

THE MERITOCRATIC TURN:
PERSPECTIVES ON TWO ODIA AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

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Meritocracy as a term refers to the idea that whatever our social position is at birth, the society ought to facilitate the means for 'talent' to 'rise to the top.' This paper explores how meritocracy was transplanted to the Indian circumstances and how the history of autobiographical writings bears an eloquent testimony to it. Through a reading of autobiographies by Nilakantha Das (1884–1967) and Godavarish Mishra (1886–1956), whose lives were deeply intertwined, this paper will examine how these two individuals looked upon the trajectory of their lives. We will also try to establish how Odia autobiographies took a meritocratic turn.

Keywords: merit, meritocracy, autobiography, social ladder, Satyabadi School.

INTRODUCTION

Modernity legitimizes itself through a secular hierarchy that gradually replaces inherited privilege with the rhetoric of merit. In India, this transformation was accompanied by a redefinition of personal worth and status, which was once determined by birth and caste, came to be justified through achievement, education, and professional success. This shift marked a profound reorientation of social hierarchies in the country. Inherited privileges were slowly displaced by the language of meritocracy, which promised fairness and opportunity. Yet, for many,

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the promise remained uneven. Structural inequalities, rooted in wealth, social background, and institutional bias continued to shape outcomes.

Michael Young argued in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), this transformation does not produce equality but rather a subtler form of stratification, where success appears morally earned and failure personally deserved. By grounding status in intelligence and effort, meritocracy obscures the structural force of luck, social capital, and institutional advantage, converting historical contingency into ethical entitlement. Daniel Markovits shows, in *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019), how this logic reorganizes education and labor around hyper-credentialism, while Michael J. Sandel in *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) reasons that the conviction that market rewards equal desert corrodes solidarity and humiliates the “losers” of globalization. The meritocratic philosophy resonated in the discourses of thinkers such as Jo Littler and Cynthia Franklin, restructures subjectivity itself, fostering competitive self-fashioning and neoliberal celebrity while displacing structural critique with narratives of personal agency. Thus, meritocracy inherits the moral essence of nineteenth-century Social Darwinism, very subtly naturalizing inequality and ranking labor according to prestige rather than social necessity, a contradiction starkly illuminated by Martin Luther King Jr.’s insistence on the indispensable dignity of sanitation work. Autobiographical writing becomes a privileged literary site for tracing this ideological shift: from Benvenuto Cellini’s self-mythologizing rise in *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* (1887) Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s meditative self-justification in *Confessions* (1782) and his critique of social differentiation in *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), life narratives projects how individuals internalize, negotiate, and sometimes resist emerging capitalist ideals of distinction. Thus, while meritocracy promises emancipation from aristocratic birth, it simultaneously moralizes inequality, privatizes structural injustice, and transforms modern democracy into a competitive order sustained less by civic decency than by the consoling fiction that we always get what we deserve.¹

Meritocracy operates as both a moral justification and an affective anxiety. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Michael Young’s intelligence and effort become the criteria through which inequality is rendered rational and deserved. This rationality promises fairness – those who climb the social ladder earn a place of repute and those who fail have not demonstrated sufficient merit. Such a system appears ethically superior to aristocracy due to its competitiveness. Daniel Markovits, in *The Meritocracy Trap*, demonstrates how accrued credential and elite education institutionalize inequality while preserving the illusion of fairness. However, the

¹ During the sanitation strike in the US in 1968, after the deaths of workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker exposed unsafe conditions of the sanitation workers. More than one thousand African American sanitation workers protested for fair wages, overtime pay, and improved safety. This movement inspired Martin Luther King Jr., who delivered his iconic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech shortly before his assassination.

same structure that morally legitimates hierarchy also produces intense affective anxiety. As Jo Littler notes, meritocracy circulates as a “feeling,” attaching aspiration, resentment, and shame to economic life. The ideology that reassures the winners simultaneously destabilizes everyone, including those at the top, who must perpetually defend their superiority. In this way, meritocracy sustains inequality not only through institutional arrangements but through emotional economies. It offers ethical comfort – “we get what we deserve” – while generating psychic unrest. The result is a modern social order in which justice is proclaimed, hierarchy is intensified, and individuals oscillate between pride and anxiety, caught in a system that demands both belief in fairness and relentless proof of worth.

