

INDIAN POETRY -20th Century

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Part I : Early 20th Century

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Early 20th Century Poetry

Overview

Poetry, the oldest, most entrenched and most respected genre in Indian literary tradition, had survived the challenges of the nineteenth century almost intact. Colonialism and Christianity did not substantially alter the writing of poetry, but the modernism of the early twentieth century did. We could say that Indian poetry in most languages reached modernity through two stages: first romanticism and then nationalism. Urdu, however, was something of an exception to this generalisation, in as much as its modernity was implicated in a romantic nostalgia for the past.

Urdu

Mohammad Iqbal Mohammad Iqbal (1877?-1938) was the last major Persian poet of South Asia and the most important Urdu poet of the twentieth century. A philosopher and politician, as well, he is considered the spiritual founder of Pakistan. His finely worked poems combine a glorification of the past, Sufi mysticism and passionate anti-imperialism. As an advocate of pan-Islam, at first he wrote in Persian (two important poems being 'Shikwah,' 1909, and 'Jawab-e-Shikwah,' 1912), but then switched to Urdu, with *Bangri-Dara* in 1924. In much of his later work, there is a tension between the mystical and the political, the two impulses that drove Urdu poetry in this period.

Progressives The political came to dominate in the next phase of Urdu poetry, from the 1930s, when several poets formed what is called the 'progressive movement.' Loosely connected, they nevertheless shared a tendency to favour social engagement over formal aesthetics. 'Miraji' (Muhammad Sanaullah, 1912-1949) wrote satirical verse, drawing on his knowledge of French poetry, while Sardar Jafri (b.1912) was influenced by Walt Whitman in his use of free verse, and Majruh Sultanpuri (1912-1955) went back to the traditional *ghazal* to express his progressive ideas.

Hindi

Dwivedi The new poetry in Hindi was pioneered by Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi (1864-1938), whose verse broke from the mannerism of earlier poets, particularly those who used the Braj dialect. Through the magazine *Saraswati*, which he edited for a while, Dwivedi popularised a poetry inspired by nationalism and by an awareness of social evils.

Chayavad A more lasting influence on Hindi poetry was exerted by the *chayavad* ('reflexionist') movement in the 1920s and 1930s. These poets, influenced by the English romantics, Tagore's Bengali lyricism and Indian mysticism, wrote with self-reflection about sensual love and nature.

Nirala A key figure of this 'neo-romanticism' was Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' (1896-1961), a Bengali Brahman, who nevertheless wrote his poetry in Hindi. Equally conversant with ancient Indian philosophy and modern English literature, he had the intellectual power to synthesise various strands in his humanist and revolutionary writing. Often using free verse, his work was considered too unconventional to be popular in his lifetime.

Mahadevi Varma The only woman poet in the *chayavad* movement, was Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987), who went largely unrecognised in her time. She drew on the more traditional reservoir of Sanskrit poetry and the medieval lyrics of Mirabai (a woman poet of the 16th c. CE) to create sensual love poetry.

Bengali

Rabindranath Tagore Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who had already helped shape modern Bengali with his poems and fiction in the late 19th century, continued to influence its future with his poetry in the 20th. In 1901, he established a rural retreat (Shantiniketan), where he wrote his Nobel Prize winning *Gitanjali* ('Song Offerings') in 1912. Although these poems are rightly regarded as mystical (and often derided as such), they were deepened by his grief over the recent deaths of his wife and two of his children. Tagore, however, was moving away from spiritualism at the time and soon produced a collection of robustly humanist verse (*Balaka*, 'Wild Geese,' 1916).

Kallol poets The modernist movement in Bengali poetry was self-consciously announced by the Kallol poets (from a magazine of the same name, which translates as 'Sound Waves') that published their poetry in the 1920s and 1930s. Influenced by Marx and Freud, Pound and Eliot, and distancing themselves from Tagore's 'soft' humanism, some (like Premendra Mitra, 1904-1988) preferred a gritty realism, while others (like Buddhadeva Bose, 1908-1974) produced 'art for art's sake.'

