

Dr. Iyengar's Contribution to Indo-Anglian Poetry

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Dr. Iyengar was a fine prose-writer who possessed a keen critical sense and contributed liberally to what we may call Indo-Anglian literary criticism. His main critical works are : **Shakespeare : His World and His Art, Gerard Manley Hopkins : The Man and the Poet, Francois Maurice : Novelist and Moralist, Rabindranath Tagore : A Critical Introduction, The Adventure of Criticism, Dawn to Greater Dawn, Six Lectures on Savitri**, and **Indian Writing in English**, besides his brilliant Doctoral dissertation on Lytton Strachey. All these books illustrate a balanced approach which takes in the best from criticism right from Plato and Aristotle to Eliot and Leavis and also Sri Aurobindo. For him, the purpose of literature is to instruct and delight in that order. Himself a highly disciplined person, his position is somewhere between classical austerity and Romantic exuberance.

But the principal critical contribution of Dr. Iyengar consists in his successful attempt to place the Indian contribution to English literature in the right perspective through his epoch-making book **Indian Writing in English**. The book boldly puts forth the claim of Indian English writing for its due. If Indo-Anglian literature is by now an established fact, it is largely because of this book which was first published in 1962. The book grew out of the author's lectures on Indo-Anglian Literature delivered to post-graduate students of the Department of English Literature at the University of Leeds as Visiting Professor of Indo-Anglian Literature during January-March 1959.

The most striking thing about the book is the use of the term 'Indo-Anglian'. If Dr. Iyengar did not actually invent this useful term, he has certainly popularised it in his works. Previously, 'Anglo-Indian' was generally used not only for writings by Englishmen living in India, but also for Indian English writers. The most notable example of it is Sampson's **Concise Cambridge History of English Literature** where the section on Anglo-Indian Literature includes also "Indian Writers of English".¹ On the use of this term which has decisively replaced 'Anglo-Indian', the writer refused to claim that it originated from him: "It is sometimes said that I concocted this expression Actually, it was used as early as 1883 to describe a volume printed in Calcutta containing "Specimen Compositions from Native Students".² But he himself accepts that he "gave general currency to the name when, in 1943, I adopted it as the title of my first book on the subject"³ He is here referring to "Indo-Anglian Literature", the handbook that he wrote for the P.E.N. in 1942. The term was extensively used by the author in his books **Literature and Authorship in India** and **The Indian Contribution to English Literature**. By the time **Indian Writing in English** was published in 1962, the term 'Indo-Anglian' had gained wide currency and universal approval to be accepted as an established fact of the Indian literary scene.

And, besides its successful espousal of this key-term that has, because of its rightful implications, contributed to the respectability of Indian writing in English, the book stands out as an excellent summary of the Indian achievement in English. His methodology in the book is somewhat akin to how Dr. Johnson proceeds in his **Lives of the Poets**. That is, the author starts with a brief account of an individual writer's life and then goes on to throw critical light on his works and concludes with his views on his total achievement. So, he is never tiresome, and one goes through his summary with ease enough. Again, he gives ample space to major writers and poets, and shows an uncanny understanding of who they could be. In fact, he omits no major author and refuses to devote any extra attention to minor ones. He wisely starts with Raja Ram Mohun Roy, father of the Indian Renaissance, who also shows mastery of the English language, and then goes on to probe in depth the mind and art of almost all the prominent ones in Indo-Anglian literature. It is indeed a masterly account which must convince even doubting ones of the viability of Indo-Anglian writing. Indeed, even just **Indian Writing in English** might have won for the author a high position in Indo-Anglian writing. But, happily enough, Dr. Iyengar's remarkable achievement is confined not only to critical writing but also extends to poetry.

For Dr. Iyengar has composed at least two full-fledged epics in English—**Sitayana** and **Satisaptakam**. **Satisaptakam** first published in January, 1991, it closely followed **Sitayana** which came out in April, 1987. Thus, after he composed **Sitayana**, in just four years, he had produced another epic—a stupendous feat of creativity! This also shows the author's profound commitment to literature.

The theme of the epic, like that of **Sitayana**, is the glorification of Womanhood, and, for this, he takes up seven exemplars of feminine greatness—Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damayanti, Renuka, Draupadi and Kannaki. Thus, it is the saga of Seven Mothers which is in the author's own words "the Seven tints of the Rainbow Arc of Evolution"⁴ which gives us a clear hint of the inspiration of Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary philosophy behind the epic.

Really, whether it be **Sitayana** or **Satisaptakam**, the Aurobindonean influence is clear and strong. The Mother of Pondicherry in a way embodies the Aurobindonean concept of the active, archetypal role played by the matriarchal force in the created Universe. "The one whom we adore as the Mother is the divine Conscious Force that dominates all existence, one and yet so many-sided that to follow her movement is impossible even for the quickest mind and for the freest and most vast intelligence."⁵

All the women he takes up in his epic have suffered due to male callousness. For example, though Kardama married Devahuti, he went on with his austerities and for long did not take any notice of his spouse. But, finally, he discovered her worth:

Kardama, life-denying ascetic,
found in his angelic spouse,
Devahuti, the life-giving Mother
of the mothers of the race.⁶

Sukanya's case was even worse, because Chyavana, her husband, though old and blind, had insisted on marrying her. But Sukanya's wisdom saved the situation for them:

When the blind aged Chyavana married
Sukanya, her virgin grace
could transform the misalliance itself
into love and fulfilment.⁷

Devayani, Sukra's daughter, was yet another victim of male duplicity:

And Devayani, let down by Kacha
whom she loved, insulted and
outraged by Sarmishta, and betrayed and
drugged by her lord, Yayati.⁸

Damayanti suffered no less:

There's, then, the proverbial Damayanti
the wedded wife abandoned
by her Lord, Nala, the Nishadan king
who gambled away his all.⁹

Renuka and Draupadi and Kannaki had equally poignant tales to tell.

