.

Indian English poetry since its inception up to the time of independence has not remained much relevant after independence. The poets writing during the colonial period were temperamentally different from the poets who started writing after independence or whose major work appeared after independence. The post-independence Indian English poets were only too eager to come out of the shackles of colonial period and they were averse to everything that had a colonial stigma attached to it. Consequently, a commentator such as Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, introducing a recent anthology of Indian verse in English, states;

*[Indo-Anglian] poetry... especially that written between 1825 and 1945, is truly dead. Later poets have found no use for it, and a literary tradition is of no use to anyone else.... Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and women, but not those with whom you could today do business. (1-2)*
In fact, with Sarojini Naidu, the era of romanticism ended for Indian English poetry. Aurobindo’s *Savitri* (1950-51), *Last Poems* (1952) and *More Poems* (1953) though published after the independence, are actually pre-independence poems as they were written before independence. This was the last flicker of the romantic strain in Indian English poetry. Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, and other English romantic poets who were the source of inspiration for Indian poets no longer appealed to the post-independence poets who were modernist in their outlook. It is not that the Indian poets writing in English stopped looking westward for inspiration. Now their source of inspiration had changed. Poets like Ezekiel and Dom Moraes praised Eliot, Ezra Pound and Rilke. The change was palpable in Indian English poetry. The subject matter of their poetry had changed; their way of looking at life and world had changed.

The new generation of Indian English poets drew inspiration from western poets but they were not slavish imitators. They looked upon their western counterparts not as masters to be followed but as co-practitioners with whom they could stand shoulder to shoulder without any sense of inferiority. The Indian English poetry had come of age and had aspirations to find a respectable place in the arena of world poetry. They were not imitators but awakened globalized citizens who were receiving the vibrations of change happening around the world in the field of poetry and reverberating the same. They now have a fairly broad view of the western poetry and are in sync with the trends in the world poetry.

The pre-independence Indian English poetry was, in spite of its occasional bright spots of individual achievements, considered to be an insignificant phenomenon, a fad or an aberration. One reason probably for this lack of serious attention was that the pre-independence Indian English poetry failed to respond to the
national aspirations of the people of India. The national independence movement and the subsequent social reformation movement did not find adequate reflection in the Indian English poetry of the time. It could not reflect the intellectual and cultural ethos of the time. Hence, it did not receive the kind of attention African or Caribbean writers did. The poets before independence were content to imitate the romantic poets of English and even when India featured in their poetry; it was India of their imagination idealised and idyllic. Their attitude to India was romantic and lyrical not argumentative and analytical. Hence it had totally cut off from the intellectual discourse of the time. Around the time of independence, the poets started taking their job seriously. Poetry was not a favourite pastime for them but a serious activity. They started experimenting with the style, technique and subject matter of the poetry.

In fact the biggest challenge before Indian English poets was regarding the very raison d'être of their existence as poets. The old school nationalists questioned their very choice of English as a medium of expression. The not-so-invalid argument was that one cannot write authentic poetry in a language which is not their first language or mother tongue. The regionalists were clamorous about the need to go back to the roots i.e. languages of the pre-colonial period. The very fact that these poets were writing in English was a reason to criticise them for colonial mindset. The biggest criticism being that how can any authentic Indian poetry be written in a language that is alien to multitudinous masses of India. Most of the poets writing in English were from elite, university educated, English speaking miniscule intellectual minority who felt alienated from the vast majority of Indian population. Moreover, a few of them were from religious minorities also being either Jew, or Parsi, or Christian. This made it increasingly difficult for them to be part of main stream
cultural environment of the country. As Bruce King, in a pinpointed manner, comments:

The only answer to those who claimed that Indians could not write authentic poetry in the English in which they had been educated was to write poetry as good as that of British, American and Irish poets, but to write it about Indian lives and conditions. (1)

The new poets took up this challenge and successfully created a body of poetry that is Indian in matter and manner and world class in quality.

