

An Analysis of the Christian Ethos in Toru Dutt's Corpus And Its Co-Relation with Her Depiction of the Ancient Indic Past in Her Works

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Abstract

The figure of Toru Dutt (1856-77) contains within it the sheer affect of an emergence of new possibilities in the enunciation of new paradigms towards a fresh understanding of the cultural and literary scenario in nineteenth century Bengal under the full impact of colonialism. In this instance, it has been endeavoured to delve into the life and works of the Bengali Christian writer Toru Dutt to show how religious identity and the colonial connection collectively shaped her oeuvre. Hitherto, most of the scholarship pertaining to Dutt has largely attempted to situate her in the category of the 'Indo-Anglian' literary realm, which in some respects acts as a deterrent towards a more inclusionary understanding of Dutt because the 'Christian religious' and the 'western cultural' elements are not often perceived as separate categories, but rather clubbed together under the broad purview of South Asian women writers. The attempt here is to enunciate and envisage a distinct kind of Christian consciousness as can be gauged from her writings and show how that Christian approach influenced her poetical works which represented Hindu mythological characters. Along with the colonial connection, the question of religion (Christianity, in this instance) also assumes cardinal significance because of the author's personal conversion to that creed and also because of the rich allusions to that creed's doctrines, ideas and theological notions which can be discerned throughout her corpus. Toru Dutt was one of the two poets who represented a very crucial period of Bengal, a poet whose poems reflected a decisive turning point in the literature and culture of Bengal, the other poet being Michael Madhusudan Dutt. She was the product of the great interaction of cultures and religious faiths that occurred in Calcutta following the cultural and social reawakening which took place in the aftermath of the enunciation of the colonial connection in Bengal. This article examines the manner in which Toru Dutt's sensibility encouraged the absorption of new ideas and trends which gave birth to a conscious endeavour to study foreign (primarily European) cultures.

The colonial European Christian influence prompted Toru Dutt (and to a greater extent, the Dutt family) to westernize mentally, socially and also in terms of religion whereby Christianity was held to be on a more elevated and sublime plane of morality that was worthy of being emulated. One of the best examples of the great influence of the Christian religion which permeated her intimate familiar circles is the collected anthology of poetry titled the *Dutt Family Album*.¹ The preface clearly provides the *raison d'etre* of the poetic corpus:

¹ *The Dutt Family Album*, (Longmans, Green, And Co, 1870).

“The writers of the following pages are aware that bad poetry is intolerable, and that mediocre poetry deserves perhaps a harsher epithet. There is a glut of both in the market. But they venture on publication, not because they think their verses good, but in the hope that their book will be regarded, in some respects, as a curiosity. They are foreigners, natives of India, of different ages, and in different walks of life, yet of one family, in whom the ties of blood relationship have been drawn closer by the holy bond of Christian brotherhood. As foreigners educated out of England, they solicit the indulgence of British critics to poems which on these grounds alone may, it is hoped, and have some little title to their attention.”²

This invocation of Christian brotherhood on the part of the anonymous author of the Dutt family can serve as a yardstick for the deep and profound Christian convictions and faith cherished by the members of this illustrious literary family. It might also be mentioned in passing that Toru Dutt’s mother Kshetramoni had translated into Bengali the book, *The Blood of Jesus* by Andrew Murray, although she never converted to Christianity along with her brothers and cousins. Contemporaneous upper echelons of Calcutta society, both Bengali and European, were full of praise for the Dutt family, especially Toru Dutt’s father, Govind Chunder Dutt, who too had contributed a substantial portion of poems to the ‘*Dutt Family Album*.’³ Yet this work was never held in great esteem by the literary world of his time. As Rosinka Chaudhuri has stated:

“The tone in which critics have dealt with the poetry produced by the Dutt family has been generally dismissive. The Dutt family were writing in an age when the greatest respect was reserved for men like Bankimchandra, who were propagating Bengali. But even earlier, by the time of Madhusudan in the middle of the century, it had become unprofitable to be an Indian writing in English. As late as 1970, John B. Alphonso-Karkala, in *Indo-English Literature in The Nineteenth Century*, described the *Album* as ‘typical of the earlier school of Indo-English poetry when poets were not daring enough to experiment with European metrical forms’

