

Issues in Historiography*

When one thinks of Srinivasa Iyengar,¹ one automatically thinks of historiography. The two go together as he was a pioneer where the history of Indian writing in English is concerned. The persistence, the devotion, the ongoing additions, expansions, new editions all bear testimony to the tremendous effort he spent on not only writing the literary history but also responding to its constantly changing demands. He first brought it together in 1943 as *Indo-Anglian Literature*, following it up two years later by *Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945). The next version was to come nearly fifteen years after independence in the form of *Indian Writing in English* (1962) when he put together the lectures he had delivered at Leeds in 1958. An enlarged edition appeared in 1973 and subsequently several reprints have followed. Despite the fact that several other histories of Indian Writing in English have appeared since then, the authority and the comprehensive range of his work go unmatched.

The centenary celebrations naturally call for both: an evaluation of the problems that beset historiography and the importance of literary history in its own right. For in no case is it possible to treat it merely as an account of literary happenings or a recording of literary publications. Instead it spills over into every

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sphere of life and its ramifications touch almost all aspects of socio-cultural life as caste, class and language, education and the power structures it nurtures, the idea of nationhood and that of tradition with its multiple strands all find a reflection in the literary artifact.

Literary histories have followed different courses. Early histories based their interpretation on linguistic identities and equated Sanskrit with Indian tradition. We have accepted this all along, but there is another aspect to be foregrounded, that of the claim of Tamil as an ancient literature and a formulative influence upon the making of literary traditions. The division of languages into Indo-Aryan and Indo-Dravidian brought about an unnatural division in literary culture.² But this equation of Sanskrit with India demonstrates how language – in this case of the elites; power vested in the upper classes, and nation as represented by a territory come together to constitute the basis of literary history. I draw attention to this in order to work out the basic framework and also to problematise the same. Apparently this three-fold base does not work in the case of IWE (Indian Writing in English), which in any case has journeyed through several avatars. It began as Anglo-Indian and was concerned with the writings of the British about India, then moved on to Indo-Anglian. It foregrounded the national identity and the constituents also changed. Later when the concern was with Indians, it slid into a clumsy description as Indian English which was neither hyphenated nor a description of the language in use and this had soon to be replaced by the circuitous description 'Indian Writing in English' disrupting at one stroke the accepted relationship between nation and language. Srinivasa Iyengar's history as embodied in his lectures delivered at Leeds recognises this rupture, though the writer does not talk about the many problems that may have confronted him or account for the choices he made. I propose here first to list the various issues that clamour for attention then move on to the manner in which some writers have addressed them, and finally work out the priorities of historiography in our times.

Literary historiography owes its development to the growth in the reading public, the fostering of national sentiment and the onset urban life in the eighteenth century – factors which

impacted the role of the writer. It coincided with the growth of imperialism as well as with the expansion of the notion of freedom. The contradictory impulses – attraction towards the west and simultaneously a resistance to it – made power a negotiable term. Scholars in India have largely accepted the idea that literary historiography is of western origins. This misconception is due to our adherence to form; there is a need to realise that literary history is written and has been written in several different ways: Ganesh Devy in *Of Many Heroes: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography* (1998) has traced out some early beginnings in India by moving out to plural histories and working through different categories of writing such as the *suta* and the *mantra* literatures and drawing attention to the commentaries on classic texts which successive generations of scholars have indulged in (29–35).

Historiography as a discipline needs to be freed from any single or fixed model primarily for the reason that there is none. Different scholars have evolved their own strategies and worked out different priorities – chronological, ideological, genre-based divisions or bibliographical approaches; some have worked through reception theories. It is difficult to define or lay down normative parameters of literary historiography. One way as well begin with the question: Why history? Is literature not good enough in itself? Why is a literary history necessary? Who is the likely reader and what does this history say? These questions need to be addressed before one can determine as to what are the likely methodologies or sources that can be appropriated for this purpose.

