CHAPTER SEVENTH
Indian poetry in English by women can be described as the boldest assertion of the modern Indian woman. An Indian woman poet in English evolved her full identity as a ‘modern’ woman only in the post-Independence period. Post-Independence women poets are, in a way, the index of the consciousness of the modern Indian woman at the transitional stage of Indian society, and they indicate the direction in which the Indian feminine psyche tends to evolve in future. The variety of new tensions encountered by contemporary women stimulates Indian feminine poetic psyche’s progress from tradition to modernity.

The Indian women poets in English deviate from the traditional pattern of Indian womanhood as may be understood with reference to the situation of a vast majority of women in contemporary India. For instance, the national committee, which studied the position of women during 1971 and 1974, reports, “In the cultural understanding of the people, homemaking, like child bearing and child rearing, is identified with femininity”¹ and this leads to “an inevitable effect on girls’ personalities and identities. They learn early in life the need for flexibility, adjustment and submissiveness, and hesitate to develop strong opinions and commitments which they may
not be allowed to pursue after marriage. Apart from the economic reasons, there is also a lurking fear that education may alienate girls from their conventional roles and make them less submissive in the family." 2 On this background, the variety and complexity of Indian women poet's situation gives rise to certain inevitable tensions in personal and social life. They rebel against the conventional role of woman in the society and struggle to assert their new identity as independent, individualistic and conscious participants in experience. They mark thus the evolution of the Indian feminine psyche from the tradition to modernity. They encouraged, in particular, a new awareness about woman so far regarded to be an inferior parasitic unit as having an independent personality. Mamta Kalia is the product of this new awareness. She is a bilingual poet and writes both in Hindi and English, and has made a dint as a poet, novelist, and a short story writer in Hindi. Poetry, in her case, is an inevitable result of the tension caused by her traumatic experience as a woman. She tries to find a pattern for the trivialities of life of a normal, urban, middle-class, serving woman.

Author of five novels, seven short story collections, two one-act play collections, four novelettes in Hindi for children, besides editing three anthologies, Mamta Kalia has published just two volumes of poetry in English. Yet, she is recognized as an important member of the new generation poets whose works are distinguishable by the felicity with which they have incorporated and adapted traditional forms of imaginative expression, to the exigencies of an
inherited English language. The relative ease with her medium and the down-to-earth realism, with which she captures her mundane, middle-class existence, has helped initiate what Bruce King terms as "the present contemporary manner"\(^3\). The writer herself acknowledges the fact that "in 1998 you cannot write in the manner of 1948. Today language is breaking down, diction is splitting up"\(^4\) and a stripping down of style is essential to avoid dissonance with the contemporary reality of dot COM and biodata. And yet, there is a complexity and poignancy underlying the ironic wit and surface simplicity in her poems that arises out of a profound concern for the overlapping worlds of tradition and skepticism, collective responsibility and individual choice. This whole process is seen as choice between womanly, maternal and altruistic love, and egotism, that is the force directed by men into creation, ambition and achievement, often at the cost of others. Her poetry provides ample evidence of the effort that goes into striking a tenuous balance between relational expectations and responsibilities and individual proclivities. Like most women writers before her, Kalia too is trapped in the dichotomy between her imagination and her real life-style, her vocation and her gender. Having to juggle several roles, she realizes that it is the creativity of the woman writer that is almost invariably relegated.

Born in Mathura, Mamta Kalia the Principal of Mahila Seva Sadan Degree College in Allahabad had to struggle for her identity. The place she says was so "politically charged" that you had to "peel off your ego to get along" and the only resource for survival
was her “creativity at its biting best”⁵. This would probably account for the fine sense of balance in both, her personal as well as her professional life- a virtue that extends to her poetic articulations as well. After schooling in Delhi, Nagpur, Bombay and Pune, she earned a master’s degree in English Literature from the University of Delhi in 1963. A regular broadcaster for Akashvani and Doordarshan, she is married to the noted Hindi writer Ravinder Kalia whom she met in 1965 at a seminar in Chandigarh. He was then an established writer, while she was still struggling and “breaking up within”⁶ to be heard.

