

**Communal Consciousness and Contemporary Indian  
English Women Poetry: A Select Study of Imtiaz  
Dharker, Seeme Qasim and Rukmini Bhaya Nair**

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Communalism has always manifested itself in socio-political and cultural realms in the form of systemic violence, genocides and terror strikes. The insidious march of communalism has exacerbated social divisions and made the contemporary world a precarious socio-political domain. Targeting people on the basis of their religious and ethnic affiliations has led to the communalization of not only political but socio-cultural spaces also. The intensification of the national movement paved way for power politics of which communalism became an integral part. The year 1947 saw the acme of communal-political nexus and its socio-psychological repercussions. It resulted in an unprecedented demographic displacement and violence on both sides of the border. The traumatic stress of this cataclysm reverberates in social debates till today. This politics of faith has had a checkered yet atavistic existence that has continued to affirm itself through the anti-Sikh pogrom in 1984, Bombay riots in 1992, Gujrat riots in 2002, Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013 and so on. Today communal occurrences are no longer sporadic in nature hence they create a greater upheaval than before. Aided by parochial political organizations and facilitated by economic and technological linkages, communalism stands transformed after Partition. Secularism and democracy are among the first casualties of dogmatism that exhibits itself through misguided religious movements like *jihad*, Saffronisation and quest for Khalistan. From its reductive understanding as a byproduct of religious intolerance, communalism has gradually been understood as a complex phenomenon with numerous variables and agendas at stake. These events have been so exhaustively discussed and debated in literary narratives that they now occupy as much a spatial space as temporal in both the personal and national memory. Contemporary responses to the issue of communalism explore the role of socio-political factors in breeding such attacks, the changes in the characteristics of communalism from Partition to the present times and threats that communal moorings pose to the mainstream secular democracy.

Indian women poetry like other literary genres is a rich corpus that chronicles the historical and cultural nuances of women's experiences through time and space. From 1960 onwards, Indian women poets adopted a confrontationist stance incorporating multifarious issues like patriarchy, freedom and female body within their thematic ambit. Poetry was no longer a product of pensive reflection or fanciful indulgence but a means to foreground their angst and dilemmas. In the twentieth century Indian women poets migrated from the confines of insular domestic spaces to traverse the public sphere. The poetic praxis of Imtiaz Dharker, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Seeme Qasim replaces the passive conformity to decrepit models of womanhood and nationalism with an awareness of community-specific violence and religious hypocrisies. Indian women poetry today has become dialogic and interrogative in nature and is not simply ideology-oriented as before. Kumar has aptly stated that "Instead of moving from complexity to rhetoric, as is normally the case with protest literature, it moves from rhetoric to complexity" (360). Since, these women poets share with men the same retrogressive professional and political spaces it becomes imperative for them to contest for inclusion. Women poets are vocally active in their day to day life which invariably leads to the re-structuring of their cultural and communal identity through the poetic medium. They are now vigilant about socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of the society which takes this poetic corpus much beyond the unidimensional feminist axis. Indian women poetry in its present avatar discusses issues like caste, nationality, communal violence, politics and market forces, marking a conscious deviation from the gendered polarity of home and the world. Contemporary women writers' response to communalism has furnished a complex and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. The multifocal response of women poets to the issue of communal violence signifies their making inroads in the public sphere. These socially sensitive and politically aware poets document the apprehensions of people living in a communally susceptible society.

The present paper seeks to analyze the creative feedback of women poets to the problem of communalism vis-à-vis the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, Seeme Qasim and Rukmini Bhaya Nair. It will try to place their poems within various theoretical debates that surround the genesis and propagation of communalism in the country. Several questions will be tackled in order to understand the ideological positions of these poets. Some of them are –

does Dharker's transcultural exposure disengage her from the root-level problems in India? Does Seeme Qasim's primary focus on Muslim experiences deprive her poetry of a horizontal sweep? Does Rukmini Bhaya Nair's interplay between the esoteric and the mundane dilute the effectiveness of the content or provides continuity to it? The paper records only the contemporary literary responses to communalism in detail while Partition is just used as a vantage point.

