

SPRITUALISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY**Dr. Bhavesh Chandra Pandey**

Associate Professor

Department of English

S. K.R.College, Barbigaha

Sheikhpura, (Bihar)

It is believed that literature cannot be vital unless it stems out of and is involved in the life around it. According to D. H. Lawrence all creative art must rise out of a specific soil and flicker with the spirit of the place. (Peeradina) Judged by this yardstick, a distinct character, context, tone and sensitivity to language can be found at work in Indian English Poetry.

Spiritualism is often considered to be the core of Indian culture and as such it has found a very prominent place in Indian English poetry, particularly in the Pre- Independence era. The basic ideas of the chief scriptures and the fundamental principles of Indian spiritual tradition found representation in the poems of this period.

Spiritualism across cultures recognizes that man is not a psycho-chemical aggregate and body and mind are not the ultimate limits of human existence. Therefore human evolutionary pursuit has tried to cross the limits of material and hedonistic preoccupations and to look for a higher fulfilment in the arena of spirit. Indian culture, in particular, has always fore-grounded spirit and has accorded it a higher position than bodily preoccupations. It has aimed at a march from untruth to truth, darkness to light, and death to deathlessness (*asato ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrityurma amritam gamay- Vrihadaranyak Upanishad*). In the Indian tradition *moksha* has been held as the highest *purushartha*, higher than *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*. Similarly, of the three *gunas*, *sato guna* is held higher than *tamo guna*, and *rajo guna*. *Sato guna* represents auspicious qualities whereas the other two *gunas* represent baser qualities. Man as a descendent of God has been treated as made of tissues charged with potential divinity and immortality. *Tatwa jigyasa* (curiosity of spirit) is the chief preoccupation of Indian spiritual tradition. Indian *rishis* and philosophers have announced unequivocally that *Brahma* is the only truth and all other things are just illusion or *maya* (*Brahma satyam jagat mithya*). The attainment of divinity,

immortality and bliss is the ultimate destiny of man. The purpose of human journey is to move from *annmaya, pranmaya, manomaya, vgyanmaya to anandmaya kosh*. The path suggested for the attainment of *moksha* is *yoga- bhakti, karma, gyan, and Raj yoga*, attainment of non-attachment, practice of *brahmacharya* and renunciation, recognition of divinity (*tat twam asi*), realization of union of the supreme and soul (*brahmatmaektatwabodh*, Vivek Chudamani, Shankaracharya, 58) and above all absolute faith in God (*shraddha*).

The most essential feature of Indian spiritual ethos is the recognition of the presence of divine energy in every part and parcel of the universe and renunciation of material possession for the sake of spiritual progress. *Ishavashyapanishad* announces this idea most unequivocally in the opening verse:

Ishavashyam idam sarvam yatkincha jagatyam jagat

Ten tyakten bhunjitha ma gradh kasyachit dhanam.

(Every part and parcel of the world is charged with the energy of god and so there is a need to renounce all possessions as a piece of valueless soil)

This belief forms the bedrock of Indian cultural ethos. In this belief *Jiva, Jagat and Jagadish* are fused in a union. Indian culture lays thrust on the spiritual quest, union with God and treading the course of *Bhakti, gyan, karma, and Raj yoga*. Salvation (*moksha*: liberation from the endless cycle of life and death) and spiritual evolution leading to the realization of the ideal of life divine are the two most significant goals of Indian spiritual philosophy.

“In the introduction of his book *The Golden Treasury of Indo- Anglian Poetry* V.K. Gokak writes: What is the vision of Indo-Anglian poet? We shall be able to understand it if we examine the creative perception with regard to major themes of poetry- Nature, Love, Man and Heritage of man consisting of myth, legend, history, and fine arts. We have balancing these, another world of themes-metaphysical longing, devotion, mystical contemplation and spiritual evolution”.

He further writes:

“ A poet has not only to throw open the window on the world around him and study the face of Nature, Love, Man and human achievement, he has also to take into his own heart, cerebral cortex and the world of imagination and fantasies”.

Extending his argument he goes on to write:

“A poet is ordinarily a denizen of both these worlds: Nature, Love, Man and Human Heritage are his four fields of exploration in one direction. In another he is on the way to metaphysical thought, passion, visionary power and spiritual illumination”.

Indian English Poetry in general and Pre- Independence poetry in particular produced some very well-known exponents of poetry with spiritual themes. Chief among them are Sri Aurobindo, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Saojini Naidu, Swami Vivekanand, Harindranath Chattopadhyay besides some others.

