



Block

# 3

## **BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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May, 2021

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ISBN:

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Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, by Registrar, MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

Laser Typeset by : Raj Printers, A-9, Sector B-2, Tronica City, Loni

Printed at :

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## BLOCK 3 INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to Block 3 of the course on Understanding Prose (BEGE-141).

In this Block we shall study biography and autobiography as literary forms of prose.

**Biography** as a literary form is the written story of the life of an individual. Broadly, it may be defined as a truthful account of the life of an individual, written in prose. Biographical literature is a very old form of human expression. It attempts to recreate the life of an individual by drawing upon either memory, written or oral evidence, or even pictures. While biography is the record of someone else's life, **autobiography** is the story of one's own life written in the first person. It is a branch of biographical literature written in subjective prose. It is unfinished as it is the story of a person who writes it himself/herself.

In **Unit 1** we have provided you with a comprehensive introduction to the genre of biography and autobiography.

In **Unit 2** we have taken up Mahatma Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*.

In **Unit 3** we have talked about Bertand Russell's *Autobiography*, and in **Unit 4** we have dealt with *Queen Victoria* by Lytton Strachey.

It would, of course, not be possible to give you the complete biographies or autobiographies to study as that would take up far too much time. So we have selected short passages from these, to give you an idea of the nature and characteristics of biography and autobiography, their similarities and differences.

All the best.





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# UNIT 1 BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN INTRODUCTION

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 What is Biography?
- 1.3 Origin and Development of Biography
- 1.4 Forms of Biography
- 1.5 Autobiography
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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We shall discuss the characteristics of biography and autobiography in this Unit. If you read this Unit carefully, you will be able to:

- outline the various aspects of biography;
- describe the origins and development of biography;
- define the forms of biography and autobiography;
- explain the features of autobiography;
- describe the differences between biography and autobiography.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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We have already discussed some forms of prose in the previous Blocks. In this Unit, we shall give you a brief introduction to biography and autobiography. We shall discuss autobiography as a form of prose in some detail in the next two Units by taking up passages from two-famous autobiographies. We will also give you adequate exposure to a biography and will also highlight the differences between the two.

Biographical literature is a very old form of human expression. It attempts to recreate the life of an individual by drawing upon either memory, written or oral evidence, or even pictures. While biography is the record of someone else's life, autobiography is the story of one's own life written in the first person. In the following sections you will find out more about the differences between the two forms.

We expect you to read each section carefully and then attempt the exercises. You can then turn to the end of the Unit to check if your answers are correct.

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## 1.2 WHAT IS BIOGRAPHY?

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### What is Biography?

We know that biography as a literary form is the written story of the life of an individual. Is this story 'true' or 'fictional'? Should it be written in prose or verse? Are there any special methods by which this story can be written? Before we examine these questions at some length, let us define biography. Broadly, it may be defined as a truthful account of the life of an individual, written in prose. A biography is the life of an individual as opposed to a group. While it may depict several characters, these are depicted only in relation to the individual whose life is being recreated. In short, the focus is always on the individual. A biography must be a truthful account. But while a good biography must be factual it must also be something more. It must have literary value. Now we might well ask: in what does this literary value lie? We may locate it in the writer's use of language. Or in his/her imaginative selection and use of documentary evidence so that the work emerges as a unified whole. Or in the writer's use of literary devices. However, we would like to point out that all these factors contribute to the literary quality of a biography. To sum up, a biography must combine the authenticity of history and the creativity of fiction.

### Biography and History

Biography is closely related to history on the one hand and to fiction on the other. It is related to history because like history, it deals with the past and it also makes use of the same resources that a historian needs for research. Does that mean that biography is a branch of history? No. The crucial difference lies in the fact that history is a factual record of individuals and events. In biography, the focus is not on the background but on the individual. The aim of the biographer is not just to convey facts but to probe into the psyche of the individual and to make him/her come alive. This imaginative rendering of personal experience links biography to fiction. But fiction is primarily imaginative whereas biography aims at truthful presentation of detail.

### Biography and Fiction

Thus we see that the biographer needs to employ the methods of the historian as well as of the writer of fiction. Biography uses the techniques of research to test whether the material at hand is true or false. The biographer must also make a selection of interesting and relevant incidents. By imposing a certain design on the selected material the writer must transform the lifeless material into a living experience. Thus biography has many aspects. It is historical, psychological and aesthetic. It is historical because it provides a factual account of the life of an individual. It is psychological because it probes into the mind of the individual. And it is aesthetic because the writer imposes a certain design on his/her material and renders it pleasing by his/her use of language and other literary devices. As an art form, it not only aims to delight the reader but also to provide a certain insight into the character of another individual. The reader is made to identify with certain feelings and experiences of the characters who seem to come alive.

### Biography as an Art Form

How can we distinguish between a well-composed and a sub-standard biography? There are several ways in which a biography can be marred. Sometimes there is

an undue tendency to celebrate and praise the dead by suppressing unpalatable facts. At other times, the author's personality intrudes unnecessarily into the narrative. At other times a biography suffers if the author starts with a certain thesis or preconceived idea and bends facts to suit it.

On the other hand, a well-written biography, is an honest portrayal of historical facts without suppressing any unpleasant truth. There are no unnecessary digressions impeding the flow of the narrative and the events selected are apt and to the point. A good biography is brief and gripping so that it might seem as if one is reading an interesting novel. As Leon Edel puts it 'The biographer may be as imaginative as he pleases – the more imaginative the better – in the way in which he brings his material together. But he must not imagine the materials. He must read himself into the past, but then he must read that past into our present. (*Literary Biography*, p.31) This clearly means that writing a biography involves exhaustive research. But as a creative artist, the biographer must assimilate facts and then present them in the most interesting manner possible.

### Use of Time

Does a biography proceed in strict chronological sequence? This is a question that you might well ask! As biography is not history it is not necessary to follow the birth to death sequence. The biographer does not have to begin his/her account of the individual's life from the day s/he was born and conclude the narrative at the death. The biographer can and often does use time in a flexible manner, moving forward and backward in time. Thus an individual life is not portrayed strictly by the clock. This method helps to make the person come alive, as Leon Edel believes (*Literary Biography*, xvi).

### Selection of Details

Lytton Strachey, an extremely successful practitioner of the form, suggests that a biography must have 'a brevity which excludes anything that is redundant and nothing that is significant' (*Preface to Eminent Victorians*). Does this mean that a biography has to be brief? There are no hard and fast rules about the length of a biography. It may run into hundreds of pages as we find in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* or it may be as brief as a character sketch. The idea is to make the character come alive and to project an impression of unity in the work. The length then becomes a matter of individual choice.

### Why do we Read Biography?

Clearly different persons would have different reasons for selecting specific reading material. Curiosity about the lives of others may be one reason for reading biographies. However, the function of biography is not only to interest and delight but also to stimulate our sympathy so that our understanding of the human condition is enhanced and our sympathies extended. It is for this reason that Lytton Strachey described biography as 'the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing'. H.W. Longfellow, the American poet has said:

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime  
And departing leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time



iii) Why do people read biography? Give your reasons in about 4-5 sentences

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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### 1.3 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BIOGRAPHY

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#### Earliest Biographical Literature

The initial impulse towards biography can be found in the ancient sagas and epics and elegies written to commemorate dead friends, relatives and public figures. The first biography was written by the fifth century B.C. Greek poet, Ion of Chios. He wrote brief sketches of his famous contemporaries such as Pericles and Sophocles. The Church also began to record the lives of its early founders and saints. This branch of biography is called hagiography or commemoration of the lives of saints. At this point, another function was added to biography. At the very beginning only the dead were commemorated, but now it became didactic as well. The lives were recorded in order to provide ethical models of conduct for others. While the history of biography is as old as human history, the word biography was first used only in the seventeenth century to create an identity for this kind of writing.

#### Development of Biography

Biography, as we now understand the term, began to appear in the sixteenth century. Cardinal Morton's *Life of Richard III* (circa 1513) and *Cavendish's Life of Wolsey* (1554-7) are two of the first biographies written. The more famous of seventeenth century biographies are Bacon's *Life of Henry VIII* (1612) and Walton's *Lives* (1640-78). Among the biographies written in the eighteenth century, also known as the age of prose, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) established the form beyond doubt. Johnson's contribution to the form consists in insisting that only the undiluted truth be told. Boswell broke the stiffness and formality of tone by speaking in his natural voice. In the nineteenth century, primarily an age of the novel, there was a decline in the form but the more famous biographies written are Lockhart's *Life of Scott* (1837-38) and Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* (1863). In the Victorian age the decline also occurred because of the undue tendency to eulogize.

#### Biography in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century, however, has seen a flowering of the form. Lytton Strachey found himself famous after the publication of *Eminent Victorians* (1918). This set the trend for debunking or exposing the feet of clay of venerated public figures. There was a change in point of view as well. The author was no longer the admiring sympathetic underling in the service of the hero/heroine but an equal

who may admire or be critical according to his/her understanding of the situation. The impulse to eulogize was replaced by the impulse to reconstruct the life as vividly as possible. Instead of the tendency to praise or hero worship, the twentieth century witnessed an increasing trend of presenting the characters in their human dimension with all their positive and negative aspects. This Virginia Woolf termed as the 'new biography'. Another prominent example of this is Leon Edel's biography of the famous American novelist Henry James.

Another visible change in twentieth century biography was the reduced length. Biography no longer ran into several volumes but was often the size of a novel. The biographer was no longer a chronicler but an artist. Biography thus acquired an aesthetic dimension. The biographer did not just portray the outer life of work and activity but also the inner life of emotion and thought. There were no fixed standards of morality to which the subject must conform. The interest was in the individual as a human being with all his/her faults and idiosyncrasies. Biography from its status as a hybrid form began to acquire an identity as a distinct genre.

Let us now examine some of the different forms of biography.

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## 1.4 FORMS OF BIOGRAPHY

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There are many kinds of biographies but let us broadly place them in two categories – those compiled by first hand knowledge of the individual and those compiled by research. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) belongs to the first category. Boswell was a friend and admirer of the great literary figure of his age, Samuel Johnson. As such Boswell spent a lot of time with him observing him and recording his conversations in his diaries. On the other hand, Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* (1922) is a biography based on research. Also based on research are reference biographies that we find in Encyclopaedias and dictionaries of biographies. Their function is to provide factual information. However, we are interested in biography as a literary form and will not discuss biographies used purely for reference purposes.

Some biographies are written subjectively with the author's personality intruding upon the narrative while others are written objectively and with detachment. In such cases, the author does not intrude with comments or explanations but recounts the main events so that we have an effect of a life unfolding itself. This form of biography is known as 'standard' biography. 'Fictionalized' biography, is another form in which: conversations are imagined and materials invented without any consideration for factual information. There is an attempt to fuse the appeal of biography with the charm of the novel. Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* (1959) is a fictional account of the life of Van Gogh, the famous Dutch painter. Allied to this form is fiction presented as biography – there is no attempt at authenticity. It is simply a novel written as biography or autobiography. Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) does not attempt to project itself as a life. The attempt is to evoke a life (the painter Gauguin's in this instance) rather than to recreate it.

In your course, you will find one passage from what we have just defined as 'standard' biographies. It is taken from Lytton Strachey's famous work *Queen Victoria*. We hope you will enjoy reading it.

## Check Your Progress 2

Answer the following questions in your own words.

- i) Describe the two main changes that took place in biography writing in the twentieth century.

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- ii) Name two famous biographies each from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## 1.5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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### What is Autobiography?

Autobiography is a branch of biographical literature written in subjective prose. It is unfinished as it is the story of a person who writes it him/herself. It is usually written at a later stage in life. The events are recollected either in chronological sequence or at random, moving back and forth in time. However, all autobiographies are not written when the author is old. For example, Dom Moraes wrote his autobiography entitled *My Son's Father* when he was only twenty two!

An autobiography may appear biased which is justifiable because a personal point of view is being presented. Details of personal experience are made interesting so that regardless of the fame or obscurity of the writer, the reader's attention is engaged and curiosity aroused. Writers talk freely about themselves making frequent use of the first person pronoun. The reader is expected to be sympathetic rather than to sit on judgement. What is important in such a literary form is not a rigid or strictly logical structure, but a spontaneous, easy and flexible movement. Thus we cannot judge autobiography in the same way as we would biography. In a biography, the objectivity of the writer is a major consideration in judging its overall merit.

### Informal Autobiography

Autobiographies can either be informal or formal. Informal autobiographies may or may not be intended for publication. Letters, diaries and journals fall within



this category. Letters of famous men like Byron are an index to their personalities and therefore of great interest to the reader. The young Jewish girl Anne Frank's *Diary* created such an impact that it has often been staged as well as filmed. Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals* (1897) record her experiences providing us with information about the little-known facts about her more famous brother, the poet Wordsworth. All these books represent a self-conscious form of revelation. But they are not important only for the information that they provide but are also aesthetically pleasing. Memoirs are another form of informal autobiography. Here the emphasis is on the events and experiences remembered rather than on the personality of the person who remembers.

### **Formal Autobiography**

Formal autobiography attempts to reconstruct a life through recollection. The autobiographer has the advantage of first-hand experience of his/her own subject i.e. him/herself. The problem that the author faces is that of striking a balance between sounding too modest or too aggressive. What are the other types of autobiographies? There are religious autobiographies like *St. Augustine's Confessions* (circa AD 397 to AD 401) and intellectual ones such as J.S. Mill's *Autobiography* (1873). (Mill's autobiography was published posthumously). Fictionalized autobiographies like James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916) transpose the actual experiences of the author onto a fictional plane and as such do not come under the category of biography.

