

Life Writings in Odia

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Many of the earliest autobiographies in India were written by the veterans of the freedom movement with the plain aim of providing information about public affairs and the autobiographical element in them is only incidental. It seems that the seriousness of political and social events prompted them to write as historians, not as autobiographers. They usually tell of events and occasions and the direction of events but the outcome of these has little bearing with the personality of the man engaged or with his private character, so that we may agree with Roy Pascal's comment on the autobiography of statesmen in general that 'while his personality as a politician may be consistent, it may not have much to do with his private being' (120).

Fakir Mohan's *Atmajivancharita*, the first Odia autobiography was written when Fakir Mohan was already a noted poet and a novelist of repute. Aware of the literary tastes of his times, he fashioned his autobiography partly in deference to the Oriental spirit of self-relegation and partly to his judicious discretion as a novelist. His ostentatious aim is to provide a model for later writers to emulate. His work reveals clues to his predominant fatalism: 'The meanest blade of grass is not created without purpose. What purpose was it, I wonder, that prompted God to keep me alive so long?' (5)

Fakir Mohan's transformed his individual journey through life to the story of an entire community undergoing transition from an age-old agrarian community to a gradual cosmopolitan world view. Boulton says, 'Autobiography was an innovation in Oriya. There was no knowing how the public would respond to it. The public was more likely to respond favorably, however, if its attention was focused not on the man himself but on his times for these were of universal interest' (113).

Odia autobiographers are rooted in historical and social consciousness. Their awareness led them to believe that the individual's development is part of a general social process. Autobiographers like Fakir Mohan Senapati, Chintamani Mohanty, Gobinda Mishra saw themselves as the focal point of historical forces. Such focusing did not take away the uniqueness of the individual character and fate, on the contrary it is noticed that the more marked the personality, the more he seemed to sum up a whole social trend, a generation and even a nation. It is this summing up which is evident in the theme for Gobinda Mishra in the first two parts of his autobiography, *Jatiya Jibanara Atmabikash*. He observes: 'This is the

story of my life, a story about the germination and growth of my dream to liberate my country and about the various highs and lows, hope and despair through which I pressed on in the service of my country' (Preface). He further writes, 'National consciousness is an enormous force, so high and mighty that it cannot be held in check.'

Odia autobiographies give due credit to the acquirement of education. Fakir Mohan's autobiography combined the helplessness of his loneliness to a world of enlightenment and education fused the evolution of a new age. His ambition of setting a model to future autobiographies came true in more ways than one. Expectations of social and historical record from autobiographies strengthened with each new publication. Chintamani Mohanty's autobiography supplements Fakir Mohan's work with its description of contemporary writers, eminent personalities and princes by recreating the literary scenario of his times and the magic of the freedom movement. Rajkishore Das justifies the writing of autobiographies due to its representative and universalizing merit: 'It cannot be claimed that there is no need for autobiographies. Sometimes their publication reveals a lot of useful and interesting information about national character, social occurrences and intellectual evolution of a society (128). This attitude was particularly strong in public personas who participated in social or political movements.

Autobiographies where the 'attention is focused on the self' are criticised severely. Pathani Patnaik denounces Praharaj's autobiography as deficient in contemporary events. 'His life was uneventful; he did not enjoy the facility to enter public life nor the good fortune to participate in social events. This is an entirely subjective autobiography – an illustration of his creativity and his experiences' (70).

Praharaj confesses about his association with prostitutes, about lying and about his addiction to opium but it cannot be regarded as a confession in the Augustinian or Rousseau sense. Augustine and Rousseau talk of a unified self (representation of the growth of the personality in a single direction). One Odia autobiography mirrors Roy Pascal's ideal in the sense that the narrator presents a consistent relationship between outward experience and inward growth, a selection of incidents and how they enrich or change him, so that 'each circumstance, each incident, instead of being an anomalous fact, becomes a part of a process and a revelation of something within the personality' (Pascal 10). Godabarish Mishra had intended to write a two volume autobiography, the first of which was supposed to include the initial fifty years of his life during which he prepared himself for the service of his country and his people. He writes: 'my year of birth appears to be 1886. Odisha became a separate province in 1936. The period from 1886 to 1936 encompasses fifty years, in other words, half a century. I shall narrate the events which I remember concerning this half-century. These fifty years were the time during which I prepared myself to serve my country and my people.

I have thought of writing about the events taking place after 1936 separately in another book' (3).

His book charts Mishra's journey from the ignominy of grinding poverty to the limelight of centre stage politics. It also strikingly records his moral dilemma- whether to yield to his personal ambition of a life of riches and comfort as a befitting antithesis to his inevitable poverty or to endure self-imposed poverty in the service of his motherland. Throughout his early life he is goaded by one aim i.e. to overcome poverty through education, but when the time comes to realise his dream, he relinquishes it for a greater good. The pain and suffering he undergoes is not immediate but comes back to haunt him soon after he joins Satyabadi- the school set up by Gopabandhubabu to produce ideal young men who would restore the glory of the lost tradition of the Odia nation. Godabarish Mishra remains loyal to this ulterior motive which is evident throughout and if he remains hesitant to pronounce it as the principal thread in his story, it is his way to avoid what Georges Gusdorf calls the original sin of autobiography, 'retrospective rationalization' (42).