### I

Women poets like Imtiaz Dharker, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Seeme Qasim venture from the secure enclosures of the inner space into the outer world characterized by hate politics, regressive nationalism, communal genocide and global terrorism. The urge for equal participation in the construction of a new social order is captured by Dharker in the poem "Open" thus:

Strange for someone as secretive  
as me, I don't mind.  
I'm opening up the public spaces.  
There are no intruders.  
They own this place as much as you,  
As much as me. (50)

After attaining independence from the colonial rule the same practice – in which the majority denied the minorities of education and modern lifestyle – was followed. The right-winged fundamentalists vindicated the chronic antipathy between Hindus and Muslims on account of the difference in their religious beliefs and historical backgrounds. The Muslim radicals maintained a myopic view of Islam, discouraging any moderation in the precepts laid down in the Quran. It is ironic that religious dogmas were of paramount importance to these self-appointed custodians of religion while God himself in "Postcards by God" says, "I walk around the battered streets/ distinctly lost/looking for landmarks/ from another promised past" (8). Dharker suggests that while an anguished God laments the predicament of human beings split by technological development and lack of ethics, people are busy endorsing their own set of faith. The communal leaders further aggravated the chasm between the two communities by following a 'no *beti-roti*' relationship (no intercommunity marriages and partaking of food) between both the communities. Akhilesh Kumar in this respect says, "Communal violence operates on the idea that *kafirs* or aliens (not

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necessarily people from different religion) have no right to exist with the members of other communities” (72). On the other hand, orthodox Hindus aim at cultural homogenization as the word ‘Hindustan’ means a land for Hindus. Incidents of lynching Muslims and Dalits who are found consuming beef is more than a case of traditional veneration of the cow. It is an example of politicization of cultural symbols in favour of the Hindutva agenda. The poem “*Gomata*” by Rukmini Bhaya Nair was intended as a feminist text but it is relevant in today’s attendant identity politics coalescing around the animal. While the fundamentalists vehemently oppose the Pink Revolution, the plight of the incognizant cow is captured in the following lines:

though you are sacred, you are not beloved  
thrusting your nose into city garbage  
unembarrassed, a fly-blown beggar  
driven from the dusty villages  
how do you stand it, cow? (81)

Contrary to the idea of India as a nation, certain insular institutions have always been working on the agenda of a ‘Hindu *rashtra*’. They uphold the jingosim ‘*Ghar Wapsi*’ meaning those who have been forced or allured to convert to Islam or Christianity should be brought back to the Hindu fold and this would not be a conversion but merely their returning home. In the country where Hindutva ideologues dominate the social and political discourse, it is implied that a non-Hindu has to submit to a series of coercive loyalty tests. Dharker’s poem “They’ll Say: She Must be from Another Country” resonates a similar concern when she says, “all of us freaks/who aren’t able to give/our loyalty to fat old fools/the crooks and thugs/ who wear the uniform/that gives them the right/to wave a flag” (33). In “Being an Indian”, Qasim contemplates how her cultural and religious identity becomes more important over her being an Indian during a communal tussle. Following are the opening lines of the poem:

The carnage makes me talk  
about being an Indian;  
of the fact  
that my roots  
can be traced  
to the plains

of Uttar Pradesh. (11)

The minority-majority debate has led to a number of communal conflagrations in the country. In this regard, Syed Najiullah theorizes the secondary status of the Muslims in the country. He observes that after independence the Muslim leadership was primarily concerned with peripheral issues like Muslim personal laws, status of Urdu in the country instead of focusing on the seminal problems like national integrity and economic development. Since the minority politics was dominated by orthodox religious issues, the incident of demolition of the Babri mosque was not treated as an alarming socio-economic condition but as a religio-communal feud. Seema Qasim deplors the state of affairs which make Hindus look upon Muslims with distrust. In "Indian Muslim" she rues, "expressions change/and within seconds/I become another race" (4). This socio-religious schism was presented to Man Mohan Singh in a report titled "Social Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India" which stated thus:

Apparently, the social, cultural and public interactive spaces in India can be very daunting for the Indian Muslims. The general sense of unease among Muslims can be seen on a number of fronts % in the relationships that exist between the Muslims and other Socio-Religious Communities (SRCs), as well as, in the variations in understanding and interpreting them. . . They carry a double burden of being labeled as "anti-national" and as being "appeased" at the same time. While Muslims need to prove on a daily basis that they are not "anti-national" and "terrorists", it is not recognized that the alleged "appeasement" has not resulted in the desired level of socio-economic development of the Community. In general, Muslims complained that they are constantly looked upon with a constant degree of suspicion not only by certain sections of society but also public institutions and governance structures. (11)

The report makes it evident that the Muslims are stereotyped as uneducated and bigoted while the Hindus are regarded as xenophobic and dominating. This systematic stereotyping subtly leads to communal polarization and accentuates the mutual distrust among the members of different communities. Qasim in "Going There" foregrounds her apprehension about interacting with people in Gujrat after the Godhara massacre. She says,

“How will I deal/with things/in Gujrat now/whenever I disclose/my name?”  
(6).

## II

It will be naïve to suggest that communal vandalism has its roots only in religious differences. Riots are often used to cloak a number of complexities like class and electoral politics that operate alongside religion. In a socially backward and communally-split country like India, religion is a potential tool to mobilize the masses to realize class aspirations. This brings one to the Leftist school of thought that relates communal violence to class struggle, underdeveloped economy and ballot box politics. Asghar Ali Engineer avers that the micro-level factors that trigger communal violence may be religiously motivated but they are directly related to the macro-level factors i.e. socio-economic development of the country. Incidents of communal outbreak mostly occur in underdeveloped or developing urban areas. The number of deprived and unemployed people carrying hostility against the state and social discrimination is large in these places. Thus, their acute sense of neglect can be easily converted into rage by the ruling elites and political members on the pretext of religion. The article, “Organized Crimes, Violence and Politics” cites Judge Paolo Borsellino's quote, “Politics and mafia are two powers on the same territory; either they make war or they reach an agreement” (1). It should be noted that despite being actual beneficiaries, the politicians and elites never engage in the riots directly. They organize crimes by not only instigating the vulnerable masses but also by supplying means for the execution of violence. The poet castigates the politicians who under the garb of secularism actually ignite the communal passions of the people for electoral gain. In “Custodians of Republic” Dharker writes:

Speeches are read  
A few points made  
Somewhere else in the city  
A blade finds flesh.  
Here in this quiet civil room  
Permission has been given  
For the carnage to begin. (27)

The demolition of Babri mosque on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 unleashed a bloody trail of communal agitation in which thousands of people and

incalculable properties perished. The political overtone in Dharker's poem is unmistakable but she does not provide a religious identity to the perpetrators, as they could be the members of any community. In the poem "8<sup>th</sup> January 1993" (following "6<sup>th</sup> December 1992") Dharker describes the scene of a house claimed by religious fanatics as follows:

The bolt bangs in.  
A match is struck and thrown.  
The burning has begun...  
And this is left:  
Blackened Saris, Trousers', petticoats  
The shell of a T.V. set a tin box of bangles  
And face cream  
Like a looted face  
That opened its mouth,  
In a scream  
That never found an end. (81)

A similar dread hovers in Qasim's mind when she thinks about visiting a place with an Islamic name as it could be the first target of a communal scuffle. Despite being assured by the ruling party, she records her dilemma in the poem "In Ahmedabad" in the following lines:

Uncertainty begins  
the moment I reach  
the airport  
even though the BJP  
states on a TV screen  
'Things are normal  
In Gujrat.' . . .  
On the way  
To Muslim Shah-e-Alam  
I'm told, 'But that's  
The first place  
To be attacked  
If there's a riot tonight.' (7)

According to Asutosh Varshney an incident can be termed as communal riot if "there is violence and two or more communally identified groups confront each other or members of other groups at some point during the violence" (363). The lackadaisical attitude of the police in

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communal riots and governmental inaction in bringing to book the offenders is encapsulated in the poem “The Museum of Death” by Qasim. The poet posits thus:

Some will be forced to come  
With shamed faces.  
They were safe in their houses  
When their neighbour’s  
Was burnt  
And the police watched. (14)

