CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Modern Indian English-language poetry is one of the many 'new literatures' which began to emerge at the end of the Second World War after the end of colonialism. Unlike the creative writing of Africa and the Caribbean, modern Indian poetry in English has been neglected by most critics, foreign readers and intellectuals for it has no obvious direct relationship to the cultural movements which led to national independence; by 1947 the situation had changed and with it the concern of the new poets became their relationship to and alienation from the realities of their society. In particular, they faced a challenge from older nationalist intellectuals and from regionalists who demanded a renaissance of the culture of the pre-colonial languages of India.

The only answer to those who claimed that Indians could not write authentic poetry in the English in which they had been educated was to write poetry as good as that of British, American and Irish poets, but to write it about Indian lives and conditions. This in itself became the basis of a still continuing conflict as cultural conservatives, nationalists and political radicals wanted a literature about traditional culture or the poor and the rural Hindu masses, whereas the poets were more likely to be well educated, middle class and part of or aware of the modern westernized culture of the cities, universities and professional classes. They often had been raised in families where English was one of the languages spoken, attended good English-language schools, early fallen in love with the English language and its literature, and been either brought up in a cultured environment or by their university days had friends with an interest in the arts and ideas. The supposedly traditional culture of the Hindi-speaking masses, or of their Parsi or Goan Catholic families, was either irrelevant to them or, in some cases, was part of the restrictions against which they were rebelling.

Many of the poets left India for study and travel abroad, or out of dissatisfaction. In this they were no different from previous

generations of Indian intellectuals and writers, including the leaders of the independence movement. Similar to previous generations, some of the writers settled abroad, while others returned, having made a significant choice which would be central to their subsequent history and the development of Indian poetry in English. Among the early poets Nissim Ezekiel, Kersey Katrak, Srinivas Rayaprol and Keshav Malik returned, while Dom Moraes remained abroad for many years. Such poets as Deb Kumar Das, R. Bartholomew and Lawrence Bantleman were, for one reason or another, to become permanent exiles. Later the process would be repeated when Adil Jussawalla and R. Parthasarathy would study in England with the intention of residing there, only to return disillusioned to India, while G. S. Sharat Chandra and A. K. Ramanujan would become American residents.

By the early 1960s the pioneering of Ezekiel and others, centred first on the magazines *Illustrated Weekly of India* and *Quest*, had borne fruit in Writers Workshop volumes of poetry and the journal *Miscellany*. P. Lal, the editor, was one of the early poets; for the first time there was a publisher of volumes of Indian poetry and another devoted promoter and publicist besides Ezekiel.

By the later '60s English-language poetry in India had a handful of now classic volumes, not necessarily published by Writers Workshop, and established significant writers, including Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Ezekiel and Jussawalla; it was gaining recognition from those with an interest in poetry and culture both in India and abroad. Other significant writers had begun to appear, including Parthasarathy, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre, along with Pritish Nandy. A few years later Keki Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar and Jayanta Mahapatra were becoming names to those with an interest in poetry. By now the modern Indian English poets formed a sufficiently large group to have different tastes, aesthetics, standards and styles, with the result that Lal and Nandy were not considered by many of the more serious poets to be of their number. This partly reflected the rapidity with which the poetry was evolving towards international standards as well as differing notions of the art. By 1980, when Keki Daruwalla published the most recent of the major anthologies of modern Indian English verse, eighteen poets were considered worthy of serious attention, and since then others, such as Manohar Shetty, Santan Rodrigues, Vikram Seth

and Melanie Silgardo have appeared, as has a small but rapidly increasing body of critical studies in books and academic journals on the poetry.

