

The Indian Autobiography: Origins and Development

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Abstract: *In India autobiographies are written and read for the sake of the inexhaustible interest in the information they provide about the author and his times. They prove to be a valuable corrective to history which is centred on what is common to a people and a period, to general factors and a general outcome, and ignores much of what is specific in the individual. The amazing bulk of miscellaneous information they provide is notable but as historical records they have to be studied and checked with the most cynical skepticism. They do lend a contribution to the knowledge of human nature, but their most valuable asset is often the involuntary self-revelation of the author. They acquire distinction not simply because of what they tell us, but also because of their interest in the multitude of human experience, of personality and of circumstances they make available. They are also read and respected for the men whose lives are described in them.*

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Autobiography is the gift of Western education to India. Christianity and Western scholarship had an undoubted effect on social reformation and modern Indian culture. But the creators of modern Indian culture were all born and brought up in an environment which was permeated with the spirit of nationalism. They could never be expected to face the fact of British rule in India without a violent predisposition against it. This dual attitude of Indians toward English culture on the one hand and to the British rule on the other is amply illustrated in Choudhuri's observation, 'What Indians in the mass want is nationalism, which does not, however, preclude a wholesale and uncritical acceptance, or to be more accurate, crude imitation, of Western habits of living and economic technique. This is not as inconsistent as it might sound, for the concept of nationalism has been working against the concept of synthesis on the conscious plane while the absorption of the Western trends has been taking place on the unconscious and the subconscious' (498 - 499). The greatest paradox in the Indian hostility towards the West, in Choudhuri's opinion, is that nearly all great Indians of the nineteenth century were neither able to gain any recognition from their countrymen nor exert any influence over them until they were recognized in the West. Vivekananda, Ram Mohun Roy, Tagore and Gandhi all came to be regarded as great contributors to Indian culture only after they had gained European recognition (500).

In India, literary expression in prose was an innovation, a product of British rule. Prose literature in India was unheard of until the end of the eighteenth century and within prose, all literary forms - the novel, essay, short story, history, biography and autobiography were taken over from English (Chaudhuri 497). Nirad C. Chaudhuri argues that even the routine of spiritual exercise which the reformed monotheistic Hinduism popularized was wholly copied from the ritual of Christianity. The monastic order founded by Swami Vivekananda had little in common with the pre-existing forms of Hindu monasticism and far more closely approximated to the Christian missionary societies and religious orders (496 - 497). Contact with Western scholarship affected the Indian mind in countless detail.

This conflict and cooperation, resistance and collaboration marked the personality of almost all who came in contact with Western sophistication. Many were moulded by that struggle and the ideals and objectives that governed them were inevitably linked with the destiny of their nation. All these experiences played a crucial role in their development and achievements and the autobiographies written during this period clearly divulge a fundamental confusion in the reconciling of private and public aspects of their lives. Nehru writes in his preface to the 1962 edition of his autobiography that though an autobiography is essentially a personal document, the private life merges with the larger movement and therefore represents, in a large measure, past history. His autobiographical purpose is stated in his preface where he writes,

'My attempt was to trace, as far as I could, my own mental development, and not to write a survey of recent Indian history. The fact that this account resembles superficially such a survey is apt to mislead the reader and lead him to attach a wider importance to it than it deserves.'

However he agrees that his work along with other personal narratives will help them to fill the gaps and to provide a background for the study of hard fact.

Many of the earliest autobiographies in India were written by the veterans of the freedom movement. They are therefore written with the plain intention of providing information about public affairs and 'the autobiographical element is only incidental'. It seems that the very seriousness of political and social events prompted them to write as a historian, not an autobiographer. They usually tell of events and occasions and the direction of events but the outcome of these has little bearing with the personality of the man engaged or with his private character, so that we may agree with Roy Pascal's comment on the autobiographies of statesmen in general that 'while his personality as a politician may be consistent, it may not have much to do with his private being' (120). Among the most outstanding autobiographies of this kind are Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of*

an Unknown Indian, Rajendra Prasad's *Atmakatha*, Morarji Desai's *The Story of My Life*, and M. R. Masani's *Bliss Was in That Dawn*, K. P. S. Menon's *Many Worlds* and Apa B. Pant's *A Moment in Time*.

