Chapter-V:

Indian Ethos in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

It is an accepted fact that without being rooted in the culture of land it is difficult to give authenticity to the writing. While discussing the Indian ethos in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, it is imperative to keep in the mind that here is a writer who has declared his intentions to be rooted in India. Nissim Ezekiel does have regard for ‘cultural life’ of a country, as in one of the essays he wrote, “Political points of view without cultural associations are futile.” (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘The Cultural Vacuum’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 48) Asked by John B. Beston, “Writing in English in India, would you see yourself essentially as an Indian poet, or a world poet?” Ezekiel answered, “I regard myself essentially as an Indian poet writing in English.” In other words, the desire to fit in the native tradition and to belong to the native scene is explicit.”(As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 30). In one of the ‘Poster Poems’, the poet declares that:

I’ve never been a refugee
Except of the spirit,
A loved and troubled country
Which is my home and enemy. (CP, p.209)

And in ‘The Egoist’s Prayers’:
Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don’t want to go abroad.
Let me find my song
Where I belong. (*CP*, p.213)

The emphasis is on being rooted in the land and trying to come in terms with the ethos of India. M.K. Naik emphasizes the need of rootedness: “…unless art is rooted in the soil, it is bound to be condemned to both superficiality and artificiality…This Indianess may take several forms and shapes, and may appear in work of art in diverse ways, obvious and subtle—but it is quality which is unmistakably present in the finest works of all Indian writers, whether they write in their mother tongue or in English. Modern India is a synthesis of many cultural cross currents and modern India, in Mulk raj Anand’s words, is conscious of ‘the double burden on my shoulders, the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalaya of my Indian Past…” (Naik, M.K. “The Indianess of Indian Poetry in English,” *Indian Poetry in English*. ed. H.M. Prasad. Aurangabad: Parimal Prakashan, 1983, p. 33) Ezekiel was also aware of the need to be rooted. So in one of the interviews he stated that, “I don’t believe it’s possible to be a universal man without some specific roots which are strengthened, accepted or revolted against. A writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of imitations, echoes, responses, but you don’t develop because there’s nothing at the core to develop.” (In an interview with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 44).
V.A. Shahane thinks that, “The Indian ness of Indian creative writing in English will have to be judged by the awareness of the author of certain specific characteristics of societies and cultural patterns in India.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 5). Defining Indianness, V.K. Gokak points out that Indianness is “wide ranging and it operates at various levels”. He believes that Indian ness is “a thing of flesh and blood.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 6) Vrinda Nabar asserts that art can not exist in vacuum: “I share the widely held view that poetry, or any of the arts, does not and can not exist in a vacuum, that its perceptions are shaped by upbringing, social and other environmental elements, the tradition of the society within which the artist functions…Identity refers to the fact of being born in India, living amid its multiple economic and cultural complexities, identifying with them and making them the direct or indirect concerns of his work.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 6)

There can be no two words about the fact that Indianness and nativism are the same thing. Another critic B.V. Nemade prefers ‘nativism to ‘Indianness’. He says that, “…nativism evokes an emotional constellation of feelings, thoughts, perceptions and memories that have been growing in association with a peculiar locus. It tends to be lyrical rather than rational, traditional rather than future connotation. It is the entire community’s response, past and present, a life style of the whole race, a collective thinking and feeling. In this respect nativism becomes a principle harmonious with the conservative principle.” (As Quoted by
Nissim Ezekiel is also fully aware of the necessity of local knowledge to make the poetry authentic and live. The poet clearly knows and accepts that, “All my writing comes out of staying here. I am happy to be unhappy here rather than somewhere else. If I stay anywhere else, I will only be unhappy. Here, at least the unhappiness makes sense, unhappiness leads to critical perceptions.” (In an interview with Saleem Peeradina, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 48). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Ezekiel is graded as one of the most important poets of the second half of the 20th Century. According to Dr. Shaila Mahan, Ezekiel falls into a category of the poets who have stayed back in India. She divides the Indian poets writing in English into three broad categories: “Indian English poets may be divided into three groups. The first group comprises of poets who, after having lived for some years particularly during their formative years in the west, have returned to India. Ezekiel belongs to this category. The second category consists of those poets who have settled abroad. They have made their home in the west. In the last group come those poets who have never lived abroad for any substantial period.” (Mahan, Shaila. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 44) In the essay, ‘Poetry and Knowledge’ Ezekiel tells us, “what the poet knows makes the poem what it is, if the poet’s knowledge is alive and artfully extended while he writes the poem.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 38)
Although the poet has made his commitments to stay back in India there is no nationalistic fervor in his poetry. Like a true post modern artist he objectively analyzes the Indian scenario in his poetry. In an answer to a question ‘Does the consciousness of being Jewish shape your work at all?’, the poet replied with mixed feelings that although the Jews are living in India since 2000 years, they are not thought to be real Indians. He said, “From the time I was seventeen, the attempt has been to become Indian, and that has meant responding to the Hindu tradition. The Jewish tended to be has among many other traditions. Now, I think that attempt of thirty years has been a failure. I see a great difference between a real Indian and my Indianness. A major Scottish poet recently said to me, at an international poetry festival in Rotterdam. “You’re not a real Indian”, and my response was, “No, we’ve lived in India only 2,000 years”. A Jew can never be a ‘real’ Indian or a ‘real’ Chinaman. I’d say Parthasarathy and Ramanujan are ‘real’ Indians.” (In an interview with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 44)

In the words of Shakuntala Bharvani, “unlike the earlier poets, Ezekiel displays no needless nationalistic fervor or long windedness. Instead, he expresses his skepticism, his restlessness and the desire to dedicate himself to his poetic impulses.” (Bharvani, Shakuntala. Nissim Ezekiel. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 3) This tendency of being a post modernist poet makes the poet ‘representative of the modern individual’. Bruce King opines that, “Ezekiel, like many other Jewish intellectuals of the last two centuries, becomes, in his own search for a way, representative of the modern individual in a secular, urban, atomistic, rapidly changing society. His very marginality in relation to the Hindu
and Muslim communities, to the various language groups, makes him central to the modern, urban, international English – speaking culture of the postcolonial nation, especially in Bombay, the most international and cosmopolitan of modern Indian cities.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. 69)

So on the one hand Ezekiel associates with Indian scene, but at the same time maintains a secular and unemotional stance towards India. This unique combination of association and disassociation should be kept in mind while discussing Indian ethos in the poetry of Ezekiel. In the poem, ‘Something to Pursue’, the poet accepts that one needs to drink the waters of one’s soul to be authentic:

But drink at first the waters of
Your own soul; a fool instructed
May remain a fool. Renounce
Your folly first, my son. (*CP*, p.16)

For Ezekiel, ‘Man is measure of mankind’ (*CP*, p.55). He wants to ‘dream the dream of Man’ (*CP*, p.55). Here is a man who has ‘traveled, so he found his roots’ (*CP*, p.126) in order to ‘see things as they are’ (*CP*, p.97). Leela Gandhi is aware of this while she writes,” Espousing a poetics where social or cultural withdrawal is prerequisite to radical or eclectic engagement, Ezekiel’s work develops that flight from blood, birth, family, and nation allows, albeit painfully, for the germination of more expansive affinities. ‘The pattern’, as he insists, ‘will remain, unless you break/ It with a sudden jerk’ (‘Case Study’, *CP*, p. 125)” (Gandhi,
G.J.V. Prasad compares Ezekiel with Yeats who also constantly examined his life. He states that, “Like Yeats, Ezekiel was a poet who constantly examined his life and his experiences to write poetry. His personal life became a poetic corpus for the construction of a space for the westernized Indian urban male who, from his anonymity, his very de-centeredness, asserts his right to belong, to contest and critique other spaces and positions both inside and outside the nation.” (Prasad, G.J.V. ‘Always in the Poet’s Eye: Nissim Ezekiel’s India’, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 500).

