

Romesh Chunder Dutt's Contribution to the Indo-Anglian Literature

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Romesh Chunder Dutt was a towering figure of his time. A versatile genius, he enriched whatever he touched. He was a distinguished poet, historian, economist and administrator. Besides condensing the Ramayana and the Mahabharata into English verse, he wrote such monumental books as History of Ancient Civilisation and The Economic History of India. It augured well for Indo-Anglian poetry that this man with a multi-splendoured personality came to it.

Romesh Chunder knew Sanskrit well, and the matchless compositions in this language inspired him to render them into English, thus showing to the world the magnificence of the classics of India. Lays of Ancient India was published in 1894. The poems of the book have come from the entire range of ancient Indian poetry. To cull the best from the vast domains of Sanskrit was a really challenging task; but assisted by his encyclopedic knowledge and innate understanding of the beauties of literature, Romesh performed it very well.

The renderings in 'Lays of Ancient India' are quite competent. The poet proceeds with a remarkable sureness. The lines almost always have an easy flow; the metre seldom stumbles. Such renderings are bound to suffer from certain limitations too, for Romesh Chunder could not have hoped to recapture all the freshness and feel of those distant times, when life shone in all its pristine glory. And, still, when we read such lines as the following addressed, for example, to Usha and taken from the Rig-Veda, we cannot help appreciating the power of the poet:

Come like a housewife gentle-hearted,
Tending all: - for night is departed,

Grant another joyous day
To beasts that walk and birds that fly.
And men and beasts to their work repair,
And birds with joyous notes will fill the air!¹

The lines with their apt images convey the bustle of the early morning. The following lines, crackling with speed and energy, beautifully describe the arrival of dawn:

She comes! she comes! in her bright car
Scattering splendour from afar!
From regions far above the sun
In hundred chariots comes the Dawn!
she comes! She comes! In radiant loveliness,
she comes! She comes to heal us and to bless!²

These lines don't have the naivety of, any, those of Kashiprosad or Madhusudan. Though they cannot be called deeply suggestive, there is a kind of beauty in plainness of structure itself. In such renderings, there is always the danger of distortion of details. But Romesh's lines never suffer from this defect: the poet never does any violence to the basic sentiment, and recaptures the atmosphere of the dim past.

In 1898, Romesh Chunder published his condensed translation of the Mahabharata and in 1899 that of the Ramayana. It was a very ambitious project. But having the vision of a born artist, he successfully tackles the problem. He takes out the main strands of the story and leaves out the rest. Consequently, the ninety couplets of the Mahabharata have been condensed into two thousand couplets, and twenty-four thousand verses of the Ramayana into two thousand verses. The seven 'kandas' of the Ramayana and the eighteen "Pervas" of the Mahabharata become twelve books each, the same number as Paradise Lost.

Romesh uses the meter adopted by Tennyson in his 'Locksley Hall', as he thought it to be the ideal English equivalent to the "anushtub" metre of the epic. It was a happy choice. As Dr. Iyengar points out, "The seeming bareness, the utter simplicity, the insinuating cadence and the magic of the anushtubha of Valmiki and Vyasa, unique as they are and hence as Homer's hexameters or Dante's terza rima, can hardly be wholly reproduced even by such a mastercraftsman as Romesh Chunder Dutt. But, such as it is, Romesh Chunder has done his very best, and the norm of the verse is elastic enough to reproduce many of the potent spells of the originals."³ In the following lines, Hanuman, sings of the story of Rama to Sita in the Ashoka Garden of Ravana:

Hanuman from leafy shelters lifts his voice in sacred song,
Till the tale of Ram's glory Lanka's woods and vale prolong:
Listen Lady to my story; famed in war,

Rich in steeds and royal armed men and battle car,
Ruled his realm in truth and virtue, in his beauty ever free,
Of the mighty race of Raghu mightiest king and monarch he,⁴

Once we put such lines beside those of, say, Kashiprasad and even Madhsudan, their beauty will be evident. In the first place, here we get a careful choice of words: they are for the most part simple and suggestive. Here, we don't come across the artificial diction of the two earlier poets. The long metre the poet uses produces striking solemnity. The rhythm has the sweep and elevation worthy of the subject.

