

Purifying the Nation: The Arya Samaj in Gujarat 1895-1930

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the Arya Samaj in Gujarat from 1895 to 1930. Although the founder of this body, Dayanand Saraswati, was from Gujarat, it proved less popular there initially than in the Punjab. The first important Arya Samajists in Gujarat were Punjabis, brought there by Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda to carry out educational work amongst untouchables. The Arya Samaj only became a mass organisation in Gujarat after a wave of conversions to Christianity in central Gujarat by untouchables, with Arya Samajists starting orphanages to 'save' orphans from the clutches of the Christian missionaries. The movement then made considerable headway in Gujarat. The main followers were from the urban middle classes, higher farming castes, and gentry of the Koli caste. Each had their own reasons for embracing the organisation, ranging from a desire for higher social status, to religious reform, to building caste unity, and as a means, in the case of the Koli gentry, to 'reconvert' Kolis who had adopted Islam in medieval times. The movement lost its momentum after Gandhi arrived on the political scene, and many erstwhile Arya Samajists embraced the Gandhian movement. When the Gandhian movement itself flagged after 1922, there was an upsurge in communal antagonism in Gujarat in which Arya Samajists played a provocative role. A riot in Godhra in 1928 is examined.

Over the past decade, Gujarat has come to be seen as a hotbed of communalism, ruled by a state government that has connived at, and even encouraged, murderous attacks on Muslims and Christians. At the time of the notorious pogrom against Muslims of 2002, several observers commented on the irony that this should have occurred in the homeland of Gandhi, the great proponent of non-violence and Hindu-Muslim unity.¹ They saw this as violating not only the memory of the Mahatma, but also the very history of this region – one known, it was said, for its spirit of tolerance and regard for the sacredness of all life. As Tridip Suhrud stated in anguish:

What has happened to the dialogic space that Gandhi nurtured? What has happened to the Jain ethos, which informed the structure of mercantile capitalism and from which Gandhi drew sustenance?²

Although these are questions that we should certainly ask, they project only one view of Gujarat and its history, for this is not an area that has escaped violence, bigotry and communal strife in the past. Communal tension between Hindus and Muslims, and even violence between the two, has a genealogy that stretches back well over a century; predating Gandhi's arrival on the political scene in 1915.³

¹ For example Panikkar, K. N. 'The Agony of Gujarat,' *The Hindu*, 19 March 2002; Suhrud, T. 'Gujarat: No Room for Dialogue,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, [Hereafter *EPW*], 37 (11), 16 March 2002, pp. 1011-12.

² *Ibid*, p.1011.

³ To take one case, there was a long history of tension between Hindus and Muslims in Somnath in Kathiawad in the later nineteenth century that led to a fracas in 1892,

In this article, I shall examine an aspect of this history by focusing on the growth and development of the Arya Samaj in Gujarat between the years 1895 and 1930. It is not suggested that there was an inevitable progress from the doctrines and activities propagated by this body to the Hindu bigotry that dominates the political scene in modern Gujarat, for there were many countervailing forces at both a popular and elite level that might have produced a different trajectory.⁴ Also, many of the features of the modern manifestation of Hindutva were not present in the early decades of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, a way of thinking about the modern nation state and the place of Hindus and Hinduism within it became a part of the public culture of this region, and this could be deployed in new ways, and to new effect, in changing political circumstances.⁵

followed by a riot in which several died in 1893. See file on 'Patan Riot: Hindus and Mussulmans Patan Commission, Part I,' Oriental and India Office Collection, R/2/721/56; Krishnaswamy, S. 'A Riot in Bombay, August 11, 1893: A Study in Hindu-Muslim Relations in Western India during the Late Nineteenth Century,' unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1966, pp. 76-90.

⁴ As pointed out for India as a whole by Fischer-Tiné, H., 'Kindly Elders of the Hindu Biradri': The Arya Samaj's Struggle for Influence and its Effects on Hindu-Muslim Relations, 1800-1925,' in Copley, A. (ed.), *Gurus and their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in India*, New Delhi, 2000, pp.107-08.

⁵ In the ways alluded to for Bengal by Sarkar, S. 'Intimations of Hindutva: Ideologies, Caste, and Class in Post-Swadeshi Bengal,' in Sarkar, S. *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Postmodernism, Hindu Fundamentalism, History*, New Delhi, 2002, pp.81-95; and for

The Arya Samaj in Gujarat 1895-1915

Although Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83), the founder of the Arya Samaj, was from Gujarat, being a Samvedi Audich Brahman of Kathiawad, his career had developed beyond that region. He had returned there briefly in 1875, establishing branches in Ahmedabad and Rajkot.⁶ His message did not, however, prove popular in Gujarat at that time. In part this was due to his vitriolic attack on the Vallabhacharya and Swaminarayan sects, which were both very popular in Gujarat, and in part because Narmad, a prominent Gujarati intellectual, had developed his own ideas about 'Aryajan' (Aryan people) and 'Aryadhara' (Aryan religion) that formed the basis for a number of Arya Sabhas that were formed in Gujarat in the 1880s that were not connected with Dayananda's Arya Samaj.⁷ It was only at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the organisation began to attract a significant popular following in Gujarat. This came about to a large extent because of apprehensions about the number of converts that Christian missionaries were gaining in the aftermath of a severe famine. Calls were heard to 'reclaim' those lost to Christianity by applying the Arya Samaj ritual known as *shuddhi*.

the United Provinces by Gould, W. *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*, Cambridge 2004, p. 37.

⁶ Dobbin, C. *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City 1840-1885*, Oxford, 1972, pp.254-7.

⁷ Yagnik, A. and Sheth, S., *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*, New Delhi 2005, pp. 138-9 and 201.

The ritual had been developed by the organisation in the late nineteenth century to regain Indians who had been lost, supposedly, to the Hindu fold. This activity had been stimulated by the counting of religious groups in the decennial census operations that took place from 1872 onwards, which gave rise to a claim that large numbers had been converted to ‘non-Indian’ religions. In this, it was assumed – often wrongly – that there were clear-cut boundaries between ‘Hindus’, ‘Sikhs’, ‘Muslims’ and ‘Christians’, and that the supposedly ‘Indian’ religions were losing members inexorably to the ‘non-Indian’ religions through aggressive proselytisation. Over the following years, large numbers of caste Hindus came to accept the notion that their religion was under demographic threat, to the extent that it became a form of Hindu ‘common sense.’⁸ The remedy, it was held, lay in reversing the conversions through a counter-proselytisation that would culminate in the public performance of *shuddhi*.

The practice of a rite to remove ritual pollution – *shuddhi* – has been central to the Hindu tradition, providing a means through which transgressors can be assimilated back into their caste and religion. In the nineteenth century, it was often applied for high caste Hindus who were considered to have incurred ritual pollution by travelling outside India. In 1877, Dayananda Saraswati deployed the idea in a new way to

⁸ My use of the term ‘common sense’ here accords with that of Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, 1971, p.327. For the development of such a belief see Jones, K. *Arya Dharma: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab*, Berkeley 1976, pp. 287-9; Datta, P. ‘Dying Hindus: Production of Hindu Communal Consciousness in Early Twentieth Century Bengal,’ *EPW*, 19 June 1993.

reclassify a Punjabi Sikh turned Hindu turned Christian as an 'Arya.' Two years later he adopted the procedure for a Punjabi Muslim, who was given a 'Hindu' name.

These were the only two times in which Dayananda applied this measure himself. He never laid down any particular rite, though his actions clearly endorsed the principle of so-called 'reconversion.' He took this step in the context of a wave of conversions to Christianity in the Punjab in preceding years. Some of his critics had claimed that his new Arya religion was no more than a disguised form of Christianity, and by taking such a stance he was distinguishing himself from Christianity in a clear manner. After his death, his followers in the Punjab institutionalised the ceremony, with a series of conversions of individual Christians and Muslims. In the words of Fischer-Tiné:

In the view of the Arya Samajis, one of the greatest deficiencies of Hinduism and a major reason for its decline since the golden age of the Vedas was the want of a ritual of conversion; active proselytisation would help make the Hindus resistant against the propaganda of Christian and Islamic missionaries.⁹

An initial rite was evolved, administered by orthodox Brahman priests, with a bath in the Ganges at Hardwar providing the final seal to the process. Many Arya Samajists considered such holy immersions to reek of old superstitions, and in the 1890s a supposedly 'pure' Vedic ceremony was concocted, with a *havan* (sacred fire), a lecture on the *Gayatri* and principles of the Arya Samaj, a shaving of the head, an

⁹ Fischer-Tiné, 'Kindly Elders of the Hindu Biradri,' p. 112.

investiture of the holy thread where appropriate, and a final distribution of sweets by the convert to all present.¹⁰

The year 1896 saw a significant transformation of such work in the Punjab. First, the ceremony began to be applied to whole communities of Sikh untouchables, who were thereby ‘purified’ and admitted to full Sikh status. This was done to forestall possible Christian conversion of such groups. Secondly, many orphans who had been taken in by Christian missionaries during the famine of that year were seen to be in danger of conversion, and the Arya Samajists started establishing orphanages to ‘save’ such children from the missionaries. Subsequently, during the great famine of 1899-1900 in western India, Arya Samaj workers were sent from the Punjab to Gujarat and other affected regions to ‘rescue’ orphans and bring them back to the Punjab. The Arya Samaj was now acting as a nation-wide organisation in mobilising a counter to the missionaries.¹¹ It was in this context that the Arya Samaj for the first time struck a popular chord within Gujarat.

