

# Relevance of Spiritual Poetry In Modern Times

Dr. Purnima Bhatnagar

Associate Professor in English

M. B. Govt. P. G. College, Haldwani -263139 Nainital-Uttarakhand

**Abstract:** poetry echoes the very psyche of the age in which it is produced. If the other branches of literature like drama, novel, prose etc. voice the cultural, political and social mind-set of the age; poetry expresses the soul of it. The awakening of the soul and permanently seated in that soul consciousness is called spiritual enlightenment and the key to all problems of existence is hidden in this enlightenment. Judged from this standpoint, modern poetry will have to be spiritual to solve and resolve the critical issues of the modern age, which is getting more and more chaotic, turbulent and violent as time passes on. Peace, harmony, happiness and perfection are the properties of the soul and unless the soul is awakened, normalcy cannot be restored in the world. Once again the world will have to look forward to the ancient wisdom of India enshrined in the Vedas and Upanishads. The language of poetry will be *mantric* having a soothing effect on the disturbed and agitated mind of the modern man. Therefore spiritual poetry is the demand of the present times and its relevance cannot be questioned.

**Key Words:** Superamental. Intuition, enlightenment, mantric poetry.

The very word spiritual implies the domain of spirit. Spirit is variously called as Self, Soul and Inner Being. The initiation in spiritual life aims at exploring higher ranges of consciousness, intensifying intuition and exploring new dimensions of being. At a glance this seems to be abstract and ambiguous to a scientific mind but to a person, deeply interested in studying his individual nature and the workings of mysterious Nature in the universe, this is the only key to unlock the mystery of creation. The most ancient and the earliest creation- the Vedas are a proof of this highest state achieved by the rishis. Thus spirituality is a domain of awareness, a turning to inward consciousness and embarking on an inner journey of being. Indian wisdom, from the very ancient times, declares that the innermost consciousness is the centre; the core of human existence and everything else besides it is peripheral. Usually mankind lives in an outward consciousness; lives his materialistic life according to a fixed, stereotyped plan imposed by the orthodox society and seeks the solution of his problems in the external. To live in external consciousness is always easy, comfortable and requires no pain since humanity is habitually steeped in indolence. If few people try to come out of this comfort zone of physical inertia, they reach, at the most, the plain of intellect or mind and do not go beyond it. The unprecedented development of science is the outcome of it. But science has its own limitations and it cannot go beyond matter. Matter is the first crust of the multilayered truth and science cannot penetrate into the depths.

The seers, the rishis who live in the soul- consciousness, have realised the inmost truth of existence and on the basis of their profound knowledge of the creation, declare that being's consciousness has three

dimensions- mind, heart and soul. Mind goes in different direction and heart says something else. All the efforts to establish a union between mind and heart turn futile and human energy goes waste. The modern man is a fragmented being.

A spiritual person is an integrated being, free from internal conflict, full of love, compassion and humanitarian attitude. Buddha, Christ, Lord Ram, Krishna fall in the category. But the problem is how it is possible to reach that high level. It is possible if man begins to live in soul- consciousness and in order to live in this consciousness one should have an intense aspiration, an overwhelming inner urge to take a leap in that consciousness of illumination that banishes the dark ignorance. When the ordinary mental consciousness is flooded with effulgent light, the seer cannot help singing poems. Great and grand poetry has a mystic connection with this state of transformation.

The spiritual poetry ventures to enter into a new consciousness and this poetry is often termed mystical poetry. The word mystic is used in the sense of a certain kind of inner seeing and feeling of things, a way which to the intellect would seem occult and visionary-for this is something different from imagination and its work with which the intellect is familiar.

Belief in the unseen is the pivot of mystical poetry and to reach the unreachable, to make visible the invisible and to define the ineffable is the effort of the poet. The mysterious creative power of the universe is termed as Nature and mystical poets explore it and come out with some shining jewels of truth.