### **Autobiography and Memoir**

An autobiography is distinct from a memoir. As Roy Pascal puts it, 'In the autobiography, proper attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others' (*Design and Truth in Autobiography RKP, 1960, p.5*). These two forms may be in the same book or even the same page. But the difference lies in the focus. In an autobiography the emphasis is always on the self. It is clear that the individual does not live outside society. And thus even in an autobiography, it is essential to portray people and places. But in general the interest remains mainly on the self.

### **Biography and Autobiography**

We have discussed some different types of biography and autobiography. Let us now look at the main differences between the two:

- 1) In autobiography, childhood is portrayed prominently. On the other hand, in biography the author concentrates on the active period of the individual especially his/her success.
- 2) The biographer places special emphasis on the death of the individual while in an autobiography, needless to say, death does not figure at all.
- 3) Autobiographies often feature the relationships with parents and siblings, biographies, on the other hand, deal with relationships with friends and colleagues who directly or indirectly contributed to the person's success.
- 4) A biographer has to rely on external evidence. He may have a close relationship with the subject. Or he may reconstruct his/her life by culling evidence from documents, diaries or letters. An autobiographer does not

need to rely on such evidence. S/he can take recourse to his/her memory. But that does not mean that the autobiographer does not make use of documentary evidence. As you read on, you will discover that Bertrand Russell made extensive use of letters in his *Autobiography*.

- 5) The main difference, as we know, lies in the point of view. In biography the life is recreated by a third person narrator, who may or may not be objective. In autobiography, the first person narrator is mainly subjective.

### Why do we read Autobiographies?

The reasons for reading autobiography are as manifold as those for reading biography. One reason could be curiosity and the other could be the desire to gain insight into the lives of people like ourselves. Another could be simply delight in the book as a work of art.

Autobiography, as you know is the most personal of literary forms. What are the ways of reading autobiography? One can read it as a historical record or as a work of art. A literary autobiography is read as a work of art. Here one would keep in mind the idea behind the writing. For example, how does the writer perceive his or her own nature and development and how does s/he give form to this perception? To put it simply, how does s/he shape his/her material? Another relevant question at this point would be: how effectively does s/he use language to convey his/her experience to the reader?

You will read two passages taken from the autobiographies of Bertrand Russell and Gandhi in this Block. You will notice the different styles, different experiences and the different cultures from which they arise. They are fine specimens of the autobiographic form and you will find that they make interesting reading.

### Check Your Progress 3

Answer the following questions in about 100 words each.

- i) What is autobiography? Name some forms of autobiography.

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- ii) What are the differences between biography and autobiography?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.)

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## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, we have discussed:

- biography as a truthful account of the life of an individual;
- autobiography as a first-person unfinished account of the life of an individual;
- the differences between biography and autobiography;
- the origin of biography in early sagas and epics;
- the development of biography over the ages; and
- different forms of biography and autobiography.

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## 1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Biography is a truthful account of the life of an individual. It is written in prose. While it is based on facts, a biographer uses his/her imagination to present a lively and interesting picture of the person portrayed.
- ii) History is a factual record of individuals and events while in biography the focus is not on the background but on the individual. Fiction is independent of facts and operates solely in the realm of the imagination. While a biographer must be imaginative, s/he cannot lose sight of facts.
- iii) Curiosity about the lives of others may be one reason. Another may be to draw lessons that may have some relevance to our lives. By reading about the lives of others, our understanding of the human condition is enhanced and our sympathies extended.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) In earlier times, there had been a tendency to praise the subject. In the twentieth century, a 'new' biography developed wherein one can find that the biographer is not an admiring subordinate but a critical equal who examines the character from all angles – positive and negative. Biographies also became almost as short as the novel. The interest shifted from a mere depiction of outer events to the states of mind of the character.
- ii) 18th century :  
Boswell's *Life of Johnson*  
20th century :  
Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria*

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) An autobiography is a branch of biographical literature. It is the story of the life of a person written in his/her own words. It is usually written at a later stage in life and events are recollected either in chronological sequence or at random. Autobiographies are either formal or informal.

- ii) A biographer has to rely solely on external evidence but an autobiographer uses memory as a major source. The biographer also makes use of documentary evidence. A biographer concentrates on the successful middle years of a person's life while in autobiography childhood is portrayed extensively.



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## UNIT 2 M.K.GANDHI'S: *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OR THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH*

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948)
- 2.3 Text “A Month with Gokhale”
  - 2.3.1 Chapter 17
  - 2.3.2 Chapter 18
  - 2.3.3 Chapter 19
- 2.4 Glossary
- 2.5 Discussion
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit you will be able to:

- read and comprehend “A Month With Gokhale - I,II,III” from M. K. Gandhi’s *Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927);
- appreciate Gandhi’s art and craft of autobiography.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit we will be taking up passages from Gandhi’s *Autobiography* which will give you a good idea about the art and craft of Gandhi’s autobiography.

*Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is the autobiography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (or Mahatma Gandhi) and covers his life from early childhood through to 1920. It was initiated at the instance of Swami Anand, Jeramdas and other close co-workers of Gandhi, in his mother-tongue Gujarati entitled *Satyana Prayogo athva Atmakatha* published in two volumes – Vol. I in 1927 and Vol. II in 1929. It was translated into English by Mahadev Desai and first appeared serially in *Young India* before being published in book form.

In this unit you are going to read three short chapters from Part III of Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography, which describe his month long stay with Gokhale in Bengal when he was on a visit to India from South Africa in 1901 in order to plead his cause for improving the condition of Indians settled in South Africa. You must remember that at this time in his life, Gandhi did not have the title of ‘Mahatma’ nor had he yet conceived of the idea of an independent India or of becoming a national leader in this cause. At the time of which you will read, he was a loyal British subject, a young lawyer in South Africa, who had been struck

by the injustice meted out to the Indians there. So you will gain some insight into the making of a great leader and get a glimpse of some of the important people who influenced and shaped his thoughts.

Read the text carefully. You may not know about some of the places and people mentioned but give an uninterrupted first reading. You may consult the glossary later in subsequent readings.

Before you proceed to the text, we will quickly refresh your memory about the life of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our nation.

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## **2.2 M. K. GANDHI (1869-1948)**

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the youngest son of Karamchand Gandhi and Putlibai. Karamchand Gandhi was the Diwan of Porbandar State for some time, and later became the Diwan of Raikot State. Of his mother, Putlibai, Gandhi once said, “If there is any purity in me, it is all due to my mother.”

Born in Porbandar in the present day state of Gujarat in India on October 2, 1869, he studied law at University College, London. In 1891, after having been admitted to the British bar, Gandhi returned to India and attempted to establish a law practice in Bombay, but with little success. Two years later, an Indian firm with interests in South Africa retained him as legal adviser in its office in Durban. Arriving in Durban, Gandhi found himself treated as a member of an inferior race. He threw himself into the struggle for elementary rights for Indians in South Africa.

Gandhi remained in South Africa for twenty years, visiting India twice, in 1896 and 1901. When pleas and petitions failed, Gandhi began to teach a policy of passive resistance to, and non-cooperation with, the South African authorities. He was inspired by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy and the 19th century American writer Henry David Thoreau, especially by Thoreau’s famous essay “Civil Disobedience.” However, Gandhi considered the terms passive resistance and civil disobedience inadequate for his purposes and chose another term, *Satyagraha*. In Part IV, chapter XXVI of his autobiography, Gandhi relates how the term came into being:

“...I could not for the life of me find out a new name [for passive resistance], and therefore offered a nominal prize through *Indian Opinion* to the reader who made the best suggestion on the subject. As a result, Maganlal Gandhi coined the word ‘Satagraha’ (Sat=truth, Agraha=firmness) and won the prize. But in order to make it clearer I changed the word to *Satyagraha*...”

Gandhi returned to India in 1914 and launched his movement of non-violent resistance to Great Britain. In 1920, witnessing a massacre of Indians protesting against the Rowlatt Act at Amritsar by British soldiers, Gandhi proclaimed an organized campaign of non-cooperation. As a consequence, Gandhi was arrested but the British were soon forced to release him.

Economic independence for India, involving the complete boycott of British goods, was made a corollary of Gandhi’s Swaraj (which means “self-rule” in Sanskrit) movement. British industries had brought about extreme poverty and

the virtual destruction of Indian home industries. As a remedy for such poverty, Gandhi advocated revival of native Indian industries and the production of Khadi was one step in this direction. Gandhi therefore, did not dream of an India free from the British rule but also free from poverty, social injustice and religious evils. Indians revered him as a saint and began to call him Mahatma.

In 1921 the Indian National Congress, the group that spearheaded the movement for nationhood, gave Gandhi complete executive authority, with the right of naming his own successor. The British government again seized and imprisoned him in 1922.

After his release from prison in 1924, Gandhi withdrew from active politics and devoted himself to propagating communal unity. Unavoidably, however, he was again drawn into the vortex of the struggle for independence. In 1930, he proclaimed a new campaign of civil disobedience, calling upon the Indian population to refuse to pay taxes, particularly the tax on salt. This campaign was the famous Dandi march, in which thousands of Indians followed Gandhi from Ahmedabad to the Arabian Sea, where they made salt by evaporating sea water. Once more the Indian leader was arrested, but he was released in 1931, halting the campaign after the British made concessions to his demands. In the same year Gandhi represented the Indian National Congress at a conference in London.

In 1932, Gandhi began new civil-disobedience campaigns against the British. Arrested twice, the Mahatma fasted for long periods several times; these fasts were effective measures against the British, because violence might well have broken out in India if he had died. In September 1932, while in jail, Gandhi undertook a "fast unto death" to improve the status of the Hindu Untouchables. Although he was himself a member of the *Vaishya* (merchant) caste, Gandhi was a great leader of the movement in India dedicated to the eradication of the injustice of the caste system.

In 1934 Gandhi formally resigned from politics and was replaced as leader of the Congress party by Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi travelled through India, teaching *ahimsa* (non-violence) and demanding eradication of "untouchability." A few years later, in 1939, he again returned to active political life because of the pending federation of Indian principalities with the rest of India. His first act was a fast, designed to force the ruler of the state of Rajkot to modify his autocratic rule. Public unrest caused by the fast was so great that the colonial government intervened and the demands were granted. The Mahatma again became the most important political figure in India.

By 1944 the Indian struggle for independence was in its final stages, the British government having agreed to independence on condition that the two contending nationalist groups, the Muslim League and the Congress party, should resolve their differences. Gandhi stood steadfastly against the partition of India but ultimately had to agree, in the hope that internal peace would be achieved after the Muslim demand for separation had been satisfied. India and Pakistan became separate states when the British granted India its independence in 1947. During the riots that followed the partition of India, Gandhi pleaded with Hindus and Muslims to live together peacefully. On January 13, 1948, he undertook a fast in New Delhi to bring about peace, but on January 30, 18 days after the termination of that fast, as he was on his way to his evening prayer meeting, he was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, a fanatic Hindu.

Gandhi's death was regarded as an international catastrophe. A period of mourning was set aside in the United Nations General Assembly, and condolences to India were expressed by all countries. The teachings of Gandhi came to inspire non-violent movements elsewhere, notably in the U.S. under the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and in South Africa under Nelson Mandela.

Gandhi was not just a lawyer, a politician or even a social reformer; he was a man who thought hard about life and humanity and eventually gave a whole new philosophy of life and governance. He did not claim either this philosophy or himself to be perfect; as the title of his autobiography states clearly, he saw his life as a series of experiments. You will now take a closer look at his quest, his search for the true path by reading the following extract from his autobiography. *Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Part III, Chapters 17, 18 and 19. (Trans. Mahadev Desai, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 2005. pp. 213-220).

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## **2.3 TEXT: "A MONTH WITH GOKHALE"**

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### **2.3.1 Chapter 17**

#### A Month with Gokhale-I

From the very first day of my stay with him **Gokhale** made me feel completely at home. He treated me as though I were his younger brother, he acquainted himself with all my requirements and arranged to see that I got all I needed. Fortunately my wants were few, and as I had cultivated the habit of self-help, I needed very little personal attendance. He was deeply impressed with my habit of fending for myself, my personal cleanliness, **perseverance** and regularity, and would often **overwhelm** me with praise.

He seemed to keep nothing private from me. He would introduce me to all the important people that called on him. Of these the one who stands foremost in my memory is Dr. (now Sir) **P. C. Ray**. He lived practically next door and was a very frequent visitor.

This is how he introduced Dr. Ray: "This is Prof. Ray who having a monthly salary of Rs. 800, keeps just Rs. 40 for himself and devotes the balance to public purposes. He is not, and does not want to get married."

I see little difference between Dr. Ray as he is today and as he used to be then. His dress used to be nearly as simple as it is, with this difference of course that whereas it is khadi now, it used to be Indian mill-cloth in those days. I felt I could never hear too much of the talks between Gokhale and Dr. Ray, as they all pertained to public good or were of educative value. At times they were painful too, containing, as they did, strictures on public men. As a result, some of those whom I had regarded as stalwart fighters began to look quite puny.

To see Gokhale at work was as much a joy as an education. He never wasted a minute. His private relations and friendships were all for public good. All his talks had reference only to the good of the country and were absolutely free from any trace of untruth or insincerity. India's poverty and subjection were matters of constant and intense concern to him. Various people sought to interest him in different things. But he gave every one of them the same reply: "You do the



thing yourself. Let me do my own work. What I want is freedom for my country. After that is won, we can think of other things. Today that one thing is enough to engage all my time and energy.” His reverence for **Ranade** could be seen every moment. Ranade’s authority was final in every matter, and he would cite it at every step. The anniversary of Ranade’s death (or birth, I forget which) occurred during my stay with Gokhale, who observed it regularly.

