

Chapter II

Life Writing: A Historical and Theoretical Approach

2.i Terminology and its Associated Meanings

Biography is defined in a number of ways in different periods of literary, social and cultural history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines biography as the history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature. The same dictionary describes it as a written record of the life of an individual or the life-course of a man or other living being, the 'life-history' of an animal or plant (OED, Vol. II). Comparatively a later phenomenon or a literary form than others like poetry or drama, biography emerged in late seventeenth century. The name connotes a relatively full account of a person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament and milieu, as well as the facts of the subject's activities and experiences.

Like biography, autobiography is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the writing of one's own history, the story of one's life written by himself (OED, Vol. I). Here subject is also the author; it is generally written in the first person and covers most or an important phase of the author's life. The term 'autobiography' was first used in 1809 at the height of the Romantic period. The first formal use of the word in publishing was W.P. Scargill's volume *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister* in 1834 (Abbs,1984,513). Semantically the syllables in autobiography, 'autos', 'bios' and 'graphe' mean self, life and the act of writing respectively. It is literally a person's recording of his own life through introspection and self-analysis. Thus, biography is a relatively full account of the facts of a man's life. Personal accounts of individual lives are alternatively known as life story, life history and life sketch. The term 'life writing' is perhaps, more appropriate to collectively describe autobiography, biography, memoirs, diaries, personal letters and essays. Be it biography, autobiography, a memoir or even a life sketch, there is always a hidden element of inspiration. Behind every life writing there must be this practice generated from within or prompted by outer stimuli.

The autobiography as a literary genre has received a great deal of critical attention in the recent past. The French critic Philippe Lejeune gives modern definition of autobiography as 'a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own

existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality' (Birch,2009,83). Its importance as a valuable means of self-examination, self-creation and self-regeneration has been recognized. This self-conscious act 'aspires to capture the process of self-recognition and hopes that it would assist the pilgrim towards self-realisation' (Suhud,2009,8). Autobiography, indeed, provides a tremendous scope for self-evolution and speaks not only about writers and incidents but also about their experiences. The actual nature of autobiography was discussed for the first time in history by Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960). He delineates,

Autobiography is historical in method and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world. (Pascal,1960,8)

Illustrating the point, he further says,

Every experience is a nucleus from which energies radiate in various directions. In any worthwhile life there is a dominant direction that is not accidental; therefore ultimately the life is a sort of graph linking the experiences. One should have a worthwhile life to write an autobiography (Pascal,1960,17).

Autobiography is to be distinguished from memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author knew or had opportunity to observe and experience. Private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in a person's life, written for personal use and pleasure, with little or no thought of publication are also important sources (Abrams,1957,15). An autobiographer is expected to be impersonal and objective in self-portrayal. A memoirist may sound more personal and subjective. The voice of any auto/biographical work brings together narration and interpretation of the author. The most important aspect of an autobiography is the individuality of the experience and expression. The narrative is a powerful way of making meaning out of experiences. It is the means by which the autobiographer understands and expresses his own identity (Eakin,1999,100). Autobiographies have always been a popular form of writing because the unique experiences of an individual provide the readers a sense of joy in knowing others in addition to instructional values contained in them. Biographies are similar kind of literature. The biographer carries in his voice the power to define people and their places in history, to characterize a nation and transmit its value and to support or undermine accepted cultural values (Bakscheider,1999,8).

Life writing of a woman is all the more useful for manifold roles of the subject and the dynamics of society that act upon her. It has the scope to be interpreted in the light of gender perspectives. The 'woman's text' makes use of the domestic space and its inhabitants to commemorate a certain version of traditional culture at a time when culture is believed to be both in transition and in crisis. It is also important to see that woman, who is often taught to be submissive and docile, is attempting at self-expression by revealing her innermost feelings. A woman's autobiography generally deals with the various relationships like those with her parents, siblings and also with her spouse, children and other women of her family. Her identity is established on the basis of these relationships. Somewhat differently, a man's autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, achievements and the world of work. He focuses less on his familial relationships. It is generally observed that men record external events, geographical features and climatic conditions, discoveries, feats of endurance, observations on native flora and fauna, whereas women concentrate on the minutiae of daily life, the pleasures and discomforts of relationships, the personal feeling of the place that is the new or familiar home, the anxieties and loneliness (Hooten,1992,33). Thus, women's autobiographies deal mainly with the emotional state of women and their social relationships. Writing gives a kind of 'inward freedom' to the writer in releasing emotions; when it is life writing. Nostalgia is one of the constant features of life writing.

2. ii Historical Background of Life Writing in the West and India

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans produced short, formal lives of individuals. Biographical writings began in the early accounts of monarchs and heroes; for example, in the Old Testament stories and in the Greek, Celtic and Scandinavian epics. The most famed surviving example is the *Parallel Lives* by the Greek biographer Plutarch (c 46-120). It covered twenty-three Greeks and twenty-three Romans, arranged in pairs. Its English translation by Sir Thomas North in 1579 was the source of plots for Shakespeare's plays on Roman subjects.

