

INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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PARTS

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PART I: Early post classical

Overview

Biography and autobiography, in their conventional forms, did not appear in Indian literature until Indo-Persian influences (1000 CE onward) and not in their modern forms until the late eighteenth century. However, pre-modern Indian literature does include a type of life-narrative known in Sanskrit as *carita* ('history') and in Tamil as *caritiram*. This is 'history' as told through the figure of a king, god or saint, which tends toward hagiography. Early examples would include the *Buddha-carita* by Asvaghosa (100-200 CE), versions of the Rama story (often titled *Rama-carita*), *Padma-carita* (10th c. CE) and *Dasakumara-carita* (discussed under 'fiction'). There is one extraordinary exception to absence of life-writing in Indian before 1000 CE, and that is the *Harshacarita*.

Harshacarita

Author The *Harshacarita* was written by a well-known poet named Bana (7th c. CE.), famous for *Kadambari*, an example of the sub-genre of poetic prose in Sanskrit. What we know of Bana's life is taken from introductory verses to *Kadambari* and the initial sections of *Harshacarita*. This is the first special feature of the latter text: it is not only the first biography but also the first (fragmentary) autobiography in Indian literature.

Autobiography Bana describes his early childhood in a well-to-do Brahmin family, when he lost first his mother and then his father at age 14. During his grief, he was consoled by friends and then took to the itinerant life, visiting various courts and cities in north India. During these years of wandering, he befriended people from all walks of life, including a snake doctor, a gambler, a goldsmith and a musician. He was received at the court of Harsha, whom he offended and was expelled. He returned to his village and took a peaceful life but was recalled to court and was restored to favour.

Literary skills From these varied experiences, Bana seems to have developed his unparalleled ability to create characters from princes to prostitutes. The mixture of personal loss and success seems to have nurtured empathy for others. These skills, plus his acute observation of place, make his writing resemble modern writers more than those of his own time.

Biography The *Harshacarita* tells the story of king Harsha, who at first disliked the poet but later admitted him to his inner circle. Bana begins his tale with the king's rise to power and recounts his many territorial conquests, especially his resolve to achieve 'world-wide' conquest. From the biography, we learn that Harsha issued a decree that all kings must either submit to his rule or fight him.

Hagiography There is evidently a degree of exaggeration in Bana's description of his royal patron, although the story does follow the main events of Harsha's rule. Historians, understandably, treat Bana's 'history' with some scepticism and also with a good deal of frustration because it ends prematurely.

Document Even if the *Harshacarita* glorifies the king's political and military exploits, it is regarded as a reasonably accurate document of various social, administrative and military practices. For example, Bana includes more than one description of *sati*, or self-immolation of a widow. He also speaks in some detail of the various

castes and sub-castes of the time. A fascinating topic is the tributary (*samanta*) system of north Indian kingdoms in the post-Gupta era, which Bana explains. Similarly, there are detailed portraits of armies and soldiering (as shown in textual sample below).

Controversy As a measure of its valuable insight into Indian culture more than a thousand year ago, the *Harshacarita* has been brought into the contemporary controversy about Aryans and Dravidians. Bana uses the term *anarya* (non-Arya) for a Brahman who assassinated his leader, a minor linguistic fact that scholars have seized upon to demonstrate that society was divided into Brahmans and non-Brahmans.

Discussion

At the centre of scholarship concerning the *Harshacarita* is the debate over the extent to which literature can be regarded as historical document. *Carita* is translated as ‘history,’ but this is usually qualified by adding ‘traditional history’ or ‘historical narrative.’ A similar debate thrives in contemporary Western culture about the category ‘historical fiction.’ This should make us curious about the development of our own understanding of both ‘history’ and ‘fiction.’

Reading

E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas (trans.), *The Harsha-Carita of Banabhatta* (1897, also online at archive.org and www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/literature).

Text

From *Harshacarita* trans. by A.L. Basham

Then it was time to go. The drums rattled, the kettledrums beat joyfully, the trumpets blared, the horns blew, the conches sounded. By degrees the hubbub of the camp grew louder. Officers busily roused the King’s courtiers. The sky shook with the din of fast-hammering mallets and drumsticks. The general assembled the ranks of the subordinate officers. The darkness of the night was broken by the glare of a thousand torches which the people lighted. Loves were aroused by the tramping feet of the women who kept watch. The harsh shouts of the elephant-marshals dispelled the slumber of their drowsy riders as awakened elephants left their stables. Squadrons of horses woke from sleep and shook their manes. The camp resounded loudly as spades dug up the tent-pegs, and the tethering chains of elephants clinked as their stakes were pulled up...

Part II: Late Postclassical

Overview

The key development in life-writing during this period was the popularity of saints' biographies, a phenomenon that was remarkably consistent across Hindu, Jain and Muslim traditions. From the hagiographical tendency already present in Indian literature in the stories of the gods (such as Rama and Krishna), it was a short step to the hagiography of the humans who were themselves revered as gods. These saints (*sant* in Hindi; *tonṭar*, or 'servant', in Tamil) had become near-divine through their intense devotion to a god, expressed through devotional songs. The Sufi tradition within Indo-Persian writing regarded their saints without the full supernatural trappings of Hinduism, but they too saw these god-men as intermediaries between humans and the divine. People, it seemed, had an insatiable need to learn from these exemplary lives, and biography became a literary mechanism for morality.

Tamil

Periyapurānam This development is clearly illustrated by *Periyapurānam*, a Tamil text of the 12th c. CE. Even its title is instructive: 'The Great Purānam' borrows the genre title of *purāna* ('myth') for a compilation of biographies of poet-saints who were famous in Tamil literary tradition. The *Periyapurānam* tells the life-stories of 63 saints in more than 4,000 stanzas. It begins with a mythic story on Mt Kailasa, heavenly abode of Siva, and slowly descends to the Chola kingdom, where the text was composed by Cekkilar. This court poet, in true Indian storytelling fashion, uses the saints' lives to bring in a host of oral tales and legends.

Kannappār One of the most famous saints in the *Periyapurānam* is Kannappār, a rustic hunter who worshipped Siva in unorthodox ways. He sprinkled liquor over a crude image of the god, tossed on pieces of fresh red meat and then jumped around in a frenzied dance. One day, however, a Brahmin saw what he was doing and was outraged. The next day the Brahmin watched again. The hunter knelt down before the image and noticed that one of the Lord's eyes was bleeding. He immediately sharpened one of his arrows, cut out one of his own eyes and inserted it into Siva's empty socket. Then he saw that Siva's other eye was also oozing blood and began to cut out his other eye but stopped when he realised there was a problem. How would he be able to put his second eye into the empty socket in the image when he couldn't see? He lifted his foot and planted a toe in the empty socket, to know where it was, and began to carve out his second eye. Because touching a god with one's foot is an insult and defilement the Brahmin called out in protest. Siva, however, so admired the heart-felt devotion of the hunter that he restored both his eyes.

Kannada

Jain biographies Kannada writers of the period composed similar biographies, but of Jain saints (*tirthankaras*, 'the ford crossers'). Most of the twenty-two Jain saints are celebrated in one or more of these purānas composed in a fertile period between about 1000-1300 CE.

The first of these was called the *Adipurāna* ('The First Purāna') not because it was chronologically primary but because it told the story of the first Jain saint. It was written at the end of the 10th c. CE by Pampa, considered the greatest of medieval Kannada writers. His contemporary, Sri Ponna, wrote an equally influential biography of the 16th *tirthankara* under the title *Santipurāna*.

Marathi

Mhaibhat Some of the earliest literary works in Marathi are a series of biographies written by Mhaibhat, who lived in the 13th c. CE, about his religious mentor Charkadhara. Two of these texts survive (*Acharya Sutra* and *Siddhanta Sutra*), in which he relies primarily on his teacher's sayings to tell the story. This form may have been borrowed from Indo-Persian tradition, in which it was prominent at the time (see below). Mhaibhat also wrote an autobiography called *Lilacharitra*, which chronicles nearly 1000 events, each in a short section of 8-10 lines of prose.

Sanskrit

NaishadhaCharita It is revealing that one of the few Sanskrit works of any note during this period was a biography of a king. The *NaishadhaCharita* was composed by Sri Harsha during the 12th c. CE. In some 1800 ornate stanzas, it narrates the life of King Nala, a legendary figure found in the *Mahabharata*. This Sanskrit text is one of the five great narrative poems (*mahakavya*), and its universal plot of separated lovers reunited had made it extremely popular in its Hindi versions, which are performed by itinerant musicians as an oral epic.

Indo-Persian

Malfuzat Indo-Persian writers, whether influenced by contemporaneous life-writing in India or drawing on sources from their native Persia, also produced a number of important biographies during this period using the popular genre known as *malfuzat* ('dialogues'). These 'dialogues' are a written record of a Sufi saint's conversations with his disciples, including question-and-answer sessions. These texts typically include comments on the authenticity of the conversations and on the method of their collection. A good example is the *FavaidulFaud*, compiled by Amir Hasan (d. 1328) who was a disciple of Nizamud Din and himself a mystic poet.

Tadkera Another Indo-Persian genre used to write the lives of Sufi saints in India is the *tadkera* (*tazkera*, *tazkirah*). This form relies primarily on the saint's poems or songs, interspersed with descriptions of their miraculous deeds. The first of these is *Tazkirat al-Awliyā*, a complex work of 72 chapters telling the lives of as many saints, composed by Shaikh Farid al din Attar in the early 13th c. CE. However, the most famous is Saiyid Muhammad Bin-Mubarak's biography of his mentor, the 14th century teacher Harzat Sultan-ul-Mashaikh of the Chisti order.

Autobiography Two intriguing Indo-Persian autobiographies survive (just) from this period. The first was written by Muhammad Shah Tughluq (14th c. CE), one of the Turkic kings of the Delhi Sultanate. As this king left no son, his cousin, Firuz Shah Tughluq, succeeded him and wrote his own autobiography, a 32-page memoir called *Futuhāt-e-Firozshahi*. It is a series of disjointed anecdotes about the author's hunting and military expeditions, plus his comments on various topics such as medicine, astronomy and archaeology. In one passage, he describes how visiting governors brought him hordes of ornamented slaves, and that he made a meticulous accounting of such gifts, which were immediately credited back to the governor's provincial treasury.

Questions

1. Biographies of saints dominate the life-writing of this period, a development that is yet another literary manifestation of the groundswell of devotionism. Some would argue that these are 'hagiographies' and not proper biography. What is the difference between these types of life-writing?
2. Compare the Indo-Persian forms of life-writing with those composed by Hindus and Jains. Are there any essential differences, and can they be correlated with cultural contrasts between these communities?

Reading

Asim Roy, 'Indo-Persian historical thoughts and writings: India, 1350- 1750.' In José Rabasa, Masayuki Sato, Edoardo Tortarolo, Daniel

Woolf (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 3: 1400-1800* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 148-172

Attar, Farid al-Din. *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat Al-Auliya*. Trans. A.J. Arberry (Penguin, 1990)

Kamil Zvevibel, *Tamil Literature* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1974)

Alastair Mcglashan, *The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Siva: A Translation of the Periya Puranam of Cekkilar* (Trafford, 2006)

Texts

1. From the Preamble to the *Periyapuranam*, trans. R. Rangachari, 2008

It is a nector that will give you the immortal love, drink it.

It is a perennial river of love that will make the lands of your mind fertile, irrigate with it.

It is an ocean that will get you pearl heaps of coveted qualities, dwell in it.

It is a sharp sword that will cut off the bonds to make you feel the bliss of freedom, hold it strong.

It is a teacher that tells morals of life, make yourself a rock of discipline.

It is a historical information resource, develop your knowledge with that.

