

MODERN
INDIAN POETRY

an anthology

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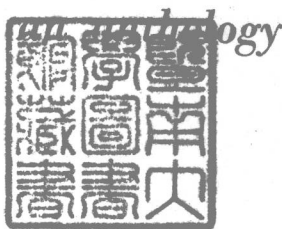
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MODERN INDIAN POETRY



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TO
SRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

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Humayun Kabir

foreword

AN ANTHOLOGY is a reflection of the editor's taste and judgement. Since no two readers react in exactly the same way to the same poem and sometimes the reaction of the same reader to the same poem differs at different times, it is obvious that no anthology can be fully satisfying. However careful and discriminating the editor may be, there will be critics who will point to notable omissions and unfortunate inclusions. Even the editor will at times feel that he has been compelled to leave out pieces that he would fain include and included ones which would perhaps be better left out.

To compile an anthology of poems from one language is thus in itself a difficult task. In the case of an anthology of modern Indian poetry, this difficulty is enhanced manifold. Indian poets write in many languages and standards of taste and criticism are by no means uniform. The editor is faced with an almost impossible task in selecting poems from different languages with which he has differing degrees of familiarity. He has to depend on translations into some common medium except in the case of his own mother tongue and at the most one or two other languages. To make a selection of representative Indian poetry in such circumstances requires courage as well as grace.

To present through the medium of English Indian poems written in different languages is no easy task. Translation is always a difficult business and it becomes

even more difficult when the languages concerned have such different backgrounds and associations as English and any Indian language. Poetry is written with words and it is wellnigh impossible to transplant into another language the nuances of feeling and thought which are associated with particular words. Even the best of translators cannot carry over into another language the tradition and the heritage of the original.

A. V. Rajeswar Rau is conscious of all these difficulties but has all the same attempted the task of representing Indian poetry through English translations. He has done so as a contribution to better understanding and communication not only among Indians speaking different languages but also between Indians and peoples of other countries. English has in a very real sense become a common medium for people of different races, nationalities and traditions. English translations of the work of Indian poets will help to bring their work into the common pool of the poetry of the world.

Translations are difficult and yet there is perhaps no alternative to translations in building up a universal literature out of the contributions of writers and poets of different nations. English has enriched itself by translating freely from all other languages and Indian languages must do the same. The difficulties of translation may also be overstated. It may be true that the subtle nuances and associations of poetry cannot be transferred from one language to another. The feelings and the thoughts of the poet can however raise echoes in the hearts of people across the barriers of language. I sometimes feel that great poetry suffers least in such translation. The original writer may be superior in genius and have a fresher inspiration, but even after making all allowances for such differences, a genuine and authentic poem carries over into another language some of the deepest thoughts and feelings of the original.

This anthology of modern Indian poetry proves on the one hand the basic unity of the Indian outlook, and on the other, the common humanity which characterises

men and women of different countries and nations in spite of differences in customs, traditions and history. Indians have reacted to the various human situations in the same way as men and women elsewhere. There are poets for whom the word is the basic unit and poetry essentially a combination of sounds and symbols. There are others who have exalted feelings at the cost of thought and experience. Still others have been swayed by intellectual considerations. Currents which have influenced poetry in Europe have also impinged upon the poetic consciousness in India. By presenting this variety and vitality of the poetic impulse among our contemporaries, A. V. Rajeswara Rau has helped to increase understanding and comprehension among Indians inter se and among Indians and other peoples of the world.

New Delhi.

30 October 1958.

WHAT is essentially modern in modern Indian poetry, is partly the offspring of an alien culture whose impact on our life and letters was immense, in the wake of the British rule of our country. Towards the close of the 19th century British Missionaries in an all-out endeavour to spread the gospel, helped to resuscitate several regional languages. As the imperialist hold was gradually consolidated, the English language became almost a part of our life and culture. It also awakened the sleeping soul of India to the wonder of a new life and purposeful striving.



