

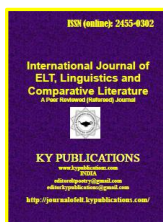


INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

The sense of nationality or the spirit of nationalism inevitably grows out of the discovery of identity. During the pre-Independence period, this discovery is engaged in various ways. The poets, while constructing their cultural identity construct the identity of the nation. Thus, the concentrated Endeavour of the poets during pre-Independence period is inevitably directed towards the revelation of the spirit of nationalism.

Introduction

Many of the young men who received the blessings of a dynamic education in the new schools were fired with the ambition to put India once more on the cultural map of the world. They yearned to make their seemingly dumb country articulate once again. This meant naturally that they should themselves write, either in English or their own mother-tongues. They should write in English so that they could easily compel the attention of their English 'masters' and also reach their own countrymen in different linguistic areas. Indian English literature was born out of this excitement.

Indian English poetry had its humble beginnings in this environment of growing craze for English education and English literature. The Renaissance period gave tremendous flip for self-assertion and the first attempt was made in 1830 by Kashiprasad Ghose. His *The Shair and Other Poems* brought the flavour of local tradition in Bengal. Henry Derozio and Michael Madhusadan Dutt were his contemporaries.

Along with the contemporary socio-religious situation, the forceful writing of Rammohun Roy was a shaping influence on the body of Indian English poetry. H. M. Williams (1987: 1) 'His (Roy's) influence extends through the Dutts, Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and on the Sri Aurobindo Ghose'. Further he says: 'This continuity I find strongly related to the development of Indian self-awareness and national aspirations'. As he points out, the cultural response to the challenge of British rule resulted mainly into 'cultural nationalism' and Indian English poetry was the bold expression of this.

In its historical perspective, Indian English poetry reveals three main stages in its growth and development. These three stages may be indicated as - Imitation, Indianization and Individualization. The period of Imitation is the earliest when poets like Kashiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusadan Dutt and the contributors of Dutt Family Album wrote verses entirely in imitation of the English poets like Scott, Byron, Wordsworth and others. However, though the early Indian English poetry was imitative, it attempted to recreate Indian sensibility by portraying Indian milieu. In theme and treatment, no doubt, it followed European models. It was deficient in rich Indian details, but it used incidents from Indian history, myths and legends and Hindu rituals. This was the first stage in the creation of national awakening which slowly geared up through the corpus of Indian English poetry to capture its own voice. Though these early poets have not contributed anything of substantial value, they have earned their place as the pioneers who laid foundation for the beautiful edifice of Indian English poetry.

The second stage - that of Indianization- begins with Torn Dutt. The other practitioners of this stage - Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore enriched this phase of poetry with their exhaustive



treatment of Indian themes. They explored the rich heritage of India and revived the Indian culture and history and confirmed its own voice and with it, the national identity. This phase is complementary to Hinduism.

In the third stage, that of 'Individualization', each poet has his own particular outlook and particular utterance. The Indian English poetry while passing through the period of Individualization turned inward and explored the realms which the earlier poets failed to enter. Here is an intensely experienced personal realisation which is integrated to the world around. This individualization in its best aspect has reached its apex in the later poetry of Sri Aurobindo. His poetry has supreme spiritual stature and it bears the stamp of the profound mantric utterance of ancient rishis. Modern Indian English poets also belong to this phase. The individualistic utterances have enriched the Indian sensibility by depicting the Indian details. The details of Indian life are available in abundance with all the rich Indian sensibility.

Though these are transition phases of Indian English poetry, the common thread that links them together is the Indian sensibility. In the first transition phase, the sensibility is weak. In the second phase, it is exhaustive and in the third, it is precise, rich and truly indigenous.

These phases encompass the socio-political development in India which naturally gets reflected in literature regenerating nationalistic spirit. And so, they would be quite useful in discussing 'nationalism' in Indian poetry in English.

Nationalism

The course of nationalism in pre-Independence Indian poetry in English can be determined by different aspects of nationalism. Indian nationalism manifested itself in various stages in its growth. Naturally, the various aspects of nationalism are the direct outcome of the growth of nationalism in general. In the foregoing discussion on Indian nationalism, in Chapter II, the different aspects of nationalism are clearly revealed. Here an attempt is made to enlist and interpret the different aspects of nationalism reflected in the text of Indian English poetry.

The various aspects can be enlisted as: the search for identity, the glorification of the past, the social and reformative zeal, the patriotic fervour and the political aspect of the struggle for freedom.

The Search for Identity

One aspect of nationalism is the spirit of self-assertion or self-identification and the poems reflecting this spirit rightly carry out the search for identity.

The act of self-assertion can be perceived as anti-colonial in spirit. The renaissance spirit cultivated through English language and literature awakened the Indians for self-assertion or self-identification. What did prompt the poets for self assertion? It is the process of cultural colonisation of India started in the early nineteenth century motivated the Indian poets for self-assertion. The enslaved consciousness in the Indians slowly withered away with the touch of renaissance and for the first time they realised their cultural identity

The Christian missionaries depicted Indian society and religion in a derogatory manner to promote proselytisation. A very dark picture of inferiority of the Indians in every field of life was painted, be it religious, social or about scientific progress. Indian culture was looked down upon and the superiority of British culture was advocated to impress the Indian mind. This biased propaganda of the Christian missionaries was a challenge which was counter noted by rediscovering India's glorious past and cultural heritage in English language.