Despite continuing attacks on the Indian English poets, their place in modern Indian culture is recognized. Their poetry is part of the process of modernization which includes urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change, increased communication (in the form of films, television, radio, journals and newspapers), national and international transportation networks, mass education and the resulting paradox that as an independent national culture emerges it also participates in the international, modern, usually westernized world. Unless some new radical change occurs, Indian social and economic progress is linked to the same processes of modernization which, for historical and political reasons, have become wedded to the spread of the English language and the evolution of an English-language culture alongside Hindi and the regional languages. Although presently the language of only some four per cent of the population and with no regional base, English is the language of those who govern, communicate, produce and make decisions at the national level. As the language of upward mobility and modern consumer tastes, its use is likely to spread further and as it does it will increasingly become Indianized, a process already noticeable in magazines and in English-language poetry—in such features as the syntax, word order, lexis, idioms, pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns. This reflects a change in mentality. English is no longer the language of colonial rulers; it is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances and references, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling. Such Indianization has been proceeding for several generations and is prominent in the poetry of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy, and present, although more nuanced, in the work of Keki Daruwalla; it is more likely to be felt in terms of voice and stress in the verse of Ezekiel and Jayanta Mahapatra, or in the kind of rapidly expressed ironies found in the poetry of Ramanujan.

The poets as a group tend to be marginal to traditional Hindu society not only by being alienated by their English-language education but also, more significantly, by coming from such communities as the Parsis, Jews and Christians, or by being

rebels from Hinduism and Islam, or by living abroad. Many of the poets come from families that have already been partly westernized or that moved extensively during their childhood; several were sent to boarding schools. They often do not have local roots, or have been brought up in urban centres or studied or travelled abroad while still in their formative years. Their perspective is modern rather than traditional. Unlike many of the colonial clerks and the bourgeoisie who attempted to imitate the British, there is no other authentic mentality for the poets except that of the modern world and its concerns, which they may express or criticize but of which they are a part, as are an increasing number of Indians.

Since Ezekiel published his first book (1952) and the *Illustrated Weekly* and *Thought* began publishing English-language poetry, a history of publication, major works, journals, events, personalities and awards has already developed. There are perhaps thirty poets recognized to be of worth, a number of younger poets aspiring to that title and probably several hundred who have published volumes of poetry in English.

More significant than the achievements of individual poets is the rapidity with which Indian English poetry has become a self-sustaining tradition with recognizable models, periods and influences. Where the early Ezekiel and P. Lal offered two contrasting models, since then Ramanujan, Parthasarathy, Daruwalla, Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Vikram Seth and de Souza are among those who have moved poetry into new dimensions, as Ezekiel continues to do. Poets have a wider variety of Indian poems, voices, perspectives, forms and subject-matter for models. How a national tradition is being formed can be seen in the way Ramanujan's poetry is an example for Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*, while Parthasarathy influenced Santan Rodrigues's poems about his own Goan heritage.

There are identifiable periods when Indian poetry took new directions, such as the focusing on the actuality of personal and family life by Kamala Das and Ezekiel in the early '60s, or the experimental poetry of Mehrotra, Kolatkar, Nandy, Chitre and Mahapatra which began to appear in the later '60s and early '70s. A renewed, more detailed, satirical and yet compassionate focus on communal and family heritage has become evident more recently.

With each decade an increasing immediacy and heightened awareness of actual Indian experience is noticeable. While this might be a matter of kinds of technique and expression, it reflects a narrowing of the distance of the poet's perception of her or himself as poet from the actualities of the community life. I do not mean that the poet is less conscious of being isolated or alienated, but rather that poetry reveals more of the environment, of other lives, and of the specifics of daily life, including relations with others. While this is clear in the verse of Eunice de Souza, Saleem Peeradina and Manohar Shetty, even the older poets write more directly from a context than previously. The increased perception of details and memories of Indian social reality, found in the work of Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and Ramanujan during the '60s, and taken up by Daruwalla, has now been internalized, with recent poetry being richer in its sense of location and range of subject matter.

