

## *Introduction*

Hinduism is old – very old; Swaminarayan Hinduism is a modern movement of Hinduism at only two hundred years old. Sahajanand Swami arrived in Gujarat at the beginning of the nineteenth century following a period of sacred wandering through the major religious sites of India during a period of rapid social, political, and cultural change precipitated in part by the British East India Company's increasing colonial control in Gujarat. He founded a religious reform movement based on basic ancient Hindu teachings and practices that proclaimed new theological bases for bhakti devotion, instilled a strict discipline for ascetics and householders, and built new temples and institutions that were successful in attracting a large number of sadhus and householders. By the time of his death in 1830, the messenger had become the message, and Sahajanand Swami was revered as the manifestation of Krishna and of *Purushottam*, the supreme being, and given a new title, "Swaminarayan." That devotion continues to be the heart of movement he founded, known as Swaminarayan Hinduism.

He became and remains a significant religious leader because his adaptive reforms of the Hindu tradition shaped a new and effective Hindu identity, a creative ideology, an attractive ethic, and strong, flexible institutions. The traditional and adaptive aspects of his movement revived ancient practices associated with Vaishnava and Krishna devotion and a discipline with reforms appropriate to the colonial context in Gujarat. These have provided the foundation for successfully negotiating the social, political, and economic changes in the modern period and developing transnational opportunities. The reforms in social and moral practices brought Swaminarayan Hinduism to the attention of British officials and religious leaders and garnered positive responses.

Economic opportunities that opened in East Africa led to migration and the development of a strong Swaminarayan presence among Gujaratis there in the first half of the twentieth century. Success continued at an accelerated pace in a whirlwind of midcentury changes following the end

of World War II, Indian independence, independence of East African nations, and the global economic changes and migrations that continued through the century. Rapid changes in the early twenty-first century have carried Swaminarayan Hinduism into a period of significant growth in numbers, institutions, wealth, and public visibility in India and across an expanding transnational network. It has become the most prominent and visible of the modern Hindu movements and is the face of Hinduism most often on display in regional, national, and transnational contexts. The creative tensions between revival and reform and between tradition and adaptation propel and shape future developments. Although still primarily Gujarati in following and focus, with few, if any, Westerners visible in the temples and meetings, knowledge about and influence of the group is not limited to Gujarat or India. Indeed, it promises to be that form of authentic Indian religion with which many non-Indians may get their first acquaintance with Hinduism.

The aim of this book is to present a comprehensive account of the history, doctrines, organization, discipline, and rituals of Swaminarayan Hinduism, and to place the main subgroups and their practices in appropriate contexts. Swaminarayan is one of many manifestations of Hinduism, albeit the most prominent of the modern neo-Hindu devotional reform groups. The common word in India for such groups is *sampradaya*[a], which is difficult to translate. It is not equivalent to a philosophical school, a monastic order, a denomination, a church, or a sect; it is definitely not a cult in modern pejorative terms. A *sampradaya* is a tradition that has been handed down from a founder through successive religious teachers, which shapes the followers into a distinct fellowship with institutional forms. Those who take initiation in this fellowship are called *satsangis*, companions of the truth, because they seek the truth in the company of others who share the same language, religious specialists, sacred scriptures, history, and rituals.

This revised edition brings the story of the Swaminarayan *sampradaya* up to date through the enormous changes that are currently taking place in India and abroad, in what Thomas Friedman calls “the age of accelerations” in technology, globalization, and environment (Friedman 2016), all of which affect Swaminarayan Hindus in a rapidly expanding transnational network reaching out from its birthplace in Gujarat. Swaminarayan Hinduism’s early history and that of the theology that developed from Sahajanand Swami’s work are fundamental (Chapters 1 and 3). The religious specialists and the rituals and rules prescribed by Sahajanand for both ascetics and householders (Chapters 4 and 5) are essential to the religion as

it is practiced. The methods of transmission of the tradition across the transnational network (Chapter 6) and the transplanting of the religion to the different social, political, and economic soils where Gujaratis are settling (Chapter 7) are significant for the future prospects of Hinduism. What might be called in other contexts “the more delicate parts” – the disputes, quarrels, and divisions – and the contemporary status of the various groups are also included (Chapter 2), which, even though available in public records, some may wish kept more veiled from view.

