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An Indigenous Perception of 'Myth' and 'Mysticism': A Study in Early Indian English Poetry

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Abstract

The essay discusses how myth and mysticism are inseparable from each other in Indian English poetry. The perception of myth, in Indian philosophy and religion, especially the Puranic tradition is very different from that of the West,

Keywords: *myth, mysticism, desire*

'Myth' and 'mysticism', generally speaking, denote and connote distinctly separate and mutually autonomous interpretations in different cultures because these are by and large cultural perceptions. An influential constituency of Indian scholarship, especially the academe, still subscribes to the various construes of the West and even tries to apply them to Indian literature(s). However, in the Indian perceptions, these two are seen as complementary experiences, owing to the rich literary and cultural heritage of the subcontinent. Besides, in our tradition, there is always overlapping among myth, legend, history and oral narratives. It is also important to note that myth and mysticism have always been the hallmark of Indian poetry: English as well as bhasha poetry traditions. In my present paper I wish to work out an indigenous perception of 'myth' and 'mysticism' and examine how early Indian English poetry negotiated with the aesthetic tradition notwithstanding their English education and western influence.

By 'myth', I mean the very general sense of 'mythology', a term which is being re-invented and re-interpreted by the western scholars (Carl Gustav Jung, Northrop Frye, Ronald Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, et al); its affiliation with various kinds of politics, such as race, gender or

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high/popular/mass cultures are explored. 'Myth' or 'mythology' is generally defined in the West as a traditional or legendary tale/story, usually concerning some hero or heroic event; one that is concerned with gods, deities or demigods; and explains some practice, belief, rite, or natural phenomenon.

I would like to submit here that the western concept of 'myth' and 'mythology' are quite different from that of our puranic tradition. While there are no puranas or mahakavyas in most of the Western traditions, English literature has a few epics – the longest and the most complex being, interestingly, Sri Aurobindo's (1872-1950) *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (the first definitive edition [1954] has 23,813 lines) -- and of course mythologies, which also include the borrowed ones. Moreover, the bhashas in India have their own corpus of legends and folktales. Besides, the various religious traditions apart from Hinduism – viz. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism -- which were born in India; as well as the countless clans and sects (Natha, Alekha, Mahima, Lingayat, Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnab, Ganapatya, etc.) have their own narratives. In addition, we have a wonderfully rich repository of folklore; the oral narratives coming down the ages among the ethnic communities which constitute a large part of our demography. We also have the Jataka tales which we know have migrated to many parts of the world and got assimilated in various other cultures. On the other hand, India has also assimilated religious beliefs and ways of life from beyond the borders, especially through those who came to India as invaders or immigrants, but settled down here for centuries. Thus we have the presence of the various forms/sects of Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, etc. Most importantly, all these traditions have lived in India for thousands of years -- not as isolated, opposing entities -- but in contiguity, culturally subsuming each other and sometimes even one getting incorporated in the other. In short, the mystical experience in India, in general, has been a diverse but composite one.

Thus, in my opinion, it may not be desirable on our part to depend wholly on western theories, concepts and experiences of myth, mythology, or archetype. In this age of interdisciplinary scholarship, myth and archetypes have paved the way for fresh interpretations and re-presentations in the realm of literature, an activity, which has always been deriving from myth.

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Interestingly, Northrop Frye, and not Jung, influenced the studies in myth and archetype that came into circulation in the Indian creative and the academic world a few decades ago. At the conceptual level, Frye's project represented the social process of constructing and revitalising myths. The theoretical intercession of Ronald Barthes has taken mythology to yet another level.

While the modern western academia was being enthralled by the newfound dynamics of the 'unconscious', our own literatures were also predictably influenced by it because the Indian academic world has had the absolute faith in "the English book". There were painstaking scholastic interrogations on the prevalence of myth and archetypes in our modern literatures, and a linear analysis of texts became quite fashionable with our scholars and critics. While the West was trying to re-discover, even fabricate new myths, revitalise forgotten ones, and invent popular archetypes in a common ancestry in the western mythological systems in the Greek, Latin, Biblical literatures, etc., our intellectual response in India to the academic high drama was charged with awe and admiration. Little did we realise that our traditions abound with myth and archetypes which are intrinsically woven into our very sociocultural fabric, our creative framework, and that they are quite capable of multidimensional re-formations and re-interpretations even in the context of the modern and postmodern complexities. We must admit that the western engagement in the discourse was directly responsible for our awareness of the significance of myth studies, but its utility in the Indian context should have come to a close there.

