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Translation of Nilakantha's Autobiography into English: A Study

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Abstract:

*Life histories have a wide appeal. At some stages every one of us was fascinated by the lives of other people. Of course all of them may or may not be men and women of grand reputation, but they were heard, read, watched and followed by us. They may be characters from history, novels, legends or myth. From time to time they have inspired their audience with their great deeds and admonish them with their follies. Regarding writing an autobiography, Cellini (1500 –1571) had stated this about five centuries ago: "All men of whatsoever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence, or which may properly resemble excellence, ought, if they are persons of truth and honesty, to describe their life with their own hand; but then ought not to attempt so fine an enterprise till they passed the age of forty" (qtd. in Symonds 1934: 71). Autobiographies are life stories told by the author. It gives us the current impression of the author on the different activities of life: struggle, achievements, successes and failures. This article highlights some of the features of translating an autobiography with a special reference to the translation of Pundit Nilakantha's autobiography *Atmajivani* (1963) into English.*

Keywords: *Autobiography, translation, culture*

Life histories have a wide appeal. At some stages all of us were fascinated by the lives of other people. Of course, all of them may or may not be men and women of grand reputation, but they were heard, read, or watched by us either on stage or on screen. They may be characters from history, novels, legends, or myth. From time to time they have inspired their audience with their great deeds and admonish them with their follies. They even inspire their audience to write life writings of their own. Indians have their specific way to react to these life situations. As an impact of modernity in India during and after the colonial era, some scholarly statesmen wrote autobiographies. They showed that how these autobiographies are different in content, form and intention, and how different societies articulate life writings in distinctive ways.

Regional languages in India are the store house of some of the finest literary works. Autobiographies written in regional languages are valuable social documents to understand notions of self, individual practices, intentions and the importance of collectivities in India. Like biographies the autobiographies also vibrate into the social life. This is a product of a combined desire of self analysis, self correction and a process of establishing self in the society. For this, it is not an easy task to write an autobiography being impartial. Autobiography is not only the life sketch of the writer but it is also the spirit of his contemporary time and society, analyzed in the present context. The translation of some of these remarkable works into English is a novel practice to open them to a grand horizon. Translation of autobiographies from regional languages to English started with Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* (1927). It was first published autobiography in English translation in India. In its tenth decade it still commands the power, just like its original version. It has also opened the path for remarkable life writings in regional languages to be translated to English.

The autobiographies written in regional languages call our attention to several Odia autobiographies. In Odia mainly three categories of people: poets and literary men, teachers and professors and, politicians and social workers have written their autobiographies in the initial days. Fakir Mohan started the tradition of autobiography with *Atmajeevancharita* (1927). Fakir Mohan, regarded as the father of Odia fiction is the initiator who wrote his autobiography serially in the famous Odia literary magazine *Utkala Sahitya* in the year 1918. Fakir Mohan had expressed a deep faith in the Odia literary tradition and hoped for a bright future of Odia autobiographies and wrote, "In fact, for the temerity, with which I embark upon this present enterprise, I have only one excuse to offer: I am firmly convinced that the not-too distant future will find this sacred soil of ours teeming with autobiographers. All I want to do is to provide a path for them." (Boulton, 1985: Xi) The first of its kind, *Atmajeevanacharita*, was written in the year 1917. It was published in form of a book in the year in the year 1927. It is an exclusive source of information and also a unique piece of literature and a social document representing one of the transitional phases of Odisha when western influences were slowly entering into the Odishan society. Subsequently, several autobiographies were produced, such as *Jatiya Jeevevanara Atmabikash* by freedom fighter, Govinda Chandra Mishra, *Praharaj Prikrama* by Gopal Chandra Praharaj in between the years 1941-45. In the year 1949 Harekrushna Mahtab's autobiography, *Sadhanara Pathe* came in print bearing a lot of aspects important from historical point of view. Another remarkable autobiography in Odia literature is the autobiography of Godavaris Misra, *Ardha Satabdi ra Odisha O Tahinre Mo Sthana*.

