

Chapter : 1

Background to Indian English Poetry

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1.0 Objectives

Friends, this paper deals with Indian English Literature and we are going to begin with Indian English verses. After studying this chapter you will be able to -

- Elaborate the literary background of the Indian English Poetry
- Take a review of the growth and development of Indian English verses
- Describe different phases and the influence of the contemporary social and political situations.
- Narrate recurrent themes in Indian English poetry.

1.1 Introduction

Friends, this chapter will introduce you to the history of Indian English verses. It will provide you with information of the growth of Indian English verses and its socio-cultural background. What are the various themes in Indian English poetry? Who are the major Indian English poets? This chapter is an answer to these questions with a thorough background to Indian English verses which will help you to get better knowledge of the various trends in Indian English poetry.

1.2 History of Indian English Poetry

Poetry is the expression of human life from times eternal. India in fact has a long tradition of arts and poetry from ages. Colonialism gave a new language, English for the expression of Indians. The poetry written by the Indians in English in the last 150 years may be said to have three phases: the imitative, the assimilative and the experimental.

The period from 1850 to 1900 is the imitative phase when the Indian poets were romantic poets in the Indian garb or in George Bottomley's words "Matthew Arnold in a saree" or as some derogatively observes "Shakuntala in a mini-skirt". The chief sources of inspiration were the British romantic poets: Wordsworth, Scott, Shelley, Keats, Byron.

The period from 1900 to 1947 is the assimilative period when the Indian poets still romantic tried to assimilate the romanticism of the early nineteenth century British poets and the "new" romantics of the decadent period for expressing the consciousness of the Indian renaissance between nationalism and political changes which ultimately led to the attainment of political freedom in 1947.

1.2.1 Poetry of first phase

The first phase of Indian poetry was the period of literary renaissance in India. Derozio's poems, Kasiprasad Ghose's *The Shair or Minstrel* and other poems, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *The Captive Lady*, Manmohan Ghose's *Love Songs and Elegies* are a testimony to the creative upsurge occasioned by the romantic spirit kindled by the literary renaissance. Toru Dutt alone among these romantic poets of

the first phase puts an emphasis on India and her heritage by putting into verse a large number of Indian legends. The romantic Toru Dutt is also a predecessor in respect to the use of the tree in verse as demonstrated by "Our Casuarina Tree", a predecessor in respect of childhood memories recalled with nostalgia or regret.

1.2.2 Poetry of second phase

The poets of the second phase, still romantic in spirit were Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and Harindranth Chattopadhyaya. The poetic output of these poets was prolific. Romanticism of these Indian poets was fraught with nationalism, spirituality and mysticism. It was therefore different from English romanticism. Indian romanticism widened the poet's vision. While Aurobindo's was the search for the Divine in Man and Tagore's was the quest for the Beautiful in Man and Nature. Both were philosopher poets. Sarojini Naidu's romantic muse underscored the charm and splendor of traditional Indian life and Indian scene. She had a fine ear for verbal melody as she was influenced not only by English poetry but also by the Persian and Urdu poetry. She excelled in lyricism. She was a true nightingale of India.

Poetry written in the colonial period with a view to establish Indian identity by the Indian poets was an explosion or rather outburst of emotions: the nationalistic, philosophical, spiritual or mystical emotions. The appeal was to the heart of the readers. The poetry of Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu could not be romantic since they had to express the ethos of the age. They were not merely imitating the English romantics, Victorians and Decadents blindly. Their poetry was the best voice of the contemporary Indian time - spirit. It would be fair to say that Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu constitute a kind of watershed between the first two phases, in that they share their predecessor's individual nostalgia as well as their successor's sense of crisis and quest for identity.

1.2.3 Post independence poetry

The ethos of the post-independence phase of Indian English literature is radically different from the first two phases. Its relation to the first two phases is that of the modern age in English literature to

Victorianism. When the question of political independence was resolved in 1947 with the partition of India, the tensions of the Indian psyche suddenly relaxed. The post - independence era of hope and aspiration was replaced by an era of questioning and ironic exposure. The national identity achieved after independence gave Indian writers a new confidence to be the critic of the present, the past and of themselves. In this new spirit and confidence the Indian poets found themselves in line with Modern English and American poets. So once again there was borrowing up to some extent as in the first two phases of Indian poetry. While the pre - 1947 poets borrowed from the romantics, Victorians and "new" Romantics of the decadent period, the post - 1947 poets borrowed from the modernist poets like Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden.

