
Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 4: The Emergence of Indian Poetry in English

- 1) Beginnings (1800-1857)
- 2) Voices Shaping Perception:
Poetic Depictions of Indian Reality
- 3) Retrenchment and Imperial Reassurance
(1857-1901)
- 4) Ways to Independence (1901-1947)

1) Beginnings (1800-1857)

1

William Wordsworth (1802)
Upon Westminster Bridge
Sept. 3, 1802

EARTH has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

2

D.L. Richardson (1830)
Evening on the Banks of the Ganges

I wandered thoughtfully by Gunga's shore,
While the broad sun upon the slumbering wave
Its last faint flush of golden radiance gave.
And tinged with tenderest hues some ruins hoar.
Methinks this earth had never know before
A calm so deep – 'twas silent as the grave.
The smallest bird its light wing could not lave
In the smooth flood, nor from the green-wood soar
(If but the tiniest branch its pinions stirred,
Or shook the dew-drops from the leaves,) unheard.
Like pictured shadows 'gainst the western beam
The dark boats slept, while each lone helmsman stood
Still as a statue! – the strange quietude
Enthralled my soul like some mysterious dream!

3

H.L.V. Derozio (1827)
To the Students of the Hindu College

Expanding like the petals of young flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powers
That stretch (like young birds in soft summer hours)
Their wings to try their strength. O! How the winds
Of circumstance, and freshening April showers
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds
Of new perceptions shed their influence;
And how you worship truth's omnipotence!
What joyance rains upon me, when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity,
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain,
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.

4

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1849)
Satan

A form of awe he was – and yet it seemed
A sepulchre of beauty – faded, gone,
Mouldering where memory, fond mourner, keeps
Her lonesome vigils sad – to chronicle
The Past – and tell its tale of coming years.
Or like a giant tree in mighty war
With storm on whirlwind car and fierce array
Blasted and crushed – of all its pride bereft.
Or like a barque which oft had walked the deep
In queenlike majesty – and proudly brave –
But by the fiery hand of some dread fiend
Nursed in starless caves of ocean, shorn
Of all its beauty in the boundless surge
A phantom of departed splendour lone.

5

From: *The Queen of Delhi's Dream* (1849)

Methought there came a warrior-maid,
With blood-stain'd brow and sheathless blade;
Dark was her hue, as darkest cloud,
Which comes the Moon's fair face to shroud,
And 'round her waist a hideous zone
Of hands with charnel lightnings shone,
And long the garland which she wore
Of heads all bath'd in streaming gore
How fierce the eyes by Death unseal'd
And blasting gleams which they reveal'd.
I shudder'd – tho' I knew 't was she,
The awful, ruthless Deity,
On whose dread altar like a flood,
There flows for aye her victim's blood!
I shudder'd - for, methought, she came,
With eyes of bright consuming flame,
'Daughter,' – she said, - 'farewell! – I go:
'The time is come, - it must be so
'Leave thee and thine I will to-night,' –
Then vanish'd like a flash of light!

**2) Voices Shaping Perception:
Poetic Depictions of Indian Reality**

6

Govin Chunder Dutt (1828-1884), “Vizagapatam”
(from *The Dutt Family Album*, London: Longmans, 1870)

Down went the anchor and the ship stood fast,
Rocking upon the billows, while around
Wheeled the white sea-birds, rising with the blast,
Or skimming lightly o'er the depth's profound,
White, oh! how white, beneath the morning ray,
Like fitful snowflakes 'mid the ocean-spray.

The hills down-sloping to the ocean's edge
With verdure smooth were covered to their tops;
Clumps of tall trees o'ershadowed many a ledge,
And coffee-plants displayed their berry crops;
And spanning all like God's embracing love,
Sublime and stainless, hung the sky above.

Villas and houses gleamed from many a peak,
Or peeped through trees that hid them from the sight,
Like shamefast maidens beautiful and meek;
And temples rose with banners streaming bright
An burnished spires; and humble peasant huts
Circled by slender palms and betel-nuts.

And some abodes to memory might bring home
That vision of the poet's fancy born,
His 'magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.'
These close but high – might almost feel the shock
Of the wild surges breaking on the rock.