If at first modern Indian English verse appeared to be indebted to British and a few European models, it now reveals an awareness of most of world literature, including contemporary American, recent South American, and older Indian devotional verse in the regional languages. In this Indian English-language poetry is no different from that of the regional languages, which also during the colonial period followed British examples and conventions of verse. Around the time of national independence it started to reform itself as a modern literature by incorporating the techniques and themes of such major twentieth-century modernists as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, by discovering the great body of French experimental poetry from the nineteenth-century Rimbaud and Lautréamont to the twentieth-century dadaists and surrealists, while learning from the political poetry of Neruda and others. Several of the English-language poets, such as Kolatkar, Ramanujan and Chitre, are also involved with changes in the regional literatures.

The poet's decision to use English is influenced by education, but also by the state of regional-language poetry. Kamala Das says that when she began writing in English there was no modern poetry in Malayalam. Manohar Shetty says that in Tulu, the language of his family, there is no creative literature. The many Parsi poets writing in English may be explained by the fact that Parsi Gujarati is a dialect without a tradition of serious creative literature. The

varied interplay of English-language poetry with that in the regional languages is a subject that needs further study.

Besides the role played by Kolatkar and Chitre in developing regional-language poetry in a new direction, the poets have been particularly active in translating from regional languages. There are translations by Ramanujan from classical and medieval Tamil and modern Kannada, by Mahapatra from modern Oriya, by Kolatkar from Marathi, by Chitre from modern and medieval Marathi, by Patel from Gujarati, by Mehrotra from Hindi, by P. Lal from Sanskrit, by Nandy from Bengali, Urdu and other languages. P. Lal and Nandy have been especially active as promoters and publishers of translations from classical and regional languages. Ezekiel and G. S. Sharat Chandra have also been involved with translations from Indian languages. Just as English has become the 'link' language for inter-regional communication for such groups as administrators, academics and the professional class, English translation serves as a link cultural language, making available to the middle classes the various regional languages and the classical tradition.

The English-language poets' interest in devotional verse is part of the increasing range of Indian English-language poetry. Whereas the significant poetry of the '50s and early '60s was primarily the personal short lyric, often confessional or argumentative, in the mid '60s poets found new modes of expression. While Ezekiel and Ramanujan were already familiar with American poetry, the American influence on Indian poetry became more significant in the mid '60s, when Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar and others began to aim for a less formal, direct personal voice and diction and to write about ordinary experience in recognizable locations. The man-alone-in-a-hostile-world attitude, with its sense of opposition, cynicism and the ironies of life, found in the poetry of Daruwalla, has its affinities in American literature, as does Daruwalla's trust in the speaking voice. Although he continues to use traditional prosody and formal stanzaic shapes, the voice seems closer to the experience of the senses than in previous Indian poetry where there was often a distance between moral reflection and actuality. There is also an openness, especially noticeable in the middle portions of the poems, as if association were taking over from logic. Narrative becomes experience itself instead of an example in an argument.

This increasing openness and immediacy is also noticeable in Mehrotra's early *bharatmata: a prayer*, and somewhat later in the poetry of Saleem Peeradina. Besides being the start of a highly subjective protest poetry, sometimes written by Nandy, the counter-culture of the '60s strengthened the interest in surreal, dadaist and experimental verse which had already been explored by Kolatkar, Chitre and others in Marathi. While Marathi, Oriya and other regional languages had recent traditions of experimentalist, avant-garde writing, Indian English-language poetry began developing in such directions after 1965. Among the poets of the avant-garde were Mehrotra, Kolatkar, Chitre, Mahapatra, Nandy and Deba Patnaik; while they have gone on to write other kinds of poetry, some of their best-known poems, such as Mehrotra's 'The Sale' and 'Continuities', Kolatkar's 'the boatride' and Chitre's 'The Ambulance Ride', show how liberating and productive was such experimentalism. If recent poets, particularly Silgardo and Shetty, have taken a renewed interest in the more logically developed, more formally organized lyric, they can do so with a sense of having been freed from the necessity of beginning a poem with a statement which is logically developed to a conclusion. Their poetry is more linear and argumentatively constructed than that of Mehrotra and Mahapatra, but it is still more open, more ready to shift to the unexpected in subject matter and images and to offer unconventional emotions, than the poetry written between 1950 and 1965; it is more associational in organization than logically structured.

