



The Autobiographical Contents in Sanskrit Literature

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ABSTRACT

The Sanskrit literature is a treasure house of India's cultural and intellectual legacy of pre-Christian era literature and it is also rather odd in that besides a personal introduction, it does not contain personal histories of the authors themselves. This kind of anonymity, which is resultant of emphasis on principles rather than individual glory, has led to the chronic lack of properly documented autobiographical accounts. However, it is possible to identify elements of autobiography in many other types of texts, including Vedic hymns, epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, historical texts such as Bana's Harṣacarita or Bilhaṇā's Vikramankadevacarita. It considers these texts as experiencing subjects that provide insights into the life narratives of the authors intertwined with their philosophic and narrative views. As for the biographical aspect, modern Sanskrit literature also comprises numerous biographies indexing the lives and characters of significant persons which also expanded the Sanskrit literature. This paper seeks to discuss the aspects of auto-biographical material in Sanskrit writings and how they help analyse the history of Ancient India and its contribution to the intellectual and cultural fabric of the world as well as how a portion of ancient writings contributes a small but important resume of lives that was important towards enlightening people and changing them.

KEYWORDS: Sanskrit Literature, Autobiography, Ancient Indian Texts, Vedic Tradition, Cultural Heritage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sanskrit literature is incredibly diverse, encompassing a vast array of genres, themes, and styles that reflect ancient India's rich cultural and intellectual heritage. It includes religious texts, profound philosophical treatises, scientific texts, lyric poetry, fairy tales, and fables. All of these works demonstrate the richness of this language. It is fascinating to read the pre-scientific revelations

of the Upanishads or the poetry in the Kavya tradition of Sanskrit literature, even in today's world.

Sanskrit writers typically do not write about themselves and the reality in which they exist. Sometimes the only information we possess is the name; in other cases, the information that we have is restricted to the lives of the people as well as their period. Tradition and legend invariably seek to compensate for the lack of reliable biographical information.

Despite historical evidence which indicates that the Sanskrit literature is superior in certain aspects of writing, it lacks in others, especially when it comes to biographies and autobiographies. The literature of Sanskrit encompasses vast material in the field of biographical and autobiographical literature in Epic, Prose and Campu Kavyas. The literary form of a complete autobiography is very rare in Sanskrit literature. The list of biographies and historical personalities in Sanskrit literature is very vast in modern Sanskrit literature. Great poets, writers, playwrights, and dramatists are involved in creating great literature about the lives of great men, leaders, kings, saints, queens and women. With these biographies, we can extend the way to better our lives and foster a dignified character.

The topic of Indian autobiography acquires significant importance in this context. Autobiography is a type of writing that narrates the story in a person's own life. Autobiographies have continuously been embraced by many for centuries. In an autobiography, it is expected the author expounds on different facets of his or her life such as early life, parents and family, education, profession and relationship, achievements, setbacks, challenges and memorable occurrences. They may also investigate feelings, opinions, ideas, and principles, and these provide a way of understanding their subject's nature. Moreover, autobiographies can also function as historical or cultural records, providing valuable insights into a



specific era, society, or culture from the perspective of someone who experienced it.

An autobiography can be written for any reason. Some people write to express the purpose of their life experiences with others to inspire people or even to record their personal experiences for themselves or future generations. Autobiographies play a crucial role in preserving personal history, inspiring others, fostering human connection, and offering valuable insights into historical and cultural contexts. Authors create connections with readers by sharing their triumphs, struggles, and life lessons. Through their self-stories, the authors establish rapport with the readers by relating with them their successes, challenges, and small stories in life. This is evidenced by the fact that autobiographies can serve as a source of learning where real-life experiences are incorporated into the learning process to help better understand academic theories and make them more interesting. Overall, autobiographies are vital tools in comprehending the past, facing the present or indeed carving for the future.

