Quantitative Metre in English and Bengali

English Quantitative Verse — Rhythm in English and Bengali

There have been attempts to write in English quantitative verse on the Greek and Latin principle with the classical metres, attempts which began in the Elizabethan times, but they have not been successful because the method was either too slipshod or tried to adhere too rigidly to the rules of quantity natural to Greek and Latin but not to the English tongue instead of making an adaptation of it for the English ear or, still better, discovering directly in English itself the true principle of an English quantitative metre. I believe it is perfectly possible to acclimatise the quantitative principle in English and with great advantage. I have not seen Bridges’ attempts, but I do not see why his failure — if it was one — should damn the possibility. I think one day it will be done.

It is true that English rhythm falls most naturally into the iambic movement. But I do not admit the adverse strictures passed on the other bases of metre. All depends on how you handle them, — if as much pain is bestowed as on the iambic, the fault attributed to them will disappear. Even as it is, the trochaic metre in the hands of great poets like Milton, Shelley, Keats does not pall — I do not get tired of the melody of the Skylark. Swinburne’s anapaestic rhythms, as in Dolores, are kept up for pages without difficulty with the most royal ease, without fatigue either to the writer or the reader. Both trochee and anapaest are surely quite natural to the language. The dactyl is more difficult to continue, but I believe it can be done, even in a long dactylic metre like the hexameter, if interspersed with spondees (as the metre allows) and supported by subtle modulations of rhythm, variations of pause and caesura. The iambic metre itself was at first taxed with monotony in a drumming beat until it was used...
in a more plastic way by Shakespeare and Milton. All depends on the skill which one brings to the work and the tool is quarrelled with only when the workman does not know how to use it.

The English language is not naturally melodious like the Italian or Bengali — no language with a Teutonic base can be — but it is capable of remarkable harmonic effects and also it can by a skilful handling be made to give out the most beautiful melodies. Bengali and Italian are soft, easy and mellifluous languages — English is difficult and has to be struggled with in order to produce its best effects, but out of that very difficulty has arisen an astonishing plasticity, depth and manifold subtlety of rhythm. These qualities do not repose on metrical building alone but much more on the less analysable elements of the entire rhythmic structure. The metrical basis itself is a peculiar and subtle combination on which English rhythm depends without explicitly avowing it, a skilful and most extraordinarily variable combination of three elements — the numeric foot dependent on the number of syllables, the use of the stress foot and a play of stresses, and a recognisable but free and plastic use of quantitative play (not quantitative feet), all three running into each other.

I am afraid your estimate here is marred by the personal or national habit. One is always inclined to make this claim for one's own language because one can catch every shade and element of it while in another language, however well-learned, the ear is not so clair-audient. I cannot agree that the examples you give of Bengali melody beat hollow the melody of the greatest English lyrists. Shakespeare, Swinburne’s best work in Atalanta and elsewhere, Shelley at his finest and some others attain a melody that cannot be surpassed. It is a different kind of melody, but not inferior.

Bengali has a more melodious basis, it can accomplish melody more easily than English, it has a freer variety of melodies now, for formerly as English poetry was mostly iambic, Bengali poetry used to be mostly aksaravratta. (I remember how my brother Manmohan would annoy me by denouncing the absence of melody, the featureless monotony of Bengali rhythm
Quantitative Metre in English and Bengali

and tell me how Tagore ought to be read to be truly melodious — like English in stress, with ludicrous effects. That however is by the way.) What I mean is that variety of melodic bases was not conspicuous at that time in Bengali poetry. Nowadays this variety is there and undoubtedly opens possibilities such as perhaps do not exist in other languages.

I do not see, however, how the metrical aspect by itself can really be taken apart from other more subtle elements. I do not mean the spirit and feeling or the sense of the language only, though without depth or adequacy there metrical melody is only a melodious corpse, but the spirit and feeling or subtle (not intellectual) elements of rhythm and it is on these that English depends for the greater power and plasticity of its harmonic and even if to a less extent of its melodic effects. In a word there is truth in what you say but it cannot be pushed so far as you push it.

May 1934

Bengali and English Quantitative Poetry

Nishikanta’s poem in *laghu-guru* is splendid. But perhaps Girija would say that it is a pure Bengali rhythm, which means I suppose that it reads as well and easily in Bengali as if it were not written on an unusual rhythmic principle. I suppose that must necessarily be the aim of a new metre or metrical principle; it is what I am trying to do with quantitative efforts in English.

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Is it true that the *laghu-guru* is to the Bengali ear as impossible as would be to the English ear the line made up by Tagore: “Autumn flaunteth in his bushy bowers”? In English such a violence could not be entertained for a moment. It was because Spenser and others tried to base their hexameters and pentameters on this flagrant violation of the first law of English rhythm that the first attempt to introduce quantitative metres in English proved a failure. Accent cannot be ignored in English rhythm — it is why in my attempts at quantitative metre I always count a strongly accentuated syllable, even if the vowel is short, as a long one —
for the stress does really make it long for metrical purposes.

21 July 1936

English Prosody and Bengali Metrics

You have set me two very intricate subjects to wrestle with — English prosody and the *yaugmika-akṣara* tangle! English prosody is neither syllabic nor quantitative nor anything else; it is simply English prosody — that is to say, everything together, except what it pretends to be. As to the other, you and Prabodh Sen and Anilbaran and Tagore and the rest are already in such a tangle of controversy from which there seems no hope of your ever getting out that I don’t propose to add any cord of my own to the knot, and probably, if I tried, it would be a very incorrect cord indeed. However I will try to explain myself as soon as possible. . . .

4 June 1934