This cultural challenge was faced effectively by the Indians. In their zeal to show that they are by no means inferior to their rulers, they then make a search for their own identity and try to affirm it. And this is the first stage of the assertion of national identity. The derogatory attitude of the rulers incited the Indian elites to assert themselves and the Indians, educated in the new system of Western education through the medium of English started eulogising Indian tradition and culture. They found in the English language an excellent medium of rediscovery and creative statement.



This act of self-assertion or self-identification led the Indians to distinguish their manners and customs, religious and social institutions and culture and civilization. There are a number of poems depicting Indian customs and manners and folk tales, mythological tales and legends. This aspect of nationalism very boldly asserted in the poetry of Torn Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. To generate pride in being an Indian was the motivating force behind these creative writers. The act of self-identification rightly promotes pride and unity amongst the Indians in the colonial period. So the search for identity in the religious and cultural past is nationalistic and at the same time Hindu in spirit. So the act of self-assertion can be perceived as a Hindu nationalism.

Hindu Nationalism

The act of self-assertion or self-identification is an off-shoot of Hindu nationalism. In the second phase 1857 to 1920, the search for identity is wholly imbued by Hindu nationalism. The poets like Torn Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and others have specifically explored the rich tradition of Hinduism through their themes and characters. Hinduism is the watch-word of their poetry. So it is necessary to understand the concept of Hindu nationalism.

Hindu nationalism has been defined as a feeling of pride in the ancient glory of the Hindu culture and tradition. It discards the Western ideas and is solely inspired by Hindu culture and tradition. It is believed that the Hindus are bound together by most sacred and most enduring bonds of a common Fatherland and common Holy land. Hinduism accepts the authority of Vedas which are foundational scriptures of Hindus. It is not dogmatic or authoritarian religion. Hinduism, as a faith, is indefinable, amorphous, many-sided accepting to all men. Mahatma Gandhi defines it as the search after truth, a religion of truth. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth, a religion of truth. Whatever the word we may use, Indian or Hindustani for our cultural tradition, derived from the Indian philosophic outlook was the dominant feature of Indian culture and even social development.

In Hinduism, the alliance of reason and revelation is responsible for the kinship of religion and philosophy in India. In East, philosophy has always been regarded as a way of life, an avenue to spiritual realisation. Inquiry into truth is means to spiritual freedom. Thus, philosophy in India is the pathway to religion.

All these features strengthen the spirit of Hindu or Indian Nationalism. Though the terms Hindu Nationalism and Indian Nationalism seem different, it is not easy to separate them. They are not competitive but complementary phenomena.

Indian English poetry of the period 1857 to 1920 gives an ardent expression of Hinduism. To generate the spirit of Hindu Nationalism, the contemporary socio - cultural factors are responsible. The revival of Hinduism was at its peak and the zeal of social reforms were subsided. The contemporary socio-religious organisations like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Ramakrishna Mission influenced the character of Indian English poetry. All this contributed to the promotion of Hinduism and that was the need of time.

With the dawn of twentieth century, the nationalist movement in India became more agitational. With the partition of Bengal in 1905, the extremists dominated the political scene. The moderates who dominated the Indian National Congress believed in the development of liberal, secular nationalism. They sought inspiration from the Western countries. But the Extremists led by Tilak, Aurobindo, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai and others sought to rely on aggressive Hinduism. The nationalism of the Extremists had a religious tinge. Sri Aurobindo, Bipin Chandra Pal, advocated spiritual type of nationalism.

The Glorification of the Past

The second aspect of nationalism is the glorification of the past or the discovery of the past. Behind the glorification of the past lies the spirit of the regeneration of the nation. The people of a country are enthused by this spirit generally in the first stage of the development of nationalism. The search for the glories



of past is a sort of an Endeavour for self-assertion and this appears in the first stage of development of national spirit in the country. Thus, the assertion of the self of the nation through the historical past has the purpose to arouse political and historical consciousness of the nation and achieve national unity. The poets were influenced by this renaissance spirit. They idealized the country's historical past and her inspiring heroes and thereby promoted the feeling of nationalism and patriotism. The aim is to generate self-confidence by national assertion and inculcation of pride in Indian heritage.

The Patriotic Fervour

The patriotic fervour is the direct outcome of the Bengal Renaissance. It is a kind of self-assertion which has a purpose to awaken the people for freedom and patriotism. The sense of patriotism develops generally amidst the oppressed subjects of a country and a complete development of this sense leads to a struggle for total freedom. The sense of patriotism also arises at the time of war or when the new awakening dawns in the form of knowledge.