The organisation had for the first time established a more active presence for itself in the region when in 1895 it opened a branch in Baroda City. Two prominent Arya Samajist preachers, Swami Nityanandji and Swami Vishweshwaranand, had visited the city in that year with a letter of introduction to Sayjirao Gaikwad, the ruler of Baroda State, from the great Maharashtrian social reformer M.G. Ranade. Sayajirao – a committed social reformer himself – met them and was highly impressed by their work

¹⁰ Jones, *Arya Dharma*, pp.129-35; Jordens, J.T.F. *Dayananda Saraswati: Essays on His Life and Ideas*, New Delhi, 1998, pp.163-67.

¹¹ Jones, *Arya Dharma*, pp.235-41; Jordens, *Dayananda Saraswati*, pp.167-8.

for the uplift of the depressed classes, and he asked them to find an Arya Samajist who was willing to come to carry out such work in the state. They persuaded Atmaramji Amritsari (1867-1938) – a Vedic scholar and noted orator of Amritsar – to take up this offer, and Sayajirao employed him in educational work. Atmaramji Amritsari also pursued the wider Arya Samaj agenda by establishing an orphanage in Baroda – the Antyaja Boarding House.¹² He used to preach in the city and surrounding area.¹³ The Arya Samaj branch was affiliated to the Arya Samajist DAV College in Lahore, and its President was a Baroda state official. An Arya Samajist from Lahore, who was in Baroda temporarily, established a second branch in the city in 1897-98. After he left, Ranjitsinh, a local waiter who was a member of the Dhed or Vankar untouchable community, ran this body. The two branches later merged in 1907.

As in the Punjab, fears of mass conversion to Christianity provided a major fillip to the organisation in Gujarat. The wave of conversions had started first in Bombay City, where many Dhed or Vankar untouchables of central Gujarat had migrated in the late nineteenth century. There, one of their community leaders called Karsan Ranchhod, a follower of the Kabir Panth, came into contact with missionaries of the Methodist Episcopalian Church, an American-based mission, and from 1888 onwards he orchestrated mass baptisms within his community. Karsan Ranchhod was a powerful preacher, and he took the message to the home villages of the community in

¹² Report by Police Commissioner, Baroda, 8 August 1907. Gujarat State Archives, Baroda Records Office, Huzur Political Office, Police Dept, sec.36, file 17.

¹³ Pandit, S.S. *A Critical Study of the Contribution of the Arya Samaj to Indian Education*, Baroda, 1974, pp.307-10.

central Gujarat. A great Christian *mela* was held in Bhalej village of Kheda District in 1895, with three hundred people being baptised by the bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Between 1895 and 1899, the number of baptised members of this church increased in central Gujarat from 496 to 5,321.¹⁴ In 1899-1900 there was a great famine in Gujarat, the effects of which lasted for years afterwards. The Vankars were traditionally weavers and field labourers, and a considerable number were employed by missions to weave cloth for tents on the relief works and for relief clothing. In this way, they earned sufficient to survive.¹⁵ The famine gave a further impetus to conversion – the 1901 Census recorded that there were 23,000 Christians in Kheda District alone – the largest number of all districts of Bombay Presidency.¹⁶ Although it was estimated that about 5,800 Gujarati Methodists died during that period, baptisms continued apace, so that by 1906 there were 14,000 Gujarati members of that church alone.¹⁷ The converts were known by high caste Gujaratis, scathingly, as ‘*Chhapaniyas*’ – that is, products of the *chhapan dukal*, or ‘famine of fifty-six’ (1899-

¹⁴ Boyd, R. *A Church History of Gujarat*, Madras, 1981, pp.60-1.

¹⁵ Collector’s Report, Kheda District, 1899-1900, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai [hereafter MSAM], Revenue Department [hereafter RD] 1901, Vol. 51, Comp.137, pt. II, p.31.

¹⁶ *Census of India* 1901, Vol. IX, *Bombay*, Pt. 1, *Report*, Bombay 1902, p.70.

¹⁷ Hoffert, A.T. ‘Mass Movement among the Methodists’, *Missionary Visitor*, Vol. 22 (1), January 1920, pp.13-14.

1900 was Samvat 2056).¹⁸ In fact, as we have seen, the process had begun well before the famine.

The mass conversions created a sense of optimism among many Christian missionaries in Gujarat. J.M. Blough of the American Church of the Brethren Mission believed that India was at a great crossroads. Western civilisation, with its education and technology, had transformed the country; now it was on the cusp of similarly embracing Christianity.

Religiously India is in turmoil. Really it is sad to look upon the religious condition of India today, for the people are like a ship that has lost its bearings. You know what the condition is in the front-yard when the old house is being pulled down and the new one built. Such is the religious condition of India today. But it is a hopeful one. Christianity has driven Hinduism to a defensive attitude, and even an aggressive one.... Idolatry is certainly losing its hold upon the people....

Christianity has forced Hinduism to show the best she has. The effort today is to Christianise Hinduism to such an extent that the people will be satisfied with it and not turn to Christianity. If this is a hopeful sign I cannot judge. The leaders know they are losing ground, so they are hunting up the best their Scriptures can afford in the (vain) hope of satisfying the inquiring mind.

¹⁸ Interview with Dave, Natwarlal Maneklal, Vallabh Vidyanagar, 21 January 1972.

Blough closed by stating that in his opinion Christianity must in the end prevail, as it alone could reconcile India to western modernity.¹⁹ Nonetheless, at the same time, other members of his mission working in South Gujarat were reporting a hardening of opposition to their work by high caste Hindus as well as Arya Samajists.²⁰

The same was true elsewhere in Gujarat. In Kheda District, the Assistant Collector of Kheda District reported that the mass conversions had created considerable friction in several villages. The missionaries were encouraging converts to attend the village schools, something strongly resented by the higher castes, as they considered them still to be untouchables.²¹ In Alindra, a Patidar-dominated village, the situation became so tense that the high castes withdrew all their children from the village school after fourteen Christian boys insisted on attending. Only in 1906, after the missionaries

¹⁹ Blough, J.M. 'India in Transition,' *The Missionary Visitor*, Vol. 12 (1), January 1910, pp.7-9.

²⁰ See for example *Annual Report* (Church of the Brethren) to 31 March 1907, Elgin (Illinois, USA), 1907, p. 19; Stover, S. 'The Unrest in India,' *The Missionary Visitor*, Vol. 10 (9), September 1908, p. 344; *Annual Report* (Church of the Brethren), to 31 March 1910, Elgin, 1910, p. 25.

²¹ Assistant Collector's Report, Kheda District, 1903-04, MSAM, RD 1904, Vol. 21, Comp. 177, pt. II, p.252.

opened a separate school for Christians, was the situation resolved.²² During the famine of 1899-1900, the Reverend G.W. Park of the Methodist Episcopalian Church had established an industrial school for boy orphans in Nadiad, the largest town of Kheda District. They were given free boarding and taught various handicrafts. By 1905 there were 300 boys at the school.²³ The local branch of the Arya Samaj was run by Phulchand Bapuji Shah (1882-1934), the son of a rich Baniya banker, and Gokaldas Talati (1868-1945), also a Baniya and a Bombay- educated lawyer. In 1908 they launched a campaign to reconvert some of these orphans. Some were ‘rescued’ and given shelter in Nadiad, others were sent to Arya Samaj schools in Lahore and Ajmer. The Reverend Park retaliated by prosecuting the students. Vithalbai Patel, then a rising young Bombay barrister, was called by the Arya Samajists to defend the students in court.²⁴ As a result of this, the Arya Samajists established a ‘Hindu Anath Ashram’ for the ‘rescued’ orphans. There was a primary school to fourth standard attached to it that concentrated on teaching trades, such as carpentry and weaving.²⁵

²² Assistant Collector’s Report, Kheda District, 1904-05, MSAM, RD 1906, Vol. 10, Comp. 511, pt. II, p.170 and Assistant Collector’s Report, Kheda District, 1905-06, MSAM, RD 1907, Vol. 12, Comp., 511, pt. III, p.74; interview with Vyas, Indravardhan Purushottam, Alindra, 15 February 1977.

