

# Autobiographical Narratives and Indian Literary Canon: Practice and Praxis

Ananya Parida\*

Since Athanasius's *Vita Antonii*, written between 356 and 362 AD, several terms are attributed to different forms of writing which give an account of a person's life. Terms such as 'hypomnemata', 'commentarii', 'vita', 'confessions', or 'memoirs' found mention as 'biography' with the *Oxford English Dictionary* attributing its first English usage to Southey in an article on Portuguese literature in the year 1809. A text in the auto-fiction mode of writing is known as autobiography that demands an author's extensive knowledge, keen observation, genuine understanding and presentation of all these in writing. Here the writer is both the subject and the object and the process of writing becomes an interface between her objective knowledge gained from events occurred at some point of time and her subjective experiences drawn from it. Often the various forms of literature undergo some sort of judgment to be assigned a place in literary hierarchy, and in the process, some are perceived as high and some low. Autobiography as a genre of literature is placed on the lower stratum in the literary canon, a structure that considers 'literariness' of the work to differentiate literatures. Autobiographical fiction is self-reflexive and reflects history in the making, subconsciously producing a historical book, but stays at an inferior place in the literary canon. Letters, memoirs and autobiographies constitute the genre that is always categorized as 'low' literature, at least in the Indian context, but some of them are certainly popular among the reading public.

This article questions the Indian literary canon that has sidelined the genre of (auto)biography to a significant extent. Taking into account autobiographical records—life sketches, autobiographies, letters and memoirs—of the political prisoners incarcerated at the Andaman

penal settlement, this paper argues that autobiographical narratives tend to be historical and informative but are less acknowledged in the literary canon owing to political motives of canon formation. In short, this article on the one hand explores the politics of canon formation in India to explain the alternative positioning of autobiographical accounts in reading circle. On the other hand, it throws light on autobiographical narratives of political prisoners to establish that these are the key texts that project the colonial archive from a native point of view; that they have been sidelined and must come to the fore.

## Positioning Autobiographical Narrative in Indian Literary Canon

There has been a growing concern in the way literature is defined in contemporary times. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines literature as 'Written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit'. Consequently, with time and development, there has been a perception of 'high' and 'low' literature, which in recent decades has been challenged. Even the position of the Bible in the hierarchy is questionable. It is during such debates, that a degree of importance is given to a perceived 'low' genre of literature that goes by the cult name autobiography or autobiographical fiction. It is in the modern era, only in the twentieth century, that autobiographies are written about the self, in the context of the history of the time. Hence this category becomes a performative utterance of one's experiences and feelings. Georges Gusford called it 'scripture of the self' and its authorship is often suspected, truthfulness put to trial and its criticism undergoes radical revision. It is established that St. Augustine initiated the modern autobiographical trend with his *Confessions* and the onset of twentieth century saw Georg Mirsch's theorizing the

\* Lecturer in English at Lokanath College, Utkal University. UGC-IUC Associate at IIAS, Shimla (2020-2022).

autobiography, thus establishing this form as a genre. Georg Mirsch, the founder of modern autobiography, in his book *The Conception and Origin of Autobiography* (1950) defines autobiography as 'a repository of inner experience and historical reflection' (1), and asserts its existence since ancient time. At least after Montaigne's popularising the essay as a literary genre, autobiography is naturally sanctioned a place in the hierarchy of literariness. But the discipline of autobiography is in serious crisis, in academic pedagogy. Only a handful of politically mediated autobiographies find place in the literature syllabi in the academia. A few significant phenomena have been initiated in this regard.

It is largely evident that autobiography as a genre is not new to the Indian reading circle, but paving its way to university syllabi is a new step towards encouraging personal narratives. A handful of autobiographies which have made it to Indian households do not make it to the academia. Autobiographies of freedom fighters and women's autobiographies are constantly read and appreciated, but few of them are taught as academic texts. It is only recently that autobiography as a course of study is making its way to the Indian classrooms.

Indian texts coming to the fore may be divided into three sections/phases. The first section constitutes the texts of the nationalist period creating a 'usable' past to challenge colonialism and thereby create an idealistic and exclusive national culture. The second section encompasses texts produced after 1947 using a devastated or 'present' India. The third constitutes the side-lined cultural voices coming to the fore. A category of autobiographies that remains absent from these three phases are penal narratives. Written when liberal nationalism was at its peak—these autobiographies succumbed to the stereotype of militant nationalism. Canonized as violent articulation of freedom ideal—against the Gandhian or Tagore model of cultural renaissance—these texts projected a heroic past to destabilise the Empire and showed the suffering of a different opposition in the nationalist period of colonial consciousness. Moreover, after independence and with the trial of Veer Savarkar in Gandhi's assassination case, a new culture of Savarkar-hatred came to the neo-liberal academia. India's educational policies contributed substantially to this historical enterprise. On the one hand, a national history of Andaman penal settlement in colonial documentation was wiped out during the Japanese occupation of the Island and native writing, chiefly autobiographies, were condemned for being orthodox. On the other hand, in creating a national history after independence, the Andamans, as a space that contributed to the strategic control of the Indian subcontinent, fell into a phase of darkness owing to

lack of patronage by both the Government and the academia.

