

Versification of Dr. Iyengars epic *Sitayana*

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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.

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.

Sitayana uses a novel verse-form. In the words of the author, "As in my earlier 'The Epic Beautiful', here too the verse-form used is the 10-7-10-7 syllabic unrhymed quatrain."¹ Probably such an experiment was not made by any Indo-Anglian poet who took up the Ramayana theme. Romesh Chunder Dutt, the first such Indian poet in English, used the long metre used by Tennyson in his poem 'Locksley Hall'—iambic heptameter rhymed couplets as he thought it to be the ideal equivalent to the "anushtup" metre of Valmiki. Ralph T.H. Griffith, an Englishman who produced an abridged version of the **Ramayana** in 1870-5, used rhymed octosyllabics. P. Lal, a contemporary poet, who too tried his hand at it, uses in parts free verse and prose. Sri Aurobindo, the poet's mentor, uses blank verse in **Savitri**. Thus, Dr. Iyengar chalks out his own path in **Sitayana**, so far as versification is concerned.

Notably, Dr. Iyengar aims at approximating the Anushtup by this novel verse-form. For he thinks the rhymed couplets or even blank verse cannot do the job in a proper manner: "...I thought this was a nearer approximation to the anushtup movement than blank verse on the one hand or a very rigid stanza mould on the other."² How far has he succeeded in this endeavour?

This "anushtup" was the verse-form that Valmiki spoke out without any forethought when he saw "the felling of a bird while it was in love-play, and deeply moved, broke out into rhythmic speech."³ It was the first ever shloka:

O vile huntsman-killer of this Krauncha
just in his moment of joy,
ah how may you hope in all this wide world
for a place of restful ease!⁴

These lines are almost a literal translation of Valmiki's lyric outburst in the Ramayana.⁵

Valmiki himself was charmed by what he had said. He spoke to his disciple Bhardwaja thus: "Son, what came out of my mouth has four spans (charan) and each span has eight letters. So, what I spoke is in the form of a sloka."⁶ So, here, we have two lines: each line has two spans and sixteen letters, and there is a pause in each exactly in the middle. This is probably the most popular verse-mode in Sanskrit, and used also in the **Mahabharata** by Sage Vyasa. Another notable feature of Anushtup is that it does not have any rhyming. And it possesses wonderful resonance the like of which is very difficult to achieve in any other language including English. Both Romesh Chunder Dutt and Griffith failed to achieve any notable approximation to the Anushtup in their rhymed couplets, and Dr. Iyengar fares no better. If the use of rhyme failed to achieve the purpose, Dr. Iyengar might have reasoned, why not try an unrhymed mode?

Perhaps Dr. Iyengar too must have thought that he was trying the impossible; for the rejection of rhyming had made his lines quite like prose. This is how he himself states it with disarming candour: "My

unrhymed quatrain is a cross between prose and regular metrical verse, Now at the end of my labours, I frankly ask myself whether the final product isn't after all disconcertingly like prose cut up to look like verse."⁷

None could have stated it better than the author himself. Really, his lines produce the impression of being "disconcertingly like prose cut up to look like verse." The opening quatrain itself might be cited to prove this:

The famed philosopher-king Janaka,
paid obeisance to the Bard
of the Worlds, Narada, as he floated
into Mithila's domain.⁸

It could very well be put in prose-form without any change whatsoever: "The famed philosopher King Janaka paid obeisance to the Bard of the Worlds, Narada, as he floated into Mithila's domain." Why it is so has also been stated by the author: "... I have generally steered clear of inversions, archaisms and the like."⁹ And, what is very important, in an unrhymed form, it must be what prose is.

It is doubtless prose, but with a difference—it is poetic prose, prose having the proper rhythms to make it "poetic" enough. As we have seen, the author was quite conscious of the hazards of his mode, and still he hoped for the best:

My only hope—or hope against hope—is that, along with this impression, something else also may make itself felt: for the span of thought often overflows the feet of sound in the quatrain measure, and besides breaking or softening the metrical monotony, one may feel conscious perhaps—especially when read at some length—of a reasonably viable rhythmic flow as well.¹⁰

And readers of the epic must confirm that the author had not hoped in vain. For despite its conspicuous "prosaicness", there is all along a poetic current or undercurrent that carries the reader with it. For there is seldom a dull moment in the whole book and the ultimate impression is "poetic", not "prosaic". It is just like what one feels when one reads Tagore's 'Gitanjali' and Plato's 'Dialogues'. If, on the authority of Aristotle, it could be said that mere versification cannot make poetry, it could be similarly reasoned that merely the lack of it cannot divest a poetic piece of its claim to being poetry.