A conundrum is that, on the one hand, every individual is a minority of one; any generalization based on aggregation thus risks distortion of individual volition and identity and even risks stereotyping. Yet, on the other hand, individual identity, or any significant aspect of identity, is experienced, understood, and expressed as a communal reality. That is certainly true of religious identity, which is one of the most powerful aspects of individual commitment (volition) and identity. An individual is never religious in general, or Hindu in general; religious reality is always known as part of a corporate experience. Hence, each Swaminarayan Hindu is unique in his or her religious identity while constantly evolving in intensity and type of volition in relation to the group. The best way to learn about what it means for a person to be a Hindu or a Swaminarayan Hindu is to focus on a specific sampraday. In religion, as in other affairs, the only way to gain knowledge of the general is through the particular: in this case, Swaminarayan Hinduism.

## CHAPTER I

*The Beginnings of Swaminarayan Hinduism*

Two leaders entered Gujarat in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Sir John Malcolm was an official of the British East India Company and during that period became governor of the Bombay Presidency. Sahajanand Swami was an itinerant religious ascetic who established himself as leader of a major Hindu tradition. Their arrivals in Gujarat were like two footsteps entering the water from two sides of a lake, thereby creating ripples that moved through deeper waters, crisscrossing in multiple ways, and unleashing forces that have affected people and events far distant in geography and time. Their meeting in Rajkot, Gujarat, on February 28, 1830, was an almost inevitable result of the growth of British power and control in Gujarat and of the growing popularity and following enjoyed by Sahajanand Swami in the early days of Swaminarayan Hinduism. The meeting resulted from many earlier contacts between British political and religious officials and Swaminarayan religious leaders. The context provides valuable information about the early history of Swaminarayan Hinduism and the role and impact of British control over Gujarat and other parts of India. It set in motion forces that significantly affected the political, social, cultural, and religious landscape of India. Those forces continue to exert collateral influence in Britain and across modern transnational networks wherever migrations from Gujarat have reached. The meeting took place during Sahajanand Swami's final illness and was one of his last public acts. It was in the last year of Sir John Malcolm's long and distinguished career in India. He resigned from his position on December 1, 1830, and returned to England. These two men witnessed and helped create powerful ripples affecting cultural and religious forces across geography and time that continue to the present.

Malcolm had come to India as a lad from a poor family. Born in England in 1769 as one of seventeen children, he was commissioned at the age of thirteen by the directors of the East India Company. He served the company both as a military officer and diplomat. It was he who took

the surrender of the Peshwa of Poona in 1818 and negotiated the settlement that finally placed Gujarat under British control. In that year, he assumed military and political administration of Central India, in territories adjacent to Gujarat, where he attempted to establish order and root out the practices of brigandage and immolation of widows, which he found particularly objectionable. His desire was to become governor-general of India, but he did not achieve that high position. He did attain the rank of major-general in the military, and his diplomatic skills were recognized by his appointment as governor of the Bombay Presidency from November 1, 1827, to December 1, 1830. He held this position when he met Sahajanand Swami. His biographer wrote of his career, “He left the country of his adoption having attained, if not its highest place, the highest ever attained by one who set out from the same starting point” (Kaye 1856: 2:541). In recognition of his statesmanship, his statue by Chantrey stands in Statesmen’s Aisle of Westminster Abbey. The inscription reads in part: “Disinterested, liberal and hospitable, warm in his affections and frank in his manners, the admirer and patron of merit, no less zealous, during the whole of his arduous and eventful career, for the welfare of the natives of the East than for the service of his own country . . .”