There were with him then, besides myself, his friends Prof. Kathavate and a Sub-Judge. He invited us to take part in the celebrations and in his speech he gave us his reminiscences of Ranade. He incidentally compared Ranade, **Telang** and **Mandlik**. He eulogized Telang’s charming style and Mandlik’s greatness as a reformer. Citing an instance of Mandlik’s **solicitude** for his clients, he told us an anecdote as to how once, having missed his usual train, he engaged a special train so as to be able to attend the court in the interest of his client. But Ranade, he said, towered above them all, as a **versatile** genius. He was not only a great judge, he was an equally great historian, an economist and a reformer. Although he was a judge, he fearlessly attended the Congress, and everyone had such confidence in his **sagacity** that they unquestioningly accepted his decisions. Gokhale’s joy knew no bounds, as he described these qualities of head and heart which were all combined in his master.

Gokhale used to have a horse-carriage in those days. I did not know the circumstances that had made a horse-carriage a necessity for him, and so I **remonstrated** with him: “Can’t you make use of the tramcar in going about from place to place? Is it **derogatory** to a leader’s dignity?” Slightly pained, he said, “So you also have failed to understand me! I do not use my Council allowances for my own personal comforts. I envy your liberty to go about in tram-cars, but I am sorry I cannot do likewise. When you are the victim of as wide a publicity as I am, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for you to go about in a tramcar. There is no reason to suppose that everything that the leaders do is with a view to personal comfort. I love your simple habits. I live as simply as I can, but some expense is almost **inevitable** for a man like myself.” He thus satisfactorily disposed of one of my complaints, but there was another which he could not dispose of to my satisfaction.

“But you do not even go out for walks,” said I. “Is it surprising that you should be always **ailing**? Should public work leave no time for physical exercise?” “When do you ever find me free to go out for a walk?” he replied.

I had such a great regard for Gokhale that I never **strove** with him. Though this reply was far from satisfying me, I remained silent. I believed then and I believe even now, that, no matter what amount of work one has, one should always find some time for exercise, just as one does for one’s meals. It is my humble opinion that, far from taking away from one’s capacity for work, it adds to it.

### 2.3.2 Chapter 18

#### A Month with Gokhale-II

Whilst living under Gokhale’s roof I was far from being a stay at-home. I had told my Christian friends in South Africa that in India I would meet the Christian Indians and acquaint myself with their condition. I had heard of Babu Kalicharan Banerji and held him in high regard. He took a prominent part in the Congress,

and I had none of the misgivings about him that I had about the average Christian Indian, who stood aloof from the Congress and isolated himself from Hindus and Mussalmans. I told Gokhale that I was thinking of meeting him. He said: "What is the good of your seeing him? He is a very good man, but I am afraid he will not satisfy you. I know him very well. However, you can certainly meet him if you like." I sought an appointment, which he readily gave me. When I went, I found that his wife was on her death-bed. His house was simple. In the Congress I had seen him in a coat and trousers, but I was glad to find him now wearing a Bengal dhoti and shirt. I liked his simple mode of dress, though I myself then wore a Parsi coat and trousers. Without much ado I presented my difficulties to him. He asked: "Do you believe in the **doctrine of original sin**?"

"I do," said I. "Well then, Hinduism offers no **absolution** there from, Christianity does," and added: "The wages of sin is death, and the Bible says that the only way of deliverance is surrender unto Jesus." I put forward Bhakti-marga (the path of devotion) of the Bhagavad Gita, but to no avail. I thanked him for his goodness. He failed to satisfy me, but I benefited by the interview. During these days I walked up and down the streets of Calcutta. I went to most places on foot. I met Justice Mitter and Sir Gurudas Banerji, whose help I wanted in my work in South Africa. And about this time I met Raja Sir Pyarimohan Mukarji.

Kalicharan Banerji had spoken to me about the Kali temple, which I was eager to see, especially as I had read about it in books. So I went there one day. Justice Mitter's house was in the same locality, and I therefore went to the temple on the same day that I visited him. On the way I saw a stream of sheep going to be sacrificed to Kali. Rows of beggars lined the lane leading to the temple. There were religious **mendicants** too, and even in those days I was **sternly** opposed to giving **alms** to sturdy beggars. A crowd of them pursued me. One of such men was found seated on a verandah. He stopped me, and **accosted** me: "Whither are you going, my boy?" I replied to him. He asked my companion and me to sit down, which we did.

I asked him: "Do you regard this sacrifice as religion?"

"Who would regard killing of animals as religion?"

"Then, why don't you preach against it?"

"That's not my business. Our business is to worship God."

"But could you not find any other place in which to worship God?"

"All places are equally good for us. The people are like a flock of sheep, following where leaders lead them. It is no business of us sadhus."

We did not prolong the discussion but passed on to the temple. We were greeted by rivers of blood. I could not bear to stand there. I was **exasperated** and restless. I have never forgotten that sight.

That very evening I had an invitation to dinner at a party of Bengali friends. There I spoke to a friend about this cruel form of worship. He said: "The sheep don't feel anything. The noise and the drum-beating there deaden all sensation of pain."

I could not swallow this. I told him that, if the sheep had speech, they would tell a different tale. I felt that the cruel custom ought to be stopped. I thought of the story of Buddha, but I also saw that the task was beyond my capacity.

I hold today the same opinion as I held then. To my mind the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. I should be unwilling to take the life of a lamb for the sake of the human body. I hold that, the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man. But he who has not qualified himself for such service is unable to afford to it any protection. I must go through more self-purification and sacrifice, before I can hope to save these lambs from this unholy sacrifice. Today I think I must die pining for this self-purification and sacrifice. It is my constant prayer that there may be born on earth some great spirit, man or woman, fired with divine pity who will deliver us from this heinous sin, save the lives of the innocent creatures, and purify the temple.

How is it that Bengal with all its knowledge, intelligence, sacrifice, and emotion tolerates this slaughter?

### 2.3.3 Chapter 19

#### A Month with Gokhale-III

The terrible sacrifice offered to Kali in the name of religion enhanced my desire to know Bengali life. I had read and heard a good deal about the **Brahmo Samaj**. I knew something about the life of **Pratap Chandra Mazumdar**. I had attended some of the meetings addressed by him. I secured his *Life of Keshav Chandra Sen*, read it with great interest, and understood the distinction between Sadharan Brahmo Samaj and Adi Brahmo Samaj. I met Pandit Shivanath Shastri and in company with Prof. Kathavate went to see Maharshi **Debendranath Tagore**, but as no interviews with him were allowed then, we could not see him. We were, however, invited to a celebration of the Brahmo Samaj held at his place, and there we had the privilege of listening to fine Bengali music. Ever since I have been a lover of Bengali music.

Having seen enough of the Brahmo Samaj, it was impossible to be satisfied without seeing **Swami Vivekanand**. So with great enthusiasm I went to **Belur Math**, mostly, or maybe all the way, on foot. I loved the sequestered site of the **Math**. I was disappointed and sorry to be told that the Swami was at his Calcutta house, lying ill, and could not be seen.

I then ascertained the place of residence of **Sister Nivedita**, and met her in a **Chowringhee** mansion. I was taken aback by the splendour that surrounded her, and even in our conversation, there was not much meeting ground. I spoke to Gokhale about this, and he said he did not wonder that there could be no point of contact between me and a volatile person like her. I met her again at Mr. Pestonji Padshah's place. I happened to come in just as she was talking to his old mother, and so I became an interpreter between the two. In spite of my failure to find any agreement with her, I could not but notice and admire her overflowing love for Hinduisim. I came to know of her books later.

I used to divide my day between seeing the leading people in Calcutta regarding the work in South Africa, and visiting and studying the religious and public institutions of the city. I once addressed a meeting, presided over by Dr. Mullick, on the work of the **Indian Ambulance Corps** in the **Boer War**. My acquaintance with *The Englishman* stood me in good stead on this occasion too. Mr. **Saunders** was ill then but rendered me as much help as in 1896. Gokhale liked this speech of mine, and he was very glad to hear Dr. Ray praising it.

Thus my stay under the roof of Gokhale made my work in Calcutta very easy, brought me into touch with the foremost Bengali families, and was the beginning of my intimate contact with Bengal.

I must needs skip over many a reminiscence of this memorable month. Let me simply mention my flying visit to Burma and the *foongis* there. I was pained by their **lethargy**. I saw the golden pagoda. I did not like the innumerable little candles burning in the temple, and the rats running about the sanctum brought to my mind thoughts of Swami Dayanand's experience at Morvi. The freedom and energy of the Burmese women charmed just as the **indolence** of the men pained me. I also saw, during my brief **sojourn**, that just as Bombay was not India, Rangoon was not Burma, and that just as we in India have become commission agents of English merchants, even so in Burma have we combined with the English merchants in making the Burmese people our commission agents.

On my return from Burma I took leave of Gokhale. The separation was a **wrench**, but my work in Bengal, or rather Calcutta, was finished, and I had no occasion to stay any longer.

Before settling down I had thought of making a tour through India travelling third class, and of acquainting myself with the hardships of third-class passengers. I spoke to Gokhale about this. To begin with he **ridiculed** the idea, but when I explained to him what I hoped to see, he cheerfully approved. I planned to go first to Benares to pay my respects to Mrs. Besant, who was then ill.

It was necessary to equip myself anew for the third-class tour. Gokhale himself gave me a metal tiffin-box and got it filled with sweet balls and puris. I purchased a canvas bag worth twelve annas and a long coat made up of **Chhaya wool**. The bag was to contain this coat, a dhoti, a towel and a shirt. I had a blanket as well to cover myself with and a water jug. Thus equipped I set forth on my travels. Gokhale and Dr. Ray came to the station to see me off. I had asked them both not to trouble to come, but they insisted. "I should not have come if you had gone first class, but now I had to," said Gokhale.

No one stopped Gokhale from going on to the platform. He was in his silk turban, jacket and dhoti. Dr. Ray was in his Bengali dress. He was stopped by the ticket collector, but on Gokhale's telling him that he was his friend, he was admitted. Thus with their good wishes I started on my journey.

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## 2.4 GLOSSARY

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**Gokhale** : Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866- 1915) was born at Kolhapur in a humble Chitpavan Brahman family. Graduating in arts from the Elphinstone College, Bombay, in 1884, he joined as Professor of history and political economy at the Fergusson College, Poona. Recognizing his services, he was conferred Professor to Order. He was one of the founding social and political leaders during the independence movement against the British Empire in India. Actively identified with the Indian National Congress, he was for some years the Joint Secretary of the Congress and in 1905, proclaimed its President at the

Benares session. A few months before his death, he declined a knighthood. Gokhale was a mentor to Mahatma Gandhi when he returned from South Africa. In 1905 he founded his Servants of India Society which aimed at bringing about social reform. Though his last years were clouded by illness, he was a powerful member of the Indian Public Services Commission 1912-5.

**perseverance:**

persistent determination.

**overwhelm:**

overcome, as with emotions.

**Dr. P. C. Ray**

: Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray (1861-19428) was a Professor of Chemistry in the University and a scientist of international acclaim. His activities were concerned with all spheres of human interest –educational reform, industrial development, employment generation, poverty alleviation, economic freedom and political advancement of the country. He was a pioneer in social reforms in the country. Ray was a voracious reader of literature, history and biography. He knew half-a-dozen languages. He was knighted (and became Sir P. C. Ray) by the British monarch for his scientific achievements.

**Ranade**

: Rao Bahadur (Justice) Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) was an energetic social, political and religious reformer. In the political sphere he founded the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, through which he frequently helped the government with sound advice, and was one of the originators of the Indian National Congress. Ranade became a member of the legislative council of Bombay in 1885, and occupied that position until he was made a justice of the High Court in 1893. He published books on Indian economics and Maratha history. For this service, he was appointed Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire.

**Telang**

: Kashinath Trimbak Telang (1850-1893) was a judge of the Bombay High Court and one of the founders of the Indian National Congress. Along with P.M. Metha, he was the originator of the Bombay Presidency Association. His translation of the Bhagavad Gita into English prose and verse is a standard work. His intimacy with Sanskrit enabled him to study and quote the Hindu law-books with an ease not readily attained by European lawyers and judges. He was nominated to the Bombay legislative council in 1884, but declined a similar position on the Viceroy's council.

**Mandlik**

: R. N. Mandlik was a member of the Executive Committee, Satyagraha Sabha, Bombay.

**solicitude**

: anxious concern.

**versatile**

: talented, having many skills.

- sagacity** : ability to make good judgements
- remonstrated** : protested
- derogatory** : below one's dignity/showing a low opinion.
- inevitable** : which cannot be avoided or prevented.
- ailing** : ill or prone to illness.
- strove** : struggle
- doctrine of original sin** : according to Christian tradition, original sin is the general condition of sinfulness (lack of holiness) into which human beings are born because of the Fall. The Fall refers to the first sin, committed when Adam and Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation.
- absolution** : salvation from sin; the condition of being formally forgiven by a Christian priest.
- mendicants** : beggars
- sternly** : strictly; in a severe manner
- alms** : money or goods given to the poor as charity
- accosted** : approached and spoken to by someone
- exasperated** : greatly annoyed or impatient
- Brahmo Samaj** : It is a social and religious movement of the nineteenth century, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy on 20th August 1828. Brahmo Samaj literally means the society of worshippers of "One True God." "Brahmo" means one who worships Brahman, or the supreme spirit of the universe, and "Samaj" means community of people united together. It promoted belief in one God or monotheism, support for the rights of women, and opposition to such aspects of Hinduism as idolatry and animal sacrifice. The organization attained considerable importance but began to decline after the death of Roy in 1833. It was revived by Devendranath Tagore in 1843 under the name of Calcutta Brahmo Samaj. It got divided in 1866 under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen, who formed the Adi (original) Brahmo Samaj. In 1869, Keshab Chandra Sen chose from amongst his missionaries, four persons and ordained them as adhyapaks or professors of four old religions of the world – Gour Govinda Ray for Hinduism, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar for Christianity, Aghore Nath Gupta for Buddhism and Giris Chandra Sen for Islam. Adi Brahmo Samaj itself suffered a split on 15th May 1878 when the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was formed, led by Ananda Mohan Bose, Shibchandra Deb and Umesh Chandra Datta.