What will be the nature and source of this poetry? It will be intuition and in spiritual poetry intellect will not interfere. The inspiration to write this poetry takes the poet beyond the last bounds of imagination: "It will be first and most a poetry of the intuitive reason, the intuitive senses, the intuitive delight soul in us, getting from this enhanced source of inspiration a more sovereign poetic enthusiasm and ecstasy, and then, it may even be, rise towards a still greater power of revelation nearer to the direct vision and word of the overmind from which all creative inspiration comes." (*SABCL, Vol. 9, p. 207*)

Poetry is the powerful overflow of emotions and it hardly matters whether it is spontaneous or deeply thought over. It voices the aspirations and feelings of the society, the age in which it is produced and expresses the concern of the poet for it. Sensuous, romantic and realistic poetry is written in accordance with the demand and temperament of the age. In the history of literature, it has been seen that in the age of crisis, poetry has taken a spiritual turn. More than often, poet's own inquisitive nature and his interest in the mystery of creation ushers him in the domain of mysticism. Spiritual poetry seems to be a rare phenomenon in literature but this is not totally absent from the scene. It is also a fact that poets, genuinely interested in the mystery of creation, have turned to it now and then. They have tried to fathom the depth of the vast ocean of mysterious life according to their capacity. A cursory look on the history of English poetry proves it.

Mystical thought and metaphysical consciousness occur throughout in various degrees and forms in English literature. From the fourteenth century onwards, the mystical tradition grew steadily in England.

Contemplation was then socially recognized as the noblest activity one could engage in. It was, however, in the seventeenth century that mystical verse flourished in England. It was a period of settled belief. A number of poets belonging to the 'school of Donne,' known popularly as the Metaphysical poets, distinguished themselves by writing verse that gave superb expression to their thoughts of Nature, mostly religious in essence. They were devout Christians and, though not altogether free from doubts and perplexities, their religious moorings were firm; they never crossed the bounds of dogma. The poets are notably George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan. Poetry, in their hands, acquired a distinctively intellectual tone. Often religious poetry is misunderstood for spiritual poetry. The organized sects of religions restrict freedom of thinking. Even the much-acclaimed epic - Milton's *Paradise Lost* falls in this category. It cannot look beyond orthodox Christianity. Rohit Mehta says, "The most powerful expression of this denial is the worship of a Dogma or a Creed. One of the essential freedoms is the Freedom to Think, but this has no place where dogmas and creeds rule. In any country or civilization where dogma takes the place of intellectual freedom, there, very soon, decadence starts. (The Dialogue With Death107)

Coming to the eighteenth century, the following lines sum up the view of Nature of creation as held by the whole of the period:

First follow Nature and your judgment frame  
By her just standard which is still the same:  
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright.  
One clear, unchanged and universal light,  
Life, force, and beauty must to all impart,  
At once the source, and end, and test of Art.

This is the famous counsel which Pope in his Essays on Criticism gave to writers. In fact, Dryden, Pope and all their followers revered Nature alike. But their Nature was not the same as the Nature of the romantics. The Romantic Movement in English poetry is generally described as a 'Return to Nature'. Nature for Pope and his school stood for normal reality or something like the universal laws of reason. It was something moral and internal. Dr. Johnson characteristically asserted that nothing can please many, and please long but just representations of general nature. The Augustans were against indulgence in personal whims, eccentricities and abnormalities because they were 'unnatural'. Thus, their slogan 'first follow Nature' has to be interpreted in this light. Their perception of Nature was based on the laws of the society and the laws of conventional morality. When the romantics shouted 'return to Nature,' they meant the people should return to the external world of sights and sounds such as trees, mountains, birds, peasants and the sound of storms, birds and animals, as also to primitive simplicity untainted by the fingers of refinement and sophistication of civilization. Eighteenth century poetry was urban or 'drawing-room' poetry as it did not concern itself with the beauties of Nature. The Romantics, without any important exception, stood for a

love of the sights and sounds of Nature, and some even went to the extent of finding a bond of kinship between Nature and man. To Wordsworth Nature became a guide, teacher, and friend. To others also Nature came to have a deeper than physical significance. Blake, at once mystic and poet, was throughout conscious of his role as a prophet. He conceived that it was his vocation to bring mystical illumination within the range of ordinary man and believed that the Infinite is within man's reach if his doors of perception are cleansed. His poems afford sufficient evidence of his unique perception, of his ability to look at life from an unusual mystical angle; his poetics conveys a surprise of "revelation".

It is extremely appropriate to begin with Wordsworth both because he is the senior of all Romantics and is the "high priest of Nature" to whom Nature means more than she does to any other English poet. In the Romantic era, the position of belief was no more secure; religion came into a sharp conflict with science. A new trend is discernible in religious poetry, of which Wordsworth could be looked upon as the leading representative. The larger body of his verse is contemplative in mood and in a number of his poems, especially 'Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey', 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality' and 'The Prelude', the meditative and mystical element is insistent.

