



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 305

COURSE NAME: INDIAN WRITING IN  
ENGLISH I

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND  
ONLINE EDUCATION  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**ENGLISH  
BLOCK I**



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## MAEGD 305: Indian Writing in English I

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Published by **The Director** on behalf of the Centre for Distance and Online Education ,  
Tezpur University, Assam.

<b>MODULE I: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND</b>	<b>UNIT 1: ENGLISH IN INDIA BEFORE MACAULAY</b>
	<b>UNIT 2: THE CHARTER ACT OF 1813 AND THE ANGLICIST AND ORIENTALIST DEBATE</b>
	<b>UNIT 3: MACAULAY'S MINUTES, THE ENGLISH EDUCATION ACT OF 1835</b>
<b>MODULE II: MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY</b>	<b>UNIT 4: POETRY BEFORE INDEPENDENCE IN BRIEF: HENRY DEROZIO, TORU DUTT, AND SAROJINI NAIDU</b>
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## **COURSE INTRODUCTION**

**MEG-305: Indian Writing in English I** is the first and compulsory course which aims to introduce learners to the history and context of Indian Writing in English (IWE). The reason for this compulsory paper has been to ensure that learners appreciate the fact that if English literature is a vast ocean then one of the rich rivers is English writings by Indians. Ever since the British colonized the Indian subcontinent and spread English education for various reasons, the number of people using English in public and private spheres has been steadily increasing. This is partly the result of the fast progress in technology and communications and rapid march of globalization. In addition, the course seeks to acquaint the learner with some landmark authors and texts of Indian Writing in English. It is hoped that the course will help the learner acquire an appreciation of the cultural complexity of IWE and a sense of how IWE is one of the contemporary literatures of India.

### **INTRODUCTION: BLOCK I**

**Module I: History and Background** is divided into three units. *Unit 1: English in India before Macaulay* will deal exclusively with the history and background of English language in India. This history covers a time span of almost 300 years – from the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 to the late 1790s when English language literature and newspaper began to be published in India. This unit also explores the active role the early missionaries played in the dissemination of the English language through their educational system. *Unit 2 : The Charter Act of 1813 and the Anglicist and Orientalist Debate* takes up certain milestones in the colonial history. It covers the time period between the passing of the historical act and Thomas Babington Macaulay's official introduction of English and Western concepts of education in India in 1835 with the passing of the English Education Act. With topics like the Charter Act of 1813 and the Anglicist vs. Orientalist debate, Macaulay's minutes and The English Education Act of 1835 etc., this unit hopes to



acquaint the learners with the complex forces that lay behind the spread of English. This will also enable the learners to analyse the issues while reading the literary texts. **Unit 3: Macaulay's minutes, The English Education Act of 1835** covers the social and political outcome of Thomas Babington Macaulay's official introduction of English and western concepts of education in India with the passing of the historic English Education Act in 1835. This unit also explores the role played by the English language in transforming the landscape of both national and regional literatures produced in India, and its role in creating awareness of their identity among the Indian literati through their close encounter with the foreign language.

**Module II: Modern Indian English Poetry** deals with four of the major modern Indian English poets. The first is Nissim Ezekiel who occupies the pride of position as one of the founding fathers of modern Indian English poetry. Witty, satiric and at the same time sympathetic to Indian realities, Ezekiel has encouraged young poets to write confidently about urban India. A. K. Ramanujan's simple verse is steeped in the deep religious traditions of Southern India. Kamala Das can be regarded as the forerunner of feminism in Indian English poetry. Her intensely personal poems mirror the exploitation and resultant frustration of women in traditional society. Jayanta Mahapatra, the first Indian English poet to win a Sahitya Akademi, wrote lyrics which seem simple and yet deal with complex realities of Indian life. This module has three units elaborately discussing various thematic concerns of these poets along with a brief survey of poetry before Independence. **Unit 4: Poetry before Independence in brief: Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, and Sarojini Naidu** briefly discusses three leading figures, namely, Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who pioneered Indian English poetry during the colonial period. One of the concerns of these early poets was how to give proper expression of their feelings in a language which was not native. Thus, poetry in their hands became experimental. **Unit 5: Poetics of Modern Indian English Poetry** will familiarize the learners with three major figures in modern Indian English poetry, namely, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra, all of whom have played a significant role in giving shape to Indian English poetry in post-independent India. Modern Indian English

poets break away from the concerns of the early Indian English poets in their choice of theme, their experiments with the English language and their adoption of modernity in their poems. This unit will also explore the influences of the imagist movement and the modernist movement on the production of modern Indian English poems. ***Unit 6: Kamala Das and confessional writing*** will deal with one of the most prominent of the post-independence Indian poets, Kamala Das. Das' poetry speaks with a fierce honesty about being a woman in a culture where women are silenced. As a poet she is quite frank in speaking of her experiences and her desires in an uninhibited way. In this unit we will try to understand Kamala Das' life, her works, and her writing style which often assume the structure of a confession.

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## **MODULE I: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

## ***UNIT 1: ENGLISH IN INDIA BEFORE MACAULAY***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Learning Objectives
- 1.2 The arrival of the Explorers: the Portuguese and the Dutch
- 1.3 The arrival of the East India Company
- 1.4 The Missionaries
- 1.5 Early Indian Literature in English
- 1.6 The English Newspapers
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 Assessment Questions
- 1.9 References and Recommended Readings

### ***1.0 INTRODUCTION***

This unit deals with the history and background of the arrival of several European explorers in India and the events that followed which contributed to the emergence of English language in India. It covers a time span of almost 300 years – from the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 to the late 1790s when English language literature and newspaper began to be published in India. This unit also explores the active role the early missionaries played in the dissemination of the English language through their educational system.

### ***1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

On completion of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the historical background of the arrival of European explorers, their language and culture in India;
- able to relate colonial policies with the teaching of English literature in India;
- able to understand the role the missionaries and the early press played in popularizing the English language in Colonial India;

- able to grasp the significance of the beginning of English literary Studies in India.

## ***1.2 THE ARRIVAL OF EXPLORERS: THE PORTUGUESE AND THE DUTCH***

All systematic form of colonialism is inherently tied to economics. Driven by the zeal of the Age of Exploration (early 15th century till the late 18th century) the Europeans in their search for wealth and prosperity went on extensive overseas explorations during this period. It led to the discovery of the Americas, the coasts of Africa and brought the Portuguese sailor Vasco de Gama to the shores of India in 1498, re-establishing in the process a trade route between Europe and the Indian subcontinent for the first time since the decline of the great Roman Empire.

Marked by its widespread adoption of colonial and mercantile ideologies as national policies among the European nations, The Age of Exploration may be understood as the beginning of globalization. Vasco de Gama's covert landing on the Indian soil marked a new chapter with far-reaching consequences. With his subsequent visit in 1501, the Portuguese succeeded in establishing trading centres in Calicut, Cochin and Cannanore by suppressing the Arab resistance. The appointment of Francisco de Almedia as the first Viceroy of India in 1505 also led to the establishment of the 'Blue Water' policy which advocated Portuguese control over the sea and effective use of Portuguese naval power rather than building forts and other establishments on the land. But it was during Afonso de Albuquerque's reign that the foundation of the Portuguese power in India was laid through the conquest of Goa in 1510. Goa was converted into the headquarters of the Portuguese in India. They also conquered and established power over the territories of Diu and Daman in 1534 and 1538 respectively. The Portuguese maintained their power in India but their influence never grew because, among many factors, they failed in their attempt to widely convert Indians to Christianity and so neither their religion nor their language really blossomed. This led to the gradual decline of their influence from the beginning of the 17th century. The defeat of Portugal by Spain in 1777 also had a great impact

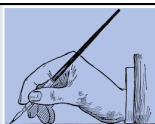
on Portugal's colonial ambitions as well. But the Portuguese's maiden journey to India is historically important because for the first time in the history of international trade, the Portuguese alone successfully carried out the legalities of commercial treaties with Indian rulers and opened the shores of India for the other European nations.

The Portuguese conquest of India was succeeded by the Dutch East India Company which was established in 1602. The prime interest of the Dutch was not exploration but trade, particularly the Indian spice. Their ultimate interest was the Far East and hence India was strategically made their mid-way trading depot. Factories were established at Petapalli, in present day Odisha and Masulipatnam, in present day Andhra Pradesh in 1606. Understanding the appeal of Indian textiles and the large market it promised, they established factories at Pulicat in 1610, Cambay in 1620, Surat and Agra in 1621 and in multiple other cities during the next 60 years. From these historical records it can be understood that the interest of the Dutch in India never went far beyond commerce. The attempt to spread religion, education and language was never their immediate interest. Nevertheless the rising Dutch power was seen as a threat by the British, and the signing of a truce in 1619 was unable to save the relationship, both economic and political. By 1795, the British had expelled the Dutch from India totally.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- Vasco de Gama first landed in India in the city of Calicut in present day Kerala.
- The spice trade that Portugal developed with India boosted Portugal's economy enormously in the 15th century.
- Portuguese intensive maritime exploration in the 15th and 16th century was influenced by Prince Henry the Navigator, who himself was a passionate explorer.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What drove the Europeans to go for overseas explorations during the Age of Exploration?

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2. In which year did the Portuguese conquer Goa?

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2. Which European company succeeded the Portuguese rule in India?

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### ***1.3 THE ARRIVAL OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY***

When the Portuguese and the Dutch arrived in India between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Britain's interest in India was still in its formative stages. It was only in the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the British established an effective relationship with India. Although the first Englishman to visit India dates back as early as 883 A.D., it must be understood that all systematic form of colonialism is inherently tied to economic interest. From the very beginning Britain's purpose of exploitation in India was very clear. A petition addressed to King Henry VIII in 1511 reads thus: "The indies are discovered and vast treasures brought from thence every day. Let us therefore bend our endeavours thitherwards."

The East India Company was exclusively formed in 1600 to develop trade with the new British colonies in India and south-eastern Asia. It first arrived in India with mercantile intentions in mind. Britain's interest in India was primarily commerce and not conquest, at least not in the beginning. It was only with the arrival of the 18th century that they assumed administrative control of Bengal and maintained their power until the British army took over in 1858 after the Indian Mutiny. The East India Company's arrival in India is of landmark importance because the language that arrived with it stayed as a

medium for colonial and business transactions. It was linked up with India's destiny for the next two hundred years.

The success of the East India Company's conquest can be traced to the perfect timing of their arrival, which was met with the gradual disintegration of the Mughal Empire during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their arrival in India was perfect to fill that vacuum. Rudyard Kipling in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1922) writes: "Once, two hundred years ago, the trader came/meek and tame./Where his timid foot halted, there he stayed,/ Till mere trade/Grew to Empire,/And he sent his armies forth/ South and North,/Till the country from Peshawur to Ceylon/was his own."

The victory of the British in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 naturally made the Company the rulers of Bengal. This victory also triggered the systematic process of modernization in the 18th century and the introduction of the English language and literature was an important aspect of this process.

The difference between the presence of the Portuguese and the Dutch with that of the East India Company was that the Company was empowered to make laws and judicial powers. It was backed by the power of the Crown and the Parliament too. The trade that the company established in India was much more systematic and was designed with the help of legal codes. Thus each factory established in India was administered by a governor-in-council. The future that the East India Company envisioned was no longer of just trading or conducting commercial exchange and making profit, it is evident that their intentions ran much deeper.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- During the pinnacle of its rule in India, the British East India Company's private army had about 260,000 soldiers, which was twice the size of the British Army
- The East India Company employed "writers" to record the details of accounting, managerial decisions, and activities related to the company. Well-known British figures such as Charles Lamb were a part of this group. The Indian writer Raja Ram Mohan Roy who learned English, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Greek, and Latin was part of this group in the 19th century.





### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. When was the East India Company formed?

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2. The victory in which battle made the Company the rulers of Bengal?

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2. Was the English language a business tool in colonial India?

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### ***1.4 THE ARRIVAL OF MISSIONARIES***

The opening of the Indian sea route by the Portuguese and the subsequent Portuguese Armadas that visited India, principally Goa, between 1497 and 1511 also brought Christianity to India. But it was only in 1542 when the Jesuit Francis Xavier, a papal ambassador, arrived that the work of the Roman Catholics began in earnest. It must be noted that the medium of instruction was still Spanish and it would be wrong to equate the arrival of Christianity with the arrival of the English language in India. The English language arrived in India only with the English missionaries and traders in the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but prior to the advent of the East India Company. A Roman Catholic parson, Father Thomas Stephens, who reached Goa around 1578, is considered to be the first English missionary to reach India.

The activities of the Christian missionary is inherent in understanding the arrival of English language in India because with the establishment of churches also came the establishment of an education system. This effort also led to the creation of high-quality English medium schools. The creation of these schools were followed by the creation of printing presses, which further assisted in the dissemination of literature of all kinds including the production of textbooks, dictionaries, and grammar books. The early missionaries thus were responsible, to a large extent, for pioneering English and modern vernacular education. In his book *History of Indian Education*, R. L. Rawat suggests that India will forever be indebted to the efforts of the missionaries for their fervent pursuit of educational advancement.

Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *Discovery of India* also acknowledges the contributions the early missionaries made, especially the Baptists of Serampore, whose mission press produced more than 212,000 books between 1800 and 1832. The activities of the missionaries played a very vital part in shifting the focus from both Sanskrit and Persian to English. The printing of books and newspapers by the missionaries, together with the avid drive towards English language education, according to Nehru, no doubt dissolved the hold of the classics, and also allowed regional languages to emerge and blossom. But while he saw no difficulty on the part of the missionaries to deal with the major languages, he acknowledges their effort to communicate with the remote forest tribes of India. He writes:

[English missionaries] even laboured at the dialects of the primitive hill and forest tribes. . . . The desire of the Christian missionaries to translate the Bible into every possible language thus resulted in the development of many Indian languages. Christian mission work in India has not always been admirable or praise worthy . . . but in this respect, as well as in the collection of folklore, it has undoubtedly been of great service to India. (Nehru, pp. 317–318)

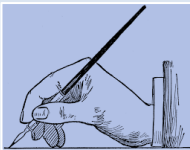
The "good works" carried out by missionaries and Christians during this period have always been understood to be an expression of their love and obedience to Jesus. The underlying motivation, of course, was their obligation

to proclaim the salvation of God through the Christian faith. And although English as a language slowly started to spread through the Catholic schools, the intention of social and religious reformation still remained a task because many Indians, particularly upper caste Hindus, rejected the need for Jesus, the saviour, claiming that they had their “own saviours.” Still, the missionaries contributed in the building of the nation by granting an upward social mobility to certain communities who are at the bottom of the caste system.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- The oldest record of Christians visiting India dates back to the 2nd Century.
- Between 1527 and 1537 the Portuguese converted the entire Paravars community into Christians as a price for protecting them against the Arab fleets.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What was the medium of instruction when the Portuguese missionaries first started out their “good work”?

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2. List some of the efforts made by the missionaries that contributed to the growth of the English language.

