Chapter -- II

Backgrounds

This chapter, as the title suggests, seeks to provide a backdrop to the study of spiritual autobiographies in the forthcoming chapters. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section titled “The Renaissance - A Reading Back” defines at the outset a few theoretical concepts frequently used in the study. Secondly, it examines what is termed as "inflections" of the Renaissance that have been traced in the texts chosen for study. The study also sees these texts as effects of these inflections. The second section "Autobiography in India" examines the evolution of this genre in India particularly in the spiritual context. The third section "Quest for Theory" relates the dilemma and ambivalence in identifying critical approaches to these texts. This section uses Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism for the analysis of the autobiographies. This theory enables an analysis of the heterogeneity found in these texts for which I later found support in G.N. Devy’s After Amnesia (1995).

I

The Renaissance - A Reading Back

This section is an attempt at a reading back of the nineteenth century Indian Renaissance located mainly in Bengal, and traces what I choose to term as "inflections" of the Renaissance discourses found in the spiritual autobiographies chosen for study. Revivalist tendencies, appeals to rationalism, synthesis of the Christian and Hindu methods of worship, attempts at alleviating class-caste distinctions and gender inequalities by accentuating the spiritual and universalist qualities of Hinduism, communal tensions between the Hindus and Muslims, resistance to proselytisation and the depiction of the East-West relationship as an encounter between the spiritual and material worlds constitute some of the characteristic traits of the period identified as the
Indian Renaissance. The autobiographies I have chosen for study are clearly products of the Renaissance. They question, synthesize, refine and interweave various aspects of the Renaissance discourse. I use the term "discourse" in this study in somewhat similar ways to Merry's use of the term which he defines as follows:

"Discourses are aspects of culture, interconnected vocabularies and systems of meaning located in the social world. A discourse is not individual and idiosyncratic but part of a shared /cultural world. Discourses are rooted in particular institutions and embody their culture. Actors operate within a structure of available discourses. However within that structure there is space for creativity and actors define and frame their problems within one or another discourse" (qtd.in Candlin 2001: 2).

The Indian Renaissance, as various studies show, has to be seen in the context of its encounter with modernity. This had had a tremendous impact on the spiritual discourses of the Renaissance and it is particularly felt in the distinct shifts in the rhetoric employed to communicate spiritual experience. Of these, autobiography by spiritual masters is a significant development. The study will also show how some of these texts add dimensions to the very concept of the autobiographical act. For these reasons, the terms "intertextuality" and "interdiscursivity" recur in the study, particularly in the chapters that analyse Sitanath Tattvabhushan's *Autobiography* and Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I have borrowed these terms from Vijay Bhatia who uses them to explain multiplicity of texts, genres and contexts that simultaneously occur in a particular discourse. According to Bhatia, intertextuality is a short hand for "texts providing a context, texts within and around the text, texts explicitly referred to in the text, texts used implicitly in the text, texts embedded with the text, texts mixed with the text as part of the rhetorical structure" in a discourse (Bhatia 2001: 1). Interdiscursivity is referred to as "genre-mixing,
genre-embedding, one set of generic conventions used to exploit another, system of genres, change and development in genres and appropriation of genres" in a discourse (ibidem).²

Texts facilitate a better understanding of context, the historical processes that went into the making of the text. These autobiographies enable us to read significant developments in the Renaissance period in a new light and then to trace some of its continuities in the autobiographies. Thus the reading of these autobiographies engage the reader not only in a dialogue with the times in which they were written but also with the past that influenced the production of these texts. This study, therefore, represents a dialogic experience of reading.

The term "modernity" remains to be defined. However it does have affiliations to Tejaswini Niranjan's definition of "modernity" in her introduction to Interrogating Modernity as a short hand for industrialisation, expansion and consolidation of colonialism, the institution of democracy and post-colonial nation states (Niranjan 1993: 2). "Modernity" is a post-Enlightenment idea and has to do with institutions, discourses and value systems that facilitated the colonial practice. Orientalism and Anglicisation were important aspects of the colonial practice. This study shows how spiritual autobiographies challenge the "post-Enlightenment thematic", that deals with the mechanistic view of the universe and a belief in the distinction between matter and spirit and science and religion.³

Against this background, spiritual autobiographies contribute to the interpretation of culture and function as documents of resistance to cultural hegemony. Edward Said points out the role of resistance narratives in decolonisation: "In the cultural discourses of decolonization, a great many languages, histories, forms circulate. As Barbara Harlow has shown in Resistance Literature, the instability of time, which has to be made and remade by the people and its leaders, is a theme one sees in all genres - spiritual autobiographies, poems of protest, prison memoirs, didactic dramas of
deliverance” (Said 1994: 280). Said’s point is clearly influenced by Michel Foucault’s concept of power: According to Said, "resistance far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history. It is particularly important to see how much this alternative reconception is based on breaking down the barriers between cultures" (260). In other words, cultural resistance in this context can be considered as a positive potential force which in the process of assimilating or countering Western religious practices, knowledge systems and cultural discourses gives rise to new methods of worship, new knowledge systems and new cultural discourses. Verbalising spiritual experience in English, of which autobiography is one of the forms it takes, is an intense cultural message in the context of the colonial encounter. The expression of subjective spiritual experience by Indians in a Western form and language is a dialogic exercise. Cultural resistance and dispelling of stereotypical notions regarding Indian spirituality are some of its effects. These texts placed at a significant point of time in history neither seem to indulge in a glorification of an imagined past nor are they indulging in a full advocacy of modernity. They do not do away with the material world in seeking the spiritual world; nor do they advocate self-abnegation in relation to self-assertion. What these texts seek to do is to define the self within a delicate and difficult framework of a possible synthesis between the East and the West, the spiritual and the material, the self and the other as ways of life. Nationalism and citizenship are envisioned as striving for this balance in an individual. Saints perhaps envision such a balanced living as true nationalism. This is where autobiographies as a new form and rhetoric of spiritual discourse in India achieve a power over the reader. They become agents of conversion where the reader seeks to emulate the way of life of the autobiographer. Contrary to the popular concept of spirituality as negation of life, these texts affirm life. These texts initiate a phase of imparting spiritual knowledge in a rhetoric of sharing an individual's direct encounter with the spirit.
We will now examine the inflections of the Renaissance traceable in spiritual autobiographies. What is meant by the term "inflection" can be briefly illustrated. Primarily, the term is derived from "Inflectional Morphology" in Linguistics which studies "the way in which words vary (or 'inflect') in order to express grammatical contrasts in sentences, such as singular/plural or past/present tense" (Crystal 1987: 90). The term "inflection" is used here to indicate certain shifts and variations in the rhetoric of spiritual autobiographies for which the Renaissance trends are largely responsible. Sitanath Tattvabhusan’s Autobiography for instance, is marked by his disenchantment with the schism in the Brahma Samaj in the post-Rammohan Roy period. Tattvabhusan’s very quest for self-realisation through philosophical pursuits springs from a strong felt-need to identify an acceptable theological position in Brahma faith, the absence of which was the root cause for the schisms. In this context, the schism as an inflection of the Renaissance is latent in the rhetoric of Tattvabhusan’s Autobiography. Hence a study of his autobiography will be incomplete without an understanding of this inside story. Most of the studies of the Renaissance examine the contribution of the Brahma Samaj to social and religious revival. This inside story was however traced in Pt. Sivanath Sastri’s History of the Brahma Samaj (1974) and David Kopf’s The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Mind (1988). The historical accounts relating to the schisms of the Samaj will be examined here and whatever theoretical insights emerge will be utilised later in the respective chapters that deal with these inflections. Further, the appeal to and encounter with Western Science in Dayanand Saraswati’s rhetoric, the bhakti of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, the nationalist spirit in Swami Vivekananda’s address to the West, the disenchantment with violence in Bankim’s Anandamath are some other inflections useful to understand the changing patterns in the rhetoric of spiritual discourse through the autobiographies chosen for study. We will now proceed to understand the dynamics in the Brahma Samaj after Rammohan Roy.
The reform movements initiated by the Indian Renaissance were basically religious reform movements that worked at two levels — at the societal level and at the intellectual level. It can also be seen that the social life and religious life in India had been inextricably linked in such a manner that any reform at the religious level meant a reform at the societal level as well. For instance, the movement sought to abolish or reform certain customs and practices which had both social and religious implications. These included customs like Sati, idolatry, casteism and the ill-treatment of widows. The second level at which this worked was the intellectual, academic and literary level which was an engagement in dialogue with the West through a comparative study of Eastern and Western philosophies and Theology of the kind we find in Rammohan Roy's *Precepts of Jesus*. Roy's contribution to Unitarianism is well known and his Brahma Samaj appealed for a spiritual regeneration and sought to synthesise Hindu and Christian methods of worship to achieve this goal. Spencer Lavan in "The Brahma Samaj: India's First Modern Movement for Religious Reform" points out that Brahma Samaj turned out to be the "first modern Indian challenge to foreign domination, Christianity and internal religious disintegration" (Lavan 1991: 23). What is relevant to our study is the post-Rammohan Roy developments in the Brahma Samaj particularly the schisms that took place repeatedly due to the absence of a theistic doctrine.