Why does man historicise? Apparently to trace lineages, establish continuities, extract some meaning from the happenings around him and relate them to the present, acquire authority and if not authority, at least an overwhelming sense of cohesion. History is a record. And Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* said that history is ordinarily an account of conquests (*Hind Swaraj* 89).³ Struggles and processes often have no history. India and Indians have often been targeted as a historical people, people without a history or a sense of history. [See Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India*. New Delhi: OUP, (1996), 2006]. Applying the same analogy to literary history, one may take it to be the visibility and influence of certain texts. Whereas this would be a record of shifts in style, in subject

matter and concerns, this record may be a misrepresentation and the canon thus formed a truncated one. A literary text is often misjudged by its own contemporary readership. The manner in which failed texts phoenix-like rise out of their ashes, compels us to consider a wider role for literary historiography.

Both history and theory flourish in, and because of, the academia. They have been treated as rival claimants for space in the academic syllabi.⁴ One is seen to push the other out. This was also one of the major fallouts of the close textual reading propagated by new criticism. The historiographer today has to review and explore their relationship to each other: do they merely impinge or do they – that is, history and theory – feed on each other in order to redefine themselves? In fact it is the literary artifact, the primary work of literature, which happens to be at the centre of both. And this work is not autonomous or self-contained. It relates to life, imagines it, fictionalises it, moves out from the page to external happenings, socio-cultural issues, political power structures and inwards into the human mind. Literature works through narratives; in the same measure literary historiography is a narrative, a constructed narrative, organised towards leading to a particular meaning. Like the writer, the historian selects certain events, builds up his plot, works it towards a climax and relates it to temporality. It is not for nothing that Hayden White borrowed the idea of emplotment from fiction. Histories have their plots, their frames, their core ideology as they relate to the outer event in history, reflect the change in cultural reception and continue with the specific objective they may have in mind – nation construction, recovery of tradition, new definitions or providing a source for future research.⁵ It is on account of all these factors that histories have to be written. Those who do not have one, invent it. American academia had to make a concerted effort to separate their literature from that of the mother country. In the beginning it was an invention. In India, we are differently placed, especially when it comes to English language writing. We use the language but not the culture or the social milieu. And our political history is different. One of the factors which needs to be problematised is the nature of this difference.

Let me return briefly to Srinivasa Iyengar's monumental work on *Indian Writing in English*. It is a work infused with national

pride, it is a response to the 'civilisation discourse', histories written by the imperial rulers and, in 1958, the assessment is guided by the need to project the literary tradition of an erstwhile colony, now an independent country, to a foreign, non-culture audience. Therefore it problematises difference. It looks for its own strengths and like Swami Vivekananda's speech in the Parliament of Religions,⁶ Iyengar's main stress is on spiritual strength. But his objectivity and training as a scholar push him to look at the beginnings, at Hindu College and the ensuing debates. The debates in nineteenth century Calcutta were also part of a rising national consciousness. The literature of self-definition is prioritised above all else. Writers like Sri Aurobindo – of whom he was a lifelong devotee – and then Gandhi and Nehru are taken up for building up a sense of national worth. These writers were engaged in looking for alternative traditions, alternative power-structures and in discovering their own inner strength. Iyengar's history, being a response to the imperial perceptions of culture, fell comfortably in place with the requirement both of the academic mission as well as that of a newly independent nation. It progresses along a genre-based chronological narration. Within the genre divisions, it is a writer-based history as some of the writers are discussed at length and in fair amount of detail. Bengal Renaissance interests him though nowhere does he use that term; there are two chapters on Tagore and three on Sri Aurobindo. The latter are also an elaborate discourse on Indian spirituality. From there he moves on to political prose before taking up the development of the novel. There is a single chapter on women writers though the account covers both the beginnings of the novel in the late nineteenth century and the modern period till the late sixties – from Krupa Sathianadhan to Anita Desai. In itself it is a monumental work. A huge amount of research has gone into it; a great deal of information is provided, minor writers, beginners, dropouts are also briefly mentioned especially wherever Gandhian impact is traced. These are writings which are not easy to trace and Iyengar continues to remain our main source of information. Faithful to its time, today when we place it side by side with certain other literary histories, we are in a better position to gauge its merit. Srinivasa Iyengar presents a record not only of the writings but also of the major ideological flows: the spiritual as

