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V.V.S. IYER: The pioneer of militant nationalism in colonial Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

It has been said that the all round revival of the Tamil country in the first two decades of the century owes much to three brilliant sons of Tamil Nadu, Poet C. Subramania Bharathi, Scholar-Revolutionary V.V.S. Iyer and Swadeshi Steamship hero, V.O Chidambaram Pillai. They were all dedicated patriots working with a passion, each in his chosen field the Tamil language and the culture of the Tamil people. Each contributed his own quota to boost the self-esteem of the Tamils... Whilst the names of Bharathi and Chidambaram Pillai are familiar to present day India, it cannot be said that it is equally familiar with the name of V.V.S. Iyer. They were all dedicated patriots who worked with a passion, each in his chosen field for the liberation of Bharatmata. Whilst the names of Bharathi and Chidambaram Pillai are familiar to present day India, it cannot be said that it is equally familiar with the name of V.V.S. Iyer.

Keywords: Freedom fighter, political activities, V.V.S Ayer with Vanchinathan, VVS Ayiar with Savarkar

Introduction

Varahaneri Venkatesa Subramaniam Iyer was born to a middle class family of Tiruchi on 2 April 1881. He was 44 years old when he died on 3 June 1925. It was a relatively short life. He will be remembered both as an early Tamil revolutionary and as the father of the modern Tamil short story. R.A. Padmanabhan writes in his biography of V.V.S. Iyer: V. Venkatesa Subramaniam Iyer popularly known as Va Ve Su, wa Iyer a close associate of Bharati. Ayiar studied law and qualified as a pleader (junior lawyer) from Madras University in 1902. After a stint as lawyer in Tiruchi, he moved to Rangoon in 1906. He worked there as a junior to a British lawyer. He left for London in 1907 and enrolled in Lincoln's Inn to become a Barrister. In London, he came in contact with V.D. Savarkar and began taking an active part in the freedom movement, which resulted in an arrest warrant being issued against him. Fearing arrest, he fled to Paris.

From there, Iyer sailed to Pondicherry. En route, from Rome, he sent a copy of Dante's Divine Comedy by post to Mandayam Srinivasachari in Pondy. In due course Iyer, disguised as a bearded Muslim, landed up in Srinivasachari house and asked if he had received a copy of the Divine Comedy. The name of the book was the password!

Literary Works of V.V.S. Iyer

V.V.S. Iyer or Varahaneri Venkatesa Subramaniam Iyer wanted to expand the body of works in the genre short story in Tamil literature following the tradition established by western short story writers. Iyer was amongst the foremost Tamil writers to compose excellent short stories giving adequate notice to form, which is of supreme significance. The various short stories written by V.V.S. Iyer are compiled and collected in the anthology titled Mahkaiyarkkaciyin Katal Mutaliya Kataikal. One of the popular short stories named Kujattankarai Aracamaram Conna Katai included in the collection portrays the grave miscalculation of a woman who commits suicide on Meagre mistrust and doubt that her husband will leave her in order to live with another woman. This tragic story is described in a manner that will give rise to feelings of sympathy and pity in the hearts of readers. The renowned Tamil short story writer has also translated one of the short stories composed by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali into Tamil, titled Kabulivala.

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The type of short stories that were written in Tamil prior to the advent of V.V.S. Iyer could not be considered as short stories in the proper sense of the word. These works rather resembled works of a biographical narration with an amusing ending. But Iyer incorporated various aspects into his short stories and he projected a facet of life, an incident, a human quality, an idea, an emotion, any side of a problem with insight and perspicuity through his works. Thus V.V.S. Iyer (Varahaneri Venkatesa Subramaniam Iyer) was indeed the father of modern short story in Tamil literature.

