

The Social, Cultural
and Spiritual
Dimensions
of Modern Indian
Poetry in English

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Edited by

Vijay Kumar Roy

Cambridge
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PREFACE

Post-independence India has produced many brilliant writers whose works have their own importance in the field of Indian English literature. These writers have brought new themes and new styles of writing that have enriched Indian English literature to a great extent. Besides fiction authors, poets have emerged on a large scale, and poetry is receiving its due attention for studies, research and discussion. This situation is best exemplified in an increasing number of publications of poetry collections and anthologies, along with print and online journals and magazines.

William Henry Hudson said that “[e]very writer is a ‘product’ of his time”. Time helps the writer to develop a particular taste or perception and express it in their own words, resulting in literature. It leads them in the direction of creating their own world. This world can be spiritual: a cherished shelter for them, and sometimes an escape from real-life situations and material pleasure. There is a possibility that they might seek to strengthen the social and cultural values that gave them an identity. They might also develop a zeal for bringing change and revolution into the present social and political system for the sake of developing a scientific temperament, ecological awareness, fraternity, equality, justice or global peace and harmony.

Modern Indian poetry in English is rich with all these elements. Research on these subjects can prove a precious contribution to the academic as well as literary world, for the further exploration and enrichment of Indian English literature.

The book *The Social, Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Modern Indian Poetry in English* examines the work of modern Indian poets, particularly those whose verse is less explored.

Aju Mukhopadhyay in his paper, “Devotional Zeal in Modern Poetry”, discusses the themes of spirituality and mystical experiences in the poetry of Dev Ganguly, Syed Ameeruddin, Rudra Narayan Mishra, N. Karthikeyan Osho, O. P. Arora and Anuradha Bhattacharya.

Professor Nigamananda Das, in his detailed study of the poetry of Northeastern India, explores eco-cultural and spiritual aspects in the poetry of Mamang Dai, Yumlam Tana, Hem Barua, Maheswar Neog, Lakshahira Das, Dayananda Pathak, Umakanta Sarma, Bhupati Das, Rupanjali Baruah, Robin S. Ngangom, R. K. Madhubir, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao,

Rajendra Bhandari, Bhaskar Roy Barman, and also the English rendering of the poetry of Hiren Bhattacharya, Bhupen Hazarika, Nagen Saikia, Megan Kachari and Kathita Hatibaruah.

The poetry of K. V. Raghupati has been taken by two authors. V. Sunitha in her paper, “Precepts to People from the Peepal Tree: An Appraisal of K. V. Raghupathi’s *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree*”, depicts the ideology that nature “uplifts human lives with its unarticulated but explicit philosophies” in a number of ways in order to spread good values from generation to generation. G. Srilatha’s paper, “Reflections on K. V. Raghupati’s *Voice of the Valley*”, depicts the philosophy of human life and the relationship between human beings and the Almighty through mystical experiences.

Vijay Kumar Roy’s paper, “The Fusion of Social and Spiritual Elements in the Poetry of R. K. Singh”, illustrates poetry as social criticism, and the need for liberation from superstitions, ignorance, rituals and evils in order to change materialistic views into spiritual experiences.

The poetry of Pashupati Jha has been discussed by two scholars. In the first paper, “Spiritual and Sociocultural Concerns in the Poetry of Pashupati Jha”, Kusum Kundu discusses religious, social, cultural and political aspects of Jha’s poetry and shows that Professor Jha “simply depicts the scene and does not dictate his terms”. He does not impose his own ideas on the readers. Thus, he has all the qualities of a true poet. The second paper, “Pashupati Jha’s Poetry: A Journey to ‘Nirvana’ Amidst ‘Unrest’, ‘Realization’, ‘Truth’, ‘Acceptance’ and ‘Submission’”, by Ram Kulesh Thakur presents Jha’s work as “a departure from the traditional notions of poetry” and as introducing new ideals, evolving new styles and attaining liberation “through the medium of his poetry”.

V. Sunitha, in her paper, “Shujaat Hussain’s Civic Concern: A Critical Appraisal of His Selected Poems”, discusses “the ubiquitous spiritual, cultural and political aspects” of Hussain’s poetry. She also highlights the “sense of duty, responsibility, humility, ethics and moral values” reflected in his work.

There are two papers on the poetry of K. V. Dominic. The first, by D. C. Chambial, is a thorough analysis of Dominic’s poetry as social criticism. Spiritual and aesthetic grounds also find proper mention in it. Another paper, “The Matrix of Cultural Coexistence in the Floral, Faunal and Human Worlds as Presented in K. V. Dominic’s *Winged Reason*” by Kavitha Gopalakrishnan, deals with “coexistence and cohesion” between human beings and flora and fauna – and, at the same time, an exposition of the latent pain of speechless animals and plants caused by human beings.

Robert Maddox-Harle, in his paper, “The Poetry of Sunil Sharma: An Expression of Love and Liberal Humanism”, discusses true “liberal humanism” in the light of love and equality, and compares the poetry of Sunil Sharma with some of the notable stalwarts. He also highlights “divine elements” in Sharma’s poetry that provide a “transcendental experience”.