Oh, what a sight of varied loveliness!
What hills! what skies! what piles of foliage green!
Is there a spot which Nature deigns to bless
With such profusion as this woodland scene?
The fairest flowerets here perennial glow!
The freshest breezes here for ever blow!

Thought uncontrolled erratic ever flies,
And he that writes mused idly – Can this be
Our long-lost, nor forgotten Paradise?
When lo! he started from his trance to see,
Where o'er the hills the devious footpath led,
A long and sad procession bear the dead.

“Vizagapatam”:

Voice: implicit 'I' (as manifest in apostrophes in stanzas 1 and 5)
represented as 'he' in the last stanza
⇒ second-order (self-)observation of distance between
world and voice
⇒ tone somewhat muted
⇒ Indian reality is acknowledged as equal in poetic potential
but poetic potential itself is qualified

- Form:** iambic pentameter lines rhyming ababcc
⇒ rather simple, neither songlike nor in the fashion of
metrically elaborate odes in spite of emphatic reference
to Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' in stanza 4
⇒ qualifies the power of poetry

7

Greece Chunder Dutt (1833-1892), "The Soonderbuns"
(from *The Dutt Family Album*, London: Longmans, 1870,
republ. in G. C. Dutt, *Cherry Blossoms*, London: T. Fisher
Unwin, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1887)

In the wild district where the Ganges pours
Its lavish waters by a hundred mouths
Into the bosom of the sounding sea,
Are plains, like prairies, of enormous length,
Adorned with ancient trees of stately growth –
And shady coverts of white-tasselled cane,
In which, defended from the noonday heat,
The mighty monarchs of the waste repose –
And shallow pools where wild fowl pluck in sport,
The fragrant spathes of blossoms rich that deck,
The hardy creepers that delight in swamps –
And leagues of woodlands sparsely scattered o'er
With mat-fenced villages – and seaward slopes,
As smooth and verdant as a billiard board,
O'er which unnumbered troops of nimble deer
Range undisturbed – and fens whose sluggish streams
With mazy error twist ten thousand ways –
And dreary moors where naught the stillness breaks
Except the eagle's scream, the bittern's boom,
Or yet the sullen tiger's hoarse 'ragum'.

Although no hills diversify its face,
Or swelling uplands crowned with hamlets white,
Or babbling rills with banks of splintered rock,
Or foaming water-breaks o'er which the ash
Inclines its grateful arms, or brooklets keen,
With beds of gravel like new minted gold
The chosen play ground of the lusty trout,
Or winding dells that half unwillingly
Reveal the gabled roofs of dairy farms,
Or vast cathedrals with elm-guarded spires,
Or modest manses amid bright parterres,
Or high-walled orchards, where on mossy trees
Defended safely from the jay with nets
The black-heart darkens in the genial sun –
Yet has this delta an inherent grace,
An unsophisticated loveliness,
And rustic glory not to be surpassed.

Its dented coast line to the stranger yields,
On his first journey to Bengal by sea,
A sight as beautiful as that which greets
The sailor in the channel, when he makes
The shores of England near the Isle of Wight,
For when half hopefully and half afraid,
He scans with stedfast gaze the goal at last,
Delightful slopes green to the water's edge,
And lofty trees, that viewed from ocean seem
Arranged to screen the windows of a pile,
(The castle dwelling of some mighty earl)
From the rude fury of the wild sea blast
Enchant his soul, and as the ship draws near
The herds of antlered deer that haunt the coast
Rivet his fancy, and still fan the dream
The waste before him is a mighty park:
And if perchance his eyes one moment miss,
The gentle uplands and the white chalk cliffs,
That loss at once the graceful palm atones,
With its rich tuft of leaves like drooping plumes,
And clusters strange of green and golden nuts.