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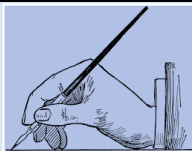


introduced a new educational system which would concentrate on the content of education, the spread of education and the medium of instruction. In fact, behind it were the missionaries who participated actively to introduce such a system of education which is totally different from the indigenous system. Of course, many scholars now believe that the enthusiasm shown by the missionaries in the introduction of a new educational system was essentially aimed at proselytizing.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* consists of sixteen volumes consolidating in literature the history of English exploration and seafaring activities.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who wrote *The Travels of Din Mahomet* in 1794? Mention some early fictional works written by Indian English writers not mentioned in this unit.

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2. List some of the educational systems that existed in India before the colonial intervention.

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2. The British found the indigenous education system deficient and imperfect. What steps did they take up to mitigate this problem?

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## 1.6 THE ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS

The newspaper in India was among the first form of literature published in English and which was aimed at the general public and not a specialized niche community. On 29 January, 1780, James Augustus Hicky under the British Raj published the first ever English language weekly in Asia called *The Bengal Gazette* in Calcutta. It was also known as the *Calcutta General Advertiser* but more popularly referred to lovingly by the people as simply *Hicky's Gazette*. In his own words Hicky described his newspaper as, “a weekly political and commercial paper open to all parties but influenced by none.” The newspaper was made up of two sheets of dimensions 12 inches by 8 inches and each page was further divided in three columns. Although



**Masthead from Hicky's *Bengal Gazette* - June 1781. (British Library archive)**

most of the content comprised advertisements, the editorial content was a melange of extracts taken from British newspapers and Hicky's own articles that addressed contemporary issues including moral and political problems of the day, society gossip, correspondences of local and distant writers, reports on the latest London fashions and a Poetry corner, where poetry was published - a section which still finds place in most local and national newspapers to this day. Hicky's *Gazette* was a very small newspaper which in its heyday sold around 200 copies. Nevertheless its historical importance is paramount because it initiated and created a platform and primed the market for other newspapers in the future.

Only after a few months after Hicky's paper debuted, Englishmen Messer B. Messinck and Peter Read brought out their own *Indian Gazette* in November 1780. The following decade saw an exciting explosion of English newspapers in India. In Calcutta the English newspapers included the *Calcutta Gazette* (1784), *The Bengal Journal/Oriental Magazine/ Calcutta Amusement* (1785) and the *Calcutta Chronicle* (1786). In Madras, Richard

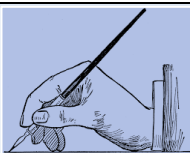
Johnson brought out his own English language paper called the *Madras Courier* (1785), R. William his *Madras Gazette* (1795), Humphrey his *India Herald* in 1796 and finally the *Hurkru* which debuted in 1793. In Bombay the *Bombay Herald* (1789) and *The Courier/Bombay Gazette* (1791) were published.

The emergence of newspaper in India was also marked by strict government control and censorship. Newspapers publishing any news against the East India Company or indictment against any of its officials were often met with strict punishment. Hicky's launch of a malicious attack on the Governor General and his key officials in his newspaper in 1782 resulted in his imprisonment and the shutting down of his newspaper as well. It was only in 1811 when some merchants of Calcutta started *Calcutta Chronicle* edited by James Silk Buckingham that journalistic integrity was introduced. His clear journalistic practices covered the problems of local people and their lives, even starting a movement against the evil practice of 'Sati'.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- Hicky's Bengal Gazette was the first and only printed English language newspaper to be published in both the Indian sub-continent and in Asia.
- The first poem published in the Poet's Corner of the Bengal Gazette's first issue was called "The Seasons," a poem which described the English season.
- By the 19th century most major newspaper companies had a sizeable circulation in both India and in Europe.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the title of the newspaper that James Augustus Hicky started in Calcutta?

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2. Briefly list the general contents of Hicky's newspaper?

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## **1.7 SUMMING UP**

In this unit, an attempt has been made to cover the history of the first arrival of European explorers in India during the Age of Exploration and the subsequent events that followed which eventually led to the introduction of the English language in India. Through this history we have traced the history of the establishment of trade posts in several strategic ports and cities throughout the Indian subcontinent. It was the Portuguese, led by the sailor Vasco de Gama, who first arrived in 1498 followed by the arrival of the Dutch East India Company and by the English East India Company in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. All of these initial arrivals were driven by mercantile intentions, and goals of opening trade with the materially rich India. English as a language was not established in India during this early period and no attempts were made to educate the natives too. In fact, it was the exact opposite; it was the foreigners who put an effort to learn the native language(s) in order to conduct trade and business transactions smoothly. It was only with the arrival of the English missionaries that educating the Indians became a systematic process. The arrival of the missionaries also led to the establishment of English medium schools which was further followed by the creation of printing presses, which crucially assisted in the dissemination of literature of all kinds – textbooks, dictionaries and grammar books too. Finally, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of multiple English language newspapers in cities like Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. And for the first time the publication of newspapers spread the English language to the general public and paved the way for a widespread use of the English language by the Indians.





### 1.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the gradual arrival of the English language in India by referring to historical events.
2. Discuss the role the English missionaries played in establishing English as a medium of communication in India.
3. Discuss the role the English newspapers played in spreading the use of the English language.
4. Should the arrival of Christianity in India be equated with the arrival of English language in the subcontinent? Discuss.
5. The Portuguese and the Dutch failed to colonize the Indian masses with their languages even though they arrived in India earlier than the East India Company but the British Empire succeeded in doing so. Examine the different factors which led to the latter's success.
6. Discuss some of the early publication of English language literature in India and the factors which contributed to its inception.
7. How does the discourses of colonialism and nationalism help to shape the history of Indian English literature?



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## ***UNIT 2: THE CHARTER ACT OF 1813 AND THE ANGLICIST AND ORIENTALIST DEBATE***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Learning Objectives
- 2.2 The Charter Act of 1813
- 2.3 Anglicist versus Orientalist
- 2.4 Summing Up
- 2.5 Assessment Questions
- 2.6 References and Recommended Readings

### ***2.0 INTRODUCTION***

This unit covers the social and political changes that came in colonial India after the amendment of the Charter Act of 1813. It covers the time period between the passing of the historical act and Thomas Babington Macaulay's official introduction of English and Western concepts of education in India in 1835 with the passing of the English Education Act. This unit also examines the emergence of the two schools of thought, namely the Anglicist and the Orientalist, their contentious relationship, their policies and their respective views on English education in India.

### ***2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the political and social impact the Charter Act of 1813 had on India
- familiar with the views the Anglicists and the Orientalists had on the question of implementing English language in India
- able to relate colonial policies with the emergence of English education in India

## ***2.2 THE CHARTER ACT OF 1813***

Although Western education in India began in a limited way with the arrival of the missionaries in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was only in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the amendment of the Charter Act of 1813 that provisions for formal modern education were made and implemented in full swing. The Charter Act of 1813 not only renewed the licence of the East India Company for a period of twenty years but also relaxed controls over missionary activity in India granting them permission to propagate the English language and preach their religion.

As per the provisions laid down in the Charter Act of 1813, a sum of one lakh rupees was sanctioned for expenditure on Indian education. However, the Act did not specifically outline the course the Company should adopt regarding the spread of education in India. Nevertheless, the Company was inclined to revive and improve classical literatures in Sanskrit and Arabic and also favoured the teaching of Western sciences to the Indian people. But the recommendations of the policy were executed only after the Government of Bengal appointed a general committee of Public Instruction in 1823. The task of this committee was to encourage oriental learning and the British government, for the first time, assumed responsibility towards native education. Section 43 of the Act reads as thus:

That it shall be lawful for the Governor-General to direct that out of any surplus which may remain of the rent, revenue, and profits arising from the said territorial acquisitions after defraying the expenses of the military, civil, and economical establishments and paying the interest of the debt in manner herein after provided a sum of not less than one lakh of rupees in each year shall be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of Sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India.

Through the Charter Act of 1813, the British Parliament intervened in the cultural and educational spheres of the natives. Though the British

Government apparently took the responsibility of education for the natives as a part of their activities in India, it was actually done in order to curb the growing power and influence of the Company. The Company, which already had established itself in Bengal since 1757, was pushing hard its expansion policy quite openly. Moreover, the employees of the East India Company had started gaining ill-fame for following a lavish and immoral lifestyle back home in England. Therefore, some of the British parliamentarians, driven by the reports of depravity of their own people, insisted on imparting moral and religious education in order to promote interests and happiness of the natives, insisting on offering useful knowledge for their benefit. This was an ideal opportunity for them to clip the wings of the company and prepare the ground for an active involvement in the affairs of India. In fact, all these policies were mainly prescribed as a measure for preparing the ground for establishing the British Raj. So, the real aim of the British government was not to educate the natives but to push itself into the political domain of India.

Not all British people supported the new policies proposed in the Charter Act of 1813 regarding the education of the natives. Lord Burke and Warren Hastings were the main figures who opposed the ambitious mission. Lord Burke pleaded in the House of Lords that Indian society should not be judged by the Western standards for they have their own well developed culture and established literature. He referred to the Indian past and its historical continuity and argued that the Indian society was exclusive and governed by its own class and caste systems. This argument of Lord Burke helped the parliamentarians in understanding the existence of a rich Indian culture and history. Therefore, they agreed in principle the necessity to understand the Indian society, and build a rapport with the ruled in order to fashion the administration for their advantage. The then Governor General of India, Warren Hastings also argued that the British administration was not at all accessible to the ruled, and it was also insensitive to the customs and morals of the Indians. So, his administration tried to make amend in its attitude towards the native, and also tried to forge empathy with the native's way of life. This change in policy led to the emergence of academic Orientalism. According to Gauri Viswanathan, "Orientalism was adopted as an official policy partly out of expediency and caution, and partly out of an

emergent political sense that an efficient Indian administration rested on an understanding of ‘Indian culture’” (151). Orientalism is a ploy by which the colonisers, in the pretext of accumulation of knowledge of the colonised, appropriate native’s knowledge and put it into use for legitimising their cultural and political hegemony. Orientalism reinforces the superiority of the Western culture. So, it is the Orientalist whose intellectual hegemony sustained the domination and control over the natives to the greater advantage of the colonisers. Nevertheless, the Orientalists deciphered and translated the classical texts of India from their perspectives and, thereby, misrepresented the reality of India. They attributed a false identity to the Indian reality by claiming to have gathered some sorts of ‘essence’ from the classical texts of India. This discursive strategy of the Orientalists was superficial and led to the “othering” of the Indians, a process that differentiates Indians from the worldly West.

What needs to be understood is that the Orientalists were overwhelmed by the excellence of the classical Indian texts. However, some missionaries and British officials undermined and disparaged these texts, for they wanted to prove that the Indian culture was inferior. They, in fact, had a ‘mission’ of launching a system of education which would indoctrinate Christian values and morality to the natives in order to produce a class of people who would imitate English manners and tastes. They believed that the selective indoctrination would enable them to maintain social control over the natives. The influential British politician Charles Grant advocated the notion that the spread of English education among the natives would eventually lead to the assimilation of Western culture by the Indians and eventually lead to the stability of the British Empire.

### **LET US STOP AND THINK**



- The Charter Act of 1813 is preceded by the East India Company Act of 1793 and is followed by the Saint Helena Act of 1833, both of which renewed the charter issued to the British East India Company for 20 years.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What were some of the major focus of the Charter Act of 1813?

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2. What amount of money was sanctioned for education in the Charter Act of 1813?

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3. Why did the East India Company focus on moral and religious education of the natives?

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4. Who advocated that the spread of English education would eventually lead to the assimilation of Western culture by the Indians?

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### **2.3 ANGLICIST VERSUS ORIENTALIST**

The policy of the promotion of Oriental languages and literatures made many British loyalists unhappy. As a result, there emerged a counter movement called Anglicism. This movement advocated the promotion of Western thought and literatures to directly counter Eastern learning, eventually leading to a bitter conflict among the adherents of Anglicism and the proponents of Orientalism, for the persons supporting the latter felt that such a counter move will alienate the natives from the British rulers. The growing support for English language among the Indians alarmed the Orientalists, however, it is to be understood that both Anglicists and Orientalists depended on each other to intensify their colonial control over the natives. The Anglicists very craftily employed the knowledge of the East unearthed by the Orientalist scholars to prove their superiority over the natives. They engaged themselves in comparing native cultures with their own, establishing their own as the benchmark. As a result, they managed to instil in the minds of the natives a sense of cultural inferiority.

Though the Orientalist scholars claimed that the Eastern Knowledge system was rich, the Anglicists managed to refute the claim of the Orientalists. Moreover, this colonial project of interpreting/decoding the Eastern archive for their own interest was cleverly masked by their philanthropic activities. Thus, it can be argued that both Anglicists and Orientalists, though they apparently followed different paths, actually shared a common methodology, with an objective to dominate and govern the natives. It became clear after the departure of Warren Hastings when Lord Cornwallis became the Governor-General. After assuming charge, Lord Cornwallis repealed the pro-native policies of Warren Hastings, and worked, instead, for centralising the British authority over India. He believed that the influence of the native and their culture might corrupt the British, and would, eventually, make them less powerful. He was particularly worried of the possibility of losing the British hold over India. Being aware of the abuse of power by the East India



Company officials which had already questioned the legitimacy of their hold over India, he believed that the affinity with the natives would contaminate them more. As a measure to revert the declining European morals, he announced his policy to exclude all Indians from responsible government positions and administration. Thus, the principle of exclusion became the main operating force in Cornwallis administration.

The Anglicists were unduly unfavourable towards the natives' rule, and argued, picking up certain stray events from Indian history, that the natives depend on models of corruption, despotism and anarchy, and would definitely be a bad influence in effective governance. The main objective of Cornwallis and his administration was to defend the British Raj from all adversaries. He started the impersonal and mechanical bureaucratic system of government that gave importance to British rules and laws, and also removed the natives from active participation. Cornwallis took a neutral stand towards the Oriental cause and did not bother much about its influence and growth. However, his successor, Wellesley, repealed his impersonal administrative set-up in order to re-include natives' participation in the British government. Moreover, Wellesley realized the potent power of Orientalism in consolidating the British rule, and employed it in the dispensation of his administration. His government used Oriental learning as tools for consolidating their rule. Therefore, having learnt about the feudal mind-set of the natives, his government introduced policies to garner support and cooperation from the Indian aristocratic or ruling upper classes so as to consolidate the British hold over the natives.

Nevertheless, Orientalists' effort later suffered a self-defeat for want of a strong agenda, they had a complex relation to the colonial enterprise. Their indirect method of inculcating Western values in the natives was vehemently criticised by the Anglicists. The Anglicists, on the other hand, encouraged a policy that would promote a direct reform process. They were helped by the missionaries who played an important role in the execution of the British educational programmes and policies. From 1813 onwards, missionary activities began to thrive in India. However, the policy makers warned them against interfering in natives' religious beliefs as it could disturb the British strategy. As a result, the British education policy had to tinker with their

avowed aims of the moral and intellectual development of the natives. So, they had to impart an education to the natives which was secular in nature, in fact, apparently free from the English cultural and religious doctrines. Fortunately, it was at this critical juncture the British policy makers found English Literature to be ideally suited for their purpose. The purpose is exemplified in the following words of Gauri Viswanathan:


Literature's relation to Christianity undoubtedly stemmed from an awareness of the operational value of English literature's double stance in reinforcing the validity of the knowledge to be imparted and, by extension, of the authority of those imparting it. Further, literature's doubleness enabled the validation of Christian belief by the disciplinary techniques of European learning while at the same time deflecting attention from its self-referential, self-confirming aspects. Its power rested on the idea that European disciplines, being products of human reason, were independent of systems of belief based on pure faith. (108-9)

As such, English Literature was introduced in the British India. Its introduction was facilitated by a provision in the Charter Act of 1813 which had empowered the Governor General with the provision that "a sum of not less than one lakh of rupees in each year shall be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of Sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India."

Many enlightened Indians felt at that time that the system of education which was introduced in India was done in total ignorance and utter disregard of the existing social needs or priorities. It was done to earn the goodwill of the Hindus as well as of the Muslims (Sharp and Richey 3-4). Some learned Indians along with the Anglicists had built up a pressure to westernise the Indian society. Raja Rammohan Roy, one of the founders of the Brahmo Sabha movement, pleaded for the introduction of Western knowledge to the Hindus. In 1817, James Stuart Mill also underscored the need for lifting India and her people out of the accumulated errors of the past. The Court of Directors too, in spite of some reservations it had regarding the exclusive

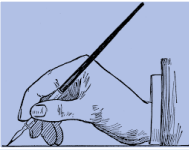
concentration on oriental learning, reflected on the usefulness of the Calcutta Madrasa and the Benares Sanskrit College. The words “the great end should not have been to teach Hindu learning or Mohammedan learning, but useful learning” reflect their sentiment. (Sharp and Richey 3-4). So, in 1817, the Government took the first official step to promote English education in India. Accordingly, the Hindu College was set up at Calcutta on the 20th January, 1817, to impart education to the sons of “respectable Hindus in the English and Indian languages and in the literature and science of Europe and Asia.” Gradually, a conducive environment got created for dissemination of English education. Even the Oriental colleges pressed for English learning in their institutions. For instance, the Managing Committees of the Sanskrit Colleges of Calcutta, Benares, Agra, and Delhi urged for introducing English classes in their institutions. The Government, accordingly, either attached English classes to these colleges or set up separate English academy near them.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- Given below is an extract from Raja Rammohan Roy’s letter to the King in Council.
- “Your Majesty’s faithful subjects from the distance of almost half the globe, appeal to your majesty’s heart by the sympathy which forms a paternal tie between you and the lowest of your subjects, not to overlook the condition; they appeal to you by the honour of that great nation which under your royal auspices has obtained the glorious title of liberator of Europe, not to permit the possibility of millions of your subjects being wantonly trampled or oppressed; the lastly appeal to you by the glory of your Crown on which the eyes of the world are fixed, not to consign the natives of India, to perpetual oppression and degradation”.

(Raja’s Appeal to the King in Council, Appendix-E in Reena Chaterji’s *Impact of Raja Rammohan Roy on Education in India*, New Delhi: S Chand, 247)



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What was the main cause that gave birth to the counter movement of Anglicism?

2. What strategies were employed by the Anglicists to prove their superiority over the natives?

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3. Why did the Orientalist movement suffer a self-defeat?

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## **2.4 SUMMING UP**

In this unit an attempt has been made to locate and examine the first formal initiation of western education in India, from the limited beginning of English education with the arrival of the missionaries in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century upto the eventual amendment of the Charter Act in 1813. The historic Act not only renewed the licence of the East India Company for a period of twenty years but also relaxed controls over missionary activity in India, granting them permission to propagate English and preach their religion. This unit has also examined the rise of the Evangelical movement in England and the impact it had on the education policies being implemented in India. The imperialists' cause of the introduction of the English language in India has been dealt with comprehensively in this unit. Figures like Charles Grant argued that the introduction of the language of the conquerors was a means of assimilating a conquered people to them (Tara Chand, 187). This sparked opposition from the Orientalists who supported the oriental culture

and local vernaculars. There also emerged during this period a counter movement called Anglicism which advocated the promotion of Western thought and literatures instead of Eastern learning. Although the relationship between the two parties was contentious it must be understood that both Anglicism and Orientalism depended on each other to intensify their colonial control over the natives. However, the Orientalists' effort of attaining dominion indirectly failed because of their inability to consolidate power. The Anglicists however encouraged a policy that promoted a direct reform process. Their efforts were also supplemented by the missionaries who played an important role in the execution of the British educational programmes and policies. From 1813 onwards, English language began to flourish and thrive in India.



## 2.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the political and social impact the Charter Act of 1813 had on the day to day governance of India.
2. Discuss the views the Anglicists and the Orientalists had on the question of implementing the English language in India.
3. Examine the impact the colonial policies had on the Indian Education system.
4. Discuss the role of Lord Burke and Warren Hastings on the issue of the British government's intervention in the Indian education system.



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### ***UNIT 3: MACAULAY'S MINUTES AND THE ENGLISH EDUCATION ACT OF 1835***

#### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

##### 3.0 Introduction

##### 3.1 Learning Objectives

##### 3.2 Macaulay's Minutes

###### 3.2.1 Extracts from Macaulay's Minute

##### 3.3 The English Education Act of 1835

###### 3.3.1 Extracts from Wood's Despatch of 1854

###### 3.3.2 English in India and Vernacular Languages

##### 3.4 Summing Up

##### 3.5 Assessment Questions

##### 3.6 References and Recommended Readings

#### ***3.0 INTRODUCTION***

This unit covers the social and political outcome of Thomas Babington Macaulay's official introduction of English and western concepts of education in India with the passing of the historic English Education Act in 1835. This unit also explores the role played by the English language in transforming the landscape of both national and regional literatures produced in India, and its role in creating awareness of their identity among the Indian literati through their close encounter with the foreign language.

#### ***3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the views Thomas Babington Macaulay had on the English language and the Indian vernacular languages
- familiar with the policies devised by Macaulay to separate the different class of the Indian population to weaken the sovereignty of the nation
- familiar with the architecture of the English education system designed by Macaulay

- familiar with the policies the British government made to institutionalize the English language in India

### **3.2 MACAULAY'S MINUTES**

The implementation of the Charter Act of 1813 and its allocation of fund for institutionalising a language for teaching led the Anglicists to support the English language as a language more potent than the Indian vernacular languages which were supported by the Orientalists. However, this controversy over the use of funds for the promotion of a medium of teaching in schools and colleges came into the notice of the British Government of India when the secretary of the General Committee wrote two referral letters dated the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, 1835. Lord Macaulay, then a law member of the Governor-General Council, proclaimed a famous minute to solve the dilemma created by the educational clause of the Charter Act of 1813. In his Minute dated the 2nd of February, 1835 Macaulay writes:

This lakh of rupees is set apart not only for 'reviving literature in India', but also 'for the introduction and promotion of the knowledge of the Sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories' — words which are alone sufficient to authorize all the changes for which I contend (Sharp 22).

Macaulay dismissed the demand of the Orientalists to institutionalise an Indian vernacular language as a medium of instruction to be adopted for higher education on the ground that it is inferior in quality in comparison to the English language. He made the (in) famous remark that a single shelf of European literature was worth all the books of India and Arabia. Moreover, Macaulay paved the way for the English language to be the most dominant language in India since he believed, and rightly so, that English was more likely to become a widely spoken language in the world of trade and commerce. In this context Macaulay observes:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions,



in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich their dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great masses of population (Sharp 16)

The “divide and rule” policy was devised by Macaulay to separate the Indian upper middle class from the masses and to prevent the formation of patriotism among the Indians and the demand for independence of India. As an architect of English education in India, Thomas Babington Macaulay in his *Minutes on Indian Education* (1835), suggested that “English education would train natives who were Indian in blood and colour...English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”. He further argues in favour of the massive cultural impact the English tradition had on most of the elite Indian minds. This group of Indians has, however, come to be known as “Macaulay’s Children.” Macaulay was also successful in asserting faith and morality which would serve the utilitarian purpose of the British Administration. His rejection of the study of vernacular languages was based on his belief that English alone stands as a superior language worthy of knowing, as compared to other languages which lacked imaginative and rational discourses. Macaulay equated rationality with English language, and Asian languages like Sanskrit and Arabic with superstition, vague metaphysics and ambiguity. It can be argued that Macaulay’s main focus of introducing English education system in India was to serve the political end, i.e. to transfer the ‘white man’s burden’ to the elite upper middle class Indians.

### **3.2.1 EXTRACTS FROM MACAULAY’S MINUTE DATED 2<sup>ND</sup> FEBRUARY, 1835**

- “...a single shelf of a good European literature was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” (clause 10)
- “We want a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

- “...The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us— with models of every species of eloquence— with historical compositions which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equalled – with just and lively representations of human life and human nature – with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade – with full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect man. Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations. It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago extant in all languages of the world together...In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government. It is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East...” (clause 12)
- “...We are to teach false history, false astronomy, false medicine, because we find them in company of a false religion. We abstain, and I trust shall always abstain, from giving any public encouragement to those who are engaged in the work of converting the natives of Christianity. And while we act thus, can we reasonably or decently bribe men, out of the revenues of the state, to waste their youth in learning how they are to purify themselves after touching an ass or what texts of the Vedas they are to repeat to expiate the crime of killing a goat?” (clause 31) (Sharp 107-117).

Macaulay showed a great commitment to his mother country. The new education policy did not overlook the priority for the material and political needs of the East India Company and the British Empire. This also gave the Administration an opportunity to ease the requirement of a large British

population to be diverted to other regions by employing educated Indians to do the bidding of the Administration. Moreover, Britain was able to harness more manpower for the purpose of colonial expansion. Administration could now employ educated Indians who could easily connect with the masses. Further, it also served the evangelical purposes of the missionaries to spread Christianity. With these objectives in mind the project of English education was initiated with a special focus on literature. The rising Indian middle class and the reading population posed a challenge to the establishment by demanding alternatives which incorporated modern subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Biology and other specialized sciences. At this point the British government also became aware of the absence of an education system which was prevalent in Indian traditional educational system. Therefore, a synthesis between secular and religious concerns began to be practised in the teaching of English Literature. This exposed the Indians to liberal ideas, but at the same time successfully bound them to the colonial ideological programme.

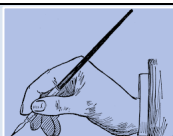
Despite the fact that theological elements were incorporated in the teaching of English Literature, Christianity was not seen as a replacement of Indian religion and philosophy. However, missionaries were not satisfied with the secular education system and they started incorporating exclusive theological studies as a main component in their education. The British rulers were able to project English literary texts as superior to Indian texts. So imperialistic and religious purposes were served under the guise of innocent and objective pursuit of knowledge. This was an imperialistic strategy to obscure the production of knowledge produced in a specific historical period. Oriental knowledge, which was derived from Indian literature and traditions, was criticised as unreliable because of its dependence on divinity, rather than intellect and progression.

The platform for exploitation was prepared by the British rulers by taking advantage of the presence of learned natives. Through disavowal of authority in the text, a class of Indians with allegiance towards the British rulers acted in favour of British interests. The authority provided to these elite class of Indians blinded their conscience towards their native brothers, automatically weakening the bond between learned class of Indians and the common population. English literary texts began to substitute Englishmen and

the texts were designed to create tension between two belief and value systems. The texts served the purpose of showing how empirically verifiable knowledge can enlighten people from 'ignorant' traditional beliefs of the orient. It was a programme designed to uproot the natives from their own cultural traditions and to make space for western ideology to take root.

The production of English literary texts was also a process of breeding rational minds, the ultimate objective being the creation of logical readers with liberal approaches. Rationality is achieved effectively only through the process of reading, which involves making intellectual inquiry by putting immense faith in the text. The English educators made immense efforts to strengthen liberal thoughts of the reader, and to put faith in the totalitarian system of post-Enlightenment rationalism by constantly arguing that rational attitude was missing in Oriental literature and religions.

The endorsement of English Literature on an absolute scale on these grounds overlooked the need for considering literature as having universal appeal and at the same time being culture-specific literary production. However, the colonial British rulers had a strategy of taking cautious steps, of not using coercive power over the colonial resistance or patriotic extremism. Since they could command a full influence by making English characters with British ideology present in their literature, who strategically justified the legitimacy of colonial expansion and suppression of native resistance. This discursive strategy was a weapon of choice for the British rulers.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. On what grounds did Macaulay dismiss the claims of the Orientalists to institutionalise Indian Vernacular languages as a medium of instruction for higher education?

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2. Who devised the 'divide and rule' policy to separate and weaken the sovereignty of India?

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3. Why are Indians also known as “Macaulay’s children”?

4. The missionaries started making theological studies a mandatory component on their courses. Why did they do so?

### **3.3 THE ENGLISH EDUCATION ACT OF 1835**

The British Empire’s announcement of an educational clause to be adopted by the East India Company in the Charter Act of 1813 classified the British scholars and educators as the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Thomas Macaulay’s 1835 Minute on Educational policy supported the Anglicists’ cause and was approved by Lord William Bentinck. Referring to this Lord Bentinck says that “all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be employed on English education alone”. However, this was opposed by John Stuart Mill in a Despatch of October 1836 who was of view that withholding patronage from India’s scholarly class would affect the progress of the country. At the same time concentrating so narrowly on western learning would lead to unfulfilment of the true the pursuit of learning.

By November 24, 1839 the Anglicists-Orientalists controversy had come to end with Lord Auckland’s Minute, which considered both sides of the educational policies. By 1837 English had already replaced Persian as a language in the court of law and in all the higher branches of British

Administration. This prominence came with the native people showing great interest in English, especially the people of Bengal. A college was established in 1836 at Hooghly and Calcutta Hindu College was transformed into the famous Presidency College and plans were made to build colleges in Dacca (modern-day Dhaka) and Patna as well.

Despite the Anglicists-Orientalists controversy, English education, to some degree, was encouraged by Indians themselves. In 1844, Lord Harding made a proclamation that preference in employment for the public services would be given to those candidates who acquainted with the Western Sciences and the English language. Thus, the Indian Civil Services Examination was introduced for this selection process. This system demanded that the students should have knowledge of the works great English authors like Milton, Shakespeare, Bacon, Johnson etc. Together with these, knowledge of ancient and modern history, mathematical sciences, capability of writing in fluent and idiomatic language was made essential requirements. Interestingly, these requirements did not discourage Indians from taking up English education. In fact its popularity soared so much that even the remote villages also felt the need to establish schools and assistance from the Government for English education.

In 1854, the British rulers began to accept the responsibility for the education of the whole population of India, as such Charles Wood's Education Despatch was recommended as "The Magna Carta of English Education in India". Very strategically the Despatch took English language over the vernacular languages of India. English became a language of the elite, placed it at a stable position, whereas vernacular languages being the language of the masses were pushed to the periphery.

### **3.3.1 EXTRACTS FROM WOOD'S DESPATCH OF 1854**

- "The system of science and philosophy which forms the learning of the East abounds with grave errors and Eastern literature is at very best deficient as regards all modern discovery and improvement...We must emphatically declare that the education which we desire to see extended in India is that which has for its object the diffusion of the improved arts,

science, philosophy and literature of Europe; in short of European knowledge.”