Autobiography of Godavaris was published in the year 1958 after his death. Although the author had already prepared the contents for its next volume, that could not be completed. The author was honoured by the Kendra Sahitya Academy for this great work.

Nilakantha's Autobiography

Godavaris Misra and Pundit Nilakantha were contemporaries. They were motivated and dedicated leaders of the Satyabadi era and ardent followers of Utkalmani Pundit Gopabandhu. Nilakantha belongs to a very important period of the history of both Odisha and India. He has witnessed crucial phases of the pre and post independence period. Even he has witnessed the Second World War. He was involved in all these stupendous occurrences in some way or other. He was a legislator both in the Central Assembly and State Assembly, in pre-independence and post- independence periods respectively. He has witnessed the political practices and upheavals of that period as a participant and also as a keen observer. He played important roles as a politician, freedom fighter and also a reformer in this sphere.

It is commonly approved that any work of literature is nurtured by culture. The subject matter, the topic, the way the author reveals— all are products of certain circumstances of a certain age. Since translated literature is regarded as a branch of target literary system (Xie Tianzhen, 2003:154), translated literary products share certain manifestations of cultural traits at a particular period of time. The role which culture plays in the translation of literary texts can thus never be obliterated. There are other social factors and impressions, which also find place in the translated literature. The translated literature often takes the target readers to its own horizon with the help of the target reader's own language. Several obstacles may come on the way of a translator when a 'period writing' is to be translated. There is a challenge to cover different periods and values.

While translating the autobiography of Pundit Nilakantha it must be taken in to account that, more than being a psychological document, it is a social representative and the main theme in such a life writing is concerned with the confrontation between man and the society, and shows the growth and development of the author's character and deeds. Therefore, the translator has a social duty to balance and respect the interests and perspectives of both the Source Text author and of the Target Text reader. The translator must be conscious to the cultural aspects of the source text so that its target readers could also get a glimpse into the autobiography and its period.

Nilakantha's autobiography gives the readers a glimpse into the phase of transition of Odishan society. It was also a transition from a caste-ridden feudal society to a modern one which admits no distinction based on one's birth. Nilakantha gives a vivid account of his school days, when people were conscious about retaining the sanctity of their caste. There were discriminations in the society. People of one caste were so intolerant of the people of a different caste that they preferred not to dine with the latter. Another striking factor was the discrimination that existed within Brahmin caste. This caste system had its direct impact on marriage. In Nilakantha's family, his father was also a victim of this caste discrimination because he married a so-called lower caste Brahmin girl. The typical system of marriage and the changes in the wake of influences from Bengal, both in terms of religious and social practice illustrate that the Odishan society was in transition. Bride-price and Groom-price were fixed according to caste. Nilakantha described how today's dowry system had begun in Odisha as an influence of Bengal. The groom price which was paid in a small amount gradually was raised when there was a competition to buy a higher caste. At times the bride's father also used to bear the expenses of higher education of prospective grooms. Nilakantha gives a detailed description of the evolution of caste feelings in Odisha. While the regular practices of the society Nilakantha

Those days, people were superstitious about dreaded diseases and treatment of such diseases. They believed in the age-old stories and anecdotes as gospel truth. To create faith in gods and goddesses stories were fabricated. In case of epidemics, instead of giving treatment to a patient, people used to offer oblations to the goddess. Nilakantha was against this wrong practice. His aim was to make the society free from such superstitions. One may get a distinctive idea on Bhakti cult, and Tantric cult, the worship of the mother goddess and several other social beliefs and practices of that period by reading Nilakantha's autobiography. Nilakantha gives a comparison between the practices prevalent in his early years and those of the period of his writing. He criticizes the social practices and tries to establish that these were not essentially Odishan in character. Nilakantha vividly portrays the pathetic condition of the people of Odisha due to poverty, ignorance and superstition in the pages of *Atmajivani*. An awareness among the youth with the spread of modern education, changing socio-cultural practices and dedicated effort to build character – all these are honestly recorded in *Atmajivani*.

It is easier to understand the source text if it happens to be the mother tongue of the translator. The nuances of the original work can be decoded as the author encoded it in the source text. But surely creativity is the guiding factor in identifying the real purpose. It is a tough task also to recreate the magic of humours, jokes and proverbs in the translated text. If the source text happens to be the mother tongue of the translator, then he may not be able to convince himself while translating the same in the target language that adequate justice has been done to the targeted text. At this moment the translator should make his translation free from his own position and should stop his mother tongue intervene in his translating process. The translator's duty is to make the source text available in the target language. If there is any such reciprocal form in the target language, then the translator should use it. During the translation of this autobiography, for example a proverb, "*nai badhi ku dianka rana*" was met with for treatment. The meaning here is, to attempt hopelessly to stop the surging river in flood, by giving it god's sake. Often it is not so easy to let such proverbs convey the same meaning as is desired by the source text.

Atmajivani is a journey of more than hundred years. While giving reference to some cultural aspects Nilakantha has taken us back to more than an era. He had performed a serious research to reach at the origins of some of the existing orders. Similarly, he has discussed social norms and developments of a period of more than hundred years. He recorded this in his valuable autobiography as result of his keen observation. The translator of such a text has to take care of this journey in such a way so that the target readers would not confuse themselves but at the same time would be a part of it. A few instances from the source text may be discussed here: while the author presented some of the facts relating to cultural change and cultural intervention, he tried to give it in detail and also gives some of the factors which had come out of rigorous research. At a later stage of his life also his memory sails really fast. He covers a period from rulers of feudatory states to the rulers of modern and independent Odisha. At times he travels places from Puri to Cuttack and to Delhi, and from Calcutta to Patna, Jamshedpur, and comes back to his comfortable zone of Satyabadi, down in the memory lane. Never does he allow any specific experience and opinion obstruct his creative space. At times it may be a difficult task for the target readers to relate to all these incidents. The role of the translator here is to act as a mediator and bridge the gap. The translator has to establish a link between these factors with the original flow of the autobiography. Without the link the translated text would lose the flavour and importance.

To conclude one may find it a difficult task to get the exact meaning of a word, phrase or proverb in a literary translation. The major objective of literary translation is a change into another language retaining the sense of the original text. Translation is both a substitution and conversion of meaning from the source language to the target language. But over the years there were drastic changes brought by the theorists, and in the present context culture mostly holds the key. The basic problem of translation practice is that of finding the target language translation equivalents both culturally and syntactically. A translation theory defines the nature and condition of translation equivalence. The process of translation involves an analysis, interpretation and creation of the source text into the target text which would be acceptable to the target readers. It is also a process of substitution of linguistic components and semantic values from one language to another. There are several occasions where the translators may fumble to provide the appropriate meaning. The translator here should act as a comparer and creator to deal with such problems. Similarly, there are culture-specific terms for food, grains, celebrations, dress codes, life styles, living conditions, worships and prayers, jokes and criticisms, and also typical emotions—all these form the stuff of an autobiography. Especially, when it is the autobiography of a person with versatile talent in all the possible fields and subjects, a person who is highly regarded as an intellectual and scholar like Pundit Nilakantha, the translation needs to be of a superior quality. Many workers like him who had great contribution to Indian freedom struggle and had dedicated their lives for the cause of the nation, were still not popular among the people of the country. Nilakantha was a multidimensional personality who was born to inspire and lead by example. The work of translating Nilakantha's autobiography is a challenge worth taking, the purpose of which is to bring these gifted personalities to limelight with the help of an English translation so that the whole world would not only respect and adore him, but would also learn from his life.

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