Introduction

This study examines five Indian spiritual autobiographies in English written and published between 1900 and 1950. The texts chosen for study are chronologically speaking Swami Ramdas's autobiography in two volumes, *In Quest of God* (1923) and *In the Vision of God* (1935); Mahatma Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), originally written in Gujarati and translated into English by Mahadev Desai; Purohit Swami's *The Autobiography of an Indian Monk* (1932); Sitanath Tattvabhusan's *Autobiography* (1942) and Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). Spiritual narratives, Western or Eastern, are generally considered to be unrelated to social and material concerns. However, this study assumes that Indian spiritual autobiographies in English written between 1900 and 1950 do have several significant social messages to offer and that it is worthwhile to attempt to trace them.¹ These autobiographies written during the first fifty years of the twentieth century, coincide with the nationalist movement in India and bear an intimate relation to the revolutionary changes that were taking place in Indian social, political, cultural and religious spheres. These autobiographies are significantly sandwiched between the nineteenth century Indian Renaissance and India's independence. This period also coincides significantly with the 'Modern' and the various debates' in the West on Enlightenment Reason and Post-Enlightenment thought not to speak of the Post-Relativity Theory situation which undermined most of those thought patterns. This study explores both the spiritual dimension of the autobiographies — their status as texts portraying the individual spiritual quest for self-realisation - and their key supporting role as contributions to the discourse' of Indian nationalism where the dichotomy between the social and the spiritual gets blurred. The study assumes that these texts offer resistance to modernity particularly to Western cultural hegemony, participate in the process of nation building, define the
identity of the nation and mark radical rhetorical shifts in the nationalist thought.

Partha Chatterjee in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* identifies the growth of nationalist thought particularly in the colonial world as an "evolution" and relates it with the very historicity of thought (Chatterjee 1996: 42). "Thought" at any given point of time and space in *history* works like a catalyst in society and stimulates reversible reactions between the past and the present. This can be viewed as a part of the constant struggle to achieve an imagined, ideal state of equilibrium and harmony between the individual and society. Spiritual autobiographies here are identified as catalysts that participate in this reversible reaction. The study assumes that spiritual autobiography is a part of the "fascinating story of the encounter between a world-conquering Western thought and the intellectual modes of non-Western culture" (41). The attempt is also to show that these texts seek to strike a fine balance between silence and speech, tradition and modernity, the East and the West, the material and the spiritual and several such contending claims that the Indian elite met with during that period.

We need to underscore the relation between autobiography, spirituality and nationalism at this point. Autobiography enables an interface between the inner life of the writer and the reading public. In this process of "self-life-sketch", autobiography explores not only the writer's own notions of the self but also shares notions of the self in general in a "cultural moment". In this study, the term spiritual autobiography is employed to mean the writer's portrayal of the self in its interaction with the outer world and in its conscious pursuit of the higher states of consciousness in a socio-cultural context. The link between spirituality and nationalism in India is not a new thing. The contribution of spiritual masters like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo to nationalist thought has been thoroughly discussed by various scholars. The introduction of autobiography into the spiritual domain and of the English
language as the medium is of special interest here. In contrast to the age-old Western autobiographical tradition, verbalising one's own supramental experiences by a spiritual aspirant or a saint in India was a rare occurrence. Predominantly Western in origin, these autobiographies represent not only a dynamic transaction between the "inner" and the "outer" but also the encounter between Western and Eastern literary traditions and between the coloniser and the colonised.

Partha Chatterjee in his *Nation and Its Fragments* (1994) challenges notions of our nationhood as a derivation from the West and ascertains a distinct contribution of our imagination to nationalism. I wish to quote Chatterjee here to show my points of agreement with, extensions to and departure from him. He points out that

History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must forever remain colonised.

I object to this argument not for any sentimental reason. I object because I cannot reconcile it with the evidence on anticolonial nationalism. The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the "modular" forms of the national society propagated by the modern West (Chatterjee 1994: 5).

Chatterjee further shows that anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices
into two domains - the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture. This formula is I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa (6).

