

## *Introduction*

The final quarter of the twentieth century was a very good time for Swaminarayan Hinduism. Rapid social change provided the occasion and energy that propelled Swaminarayan Hinduism from a position of strength among Hindu groups into even more prominence in the State of Gujarat where it originated and on the expanded international stage where Gujarati immigrants live and have increasingly important roles. It began as a small Gujarati reform movement within Hinduism early in the nineteenth century and maintained considerable strength as an important modern manifestation of Hinduism into the twentieth century. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century it demonstrated significant resilience and adaptability which enhanced its importance and created its potential now at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is one of the more recent and important of the religious exports of India.

Gujarat participated in the modernization of India's agricultural, industrial, and commercial base after Independence, creating both human and material capital that supports many new social institutions, including religious ones. The goal of universal public education following Independence and the increase in the numbers of graduates from secondary schools and universities produced numbers of highly educated young people beyond what the expanding industry could absorb. Gujarat also shared in the enormous population explosion that maintains India as the second most populous country on earth. Hence, many young people moved from Gujarat to major Indian urban centers and to other countries that opened doors to emigrants from India seeking their fortunes. Increased rapid mobility and almost instantaneous communication made possible by new technologies at the end of the twentieth century shaped them into new transnational communities that maintain complex infrastructures and communications between Gujarat, other locations in India, East Africa, Britain, Europe, and North America.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65422-7 - An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism

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Excerpt

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Swaminarayan Hinduism has become a transnational form of Hinduism while keeping its integrity and strength in the land of its birth. Adaptation and change have been hallmarks of Swaminarayan since its origin as a reform movement within Hinduism in Gujarat at a time of enormous social and political changes that accompanied the introduction of British rule throughout Gujarat in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century Gujaratis and Swaminarayan Hindus were prominent in the emigration to East Africa, where they established a strong and prosperous community. At mid-century the impetus for change came in India with Independence and in the West with emigration to Britain from both India and East Africa. Large numbers of Gujaratis and Swaminarayan Hindus have entered the United States and Canada since 1965 as part of the “new ethnics” and they have established temples and centers. Leaders do not seek to attract Western followers, but rather attempt to serve the Asian Indian community. The religion is, therefore, significant in the formation and preservation of ethnic identity and in the cultural negotiation of the Gujarati immigrants with the settled society. It promises to be that form of authentic Indian religion from which many non-Indians may get their first acquaintance with Hinduism.

One reason for its adaptability may be that it was born at the margin between the medieval and the modern in Gujarat. Sahajanand Swami, the founder, who attained the status of the manifestation of the divine as Swaminarayan, has been called the last of the medieval saints and the first of the modern sadhus of neo-Hinduism. Indeed, the Swaminarayan sect has become the most successful of the neo-Hindu reform groups. Hinduism is very old, and its Swaminarayan form preserves many of the ancient texts, beliefs, and practices. Sahajanand is called a reformer, and followers assert that he preserved the best of the beliefs and practices from the past and forged a new form of Hinduism well suited to the modern period. It is part of the Hindu devotional movement so popular in North and Central India, but here the devotion is directed to Swaminarayan, who is worshiped as the perfect manifestation of the eternal reality of god. Such devotion to Swaminarayan is the source of the commitment which is made by both ascetics and householders to follow the rather strict obligations prescribed in the sacred texts and to support the institutions founded by Swaminarayan. Devotion is the heart of Swaminarayan Hinduism.

Hinduism has many forms, but this work is about one group, the history, beliefs, religious specialists, and way of life that constitute the

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Swaminarayan form of Hinduism. The Indian word is *sampradaya*, 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 the modern American sense. A *sampradaya* is a tradition which has been handed down from a founder through successive religious teachers and 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. To a large extent the individual's exposure to the elements that make up what is called Hinduism comes through participation in a particular *sampradaya*. Those aspects of belief and practice common to most persons who call themselves Hindus constitute what could be designated "Hinduism in general," but most individuals are first of all "Hindus in particular." Particularity is the essential feature of religious and group affiliation. Certainly it is the case with the *satsangis* of the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*.