2. From the autobiography of Firuz Shah Tughluq trans. Anjana Narayanan, 2015

Among the gifts which God bestowed upon me, His humble servant, was a desire to erect public buildings. So I built many mosques and colleges and monasteries, that the learned and the elders, the devout and the holy, might worship God in these edifices, and aid the kind builder with their prayers.

Through God's mercy the lands and property of his servants have been safe and secure, protected and guarded during my reign; and I have not allowed the smallest particle of any man's property to be wrested from him.

Overview

As one scholar put it, Indian ‘literary tradition...rarely thought in terms of personal histories.’ This reluctance changed substantially during the early modern period, when two external literary traditions came to India on the back of political and economic power. The historiographical impulse in Islam, evident in Indo-Persian writing, produced a remarkable series of autobiographies and biographies, mostly at the Mughal court in Delhi. Somewhat later, the arrival of Europeans, and their foreign languages, was another catalyst to self-reflection. The perspective of the outsider seems to have stimulated Indian writers to observe themselves more closely.

Indo-Persian

Baburnama The *Baburnama* (‘Book of Babur’) is the autobiography of the Babur (1483-1530 CE), the first of the Mughal emperors. It was written in Babur’s native Chagatai (or Turki), a language of central Asia, although it is highly Persianised in vocabulary and morphology. It was soon translated into Persian, the language of the Mughal court, and reproduced in illustrated manuscripts. At 600 printed pages, it provides readers with an extraordinary insight into Babur’s life in Transoxiana (present-day Uzbekistan, Babur’s homeland), Kabul and Delhi. It is a bold political self-statement, a ‘mirror for princes’ and a valuable source of information about the social and natural world. We learn, for example, about the lack of decent trousers in Delhi, the colours of flying geese and the smell of apple blossoms.

Later Mughal Babur’s work inspired a number of later Mughal autobiographies, all in Persian. They include the historian Haydar Mirza Doglat’s (1499-1551 CE) *Tarik-e rasidi*, which is more self-consciously objective chronicle. A rare insight into women’s lives at the Mughal court is provided by *Homayun-nama*, written by Golbadan (Gulbadan) Begim, who was Babur’s daughter. *Jahangirnama*, the autobiography of Jahangir, Babur’s great-grandson, is a psychologically complex self-examination, revealing the author’s various cultural interests.

Akbarnama However, the most famous piece of life-writing during this period, and one of the most revealing texts in all Indian history, is the *Akbarnama* (‘Book of Akbar’), the biography of Akbar, who ruled from 1556-1605 CE. Written by his court poet, AdulFazl, and exquisitely illustrated by 116 miniature paintings, it took seven years to complete. It covers Akbar’s life and reign, but also includes a detailed description of the Mughal administration, from taxation to public works.

ChaharUnsur A remarkable autobiography written outside the Mughal court is *ChaharUnsur* (‘Four Elements’, 1680-1694 CE) by Bidel of Patna (1644-1721). It is a complex and difficult book, composed in rhymed prose, *ghazal*, *matnawi*, *rubai* and other verse forms. Arranged in four chapters (one each for air, water, fire and earth), it contains Bidel’s reflections on his life, travels and religious experiences, including dreams and the benefits of silence.

ChaharChaman *ChaharChaman* (‘Four Gardens’) is a memoir written by ChandarBhan Brahman (d. 1662), a Hindu poet who also mastered Persian literary forms and became a *munshi* (secretary) at the Mughal court. While the first two ‘gardens’ describe historical events, the brief third and fourth ‘gardens’ are an autobiography, supplemented by his personal letters. Unfortunately, for readers, he ends his short text at the point when he is given a post at court by Shah Jahan.

Sufi

A popular form of life-writing during the period was a collective biography of sufi saints, or a group of them, following the earlier model set by Attar’s 13th-century text, *Takzirat al-Awliya*. Representative of this genre is *Haft Iqlim* (1594 CE) by Amin bin Ahmad Razi. Individual biographies of sufi saints were less common but not unusual. *Mu’nis al-arvah* (‘The Confidant of Spirits’), an account of Mu’in al-Din Chishti, was composed by Jahanara (1614-1681 CE), daughter of emperor Shah Jahan.

Hindi

Ardhakathanak *Ardhakathanak* (‘Half a Story’) by Banarasidas (1585-1643 CE) is the first extant autobiography in an Indian 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 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 autobiographical in that it attempts to understand the human condition through 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.

Tamil

Tamil NavalarCaritai *Tamil NavalarCaritai* ('History of Tamil Poets', probably 18th c. CE) is a paradoxical text. On the one hand, it is a traditional text, following the much earlier (12th c. CE) Tamil anthology of the brief lives of Tamil poet-saints. On the other, such anonymous texts were rare in the early modern period. It comprises 270 *catuverses*, or separate, stand-alone stanzas, that are intended to be memorised.

AnandaRangaPillai AnandaRangaPillai (1709-1761 CE) is not a name known to many students of Indian literature. However, his private diary, written over a period of twenty-five years, is an unparalleled source of information about colonial India, in the same way that Mughal India is revealed by the biography of Akbar. AnandaRangaPillai was a Tamil merchant who rose to considerable influence as the chief agent to the French in their enclave of Pondicherry on the southeast coast. His diary documents, often in excruciating detail, the social and economic life in Pondicherry, while also revealing his own opinions of people, politics and changing times. Written in Tamil, it was not fully translated into French until 1894, and then into English in 1896.

English

Sake Dean Mahomet Sake Dean Mahomed (or Mahomet, 1759-1851 CE) was born in India, where he served in the East India Company's army as a camp-follower and officer. He then emigrated to Ireland, married an Anglo-Irish woman and finally settled in England, where his medical therapies, including his famous shampoo (from Hindi *campo*, 'press') became popular with the British royal family. Here, too, the colonial encounter led to someone experimenting with a new literary form.

