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HISTORY OF INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY TILL NEHRU

Dr. Satyabratt Singh

KIPM College of Engineering and Technology
Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh., India

Abstract

Present paper is focused on history of Indian autobiography which records the history of autobiography writing in India. It is very recent origin in this country because Indian tradition does not consider good of writing about self. The first great figure who emerges with distinct outline out of the distant past of India is Gautam Buddha, but even his personality does not come to us as vivid and fresh as that of Socrates in the dialogues of Plato. The greatest of Sanskrit dramatists, Kalidas, who delighted in creating immortal characters, did not think it worthwhile to tell his own story. Only the edicts of Asoka on stone pillars give us a vivid portrait of the great emperor. This paper discusses the systematic history of Indian autobiography.

Keywords: Indian Autobiography, Cultural History, Indian English Writing, Art.

Introduction

The Indian 'autobiography', therefore, is in the tradition of the West rather than in the tradition of Babur or Jahangir. The period of 1757 to 1857 witnessed a great surge in social, political, religious and intellectual fields. The process of change got an impetus with the introduction of English in India. The study of English language enabled the Indians to read English and European literatures. The autobiographical literature in English must have inspired some of them to write about their life-histories after the western fashion. As Bengal was the first province to come in contact with English study, most of the early Indian autobiographers are Bengalese. To Raja Ram Mohan Roy goes the credit of being the first Indian to write his autobiography in English in 1833. In September 1834, Kasiprasad Ghose, a poet in English, wrote a brief account of his life in a letter written to one Rev. James Long. The first to write his full autobiography in English was Lutfullah. He wrote the book in 1854 and got it published in 1857. The other autobiographical works of nineteenth century are Rakhala Dasa Halder's the English Diary of an Indian Student (1861-62) and the Diary of the Raja of Kol Rapoor written during his visit to Europe in 1870. There is an autobiography in Hindi written by Seetaram, a retired Indian army man. The autobiography was translated by Lt. Col. Norgate in English and published in 1873 under the title From Sepoy to Subedar. Lal Behari Day (1826-1894) wrote his autobiography Recollections of My School Day between 1873 and 1876. The advent of the twentieth century saw the dawn of an era which presented a fertile ground for autobiographical writings. The new political awakening and upheaval brought forth new political leaders on the horizon of India. The religious and social institutions got a jolt. The century saw an unprecedented spurt in autobiographical writings. The people from all walks of life came forward to share their experiences with others.

Origin of Autobiography in India

The writing of autobiography is, of recent origin in this country. The reason is obvious. Traditionally the Indian, till his contact with the West, was too much engrossed in the other world to think of this, too much preoccupied with the 'obstinate questionings of sense and other things' to look around him, and to record his reactions to what he saw, felt or heard. The life and story of the writers of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are enshrouded in a mist of myth and legend, so also the singers of Vedic hymns have left no details of their lives and times beyond their names associated with some of the verses of the sacred text.

The first great figure who emerges with distinct outline out of the distant past of India is Gautam Buddha, but even his personality does not come to us as vivid and fresh as that of Socrates in the dialogues of Plato. The greatest of Sanskrit dramatists, Kalidas, who delighted in creating immortal characters, did not think it worthwhile to tell his own story. Only the edicts of Asoka on stone pillars give us a vivid portrait of the great emperor. Asoka, however, raised these pillars not to serve as monuments to his own glory but to preach and to bring home to the masses the tenets of his great master. It is only incidentally that we know through them of the emperor also.

It is not stranger, therefore, that Indian travellers who made perilous journeys both by land and by sea, to remote countries beyond the Himalayas or across the ocean, to China, Persia, Asia Minor, or to Java, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Siam and Indo-China, have left no record of their travels as Megasthenes, Xuan Zang (Hsuan-tsang), or Faxian (Fa-hsien) did. No travel-accounts, diaries, or memoirs have come down to us from any of those who helped to spread the religion of the Buddha in Tibet, China or Japan, or helped to build the magnificent wonders of Java and Cambodia. Nor will we come to the Muslim invasions of India do we find any



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urge for self-description, or interest in the life around. The Memoirs of Babur, the Mogul Emperor (1483-1530), and of his great grandson, Jahangir (1569-1627), containing as they do a faithful self-portrayal, are the first of their kind in this country. The writing of memoirs, diaries or autobiographies, such as we know it now in this country, is essentially the result of English education.

The Indian ‘autobiography’, therefore, is in the tradition of the West rather than in the tradition of Babur or Jahangir. The great revolt of 1857 is an important watershed not only in the political but in the cultural history of India also. When the first products of higher education in India started coming out of the portals of the first Indian universities, the seeds of the ideas sown by Ram Mohan Roy began to sprout vigorously. The latter half of the Nineteenth century was a period of important movements of religious and political reform of which the establishment of Arya Samaj in 1857 and the Indian National Congress in 1885 were the most signal respective manifestations.

Politics, in fact, became the ‘overwhelming question’ of the age, though it is a mark of the increased Indian self-awareness that writing on historical and philosophical-religious subjects, and biography and autobiography also flourished. More specially, is it the outcome of a close study of the spat of memoirs, reminiscences, and autobiographies which followed the First World War and from such an interesting feature of post war literature in Europe and America. Once again, after the Second World War the stream of self-portrayal or self-justification has begun to flood on either side of the Atlantic. The development and progress in the genre of autobiography in English in India, is the direct outcome of the Western influence.

The Development of the English Writing in India

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The First English Autobiography

The first to write his full autobiography in English was Lutfullah. He wrote the book in 1854 and got it published in 1857. He was born in a Muslim family at Dharnagar in Central India in 1802. English language and the English way of life impressed him a lot. He began to learn English earnestly and though he did not receive any formal education in the language, he became somewhat proficient in it. Later he began to teach Persian and Hindustani to the English Military officers. He got a chance to go with the British Army to Sindh. He has given a detailed account of the annexation of Sindh by the British. In 1844, he went to England. Lutfullah did not mention the motive of writing his autobiography. It appears he wrote it to share his experiences with the English-speaking people. He presents a fairly readable picture of the Indian Society of the middle of the nineteenth century. He is critical of the evil customs prevalent in the Indian Society. He attacks the system of ‘Sati’ among the Hindus and circumcision among the Muslims. From the autobiography Lutfullah emerges to be a very upright man with straight-forward opinions.

The Development of Art of Autobiography

The other autobiographical works of nineteenth century are Rakhala Dasa of nineteenth century are Rakhala Dasa Halder’s the English Diary of an Indian Student (1861-62) and the Diary of the Raja of Kol Rapoor written during his visit to Europe in 1870. There is an autobiography in Hindi written by Seetaram, a retired Indian army man. The autobiography was translated by Lt. Col. Norgate in English and published in 1873 under the title From Sepoy to Subedar. Seetaram was a sepoy in the English army and took



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part in the battle against Afghanistan and the Punjab and also supported the British forces loyally during the Mutiny of 1857. He wrote his autobiography on the request of his British officers. He gives a fascinating account of his rise from sepoy to a subedar. He also tells about the reputation he enjoyed during his service in the British Army. Lal Behari Day (1826-1894) wrote his autobiography *Recollections of My School Day* between 1873 and 1876. The recollections appeared in regular instalments in the *Bengal Magazine*, of which he was an editor. His motive is to tell the story of his education and the book covers his school days. He tries to prove through the book that the English system of education is superior to the Indian system of education. In his autobiography he has also given the vivid description of Calcutta of those days. He was fascinated by the beauty of Calcutta which was a new world for him. Everything of the city roused his curiosity. He had described the various scenes with poetic beauty.

Before the close of the nineteenth century two more autobiographies appeared: one was that of Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya's *Reminiscences of German University Life* and the other was Maharishi Chvendranath's autobiography in Bengali which was later translated into English by his son Satyendranth and daughter-in-law Indra Devi in 1909. The advent of the twentieth century saw the dawn of an era which presented a fertile ground for autobiographical writings. The new political awakening and upheaval brought forth new political leaders on the horizon of India. The religious and social institutions got a jolt. The century saw an unprecedented spurt in autobiographical writings. The people from all walks of life came forward to share their experiences with others.

In 1905 A. Balakrishnan Mudaliar wrote *The Reminiscences of a Retired Hindu Official*. However, the book is more on Hindu philosophy than on the experiences of his life. Lala Lajpat Rai is the first politician of twentieth century to write about himself. It was written in three fragments, *The Story of My Deportation* (1908), *The Story of My Life* (1914 in Urdu) and *Indian Revolutionaries in the United States and Japan* (1919). The autobiographical pieces reveal the personality of stalwart leader who lived and died for the freedom of the country. A contemporary of Lala Lajpat Rai, Shyam Sunder Chakroverty, wrote his prison experiences during his deportation in 1907 in his autobiographical piece *Through Solitude and Sorrows* (1910).

A Brahma Samaj missionary Banga Chandra Roy wrote *The Story of My Life* and got it published in 1913. However, the most important piece of autobiographical work during the time was Rabindranath's *Reminiscences*, which was published in English translation in 1917. He was the first notable poet and writer to write about his creative experiences. The book stirred the imagination of many Indians. It was written and published by Tagore in his fiftieth year, shortly before he started on a trip to Europe and America in 1912 for his falling health. We are taken into his very bosom and are permitted to watch the processes of the development of his mental spiritual natures, and thus acquire such understanding and ability to appreciate his writings. This book was originally published in Bengali in 1912. Two other Bengalese, Rash Behari Day and Bipin Krishna Bose, wrote their autobiographies – *My Days with Uncle Sam* and *Stray Thoughts on Some Incidents in My Life* respectively. The books were published in 1919. Rash Behari Day tells his adventure during the voyage to America with only a few rupees in his pocket while Bipin Krishna tries to justify his pro-British activities. A. Appasamy, a Tamilian gives the story of his conversions to Christianity in *My Conversion* (1919) and *Fifty Years Pilgrimage of a Convert* (1921).

The Autobiography of an Indian Princess (1921) was the first to be written by an Indian woman in English in the twentieth century. Sunity Devec was the daughter of an eminent Brahm Samaj leader Keshav Chandra Sen. Her marriage to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar raised a storm of protest and resulted in the division of the Samaj. In the first half of the autobiography, she has defended the action of her father and in the later half (of the autobiography) she has presented herself as a dutiful wife and loving mother.

An associate of Mahatma Gandhi and 'Khilafat Movement' leader Maulana Mohammad Ali wrote a short sketch of his life, *My Life: A Fragment*. Maulana was an intensely religious man and writes about his religious experiences in an interesting style. There is a description of jail life by another Indian exiled leader Brindra Kumar Ghose. He was deported to the Andaman's islands in 1909 and he wrote *The Tale of My Exile* (1922). Dan Gopal Mukerji's *Caste and Outcaste* (1923) was written with motive to defend the customs and rituals of the Hindus. The autobiography is meant to counter the propaganda of the Westerners against Hinduism. During the same period the first volume of Swami Ramdas' autobiography *In Quest of God* appeared. The second volume *In the Vision of God* appeared in 1935. The books narrate Ramdas' spiritual experiences and his search for the realisation of God. The next to follow are the two important autobiographies which stirred the imagination of many future autobiographers.

First to appear was *A Nation in Making* (1925) of Surendranath Banerjee and the second was Mahatma Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Banerjee was an eminent Congress leader. Once considered to be the lion of Bengal. His autobiography attracted no notice. Due to his political outlook Sir Surendranath had fallen from grace. He accepted the office of Ministry for Local Self Government. The autobiography has been written in defence of his action. A masterpiece of English prose, his



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autobiography is a land mark in the history of autobiographical writings in India. Mahatma Gandhi had published his autobiography The Story of My Experiments with Truth, in 1927-29. This is originally written in Gujarati had been published earlier. The book is unique in its subject matter. It presents a record of his spiritual quest. In his classic autobiography he recounts the story of his life and how he developed his concept of active nonviolent resistance, which propelled the Indian struggle for independence and countless other nonviolent struggles of the twentieth century.

The book is divided into many small chapters. It is clearly intended for a large audience and the chapters are largely able to stand on their own and simply written. The various episodes relating to his numerous experiments with truth show Gandhi's intense love for truthful life. Gandhi addresses issues such as food habits, comparative religion, political involvement, justice and the law, and chastity. The book is unmatched in its character and execution in the Indo-Anglian autobiographical writings. Next to come is Puran Singh's On Paths of Life (written in 1927 and published in 1956).

He had beautifully and artistically described his childhood. In fact, his aim in the autobiography is to relieve back in the infancy, in dreams of youth and forget the calculations and plans of an experienced and tried intellect. Bipin Chandra Pal, the great freedom fighter, was writing his memories of My Life and Times in 1932 when he died. The autobiography covers only the first forty-two years of his long life. He endeavours to present his eventful political career in the book.

Another autobiography which was published in 1932 was that of Purohit Swami, a monk, who spent his life in the realization of God. In his book, An Indian Monk: His Life and Adventures, he has related his varied spiritual experiences in a superb manner. Another important autobiography published in 1932 was that of P.C. Ray's Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist. A noted scientist, a writer, a freedom fighter and politician, Ray wrote his autobiography in two volumes and dedicated it to the youth of India. Part first contains autobiographical material while part second relates to educational, industrial, economic and social problems confronting India of the time. India Calling (1935) is an interesting life-story of a Parsee woman of India, Cornelia Sorabji, who had to wage a great struggle to become a lawyer. In order to fight for justice for the weaker sex, she decided to be a lawyer. She had to face many obstacles, as women, in those days were not encouraged to study law. She recalls how she was able to overcome these obstacles one by one and ultimately succeeded in her ambition.

The book is full of witty and humorous anecdotes. Jawaharlal Nehru's an Autobiography is another milestone in the history of Indian English autobiographies. In India, particularly, the one book which dissolved the shyness of a number of prominent Indians was Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography, first published in 1936. Nehru wrote his autobiography in the eight months from June 1934 to February the following year. He was 45, at the height of his powers, and his years as India's first prime minister were still ahead to him. His motive is to assess the political and other events in which he was intimately involved.

The book was written entirely in prison. Nehru's attempt was to trace his own mental development and not to write a survey of Indian history. The book is an authentic document on the political philosophy of Nehru. It also has historical validity as many important events of freedom movement have been faithfully discussed in detail. The book, in fact, is a statement on the development of Nehru's political personality.

Conclusion

This is a brief history of autobiographical writings in India till Nehru. The phenomenal growth of this art has made it a very significant part of English literature in India. The autobiographies like Surendranath Banerjee, Jawaharlal Nehru, P.C. Ray, A. S. Iyengar write with a rare historic sense and besides giving their life-histories they have given in detail the historical events which shaped and moulded their personalities. M.K. Gandhi's My Experiments with Truth is a rare piece of subjective literature. It unfolds the various events in Gandhi's life which becomes decisive factors in his quest for truth. Autobiographers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sitanath and D.K. Karve are very much concerned with the social evils prevalent in the Indian Society and one of their motives of writing their autobiographies and their passion for social reforms. The autobiographies of Kasiprasad Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya trace the development of the poetic genius of their authors.

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