The poems of her first collection ‘Tribute To Papa And Other Poems’ (1970), range from purely subjective musings to humane understanding of her milieu and people. She expresses her impatience for social etiquettes which smother one’s inner urge to live naturally. Yet the insignificant details, through which she concretizes that urge, naturalize her articulation. For example:

I want to pay Sunday visits
   totally undressed
I want to throw away
   all my cosmetics
I want to reveal
   my real age.⁷

Unwilling to be treated as a decorative ornament, a member of a special – interest group handicapped by subordinate status, she states her wants unambiguously, demanding that she be recognized for her own worth. Mamta Kalia struggles to interpret her identity as a
serving woman in few poems. These poems reveal a strictly limited range of experience of a woman who is socially well placed and does not have any emotional or social accidents. For instance, the poet articulates her impatience with the social etiquettes, and rebellious desire for natural life, in:

I want to pick my nose
in a public place
I want to sit in my office chair
with my feet up

The apparently mischievous tone of 'Viewpoint', as in:

Once I did stand up
but I found everything down:
prices, politics, love.
So I stood on my head again
and struck a tidy bargain.

emphasizes the deteriorating condition in important fields of life. In 'Viewpoint' we are told that the poetess was born upside down. She is not satisfied to see either the prices, politics or love and decides to stand on her head again. In this poem we get a clue to her viewpoint about life in general and prices, politics and love in particular. The poetess finds it comfortable to walk on her head or talk with her toes. These acts are certainly symbolical and suggest her rebellious attitude towards life. She reacts against the hostility and unsympathetic attitude of the world and calls it her 'Viewpoint'.
Kalia is as caught up with parodying inequitable human relationships as she is with exposing the hypocrisy of middle-class respectability and social issues concerning women. Her played-down persona, her crisp, terse wit and her colloquial idiom however, lend her poems a wry humor that makes the "enormous uncertainty of this universe" and the sordidness of life seems relatively bearable. She is aware of the social problems too. According to her, an average Indian cannot always be happy. She has produced some poems under the spell of Marxist ideology. The following lines are remarkable in this connection:

I will always be the sty
In Establishments cool eye
As long as I'm made to linger and not live.11

She is deeply pained to see the lot of the underprivileged section of Indian society. In an interview with Suresh Chandra Dubey, she remarked, "Sarojini Naidu and Tagore were born with a silver spoon in their mouths". "They have", she added, "written good poetry. But we have moved far away from them. Hence the necessity for new poetry." In her poem 'Hell', she presents a sort of social criticism:

Give up all hope,
Ye that enter the kingdom of
Government Service.14

The Government service is regarded as a hell where man is doomed to suffocate and suffer.
The title poem ‘Tribute To Papa’ is personal in tone but universal in experience. The poem depicts the agonies of the generation gap, which separates the poet from the old world values, which have now become apocryphal. The poem is a direct statement on the old world-values, but without the ironic penchant of an Anne Sexton or a Sylvia Plath. For example:

Who cares for you, Papa?
Who cares for your clean thoughts, clean words, clean teeth?
Who wants to be an angel like you?
Who wants it?
You are an unsuccessful man, Papa.
Couldn’t wangle a cosy place in the world.
You’ve always lived a life of limited dreams.15

‘Tribute To Papa’ is the only poem in which Mamta Kalia tries to explore the social theme of the communication gap between the old and the young in terms of values. It expresses a deep sense of regret for the loss of values in the younger generation. In the poem, the daughter grieves for her loving father’s failure in life. Apparently, she protests vehemently against the father’s ideals which, according to her, are the cause of his failure. But, on a deeper level, her protest reveals the regretful lack of values in the younger generation. For instance, the daughter regrets ironically her father’s lack of courage in:

I wish you had guts, Papa,
To smuggle eighty thousand watches at a stroke,
And I’d proudly say, “My Father’s in
import- export business, you know”.

The Papa and the daughter are poles apart; they have nothing in agreement with each other. The Papa was an unsuccessful man who could not attain a high position in his life. He always lived the life of limited desires. The daughter would be proud of him only when he would be in an import- export business. She does not want to be either like him or like Rani Lakshmibhai:

You want me to be like you, Papa,
Or like Rani Lakshmibhai............
I give two donkey- claps for your greatness.
And three for Rani Lakshmibhai.

The revolt does not end here but leads to “I am seriously thinking of disowning you, Papa”. The outspokenness borders on open defiance—“Everything about you clashes with nearly / everything about me”:

You suspect I am having a love affair these days,
But you’re too shy to have it confirmed.
What if my tummy starts showing gradually
And I refuse to have it curetted?

The poem takes on the narrative form of a song of abuse, which opens with a direct address to the father, enumerates a series of patriarchal vices particularly those that affect her and through a categorical declaration of her independence, suddenly and unexpectedly closes on a note of concern. This sudden turn at the close is quite possibly
motivated by an awareness of the pain that is encountered in the process of snapping filial bonds and challenging social taboos. The poem is a powerful expose of the middle class hypocrisy and established relationships and offers a witty and sardonic comment on rampant corruption and established values. Its implicit irony and complex subtlety percolates through a deceptively explicit derision for the father, who could not even "wangle a cozy place in the world" and would not hesitate to "think of suicide", were his daughter to bear a love child out of wedlock. The pressures of survival that exist in different cultural contexts are thus brought to bear upon the absence of options and choice, by focussing on the poet's inchoate feelings and uncannily accurate analysis of real life situations. The concluding lines bounce her again into the maelstrom trivialities and tantrums of modern life. While Anne Sexton succeeds in re-living her experience and devitalizing her traumas, Mamta Kalia regales in cataloguing the details in terms of metaphors of response. The poem closes on a note of concern for the father and all protestations lose their bite and bitterness:

But I'll be careful, Papa,

Or I know you'll at once think of suicide.¹⁹

Kalia's poetry reflects a keen social consciousness and is far from a maudlin, private lament. She assigns the poet a role of social responsibility and sees poetry as its own form of activism even though writing may take "a hundred years to create a ripple"²⁰. Admitting that poetry may not be able to affect immediate change, she lives on
in the hope of being able to alter perception if and when she is heard and read. As she tells de Souza, "On the threshold of a brand new century, who knows people may just tire of telly inanities, electronic amenities, information bonanzas, and get back to books." For her art is an armor, a defense against the pressures of a chaotic reality. Although there is a dichotomy between artistic impulse and conscious action, there is never any doubt about the honesty of intent. What follows is a finely controlled acceptance of the necessity for constant adjustments to our perception, of what can be admitted to the category of accepted behaviour and community sensibility. Far from being iconoclastic, Mamta Kalia's poetry reflects a recognition and appreciation of the fact that individual sensibilities will inevitably be influenced in the expression of a renewed sense of identity and self-value, by the literary, aesthetic and societal assumptions of their own culture. Hence the "relaxed attitude to poetry" that de Souza appreciates and the scaled down persona that preserves so much of the import, purpose and effect of her work. Her poems move neither "towards anarchy", nor "nihilism" as her friends and readers allege. They record no acrimonious and belabored debates on relational and personal conflicts, but give a perfectly controlled account of their engagement with social concerns, in open-ended forms that encourage audience participation.

Mamta Kalia is no strident, feminist activist either. Yet her poetry shares a vital concern with the basic proposition of women's demands for an equitable life. That she does not conform to
the Barbie doll image and protests against the treatment of women as sex objects, is quite evident from the unconventional, deromanticised, de-glamorized self-portrait that she presents:

in an ill-fitting Kurta,

a fag and minus- four glasses.\textsuperscript{24}

Also, supporting the feminist agenda for liberation from patriarchal oppression, is her critical cataloguing of the several harrowing possibilities that retrogressive practices violative of human dignity, could expose women to. Female fate seems to hang precariously in a balance that could tilt over any moment:

I could have been kidnapped
at the age of seven
and ravaged by
dirty-minded middle-aged men.
I could have been married off
to a man with a bad smell
and turned frigid......
I could have been
an illiterate woman
putting thumb-prints
on rent receipts.
But nothing ever happened to me except two children
and two miscarriages.\textsuperscript{25}
The poem strategically but forcefully conveys through a dissimulating flippancy and lightness of touch, the underlying poignancy of women who have no control either over their fates or their bodies. It underscores the enormity of physical and psychological abuse, both within and outside institutionalized and socially sanctioned gender relationships. This recalls Adrienne Rich’s inference that healthy heterosexual relationships are not normative, but more a matter of chance. It is no accident then, that the poet has significantly entitled her poem ‘Sheer Good Luck’. The related issue of conjugal harmony and its many intricate ramifications is taken up in yet another poem ‘After Eight Years Of Marriage’:

After eight years of marriage  
The first time I visited my parents,  
They asked, ‘Are you happy, tell us?’
It was an absurd question
And I should have laughed at it.
Instead, I cried.
And in between sobs, nodded yes.²⁶

This poem too, is a sad commentary on community attitudes and customs that enforce a fictional happiness on men and women to escape the stigma and attendant responsibilities of broken marriages. Cribbed, confined and consigned, people drag themselves through a lifetime of bickering and friction that is the natural outcome of soured and incompatible relationships. “Instead of post-modernism we should be talking about post barbarism”²⁷ the poet says indignantly.
Neither hysterical nor militant, Kalia demands discourse and dialogue, not protests and marches for possible solutions. In the poem ‘I Feel Like Crying All The Time’, Kalia analyses the cardinal point of disgust in the tenets of Indian society itself where marriage means not just building up a relationship with a husband but involves marrying, as it were, a whole family with its kith and kin. The emotional adjustments in a joint family a bride is obliged to undergo are terribly shaking:

I hate these people around.
Related to me
Just because they were born
To my husband’s mother brother’s daughter.
I don’t know who she was.
I don’t know who anybody is.\(^{28}\)

