

INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – Postclassical Period

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Early Postclassical Autobiography

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 Asvoghosa (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 drum-sticks. 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...

Late Postclassical Autobiography

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; *tonjar*, 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

Periyapuranam This development is clearly illustrated by *Periyapuranam*, a Tamil text of the 12th c. CE. Even its title is instructive: ‘The Great Puranam’ borrows the genre title of *purana* (‘myth’) for a compilation of biographies of poet-saints who were famous in Tamil literary tradition. The *Periyapuranam* 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.

Kannappar One of the most famous saints in the *Periyapuranam* is Kannappar, 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 puranas composed in a fertile period between about 1000-1300 CE.

The first of these was called the *Adipurana* ('The First Purana') 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 *Santipurana*.

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 *Futuhat-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 devotionalism. 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 Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1974)

Alastair Mcglashan, *The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Siva: A Translation of the PeriyaPuranam 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.