However, our academic world -- even the creative writers, conscious artists as they are in our times -- was literally swayed away by the western critical upheaval over myth and archetype forgetting the fact that western critical parameters are not necessarily relevant to the appreciation of Indian literatures. G. N. Devy rightly observes, "Most of the Indian critical talent has been wasted in pursuit of theory, much of which has been totally irrelevant to literature in India" (106); and he further elaborates, "In criticism ... modernism brought with it the trend of pseudo-theorizing, for most of it was theory based on alien theories without any relevance to Indian traditions" (117). Sitakant Mahapatra, a major Odia poet appropriately given credit for the creative use of mythopoesis in his poetry has expressed chagrin over critical

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stereotyping in the Odia academia in his famous essay 'Literary Criticism as Building of Bridges: A View from Oriya Literature' (1993). Exemplifying the Yashoda myth, he points out, "A poet uses myths and archetypes to describe a contemporary or universal situation" (86), ... "But critics can also look only for a mythical name to label a poem as using myth. This takes away the sense of discrimination, which can make literary criticism meaningful and worthwhile" (87). A judicious balance and an Indocentric approach are, therefore, crucial in the appreciation of our literatures, especially on such subjects as myth, archetype or mysticism.

I have similar anxiety over the term 'Mysticism'. Mysticism is a term which will fail all attempts at a definition or a succinct theorisation. However, it can be roughly explained as something mysterious, something inexplicable, something indefinable, and something too obscure to comprehend. In most cultures, it is generally understood as the mysterious experience of "union with God". According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, it is "the practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them". The term, as the West understands it, has been derived from the Greek *mystes*, "which originally designated an initiate of a secret cult or mystery religion". It further maintains that "Early Christianity appropriated the technical vocabulary of the Hellenistic mysteries but later disavowed secrecy, resulting in a transformation of the meaning of *mystes*. In subsequent Christian usage, *mystes*, or *mystic*, referred to practitioners of doctrinally acceptable forms of religious ecstasy." In course of time, it came to mean the personal experience of states of consciousness, i.e. levels of being, beyond normal human perception, including experience of and even communion with a supreme being. the belief that personal communication or union with the divine is achieved through intuition, faith, ecstasy, or sudden insight rather than through rational thought -- a system of religious belief or practice that people follow to achieve personal communication or union with the Divine (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

In *Hindu Mysticism* (1927), Surendranath Dasgupta also maintains that "Mysticism in Europe has a definite history. In spite of the variety of its types, it may roughly be described to refer to the belief that God is realized through ecstatic communion with Him" (viii). He seems to be

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proposing an Indian definition when he says that "Mysticism is not an intellectual theory; it is fundamentally an active, formative, creative, elevating and ennobling principle of life" (ix).

The desire for the union of the self with something grander than the self, whether that is defined as a religious principle or as a 'personal' God, is one sense in which Hinduism has a 'mystical' dimension. Yet, while Indian/Hindu mysticism, according to the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, is the realisation of the identity of the individual self with the impersonal principle called *brahman*, in the universal parlance it is the union of the *Atma* (the self) and the *Paramatma* (the Absolute). The attainment of the mystic ecstasy of this sublime union is described as *Brahmananda*. Interestingly, *kavyananda,* the ultimate *ananda* or bliss of poetry -- also called *Rasananda* -- is equalled to this divine experience in the Indian poetic tradition. "*Kavyananda Brahmananda sahodara*": has been a popular principle in the Indian poetics. Viswanatha Kaviraja, the well-known rhetorician of the 13th century AD reiterates the extant conception coming down the ages, through Abhinavagupta and other rhetoricians when, in his iconic work *Sahityadarpana*, he says, "*Sattwodrekadakhanda swaprakashananda chinmaya . . . vedtyantarasparshashunyo Brahmaswada sahodara"* (3-2-3 22). In *An Aspect of Indian Aesthetics* (1956), Jaya Chamaraja Wadiyar (1919-1974), the Maharaja of Mysore (1940-50) and a celebrated scholar also endorses the time-honoured aesthetic principle of mystic ecstasy when he says that poetic bliss and divine ecstasy are "brothers", and that "The relationship of Kavyananda to Brahmananda is like that of the bimba (image) to pratibimba (reflection)" (29).

It is significant to note that the founding fathers of Indian English criticism like Mulk Raj Anand, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. D. Narasimhaiah, V. Y. Kantak, Krishna Rayan, et al have also sought to relocate the aesthetics of Indian poetry in English in our ingenious traditions. According to Iyengar, "Kavyananda is a first step to Brahmananda, … poetry is indeed an incantation allied to prayer, … it is the function of poetry and art to take us beyond life and Nature to God" ('Aesthetics, Indian and Western' *Adventure of Criticism* 41). Sri Aurobindo also "equates Brahmananda with Kavyananda" (Kumar 170). This is the essence of Indian poetry and this is acknowledged as mysticism.