Her outrage is directed at the very definition of family which includes the near and dear and also the not-so-near-ones. Since this Noah’s Ark includes the female section of humanity also, the persona’s feminist predilections, if any, are suspect. She cannot express her thoughts openly because she often feels “That a whole culture/ within me lies foul”.\(^{29}\) ‘Inside Out’ describes the agony and pain of a split personality. Modern man is not one piece intact. The various parts of the personality of the poetess resemble fire and ice, jackal, ass, swan and fawn. Mamta is conscious of a decadent and foul culture where words have lost their meaning and can only growl.
Her sense of disgust with the present and the nostalgic yearning for the present in past is not, however, the result of her disappointment in love as it is in the case of Kamala Das. It is the result of her general feeling of disenchantment with life and its monotony. For example:

Rejection, Dejection, Erection,
You can't adjust even with your own children.
You feel the world is full of whores
Knocking hard at your bedroom doors.
You sleep with a headache
And wake up with a backache.
Except yourself
You feel everything is fake.\(^30\)

Almost all of the poems from the second volume, 'Poems 78', project the tension of surviving through the boredom of many years of overfulfilment in love. The poet, for instance, explores the present love-relationship in terms of the past in:

My hair held a fragrance once-
A fragrance you associated with so many flowers

Now when I lower my head
You only see dandruff and grey hair.\(^31\)

Mamta Kalia also struggles to discover a pattern of value for the trivialities of an urban, middle class, serving woman's life through her gift of irony. In 'Active Life', she ironically portrays a lady Lecturer, who 'In her spare time/ pulled out her gray hairs/ and read Harold
Robbins'. She spends her Sunday in seeing a movie and writing weekly diary and, on the other days, she keeps herself busily engaged in 'preparing for Lectures, jotting down dictionary meanings in the softest pencil on the books borrowed from the library'. The poem ends in an interesting way:

In the lounge she sat every evening
criticizing Indira Gandhi
and swearing the dhobi, had run away
this time with her clothes.
She gargled at night
and sleep serenely
after a bit of mental masturbation. 32

'An Active Life', maintains the ironical tone and temper of 'Tribute To Papa'. In poem after poem she writes again so and gives us a realistic description of modern life with its coarser attitude towards sex. It is not difficult to hear autobiographical echoes in her poetic corpus. Her poetry is a dispassionate encounter with the reality about the self-concretized in terms of community and milieu. Her social awareness merges with her intense awareness of the self. She tries to explore her identity on cultural, individual and poetic levels in particular. For instance, the myth of Christian compassion melts at the touch of irony in:

Every Christmas we feed the poor.
We arrive an hour late: poor dears,
Like children waiting for a treat. 33
As a daughter, the poet probes into her relationship with the parents. For instance, her relationship with the mother gains a new perspective when the poet matures, as in:

I was never young
Now I’m old, alone.
In dreams
I hack you.  

She is bitterly satirical in attacking the stereotyped treatment of feminine experience by poets in:

It pays to be a poet:
You don’t have to pay prostitutes

It has been argued by Feminists that patriarchy treats woman as an appendage, an accessory and accords her secondary importance. Kalia sounds anti-feminist in ‘Sunday Song’ and gynocritics might term such a situation as ‘internalized patriarchy’:

I followed you like a corollary.
Now I am away from you,
missing my handcuffs,
feeling stupid
on this long unpromising Sunday.

The image of handcuffs fully conveys the poet’s perception of the bond between husband and wife. It should not, however, be construed that it is persona’s foolish appreciation of her position. She knows full well “I keep hanging to you like an appendix”. Despite feeling “all disjointed inside”, she anxiously awaits her husband’s arrival:
But the moment I hear your footsteps
I put all of me together
And give you my best smile...\textsuperscript{38}

Putting 'all of me together', even if taken as a scheme, is a typically Indian woman's concern for domestic bliss which must of necessity ignore minor bruises and scuffles. The end of the poem is typically Mamta Kalian in that its beauty is enhanced by the touch of subtle humour woven in its texture:

I've also developed gas trouble and amenorrhoea,
But I don't want to tell you
Or you'll send for a doctor
And rob me even of these.\textsuperscript{39}

The victim-complex is mocked at though at persona's own cast.

Mamta Kalia protagonist is unsparing to her husband when he fails to acknowledge her accomplishments and the sacrifices in the wake of the marriage:

Love made a housewife out of me.
I came with a degree in Textile Designing,
Skill in debates, dramatics and games...
You don't realize
You don't sympathise.\textsuperscript{40}

She threatens of moving to her mother's house should the things continue that way. In fact her rancour stems from routine domestic clashes and she won't mind returning to him "when called/ Not one [sic] or twice but thrice." However, the poet also presents the
husband's point of view, as he feels cheated owing to emotional advances—"Love made a husband out of me". He images his situation thus:

I had no intention

When I looked in that fatal direction,

I'll be caught, caged and put in eternal retention

(Flirtation assumes monstrous [sic] proportions).\(^{41}\)

The poem 'New Deal' pleads for leading a new life afresh burying the hatchet once forever evolving "new contexts and new references". Since the persona is a female and intends to strike a compromising deal by following the policy of 'let bygones be bygones', one can infer that Mamta Kalia is fully aware of the Indian situation and whatever be the blemishes of a married life, (one may choose to regard it 'subordination by domestication' as well), she appeals to her husband to "live all over again":

Let's together forget our horrors-in-law,

your "never-enough" salary-

my "never-enough" needs........