One cannot dwell into ethos of India sans involvement into the Indian scene. Nissim Ezekiel has essentially involved into the Indian scene. Makarand Paranjape regards that, “Nissim’s poetry is no esoteric exercise with words, or an avenue of unrestrained emotional catharsis. Poetry to him is a communicative act, a discipline. This has made Nissim the most readable and consistent of the modern Indian English poets.” (Paranjape, Makarand. ‘A Poetry of Proportions: Nissim Ezekiel’s Quest for the Exact Name’, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 415-16). The urge to be involved is found in the poem ‘Prayer’ as:

Let me not be isolated
Uninvolved in man’s defeat, (*CP*, p.56)
It is only an insider like Ezekiel who can declare that, ‘I would rather suffer when I must’ (CP, p.11). And he declares that, ‘I cannot leave the island, I was born here and belong. (CP, p.182) In the poem ‘Transmutation’, the poetic voice says that:

Merge
Into a wider, warmer meaning.
Holiness reveals itself in everything. (CP, p.56)

As Ezekiel says, “I am conscious of my very special situation in relation to India, as a poet, but as a person and citizen I identify myself completely with the country. Its politics, social life, civic problems, education, economic difficulties, cultural dilemmas are all part of my daily life. I would like that cultural identification to be fully expressed in my poetry but it is perhaps only partially so.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 57) Ezekiel’s poetry has recently received more critical scrutiny than the others, and one of the reasons for this special focus on his work might be related to the fact that he is the only to state:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am (CP, p. 181)

Critically studying the poem, Shaila Mahan brings out the confusion of insider and outsider: ‘Background casually’ epitomizes the consciousness
of living in an imperfect, unromantic India, which characterizes the new
poetry. Ironically, Ezekiel sees himself within the ambiguous
perspectives of the inside – outsider. His Jewish – westernized – Indian
background makes him a natural – outsider. He has expressed
unhappiness with his environment, without wanting to abandon or being
liberated from it. However we find Ezekiel making an attempt especially
in his later poetry, to understand India’s past, its culture and relate
himself to India.” (Mahan, Shaila. The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Jaipur:
Classic Publications, 2001, p. 47)

It has always been on-going conflict for Ezekiel either to be objective to
the outside phenomenon or to involve in. He wrote in an essay in 1997
that, “As a poet, it is a contradiction that I have felt most strongly: that
the nature of my avocation demanded withdrawal and that
simultaneously events that were taking place outside demanded that I be
connected with them. How to bridge this gulf is perhaps one of the
dilemmas of the poet everywhere in the world, but in the India of the last
50 years, it was an acute problem.” (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘Poetry in the Time
of Tempests’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New

In the words of John Thieme, “Ezekiel…inches his way towards a
tentative affiliation to his ‘backward place’. Unsettling simplistic notions
of ‘home’, the poem works its way towards a type of belonging that is the
more powerful because it has been tested and resisted.” ((Thieme, John.
xxvii) His ‘quarrel’ with Naipaul is that he ‘is so often uninvolved and
unconcerned’. John Thieme suggests that, “this is a comment which says
as much about Ezekiel as the Naipaul of *An Area of Darkness*. Ezekiel’s India can be highly individual- at times subjective to the point of being quirky- and he shares the early Naipaul’s fascination with irony. However, his own gift for the ‘telling detail and the penetrating observation based upon it’ emerges from understanding. His amused observation of aspects of Indian life never involves rejection. He is ever alert to the multiplicity of his home city of Bombay and even in his most detached moods, never simply sardonic or ‘unconcerned’.” ((Thieme, John. ‘Introduction’, *Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel*. Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. xxii)

It is a proven fact that one who loves has a right to criticize as well. So when Ezekiel depicts the Indian ethos, it is a combination of both the things. By being intimately involved with India, he naturally possesses the right to criticize the hypocrisy of institutions and double practices of many professions. Such stance doesn’t take away the authenticity of Indianness. Shirish Chindhade also opines that, “Ezekiel’s unwillingness to be isolated has already been underlined. It, in fact, has been his constant, positive struggle to develop a meaningful, intimate kinship with the weird world of India. And he who loves has a right to criticize and even ridicule. It is his love for India that makes him criticize and ridicule her. Therefore a mild dig at the *Bhagwat Gita* (as in the poster poem) spells an important truth about the poet’s attitudes, about his growing and honest involvement with India. This is, again, a paradoxical relationship with a difference that Lawrence depicts among his characters. (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 49-50). In the poem titled as ‘After Reading a Prediction’, the poet explicitly writes that:
This is the place
Where I was born. I
Know it
Well. It is home,
Which I recognize at last
As a kind of hell
To be made of tolerable.
Let the fevers come,
The patterns break
And form again
For me and for the place.
I say to it and to myself:
Not to be dead or dying
Is a cause for celebration. (CP, p.155)

Another Ezekielian comment further clarifies his relationship with India:
“I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India.” (As quoted by Lall, Emmanuel Narendra. *The Poetry of Encounter*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, p. 66). There are certain voices which doubt the nationality of Ezekiel. Being a Jew, many so called nationalists view him as an outsider and not capable to deal with Indian ethos. Bruce King narrates such views and maintains that for a person who has not moved back to Israel, India is a place of blood. He says, “There is a recurring strain of nationalism which tends to distrust others and the unconventional. Some voices can still be heard asking how it is possible for Ezekiel to be an Indian nationalist as he was a Jew. Ezekiel, however,
returned from London to Bombay, which became the subject and setting of his poems, and he did not immigrate to Israel. He was fully involved in the literary and intellectual life of India.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. x)

E.V. Ramakrishnan finds out three elements that shaped the poet’s life. He writes, emphasizing the fact that Ezekiel always liked to be public commentator: “I would like to underline three elements of Ezekiel’s life and work that have shaped his career as a writer and have something to do with his involvement in public life. The first is traceable to his lifelong conflict between the personal and the social or what Bruce King describes as the conflict between ‘desire and ethics’...Secondly, Ezekiel felt the need to speak out from time to time. This need to be a public commentator, reflected in his role as editor of books and periodicals, satisfied a deep urge in him to be true to his own self by being part of a larger community...Thirdly, he identified with his community and that identity was an important source of his strength. This does not mean that he was communal in any sense. Far from it, he was the quintessential cosmopolitan democrat who recognized the importance of public institutions.” (Ramakrishnan, E.V. ‘My Backward Place is where I am’: The Public Voice in Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry’, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 461-2).