Landwards the sylvan solitude affords,
To him who slowly follows in a boat,
The lazy mazes of its tidal streams
In shrewd November, that delicious draught
Of genuine pleasure, that rewards the toil
Of keen explorers in the favored parts
Of Brazil or Australia or the Cape:

Whether he glide by clearances where yet
The rifted roots of giant trunks attest
The squatter's toil, or watch at morn the smoke
Curl upwards from the leaf-fed forest fire –
Or mooring fast his cumbrous vessel chase
In a light skiff, on some lagoon immense,
The countless swarms of wild ducks that infest
The land-locked inlets edged with graceful reeds –
Or by a rustic weir of mats and stakes
Assist the fisher, and with lusty arm
Drag up his net, that oft has fish enough
To fill a barrel - or in jungle deep,
Where not one single sign of man appears,
(Not e'en a rude built trap of unbarked logs
Of knotted soondri, ponderous as lead,
Among the thickets on the river's brink)
At shut of eve, while on the cabin roof
His haunch of fen deer smokes 'mid charcoal gleams',
Prepare to anchor for the night his craft.

“The Soonderbuns”:

Voice: no explicit speaker, no personal voice

- ⇒ tone rather expository, no twisted reflective syntax
- ⇒ drawing on available modes of representation
(the sublime, Romanticism, Neoclassicism)
- ⇒ Indian nature is acknowledged as equal in poetic potential,
but in need of domestication and civilisation
- ⇒ poem adopts the colonizer's perspective in its entire
outlook, not only in its situational setting

Form: blank verse in long verse paragraphs of differing length

- ⇒ not particularly poetic (in the Romantic sense)
- ⇒ finds its final apotheosis in a reference to colonial
travel writing
- ⇒ the colonizer's perception of Indian nature
(Enlightenment vs. Romanticism)

8

Toru Dutt (1856-1877)

“Sonnet – Baumaree” (1873-77; publ. 1882)

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,
 But not a sea of dull unvaried green,
 Sharp contrasts of all colours here are seen;
The light-green graceful tamarinds abound
Amid the mangoe clumps of green profound,
 And palms arise, like pillars gray, between;
 And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red – red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.
But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges
 Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon
Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes
Into a cup of silver. One might swoon
 Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze
On a primeval Eden, in amaze.

“Baumaree”:

Voice: no explicit 'I', but emphatic perception universalized into 'one' in line 12 (end of last quatrain, introducing the final couplet)

- ⇒ celebratory and emancipatory tone which rejects colonial intrusions
- ⇒ emancipation of vision at the cost of privatization?

Form: iambic pentameter, rhyming abba abba cdcd ee

- ⇒ sophisticated mixture of Italian (ll. 1-8) and English sonnet form (ll. 9-14)
- ⇒ validates poetic form as a medium of perception and communication

3) Retrenchment and Imperial Reassurance (1857-1901)

9

W. Trego Webb (ca. 1880)
The Nautch Girl

Swaying slow she quits her station.
All one silken undulation,
Past the rows of swarthy faces, cresser-lit, that line the walls,
With a sleek and sliding motion,
Like the glowy swell of ocean,
Like a cataract's water gliding oily-smooth before it falls.
Silvery-golden gleams and glances,
Dancing with her as she dances,
Flash, like fire-flies, from her jewelled ankle, arm, and throat, and ear;
Gemmed with light she glisters darkling,
As a dusky billow sparkling.
Sown with phosphorescent lustre in a tropic midnight clear.
Clasping folds of gauzy vesture,
Float her hands in wavy gesture,
As she winds in snaky wreathings to the droning of the hymns;
Till the truth is lost in seeming,
And our spirits fall a-dreaming,
'Neath the spell of rhythmic paces and the mist of woven limbs.
Like the sea-foam's glittering daughter,
Like an image carved of water,
Trembling into hues of opal, darkly flushed with radiance rare,
There she circled in her splendour,
While a passionate light and tender,
Smote upon us from her dark eyes and the ripples of her hair.

10

A.C. Lyall (1889)

The Land of Regrets

...What lured him to life in the tropic?
Did he venture for fame or for pelf?
Did he seek a career philanthropic?
Or simply to better himself?
But whate'er the temptation that brought him,
Whether piety, dullness, or debts,
He is thine for a price, thou hast bought him,
O Land of Regrets! ...

From the East came the breath of its odours
And its heat melted soft in the haze,
While he dimly descried thy pagodas,
O Cybele, ancient of days;
Heard the hum of thy mystic processions
The echo of myriads who cry,
And the wail of their vain intercessions,
Through the bare empty vault of the sky...

