K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's Contribution to Biography

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ABSTRACT

Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's contribution to the literary genre biography is both significant in volume and very much distinctive in nature. He wrote his works of biography in two different phases of his life. As such, they can be classified under two divisions, which signify the different periods of his life.

His earlier biographies on S.Srinivasa Iyengar and Raja Lakhamagauda and later works on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother mark respectively the periods prior and subsequent to the influence of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts on him. It is in this context that it would be in the fitness of things to discuss Prof. Iyengar's works of biography separately under these two classifications.

In the present article a modest attempt is made to study his contribution to Biography in his later phase, i.e., I concentrate on his two-volume work Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and History and Lights on a life Sublime, (popular with its earlier title On the Mother: The Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry).

Prof. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar's contribution to the literary genre biography is both significant in volume and very much distinctive in nature. He published his first work of biography in 1939 on S.Srinivasa Iyengar, one of the most leading figures in Indian politics of the first quarter of the twentieth century. The book entitled *S.Srinivasa Iyengar: The Story of a Decade of Indian Politics*, narrates mainly the role played by S.Srinivasa Iyengar in the political developments during India's struggle for freedom. In 1941, Prof.Iyengar brought out *Sardar Raja Lakhamagauda Basawaprabhu: A Memoir*. The memoir delineates the multifaceted personality of Sardar Lakhamagauda, the Rajasaheb of Vantamuri in Karnataka.

Prof. Iyengar's most outstanding work of biography *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History* which reveals altogether a unique approach to this literary form, appeared in 1972 just before the birth centenary celebrations of Sri Aurobindo. The book in two volumes supersedes his earlier writings on the life of the sage of Pondicherry: *Sri Aurobindo* (1945) and *Sri Aurobindo: An Introduction* (1961). Following the same unique approach, he published the companion biography, *On the Mother: The Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry* in 1978 at the time of Mother's birth centenary celebrations. The book in two volumes is the most authentic record of the life of the Mother, the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo. It also incorporates his earlier biographical study, *On the Mother*, which came out in 1952.

Prof. Iyengar has written his works of biography in two different phases of his life. The earlier biographies, namely, *S.Srinivasa Iyengar: The Story of a Decade of Indian Politics* and *Sardar Raja Lakhamagauda Basawa Prabhu: A Memoir* came out in 1939 and 1941 respectively, when Prof.Iyengar was only in his early thirties.

In the succeeding years, Prof. Iyenagr came into close contact with the life and works of Sri Aurobindo, the spiritual yogi of supreme intellect. It can be said that the company of Sri Aurobindo's works and philosophy effected a spiritual transformation in Prof.Iyengar's ideology, as it is evident from the fact that Prof. Iyengar in his works written in the fifties and later had often dwelt with Sri Aurobindo's perception of literature and life. This transformation

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turned him to the exploration of the inner world. Prof.Iyengar's later biographies, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History* (1972) and *On the Mother: The Chronicle of a Manifestation and a Ministry* (1978), remarkably distinctive as they display the transformed state of the author's soul and spirit and also, for that reason, his approach towards writing biography.

Thus, the biographical works of Prof.Iyengar can be classified under two divisions, which signify the different phases of Iyengar's life. His earlier biographies on S.Srinivasa Iyengar and Raja Lakhamagauda and later works on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother mark respectively the periods prior and subsequent to the influence of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts on him. It is in this context that it would be in the fitness of things to discuss Prof.Iyengar's works of biography separately under these two classifications. For want of space in an article of this kind I restrict myself to the later phase here in my article.

Prof. Iyengar's two-volume work *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and History* is an outstanding example of the Indian kind of biography. It appeared in 1972 just before the birth centenary celebrations of Sri Aurobindo. The work supersedes his writings on the life of the Sage of Pondicherry: *Sri Aurobindo* (1945, 1950) and *Sri Aurobindo: An Introduction* (1961). A composite biographical study, the book gives due importance to the diverse facets of Sri Aurobindo's personality – the poet, patriot and prophet, the thinker, philosopher and yogi.

The work is divided into four parts with twenty-six chapters. The First part, 'Humanist and Poet' is a sketch of the early years of Sri Aurobindo. The Second part, 'Patriot and Prophet' deals with Sri Aurobindo's active participation in freedom movement and the period of his spiritual transformation. The Third part, 'Pilgrim of Eternity' narrates Sri Aurobindo's settlement in Pondicherry, his starting of the philosophical magazine *Arya*, and the publication of his spiritual epic *Life Divine* etc. In the Fourth part, 'Architect of the Life Divine', we have the details of his magnum opus *Savitri* and his attainment of *moksha.*

Commenting on the work Prof. C.Vijayasree writes:

> If Sri Aurobindo's life is like a 'crystal', Iyengar successfully captures its multi-angled magnificence in his work through the constant alternation he makes between the man and his milieu, literature and politics, philosophy and yoga, outer and inner realms of experience. Iyengar's work fulfills the tall order set by Edmund Gosse for a biographer as 'the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life.[1]

Prof. Iyengar's *On the Mother: The Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry* was published in 1978, at the time of the Mother's birth centenary celebrations. The book is an authentic record of the life of the Mother, the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo. The book won for him the Sahitya Akademi award in 1980.

