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The Life of 'Agyeya' the Unknowable

By: Alok Rai

There is a quality of honesty in Akshaya Mukul's biography of Agyeya, a willingness to lay bare the messy complexities of actual lives, which is a welcome break from the tradition of producing hagiographies.

Akshaya Mukul has done us hacks in academia a serious disservice by producing such a meticulous biography of the litterateur Agyeya. He has made extensive use of the Agyeya archive which – unusually for the Hindi literary world - is impressively maintained by the Vatsal Nidhi.

While one must, on the one hand, say unreservedly that Akshaya Mukul's *Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover: The many lives of Agyeya*, is a monumental doorstopper of a book, and sets a demandingly high standard for future academic work, even in Hindi, it is equally important, here, to acknowledge the resources that have been assembled by the Vatsal Nidhi. Without the latter, the biography would have been impossible. Indeed, one hopes that Akshaya Mukul's biography, and the archival infrastructure on which it rests, will jointly bring about a transformation in the academic culture of the Hindi academic world. As a true pioneer, however, Akshaya Mukul must not expect gratitude, particularly because this labour has been exercised in favour of a writer who was, and continues to be, controversial.

A disclosure

I must also, at the very outset, declare a complicated personal investment in this entire story. (I suppose it must be a function of age, that matters of public discourse should start lapping at the edges of one's personal life.) What is well-known, and indeed recorded by Mukul, is that the *nom de plume* – Agyeya – was conferred on Sacchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan by Premchand. Agyeya's seminal contribution, the first *Saptak*, was conceived and executed at an improbable and fractious literary commune that was maintained by Sripat Rai, at 14 Hastings Road, Allahabad – and when the commune broke up, after my uncle got married, the crew, including Agyeya, moved to 18 Hastings Road – my present address.

On a more personal note, my very first photograph – as a child sitting in a waste-paper basket - was shot, with prophetic insight, by Agyeya, who enjoyed yet another distinction not acknowledged in Mukul's title: he was a brilliant photographer. Agyeya and my father, Amrit Rai, were close friends at one time – which is what explains that funny photo. My copy of Agyeya's collection of Partition short stories, *Sharanarathi* – oddly, missed by Mukul, who acknowledges it as a book of poems – is inscribed by Agyeya: “*samaan-dharma Amrit ko*”. However, that “dharma” was the cause of the parting of ways between Amrit Rai and Agyeya soon after. And while their relations remained cordial at a personal level, there was a significant amount of public acrimony later. My father was firmly – or well, not so firmly, as was soon to become evident – identified with the Progressive Writers' Movement, the cultural wing of the Communist Party. Agyeya, on the other hand, was very visibly identified locally with the anti-Progressive literary grouping called Parimal, and nationally, with what was later revealed to be the American-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was an important part of the American effort to redescribe the post-war U.S. effort to dominate the world, as a fight for “freedom and democracy”.

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As a child growing up in Allahabad, I had occasion to get a close-up, and inevitably somewhat distorted and farcical, view of this cultural cold war. But I must abandon the temptation to slip into personal stuff here, and return to Akshaya Mukul's biography. Sufficient though to have given due warning that anything I say must be subject to the same scepticism with which one must regard all testimony that has a personal inflection —archives not excluded.

The personality

Akshaya Mukul brings formidable credentials to this biographical task. His work on the *Gita Press – The Making of Hindu India* – was path-breaking. The fact that he was able to gain access to the archive – indeed, given the state of Hindi publishing, even the fact that there was an archive at all – was remarkable enough. But Mukul brought a rare diligence to the business of mining the archive, and

through his labours the vaguely pious monsters who were responsible for the making of Hindu India through administering regular doses of Kalyan, finally acquired a tangible, historical reality. The work under review – *Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover: The many lives of Agyeya* – shows that that diligence is but one aspect of the way he works. He has had access not only to the archives of the Vatsal Nidhi, but he has also accessed archives held in foreign libraries including, not least, the archives of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the Rockefeller Foundation. There is something else that marks Mukul out from the general run of Hindi biography. This is a quality of honesty, a willingness to lay bare the messy complexities of actual lives, instead of the soporific hagiographies which reduce the “greats” to a monotonous eminence. Mukul’s *Agyeya* is a glorious and welcome break from this tradition.

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Given Agyeya’s characteristic air of reluctant corporeality, perhaps the most remarkable thing about this biography is the fact that it gives us such a vivid day-to-day sense of the person himself. His troubled relations with his father; his volatile ideological affiliations; his restless, hustling ambition; his many, and occasionally passionate relationships with sundry women which still have a whiff of narcissism about them. The great puzzle – and perhaps even clue? – might be the ambiguous nature of Agyeya’s sexuality: the ardent relationships on the one hand, on the other, the fact that he was once granted a divorce on grounds of impotence. But, I must confess, even to broach matters like this carries, in the world of Hindi, an air of transgression, of touching on subjects that are taboo – and it is to Mukul’s credit – and, indeed, to the keepers of the archive who did not impose censorship on his use of the materials – that such matters can be thought about at all. And it is this vivid personal detail, backed up with archival references, which does a great deal to make the person come alive and step out from the panel where the revered ancestors’ portraits hang, hidden behind dusty garlands.

Literary achievements

The matter of Agyeya’s literary achievement must, however, be central to literary biography. This cannot be easy because Agyeya’s output, both in terms of volume and variety, is daunting. After all, as Ashok Vajpeyi is quoted as having said a couple of years after Agyeya’s death, no other Hindi writer had mastered so many different forms of writing and creative expression: novelist, poet, travel writer, journalist, editor. Akshaya Mukul gives a very full account – nearly 600 pages of text, 200 pages of references – of Agyeya’s literary achievement. But a critical evaluation of that achievement will perhaps demand a critic of matching ambition. Meanwhile, I will merely touch on some of the questions that will have to be addressed in such an account.