²³ Collector’s Report, Kheda District, 1904-05, MSAM, RD 1906, Vol. 10, Comp. 511, pt. II, p.9.

²⁴ G.I. *Vithalbai Patel: Life and Times*, Vol. 1, Bombay, 1951, p.28.

²⁵ Interview with Suraiya, Chunilal Ramanlal, Nadiad, 2 February 1972.

The extreme insecurity felt by high caste Hindus in central Gujarat in the face of these conversions found their voice in a collection of *bhajans* to be sung by the Nadiad orphans in processions around the town that was titled *Anath Bhajanavali*. It was compiled and printed in 1911 by Phulchand Bapuji Shah.²⁶ In one of the *bhajans* the orphans were made to sing that their beloved parents were no more, leaving them in these wicked times of famine to the mercy of Christians and Muslims. ‘To eat us alive the Quran and the Bible are hissing [like snakes]; to drink our blood, famine and plague are gnashing their teeth.’ ‘The greatness of India has departed, religion has gone out of the land; many of your children have become Christians leaving the religious life.’ One *bhajan* voiced the popular high caste paranoia of Hindu racial decline.²⁷

If, O father! You do not save us we shall lose our religion;

for want of a handful of grain, the children will become Christian cow-killers;

²⁶ Shah, P.B. *Anath Bhajanavali*, Nadiad, 1911. The original was in Gujarati and only translated extracts are available in MSAM, Judicial Department, 1913, Comp. 234. These translations, by the Government Oriental Translator, are at times awkward in their language.

²⁷ In 1909, a series of articles in the *Bengalee* had argued that census figures showed that Hindus were in demographic decline, and that this was caused by the failure of the high castes to cater to the aspirations of the lower castes. The articles had a big impact in Bengal. Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, pp.82-3. It is not unlikely that they had a similar impact on those nationalists in Gujarat whom we know were inspired by the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, and who had translated Bengali nationalist texts into Gujarati. See Hardiman, D. *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District 1917-1934*, New Delhi, 1981, p.62.

the limited children of India, who are protectors of the cow, will turn into cow-killers;

Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras will thus become issueless.

Today, the very name and vestige of Aryan Hindus will come to an end.

The general theme of this collection was that Christians and Muslims were plotting to overthrow Hindu *dharma*, that European and American millionaires were sponsoring the missionaries, that Hindu *dharma* was imperilled through famine and cow slaughter, that caste rules were no longer being maintained, that moral fibre had deteriorated, and that discord, envy and hatred had replaced former harmony and peace. Hindus were exhorted to despise Christians and Muslims. They should live simply and donate generously to charity. The cow and the Brahman should be revered as in days of old.

The *bhajans* revealed a profound fear of Muslims by these urban upper-caste Hindus. In Nadiad, the animosity between the two religious communities found its expression in a riot at the time of Moharram in 1906.²⁸ According to Fulsinji Dabhi, interviewed in 1973, many high caste Hindus held a stereotype of the ‘aggressive Muslim,’ and they lived in fear of them. Dabhi was born in a small state in central Gujarat in 1895, and had come into contact with the Arya Samaj in Ahmedabad, where he went for his education in 1912. Although he remained unsympathetic to the Arya Samaj, he understood the fears that drove them.²⁹ The image of the supposedly cruel,

²⁸ Assistant Collector’s Report, Kheda District, 1905-06, MSAM, RD 1907, Vol. 12, Comp., 511, pt. III, p.15.

²⁹ Interview with Dabhi, Fulsinhji, Nadiad, 29 September 1973.

fanatical and belligerent Muslim was a relatively recent construct in a society in which there were many different communities classed under such a rubric, and in which the divides between Hindu and Muslim were often nebulous. The Daudi Bohras, for example, were very similar to the Baniyas in many elements of their culture. The Molesalam community employed both Islamic priests and Brahmans, and consulted Hindu genealogists. They dressed like Rajputs and sometimes intermarried with low status Rajputs. In the census of 1911 the 35,000 members of this community were even placed in a category of 'Hindu-Muhammadans.'³⁰ There were several other such communities in Gujarat. During the late nineteenth century, moves were made within some of these communities to cleanse them of supposedly non-Islamic customs. Many Sunni Bohra peasants of southern Gujarat, for example, came under the influence of the Wahabi movement, and carried on a campaign to abandon the various syncretic saints whom they revered in favour of a direct relationship with Allah. Previously known for their love of liquor and toddy, they abandoned this indulgence as contrary to the tenets of Islam.³¹ As education spread in this community, the preference was for Urdu-medium education, which created a chasm between them and other children who were educated in Gujarati-medium schools.³² This drive towards a new orthodoxy helped

³⁰ *Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol.IX, part III, *Gujarat Population: Musalmans and Parsis*, Bombay, 1899, p.68; *Census of India*, 1911, Vol.VII, *Bombay*, Pt. 1, *Report*, Bombay, 1912, p.118, quoted in Sarkar, S. 'Conversions and the Politics of the Hindu Right,' *EPW*, 26 June 1999, p.1694. The census commissioner, E.A. Gait, rebuked his subordinate in Bombay for allowing such a category – people had to be classed either as Hindu or Muslim.

³¹ *Punjab Notes and Queries*, Vol. 3 (29), February 1886, p.82.

³² Collector's Report, Surat District , 1915, MSAM, RD 1917, Comp.511 pt.VI.

differentiate ‘the Muslim’ more clearly, as such people now made a point of distinguishing themselves with markers such as ‘Islamic’ dress, beards for men, non-vegetarian food, use of Urdu language, and so on. In the process, certain of such communities that were typecast by Hindus as ‘aggressive’ – such as the supposedly ‘violent’ Pathans or the ‘belligerent’ Muslim Ghanchis – were held to stand for ‘the Muslim’ in general. Even Gandhi – also, like Phulchand Shah, a Gujarati Baniya – applied such stereotypes. Writing in 1924, he stated: ‘My own experience but confirms that the Mussalman as a rule is a bully, and the Hindu as a rule is a coward. I have noticed this in railway trains, on public roads, and in the quarrels which I have had the privilege of settling.’³³ For many Brahmans and Baniyas the Arya Samaj provided one means by which they could stand up against this supposed aggression.³⁴

³³ ‘Hindu-Muslim Tension: Its Cause and Cure’, *Young India*, 29 May 1924, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [hereafter CWMG], CD Rom edition, New Delhi, 1999, Vol. 28, p.49.

³⁴ For a discussion of the way in which this image of the ‘cruel Muslim’ was constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Chandra, S. *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*, New Delhi, 1992, pp.139-44. On popular fears amongst high caste Hindu about their supposed effeminacy, see Sinha, M. *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester 1995; Chowdhury-Sengupta, I. ‘The Effeminate and the Masculine,’ in Robb P. (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, Delhi 1997; Banerjee, S. *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India*, New York, 2005.

Support for the Arya Samaj did not rest on such considerations alone. Writing of the southeast Punjab, Nonica Dutta has argued that the organisation provided a means for the self-assertion of the local Jat peasantry. In this, it incorporated many cultural traditions that were anti-Brahmanical and anti-caste, and which had been expressed previously in certain Bhakti traditions that preached monotheism, equality, purity, frugality and physical fitness. The Jats had been subjected by Brahmans, Baniyas and Rajputs to many humiliating restrictions on their dress, modes of worship, places of eating and the like, and had been strictly forbidden to wear the sacred thread. Large numbers joined the Arya Samaj in the 1905-12 period, believing that it would provide for them a new and better status. They now claimed Kshatriya status. There was a strong stress on the unity of the Jat community as a whole, with older internal divisions being abandoned. They began to abstain from eating meat and drinking liquor, and reduced their marriage expenses. Jat women were now expected to act in a more modest way, not visiting the bazaar and dressing in less revealing ways. Gurukuls were established to provide education for members of the community.³⁵

In Gujarat, there was similar support for the Arya Samaj from dominant peasant communities in the period after 1900. One such group were the Anavils of South Gujarat. Known as 'Bhathelas' earlier in the nineteenth century, they were distinguished from landlords of the community, who were known as 'Desais.' During the course of that century, the Bhathelas began to call themselves 'Anavils,' and claimed Brahman status. During the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of them joined the Arya Samaj. The Desais were in the habit of accepting girls in

³⁵ Datta, N. 'Arya Samaj and the Making of Jat Identity,' *Studies in History*, 13 (1), January-June 1997.

marriage from the Bhatelas on payment of a large dowry – the Arya Samajists resolved to stop paying high dowries.³⁶ They also advocated widow remarriage. This all caused considerable controversy within the community, and in villages in which the Arya Samajists were in a minority, they were in some cases persecuted by the other Anavils. For example, in Umarsadi village, Monji Rudar Nayak (1864-1937), a medium-sized farmer and ghee-trader, joined the Arya Samaj and promptly arranged the marriage of his daughter, who had been widowed age seven. He was put out of caste and suffered a social boycott for almost five years.³⁷ In general, certain Anavils deployed the Arya Samaj as a vehicle for their claim for higher status, and can be compared in this respect to the Jats of the Punjab.

