



Forlorn Voices of Indian English Poetry with Special Reference to Bengal

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Abstract

In order to appreciate the significance of the Indo-Anglican achievement in poetry, one has to remember the innumerable Indo-Anglican boats that capsized on the sea of poetry. Some of these were never more than paper-boats, hardly carrying any merchandise other than the writer's own impatient longing for fame. On the other hand, a number of promising writers adorned the galaxy of Indo-Anglican poetry and thereby enriched its stock and quickened the pace of its growth and expansion. In this context the contribution of Bengal to the growth of Indo-Anglican literature has been immense and remarkable.

Keywords- Indo-Anglican, Bengal,

Introduction:

All those who are interested in studying the growth of Indian English poetry owe a special debt of gratitude to Theodore Douglas Dunn for having selected and arranged a large number of early poems by a few talented Bengali writers in *The Bengali Book of English Verse*. The work of Dunn has served as a repository of the earliest writers.

Henry Vivian Derozio

The first quarter of the 19th century was the period of incubation for Indo-Anglican poetry and Henry Vivian Derozio was the moving spirit then. Derozio was Indian only on his mother's side, his father being a Portuguese. A poet as well as a teacher of poetry, Derozio loved India and loved Nature; and he also loved his students whom he addressed in his inspiring poem,

To the Pupils of the Hindu College.

As a poet his achievements are creditable and promising. Like Keats and Chatterton before him, like Toru Dutt and Aru Dutt after him, Derozio moved in the fields of poetry for all too brief a period; all of them were alike in the Shalleyn phrase, "inheritors of unfulfilled renown." He died of Cholera on 23rd December 1831. Mr. Oaten condoled his death in these words, "what English literature lost through the early death of Keats, Anglo-Indian lost, in lesser degree when Derozio died; for in both men there was a passionate temperament combined with unbounded sympathy with nature, both died while their powers were not yet fully developed."

As a poet, Derozio was obviously influenced by the Romantics—notably Byron, Scott and Moore. His *The Fakir of Jungheera*, is full of Byronic echoes; and the ardent social reformer too peeps through the poem with a face twisted by pain and also lit up with a hope for future. Derozio totally identified himself with India and hence he has been called the National Bard of Modern India, a true predecessor of the great poets of future.

David Lester Richardson continued the noble tradition established by Derozio. His poems and essays offer us a delightful reading. His selection from the British poets published in 1840, shows his liberal view at the range of literature. He was a very good scholar of Shakespeare and his role as a patron of education in Calcutta cannot be, in any way minimized. The teaching of Professor Richardson exercised a wholesome influence on the future life of Govin Chunder Dutt.

Kashiprasad Ghosh (1809-1873)

Kashiprasad Ghose was one of the first Indians to publish a regular volume of English verse. Ghosh started writing very early while he was at college. His review of Mill's *History of British India* was printed in the *Government Gazette*. He wrote *The Vision- a Tale*, *On Bengali Writers*, *On Bengali Works and Writers* and *The Shair and Other Poems*. One of the poems in this book was commended by D. L. Richardson in these words: "Let some of those narrow minded persons who are in the habit of looking down on the natives of India with arrogant and vulgar contempt read this little poem and ask themselves –could they write better verses not in a foreign tongue but their own."

The Shair relates the story of a minstrel whose lady –love dies and who throws himself into the sea in a grief. The style is ornate, full of conventional epithets, metaphors and similes

usually from Bengali or Sanskrit poetry. Dasahara is a hymn in praise of the Ganges. ‘Glorious River’, ‘propitious river’, ‘holy stream’, ‘beauteous river, and dreadful river’ are the epithets used for invocation. The Ganges descended from the peak of Himalaya

Where (thy) lucid waters stray,

Dispensing to the gods above

Purity and holy love.

The common man reveres her as the mother Ganges whose water absolves him of all sins:

Holy stream, thou doth bestow

Freedom from each earthly woe

Destroying all the sins that be

Pertaining to humanity,

And ensure at being’s close,

Sweet and undisturbed repose.

The Lotus – a symbolic offering –swings, with petals wide opened, with her tide. The Lotus, the Bhagwat Gita tells us, is a symbol: it is in the river, yet always above it, not a drop can stay on its leaves. Human beings, it signifies, should be in this physical world and yet above its temptations.

In gladness doth its leaves unfold

Full to the morning's beam of gold,

As if inspired with the love

Of the majestic sun above.

The poet has an eye for beauty of nature. He resembles Crashaw and Wordsworth in his treatment of the Lotus flower as a symbol and a teacher.

To a Young Hindu Widow

The deplorable condition of a widow has been described by the poet in this song of lament. He addresses the young widow in heart –rending words:

Ah, fair one; lone as desert flower,

Whose bloom and beauty are in vain...

Like a diseased limb she is dismembered and cast aside. She must not indulge in any joy, nor must she hope for any blessings.

And thou art doomed to be at strife

For ever with thyself, to quell

The very elements of life,

And every brighter thought repel.

Storm and Rain

In this poem the poet approaches the subject from the classical point of view:

The mighty demons of the storm have met

In battle fierce. Relentless anger fires

Their bosom, proud of desolating power.

Their swords in rapid wavings flash; and oft...

The above lines at once suggest to us Shelley, and Byron. Kashiprasad Ghosh has the gifted eye and the poetic impulse but is handicapped by the foreign medium.

Rajnarain Dutt (1824-1889)

Song from Uswyn: The poem purports to be a Bedouin war song describing how they ride out to kill the enemy. It appears to be worked on the model of Byron's Destruction of Sennacherib. The lines ring with marital music:

O'er the hill and o'er valley they ride with the blast

Ah! Blood shall soon mark where those footsteps have past,

Like the lightening they come, like the lightening they go,

To work out destruction and slaughter and woe."

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873)

Michael Madhusudan Dutt is the one poet who matters in the Bengali renaissance of the early 19th century. A Hindu by birth, he embraced Christianity and led a chequered life and died in the prime of his youth.

He wrote verse principally on such subjects as love, misanthropy and patriotism. He had a great longing to visit England. He wrote:

“I sigh for Albion’s distant shore,
Its valleys green, its mountains high;
Though friends, relations have I none,
In that far clime yet, oh, I sigh,
To cross the vast Atlantic wave,
For glory, or a nameless grave.”

Poetry was in his blood. He was a passionate admirer of Byron and sent poems to the Blackwood’s Magazine dedicating them to Wordsworth. Two longer pieces, *The Captive Ladie* and *Visions of the Past*, some sonnets and lyrics from his quota of English verse. His fame now rests solely on his great Bengali Epic *Meghnad-Badha* of which an English rendering was published in 1879. His long metrical romance in English *The Captive Lady*, won general approval with its Byronic fluency and gusto. “It is well told and shows Michael’s command over English metrical forms.”

He has been a great inspiration to successive generations of poets. In his *In Memorium* the poet Nabokissen Ghose (Ram Sharma) wrote as follows:

Hushed is the tuneful voice that thrilled the soul,
Silent the lyre, whose swelling notes did roll,
In streams of music sweet that did impart

A life-a soul even to the dullest heart.

The Dutt Family Album

It contained the collected poems of a brilliant set of Bengalis and was produced in 1870. From the date of its publication it is obvious that the young poets were inspired, by the example and success of Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Govin, Hur, Greece and Omesh belonged to the famous Dutt family of Rambaghan whom Richardson called, “the nest of singing birds of Rambaghan.” They belonged to the third generation and not quite divorced from older traditions looked to the west for regeneration. *The Dutt Family Album* (1870) containing about 200 poems was written by Omesh Chunder Dutt, Govin Chunder Dutt, Greece Chunder Dutt, Hur Chunder Dutt, three of whom were the sons of Rasamoy Dutt, the secretary of Hindu College Committee and commissioner of the Court of Requests. It is a work of great interest and importance. In the Preface, the joint authors declare it to be the piece of ‘a curiosity’ and one of ‘foreigners, natives of India ... educated out of India. In fact, this *Album* is the first to ‘represent the older school of Bengali poetry in English.’ The quality of the verse, the range and variety of theme, the command of various metrical forms and the restraint and dignity of style are everywhere pleasing. Indian history, legend and landscape, the picturesque elements of the Christian and the Hindu faith, and such ideas as would attract an Oriental in his first intercourse with the West; provide the subject of their poems.

Govin was a linguist and had an inborn gift of poetry. “Of him it might almost be said that he lisped in numbers for the numbers came.” Govin Chunder, the father of Toru Dutt, made

remarkable contributions to the *Album*. It is didactic in nature and themes are drawn either from Christian theology or in narratives from the Scriptures. He had a wonderful command of an intricate stanza form. At an early age he published a small volume of verses which was appreciated by the Blackwood Magazine and the Calcutta Review, 1849. The *Album* throws light on the atmosphere of Govin's house, an ideal atmosphere by all means for Aru Dutt and Toru Dutt. His *Song from the Bengali* is a translation of a lover's song and reproduce the familiar sentiment so well and oft repeated in the songs of Shakespeare. The rhymes are perfect and the imagery is conventional; "serpent gaze", "twin born blush and smile". The theme is, "Frailty, thy name is woman."

