

## **The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu: The Pageant of Folk Life and Culture**

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Unity in diversity and continuity in the midst of change, the fundamental qualities of Indian Culture, Indian Culture is a veritable portrait gallery of Indian folk characters, living their lives, and carrying on their different vocations and existence of religious tradition. Religion is the foundation of Indian life and culture, celebration of folk life, folk festivals etc. The picture of India and the life of their masses thus evoked may be romantic but it is not false, there is a heightening of realities. Sarojini was fully alive to the two basic qualities of Indian culture: the continuity of Indian tradition and culture through centuries and the unity of spirit underlying the amazing diversity of Indian life, culture and religion.

Sarojini has made significant contributions to the development of Indo-English literature. The task of interpreting the culture of India and of creating a truly Indian atmosphere in English poetry was first undertaken by Toru Dutt. But her premature death left it incomplete. This was taken up by Sarojini Naidu. Her poems deal almost entirely with Indian themes. The most ordinary incidents in the lives of common men and women in India are portrayed with a romantic colour and sympathetic imagination. We are delighted to find in her poems beautiful descriptions of the Indian flowers and festivals, the Coromandel fishers, the dancers and the bangle sellers. She has described typical Indian scenes in her poems. Her poetry originally published in three volumes; *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1915).

This paper is an attempt to show the depiction of Indian masses and their life in Sarojini's poetry, which acquire a new significance and orientations in her poems. The treatment has been characterized by directness and simplicity and it has aimed at presenting

the collective or community life rather than at rendering of individual life and character. In her poetry Sarojini is able to capture all the qualities of traditional folk poetry. In her poetry simplicity, vocabulary and imagery are drawn from the everyday scenes and sights, expresses her sense of solidarity with folk life. The majority of the lyrics are about the common people of India engaged in their day to day activity-fisher men, corn-grinders, snake charmers, weavers, farmers harvesting their crops, dancers, wandering singers etc. In the simple traditional life and work of these people Sarojini sees the unbroken flow of Indian life. Its simplicity suggests Arthur Symons:

Her poetry seems to sing itself, as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sang into lyrics of itself. It is always musical, its eastern colour is fresh and its firm touch is quick and delight. (Introduction)

“Wandering Singers”, is a lyric set to the very tune of the songs of the bards or wandering singers of India, and the wandering singer speak as many to many and not as one person to another person, thus stressing that in folk poetry it is the life and culture of a community that matters and not individual life and characters. The wandering singers express the realities of vocational and group life, the eternal realities of birth, life and death, the basic passion of love and sorrow and the rituals of courtship and worship. They sing of the present but also of the past, of its greatness and glory. They are, thus truly of the folk and it is of their life that they sing as it has been lived since times immemorial. The appeal of their song is therefore, deathless and equally immortal, as can be felt in the folk poetry of Sarojini.

Sarojini’s poetry is a portrait gallery of Indian folk characters against a rural background, which is a faithful representation of the Indian rural landscape, with its vividly realised flora and fauna. There is heightening of reality but no falsification or distortion of it. Her ‘snake-charmers’, ‘Palanquin – bearers’ are not “kiplings India”, but very much a part of the Indian scene. They are not merely picturesque or decorative characters. They are suitable symbols of the Indian folk-culture and tradition. They are not outmoded or faded types but rather figures who, for the first time, have emerged from the folk life to find a place in the world of literature. Religion is the foundation of Indian life and culture. Sarojini Devi was fascinated by the diversity of the Indian religion. She believed, like Mahatma Gandhi, that the fundamental message of all religions was the same. Religion, according to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary is: “Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship”.

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True religion is one's faith in one of the prevalent systems of worship, it is the unending union of soul and spirit, it is the bond that unites humanity with eternity. Sarojini Naidu was a Hindu but she respected all the systems of worship. Her ambition was to create a feeling of unity between the Hindus and the Muslims. Naturally she believes in brotherhood of diverse creeds, and harmony of diverse race. In her religious poems, there is profound understanding of diverse cultures and cults. She speaks of the divinity in man and points out that the eternal may be presented in multiple religious cults, but He is one and His image remains unchanged. The truth is that the religious instinct appears in diverse form of human worship and invariably retains the image of the supreme.

Sarojini Naidu's exquisite poem, "The Call to Evening Prayer", which dramatically portrays the presence of one father under whom the devotees of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism are united in the bond of divine worship. The noblest message of Sarojini in her poems is that of the oneness and greatness of all religions. Her poetry shows inherent harmony and emotional integration. She expresses man's lyrical feelings for creation and the creator.