Well, *Shekhar: Ek Jivani* is something of a holy cow, but irrespective of its qualities as a stand-alone text – I personally find its intense self-absorption less than compelling – *Shekhar* (and, indeed, the Agyeya of *Pratik* and the *Saptaks*) is a good point at which to open up the question of Hindi’s “modernism”, the attempt to define an aesthetic adequate to its turbulent, troubled time. It is an ongoing struggle and one that was played out in various genres, in various media, famously in painting. It is too important to consign it merely to a struggle between two ideological factions, the Pragativadis and the Prayogvadis. Obviously, the attempt to construct an indigenous modernism cannot remain unaffected by the fact that it inherits colonial confusions, and inhabits the shrill polemical world of the Cold War. Perhaps it is too much to expect Mukul to do all that – but he has whetted our appetite for it.

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In a critical evaluation of Agyeya the poet, the crucial perspective in my view, would be somewhat different. This has to do with the matter of language, something that has bedevilled Khari Boli poetry from its earliest days – i.e., the early 20th century. I have been pushing people who are far better qualified than I am, to essay an account of the making of modern Hindi poetry as a tense passage between two anxieties. On the one hand, an anxiety to resist the magnetic attraction of the highly developed tradition of Urdu poetry; and on the other hand, to seek to nudge ever closer to Sanskrit poetry, with its highly evolved poetic tradition, its hypnotic consonantal music. This quest is, inevitably, fraught – because the language itself is actually Urdu-near, and Sanskrit-distant – but has a longing for Sanskrit built into its social foundations. Obviously, this farce plays out at several different levels, but an account that focusses strictly on the matter of poetic language would obviously have to take account of Agyeya the poet – with his Sanskritic legacy, and his feel for the music of the dialects. I’m still waiting.

The contribution of Agyeya the journalist – the inventor, really, of the *Dinaman* style of serious journalism – is, again, too significant to be considered parenthetically. His term as editor was not, really, very long – but it served to create a model of serious public concern which has, unfortunately, rather lapsed at the present time. Still, it nurtured serious talent, and played a formative role in its time. Akshaya Mukul recalls a fascinating incident from around that time, involving one of these people, Raghuvir Sahay. Apparently, Sahay wrote a poem - “Hamari Hindi” - in which he used somewhat indecorous language to describe the parlous state of the so-called, so-fervently desired “rashtrabhasha”. There was a furious backlash. The Hindi purists were horrified and, enamoured of Agyeya’s fluency with the Sanskritic range, called him to act and reprimand. Sahay, who actually regarded Agyeya as a mentor, also turned to him for support. Mukul’s comment is brief: “Agyeya’s response, if he had one, is lost.”

The Congress for Cultural Freedom

No biographical account of Agyeya would be complete without some engagement with the question of Agyeya’s connection with the American cultural machine, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). This was certainly much talked about at the time. In the perpetually cash-starved world of Hindi, there was a sudden influx of dollars. I have little doubt that, mixed in with the ideological stuff, there was a heavy dose of envy on the part of his critics. But it is to Akshaya Mukul’s credit that he does not shy of putting on record the fact that there was also a matter of financial impropriety in which Agyeya was implicated. But while the CCF may have become somewhat wary of entrusting Agyeya with funds, there is a particular American figure with whom Agyeya remained in touch – and sometimes sought favours from. By a bizarre coincidence, this is someone who actually got in touch with me directly after I got the Rhodes Scholarship. Buzzing with dreams of Oxford, I didn’t follow up on the invitation, and the name dropped out of my memory until I chanced upon it here. Apparently, this person, Chadbourne Gilpatric, had come – Mukul writes, “straight from the CIA” - and became a busy functionary of the Rockefeller Foundation, promoting “freedom” in South Asia.

Myth of the Unknowable

I’m afraid that, rather like the biography, even a review runs the risk of becoming over-long. Thus, I can do no more than mention the fact that Agyeya was one of the pioneers who sought to create an awareness about the natural environment, and the dangers it faced from the headless pursuit of *vikas*. Or to notice the ironic fact that the two iconic figures in the story of Hindi’s modernism, Agyeya and Nirmal Verma, also happen to be the two who were the most cosmopolitan, the most comfortable with “Western” modes of being. Indeed, I would go further to suggest that a significant measure of their charisma in Hindi’s provincial world derived from that global fluency, that whiff of foreign places. But then there is the further fact that both these persons also exhibited, in their late phase, a reaching out towards some “Hindu” cultural themes. Agyeya with his “Janaki yatras” in the period just before the Ayodhya movement took off, and Nirmal with his abstract affinities with anonymous others who, he believed, experienced a civilisational fulfilment that was denied to his alienated self.

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There are important differences, of course. Agyeya was the eldest son of the famous classicist and archaeologist, Hiranand Shastri, and had first-hand acquaintance, willy-nilly, with the classical past; Nirmal Verma came to consciousness with Partition refugees in Karol Bagh, and with refugees from communism in post-war Prague. But reviewers are prone to suggesting books that they hope other people will write – and I must desist. Akshaya Mukul has produced a splendid biography, one that will set the standard for serious academic work in Hindi for a long time to come. The polymathic achievement of Agyeya has found a biographer of comparable ambition. Still, I can’t help saying, finally, that over and above his many literary achievements, perhaps the most durable of Agyeya’s creations is the myth of “Agyeya” himself, the famous Unknowable. And in any examination of that cultural phenomenon, Akshaya Mukul’s biography of the *Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover* will have to be the first stop.

Alok Rai lives in Allahabad, and is resisting moving to Prayagraj.