A Critical Note on Taylor's Autobiography as a Source

Capt. Meadows Taylor's "The Story of My Life" was completed in June 1874. There is no mention in it when exactly he began to write it, but it may be safely inferred that it was begun sometime in the latter half of 1872, when he had finished his last historical romance Sesta. It was more than a dozen years since he had left Surapur; blindness was approaching and he was suffering from many infirmities and ailments. But declining memory was not amongst them according to Henry Bruce, editor of a new edition of the Story. "It depended, not on an old man's uncertain recollections, but on the mass of correspondence which had passed between Taylor and his father". Occasional extracts from his letters to his father are interspersed throughout the Story. It is further strengthened by incidental extracts from official correspondence, which are quite faithful to the original except for a minor word here and there. The Story also contains a few extracts from private letters by officials written to Taylor. There are incidents and instances in it which, when compared with a contemporary official letter, tally more or less perfectly thereby confirming Bruce's certificate of the author's unfailing memory. All this lends an aura of complete authenticity and accuracy to every statement made by Taylor in regard to Surapur. A political agent's autobiography coming from a man of Taylor's ability, integrity, honesty and memory was naturally likely to be fully believed in all respects.
Had Bruce checked the Story with Taylor's official correspondence available in the India Office Library when preparing the new edition the present note would have been superfluous. Bruce, however, chose to provide only literary criticism of Taylor's novels by way of introduction. So far as notes were concerned he mainly drew upon the Imperial Gazetteer of India, and some other published works. He also wrote to those related to or interested in Taylor and received help from them. But it occurred to none of them to verify Taylor's facts with their unpublished, official version. These remained unchallenged.

The Story comprises 19 chapters of which only 9 relate to Surapur, (Chapters VII-XII and XIV-XVII) two of them very cursorily. Many of Taylor's statements therein are found to be inaccurate when compared with what he himself wrote at the time in his official letters, or what the officials wrote to him. Most of these have been pointed out in preceding notes and references. A few are too trifling to deserve notice. Here only two major faults are dealt with.

Gravest injustice has been done by Taylor to Rani Ishwaramma. Throughout the Story she has been described as a woman of easy virtue. At the very beginning of his appointment he describes her as "dissolute to a degree - in fact a very Messalina" (p.143) and closes his account of her saying that "her profligacy and baneful influence over her son were terrible to think on, and continued to have effect on him to the last". (p.275). He first met her in December 1842 and she died on 27 May 1853. The above might have been his honest opinion of her during this period, but was
he justified in forming it? At the time he first met her
he knew only what Grealey and Lakshmangir Gosain told him
about her. The latter had filled the former's mind with
false stories and Taylor merely repeats them. At the
time when Chanbasappa was released he came to learn from
him the deceit practised by the banker upon him. In the
Story he not only gives Chanbasappa's version but also has
good words for him. So far as their illicit connexion was
concerned he merely remarks that "whether he was her
paramour or not was no business of mine" (p.179) and leave
it at that. But in a long letter to the Resident on the
banker's doings he confessed of having been deceived by the
banker in respect of the Rani and Chanbasappa. It would have
been fair on Taylor's part to mention this in his auto­
biography. At least if he had really considered the Rani's
alleged amours as none of his business it would not have
resulted in so much of character assassination. But he
continues to mention a number of paramours. It is significant
that he does not mention anyone by name except Kasima. Kasima
was a partly handsome man brought up by Raja Krishtappa
himself from his childhood in the palace and naturally moved
freely in the Rani's apartments. That is not to say that he
was the Rani's lover. Like Lakshmangir earlier, a daftardar
Venkappa filled Taylor's mind with gossip about their
illicit love to gain his own ends and Taylor was once again
deceived. He was finding it too difficult to settle land
disputes among the Bedar clans and attributed it to Kasima's
ascendancy among the Sarnoubats, who he assumed, were
encouraged by the Rani on account of her forbidden love.
He therefore got her banished from Surapur. But the Court
of Enquiry found her innocent. It is equally significant
that not one of the 56 witnesses examined by the Court
mentioned Rani's alleged love for Kasima. It is perhaps,
needless to point out that the quarrel between Kasima and
the Rani before her removal is a dramatic invention by
Taylor; nor did the "rebellious" party thunder at the gates
to get them. She was already on her way to banishment when
Resident Fraser arrived at Surapur.

Taylor persisted in his prejudices till the last.
It is, of course, difficult to prove charges of profligacy
but unless positive proof is forthcoming it is only fair
and gentlemanly to give benefit of doubt and leave the
matter at that. But Taylor continues to report bazar
gossip of which he had neither first-hand knowledge nor
definite proof. To say the least this is unbecoming in him.
It may also be noted that after the so-called Kasima affair
he did not report officially on any of the Rani's alleged
paramours, presumably because he could not have given any
proof.

Another of his suspicions against the Rani was that
she was constantly intriguing against him. This has been
repeatedly mentioned in the Story but quite vaguely. Since
he did not report officially it is safe to assume that either
no intrigues existed or if they did they were too trifling
to engage his attention officially. If so, it is again un-
fair to the Rani to convey mere suspicions as established
facts to the readers of a published autobiography. He
goes so far as to drag in Lord Dalhousie, who, he says,
confirmed her intrigues whereas there is nothing on record
to that effect. There are a few other misstatements about
the Rani; that she defied Gresley's settlement, that it was proposed to send her to Vellore from Bangalore on account of her constant intrigues, that her banishment was ordered by Lord Hardinge, that she professed herself content with her allowance after her return to Surapur, that she was on her way to Tirupati before her death. We have already given sufficient proof that what she defied was not Gresley's settlement but imposition of Pid Naik as diwan. If Lord Hardinge ordered banishment it was on Taylor's recommendation and the Governor-General in Council had added that it should be carried out with all due courtesy. No intrigues on her part at Bangalore were mentioned officially at the time. Taylor did mention them while refusing to clear her debts 5 years after her death. Neither she nor her creditors had pressed their claims any further when she was alive and the Government of India was happy to reduce the burden on Surapur under sequestration with such a handy pretext. She contracted these debts on account of her charity and generosity and she was unable to live within a paltry allowance reduced to Rs.500 per mensem from her former allowance of more than Rs.1500 per mensem. Even after her return Taylor continued to give her only Rs. 1000 per mensem deducting from them instalments on loans. She may not have known what Parliament was, but she sent her petitions for restoration of jameer to the Governor-General through whom they were forwarded to the Court of Directors. All the authorities concurred in Taylor's view and she had to reconcile herself to this final decision. The Court of Directors, also ultimately withdrew their earlier permission to her to
stay outside Surapur on Taylor's initial insistence. It is he who prevented her from undertaking a pilgrimage to Tirupati, a decision which was naturally supported by superior authorities. Taylor fails to mention that Bangalore was Rani's second choice during banishment, and also omits to state that the Rani was not only allowed to return but also all her privileges were to be restored to her. It is difficult to believe that the detailed conversation with her on her return was conveyed to his father in the manner in which it is reported in the Story. Taylor did not know Kannada and this kind of conversation would not be easy to be carried on through interpreters.

All in all from the Story emerges a picture of the Rani not corroborated by official papers. It is easy to understand why Taylor harboured suspicions and prejudices against her. He felt in his heart that she was the only one in Surapur who had the capacity to replace his authority, particularly because her Bedar subjects were loyal to her. He meted out to her the treatment one is most likely to give to possible rivals. On the other hand through the Story one can see the efforts made by the Rani to develop and maintain good relations with him. He smarted under the censure conveyed to him by the Government of India mostly on her account but for which he alone was responsible. But while one can understand his behaviour that does not justify it. Particularly, to harp upon his prejudices giving them as if they are statements of facts in an autobiography published 20 years after the Rani's death when he was expected to have a more generous attitude, certainly detracts from the merits of an excellent work.
Taylor's version of the so-called Raja's revolt is equally faulty. It appears that he was unacquainted with Capt. Campbell's report on events leading to the skirmish on 7th February 1858 which proved the Raja's unpreparedness and want of any intention to rebel. He was not defeated for he gave no battle, and therefore did not hold his position bravely at all. Taylor mentions his 3 visits to the Raja but fails to mention that however incoherent he was he gave out the names of all those whom he believed to be involved in the 'Mutiny'. Instead he puts in a noble but entirely false speech in the mouth of the Raja which is so misleading. Taylor's later assertion that the Raja did not give out names is contradicted by his own earlier official reports to the Resident. The Resident's assurances to Taylor on that account, therefore, must be equally false. The Resident did not commute the sentence of transportation for life given by the military tribunal, nor did the Governor-General do so. In fact the trial papers reached the Governor General on the day the Raja committed suicide.

The prejudiced presentation of his relations with the Rani and the faulty account of the Raja's 'rebellion' in addition to Taylor's many other misstatements are sufficiently indicative to show that his story must not be relied upon in its entirety as a source for British relations with Surapur. For example, he misappropriates to himself the settlement effected by Gresley, giving on top of it the wrong figure of Rs. 60,000 per year as Surapur's dues towards Hyderabad instead of Rs. 40,000. He also claims false credit for having stopped the nasrana, a decision taken by
the Government of India before his time on the accession of Raja Venkatappa IV in August 1842. The Story, therefore, must be read with due caution towards factual accuracy. Many of his statements and versions in the Story are contradicted by his own contemporary official letters to the Resident. The latter are obviously more trustworthy not only on account of their contemporaneity but also because he was required to be more cautious in them and could not afford to write as loosely and vaguely as he does in the Story. From the latter one can see that Taylor undoubtedly enjoyed the position of power he had earned. In the former as a subordinate he could but only submit his views for final decision by the higher authorities. They checked him whenever necessary and such instances have been altogether passed over in the Story while approbation, which was due and certainly justifiable, has been repeatedly mentioned. Even in his official letters and reports at times he appears confused, middle-headed and contradicts himself. Nevertheless they leave no doubt about his devotion to duty, his zeal, integrity and sincerity.

While his official letters are more reliable his Story is more readable. So far as his revenue work, public works and schemes of irrigation are concerned the Story is trustworthy except for a minor detail here and there. And these naturally come out more alive there than in the dry-dust official letters. His conjecture that the Raja's suicide might have been accidental is worthy of consideration. The valedictory address presented to him by a thousand citizens of Surapur is a good summarizing up of the work done by him for them but not available in official
records. His account of the continual conflict with Pid Naik is in fair accordance with his contemporary official reports on them. Besides, the Story has the advantage of extracts from private correspondence of officials. The descriptions of various ceremonies could not have been so vivid and graphic in an official letter. His observations on the Bedars are uniformly appreciative in the Story while officially he had to exaggerate their violent character to urge the presence of British troops. It is difficult to assess how far his misstatements in the Story are due to failing memory in old age, natural egotism of a successful administrator or prejudices and predilections developed over the years. With all its defects as a historical source one can feel from the Story that there was a gradual evolution of the process of his identifying himself with the samsthon of Surapur; he had fallen in love with the land and the people of Surapur. This is not the place to estimate the Story as a work of art, as we are more concerned here with it as a source. Suffice it to say that merely read as autobiography without bothering about its authenticity it reflects the sublimation of his subconscious sentiments. It is a polished and revised version of his life and work, a result of mellow and mature reflection in the evening of his life presented with the superb artistry of a seasoned novelist.