The work in two volumes is divided into three parts with sixty chapters. The First part, 'Mirra' consisting of fifteen chapters picturises Mother's early life, her occult experiences, her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo on 29th March 1914, her return to France and her following visit to Japan, her second and final coming to Pondicherry. The Second part, 'Mother' consisting twenty chapters, is a record of the transformed state of Mirra Richard (earlier name of the Mother). It depicts the Mother's role in the *Ashram*, Sri Aurobindo's views on The

Mother, her yogic experience, her influence over Sri Aurobindo in his composition of *Savitri* and the final withdrawal of Sri Aurobindo from the physical world.

Part Three, 'Aditi', containing twenty-five chapters, describes the Mother's greater role after the departure of Sri Aurobindo. We also find the Mother's views on education, her discourses, her founding of the International University Centre at Pondicherry, her concept of 'Supramental World' and 'Superman Consciousness' and her departure from the physical world. Prof. Iyengar enlarged and re-titled this work as *Lights on a life Sublime* in 1996, at the age of eighty-eight.

As mentioned earlier, Prof. Iyengar had cast his later biographies in an altogether new mould. The mould is new in the sense that it resembles neither the biographical patterns of the West nor the contemporary biographical practices in India that predominantly imitate the West. Prof. Iyengar's was an effort to revive the ancient Indian spiritual approach in its fullness. This statement is strengthened by the line of approach delineated by the author in the introductory chapter of his biography on Sri Aurobindo. He starts the passage with the following lines: "When, by the end of the eighteenth century, the foreigner consolidated his power in India, the country was to all appearance a spiritual 'wasteland' "[2]. In due course, he gives an account, often citing from the works of Sri Aurobindo, of the richness of India's spiritual base during the Vedic times and its decadence over the ages.

The conventional techniques which are in vogue in the West as well as India, for writing the biography are considered ineffective when they are applied to a spiritual personality as towering as Sri Aurobindo or the Mother. Prof. Iyengar is aware of this fact. In the Preface to his biography on Sri Aurobindo, he writes, "…Sri Aurobindo's biography cannot be written, for his real life had not been lived on the outside". Then how should he explore Sri Aurobindo's inner life? The author writes: "In Sri Aurobindo's life, his writing was not a thing apart; it was (in the Miltonic phrase, but in an even truer sense) "the precious life-blood of a master spirit". The inner man was the real man, and the inner man is best revealed for us in his writing. Poetry, drama, philosophy, Yoga, exegesis, political comment, sociological inquiry, literary and art criticism, educational theory- everywhere there is the signature of the inner man, the light from the inner Sun, the tremor of the unique Sensibility. If it be true, as Keats said, that "Shakespeare led a life of allegory, his works are his comments on it", might it not be said of Sri Aurobindo that his was a life of progressive Divine manifestation, and his writings are but its radiations and recordings? (*Sri Aurobindo*, Preface, 3rd ed.)

Similarly, in the Preface to the enlarged edition (1978) of his biography on the Mother, the author observes, "… basically my approach hasn't changed, for it had the sanction of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother; and so the stress on the inner history, …"[3] His sources to unfold the inner being also remain the same: "The two main sources were of course the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's writings and conversations, …" (*On the Mother* xii). Thus the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother do not merely contain their thoughts. They, in fact, are the reflections of the thoughts actually lived by them- of their life itself. This is the reason that frequent use of the quotations from these writings by the author in his both the biographies, becomes unavoidable.

Another striking new feature of Prof. Iyengar's approach is that he establishes a rhythmic contact with lives in his biographies. It is so because as one who lived in Aurobindo's

Ashram, the author, who inherited a spiritual tendency from his parents and grandparents also naturally, found it congenial to establish a rapport with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and share their spiritual experiences. Prof. Iyengar takes up the task of writing these two biographies with truly sublime consciousness, which born of his own spiritual experience. Paradoxical though it may seem, his attitude of humility and later on his excitement and spirit of dedication are some elements of his sublime consciousness. One can only admire his humility observing what he says in the preface to the 1972 edition of the biography on Sri Aurobindo: "With each succeeding year, the task only became more and more difficult, and I felt correspondingly inadequate and was afraid even to make a beginning". Again, in the Preface to the 1978 edition of *On The Mother*, he writes, "When I began the work at last, there was doubtless excitement and dedication, but there was also some residual fear and trembling" (*On The Mother* xi). It is the testimony to his total humility, dedication and sublime consciousness. By this state of his mind and soul, he as a biographer, becomes a part of the life of his subjects and is able to comprehend them. This totally spiritual attitude also enables him to attain detachment and narrate the truth.