He was touched with the tales of our glory
He was stirred by the clash and the jar
Of the nations who kill *con amore*
The fury of races at war;
'Mid the crumbling of royalties rotting
Each cursed by a knave or a fool,
Where kings and fanatics are plotting
He dreamt of power and a rule;
Hath he come now, in season, to know thee;
Hath he seen, what a stranger forgets,
All the graveyards of exiles below thee,
O Land of Regrets?

Has he learned how the honours are rated?
Has he cast his accounts in thy school?
With the sweets of authority sated,
Would he give up his throne to be cool,
Doth he curse Oriental romancing,
And wish he had toiled all his day,
At the Bar, or the Banks, or financing,
And got damned in a common-place way?

Thou hast tracked him with duns and diseases,
And he lies, as thy scorching winds blow,
Recollecting old England's sea breezes
On his back in a lone bungalow;
At the slow coming darkness repining
How he girds at the sun till it sets,
As he marks the long shadows declining
O'er the Land of Regrets.

Let him cry, as thy blue devils seize him,
O step-mother, careless as Fate,
He may strive from thy bonds to release him,
Thou hast passed him his sentence – Too Late;
He has found what a blunder his youth is,
His prime what a struggle, and yet
Has to learn of old age what the truth is
In the Land of Regret.

11

Rudyard Kipling (1899) ***The White Man's Burden***

Take up the White Man's burden -
Send forth the best ye breed -
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild -
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden -
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden -
The savage wars of peace -
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden -
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper -
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go make them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden -
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard -
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light: -
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden -
Ye dare not stoop to less -
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloak your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden -
Have done with childish days -
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years
Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!

4) Ways to Independence (1901-1947)

12

Rabindranath Tagore (1912)
Gitanjali

I

THOU hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

II

WHEN thou commandest me to sing, it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony – and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord.

13

Sri Aurobindo
Thought the Paraclete

As some bright archangel in vision flies
Plunged in dream-caught spirit immensities;
Past the long green crests of the seas of life,
Past the orange skies of the mystic mind
Flew my thought self-lost in the vasts of God.
Sleepless wide great glimmering wings of wind
Bore the gold-red seeking the feet that trod
Space and Time's mute vanishing ends. The face
Lustrated, pale-blue-lined of the hippogriff,
Eremite, sole, daring the bourneless ways,
Over world-bare summits of timeless being
Gleamed; the deep twilights of the world-abyss
Failed below. Sun-realms of supernal seeing,
Crimson-white mooned oceans of pauseless bliss
Drew its vague heart-yearning with voices sweet.
Hungering, large-souled to surprise the unconned
Secrets white-fire-veiled of the last Beyond,
Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,
Climbing high far ethers eternal-stunned,
Thought the great-winged wanderer paraclete
Disappeared slow-singing a flame-word rune.
Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.

14

V.K. Gokak (1947)
English Words

Speech that came like leech-craft
And killed us almost, bleeding us white!
You bleached our souls soiled with impurities.
You bathed our hearts amid tempestuous seas
Of a purer, drearer, delight.

O tongues of fire! You came devouring
Forests of nightshade, creepers that enmesh,
Trees that never remembered to grow,
And shrubs that were but thornmills in our flesh.
You were the dawn, and sunlight filled the spaces
Where owls were hovering.

O winged seeds! You crossed the furrowed seas
To nestle in the warm and silent earth.
Like a warm swarm of fireflies that came
Pining for a new agony, a new birth.
You blossomed into a nascent loveliness.
You ripened into nectar in fruit-jars
That hung like clustered stars.

O winging words! like homing bees you borrow
Grown murmurous, the honey of delight,
Pollened within our hearts the coming morrow,
Sweetened within our souls for aeons bright:
You kindle in the far corners of the earth
The music of an ever-deepening chant:
The burthen of waneless, winterless spring,
The gospel of an endless blossoming.

Fathomless words, with Indo-Aryan blood
Tingling in your veins,
The spoils of ages, global merchandise
Mingling in your strains!
You pose the cosmic riddle:
In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was God.
The Word is in the middle
And the Word is Man.
In the end will be the Word
And the Word will be God in Man.

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