This paper will explore how meritocracy under the impact of colonial policies, western education, and missionary activities, individuality assumed greater significance, and writing about one’s life made implicit greater popularity. The influence of colonialism created an environment conducive for the rise of individualism in India.² It gathered momentum during the freedom struggle, when several eminent participants in it wanted to leave accounts of their experiences of taking part in the anti-colonial movement for the benefit of the posterity. These autobiographies are more teleological and didactic in nature. Although they endorsed merit over birth or privilege, Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Surendranath Banerjee, Rajendra Prasad, and Fakir Mohan Senapati aimed at liberating India from colonial rule, rather than achieving upward mobility as individuals.

This paper revolves around a discussion on two autobiographies written by two eminent freedom fighters from Odisha. From the sacred silence of its ancient caves to the thunderous rush of chariot wheels on Puri’s grand avenue, Odisha is a state which has a very rich history and literary culture that speaks in powerful contrasts. This state from the eastern part of India stands as a compelling testament to a civilization that has masterfully preserved its ancient identity while stepping confidently into the future. A new era of modern Odia literature originated in the latter half of the 19th century under the leadership of Radhanath Ray³ and this paved the way for the consolidation of Odia identity. However, Radhanath came to be seen as deeply influenced by Western literary models and themes. In response to his dominant position in Odia literature, a group of litterateurs emphasized upon the originality of Odia literature and culture and initiated Satyabadi Movement in Puri. Though the tenure of stay and service of a number of litterateurs at Satyabadi and their literary output of this period were limited, it ushered in a cultural renaissance in Odisha. Gradually the school became the nerve-centre of Odia

² Amman Madan, in his article “Modernity and Meritocracy”, claims that meritocracy “came to India in a dramatic way when the Indian Civil Service changed its recruitment model from patronage by the directors of the East India Company to selection through an entrance” (p. 16).

³ Radhanath Ray was the first Inspector of Schools in 1873/74. Later in 1892 he was appointed as the first acting inspector of Schools. The graduates of the emerging middle class were instructed under his supervision.

culture due of the literary output of theyabadi group of litterateurs popularly known as *Panchsakhas* – Pandit Gopabandhu Das, Pandit Nilakantha Das, Acharya Harihar, Pandit Krupasindhu Mishra, and Pandit Godavarish Mishra.⁴ The linguistic, ideological, and emotional significance of the Satyabadi group awakened self-consciousness in the Odias about their rich heritage. A monthly journal titled *Satyabadi* was initiated in 1933 and was published by Nabaharat Press; many intellectuals of the time contributed to it.

To establish our point, we have taken two Odia life narratives – one written by Pandit Nilakantha Das, *Atmajibani* (1986) and the other by Pandit Godavarish Mishra, *Ardhasatabdira Odisha O Tanhire Mo Bhumika* (1958). The rationale behind choosing these two life narratives is that they contributed to the common cause of promoting Odia identity, the arcs of their lives are similar and they lived during a period of rapid and transformative change. Both these public figures shared intimately intertwined lives: they studied at the same school, same college, went to Calcutta for higher education, sought to resist the dominance of Bengalis, laid the foundation of Satyabadi School, had a close association with Gopabandhu Das, and participated in the Odisha identity movement and the anti-colonial struggle led by Indian National Congress. Each of these autobiographies represents a comprehensive synthesis of competing features of culture, acting as agents of change for Odisha. These individuals in their life narratives mirrored their lived experiences relating to the actual socio-political conditions. They shared a close yet fraught relationship, and their similarities were less significant than their differences, which could be understood more fully if we examine their lives from the perspective of meritocracy. The authors discussed here encountered cultural anxieties as their persona took shape, and depicted those experiences in their life story writings. Through a reading of the two autobiographies, this paper will explore how these two individuals looked upon the trajectory of their lives and will also try to establish how Odia autobiographies took a meritocratic turn.