These poems, and their aesthetic value or lack of it, exist meaningfully only within their historical context. Theodore Dunn was more accurate, in fact, about the value of the *Dutt Family Album*, when he said the book ‘must be of abiding interest to the student of literary history in India.’⁴

This precisely was the context in which the young Toru Dutt had to write her works. But she did not let herself remain embedded within any particular literary tradition and kept herself unfettered from any kind of ideological predilections which means that she could approach her subject in a much more liberal and nuanced manner. The intermingling of Christianity and colonialism presents a unique instance of the cross-fertilisation of theology, politics and religion and this chapter will show how such a kind of cultural effervescence shaped the works of Dutt. Toru Dutt’s intimate familiarity with the classical literature of Europe was part of the pedagogic tradition, thoroughly western in its provenance, which began to take

² Ibid., Preface

³ Das, Harihar. *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1920) pp.7.

⁴ Chaudhuri, Rosinka *The Dutt family Album And Toru Dutt*, in Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna (ed.) *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2016). Eighth impression, pp. 59-60.

roots in South Asia in the aftermath of the establishment of the colonial regime, a time when native connoisseurs of literature took interest and delight in discoursing and delineating upon the virtues of Graeco-Roman antiquity. But there comes a point of divergence and a fundamental dichotomy between what is called as ‘Graeco-Roman antiquity’ and ‘Christian’ sources of literary inspiration and fervour. The novelty lies in envisaging an amalgamation of the both the Christian and Graeco-Roman literary and cultural traditions by which a kind of *modus vivendi* would be envisaged in clearly delineating the socio-cultural milieu in which Toru Dutt flourished. This approach is important because in two of Dutt’s novels, the protagonists are female characters and the entire plot and thrust of the story always **revolves** around them.

The ‘Foreword’ which the British historian H.A.L. Fisher wrote in Harihar Das’s compendium of Toru Dutt’s letters and poems reveals a very profound kind of attachment to the Christian faith on her path which Fisher found to be extremely praiseworthy.⁵ Along with Christian faith, what Fisher found even more significant was the enunciation a series of literary works (poems, novels, translations from French poets) and how the driving force behind the creation of what Toru Dutt wrote was a kind of a peculiar ‘Christian literary culture’. As Fisher says:

“The pious labours of Mr. Das have now added some welcome and altogether attractive touches. They show us how devoid Toru was of the foibles often attaching to the literary character, how exempt from ostentation, vanity, self-consciousness, how childlike and eager, with how a warm glow of affection she embraced her friends, how free was her composition from all bitter and combustible elements. They enable us also to realise how much she was helped by the fact of her Christian training to an appreciation of certain aspects of Western literature (her love of *Paradise Lost* and Lamartine are illustrations) not usually congenial to the Indian mind, and how personal friendships formed during a girlhood spent partly in France and partly in England united to strengthen her hold upon the essential soul of the two languages in which she wrought.”⁶

Fisher here spoke about the pivotal significance of ‘Christian training’ which thoroughly permeated her works. By means of her own religious convictions, Toru Dutt was able to situate herself within different historical settings for her novels and her poems, which clearly showed how she felt at ease in straddling the different dimensions in the realm of literature which she assiduously cultivated.

Taking the first instance in regards to the novel, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d’Arvers*, the central character Marguerite possess all the finesse, ardour and esprit associated with the cultural ethos of the literary salons in post-Napoleonic France. Here also, with regard to the protagonist, an admixture of the religious and the secular themes of education and social conduct can be found in abundance. The questions of love, religion, courtship, and family traditions are explored in great depth so as to as provide a realistic portrait of domestic life and its vivacity in the said period in France. It must be emphasised that literary tropes are only significant to the extent that the author draws the inspiration behind the creation of the

⁵ Das, Harihar. *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, Foreword by the Right Hon. H.A.L. Fisher, (April 3, 1920), pp. vii-ix.

⁶ Das, *Life and Letters*, pp. viii.

specific character in a novel from other literary sources. What is even more important is that this novel was originally written in French and it was published posthumously at the initiative of Dutt's bereaved father. A subtle point of similarity can be found between the characterization of the figure of Marguerite and the author herself because Dutt delineated the social pathos and cultural milieu which she had beheld and admired in Britain and France during her sojourn to those countries with her family.

