

Autobiography as History : A Perspective on Two Odia Autobiographies

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Expectations of factual authenticity pre-dominate readers' interest in autobiographies. But it is an acknowledged fact that the individual responsible for telling the truth about himself is simultaneously describing himself, thereby restricting the degree of honesty that can be expected. Autobiographers frequently resort to acts of censoring and distorting facts not to speak of concocting ideas to enhance their self image. Roy Pascal notes, "Leslie Stephen remarked long ago that distortions of the truth belong to the values of autobiography and are as revealing as the truth...." One of the features of an autobiography is that it reveals secrets vistas of truth that its author never consciously intended to uncover. Often autobiographers give themselves away through unintentional revelations.

This kind of unintentional revelations can be seen in Godabarish Mishra's autobiography *Ardha Satabdira Odisha O Tahinre Mo Sthana*. The quality of his self-projection is perhaps most rapidly detected in the style adopted by the author. The bold and throbbing use of ironic language in Mishra's autobiography strike the readers as entirely consonant with his introspective theme and thoroughly suited to his winding roundabout style. All his chapters and all important events of his life are precluded with extensive discourses aimed at tunnelling the readers' vision as much to the

incidents described as to the narrator's viewpoint. The present observing and recording self which he draws on to exhibit his understanding of himself becomes subject to adult reflection and is further distorted during its embodiment in a written narrative. Like, for example, his depiction of poverty is heart-touching and pathetic but it bears proof of his tremendous self respect, too. Often the distressing account of his early life in adverse circumstances and his expert narration influence the readers' minds to unconditional acceptance and spontaneous sympathy.

So completely overcome is the reader with this confessional strain that his first reaction is to respond with admiration. Hints of ambiguous feelings of remorse and neglect crop up only when he tries to recreate the complex development of expectation and regret. He writes, "I have worked hard all my life but I have not earned enough wealth or landed property that I will look towards it for support. As I left behind all sources of acquiring money, in my weak moments I am filled with remorse. My decision was not always mine; Gopabandhu babu was responsible for my decisions to a large extent. My life was shaped like clay at the potters' wheel at the hands of Shashida and I let go of these opportunities at the instigation of Gopabandhu."

Mishra shared a significant part of his life together with Nilakantha Das. A dig into the formative periods of their lives reveals similar views and aims. Yet there were differences in their personality and these differences become conspicuous in the different styles adopted by them. Das rarely shows Mishra's hesitance and censure. His style is marked by a sense of celebratory achievement and unrepentant retrospection. His sweeping lines exemplify his all-important attitude. When Prof. Gopal Chandra Ganguly asked him why he needed to study M.A. when he had already decided to be a teacher at Satyabadi, Das answers : "Satyabadi is a rural place. I will not be doing justice to this important role of Headmaster if I am not equipped to clear all doubts of all students. Prof. Ganguly questioned, 'You have monetary difficulties. Where will you get money from ?' I answered 'I'm not worried about that ? Surely, it can be managed.' Some days later I received news about my scholarship."

Such carefree abandon is seldom found in Mishra. The candour and simplicity with which Das takes credit for his efforts and achievements is an antithesis to the hesitant and sometimes sly manner adopted by Mishra. On the other hand, the continuing apologetics and complacent obtuseness in Mishra are not aimed at a mere historical account of his life and actions. He probes into his feelings, impulses and beliefs in order to lay bare the truth of his personality. He is analytical and his analyses lead him to a web of confession and contrition. Das adopts an ingenuous style by denying the possibility of using sophisticated, self-reflective responses present in Mishra. He thereby fails to recognize the full opportunities which the genre offers in the form of interpretative truth in addition to factual truth.

Another example of Mishra's complex emotions and ambiguous presentation is the portrayal of his father's character. He talks about his father as an extremely pious man given to rituals and worship. He remembers his father's altruism with studied objectivity and impersonal adulation. On closer inspection Mishra's dubious admiration of his father seems to hide hints of guilt. Was it that he was ashamed of his father for their poverty ? He writes, "My father was not a big pundit. But he was highly regarded even in places far from our own place. He was a family man but lived the life of a *sanyasi*. He spent whatever he earned each day and did not save for the next. His hair was matted and his teeth showed like bones. He never massaged oil on his body. His dress was a small saffron cloth. People came to know him by the name of 'jatia baba'."

There are further ambiguities in the father-son relationship. Given his father's spirituality and renunciation, Mishra's admission that it was his father's wish that he studied English and became a lawyer and his subsequent disappointment over Mishra's failure to obtain scholarship shows the contradiction in the father's portrayal. His revolt against rituals and customs steadfastly observed by his father, his adult rejection of social norms, his guilt when his father disciplines him and his solitary and senile mumblings of the prayers learnt unwillingly in youth chart his emotional ambivalence towards this patriarchal figure.

Nilakantha Das hardly attempts to justify or exonerate his father in Autobiography. In his smug narration there is no doubt or denial but pride and satisfaction at having fulfilled his father's prophecy and expectations. His father presents no contradiction, but silently supports all his son's public activities and efforts for reformation even when he is ostracized from the Brahmin society.

Unconsciously, Das's father becomes an epitome of paternal superiority-silent, supportive and sympathetic. Das also tends to oversimplify the complexities of personality. In an interesting chapter titled 'Srimati Radhamani Debi', he celebrates his wife's unstinting support in both private and public spheres in terse pithy words. Unlike Mishra he does not attempt lengthy introductions nor does he rationalize his wife's loyalty. His statements are directly reminiscent of his strict authoritarian presentation. Until her father-in-law's demise, Das's wife leads a life of homely responsibilities. His death liberates her from domestic duties and enables her to walk shoulder to shoulder with her husband in public life. Das again turns to her lucid and orderly transition from a housewife to a public activist in the episode where she deftly bails out her husband's party workers in his absence.

By contrast, Mishra largely ignores his wife's role in public life. Like the proverbial 'badi baigana' and 'pothi baigana', his views on female literacy and women's liberation come as confused and unclear. He claims to be the first man to send a Brahmin girl to Cuttack Girls' School and talks at length about the respective importance of boys and girls in society. Yet, two examples suffice to demonstrate his ambivalent attitude towards women. He comes closest to his ideals of youthful relationship between husband and wife in these lines; "Youth is the time for the bonds of love between husband and wife; the best things to share are the smile on lips and sweet loving glances. Spreading hands for money parched my lips and dried the water from my eyes."

Throughout his life he accepts pecuniary benefit from several sources, but doing so from his wife is a disgrace. Later, when Gopabandhu babu proposes to send one of the teachers at Satyabadi to Chakradharpur for the purpose of

Odia enlightenment, Mishra declares, "I was the only teacher to have passed B.T. examination and Gopabandhu babu did not wish to send me elsewhere. But Nilakantha babu's father was like a ripe leaf, you could not say when he would fall. Krupasindhu's wife was not willing to go out. My father was dead and I did not ask for my wife's opinion in such matters. Hence, I got ready to go to Singhbhumi."

The pride of his declaration allows the reader to assess for himself the intended and unintended levels of exposure.

A unique feature of the genre is that all portraits of other people in autobiographies contribute to the central self-portrait. The reverence with which Das talks about Satyabadi inevitably contributes to his self-portrait. Mishra largely remains uninvolved with the conception and inception of the school. It quickly becomes clear that Mishra is largely repentant about lost chances in distinctive jobs and continually feels constrained and out of place.

One of the rewards the autobiography offers Mishra is the chance to stand up and claim retribution for his hitherto ignored self. An interesting example of this is seen in the description of the circumstances leading to his becoming the principal at Satyabadi. The need to prove himself noble and unselfish some forty years later prompts him to write an elaborate account of the sequence of events. In the prefatory chapter What Shall I Write, Mishra states, "While I sit down to write this, I feel that those friends who have repeatedly requested me to write the story of my life and made me put it in writing it have made me appear as a witness in a court presided over by the public and there I say, 'I solemnly swear that I shall speak the truth, I shall not tell a lie, and except very personal matter, I shall not withhold anything.

