An autobiography is a form of literature that articulates the case of the individual as well as that of a nation. It is not only an efficient way to narrate the nation, as story of the nation, but also a sensitive measure of social changes. In this regard, Pundit Nilakantha Das’s (1884-1966) autobiography "Atmajivani" (1963) is remarkable. It presents an account of the life and times of the contemporary Odishan society and the struggle of Odishan people scattered in different provinces and feudatory states. During the early years of the 20th century, a new wave of change and transformation which was blowing across India got its manifestations in Odisha due to dedicated efforts of people like Utkal Gourav Madhusudan and Utkalmani Pundit Gopabandhu. Nilakantha was an honest disciple of Pundit Gopabandhu, who was also highly inspired by Utkal Gourav Madhusudan. Nilakantha belonged to group of committed persons who were known under the common appellation of Panchsakha, the five-companions of the Satyabadi Era. They had dreamt of asserting the identity of their own people even when the national freedom movement was acquiring momentum. Nilakantha was a social reformer, an educationist, a poet, a patriot, a Parliamentarian and out-and-out an Odia – all rolled into one.

Nilakantha was born on 5th August 1884 at Sriramachandrapur, one of the Shola Shasans, the sixteen conservative Brahmin villages around Puri. His parents wanted him to rekindle the scholarly tradition of their family. Throughout his life, Nilakantha was aware of this and he tried to uphold the values of his family and also dedicated himself to the greater cause of the nation. He was a man with a mission to bring in revolutionary changes into the society. Those days, the society deprived of the light of modern education, was largely engrossed in superstitions. The colonial rulers were also least bothered about the miserable condition of common people. This article provides an account of life and times in Odisha at the beginning of the twentieth century as reflected in 'Atmajivani'.

Nilakantha’s magnificence was not something which could be confined to a particular sphere. Time, personality and commitment are the three important factors which determine one’s success in public life. When a nation under the bondage of foreign rule fights for freedom, spirited, educated and dedicated men like Nilakantha become leaders of people. Two major political issues were in focus during that period in Odishan political world: one, to integrate all Odia-speaking areas into one province and two, to free the colonized India from the shackles of foreign rule.
Nilakantha was inspired by Gopabandhu Das and Utkal Gourav Madhusudan. The movement was spearheaded by Utkal Sammilani led by Madhu Babu. Both Gopabandhu and Nilakantha were closely associated with it. Later under Gopabandhu’s instruction, Nilakantha joined active politics and was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly. On February 8th 1927 on the floor of the Central Legislative Assembly he demanded a separate province for Odia speaking people for the first time. In a way, this move of Pundit Nilakantha facilitated the formation of a separate province. Nilakantha wrote several articles in The Statesman and The Bombay Chronicle on the formation of separate provinces on linguistic basis. Under its impact, the struggle for a separate province for Odisha assumed greater intensity and vigour. In free India, Nilakantha was twice elected to Orissa Legislative Assembly and became the Speaker. He brought the Constitutional role of the Speaker to prominence. He was loved and respected by the people of Odisha.

Satyabadi School stood at Sakhigopal, the centre of an orthodox, conservative and caste-ridden society. But the school admitted no such distinction; students there lived and dined together. Denouncing the social order and admonitions of the conservatives, Nilakantha made Satyabadi School free from any discrimination. Emphasis was laid on building the character of the students, who were the future of the nation. Democratic methods were conceived and practiced in the school, and literary and creative qualities were nourished and polished. Satyabadi School was regarded an industry, building human character and preparing true human resources. The school earned reputation for its discipline and culture. Innovative teaching methods, classroom library system, and a unique experience of teaching and learning: all these were experimented in Satyabadi School. Nilakantha as the Headmaster of the School was instrumental in all these endeavours. His remarkable literary career started during his days at Satyabadi School. Several literary discussions with colleagues and students facilitated and prompted him to create a style known for its simplicity and excellence. Nilakantha’s contribution to Odia literature is remarkable. His efforts at reinventing the glory of Odia language are visible in his literary creations.
like \textit{Konarke}(1921), \textit{Dasa Nayak}(1923), \textit{Pranayeeni}(1919),\textit{Kharvela}(1920),and \textit{Atmajivani}(1963).

Around the year 1870, there was a conspiracy to abolish Odia language from the Odia-speaking areas which lay scattered in several provinces. Literary geniuses of that period, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Gouri Shankar Ray and others tried to assert the importance of Odia language. The efforts of these great men inspired the literature of Satyabadi Era. Under the strong influence of languages of the neighbouring provinces Odia language and literature were reduced to be only translated forms of these literatures. Greek literary masterpieces were translated and presented as history. There were no traces of Odishan history or culture in those works. Nilakantha’s literary creations were revolutionary in this particular aspect. He wanted the Odias to assert their literary identity. Before Nilakantha, no Odia poet had tried to create any literary work on the world famous monument of Konark. Nilakantha’s works were alive with heroic Odia characters like Narsimha Dev and Kharavela which were meant to encourage and motivate the people towards patriotism by reminding their illustrious past. Nationalism was the predominant flow underneath the original theme. In contrast, most of the protagonists in the literary works of the Radhanath Era, were kings and princes and the themes were in no way linked to the culture and tradition of Odisha. No Odia poet had also tried to present protagonists from the lower strata of the society although Fakir Mohan did it in his novels. Nilakantha’s \textit{Dasa Nayak}, presents the life of a fishermen’s community. Although Nilakantha took the original idea from Tennyson’s \textit{Enoch Aredn}, he has presented it in a genuine Odia setup. It was an exception in the world of Odia poetry and touched common men. Like his poetic volumes, prose works and criticism such as, \textit{Odia Sahityara Kramaparinama-Vol-I and II, Bhagvat Gita Vasya}(1936)and many of his research articles on Jagannath establish his talent as a prose writer.