NILAKANTHA DAS

Born on 4th August 1884, Nilakantha Das was the eighth child and the only son of his parents. Though he belonged to a family of erudite scholars, his father could not attain the status of a ‘pandit’ as he had lost his father at a very young age. A father’s prayer for a son who would bring back the lost glory of ‘panditya’ was answered when Nilakantha was born. His early education at his village school, followed by Puri Zila School and then Ravenshaw College and Calcutta University and the scholarship he won has prepared him for a career as a teacher, politician, and administrator. Most of the teachers who taught him were Bengalis and only a handful of Odias were to be found in the teaching profession back then, “Headmaster

⁴ *Panchsakha*. Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das, Godavarish Mishra, Acharya Harihar, and Krupasindhu Mishra are revered as Paanchsakha. They hailed from the district of Puri.

and many other teachers were Bengali. I remember in 1904, Ramachandra Das of Puri counted the number of students who passed the BA examination in Odisha and published the list in *Utkal Deepika*. I do not remember the exact number. Advocate Madhubabu and late Abhiram Bhanja included, the number of Odias who completed their Masters were only five” (*Atmajibani*, p. 20). And later in the book he discusses how Bengali pandits established themselves in a dominant position within the academic world of Odisha and tried to erode Odia identity based on language and culture (idem, pp. 34–36). He had always been unresponsive to the influence of the Bengalis on Odishan culture and tried to combat this in different ways.

The social climate, during their childhood, was characterised by conservatism, superstitions and orthodoxy. Social conditions are slightly a different thing, in our understanding. He narrates the incident of the day of his marriage, when an old relative of his in-laws asked him to chant a ‘shloka’. Nilakantha who was in his Intermediate⁵ then responded that they had knowingly chosen an illiterate son-in-law and it was a planned action to put him to shame in that group of Brahmins of his in-laws family. He writes: “Such practice of chanting rituals was gradually becoming popular. That is why I did not like it” (idem, pp. 89–90). The Brahminical patriarchy propagated religious superstitions and caste discriminations (“*Etihāsare Prachedapata o Brahman Sasan*”, Transl. “Social Discrimination in History and Brahmin Villages: A Historical Overview” (pp. 91–92). This, along with the negligence of the British administration, had only contributed to the continuation of age-old poverty, ill health and illiteracy that plagued society. Little had been done for the development of education that could have substantially solved all these problems (pp. 130–144). Nilakantha admits that he received his basic education, not from the daily schooling process, but from the culture, language, and habits of his childhood days (pp. 7–8).

Playing diverse roles as an educationist, a social reformer, a litterateur, and a journalist, Nilakantha consistently strived towards fulfilling his father’s dream of seeing his son established as an eminent scholar. As a student he combined the pursuit of scholarship with selfless social service. As a schoolboy, he felt a deep admiration for Gopabandhu Das, and he looked up to him as his mentor and later followed in his footsteps during the anti-colonial movement. When he met Madhusudan Das, Nilakantha was highly impressed by his charismatic personality and that provided him further impetus to fulfil the task of asserting his Odia identity based on language, literature, and culture. On the strength of his academic attainments he could have easily achieved lucrative jobs that was available to anyone who had received western education, but the influence of Gopabandhu was so strong on him that he came to be actively associated with the idealistic academic

⁵ Intermediate is a two-year bridge course between school and university. It is commonly known as Class 11–12 or +2 education in India.

project of Satyabadi Banavidyala, and joined as its headmaster on a modest salary of Rs 30/-.⁶ The school gained immense popularity attracting student from far-off corners of Odisha Nilakantha writes that his popularity went up as well, along with the reputation of the school – not only in Odisha but also in the neighbouring states, which points towards his own realization that his life and that of the institution were intricately interwoven. In 1912, the school's temporary building was set on fire. All teachers felt devastated, but the arrival of Gopabandhu and his consoling words “Why should you be heartbroken for this? Maybe God desires that the school will have a pucca building” gave all the stakeholders courage. Nilakantha writes: “My hopes were revived on seeing him. After listening to his words I felt at ease. In a moment I forgot about the fire” (p. 91, translation mine). Such was the impact of the personality of Gopabandhu on the hearts and minds of young Odias, especially Nilakantha.