It is ironical that the word "romantic" should become a veritable red tag to the post- independence poets. If the word "romantic" is a red tag, the word "mystical" drives them to a fury. Adil Jussawalla, for example, finds Sri Aurbindo's Savitri "unwinding like an interminable sari". Parthasarthy declares that "Savitri fails as a poem because Ghose's talent and resourcefulness in the use of English was limited." About Toru Dutt, Parthasarthy says, "Toru Dutt's poems mean little to us because our idea of poetry has changed since her day."

If the succeeding generation denigrates the preceding generation so vehemently, all past poetry - Valmiki, Homer, Dante, Kalidas, Shakespeare, Goethe, Whitman - would become irrelevant. No true poet can escape tradition for tradition haunts the poet. The radical past is stored in the poet's deeper consciousness what the psychologist Jung calls "the blocked off radical unconscious". At the same time, no poet can escape the present also because he is in it and of it. The best that the poet can do is to relate the immediate present to the living past and if possible to a future that is in the process of becoming.

The later phase of Indian English poetry is of the modern and post-modern phase. The modern or experimental Indian English poetry is part of the process of modernization which includes urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change, increased communication (in the form of films, television, radio, journals and newspapers) national and international transportation networks, mass education and the resulting paradox that as an independent culture emerges, it also participates in the international, modern usually

westernized world. Following are some of the factors responsible for the emergence of "new", "modernist", "experimental" Indian English poetry:

1. The economic progress achieved through the government's policies of democratic socialism and five year plans.
2. The social progress achieved through the rise in mass education.
3. The economic and social progress resulted in the broadening of the middle class sections of the society.
4. The spread of the English language and the evolution of the English culture alongside Hindi and the regional languages hastened the process of modernization. English has been Indianised in pronunciation, intonation, stress parts, idioms, word order and the syntax.
5. The scientific and technological advancement, the scientific temperament and modern sensibility has given rise to agnosticism and atheism among the educated intellectual. The modern educated intellectual Indian is critical of the formal and ritualistic religion.
6. The modern sensibility has led to an open mode of expression in social relationships.
7. Modern poetry deals in concrete terms with concrete experiences in free verse. Rhyme and other devices of meter and stanzaic forms are discarded.

The major post - independence Indian English poets are :

Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, Gieve Patel, Arvind Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, Kamala Das, K. N. Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dilip Chitre, Saleem Peerdina, Santan Rodrigues, Eunice De Souza, Silgado, Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, Manohar Shetty etc.

The models of the modern Indian poets are neither exclusively Indian nor British but cosmopolitan. Europe, Africa, America and Asia have all become a part of our cultural consciousness and offer impetus and stimulation. So the poets have cosmopolitan culture to fall back on, though the preference is shown for Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath,

devotional poetry of saints like Tukaram.

Contemporary Indian English poetry is the expression of certain attitudes and values believed in by certain sections of today's Indian society, wholly urban, middle class. The poets are realistic and intellectually critical in the expression of their individualized experience. The poets go in for precision at all levels.

The poems are not didactic but thought provoking as they fall back on psychological problems presented in a psychoanalytical manner. So most of the poems do not strive for resolution of themes or conclusive stance. Modern Indian poems are by the poet turned psychologist, psychoanalyst, existentialist, surrealist etc. They are purely an expression of thoughts felt.

There is a lot of experimentation in the modern Indian poetry with a view to achieving modernity. Rhyme and stanzaic forms were replaced by free verse. Verbal melody came to be evoked through the use of alliterative and assonant words. The tone was one of intellectualized irony and sarcasm. The stance of the poets was one of complete detachment and objectivity. The other innovation of the modern Indian poets is the use of symbolism. The poets use modern techniques used by the film industry and advertising industry, besides the stream of consciousness and free association of ideas. There is much "word-hunting" and "image-hunting" which reflects the medium of consciousness on the part of the poet. The Indian poets therefore borrow words from their regional languages. To be Indian, poets have to be rooted somewhere in India - geographically, historically, socially or psychologically.

1.2 Check Your Progress.

Fill in the blanks in the following statements:

1. Indian poetry written by the Indians in English can be divided into three phases: _____, _____ and _____.
2. George Bottomley's has described Indian English Literature as "Matthew Arnold in a _____".
3. The pre-independence poet, Toru Dutt's poem _____ describes the use of the tree in verse.



4. Rhyme and stanzaic forms were replaced by _____ in modern Indian English poetry.
5. There is much "word-hunting" and _____ which reflects the medium of consciousness on the part of the poet.

1.3 Major Indian English Poets

Before Indians could write poetry in English, two related preconditions had to be met. First, the English language had to be sufficiently indianised to be able to express the reality of the Indian situation. Secondly, Indians had to be sufficiently Anglicized to use the English language to express themselves. In 1780 India's first newspaper, 'Hicky's Bengal Gazette', was published in English. In 1817, the Hindu college, which later became Presidency College, the premier educational institution of Bengal, was founded. More significantly, in 1835, Viceroy Macaulay, in his famous Minute, laid the foundations of the modern educational system, with his decision to promote European science and literatures among Indians through the medium of the English language. The result was that English became in India, as later in other British colonies, a passport to privilege.