The aim of this work is to present a comprehensive account of the history, doctrines, organization, discipline, and rituals of Swaminarayan Hinduism and to place all the subgroups and their practices in appropriate contexts. The first edition on Swaminarayan Hinduism was published in 1984 by Cambridge University Press with the title *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*. This revised edition brings the story of the *sampradaya* up to date through the enormous changes that took place in India and abroad during the last part of the twentieth century. Thus, each chapter is an attempt to describe an aspect of Swaminarayan Hinduism as it exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The history of the foundation and the theology which 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 the transmission of the tradition, especially in contemporary mega-festivals (chapter 6), and the transplanting of the religion to the different soil of East Africa, Britain, and the United States and the development of transnational mission and infrastructure (chapter 7) are significant for the future prospects of the religion. 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), even though

some may wish that they were kept from public view. Much of the history and theology remains the same, but the contexts in which they are displayed have changed enormously in the past twenty years. The best approach to Hinduism is through acquaintance with a particular sampradaya in its contemporary settings because study of a sampradaya best fits the contours of the religious experience of many Hindus who worship in temples and discipline their lives according to the prescriptions and virtues of specific traditions. The study of this modern, ethnically based, and transnational form of Hinduism provides one such approach to the study of Hinduism in general. William Blake's statement, "But General Forms have their vitality in Particulars" is particularly apt with respect to religions. Hinduism in general certainly has a vital component in the Swaminarayan sampradaya.

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## CHAPTER ONE

*The beginnings of Swaminarayan Hinduism*

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. Governor Malcolm stands before him in black official dress in an attitude of respect along with a few British and Indian officials. The two leaders met in Rajkot at the residence of the acting political agent for Kathiawar on 26 February 1830. 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. He died later in that year. It was also near the end of Sir John Malcolm's long and distinguished career in India. He resigned from his position on 1 December 1830 and returned to England. No doubt he would have been astounded to learn that pictures of him now appear in Swaminarayan temples in London as well as India to mark the event, but he would have understood that their existence signifies more than the accidental meeting. They 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 a common interest in social order and harmony.

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 Bombay (now called Mumbai) on the Arabian Sea with Surat, Broach, and Baroda (now called Vadodara) as the main centers. North Gujarat is the land on the main land mass north of the Gulf of Cambay where Ahmedabad (now called Amdavad) is the major city. Kathiawar or