The three major missions of humanities are religion, politics and literary activities. They are also the basic factors for most of the life writings. The religious preceptors took the privilege of getting the lives of their leaders documented as extraordinary and different from the common men. Medieval authors wrote generalized chronicles of the deeds of a king, as well as hagiographies. The hagiographies were the stylized lives of Christian

saints, often based on pious legends than on facts (Abrams,1957,15). In the Middle Age and in the later periods also, life writings of religious celebrities sought to establish their own faith. Intense emotions replaced normal standard with reverence for their subjects. The persons who stood out from the masses were endowed with unusual qualities, extraordinary charm and social authority. Their biographers had the natural tendency to magnify their heroes (Thayer,1920,147). The portraits of most of them were imaginary and drawn by authors being as ignorant as their readers. These hagiographical writings narrated facts in such a way that the readers would get answers to their curiosity for a certain faith. Motivation came from devotion to that particular religious ideology. The lives of the medieval saints were documented in a graceful style with a chosen vocabulary. There was uncritical acceptance of myths to prove sainthood of religious apostles and martyrs.

The modern biography appeared in England in the seventeenth century. Secular biography emerged only after the recognition of individuals beyond the lives of kings and saints. The style began with William Roper's *Life of Thomas More* (1626) and culminated in Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). The greatest instance is considered to be the *Lives* by Izaak Walton written between 1640 and 1678. Samuel Johnson (1709-84) was one of the most famous figures of English literature. He had to his credit *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-81) covering short biographies and assessments of fifty-two poets. They must have provided the model for the 'exhaustive, monumental nineteenth century biographies' such as A.P. Stanley's *Life of Arnold* and Lord Marley's *Gladstone* (Bhattacharjee,2004,6).

The beginning of autobiography can be traced to the impulse in an individual to write about vital religious experiences — to record the stages by which the individual loses his/her identity to celebrate God's divine power. History of autobiography in the western world dates back to St Augustine's (354-430) autobiographical work, *Confessions* written in c. 399. It is commonly accepted as the first major attempt to narrate individual experience which revolves round a vital religious experience or conversion.

Parallel to such literary expressions in Europe, the Indian scenario too did not look like a literary vacuum. Rather, it showed popular forms of performance and literary cultures that had their own histories which were however not always based on proven historical records or facts. The *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta belonging to the seventh century is

regarded as the earliest biography in Indian history. The biography writing tradition in Persian, known as *siyar*, came to India in the early medieval period. In the Mughal era, biographies were written by scholars as well as peers of the court and members of the nobility. Banarasidas' *Ardhakathanataka* (1641) written in Hindi verse form is considered to be the first Indian autobiography. Since then autobiography seems to have surpassed biography in the country possibly because of the inherent tradition of intense self-scrutiny (*atma-jnana*).

The form of life writing as perceived by the west was quite alien to the Indians before the arrival of the British. The entry of English language and literature has great significance in India's literary history. The autobiographical literature in English must have inspired some Indians to write about their life histories in the western mode. Bengal being the first province to come in contact with the English, most of the early Indian autobiographies were written by select Bengali elites. Rammohun Roy's (1772-1833) *Autobiographical Letter* in 1832-33 was a pioneering example of the genre in Indian literature. Rammohun was considered a 'valuable product' of the complex interactions between a literate, multi-lingual Indian culture and English language and European print culture (Pollock,2004,220). Assamese literature of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a small part of the intellectual movement centering Calcutta, known as Renaissance. The term 'Renaissance' was first used in a specific European context, to describe the great era from the fourteenth century till the sixteenth century, when the socio-cultural scenario of Europe underwent a spectacular transformation. Its meaning has been extended through the ages. In the nineteenth century Indian context, rapid changes took place in political, economic, religious, social, cultural and literary fields similar to the period of Renaissance. Sushobhan Sarkar (1900-82) observed,

The impact of British rule, bourgeois economy and modern western culture was felt in Bengal and produced an awakening known as the Bengal Renaissance (Sarkar,1946,3).

Recently Subrata Dasgupta explained the term 'Bengal Renaissance' as the revolutionary awakening of the Indian mind in the nineteenth century (Dasgupta, 2010,2,352). The first Indian to write a full length autobiography in English was Lutfullah in 1857. He presented a fairly readable picture of the Indian society of his time. He was critical of the evil customs such as *sati* among the Hindus and 'circumcision' among the Muslims. The other autobiographical works of the nineteenth century are Rakhhal Das Halder's (1832-

87) *The English Diary of an Indian Student 1861-2* (1903) and Lal Behari Dey's (1824-1892) *Recollections of My Schools Days* (1870). Narmadashankar Lalshankar Dave (1833-86) was a pioneer to introduce the genre in any regional language of the country. Narmad was a Gujarati poet and wrote his autobiography *Mari Hakikat* (1866) in Gujarati at the age of thirty-three. He resolved 'to institute the practice of writing the autobiography which does not exist among us' (Suhrod,2009,10). The same spirit was present in other autobiographical writings of the nineteenth century. Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) wrote *Atmajeevancharitra* (1892), the first autobiography in Odia. He was determined to write it because he thought that the Odia language was particularly deficient in autobiographies.

Rassundari Debi (1809-99) wrote *Amar Jeevan* (1868) in Bengali. This was a remarkable autobiography as it was written by a housewife stealing time from her everyday jobs. She raised question on the worth of a woman's life. The Maharani of Cooch Behar, Sunity Devei (1864-1932) wrote *Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921). She was also a proponent of women's rights. The life of Haimabati Sen (1866-1933) was a story of the making of a 'new woman'. Motivational force came from her search of independence and identity.