Indian poetry in English began in Bengal, the province in which the British first gained a stronghold. In addition, his poetry was largely an urban phenomenon centered in Calcutta. Infact, for the first fifty years, it was confined entirely to a few Bengali families who were residents of the city. Then, gradually it moved to other urban centers such as Madras and Bombay; even today, Indian poetry in English remains largely urban. Moreover, because English was an elite language in India, Indian poets in English came from the upper classes and castes.

When Indians first began to write poetry, it was not distinguished from that of the British in India, or Anglo - Indians as they were called. Indeed, because India was a part of the British Empire, Indian poets in English were not given a separate national identity; their early efforts were considered tributary to the mainstream of English Literature.

Perhaps it is best to see Indian poetry in English as a phenomenon as valuable for what it symbolizes as for its own achievements. It embodies the legacy of colonialism, our struggle against colonialism and oppression. It is also the site for the continuing Indo - western encounter and the evolving culture of post - colonial India. It is still a literature of major aspirations, a literature which has access to a national consciousness and to some of the best minds produced by this country.

1.3.1 Pre - independence Poets

The nineteenth century saw the institutionalization of British imperialism in India. An oppressive economic, political and social system was put into place which emphasized the inequality between the minuscule British ruling class and a vast populace of Indian subjects. Indian English poets displayed various degrees of compromise and resistance to it. The fact that they wrote in English itself showed the extent of their capitulation. On the other hand, they tried to make up for this by writing in a manner which emphasized their difference, their Indianness. The tension between the alienating language and the Indian sensibility is as old as Indian poetry in English itself.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) is generally credited as being the first Indian poet in English. He was born in Calcutta and especially remarkable because he was Christian and reared among Eurasians who were closer to the British. Infact, many of his Hindu Bengali contemporaries too strove to identify themselves with the latter. Derozio's love for India is revealed in several of his poems. He had an extraordinary career as a journalist, teacher, poet and a leading intellectual of his day. In poems like, "The Harp of India" and "My country! In thy day of glory past", he strikes a nationalistic note, trying to revive in English a moribund indigenous tradition of poetry. His long poem, "The Fakeer of Jungheera" is an interesting attempt to fuse the Byronic romance with social criticism of contemporary Indian mores. He died before he could fulfill the great promise that he showed as a poet and intellectual. Despite this he is counted among the major Indian poets in English for both historical and artistic reasons.

A contemporary of Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghose, published *The Shair and other poems* (1830). Ghose has the distinction of being the first Hindu to write original English verse. He wrote several pieces on Indian festivals which were meant for his British and Eurasian readers. His best work, perhaps, is "To a dead Crow", a semi-comic poem which is a parody of an elegy.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824 - 1873) whose long narrative poem, 'The Captive Ladie', failed to earn him the fame he so aspired for, is an interesting, almost archetypal figure in modern Indian poetry. Dutt is remembered today not as an English poet but as the first and one of the greatest of modern Bengali poets. After his failure at English verse, he turned to Bengali, embarking on a brilliant literary career which after producing a series of original plays and poems, culminated in a Miltonic epic in blank verse, *Meghnathbadh Kavya* (1861).

Another family with the same surname, Dutt, brought out an anthology called *The Dutt Family Album* (1870), featuring about two hundred poems by Govin Chunder Dutt (1828 - 1884), his two brothers and a nephew. The Dutt family was to produce another generation of poets in Govin's daughters Aru and Toru. Another noteworthy poet of his time was Ram Sharma, born Nobo Kissen Ghose (1837 - 1918). He wrote volumes of satiric verse and also introduced a religious dimension to Indian poetry in English. In this period, Indian poetry in English moved out of Bengal for the first time with the publications of the Bombay Presidency poets, B. M. Malabari's *Indian Muse in English Garb* (1876), Cowasji Nowrosi Versuvala's *Counting the Muse* (1879) and A. M. Kunte's *The Risi* (1897).