The lack of autobiographical records is seen to be a feature of the ancient Indian period. Our great men did not aspire to personal fame. They valued only principles and ideals. They embodied the principles into their works. This is why they remained anonymous and devoted to their goals rather than being in the limelight for their achievements. They knew what they wanted without the need for compliments or applause. Even Vyāsa and Vālmīki who wrote the great and incomparable epics were not mere critics of the sound and much less story of the prehistoric Vaidikaṛṣīs. Sankaracharya himself, who might be crowned as relatively 'modern,' might also be described as belonging to that unknown progenitor in terms of his bio-data. The present study is an attempt to identify autobiographical elements in Sanskrit literature.

Rather than being laden with autobiographical content directly in Sanskrit literature like in modern literature, there exists a measure of autobiographical history that still has significant worth in enabling a viewer to understand more about than the writers in India. Coming to Indian Sanskrit literature there is a vast of text in the form of poetry, drama, prose texts and philosophic dialogues which covers several elements of auto-biographical nature that may be seen in all stages of the growth of Sanskrit literature.

Here's a detailed explanation of the autobiographical contents in Sanskrit literature:

In Vedās

The *Vedās*, are considered the most ancient Hindu holy writings, which are hymns, ritual and philosophical instructions in the form of the songs and incantations passed from generation to generation by the ancient wise men and seers. The *Vedas* may not be strictly autobiographical as are many works of today, but they are composed of portions of the composer's spiritual journey and formation. Here is one example:

तवाहंशूरुतिभिः प्रत्यासिन्धुमावदन् उपातिष्ठन्तगिर्वणोविदुष्टेतस्यकारवः ॥¹

These examples show how the *Vedās* include biographical aspects belonging to the ancient writers who wrote them the seer. The use of उत्तमपुरुष is also found in many of the Vedic signals throughout the sacred Vedas. The ṛiṣis of the Vedic tradition shared their religious experiences, visions and feelings using hymns, prayers and philosophy, making Vedic literature all the more valuable for including first-person narratives and testimonies of saintly teachers.

In Epics

Although not fully self-reflective, such epics spiked with certain aspects of the author's life experiences. Thus, according to some critical interpretations, there is a lot of autobiographical material thought to have been superimposed in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* quite particularly in the later parts of the epics where we find Vālmīki depicted as a character. These instances present glimpses into the personal lives of the poet Vālmīki as well as his modes of thinking.

प्रचेतसोऽहं दशमः पुत्रोराघवनन्दन।
नस्मराम्यनृतवाक्यमिमौतुतवपुत्रकौ।
बहुवर्षसहस्राणितपश्चर्यामयाकृता।
तस्याः फलमुपाश्रीयामपापायदिमैथिली।
अहंपञ्चसुभूतेषु मनःषष्ठेषुराघव।
विचिन्त्यसीतांशुद्धेतिजग्राहवननिर्झरा॥²

In the Uttara Kāṇḍa of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the author Vālmīki comes into the picture. When Sīta is expelled from the kingdom on false suspicion of infidelity in Ayodhya, she chooses Vālmīki's hermitage as her dwelling place. There she gives birth to twins – Lava and Kuśa, who later transform into handsome young men. Vālmīki adopts them and imparts the knowledge of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to them which they sing in the noble court in the presence of Rāma during the Aśvamedha Yāga. This episode is interpreted as autobiographical with Vālmīki identifying with a sage living in the forest teaching disciples spiritual principles.



The epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, although centred on the story of Rāma, is believed to reflect Vālmīki's emotions and experiences. This is especially evident in the portrayal of characters and situations, with Vālmīki's compassion and empathy, developed through his spiritual journey, shining through in characters like Sīta, Rāma, and Hanumān. In sum, even though the *Rāmāyaṇa* is largely centred on the life and experiences of Rāma, it also has strong hints of an autobiography that Vālmīki himself through his work. They add to the substance of the epic and prevent it from being viewed as merely a classic piece of Art but as a living and breathing tale that continues to bear relevance within the Indian consciousness even today.