The new forms of writing got widely disseminated after commercial printing had taken root in the 1830s and 1840s in the metropolitan centres of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and later in Lucknow, Benaras, Delhi, Pondicherry, Bangalore and other cities. The initiators had a 'self-reflexivity and transparent reformist agenda' (Blackburn and Dalmia, 2004,5). Fakir Mohan Senapati was a spokesman of Odia nationalism. In Gujarat Narmadashankar initiated the *Asmita* movement which was an embodiment of Gujarati national self-consciousness. Hence, the new way of writing about one's own life, was a part of nationalist consciousness. On the other way, life stories of historical figures tend to be seen largely from the nationalist perception in the country. A modern literary-historical sensibility developed at that time, as a part of a gradual movement from merely recording the past to rewriting it within a wider public debate about national origins, linguistic identities and political entitlements (Blackburn and Dalmia, 2004,2). In *A History of Indian Literature*, S. K. Das observed that biographies were becoming popular in all Indian languages by the end of the nineteenth century (Das,1991,261). The lives of social reformers and national heroes were widely read. M. K. Naik was of the view that

biography, like prose fiction gained a distinct identity in India with the spread of western education (Naik,1985,Introduction). After the coming of *Eminent Victorians* by Lytton Strachey in 1918, it became the major Western model in this field. For some years, modern Indian biographical literature was influenced by the Victorian ethos and the portrayal was mostly linear. Over the years, life writing has come of its own and captured the imagination of readers.

The first form of biography in Assamese was the *Caritas* or the *Carit Puthis* – life accounts of the Vaishnava saints of Assam. They constitute a remarkable legacy of the *Bhakti* movement initiated by Sankaradeva (1449-1568). They are one of the best expressions of the Vaishnava movement emerging from a sense of intense devotion. The *Guru Carita Katha* is a famous compilation of biographies covering the lives of twenty five Vaishnava saints, more particularly of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva (1489-1597) and their apostles spread over a period of about two centuries. Prevailing through an oral tradition ritually performed in the *namghar* (prayer hall) as a part of the prayer session it got compiled in the hands of anonymous devotees in the form of manuscript, which was published in 1987 by Gauhati University. Scholars are not unanimous regarding its date and author as it had no mention of it. From the late sixteenth century, there emerged a written tradition of composing such *Caritas* in verse to render devotion to the Vaishnava saints in and around the ambience of *sattras*. They had a wide range of audience and continue to be so, mostly in the *namghars*. The authors were more concerned with the man and his mission in the world, as if, they had a predestined role to play. It was a means to spread Vaishnavism. Superhuman traits were instilled to show the godliness of the saints. Some other faiths in medieval India also had similar biographies of their saints. The *Janam-Sakhis* of the sixteenth century were about the lives of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and his followers written in Hindi or West Punjabi. There were hymnic poems of Kabir (1440-1518) in Western Hindi, the *Caitanya-Caritamrita* of Caitanya (1486-1534) in Bengali and the *Abhangas* of Tukaram (1588-1649) in Middle Marathi.

The Assamese *Caritas* come nearer to the hagiographies, similar to their medieval European counterparts. Hagiographies carried philosophy of the creed and its social programme, while explaining the life story of a ‘saint’ (Dutta,2014,211). The *Caritas* like the Middle Age Christian literature emphasised submission of the individual to the religious order. They recorded ‘not the whole life but a few key incidents, not the man but

the way he reflected the universal faith' (Garraty,1957,55). The authors' lifelong conditioning helped in the imagination of the subject as the 'total man'. Reliability of accounts in hagiographies is doubtful for some 'unholy alliance' between fact and fiction (Bhattacharjee,2004,5).

From the thirteenth century, the Ahoms introduced in Assam the tradition of recording the *Buranjis* which were chronicles centring round the Ahom royalty and the capital. They did not have the detailed individual accounts. The tradition of chronicle writing both in the Tai-Ahom language and Assamese continued down to the early twentieth century. It might indirectly have inspired the Vaishnava followers to write down the lives of their *gurus*. Madhavadeva was the earliest exponent of the *Caritas* who imbibed the life of Sankaradeva after his death. Then on began the two parallel traditions of memorising the life and achievements of Vaishnava leaders and devotees of prominence, one through oral presentations, the other in written form. Chanting of these sacred texts took the form of ritual performances. Those were later transcribed as recited in a style of colloquium and the written document accounted to be a significant work of Assamese prose as it was then at its initial stage of development. Alokaranjan Dasgupta, observed that in the *Caritas*, 'the identifying trait is that of fervent devotion' (Dasgupta, 2004,158).

Going beyond the debatable points in the *Caritas*, the *Guru Carita Katha* contains ample information regarding the society of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is essentially a humane document portraying human situations. It depicts the social system of medieval Assam. The saint poets did not advocate detachment from worldly life as a requirement for the pursuit of *bhakti* or devotion. They advocated normal family life. The caste system existed in the society rigour of which was however much ameliorated as a result of the Bhakti movement, and the Brahmins were held in high position. Apart from the priestly class and agriculturist masses, there were references of various professional people like weavers, rearers of silk cocoons, potters, wood-carvers, blacksmiths, oil pressures, fishers, net makers and barbers. There were centres of learning called *chatrasalas* which admitted pupils across the castes. The moment Mahendra Kandali, the teacher of Sankaradeva praised the talent of his pupil Sankara, several other students left the school and made a complaint of it to Raghava Acharyya, a Brahmin *pundit*. Acharyya asked Kandali not to praise a *sudra* pupil. On doing so, the Brahmin pupils of his class would be compelled to leave learning. There was a situation when Madhavadeva's elder brother,

Damodardeva was worried to perform the last rites of his father because of the high demands of the Brahmin priests in the social functions. Sankaradeva translated some chapters of the *Bhagvata* into Assamese. He was then warned by a Brahmin that he being a *sudra* should not write or read the *Bhagvata*. A man would lose his Brahmin quality on taking food in a *sudra* family. In the affluent houses there were bonded labourers. However the institution of servitude was not rigorous and the slaves lived among the family. One conversation with *Badula Aata* is recorded where he admitted that he had no rice to feed but had five slaves. The slaves serving in the house of Sankaradeva had the same dignity as that of the monks of the *sattra*. But they were not always kindly treated and they often changed hands. The slaves were known differently as *golam*, *bahata*, *bandha* and *lathariya* (Neog,1987,23,53,162,379).