The trials and travails which Marguerite Arvers had to face after her return from the monastery as a part of the completion of her education portrays a lot about the social settings and especially how families belonging to the minor nobility in France led their *otium cum dignitate* and the process of scholastic cultivation among the retreat to the rural settings, and also perhaps the Christian environment in which she grew up. As we have seen already, Dutt's was one of the aristocratic families of Bengal with Govin Chunder Dutt himself being a philanthropist, a very well-read man, deeply interested in literature and poetry. This was one family that responded whole-heartedly to the winds of change sweeping the religious facets of society. Deeply attracted towards the ideals of Christianity, the entire Dutt family converted to Christianity in the year 1862. It can be emphasised that that Christian connection was too deeply entangled in the family and it was in this social and familial milieu that Toru Dutt's upbringing ensued.

Toru Dutt's graphic description of the convent from which her protagonist ventures to return and the parting conversation between her and the nuns at the ecclesiastical seminary forms a valuable part of her understanding of the different facets of social and religious life in nineteenth-century Europe. The biographical element in this epistolary novel can have two meanings. Perhaps, Marguerite was the alter ego of Toru Dutt herself, especially considering the formidable acuity and prescience of Dutt and her thorough acquaintance with different facets of English and French literature, because the articulate erudition and refined countenance of Marguerite bears striking similarities with the character of Dutt. Or, perhaps she had modelled this character in the cast of her late sister, Aru Dutt, whose death had preceded her own, because one can gauge a similarity between Aru Dutt's demise and the demise of Marguerite despite the fact the her character was shown, unlike her sister, leading a leading a happy married life with the person (Comte de Ploverven) she had loved ardently.⁷ It is not surprising considering the depth and insightful tone and tactful taste which Dutt displayed in constructing the characters of Mademoiselle D' Arvers that critics were generally impressed by the unique and formidable literary prowess of the young author. One reviewer admirably stated:

“There is every reason to believe that in intellectual power Toru Dutt was one of the most remarkable women that ever lived. Had George Sand and George Eliot died at the age of twenty one, they would certainly not have left behind them any proof of application or of originality superior to those bequeathed to us by Toru Dutt; and we discover little of merely ephemeral precocity in the attainments of this singular girl.”⁸

⁷ This has been suggested in a review article of this novel by Asaduddin.M ‘The Diary of Mademoiselle D'Arvers by Toru Dutt and N. Kamala’, *Indian Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (231) (January-February 2006), pp. 184-185.

⁸ ‘Saturday Review’ critique (August, 1879), Quoted from Das, Harihar *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, pp. 827.

This degree of intercultural penetration clearly shows the extent of cultural assimilation which was a part of the process of normal western education pertaining to the colonised elite in nineteenth-century South Asia. What is most astonishing is the self-satisfied social countenance of the protagonist in the novel. Her chief aspiration is to seek an eligible husband for herself and live the rest of her life happily.⁹ This structured self-inclination which the author conveys through her character in the novel largely signifies that despite the cultivation of western classics, the patriarchal notions of hierarchical domesticity for the female does not get effaced but rather such traditional patriarchal notions gets reinforced in two ways. Firstly, the very European social settings in the novel make it necessary that the 'correct' and patriarchal ideas would be accepted as the 'true' marker of social relations. Secondly, the very nature of the author's exposition of the charms and 'grandeur' of western domesticity would act as a pillar of attraction so as to render any intellectual resistance to patriarchal domination redundant. Govind Chunder Dutt, her father, wrote in the preface of *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* regarding the task of undertaking of the enunciation of this work, in the following terms:

“The great ambition of Toru and Aru was to publish a novel anonymously which Toru should write and Aru who was far more deft at pencil, should illustrate. Toru's part of the contract has been faithfully fulfilled. I have before me, her manuscript. It is in the form of a diary written in French by a young lady. The scene is laid in France and the characters are all French men and women. I shall publish it probably hereafter. Aru did not live to complete her part of the undertaking.”¹⁰

