

## Institutional Hinduism: The Founding of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, 1912

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**ABSTRACT** The majority of the indentured workers who were shipped to Natal between 1860 and 1911 to serve as a source of cheap labour settled in the colony after completing their indentures. Notwithstanding their limited financial means they attempted to recreate aspects of their religious life in South Africa. This heterogeneous group practised a form of Hinduism that placed emphasis on ritual forms of worship and was based on a wide variety of myths, traditions, texts and festivals. By the beginning of the twentieth century a small but influential group of reform minded Hindus, who included in their midst indentured workers and their descendants who had established themselves in business or acquired an education, as well as some trading class passenger migrants, embarked on a reform drive. They were motivated by several concerns. One was a fear that ritualistic Hinduism, based on ignorance and illiteracy, was making Hindus receptive to the preachings of Christian missionaries. Another belief was that a central organisation was needed for Hindus to deal in a unified manner with the common problems that they faced as a community. There was a concern that in the absence of such a 'voice' the Hindu agenda was being submerged into a broader Indian one, which was dominated by Mohandas K. Gandhi and his mainly trader class supporters.

### INTRODUCTION

The founding of the South African Maha Sabha in 1912 was an important symbolic moment in the lives of Hindus in South Africa. It was a sign that they had definitely settled in their new 'home' abroad. It was also an institutional marker that reassured members of the faith that they would receive 'protection' in what was a very hostile setting. It was a sign too of Hindus' legitimate presence in South Africa and a source of prestige for its founding members. This article traces the events that led to the founding of the Maha Sabha. These include the struggles of early Hindus to establish temples and festivals, as well as visits by key Arya Samaji missionaries from India in the first decade of the twentieth century, who first encouraged local Hindus to form religious organisations.

Key questions that this study considers are: Why were Arya Samajis at the forefront of forming Hindu organisations in the Hindu diaspora? What was the attitude of settler society in Natal towards the establishment of the Maha Sabha? Did settlers accept Hindus as "authentic" citizens whose needs should be met? Or were these institutions seen as a negative presence? Were there differences among Hindus about the formation of a central body? What impact did the founding of the Maha Sabha have on Hindu identity and the practices of Hindus in South Africa? Did the establishment of the Maha

Sabha foster communalism in this diasporic setting where there was a significant Indian Muslim and Christian presence?

### Hindus and Hinduism in Colonial Natal

Ninety percent of indentured immigrants to Natal (137,099) were Hindu (Naidoo et al. 1989: 46). According to Diesel and Maxwell the form of Hinduism practised in Natal during the early decades was "a non-scriptural devotional and ritualistic cultus", known as Sanathanist Hinduism, which operated at a popular level rather than a philosophical one. It was closely bound to ritualism associated with traditional temples and festivals, which sometimes involved blood sacrifices (Diesel and Maxwell 1993: 17). The first Hindu temple in the southern hemisphere was built at Rosburgh, Durban, in 1869. Immigrants were encouraged by employers, who donated land and/or money to construct temples and shrines and even gave their employers time off for worship. During the early years the tenets of Hinduism were transmitted to the young orally in the form of stories from Hindu texts like the Ramayana. This form of religion centred around the priest and the temple, and emphasised the practical aspects of religion.

While these simple structures allowed for the practice of ritual and sacrificial worship, no general religious doctrine was disseminated, nor was there any religious organisation to publish

religious literature. The *African Chronicle* noted in one of its editorials that many indentured Indians between ages 12 and 20 had accumulated “no knowledge of religion in India, and when they arrived here there was no-one there to teach them ... [because] the learned Pandits in Natal themselves have very little formal education”. The editorial also commented that when learned scholars visited Natal, local Pandits did not assist them to transmit religious knowledge because they, the Pandits, favoured the *status quo* which enabled them to exploit the beliefs of the masses in superstition and idolatry (Naidoo 1992: 7).