Many of the poets writing after independence were from westernised families and had travelled abroad or had been educated in boarding schools or had moved across India because of family movement. They were the newly emerging westernised Indians who had little sense of belonging or roots. They were part of the modern westernised society about which they were writing. They have developed an idiom to express the Indian realities, traditions and ways of feeling not unknown to modern Indians. They write about the urban middle class Indians reflecting their concerns, life struggles, dilemmas, paradoxes and ironies. They sing the glories of their small pleasures and pains, their dreams and aspirations, their frustrations and failures, their worst fears and best hopes. The experiences they depict and the observations they share are their very real personal experiences and observations of the real life shared by Indians of varied hues. They are frank, unconventional and analytical in their treatment of the material they have gathered from the life around them. Their attitude to life is modern, analytical, rational and questioning. Their treatment of their material is subtle, ironic and satirical. Their style is less formal, more direct and colloquial. Their tone is argumentative and confessional. The earliest post-independence Indian English poets were ready to experiment and evolve an idiom and style that best suited their purpose.
In 1953 Nissim Ezekiel published his first volume of poetry *A Time to Change*. The poems already show a new beginning. The poems reveal a poet who talks about the human life lived in the constant struggle with himself and the world around trying to find a spiritual peace. He talks about “a bit of land, a woman and a child or two / Accommodated to their needs and changing moods, / And patiently build a life with these” *(CP 4)* or about the dehumanising effects of the modern world on man and says, “I am corrupted by the world continually / Reduced to something less than human by the crowd” *(CP 7)*. In *Double Horror* the poet continues to write “… but secretly rejoice / When fifty thousand Chinese have been killed, / I who, as a child, wept to see a rat destroyed. / Corrupted by the world I must infect the world / With my corruption.” *(CP 8)* The tone of poetry has changed. Here we no longer hear the romantic poet singing paeans in the glory of the idyllic life of bliss and love. The poet’s predicament in the modern world of utilitarian values and soul draining commercialization makes him question his life, and brings him face to face with his failures. The tone is argumentative and confessional. Poetry is no longer a flight to utopian land of wonder; poetry is a journey within to come to face to face with oneself.

The next important name is Dom Moraes who is Ezekiel’s younger contemporary. Moraes shows remarkable mastery over English language and captures the English speech rhythm beautifully. Moraes was born in India in a Sarasvat Brahmin family which had converted to Christianity before some generations. He considered himself to be an outsider in India because he left India when he was only a boy and held a British passport. However, much he tried to renounce India, India never renounced him. After living in Britain for many years and a couple of divorces, he returned to Mumbai and lived there for the rest of his life. His first book of poems,
A Beginning was published in 1957 when he was 19 and still a student at the Oxford University. It was followed by Poems (1960), John Nobody (1965) and Beldam and Others (1966). A Beginning won him Hawthornden Prize which made him an instant success. English was his mother tongue. He lived the most part of his formative years in England so he had natural rhythm of English sounds. He felt natural affinity with the romantic poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and wrote romantic poetry when many poets of England were already writing Movement poetry of everyday experience and common sense and aimed at clarity. This made him stand out from the routine poetry of the time and gave his poetry a sweet mellifluous voice.

However, his early poetry is all about his personal sense of homelessness, frustration, anxiety and hurt. He had a troubled childhood because of his mother’s poor mental health. His earlier poems reflect his personal insecurity and sense of alienation. In his poem For Peter he says, “All of you now have homes, Peter, not me”(138). Moraes had everything needed to make a great poet: he had natural poetic gift and an ear for rhythm; he was in touch with the most noteworthy and right poets of his time; he had early fame to boost his confidence; he had travelled a lot to give him enough experiences; he was in London and had his first book published from there; his poems were appreciated on both sides of the Atlantic. In spite of all these, one could say about Moraes, like Empson said of another American poet, that one would wish he had more things to say. He had the manner of saying; he couldn’t say anything more than his personal pains.