There is almost complete critical consensus that Toru Dutt (1856 - 1877) was an original talent in Indian poetry in English. Like Derozio she died young, and like Emily Bronte, her life has been the object of as much curiosity as her poetry. One year after her sister, Aru's death, Toru published *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1875), which also featured eight pieces by Aru. These poems, "renderings" from the French, were enthusiastically received in England and India, and soon went into three editions, the third published by Kegan Paul, London, in 1880, with a Foreword by Arthur Symonds. In 1875, Dutt took up the study of Sanskrit and ten months later, she was proficient enough in it to think of producing a "sheaf" gleaned from Sanskrit fields. This

volume was published posthumously in 1882 as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* by Kegan Paul, London, with a Foreword by Edmund Gosse. Before she died, she had written one French novel and left incomplete another in English, both of which were published after her death. The most significant aspect of Dutt's literary career was her use of the rich Indian heritage of myth and folklore. In *Ancient Ballads* she converted popular stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas into English verse. In this, she pioneered a way for several later Indian writers in English who had similar problems regarding their poetic identity. The best of these, probably one of the best individual compositions in Indian poetry in English is "Our Casuarina Tree". This poem, reminiscent in both form and content of Keats' odes, is about memory, imagination and transcendence. The beautiful tree in the poet's garden at Baugmaree becomes, by the end of the poem, a symbol not only of the poet's joyous childhood but also, through an extension in time and space, of the poet's longing for permanence and eternity. Similarly, "Sita" is a remarkable poem whose subject is not much the pathos of the banished Sita in exile but the power of poetry to produce emotion, much in the manner of Valmiki's 'shoka' (sorrow) leading to the 'shloka' (verse).

Manmohan Ghose (1869 - 1924) went to win an open scholarship to attend Christ Church College, Oxford, in 1887. There he befriended Stephen Phillips and Lawrence Binyon. While at Oxford, Manmohan's poems appeared in *Primavera* (1890) along with those of three other poets. Oscar Wilde reviewing the book in the 'Pall Mall Gazette' commented favorably on Manmohan's poetry. During his lifetime just one collection of his poems, *Love Songs and Elegies*, was published in London by Elkin Mathews in the Shilling Garland series in 1898. He remained a dedicated poet and wrote a number of longer, more ambitious works including 'Perseus', 'the Gorgon Slayer', 'Nala and Damayanti', 'Orphic Mysteries', 'Immortal Eve' and 'Adam Alarmed in Paradise'. After his death, Binyon published some of his shorter poems as *Songs of life and death* (1926), prefaced by a memoir. Later, the Calcutta University, where he was remembered fondly as one of their greatest teachers of English, commissioned his daughter to publish his complete works in five volumes (1970 - 1971).

Sri Aurobindo (1872 - 1950) probably has the best claim to be regarded as the greatest Indian poet in English. He wrote a vast body of verse in almost every available genre during his poetic career of over fifty - five years. He wrote lyrics, sonnets, long narrative poems, dramatic poetry and epics. He was well - versed in both European and Indian classics, proving his command over them in his brilliant translations. He was also one of India's most significant philosophers and critics in recent times, thereby originating a new, and evolutionist Yoga philosophy. He founded an original school of thought and religious sect as the head of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. He used his original English poetry equally with prose as the vehicle of his ideas. Aurobindo is the most discussed of the Indian poets in English; there are more books and articles on his epic of over 24,000 lines, *Savitri*. In *Savitri* he used the story of *Savitri's* conquest of death in the *Mahabharata* - a story which has influenced Indians for centuries as an exposition of perfect womanhood - and expanded it to create his epic. *Savitri* realizes her divine potential and like Christ worsts Death; afterwards, she returns to the earth as a symbol of what humanity can achieve. A mystic and a seer, Aurobindo claimed to have described his own, palpable experiences in writing the poem. *Savitri* is one of the longer poems in the English language (it is roughly twice the length of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*). It took about fifty years to write - from the germ of the idea to the final written version - and complete and faithful reading demands a long time; nevertheless, year after year, it continues to attract, repel and challenge critics, students and other readers.

If Aurobindo is the greatest, Sarojini Naidu (1879 - 1949) is among the most popular and accessible of Indian poets in English. Naidu's poems are deliberately grounded in an anti - intellectual aesthetics of ephemeral beauty. She was primarily a lyric poet whose mastery of rhyme and meter is unmatched. The chief quality of her poetry is melody - sound and sense combine to produce an emotion, as in music. She is remarkably versatile. She draws on the rich traditions of several Indian languages, regions and religions. Naidu's images are stylized and sophisticated, not naïve or simplistic. She uses several discourses - types from Indian traditions of poetry: some of her poems are monologues or duets; still others are communal songs in separate voices and in chorus. Naidu was chiefly a love poet and her poetry

explores the many facets of love as outlined in classical texts: love in union, love in longing, love in separation; the pain of love, the sin of love, the desire of love; earthly love, divine love and so on.