The autobiographies chosen for study assert their recognizable difference from any Western experience in various ways. The various culture specific rhetoric employed to communicate spiritual experiences, as we shall see, is a good example. Chatterjee's view also somehow gives us the impression that the spiritual was kept as distinct and even mysterious in order to preserve the essence, put up a resistance and assert superiority in that domain. Numerous colonial narratives also show that this is true to a great extent. Interestingly, spiritual autobiographies follow another route. Spiritual autobiographies do not occlude the domain of the public, the material and the Western from the domain of the private, the spiritual and the Indian. Instead by communicating aspects of the spiritual to the material, the texts demystify the spiritual, initiate a dialogue and subtly challenge the dichotomy between the two. These narratives also refrain from glorifying the essential difference. Instead they become a platform for introspection and critique religious culture. Chatterjee's study focuses basically on nineteenth century Bengal while this study will examine autobiographies by spiritual aspirants and saints from various parts of the country and written and published in the first half of the twentieth century. Hence the texts are to a certain extent representational. This will help us to
discern the diversity and trends in the rhetoric of spiritual discourse as well. Points of such interface are an extension of Chatterjee's view that our difficulty arises because "we have all taken the claims of nationalism to be a political movement much too literally and much too seriously" (5). Accordingly, spiritual autobiographies project nationhood as ways of life, while providing, among other things, vignettes of family traditions, pilgrimage, travel ethos, modes of expressing devotion, communal amity and defiance of caste and gender discrimination.

It is apposite at this point to define terms like "religion", "spirituality" and "nationalism" in the context of this study. The spiritual autobiographies chosen for study show that these three terms are inextricably linked. First, "religion" is understood here as ways of life, prescribed or non-prescribed, if consistently or meticulously followed that will lead to the experience of the spirit of cosmic play or what is known as self-realisation. In Hinduism, karma yoga (service), bhakti yoga (devotion), jnana yoga (wisdom) and raja yoga (the exercise of will power) are various ways of life that facilitate self-realisation. "Spirituality" is the aspiration for that state of consciousness in which the self communes and merges with the spirit and realises the meaning and the essence of life. The texts chosen for study are called spiritual autobiographies because the authors narrate their experiments with various ways of life like karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga that lead them to spirituality and self-realisation. The autobiographies show that not all the authors were fully evolved, self-realised people. They however stand the test of spirituality in their conscious choice and pursuit of a way of life to attain self-realisation. The term "rhetoric" is frequently used in this study. Here the term stands for the art of communicating spiritual experience through the paths of karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga. The study assumes that the portrayal of karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga in these texts represents certain Indian ways of life and certain modes of our cultural and knowledge transactions with the West. It will be interesting
to see how these ways of life and modes of transaction dispel certain mistaken notions of religion and spirituality and widen the scope of secularism in a pluralistic nation. The very choice of autobiography as the form and the English language as the medium also has a persuasive role in the rhetoric. This aspect will be further explored in the second and third sections of the second chapter. By "nationalism" and its related terms like "nationality" and "nationhood", I mean the spirit of co-existence of races in a vast geographical area, diverse in its climatic conditions and landscaping, that shares social, religious, cultural, political, linguistic and ideological differences and similarities simultaneously. The relation between religion, spirituality and nationalism in these autobiographies addresses the changing notions of the "self and the "other" in social, political, cultural, ideological, economic and literary spheres in the wake of modernity.

