

INDIAN POETRY – 19th Century

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview

The nineteenth century was the long century of colonialism in India. From a few hundred officials in 1800, the British Raj grew into an empire by 1900. Christianity, English education and printing brought enormous changes, not least in literature. Rejection of the new was not possible, but a debate raged about the degree of accommodation, and the key literary battleground was poetry. The novel was too new—it had no genuine Indian counterpart—and it came too late in the century. So it was in poetry (and, to a lesser degree, drama) that the battle between tradition and modernity was fought. With few exceptions, the result was the insertion of new content into traditional forms, but even that proved controversial. It was an exciting time to write poetry.

Urdu

Ghazal The decline of Muslim power meant a loss of prestige for Urdu (and Persian), which then became the literature of lament. The *ghazal* was ideally suited for this role, since even classical form expressed the pain and sorrow of lost love, in both earthly and divine realms. The *ghazal* was not, however, ‘love poetry’ in the Western sense. Rather, it was poetry about love, a highly formalised and stylised love that enabled poets to leave the constraints of reality behind and reach transcendental heights of mysticism.

Ghalib The greatest Urdu poet (and arguably the greatest Indian poet) of the century was Ghalib (1797-1869), who was an aristocrat and a defender of the crumbling Muslim aristocracy. He was educated in Persian and Arabic, and wrote Persian verse, but his Urdu *ghazals* are considered his finest work. Although a conservative, he was also a mystic who criticised the ritualization of religion and placed emphasis on personal experience. His verse is both complex and quotable, which is why he has come to represent the faded glory of the Mughal Empire.

Gujarati

Narmad Narmad (Narmadashankar, 1833-1886) was the voice of poetic change in Gujarati, though he spoke for all of India when, in 1858 he wrote a manifesto (*Kaviani Kavita*, ‘The poet and poetry’). In it, he eloquently defended the new poetry that self-consciously borrowed from English verse. In the same year, he demonstrated his ideas by publishing a collection of his poetry (*Narma Kavita*). It was hailed, even by reluctant critics, as brilliant, and soon became a landmark of Gujarati literature. Narmad himself became something of a literary hero, a patriot (despite appreciation of English literature) and a fiery social reformer. His attitudes, shaped by the revolt of 1857-1858, are most clearly expressed in *Hinduo-ni-Padati*, which is a glorification of the Hindu past.

Tamil

Vedanayaka Sastri Devashayam Pillai (1774-1864) was born in a Tamil Catholic family but converted to evangelical Protestantism as a young boy and became Vedanayaka Sastri. He wrote more than 35 books in Tamil, mostly prose tracts, but his lasting contribution was as a poet of this age of transition, transposing traditional devotionalism into the hymns that Tamil Christians sang in church. His accommodation between *bhakti* and the bible, however, met with resistance from some parts of the Tamil Christian community who objected to Sastri’s inclusion of ‘heathen’ aesthetics and practices. Still, his collection of hymns (*Jepamalai*) remained extremely popular with congregations.

Henry Alfred Krishna Pillai A generation after Sastri, came another Tamil Christian who wrote one of the finest poems of the 19th century in that language. Krishna Pillai (1827–1900) was born a Hindu but was educated in a Christian school in a small village.

He was later baptised in Madras, adding the names 'Henry Alfred,' but, significantly, retaining his Hindu names. Like Sastri, his life's work was an accommodation of traditional Tamil devotionalism to Christian thinking. His greatest work, *RatchanyaYatrigram*, which took him sixteen years to complete, was inspired by both Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Kampan's Tamil *Ramayana* (12th CE.)

RamalingaSwamigal Despite the impact of Christianity, traditional Tamil poetry continued to flourish during this century, as evident in the work of RamalingaSwamigal(1823-1874). Some scholars even consider him the greatest poet of the century, which is debatable, but certainly he was the last in the long line of Tamil Saiva poet-saints. Although he lived in the 19th century, little is known of his life, though today he is the centre of a cult whose members believe that he did not 'die' but was 'received by God.' His output was enormous (one modern print collection runs to 1500 pages), composed in many different verse forms and exhibiting a nimble use of language. However, the outstanding feature of his poetry, again deriving from the *bhakti* tradition, is its musicality. These are poems meant to be sung.

MastanSahab Tamil poetry of a high quality was also written by Muslims, the most famous of whom is Mastan Sahib (b. 1830?). Like Ramalinga, he was a mystic, who withdrew from life, wandered in the forest and acquired disciples. He did not write many poems—only about 5,000 lines survive—but many display a subtlety and depth of feeling, again similar to that of the classical Tamil *bhakti* poets, in expressing his universal religion.