- “Considerable misapprehension appears to exist as to our views with respect to religious instruction in the Government institution. Those institutions were founded for the benefit of the whole population of India; and in order to affect their object it was, and is, indispensable that the education conveyed in them should be exclusively secular. The Bible is, we understand, placed in the libraries of the colleges and schools and the pupils are able freely to consult it. This is as it should be; and moreover, we have no desire to prevent, or discourage, any explanation which the pupils may, of their own free will, ask from the masters upon the subject of the Christian religion provided that such information be given out of school hours. Such instruction being entirely voluntary on both sides, it is necessary, in order to prevent the slightest suspicion of an intention on our part to make use of the influence of Government for the purpose of proselytism, that no notice shall be taken of it by the inspectors in their periodical visits.”
- “The rapid spread of a liberal education among the natives of India since that time, the high attainments shown by the native candidates for Government scholarships and by native students in private institutions in the success of Medical Colleges, and the requirement of an increasing European and Anglo-Indian population have led us to the conclusion that the time is now arrived for the establishment of Universities in India.”

In 1882, the Hunter Commission was constituted to review the state of education in India, especially at the primary level of education. The commission came to the conclusion that it was necessary to use vernacular or mother tongue at the middle and high school level to support the use of English. Moreover, on the recommendation of the Indian Education Commission or Hunter Commission, the Public Service Commission was established in 1886. This Service Commission began to recruit large number of Indian graduates for senior teaching positions.

### **3.3.2 ENGLISH IN INDIA AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGES**

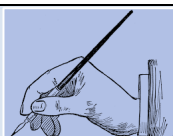
Language is a very powerful weapon which has been used by numerous rulers to conquer and dominate the subject people, and to construct the legacy of colonial space. The introduction of the English language and literature in India was not only an attempt to re-establish the importance of the language but was also an attempt to reconstruct the Indian history through western perception. Moreover, the English language is a language which was imposed. A need to free us from this imperialistic imposition and reconstruct our national history was strongly felt. However, the possibility of complete exclusion of English language died when the nationalist movement adopted English as an alternative language to their mother tongue. Moreover, it is impossible to remove the influences of English language now since it has been granted status of an official language.

English teaching/learning in India does not depend on contemporary British canonical texts only, it has adopted writings in English by the Indians as well as translations from different Bhasa literatures. Hence, it has established a meaningful dialogue with Indian reality represented both in English and different Indian languages. The dilution of binary opposition between Indian and Western traditions and acceptance of a modern approach can be instrumental in bringing English and other Indian languages closer to one another. In India English was never considered as a language of creativity but it gained early prominence in India particularly because of the interest of the Bengalis (and later of the people of other regions) in learning English to acquire new dimensions in professional skills, and to explore the vast written knowledge of West (including its literature). But with the rise in popularity of the English language in India the importance of the mother tongue also came to the fore during the colonial period because of the rise of nationalism, and people's attachment to their own cultures and the need for self-expression in their own languages. Vernacular or the mother tongue remained the base of colonised identity and ironically it was only after colonisation that the vernacular began to get a prominent space than it was in the pre-colonial period. Calcutta, the capital of the British Empire, became the centre of



linguistic and cultural activities in mother tongue. These activities became a medium of political resistance against the imperial domination.

The English language was a key element in the formation of the British Empire. Through its use the Empire established its control, without overt violence, over heterogeneous people having diverse languages, cultures, religions and ethnicities. However, the literary works in English produced in India reflect the Indian socio-cultural reality in unique ways and styles. The English language has been transforming the landscape of Indian national and regional literatures. It has become a great tool for oral and written communication. Translation too plays an important role in the creation of a meaningful dialogue between different Indian languages. The landscape of Indian literatures is much wider than it had ever been earlier.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why did Indians encourage English education despite the Anglicists-Orientalist debate?

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2. In which year did the British ruler accept the responsibility for the education of Indians?

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3. What role did the Hunter Commission play in the language discourse in Indian education system?

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4. Why did Indian vernaculars suddenly become prominent during the nationalist movement?

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### 3.4 SUMMING UP

In this unit, an attempt has been made to catalogue the various educational decisions, acts, and resolutions that led to the institutionalization of English in India. We have tried to trace the main developments in this regard from the advent of the first Christian missionary to India in 1578 to Macaulay's Minute and the proclamation of Lord William Bentinck in 1835. Many debates and experiments were made on the nature of an ideal system of education for the natives in India. However, with the proclamation of Lord William Bentinck on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1835 for the promotion of European language, literature and sciences in India, there was a rapid growth of English education.

In her book, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), Gauri Viswanathan has presented how the colonial authority employed the English-Literary canon in India as a tool by which a class of Indian was created members of which were convinced of the cultural superiority of Britain. English literary study was introduced in India in 1817, i.e. prior to its institutionalization in England in 1871, partly as a strategy of colonial management. As literature can never be ideologically neutral, the British officials considered it to be the best medium to impart moral education to the natives. A committee comprising Alexander Duff, Charles Trevelyan and W.H. Pearce was set up to select and prescribe literary texts suitable for the natives. Through the teaching of English literature the superiority of the British culture was sought to be established and this justified the British colonial presence in India and masked their political and economic exploitation.

After the First War of Indian Independence and with the declaration of peace on 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1858, the activities of the East India Company in India came to an end. India came under the direct rule of the British monarch. During the period from 1857 to 1947, the English education in India brought about a great change in the mindset of the upper class Indians. They became more confident and responsive, and, as a result, they started exploring new opportunities. Most of the Indian intelligentsia got involved in religious, social, and political reform. In 1885, the Indian National Congress came into existence. By the time World War I began, the Indians were in a position to challenge the British hegemony.

The English education, particularly English literary studies, made the educated Indians aware of their own identity. As such, it led to the emergence of national consciousness. This national consciousness united the people of India despite the fact that they belonged to diverse regions, religions, castes, classes, creeds and colours. They began imagining themselves as a community. Thus, Indian nationalism began to get shape and direction. It, however, required narratives to proliferate, and Indian writers responded to the call of the hours. The writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and others successfully represented the Indian ground reality. It is important to think of the nation through ‘narrations,’ a task we shall take up in the subsequent units.



### **3.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss Thomas Babington Macaulay's views on the English language and the Indian vernacular languages
2. Discuss the role Macaulay played in the British government's attempt to weaken the foundation of the Indian nationhood.
3. Discuss the various policies of the British government to institutionalize the English language in India.
4. Despite the Anglicist-Orientalist debate, Indians encouraged English education. Discuss in detail.



### 3.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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## **MODULE II: MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY**

## ***UNIT 4: POETRY BEFORE INDEPENDENCE IN BRIEF: HENRY DEROZIO, TORU DUTT, AND SAROJINI NAIDU***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Learning Objectives
- 4.2 Henry Derozio: An Overview of his Life and Works
- 4.3 Reading the Poems of Henry Derozio
- 4.4 Toru Dutt: An Overview of her Life and Works
- 4.5 Reading the Poems of Toru Dutt
- 4.6 Sarojini Naidu: An Overview of her Life and Works
- 4.7 Reading the Poems of Sarojini Naidu
- 4.8 Summing Up
- 4.9 Assessment Questions
- 4.10 References and Recommended Readings

### ***4.0 INTRODUCTION***

One of the central issues that confront the Indian poets writing in English is the issue of language itself. The question they often have to engage is – how do they convey their ideas in writing in a language that is not their own? This unit briefly discusses three leading figures, namely, Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who pioneered Indian English poetry during the colonial period. This unit aims to introduce you to the main concerns and poetic styles of these early Indian English poets.

### ***4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

After studying this unit, you will be:

- Acquainted with the early Indian poetry in English
- Familiar with the lives and works of the three selected poets

- Accustomed with the thematic concerns and stylistic features of early Indian Poetry in English
- Familiar with the socio-political and cultural background that played a role in the production of these poems.

#### ***4.2 HENRY DEROZIO: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS***

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was one of the early Indian poets who adopted the English language as a medium of his work. He was born on 18 April 1806 in Calcutta, West Bengal. And although of Anglo-Portuguese descent, he considered himself to be an Indian through and through, often describing himself as “a Bengali poet who wrote his poems in English”. Derozio’s formative years were spent in David Drummond’s Academy – Calcutta’s best-known school – where he was a pupil from age eight to fourteen, after which he left school to join his father’s business in Calcutta as a clerk. But a clerk’s life was not bound to be his destiny. In 1826 he went to live with his uncle, an indigo planter in Bhagalpur, Bihar, which is where he wrote his first poems. Derozio’s romantic inclination is evident in the fact that his first work appeared after his contact with nature, after witnessing the beauty of the river Ganges.

Derozio started writing poetry at a time when Bengal was undergoing a paradigm shift, especially among the Hindu society. In 1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy initiated the Brahmo Swaraj movement which preserved Hindu ideals but discarded the practice of worshipping idols, initiating in the process a lot of opposition from orthodox Hindu community. It was during this unstable period that Derozio, who was a radical thinker, was given a position as an Assistant Editor of The India Gazette and was later appointed as a lecturer in English Literature at Hindu College (present day Presidency College) in Calcutta. Taking advantage of his new position and the new platform, Derozio inculcated in the minds of the students an idea of freedom, constantly giving them encouragement to think freely and to question everything. He inspired the young people with the ideals of liberty, freedom and equality. Like many radical thinkers, Derozio had a zeal for reform and

was (along with Raja Ram Mohan Roy) a major figure of the early Bengal renaissance movement. The management committee of the Hindu College, dominated by the members of orthodox Hindu community, disagreed with Derozio's approach and he was made to resign in 1831. Soon afterwards Derozio went back to journalism and started *The East Indian*, a newspaper devoted to the cause of the Anglo-Indian community. He died of cholera at the age of twenty-two before the paper could take off.

### ***4.3 READING THE POEMS OF HENRY DEROZIO***

Henry Derozio's poetry follows the Romantic tradition. His poems have a lyrical touch, and are characterised by sensuousness and a detailed observation of nature. Although he often mingles Western mythology with Indian mythology in his poems, the setting is almost always predominantly Indian. 'His Fakeer of Jungheera' is saturated with the sights and sounds and fragrances of Bhagalpur in Bihar, where he spent a period of time in his uncle's indigo plantation. Derozio's poetry may be broadly divided into two groups: the patriotic poems and the introspective poems. The patriotic poems stem from his concern for the subjugated state of his Homeland. In his poem 'The Golden Vase' Derozio's patriotism becomes very visceral, almost overpowering:

Oh! when our country writhes in galling chains  
When her proud masters scourge her like a dog;  
If her wild cry be borne upon the gale,  
Our bosoms to the melancholy sound  
Should swell, and we should rush to her relief

The same strain of emotion runs throughout the poem. He continues:

Like Hope's returning light; we should not pause  
Till every tyrant dread our feet, or till we find  
Graves...



In poems such as 'The Harp of India' and 'To India- My Native Land' Derozio laments the state of his Homeland under the colonial rule. There is surely a touch of Byronic melancholy as he writes:

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?  
Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;  
Thy music once was sweet - who hears it now?

and in the visceral 'To India- My Native Land' the sentiment continues:

My country! in the day of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,  
And worshipped as a deity thou wast.  
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?

Derozio's anti-imperialist fervour separated him from the Anglo-Indian community, who were overwhelmingly pro-British at the time. It seems for Derozio his own race was secondary, his roots lay deeper in his place of birth and his nation.

The other side of Derozio's poetic ethos can be found in poems such as 'Night' and 'A Walk by Moonlight'. Both use a melancholy narrative which almost attains the form of a religious meditation. 'A Walk by Moonlight' shows how far the romantic influence had an impact on Derozio. What starts out as a casual walk by the moonlight ends with the speaker being taken to a heightened space of awareness, each blade of grass getting crushed under his feet.

How vague are the mysteries  
Which binds us to our earth;  
How far they send into the heart  
Their tones of holy mirth  
and continues:  
The inward eye is open then

To glories, which in dreams  
Visit sleeper's couch, in robes  
Woven of the rainbow's beams

The poem itself is charged with a romantic spirit and echoes self-consciousness. It carries the same sentiment of the speakers in Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and Keats' 'Ode to the Nightingale'. Derozio's presence is everywhere in his poems and his creative side shines best in his shorter poems. Looking back to his works, no doubt, one can see the workings of a truly sensitive mind.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- Derozio's father, Francis Derozio, was a well-respected man in the Anglo-Indian community and worked for the house of J. Scott and Company in Calcutta.

He was a mix of Indian and Portuguese descent.

- David Drummond in whose academy Henry Derozio studied was a Scottish poet. He believed that opinions should be formed on the basis of science, logic and reason and should not be influenced by tradition or authority or any form of dogmas.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. As a teacher what ideas did Derozio instil in the minds of the young students?

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2. What is the name of the newspaper that Derozio started?

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3. What are some of the prominent themes in Derozio's poetry?

4. Which English Romantic poets influenced Derozio the most?

#### ***4.4 TORU DUTT: AN OVERVIEW OF HER LIFE AND WORKS***

Toru Dutt was born in Calcutta in 1856 in a family which produced famous literary figures. When she was only six years old her entire family converted to Christianity. This decision of the Dutt family caused uproar in upper-class Bengali society. Following this, Govin Chander Dutt, Toru's father, who himself was a poet, thought it was best to leave the country and in 1869 took his family to Europe where Toru and her sister, Aru were taught English and French.

Toru was recognized as a child prodigy the moment she started writing. She loved French best and it was Edmund Gosse's opinion that she "was a better French than an English scholar. She knew its literature best and wrote its language with more perfect elegance." While in Europe, Toru travelled frequently attending lectures for Women at Cambridge and other European institutions. When the Dutt family finally returned to Calcutta in 1873, Toru began her study of the Sanskrit language. This interest is visible in her retelling of the stories of the mythical heroines. She added her own personal commentary on the old tales. In 1874 Toru published an essay on Henry Derozio in The Bengal Magazine. Four years after her return from Europe, Toru died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty one in 1877. Toru

Dutt's poetry collection *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* was published posthumously in 1882.

#### **4.5 READING THE POEMS OF TORU DUTT**

Toru Dutt's unique style of poetry and her choice of language may be traced back to the traditions of her family. The Dutt family was one of the most literate families in Bengal and had a natural affinity with the English language more than their mother tongue, Bengali. The Dutt family produced two generations of English writers: the first was led by Michael Madhusudan Datta who proudly declared "I acknowledge to you, and I need not blush to do so – that I love the language of the Anglo-Saxon" (Dutta 9) and the second generation which was led by Romesh Chandra Dutt and Toru Dutt herself. The long tradition of Orientalist verse that the Dutt family relished in ended with R.C. Dutt, because Toru heralded in a new form of poetry, one which may be considered as the first modern Indian poetry in English. Toru successfully brought in the 'personal' and the 'cultural' in her poetry, a dimension which was ignored or suppressed in the earlier Indian English writings.

Toru's first publication, *A Sheaf Glean'd in French Fields* (1876), although a translation of works of other French poets, lives today as an example of her skilled mind and the command she had over the English language.

Still barred thy doors! The far east glows,  
The morning wind blows fresh and free.  
Should not the hour that wakes the rose  
Awake also thee?