Atmajibani, though not a coherent narrative, charts his student years, professional mission, political calling, ideological inclinations, and within these parameters, the part he played in building modern Odisha. Traditional Indian society underwent a radical transformation under Western influence. This culminated with the diffusion of the spirit of freedom and democracy. Before Gandhi crafted his strategy for the attainment of independence of India, Madhusudan Das, the patron of Odia nationalism and architect of Utkal Sammilani had already emphasized the need and possible strategies for the achievement of the goal of the right to self-determination. Inspired by this idea, the teachers of Satyabadi Banabidyalaya introduced a radically new pedagogy. In addition, the teachers, through their literary works and social service, sought to revitalize and regenerate a stagnant social order.

The three towering figures of the Satyabadi School Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das, and Godavarish Mishra⁷ became the symbol of the significant literary and social reform movement that emerged in Odisha during the early 20th century (*Atmajibani*, pp. 86–88). He saw Satyabadi as a powerful agent of moral, intellectual and spiritual regeneration and he saw himself as a chief exponent of Gopabandhu Das' vision of renewal of Odisha as well as the country. In his autobiography, he recounts several episodes that echo virtues such as hard work, talent, and ethical conduct, reflecting a belief in the intrinsic value of the individuals. As a student at Puri Zila School and later, in higher education institutions, his

⁶ On the request of Prof Mukherjee, the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University, Nilakantha joined as a lecturer of the University, but, shortly after, he gave up this rewarding job to join the Non-Cooperation Movement. He stood by his vow on the banks of the river Bhargavi to shirk all personal beneficial services under the foreign Government and dedicated himself to the service of the nation.

⁷ The Satyabadi School advocated for the use of the Odia language in literature and education, aiming to elevate it to the status of a literary language and promote cultural pride among the Odia-speaking population. The movement emphasized the need for social reforms, including the eradication of caste discrimination, promotion of women's education, and upliftment of the downtrodden.

reputation as a sincere, earnest and helpful student was well-established. In his autobiography, Godavarish reminisces his hostel life when Nilakantha had saved him from disgrace and also helped him in his studies. Unwavering commitment to his mentor Gopabandhu and to the school are defining the account of his life in his narrative. An aggressive social reformer, an ardent adherent to the cause of Odia language, Nilakantha once advised Subash Chandra Bose during the latter's visit to Odisha: "You can deliver your speech in Hindi, or English or even Odia. But do not speak in Bengali" (p. 149). Another example shows how, despite the Brahminical hierarchy that Satyabadi School had, he dared to introduce the system of common dining for upper and lower caste students alike (in the School's Boarding house). It might be mentioned here that this was almost two decades before Gandhi had started the Harijan movement in India, a movement for inclusiveness of the backward castes and untouchables among the mainstream in India. Moreover, his symbolic protest in the form of the "Moustache Movement", which he had started with the broader objective of emancipating the caste-ridden conservative traditional Odia society from the evils of blind superstitions and dogmas had inspired a progressive revolution in Odia society. Politics, for Nilakantha, was not just a profession, but a means to fulfil his vow to dedicate his life to the country. Within the limited power and opportunities that were available to him, he dedicated himself to the development of the people both before and after independence (p. 109).

From the meritocracy theory perspective, Nilakantha Das's *Atmajibani* can be read as a negotiation between merit as moral legitimacy and merit as collective responsibility. Born into a family of scholars, Nilakantha's life appears at first epitomizing classic meritocratic narrative described by Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*: talent, perseverance, and education enables upward mobility and restore lost status. His academic excellence while a student in Puri Zila School, Ravenshaw College, and Calcutta University, and his ability to command respect across Odisha seem to validate the principle that achievement rather than birth should determine distinction.

Yet, at the same time, his self-narrative is coming to grips with the logic of modern meritocracy. Unlike the self-maximizing subject critiqued by Daniel Markovits in *The Meritocracy Trap*, Nilakantha repeatedly gives up lucrative opportunities to join Satyabadi Banavidyalaya on a very modest salary, and proves detrimental to his personal advancement to the collective upliftment of Odia society. The reforms he implemented, such as common dining across caste lines, linguistic assertion against Bengali dominance, social service during nationalist struggles, transformed merit from a claim to superiority into an ethical obligation toward society. In contrast to the cycle of humiliation and pride identified by Michael J. Sandel in *The Tyranny of Merit*, Nilakantha's autobiography posits merit as service, not privilege. His achievements are not a proof of inherent worth, but an instrument for the moral, intellectual, and cultural renaissance of the State.