There are two papers on the poetry of Vijay Kumar Roy. In the first paper, “Reconnecting with the Sublime: The Poetry of Vijay Kumar Roy”, Robert Maddox-Harle examines the connection in Roy’s poetry of nature with spirituality, with “shades of mystical experience”, “animistic themes”, “a deep respect for the natural world” and social criticism – all to rise “above our base material existence”. He compares the poetry of Roy with that of John Donne, William Wordsworth and John Keats. In the second paper, “Spiritual Trends in the Poetry of Vijay Kumar Roy”, Bhaskar Roy Barman begins with a historical background of Indian poetry in English and analyses the poetry of Roy in the light of divinizing nature, love, beauty, surrendering to the Almighty and the complexities of life.

In the last paper, “Sociopolitical Issues in the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy”, C. L. Shilaja discusses the issues of the *dalit* (oppressed) class in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy, who is best known for her “inflammatory writing”.

Thus, this book covers the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of modern Indian poetry along with some other relevant themes that can prove useful to students, teachers and all those interested in Indian English poetry for study and research purposes.

I am thankful to all the esteemed contributors who helped bring about the book. I am grateful to Ms. Victoria Carruthers and the whole team at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom for encouraging me and publishing the book in such an attractive format.

-Vijay Kumar Roy

Arar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

20 September 2016

CHAPTER ONE

DEVOTIONAL ZEAL IN MODERN POETRY

AJU MUKHOPADHYAY

Devotional Poems: The Indian Tradition

The tradition of writing devotional poems began, as per known records, from the time of Tamil Vaishnav and Shaiva poets in the sixth century, like Andal. Among the many, a few such poets over the centuries have become household names in India, like Mirabai, Sant Kabir, Tulsidas, Tukaram, Akka Mahadevi, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Jaydeva Goswami, Narsi Mehta, Ramprasad Sen, Atulprasad Sen, Rajanikanta Sen, Dwijendranath Roy and Kaji Nazrul Islam. The Bauls of Bengal and Sufis of the Islamic faith are also a part of this culture. In modern times, too, there are many poets who write devotional works in regional languages. Sometimes they also become mystic poets, like the women poets from Chittagong, which is now in Bangladesh; and Jyotirmoyee (or Jyotirmala) Choudhury, who lived in Pondicherry after her education in England. Though good volumes of their works have subsequently been translated into English, they were, and are, not Indian English poets.

Among those who were Indian English poets, three stalwarts are the most famous: Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, all of whom wrote devotional and spiritual poems. They were mystics. Other poets belonged to the Sri Aurobindo School of poetry, among them Nolini Kanta Gupta, K. D. Sethna (Amal Kiran), Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Dilip Kumar Roy, Tehmi and Nirodbaran. Subramania Bharati, an associate of Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry, wrote devotional poems in English and Tamil.

Spiritual and devotional poetry is not the monopoly of India, but, owing to its millennia-old tradition of spirituality, India is always ripe with such expressions in poetry. Nonetheless, it is also found in other countries. Discussions here are focused on some modern Indian English poets who

write devotional poems, but they also cover some of those who are opposed to such work or avoid mention of it.

Dev Ganguly's Longing for God

Dr. Debabrata Ganguly, writing under the short name of Dev Ganguly, is a retired professor. His first book of poems, entitled *Moments*, was published in 1995; his second, *Mother Forgive Me*, twenty years later. In his poems, one finds a longing for the Divine and its effect. Mental and intellectual products tinged by the psychic touch, his poems evoke a sweet feeling in the simple heart of a devotee. They are simple songs couched in symbols and imagery. Almost none of the lyrics occupy more than a page; some, half that length. But they are artistic enough to charm the reader. They evoke a similar feeling to that which one has when reading Tagore's poems in *Gitanjali*.

Tagore's *The Gardener* carries the same vibration and rhythm. *Gitanjali*'s poems evoke immediate response among Western readers and critics for their "songs" evoke memories of the Bible, uttered in charming simplicity – though in fact they resemble, more than any other source, the ideas contained in the Upanishads, as expressed by a young seeker of God. Dev's poems do not share this quality but they seem to be of the same group, carrying a similar, simple aspiration and faith in God. They have the same old language.

Some of Dev Ganguly's poems repeat Tagore's ideas in language old enough to catch the biblical rhythm in them. Tagore's poems are sudden and wondrous, a poet directly addressing God – fulfilling and quenching the song-thirsts of not only the Bengalis but of many other Indians down the years. See the poems below by Dev Ganguly and remember the *Gitanjali*. The ideas are repeated and the way of presentation too.