As Pandit Sivanath Sastri points out in his account, Rammohan Roy's contribution towards establishing a universal religion that believed in the concept of one God was significant. Sastri writes that Roy "derived his ideas on the spiritual side from Hindu sources; but his passion for Unitarianism was derived from Mahomedanism and many of his moral ideas he got from the Precepts of Jesus" (Sastri 1974: 49). However, Sastri points out that Roy could not do much towards building up a constructive theism and that as a pioneer his duty was to clear away a mass of popular prejudice paving the way for the
next generation to take over. Hence his work was mainly negative and reformatory and not positive and constructive (48-49). After Rammohan Roy's death Vidyabagish "kept the lamp burning" till Devendranath Tagore's initiation into the Samaj in 1843. After Tagore's entry into the scene, "a great theological revolution in the principles of the Samaj was impending" (63). In the wake of the anti-Christian agitation of 1845, the doctrine of Vedic infallibility was prominent and the Vedas were publicly proclaimed as the basis of Brahma-Theism. Akshay Kumar Datta, the editor of the Tattwabodhini Patrika, as a rationalist raised voices of dissent against this stance and was also supported by many young men of similar temperament. Under pressure and after much contemplation and debate, (the specificities of which will be examined in the chapter on Sitanath Tattvabhushan in this study) Devendrenath Tagore decided to reject the doctrine of Vedic infallibility. The period that followed i.e from 1850-1856 was one of new social ideals and rationality. With Keshub Chandra Sen's entry into the scene during the 1860s, a new impetus was given to the activities of the Samaj. The appeal to faith, intuition, salvation and atonement could be traced to the religious temperament of Keshub who was a charismatic personality. The first schism in the Brahma Samaj took place in the wake of differences of opinion between the older and the younger generation on the question of caste. This resulted in the formation of the Brahma Samaj of India and Devendranath and others remained part of what came to be known as the Adi Brahma Samaj. Besides social welfare activities, the hey-day of Keshub's leadership also saw the infusion of bhakti in the methods of worship which is attributed to the influence of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa on Keshub. Moreover Keshub was also to introduce the four-fold classification of karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga. In one of his lectures delivered in 1879, he reasserted his view that Christ was an Asiatic. "Behold Christ cometh to us as an Asiatic in race, as a Hindu in faith, as a kinsman and a brother and he demands your heart's affection. Christ is a true Yogi" (206).
This view of Keshub is important for he seems to anticipate Paramahansa Yogananda’s spiritual rhetoric in the West. This will be taken up in the chapter on Paramahansa Yogananda.

However Keshub Chandra Sen was also not immune to further progressive tendencies of the younger generation which demanded constitutional modes of Government in the affairs of the Church. Also the marriage of Suneethi Devi, Keshub’s daughter, to the Prince of Cooch Behar became controversial since it seemed to contradict the doctrines of the Samaj. This led to a further schism and resulted in the formation of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj. Ananda Mohan Bose, Shibchandra Deb, and Umeshchandra Datta were instrumental in introducing constitutional modes of governance. Sitanath Tattvabhushan, whose Autobiography is one of the texts chosen for study, was a member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj. As a part of revivalism Keshub further announced the birth of a New Dispensation. Tattvabhushan is located during a period that saw such schisms and lack of direction in Brahma activities following these schisms. The absence of a theology, that Sivanath Sastri draws our attention to, continued. Considering the "instability of time", adoption of a theology could not have avoided schism. Moreover, theological positions were based on the temperamental leanings of the leaders like Devendranath Tagore and Keshub. In the absence of their charismatic presence, the spell was broken and reason and faith were again in conflict. Tattvabhushan’s contribution was to fill this void through a dispassionate criticism of loopholes in Brahma thought over the years and to re-establish the credibility of the Upanishads in Brahmaism through deep and comparative study of both Eastern and Western metaphysics.

Apart from the "return to Vedas" slogan of Dayanand Saraswati’s Arya Samaj, its rationalism is also important. It was the rational spirit in Dayanand that made him question idolatry in the first place. Kenneth W. Jones in his article "The Arya Samaj in British India 1875-1947" (1989), points out that
Dayanand's religion was monotheistic, open to all, rationalistic and compatible with modern science. Zacharias's example in his study on the Renaissance will suffice to illustrate this point: "Where others are satisfied to translate Rig Ved 1,2,7 as follows: 'I invoke Mitra and Varuna for the success of my poem" - Dayanand loftily informs his adherents that it means that water is generated by the combination of hydrogen and oxygen!" (Zacharias 1989: 38). Though Zacharias dismisses this explanation as puerile the above quotation throws light on one major trait of the period - a subtle reading of Vedic truths as not effete but as seminal, compatible and contemporary — on par with modern science which rationalists have been using to attack Hinduism. This kind of application of rationalism to religion during that period served to counter growing scepticism towards Hinduism among the educated elite and worked as an effective resistance to colonialism in its garb of cultural hegemony. The message of the Arya Samaj was not confined to the nationalist intellectual elite but had mass appeal as well. "With the Arya Samaj…we have reached a movement, whose founder never knew English and who made his appeal, not to an English educated elite, but to the broad mass of his fellow country men" (35). The above aspect has been highlighted as an inflection because it is the synthesis of science and yoga in the rhetoric of spiritual discourse that can be traced in Yogananda as well.

