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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE ART OF INDENTING: A READING OF HIREN GOHAIN'S IMAN TITA SAGARAR PANI (2011) AND RELOCATING THE CAUSES OF INDIAN EMERGENCY

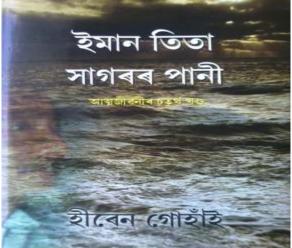
Kamal Nayan Patowary Asstt. Professor, Department of History, Barama College, Barama (Assam).

ABSTRACT

Reconstruction is a phenomenal characteristic feature of the subject history. This is an unending endeavour continued with gathered information that the historian tried to extract from divergent sources of information. The sources provide them the fact to support their argument and draw conclusion. Autobiography, a popular literary genre which has lately been included in the list of diversified categories of historical sources as 'hybrid' one to fetches the history of a specific time and region.

Though western in origin, autobiography as an accomplished genre is quite popular in Assamese literature right from the beginning of 19th century. Iman Tita Sagarar Pani, the fourth volume of the autobiographical series of Prof Hiren Gohain is the latest addition in the list of the autobiographies of Assamese literature. Taking this autobiography as an example, the paper here intends to examine how autobiography as a form divulged the history of a specific phase of independent India. The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section the paper intends to define autobiography as a genre, motif behind its writing and its relation to history. In the second part, Prof Hiren Gohain's Iman Tita Sagarar Pani is taken as a case study to examine the prospect of reconstructing history at the edges of an autobiography.

KEYWORDS: Emergency, Reconstruction, Autobiographical, Holistic, Self.



INTRODUCTION:

The term autobiography is a combination of three Greek words, auto means self, bios means life and graphein means to write i.e. autos- bios- graphia- description of oneself by the person himself. Encyclopaedia describes autobiography as a biography of oneself narrated by oneself¹ or it is an account of an individual human life written by subject himself.

An autobiographical instinct may be as old as man writing². There are few scattered

antiquarian example of autobiographical literature in human civilization like Shiji (historical records) of Chinese classical historian Sima Quian of 2^{nd} century BCE, St. Augustain's Confession in 3rd/4th century A.D etc.³ But, at that time they were not known as autobiography but as memoir. It was only during the days of renaissance these memoirs starts wearing the apron of autobiography4. It is further interesting to know that the word autobiography appears in dictionary only after 18th century A.D5.

Whatever might be the fact, soon after its emergence, autobiography has successfully caught the nerve of human imagination and today it becomes an important means to explain the character of a person and his time. Thus, autobiography is a fine combination of man and thing.

Like many other countries of the world, India also has a great tradition of writing memoirs- a fact that being appropriated by the composition like Tuzuk-i-Bubari, Tuzuk- I- Jahangiri etc. But, the tradition of writing autobiography in real sense of term starts in India only after 19th century6. With the passes of time numbers of autobiographies written both by Indian man and woman in national and regional languages goes on increasing. Assamese literature also has a long list of autobiographies. Right from the beginning of Sadaraminar Atmajibini (an autobiography written by Harkanta Mazumdar Barua) in the 19th century, there are autobiographies of prominent personalities in Assamese literature to go through the experiences of their life. Iman Tita Sagarar Pani (2011), the fourth volume of the autobiographical series of Prof Hiren Gohain is a new addition to the list of autobiographies in Assamese literature. His interaction of life with some significant occurrences of the country might have help us to interpret the history of independent India with a new frame of mind.

Statement of Problem:

Autobiography and history are two different branches of study with great similarity. Both claim to tell the stories about the past. However, when autobiography is primarily concern with those passing time of an individual, history keeps records of people in general.

Despite of their similarity, a section of historian often hesitates to consider autobiography as a normal historical source. Because, there is a proposition that such first person's account, have an overwhelming dominance of subjective element to rely on. But, with the passes of time the concept of writing history has been changed. Today's history is the history of thought. That means, now a days the subject history tried to be understand subjectively i.e. through the thought and the experiences of historical agent. Every historical event has an inside and outside historical module to consider, where outside history concern with what actually happened in the past while inside history refers to the thought process of historical agent.

Like history, autobiography also has two parts- self and surrounding. The surrounding here, creates the self. An autobiographical subjectivity in the form of self may have introduced us with thought of a particular person of a particular age; similarly, autobiographical surrounding has referred to some verifiable facts. In other word, a well crafted autobiography seems to have the potentiality to re-examine the effective and cognitive inside of a historical moment which itself accentuated the prospect of our historical understanding.