The Travels of Dean Mahomet He published his autobiography and travelogue, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, in Ireland in 1794. It is the first extant autobiographical writing by an Indian in English. Presenting a young man's life as a soldier in north India in the form of letters to an imagined friend, it offers a picture of this dramatic period of Indian history through the eyes of one individual. Since Dean Mahomed rarely speaks of himself, we might think of his book as a 'memoir.' The 100 or so pages, which are filled with descriptions of camps, manoeuvres, towns and garrisons, also resemble a travelogue. Although its style is not engrossing, the attention to detail and the self-confessed desire of the author to 'acquaint' Europeans with his early life has produced a powerful portrait.

Reading

Muzaffar Alam and François Delvoe and Marc Gaborieau, *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture. Indian and French Studies* (Manohar, 2000)

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/pillai/> (for AnandaRangaPillai diary)

Rupert Snell, 'Confessions of a 17th-century Jain merchant: The *Ardhakathanak* of Banarasidas.' *South Asian Research* 25:1 (May 2005), pp. 79-104

David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds.), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (Permanent Black, 2004)

Banarasidas. *Ardhakathanak (A Half Story)*. trans. R. Chowdhury (Penguin, Delhi, 2009)

Michael Fisher, *The First Indian Author in English: Dean Mahomed (1759-1851) in India, Ireland and England*. (OUP, Delhi, 1996) *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey Through India*. ed. Michael Fischer (California, 1997)

Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: ChandarBhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (California, 2015)

Texts

1. from *Baburnama*, trans. Wheeler Thackston, 1996

Compared to ours, it [India] is another world. Its mountains, rivers, forests, and wildernesses, its villages and provinces, animals and plants, peoples and languages, even its rain and winds are altogether different.

The cities and provinces of Hindustan are all unpleasant. All cities, all locales are alike. The gardens have no walls, and most places are flat as boards.

The parrot can be taught to talk, but unfortunately its voice is unpleasant and shrill as a piece of broken china dragged across a brass tray.

[addressed to Humayun, Babur's son]

Through God's grace you will defeat your enemies, take their territory, and make your friends happy by overthrowing the foe. God willing, this is your time to risk your life and wield your sword. Do not fail to make the most of an opportunity that presents itself. Indolence and luxury do not suit kingship... Conquest tolerates not inaction; the world is his who hastens most. When one is master one may rest from everything—except being king...

Item: In your letters you talk about being alone. Solitude is a flaw in kingship, as has been said. 'If you are fettered, resign yourself; but if you are a lone rider, your reins are free.' There is no bondage like the bondage of kingship. In kingship it is improper to seek solitude....

For some years we have struggled, experienced difficulties, traversed long distances, led the army, and cast ourselves and our soldiers into the dangers of war and battle. . . . What compels us to throw away for no reason at all the realms we have taken at such cost? Shall we go back to Kabul and remain poverty-stricken?

2. From *Mu'nis al-arvah*, trans. Sunil Sharma

It should be known to everyone that the guiding master KhvajaMu'inuddin Muhammad [Chishti] (may almighty God protect his secret) was a *sayyid*, and without doubt was among the offspring of the prophet. There is no disputing this. When the ruler of the age... Shah Jahan (may God preserve his realm), my glorious father, did not have information about the origins of the guiding master, he investigated the matter. I told him repeatedly that the master was a *sayyid* but he did not believe me until one day he was reading the *Akbarnama* and his auspicious eyes fell on the part of the where Shaikh Abu al-Fazl describes briefly the reality of the guiding master being a *sayyid*. From that day on this fact that was clearer than the sun was revealed to the king, shadow of God.

3. From the diary of AnandaRangaPillai

The English have captured the ships bound for Pondicherry, and have received as reinforcement men-of-war from England and other places. This accounts for their activity. Nevertheless they are much troubled owing to their leader, the governor [of Madras], being a worthless fellow, devoid of wisdom. Although Pondicherry receives no ships, her government lacks funds, the enemy has seized her vessels, she is feeble and wanting in strength, and her inhabitants are in misery, although she has all these disadvantageswhen her name is uttered, her enemies tremble...

In times of decay, order disappears, giving place to disorder, and justice to injustice. Men no longer observe their caste rules, but transgress their bounds, so that the castes are confused and force governs. One man takes another's wife and his property. Everyone kills or robs another. In short, there is anarchy...unless, justice returns, this country will be ruined. This is what men say, and I have written it briefly.

Part V: 19th Century

Overview

In one sense, biography in the nineteenth-century, particularly at the end of the century, was quite different to the life-writing in earlier periods. In place of the hagiographies of deities, legendary sages and medieval poet-saints, the new subjects tended to be real historical figures, some of whom were known to the biographer. Beneath this change, however, the fundamental impulse of the biographer—to present exemplary lives, often as a part of a movement—remained the same. Influenced by Caryle's *Hero and Hero Worship*, there were numerous translations of English-language textbook biographies of famous figures (such as Ashoka, Napoleon, Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln), but toward the end of the period the lives of important Indian men, usually social reformers, appeared.

Urdu

Altaf Hussain Hali Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) is considered one of the key figures in the Aligarh reform movement. Poet, scholar and government employee in Delhi, he wrote three pioneering biographies in Urdu, which taken as a whole amount to a manifesto for change among Muslims in the rapidly shifting world of the late 19th century. In *Hayat-e-Saadi* ('The life of Saadi,' 1886), he praised the religious and cultural views the 13-century Persian poet and thinker Saadi. His next biography documented the life of his contemporary, Ghalib (*Yadgar-e-Ghalib*, 'Memorial to Ghalib,' 1897), and broke new ground in revealing unknown episodes in the private life of this famous poet. However, his most influential book was *Hayat-i-Javed* ('A Life Eternal', 1901), a biography of the great social reformer and champion of Urdu, Syed Ahmad Khan.