No denying the fact that the *Guru Carita Katha* is an invaluable source material of history and much like any other source, it has its own bias. Besides the preconceived feeling of reverence for the saints, the presentation was based on truth as perceived by the narrator. An attempt to understand the narrator's motive and his attachment to the society shows the place of the *Caritas* in between hagiography and history. In a historical process, the medieval Assamese religious tradition developed and was transmitted over several generations. There was a gradual influence of changing time and context.

2.iii Emergence of Modern Assamese Life Writing

Modern life writing in Assam, like in most parts of India, appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. As far as the content is concerned, the term 'modern' in regard to literature, has been a matter of debate. In terms of genre, autobiographies and biographies of this period certainly have come into sight as modern forms of life writing. They share more distinction than commonality with the *Caritas* of the past. The spirit of Assamese autobiographical writings was not a direct legacy of medieval biographical tradition. Far from the *Carita* tradition of eulogising lives, there was an attitude of self-revelation and self-explanation. The ideals rational man replaced the earlier notion of a perfect spiritual man. In terms of circumstances, purpose and narrative structure, the two cannot be placed at the same plane.

The nineteenth century Assam under colonial dispensation brought about a train of changes in life and society of the people. Trade and commercial prospects and the

possibility of tea industry in Assam attracted the British East India Company. A gradual transformation was taking place in political, economic, judicial and administrative systems under the new and alien rule. With the spread of Christianity and introduction of western model of education, there was considerable increase of literary efforts. There was a simmering discontent against the British hegemony at the banishment of Assamese language in all governmental transactions and educational institutions and introduction of Bengali in its place and at the imposition of stringent revenue measures on the people. Simultaneously there was the growth of a new class of people with employment and patronage coming from the British. Many of the educated youths born of these families went to Calcutta for pursuing higher education. Those going to Calcutta for studies were the forerunners of modernity. They gave a shape and voice to Assamese identity-consciousness. Under the new circumstances, Assamese language and literature acquired a new stage of development. Gradually, more people from Assam undertook writing in Assamese to assert themselves from foreign domination. The notion of secular individual, cultural identity, imperialist exploration and spread of print culture were a few factors giving birth to a new genre of literature in Assam that is life writing. Writing of memoirs and autobiography was now considered as a respectable way of expression. There are enough things to be studied and interpreted from a crop of select lives. A thorough reading of them is a fruitful exercise to obtain insights of the age.

Hemchandra Baruwa (1835-97), the eminent lexicographer was also an author of a brief but useful autobiography called *Atmajeevan Charit*. It covered a small part of his life. Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua's autobiography, being a complete account, *Sadar-Aminor-Atma-Jeevani* was the earliest one written in Assamese that came in the year 1890. In 1834, Harakanta *Sadar Amin* was first working up with his thoughts and activities which he recorded in his diary for posterity. The diary is an intimate record of an individual's personal history, it 'affirms an inner reality of the writer' and, therefore, more reliable (Beauchamp, 1985, 40). Harakanta's diary was a record of events performed, happening or recurring every day. The writer was concerned with the day to day experience and his immediate reaction to the outside world. It comprised fact-in-the-making more than analysis.

Harakanta Sarma Majundar Barua had been a descendant of the erstwhile Ahom aristocracy. During the British rule, he was serving the British in different positions; he

started as a copyist and rose to the high post of Deputy Magistrate. He started recording the events of his life from the age of nineteen. His primary concern was to record his life journey. Depiction of the society was not his objective yet there are mentions of social organization, land and people, their relations with the British administrators and revenue system of the nineteenth century Assam. Most of the events are dated and have historic value. This way, Harakanta brought historical context to his work. At the same time it could express momentary experiences without the need to explain them in terms of the past or future. Gobinda Prasad Sarma, a critic on Assamese biographies has compared this work with the diary of Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) (Sarma,2013,116). Written in the seventeenth century, this is a widely read diary in the English language. Covering a period of nine years, 1660-1669, Pepys wrote not merely about his home, family and friends, but was also interested in making a summary of his contemporary events, like the coronation of King Charles II, the Great Plague of London, the Second Dutch War and the Great Fire of London. Pepys' diary is a primary source for the Restoration period in England. After Harakanta, only a few Assamese wrote their autobiographies in the nineteenth century. Therefore, he could not be ascribed as the founder of a new literary tradition- for a tradition implies a sense of continuity. This diary was later on edited and published by his great grandson Kumud Chandra Bardaloi in 1960.