Bengali

Michael MadhusudanDuttAs the capital of the British Raj, Calcutta was the seedbed for the new literature, and that city's most celebrated author (until Tagore) was Michael MadhusudanDutt (1824-1873). A highly-respected playwright and essayist, Dutt also pioneered the Bengali blank-verse and the Bengali sonnet. One of his poems, 'AtmaBilap' ('Self-lament') nicely reveals the shift towards personalised literature that epitomises the period. However, his most celebrated work, and one that displays the transitional nature of 19th-century Indian poetry is *Meghnad Bodh Kavya* ('Story of Meghnad's Killing'). In it, he adapts a story from the *Ramayana* using a variety of western romantic and classical influences, as well as Sanskrit poetics.

Rabindranath TagoreThe most remarkable writer of this remarkable century, however, was surely Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Even before his concern for the destiny of his country brought him into politics, his poetic world shone with his passion for the natural world and his understanding of human emotions. Like other great poets of this century, he married the sensibility of his regional (Bengali) tradition with that of modernity. In particular, he drew on the ballads of the itinerant

Bauls, plus the Vaisnavadevotionalism of his own language and that of Braj. At the age of 16, he composed poems later published (under a pseudonym) as *BhanusimhaThakurerPadabali*. His most famous work, *Gitanjali*, which was published in 1910, earned him the Nobel Prize in 1913.

Questions/Discussion

1. Poetry has been the default position of Indian literature since ancient times. For more than two thousand years, it was regarded as the most cultivated expression of the literary arts, close to singing and close to god. Perhaps this longevity and cultural status is what enabled poetry not only to survive the encounter with western literary models, but to enrich itself in the process.
2. The accommodation of Christianity with devotionalism in Tamil poetry is a good example of this process. Yet, this, too, was controversial and generated debates about the unwanted 'heathen' elements in Indian Christian hymns and prayer practice. This situation was replicated all over the colonised world, in Asia and Africa. Today, however, the 'empire strikes back,' and the Church of England is facing a severe challenge to its unity from African churches who do not like the liberal drift of its leaders.

3. Compare the poetry of Dutt and Tagore. Separate by a generation, do they display traces of the significant political and social changes that had occurred by the end of the century?

Reading

Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910. Western Impact, Indian Response* (SahityaAkademi, 1991)

David Shulman and V. NarayanaRao (trans.), *Classical Telugu Poetry: An Anthology* (California, 2002)

Lakshmi Holstrom, SubashreeKrishnaswamy and K. Srilata (eds.), *Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry* (Penguin, 2009)

Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Seagull Books, 1989)

Murshid, Ghulam, and GopaMajumdar, *Lured by Hope: A Biography of Michael MadhusudanDutt* (Oxford, 2003)

Texts

1. From Ghalib's poetry

The Sheikh hovers by the tavern door,
but believe me, Ghalib,
I am sure I saw him slip in
As I departed

Said I one night to a pristine seer
(Who knew the secrets of whirling Time)
'Sir you well perceive,
That goodness and faith,
Fidelity and love
Have all departed from this sorry land.
Father and son are at each other's throat;
Brother fights brother.
Unity and Federation are undermined.
Despite these ominous signs
Why has not Doomsday come?
Why does not the Last Trumpet sound?
Who holds the reins of the Final Catastrophe.'

2. From *Gitanjali* by Tagore

Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light! Ah, the light dances, my darling, at the centre of my life; the light strikes, my darling, the chords of my love; the sky opens, the wind runs wild, laughter passes over the earth. The butterflies spread their sails on the sea of light. Lilies and jasmines surge up on the crest of the waves of light. The light is shattered into gold on every cloud, my darling, and it scatters gems in profusion. Mirth spreads from leaf to leaf, my darling, and gladness without measure. The heaven's river has drowned its banks and the flood of joy is abroad.

3. From poetry of Dutt, translated from the original Bengali by the poet

Where man in all his truest glory lives,

And nature's face is exquisitely sweet;
For those fair climes I heave impatient sigh,
There let me live and there let me die.
Long sunk in superstition's night,
By Sin and Satan driven,
I saw not, cared not for the light
That leads the blind to Heaven.
But now, at length thy grace, O Lord!
Birds all around me shine;
I drink thy sweet, thy precious word,
I kneel before thy shrine!

[on his way to England]:

Forget me not, O Mother,
Should I fail to return
To thy hallowed bosom.
Make not the lotus of thy memory
Void of its nectar Madhu.