The lucidity and simplicity in communicating spiritual wisdom was a remarkable feature of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa's spiritual rhetoric. If "liberal religion in the 1880s taught that religion based on reason could rid the world of superstition, idolatry and the social ills which weighted down the men and women" (Williams 1991: 59), Ramakrishna Paramahamsa showed how the simple rhetoric of bhakti could equally contribute to this. Sivanath Sastri and Partha Chatterjee (46) have made a mention of the influence of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa on Keshub Chandra Sen and the subsequent infusion of bhakti in the Church. In Swami Ramdas's autobiography, we find traits of Ramakrishna's
childlike bliss and lucidity of expression. If Ramakrishna achieved this in Bengali, then Ramdas made it possible in English as well.

In Swami Vivekananda, we find a blend of rationalism of the Brahma Samaj and spiritual conviction derived from his Guru's guidance. The impact of Swami Vivekananda's spiritual rhetoric at the World Parliament of Religions in the United States was so great that it served to dispel stereotypical notions in the West regarding Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda emphasised the futility of proselytisation in India by missionaries when he said: "The great need of India today, which is not the India of fifty years ago, is, ... missionaries to educate the people industrially and socially and not religiously. The Hindoos have all the religion they want, and the Hindoo religion is the most ancient in the world" (Vivekananda 1984: 469). In this sense Swami Vivekananda's mission in the West was also to resist and counter "virulent missionary propaganda which was eagerly and gratefully accepted in many circles because it seemed to provide a sanction for Western imperialism by reinforcing highly derogatory images of the Oriental races" (Gupta 1987: 121). In offering a counter hegemonic rhetoric to the West, Swami Vivekananda's speeches and writings became popular and were held up as an important contribution to nationalist thought. Swami Vivekananda's U.S. tour further opened passages to spiritual masters like Paramahansa Yogananda in the West. It is also important to note that the receptivity to Hindu spiritual thought was more pronounced in the United States in comparison to England. This can however be traced to the growth of Unitarianism in the United States to which Rammohan Roy also contributed as a pioneer. With Swami Vivekananda we see how the rhetoric of modernity came to be employed in order to counter cultural hegemony in spiritual discourse. Unlike Rammohan Roy and his times, Swami Vivekananda's rhetoric appealed more to the commoner than to the intellectual. This is clear in Tattvabhushan's Autobiography in which he criticises Swami Vivekananda's
lectures as "shallow and unsystematic notwithstanding his undoubted religious zeal and earnestness" (Tattvabhusan 1942: 66).

A similar nationalist spirit with elevated rhetoric is traceable in Sri Aurobindo's writings. Sri Aurobindo's disenchantment with violence and his retirement from active politics, the subsequent emphasis on the role of spirituality in the independence of the nation through an irresistibly energetic rhetoric, further integrated nationalism with spirituality. An agnostic turned nationalist turned Yogi — that was Sri Aurobindo Ghosh who was also the progenitor of the doctrine of passive resistance, which was later adapted and utilised by Gandhiji in India's struggle for independence:

"Passive resistance is an attempt to meet such disturbers by peaceful and self-contained Brahmatej … Our attitude is a political Vedantism. India, free, one and indivisible, is the divine realization to which we move, emancipation our aim; to that end each nation must practice the political creed which is the most suited to its temperament and circumstances; for that is the best for it which leads most surely and completely to national liberty and national self-realization. … Passive resistance may be the final method of salvation in our case or it may be only the preparation for the final sadhana. In either case, the sooner we put it into full and perfect practice, the nearer we shall be to national liberty" (qtd. in Hay 1991: 151).

Sri Aurobindo also held that Sanatana Dharma was nationalism, that one did not exist without the other. It is interesting to note that Sri Aurobindo and Gandhiji shared certain views about integrating religion with politics. In other words, they did not see one as different from the other, in fact one was the other. It is this vision that is embodied in the above quotation especially when Sri Aurobindo uses the term "national self-realisation". For Gandhiji, self-realisation was the service of India, her freedom, not merely in terms of
political governance but in terms of self-governance as a citizen of a nation by pursuing ways of life befitting national character (Gandhi 1927: 132). Gandhiji's autobiography shows this constant quest for or interpretation of the idea of nation by experimenting with truth. The nationalism of Sri Aurobindo and Gandhiji was not Hindu oriented. Rather it attempted to inform followers of Hinduism to identify its' true spirit. To that end, Sri Aurobindo was also responsible for lifting the veil of esotericism on raja yoga and can be seen as a precursor of Paramahansa Yogananda in making it a "scientific", rational, comprehensible and practical exercise. His narrative style also served to dispel the misconception that the end of spirituality was escape from earthly existence:

The inter-penetration of the planes [material, vital, mental and supramental] is indeed for me a capital and fundamental part of spiritual experience without which yoga as I practise it and its aim could not exist. For that aim is to manifest, reach or embody a higher consciousness upon earth and not to get away from earth into a higher world or some supreme Absolute. The old yogas (not quite all of them) tended the other way — but that was, I think, because they found the earth as it is a rather impossible place for any spiritual being and the resistance to change too obstinate to be borne; earth-nature looked to them in Vivekananda's simile like the dog's tail which, every time you straighten it, goes back to its original curl (qtd. in Hay 1991: 158).

With Sri Aurobindo we see the tendency to impart the knowledge of yoga as an efficient path to harmonious existence in this world. Aurobindo, as the above passage shows, challenges the concept of God as separate from earthly existence. Paramahansa Yogananda's spiritual rhetoric picks up this thread and gains greater force and persuasiveness when seen in consonance with the
changes in modern science. This aspect will be discussed in the chapter on Paramahansa Yogananda’s autobiography.

The Renaissance also saw a renewed sense of service among the ascetics of India. This should be seen as an answer to the challenge posed by the Christian missionaries whose activities included establishment of schools and hospitals across the country. Indian ascetics reacted proving their mettle in social service. Besides providing spiritual guidance, they served the community by establishing orphanages, vocational training centres, schools and dispensaries. Of these Swami Sivananda Saraswati, founder of the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, deserves special mention. He was a medical practitioner in his purvashrama and did not refrain from continuing to render medical services even after his initiation into Sannyasa. This is an example of modernity fusing with tradition. We find spiritual masters like Swami Ramdas initiating similar activities in the South.

Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai was also a focal point for seekers during the first half of the last century. His mode of imparting spiritual initiation and of providing answers to seekers was through, what could be termed, a dialogic, eloquent silence. Paul Brunton's Search in Secret India (1934) shows how the Maharishi, in an inexplicable manner would challenge a seeker's tendency to gaze outward for answers by reverting it inwards to ask "Who am I?" Ramana Maharishi’s method, interestingly turns the seeker's attention to engage in a dialogue with himself in order to dismantle the sense of difference between the self and the other irrespective of race, caste, culture and religion. This reversal of gaze that Paul Brunton experienced cannot be ignored while discussing the influence of the Renaissance on the subject of our study for it conveys a significant dimension of the East-West encounter:
The Maharishee turns and looks down into my face; I in turn, gaze expectantly up at him (Brunton 1934: 152, emphasis mine).

