Preface

This study of five Indian spiritual autobiographies in English has been a spiritual and literary Odyssey and a happy return to my native traditions. I selected these texts initially because I was interested in narratives of spiritual experiences. But I also found that these texts were published between 1900 and 1950 and that they were documents of resistance where notions not only of "self" and "sainthood" were being explored but also that of Indian nationhood. I found myself fascinated by the wonderful blend these texts had of the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective and the personal and the political. I realised that our spiritual masters had strong views regarding Indian nationalism and reading their texts was going to be an important exercise in constructing our idea of the nation.

Moving from text to text, I encountered only differences between one text and the other -- in form, content, the paths of spiritual pursuit, the manner of narrating spiritual experience and even in the very way the authors allowed the texts to undermine themselves. The texts one after the other dispelled any notion that the "spiritual" meant turning away from the "social" and that the ochre-robe, or the Himalayas, or ashrams were the only sources of, means for, or end of self-realisation. I also realised that sadhuism "is not a joke". It was clear to me that these texts deserved serious attention because they critiqued caste, culture, religion, gender, family, the East-West encounter, colonial culture and revealed the rhetorical shifts in spiritual discourse that encouraged a dialogue between Modern Physics and spiritual experience. These texts thus are not linear narratives of a "self in quest of "Self. Instead they are a celebration of the role of social experiences and cultural differences in expanding spiritual consciousness. In the process they help us to understand that the India prior to independence was also perceived not as a monolith but actually as a pluralistic and multicultural community. In other words these texts were challenging the
unitary view of India which nationalist discourse is supposed to have promoted. These texts have a strong sense of the audience. They speak as belonging to a generation that was struggling to find a balance between faith in tradition and the challenges of modernity. In order to understand the autobiographical tradition, I read some of the well-known Western spiritual autobiographies like St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* and St. John of the Cross's *The Dark Night of the Soul*. I could not relate to them as well as I was able to relate with Indian autobiographies. I also read up critical studies of autobiography and of nationalism from a Western perspective and found that only some of those insights blended with my own nativist predilections. Clearly here was a situation where no one approach would be sufficient. The approach became a confluence of a Benedict Anderson and a Partha Chatterjee, a Foucault and a Bakhtin, a Cronin and a Sinha, a Bharata and an Olney deployed effectively. Thus I found that in certain contexts my Indian sensibility facilitated the application of *ashramadharma* to understand Gandhiji, *Natya Sastra* to understand Ramdas and Purohit Swami and Sri Sankara to understand Tattvabhushan. I also found that my experience with *shravanabhakti* i.e. my own "hearing" of the spiritual discourses of Swami Jnanananda Saraswati, Swami Chidananda Saraswati and Swarnijis of the Chinmaya Mission, of *Bhagavatha Saptahams* and the recounted experiences of my grandparents, parents and aunts stood me in good stead. The impact of what I heard, saw and had become a part of were a testimony to communion with the spirit and these did service in my analysis. These texts have a dynamic dialogue imbedded in them and bring out the interconnection between art, science, language and religion in a world of Quantum Mechanics, "Matrix theory" and the challenge to the matter-spirit dichotomy evident in science where consciousness is erected into an important intellectual category. These texts proved to be very exciting indeed.
I had in fact asked for something beyond comprehension when I wondered in my childhood days how the ochre-robed Swamijis I met and listened to experienced God. The texts show that God is the *rasa* which evokes in the seeker a sense of *ascharyam* (wonder) beyond words. How does one "problematis[e]" such texts which have already "problematised" themselves? Was my hypothesis wrong? How was I to defend my stance if my approaches to these texts were to be attacked for lacking the conventional coherence? I found G.N. Devy's *After Amnesia* extremely useful in this context. To my surprise I found that Devy provided confirmation of many of the opinions I myself was forming.

Now as I present my understanding of "nation", "religion", "modernity" and "secularism" from a nativist and devotion-like perspective, I am convinced that I am not wrong. I find that I can relate better to Shanti's disenchantment with violence in *Anandamath* because that provides a context for an understanding of Gandhiji. The synthesis between the rhetoric of post-Relativity Theory in the West and the vision of matter as "*signifiers*" in Yogananda is yet another confirmation of my eclectic approach. Mirabai's and Bahina Bai's revolt against patriarchy provides the context for understanding Purohit Swami just as Kabir Das's secularism and Sant Tukáram's revolt against casteism illuminate Ramdas. Hindu spirituality, as I see it, has never been a monologic discourse of "*neti*". Instead it is a twilight zone in human consciousness. It signifies transition and synthesis, the dynamics between duality and non-duality. It is located between the constraints of space and time on the one side and the experience of freedom from these constraints on the other.