

# INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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## 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 Carlyle'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 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Hayat-e-Saadi* ('The life of Saadi,' 1886), he praised the religious and cultural views of 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 Kapol Karsandas Mulji Charitra** A representative example of Rupram's biographies is *Uttam Kapol 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 Arumuka Navalar (*Srilasri Nallur Arumuka Navalar Carittiram*, 'The Story of His Holiness Arumuka Navalar of Nallur', 1892). The subject, Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879), was a Sri Lankan Tamil scholar and reformer whose life contains the

contradiction implicit in colonialism. Navalur 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 Deb** Rassundari 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 16<sup>th</sup>-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 Tagore** Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905), father of Rabindranath, was a deeply spiritual man but also a radical thinker, who spearheaded the Brahma Samaj movement, which fashioned a 'modern' Hinduism in this age of reform. His autobiography (*Maharshi Devendranath Thakurer Atmjivani*, '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 Lal Behari 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, Nishikanta Chattapadhyaya'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 Kavalu Charitramu* ('History of Andhra Poets', 1897) in Telugu by Kandukuri Viresalingam and *Kavi Charitra* ('History of Poets,' 1865) by Narmadashankar in Gujarati. The new politics of nationalism, however, required new subjects, as supplied in English by Parameswaran Pillai's *Representative Indians* and Manmathanath Dutt'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

G.N. Devy, 'Indian subcontinent: autobiography to 1947.' In Magaretta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* (Routledge, 2001)

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

Amaresh Datta (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, 1987)

### 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 Jagannath Kshetra 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.