There are the lines in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which reflect Romesh's deep feeling and nature:

Massive clouds like rolling mountains
gather thick and gather high,
Lurid lightnings, glint and sparkle,
pealing thunder shake the sky,
Pregnant with the ocean moisture
By the solar ray instilled'
Now the sky like fruitful mothers,
ladder-like of smooth ascent,
one could almost reach the Sun-god,
wreath him with a wreath of acent,

and when glow these heavy masses

red and white with evening's glow,⁵

thus is accurate enough, suffused with a colouring of the imagination. The use of "massive", "rolling" and "thick" makes the picture of heavy clouds highly concrete. The images of clouds as mountains and the skies as fruitful mothers, etc., have a pristine freshness. Elsewhere he writes_

Now the clouds with lurid flashes gathered darkling, thick and high
Lines of cranes like gleams of laughter sailed across the gloomy sky,⁶

Certainly, one who is capable of writing such lines cannot be dismissed as a mere versifier still Dr.K.R.S Iyengar thinks that "Romesh Chunder was certainly an adroit versifier – although no poet ..."⁷ But a mere versifier cannot give us such palpitating lines as the following:

Darksome woods of Panchavati, Janasthan's smiling vale,
flowering trees and winding creepers, murmur to my lord this tale
Sweet companions of my exile, friends who cheered my woodland stay,
Speak of Rama, that his site ruthless Ravan bears away!
Towering peaks and lofty mountains, wooded hills sublime and high,
Far-extending gloomy ranges heaving to the azure sky,
In your voice of pealing thunder to my lord and consort say,
Speak of Rama, that his Sita ruthless Ravan bears away:⁸

This is Sita's touching farewell to the woods at the time of her forcible departure from Panchavati. It is one of the most moving episodes in the Ramayana. These lines show that Romesh has done full justice to the original: dipped in deep pathos, they communicate Sita's complete identification with the woods.

Abhimanyu's death is one of the most pathetic events in the Mahabharat: seven great generals join in to kill this sixteen year old lad. This is how the poet describes his end:

Like a tusker of the forest by surrounding hunters slain,
Like a wood-consuming wild fire quenched upon the distant plain,
Like a mountain-shaking tempest spent in force and hushed and still,
Like the red resplendent day-god setting on the western hill,
Like the moon serene and beauteous quenched in eclipse dark and pale,
Lifeless slumbered Abhimanyu when the softened starlit fell:⁹

In these lines, "piling simile upon simile, the poet turns the pathos of Abhimanyu's death itself into poetry that is truly too deep for tears."¹⁰

So, Romesh Chunder Dutt cannot be dismissed as a mere versifier or translator. He is most certainly a poet. No doubt Valmiki and Vyasa were always there to help him. But in the same way, Shakespeare too had his Plutarch and Holinshed. Romesh has written verse that is to an extent flawless; his characters preserved all the qualities of the ancient heroes. He is a perfect master of all that goes to make good, if not great, poetry. As Dr. Iyengar too accepts, "whether in portraiture or in dialogue, in description or in exhortation, Romesh Chunder is

always convincing; alike in depicting the horrors of war and in delineating the primary human emotions, he shows himself worthy of his originals; and that is the measure of his greatness as an Indo-Anglian poet.”¹¹

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Romesh Chunder Dutt-Lays of Ancient India, pp. 24-25.
- [2]. Ibid., p. 25
- [3]. K.R.S.Iyengar, The Indian Contribution to English Literature, p.28
- [4]. R.C.Dutt, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, p-103
- [5]. Ibid., pp. 96-97
- [6]. Ibid., p.176.
- [7]. K.R.S.Iyengar, Indian Writing in English,p.77
- [8]. R.C.Dutt, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, p.87
- [9]. Ibid.,p.297.
- [10]. K.R.S.Iyengar, The Indian Contribution to English,p.29.
- [11]. Ibid.,p.30