well as the political. With the sole exception of the chapter on women writers, others are placed together in ideological clusters. It is a storehouse for future researchers. But its own growth from a base to its superstructure does not indicate the major problems a historiographer faces.

Any attempt at writing the history of Indian Writing in English is beset with problems primarily because of the rupture in the relationship between language and national culture. Invariably it has been perceived as a response to a new culture, and in its relationship to the language of the imperial rulers; it has laid claim to the literary tradition of England. It is born of a twin parentage and is hence divided between language and culture. As a result the cultural half gets an advantage where historiography is concerned. Sujit Mukherjee in 'Indo-English Literature: An Essay in Definition' had asked the question 'where do we accommodate translation?' Mukherjee refers to V.K. Gokak's use of the words 'Indo-Anglian' for works originally written in English and 'Indo-English' for works translated into English. Mukherjee seeks a further division and asks for a separate treatment for works translated by the authors themselves, as Tagore and now Girish Karnad do (205), on the ground that a self-translator accommodates the claims of language, while when the work is translated by another it is more closely rooted in the language of original composition. In another work, Sujit Mukherjee questioned the periodisation of Indian literature under the time-lag theory (Refer *Towards a Literary History of India* and *Some Positions on a Literary History of India*). Here one is able to see that Indian Writing in English is closer to other Indian literatures than to the writing of British authors. Iyengar's history, however, does not work along these lines hence the problem does not arise for him.

What happens when the outsider writes literary history? Despite a better grip over the language, the outsider is distanced by the cultural density of the literature. William Walsh, a respected scholar in the field of Commonwealth Studies, brought out a history – *Indian Literature in English* – in 1990. Obviously the book is meant for students of Indian Literature all over the world and having been written by a Britisher and published in England (William Walsh is Professor Emeritus at Leeds), it has greater

visibility than the various other histories that have followed Iyengar's. I want to look at it briefly on two counts: its organisation and its ideology. It follows a genre-division but drama is totally absent. It also includes a chapter on British writers who have written about India. One wonders whether the last chapter beginning with Kipling and ending with Farrell has a legitimate place in it. Again R.K. Narayan, on whom Walsh has a separate book, finds a place of pride in this. Almost all his novels are discussed in detail while Anand and Rao get a quarter of the space – their work is discussed in ten pages while Narayan has as many as twenty pages devoted to him. Is this the making of a canon, a critical evaluation, a personal preference, or a shortcut? Where is the balance? *Auchitya* as we call it. Does the literary historiographer have the right to define literary preferences in this manner?

As for the ideology, right in the 'Foreword', Walsh takes up a superior position – when he writes about the making of the Empire, and describes English as a link language which is a 'powerful testimony to the expressive and creative capacities of the English language itself' (vii). But as one reads the book not only is Walsh's history one-sided, replete with political generalisations, but even his sense of geography is inaccurate. For him the Indian National Congress developed into a powerful Hindu Socialist party to which the Raj was compelled to hand over the government of 'non-Muslim India' (28); William Bentinck is a *large minded* Governor General (31) (one wonders for whom?). Then again 'There is no word either for religion or spirituality in any of the Indian languages' (36). Bengal becomes the Sikh heartland (16). I would rather not go on listing the many biases that the work is replete with, and which are not visible to the outsider, or even to many of the younger generation of Indian scholars. But I refer to it primarily because it substantiates my point that historiography faces many pitfalls, especially the difficulty of being objective. In Walsh's work the nature of emplotment is based on imperial ideology.