Atmajibani thus offers an alternative model of meritocracy, which is rooted in civic responsibility rather than competitive individualism. It shows that when merit is not tied to material privilege but grounded in social reform, it will detach from hierarchy. Instead, it can become a tool for democratizing knowledge, challenging caste orthodoxy and strengthening regional identity within the broader national movement.

GODAVARISH MISHRA

Born to Lingaraj Mishra and Apsara Devi in Banapur in the undivided Puri district of Odisha, Godavarish Mishra was one of the *Panchsakahs* who, under the tutelage of Gopabandhu and Nilakantha, played a vital role in the consciousness raising project launched during early 20th century Odisha. From a state of penury in which his family was mired for a long time, he rose to eminence during the language movement in Odisha. Besides playing a pivotal role in the establishment of Satyabadi School, he was also at the forefront during the non-cooperation movement. The gifted child rose above the financial hardships endured by his family and managed to pursue his early education at the Puri Zila School and later went to Ravenshaw College, Cuttack and then to Calcutta University to obtain an MA degree. His autobiography, *Ardhasatabdira Odisha o Tahinre Mo Sthana*, (Fifty Years of Odisha and My Place in It) covers a span of almost fifty years of Odisha's political and social history (1886–1927).⁸ It was written around 1951,⁹ five years before Godavarush Mishra's death in 1956.

Godavarish Mishra and Nilakantha Das grew up during the same socio-historical period and, as young men, joined the anti-colonial crusade under the guidance of Gopabandhu and Madhusudan. In the chapter “Kie Kana” (“Who's Who”) of his autobiography, Godavarish talks of his friendship with Nilakantha. While Nilakantha's autobiography is more chronologically ordered than that of Mishra, he talks more about people who influenced him and left a mark on his consciousness. He writes in the newspaper “The Navabharat”:

I had begun my life in the service of knowledge and learning. This had been my inspiring force in the times of my youth. But with time, the realization dawned upon me that the shape and stability of the nation and the society were of prime importance, and, for this, the kings and subjects, teachers and pupils, the caretakers and the dependents, all of them, will have to merge themselves in the great struggle for national emancipation, reconstruction, and development.

(June 1938)

⁸ His autobiography remained incomplete because of his participation in the political campaign, illness and finally his death in 1886.

⁹ Jagannath Mahapatra, teacher from Banapur High School assisted him in the process of writing the later part of the book (Mishra, pp.1–3).

A reading of Godavarish Mishra's autobiography reveals a dominant theme – formal education. At the same time, his autobiography reflects an ongoing effort to come to terms with his experiences – whether as a student in school or college, or later as a teacher, organizer, and manager. In each role, whether at Satyabadi School or in Singhbhum, he was engaged in building institutions, most notably through the establishment of the Satyabadi School. We can see a point of connection between Nilakantha and Godavarish here: both were taught by Bengali teachers and expressed, in their autobiographies, their discontent with the dominance of Bengalis in the public sphere. In the chapter “Adhasaha barsa tale” (“Fifty Years Before”), Godavarish Mishra writes that fifty years before, there were hardly any Odia teachers in higher colleges and most of them were Bengalis and some Britishers (Mishra, pp. 18–20). Realizing the need to coordinate and have an effective networking among schools, British government brought 832 *pathshalas*¹⁰ under one institutional umbrella. Radhanath Ray was appointed the First Inspector of Schools for Odisha in 1873–1874. He held that position for many years and managed to revamp the education system by reorganizing the scheme of distribution of funds and by fixing standards of examination. Higher education in Odisha was thus initiated, with the opening of collegiate classes at Cuttack Zila School, which was affiliated to Calcutta University. In addition to the efforts of the British government, the extension of patronage to educational institutions by Raja of Mayurbhanj, Raja of Khalikote and other Odia feudatory chiefs, and the efforts of reformists like Raja Rammohan Ray created awareness that progress was only possible through education. This perception moulded the aspirations of many young and brilliant minds, like those of Godavarish and Nilakantha. They crossed the borders of the State for acquiring higher education at Kolkata.

