

2 April 1991



Sahitya Akademi

# meet the author

**K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar**





Receiving Sahitya Akademi Fellowship July 1985

**P**rofessor Kodaganallur Ramaswami Srinivasa Iyengar was born on 17 April 1908 at Sattur, and had his formal education at Tirunelveli and Palayamcottai. After teaching at Valvettiturai (Ceylon), and at Lingaraj College, Belgaum, and Basaveshwar College, Bagalkot, he joined Andhra University, Waltair, as Head of the English Department in 1947, and rose to be Vice-Chancellor in 1966. In 1969 he was nominated 'Adhishthata' of Sri Aurobindo Ashram (Delhi branch) by the Mother. He was twice elected Vice-President of Sahitya Akademi, and served as its Acting President during 1977-78.

Professor Srinivasa Iyengar is a scholar and teacher of eminence, a seasoned literary historian and critic, a biographer of Sri Aurobindo and of the Mother of the Yogashram at Pondicherry, and an epic poet with a vision and voice of his own. To quote Professor DVK Raghavacharyulu his student, "Professor Iyengar started his multi-faceted career as a teacher. His students fondly remember his lectures for their 'shining simplicity, an immediacy of feeling, a delicately grained sensibility, a suppleness of form and ease of expression.... replete with scintillating wit and sparkling humour and occasional subtle implosions of irony."

Professor Iyengar's long career as a teacher is inseparable from his literary pursuits. He took to reviewing books when he was barely out of his teens. His critical study of Lytton Strachey was published in India and the U.K. and established him as 'an

accomplished critic of life and letters' and 'a very gifted critic of English literature', and earned him in 1939 the D.Litt. degree of Madras University. Four decades later, his biographical homage, *On the Mother*, won him the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1980 – a long trek from Strachey's model of irreverent pungency to ardent admiration, marked in between by his monumental work on Sri Aurobindo.

A prolific writer, his well-known works are: *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1948), *The Mind and Heart of Britain* (1955), *The Adventure of Criticism* (1962), *Francois Mauriac: Novelist and Moralist* (1963) and *Shakespeare: His World and His Art* (1964).

Professor Iyengar is a pioneer of the systematic study of Indian writing in English. His early efforts used to cause a mild flutter among teachers of English in India; now this discipline has been accepted as a respectable branch of learning in the academic circles both in India and abroad. His lectures as Visiting Professor of Indo-Anglian literature at the University of Leeds in 1959 were published in 1962 as *Indian Writing in English* (4th enlarged edition 1984). This 848 page study of the Indian contribution to English literature was not only a pioneering work, but remains a standard book of reference to which literary historians owe their first debt of gratitude.

Among the many valuable publications edited by Professor Iyengar is *Indian Literature since Independence*, to which he contributed in 1973 a fifty-page introduction, surveying, for the



At study





Presenting Sahitya Akademi Fellowship to T.P. Meenakshisundaran

first time, the entire gamut of Indian literature.

He wrote some fine Indian poetry in English, ranging from the descriptive, narrative, reflective, dramatic, heroic to the tragic, ironic and satiric. 'Zero Hour', his first sustained poetic composition, reveals a soul in anguish, groping for a new mode of expression. He begins with spring and finds Holi an occasion for festive fireworks and new year offensives. After painting the grisly horrors of the Boom City and the Walpurgisnight, where 'humankind is rendered superfluous' waiting 'for the computerised leap from the brink', he calls for a return to the 'lost kingdom of the child'. His first sustained venture into verse is thus an emphatic restatement of faith in the God in man, symbolized in the child, for 'isn't the child, any child, the secret place where the new mankind may arise?'

Widely travelled, Professor Iyengar has been associated with many national and international organisations. While the Andhra University, Sri Venkateswara University and the Nagarjuna University have conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Letters, (Honoris causa) the Modern Languages Association of America has elected him its Honorary Member.

Modest and soft-spoken, Professor Iyengar is a true *Karmayogi* who has realised in his person 'the unity of Indian literature and culture from the Vedic Age to the present day.' He has been hailed by Allen Tate as 'one of the last surviving humanistic critics... who so graciously combines penetrating literary insight with a sure sense of human values'.

Late in life, in the nineteen seventies and eighties, Professor Iyengar turned back to the perennial springs of our native tradition. He has rendered in English quatrains the 'Sundara Kanda' of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as *The Epic Beautiful*, with a long Introduction and elucidatory notes. He has retold the *Ramayana* as quintessentially Sita's story, *Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born*. Also, freely drawing upon our historical, Puranic and epic heritage in Sanskrit and Tamil, Professor Iyengar has indited the life-histories of Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damayanti, Renuka, Draupadi and Kannaki, so as to project a parable of evolution of the feminine psyche covering almost a whole Yuga cycle. With its convincing evocation of past ages and of Adya Shakti in seven of her human manifestations, *Satisaptakam: Saga of Seven Mothers* will appeal to a wide circle of lovers of Indian culture and literature.

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With Shivarama Karanth



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International Seminar held in  
January 1981, Sahitya  
Akademi, New Delhi, 1983.



With Gokak and Annada Sankar Ray



With wife and daughter  
Prema Nandakumar

### A Chronology

- 1908: Birth
- 1928: B.A.; 1932 M.A.; 1939 D. Litt.; all from Madras University
- 1933: Professor of English, Lingaraj College, Belgaum
- 1944: Vice-Principal, Basaveshwar College, Bagalkot
- 1947: Head of the English Department, Andhra University, Waltair
- 1951: Visited UK during the Festival of Britain
- 1957: Attended PEN Congress, Tokyo-Kyoto
- 1959: Visiting Professor, University of Leeds, UK
- 1963: President, All-India English Teachers Conference, Jaipur
- 1964: Attended Shakespeare Conference, Stratford, and Commonwealth Literature Conference, Leeds, UK
- 1966: Vice-Chancellor, Andhra University
- 1968: Attended Commonwealth Universities Congress, Sydney
- 1969: Vice-President, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi
- 1971: Member, Press Council of India, New Delhi
- 1972: Attended Congress of Literary Critics, Rheims
- 1973: Attended Union Académique Internationale, London
- 1974: Attended World Conference of Religion and Peace, Leuven
- 1977: Acting President, Sahitya Akademi
- 1981: Sahitya Akademi Award for the book *On the Mother*
- 1983: 'For the sake of Honour' Award by Booksellers & Publishers Association of South India
- 1984: Hon. Member of Modern Languages Association, USA
- 1985: Fellow, Sahitya Akademi
- 1986: Vice-President, The PEN All-India Centre, Bombay
- 1990: Dr. Kalidas Nag Memorial Medallist



Inaugurating 'Akademi 1989' Exhibition