Naidu has given us the pageant of Indian life in her poems. Her songs of life cover every aspect of Indian society. They mirror the hopes and aspirations, the customs and conventions of the Indian people and give a panoramic view of Indian life. The entire human life is summed up in three stanzas of "Indian Weavers". Weaving is one of the most important of the folk vocations in India and the weavers are important folk characters; the poet has skillfully retained the simplicity and lilting music of a folk song, the lyric has a symbolic significance and a rich texture. At day break they weave the robes of a new born child and at fall of night they weave a queen's marriage-veils which are bright like the plumes of a peacock, purple and green, And in the cold moonlight the poet finds the weavers still at work, They are now silent and their mood is serious. They are now weaving a white cloth for a funeral shroud of dead man. Thus in this admirable lyric the poetess has traced human life through the three most important stages that it passes-birth, marriage and death. P.E. Dustoor rightly points out; "We are made to realize that the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, grave and gay together (6).

The poem entitled "Coromandel Fishers" describes the life of the fishermen who call themselves the son of the sea. They consider the sea as their mother, the cloud as their brother and the waves as their comrades. Though the scent of the mango grove and the sands glimmering in the light of the full moon are sweet, sweeter is the dance of the wild waves on the sea. The Coromandel Fishers' not only express the fishermen's identity with the sea and

with the community, but also the folk sense of order and discipline it evokes a folk vocation which is yet untouched by modern technologies and sophistication.

“The Snake-Charmer” is a loving portrait of a familiar folk personality of the Indian scene. The charmer takes something more than a professional pride in his dangerous cargo. He treats his pets as his protégée, fiancé and bride to be wooed with love, curtesy and concern. His attitude reflects the folk artisan’s reverential approach to his tools, and his sense of identity and partnership with his craft. It is another folk vocation carried on in the age old ways.

Sarojini’s love-poetry is rooted in Indian folk-lore, myth and legend; the way in which the lover’s adoration to the beloved is derived from immemorial forms of folk worship. In the festival rites of Holi, the folk lovers tease and force each other and thus seek to achieve a union through love- play in the folk tradition of Krishna and the Gopis. Sarojini's lover-beloved relationship is so rooted in folk-lore that her lover needs a master to achieve mastery over herself. The village maidens are unsophisticated, but they show an extreme refinement in coquetry. They invite their dream-beloveds to master them and teach them in turn the art of mastery as well as the grace of submission. In her love poetry Sarojini reveals an unconscious creative identity with her folk inheritance which lends substance, meaning, and credibility of her psychology of love. As a singer of love Sarojini is supreme. Love is a multicoloured gem whose variegated splendour she has described with the sure touch of a great artist.

Every aspect of India is celebrated in Sarojini's poetry. There are number of poems on the seasons of India specially spring. A number of Indian festivals are also celebrated, The Indian Weavers, The Palanquin Bearers, The Bangle Sellers, the Coromandel Fishers, the Snake Charmers all celebrate the different occupations and vocations of the Indian people. Nor are the Indian women unrepresented in her poetry. Poems like 'Suttee'-that celebrates the heroic self-sacrifice of Indian womanhood-, 'VasantPanchmi', 'In Praise of Henna', are all devoted to one aspect or the other, of the life of Indian women folk. Her Indianess is also seen in her imagery, in her vocabulary and in the ‘mantric’ quality of her tunes. Her depiction of India has been criticised as “Kipling India” that is to say unrealistic, sentimental and romantic. There is no doubt, that she ignores the harsh and the ugly aspects of life, but still what we get from her is reality. Sarojini’s depiction of India is comprehensive and all inclusive. She takes delight in nature as well as in the life of Indian humanity.

Despite the political polarization and tension between the Hindu and Islamic sides of the Indian personality, there has always existed a synthesis and fusion of their religious and

spiritual elements in the folk culture. In rural India, the Hindus pay homage to Muslim saints, while the Muslims exchange gifts and benedictions with the Hindus on festive occasions steeped in the folk customs and rituals. Sarojini captures the true spirit of Muslims' folk festivals. Her poems are resonant with the muezzins prayer calls, litanies and incantation of Islam. 'The Night of Martyrdom' is splendid evocation of the spirit of sacrifice and brotherhood through sufferings and purification which underlines the Muslim festival of Maharrum. As a mark of faith and devotion, the act of Martyrdom is dramatically relived by the followers of Mohammad who take out a procession and perform the fire walking. The festival has, like, the Holi, Deepavali and other Indian festivals, the intensities and freedoms of folk drama. It aims at reintegration of the individual into the total culture, through a revival of the memories of sacred history.

As a folk poet, Sarojini presents a colourful pageant of the life of the Indian masses and of their diverse occupations, customs, traditions and beliefs. No aspect of folk life is left untouched. The folk note permeates her poetry- her themes, motifs, images and symbols. The best of her poetry is the result of her folk inspiration. Poems of this genre are characterised by directness, immediacy, simplicity and lilting melody.

She retained throughout her life a vision of India that was joyous and fascinating. She visualises India as a divine mother who bestows her blessings on all her children- Hindu, Muslim, Christian or of any other creed.

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