

## PAGES FROM THE PAST

# First among equals

Poet, novelist, essayist, translator and polyglot - Toru Dutt wore many hats during her very short life. An illustrious writer, she contributed greatly to Indian literature and was the first Indian writer who could write in English and French. She rose to fame at a time when Indian writing was being criticised by the West, and her writing continues to be relevant today

By Anusha Parthasarathy

**BIO**

**Name:** Toru Dutt  
**Work:** "A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields"  
**Period:** 1856 -1877 AD  
**Language:** Bengali



PHOTOS: HARIHAR DAS & SUMIT SURAI / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS & INTERNET ARCHIVE BOOK IMAGES / FLICKR



### About Toru Dutt

Born into the aristocratic Dutt family in Calcutta, Torulata Dutt was the youngest of three siblings. Toru's father Govin Chunder Dutt was a noted linguist and a poet, and her cousins and uncles were also accomplished in the literary field. "The Dutt Family Album", published by Govin in 1870 in London, bears evidence of the family's literary prowess.

The family converted to Christianity shortly after Toru's birth and moved to Europe three years later, when Toru's brother died. Govin made sure both his daughters (illustration on the right) were well-educated. They studied at a school in Nice, France, spent time in Paris and Boulogne, Italy, and then moved to England in 1870. Here, they studied music and history.

The girls began to translate French poems into English from an early age and created a companionship through writing. The family moved back to Calcutta in 1873 due to the girls' poor health. Here, the girls began to write more, finding ways to cope with the stifling atmosphere in Calcutta. Unfortunately, their partnership came to an end in 1874, when Toru's sister Aru died at the age of 23.

Toru spent the next three years writing a lot of poetry and prose for "The Bengal Magazine" and "The Calcutta Review". In 1877, at the age of 21, Toru died due to tuberculosis.

Toru's only work to be published during her lifetime was "A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields", a collection of English translations of French poetry. Toru left her first novel "Bianca" unfinished.



### Excerpt

Toru was often called the Keats of Indo-English literature for the quality of her writing and meteoric rise to fame.

#### Sonnet

*A sea of foliage girds our garden round,  
But not a sea of dull unvaried green,  
Sharp contrasts of all colors here are seen;  
The light-green graceful tamarinds abound  
Amid the mango clumps of green profound,  
And palms arise, like pillars gray, between;  
And o'er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,  
Red—red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.  
But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges  
Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon  
Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes  
Into a cup of silver. One might swoon  
Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze  
On a primeval Eden, in amaze.*

### Did you know?

Toru loved the Indian epics "The Ramayana" and "The Mahabharatha", and often read old Sanskrit classics to gain first-hand knowledge of those stories.

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N. RAVI

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