

HALF A STORY (ARDHAKATHANAK)

Banarasi

Reading

Ardhakathanak: A Half Story, translated by Rohini Chowdhury, 2010

Cultural significance

The cultural significance of *Half a Story* is manifold. As the earliest autobiography written in an Indian language, and by someone outside the Mughal court, it is an invaluable source of information about many aspects of life in the seventeenth century. Unlike the earlier Mughal texts (Babur's autobiography and Akbar's biography), which documented the life of the imperial court at Delhi and Agra, the life-story of this Jain merchant presents vivid pictures of the life of ordinary people. Those Mughal predecessors probably influenced Banarasi's choice of the life-story, but rather than the grand palaces and vast battlefields, his settings are bazaars, crooked streets, cramped houses and dusty shops. This perspective from the 'street' rather than the court is particularly illuminating when the two realms interact. Banarasi gives us details of Mughal officials harassing merchants and seizing their assets. Then there is the panoramic portrait that the poet paints of a town in panic when it learns that Akbar has died. The text is also useful for the economic historian because it supplies details on the alliances, business practices and trade routes for jewellery in 17th-century Mughal India. An even richer storehouse awaits the student of religion who reads this text. The author documents rituals and ceremonies of his specific Jain community and then provides us with a critical analysis of competing theological schools of thought. And, finally, as a bridge between the epic poetry of Tulsi Das (author of the Hindi *Ramayana*) and later eighteenth-century literature, it contains evidence for constructing a more coherent literary history of north India. Why then has the text been overlooked until recently by most scholars? One suggestion is that it encourages a heterodox view of Jainism. Another is that it includes scurrilous and sexualised imagery. Or perhaps its simple verse form convinced critics that it was not worthy of study. 'Written in a great hurry,' was the conclusion of one respected scholar. 'Juvenile account of a dissolute youth moving into adulthood,' is another common evaluation. Now, however, we have several reappraisals and a new translation of this remarkable text, which belongs in the category of 'classics of Indian literature.'

Overview

Half a Story (Ardhakathanak) by Banarasi (or Banarasidas, 1585-1643 CE) is the first extant autobiography in an Indian language (Babur's earlier *Baburnama* was in Chagatai, a Turkish language). Whether or not the author had access to the Persian autobiographies of the Mughal court is unknown, but he was clearly a remarkable man. Unsurprisingly, as a poet and scholar, he wrote his life-story in verse. As a Jain merchant and a philosophical man, he takes account of his failings and ascribes much to karma, the law of cause and effect. Although he writes of himself in the third person, his 'Half a Story' is intensely autobiographical in that it attempts to understand the human condition through his own personal experiences. His skilful interweaving of the domestic sphere with the social, commercial, religious and political worlds of his time reveals his hard-earned views on greed, death, passion, ambition and the pursuit of truth. When he sat down to write, he was 55 years old, half the life-span of 110 recognised in Jain tradition. He died two years later, so his 'half a life' became his whole life. It is not a remarkable or an exemplary life, but it is narrated with humour, depth and empathy.

Story

The story begins with the poet advancing his purpose: 'He who bears the name of the Holy City of Banaras [Varanasi], thought to himself "let me make my story known to all. All that I have heard and seen with my own eyes. Let me tell of those matters in my own words. Let me tell of my past faults and virtues, keeping in mind the limits of custom and decorum."' Then he takes us to a small village,

not far from Banaras, where his father was born in 1551. We follow his life as a businessman in Agra and Jaunpur, where the author is born in 1586. After this quick canter through family history, we slow down and see the young Banarasi taking up his father's business and trailing behind him on journeys to major cities in north India, where other Jain merchants had enclaves. The family fortunes begin to shift downward when his father's employer, a rich Jain merchant from Bengal, dies suddenly. The poet describes this tragedy for his family with characteristic crispness: 'Rai Dhana gave up his life instantly, before a single word could escape his mouth. His body fell like a crumbling wall and his soul left for another abode.'

The poet is also candid in narrating his repeated business failures, which left him penniless for long stretches of time. He visits a prostitute at a young age, gets disillusioned about love, but later marries three times and has nine children, who suffer from his impecuniousness. In one moving scene, his wife weeps as she hands over the few rupees she has saved up just so that her husband can restart his business.