Indian poetry in English of this period can also claim Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941) as one of its own. Though strictly speaking, Tagore wrote only one poem, 'The Child' (1931), in English, his own English renderings of his famous poem, Gitanjali (1912) won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 and world - wide renown. After that, Tagore continued to "translate" several of his works into English, deviating considerably from the Bengali in the process. Tagore bestrides the world of Indian culture like a colossus. Poet, dramatist, novelist, short - story writer, critic, musician, educationist and savant, he was one of the most remarkable figures in the recent history of India, besides being almost certainly the greatest Indian poet of the century. We find a chiseled perfection to his work. His poems are strikingly finished, rich in texture and profound in thought. He celebrated and affirmed his pleasure in the world of the senses. He saw the world as imbued with the glory of God. He carried over the plaintive longing for the beloved, the self - chastisement and the humility of the Bhakti poets, but in a more formal, sophisticated and self - conscious manner. He aligned himself with the down - trodden and the suffering masses of India, criticizing the oppression of the British. His sensibility was idealistic and romantic, but his romanticism grappled with modernism and survived it.

Sri Ananda Acharya (1881 - 1941) wrote over thirty - five books, out of which ten were collections of verse. All of these have been collected in the volumes, Snow Birds and other poems and Arctic Swallows and other poems both edited by K. V. Sharma. Acharya's poems are spiritualist and mystical. They propound a philosophy of life which emphasizes self - transformation and pacifism. Many of his poems use esoteric imagery and symbolism. The poems show overall, a combination of Vedantic and Buddhist influences.

Puran Singh (1881 - 1931) is chiefly remembered as a pioneering figure in twentieth century Punjabi literature. Besides poems, novels, short stories, drama and criticism, he also wrote extensively on Sikh culture and history. His form and technique were influenced by Tagore, while his ideas were inspired by Sikh scriptures and devotional literature.

J. Krishnamurti (1895 - 1986) wrote poetry for a brief but crucial juncture in his long career as a philosopher and teacher. From 1927 - 1931 he published three collections of poetry. His poems are all in a poetic prose, the form which Tagore popularized. They are basically devotional and mystical poems, passionately didactic but rich in imagery and metaphor. He underwent a spiritual transformation. Since then he toured the world speaking against occult hierarchies and authority in matters of spirit.

Humayun Kabir (1906 - 1969) was an individual of vast and varied accomplishments - scholar, educationist, administrator, politician, trade union leader, poet, novelist and translator. He wrote over thirty books in English and Bengali. Besides two volumes of poems, he wrote a novel, *Man and Rivers* (1945). His poems are far more concrete, realistic and modern in sensibility than those of his contemporaries; in fact, in tone and character.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898 - 1989), brother of Sarojini Naidu showed great promise in his first collection, *The Feast of Youth* (1918). Both Tagore and Aurobindo were impressed by his talent; the latter wrote a glowing review of the book, while the former hailed him as his successor. His output is varied in theme, ranging from Aurobindonian idealism to Marxist materialism. He usually writes rhymed and metric verse.

1.3.2 Post - Independence Poets

There is no doubt that during the 1950's the dominant tone in Indian poetry in English shifted. The impact was swift and sweeping. What had been a minority voice suddenly became that of the majority. A readymade aesthetic was available to the new poets - the modernism of Eliot and Pound, of Richards and Leavis and of Picasso and jazz music. This aesthetic found rapid acceptance in the disillusionment of the post - independence era. Instead of ushering in the promised golden age, independent India became a typical third world country, backward, corrupt and hypocritical. The new generation which had come of age in the 1950's and 1960's found itself betrayed by its elders. It was impatient for change and fed up with the platitudes of the past.

The first major characteristic of the modernists was a rejection of the past. This was suggested in the title of Ezekiel's first book of poems, *A Time to Change* (1952). A whole generation turned its back on tradition and found itself alienated in the new India. Secondly, they declared themselves opposed to the idealism and romanticism of their predecessors. They wanted a poetry which was without escapism and flights of fancy, a poetry written in a clear, hard, unsentimental voice and in everyday language. Thirdly, the poets believed in a secular muse. They had little faith in mysticism and other - worldly ideologies. Instead with relish, they introduced a bold, new frankness into their poetry. Turning away from religion, they sought meaning and order in personal relationships. They wrote about the city and its dirty, poverty - stricken and dehumanizing environs. Finally, the poets increasingly resorted to irony as the best means of representing their love - hate relationship with their surroundings. They believed they were alienated from their society and irony was the only way of expressing their ambivalence towards themselves and their world.

