

# Indo-Anglian Prose of the Pre-Mutiny Period: An Analytical Study

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## Abstract

Indo-Anglian prose or Indian English prose was the earliest to emerge, of various genres of Indian English literature, due to the circumstances prevailing during the beginning of the British rule. A vast literature on History, Economics, religion, Philosophy, Political Thought, Sociology, autobiography, biography etc. was created as a result of the historic decision to use English for official communication and as a medium of instruction for higher education in place of Sanskrit or Persian. Soon, English proved to be an adaptable language. Indian English prose, in spite of being influenced by the late Victorians and Edwardians, and crowded with the echoes of Burke, Macaulay, Carlyle, Gladstone, Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, cultivated an individual style suited to express Indian sensibility and ethos. The Cosmopolitan character of English language to adapt words from other languages rendered the Indian writers to express native ethos and sentiments and Indian English prose which began as a mode of literature of knowledge, underwent remarkable mutations, and became, in the hands of great writers, a powerful medium of evoking profound emotions and quickening human imagination which resulted in the creation of literature of power. This paper presents an analytical study of the writers who embellished the Indo-Anglian prose of the Pre-mutiny period.

Key words: Indo-Anglian prose, pre-mutiny prose, Indian sensibility, utilitarian prose, native ethos.

## Indo-Anglian Prose of the Pre-Mutiny Period: An Analytical Study

The rise of Indian English prose, like the other genres of literature, was but one manifestation of the new creative urge in India what is generally referred to as Indian Renaissance. “The era of Renaissance is the golden age of prose”, which emerged with the rise of pamphleteering and journalism in English. The English language in turn played a pivotal role in harnessing it to the expression of various debatable issues – religious and spiritual awakening, political unrest and social and religious reformation (Kumar, 2008, p. 5).

The twofold impulse - the rediscovery of India's past by certain high-minded early officials of the East Indian Company and spread of English education and western ideas - resulted in the creation of prose of thought (Iyengar, 1962, p. 24). This was an age of utilitarian and “purely functional prose oriented towards ‘literature of knowledge’ rather than ‘literature of power’” (Naik, 1982, p. 223).

According to the latest research done in the field of History, the first text to be composed in English by an Indian-born author was Sake Dean Mahomet's *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* which appeared in two volumes in 1794 ( (Fisher, n.d.). Cavelly Venkata Boriah's "Account of the Jains", published in *Asiatic Researches or Transactions of the Society instituted in Bengal for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Art, Sciences and Literature of Asia*, Vol. IX, written in c. 1803 and published in 1809 in London, was placed at the chronological beginning of Indian English literature in the first decades of the nineteenth century by both K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and M. K. Naik while writing in the 1970s and 1980s. The twenty-eight pages, "Account" is not an original composition as it has been described in the essay itself as "collected from a priest of this sect at Mudgeri and translated by C. Boria" (Boria, 1809, p. 244). While the texts of both Mahomet and Boriah attain only historical importance, Raja Rammohun Roy was the most accomplished of the early period and "his essay on "A Defence of Hindu Theism" (1817) may be regarded as the first original publication of significance in the history of Indian English literature" ( (Naik, 1989, p. 14).

Raja Rammohun Roy joined the East India Company in 1804 and served under two British officials Woodforde and Digby. After resigning service, he returned to Calcutta in 1814 and carried on his life as a crusader striving to achieve social, religious and political reform for his country until his death at Bristol in 1833. Rammohun was proficient in about a dozen of both oriental and occidental languages and wrote as many as thirty two original essays in English language.

Rammohun's rationalistic religious approach resulted in controversy with Hindus and Christians as well. His translations of the *Kena* and *Isa Upanishads* and the "Abridgement of the Vedant" rendered in 1816 were severely attacked by one Sankara Sastri and according to M.K.Naik, Rammohun wrote the first original essay in English "A Defence of Hindu Theism" in 1817 to rejoin the censure. This was followed by "A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas in reply to an Apology for the present State of Hindoo Worship " in 1817.