In the instance of her other unpublished novel, *Bianca, or the young Spanish maiden*, published in 1878, Toru's protagonist (Bianca) in the novel once again bears a striking resemblance to its author.¹¹ Bianca Garcia is the younger and the only surviving daughter of a Spanish gentleman who has settled in an English village. Her elder sister, Inez, has just died. The narrative opens with an account of the burial on a dreary day in the month of February. Bianca and her father are the sole mourners. Bianca is to visit Moore Hall and the next day she goes there. Mr. Garcia had been reluctant to consent to this visit until he has heard that the grown up son of the house, young Lord Moore, would be away in London that day. He had no wish that his daughter should be accused of hunting for prospective suitors. However, Bianca was already deeply in love with this young man. We are introduced to the Moore household – the aristocratic, conservative, devout and haughty mother; the gracious daughter; and to Lord Moore himself in all the force and vigour of his youth. He returns home unexpectedly and his mother is troubled because he finds Bianca there. He escorts her to her home later on and returning comes to the determination to seek her as his wife. Just at that juncture his mother enters his room with a suggestion of another lady as his bride and when she finds that he has no inclination whatever in that quarter, she begins to speak disparagingly of Bianca. Lord Moore vows that he can marry no one else but her. Matters soon reach a crisis. He and his younger brother Willie call at her home and he stays engaged in an artful conversation with her in the garden after his little brother has left. Bianca feels it

⁹ Dutt, Toru. *Le Journal De Mademoiselle d' Arvers*, from Lokuge, Chandani (ed.), *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006)

¹⁰ Dutt, Toru. *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, (Calcutta: Saptahik Sambad Press, 1878). Prefatory memoir by Govind Chunder Dutt. pp. xi.

¹¹ Dutt, Toru. *Bianca, Or the Young Spanish Maiden*, from Lokuge, Chandani (ed.), *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2006), pp. 93.

her duty to tell her father who is aggrieved to hear of the incident and while they are talking a letter is brought in containing Lord Moore's proposal of betrothal to Bianca. Mr. Garcia is unwilling to grant his consent and to please her father; Bianca agrees to decline the proposal when her lover arrives at the house that same evening to learn his fate. The young man's grief is so intense that her father finally relents and sends for Bianca, who, however, falls ill at the prospect of her father meeting Lord Moore. Lord Moore hastily returns home to ride for the doctor and his melancholy is noticed by his family.¹² Lord Moore's distress over his beloved's illness meets with scant sympathy from his mother. At last, Bianca's ailment is cured and her marriage takes place with Lord Moore, who immediately embarks to participate in the Crimean War (1854) in the British army, after which the story is left discontinued.

This unravelling of different characters and their conflict of interest amongst themselves, especially regarding the choice of a bride in which the groom's mother usually had a great discretionary role to play reveals the mastery of the intricacies of the social scenarios which was then prevalent in Europe. While writing her two novels, Toru Dutt presented to the readers an authentic world which remained true to the author's vision of life. Dutt's poetry proclaims her individuality and ardent interest in her subjects. In stark contrast while writing the two novels, Toru Dutt has been supremely subjective in the choice of plot, theme and mode of expression. Both of Toru's novels share a unique phenomenon. For the French novel, the setting is unmistakably early nineteenth-century France, the idiom is what was spoken by French aristocracy, yet the characters are essentially creations which resulted from her thorough perusal of European literature. What enhances the insight is her realistic depiction of the *salons* which abounded in France at that time and the conversations which took place in the various literary coteries.

Dutt was the product of the great interaction of cultures and religious faiths that occurred in Calcutta following the cultural and social reawakening which took place in the aftermath of the enunciation of the colonial connection in Bengal. The manner in which Toru Dutt's sensibility encouraged the absorption of new ideas and trends gave birth to the conscious endeavour towards the study of foreign (primarily European) cultures. The colonial European influence in Bengal which prompted Dutt (or to a greater extent the Dutt family) to westernise mentally, socially, and also in terms of religion - whereby Christianity was held to be based on a more elevated and sublime plane of morality and worthy of being emulated and practiced - becomes evident especially in the depiction of Marguerite and Bianca in her novels.