These brief inception of propose study make ourselves acquainted with two general problems like what is autobiography?, why people are interested in writing autobiography?, what are the similarities and dissimilarities between history and autobiography?, under what methodological approach an autobiography can be used as source of history?, how does an autobiography of a regional language like Iman Tita Sagarar Pani can help us in understanding a specific phase of the history of post independent India? etc.

Significance and Methodology:

The significance of the study lies on its path finding approach to understand a specific phase of the history of independent India. This is an earnest attempt of its kind to look into the prospect of the life writing research to the history of the days of Indian emergency. By using the resources of an autobiography the study proposed to proceed with an ethnographic technique of narrative

methodology i.e. capturing the story of the auto biographer, who will be the informant here, simply by observation. Accordingly, the study here trends not to put the informant i.e. the writer into the witness box of the historian but accept his narrative in a holistic frame of mind.

History in Autobiography-A Paradoxical Queries

When intending to discuss about autobiography in terms of history many more issues have come normally to our mind particularly about the nature of autobiography like what makes one to write autobiography? The answers is not simple but are many. A person might write an autobiography to examine the way he/she has spent the life. Another reason might be to see whether one has led a meaningful existence. Perhaps, one might write autobiography to take stoke of past and leave it to posterity. One can also write autobiography to posses what psychologist Carl Jung says, 'Individuation' to possess an integrated self⁷. The list thus can go on.

Again, what makes historian to look into autobiography for their history? 'An autobiography often assumes the proportions of a secondary history through which the writer has live as well as a primary account of his own experiences and thought'⁸. In that sense,' an autobiography, normally composed long after the event described 'with greater circumspection than more straight forward primary document.⁹ In other word, an autobiography has given us an exposure both as primary and secondary sources of evidence for understanding a person and place. Moreover, the concept like 'historicism'¹⁰ which refers to 'a critical movement insisting on prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of text of all kind'¹¹ has inspired historian to view an autobiography more carefully than ever.

Above all, autobiography are written by person who either have some distinctive role in society or by persons who have the opportunity to look at 'history in making' from close range. In an autobiography, the autobiographical self always revolves around the questions like who was he?, who is he?, who will be he? etc. that is a continuous search of his real identity. Thus, though valued in deep sense of self knowledge, in an autobiography, the interior life however, normally rest only second place of its attention.

Moreover, the very nature of an autobiography itself put it more near to subject history specially in reference to a specific interpretation of E.H. Carr that history is an unending dialogue between past and present.¹² Like historian, an auto biographer also resides in present and makes deal with those experiences which he had already crossed over at different stages of his life.

There is another mode of similarity between history and autobiography and that is over the meaning of the term 'self knowledge'. In history 'self knowledge' does not mean man's bodily knowledge, nor even a knowledge of his mind that consists of feelings, sensation and emotion, the knowledge of his knowing faculties, but his thought or understanding or reason.¹³ 'The historian investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and inside of an event'¹⁴. The outside history may be described as the bodies and their movement while the inside history can be described as thought. According to Collingwood, true historical understanding is the understanding of inside happening of a historical event¹⁵.

These ingredients are available also in autobiographies. Autobiographical surrounding is the external happening of events while self is the expression of the thought process of auto biographer which is nothing but the inside history. In other word, it can be said that an autobiography is a fine combination of self and surrounding and thus, can be viewed as a piece of history with a unique style of its own.

Incidentally, history, one can infer, is an attempt to narrate things in a matter of fact as what has

happen to individuals and society in past and that is why, it is viewed as a study that ultimately rest upon the ground of an amalgamation of memories. However, it should be kept in mind that 'historical past is not a remembered, nor a sum of individuals remembered past, it is an ideal past arrived at in one's mind by process of theorizing or thinking'¹⁶ Same is the case of autobiographies and today autobiographies are being recognised as an art form which brings history and memory together.¹⁷

Despite of all such similarities between history and autobiographies, scholar like A.J.P Taylor however, strongly talked about the importance of autobiography in history as misleading and useless except for atmosphere.¹⁸ The main objection of this group of scholar is that an auto biographer is a conscious writer and hence, its content definitely selected with the taste of public reading in mind; his conscious attitude towards audience always keeps him under a tendency to omit some of the most intimate but, considered to be discreditable details; interestingly, a historian does not have the opportunity to cross question the author or ask to elaborate some point of significance.¹⁹

Apart from that, another principal issue connected with autobiography is the question of memory as 'memory does not provide us with the kind of pinpoint accuracy found in documentary evidence'²⁰. That is to say that there is a possibility that truth being hidden or used partially. Over the question of memory, there is another problem in autobiography when intending to use it as a source of history that 'there is a radical difference between act of remembering and act of writing. Both may be historical act, but later also rhetorical one. Memory may or may not simply given, but its inscription must always be shaped by perspective and needs of present self'²¹.