Thou art all-
Art thou not my master too? All I call mine is yours
Everywhere is your presence felt
And I find you
In my innermost self, consuming
All I have

("Eternity", *Mother Forgive Me* 17)

Addressing God as his master, Tagore writes, "I know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement" (*Gitanjali* 3/43). Tagore sings in the first song of *Gitanjali*, "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou / emptiest again and again,

and fillest it ever with fresh life” (*Gitanjali* 1/43). In Ganguly, the same feeling is expressed differently:

And then comes the moment of fulfillment.
i-ness and thou-ness mingle,
The entire sky seems to crumble
into metal flakes

(“Abyss of Affection”, *Mother Forgive Me* 18)

Dev Ganguly wishes God to beat and hit him (as does Tagore) to bring him into shape. “Crush me, my Master, under thy weight/ Hook me to agony . . . / Turn me to dust” (“Crush Me”, *Mother Forgive Me* 25).

In a different way, Tagore finds his sorrow transformed into joy by God’s pressing touch upon his heart with His feet (*Gitanjali* 45/57). “I will grumble no more” is another such poem, in which the writer feels very humble before God. After all he has done, the poet is quivering in expectation. “Night rolled by and came the dawn / No God came, no manifestation. / I opened the door and saw you / manifest in limitless blue” (“The Devil-song”, *Mother Forgive Me* 32).

Tagore writes, “From dawn till dusk I sit here before my door, and I know that of a sudden the happy moment will arrive when I shall see. / ... the air is fulfilling with the perfume of promise” (*Gitanjali* 44/56). Like Ganguly, Tagore did not find God in a temple bound by rituals, so he gave a call: “Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!” (*Gitanjali* 11/46). Tagore introduced the image of the sitar, comparing it with himself, imagining God tuning it properly. Dev evokes the same idea differently – linking it with a pen, waiting for God to use it:

My pen lay like a sitar
on the floor
for years
but the player did not turn up:

(“Savari”, *Mother Forgive Me* 13)

But he becomes a sitar too:

Last evening I lay inert, supine,
as usual.
And you came softly down on me,
And your fingers that knew the zones
And strings
Started playing the most efficient

Until melody broke all its shackles
 ("I am the Instrument", *Mother Forgive Me* 44)

The idea of being an instrument of God is neither Tagore's originally nor that of the recent poet. This is an age-old Indian concept and realization. We also hear it in songs by the worshippers of the Goddess Kali.

The idea of the poet becoming the instrument of God recurs in "Will You, Lord?" (*Mother Forgive Me* 45), in which he asks the Lord if He could come and wash the dirty and dusty instrument for His purpose. In "Excuse me", the poet repents for having wasted God's gift to him without any gratitude, and is afraid at the end of having no time to atone for his wrongdoings.

"Desert-Walkers Know" (50) is a fine poem, perhaps the best in the collection, recounting the *summum bonum* of human life as one is cheated by mirages throughout one's existence on earth:

Sunburnt skeletons lie half-hidden in sand
 And through their hollow sinuses
 blow the wind
 to whistle
 the story of the agony of flesh
 the story of a conspiracy
 behind the illusion of a mirage.
 ("Desert-Walkers Know", *Mother Forgive Me* 50)

Personal reference in "I Envy Your Luck" (33) tells us that the poet is aware of the people around him as well as of God. Throughout his childhood and youth he was not allowed to dream, but in the evening of his life his inner being could not keep his promise and dreamt, thereby losing his material wealth but feeling relieved and free. The poem gives a sense of one who seeks God but is not allowed to meet Him. When the time is ripe, he jumps in without paying heed to the idea of forbearance, and feels deliverance when he loses everything to reach the most coveted presence of God. It carries the same sense of longing for God and meeting Him, or getting a chance to be near Him.

"The Tides" (58) is a poem of attachment through playing with the waves and tides, reminiscent of past days of love and romance. The idea continues towards the end of *Mother Forgive Me*, in poems like "Treasure" (60) and "Yesterday, Tomorrow and Today" (61), in which the poet lightly remembers the tales of his teens and youth though they were full of routines told many times and done so often by humans. The charms of these forgotten days live in one's heart.

Most of us love Tagore but modern poets do not repeat him, for few are so attached to or anxious for the love of God. When Dev brings in the memory of Tagore through his love for God, it is a breath of fresh air. Through simple poems, the poet has evoked an exalted spirit. The idea and essence of spiritualism, being part and parcel of India, is natural. Such trends in poetry shall continue to embellish Indian English literature, even if they tend to be of lesser amplitude in our modern times.

Syed Ameeruddin's Spiritual Emotion Crosses the Boundaries of Religion

Visioned Summits and *Visions of Deliverance* by Syed Ameeruddin depict the soul's journey to the heights through the ascending scales of consciousness, beginning with failure and frustration. They record his physical and psychic journey through countries:

At last, my search
Has become a quest beyond . . .
To unfathom the eerie secrecies
And revered revelations . . .
The vibrant divine within me blazes:
La Ilaha Illal Lahu!
Salam! Salam! Salam! . . .
Ekam Eva Advitiyam Brahman! . . .
Thus, I visioned
Summits of illumined peaks
Of benign Nirvana
Aham Brahman, Anal Haq,
And touched a moment eternal
Breathing the divine light of bliss-
The Sat-Chit-Ananda!

