



Research Paper

Indian Culture, Custom and Tradition Reflected In the Folk Poems of Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract-

Sarojini Naidu is the most brilliant star in the Galaxy of Indo-Anglian Literature. She can be put in the rank of Mirabai the Queen Poetess, Muktabai and Toru Dutt. She is the vehicle of dormant wealth of art in Indian womanhood that has long waited to break down the barriers concealing it. The innate beauty & patriotism of her poems stir up the soul of India. She is the greatest Indian women since Mirabai to influence our women. Like Maupassant, Naidu has neither caste nor race. Her poems are the voice of the East & the West echoing vividly the spirit of the East. She was influenced by Shelley, Keats, Rossetti, Swinburne and Tennyson but pruned by Edmund Gosse who advised her to turn to Indian themes. She followed his advice and the result was that she composed her three volumes of verse after Gosse's advice, there is no theme that does not belong to India. Her poems are therefore purely Indian; and she is full of the spirit of devotion to her motherland As Gosse stated she was "autochthonous" in all things, and the fullest extent

The purpose of the research paper: *The purpose of this research paper is to discuss on the Indian culture, customs and tradition treated in the folk poems of Sarojini Naidu including Indian Weavers, The Palanquin-Bearers, Bangle Sellers, The Snake Charmers, Corn-Grinders, wandering Singers, Indian Dancers, Vasant Panchami, Raksha Bandhan, In Praise of Henna and Harvest Hymn etc. Sarojini Naidu depicts the Indian customs, tradition and culture in her poems. This research paper too examines how Sarojini Naidu treats the role of men and women in Indian society through her writings. This paper aims to provide a better grasp into Indian tradition as well as Indian culture that beautifully is shown in Sarojini Naidu's poetry.*

Mythology and Approach: *The study of this paper is on the folk themes that includes Indian customs, tradition and culture which are highlighted in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu. Her poems evoke Indian Spirit and Indians combining mythological elements and traditional customs. Indian mythology is full of tales, rituals and legends that capture social, spiritual and historical backdrop of India. A lot of writers like Sarojini Naidu and R. N. Tagore have taken inspiration from myths and legends to depict Indian customs, tradition and culture in their works. This paper also describes the values of Sarojini Naidu's poetry in conserving Indian culture as well as tradition; and its impact on Indian modern writers.*

KEY-WORDS- *brilliant star, barriers, Indian culture, Nightingale of India, motherland, devoted, folk-life, patriotism, customs and tradition, social festivity*

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I. Introduction

Sarojini Naidu has made important contributions to the development of Indo- English literature. It was Toru Dutt who first undertook the task of interpreting the Indian culture and of creating a true Indian atmosphere in English poetry. But her premature death left it incomplete. This was taken up by Sarojini Naidu. Her poems deal almost entirely Indian themes. *"The best of sarojini's poems are those which give us a panorama of Indian life in all its colours and mood.....No event of importance in Indian life, no social festivity, no cross-section of the society has remained untouched....Sarojini touched both usual unusual....Every aspect of Indian life seems to interest her, and this interest is crystallized in a class of poetry in its form, technique and imagery and full of thousands of possibilities.....no other Indian poet except Tagore, has so successfully interpreted the country to the Western readers through The English Muse."* (Bhatnagar-22-23) She describes the most ordinary incidents in the lives of common men and women with a romantic colour and sympathetic imagination. In her poems we find the beautiful descriptions of Indian flowers and festivals, fishers, the dancers

and the bangle sellers. Edmund Gosse admires her poems for melody, beauty and Indian content. Through her poetic canvas that includes *The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time*, *The Broken Wing*, *The Feather of Dawn* (posthumously published by Padmaja Naidu)

She has offered to the west what she sees around her the Indian landscapes with people and things without going into depth. Arthur Symonds and Mary C. Sturgeon praises her. Kotoky offers a frank assessment of Sarojini's poetic journey when he states:

"There is not much of a distinct growth of her poetic personality. Hers is not poetry that stirs the soul to its depths. It is poetry that only charms and delights. Sarojini was not moved to interpret life," a clear and happy presentation was her business". But her presentation does not give us abundance of life: does it rise to the level of vision. She gives us only poetry of external life.(54)