A significant number of Patidar peasants were also attracted to the organisation at this time. The Patidars, who were found all over Gujarat, were divided into numerous subcastes, such as the Levas, Kadvas and Matias. Two particularly influential Leva Patidar Arya Samajists were the brothers Kalyanji Mehta (1870-1973) and Kunvarji Mehta (1886-1982) of Vanz village near Surat. The two were persuaded to join the Arya Samaj in 1899 by an Anavil friend of theirs. Claiming that their

³⁶ Van der Veen, K.W. *I Give thee my Daughter: A Study of Marriage and Hierarchy among the Anavil Brahmans of South Gujarat*, Assen, 1972, pp.13-14, 36-39 and 198-99.

³⁷ Anand, Swami, *Dhartini Arti*, Ahmedabad, 1980, pp.7-33.

community was of Kshatriya status, they began wearing the sacred thread.³⁸ From 1910 onwards, the two brothers launched a campaign to unite the different Patidar communities of South Gujarat under an Arya umbrella. In that region, there were at least seven different endogamous Patidar groups, some of which did not interdine. In 1914, for example, Kunvarji Mehta persuaded some Patidars followers of the Kabir Panth to dine with other Patidars. He also persuaded some Matia Patidars to join the Arya Samaj.³⁹ The Matias were followers of the Pirana Panth, a syncretic sect that revolved around devotion to certain pirs, and their customs were syncretic. For example, whereas other Patidars generally cremated their dead, Matias buried them.⁴⁰ In 1911, the brothers established a boarding house for rural Patidars who wanted to study at high school in Surat City. Patidars from all the various sub-castes were encouraged to come and live and eat together. This caused some initial problem, as the Levas considered themselves superior to the others. The Matias were particularly despised because of their 'Islamic' customs. Some older Patidars accused the brothers of 'polluting the Patidar caste,' and opposed their work. However, most of the boys wanted to dine together, and the opposition was soon overcome. Arya Samaj ideals were propagated during the daily prayer time. The boarders were invested with the sacred thread. Besides study, stress was laid also on gymnastic exercises, swimming

³⁸ Interview with Mehta, Kunvarji, Malad, 29 November 1981; Bhatt, A. 'Caste and Political Mobilisation in a Gujarat District,' in Kothari R. ed., *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1970, pp.303, 318.

³⁹ Interview with Mehta, Kunvarj, Malad, 28 February 1981.

⁴⁰ Interview with Patel, Kushalbhai Morarbhai, Bardoli, 27 & 28 January 1982.

and sports.⁴¹ In this case, the Arya Samaj provided a focal point for an internal move to forge caste unity.

In the rich agrarian tract of Charotar in Kheda District, many young Leva Patidar men also joined the Arya Samaj at this time, often in response to Baroda-based Arya Samajists who held meetings in their villages. For example, after a meeting in 1912 at Vanthvali village addressed by the Baroda-based Arya Samaj activist Pardhabhai Sharma, about five young men from the leading Patidar families joined the organisation. They were particularly impressed by his denunciation of *murtipuja* (image-worship) and demands for social reform. Their subsequent refusal to participate in death feasts led to tensions with other Patidars of the village, but they were not boycotted as such.⁴² In the village of Ras, about twenty-five young Leva Patidars joined the Arya Samaj around 1913-14. The older Patidars saw this as a *dharmik* (religious) activity, and did not attempt to interfere.⁴³ In Narsanda, about twenty young Patidars men joined the Arya Samaj under the influence of a Brahman of the village who had become an Arya Samajist while working in Madras. The older Patidars – mostly Vaishnavites who believed in *murtipuja* – disliked the Arya Samaj, as they considered it to be atheistic. Nonetheless, they did nothing to stop the youngsters from joining. In an interview, two of these Arya Samajists, Manibhai and Punjabhai

⁴¹ Mehta, S. *The Peasantry and Nationalism: A Study of the Bardoli Satyagraha*, Delhi, 1984, pp.67-8.

⁴² Interview with Patel, Tulsibhai Dayabhai, Vanthvali, 18 February 1977.

⁴³ Interview with Patel, Ashabhai Lallubhai, Ras, 21 & 22 September 1973.

Patel, stated that they were attracted to the Arya Samaj because of its stress on leading a simple and unostentatious life, in which work was worshipped rather than God. They supported its emphasis on social reform in regard to dowries, heavy marriage expenses, child-marriage, and death feasts. They appreciated its condemnation of superstitions, such as the belief in ghosts. Also its opposition to the practice of untouchability attracted them. They said that at that time the Patidars and Vankar untouchables of the village had good relations, and strongly denied that there was any anti-Christian or anti-Muslim content to their feelings at that time, even though nearly half of the Vankar families in the village had converted to Christianity. They said that the Arya Samaj made them politically aware. They used to read the *Arya Prakash*, an Arya Samaj magazine published from Anand, also in the Charotar. However, they were not politically active until Gandhi came.⁴⁴

In the Charotar, individual young Leva Patidar men – women do not appear to have been much involved – appear to have been attracted to the Arya Samaj because of its ‘modern’ reformist image. In contrast to the Patidars of South Gujarat, the Charotar Patidars did not try to make this a vehicle to forge unity within the caste, even though there were sharp status divisions based on marriage circles, known as *gols*. Their condemnation of dowries could be seen as an attack on the main element of this status system, but it was at best indirect and failed to pose any serious challenge. They denied that they were motivated by any animosity towards Christians and Muslims, even though their involvement came at a time of considerable inter-religious tension in that

⁴⁴ Interview with Patel, Punjabhai Ottambhai, and Patel, Manibhai Prabhudas, Narsanda, 5 May 1976.

area. We have already noted the resentment shown by many Patidars towards the Vankars who had converted to Christianity. For Narsanda village, government records revealed a history of tensions between the Patidars and Muslims there during the first decade of the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Although the Narsanda Arya Samajists acknowledged these animosities in their interviews, and in fact provided more details of the conflict, they denied any involvement. This might have been because their later participation in the Gandhian nationalist movement had changed their feelings in this respect, though it is striking that even then they did not attempt any campaigns of reconversion, in contrast to the Arya Samajists of Nadiad town. Their chief agenda appears to have been a social and religious reformist one, and it was one that subsequently fitted seamlessly into the movement led by Gandhi.

A very different social group that became involved with the Arya Samaj were a local gentry of central Gujarat, the *thakors*. Ruling either single villages, or small groups of villages, they claimed Rajput status. This claim was not accepted by the Rajput Maharajas of the major princely states of Gujarat, who generally regarded such *thakors* as Kolis, an inferior caste. The syncretic Molesalam community was considered to be an offshoot of this group, and certain of the *thakors* developed an interest in the Arya Samaj with a view to reclaiming them to the Hindu fold. There were particular grievances that heightened feelings in this respect. The Jhala Molesalams of Kapadvanj Taluka of Kheda District, for example, claimed descent from the high status Jhala Rajputs, who ruled a number of states in eastern Kathiawad.

⁴⁵ Assistant Collector's Report, Kheda District, 1905-06, MSAM, RD 1907, Vol. 12, Comp., 511, pt. III, p.3.