And again:

The hall is becoming pervaded with a subtle, intangible and indefinable power which affects me deeply. Those lustrous orbs seem to be peering into the inmost recesses of my soul. In a peculiar way I feel aware of everything he can see in my heart. His mysterious glance penetrates my thoughts, my emotions and my desires; I am helpless before it. At first this disconcerting gaze troubles me; I become vaguely uneasy. I feel that he has perceived pages that belong to a past which I have forgotten. He knows it all, I am certain. I am powerless to escape; somehow, I do not want to, either (162).

The above lines are also an instance to show the role of Western writings as well in reiterating the construct of the East as spiritually "superior" to the West. Brunton's *Search in Secret India* appeared at the same time as Purohit Swami's autobiography. Hence we cannot ignore a similar strain present in Yeats's introduction to Purohit Swami's autobiography in which Yeats declares that a "converse impregnation has begun with the East as the male" spiritually. While examining Purohit Swami's autobiography, we shall see how the narrative evades the Western demand for "experience" voiced in Yeats's introduction to the text; instead words are rendered inadequate to communicate the "experience". The readers are urged to turn their gaze inwards for this experience. The narrative conveys the author's 'intimations of immortality' and not the experience of immortality as such. Such a ploy often works to add persuasiveness, to unsettle the reader and carries out the conversional effect on the reader. In studies of Western mystical autobiographies this is termed the 'conversional effect'; in other words these texts act as agents of change. These aspects are discussed at various points in this study.
No discussion on the Renaissance and its inflections would be complete without referring to the theme of the Sannyasi rebellion in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* (1882). This novel shows a dynamic tension between renunciation and householderhood, violence and non-violence, sin and salvation and life and death in the context of envisioning nationhood and national identity. The most popular interpretation of this text is that it gave a tremendous impetus to the various religious, patriotic and national activities beginning with Hindu missionary activity and culminating in the terrorist movement in Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century. In contrast, in this study, the text is read as one that reveals disenchantment with violence in the revolt against colonial power. The prologue to the novel reveals the tension between violence and non-violence at the outset:

"What can you sacrifice to win your heart's desire?"
"My life *itself*!" was the reply.
"*Life* is so insignificant that it is the simplest thing for anyone to sacrifice!"
"What more have I? What else can I offer?"
"Devotion! My friend, devotion!" declared the voice from above (Chatterjee 1992: 23).

Underlying the tone of the masculine, ascetic and militant voices in the novel is the "passive" yet persistent voices of the women characters the echoes of which can be found in Gandhiji. These voices foreground themselves towards the last paragraphs of the novel in Shanti's conversation with Jiban:

"...How strange that I am fully cured so soon! Where do you want to go now Shanti? There, there, I hear the noise of our victorious army!"
"*We* shall go there no more," Shanti said firmly. "We have won victory for Mother India. This part of the country belongs to us. We want no reward for doing our duty. So why should we go there?"
"What we have won by force, must be protected with the strength of our arms."
"Mahatma Satya and Mahendra are there to protect our kingdom. You sacrificed your life for the Children in order to make atonement for a sin. The Children have no more claim upon you. We are now dead to them. If they see us now, they are sure to say: Tor fear of atonement with death Jiban hid himself somewhere during the battle. Now he has come to claim a share in our kingdom'."
"What do you mean, Shanti? Do you think that for fear of public opinion we should refuse to do our duty? My duty is to serve the Mother unselfishly. Let people gossip any way they like. I must continue to serve the cause of our Mother India".
"You have forfeited all your right to do that. For you did sacrifice your life in the Mother's service. If you can serve her again, then where is the atonement? The outstanding part of the atonement is to be fully deprived of all opportunities to serve the Mother. Otherwise, just to sacrifice an insignificant life is not a great thing in itself.
"Shanti, it remains for you to understand the real kernel of the great problems of life. My greatest happiness lies in performing my duty as a child in the service of the Mother. I must deprive myself of that happiness. But where shall we go? We certainly could not be happy at home, thus abandoning our Mother's service".
"That is certainly farthest from my mind. We are no longer householders. We shall ever remain ascetics. And we shall ever observe strictest continence. Come, let us travel all over India, visiting the holy places of pilgrimage".
"What shall we do after that?"
"After that? Yes, after that we shall build ourselves a little cottage on the Himalayas. There we shall pass our days in prayer and meditation - in the service of God. We shall ask direct from Him the boons that are best for Mother India and for all her children; and also for Mother Earth and for all her children; the world over" (134-35).
In the light of such a passage one can draw a connection between Bankim's *Anandamath* and Gandhiji's non-violence. As a narrative on ways of life, Gandhiji picks up the thread that Bankim leaves. Shanti, (a name that significantly suggests peace and non-violence), is the character that dissuades Jiban, (a name that suggests life), from giving up life through violence in the name of sacrifice. Non-violence has also to do with observing celibacy the possibilities of which Gandhiji explored in word and in deed. Celibacy was a ploy for empowering women in the new nation. *Anandamath* concludes on a note of *Jiban-Shanti*, i.e. living in peace.⁸

David M. Miller in his essay on the Divine Life Society Movement points out that Western representation of traditional institutions such as monasticism and asceticism as "escapist", “other-worldly” or "world negating" is incorrect. In fact the opposite is true because these institutions were instrumental in the process of change. Drawing insights from Agehananda Bharati's views, Miller also highlights the ambivalence of the modern Hindu toward the "old fashioned", non-English speaking, peregrinating or *ashram-hound* sadhu who does not contribute to modern life (109). The contribution of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Sivananda Saraswati in addressing such attitudes in the language and rhetoric of modernity is remarkable. Moreover, "to be a modern Hindu, then, is not only to engage in the rhetoric of the apologetic, but to carry out its pronouncements in religious action, and of those groups directing sociocultural change, the modernist sadhus are at the helm of things" (110).

The above view throws light on three significant aspects of the autobiographies I am studying. First, the rhetoric of the apologetic is constantly subjected to change. This is clear from the evolution of spiritual autobiography as a form of this apologetic. Secondly, while moving from text to text chronologically, remarkable shifts in the rhetoric of spiritual discourse can be detected. Thirdly, it shows that the scope of the genre expanded in various ways, the most important of it being not only a "self-life-sketch" of a modernist sadhu but a
vindication of the lives of seekers and devotees who function beyond the purview of "modernity", quietly, unnoticed, perhaps even subjected to ridicule by the ambivalent group. It is in this sense that we can detect the strong sense of the audience in these texts. They seem to address an English speaking audience, both Westerners and Westernised Indians. The rhetorical shifts in spiritual discourse thus show how modern apologetics worked both as an empowering mechanism and resistance mechanism.

II

Autobiography in India

This section undertakes an analysis of spiritual autobiography as a literary genre in India in its social, political and cultural context. The apparent contradiction pointed out very often in terms of relating spiritual masters of India with the autobiographical act will also be addressed.