After late sixties, Moraes seems to have abandoned poetry. The muse appears to him again in eighties when he was back in Mumbai. The earlier felicity and ease seem to have returned but the style had changed. His idiom and temperament still remains romantic but he writes in a less formal and more contemporary style like
those of the Movement poets. Moraes’ poetry remains intensely personal. He writes about his personal sense of exile and alienation, grief and loss, hurt and insecurity. His personal emotions do not translate into some wider context.

Another voice that catches the attention of the readers for her honesty and directness is Kamala Das. She is a bilingual and writes poetry in English and fiction in Malayalam. Her first book of poems appeared in 1965 titled *Summer in Calcutta* which was followed by *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Collected Poems Vol. 1* (1984). She also wrote her autobiography, *My Story* which was originally written in Malayalam. Her autobiography is in tune with her poems which are intensely personal and often autobiographical. Kamala Das was ahead of her times in her frank depiction of female sexuality. She is a rebel against the humiliation and subjugation of women in society. She asserts her voice in her poems speaks unhesitatingly about the plights of women in Indian society. Her poem *An Introduction* vociferously echoes her assertion of womanhood:

The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don’t
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions… (poemhunter.com)

In the same poem, the poetess rebels against the humiliating gendering that a woman is subjected to and her rebellious nature revolts:

Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,

Belong, cried the categorizers. (poemhunter.com)

Kamala Das gave Indian English poetry a modern female voice. Earlier women poets were romantic in their depiction of femininity and presented an idealistic picture of womanhood. Kamala Das is the first modern poetess to write in English who espouses the cause of women in her poetry.

A. K. Ramanujan’s contribution to Indian English poetry is immense and his name can be included in the most important poets of Indian English literature. He was a scholar and translator of Tamil and Kannada and his interests ranged from folklore to philology to dialects to oral literatures. He worked as a professor of English at a couple of college before he joined Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda where he worked for eight years. Then he joined University of Chicago and also taught at other American universities. Ramanujan’s poems reveal his preoccupation with the regional literatures, folklores and classical Sanskrit literature as he drew from them the images and myths to transform them to contemporary context. His poetry largely deals with interplay between the past and the present, the question of identity which is mercurial and impermanent, reverie and reminiscence where the line between fact and fiction is blurred and images conjure up like shadows. His poetry fuses the conventions and techniques from European, American, Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit literatures. In his poem Ecology he says: “The day after the first rain, / for years, I would come home / in a rage.”(SS14) The two facts the flowering of the Champak trees and his mother’s bout of migraine are juxtaposed to highlight the old woman’s love for trees because she would not allow him to cut down the Champak trees even if it caused her migraine. In his poem Self Portrait the poet’s idea of identity as ever eluding inconstant self is presented:
I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father. (TS 21)

A. K. Ramanujan’s contribution to Indian English poetry is very significant. He along with Ezekiel and Moraes gave Indian English poetry an identity. He was responsible for creating a tradition of Indian English poetry to which the later poets could look up to for inspiration.

Another name who tremendously influenced the post-independence Indian English poetry is P. Lal who started the Writers Workshop in 1958 which proved to be a great source of encouragement for future poets by publishing and promoting Indian English poetry. K. R Srinivasa Iyengar aptly observes:

The organizing spirit behind the Writers Workshop (Calcutta) and the enterprising editor of its “Miscellany”, P Lal has been ... both an indefatigable poet and the rallying centre for many of the ‘new’ poets (29).

His works include The Parrot’s Death (1960), Love’s the First (1963), ‘Change!’ They Said (1966), Draupadi and Jayadratha (1967). He also attempted verse translations of the Gita, the Isa Upanishad, the Dhammapada, and selections from the Rig Veda, Sanskrit love lyrics, Jap-Ji and the Mahabharata. However, later assessment shows that P. Lal was careless in his editorship and published much which would rather not have been published at all. Many who were once associated with
Writers Workshop later turned away and started to believe that P. Lal had gone astray. As in his editorship, so in his craftsmanship as a poet, P. Lal could not maintain the standards set by other poets and showed reckless disregard for quality.