Shibli Numani Undoubtedly the most sophisticated Urdu biographer of the period was Shibli Numani (1857-1914), who was both a poet and a scholar. Like Hali, Numani belonged to the Aligarh reformist group led by Syed Ahmad Khan. However, if Hali's biographies succeeded in pointing the path to a Muslim future, Numani, who was first an historian, dedicated his to reclaiming a Muslim past. In both *Sirat-un-Nu'man* (1892-1893), on the life of an Islamic jurist, and *Al-Faruq* (1899), the life of the second Caliph, he demonstrated his ability to temper reformist zeal with critical skills absorbed from western historiography.

Gujarati

Mahipatram Rupram Biography in Gujarati, as in Urdu, was wielded as a weapon in the fight for reform against an entrenched conservative elite. The biographer for Gujarati was Mahipatram Rupram (1829-1891), himself an ardent reformer, poet and novelist, who documented the lives of several fellow reformers with a mixture of anger and wit. The anger is understandable: as the first Gujarati Brahman to cross the sea (to England), he was excommunicated on his return.

Uttam Kapor Karsandas Mulji Charitra A representative example of Rupram's biographies is *Uttam Kapor Karsandas Mulji Charitra* ('A Memoir of the Reformer Mulji,' 1877), a study of his friend Mulji. In the preface, Rupram declared that the book is dedicated 'to the rising generation who emancipated themselves from the thralldom of ignorance, superstition and priest craft.' The book is noteworthy for its detailed account of the famous Maharaj libel case (1862), in which Mulji was accused of defamation by a religious sect (Vallabhacharyas) to which he had belonged and then had criticised in print.

Tamil

A similar trend is evident in Tamil biographies of the late nineteenth-century. Here, too, life-writing is used to showcase men who have contributed to both social reform and literary reclamation. Perhaps the most representative, and influential, of these is Kanakarattina Upattiyayar's biography of

ArumukaNavalar(*SrilasriNallurArumukaNavalarCarittiram*, 'The Story of His Holiness ArumukaNavalar of Nallur', 1892). The subject, ArumukaNavalar(1822-1879), was a Sri Lankan Tamil scholar and reformer whose life contains the contradiction implicit in colonialism. Navalar received a Christian education, which he then used to fight against the mass conversion to Protestantism that he feared would destroy his culture. The man who had translated the Bible into Tamil, inspired a movement to restore traditional Hindu values through the texts of the Tamil Saiva poet-saints.

Bengali

Rassundari DebRassundari Deb (1809?-1899) achieved a milestone in Indian literary history when she wrote her autobiography *Amar Jiban* ('My Life,' 1876, with a second part added in 1897). While we have a 16th-century memoir in Persian by the daughter of a Mughal Emperor, Deb's is thought to be the first autobiography written by a woman in an Indian language. More important, Rassundari Deb lived in a village. Given the position of women in rural Bengali society, she waited until her husbands' death before writing her memoir, but she did not hesitate to include some distressing details of her life. Aged 12, she tells her readers, she woke up in a boat full of strangers, in the middle of a river, finding herself dressed as a bride. Later she bore twelve children, one of whom became an advocate in Calcutta. With little formal education (from a missionary woman who taught children in her father's house), she taught herself to read through devotional literature.

Devendranath TagoreDevendranath Tagore (1817-1905), father of Rabindranath, was a deeply spiritual man but also a radical thinker, who spearheaded the BrahmoSamaj movement, which fashioned a 'modern' Hinduism in this age of reform. His autobiography (*MaharshiDevendranathThakurerAtmjivani*, 'The Autobiography of Maharshi [an honorary title used to address him when he was alive] Devendranath Tagore') was written in Bengali in 1898 and translated later into English by one of his sons as 'Autobiography.' In this nearly 400-page book, he describes his inner struggles and spiritual growth that resulted in his belief in a 'unified' god and a 'separate' nature. He records an early experience, by the bedside of his dying grandmother, which taught him the 'unreality of things' and bred in him a fierce 'aversion to wealth.'

English

Life-writing in English seemed to wait until the end of the century, when it displayed the two trends seen elsewhere. First, there were the memoirs, whose authors reflect the kind of person who had the ability and confidence to write about himself in English. These include a book, with a revealing sub-title, by Lutfullah (1802-1874), who was a tutor to British officers: *Autobiography of Lutfullah, a Mohammedan Gentleman, and his transactions with his fellow-creatures interspersed with remarks on the habits, customs, and character of the people with whom he had to deal*(1857). Similarly self-revealing is the *Diary of the Late Raja of Kolhapur during his visit to England, 1870* (1872). A more humble autobiography, but one that followed the pattern of reform-motivated life-writing, is *Recollections of My School Days* by LalBehari Day (1824-1894). Serialised in the *Bengali Magazine* (1873-1876), it argued the merits of an English education over traditional Indian learning. Finally, we can note, NishikantaChattapadhyaya's *Reminiscences of German University Life* (1892).

Collective Biography The tradition of writing collective biographies, typically of a group of poets or saints, which was popular in the early modern period, was overtaken by the individual life-stories noted above. However, in the final decade of the century, the group biography re-emerged. Most, like the earlier examples, were brief biographical sketches of poets, such as *Andhra KavaluCharitramu* ('History of Andhra Poets', 1897) in Telugu by KandukuriViresalingam and *KaviCharitra* ('History of Poets,' 1865) by Narmadashankar in Gujarati. The new politics of nationalism, however, required new subjects, as supplied in English by ParameswaranPillai's *Representative Indians* and ManmathanathDutt's *Prophets of India* (both 1897).

Questions/Discussion

1. Most Indian life-writing in the nineteenth century was put to the service of social and/or religious reform. How does this motivation differ from the purpose of biography and autobiography written today?
2. Make a list of known biographies and autobiographies in this period. How many were written by Christians? How many by Muslims?
3. Rassundari Deb appears to be the first woman to write her story in an Indian language. It is entirely possible that other such manuscripts have been lost, or destroyed, or suppressed. Consider also other means by which women in India have 'told their story,' such as oral tales and painting.

Reading

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Text

From Devendranath Tagore's 'Autobiography,' translated by his son

My grandmother was very fond of me. To me, also, she was all in all during the days of my childhood. My sleeping, sitting, eating, all were at her side. Whenever she went to Kalighat, I used to accompany her. I cried bitterly when she went to JagannathKshetra and Brindaban leaving me behind. She was a deeply religious woman. Every day she used to bathe in the Ganges very early in the morning ; and every day she used to weave garlands of flowers with her own hands for the Shaligram.* Sometimes she used to take a vow of solar adoration, giving offerings to the sun from sunrise to sunset. On these occasions I also used to be with her on the terrace in the sun ; and constantly hearing the mantras (texts) of the sun-worship repeated, they became quite familiar to me.

I salute the bringer of day, red as the Java flower :
Radiant son of Kashyapa,
Enemy of Darkness,
Destroyer of all sins.

At other times Didima used to hold a Haribasar festival, and the whole night there was Katha and Kirtan the noise of which would not let us sleep.

She used to look after the whole household, and do much of the work with her own hands. Owing to her skill in housekeeping, all domestic concerns worked smoothly under her guidance. After everybody had taken their meals, she would eat food cooked by herself ; I too had a share in her

havishyanna} And this prasad of hers was more to my taste than the food prepared for myself. She was as lovely in appearance as she was skilled in her work, and steadfast in her religious faith. But she had no liking for the frequent visits of the Ma-Gosain. There was a certain freedom of mind in her, together with her blind faith in religion. I used to accompany her to our old family house to see Gopinath Thakur. But I did not like to leave her and go to the outer apartments. I would sit in her lap and watch everything, quietly, from the window. Now my Didima is no more. But after how long, and after how much seeking, have I now found the Didima that is hers also; and, seated on Her lap, I am watching the pageant of this world.

Some days before her death Didima said to me, "I will give all I have to you, and nobody else." Shortly after this she gave me the key of her box. I opened it and found some rupees and gold mohurs, whereupon I went about telling everyone I had got mudi-mudki. In the year 1757 Shaka (1835), when Didima was on her death-bed, my father had gone on a journey to Allahabad. The vaidya came and said that the patient should not be kept in the house any longer; so they brought my grandmother out into the open, in order to take her to the banks of the Ganges. But Didima still wanted to live; she did not wish to go to the Ganges. She said, "If Dwarkanath had been at home, you would never have been able to carry me away." But they did not listen to her, and proceeded with her to the river-side. She said, "As you are taking me to the Ganges against my wish, so will I too give you great trouble; I am not going to die soon." She was kept in a tiled shed on the banks of the Ganges,

where she remained living for three nights. During this time I was always there with her, by the river.

On the night before Didima's death I was sitting at Nimtola Ghat on a coarse mat near the shed. It was the night of the full moon; the moon had risen, the burning ground was near. They were singing the Holy Name to Didima:

Will such a day ever come, that while uttering the name of Hari, life will leave me?

The sounds reached my ears faintly, borne on the night-wind; at this opportune moment a strange sense of the unreality of all things suddenly entered my mind. I was as if no longer the same man. A strong aversion to wealth arose within me. The coarse bamboo-mat on which I sat seemed to be my fitting seat, carpets and costly spreadings seemed

hateful, in my mind was awakened a joy unfelt before. I was then eighteen years old.

Part V: Early 20th Century

Overview

Biography During the first half of the twentieth century, life-writing gradually gained in popularity and by the end of the period had established itself within the literary culture of the country. For those writing in English, or for those writing in regional languages who were conversant with English literature, autobiography and biography were already accepted literary forms in the first years of the century. But for others, they remained associated with an external culture, the culture of the colonialists. Soon, however, the biographical impulse overcame this prejudice, and Indians were writing the lives of figures from the turbulent 19th century, such as Raj Mohun Roy and Karl Marx, and of those who were still alive, especially M.K. Gandhi.

Autobiography Autobiography also flourished in modernising, urban India, amid joint families and close kin networks, where individualism was becoming both more respectable and necessary. The invention of a private space, traditionally the preserve of the ascetic, became a more widespread public project. Indeed, autobiography became a quest not just for an individual but for the larger identities of a regional language and an independent India. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru used autobiographical writing to think through the political and ethical dilemmas that faced them.

English

M.K. Gandhi M.K Gandhi (1869-1948) wrote one of most influential autobiographies in world literature. *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* inspired freedom movements across the globe, including those led by Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Gandhi began his book while in prison in 1921, when his greatest achievements still lay ahead of him. It was serialised in a Gujarati-language magazine and in translation in an English-language magazine between 1925 and 1929, appearing in book form in English in 1940. Gandhi explains that he had severe doubts about writing an autobiography because it was thought to be a western genre written by westernised Indians. He explained his decision to write it with this, far from clear, logic: 'It is not my purpose to write a "real" autobiography; I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with the Truth.'

Truth 'Experiments with Truth' is not a standard narrative of one's life. Rather than a chronology of events, it is an intense self-examination, and at times self-condemnation, of the author's adherence to his philosophy of *satyagraha* 'truth force.' As such, it is a deeply personal and yet detached scouring of the soul. However, this most private of literary forms had a massive public impact. Gandhi's search for an inner truth led to an independent India.

Nehru The convergence of self-examination and nation-building is even more explicit in the thoughtful autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). Like Gandhi, Nehru began his book (*An Autobiography*, 1936) while serving a prison sentence for this political activism. And he, too, subjected himself to extended self-analysis, but for Nehru the self was a psychological not a spiritual entity. He had read a great deal of Freud during his lonely prison life. Nevertheless, Nehru also records fascinating details of his own family and leading figures of the 1920s and 1930s (describing Gandhi as 'an introvert'). As such, it is an incomparable source for understanding the political and social developments that led to the independence of India.