Ezekiel has memorably created the Indian ethos and sensibility through the portrayal of some of delightful characters. Also dramatic monologues are truly “modern” and “contemporary”. Thus when the railway clerk says his friend are “thinking of foreign”, or the professor says “these are
days of family planning” of miss Pushpa is leaving “for better prospects”, or the shopper is afraid of being sold “imitation” or “duplicate goods”, we understand that this indeed is the reality of life in India. Only a poet who is mingled in Indian scene can say that:

And the wisdom of the centuries
   Is mingled in my blood;
And the loves of all the world
   Are drawn towards my lips;
And the patience of the mountains
   Is steady in my eyes. (CP, p.59)

G.J.V. Prasad feels that, “‘I am Indian’, is a constant refrain in Ezekiel’s poetry. His India was the metropolis, a ‘barbaric city’, Bombay, a ‘Home... where we have to earn our grace’. Ezekiel’s search for a personal integration that came from an awareness and acceptance of ones inadequacies as well as of ones place in society was a poetic strategy. Hence this intensely personal poet is also a nationalist poet. In his desire to explore, construct and reconstruct his own sense of identity, Ezekiel saw himself as a poet who belonged to the land even if he could not connect with it completely. His was the poetry of longing and belonging and perhaps longing to belong.” (Prasad, G.J.V. ‘Always in the Poet’s Eye: Nissim Ezekiel’s India’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 501).

In reply to the question ‘should the element if Indianness be considered a yardstick for the evaluation of Indian English poetry’, Ezekiel replies that, “I think inevitably it is so, or at any rate a general feeling that some
Indian element in this poetry is essential to its authenticity. It is unlikely for a poet to ignore it completely and write as if he is from any country. Subconsciously, something from his environment, from his readings, from his contact with other Indians might enter his poetry and provide an Indian element. He also says: “some Indian connection strengthens the work’s living presence.” (As quoted by Mahan, Shaila. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 45). How truly Ezekiel describes the day to day domestic scene of average Indian couple in the poem ‘To a Certain Lady’:

Then, absences and quarrels, indifference  
Sucking like a leech upon the flesh,  
Crude acceptance of the need for one another,  
Tasteless encounters in the dark, daily  
Companionship with neither love nor hate

(*CP*, p.29)

And again in a typical Indian English, he narrates the anguish of the husband troubled by the wife in the poem ‘Song to be Shouted Out, from Songs for Nandu Bhende’:

Shout at me, woman!  
Pull me up for this and that.  
You’re right and I’m wrong.  
This is not an excuse,  
It’s only a song.  
It’s good for my soul  
To be shouted at.
Shout at me, woman!
What else are wives for? (CP, p.242)

In the simplest of language, he presents the attitude of the Indian female in the poem ‘In India’:

The wives of India sit apart,
They do not drink,
They do not talk,
Of course, they do not kiss. (CP, p.133)

As far as material and content are concerned Ezekiel’s poems are full of Indianness. A typical Indian atmosphere is found to prevail in the poems of Ezekiel. The Indian society, the Indian relationship between society and nature surprise the reader with their freshness of approach and observation. The persona’s quarrel at the soap about the defective soap being given by the shop keeper is all hilariously Indian:

Now small crowd is collecting
And shopman is much bigger than me,
And I am not caring too much
For small defect in well-known brand soap.
So I’m saying
Alright OK Alright OK
This time I will take
But not next time. (CP, p.269)
The suffering of average Indian middle class is mentioned in the poem ‘Occasion’ wherein the typist is ‘without a face or figure’:

The typist says goodnight,
A south-Indian middle-aged balding man
Without a face or figure.
His name: Ramanathan or Krishnaswamy. (CP, p.277)

Suffering from the humilities of everyday life many Indians everyday speaks the following language:

I tell you, we should have left
This country twenty years ago.
Now it’s too late. There’s no future for us.
(CP, p.277)

In his one of the Newspaper Columns, Ezekiel wrote, “India being India, and not some other country, everyone gives you advice about diet and medicine.”(Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘Minding My Business’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 382). The Indian family life wherein the quarrels of in-laws are common are also depicted by the poet:

Said the Son
To his angry bride,
‘if you quarrel with my Mother,
You quarrel with me.’ (CP, p.292)
It is very difficult to miss the distinct Indian colors and smells present in his poems. In reply to a Questionnaire sent by Shirish Chindhade, Nissim Ezekiel stated, “My “Indianness” is nothing very obvious or distinct. I cannot say how “vital” it is, though I would like it to be so. I am conscious of my very special situation to India, as a poet, but as a person and citizen I identify myself completely with the country. (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 156). It is difficult to describe the Indianness by the poet. In a reply to Shirish Chindhade, he wrote, “I may not be able to define Indianness but I can recognize and analyze it. There is an Indianness of the tradition, and there is also a contemporary Indianness which relates to the tradition or stands in opposition to it, is Westernized, fully or partially, changes and belongs to the world of modern ideas and values. Distinctions of that kind can and should be made in discussing Indianness, so that it does not remain a static pattern of qualities.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 156)

The Indian belief system is realistically presented in the poem ‘The Visitor’ when the protagonist waits all day for a guest since the crow crowed in the morning:

All day I waited, as befits
The folk belief that following
The crow a visitor would come, (*CP*, p.133)
The Indians have a habit of not telling directly, particularly to the male head of the family. So the poet reflects in ‘How the English Lessons Ended’:

My daughter tells my wife
Who tells my mother
Who tells me. I laugh it off. (CP, p.201)

The poet is equally Indian as he considers himself as an heir to the great Sanskrit poets, albeit feels ‘inhibited’ as in the ‘Passion Poems’:

How freely they mention
Breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why I am so inhibited? (CP, p.214)

John Thieme makes a correct observation by saying that, “Born into Bombay’s Jewish (Bene-Israel) community, Ezekiel writes from a very specific Indian view point…Nonetheless his verse offers a social vision which moves towards from his urban experience and minority background to provide optics on many areas of Indian life.” ((Thieme, John. ‘Introduction’, Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. xxi) Ezekiel started to be more conscious of his Indianness and Indian ethos as he developed as a poet. Shirish Chindhade takes this aspect into consideration when he says, “To pass from The Unfinished Man and The Exact Name to Hymns in Darkness is to step out of the labyrinthine ways of the mind and walk in broad day light with the Indian sun scorching one’s head and feet. The tongue-in-cheek mode makes
itself equally poignantly.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 38). The poem ‘At the Hotel’ presents the hidden motives of average Indian:

Our motives were concealed but clear,
Not coffee but the Cuban dancer took us there,
The naked Cuban dancer.
On the dot she came and shook her breasts
All over us and dropped
The thin transparent skirt she wore.
Was it not this for which we came?
The noise, the smoke, the smell of flesh we relished
Secretly and wanted more,
We drank our coffee swiftly
When the Cuban dancer left the floor,
The naked Cuban dancer. (*CP*, p.112)

‘Entertainment’ shows an authentic Indian ness. It is a faithful description of a monkey-show which one can witness in any street corner of India. The reactions of the audiences are tellingly noted. They have an intuitive fore-knowledge of the time to pay:

Anticipating time for payment
The crowd dissolves,
Some, in shame, part
With the smallest coin they have,
The show moves on. (*CP*, p.193)
And if it does not, the monkey and its master will have to starve to death. A usual roadside diversion provides the poet with an opportunity to offer his reflections on Indian social life at the meanest. Commenting on the poem, Dr. Shaila Mahan offers that, ‘Entertainment’ depicts the monkey show, which is a peculiar Indian street scene. The situation is typically Indian. We see the poor Indian society and the meanness of people. They watch the show but do not pay for it and slunk away after the show ends.” (Mahan, Shaila. The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 47) Reading this poem, it becomes clear that although Ezekiel avoids most of the time to talk about his Indianness, he expresses a particular Indian identity. As John Thieme narrates: “For the most part he avoids writing about his ‘Indian ness’, but in so doing he communicates a particular view of Indian identity.” ((Thieme, John. ‘Introduction’, Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. xxi) R. Parthasarathy shows this poem to mention the measure of Ezekiel’s Indianness by quoting the poet: “Any evaluation of Indian verse in English is usually bedeviled by the question of national identity… Ezekiel states his position honestly and without rhetoric: “India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India.” In the poem, ‘Entertainment’, we see a measure of his involvement. Incidentally, he also encapsulates the ‘boring minutiae of suburban and urban existence’.” (Parthasarathy, R. Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets. Delhi: OUP, 1976, p. 5.)