<b>Biography and Autobiography</b>	<b>Pratap Chandra Mazumdar</b>	leader of the Hindu reform movement, the Brahmo Samaj, in Bengal
	<b>Keshav Chandra Sen</b>	: Hindu philosopher and social reformer.
	<b>Debendranath Tagore</b>	: Hindu philosopher and religious reformer, active in the Brahmo Samaj. Father of Rabindranath Tagore.
	<b>Swami Vivekananda</b>	: The pre-monastic name of Vivekananda (1863-1902) was <b>Narendranath Dutta</b> . He was one of the most famous and influential spiritual leaders on the philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga. He was the first known Hindu Swami to go to the West, where he introduced Hinduism, Yoga and Vedanta at the World's Parliament of Religions, in connection with the World Fair in Chicago, in 1893. It was there that he achieved world-wide fame by drawing huge audiences in Chicago and then later elsewhere in America. He was the chief disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the founder of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. He died on July 4, 1902 at Belur Math near Kolkata at the young age of 39.
	<b>sequestered</b>	: providing privacy or seclusion.
	<b>Belur Math</b>	: located in the bank of the River Hooghly near Calcutta, has the Ramakrishna Temple, as well as many other temples. In 1899, Swami Vivekanand established it as the Mother House for all the monks of the Ramakrishna Order who live in various branch centres of the Ramakrishna Mission in different parts of India and the world.
	<b>ascertained</b>	: find out or determine with certainty.
	<b>Sister Nivedita</b>	: Nivedita (1867-1911) was christened Margaret Elizabeth Noble. She was an Anglo-Irish social worker, author, teacher and disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who gave her the name Nivedita (which means one who is dedicated to God) on March 25, 1898. She started a school for girls and worked to improve the lives of Indian women of all castes. Later, she took up the cause of Indian independence. At the time when Gandhiji saw her, Sister Nivedita was the guest of two ladies at the American consulate. She was not, therefore, responsible for "the splendour that surrounded her".
	<b>Chowringhee</b>	: Chowringhee Road is a major road in Kolkata. In his book <i>The Changing Face of Kolkata</i> , David William Martin says, "It represents the nearest

equation in India to what Piccadilly is to London, Fifth Avenue to New York and the Champs Elysees to Paris. Nostalgic Londoners like to regard their Circus as the centre of the universe. Kolkatans are more reserved in their acclaim, although the fervour they display for their city is perhaps unmatched.”

**Indian Ambulance Corps** : When the Boer war broke out in 1899, Gandhi organized The Natal Indian Ambulance Corps of 1100 Indian men. Its task was to take the wounded brought by the Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps from the battlefield and carry them to the railhead.

**Boer War** : It was fought from 11 October 1899 until 31 May 1902, between the British Empire and the two independent Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal Republic). After a protracted hard-fought war, the Boers were defeated, and the two independent republics were absorbed into the British Empire. It is also known as the Anglo-Boer War (among some South Africans) and in Afrikaans (the language of the Boers), as the *Anglo-Boereoorlog* or *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (“Second War of Independence”). The Boers were descendants of the Dutch colonizers of South Africa.

**The Englishman** : It was a newspaper begun by British merchants in 1821 by the name of *John Bull in the East* to support the British rule in India. Stocqueler changed its name to “The Englishman.”

**Mr. Saunders** : Mr. J. O’B. Saunders bought The Englishman after 1857 the first war of independence, and became its editor.

**foongis** : monks

**lethargy** : inactivity; showing an unusual lack of energy

**indolence** : inactivity resulting from a dislike of work

**sojourn** : a temporary stay

**wrench** : painful uprooting or parting

**ridiculed** : subject to laughter or ridicule

**Chhaya wool** : wool from Chayya, a place in Porbandar State noted for its coarse woollen fabrics



i) Who introduced Gandhi to Dr. P. C. Ray and how?

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ii) What was Gandhi's opinion about physical exercise?

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iii) Describe Gandhiji's visit to the Kali temple in Calcutta.

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iv) Name the people whom Gandhi goes to meet and succeeds in doing so during his stay with Gokhale.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## **2.5 DISCUSSION**

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Gandhi begins the chapter by praising his host, G. K. Gokhale and his attentions towards him. However, note that Gandhi observes the people he meets and then comments on his estimation about them while at the same time trying to learn from them what he deems to be good. Twice he is dissatisfied with Gokhale's conduct and voices his concern – first, when he sees Gokhale using an expensive

horse-carriage and second, when he complains that Gokhale's ailments could well be due to the lack of physical exercise. Gokhale's explanation about the use of the horse-carriage satisfies him but not his excuse for not exercising. It is made quite clear that while he keeps an open mind to others' ideas, he is a man of strong convictions.

Another instance of both his open mindedness on the one hand and strong convictions on the other can be seen when he insists on visiting Babu Kalicharan Banerji. He does not dismiss the man simply because he has chosen to convert to Christianity, but seeks to know what might have prompted such a decision. He likes his simple dress and listens to Banerji carefully though in the end, he does not agree with him. Again, his strong belief in Hinduism does not make him blind to the evils practiced in the name of his religion and cannot condone the lulling of sheep in sacrifice to Kali. We witness here his flair for making his point, a skill essential for someone who is a lawyer by profession – when a friend argues that the sheep feel no pain in the noise of the drum-beating, Gandhi opposes such an outrageous excuse for cruelty and says “I told him that, if the sheep had speech, they would tell a different tale.”

Notice also that Gandhi feels incapable of stopping this custom and wishes, like the average person, for the birth of some great spirit to save the lives of the innocent sheep. He does not yet think of himself as a leader of the people, or as someone who could lead a revolution. He behaves just like you and me in wishing that someone else should stop the cruelty. However, the difference in his wish lies in the fact that he does not lament his helplessness but wishes to go through self-purification and self-sacrifice in order to become capable of saving others. He knows that before changing the world, you must first change yourself and rid yourself of weaknesses.

It is quite clear from our reading of the text that Gandhi not only had a very deep curiosity for knowledge and the desire to learn, but was willing to go through substantial trouble, criticism and hardship to attain his goals. He decides to travel third class in the trains on his tour of India, not to impress people or to make a political statement, but simply to understand the conditions in which third class passengers travelled and thereby gain knowledge about their hardships so that he could then decide how the situation could be improved, if at all.

In Part IV, Chapter XI of his autobiography, Gandhi comments thus on the writing of his autobiography:

“I understand more clearly today what I read long ago about the inadequacy of all autobiography as history. I know that I do not set down in this story all that I remember. Who can say how much I must give and how much omit in the interests of truth? And what would be the value in a court of law of the inadequate *ex parte* evidence being tendered by me of certain events in my life? If some busybody were to cross-examine me on the chapters already written, he could probably shed more light on them, and if it were a hostile critic's cross-examination, he might even flatter himself for having shown up ‘the hollowness of many of my pretensions’.”

Gandhi is here emphasizing the fact that one cannot write down *everything* in an autobiography. We have just read about a whole month of Gandhi's stay with Gokhale in a few pages and of course he does not describe every single moment

of that stay: "I must needs skip over many a reminiscence of this memorable month." While we can easily dismiss descriptions of mundane activities like eating or sleeping, he might have casually met many more people and seen more places than the ones he mentions. Here we must understand that an autobiography describes only those aspects of the author's life that the author believes to be important and worth reading by others. Also, the author might omit embarrassing moments or events which he/she does not wish, to disclose to public knowledge. And finally, there might be many things that he/she has simply forgotten although his friends or acquaintances might remember them and judge them to be important. All these omissions can lead us to question the truth of an autobiography and Gandhi voices his dilemma of how to select material while writing about his life. He says that he does not wish to distort the truth but he must be selective. He is also aware that he cannot provide "evidence" or proof for some of the things that he is writing. It is here that the role of the reader becomes all important for it is up to the readers to interpret what they read according to their own judgement and preconceptions.

Gandhi establishes a relationship with his readers by moving back and forth between the past that he is describing in the autobiography and the time when he is actually writing it down. For example, he says:

"I see little difference between Dr. Ray as he is today and as he used to be then."

"I believed then, and I believe even now, that, no matter what amount of work one has, one should always find some time for exercise..."

"I came to know of her books later."

In the last sentence, Gandhi is talking about Sister Nivedita. He did not have a very favourable opinion of her from his first meeting but the second meeting made him admire her love for Hinduism and the reader is then told that he later came to know more of her through her books. This movement in time reminds the reader that this is not simply a chronological account of events but by writing this autobiography, the author is engaging in a conversation with the reader about his experiences and how he changed with time.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- i) How were Gandhi's days spent in Calcutta?

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- ii) Briefly describe Gandhi's impression of Burma.

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iii) Why did Gandhi wish to travel third class? What preparations did he make?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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The narrative of Gandhi's autobiography is structured by balancing contrasts of praise and criticism, success and failure, past and present. He presents to the reader both the positive and the negative opinions about the people whom he meets and the customs and beliefs he encounters. He is successful in espousing his cause in South Africa but fails to do anything to stop the cruelty that he loathes in the Kali temple. Similarly, he succeeds in meeting many important people but not Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. There are two clear times mentioned in the text – the past or the time *of which* he is writing from memory and the present, i.e., the time *at which* he is writing the autobiography. There is of course a *third* time – the time when you are reading his words in the twenty-first century and have the advantage of knowing what was to happen later in his life, a knowledge that he could not share or know when he was writing in the 1920s.

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## 2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Gokhale introduced Gandhi to Dr. P. C. Ray by saying that Dr. Ray was a man who devoted nearly all his salary for public work, keeping just Rs. 40 for his own needs. He had decided not to marry.
- ii) Gandhi believed that no matter what amount of work one has, one should always find some time for exercise, just as one does for one's meals. Further, he believed that physical exercise adds to one's capacity for work and keeps the body free from diseases.
- iii) Gandhi's visit to the Kali temple left a deep impression on his mind. He was appalled at the sight of a stream of sheep going to be sacrificed to Kali. He also did not like the line of beggars along the lane that led to the temple, among whom were also present able-bodied sadhus and Gandhi was strongly opposed to giving alms to those who could earn their own livelihood by working. He talked to one such sadhu who refused to take the responsibility of stopping the cruelty to the sheep. Inside the temple, he was exasperated at the rivers of blood and it was a sight that he never forgot.
- iv) The people whom Gandhi goes to meet and succeeds in doing so include Dr. P.C. Ray, Babu Kalicharan Banerji, and Sister Nivedita.

- i) Gandhi's days in Calcutta were spent in seeing important people regarding his work in South Africa, and visiting and studying the religious and public institutions of the city.
- ii) Gandhi's most important impression of Burma was that just as Bombay was not India, Rangoon was not Burma and that the Indians had joined hands with English merchants in Burma in making the Burmese people their commission agents, i.e., Indians were equally responsible for the exploitation of the Burmese. Gandhi was pained by the lethargy of the monks or foongis and did not like the innumerable candles and rats in the golden pagoda. However, he was charmed by the freedom and energy of the Burmese women.
- iii) Gandhi wished to travel third class in order to acquaint himself with the hardships faced by the third class passengers. He was given a metal tiffin-box by Gokhale which he got filled with sweet balls and puris. He purchased a canvas bag worth twelve annas and a long coat made of wool. He also carried a blanket and a water-jug.



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## UNIT 3    BERTRAND RUSSELL'S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Bertrand Russell: Life and Works
- 3.3 Passage from Russell's *Autobiography*
  - 3.3.1 Text
  - 3.3.2 Glossary
- 3.4 Discussion
  - 3.4.1 Summary
  - 3.4.2 Portrait of Russell
- 3.5 Russell's Prose Style
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 3.0    OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, we shall read and discuss a passage from the *Autobiography* of Bertrand Russell. After a careful reading of this Unit, you should be able to:

- outline the life and works of Russell;
- describe Russell's childhood;
- outline the different aspects of Russell's personality;
- critically appreciate the prose style of Bertrand Russell.

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### 3.1    INTRODUCTION

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In the first Unit, we introduced you to biography and autobiography as forms of prose. In the previous Unit, we discussed a few passages from Gandhi's *Autobiography*. Let us now look at another passage from an *Autobiography* written by one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell.

Bertrand Russell was a multi-faceted personality who has written extensively on mathematics, philosophy, sociology, politics and education. He is the perfect example of the complete man who has had three ruling passions in his life—the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind (*Autobiography*, p.9).

Russell was a philosopher, a mathematician and an educationist, among other things. However, it is primarily for Russell's contribution to English prose that we have selected this passage for you. Russell is universally known for his tremendous capacity for expressing even the most complex ideas in a lucid and elegant language that is easily comprehensible to the lay reader. His *Autobiography*, first appeared in three volumes between 1967-71 and immediately

became popular. It is frankly written, at times hilarious, at others deeply moving. It provides a valuable insight into the various facets of this famous personality.

Let us briefly recapitulate what we read about autobiography in the first Unit of this Block. An autobiography is a first-person account of a person's own life. It is usually, though not always, written at a late stage in life when one looks back in perspective. In an autobiography we often find extended accounts of childhood whereas in a biography the interest centres more on that period of life when one has become successful and famous. At times an autobiographical account may appear biased which is justifiable because a personal point of view is being presented.