Hence, the historian should have to be very careful while using autobiographical source to compose their history as there is always a possibility of rhetorical appreciation of self in past environment which may lead historian to the cause of a passive surrounding to spell of auto biographer's mind. Under such circumstances a historian must have to keep in mind the observation made by Collingwood that 'when a man thinks historically, he has before him certain document or relics of the past. His business is to discover what the past was which has been left this relics behind it. This means, discovering the thought which has been expressed by them to discover what the thought was, the historian must think it again for himself'²². It is quite apparent here that, while dealing with an autobiography, the historian must have to don the role of a critical historian. By abandoning mere receptive attitude towards what his autobiographical authorities tell him, he or she should have to put his authorities in the witness box and extort from him the information which he has withheld.

The Case Study:

As stated earlier, 'Iman Tita Sagarar Pani' is the most recently published autobiographies in Assamese literature. The writer of this autobiography Prof Hiren Gohain is a renowned critic of Marxist school of thought in Assam. For we, the student of history, this autobiography is important not only because of writer's literary stature but also because of the fact that it is written by a person who is highly estimated by the people of Assam for his sensible approach towards different socio-political issues of the state and nation. In other word, the reading of this autobiography can be regarded as an opportunity to come across the thought process of an eminent social thinker of our time.

However, it is interesting to find that regarding national issue, Gohain sir is very selective as he is picking up only that part of his life when India was heading towards emergency and subsequently experience it with it's all relative consequences. The proclamation of emergency²³ was made just before midnight on 25th June 197524 and it was continued up to 18th January 1977. That means, for nearly about eighteen month, country remain under the situation of an internal state of emergency. This was one of the most dramatic phase of Indian politics in recent past. As reported by Ramchandra Guha, this

was the periods which not only undermine democratic process and democratic institution in the country but also created a sense of fear in common Indian mind25. Such state of condition was adequate enough for a man and that too of Prof Hiren Gohain's nature to consider those days as the days to have dark cloud in the horizon.

The most fascinating feature of this particular section of the autobiography is that the writer here intends to examine his self mainly around the activities of prominent political leaders of his chosen time. Under such contemplation, the focus of the author naturally centred upon the activities of late Mrs Indira Gandhi, the third prime minister of Indian federation who persuaded emergency in the country. Her persuasion for emergency was chiefly motivated by two of her hidden agenda i.e. to crush her opposition and to remain in power forever as to the understanding of Prof. Hiren Gohain. Thus, roaming around the days of emergency, the writer of this autobiography has left his observation to add value to the personified history of late Mrs Indira Gandhi both as a person and as a leader. Accordingly, he defines Mrs Gandhi as an efficient leader with a cleaned and cultured personal appearance who in later stages of her tenure had lost her precise political image due to her tendered aptitude for absolute power.

His life reads two specific accomplishments of Mrs Gandhi which in his supposition worked as catalyst for her changing aptitude. Of them, the first one is related to India's victory over Pakistan during the Bangladesh war of independence in the year 1972. In this victory which made every Indian proud, Mrs Gandhi was the guiding spirit. Everybody appreciated her innovative guidance in this war of Indian victory. But, the amount of her appreciation went to such an extent that people start comparing her with goddess Durga. In this connection Gohain sir remembers how the leader like Atal Bihari Bajpayee was sending a telegram to congratulate her for this victory by using the word of her comparison with Durga.

Her next achievement at his observation was her initiative towards 'green revolution'. To make her people free from starvation, Mrs Gandhi had made a plan to introduce a scientific agricultural system in the country to increase productivity. It was due to her effort the plan was successfully implemented in the state like Punjab and Haryana. Though, he acknowledges her effort, as a responsible thinker he, however, does not forget to ask his reader to think about those negative effects of green revolution that exposed before public after 1990. Whatever might be the fact, in his understanding these successes totally changed the mental setup of Mrs Gandhi. And as a result, India had experienced a rule of an emerging 'authoritarian'²⁶ leader for next few years to come. Gohain sir observed the reflection of her changing aptitude first during the courses of famous Indian Railway employee's hartal in 1974(27). His recollection refers that Mrs Gandhi had used heavy hand of her power to suppress the movement which is nothing but a clear demonstration of her authoritarian aptitude. In this regard, he also remembered a popular speculation of that time as an example to explain her changing aptitude that by using the power of her post she had collected a huge sum of money from state bank of India for her election campaign

Putting light on some other character of Mrs Gandhi Gohain sir presumed that she did not believe in the theory of sharing power and could not tolerate anybody to oppose her even within the party. Her such attitude have made Mrs Gandhi unpopular among her fellow congress man and as a result of that many old and loyal congress men start keeping distance from her as Gohain sir observe during the courses of his life. However, the autobiography also blamed late Sanjoy Gandhi, the younger son of Mrs Gandhi for creating such an atmosphere in the party. This self created atmosphere, in turn, have made her total dependent on secret service agencies. And its result was mushrooming of government sponsored secret service agencies in the country at that time. In this connection Gohain sir remembers an important allegation once made by an opposition leader, Jyotirmoy Basu that her prime minister ship was a birthing tenure of more than thirteen secret service agencies in the country. Later, he saw the creation of R&AW at her auspices to maintain co-ordination between different secret service agencies in the country. As a conscious thinker his experience makes him to realise that those development were not the sign of an efficient leader.

