CHAPTER SIX
Indian Poetry in English :
The Problematic of Identity and Representation

The medieval Indian period, marked by the presence of the Delhi sultanate and the Moghul empire between the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, stood witness to a remarkable degree of cultural exchange between the Hindus and Muslims. It is well known that Indian classical music deeply influenced their musical traditions, and that Moghul architecture left a lasting impact upon the Hindu traditions of building. The two were poles apart in their religious and political ideologies, but the intense give and take among their poets and mystics – the Sants and the Sufis – in a land whose people were in the habit of singing their poetry, led to a period phenomenally rich in the creative arts. The political tension and struggle between the Moghul rulers and the Indian kings seems to have lent the phenomenon just that extra edge of a catalyst – previous chapters give us enough proof of this.

In this chapter we shall try to assess the place of mysticism and the impact of the Bhakti genre, upon Indian English poetry. But before that we will briefly examine the pre-Independence period which like the Moghul period, too was marked by political struggle and religious strife with a ruling foreign culture. The advent of English Education, the Indian’s opening up to the world, and the Indian struggle for Independence (in the nineteenth and earlier half of the twentieth century), led to an intense struggle at the intellectual, spiritual and social levels. The period produced great heroes and men of genius. But did it produce great literature too? Did it give us a rich harvest in terms of Indian poetry in English? This, the chapter attempts to address.

As S.N. Hay in his essay on "Modern India and Pakistan" observes:

Just as the Muslim conquest had injected a fresh stream of religious thought into the veins of Hindu society, so the British conquest brought with it new views of the world, man and God.
Confronted with the message of Islam that all believers are equal in the sight of their Maker, religious leaders like Kabir and Nanak had come forth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to translate this teaching into traditional Hindu terms. Similarly in the nineteenth century a series of creative individuals emerged from the ranks of Hindu society to respond to the combined challenge of Christian religious ideas and modern western, rationalist and utilitarian thought. (602)

But the extent to which it influenced and interfered with the Indian’s individual and cultural sense of identity, was far more injurious than it was progressive (Please see the Appendix). For while the English program of education in India, alienated the native from his own culture, background and traditions, the mask it cultivated was that of being an agency that restored the Indian youth to its essential self, while actually it was reinserting him into the course of western civilisation. To illustrate this point I shall quote a sonnet by one of the earliest Indian English poets and educators, Henry Derozio:

Sonnet
Your hand is on the helm – guide on young men
The bark that’s freighted with your country’s doom
Your glories are but budding; they shall bloom
Like fabled amaranths Elysian, when
The shore is won, even now within your ken,
And when your touch shall dissipate the gloom
That long has made your country but a tomb,
Or worse than a tomb, the pest’s, the tyrant’s den.
Guide on young men; your course is well begun;
Hearts that are tuned to holiest harmony
With all that e’en in thought is good, must be
Best formed for deeds like those which shall be done
But you hereafter till your guerdon’s won
And that which now is hope becomes reality.
( Hay 570 )
It is interesting to note the contradiction in the sonnet above. On the one hand Derozio paints a gloomy picture of India's past as a "tyrant's den," and on the other hand he romanticises India for her former glories. In this respect, Derozio foreshadows the mental conflict of later Indian nationalists as they sought to rid their country of the evils of the past and at the same time to bolster their claim to self rule by glorifying an ancient and honourable national heritage (Hay 569).

One suspects here the play of a carefully crafted policy by the British that chose to ignore the existence of regional Bhakti literatures, surcharged as they were with the spirit of freedom, fearlessness and equality. Instead the flashlight was turned towards the revival of Sanskrit and the ancient Vedic literatures to the exclusion of all else that was Indian, and (perhaps more) relevant to the Indian sense of continuity. The fractured persona that emerged out of such circumstances, and the state of unbounded euphoria among the Indian youth, for all that was English, contributed to the nineteenth century being a relatively barren period for the Indian tradition of soul-stirring poetry.

Had the young generation of English-educated Indian men and women been even familiar with their own mystic verse tradition; had a cohesive body of translated Bhakti Literature (or even Bhakti poetry in their regional language) been available to them, their fervent response towards British romantic poetry might have been tempered, more mature, and balanced in perspective. The same as had been the case with Tagore, who was obviously familiar with not only the Bhakti verse (his Hundred Poems Of Kabir is a translation of Kabir's poems into English), but also with the local tradition of Bengali poetry. Its sound patterns and the typical Bengali sensibility lend to Tagore's verse even in English translation, the allure of the mystic, the harmonious, and the elusively beautiful. The popular momentum that Tagore's Gitanjali (originally written in Bengali and translated later into English by Tagore himself) stirred in England around 1912 to 1914 A.D. is some measure of the strength of being original and being rooted in one's own tradition. If Bhakti poetry was
little known in the nineteenth century (despite having been fairly active until the seventeenth century), the onus must partly lie upon the lack of its proper representation and upon the absence of printing technology, which must have been further compounded by the lack of a national institutionalised system of education. But then India had never been a formal nation so to speak. The concept of a broad nationality among the regional Indian (bonded as he or she was by shared faiths, ethos, tradition and natural geographical features), just did not exist. The concept of Indian Nationality and that of the spread of English Education in India are discussed in some detail in the Appendix.

Having established in the Indian subcontinent (esp. among the Brahmins and the upper classes), the lack of a shared contemporary rhetoric, it is easier to understand the euphoria that followed the spread of English education. Its literature and sciences, fulfilled the imminent need among the youth for a more contemporary, egalitarian and progressive ideology. The ancient brahminized literary texts must have appeared too ancient and removed from reality to the Indian youth, while the Bhakti literature which could have spoken more relevantly, was misrepresented by its eighteenth century upholders. The Bhakti schools had shrunk into ritualised/mechanical following within cloistered groups of continuing disciples (the Kabir Panthies for instance), and survived as an oral tradition passed on through songs from generation to generation, only in the poor man’s hut.