Though the syllabi in recent years have come to acknowledge autobiographical poems or prose or fiction—with the pronoun 'I' suggesting personal experience—autobiographical narratives are still side-lined to a significant degree. This is not to state that autobiographies are not read in the Indian context. Gandhi's and Nehru's autobiographies are best sellers. Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), Nirod C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), Kamala Das's *My Story* (1973) and R.K. Narayan's *My Days* (1974) are few texts which have gained acknowledgement in the academic circle recently. These autobiographies have done well in market and have entered the Indian households only as popular books. In most recent times, autobiographies from the periphery such as Bama's *Karukku* (2000), A. Revathi's and Laxmi's transgender autobiographies *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) respectively, are notable names reviewed positively in the Indian context.

### Andaman Penal Autobiographies in Question

Why are penal autobiographies side-lined, sometimes defamed, and why are they in the periphery without patronage of the neo-liberal academia? What politics of exclusion governs the writings of the militant nationalists? Even if condemned for being Hindu orthodox ideologues, why don't they form part of an academic syllabus? The Autobiographies of political prisoners transported to the Andamans during Indian nationalist period are still at a considerable distance from public awareness. Barindra K. Ghose's *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years of Penal Life* (1922), V. D. Savarkar's *The Story of My Transportation for Life* (1927), Ullaskar Dutt's *Twelve Years of Prison Life* (1924), and Bhai Parmanand's *The Story of My Life* (2003)—although limited in number due to obligations such as press censorship, less feasibility of translation from regional languages etc.—are hardly recognised in the Indian literary canon. Hence, these seminal texts fall short of critical inquiry. These autobiographies are first-hand narration of their innermost experiences as prisoners, of legal affairs of the Imperial Government and provide a historical reflection of the time. Because these texts are rare and they project an alternative colonial history that could remake or subvert history, they are side-lined to a significant extent. Moreover, school textbooks neither have the names of these political prisoners nor do they talk about their momentous participation in the Indian freedom movement; these names have been politically side-lined in the chapters of Indian history.

The autobiographies in question are said to lack a proper grammatical structure and flow of thought, and break the linear sequence of time and place. However, the constant grammatical errors and disjointed thought processes are in fact language markers, that add to the authenticity of an autobiographical document. John Strurrock argues in his article "The New Model Autobiographer", that the true importance of a self-written life lay not in its chronology, not in a verifiable sequence of developments, but precisely in its repetitions, digressions and discontinuities: in those 'obsessional structures of the mind that alone guarantee the consistency of a personality' (1975: 54). In the starting lines of his autobiography *The Tale of My Exile*, Barindra K. Ghose tries to remember the exact date of his deportation, he recounts, 'It was perhaps on the 11 December 1909. There has been a complete overhaul of things during my twelve years' exile... This faculty seems to be fallen in a moribund condition and can only groan at its best. All the past events have come there shadowy and uncanny images, as it were, parading in a drunken brain' (1922: 1). His oblivious state of mind narrates in itself, his agony and aloofness from the world outside the Alipore 44 Degree Jail and at the Andamans. Throughout the book he remembers and makes repeated statements about penal culture relating to system of labour, reward and punishment and marriage in the Andamans.<sup>1</sup>

Savarkar recollected memories of prison and its related experiences in his autobiography *The Story of My Transportation to Life*. It is said that he used to scribble them down on the jail stone walls to memorise the incidents. The seven wings of the Cellular Jail become his subject and his own life his object of study. Years after repatriation, he recollects those fragments of memory and writes an 'auto' biography recounting the then events of his life, that immensely add to colonial historicity. Purpose of writing such an autobiography was never merely to express but to inform people about the views and ideas of the group of political prisoners, later termed as 'militant nationalists', which found expression in their autobiographies. V.D. Savarkar, Barindra K. Ghose, Ullaskar Dutt and Bhai Parmanand, all of them have tried to explain their political motives and life at the Andamans. Reading these autobiographies, it is apprehended that all of the four writers who underwent penal servitude, among others, narrated similar kind of life narratives indicating the ills of colonialism. These autobiographies serve as penal history and much has to be drawn from these texts. Moreover then, there exists a gap between autobiographical narratives and archival documents compiled by the Imperial Government in terms of working of the penal settlement. However, this is a matter of discourse as how these texts are not selected as course in the educational institutes, whereas autobiographies