Indeed, there is a point where prose and poetry might meet. That is, beyond this point, prose becomes poetry and poetic prose. Dr. Iyengar happily has not crossed what we may call the frontier of poetry. A poet without the thorough English literary background of Dr. Iyengar could not have carried on with this kind of experiment.

Are Dr. Iyengar's lines metrical? He himself calls it "a cross between prose and regular metrical verse."¹¹ Thus, the poet accepts that his lines are not strictly metrical. But because of their fixed syllabic structure, one may discern, if one so likes, also a metrical pattern in the lines. Or it would be better to call it syllabic verse the basis of which is a given number of syllables to the line, disregarding the number and arrangement of stresses. In such verse, unlike the traditional pattern, a line might not begin with a capital letter, and Dr. Iyengar also does the same.

The poet feels that his lines should achieve "a nearer approximation to the anushtup movement."¹² It is interesting to note that Sri Aurobindo translated a passage from Valmiki's **Ramayana**, Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 26 to 30 where he uses blank verse. The passage titled 'The Wife' wonderfully succeeds in communicating the charm of the original. Dr. Iyengar too might have thought of this option. But, perhaps, he found it incapable of conveying the feel of the anushtup. The success of Sri Aurobindo in both **Savitri** and 'The Wife' probably could not convince him of the total suitability of this verse-mode for approximation to the anushtup.

In a literal sense, Dr. Iyengar is right when he thinks both rhymed and blank verse unsuitable to his purpose. For the anushtupslokas of Valmiki are unrhymed couplets and the first line most often runs into the second. The poet's quatrains too have run-on lines and they are most often closed.

To sum up, it might be said that despite determined intrusions of prose, Dr. Iyengar did well to use the mode: blank verse or rhymed couplets might not have served the purpose in such a befitting manner. The failure of the rhymed couplet is obvious in Romesh Chunder's **Ramayana**, and even blank verse could not have captured the sweep of Valmiki's anushtup in a way that Dr. Iyengar's "prosaic" lines do. To cite an example,

Sita would be free to wander about
in reasonable measure,
relaxed under the gold-hued Simsupa,

or speak to the deer and swans.¹³

Sita is here ‘relaxed’ under the Simsupa and so are the lines. Surely, neither the blank verse nor the rhymed verse would have been so “relaxed”. Of the style of **Sitayana**, the poet says in his Introduction: “There is no intrusion of ‘poetic diction’.¹⁴ That is to say, the poet is not bothered about whether the words and phrases used by him have an elevation generally suited to poetry. So, perhaps like Wordsworth, he, too, starts with the premise that there should be no essential difference between the language of prose and that of poetry. “Inversions and archaisms”¹⁵ too he has avoided. So, we have poetry which has plainness as its hallmark.

Thus, in **Sitayana**, we do not have many striking images. At least, in this sense, Dr. Iyengar uses a method that stands in sheer contrast to Sri Aurobindo’s **Savitri** where images as it were rush in throughout making the book a vast storehouse of memorable quotes. This we cannot say about **Sitayana** which shows from the beginning to the end utter simplicity and plainness. And that leads us to the moot question: how far does Dr. Iyengar’s “plain” manner help the epic theme?

Also because of its lack of rich imagery, **Sitayana** lacks the sublimity of, say, Sri Aurobindo’s epic. In fact, Dr. Iyengar too must have known from the very start that his epic cannot compete with his mentor’s. His aim was to project the Sita theme in the overall context of Rama’s heroic saga. And, despite his “plain” manner, if not because of it, he succeeds in achieving his goal to a certain extent.

Dr. Iyengar succeeds because of his thorough mastery of the English language due to which he has at his command a copious vocabulary, thus enabling him to make an apt choice of words. And these are mostly simple, but suggestive and euphonious words. To cite one example,

And let me say again that life with you
Is heaven; without you, hell;
if you will not take me with you today,
I’ll just drink poison and die.¹⁶

The context here is Sita’s passionate plea to Rama, at the time of his exile, that he should let her accompany him to his destined jungles. All the words here are familiar ones. Out of 29 words used here, 24 are monosyllabic and the rest disyllabic. None of these are ponderous or Latinate words. Thus, it is a pure Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. The alliterations—“heaven” and “hell” in the second line and “drink” and “die” in the fourth—add to the effectiveness of the stanza in suggesting Sita’s profound pang. Images here are none and all is utterly plain, even austere, and still we very much feel Sita’s agony.