To Lord Canning, is written in vindication of Lord Canning. Govin's poem was dictated by his love of justice and fair play.

A Farewell to Romance is one his great poems written under the combined influence of Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth. The poem gives us an insight into his love of nature. The poem opens like Scott's Farewell;

"Farewell- a long farewell-to thee, Romance;

We may not meet as we have met before..."

Lines is one of his religious and didactic poems. Govin Chunder recalled to his 'inward eye' his 'own dear native home' in his poem *Home. In Night on the Ganges* Govin acknowledges the higher power of nature like Wordsworth.

Hur Chunder and Greece Chunder shared Govin's literary gift. In the year 1851, Hur Chunder Dutt produced in Calcutta a small volume of poetry called *Fugitive Pieces*, many of which were reprinted twenty years later in his second volume named *Lotus Leaves*. Both works

are slight but they contain a variety of themes drawn from Indian history. Hur Chunder was a regular contributor to the pages of the Bengal Magazine and the author of two beautiful works entitled *Writings, Spiritual, Moral and Poetic* and *Heart Experience or Thoughts for Each day of the Month*. His volume of verses was the *Fugitive Pieces*, *Lotus Leaves* and his contributions to the *Dutt Family Album* were in addition to these. To the *Dutt Family Album*, he contributed only 11 poems. Dunn remarks, "Both volumes are slight but they contain a pleasing variety of themes drawn from Indian history and the verse is graceful."

Girish Chunder's best work is *Cherry Blossoms* published in 1887. He had no children and as compensation studied with his wife Classics in French and German. *To the Dutt Family Album*, he contributed 47 separate pieces. The author had specialized in the sonnet form. Mrs. Lotika Basu makes the following remarks about Girish's works: "Cherry Blossoms contains sonnets and lyrics on various subjects. Many of his sonnets are on religious themes.

Their cousin Shoshee Chunder, was a voluminous writer in English. His historical studies are his best known works. *The Vision of Sumeru* and *My Native Land* are two of his best poems. The success of his writing lay in the extreme ease and felicity of his style, directness of narrative, brilliant anecdote, quite humour, and chaste sentiment. From the consideration of his poems it is evident that Soshee would have excelled in historical portraiture if had preserved and not shifted his loyalty. In due course of time then he would have acquired a fair working knowledge of prosaody.

Omesh Chunder Dutt, also well known as a French and German scholar, was a nephew of Govin Chunder. Attracted by the legends of India he wrote original verses in English and made metrical translations from some of the French and German poets. The major portion of the poems in *The Dutt Family Album* is his work. It is unfortunate that his "undoubted talent for narratives

did not find greater scope in the abundant historical material of India.”²³ He wrote various types of poems on Indian history, legend and landscape; the picturesque elements of Christianity and Hinduism and new ideas arising out of the western contact. He excels in ballad writing. His poems *The Chief of Pokurna*, *The Hindu Wife to Her Husband*, *Hymn to Siva*, two *Sonnets- War and Peace* are remarkable.

Romesh Chunder and after him Toru were the brightest jewels of the family of litterateurs. “The Dutts did not share in the general belief that English education served only to undermine the deep-rooted ancient faiths and the ideas of life cherished by the Indian people; they saw in it the hope of a new intellectual life and a means of gradually uplifting the whole nation. Poetry seemed to be as natural to them as songs to birds. Romesh Chunder was brought up under the influence of his uncle, Shoshee Chunder, who wielded a prolific pen. He had a keen eye “for the sublime and beautiful in Nature and art.” His contemplative mind reveled in the beauty and splendeur of Scottish scene.

Maharaja Sir Jotindra Mohan Tagore (1831-1908)

Dunn in his anthology has given four samples of the Maharaja’s verse: *An Indian Wreath*, *the Rajput Soldier’s Farewell*, *the Gopee’s Address to the Kokil* and *Origin of the Kamini Flower*. *An Indian Wreath* and *Origin of the Kamini Flower* are poems on flowers. The style is heavy and is a combination of the 18th century diction with romantic touch and approach as was the case with the poets of the transition- Thomson, Gray and Collins. Some of the flowers also have the symbolic value and suggest suitable comparisons with human beings. *The Rajput Soldier’s Farewell* is a farewell song and is particularly winning by its melody, which is due to the refrain. In *The Gopee’s address to the Kokil*, like the nightingale in western poetry, the

Kokil symbolizes melancholy in Indian poetry. The Gopees have been deserted by Krishna and Kokil's song increases their agony:

“Past and gone are those sweet days,
And all our joys are o'er.
The songs but and remembrance raise,
Oh! Sing thy lays no more, sweet bird!
Oh! Sing thy lays no more.”