(“Summits” *Visioned Summits* 152–57)

“His Footfall Rings” is a sweet lyric creating a jingling note of music in each footfall of the flute-playing Krishna in the ear of his bride, Radha:

Across the sunny
Shoals of Time,
Athwart the womb
Of flowing things
His footfall rings!
His footfall rings! . . .

From mystic sleep
 Of soul's chambers,
 From lovely strings
 Of chanting Hope
 His footfall rings!
 His footfall rings!

Beyond the leap
 Of eternities
 His footfall rings!
 His footfall rings!

(“His Footfall Rings”, *Visioned Summits* 145–47)

A worshipper of heritage and glory, the poet writes in “Turkey”,

Turkey! You symbolize the golden moments
 In Human Destiny! . . .
 Divine Radiation everywhere
 And experience the Bliss of God,
 The Sat, Chit, Ananda.
 Turkey! You symbolize the Essence
 Of Spiritual Beauty! . . .
 Man's life on earth a Visioned March
 From Darkness to Light:
 From Untruth to Righteousness:
 From Death to Immortality.

(“Turkey”, *Visions of Deliverance* 109–12)

Both the books discussed mark the writer's poetic journey in the spiritual languages of both Hindu and Islamic heritage. To a poet immersed in spiritual bliss, at whatever stage of his life, there is no difference in essence between the two cultures. He freely walks his poetic path using images from both traditions, comparing and relishing them, and thus proving the real spiritual urge in him, finding no narrow division or difference between them. A broad heart, spiritual urge and benevolent feeling permeate Ameeruddin's works.

While the above books fill the reader's heart with spiritual happiness, *Rainbow Rhapsodies* fills it with exuberant love between man and woman – but here, this love is polished, having passed through the cultured mind and heart of the poet who has realized his poetic zeal and passion through religious harmony and spiritual bliss. All through this book, his journey of love and the memories of it move in stages, reminiscent of his earlier journeys. Love for God and love for the beloved reach a harmonic resolution through these poems.

Rudra Narayan Mishra's Zeal to Teach

Rudra Narayan Mishra, a veteran teacher and educator, wrote large numbers of poems in two volumes of *Flashes*: 151 and 214, respectively. Most of his works are quatrains, in which, with some variations, the second and fourth lines usually rhyme. The first poem of the series takes us to the source of his *bhakti*:

When I utter Thy name, O Lord!
When I hail to Thee,
My filthy heart gets purified
And seems to dance in glee.

(“When I Hail to Thee”, *Flashes* 1)

Most of the poems in these two books are repetitions of the same thoughts and ideas: supplications to God, surrendering to Him, concentrating on Him. Each could be called a book of prayers and meditations, but there are varieties within the genre. It is rare to find such poems in profusion in modern times, and their dictions are somewhat old, biblical, sermon-like and didactic. It is usual for such a poet, who is also a teacher, to write in order to inspire, trying to raise the morale of their students. If we could have such paeans clothed in modern garments, it would be quite another experience. The poet's eyes are open; he looks at what happens around him. For instance, he takes lessons from the tree, which we have been party to for ages but seldom acknowledge:

Let me learn from thee, O Tree!
Everything for others to give away
Without a sense of possessive pride
And so superb happiness enjoy.

(“Lesson from the Tree”, *Flashes* 17)

But for the lesson of humility, he turns to the grass:

After the sweep of a terrific cyclone
One is surprised to see
While the humble grass escapes any harm
Affected is the arrogant tree.

(“Humility”, *Flashes* 40)

Does the same tree become arrogant which is elsewhere “[w]ithout a sense of possessive pride”, because the poet wants to glean a different lesson from the plant world?

Coming to the “Ganga-water”:

The sacred Ganges flows with all her glory
 And people collect her water in bottles small
 Foolishly thinking they've Ganges in their grasp
 While it's but Ganga water, not Ganga at all.

("Ganga-water", *Flashes* 41)

Though the poet has a devotional heart, in respect of Ganga and Ganga-water he becomes rigidly materialistic.

The God-loving teacher, who writes not for himself but for his students, writes from his heart rather than from his intellect – that is, unless the doctor in him strikes a difference between *bhakti* and superstition.

N. Karthikeyan Osho's Biblical Ideas

Osho's poetry comes direct from his heart – full of emotion, devotion and prayer. Sometimes it seems that he is a continuation of another, forgotten generation with its old and biblical language, but after some searching it is found that his words carry the meaning that he intends them to offer. Expressing the same feelings and passions as his forebears, he cannot change them to accommodate modern language. Like a true *sadhak* in search of God, he pours out his heart:

Hail. . . ! I search thee!
 As a mad . . . inebriate bee!
 My dear. . . lo! thou in my heart!

("Hallow Holy", *Showers to the Bowers* 40)

In this poem he prays, "Let my life's chalice ne'er taste the malice / E'er fills with those ambrosial divine's miracle" ("Life is a Wave of Ocean", *Showers to the Bowers* 69). His devotion to the Holy Mother flows through several poems:

Immortal She! Sheen;
 Immaculate She! Virgin Queen,

 aye all adore thy Divine feet.