Details of personal experience are made interesting so that regardless of the time or obscurity of the writer, the reader's attention is engaged and curiosity aroused. Writers talk freely and confidentially about themselves. The use of the first-person pronoun is frequent. The reader is expected to be sympathetic rather than to sit on judgment as an objective evaluator. What is important in such a literary form is not a rigid or strictly logical structure, but a spontaneous, easy and flexible movement. Thus we cannot judge an autobiography in the same way that we would a biography. In biography, the objectivity of the writer is a major consideration in judging its overall merit. On the other hand, an autobiography is primarily subjective.

Let us first look at an outline of the life and works of Bertrand Russell before reading the selected passage.

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### 3.2 BERTRAND RUSSELL: LIFE AND WORKS

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Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was born in Wales. He was educated privately and went to Trinity College, Cambridge to study maths and moral sciences. He distinguished himself as a scholar and became Fellow of Trinity in 1895. A visit to Germany resulted in *German Social Democracy* (1896) followed by *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897), books which point to his major intellectual interests. He was a humanist reformer opposed to dogmatism and intolerance. He wanted to establish a more liberal system of education and opened a school in London in collaboration with his second wife Dora. He believed that for the fullest development of the individual it was essential to provide freedom of thought and action. He was a pacifist who refused to serve in the army during the First World War and was consequently imprisoned. He started the anti-nuclear movement popularly known as the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) in the nineteen fifties which subsequently spread all over western Europe. Along with his philosophical treatises, Russell has also written short stories. In addition to these, Russell has published more than two thousand papers and articles. In 1950, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of the 'many-sided and important work in which he constantly stood forth as a champion of humanity and freedom of thought'.

#### Selected Works

*Principia Mathematica* 3 Vols. (written with A.N. Whitehead) (1910, 1912, 1913), *Political Ideals* (1917), *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920), *The ABC of Atoms* (1923), *Marriage and Morals* (1929), *A History of Western Philosophy*

(1945), *Unpopular Essays* (1950) *Understanding History* (1957), *Wisdom of the West* (1959) *The Collected Stories of Bertrand Russell* (1972)

These are only a few of the numerous works written by this versatile writer. The diverse titles indicate Russell's wide range of interests.

**Check Your Progress 1**

Answer the following questions in your own words in the space provided.

i) Name five subjects that Russell has written on.

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ii) How would you define autobiography? How is autobiography different from biography? Give your answer in 3-4 sentences.

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iii) What was Russell's contribution to world peace? 2-3 sentences will do.

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iv) Name five titles of Russell's books.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)



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### 3.3 PASSAGE FROM RUSSELL'S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

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In his *Autobiography*, we find Bertrand Russell looking back on his past life and tracing his intellectual and emotional development. He inserts personal letters and pages from his diary to stress the authenticity of his narrative. This is usually the method adopted by a biographer. However, a writer can make the decision either to include or omit such documents from his/her work. The passage you will read is taken from the first chapter of his *Autobiography* entitled 'Childhood'. However, it would be well to remember that this is only an isolated passage that we have selected to illustrate Russell's style and technique. For a more complete understanding of autobiography as a literary form, it would be advisable to read the complete work.

Let us now read the text. Difficult words have been explained in the glossary at the end of the passage. In case there are other words which you find difficult, do keep your dictionary at hand.

#### 3.3.1 Text

Throughout the greater part of my childhood, the most important hours of my day were those that I spent alone in the garden, and the most vivid part of my existence was solitary. I seldom mentioned my more serious thoughts to others, and when I did I regretted it. I knew each corner of the garden, and looked year by year for the white primroses in one place, the redstart's nest in another, the blossom of the acacia emerging from a tangle of ivy. I knew where the earliest "bluebells were to be found, and which of the oaks came into leaf soonest. I remember that in the year 1878 a certain oak tree was in leaf as early as the fourteenth of April. My window looked out upon two Lombardy poplars, each about a hundred feet high, and I used to watch the shadow of the house creeping up them as the sun set. In the morning I woke very early and sometimes saw **Venus**. On one occasion I mistook the planet for a lantern in the wood. I saw the sunrise on most mornings, and on bright April days I would sometimes slip out of the house for a long walk before breakfast. I watched the sunset turn the earth red and the clouds golden; I listened to the wind, and exulted in the lightning. Throughout my childhood I had an increasing sense of loneliness, and of despair of ever meeting anyone with whom I could talk. Nature and books and later mathematics saved me from complete despondency.

The early years of my childhood, however were happy and it was only as adolescence approached that loneliness became oppressive. I had governesses, German and Swiss, whom I liked, and my intelligence was not yet sufficiently developed to suffer from the deficiency of my people in this respect. I must, however, have felt some kind of unhappiness, as I remember wishing that my parents had lived. Once, when I was six years old, I expressed this feeling to my grandmother, and she proceeded to tell me that it was very fortunate for me that they had died. At the time her remarks made a disagreeable impression upon me and I attributed them to jealousy. I did not, of course, know that from a Victorian point of view there was ample ground for them. My grandmother's face was very expressive, and in spite of all her experience of the great world she never learned the art of concealing her emotions. I noticed that any allusion to insanity caused her a spasm of anguish, and I speculated much as to the reason. It was

only many years later that I discovered she had a son in an asylum. He was in a smart regiment, and went mad after a few years of it. The story that I have been told, though I cannot vouch for its complete accuracy, is that his brother officers teased him because he was chaste. They kept a bear as a regimental pet, and one day, for sport, set the bear at him. He fled, lost his memory and being found wandering about the country was put in a **workhouse infirmary** his identity being unknown. In the middle of the night, he jumped up shouting 'the bear- the bear!' and strangled a tramp in the next bed. He never recovered his memory, but lived till over eighty.

When I try to recall as much as I can of early childhood, I find that the first thing I remember after my arrival at Pembroke Lodge is walking in melting snow, in warm sunshine, on an occasion which must have been about a month later, and noticing a large fallen beech tree which was being sawn into logs. The next thing I remember is my fourth birthday, on which I was given a trumpet which I blew all day long, and had tea with a birthday cake in a summer house. The next thing that I remember is my aunt's lessons on colours and reading, and then, very vividly, the kindergarten class which began just before I was five and continued for about a year and a half. That gave me very intense delight. The shop from which the apparatus came was stated on the lids to be in Berners Street, Oxford Street, and to this day, unless I pull myself together, I think of Berners Street as a sort of **Aladdin's Palace**. At the kindergarten class I got to know other children, most of whom I have lost sight of. But I met one of them, Jimmie Baillie, in 1929 at Vancouver as I stepped out of the train. I realize now that the good lady who taught us had had an orthodox **Froebel** training, and was at that time amazingly up-to-date. I can still remember almost all the lessons in detail, but I think what thrilled me more was the discovery that yellow and blue paints made green.

When I was just six my grandfather died, and shortly afterwards we went to St. Fillans in Perthshire for the summer. I remember the funny old inn with knobbly wooden door-posts, the wooden bridge over the river, the rocky bays on the lake, and the mountain opposite. My recollection is that the time there was one of great happiness. My next recollection is less pleasant. It is that of a room in London at No. 8, Chesham Place, where my governess stormed at me while I endeavoured to learn the multiplication table but was continually impeded by tears. My grandmother took a house in London for some months when I was seven years old, and it was then that I began to see more of my mother's family. My mother's father was dead, but my mother's mother, Lady Stanley of Alderley, lived in a large house No. 40, Dover, Street, with her daughter Maude. I was frequently taken to lunch with her, and though the food was delicious, the pleasure was doubtful, as she had a caustic tongue, and spared neither age nor sex. I was always consumed with shyness while in her presence, and as none of the Stanleys were shy, this irritated her. I used to make desperate endeavours to produce a good impression, but they would fail in ways that I could not have foreseen. I remember telling her that I had grown  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in the last seven months, and that at that rate I should grow  $4\frac{2}{7}$  inches in a year. "Don't you know, she said, 'that you should never talk about any fractions except halves and quarters?—it is **pedantic!**' 'I know it now, I replied. 'How like his father!' she said, turning to my Aunt Maude. Somehow or other, as in this incident, my best efforts always went astray. Once when I was about twelve years old, she had me before a roomful of visitors, and asked me whether I had read a whole string of books on popular

science which she enumerated. I had read none of them. At the end she sighed, and turning to the visitors, said: 'I have no intelligent grandchildren.' She was an eighteenth century type, rationalistic and unimaginative, keen on enlightenment, and contemptuous of Victorian goody-goody **priggery**. She was one of the principal people concerned in the foundation of Girton College, and her portrait hangs in Girton Hall, but her policies were abandoned at her death. 'So long as I live', she used to say, 'there shall be no chapel at Girton.' The present chapel began to be built the day she died. As soon as I reached adolescence she began to try to counteract what she considered **namby-pamby**, in my upbringing. She would say: 'Nobody can say anything against me, but I always say that it is not so bad to break the Seventh Commandment as the Sixth, because at any rate it requires the consent of the other party.' I pleased her greatly on one occasion by asking for **Tristram Shandy** as a birthday present. She said: 'I won't write in it, because people will say what an odd grandmother you have!' Nevertheless she did write in it. It was an autographed first edition. This is the only occasion I can remember on which I succeeded in pleasing her. Formidable as my grandmother was, she had her limits. Once when **Mr. Gladstone** was expected to tea, she told us all beforehand how she was going to explain to him exactly in what respects his **Home Rule** policy was mistaken. I was present throughout his visit, but not one word of criticism did she utter. His hawk's eye could quell even her. Her son-in-law, Lord Carlisle, told me of an even more humiliating episode which occurred at Naworth Castle on one occasion when she was staying there. **Burne-Jones**, who was also staying there, had a tobacco pouch which was made to look like a tortoise. There was also a real tortoise, which strayed one day by mistake into the library. This suggested a prank to the younger generation. During dinner, Burne-Jones's tobacco pouch was placed near the drawing-room fire, and when the ladies returned from dinner it was dramatically discovered that this time the tortoise had got into the drawing-room. On its being picked up, somebody exclaimed with astonishment that its back had grown soft. Lord Carlisle fetched from the library the appropriate volume of the Encyclopedia, and read out a pretended passage saying that great heat sometimes had this effect. My grandmother expressed the greatest interest in this fact of natural history, and frequently alluded to it on subsequent occasions. Many years later, when she was quarrelling with Lady Carlisle about Home Rule, her daughter maliciously told her the truth of this incident. My grandmother retorted: 'I may be many things, but I am not a fool, and I refuse to believe you....'

At the age of eleven, I began **Euclid** with my brother as my tutor. This was one of the great events of my life, as dazzling as first love. I had not imagined that there was anything so delicious in the world. After I had learned the fifth proposition, my brother told me that it was generally considered difficult, but I had found no difficulty whatever. This was the first time it had dawned upon me that I might have some intelligence. From that moment until Whitehead and I finished *Principia Mathematica*, when I was thirty-eight, mathematics was my chief interest, and my chief source of happiness. Like all happiness, however, it was not unalloyed. I had been told that Euclid proved things, and was much disappointed that he started with axioms. At first I refused to accept them unless my brother could offer me some reason for doing so, but he said: 'If you don't accept them we cannot go on', and as I wished to go on, I reluctantly admitted them **pro tem**. The doubt as to the premises of mathematics which I felt at that moment remained with me, and determined the course of my subsequent work.

It would be completely misleading to suggest that my childhood was all solemnity and seriousness. I got just as much fun out of life as I could, some of it I am afraid of a somewhat mischievous kind. The family doctor, an old Scotchman with mutton-chop whiskers used to come in his **brougham** which waited at the front door while the man of healing spoke his piece. His coachman had an exquisite top-hat, calculated to advertise the excellence of the practice. I used to get on the roof above this splendid head-piece and drop rotten rosebuds out of the gutter on to its flat top. They spread all over with a delicious squish and I withdrew my head quickly enough for the coachman to suppose that they had fallen from heaven. Sometimes I did even worse. I threw snowballs at him when he was driving, thereby endangering the valuable lives of him and his employer. I had another amusement which I much enjoyed. On a Sunday, when the Park was crowded, I would climb to the very top of a large beech tree on the edge of our grounds. There I would hang upside down and scream and watch the crowd gravely discussing how a rescue should be effected. When I saw them nearing a decision I would get the right way up and quietly come down. During the time when Jimmie Baillie stayed with me I was led into even more desperate courses. The bath chair in which I remembered my grandfather being wheeled about had been lodged in a lumber room. We found it there and raced it down whatever hills we could find. When this was discovered it was considered blasphemy and we were reproached with melancholy gravity. Some of our doings, however, never came to the ears of the grown-ups. We tied a rope to a branch of a tree and learnt by long practice to swing in a complete circle and return to our starting point. It was only by great skill that one could avoid stopping half way and bumping one's back painfully into the rough bark of the tree. When other boys came to visit us, we used to carry out the correct performance ourselves and when the others attempted to imitate us we maliciously exulted in their painful failure. My Uncle Rollo, with whom for a while we used to spend three months each year, had three cows and a donkey. The donkey was more intelligent than the cows and learnt to open the gates between the fields with his nose but he was said to be unruly and useless. I did not believe this and after some unsuccessful attempts, I learnt to ride him without saddle or bridle. He would kick and buck but he never got me off except when I had tied a can full of rattling stones to his tail. I used to ride him all round the country, even when I went to visit the daughter of Lord Wolsely who lived about three miles from my uncle's house.

### 3.3.2 Glossary

- Venus** : goddess of love and beauty in Roman mythology. Here it simply means morning star.
- workhouse** : a poorhouse where paupers were given work.
- infirmary** : a place where sick people receive care.
- Aladdin's Palace** : a palace of fabled treasures in the stories of the Arabian Nights.
- Froebel** : (1782-1852) German educational reformer who founded the kindergarten system.
- pedantic** : excessively concerned with minor details.
- priggery** : smug or unthinking adherence to standards of morality or propriety.