Dr. Shaila Mahan believes that since Ezekiel has a privilege to be regarded as ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ simultaneously, he uses ironic stance to mention his Indian ethos: “He is not of Indian origin Ezekiel has the
advantage of viewing Indian poetry in English both as a foreigner and a native. This fact qualifies him to write with ironic detachment almost with the background of an outside. The times literary supplement noted: “Ezekiel specifically Indian poetry is inward and detached, aware of its limitations, a combination making for a peculiar strength and validity”. (Mahan, Shaila. The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 44-5)

Ezekiel’s Indian ethos is a method of surprising discovery in the course of his poetry. He never makes the direct statement about India. But rather creates characters who are representative of Indian life style and mentality. And what more rather than looking down on the meanness of the characters, he shares smile and laughter with them. But how a person who is conscious about the unity of India can be non-nationalist? He wrote in one of the essays, “We must make it clear that separatism is a political crime against the unity of India. The valid issues raised by it should be discussed only on the assumption that the framework never to be touched is Indian national integrity.” (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘How to Destroy the Unity of India’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 369)

Shakuntala Bharvani agrees with this view: “Ezekiel is not adopting a stance of superiority and looking down at his characters. He has projected his characters in real life situations, attempting to come to terms with their language and their problems. They accept and reconcile themselves to their lot and put on a brave front. At moments of heightened emotion when the English language fails them, “they smile and smile” because
they are “feeling and feeling only”. (Bharvani, Shakuntala. *Nissim Ezekiel*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 84)

Many Indians suffer the relationships for the sake of maintaining the relationship. This tendency not to ‘unfriend’ is typical Indian mentality as portrayed in ‘Hymns in Darkness’:


Incapable of quarreling with them,  
He maintains the old  
Stale  
Unredeemable relationships. (*CP*, p.220)

How simply the poet narrates the Indian beggars’ mentality when he says, ‘She didn’t know beggars in India smile only at white foreigners.’ (*CP*, p.231) The Indian mentality is of ‘the music Indian and the language English’. (*CP*, p.232) The Indian waiters in the costly hotel proudly say that, ‘no Indian whisky sir all imported this is Taj’ (*CP*, p.232). The marriage ceremonies are a great part of Indian life. Ezekiel presents the subtleties of the celebrations in his typical tongue in cheek style in the poem ‘Jewish Wedding in Bombay’:


Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn’t really  
Crying. It was the thing to do, so she did it,  
Enjoying every moment. The bride laughed when I  
Sympathized, and said don’t be silly. (*CP*, p.234)

The poet is really making a politically correct statement when he says in ‘Minority Poem’:  


It’s the language really
Separates, whatever else
Is shared. (CP, p.236)

Chetan Karnani has rightly said of the poem ‘The Patriot’: “it is to the credit of Ezekiel that in one poem, he has reflected not only what many Indians think but also the way they think in English”. (As quoted by Mahan, Shaila. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 153) As Havovi Anklesaria mentions, “Ezekiel was brought up in an age of great causes where all was to be sacrificed for the big idea. He aspired to make everything subservient to his need to be a poet. The writing of poetry was more than just ambition and vocation; it was a crusade, to do something for India. In his early work Ezekiel believed himself to be forging a new tradition, evolving a new idiom appropriate to the spirit of a free, secular, more self – reflective modern India.” (Anklesaria, Havovi. ‘Introduction’, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. xxvi)

Being a city poet in general and Bombay poet in particular, we can easily say that in his poetry he is not representing the Indian ethos in Toto. Sans some poems like ‘Night of the Scorpion’, he describes the moods and mentality of urban people. So it is just to say that here is a poet who is busy in analyzing the urban Indian ethos. In the poem ‘A Morning Walk’, the poet says:

Barbaric city with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And childlike masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs. (CP, p.119)

This is repeated in ‘In India’:

Always in the sun’s eye,
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead soul of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence. (CP, p.131)

Nissim Ezekiel believed that the city of Bombay is not a city of soul. The people come to Bombay not in search of salvation but success. He wrote: ‘BOMBAY IS NOT a holy city. No one comes here on a pilgrimage. No one boasts of having learnt during a short visit how to speak in a softer voice or breathe the purer air of solitude. No, Bombay is not an ancient city of myths and poetic experience. What matters in it more than anything else is success, wealth, power, publicity and awards for achievement. No recognition here of miracles, mystic experience, real prayer instead of religious rituals as mechanical as machines. In the

And yet with all its faults he loves it still. This sense of belonging and acceptance is evident in ‘City song’. The view of the city from the terrace of a skyscraper looks like this:

As I sway in the breeze,
The city sways below.
Suddenly I learn
What I always knew:
I don’t wish to go any higher.
I want to return
As soon as I can,
To be of this city,
I feel its hot breath,
I have to belong. (*CP*, p.223)

In ‘Encounter’, the poet feels angry as the city ‘presses’ on him but the ‘people said nothing’:

The city pressed upon me; shops, cinemas and business houses spoke in unambiguous accents. Only the people said nothing. (*CP*, p.35)
In the words of Shirish Chindhade, “Just as in Lawrence’s novels relationships are often defined in terms of love and hate, similarly in Ezekiel’s poetry the relationship with the city is of such a dual response.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 33) But for Shirish Chindhade, Bombay is epitome of India and the poet is really referring to Indian ethos when he alludes to the mentality of the people of Bombay: “…Bombay being the very epitome of India in all her minutiae, Ezekiel’s poetry has acquired an unmistakable Indian ethos and local color. There is a profound sense of compassion, understanding, acceptance and sympathy for the city. The poet has seen and known this city in all its aspects. The tone is not one of denigration or denunciation; it is rather, one of understanding and forgiveness.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 31)

Ezekiel considers “social awareness” as one of the basic requirements of a good poet. A keen observer of contemporary social reality, Ezekiel describes the slums of Bombay, which he has known since his childhood days. The description of the slums of India in ‘A Morning Walk’ is a realistic one. It is a stark representation of the squalidness of India, which Ezekiel mirrors microcosmically in the city of Bombay.

Bombay has given him a sense of place, as aptly described by Shirish Chindhade by quoting the poet himself: “The sense of self-absorption has given way, among many other things, to a sense of place. The urban theme emerges in his song. From *The Unfinished Man* onwards unmistakable traces of the development of the intimate relationship with
his own city are found in great frequency. It is the city of the poet’s ‘birth and re-birth’ that has moved to a prominent place in the poet’s consciousness. It is the city of Bombay. Asked, ‘Has living in the city like Bombay…affected your poetry?’ Ezekiel answers as follows: “I feel I am a Bombay city poet, can’t imagine living long anywhere else. I lived in London for three and half years, 1948-52, but never thought of myself as a Londoner except that the Movement was alive then and I had a live contact with it. I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 31).