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused  
.....  
.....  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of thought  
And rolls through all things. (100)

Likewise Shelly also has the same experience echoing in these lines:

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
  
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
  
Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,  
  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
  
Until Death tramples it to fragments. —(85)

Throughout, the poet values and stresses contemplation; he often dwells on the significance of the condition of equilibrium, the 'wise passiveness' that he considers essential to spiritual growth. He has rightly been described as the greatest prophet of contemplative mysticism. He brings a fresh curiosity and

wonder to bear upon his study of Nature. His creed is strongly pantheistic, as Nature for him becomes something like a goddess. Wordsworth's attitude to Nature continued changing throughout his life. It started with animal and sensuous pleasures and ended on a mystic note. God and Nature became one for him. Nature became the universal Spirit ready for guiding anyone who would care to be guided by her.

The rest of the romantic poets occasionally see a higher power in the outdoor world of physical Nature. In the beginning Coleridge, believed with Wordsworth that Nature leads one 'from joy to joy' and that she never betrays the heart that loves her. Later, however, he became more realistic, and came to realize that joy came from within and not from external Nature. To him the physical nature and man's nature were two different things and not one as in case of Wordsworth. Shelley, like Wordsworth, believed that Nature was a living being. He, however, did not think of Nature as the Supreme spirit meant to delight and teach human beings, but as a spirit full of the principle of Love to which he did not assign any particular function. Shelly, like Wordsworth, found 'healing power' in Nature. It is a different thing that sometimes he found himself to be too sad to be consoled by her. As far as Keats is concerned, he loved Nature not for her spiritual significance or any deep message conveyed by her, but for the sensuous pleasures which she offered. It is a widespread belief that Keats was a sensuous poet. But the lines "unheard melodies are sweeter than heard" and "truth is beauty and beauty is truth" indicate that he was heading slowly towards the mysticism but the factor of his early death stopped him. Had he been given some more time he could have developed a mystical view life. Byron's love of Nature was partly a by-product of his contempt of man. He took a particular delight in envisioning and describing wild and terrifying objects and aspects of Nature which seems to be mocking, as it were, the insignificance of man. He did not deny, however, the healing power of Nature.

The Victorian era was an age of rapid flux and baffling complexity. The position of belief was insecure in the face of the developing scientism of the age, which questioned the claims and basic assumptions of all forms of religion. This time the focus was on human nature and its by-product society, its fulfilment and perfection. Both science and religion did not ensure it. The creative artists such as Carlyle, Dickens and Ruskin protested against what they saw as the evils of the age and pleaded for the preservation of human values, which they felt were being undermined by the new forces of 'progress'. Likewise, the major poets of the period, notably Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, wrote as masters responsible to their age, each committed in his own way to an individual view of life. Of the three poets, Tennyson, the acknowledged bard of his generation, sought a personal solution to the problem posed by the Christian faith, assailed as it was by doubts caused by the theory of evolution. The poem "In Memoriam", though not a religious poem in the conventional sense, involves meditations on the theme of immortality. A disposition for philosophizing and moralizing in verse is equally evident in Robert Browning though he adopts many disguises and gives the impression of being detached in his monologues. A large body of Victorian poetry is discursive in quality, often impregnated with speculative elements. In handling their mediums and materials,

the poets are handicapped by an 'indecision of thought' and 'uncertainty of language' traceable to the complexity and confusion typical of the period.

In the twentieth century Nature of creation fascinates some poets because she offers such a wonderful contrast with the hubbub and ugliness of an industrialized and over sophisticated age. A spirit of alienation impels poets to seek something meaningful. Poets as Masfield, Robert Bridges, W.H. Davies, and Edmund Blunden may not find any mystic significance in Nature, but they are, all the same, charmed by her unsophisticated beauty. Masfield in "Sea-Fever" expresses a strong desire to run away from the dreary life into 'the lonely sea and the sky'. Edmund Blunden points his finger lovingly at the little noticed things of Nature. Davies' poetry has the feature of childlike curiosity in the natural objects everybody finds around himself. Coventry Patmore, Francis Thompson and Yeats found religious and mystical interpretation in Nature. But once again, focus shifted more upon human nature. Poets and thinkers alike discarded the conventional concept of time, and directed their attention to the exploration of the layers of human consciousness and even the unconscious. This time nature was a synonym for the mental or psychological make-up of human nature that is the consciousness of the individual. Influenced by the new psychologists – Freud, Jung and Adler- they came to recognize the human consciousness as a flowing stream which linked the past, present, and future in an organic unity and gave them all a never-changing reality. At any given moment in time the consciousness of a man is abode of a million disjointed impressions which is the job of the artist to reproduce with the least possible interference.