Moraes chooses "Babur" as a persona to suggest his own sense of alienation from India; Jusawalla finds himself filled with revulsion and pain upon "Approaching Santa Cruz Airport, Bombay", in Kamala Das' "The Sunshine Cat", the speaker castigates all the men who abused her, Ramanujan wonders if he is really himself in a characteristic self - reflexive "Self - Portrait". Mehrotra resorts to a surrealist subversion of meaning in very discontinuous "Continuities"; Parthasarthy's "Homecoming" is loaded with self - criticism and loss; in Daruwalla's "Routine" the police officer cynically prepares himself for another riot; Mahapatra's "Dawn at Puri" links the temple at Puri with crows and skulls' Chitre's speaker regards his "Father returning Home" with dispassionate and ironic detachment. Kolhatkar turns the whole idea of the traditional pilgrimage inside out in "Jejuri". The situation is Indian; the observer is critical and alienated. Sometimes the detachment turns into attachment and the irony into anger. But often the attitude is as troubling and uncertain as the language is precise and clipped.

The poets seem unable to commit themselves to any ideology but remain on neutral, treacherous ground. Alienation is the tension between the English medium and the Indian experience is the source of the poetry. The sort of sensibility which came into vogue during this

time is characterized by Mokashi - Punekar's phrase, "cultural allotrophy".

On the other hand, even the first of our modernist poets, Shahid Suhrawardy was quite aware of not just the tension between his mother tongue and his language of expression but the allegiance that modernism bears to trends in western literature and art.

By the 1960's the West was entering a new age, what came to be known later as "post - modernism". At that time the modernist sensibility in India had, paradoxically, just taken root: the sixties saw the publication of a vast number of "new" poets: Jussawalla, Das, Mehrotra, Ramanujan, Patel, Nandy and so on, who are now acknowledged as the protagonists of the movement. Hence, modernism in Indian poetry in English was established about twenty years after it had passed into history in Europe and America!

Those who started as modernists became affirmers of the past and of tradition. Eliot himself is a paradigm of this pattern; starting as a literary radical he ended as a conservative. Two Eliot figures in India, one a poet, the other, a critic, who are greatly responsible for the popularity of modernism, too, follow a similar paradigm. Both Lal of the Writers Workshop and Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah of the 'Literary Criterion' started as radical modernists, but have now mellowed into upholders of Indian traditions in literature and criticism.

Such a return is discernable in other modernists too. Ezekiel's poetry is increasingly spiritual in theme; Daruwalla's last book of new poems ends with a passionate plea to God for knowledge and truth; Parthasarthy and Ramanujan have both been obsessed with discovering their Tamil heritage. After the initial revolt against tradition, the modernist poet seems to be turning back to tradition to discover the roots of his identity. Alienation, the very condition which made poetry possible, is now being cured through poetry.

The very poets who dismissed their predecessors as being inferior and derivative can themselves be accused of being imitative and contrived today. They formed themselves into clichés and groups and launched attacks on those they considered their opponents. They polemicalised poetry. And through their anthologies, introductions, critical commentaries and interviews, they sometimes descended to bitter wrangling and mud - slinging.

Straight away, one can separate the high modernists from the neo - romantics. To the latter category belong not only Lal and Nandy, but Moraes, Meena Alexander and to an extent, Mahapatra; romanticism, no doubt, continued to be the minor mode throughout this period, with numerous practitioners. Among the romantic poets we find a variety of styles and modes. Lal is witty and dainty in his gestures; Moraes very conservative in form, but always experimental with his numerous personae; Nandy is excessive and expressionistic; Mahapatra emotional and sentimental; and Alexander dreamy and academic.

Within the high modernists, essentially two traditions can be posited: the clear and the obscure, or the conversational and the esoteric. The first, best exemplified by Ezekiel, is poetry of communication. The poet tries to speak to his readers as clearly as possible, almost in a manner of a British movement poet like Philip Larkin. There is no attempt to subterfuge or complexity, through irony is the chief vehicle of evasion. To this group belong the majority of the poets like Ramanujan, Patel, Parthasarthy, Kumar, Daruwalla and Peeradina. The other tradition is of obscure and esoteric poetry which resists easy decoding. Practitioners include Mehrotra, Kolhatkar and Mahapatra. Finally, there are the confessional poets like Das.

Of course, all the poets write about personal relationships, growing up, city scapes, tradition - modernity conflicts and their identity crises.

Post - modernism seems to promise a variety of new devices including parody, pastiche, collage, intertextuality and literary cannibalism of varying degrees. One of the main subjects for poetry is the nature and problematic of poetry itself. There is, at the same time, a return of involvement in the Indian context, celebration of difference and the exploitation of ethnicity. This period has already produced noteworthy talents like Agha Shahid Ali, Saleem Peeradina, Manohar Shetty, Vikram Seth and Imtiaz Dharker. There are other poets, with published collections to their credit, waiting in the wings. Among these are Melanie Silgado, Bibhu Padhi, Sujata Bhatt, R. Raja Rao, Sanjiv Bhatla, Charmayne De Souza, Menka Shivdasani, Hoshang Merchant, Sudeep Sen, Tara Patel, Tabish Khair, Ranjit Hoskote, Jeet Thayil and Vijay Nambisan.