Bengali

SibnathSastriSibnathSastri (1847-1919) was a leading reformer in the BrahmoSamaj movement in Calcutta. His *Atmacarit* ('Autobiography,' 1918) is a report of his religious life, partially inspired by the confessional strand of Christianity, which influenced the Brahma Samajists. Unlike Augustine, or Rousseau, or even Gandhi, however, this Bengali intellectual does not disclose a private self. Instead, he writes without personal intimacy, documenting his experiences in simple language and without any attempt to teach. But precisely because it is so artless, his autobiography provides deep insight into the complex thinking of the 19th-century reformers in Bengal.

Oriya

Fakir Mohan Senapati Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918), credited with the modernisation of Oriya literature (one of India's lesser regional literatures), also wrote a remarkable autobiography. Although *Atmajeevancharitaw* was begun in the 1890s, and although it was serialised in magazines soon after, it only appeared in book form posthumously in 1927. The author, who had penned several well-received novels and short stories, claimed that his life was 'too insignificant' to make the book 'worthwhile', but that Oriya needed an autobiography. Here we see how this untraditional literary form became a prerequisite for a modern literature.

Tamil

U. Ve. SwaminathaIyerThe life of U.Ve. SwaminathaIyer (1855-1942), the last in a two-thousand-year tradition of Tamil pundits, was remarkable. He discovered, edited and published many of the oldest texts of Tamil classical literature; without his diligent searching for crumbling manuscripts in the attics of disused houses, we would have lost about 500 years of Indian literary history. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the most important autobiography and biography of this period in Tamil were both written by this man.

Autobiography SwaminathaIyer published his autobiography *En Carittiram* ('My Life') in the Tamil weekly *Anandavikatan*, from January 1940 to May 1942. It was later published as a book in 1950. Running to 762 (sometimes monotonous) pages, it is an unparalleled account of village life, especially in the Thanjavur district in the late 19th century. The language is simple and peppered with many observations on people as well as descriptions of school life and life in a monastery (*matta*). The book also reveals the enormous perseverance of SwaminathaIyer in his quest to find and preserve old manuscripts.

Biography SwaminathaIyer's definitive biography of his teacher, MeenakshiSundaramPillai (1815-1875), was the first prose-biography in Tamil. He published the first volume in 1933 and the second in 1940. It was a massive undertaking, which he approached like any other scholarly project. In 1900, he issued a call in a magazine for any materials that people might have concerning his subject. In the end, after working for nearly forty years, he produced a flowing and detailed account of his mentor. We learn, for instance, about how he prepared palm-leaves for writing upon, what he had for breakfast and who he most enjoyed locking horns with in debate.

T. SelvakecavarayaMutaliyar T. SelvakecavarayaMutaliyar (1864-1921) was a fine literary biographer in Tamil during this period. He wrote a number of life-studies, including those on the two giants of Tamil literature (*Tiruvalluvar*, 1904, and *Kamban*, 1909), but his best biography, paradoxically, is that of the Marathi nationalist Ranade (*MadavaGovindaRanade*, 1920), which is based on a memoir by Ranade's wife.

T.S.S. Rajan*NinaivuAlaikal* ('Waves of Reflections,' 1947) by T.S.S. Rajan (1880-1953) is the most sophisticated political autobiography ever written in Tamil. Through 400 pages, the author, who was a

doctor and politician, describes his family's early struggle with poverty, his own education and his rise to become a minister in the provincial government in Madras.

Nammakal Ramalingam Pillai For sheer reading pleasure, however, the best Tamil autobiography of this period is *En Katai* ('My Story,' 1944) by Nammakal Ramalingam Pillai (1888-1972). A poet and a freedom-fighter, the author entertains us with portraits of his mother—who was uneducated but could recite the epics and many myths by heart—and his father, who was an unassuming postman. Pillai describes his first love, who jilted him for another man, his career as a painter and a musician, his journey to Delhi in 1912 for the coronation of George V and his tour of the Northwest Provinces. The most moving sections narrate his arranged marriage to a cousin, a village girl who was forced on him and whom he mistreated. Eventually, though, he was shamed by her patient suffering and learned to love her.

Marathi

One of the most gifted biographers of this period was N.C. Kelkar (1872-1947). Like many of his literary contemporaries in other parts of India, Kelkar wrote poetry, fiction and non-fiction, edited a newspaper and played a leading role in the nationalist movement. He began his biographical writing with a long study of the Italian patriot Garibaldi, though he dedicated most of his time to a study of Lokmanya Tilak (1856-1920), who stirred nationalist feelings even before Gandhi. Kelkar published four separate books on this man, whom he had known during his lifetime, the most important being the three-volume *Lokmanya Tilka Yanche Charitra* ('The Life and Times of Lokmanya Tilka,' 1928).

Questions/Discussion

1. Biography and autobiography are both considered 'life-writing', but are their differences greater than their similarities?
2. Some scholars have called the emergence of autobiography in late 19th and early 20th century India, 'the invention of private space,' arguing that it was created to express the new sensibility of individualism. Others have shown that individual lives were not separated from the wider social and public contexts in which they were written. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that autobiography created a bridge between the private and the public.
3. Autobiography as a literary form may have emerged in the modern era, but contemplation, meditation and other forms of self-examination have been a part of Indian culture for a very long time. What link, if any, might exist between these meditative practices and the writing of one's life?

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Part VI: Late 20th Century

Overview

During this period, life-writing has gradually assumed a firmer foothold in the literary culture of India. The lives of writers, politicians and other public figures, from film stars to cricket heroes, have a sizable market, though mostly in English. Among these somewhat predictable books, however, several out for their brilliant writing or original technique. A notable development has been the popularity of other lives, the lives of marginal people, men and women from low-castes and tribes. These books, usually the result of oral interviews written up by someone else, pose questions about the genre of 'auto'-biography.

English

Prakash Tandon Prakash Tandon (1911-2004) was one of the leading businessmen in twentieth-century India. After eight years in England, where he met his future wife, from Sweden, he eventually became head of Unilever and later the Punjab National Bank. None of this prepares the reader for his remarkable book, *Punjabi Century, 1857-1947* (1963). It is ostensibly an autobiography, but he takes the reader back to his grandparents' generation and tells his family's story as part of the wider historical forces that shaped the subcontinent.