Sarojini Naidu is called "**The Nightingale of India**" and she was the second woman of India who was the President of Indian National Congress. Being one of the famous heroines of the 20th century, her birthday is celebrated as "**National women's Day**". She wrote on the rural i.e. the folk aspects of Indian culture and women's experiences. Like Browning Sarojini's poetry has a vivacious and enthusiastic touch of optimism and faith. She describes the panorama of Indian life with all the shades of colours and moods. Through different professions Sarojini has portrayed the association of various Indian culture and tradition. She painted the beautiful pictures of different professions along with the important aspects of Indian life such as *Indian Weavers*, *Fishermen*, *Palanquin Bearers*, *Wandering Singers*, *The Bangles Sellers*. She sings the songs of love and life. She is true to her mother land and she sings her songs to inspire and invoke. Her poetry has the humanist feelings and Keatsian touches on the verge of sensuousness. She has written lyrics on the various professions of Indian people; it echoes the melody and rhythm of rich folk tradition and customs. India is a land of diverse of culture. Sarojini was sensitive towards Indian folk culture.

Sarojini is a singing bird whose wings are broken, invokes the Master of Birds to grant her a sheltering place so that she may feel joy and freedom to the extent that she may sing freely and joyfully.

In your gracious garden there is joy and fostering freedom, Nesting place and singing space for every feathered thing. O Master of Birds, grant sanctuary and shelter Also to a homing bird that bears a broken wing.(Sarojini Naidu -186)

It is a part of culture of India that we start any work with the name of God (no work is set in without the invocation of God) This is the love of devotee who cares for them in every circumstance. Whether it is home or harvest, God is always sought for help, care and blessings:

Lord of the Universe, Lord of our beings,
Thou art the Seed and Scythe of our harvests,
Thou art our Hands and our Heart and our Home,
We bring thee our lives and our labours for tribute,
Grant us thy succor thy counsel, thy care.
O Life of all life and all blessing, we hail thee
We praise thee, O Brahma, with cymbal and prayer.
(The Sceptered Flute 15)

Sarojini Naidu was a keen commentator of folk life that inspired her to write poetry which beautifully captures celebration of folk life. Her poetry is unique. The theme of her poetry is native and bears the spirit of India. Her approach towards the things and objects was original and fresh. The rural is the setting of her poems. Her poetic themes are real, mystical, spiritual and mythical. She has used various colours in her poems and she has used the colours and colours associated the words to symbolize various aspects of life. Her poetry reflects the stages of woman's life. *Indian Weavers*, *In Praise of Henna* and *the Bangles Sellers* are the poems selected for a special mention in the perspective of colour culture and tradition of India. The poem '*In Praise of Henna*' displays the Indian scene. The henna is a kind of leaf which is really a symbol of happiness in Indian life. Henna is a plant the power of whose dried leaves made into paste is applied by maidens and young women on auspicious occasions to their palms and feet in order to colour theme red. This red colour lasts for about two weeks in spite of constant washing. When the rain season comes, a call goes to the girls to come out and collect the leaves of henna and sing the songs in its praise. This is a short poem but it has a great importance because of its intense relation to women's feelings. The darkness of red colour symbolizes the intensity of love a woman's husband have for her. Henna is regarded very auspicious in festivals related to husband's love and for husband's long life like Karwa chauth and Hartalika Teez. As in the lines from first stanza:

Grind them in mortar of amber and gold,
The fresh green leaves of the henna tree.

Here green colour is the colour of life. This colour is the colour of seasonal renewal green symbolizes hope and immortality. Red colour symbolizes love warmth compassion into a woman's life. Even if the form of the leaves is changed the continuity of life remains.

But, for lily like fingers and feet,
The red, the red of the henna tree.

In the poem 'The Vasant Purnami' Sarojini describes the spring festival. At this time Hindu girls and married women carry gifts of the goddess of spring, which they set afloat on the surface of the water. The Hindu widows cannot participate in any festive ceremonial; sorrow and austerity are their only lot. A widow grieves at the sight of young brides decked in their colourful best going out to take part in the festive ceremonials. The songs of birds do not delight her. They strike her heart as poisoned arrows and the champa and the sirish flowers slay her heart with bitter memories. This poem portrays the mournful thoughts and feelings of the Hindu widow.

