Preface

Mapping the primarily turbulent, the periodically controversial and the now complacent course traversed by the movement of Indian poetry in English has proved to be a richly rewarding experience. Weaving one's way back to an era roughly two hundred years ago, an era which bore witness to the beginnings of this movement has been, to use a worn-out cliche, an eye-opener in every sense. The first realization this brought forth was the fact that it was indeed predestined that a whole corpus of literature on India and Indian themes would be written by Indians in, what was looked upon then, as a non-Indian language, English. It was once again fore-ordained that this foreign language would enter India through the East, in Bengal, for the British came to India through Bengal.

Coming down from the huge body of Indian literature in English to a study of Indian poetry in English, one is struck by the fundamental note of duality which appears to be carried down from Indian literature in English to Indian poetry in English. The strains of ambivalence were very prominently felt by the Indian writers of English, governed by factors that our writers stood to win and lose in the process of the transformation of native ideas through
a newly-acquired tongue. The evolution of Indian Writing in English occurred in an ambience of duality, of conflicting allegiances of the colonized towards the colonizer and the native.

Selecting to specifically study the course taken by Indian poetry in English and working a route backwards from the present day to the period in the early years of nineteenth century when this genre evolved, one gets inadvertently familiarised to two schools of thought. Sifting through the innumerable kinds of anthologies which have recorded the poetry written by Indian poets in English, one is inexorably drawn into a crossfire of choices, of identifications of poets and poetry. The process serves to make one increasingly aware that the entire business of deciding when this movement of Indian poetry in English began is governed by two opposing ideologies. While the older school declares the movement to have begun in the early nineteenth century with the poems of the first Indian poets in English like Kashiprasad Ghose, Henry Derozio and Toru Dutt, the modern school of thought, to quote R.Parthasarathy, declares in no uncertain terms that "In examining the phenomenon of Indian verse in English, one comes up, first of all, against the paradox that it did not seriously begin to exist till after the withdrawal of the British from India" (Paranjape, Indian Poetry xvi). That is to say, that in one single stroke, the entire set of poets, small and large, the famous and the not-so-famous, the beginners like Kashiprasad Ghose, and the grand masters like Tagore, are swept off, so to speak, since poetry "did not seriously begin to exist till after the withdrawal of the British from India".
A perusal of many modern anthologies makes one increasingly conscious of this growing fashion of the new generation of poet-critics, of poets who versified "after the withdrawal of the British from India", to denounce and cast aspersions on the first generation of poets, to dismiss them as nonentities in the field. By rejecting the past and by trying to establish a highly restricted carefully vetted, pure canon of "high art", . . . by setting itself up as a self-appointed priestocracy, adjudicating over and dictating the fortunes of Indian poetry in English, the modernist avant garde has alienated itself not only from others who don't subscribe to their aesthetic ideologies, but from the "common" readers (however uncommon they might be) of Indian poetry in English (Paranjape, Indian Poetry xviii).

Kashiprasad Ghose, Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt and Michael Madhusudan Dutt are the poets who have, since the emergence of the new class of "modern" and "post-modern" poets of twentieth century, been nudged out of the poetic lineage as poets to be merely glossed over. A critical evaluation of these poets and their poetry confirms that in this poetry and in this age rests the seed of Indian-English Writing which has now grown into one of today's distinct manifestations of English literature worldwide, despite the tendency of present-day writers to skirt over their work, their mission and their ideology.

The first poets had their own mission to accomplish, the mission of socially constructing India, of restoring Indianness, of
keeping the Indian spirit intact which they accomplished through their poetry. Their poetry also reflected the dilemma they experienced in their own ambivalence between the East and the West, in their acceptance of native heritage and their rejection of native customs and their conservatism, in their rejection of the native language for a foreign one. This conflict, this inner struggle is evident in their works.

The fact that they chose to be native in their themes, the fact that they felt the responsibility to socially be by their nation, the first strains of nationalism as witnessed in their poetry prove that it was this generation of poets who set the ground for the generations to come, to set their verses around Indian themes, to be in India, to look within themselves and their culture for their art. This generation constructed India for the later poets who in turn rejected their predecessors, devaluing their works.

The concept, the desire for return to India experienced by some of these poets like Toru Dutt and Madhusudan Dutt is a very notable factor. The reason for this inclination to return could be a fascination for their country, it could be their sense of social responsibility towards their country as a result of which they sought to modernize India, they sought to criticize customs, they desired Westernization.

The poetry of the early stages of Indian Writing in English, in the works of Ghose, Derozio, Toru Dutt and Madhusudan Dutt reflect these notable features, making this
project not merely a study of their poems but a study of the ideology issuing through their poetry, an ideology bound by the inner conflicts of acceptance and rejection, by the sense of marginalization at various levels, the personal, religious, regional, literary and social dimensions of this marginalization. This marginalization, this distancing, the tensions and the ultimate colonial dilemma were experienced by the poets and expressed in their poetry. This poetry therefore had its own limitations and restrictions, resulting from being bound within a definite framework.