From this point in time, one must also draw a distinction between religious and sectarian literature. The tradition of religious poetry according to history, was fairly strong in the regional languages, except that it lacked the originality of the former, and generally tended to be “repetitive and dull”. The Indian fabric too had degenerated by and large, and had lapsed back into castism and all kinds of formalism. Besides Tyagaraja (1767 to 1847 A.D.) — the last of the great canon of Bhakti poets — who composed some good Bhakti poetry in Telugu in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, another source of qualitative spiritual poetry were the songs written in Bengali by the Brahmo Samajis. Their songs were in line with the tradition of Kabir, Dadu and
Nanak, with whom they shared their catholic spirit and the *Nirguna* concept of Godhead.

The pre-independence period threw up a good number of mystics, saints, leaders and intellectuals, and was marked by intense change and revolution in the Indian society fighting for Independence. The great genius of this period — intelligent gifted men and women, were among the first Indians to acquire an admirable proficiency with the English language, literature and ideology. Usually such a combination of the individual genius and socio-political turbulence should have paid rich dividends in terms of great poetry, music and art, and further enriched the cultural tradition of India, which strangely did not happen. Except for a rare Tagore or an Aurobindo, there was no great poetry in English during this heroic period of phenomenal mass upsurge and political ferment. Large scale reform movements were a part of this period and so were the social saints, reformers and mystics like Ram Mohan Roy, Devendranath Tagore, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda and Gandhi. Most of them were well acquainted with the traditions of both the orient and the occident. Their main language of public expression was English (they shifted to the regional languages much later) and unlike the genius torch-bearers of the Bhakti movement, they hailed largely from the elite pocket of Indian society. They wrote excellent prose in English (not poetry), and delivered fiery, highly inspiring speeches (not the *kirtan* singing for them). Simultaneously they worked towards freeing their country, both from the British rule and from the social evils within the structure. They sang with Tagore: ‘Into that heaven of freedom my Father, let my country awake....’

The modest corpus of Indian poetry written in English in its first phase between 1800 to 1857 A.D. involves the initiation of Indians to the English. Fed upon the European and English traditions of verse writing, the nineteenth century Indian poets endeavoured in varying degrees to write like the British romantic poets in theme, sentiment, imagery, poetic-form and diction. At times Indian myth was also used as a subject for poetry. An example: the following poem — "*The Captive Ladie*" — by Michael Madhusudan Dutt.
narrative poem published by the poet in 1849 A.D., it shows the influence of the Romantics, particularly of Sir Walter Scott and Byron. The theme of the poem is the classic love story of Prithviraj and Samyukta and the way in which the heroic abduction of Samyukta by Prithviraj had far-reaching consequences in Indian history. The excerpt quoted below weaves round the subconscious fears of the queen, who fathoms in a dream, that the deity of destruction has withdrawn her protection from upon the kingdom of Prithviraj:

Methought there came a warrior-maid.
with blood-stain'd brow and sheathless blade,
Dark was her hue, as darkest cloud,
Which comes the Moon's fair face to shroud
And 'round her waist a hideous zone
Of hands with charnel lightnings shone,
And long the garland which she wore
Of heads all bath'd in streaming gore
How fierce the eyes of death unseal'd

I shudder'd — for, methought, she came,
With eyes of bright consuming flame.
'Daughter,' she said, — 'farewell! I — I go.'
'The time is come, — it must be so.'
Leave thee and thine I will tonight,' —
Then vanished like a flash of light!
Again I dreamt — I saw a pyre
Blaze high with fiercely gleaming fire:
And plung'd — oh! God! into the flame

I shnek'd — but tell me why that start.

( Twenty-five Indian Poets in English 79 )

As Sisir Kumar Das observes in the ninth volume of Sahitya Akademi's History of Indian Literature, the trends of new poetry were visible in the
treatment of various themes — worship of beauty in nature and in women, uninhibited flight of imagination, mysteries of creation and death, as well as situations of social protest and patriotism. It was not the theme which made the new poetry conspicuous but the attitude, the atmosphere, and intense subjectivity of the poems at large. Some of the most prominent Indian poets writing in English in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were, Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. A short survey of their poetic concerns follows.

Indian poetry in English is said to have begun with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who published *Poems* (1827 A.D.) and *The Fakeer of Jangheera* (1828 A.D.), a long poem. He not only wrote, but also taught English poetry at Hindu College, Calcutta. Born of a Portuguese father and an Indian mother, he was extremely westernised in outlook, his poetry however burns with nationalistic zeal and patriotic fervour. His verse was more like an Indian extension of the poetry of the English Romantics and Victorians. The following is a sonnet by Henry Derozio where the symbol 'harp' stands for the once rich and vibrant culture of India.

**The Harp Of India**

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:
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave,
And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine.
Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:
Those hands are cold — but if thy notes divine
May be by mortal wakened once again,
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!
Derozio died at the young age of twenty years. Among his noteworthy contemporaries were, Kashiprasad Ghose (1809 to 1873 A.D.), and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824 to 1873 A.D.), who was better known for his epoch-making writing in Bengali.

In its second phase, (1857 to 1920 A.D.), the romantic strain of Indian English Poetry was charged with reformistic zeal. The socio-political awakening had generated a new self-confidence and authenticity in the verse of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, (both of whom were preoccupied with the romance and beauty of India), and of course Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. In his introduction to *Twenty Five Indian Poets in English*, K.S. Ramamurti rightly says that the poets cannot be accused of being consciously imitative or derivative:

...the creative impulses of the English educated Indians, stirred as they were by the poetry to which they were exposed, drew their sustenance and momentum from the same tradition and they tried to create a new poetry out of that experience and inspiration. In other words they continued that tradition on the Indian soil even as many British and American poets did on their respective soils. (1)

Consequently, the above mentioned phenomenon led to two things: (a) While the British (including American), poetic traditions got a new lease of life on Indian soil; (b) for the Indian poetic tradition, it was the beginning of a phenomenal setback to begin resurfacing from which colonial mentality it has taken it more than a century.

