CHAPTER - I

INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY : AN OVERVIEW
Indian English poetry has a long and varied tradition from Henry Derozio (the first Indian English poet who published his *Poems* in 1827) and Toru Dutt of the nineteenth century to contemporary poets like Jayant Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre. Critics have applied different criteria for the periodization of this poetry. A demarcation of twenty-five years' span has been made by Prof. V.K. Gokak while categorizing poets in 'The Golden Treasury' (1978). But this categorization is not very logical. Prof. M.K. Naik proposes four specific periods in his book, *A History of Indian English Literature* (1982): (1) From the beginnings to 1857; (2) From 1857 to 1920; (3) From 1920 to 1947; and (4) Independence and After. Though this is a more acceptable periodization, yet the main weakness of Naik's plan consists in the fact that it does not read like a periodization of literary history. Makarand Paranjape has succeeded, to a great extent, in rectifying this defect and in providing a very satisfactory periodization in the perceptive Introduction to his anthology, *Indian Poetry in English* (1993). He outlines the following periods: (1) 1825-1900: Colonialism - period of Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt
and Manmohan Ghose; (2) 1900-1950 : Nationalism - of poets like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu; (3) 1950-1980 : Modernism - of Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, A.K. Mehrotra, R. Parthasarathy, Jayant Mahapatra, Shiv K. Kumar, Keki N. Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, Prithish Nandy and Dilip Chitre and so on; and (4) Post-modernism : 1980 -, of poets like Agha Shahid Ali, Saleem Peeradina, Manohar Shetty, Vikram Seth and Imtiaz Dharker. The main tradition of Indian English poetry is a unique conglomeration of various traditions and conventions. And it is this which defies a completely satisfactory and acceptable categorization.

The post-Independence Indian English poetry is significant for its vitality and productivity. It has become increasingly robust, varied, responsive to the time and enjoyable. The new mind required a new voice and the new voice was discovered by the poet's genius for intimately registering the idiom of his own world. Lakshmi Raghunandan rightly says, "It is not just the glimmer of a modern dawn that one is beginning to see over the horizon, the arc of the sun is already visible". The poet today is striving to seek a more personal I-centred actuation using more original phrases that are closer to the native idiom. The thrust in this direction has not yet reached its limits and
experiments will continue before a satisfactory mould is arrived at, but the genuine striving must be appreciated. Mere verbal expertise and technical control are not sufficient to make any poet a major voice; the potential has to be developed and it is here that poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, R. Parthasarathy and Arun Kolatkar can collectively and individually herald in a new age in poetry. Commenting on the contribution of Indian poets writing in English, R. Parthasarathy says, "... it can, today, be unreservedly said that it is a significant contribution in that it is a legitimate expression of universal, human experience".²

The beginnings of Indian English poetry before Indian Independence was an unfulfilled phase primarily due to the lack of originality and early demise of two of the most promising poets of the day, namely, Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. The techniques adopted in Indian English poetry were, to a large extent, imitative and derivative. That was, in a way, a historical imperative. The next phase of Indian English poetry, the "high noon of Indian English romanticism", was the period in which some of the finest lyricists of the age like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu revealed their talent, and masterpieces like Tagore's Gitanjali and Sri Aurobindo's Savitri were written, but
there was no lack of imitators as is seen in every age. However, one notices that the best products of the age are authentic in their concern to interpret life and express universal, human condition. This was a natural outcome of the age when Raja Rammohan Roy's leadership generated patriotic feelings in the minds of Indians. The implementation of English education in India encouraged scholarship in the language that, in turn, produced an elite, the intelligentsia of the time, who were mainly responsible for organising religious and social reform movements and political resistance after the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. It ushered in a new age of hope, a newly discovered strength and an awareness that one stood on the threshold of a forceful change that promised unlimited possibilities. History bears witness to the fact that in such moments the spirit of the age inevitably expressed itself in romantic art as is evident in the Elizabethan age. Thus, it was not surprising that Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu evinced this interest in their poetry. It would not be fair to dismiss them as mere imitators of English Romanticism. Their poetry reveals an uncompromising determination to express the spirit of the time and, when it did make itself heard, one could not doubt the genuineness of the voice.
During the Gandhian age, the freedom struggle reached its zenith and democratic ideals inspired various sections of the society such as women, youth, and the depressed classes to assert their individuality and to shake off the yoke of meaningless authority. Romantic poetry ought to have established itself on a firmer footing than ever before but singularly enough it did not. "The high noon of romanticism" had given place to a twilight and many minor romantics followed. Some were the disciples of Aurobindo such as K.D. Sethna and N.K. Gupta, others were academicians such as B.N. Seal, V.N. Bhushan, Armando Menezes, G.K. Chettur, while still others such as Manjari Isvaran and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya whose poems were strongly derivative contributed to the general impression that pre-Independence poetry was imitative and, therefore, not significant.