Now, after having a look of the English poetry in England, it will be appropriate to see the development of mysticism in Indian English poetry. As popularly known, Indian mind-set is spiritual and mystical.

During the British regime, some Indians took to English poetry as the medium of expression. Thus the school of Indo-English poets came into existence in the British India. Though English was their medium, the theme and ideas are embedded in Indian philosophy. That period was the period of spiritual crisis in human history. This crisis had led to the one-sided growth of this modern, rational and scientific civilization. This is the law of Nature that excessive negative forces give birth to something positive or harken the dawn of illumination after impregnable darkness of night. Satyuga the cycle of divine illumination comes after the culmination of the darkest forces of Kaluga. Man has infinite potentialities and will climb the ladder of spiritual evolution. Sri Aurobindo says in The Synthesis of Yoga: "It is not mental incapacity, but the long rejection or seclusion from opportunity and withdrawal of the awakening impulse that creates the savage. Barbarism is an intermediate sleep, not an original darkness." (10)

Some poets revolted against the growing materialism and the cultural crisis and once again voiced the peculiar Indian spiritual temperament. In modern poets, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, Mohan Singh, Toru Dutt evince typical Indian philosophical temper of inquiry and questioning the secrets of Nature. Among these are the two stalwarts, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo.

One of Sri Aurobindo's main concerns in all his major works is the exploration of Nature in its cosmic, transcendental and individual aspects. He distinguishes the two modes of Nature, lower and the higher, and suggests that total transformation of lower nature into the higher is the real meaning of spiritual evolution. His concept of poetry is linked to his philosophy that poetry should reveal something higher.

The modern age, more than ever is in intense search for perfection. Happiness, harmony, health, peace are not mere words or shadows. They are the essence of an ideal human life and humanity has been in search of these since times immemorial. When man moves in this direction, struggles and endeavours, he embarks on the journey of evolution. His transformation from a beast into a present day civilized man is the result of this evolutionary process. It has yielded some fruitful results as man has made some more advances in this direction. The development of science and technology is a proof of it. The modern age is proud of it and considers the past ages backward. Man feels a fierce rivalry with Nature and in order to let her down, has accepted all the challenges posed by Nature. Today, man has gone to the Moon and Mars and is planning to establish colonies there. He takes all these as a pinnacle of evolution, thinking to be near the point of perfection. But the real question is-does this development really ensure happiness in life? Does it really bring a soothing effect to suffering humanity? Is it able to heal the wounds of mankind inflicted by the widespread forces of tyranny, cruelty and injustice? Honestly speaking, it does not guarantee happiness, though it creates the illusion of perfection. To live in illusion is the worst possible predicament. Better this perfection should be called pseudo perfection. The unprecedented development of science and technology instead of facilitating life, it has created complexities in it. So long as there is thinking and feeling, as long as there is reacting of the mind, we will not perceive what life is, what reality is. For that very reason science does not ensure true happiness and solace to the aching humanity. The renowned philosopher J. Krishnamurthi says, "Technical knowledge, however necessary, will in no way resolve our inner, psychological pressures and conflict; and it is because we have acquired technical knowledge without understanding the total process of life that technology has become a means of destroying ourselves. The man who knows how to split the atom but has no love in his heart becomes a monster. (43)

Coming to the twenty first century, the scenario has changed completely. This is the age of fierce individualism, all round deterioration of values and ethics but at the same time, the search for perfection and true happiness has become intense.

The satanic forces are dancing a necked dance everywhere and in the midst of forthcoming wars and destruction; there is a little hope to regain the lost paradise. The morning newspaper is full of heart-wrenching stories of corruption, rape, murder, loot and cruelty-leaving man's head held in shame and mocking the glorious saga of the so-called development. The unprecedented progress of science and technology instead of facilitating life, has created complexities in it.