From the point of publication, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Mor Jivan Sowaran* (My Recollections) was the first autobiography in Assam that came out periodically in the *Banhi* from 1922. It was published as a book in 1944. Assam was then in need of a stimulation. The pride of this land had suffered a setback ever since the Burmese invasion followed by the British occupation. More importantly, there had been a colonial tendency to homogenize regional cultures and tastes. The British had a fair acquaintance with Bengal and its people and had a tendency to treat people around Bengal as distant cousins of the Bengalis. In reaction to this, the Assamese consciousness emerged through the pioneering activities of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruwa and Gunabhiram Baroah (1834-94) in addition to the efforts of the American Missionaries. Gunabhiram Baroah's patriotism inspired by this awakening is behind the writing of the first modern Assamese biography on Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Some biographers remind the reader of his/her similar situation with the subject. Gunabhiram was one of them because he wrote about his 'enlightening' association with Anandaram. Jogendranarayan Bhuyan (1939-2010), the biographer of Gunabhiram Baroah, remarked

that Gunabhiram was not only a close relative of Anandaram, but also his spiritual successor (Bhuyan,2001,156). *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jeevan Charitra* (1880) is a detailed account of Anandaram's ancestry, day-to-day activities, food, dress, modern outlook, endeavours, and philosophy of life including some shortcomings in the hero's personality. Gunabhiram, the historian and the biographer rolled into one in this remarkable work. It reflects social history of three scores. Here the author considered the subject in an objective manner.

Suryya Kumar Bhuyan (1894-1964)'s true passion was history, but he had also to his credit large and diversified works. He authored a good number of biographies, *Gopal Krishna Gokhale* (1916), *Rabindranath Thakur* (1920), *Anundoram Borooahr Jeevan-Carit* (1920), *Ramani Gabhoru* (1951), *Harihar Aataa* (1962), *Lachit Barphukan* (1962), *Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha* (1975). A few of these chosen lives have historical importance. His biographical sketches are well accepted and used as a source of historical studies. The life of Anundoram Borooah is a valuable document reflecting some aspects of social history of Assam in the early modern period. Suryya Kumar being a historian, lent to his analysis of contemporary concerns a unique vantage point. He felt that it was a very challenging task to locate sources for narrating the life of this famous nineteenth century B.A., I.C.S., Barrister-at-law and famous Sanskritist from Assam. Because Anundoram's Civil Service career was spent in Bengal and he had little association with his native land. Suryya Kumar, in his own words was committed to pen this 'great figure' and, therefore, tried his best in collecting Anundoram's publications, met some of his friends and teachers and also visited the places associated with his life. The man comes out in this biography. The biographer reveals the underlying ideals of Anundoram and the various social and intellectual factors. The events in *Anundoram Borooahr Jeevan-Carit* are presented in a linear chronological pattern and the life-philosophy is also lucidly narrated. Gobinda Prasad Sarma comments that inclusion of smaller details is a positive aspect of the biography of Anundoram Borooah. He moreover argues that in spite of some shortcomings, this biography was a turning point as the art of writing Assamese biography was attaining maturity (Sarma,1986,129,141).

The *Atmajeevani* (Autobiography) of Haribilash Agarwala was posthumously published by his grandson Tarunkumar Agarwala in 1967. Benudhar Sharmah (1894-1981), in his foreword to this book stated that this autobiography was 'going beyond its general scope

by catering to a brief sketch of economic, social and political conditions of northern parts of Assam' (Translation by the present author) (Agarwala, 1967, 2). Haribilash traced the history of his father Navarangaram Kedia's (1811-65) coming to Assam and his subsequent settlement.

In a similar pattern, the autobiography of Lakshminath Bezbaroa carries his intellectual persona. Lakshminath belonged to two centuries- the later part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century. In *Mor Jivan Sowaran*, Lakshminath covered his life from birth in 1864 which he wrongly thought to be 1868, till 1930. He died on 26 March 1938 at Dibrugarh. His autobiography is one of the most readable narratives bearing testimony to his concern for his motherland Assam. It is a mine of information not only for its account of the life of Lakshminath Bezbaroa but also for the social milieu of the time.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah's autobiography, *Mor Sonwarani* (My Reminiscences) is a revelatory account of his life and the agenda behind his literary and social career. It was published in 1971. He wanted to share with the younger generation his mature wisdom and knowledge of life. In his autobiography, the 'self' was placed at the centre, but he did not live in isolation. A social activist is always a sum-total of his society, milieu and time. Apart from his literary skills, Padmanath had a historically oriented mind. Historians hesitate to express those insights and thoughts which are not always supported by data but based on intuitive inferences. But his memoirs are not restrained by the compulsion of evidence. In Padmanath's account, one would see the conversion of the inner self into a social and political self. He arranged his writing in small sections, dealing with specific themes covering the main phases of his life. But he never dissolved himself in narrating other events.

Benudhar Rajkhowa was a senior government official under the British. His autobiography, *Mor Jivan Dapon* (The Mirror of My Life) inevitably mirrored his experiences and inner mind. Written in about 1941, it was published in 1969. The 'dedication' of this autobiography was in the manner of a foreword. Benudhar described how hurriedly he took to the recording of his life lest he would not find time at all to do it later. He revealed his intention of writing his autobiography; it would allow him to examine his own life and draw lessons from the mistakes of his life for the benefit of the next generation. Unlike the soul-searching of the early religious life writers, his self-

examination was to convert his private emotions into public one. He presented a vivid portrayal of his experience of the national movement in his life-story. At the end of the autobiography, Benudhar Rajkhowa appended three sections each one being of introductory character. The first section dealt with the notes on his family members, the second one dealt with a few biographical sketches of renowned persons, the last one gave a small amount of information regarding the books authored by him.