The issue of self-biography is constantly reflected in the *Mahābhārata*, thus containing many autobiographic elements that give information about Vyāsa's life, experiences and philosophical perspectives. Vyāsa is not only a character in the *Mahābhārata* but also the narrator who recounts the events to the sage Vaiśampāyana, who in turn narrates them to King Janamejaya. Some peep into the 'lineage of Vyāsa' and his 'family relations' in *Mahābhārata*. Vyāsa is depicted as the son of Parāśara, a revered sage, and Satyavati, the daughter of a fisherman. His birth is a story of hopeful signs and divine Providence echoing such concepts as birth line and destiny that pervade the epic.

सत्यवत्यात्मजेनेहव्याख्यातममितौजसा³

However, in addition to being an epic of dynastic war and ethical issues and a work containing historical and didactic appendices, the *Mahābhārata* itself is also strongly autobiographical revealing aspects of Vyāsa's life and his theological and philosophical outlook on the world.

In literature works

The introductory verses of *Kādambarī* and the first two ucchvāsās of the *Harṣacarita* contain the full description of Bāna's parentage and boyhood. He gives a personal account of himself in the introductory verses of *Kādambarī*–

बभूववात्स्यायनवंशसम्भवोद्विजो जगद्गीतगुणोऽग्रणीः सताम्
अनेकगुणार्चितपादपङ्कजः कुबेरनामांशइवस्वयंभुवः॥⁴

It is here that we encounter Kubera's name at least as an initial reference. He is said to be a brahmana from the वात्स्यायनगोत्र who was indeed patronized by many kings. And also-

सरस्वतीपाणि-सरोजसम्पुट-प्रमृष्ट-होम-श्रम-शीकराम्भसः।
यशोऽशुशुक्लीकृतसप्तविष्टपात्ततः सुतोबाणइतिव्यजायत॥⁵

Bānabhaṭṭa reveals considerable information about himself, his ancestors and his surroundings in the first two ucchvāsās and apart of the third ucchvāsās of his *Harṣacarita*. The first section of the text known as vātsāyanavaṃśavarṇanā is an autobiographical narrative of the author from the chronology of his family and birth to his childhood. Bānā belongs to Vatsa gotra and he was born to Citrabhānu and Rajadevi –

अलभतचित्रभानुस्तेषामध्येराजदेव्यभिधानानां ब्राह्मण्यां बाणमात्मजम्⁶

The 2nd ucchvāsa called rājadarśanam describes how Bāna pays obeisance to the camp of King Harṣavardhana and gets favour from him. It is clear that the book *Harṣacarita* is completed in these eight chapters, but the biography of King Harṣavardhana and the author's autobiography remain unfinished.

Like the *Harṣacarita*, **Bilhaṇa** also gives a complete and detailed geographic representation of the writer's country rich in political, family and personal history concluding the eighteenth and the last canto of *Vikrāmankadevacarita*. He was born at Khonamukha, three miles away from Pravarapurain a family of Madhyadesi Brahmanas.

अङ्गोस्त्वङ्गलनकरुचिभिः कार्माणलोचनानां
सूरेस्तस्मादजनिजगतांशेखरोबिल्लहणाख्यः।
सान्द्रैर्वेदध्वनिभिरनभिव्यक्तमञ्जीरनादा
मौञ्जीबन्धात्प्रभृतिवदनेयस्यवाग्देवतासीत्॥⁷

And also, Bilhaṇa pays a glowing tribute to the Sarasvatas of his homeland.

ब्रूमः सारस्वतकुलभुवः किनिधेः कौतुकानां.....⁸

His father is Jyeṣṭha kalasa and he was a grammarian who wrote a commentary on the *Mahabhāṣya* and his mother is Nagadevi.