In 1820, he compiled "Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness" which resulted in a heated argument with the Christian missionaries, and three "Appeals" were written in defence of the "Precepts of Jesus". In these "Appeals", Rammohun stressed the necessity of rejecting Christian myth, miracle and dogma and insisted on the actual teachings of Christ. The controversy he had both with the Hindu reactionaries and bigoted Christian missionaries, in the opinion of H.M.Williams, "was important to Roy not only in helping him to clarify his own ideas but in extending the scope and intensifying the depth of his English Prose" (as cited in Kumar, 2008, p. 8).

“He is the first Indian who raised his powerful voice against the iniquitous treatment of women” especially the practice of *Sati* (Bannerjea, 1919, p. 41). His broadsheets against widow-burning include: “A Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of burning Widows alive” in 1818; “A Second Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of burning Widows alive” in 1820; “Abstract of the Arguments Regarding the Burning of Widows Considered as a Religious Rite”; “Address to Lord William Bentick” in 1830 and “Anti-Suttee Petition to the House of Commons” in 1832. He also raised his thundering voice against polygamy and denial of women’s equal rights to inheritance in his “Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females According to the Hindu Law of Inheritance” appeared in 1822.

He was the “ablest Indian champion” of the cause of English education for his country and his famous “Letter on English Education” addressed to the Governor-General, Lord Amherst in 1823, is not only the first authentic piece of prose in Indian English Literature but also regarded by Naik as “the manifesto of Indian Renaissance” (Naik, 1989, p. 16).

In this letter he expressed profound regret that the Government was proposing to found a Sanskrit College – “to impart such knowledge as is already current in India”. Rammohun argues that such a seminary would resemble those existing in Europe before Lord Bacon’s day, and would only “load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use” (as cited in Collet, n.d.,107). Bishop Heber, who took this letter to Lord Amherst, genuinely appreciates that the letter “for its good English, good sense and forcible arguments is a real curiosity, as coming from an Asiatic” (as cited in Ganguly, 1934, p 101).

Rammohun also led agitation against the Press regulations, the resumption of lakheraj holdings and other grievances of his country. His first of the two “Petitions Against the Press Regulations” written in 1823 was regarded by Miss Collect as “The Areopagitica of Indian History” and she observes, “alike in diction and in argument, it forms a noble landmark in the progress of English culture in the East” (101). He also presented the documentary evidence entitled “Exposition of the Practical Operation of the Judicial and Revenue Systems of India” before a Parliamentary Select Committee in London in 1831, which embodies his views on administrative reforms. The “Exposition” is remarkable for its spirited protest against the economic drain in India under the East India Company and the exploitation of the peasantry by the rich landlords.

Rammohun’s brief autobiographical sketch, appeared in the *Athenaeum and the Literary Gazette*, is the first exercise in Indian English Literature of the form “which was to be handled with conspicuous success by later writers like Nehru and Nirad C. Chaudhuri” (Naik, 1989, p. 17).

Rammohun is the first Indian writer to use English for social criticism and the exposition of hypocrisy and contemporary social evils and in this sense he is, in the opinion of Satish Kumar (1996), the Addison in Indian English prose (p. 7). He skilfully chose a vocabulary and a style to meet the demands of the occasion which made him unsurpassable as a utilitarian writer. Of the style of Rammohun, the words of Bentham are worth noting for, in a letter written to the reformer, besides addressing him as “Intensely admired and dearly beloved collaborateur in the service of mankind” he wrote, “your works are made known to me by a book in which I read, a style which, but for the name of a Hindu, I should certainly have ascribed to the pen of a superiorly educated and instructed Englishman”; and in the same letter, praising James Mill’s *History of India*, he added, “though, as to style, I wish I could with truth and sincerity pronounce it equal to yours” (Pillai, 1897, p. 6). Rammohun is also the first Indian to express Indian sensibility in English with dignity and grace and stood without a peer in the nineteenth century literature as a crusader of argumentative, lucid, forceful, logical, persuasive and balanced prose style and crammed, in the last ten years of his life, according to Brajendranath Seal, “the work of half a dozen giants” (as cited in Iyengar, 1962, p. 31).