The above definitions have evolved out of my analysis of these autobiographies which were written prior to the partition of India. In what way is the study of these texts relevant to the present times? The introduction of democracy in India after gaining political independence from the British has radically changed our perceptions of the nation and the self. There are reasons to believe that it is best suited to serve the interests of a monolithic political, linguistic and religious culture. When adopted in a nation of diverse cultures like our own, the result as we see now is the proliferation of various difficulties and a process of churning. The "self has now affiliations with power, wielded through knowledge of these political strategies. Democracy has become an exercise in conflict management and in the promoting of interests of various collectivities like class, caste, language, region and religion. However, the texts under study instead share the lived experiences of certain individuals, who in the course of their quest for the self as citizens of the world, adopted a midway between the two extremes of self-abnegation and self-promotion and tradition and modernity.
The causes for the preponderance of spiritual autobiographies during the nationalist phase are integral to the observations made above and are also examined in the second section of the second chapter and also at various points in the subsequent chapters that deal with individual texts. It also needs to be noted that the texts examined were written by Hindu men. Studies in the Renaissance show that colonial enterprise directly affected the Hindu religious practices in various ways. The effects were immediately cognised among the Hindu elite. One must hasten to add that just as it is not possible to define anything like an Indian culture, (or even the term culture for that matter) it is also not possible to define Hindu culture as a singular entity. The multiplicity can be understood from the variety of discourses that proliferated in the Renaissance itself. It is possible to say that at various points of time, certain trends in this culture proliferate or predominate or tend to define themselves as the representative voices of Hinduism. Hinduism, basically understood as the Sanatana Dharma, revolves around a human being’s duty towards society and describes ways of life that serve to fulfil this duty. His or her birth as a human being in itself is construed as the enjoyment of a right and in doing so he or she should fulfil certain duties. The fulfillment of duties leads to self-realisation. The paths of karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga are ways of life that facilitate fulfillment of this objective. While following these paths the authors of these autobiographies treat scriptures not as prescriptions on ways of life but as descriptions because they freely experiment with these various ways of life. For instance, the autobiographies explore notions of individual freedom that spiritual realisation entails. The authors deviate radically from the conventional Hindu social structure and defy class, caste and gender distinctions. In other words we see that the authors follow these ways of life not because any scripture prescribes them but because a certain way of life suits their temperament. Though these authors are men, they reveal extraordinary sensitivity to the patriarchal social structure and defy it. The autobiographies
show how even the world of spiritual pursuit is not free from male domination and the narrative act subsequently defies it. The autobiographies narrate the nation through these representations and resistance strategies. The study sees *karma, bhakti, jnana* and *raja yoga*, the four ways of life, as an integral part of national identity. The variety, methodology and freedom, which these paths offer, are responsible for the identity of the nation as a spiritual land.

The study proceeds chronologically by first examining the Renaissance as a background to the study. Accordingly, Chapter Two titled "Backgrounds" is divided into three parts viz. "The Renaissance — A Reading Back", "Autobiography in India" and "Quest for Theory". The first part, "The Renaissance -- A Reading Back", defines certain theoretical concepts frequently used in the study and undertakes an analysis of the Renaissance in India as a backdrop to the study of twentieth century Indian spiritual autobiographies. The chapter identifies certain inflections of the Renaissance and sees spiritual autobiographies generically as a product/effect of these inflections. The term “inflection” is defined in the first part of Chapter Two. Further the literature of the Renaissance period and spiritual autobiography as an effect of the Renaissance are seen as contributions to the interpretation of culture. They uniquely define modernity by their modes of resistance to its onset during the colonial period. Cultural resistance in the light of these inflections is identified and defined 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 worship methods, new knowledge systems and new cultural discourses. These movements are thus viewed as pioneering attempts at decolonisation which contribute to nationalist thought and give new dimensions to the construction of cultural and national identity. The section concludes with the view that eclecticism, spiritualising of religion, *scientism*, the integration of Science and Yoga, *disenchantment* with violence and the spirit of service which were high points of these socio-religious
movements in fact served as re-adjustment mechanisms to effect resistance (very much like immunisation in medical science) and to prevent things from "falling apart". Spiritual autobiographies as inflections of the Renaissance show how the quest for self-realisation as "ways of life" is a part of constant negotiation between tradition and modernity and notions of the self and the other in the colonial and post-colonial set up in a multi-cultural state. In the process, these narrative acts demonstrate this negotiation by amalgamating a predominantly "Western" form with "Eastern" experience and become part of the ongoing quest for rhetorical structures to communicate spiritual experience.

Section two of this Background chapter titled "Autobiography in India" undertakes a study of the nature and scope of the form and language of autobiography in India as a literary genre in general and of spiritual autobiography in particular in its social, political and cultural context. The section also addresses at the outset the apparent contradictions pointed out very often in relating spiritual masters of India with the autobiographical act.

Section three of this chapter, "Quest for Theory", attempts to problematise some of the characteristic features of the texts under study. The "quest" takes off from the premise that though spiritual experience per se remains largely independent of external influences, in spiritual discourses the language, the words and the forms chosen to narrate spiritual experience carry and convey strong socio-political and cultural messages and thus project Various dimensions of the cultural moments in which they were narrated. The chapter also demonstrates how Western assumptions are usually unsatisfactory as theoretical base for these composite texts. The primary concerns of this study, viz., the aspects of the "self, the presence of other literary devices and the rhetoric of the narrative of spiritual quest through karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga and raja yoga, demand a theoretical framework that can accommodate the social, political, cultural and spiritual inflections in the text. I, therefore, use
certain aspects of Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism in my attempt at recognising and problematising these inflections.

Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven examine the texts in accordance with the paths chosen by the authors to attain self-realisation viz., karma, bhakti, jnana and raja yoga. Gandhiji's role as a Karma Yogi in politics finds mention at various points in almost all the autobiographies chosen for this study. Therefore the analysis begins with Gandhiji's autobiography widely read in its English translation.

Chapter Three titled "The Rhetoric of Karma Yoga" examines Gandhiji's An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth as a spiritual discourse rendered through the rhetoric of nationalism. The chapter at the outset identifies the dialogic imperatives in the text that reveal the author not as an individual per se but as a way of life. The attempt is to see how Gandhiji as a way of life affects and is affected by social changes of the period. Further his experiments with ways of life explore how decolonisation of the nation can be facilitated by decolonising the mind. In Gandhiji we see how self-realisation becomes not only the end but also the means to that end through a passionate pursuit of karma yoga. The first section of the chapter examines both the form and rhetoric of the text and sees how they participate in amalgamating nationalism with spirituality. To that end the study identifies a discursive pattern that emerges in the narrative and this is systematically examined under four sections viz., "Dynamics of Garhastya", "Potency of Brahmacharya", "Redefining Vanaprastha" and "Inflections of Sannyasa".

Chapter Four titled "The Rhetoric of Bhakti Yoga - Dasya and Putra Bhava" examines the two-volume autobiography "of Swami Ramdas as a discourse on bhakti yoga which critiques certain aspects of national character and national consciousness. The chapter at the outset examines bhakti as a rasa which manifests itself in various bhavas in the God-devotee relationsliip. The second section of the chapter examines the rhetoric of bhakti bhava in Swami
Ramdas's autobiography. Section three of the chapter examines the socio-cultural dynamics that significantly permeate his narrative of *bhakti* and of his pilgrimage across the length and breadth of the country. Pilgrimages are thus seen as a socio-spiritual act that serves to both spiritually charter human mindscape and geographically reiterate national consciousness. The study reveals the role of the railways as a colonial prop during the period in undermining the spirit of various indigenous devices that accommodated the indigent and the itinerant *sadhus*. Swami Ramdas's autobiography is seen as a contribution to nationalist discourse for its specific critiquing of a highly caste-ridden, caste conscious and gender discriminatory social set up of the period.

Some of the above aspects are also found in the autobiography of Purohit Swami. In Chapter Five titled, "The Rhetoric of *Bhakti Yoga - Madbura and Anuraga Bhava*" the characteristic features of the *bhakti bhava* of Purohit Swami are examined. This is followed by an analysis of the socio-political dimensions in the autobiography, particularly, in the light of W.B.Yeats's introduction to the text and the nexus between gender, *bhakti* and a reversal of what appears to be, to adapt an expression from colonial theory, the Western male gaze.

Chapter Six titled "The Rhetoric of *Jnana Yoga*" examines the autobiography of Sitanath Tattvabhushan as a nationalist discourse in the light of the rhetoric of *jnana* employed in the text. The text is similar to the autobiographies of Purohit Swami and Swami Ramdas in terms of the critique of the social transitions and of the tensions in inter and intra-religious relationship. The author's disenchantment with schisms in the Brahma Samaj is latent in the discourse and is in a way instrumental in the production of the text. The dialogic imperatives are striking since Tattvabhushan inducts other genres like diary entries into the text to reveal the spirit of his philosophical inquiry. The text also reveals the role of the colonial subject initially as an unassuming votary of the British Empire and then as a contestant.
Tattvabhushan, as one of the leaders of the *Brahmā* Samaj movement, squarely addresses the issues relating to colonial practices and also the inner communal tensions that delayed the winning of the country's independence. The autobiography shows the dynamic tension in the philosophy of *Brahmaism* between the influence of Classical Western metaphysics that held spirit and matter as dichotomous and Hindu thought that held an organic view of the universe. Empiricism in the West has yet to keep pace with this organic view of the universe and Tattvabhushan's return to Upanishadic thought, while intellectually envisioning this unity, hopes for the future to endorse and prove this scientifically as well.

Chapter Seven titled "The rhetoric of *Raja Yoga*" examines Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* as a nationalist discourse rendered through the rhetoric of *Raja Yoga*. The text is seen as heralding a significant shift in the rhetoric of Hindu spiritual discourse in the wake of the post-Relativity theory era. In a sense the book picks up the thread from Tattvabhushan. Einstein's Theory of Relativity earmarked radical shifts in scientific discourse in the West for it undermined the post-Enlightenment trends of thought. To that end, Section One of the chapter titled "The Physics of *Yoga*" examines the contextual aspects that render the rhetoric integral to nationalist thought. Section Two titled "Autobiography as Research" examines the architectonics of the text as integral to the spirit of the work. Section Three titled "Miracles - A Critique" identifies the miracle discourse in the narrative as a strong reading of *Yoga Sutra* in relation to modern scientific theories that challenge the classical Western metaphysical notion of matter and spirit as dichotomous entities. Consequently, the text is seen as addressing the cultural experience of the period as well. In other words, the felt dynamics between science and spirituality in that cultural moment permeates the text both rhetorically and content-wise. Moreover the employment of the rhetoric of *raja yoga* as a scientific discourse projects yoga as capable of addressing the concepts of
consciousness, space and time that intrigue the modern world of scientific inquiry. At this point the narrative functions as a counter-hegemonic exercise by not contradicting but by accommodating certain aspects of modernity into the spiritual discourse. Section Four titled "Linking Past and Future" traces the fusion of the rhetoric of the Renaissance and the compelling rhetoric of science in Yogananda. The popularity of *raja yoga* in the present day can definitely be attributed to the persuasiveness achieved through this fusion that other masters were to emulate.

"Conclusion" recapitulates in brief the findings of the study and identifies these texts as both inter and intra discursive as they address nationalism in the spiritual agenda. The relevance of these texts to the twenty-first century is that their life-sketches problematise modern notions of secularism. Secularism is not life divorced from religion. Nor is life seen as unproblematic if wedded to religion. The autobiographies are relevant as they deliberate on the notions of religion, culture, secularism and spirituality as problematic both in theory and practice in a modern civil society. The identity of the self as a citizen in a multi-cultural postcolonial society is in fact a constant negotiation and struggle to attain the difficult and delicate balance between tradition and modernity, between the self and the other. Secularism in these texts emerges as ongoing experiments with ways of life, as a dialogic exercise in a multi-cultural State.
Notes

1 I have used the term autobiography in its strictest sense, I have not included memoirs or edited versions of journal entries like Sri Aurobindo's *On Himself* in this study.

2 Georges Gusdorf points out that autobiographies are placed in their cultural moment (Gusdorf 1980: 35).

3 I have deliberately avoided using terms like "saint", "ascetic" and "mystic" while describing men or women in the Hindu spiritual tradition. Hindu spiritual tradition employs terms like *brahmachari*, *sadhu*, *sannyasi*, *yogi*, *avadhoota*, and so on that indicate various paths of spiritual pursuit and stages of spiritual progress. However, for the sake of convenience, the term "sainthood" which William James introduces as the "collective name for the ripe^ fruits of religion in a character" (James 1961: 220) can be invoked to describe the spiritual status of the authors I am studying. It is interesting that even James points out that he is using this word in spite of a certain flavour of "sanctimoniousness" which sometimes clings to it, because no other word suggests as well the exact combination of affections which the text goes on to describe. William James defines the saintly character as "the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy" (220). He frames "a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness" (220) which have the following distinct features. These features are, to paraphrase James, a feeling in a wider life; self-surrender to the control of the ideal power; an immense clarion and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down; and a shifting of the emotional centre towards affirmations. These are, no doubt, universal traits of spiritual people.

4 Following the spelling used by Sitanath Tattvabhushan, I have used the letter "a" in expressions like "Brahma Samaj", "Brahmaism" and "Brahma" instead of the phonetic spelling popularly used as in "Brahmo Samaj", "Brahmoism" and "Brahmo" throughout this study.