In chronicling his years, the author presents a novelistic portrait of the times, commenting on minor characters, mentioning anecdotes and including some well-known historical events. The most dramatic of the latter is the death of Emperor Akbar in 1605, which came as such a shock to Banarasi that he fell down some stone steps and cut his forehead. Later, he writes with ill-disguised disdain about the local Mughal potentates who mistreated his Jain community. He describes how in 1597 and again in 1617, the governor of Jaunpur raided the houses of Jain merchants, as part of a supposed criminal investigation, when all they wanted was to steal money from rich Jains. On both these occasions, Banarasi flees the town and hides elsewhere.

Alternating with these periods of depression are those in which he plays the lover-boy about town. Everything is noted with the precision of a diarist, with dates and places, names and details, including the religion and caste of everyone mentioned. We feel he is totting up his sums, on a balance sheet, and this impression is confirmed when he frequently invokes the workings of karma to explain his ups and downs. Finally, especially toward the end, the story broods on deep philosophical questions regarding existence, death and destiny.

Themes

Self-reflection It might appear obvious that any autobiography would focus on the nature and benefits of self-awareness, but not all first-person life histories do. Many are written with a journalistic objectivity that shies away from delving into the very process of self-examination. And this is what makes *Half a Story* so unique, that it makes self-reflection such a prominent theme. From an early age, Banarasi was a thinking person who questioned and challenged convention. This rigorous self-debate is expressed primarily through his struggles with finding a religious outlook that makes sense to him. His family background taught him to follow Jainism in a strict manner; at the time, the religious practices of a Jain merchant would not differ much from that of a Hindu merchant. He would go to temples and shrines, very often to Hindu temples and shrines, for worship. He would hire a Brahmin to officiate at important life-cycle rituals such as birth, marriage and death. Early on in his life, however, Banarasi becomes aware of a reform movement within Jainism. The Adyatma movement, much like the contemporaneous *nirguna* ('formless') bhakti movement or the Sufi movement in Islam, eschewed outward displays of worship in favour of inward contemplation. This appeals to the young, free-thinking man, who does not hesitate to criticise his parents' pilgrimage to Hindu/Jain temples, including worshipping at a shrine of a *sati* (a widow who burned on her husband's funeral pyre). And, yet, his intense self-reflections yield no new understanding. Contemplation itself becomes a kind of ritual. Banarasi returns briefly to conventional religious practice, but by the end of the text he has shifted back again to the stoicism of the philosopher. A single verse puts this succinctly: 'A grandmother's death, a daughter's birth, the coming of a bride: all three events, on a single day, occurred in the same place. Seeing the world's masquerade yields grief and regret; the wise become detached, fools know not the cause.'

Mundane life While self-examination is clearly the fundamental purpose of Banarasi's autobiography, he also wishes to present the reality of the external world. Indeed, he is only too aware that the two realms interact with each other. Early on in the text, he addresses his readers and says, 'I will tell my tale in the common speech of Madhyadesh [middle or common country]. I will reveal that which is hidden.' Then, alternating with passages that delve deep into philosophy, he presents vivid picture of mundane life, especially among his Jain community in the towns of north India in the 17th century. We hear about sexual misbehaviour, petty-minded greed, bawdy jokes and even a

farting camel in the streets. The most famous example of his documentation of everyday life is the day that Akbar died, in 1605. Here the poet adopts a two-level narrative strategy to present what was the most important political event in his lifetime. First, he describes how he himself reacted to the news of the great emperor's demise. Banarasi faints with shock, cuts his head and is tended to by his mother. The household is filled with wailing, but his mother calms everyone down and puts her injured son to bed. Then Banarasi shifts focus to the town outside the house and describes the wider impact of the sudden news that the man who had ruled for nearly 50 years, and was seen as a god, is no longer there to maintain social cohesion. There is an atmosphere of panic. Fearful that looting will take place, rich merchants begin to dress up as paupers and shopkeepers close shops, leaving the bustling marketplace a graveyard. Men skulk about in the shadows, hiding their ledgers under their cloaks. There are widespread rumours about a bloody succession to the throne, with pretenders, rivals and charlatans all ready to cause chaos. Then, in the poet's typical pared down style of writing, he puts the panic to rest with one sentence: 'A letter came from Agra saying all was well.' In the space of two pages, Banarasi has shown us the mundane reality of life and how it intersects with a history of the Mughal emperors.