The great Renaissance, which came in the nineteenth century in the wake of the Western impact on India, had awakened in its people a sense of nationality and made them conscious of the richness of their cultural heritage and its wealth of natural resources. Ironically, this awareness had arisen through the introduction of the English education which made it possible for great minds like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda to reassess
the country's cultural and spiritual values and articulate them in English. It was a period of immense emotional and mental stress as the country warmed up in its struggle for independence. The ideological ferment during this period hastened by the English language, produced besides the poets, a good number of eminent orators, novelists and pamphleteers like Surendranath Banerjee, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Srinivasa Shastri, Bankim Chandra, Romesh Chunder Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century marked as it was by intense struggle and reform, was also a period of immense violence, great sacrifices and deeds of courage. It should logically have given rise to a spate of inspirational and heroic poetry; both in the regional languages and in the English which was keeping euphoric rhythm with the ongoing British poetic traditions (of Romanticism and Victorianism) and was quite detached from the poetic traditions of its own soil. A Basavanna, a Narasimha Mehta, a Kabir, or a Nanak would have risen to the occasion and written inspiring verse that could have mingled with the men and women on the streets, warmed their hearts, lifted their spirits, and earned its worth as national literature.

But the mode of effective communication adopted by Indian Nationalists was prose, (not poetry), both spoken and printed. Later of course, as the movement spread to the masses, the English idiom had to be abandoned in favour of Hindi and other region specific dialects. Even Shri Ramakrishna (1836-1886 A.D.), who is regarded as being in the direct line of mystics like Kabir and Nanak, has left us some excellent literature in English prose. For instance, when referring to the time of joyous illumination which followed the experience of enlightenment, he writes:

What a state it was! The slightest cause aroused in me the thought of the divine ideal. One day I went to the Zoological Garden in Calcutta. I desired especially to see the lion, but when I beheld him, I lost all sense-consciousness and went into Samadhi. Those who were with me wished to show me the other animals, but I replied, "I saw everything when I saw the king of beasts. Take me home."
strength of the lion had aroused in me the consciousness of the omnipotence of God and had lifted me above the world of phenomena. (Sources of Indian Tradition 639)

We can say that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the departure of mainstream literature from the Indian tradition, as new forms (prose and criticism) and ideologies were absorbed and adopted under the Western impact. Even the sentiment of aggressive nationalism was an imported concept. That it proved beneficial to the country, is a matter of good fortune.

Against this background, when we look back at the corpus of English poetry written by Indians, we see it in its infant stage, as a bright-eyed child looking up at its newly acquired foster parents, and all eagerness to ape their ways of conduct and speech. The poets considered themselves a part of the British tradition (a distortion of personal and national identity) and did not think that they were capable of creating a regular tradition of their own or creating poetry of merit that would rank them with the British masters. Their poetry was predominantly nostalgic and often its romanticism bordered on sentimentality. Quoted below are two comments by two different critics, on the profuse emotionalism in Indian English poetry of the nineteenth century:

Hero-worshipping the British poets and piously imitating their form and meter, even at times their themes and moods, the Indo-Anglican poets of the nineteenth century recollected their emotions almost in futility. (Syed Amanuddin 425)

This all-embracing sentimentality generally stood in the way of wit, humour, and satire, only allowing one form to succeed, viz. that which enabled the writer to express his dissatisfaction without much offence to the state or society. (D. P. Mukherji 121)

Mention must be made of two fine women poets – Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu – who wrote excellent romantic verse in English, celebrating the beauty
and rhythm of the Indian landscape, Indian customs and legends. Both of them had travelled abroad, and were equally well exposed to their own culture. Toru Dutt, (1856 to 1876 A.D.), belonged to a wealthy family which was also highly cultured and encouraged higher education. Toru’s father was a Christian convert, while her mother continued to be a chaste Hindu. The following first two stanzas from her much celebrated poem “Our Casuarina Tree”, display the poet’s sensibility, depth, and facility with the English language and form. They also indicate the poet’s potential mystic leanings which, as the poem progresses, are some what submerged by obvious allusions to the Romantics.

Like a huge Python, winding round and round
The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars
Up to its very summit near the stars,
A creeper climbs, in whose embraces bound
No other tree could live. But gallantly
The giant wears the scarf, and flowers are hung
In crimson clusters all the boughs among...

A gray baboon sits statue-like alone
Watching the sunrise, while on lower boughs
His puny offspring leap and play;
And far and near Kokilas hail the day;
And to their pastures wend our sleepy cows
And in the shadow, on the broad tank cast
By that hoar tree, so beautiful and vast,
The water lillies spring, like snow enmeshed...

(Twenty Five Poets 84)

After a brilliant meteoric career in poetry, Toru died at the young age of twenty one. Sarojini Naidu (1879 to 1849 A.D.), who was born three years after Toru’s death, to progressive minded Brahmin parents, grew up to be known as the ‘dreamy eyed mystic child of India’. Her lyrical art reveals the influence of both British romanticism and Persian and Urdu verse traditions.
with their characteristic opulence. Poems like, "Palanquin Bearers," "Bangle Sellers," "Flute Player Of Brindavan," and "Song Of Radha The Milkmaid," are among her better known poems with an Indian theme. She is quite Mira-like in her sense of devotion, in the following poem addressed to Lord Knshna

**Song Of Radha, The Milkmaid**

I carried my curds to the Mathura fair. How softly the heifers were lowing.