Political activities

Iyer's militant attitude prompted the British Raj in 1910 to issue a warrant for his arrest for his alleged involvement in an anarchist conspiracy in London and Paris. Aiyar resigned from the Lincoln's Inn and escaped to Paris. Although he wished to remain in Paris as a political exile, he had to return to India. Iyer landed in Pondicherry on 4th December 1910 disguised as a Muslim to escape arrest and remained there as exile. Iyer remained in Pondicherry for over ten years. While in Pondicherry Iyer, met with fellow revolutionaries Subramaniya Bharathi and Aurobindho. In Pondicherry, Iyer was involved in the plot to assassinate Ashe, the Collector of Tirunelveli. One of his students, Vanchinathan assassinated Ashe. Thus more trouble arose for Aiyar and his companion Subramanya Bharathi.

On 22 September 1914 the German cruiser SMS Emden entered the Madras harbour and bombarded the city. The British colonial government blamed this on the activities of the exiles in Pondicherry, and urged the French Governor to deport Iyer and his companions to Africa. The French police brought several charges against the revolutionaries, but failed to convict them. During this period Iyer translated the Thirukkural into English. He later revealed that he wanted to leave a legacy behind if he were forced to leave the country.

Iyer returned to Madras after World War I and worked as the editor of the newspaper Desabhaktan (Patriot). He was arrested in 1921 on sedition charges and spent nine months in prison. While in prison Iyer wrote the book A Study of Kamba Ramayana.

As a writer, Iyer has often been referred to as the "founder" of the short story genre in Tamil. In Pondy, Iyer became close to both Aurobindo and Bharati. The Government of India, looking for a case against Iyer, blamed him for the shelling of Madras by the Emden and urged the French Government to deport him to South Africa. This, however, did not materialise and Iyer on the other hand, became a *littérateur*, writing several Tamil articles, translating the Thirukkural into English, etc. Later, he moved to Madras and edited Desabhaktan, a Tamil journal. He was arrested in 1921 and given a nine months' sentence. It was then that he wrote A study of Kamba Ramayana.

V.V.S. Iyer passed the Pleader's Examination in Madras in the First Grade in 1902 and thereafter practised as a Pleader in the District Court of Tiruchi. In 1906, he went to Rangoon, and practised as a junior in the Chambers of an English Barrister whose clientele included a number of Tamil businessmen who were resident in Burma. From Rangoon, he left for London in 1907, enrolled in Lincoln's Inn with a view to becoming a Barrister at Law. His intentions at that time was to study English music and also to learn English dance. However, his life changed

dramatically when he came in contact with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. He was the right hand man of Savarkar in organizing the Indian Home Rule League and giving training for a violent uprising for India's liberation.

After the episode in Aurobindo's residence, the police searched Bharati's house in Dharmaraja Koil Street. The officer found only poems by Bharati, and left without any further ado. But the matter did not end there. All three, Aurobindo, V.V.S. Iyer and Bharati, had to go to the police station for interrogation.

Once, Bharati had a strange visitor, a sanyasi! Replete with matted locks, staff, bowl and saffron robes, the caller looked quite venerable. The mistake he made was greeting Bharati with folded hands. Bharati knew the custom, according to which the sanyasi had to be first greeted with respect, and then the sanyasi would bless the host. Bharati knew at once that he was a fake sanyasi, actually an agent of the CID. Bharati was in fact more amused than bewildered. He admonished the person for stooping to such low levels for the sake of a livelihood. On another occasion it was a diamond merchant who called on him. Bharati knew instantly that the person was also from the CID. The person started saying that he had come to sell precious stones, whereupon Bharati told him, I agree, but I too have some gems of immense value and would like to show them to you." The visitor was perplexed. Bharati showed him drafts of his poetry and said, "Each of these is a priceless gem of all nine varieties." The bogus merchant left in a hurry. Others came as budding poets seeking Bharati's blessings! But there were also many who were good friends.