Besides the towering contribution made by Rammohun to the development of Indian English prose there was no little contribution made by the other prose writers worth mentioning during the mid and later nineteenth century in various metropolitan centres like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. In Bengal, the prominent prose writers, who displayed a remarkable talent in English expression in their writings on varied subjects include Krishna Mohan Banerji, Ram Gopal Ghosh, Hurish Chunder Mukerji, Rajendra Lal Mitra, Girish Chunder Ghosh and Ram Raz.

Krishna Mohan Banerji (1813-85), one of the prominent Christian converts of the day, came under the influence of Derozio and led the ‘Young Bngal’, the radical youth group, which played a decisive role in the Bengal Renaissance. In 1831, he became the editor of the *Enquirer* and wrote strong articles on the errors and inconsistencies of Hinduism. Being a great scholar and a linguist, he knew ten languages. His *Dialogues on Hindu Philosophy* (1861) professes to set forth clearly some of the principle features of Hindu Philosophy and is considered a potted handbook for missionaries in India. In his better appreciated and better known book, *Aryan Witness* (1875), he attempts to prove by quotations from the *Vedas* that the Prajapati spoken of in the *Vedas* is no other than Jesus Christ.

In his later writings, *Two Essays as Supplements to the Arian Witness* (1880) and *The Relation Between Christianity and Hinduism* (1881), “he makes it clear that Hinduism is the religion of the Vedas and that it is theistic and then expounds his theory, based on the ideas of sacrifice found in the Vedas and in the Bible, that Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism” (Philip, 1980, p. 77). In 1840, Krishna Mohan in his prize winning paper on “Native Female Education” urged the necessity of liberally imparting education to Indian women (Bhattacharjee, 1986, p. 116). With his massive, ponderous and scholastic style he made a considerable contribution to Indian English prose.

Ram Gopal Ghosh (1815-68), an enthusiastic pamphleteer, social reformer and a fierce orator, eulogised as ‘Indian Demosthenes’, contributed to journals such as *Agyananashun*, *Durpan* and *The Spectator*. In his publication, “A few Remarks on certain Draft Acts, commonly called Black Acts”, written in defence of ‘Black Acts’ of 1849, which abolished some of the privileges of Europeans in India, Ghosh vehemently opposed the invidious discrimination made between Englishmen and Indians in the administration of jury trial. The work caused such a furore in the European community that he was removed from the Vice-Presidentship of the Horticultural Society of Calcutta.

He also made several memorable speeches and won many victories on public platforms. His speech on the Charter Act was described by the *Times* as ‘a masterpiece of oratory’. His eloquent oration on the occasion of the Queen’s Proclamation, provoked the *Indian Field* comment that ‘if he were an Englishman, he would have been knighted’ (as cited in Pillai, 1897, p. 42).

Hurish Chunder Mukerji (1824-60), the first native Journalist of any note in India, edited *The Hindu Patriot* from 1854 to 1860 besides contributing articles to *The Hindu Intelligence* and the *Englishman*. He was also the first to draw up a petition protesting against the renewal of the Charter Act in 1853. In his articles, he strongly supported the Hindu widow remarriage movement launched by Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar with all the force of logic and compassion he had at his command. In his article, “Hindu and European civilisation – a contrast” he skilfully replied to the accusation levelled by some Europeans that the Hindu civilisation was nothing more than some barbarians (Bhattacharjee, 1986, p. 219). The annexation policy of Lord Dalhousie also received a good deal of adverse criticism from his pen. He played the part of peace-maker between the native soldiers and the government in 1857 and wrote a series of articles.

In 1860, during the great Indigo crisis, Hurish Chunder boldly stood by the side of the ryots and launched tirades, in the columns of the *Patriot*, against the oppression and high-handedness of the foreign planters. He was a great admirer of Jeremy Bentham and formed his style on the model of that of the great jurist. According to Manmathanath Ghosh (1911), “Harish’s solid sense, his dignified, weighty and sententious utterances, his wide grasp of each subject with which he dealt, his calm judicial fairness and candour and his power of close reasoning” enabled him to help Lord Canning in steering the ship of the State during a most stormy period of British India’s history (89).