1.3 Check Your Progress.

Answer the following questions:

1. Which is India's first newspaper?

2. Who laid the foundations of the modern education system?

3. What is the poem 'The Fakeer of Jungheera' about?

4. Which Bengali epic did Michael Madhusudan Dutt write?

5. Which poet converted popular stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas into English verse?

6. What does Aurobindo's Savitri symbolize?

7. Why is Sarojini Naidu called 'the nightingale of India'?

8. Which are the various facets of love highlighted in Naidu's poetry?

9. Which is the only poem written in English by Tagore?

10. Which is the first collection of poetry by Ezekiel?

11. What does Moraes "Babur" suggest?

12. Who are the two Eliot figures of India?

1.4 Major themes dealt in Indian English Poetry

One cannot deny the fact that Indian poetry in English in the post - independence period is different from the poetry in the pre - independence period or rather colonial period. All literature, as Taine, the French critic said, is the product of the triad, the race, the moment and the milieu and since for the Indians the attainment of independence in 1947 marks a great watershed in the annals of India's political history, the period preceding independence was naturally full of political ferment and turmoil and the urge of the nationalist Indians to acquire a distinct national identity to avoid being brow - beaten by the imperialist forces.

The Time - spirit that permeated colonial India and began to permeate independent India were different. The sources of inspiration derived from the Indian ethos were ipso facto different. What England and America witnessed in the early part of the 20th century, India witnessed in the post - independence period. Indian English poetry therefore acquired a new dimension of modernity and modernist trait in the 50s when the English and the American poetry had acquired it in the 20s.

1.4.1 Pre-independence poetry themes

Poetry in English written in the colonial period, though of a different order, cannot be just dismissed as insignificant however imitative or derivative it may be. Whatever its deficiencies, it has no doubt certain areas of excellence in the works of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, Tagore and Ghose. Literary history shows how the succeeding generation tends to run down and disown the preceding generation, the predecessors.

Most of the early poetry was inspired by the Indian freedom struggle and the western romantics. Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghose and the Dutt family wrote romantic poetry highlighting the Indian culture and ethos. The themes were vivid like Indian legends and myths, epics like Ramayana, childhood memories under the Indian sun etc.

Sarojini Naidu with a deep sense of rhythm wrote romantic poetry basically. She also wrote about the unique Indian culture and nationality. Tagore and Aurobindo Ghose were philosophers and mystics. They put in the Indian philosophy of oneness of God, religion,

childhood, spirituality etc. Infact they both are even today the most widely read and critically evaluated Indian English poets.

1.4.2 Post - independence poetry themes

The post - independence poetry underwent a sea change as far as the themes are concerned. The poets are faced with the crisis of identity so their poetry is one of quest, a search of their self, a search for their cultural roots. The reason for such a theme of Indian poetry is not far to seek. The Indian poets who express themselves in English have their cultural roots in their community. Many of these Indian poets have been educated abroad but since they belong to the middle - class, they find themselves alienated within their own immediate circle and even from the westernized ethos.

Some of the poets come from different racial backgrounds but are nationals of India for example, Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew, Dom Moraes is an Anglo - Indian, Daruwalla and Jussawalla are Parsees, Eunice De Souza is a Goan Christian. The Indian poet writing in English therefore finds himself alienated. So the poetry of modern Indian poets naturally turns on the theme of identity crisis. Poets like Ramanujan, Parthasarthy and Arun Kolatkar are preoccupied with the problem of roots. Their examination of Hindu ethos has been in several directions. Ramanujan, for example, conjures up his early childhood memories with strong sense impressions. At the same time his mind keeps examining the strong and weak points of his cultural heritage. Parthasarthy too is obsessed with his roots in India while leading a westernized life style. His poem 'Rough Passages' is an attempt to deal with the theme of identity exposed to two cultures namely the Indian and the Western.

The scrutiny of society is another subject matter of modern poetry. The poets who write in English were born, say in the twenties and thirties of this century and on growing up they have been a part of independent India. They are a witness to and a part of socio - economic and political changes. They cannot but be critical of all that happens around. So the socio- political and economic scene as it impinges on the poet's consciousness becomes the subject - matter of modern poetry. Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is an example in point. A mood of disillusionment and despair, cynicism and sarcasm characterizes

modern Indian poetry.