Nalinibala Devi (1898-1977) was one of the earliest women from Assamese society to record their life-history. Her autobiography titled *Eri Aha Dinbor* (The Bygone Days) was published in 1976. It was a narrative in the style of a memoir. Nalinibala was a classic example of a spirited woman who in spite of suffering the reverses never lost hope. She never kept her aloof from the society. Self-expression for her meant a celebration of her power of the soul to expand and reach out to the external world. It had been arranged in three sections- covering her life from childhood to public life, emotions and experiences of her literary journey. Each section had a number of subsections with a title of the appropriate themes. Nalinibala included some of her correspondences- both personal and political and poetic compositions. She also included a brief but inspiring essay by Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) entitled *Lovely Assam*. In the concluding part, Nalinibala appended a few obituaries of her kin that left her sad for the entire life. She sustained dictates of patriarchy but she did not give up her creative endeavours. She was a remarkable personality and she had her share of honour and recognition, an exclusive domain of man for that time.

The autobiography of Rajabala Das is *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti* (Memory of Three Scores and Ten). Rajabala, the former Principal of Handique Girls' College resolved to write down her memories and got it completed by 1971. It was the first Assamese autobiography by a woman. This was a small volume of hundred and fifteen pages yet of high value with historical importance (Barua,2004,1). This autobiography is testimony to a very individual kind of confidence and courage. Rajabala mentioned in the 'objectives' that she was writing her life trying to document the real story of the growth and transformation of Assamese women as seen throughout her life. She specified that her autobiography was an account of her life built up with her memory. Her preoccupation with education, self-esteem and a space of her own, were the basic concerns of her

autobiography. Her life-story does not voice a kind of protest but it has a strong sense of freedom in it.

Autobiography came into being when the individual became conscious of his/her 'self'. It was a subjective thinking and feeling entity distinguished from everything objective and impersonal. Private emotions and individual conscience replaced some of the functions attributed to God in traditional theology. With the secularization of autobiography, self-examination turns out to be different from spiritual soul-searching. This 'self', or the 'I', as it becomes consciously aware of its own existence, 'shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself' (Olney, 1988, 21). The word 'self' can be subjected to various levels of interpretation and the nature of the autobiographical writing depends to a great extent on how one defines it. There are two possibilities, namely the 'self' which knows, suffers, desires and remembers, may be termed the historical self as it is a person's identity in time and space and the 'self' may be termed the a-historical, transcendental self when it is concerned with pure consciousness within it. The nine narratives chosen for the present study formed a fraction of early modern Assamese literature having a close and intimate relationship with real life and the society around.

Literature in India- poetry, drama, religio-philosophical works and commentaries on them were earlier dominated by religious ethos; gradually rational outlook and new ideas drove them. This holds true in respect of Assamese literature also. Novelty came to Assamese literature through the secular writings like novel, short story and life writing. They bore a distinct identity of their own because of historical reasons effecting Assam's socio-cultural conditions.

2. iv Life Writing and History

The meaning of history, as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) is a written narrative constituting a continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events, especially those connected with a particular country, people or individual. It is also defined as the whole train of events connected with a particular country, society, person, thing, etc. and forming the subject of his or its history (OED, Vol VII). In this sense, the word 'history' came to be used since late fifteenth century in west Europe. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) stated that the history of the world is but the biography of

great men. He asserted in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* that heroes shape history through both their personal attributes and divine inspiration (Carlyle,1840). This kind of certainty demonstrated the general idea of the time that biographies were very important for understanding of society. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) utilized memoirs, diaries, letters, diplomatic reports and original narratives of eye-witnesses as the primary sources to gather information for his historical writings. For him, history was not simply an academic subject but ‘the knowledge of history of mankind is the common property of humanity’ (Marwick, 1989,38,40). Traditionally the lives of people in power were the centre of history writing. E. H. Carr found history as the biography of great men to be ‘a reputable dictum’ still in the twentieth century (Carr,1990,45). But new facets of political and social history can emerge from the life stories of people from a different social category. It depends on the choice of the individual author.

Self centeredness is an important characteristic of an autobiography. Yet, an autobiographer does never limit the scope of his life only to personal things and goes on explaining the contexts. An autobiography reflects how the personal and public spheres of life relate to and effect one another. In the autobiographies of public figures, the writers’ selves get dissolved in narrating other events, characters and places. An autobiography being a life-history is surely associated with reality. Fact is the soul of it. There is a process of selection and rejection of facts with emphasis on certain aspects of life. The autobiographer seeks genesis of his/her present condition and considers only those facts helpful in the evolution of the self. It recreates life through the creative arrangement of facts. Likewise, the primary task of a historian is to understand the past, constituted of events and experiences. But an autobiographer’s treatment of fact is quite different from that of a historian. A historian is more concerned with the results and explanation of events while an autobiographer is concerned with the events themselves.

As a source of history, memory has recently become an important category. While making an understanding of memory, Hannah Ewence observed that ideas about space and place are encoded with individual and collective identity (ies), memories and histories (Ewence,2013,162). Memory based historical studies prescribe for analysis of the past representations. Along with transmission of information from the past to the present, memory assigns duties. It depicts not only what it was but also what ought to be.

Along with time, several characters and events gain significance, they grow larger than life.

A theoretician of social memory, Maurice Halbwachs contrasted memory and history as two contradictory ways of dealing with the past. In his view, history starts when social memory and continuous tradition stop operating. As such, there is only one history, but there are as many collective memories as there are human communities (Halbwachs, 1980). Jacques Le Goff has made an interesting point in his book, *History and Memory* that the exteriorization of memory in the form of documentation is at the root of the conceptual separation of 'history' from 'memory' (Goff, 1992). History is today considered by many as yet another genre of story. In fact history (writing of what actually happened) and story (event imagined to resemble history) etymologically remain inseparably associated (Davees,2007,4). Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) makes the distinction of a memoir and history in a very interesting way. He published his memoirs as *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (2003). One of his interesting books written about that time is *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (1995). The time frame of both these books is same. But he calls one a memoir and the other a history. In his view, history is what happens, seen from outside, memoirs about what happens seen from inside (Hobsbawm, 2003,Introduction). It is possible to understand the implications of a memoir only when we study the subject with some reliable tools available to us.