The open, associational poetry, with its surprising attitudes, prominence of such topics as guilt, sexuality, ambition, memories of past rebellions, conflicts, shames, childhood and love affairs, and the assertion of an articulate but fractured self, was part of the confessional mode that started in America during the early '50s and which was practised internationally during the '60s. There had always been a confessional tradition in modern Indian poetry as Ezekiel's poetry often makes use of allusions to his life and a desire for personal change, but Kamala Das's highly emotive, self-revelatory, moody poems were much more confessional; she wrote openly about varied, often conflicting emotions, values and hopes, without being concerned—as Ezekiel was—with consistency and the will for self-improvement. Whereas the autobiographical elements in Ezekiel's poetry usually appeared distanced, in Das's

poetry her private life was brought forward as the subject matter. Around 1970 Shiv Kumar took the confessional mode further in poetry filled with sexual desire, anger and rebellion, in which the voice and what was said shaped rhythm and form. While it might seem that anything could be said in whatever way it came to the writer provided that its rhythms, cadence, language and imagery felt like poetry, such recent confessional poets as de Souza, Shetty and Silgardo are highly conscious of craft, revising their poems for understatement, economy and visual shape.

Related to but different from the confessional poem is the kind of open, obscure, somewhat surreal lyric practised by Mahapatra, and which younger Orissa poets have learned from him. In these poems, probably influenced by the 'open field' poetry written in America by Robert Bly and James Wright, an opening observation of the natural world is rapidly overtaken by obscure, highly charged personal associations, sometimes expressed in unexplainable imagery, concluding on an unexpected assertion of guilt, failure or, occasionally, hope. Such poetry appears very different from, and much more arbitrary in content as well as less open than, the confessional mode; but it shows such similar charateristics as rapid fluctuations of feeling, associational organization and a tendency towards the use of fantasy and the exploration of normally unarticulated areas of self-awareness. Even more than confessional poetry it appears addressed to the self. The poet ruminates about life and brings up, in striking and unusual images, feelings that others repress or are reluctant to display.

Besides the immediacy, experimentation, openness and self revelation of modern Indian poetry in English, there is an increasing interest in the long poem, as a means of going beyond the fragmented vision and isolation associated with the short lyric. Such long poems are perhaps the closest modern culture can come to the shared national and communal values and experience of the classical epic. The distance between the modern sceptical individual and the traditional beliefs of a community is, however, the subject of this modern equivalent of the epic, as can be seen from such volumes as Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*, with its record of alienation and desire for reintegration into a cultural tradition, Kolatkar's puzzlement at the discrepancy between legend and actuality in *Jejuri*, or Mahapatra's attempted reconciliation to his environment in *Relationship*. Daruwalla's 'The Waterfront' sequence is another instance of an Indian English poet seeking reconcilement with a tradition from which he feels alienated and of which he is rationally sceptical. A different approach to the problem of reintegration is Jussawalla's 'Missing Person' in which the alienated middle-class intellectual is satirized for lack of commitment to the revolutionary forces of history. While such longer sequences of poems, with their extended range of themes and subject matter, may seem a world away from Ezekiel's early lyrics, it was Ezekiel who in *The Unfinished Man* first showed how a unified vision could be put together in which diverse lyrics were linked by theme, implied narrative, imagery and recurring but developing concerns.

