Chapter 1

Introduction
INTRODUCTION

The term spirituality has been defined in numerous ways but there seems to emerge no consensus till date. Spirituality involves subjective meaning derived by each individual in his own ways. However, it has been generally defined as search for ‘the sacred’, where ‘the sacred’ is broadly defined as that which is set apart from the ordinary. It is also defined as a belief in a supernatural power operating the universe which is greater than oneself, a belief in supreme consciousness, a sense of interconnectedness with living and non-living, and an awareness of the purpose and meaning of life. The use of the term by the social scientists has been ever changing depending on the focus and scope of their research.

Religion and Spirituality have been used interchangeably since ages. Both the concepts are as old as civilizations. Earlier, spirituality was considered to be the experiential part of religion. The generic term used to represent both was religion. Gradually, the two terms started gaining separate attention and meaning. Religion gained the connotation of being referred to as ritualistic, institutional and dogmatic, whereas spirituality was taken as a search for transcendence, primarily based on experiences rather than any kind of ritualistic compulsions. These concepts are implicitly related to human behaviour and are prime concerns of research in the realm of psychology. Earlier, religion and spirituality were considered as domains of study in the context of older people or moralistic values. These were considered to be of relevance to people in traumatic circumstances like HIV, Cancer, addictions etc. Religion and spirituality were also considered to be rigorous theoretical concepts in the field of philosophy.

Not enough attention was paid to the study of religion and spirituality in the context of adolescence and young adulthood. Researchers have found that biological and cognitive development indicates identity formation, including that in religious and spiritual domains (Waterman, 1985). Individuals who have progressed towards identity achievement are likely to report high levels of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices (McKinney & McKinney, 1999) during their life span.
Young people today live in far more complex times than people in previous generations. Their lives are defined by uncertain transitions and the dominant culture of materialism and individualism. It affects their lives by breaking down connections to community as they see each other in competitive terms rather than connectedness with each other. The increasing rates of youth crime, substance abuse, suicides, and violence are all pointers to the youth going astray and perhaps also struggling to draw meaning out of their lives.

The young adults experience peak of material prosperity and comfort. Their experiences across the globe are altered by macro-societal changes that are affecting their preparation for adulthood. Amidst all these unstable stressful life situations, youth are emerging as active agents of change, creating their own contexts for development, including search for self, a sense of purpose, and deriving meaning of life in the varying contexts that they live in. In an age where young adults grapple with peer pressure and stiff academic competition, spirituality may enabling youth to excel by equipping them with practical strategies to handle their minds and emotions positively. Spirituality may fill the vacuum in life and answer the questions of handling stress and upcoming challenges. Thus, investigating the role of spirituality among youth is important in the context of the widespread societal changes.

Deciphering the role of spirituality in the lives of youth requires urgent attention of the empirical investigations. As already stated, spirituality may provide them with an edge to encounter the challenges of identity, relationships, competition, sexuality and other issues typical to the age. It may be found to be related to the enhancement of positive energy in youth enabling them to resolve these issues effectively and stimulate the experiences of positive states. Spirituality in the lives of youth may contribute from the micro level (individual growth) to the macro level (betterment and development of society). Such research is expected to highlight evidence of positive effects, if any, on the individual in specific and society in general.

The spiritual journey is defined by a need to understand self in relation with the sacred. The way in which this belief takes expression is determined by a wide variety of influences. Certain individuals find their own ways of connecting to the sacred
whereas others seek a community of believers to help them progress on the spiritual path. In the present times, an increasing number of youth are moving towards spiritual organizations to gain skill in spiritual practices and experience their effects. Hence in the current research paradigm, effort was made to investigate the conations and experiences of youth in the context of the organization they get involved with for seeking spirituality. The case profile of youth involved with widely recognized spiritual organization; the Art of Living was the focus of attention in the present study. The focus of the research was on understanding the spirituality of such youth and to get deep insights into their spiritual experiences in various contexts.