Not many critical studies on Indian spiritual autobiographies exist except for the painstaking survey and study undertaken by R.C.P. Sinha in his Indian Autobiographies in English (1978) and by K.C. Yadav in his "Introduction" (1976) to the English translation of Swami Dayananda Saraswati's autobiography originally written in Marathi. Some interest in Indian women's autobiographies has been initiated by scholars like Ranjana Harish and others but a concerted attempt is yet to be made.

A word about the shifts in the rhetoric of literary criticism in India over the years would be appropriate here. The reasons for the shift could be attributed to the social, political, cultural and ideological imperatives within which a critic functions. For instance, if R.C.P. Sinha views the development of Indo-Anglian autobiography as "inextricably linked with social, political, literary and religious forces operating in modern India" (Sinha 1978: 193), Sivarama Padikkal has viewed the development of the novel in India as "a social practice linked to social and economic production and reproduction, connected
therefore with other kinds of social practices" (Padikkal 1993: 220). In any case, the development of spiritual autobiography in India as a genre in itself is not free of contextual influences. Accordingly, this critical study of spiritual autobiographies is pitched at a level that is not free of, what Said terms as, "contrapuntal" renditions and responds to current trends in literary theory and criticism as well.

R.C.P. Sinha points out in his study that an impression continues to persist that the practice of writing autobiography did not exist in India before the advent of the British. He says that it was not as though the autobiographical impulse was discovered for the first time during the Renaissance in India: "An autobiographical tradition of a sort did exist, but it had been too tenuous and irregular to become a significant feature of the national culture" (Sinha 1978: 4). His well researched chapters, "Autobiography in Ancient India" and "Autobiography in Medieval India", are brilliant expositions with the purpose of dispelling this notion. He points out that, there were indeed some elements in the Hindu tradition that hindered the free and natural growth of autobiography (ibidem). To illustrate, K.C. Yadav in his introduction to the English version of Swami Dayananda Saraswati's autobiography points out that "in the olden times a general notion had persisted amongst Indians that self-portraiture was Ashistata (bad manners). The popularity of this belief probably accounts for the complacent indifference to the composition of autobiographical writings" (Yadav 1978: 1). However, Sinha quotes instances from the Rig Veda in which a risbi narrates his life story in terms of his transformation from waywardness to spiritual living. "The Lament of the Gambler", according to Sinha, is remarkable for its autobiographical appeal (Sinha 1978: 13-14).

It is possible to read the Mahabharata as Sage Vyasa's autobiography. Such an interpretation would however provide a new dimension to the term autobiography. The Mahabharata spans events that go beyond the direct
concerns of the "author" though his birth and mission are inextricably linked with the events he narrates.

Bahina Bai's *Atmanivedan*, her autobiography in verses written in the 17th century is another instance to prove the existence of the autobiographical impulse in India. Bahina Bai's autobiography, quite interestingly, throws light on the social life of the times and places that she visited. One can analyse her work as a brilliant critique of the way religion was practiced in those days, the inaccessibility of certain practices to women, the way women were treated, and the caste system. Here are some instances to illustrate her protest against exploitation of the woman's body:

Possessing a woman's body, and myself being subject to others, I was not able to carry out my desire to discard all worldly things [vairagya] (Bahina Bai 1929: 38).

The *Vedas* cry aloud, and the *Purans* shout that no good comes of a woman.... The characteristics (of a woman) are foolishness, selfishness, seductiveness, and deception. All connection with a woman is disastrous. (Such is their opinion). Says Bahini, "If a woman's body brings disaster, what chance is there for her to acquire in this life the supreme spiritual riches?" (39).

Bahini also protests against the gender and caste discrimination in the religious field:

(As a woman) I have no right to listen to the reading of the *Vedas*. The Brahmans have made a secret of the *Gayatri mantra*. I am told I must not pronounce the sacred word 'OM'. I must not listen to philosophical ideas. I must not speak to anyone about them. My husband is Jamadagni himself (if I did those things) (ibidem).

It was Sant Tukaram's times. The verses reveal the attitude of some of the members of the upper classes towards Sant Tukaram since Tukaram was a
“shudra” by caste. Bahina Bai records the assertion of her husband regarding Tukaram: "What is all this! The shudra Tuka! Seeing him in a dream! My wife is ruined by all this! What am I to do?" (24). Further after her husband undergoes a total change of heart, and becomes his disciple, other Brahmins admonish them: "You have received an anugraha in a dream, and you have made a Shudra your guru. And he is a good-for-nothing and without knowledge. You should be ex-communicated from the Brahman community" (31). Bahina Bai discreetly protests against not only the beatings but also sexual violence she has to suffer from her husband, a thirty year old person who had married her when she was hardly nine years old. She turns these sufferings to her advantage to facilitate her spiritual quest:

Thou art causing this irritation by the hand of my husband, but my soul has made its determination. Now then, O God, Brother-of-the-distressed. Thou art seeking to test me? For through my husband my body is being destroyed. What am I to do? I am in the midst of hardship. I have no desires for my body (40).

One can infer from these sporadic instances of autobiographical writing in early India that in a society where self-life-sketch was considered as bad manners, certain dominant interests of the community were protected. These interests were more important than individual aspirations leading to great insensitivity to and repression of women’s spiritual aspiration. Bahina Bai’s Atmanivedan and verses hold testimony to this interesting inflection of the Hindu socio-religious life. 9

A late nineteenth and early twentieth century instance is the Memoirs of Dr. Haimabathi Sen, originally written in Bengali which was discovered and published only in 2000. Sen who became a child widow and later married a Brahma does not hesitate to expose the debilitating practices even among the Brahmas of the period. She depicts instances of oppression and sexual
exploitation in the Bengali society. Though such autobiographies existed, they did not see the light of day for several years. The fact remains that they were written even though women were not expected to be educated enough to write thus during that period. This would perhaps account for the conspicuous absence of published spiritual autobiographies by women during the nineteenth century. The term "publish" of course has the sense of going public when actually women's voices of protest remained "private."