Nobo Kissen Ghose (Ram Sharma) (1837-1918)

Of the early writers in Bengal he was the most prolific and wrote as much verse and as much varied as was possible. He was conscious of his talents and he dedicated his muse to the betterment of society, socially, politically and religiously. During his period of adjustment between the West and the East, he wrote courageously and conveyed his feelings to his masters in their own tongue. He wrote considerable prose and when he was moved he wrote verse, at once passionate and effective. He was the man of the world, a religious, man and a poet. In his poems are combined these three threads. His seriousness and puritanical instincts place him on par with Milton. There is another division of his verses – the Memorial Verses. As a tribute to the motherland he translated the Bande-matram song. Mrs. Lotika Basu estimates his work in these words: “His long poems are full of allusions to Indian thoughts and legends. The Swayamber of Princess Lila shows that he can tell a story simply and connectedly, but his poems do not show any originality in style or treatment.” Even in this depreciation there is an admission of two salient features of Ram Sharma's poetry. First that his longer poems are full of allusions

to Indian thought and legends. This is what we can never get from a foreigner who writes on an Indian subject. If the Indian poets writing in English do not refer to Indian thoughts and legends, it is no use their taking up their pens at all. Secondly that Ram Sharma can tell a story simply and connectedly. What more was needed? If he could tell a tale well and weave its threads into a pattern and stage it against an Indian background of thoughts and legends, he would have marched far on the highway to success. The only thing lacking in his equipment would have been mastery of form. That he could have acquired only by apprenticing himself to better masters of art.

Born amid most unpoetic environments in a busy and crowded quarter of Calcutta, yet he was an ardent lover of nature. His method of writing poetry was peculiar though not uncommon. His style was indeed great. Roll and majesty, stateliness of march, sonorous music, harmony of proportion, a strong grasp of the subject, equality of power and splendor through the shelving heights of imagination, a majesty and purity in the conduct of thought and a music in the majesty which fills it with exquisite grace and loveliness, all belong to it.

In the Shiva Ratri and the Bhagwat Gita he attempts a more sustained flight; makes a more decided claim to take rank along with contributors to English literature; and in our judgment these poems are worthy companions to Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia. There are many passages giving such pure expression to the better aspiration of the human heart and they appeal with equal force to Eastern and Western.

“Self-lessness, -

Self – sacrifice, that seeketh no reward,

And found regard for everything that lives-

That's man's highest, noblest duty here."

His long poems are "Willow Drops", "Mohinee" or the Hindu Maiden; "The Last Day"; "The Lay of the Dagon of Wrays", "Shiva Ratri"; "Bhagwati Gita" and "Daksha Jajna: How it fell through". These poems are his solid contribution to Indo-Anglican literature. Moreover, they shall endear his name to his own countrymen. The fare provided in them is rich, familiar and native. The narrative is simple, flowing and haunting.

It is a part of his distinction that he was the first to write patriotic poems in the exact sense of the word. He wrote four poems: India to Britain, To England, To the Men of India and To Indian Patriots. He translated the famous Sanskrit national anthem of Bande Matram into English. Here is an excerpt from the anthem:

"Mother, to thee I bow;
Rich with fine streams and fruits art thou;
Cool breezes, cornfields green are thine,
Mother mine; "

Ram Sharma has made an effort to catch the music of the original and reproduce the rich diction.

Narendranath Dutt (Swami Vivekananda) 1863-1902

Narendranath Dutt, the renounced missionary disciple of Sri Ram Krishna, belonged to the holy order of mystics. Poetry, being the language of ideals moved him strongly. "Wordsworth was to him the fixed star of the poetic firmament." He wrote poems in English and

Bengali. These poems lie scattered in his printed works. He did not believe in literary excellence and melody unless there was something to be conveyed.

According to the classification of mystic poets made by Caroline swami Vivekananda is a “devotional and religious mystic. He followed a system of philosophy, but it was only as a means to the attainment of the Divine presence. In the words of Boehme he was a “kernel” man. Amongst Indian writers of English verse, he ranks as the pioneer poet of mysticism. He set a tradition which was to include celebrities like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyay. Prafulla Ranjan Das is his immediate successor in this direction. This innovation was not something new but a reversion to the older and native tradition. “Back to the past” even in a foreign medium.

He is a Vedantist and regards life as a test for the soul on the path of attainment. Here is an example:

This is your task. It has no joy nor grace,
But ‘tis not meant for any other hand,
And in thy universe hath measured place.
Take it (the cup). I do not bid you understand.
I bid you close your eyes to see My face.

