

INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 20th Century

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Part I : Early 20th Century

Part II : Late 20th Century

Early 20th Century Autobiography

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

SibnathSastri SibnathSastri (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 *Atmajeevancharitawas* 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. SwaminathaIyer The 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.

NammakalRamalingamPillai For sheer reading pleasure, however, the best Tamil autobiography of this period is *En Katai* ('My Story,' 1944) by NammakalRamalingamPillai (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?

Reading

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

Tridip Suvrud, 'Indian subcontinent: auto/biography to 1947,' In Margaretta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* (Routledge, 2001).

G.N. Devy, *In Another Tongue: Essays on Indian English Literature* (Peter Lang, 1993)

Husain Mujahid Zaidi (ed.), *Biography and Autobiography in Modern South Asian Languages* (Heidelberg, 1979)

Late 20th Century Autobiography

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. Lakshmibai, 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

VisnuPrabhakar VisnuPrabhakar (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. Ramachandra Guha'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.

Reading

Pallavi Rastogi, 'Indian subcontinent: auto/biography 1947 to the present.' In Magaretta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* (Routledge, 2001).

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