



## Echoes of Mythology and Folklore in the Poetry of Toru Dutt

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### Abstract:-

Indian English poetry represents a unique literary space where indigenous philosophical traditions intersect with the global language of English. Rooted in India's ancient civilizational heritage, Indian Knowledge Systems encompass spiritual philosophy, ethical thought, metaphysics, aesthetics, and ecological consciousness. Indian English poets have consistently drawn upon these systems to articulate cultural identity, spiritual inquiry, and human experience. Toru Dutt occupies a seminal position in Indo-Anglian literature as one of the earliest Indian poets writing in English to consciously employ Indian myth and folklore. Writing during the colonial period, Dutt used ancient Indian legends not merely as narrative material but as a means of cultural assertion and literary resistance. This paper examines the use of myth and folklore in Toru Dutt's poetry, particularly in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, and analyzes how she reinterprets traditional narratives to explore themes of identity, gender, morality, and nationalism. By blending Indian mythic content with Western poetic forms, Dutt bridges the Eastern and Western literary traditions, establishing a distinct Indian voice in English poetry. Focusing on select poets such as Toru Dutt, the study examines how Indian English poetry serves as a modern conduit for ancient wisdom, enabling the continuity and reinterpretation of Indian Knowledge Systems within a contemporary literary framework. This research paper also explored how Indian Knowledge Systems are reflected in Indian English Poetry through themes, imagery, symbolism, and philosophical concerns.

**Keywords:** Toru Dutt, Indian mythology, folklore, Indo-Anglian poetry, cultural nationalism, women in myth.

### Introduction: -

The nineteenth century marked a crucial phase in Indian literary history, particularly with the emergence of English as a medium of creative expression. English education, introduced by the British, initially functioned as a tool of administration and cultural dominance. However, Indian writers gradually appropriated the language to express indigenous experiences, traditions, and values. Among the earliest and most remarkable of these writers was Toru Dutt (1856–1877), whose poetry represents a crucial moment in the evolution of Indian English literature. Amidst colonial dominance and cultural marginalization, Dutt emerged as a pioneering voice who reclaimed Indian heritage through poetry. Despite her short life, Dutt made a lasting contribution to Indian English literature by drawing extensively on Indian myth and folklore. Her poetry reflects a deep engagement with India's ancient past while simultaneously employing Western literary conventions.

Despite her tragically short life, Toru Dutt produced a body of work that continues to be studied for its depth, originality, and cultural significance. Her poetry is marked by a profound engagement with Indian myth and folklore, which she used to reclaim India's cultural heritage at a time when colonial discourse often dismissed it as primitive or inferior. By retelling ancient legends in English, Dutt sought to demonstrate the richness, complexity, and universality of Indian civilization. Toru Dutt occupies a lasting place in the tradition of Indo-Anglian poetry. Her brief life was marked by both happiness and suffering, and her untimely death deprived Indian English literature of a gifted poet. She was born on March 4, 1856, in a Hindu household at Rambagan in Calcutta. Her father, Govin Chunder Dutt, was a distinguished scholar of languages, and her mother, Kshetramoni Dutt, had a strong command of English as well as Bengali. Deeply rooted in Indian culture, her mother regularly shared stories from Hindu mythology with her children, which deeply influenced Toru's imagination. These early influences later shaped her renowned work, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Toru's health gradually declined, and by 1877, it had worsened beyond recovery. She died on August 30, 1877, at the age of twenty-one. Though her life was short, her literary achievements, particularly *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, have ensured her permanent recognition in Indo-Anglian poetry.

### Objectives: -

1. To analyse a selected poem by Toru Dutt through close textual reading
2. To identify mythological and folkloric elements in her poetry



3. To analyse Indian mythological themes and characters.
4. To understand cultural and national identity in her poetry.
5. To examine her reinterpretation of Indian myths and legends.
6. To evaluate her contribution to Indo-English poetry.

#### **Hypothesis:**

Toru Dutt's use of mythological and folk narratives in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) serves as a deliberate literary strategy to articulate human emotions, moral conflicts, gender roles, and a developing sense of national identity.

#### **Methodology: -**

The study adopts a qualitative, text-based methodological approach to analyse a selected poem by Toru Dutt, focusing on close reading and detailed textual analysis to examine language, imagery, symbolism, and thematic concerns. Special attention is given to the identification and interpretation of mythological and folkloric references, particularly those drawn from Indian epics, legends, and cultural traditions, to understand how Dutt reworks these sources within a poetic framework. The methodology incorporates established critical and literary theories, drawing on scholarly interpretations and historical contexts.