Ezekiel is not always in the mood of making the caricature of city characters. The poem ‘Yashwant Jagtap’ personifies patience, silent suffering and fatalism, the three characteristics of the poverty-smitten Indians. It draws the portrait of a Bombay coolie staying in a dilapidated shanty with water dripping down all over through the sieve-like roof during the heavy Bombay monsoon- a crowded hut, no privacy, no ease, no cleanliness, no security. Yashwant Jagtap pushes a handcart at the age of sixty, just to earn a meager rupee after a hard day’s back breaking labor. What is remarkably impressive about the poor fellow is that all these rigors of work and inhuman inconveniences in life have not embittered him, for

A true-blue Indian, he  
Is reconciled to his lot,  
And so are we. (*CP*, p.178)
The last line widens the frame of references to include every poor Indian—
with whom the country is overcrowded. Perhaps that’s why the poet
writes ‘From Edinburgh Interlude’:

Perhaps it is not the mangoes
That my eyes and tongue long for,
But Bombay as the fruit
On which I’ve lived,
Winning and losing
My little life. (CP, p.293)

‘Night of the Scorpion’ is regarded as one of the poems from rural
background. According to M.K.Naik, “Night of the Scorpion’ is
generally taken to be an ironic presentation of the contrast between
popular superstition and skeptical rationalism.”(Naik, M.K. ‘The Tale in
the Sting: An Analysis of Ezekiel’s “Night of the Scorpion” ’,
Dimensions of Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers
Private Limited, 1984. p. 35). The poet successfully catches the belief
system of various people in this poem. Very few Indian writers of
English are successful in conveying indigenous speech rhythm, tone,
colloquial nuances in English especially in the speech of peasants and
petty merchants which figure in their works. The sentence structure
deftly reflects the Indian experience and ethos:

With every movement that the scorpion made
His poison moved in mother’s blood, they said.
May he sit still they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
The misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil
Balanced in this unreal world
Against the sum of good
Become diminished by your pain. (CP, p.130)

M.K. Naik finds out four distinct treatments to the poem in terms of the attitudes expressed: “Four distinct attitudes to these allied problems are sharply differentiated in the poem (‘Night of the Scorpion’) The first is traditional, popular Indian (Hindu-Buddhist) view of it, which is a curious mixture of metaphysics, faith and superstition. Diametrically opposed to this view is that represented by the father, “skeptic, and rationalist.” For him a scorpion bite is just a case for the employment of experimental medicine, “powder, mixture, herb and hybrid”. He even pours a little paraffin on the bitten toe and puts a match on it.” (Naik, M.K. ‘The Tale in the Sting: An Analysis of Ezekiel’s ‘Night of the Scorpion’, Dimensions of Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984. p. 35-6)

The last stanza of ‘Night of the Scorpion’ is the very culmination of the sense of sacrifice and vicarious suffering of the mother for her children:

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children. (CP, p.130)

The poem is a non-judgmental attempt to find the relationship pattern in Indian life. According to John Thieme, “it provides a powerful depiction of conflicting belief systems coming into dialogue during a moment of family crisis, with his father’s rationalism being influenced by the simple piety of the Hindu villagers, who provide a chorus of commentary on the consequences of a scorpion’s sting. As such it is a piece that is typical of Ezekiel’s verse: both a very personal poem and a social poem that investigates relationship between different social strata. The tone is enigmatic and non-judgmental, suggesting ironic detachment from the peasants’ faith, but also, as is virtually always the case in Ezekiel’s verse, neutral enough to leave a range of possible attitudes open…” ((Thieme, John. ‘Introduction’, *Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel*. Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. xxi)
V.M. Madge finds this poem as one which reinforces the Westerners opinion about India. He says, “No matter how much India has progressed; it need cause no flutter in the rest of the world. Ezekiel, the leading poet here gives out a comforting reassurance that it continues to be a land of superstition and foolish sentiments, as if patients are not taken to hospitals for scorpion bites, as if Indian mothers do not thank doctors for relieving them of pain. Naturally ‘Night of the Scorpion’ is a favorite piece with Westerners; it reinforces one of their comforting myths about India.” (Madge, V.M. “Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.” Makers of Indian English Literature. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 193)

The poet also creates an authentic flavor of India by his use of Indian English, Pidgin English or Babu English as it is often called. This is clearly seen in poems like ‘Very Indian Poems in Indian English’ and ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’ where the syntactical peculiarities of Indian English - particularly the use of present continuous tense for simple present - is indicative of the thought processes of Indians. According to Shakuntala Bharvani, “in these poems Ezekiel has moulded the language so as to bring out the true sound and texture of the language as it is used by Indians.” (Bharvani, Shakuntala. Nissim Ezekiel. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 83)

In his more recent verse Ezekiel has tried to create an Indian flavor by the use of common Hindi words. Guru, Ashram, Burkha, Chapatti, pan, mantra are a few of Indian words the poet has used to create an illusion of real life as it is lived in India. He reflects the Indian way of life both
through the use of vernacular words and imagery drawn from the common scenes and sights of India. A vast panorama of Indian humanity is presented. His poetry is a vast gallery of portraits representative of the various Indian professions and ways of life; we meet the railway clerk, house maid, professor, guru, office worker, society girl in his poems.

The language of Indian writing in English is the natural product of interaction between English and native language and native cultures. The Indianness of indo – Anglican literature lies in the typically Indian slant, habits, beliefs, manners, the distinct Indian flavor of the subject matter and setting on the one hand, and the words, phrases, idioms, proverbs, images and metaphors, rhythm, tone, modes of address, terms of endearment and terms of relationship on the other. According to Shaila Mahan, “when a writer in Indian English faces difficulty in conveying certain concepts in an alien medium and also when he wishes to convey the peculiar Indian flavor he feels impelled to borrow words and expressions from his mother tongue. Various writers employ various devices to capture Indianness in their works. The use of ‘guru’, ‘siapa’, ‘sarkar’, ‘karma’, by Mulk Raj Anand, ‘maharaja’ and ‘Puriyanaga’ by Raja Rao, ‘Babu’, ‘deo’, ‘haseen’, ‘banyan’ by Khushwant Singh, ‘mantra’, ‘kundalini’, ‘guru’, ‘Shakti’ by Ezekiel are illustrative instances which add to the exoticism of these works. The subtle nuances, reverberations and cultural associations of these words could not have been captured and conveyed through translation and explanation.”(Mahan, Shaila. The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 35-6).
So Ezekiel’s ‘Very Indian Poems in Indian English’ are a good document to look into the Indian ethos of the poet. They are simply not for the purpose of creating humor through caricature of Indian people and Indian scenes. In a reply to a query that he was “making fun of the Indian English speaker in these poems”, Ezekiel mentioned that he was just catching the ‘idiom’ of the people. He said, “I hear a person talking in a certain way. I catch the idiom, his attitudes in a poem. Should this be interpreted as lack of respect, a colonial snobbishness? I take the risk. With the passage of time, the emphasis will change.” (In an interview with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 46) Written in the form of a farewell speech, the poem ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’ takes away all logic of poetry writing to describe typical Indian thought processes:

Miss Pushpa is coming
From very high family
Her father was renowned advocate
    In Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place.
    Surat? Ah, yes,
Once only I stayed in Surat
    With family members
Of my Uncle’s very old friend.” (CP, p.190)