of other freedom fighters favouring liberal nationalism, such as Gandhi's or Nehru's, are taught at different levels. During this time, while Gandhi was leading the freedom movement through a non-violent and peaceful negotiation with the British government, Savarkar in his autobiography questions Gandhi's leadership by calling the 'militants' who were under penal detention, the actual leaders leading the freedom struggle with endurance of all pains. He declares, 'They had not a tear to shed for us, seated as they are in the spacious, airy and well-appointed pandal of the Indian National Congress—for us who were, in contrast, doomed to spend our lives in a dark dungeon, away from our hearths and homes, and in solitary confinement!' (1927: 218).<sup>2</sup> Savarkar puts forward his dissatisfaction towards the Congress Working Committee led by Gandhi and its guiding principles. He further defends their act of taking to arms stating: 'Our petition, like all other petitions before it, went for nothing; and strike was the weapon we decided to employ' (p. 130). Similarly, Bhai Parmanand in a similar vein comments, 'The belief that if we fill the jails, the Government would grow tired of the struggle and accede to our demands was at best but childish' (2003: 165). The Andaman penal settlement stands as a witness to the treatment meted out to the prisoners, and the writings of political prisoners bear testimony to it.

The history of the Andaman penal settlement is suppressed to encourage political monarchy. History beyond the mainland is never taught and often suspiciously viewed. In view of Savarkar questioning Gandhian leadership by calling the 'militants' actual leaders, the dichotomy is visible in the autobiographical texts of political prisoners. Without these autobiographies, the course structure has a partial entry of the movement, ignoring till date, the beginning of a new movement that started at the Andamans. For this, partly responsible is the academia which could have introduced these topics in the syllabi without any prejudice. Thereby there is a relative academic neglect in perceiving the history of the Andamans and autobiographies of political prisoners. Moreover, consequent to the canonization of Savarkar, Barindra K. Ghose and others as militant nationalists, and owing to the fact that independent India look up a kind of Russian model of Socialism in political and academic realm, the neglect in reading Andaman texts in the colonial context seems significant. The authenticity of facts and events narrated in penal autobiographies are usually questioned, citing colonial records rather than authentic life narratives, statements, letters and memoirs which still remain at the margins. The autobiographical records in question show the lives of political prisoners and take an exclusive perspective towards the cause of 'freedom struggle'. They provide an idea of penal

suffering the political prisoners received and the quality of life they lived. These texts are penal memorabilia and remembrance as well as 'anticipatory' and 'emancipator' as Munslow argues historical narratives ought to be (2007: 25). Knowing the significance of life-narrative of a prisoner and the role of prison in human society, Victor Brombert in his *The Romantic Prison* (2015) writes, 'Prison haunts our civilization' (p. 3). The political prisoners in question also seem to rehearse the statement, as would Fyodor Dostoevsky who suggested that it is prison that mirrors a society. The subjugation of the colonized through applying a strategy—that puts forward the idea of discipline and punishment in order to 'civilize' the convicts—remains the underlying subject in these autobiographical accounts.

### Conclusion

Playing both the signifier and the signified—signifier being more prominent here—an author has all the authority to construct or deconstruct history from his/her perspective. In the auto-fiction mode, the author is not dead; rather acts as an all-pervasive entity. This is the power through which marginalized sections of any society frequently gain a place in society. By narrating their lives, they demand hearing, consideration of human rights and resist the prevalent hegemony. Some other texts in line, Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1432-36), Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (1688), Bama's *Karukku* (2000), Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), or Dean Muhammad's *The Travels of Dean Muhammad* (1793), are all written in a quest for a change. Hence, Misch has marked the result of such autobiographies to be a corollary of a certain kind of 'cultural advance'. To go by Italo Calvino's claim in *The Uses of Literature*, 'This is the paradox of the power of literature: it seems that only when it is persecuted does it show its true powers, challenging authority, whereas in our permissive society it feels that it is being used merely to create the occasional pleasing contrast to the general ballooning of verbiage.' Therefore, a position of autobiographical literature in the high stratum of literary hierarchy is envisioned.

### Notes

1. He defines the state of convicts in Cellular Jail in the same book as "there was no such thing as gentleman, not even perhaps a thing as man, here were only convicts" (1922: 46). With the process of disciplining, they inserted shame and fear in the prisoners as the jailers were the lowest kind of 'brute force.'
2. He presents the dehumanized condition of the educated convicts and exclaims: "What a heavy price this, to pay for bare existence!" (1927: 12).

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