क्षमासारः सारस्वतरसनिधानंश्रुतिनिधिः
समुत्पन्नस्तस्मादमलयशसो ज्येष्ठकलशः।
महाभाष्यव्याख्यामखिलजनवन्द्यां विदधतः
सदायस्यच्छत्रैस्तिलकितमभूत्प्राङ्गणमपि॥⁹

.....नागादेवीमलभतशुभस्तोमपात्रकलत्रम्॥¹⁰

Maṅkhaka in canto 3 of the *Śrīkaṅṭhacarita* gives a detailed account of his geneology. He then compiled accurate information regarding his ancestors, beginning with his grandfather Manmatha, a great nobleman and patron of scholars and the learned.

समन्मथो नाम जगाम तद्भुवि प्रथां प्रसन्ने श्वरदृष्टिभाजनम्।



नमार्गणानांसुमनोमयात्मानांमनागपिक्षेपकलासुशिक्षितः॥¹¹

His son Viśvāvarta, endowed with his father's virtues and had four sons, Srṅgāra, Bhṛṅga, Alamkāra, and Maṅkhaka.

वदान्यमास्त्यानवृहत्कृपारसप्रवाहशङ्काजननैकदक्षिणम्।

स्वसूक्तिकीर्तिप्रसरैरनश्रंसविश्ववर्तारख्यमवापनन्दनम्॥¹²

He was the youngest son and he himself about him

अथोदभुतस्यकनिष्ठसोदरःसमङ्खकोयस्यशिशोरतन्वता।

शिरस्युपोढागुरुपादेणवःसरस्वतीकार्मणचूर्णनैपुणम्॥¹³

Maṅkhakain the *Śrīkaṅthacarita* has said that – King Jayasimha, the son of King Sussala has taken up the job of the protector of the subjects and is Prajāpālanapuraṣa.

अनन्तरंसुस्सलदेवनन्दनोयमादराच्छ्रीजयसिंहभूपतिः।

व्याघात्प्रजापालनकार्यपुरुषंरुषंवितन्वन्विनीतजन्तुषु॥¹⁴

Viśvāvarta simply renounced his body at the Ranasvāmin temple and merged with the forms of Hari and Hara. These are the parts of the poem where the poet expounds on how he came to write the poem.

The *Gaudavaho* is conventionally described to be a prakṛt epic written by **Vakpatiraja**, the poet laureate of Yasovarman, king of Kanauj. The poem commences with a lengthy series of invocations paying tribute to various deities or concepts, with the first sixty-one couplets dedicated to this purpose. It then delves into a discussion of poets in general, encompassing their strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, and disappointments.

Mahāvīracarita by **Bhavabhuti** has narrated many details about his life. In the prelude to the *Mahāvīracarita*, by supposing Padmapura to be in the Dakshinapatha the home of the poet. His ancestry traces its roots to a village called Padmapura. Nilakantha is his father while the mother is called Jatukarni.

अस्तदक्षिणपथेपद्यपुरं नामनगरमात्रकेचित्तिरीयाःकाश्यपाश्ररगुणवःपङ्क्तिपाव
नाःपञ्चामनयोधृतव्रताःसोमपीथिनउदुम्बरनामानोब्रह्मवादिनःप्रतिवसन्ति।तदामुष्याय
णस्यवाजपेययाजिनोमहाकवेःपञ्चमःसुगृहीतनाम्नोभट्टगोपालस्यपौत्रःपवित्रकीर्तेर्नी
लकण्ठस्यात्मसम्भवःश्रीकण्ठपदलाञ्छनःपदवाक्यप्रमाणज्ञोभवभूतिर्नामजतुकर्णोपुत्रः
कविर्मित्रधेयमस्कामितिभवन्तोविदाङ्कुर्वन्तु॥¹⁵

By this, it is clear to us that the latter was a passionate follower of the Vedic uncanonical writings. It is also clearly stated in the prologue, that expert success in many fields of knowledge, originates from Padmapura of the high caste Brahmin and adherence to Saivaite ideas. The work is said to be meant to be done at Yathra festival of

Kalpaprīyanatha almost celebrating the glory of this great personage of South India.

Like other works, as in Bana's Harṣacarita in *Avantisundarikathā* also **Daṇḍin** gives an account of himself and how he came to write the work.

The work confirms that the gotra of Daṇḍin was Kausika and hence he had ancestral links with Anandapura, which is a town in the northwestern part of the country nowadays known as Gujarat. The said Damodararavamin was the progenitor of Dandin who was born to Viradatta and Gauri after quite several daughters had been born.

वीरदत्तशर्मणोब्रह्मर्षेर्वसिष्ठस्येवारुन्धतीसतीनामगामिनीगौरीनाममातरसगोत्राब्राह्मणीगु
हिणीपदमध्यतिष्ठत्सतस्यामनेककदुहितृजन्मजातोद्वेगशान्तेतनुमेकंदिनामानमवि
न्दतपितुरस्यप्रेयसीसपत्नीपुत्रइत्यकृत्वामत्सरमहानुभावासप्तमाद्वर्षादारभ्यसरस्वत्येवसु
प्रसन्नादण्डिनमवर्द्धयत्॥¹⁶

On the completion of the upanayana ceremony, Dandin started learning education and training. At the same, he lost his father. He was a devotee of Vishnu, who inspired him to write his *Avantisundarikatha*.

In the last of *Avantisundarikatha*-

इत्याचार्यदण्डिनाकृताअवन्तिसुन्दरीसमाप्ता॥¹⁷

It is also stated in the work itself that Dandin narrates the story.

II. Conclusion

Modern literature does not set autobiographical elements like in ancient Sanskrit literature. Still, the essence of complete autobiography is inherent in the ancient Sanskrit books, giving the reader a unique opportunity to get acquainted with the authors' life, perceptions, and actions. The Sanskrit tradition of anonymity among writers, driven by a focus on principles and ideals rather than personal fame, has resulted in a relative scarcity of direct autobiographical accounts. However, one can trace fragments of authors' personal experiences or, at least, their visions of the subject in the given works that belong to the epic, philosophical, poetic, and historical genres.

Of particular interest, it is also relevant to note that the Vedas as the oldest and primary scriptures of Hinduism are majorly spiritual texts that also contain fragments expressing individual spiritual experiences of their authors. Concerning the historical realities reflected in the epics the latter is closely connected with the identity of their writers – Valmiki and Vyasa, where their own experience interpenetrates with the main plots of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, successively. At the same time, more descriptive biographies



include the work by Bana Harṣacarita and Bilhana's Vikramankadevacarita that present direct autobiographical information about the authors and their families, as well as the general experiences of people in society at the time.

In modern times, the landscape of Sanskrit literature has expanded to encompass detailed biographical works, adding depth to the tradition with comprehensive accounts of the lives of noteworthy individuals. It can be seen that these works prove useful for historical and cultural analysis, as well as proving engaging to readers.

This paper is significant because it showcases that Sanskrit is more than a formal language for writing scripture, but has a grand capacity to tell and capture personal, philosophical, and even historical narratives. Exploring these aspects helps us better grasp the intellectual and cultural legacy of ancient India and the continued significance of Sanskrit literature in portraying the human experience.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Rīgveda 1.11.6

² Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa, 19-21,96,7

³ Mahabharata 1.62.14

⁴ Kadambari 10

⁵ Kadambari 19

⁶ Harṣacarita 1st chapter

⁷ Vikramankadevacarita 18.81

⁸ Vikramankadevacarita 18.6

⁹ Vikramankadevacarita 18. 79

¹⁰ Vikramankadevacarita 18. 80

¹¹ Śrīkaṇṭhacarita Canto 3.31

¹² Śrīkaṇṭhacarita Canto 3.35

¹³ Śrīkaṇṭhacarita Canto 3. 63

¹⁴ Śrīkaṇṭhacarita Canto 3. 66

¹⁵ Mahāvīracarita

¹⁶ Mahāvīracarita

¹⁷ Mahāvīracarita

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