So, the writing of his autobiography becomes an act of self-justification. Author, narrator and protagonist all interact to create an impression of confession and absolution. Even when talking about his guilt, he is looking for remittance. Conversely, the vehemence with which Das attacks Mishra's chronology about the handing over of charge as principal or the closing of Satyabadi is an outpour of the hurt he suffered when the school he had nurtured from its inception broke up. However, his overtly pungent remarks against Mishra fail to convince and the reader is put on guard because of the directness of their attack. The subtle and faintly shrewd remarks made by Mishra penetrate deeper so as to take the reader into confidence. The resulting intimacy between reader and author succeeds to win the readers and appeals for their sympathy. His persuasive tone smoothly glides the reader into unsuspecting acceptance.

Ironic overtones are dominant when Mishra talks about Gopabandhu, too. He says, "If you have to lose everything and be a homeless beggar, it should be under the influence of a person like Gopabandhu."

The sarcasm is obvious in these lines. Mishra surely did not aim to be a homeless beggar. For Nilakantha Das, however, Gopabandhu babu was a foster father, a superior associate and a constant source of strength. His real father plays only a peripheral role in the book. It is Gopabandhu babu who has firm hold on Das. Not once does he lament the lost opportunity of earning worldly riches. He becomes a teacher and later jumps into the fray of politics all at the behest of Gopabandhu babu. But he is unforgiving about the break up of Satyabadi. Remembering the painful incident, he writes, "That day in the middle of October, Gopabandhu babu was himself

present when he nearly broke the school. The way he sought to appease everyone pacified no one."

Satyabadi was an embodiment of his personal enthusiasm and national zeal for the formation of an ideal Odia society. He gave his best to the school and grieved when he was not accepted as the sole disciplinarian of the school. For this he never forgave Mishra. He also held Gopabandhu babu responsible for the breakdown of the school.

Both Das and Mishra were goaded by aims of Odia regeneration and reformation, yet their autobiographies reveal that neither was anti-British. They took to European learning and scholarship with exemplary eagerness and Mishra even nurtured hopes of serving under the British. More than freedom from the British, their attention is centred on fighting for the revival of the lost glory of Odisha and getting rid of the Bengali hegemony. For a number of years their nationalist activities were limited to serving the people of flood and famine affected areas and helping people get rid of the clutches of unjust and restrictive social customs. They aimed at working in collaboration with the British for the betterment of their community. The Satyabadi School was initially named Victoria M.E. School in honour of Queen Victoria, the then Empress of India. Justice Harihar Mahapatra writes, "The School had been named Victoria M.E. School after Queen Victoria when it had been started. Gopabandhu babu and his associates had no difference with the government at that time."

Interestingly none of them mention this fact in their autobiographies. As Brian Finney puts it, "There is the common practice of imperceptibly altering the past over the years so that it answers more closely the needs of the present."

Mishra's sojourn at Chakradharpur was motivated purely by the Odia movement. Only after the fierce rumblings of the non cooperation movement rocked the nation that he and the other associates of Gopabandhu Das stepped out of their myopic regional vision and embraced the national cause. Initially Mishra was not eager about the movement nor did he have much faith in Gandhi's claims. He criticizes, "I have always believed that the non violent policy has its place in the chaturtharthi ashrami's life in the Vaishnav religion, but not in politics."

Even Das had his reservations about Gandhiji' and his views on spinning. Das also appears critical about the vegetarian food habits preached by Gandhi.

There are many parallels between the autobiographies of Mishra and Das. They deal with the same set of socio-politico events. Their difference lies in the different perspectives adopted which in turn creates different versions of their retrospective retribution. However, this does not alter the truth or validity of their respective autobiographies. After all, autobiographies are not just a log of events, their real value lies in the interpretative truth they offer. They are judged by the amount of psychological insight they show. This brings us to Roy Pascal's claim, "If Darwin's or Freud's theories were proved to be false, it would not affect the quality of their autobiographies; or inversely, it is the

quality of their spiritual personalities, as recorded in their autobiographies, that provides the sufficient guarantee of the truth of their doctrines." The autobiographies of Mishra and Das together offer unparalleled insights into the mode of consciousness at that point in time when individual identities were crafted in the background of a confrontation between traditional and modern values and by corollary reflect upon the nature of modernity. Even if what they tell us is not literally accurate or only partially exact, they provide true evidence of their individuality.

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