#### **Discussion: -**

Toru Dutt stands as one of the earliest and most significant figures in Indian English literature, particularly for her pioneering use of Indian myth and folklore in English poetry. Writing during the colonial period, Dutt consciously turned to India's ancient epics, legends, and folk traditions as a means of cultural reclamation and literary assertion. She reinterprets traditional narratives to address themes of identity, gender, morality, nationalism, and cultural memory. Dutt's poetic engagement with myth is not merely nostalgic or imitative but deeply transformative, humanizing legendary figures and blending Indian content with Western literary forms. Through this, Toru Dutt laid the foundation for a distinct Indo-Anglian poetic tradition and challenged colonial assumptions about Indian culture and literature.

Toru Dutt's poetry is a rich tapestry of Indian mythology and folklore, woven together with threads of Western influence and personal experience. This collection of poems explores the ways in which Dutt draws upon the myths and legends of her native India, reinterpreting them in a modern and uniquely personal way. Through her poetry, Dutt breathes new life into ancient tales, revealing the timeless themes and emotions that continue to resonate with readers today. From the god and goddesses of Hindu mythology to the folk tales of rural Bengal, Dutt's poetry is a celebration of the rich cultural heritage of India. Her poems are a testament to the enduring power of myth and folklore to inspire and transform us and a reminder of the importance of preserving and honouring our cultural traditions.

#### **Toru Dutt: Life and Literary Background:-**

Understanding Toru Dutt's engagement with myth and folklore requires an awareness of her personal and intellectual background. Born into a cultured Bengali family in Calcutta, Dutt was exposed to both Indian and Western traditions from an early age. Her family was deeply interested in literature, and she received an education that included English, French, and classical European literature alongside Indian cultural influences. She spent several years in Europe, where she became familiar with Romantic poetry, classical mythology, and Western literary forms. At the same time, her emotional attachment to India remained strong. This dual exposure shaped her literary sensibility, enabling her to write in English while remaining rooted in Indian tradition.

Toru Dutt was the youngest child in her family, preceded by her sister Aru and her brother Abju, who died in 1865. She was related to Romesh Chunder Dutt, a notable poet and civil servant. Beginning in 1869, Toru and her sister spent nearly four years in Europe, where they developed strong skills in both English and French. Their education started at a school in France and continued in London in 1870, the year *The Dutt Family Album* was published. In 1871, they moved to Cambridge and took part in the "Higher Lectures for Women." The family returned to India in September 1873 and resumed living at their homes in Rambagan and at their garden residence in Baumaree.

Her major works include *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876), a collection of translations from French poetry, and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, published

posthumously. While the former reflects her engagement with European literature, the latter stands as a conscious return to Indian myth and folklore. Her debut poetry collection included 165 poems translated from French literature, with only eight contributed by her sister Aru and the remainder translated by Toru herself. The loss of her sister and closest companion, Aru, who died of consumption on July 23, 1874, had a profound emotional impact on Toru. This tragedy motivated her to compile a body of poems inspired by Indian traditions, for which she began learning Sanskrit during 1875–76. Even while struggling with illness, she continued to write and completed *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* during this period. Toru Dutt died on August 30, 1877, from the same disease and was buried in the South Cemetery of Calcutta. Following her death, her father arranged for the publication of her remaining manuscripts, including two novels—one in English and the other in French—along with her final collection of poems, which were released in London and Paris.

**Love for Ancient Myth and Legends:** Toru Dutt's fascination with ancient Indian mythology is clearly reflected in her poetry, which draws inspiration from the great epics such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas*. The tale of Savitri, for instance, is taken from the *Mahabharata*. The poem begins in a conventional epic manner, introducing the central characters while also highlighting the social customs of the time. During that period, Indian women were not strictly confined to the zenana. Savitri is depicted as a free-spirited young woman who could travel freely with her companions. She frequently visited gardens and the dwellings of sages, who gladly received her and imparted their spiritual knowledge to her.