Iyer's activities in India

In 1910, Iyer resigned his membership of Lincoln's Inn. A warrant was issued by the British for his arrest and Iyer escaped to Paris. But he had no wish to remain in Paris as a political exile. From there, Iyer sailed to Pondicherry. En route, from Rome, he sent a copy of Dantes Divine Comedy by post to Mandayam Srinivasachari in Pondicherry. On arrival, Iyer, disguised as a bearded Muslim, landed up in Srinivasachari's house and asked if he had received a copy of the Divine Comedy. The name of the book was the password for identity! Thus, he managed to return to India, albeit to French Pondicherry, and there he met Subramaniya Bharathi and Aurobindo. He remained in Pondicherry for ten years till the end of the First World War. In Pondicherry, Aiyar was involved in the plot to assassinate Ashe, the Collector of Tirunelveli. Vanchinathan who assassinated General Ashe was his disciple and it was Iyer who trained him in the use of pistol.

Subramaniam passed the Pleader's Examination in Madras in the First Grade in 1902 and thereafter practised as a Pleader in the District Court of Tiruchi. In 1906, he went to Rangoon, and practised as a junior in the Chambers of an English Barrister whose clientele included a number of Tamil businessmen who were resident in Burma. From Rangoon, he left for London in 1907, enrolled in Lincoln's Inn with a view to becoming a Barrister at Law. It was in London, that V.V.S. Iyer together with Vinayak Damodar Sarvakar, began to take an active role in the militant struggle for Indian independence.

In 1907 or somewhere there, one day the maid-servant at the famous India House in London handed a visiting card to us as we came downstairs to dine and told us a gentleman was waiting in the drawing room. Presently the door was flung

open and a gentleman, neatly dressed in European costume and inclined to be fashionable, warmly shook hands with us. He told us he had been a pleader at Rangoon and had come over to England to qualify himself as a full-fledged barrister. He was past thirty and seemed a bit agreeably surprised to find us so young. He assured us of his intention to study English music and even assured us that he was eager to get a few lessons in dancing as well. We, as usual, entered our mild protest against thus dissipating the energy of our youth in light-hearted pastimes when momentous issues hung in the balance. The gentleman, unconvinced, though impressed, took our leave promising to continue to call upon us every now and then. He was Srijut V.V.S. Iyer. In 1910, Aiyar resigned his membership of Lincoln's Inn. A warrant was issued by the British for his arrest and Iyer escaped to Paris. But he had no wish to remain in Paris as a political exile. He returned to India, albeit to French Pondicherry, and there met with both Subramaniya Bharathi and Aurobindo. He remained in Pondicherry for ten years until after the end of the First World War. It was during this period that he translated the whole of the Thirukural into English. In his Preface to the Second Edition of his 'Maxims of Thiruvalluvar', Iyer declares the reasons that led him to write:

"When, soon after the Great War broke out, the (German battleship) Emden was scouring the Bay of Bengal, some members of the secret police force stationed by the British Indian Government at Pondicherry to watch the movements of the Indian refugees thought it a golden opportunity to rise in the service by connecting the latter with the activities of the Emden. It is said that as a result of their plot, the Madras Government desired the then Governor of Pondicherry to banish the Indian political refugees to Africa. Anyway, the French police brought several charges against these refugees among who was Shriman Iyer. These cases, however, failed ignominiously. In spite of that, the then Governor of Pondicherry wished to deport them to Algeria. He however, wanted that it should not appear that he forced them to leave Pondicherry. He therefore sent messengers to them who threatened them unofficially with all sorts of dire consequences if they did not voluntarily leave for Algiers. The negotiation lasted for about four or five months. As soon as the negotiation started, Shriman Iyer thought that the French Government might any day force him out of Pondicherry, and wanted to leave something behind him which might keep his memory green among his countrymen even though his body should be removed by force out of the Tamil land which he loved so dearly.

He therefore set about to think as to what would be the best thing for him to do under these circumstances, taking into consideration the very short and precarious period of time at his disposal. It did not take him long to decide that if he could translate into English the shortest and at the same time the most perfect of the ancient Tamil classics, he could claim a small corner in the memory of his countrymen. He therefore set to work at it at top speed.