While being a student at Puri, Godavarish had met the revolutionary Sashibhusan Raichaudhury, who was popularly known as Shasida from Bengal.¹¹ The company of Shasida (he dedicates a chapter to him in the autobiography) (pp. 41–46) had a transformative impact on him and instilled in him feelings of patriotism. Barbara Lotz, in “Autobiographies of Oriya Leaders: Contributions to a Cause”, highlights the shaping influence of boarding houses on his life all through his school life and also during his stay at Calcutta. When he went to Calcutta, Shasida took him around and made him participate in clandestine meetings where he was exposed for the first time to a generation of teachers who secretly possessed guns and could make bombs too. Following Godavarish's disagreement with one of the political figures there, Shasida decided that his service to the nation should take a different form and he should become an educationist.

Mishra illustrates how his generation seemed to make a decisive leap toward a bright and prosperous future, and recounts the joy he felt upon earning

¹⁰ Pathshala is a school or centre of education.

¹¹ Shashibhusan Ray Chaudhury was part of the underground terrorist activities in Bengal.

his B.A. and M.A. degrees. But he often mentions the academic and professional achievements of others too. For him, being meritorious and achieving a high level of education means an opportunity to climb the ladder of success and thus establish oneself as a meritocrat. His work at the Satyavadi School offered him a new perspective on education, religion and patriotic fervour, to which his generation was exposed for the very first time. The education imparted in this school was a lively amalgam of indigenous knowledge and progressive western science. The school soon assumed the role of cultural centre and became a hub for promoting Odia's culture, language and literature. Even while in Calcutta, he participated in activities which contributed to the assertion of Odia identity.

Though a dedicated teacher, Godavarish was never content with the salary he received and unlike Nilakantha, working as a teacher made it difficult for him to meet his material ends (Mishra, pp. 139–142) and the school committee decided to pay him as per his needs. Considering his financial background, his decision to forgo a well-paid job in favour of the modest prospects at Satyavadi can be seen as a courageous and commendable decision.

When the British government wanted him to undergo training in England, with a prospect of his taking up the charge of the school of deaf and hard-of-hearing upon returning to India, Gopabandhu talked him out of it and reminded him that his state in Odisha needed his services (Mishra, p. 114).¹² Nevertheless, money remained a constant worry for him. In the chapter 'Parivartan' ('Change') he talks about how as a student and then as a teacher, he had witnessed that students who came from financially strong backgrounds got their way through and were always in an advantaged position. He writes,

Once upon a time the behaviour of the students was very decent. Some senior students from rich families used to make junior students at school work for their comfort. And when they were punished for acts of indiscipline in the schools, the poor students were punished and the rich ones were spared... Maybe teachers in those days were scared of students who came from rich backgrounds. Or maybe it was not fear of rich students, but an immense respect for money. Twelve years later, while in class, I hit a boy because of a grievous mistake he had made. And the matter reached the Headmaster's ears and he told me, "It is not right to hit a rich man's child, the authorities would be annoyed."

(Mishra, pp. 44–45, our translation).

Mishra's tenure as a teacher at the Satyabadi Banvidyalaya span from 1913 to 1919 and was followed by an assignment as Headmaster at Chakradharpur High School in the Singhbhum district, from 1919 to 1921. Gopabandhu sent him there

¹² Nilakantha also mentions about this incident in his *Atmajibani* in the chapter "Satyabadira Etikatha" (p. 107).

to implement an agenda, i.e., the preservation and spread of Odia language. After taking part in the non-cooperation movement, he returned to his village Banapur in 1922 and engaged with nation building projects like establishing new schools, small-scale industries, farms, and social welfare organizations. However, he found the world limitative. Inspired by Gandhi and Gopabandhu, he joined the Congress Party. He left Congress in 1939 and joined the Forward Block founded by Subash Chandra Bose. Later, he served as finance and education minister in the ministry headed by Maharaja of Parlakhemundi from 1941 to 1944. During his tenure as minister in 1943, he played an important role in the establishing Utkal University, the High Court at Cuttack, and various colleges in Puri, Balesore, and Sambalpur. He was elected to become a member of the State Legislative Assembly from 1937 till his death, with an exception of five years. He died aged 56.