Toru Dutt's poetry, most notably in her collection *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, reveals a strong influence of Indian mythological traditions. In this work, she retells well-known stories such as Savitri, Sita and Lakshmana, and Dhruva and Ekalavya, taken from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. By combining Indian cultural values and moral concepts like karma and the search for identity with Western poetic forms, she emerged as one of the earliest voices of Indian English literature, distinguished by her deep sense of Indian consciousness. The volume was published in 1882 after her death. It consists of nine ballads or legends drawn from Indian mythology, along with a few additional poems. Arranged into nine sections followed by miscellaneous pieces, the collection remains an incomplete body of original verse. In total, it contains sixteen poems, some of which are adaptations from ancient Sanskrit sources. Drawing inspiration from the mythological tales passed down to her by her mother, a reflection of India's oral storytelling tradition, Toru Dutt presents new interpretations of familiar legends and their characters.

#### **Mythological Sources in Toru Dutt's Poetry: -**

Toru Dutt drew extensively from Hindu epics and Puranic myths, especially the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Her primary engagement with myth is evident in her collection *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882). The poems draw heavily from Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as from Puranic legends and regional folklore. It retells Indian myths in English verse. The collection opens with the narrative of **Savitri and Satyavan**, a well-known episode from the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. This poem, which runs to nearly a thousand lines and is divided into five sections, forms the centerpiece of the work. The legend of Savitri holds a special place in Indian tradition and is one of the most prominent pieces in the collection. Alongside this, the book presents a moment from the *Ramayana* depicting a conversation between **Sita and Lakshmana** in the forest, occurring just before the drawing of the **Lakshmana Rekha**. The poem **Jogadhya Uma** draws inspiration from Bengali folklore, while **The Royal Ascetic**, **The Hind**, and **The Legend of Dhruva** are adapted from stories found in the *Vishnu Purana*. The episode of **Eklavya** from the *Mahabharata* is retold in the poem **Buttoo**, followed by **Sindhu**, another narrative based on the *Ramayana*. The tale of **Prahlad**, also derived from the *Vishnu Purana*, is a significant inclusion. In contrast to these mythological retellings, the poem **Sita** adopts a more intimate and reflective tone, emphasizing personal emotion rather than grand epic events.

Poems like *Savitri*, *Sita*, *Lakshman*, *Sindhu*, and *Buttoo* revisit well-known mythological stories, but Toru Dutt does more than simply retell them. She reimagines these tales to focus on ethical questions, emotional struggles, and universal human values. In her poetry, myth becomes a living tradition rather than a static inheritance. Had she lived longer, she might have further developed this approach, as seen in her treatment of Sita's grief at Valmiki's hermitage. Her collection also

includes seven other poems, among which *The Lotus* and *Our Casuarina Tree* are especially popular. Toru Dutt's skill as a storyteller is evident in the careful and structured way she handles these legendary narratives.

Different Aspects of the Poem Ancient Ballad and Legends of Hindustan: -

#### 1. Revival of Indian Mythology: -

Toru Dutt consciously used Indian myth and folklore to assert cultural identity under colonial rule. Her poetry blends classical Indian legends, folk traditions, and Western literary forms, creating a unique Indo-Anglian voice. She drew extensively from Hindu epics and Puranic myths, especially the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Her celebrated volume, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, recreates well-known Indian myths in English poetic form. The collection includes poems such as "Savitri," "Sita," "Lakshman," "Sindhu," and "Buttoo," each presenting familiar legendary figures in a new literary style. *Savitri* tells the enduring story of Satyavan's death and the steadfast love of Savitri, whose courage and devotion succeed in reclaiming her husband's life. The poem *Lakshman* focuses on the memorable episode of the **Lakshman Rekha**, drawn as a protective boundary for Sita. *Jogadhya Uma* is drawn from a regional legend in which the goddess is portrayed as the daughter of a temple priest at Khirogram. *The Royal Ascetic* and *The Hind* portray **Bharat's** deep sense of duty and sacrifice as he governs the kingdom on Rama's behalf, honoring Rama's sandals as a symbol of rightful authority. In *Dhruva*, the poet celebrates the intense faith of a young boy whose devotion earns him an everlasting place in the sky as the **Pole Star**. *Buttoo* retells the story of **Ekalavya**, whose extraordinary skill in archery amazes even the great warrior Arjuna. *Sindhu* narrates the tragic account of **Shravan Kumar** and the sorrowful curse pronounced on King Dasharath by Shravan's blind parents. *Prahlad* narrates the tale of a devoted child saved by Lord Vishnu in the form of Narsimha, who destroys his cruel father, Hiranyakashipu. *Sita* is a brief poem and remains unfinished. In these works, Dutt does more than retell myths; she reinterprets them to highlight moral strength, selflessness, and the emotional depth of human experience.