Toru Dutt's approach to the ancient Indic mythology deserves a closer inspection because of her own preparatory literary and social background when she prepared herself to devote her life to this task of writing *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Dutt's initial interest into Indian mythology largely grew out of her ardent curiosity when she had, as an infant, beheld her mother recite stories from the Hindu scriptures and whose recitation, brought forth tears, simply due to the irresistible charm which lay in the ancient lays of India.¹³

The ballads primarily deal with common legends of Hindu mythology -- those of Savitri, Bharata, Dhruva etc. Toru's own readings in Sanskrit enabled her to perceive the ethical meaning with which many of these ancient legends were charged. On studying

¹², Toru. *Bianca, Or the Young Spanish Maiden*, from Lokuge, Chandani (ed.), *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2006), pp. 101-103.

¹³ Das, Harihar *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, pp. 329-330.

these poems individually, one would perceive that Dutt, in selecting these particular characters of Indian mythology, has a perception of the distant Indic past and how to present the characters from Hindu mythology. Also, Dutt has sought to renew her understanding of these mythological characters through a reinterpretation which reflected her Christian convictions and the literary taste which she had assiduously cultivated through her study of English and French literature. An outcome of this assessment was that the poet confirms the immortality, the permanence of these representatives of Hindu mythology and the qualities they stand for.

An identical attraction, a pull towards the native soil was experienced in the other spheres too - religious and cultural. Though for all purposes she formally accepted Christianity, the potent streak of Hinduism constantly stirred within her and was aroused by the songs and myths of yore. It should be obvious that Christianity, while having a limiting influence towards mythological tales belonging to pre-Christian period, sharpened her perceptions of the need for rediscovering, if not recovering, her half-forsaken traditions of Hinduism. The translations from the Sanskrit were done by Dutt and her elder sister, Aru, though Toru herself played the major part in this translation venture. Without any explicit avowal, Toru's translations assume the character of a kind of transcendence for the distant Indic antique past which is not surprising because of her own temperament being attuned to that of French - a temperament that expresses one's unceasing quest for love, freedom and beauty.

There would definitely arise the question about the conflict between 'Indian' and foreign affiliations in her poems and whether such rigid dichotomies were indeed viable and present and if so, were they often at variance with each other, or lay converged under a common framework. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* is an eloquent testimony to Toru's 'Indianness'. Toru's ardent love of Indian's glorious past is reflected in her ballads. Her conversion to Christianity, her European visit and her English education could not lessen her love for India's ancient religion and mythology. Despite her stay abroad and the peculiarity of her education and the fact of her sojourns to the West, she always nourished herself an inborn love for the Indian scene. This latent sympathy towards the Hindu mythological characters needs to be brought forth because of her extraordinary favourable portrayal of them.¹⁴ Edmund Gosse in his Introductory Memoir to Dutt's posthumous *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* declared:

"Here, in a mystical retirement more irksome to an European in fancy than to an Oriental in reality, the brain of this wondrous child was moulded. She was pure Hindu, full of the typical qualities of her race and blood, and as the present volume shows us, for the first time, preserving to the last, her appreciation of the poetic side of her ancient religion, though faith itself in Vishnu and Shiva had been cast aside with childish things and been replaced by a purer faith."¹⁵

For instance, in the poem, 'The Legend of Dhruva', she introduces her theme in the following verses:

¹⁴ This probable query about the change of attitude towards the Indic mythological tales as represented in Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends* has also been probed by Meera Jagannathan, 'The Enigma of Toru Dutt', *Dalhousie French Studies*, Vol. 94 (Spring 2011), pp. 13-25.

¹⁵ Dutt, Toru. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan paul, trench & Co., 1982). Pp. xi-xii.

“Sprung from great Brahma, Manu had two sons,
Heroic and devout, as I have said,
Pryavrata and Uttanapado, - names,
Known in legends; and of these the last
Married two wives, Suruchee, his adored,
The mother of a handsome petted boy
Uttama; and Suneeetee, less beloved,
The mother of another son
Was Dhruva.”¹⁶

The poet is retelling the well-known story of Dhruva in English from the original Sanskrit and it bears a striking similarity in tone and tenor to the rustic recitations of identical mythological tales in the Indian context. In ‘The Legend of Dhruva’ we find the sense of duty prevailing when Dhruva declares that the throne should be given to Uttama. Dutt has imbibed the spirit of her subject well because without some form of intellectual sympathy for the religion whose mythological characters she is translating and rendering into English verse, this kind of apt yet sonorous description of a character (Dhruva, in this instance) does not seem feasible.