It would be pertinent to start our discussion with the supreme example of autobiographical writing in India, *My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi. The common run of autobiographies is to take delight in taking the reader behind the scenes of the public personality and tell us about the author's private affairs and thoughts, their home and hobbies, and so forth. This has a particular charm for the reader as it gives information of an interesting and amusing kind. However, Gandhi is reticent about whole aspects of his life in the interest of his main task. It is not to be concluded that what he writes is all that could be written, but that it is all that is significant and relevant. His autobiography is exceptional in its homogeneity and purposefulness. In this regard Roy Pascal says,

'...it is rare that a statesman can write a true and satisfactory autobiography. He depends on luck as well as on himself, though of course the luck also depends on him to some extent. Gandhi's autobiography is one of the few to be really satisfactory. What is distinctive about his life is that he evolved his own moral idea and purpose, had the courage and sagacity to pursue and organise a practical policy towards its realisation, and yet remained devoted to his idea so that he never was submerged in practical politics. Thus, in his autobiography, his personality remains dominant throughout' (123).

His autobiography is proof of his deep personal conviction so that he could conclude his account of his political struggles in Africa and India with the noteworthy remark;

'To describe Truth, as it has appeared to me, and in the exact manner in which I have arrived at it, has been my ceaseless efforts. The exercise has given me ineffable mental peace because it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in Truth and Ahimsa to waverers' (462).

His book succeeds as autobiography because his political achievements had meaning for him only in relation to the spiritual source from which they sprang. His political action in South Africa and India is dominated by his spirituality of objective and becomes strikingly synonymous with his aim of national liberation. Even his vows of abstinence and continence are taken to enable his undivided attention available to the service of his people. His hunger strikes are made as penance to atone for the sins of his disciples for whom he felt morally responsible as teacher and guardian. His fasts become symbolic of his shrewd political dealings and many criticized it to be mere political tactics, yet his autobiography leaves us in no doubt that it was not a mere political manoeuvre but that it sprang from his profound spiritual and moral urge which lay at the root of all his major decisions. He claims that for him fasting was a penance for the sins of his opponents as well as his allies. The following lines stand as example for his all-embracing love:

'Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be. "Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world' (255).

An Autobiography, also known as *Toward Freedom*, is an autobiographical book written by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru while he was in prison. He wrote the book to explore how and why he had ended up taking the path of civil disobedience that in turn led to his imprisonment. Nehru starts his history with how his ancestors migrated from Kashmir, and then goes on to tell about his own life, with a particular emphasis on those parts of his life that had brought him to this point in time. His entire life history, from even before his father was born, seems to have led him naturally to where he was. As a child he seems quiet, observing, and thoughtful. As a (very tall) grown up he is still thoughtful. One sees his admiration for humble people, and his aversion to any form of violence very early in the book.

Nehru began his autobiography in a mood of self-questioning to occupy himself in the solitude of jail with a definite task and to review past events in India with which he had been connected to enable himself to think clearly about them. The history he records is marked with the distinctive flavour of his personality as he tries to portray a difficult and dangerous passage from a flawed and dying world to a hoped-for and cherished vision of justice and freedom. His rebellious temperament, his irrepressible spirit of adventure and his literary capabilities equipped him well to write his autobiography. But what is lacking is the close coordination of private and public aspects of self. The tendency to sentimentalize his private life is great but the result lacks the force and unity of good autobiography. On the whole his personality as a politician does not have much to do with his private being for we do not want to see the private individual behind the public façade, or the man behind the work but the man within the work. His autobiography is important as memoir, as historical material and though it has traces of vanity and self-importance, it does portray a picture of contemporary politics, of his adaptation to challenges and confusion, victories and celebration. Gandhi, then again, is so far from being a historian that readers are apt to feel that Gandhi has assumed the basic knowledge of the events and socio-political situation of India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on the reader's part.