Whenever there has been social repression, there has been rebellion. The role of saints as rebels against oppression was significant. Saints urged the individuals to work for social change, to awaken and to work for their own salvation from social practices that fettered them. This also served to uplift the downtrodden and enlighten them. Since religion has been the most dominant and influential social practice prevalent in India for centuries, religious reformation was the source of social change. People were sensitive and receptive to the "rhetoric" of religion and as we have seen through the ages, social reformers appealed to them through the very same rhetoric to bring about changes within the religion and thus in the society as a whole. *Jnanappaana*, a devotional poem, by Poonthaanam Vasudevan Nampoothiri written in the sixteenth century in simple Malayalam is an intense criticism of social life which is steeped in ignorance, corruption and immorality. By attacking class and caste distinctions, gender oppression and power play, Poonthaanam conveys the true essence of wisdom. Here for Poonthaanam, *jnana*, wisdom, did not require sublimity of style for the expression of simple truths. The popularity of *Jnanappaana* even today is due to its relevance to social mores and personal conduct. One may also recall Sri Narayananaguru's (1854-1928) retort to the Brahmins who challenged him for establishing a Shiva temple for the Ezhavas. He said: "I have only installed an Ezhava Shiva". (Ezhavas were deemed as lower caste). Religion as such can be perceived as an experiment with or a quest for modes of regulating social and personal
behaviour. Renaissance literature is only one part of this ongoing historical process of rhetorical shifts in religious discourse. Spiritual narratives thus became social narratives, acts of protest against exploitation in the name of religion. The Hindu cultural mosaic has readjusted itself through such individuals and survived as a consequence. Otherwise it would have ceased to exist the way Greek or Roman civilization did. Buddha, Adi Sankaracharya, the poet saints of the Bhakti movement, Sri Narayananaguru, Sai Baba of Shirdi, Guru Nanak, the social and religious reformers of the Renaissance period and Gandhiji in the twentieth century spearheaded these 'readjustments, thus preventing the Hindu culture from fading into oblivion. They were men or women who rebelled against the existing evils in the society and devised ways and means appropriate to the needs of the times to repair the fissures in society. Culture, it is important to note at this point, should not be misunderstood as "unchanging", as something which remains in a "glorious past" and in "tradition", but is a process that contributes to new perceptions and new definitions of identity. The reformers were individuals whose quest for the self led them to realization and were also people who disseminated those experiences through the spoken and written word. The self was not divorced from the social, and scriptures and spiritual discourses were fundamental tools to bring about social change. If we examine the pattern of religious reformation movements from the time of the Buddha to the present, the expression of spiritual experiences was in an idiom suitable to the needs of the audience addressed. Considering the inextricable link that prevailed between social and religious life in India, discourses or singing in the temples or on the streets were an important means of reaching the masses. Saints, thus were the most sensitive to the needs of the people. For example, the abhangas were palpable in a period when the print media was unheard of and picked up, repeated and sung in households. After the advent of the British, when print media became prominent and literacy increased, there was no dearth of
spiritual literature. Also, the curious Westerners and English educated Indians needed "subjective" or "true" spiritual experience to "believe" and reform. The autobiographical impulse in India is therefore closely linked to reformation. In this sense, autobiography, as we have hinted, is a **discourse** of conversion. Both the author/narrator and the listener/reader experience a change. Autobiographical narrative of a spiritual experience that exemplifies "this happened to me", is inextricably linked with the mode of communicating it. Harpham in his study views autobiography as a particular organization of the conversional aspects of language acquisition and use (Harpham 1988: 48). It follows that the genre in itself embodies persuasion. In the texts chosen for study the rhetoric of *karma*, *bhakti*, *jnana* and *raja yoga* also embody persuasion. What was the impulse that necessitated persuasiveness? G.N. Devy's view on the impact of colonialism would be apposite to answer this: "Colonialism creates a cultural demoralization. It creates a false sense of shame in the minds of the colonized about their own history and traditions" (Devy 1995: 10). Spiritual autobiographies counter demoralising forces of colonial culture and contribute to the interpretation of culture. Spiritual autobiographies in the twentieth century served the same function as the *abhangas* of the *Bhakti* movement.

The study presupposes that the autobiographies written in English and in Indian *bhashas* were influenced by Western notions of form and structure. However they also retain a peculiar Indian quality and my analyses of the texts demonstrate this. The autobiographers wrote at the behest of their friends, disciples or well-wishers who were either Westerners or Indians who had come under Western influence. The earliest forms were written in **prose**, but were fragmentary. Rammohan Roy's self-life sketch was termed "autobiographical remarks" and Sinha identifies this as the first example of autobiographical writing in English. Srinivasa Iyengar points out that Roy "started the tradition of Indian leaders writing autobiographies, and modern autobiographers like
Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Surendranath Banerjee, Rajendra Prasad and M.R. Jayakar may proudly trace their lineage to him!” (Iyengar 1985: 33). Roy's style does not seem to be too deliberate and certainly does not suggest self-consciousness:

My ancestors were Brahmans of a high order, and from time immemorial were devoted to the religious duties of their race, down to my fifth progenitor…. In conformity with the usage of my parental race, and the wish of my father, I studied the Persian and Arabic languages; these accomplishments being indispensable to those who attached themselves to the courts of the Mohammaden Princes….I devoted myself to the study of the Sanskrit, and the theological works written in it, which contain the body of Hindu literature, law and religion…. After my father's death I opposed the advocates of idolatry with still greater boldness; availing myself of the art of printing, now established in India, I published various works and pamphlets against their errors, in the native and foreign languages…. (qtd. In Hay 1988: 19-21).

The evolution of the autobiography into its present form in India has parallels to the evolution of the novel in India. Indian autobiography, like the Indian novel, was not derived, to use Sivarama Padikkal's words, "simply from a Western form" nor is it "merely continuing…pre-colonial culture of narrativity" (Padikkal 1993: 222). It is a good mix of the two. In so far as the novel and autobiography in India are a translation of a Western genre, one is seeing a complex historical transaction taking place. As Padikkal puts it, "even the transfer of literary genres can be treated as a part of a tale of resistance" (222). Swami Dayanand Saraswati's autobiography in Marathi is a pioneering example of this tale of resistance. It is not possible to decide whether the autobiographical impulse had this common motive attached to them. But in terms of their effects, the narratives strike us as being impelled more by
reformatory zeal and resistance than the lonely enterprise of the radical rupture between individual and society as it existed in the West (Sinha 1978: 11).

Is the expression "spiritual autobiography" an oxymoron? Is it possible for enlightened spiritual masters who have dissolved their ego to write autobiography? When St. Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, he was conveying the spirit of the dissolution of the ego, the moment of surrender and intense spiritual insight. The primary concern of a spiritual aspirant is the quest for the Self, that which pervades the multitude of "selves" which we cognise. Spiritual autobiography springs from the urge to share this experience with the world and to impel the reader to embark on a similar quest. This must not be mistaken as indulgence in one's ego and as indicative of the absence of spiritual maturity. However, the truth remains that the enlightened one who chooses to remain at the highest level of spiritual consciousness is likely to remain silent. It does require that the enlightened one must come down to a certain material level to translate that silence into words. After all spirituality is also the spirit of sharing the experience of God with the widest commonality of man.

III

Quest for Theory

In this section an attempt is made to problematise some of the characteristic features of the autobiographies under study. This will help us to identify various focal points of analysis in the following chapters. It needs to be noted that though spiritual experience per se remains largely independent of any external influences, in spiritual discourses the language, the words and the forms chosen to narrate spiritual experiences convey strong social, political and cultural messages and hence project the various dimensions of the cultural moment.

I tried to identify a suitable framework for this study and came to the conclusion that Western theoretical notions of autobiography were not always
suitable for an analysis of the Indian spiritual autobiographies I was focussing on. For example the place accorded to the authorial self in Western criticism is not suitable in the context of Indian spiritual autobiography because the authorial self is one among the many voices which emerge from the texts. The reason for this is that as G.N. Devy observed in a different context, the functions of literature in India "are not necessarily what the European sociology of literature stipulates" (Devy 1992: 123).