### III

The most inhuman atrocities have always been reserved for women whenever communal riots have taken place. The barbaric victimization of women during Partition riots reverberates in social and academic debates even today. Saneya observes;

More so is the case in the acts of violence like riots and genocides, where women usually keep away from any active participation in violence but have always bore the worst burnt as victims: the tortured, the raped, the burnt, the widowed, the orphaned, the one-left-without-a-son/husband/father/brother. (241)

Another theoretical perspective to the communalism debate is in Veena Das’s expression the “sexualization of social contract” (1). It will be a lopsided approach if only dominant religious ideologies are held accountable for nurturing the attacks on women during communal riots. Gendered communal violence is the outcome of archetypes formed about women as being commodities for male-pleasure and ironically the flag-bearers of honor of their communities at the same time. SK Fisher remarks, “Ethnic cleansing or genocide specifically target women and direct both sexual and reproductive violence towards them as women are seen as the cultural and biological repositories of ethnic or religious groups” (91). However, the problem is deceptively uncomplicated. A myth that the historians and sociologists adhered to for a long time was that the modesty of a woman is essentially violated by the member/members of the other community. On the other hand, the reality is that women, irrespective of their religion are subjected to sexual violence by all the communally frenzied men. A communally violated woman is several times more vulnerable than a normally oppressed woman but the society makes her undergo the

same trauma at regular intervals either propelling her to commit suicide or seek revenge. Contemporary women poets vocalize their concerns on gendered violence with great poignancy. Qasim in “In Ahmedabad” laments “of blood, of swords/inserted into/ten-year-old girls” (9). Rukmini Bhaya Nair in the note to *Ayodhya Cantos* informs about her encounter with young girls selling marigold garlands in Ayodhya who refused to divulge their names fearing their identities would be betrayed.

Dharker’s anthology *The Terrorist at My Table* raises pertinent question in the simplest language:

We live now working, travelling, eating, listening to the news,  
preparing for attack. What do anyone of us know about the  
person who shares this street, this house, this table, this body?  
When life is in the hands of a fellow-traveler, a neighbor, a lover,  
son or daughter, how does the world shift and reform itself  
around our doubt, our belief?

Seeme Qasim also registers a similar concern in the poem “Don’t Stay. . . Go” when she says, “The most dangerous place is your neighbourhood” (22). Same idea also finds expression in the opening lines of the poem “The Right Word”. The poet records the pervasiveness and inescapable presence of violence which skulks just at the doorstep:

Outside the door  
Lurking in the shadows  
is a terrorist. ( 27)

The first poem “After Gujrat” of *After Gujrat and Other Poems* by Seeme Qasim records the snippets she can recall after communal riots following the razing down of Babri mosque. She miserably recollects the images of blackened domes of the mosque, slaughtered animals, mangled bodies of women, destroyed lives and eerie silence as:

After Gujrat, I remember  
those other death trains,  
the screech. . .  
thse old destroyed lives,  
their torn clothes  
their hacked breasts. (3)

Gold, women and land signifying economy, gender and ownership respectively have been the root cause of discontent since times immemorial. Qasim in a poem titled “Nights” rightly records, “Behind all

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the fighting there are three things/ says the boy from my village/ Zar, Zan, Zameen” (Beyond October, 45). The same report by Rajindar Sachar and others also read:

Markers of Muslim identity the *burqa*, the *purdah*, the beard and the *topi* while adding to the distinctiveness of the Indian Muslims have been a cause of concern for them in the public realm. These markers have very often been a target for ridiculing the community as well as for looking upon them with suspicion.  
(12)

Dharker registers a vociferous outcry against these “markers” of identity made compulsory by religion. The denunciation of socio-religious dogmatism in the name of community honor is most potently encased in her poem “Honour Killing”. It speaks of a Muslim woman who despises the orthodoxy of religion which indirectly marginalizes women. She remonstrates thus:

This black veil of faith  
That made me faithless  
To myself.  
That tied my mouth,  
Gave my God a devil’s face  
And muffled my own voice. (13)

In the wake of communal violence and its aftermath, women are forced to resort to gross survival strategies. Qasim’s poem “Bombay Dairy-1” portrays the desperate measures taken by them in the words, “Zubedia’s children are now called/Paro and Raj/ Her walls are covered with calendars of gods” (23).

