

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 7 July 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil.

P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.



Autobiographies and Biographies of Great Leaders

In the history of every nation, leaders impact the lives of people not only of their own generation but every generation that would follow them. Abraham Lincoln, Vladimir Lenin, M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Periyar Ramasamy, B. R.

Ambedkar and Phule, for example, have had profound influence on the mental make-up of our modern world, social structure and intellectual development. Lives of scientists, inventors and business leaders like Thomas Edison, Einstein, Bill Gates and Narasimhamoorthy continue to inspire the young scholars and businesspersons in their endeavor in creating more wealth and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil. and P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism

more relevant knowledge. Some of these have written their autobiographies, and, for some others, only others have written their biographies.

However, both the autobiographies and biographies of such leaders among us have given us the most moving and candid accounts of the sorrows, sufferings and heart-aches, successes and failures of these leaders.

Autobiography and Biography in the Wider Indian Context

Autobiographical documents can be found in all cultures. But detailed autobiographies are rare in ancient India. For example, Thiruvalluvar or Kamban, two among the many celebrated poets of Tamil, did not choose to write their autobiography. Temples with impressive *gopurams* (entrance towers) may have some inscriptions or copper plates that reveal the name of the king or the queen, et al. behind the effort to construct such huge edifices, but no detailed autobiographical sketches. Except in one or two temples, even the images of the kings or the queens are not carved, while so much effort had gone into carving so many beautiful statues, sceneries and other artistic expressions in stone, mortar and/or bronze. Their names and deeds are buried in mythological stories, not in realistic biographical details. Gandhi was questioned why he should write his autobiography, when this was not done in Indian tradition earlier.

Autobiographies and Biographies Foster Nationalism

Thus, autobiography as a deliberate literary product is brought into existence only under certain conditions. One of the most important contextual factors is that autobiography flourishes well as a tool to foster nationalism, especially when a nation is under foreign yoke.

The term *nationalism* refers to

An ideology, offers an interpretation of the historical and contemporary reality in which a nation finds itself a critique of that reality together with a conceptionalization of an ideal or preferred reality as a goal to be striven for, and a plan or set of guidelines for researching that goal (*Encyclopedia Americana* 435).

In effect, nationalism can be used to mobilize people for political action by cultivating or even creating through propaganda and education, a national consciousness based on the existing perceptions of common identity which differentiates the group of people from other nationalities. In developing this nationalistic fervor, myths may also be of great use. Myths are defined and described in terms of a heroic, glorious or romanticized past or a conception of a threat to the existence of the nation.

A Wide Variety of Authors

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil. and P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism

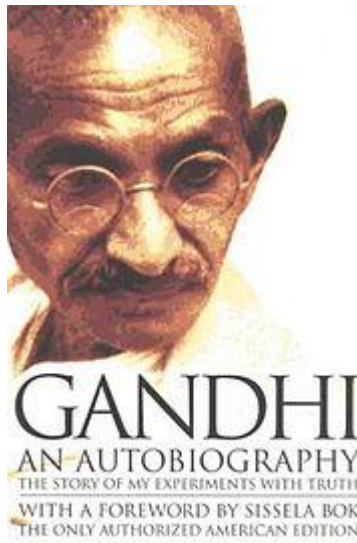
All kinds of men and women acting from all kinds of motives, have written their own lives. But probably all of them have acquired a certain detachment from the events they choose to record. Their experience, something in the nature of a conversation or a change of environment or injustice, imprisonment in which the writer attempts to declare and to justify the course of his or her life or particular action thereof, exploratory in which the act of writing used as a research tool or simply egocentric portraiture in which the writer assumes that his or her life is worth sharing with others. (*Mahatma Gandhi: The Man and His Message*, 108)

There are many leaders who have used their autobiographies as a tool of nationalism. Among them are Nehru and Gandhi. Nehru's *An Autobiography, Letters from a Father to his Daughters* and Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

Nehru's Autobiography

Nehru's *Autobiography*, which tells the story of his life and struggle, without a touch of self-pity or moral superiority, is one of the most remarkable books of the modern age. His Autobiography was written when he was in jail. As a story of national struggle, the autobiography influenced many readers in the past, and it continues to throw light on the happenings in India's freedom struggle. The autobiography is also a sympathetic study of the characters of some of the men and women who shaped India's destiny in those fateful days.

Gandhi's Autobiography



Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, tells the story of his numerous “experiments with truth.” Gandhi viewed his life as an ongoing experiment with truth in several layers. One could perhaps consider and describe every incident in his life as an experiment.

What is Meant by Experiment?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil. and P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism

The word *experiment* is, indeed, an interesting choice. In general plain English, it means a process, a process to find out the suitability of what is being experimented or tested for a purpose on hand. Dictionaries usually define experiment as “the act or test performed to demonstrate or illustrate a truth” (*Dictionary New Encyclopedic Edition 2004*). So, one has to be active, one has to test and one need not assume that he or she is on the correct track, one has the desire to get involved and act. Truth is not seen and assumed to be a changing variant, it is seen to be there already and is a constant. It is our process that can vary and adjust itself to reach and attain truth.

Gandhi’s life, then, became a continuing process to identify, reach and celebrate truth. His Truth is intended for the universal audience, but in its specific operation touched the lives of millions first of all in his country of birth, India, and it consists of nothing but those experiments. It is true that the story has taken the shape of an autobiography. Gandhi’s experiments in the political field are very well known and had its impact on movements of freedom around the world. His personal life, like in most autobiographies of public figures, did not receive detailed attention, as he was consumed by the public purpose and goals.

Overcoming Language Interference

Gandhi wrote his original piece in his mother tongue, Gujarati. His writing in English was vetted by an anonymous friend. There is a flavor of Indianness in his writing and at the same time, Gandhi expressed himself well to the audience around the world. Gujarati or Indian nuances do not stop his readers from reaching his heart.

In a vivid and direct style, he recounts the early scenes from his childhood, the years he spent in London and Africa, his early involvement in public life, the fight against the British and his friendship with great people. He shares with us his views on life, love, national duty, personal fulfillment and his unique vision of India. This is a fascinating insider’s account not only of his life, but also of the forces that shaped India’s history during the early years of India’s struggle for freedom.

To Conclude

The autobiographies of Nehru and Gandhi portray not only their life, but also their struggle and participation in national movement. It is not that they tend to show their nationalism through writing but it becomes necessary for them to document nationalism in their autobiography as it is part of their life. Thus their autobiographies become a tool of nationalism.

References

Gandhi, M.K. *An Autobiography*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan publishing House, 1984.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. *A Autobiography, Letters from A Father to his Daughter*. New Delhi:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil. and P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism

S.Chand and Company, 1974.

Byrne, Donn. *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man and His Message*. Bombay Orient Longman, 1984.

Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature. New York: Merriam-Webster, Inc., Publishers, 1996.

Author, not known. *Dictionary New Encyclopedic Edition*. Columbus, OH: School Specialty Publishing. 2004

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor in English
Vel Tech Technical University
Avadi
Chennai 6000062
Tamilnadu, India
subha_apsara@yahoo.co.in

P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.
Lecturer in English
Vel Tech Engineering College
Avadi
Chennai 6000062
Tamilnadu, India
P_revathi@rediffmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. Subhashini Meikandadevan, M.A., M.Phil. and P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.
Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism