THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH ON GUJARATI POETRY

PART I.

The Background

Chapter I.

East and West: India's Receptivity and Genius for Assimilation.

The changes brought about in Indian life and literature as a result of the contact of India with England in the course of the last 150 years, viewed in relation to India's historical past, are revolutionary and far-reaching in their character and extent. Though India has a distinguished cultural heritage of its own, it has kept the window of its mind always open through the centuries. In the Rig Veda, one of its hymns is a prayer, "Let good thoughts come to us from all the quarters of the world".\(^1\) After centuries, Mahatma Gandhi repeated the same prayer with a corollary, "I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."\(^2\)

Mahatma Gandhi's words were uttered pointedly in the context of the influence of the English on Indian life. He welcomed such an influence, as he would any that would do good to India and her people, but he would not allow that influence to blow off India and her people and make them lose their individuality.

Now that the English have retired from the scene, we can have a look at things in a proper perspective and find that though the English influence was and is a fact, neither the life nor the literature of India has allowed itself to be

---

1. 'Aa no bhadraka Kratavo Xantu Vishvataha' (1-89-1)
2. English Learning - "Young India" June 1921.
submerged under, much less to be swept off by, this influence. Rudyard Kipling prophesised that the East and the West shall never meet. There is perhaps some truth in this. Though the East and the West have met not only in India but elsewhere too, the West has not succeeded in annihilating the East or even transforming the East culturally into the West. This, however, does not prevent interaction or reciprocity of influences. In Europe, the English, French and German influences have interacted in its literatures. The traffic between the East and the West was certainly not one-way, though the volume and extent in each of these two directions may differ. The resemblance between ancient Greek and Indian philosophical concepts is too striking to be missed. Indian beliefs and fables had found their way into the West since the time of Alexander, the Great. Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea-route to India in 1498 and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated and accelerated this exchange. Though the influence of the West on the East is not to be minimized or underestimated, the influence of the East, particularly of India, on the West is also an incontrovertible fact. The 29th International Congress of the P.E.H. held in September 1957 at Tokyo included in its deliberations a symposium on the influence of the East on the West, which makes, indeed, very interesting reading, especially for those in India who are inclined to the view that India had nothing to give and everything to receive from the West. The picture that emerged from those deliberations, in which writers and scholars of different Western languages participated, is not unflattering to India. The impressive array of authors who were in varying degrees, receptive or amenable to this influence include such outstanding names as Goethe, Schiller and Rainer Maria Rilke; Voltaire and Kant; Sir William Jones and Sir Edwin Arnold; Gautier and Mallarme; Emerson, F.W. Bain, E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot, Louis Bromfield, Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley and
Christopher Isherwood. As Helmuth Von Glasenapp put it, 'Towards the end of the 18th century a few thinkers began to realize that India had contributed much to the solution of the great problems of mankind, but it is their duty to do away with prejudices of colonialism and the arrogance which, for long time, has prevented India from being seen in the right light'.  

Goethe, who believed that 'heavenly and earthly things cover such a wide field that the realm of the spirit can only be fully grasped through the efforts of all human beings combined', also believed that 'Orient and Occident can no longer be disconnected'. In his 'Psychological Remarks on the East-West Controversy', Joost Meerloo suggested that 'in future, we will not speak any more of the essential differences between Eastern and Western psyche, but about their separate developments and what mankind, as a whole, can learn from these. Only the integration and impact of both cultures will lead to an intensified understanding and enhance mutual creative endeavour' and when this is achieved, 'we shall be able to repeat with confidence, the less-known lines in Kipling's poem:

But there is neither East nor West
Border, nor Breed nor Birth
When two strong men stand face to face
Though they come from the end of the earth'.

Even before the English came to India, first as traders and then as rulers, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Dane and the French had occupied strips and pockets of India, but they left India, leaving hardly anything more than their footprints on the Indian soil behind them. The Moguls overran India.