With the dash of renaissance, the Bengali elites were influenced by the European literature of Revolt. This new literature germinated in them the zeal of patriotism and the ideal of political liberty. This made the Indian elites to explore the ancient and historical past of India. They ransacked history to find out the high ability and heroism of Indians in the political and military fields. This blooming patriotic zeal influenced the character of contemporary Indian English poetry. The poets idealized the valour of King Porus, Prithviraj, Shivaji, Baji Prabhu and Tara Bai to promote the sentiments of patriotism and freedom in the Indian minds which were caught in the decadent phase. In some poems, the patriotic fervour is born out of the concern for human liberty. In others, there is direct assertion of freedom but it is conceived on romantic plane. Thus the patriotic zeal is the part of Indian renaissance.

The Social and Reformative Zeal

The growing demand for social reform exerted its influence on the poetry of the contemporary period. Indian English poets like Henry Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghose, B.M. Malbari and others have given expression to this spirit with the purpose of purging society of its harmful practices that in the name of custom is only causing harm, is also a national process. So this zeal can be treated as one of the aspect of nationalism. The aspects discussed above rightly bring to notice that the first expression of Indian discontent and the assertion of nationalism were not mainly political but strictly cultural. Naturally, Indian English poetry can be studied as an emblem of cultural nationalism. According to K.R. Minogue, this is the first stage of nationalism. It is time of casting around for a cultural identity.

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The second stage is the centre-piece of nationalism; it is the time of the struggle for independence. And this spirit is understood as the political aspect of the struggle for freedom.

The struggle for freedom

The period 1920-1947 is considered as the Gandhian Age or the period of struggle for freedom. The entire period of near three decades of the Gandhian age was one of far-reaching changes not only in political scene but in all areas of Indian life. This was an epoch making period of Indian nationalism.

Gandhi activated the mass of people all over the country for the ultimate goal i.e. Freedom. This activation of people came through various movements launched by Gandhi. The movements were more political strategies realised through nation-wide agitation and protest.

India's freedom struggle under the leadership of Gandhi assumed three distinct features-attainment of Swaraj, use of truthful and growing progress towards constructive nationalism and mass movement. The



story of Gandhiji's movements from the Non-Co-operation of 1920 to that of the Quit India Movement of 1942 confirms this fact.

Indian national struggles after all an expression of the people's dissatisfaction with the foreign rule. The collective awareness of suffering broke out as Gandhi launched systematic movements. The aspect of freedom struggle is the outcome of all these movements. Gandhiji launched the first country-wide Non-Co-operation Movement on 1st August, 1920. The movement created an unprecedented awakening, the most important feature of which was that it had converted Indian nationalism 'from middle class movement to a mass emotion' (Spear 1961:359). The movement proved to be a first experience of warfare which initiated the people into a new faith and new hope, and inspired them with a new confidence in their power to fight for freedom. The second mass movement was launched in March 1930 to practice civil disobedience. The salt laws were made focal point. This movement differed substantially from the earlier Non-Co-operation movement, though the goal remained the same 'The first was passively, the second was actively, revolutionary. The first hoped to bring government to a standstill by withdrawing from the administration; the second sought to paralyse government by mass performance of specific illegal acts' (Spear 1965:351). Among these acts, the one that captured the imagination of the people was the illegal making of salt. To break the salt laws electrified the entire civilized world. The Salt Satyagraha roused to India to action as never before. Another ten years later come the third and last Satyagraha campaign of 1940 which after the historic 'Quit India' resolution of 9 August, 1942, led to violent underground revolutionary activity. The British Government arrested all the top leaders of the Indian National Congress. The people launched the movement according to their understanding of the situation. The Government's repressive policy added fuel to the fire, the enraged people took to the destruction of government's property which included the burning of post-offices, railway stations, the cutting of telegraph wires and tampering with railway tracks. There were huge demonstration of thousands of workers and college and school students carrying the tricolour flag armed with nothing but non-violence, people ready to carry out Gandhi's call for "Do or Die". This massive upsurge made the movement so formidable that the government took to brutal repression. Soon after the world war U, the political, economic imperatives of the day compelled Britain to concede independence to India on 15 August, 1947

Thus the aspect of the struggle for freedom quite rightly reveals through the national movements. This political aspect generated an all-pervading national consciousness.

In cultural sphere, Gandhian thought and the Quit India Movement provided an immense creative impetus to contemporary literature. But in case of Indian English poetry, the impact of Gandhian whirlwind produced no outstanding poetry of any kind. However, the poets like Armando Menzes, Humayun Kabir and V.N. Bhushan reacted with the spirit of Quit India Movement and thereby promoted the spirit of freedom.

All these aspects will be examined through the text of poetry and comment will be made on the socio-cultural factors which have enriched the spirit of nationalism. In short, these aspects are the theoretical grounding through which the pre-Independence Indian English poetry can be assessed for the spirit of nationalism.

Conclusions

Thus, the spirit of nationalism expounded by the poets in the pre Independence period is solely occupied with the search for national identity. As the colonial rule suppressed the Indian identity, the Indian elites in contact with Renaissance turned, to the rich heritage of India. This was the initial attempt at self-expression or self-identification, on the part of Indian poets. In the latter phases, this identity is consolidated through social, historical and political sphere.

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