Alienation and exile, the crisis of personal identity and of cultural identity, childhood memories, familial relations, and love, nostalgia for the past and cultural traditions therefore constitute the themes of Indian poets. In the case of some poets, the sense of alienation from the family or the community becomes so overwhelming that they turn completely inward. The result of such inwardness is a highly personal poetry, confessional in tone and obsessed with loneliness and insecurity from which the escape is sought either in the erotic fantasies or the self-probing of a tortured soul. Such is the poetry of Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza and Shiv Kumar.

The poets of the 80s seem more interested in depicting and evaluating their family background, personal and social landscapes. So do the poets Agha Shahid Ali, Dilip Chitre. Mahapatra portrays the rural Indian landscape of the state of Orissa.

The poets thus reveal their awareness of raw Indian identity. The poetic sensibilities are oriented along three distinct avenues: the modes of affirmation in terms of myth and history, quest for the self in and through love, modes of negation in terms of longing for dissolution and death. In other words, modern Indian poetry has centered itself around self in relation to society, history with family as the core unit and in relation to self, its own propelled emotions and feelings. So the themes of modern Indian poetry are secular and more introspective - contemplative.

1.4 Check Your Progress.

1. According to Taine, what is literature?

2. Name the two pre - independence poet - philosophers.

3. What were the pre - independence themes of Indian English poetry?

4. Name some of the poets who come from different racial backgrounds but are nationals of India.

5. Name the post - independence poets who are preoccupied with the problem of roots.

6. What are the reasons for expression of the poets in confessional mode?

7. Name some of the confessional poets.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter enables us to know that when one surveys the history of the evolution of Indian English poetry we realize that Indians have mastered the alien language, English with perfection. It was in an infant stage during the pre- independence stage but now it has grown up. Its increasing number of poets proves that it has been a successful medium of expression. At the same time, we find a variety of themes prevalent both in the pre and past independence period. There have been much experimentation in the past and they are ongoing still. The future may bring for admirers of Indian English poetry a new refreshing change.

The next chapter deals with the Indian English poet, Nissim Ezekiel with reference to his selected poems.

1.7 Summary

The Indian English poetry began far back before the independence. The credit of introducing Indians to English goes to Lord Macaulay. The Indian value of cultural assimilation was applied to English language. With English education, Indians befriended English making it a language of their intellectual as well as emotional make - up.

The pre - independence period poetry had imparted some great minds like Tagore, Dutt family and Aurobindo. Their poetry had themes like nationalism, nature, Indian culture, love etc. Most of the poets of those times wrote poetry in imitation but there were few genuine

figures too. Their poetry reflected their individualism.

Post - independence brought in a dawn of a new era of disillusionment and identity crisis. The promises of a bright future of India and the bitter experience of partition had made life miserable. A new elite middle class had come into existence bringing in a quest for identity as Indians and as humans. Diaspora and culturally rootedness had its own problems. These themes gave birth to new techniques and experimentation in poetry. Confessional mode of poetry explores the trauma of modern life. The poetry of the modern and the post - modern Indian poets reflect the contemporary society and life. It can be called an India in a miniature form.

Answers to Check Your Progress

1.2

1. The imitative, the assimilative and the experimental.
2. Saree
3. "Our Casuarina Tree"
4. free verse
5. "image-hunting"

1.3

1. 'Hicky's Bengal Gazette'
2. Lord Macaulay
3. Fusion of Byronic romance with social criticism of contemporary Indian mores
4. Meghnathbadh Kavya
5. Toru Dutt
6. Savitri realizes her divine potential and she returns to the earth as a symbol of what humanity can achieve.
7. Her poetry is melody - sound and sense combine to produce an emotion, as in music.
8. Love in union, love in longing, love in separation; the pain of love, the sin of love, the desire of love; earthly love, divine love and so on.

9. 'The Child'
10. A Time to change
11. Suggests his own sense of alienation from India
12. Lal and D. Narasimhaiah

1.4

1. literature, as Taine, the French critic said, is the product of the triad, the race, the moment and the milieu
2. Sri Aurobindo and Tagore
3. The themes were vivid like Indian legends and myths, epics like Ramayana, childhood memories under the Indian sun etc.
4. Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew, Dom Moraes is an Anglo - Indian, Daruwalla and Jussawalla are Parsees, Eunice De Souza is a Goan Christian.
5. Ramanujan, Parthasarthy and Arun Kolatkar
6. The result of inwardness is a highly personal poetry, confessional in tone and obsessed with loneliness and insecurity
7. Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza and Shiv Kumar

Field work

Read few poems of the poets we have examined in the chapter and try to critically analyze them on the basis of this background chapter.