I wanted to cry, "Who will buy
These curds that are white as the clouds in the sky
When the breezes of Shravan were blowing?
But my heart was so full of your beauty, Beloved
They laughed as I cried without knowing
    Govinda! Govinda!
    Govinda! Govinda!

How softly the river was flowing.

I carried my pots to the Mathura tide...
How gaily the rowers were rowing!...
My Comrades called, "Ho! Let us dance, let us sing
And wear saffron garments to welcome the spring.

    ....... . . . . .......... .......... . . . ....... ......
    Govinda! Govinda!
    Govinda! Govinda!

How gaily the river was flowing!

I carried my pots to the Mathura shnne...
How brightly the torches were glowing!
I folded my hands at the alter to pray
"O shining ones guard us by night and by day"
And loudly the conch shells were blowing.
But my heart was so lost in your worship, Beloved.
They were worth when I cried without knowing.

Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda!

How brightly the river was flowing!

(Commonwealth Poetry  18 -19)

Sarojini Naidu was the most musical of the nineteenth century poets, and although younger to both Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, she won recognition in England much earlier. Her verse however, tends to lapse at times into sentimentalism and abstraction. As Sisir Kumar Das comments: Her poetry gave neither any particular direction to the Indian poetry in English or any other language, nor did she articulate any particular manifesto of poetry challenging the existing tradition. Sri Aurobindo on the other hand thought and wrote extensively on Indian poetry..(he saw)..... very clearly, the relationship between the mentality of the nation to which he belongs and the spiritual, aesthetic, intellectual tradition and environment which it creates for him. (Vol. IX  184)

The sense of inadequacy, of having lost something in Indian poetry would come much later. At this stage of its genesis, the Indian English poet was in a mood to celebrate upon his new acquisition. Since a majority of the poets exposed to an English education/ culture, hailed from the privileged background; there is very little reference in their poetry, to the reality of the Indian, lower down the rung. As D.P. Mukherji, writing in 1942 A.D. observes: The reformist zeal in literature had certain limitations, however. The lower castes were not quite inside the pale of observation; and the social inequality was not further analyzed into its essentials." (123)
However, there is an immense gap between the work of talented poets who wrote with a superficial grounding in Indian culture, and those poets (like Aurobindo and Tagore), who were writing in (or translating into) English and yet were deeply grounded in their cultural and literary heritage.

The giant figures of Sri Aurobindo (1872 to 1950 A.D.), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861 to 1941 A.D.), loom large upon this period of the Indian Renaissance. What we find in Aurobindo and Tagore is an unfractured poetic dialogue: an exception to the general trend of the period. Here are poets who have drunk from the deep wells of tradition and tasted the waters of foreign influence and emerged even richer from the churning. Theirs is a poetry inspired by the instinct for the divine, the spirit mystical. Compare (though it may sound ludicrous), the following sonnets: “The Bliss of Brahman,” by Aurobindo with the brilliant sonnet, “To India – My Native Land,” by Derozio. The motive behind this juxtaposition is only to place before the reader the stark contrast in terms of depth and quality which the sense of history (its presence or lack in a poet), can effect. Considering that the poets were writing in a language that had had no history upon their soil, their verse was impressive, but the fact that they hailed from a culture that boasted of an exceptionally great poetic tradition, (both in Sanskrit and in the regional languages), their end product was disappointing:

**To India — My Native Land**

My country! in the day of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
And worshipped as a deity thou wast.
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?
The eagle pinion is chained down at last,
And groveling 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 those wrecks sublime,
Which human eye may never more behold;
And let the guerdon of my labor be
My fallen country! one kind wish from thee! (Hay 571)

Derozio’s sonnet is technically brilliant while spiritually it is weighed down by decay and gloom. It displays the typical “amnesia” and distorted vision of the Indian towards his/ her own history. And therefore as an Indian poem has little to contribute to Indian poetry, except for its sentimental nostalgia. Aurobindo’s sonnet on the other hand brims with the mystic wealth of its poetic legacy to which the poet adds the advantage of his facility with English language and literature. As a result we discover with Aurobindo, a fresh perspective to the tradition of Indian mystic poetry written in the English language, with Miltonic or Romantic undertones and technique flowing into the swift flowing waters of the Indian poetic tradition. The following sonnet, “The Bliss of Brahman” is an example.

I am swallowed in a foam-white sea of bliss,
I am a curving wave of God’s delight.
A shapeless flow of happy passionate light,
A whirlpool of the streams of Paradise.
I am a cup of His felicities,
A thunderblast of His golden ecstasy’s night,
A fire of joy upon creation’s height;
I am His rapture’s wonderful abyss.

I am drunken with the glory of the Lord
I am vanquished by the beauty of the Unborn;
I have looked, alive, upon the Eternal’s face.

My mind is cloven by His radiant sword,
My heart by His beatific torch is torn,
My life is a meteor-dust of His flaming Grace.

(Sri Aurobindo: Collected Poems 158)
The above sonnet was written in the later part of Aurobindo's life. It reflects the richness of his inner life. Even though Aurobindo wrote with India in his bones, he was also writing from the experience of a long and intense exposure to the English and European classics, which is obvious in the way he uses the sonnet form. Aurobindo is too great a phenomenon to be dealt with any justice in this brief summing up of a thesis. The attempt must however be made, in order to substantiate the thesis that a poetics well grounded in its cultural and spiritual roots, is bound to produce a more qualitative and distinguished verse.