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Mysticism, as a way of our collective life and collective unconscious, has percolated into our poetry, and on the other hand, myth has always formed the basis of Indian creative process. In his Preface to *The Golden Breath: Studies in Five Poets of New India*, Mulk Raj Anand makes an oblique reference to Viswanatha Kaviraja's well-known concept of "*Vakyam rasatmakam kavyam"* (*Sahityadarpana*) while trying to define the essence of Indian poetry in the following manner:

> For the Hindu view of poetry, like the Hindu view of art, has been a projection in the special field of poetry of the fundamental principles of Hinduism as a religion and philosophy. The same God, *Ananda* (Bliss), and *Ishwara* (Supreme), who was the ideal of realisation of the philosopher and the devotee respectively, became in the hands of the writers of Poetics and Rhetoric, *Rasa,* the ideal of delight to be experienced in the contemplation of poetry. (7-8)

Thus, 'mysticism' has been the essential element in Indian poetry down the ages: in Sanskrit as well as Bhasha literatures. In the Indian tradition, there is hardly any demarcation between literature and scripture. All our great works of literature are treated as scriptures and most of our scriptures are also great works of art. Our poets are looked upon as *rishis*, teachers or *seers.* Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the most popular Indian writer of the nineteenth century reportedly proclaimed, "I am a teacher or nothing" (qtd. in *Indian Writing in English* 315). Sri Aurobindo [Ghosh] calls Chatterjee a *rishi*, a saint in his 1923 book *Rishi Bunkim Chandra*. This has been the Indian tradition of writers and writing and Indian English literature is a part of this tradition.

Indian English poetry is essentially *Indian* in nature and character. The genre has demonstrated its complicity with myth and mysticism since its very inception with such poets as Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31), Kasiprasad Ghosh (1809-1873), Shoshee Chunder Dutt (1824-85), Ram Sharma [Nabo Kissen Ghose] (1837-1918), Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909), Toru Dutt (1856-77), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), et al); which became all the more pronounced after the advent of avowed mystic poets like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, and then of course the early twentieth century poets like Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) and Harindra Nath Chattopaddhyay (1898-1990). I must hasten to add here that the

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mysticism of Indian English poets is not exclusively *Hindu* in its essence or framework; it is rather enriched by as many diverse spirits as we have poets.

I would like to inform here that even in its early phase; Indian English literature had demonstrated traits of being an *Indian* literature, through written in English. This was possible because the poets and writers were rooted in the Indian culture and, maybe unconsciously, followed the aesthetic principles of the traditional Indian literature. As I have tried to put forward in several of my papers, early Indian English poets and writers showed greater complicity with essentially *Indian* themes, and even applied, maybe unconsciously, the traditional narrative techniques and aesthetics. More importantly, they sought to draw from the legends, myths, folklore, and history of their homeland and allegorized them to address contemporary issues. As I have always argued, the dividing lines between these genres are very thin and almost non-existent.

To illustrate the early Indian English poets' engagement with myth and mysticism, I wish to enumerate here some of the titles/themes of their works. Some scholars describe the early writings, especially the poetry, as the outcome of the "Orientalist" influence, obviously referring to the selective [and interpretative] translation of Indian classics by the Orientalists: William Jones, Edwin Arnold and the like. Some critics like Lotika Basu have almost dismissed the poetic quality of the early poets, and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra does not even recognise the corpus of poetry written before 1945! According to him, Indian English poetry "written between 1825 and 1945, is truly dead", and "Later poets have found no use for it, and a literary tradition is of no use to anyone else". He goes on to argue that "Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose [*sic*], and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and women, but not those with whom you could today do business" (1-2). He holds the same opinion more than twenty years later (2003): "These pioneering works of poetry, fiction, drama, travel, and belles-letters are little read today except by specialists, but when they were published they were, by the mere fact of being in English, audacious acts of mimicry and self-assertion" (Introduction *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* 6).

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It would be befitting at this point to cite the example of Shoshee Chunder Dutt, who, in my opinion, is the most representative individual of his times. Dutt, the most prolific of the nineteenth-century writer in English, whom I look upon also as the 'Father of Indian English Literature', has not only narrated the Indian experience in his works, he has even sought to redefine the metaphysical predilections of the contemporary Indian world coping with the sudden influx of western ideas, thoughts and beliefs. He belonged to the famous 'Dutt Family' of the nineteenth-century Calcutta [Kolkata] which had been struggling to negotiate with the intellectual anxiety of belief; and in 1854, made a collective resolution to embrace Christianity. But it was not until 1862 that most of the members of the family were converted. Though some of them were uncertain of the move, and a few returned to the Hindu fold after some time, the fact remains that the members of the Dutt family, who were educated and belonged to the so-called *Bhadralok* category of the Bengali society represented the religious conflict of their time.