English

Sri Aurobindo While Tagore was leaving behind the mystical traditions of Indian poetry, another Bengali poet, Aurobindo Ghose (later Sri Aurobindo, 1872-1950), was entering into a very deep spiritual plane in his poetry. Having spent 15 years in England, he returned to India in 1893 and became a passionate advocate of Indian nationalism. His radical politics landed him in jail, where he had spiritual experiences, though was later forced to leave British India to escape an arrest warrant and live in the French enclave of Pondicherry. There he wrote his masterpiece, *Savitri*, an epic poem of 23,000 lines in blank verse, which was only published after his death. It is the poetic expression of his philosophy, which explains the evolution of the human soul through the history of mankind and its hopeful future.

Sarojini Naidu Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was a poet and politician, whose career nicely illustrates the two strands of early twentieth-century poetry. She was the first woman to serve as governor of a state and the first Indian woman to be elected leader of the Indian National Congress. Her poetry, harking back to the lyricism of Bengali poets of the previous century, has been criticised as a faded voice from the past, while others have pointed out that it was an authentically Indian voice, finely tuned to the composite reality of India. Her major works include *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wings* (1917) and *The Sceptred Flute* (1946)

Tamil

Subramania Bharati Tamil had no poet of with the international fame of Tagore, but in Subramania Bharati (1882-1921) it had a poet of equal skill and status, who fired the imagination of the south Indian literary world. Burning with a revolutionary fever for political change, he famously hailed the 1917 Russian revolution as a manifestation of the power of *shakti* (female force in Hindu mythology). Like the best of his contemporaries, he combined traditional learning with western thinking, using well-known metres and *bhakti* imagery to condemn the caste system and women's oppression. Like Sri Aurobindo, he fled to Pondicherry to escape being jailed for sedition, and there he continued to publish poems that drew on Hindu, Christian and Islamic traditions. He brought also free verse into Tamil and wrote poems that sung

Malayalam

Kumaran Asan Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) was one of three Malayalam poets who were collectively known as the 'trio'. Asan was the poetic voice of a low-caste uplift movement. For instance, in his poem 'Simhanadam' ('The Tiger's Roar,' 1919), urges his readers to respond 'where the caste-demon rears its ugly face.' All his poems are similarly devoted to raising awareness of caste inequality, but he was capable of delicate lyrics, too, as in 'Vina Puvu' ('Fallen Flower,' 1908). One of his his last (and perhaps greatest) work 'Karuna' ('Compassion') is a meditation on the universal need for empathy.

Vallathol Narayana Menon Vallathol Narayana Menon (1879-1958) was a more conventional poet, utilising the traditional themes of Indian mythology. He was, however, a committed nationalist and refused to accept a gift offered by the British government in honour of his poetry. Like Subramania Bharati in Tamil, he used traditional images to articulate new feelings, as in 'Gangapati' (1913), in which Parvati challenges her husband Siva

Uloor Parameswara Iyer Uloor Parameswara Iyer (1877-1949) also followed tradition, especially in his epic poem about the history of Kerala ('Uma Keralam,' 'The Glory of Kerala,' 1913). However, his later poems move away from traditional themes and use more conversational language.

Questions/Discussion

1. The two outstanding poets on this period, Sri Aurobindo in English and Subramania Bharati in Tamil, were both jailed by the British authorities for the seditious ideas in their writing. Both subsequently fled to Pondicherry, where they became friends and talked about the role of poetry in colonial India. One observer commented that their 'conversation was a sort of variety entertainment. Only the level was very high, both of them being, in cricket language, "all-rounders".' No historical document exists of their conversations, which would make fascinating material for a short story or a play.
2. Sarojini Naidu and Mahadevi Varma were both excellent poets and the best-known women poets of their generation in English and Hindi, respectively. Yet, they were very different people. Naidu was a high-profile public figure, while Varma, though serving as Vice-Chancellor of a minor women's university, was more retiring. A good research topic would be to determine the extent to which one influenced the other.
3. Modern poetry (and fiction) in most major Indian languages was promoted by literary journals and magazines, often edited by key literary figures. Sometimes these periodicals were very small scale, poorly produced and ran for only a few years, yet their impact was enormous. The role of these minor periodicals in forging a new Indian literature would be a fascinating topic for research.

