

Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 3: Indo-English Literature: Genres and Conditions

- 1) **Before Independence:
Co-ordinates**

- 2) **Genres:**
[Poetry > lectures 4 and 6]
Drama
[Fiction > lectures 5 and 7 to 9]

1) Before Independence: Co-ordinates

Phases:

- a) 1800-1857 Beginnings/'Reaching Out'
- b) 1857-1901 Retrenchment and Imperial Reassurance
- c) 1901-1947 Ways to Independence

a) Beginnings/‘Reaching Out’ (1800-1857)

- (1784 India Act centralizes the expanding British presence)
- 1835 Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Education’ anglicizes the colonial curriculum
- 1845-49 Anglo-Sikh wars end with defeat of the Sikhs
- 1857/58 Great Indian Rebellion (“Mutiny”) brutally suppressed; India turned into a crown colony, with Viceroy as Queen’s representative; 1858 India Act officially ends rule by East India Company

(Döring 2008, 124)

One consequence of the changes taking place in Indian society under colonialism was that Indians had mastered the coloniser’s language [...] and, going one step further, had by the 1820s begun to adopt it as their chosen medium of expression. These pioneering works of poetry, fiction, drama, travel, and belles-lettres are little read today except by specialists, but when they were published they were, by the mere fact of being in English, audacious acts of mimicry and self-assertion. More than this, the themes they touched on and the kinds of social issues they engaged with would only be explored by other Indian literatures several decades later.

(Mehrotra 2003, 6)

Symptomatic Texts:

1

Krishna Mohan Banerjea’s *The Persecuted* (1831) might not be good theatre, but the subject of Hindu orthodoxies and the individual’s loss of faith in his religion had not been taken up by any Indian play before it. Banerjea, who was eighteen years old when he wrote *The Persecuted*, soon afterwards converted to Christianity. He was one of the leading lights of ‘Young Bengal’, as Derozio’s disciples called themselves, and founder-editor of *The Enquirer* (1831-5).

(Mehrotra 2003, 6f.)

2

Kylas Chunder Dutt's 'A Journal of Fourty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945' (1835) is about an imaginary armed uprising against the British. Insurrections seems a commonplace idea, until we realise that the idea is being expressed for the first time in Indian literature, and would next find expression only in folk songs inspired by the events of 1857. It is uncanny that the year of the uprising in Dutt's imagination comes within two years of India's actual year of independence; uncanny, too, the coincidence that the work should have been published in the same year that Macaulay delivered his 'Minute'. In a double irony, the insurgents are all urbanized middle-class Indians with the best education colonialism could offer, the very class Macauley had intended as 'interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern. A fable like 'A Journal [...]', where the 'language of command' is stood on its head and turned into the language of subversion, suggests itself as the imaginative beginnings of a nation.

(Mehrotra 2003, 7)

b) Retrenchment and Imperial Reassurance (1857-1901)

- 1857/58 Great Indian Rebellion ("Mutiny") brutally suppressed; India turned into a crown colony, with Viceroy as Queen's representative; 1858 India Act officially ends rule by East India Company
- 1859-60 Indigo rebellion: peasant revolts
- 1871 British PM Disraeli declares Queen Victoria 'Empress of India'
- 1885 Formation of Indian National Congress

(Döring 2008, 124)

Robert Watson Frazer, “Progress under British Rule: Education” (1896)

While from the earliest days of the Company the development of commerce and increase in the wealth of the country has received the first attention of its Western rulers the intellectual and moral welfare of the people have also claimed the earnest attention of the State.[...] The more advanced natives of India were naturally eager, that these State Funds should be employed in encouraging the study of English instead of Eastern learning. [...] The full effects of these efforts for the intellectual improvement of the people of India must be looked for in the future. [...] The ideals to be aimed towards and the results to be attained by England in thus carrying out her great mission in the history of the world's progress, have, with philosophic calm and poetic insight, been traced out by Sir Raymond West in the course of an Address to the Ninth Oriental Congress of 1892 in the following words:

“There is no great need for a large multiplication of secondary schools and of colleges to the Universities, but there is need for access to them being made easy to ability, and great need for their teaching being raised and widened, if those who pass through them and become the intellectual leaders of India are to be equal to their high calling, and are to take a part honourable to themselves and their nation in the creation of an imperial spirit which shall supersede all ideas of severance, and further that fusion of the philosophies of the East and West to which we may now look most hopefully for the moral and intellectual advance of mankind.”

(Stilz 1982, 56-59; Stilz/Dengel-Janic 2010, 131-134)

c) Ways to Independence (1901-1947)

1885	formation of Indian National Congress
1905	Viceroy decides to partition Bengal, sparking resistance campaigns
1906	All India Muslim League established
(1907	Rudyard Kipling wins Nobel Prize for literature)
1913	Bengali Writer Rabindranath Tagore wins Nobel Prize for literature
1916	Lucknow Pact of Muslim League and Indian National Congress
1919	Gandhi leads first all-India <i>satyagraha</i> (peaceful resistance); Amritsar massacre: British troops kill 400 peaceful demonstrators
1929	Congress calls for 'complete independence'
1940	Muslim league demands separate states
1942	'Quit India' resolution issued by Congress, leaders jailed
1947	Independence/Partition

(Döring 2008, 124)

N.K. Sidhanta, "The Indian Literatures of Today: English" (1945)

In speaking of English literature produced by Indians during this generation, I feel handicapped as the speakers on the other literatures have not been. I feel that I have to be on my defence, as there are charges constantly being brought forward against creative artists who have chosen English as their medium of expression. The charges are varied, and if one classifies them they amount to the following: -

First, the English language is not a natural medium of expression for the Indian writer. Secondly, the inspiration which the Indian writer of English derives is from the West, from England and other European countries, and as such is against his natural spirit and genius. Thirdly, the cross section of society that he chooses to deal with on account of his breeding and environment, is a very limited one, and does not do justice to our country. Further, his appeal is to a very limited class of readers who have practically segregated themselves from the great majority of their fellow countrymen.

