

# Epistolary Autobiographies during Pre-Independence Period

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**Abstract – The present article deals with the epistolary form adopted by two writers, namely Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Kasi Prasad Ghose during Independence for their short autobiographies. The two writers have chosen this literary genre to articulate their personal feelings and ideas for which every reader would respond with a sense of intimacy. These writers, as they belong to the early period of Indo-Anglian prose writing, would enable the reader to peep into the exciting period of Indian Renaissance.**

**Keywords: Epistolary, Autobiography, Semitic, Scintillating Manner, Castigation, Pernicious, Superstition.**

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One finds epistolary form of poem or a travelogue, fiction in British Literature but in Indo-Anglian Literature two prominent writers have chosen epistles for their autobiographies in view of their friends' entreating suggestion. Perhaps they may have chosen the epistle for want of time, economy of details and to present it in sheer informal tone mainly addressed to the friend concerned. Shortly before Raja Ram Mohan Roy left England for France in 1832, he gave a brief autobiography in epistle form at the request of his English friend Mr. Gordon of Calcutta. In this short autobiography, he traces his ancestry, his upbringing and strong opposition to the heinous practices perpetrated in the name of religion. For his castigation of those obnoxious practices, he met with stiff opposition and became a target of their scathing criticism. However he did not give in or was subdued because of his amazing scholarship with argumentative power.

He energized the Hindu religion and breathed a new life into the "degenerated, paralysed" Hindu Society. He narrates his ancestry thus:

"My ancestors were Brahmins of a high order, and, from time immemorial, were devoted to the religious duties of their race, down to my fifth progenitor, who about one hundred and forty years ago gave up spiritual exercises for worldly pursuits and aggrandisement. His descendants ever since have followed his example, and according to the usual fate of countries, with various success, some-times rising to honour and sometimes falling; sometimes rich and sometimes poor; sometimes excelling in success, sometimes miserable through disappointment."

Regarding his maternal ancestors they led

"A life of religious observances and devotion, preferring peace and tranquility of mind to the excitements of ambition, and all the allurements of worldly grandeur"

In accordance with the usual paternal practice, he learnt Persian and Arabic which was *sine qua non* for the subjects under the Moghul rule in their courts. He also learnt Sanskrit and Hindu theology and acquired supreme mastery over them.

Perhaps his passionate study of Semitic languages and their practices might have profoundly affected his mode of thinking which resulted in writing a booklet questioning about the sanctity and validity of idol worship. In view of his abrasive arguments and seething attack on the pernicious practices of Hindus they later became his opponents and inveterate foes. He was estranged from his family and fell out with his father in view of his singular opposite stand against Hindu tradition and practices. His father's demise made him free to fight against orthodoxy. He was deserted by one and all

"Except two or three Scotch friends, to whom, and the nation to which they belong, I always feel grateful"

Through his autobiography, one can understand the trials and tribulations of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in abolishing the ruthless practice of "Sati" and his crusade against inhuman Hindu custom. His epistolary autobiography, first of its kind in Indo-Anglian prose, is a remarkable testimony of an

individual's Himalayan efforts to make his religion free from blind superstition and orthodox practices.

The letter is written in a scintillating manner casting the early rays of modernism for Raja Ram Mohan Roy is hailed as the harbinger, the morning star of Indian Renaissance and his brief autobiography reflects the zeitgeist of Modern Age which heralds a new emerging independent India like phoenix.

His epistolary autobiography contains little information about his domestic life and also about significant contemporary men and matters. However, his style like the Victorian writers John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle is tinged with sarcasm and exhibits his extraordinary scholarship for he is well-versed in the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran besides being a polyglot.

His letters to the British rulers and the learned scholars bore lofty, formal style reminiscent of Bacon or Burke but in his arguments with opponents, it was scathing and sarcastic reminding us of Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift.

Another significant Epistolary autobiography was written by **Kasi Prasad Ghose** at the request of an English man Rev. James Long. In this epistolary autobiography, he gives a brief sketch of his birth and parentage. During the course of events, he narrates how the visiting professor Dr. H. H. Wilson encouraged him to write poetry. Of his love of poetry he writes:

“From my earliest boyhood I have had a fancy to write poetry. The music of the falling rain or of rusting leaves attracted my attention, and in the abstraction of my mind which followed, I used to give vent to my feelings in verse”

But as his poem lacked “measure in it,” Mr. Halifax, the Head teacher in the Hindu College, advised him to read Carey's prosody.

“.....but as a copy of that work could not then be found in the shops, I returned to Murray's Prosody, and Lord Kames' Elements of Criticism, from which I derived all my first knowledge of English versification. I then commenced reading the best poets in a regular and measured tone, which soon accustomed my ears to English rhythm. I then re-wrote my first piece, and showed it again to Mr. Halifax, who approved of it.”

In the third part of his letter, Kasi Prasad Ghose describes his domestic life. He finds it easier to express his sentiments in English rather than in Bengali:

“Perhaps because he preferred the associations, sentiments and thoughts which he found in English poems to those that he met with in Bengali poetry. Most significant, however, is the remark he makes

about the task of an autobiographer. He says that “the most faithful representation of a person when made by himself is apt to betray him”

The letter is informal and reflective of times. Thus the two epistolary autobiographies stand out prominently for their novel, intimate, details of the aches and anxieties of individuals concerned.

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