Introduction

In Indian literary history, autobiography as a reflection on the self and its relationship to private and public realms essentially developed in the 19th century although it grew out of a long tradition of biographical writing. Biography, as a way of telling the stories of kings, as history, and as a moral tale of the good and righteous life of an exemplary figure, has a tradition of more than 2000 years in Indian writing. The charitra katha, appears to be a primary motive in the composition of the various Rameyanas. The Sanskrit play Raghuvansham derives from a similar impulse. The composers of Mahabharata saw their function as writing an Itibasa (history). One of the earliest examples of prose narrative in Indian languages, the Jataka stories tell of the many lives of the Buddha through his various reincarnations teach the righteous path through an exemplary life. However, despite these biographical traditions, as G. N. Devy has observed, there was little scope for autobiographical writing in a society where the “artist had practised, very scrupulously a policy of self-effacement” and in which the ego was believed to be “only an infinitesimal part of the brahman.”

A significant break with the earlier Brahminic literature occurred in various Indian languages around the 11th century. The literatures of roughly six centuries (11th to 17th) of poetic and devotional effervescence is categorized by the term Bhakti (devotional) literature. The literatures of saint-poets composed in newly emerging Indian languages (Bhashas), challenged the Brahminical world-view. They also challenged, and indeed altered, conventional ideas of literature and literary language. An increasing assertion of the self is evident at
the level of cosmology as well as poetry, as the writers spoke and wrote of the self in relation to the spiritual. Their goal was, however, sublimation of the self in its quest to be one with the divine, and hence this autobiographical poetry speaks of the longings of the inner self, without actually emphasizing the relation of the self to the world.

It is this literary and cultural milieu, in conjunction with Western influence, that modern Indian autobiographies emerged in the 19th century. The early autobiographical writing was aware that it was laying a new path and breaking with tradition. This awareness informed the first Gujarati autobiography. Narmadshankar Lalshanker (1833-86) wrote and printed Mari Hakikat (My Factual Story) in 1866 at the age of 33. He noted: “For someone like me to write his own story and moreover to print and publish it during my lifetime itself, may appear disrespectful to our people. I am not a learned man, nor a warrior nor a religious leader, nor am I a wealthy philanthropist.” Despite this conscious break with the past Narmad wrote his story because this act, he felt, would allow him to gaze at his own life and in doing so, he would also be able “to institute the practice of writing the autobiography which does not exist amongst us.” It is notable, however, that the book was not distributed until after his death in 1886, and the full text comprising of other self-writing not published until 1994.

This self-conscious sense of being a pioneer is present in other autobiographical writings of the 19th century. Around 1892 Fakir Mohan Senapat (1843-1918) wrote the first autobiography Atmajeevancharitra (Story of My Life) in the Oriya language, first published in book form in 1927 but with excerpts in journals before that. After stating that his own life was too “insignificant” to make an “autobiography worthwhile” he chose to write it nevertheless because the “Oriya language is particularly deficient in autobiographies.” He hoped that “this sacred motherland of ours will see many autobiographers in the near future. I am merely laying the foundation for them to build on.”
Thus, it appears that the early autobiographies were not only expressions of individual lives but also representative of a linguistic community and a literary tradition finding outlets for expression. There seemed to be an increasing need not only to tell the story of the self but also to modernize various Indian literary traditions by introducing a genre that appeared to those pioneers essentially Western in origin. That a primary motive was to enrich one's own literary tradition is evident from the fact that these early autobiographies were written in Indian languages, rather than English; but it is also possible that the early autobiographers felt that speaking of one's self with authenticity and truthfulness required writing in the mother-tongue rather than in an acquired alien tongue. This tension between writing in an “alien” form and in one's own language surfaced in the almost mandatory attempts at self-effacement in Narmad's and Fakir Mohan Senapati's autobiographies. This tension is resolved by the assertion of that self which is the inheritor of a literary tradition.

Another important feature of these early autobiographies is their presentation of the story of the self as less an attempt at reflection than as a matter-of-fact narrative of events as they happened, in chronicle form. The family, for example, appears as genealogy. The idea of conjugal life with all its intimacies has no place in it. Narmad represents this impersonal trend by recording the death of his wife simply by recounting that “in 1852 my wife became pregnant but she gave birth to a still-born child on the eighth month, (and) as a result she died soon after at the age of 16-17.”

Some of the early autobiographies contain a mixture of modes of life-writing. They also contain large section of diaries or journals, along with letters and testimonials received and sent. Narmad's autobiography is divided into two sections, the first part comprising the story of his life to the age of 33, while the second part contains periodic additions to the narrative in the form of diary entries. The other major Gujarati autobiography of the 19th century, Atmaruttam, written by Manibhai Nabhubhai, also employs the same technique. The use of more than one mode of self-writing in the early
autobiographies suggests a certain hesitation in adopting fully the form of linear narrative, as if the discomfort with self-writing could be ameliorated by employing the “historical records” of letter and diary. As a result these autobiographies tend to resist becoming reflections on the self.

Two very different 19th century works did however, manage to capture the progression in the self-sense of their writers. They are Govardhanram Madhavram Tripathi's *Scrapbooks* and Rassundari Debi's *Amar Jiban*.