Young males of the community were married to women of the Hinduised Rajput/Koli community, but the young women were married to those who followed Islamic customs. From a communalist perspective, this could be interpreted as a drain on the Hindu population, with 'Hindus' being 'lost' to a so-called 'Muslim' group. Before the twentieth century, the *thakors* were unconcerned with this issue. Only in the early years of the twentieth century did a few young and educated members of this class begin to see it as a problem that needed rectifying. They were encouraged in this by some Arya Samajists of Agra, who in 1909 had established a Rajput Shuddhi Sabha. This had identified the Muslim Rajputs of northern and central India, as well as Gujarat, as targets for conversion to Hinduism. Although this body only survived for a couple of years, it managed to convert a number of Muslim Rajputs, and its work was continued at a local level by Arya Samaj activists.⁴⁶ One such person was the Thakor of Mogar in central Gujarat, Kesarisinh Solanki, who had been educated at a special school for *thakors* established and run by the British at Sadra. He became an Arya Samajist, focusing on *shuddhi* directed at the Molesalams, and in a few cases Christian converts. Solanki also encouraged education for members of his community, and established a 'Charotar Rajput Samaj' in 1917-18 to provide funds for boys of the community (girls were ignored).⁴⁷ He used this to advance their claim for Rajput status. The large majority of the *thakors* remained aloof from such activities; for the most part they were strongly pro-British and hostile to social reform of all sorts. Nonetheless, the work of

⁴⁶ Ghai, R.K. *The Shuddhi Movement in India: A Study of its Socio-Political Dimension*, Delhi, 1990, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Interview with Solanki, Natwarsinh Kesarisinh, Nadiad, 4 February 1972.

people like Solanki created an atmosphere of considerable anxiety and suspicion among the Molesalams and other *thakors* whose culture had Islamic elements.

There were strong parallels here with Arya Samajists campaigns elsewhere to 'purify' syncretic 'Kshatriya' communities, such as the Malkanas of western UP, the Mers of central Rajasthan and the Sheiks of Larkana in Sind. It was claimed that they had been converted – normally forcibly – to Islam under Muslim rule in medieval times. In the case of the Malkanas, some Rajput leaders took up the work believing that it would help to extend their political base, and by 1910, they claimed to have 'reconverted' 1,052 of the community. Tens of thousands more were 'purified' over the next two decades. The local Arya Samaj and an organisation called the Kshatriya Upkarini Mahasabha (Rajput Welfare Society) worked hand in hand in this. No attempt was made to provide any religious instruction for those targeted, and the so-called 'converts' were not expected to subscribe to Arya Samaj beliefs as such, or call themselves 'Arya Samajists.' All that was required was that they designate themselves as orthodox Rajput Hindus. Although the Arya Samaj was in theory opposed to the caste system, the whole emphasis in this campaign was on caste status, a promise being held out that 'converts' would be accepted as fully-fledged Rajputs. In fact, this promise was never fulfilled, as other Rajputs refused to intermarry or have any significant social relations with the Malkanas. In an article on this activity, Yoginder Sikand and Manjari Katju have argued that the Arya Samaj tended to focus its *shuddhi* work on areas where there were socially dominant and locally powerful syncretic communities that were considered to have once been Rajputs. Lower status Muslim communities were, by contrast, generally ignored, as they could not be lured with any promise of high caste status. They claim that community-based *shuddhi* work only

succeeded on a wide scale in the case of such communities.⁴⁸ Although this is a suggestive argument, it provides only a part of the picture. It cannot explain why some such groups – such as the Malkanas and Mers – came to identify themselves during the course of the twentieth century unambiguously as Hindus while others – such as the Sheiks of Sind and the Molesalams of Gujarat – did not. Much appears to have depended on the success of counter-mobilisations by proselytising Muslim organisations that began to assert themselves in the first three decades of that century, such as Isha’at-e-Quran and Tabligh-ul-Islam.⁴⁹ Also, the refusal by other Rajputs to have social relations with the ‘converts’ could cause such campaigns to collapse. As we shall see, such considerations appear to have been decisive in the case of the Gujarat Molesalams.

The Gandhian Era in Gujarat

With the emergence of Gandhi on the political scene in Gujarat after 1915, many of the Arya Samajists of Gujarat gravitated towards him. While working in South Africa, Gandhi had been an admirer of the body, which he saw as a progressive force for good. He particularly admired the educational work carried out through its network of *gurukuls*. He was in touch with Mahatma Munshiram, who had founded

⁴⁸ Sikand, Y. and Katju, M. ‘Mass Conversions to Hinduism among Indian Muslims,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 August 1994.

⁴⁹ Sikand and Katju themselves show on p.2216 how such Islamic counter-mobilisation prevented the mass conversion of the Mula Jats of present-day Haryana in the 1920s.

the Kangri Gurukul at Hardwar in 1902. Munshiram, who became later known as Swami Shraddhananda, had collected funds for Gandhi's work in South Africa. Immediately after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi had visited this institution and praised it highly.⁵⁰ In 1916, Gandhi attended an Arya Samaj conference in Surat and performed the opening ceremony of its new temple there. In his speech he said that although he was not an Arya Samajist, he had 'especial respect for the Samaj', and that he had come under the influence its founder Swami Dayananda Sarawati.⁵¹ Nevertheless, although Gandhi was reaching out to Arya Samajists, he did not give unqualified support to their agenda. In 1916 he told some Arya Samajists that they could do better work if they reformed themselves; in particular, he disliked the way that the organisation's spokesmen were 'only too ready to enter into violent controversy to gain their end.'⁵² He also felt that the education provided by the *gurukuls* failed to inculcate a spirit of self-sufficiency, and he recommended that they provide training in agriculture, handicrafts and sanitation.⁵³ Gandhi was establishing his leadership in Gujarat on his own terms.

Between 1916 and 1918, some of the leading Arya Samajists of Gujarat joined Gandhi, in the process refiguring their identities in a Gandhian mould. In the process, the Arya Samajist element in their personalities and work became diluted to a point at

⁵⁰ Jordens, J.F.T. *Swami Shraddhananda: His Life and Causes*, New Delhi, 1981, pp.92-3.

⁵¹ Speech at Arya Samaj Annual Celebrations, Surat, 2 January 1916, *CWMG*, Vol.15, p.123.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.124.

⁵³ Speech at Gurukul Anniversary, 20 March 1916, *CWMG*, Vol. 15, p.207.

which it became eventually invisible. These were figures such as Kunvarji and Kalyanji Mehta, Phulchand Bapuji Shah and Gokaldas Talati, and others such as Ravishankar Maharaj, who became one of the most exemplary Gandhian workers in central Gujarat. According to Punjabhai and Manibhai Patel, the two prominent young Arya Samajists of Narsanda village, once Gandhi arrived on the scene the glamour of the Arya Samaj dissipated, and although Arya Samaj activities continued in the area, the momentum was lost.⁵⁴ In the case of many of these people – particularly in the case of the Anavil and Patidar Arya Samajists – their chief agenda had been to propagate a patriotic social reform, and their work fitted within the Gandhian movement without tension. Others, such as the *thakor* Arya Samajists, remained aloof from Gandhian nationalism and continued their *shuddhi* activities regardless of Gandhi. Many of the Baroda City Arya Samajists, who were led by high-caste Punjabis, also kept their distance from Gandhi, being admirers of violent revolutionaries.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Interview with Patel, Punjabhai Ottambhai, and Patel, Manibhai Prabhudas, Narsanda, 5 May 1976.

⁵⁵ The revolutionary Bhagat Singh and three of his associates were sheltered by Arya Samajists in Baroda for a few days in 1928 when they were in hiding from the police. See Sharma, S. 'Bhagat Singh's Vadodara connection,' *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad edition, 20 June 2002. It may be noted that there was also in Baroda a flourishing branch of V.D. Savarkar's Abhinav Bharat Society– an organisation that was known to support armed revolt. Sanghvi, N. *Gujarat: A Political Analysis*, Surat 1996, pp.119-20.

These tensions remained submerged during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-22. This was a time when Gandhi was reaching out to both Hindu and Muslim activists, and he managed to forge a remarkable degree of unity against the British. Mahatma Munshiram, who had taken *sannyas* as Swami Shraddhananda in 1917, threw his support behind Gandhi. Previously he had distrusted the motives of politicians, but he felt that Gandhi's politics were different, being enthused with the spirit of religion.⁵⁶ For a time, he became a leading proponent of Hindu-Muslim unity, and was even invited to preach at the Jama Masjid in Delhi.⁵⁷ Gandhi sought to win such people to a more tolerant and inclusive nationalism, insisting, for example, that cow protection should not be made a pretext for any antagonism against Muslims – their support for this cause should be won through love.⁵⁸ However, although this strategy forged an unprecedented alliance – symbolised most strikingly by the saffron-clad Shraddhananda preaching from the pulpit of the Jama Masjid – it also enhanced the popularity and credibility of Hindu and Islamic nationalists who had previously lacked a mass base.

