

Research Article

The Swaminarayan Sect: Contested Reforms

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Date of Submission: 15/06/2018; Date of Acceptance: 12/09/2018

ABSTRACT

The Swaminarayan sect arose in Gujarat in the nineteenth century with a distinct agenda of social reform. The sect carried out a sustained campaign against female infanticide and sati. However, the religious superstructure was made extremely rigid by imposing strict regulations on its followers. The supremacy of the Hindu shastras was left virtually unchallenged. The sect found succour within the habitation of Hinduism. This paper argues that the constitution of the Swaminarayan subject is highly masculine, docile and submissive to ritual authority, while simultaneously sacramentally excluding women, dalits and tribals within its ranks. In addition, the sect facilitated the emergence of the religious subject in Gujarat. Though the sect has been divided into various groups, this paper focuses on the entire sect as the ideological universe is similar.

Keywords: Swaminarayan, Exclusion, Religious orthodoxy, Ritual authority, Caste

SITUATING THE SWAMINARAYAN SECT

In July 1607, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir had his son Khurram placed in a large balance and weighed against his own weight in gold. Three hundred and seventy eight years later, in the same month, 20th July 1985-in the football stadium of Queens Park Rangers in London, a similar ceremony was performed with Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Bochasanvasi Akshar Puroshottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (hereafter, BAPS) as the protagonist. However, out of humility, he insisted that the

opposing balance be filled with sugar, the equivalent weight in gold being calculated only after the ceremony. Two years later, during a period of severe drought in India, this same religious leader showed his surpassing powers of practical organisation when he took personal care of the complex business of the arrangement of cattle camps, the transport of livestock and feed and the provision for future crop needs (Brear, 1996). These two vignettes are a fitting introduction to the head of a *sampradaya* (movement), which occupies a significant place not only in contemporary India but also in the Gujarati Hindu Diaspora.

DD Kosambi has rightly contended that fundamental changes in Indian society can be traced through religious transformations (Kosambi, 1998). It is now fairly well established that religious movements with strong social content originate and flourish generally during large scale changes in the established social order and the accepted value system (Aloysius, 2000). The pre-British India was characterised by a profusion of linguistic and ethnic communities, distributed across various territories and enjoying different levels of development. A hierarchically segmented society, based on caste was the primary feature of the social structure of these communities, the tribal groups being the sole exception. However, throughout history, there were numerous protests and revolts against the hierarchical structure. Nonetheless, as Basham argues,

This thorough going recognition that men are not the same and that there is a hierarchy of classes each with its separate duties and distinctive way of life has held its ground from the end of the Rig Vedic period to the present day. (Basham, 1967)

The religious and cultural ideology based on exclusive privileges for the chosen few, created social cleavages and denied access to intellectual and physical resources to the vast majority. In this deeply divided, albeit traditional society, a rupture was created by British imperialism. On the one hand, a unitary administrative system was created while colonial measures like land settlement, English education, codification of local laws and knowledge helped perpetuate social divisions. The British policy of minimum interference in the socio-religious matters helped the upper-castes to retain their customary privileges.

‘We Hindus, walk and sit religiously, eat and sleep religiously and work religiously’ (Sen quoted in Mehta, 1967). Religion was closely interlinked with social institutions with caste being the dominant factor. Gujarati society was no exception to this rule. A census in Surat alone shows more than 212 castes and sub-castes (Borradaile,

1887). Gujarat was described as an encyclopaedia of religions (Desai, 1932). Hence, in the nineteenth century, any appeal for social reform was cloaked in religion. Though the scriptures were reinterpreted to suit the agenda of social reform, the scriptural authority of the Hindu Shastras was never denied.