Indian Independence in 1947 ushered in a period of prosperity in all walks of life. The tensions created by the Independence movement changed to a mood of relaxation when the object was achieved and politics ceased to be of primary importance. Independence also brought about in its wake the loss of certitude, self-enquiry and ironic assessment. The new poet, too, turned to his Western contemporaries in England and the United States to seek
models on which to base his new poetry. Eliot, Yeats and Auden replaced Milton, Shelley and Tennyson. But this phase did not last long. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, O.P. Bhatnagar, Kamala Das and R. Parthasarathy began to experiment with and find new styles of expression to suit their individual experience. They not only said new things but said them in a manner quite different from their predecessors. They brought innovations in form, imagery, style, structure, and employed in their poetry a new kind of diction akin to colloquial idiom and rhythm. These poets, as Professor William Walsh remarked elsewhere, "follow the contours of a speech which is Indian". The informal, assertive and conversational tone marks a definite departure from the past and a new beginning in the present. The minor poets, however, still remain imitative. Freed from the restrictions of form and metre, their aim seems to be the unintelligible and the obscure. Rhythm and even grammar are sometimes sacrificed, but an age should not be judged by its minor products. But one can turn one's attention to the best products of the age and distinguish the authentic voice even in the midst of this mushroom growth of inferior poetry. The Writers Workshop founded in 1958 in Calcutta by P. Lal provided an outlet for the poetic inclinations of many of the moderns. It helped to popularize poetry in
English in the sixties by publishing some important volumes by Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Monika Varma, Lila Ray and Margaret Chatterjee. Ezekiel's The Unfinished Man (1960) and The Exact Name (1965), Kamala Das's The Descendants (1968), Gauri Deshpande's Between Births, Lila Ray's Entrance (1961), Monika Varma's, Gita Govinda and other Poems (1966) and Margaret Chatterjee's The Spring and the Spectacle (1967) are some of the very important publications of the Writers Workshop which ushered in a new era for Indian English poetry. In the early nineteen seventies the Writers Workshop published quite a few noteworthy volumes of poetry by Keki N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Gauri Deshpande, Margaret Chatterjee, Monika Varma and Gauri Pant. Keki N. Daruwalla's Under Orion (1970), Apparition in April (1971), Shiv K. Kumar's Articulate Silences (1970) and Margaret Chatterjee's Towards the Sun, The Sandalwood Tree, and Jayant Mahapatra's Close the Sky, Ten by Ten are landmarks in Indian English poetry.

In the mid-seventies the Oxford University Press started publishing new poetry from India and the series included Nissim Ezekiel's Hymns in Darkness (1976), Shiv K. Kumar's Subterfuges, R. Parthasarathy's Rough Passage, A.K. Ramanujan's Selected Poems and Keki N. Daruwalla's Crossing of Rivers. R. Parthasarathy also edited an anthology of
Indian Poetry in English entitled Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets published by Oxford University Press in 1976. Prior to it Macmillan Co. Ltd. had published an anthology entitled, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English: An Assessment and Selection in 1972. But with the publication of R. Parthasarathy's anthology Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets, Indian poetry in English got "a local habitation and a name" and attracted world-wide attention. In nineteen eighties, Oxford University Press published a few more volumes of Indian English poetry which included The Keeper of the Dead and Landscapes by Keki N. Daruwalla, Latter-Day Psalms by Nissim Ezekiel, Sacred Sight by A.K. Ramanujan and Selected Poems by Jayant Mahapatra. Some of our talented Indian English poets have won recognition abroad and laurels at home. The Central Sahitya Akademi has already honoured some of them in the eighties. Those who have been honoured by the Akademi include Jayant Mahapatra, Nissim Ezekiel, Keki N. Daruwalla, Kamala Das and Shiv K. Kumar.