The author shows ample sympathy for all his heroines: "The wholesome elemental simplicity and strength of Devahuti, mother of the marvellous mothers nine: the nimble resilience and crystalline clarity of Sukanya: the lone eminence of Devayani who has been the plaything of gods, demons and humans alike: the admirably purposeful self-sufficiency of Damayanti's reactions in fair and foul weather alike: the bold, sinewy, sensitive and mature responses of Renuka to the many challenges in her life: the trapped predicament without precedent in which Draupadi finds herself, and the reverberant defiance of the hurts at the perpetrators of the outrage against her in the Sabha: Kannaki's glory of innocence and sufferance and, later, the explosion of her anger that sets a city on fire, and still later, her evolution as Goddess!"¹⁰

These heroines come from the Hindu mythology and all of them were wronged by males. These cradle tales of Hinduism have, strangely enough, a modern relevance in view of the still continuing exploitation of women behind the glare of science. Despite all the talk of their empowerment, they are still to receive their due respect from males who have craftily used them for their growing advertising industry. So, we should thank the author that, in his epic, he has given them chance to speak for themselves. Though, as we have seen, the strong Aurobindonean influence is unmistakable, the author's profound humanism showing up in his abundant sympathy for the oppressed womankind has an intensely modern ring.

Dr. Iyengar was an erudite scholar, a distinguished educationist and an illustrious writer, poet and orator. He was a prolific writer who authored at least 28 books besides 8 that he edited. His range shows breath-

taking vastness which includes history, literature, economics, politics, translation, criticism, reviewing and public administration. In all his studies, he shows a sure grasp of the facts which he presents with clarity. He succeeded so perfectly because of his deep historical sense. indeed, he moves with equal ease in all the branches of learning because of his lively interest in the contemporary times which got fortified by his profound understanding of the past. When he was just out of his twenties, he had published in 1939 a brief life-sketch of the eminent politician S. Srinivasa Iyengar while a long article on the Home Ministers of India came out in the eighties. In between, he took up, besides literature, subjects like economics, politics, etc. Thus, he possessed a many-sided personality which shows him to be a true Renaissance man.

But he was above all a committed man of letters who went on serving the Muse till his last days. Though he was a man of wide interests, literature ever remained his first love and he proceeded to produce volume after volume of brilliant writing which includes translations of Valmiki, Basava, Tiruvalluvar, and Tirumoolar; critical studies of Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francois Maurice, Rabindranath Tagore; essays on eminent authors and literary genres collected in sumptuous volumes such as **The Adventure of Criticism** and **Two Cheers for the Commonwealth**; travelogue in **The Mind and Heart of Britain**; academic administration in **A New Deal for our Universities**; spiritual causerie in **Dawn to Greater Dawn, A Big Change** and **Swami Vivekananda**; editorial productions like **Guru Nanak : A Homage** and **Asian Variations in Ramayana**. He also composed three epics: **Sitayana**, **Satisaptakam** and **Krishnageetam**, the last coming out when he was more than 86 years old.

Dr. Iyengar grew up in turbulent times when India was struggling for her freedom under the saintly, but firm, leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. But Dr. Iyengar decided to be rather a votary of Saraswati and refused to be drawn into the whirlpool of political turmoil for which we should be really thankful to him. For, in that case, how could he have authored epics like **Sitayana** and **Satisaptakam** and brilliant books like **Indian Writing in English** and **Shakespeare : His World and His Art**, etc.?

What he has written also brings out the dominant trait of his personality—his intensely spiritual temper. Significantly, it is its spiritual complexion that strongly differentiates the Indian Renaissance from the European which came as a revolt against the tyrannical dominance of the Church that had resulted in intellectual and moral suppression. In fact, 'Dharma' has a far wider significance than 'religion' which means "a particular system of faith and worship."¹¹ 'Dharma' on the other hand consists in such virtues as Patience, Forgiveness, Self-control, Non-stealing, Cleanliness, Control of the Sense-Organs, Wisdom, Knowledge, Truth and Freedom from Anger.¹² These virtues have a universal dimension and are not sectarian. So, while the European Renaissance in the first place rejected religion and upheld secularism which means utter unconcern for religious beliefs, the Indian Renaissance attached due importance to 'Dharma'. Notably enough, the Indian Renaissance sent forth spiritual offshoots under the tremendous inspiration and influence of Bhagwan Ramakrishna Paramhansa and his renowned disciple Swami Vivekananda which by now have spread over the whole world to provide it the psychic succour it so badly needs. So, Dr. Iyengar's intensely spiritual moorings coupled with his tireless work in the academic and literary fields make him a true child of the Indian Renaissance.

Dr. Iyengar's perfect mastery of the English language helped him to wield his pen with confidence and facility. But he was also a master of Tamil and Sanskrit and a sound grounding in the latter helped his genius to strike deep roots in the Indian literary and spiritual lore. Despite his profound scholarship and elevation to high positions, Dr. Iyengar remained, like Mahatma Gandhi, a model of simplicity all his life. In fact, he successfully tried to be a child of the Mother of Pondicherry who was for him the Divine Mother Herself, and when he peacefully passed away on April 15, 1999, just two days before his ninety-first birthday, it could have very well been said: This man had realised his life's mission!

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