The Swaminarayan sect emerged in the early nineteenth century as a powerful protest against the current social and religious problems. It was a splinter group of Vaishnavism initiated by Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), a Brahmin belonging to Chhapaiya, a village adjacent to Ayodhya. He started performing miracles and induced a state of trance in his disciples (Memorandum, 1823) which attracted the rural masses in large numbers. A charismatic teacher, Sahajanand used Gujarati and Hindi to communicate with the masses to popularise Krishna worship. As he pacified, the unruly Bhils and Kolis and also fought against *sati* and female infanticide, the British who were then establishing law and order in Saurashtra, were willing to accommodate him. Bishop Reginald Heber met him in 1825 with an intention to converting him to Christianity. The growth of colonial political power in Gujarat developed at about the same time as the teachings of Sahajanand gained popularity. A conjoined photograph of Swami Sahajanand and Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Bombay reflects the symbiotic relationship, both the phenomena shared.

‘Pax Britannica’ brought significant changes in Gujarat and marked a transition in the socio political arena. The fragmented polity was replaced by a uniform, unified, centralised administration. Travel and communication was facilitated. The British introduced a legal structure, novel methods of production and exchange and principles of educational organisation based on the ‘legal-rational principle’ (Desai, 1978). The politics, economy and education were secularised and separated from the overall religious and traditional matrix. They were superimposed upon the traditional fabric of Gujarat over a relatively short time. However, Sahajanand’s followers point with pride to the salutary effect his teachings had in leading the residents of the territory to lead morally upright lives in the midst of chaos. They place ‘Pax Swaminarayana’ (Williams, 1984) along with ‘Pax Britannica’ and suggest that it both complemented and was more effective than the latter in the positive transformation of the nineteenth century Gujarati society. The sect toed the British line as it suited their interests to be on the right side of their colonial masters. During the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930, the peasants of Kaira district in Gujarat refused to pay their land tax. The British approached the sect leaders at Bochasan to compel their followers to pay up the land tax. This earned the wrath of both Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel who were very critical of the sect (Patel and Jharna, 1953; Gandhi, 1965).

The movement grew during Sahajanand's public ministry between 1802 and his death in 1830. The census of 1872, the last census that gives a breakdown of membership in religious groups, gives the membership of the sect as 287,687 from a total population of 6,683,289 (Campbell, Gazetteer, 1872). Certain precepts of Sahajanand mark a point of departure from other sect leaders. Initially, Sahajanand was a disciple of the Vaishnava ascetic, Ramananda, who appointed him as the successor in a public ceremony. After Ramananda's death, Sahajanand had to re-establish his supremacy. By 1804, in a work written by a disciple, *Yama Danda* (Williams, op cit), he was regarded as a manifestation of God. He is known by a new name, *Swaminarayan*, which is also repeated by his followers in their rituals. Thus, the preacher became the message and object of the cult ritual. He initiated 500 ascetics into the highest state of ascetism-*paramhansas*. This state signifies total renunciation, with no scriptural rules or regulations and they have no actions to perform. They gave up all external marks, including the sacred thread of caste, the sect mark on the forehead, the clothing and tuft worn by ascetics-all the outward ritual observances of worship. Their new status raised them above the consideration of purity and impurity and made them 'socially invisible' (Pocock, 1973). Despite being socially invisibilised, they were ritually powerful. After his position was more secure and British rule established in Gujarat, Sahajanand ceased to ordain people to this highest status. Then he returned to the practice of ordaining ascetics who would conform to the orthodox standards of caste and ritual.

FROM SECT TO SUBJECT: THE SWAMINARAYAN SAMPRADAYA

Sahajanand inspired the growth of 'the greatest of the reforming sects of Gujarat' (Majumdar, 1977). In the nineteenth century Gujarat, bands of ascetic warriors hired themselves to fight in the military conflicts, during the early years of British rule, especially in the native states (Ghurye, 1964). Such bands had a reputation for immorality as well as violence. Strict discipline of renunciation was the norm amongst Sahajanand's ascetics. Not even for self-defence could they resort to violence. All contacts with women and money had to be avoided. Despite their vows of poverty and celibacy, the ascetics resided and worked in towns and villages. They engaged in manual work, dug ponds and wells, worked as carpenters and masons to build temples and residences. Sahajanand also participated in such constructive activities, especially at the Vadtal temple. They reached out to the people in times of famine. During a famine in Saurashtra in 1813-1814, Sahajanand sent his ascetics to Kaira in South Gujarat to collect food grains for the relief of the people of Saurashtra.