It is in the writing of these two individuals, from entirely dissimilar backgrounds, that autobiographical writing in India acquires maturity. Govardhanram maintained diaries, or "scrapbooks" as he called them. Unlike all other autobiographical works of that period, they are written in English. Govardhanram wrote other literary works — a novel, poetry, and critical writing in Gujarati. Hence, this decision to maintain the *Scrapbooks* in English was very significant. For Govardhanram his literary work was his "service towards the country." It was as part of the project of cultivating the minds and souls of his countrymen that his literature was written in Gujarati. By contrast, his *Scrapbooks* were not intended to be part of the project of imagining a nation. The *Scrapbooks* are, instead, a record of the journey of the soul in the quest of that service to the nation. They are Govardhanram’s notes to himself.

Why would someone so conscious of the importance of language choice choose to write about himself in English? To say that his inner world was captured by the colonial encounter would be to simplify the issue. Govardhanram introduces for the first time a sharp divide between the public and the private, between the realm that deals with societal obligations and that which governs obligations to one’s own self. This division is, however, made with an acute awareness about the intertwined nature of these two quests. It is perhaps to achieve this division that Govardhanram, one of the early graduates of the modern English education system, employed English to speak to himself, although speaking of the self and to oneself in an alien language poses a fascinating, and paradoxical puzzle for the contemporary reader. His *Scrapbooks* remain an extraordinary document in Indian self-writing, as they
recapture the themes and the quest of the medieval *Bhakti* tradition. They also introduce for perhaps the first time in modern idiom the idea that the self is the site for experimentation and its recording can create a separation between the outer and inner worlds at the same time as they are together in the self.

While Govadhanram was writing his *Scrapbooks*, another extraordinary act of autobiographical imagination appeared in Bengal in 1876 with the publication of Rassundari Debi’s autobiography *Amar Jiban*. Is not only the first autobiography in the Bangla language; it is also the first autobiography by an Indian woman in modern times. Unlike others who wrote their stories in the 19th century, Rassundari Debi was not a public figure, nor was she writing an autobiography in the self-conscious manner of a Narmad or a Senapati. She had lived her life in the villages of Bengal and was, in fact, unlettered. She taught herself to read and write in secret in order to read and tell others the story of God, the *Bhagved Purana*.

*Amar Jiban* was written in two parts. The 1876 autobiography contained 16 compositions, but 15 new compositions were published in 1906. Rassundari Debi shows an acute awareness of her surroundings and the affairs of the large household over which she presided. But the central concern is not to speak of what is outside but to capture her spiritual quest. In this effort she mirrors the saint-poets of the *Bhakti* period. Although a modern act in terms of its chronology, it is an example of the immediate presence of the *Bhakti* literature. It was by appealing to this tradition that Rassundari Debi found a voice for herself.

Krupabai Sattthanadhan’s *Saguna: The Story of Native Christian Life*, serialized in *Madras Christian College Magazine* in 1887-88, represents the coming together of several strands of 19th century autobiography. *Saguna* is the first autobiographical novel in English by an Indian woman. It received wide critical attention and was read by Queen Victoria, who asked for other works by the author. *Saguna* captures the major concerns of 19th century India – concerns about the question of faith, conversion, and being a “Native Christian” in a
colonized country, and about being able to speak of one's self both in “real” and “fictional” terms.

_Amar Jiban_ and _Saguna_ are important autobiographical acts not only because they represent the inner worlds of women, but because they reveal an unselfconscious confidence. This is evident from the fact that both works were published during their writers’ lifetimes. By contrast, the autobiographical writings of Narmad, Senapati, Manibhai Nabhubhai, and Govardhanram were all published posthumously. The greater assurance of women writers, especially Rassundari Debi, is perhaps the result of the fact that they did not feel burdened by a need to modernize their literary tradition in the light of Western influence; their point of reference was instead the continuing memory of ancient Bhakti tradition.

The journey of these authors, from _Mari Hakikat_ to _Saguna_, captures the major concerns of 19th century self-writing in India. It is a movement from “fact” to “fiction”. It is also a journey from anxieties about the native tongue and native literature to speaking of the self in an alien tongue with confidence and authenticity. The 19th century Indian autobiography breaks fresh ground by speaking of the self as an autonomous individual yet also maintains its link with medieval bhakti literature in locating the self in relation to a larger quest.

Profound doubts about the validity of autobiographical expression persisted well into the 20th century, often because life itself was perceived as repetitive and uneventful. Despite this, autobiographies emerged. Often they became, for individuals and social groups, a way of making sense of the times of transition, reform, and modernization. The focus of such works is therefore often on understanding the rupture introduced by early modernity in a repetitive life. The other anxiety of 19th century autobiographers that continued into the 20th century concerned the perceived “Western” origins of autobiography. M. K. Gandhi has to confront this question even before he can begin his autobiography. In the preface he recollects a conversation highlighting the dilemma. “But a God-fearing friend had his doubts, which he
shared with me on my day of silence. “What has set you on this adventure?” he asked. “Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence... Don’t you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet?”

The argument that autobiography was a mode of writing peculiar to the colonizers and the colonized, and as not an “Indian” genre, did weigh on Gandhi, and he was influenced by it. But he justified himself by the reasoning that “it is not my purpose to attempt a ‘real’ autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but these experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography.”

Gandhi thus introduced a distinction between a ‘real’ autobiography and one that he could write as an Indian. He wished to achieve this by turning his gaze inwards on the self and not on his public life. He chose therefore, not to speak of his political experiments. He called his autobiography *Atmakatha*, which in general usage would have meant just an autobiography or one’s story, but he restores to the term its deeper meaning: a story of the soul. At one level, by seeking to speak only of the journey of the soul in quest of *moksha* in its sense of self-realization he “Indianized” the autobiography. He argued that only when one speaks of the moral can one speak with truthfulness about one’s failings and fallibility. And that should be the real purpose of autobiography. To write the *atmakatha*, Gandhi takes scientific method from the West, and transforms it to become an inward analytical gaze and a form of self-experimentation. It is by bringing together the ‘scientific’ method and religion as morality that Gandhi creates the possibility of casting the self as a soul. His autobiography thus represented a movement from *hakikat* to *atmakatha.* Gandhi also reaffirmed the idea that to speak truthfully about one’s self one had to speak in one’s own tongue. It is literally through his soul searching that Gandhi crafts a genre that is truly Indian, but which also harks back to the theological origins of the autobiography as a medieval Christian practice.
This essay seeks to understand the self-sense of a people. This is sought to be achieved by a simultaneous reading of three lives and their unique engagement with the society in which they lived. These are Narmadashankar Lalshankar (1833-1866), Manibhai Nabhubhai (1858-1898) and Govardhanram Madhavram Tripathi (1858-1907).

Narmad was a poet, an essayist, a lexicographer, a historian and a social reformer. His life and work represents a deep desire to modernise Gujarati language, literature and historiography. It was because of this pioneering effort that K. M. Munshi described him as "the first among the moderns."

Manilal's self sense was that of a philosopher and a poet. It was through his philosophical writings that he engaged with the predicament of his society.

Govardhanram's Sarasvatinchandra has come to acquire a canonical status in Gujarati literature. It has become the measure by which the Gujarati novel has come to be evaluated.

All the three wrote autobiographies. Narmad and Manilal called their writing 'autobiography', while Govardhanram called his notes to himself Scrap-Books. The literary historiography in Gujarati does not regard Scrap-Books as an autobiographical work.

It is true that in its form these notes is closer to a journal or diaries. But if we were to try and understand the autobiographical act not solely in its formal terms but as a mode of self-enquiry, as a language and an act which makes possible to investigate the self and articulate it, the Scrap-Books do form part of our tradition of writing about the self.

These three figures have been selected for the present enquiry not only because they wrote autobiographies. These three figures together capture the large spectrum of social, philosophical and literary thought in the second half of the 19th century Gujarat.
The Gujarati social, political and literary history broadly classifies the second half of the 19th century through the engagement with the movement for social and religious reform. The system of classification employs three categories; Sudharak (a reformer), Samraksbak (one who wishes to preserve or a conservative) and samyojak (one who strives for a synthesis between the need and the old).

The Gujarati historiography divides Narmad in two parts, Purva Narmad (the Early Narmad) and Uttar Narmad (the later Narmad). The Purva Narmad is the 'first amongst the modern', a radical social thinker who wishes to do away with the old and herald the new. This is the Sudharak Narmad. The Uttar Narmad is seen as having betrayed a movement for transformation that he led from the forefront. The Uttar Narmad is a conservative. A large gulf separates our understanding and appreciation of the Purva and the Uttar of Narmad of is as if these are two disjointed halves, with no common ground. If Gujarati historiography moves between Narmad the Sudharak and Narmad the Samraksbak, it classifies Manibhai without hesitation as a Samraksbak. He is described by his contemporaries as an 'enemy' progress and reform. Govardhanram with his caution is seen to occupy the middle ground, he is the samyojak, some one who wishes to accommodate the new with the old without proposing any radical transformations.

These categories, although very neat and convenient will not be employed as a classificatory system in this essay. These are inadequate and partial. They are derived solely on the basis of the response to the movement for social and religious reform. This is not to deny the significance of the social reform movement. Notwithstanding that, these categories do not allow for an appreciation and understanding of the concerns which fall out of the idea of reform movement. For example they do not allow us to understand their engagement with the idea of history. They also do not allow us to look at the process by which a mind is formed. The disjunction between Purva and Uttar Narmad represents this.
This essay is concerned with the self-sense of a people in a context of the colonial cultural encounter. It is concerned with the engagement of a society with its present, its past and its future. They take the form of a language of social reform, a sense of histriography and a concerned for a harmonised future. They together represent a concern about the idea of a nation, a idea about being one people.

It is further concerned with the location of this engagement. It seeks to understand the nature of resources of the self that were required to engage not only in act of imagination of the future community but also reflections about the self that were required to be constituted which prepared the ground for this enquiry.
Notes


5. *Mar Hatak*, op. cit., P. 40


11. *Ibid*