("Immortal Mother", *Showers to the Bowers* 19)

And again:

Full of purity and treasure,
 During dusk to thy feet I reach.

("Beach I Reach", *Showers to the Bowers* 25)

He sacrifices himself at the altar of God:

Deity I sacrifice my life and time
 Avast! Almighty restore bliss aye chime.
 ("Eden Shaken and Broken", *Showers to the Bowers* 30)

O. P. Arora's Spiritual Sense

In O. P. Arora's poetry, we do not find traces of devotion directly but we find strong rationalism and straightforwardness. He does not write hymns or paeans to God but realizes his position as a man, a *gyani*: one having spiritual frankness and some wisdom who comprehends matters:

like a wave
 flaunt around my identity
 for a while, passion and intensity
 and then merge into the eternal ocean
 lost forever, unknown, unseen.
 ("Eternal Spectacle", *Whispers in the Wilderness* 13)

Not only passion and intensity but, drawing the inference, we find that his identity also merges into the ocean like a bubble, as insignificant as it is.

In this poem, a man lived in a closed, dark room for a long time; the poet slunk into his room and, defying all objections, flung every window open. Light and air and views of nature rushed into the room, greeting the occupants, and the hitherto confined man was overwhelmed, "Tears moistening his lashes / he looked at me with grateful eyes . . ." ("When There is Light", *Whispers in the Wilderness* 103). Light is Godliness; nature is close to God.

In "Death" (105), Arora finds Death entering into life stealthily, through the back door, and robbing it, giving no chance to the victim to face or fight it. This poem aims to tell of the uncertainties of life and death. Resonating with age-old Hindu philosophy and faith, he writes, "Death, inevitable, should be welcomed smiling / it is not the end, in fact another beginning" ("The Last Hour", *Pebbles of the Shore* 70).

Elsewhere, the poet rightly feels that, "No, there is nothing significant about falling / significant is- rising again after falling . . ." ("The Forked Path", *Whispers in the Wilderness* 107). The poet is robust with faith and optimism:

What if I have lost the battle!
 It doesn't matter- . . .

And . . . I would, once again
 Rise like a phoenix, once again.

(“Once Again”, *Pebbles on the Shore* 7)

A man, straightforward, has the quality of a spiritual person. When a guru, in the name of religion and spirituality, cheats an innocent follower, a devotee of God, the poet cannot be silent – and that attitude is right. A guru flaunting immaculate dress instructs his disciples in cultivated tones,

Meditate, just meditate.
 Your eyes should not see the ugliness around
 they should see the divine beauty in the hound.
 Renounce the material pleasures
 Aspire for the “Moksha.”

(“Meditation”, *Whispers in the Wilderness* 58)

The poet, realizing how the guru enjoys keeping his disciples subservient, with closed eyes, urges them, as Swami Vivekananda taught, to arise and awake:

Why don't you ask them
 to arise, awake and annihilate
 the unjust system and their persecutors?
 Why should they, your loyal followers
 who worship you like God
 suffer the curse of living like animals?

(“Meditation”, *Whispers in the Wilderness* 59)

The glittering guru realizes the point:

came up to me
 put his hand on my shoulder
 and said with his bewitching smile:
 You know too much
 an enlightened man . . .
 But then
 this ashram is not a place
 for the awakened souls . . .
 I just wanted to ask: . . .
 But before I could open my lips
 The revered steaming guru
 Had already walked away . . .

(“Meditation”, *Whispers in the Wilderness* 59–60)

Anuradha Bhattacharya's Subtle Steps Apart from Devotion

Discussing devotional poems, we now take into our fold poets of the opposite stream in order to complete the whole. Some people, like Nietzsche, are drawn more to death than life. Death attracts them more than life while they live. Some, like Freud, are more concerned about the subconscious than the conscious. Denying God, communists adore materialism; the physical thing that we see before us is the only reality for them. Moving a step further, the existentialist thinks negatively, living on the borderline of boredom and the uselessness of life, in a state akin to nihilism. Every such thing has reality – including metaphysical matters: the existence beyond the concrete reality. If the call of the beyond and the existence of the unseen, not physically felt or sensed, were not true, then the whole of existence would be bereft of romance, imagination and fantasy. It would be barren desert; neither birth nor death would have any meaning; music, art and literature would seem to be concrete structures to be broken down or ruined pathetically in time. Because of the existence of the unseen, life vibrates around the fulcrum of love, hope, romance and spiritual adventure.

But people have an inherent attraction for one or the other path. Devotees are drawn towards the unseen God, and some of them meet Him too. It does not matter to them whether someone else believes it or not; the astronaut's experience may not have been shared by others, but it remains a fact to the astronaut and the scientists who know of it. The question hangs on whether a thing exists beyond my personal experience or not. Leave aside the weakness of faith or denial of faith, if you feel it so.