<b>Biography and Autobiography</b>	<b>namby-pamby</b>	: lacking in character or emotional strength.
	<b>Tristram Shandy</b>	: (1760-7) novel written by Laurence Sterne (1713-68)
	<b>Gladstone</b>	: (1809-98) English Liberal party statesman who had several terms as prime minister: 1868-74; 1880-5; 1886 and 1892-94.
	<b>Home Rule</b>	: Gladstone advocated home rule for Ireland.
	<b>Burne-Jones</b>	: (1833-98) English painter and designer.
	<b>Euclid</b>	: Greek mathematician, often referred to as the ‘founder of geometry
	<b>pro tem</b>	: (Latin) temporarily.
	<b>brougham</b>	: a four-wheeled closed carriage with the driver’s seat outside.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Read the questions given below and write the answers in the space provided.

i) Describe in your own words some of Russell’s early childhood memories.

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ii) In 3-4 sentences, describe young Bertrand’s relationship with his grandmother Lady Stanley.

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iii) What childish pranks did Bertrand play on the doctor’s coachman? Write a brief answer in about 50-60 words.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## 3.4 DISCUSSION

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You have just read Bertrand Russell's reminiscences of his childhood from the age of four to when he was roughly about twelve. The passage is full of interesting anecdotes which are not arranged in strict chronological sequence. We begin at a later period and move with Russell to his earliest recollections. This movement back and forth in time lends a spontaneous and relaxed quality to the piece. The selected incidents from his childhood are significant because they not only tell us about the people and places that figure in Russell's childhood, but also about Russell's personality. He has also created an effective picture of upper-class life in Victorian Britain.

### 3.4.1 Summary

#### **Lonely Childhood**

At the very outset, we are told of the lonely childhood of Bertrand Russell. The orphaned lad finds diversion in the sights and sounds of nature. He loved nature in a contemplative way, appreciating it in all its aspects. He woke up early and looked long and deep at the sunrise. The lonely child is left to his own devices. As he had no one that he could communicate with, he turned to the companionship of nature and books.

Lest we should conjure a gloomy picture of his childhood, Russell assures us that he did not suffer from this oppressive sense of loneliness in his earlier days. He remembers his German and Swiss governesses with affection and even though he sometimes missed his parents, he was not desolate. He can vividly recall his arrival at Pembroke and his fourth birthday with its party and the present he received. His days at the kindergarten in the company of other children are recalled with great delight. The longing for the company of other children surfaces clearly at this point.

#### **Lady Russell**

Russell also describes his grandmother Lady Russell, his paternal grandmother with whom he spent his childhood and his mother's mother Lady Stanley whom he met only when he was seven. He lived with Lady Russell who, he recalls, had a very 'expressive' face that revealed all her emotions. She was very sensitive to the mention of insanity and it was only later that Russell discovered that her son was in an asylum. She does not seem to evoke any strong response in Russell apart from a general feeling of affection.

#### **Lady Stanley**

On the other hand, Russell seems completely in awe of the formidable Lady Stanley. He was afraid of her sharp tongue and the shy boy was often left tongue-tied in her presence. The precocious little boy tried very hard to impress her with his mathematical prowess but she only dismissed him as pedantic. She was a non-sense educationist who had literary taste. She did not quite approve of Russell's weak 'namby-pamby' upbringing. The child who was rather intimidated by this woman notices that she too could be intimidated by a person like the overpowering Gladstone (prime-minister of Britain). The child relishes the episode when his rather infallible grandmother had mistaken a tobacco pouch shaped like a tortoise for a real tortoise.

Russell was first introduced to geometry at the age of eleven. This was an exciting discovery and the boy discovered that what others found difficult, appeared perfectly simple to him. The doubts and questions that assailed him then shaped the course of his future work. From these reminiscences, we gather that the child was mostly in the company of grown-ups. He was close to neither of his grandmothers. Even though he was provided with private education at home, there is no indication that his grandmothers encouraged his passion for maths.

### **The Fun-Loving Child**

It is clear that Russell's primary passion was mathematics, but he did not miss out on his share of fun and frolic like other boys of his age. The practical jokes and pranks provided much hilarity to the boy and discomfiture to others. Pelting the doctor's coachman with snowballs and riding a spirited donkey bare-back were some of Russell's more memorable moments. These pranks, however, were carried out more in a spirit of pure fun rather than malice.

These then are the impressions of a famous man looking back at his past. Russell neither indulges the tendency to romanticize it nor does he feel nostalgic about it. He is the objective observer who can now understand the prejudices and preoccupations of his grown-ups. His tone is matter-of-fact and gentle and while it recreates the bygone era, it also provides insight into his multi-faceted personality.

### **3.4.2 Portrait of Russell**

We have just read Russell's account of his childhood. It provides a picture of the young Bertrand in the context of his family. It also gives us an indication of the times in which he grew up. At the same time we also get a glimpse into some aspects of Russell's personality. Most of the achievements and activities of famous people are widely known. But it is only through an autobiographical account that we are able to know the private person behind the public figure. Let us now consider the portrait of Russell that emerges from our reading of this passage.

On the one hand, we have the lonely contemplative boy gazing wistfully at trees and flowers and on the other, there is a mischievous boy dropping rotten flowers on the unsuspecting coachman's new hat. It is clear that Bertrand is like any other boy of his age. But there is also the keen mathematician questioning the aims and methods of Euclid. This scepticism is at the root of his intense quest for knowledge. The quiet boy is keenly observant with a sharp memory that can recollect the warm sunshine at the time of his arrival at Pembroke, so many years later. It also indicates his deep love for nature.

Russell is free from prejudice against foreigners, and remembers his Swiss and German governesses with affection. This affection and concern for other races is probably at the root of his refusal to participate in the First World War. Here is a portrait of an extremely precocious child who can ask for a novel like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67) as a birthday present. Even though he does not quite appreciate some of the foibles of the grown-ups, he does not sit in judgement on them. His grandmother's pronouncement that none of her grandchildren has any intelligence is recorded with faint irony but without any

rancor or bitterness. Russell's memories of the selected incidents seem to imply a greatness of mind in which there is no room for triviality or pettiness.

Here then is a great man recreating his childhood for the interested reader. His memories have not faded with time but are as clear and vivid as the prose in which he conveys them. Let us now look at the features of Russell's celebrated prose style

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### 3.5 RUSSELL'S PROSE STYLE

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#### **Brevity, Precision and Clarity**

Bertrand Russell is well-known for his lucid and elegant prose style. His clarity of expression reflects the clarity of his thought. Even in his philosophical works, there is no abstract jargon nor do we find any flowery expressions in his literary composition. Writing about how to avoid foolish errors, Russell says:

If the matter is one that can be settled by observation, make the observation yourself. Aristotle could have avoided the mistake of thinking that women have fewer teeth than men, by the simple device of asking Mrs. Aristotle to keep her mouth open while he counted. He did not do so because he thought he knew. Thinking that you know, when in fact you don't, is a fatal mistake, to which we are all prone. ('An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish', *Unpopular Essays*, Bombay: Blackie and Son, 1981).

He communicates his ideas in precise terms and even difficult concepts are easily understood by the lay reader. Moreover, he does not believe in circumlocution and tells us: 'I wished to say everything in the smallest number of words in which it can be said clearly'. Thus brevity, precision and clarity are the hallmarks of his prose style.

#### **Expression of Personality**

Style is the expression of a writer's personality. Russell's warmth and sincerity are communicated in his relaxed and mildly ironic tone. It is an urbane, gentlemanly and frank mode of expression. Somewhat in awe of his grandmother Lady Stanley, he tells us:

I used to make desperate endeavours to produce a good impression, but they would fail in ways that I could not have foreseen. I remember telling her that I had grown  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in the last seven months, and that at that rate I should grow  $4\frac{2}{7}$  inches in a year'.

The enthusiastic boy is told that such detailed calculations were 'pedantic'. Were you not struck by its spontaneity and informality while reading the passage? You may compare and contrast this style of writing with the passage from Gandhi's autobiography that you read in the previous Unit.

#### **Description**

Russell uses different varieties of prose. He is not only an observer describing vividly but also a raconteur narrating effortlessly. When describing nature, his



prose acquires a poetic quality. 'I listened to the wind, and exulted in the lightning has biblical cadences expressing a precise feeling. His detailed observation recreates a scene so that we can actually see the 'funny old inn with knobbly wooden door-posts, the wooden bridge over the river, the rocky bays on the lake, and the mountain opposite'.

### **Narration**

When Russell recounts the bear anecdote which resulted in his uncle's madness, the prose becomes racy, acquiring a quick tempo. For example, let us look at these sentences:

They kept a bear as a regimental pet, and one day, for sport, set the bear at him. He fled, lost his memory, and being found wandering about in the country was put in a workhouse infirmary, his identity being unknown.

A sense of urgency and quick movement is communicated. The situation is made to come alive in the minimum words possible. Not an extra word can be traced in the above sentences. Russell uses the same economy when making a general statement. 'Like all happiness, however, it was not unalloyed', is terse and epigrammatic. The rhythm is maintained by the use of the double negative 'not unalloyed'.

### **Irony**

Along with the wisdom there is a subtle irony inserted in sentences 'His coachman had an exquisite top-hat, calculated to advertise the excellence of the practice'. The tone remains even and controlled. Russell's comment about his German and Swiss governesses 'whom I liked, and my intelligence was not yet sufficiently developed to suffer from the deficiency of my people in this respect', carries a veiled satire directed against British chauvinism and prejudice against other races. Even today, long after the sun has set on the British empire, this prejudice persists in British society. In certain areas, bands of youth, known as 'skinheads' attack coloured people, especially Asians.

### **Use of language**

Russell's use of colloquial expressions like 'goody-goody' and 'namby-pamby' catch the typical flavour of native speech. The repeated use of 'I remember' throughout the passage highlights the fact that Russell is relying on memory and that a great deal of time has elapsed between the actual incident and the account of it. The use of direct speech adds a dramatic dimension to the text. Russell's grandmother's observation that 'I have no intelligent grandchildren', not only lends variety to the passage that is predominantly written in reported speech but also highlights the irony of the observation.

The varieties of prose used enriches the texture of the passage which seems to flow from the pen of a man who means every word he says. The overall style is personal and subjective very much in keeping with the form that we have been examining i.e. autobiography.

### Check Your Progress 3

Read the following passage and briefly answer the questions given below. This is an extract from Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* .

We did not believe in ghosts or ghostly existence. In fact, our one and invariable criterion for dividing our companions into sheep and goats was to put them the questions: "Do you believe in ghosts?" If anybody said that he did, with us he was damned for ever. On the other hand, we also very often received the perplexed query: "Do you not believe in ghosts?" And when we said that we did not, we were set down in the same decided manner as impious heretics. But in spite of the universal belief in ghosts we never found any of our companions, or for that matter any of the credulous elders, capable of putting forward any coherent rationale of ghostly existence, and their only answer to our challenge was a sneering counter-challenge to pass under a certain notorious tree or by the burning-ghat at night. They knew for certain from their experience of the general cowardice they felt inside and saw outside themselves that this bluff of theirs would never be called.

- i) What impressions of the young Nirad do you gather from your reading of this passage?

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- ii) Comment briefly on the prose style.

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( Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we have

- discussed a different prose form i.e. autobiography;
- acquainted you with the life and some major works of Bertrand Russell;
- read a passage on Bertrand Russell's childhood from his *Autobiography*;
- discussed the summary of the passage;

- sketched a portrait of Russell;
- presented an analysis of Russell's prose style.

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### 3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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#### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Mathematics, Philosophy, Sociology, Politics, Education.
- ii) An autobiography is a first-person account of the story of a person's life. A biography is a third-person account of someone else's life. While objectivity is the major consideration in judging biography, an autobiography is essentially subjective.
- iii) He started the anti-nuclear movement popularly known as CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament)
- iv) You can select these from Section 3.2.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- i) You may take into account his
  - a) loneliness
  - b) memory of Lady Russell's son
  - c) arrival at Pembroke Lodge.
- ii) He was in awe of his grandmother whom he tried desperately hard to impress. The relationship is formal but the boy has a secret respect for the formidable old lady.
- iii) The coachman's grand top-hat was pelted with rotten rosebuds picked up from the gutter and hurled from the roof-top. At other times, Bertrand bombarded him with snow-balls.

#### Check Your Progress 3

- i) It is clear that young Nirad, unlike most boys of his age, is extremely sensible. He does not believe in ghosts for the simple reason that no one had so far given him a rational explanation of their existence. From childhood itself, he has developed a keen incisive mind that questions and probes before accepting facts.
- ii) The discussion on style should include
  - a) clarity, brevity and precision
  - b) a formal tone
  - c) scholarly prose.

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## UNIT 4 LYTTON STRACHEY'S – *QUEEN VICTORIA*

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Lytton Strachey: Life and Works
- 4.3 Passage from Strachey's *Queen Victoria*
  - 4.3.1 Text
  - 4.3.2 Glossary
- 4.4 Discussion
  - 4.4.1 Strachey's Technique
  - 4.4.2 Portrait of Albert
  - 4.4.3 Portrait of Victoria
- 4.5 Prose Style
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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You will now read a passage from Lytton Strachey's famous biography *Queen Victoria* (1921). While it is necessary to read the complete work to appreciate Strachey's achievement, this passage will give you an idea of his style and technique and approach. We hope that after a careful reading of this Unit, you will be able to:

- identify and analyze the aspects of biography as a literary form;
- outline the portraits of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert;
- explain the features of Strachey's prose style.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Biography, as we have already discussed is the truthful account of the life of an individual written in prose. A biographer is not simply a chronicler of events in the life of an individual but is a creative artist who makes the character portrayed come alive. S/he does this by a careful selection of relevant details, an arrangement of events to sustain the reader's interest and by an artistic use of language. While other characters and events are depicted, the interest is never allowed to deflect from the main character. The biographer's personality must not intrude upon the narrative as this would deflect the focus from the main character. A good biographer is neither too complimentary nor too critical. The individual is portrayed as objectively as possible.