#### IV

Mythology embodies the Jungian archetype of the collective. Images, myths and religion inherited by individuals are potential symbols which get actualized when an interaction with the outer world takes place. Thus the hegemonic status of mythology in promoting bigotry cannot be ignored. Contemporary women poets create new literary strategies to negotiate with the dominant culture. Apart from the use of unadorned language, understated irony and laxity these poets make a liberal use of myths in their poems. They do not hark back on mythology and indigenous cultural frames to derive inspiration or borrow poetic idioms but to rewrite them sans their ascendancy. One such classic example is Rukmini Bhaya Niar’s

*Ayodhya Cantos*. The rewriting of the *kanda* (cantos) of Ramayana against the backdrop of communal violence precisely partition and the demolition of Babri mosque gives it a contemporary slant. The monkey-god Hanuman is envisaged as a tea-stall owner and Sita as a young girl named Sitara, whose religious identity is kept obscure on purpose. Vishnu (later reborn as Ram in Ayodhya) is rendered as a cosmic politician in the anthology. Unlike Dharker's God, Nair's Gods are not divine but very human. 'The Hanuman Kanda' swings among Hanuman, Vishnu and Mahatma Gandhi rendering an inclusive picture of the nation by fusing sacred images with profane. Hanuman who is traditionally a staunch devotee of Lord Ram registers his discomposure at being troubled by a pack of goons headed by the astute leader Vishnu. He ironically remarks, "Vishnu's up to his fluttery tricks again" (21), "What did he ever do to deserve such fearsome devotion?"(23), "A Bajrang-Dal stray would do, muttering the Hanuman Chalisa/ Misquoting the Gita" (23).

Mahatma Gandhi's death is merged with mythological figments and dealt with a tinge tragic-comedy. In the sonnet "Tees January, 1948", Mahatma Gandhi's "bullet-stopping phrase – He Ram!" fails to save him as "Vishnu the Preserver, plugged in to eternity's walkman" is too preoccupied to pay any attention to his plea (22). Army forces are seen marching up and down and an atmosphere of mayhem breaks out in the city. Hanuman's reaction to the entire commotion is described in the most humanly manner thus:

Hanumat the puffy-cheeked cannot manage such feats, cannot  
Smile beatifically at dissonance. When memories plague him,  
He sticks his fingers in his ears and yells, which is why he seems  
Fated to remain – or so he imagines – keeper of a small-time  
serai,

At the crossroads in Ayodhya. . . (22)

The overwhelming religious ferocity of Hindus culminated in the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992. The chorus in the sonnet "Fragments" urges the God/Politician to justify the monumental religious procession of the *Rath Yatra* in an area which first of all needs modest civic amenities. The chorus sings:

Why did Vishnu push his rath yatra  
Into the calm obscurity of Ayodhya?

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Listen, Bhavani, we're sick of politics  
Ayodhya lacks basic civil amenities  
The sacred Sarayu flows just nearby  
But drinking water's in short supply. (26)

The 'Sita Kanda' is juxtaposed with the gory episode of Partition. The ingenuous young Sitara is shown oblivious of the repercussion that would accompany Partition whereas Hanuman is intimidated by the same. The sonnet reads:

Partition Hanuman shudders  
Again, and the earth trembles. But dauntless Sita, earth's most  
Favoured daughter, jagaddhatri, just giggles.  
. . . Sita knocks one last time. (28)

In the next sonnet "White", the poet narrates the rape of Sita/Sitara. It conjures an ambience of uncertainty and fear when the lonely Sitara is frightened in darkness and impels brother Hanuman to accompany her. While she is raped, the "creation's guardian" (26), Vishnu presides over the entire scene as a passive onlooker.

Sitara is alone. Clamour and fetid darkness. *Chalo Hanuman Bhai!*  
No answer. The peanuts spill from her helpless grip. Chunni pulled  
Away, hair in a mess, breast squeezed in a wild caress. She is parted.  
Rudra Vishnu, bringer of tears, watches Sita's plight. (29)

Since the religious identity of Sita is not betrayed, it defies easy categorization of the victim-victimizer. As mentioned earlier, communal stereotype of the sadist essentially being the 'other' also falls into question in the sonnet. Thus, Sita/ Sitara embodies all the women who became a prey to sexual savagery of men during partition.