It was about the 1st of November, 1914 that he put pen on paper. Day after day he pounded away at the translation, every evening thinking that the next morning he might receive a peremptory order to leave Pondicherry. This sword of Damocles ever hanging above his head only made him determined to work at white heat, so that in case he had to leave India he might leave as large a number as possible of the maxims worthily translated. He went on with his

translation with so much our that even while his house was being searched by the French police for discovering if he had concealed in his house a fugitive from justice, he put his hand to the translation the moment the police left his study to search the other parts of his house. He was a happy man when on the 1st of March 1915 the last lines of the preface were fair copied and the whole book was ready for the press..."

After the end of World War I, V.V.S. Iyer returned to Chennai and functioned as the Editor of the journal Desabhaktan. In September 1921 he was arrested for sedition and sentenced to 9 months imprisonment. And it was in prison that V.V.S. Iyer wrote his magnum opus - a study of Kamban's Ramayana.

V.V.S. Iyer drowned in the Papanasam Falls in June 1925 in circumstances which remain controversial. On his death, Vinayak Damodar Sarvakar, Iyer's comrade in arms, paid a moving tribute in the journal, Mahratta: "Heavy griefs have often embittered our life; but none heavier than what thy sudden death caused, oh friend, ever taxed our capacity to endure. Memories of those momentous years and trying days rise in a flood and, struggling to find a vent, keep knocking at the gates of our heart. How we wish we could have spoken of them all and recited our reminiscences. But our lips must remain sealed. How we long to write of the goodness and gentleness of disposition - how when betrayed thou stood unshaken, how thou served them who owned thee not and how thou suffered when unbeknown and modest, and made not the slightest mention of it when thou got known - how we long to write of it all. But our pen is a broken reed. The noble story of thy life must for the time being, nay, perhaps for all time to come, remain untold. For while those who can recite it are living, the time to tell it may not come, and when the time comes, when all that is worth telling will no longer remain suppressed and will eagerly be listened to, the generation that could have recounted it might have passed away. Thy greatness, therefore, must stand undimmed but un-witnessed by man like the lofty Himalayan peaks. Thy services and sacrifices must lie buried in oblivion as do the mighty foundations of a mighty castle.

The news of thy sudden death was bitter enough. But bitterer by far is this, our inability to relate to posterity under what heavy obligations thou hast placed them and to express the fullness of our personal and public grief.

For indeed he was a pillar of strength, a Hindu of Hindus, and in him our Hindu race has lost one of the most exalted representatives and perfect flower of our Hindu civilization-ripe in experience, and mellowed by sufferings and devoted to the service of men and God, the cause of the Hindu Sanghatan was sure to find in him one of its best and foremost champions in Madras.

This was in 1910. Fourteen years rolled by, and the impossible actually happened. Travelling the most dangerous and meandering by-paths and by-lanes and subterranean passages of life, so formidably bordering the realms of death, I met Srijut Iyer a couple of months ago. He had travelled all the distance from Madras to Bombay to enable us to revel a few hours in the wine of romantic joy. We forgot for a while the bitterness and the keen pangs of the afflicted and the tortured past and lightly gossiped as boys fresh from school meeting after a long holiday. He took my leave. I watched him disappear and said to my mind 'Now I can call him again anytime I like.

Little I knew then that he was to disappear beyond all human recall. When human wisdom shook its head and snorted out Impossible!, events proved it possible and when it gaily assured itself, At any time, Destiny put in a stern Never! Thus our Fate seems to act with no nobler intention than to mock and humiliate human calculations!

In 1910, somewhere in March, we stood as a prisoner, then only very recently pent up in Brixton, the formidable prison in London. The warder announced visits; anxiously we accompany the file of prisoners to the visiting yard. We stand behind the bars wondering who could have come to call on us and thus invite the unpleasant attention of the London Police. For to acknowledge our acquaintance from the visitor's box in front of the prison bars was a sure step to eventually get behind them. Presently one dignified figure enters the box in front of us. It was V.V.S. Iyer. His beard was closely waving on his breast. He was unkempt. He was no longer the neatly dressed fashionable gentleman. His whole figure was transformed with some great act of dedication of life. Oh leader ! he feelingly accosted us, Why did you leave Paris at all ! We soothingly said, What is the use of discussing it here? Rightly or not I am here, pent up in this prison, and the best way now is to see what is to be done next, how to face the present.