Many of these migrants would also not have been exposed to the reformist Hindu organisations that were making their presence felt in India in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as the neo-Hindu Arya Samaj movement, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Together, these organisations and movements and the individuals who led them, helped to imagine and institutionalise Hinduism in a context of Western imperial expansion and the formation of a global society. The late nineteenth century witnessed both a process of unifying Hindu ‘orthodoxy’ (Sanatana Dharma) as well as a reaction to this among reformists (Beyer 2006: 199-201).

While the concept of ‘Hinduism’ assumed its modern form as a response to these external pressures, the concept itself has a long history and was not a British invention or construction. The responses of intellectuals and reformers who were struggling to establish the central essence of Hinduism varied from “reform-minded modernism, conservative innovation, moderate conservatism, to outright reaction” (Heehs 2008: 266). The likes of Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Lala Rajpat Rai (1865-1928), and Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) were involved in different ways in this project that invoked India’s Hindu past to meet the challenges of reform and modernisation. They responded, according to Kapur, “to the deepening territorial, political, and religious challenges posed by the British *Raj* and Christian missionaries by constructing Indian tradition anew for their time” (Kapur 2008: 122-123). As Kelly puts it, “a purified, respectable,

modern, scientific, and self-sufficient Hinduism was sought, the basis for a Hindu nation that could be modern, respectable, self-sufficient, and ... independent” (Kelly 1991: 123).

### THE VISIT OF BHAI PERMANAND

Religious leaders from India were instrumental in establishing institutions that served to consolidate Hinduism in Natal. The most influential figures belonged to the Arya Samaj movement. This was because the Samaj, with its emphasis on trained *upadeshaks* (‘preachers’, ‘missionaries’) was ideally placed to do so. And Samaj missionaries, conversant in English, could mentor diasporic Hindu communities. The first missionary to have a significant impact was Professor Bhai Parmanand, a faculty member at Lahore College, who arrived in Durban on 5 August 1905 and spent almost four months in the country. Parmanand, a descendent of the family of the famous Sikh martyr, Bhai Mati Das, studied in Lahore, and was a missionary of the Arya Samaj movement. Parmanand’s most important contribution during his brief stay was that he gathered colonial-born, educated Tamils and formed the Hindu Young Men’s Society (HYMS) in October 1905. The HYMS implored its members to study Tamil, visit India to understand their culture and appreciate India’s grandeur, and work vigorously to establish education facilities for the study of Tamil and religious texts (*African Chronicle* 4 May 1906). At the third anniversary of the HYMS in Durban in 1908, V.R.R. Moodaly, the president, mentioned that prior to Parmanand’s visit there were no religious associations among Hindus and that it was he who established organisations for the “moral and spiritual betterment of Hindus” (*African Chronicle* 12 December 1908). Parmanand also lectured on religion, education, and philosophy before Indian and White audiences under the auspices of the Theosophical Society.

Bhai Parmanand was a fascinating figure. He subsequently became so deeply involved in the anti-colonial struggle in India that he was refused a visa when Hindus invited him to South Africa in 1922. ‘Representatives of Hindu Religious Bodies in South Africa’ petitioned the Minister of Interior on 25 January 1922 for Parmanand, then based in Lahore, and Swami Vedachalam of Madras to visit on a religious mission. Parmanand was versed in Hindi and

the Swami in Tamil; both also spoke excellent English; thus they would meet the needs of all sections of Hindus. They were to hold “religious conferences for the spiritual and moral advancement of the community” and lecture on religion and philosophy to the general public under the auspices of the Theosophical Society of South Africa. The main promoter of the visit was businessman M.C. Varman of 187 Grey Street. The petition was supported by individuals and organisations and contained around a thousand signatures. Prominent supporters included C.V. Pillay, editor of *The Vineka Banoo* M. Beethasee; editor of *Swaraj* and President of the Shree Hindu, Jigyasa Sabha; R.G. Bhatta, proprietor and editor of *Dharma Vir* and treasurer of the Umbilo Temple; John Walker of the Theosophical Society of South Africa; R.S.B. Pather, trustee of the Hindu Tamil Institute of Durban; and photographer R. Bugwan. Diverse organisations across South Africa supported the petition: the Malvern Indian Progressive Association, Durban Indian Municipal Employees’ Union, Kimberley Hindu Religious Society, Pretoria Tamil Sangham, Andhra Association of Tongaat, and Kathiawar AryaMandal, to name but a few.