Taking an example from the tale of Savitri, the manner in which Dutt reiterates the despairing gesture of Savitri to Yama heightens the tragic scenario and expresses the ardent affection which she bore towards her husband which led her into the farthest promontories of hell itself. As Dutt writes:

“She took the clue, felt Death was Love,
For no exceptions now he named,
And boldly said, -- ‘Thou knowest, Lord,
The inmost hearts and thoughts of all!
There is no need to utter word,
Upon thy mercy sole, I call.
If speech be needful to obtain
Thy grace, - oh hear a wife forlorn,
Let my Satyavan live again
And children unto us be born,
Wise, brave, and valiant,’ ‘From thy stock
A hundred families shall spring
As lasting as the solid rock,
Each son of thine shall be a king.”¹⁷

In this interaction between Savitri and Yama, at a secondary level, one can visualize an interaction between the positive and negative features of society, between the demand for freedom for woman and the suppression of this freedom. The suppression of liberty is exemplified by Yama while Savitri’s bold yet dignified entreaties reflect a desire for liberty and freedom from bondage. Dutt has portrayed Savitri in a delightful manner and

¹⁶ Dutt, Toru. ‘The Legend of Dhruva, Vishnu Purana, Book I, Chapter XI’, from *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892). Pp. 71-72.

¹⁷ Dutt, Toru. ‘Savitri’, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892) pp. 37.

has made her look at askance when she journeys to the ether world and expresses her objection to the abject fate and misfortune befallen upon her husband. By these verses, it seems that Dutt is fascinated and thereby faithfully renders the old tale of edifying conjugal and marital fidelity which distinguished women like Savitri in Indic mythology. It is quite remarkable that despite her ardent profession of the Christian faith, Dutt is sympathetic to and not averse from taking cues from mythological characters exemplifying different categories of virtue.

Dutt's depiction of Sita and the despair in which she spends her days as a captive, far away from her spouse has a similar empathy informing it. As she writes:

"There, blue smoke, from strange altar rises light,
 There, dwells in peace, the poet – anchorite.
 But who is this fair lady? Not in vain
 She weeps, - for lo! At every tear she sheds
 Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall amain,
 And bowed in sorrow are the three young heads.
 It is an old, old story, and the lay
 Which has evoked sad Sita from the past
 Is by a mother sung.... 'Tis hushed at last
 And melts the picture from the from their sight away,
 Yet shall they dream of it until the day!
 When shall those children by their mother's side
 Gather, ah me! As erst at eventide"¹⁸

A striking aspect of this ballad is no doubt the style in which Sita's accusations and Lakshman's heart-rending responses are rendered and her sad predicament and the perpetual melancholy of her captivity depicted. What the poet was undergoing was perhaps a colonial crisis of identity where the native culture which so long had been suppressed by a presumably superior language and culture, now came to the fore and rapturous praise was bestowed upon the mythological characters of Indic antiquity.

Despite being a devout Christian who ascribed the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 to the rampant apostasy of the French and thereby vindicated that military catastrophe as some kind of divine punishment for the errant nation,¹⁹ Toru Dutt completely isolated herself from her native social milieu and this precisely enabled her to make an appreciative gesture towards the ancient history and religion of her nation. Dutt declaims in sadness at the defeat France in the following verse:

"No, she stirs! – There's fire in her glance.
 Ware, oh ware of that broken sword!
 What, dare ye for an hour's mischance,
 Gather around her, jeering France,
 Attila's own exultant horde?
 Lo, she stands up, - stands up e'en now.
 Strong once more for the battle – fray,

¹⁸ Dutt, Toru. 'Sita', from *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892). Pp. 121-22.

¹⁹ Letter to Miss Martin, July 1871', from Das, Harihar, *Life and letters of Toru Dutt*, (London: OUP, 1921) 135-36.