In addition to his spiritual poems, he wrote few more of topical interest. A number of his songs composed in Bengali were later translated. The Song of the Sannyasin is the longest of his English poems.

Gosain Ram Tirath (Swami Rama Tirath) 1873-1906

The saint of the land of the five rivers, Rama was by heart a poet and a collection of his poems in the Vernacular and English runs to 300 pages. These poems lie scattered all over his letters. Puran Singh and C.F. Andrews have noticed his poetic fire in their works on his life and writings. As a poet he communed with Nature. “He lived with the poetic spirit of Nature, and he was on terms of great intimacy with her.” Nature, its joys, peace and calm and its fury appear in his poems. Its calm uplifted him and its fury destroyed him, which meant to him the same thing.

C. F. Andrews in his introduction to the collection of Rama’s Writings and speeches makes three separate remarks on his poetic spirit, the value of his poems and their lack of finish. He wrote, “I experience in a measure the same sympathy when I read some of the poetry of the Upanishads or certain passages from that greatest of all Hindu poems – Bhagwad Gita. There also the note is struck which is heard many times in his writings ...” Swami Ram Tirath’s poetic spirit, which lies behind his philosophy, the highest value of his written work. In this sense to be its freshness, its originality, its contribution to the world of thought. His romantic love of nature, strong in his life as in his death, his passion for sacrifice and renunciation, his eager thirst for reality, self abandonment in search of Truth, his joy and laughter of the soul in the victory he had won; all these and other qualities, such as these which make him break out into song reveal the true poet behind the philosopher...” Here is an example from his poem Transcendentalism:

In you the highest Heaven lies,
Your mind to outer object flies;
Turn inward, know the self supreme,
No more shall maladies be seen.

Prafulla Ranjan Das:

Prafulla is one of the minor poets included by Dunn in his anthology. No details are available either about his life or work. From his poems we guess that more or less he was a mystic following the footprints of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Ram Thirtha. *Refusal*, *The Quest* and *A Lament* are mystic poems and deal with the human soul, eternity and immortality. These three subjects form the crux of Indian philosophy and literature.

Immortality is the theme of the lovely lyric, *A Lament*. His pure lyrical genius is seen in the last song: *Youth and Age*. Love never grows old and it consecrates the happiest moment of its first consummation. The poet and his love both are old, yet they had been young. They had hoped they would never grow aged:

Your life was of the sun and flower,
But mine was of the autumn leaf,
And we imagined every hour
Would take us farther from our grief,
Forgetting time, the thief;

It is as exquisite as the lyrics of Robert Bridges. Love in the lover's eye matures not. Robert Bridges sang in melancholy melody: "I have loved flower that fade." Prafulla's flowers do not fade. Swami Vivekananda, Rama and Prafulla are the earliest mystic poets of India who wrote in English verse.

Indian writing in English was but one manifestation of the new creative urge in India—what is often referred to as the literary renaissance in India. The exhausted, almost barren, native soil received the new rich fertilizer from the west; this cross-fertilization of eastern and western ideas is the root of the Indian renaissance, which took place in 19th century. In this renaissance the Dutts—Michael Madhusudan, Govin Chunder and his brothers and Toru Dutt —played a prominent role.

Another factor that inspired the Indo-Anglican to attempt self-expression in English was the meritorious work of the Anglo-Indian poets. Sir William Jones, John Layden, Henry Derozio, Meredith Parker, David Lester Richardson, Sir Edwin Arnold and William Waterfield were among the many Anglo-Indian administrators and Orientalist who derived their poetic inspiration from traditional Indian themes, and thus added a new chapter to the story of English poetry. Indians who read the work of these poets were in turn inspired to try their own hands at poetic composition. They had before them the unique achievements of Anglo-Indians and the great masters—Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson etc. as models—of English literature.

The Indo-Anglicans of the early days were the creators of a civilization checked on the way; their past was full of humiliations and frustrations, and their future was an intriguing and uncertain thing. They were, in a state of spiritual drift and aimlessness. By and by the clouds began to clear, and out of the life giving rains of a new culture they tried to rediscover their souls. In this process of re-discovery, Bengali led the way, but others were not slow to follow.

The renaissance in modern Indian literature begins with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who was destined to act as bridge between India and England. He was an indefatigable worker, a fighter, a builder of modern India, in whom the seer, the idealist, the reformer and the shrewd man of affairs were fused in admirable proportion and made him a veritable Titan among man.

These are the forlorn voices of Indian English poetry whose contribution we can never forget as they dug the trenches and sent out saps and feelers here and there and brought to fruition their efforts in a remarkable fashion.

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