The South African authorities made “further enquiries” because of the need to “be careful as to the men we admit from India in view of the present state of affairs there”. The decision to refuse a visa was based on a confidential report by F. Isemonger, Deputy Inspector-General of Police of the Criminal Investigation Department, Lahore, dated 20 May 1922. After returning to India in 1906, it emerges that Bhai Parmanand’s “subsequent activities were of a revolutionary nature”. In 1907 he studied at King’s College in London where he came under the influence of “Indians with revolutionary tendencies”. When he returned to India he became a professor of History at Lahore and toured India propagating the Arya Samaj message. In 1909, he came to the notice of police who searched his house and found a manual on explosives, bombs, and ‘seditious’ correspondence. He was dismissed from Lahore College. In October 1910 he left for Europe, ostensibly to study medicine but joined the Gadar (Mutiny) Association in the US. He returned to India in late 1913 to work on behalf of the Association. In 1915, when a large number of Sikh emigrants returned to India from the US,

Parmanand became closely associated with their plot to overthrow the British government. He was arrested and in what became known as the Lahore Conspiracy Case, was sentenced to death, though this was later changed to life imprisonment. He was conditionally released in 1920 under Royal Amnesty and took an active part in Gandhi’s non-violence movement. Parmanand was refused a visa for a second time when he wanted to visit South Africa in 1928. The Commissioner for Asiatic Affairs advised the Secretary for the Interior on 27 August 1928 that Parmanand should be refused a visa, based on a report from the Viceroy in Simla, dated 4 August 1928, which indicated that Parmanand had participated in Gandhi’s protest movement violence from 1920 to 1924, though he underwent a transformation around 1924, giving up anti-Colonial protest “in the interest of the Hindustan community” (SAB, BNS 466, A222 (2); BNS A 466 A222 (3), 1921-1928). Parmanand remained active in Indian politics until his death on 8 December 1947.

#### SWAMI SRI SHANKERANAND SANNYASI

The work of Professor Parmanandin Natal was continued by Swami Shankeranand. In March 1908 local businessman Lala Mokham chand launched an appeal to the ‘Hindu Public of South Africa’ for funds. Because of his “persistent and continued application for a religious leader”, the ‘well wishers’ of South African Hindus in India had agreed to send the Swami to work “for the betterment of the Hindu nation and Indians generally” (*Indian Opinion* 21 March, 1908). By June, over £50 had been sent to India to cover the cost of the Swami’s journey to South Africa. Swami Shankeranand arrived in Durban on 4 October 1908 aboard the *Carisbrook Castle*. More than a thousand people attended a public reception at Congress Hall on 8 October 1908. The crowd was eclectic, with Hindu, Muslim and Christian Indians attending, while part of the Hall was reserved for ‘European ladies and men.’ The chairman of the Reception Committee, V.R.R. Moodley, welcomed the Swami as Hindu “urgently needed a shepherd” and prayed that “we should prove ourselves worthy of the respect that he has shown us by choosing to come to South Africa” (*African Chronicle* 10 October 1908).

The Swami, a Brahmin, was born in Punjab in 1866. He was the son of a professor at the Oriental College of Lahore. He was educated at a mission school and at the Dayanand Anglo Vedic College. His wife died a few years after their marriage and the Swami became celibate in order to lead a more chaste life. The Swami spoke Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Gujarati, Sanskrit, Bengali and English. His Guru was Swami Shri Atmanandjee Maharaj whom he had met in 1887. He travelled on foot, cooked his own food and performed all other duties consistent with the life of a Brahmachari. In 1891 he returned to Punjab where he founded the Society of Celibates. The Swami believed that religious reform had to be accompanied by social reform, and preached against child marriage. He edited an Anglo-vernacular newspaper which advocated the use of home-made goods. In 1894 he founded the S.A.S. High School and in 1896 he became a Sanyasi. He visited Italy, France, Scotland and England on a lecturing tour (*African Chronicle* 5 December 1908).