#### 2. Representation of Women in Myth: -

One of the most significant aspects of Toru Dutt's mythological poetry is her focus on female protagonists. Her sympathetic portrayal of women is visible in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Characters such as Savitri and Sita are portrayed with psychological depth and emotional intensity. In "Savitri," the heroine's devotion and courage enable her to confront Death itself, presenting a powerful image of female agency. Thus, Savitri is presented as a woman who defies death through love and devotion. Similarly, Sita highlights suffering, endurance, and moral strength rather than idealized submissiveness. Her character emphasizes purity and emotional suffering rather than royal grandeur. Through these figures, Dutt subtly critiques patriarchal norms and elevates female agency. She questions patriarchal interpretations of myth and foregrounds women's inner strength.

#### 3. Use of Folklore and Oral Tradition: -

Toru Dutt used simple narrative structure, repetition, and made a direct emotional appeal through her poem *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. This folk quality makes the poems accessible and preserves the oral storytelling tradition of India, which colonial education often marginalized. The influence of folklore and the Ballad is apparent in this poem. *Savitri* is a narrative poem with a folkloric theme. *Buttoo* is a ballad-like retelling of Ekalavya's story from the Mahabharata, and *Lakshman* is a poem having a ballad-like quality. This stylistic choice reflects the oral storytelling traditions of India, which had long served as a means of cultural transmission. By adopting the ballad form, Dutt preserves the spirit of folk narration while elevating it within a written, English literary framework. This fusion allows her to maintain authenticity while making Indian folklore accessible to a global audience.

#### 4. Indian Sensibility in Western Form: -

Although deeply rooted in Indian tradition, Toru Dutt's poetry is shaped by Western literary influences, including Romanticism and classical European forms. This synthesis of Indian content and Western form creates a hybrid aesthetic that defines early Indian English poetry. Her work, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, shows that though Dutt uses the English language and European verse forms, the spirit of her poetry is deeply Indian. Mythological settings, Indian landscapes, and cultural values. This fusion demonstrates that Indian myths can stand alongside Greek and Roman

myths in literary dignity. Rather than diluting Indian culture, this fusion strengthens it, proving that English can serve as a medium for indigenous expression without cultural loss.

#### 5. Cultural Nationalism and Identity: -

At a time when Indian culture was often dismissed as inferior, Toru Dutt's use of myth and folklore served as an act of cultural assertion. She presents Indian legends with pride and seriousness. She challenges colonial assumptions and asserts the richness and complexity of Indian civilization. Toru Dutt's use of myth and folklore must be understood within the context of colonial India. By presenting Indian myths in English, her work demonstrates that Indian myths are as profound and artistically valuable as Greek or Roman myths, thereby placing Indian culture on equal footing within the global literary tradition. Her poem *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* is a perfect example of cultural nationalism and identity.

#### 6. Emotional and Ethical Depth: -

Dutt humanizes mythological characters, making them emotionally relatable rather than distant divine figures. Myths become vehicles for exploring love and loss, duty and sacrifice, and faith and moral courage. In her poetry, mythological narratives shift their focus from supernatural grandeur to inner emotional struggles, allowing readers to engage with the characters on a personal level. Themes of love and loss are explored through moments of grief, longing, and attachment, while duty and sacrifice emerge as profound moral choices rather than heroic abstractions. Faith is portrayed as an inner strength that guides characters through suffering and uncertainty. By reshaping myths in this way, Dutt transforms legendary figures into reflections of shared human experience, using mythology as a powerful medium for emotional and moral exploration.

#### Conclusion: -

Toru Dutt is one of the earliest Indian poets writing in English who consciously used Indian myth and folklore to assert cultural identity. Her poetry blends classical Indian legends, folk traditions, and Western literary forms, creating a unique Indo-Anglian voice. The use of myth and folklore in Toru Dutt's poetry is central to her literary achievement. Through her retelling of Indian legends, she preserves cultural memory, explores human emotions, and asserts national identity. Her poetry transforms myth into a vehicle for moral inquiry, emotional resonance, and cultural pride. As one of the earliest Indian poets in English, Toru Dutt laid the foundation for later writers who would continue to draw upon mythology to articulate Indian experiences in a global literary language. Toru Dutt's use of myth and folklore is not decorative but central to her poetic vision. Her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* stands as an early and powerful example of how mythology can be used to express cultural pride, emotional depth, and moral reflection.

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