The Swaminarayan ascetics toured the villages after being trained as preachers. Many were poets and philosophers. They represent what is called the 'sadhuization' of the Hindu revival. The modern ascetic, entirely different from the old parasitic sadhu, lead the revival of religious values and the ordering of the social life to the requirements of modernisation. They were important in the process by which the people redefined the essential character of their beliefs and practices to combat the social and intellectual forces, which accompanied the period of British transformation (Singer, 1970). Thus the new breed of ascetics peddled a novel package of empowerment through the notion of public good and engaged spirituality, while constituting an innovative this worldly religious subject.

Sahajanand's followers had to undertake five vows such as, (1) Not to steal. (2) Not to commit adultery. (3) Not to eat meat. (4) Not to drink intoxicants. (5) Not to receive food from people belonging to a caste lower than one's own. These vows are taken during initiation into membership in the *satsang*. The ascetics have to take more severe vows. After initiation they receive a name and are instructed to submit to any usage without resistance or without allowing any resentment to appear in their minds. All worldly goods and concerns are forsworn. They are not to possess any metal article, except a needle to sew their clothes and a pen to work on their holy books. They are forbidden to see or even think of a woman; if they do see one so as to distinguish her as such, if the idea of a woman enters their mind or if they touch one, they must fast for that day (*Asiatic Journal*, op cit). It is reported that when he Sahajanand came to Gujarat in 1800 after his travels as an ascetic throughout India, he would vomit even if approached by the shadow of a woman (Williams, op cit).

The ideological economy of Sahajanand and his followers continued to influence changes in Gujarat. Pax Britannica and Pax Swaminarayana took place simultaneously. The associations his followers founded helped to bind the territory together. The establishment of holy places and temples as pilgrimage sites provided a significant element of Gujarati cultural identity. The literature of the movement helped to standardise Gujarati language (Desai, op cit). An old Gujarati aphorism reflects this phenomena,

The *topi* (the British pith helmet) and the *tilak* (the characteristic mark worn on the forehead by *satsangis*) came together and they will leave together. (Williams, op cit)

Though the British legacy is evident, they are gone while the *satsangis* (the ethical values propounded by the sect) continue to dominate the cultural, political, educational and social sectors of Gujarat.

PRIVILEGING THE TEXT AND THE FAITH BUREAUCRACY

Swaminarayan can be called a religion of the book, for the texts contribute largely to the definition of identity. Texts constitute both public and private spirituality. A standard of regulations and qualifications for religious functionaries, behaviour and rituals is stated in the texts. Initially, there were eight authoritative texts, part of the *Satsangijivan* (Vedas, Brahma sutras, Bhagavata purana, Vishnusahasranamam, Bhagavad Gita, Vidura niti, Vasudev mahatmya of the Skanda purana and Mitakcara of the Yajñavalkya Smti) attributed to Sahajanand (Satananda, 1814). The sect is thus able to claim legitimacy from the hoary Hindu traditions. Then there is the *Shikshapatri* contained in the *Satsangijivan*, a summary of the rules and regulations on religious practice. The founder authorised both texts and each section of *Shikshapatri* was read in his presence for approval. These texts overlap with episodes of the *Bhagavata purana*, a continuation of the scriptural tradition, which defines the group identity (*sampradaya*). The doctrinal content of these texts provide a point of reference for the theoretical teachings as well as the regulations of behaviour and rituals in the group.

The doctrinal texts incorporate and reflect Sahajanand's teachings and personality. They are sources for public recitation and personal edifications. This textualisation is rooted in Sahajanand's arrangements for the time after his death and can thus be considered a deliberate attempt to replace personal encounter and guarantee the continued functioning of what was charisma during his lifetime. A serious attempt was made to institutionalise the founder's sayings and personality among the followers. A rigorous course is prescribed for those who wish to learn the scriptures. They have to undergo a prescribed regimen, with regular examinations, centrally monitored and supervised, which takes seven years to complete. The examinations are patterned on the conventional Board exams and a special cell takes care of the details (Patel, 2004).