Several Swaminarayan temples prominently display pictures depicting the meeting of the founder, Sahajanand Swami, with Sir John Malcolm, governor of Bombay. In the stylized paintings, Sahajanand Swami, in elaborate dress and with a light shining around his head, is seated on a formal chair surrounded by his prominent ascetic disciples. He is handing a copy of the *Shikshapatri* to Governor Malcolm. The meeting has a prominent place in the iconography and literature of the group because it occurred during Sahajanand Swami’s final illness and was one of his last public acts. No doubt both men would have been astounded to learn that images of their meeting now appear in Swaminarayan temples in Britain as well as India to mark the event, but they would have understood that their existence signifies more than the accidental meeting. Those images remain as silent witnesses to the fact that the popularity of the religious teachings and reforms of Sahajanand Swami and the growth of British political power in Gujarat developed at about the same time in the first half of the nineteenth century and to the fact that the two men shared an interest in social order and harmony (Figure 1.1).

The British had by 1830 established political supremacy in Gujarat, which included South and North Gujarat proper, Kathiawar, also called Saurashtra, and Kutch. Sahajanand’s religious movement had spread throughout this area as well. South Gujarat is the strip of land north of



Figure 1.1 Embossed mural of Sir John Malcolm and Sahajanand Swami.

Bombay on the Arabian Sea with Surat, Broach, and Baroda as the main centers. North Gujarat is on the main landmass north of the Gulf of Cambay; Ahmedabad is its major city. Kathiawar or Saurashtra is the large peninsula reaching out into the Arabian Sea between the Gulf of Cambay and the Gulf of Kutch. Rajkot, Junagadh, and Jamnagar are its important towns. Kutch, the most sparsely populated of the areas, is between the Gulf of Kutch and the desert areas to the north; Bhuj is the largest center. Kutch is fairly isolated from the rest of Gujarat by the large salt marsh, covered at times by the tide, and until recently communication has been difficult (see Figure 1.2). These are disparate areas with a great variety of peoples and social and religious customs. In the early nineteenth-century Gujarat was divided politically among three or four competing political rulers striving for mastery over as much territory and as many chieftains in various parts of the territory as possible (Desai 1978: 3).

A legacy of the Maratha rulers' failure was a territory of Gujarat divided into nearly three hundred states and principalities. Another was that by 1820 Gujarat had come under complete control of the British. A total of 369 states, many of which erstwhile chieftaincies, were constituted into native states gradually coming under the aegis of British colonial rule (Parikh 2016: 96; see also Rajyagor 1982: 391). There was no suzerain with the name or power to hold the princes and rulers in check or to provide for public order and security. The Maratha hegemony had not