Sri Aurobindo's vast volume of all kinds of verse: lyrical, narrative, philosophical and epic, produced during a poetic career spanning over sixty years, has great qualitative variations, as the poet evolved in his lifetime from a patriot to poet, to yogi, and seer. He wrote two epic poems—*Ilion*, and *Savitri*—of which, the later is not only better, but among his best work of poetry. Its subject is based upon a legend from the *Mahabharata*. Written in blank verse, it is divided into twelve books. Its diction and imagery reveal the influence of Miltonic and Romantic models. An epic of the soul and the oversoul, *Savitri* is a distillation of Aurobindo's philosophy of internal yoga, according to which "God must be born on earth and be a Man / that Man being human may grow even as God.." In contrast, the theme of *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore's finest achievement in English verse is, devotion and its motto, that "I am here to sing thee songs". Unlike Aurobindo, who withdrew into periods of complete seclusion in his life, Tagore does not see renunciation as the path to deliverance. For him the world, itself is a beautiful creation of God, it is, one source of reaching Him.

Born to affluent parents in Calcutta in 1872 A.D., Aurobindo Ghose, at the tender age of seven, was sent to England to have a purely western education. While in England, he experienced the beginnings of his spiritual life, which led him to writing poetry. At the age of twenty one, when he returned to India, he was already an excellent poet who wrote like a Romantic, but with obvious classical echoes and a Miltonic temperament. In the following stanza for instance, the European and Eastern myths are blended together in a strange
meeting across the globe: "Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati / Has called to regions of eternal snow / And Ganges pacing to the southern sea, / Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow" ("Envoi" from *Songs to Myrtilla*, poems written around the time the young poet left England for home, i.e. India.)

Aurobindo's later poetry, written from 1934 A.D onwards, reveals a radical shift in sensibility and a striking control of technique, "A deep spiritual calm no touch can sway/ Upholds the mystery of the Passion-play." As Sisirkumar Ghose comments in his essay "Sri Aurobindo: A Poet as Seer": "In his later poems, especially the inner epic *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo's role as a pathfinder, a traveller between summit and abyss, stands revealed beyond cavil or question." In *Savitri*, he repeatedly exhorts mankind to exceed itself and realise the beauty of their future:

O force-compelled, fate-driven earth-born race,

O petty adventurers in an infinite world

And prisoners of a dwarf humanity,

How long will you tread the circling tracks of mind

Around your little self and petty things?

("Nadkarni, M.  *Savitri: A Brief Introduction*  10)

The following lines from a letter he wrote to 'Mother' give us some insight into his attitude towards poetry especially towards *Savitri*, which was for him a mirror that reflected his inner levels of yogic experience and transformation:

I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level; each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level .... In fact, *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative.

("Nadkarni, M.  11")
Mirra Blanch Rachel Alfassa, the extraordinarily spiritually gifted French lady who joined Aurobindo in 1920 A.D. to start the Pondicherry Ashram.

Indian poetry (and not merely Indian English poetry,) will remain indebted to the genius of Aurobindo. For he not only enhanced and earned further the great tradition of Indian poetry, he opened up not just for Indian poets but for world literature as well. new possibilities in poetic utterance. As Sisirkumar Ghose rightly puts it.

Poetry today is mostly the poetry of crisis – now and then the crisis of poetry no less! But integration is from within and depends upon a change of consciousness. This is where a good many of our poets and thinkers fail. Placed by their side Aurobindo who speaks almost a new tongue an Orphic voice of such sanity and serenity, of incontestable inwardness and maturity.

A similar poise, integrated character, and depth of vision marked the persona of another Bengali poet – Rabindranath Tagore, who was older to Aurobindo by eleven years. Tagore was born in a family where the atmosphere was charged with deep religious feelings and yet was free from adherence to formalistic ritual. It was an illustrious family that had been at the forefront of both commercial and intellectual activities, a family steeped deeply in the Upanishadic and Islamic traditions of India while it welcomed Western education and Western life style and strove to achieve a synthesis between the two. The roots of Tagore's poetic capacity to combine tradition with new technique must lie here. Added to this, young Tagore's experience as the manager of his father's estate, brought him in direct contact with nature and man in rural Bengal, which poured out through his poetry (often set to music), and struck a chord at the deepest levels of the collective consciousness of the people of Bengal.

Tagore was a bilingual poet. Most of his poems were written in Bengali, which he later translated into English. His translations of the songs in Gitanjali were received rapturously in London and fetched him the Nobel.
Prize for literature, in 1913 A.D. He was the first Indian to make such a mark, and receive such uninhibited adoration from the English people, (even though it was retracted later due to various reasons)

What was it in Tagore and Aurobindo that fetched them such international acclaim and attention as poets, visionary, seer; and what is it that has kept their work alive for posterity? Besides their individual genius, it was their strong rootedness in the Indian poetic conscious, their courage to live by their convictions and their earnest life-long dialogue with mysticism/ spirituality. Tagore was greatly influenced by the medieval poets of India, in particular by Kabir, whose poems he has translated (under the title, Hundred Poems Of Kabir), so sympathetically, that at times the poet and the translator seem to merge. Octavio Paz, the Spanish poet ambassador to India, perceives it differently. According to Paz, "Tagore translated Kabir's poems because he saw in them the failed promise of what India could have become" (43) The following song, which is from Tagore's volume of mystic verse, the Gitanjali, 1949 A.D., begins like many a doha of Kabir's with mockery and questioning:

Leave this chanting and singing and
 telling of beads! Whom dost thou
 worship in this lonely dark corner of a
 temple with doors all shut? Open
 thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
 He is there where the tiller is tilling
 the hard ground and where the path
 maker is breaking stones. He is with
 them in sun and in shower, and his
 garment is covered with dust. Put off
 thy holy mantle and even like him come
down on the dusty soil!
 Deliverance? Where is this deliverance
 to be found? Our master himself
 has joyfully taken upon him the bonds
 of creation, he is bound with us all for ever.
Come out of thy meditations and
leave aside thy flowers and incense!
What harm is there if thy clothes
become tattered and stained? Meet
him and stand by him in toil and in
sweat of thy brow. (Macmillan Edition 8-9)