Commenting on the poem, Shirish Chindhade writes that, “Typically Indian in its laxity and shallowness the entire poem (“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”) is a biting satirical comment on the way we speak
and respond to various situations. In his simplistic ignorance the fellow hardly knows whether he is complimentary or critical to poor Miss Pushpa.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 41). Shaila Mahan catches the Indian mentality of no difference between private and personal life in this poem. She says, “The marked obliteration of the distinction between the private and public realms of living is a distinct Indian feature. The concept of privacy as it exists in the west is totally alien to Indian sensibility. Hence, even in public places people do not hesitate to lapse into something intimate, informal and confessional.” (Mahan, Shaila. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 167)

Similar characteristics are present in ‘The Railway Clerk’. If Indian ness is life attitudes, modes of perception and thought processes typical of India, they are all conspicuously present in this monologue. The clerk is caricatured as a pulling weakling who is convinced that the entire world is bent on making him a scapegoat:

> It isn’t my fault  
> I do what I am told  
> But still I am blamed. (*CP*, p.184)

This spells pathos in the poor fellow’s life: total lack of imagination, intuitive, drive and efficiency. The all pervading corruption in the Indian clerical scene is also hit on here:

> My wife is always asking for more money  
> Money, money, where to get money?
My job is such; no one is giving bribe,
While other clerks are in fortunate position…

(CP, p.184)

In putting this class three bureaucracy under his critical microscope Ezekiel has also tried to go deeper into the malady in order to analyze the causes…as a result the poor clerk wins our sympathies enough o enjoy the advantage or benefit of doubt:

I am never neglecting my responsibility,
I am discharging it properly,
I am doing my duty… (CP, p.184)

And then follows the big bang-

But who is appreciating?
Nobody, I am telling you. (CP, p.184)

Dr. Shaila Mahan believes that ‘The Railway Clerk’ is a poem, which “moves from satire to sympathy. The ‘poor’ ungrammatical English used in the poem reflects the poor social and economic situation of the half educated railway clerk.” (Mahan, Shaila. The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 164). In the words of Shakuntala Bharvani, in this poem “the Indian ethos is sympathetically conveyed in a style which clearly brings out the predicament of the poor railway clerk and so many others like him.” (Bharvani, Shakuntala. Nissim Ezekiel. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 61-2)
As Bruce King points out, “Ezekiel’s ‘Very Indian Poems in Indian English’ have sometimes been ‘misunderstood as simply satire of the Gujarati-influenced English often used in Bombay’. They are, of course, far more than this: a serious attempt to probe the nuances of a language shaped in the interstices of cultures. At the time when he was writing these poems, comments such as Raja Rao’s well-known remark in his ‘Foreword’ to Kanthapura were still often quoted to identify the problems faced by the Indian writer using English: ‘One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.’ Ezekiel’s English is, of course, entirely ‘his own’- he grew up in a household where English was spoken along with some Marathi- but he is acutely sensitive to the variations of English usage in India.” (As quoted by Thieme, John. ‘Introduction’, Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. xxx)

According to Shirish Chindhade, these poems perform two tasks for the poet at two different levels: on the perfunctory level and on the spiritual level. He notes: “On the perfunctory level it tries to deal with the practical, mundane, factual modes and more of modern India, and on the profound level it probes into spiritual subtle depths of the mind of the Indian intellectual. This does not happen in an air-tight way. Efforts overlap and experiences merge into one another in a unified whole. A whole bunch of poems on Indian themes and situations can be taken into consideration here, most of them from Hymns in Darkness. They are ‘The Truth About the Floods’, ‘The Railway Clerk’, ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’, ‘Guru’, ‘Entertainment’, ‘Rural Suite’, ‘A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”, ‘How the English Lessons Ended’, ‘Ganga’, ‘Yashwant Jagtap’, ‘The Professor’, ‘Irani Restaurant
Instructions’, ‘Servant’ and few others. They are deep going human studies with the typical Indian mind brought into focus from all possible sides. ‘The Railway Clerk’, ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’ and ‘Irani Restaurant Instructions” are what he calls “Very Indian Poems in Indian English”. The use of present continuous tense for the simple present is one of the most common pitfalls of Swadeshi Angrezi.”


Described as a “found poem based on a report by V.K.Dixit in *The Indian Express, Bombay, 25 September, 1967*”, the poem ‘The Truth about the Floods’ employs the favorite tongue-in-cheek mode in the most effective manner. The fierce irony is effectively caught in the refrain-like repetition of

But villagers would not tell me anything
Until I convinced them I wasn’t a government official…

(*CP*, p.185)

Shaila Mahan believes that the use of word ‘very’ in such group of poems serve the purpose nicely. According to her, “In his ability to exploit the nuances of Indian English especially in his Indian English poems Ezekiel remains unrivalled among the Indian English poets…Ezekiel’s Indian English poems are remarkable in so far as they focus on typical Indian English mannerisms and Indian modes of social behavior reflecting thereby a typical post colonial cross cultural situation. Ezekiel has managed to create the peculiar Indian English flavor in these poems. It is a successful attempt at using provincial speech in serious
verse. The title ‘Very Indian Poems in Indian English’ is a revealing one as it sets the tone of these poems besides defining their thematic and stylistic features. The note of irony is implicit in the intensifier ‘very’. The personas depicted in these poems are inadequate bilinguals who speak a variety of English, which deviates to a large extent from the Standard English.” (Mahan, Shaila. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001, p. 47-8). Ezekiel himself liked the term. In an interview, once he said: “My poems in Indian English are rightly described as very Indian poems. So they should not be considered as “mere lampoons”. The characters and the situations projected are intended to be genuinely Indian, and the humor is in the English language as it is widely spoken by Indians, to whom it is not funny at all.” (In an interview with Noorul Hasan, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 70).

Shakuntala Bharvani attributes the successful employment of typical Indian English to bring out the true Indian ethos on the poet’s keen observation power. She writes that, “Ezekiel, when traveling in trains and buses would often note down the way people spoke. He is therefore able to reproduce the speech rhythms, the habit Indians have of repeating themselves, the tendency to unconsciously translate literally from the mother-tongue. On one occasion, he told a group of students, “today a lady was telling another lady sitting near her in the bus, ‘I am not this way that way kind of woman’. This is a direct translation from an Indian language.” (Bharvani, Shakuntala. *Nissim Ezekiel*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 88)
Another habit of average Indians while speaking English is to use present continuous tense for simple present tense. Ezekiel has caught this tendency beautifully in many poems of this group:

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
She was saying, ‘Just now only
I will do it.’ That is showing
Good spirit. I am always
Appreciating the good spirit.
Pushpa Miss is never saying no. (CP, p.191)

And how faithfully the poet catches the Indian attitudes in the following simple lines in the poem ‘Irani Restaurant Instructions’:

Come again
All are welcome whatever caste
If not satisfied tell us
Otherwise tell others
God is great. (CP, p.240)

Although critics like Leela Gandhi believes that “If mismanaged or over-indulged, however, the mood of renunciation or retraction can also result in a crippling solipsism; manifest either as contempt for the world- at its most harsh in Ezekiel’s ‘Very Indian Poems in English…’” (Gandhi, Leela. ‘Preface’, Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. xvi) It can be surely said that the readers never feel so while reading these poems. Rejecting the idea that India has been an obsession for him as a poet, he rather wants to check if the Indian Poems have some value
regarding Indian perceptions or not. He once said, “I don’t think India has been an obsession for me as a poet. It is often the natural, unavoidable context of certain poems by me, but definitely not all of them. The critical question is whether those poems have some value as perceptions of India; or are those perceptions marginal, even worthless?” (In an interview with Noorul Hasan, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 69).