In short, let's forget

the proverbial thorn

and smell the proverbial rose.\(^{42}\)

The poet feels that the female psyche has its own contradictions under Indian tradition. While devising strategies to grab the male-centered space, she undertakes various roles suited to the imminent crisis—cunning and shrewd, foolish and indifferent, gentle and cordial,
affectionate and servile. The quest of the poet is not confined merely to the quest for identity as a woman. It is also social in nature where she relates herself to the world around and scans the quagmire of a world whose values are at variance with her own values.

Mamta Kalia is deeply concerned with the social and cultural disorder and foulness. Her poetry surveys the vast mass of chaos prevailing in the present day society. She finds material for her poems from the decaying and deadening society, but her poetry offers no solution to the problems of her age. She describes the chaotic conditions obtaining in the external as well as in the internal world. Mamta is a poet of feminine desires, hopes, fears and loneliness. She is essentially a poet of love. In almost every poem there is a reference to the body which she both likes and dislikes in turns. She writes to demolish the conservative and tradition-bound values of our society. She may rightly be called the poet of the body. In Mamta’s poetry one comes across the intensity of passion. She is intensely passional and yet maintains an equal distance between her purely personal ravings and the basic facts of life. She does not apostacise love, but rather deals with it in a simple and down-to-earth manner of realism. Love, for her, is an expression that has evolved itself out of the daily bits of likes and dislikes and certain other types of oddments. For example:

How close we felt
discussing our dislikes,
sharing a few hatreds,
comparing notes about enemies.
I was elated to find
you couldn’t stand The Faery Queen,
dahi vadas and arranged marriages.\textsuperscript{43}

Her poetry demonstrates a distaste for the abstract and a preference for the elemental. In poem after poem she tells us about the agony of the split personality. In ‘Positive Thinking’ an attempt is made to forget the death pangs with the help of modern amenities and luxuries. The poem attempts to externalize the loneliness and agony of the soul and primal disappointments:

Let us forget your death and mine
We have so much to remember:
A comfortable home
Your air-conditioned office
Our quarter-dozen children
Your bank balance
The Race-Course nearby
Your Yoga exercises
My fortnightly manicure
And all those social engagements
Who cares for primal disappointments.\textsuperscript{44}

The poem throws light on the futility of modern life, with its sick hurry and divided aims. Mamta is a subjective poet distilling into the pages of her poetry the experiences of a woman in different roles— as a girl, as a beloved, as a wife, as a mother, as a housewife, as a worker, etc.
Mamta Kalia’s poetry in English is yet to receive the critical acclaim or attention that it deserves. This does not however undermine its worth and purpose, which is a demand for a greater consideration of and attention to the problems inherent in our day-to-day reality. Poetic strength comes from her ability to maintain a fine tension between the private and the public. She comes across as a quiet, confident woman with a sound head on her responsible shoulders and her feet planted firmly on the ground. In the midst of an unpromising present in which, intrinsic worth falls prey to material considerations, her sardonic wit and irony help restore equipoise. No fiery monster out to wreak vengeance, her poetic persona is not the alienated and isolated self of Western literature, but a level-headed woman in touch with her community. Without being openly defiant she can hold her own and is part of her society, towards which she acknowledges a few explicit obligations and commitments. Mamta Kalia’s art is thus a symbiosis of the personal and the social.

In their quest for identity as a woman modern Indo-Anglian women poets seek equal status, respect, freedom of will and independent identity; on the social plane their search entails a world where values still hold good, violence and hatred do not exist, fraternity and brotherhood thrive and the miseries of the poor and the downtrodden are extinct; as individuals these poets have attempted to explore the real—self and the ultimate truth—the movement being from self-knowledge towards self-growth to attain self-discovery and as Indo-Anglian poets they also seek to affirm their native roots.
These poets have carried their quest beyond personal world to the social world. Though they have not created book-length studies on relationship of self with society like Parthasarthy’s ‘Rough Passage’, Kolatkar’s ‘Jejuri’ or Mahapatra’s ‘Relationships’, yet they have revealed substantial consciousness of the wide social scenario. Coming out of their cocoons, they have examined the quagmire of a fast emerging wasteland suffering from the pangs of poverty, a crisis of values, a spate of reckless violence, the callousness of man and the miseries of women folk. With their passionate involvement and reformatory zeal, they emerge as the custodians of moral values, apostles of peace, messiahs of the underdogs and champions of women’s cause. Social quest is most important in poets like Leela Dharamraj, Lila Ray, Roshen Alkazi, Lakshmi Kannan, Achla Bhatia, Gauri Deshpande and Meena Alexander. At the social level the poets have envisaged regeneration of Universal love which involves caring, sharing, self-sacrifice and the service of humanity. With the greater self-exposure has come a greater expansion of self.

These poets have transcended their narrow selves and reacted to the world around them. Lila Ray represents the modern women’s poet’s expanding awareness and social commitment. She responds to the area of personal, social and mystical experience in her poems. Her poetic volumes are ‘Entrance’ (1961), ‘The Days Between’ (1976), ‘Songs Of Mourning’ (1976), ‘Alive And Dying’ (1976), ‘The Valley Of Vision’ (1977) and ‘The Flowering Heart’ (1980). ‘The Days Between’ brings out her social consciousness and
'The Valley Of Vision' contains her mystic–philosophical poems. A number of poems from 'The Days Between' evidence a degree of social consciousness of Lila Ray as a poet. Deeply concerned with the malady of the present age, she defines its tragic lot when the Twentieth Century itself states how:

On the shore of an island of pain,
sole survivor of the human odyssey
I sprawl like seaweed on the sand.
Wearing my wounds like stigma
I wait the saving sail of mercy's grace,
a cosmic Crusoe, scanning space.45

As a resident of Calcutta, she has been an active witness of the miseries of refugees which the poetic psyche tries to interpret in some of the poems. For instance, 'In Times Of UnBelief And War' communicates the tragedy of the victims of the Indo-Pak war. The poem is based on the central image of the poet's soul as a passive observer of the tragedy from "the darkened room of dreams". The poet projects the horrors of war through imagistic evaluation of the sights of death and devastation, as in:

stitching streets with threads of blood
bullets sew our species' shroud.
The twitching carcass of the flame-streaked city
festeres in pools of people killed without pity.46

The miserable journey of the refugees in search of safety makes the reality of war still more hateful because:
With brains blunted by terror
and hearts maimed, upon the roads
pour rootlessness streams of refugees
from civilization's severed arteries. 47

It is however notable that the poet waits optimistically, in spite of the personal scenes of war, for "some dim tomorrow/ a metamorphosis of mind to purge out sorrow."

The theme of loss of the dearest persons like brother, father and child characterizes a group of Lila Ray's personal poems. Poetry then becomes the exclusive means of cathartic outlet for the repeated shocks of grief. The large number of poems on her brother's death from 'Songs Of Mourning' and 'Alive And Dying' reveal that the event must have been a crucial experience for the sister's psyche. The sense of loss seems to be deep and lasting because the poet identifies the brother's departure from the world to which she belonged before marriage. For instance,

To the life we knew, to the place where we grew,
to the sky that sheltered us, we are dead, you and I,
You, by mistake, I, by consent. 48

The grief at the loss of the child is pure, simple and total. As a result, sentimentality cripples the poetic psyche's stamina for exploration, as in:

Help me, Lord! I can't stop grievin',
I can't stop grievin' for my child,
and my heart is weeping ...oh...
my heart is weeping in my breast
the whole long time
the whole long time. 49

Apart from the sense of loss, her personal poems are pervaded with a deep sense of alienation, as in:

The lone dove calls.
The strange dove, the white dove,
the plaintive dove calls,
‘no home, no home, no home’. 50

Of all the women poets writing in English in India today, Lila Ray is the most emotionally rich and controlled in her technique of recreating the felt emotions in poetry.

Gauri Deshpande is another poet who has earned a niche for herself. She has published three volumes of poetry in English including ‘Between Births’ (1968), ‘Lost Love’ (1970) and ‘Beyond The Slaughter House’ (1972); and has also edited ‘An Anthology Of Indo-English Poetry’ (1974). In her poetic volumes the poet reveals her social consciousness and responds to the issues related to workingwomen. One notices in her poetry a significant reverberation of feelings that enlivens her preoccupation with interpersonal relationship, the ethos of change and permanence in the social milieu that surrounds her.

Gauri Deshpande turns to wider areas of social experience in the third volume ‘Beyond The Slaughter House’ which marks her success in freeing herself from the obsession of love. But even in the
early stage of her poetic career at which she was almost exclusively concerned with love, she occasionally responds to social realities with alertness. For instance, she evidences a notable understanding of the feminine psychology when she describes the women’s habit of seeking catharsis in the talk of “the rate of rice/ and the price of tea” for their hearts burdened with “love and despair and ungrateful children”51. ‘Beyond The Slaughter House’ projects her closer understanding of the ethos and the milieu, and her assertive personal tone gets subsumed into a collective palimpsest of social protest. Her response to the city of Bombay is purposive and sensitive, and her sensibility tries to accommodate various modes of social experience to which she is exposed. There is greater artistic control, greater emotional intensity than in the earlier collections. She endeavours to keep the steady distance between her intellectual perception and the social reality which direct her into a more meaningful exploration of the traumas which bedevil the contemporary life. Even the titles such as ‘A Report’, ‘Prisons Of Freedom’ and ‘My Love Is Like’, with their intrinsic apathy, attempt to reveal all the aspects of social life, in all their vividness of colour. She uses the image of the sea to describe the disorganized lives of the people in Bombay:

It’s the only landscape—
a sea of people bordering
the bitter limit of the sea.
If all the noses were one nose
and all the heads were one.
They’d outstone the Gomateswar
and be a monument to brotherly love
for as yet,
no one has picked my pocket
nor into my house broken.
I, as yet, not run over by a bus.  

As a woman, burdened with the typical problems of her own tribe, Gauri Deshpande talks of the loss of rapport with the outside world. Her social vision, though not as large as Sylvia Plath’s has yet a residue of energy, for she turns herself assertions into a kind of meaningful social act. As a workingwoman tied to a routinised schedule of work, she expressed her resentment born of apathy:

and none
of us bear any longer
the usual marks, such as mother, whore, matron, maid.  

In consequence, the poet loses her basic connection with the succulence of love. Most of the poems in this collection are suggestive of Gauri Deshpande’s social awareness and this sudden shift in theme is the thing which makes this collection a significant social document shorn of dogma or any creedal preoccupation. Her poems reveal maturity of art as well as her sensitive charting of the feminine consciousness.

An important concern of women poets’ social consciousness continues to be the issues related to women, but they have also reacted to the diverse facets of social life. The poets
published during the last few years have a wide canvas and reveal awareness not only of women-related issues but also of the entire social scenario. Leela Dharamraj who has published ‘Slum Silhouette And Other Poems’ is a poet of promise. Her poems in this volume are powerful enough to assert the poet’s fidelity to experience as a social being. A detailed sketch of the sordid slum life has been presented in Leela Dharamraj’s poem ‘Slum Silhouette’. Thatched huts bend low and hill of dirt rises near the walls. The children have ‘dust-stained’, bare-skinny bodies, ‘tousled hair’ and they play in ‘muddy gutters’. Some mothers raise loud cries and demand milk in charity whereas the others with babies at breasts beg with eyes. These people squalor in ‘meaningless labour’ while the cynical ones among them gamble and drink late into the night. The condition of women is really miserable:

They kick their unfaithful
Wives who, nevertheless, beget children
And resign themselves to an inescapable fate.  

The poet feels:

From their misery there is no escape.

The condition of the footpath-dwellers is heart-rending Leela Dharamraj’s poem reflects her own observations and experiences of life. Her poem invites attention because of her fidelity to experience, a degree of social awareness and lucidity of expression.

Another important poet in this regard is Roshen Alkazi. She has published two volumes of poem ‘Seventeen Poems’ and
'Seventeen More Poems'. Though her output is slender, the feeling underlying her imaginative perception, is marked by a certain austere ingenuity and down to-earth – realism. The poems of Roshen Alkazi try to come to grips with the riddle of human existence and human predicament. Though her range is not wide, she chooses her subjects well, and demonstrates a deep acquaintance with her themes. Her themes are poetry, art, loneliness, beggars, memories, flesh and body, the purity within, and alienation of the modern man. Her corpus consists of thirty-four poems in all is scattered over two volumes. There are two poems on beggars, one in each volume. The concluding line of the poem ‘Beggars’ in the second volume ends in a question, “When will they rise?” This is the basic and universal question with the underprivileged class. Like all progressive writers, she thinks over this problem seriously. She differs from most other Indian women poets in being gifted with the unusual capacity for intellectual detachment. ‘The Weight Of Loneliness’ is one of the poems which evidences Roshen Alkazi’s intellectual approach at its best. It communicates a deep and unrelieved sense of loneliness:

The weight of loneliness is like a stone
Which slowly sinks into the dark tarns of the soul

............................................................

Against whose deepening power
There’s no escape. \(^55\)

Modern man is bound to suffer from loneliness. Everyday he grows a stranger to himself as well as to his milieu. The rapport between man
and man is lost because of the disease of alienation gripping our race today. Darkness prevails over the entire humanity and a modern man’s life is marked by dark and deep fears. Roshen Alkazi describes her social milieu as a realist.