His great contemporary Nilakantha Das is skeptical of strict chronology or thematic wholeness in his autobiography *Atmajibani*. Thus, his education, meeting with Gopabandhu, his resolve to pursue a life dedicated to scholastic attainment and self-sacrifice in the national cause all remain fused. His resolve comes early on in the story but the reader is not allowed access to the gradual development of his ideals. His highest ideals are disclosed not as something rigorously pursued but revealed in his grumblings about the failure of others. Thus his eruption against Godabarish Mishra's pecuniary complaints or against Biswanath Kar's refusal to accompany him in heavy rain becomes a frame against which is wordlessly foregrounded his high ideals as an altruist and a public servant. Likewise Muktar Ramchandra Dash and Ramchandra Rath fulfill his criteria of public devotion and high moral standards in his own backgrounded image. To add to the shapelessness of his form is his commentary on the history of the rise of Odia Nationalism and Odia language as well as his reflections relating to the unification of the outlying tracts of Odisha and his contribution to the politics of his times. In short, Godabarish Mishra fulfils Roy Pascal's criteria in that 'it holds the balance between the self and the world, the subjective and the objective' (Pascal 181). He constantly analyses his innermost responses evolving as an outcome of external events and fashions his actions accordingly. There is an urge in him to recapture the past and to see his life as a whole. Nilakantha Das, on the contrary, shows no need to examine or evaluate. His autobiography is marked by his self-righteous determination to adjudicate not appraise himself or others according to his self decided notions of right or wrong. He presumptuously subjugates external situation as a corollary to his indomitable authority.

Another great autobiography which merits comparison with *Ardhasatabdira Odishao Tahinre Mo Sthana* is the autobiography by his contemporary Radhanath Rath, *Mo Swapna*

Mo Jibana. It traces the evolution of a helpless orphan reformed through education to a self respecting, fearless socialist heartlessly criticizing the thoughtless unprincipled practice of politics in independent India. Like Mishra's work, Radhanath Rath provides a glimpse of the state of politics, education and culture in contemporary Odisha not for its own sake but as an inevitable process of what Roy Pascal would say 'the story of a life in the world' (185).

Autobiographies by Laxmi Narayan Sahoo and Satya Narayan Rajguru succeed better with their accounts of childhood and early youth. But unlike Darwin, who describes his childhood activities, for instance his love of collecting, as a preface to his account as a mature scientist, the childhood described by Rajguru or Sahoo wanders aimlessly so that it becomes difficult to rationally delineate any personal line of development. The accounts of their mature lives diffuse into memoir, a picture of their activities and associations rather than as their evolution into men of outstanding achievement.

Autobiographers employ innovations of method; thus we have oblique approaches in Godabarish Mishra who works backwards and forwards from a given moment and attempts to reconcile himself to the humiliation he suffered during his childhood, or the deliberate adoption of a third person narrative in Bhubaneswar Behera's *Gaanra Daaka*. Many writers like Nilakantha Das betray a skepticism about continuous narrative and are content with impressionistic sketches, entertaining no need to rationalize, as truer to our mode of experience and some limit themselves to a particular significant relationship- with his father like Dr. Bikram Dash in *Mo Nananka Desha*, or the web of relationships like Sitadebi Khadanga in *Mo Jibana Smruti*, or even to a significant fragment of life like Chandra Sekhar Mishra in *Satyabadire Saata Barsha*. The theme tends to become more limited, more modest, more specialized. These methods point to a hesitance to grasp the whole range of experience and development. This reminds us of Roy Pascal who says that the feeling of 'ultimate confidence in the wholeness and integrity of the self and in the meaningfulness of its destiny' seems to fail in the autobiographies written during the twentieth century(52).

Most Odia autobiographies are marked by the 'feeling of time lost', a characteristic identified again by Roy Pascal as affecting the scope and technique of all autobiographies written in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. By 'time lost' he does not mean 'lost childhood or youth which is so central a theme with Rousseau, and the sentimentalized recreation of which has since become a favorite exercise of leisure hours' (Pascal 56). What is new in the autobiographies written during this period is the writers' awareness that the time described has now altered, gone beyond recall. The rapid transformation of society as Odisha awoke to a national consciousness through education and freedom and above all through widespread westernization affected the old community of villages and small towns, ties, tools, manners, religious and moral outlook and behaviour mourned so deeply by Dr. Janaki Ballabh Mohanty in *Ekaki Pathika*. The recurrent theme of

childhood and youth becomes an excuse to explain historical circumstances utterly unreachable and remote from the experience of later generations. Gopinath Mohanty's words sum up this regret about the loss of a tradition: 'No more do you find respect and reverence for your elders, the old ties of bygone days, unquestioning obedience to custom, fear of law and regard for practices of the past. In place of it you find everyone heaping accuses and claiming rights' (9).