While fully discussing the future plans, the bell rang and the warders came rushing and shouting unceremoniously, Time up ! With a heavy heart we looked into each other's eyes. We knew it would perhaps be the last time we ever saw each other in this life. Tears rose. Suppressing them, we said, No ! we are Hindus. We have read the Gait. We must not weep in the presence of these unsympathetic crowds.' We parted. I watched till he disappeared and said to my mind, Alas ! It is well nigh impossible to see this loving soul again. For one of two fates was certain to fall to my lot, the gallows or the Andaman and neither could hold any prospect before me of seeing my friends again.

V.V.S Iyer with Vanchinathan

V.V.S Iyer was an Indian revolutionary from Tamil Nadu, who fought against the British in India. V.V.S. Iyer also known as Maharishi was in London for some years, working in close collaboration with Vinayak Damodhar Savarkar, Shyamji Krishnavarma and Madam Cama. He was a scholar in Sanskrit and a master of English prose. On his return to India in January 1910, he settled at Pondicherry. He was a well-known patriot and extremist in Indian nationalist politics. He believed in violent, revolutionary means to obtain India's freedom. He was of the opinion that training to the citizens in the free use of arms and heroic deeds are necessary for free India. Thus practice in using the revolver was one of the items taught to young recruits who were sent to Pondicherry for moral and physical training. Pondicherry was found suitable for smuggling of small arms and also for printing secret pamphlets. Later the venue was converted to be the political asylum of the Swadeshi nationalists of Madras Presidency. Vanchi was a close collaborator of V.V.S. Iyer, another freedom fighter who sought arms to defeat the British. Vanchi became well acquainted with the character of a revolutionary long before his first met V.V.S. Iyer, Vanchi went in long leave initially for a period of month, later extended by another two months. He rejoined duty in April 1911, finally leaving the forest department on May 15, 1911. During that five to six months period, Vanchi appears to have undergone some form of personal

transformation, emerging at the end with a clear commitment to put family problems aside and focus on what he described as the welfare of the nation is in ruined circumstances.

VVS Iyer with Savarkar

At the end of the conversation with Savarkar, there was a metamorphosis in his life. He became an activist in the Indian freedom struggle. He became the right hand of Savarkar in organizing the Indian Home Rule League and giving training for a violent uprising for India's liberation. VVS was the man who stood by Savarkar in all his endeavours. He was inspired by Savarkar and in turn inspired Savarkar. Savarkar, VVS Iyer and TSS Rajan (who later joined the Congress and also served as Minister in Madras Presidency) were the trio who made India House a hub of revolutionary activities. One of the seminal works of Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, was translated from Marathi to English under the supervision of VVS Iyer. When the British Government arrested Savarkar for sedition, it was Iyer who with the help of Irish revolutionaries attempted to rescue him from prison in London.

Iyer together with Shyamji Krishnavarma and Madam Bikaji Cama also made plans to free Savarkar at Marseilles when he was being ferried in SS Morea from London to India. At the end of the conversation with Savarkar, there was a metamorphosis in his life. He became an activist in the Indian freedom struggle. He became the right hand of Savarkar in organizing the Indian Home Rule League and giving training for a violent uprising for India liberation.

Chambers of English The noble story of thy life must for the time being, may, perhaps for all time to come, remain untold. For while those who can recite it are living, the time to tell it may not come, and when the time comes, when all that is worth telling will no longer remain suppressed and will eagerly be listened to, the generation that could have recounted it might have passed away. Thy greatness, therefore, must stand undimmed but unwitnessed by man like the lofty Himalayan peaks. Thy services and sacrifices must lie buried in oblivion as do the mighty foundations of a mighty castle. Vinayak Damodar Sarvakar in 1925.