Thus, the validity of Indian English poetry and the position of Indian English poets are beyond question. Indian English poetry in the nineteen sixties and after registered a change both in its thematic concerns and techniques. Indian situation, folk-belief, rituals, corruption in socio-political life, and eternal themes like
love and death fill the verses of Indian poets in English in the nineteen sixties. The incipient romanticism and rapid narcissism of early Indian poetry in English have now been discarded in favour of poetry as "a criticism of life". Recent Indian poetry in English tries hard and also succeeds in setting the roots and developing its own artistic credo. It has successfully risen above "decadent romanticism" and, in the hands of our new poets, is acquiring new dimensions.

Indian situations form a vital part of the new poetry. The superstitions and folk beliefs that exist in Indian society became favourite themes of our new poets. Nissim Ezekiel handles such a theme with superb irony and subdued mockery in 'Night of the Scorpion'. The mother is stung, the rationalist and sceptical father tries (every curse and blessing/powder, mixture, herb and hybrid) as the peasants swarm in to console her, offering advice of a strongly ritualistic and faith-healing kind, the mother's reaction to her own suffering (Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children) ironically cancels earlier responses, both primitive and sophisticated. In the words of R. Parthasarathy, "poems like 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'A River' by their visions of an everyday Indian reality expressed in an unobtrusive personal voice stood out in the reader's mind as signposts indicating the directions poetry
in English was like to take in future".³ A.K. Ramanujan departs from the prevailing convention by giving a very different kind of treatment to the theme in 'A River'. Instead of the traditional song of praise for the full river, Ramanujan gives what he sees as the villagers' real experience. The river is beautiful when quiet in the summer but when it floods, it causes suffering that is not at all poetic. His visitor to the village reports what really happens, in the extremely simple language as the villagers would use.

The Indian English poets while observing the socio-political scene of their time never miss an opportunity to "look within". The desire to portray the childhood experience seems to be a very favourite theme with them. Most of them look back upon their childhood and youth age and want to share their experience with the readers. The idea behind such a desire is to preserve and guard their identity. This leads them to the quest for cultural moorings and it is here they share something with an early Indian-English poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt. The pervasive presence of this conscious 'Indianness' without any trace of romantic nostalgia or exotic quaintness sets contemporary Indian English poetry apart from the imitative mediocrity of much of this poetry in the nineteenth century. Self
scrutiny and search for identity have expressed itself in various ways. A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy and Arun Kolatkar seem to be searching for a socio-cultural identity, but their search for roots does not stop at this level. It penetrates further still to the deepest level of universality of all life. Ramanujan starts by exploring the familial scene, recalling childhood impressions and seeking explanations only to find "My particular hell in my Hindu mind". To find a personal significance in Hinduism, he probes his Hindu heritage mercilessly, but the import of its message is not belittled. In his quest for Self, R. Parthasarathy explores the possibilities of language too. In Rough Passage (1977) he attempts to explore the crisis of identity that results in the modern Indian psyche due to the influence of two different cultures, namely, the Indian and the Western. He starts from the farthest peripheral circumference of country and moves in gradually decreasing circles through the interpersonal relationships of joint family and nuclear family until the self is reached. Small ethnic minorities have also produced their poets and Nissim Ezekiel happens to be one of these. Hailing from a Bene-Israel family that settled in India many generations ago, Ezekiel, though conscious of his alienation from the traditional Hindu society, is sharply aware of the need to
change and adapt to the new situation. His perusal of Hindu
philosophy has helped him to reinterpret his own religious
convictions of the Psalms and project the universality of
all philosophy through his indomitable experience of the
Self. His poems display a variety of moods ranging from
frustration to resignation, but even in his bleakest mood
the realisation of the underlying glimmer of truth breaks
through enlightening and strengthening his poetic vision.
His detached observations in 'Night of the Scorpion' present
the concept of evil and suffering from three points of view
simultaneously, namely, the Hindu, Christian and Jewish.
The synthesis is achieved with perfect ease. These poems
are highly readable and evocative. One important aspect of
these poems is that what is conveyed in them is not the life
history of individual poets but their poetic personality.
For instance, we know much of Ezekiel's poetic creed from
his poem 'Background, Casually'. These poems record the
poetic birth, growth and development of the concerned poet.
Shiv K. Kumar has rightly warned his readers not to read
much of poet's personal life in his poems. On the other
hand, these poets convey to us the poet's right kind of
inclination to poetry. For instance, when Kamala Das says
in 'An Introduction':


"Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest
It is as human as I am human, don't you see?

One notices that nothing can be more emphatic and
authentic than this to record her determination to use the
language of her choice in any manner she likes. Ezekiel's
'Background, Casually', apart from the poet's birth,
schooling and going abroad at twenty two when "philosophy,
poverty and poetry three/companions shared my basement
room", tells us of Ezekiel's commitment to stay in India and
write about her. As the poet puts it:

"The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners

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I have made my commitments now
This is one: to stay where I am."

Similarly, in 'Broken Columns', Shiv K. Kumar reflects
on his past and recalls how he lived when he completed the
first twenty years of his life. More important than this is
the belief that he had which ultimately shaped his poetic
sensibility. Thus after being chastened by the priest the
poet comes out defiant. As Kumar puts it:

But as I emerge from the nightmare,
An aroma of deodar wells up
And a cluster of mynas hurl
Defiance at the truth.

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Parthasarathy's 'Rough Passage' imitates a dialogue with the poet's Tamil past and records his attitude to English language and the difficulties involved in writing poetry in English. This long poem records the birth and shaping of Parthasarathy's poetic personality and the biographical note is only incidental to the poem. A.K. Ramanujan's poems, though illumine his family history and ancestry, transcend the personal history and achieve a kind of acceptability in which all of us can participate in.

Of the minor poets Arun Kolatkar in his *Jejuri* (1976), which got him the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, uses a surrealistic technique to expose the similarities between religious traditions of ossified Hinduism and the rigidity of a scientifically-oriented civilization of the modern world represented in the railway station. Having found both valueless he proceeds to indicate the superiority of a value system older and more lasting than any man-made system, namely, that of the primeval life force of Nature in the "harvest dance" of the cocks and hens and the immeasurable might of the butterfly. Parsi poets such as Gieve Patel and Keki N. Daruwalla have not succeeded in voicing the current trend for self quest for they prefer to confine themselves to a search for a socio-cultural identity in the manner of their Western counterparts. Keki N. Daruwalla, who won the
Sahitya Akademi Award for 1985, reiterates in his book 'The Keeper of the Dead' his personal concern with death, thus, deepening the morbidity of the theme. His Zoroastrianism is not sufficiently strong to help him interpret life, hence the meaninglessness of existence obtrudes in satirical acidity. Gieve Patel tries to voice a social concern but his alienation remains obvious though it does not freeze into indifference. He seems to have resigned himself to "The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel he being neither Muslim nor Hindu in India". Jayant Mahapatra and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra are other poets who reveal a variety of mood, tone and technical craftsmanship.

The post-1960 Indian English poets try to make a just and lively presentation of Indian characters and situation in their poetry. The purpose behind employing such a technique is to catch the spirit of the personages in actual forms so that they can achieve the reader's total participation. In the words of K. Ayyappa Paniker, "the idiom of poetry and critical thought underwent a major change at the midcentury point". Nissim Ezekiel is the first and most important of the poets responsible for a major shift in the affairs of Indian English poetry.

For a brief period following the Indian Independence Indian English poets toed the line of their British and
American counterparts. But this tendency did not last long as the new mind required a new voice and the new voice was discovered by the poet's genius for intimately registering the idiom of his own world. The very title of Ezekiel's first collection of poems 'A Time to Change' (1952) is highly symbolic in meaning and marks a definite departure from the past and a new beginning in the present. In the post-1960s one notices the emergence of new voices slowly making themselves heard as the important poets try to cast off derivative techniques and break away from forms which are beginning to stifle and constrict their freedom in a damaging way. Kamala Das's elliptical style, the sonorous style of O.P. Bhatnagar, R. Parthasarathy and A.K. Ramanujan, the vigorous and deep engaging style of Nissim Ezekiel, Jayant Mahapatra and Keki N. Daruwalla, the emotive style of Gauri Deshpande, Gauri Pant, Lila Ray and Monika Varma, the impressive style of Shiv K. Kumar (particularly his use of very learned language in the manner of English metaphysical poets) are distinctive features of their individual poetic techniques. But very few of them such as A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy are concerned with the perfection of language. Ezekiel and, to some extent, Daruwalla strive to approximate the language in its spoken form. Ezekiel, moreover, believes in revising a poem
endlessly till it acquires the kind of perfection he desires. These poets seem to say things in the most convincing manner in free verse and try to communicate their experiences by the flexibility of syntax and new uses of language. And this creates a new Indian English idiom.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