Rajendra Lal Mitra (1824-91), Assistant Secretary and Librarian, Bengal Asiatic Society, the first native of India to obtain the honour of being elected President of that Society and hailed by Tagore as ‘Sabyasachi’, was one of the earliest Indian antiquarians, Indologists and historians of Indian origin. His works, comprising fifty books divided into 128 volumes, extending over no less than 33,089 pages, show his rich and varied contributions to the literature of his country (Pillai, 1897, p. 61). The most important of his works are *Antiquities of Orissa* (1875, 1880) and *Buddha Gaya* (1878). His essays were published in two volumes under the title of *Indo-Aryans* (1878).

Girish Chunder Ghosh (1829-69) began his apprentice hand in journalism as early as his school days by contributing to the manuscript journal of his school fellow, Babu Koylas Chunder Bose. He founded, in 1849, *The Bengal Recording Weekly*, which became *The Hindoo Patriot* in 1853. During the mutiny period, he wrote the “scathing and crushing articles against the Volunteers”. Of his contributions to *The Calcutta Monthly Review*, Rai Kristo Das Pal alludes thus- “his power of word painting, of clothing the commonest ideas in gorgeous and glittering costume, radiant with flames of wit and humour, and occasionally of originality”. (as cited in Ghosh, 1911, pp. 82-88). He also founded and edited *The Bengalee* from 1861 to 1868 and dauntlessly advocated social and political reform. His vigorous pleading in *The Bengalee* led to the appointment of the Famine Commission in 1866.

The unscathed letters of Girish Chunder, written to his brother, exhibit glimpses of the youthful writer’s inmost nature and predilections and abound in flashes of his exquisite humour. The distinguishing characteristic of his style of letter-writing is to be found in what Girish himself says in one of his letters – “Don’t think before you write. But the words spontaneously flow from your pen. I myself am aware in my own person of the procrastinating tendency of thought” (as cited in Ghosh, 1911, pp. 90-91).

Girish was also gifted with extraordinary oratorical powers. G.B. Malleson, the eminent historian of the *French in India*, admires Girish as a well-known speaker “for the brilliancy and fertility of his ideas which he gives utterance to with a fluency which many English speakers might well covet” (as cited in Ghosh, 1911, p. 4). Girish also made his appearance as a biographer with his lecture on the “Life of Ram Doolal Dey the Bengalee Millionaire” delivered on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1868. The lecture made its appearance as *The Life of Ram Doolal Dey* and is remarkable for the presentation of the social life amongst native families in India.

Ram Raz (1790?-1833?), while employed as a clerk in the office of the Military Auditor General, undertook voluntarily to translate from the Mahratta into the English language a code of Regulations drawn up by order of the late Tippu Sultan. In the words of Captain Harkness, his translation was in every respect so correct that it gave rise to considerable doubt of being the unassisted performance of a Hindu (viii). Ram Raz’s *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (Calcutta, 1834), according to Naik (1989), is perhaps the earliest attempt at art criticism (p. 19).

When one turns from Bengal to the Bombay presidency, the names that come to mind, of writers who enriched the Indian English prose with their thought provoking writings and speeches, are Bal Shastri Jambhekar, Dadoba Pandurang and Ramakrishan Vital.

Bal Shastri Jambhekar (1812-46) founded the first English-cum-Marathi journal, *The Durpan* (1832) with an aim to encourage the pursuit of English literature among his countrymen and to open a field for free and public discussion on political, social and educational matters. In all his works which covered a wide range of subjects form widow-remarriage to the evolution of the Marathi script and deciphering of old inscriptions, he

displayed a keen foresight, an intelligent appraisal of events, and a sober and wide outlook on life, and above all, a keen desire to reform and serve the country. He pioneered Indian English journalistic prose and contributed frequently to the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

Dadoba Pandurang (Tarkhadkar) (1814-82), an educationist, scholar, religious and social reformer wrote an enlightened study in comparative religious thought entitled, 'A Hindu Gentleman's Reflections respecting the works of Emanuel Swedenborg' (1878).