The temporal affairs of BAPS come within the jurisdiction of the Gujarat state. A board of trustees look after the building, repair and maintenance of the temples, supporting the *sadhus* at the *satsang*, planning for religious observances, and translation and dissemination of sacred literature. Donations given to the trust are not tax deductible. Decision-making is highly centralised and hierarchised. The entire network reached down to the village level covering various activities such as women's work, publications, children's activities, education and exams. At present, absolute authority is wrested in the hands of one person, Swami

Narayanswarupdas-Pramukh Swami (Chief Religious Head), who is both the temporal and spiritual head of BAPS (Williams, op cit). The theology of the sect bestows a divine status on Pramukh Swami. BAPS is free to set up temples and centres in India and abroad. The temples abroad are registered as per the laws of the concerned state and overall supervision is by Pramukh Swami. The central coordination committee is in India. Swami Yagnapurushdas started the novel custom of including university students on his preaching tours. This practice continues even now and is instrumental in influencing many youngsters in joining the sect as ascetics. The entire organisation works like a centralised bureaucracy where a network reaching down to the village level makes it easy to implement decisions (Williams, op cit). Undoubtedly, the Swaminarayan sect has contributed to the greater Sanskritisation of the Hindu population in Gujarat (Srinivas, 1962). This 'faith bureaucracy' (Reetz, 2008) is a significant factor in transforming this group into one of the fastest growing religious movements in India.

THE MORAL REPUBLIC OF THE SECT

Members of a religious group inhabit a sacred world. The Swaminarayan sect associates the sacrality person, space and time with the life and theology of Sahajanand. The sacredness is exhibited during their pilgrimages, rituals or sacred places (Singer, 1972). Close encounters with the laity are encouraged. The *acharyas* conduct official tours (*padhramani*) of villages, where the villagers are enjoined to donate generously to the sect and large sums of money are collected. The protocol for such visits is laid down minutely in the *Shikshapatri* (Shikshapatri, 1882).

The ties of sect loyalty are not strong enough to dissolve completely caste distinctions. 'A sect cannot survive on Indian soil if it denies caste' (Dumont, 1970). Any sect which tries to abolish caste itself becomes a caste. However, to a limited extent, the feeling of group loyalty and free association within the sect weakens the hold of caste (Srinivas, 1953). Nevertheless, the Swaminarayan sect considered the caste structure as a divinely ordained institution and the caste hierarchy was to be preserved in its purest form. Even though the sect attracted the lower sections of society such as the Kanbis, Kachhias, Sonis, Dargis, Bhavsars and Suthars, but the Bhangis and Dheds-who belonged to the untouchable castes were kept at a distance. 'None of my followers shall violate the code of Varnashram Dharma and shall never accept any code of behaviour other than that sanctioned by the scriptures (Shikshapatri, op cit). Swami Sahajanand emphasised the *varnashram dharma* in the *Shikshapatri*,

Nor shall anyone drink in Jagannathpuri from a person of a caste lower than one's own, even though such food and drink be the remnants of the offerings to Shri Krishna. (Parekh, 1937)

In yet another statement, the affirmation to traditional caste roles is reiterated. 'No one shall give up the performance of the duties that are imposed upon the class or the religious order to which he belongs, nor shall he adopt the duties that are enjoined on others, nor accept a religion propounded by heretical teacher (Parekh, op cit).