Odia autobiographies also set out to describe social oppression and wickedness and the efforts toward social reformation. Autobiographies of Gopinath Mohanty, Krushna Chandra Panigrahi and Nishakara Das are noted for the sadness with which they describe triballives and their exploitation by the civilized world. The consciousness of change is hardly absent from any autobiography, even if it is by no means a primary motive. One may link it with the consciousness of the significance of an upbringing in remote parts where it enters the specific substance of the personality and has a formative function as with Bhubaneswar Behera or Golak Behari Dhal in *Dhenkanaliara Anubhuti* or Dinanath Pathy in *DigaPahandira Drawing Master*. Behera writes, 'How vast is Bhawanipatna in comparison to his little village. Markets and shops, concrete buildings, the king's elephants and horses, motor cars and street lights- Buddhadeb watched all these in open-mouthed amazement. But the absence of his playmates, Kalakanta, Raj, Keshab, Madan and Chota, made it all seem like the shriveled grass of summer fields' (8).

The influence of education felt in the lives of their authors is another important element in Odia autobiographies. We see education as the turning point in the life and career of Fakir Mohan Senapati who is keen on his schooling regardless of the unjust caning of his primary school teacher. The importance of learning was not lost on his merciless uncle either who particularly sent his own sons to a better school. Nilakantha Das was a scholar beyond dispute whose erudition held Godabarish Mishra and others in awe of him. Godabarish Mishra himself devoted more than half of his narrative talking about his days as a student and the shaping influence of his teachers and fellow students. Radhanath Rath began his life as a rustic cowherd studying village customs. Recourse to education helped him get rid of his inferiority complex, awakened him to the political scenario of the day and brought him in contact with several idealist leaders. Udaynath Sarangi was a brilliant student and so was Phaturananda who took shade in literary activities to overcome his desperation and isolation after he lost his eyesight due to his disease. *Mo Phuta Dongara Kahani* by Phaturanda is the story of a man's will to rise against the adversities and caprices of fate and navigate through the deep-sea of life.

These men started their career as teachers- imparting knowledge and influencing lives. What is more interesting is that these men, looking at their lives in retrospect from their standpoint as experienced adults, recreate their childhood as a platform not for fun and

mischief but for the attainment of instruction and awareness. Most of them speak of little else as their most engaging activity. Writers also devote space to the idyllic recreation of childhood and portray a world of innocent tricks and naughty delights. Laxmi Narayan Sahoo tries to capture such an effect, but he too does not fail to take delight in narrating his scholastic achievements and his competence as a teacher. These writers rose from poverty and ignorance and looked upon education as a redeeming factor. Education brought them in contact with their superiors and improved their prospects of healthy and wealthy lives. It also brought them to face the challenges of ordering a new social reality; to reformation and recognition.

Odia autobiographies, like most modern works in any language spring mostly from historical and social consciousness. At their best they include that self-interpretative element which lies at the heart of the genre and satisfies truly autobiographical aesthetics. These are written not as a burden of guilt as with Rousseau or a memory of private experience like Wordsworth but a burden of memory and experiences of a social being, a man of the world. Kunja Behari Dash, for example, writes about the guiding principles of his life, his high morals and his appreciation of beauty in *Mo Kahani* and gives credence to the importance of retrospective revelation saying, 'Self-revelation leads to the expression of the human race' (Dash 289). It also leads authors to reveal the peculiarities of their trade as in Kali Charan Patnaik or Kalindi Charan Panigrahi. In this vein Dinabandhu Das says that his autobiography 'will make available a lot of information on the past, present and future of art and artists.' However this self-revelation is different from the garrulous urge of old men to talk about their childhood, it is not a simple urge for communication. It arises from the oppression for self justification, redress and recognition. Employing an obscure style typical of him, Mishra aspires to be a source of example to others in similar circumstances. He writes: Several poor people like me occupy lower rungs of society and spend the whole of their lives struggling for survival. Such people might derive some help from my autobiography. It is not meant for the rich and the pleasure-loving (3).

Sometimes autobiographies are written not for private reasons but for public, to throw light on the nature of their public achievement. This confusion in private and public realms prevails in Krushna Chandra Panigrahi. He writes: 'If I can write down whatever has occurred in my life, whatever I've felt, seen or heard, read, written or thought, it will surely provide matter to the history of Odisha and will influence people's thoughts in new directions (160)' In general Odia autobiographers believe that an autobiography does not necessarily belong to its author, but is representative of the lives of several people. Kalindi Charan Panigrahi uncovers a number of political truths in independent India in his retrospective voyage. This impulse may take us closer to memoir. *Pathika* by Gopal Chotray is in the main a recollection of personalities and circumstances.

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