

## **The Indian Renaissance: Birth of a New Literature**

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The Renaissance! What word could be more venerable and electrifying than this? The Renaissance arrived and the West started its march towards glory and never looked back. The Asian splendour started dimming while Europe went on winning fresher and fresher laurels.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word as “the revival of art and letters, under the influence of the classical models, which began in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>1</sup> But, in its widest sense, the term refers to “a total change in man’s outlook on life which extended into philosophical, scientific, economic, and technical fields.”<sup>2</sup> The Renaissance is perhaps the mightiest movement of the last millennium that has changed the face of the globe in myriad ways. But, this time, while the West was in its full glory of incessant activity, India was going through perhaps the darkest period of her long history. For the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw this vast land in total decadence—“the lowest point of moral decay and political weakness.” But a new India began to emerge exactly from the date of the British conquest of the land. While the Western influences poured in, the dormant Oriental spirit had to shake off its torpor. As darkness vanishes when light comes, so the Western rational outlook started driving away all those horrendous superstitions that had bound the soul of India.

Modern nascent India starts with Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833). He has rightly been called “the promulgator of the Modern Age in Indian history.”<sup>3</sup> A true Renaissance man, he was a versatile genius and had mastered Persian and Arabic and Sanskrit and was familiar with Hebrew and Greek also which provided him insight into the two major religions of the land. Not only that, in his quest of the Truth, he also studied the Lamaist Buddhism of Tibet. But, above all, he also gained mastery over the English language and acquired deep understanding of European metaphysics. So, whether he was opposing the despicable Sati practice or working for social reforms or evolving his own theistic line, he shows a thoroughly rational approach. Throughout his life, he was a staunch advocate of English education in India, so much so that he once even protested against the opening of a Govt. College of Sanskrit.

English education doubtless opened a new chapter in the history of India. Vigorous ideas from the West rushed into the land through the medium of English and launched India on her modern course. The light of the European Enlightenment poured through this medium into India, its twin tools of Rationalism and Liberalism chiseling our nation in a thorough manner. In the apt words of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, “English education brought about a widening of the Indian horizon, an admiration for English literature and institutions, a revolt against some customs and aspects of Indian life, and growing demand for political reforms.”<sup>4</sup>

The Indian Renaissance was not a carbon-copy of the European but shows its own unique features. For it was the result of the meeting or clash of the twain—the East and the West—out of which arose a new culture that possessed the best features of both: “Out of this clash of the new mechanical civilisation of the Occident and the old pietistic and religious culture of India, we find the emergence of a new India.”<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, Western Rationalism and Liberalism gave a new turn to the Indian frame of mind as they also led to serious probing into the native treasures of wisdom. The kind of communion of the Orient and the Occident that took place in India is absent in the European Renaissance which was, in the words of Sri Aurobindo, “not so much a reawakening as an overturn and reversal, a seizure of Christianised, Teutonised, feudalized Europe by the old Graeco-Latin spirit and form with all the complex and momentous results which come from it.”<sup>6</sup> But India continued to retain her spiritual core in the whirlwind of the Western influences. Here, India presents a striking contrast to Japan which got thoroughly westernised and in a way discarded its traditional mornings. Sri Aurobindo points out this uniqueness of the Indian Renaissance thus:

It is “rather a process of a new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme, recovers its truths, accepts whatever it finds sound or true, useful or inevitable of the modern idea or form, but so transmutes and Indianises it, so absorbs and transforms it that its foreign character disappears and it becomes another harmonious element in the characteristic working of the ancient goddess, the Shakti of India, mastering and taking possession of the modern influence, no longer possessed or overcome by it.”<sup>7</sup>

The Indian Renaissance has flowered also in the literature of the land. Under its impact, the dozen and odd native languages have made tremendous progress linguistically as well as literarily. But the most significant has been the birth of a new literature aptly called Indo-Anglian, the phrase coined by Dr. K.R.S. Iyengar. Indo-Anglian literature has got a distinct identity as much as the American or the Australian. Most importantly, it has succeeded in recapturing the Indian ethos and has thus been completely, to use Edmund Gosse's adjective which he used for Sarojini Naidu's poetry, completely "autochthonous."<sup>8</sup> From the very beginning, Indo-Anglian poetry has shown a broadness characteristic of our vast land. Notably, the first Indo-Anglian poet, H.L.V. Derozio, was born of an Indian mother and a Portuguese father. The young poet who died at the early age of 21 composed highly patriotic poems.