It appears that Shoshee Chunder Dutt, who was at the prime of his youth then, also embraced Christianity along with his family. Therefore we find instances of animated proclamation of the superiority of Christianity and Jesus Christ over Hinduism in his early literature, especially poetry. The most glaring example of this we see in some of the early poems included in *The Vision of Sumeru* (1878). According to John B. Alphonso-Karkala, "converted to Christianity", Dutt was "trying to justify the ways of a changed man to his gods" (110) in *The Vision of Sumeru* (Canto III) where the poet seems to be showing preference to Christianity. Interestingly, Dutt seems to be a bit embarrassed of his early poems of this kind which he admitted later. A mature Dutt has spelt out his religious belief elsewhere and implored not to be regarded as a 'Christian'. A mellowed Shoshee Chunder preferred to distance himself from any religious tag, and perhaps that is why he did not contribute his poems to *The Dutt Family Album* which came out in 1870 with the poetical compositions, chiefly of Christian motif, written by the other poets of his family. This is intriguing because by then, Dutt had already made a name by publishing a sizable amount of poetry, fiction, sketches, and prose of various kinds; but did not become a part of this Dutt family project.

In *The Vision of Sumeru*, Dutt creates an allegory to show how Christ conquers all Hindu gods and goddesses, and despatches them to hell. It was perhaps the articulation of the enthusiasm of a young

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poet who was converted. Much later, when Dutt re-issued the poem in 1878, some time before his death, he came out with a clarification:

> The above allegory [in *The Vision of Sumeru*] of the introduction of Christianity into India was written as the idea arose, but the author does not wish that it should be concluded from it that he is, or desires to be regarded as, a Christian. For an expression of his religious belief he would refer the reader to the Essay entitled, 'Half-Hours with Nature, or Explorations for the Truth'. (*Preface* xxi)

While a few of the family remained in their belief by birth, Shoshee Chunder Dutt, arguably the most erudite of them, chose to go his own way. His sensibility, like that of many of his contemporaries, must have been nurtured early by his reading of English/Western poets, writers, and philosophers, as well as the metaphysical systems of the world, to profess Nature as his religion. In his 1879 essay called 'Half-Hours with Nature, or Explorations for the Truth', Dutt reveals:

> The author of these pages has often been asked to vindicate his religion. If he is not a Christian, nor a Mahamedan [*sic*], nor a Buddha, nor a Hindu, what is he? And to this challenge he is anxious to give a distinct reply. (5)

Interestingly, Dutt proceeds to proclaim himself a pantheist, a worshipper of Nature. He postulates that Nature is "the greatest revelation" and the vast miraculous world before our eyes categorically speaks that the creation has a "Designer, a Director", behind all its manifestation. All religions have their own limitations; therefore he has faith only in Nature. He explains: "God is not to be seen except in his Works, but the footprints of the Deity in them are strongly marked. We cannot open our eyes in any direction but to read traces of Him" (12). More importantly, during the peak of his career, he nurtured a secular point of view, accepting the merit and significance of religions and religious belief:

> Religion is only the process by which we think ourselves up logically and consecutively into the region of the universal and there is quite as much of it indicated in the pages of the Veds [*sic*] and the Zendavesta [*sic*], of Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, and Plato, as in the Gospels, the Old Testament and the Koran.
>
> (10)

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We all know that literature is the product of the society and culture. We have to keep in mind that Indian literature – English or otherwise -- is basically the product of the Indian consciousness as well as the collective unconscious of the specific community/group which the writer represents. India has had a rich and deep-rooted literary tradition, enriched by Sanskrit as well as the bhasha literatures. Down the ages, a marvellous intertextuality has been running through the corpus of Indian literature(s). Any Indian engaged in creative writing is sure to be a conscious or unconscious receptacle of the universal elements of this literary tradition. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes, "The munificence of our racial memory is richly embodied in our Puranic tales and legends" (*Indian Contribution to English Literature* 19). In this context, the affirmation of Rabindranath Tagore is quite significant:

> When I look back, it seems to me that unconsciously I followed the path of my Vedic ancestors; to me the verses of the *Upanishads* and the teaching of the Buddha have been things of the spirit and, therefore, endowed with boundless, vital growth, and I have used them both in my own life and in my preaching as instinct with individual meaning for me as for others, and awaiting their confirmation, my own special testimony must have its value because of its individuality. (Qtd. In Anand 32-33)

Mulk Raj Anand, in his lesser known essay on Tagore seeks to relocate him "to his antecedents in Indian literary history" and assess how he [Tagore] had "dedicated himself to the rediscovery of ancient Hindu lore" ('Rabindra Nath Tagore' 32). The themes and ideas of our literature, the music of our poetry, and the way we tell our stories are apt to reflect these universal elements. With the advent of the West, our writers have certainly imbibed western ideas and beliefs, forms and style, and of course the English language, but it is natural to assume that the essential Indianness still continues to govern our literary endeavour. We ought to revise our way of reading our literatures and identify assimilative strategies while studying postcolonial Indian literatures, especially Indian English literature.

Now, I would try to trace the roots of Indian English poet's engagement with myth and mysticism. With the advent of Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) as one of the early writers of substance, Indian writing in English was blessed in many ways than one. The most important

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one to my mind is that Roy could, albeit unconsciously, demonstrate that tremendously sublime and intricate subjects of Indian scriptures, literature and metaphysical concepts could be communicated in English. He was not an 'Orientalist', and I am not referring here to his role in the debate over the introduction of English education in India. He was also instrumental in creating the groundwork for an unhesitant presentation of creative and scholarly writings in subjects *Indian*.

The post-Roy intellectual life of Calcutta/India was very much concerned with religious and metaphysical issues. Beginning with Roy, the nineteenth-century Bengal religious/spiritual scene had influential thinkers and reformers like Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-86), Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-84), Dwijendranath Tagore (1840-1926), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), et al. The engagement of Indians with spiritualism and religious reform was also seen beyond Bengal in the activities of the Rehnumai Maz'dayasan Sabha (1851) founded by Nauroji Furdonji, Dadabhai Naoroji, S. S. Bengalee, et al; the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83) in the year 1875; the formation of the Theosophical Society (1879), and the Aligarh Movement launched by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-98).

In short, the young, English-educated India had been re-thinking and articulating on religious issues and there was a revival of interest in scriptures and ancient literatures. The newspapers and literary periodicals of the nineteenth-century Bengal regularly published debates over several religiocultural issues of the Indian society in transition and even an eminent writer like Bankimchandra Chatterjee took active part in them. In short, the entire nineteenth century evidenced an aura of religious/spiritual upheaval which naturally took the contemporary literature in its sway.

One of the major activities in the nineteenth century was the presentation of the ancient texts through either translation or scholastic interpretation and the texts chosen were mostly Sanskrit classics: the Vedas, the Upanishads, *shastras* [treatises], puranas and mahakavyas. Right since

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the beginning of the nineteenth century, we have works like the anonymous rendering of Dhewdas's *The Vetal Panchavishi: Or Twenty-five Stories of Vetal* (1825). Peary Chand Mitra (1814-1883), the celebrated author of *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1857) wrote *The Spiritual Stray Leaves* (1879), *Stray Thought of Spiritualism* (1879) and *On the Soul: Its nature and Development* (1881). While Romesh Chunder Dutt translated the Ramayana (*The Ramayana: The Epic of Rama Rendered into English Verse*, 1899), the Mahabharata (*Mahabharata: The Epic of India Rendered into English Verse*, 1898), collected epics as *The Ramayana and Mahabharata: The Great Epics of Ancient India Condensed into English Verse,* 1900), and *Lays of Ancient India* (1894), as well as the metrical rendering of some passages from the Upanishads; Manmatha Nath Dutt (1855–1912), the author of *Gleanings from Indian Classics* (1893) and *Outlines of Hindu Metaphysics* (1904) also rendered Valmiki's Ramayana and Vyasa's Mahabharata in prose. There were many more: V. Mungaji's rendering of his Marathi work *The Brilliant Simantaka: Or The Most' Striking Legend of an Antique Kohinoor* (1889) based on an episode in the Mahabharata; translation of anonymously written *Harivijaya and Sivalila* (1891); *Nasiket Akhyan: Or the Journey of Nasiket to the Realms of the Dead (Being a Translation from a Marathi Pothi)* by K. Raghunath (1892); Manmatha Nath Dutt's *Tales of Ind* (1893), *Heroines of Ind* (1893) and *The Prophets of Ind* (1899), brought together under the title *Gleanings from Indian Classics*; B. R. Rajam Iyer's *Rambles in Vedanta* (1896-98); and V. V. Parameswara Aiyar's *The Ideal of Truthfulness: Or The Story of Harischandra* (1897).