Tagore’s was a vagabond spirit, a pantheist who sought poetry and the mystic
spirit on the waters of the Padma river which he traversed in his boat many a
time listening to the strain of a flute, watching the dust clouds of cattle
returning home, the blowing of conch shells, the pain of the parched earth.
and the march of dark clouds bringing heavy rain in the month of July.
Commenting upon the delicate balance of harmonies in Tagore’s verse,
W.B. Yeats rightly says that they are:
...the work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth
of the common soil as the grass and the rushes — A tradition where
poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the
centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and
emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the
scholar and of the noble. (‘Introduction’ Gitanjali xiii-xiv)

Tagore’s poetry has prominent tones of (a) the regional Bengal, (b) the
continuing tradition of Bhakti poetry with its preoccupations with nature, love
and God, (c) the spirit of the wandering Fakir, and (d) a heightened sense of
aesthetics refined further by his exposure to the greatest and finest in world
literature. According to William Radice, in his introduction to the 1985
Penguin edition of Tagore’s Selected Poems, his writings do not convey “the
full realisation or enlightenment of a mystic or seer”, rather they display, a
passionate human yearning — “a sense of the ideal always being beyond
reach”. On the other hand, in Aurobindo’s verse, we see the full realisation of
a poet as seer, a recluse who unravels through poetry, the itinerary of his
travels in the gyre of orphic experience. In this respect (in his approach to
divinity), he is more like the Nath yogis and rishis dwelling in the Himalayas,
in solitary existence, and composing poetry that deals almost exclusively with states of being, and subtle ranges of ungraspable experience. His genius, as a result, has been under-rated and misjudged by some, during his lifetime.

The following comment of Sisirkumar Ghose holds relevance not only to Aurobindo, but is also true of Mira, Nanak, Kabir, Tukaram, Akho Bhagat, and other mystic poets belonging to the pantheon of Indian devotional poetry. Dr. Ghose says:

To presume that visionary writers have a weak hold on life is part of the order of ideas that has to be left aside if we are to enter the world of Aurobindean poetry. For it deals with, as it depends upon, experiences, 'not very much frequented by common readers of poetry'. An openness to these experiences and some knowledge of the conditions of their fit expression would seem to be part of the reader's equipment.

( Mysticism: Views and Review 44 )

Thus we arrive upon two conclusions that should guide the efforts of our contemporary Indian poets writing in English. They are. Firstly, however out of fashion spirituality might be in today's world of rationale, intellect, and technical perfection, the bottom line to producing great literature and great works of art is the inner maturity and spiritual depth of an individual genius. It was this factor of an inbred spirituality, that gave Indian poetry that extra edge, that rainbow leap to levels that are transcendental and superhuman. And secondly, a poet should be familiar with not only his/her regional and national tradition, but also with his/her contemporary reality and forms of expression (both urban and rural), to fuse and experiment with which should be their constant effort. The fact that the Bhakti sentiment found fertile ground in Aurobindo who wrote in the English language goes to prove that the English language can be Indianized, that it could be stretched and manoeuvred to suitably project the rhythms of Indian life, culture, seasons, symbols and its essential mindset.

The Gandhian era of poetry in English (1920 to 1947 A.D.), was strangely silent. Despite tremendous national upheaval on the socio-political and
economic fronts, the crisis and plunder of Partition, and the first World War. Unlike Indian poetry in the regional languages, there is hardly any response through poetry in English. I shall substantiate this argument by illustrating in English translation a poem originally written in Hindi by the poet Kumar Vikal

**A Poem to Her Pain**, written shortly after the Independence, refers to the Partition experience, the emotionally ravaged existence of people in refugee camps, longing for the small basic comforts and the warmth of their homes and relationships. To return to that “courtyard with two trees”, and that “little dream-house”:

A Poem to Her Pain
First they inscribed on my back  
with red hot irons
in the language of fire  
the name of a country  
that cannot be found
on any map of the world.

The second time they came  
in the dark of the curfew  
beating the army drums and  
trampled over my body.

The third time I am in a refugee camp.  
What have I come here to look for.  
My body or my home  
in the courtyard of which  
there were two young trees  
bearing the fruits of dreams  
and a lovely little sparrow named Pinky  
frisked around chirping dreams.

In refugee camps  
there are no dream-houses
Kumar Vikal’s poem speaks of a shared experience, it holds up a mirror to the pain of partition and the futility of the exercise when it comes to the basics of human existence. The poem in other words, appeals to the larger Indian scene of experience and shared emotional history. Poetry written in English in India however does not enjoy such popular status, having largely disconnected itself from both, its literary and socio-political realities. As Bruce King (quoted by K.S. Ramamurti in Twenty-five Indian Poets in English), points out:

Indian poetry as it gained recognition, seems to have moved away from political culture towards, “other newly emerging modern arts such as painting, drama, film and cultural journalism, which appeal to the educated affluent professional classes of modern urban India.

(136)

The voices that emerge in the post independence period, produce poetry of an intellectual variety – a poetry which lacks in varying degrees, both soul and life. It is radical and more relevant in so far as it diverges from the earlier hypnotic stance of romance and idealism. It is characterised by a merciless sense of self-sufficiency, rigorous questioning, sophisticated irony and
laconic humour, punctuated with the modern man's sense of disillusionment, inertia, and his/her search in the general myopic blindness.