Adil Jussawalla appeared with his collection of poems *Land’s End* in 1962 when he was 22. Like Moraes, he was educated in Oxford and lived in England for thirteen years. His first work shows his desire to be an ‘English’ poet and the collection has poems which have an English or European background. The result was as can be expected. Most of the poems lack maturity and authenticity of an individual voice. However, there are occasional glimpses of genuine poetry that signal talent and prospect. Another book of poems titled *Missing Person* shows maturity and a sense of homecoming as they show Jussawalla as an Indian poet. The alien garb was thrown and Jussawalla seems comfortable in the native robes. Jussawalla talks about floods, famine, war, five year plans, colonial mindsets, street dogs, immigrants, foreign return Indians, and Indian life. The poet reveals his rage, bitterness and irony. The title poem of *Missing Person* is a long poem where the personal and public worlds blend. The images are sustained and turned into a myth. The missing person becomes a myth and the personal turns into universal. Jussawalla was greatly influenced by Eliot and Auden. The poetry is ironic and the idiom contemporary reflecting the fractured world of modern cities where human dignity is bartered in the rampant commercialization. The world depicted by Jussawalla is a morally corrupt, dehumanizing, soul draining world controlled by the market forces and commercialization. Jussawalla’s contribution to Indian English poetry is important because he along with Kolhatkar and Daruwala took the Indian English poetry a step further in development. The muted, hesitant and low key or even diffident tone of the sixties reflected in the poetry of first generation post-independence poets gives way to a more confident, assertive
and complex voice in the poets of the seventies. The poetry now has become much more complex, richer in imagery and better suited to reflect the modern sensibility.

Another poet who appeared in the seventies is Keki N. Daruwala. He published his first volume, *Under Orion* in 1970 and immediately followed with the second one, *Apparitions in April* in the succeeding year. Keki Daruwala is an odd one out in the fold Indian English poets as he is a police officer whereas most others are either in the teaching profession or in the media and communication industry. As if his profession had some impact on his poetry, he has an uncanny knack for description and narration. He is a poet of the event. Most of his poems have something happening in them. Vilas Sarang rightly says:

> Because he tends to describe incidents in detail, adding his reflections and comments, his poems tend to be longish.... A poem like *Monologue in the Chambal Valley* (Under Orion) tells us interesting things about a bandit and an informer, but would have really been better as a short story. (22)

His poems have a lot of information some of which might turn into images, often powerful images, but most of them only tend to make his poems loose and lax.

Another minority poet, a Parsi, is Gieve Patel. The anxieties and concerns of Parsi community figure predominantly in his poetry. He is a sensitive poet who is moved by the suffering and cruelty around him. He is also, like Ezekiel, a poet of the city and especially a poet of Bombay. It’s a strong presence in his poetry and like Ezekiel it is not just a background but a strong metaphor. As he is a physician by profession, human body figures prominently in his poetry and physical pain and wretchedness are a hovering presence in his poetry. Gieve, like other Indian English poets, wields irony in his poetry. In *University*, he refuses to mourn the death of students and teachers of Dacca University and compares the massacre with slaughtering of chicken. He is disgusted with the decay and degeneration in the life of
the students and teachers in the university. He says, “...What / was butchered? Not a / Fierce choir of learning. Not / Any newness that ten years from now would / Spread alluvial across a parched country. . . .”(125)

Another name that adds to the repertoire of Indian English poetry is R Parthasarathy. Born in 1934, he published his first book of poems, Poems from Leads in 1968 which was followed by Rough Passage in 1977. R Parthasarathy wrote in the preface to his second book of poems that the book contains the writings of twenty years. The book contains thirty seven poems in all and most of the poems are of a page or a half page of length. This shows how economical and stringent an artist he was. Nothing escaped his ruthless scrutiny and he constantly wrote and rewrote his poems. He is a punctilious writer continually refining and whetting his language. Rough Passage is conceived as a single poem in which all the poems combine to create a complete poem. He says that the poem will be complete only after his death. Parthasarathy deals with the fate of an Indian poet writing in English, a sense of non-belonging and a feeling of being an exile. He constantly tries to find his cultural roots.

