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## **THE GENRE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY DURING MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

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# The Genre of Autobiography during Medieval Period

S. Prasad

M.A. (Lit), M.A. (E.L.T), B.Ed., (PhD), Asst. Professor in English, KITS Engineering College, Divili, E. G. Distt. (A.P)

**Abstract – This article attempts to indicate that the genre of autobiography was produced not merely in western tradition but it also abounded in Medieval India. The noteworthy autobiographer was Babur who adhered to the design and truth as enunciated by Roy Pascal in his well-known authoritative book “Design and Truth in Autobiography”.**

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Roy Pascal in his “Design and Truth in Autobiography” has made an erroneous observation with regard to autobiography stating that “Autobiography is distinctive product of western, post Roman Civilization, and only in modern times has spread to other Civilizations”. Roy Pascal, perhaps, is unaware of the fact that medieval Period in India abounds in autobiographical literature mostly written Persian. Various rulers refined the art of autobiography which enabled the historian to have a peep into the minds of the rulers and for a comprehensive knowledge of contemporary events unrecorded by Chroniclers. Some of them wielded both sword and pen successively and their works gained worldwide recognition. The first compact autobiographical fragment is “Fatahat-I-Firoz-Shahi” of Firoz Tuglak. The book records about his ascension to the throne of Delhi in 1351 A.D. He was strong advocate of Islam and he felt that God had assigned him the duty of kingship in order to maintain the laws of Islam. His chief motive of writing the autobiography was “to record his achievements in battles, administration and religion.” He claimed in the book that he abolished undue taxes, cancelled all accumulated debts and mortgages of the poor and stopped various inhuman tortures inflicted on his subjects during Mohammed Tuglak’s regime. Eventhough he performed good deeds, he was a bigot and meted out the worst ill-treatment to Hindus. He was proud in proclaiming about his fanatical zeal for he wrote; “I encouraged my infidel subjects to embrace the religion of the prophet” and he promised to repeal the heinous Jizya tax on those who took to Islam. His autobiography reveals his attitude to the poor and his efforts to ameliorate their conditions but it also shows his intolerable stance towards the Hindus and Shias of Islam. Among all the autobiographies written during Muslim rule, the crowning piece among them is undoubtedly the singular, exquisite work of Babur, written in Turki, being Babur’s native tongue. It contains all details without sacrificing truth coupled with fidelity to facts. He mentions his defeat and the

loss of Andefan and Samarkand. He confessed about his vexation and melancholy. He suffered and bitterly wept over the loss of those two places. Later he gained Andejan but his elder sister Khan zadah Begum was abducted by Sheibani khan who caused a crushing, humiliating defeat of Babur. In his memoir, he recorded one significant event which exhibited an excellent quality of leadership. When once he was trapped in a snow-covered mountain, his men pleaded with him to go into a cavern for saving himself from biting cold. He refused and wanted to share their company and their suffering, His autobiography reveals his pantheistic attitude. Both Babur and Nehru have keen observation of the varying moods of nature and possess the thrill and delight of Wordsworths. One of the cardinal qualities of an autobiography is its adherence to truth and sincerity. He states thus: “In all that I have written down, to the present moment, I have every word most scrupulously followed the truth.” He continues to state that “ I have set forth merit or demerit of every man, whether friend or stranger, with the most perfect impartiality” He did not even spare his son Humayan for his grammatical errors and his letter was pointed out to be confused crabbed” Among muslim writers of the genre of autobiography, Babur can be hailed as the first autobiographer for sheer sense of fidelity to truth and keen observation even though Roy Pascal hesitated to place him along with reputed western autobiographers.

Gul Badan is the first woman autobiographer during muslim period. She is the highly talented daughter of Babur and brother Humayun. Her “Humayun Nama” written in charming Persian also throws a flood of light on harem politics and the oblique role of moghul women in the matter of administration and governance. Some of the recondite autobiographies were Mohammed Haider Dughlat’s “Trikh-IRashidi” and Albadaonis “Manatakhabu-I-Twarikh” which gave significant details of their times. Dughlat Being

the cousin of Babur, gave lengthy account of Babur as well as Humayun's various military expeditions. He recounts the degradation of Moghul army after the demise of Babur and crushing defeat of Humayun at the battle of Kanuj. Al-Badaonis's work is history cum memoirs. His account mainly dealt with Akbar's reign and his religious policy. Later, Jahangir's autobiography known as "Tuzuk-I-Jehangir" mentions his ordinance repealing harsh laws such as amputation of legs and abolition of taxes. He also writes about his continuation of father's religious policy. The book is somewhat monotonous for it is filled with trivial details of promotion, demotion, dismissal of the officials of his empire. His book was written in his own hand till 17<sup>th</sup> year of his reign but later was written by his courtier Mohammed Khan. He is a man of contradictions. He speaks of fair Justice but does not hesitate to conspire to kill Abu-L-Fazal. Like Babur, he too speaks of the beauty of nature in charming, glowing language. It is interesting to note that a Hindu Autobiographer, Banarsidasa has been hailed for his book "Arthakatha or Half-story" written in Hindi in 1641. He became a trend-setter for future writers of autobiography in Indian languages. His autobiography depicts the candid confessions of the writer in sonorous Hindi. The book contains the inner conflicts and foibles of the writer. But peace comes to him through the contact with a Jain monk. One can say "All is well that ends well." Except Banarsidasa, all other autobiographers of Muslim rule dwelt upon the themes of military expeditions, Zenana politics, administrative reforms, personal views of topical interest. Some of them gave exaggerated accounts of their splendid achievements bordering on megalomania. They have concealed their weaknesses but highlighted their valorous deeds and administrative dexterity. Another noteworthy writer during this period was Mirza Nathan who vividly described the historical events between 1608 and 1624. He narrated about the regimes of Moghul governors of Bengal-Islam Khan, Qasim Khan, and Ibrahim Khan and about the events in Bengal and Bihar during the rebellion of Shahjahan. This book gives adequate details of Moghul rule of the period. The Muslim Rulers, barring Babur, autobiographies contained exaggerated accounts of their achievements bordering on megalomania. They have hidden their short comings besides weaknesses but focused on their valorous deeds and administrative dexterity.

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