The Unending Charm of Autobiographies

I have been an avid reader of autobiographies right from my younger days. This is due to a keenness to know what was it that made great and successful men and women different from us ordinary mortals, what were the incidents that shaped their career and lives, how they handled the various situations and crises that had to face and the little known facts about them that made them fascinating individuals. I also found that accounts written by men who were in position of power to make decisions that could impact lives of many also threw light into the various factors that went into their making, some of which might not have not been in the public domain earlier. Further I also discovered that persons who had opportunities to work with and mix amongst the high and mighty were not averse to bring out occasional exposures that indicated that at least some of these personages had feet of clay!! Thus I found autobiographies to be compelling reading material, fulfilling as they did the multiple tasks of whetting my curiosities while enriching the mind and providing ammunition for light hearted anecdotes as well as serious discussions.

Though politics and sports have remained my favourite topics from childhood, I did not restrict myself to these subjects when it came to reading memoirs. Thus I have read life stories of business magnates, captains of industry, civil servants, officers from armed forces and police, religious leaders, men of letters and stars from show business. Each of these accounts were captivating ones taking the reader through the various challenges that the author faced and manner in which he responded to them. But the crucial question that every reader asks after finishing any memoir would not change- what is it that remains unsaid by the author?

A famous Malayalam writer had said in the foreword to his autobiography that while what he wrote was the truth he would not promise that what was written was “the whole truth and nothing but the truth”. This is the eternal dilemma that every person who decides to pen his memoir faces - how much can he reveal and what all should he conceal? It would be unfair to expect that persons who have been in public eye should lay bare their private lives and thoughts while writing his life story. The objective would be to travel as close as possible to the truth while causing minimum pain to people, both living and dead, who figure in his accounts.

This brings one to the basic question as to what prompts people to tell the story of their lives to the general public. Some, like Winston Churchill, would have felt that they were fulfilling an obligation placed on them by history to leave behind, for posterity, their accounts of the major events that they had an opportunity to shape. Then there are the great souls as Mahatma Gandhi and Rousseau who wrote their life history to communicate their thoughts and principles. Certain others have written to enlighten the world at large about what they and their supporters stand for and the struggles they had to face on account of their principles. Autobiographies of leaders as Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela are examples of accounts that fall under this category. Another group who reach the pinnacle of their profession do so under the genuine belief that others who follow them in the same line would benefit from reading about their experiences. Memoirs of Steve Waugh, Lee Iacocca etc are stories of persons who rose to the top in their fields and they serve as essential reading material for succeeding generations of cricketers and management professionals. Then there are those who try to justify their actions through their memoirs; invariably they end up criticising and throwing mud on many a great soul in their attempts to vindicate themselves. Unfortunately, a substantial number
of persons who decide to pen the their autobiographies fall in the last category and suggestions of “bare all” in their stories are intended to divert attention from their own limitations and failures.

It goes without saying that autobiographies are written by successful individuals who are supremely confident that general public would be interested to know the smaller details of their lives and thoughts. Hence it is only natural that such works focus solely on the author to the exclusion of everything else. Most of the writers take pains to ensure that the written matter does not sound pompous or sounds like self-praise, which the reader would detest. However, only a handful of persons have openly confessed their sins and shortcomings in their memoirs. This selective amnesia towards one’s own faults and flaws is witnessed in all categories of persons who have penned their life stories and only the truly great and the honest have resisted the temptation to conceal their weaknesses and deficiencies from the public eye. It is this unmatched courage to admit mistakes and own up failures that has elevated “The Story of My Experiments with Truth” by Gandhiji and “Confessions” by Rousseau to the level of outstanding works amongst this genre.

Recent times have seen the growth of a tendency wherein persons who are eminent in their own right choose to make an odd controversial remark that goes against the very grain of their personalities, in their memoirs. These observations are used liberally by the publishers to market the book and increase its sales. While the author has every right to state what he feels like in his memoir, making remarks solely for the purpose of stirring up a controversy and boosting the sales of the book would only serve to bring them down in the eyes of the discerning public. Thus when a Natwar Singh criticises the Gandhi family who had been his political benefactor or Sachin Tendulkar calls Greg Chappell a “ringmaster”, it serves more to diminish the writer than the person at the receiving end. In future, writers of memoirs would do well to keep in mind the fact that it is not wise to attempt to improve the balance sheet of the publisher at the cost of one’s own standing and credibility.