The Romantic and the Victorian, the Byronic and the Keatsian are just some of the styles which the poets under study are accused of imitating. Similarly the technique adopted by the poets, be it in the rhyme-scheme or in the verse-pattern is also Western, as can be seen in the sonnets on love and nature written by Ghose, Derozio and Madhusudan. But the content of their poetry has always been fundamentally Indian.

The study of these poets in this dissertation begins with a multidimensional view of the period to which the poets belonged. Thus, in the first chapter, an attempt has been made to take a survey of the early nineteenth century Bengal, focussing on the social, political and cultural climate that prevailed in Bengal. The introduction of English language in Bengal was desired by the elite of the Bengali society as well as the higher-ups among the colonial administrative set-up, though their intentions differed. The chapter touches upon the acceptance of English literature in
England vis a vis the offering of English literature as a subject worthy of study to the society in Bengal. The overt comparison of English literature with Sanskrit literature made by the colonialists resulted in English emerging as the superior language. The chapter also discusses the psychological subjugation of the society by the colonialists.

Kashiprasad Ghose is claimed to be the first Bengali poet to have written in English. He was one among those early poets who made forays into a new language and formed their own idiom. The second chapter confirms a justification of the style and content of this new-born poetry, through a discussion on Ghose's poetry. It establishes the patriotic identity of the poet. The chapter concludes with the premise that Ghose is a precursor to the movement of Indian poetry in English in Bengal.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was a poet who had to defy the stigma of ethnic marginality which came about as a result of his mixed Eurasian origin. Overcoming this handicap, he became the first Bengali poet to express, through his verses, the dreams and desires he nurtured for his motherland India. His poems described subjects like Indian rusticity, Indian students and Indian philosophy. The essential Indianness of Derozio surfaces on a perusal of his poems. The third chapter highlights the different dimensions of this poet who deserves a just recognition as the first nationalistic poet of the period. He is not a poet to be dealt with in a
mere passing mention down the course of Indian poetry in English, as has been the case so far.

Toru Dutt was the most significant Indian English poet of early nineteenth century Bengal. Dutt came from one of the aristocratic and cultured Bengali families of the period, who very readily and completely accepted and absorbed the language, literature and also the religion of the colonial masters. Dutt was a poet truly representative of the age. The fourth chapter discusses the two stages in the poetry of Dutt: the period when she was away from India, followed by the period when she returned to her native land. These two sequences in Dutt's poetry reveal the dilemma of a poet caught in the vortex of conflicting loyalties. This aspect surfaces with a critical evaluation of Dutt's poetry in the light of the poet's stay abroad contrasted with her return to India as a result of the gravitational pull of her roots here.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt was the young firebrand of Bengal, who began his literary exercises under an English penname. He rebelled against the stringency of caste and religion by converting to Christianity and also took a step further by changing his name to Michael. Madhusudan was a poet who desperately wanted to become one with the English society and even went over to England for the purpose. But he too was soon attracted back to his native Bengal by the heritage in Bengal. In this feature, as in many other features too, Madhusudan forms a complement to Toru Dutt. The fifth chapter delineates
Madhusudan the poet, against the backdrop of nineteenth century Bengal. This backdrop becomes pertinent due to the sway it held over every major development in the social as well as the literary dimensions of these poets. Madhusudan is a symbol of the ethos of this age that oscillated between the adoption of the new and the disowning of the old. The psychological turbulence which this created eventually resulted in the sensitive blend of the age-old Vedantic philosophy with the iconoclastic modern thinking symptomatic of the age. The study of the different stages of this poet and his poetry along with the priceless contributions made by Madhusudan towards Bengali poetry have been discussed in detail in the fifth chapter.

The study concludes with a comparative study of the parallel natures of these four poets of the early nineteenth century Bengal. These poets exhibited many similar trends in their individual experiences and in their responses to the winds of change brought forth in the post colonial Bengal.

Ghose’s imitative style had an underlying whisper of Indianness, of the national spirit. Derozio's Eurasian background was the chief cause of the displacement he suffered, overcoming which he strove and succeeded in becoming a total Bengali. Similarly, in accepting an alien language and religion, both Toru Dutt and Michael Madhusudan Dutt went through a psychological upheaval which culminated in their return to their native soil and to their native myth and lore. Eventually, the four poets evolved
their own individual style and technique in representing Indian mythology and folklore in its varied aspects.

The Indian poetry in English is doubtless an outcome of the struggles and pioneering endeavours of the poets of that period, representative of which are the four poets chosen for study in this project.

The evolution of the native theme and the refinement of this choice can be traced in the different stages of development of the poetry as seen from the verse content of the first poet Ghose to the later poets like Derozio, Toru Dutt and Madhusudan Dutt. They were the first generation poets of Indian poetry in English, poets who first experienced the tension of handling native themes in a colonial frame, who first succeeded in evolving a delicate balance between the native and the colonial. A study of Indian poetry in English would never be complete without encompassing these poets and their poetry. On the basis of the dimensions detailed above, this thesis attempts a re-evaluation of their poetry. Such a study would certainly contribute to a comprehensive assessment of Indian poetry in English.