The Strategy of Militant Nationalists

The Militant Nationalism adopted a plan of action to spread their gospel and to achieve its objectives and framed their common strategy even though their tactics varied having six programmers:

1. Hatred was to be created in the minds of educated Indians against the British by various propaganda in the Indian Press;
2. The fear of unemployment and starvation was to be removed from the minds of Indians and love of freedom and of the motherland was to be inculcated in the;
3. The Government was to be kept busy by means of Vande Mataram processions Swadeshi Conference and boycott meetings;
4. Young Indians were to be recruited, organized in small and trained in physical exercises and use of weapons and were to be taught absolute obedience to rules and the leaders.
5. Weapons were to be manufactured purchased from the foreign countries; and smuggled in to the country or manufacture in the country itself;

6. Money was to be raised for the Terrorist movement by means of raids and dacoities.

Their belief was that “the law of English is established on brute force and if to liberate our selves. We too must use brute force; it is right that we should do so “They always projected the revolution ideas to the Indian the rough Press and Political literature, published by the Militant Nationalists all over India.

Varakaneri Venkata Subramania Iyer, a noted militant nationalist of Tamilnadu, and a close collaborator of Swamiji Krishna Varma, V.D. Savarkar and Madam Cama of India House at London; and a staunch supporter of Abhinava Bharat Society drafted new technique of revolution reoperation in the Madras Presidency. He stressed that the liberation of Mother Bharat was to be achieved by a preparation for war against the British which included:

1. “the teaching of swadeshi, boycott and National education;
2. Purchase and storing of weapon sinneighbouring countries;
3. Opening of small we a aponmanufacturing factories;
4. Purchase of weapons in foreign countries and smuggling the min to India;
5. Adopting Guerilla tactics whenever possible; and
6. Waiting for a favorable opportunity to raise in revolt;”

This strategy of V.V.S. Iyer would help the Indian revolution aerie sin some extent in organizing such a revolution, organized by the Irish, Russian and Turkish in Europe.

1. The leaders should make compulsory visits to all parts of the country and organize meetings.
2. Leaders should discuss with the people the current political at mosphere in detail;
3. The trained nationalist must carefully locate and pick up the bold and brave ones who were prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause of national liberation;
4. The nationalist should make friendship with them from among them should pick up persons for the revolutionary (secret) in encircle;
5. The membership in the inner circle should not be known to anyone including the circle members, except the leader.
6. All the correspondence and transactions between the leader and the members of the secret society should be kept as close secret.
7. To ensure utmost secrecy, the members of the inner circle should take an oath in front of the idol of Goddess Kali and should sign with the blood taken by cutting the index finger.
8. The essence of Oath is that they are sacrificing themselves for the revolutionary movement; working for the success of the revolution, executing the orders of the leader without hesitation; not to let out secret seven if they are tortured etc.,
9. The leader should keep close touch with the members of the inner council. As for as possible messages. And incase sending letters through messengers or by post become sin evitable, they should use proxies and codes.

Based on the principles of militant nationalism and the strategies of these two revolutionaries, they executed the

theory of terrorism in to action between 1908 and 1911 in many parts of the country by assassinating the British officials.

Conclusion

With Iyer the politician we cannot concern ourselves here. It is the loss of Iyer, the scholar, the friend, the noblest type of a Hindu gentleman, the author of Kural (in translation), the saintly soul whose life has been one continuous sacrifice and worship, that we so bitterly bewail today and bitterly chafe at our inability to pay a public tribute to his memory in a fashion worthy of the noble dead. Oh, the times on which our generation has fallen! The noblest sink down and are washed off to the shores of death, while the unworthy keep gaily swimming on the tides of life.

But thou hast done thy duty, friend! It was for Human Love that thou lived, and died too for human love as martyr unto her. Thou knew no peace in life, oh Soldier of God. But peace is with thee in Death. Oh friend, peace be with thee and divine rest!

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