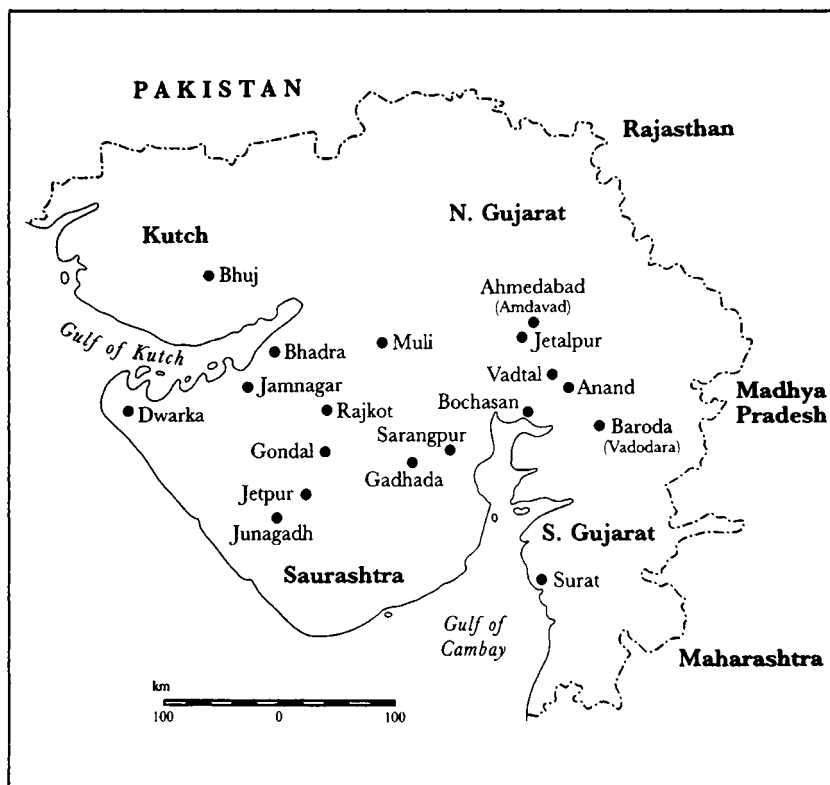


Figure 1.2 Map of Gujarat.

pacified the province. Rulers had been content to send an army to collect tribute from the local chiefs, Rajputs, Muslims, or Kathi. The intrigues between the rulers and the British did not ameliorate the situation until the establishment of British control about 1820. During the first two decades of the century, the Rajput and Kathi chiefs of Kathiawar and Kutch conducted many raids and wars resulting in a general breakdown of law and order in the territory. In short, Gujarat was a politically disunited area, lacking peace and security because of constant friction among various categories of chieftains and rulers. The Gujarati people were constantly subjected to the strains of war, plunder, changes in political rule, and hardships arising out of instability and the increasingly burdensome claims of a parade of victors.

## 8 The Beginnings of Swaminarayan Hinduism

Sir John Malcolm witnessed the results of natural disasters in Gujarat in the early nineteenth century evidenced in the breakdown in civil order and the decline in quality of life and morals. Makrand Mehta provides an analysis of a much more prosperous and positive economic, political, and sociocultural context in late-eighteenth-century Gujarat, as “comparatively prosperous and religion-oriented” (Mehta 1979: 229–30; 2016: 40). He refers to the reports of John Forbes, who traveled through Gujarat in the 1770s and 1780s, describing agricultural, pastoral, and related activities as the basis of village economy and other occupations, such as commerce and indigenous banking, as the basis for urban economy (Forbes 1811: 30–3, 79, 214, 234–6). Mehta adds his own references to local political structures of feudal chiefs, some of whom became valuable supporters and protectors of Sahajanand Swami and his nascent organization. In addition, a history of religious discourse in a primarily oral-based intellectual tradition provided part of the variegated canvas of what Mehta calls this multidimensional Gujarat that attracted Sahajanand Swami to remain in Gujarat and establish his career and attract followers.

The new century brought about significant economic and political changes. Contemporary accounts in the early nineteenth century paint a landscape in darker hues, especially in rural areas, resulting from the breakdown of elements of civic order under the pressures caused by drought, famine, and poverty among Gujaratis. According to the report of Sir John Malcolm, there was civil warfare in Kutch in 1812 and literally no government existed. Crops and cattle were destroyed, and land lay idle because of wars and brigandage. In the space of a few months, 136 villages in Kathiawar were plundered by raiders from Kutch, 40,000 head of cattle were carried off, and property in the amount of 800,000 rupees was damaged or destroyed (Malcolm n.d.: 155–8). The times were made even more difficult by natural calamities that occurred in parts of Gujarat in the first quarter of the century. There were three major famines. The worst was in 1810. In the previous year there was heavy rain, and in winter the locusts settled in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The rains failed the next year and a dry famine came to Rajasthan, Kutch, Kathiawar, and North Gujarat. A lack of rain in 1813 resulted in a terrible famine in Kathiawar; this was followed in 1814 by a deadly epidemic. On June 16, 1819, Kathiawar experienced a severe earthquake. The third famine came in 1825. In these times of disaster and scarcity, armed bands roamed the countryside killing and looting, and the weak were cowed by violence. Bishop Reginald Heber reported as he traveled through Gujarat in 1825 that no area was more disturbed, so the exercise of authority was more expensive in Gujarat than



*The Beginnings of Swaminarayan Hinduism*

9

elsewhere. Local chiefs and then the British maintained large armed forces to quell rebellions. Nevertheless, in no place was there more bloodshed or were the roads more insecure (R. Heber 1846 2:105). One writer summarized the situation in stark terms:

Never had there been such intense and general suffering in India; the native states were disorganized, and society on the verge of dissolution; the people crushed by despots and ruined by exactions; the country overrun by bandits and its resources wasted by enemies; armed forces existed only to plunder, torture and mutiny; government had ceased to exist; there remained only oppression and misery. (Dodwell 1963: 376–7)

Descriptions of civic turmoil, corruption, and suffering in the early nineteenth century provided a context for describing the religious and social reforms supported by Sahajanand Swami and for justifying colonial control over parts of Gujarat. Sahajanand Swami's followers could interpret his career in a chaotic time in light of the traditional Vaishnava teaching that such periods of decay and despair call for a great religious teacher, a manifestation of god, to bring peace and order. Malcolm's visit and the resulting "Minute on Visiting Kutch" were to inform the decision of whether or not to extend and maintain British presence there. The result was a justification for expansion of the area controlled by the British East India Company. Hence, descriptions of the same context supported rationales for both religious reform and political action. The desire to reorder civic life and reduce the social impacts of natural disasters was to some extent a shared background for the respect, civil discourse, and nascent positive relations that developed between British and Swaminarayan leaders. Nevertheless, the tension between the distinct methods and the changing dynamics of colonial power relations were always present and often visible in meetings and reports.

The advent of the British East India Company added a new claimant to power and territory throughout Gujarat. Skillfully siding with one contestant or the other, the company gradually established a foothold in Gujarat and ultimately brought a large portion of the territory under its control. The British had been in a trading enclave at Surat since 1612. Significant political influence followed in 1759 when the company shared a certain amount of political authority with the Nawab of Surat. A great advance in British power came in 1782 when the Gaekwar detached himself from the Maratha Confederacy, accepted British protection, and established an independent court in Baroda. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, British influence, both military and political, gradually

spread like a slow wave through greater Gujarat. The major accession came in June 1818, when the forces of the Peshwa of Poona were defeated, and Sir John Malcolm negotiated an agreement whereby the rights of the Gaekwar of Baroda were confirmed and the territory of Kathiawar was ceded to the British.

To a degree the British were led to establish control in Kathiawar because of their close association with the prince in Baroda. They extended their control into Kutch in order to protect Kathiawar and the coast from raiders and pirates and from the threat of invasion from the north. Malcolm described this process, in part, it must be noticed, to support a generally accepted view of the time that British rule in India was providential: "We did not obtain our influence and power in Guzerat and over the court of Baroda, as we had in other cases, by a war or treaty with a sovereign in the enjoyment of authority; we came in as mediators between parties in a country torn by factions, and in which all rule was disorganized" (Malcolm 1833: 6). Only after about 1820 was there established what could be called the "Pax Britannica" in Gujarat. In 1822 the Nawab of Junagadh relinquished to the British all responsibility for collection of taxes, and all Kathiawar came under British control. Although absolute control was not immediately established over the whole territory, the British were clearly the only power in a position to bring order in the area.

They did not, however, annex the territories of all the chieftains and rulers in the country. They retained a large number of "native states." Thus, Gujarat was divided during British rule into two parts, one directly administered by the British and incorporated into the Bombay Presidency, and the other administered by princes of various grades operating under the supervision of residents and political agents appointed by British authorities. During the British rule the significant political divisions were: (1) the British districts of Ahmedabad, Broach, Kaira, Panchmahal, and Surat; (2) the State of Baroda; and (3) a number of small princely states. By 1891, 3,098,197 persons were under direct British rule in Gujarat and 5,542,349 persons were governed through the princely states (Desai 1978: 96). During the first part of the century this political organization was being forged out of the chaos of the earlier period. Some suggest that the first part of the nineteenth century marks the transition in Gujarat from the social and political structure of medieval India to that of the modern period. At the time of Indian independence, Gujarat became a part of Bombay State, but, upon the reorganization of that state on May 1, 1960, the linguistic and cultural differences were recognized with the establishment of the State of Gujarat as it presently exists.