In the initial stages of Sahajanand's ministry, initiates from the Brahmin castes were favoured, followed by the initiates of the twice-born castes. Generally, young boys from poor families are 'donated' to the temple or they are graduates who are jobless. The heavy and rough labour of maintaining the temples and other buildings is the task of the initiates of the lower castes, who always wear white robes. They never wear the saffron robes denoting total renunciation but are in a stage of semi-asceticism. The low caste devotees only wear the red mark on the forehead and not the full sect mark worn by the upper caste devotees. The BAPS made a major change when it abolished the distinction between the *sadhus* (initiates of the first category) and *bhagats* (low caste initiates). All the initiates, despite their caste status wear the sacred thread. A new identity of brotherhood is conferred on them. The idea is that the word of the living abode of the supreme person has to take precedence over the written regulations. The category of bhagats exists in BAPS but all the novices wear white till the preceptor decides their readiness for the final initiation. This initiative was taken during the bicentenary celebrations of the birth of Swaminarayan in April 1981 in Ahmedabad by the Pramukh Swami. BAPS abolished the caste related category of ascetics permanently in white. Despite this, the bhagats neither cook food for other ascetics or for the deities in the temple nor do they conduct rituals in the sanctum of the temple. That space is still kept free from 'pollution'. The ascetics are encouraged to indulge in status defying acts like serving meals or cleaning the temple. But such ritual acts enhance their status. Thus, their status is inversely proportional to the 'lowly' activities in which they participate. Where marriage is concerned, the Swaminarayan devotees follow their traditional caste rules. The low caste devotee cannot enter the temple and they remain within the temple courtyard and have *darshan* of the spires. At the Gadhada temple, a raised courtyard has been constructed so that low caste devotees can see the sanctum, without entering the actual temple. Food is also served to them separately in the temple. This denotes a spatial reproduction of their low social rank and peripherality. Simultaneously, it also indicates their consent to the

structures of domination that made them inferior (Mines, 2000). There is a separate Swaminarayan temple for the low castes at Channi, in Baroda, where the rituals are also performed by them and women also freely participate in the temple activities (Mehta, 2002). As a part of the missionary activity, the Pramukh Swami ruled in 1981 that the shudra castes are also eligible to get initiated as ascetics. Many low caste people gave up meat and intoxicants and resort to personal and ritual cleanliness, the lack of which was supposed to mark their traditional low status after joining the sect. This was an attempt to gain ritual purity.

Sahajanand campaigned against female infanticide and the immolation of widows and undertook measures to create a space in society where widows and other unmarried women could make a contribution and receive respect (Gazetteer, op cit). The 'Sati Gita' composed by Swami Muktanand around 1824 reflects the attitude of Sahajanand Swami towards such social evils. The stress was on an austere life based on self-denial. The sect protested against the singing of obscene songs during Holi (Festival of Colours during spring) and marriage occasions. The drinking habits of the lower classes were frowned upon. There was a streak of orthodoxy in these measures.

Despite all the provisioning of reforms, the sect continues to follow a highly intolerant form of patriarchy. A sect which preached against sati did not find it irrational in encouraging a woman to worship her husband as God. She is also expected to tolerate verbal and physical abuse. 'A chaste woman should give up all sorts of ornaments and decorations in the event of her husband's absence from the village or town'. The touch of a woman was deemed polluting and had to be atoned with a 1 day fast. Swami Sahajanand observed,

One who belongs to our sect shall neither speak with a woman nor touch her.
One who will not abide by these rules shall cease to be one of us. (Kothari, 1922)

Swami Sahajanand made provision for women desiring a life of devotion to shave their heads, put on distinctive clothing and lead an ascetic life (Shikshapatri, op cit). However, the initiation of female ascetics (samkhya yoginis) is not welcomed. Swaminarayan reluctantly permitted female ascetics to reside in the temple at Gadhada. During his time, there were about 150 women ascetics at Gadhada (Burgess, 1872). The wives of the *acharyas* initiate the female ascetics, who wear red and reside in a separate area of the temple called the *haveli*. One of the chief functions of the *acharya's* wife is to provide him with a male heir (Williams, op cit). Any interaction is strictly prohibited between the male and female ascetics.

The female ascetics inhabit a distinct space, where they give discourses to female devotees, initiate them and conduct other religious activities. They are made invisible to the male gaze. When the females of the *acharya's* family visit the temple for worship, it is out of bounds for male worshipers. Symbolically, the *Samkhya* yoginis wear red as they are considered to be the brides of Lord Swaminarayan (Mehta, 2004). The female ascetics have a separate wing which was prohibited for male visitors.