Creation is always possible, with or without faith. Even negative ideas produce beautiful art objects if properly worked on. While O. P. Arora does not mention God, Anuradha Bhattacharya delves deep into the subconscious with Freud. Such ideas are akin to existentialism, and yield more pain than pleasure. But even creation born out of pain gives joy to connoisseurs, as incense gives fragrance at the cost of its life. Beauty is there in both opulence and depravity. There is something in the poetry of Bhattacharya that gives artistic pleasure born out of painful experience expressed truly.

To Bhattacharya, night is dark and devoid of light; it conceals everything positive, and that subconscious reality may be the only truth to some:

The real is in the dark
 The life of the night
 Is beyond love,
 Beyond compromise,
 Beyond the word,
 So I am asleep.

(“The Word”, *Knots* 17)

Survival is a problem. Neither good nor bad, the subject laments not being a father – but she is a mother! Why is being a mother not important? One devoid of positive thought is bored no matter what place she occupies in family or society. Leaving aside other things, this may be a problem of godlessness (“To Survive”, *Knots* 25).

One grieves, feeling oneself ridiculous, scoffed at by the other, being identified as worthless:

And suddenly
 There seems
 Someone
 Grinning at you . . .
 At your face
 A loud cackle
 Tearing
 Your senses
 Into rags.

(“Remorse”, *Knots* 48)

Below is a very subtle observation of things slipping out of their existence. The word floats in the atmosphere, but does not enter into my memory. It amounts to futility:

Something palpable has disappeared,
 Like a whistle as the whistler
 Grows out of breath
 The word has stuck at the throat.
 The word was to name it.
 In its disappearance lies
 The futility of its appellation.

(“Futility”, *Knots* 32)

The poet moves very subtly, stealthily like the tiptoed movement of history. Actual happenings often do not take place in broad daylight. Many things are hidden. Falsehood reigns behind the written history. Beautifully, she expresses the tale of night and of its depravity:

A hungry night wails
In the new light . . .

A gruesome history
Has picked up cues
Of tiptoed steps.

(“Killjoy”, *Knots* 56)

“Somewhere down the line in history / We too have been caught mid-air and hauled” (“Discourse”, *Knots* 28). This poet sometimes suggests volumes in a line, and speaks louder with fewer words. Brevity is the essence of good poetry.

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CHAPTER TWO

CULTURAL ETHOS IN THE POETRY IN ENGLISH FROM NORTHEAST INDIA

NIGAMANANDA DAS

This paper explores multiethnic poetry in English from Northeast India since 1960. This includes the poetry written originally in English and also translations from vernacular poetry, both religious and secular, by various translators. Those who have written originally in English are Lakshahira Das, Bhupati Das, Dayananda Pathak, Umakanta Sarma, Mamang Dai, Yumlam Tana, Robin Ngangom, Easterine Kire (Iralu), Temsula Ao and others. The poetry in English by these writers reflects various multiethnic, cultural, spiritual and ecological perspectives pertaining to the region. In this regard, it is different from the English poetry written in other Indian provinces. Multiple impressions are expressed in multiple moods.

More than two dozen poets from various provinces of the northeastern part of India have published their poems and poetry collections in English, both in India and abroad. They have been called “ethnic poets” (Guha 2000: 119). They may be called multiethnic poets because they hail from multifarious ethnic groups, which are troubled by various ethnic crises. The themes addressed in their work include hills, valleys, people, myths, legends, communal violence, tribal rites, mystic and profoundly aesthetic sensibilities, ecology, self-alienation and autobiographical exegeses of the self. These poets are proved to be consistently homeward-bound pilgrims.

Mamang Dai (1957–), a famous Indian English poet of Arunachal Pradesh, was born in Pasighat, East Siang District. She left the Indian Civil Service in order to pursue a career in journalism and the bettering of the social and eco-cultural standards of her people. A poet from the Adi tribal community, she founded the Arunachal Heritage Society in 1992 and has been its president since then. An accredited journalist to the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, she has been tirelessly devoted to social welfare through this non-governmental organization. She has published poems in

various Indian journals and has brought out a collection of poetry, entitled *River Poems* (2004), from the Writers Workshop, Kolkata. Dai is a homeward-bound pilgrim in her quest for identity. In her poetry, life in Arunachal Pradesh, peoples' faiths and her own, agriculture, mountains, streams, rivers and stones, myths and nature's magic all reveal the myriad, ecological worlds of Arunachal and its mysterious and glorious heritage. She reflects Arunachalee culture and traditions, and recent or modern transitions in the mosaic of its living conditions. A keen explorer of heritage, she seems to be a sentinel for traditional tribal values. Environment/ecology, profound serenity in nature and an innocent voice regarding the issues of her surroundings have been her important concerns. She voices her emotions and feelings through images and metaphors chosen mostly from nature. Her search for identity has revealed her to be a nature-loving humanist. She reveals her beliefs in a tribal pantheon of Gods and the mystery of ecology:

Yes, I believe in gods,
in the forest faith
of good and evil,
spirits of the river
and the dream world
of the dawn.