You must read each section carefully before you attempt the exercises. Do avoid the temptation of looking at the answers that we have provided at the end of the unit unless you have completed the exercises first.

Let us first take a brief look at the life and works of Lytton Strachey before we turn to the selected passage.

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## 4.2 LYTTON STRACHEY: LIFE AND WORKS

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### Life

Lytton Strachey was born in London on March 1, 1880 and educated first at Liverpool and then at Trinity College, Cambridge. He was a prominent member of the Bloomsbury Group, a London-based group of intellectuals which included other famous contemporary writers like, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster. Strachey was a literary critic and essayist but above all is known best as the inaugurator of a new kind of biography. His first volume of four biographies entitled *Eminent Victorians* started the trend for ‘debunking’ or exposing the negative traits of otherwise admirable characters. By fusing fact and reflections, he was able to raise biography to the status of a brilliant work of creative art.

### Works

*Landmarks in French Literature* (1912) literary criticism;

*Eminent Victorians* (1918) biography;

*Queen Victoria* (1921) biography,

*Books and Characters, French and English* (1922) essays;

*Pope, Cambridge* (1923) criticism;

*Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928) historical biography;

*Portraits in Miniature and Other Essays* (1931) essays.

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## 4.3 PASSAGE FROM STRACHEY’S *QUEEN VICTORIA*

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*Queen Victoria* is one of the great biographies of all times. Other biographies on the Queen’s life have been subsequently written and have superseded Strachey’s version with more up-to-date information, but they have not superseded its continuing appeal. What then constitutes this appeal? But before we discuss that question, let us find out about Queen Victoria.

Queen Victoria (1819-1901) came to the British throne in 1837 and ruled until her death. In 1840, Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (Germany), who died in 1861. Victorian England saw a period of peace and prosperity. The Victorians believed that honesty and hard work would lead to material prosperity. By the end of her reign, the British empire had reached its highest point in terms of material and political achievement.

Strachey had to read extensively for three years before he could attempt to construct the life of the Queen. This was especially difficult because her life was shrouded under the veil of propriety. As you know, the Victorians were known for being very prim and proper especially in public. They may have had their moments of indiscretion in private! But that was a different thing. Queen Victoria herself was the very picture of sobriety and decorum. In most of her portraits, you will notice that she has a very, grim expression. Her style of dress was also very staid. The Queen was often known to say “We are not amused”. Humour was obviously not her strong point. So you can understand how difficult it must have been for Strachey to penetrate these facades erected by this strict conformity to decorum and propriety.

Apart from this extensive reading and research, Strachey had another problem. He was also 'faced with eighty-one solid years, and each one of these years was crowded with intricate and important events directly relevant to his subject' (Nicolson, p. 148). Yet it goes to Strachey's credit, that he did not include a single superfluous detail. As such the Queen's long and eventful life is portrayed clearly and vividly within a space of three hundred pages.

What is Strachey's attitude to his subject? As you know an author's point of view can be either adulatory or critical. Strachey avoids the two extremes and assumes a mildly detached ironical tone. R.A. Scott James points out that 'He [Strachey] came to scoff, and remained to pray' a very precise assessment. The character of the Queen unfolds and develops in the course of the book and we see an unexceptional young girl who gradually grows in stature to become a powerful and beloved regent of her subjects. *Queen Victoria* contains a gallery of vital characters such as Lord Melbourne, the young monarch's powerful prime minister, Disraeli and Palmerston who succeeded him, the Baroness Lehzen, the Queen's confidante and teacher and the royal consort, Prince Albert. Even though these characters are portrayed in detail, the spotlight is always on Victoria.

The passage we have selected for you introduces us to Prince Albert when he first left his native Germany to marry the English sovereign. From a weak non-entity, the Prince emerges as a man of considerable talent, who ultimately becomes the most powerful influence in the Queen's life. His untimely death was mourned by his wife for the rest of her days. In the present passage we shall read about this relationship in its early stages.

#### 4.3.1 Text

Albert had foreseen that his married life would not be all **plain sailing**; but he had by no means realized the gravity and the complication of the difficulties which he would have to face. Politically, he was a cipher. Lord Melbourne was not only Prime Minister he was in effect the Private Secretary of the Queen, and thus controlled the whole of the political existence of the sovereign. A Queen's husband was an entity unknown to the British Constitution. In State affairs there seemed to be no place for him: nor was Victoria herself at all unwilling that this should be so. "The English", she had told the Prince when, during their engagement, a proposal had been made to give him a **peerage**, "are very jealous of any foreigner interfering in the government of this country, and have already in some of the papers expressed a hope that you would not interfere. Now, though I know you never would, still, if you were a Peer, they would all say, the Prince meant to play a political part, I know you never would!" In reality, she was not quite so certain; but she wished Albert to understand her views. He would, she hoped, make a perfect husband; but, as for governing the country, he would see that she and **Lord M.** between them could manage that very well, without his help.

But it was not only in politics that the Prince discovered that the part cut out for him was a negligible one. Even as a husband, he found, his functions were to be of an extremely limited kind. Over the whole of Victoria's private life the Baroness reigned supreme; and she had not the slightest intention of allowing that supremacy to be diminished by one iota. Since the accession, her power had greatly increased. Besides the undefined and enormous influence which she exercised through her management of the Queen's private correspondence, she

was now the superintendent of the royal establishment and controlled the important office of **Privy Purse**. Albert very soon perceived that he was not master in his own house. Every detail of his own and his wife's existence was supervised by a third person: nothing could be done until the consent of Lehzen had first been obtained. And Victoria, who adored Lehzen with unabated intensity, saw nothing in all this that was wrong.

Nor was the Prince happier in his social surroundings. A shy young foreigner, awkward in ladies' company, inexpensive and self-opinionated, it was improbable that, in any circumstances, he would have been a society success. His appearance, too, was against him. Though in the eyes of Victoria he was the mirror of manly beauty, her subjects, whose eyes were of a less **Teutonic cast**, did not agree with her. To them — and particularly to the high-born ladies and gentlemen who naturally saw him most — what was immediately and distressingly striking in Albert's face and figure and whole demeanour was his un-English look. His features were regular, no doubt, but there was something smooth and smug about them; he was tall, but he was clumsily put together and he walked with a slight slouch. Really, they thought, this youth was more like some kind of foreign **tenor** than anything else. These were serious disadvantages, but the line of conduct which the Prince adopted from the first moment of his arrival was far from calculated to dispel them. Owing partly to a natural awkwardness, partly to a fear of undue familiarity, and partly to a desire to be absolutely correct, his manners were infused with an extraordinary stiffness and formality. Whenever he appeared in company, he seemed to be surrounded by a thick hedge of prickly etiquette. He never went out into ordinary society; he never walked in the streets of London; he was invariably accompanied by an **equerry** when he rode or drove. He wanted to be irreproachable and, if that involved friendlessness, it could not be helped. Besides, he had no very high opinion of the English. So far as he could see, they cared for nothing but fox-hunting and Sunday observances; they oscillated between an undue frivolity and an undue gloom; if you spoke to them of friendly joyousness they stared; and they did not understand either the Laws of Thought or the wit of a German University. Since it was clear that with such people he could have very little in common, there was no reason whatever for relaxing in their favour, the rules of etiquette. In strict privacy, he could be natural and charming: Seymour and Anson were devoted to him, and he returned their affection: but they were subordinates—the receivers of his confidences and the agents of his will. From the support and the solace of true companionship he was utterly cut off,

A friend, indeed, he had — or rather, **a mentor**. The Baron, established once more in the royal residence, was determined to work with as whole-hearted a detachment for the Prince's benefit as, more than twenty years before, he had worked for his uncle. The situations then and now, similar in many respects, were yet full of differences. Perhaps in either case the difficulties to be encountered were equally great; but the present problem was the more complex and the more interesting. The young doctor unknown and insignificant, whose only assets were his own wits and the friendship of an unimportant Prince, had been replaced by the accomplished confidence of kings and ministers, ripe in years, in reputation, and in the wisdom of a vast experience. It was possible for him to treat Albert with something of the affectionate authority of a father; but, on the other hand, Albert was no Leopold. As the Baron was very well aware, he had none of his uncle's rigidity of ambition, none of his overweening impulse to be personally

great. He was virtuous and well-intentioned; he was clever and well informed; but he took no interest in politics, and there were no signs that he possessed any commanding force of character. Left to himself he would almost certainly have subsided into a high-minded nonentity, an aimless dilettante busy over culture, a palace appendage without influence or power. But he was not left to himself: Stockmar saw to that. Forever at his pupil's elbow, the hidden Baron pushed him forward, with tireless pressure, along the path which had been trod by Leopold so many years ago. But, this time, the goal at the end of it was something more than the mediocre royalty that Leopold had reached. The prize which Stockmar, with all the energy of disinterested devotion, had determined should be Albert's, was a tremendous prize indeed.

The beginning of the undertaking proved to be the most arduous part of it. Albert was easily dispirited: what was the use of struggling to perform in a role which bored him and which, it was quite clear, nobody but the dear good Baron had any desire that he should take up? It was simpler, and it saved a great deal of trouble, to let things slide. But Stockmar would not have it. Incessantly, he harped upon two strings: Albert's sense of duty and his personal pride. Had the Prince forgotten the noble aims to which his life was to be devoted? And was he going to allow himself, his wife, his family, his whole existence, to be governed by Baroness Lehzen? The latter consideration was a potent one. Albert had never customed to giving way; and now, more than ever before, it would be humiliating to do so. Not only was he constantly exasperated by the position of the Baroness in the royal household; there was another and still more serious cause of complaint. He was, he knew very well, his wife's intellectual superior, and yet he found, to his intense annoyance, that there were parts of her mind over which he exercised no influence. When, urged on by the Baron, he attempted to discuss politics with Victoria, she eluded the subject, drifted into generalities, and then began to talk of something else. She was treating him as she had once treated their uncle Leopold. When at last he protested, she replied that her conduct was merely the result of indolence; that when she was with him she could not bear to bother her head with anything so dull as politics. The excuse was worse than the fault: was he the wife and she the husband? It almost seemed so. But the Baron declared that the root of the mischief was Lenzen: that it was she who encouraged the Queen to have secrets; who did worse: undermined the natural ingenuousness of Victoria, and induced her to give unconsciously no doubt, false reasons to explain away her conduct.

Minor disagreement made matters worse. The royal couple differed in their tastes. Albert, brought up in a regime of Spartan simplicity and early hours, found the great Court functions intolerably wearisome, and was invariably observed to be nodding on the sofa at half-past ten; while the Queen's favourite form of enjoyment was to dance through the night, and then, going out into the portico of the Palace, watch the sun rise behind **St. Paul's** and the towers of Westminster. She loved London and he detested it. It was only in Windsor that he felt he could really breathe; but Windsor too had its terrors: though during the day there he could paint and walk and play on the piano, after dinner black tedium descended like a pall. He would have liked to summon distinguished scientific and literary men to his presence, and after ascertaining their views upon various points of art and learning, to set forth his own; but unfortunately Victoria had no fancy to encourage such people, knowing that she was unequal to taking a part in their conversation, she insisted that the evening routine should remain unaltered; the regulation



interchange of platitudes with official persons was followed as usual by the round table and the books of engravings, while the Prince, with three of his attendants, played game after game of double chess.

It was only natural that in so peculiar a situation, in which the elements of power, passion, and pride were so strangely **apportioned**, there should have been occasionally something more than mere irritation: a struggle of angry wills. Victoria, no more than Albert, was in the habit of playing second fiddle. Her arbitrary temper flashed out. Her vitality, her obstinacy, her overweening sense of her own position, might well have beaten down before his superiorities and his rights. But she fought at a disadvantage; she was, in very truth, no longer her own mistress; a profound preoccupation dominated her, seizing upon her inmost purposes for its own extraordinary ends. She was madly in love. The details of these curious battles are unknown to us; but Prince Ernest, who remained in England with his brother for some months, noted them with a friendly and startled eye. One story, indeed, survives, ill-authenticated and perhaps mythical, yet summing up, as such stories often do, the central facts of the case. When, in wrath, the Prince one day had locked himself into his room, Victoria, no less furious, knocked on the door to be admitted. ‘Who is there?’ he asked. ‘The Queen of England,’ was the answer. He did not move, and again there was a hail of knocks. The question and the answer were repeated many times; but at last there was a pause, and then a gentler knocking. ‘who is there?’ came once more the relentless question. But this time the reply was different. ‘Your wife, Albert’. And the door was immediately opened.

### 4.3.2 Glossary

<b>plain sailing</b> (figurative) :	simple and easy course of action
<b>peerage</b> (Britain) :	to confer a title like duke, marquis, earl, viscount, baron etc.
<b>Lord M</b> :	Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister,
<b>Privy Purse</b> :	allowance of money from the public revenue for the Sovereign’s private expenses.
<b>Teutonic cast</b> :	having Germanic tastes.
<b>tenor</b> :	general meaning or drift.
<b>equerry</b> :	officer in attendance on a member of a royal family.
<b>mentor</b> :	adviser and helper; an experienced person.
<b>St. Paul’s</b> :	cathedral in London.
<b>apportioned</b> :	divided or distributed.

### Check Your Progress 1

i) Explain the meaning of ‘Politically, he was a cipher’. (about 50 words)

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ii) Who were the two most influential people in Queen Victoria's life?

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iii) Why did the English aristocracy not approve of Albert?

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iv) Who decided to support Albert and how did he go about it?