The spiritual truth seems to be impractical to follow to the people of ordinary consciousness but this is the only and ultimate truth and the only key to permanent happiness. The truth Sukriti Ghosal explains in her article Nature of Truth in Art: A Re-Evaluation:

The Vedantists propose three categories of truth: Truth Absolute, Truth Practical and Truth Illusory. They put ideas like god and soul into the first category. Evidently, these ideas are sustained by faith and cannot be established empirically. They look upon Truth Practical as a lower form of truth which is valid in practical life but which does not seem to be true in the strictest metaphysical sense. (The Atlantic Critical Review 7)

Therefore, presently spiritual poetry is the need of the hour and the more crises are there, the more demand for spiritual poetry will be there. The psyche of confused and bewildered humanity finds solace only in the awakening of the spirit. In the bygone ages, this urge in poetry has been felt but now the time has come to write spiritual poetry more consciously than ever before.

Moreover the modern age is consciously seeking new texture of consciousness and wants to open the untapped virgin parts of it. At present the stream of evolution has changed its course from matter and is flowing in the direction of spirit. Evolution of the soul is the breath and life of existence. In every age spiritual evolution is required but it is more than ever required in the present age. The material development has reached its culmination but it is one sided and has brought unresolved complexities in life. No evolution at the cost of spirit can bring solace to the aching heart of humanity and the sad, still, music of humanity will continue forever.

After biological evolution, the greatest challenge before man is the spiritual evolution, Sri Aurobindo aptly defines it “But all life, when we look behind its appearances, is a Vast Yoga of Nature attempting to realise her perfection in an ever increasing expression of her potentialities and to unite herself with her own divine reality.” (Synthesis of Yoga 2) In this enterprise, spiritual poetry alone can be of great help.

This is a tragic fact that stalwart spiritual genius like Sri Aurobindo's poetry and his great pioneering critical work Future Poetry has been neglected so far and he has not been given his due. Savitri is the longest epic of English poetry and the first spiritual one of its kind. But the West is not in the habit of appreciating this kind of poetry -the supremacy of the West and the attitude with which it looks at the Orientals. Humanity is trapped in the whirlpool of uncertainty and imprisoned in the dark sell of ignorance and only such poetry like that of Savitri can help. Dr. H.P. Shukla says, “For that wide release, for the truth light that shall make us whole, that shall liberate us from our present state of helpless thralldom, we must look homeward to the Indian discourse of soul, of Savitri, Nachiketas and Buddha where there is no such thing as a pre or post-colonial agenda and as such perhaps no place for the wrapped voices of the Indian English teacher either.” (Marginal Existence New Trends in Literature 105)

But this scenario of neglect is changing slowly. The proof is the poetry written by the modern American and British poets. Though it is not spiritual in its strict sense, but the restlessness of the psyche is quite conspicuous. They are experimenting with the verse that is vague, ambiguous as though they were trying to reach somewhere.

According to Sri Aurobindo, "Poetry is the most complete of all the arts and most subtle of our means of aesthetic self-expression" is rightly felt to be one of the most powerful aids to this endeavour. Kishor H. Gandhi aptly comments in the foreword of the book Sun-blossom:

After the inevitable but temporary eclipse of its true aim and function which poetry suffered in recent times in common with all the other cultural values of life owing to the preponderantly externalised activism of the modern age, it seems to be endeavouring not only to recover the height of its past achievement from which it fell but also enriched inwardly even from this fall and made more powerfully conscious of its high purpose, to rise to yet newer and greater heights, once again the poetic spirit seems to be coming to the front as a luminous guide to "the ever-progressing soul of humanity;" once again it seems to be resuming its essential function of being the mediator between the truth of the spirit and the truth of life and of revealing through inspired rhythmic word the infinite delight and beauty of the spirit on all the manifold planes of its manifestation. (1)

The dawn of spiritual poetry is sure to come at a fast pace, as time is ripe to welcome it with both hands.

Sri Aurobindo touches or rather reveals the very purpose of creation in this way

Nature shall live to manifest secret God,

The Spirit shall take up the human play,

This earthly life become the life divine. (Savitri 710)

The spiritual poetry will restore the element of sight and listening, the rhythmic speech, as it rose in the past from the heart of the seer and from the native home of the truth. The *mantra* will return with a more deliberate searching, a more deliberate exploration of the self. The spiritual Poetry is not just a search for mantric poetry; it touches on various planes of life, society and culture in general. All life is one and a new human mind moves towards the realisation of its totality and oneness. The poetry which voices the oneness and totality of our being and nature and the worlds and God, will not make the actuality of our earthly life less but more real and rich and full and wide and living to men.

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