

Contribution of Indian English Poets towards Indian Freedom Movement

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Abstract

The idea of independence has always captivated the minds of the poets. Poets all around the world have always supported the cause of freedom of different countries. They have even served in wars for the same purpose. English Romantic poets were inspired by the French Revolution. There were war poets who served in the world wars and filled the hearts of people with patriotism. Some fought for the liberation of Greece and Spain. India had also been colonized by the Britishers for over a century. Freedom for India was brought about by the supreme sacrifice of many brave souls. The contribution of poets was no less as they ignited the souls of the people through their fierce words. Many poets have dedicated poems to their mother land which in turn reminded people of their glorious past. Prominent pre-independence poet Henry Derozio pines for the country to return to its pristine glory. Poets like Toru Dutt have written on Indian themes. Sarojini Naidu, through her poems, has shown her hatred for all forms of tyranny and shows the wish of rejuvenation of her motherland. This paper is a humble attempt to show the contribution of different Indian English poets towards the Indian freedom struggle.

Keywords: Independence, sacrifice, patriotism, motherland, tyranny

Article Publication

Published Online: 31-Dec-2023

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doi: [10.31305/rrjs.2023.v03.n02.006](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjs.2023.v03.n02.006)

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The idea of independence has been a core value for the poets around the world. Poets believe in the dignity of every individual. This dignity can be preserved only when one is free. So, a society where everyone is free and has basic human rights is a utopia cherished by many poets. This idea is reflected in their poems as well. English Romantic poet P.B. Shelley was a poet who was filled with the zeal of liberty. When he saw his country under the rule of despotic ruler, he could not stop himself from giving vent to his emotions through his poem "England in 1819". He gives a blunt warning that the army which snatches away the liberty of the people only provokes them to fight back "An army, which libicide and prey / makes as a two-edged sword to all ... (Shelley 44). Shelley is obsessed with the idea of freedom. Desmond King - Hele says his "Ode to Liberty" is "a clarion- call to fight for freedom" (np). For Lord Byron Freedom "Streams like the thunderstorm against the wind" (np). Langston Hughes urges for freedom for the Blacks. His poem "Freedom" gives voice to the Blacks when he says

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land (np).

Similarly, Maya Angelou writes in her poem "Caged Bird" "the caged bird/ sings of freedom" (np). She also pitches for the freedom of the black people. Poets, everywhere, are concerned about freedom of people. They are the mouthpiece of the weak and downtrodden people.

Even though everyone cherishes the idea of freedom but still the lust for power has so intoxicated people and countries that rulers turn into dictators, people are made slaves and countries are colonized to satisfy this lust for power. Many countries all over the world had been colonized by the Europeans in the nineteenth century. The colonizers become the rulers and heinous crimes were perpetrated against the native people. Merriam Webster dictionary defines colonization as "subjugation of a people or area especially as an extension of state power." Initially colonization had begun for the sake of adventure, for finding new lands, spreading Christianity and finding treasure. But in the 19th century colonization took a very ugly turn and humanity took a dip as indigenous people were subjected to all sorts of brutality. The colonizers changed the boundaries of many African and Asian countries which resulted in disruption of peace among many ethnic groups. The ramification of this can be seen even in the present-day world. They also changed the age-old system of knowledge of the natives. A systematic elimination of many people also took place during this period. The colonizers instead of feeling shame or guilt for these crimes considered it a "white man's burden". They believed it to be their sacred duty to teach the natives their ways of living and learning and to make them civilized.

India had also been colonized by the Britishers for over a century. India also underwent a similar fate under the foreign rule. It had damaging effects on the age old education system, culture, languages and politics of the country. During the twentieth century many countries which were previously colonized started to fight against the colonial powers. The setback faced by many European powers during the world wars exposed their weaknesses. Also, during this period there was rise of nationalism. This spirit of nationalism brought about renaissance in Indian as well. The literature of the west inspired many Indian writers. The early Indian English writers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dwarka Nath Tagore and Baidyanath Mukherjee pitched for education in English in India. This education brought about rational thinking and helped in eradication of many social evils. Various modern inventions like railways also brought people close. The rise of nationalism was also brought about by literature written during this period.

The most prominent poet of the early Indian English writing was Henry Derozio whose poetry was full of nationalistic zeal. Among his many such poems include "To India - My Native Land", "The Harp of India" and "To The pupils of Hindu College". These poems have "an unmistakable authenticity of patriotic utterance which stamps Derozio as an Indian English poet who is truly a son of the soil" (M.K. Naik 24).

In "To India My Native Land" he pines for the lost glory of the motherland. He is keenly aware of the pathetic condition of his country under the British rule and gives outlet to his feelings of pain and utter distress when he asks

Where is that glory, where that reverence now?
Thy eagle pinion is chained down of last
And grovelling in the lowly dust art Thou?
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee
Save the sad story of thy misrey! (Derozio np).

Similarly, in "The Harp" he mourns the lost freedom of India saying

Thy music to once was sweet- who heave it now?...
Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,
like ruined monument on desert pain (Derozio np).