The lines also justify the author’s claim that they possess “a reasonably viable rhythmic flow.”¹⁸ Indeed the lines are rhythmic as are almost all of the epic. In the first line, here, there are ten syllables and four of them accented. The number will become five, exactly half, if we stress “you” in view of its importance. And the pattern is strictly iambic:

And lét / me sáy / a-gáin / that lífe / with yóu /

The second line has seven syllables, three or four of them (in case we stress “you” again) accented. The same order is kept up in the last two lines also. Thus, we discern here a nice rhythmic pattern which is maintained throughout the poem. Remarkably, the lines do not use any adjective at all, but five main verbs.

Thus, Dr. Iyengar’s use of the unrhymed quatrain proved to be a happy choice. Notably, he had already used it in **The Epic Beautiful**, a successful verse rendering of the Sundara Kanda of the **Valmiki Ramayana**. The form, as we have seen, was less restrictive than blank verse and more spacious than rhymed verse. Moreover, he knew full well that he could not attain to heights of Sri Aurobindo’s **Savitri** in both content and manner. So, **Sitayana**, as it is, is beautifully formed.

The same could be said of its simple style. It is an epic that could be sung by the fireside by all who must effortlessly grasp its meaning. It is a simple world with soulful depths presented with childlike simplicity. Unlike in **Savitri**, the characters here are too many. But they have been presented vividly. Though unadorned, other poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, etc., have been used to good effect so that the ultimate impression the epic produces is a happy one.

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Savitri: The First Canto

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Savitri is a cosmic epic. For it presents man against the enormous backgrounds of “ a complex and vast cosmos made of a hierarchy of planes of consciousness.” So its canvas is truly stupendous. Written in twenty four thousand lines, it is by far the most massive epic in the English language. Originating in the super mental consciousness, the whole poem has that mantra quality which we come across in the Vedic and Upanishadic compositions.

“...by some innate power the true sublime uplifts our souls ; we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaulting joy ...’, says Longinus. All serious readers of Sri Aurbindo’s *Savitri* would testify to this uplifting power of the poem. This ecstatic power no doubt springs from, to quote Longinus words, “ a certain excellence and distinction in expression” that the poem shows. Indeed, each and every line of this vast work is characterized by profound thought and passion as well as elevated expression – Longinus chief criteria of sublimity.

“*Savitri* is in a way the sole justification of what we call Indo – Anglican poetry. Without this soaring solitary peak, Indo-Anglican poetry would really be a meager thing. For whatever we might say about other Indo Anglian poets, they at best give us a patch here and a patch here, but do not show any sustained elevation. To put this proposition more forthrightly, where would Derozio and Toru and Sarojini and Harindra, not to mention a number of other versifiers past and present, stand if we consider them in the overall context of English literature? But Sir Aurbindo would distinguish himself, no doubt because of his magnum opus, even in this high company.

In more sense than one, ‘*Savitri*’ is an uncommon poem and therefore poses obvious difficulties of understanding. Sripreca Aurbindo himself was quite conscious of this problem: “*Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind...” So, one needs approach ‘*Savitri*’ with a good deal of patience and preparation. But this is more or less a necessary precondition in approaching all major poets and writers. ‘*Savitri* is not “*Savitri*” is generally shunned because of its opening canto, which really poses formidable difficulties to its reader. Once we understand its import, it’s should not be that difficult to appreciate the other portions. The poem opens thus:

This was the house before which the gods awake.

The gods, our religious books state, awake at dawn. Dawn or Usha in the Vedas is the symbol of the beginning of new life : “ Usha widens Bringing out that which leaves, awakening someone who was dead.” It also symbolizes life’s eternal cycle: “ She desires the ancient mornings and fulfils their light ; projecting forward her illumination she inters into communion with the rest that are to come.” “ The Symbol Drawn”, the title of the opening canto, suggest a fresh beginning of what once existed.