Indian English poetry has since independence already evolved into a literary tradition with a history of major journals, such as *Poetry India* and *Opinion Literary Quarterly*, interesting little magazines such as *damn you* and *Dialogue*, central volumes such as Ezekiel's *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*, Kamala Das's *Summer in Calcutta* and Ramanujan's *The Striders*, which began a canon and which, belonging to the mid '60s, are now regarded as part of a golden age. It is a still vital, living, evolving tradition, as is shown by the, often precarious, existence of such journals as *Chandrabhaga*, *Kavi-India* and the *Indian Literary Review*, each and all of which may have disappeared by the time you read this, no doubt to be replaced by other torch-bearers of contemporary poetry. And there have been exciting first volumes published more recently, such as Eunice de Souza's *Fix* and Manohar Shetty's *A Guarded Space*.

While Indian English poetry appears firmly established, in contrast to the 1950s when it hardly existed beyond the self-published volumes of Ezekiel and the publication of Dom Moraes in England, it still has major problems. More poetry is being written than before and publishers receive manuscripts every day from new English-language poets hoping to break into print, but few publishers will publish poetry. The only commercial publishing houses to do so are Oxford University Press and Arnold-Heinemann; the others argue that the market is too small to make a profit. While the Oxford series shows that it is possible to make a profit on poetry, their authors are established names and the books have the benefit of Oxford University Press's name and distribution network. Most poetry in India is privately

published or subsidized by the author.

Major differences between the Indian and foreign poetry markets are the lack of the usual republication fees from publishers of textbooks and anthologies, and the lack of institutional support. Foreign publishers are willing to take chances on poetry books because whether or not the volumes sell they hope that if the poet becomes well known there will be fees for republication in school and university textbooks and in anthologies of poetry sold to a general public which otherwise seldom buys books of verse. In the case of India this market hardly exists. Because of a desire to produce school books as inexpensively as possible the relevant government agencies will reprint material without offering a republication fee to publishers, or will offer a small fee hardly worth anyone's effort. The university textbook market might seem to offer more promise; but the number of university English departments currently offering courses in Indian literature is small, although growing, and often the course is taught to small groups of Honours or MA students. As for commercial anthologies of poetry, many are published without seeking permission from the poet or the poet's publisher and no fees are paid. The Parthasarathy and Daruwalla anthologies are exceptional in that commercial republication rates were paid.

Indian English poetry has taken root in India, found a small but increasing readership, and is here to stay. Indian English poetry is one of the many new areas of culture which have resulted from national independence. Perhaps the most exciting literary development in recent decades has been the emergence of national literatures in the Third World and in such former cultural colonies as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The new literatures have taken their place alongside the older national literatures as equals. There are perhaps thirty Indian poets with whose work I am familiar (there are undoubtedly others), who can stand alongside good English-language poets in other countries. This may not seem a large number, but, considering that the history of modern Indian poetry began around 1950, it is remarkable.

CHAPTER TWO

History and Publishing Circles

A survey of the history of modern Indian poetry will show how the emergence of the new poetry depended on the poets themselves who, along with a few editors and promoters, had to be their own publishers, critics and sponsors. Although the new poetry was often closely associated with the development of other post-independence arts such as drama and painting, the poets had to create their own cultural space, start their own journals and edit and publish each other's manuscripts. There was no continuity between the new poetry and that written before independence. Poetry of the pre-independence period was, the writers felt, a mass of sentiments, clichés, outdated language and conventions, the ossified remains of a colonial tradition badly in need of a new start through grafting on a vital body of contemporary verse and contact with contemporary life and speech. Nissim Ezekiel appears to have been the only poet to have been for a period of his youth influenced by an older Indian poet: Armando Menezes was his first model, but he soon turned to a more modern idiom.

The new poets who began to appear at independence were in love with the English language, excited by their discovery of such late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century poets as Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden; their concerns in their writing were individual or expressions of the human condition in general rather than the peasants and the now superseded issue of political independence. The nationalist political need for a usable past, with its emphasis on national classics, mythology and representation of typical characters, no longer seemed relevant. Instead, the younger poets were more likely to write about life in the city and their personal desires and discontents. Their emphasis was more on the aesthetic, ethical or interpersonal than on politics, nationalism and mythology. The new poetry was part of the post-in-