Ramakrishan Vital (1822-74), better known as Bhau Daji, a physician by profession, was a great scholar and antiquarian besides being a man of science who undertook investigations in Indian medicine. He wrote numerous articles on social and political problems and in 1847 appeared his 'Essay on Infanticide'. His antiquarian researches were often visible on the pages of the *Antiquary* and other magazines and made Prof. Max Muller comment, "I always look upon Dr. Bhau Daji as a man who has done excellent work in his life- and though he has written little, the little he has written is worth thousands of pages written by others" (as cited in Pillai, 1897, p. 287).

Apart from Boriah's "Account", which has already been mentioned, other noteworthy productions in the Madras presidency came from the pens of Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami, Vannelakanti Soobrow and Gazulu Lakshmi Narsu Chetty.

Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami (1765-1840), the elder brother of C.V. Boriah, wrote *Biographical Sketches of the Dekkan [sic] Poets* (1829) which attains the distinction of being the first work of literary biography in Indian English literature (Naik, 1989, p. 20). According to Dharwadker (2002), the book was "mostly likely modelled loosely on Samuel Johnson's *Lives of English Poets*" (p. 113). It contains the lives of more than one hundred Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and Marathi poets, with accounts of varying length and accuracy, written in a pedestrian style without attempting critical commentary of their poetry. Ramaswami's attempt of writing a work like this in English and "with this scope in early Nineteenth century India", in the words of Naik (1989), "is itself no mean feat" (p. 21).

Vannelakanti Soobrow (1784-1839), significantly known as English Soobrow, submitted a report on the "State of Education in 1820" to the Madras School Book Society when he was an appointed member of that society. Written in 1820, it was published in the *First Report of the Madras School Book Society for the year 1823*. He recommended, while addressing the need for teaching morals, that "tales extracted from different books composed chiefly of morals written in modern languages" be prescribed for study (as cited in Rao & Subrahmanyam, 2009, p. 207).

Gazulu Lakshmi Narsu Chetty (1806-68), a zealous and honest reformer and a public-spirited businessman, founded the Madras Native Association. He purchased the *Native Circulator* and the press and started it afresh as *The Crescent* whose object was stated to be “the amelioration of the condition of the Hindus” (as cited in Pillai, 1897, p. 196).

The north India of the period, in contrast with the other presidencies which accomplished considerable contribution to the Indian English prose, produced little writing except the first extensive Indian English autobiography by Lutufullah.

Lutufullah (b. 1802), who travelled widely over India and visited England as well, penned, *Autobiography of Lutufullah: A Mohamedan Gentleman and His Transactions with his fellow creatures: Interspersed with remarks on the habits, customs and characters of the people with whom he had to deal* (1857). The book shows Lutufullah’s admiration for the English’s civility, spirit of patriotism and respect for law besides revealing his dauntlessness of judgement in criticising their attitude towards women.

He sums up the character of the English thus:

I may now sum up the character of the English, by saying they are entirely submissive to the law and obedient to the commands of their superiors. Their sense of patriotism is greater than that of any nation in the world. Their obedience, trust, and submission to the female sex are far beyond the limit of moderation. In fact, the freedom granted to womankind in this country is great, and the mischief arising from this unreasonable toleration is most deplorable. (Edward, 1858, p. 409)

Therefore, Indo-English prose of the pre-mutiny period, both in conception and execution, was obviously utilitarian. It was such an age that the nation itself was striving to attain an identity of its own after decades of chaos and confusion which provided no room for various other forms of prose – essays and belles-letters almost absent, except Lutufullah’s *Autobiography* and Rammohun’s brief sketch there was no significant contribution in autobiography and the same may be said in case of biography in which the only notable accomplishment was C. V. Ramaswami’s *Biographical Sketches*. But the prose of this period is remarkable for sowing in the seeds of ideas which would sprout vigorously in the later age and also for the use of language which was not only adequate but in many cases effective and forceful.



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