Gohain sir is also very serious about country's economic condition during that time. He observes that the economy of the country was deteriorating and with the passes of time it was slowly slipping out of her control. He found it as an alternate code for her increasing unpopularity in the country. He saw dissatisfaction, especially among the business communities over the question rigid government control on the procedure of issuing licence and permit for establishing new business houses in the country. He saw no such positive approach from her in solving their problem Thus, an another immature face of Mrs Gandhi was exposed before him to remember.

Making us aware of her foreign policy, the autobiography put forwards a significant thought regarding Indo-US relation and its effect during that time. According to him, pentagon headed by President Nixon at that time was highly suspicious of Mrs Gandhi for her activities. The amount of their suspicion increased enormously way when she successfully test fire a nuclear device, 'smiling Buddha' in the year 1974. The test mounted immense psychological pressure on Pakistan, the most trusted allies of U.S. in south east Asia at that time. Apart from that her effort, as the autobiography reveals, to find herself more near to Soviet Union further deteriorated her image in U.S. circle. The result proved to be disastrous one for Mrs Gandhi in terms of increasing activities of CIA in the country in following years of her tenure. CIA's activities in the country work as a deterrent in accumulating her opposition in the country. Gohain sir observes that not only the opposition leader, many loyal congress leader at that time were in a constant contact with CIA's agent in the country.

Her tenure is known for witnessing "the first anti corruption movement demanding accountability and transparency from government"²⁸. The founding father of this movement was none other than Jayprakash Narayan, popularly known as JP. His movement created a major hurdle for Mrs Gandhi in her domestic front. Revealing the character of this movement the autobiography describes that by propagating some utopian concept like 'total revolution', 'party less' democracy, JP successfully attracted people from all section of society to come and join in his movement. This movement had assumed a dominant shape in north India while south India remain out of its influence as the autobiography let us to know. Attracting our attention to the early career of some prominent political leaders of our time like Lalu Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Sarad Yadav, Ram Vilash Paswan, this autobiography inform us to know that they actually entered in Indian politics as the lieutenant of Jayprakash Narayan. Thus, by using the emotionally charged voices of JP's movement the opposition had successfully created an anti congress atmosphere in the country. The best exposition to which Gohain sir would like to attract his reader's attention was the strike organised by Morarji Desai in Gujrat under the banner of Gujrat Nava Nirman Samiti which compelled the corrupt congress government there to resign.²⁹

Thus, the situation of the country was totally out of the favour of Mrs Gandhi. And it was under such situation, the famous verdict of Allahbad High court came to rock Indian politics and shattered the position of Mrs Gandhi. The verdict was in favour of a petition filed by one Raj Narain which declared the victory of Mrs Gandhi in her last parliamentary election as illegal. The court was convinced that she had adopted unfair means during her campaign to win over her parliamentary seat.³⁰ The situation was very critical. The opposition was mounting pressure on her to resign. In that critical juncture Gohain sir remembers how one of her personal aptitude had played a crucial role in deciding the fate of the

country. That, she never intended to share her power with anybody and that was why she had found no other option but to declared emergency to remain herself in power. And accordingly, at the advice of her most trusted fellow Siddhartha Sankar Roy, she decided to send her prime ministerial resolution for an internal state of emergency to the table of the president of India for recommendation.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the autobiographical manoeuvre of Prof Hiren Gohain can better be considered as an alternate account to assess the major issues of a most dramatic phase of Indian politics in recent past. This is a rare occurrence to the literary history of Assam when a renowned social thinker of national repute exposes his self before his readers. The most interesting part to read about this autobiography is that the author anchor here with those social issues which were more or less embolden to the nerve of our national life. The importance of this autobiography is accentuated further to its approach as it defines a new dimension to the personified history of Mrs. Gandhi in special and other in general. Accordingly, the discussion may be sum up with the words that the surrounding of an autobiography like Iman Tita Sagarar Pani, resumed us with facts; at the same time, their interpretation in the word of autobiographer seems to have opened up a new horizon in understanding the history of our passing time.

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