The implosion came after Gandhi called off civil disobedience and was arrested and jailed in early 1922. Already, the revolt by Muslim tenants in Malabar in 1921, which had been accompanied by attacks on Hindu landlords and cases of forcible conversion, had caused uneasy stirrings amongst those whose agenda had a strong anti-Muslim and anti-Christian content. They resented the way in which the

⁵⁶ Jordens, *Swami Shraddhananda*, p.107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁵⁸ 'Hinduism,' *Young India*, 6 October 1921, *CWMG*, Vol.24, pp.373-4.

Khilafat leaders had refused to condemn these attacks.⁵⁹ Swami Shraddhananda took it as a sign of Muslim bad faith:

...it appears that the Muslims only want to make India and the Hindus a mere means of strengthening their own cause. For them Islam comes first and Mother India second. Should not the Hindus work at their own *sangathan* [consolidation].⁶⁰

In 1922 he turned on the offensive, demanding that the Congress provide funds for a campaign of *shuddhi*, aimed at 'reclaiming' Muslims to the Hindu fold. When this request was turned down, he renounced his affiliation with the Congress and, in alliance with the Hindu Mahasabha, formed an All-India Shuddhi Sabha in February 1923.⁶¹ In the same year, V.D. Savarkar published *Who is a Hindu?*, which defined a Hindu as those who regarded Bharatvarsha as their holy land and fatherland. This formula allowed a wide variety of religions within India, such as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Jainism, Sikhism to be included within the 'Hindu' umbrella, but not religions such as Islam or Christianity, which were considered 'alien', and by extension, unpatriotic. Muslim leaders countered all this with their own *tabligh*

⁵⁹ Gordon, R. 'The Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress, 1915 to 1926,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 9 (2), 1975, pp. 163 & 165.

⁶⁰ Jordens, *Swami Shraddhananda*, p.126.

⁶¹ Gordon, 'The Hindu Mahasabha', pp.163, 170 & 172. The alliance with the Hindu Mahasabha was short-lived; within a year Shraddhananda was railing against the organisation for failing to promote the doctrinal and ritual unity demanded for Hindus by the Arya Samaj. Fischer-Tiné, 'Kindly Elders of the Hindu Biradri,' p. 120.

(propaganda) and *tanzim* (organisation). There followed what has been described as ‘a spate of Hindu-Muslim riots from 1923 onwards’.⁶² In general, the Arya Samaj became far more strongly identified at this time with anti-Muslim mobilisation than it had during its earlier years.⁶³

In Gujarat, the Arya Samajists of Baroda City revived the Arya Kumar Sabha and the Shuddhi Sabha in 1923, both of which organisations had been quiescent for several years. With the Hindu Mahasabha, they formed a Gujarat Hindu Sabha to unite the Hindus of the province against both the conversion of untouchables to Christianity and a supposed Muslim aggression. In 1923 and 1924, this organisation established nineteen schools for untouchables in villages around Baroda and in Bharuch District, where there was a particularly large concentration of Molesalams, who became a target for *shuddhi*.⁶⁴ In response, some maulvis started visiting the Molesalam villages to counter this activity.⁶⁵ Writing in the Gujarati journal *Yugdharma* in 1924, the Baroda city Arya Samaj leader Pandit Anandpriyaji stated that Muslims were conspiring to convert Hindus to Islam, while missionaries were busy converting untouchables and Bhil tribal people to Christianity. He accused the Aga Khan – the

⁶² Pandey, P. *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, New Delhi, 1990, p.234.

⁶³ As pointed out by Fischer-Tiné, ‘Kindly Elders of the Hindu Biradri,’ pp. 116-18 and 121.

⁶⁴ Yagnik and Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, pp. 213-214.

⁶⁵ Secret Bombay Presidency Police Abstracts of Intelligence, C.I.D. Office, Mumbai, [hereafter: Bombay Secret Abstracts], 1923, p.1032.

leader of the Khoja community – of funding Islamic conversion work in the villages of Gujarat. Impoverished untouchables were, he said, being snared by offers of money. He concluded: ‘Thus Christians and Khojas worked day and night to transform the great devotees of Ram and Krishna into Johns and Alis.’⁶⁶ Swami Shradhanand toured Gujarat in 1924 holding meetings that attracted large crowds. Both the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha recruited many new members at this time in Gujarat. Some Congress leaders who had been prominent advocates of Hindu-Muslim unity during the Non-Cooperation now joined the revived *shuddhi* campaign. For example, Manantrai Rayaji, a prominent Congressman of Surat, turned against the Khilafat leaders who he had been working closely with in 1920-22, and started a communal newspaper called the *Hindu* that propagated the need for *shuddhi* in a strident manner. The Congress leader of the Panch Mahals District, Vamanrao Mukadam, joined the Hindu Mahasabha at this time. There were Hindu-Muslim riots at Siddhpur in North Gujarat and Wadwan in Kathiawad.⁶⁷

Gandhi was in prison from 1922 to 1924. After his release, he received many abusive letters from Hindus who accused him of opening the floodgates by integrating the Khilafatist Muslims within the Non-Cooperation movement. They argued that the ‘awakened’ Muslims had reverted to their true nature by launching ‘a kind of jihad’ against the Hindus. Many argued that Gandhian nonviolence and *Satyagraha* had

⁶⁶ Pandit Anandpriyaji, ‘Gujaratma Hindu Sabha,’ *Yugdharmā*, 4 (5), Sanvat 1980, quoted in Yagnik and Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, pp. 213-14.

⁶⁷ Yagnik and Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, pp. 211-214; Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India*, pp. 276-77.

become discredited – the only answer was to answer Muslim belligerence with their own counter-aggression. Muslims on the other hand wrote to him complaining of the *shuddhi* and *sangathan* activities of the Hindus. While in jail, Gandhi had for the first time read Swami Dayananda Saraswati's *Satyarth Prakash* – the so-called 'Arya Samaj Bible.' He was not impressed by the tone of this work. In his opinion, Swami Dayanada had severely misrepresented all religions, including Hinduism. 'He has tried to make narrow one of the most tolerant and liberal of the faiths on the face of the earth.' Gandhi also condemned his erstwhile ally, Swami Shraddhananda, stating that although he admired his bravery and his educational work, his speeches were 'often irritating' and had the unjustifiable ambition of bringing all Muslims into the Aryan fold. He went on to attack the principle of *shuddhi*, arguing that proselytisation was alien to the spirit of Hinduism. He accused the Arya Samaj of imitating the techniques of Christian missionaries; like them: 'The Arya Samaj preacher is never so happy as when he is reviling other religions.' This all did far more harm than good. He also condemned the Muslim campaign of *tabligh* as being alien to the spirit of Islam. He had read some pamphlets from the Punjab, and found them full of hatred and vile abuse.⁶⁸

None of this was heeded by the Arya Samajists, who continued to organise provocative meetings at which the *shuddhi* ceremony was performed. One such meeting was for example held at Laval village in Kheda District in 1925, attended by about a thousand people. Twenty Molesalam families took part, with about 67 being 'purified.' There was a counter-demonstration by about 600 Muslims, led by their

⁶⁸ 'Hindu-Muslim Tension: Its Cause and Cure', *Young India*, 29 May 1924, CWMG, Vol. 28, pp.43-4, 52-3, 56.

maulvis. The ‘purified’ Molesalams then asked to dine with the other ‘Rajputs’ of the village, but this was refused. Next day, when a ceremony was held to invest them with the sacred thread, only 21 turned up.⁶⁹ This incident revealed one of the major the main fault lines in the whole *shuddhi* approach, namely that there was no guarantee that caste Hindus would accept those ‘purified’ as equals. They would not even dine with them, let alone enter into marriage relationships. In such circumstances, there was no way in which they could avoid continuing as, in effect, a separate community.⁷⁰

Despite this, these divisive activities continued during the late 1920s, further poisoning relationships between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat. The *thakor* Arya Samajists established an umbrella organisation for their work in central Gujarat in early 1926 called the ‘Charotar Pradesh Hindu Sabha.’ Its primary aim task was stated to be *shuddhi* activities amongst Muslims and Christians. It had 62 members. They claimed that in 1925, 189 native Christians, 3 Khojas and 215 Molesalams had been ‘reconverted’ to Hinduism.⁷¹ The Molesalams countered with an anti-*shuddhi* conference at Napa village of in the Charotar in March 1926. The president of this

⁶⁹ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1925, pp.10-11.