John J. Arnold considered three reasons for writing history as 'enjoyment or pleasure, opportunity to study human nature and to think differently about oneself, that is to realize one's own creativity' (Arnold,2000,119-120). He seemed to be confused as to how the role of a historian should be different from that of a literary writer. There might be difference between past and present. Gerhard Stilz thinks that the autobiographer can bridge this gap by borrowing the models and devices of historiography which help him to show how the complicated state of present affairs can be convincingly derived and explained by relating it to the well arranged steps performed in the past (Spacks,1999,20). According to Keith Jenkins, history is, in fact, historiography which is considered not as an extra to the study of history but as actually constructing it. He observes,

When we study history we are not studying the past but what historians have constructed about the past. (Jenkins,2003, 56)

What had been traditionally considered anti-historical is treated now as contribution to historical knowledge. Myth, for example, was the antonym to history. Arthur Marwick considers the objective of history as to challenge and subside myths (Marwick, 1989, 14). But the scope of history is getting wider with time. Now a days, memory, fantasy, narrative and myth are found to be continuously in interaction with history, culture and power. All it brings are experiences of continuity and difference (Walia, 2001,63).

A person is always known in terms of his involvement with his environment. A close reading of personal essays reveals the whole world lived by the narrator. The problems and possibilities of the life concerned are very much of the society inhabited by the subject. Individual personhood is culturally constructed and, therefore, life histories may be considered as cultural representations. Historical realities come through it. In Indian context, life writing can be accepted as ‘a historically persistent and socially pervasive form of expression’ (Arnold and Blackburn,2004,6). A recent trend of life studies looks at the interaction of the aspects of culture and politics in a person. Paula R. Backscheider remarked that cultural history of a nation, its anxieties, needs and aspirations over the years, could be built out of its biographies (Backscheider,1999,39). Personal feelings might be recognized in the multiple contexts of psychology, philosophy and history. John Eakin approached autobiography not only as a literary genre but also as a part of a lifelong process of identity formation (Eakin,2008, 34). It is an autobiography that makes human nature behind an image understandable to others. It tries to open up the reasons behind a particular life style, way of thinking and one’s encounter with the animate and inanimate world. A subject while portraying his/her self-image is very sensitive to the audience and the social environment. He/she would consider all its social significance. Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928) believed that history is a teaching of philosophy by example and life stories of great personalities impart lessons on philosophy because their biographies constitute episodes on history (Bhuyan,1966,Preface).

Historians are sometimes reluctant to biographies. They feel that it serves an audience that likes simple and personal history without any understanding of underlying historical processes. Despite discontents, academics take both individual and group biographies to understand history. An author of a number of works on history, Judith M. Brown considers the research on life writing as a ‘nuanced methodology’. She feels that it allows the historian to shift gaze from the general theme and theory to the particular and precise

experience of people and groups. She uses individual life histories to ‘probe broad historical themes’ and to ‘anchor more theoretical discussions in the lived experiences of real people’ (Brown,2011,3-4). Sunil Khilnani , exploring the lives of fifty historical figures who shaped India, comments that it is the lives of individuals that offer a useful thread to enter into the labyrinth of Indian history, to know better its creativity and conflicts (Khilnani,2015,12). The scope of life writing as a historical source is, therefore, getting enlarged every day.

Prosopography, as the classical historians have called it, is a key tool for exploring any aspect of social history that involves an investigation of the common background of a sample group of personalities. The social scientists call it career-line analysis. It is a *collective biography*, describing the external features of a population group with something common in them. As a historical research tool, it developed in the late nineteenth century. It is an attempt to bring together all relevant biographical data of groups of persons in a systematic and stereotypical way (Verboven,42,37,39). It is a collective study of a set of traits such as birth and death, marriage, family, social origins, inherited economic and status position, place of residence, education, personal wealth, occupation, and religion. All kinds of biographical information found at hand from the select Assamese life writings are to be analysed and explained to construct social and cultural history. The making and being of a person is easily discussed in his family background. Prosopography illuminates the social context of a family and its members. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, an avid reader of European history was most likely aware of this. Very likely he experimented this approach in recreating the life of Anundoram Borooh. He visited all possible places, met people once having some contacts with this scholarly figure. He talked to the few teachers and friends. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan organised the scarce data, used his analytical power and historical imagination; after all he revealed connections and patterns that influenced the nineteenth century awakening.

Lawrence Stone observed the contribution of prosopography in understanding social, religious and political history of England during 1500-1660. In her view, it is more useful in social history, which is concerned with groups rather than individuals, ideas, or institutions. She observed the limitation prosopography because almost everything is known only about a well-documented section of people (Stone,1987,57,66-73). Since the objective of the present study is to account for ideological affiliations and social contexts,

therefore, this approach is suitable for this proposed study.