Besides these major voices, the poets who have aroused interest and created awareness about the problems like poverty, and the miserable condition of the exploited and downtrodden are Achla Bhatia (Awakening, 1989), Lakshmi Kannan (Impressions, The Glow And The Grey, 1976), Meena Alexander (Bird’s Bright Ring, 1976), Dorothy Sinha (Facets, 1976), Nilima Wig (The Distant Echo, 1990) and Vijaya Goel (The Autumn Flowers, 1990). Achla Bhatia’s ‘Dust And Death’ is a sympathetic reflection on the fate of poor labourers and exploited workers. The labourers toil hard to raise mansions by ‘the sweat of their brows’. These creatures:

languish in the smouldering heat
of hunger and pangs humiliation,
the pain and pangs of poverty
Peep through their eyes.56

But the world moves on ‘unruffled’ while these unfortunate people live amidst ‘the din of dust and death’. In Nilima Wig ‘The Labourer’ a labourer works in very hard conditions under violent red sky and scorching sun. This young man has ambition to ‘reach for the sky’ but is crushed between two powerful trucks- symbols of our modern mechanized cruel world. None notices his death, as he was entirely irrelevant and immaterial for the world around him:
Who cared if he was dead or alive anyway
just one among multitudes.\textsuperscript{57}

The only fact that people are concerned about is “Thank Heaven, there would be no case after compensation.” The children of the working class who grow up as undesirable and unwanted creatures finally go astray. A child’s worker mother sits in the chill morning and hot summer days breaking stones in the dust:

Breathing coaltar fumes
And eating dust-coated bread.\textsuperscript{58}

She leaves the child to ‘weep or laugh’ and the child’s reaction starts building up right from his infancy. His innocent eyes watch his mother breaking stones year after year. Stones are his bed, his games and he learns to chew and dream stones. No wonder, such a child grows up to be a ‘stone-hearted’ man whose strong hands break many necks. People call him an evil-incarnation but they do not realize the tragic irony:

He is what they made him
And he is giving to the world
What he got from it.\textsuperscript{59}

Meena Alexander has also voiced her concern about the miserable state and exploitation of working class:

I sing for all who work head bent
close against the great red sun
who labour tooth nail sinew bone
against glass metal paper stone.\textsuperscript{60}
Achla Bhatia in her poem ‘Moments Recollected’ is pained to see the gap between two worlds - one of ‘semi-naked human beings’ and the other where ‘we wrap our dogs with shawls’. The condition of the foot-path dwellers in Lakshmi Kannan’s ‘An Embarrassment’ is heart-rending with flies, fleas and foul breath as a lady with ‘wrinkled breasts’ cannot sell herself ‘cheap’. The picture is highly repulsive as:

- Scratching her matty hair,
- She spews bloody betel ooze
- On to puddle, spawning with mosquito.

Her child enjoys the ‘legacy of starving’. Always waiting for nothing, he grows prematurely old and poverty makes a criminal out of such a child:

- At nine, he was nimble in
  slicing pockets with tiny razors

Beggars spill over in millions. Lakshmi Kannan’s attention is compelled by a young Bhikshu wrapped only in a bare long thread. Penury has laid waste his capabilities otherwise the fellow could have been a celebrity:

- Narlikar, Ramanujam,
- Homibhabha he could have been.

but now he has a ‘stretched hand’ and a ‘shame-faced bowl’.

Memories of poor children haunt Achla Bhatia in ‘Reflection’ and she cannot forget their eyes, dirty rags, bowed bodies and yellow-brown palms. The ‘future of my country’ in naked, shivering and sweating children depresses her. Urchins playing on
shore draw Nilima Wig’s attention in her poem ‘Urchins’. She offers them brownies which leave them begging for more. To the poet their ‘oil-blackened faces’ are a ‘foresong to the future’ of unemployed, poverty-stricken youth.

Dorothy Sinha eulogizes common people like woman-labourer and maid-servant in her poems. Dignity of labour lifts these people on to a very high pedestal in the poet’s eyes. A woman labourer with child in arms, fatigue of ‘heat and dust’ on her face and bundle of load on her head appears a ‘queen’ to the poet and she feels like doing obeisance to this uncrowned queen:

Yet, on her head
Like a crown
She carried a load.⁶⁴

A hard-working maidservant, careless of her bodily comforts, toils hard in the poet’s house. Dorothy finds ‘None so lofty’ as her and she calls this lady a ‘compassionate goddess’ who might be ‘foster mother’ of an orphaned little refugee. Sujata Bhatt cannot forget a muck-picker girl and in her mind are alive:

the greatness
and the power glistening through her cheek bones
each time she found a particularly promising mound of dung.⁶⁵

Thus, these poets have shown a great humanistic and democratic concern and the concern is genuine. With a poet like Achla Bhatia the ‘Moments Recollected’ are not of daffodils or ecstasies of love but of
the wretched state of labourers, farmers, poverty-stricken beggars, starving children and the crying vendors. The very first question Nilima Wig puts to God in her ‘Encounter With God’ is:

Why have you created so much misery? \(^6^6\)

These poets wish to usher a New Era where tears and travails of humanity will end and all individuals will live a life of dignity which is every human being’s right.
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