My country! In thy days of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,  
And worshipped as a deity thou wast—  
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?<sup>9</sup>

Derozio was Professor of English at the Hindu College, Calcutta, and pursued his work with such zeal and dedication that he has rightly been hailed as a maker of modern Bengal. A contemporary, Haramohan Chatterjee, says this about him: "In fact Mr. Derozio gained such a great ascendancy over the minds of his pupils, that they would not move even in their private affairs without his advice. On the other hand he fostered their taste in literature, taught the evil effects of idolatry and superstition, and so reformed their moral feelings as to place them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age. Such was the force of his instructions that the conduct of his students out of college was exemplary."<sup>10</sup>

Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote two volumes of verse—**Visions of the Past** and **The Captive Lady. The Captive Ladie** is the story of Prithvi Raj Chauhan and Samyogita and is full of echoes from English Romantic poetry, though the theme happily is Indian. It is in the manner of verse-tales of Byron. **The Visions of the Past** too lacks original flavour and is no less imitative.

Indo-Anglian poetry achieves a certain growth in Romesh Chunder Dutt's **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**. Romesh, an I.C.S., was a master not only of English, but also of Sanskrit. So, his condensation is rather credible. Moreover, he was the first to handle the stories from the great epics. The tradition he inaugurated flowered in Sri Aurobindo's **Savitri**, an epic sublime, and Dr. K.R.S. Iyengar's **Sitayana**.

The next notable poet is Toru Dutt, Romesh's second cousin. Born on March 4, 1856, she came of an illustrious family and had started composing poems at an early age. But she died prematurely on August 1877. Though she was granted a very short life-span, she contributed significantly to the growth of Indo-Anglian poetry with her solitary volume of poems, **Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan**.

Though Toru belonged to a family recently converted to Christianity, her poems are all based on the Puranic stories. Toru's handling of the purely native puranic themes shows that the Indian Renaissance, more than anything else, had made the Indians conscious of their native roots. In Indo-Anglian poetry, Toru has a high place because of the authenticity of her sensibility and, what is still more important, Toru was initiating a tradition that achieved glorious growth in Tagore's **Gitanjali**, Sri Aurobindo's **Savitri** and Dr. Iyengar's **Sitayana**, to name just a few of such works.

Another woman poet who contributed significantly to Indo-Anglian poetry was Sarojini Naidu (1870-1949) who was also a renowned patriot and freedom-fighter. Mahatma Gandhi called her the Nightingale of India because of her sweet poetic eloquence, and she enriched Indo-Anglian poetry at that nascent stage with her lyricism.

**The Golden Threshold**, published in 1905, is her first volume of poems. With an introduction by Arthur Symonds, the book was dedicated to Edmund Gosse. There are forty poems in the collection arranged under three heads: 'Folk Songs', 'Songs for Music', and 'Poems'. **The Bird of Time** that followed contains forty-six poems and was brought out by the same publisher in 1912 with an introduction by Edmund Gosse. Gosse finds that Sarojini "is in all things and to the fullest extent autochthonous. She springs from the very soil of India; her spirit, although it employs the English language as its vehicle, has no other tie with the West."<sup>11</sup> **The Broken Wing**, her last collection of poems, was published in 1917. Thereafter she almost ceased to be a poet, though a small volume of her poems, all of them composed in 1927, were posthumously published in 1962. Sarojini bid adieu to the Poetic Muse with the publication of **The Broken Wing** because of "the incompatibility between her real self and the artificial medium she had learnt to master."<sup>12</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the literary giants of the Indian Renaissance, has rightly been called an Indo-Anglian poet. For, he won the Nobel Prize for his English Version of **Gitanjali** which was originally composed in Bengali. The lyrics of **Gitanjali** are mystical and also charged with deep devotion which brings out the spiritual face of the Indian Renaissance. While they have the sweetness of the lyrics of Vidyapati and Chandi Das, they also show the influence of Kabir's mysticism:

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou  
emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.<sup>13</sup>

The 'vessel' here is the human body which God empties and fills again and again. The homely image has a native flavour.

The poet's devotional fervour ever seasons his mysticism, thus obviating all obscurity:

Pluck this flower and take it, delay not!  
I fear lest it drop and droop into dust.<sup>14</sup>

Here is an example of ultimate dedication to love. For the flower here is the poet's own life which he wants to offer for God's worship.