Fate The other theme running through the text is the power of fate, or karma. Banarasi was a merchant, raised in a family of merchants, within a caste of merchants, and it is often suggested that his focus on karma, or the calculation of life's deeds and misdeeds, can be explained as a moral version of a businessman's financial reckoning. Whatever the truth of that claim, it is undeniable that Banarasi's outlook on life is heavily fatalistic. On another occasion, a disaster strikes Jaunpur, where Banarasi lives, but he is not presented as an innocent victim: 'Banarasidas went to escape the plague. He rented a house close to that of another merchant. He lived alone in that house, a secret matter that is not to be told: he was guilty of an indiscretion there, which was the result of his past deeds.' Again, after he has suffered from poverty for several months, the poet refuses to blame others or circumstances beyond his control. 'No man can change, unless his conditions change,' he writes. 'Good karma creates, and bad karma destroys.' In his attempt to understand the vicissitudes of human life, he has relied upon and then rejected ritual and supernatural powers. And he is too wise to shift the responsibility for his misfortunes onto the shoulders of governors and emperors. In the end, he is too honest to do anything else but accept the law of karma, which, unlike the western notion of fate or destiny, holds the individual responsible for his plight.

Characters

Kharagsen Kharagsen was Banarasi's father

Bhanachand Bhanachand was a Jain ascetic, who became Banarasi's guru

Chandrabhan Chandrabhan was one of Banarasi's close childhood friends, who remained loyal to him throughout his life.

Devdutt Devdutt was a Hindu scholar (pundit), who was Banarasi's teacher

Dharamdas Dharamdas was Banarasi's business partner in Agra

Nuram Khan Nuram Khan was the governor of Jaunpur, whom Banarasi blamed for many of his family's troubles

Potdar Potdar was a local revenue collector, who caused distress to Banarasi and his relatives

Banarasi (Contemplative)

Character As with all autobiographies, it is difficult to disentangle the self-presentation of Banarasi (or Banarasidas) from the historical personage. In the case of *Half a Story*, however, this is somewhat easier in that the character is described in the third person, which lends at least the impression of objectivity to the portrait. And it is certainly not a flattering self-portrait. Banarasi is shown to fail miserably in business, causing hardship to his wives and children (all nine of them). He is also fickle in his religious beliefs, first practicing fastidiously and then rejecting ritual altogether. But these failings can be forgiven because he is candid and sincere in trying to make sense of his life, as a philosophical exercise in his examination of life in general. He was certainly a reflective man, who read deeply, especially in Jain theology but also in Muslim philosophy and Sufi texts. In this respect, he was a free-thinker who prided himself on his freedom to challenge orthodoxy and adopt whatever creed his study of life led him to accept as moral. It is tempting to think that he might have been encouraged in his liberal roaming of literature and religion by the example of Akbar at the Mughal

court. Banarasi lived through the later years of the Great Emperor's rule, which promoted new kinds of thinking in religion and the arts. Banarasi also possessed an irrepressible energy, which carried him through his darkest hours. Even when he was without money, he used to host lively evenings with his friends, singing songs and making light-hearted conversation. His joyful effervescent character surfaced when he was alone, as he noted: 'I often spring into a dance when all by myself.' Although clearly a *bon vivant*, he was also deeply contemplative and devoted the last part of his life to promoting the Adyatma movement in Jainism, which disdained outward forms of worship and favoured self-reflection. A poet and a businessman, he was acutely aware of both the value and the difficulty of contemplation. In this respect, the character of Banarasi invites comparisons with other famous confessional autobiographical portraits by religious figures, such as Gandhi and Augustine.

Activities As a boy, Banarasi received a traditional Jain merchant's education, especially in calculations and weighing metals. As a young man, he spent time in his jewellery business, mostly travelling to towns and meeting partners to set up networks of trade. During his young adult years, when he often had little or no money, he enjoyed late nights singing and eating with friends. As he got older, however, he spent more and more time reading about Jain theology and writing scholarly treatises on the subject.

Illustrative moments

Introspective The dominant aspect of Banarasi's character is his introspection. It is this tendency toward inward self-examination that prompts him, in the first place, to write his autobiography. And one of the clearest examples of his introspection comes toward the end of his narrative poem, when he says, 'A man's life has much that is subtly secret and profoundly beyond grasp. Even within the tiny span of a day he passes through myriad states of consciousness. The Omniscient Tirthankara [Jain saint], perhaps, sees it all, but even he cannot report it in its fullness.' This is his own reflection on his attempt to see beneath the surface of his life. Compare its appreciation of the mystery of life's meaning with the confident statement of his goal at the beginning of the text: 'I will reveal what is hidden and describe my past life and my character.' He certainly does describe his life, in vivid detail, and he sums up his own character in his usual clipped style:

'He [Banarasi] is of steady and resolute mind, and does not vacillate. He gives good and friendly counsel to all. His heart is virtuous, without the smallest trace of depravity or wickedness. His heart is pure; equilibrium and balance are important to him. These are his various virtues, both small and great; None of them is outstanding, and none without its faults.

Now his faults will also be told. He has little anger, pride or artifice in him, but his greed for wealth is great. He lacks restraint by nature—the result of his past deeds. He does not practise any rites or rituals, nor does he practise self-restraint. He does not give alms, nor does he perform puja.'

Coming at the end of the poem, this self-assessment is delivered like the results of an exam. He hasn't flunked, but he hasn't passed with flying colours, either. If there is any success to be claimed, it is in the fact that he has honestly attempted to understand himself.

Rebel Another influential trait is his free-thinking spirit, which led him through a series of tests of faith. Born a Jain, he remained a Jain, but only after first rejecting the orthodox, then embracing it and finally finding some reconciliation with convention at the end. We have illustrations of Banarasi's rebellion from the beginning of his life story, even when he comments on his own birth. His parents take him (as a new-born) to a Jain shrine, where the priest gives him a name and an astrological horoscope. When describing the ceremony in retrospect, Banarasi shows his disdain for traditional religion. With a curled lip, as it were, he says, 'Then that priest held his breath, with sham absorption and false silence, and when some minutes had passed offered his inspired words.' The priest explains that he had gone into a trance in order to communicate with a spirit, who could foretell the boy's future. This bogus claim to knowledge, and especially to knowledge that any parent would desire (to know his/her child's future), offends Banarasi's rational mind. But, again, because he wants to be candid, later on he admits that his rejection of ritual caused him great distress: 'There came a change in Banarasi's condition,' he writes. 'In his heart he would scorn the images of the Jain saints, and with his mouth would utter words that should not be said...He became isolated from others, and remained drunk on falsehood. The outward forms of worship, the rites of Jainism, he stopped observing them all. There was no limit to his disillusionment with ritual. This state of mind made Banarasi feel very alone.' The lonely rebel is a familiar character type in western novels and films,

from Jack Kerouac to James Dean, but it also describes this Jain merchant in 17th-century Mughal India.

Self-promotion Most critics have described Banarasi as self-effacing and modest, and for most of the story he is presented as acting without much of an ego. His contemplative nature, it seems, has cancelled out any such inflated self-image. But self-reflection does not necessarily rule out self-promotion, and there are sly hints in the text that he held himself in high regard. The most notable of these is his description of his own birth, which a first glance reads like a fairly standard account of the date and astrological signs:

In the year 1643, in the pleasant bright half of the month of Magh,
On the eleventh day, a Saturday, under the reigning asterism of Rohini and the moon of Vrsa,
In Kharagsen's house a son was born.

Now, what is unusual here is that Banarasi uses three full lines of astrological information to build up to the birth, whereas other births are quickly given in one line or half a line. He also uses Sanskrit words rather than the common Hindi (more accurately, Braj dialect) words in which he writes the rest of the poem and which he proudly says he will use in order to communicate with 'ordinary' people. As other scholars have pointed out, the whole verse is carefully orchestrated to lead to the crescendo in the final word: *avatara* ('was born'). It can hardly be coincidental, also, that the verse announcing his birth is number 84, an auspicious number for Hindus.

Sensitive A third prominent element of Banarasi's character is his sensitivity. Although a businessman by trade, he was in reality a poet, a philosopher and a theologian. He appears, in his self-portrait, to regard life as a spinning carousel of fortune and misfortune, determined by karma and for which the wise man should feel no remorse. His preferred state of detachment is clearly expressed in these lines: 'Allow me to pause a little here and meditate on life's vicissitudes; wise is the man who strives for equanimity, remaining equally unmoved by either joy or sorrow.' However, there are also key moments when Banarasi the man emerges and his feelings are displayed. The best-known example is his emotional reaction to the death of Emperor Akbar, in 1605, when he fell and injured himself. A less-well known but more revealing illustration occurs when his third son died.

In Banarasi's house,
Death came to the third son,
Banarasi mourned his son deeply.
He was distracted with grief.
In this world, attachment and affection have great power.
They reduce the wise and the foolish to the same level.
Even after two years had passed in this manner,
Banarasi received no respite from the grief he felt for his son.

His grief is all the more moving because we know that he is not easily moved to sorrow. His philosophical introspection has taught him to disregard the gyrating wheel of fortune and focus on deeper truths. But with the death of a son (and especially a son, in early modern India), all that conceptual scaffolding collapses and reveals that Banarasi is a father who loves his child.