An in-depth reading of the autobiography shows how Godavarish defined his life in terms of social hierarchy. The title of the text *Ardhasatabdira Odisha o Tahinre Mora Sthana*¹³ (*Fifty Years in the History of Odisha and My Place in It*) echoes his ambition and also conveys the underlying tone of disappointment – and this is primarily because he always felt his merit was not adequately rewarded. He used to ask people what their studies/degrees were and what their professional position was.¹⁴ Upon his arrival at Satyabadi Ban Vidyalaya (now Satyabadi High School) in 1913, he was greeted by large number of students from the school who had gathered at the railway station to welcome him. The honours that he received at the station undoubtedly made him happy but at the same time he was sceptical and ambivalent about that reception and assumed that probably the people associated with the Satyabadi School had a vested interest in retaining him and dissuading him from accepting other lucrative assignments (pp. 1158–1159). He was never self-assured, unlike Nilakantha Das. On another instance, when he was back from his assignment at Singhbhum, he did not go to Satyabadi School, but got down at Banapur and only one of his associates was there on a bullock cart to receive him. As Michael Young puts it, ‘a system in which merit plays a paramount role in determining the allocation of opportunities and rewards’ (p. 4), Mishra climbed the social ladder and became part of the elite through his merit, but at the back of his mind remained the feeling that he had not received his due. He wanted his merit to be given due recognition. Despite climbing the ladder of social hierarchy in life, anxiety concerning money never left him and his narrative carries traces of bitterness and disappointment.

Many scholars, including Raymond Williams, working in the area of meritocracy have used the metaphor of “ladder” and ladder is a near to perfect symbol of bourgeois idea of society where one undoubtedly gets an opportunity to climb, but then he made his way up all by himself. Godavarish was meritorious, in

¹³ Godavarish received the Central Sahitya Akademi Award for this autobiography.

¹⁴ In his autobiography he categorically mentions that Gopabandhu has a BA degree, Nilakanta DAS, Godavarish Mishra and Krupasindhu had MA degree and Harihar has an FA (p. 131).

the social and cultural metrics of his times. He firmly believed his talent and effort would inevitably lead to success, reflecting a strong personal conviction in meritocracy. All through the text there are references to social and material achievers. His autobiography also designates what Jo Litter hypothesises about the meritocracy myth. Jo posits that some form of meritocracy has been encoded in the cultural rhetoric of the society.¹⁵ The myth overvalues “effort,” while undervaluing social and economic location, thereby obscuring the unevenness of the social playing field. For Godavarish, lacking an inherited wealth co-existed with climbing up the rungs of the ladder; however, climbing up the ladder was not as tangible as it was for some others, like Nilakantha. His merit became the key factor through which he established his cultural legitimacy.

Ardhasatabdira Odisha o Tahinre Mora Sthana becomes a revealing text of both ascent and unease, embodying what Michael Young defined in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* as a system where intelligence and effort determine the allocation of opportunity. Mishra embodies the meritocratic potential, where aptitude can excel birth; his academic achievements, institutional leadership, and ministerial career appear to validate the “ladder” model of social mobility. Yet his narrative simultaneously exposes the fragility of that promise. Unlike those who succeed in a meritocratic system, Godavarish remained acutely aware of how wealth, social background, and also persistent financial anxiety constrained his career choices. He also realized that recognition was often unevenly distributed, and he is explicit about such ambiguities while he pens down his experiences. His autobiography thus illustrates what Michael J. Sandel criticizes in *The Tyranny of Merit*: the moralization of success intensifies the bitter feeling of perceived under-recognition.