Males shall not listen on discourses on religious knowledge from the mouths of women, nor shall they carry out discussions neither with women, nor with a king or his officials. (Shikshapatri, op cit)

In addition,

My male followers who are *grihasthis* (house-holders) shall never touch widows unless they are their close relations. They shall not remain alone in any private place with a youthful mother, sister or daughter except in times of distress, nor shall a wife be given away to another man. (Shikshapatri, *ibid*)

The sect vehemently opposed widow remarriage. Durgaram Mehtaji, a prominent social reformer, requested the *acharya* of this sect to preach in favour of widow remarriage, when the latter visited Surat in 1849. The enraged *acharya* and his companions dubbed Durgaram an 'atheist' and 'infidel' (Buddhiprakash, 1877).

For Sahajanand, celibacy meant the abhorrence of women as objects of sexual desire (Shikshapatri, *ibid*). Verbal discourse is not permitted between the ascetics and women followers. Any form of secular dramas, literature or films is avoided for this might upset the discipline of the ascetics, who have to resort to severe penance if there is any moral lapse. The sect's scriptures categorise women as follows,

the woman who attracts attention is made up of bones, blood vessels, spittle, blood, mucus, and faeces; she is simply a collection of these things and there is nothing to be attractive. (Satsangijivan, 1829)

The male ascetics never conduct rituals in the Hanuman and Ganesh shrines at the Swaminarayan temples for women congregate there. This task is left for the Brahmin priests. Even the Pramukh Swami refuses to address women. All the restrictions of a patriarchal society exist in the sect. No woman can exercise authority over a man though she might be highly advanced in learning and piety. A woman never addresses a religious gathering where men are present, nor can she share a common platform with them. They cannot head any charitable or religious trusts or major

temples. Thus, men effectively exercise control over the institutional wealth and power. The sect's ideology constructed the women as docile, polluted bodies. The injunctions to the swamis and laity seem to reflect the commandments of Manudharmasastra.

CONCLUSION

Analysing the historical trajectory of the sect, one can argue that it is the ideological voice of a small capitalist class who utilise their social capital to buttress their economic life. Any member of the sect can use its economic clout to further their business interests. The highly inequitable, patriarchal Swaminarayan Sampradaya is a bulwark against any meaningful social transformation in society. Despite the cosmetic changes of including the lower castes and women into the faith republic, the scriptural hegemony of the Hindu religious texts remained unchallenged. By privileging the ethic of community morality and hard work, the sect has emerged as a brand identity of 'Vibrant Gujarat'. This is not surprising as they form the backbone of the sect and provide it with valuable social capital. The sect members favour each other in business dealings and promoting mutual interests. In short, it is akin to an exclusive club which helps its members to further their spiritual or material interests. The sect has learned to successfully manipulate modern technology and communication. Any religious event happening anywhere in the globe is beamed live to the devotees. The two vignettes discussed in the introduction offer ample testimony to the powerful social capital of the sect. The visit of Pramukh Swami is nothing short of a state visit with even the government officials participating. All activities follow due protocol. The sect participates with the state in its educational ventures. At present, the sect is engaged with the activities of the Christian missionaries and the strategies to contain them. The race for harvesting the souls and thereby the socio economic power is well in earnest (Patel, op cit; Times of India, 2004).

Although the sect is avowedly apolitical, nonetheless, it promotes capitalist comprador values and a selective morality. Any critique of its functions and ideologies is severely dealt with. The Swaminarayan epistemology has bolstered the hegemony of the capitalist state. It acts as a pseudo state silencing all critics[#] and promoting its own value systems. The political modernity espoused by the

[#]The sect launched a vitriolic attack on the historian, Makrand Mehta for his critique of the sect in an article in 1986. The author and the editors of the journal had to face legal proceedings. For details refer Makrand Mehta, 'Sampradayki Sahitya ane Samajik Chetana: Swaminarayan Sampradayno Abhyas 1800–1840', (Sect Literature and Social Consciousness: A Study of the Swaminarayan Sect, 1800–1840), Arthat, Vol. 5, No. 4, October–December 1986.

sect ended up strengthening the hierarchical structures of society, thereby consolidating the increasingly upwardly mobile, upper caste and literate 'Hindu' identity. The cultural values and ethos privileged by the sect ended up ritually excluding women and lower castes from its rank. The sanskritisation of society promoted by the sect prevented any ruptures in the traditional socio-cultural structures of society.

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