Reading

Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956* (Sahitya Akademi, 1995)

Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* (Oxford India, 1998)

Subramania Bharati and Usha Rajagopalan, *Selected Poems* (Hanchette India, 2012)

K.M. George (ed.), *Modern Indian Literature, Vol. 1. Surveys and Poems* (Sahitya Akademi, 1992)

Vijay Dwarwadker and A.K Ramanujan (eds.), *Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (Oxford India, 1996)

Texts

1. From Tagore's *Gitanjali*

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.

It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.

The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!'

The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'

2. From Subramania Bharati's poems

trans. S. Vijaya Bharati (the poet's granddaughter)

They are fools who cultivate the flames of enmity

Insisting on the existence of several Gods

God is One, Which exists in all beings.

There should be no cruelties of caste .

The world will flourish only by love."

God blessed woman with wisdom

A few fools on earth destroyed their intellect.

trans. A.K. Ramanujan

Wind, come softly.
Don't break the shutters of the windows.
Don't scatter the papers.
Don't throw down the books on the shelf.
There, look what you did — you threw them all down.
You tore the pages of the books.
You brought rain again.
You're very clever at poking fun at weaklings.
Frail crumbling houses, crumbling doors, crumbling rafters,
crumbling wood, crumbling bodies, crumbling lives,
crumbling hearts —
the wind god winnows and crushes them all.
He won't do what you tell him.
So, come, let's build strong homes,
Let's joint the doors firmly.
Practise to firm the body.
Make the heart steadfast.
Do this, and the wind will be friends with us.
The wind blows out weak fires.
He makes strong fires roar and flourish.
His friendship is good.
We praise him every day.

3. From Nirala's poems, trans. David Rubin

As T. S. Eliot tossed out
A stone from here, a pebble from there

His readers, with
their hands on their hearts,
exclaimed,
'He's described the whole world!'

I know I've crossed
The rivers
and torrents I had to cross.
I laugh now
as I see
There wasn't any boat.
Whoever's spent
these days of sorrow
counting and counting
the minutes,
the trifles,
has strung
a necklace
of tears
like pearls
and tossed it around
his lover's throat
to see the fair face
serene and bright,
in the night of sorrow.

Late 20th Century Poetry

Overview

Poetry, the premier literary form in India for three thousand years, did not recover from the onslaught of modernity in the twentieth century. There is no modern counterpart to the court-poet or the poet-saint, unless we speak of the lyricist whose lines are sung in Indian cinema. While the Indian novel continues to flourish, poetry has largely lost its cultural status and public profile. It is still written in regional languages, but audiences and book sales are small. Indian English poetry does enjoy some success, although it retains little from premodern Indian poetry except on the level of content.

There are, however, bright spots in Indian post-colonial poetry. We can, for instance, point to the rise of women poets in all languages, as part of the broader feminist movements in the late 20th century. And poetry has one advantage. Its brevity means it can be read with pleasure in a matter of minutes. And, so, in the age of the internet, a poet in a small town in India can reach an audience in Tokyo and Melbourne.

Urdu

Gulzar These trends are illustrated by the career of Gulzar (Sampoorn Singh Kalra, b. 1934), who is today described as a 'poet-lyricist'. He writes in several languages (Hindi, Punjabi, Braj and Urdu) and has published several well-received collections of poetry, the latest in 2014 (*Green Poems*). However, his reputation rests on the Urdu lyrics, featuring the trials and hopes of the common man, which he has composed for films, starting with songs like 'Mora Gora Ang' (in *Bandini*, 1963) and 'Humne Dekhi Hai' (in *Khamoshi*, 1969). In 2008, he shot to international fame when he won the Oscar for 'Jai Ho' in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Hindi

Ashok Vajpeyi Hindi writer Ashok Vajpeyi (b. 1941) represents another kind of modern poet. More a 'man of letters' than of song lyrics, Vajpeyi is an academic poet, critic, essayist and cultural administrator. He has published more than twenty books, including poetry collections, starting with *Shaher Ab Bhi Sambhavana Hai* ('The City is Still Likely') in 1966 and continuing with *Vivaksha* ('Implication') in 2006. He has also had a parallel life in government, beginning in 1965 and culminating in his chairmanship of the country's elite arts organisation in 2008-2011.