The Indian Weavers is a small lyric which has three stanzas and each stanza possesses four lines. In it the colours are prominently used to represent the three stages of life. Sarojini has presented the journey of life that includes birth, youth and death in a simple manner through the Indian weavers who weave the clothes from early in the morning till late at night for different occasions. Sarojini Naidu successfully presents as in the following lines:

Weavers, at break of day,
Why do you weave a garment so gay?
Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild,
We weave the robes of a new born child. (*The Sceptred Flute 5*)

The poetess asks the question to the weavers why they are weaving such a gay cloth. The weavers reply that they are weaving it for the dress of a newly born child. It relates to the childhood of a person. Break of day symbolizes the beginning of life, the birth of a new life. The blue symbolizes the love and innocence so is a new born baby. The halcyon stands for the breeding bird whose wings are blue.

At nightfall the poetess finds the weavers, weaving a cloth, bright and multi-colored, and asks them for whom they are weaving a cloth of such variegated colours. They tell her that it is a marriage veil of a Queen. This suggests the youth of human being. Youth is the golden time in one's life, full of energy, full of attraction and enjoyable-

Weavers, weaving at fall of night,
Why do you weave a garment so bright?
Like the plumes of peacock, purple and green,
We weave the marriage veils of a queen.
Weavers, weaving solemn and still,
What do you weave in the moonlight chill...?
White as a feather and white as a cloud.

We weave a dead man's funeral shroud. (*The Sceptred Flute 5*)

The Indian Weavers offers the truth a human being takes birth on this earth, lives happily and becomes youth enough to marry and in the end he becomes old and dies. Dawn, evening and night are quite relevant periods for birth, marriage and death respectively. Plumes of peacock symbolize love, purple maturity and green standing for life. In the moonlight the weavers are silent and their mood is serious. They are weaving a white cloth, as white as a bird's feather or a cloud. They say that they weave the cloths of a dead man's funeral shroud. This stage clearly indicates the old time of a man's life. The chill of the moonlight symbolizes death and white is the symbol of purity of unity and of possibility. Death means a re-union with the eternal and the possibility of regeneration. In this admirable lyric Sarojini has traced human life through the three most important stages that it has-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, *The Bangle sellers*, was first published in the year 1921 by Sarojini in her collection of poems called 'The Bird of Time'. The poetess tells the important role of the bangles in a woman's life in a traditional Indian society. She makes the powerful connection between the bangles and their part in giving the happiness to the mothers, the wives and the daughters. The bangles possess a symbolical fitness for a maiden, bride or matron. Indian bangles are made of silver, brass, glass and lac are characteristic in the variety of material and colour. A large quantity of lac and glass bangles of various shapes and colours were manufactured in Hyderabad State. Lac bangles are produced by covering tin pewter with the liquid dye. The bangles sellers carry the radiant, delicate bright and rainbow coloured bangles to the temple fair for selling where the happy daughters and happy wives will buy them. The bangles they sell are of religious and symbolic significance. It is a sorrowful thing that an Indian widow is not permitted to wear the bangles. The wearing of the bangles is thought to be very auspicious and of great symbolic importance for married women and the brides. Some silver and blue as the mountain mist are fit for maidens' wrist. Some like fields of sun lit corn are suitable for

brides on their bridal morning. At last, some purple and gold flecked for the matron who journeyed through life mid way. The bangles sellers show another Indian scene:

Rain bow tinted circle of life...
Lustrous token of radiant lives,
For happy daughters and happy wives.

The poem '*Bangles Sellers*' is a lyric in which Sarojini Naidu describes the cultural and social life of Indian women through the various images related with bangles. The bangles are an ornament that is worn in the wrist. In India the women purchase the bangles on the occasions of different festivals and religious ceremonies. The colours of the bangles portray the stages of a woman's life. They reveal the emotions and the feelings of a woman. The bangles are not just a series of beautiful imagery but a symbolic representation of the various stages in life of a typical Indian woman. They play their part of lives in the four stages as her maidenhood, the state of being a bride and motherhood are depicted in four stanzas. The colours linked up rainbow include seven colours the gives the effect of all shades of life particularly the happy moments, as the in which rainbow is seen is happy and pleasant. The word radiant also reveal in bright glow emanating joy and happiness. Silver and blue colour are symbolized as mist seasons in which nothing is clearly visible the unknown future in which an inexperienced girl's life is advancing. She is compared to a bud yet to unfurl:

Some are meant for maiden's wrist,
Silver and blue as a mountains mist;

.....
Some are like fields of sun lit corn,
Meet for a bride on the bridal morn;

In the following stanza the natural imagery shows the charming beauty of bangles and their representation of the ideals help to increase their precious value. Some of the descriptions conjure the intensity in marriage life:

Some, like the flame of marriage fire,
Or, rich with hue of her heart's desire,
Tinkling, luminous, tender, and clear,
Like her bridal laughter and bridal tear.