The greatest master of spiritual poetry in Indian English literature is undoubtedly nationalist, freedom fighter turned sage Sri Aurobindo. A veteran scholar of Indian Vedic and *vedantic* tradition and a spiritually enlightened yogi, Aurobindo became an exponent of the concept of spiritual evolution of man leading to the realization of life divine. He furthered the tradition of theories of evolution from Darwin to Shaw and came out with a theory of the spiritual evolution of man. In his epic *Savitri*, an odyssey of spirit, Aurobindo deals with the theme of evolution of spirit and nature. He traces the course of evolution of human consciousness and nature from the lowest sensuous and physical plane to the plane spiritual light and spiritual being. He deals with the problem of man’s destiny on earth and the nature of perfection he can attain. According to him man’s destiny is to achieve divinity on the earth to manifest supramental consciousness, and to recreate life, individual and collective in this light. There will emerge a new race of Gnostic being into which man will be transformed. The purpose of evolutionary nature is the total spiritual transformation of the individual through his liberation from the domination of ignorance and inconstancy.

In *Savitri*, Aurobindo harps on the idea of the inevitability of spiritual evolution of man and his victory over death. He clearly states that creation has a supra rational purpose and mind is not the limit of human existence. Aurobindo firmly believes that man is not merely a ‘death bound littleness’ and human life is a march to a ‘victory never won’. To him man is a transitional being. Like Bertrand Russell he seems to believe that the present form of man cannot be a worthy climax of the enormous prelude of the omnipotent God. Man is destined to be divine. *Savitri* says:

To bring God down to the world we came,

To change the earthly life to life divine. (*Savitri*, Book XI, Canto 1)

She further pronounce the descent of life divine on the earth:

The spirit shall take up human play,

The earthly life become life divine. (Book XI, Canto 1)

Aurobindo proposes the emergence of a supramental, suprarational consciousness in man.

Besides Savitri Aurobindo's smaller poems also express similar themes. For example in his poem *Transformation* he expresses his experience of elevation to the divine plane from the mundane by the influx of the unknown and the supreme. He writes:

I am no more a vassal of flesh

A slave to the Nature and his leaden rule;

I am caught no more in the sense's narrow mesh.

My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,

My body is God's happy living tool

My spirit a vast sun of deathless light.

The poet appeals for a similar transformation from death to deathlessness and for bridging earthhood and heavenhood in his poem *Rose of God*:

Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and magical rhyme;

Bridge our earth hood and heaven hood, make deathless the children of time.

There is also an appeal to make the earth 'the home of the wonderful and life Beatitude's kiss'. The *Upanishadic* yearning of moving from death to deathlessness (*tamaso ma jyotirgamaya*) is found in this poem. There is an earnest desire to achieve spiritual upliftment.

Spiritual yearning is also a favourite theme of the poems of Gurudev Rabindranath tagore. His *Gitanjali* is a wonderful collection of poems of devotion or bhakti. He experiences the presence of God in every part and parcel of nature and offers Him prayers treating Him his friend, philosopher and guide. The thread of spiritual humanism runs through *Gitanjali*. The poet experiences the presence of the Infinite in the finite. The poems in this collection are a sojourn to the Supreme Being who is ever elusive, mystical and mysterious.

In the opening poem of *Gitanjali* the poet expresses his gratitude to God for emptying and filling the frail vessel with His grace:

“Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it with fresh life”.

Gurudev expresses his spiritual humanism when he says that God cannot be found in temples by shutting one’s eyes. He says that God lives with ‘the poorest, the lowliest and the lost’ (poem 10), and ‘where tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path- maker is breaking stones’. (poem 11). The poet regards God as his friend and prays to Him to show His face, otherwise it will be difficult to pass the long rainy hours:

“If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside, I know not how I am to pass these long rainy hours”. (Poem 18)

Tagore hints at the omnipresence of God as he sees Him in all places, seasons and moods and it is His presence and golden touch that makes his joy to shine:

Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes

Every moment and every age, every day and every night, he comes, comes, ever comes. (Poem 47)

Sarojini Naidu is generally highly acknowledged for her sweet emotional songs. However,, in some of her poems she shows an exceptional spiritual touch. In her poem ‘*The Soul’s Prayer*’ the poet shows her desire to know the secret of God. She is ready to go through all pains and pleasures in order to get the answer. God promises her the answer after her spirit is chastened:

I bending from my sevenfold height,

Will teach thee of my quickening grace;

Life is a prism of my light,

And death is the shadow of my face.

This idea of Sarojini Naidu is very similar to that expressed in the Gita:

Bhutgramah sa evayam bhutwa bhutwa praliyate,

Rashtrgramewashah partaprabhawtyaharagame. (Gita, Chapter 8, verse 19)

(When it is God’s day all beings are born and when it is God’s night all living beings disappear)

In her poem ‘*Village Song*’ Naidu on the surface level describes a girl’s fears and apprehensions on getting late while returning home from Yamuna’s bank with pitchers full of water as she is lured by boatman’s song. She is afraid of spirits and snakes and storms besides social stigma:

Full are the pitchers and far to carry

Lone is the way and long

Why, o why was I tempted to tarry

Lured by the boatman’s song?