Anamika Among a younger generation of Hindi poets, is Anamika (b. 1961). Born after Independence, she belongs to another cultural world, more cosmopolitan and less connected to tradition. Anamika writes poetry and novels in Hindi, literary criticism in English and translates from English into Hindi. Her work, especially the poetry, reflects a feminist, social activist and global perspective. Among her collections, critics have single out *Anushtup* ('Invocation', 1998) and *Khurduri Hatheliyan* ('Rough Palms,' 2005).

Marathi

Arun Kolatkar Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004), who wrote in both Marathi and English, is widely recognised as an outstanding modern poet. Although he published widely as a young man, mostly in small magazines and newspapers, his first book of English poems (*Jejuri*, the name of a town) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1976 and another collection (*Kala Ghoda*, 'Black Horse,' a neighbourhood of Bombay) won a Sahitya Akademi Award in 2004. *Jejuri*, however, is still regarded as his finest. Named after an old town, with a famous temple, It describes the experience of a traveller, who arrives on a state transport bus and wanders about the town, confused and alienated, and yet at the end leaves the place with a sense of wonder. It is a haunting portrait of psychological disorientation.

Tamil

Salma The story of Tamil poet and novelist Salma (Rajathi Salma, b. 1968) is almost the stuff of legend. Born into a conservative Muslim family in a small town, she was taken out of school at age 13 and forced to marry. Undeterred, Salma continued to write her poems surreptitiously. She hid the scraps of paper, smuggled them out of the house and posted them to a publisher in Madras. Eventually, in 2000, a collection of poems (*Oru Malaiyum*,

Innoru Malaiyum, 'An Evening and Another Evening') was published, followed by another (*Pacai Devatai*, 'Green Angel') in 2003. Reactions to these often overtly sexual and sensual poems have ranged from disgust to high praise. Today she is a central figure in new Tamil poetry.

English

Dilip Chitre Like many of his contemporaries, Dilip Chitre (1938 -2009) was a poet who travelled back and forth between his mother-tongue and English. Born in Baroda and brought up in Bombay by a Marathi-speaking family, he was educated in English and later spent time in several countries, including the USA. He published his first book of Marathi poems in 1960 but gained an international reputation in 2008 with his collection of English poems (*As Is, Where Is*). His bilingual poetic powers are evident in a famous translation of devotional poems from the 17th-century Marathi writer Tukram (*Says Tuka*, 1991). Chitre was also a talent painter and musician.

Nissim Ezekiel Nissim Ezekiel (1924 –2004) was another polymath best-known for his poetry. Born into an Indian Jewish family in Bombay, he was brought up by his professor father and school-principal mother. After four years studying in London, where he immersed himself in the world of film and the visual arts, he returned to India (working on a cargo ship) and worked as a critic and editor. His first poetry collection (*A Time to Change*) was published in 1952, followed by a dozen others. When his language was criticised as 'old school' and 'colonial', he experimented (unsuccessfully) with 'Indian English.' His best poems ('Patriot' and 'The Night of the Scorpion') display a wicked wit and deep humanism.

A.K.Ramanujan A.K. Ramanujan (1929 –1993) was perhaps the most brilliant of all the Indian English poets. Trained as a linguist, famous for his translations from ancient poems, and fascinated by Indian folklore, he brought to all his work a deep knowledge of Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada and English literature. At the same time, he balanced this classical learning with an appreciation of Indian oral traditions. For example, he opened up the study of the *Ramayana* with an essay 'Three Hundred Ramayanas', which was subsequently banned in major Indian universities but continues to enlighten generations of students and researchers. His poetry (*The Striders*, 1966; *Relations*, 1971; *Selected Poems*, 1976; *Second Sight*, 1986) displays a similar originality in its Haiku-like lapidary concision.