The theme, relating to the inner life of the great spiritual personalities chosen by the author for these two biographies, strikes the reader at a metaphysical plane. The part of society that is capable of, and inclined to, thinking in metaphysical terms is extremely limited. Therefore, there was the probability that these biographical works by the author might fail to find readership beyond the highly intellectual segment of society. But the litterateur in Prof. Iyengar could not put up with the shrinking base of readership for his writings. The measures he took to make the theme of these works comprehensible to a wider cross-section of the society are, he affects interplay of artistic presentation and scientific accuracy, the twin elements of popular biography.

Prof. Iyengar brings about an artistic orientation in both these biographies with his enchanting language and his simplicity of presentation. An alluring simplicity is a characteristic of his style. By maintaining simplicity in presentation, the author successfully familiarizes the reader with the life and works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Sri Aurobindo had a life-long passion for writing on the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and a whole range of spiritual issues. The complexity of such writings for an ordinary mind can be well understood, and Prof. Iyengar is bound to refer to these writings because they necessarily constitute the life and personality of Sri Aurobindo. The presentation of these works with the versatility of comprehension demands many literary skills and experience on the part of a biographer. Prof. Iyengar effectively employs these literary skills in both these biographies. He thus introduces the 'Supramental Manifesto' outlined in *The Life Divine*:

"Yet all great ideas, all heady leaps of thought, all audacious adventures in the ambience of Consciousness are fundamentally so simple that a child should be able to take them in and experience a surge of pure joy. There must lie behind the manifoldness and complexity of the Aurobindonian revelation a basic unity and a synoptic center- a nuclear and nectarean core. What is it, then? In brief, Sri Aurobindo felt that it was possible for man to advance yet father in the evolutionary race and reach a new dynamic status, that of the Superman. But a kind of roadblock was barring the way. If that could be removed-and it could and indeed would be- the transitional being, the mental man, would give place to the future

man, the supramental man; and when man changed, society and its institutions and its activities would change too, and the Life Divine would be established here on the earth." (*Sri Aurobindo*, P. 400)

While elaborating on the 'global comprehension' of Sri Aurobindo, Iyengar gives us the whole essence of ancient Indian scriptures in nutshell :

"Man has a soul, and it is one with the Divine; to awaken man to this Truth and help him to realize it is the whole aim of Indian religion and spirituality. The Veda with its symbol-pointers and seer-wisdoms, the Upanishads with their lightning flashes and leaps of thought, the Gita with its high-arching reasoning and culminating revelation, Purana and Tantra with their more pronouncedly rich and complex appeal to the human psyche, all addressed themselves to the same elemental task of man's self-transcendence, only the changing times compelling a change in the terminology. (*Sri Aurobindo*, P.478)

Unlike Sri Aurobindo, who, as a yogi, devoted most of his time to creative writing, the Mother spent a good deal of her energy and time in looking after the Ashram and a host of other activities concerning Sri Aurobindo's 'Cosmic Vision' or 'World Divine'. She played a very active role in implementing Sri Aurobindo's manifesto of the Supramental man. She was a 'Karma-yogi' in the true sense of the term and facilitated the glimpse of her spiritual thoughts only in her discourses, conversations, prayers and diary jottings. Therefore, the narrative in *On the Mother* concentrates more on the spiritual deeds of the Mother rather than her writings. But whenever Prof. Iyengar covers the thoughts and writings of the Mother, he does it in a simple way. He selects the following illustration from the Mother's conversation on the two classic paths to Realization:

"The baby monkey holds to its mother in order to be carried about and it must hold firm, otherwise if it loses its grip, it falls. On the other hand, the baby cat does not hold to its mother, but is held by the mother … it has nothing to do but to let the mother hold it." (*On The Mother*, P.305)

Regarding objectivity, Prof. Iyengar, as a biographer, solemnly adheres to it in both the biographies. The stream of narrative flows well within the limits set by the central figure. The description of auxiliary lives is proportionate to their relevance to the pivotal portrait. Sri Aurobindo's wife Mrinalini Bose, Mirra's husband Paul Richard, their other members of the family, various *sadhakas* and visitors to Ashram, appear and disappear only to reinforce the central lives. The author's own predilections are kept to the minimum and they exist only to make the subject comprehensive.

After forming a clear cut view of his subject, he projects it with scientific accuracy and artistic orientation. The scientific spirit remains universally the same. The appeal of Prof. Iyengar's artistic orientation is based on his successfully presenting a complex theme in a comprehensible manner. Moreover, he covers the life of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in its entirety and supports almost all the details with reference to the source whence it has been taken. These are the special traits that have earned widespread recognition for both these works as excellent authentic biographies in the field. He rightly claims: "My biographies of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are my two substantial works, and they are for the time being the 'standard' books on these subjects."[4]

Thus, Prof. Iyengar, as the author of both these biographies, establishes himself as a unique and pioneering biographer of the spirit in exploring in Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's "really one story, a single saga of the conquest of New Consciousness and the inauguration of the Supramental Age" (*Sri Aurobindo*, Preface to 4th ed.).

Works Consulted

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4. Leaflet published on the occasion of the Programme, *Meet the Author*, organized by Sahitya Akademi on April 2, 1991, to honour Prof. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar.