Survey of Literature

In India, autobiographies and autobiographical studies gained significance only since the last decade (1990s). This must indicate the status of autobiographies. In libraries, autobiographies go without any independent classification. Like biographies, autobiographies are often included in the History section. How farther than a “genre” is this form of writing then! K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar’s *Indian Writing in English*, (1962) is the first book to discuss, in brief though, the autobiographies of Gandhi, Nehru, and Nirad C. Chaudhury. The 2001 edition of Iyengar’s work mentions Kamala Das’s *My Story* (1986) Princess Gayatri Devi’s *A Princess Remembers* and a few more autobiographical works. These autobiographies, however, are not ‘discussed’; they are alluded to in a ‘Postscript’.

R.C.P. Sinha is perhaps the first scholar to make a full length study of Indian autobiographies. His *The Indian Autobiographies in English* (1978) is a pioneering work that attempts an extensive study of almost all Indian autobiographies written in English till that time. While disagreeing with the view that the autobiographical tradition is alien to Indian culture, Sinha traces the Indian autobiographical tradition back to *Danastutis* of Vedic period, King Ashoka, Bana Bhatta, Bilhana, Kalhana,
Moghul Kings, Banarasi Das and argues that however “irregular and tenuous” (Sinha 4) autobiographical tradition might have been, it got expressed itself “intermittently and spasmodically” (Sinha 2) in the Indian past. He holds this view against the notion that Indian autobiographies derive from the West. But he acquiesces that with the rise of the National Movement in India, British ideas and education exercised immense influence on the remarkably increasing number of autobiographies in India. Sinha’s study also provides a bird’s eye-view of autobiographies of renowned personalities like Saint Augustine, Goethe (1849), W.B. Yeats (1926), Darwin (1929), Freud (1946), Romain Rolland (1947), G.B. Shaw (1949), Rousseau (1954), Russell (1968), Tolstoy (1932 & 1968), and others. The extensive study of Sinha formulates the argument that the power and charm of Indo-Anglian autobiographies owe to the superior interaction between “self and the world and man and the milieu” (Sinha 189). According to him, in India, both the autobiographical mode and the mood of the nation and the conscious individual in it blend well with each other, making the Indo-Anglian autobiographies “a sensitive index of the ebb and flow of national consciousness” (Sinha 193). And such a tradition has stimulated the growth of autobiographical convention which in turn “continues to be a rich and proud heritage.
and a perennial source of inspiration to posterity” (Sinha 193). Sinha’s study is commendable in that it also includes, some hardly noted women autobiographies such as Cornelia Sorabji’s *India Calling* (1934), Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit’s *So I Became a Minister* (1939), Krishna Hutheesingh’s *With No Regrets* (1944), Savitri Devi Nanda’s *A City of Two Gateways* (1950), Maharani Brinda’s *The Story of an Indian Princess* (1953), Nayanatara Sahgal’s *Prison and the Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1961), Sita Ratnambal’s *Beyond the Jungle* (1968). Since Sinha’s autobiographical survey is quite extensive, he categorises them according to the “‘mission’ or ‘calling’” (Sinha 8) of individual autobiographers.

The very diversity and vastness must have constrained the nature of Sinha’s study. Because, the first Indian woman autobiography (written in English) by Sunity Devi (1921) and also another significant work by Muthulakshmi Reddy (1964) do not figure in his work. But there is no denying that Sinha’s work offers rich source material for Autobiographical Studies. Prior to him a couple of articles on selected autobiographies, like Babhani Bhattacharya’s “The Story of My Experiments with Truth” (1968) and K. Raghavendra Rao’s “Indo-British
Encounter in Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*” (1968) were available.

Later K. Shenbagevalli’s “Indian Autobiography in English”, an unpublished dissertation from University of Madras (1984) attempted another detailed study of the autobiographies in India. The emphasis in this thesis is more on the genre and its unique features. Shenbagevalli considers in her later chapters the historical, fictional and confessional modes of the genre, but confines her study to literary autobiographers with a “subtle poetic vision of life ... not mere analyst[s] of ... life, but its philosophic historian[s]” (Shenbagevalli 11). Such life stories, she observes, “are at once casual and full of implications” (Shenbagevalli 11). Shenbagevalli contends that Indian English autobiographies are mainly consequential of British advent; naturally she draws parallels in the growth of autobiographical tradition both in England and India. She expostulates against R.C.P. Sinha’s view. Her counter-reading was that though the autobiographical subjects mentioned by Sinha deserve a special attention as the earliest attempts at self-portrayal, they are in want of self-revelation and self-exploration, qualities that one tends to associate with modern autobiographies. Shenbagevalli notes that the little self-exploration that is occasionally seen in the
autobiographies is not the primary intention, but an incidental by-product, although of great value. Shenbagevalli attributes the quick growth of autobiographies in nineteenth century India, to the impact of West. According to this scholar, sharpened self-consciousness and vivid perception of an individual, and his role in society are mainly due to British influence. Nehru, N.C. Chaudhuri, Ved Mehta, Prakash Tandon, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Das, Dom Moraes, Tagore and Gandhi: the major historical, political and literary personalities of our time, constitute K. Shenbagevalli’s work. Strangely she locates Indian women autobiographies in an area with great potential for future studies, though she herself does not discuss any woman-autobiography, except Kamala Das’s. Her discussion of Kamala Das’s autobiography, along with those of the great minds of her time is quite insightful. For Shenbagevalli, emergence of women autobiographies suggests gradual transformation of values and a unique “revolt and self-assertion” (Bagevalli 236) of women. On the whole, for Shenbagevalli Indian autobiographies mean a “kinship and affinity with the two worlds... [a] Fusion between the East and the West at the level of thought, feeling and sensibility” (236).
Indian Women Autobiographies (1993) by Ranjana Harish is the first book to devote itself to Indian women autobiographies as a separate genre. Works like Voices from Within (1991) by Malavika Karlekar, Women Writing in India (1991) by Susie Tharu, Tanika Sarkar’s Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban (1991) and Uma Chakravarti’s Rewriting History (2000) have been into the task of reclaiming self-expressions of Indian women from deliberate social amnesia. Study of Indian Women’s self-portrayal gains greater specificity with Ranjana’s dissertation “The Female Mind: A Study of Indo-English Autobiographies by Women” (1991), and her books, Indian Women Autobiographies (1993) and The Female Foot Prints (1996). Drawing theoretical support from thinkers such as Patricia Meyer Spacks, Nancy Chodorow, Sheri Benstock, Sheila Rowbotham, Susan Stanford Friedman, Estelle Jelinek, Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter, Ranjana Harish argues that in lieu of the individualistic personality, which according to many thinkers is a precondition to any autobiography, women autobiographies spring from a collective identity. A woman’s works, including autobiography issues from a collective consciousness of women’s subculture than from an isolated ‘I’. Ranjana discusses the nature of a woman’s self as presented in her autobiography in opposition to the individualistic, well defined, and isolated ‘I’.
Consideration of the approaches of psycho analysts and socio-literary critics like Sudhir Kakar, Yann Martel, Nancy Friday, Indira Parekh makes Ranjana’s study gain in perspective. Ranjana’s work commends itself by not limiting itself to discussion of women autobiographies in English; it also scans works in regional languages available in English translation. Ranjana’s study of autobiographies earns credit for more than one accomplishment: it is the first full-length work on Indian women autobiographies; it attempts to define “female mind” from the ‘gyno-critical’ point of view; and it involves itself in the “recovery of lost female texts” (‘Preface’ to Ranjana’s dissertation). The research work of Ranjana Harish is followed later by her books, Indian Women’s Autobiography and The Female Foot Prints. The Female Foot Prints contains excerpts from six autobiographies not included in her earlier work. Ranjana Harish is the only scholar who has over the years persistently pursued the study of Indian women autobiographies. In “The Cultural Hall of Mirrors: Issue of Gender Genre Incompatibility of Women’s Autobiography” (included in Commonwealth Autobiographies, ed. CDN, 1996), she discusses the need for gynocentric point of view while examining the unique nature of a woman’s self in autobiography. Her “My Story” (in Women’s Writing: Text and Context, 1996) applies Virginia Woolf’s ideas in
the reading of Kamala Das’s autobiography. In another long essay “Scrutiny of Self in Society: Women’s Autobiographies” (Women about Women, (1998), Ranjana Harish categorises the Indian autobiographies on models prescribed by Elaine Showalter: Feminine (muted group), Feminist (eloquent group), and female (articulate group). This essay argues for the greater relevance of feminist theoreticians like Patricia Meyer Spacks and Susan Stanford Friedman, in gynocentric readings of women autobiographies than Gusdorf, Olney etc who insist on the mandatory existence of ‘isolated self’ as a primary requisite for any autobiography. In “Exorcising the Cruel Patriarchy: A Comparative Study of Autobiographies by Claire Martin and Sharan-Jeet Shan” (The Literary Criterion 35, 2000) Ranjana argues that women’s autobiographies are a means of creating a space for their new selves after a departure from their old selves which are the victims of cruel patriarchy. Yet another article by her, “Pen and Needle: The Changing Metaphors of Self in Autobiographies by Women in Post-Independent India” (Indian Literature. July-Aug 210, 2002), examines in brief Indian women autobiographies from 1970 to nineties, and attempts to see through them the use of pen as an identity provider. That is to say, it is through writing that women assert an authority and transform themselves from passivity to action. Writing is seen as a journey
towards empowerment of the feminine. Accordingly, Ranjana holds that every woman autobiography is a metaphor in itself; particularly in societies that deny a unitary, a specially human and unique, also a constantly evolving ‘self’ to women. The precondition suggested by Olney’s, creates an exclusive connection of men with the genre. But then Ranjana notes, for minorities and marginals like blacks, women and non westerners—their self-creation, self consciousness, self are profoundly different and emerge from their cultural category that allows expression of individual identity. Hence, the valid and justified similitude in the metaphors that women employ in their self-representation. Ranjana Harish’s most recent article “Authority of Experience: Autobiography as ‘Scriptotherapy’” (Littcrit 69.36 1, 2010) asserts, through the experience of an American friend, the therapeutic and visionary quality of self-narration. This issue of Littcrit offers, along with Ranjana Harish’s article, two essays on dalit women autobiographies (Mayilamma’s and Viramma’s in Malayalam and Tamil) and one article on Phoolan Devi’s autobiography. Commonwealth Autobiography (ed. CDN) already mentioned, contains an article by Jayasree Sanjay on Susannah Moody. The Monograph—though not exclusively on Women Autobiographies, contains an insightful Introduction by
CDN. *Autobiography in Indian Writing in English* (2004) by Shashi Bhushan Mishra contains a lone article on women autobiography. This is on Kamala Das’s *My Story*. The general run of Shashibhushan’s argument in the book is that the genre of autobiography and the discipline of autobiographical study is essentially the result of English education in India.

Two recent works on Autobiographical Studies ask for our attention: Sidonie Smith’s *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987), and *Autobiography* (1988, Indian Rpt 2007) by Linda Anderson. In her article Sidonie Smith observes that it is problematic for a woman autobiographer to get engaged with the ideological voices of female difference. The problem, she notes gets aggravated with the generic contact of autobiography. Linda Anderson’s *Autobiography* serves as an excellent preliminary to Autobiographical Studies. It describes the tradition of autobiography starting from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and Rousseau’s *Confessions*; expresses post-structuralist concerns in autobiographical studies, examines the relevance of autobiographical writing as political questioning, and finally discusses the ethical value of autobiography.
A few more essays/reviews from various journals need to be mentioned. “Kamala Das: The Pity of It” (Indian Literature 3.22, 1979) by R. Raphael views Kamala Das’s writing as an artistic failure; Raphael’s complaint is that Kamala Das lacks the detachment in universalising her personal experiences. K. Chellappan’s “The Discovery of India and the Self in Three Autobiographies” (The Colonial and the Neo-Colonial Encounters in Commonwealth Literature. ed. H.H. Annaiah Gowda, 1983) defines “individualising” as a process of recognition and response of both the other and self and discusses Gandhi, Nehru, Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s autobiographies as discovery of the self paralleling the discovery of modern India. Mohinder Singh’s essay “The Indian Disadvantaged as Autobiographers” (The Literary Half-Yearly 29 Jan, 1988) regards the autobiographical mode in India and elsewhere as a weapon for the oppressed, disadvantaged groups such as women, dalits and tribals. “Autobiography: A Literary Genre” (Women’s Writing: Text and Context. ed. Jasbir Jain, 1999), an essay by Sarojini points out the flexibility of autobiographical form because of its affinity and semblance with other literary forms. While doing so, this new form recognises the differences between male and female self-expression due to their unequal status in society. Rangarao Bhongle’s article titled “Dalit Autobiographies: An Unknown Facet of Social
Reality” shows, with brief references to around ten Dalit self-stories in Marathi language, how Dalit autobiographies unveil the wretchedness and miseries of Dalits rooted in their collective consciousness. “Recent Indian English Autobiographies: A Survey” (Journal of Literature and Aesthetics 2.2 July-Dec, 2002) by Shyamala Narayanan provides an overview of contemporary autobiographies. Ladha Barathan’s “Female Voices: Focus on the Autobiographies of Charlotte Perkin’s Gilman and Maya Anjelou” (in Journal of Literature and Aesthetics 3.1-2 Jan-Dec 2003), notes that despite the differences between the self stories of women and men, Gilman and Anjelou use the genre for an effective portrayal of their marginalised existence. Another article by Bijay Kumar Das titled “Postmodern Indian English Autobiography” discusses around a dozen autobiographies to argue that the genre in India is ignored and there is a need for literary autobiographies in the literary scenario. In “The private as the Public: Some Theoretical Issues in Women’s Autobiography” (Figuring Female 2006), Usha V.T. and Murali discuss the need to distinguish between sensible and sensational autobiographies and assert the need to re-examine the impact of colonisation and neo colonisation on subaltern structure and women in autobiographical studies. An Indian student of Autobiographical study is sure to be benefited by
Mira Behn
(Madeleine Slade Nov 1892–July 1982)

Madeleine Slade named ‘Mira’ by Gandhi whose staunchest disciple she remained till her death, was from Imperial England. Daughter of British Admiral Edmund Slade, Mira left her home in England in 1925 to live and work with Mahatma Gandhi. From then to her stay in India till 1958, she devoted her life to the humanist and environment concerns, advancement of Gandhian principles and the Freedom Struggle in India.

During her stay in India, Mira Behn started her Hindi language learning in Gurukul Kangri and continued in Bhagawat Bhakti Ashram of Rewari, in serious pursuit of Rigveda, Upanishads and other religious texts. In post Independent India, she worked in the Animal Husbandry Department for the UP Government and established harmonious coexistence of man in nature along with both domestic and wild animals at the foot of the Himalaya in Hrishikesh. In 1982 the Government of India conferred on Mira Behn Padmavibhushan. After 1965, till her death, she lived in Vienna nearby the woods where her lifetime passion Beethoven breathed his music. Her autobiography The Spirit’s Pilgrimage was first published in 1960.