MODERN Indian poetry although barely half a century old, has already passed through many vicissitudes in its chequered career, seemingly lacking a proper direction. This is because of the unsettled social and political conditions in the country and the uncertain future of poetry itself. The first quarter of the century had seen what may be termed as the Romantic Revival. It had a mystical accent about it. It had besides a certain refinement of language and a dexterity of metrical composition, blending softness of sound with sweetness of phrasing. Platonic love coupled with a Bohemian outlook was the fashion among its devotees. Later realisation of moral and material suppression at the hands of an alien power and the burning desire to be free from foreign domination added a sort of prestige to the patriotic sentiments reflected in the poetry of the time. A number of exquisite lyrics of outstanding merit have been composed by writers belonging to this school.

During the later thirties the Indian poet came into contact with other European poetry, particularly that of France, which initiated him into the mysteries of sound and symbol and of image and ornament—the essential ingredients of the modern experiment in the field of poetry. Influenced by this revelation and inspired by a possible social upheaval, he announced a revolt against the romantic revellers and inaugurated a new search for freedom in metrical innovation and thematic construction. He drew his inspiration from the teeming life around him and modelled his metrical forms on the patterns of indigenous folk-songs.

While this experimentation was still in its formative stage, the threat of a world conflagration and the war itself came in quick succession and took the poet unawares. The new experiment was caught up, before it was fully tried, in the coils of a political upsurge. The glory of a new social order that was the dream of an oppressed people reflected itself in every form of art and poetry was no exception. The quest for a new freedom, the desire to break the shackles of outworn metre soon led a large number of young poets of great promise to a practice of versifying political slogans, using the very jargon current about social inequalities. Their talent, the strength of their sentiment and the authenticity of their emotion was in some cases of a high order. But generally aesthetic purpose was subordinated to propaganda. In course of time it became widely known that this school of poetry bore the stamp of a political ideology devoted to the promotion of a dogmatic faith in the inevitability of class conflict. This is often proudly styled people's poetry. The advent of 'progressivism' in our cultural life has had an adverse, if not a devastating, effect on our arts, especially poetry.



Nor long after the end of the second world war, India attained her independence. A strong sentiment of nationalism took hold of the people but national pride has, alas, tended to restrict the widening of our poetic vision. The creative upsurge in the poetry of the pre-independence era, soon showed signs of decline with the emergence of freedom. The reasons are not far to

seek, for the gulf dividing the dream of the poet and the reality staring at him was far too wide. He wanted something to happen that would set at nought all that was responsible for his material want and spiritual loneliness. To him, independence, in the absence of relief on his own terms, remained a mere sentiment, with the result that he was disillusioned and frustrated.

Curiously enough, the middle class intelligentsia, which contributed the largest share in the struggle for freedom was overnight thrown out of the ranks of power in the new India that emerged. With the transfer of power, there have crept in strange forces whose supreme aim is to get into saddles and dominate every sphere of our national activity. The intelligentsia temperamentally out of tune with the strange climate thus created, have slowly withdrawn themselves from active participation in the life of the community. The intellectual ferment of the creative mind has given place to mediocrity and opportunism, with the result that several pretenders to the throne of the Muse are today struggling for recognition and reward. Evaluation of art is decided by the opinion of the many—a kind of democratic aestheticism! To them culture or art is no more than another means of self-aggrandisement.



POETRY of our generation is passing through one of its most critical periods. The votaries of the old school influenced by Tagore and the Romanticists are unable to adjust themselves to the spirit of modern times. In their search for novelty in a return to traditional methods, they have almost lost touch, except in a few cases, with the spiritual unrest of mankind, characteristic of our age. Their poetry which sprang out of innocence, has failed to blossom into experience. The main source of their imagery which has all along been the tranquil, unsophisticated rural landscape and life, could not be rescued to fit into the new image of the city. Sometimes their reaction to visual and emotional events has been eclectic, far from being genuine.

Among some of the younger poets today, signs of great promise are discernible and their work is distinguished by striking technical innovation and lucid, impassioned utterance. Their