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**Rise of Indian Poetry in English**

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## Rise of Indian Poetry in English

India is a knowledge based civilization. It has always been following one of the greatest traditions of 'आनोभद्राःऋतवोयन्तुविश्वतः'. This open mindedness or the pursuit and acceptance of knowledge from anywhere in the world has been the tradition in India. When it comes to literary tradition one can trace the continuity in this tradition through the influence of Vedic Literature for thousands of years. This influence, in oral tradition, has survived and is intact to speak of the importance of knowledge in India since the oldest text the Rigved originated. Vedas are the impulse of all Indian literatures.

Scholars do take note of a break in this traditions after the foreign invasions where during the last millennium India came in contact with Persian and European civilizations. By the time, British took over India and established their hegemony to influence all spheres of life to colonize the ancient civilization with its rationalistic, individualistic and materialistic way of life. With their political take over, they established themselves to an extent to introduce their governing systems along with the education system as part of their strategy. Many critics have considered 'Indo-English' encounter as an embarkation of Indian modernisation and it has not only impacted the literary tradition of the country but it also altered social, political, economic, dynamics of the world.

Call it flexibility or compulsion on the part of English or language, more and more Indian words were added to their vocabulary and so was it in case of Indian languages. Sisir Kumar Das sees the spread of English language while studying it from historical perspective as 'the sovereignty of the English of the British Isles, and the centrality of English literature produced in England, has finally come to an end. English is the language of many nations and consequently of many literatures.' (19) Many Indians learned



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the language of the colonizers as a compulsion to fulfil various means. For them to adopt a foreign language in creative writing, they had to acquire the language to make it their own and so that they could also express their literary sentiments in English. According to Paranjape, 'Indianization' of English language and 'Anglicization' of Indians were two pre-requisites before they started writing in English.

The Indianisation of English language for communicating the Indian sensibilities and writing back using the linguistic tools of masters to give vent to their angst and aspirations gave birth to Indian writing in English. It began with the book called *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey through India* in 1794 wherein Dean Mahomet narrates his autobiographical journey. The book was the first insignia in Indian Writing in English. A K Mehrotra in his history book considers this book as '...the first book ever written and published by an Indian in English' which '...in the form of a series of letters to a fictive friend, is in large measure based on his experiences in the colonial army.' Furthermore, another remarkable Indian English historian M K Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* finds Boriah's 'Account of the Jains' published in *Asiatic Researches or Transactions of the Society instituted in Bengal for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Art, Science and Literature of Asia*, Vol. IX (London, 1809, written in c.1803) as appropriate of length and the first published composition by an Indian in English. He writes that it 'is perhaps the first published composition in English of some length by an Indian.' (Naik 14) Many critics and scholars of the time derogatorily commented on Indian Writing in English. In 'Does Language Matter?', a piece which appeared in the *Times of India* of 26 March 1988, Sham Lal, a former editor of the paper ended it by saying:

There was a time when a British writer jeeringly described Indian writing in English as "Matthew Arnold in a *sari*" and an Indian professor hastened to correct him and said it would be more appropriate to compare it to a "Shakuntala in skirts". (As quoted in Mehrotra 21)

Initially, it was mimicking in nature and its origin traits can better be understood as it is 'being a progeny of



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this encounter overtly mimicked the more dominant parent; viz. the British, especially in its formative years' (Nair 1). At the same time, it was retaining the defining characters of the country of its origin. In spite of being a product of such complications, it later evolved and assumed a reasonably rich and independent identity of its own.

Indian writing in English has been identified in various ways. These identities were elaborately studied by major historians. Paranjape comprehensively discusses it in his latest anthology as,

...“Indo-Anglian,” itself was invented as early as 1883 in a volume printed in Calcutta containing “specimen Compositions from Native Students” (Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 3). “Indo-English,” and “Indian literature/writing/fiction/poetry/drama in English” have also been popular ways of naming this literature. The term “Indian English” has been in use since the 1960’s in a sense similar to, say, African American or French Canadian literature. Despite the SahityaAkademi’s official endorsement of it in the early 1980’s, as evidenced in M.K. Naik’s *History of Indian English Literature* and the Akademi’s use of it since, “Indian English” is yet to be universally accepted...“Indian English” poetry, “Indian Poetry in English,” and “Indo-Anglian” poetry are both accepted and current. (*Indian* 4)