⁷⁰ Ghai has pointed out in his study of the *shuddhi* movement how this was a major problem with the project as a whole in India. He cites the case of untouchables who had undergone *shuddhi* who continued to maintain close social relationships with unconverted members of their community, so that many orthodox Hindus refused to accept them within the Hindu fold. Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, pp. 81-2.

⁷¹ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1926, p.128.

meeting was Sardar Naharsinji Ishvarsinji, who, as the Thakor of Amod in neighbouring Bharuch District, was a leading figure in the Molesalam community. He was a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly. Some two thousand attended, and several maulvis spoke, deploring the aggressive attitude of the Arya Samaj.⁷² In late 1926, the office of the Bombay Pradesh Arya Patinidhi Sabha was transferred from Bombay to Anand in Kheda District, and its paper *Arya Prakash* was published from there. Anand became an important centre for the Arya Samaj.⁷³

In February 1927, an Arya Samaj meeting was held in Anand, at which Pandit Mangal Datji gave a speech in which he claimed that the Hindu population was being reduced year by year in numerical strength. He appealed for *shuddhi* directed towards the Muslims.⁷⁴ There were further such meetings that year. In one, in Nadiad in June, a *shuddhi* ceremony was held at which about 45 members of the Pirana Panth were 'reconverted' to Hinduism. Arya Samajists attended this from other parts of Kheda and Baroda City, and it was presided over by Dadubhai Desai, an influential Patidar landlord of Nadiad and member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly. He made a short speech 'welcoming back' the 'Pirana Shaikhs' to the Patidar fold.⁷⁵ In June, about 700 Muslims of Kheda District, and adjoining areas of Baroda and Cambay States met and

⁷² Bombay Secret Abstracts 1926, pp.112 and 199.

⁷³ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1926, p.580.

⁷⁴ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1927, p.73.

⁷⁵ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1927, p.250

protested against publication of anti-Islamic literature by the Arya Samajists.⁷⁶ In August, the Muslims of Mehmedabad town in Kheda District took threw brickbats at a procession in honour of the deity Mahadev, injuring about fifteen people. They then slaughtered a cow in the mosque. The Hindu shopkeepers retaliated by refusing to sell to Muslim customers. This was the first time any such tensions had been reported in the town.⁷⁷

The violence escalated over the course of 1927-28, with disturbances in Surat and Godhra. In both cases, there was deliberate provocation of the Muslims of these two towns by leading caste Hindus who were members of both the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha. This was countered by Muslim populists, creating a poisonous atmosphere in the province. According to the fortnightly political report of the Government of Bombay for the second half of September 1928:

There is no doubt that Hindu-Muslim ill-feeling in Gujarat has been carefully fostered by ill-intentioned leaders on both sides during the last year, especially in the press. The *Aftab-i-Islam* of Ahmedabad had to be prosecuted and the *Hindu* of Surat is at present being prosecuted, both for exciting religious animosity. ...In fact, Gujarat at present is a sad comment on the Nehru Report.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1927, p.291.

⁷⁷ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1927, p.344.

⁷⁸ Fortnightly Report of the Government of Bombay, second half of September 1928. The Nehru Report of 1928 was a Congress-initiated plan for a future constitution for India that addressed the issue of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Douglas Haynes has documented this process in detail for Surat, showing how some leading Congress nationalists with links to the Hindu Mahasabha, such as Manantrai Rayaji, organised procession during the Shivaji and Ganpati festivals that were deliberately provocative towards Muslims. Only a few staunch Gandhians refused to countenance such activities, and they were for a time marginalized. There were serious riots during the celebration of both of these festivals in 1927, in which both Hindus and Muslims were killed.⁷⁹

The case of Godhra has been less well documented, and as the town has subsequently become notorious for sparking off the pogrom of 2002, we may examine this case in more detail. Godhra was the headquarter town of the British Panchmahals District. Its most important nationalist leader was Vamanrao Mukadam, a Maharashtrian Brahman high school teacher. From 1923, he was a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly, and in 1924 he had, as we have seen, joined the Hindu Mahasabha. His close associate in the local Congress organisation, Purushottamdas Shah, was the president of the Godhra branch of this body. The Arya Samaj did not, by comparison, have any notable presence in the town. In 1928, Mukadam started a local newspaper called *Vir Gajna* that became notorious for the malignant tone it adopted towards Muslims.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Haynes, D.E. *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of Public Culture in Surat City, 1852-1928*, Berkeley, 1991, pp. 261-82.

⁸⁰ Interview with Vaghela, Arun, Godhra, 14 December 2004.

There was considerable tension in the town between the high caste Hindus, particularly the Baniyas, and the Ghanchi Muslims. The latter were Sunnis who were said to have been converted in medieval times, and were sometimes called ‘Bohra Ghanchis,’ ‘Bohra’ being a term for ‘convert’.⁸¹ In other parts of Gujarat, the Ghanchis were Hindus.⁸² They were the single largest community in Godhra, and they had a reputation for being a prosperous and enterprising community that had in the past dominated the carting and carrying trade in the region. The coming of the railways in the second half of the nineteenth century had undermined this business, causing difficulties for many.⁸³ Some had diversified by buying up land in the district, which they farmed commercially.⁸⁴ In Godhra, some lived from shop keeping and usury. They also dominated the leather-tanning trade of the town. They had a reputation for being an assertive group – British officials complained that they often evaded their taxes, were involved in opium smuggling, and as tenants frequently refused to pay their rents. Landlords were afraid to take action against them, so it was said, as they had an

⁸¹ *Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol. VI, *Rewa Kantha, Narukot, Cambay, and Surat States*, Bombay, 1880, p.35.

⁸² It might be noted that Narendra Modi, the BJP leader and Gujarat Chief Minister who is said to have masterminded the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, is a Hindu Ghanchi of north Gujarat.

⁸³ Collector’s Report, Panchmahals District, 1874-75, MSAM, RD 1875, Vol. 6, Pt. II, Comp. 963.

⁸⁴ *Papers Relating to the Revision Survey Settlement of the Godhra Taluka of the Panch Mahals Collectorate, Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government*, No. CCCCXXVIII- new series, Bombay 1904, p.100.

aggressive reputation.⁸⁵ In the nineteenth century they had been in conflict with the Daudi Bohra Muslims of the town, who were also traders and usurers, and in 1855 there had even been a riot between the two.⁸⁶ They were said, by contrast, to have good relations with the Hindus of the town.⁸⁷ This all changed during the first decades of the twentieth century, as they began to adopt more a orthodox Islamic culture while the Baniyas moved towards a Hinduised nationalism. Politicians such as Mukadam and Shah exploited these new tensions to build a power base for themselves among the caste Hindus of the town, who, owning a large proportion of the property there, controlled its property-based vote. Matters came to a head on 18 September 1928 when some Hindus, led by Mukadam and Shah, insisted on their right to take out a procession on Ganesh Chaturthi day. They provocatively played their *manjiras* (cymbals) in front of the main mosque. As the procession was dispersing, some Ghanchis attacked Mukadam and Shah. Mukadam suffered a broken left arm, and Shah received a head injury from which he died next day. Although twenty Muslims were arrested and later

⁸⁵ Assistant Collector's Report, Panchmahals District, 1907-08, MSAM, RD, Vol. 13, Comp. 511, pt. IV; Maconochie, E. *Life in the Indian Civil Service*, London 1926, p.36.

⁸⁶ *Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol. III, *Kaira and Panchmahals*, Bombay, 1879, pp.314-5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.226.

tried for this crime, they were all acquitted, as it was impossible to prove a case against them.⁸⁸

Ten days after this clash, the Baroda Arya Samaj leader Pandit Anandpriyaji addressed a meeting in the city at which he stated that the lack of unity amongst Hindus and their general physical weakness was to blame for such events. The Hindu Sangathan held a meeting on 9 October, addressed by Arya Samajists, such as Swami Paramanand, Thakor Govindsinhji of Agra, and Anandpriyaji. About 300 attended. Speakers advocated Hindu unity and social boycott of Muslims.⁸⁹ In an Arya Samaj meeting on 15 October, Swami Paramanand said that Hindus had to be physically strong so that they could defend themselves against Muslim aggression. There were similar Arya Samaj meetings in that month.⁹⁰ There were petty disturbances in Kheda District. For example, on 25 September 1928, Muslims of Mogar village objected to the playing of music in front of their mosque by some mendicants who were passing

⁸⁸ Desai, M. *The Story of my Life*, Vol. 1, Madras 1977, pp.61-2; Fortnightly Report of the Government of Bombay, first half of December 1928; Bombay Secret Abstracts 1928, pp.621-22. Morarji Desai, who was a Deputy Collector based in Godhra at the time, claimed in his autobiography that the British Collector of the Panch Mahals deliberately ensured that the charges against the Muslims would not stick, as he was strongly anti-Congress. Desai depicts this as a blatant example of British 'divide and rule.' He is not however particularly sympathetic towards Mukadam, whom he accuses of rumour-mongering. See pp. 62-66.