[...]

(Stilz 1982, 71-73)

2) Genres

Mimikry – Hybridity – Identity (cf. Stiliz 1999)

Poetry:

- 'English as a creative medium and a window to the world'
- English and European influences ⇔ creative independence
- colonisation ⇔ emancipation
- heightened awareness of aesthetic craft and social responsibility
- 'modernist' breakthrough only after independence

> lectures 4 and 6

Drama:

N.K. Sidhanta, "The Indian Literatures of Today: English" (1945)

When I think of the Indian drama written in English, I cannot feel very optimistic. Looking at what has been produced in this regard during the last 25 or 30 years, and thinking of its future in the years to come, one cannot feel hopeful for the simple reason that here is a type of literature which does not depend wholly on the creative artist, but must appeal to the public at large. Drama is not intended to be read, it is intended to be seen. [...] In the case of all dramas we have to think of the illusion of reality and naturally we ask if it is possible to produce this illusion in a drama where Indians converse in English. [...] I find that this is where these writers face the greatest difficulty.

They have to make the language almost semi-natural in order to prevent it from being definitely and positively unnatural. The language spoken by these characters cannot be colloquial English nor may it be the English of Burke or Macaulay. It has to be something like a neutral medium and the greatest difficulty is experienced by artists in regard to a medium of expression for characters who have been imaginatively created. And if it is difficult to manage this in prose fiction, how very much more difficult it must be in dramatic writing where characters appear on the stage and have artificially to produce an illusion of reality?

(Stiliz 1982, 72f.)

The Dramatic Tradition:

- indigenous traditions of dramatic presentation:
 - a) Sanskrit drama (courtly tradition, 3rd to 9th century CE)
 - b) popular drama (based on rules of a codified tradition in its decline)
- commercial drama in Bengal, Maharashtra and Gujarat, based on b and spreading out from provincial centres in the 19th century seems to be heavily influenced by Victorian theatre in the British context (spectacle, melodrama; for an instructive case study from Maharashtra cf. Bhirdikar 2013)
- the rise of the middle class inspires musical and opera on the one hand and realist/naturalist theatre on the other,
- Shakespeare as the most eminent author (for Maharashtra cf. Jaaware/Bhirdikar 2012), many imported works
- modern Indian drama largely motivated by Independence movement in the 1930s and 1940s, but hampered by the precarious position of English in this political process

Earliest known Indian plays in English:

Krishna Mohan Banerjea, *The Persecuted* (1831)

First imitation of Shakespearean tragedy:

Jogendrachandra Gupta, *Kritivilas* (1852)

Cf. a 'native' epilogue to a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*, publ. in 1867:

Bethink ye that your sweet Avonian swan,
Still flutters strangely over Hindustan.
We know not yet the future of its tone,
The modulations are not yet our own.
We fain would hope that, as it flies along,
T'will scatter sybil-like its leaves of song,
And o'er parent East new triumphs win,
With but that touch that makes the whole world kin.

(Gokhale 2003, 338)

Continuously documentable tradition of dramatic writing starts with

M. Mashusudan Dutt, *Is This Civilisation?* (1871)

Influential:

Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) translation of his Bengali plays into English:

The Genius of Valmiki (1881)

Sacrifice (1890)

Chitra (1892)

The Post Office (1912)

The Society of Confirmed Bachelors (1926)

Closet Drama:

Sri Aurobindo (Ghose) (1872-1950)

Perseus the Deliverer (c. 1900)

Rodogune (1906)

Eric (1912/13)

T.P. Kailasam (1885-1948)

The Burden (1933)

Fulfilment (1933)

The Purpose (1944)

The Curse of Carna (1946)

Keechaka (1949)

Social Drama:

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898-)

The Window (1937)

The Parrot (1937)

The Sentry's Lantern

The Coffin

The Evening Lamp

A.S.P. Ayyar (1899-)

The Slave of Ideas and Other Plays

(*In the Clutch of the Devil, A Mother's Sacrifice, Sita's Choice*)

Bharati Sarabhai (1912-)

The Well of the People (1943)

Historical Drama:

Swami Avyaktananda, *India Through the Ages* (1947)
Gurcharan Das, *Larins Sahib* (1970)

Experimental Drama after Independence:

G.V. Desani, *Hali* (1950)

Asif Currimbhoy (1928-94)
The Tourist Mecca (1959)
The Doldrummers (1960)
The Dumb Dancer (1961)
Goa (1964)

Partab Sharma (1939-)
A Touch of Brightness (1968)

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-)
Nalini (1969)
Marriage Poem (1969)
The Sleepwalkers (1969)

Gieve Patel (1940-)
Princes (1970)
Savaksa (1982/89)
Mister Behram (1988)

More recent playwrights:

Cyrus Mistry (1956-)
Mahesh Dattani (1958-)

If Indian drama in English is still in its infancy, the publication of plays is even more so. Publishers will take plays seriously only if they have been produced, but producers will touch plays only if they are commercially viable. And there are not many of these. In short, few plays get published.

(Gokhale 2003, 350)

Fiction > lectures 5 and 7 to 9

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B. Poetry

(various chapters in

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