Mishra believes in merit, and consistently assesses himself and others according to their educational achievements, yet the emotional tone of his self-narrative carries traces of disappointment, suggesting that merit does not automatically translate into security or satisfaction. His life also exemplifies what Jo Littler terms as “meritocratic feeling” – the internalization of effort, aspiration, and comparative evaluation as emotional structures. Thus, Mishra’s autobiography is not a mere celebration of meritocratic ascent, but also a revelation of its emotional underside. His merit becomes the primary source of cultural legitimacy in a colonial and caste-stratified society. Yet, the persistent anxiety over money, status, and due recognition exposes the uneven social terrain beneath the rhetoric of equal opportunity. While narrating his “place” in history, Mishra affirms merit as moral

¹⁵ Jo Litter, in her article “Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketing of ‘Equality Under Neoliberalism’”, writes “Meritocratic discourse, as I show below, is currently being actively mobilised by members of a plutocracy to extend their own interests and power. Contemporary meritocracy operates to commercialize the very idea of equality and can be understood in the light of Foucault’s formulation of neoliberalism as a state in which competitive markets are not conceptualised as the ‘natural’ order of things (as they were under classical liberalism), but as entities that need to be produced” (p. 53).

justification and registers the restless dissatisfaction that modern meritocracy inevitably produces.

CONCLUSION

A comparison between the autobiographies of Nilakantha Das and Godabarish Mishra reveals two distinct modes of self-writing, shaped by differences in narrative voice, retrospection, omission, and strategies of self-fashioning. Das's autobiography inclines toward a public, declamatory voice – measured, didactic, and oriented toward collective history. His “I” often dissolves into the “we” of Odisha and the nation; his personal experience becomes illustrative of a larger moral and political awakening. Retrospection in his narrative is teleological: early struggles are narrated as necessary steps toward nationalist fulfillment. His self-fashioning aligns with the archetype of the public intellectual-patriot: disciplined, sacrificial, ideologically steadfast. The autobiography becomes a moral document, shaping memory into exemplary citizenship.

In contrast, Godabarish Mishra's *Ardhasatabdira Odisha o Tahinre Mora Sthana* adopts a more introspective and self-questioning voice. While he too situates himself within Odisha's historical transformation, his narrative foregrounds his personal struggle – financial insecurity, professional disappointments, and institutional politics. His retrospection is less teleological and more evaluative; he repeatedly assesses his “place” in history, revealing anxiety about recognition and legacy. Where Nilakantha glides over conflict, Godabarish allows ambivalence to surface. His self-fashioning is meritocratic rather than purely nationalist, as he writes about himself as a self-made intellectual navigating colonial hierarchies, caste structures, and economic vulnerability. Although both autobiographies contribute to nationalist historiography, they construct very different kinds of selves. While Nilakantha Das emerges as an exemplary figure whose life unfolds in alignment with a larger collective destiny, his narrative emphasizes ideological clarity, moral conviction, and public service, thus the self appears steady and his personal experiences are shaped to reinforce coherence and historical inevitability, Godabarish Mishra's self-portrayal is that of a more modern autobiographical subject – introspective, evaluative, and emotionally complex. Rather than embodying a seamless nationalist destiny, he reflects on struggle, uncertainty, achievement, and disappointment. If Nilakantha privileges ideological consistency, Godabarish highlights personal effort, vulnerability, and the anxieties that accompany social mobility. But for both of them, autobiography is a tool helping them express their anxieties associated with social mobility while recounting their life.

More than three hundred autobiographies¹⁶ came to be written in Odisha after these two life narratives.¹⁷ Most of them appear to follow the pattern established in Godavarish Mishra's autobiography.¹⁸ Few, if any, reveal the kind of idealism, conviction and self-assurance that one finds in Nilakantha Das's account of his life. One may therefore contend that, with Godavarish Mishra's iconic autobiography, life writing in Odisha took a meritocratic turn.

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¹⁶ The Centre of Excellence for Translation and Life Writing prepared a bibliography of autobiographies written in Odia. The book *Life Writing in Odisha: A Bibliography* has been compiled by Pati and Nayak.

¹⁷ "A Bibliography of Autobiographies of Odisha." A compilation of Odia autobiographies published by Centre of Excellence for Translation and Life Writing, RDWU. The book records 320 autobiographies of Odisha.

¹⁸ Sikshasandhan Bhubaneswar publishes, prints and houses Odia autobiographies.

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