In the last stanza, the socially the part of woman is described:

Some are purple and gold flecked grey,
For her who has journeyed through be life - half - way.
Whose hands have cherished, whose love has blest
And cradled fair sons her faithful breast,

The colour of purple and grey flecked is meant to symbolize a woman who by serving her family has profit the pride to sit with her husband to pray God:

Serves her husband in fruitful pride,
And worships the gods at her husband's side.

In the poem the poetess has used the various colours of bangles that possess symbolical meaning as misty silver and blue colour stands for a maiden, virgin who aspires for bright future, and golden yellow colour represent the expectant and passionate bride, and for the mature married woman it is a "purple and gold flecked grey. Sarojini describes the longing of an Indian woman according to each stage of her life through the poetic imagery.

Sarojini wants to unite the people of every caste, class, colour and religion for the sake of her country that needs a joint effort to uproot the English from India. Freedom is the innermost desire of her heart. She appeals her to be awakened from her sleep and free from the "bondage of sorrow". She tells her that her children are ready to serve her and adore her. She exhorts all Hindus, Parsees, Muslims and Christians and fuses the patriotic fervor in their hearts to the extent that they take an oath to protect her:

Hindus: Mother the flowers of your worship have crowned thee|
Parsees: Mother| the flame of our hope shall surround thee|
Mussulmans: Mother| the sword of our love shall defend thee|
Christians: Mother| the song of our faith shall attend thee|
All Creeds: Shall not our dauntless devotion avail thee?
Hearken| O queen and O goddess we hail thee/(*The Sceptred Flute 180-181*)

Sarojini Naidu's poetry is based on Indian folk characters against a rural background, which is faithful representation of the Indian rural landscape. She wrote a number of lyrics about the common people of India engaged in their day to day activity-fisher men, corn-grinders snake weavers, farmers, dancers wandering singers. She sees the unbroken flow of Indian life in the simple traditional life and work of these ordinary people. As Arthur Symons says:

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

We find reality in poems. Her poems are a part of the Indian scene. Her poems are suitable symbols of the Indian folk, culture and tradition. They are not outmoded or faded types but rather figures who, 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. She was fascinated by the diversity of the Indian religion. Like Mahatma Gandhi, she believed that fundamental message of all religions was the same. According to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, the religion is:

“Recognition on the part of man some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship”

The poem ‘Snake Charmer’ is a loving picture of a familiar folk personality of the Indian scene. The snake charmer can be seen even today, whether in the town or in the country side. He moves about, clad in dirty ochre, with a pair of baskets hanging by a swinging bamboo on his shoulders—the baskets he carries have the snakes. It is a song which the charmer sings to woo a snake in to his basket.

-a palace-bower where golden –vested maidens
Thread with mellow laughter the peals of delight.

And the way the snake is wooed by the charmer:

Come, thou subtle bride of my mellifluous wooing,
Come, thou silver –breasted moonbeam of desire?

Sarojini Naidu’s love poetry is based on Indian folk lore, myth and legend; the lover’s adoration to the beloved derived from immemorial forms folk worship. In the festival rites of Holy, the folk lovers tease and force each other. So they seek to achieve the union through love play in the folk tradition of Krishna the Gopies. The folk songs also reveal the devotion to God. Krishna becomes iconic figure for the gopies or the maidens. The gopi fills her pitcher with water, the water of love for Krishna. She has to carry it a long way but, she is tempted by the boatman Krishna’s song that makes her delay in reaching home where her brother and the relatives have been waiting for her. She feels nervous and is afraid of being bitten by a serpent in the darkness or smitten. She seeks for the help of Krishna, or she will die.