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v) In what ways were the Queen and Albert different?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## 4.4 DISCUSSION

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In this section, we shall discuss Strachey's technique as a biographer and the portraits of Albert and Victoria that emerge from his skilful and artistic presentation.

### 4.4.1 Strachey's Technique

What are some of our first responses to Strachey's technique? It is but natural that individual responses will differ. However, we have recorded some of our

observations here. We hope you will respond to these critically, relating them to the text.

The first thing we notice about Strachey's technique is that he not only presents external details but also reflects on the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters. It is a case of psychological probing deduced from the facts at hand. It is from the historical situation that Albert's predicament and his personal response to it, is reconstructed. The fact that Lord Melbourne and Baroness Lehzen exercised such strict control over the Queen's political and personal life as well as the prejudice that the English had against foreigners, put Albert as a German prince in a difficult situation after his marriage to the English Queen. The extent of this difficulty and its impact on Albert's mind has then been sensitively recreated by Strachey.

The second important fact to strike the reader is the rigorous and in-depth scholarship that has gone into this work. Strachey has sifted the significant from the redundant and composed a piece of immense intensity and brevity. The factual sometimes mingles with the fictional. This is particularly true of the anecdote when Albert locks himself in a room following a disagreement with his wife. On hearing a knock upon his door when Albert asks "who is there?" the response is "The Queen of England". It is only when the reply is "Your wife, Albert" does he open the door. It is questionable whether such an incident took place. Moreover, were these the exact words exchanged? Strachey himself acknowledges that this story may be 'ill-authenticated and perhaps mythical...' Not only does Strachey reconstruct the incident imaginatively but he also gives it a dramatic treatment.

While in this instance the dialogue is imagined, at other points in the passage one may also find the actual words spoken by the Queen. We notice that even the speeches attributed to the Queen:

The English are very jealous of any foreigner interfering in the government of this country and have already in some of the papers expressed a hope that you would not interfere. Now, though I know you never would, still, if you were a peer, they would all say, the Prince meant to play a political part.

This is not an imaginary construct but the actual words reported from sources like the *Letters I*. Thus there is an attempt to keep as close to authentic evidence as possible.

The text you have just read focuses on Albert, yet Strachey while portraying his character especially highlights his relationship with the Queen. At the same time we can reconstruct the political scenario of Victorian Britain. The cultural prejudices of the British people against foreigners and their resistance to external interference are clearly predicated. But alongside these effects we are aware of the all-pervasive presence of the Queen. Even in this brief passage, we find a vivid portrayal of Albert as he looked, felt and thought during the early days of his marriage.

#### 4.4.2 Portrait of Albert

Albert appears to us as a tall shy young foreigner, who was awkward in a society that he knew was hostile to him. The insular and snobbish British aristocracy

dismissed him on the grounds of his un-English looks and his lack of equestrian expertise. But Albert was not intimidated and carried no very high opinion of the English either. He lacked friends he could trust, even though he found confidantes among his subordinates Seymour and Anson. It was not that he was not a warm person — it seemed more a case of a foreigner minding his p's and q's. He did not want to transgress the social norms of this alien land even if it made him appear stiff and unfriendly. That Albert passed through a phase of extreme tension and uneasiness is clear from the fact that he had to contend with formidable rivals such as Lord Melbourne and the Baroness Lehzen. While Lord Melbourne directed the Queen's political life, Lehzen had complete control over domestic and private affairs. This left Albert with hardly any role in the royal scheme of things. The reader is made to empathize with his mental state to the extent that when Lehzen is ousted from the royal household, there is a tangible feeling of relief.

Up to this point in his life, Albert had always had his own way. Now he was increasingly forced to subjugate his will to that of Victoria's. He tried to discuss politics with her but she evaded such discussions. Nor did she encourage Albert's intellectual and artistic aspirations. For his part, Albert could not share the Queen's enthusiasm for dancing or for her other frivolous interests. He played chess instead. While the Queen loved London he yearned for Windsor and the fresh country air. One can almost sense the humiliation that this sensitive man must have initially felt at the hands of one who was his intellectual inferior. Little wonder then that he lacks the vitality of his wayward wife and appears serious and impassive.

Yet Albert was not easily crushed. With an ally and friend like Baron Stockmar to support him, he emerged as a personage of some stature in his own right. Stockmar built him up by appealing to his 'sense of duty and his personal pride'. Gradually his influence increased as the Queen fell more deeply in love with her husband. The quarrels continued but Albert could no longer be trifled with. That he would not open door to the 'Queen' provides ample evidence of this.

This then is the picture of Albert that emerges from our reading of the passage: he appears serious, clever, well-informed and virtuous. He is not ambitious and has no interest in politics or political power for himself. He is human enough to be easily discouraged but with the necessary support manages to surmount his inherent reserve. He loves to play the piano, walk and paint and one wonders how this sensitive man with simple interests would ultimately mould his wife to adopt his lifestyle. It was only with patience and firm handling that he won her affections.

#### **4.4.3 Portrait of Victoria**

Victoria emerges as a young girl, fresh and vital, determined to enjoy every moment of life. This image is quite different from the formidable portrait that one usually sees of Queen Victoria. Strachey understood his fascinating subject in all her complexity and has captured the process of her development. She is depicted not just as a wayward young monarch but also as a woman deeply in love. She is also a shrewd politician who knows the mind of the English public and aspires to rule over it one day. She cannot then offend their sentiments. It is for this reason that she cannot allow Albert a role in the government of the country.

The lighter pleasures of life had great attraction for Victoria, Her favourite form of enjoyment was to dance through the night or to look at books of engravings. She did not look forward to serious conversations nor did she have intellectual aspirations. In a lightly ironic tone, Strachey portrays her as an unexceptional person who slowly but surely acquires a stature that earns her the love and reverence of her beloved subjects.

Do you think Victoria was like other women of her time? The answer is clearly no. In her marriage she is the one who has the upper hand. As a monarch she can afford to indulge her whims and fancies while Albert is the one who must make the adjustments, She has the additional advantage of being on her home ground, whereas Albert is the outsider. In spite of all these factors, the marriage is a success. And this success is based on one vital emotion: the love that she felt for her husband. Albert's death was one tragedy that she never could get over.

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## 4.5 PROSE STYLE

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Virginia Woolf hailed *Queen Victoria* as a 'masterpiece of prose' and subsequent generations have concurred with this assessment. Strachey is undoubtedly a master craftsman of English prose. He narrates and describes with equal ease, creating past events as if he had actually witnessed them. He looks at the past in an unsentimental and detached way writing in a prose that is playfully frank without being malicious. For example, he tells us 'Victoria, no more than Albert, was in the habit of playing second fiddle'. Nor is he in the habit of mincing words and we learn of Victoria's 'arbitrary temper' and 'her obstinacy'.

The tone that Strachey adopts is that of an equal making lightly satirical tongue-in-cheek comments such as 'A Queen's husband was an entity unknown to the British Constitution'. Who is the irony directed at? It is these light touches that make the book that in different hands may have become a ponderous treatise, eminently readable. Such comments draw the reader into a community of shared experience thus introducing a note of intimacy. The predominant tone is an amused rather than a critical one.

The clash of the two personalities and cultures is highlighted in simple antithetical statements 'She loved London and he detested it'. The statement is straightforward and effectively sums up the situation. Strachey does not indulge in long-winded juggling with words but comes straight to the point. This directness and brevity have become the hallmark of Strachey's prose style.

You must have noticed that the overall style is simple and idiomatic with no attempts at inserting literary or learned allusions '...his married life would not be all plain sailing' and 'Politically, he was a cipher', introduce figurative and metaphorical expressions to the prose investing it with a certain informal quality. If you read the passage aloud, you will notice that it has a rhythm that sweeps you along without letting the interest flag. There is sufficient use of alliteration—'his wife's existence was supervised by a third person...'—and this contributes to the rhythmical quality of the prose.

Longer sentences alternate with fairly short ones to project the effect of variation within the main theme. The sense of continuity is maintained as one paragraph leads to another, the transition being made by connectives such as 'But...' and 'Nor...'. We can almost 'watch the sun rise behind St. Paul's...' with the young

Queen. The prose is vividly evocative, yet one is never allowed to lose sight of the fact that one is not reading fiction but a well-researched and rigorously evidenced work of history. 'Albert... was invariably observed to be nodding on the sofa at half-past ten....' Notice the use of the word 'observed'. Strachey is reporting observed facts and not simply imagining them. He does not conjure conversations but gives the impression of a direct exchange by placing the necessary stress on the significant word. The Queen excuses her reluctance to talk politics with Albert saying 'that when she was with him she could not bother her head with anything as dull as politics'. Strachey does not sacrifice authenticity to the interests of dramatic presentation. The strategy seems to highlight the fact that the historian and artist could co-exist in the same person especially if the person happened to be Strachey. Thus the prose operates at two levels. On the one hand it is a historical work, at another it is also a piece of literature. The reader thus responds to it intellectually as well as emotionally and it is perhaps for this reason that reading the biography is such a rich and rewarding experience.

Not only does Strachey inform us about the life and times of Queen Victoria, he also amuses and delights us with his mildly ironic comments and anecdotes. The final anecdote in the passage is narrated with the masterly expertise of a consummate story teller. In a few sentences the whole scenario of conjugal discord is evoked. Its resolution following the desired response 'Your wife, Albert' sums up the human dimension of the drama at the same time exposing the vanity of power and rank. This constant process of 'debunking' is achieved by Strachey's overall style that Michael Holroyd describes as 'whimsical, teasing, half-admiring, half-mocking....'

### Check Your Progress 2

The following passage is an extract from Hilary Spurling's biography of the novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett entitled *Secrets of a Woman's Heart* (1984). Read the passage and answer the questions that follow:

Ivy's last novel had been giving trouble long before illness forced her to lay it aside ("My next novel is in a lamentable state and belongs to the future. I am sorry it is so", she wrote to Victor Gollancz on 21 August 1964....)

Well before her first fall, she told several people that, though she had got the characters, she did not yet know what was going to happen to them and that she had never found a plot so elusive before. She kept her 'little book'-or rather the growing pile of flimsy, tattered school exercise books, thirty in all by the end stuffed under a cushion with chocolate boxes and newspapers at the end of the sofa (where the pile was discovered the day after she died by Elizabeth Sprigge, a faithful visitor in these years, and later author of the first memoir). All Ivy's manuscripts were endlessly rewritten, crossed out and gone over before being copied in a neat schoolgirl's hand quite different from the loopy black scrawl in which she wrote letters and composed her first drafts. But the twelve notebooks which contain the fair copy of this last novel 116 are still miserably expressive of labour and effort. They are written in a mixture of both hands, in parts indecipherable and so disturbed that her final revisions are strung out like a chain of islands across a swamp of alterations. Five or ten lines left standing on a page criss-crossed with interpolations, corrections, deletions, as many as three or four alternative versions scored through or scrubbed out; and the twelfth booklet, labelled 'Next!', has been dismembered altogether, containing little more than often incoherent notes on scraps or sheaves of loose paper.

- i) What impression do you get of Ivy Compton-Burnett from this passage? (100-150 words)

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- ii) Comment on the style of the passage. (100-150 words)

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, we have discussed:

- Strachey’s technique as a biographer in relation to a selected passage from *Queen Victoria*;
- the portraits of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria that emerge from our reading of the passage;
- the main features of Strachey’s prose style.

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## 4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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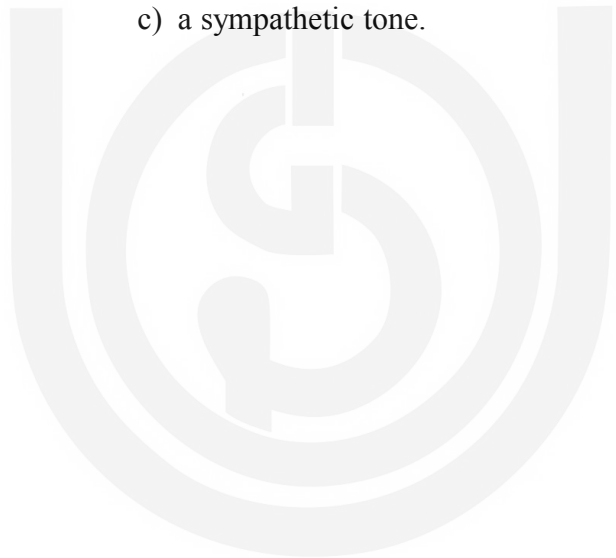
### Check Your Progress 1

- i) This means that he had no political influence in the court of Queen Victoria and was allowed no say on matters of the state.
- ii) In the Queen’s public life it was Lord Melbourne the Prime-Minister who had the major influence while in her private life Baroness Lehzen was all-powerful.
- iii) The English aristocracy did not approve of Albert because of his un-English looks and manners. He was shy and awkward and did not mix easily in London society.
- iv) Baron Stockmar decided to build up Albert into a person of stature. He knew Albert was not assertive and needed constant encouragement to come forward. By calling upon the Prince’s sense of duty and self-respect, the Baron managed to achieve his aim.

- v) The Prince was a man of intellectual pursuits who did not care for the frivolous social occasions that his wife loved. He hated London while she loved it. He would rather paint, walk or play the piano. But the Queen had no interest in such pursuits and would rather talk shop to officials than enter into these.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) This is a very human account of Ivy Compton-Burnett. She is described as a sensitive person who seems a bit shy and embarrassed about her own writing. This is clear from the fact that she had kept her book stuffed under cushions. She is also frank enough to admit the difficulty that she had over her character portrayal and plot construction. As a novelist, she emerges as a painstaking and conscientious writer who revised and re-revised her work till she was perfectly satisfied with it.
- ii) Your comment should give examples of:
- a simple flexible style;
  - how authentic facts are provided—there is no attempt to put her on a pedestal;
  - a sympathetic tone.







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