References

- Abbs, Peter. 'Autobiography: Quest For Identity'. *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. ed. Boris Ford. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1983. Reprint 1984.
- Abrams, M. H.. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bangalore: Prism Books, 1957. Reprint 1993.
- Agarwala, Haribilash. *Haribilash Agarwala Dangoriar Atmajivani*. Guwahati: Tarun Kumar Agarwala, 1967. Print.
- Arnold, David, and Stuart Blackburn, eds. *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004. Print.
- Arnold, John, J.. *History: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
- Backscheider, Paula, R.. *Reflections On Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Barua, Preeti. 'Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti Aru Adhyaksha Rajbala Das'. *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti*. Rajabala Das. Guwahati: Chitrabon Prakashan, 1971. Reprint 2004.
- Beauchamp, Virginia, Walcott. 'Letters and Diaries: The Persona and the Real Woman — A Case Study'. *Women's Personal Narratives: Essays in Criticism and Pedagogy*. eds. Leonore Hoffman and Margo Culley. New York: MLA. 1985. Print.
- Bhattacharjee, Nirmal Kanti. Editorial. *The Indian Literature: Sahitya Akademi's Bi-Monthly Journal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, Jan-Feb 2004. Print.
- Bhuyan, Jogendranarayan. *Gunabhiram Baroah*. Guwahati: Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture, 2001. Print.
- Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. *Anundoram Borooah Jeevan-Carit*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1966. Print.
- Birch, Dinah. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Blackburn, Stuart, and Vasudha, Dalmia, eds. *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, Reprint 2010.
- Brown, Judith, M.. *Windows into the Past: Life Histories and the Historian of South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. 1840. Web. 08 May 2015. <www.gutenberg.org/files/1091/1091-h/1091-h.htm>.
- Carr, E. H.. *What is History*. London: Penguin Books, 1961. 2nd ed. 1987. Reprint. 1990.

- Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature 1800-1910. Western Impact: Indian Response*. Vol VIII. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991. Print.
- Dasgupta, Alokeranjan. 'Biography: A Maya? The Indian Point of Departure'. *The Indian Literature: Sahitya Akademi's Bi-Monthly Journal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, Jan-Feb 2004. Print.
- Dasgupta, Subrata. *Awakening: The Story of the Bengal Renaissance*. Noida: Random House India, 2010 Print.
- Davees, C. J.. *Literature as a source of history: a case study on Luis vaz de camoes's s Lusindas*. Ph. D. Thesis. Pondicherry University, India, 2007. Web. 27 July 2014. <<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/840>>.
- Dutta, Ranjeeta. *From Hagiographies to Biographies: Ramanuja in Tradition and History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.
- Eakin, J. P.. *How Our lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. Print.
- Eakin, J. P.. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Print.
- Ewence, Hannah. 'Memories of suburbia: Autobiographical Fiction and Minority Narratives'. *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*. ed. Joan Tumblety. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Garraty, John, A.. *The Nature of Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957. Print.
- Goff, Jacques, Le. *History and Memory*. New York. 1992. as cited in N.N. Vohra and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, eds. *Looking Back: India in the Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2002. Print.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. 1980. Web. 06 June 2015. <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/holtorf/2.8html>>.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*. London: Little Brown Book Group, 2003. Print.
- Hooten, Joy. 'Autobiography and Gender'. *Writing Lives: Feminist Biography and Autobiography*. ed. Susan Magarey. Adelaide: Australian Feminist Studies Publication, 1992. Print.
- Jenkins, Keith. *Re-thinking History*. London: Routledge, 1991. Reprint 2003.
- Khilnani, Sunil. 'History isn't a backward-looking exercise. It nudges us forward.' Interview by Vaishnavi Chandrashekhar. *The Sunday Times of India*. 31 May 2015. New Delhi, Print.

- Marwick, Arthur. *The Nature of History*. London: Macmillan Education, 1970. Reprint 1989.
- Menon, Dilip, M., ed. *Cultural History of Modern India*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2006. Print.
- Misra, Tilottoma. *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of the Assamese Renaissance 1826-1926*. Guwahati: Omsons Publications, 1987. Print.
- Naik, M. K.. Introduction. *Comparative Indian Literature*. Vol I. ed. K.M. George. Madras: Kerala Sahitya Akademi and Macmillan India Limited, 1985. Print.
- Neog, Maheswar, ed. *Guru Carita Katha*. Guwahati: Gauhati University, 1987. Print.
- Olney, James, ed. *On Writing Autobiography: Studies in Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960. Print.
- Pollock, Sheldon, ed. *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.
- Sarkar, Sushobhan. *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays*. Bombay, 1946. Reprint. New Delhi. 1981. As cited in Tilottoma Misra. *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of the Assamese Renaissance 1826-1926*. Guwahati: Omsons Publications, 1987. Print.
- Sarma, Gobinda Prasad. *Asamiya Jati Chinta*. Guwahati: Bhabani Books, 2013. Print.
- Sarma, Gobinda Prasad. *Jivani aru Asamiya Jivani*. Guwahati: Students' Stores, 1986. Print.
- Simpson, J.A. and E.S.C. Weiner, eds. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Vols I, II, VII. London: Oxford University Press, 1989. Reprint 2004.
- Spacks, Patricia. 'Stage of self: Notes on Autobiography & the lifecycle'. *The American Autobiography*. ed. Albert E. Stone. As cited in Sodhi Meena, *Indian English writing: The Autobiographical Mode*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999. Print.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Past and The Present Revisited*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987. Print.
- Suhrud, Tridip. *Writing Life: Three Gujarati Thinkers*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009. Print.
- Thayer, William Roscoe. *The Art of Biography*. New York: Elibron Classics, 1920. Reprint 2001.

Verboven, Koenraad. et al. *A Short Manual to the Art of Prosopography*. Web. 16 July 2015.

<http://prosopography.modhist.ox.ac.uk/images/01%20Verboven%20pdf.pdf>.

Walia, Shelley. *Edward Said and the Writing of History*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001. Print.