(“Two Poems” 3)

Dai also ponders the contemporary systems of living in Arunachal, and contrasts them with the ancient ways of life and agriculture. She has been an observer of changes in the state's tribal society over time:

I know / from faces that I meet / in these lives / that have crumbled /
that the past lives / in these eyes / that the jungle shows / sometimes ...,
the mountain knows / how we pressed our hearts / against its earth / we
placed the shadows / where they are / in the leisure of dreams / the sky
wind knows, / how we grew flowers / in fields of stone.

(“Two Poems” 3)

She has been a close observer of the wide-ranging sociocultural changes in her land. The people, mountains, rivers, trees and harvest have been her primary subjects. In her poem entitled “Sky Song”, she writes,

We left the tall trees standing.
We left the children playing.
We left the women talking,
and the men are predicting

Good harvests, or bad
that winged summer
we left, racing with
the leopards of morning.

(“Two Poems” 5)

“Indian English poets are ‘river poets’. Poems on rivers abound” (Sarang 1995: 13). Living near rivers, amidst natural surroundings and varied feelings, experiences and emotions makes the poet remember the transactions of life and the plight of the natural world. The past of her ancient land; the red-robed men; the tribal rituals; tribes living in caves; and, her favourite theme, mysterious ecology all lurk in her mind. Such remembrances make her a mythmaker, a designer of living realities and contemporary myths or the ancient and present life in Arunachal Pradesh:

I remember then / the great river / that turned, turning / with the fire /
of the first sun / away from the old land / red robed men, / and the
poisonous ritual, /Remember the flying dust / and the wind, / like a
long echo / snapping the flight / of the river beetle, / venomous in the
caves / where men and women / dwelt, facing the night, / guarding the
hooded poison.

(“Four Poems” 64)

The eastern mountains; the flash of summer; intricate nature; divinity in trees; starry skies; the great River Brahmaputra; a landscape full of memories, which the poetess calls “myth and mystery” (Dai, “With the Confidence of Things Impermanent” 154) crowd the lines in her poetry. Hers is the poetry of landscape:

Without speech
We practised a craft
leaving imprints
on sky walls,
Linking the seasons,
coding the trailing mist
in silent messages
across the vast landscape.

(“Four Poems” 66)

Mamang Dai’s *River Poems* (2004), containing fifty-one poems, legitimizes her voice of homeward-bound ballads. This single collection makes her presence felt when the poet expresses her concerns for both local and global events. She feels the palpitations of the rivers’ hearts and recurrently says, “The river has a soul the river knows/ the immortality

of water” (*River Poems* 29). Several local concepts of Arunachal have prompted the powerful feelings of the poet – including the Arunachalee *tapu* dance and the folk-faith, associated with it, that issueless women can conceive a son by joining the dance and putting on male attire (*River Poems* 42–43). There are also the funeral rites of the Adi tribes (*River Poems* 46–47), the *ponung* dance of the Adis during the festival of *Solung* (*River Poems* 19–20) and man/tiger brotherhood (*River Poems* 50–51). Her Korea poems, which express her emotional concern for the effects of a mid-air explosion that killed many of that nation’s top leaders, reveal her profoundly responsible soul.

locked in our tears blind storm
on this clearest of mornings
we feel again the draining of strength
when the hills are waiting
acrid, sad
smoky with autumn and her wild fires
in the courtyards the old men sit
like stone, remembering

(*River Poems* 66–67)

These tragic images of Korea reflect the Arunachalee countryside in Dai’s description. Her poetic explorations concentrate on the rites of living in Arunachal Pradesh, and are thus a conscious attempt in the quest for identity.

Yumlam Tana (1976–), born at Koloriang, Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh, teaches English Literature at the Government School, Karsingsa in Papumpare District. He has published a collection of poems in English entitled *The Man and the Tiger* (2000). In his poetry, we see him constantly clinging to the mores of the quest for identity, a major concern of postcolonial Indian English literature. He belongs to the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, and his poems allude to their myths of the brotherhood of man and tiger, Nyishi legends, superstitions, rites and rituals, customs and costumes. He writes about his identity by humanizing his status universally:

I write in English
which is not my language
You see, I am a Nyishi
A tribal claiming to be a man.
I am all humanity,
With no geographical boundary,

No social restrictions, no biological limitations.
 ... Nothing to divide me from my fellowmen.

(“Three Poems” 13)

He speaks of his brotherhood with the tiger, the *jhum* fields in his surroundings, his sojourn in the Dibang Valley and life in the bosom of nature:

My brother, my mother nestled so fondly on her bosom
 Singing lullabies in the night and
 when away to the *jhum* fields in the mountains
 We played various games around the house
 He was my playmate. He was my nurse
 The Tsangpo flowing through the Dibang Valley
 And the plains of India
 And Bangladesh
 ...
 So the tiger must stalk in the forest
 To kill and spill blood for blind appetite
 And the man, a social animal,
 Search an Ideology to suit his Intellect.

