

# INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – Early Modern Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## 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, Adul Fazl, 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.

**Chahar Unsur** A remarkable autobiography written outside the Mughal court is *Chahar Unsur* (‘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.

**Chahar Chaman** *Chahar Chaman* (‘Four Gardens’) is a memoir written by Chandar Bhan 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 13<sup>th</sup>-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 Navalar Caritai** *Tamil Navalar Caritai* ('History of Tamil Poets', probably 18<sup>th</sup> c. CE) is a paradoxical text. On the one hand, it is a traditional text, following the much earlier (12<sup>th</sup> 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 *catu* verses, or separate, stand-alone stanzas, that are intended to be memorised.

**Ananda Ranga Pillai** Ananda Ranga Pillai (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. Ananda Ranga Pillai 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 Delvoye 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 Ananda Ranga Pillai diary)

Rupert Snell, 'Confessions of a 17<sup>th</sup>-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: Chandar Bhan 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 Khvaja Mu'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 Ananda Ranga Pillai

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 disadvantages ....when 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.