

## *Introduction*

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English poetry, it might safely be surmised, arrived in India from about the seventeenth century onward in the knapsacks, trunks, bags, and portmantaus of traders and adventurers intent on making their fortunes in the East. It then proceeded to establish itself among readers in exile and readers new to the English language with astonishing rapidity, fueled in the most part by the newspaper and periodical print culture that had spread through urban and semi-urban settlements in every part of the country. The first newspaper in India, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, reserved a section of the pages of its first issue in 1780 for a Poet's Corner, a demarcated space which would carry one or more poem in each issue for the short period of the paper's existence, a practice followed by every nineteenth-century newspaper published subsequently. The poem published in the first issue was called "The Seasons," and described, expectedly, the English seasons; it took a few months for a long poem with the title "A Description of India" to make an appearance here.

Since then to the present day, poetry written in India in the English language has, of course, changed hands and, indeed, changed nationality: what was once written by Englishmen in India – English poetry – is now Indian poetry (and has been since the nineteenth century), and is currently generally called Indian poetry in English to distinguish it from poetry written by Indians in the classical languages in the past and in the many powerful modern Indian regional languages since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> If used in an over-arching sense, any category called "Indian Poetry" is a construct that is still hard to defend; in a 1963 article titled "Bengali Gastronomy," the famous Bengali poet and critic Buddhadeva Bose commented derisively that just as there was no such thing as "Indian food," there was no such thing as "Indian Literature," gesturing elliptically toward the common understanding that every region in India produced its own variant tradition – of poetry or curry – and needed to be marked accordingly. So there was Kannada, Punjabi, or Gujarati literature (or

cuisine), but nothing that could be described as “Indian” curry or “Indian” poetry outside of Indian restaurants and international publishing houses. Besides, in India, Indian writing had never meant, and could never only mean, Indian writing that was done in English; the colonizer’s language was presumed to be a deracinated thing of the elites: unrepresentative, uninviting, and certainly unwanted. Thirty-five years from Bose’s comment, toward the end of the twentieth century (1998), the pendulum had swung so far in the opposite direction that Salman Rushdie was emboldened to declare, in the introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947–97* that he co-edited with Elizabeth West, that not only was there something called “Indian Writing,” as their title indicated, but that on the evidence of the fifty years under consideration in the volume, it was best represented by writing in English alone. Such a remark, of course, was always designed to provoke a backlash from the Indian literate classes, which it did with great success; less remarked upon was the fact that Rushdie’s notion of “writing” did not for a moment include poetry – irrespective of whether it was of the regional or Anglophone variety. Yet Indian poetry in English arguably has a more distinguished lineage than its counterpart, the novel; intrinsically, it has accomplished and achieved as much, if not more, than the celebrated fiction by well-known names that occupies so much shelf space, media space, and literary chatter nowadays, and it has done its work quietly, passionately, and to extraordinarily high standards through all these years. This book is an attempt to elucidate this fact and make a case for it in the wider world of reading.

Indian poetry in English is an indissoluble component of India’s existence in modernity, yet this is a tradition without a proper history, an unclaimed tradition for much of its beleaguered and secret existence. No clear notion of its origins and development exists in the minds of most literate Indians, who have generally been introduced to it through prescribed reading at school, existing side by side with much-anthologized and occasionally syrupy specimens from the English canon proper. The first introduction to poetry in the English language for Indians might go back to pre-school childhood for some and linger in memories of books of English nursery rhymes with colored illustrations (in what can only be described as Eastman color) of blackbirds coming out of pies, rosy-cheeked boys and girls, fat *pink* pigs, or grandfather clocks with mice in them, all of which usually existed in middle-class surroundings far removed from the world depicted in the utopian space of the pages themselves. From there to

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“Lochinvar” and “Daffodils” in school – without any clear idea as to what the Scottish Border or the daffodil looked like, in common with almost every boy or girl studying English in formerly colonized countries anywhere – was a short hop. The only concession to hard-earned political independence in these school text books was the inclusion of Derozio’s apparently dreary sonnet, “To India, My Native Land” (a title ascribed to the sonnet by the anthologist rather than the poet), or some even drearier Sarojini Naidu specimen on Coromandel fishermen or palanquin bearers that continues to be part of school text books today.