Nissim Ezekiel’s prayer poems, in that one can include *Hymns in darkness* and *Latter-Day Psalms*, are good to look at to find his search for Indian ethos. The prayer mood, the commitment, the belonging and the development of a new style not only mark a stage of maturity but also help to make Ezekiel’s Indian ness comprehensive and convincing. In ‘Waking’, Ezekiel is almost Hindu in his religious belief. Gieve Patel acknowledges the poet’s relationship and fascination for the religio-spiritual texts. He writes that, “We all know Nissim’s reading in philosophy and the mystics were wide, and his interest in the area not merely academic. He often carried a pocket edition of the Dhammapada (tr. Max Mueller) with him, and several times a day would dip into it. It was obviously a source of sustenance. He was also not unaware of the Upanishads, or of Vedanta and the advait concept that good and evil, two faces of the same coin, are both dissolved in the unitive state. He was a devout reader of Jewish texts as well.” (Patel, Gieve. ‘A Recollection’, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 12)

Makarand Paranjape takes the note of Ezekiel’s “obsession with seeing things as they are is connected with trying to understand what is – that
reality, both inner and outer, which presents itself to our perception every
given moment of our existence. Reality, then, is no ideal, fantasy, utopia,
or dream; it is neither located in some glorious past or some equally
glorious future. Reality is neither a project nor a projection, neither desire
nor desiring.” (Paranjape, Makarand. ‘A Poetry of Proportions: Nissim
Ezekiel’s Quest for the Exact Name’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed.

In the words of Shakuntala Bharvani, “The Hindu approach of being led
by destiny and having a limited circumscribed choice is very apparent in
several of Ezekiel’s poems.” (Bharvani, Shakuntala. Nissim Ezekiel. New
Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 38). The mood of submission is also found in
the poem ‘Declaration’:

    Intimation of some final good comes in surrender; waiting
    instead of seeking, wanting nothing, being nothing, like a
    crab or kingfisher by the water, in the sun, and lighted up
    within. (CP, p.34)

As John Thieme finds out “In his later verse, beginning with Hymns in
darkness (1976) where he draws on Vedic hymns, and continued in
Latter-Day Psalms (1982), Ezekiel appears to move into new poetic
territory. Urban experience, understated accounts of love affairs and wry
social observation are replaced by a dialogue with spiritual genres, but
Ezekiel’s response to the Sanskrit and a Judaic original on which he
draws is as skeptical as anything in his earlier poetry.”(Thieme, John.
xxxvii) The typical Indian religious mentality is expressed in the poem ‘Counsel’:

Express your gratitude
By giving what you have to give.
You may get nothing in return.

……………………………………

And bear your restlessness with grace. (CP, p.230)

V.A.Shahane quotes from Ezekiel’s personal letter to him describing the LSD trip, “I came out of that with my ‘philosophy’ turned inside out in eight hours, and became a believer’. Though Ezekiel is born in the Bene-Israel Jew community in India, Shahane thinks that he is very much under the impact of the Hindu thought. Shahane quotes, “I also veered towards the Hindu view of life, which I consider mystically, religiously and metaphysically right, though I don’t accept its ethics and social codes…” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 52)

Bruce King also believes that “Ezekiel has always been a religious poet, even when an agnostic or skeptic. Even when conscious that the naked world is nothing but matter, he has never been a genuine materialist; there has always been the assumption that there are values, a good in contrast to evil, and the good should be ones guide. His outlook is that of liberal humanism, with its belief in such universals as the individual, justice, equality, freedom, rationality, skepticism. Certainly his continuing defence of freedom, of western democracy, of liberty, has been central to his life (as, one should note, is often more true of writers
in contrast to intellectuals. Plato, remember, would not have poets in his republic.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. 68-9)

So the poet seeks equilibrium of mind in the poem ‘Creation’:

Child of flesh and fancy,
Be equable, as the sages recommend,
And God-like make a universe
From chaos,
Of fire and air and earth and water. (*CP*, p.79)

And the poet recognizes that, “The problem is to make the effort” (*CP*, p.80). The poet advises to “Seek plain seeking” (*CP*, p.84). So the poet wishes to be without desire in the poem ‘Prayer’:

This much is true: to pray is good,
To go the way of dispossession,
To be alone, without desire, (*CP*, p.101)

In ‘The Egoist’s Prayers’, we find the voice of somebody who has tried everything and yet the reconciliation is not coming. So ultimately the poet-persona tells the creator to do his duty to restore him to good state of mind:

The vices I’ve always had
I still have.
The virtues I’ve never had
I still do not have.
From this human way of life
Who can rescue man
If not this maker?
Do thy duty, Lord. (CP, p.212)

In a typical Ezekiel friendly way, the poet asks the creator for the fruit of his action since he is so hungry:

No, Lord,
Not the fruit of action
Is my motive.
But do you really mind
Half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
And I’m so hungry. (CP, p.212)

And the poet doesn’t have any desire to be chosen to carry out the desire of god on the earth. He rather wishes the god to accommodate His desires according to those of the poet’s:

Do not choose me, O Lord,
To carry out thy purposes.
I’m quite worthy, of course,
But I have my own purposes.
You have plenty of volunteers
To choose from, Lord.
Why pick on me, the selfish one?
Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan quotes from ‘Latter-day Psalms’ to mention Ezekiel’s ‘sacredness of the profane’. It is narrated that, “Ezekiel’s poetry makes the shift from the profanity of the sacred to the sacredness of the profane. It is the poetry of the here – and – now, of the prosaic, of the miracle of every day. Rejecting the role of the poet-as-prophet, Ezekiel undertakes the role of the poet-as-healer.” (Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. ‘Part of My Flesh: The Subversive Jewish Voice of Nissim Ezekiel’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 451-2)

The poet goes so frustrated with the concept of heaven that he doesn’t mind appreciating the hell in the poem ‘Hymns in Darkness’:

There is one thing to be said for hell:
It’s a pretty lively place.
A man could be happy there. (CP, p.220)

The poet wants to worship such a God who is a God of people who are rejected in society, as in ‘Latter-Day Psalms’:

I worship the God who regards
The prayer of the destitute,
Who hears the groaning of the
Prisoner, and of those who are
Appointed to death. (CP, p.259)

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan finds the typical Ezekielian angst against the institutionalized religion also in other Jew Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. It is noted that, “The fundamental ambivalence we have noted in the Ezekiel’s text, the refusal of that which is ‘part of my flesh’, and the quarrel with institutional religion in the name of suffering humanity, is also evident in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, the beloved Israeli poet, who is Ezekiel’s contemporary (1924-2000). Amichai, too, makes use of liturgical formulas for a powerful protest. Taking the words of the prayer for the dead, beginning with an address to the All – merciful god, he writes:

All – Merciful god.
If it hadn’t been for that All-merciful-god,
There would have been mercy in the world,
Not only in him.