Questions/Discussion

1. One explanation for the decline of poetry in Indian languages in the twentieth century is that the nationalist and reformist ideas that dominated India until after 1950 were more effectively articulated in fiction and the essay.
2. To what extent can we compare the poet-saints of medieval and pre-modern India with the lyricists of today's cinema? Both composed and sang songs, but is this only an irrelevant, albeit interesting, commonality?
3. Many of the best English-language poets either wrote in or translated from a regional language. What role does bi- and tri-lingualism play in the formation of literary culture in contemporary India?

Reading

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Oxford, 1997)

Eunice De Souza(ed.), *Nine Indian Women Poets* (Oxford India, 2001)

Jeet Thayil(ed.), *60 Indian Poets* (Penguin India, 2007)

Jeet Thayil(ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (Bloodaxe, 2009)

Bruce King (ed.), *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Oxford, 2005)

Texts

1. 'The Black Hen,' by A.K Ramanujan

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all

yet it comes sometimes

as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it's all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you're afraid.

2. 'Father returning home,' by Dilip Chitre

My father travels on the late evening train
Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light
Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes
His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat
Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age
fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.
Now I can see him getting off the train
Like a word dropped from a long sentence.
He hurries across the length of the grey platform,
Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,
His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onward.
Home again, I see him drinking weak tea,
Eating a stale chapati, reading a book.
He goes into the toilet to contemplate
Man's estrangement from a man-made world.
Coming out he trembles at the sink,
The cold water running over his brown hands,
A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists.
His sullen children have often refused to share
Jokes and secrets with him. He will now go to sleep
Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking
Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass.

3. from *Jejuri*, by Kolatkar

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down
on the windows of the state transport bus.
all the way up to jejuri.

a cold wind keeps whipping
and slapping a corner of tarpaulin at your elbow.

you look down to the roaring road.
you search for the signs of daybreak in what little light spills out of bus.

your own divided face in the pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see.

you seem to move continually forward.
toward a destination
just beyond the caste mark beyond his eyebrows.

outside, the sun has risen quietly
it aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin.
and shoots at the old man`s glasses.

a sawed off sunbeam comes to rest gently against the driver`s right temple.
the bus seems to change direction.

at the end of bumpy ride with your own face on the either side
when you get off the bus.

you don`t step inside the old man`s head.

4. 'Oppantam' ('Contract'), by Salma. Trans. N. Kalyan Raman

My sister hisses at me in anger
what my mother whispers tactfully:
that all failures
on the conjugal bed
are mine alone.

The first words I hear
every night in the bedroom:
'What`s with you tonight?'
These are, most often,
the final words too.

A finger points to whorish barter.
Upon the air of timorous nights, awaiting redemption
from ten million glowing stars,
float words of wise counsel

Unable to feed its young,
the cat sobs like a child;
and its wail
seizes my heart.

You, too,
must have your complaints.
My stand, though,
has been made clear
by time and history.

To receive
a little of your love,
dreary though it might be –

To fulfil
my duties

as the mother of your child –

To have you bring
sanitary towels and contraceptives
From the outside world;
And to seek more such petty favours –

To order you around a bit,
if I could –

To affirm a little
of my authority –

My vagina opens,
knowing all that it should.

5. 'Pacai Devatai' '(Green Angel)' by Salma. Trans. Lakshmi Holstrom

In the midst of a thicket
beside a pond that has fed on the morning
and spreads out in beauty
I search for the pathway that I have lost.

Just as the darkness of the dense trees
threatens to snatch me up and swallow me
a compassionate angel appears
to close up my dark hole of fear
and to retrieve three pledges
even from the depths of the mysterious pond:

to light up the path I lost
to re-thread a shattered dream from my youth
to imagine an entirely new dream.
And while I find again my path,
straighten an old dream that was askew,
relish a new dream once more,
through tongues of fire that flame my eyes
I see the angel treading the earth
her clothes steeped in green.