Indian Writing in English developed in various phases: first phase was of translations, essays and letters of Raja Rammohan Roy and others. Second phase was the rise of Indian poetry in English with poets like H L V Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghose, M M Dutt and Toru Dutt. The third phase was the emergence of Indian novels in English initiated with *Rajmohan’s Wife* in 1864 by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

The development pace of Indian Writing in English was very gradual and it took almost a century to reach at a perceptible place. It is also pertinent to understand the periodization of Indian Writing in English as per the important social, political or literary events. The periodization was in a way difficult task to accomplish as the beginning of Indian Writing in English neither had clear cut literary trends nor any literary schools henceforth to which all the three major historians periodized differently. Paranjape (*Indian* 8), in introduction of *Indian Poetry in English*, put forth a solution of classifying with combination of prevailing political and poetical ideologies, and classifies various phases of Indian Writing in English. He affirms the



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first phase “colonialism” from 1825-1900, the next phase is “nationalism” which extends up to 1947 or 1950, then “modernism” from 1950-1980 and the most recent is “post-modernism”. He also offers the last two phases with alternative classification of “neo-colonialism” and “post-colonialism” respectively.

Iyengar, one of the major historians, in his history book mentioned the social and political encounters of the Indo-West first and then focused on the first Indian educated Englishman Raja RammohanRoy. However, the poetry form was more effective literary form in the first half of the nineteenth century and took birth much earlier than the novel and other forms. With H L V Derozio and M M Dutt, Indian poetry in English rose gradually which was, later, with the poetry of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu growing to its maturity. MakarandParanjape studying the social and cultural contexts of this poetry states that it began ‘in Bengal and it was centred in Calcutta.’ Further he commenting on expansion says ‘it moved to other urban centres such as Madras and Bombay...’ (*Indian 3*)

Early Indian poetry in English, tried to address the contemporary Indian society with English literary trends, has, often, been critiqued and questioned for its authenticity. As Eunice notes in her introduction to *Early Indian Poetry in English* ‘Nineteenth-century Indian poetry in English has generally received bad press. It has been dismissed as imitative, tepid, un-Indian, unpatriotic, and interesting only as sociology.’(XV) This poetry raised slowly with questions but surely grew. At the beginning, there were very few Bengali poets, who were truly able to compose the poetry in English, were coming from different wakes of life. Paranjape commenting on the poets says ‘as English was an elite language in India, Indian poets in English came from the upper classes and castes.’ He also adds,

These poets, or Anglo-Indians as they were called were outnumbered by the English people who were also composing the poetry on the Indian subjects. The term “Anglo-Indian literature” came to include not just the work of English writers on Indian themes, but also of Eurasians and “native” Indians in English(*Indian 3*).

The nineteenth century saw major poets like Henry Derozio(1809-1831), Michael Madhusudan



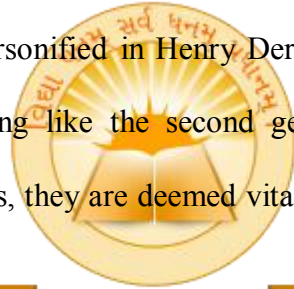
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Dutt(1824-1873) and Toru Dutt (1856-1877) among minor poets like KashiprashadGhose(1809-1873), Cavally Brothers, Hasan Ali, P. Rajagopaul, Mohan Lal, GovindChunder Dutt(1828-1884), Ram Sharma(1837-1918), RomeshChunder Dutt(1848-1909) and BehramjiMerwanjiMalabari(1853-1912) voicing their aspirations and angst in the colonizer's lingo. The poets were famously called "The Young Bengal" who heralded the literary Renaissance in Bengal in general and Calcutta in particular. Some of these poets were also known as the *Derozians* because it was Derozio who ignited this flame. The way Derozio explored a path against the set order prompted many others to follow. He and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, were associated with the Hindu College, later known as the Presidency College, which became an intellectual power hub because it housed many young men simmering with rational ideas. The hallmark of the Bengal Renaissance, adopting from the Romantics, was an acute sense of individualism and rationalism. These very Romantics' qualities were personified in Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Toru Dutt, three young poets, who died young like the second generation Romantics poets. Though, their contribution inspired from Romantic poets, they are deemed vital to the treasure house of Indian Writing in English during the nineteenth century.



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