...

O! If the storm breaks what will betide me?

Safe from the lightning where shall I hide me?

Unless thou succor my footsteps and guide me

Ram Re Ram! I shall die.

The poem has a deep spiritual significance. The village girl’s journey symbolizes individual’s quest of self. Her journey is life on trial. The boatman’s song represents worldly temptation that leaves the self astray. Darkness, spirit, thunder, lightning are the negative forces that sway the mind of the aspirant on the course of spiritual quest. The anxiety of the members of the family signifies the bondage that binds one to the preoccupations that pose hindrance in the journey on the spiritual path. The aspirant cannot achieve destination in this journey as long as god does not provide the desired succor. The poem has a metaphysical connotation pointing to the longing, fear and anxiety of the soul in the spiritual journey to reach the ultimate.

In another poem ‘*Songs of Radha*’ Naidu says that the individual and God are parts of each other and God can be seen in the mirror of the soul:

I am of thee, as thou of me, a part,

Look for me in the mirror of thy heart.

Swami Vivekananda’s poems are self revealing and introspective un veiling the inconceivable spiritual mysteries and making irresistible urge on the reader’s mind for lofty spiritual realization. Almost all his poetic creations are linked with the single thread of Vedanta and recapitulate the summary of all his teachings in a nutshell. In his poems he has tried to express

powerfully the *vedantic* concept of the unity of soul, divinity of mankind and universality of religion with the symbolic images drawn from different sources.

In the poem ‘*The Cup*’ Vivekanand suggests that god has given everyone his due share of happiness and sorrow in the cup of his life depending upon his karma and no one can question the wisdom of God in deciding ones share. One has to accept one’s lot without questioning as a total surrender to God is essential for understanding his ways. He writes:

But you my child must travel here

This is your task. It has no joy nor grace

But it is not meant for any other hand

And in my universe hath measured place

Take it. I do not bid you understand

I bid you close your eyes to see my face.

The essence of Indian spiritual tradition is thrust on renunciation and salvation and according higher value to spiritual achievement than material possession. God is truth and all other things are illusion (Bhahma satyam jagat mithya) is a highly held faith of Indian tradition. Vivekananda voices this truth in the following lines:

This world is a dream

Though true it seems

And only truth is He, the living! (In Search of God and other Poems 9)

Rebirth, sin and redemption are favourite themes of Indian religious faith. The effect of sins and good actions carries over to the next life. Suffering can diminish the effect of sin. This theme figures out in a very popular poem of Nissim Ezekiel ‘*The Night of the Scorpion*’. This spiritual belief is so deeply rooted in the Indian soil that even the poor, uneducated villagers steeped in darkness and superstition know it. When the poet’s mother is stung by a scorpion the villagers give various consolations to her. One such consolation is that suffering will burn the sins of the previous birth and diminish its ill effects:

May the sins of your previous birth

be burned away tonight, they said.

May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said
May the sum of evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain
May the poison purify the flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition
they said...

Though there is an inherent sense of irony in the poem it is also a simple rendering of a philosophy of sin, suffering and redemption, good, evil and spiritual purification. The cleansing effect of pain is also to be found in Sarojini Naidu's poem '*The Soul's Prayer*':

And pain shall cleanse thee like a flame
To purge the dross from thy desire.

Many poems of Harindranath Chattopadhyay express mystical and spiritual views. Like Sri Aurobindo he also seems to believe that in the present form man is still an unfinished product. In his poem *Futurity* he writes:

All birth is as yet to be born since man is unfinished
And still in the making, the foetus awaiting the birth-time.

Talking about the mysterious ways of God, the creator he says that He is both destroyer and preserver:

He who sets out to destroy
Whole cities with fire and flood
Toils in a mother's womb and moulds
A baby as soft as a bud.

Besides these major voices a large number of other Indian English poets have dealt with spiritual themes in one way or the other. However the overall themes run around the above subjects.

The basic tenets of the spiritual values of Indian tradition can be found in the poems of the Indian English poets. The major spiritual questions related to God, soul, salvation, rebirth, renunciation, pains of desire, pleasures of renunciation, the potential divinity of man and transcendental approach to nature have been rendered in these poems. In fact a cursory survey of Indian English poetry gives a feel of the essence of spiritual consciousness of the Indian soil.

References

Gokak, V.K.(ed.) The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2006.

Iyengar, K.K. Srinivas. Indian Writing in English, Delhi, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2001.

Kumar, Anil.Swami Vivekanand: The Prophet- Poet of Indian English Literature, The Interiors, Vol. 3, 2014.

Naik, M.K. A History of Indian English, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1995.

Peeradina, S.(ed.) Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, Delhi, Macmillan, 2007.

Singh, Uma Shankar. Gitanjali: A Vision of Psychic Quest, The Interiors, Vol. 3, 2014.