Despite being Indo- Portuguese Derozio wrote on Indian themes. This also generated nationalistic feelings among the masses. Derozio's passion, idealism and nationalistic enthusiasm inspired many young students. Another Indian English poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt exploited Indian themes in his poems. For e.g. "The Captive Ladie" is based on the story of Prithvi Raj Chauhan, his famous sonnet "Kapatakkha River" and many other poems like "Sermista", "Meghnadbad - Kabya" etc.

The revolt of 1857 brought about a huge change in the outlook of both the Britishers and the Indians. The equation between the two changed after this revolt. This change in scene also led to changes in Indian society and literature. Several reforms happened in the country inspired by the efforts of eminent figures like Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Rabindra Nath Tagore. Insisting on the influence of Swami Vivekananda M.K. Naik writes "Vivekananda's fiery eloquence, having dazzled the west, instilled a new self-confidence in the minds of his compatriots" (34).

It was not just of a period of religious reforms but also that of political upheaval with the establishment of Indian National Congress. Earlier it was governed by moderate leaders but later radical leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak added fuel to the freedom struggle. This second phase of change continued till 1920. In literature even though several poets like the Dutt brothers were still following the English poets' others like Toru Dutt, Ram Sharma, Romesh Chunder Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, Ravindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu who exploited Indian themes in their poems. These poets not only created a niche for themselves but also made Indian themes prominent in Indian English literature which were earlier only few and far between. Ram Sharma's poems like "Bhagobati Gita" and "Siva Ratri" show his inclination towards mysticism. MK Naik writes "he was certainly in a position to recreate genuine mystic experience in poetic terms" (39).

The short career of Toru Dutt is filled with poems on Indian themes. According to MK Naik "Toru Dutt is the first Indian English poet to make an extensive use of Indian myth and legend" (41). Her poems like "The Royal Ascetic and the Hind", "Savitri", "Lakshman" etc. show that she is not merely imitating the myths but has an "understanding of the spirit underlying them" (41). Similar effort has been made by Romesh Chunder Dutt through his collection *Lays of Ancient India* published in 1894. It contains translations of different classics from Sanskrit, Prakrit etc.

A shining gem of Indian freedom movement was Sri Aurobindo Ghose who first worked as a political radical leader and then became a poet and yogi. With a long poetic career and mystical experience, he brought a genuine experience which inspired many in the past and continues to do so even today. This experience is reflected in his poems like "Urvastie", "The Rishi", "Chitrangda", "Ulupie", "The Tale of Nala" and most prominently in *Savitri* which is his magnum opus. According to MK Naik "Savitri is not just another there imitative and stale exercise in the western epic mode; it is an utterly unconventional, highly original and deeply philosophical Hindu epic" (58).

Another prominent poet of the period whose influence on the Indian masses is enormous is Rabindra Nath Tagore. He is a household name and his poetry is all too well known. A versatile man, Tagore left his mark on every field he worked in be it literature, education, painting or music. The first Asian to win the prestigious Nobel Prize, Tagore has caught the essence of Indian life in his poems. His magnum opus *Gitanjali* is "firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of Indian saint poetry..." (Naik 63). But spirituality is not the only theme in his poems. His patriotic zeal is seen in poems like "Where the mind is without Fear" which is an earnest prayer to the almighty to awaken our motherland in a heaven like place which is free from all kinds of evils. His intense desire for a just and eclectic society is seen in the following lines:

"where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

where knowledge is free
 where the world has not been broken up into Fragments
 by narrow domestic walls
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake (np).

This small poem summarises the efforts of the freedom fighters and social reformers alike who wanted create to a Ramrajya in India. Rabindranath Tagore's contribution through his writings towards the freedom struggle is supreme as his song "Jan Gan Man" became the national anthem. This lyric delineates the unity in diversity of the country.

Among the female poets Sarojini Naidu's contribution towards freedom struggle is huge. She was a prominent political figure as she became the President of the he Indian National Congress in 1925. She was a great orator too. In writing poetry, she was initially, inspired by the British poets of the fin de Siecle period but she dealt with Indian themes and the song like quality of her poems brought her closer to the masses. The essential Indian touch of her poems has made her a popular poet. Her poems like " Palanquin Bearers", "Wandering singers", " "Bangle sellers, Indian Weavers", "Coromandel Fishers" etc. capture the Indian sensibility and way of life and show her love for the country. In "The Gift of India" she remembers the sacrifice of Indian soldiers in World War I. She implores "Remember the blood of my martyred sons". In "Anthem of Love" she shows her love for her motherland:

One heart are we to love thee, O Our mother,
 One undivided indivisible soul.
 Bound by one hope, one purpose, one devotion.
 Towards a great, divinely destined goal. (np)

Thus, the spirit of nationalism is reflected in numerous writers of the pre- independence period. They not only liberated the Indian English literature from the slavery of British poets but also inspired the countrymen to liberate their country from the clutches of the Britishers.

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How to Cite this Article?

Meenu. (2023). Contribution of Indian English Poets towards Indian Freedom Movement. *Research Review Journal of Social Science*, 3(02), 38–41.
<https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjss.2023.v03.n02.006>