

His Poetry was a Forest Fire

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THE life of Ambikagiri Raichaudhuri is as interesting as his poetry and prose writings, there being a strong visible interaction between the two throughout his literary career. In his case, poetry or prose writings were the expression of his personality. The aesthetics of his poetry was romantic, based on unusual sound effects and imagery. His radical nationalism, nurtured in the Swadeshi and Non-cooperation Movements in the first half of the twentieth century, was expressed in songs, poems, oratorical and evocative prose, as well as political action. Love for his beloved, marked by intensity of enhanced feelings, found its ultimate consummation in transcendental poetry addressed to an imagined essential thing, which was the source of both beauty and truth. His view of poetry, as expressed in his own statement about his poems and songs, is very much different from the contemporary view of poetry:

Those wise men who enjoy relishing the *rasa* of poetry may not call them (*i.e.*, *his poems*) poems and denounce them as 'natural forest fires'. Certainly these are wild fires raging in my heart. The fire has reduced my heart to ashes.

The poet at times saw only manikins around him, and not men. He calls them *jada-bharatas*, a heap of cold stones. His heart had

merged in the country. The fire burnt both, the fire of the spirit.

Some of his songs, available in English translation as *Songs of the Cell*, are both invocatory and evocative. The translation was done by his friend and reputed scholar-critic, the late Dr Banikanta Kakati (1894-1952). The title refers to a period of the poet's life spent in jail. He wrote and sang his poems while undergoing the rigours of hard labour imposed by a foreign power on a political prisoner. The title, 'Songs of the Cell', aptly expresses the spirit of the songs. Some of them were sung on public occasions and at the 1926 session of the Indian National Congress in Pandu, Assam, and at the Assam Association Sessions. All these songs were placed at the service of the nation in the cause of revolution and reconstruction. Lakshminarayan Sahu, the Oriya social worker, associated with the Servant of India Society, has rightly observed in his Preface that "Ambikagiri's songs are soul-reaching and at times soul-piercing too."

As the Publisher says: "All but the tenth and eleventh poems were composed in prison cells when the author was incarcerated twice in connection with the fight for Swaraj. The tenth and eleventh were composed and sung as opening songs at the Indian National Congress held at Pandunagar in 1926."

These poems of his early years were marked by a spirit of Indianness that is remarkable for its breadth of patriotic imagination.