Towards the fag end of his career, Nilakantha wrote his autobiography, \textit{Atmajivani}. This is one of his simplest and best creations. In fact, Nilakantha was not in a condition to devote himself to any formal writing at that time; this important prose piece has been elicited from him by a few of his well-wishers and followers in form of dictation. \textit{Atmajivani} is mostly based on the facts and activities of Nilakantha’s illustrious life. Written in the year 1963, \textit{Atmajivani} bagged the Kendra Sahitya Akademi award in the year 1964. It gives a deep insight into the life of the period and vividly presents the pictures of the socio-cultural evolution up to Nilakantha’s period. \textit{Atmajivani} does not lay emphasis on the life of the author. It gives an account of the impressions of the author on all the happenings around him. Although Nilakantha has said from the beginning of \textit{Atmajivani} that he may not maintain the chronological order yet, apart from a few repetitions, the work is more or less ordered. It is free from dramatizations and exaggerations as Nilakantha was direct in his style to communicate with his readers. No biographer could ever express the feeling of that \textit{Great Oath} and catch the morbid ambience of that moonlit night on the bank of river Bhargavi, where young Nilakantha, Acharya Harihara promised to see the nation in a better position at the time of their death than what they had seen at the time of their birth and how it was a source of inspiration for Nilakantha throughout his life. Gopabandhu was the soul behind this \textit{Great Oath}, that they would serve the nation for its better future and would not go
for any Government service, business or legal practice; Nilakantha followed it whole-heartedly.

Nilakantha’s *Atmajivini* gives the readers a glimpse into the phase of transition of Odishan society. It was also a transition from a caste-ridden feudal society to a modern one which admits no distinction based on one’s birth. Nilakantha gives a vivid account of his school days, when people were conscious about retaining the sanctity of their caste. There were discriminations in the society. People of one caste were so intolerant of the people of a different caste that they prefer not to dine with the latter. Another striking factor is the discrimination that existed within Brahmin caste. This caste system had its direct impact on marriage. In Nilakantha’s family, his father was also a victim of this caste discrimination because he married a so-called lower caste Brahmin girl. The typical system of marriage and the changes in the wake of influences from Bengal, both in terms of religious and social practice illustrate that the Odishan society was in transition. Bride-price and Groom-price were fixed according to caste. Nilakantha described how today’s dowry system had begun in Odisha as an influence of Bengal. The groom price which was paid in a small amount gradually was raised when there was a competition to buy a higher caste. At times the bride’s father also used to bear the expenses of higher education of prospective grooms. Nilakantha gives a detailed description of the evolution of caste feelings in Odisha.

Those days people were superstitious about dreaded diseases and treatment of such diseases. They believed in the age-old stories and anecdotes as gospel truth. To create faith in gods and goddesses stories were fabricated. In case of epidemics, instead of giving treatment to a patient, people used to offer oblations to the goddess. Nilakantha was against this wrong practice. His aim was to make the society free from such superstitions. One may get a distinctive idea on Bhakti cult, and Tantric cult, the worship of the mother goddess and several other social beliefs and practices of that period by reading Nilakantha’s autobiography. Nilakantha gives a comparison between the practices prevalent in his early years and those of the period of his writing. He criticizes the social practices and tries to establish that these were not essentially Odishan in character. Nilakantha vividly portrays the pathetic condition of the people of Odisha due to poverty, ignorance and superstition in the pages of *Atmajivani*. An awareness among the youth with the spread of modern education, changing socio-cultural practices and dedicated effort to build character – all these are honestly recorded in *Atmajivani*. It also depicts the services of committed workers such as Muktiar Ramachandra Das, Ramachandra Rath, Brajasundar Das, and Ananta Mishra.

The *Atmajivani* also gives us a picture of administrative negligence during the British rule. Government Officials usually prepared fabricated reports on natural calamities, crop loss, and epidemics as a result of which the real loss could not be assessed. Nilakantha tried to bring such injustice to public notice. Many lesser known incidents such as the suffering of Odia students due to the prejudice of Bengali teachers, malice of students from neighbouring provinces, their disrespect to Odia teachers, compulsion on vegetarian diet for Odias of Brahmapur, faulty execution of power by the people in higher positions, disrespect to the interest of Odias by leaders with regional feelings - have been highlighted in *Atmajivani*.

For the workers of Satyabadi, freedom meant freedom from bondage. In the pre-independence era, it was a fight for national
freedom and identity and in the post-independence era it was freedom from unhealthy political practices. Nilakantha was elected Speaker of Orissa Legislative Assembly towards the end of the political career. The office of the Speaker was functioning jointly under the Finance and Home Departments. Nilakantha tried to make the status of the Speaker independent. Pundit Nilakantha’s Atmajivani thus gives us a glimpse into Odishan life in the early and mid twentieth century. It carries the traces of an illustrious life to inspire the future generations.

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