Toru's translations move with freedom and independence as if they were her own creative work. There is always rapture, but never an imitation. Her translations of the French texts are not merely the conversion of one language into another, but we find in it a balance between staying true to the original and creating new meanings and messages for the audience. Toru Dutt, through

her translations, smoothly presents texts from a distant history to non-native speakers. Thus her translation reads like an ‘original’ piece of writing. The poems collected in her posthumous collection *Ancient Ballads*, in spite of their ‘Victorian’ strain, are not just well accomplished poems, but a new style which was better than anything an Indian writer in English had written till then.

Dutt’s poem “Our Casuarina Tree” harmonizes both matter and manner in perfect proportions. The tree stands as a symbol of past memory: the rich tradition of Indian culture and philosophy which played an important role in shaping the poetic and aesthetic sensibility of the poets. Toru Dutt’s “Our Casuarina Tree”, the tree connotes the nostalgic feelings and memory of Toru Dutt. This is the tree under which she played with her brother and sister – Abju and Aru. So the very thought of the tree transported her to her golden past. While in the third stanza, Dutt establishes that it is neither the stateliness of the tree nor its external beauty that endears to her. She writes:

But not because of its magnificence

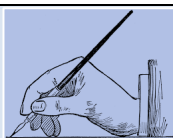
Dear is the Casuarina to my soul

Dutt talks of a beauty that transcends the exterior façade. The importance and value of the tree lies in the fact that it is a part of Dutts’ existence, a reminder of family ties, of the warmth shared by three siblings: Abju-Aru-Toru. In ‘Sita’ she revisits the same theme of nostalgia and longing. It begins with “Three happy children in a darkened room” listening to a story and ends on a melancholic tone because the children will never gather again “by their mother’s side.” The bulk poems in *Ancient Ballads* along with characters such as Sita Savitri or Sindhu are all based on Indian mythology but they take shape in style different from her Orientalist predecessors. The mythological aspect of her poems is intrinsic with her consciousness and her memory; they are close to her individual life.

The metaphor of the tree is a recurring aspect in most of Toru's poems. In 'The tree of life' the tree is a father figure, angelic and sublime. Her sonnet 'Baugmaree' takes its name from the country house she and her family used to live in Bengal. It is a celebration of nature, of trees.

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,  
But not a sea of dull unvaried green  
.....  
One might swoon  
Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze  
On a primeval Eden, in amaze.

It is a sensory poem, a record of colours and shapes observed, and one might trace an affinity with Emily Dickinson's poetry, who was also her contemporary. Tamarinds, mangoes, palms – all prominent in the Bengal landscape appear in the poem. Beauty lies in diversity and "a sea of foliage" creates an exciting spectacle which would have been impossible with a single monotonous "dull unvaried green". Just as the mixture of colours and textures that creates the sea beautiful, Toru Dutt compares her family's garden with the sea or Garden of Eden – the first garden created by God for Adam and Eve. There is what T.S. Eliot calls a 'unified sensibility' in the poetry of Toru Dutt. Although she deals with cultural mythologies, her poems are deeply personal at the same time, and she may be read and understood more successfully as a poet of memory.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are some of the influences Toru Dutt derived from her family that shaped her attitude towards language and literature?

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2. What are some of the recurring themes in the poetry of Toru Dutt?

3. List some major motifs which are present in the poetry of Toru Dutt?

#### **4.6 SAROJINI NAIDU: AN OVERVIEW OF HER LIFE AND WORKS**

Sarojini Naidu was born in 1879 to a middle class family in Hyderabad. She was the eldest daughter of Dr Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, a scientist, and Varadasundari Devi, a minor Bengali poet. At the age of thirteen she wrote her first poem 'The Lady of the Lake' which comprised an impressive 1,300 lines. At age seventeen she was sent away to England, where she studied at King's College, London (from 1895–98) and later attended Cambridge University. While at Cambridge she circulated her poetry among the literary figures of the day. On her return to India in 1898 she married Dr Govindarajulu Naidu, a physician and a widower who was ten years older than her.

Sarojini's literary output, although valuable, was never consistent. After returning from England, Naidu spent the next thirty-five years travelling extensively in India and abroad, building relations with people and forming

public opinion against the British rule in India. During this phase she also delivered numerous lectures on women's education. Her role as a political activist during the nationalistic movement also brought her close to Nehru and Gandhi himself, and she even accompanied them all the way to prison. She served multiple prison sentences during the years 1930, 1932, 1942 and 1943. After India's independence she became the first Indian woman governor of the United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh) and served the position until her death in 1949 at the mature age of seventy.

Sarojini's poetry collection includes *The Golden Threshold* (1905) which was followed by *Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917) and *The Sceptred Flute* (1943).

#### **4.7 READING THE POEMS OF SAROJINI NAIDU**

Sarojini Naidu's reputation as a poet mainly resides on the volumes of poetry that she subsequently published between 1905 and 1917. In terms of content her four collections of poetry do not differ much from each other. Naidu carries the images and cadences of a romantic India throughout her poetry and there is a persistent continuity of poetic imagination. Naidu's poems often embody the quality of mystical poems and follow the lavish emotionalism of ghazals. In poems of her love for her country there is always a sense of longing. Woman and womanhood are also celebrated. Much of the credit however goes to Englishmen, Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse, both of whom were mentors to Naidu. They helped her find her true voice. Gosse famously advised her to stop writing poems about England and to start writing about India; as a result, poems such as 'The Coromandel Fishers' were born.

Rise, brothers, rise; the wakening skies pray to the morning light,

The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn like a child that has cried all night.

Come, let us gather our nets from the shore and set our catamarans free,

To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for we are the kings of the sea!



Naidu's 'The Coromandel Fishers' is a poem which expresses the daily practice of the fishermen of Coromandel coast embarking on yet another day of fishing. One of Naidu's finest, it is a poem which captures the dignity of labour of the fishermen. They are so acquainted with the water they grew up with that they call themselves "the kings of the sea." Nature is a key character in 'The Coromandel Fishers' and Naidu explores the symbiotic relationship men shares with nature – men's relationship with the sea, the sea gulls, the fish, the "coconut glade" and the "mango grove" and the sands under a full moon. Naidu creates through the first and last lines of the poem a loop, a circle of time, an eternal cycle which all men must follow; for the fisherman it is the sea they rise with the sun and come back to the shores when "the low sky mates with the sea."

In her poem, 'The Bazaars of Hyderabad', Naidu sketches the image of an archetypal Indian bazaar, and through it, the Indian customs and traditions, festivals, images of men and women, places and legends of kings and queens are unfolded. The poem takes the shape of a Platonic dialogue; where each stanza begins with a question and ends with an answer. The quick exchange of the speaker's enquiries and the vendors' responses bring out the grandeur and vibrance of the traditional Indian bazaars. There is also special charm to the lyrics of the poem: the rhyming words such as 'brocade-jade'; 'rice-spice-dice'; ring-wing-king'; 'red-bed-dead' and many more instil life and balance in her descriptions. Naidu writes in 'The Bazaars of Hyderabad':

What do you cry, O ye fruitmen?

Citron, pomegranate and plum.

What do you play, O musicians?

Cithar, sarangi and drum.

What do you chant, O magicians?

Spells for the aeons to come

In 'The Bazaar of Hyderabad' she touches upon all the five senses of the human body to describe the splendour of the Indian traditional bazaar. The

vibrancy of the bazaar is communicated through colours – silver, crimson, purple, amber, blue, azure, red and white; through olfactory senses stimulated by the fragrances of sandalwood, henna and the smell of flowers; through auditory sounds created by the sitar, the sarangi, the drums, and the chanting of the magical spells by the magicians. Gastronomical images such as lemons, pomegranates, plums create the sense of taste and finally, the tactile imagery of the bells made for the pigeons gives the reader a sense of touch.

Naidu's poetry may be best understood as poetry of observation and of the senses; poetry ripe with intensity; poetry about nakedness of feelings, and there is always a more than present visceral persona behind each poem that observes life as it is lived. 'The Bazaars of Hyderabad' is a lyric expressing the personal and emotional feelings of the poet, and just like 'The Coromandel Fishers' it is also a celebration of the life and the occupation of the common folk, their joys and sorrows of everyday life. Her poem 'The Bangle Sellers' captures the same kind of working-class life and the vibrancy of the wares they sell – full of colour and life. But the brilliance of Sarojini Naidu's poems lies not in the resplendent description of the lives of the working-class people but in the way she places them within the larger collective. The bazaar witnesses and participates in both sorrows and joys of others – the bazaar vicariously witnesses happy moments such as weddings and festivals when it is crowded with people buying garlands, jewellery, fruits and sweets. And the bazaar also witnesses occasions of sadness and death when kings and soldiers fall and the flower girls are seen weaving sheets of white flowers for the dead people's grave. There is a very universal human story behind each of Naidu's poems. Beneath the colours and happiness Naidu explores the images of fishermen, bazaars or bangles, the traditional Indian society and often the role of women in it as well.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



It is believed that Sarojini Naidu met Ezra Pound at her home in London in 1913 when she played the hostess for a gathering. But she had no interest in the early Modernism and continued in her familiar late romantic style.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the title of the first poem Sarojini Naidu wrote?

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2. What kind of political works did Sarojini Naidu take up after her return from England?

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3. Naidu's poetry often concerns images that excite the senses. List some of the images used in her renowned poems.

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### 4.8 SUMMING UP

By now you must have become acquainted with all the three poets discussed in this unit – Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. All these poets, in their own individual ways, have helped in laying the foundation of Indian English Poetry. Using English as the medium they have been successful in creating a literary universe that is distinctly Indian. Though the poets write in English they are rooted in the Indian landscape – Henry Derozio with his nationalism, Toru Dutt with her mythological resurrections and Sarojini Naidu with her celebration of the vibrant life of the working class Indians in her poetry.

Poetry, as a genre, was the first that took shape in the Indian English writer's imagination. All of the poets discussed in this unit, in some degree, were influenced by the idealistic strain of romanticism and their poetry often reflects Christian as well as lyrical sentiments. One of the remarkable things about these early poets is that they did not see any contradiction between the Indian and Anglicized identities. Henry Derozio, for instance, was a fervent nationalist; yet, his love of the romantics found him riding an Arab horse through the streets of Calcutta. Similarly, Toru Dutt went to Indian myth and legend for her themes in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, freshly reinterpreting some of these; yet, she remained attached to France and French literature, even writing a novel in French and translating French poems into English. Thus these early writers did not merely reproduce the axioms of imperialism and mindlessly imitate Western literature. They were the mediators between the East and the West.



#### **4.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss the life of Derozio and the contribution he made to liberate the minds of the young people in Bengal?
2. The Romantics no doubt influenced Derozio a lot. Discuss the poetic style of Derozio by analyzing some of his major works.
3. Discuss, using poetic examples, Toru Dutt's resurrection of old Indian mythologies in her poetry.
4. Do you agree that Toru Dutt's poetry is often a poetry of memory? Justify your answers with elaborate discussion of her style.
5. Sarojini Naidu represents in her poetry the life and work of the working class Indians. Discuss using examples from her poems.
6. Sarojini Naidu's poetry often accompanies images that describes the senses. Citing examples discuss a few of her poetic works that uses this technique.



#### 4.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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## ***UNIT 5: POETICS OF MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

5.0 Introduction

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Nissim Ezekiel: Life and Works

5.3 Reading the poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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5.3.2 “Background, Casually”

5.3.3 “Case Study”

5.3.4 “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”

5.4 A. K. Ramanujan: Life and Works

5.5 Reading the poems of A. K. Ramanujan

5.5.1 “A River”

5.5.2 “Obituary”

5.5.3 “Breaded Fish”

5.5.4 “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”

5.5.5 “Self-Portrait”

5.6 Jayanta Mahapatra: Life and Works

5.7 Reading the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra

5.7.1 “Hunger”

5.7.2 “Indian Summer Poem”

5.7.3 “A Missing Person”

5.8 Summing Up

5.9 Assessment Questions

5.10 References and Recommended Readings

### ***5.0 INTRODUCTION***

Modern Indian English poets break away from the concerns of the early Indian English poets in their choice of theme, their experiments with the

English language and their adoption of modernity in their poems. Therefore, in this unit we will familiarize you with three major figures in modern Indian English poetry, namely, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra, all of whom have played pivotal role in giving shape to Indian English poetry in post-independent India. These poets were hugely influenced by the Imagist as well as the modernist movement and contributed significantly to modern Indian English poetry. This unit will also discuss important and recurrent themes of urban dissonance, personal attitudes to objects and nature, and a sense of alienation that is prevalent in the poetry of these poets.

### ***5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

After studying this unit, you will be:

- acquainted with a brief overview of the history of Modern Indian poetry in English
- familiar with the life and works of the three selected modern Indian English poets
- able to analyse in depth the selected poems of each of the three poets
- familiar with the thematic concerns of the poets and stylistic features of their poetry
- familiar with the socio-political and cultural milieu that played a role in the production of these poems

### ***5.2 NISSIM EZEKIEL: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS***

One of the most eminent poets of Indian English poetry, Nissim Ezekiel was born on 16 December, 1924 to a Jewish family in Bombay. His father, Moses Ezekiel, worked in Wilson College as a Professor of Botany and his mother served as the Principal in her own school. Ezekiel earned his B.A. and M.A. in English Literature from Wilson College, Bombay. After completion of his studies in English literature he further went on to read Philosophy under C.E.M. Joad at Birkbeck College in London.

It was in London that his interest in poetry, theatre and the visual arts developed. While in London he also worked as a clerk in the Office of the High Commissioner. In 1951 he returned to India without earning any degree. He married Daisy Jacob in 1952 and soon started working for various journals. In the same year, Fortune Press (London) published his first collection of poetry, *A Time to Change*. In 1953, Ezekiel joined The Illustrated Weekly of India as an assistant editor and worked there for the next two years. His second book of verse *Sixty Poems* also came out in 1953 and for the next 10 years he worked as a broadcaster on arts and literature for All India Radio.

Nissim Ezekiel was editor to journals such as the *Quest*, *Poetry-India*, *The Illustrated Weekly*, *Imprint* and *The Indian P. E. N.* and also worked in the fields of advertising and broadcasting. He also worked as a director for a theatre group in Bombay. Ezekiel's teaching career began only in 1961 when he joined Mithibai College in Bombay and later served as its head of English department till 1972. He later went on to become Professor of English at the University of Bombay. It was during these years that he also held short-term tenure position as Visiting Professor at various Universities in India and abroad, particularly at the University of Leeds in 1964 and at the University of Pondicherry in 1967. He died on 9 January, 2004 at the age of seventy-nine.

One of the foremost among the modern Indian English poets in the post-colonial scenario, Nissim Ezekiel has seven volumes of poetry to his credit. His first volume of poetry *A Time to Change and Other Poems* was published in the year 1952. His second volume *Sixty Poems* came out in 1953, *The Discovery of India* in 1956, and was followed by *The Third* in 1959. It was in 1960 that his most remarkable work *The Unfinished Man* was published. It was through the poems published during the 1960s and the 1970s that Ezekiel found his true voice and later cemented his role as the harbinger of a new verse in the Indian literary scene. *Hymns in Darkness* published in 1976 and *Latter-Day Psalms*, published in 1982 won him laurels and for his contribution he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. He was also awarded the Padma Shri in 1988.