In contradiction to the general spirit of the times, we have Nirad Choudhuri, a self-professed Anglophile, who dedicates his autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* to the memory of the British Empire in India. The book can be described as a monument to 'the creative clash of two civilisations' (Walsh 52). It records the early period of his life, of the conditions 'in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of this century' (Chaudhuri Preface). These 'conditions' include his life

from his birth in Kishorganj, a small town in present Bangladesh, his mental and intellectual development and his life and growth at Calcutta. His observations of Vanishing Landmarks carry a dual connotation—changing Indian situation and historical forces that made the British retreat a near probability. We see Nirad at his best in observing as well as observing - at - a - distance and this dual perspective makes his work a wonderful reading. His treatment of his childhood, his enchantment, disillusionment and gratitude to the colonial capital Calcutta is highly factual as well as artistic and also readable. Consciously or unconsciously he has left traces of all his erudition, his spirit and learning in this book. For him the test of a good autobiography lies in its testimony as history. He notes,

‘The story I want to tell is the story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment, in which the destiny of British rule in India became necessarily involved. My main intention is thus historical, and since I have written the account with the utmost honesty and accuracy of which I am capable, the intention in my mind has become mingled with the aspiration that the book may be regarded as a contribution to contemporary history’ (Preface).

Highly informative and reflective passages strewn throughout the book exhibit his critical acumen and insight as he strives to give a coherent picture of India’s past history. The book is claimed to be Chaudhuri’s verdict on British rule and also his virulent criticism of Indians being poor imitators of Western materialist culture. It delineates through concrete images the alien society’s superior material culture that transforms us into what Naipaul would have called ‘mimic men’ (qtd. in Swain 170).

Revolutionaries put to use their newly acquired English education to reach out to a wider public and make the tale of their suffering and struggle known to the world. Notable autobiographies by revolutionaries include Barindra Kumar Ghose’s *The Tale of My Exile* and Bejoy Kumar Sinha’s *In Andamans: The Indian Bastille*. These present fascinating insights into the actual ordeals and experiences of individuals all too often silenced by history and in so doing make an invaluable contribution to the historiography of colonial rule. Mention may be made of *Sinhalalokan*, a Hindi autobiography in three parts, written by Yashpal which gives an exhaustive history of the armed revolution in India along with revealing the character and personality of the author. The most moving autobiography in Telugu is by a little known revolutionary and member of the ‘Gadar Movement’, Darisi Chenchayya. His book *Nenu - NaaDesam (I and My Country)* shows how he became a member of the organisation when he was a student in California University; how he survived attempts of the British to torture him mentally and physically, how he crusaded against social evil and the influence of Sun - Yat - Sen whom he met in China on his life. *Twarikh - e - Ajib* by Jafar Thanasari is a narrative of the author’s life, description of his ideology and discussions about law and religion. This book also contains interesting information about the Andaman archipelago where he was deported and remained imprisoned for eighteen years.

An important autobiography which transcends national boundaries in scope and popularity is *Caste and Outcast* by Dhan Gopal Mukherji. Dhan Gopal Mukherji was in the transmission and interpretation of Indian traditions to Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century. His classic autobiography *Caste and Outcast* is an exercise in both cultural translation and cultural critique. In the first half of the book, Mukherji draws upon his early experiences as a Bengali Brahmin in India, hoping to convey to readers ‘an intimate impression of eastern life’; the second half describes Mukherji’s coming to America and his experiences as a student, worker, and activist in California. Mukherji’s text, written in an engaging personal style, is the kind of ethnological writing that seeks to render intelligible and familiar the unfamiliar and the exotic. Gordon H. Chang’s extensive Introduction places the story of *Caste and Outcast* in the overall perspective of Mukherji’s life, sketching the author’s personal history and his associations to such important personalities as Jawaharlal Nehru, M. N. Roy, Van Wyck Brooks, Roger Baldwin, and Will Durant while the Afterword, by Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta, studies the ways in which Mukherji stretches the limits of the autobiographical genre and provides a counter narrative to the dominant nationalist account of American society. [1]

Many imaginative writers have attempted autobiographies and as ‘successful autobiographies depend more on their literary quality than on the nature of the lives they are describing’ (Finney 12). Quite a few of them have found their way into using language for narrative ends. Rabindranath Tagore’s autobiography, *Jiban Smriti*, remains the best of its kind. Though written in the first person Tagore describes the growth of a young boy as a poet, his inner sensitivities, his gradual development to maturity as if it was someone else’s story. He is not much concerned about chronological correctness but gives emphasis to the sights and sounds that charmed him as a child, the flying birds which roused in him a craving for the far, and the sweet flowing rhymes of Jaidev. It is the narrative of a poet in making by the poet himself. Sometimes men of letters resort to writing autobiographies to call attention to their work. *Zyada Apni Kam Parayi* by Upendranath ‘Ashk’ throws light on the writer’s literary personality and his views on literature. Harivanshrai Bachchan’s four volumes of autobiography, however tell more about the personal life of the author than about the world outside. *Meri Filmi Atma Katha* by Balraj Sahani is a partial story where the author gives a vivid account of the hard struggle he had to put in to achieve success as an actor in Bollywood but ignores other aspects of his personality. Other notable literary autobiographies by Punjabi writers include *Rasidi Ticket (Revenue Stamp)* by Amrita Pritam, *Nange Pairon da Safar* by Dalip Kaur Tiwana, a novelist and *Mere PatteMeri Khedby* Mohinder Singh Joshi, a Punjabi short story writer and a retired judge. All these relate the struggle of their childhood and early years of youth but omit large areas of their lives. One of the most important autobiographies in Bengali is *Maharshi Devendranath Thakurer Atmajivani* by Devendranath Tagore, the founder of the Brahma Samaj in Bengal, widely acclaimed as a saintly religious personality for his integrity of character and deep religious realisation.

He wrote the story of his own remarkable life in simple and lyrical language, a tale of his inner growth.

On the whole Indian autobiographies have come a long way since its earliest publications where Indian leaders communicated their worldviews using this genre. These leaders doubtfully debated on the need for writing such works. Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his *Autobiography*: ‘... this account is wholly one - sided and, inevitably, egotistical; many important happenings have been completely ignored and many important persons, who shaped events, have hardly been mentioned. In a real survey of past events this would have been inexcusable, but a personal account can claim this indulgence’ (Preface). Gandhi justified writing an autobiography with these words: ‘But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments; it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind, if every page of it speaks only of my experiments. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader’ (Gandhi Preface).

In India autobiographies are written and read for the sake of the inexhaustible interest in the information they provide about the author and his times. They prove to be a valuable corrective to history which is centred on what is common to a people and a period, to general factors and a general outcome, and ignores much of what is specific in the individual. However information of this type, psychological or historical, does not suffice to promise autobiographical excellence. The amazing bulk of miscellaneous information they provide is notable but as historical records they have to be studied and checked with the most cynical scepticism. They do lend a contribution to the knowledge of human nature, but their most valuable asset is often the involuntary self - revelation of the author. They acquire distinction not simply because of what they tell us, but also because of their interest in the multitude of human experience, of personality and of circumstances they make available. They are also read and respected for the men whose lives are described in them. Today autobiographies occupy an important place in Indian Writing in English. With newer and more fertile expressions, these have entered into a period of complexity and obscurity that attempts to do justice to the conflicting currents of thought and feeling, of text and subtext, conscious intention and unconscious revelation and this in turn accounts for much of the fascination which the genre holds. The personality of the author has a perpetual sway on the style he adopts. Every new book demonstrates the abiding interest in this genre. *Wings of Fire*, *My Years with the IAF*, and *My Country My Life* show that autobiography has lost none of its appeal and continues to draw attention to itself and its subject. In fact, it has become a convincing and relevant element of modern Indian literature.

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