O | if the storm breaks, what will betide me?
Safe from the lighting where shall I hide me?
Unless Thou succor my footsteps and guide me,
Ram re Ram I shall die. (*The Sceptred Flute 103*)

Raddha becomes mad in love with Krishna. His flute always incites her imagination and forces to go to the place where Krishna plays the flute. If she has to respond to the music of the flute, she will have to leave the lures of the worldly world;

Still must I like a homeless bird
Wander, forsaking all;
The earthly loves and worldly lures
That held my life in thrall,
And follow, follow, answering
Thy magical flute—call. (*The Sceptred Flute 161*)

Raddha does not care for the perils that will come in the way of her following Krishna’s flute. She is ready to go Indra’s golden-flowering groves. /Where streams immortal flow.”Neither height nor depth can discourage her:

No peril of the deep or height
Shall daunt my winged foot;
No fear of time –unconquered space,
Or light untraveled route,
Impede my heart that pants to drain
The nectar of thy flute. (*The Sceptred flute 162*)

M. K. Naik asserts:

“Some of the pieces in a latter section entitled ‘Indian Folk Song’ follow a similar strategy. Here are also celebrating traditional Indian mythology, legends and history which reveal the poet’s catholicity of sympathy and secular outlook. A Hindu Brahmin domiciled in Muslim Hyderabad, she sings of both Krishna and Allah, and Radha and Gulnar with equal zest. Love is naturally one of her favourite subjects and her handling of this age-old theme is marked by a variety of approach, mood and technique.”

Sarojini Naidu, a true patriot, sings the songs of the Indian soil that emits out the aroma of love and devotion and sacrifice—the very ingredients that make one to be truly Indian at heart. She was a freedom fighter who not only took part in politics but awakened the people through her songs. Her poems express that she is a patriot to

the core. She feels sorrow when she sees Mother India in her slavery. She regards India as her Mother and urges her to arise from her sleep so that once again she may become what she was in the past. As Iyengar writes in his book 'Indian Writing in English' about Sarojini Naidu.

"Like Tagore and Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu too was more than a poet, she was of Mother India's most gifted children, readily sharing her burden of pain, fiercely articulating her agonies and hopes and gallantly striving to redeem the Mother and redeem the time" (Iyengar- 207)

We find Sarojini's love for Mother India:

Mother, O, Mother, wherefore dost thou sleep?
Arise and answer for thy children's sake;
Thy future calls thee with a manifold sound
To crescent honours, splendours, victories vast;
Waken, O slumbering Mother, and be crowned,
Who once wert empress of the sovereign Past.

(The Sceptred Flute 58)

Sarojini's love for her Motherland is seen in the poem, 'Traveler's' Song which she wrote as a child of twelve year, a poem in which she tells us that wherever she might go, she yearns for her Motherland:

But where so ever I may roam
I long for thee, my dear home.

Sarojini Naidu was fully alive to the two basic qualities of Indian culture: first, the continuity of Indian tradition and culture through centuries, despite all revolutions and upheavals and the second quality, the unity of spirit underlying the amazing diversity of Indian life, culture and religious. It is this continuity in the midst of change, this unity in diversity, which she herself experienced, felt and enjoyed which she celebrated in her poetry. She loved India as a whole. India was for her a single entity. She was free from provincial, caste, linguistic and religious prejudices. V. S. Naravane says:

"She visualizes India as the Divine India, who bestows her blessings on all her children, be they Hindus or Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs or Christians or of any other creed. And they, in their turn, adore her with equal love, though in different ways."

Sarojini Naidu maintained throughout her life a vision of India that was joyous and fascinating. She is genuine singer who infuses enthusiasm and freshness in the hearts of the reader who has become lifeless and neurotic because of the influence of the materialistic culture that has snatched peace and bliss for him leaving him at the crossroads of confusions and doubts. Kotoky is right when he assesses Sarojini Naidu thus:

True, there is not in her writings much of that which may be called timeless; but what she wrote of that which is transient, is beautiful. For this, for her love of life and colour, her poetry will be long admired. (54)

II. Conclusion

As an Indian poet, Sarojini shows a colourful pageant of the life of the Indian masses and of their diverse professions, customs, rites, traditions and beliefs. No aspect of folk life is left untouched. The folk –note permeates her poetry-her themes motifs images and symbols. Her poetry is full of patriotism. Bhavnagar regards Sarojini Naidu as the founder of "a new type of poetry which can be rightly called the poetry of nationalism or the poetry of national life." (23)

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