THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH ON GUJARATI POETRY

Part II
Chapter VIII
Introduction

The passing away of poet Dayaram, the last great representative of the mediaeval tradition, in 1852, marks the end of the old and the beginning of the new order in the evolution of Gujarati poetry. Though literary historians have never been slow in pointing out the dangers of dogmatism in compartmentalisation of literary epochs in terms of certain fixed dates, the year 1852 here serves as a convenient dividing line between the earlier and modern Gujarati poetry, especially when it also coincides with the Indian Renaissance, which brought in its wake the sprouting of new literatures almost simultaneously in all the major modern Indian languages around the year 1852 (Vide, Chapter III).

The Indian Renaissance, as already stated (Chapter III), was one of the most pleasing features of India's contact with the West through English. In some measure, this contact dates back to the early seventeenth century (Vide, Chapter II), but the actual impact on the life and literature of Gujarat, as elsewhere, came to be felt substantially and tangibly, for a variety of reasons, only after 1818, when the British regime in India began consolidating itself. The poetry of Dayaram, it is interesting to note, bears no evidence of even an awareness, much less of the influence of English. The far-reaching and revolutionary changes in the form and spirit of Gujarati poetry since his death in 1852, therefore, come out as a startling fact, which would, however, appear less startling and sudden, if the work of the pioneers in the inevitable period of transition is taken into account. Between the gradual disappearance of the earlier poetic traditions and the emergence of new poetry of a distinctly English complexion, lies the period
of transition and twilight, where the two could be seen interlocked in an interesting struggle for survival and self-assertion. That this struggle between the old and the new was not confined merely to poetry, but was also witnessed in the varied fields of life - educational, social and cultural - has already been suggested. (Vide, Chapters IV, V, VI). The old order, however, good, everywhere yields its place to the new, though this does not altogether prevent the old from being assimilated with the new, in one form or another, later on or even simultaneously. Old bottles could indeed be used for pouring in new wine and one could always play a few new tunes on an old piano.

The following pages do not presume to be a survey of modern Gujarati poetry as such, or in its entirety, for no survey with any pretension to completeness in this respect, could possibly exclude the other two influences on Gujarati poetry - Sanskrit and Persian - which are deliberately excluded here from consideration. Again, the emphasis is sought to be put not on the individuals, but rather on the new trends and tendencies, which they happened to represent. What is relevant to this thesis is to show how modern Gujarati poetry from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present time was gradually transformed and moulded into a new entity under the impact of English poetry and poetic conception, directly or indirectly, from time to time.

This is attempted here by first underlining certain new trends in the work of the pioneers in the period of transition and twilight, and then by showing how the first deliberate and conscious attempt at introducing the Western type of poetry, with Palgrave's "Golden Treasury" Book Fourth as the model, was followed by successive attempts, which resulted finally in establishing certain new forms, modes of expression and representation, typically English in origin, inspiration and complexion.
That this was not accomplished at a stroke or at once is borne out by the fact that the whole process, outlined in the following chapters, was spread over the three stages of action, reaction and assimilation, where the indirect influence of the time-spirit and the general attitude of the people towards the West were almost as decisive as the direct influence of English poetry in the final outcome. If, as Ernest Rhys says, (Vide, 'Lyric Poetry', pp.vii-viii) there is a 'natural concert between the mind of the poet and the larger mind and rhythm of his time', the Gujarati poets of this age of transition were truly representative of the larger mind and rhythm of their time. The lead, except in the case of some of the pioneers in the field, was taken by men who had the benefit of the Western type of education provided by the University, established in 1857, but if their efforts met with a ready public response, it was because the prevailing social and cultural climate was helpful. Again, without an appreciative poetry-reading public, which included men already familiar with English poetry, this attempt at introducing the English type of poetry would not have thrived, as it actually did.