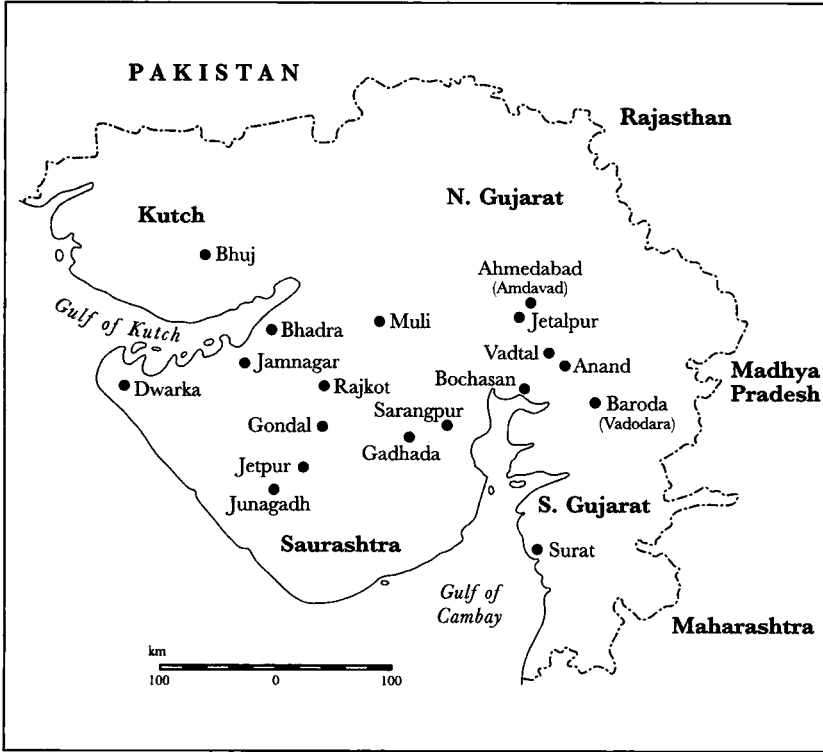


Figure 1 Map of Gujarat

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 the 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). 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).

The legacy of the failure of the Maratha rulers was a territory of Gujarat divided into nearly three hundred states and principalities. 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

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hegemony had not pacified the province. The Maratha 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.

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 the natural calamities which 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. Then in 1810 the rains failed 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 an epidemic in which many people died. On 16 June 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 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 elsewhere. The officials maintained large armed forces to quell rebellions. Nevertheless, in no place was there more bloodshed or were the roads more insecure (R. Heber 1846 II: 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)



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Swaminarayan Hindus interpret these times and Sahajanand Swami's career in light of the traditional Vaishnava teaching that such periods of decay and despair call forth a great religious teacher, a manifestation of god, to bring peace and order. A reading of the pious literature distributed by members may lead one to believe that the account of social disruption is overdone in order to set the stage for the appearance of a religious leader. Contemporary reports of British officials confirm, however, that the situation was at least as bleak as portrayed in the literature. In this instance the Swaminarayan reformers and the British shared a common interest in reporting widespread disruption as a background for providential religious reform and colonial expansion into Gujarat.

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 at Baroda. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century British influence, military and political, gradually spread like a slow wave through greater Gujarat. The major accession came in June of 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 forced 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. Sir John 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 was 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 the British government. 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 this 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 1 May 1960, the linguistic and cultural difference was recognized with the establishment of the State of Gujarat as it presently exists.

The “Pax Britannica” brought significant cultural changes to the area and does mark the transition from medieval to modern. It was a time of great social change. However, neither the political nor the social changes occurred in a uniform pattern throughout Gujarat. The new pattern of political administration meant that in one part of Gujarat fragmented, multiple administration was abolished to be replaced by a uniform, unified administration which was in turn a part of a complex but uniform centralized administration. The other part lagged behind in establishing political integration. Nevertheless, there was a growing sense of the unity throughout the Gujarati-language area. Travel and communication were facilitated. The British rulers introduced legal structure, methods of production and exchange, and principles of educational organization founded on what Desai called the “legal-rational principle” (1978:96). The politics, economy, and education were secularized and separated from the overall religious and traditional matrix. These were superimposed

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upon the traditional social system of Gujarat over a relatively short period of time.

Governor Malcolm came to Rajkot in 1830 after a spectacular career in India that had affected Gujarat greatly. Born in England in 1769 as one of seventeen children in a poor family, 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 as a diplomat. It was he who took the surrender of the Peshwa of Poona in 1818 and negotiated the settlement which 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 Bombay from 1 November 1827 to 1 December 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 II: 541).

He was acutely aware of the social and cultural changes that were coming in India because of British rule, and he was especially concerned that changes forced too rapidly and without the willing cooperation of Indian leaders would lead to distrust, rebellion, and expulsion. Both his writings and his policies indicate that he had a great respect and sympathy for Indians. Even as he endeavored to eradicate from the territories under his control the evils of robbery, murder, immolation of widows, and infanticide, he wrote,

The chief obstruction we shall meet in the pursuit of the improvement and reform of the natives of India will be caused by our own passions and prejudices . . . This theme should be approached with humility, not pride, by all who venture to it . . . We should be humbled to think in how many points, in how many duties of life, great classes of this sober, honest, kind and inoffensive people excell us. (Malcolm 1824 II: 154)

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