2.2 Social Research Methods


In this methodologically-oriented article, the author draws attention to the importance of life histories and autobiographies as social science tools for understanding the history and structure of the Indian diaspora. His case study is the rewritten version of a chapter on emigration from Munshi Rahman Khan’s autobiography, *Dharma aura Kali Samvada*, an imaginary dialogue between King Kali and the protector of Dharma, which was discovered by the author in 2006. The book involves a narration of events during the Khan’s emigration to the plantations of Surinam under a five-year indentured labour contract. The author then cross-references this source to oral histories by others on Khan, and to his own autobiography, *Jeevan Prakasa*, compiled in 1943.

According to the author, the development of anthropology began with unsystematic written accounts of travelers, transforming over the course of years into a rigorous study of non-European societies. Beginning in 1918, life history writings have now found many supporters as an important tool for understanding social realities, albeit incomplete and secondary source material. In this regard, Gautam deploys the text to understand the experiences of emigrant labourers in the plantation colonies, contrasted with the picture that emerges from archival materials and travelers’ accounts of the colonial period. The specific case taken up is the story of the migration of labour from the eastern part Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar to the plantations of Surinam, as seen through the life history of Munshi Rahman Khan. The author concludes by pointing to the inconsistencies and generalizations present in the text in contrast to other sources, and attributes these inconsistencies to the changing nature of Hindu-Muslim relations in Surinam and to Khan’s own political stand as reflected in his writings against the Hindu caste system and untouchability.

*See also* Mahabir (23.1); Mathur (6.5); Srivastava (1.1)

2.3 Computer Applications in Social Research