⁸⁹ Fortnightly Report of the Government of Baroda, first half of October 1928.

⁹⁰ Fortnightly Report of the Government of Baroda, second half of October 1928.

through the village, and retaliated by damaging the crops of several Hindus.⁹¹ In January 1929, Muslims met in Anand and condemned the Arya Samaj.⁹² A Charotar Pradesh Arya Samaj Conference was held in April 1929, presided over by the politician Dadubhai Desai. He advocated removal of untouchability and the practice of *shuddhi* and *sangathan*, as all Hindus had to unite to obtain Swaraj. He accused Muslims of killing Hindus.⁹³ In Baroda, there was a meeting in April 1929 presided over by Pandit Atmaram, who spoke about the supposed helplessness of Hindus against the Muslims. Muslims, he said, knew the value of their religion, while Hindus were divided and weak. Darbar Gopaldas Desai, a staunch Gandhian nationalist leader of Kheda, attended the meeting. In his speech he criticised Atmaram and called for Hindu-Muslim unity in Gujarat. In July, the Gandhians linked up with the Muslims of the city to stage a *hartal* in protest against Arya Samaj propaganda.⁹⁴ In Surat City, Dayalji Desai and Jinabhai Desai – who were both ardent Gandhians – worked hard to repair the damage that had been done to Hindu-Muslim relations there after the riots of 1927. Although initially marginalized within the local Congress, they received the firm support of Vallabhbhai Patel, the highly influential President of the Gujarat Congress Committee. With his backing, they succeeded in their efforts to a remarkable degree.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1928, p.698.

⁹² Bombay Secret Abstracts, 1929, p.43.

⁹³ Bombay Secret Abstracts 1929, p.312.

⁹⁴ Fortnightly Reports of the Government of Baroda, second half of April 1929 and second half of June 1929.

⁹⁵ Yagnik and Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, pp. 214-15.

Despite these Gandhian initiatives for communal harmony, the majority of Muslims in Gujarat remained wary of the Congress, for they could see that it was linked inextricably at the local level with many hard-line Hindu communalists. Few as a result supported the Civil Disobedience campaign that Gandhi launched in early 1930, in marked contrast to the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-21. For example, of the 14,057 peasants counted in the census of early 1931 who had migrated from British Gujarat to Baroda State areas in 1930-31 to avoid paying land tax to their colonial rulers in support of the movement, only 0.22% were recorded as Muslim.⁹⁶ There was however little outright hostility by Muslims at that time to this Congress-led campaign. This was less and less the case as the 1930s progressed and as the Congress in Gujarat came to be associated increasingly with Hindu nationalist interests.⁹⁷ Many Muslims gravitated towards the Muslim League at that time. This culminated in a four-day street battle in Ahmedabad City in April 1941 in which 76 were killed and over 300 injured. The majority of the casualties were Hindu. Afterwards, the Muslim League paid the fines of convicted Muslim rioters, while the Congress paid the fines of convicted Hindu rioters.⁹⁸ The communal polarisation that Gandhi and his close

⁹⁶ *Census of India 1931, Bombay*, Part I, Bombay 1933, pp. 482-93.

⁹⁷ The reasons for this are discussed in Hardiman, D. 'The Quit India Movement in Gujarat,' in Pandey, P. *The Indian Nation in 1942*, Calcutta, 1988, pp. 91-2; reprinted in Hardiman, D. *Histories for the Subordinated*, New Delhi, 2006, pp.163-65.

⁹⁸ Fortnightly Report of the Government of Bombay, second half of May 1941.

followers had worked so hard to avoid had become an everyday reality in the political life of Gujarat.

Conclusion

The Arya Samaj provided a vehicle for a range of interests in Gujarat. It grew first out of a programme by Punjabi Arya missionaries to save India from Christian proselytisation. In Gujarat, the Gaikwad of Baroda agreed to patronise them if they would carry out educational and social work amongst untouchables. Although this ruler was moved above all by social reformist sentiments, he was nonetheless prepared to turn a blind eye to their more communal work. He did the same with other Hindu nationalists, such as the Maharashtrian gymnast and extremist Manekrao,⁹⁹ and the Hindu Mahasabha. There was at the same time in Baroda City strong sympathy for the nationalist terrorists of Bengal, Maharashtra and the Punjab. In time, the Baroda Arya Samajists began to place more emphasis on the need to stand up against alleged Muslim aggression, particularly after the failure of the Congress-Khilafat pact in 1922. This was seen very clearly in the speeches of the Baroda Arya Samaj leaders in 1928 and 1929, when they made strident calls for Hindus to build their unity and strength to resist the 'violent' Muslim. The anti-Christian agenda had by that time become far less significant.

⁹⁹ For Sayajirao Gaikwad's patronage of nationalistic wrestlers, see Alter, J.A., *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley, 1992, pp.75-6.

The Arya Samaj was also an instrument for high-caste Gujarati Hindus who were insecure about the success of Christian proselytisation in central Gujarat in the period 1895-1905. Although there was an anti-Islamic sub-theme, this was at that time secondary, with most of their efforts being directed towards 'saving' Hindu orphans from the clutches of missionaries. During the second decade of the twentieth century, this issue faded away, as there were no fresh waves of conversion to Christianity in Gujarat. Arya Samajists of this sort then gravitated towards the Gandhian Congress, putting their energies into implementing nationalist programmes, such as Non-Cooperation, nationalist education, *khadi* spinning and weaving, and anti-untouchability work. With the collapse of the Non-Cooperation movement in 1922 and the subsequent development of a more strident anti-Muslim rhetoric amongst many Hindus, some Congress leaders and activists in Gujarat began to adopt a more communal tone, while others – who it might be argued were truer to Gandhi – fought strongly for religious tolerance and communal harmony.

In other cases, the Arya Samaj served in Gujarat as an instrument for caste mobility, caste unity and socio-religious reform amongst middle-level peasant landowners. This was most important in the period from around 1905 to 1915. Afterwards, these groups were attracted increasingly towards the Gandhian Congress, with their Arya Samaj affiliations largely lapsing in the process.

Finally, some politically ambitious young men from Koli *thakor* families saw in *shuddhi* a tool to win support from communities that had been supposedly converted from the Rajput caste to Islam in medieval times. In making this an issue, they demonstrated that they saw themselves as Rajputs, a claim that was not accepted by

many in that community. Their *shuddhi* was directed primarily against Muslims – rather than against the Christians who had in Gujarat provided the main focus of attention for Arya Samajists during the first decade of the twentieth century. This agenda came into its own in the period after 1922, as Hindu communalists began to project Muslims as the chief threat to the unity of the Indian nation. The strong backing of certain members of this gentry class for such a campaign tainted the atmosphere in Gujarat in the late 1920s, contributing to the communal disturbances in towns such as Surat and Godhra.

Although the Arya Samaj played an important role in alienating many Muslims in Gujarat from the Indian National Congress, it was by no means the only cause for this division. Others were the activities of Maharashtrian extremists with leanings towards the nationalist tendency associated with V.D. Savarkar, as well as the Hindu Mahasabha, all fuelled by wider ‘common-sense’ prejudices held by many Hindus about Muslims and Christians.¹⁰⁰ Despite Gandhi’s antipathy to such a politics, it often flourished within the Congress, with Congress activists even portraying Gandhi as a ‘Hindu’ hero who was fighting for ‘Hindu’ rights.¹⁰¹ As a

¹⁰⁰ Many popular Gujarati novels authored by high caste Hindu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, for example, infused with a strongly anti-Islamic bias. See Yagnik and Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, pp. 201-02.

¹⁰¹ Gould has brought this out very clearly in the case of U.P. See in particular Chapter 2, ‘Congress and the Hindu Nation: Symbols, Rhetoric and Action,’ *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*, pp. 35-86; Haynes

rule, Gandhi made a point of disassociating himself from such rhetoric, with varying degrees of success. Although there were at times hardenings in positions, with divisive consequences, there were also periods when barriers were broken down. The situation was thus always a fluid one.

shows how Hindu symbolism became associated with the Congress in Surat in the 1920s in *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India*, pp. 220-36.

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