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Homi Bhabha has called Naipaul’s fictional Trinidadians “vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language,” relating them to his own “growing up in Bombay as a middle-class Parsi,” “learning to work with the contradictory strains of languages *lived*, and languages *learned*, [which] has the potential for a remarkable critical and creative impulse.”<sup>2</sup> While the condition of vernacular cosmopolitanism is one which he himself (as indeed do many of us) shares to a greater or lesser degree, what is far more surprising in the context of Bhabha is his fervent declaration elsewhere in an interview: “I was absolutely convinced in those days [Bombay in the ’70s] that my great gift was to be a poet . . . It was my all-embracing, all-absorbing passion.”<sup>3</sup> This incongruous example is invoked here in order to point toward the power of the moment of the rebirth of modern Indian poetry in English, to show how pervasive and persuasive the space and place of the regeneration of this corpus had been. Bombay in the ’70s, with Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Adil Jussawalla, Eunice de Souza, Gieve Patel, and the itinerant Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Kamala Das, was where Indian poetry in English was reborn in an independent, impoverished country, irritated with and deliberately forgetful of its colonial modern ancestry that could be traced back to Calcutta in the fecund nineteenth century. Just as the Bombay Progressive Artists’ Group turned impatiently away from the pioneers in the Bengal School of Art, the poets too, often personal friends with the “progressive artists,” began a conversation with American and European poets, with regional and Dalit poets (Dilip Chitre’s collaboration with Namdeo Dhasal comes readily to mind), with what Bhabha calls “the full clamour of contemporary experience,” with, in the words Bhabha cites of Auden’s, “*the democratic aspect of literary creation.*”<sup>4</sup> It would be a

mistake to draw too firm a line between the cities and eras, however: the Progressives had an influential Calcutta chapter, and P. Lal's Writers Workshop, still operating today out of the same lane in south Calcutta, as we shall see in the chapter on it in this book (Chapter 10), published many of the Bombay poets for the first time. It is even more crucial, however, that nineteenth-century poetry in English about India not be dismissed out of hand. This is not just because such a move would dishonor the origins of a tradition, but also because there is much in that body of work that rewards study. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra had famously said, in his introduction to the hugely influential *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* in 1992, "Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and women, but not those with whom you could today do business."<sup>5</sup> His chapter here, on the other hand, begins with this quotation, and continues in the next sentence: "What follows is an atonement for what is said above." Given that poets such as Mehrotra (and many other critics and writers) have re-evaluated this body of work – not least because it forms, in itself, such a fascinating field – the present volume has attempted to correct the imbalance in the attention paid to the nineteenth-century corpus by devoting a substantial section to it in its many incarnations.

In an essay written in English in 1854, Michael Madhusudan Datta spoke of the Hindu as "a fallen being – once – a green, a beautiful, a tall, a majestic, a flowering tree; now – blasted by lightning!" and asked, "Who can recall him to life?"<sup>6</sup> Conflating language and race in an essay that extolled the beauties of the English language, he answered unequivocally: "it is the glorious mission of the Anglo-Saxon to regenerate, to renovate the Hindu race!"<sup>7</sup> Whether writing in English, as here, or in Bengali, which too was informed by English in unprecedented ways, such sentiments were not his alone, but common to the age – albeit perhaps not always in so exaggerated a rhetoric. Four years later, in 1858, the Gujarati poet Narmad published an essay, "Kavi ani Kavita" [The Poet and Poetry] as a manifesto for a new poetry, therein attempting something very similar to Madhusudan's endeavors in Calcutta at the same time – to sweep away the older forms in favor of the new. Thoroughly impressed with the need to reform the old style in order to usher in a modern poetry for the people, Narmad described the concept of *rasa* in this article as "*andarni maja*" or inner delight, using both Aristotle and Wordsworth in his attempt to redefine poetry as a work of the imagination, or, as he put it, as "the spontaneous expression of feelings."<sup>8</sup> Madhusudan was thwarted in his ambition to be an "English poet" (his poems were rejected by Blackwood's Magazine, and

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in India, Englishmen told him to write in his own tongue); nevertheless, his reading of the Western canon became instrumental in his reformulation of a modern poetry for Bengal, as we shall see here. The material power of the modern – whether incarnated in the steam engine or the printing press – was gladly appropriated by many writers in the nineteenth century involved in the formulation of a modern Indian literature, regardless of the language they wrote in. (Bankimchandra Chatterjee, for instance, said: “And with this new dawn of life came into the country one of the mightiest instruments of civilization, the printing-press.”)<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we forget how thin the line dividing those who wrote in the regional languages and those who wrote in English actually was.

Whatever the languages of composition, it could perhaps be said that what Madhusudan Datta had tersely reminded a friend of in 1859 in relation to his Bengali work holds true of every poet in modern India: “Besides, remember I am writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with western ideas and *modes of thinking*.”<sup>10</sup> This is a defense most often – and almost automatically – associated with the Indian writer of English now, though it is, of course, equally applicable to those writing in the Indian languages, such as Madhusudan himself, although it is doubtful if many would have had the courage to continue to make such a defense as nationalist sentiment grew in the years succeeding him. What it reminds us of today is that literary writing in India was often criticized for being located in an Indian modernity deemed unacceptable because it did not penetrate the hearts of the common people of the country, or, indeed, our kitchens, as Marathi writer Bhalchandra Nemade has reiterated in a recent interview: “You walk through the gutter by way of English, but don’t bring it to your kitchen.”<sup>11</sup> Outer and inner domains are neatly separated in such organicist rhetoric, reminiscent of R. Parthasarathy’s finding of “deposits of . . . Kannada and Tamil . . . assimilated into English” in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry, with the native languages in the deepest, purest, innermost layer being excavated to build poetry in the shallow soil of the English language.<sup>12</sup> The critic who scorned such “a geological model” of the hierarchical stratification of languages, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, has also more recently pointed out that the hostility stems “in large measure from the animosity toward the social class English has come to be identified with: a narrow well-entrenched, metropolitan-based ruling elite.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, while it is true that many (although increasingly, and crucially, certainly not all) writers of English in India belong to the metropolitan elite, “it is also true that many who write at all, irrespective of language, belong to a privileged stratum.”<sup>14</sup>

As I have pointed out elsewhere, in India, colonial domination added its own complexities to the repudiation of what was perceived to be “foreign” influence, with the nativists joining hands with social activists in promoting a fundamental feeling of guilt at being associated with anything so inconsequential as literature or literary studies in the post-Independence years of nation building and civil engineering, poverty alleviation and the green revolution, war and peace. That this was not a turn unique to India, although particularly virulent in its manifestation here, is testified to by J. Hillis Miller when he wrote about the changes to literary studies in *The Ethics of Reading* (1985), where he suggested that the denudation of the field had been propelled by “a sense of guilt in occupying oneself with something so trivial, so disconnected from life and reality, as novels and poems, in comparison with the serious business of history, politics and the class-struggle.”<sup>15</sup> The importance of materialist Marxist critics to this turn in these years, of course, hardly needs pointing out in this context.<sup>16</sup>

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Very little critical work has been done on the history of Indian poetry in English. The intermittent publications of anthologies that have appeared over the years have contained introductions or head-notes to individual poems that were generally the most reliable guides to the field, filling the gaps between the poems themselves with information and sometimes insight into the importance of individual poets and their works. D. L. Richardson, poet, teacher, and editor in Calcutta through the 1830s and '40s, was the first to anthologize some of this poetry in his *Selections from the British Poets* (Calcutta, 1840), an anthology published for the benefit of “Hindoo” students of English literature in India, compiling the work of both British and Indian poets in India as annexures at the far end of his compendious anthology. While the section titled “British-Indian Poetry: Specimens of British Poets Once or Still Resident in the East Indies” began with John Leyden and included copious amounts of his own verse, three poems by Derozio were included under “Poems by An East Indian” and one by “Kasiprashad” (as he spelled it) Ghosh under “Poem by a Hindu.”<sup>17</sup> Preventing the English verse written in nineteenth-century India from passing into oblivion, however, was the life’s work of another man, Theodore Douglas Dunn, who brought out three anthologies, including *The Bengali Book of English Verse*, introduced by Rabindranath Tagore, in 1918.<sup>18</sup> Toward the end of the twentieth century, two important and interesting anthologists published their selections in 1976 and 1992. R. Parthasarathy’s controversial *Ten Twentieth-Century*

*Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976) provoked Arvind Krishna Mehrotra to write one of the finest essays on Indian poetry in English, “The Emperor Has No Clothes,” and to later put together his own selection in *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).<sup>19</sup>

But before either Parthasarathy’s or Mehrotra’s anthologies, we had a pioneer in Roby Dutt, who edited *Echoes from East and West* from Cambridge in 1909, preceding Dunn, while V. N. Bhushan’s well-known *The Peacock Lute: Anthology of Poems in English by Indian Writers* was published in 1945. In 1946, Fredoon Kabraji’s had published his excellent *This Strange Adventure: An Anthology of Poems in English by Indians, 1828–1946*, a compilation that was comprehensive and accommodating in its reach and range. Although the post-Independence years were lean ones for the field – due in part, no doubt, to the utter marginality that this body of poetry was relegated to in the context of modern Indian culture generally – a resurgence of interest led to several additional anthologies in the 1970s, as well as Parthasarathy’s; so we have Saleem Peeradina’s *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1972) at the start of the decade, and Keki N. Daruwalla’s *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960–1980* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980) at its end. In between, Adil Jussawalla’s path-breaking *New Writing in India*, which contained poetry and prose that was both translated and originally in English, was published in 1974, for which, as the chapter on him in this book points out (Chapter 16), Jussawalla had traveled to different parts of India and started collecting material in 1967. Eunice de Souza, meanwhile, has not only anthologized women’s poetry – *Nine Indian Women Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) – but has also attempted to reformulate early poetry in English in India – *Early Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology: 1829–1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) – while bringing out a wide-ranging selection of post-independence poetry in English – *Both Sides of the Sky* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008). Meanwhile, Ranjit Hoskote has edited *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (Viking/Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2002), and Jeet Thayil’s *60 Indian Poets* (2008) came out in the same year as his *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*; subsequently, Sudeep Sen has edited *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry by Indians* (2011). These are only the most representative names that preside like milestones in a field populated by many other anthologists/anthologies of selected poetry; often, they have also acted as a guiding beacon to readers finding their way across a landscape that has very few signposts and even



scarcer literature on the significance and meaning of the territory under review.

Books of criticism on the subject of Indian poetry in English have been much scarcer than the anthologies, although certain defining publications have appeared fitfully over the years. Critical works both preceded and followed Dunn's anthologies in the early twentieth century: Edward F. Oaten's *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* (London, 1908) was the first book on such a subject, and was concerned mainly with writing by Englishmen in India; however, it also included an estimation of the poetry of Derozio, Greece Chunder, Hur Chunder, and Shoshee Chunder Dutt, as well as of their niece, Toru Dutt. Lotika Basu's *Indian Writers of English Verse* (Oxford, 1933) was written in a rather dismissive tone that was characteristic of the time; nevertheless, her work remains a departure in that it focused on the poetry alone. Following independence, a great number of Indian critics devoted themselves to the larger subject of Indian writing in English, with a section dedicated to poetry; most, however, such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, concentrated on fiction alone in the period following Salman Rushdie's publication of *Midnight's Children*, which led to a growing demand for circumambulations in the textual premises of nation and narration.

Among the older critics, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar wrote pioneering studies alongside another noted critic, M. K. Naik, who published several overviews with titles that included words such as "Aspects," "Perspectives," "Survey," or "Studies" of the field, including *A History of Indian English Literature* (1982) from the Sahitya Akademi, the official caretaker of the nation's literary upkeep. Twenty years later, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* (2002) proved itself by far the most valuable guide to all genres of writing in English to be found in print; however, although richly informative, critically informed, and beautifully illustrated, poetry is but one constituent part of the book. None of these books, in fact, devoted themselves exclusively to poetry. The few notable exceptions to this rule over the years have been Bruce King, foreigner and expatriate, an American in Paris, who has written a substantive critical work on Indian poetry in English, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi, 1987), which can safely be described as the definitive work on the subject; Makarand Paranjape, who began his career with *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry* (Delhi, 1988); and the much-neglected Sudesh Mishra, *Preparing Faces: Modernism and Indian Poetry in English* (Adelaide, 1995). Mary Ellis Gibson's *Indian Angles*, published comparatively recently in 2011, restricts itself, as the subtitle indicates, to "English



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verse in colonial India from Jones to Tagore,” and it, along with Máire Ní Fhlathúin’s *The Poetry of British India 1780–1905*, published by Pickering and Chatto in the same year, robustly embodies the new spurt in interest in nineteenth-century English poetry written in India.