Gleams bright the star, that from her brow'
Lightens the world. Bow, nations, bow,
Let her again lead on the way!"²⁰

The defeat of France shook her to the core. And the defeat was the result of the wrath of God which fell on the apostate nation which had turned away from god. And Dutt hoped that this defeat would act as a force of chastisement for the French to return to their roots of devotion to God. The defeat of France and the exultation of 'Atilla hordes' (reference to the Germans) represent nothing but the divine providence as laid down by god through his infinite mercy and concern for his fallen children. Dutt was in England during the time when the war had broken out. Her impressions at the surrender of France (and Emperor Napoleon III after the Battle of Sedan) were as follows:

"When the war began, my whole heart was with the French, though I felt sure of their defeat. One evening, when the war was still going on, and the French had suffered many reverses, I heard papa mention something to mamma about the Emperor. I descended like lightning, and learnt that the French had capitulated. The Emperor and all his Army had surrendered at Sedan. I remember perfectly how I ascended the stairs, and told the news to Aru, half choked and half crying. O France, France, how thou art brought low! Mayest thou, after this humiliation, serve and worship God better that thou hast done in those days – Poor, poor France, how my heart bleeds for thee!"²¹

Dutt's self-affiliation with the fallen fortunes of France in battle testifies to her ardent identification with the predicament of the French. Edmund Gosse duly noted this,

"...but it would seem that the marvellous faculties of Toru's mind still slumbered, when, in her thirteenth year, her father decided to take his daughters to Europe to learn English and French. To the end of her days Toru was a better French than English scholar. She loved France best, she knew its literature best, she wrote its language with the most perfect elegance."²²

Precisely equivalent was the comment of her long time English acquaintance Clarisse Bader who in agreement with Gosse's views, wrote:

"Toru was an earnest Christian, and she thought that the misfortunes that befell France at this time were due to the depravity of the French people. She remained unshaken in her love for the French and in spite of their defeat and of her Christian education, which caused her consider the downfall of France as a punishment for irreligion."²³

Political and military debacles being caused as a consequence of divine wrath had been an old Christiana belief going back to the time of the Old Testament prophets. The inscrutable decree of divine providence often caused the fortune of nations and entire peoples to hang in balance, and such kinds of chastisements were often understood as being the cause of the

²⁰ Dutt, Toru. 'France – 1870', *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1892) 129-30.

²¹ Toru Dutt's diary entry, quoted from Das, Harihar *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, pp. 38.

²² Gosse, Edmund 'Introductory Memoir', Dutt, Toru. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, (London: Keegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1982) xii.

²³ Das, Harihar, *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, pp. 39.

harbinger of defeats and humiliations, straight from divine will. Dutt's identification of the miserable predicament of the French with this tremendous notion of the intervention of God in human affairs and establishing his justice by means of chastisement to those who had apostatised serves as a testament of her infallible convictions in the Christian faith and despite the raging appurtenances of atheism, emanating from modernity, around her (both in Europe and in India), had remained largely unaffected by it. Dutt's example often acts as a convenient point to refute the commonly held dictum that western education directly leads to atheism and scepticism in religious matters. Had it really been so, Dutt would have long proclaimed herself as an atheist or at least, there wouldn't have been her protestations about her fealty to God much in her voluminous corpus.

In inference, it can be said that despite her Christian upbringing, she never completely tried to engage in any kind of self-isolation from the cultural milieu of his times. The best testimony to that was in her endeavours to learn the Sanskrit language. From a purely Christian point of view, all pre-Christian mythologies are merely heathenish and only fit for intellectual enquiry but any kind of devotional interest in them was unbecoming of a devout Christian. Toru Dutt succeeded in transcending the purely Christian milieu and this enabled her to treat with sympathy and gusto the characters from the mythological characters from the Puranas. Despite being an ardent reader of English and French literature, she did not cut herself completely off from the indigenous roots in which her parents had been born and which her mother still retained. Being a Christian did not necessarily mean in her instance, that she would wantonly denigrate the Hindu religion to which most of her extended family kinsmen still belonged. Toru Dutt's wide curiosity for Indic religions made her revert to treat subjects from Hindu mythology and this led her to compose the '*Ancient ballads and Legends of Hindustan.*' Moreover, she never forsook her wider identity as a Bengali and never affected to mimic English ways and mores and any other European social custom to which she could not relate herself or felt uncomfortable. Despite moving in the higher echelons of the European society in colonial Calcutta, to which she and her family secured entrance because of her father's eminence and high office (as an administrative functionary), she never affected to engage in any kind of vanity or looked down on those who were down her social scale. She maintained an attitude of equanimity to both ancient Indian and European literatures and never felt or even deigned to enunciate to create any literary hierarchy and put the Indian one at a lower scale than the European.

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