As I have already submitted, since its very early phase, Indian English poets had found their umbilical cord in their own tradition. Beginning with the earliest poets like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Kasiprasad Ghosh, through Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Shoshee Chunder Dutt, Ram Sharma, Romesh Chunder Dutt, and Toru Dutt, many poets sought to draw their poetic ideas and themes from Indian mythology and even displayed elements of the mysticism that is peculiar to the Indian poetic tradition. Romesh Chunder Dutt, a versatile personality of the time, believed that the Indian mahakavyas and scriptures are the greatest in the world literature. When a person of Dutt's stature says this, we have to believe in his/her sincerity. In an article

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published in the *Wednesday Review* on 23 August 1905, he admits that Sir Walter Scott had been his favourite author forty years ago, and he had been influenced by many a western writers; but then he values 'the poet of the "Mahabharata" to be the greatest among the poets of all nations' (qtd. in Gupta 387).

Although some of the poets of the time had converted to Christian or some other faith or sect, they could not move away from their essential past. In the limited scope of a paper it is not possible to go for textual analyses but I wish to present here a few representative instances. Omesh Chunder Dutt (1836-1912), who along with many members of the Dutt family had converted to Christianity, has written poems like 'Hymn to Shiva' (*Dutt Family Album* 56). Michael Madhusudan Dutt was converted in 1843, but his masterpieces like *The Captive Ladie* (1849) and *Meghnadbadh Kavya* (1861), published much after his conversion, incorporate episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* Like many of his contemporaries, he also keeps referring to Hindu gods and goddesses. A minor poet like Hur Chunder Dutt (1831-1901) writes in his Preface to *Lotus Leaves or Poems Chiefly on Ancient Indian Subjects* (1871) how one can find "in those gigantic epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata such an inexhaustible mine of the romantic and the poetical" (ii). Nabokissen Ghose, more known as Ram Sharma, may not be looked upon now as a poet of significance, but we cannot overlook his passion for Hindu mythology. His works like *Shiva Ratri: Or A Glimpse of Maya Fair*, *Bhagaboti Gita: Or The Doctrine of Sakti Worship*, *Hymn to Durga,* 'Daksha Yagna', etc. have drawn the attention of critics as remarkable poetry of mystical beauty. While Ram Sewak Singh and Charu Sheel Singh believe that "Ram Sharma (1837-1918) anticipated Aurobindo and Tagore as far as the mystic temperament of the verse was concerned" (201), according to Vinayak Krishna Gokak, *Bhagobati Gita* … "gives expression to Ram Sharma's mystical perceptions" (Gokak 45). There were poets in other parts of India who also went back to Indian mythologies to write their poems. Some of them may be mentioned here: A. M. Kunte ('A Hymn to Surya'), Nagesh Wiswanath Pai (*Angel of Misfortune*, 1903).

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Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, the earliest Indian poet in English, who did not even share the background of his compatriots, demonstrates a sublime poetic sensibility in a few of his poems. His poem 'A Walk by Moonlight' may be taken as an example. Let us look at the following lines:

> And there was something in the night
> That with its magic wound us;
> For we - oh! we not only saw,
> But felt the moonlight around us.
>
> How vague are all the mysteries
> Which bind us to our earth;
> How far they send into the heart
> Their tones of holy mirth;
>
> Oh! in such moments can I crush
> The grass beneath my feet?
> Ah no; the grass has then a voice,
> Its heart - I hear it beat.
>
> When, like a thing that is not ours,
> This earthliness goes by,
> And we *behold* the spiritualness
> Of all that cannot die....

And citing the following lines Iyengar says, "Almost like Donne, Derozio faces the awful mystery of Death challengingly, triumphantly":

> But man's eternal energies! can make
> An atmosphere around him, arid so take
> Good out of evil, like the yellow bee
> That stocks from flowers malignant a sweet treasure,
>
> O tyrant fate! thus shall I vanquish thee,
> For out of suffering shall I gather pleasure.
>
> (*Indian Contribution to English Literature* 13)

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Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, especially her poems like 'Sita', 'Savitri', 'Prehlad', 'Our Casuarina Tree', 'Jogadhya Uma', 'Sindhu', 'The Legend of Dhruva', 'The Lotus', 'Tree of Life' and 'Lakshman' may be seen as the brightest evidence. According to Harihar Das, her biographer, "'Jogadhya Uma' is a poem unique in this collection for its dreamy, mystic beauty" (334); and "'The Tree of Life' is perhaps the best example we have of the mysticism which lay deep in Toru's nature" (*Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* 338). I quote below a few lines of her well--known poem 'My Vocation' to show how, even a young person like her, who had mostly been 'educated' in English and of course, French, can evoke the mystic experience:

> Now near Beauty I sigh,
> But fled is the spring!
> Sing -- said God in reply,
> Chant poor little thing.
>
> All men have a task,
> And to sing is my lot --
> No meed from men I ask
> But one kindly thought.
> My vocation is high --
> 'Mid the glasses that ring,
> Still -- still comes that reply,
> Chant poor little thing.

Iyengar's appreciation to this poem is worth noticing: '"she, "poor little thing"',

> would sing she would sing now of India's heroes and heroines, of Savitri and Satyavan, of Sita and Lakshman, of Dhruva and Ekalavya (Buttoo), of Dasaratha and Sindhu, of Prahlada and his father Hiranyakasipu; she that could so accurately render the heart-beats of a French poet of the sixteenth century would now interpret the great creations of Sanskrit seers and poets. (*Indian Contribution to English Literature* 18)

This brings me to Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the greatest mystic of the early Indian English literature. The Swami, like Sri Aurobindo, chiefly dwelt on myth and mysticism. In the last part of the nineteenth century, we had the presence of these two great poet-seers, who

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were more widely known than their contemporaries. In this paper I am not discussing Sri Aurobindo because most of his poetry appeared in the twentieth century. However, I must mention that he had already written poems like 'Urvasie', 'Vidula', 'The Rishi', 'Who', 'Parabrahman', 'Hymn to Durga' and 'The Mother of Dreams', where we can see the germination of his later ones, but his major publications came to light in the later century. I have also excluded Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu for the same reason.

Most of the early scholars have acknowledged the influential contribution of the early poets like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo in the formation of an intrinsic metaphysical basis of Indian English poetry. Though Tagore basically wrote in English, he inspired generations of poets in India irrespective of their linguistic choice. I think more than his poetry, Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical concepts and his profound theoretical explications of literature in general became more influential in the formation of an essential mystical function of poetry. *The Future Poetry*, which contains most of his theoretical and critical ruminations, was published in the *Arya* in thirty-two instalments between December 1917 and July 1920, though he had been writing critical essays for a long time. *The Future Poetry*, therefore, spells out all the seer-poet had to say on poetics and aesthetics, and of course his views on poetry.

According to Sri Aurobindo, a true poet is a "seer", who transcends conventional stereotypes to attain the level of a visionary, where the idea of "*tat sat*" is realised. The following excerpt from *The Future Poetry,* succinctly defines Sri Aurobindo's concept of poetry and in my opinion, this has served as the guiding principle of the coming generations of Indian English poets who sought to synthesise poetic experience with mysticism. His perception of "intuitive" poetry seems to exactly define the poetry of Swami Vivekananda:

> It [poetry] will restore to us the sense of the Eternal, the presence of the Divine which has been taken from us for a time by an intellect too narrowly and curiously fixed on the external and physical world, but it will not speak of those things in the feeble and conventional tones of traditional religion, but as a voice of intuitive experience and the rhythm and the chant of the revelation of an eternal presence. The voice of the

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> poet will reveal to us by the inspired rhythmic word the God who is the Self of all things and beings, the Life of the universe, the Divinity in man, and he will express all the emotion and delight of the endeavour of the human soul to discover the touch and joy of that Divinity within him in whom he feels the mighty founts of his own being and life and effort and his fullness and unity with all cosmic experience and with nature and with all creatures. (*The Future Poetry* 240)

Swami Vivekananda, known the world over as a visionary and a saint, wrote quite a few wonderful poems, though his poetic output was hardly visible in the overwhelming corpus of his speeches and prose writings. It is unfortunate that his contribution as a poet still remains unrecognised. The Swamiji wrote at least 30 poems in English and Bangla and translated three verses from Sanskrit during about nine years -- from 1893 to 1902 -- the most meaningful and active years of his brief life. The English version of seven of his Bangla poems (sometimes he called them "Songs"), most probably done by himself, is also available. Unfortunately, his poems are not available easily, and that could be a major reason why his poetry has not received the kind of reception and readership as it deserves.