Arun Kolatkar is a bilingual poet writing both in English and in his mother tongue Marathi. He also translated some of his own Marathi poems into English as well as Marathi saint poets, especially, Tukaram. In terms of his output he is not a very prolific writer. But his magnum opus Jejuri won him instant fame and Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in 1977. The poems in this collection are centred on Jejuri – a place of worship in Maharashtra. Jejuri shows great unity and completeness in itself. He has natural talent for precision and detachment. It is a fascinating work of interplay between the physical and metaphysical. However, Kolatkar remains on the surface and does not delve deep in the questions raised in the poems about the god, religion, and the belief in the cultural myths and legends.
This brief, cursory and in no way comprehensive survey of Indian English poetry raises one seminal question which needs to be addressed. What does a nomenclature like Indian English poetry suggest? The obvious interpretation of this nomenclature is that it is ‘Indian’ poetry and it is written in English. The language employed by the poet is English but it is primarily Indian poetry in the sense that it draws its life source from Indian life and culture. It is the people of India, their culture, religions, beliefs, customs, conventions, way of life, myths and traditions. It is the authors response to all these. When one say it is Indian poetry, it is understood and expected that it is firmly rooted in the Indian ethos. And it is natural for all art to draw from the life around. Life and art has umbilical connection. Art gets its sustenance from life. If this umbilical cord is snapped the foetus will not survive. There won’t be any life left in it. All creative artists have felt the need to be rooted in the culture in which they were born and brought up and in which they lived. Dostoevsky pointed out the peculiar position of Russian writers when he said that they have two mother lands – Russia and Europe. Irish writers have emphatically voiced their Irish identity. O’Neill said that the one thing that explains more than anything about him is the fact that he was Irish. Oscar Wilde with his characteristic sarcastic flair declared that he was Irish by race but the English had condemned him to talk the language of Shakespeare. Katherine Mansfield never forsook New Zealand and Patrick White cannot be imagined without Australia. The writers and creative people have to grow from the soil to create any genuine and authentic art.

It was in this context that Edmund Goose advised Sarojini Naidu that he expected her to sing of the native passion, of the principles of the unique religion and mysterious intimations that stirred the soul of India. P. Lal wrote in the introduction to *Modern Indian Poetry in English* that “It is essential that we write about life and
values around us – what we see and what we feel what gods and goddesses excite our conscious and subconscious.” (xxxvi) He calls this idea of sensibility of a particular culture ‘a sense of myth’ (xxxvii). He says, “what a sense of myth is hard to define – but without it creative writing becomes thin and merely slick”. (xxxvii) P. Lal has elaborated on the circumstances that led to this thought in his mind. He narrates that when he was a student at St. Xavier’s college he studied Manmohan Ghosh’s Songs of Life and Death. One poem Song of Britannia sang the glory of Britain which to the teenagers in those days of hyper nationalism sounded gross and another poem, April, was even strange because it was filled with names, birds, flowers they had seldom heard of. He wonders after all Keats’ April was one thing – but why should Ghosh’s April be like this. There is no ‘purest, warmest breeze’ in Calcutta in April. It is hot dry and one doesn’t find ‘green grasses lush’. What basically P. Lal wanted to convey was that the poems were unrelated to them. It was not directly rooted to the cultural soil of the poet. He was grafting alien element in native soil.

On this issue of Indianness M. K Naik has elaborately commented in the following words:

“. . . unless art is rooted in the soil, it is bound to be condemned to both superficiality and artificiality . . . This Indianness may take several forms and shapes, and may appear in a work of art in diverse ways, obvious and subtle – but it is a quality which is unmistakably present in the finest work of all Indian writers, whether they write in their mother tongue or English. (HMP33)

Another equally important historian K. R. S. Iyengar comments:

It stands to reason that what makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature, and not just a ramshackle outhouse of English literature is the quality of its ‘Indianness’ – in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought
and play of sentiment, in the organisation of material and in the creative use
of language. (RM 8)

M. P. Rege thinks of Indianness in terms of total human situation which includes a
way of life, the total ethos and cultural archetypes. He clarifies this by explaining the
four purusharthas which is at the core of Hindu ideal of fulfilment. The great epics,
the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the great works of Sanskrit poets Kalidasa
are cited by Rege to explicate the idea of Indianness.