(“Three Poems” 14–15)

He expands on tribal animist rituals to propitiate the spirits and the primordial sentiments, and expresses a constant preoccupation with tribal anthropomorphism:

In spite of all those talks about rationales
 And scientific temper
 A primordial sentiment lurks
 Somewhere in us begotten in the days of chaos.
 The *Nyibu* had read the entrails of
 The chickens
 And presaged that six dead monkeys
 Shall lie beside a stranger in the house
 And as required six horns of Mithuns to be slaughtered,
 Besides the fat pigs from grandpa's sty
 To appease the hungry spirits from the
 World of the dead
 Amidst chantings of prayers in four
 Sleepless weeks.

(“Three Poems” 16)

The power of divination and healing claimed by the *Nyibus* (the traditional priests of the *Nyishi* people), traditional *Nyishi* attire, the *Nyishi*/tiger

brotherhood and the formers' similarity with the physical features of the tiger, the ecology of the Nyishis' land, their mysterious faiths and ideology are the prime concerns in Tana's poetry.

Mamang Dai and Yumlam Tana have brought acclaim to Arunachal for their contribution to Indian writing in English. They are trying to legitimize their voices by giving expression to the tribal cults, myths, mystery, history and ecology of Arunachal and contemporary transitions. Their future poetry will undoubtedly mirror their quest further in quality and quantity.

Assam has made a major contribution to Indian English poetry, and its poets have been writing in English since the 1960s. In 1960, Hem Barua published *Modern Assamese Poetry*, a select collection of English translations of Assamese verse. Out of the twenty-six Assamese poets in this collection, nine translated their own work. This shows that in 1960 in Assam, there were poets who could have written in English. Assamese poetry, which has yet to renounce romanticism, is quite different from that of the other provinces of India in its emotional effects and aspects. With few exceptions, Assamese poets writing in Assamese are seldom obscure. However, those writing in English do not reflect the essence of Assamese culture to any great degree. In this regard, Assamese poetry also differs from the English poetry written in other Indian provinces.

The poetry in English from Assam abounds in translations from folk and religious, vernacular and ethnic literatures. The *Bhagavat*, *Kirtan*, *Namghosha*, *Bhaona* and other forms of Vaishnavite or ethnic literatures have been translated, enriching the reservoir of poetry in English. Discussion of a few samples will provide us some information about the works in this area. Pradip Acharya, Ajit Barua and some other English teachers of Assam have published commendable works in this field. Mahapurush Sankardeva (1449–1569) – who propagated *Ekasarannamdharm*, the neo-Vaishnavite faith of surrendering to the single Lord by chanting His holy name – penned a good number of songs that salute the glory of the Almighty. Some of these verses bear the mark of literary excellence and universal appeal:

Numbered are the years that measure your life;
 Half the life slips away in the hours of sleep;
 A score of years fly in the winds of boyish pranks;
 Ten years go in counting coins on the finger-tip.
 Think of the twenty years at the other end of it
 When life shall grow too heavy to drag on;

Each hour in the sand-glass shall be an eternity of aches,
 Each sunrise bringing dullness and disease unknown.
 And shall melt away the dreams of your eyes and starry hues;
 Confined in a cabin it shall pile up a welter of woes.
 (Barua, *Prahlad Caritra* 27)

The English rendering of Sankardeva's works by various scholars is mostly prosaic, as it is very difficult to convey the required felicity in translation:

Madhava, Rama Hari,
 O Jadava! Rama Hari.

Being Vyasa, son of Satyabati, you saw the people becoming very foolish.
 Then you spread the teachings of the four Vedas and wrote the epic of 'Mahabharat' ...
 You fought with the demons for gods and Indra won the battle at your blessings
 Shri Shankardeva, the disciple of Krishna says such, "All say Hari Hari in order to destroy your vices."
 (Tr. and qtd. Punya Hazarika 5-6)

Sankardeva propagated the various modes of *bhakti*, the teaching of the equity of human beings in a caste-ridden and creedless society and the uplifting of the downtrodden. In his *Kirtan Ghosha*, he declares from the tongue of Lord Krishna: "If women and sudras cultivate bhakti for me / Impart to them this knowledge, great minded one" (*Life and Teachings of Mahapurush Sankardeva* 20).

He propounded the doctrine of self-surrender to the Almighty Lord, and advised his disciples, "Throw thy body, soul and all at the feet of that vast one / With single minded devotion and thou wilt enjoy the / Bliss of human life" (*Life and Teachings of Mahapurush Sankardeva* 22).

Madhavadeva, the prominent disciple of Sankardeva, propagated in his works the notion of *bhakti dharma* in order to uplift the downtrodden and to cleanse society from all manner of evils:

My obeisance to that devotee
 Who is indifferent even to salvation.
 Verily, I crave for ecstatic devotion.
 My adoration to that Lord Yadupati
 Who, being the crown-gem of all,
 Remains enslaved to His worshipper.
 (Madhavadeva, *The Divine Verses* 1)