In my opinion, Swami Vivekananda's poetry epitomises the harmony between the twin mystical experiences of *Rasananda* and *Brahmananda.* According to M. Sivaramkrishna, in the Swamiji's poetry, "*Rasananda* -- aesthetic delight -- is present but it is subsumed as a component of the transcending significance of literary texts". Vinayak Krishna Gokak sees the significance of Swami Vivekananda as enriching Indian English poetry with "metaphysical longing, mystical contemplation and spiritual illumination" (24). K. V. Suryanarayana Murti, one of the early scholars to have made an in-depth study of the Swamiji's poetry, looks upon Swami Vivekananda and Tagore as poetical re-presentations of Indian spiritualism. In two of his essays called 'The Poetry of Vivekananda' and 'Vivekananda and Tagore', he submits that the works of these early poets were influential in carving out an identity of Indian English poetry in the perception of the western readers. Defining Vivekananda's poetry as "sublime poetic art", he observes,

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> His poetry is a splendid blend of immense poetic sensibility and spiritual profundity, intellectual brilliance and indefatigable energy, unselfconscious universal love and the authentic voice of a prophet. His sense of renunciation, devotion, quest, innate mystic effulgence, self-realization, and the consequent philosophic off-spring – all are there converged in his poetry inseparably fused. (11-12)

The Swami himself was aware of the *mantric* power of poetry. He believed that great poetry rose from the finite to the "infinite". He believed that in great, sublime poetry, there is always "a grasping at infinity" (220). He had read and written on the great poets of the world literatures and had developed a unique concept of poetry as spiritual communion. Nearly all his poems seem to have been spontaneous and rich in poetic beauty, though understandably, some of them are didactic in tone. However, his mystic experience has been more expressive in 'Light', 'Quest for God', 'The Living God', 'Let Us Go back', 'The Song of the Sannyasin', and 'The Cup' and 'Kali: The Mother'. He poeticises the idea of '*Tattwamasi*' in his poems by presenting the quintessence of the Vedanta as well as his own realisation in a very simple yet profound manner.

In his quest for God, the seeker had been searching "O'ver hill and dale and mountain range,/In temple, church, and mosque,/In Vedas, Bible, Al Koran;" but that was all "in vain", because He does not dwell there. The seeker finds Him "In nature's beauty, songs of birds," He sees "through them - it is He". He is not only manifest in the world without; He is there within his own self:

> A flash illumined all my soul;
> The heart of my heart opened wide.
> O joy, O bliss, what do I find!
> My love, my love you are here
> And you are here, my love, my all! (Quest for God)

Similarly, in 'To a Friend', the poet exhorts that God is there in His "manifold forms before" everyone, but we, in our ignorance, cannot see Him:

> These are His manifold forms before thee,
> Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God,
> Who loves all beings without distinction,
> He indeed is worshipping best his God.

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The profound exploration of the mystic can be found in many of his poems. Here are two citations from two of his representative poems:

> All nature wear one angry frown,
> To crush you out - still know, my soul,
> You are Divine. March on and on,
> Nor right nor left but to the goal.
>
> Nor angel I, nor man, nor brute,
> Nor body, mind, nor he nor she,
> The books do stop in wonder mute
> To tell my nature; I am He.
>
> Before the sun, the moon, the earth,
> Before the stars or comets free,
> Before e'en time has had its birth,
> I was, I am, and I will be. (‘The Song of the Free’)

and,

> There is but One—The Free—The Knower—Self!
> Without a name, without a form or stain.
> In Him is Maya dreaming all this dream.
> The witness, He appears as nature, soul.
> Know thou art That, Sannyasin bold! Say—
> ”Om Tat Sat, Om!”
>
> Where seekest thou? That freedom, friend, this world
> Nor that can give. In books and temples vain
> Thy search. Thine only is the hand that holds
> The rope that drags thee on. Then cease lament,
> Let go thy hold, Sannyasin bold! Say—
> ”Om Tat Sat, Om!” (‘The Song of the Sannyasin’)

The title of the first comprehensive study of Swami Vivekananda’s poetry I had written was ‘The Mystic as Poet: The Poetry of Swami Vivekananda’ (2005), and after a few years, I published a revised version as ‘The Mystic Muse: The Poetry of Swami Vivekananda’. I mention this because ‘mystic’ is the word which had always hunted me whenever I read the Swamiji’s poems. Although all his poetical works were not put into one single book, most of

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his poems were very much available here and there, especially in his complete works and selections. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that his poetry must have exerted a benign influence on the succeeding generations of poets.

In conclusion, I wish to say that we have to re-read our early poems, as well as the corpus of Indian writing in English of the formative phase in an objective manner to know how they could prepare the groundwork for what we have today. The early poems have been generally dismissed as "imitative", "superficial", "Orientalist", and the like; and I do agree that quite a few works were mere poetical exercises in English without genuine poetic inspiration. But a close reading will surely reveal that not all of them deserve to be summarily dismissed. There is no doubting the fact that these early poets have indeed contributed to the making of *Indian* English poetry.

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