The writing of any literary history is problematic, but these problems are manifold in India because we have a multi-lingual tradition; there is a long tradition of oral literatures and also because we are still caught up in colonialism in two entirely different ways. First, we address the west, work through a system of responses as if the stimuli is somewhere else. Thus we forego

our agency. Sisir Kumar Das's two-volume history of modern Indian literature, subtitled the first volume as a response to the west. Part of this is historically true, because we work through the history of British encroachments in India and follow the course of their control: that is, our methodology is wrong. We fail to turn our attention to all else that falls outside it. The second reason is that we look for similar structures and quickly come to the conclusion that literary history – like the term nation, the ideology of resistance, of feminism, and literary forms like the novel – has come from the west. But if we were to look around and notice the different concepts available to us in our traditions, and the narrative forms that have evolved over a period of time, we suddenly realise that these forms have contributed a great deal to modern writing. In fact, the forms and concepts that are said to have been imported have been stretched to accommodate the native forms in ways that compel us to realise the limits of our initial premise. Edward Said in his essay 'Traveling Theories' has elaborated upon the idea how theories and concepts travel but falling on different soils they do not remain the same. Again, Homi Bhabha's essay on 'Postcolonialism and Postmodernism' in *The Location of Culture* explores the dependence of postmodernism on postcolonialism. In fact, they are not only parallel in time, they have an almost incestuous relationship in this that they have used similar materials like oral traditions, non-conclusive endings and magic realism; materials are similar, but the impulses are different. It is to work out these parallels, interactions and interdependence that literary histories have to be written time and again covering the same ground but interpreting it anew. Every new history demands a re-evaluation of the earlier formulations; it intervenes with earlier assessments. No two literary histories are the same. The historiographer is constantly called upon to define his location – in time, in culture, in ideology – and to define a framework.⁷ The latter demands the principles of inclusion and exclusion to be adopted. There is a constant tussle between the hermeneutics of interpretation and the compulsion to relate to a larger socio-cultural narrative. What then are our basic expectations from the historiographer? We turn to history in order to get a sense of time, to be able to see things in continuity, to trace

traditions, to mark the shifts in sensibility, the crisis in society, the transformations of form and to be able to pick up the missing links. This, in itself, is a tall order. Often, the question is asked is literary history a substitute for literary criticism? Is the historian a judge? Then it is very likely that a great deal may be excluded, understated or abandoned. As a literary critic he may be inattentive to the overall atmosphere of ideas. But on the other hand if no evaluative norm is applied, it is reduced to a mere record, existing in limbo for future investigations.

Iyengar himself did not use the word 'history'. Others have also often stayed away from it. But histories are being written all around through selections, anthologies, hagiographies, and comparative studies. Selections help both in canon-formation and its destabilisation, while comparative studies move horizontally into similar yet different structures. Selections, through the act of repetition, keep literary memory alive, and through newness call for the expansion of received ideas and existing perspectives. We have a variety of examples where methodology is concerned. In English literature, Legouis and Cazamian progress through literary periodisation, Boris Ford's multi-volume history is a collaborative effort, but it is very consciously set against historical and cultural specificities marked by the flow of time; other histories are specific to a period like the Victorian Age or the eighteenth century, still other work with ideas – like Basil Willey's background studies. These work through observation, recording, interpretation, reception and a host of other narrative techniques.

Do we have something similar happening today in our own country? We too have histories working with the pluralism of India and its multi-lingual traditions – the multi-volumed history being produced by Sahitya Akademi; and then mono-language histories of all literatures, there are also several interventions by theorists. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha in their two-volume work *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, have provided a historical view of women's writing across languages. The biographical notes and the lengthy introduction use chronology, social background, biography and theory. The selection is also an evaluation. The missing elements are the sources for the researcher to investigate and pursue. Sisir Kumar Das in his