For his remarkable contributions in the field of poetry many scholars regard him as the father of modern Indian English poetry. Ezekiel forged a new beginning in establishing the standards of modern Indian English poetry and explored various themes— themes of ‘self’, of individual identity, of human existence in the contemporary world, love, life and death. One of the dominant themes in his poems is his attempt to establish a sense of belonging to his country India. Perhaps because of his Jewish identity he has always felt a need to strike a connection to his nation. Unlike Naipaul, who always attempts to escape from India, Ezekiel wants to belong to India. In his poem “Background, Casually” he speaks of his own self and identity against the larger multicultural backdrop of the country. But towards the end of the poem he strikes a connection to the larger Indian reality.

Many of his poems also portray the complex socio-cultural reality of the urban life in Bombay. With great skill and artistry he deals with the themes of identity crisis, alienation, struggle for existence and so on. His collections *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Man* include poems like “Urban” and “A Morning Walk” – poems which throw light on the predicament of a city man and his existence. Again his poem “In India” provides at the very outset the description of the city of Bombay; “Portrait” included in the volume *The Third* describes the condition and dilemma of a modern man.

Another very important element of Ezekiel as a poet is his depiction of the various nuances of the “Indian English.” Ezekiel exploited the resources of the English language used by Indians, and in his poems he employs Indianized English with a unique sense of humour. Critics also have pointed out that Ezekiel’s use of Indian English generates satire and parody. His poems “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” and “A Very Indian Poem in Indian English” are instances of his unique use of Indian English.

### 5.3 READING THE POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

#### 5.3.1 'POET, LOVER, BIRDWATCHER'

This poem appears in his poetry collection *The Exact Name* (1965). It comprises twenty lines which are divided into two stanzas. One of the most celebrated and well known poems written by Ezekiel, "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" deals with the theme of poetic creation. In this poem, Ezekiel describes the poet in relation to his craft and artistic creation, placing the poet in relation to the lover and the Birdwatcher. Ezekiel compares the skill and artistry of a poet to that of the lover and the birdwatcher, bringing out the resemblances between these three entities.

The hunt is not an exercise of will  
But patient love relaxing on a hill  
To note the movement of a timid wing

As the birdwatcher hunts for birds and the lover is in search of love, a poet too waits for the perfect word. And in their 'hunt' for bird, love and word, the birdwatcher, the lover and the poet become one and the same. The main contention of the poem is the idea that the wait for perfection cannot be termed as a simple affair because it involves a lot of artistic tolerance. The 'hunt' can in no way be anxious and hurried, instead it has to be 'patient' and full of poise. Ezekiel further extends the comparison of the poet, the lover and the birdwatcher in the next stanza. He writes:

To watch the rarer birds, you have to go  
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow  
In silence near the source, or by a shore  
Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.

To achieve perfection in art, the poet, like the birdwatcher has to tread along unknown territories and 'deserted lanes'. To gain greater sensibility of poetic creation, the poet has to come to terms with truth

in silence and in the dark recesses of his soul. According to the speaker, the effect of poetic creation should be such that it compels the beloved to accept the love of the lover.

And there the women slowly turn around,  
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light  
With darkness at the core, and sense is found  
By poets lost in crooked, restless flight,  
The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.

The power of words in poetry should be such that it should enable the deaf to hear and empower the blind to see. Ezekiel describes it in relation to the ‘surrendering’ of the beloved not only physically but spiritually. Towards the end he concludes that the poet in his attempt to find words finds sense and equilibrium even in the midst of darkness.

This poem is remarkable in its use of imagery. The images of the birdwatcher and the lover are seamlessly united with that of the poet and the transition from one to the other is achieved with grace and subtlety. This fusion of multiplicity into one renders a specific meaning and transforms the idea into a poem.

### 5.3.2 ‘BACKGROUND, CASUALLY’

Ezekiel’s poem ‘Background, Casually’ was first published in the year 1965 and is included in his collection, *Hymns in Darkness*. Written in the form of a long narrative comprising seventy-five lines, the poem is divided into three parts, each part of the poem is further structured into five stanzas of five lines. The poem is unique for its delineation of the ‘self’ and the gradual progression which leads to the formation of his identity. The poem is autobiographical in the sense that it documents the poet’s own progression in life. The three parts of the poem are arranged in a chronological order and depicts the experiences of his childhood, youth and old-age. In the very first line he describes himself as a

‘poet-rascal-clown’ and then contextualises his own religious background against those of the more dominant Hindu, Muslim and Christian groups:

I went to Roman Catholic school,  
A mugging Jew among the wolves.  
They told me I had killed the Christ,  
That year I won the scripture prize.  
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.  
I grew in terror of the strong  
But undernourished Hindu lads,  
Their prepositions always wrong,  
Repelled me by passivity.

Ezekiel’s minority status owing to his religious affiliation as a Jew amidst the dominant Hindu and Muslim majority people is the main concern of the lines mentioned above. He attempts to illustrate his identity and the uneasy relationship he has with the society around him. The alienation and the discriminatory attitude he faced in his childhood is aptly described in these lines, but they also bring to the surface his self-perception.

At home on Friday nights the prayers  
Were said. My morals had declined.  
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.  
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi saint  
The more I searched, the less I found.

In these lines the poet’s quest for spirituality emerges. He attempts to strike a balance with his ‘self’ and spirituality. But there is a sense of scepticism involved in his quest for identity as well: “The more I searched, the less I found.” In a similar manner, the comment perhaps suggests a lack of perceptible success in his artistic endeavours.

The second section of the poem describes his experiences of staying abroad. In the following lines he talks about his experiences of homelessness, loneliness and his quest for identity:

Twenty two: time to go abroad.  
First, the decision, then a friend  
To pay the fare. Philosophy,  
Poverty and Poetry, three  
Companions shared my basement room.  
The London seasons passed me by.  
I lay in bed two years alone, . . .  
Of Man. I knew that I had failed  
In everything, a bitter thought.  
So, in an English cargo ship . . .  
To Indo China, scrubbed the decks,  
And learned to laugh again at home.

Ezekiel mentions how the three P's, namely Philosophy, Poverty and Poetry, were his companions in England and how he returned home by scrubbing decks to manage his fare. The poem is marked by a sense of restlessness at home and a restlessness with his environment that Ezekiel experienced growing up: "How to feel at home, was the point." Even his stay abroad could not help him in his formation of an identity. The search for meaning and order led him to the married life. He finally brings in the references to his ancestry:

My ancestors, among the castes,  
Were aliens crushing seed for bread  
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).  
One among them fought and taught,  
A Major bearing British arms.

He told my father sad stories  
Of the Boer War. I dreamed that  
Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.

Through these lines, by resurrecting his ancestry, Ezekiel perhaps is trying to portray a history of his own self and the relationship of his family with India. In the third section of the poem, the poet realises his position in the larger scheme of events. He writes:

The later dreams were all of words.  
I did not know that words betray  
But let the poems come, and lost  
That grip on things the worldly prize.  
I would not suffer that again.  
I look about me now, and try  
To formulate a plainer view:  
The wise survive and serve—to play  
The fool, to cash in on  
The inner and the outer storms.  
The Indian landscape sears my eyes.

In these lines the poet seems to attain a sense of selfhood and meaning in his vocation as a poet. His identity finally strikes a balance with the society around him as he observes that although his country India is a land of darkness, he still has his commitments as an Indian.

I have made my commitments now.  
This is one: to stay where I am,  
As others choose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am.

The poem concludes with the realization that the poet has a duty towards his own self and towards his country, and this helps him establish his identity. The awareness of his position in his environment removes his notions of alienation and identity crisis, thus successfully reconciling himself to the society around him.

### 5.3.3 'CASE STUDY'

In "Case Study", Nissim Ezekiel reviews the life of an urban man from the perspective of a detached observer. He assesses the fate of a man "damned in the domestic game" and suggests that cultural and societal expectations weigh heavy on man and on woman. The tragedy of man is that "The Masters never failed, however weak." The last stanza shows the exasperation of this person who goes to the poet for advice.

Ezekiel's "Case Study" begins with the description of a man who has committed some grave mistakes in his life and is a failure. The poet refers to the realm of Yoga and Greek, which helps the spiritual masters to attain the knowledge of light. He questions whether such practices can transport the individual from his state of failure and misery. The second stanza begins with the description of the life of the individual and his experiences during his life which led him to his downfall. From 'foolish love affair' to his relation with 'politics', all these were responsible for his destruction in life. The poet in the second stanza uses terms like 'common school', 'rotten college', 'useless knowledge' to depict the reasons for the ruin of the protagonist of the poem. The third stanza begins with the description of the marriage of the protagonist which further adds to his doom, describing the marriage as 'the worst mistake of all'. The poet in this stanza portrays the family life of the protagonist and his role as a father to his children. The poet not only describes his life chronologically in the stanzas of the poem but also projects his persona and psyche. In the next stanza, the poet reflects the changing of jobs by the subject of the poem. The poet describes how he failed miserably in life, the bits and parts of his life which he collected from others. In the last stanza, the

poet gives him some piece of advice to reiterate back in the truth of life and existence. The poet motivates him by advising him to break the usual pattern of his existence and asks him 'to use his head' i.e. his rational thinking so that he may come to terms with his life.

The poem is interesting in the sense that it narrates the story of an individual's life, his journey and his experiences. But at the same time one finds a dialogue going on between Ezekiel and the persona in the poem.

#### 5.3.4 'GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T.S.'

One of Ezekiel's most anthologized poems, 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' is an example of his exploits of the resourcefulness of the Indian English language. The poem appears in his sixth volume of poetry, *Hymns in Darkness*. Like his poem 'A Very Indian Poem in Indian English', this poem demonstrates with humour the peculiarity of the Indian English language in its popular usage. The poem centres around the farewell party given to Miss Pushpa who is leaving the country and going abroad. It begins thus:

Friends,  
our dear sister  
is departing for foreign  
in two three days,  
and  
we are meeting today  
to wish her bon voyage.

The poem describes a farewell party on the eve of Miss Pushpa's departure for a foreign country. It presents the picture of the rise of an English-speaking middle-class in the postcolonial India – many belonging to the class nurture the dream of moving abroad. Their use of English is characterised by the mother tongue pull in the fields of lexis, syntax, semantics, accents and intonations. Carried to the extreme, these linguistic elements in the poem provide entertainment and undercut the seriousness of the theme.



Surat? Ah, yes,  
Once only I stayed in Surat  
With family members  
Of my uncle's very old friend-  
his wife was cooking nicely...  
that was long time ago.

The manner in which the speaker narrates the event is mostly typical of the way Indians speak English. It mimics the popular use of the language. Contrary to the institutionalised English, the popular variety of Indian English is full of grammatical errors, lexical errors, tense errors, sentence formation errors and so on. Although the poet deals with the subject of the poem with a humorous tone, scholars point out that it often verges on irony and satire. And reading the poem in the form of a dramatic monologue not only reveals the personality of the speaker but also reflects the individuality of Miss Pushpa.

Coming back to Miss Pushpa  
She is most popular lady  
With men also and ladies also.  
Whenever I asked her to do anything,  
She was saying, 'Just now only  
I will do it.' That is showing  
good spirit. I am always  
appreciating the good spirit.

The speaker speaks of the 'qualities' of Miss Pushpa who always has the habit of saying 'yes' to everybody, men and women alike, and appreciates such spirit.

And today she is going  
to improve her prospect  
and we are wishing her bon voyage.

The poet projects the idea that travelling abroad improves one's future prospects. Such a person is hailed as 'foreign returned.' Miss Pushpa seems to believe in this idea, and the speaker directly confirms the colonial mindset while hailing it in the meeting. The poet in his delineation of the English used by Indians highlights, and at the same time criticises, the celebration of the colonial mindset. The poem thus offers a realistic representation of the contemporary middle-class Indian attitude which is characterised by a distinct colonial hangover. In offering such a picture, Ezekiel employs Indian English language to achieve the best possible effect.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why do you think Ezekiel is the father of modern Indian English poetry?

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2. What are some of the major themes that appear in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry?

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3. Name some of Nissim Ezekiel's poems where the main concern is the Indian English language.

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#### 5.4 A.K. RAMANUJAN: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS

A.K. Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 to an astronomer father and an orthodox Brahmin mother who was a homemaker. He attended Marimallappa's High School and Maharaja College, both in Mysore after which he pursued Linguistics at Deccan College in Pune. He did his Ph. D in Linguistics at the Indiana University on a Fulbright fellowship between 1959 and 1962. He worked at the University of Chicago, where he remained until his death in 1993.

During his lifetime Ramanujan wrote several books, including collections of verse in both English and Kannada, but he is best known as a translator. His known translated works are *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1972), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981) and *Poems of Love and War* (1985). His best-known translation into English is *Anantha Murthy's Samskara* done in 1976. One of his last publications was *Folktales from India* (1994), a selection of oral narratives from twenty-two Indian languages. A. K. Ramanujan's collection of poems includes *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976) and *Second Sight* (1986). There is often, in Ramanujan's poetry, an encounter between the past and the present, and of the East and the West. In almost all his poems he goes back to his childhood memories and experiences of life in India.

Though Ramanujan spent a considerable part of life abroad, he always remained connected to his native Indian traditions and ethos. "His expatriate sensibility provided him a chance to portray his experiences in India and America in an objective and accurate way", E.N. Lal rightly said, "Ramanujan's poems take their origin in a mind that is simultaneously Indian and Western – the Indian mode of experiencing an emotion, and the western mode of defining it". The main themes of Ramanujan's poetry are family, love, despair and death. His poems are replete with nostalgia, pathos, irony, humour and sympathy. "The linking of familial experience with history and tradition is a feature which runs through the poetry of Ramanujan."

## 5.5 READING THE POEMS OF A.K. RAMANUJAN

### 5.5.1 'A RIVER'

Ramanujan's poem, 'A River' was first published in his collection *The Striders* (1966), and as the title suggests the poem is about a river, in Madurai, one of the ancient cities of Tamil Nadu. At the very outset the poet describes Madurai as a "city of temples and poets" where poets sing of "cities and temples".

In Madurai,  
city of temples and poets,  
who sang of cities and temples,  
every summer  
a river dries to a trickle  
in the sand,  
baring the sand ribs,  
straw and women's hair  
clogging the watergates

Undoubtedly the poem is about a river and the poet unlike the old poets, projects the river instead of "cities and temples". We find a note of cynicism on the part of the poet who writes of "old" and "new" poets. What do the old poets of Madurai write about and what does the present poet see in Madurai? In the "city of temples" the poet captures in summer the river that is most of the time dry: "every summer/ a river dries to a trickle in the sand". The impression one gets is not of a grand and flowing river but a dried up river. We are told through a series of images what the dried up river leaves behind: "sand-ribs, straw and women's hair" that clog the "watergates", "wet stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles" and "water buffaloes lounging on the sun". What the poet describes in verse is the reality of the place, his is a different idiom altogether.

Ramanujan uses an image of the poets singing “only of the floods” implying that he was actually “there for a day when they had the floods”. What the poet perhaps intends to accomplish here is to bring a contrast again in the depiction of floods by the “old poets” and what he himself saw in the flooding river that day. He gives some vivid images of the rising river, of three village houses being carried off, of the pregnant woman being carried away and the cows Brina and Gopi, too.

The new poets still quoted  
the old poets, but no one spoke  
in verse  
of the pregnant woman  
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,  
kicking at blank walls  
even before birth.

What the poet writes about the flood is in keeping with what “people everywhere talked” about. In other words, the poet writes keeping the reality in mind. He goes on to say what the “new poets” write about: “the new poets still quoted the old poets” and that “no one spoke in verse of the pregnant woman drowned,” guessing perhaps the woman was with “twins in her”. He adds this description to drive home the point that indifference marks the works of most ‘new poets’ who are very often not grounded in reality when they write.

In the last stanza the poet seems to be justifying his own writing. He says that he saw in the river what the “old poets” and “new poets” did not. So what can one conclude from this rather complex poem? The poem is about a river, and the poem is about the act of writing poetry as well. Moreover, who are the “old poets” and the “new poets”? Where does the speaker place himself? These are questions for the readers to speculate. According to G J V Prasad, Ramanujan constructs an “insider-outsider space” to be able to speak of the river in the manner he does in his poem ‘A River’.

### 5.5.2 'OBITUARY'

The poem, 'Obituary' appears in Ramanujan's collection *Relations* published in 1971. The title of the poem elicits from the readers a particular kind of expectation; one usually associates an obituary with a tribute paid to a person who has passed away, and it is often a eulogy for the dead man. Written in first person narrative, the poem takes the shape of a eulogy for a dead father by a son, but unlike an obituary the poem is a record of the deeds of the father, of the things that he had left undone. The poem lists the things the father left behind when he passed away:

left dust  
on a table full of papers,  
left debts and daughters,  
a bedwetting grandson

Irony manifests right at the start. The son seems quite disgruntled with his father and he describes him as "the burning type" who also "burned properly at the cremation". The son goes on to say, how as a practising Hindu, he performed all the cremation rituals expected of sons, but his father would have no headstone with the dates of his birth and death because his father "didn't quite manage to do himself" as is expected of the head of a family in an Indian household while he was alive. The highest point of irony in the poem is when the son hears that his father's obituary appeared in merely two lines in a local newspaper four weeks after his cremation. And the paper in which the obituary appeared was the very paper which was used to wrap salt, coriander and jaggery which he bought from a small grocery shop. He used to look up the paper "for fun" but says does so "lately in the hope of finding these obituary lines". The poem concludes with the narrator/son saying that the death of his father has left them "a changed mother and more than one ritual". In spite of whatever his dissatisfaction be with his father it is evident that the son still wants the obituary of the father, owing perhaps because of respect or customary tradition.

The poem 'Obituary', like many of Ramanujan's poems, is one about relationships. We are given the picture of a typical Indian family and how death, particularly the death of the head of the family, impacts upon those left behind. The poem interrogates practices, stereotypes and beliefs. By bringing together "debts and daughters" Ramanujan reveals how daughters are considered to be a burden on an Indian family. The obituary of the father appearing in a paper sold to hawkers, who in turn sells it to a grocer from whom the poet occasionally buys provisions underlines the triviality of the father's achievement. Perhaps the speaker is trying to discover some meaning in his father's existence. The last lines of the poem referring to the "changed mother" and "more than one annual ritual" reveals the continuing link with the father, though he is no more.

### 5.5.3 'BREADED FISH'

The poem 'Breaded Fish' appears in Ramanujan's first collection of poems *The Striders* published in 1966. The poem's main theme is memory and how it oscillates between the past and the present. It begins with the poetic persona being given some "breaded fish," a delicious crunchy food made of fish, specially prepared for him. It is in fact a thrust in his mouth apparently because he is fond of it.

Specially for me, she had some breaded  
fish; even thrust a blunt-headed  
smelt into my mouth;  
and looked hurt when I could  
neither sit nor eat, as a hood  
of memory like a coil on a heath  
opened in my eyes

The hostess even pushed some 'smelt,' 'a small silvery fish of both marine and fresh water,' into his mouth. The speaker was visibly unprepared for this hospitality. The smell of the fish made him uncomfortable. He could "neither sit nor eat" as memory, "like a coil on a heath," opened up to reveal the sight

of a “dark half-naked length of woman, dead on the beach in a yard of cloth”. The body was ‘[b]readed/ by the grained indifference of sand.’ It was a repulsive spectacle. The breaded fish served by the lady immediately recalled the scene. It made it impossible for him to enjoy the taste of the delicacy. The memory that lay coiled like a snake, now opened up and made him uneasy.

In this short poem, through vivid images, Ramanujan presents the power of memory which, when provoked, can bring back memories, both pleasant and unpleasant. At such moments it connects the present with the past. He presents the psychological state of the persona of the poem. With the use of sparse words and powerful images he builds up layers of meanings in the presentation of a very common event.

#### 5.5.4 “LOOKING FOR A COUSIN ON A SWING”

The poem “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing” is from Ramanujan’s first poetry collection, *Striders* (1966). Composed in an irregular metre, the poem consists of twenty-three lines. Memory is the main theme again in this poem. The speaker is reminded of his past in India as he is situated abroad. The poem builds on a number of contrasts – the past and the present, home and abroad, village and cities, innocence and experience. The poet recalls his cousin “when she was four or five” and how they would sit together on the village swing. The sense of innocence is emphasized in the first stanza as the poet writes:

with every lunge of the swing  
she felt him  
in the lunging pits of her feeling

This was followed by them “climbing a tree”, “not very tall, but full of leaves/ like those of a fig tree”. The past is contrasted with the present as she

Now she looks for the swing  
in cities with fifteen suburbs  
and tries to be innocent



about it

There is a suggestion of lost innocence as now she is grown up and looking for that experience in the swing “in cities with fifteen suburbs”. What is that experience of the past referred to here? As a child on the swing, she felt “himself against her”, “she felt him in the lunging pits of her feeling”. But the poet wrote that they “were innocent about it”. Now the poet does not seem to subscribe to her forays in “cities with fifteen suburbs” looking for the “swing”. Swing here perhaps would stand for the sense of touch and feeling which, according to him, cannot be any more innocent as he writes “she tries to be innocent about it.”

In the next stanza there is again a reference to the earlier climbing of the tree, a tree that was “not very tall, but full of leaves/ like those of a fig tree”. Now the tree looks “as if it would burst/ under every leaf/ into a brood of scarlet figs”. The tree therefore becomes a symbol, a symbol perhaps of fertility. The poem appears to be about the poet’s cousin’s journey from innocence to experience, childhood to adulthood.

#### 5.5.5 ‘SELF-PORTRAIT’

‘Self-Portrait’ is a very short poem from *Striders* (1966). The title of the poem is extremely suggestive. Preoccupation with the self is a pervasive theme in modern poetry and here Ramanujan resorts to self-portrait. In the case of paintings, self-portraits reveal the painters’ interiority. In the poem it is interesting to note the poet revealing himself not in colours, but in words. Ramanujan is perhaps trying to interrogate the notion of the ‘self’.

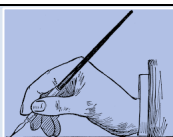
The poem begins with the tantalizing lines, “I resemble everyone/ but myself”. It is intended to shock the reader. How can one resemble everyone but oneself? This is one of the favourite techniques with Ramanujan. He usually begins with flat statements. The suggestion embedded in the lines quoted above perhaps is whether one is a stranger to oneself:

and sometimes see in shop-windows,

despite the well-known laws

of optics,  
the portrait of a stranger

In the above lines the poet is a stranger to himself. Why does this feeling of self-estrangement come to the poet? As a diasporic writer born and educated in India, Ramanujan perhaps feels the displacement, dislocation and anxiety inherent in modern life. The last lines of the poem subverts what was stated in the beginning: “date unknown,/ often signed in a corner/ by my father.” Unusually therefore the portrait is signed by his father! The question is how this can be a self-portrait then. The poem raises a number of issues like self-recognition, self-denial etc. To make a self-portrait one has to know oneself well enough. Perhaps the poet, in trying to become what his father wanted him to be, has become a stranger to himself. So he denies his own signature and attributes it to his father. The poem ends in a mode of self-denial where the poet is left figuring out what his ‘real’ self is.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. List some of Ramanujan’s poems where memory is the major theme.

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2. What are some of the themes that appear in Ramanujan’s poem ‘Looking for a Cousin on a Swing’?

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3. What are some of the contradictions found in Ramanujan’s poem ‘Self-Portrait’?

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## **5.6 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS**

Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the leading figures of Indian poetry in English. He was born on 22nd October, 1928 in the ancient city of Cuttack in Orissa. He completed his early schooling at Stewart School, Cuttack and obtained his MSc degree from the Science College located in Patna, and for a short span of time also taught there in 1949. Mahapatra taught Physics throughout his life in several Government Colleges of Orissa before finally retiring in the year 1986.

Mahapatra started writing poetry quite late in his life, when he was 38 years old. His first volume of poetry titled *Swayamvara and Other Poems* came out in 1971. In the same year, another collection of poetry followed - *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*. His other poetry collections include *A Father's House* published in 1976, and the critically acclaimed *A Rain of Rites* which also appeared in 1976. His other collections *Waiting* appeared in 1979, *The False Start* in 1980 and 1981 saw the publication of *Life Signs*. Several other books of poems followed - *Selected Poems*, 1987, *Burden of Waves and Fruit*, 1988, *Temple*, 1989, *A Whiteness of Bone* in 1992. One of his most celebrated works, *Relationship* (1980) won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for the year 1981. Apart from being a poet he also published a short story collection entitled *The Green Gardener* written in English. He published a collection of original poetry composed in Oriya too. Mahapatra had also been deeply engaged with *Chandrabhaga*, a journal for creative writing, from 1979 to 1985. His most recent books of poems include *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2001) and *Random Descent* (2005).

Mahapatra often deals with various complex issues in his poetry. In his poems he writes about themes like life, death, human

relationships, traditions and superstitions. Mahapatra as a poet is deeply influenced by Orissa, his native place and many of his poems dominantly deal with the society and milieu of Orissa. He heavily draws on the landscape of his place of birth. In fact, Orissa constitutes one of the significant presences in his poems. His poem ‘Dawn at Puri’ is an excellent example of this. In this poem, the poet describes the sea beach of Puri, the famous Lord Jagannath temple with all its harsh realities. The poem poignantly projects the deplorable condition of the white clad widowed women who are waiting their turn to enter the temple premises. In his poem “Indian Summer Poem” also we find the realities of Orissa is reflected. Here he talks about life and death, and the funeral pyres which happen to be the dominant image in most of his poems.

Although Mahapatra represents the regional socio-economic reality of Orissa in his poems, his delineation of the subjects reflects the universal ideas of existence. The regional backdrop in his poems transcends, and touches upon, the general and the universal understanding of things. Another feature of Mahapatra’s poems is that it reflects his critical attitude towards religion and tradition, especially Hindu customs and rituals. Many poems expose the hollowness of religion and its callousness towards the weaker sections of society. In his poems he holds up the grandiosity of religion with its big temples, chanting priests, etc and places it against the miserable condition of the people. He showcases the failure of the religious class in understanding or helping the people who suffer. His poem ‘Dawn at Puri’ subverts the patriarchy sanctified notions associated with the widows who are forced to follow religious rites and rituals. The various images like skull, endless crows, funeral pyres, project the grim realities of the religious atmosphere of Orissa. Thus, Mahapatra as a poet brings to light the true nature of things and criticises it in his poetic representations.

## **5.7 READING THE POEMS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA**

### **5.7.1 'HUNGER'**

The poem 'Hunger' poignantly deals with the crude nature of human existence. The poet describes various manifestations of 'hunger' in a very telling manner. He refers to the despicable poverty of under-privileged people and sexual hunger in others who exploit the poverty-stricken people to satisfy their carnal desires. The speaker/persona of the poem is led by a fisherman to his young, 15-year-old daughter to carry out a sexual transaction. The fisherman offers the speaker her daughter for the latter's sexual gratification. Unable to contain his lust the speaker succumbs to his desires which is aptly described by the poet when he says that 'the flesh was heavy on my back'.

The fisherman said: Will you have her, carelessly,  
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words  
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.

I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

The fisherman's 'net' in the poem symbolic acts as a device to lure interested customers. The young girl's response is best summed up by the phrase "as cold as rubber". This is a shocking reality as she is shown as bereft of her will and agency and she has to submit to the will of her father and the need of her family. She is just a tool in the hand of her father. In this poem the poet explores two kinds of hunger which run parallel in the poem till they intersect at one point: the fisherman's (or the girl's) hunger for survival is linked to the speaker's physical hunger. The poem is thus a poetic rendering of the gloomy and bitter realities of life and human relationships.

### **5.7.2 'INDIAN SUMMER POEM'**

This poem describes the truth of human existence in all its manifestations. Set against the backdrop of a scene in Orissa with the

priests chanting louder and the funeral pyres burning bright, the poem opens with a rather gloomy note with the gloomy sound of the 'sombre wind' which he parallels with the loud chanting of the priests:

Over the souging of the sombre wind  
priests chant louder than ever;  
the mouth of India opens.

Crocodiles move into deeper waters.

Mornings of heated middens  
smoke under the sun.

The poem describes a summer afternoon with images which signifies the harsh realities of existence. On one hand, the 'souging of the sombre wind' is heard ('souging' meaning of 'a moaning, whistling, or rushing sound') and on the other the 'priest chant louder'. It is therefore apparent that the priest's loud chanting (suggesting presence of Brahmanical/patriarchal power) is foregrounded against the background of the death of the widows which may be interpreted beyond its literal meaning. While 'good wife lies . . . in bed' 'unexhausted', there is 'the deep roar of funeral pyres.' The poet here reflects the truth of death in a very evocative manner. He presents how his wife slumbers in the summer afternoon quite unaffected by the gloomy 'roar' of the burning funeral pyres. The image of the poem perhaps hints to the presence of evil or danger lurking beneath the banality of being in the world, like crocodiles moving in deep waters unnoticed by their prey. The image of a heap of cow dung getting smoked in the sun points to the decay and decadence surrounding human lives. The burning sun of the hot afternoon seems to get connected with the burning pyres. The poet seems to be conscious of such a depressing state of affairs and in this case he is separated from his wife who is totally oblivious of such awareness

going on in the mind of the poet. Thus, this poem is about the condition of life and its relationship with death and his understanding of human relationships in such a state of realisation.

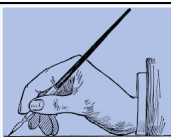
### 5.7.3 “A MISSING PERSON”

The poem “A Missing Person” by Mahapatra describes the condition of a woman and her state of existence. The missing person referred to in the poem is a woman who is unable to recognise her own self.

In the darkened room  
a woman  
cannot find her reflection in the mirror

waiting as usual  
at the edge of sleep

The poem points to the effacement of the woman’s identity and this is achieved by the use of the line like ‘cannot find her reflection in the mirror’. ‘The darkened room’ in the poem is suggestive of the grim realities of her existence which perhaps is responsible for her lack of understanding of her own condition. Towards the end of the poem the writer gives the image of a lamp burning in the midst of darkness. The ‘yellow flames’ of the lamp hints at the light of knowledge which alone can illuminate her life and state of being in the world. The realisation of her own self and identity can only be brought with the power of knowledge. Here we find that the mind in absence of knowledge of the true nature of things is unaware of where her ‘lonely body hides’, suggesting the external factors of her life. The physicality, or the surroundings of her existence, is deeply connected with the realm of her mind or her consciousness as a being in the world around her. The poem thus is a poetic representation of the quest for self and identity of a woman and her struggle for existence.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are some of the major themes of Jayanta Mahapatra's poems?

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2. How old is the fisherman's daughter in Mahapatra's poem "Hunger"?

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3. What, according to you, is the major irony in Mahapatra's poem "Indian Summer Poem"?

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### 5.8 SUMMING UP

By now you may have been acquainted with all the three poets prescribed in this unit – Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra. All these poets have shaped up Modern Indian English Poetry in their own individual ways. They have been able to strike a balance between tradition and modernity and at the same time they have been successful in carving a language of their own. More so in their poetry we find the “need to probe and assert their Indianness” (Prasad 36). What becomes important in their poetry is their relationship with their environment – both the urban space and the natural rural space. According to G.J.V. Prasad, it “has always been the agenda for Indian English poets – to defend their right to exist as Indians and as poets writing in English” (45). So whether they are poets writing from India such as Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra or poets like Ramanujan



who writes from abroad, India and her concerns continue to occupy the central locus and it is evident from their poetry we have discussed in this unit.



### 5.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Critically discuss Nissim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English Poetry? Illustrate from your reading of some of his poems.
2. Comment on Nissim Ezekiel's experimentation with language through a discussion of the poems prescribed for you.
3. Would you consider Nissim Ezekiel a modern poet? Give a well-thought out answer.
4. What are the dominant themes in the poem "Background Casually"? Why are they so important for Ezekiel?
5. Would you agree that the poem "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is about the relationship between poetry and love? What exactly does the poet want to convey through this poem?
6. What is Nissim Ezekiel's intention in writing a poem like "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S."? Comment on his use of English in this poem.
7. Discuss how Nissim Ezekiel brings out the predicament of the urban man in "Case Study".
8. From a reading of Ramanujan's poems can you say that his location away from India governs most of his writings? Give a well-reasoned response.
9. Where does the poet position himself in the poem "A River"? Discuss the concerns that preoccupy the poet.
10. Comment on Ramanujan's use of memory in "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" and "Breaded Fish"?
11. How does Ramanujan address the theme of family and relationships in his poems "Obituary" and "Self-Portrait"? Give a well-considered answer.
12. Bring out the main themes in Jayanta Mahapatra's poems.
13. "Hunger" by Mahapatra is a very moving poem. Discuss the two kinds of hunger that Mahapatra depicts in the poem and how he actually resorts to a social critique of the society.

14. Comment on Mahapatra's representation of women in his poems "Indian Summer" and "A Missing Person".



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## ***UNIT 6: KAMALA DAS AND CONFESSIONAL WRITING***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

6.0 Introduction

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Kamala Das: Life and Works

6.3 Reading the Poems of Kamala Das

6.3.1 An Introduction

6.3.2 The Dance of the Eunuchs

6.3.3 The Looking-Glass

6.4 Summing Up

6.5 Assessment Questions

6.6 References and Recommended Readings

### ***6.0 INTRODUCTION***

Among the post-independence Indian women poets, Kamala Das perhaps has made the most lasting impact. Das' poetry speaks with a fierce honesty about being a woman in a culture where women are silenced. As a poet she is quite frank in speaking of her experiences and her desires in an uninhibited way. In this unit we will try to understand Kamala Das' life, her works, and her writing style which often assume the structure of a confession.

### ***6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

After studying this unit, you will be:

- acquainted with a brief overview of Kamala Das' life and works
- familiar with the thematic concerns and stylistic features of her poetry
- able to analyse women's concerns that are prevalent in Das' poetry

## 6.2 KAMALA DAS: AN OVERVIEW OF HER LIFE AND WORKS

Kamala Das was born on 31 March 1934 in Punnayurkulam, a village in Malabar, South Kerala to V.M. Nair and Balamani Amma, a well-known poet and writer in Malayalam. Her maternal grand-uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon was also a famous poet, a theosophist and an outstanding scholar of the Malabar. Kamala Das grew up in a large joint family and all of its members lived in the Nalapat House with its idyllic surrounding. This house becomes the subject of many of her poems.

Kamala Das was exposed to the English language at a very early age through her father's job in Calcutta in a British company. She studied in a Catholic English school meant for "white" children and for some years even attended a boarding school too. Kamala got married even before she finished her undergraduate education. As a bilingual writer she began writing quite early at the age of six and her first poems were published in the *The Indian P.E.N.* and in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Her works include *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems* (1984) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selected Poems* (1997). She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985 for the first volume of her *Collected Poems* (1984). She is also a short story writer and a novelist. Some of her short stories are collected in *The Doll for the Child Prostitute and Other Stories*. Her autobiography *My Story* was published in 1974.

Kamala Das belongs to a poetic tradition of Indian women writers in English that dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, to its pioneers, Toru Dutt and Aru Dutt. One more tradition that Das imbibes is the local tradition of the Malabar poets which includes her own ancestors of the Nalapat House. The native roots of her sensibility lend a unique quality to Das' poems written in English. Das is mostly considered as a confessional poet perhaps because most of her poems are accounts of her deep personal experiences. What strikes one on reading her poems is the frankness of her expression. She wrote about sexual frustrations, desires, love-less marriage, affairs, lust, neurosis and loneliness at a time when such things were taboos.

In her own way she has given voice to her anger against the patriarchal norms. In doing so she brought novelty to Indian English poetry which so far had not articulated the subject of woman's anxiety. She brought into her writing a whole range of women's experiences which were never spoken about before.

### 6.3 READING THE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

#### 6.3.1 'AN INTRODUCTION'

'An Introduction' is one of the most anthologized poems of Kamala Das. It first appeared in her collection *Summer in Calcutta* published in 1965. The most prominent characteristic feature of the poem is the frankness of tone. It brings to the surface questions of language, woman's identity, and patriarchy at large. Bruce King is of the opinion that "in Das' poetry distance between the poet and poetry is collapsed" (King 21). The very opening of the poem is suggestive and brings out the issue of language; the poem itself becomes a defence for her writing poetry in English. Kamala Das seems to suggest that writing in English is a matter of choice. By writing in English she also resorts to politics of language. Writing in a non-native language by a female poet itself constitutes an act of resistance. Das asserts the right for exercising artistic and individual freedom of expression. For her, using any language is a matter of personal choice:

Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like?

These lines articulate her frustrations as well as anger which is directed to individuals located both in the domestic/family and public spaces. This frustration is born not just out of people's objection to her use of English for creative purpose but basically of the patriarchal attempts to control women's agency. She objects to certain impositions made by patriarchal agents to curtail women's exercise of freedom. She writes:

The language I speak  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses,  
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half  
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,  
It is human as I am human, don't  
You see?

The speaker in the poem asserts her right to speak and to speak the language of her preference, too, which in this case is an idiosyncratic version of Indian English. The speaker defends her choice of using this language, even though people consider it distorted and funny, because it is a language that gives expression to her own emotions and experience. This poem cannot just be read as a plea for Indian English; it is also a plea for individual freedom of expression in particular, and the freedom of women in general. Being silenced for a long time, her own desire to be considered “human” is palpable when she says outright that the language used is “mine, mine alone.”

She then starts narrating her own story. In other words, ‘her’ story is as important as ‘his’. She narrates the story of her childhood which was solitary and how difficult it was for her to grow up on her own.

I was child, and later they  
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.  
When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.

The focus here is on the physiological growth of the speaker’s female body which the world around her gazed at with interest and lust. This is in contrast to her own desire for love. The juxtaposition of these two different varieties of

love and desire is foregrounded in the lines quoted above and generates anxiety and uncertainty in the mind of the girl. Her marriage is fixed at an early age and it materialises as a union of bodies rather than minds. Being too young to understand the complexities of marriage, she experiences marital rape. There seems to be autobiographical resonance here as we know that she married when she was just sixteen years old. Legally, she is still a minor but marriage gives her husband the right over her body. She says: "He did not beat me/But my sad woman's body felt so beaten." The narrator was unprepared for this experience and this remains a wound in her psyche from where she is unable to come out. This traumatic experience in turn forces her to make various attempts to escape from her 'self'. What follows is an act of rebellion on the part of the poet as she rejects the norms that society sets for women. She becomes hysterical as she records the voices that want to restrict women to their feminine roles:

Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit  
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.  
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better  
Still, be Madhavikutty.

She is asked to "fit in", is expected to play her domestic "role", and display behaviour that is becoming of a woman "Don't play at schizophrenia or be a nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when jilted in love...". The speaker, however, is not someone who is ready to fit into the roles expected of her.

The last stanza of the poem is steeped in incoherence as the speaker is engaged in a search for her 'self'. She seeks company in other men only to be rejected. There is a note of uncertainty in these lines as the poet is desperately seen to be on the move searching for love, for freedom, for understanding, all of which have been denied to her. The repetition of "I" in the last stanza reiterates the poet's search for 'self' which was stated at the very beginning.

This is a very telling poem by Kamala Das that captures the struggle of a woman to survive in a claustrophobic society.

### 6.3.2 'THE DANCE OF THE EUNUCHS'

The poem 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' was first published in Kamala Das' collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). As the title suggests, this poem is about eunuchs, who are people always marginalized by the society. Once again this poem assumes an almost autobiographical tone as the author identifies her own plight to that of the eunuchs, the drags in society. Through the use of apt symbols and images Kamala Das conjures up in the poem an atmosphere of a hot, tortured, corrupt, sterile and barren world. The question that would confront the reader is: what does the poet associate the dance of the eunuchs with? Does it remind the poet of her own colourless and fractured life? Is the word 'dance' suggestive of ecstasy or is it, particularly when it is associated with eunuchs, suggestive of pain and desperation? Is their dance driven by happiness, or is it a dance that is in a way forced upon them as they have limited ways to earn a living. Beneath the dance lies the unfathomable pain of rejection, lovelessness, melancholy. Their performance is mechanical and painful – "they danced till they bled." The conditions in which they have to dance are difficult.

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came  
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals,  
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling,  
Jingling.

As the poet writes 'Their voices/Were harsh, their songs melancholy.' Even as they sang and danced of "lovers dying" and of "children left unborn," they "wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy." The use of "vacant ecstasy" is very suggestive. Why does the poet observe that their ecstasy is vacant? She puts that question to her readers who should ponder over it. Have we stopped to consider about the pathetic condition of these eunuchs who dance and sing on happy occasions of others but who have no reasons to be joyful? In the closing



lines of the poem the poet, through the use of images like “half-burnt logs”, “funeral pyres” and phrases like ‘a drought and rottenness,” brings out the sad plight of the eunuchs. Their sorry state even silences the crow and renders the children still – children who watch them performing.

The environment of heat and sterility is, first of all, expressed through “fiery gulmohur” and the “jasmynes in their hair” could not provide them any relief or soothing effect. The image of “their sorry breasts” again suggests their sterility and barrenness because they belong to neither sex. Their desires are destined to remain unfulfilled. Similarly, the images of “a meagre rain that smelt of dust in/ Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....” are highly suggestive of rottenness. Rain, which brings relief, only heightens the sense of deprivation and hopelessness. They highlight the depressed and dejected mental state of the poet as well. The images applied to the external world indeed dramatize the parched mindscape of the poet. It is a poem that successfully delineates the contrast between the superficial joy and inner depravity of being human.

### **6.3.3 ‘THE LOOKING-GLASS’**

The poem ‘The Looking-Glass’ is quite a frank outburst of Kamala Das. The poem exposes the male ego that takes satisfaction in being the provider of women’s needs. In an ironic tone she articulates the tilted relationship between a man and a woman. The speaker is the poet herself. The poem is steeped in sensuality with frequent references to sensory elements of smell and touch. She writes:

Stand nude before the glass with him  
So that he sees himself the stronger one  
And believes it so, and you so much more  
Softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your  
Admiration.

The speaker plays reverse psychology on her man as she makes him feel “the stronger one/And believes it to be so and you so much more/ softer, younger, lovelier...” She lets the man feel that he is her “only man” who satisfies her “endless female hungers.” She offers to him her whole female being which includes “the musk of sweat between the breasts”, “scent of long hair” and “the warm shock of menstrual blood.” The tone of irony is imminent when she says, “Gift him all, / Gift him what makes you woman...all your endless female hungers.” This is a suggestion of female surrender and submission which is expected of her.

This is a poem where Kamala Das very subtly and scathingly attacks societal norms regarding man-woman relationship where women always have to maintain the pretence of subscribing to the idea of a strong man. There are many references to the body – both male and female. The words like “his limbs”, “his eyes”, “dropping towels”, “jerky way he urinates” are suggestive of maleness and male superiority over woman. While words like “scent of long hair”, “sweat between breasts”, “menstrual blood” are suggestive of their being objects of male gaze. A man fantasises “endless female hungers” only as a means for his own erotic pleasure. The unequal man-woman relationship in a conjugal life is laid bare in the line “Stand nude before the glass with him/ so that he sees himself the stronger one” – both the male and female participants are stripped of their clothes which is only a façade that stands for a rhetoric of civilised norms. The implied image of the dress only conceals the hierarchical relationship in the conjugal space and, of course, in the larger social life. A woman is always expected to obey her “man”. A woman is made to believe that her whole existence is dependent on a man – “but living/ without him afterwards may have to be faced.” The concluding lines of the poem depict a picture of woman’s life in the absence of a man – “a living without life”, a life which is “drab and destitute”. Kamala Das foregrounds, and then contests, the idea that a woman’s life without the existence of a man is meaningless. This short poem can be read as a reflection of woman’s helplessness when she blindly puts her faith on her man and surrenders herself totally to him. The poet first documents the actual social position of women and then issues a wake-up call to them – they should not be a mere doll in the

hands of men who can play with at their will; they should rather be strong individuals with personal identities and agencies.

#### **6.4 SUMMING UP**

By now you must have been acquainted with the poet Kamala Das and her poetic style. Das' style is professedly provocative and exhibitionistic. Among the poets who emerged after India's independence, as we have mentioned earlier, Das stands out because of her fierce and unapologetic style which paves the way for a new kind of poetry. Das' poetry is often characterized by its extreme personal nature, using incidents from her own life to address larger social issues. Her confessional style has given a direction or dimension to Modern Indian English Poetry. Unlike her male contemporary poets, Kamala Das does not attempt to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. She is outspoken, expresses her emotion directly with images that often appear shocking to conservative element for their erotic content and brash outspokenness. She maps women's emotion realistically and expresses them with clarity. She is a pathbreaker, an iconoclast, and a beacon light for Indian feminist poets and authors who emerged later.



#### **6.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. Do you think that Kamala Das in her poetry addresses women's concerns? Discuss critically, illustrating from the poems you have read.
2. "The language I speak/ Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses,/ All mine, mine alone." From your reading of the poem "An Introduction" discuss your understanding of the language question as addressed by Kamala Das.
3. Discuss Kamala Das' representation of the eunuchs in her poem "Dance of the Eunuchs"? Comment on her use of images to emphasize her point.
4. How is the man-woman relationship treated in Kamala Das' poem "Looking-Glass"? Can you elaborate on the ironic tone that pervades through the poem? Discuss.
5. Do you consider Kamala Das as a pioneering feminist poet? Discuss.



## 6.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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### **JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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