In the chaos of verse that followed, there were poets like Dom Moraes, P.Lal, Nissim Ezekiel, Keki Daruwala, Adil Jussawala, Gieve Patel, Kamla Das, Shiv K Kumar, Arvind Mehrotra and Jayanta Mahapatra. And more recently, Eunice De Souza, Manohar Shetty, Vikram Seth, Imtiaz Dharker, Sujata Bhatt, Makrand Paranjape, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Jeet Thayil, and Vijay Nambisan, to name a few. As Dr. G.N. Devy observes in *In Another Tongue*:

The post-Aurobindo period in poetry in English is certainly a problematic one. Whereas after the British left India the standard of English has declined and its status as an 'Indian' language has been questioned repeatedly, creative writing has experienced something like a 'poetry-explosion'. ...[which factor has]... inevitably influenced the quality of poetry in an adverse manner, and yet there is some distinguished poetry in English today. Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Parthasarthy, Kolatkar and Mahapatra are among those whose work compares well with that of authors writing in Indian languages, on the one hand, and of other Commonwealth poets, on the other hand. In style, diction and aesthetics there is a world of difference between pre-Aurobindo and post-Aurobindo poets; but, increasingly, the experience pattern discernible in both groups is essentially the same. (76)

The "experience pattern" of contemporary Indian English poetry largely circles around the personal experiences and emotional tendencies of the poet. It is a rare poet or poem that attempts to look beyond, at a larger Indian reality: to hobnob with the soul of the soil and to grow from within it. (This is the reason, why Ezekiel's poem, "Night of the Scorpion" enjoys such popular appeal even, with casual Indian readers of English poetry). We see it happening, in varying degrees, in the poetry of Aurobindo, Tagore and more recent poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, Dilip Chitre and Imtiaz Dharker. However, as a general rule, Indian poetry in English is unable to surge to that level of poetry
where poetic intelligence fuses with intuition; represents the spiritual tenor of a whole culture, and resonates with the outlook, depth and variety of its living metaphor and image. Comparatively much bolder work and experimentation with linguistic expression (closer to the Indian patterns of sound) has been conducted by Indian novelists writing in English. Fiction writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundatti Roy have created their own English idiom which is unmistakably Indian in its import, and draws sustenance from the Indian reality. Poetry in English on the other hand, continues to be the occupation of an extremely limited urban population. It speaks to a limited audience and is self-generating. The following poem — one in a series of poems on *Modern English Poets I- V* by Rukmini Bhaya Nair, is a sample:

**For Kamala Das**
You have an excellent memory, forgetting
Only the incidents imagination cannot use.

Little sparrowy poets fluttering in and out,
And the girls, weak and colourless window-birds, vanishing when you clapt your wings,
Sleek pigeon, cooing from your Cuffe Parade Heights, those afternoons the predators came,
Attracted by the pheromone scent of your poems.

Because I remember facts, I am a chronicler,
There is no poetry in what I have to tell you.
Your poems smelt like the sea at low-tide, like Guano, the world after summer rain, shaming your Loud Posters, the tantrums you set up, carpeting The tawdry salon floor, a smoke-edged forest fire. (24)

Indian English poetry thus far has enjoyed an element of elitism and unlike the Bhakti poets (who spoke from among their own people), it has maintained a distance from the ngours of the dust and sweat of life. For it is a rare
sweeper or low paid worker who can understand English or identify with the limited subject and sophistication of English poetry. Bhakti poetry on the other hand, was an egalitarian literature of change, spanning through the entire gamut of social classes, it enjoyed large audience. Its poets hailing from a cross section of Indian society, could be a weaver or a cobbler by profession, or even a Brahmin or a king. They wrote and sang their poetry from the bone, marrow and flesh of Indian life. Poetry, more than popular theatre, was the main literary form of cultural expression in medieval India.

A similar intimacy with the larger reality is lacking in poetry in English, and although a change in its thematic scope has begun to appear, the process is limited and erratic. Even today, for an English literature student beginning to compose poetry, the urge to write like his/her western models, and get published in foreign journals remains uppermost. The effort however is counter productive. For an imitation will always remain an imitation however brilliantly it tries to copy. Contemporary Regional and Dalit literatures on the other hand, share a much better relation with their tradition rooted in rural and folk cultures. The following poem by Kailash Vajpayee (translated by the poet himself from Hindi), alludes to a continuing dialogue with Bhakti. The poem begins with references to the untapped resources of the "mute river" within. If the "floodgates" of that river — that "Hum of the Cosmos" — were "thrown open", "A genesis would occur." The poem also makes allusions to the blue-skinned and flute-playing shepherd-god, Krishna. In the tradition of Surdas and Mira, Vajpayee writing in the late twentieth century, portrays Krishna as he dances upon the shores of the spirit, he appeals, "Unlock this womb / Of every harmony!":

Thou art That
Within you is locked
A mute river
Of fragrance and colour.

Were you to learn
The art of blossoming
The drought in the garden
Would suffer a rout

A new genesis would occur
Were you to throw open
The floodgates.

Hear me –
Your music is diffused
Like the scattered rhymeless
Hum of the Cosmos

You are a raw reed of bamboos
Were your body fashioned
Into a flute,
Were harmonic brands
Seared into your flesh,
Were the bluest lips
Pressed against you,

The sleeping seeds within
Would banish the wastelands
With a tangle of saplings

Listen –
For you can be the grove
Where he dances,
In you is trapped
A firmament.

Unlock this womb
Of every harmony!

(An Anthology of Modern Hindi Poetry 125-126)
(All emphasis mine.)
A similar sense of being in a continuous, organic relationship with one's cultural roots is found in both the contemporary Dalit and regional literatures. However, in the absence of systematic and aggressive translation activity (by the English literature academics), they continue to circulate in a small way, beneath the blanket of Desi (meaning native) literature. One wonders if one should call it regional literature or marginalised literature?