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The first section of this book, *The Broad Nineteenth Century*, is subtitled “Indians in English and the English in India,” so that both communities that wrote English poetry in the nineteenth century may be productively brought together. Among the British poets in India are some who were known by their pseudonyms alone – Anna Maria, Aliph Cheem – and some whose names were recognized by the entire community of “Anglo-Indians” (as the British in India were then known) living in the country in the nineteenth century. They are discussed in this section in the chapters on the early years (Chapter 2), comic poetry (Chapter 6), and women poets from the British lineage (Chapter 4), highlighting the moment of genealogical commencement that all of this work represents in relation to the later poets writing in English in India. These early poets may have imagined themselves writing for London audiences, but they published their poetry in books and newspapers that were widely available and widely read in India, contributing thereby to the creation of a broader literary sphere than they themselves, perhaps, had dreamed of. Separate chapters on William Jones or John Leyden or D. L. Richardson may have been appropriate here, as perhaps might another on the greatest name to come out of here in this context, Rudyard Kipling the only poet among these still alive in the popular imagination. Yet lack of space has necessitated the regrettable omission of these and many others from this volume, despite the knowledge that the poetry of some among them will withstand the test of time. Most of the comic and satiric poets, military and exilic poets, as well as Englishwomen in India who have found a place in this volume, on the other hand, existed in a minor mode that was doubly marginalized by its location; the forgotten texts and contexts of their poetic productions are presented here for the first time. It was vital to begin our history by including the poems published not just by Indians, but by British men and women in India, in order to both appreciate the functioning of this verse at the inception of print culture in India, as well as, crucially, to note that this ephemeral poetry of the early nineteenth century was read by the public as “Indian poetry” so long as these poets were located in India and writing about India.

Notwithstanding the fact that British poets in India preceded him chronologically, it nevertheless seemed only appropriate to begin the volume with

Derozio, who so strangely straddled both communities by being born to an English mother and a Portuguese father with some “native ancestry,” and who so emphatically participated in civil rights campaigns for his community, then known as “East Indians.” At the same time, Derozio not only identified himself in his verse as an Indian poet but was also identified in turn by an English reviewer as India’s first national poet.

As far as Indians were concerned, the speed with which the idioms and conventions of English poetry and criticism percolated from the printed page into civil society at large can be appreciated by the fact that by 1830, three books of English poetry had been written and published by Indians in Calcutta, thereby inaugurating a tradition that has rarely been recognized as one. Two of those volumes were by Derozio (in 1827 and 1828), and while his poetry has found a place in a chapter here (Chapter 1), it has, unfortunately, not been possible to have a separate chapter on Kasiprasad Ghosh, whose 1830 publication, *The Shair*, has not merited sufficient attention to date.<sup>20</sup> (Nevertheless, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra partly deals with, and Amit Chaudhuri comments on Ghosh’s delightful “To a Dead Crow” - a poem I believe I first pointed out to both.) The poetry of “Indians in English” will intercut the work of the British poets in India in this section, as we attempt to retrieve a critical perspective on these poets, neglected because their poetry has been read as “derivative,” primarily as it is unresponsive to the protocols of reading that nationalist and postcolonialist critics have used.

Derozio’s poetry (less commented on than his legacy) embodied an internationalist politics in poems against slavery or in support of Greek independence in the wake of Byron, and indigenous culturalist intent in narratives such as *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1829), creating an unmistakable and distinctive strand of early Indian poetry in English that I have elsewhere called “Orientalist verse,” notwithstanding its unmistakably nationalist impetus.<sup>21</sup> Madhusudan Datta’s English poetry, generally considered a “failure,” is examined here in relation to his Bengali works – something rarely attempted – to highlight the continuity between the two linguistic parts of his literary production, without an understanding of which his oeuvre cannot be comprehended in its entirety. Toru Dutt, meanwhile, was responsible for one of the most fascinating documents to come out of poetry criticism in the nineteenth century; an essay titled “An Eurasian Poet.” Originally published in the *Bengal Magazine* in 1874, this essay was lost in time, missing from the few extant copies of the magazine it appeared in, and