There are certain critics who have heavily charged Ezekiel as one who presents India only as a country of saints and snake charmers. The top among such critics is V.M.Madge. In his scholarly article ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry’, he says that “as we begin to read his poetry, an uneasiness creeps over us…by his references to India and this

His charges against Ezekiel are many-folded and he describes them one by one. Commenting on the autobiographical poem’s mentioning of being bullied by other boys, Madge says that, “First, it is not quite clear why the bullying is being communalized. It is quite significant and revealing that the school boy identifies his tormentors not by their names, as any school boy would normally do, but by their communities.” (Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ *Makers of Indian English Literature*. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 188)

Mr. Madge is not happy the way Ezekiel has described the Hindu boys in the poem ‘Background, Casually’. He notes by quoting from Raghvendra Rao that, “…as for the Hindu lads, the description is confused and paradoxical. They are ‘strong and undernourished’, ‘fearsome and passive’ at the same time and, what’s more, their prepositions are always wrong. Raghvendra Rao, taking a psychological approach to examine the poet’s alienation, points out that the Jewish boy’s contempt for the linguistic incompetence of Hindu lads is his defence-mechanism to cope with their menace.”(Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ *Makers of Indian English Literature*. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 188)
He again shows his displeasure against the use of words ‘strong and undernourished’ in the poem to describe the Hindu boys. He notes that, “Especially ‘strong and undernourished’ goes much beyond its brief and comments on Hindu parents. It implies that these parents are either incapable or negligent in carrying out their duty of feeding their children well, as if parents from other communities are invariably solicitous in the discharge of their obligations.” (Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ *Makers of Indian English Literature*. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 189)

Mr. Madge’s main problem is about the poet’s tendency to belittle the Hindu religion only. He makes his point by referring to the poem ‘Healers’: “In ‘Healers’, once again, the stress is on Hindu quacks, as if hypocritical shepherds do not exist in India luring the lambs into the arms of the loving savior.” (Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ *Makers of Indian English Literature*. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 190). He further refers to ‘The Egoist’s Prayers’ to strengthen his argument: “…Hindus are mentioned with contempt, their scriptures and doctrines are treated with exceptional flippancy and abysmal ignorance. For instance, in ‘Egoist’s Prayers’.” (Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ *Makers of Indian English Literature*. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 190). Mr. Madge’s points of objections seem valid since it’s a fashion among so called secular intellectuals only to deride Hinduism. He further says by referring to ‘Passion Poems’ where Krishna and Radha are presented as non-idols, “…whenever religion is to be derided, it is so much easier in India to deride tolerant Hinduism. In “Passion Poems”, we get to hear of Lord Krishna’s impishness and

So when the poem says that his ‘backward place is where’ he is, Madge believes that, “What is being implied is that the poet has conferred a great honor on India by his choice…unlike the missionaries who set sail for and give themselves up to some area of darkness in an effort to spread the sweetness and light of civilization, Ezekiel does not have to seek out elsewhere. His heart of darkness is where he is.” (Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ *Makers of Indian English Literature*. ed. Narasimhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 194)

G.J.V. Prasad offers following interesting explanation for the poet’s much discussed line ‘My backward place is where I am’. He narrates: “Being neither an NRI nor foreign educated; the lines irritated me as a young man but not any more. I did then, object to the description of India as a backward place. And for gods sake he lives in Bombay, the commercial capital of the country! Older, but perhaps not wiser, I realize the value and weight of those simple lines – it is not that India is backward – that is a truism, but that one can serve best where one has a sense of belonging, a place one call home, backward though it may be.”
Such negative view of India is also visible in the poem ‘A Warning’ where the persona warns his foreign friend not to sit alone on the Bombay waterfront:

On the Bombay waterfront
You sat alone, and made
A decision: not to turn,
Not to fear the man behind,
Any man passing by
Who may, with just a touch, push you off into the sea, (CP, p.141)

Mr. Madge’s final dig at the poet’s description of India is worth listening: “If in the 19th century, India was a land of snakes, tigers and maharajahs to the foreigners, to the non resident aliens like Naipaul and to the resident ones like Ezekiel, in the 20th century, India has acquired a new stereotype of being the land of “beggars, hawkers, pavement sleepers, hutment dwellers and slums,” as if there are no Shantiniketans, Dhvanyalokas, IITs and IISCs.” (Madge, V.M. ‘Pride and Prejudice in Ezekiel’s Poetry.’ Makers of Indian English Literature. ed. Narasimhhaiha, C.D. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003, p. 192)

May be the reply to the objections raised by Mr. Madge can be found in following observations made by Ezekiel in one of his literary essays. He
mentions that, “I am not supporting the touchiness and nationalistic chauvinism which is evoked when a culture is criticized in a literary work. Even a stereotype has its real roots, in a country and a culture, a class and a religion, a profession and a way of life. Even a prejudice in literature is valuable when its causes are probed and the frequency of its occurrence examined. No literature worth the name is wholly impartial and objective, whether or not it deals with cross-cultural situations. Some distinctions are clearly necessary in assessing the national, cultural, class, religious and other major or incidental meaning of a literary work as drawn out and defined conceptually.” (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘Cross-Cultural Encounter in Literature’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 184)

In a mild attack on such people who like to be benefited from Indian tradition, Ezekiel once wrote in an essay that, “It is true that many Indian artists have explored the Indian tradition and sometimes found elements in it that have served them well. (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘Who Leads in the Arts?’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 357). And once more in another essay, he wrote that, “I don’t mean to be pessimistic, but I would like to oppose, in myself and in others around me, exercises in futility, which result from dogmatic and pseudo-ideological thinking.” (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘A Sense of failure’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 364)

Geetha Ganapathy-Dore suggests that, “While Naipaul scornfully looks down upon Indians, Ezekiel looks compassionately, at them as fellow citizens. India constitutes a pole of hatred of Naipaul, as his relation with
his mother and the land of his ancestors is complicated. Ezekiel held that he was a ‘refugee of the spirit’ in India, which was ‘his home and enemy’. India, therefore, does not serve as a site of transferred affect for Ezekiel.” (Ganapathy-Dore, Geetha. ‘Language as Instrument of Humor, Irony and Satire in Ezekiel’s Poetry’, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 484-5).

Thus Nissim Ezekiel can be called a representative Indian English poet. We find a typical Indian atmosphere pervading his poems. The Indian society, the relationship between society and nature find a place in his poetry. His poems reflect the Indian mind, the Indian scene, Indian environment and Indian experience. It is to the credit of Ezekiel that we find a freshness of approach and observation in his mode of dealing with the theme.

We can conclude this discussion of Ezekiel’s search for Indian ethos in his poetry by quoting Bruce King who maintains that, “By the time of his death Ezekiel’s place and contribution to Indian literature and culture were clear. The obituaries, reminiscences, and homages spoke of him as a nationalist, recalled his decision to return to India, and that unlike many Indian Jews he had not moved to Israel, how he had forged a contemporary poetic language for Indian poetry in English, and his contribution to the intellectual life of the nation, especially in Bombay. A year after this death a national conference to discuss Ezekiel’s role in Indian culture was held at Benares University.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*, Second Edition. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. 8)
It is true that Ezekiel’s Indianness is more of Bombayness. He explored the city to come to terms with his idea of India. King states that, “Like Baudelaire’s Paris or Eliot’s London, his Bombay was archetypical of modern experience in contrast to the spiritualism and peasantry that had been the focus of much Indian writing. He explored his own experiences and the world he knew. After he showed how to write in a contemporary voice about modern India without resorting to clichés and stereotypes, it became possible for other poets to write about more varied experiences.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. 8-9)

Bruce King quotes Kaiser Haq who has said that, ‘Ezekiel was undoubtedly the first major figure in Indian English poetry who found a resonant, authentic Indian voice. This would not have been possible without his essential commitment to the place of his birth’ (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. 9)