The mainstream trend on the other hand, favours the progressive English language and its body of literature in English—which grossly misrepresents the canon of Indian literature. By no means am I referring here to its poetic standards—which in fact are good. My issue here is with the thematic and representative value of Indian English poetry, keeping in mind its narcissistic subjects, its highbrow attitudes and ideological preoccupations. It also lacks the initiative to incorporate and experiment with Indian meters, rhythms and poetic form. Secondly, unless English is actively used to translate from regional literature and thus create a pan-Indian literary consciousness, Indian literature in English will continue to undermine and misrepresent the picture of Indian creative writing, not only to the world, but to itself as well. As a result of an essentially selective and urban environment, Indian English poetry has tended to regard British and American poets as its role models. Consequently its approach towards its own literature in the regional languages (and towards regional language itself), has been typically colonial and high handed. Indian English poetry has thus alienated itself by fabricating for itself an urban reality, distanced from the cultural and emotional ethos of the uncultivated native culture of India. It has, by and large, restricted itself to classroom scrutiny, select poetry readings and sophisticated drawing room banter. It is unfit as a document of representative and cultural value, and unfit as a piece of National literature. To quote Dr. Devy, once again:

*The language of literature, anywhere in the world and in any given period, draws its life from the language outside literature, from the language in ordinary use in the business of life. The English*
language in India lacks some of the vital dimensions which would make it a fully living language, from which the writers can draw sustenance. In the case of the post-colonial Indian English writers, fiction precedes language. It is as if these writers are trying to create an Indian English through their fictions rather than creating fiction out of a living Indian English. (116)

English language may be at the centre of power propagating circles but poetry in English has largely been in the periphery, being more of a distant, complacent onlooker, churning out poetry that rarely looks beyond its narcissistic preoccupations with, what Dr Devy calls, their "playfulness" and "fiction-making", their obsessive love affair with the intellectual and progressive outlook of urban living.

I shall close this chapter on a positive note, with two randomly selected poems, by two Indian English poets - Jayanta Mahapatra, and Imtiaz Dharker. The poems have been selected at random, and they represent in varying degrees, the better kind of verse being written today in English. The poems also mirror the kind of relationships and concerns the poets share with their environment.

Lost

Here I have learnt to recognise you
at a distance,
the evenings heavy,
the half-light wandering round the room.

I've wanted to know what lulling silence
can bloom in my hands,
what pain and pleasure your mind can wear
through the intrigues at my fingertips.

I watch your body ease off the seasons
stretched out on the stone of my breath,
The poem "Lost" by Jayanta Mahapatra, explores existential concerns. Expressions like "easing off the seasons", "some defect in a mechanical toy", "fateful encounter" and Mahapatra's reference to "this half-light" and "Where was I when I lost it?", convey through their ambivalence. And one wonders if that 'half light' is symbolic of the poet's spiritual innocence lost somewhere as the seasons of life eased off? The poet however finds succor in love and relationships as a buffer against the uncertainties of life. In contrast, the Indian mystics who were used to transcending material reality, would have sought solace in a dyadic relationship with the divine and looked for love within. This is one major difference between contemporary Indian English poetry and medieval mystic verse. In a limited way, contemporary English poetry does sometimes echo the aesthetics and sensibilities of our poetic tradition, through the symbols a poet uses and in the way he or she responds to their environment. Mahapatra's preoccupation with 'silence' is
one example. Ironically this very "silence" in modern poetry also provides a paradox to the energy, music and life which fill the metaphoric regions of Bhakti poetry. Imtiaz Dharker's poem "The Mark" brings us somewhere close to it. Its imagery is exuberant – almost pantheistic in its attitude, and its vision that of a mystic. The reference here is to the deep sense of universal motherhood that contains within it the entire circle of regeneration and life.

From the plural the poem travels towards the singular and personal spaces.

**The Mark**

I contain them all.

The churning blood and heartbeats, countless souls of men, small animals, snakes, ants, birds, trees

They swarm inside me insistent as a storm of bees, clatter across my thoughts, dragging their future with them and their million deaths, setting down their histories on the threshold of my tolerance, laying voice on voice, familiar as my own, demanding I think well of them, begging to come home. Perhaps I invited this. I have a memory of a small white card, stamped with hope; or was it a woman's body transparent as a veil that fell away to reveal a child curled up, contained within itself? (54)
"The Mark" belongs to an exclusive category of contemporary English poetry which leans towards the pantheistic and the mystic. Such type of writing has begun to occasionally smatter the poetic scene of Indian English poetry, recently. This fact offers us hope of a poetic comeback to the sources of the great Indian tradition — hope that the modern poetic sensibility and the mystic will reinterpret each other, and work towards taking Indian poetry in English towards newer and greater horizons to which Tagore and Aurobindo have alluded through their poetry.

So far with this chapter we have explored the effects of English education upon the Indian's psyche and changed worldview. (The more technical details of the spread of English education and its reception by different segments of the country, have been taken up in the Appendix). One of the consequences of the colonial rule was the fracture it caused in the Indian sense of history and continuing traditions of the arts. The complexity of its effects is most apparent in the corpus of Indian poetry that came to be written in English (in the nineteenth century), and went on to establish itself as a genre ridden with the crisis of identity and representation. In the last two centuries, Indian English poetry has travelled towards a sense of complacent self-sufficiency. It creates with an urban set of culture, concept and symbols, and is laced with the concerns and mentality of the "progressive" metropolis. As a result it fails to represent, rather it misrepresents the larger Indian reality. This issue the chapter has examined. It began with a brief survey of poetry written in the nineteenth century and went on to discuss in some detail, the early twentieth-century poets: Tagore and Aurobindo, who sustained their links with the mystic tradition of Indian poetry-writing, produced great poetry of lasting worth, and therefore continue, to be read and visited by Indian audiences ranging across a larger cross section of society.
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