Nirad Chaudhuri Nirad Chaudhuri (1897-1999) was born in a small town, in what is now Bangladesh, was educated in Calcutta, steeped himself in English literature and eventually emigrated to England in 1970, where he spent the rest of his life and became a 'Commander of the Order of the British Empire.' His literary output covers history, literary criticism and sociology, but his masterpiece is the controversial *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951). In his stubborn, contrary and mischievous examination of his own life, Chaudhuri offers a compelling description of how of one culture can penetrate another. Even its dedication is complex:

To the memory of the British Empire in India,
Which conferred subjecthood upon us,
But withheld citizenship.
To which yet every one of us threw out the challenge:
"Civis Britannicus sum"
Because all that was good and living within us
Was made, shaped and quickened
By the same British rule.

Published in 1951, at the mid-point of a life that spanned the twentieth century, his fiercely personal story also manages to be a provocative history of modern India. He brought his story up to date in 1987 with another memoir, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*

R.K. Narayan R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), like Nirad Chaudhuri, lived through every decade of the twentieth century, but there the similarities end. Narayan spent most of his life in a small town in south India, where his entertaining novels are set. Indeed, his autobiography *My Days* (1975) reads like one of those novels. With self-deprecating wit, he tells us about his hometown, his indifferent school years and how he became a writer. Beneath the jibes and journalistic reportage, however, we glimpse the anxieties of a young man struggling to find his way. An early marriage, widowhood six years later, a spot of journalism and haphazard participation in politics, but always the aspiration to become a writer. It is this combination of nonchalance and desire that makes his autobiography as gripping as the melodramas he loved to read.

Ramachandra Guha An equally talented yet completely different type of writer, Ramachandra Guha (b. 1958) completed his education and early career in India before teaching in universities in America and Europe. An historian with interests ranging from environmentalism to cricket, Guha has written three

original biographies. *Makers of Modern India* (2012) supplements biographical accounts of these leaders with substantial excerpts from their own writing. Among its nineteen figures is an English anthropologist, who spent his life documenting India's tribal groups. In *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, his Tribals and India* (1999), Guha examines the mixed motives and results of Elwin's dedication to the cause of tribal uplift. Lastly, in *Gandhi Before India* (2013) Guha again combines biography with social history to produce a portrait of a man we thought we knew but didn't.

Bengali

Mahesweta Devi A prolific Bengali writer and passionate social activist, Mahesweta Devi (1926-2006) is best-known for her novels, but she also wrote an excellent biography. Very different to most of the biographies written in this period, which tell the lives of persons known to the author, Devi's *Jhansir Rani* (1956) reconstructs the life of a figure from the 19th century. Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi (1828-1858), was killed by a British soldier during the revolt of 1857-1858, making her the first martyr of the nationalist movement. Devi did extensive research, aided by the Rani's own archive of documents held by her grandson.

Hindi

Visnu Prabhakar Visnu Prabhakar (1912-2009), a gifted writer of poems, novels and short stories in Hindi, also wrote a dozen influential biographies, mainly of political figures. One of his books covered the life of a man at the centre of one of the most sensational events in the Independence movement. Not Gandhi, or another recognisable name, but Bhagat Singh. In 1928, Singh murdered a British police officer (as revenge for an Indian protestor who died of police brutality) and was then himself hanged. Completely different in tone, *Aawara Masiha* ('Great Vagabond,' 1974), Prabhakar's biography of novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, is regularly cited as a model of the genre. The biographer describes his subject's experiences almost as if he had been present, with vivid detail and emotional insight.

Marginal Lives

Phoolan Devi Married at ten to a man twenty years older, Phoolan Devi experienced a life of brutality. She was raped several times, including by the police, and put in jail. Eventually she became the leader of a gang who attacked upper-caste villagers, held captives for ransom and eventually killed 22 men. After serving eleven years in prison, she was twice elected to the Indian Parliament and then shot dead in 2001.

Her Autobiography This is the story told in *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* (1995). The book is based on oral interviews with Phoolan in Hindi that were translated into English and then turned into a book by a French TV presenter and a British writer on rock music. This book, an immediate best-seller, raises issues of agency and voice, so fundamental to the production of an autobiography. Still, there is no doubt that her life became (and to an extent still is) a powerful symbol of female resistance, and not only in India.

Viramma The life of another marginal woman was published two years later. *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1997), however, is scrupulously authentic. An agricultural worker and mid-wife, Viramma belongs to the Paraiyar ('pariah') caste, who live in virtual bondage to the upper castes in her village. She has no land and no money. Nine of her twelve children die. Her hardship is leavened only by the pleasure she takes in the songs and dance all around her.

Her Autobiography Viramma told her story in Tamil over a period of ten years to two anthropologists, Josiane Racine (a native speaker of Tamil) and Jean-Luc Racine, who then produced this 'autobiography.' It is a gripping if harrowing read, describing the forces that determine Viramma's life, religion, relations with other castes, modernisation and political initiatives to reduce poverty. Told in Tamil, translated into French and then

English, the narration is not always smooth, but it is a raw and vivid portrayal of a life lived by millions of Indians today.

Questions/Discussion

1. How do we explain the international popularity of books about the lives of marginal people in India? Is it part of a wider global interest in human rights and suffering?
2. Another question raised by these books is their motive? Are they, as some have claimed, a call by the subjects for recognition of personhood? Where is the agency in books that are often two or three times removed from the words of their subjects?
3. Collective biography, telling the lives of a group of people, has been a part of Indian literary tradition for a long time, reaching back to the compilation of biographies of medieval saints and poet-saints. RamachandraGuha's *Makers of Modern India* (2012) and Sunil Khilnani's *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives* (2016, also a BBC radio series) have revived this technique.

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