Secondly, Western terminologies do not always apply to Indian texts written in English even though they appear to conform to the Western autobiographical form. For example, Carole Slade, in a seminal article, "A Definition of Mystical Autobiography" makes a distinction between mystical autobiography and spiritual autobiography. According to Slade, while both spiritual and mystical autobiography rely on introspection and hermeneutics, the spiritual autobiographer writes from a human perspective and the mystical autobiographer takes the vantage point of the divine. "While the spiritual autobiographer emphasizes his or her own activity in understanding the movements of the soul, the mystical autobiographer foregrounds the divine action that produced those spiritual events; that is, the mystic portrays the interior life as a relationship of the transcendental eternal self with God rather than as introspection actively conducted by the historical, empirical self for the purpose of coming to know God" (Slade 1991: 228). If one measures the texts chosen for study by Slade's parameters, differentiation of them in terms of mystical or spiritual would be difficult. Gandhiji may perhaps be called spiritual while Swami Ramdas is a mystic. The same distinction would not be applicable to Paramahansa Yogananda and Purohit Swami. The apparent distinctions between the human and the divine do get blurred in the narrative. Further, Indian spiritual masters have identified karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga as four paths for the quest and realisation of the self. Each one of these paths may be chosen according to individual temperament. But they also believe that
these paths are not mutually exclusive. One marga is inevitably linked with the other three and all four are inextricably linked. Thus, though Gandhiji, for instance, was basically a champion of karma yoga, his zest for God-realisation was manifest not only in service (karma), but also in his inherent devotion (bhakti), in his intellectual apprehension of the scriptures (jnana) and in the practice of raja yoga. Swami Ramdas was a champion of bhakti yoga, but he was also a jnani, a great karma yogi and practised raja yoga. Paramahansa Yogananda was a great exponent of the kriyayoga, but he was likewise a jnani, a great bhakta and a karma yogi. Their autobiographies represent the complex spiritual pursuit of all four paths. Slade's distinction primarily applies to the dominant strain of Western autobiographies, and they break down in the context of Indian texts.

Hence in this study, the term "spiritual" is used as an umbrella term to include those who are in conscious pursuit of the Self through all four paths.

A third question derives from the insight of Slade's reference to spiritual autobiographies as a “hermeneutic genre”. What Slade means is elaborated by Linda H. Peterson in her study titled "Gender and Autobiographical Form: the Case of Spiritual Autobiography" where she points out that the English autobiography derives from a Protestant tradition of religious introspection, one that is insistently "hermeneutic":

By "hermeneutic" I mean first that the autobiography from Bunyan to Gosse has placed in the foreground the act of self-interpretation: the autobiographer's interpretation of himself and his experience. Second I mean that English autobiographies have traditionally appropriated their pattern and principles of interpretation from biblical hermeneutics (Originally from biblical typology) and that they have done so self-consciously. One might even call autobiography a hermeneutic genre (Peterson 1988: 213).

If Western spiritual autobiographies depend to a large extent on Biblical interpretation, our autobiographies depend on the interpretation of Hindu
culture rather than on a single text like the Bible. These autobiographies have participated in and contributed to the re-interpretation of Hindu scriptures, cultural practices and spiritual traditions to suit the need of the hour in which they were written. For most of the Western autobiographers, Biblical hermeneutics was the source of rhetorical support in narrating their spiritual experiences. Spengemann's point in his *The Forms of Autobiography* (1980) that St. Augustine devised three autobiographical forms viz., historical self-recollection, philosophical self-exploration, and poetic self-expression from which every subsequent autobiographer would select the one most appropriate to his situation is significant. He also identifies certain autobiographies like *Grace Abounding* and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* under historical autobiography, *The Confessions of Jean Jaques Rousseau* and *The Prelude* under philosophical autobiography and *Sartor Resartus*, *David Copperfield* and *The Scarlet Letter* under poetic autobiography. Such a framework comes out of Spengemann's true identification of the trends in Western thought and literature in relation to the notions of the self. Similarly it is important for us to construct our own appropriate frameworks to understand Indian texts. Indian spiritual autobiographies reflect the cultural specificities, cultural encounters and cultural transitions in relation to political developments and dissemination of knowledge in Indian society. The inapplicability of a Western theoretical framework to Indian texts is reiterated by Partha Chaterjee in his *Nation and its Fragments* when he observes that the "inner" domain of national culture has been different and deemed superior in our nationalist discourse (Chatterjee 1993: 6). The study will closely examine the nature of the difference and meeting points in the texts chosen for study. Taken this way, these texts may be seen as a part of the genre of cultural hermeneutics. These autobiographies as "self-life-sketches", do not seek to proclaim the ego-based notion of the self. Instead, they attempt to share the experience of the gradual effacement of the self as ego-sense and its confluent expansion into the Self. It is this experience of
of "expansion" that becomes indescribable. Autobiography is perhaps the best medium to communicate the paradox of existence since the author speaks from a certain level of cognising the nature of Being even while consciously remaining in the range of physical consciousness that embodies the ego sense. These texts thus embody the absent presence of the author in the act of sharing the dissolution of the ego, the experience of "decentredness," the bliss of self-realisation called aparokshaanubhuti. The urge to share this bliss in fact leads them to search for a befitting rhetoric to communicate. The very expressions in Eastern philosophy like “advaita”, “aparokshanubhuti”, “aspashtam druktamatre”, “nirmuktam nityamuktam” that convey the verbal paradox of the human-divine communion are autobiographical. “Ascharyām” (wonder) is the word employed in the Bhagavad Gita to convey the ineffability of the atman. The word also suggests the sense of the seeker being a part and yet not completely merged into the Being. But its very intimation results in evoking a sense of wonder in the seeker. The beginning and end of spiritual quest is this sense of wonder. The very act of reading such texts should be urged by this sense of wonder and willingness to wonder. As Lord Krishna puts it to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita,

\[
\text{ascalryavad pasyati kashchidenam} \\
\text{ascalryavd vadati tadaivachanya} \\
\text{ascalryav vachaina manyashrunoti} \\
\text{shrutvapayainam vedanachava kashchid} (29.2).
\]

(One sees the atman as wonder, another speaks of the atman as wonder, yet another hears of the atman as wonder; still no one knows what truly it is.)

The sense of wonder remains and this is what the texts chosen for study also embody. In the attempt to communicate, the texts divulge the sense of wonder felt at points where the experience cannot be embodied in words. Our scriptures and our saints time and again emphasise the point that verbal communication breaks down when one attempts to explain the ultimate
experience. The expressions of paradox that we find in all the scriptures are a testimony to this view. It is in such a sense that spiritual autobiography as a genre also becomes the rhetoric of paradox; the form becomes the rhetoric, one undermines the other. Gandhiji's autobiography, for instance, anticipates this in his Introduction: "There are some things which are known only to oneself and one's maker. These are clearly incommunicable" (Gandhi 1927: x). Purohit Swami, in his concluding chapter of the autobiography also addresses the same issue:

Matter and spirit, illusion and reality, maya and brahma are all equally eternal, and therefore the relations we indicate by the contrasted terms are inscrutable. Information cannot enlighten us concerning them; we can only realise something through experience. . . . we can say nothing that the discursive intelligence can understand, save in distant images and parables, for language is sensuous and reflects the illusions of matter which forever veil and disguise the spirit (Purohit Swami 1993: 150-51).

It is interesting to note that matter, illusion, and maya are considered as "sensuous" and are all aspects of the eternal, though they are apparently dichotomous in relation to spirit, Reality and Brahman. The problem with words is perhaps that it arises out of the sense of dichotomy and is an instrument of communication in a world that lives in a context of relativity. However for those who have not yet had the experience, only words can inform them there is such an experience, one's very existence is a part of it and that we do not need words once we know that experience for ourselves. This is perhaps the function of spiritual autobiography. The lines also interestingly show how the very existence of language is a sign of spiritual ignorance (it has been pointed out that in Nietzsche rhetoric loses its instrumental character and becomes the name for the rootlessness of our being (Bender 1990: 27)). These are some of the ways in which the texts undermine themselves in the narrative.
Nevertheless, saints and sages of all religions have down the ages resorted to various rhetorical devices such as figurative speech, philosophical discourses, songs and commentaries to explain the process of yoking the soul with God for the benefit of humanity. The advantage of spiritual autobiography is that the narration of the nature of spiritual experience, the personal touch in the God-devotee relationship that is conveyed to the reader through the autobiography, often bring a reader closer to the realm of God communion than do other genres.

However in these texts they do not confine themselves to any sense of the conventional framework of autobiography except of course for the fact that they have a bearing on the conventional form. Their pursuit of karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga to search for the root of Being also throw light on their temperament and social location. Autobiography becomes the rhetoric, the mode of verbalising the ways of life for self-realisation and essentially mark its difference from its Western counter part. Their narratives are thus the re-enactment of the performance of their spiritual pursuit. It is qualified as a performance because, as we shall see, the perception of the world as a cosmic drama, as a cosmic motion picture is a recurring motif in these texts. Life in general and self-realisation or its pursuit in particular, is seen as a conscious enactment of one's role in this cosmic drama and not as destiny's handiwork. Accordingly, the study identifies various rahas and bhavas that surface in these narratives besides adhunta (surprise) or ascharya (wonder) experienced in the course of enacting this role.

It is in this spirit that the chapters have been titled "the rhetoric of bhakti", "the rhetoric of karma", and so on. By virtue of the choice of the English language and the context of these texts, it is clear that they are not monologues of the author, nor are they dialogues between the author and the reader. They are rather an interplay between various voices, various forms of narratives, various contexts and even planes of consciousness. The very act of
reading becomes "dialogic". The act of writing the text in English is also a dialogic experience. The bilingual nature of these texts cannot be ignored since the experiences and the interactions take place in an indigenous setting, and in the indigenous languages. The autobiographer is also thus a translator. The expression "dialogic" is strongly rooted in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. "Each word", according to Bakhtin, "tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions, contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word" (Bakhtin 1981: 293). Consequently Bakhtin sees language not as a neutral medium but as "over population with intentions of others" (294). It is in spiritual autobiographies like Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* that we can see Bakhtin's multiplicity of voices at work to the maximum degree. The autobiographer is thus a ventriloquist as well. The spiritual vision of the self as universal in fact accommodates the post modern view of the "self as a position, a locus where discourses intersect". 13

Besides, the narration of one's own spiritual quest as autobiography challenges the notion in Hindu tradition of the autobiographical act as bad manners. The texts include various narrative props that generally may be seen as too fictitious to be included in a genre that takes its form from memory. For example, the employment of dialogue between people in profusion in the narrative makes one wonder how it is possible for the autobiographer to remember a dialogue that went on between two people so well. Would not this undermine the "authenticity" of the text? The texts themselves provide the answer. Autobiography is not only a distinct recollection of memory, but as pointed out earlier, it is also a re-enactment of lived experience. It does not undermine the authenticity of experience but challenges the role of the author or the reader as the sole "authority" who constructs meanings. The texts blur generic boundaries and conventions of reading. For these reasons, the texts stand the test of literary criticism.
Note


2 These terms resemble Bakhtin's "heteroglossia". They, incidentally, also have a strong bearing on Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality that reveals how "every seemingly closed, evidently personal or otherwise situational utterance actually consists of all but infinite interlocking networks of reference, quotation, and paraquotation...every text merges without boundary into every other, just as for Bakhtin --...every word abides in, and itself contains, countless intersecting ideological contexts" (Bender 1990: 37).

3 Partha Chatterjee in his Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World has identified this conflict between matter and spirit and similar binaries as the post-Enlightenment "thematic".

4 However, the Western tendency to verbalise spiritual experience is criticised too. For example, Julius Lester points out in "Cultural Nationalism" the following: "With Western culture's emphasis on the verb, the result has been the creation of a subject-object relationship between man and his experience. The verb-oriented culture separates man from his experience in such a way that for a man to relate his experience he must set himself on one side, the experience on the other, and the verb in between to connect the two. Thus, for example, for the German mystic Meister Eckhart to state his oneness with God, he had to say "I am God," which to his congregation sounded like the highest egotism. If Meister Eckhart had been African, he would simply have been possessed by the rhythm of his particular God and exemplified the dynamic oneness" (Lester 1970: 522). Interestingly, in the texts chosen for study, there is a clear resistance to describing spiritual experience in the way Meister Eckhart verbalises. We also find a constant postponement, a deferring, of the verbalising of experience.

5 I have deliberately chosen the word "inflections" in order to show that spiritual autobiographies work like variants of the Renaissance discourse.

6 See Pandit Sivanath Sastri's History of the Brahmo Samaj and Partha Chatterjee's The Nation and Its Fragments for details on their meeting and its effect on Keshub Chandra Sen.
7 See Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*?: "It is not surprising that in the history of political movements in India, Bankim's direct disciples were the 'revolutionary terrorists' "(Chatterjee 1996: 79). Also see "Preface" to *Anandamath* by William J. Jackson and "Translator's Introduction" in the Orient Paperbacks edition (1992) of the novel. The introduction to the author also points out that *Anandamath* "gave tremendous impetus to the various religious, patriotic and national activities beginning with Hindu Missionary activity and culminating in the terrorist movement in Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century"(2).

8 Shanti also cautions Jiban regarding the dynamics of power and dissent in the post-battle leadership context as can be seen when she tells him "If they see us now they are sure to say: 'For fear of atonement with death Jiban hid himself somewhere during the battle. Now he is out to claim a share in our kingdom' ". Echoes of these occurring in Gandhiji's adoption of passive resistance and non-violent struggle and his apprehensions regarding leadership questions in the post-independence period show how Bankim's *Anandamath* can be read as anticipating Gandhiji.


10 *Advaita Vedanta* of Adi Sankaracharya

11 "The consciousness of the *atman* is a matter of intuitional perception, and as such, any amount of mere ratiocination cannot help to comprehend it. It is more to be felt than reasoned" *Kathopanishad* 2:9.

12 These expressions are from the opening sloka *oi Narayaneeyam* of Melpathur Bhattathiri who lived nearly 500 years ago in Kerala, a contemporary of Poonthanam who wrote *Jnanappaana*.

13 These are the words of Felicity Nussbaum in Jan Walsh Hokenson's "Intercultural Autobiography" (Hokenson 1995: 106).