The important question, however, is whether Indian English poetry is Indian
enough in this sense. Does it reflect the Indian ethos? Is it rooted firmly in the culture
of India? Because literature is all about using language evocatively, imparting
‘literary’ meaning to words transcending the literal meaning, and loading the words
with significance which is beyond its literal meaning. For instance, when
RajendraShukla, a noted Gujarati poet writes, ‘Hajo haath kartal ne chitta chanak /
Taleti samipe hajo kyank thanak’ (Let there be a kartal in my hands / And a place near
the foothill. [Tran. mine]), he actually evokes much more than just what the literal
meaning of the word conveys. A reader who is aware of the Gujarati culture and ethos
would immediately recognise the reference to noted Gujarati saint poet Narsinh
Mehta. The complete ghazal is an example of how poetry not just reflects but
employs the myths, symbols, images, religious beliefs, social conventions, and way of
life of a particular people. It is in this sense that literature and life has an umbilical
connection. Could anyone find such a connection between Indian English poetry and
India? Is the umbilical cord intact or it has been snapped and the child survives on life
support system drawing sustenance from artificial connections? Does the past and the
present of India find reflection in their poetry? How does the surrounding affect the
Indian English poet? Do they write for India primarily?
P. Lal had asked certain questions in the form of a questionnaire to Indian English poets and one of the questions was, “Do you feel that you lack a ‘real public’ in India?” Gauri Deshpande responds to this question in the following manner:

I do not expect readers not born Indians to derive the total meaning from my poems . . . their full appreciation, I am afraid, is reserved for Indians. An American was quite at a loss to know the meaning of . . . “and take the seven steps with him that will make him my ally”, which occurs somewhere in a poem of mine, and the meaning of which is clear to anyone who has witnessed an orthodox Hindu wedding ceremony. Thus we are quite right in asserting that we are Indian poets writing in English. Our landscape is Indian, our thought is moulded by our political, social, economic and philosophical scene. To those of us whose mother tongues are different from English, they are important, and most of us are interested in the literary scene here.

So whatever is the size of audience, an Indian English poet writes primarily for India. S/he is, and should aim to be, an Indian poet if any significant poetry is to be written. One finds ample examples where s/he can say with certainty that here is an Indian poet writing Indian poetry. There are multiple references to Indian climate, seasons, geography, rituals, beliefs, and social customs. The modern Indian English poet, at least, is writing the day to day life they see around them. A. K. Ramanunun has written about open defecation in a poem titled Poona Train Window, “I see out the window / See a man defecating / between two rocks, . . .” (RP 24). In the same manner Nissim Ezekiel writes in Irani Restaurant Instructions, “Come again / All are welcome whatever caste... / God is great.” (CP 240)
However, it must also be born in mind that in today’s highly globalized and westernized world, one cannot remain unaffected by what is happening across the world. Just as they are apt to use Indian life as their raw material, they are also likely to use other myths that have become part of a globalized culture. Some images or metaphors may come from there also but what is important is that their treatment of such material is Indian.

The three dominant themes of Ezekiel's poetry are the woman, the city, and the God. All three, in Ezekiel, are typically Indian. They appear as Indian and Ezekiel's attitude to them is typically Indian. That is what makes him an Indian poet writing in English. Ezekiel's poetry provides us an insight in the development of Indian English poetry after independence. He has become almost synonymous with the history of Indian English poetry after independence. His contribution as a practising poet and as mentor and guide for the emerging poets is so immense that a study of his poetry can provide an insight in the development of Indian English poetry.

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