---

2. Ibid, p. 156.
and made India their home. The English had not done so and yet theirs is probably the strongest influence to which India has been subjected. The Portuguese were the first to land on the shores of India, but their crude lust for power and their fanatic proselytizing activities made them so odious that the Indian people always resentfully, though hopelessly, looked upon them as intruders with whom they could have no truck. The Portuguese were gradually ousted by the more enterprising and sagacious Dutch and the English, the Portuguese 'empire' being then reduced to three tiny pockets of Goa, Diu and Daman. The Dutch were the next to arrive on the Indian scene. The Dutch sailors, in quest of trade, built their first fort on the Indian soil at Pulicat in 1609, but inspite of their settlements on the coast of India, which were neither numerous nor important, they failed to make any impression on the Indian mind. The Dutch were followed in 1620 by the Danes who established a factory at Serampore, near Calcutta. The French, who followed, exhausted themselves in unproductive rivalry with the English and ultimately threw up their hands in despair. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danes and the French had mainly commercial and sometimes political interest in India. They had not appeared on the scene as ambassadors of their culture and civilization. The Dutch, the Danes, the French and the Portuguese have left. The English also have left, but unlike the Dutch, Dane, French and Portuguese, their influence still abides in a variety of subtle, direct and indirect ways.

To trace this influence on Gujarati poetry, in particular, is the subject of the present thesis. It is necessary to observe at the very outset that this influence was not exclusive to either the poetry or literature of Gujarat; as a matter of fact, exclusive even to the cultural life of Gujarat alone; it was a country-wide, all-pervading influence, which affected the life and literature of
the entire nation from one end to another of this vast sub-continent. Though the East India Company was founded in 1600, it was only by about the middle of the nineteenth century that the English were firmly in their saddle in India. With the withdrawal of commercial interest in India, with the consolidation of political power in the country of their conquest and acquisition, released from the necessity of waging interminable wars on native potentates and princes, the English found breathing time to take stock of the situation and then began exerting their influence in a more emphatic and pronounced manner in the varied fields of Indian life and literature. It was a mighty encounter of two civilizations and cultures, so different from each other and the impact was equally mighty. The Western culture, which the English represented, was a living growing one while the Indian culture which it encountered, despite its sound core and rich heritage was for the moment laid low under the dead weight of its own outmoded customs and conventions, its self-imposed rigour of restrictive castes and communities and its conservatism and complacency. This mighty impact of the West brought first a sudden awakening and then a glorious renaissance. The people who were socially fettered, economically emasculated, psychologically suppressed, spiritually complacent, leading a life which was occasionally enlivened by petty politics and personal gossip, woke up like Rip Van Winkle and found themselves strangers at home. They were struck with awe and wonder at the achievements of a new culture to which they were introduced. So ecstatic was this feeling in the initial stages that it often burst into psalms of praise for those who had introduced them to this culture. The people of India, in their first flush of enthusiasm, began to compare themselves and their literature with those of this new world and found themselves hopelessly wanting in almost everything. The contrast, at least apparently, was so glaring that it entailed a
desire to change, amend and reform. With incredible avidity the Indians began adopting Western modes of thought, behavior, dress and sometimes even flattered their English rulers by imitating them unintelligently and indiscriminately. The East found the light coming from the West and it greeted it in its life and literature.

In its chequered history, India has seen - and survived - the onslaught of many invasions, cultures and civilizations without losing its spiritual identity or cultural individuality. Obviously, this is so because India seems to have a mysterious genius for absorbing and assimilating all exotic influences without being submerged or blown off her feet by them. This is true also of the Western and English influence on Indian literature, in general, and on Gujarati poetry, in particular. The English influence on Indian literature is an undisputed fact, yet, in the final analysis, the genius of Indian literature appears to have worked out its own salvation in its own way. This is not surprising for a people who had their own literature long before the West had its own, and yet since its Vedic days had prayed for good thoughts to come to them from all the quarters of the world. This receptivity of the Indian culture, with its power of assimilating all that it finds good in others, is perhaps the secret of its strength and of its survival through centuries of vicissitudes.

The following pages would reveal how, in Gujarat, all movements - social, educational, cultural, religious and literary - inspired or affected by the influence of the West through English, after running up and down their full gamut, invariably end as enlightened attempts at assimilation and synthesis, thus demonstrating the truth of the assertion that India has through the ages retained its unique capacity for the assimilation of exotic influence without losing its own identity or individuality.