Tagore's God is all-inclusive. So, he does not advocate escapism in any form:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou  
worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open  
thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!<sup>15</sup>

From Tagore to Sri Aurobindo should not be an arduous movement as both of them happen to be mystics. But besides being a poet, Sri Aurobindo is also a Rishi, and metaphysical moorings are far more pronounced in him. Indeed, because of his thorough mastery over not only English but also Greek and Latin side by side with his mastery of Sanskrit, he has the advantage of direct understanding of both the East and the West. The vast body of philosophical literature including the monumental **Life Divine** testifies to his sure grasp of the old and the new. The bulk of his poetical compositions is equally formidable. Besides numerous lyrical pieces and a bunch of narrative poems, he has composed the most voluminous epic in the English language running into more than 24000 lines. For **Savitri**, his poetic magnum opus, is, in the words of Prof. R.F. Piper, "perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man's mind towards the Absolute."<sup>16</sup> Again, "it records the progress of the human consciousness towards the attainment of the Life Divine in terms of the Aurobindonian metaphysics; and it is as much a cosmic poem as Dante's **The Divine Comedy**, and perhaps more extensively applicable to the universal human condition; ...."<sup>17</sup>

**Savitri** is a unique poem in the whole range of literature. For nothing like it was ever attempted. No doubt the ancient Greeks too sang of man's glory. But they could not probe the wonderful depths of man's inner being. Really, it was beyond the scope of their scientific enquiry which precluded consideration of those recondite spiritual regions. Sri Aurobindo's philosophical range is consequently truly cosmic. For the first time in the history of literature, he was attempting a work that aimed at unveiling the very soul of man by lighting up the sombre corners of his complex being where hide those dark forces which again and again hurl him down from the heights he often attains to but cannot keep on. Man is seldom a hero and often a villain. In Sri Aurobindo's cosmic world-view, the hero and the villain are one and indivisible as they embody the same spiritual principle and stuff. For Sri Aurobindo believes in the Upanishadic dictum that "all verily is Brahman." The universe, according to this philosophy, is a manifestation of God.

Yet another poet who should be included in this bird's eye-view of Indo-Anglian poetry is Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu's younger brother. He was born on April 2, 1898 and was thus junior to his illustrious sister by nearly two decades. Like her, he also started composing poetry at an early age, and published **The Coloured Garden**, his maiden poetic volume, when he was just 13. Like his sister, he too showed a strong Romantic trait and was like her inspired by the Romantic and Victorian poets. By and by, he also conceived genuine admiration for the Sanskrit classics. When Harindra went to Cambridge to do research on Blake's poetry, his mystic predilection received further fillip. No wonder he says in his autobiographical book **Life and Myself**: "... I have always held an almost continuous vision of the one-behind-the-many and the One broken into the Many."<sup>18</sup>

Indo-Anglian poetry has by now grown into a full-fledged entity. So, all the major poets, too, cannot be taken into this survey the aim of which is to trace a unique feature of the Indian Renaissance—its deeply spiritual turn. Sri Aurobindo finds that this kind of revival has been again and again taking place to renew the great spiritual tradition that India embodies. And her great message is loud and clear:

The problems which have troubled mankind can only be solved by  
conquering the kingdom within, not by harnessing forces of Nature to the  
service of comfort and luxury, but by mastering the forces of the intellect  
and the spirit, by vindicating the freedom of man within as well as  
without and by conquering from within spiritual Nature.<sup>19</sup>

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Renaissance that has awakened India from her stupor has a universal significance because “she can, if she will give a new and decisive turn to the problems over which all mankind is labouring and stumbling ....”<sup>20</sup> For she has to save the world from gross materialism that has turned it into, to use Eliot’s famous phrase, a veritable “waste land”. Really, India has to teach the peoples of the earth how “to make life perfect with a divine perfection.”<sup>21</sup>

So, the Indian Renaissance is a unique phenomenon. If the European Renaissance gave the world material prosperity, the Indian Renaissance must bring spiritual enlightenment. And Indo-Anglian poetry in its conception and growth mirrors, besides other things, the spiritual aspirations of the Indian psyche which will help the entire mankind to disentangle itself from the present material morass. Sri Aurobindo’s **Savitri** illustrates man’s eternal spiritual handerings, and so does Dr. Iyengar’s **Sitayana**. That the epics like **Savitri** and **Sitayans** could be composed in these grossly material times shows the strongly spiritual complexion of the Indian Renaissance and its immense vitality.

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