In the 'Vishnu Kanda' various incarnations of Lord Vishnu like Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama and Rama and their mythical tales are played upon. Parshurama (literally implying Ram with an axe) was the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu and quite infamous for his ire. He is believed to have wiped off the *kshatriya* clan twenty one times. In the contemporary setting, Nair replaces the *kshatriyas* with Muslims and Parshurama becomes the manifestation of Hindus. He is shown committed to torch Muslim houses and shatter down the mosques. However the chorus supplies him with the graphic details of the Ayodhya of the Kalyuga which is in stark contrast with the Ayodhya of the Treta yuga:

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The truth is Ayodhya is a dump. Our  
Economy is in a ghastly slump. Cowdung's  
Sold at two rupees a lump. Religion's even  
Cheaper! Guns, homemade like lemonade  
Sold up and down the temple lanes. Gandhi  
Locked in a cage on Ayodhya's ghats for fear. (40)

### **Conclusion**

Contemporary women poetry gravitates from stringent adherence to received literary models to experimentation and from sloganeering to a non-Oriental, secular nationalism. Poetry by women today participates in the global system of education, politics and economics that has replaced the obsolete colonial and patriarchal networks. The engagement of these poets in the issue of violence is not merely a gendered response but they understand it from multiple focal points. The aesthetic-activist response to the issue of communalism does not limit itself only to the documentation of violence that occurs during the riots but it inspects from a secular perspective, the socio-political and economic elements that triggers such events. The critical analysis of the poems above lays bare the confluence of sensibilities of these poets in raising the issues like violence, communalism, nationalism and gender yet differing in their mode of projection of the same. These poets offer a nuanced understanding of the communal problem from the paradoxical vantage point of being both revered and violated as a woman. The poetry of all the three poets is suffused with symbolic emblems that approximates and appropriates the complex ramifications of communal riots in the country. Their poetry enters the fraught terrain of the public sphere creating a parallel discourse on the complex experiences of communalism.

Instead of limiting her outlook, Dharker's locational embeddedness enables her to point out the similarity in social perils across the nations she has inhabited. She primarily negotiates with the matrix of home, gender, communal conflict and cultural displacement highlighting the alarming difference between the ideal state affairs and the reality. So instead of alienating her from the fundamental problems in India her globally-travelled self qualifies her to examine the sectarianism ingrained in every culture across the world.

Seeme Qasim utilizes her Islamic identity in her poems. In an inornate

yet bold language she foregrounds the inhuman outrage that her community has been subjected to. She also shows how stereotypes about a community lead to segregation and discrimination. Apart from Gujrat and Bombay massacre she also evokes dreadful violence of the Apartheid in her poems. Qasim as a poet displays immense depth both in understanding and expressing the barbarity of communal violence but this depth slightly makes her outlook Muslim-centric.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair should be especially applauded for humanizing the theological characters to cut across the boundaries of nation, class, religion and gender. Her poems are not a programmatic documentation of communal violence. On the contrary, they challenge everything ranging from mythology to politics and Partition to present day communalism. The poet makes use of metaphorical language and mythological episodes to enrich one's understanding of the intertwined complexities of religious fundamentalism, history and politics.

Women's representation in literary and creative texts seemed immutable till they provided strong alternative discourses on their lived reality. The response of these women poets to communal violence despite being discreetly rebellious carries a prophetic momentum. The poetic transmutation of the trauma of violence is actually an appeal to the people to be more accommodating. Communal riots dislocate the rhythm of one's everyday life and poetic articulations like these become an important medium to restore a sense of proportion in the lives of the victims. Women poets do not recommend universally- proposed but failed solutions like national and global brotherhood. They also do not endorse wreaking vengeance on communal agents. They fulfill their social responsibility by stimulating the thoughts of people by narrating to them the tragic after effects of such incidents. The poetic credo of all the three poets can be summed up in the lines, "If you must but above all, act! . . . India is yours! The last word belongs to you" (Nair, 42).

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