But drawn is yet to break, and it is still pitch dark. So, it is Night, which stands for the Nescience that reigned before the cosmos was created. Mother has thrown ample light on the opening line : “There is an ancient tradition which describes the creation as done by some first emanations of the Supreme Mother, who were four emanations. In the sense and feeling of their supreme power, they cut connection with this origin and became independent. And these emanations being separated from their origin, entered into darkness.” So, Consciousness

turned into Unconsciousness, Bliss into Suffering, Truth into Falsehood, Life into Death. "This happened after they came into the vital level. When this was seen, it was decided that some second emanations would be made to repair the mistake of the first; and the second emanations were the Gods." So, the first line refers to the time before the Gods came.

Then follows a breath-taking description of the Night of Nescience, which is reminiscent of the primordial condition described in the Rig Veda: "Then existence was not nor non-existence. The mid world was not nor either nor what is beyond." "The huge foreboding mind of night" was alone in her "until temple of eternity." The mind of the night "longed to reach its end in vacant Naught." Sri Aurobindo significantly calls it "A featureless semblance of the unknown" which

Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force

Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns

And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl So, the night here holds immense possibilities of creation. Is the Night here synonymous with Prakriti or Nature?

In this state of Nescience, the earth was "A shadow spinning through a soulless void," completely forgetful "of her spirit and her fate". Then something stirred in "the inscrutable darkness" which "Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance". So, it was a leap from in conscience to ignorance. It was a longing for "absent light" till now slumbering in this "Naught profound" the memory of "a slain and buried past":

An unshaped consciousness desired light.

And a black prescience yearned towards distant changed.

Then "a breach began in the impenetrable Night and "A long lone line of hesitating hue" disturbed "life's obscure sleep." Thus, the night consented to the birth of the dawn. A new world must now be created:

And all that was destroyed must be rebuilt.

It was a stupendous task. But "All can be done if the god-touch is there". So, the dawn was about to break:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling clock.

From the reclining body of a god.

The Goddess of light – the drawn- was approaching. There was an air of expectancy all around:

Air was a vibrant link between earth and heaven;

The wide winged hymn of a great priestly wind

Arose and failed upon the altar hills;

The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky.

It seemed that "this anguished and precarious field of toil", that is, our earth, would enjoy undying beatitude. But that was not to be, for the goddess found of the earth quite unprepared for her supernal touch:

Then the divine afflatus, spent, withdrew,

Unwanted, fading from the mortal's range.

So, the Divine power put on the mask of matter. Consequently, the divine light gave place to the "the common light of earthly day" and man had still to bear the burden of his fate.

It was left to Savitri the incarnation of the Divine Mother to divinize the earth-life;

The proud and conscious wideness and the bliss.

She had brought with her into the human form,

The calm delight that weds one soul to all.

The key to the flaming doors of ecstasy.

But the earth's ignorant nature refuses to change:

It meet the sons of god with death and pain. But Savitri embodied the love and power of the divine mother and was therefore fully equipped to challenge fate and death. At last the fatal day dawns when she has to take on death not only for satyavan but for whole universe:

Her spirit opened to the spirit in all,

Her nature felt all nature has its own,

The "fatal morn" soon changed into noon. So, the terrible hour was at hand. But Savitri was clam and composed in her strength:

Clam was her face and courage kept her mute.

And the canto ends with the chilling declaration:

This was the day when Satyavan must die.

The setting of the first canto is rather enigmatic. In the normal course, Sri Aurobindo should have stopped after describing the arrival of the dawn and its instant retreat. He takes up the story of Ashwapati, Savitri's father from control. Why did he bring in Savitri in the opening canto itself when he was to describe in detail her birth etc, from book IV onwards? It was indeed in a bold stroke to state the central crisis of the poem in the every first canto. It goes to the eternal credit of Sri Aurobindo that this unusual arrangement does not prove discordant, but splendidly fits into the epic symphony. The poet performs the feat with a single line that opens the third canto:

A world's desire compelled her mortal birth,

King Ashwapati is then introduced as “eternity’s delegate”.

So, the opening canto possesses multidimensional complexity. Here, the poet presents a bird’s eye – view of the whole cosmic evolution. So it is full of breath-taking transition. To quote Sri Aurobindo himself, “ I am describing a rapid series of transitions, piling one suggestion upon another. There is a black quietude, then the persistent touch, then the first ‘beauty and wonder’ leading to the magical gate and the ‘lucent corner’. Then comes the failing of darkness, the smile used suggesting the rapidity of change...” And, to cap it all, the saga of Savitri up to the fatal day of her encounter with death is suggested. All this must prove too much even for an initiated reader of poetry. But properly approached, the first canto may also provide the richest ever poetic fare.

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