Like Professor Parmanand, the well-travelled Swami was an adherent of the Arya Samaj movement, founded in Bombay in April 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1825-1883). The aim of this society was individualistic reform as well as to restructure Hindu society by abolishing rituals and social practices such as enforced widowhood, child marriage, idolatry, and the caste system (Naidoo 1992: 4). The Arya Samaj ideology was a mix of both reform and nationalism, for Saraswati rejected both the Hinduism practiced at the time as well as the ideas emanating from the West (Kapur 2008: 122). The Vedas became the basis of his Hinduism. It was considered to be revealed by God to man, and as containing the eternal truth that formed the basis of all Hindu life and beliefs. The Arya Samaj focused on schools, mass recruitment, and wider social reform (Naidoo 1992: 4). They both propagate the faith and defended it against Christians and Muslims. The Arya Samajists referred to this as upadesaks, whereby 'missionaries' travelled globally and publicly posited that Hinduism was superior to both religions (Kelly 1991: 127). When the Muslim League was formed in 1906, the Arya Samaj formed the Hindu Sabha in Punjab in 1907. The movement stated that India had been "the land of Hindus from time immemorial" and that they had a right to a Hindu state (Kapur 2008: 123).

## RAISING HINDU CONSCIOUSNESS

Immediately upon his arrival in Natal in October 1908 to December 1908, the Swami addressed several meetings in Durban, and embarked on an extensive tour of Natal that included places with dense Indian populations, such as Verulam, Mount Edgecombe, Stanger and Pietermaritzburg, where large crowds flocked to hear their "spiritual guide", as one newspaper put it (*Indian Opinion* 26 December 1909). The Swami preached unity and emphasised that his guide was the Vedas, with its message that "by One Supreme Ruler is this Universe pervaded" (*Indian Opinion* 17 October 1908). In November 1908 a Hindu Young Men's Association was formed in Overport. In his address to this body, the Swami explained that 'society' implied the union of persons for a common purpose. All members had to be motivated to do good to others for society to benefit. While Hindus had "many different ideals and ways of realising their God", they had to set aside their differences and work for the common good of all Hindus (*African Chronicle* 12 December 1908).

The Swami also organised Veda Dharma Sabhas in Clare Estate, Sydenham, Mayville and Overport. The objectives of such Sabhas, as we see in the case of the Mayville Sabha which was formed in January 1913, included improving the general knowledge of Indians through reading, cultivating the art of speaking, spreading the Hindi language and national script (Devanagiri), creating a love for the "Motherland", and rendering assistance to all Hindus (*Indian Opinion* 18 January 1913). At the third anniversary of the Durban Hindu Young Men's Society in 1908 the president, VRR Moodaly, noted that "owing to the Swami's presence there was great enthusiasm among the Hindus, which was working so forcibly in removing their racial differences and establishing better understanding between the various sects" (*African Chronicle* 12 December 1908).

The Swami's activities heightened religious consciousness among Hindus in various ways. For example, when the Town Council wanted to put down two tick-afflicted cows in September 1909, the Swami organised a mass meeting in Mayville which was attended by more than 2,000 Hindus. The *African Chronicle* described the scenes as follows:

*The indignation caused in consequence of the threatened shooting of the two cows, among the Hindoos is not likely to be forgotten by those who have been an eye witness to the scene of their activity... Women were crying and shedding torrents of tears as if their very children were being snatched away by the mighty hand of the messenger of death (African Chronicle 25 September 1909).*

A deputation of Hindu leaders met with the Administrator of Natal. They explained the religious significance of cattle to Hindus and convinced him not to slaughter the animals (*African Chronicle*, 9 October 1909).

The Swami was also keen to 'reconvert' Christian Indians to Hinduism. While orthodox Hinduism denied admission to its fold of those who had converted to other religions, Swami Dyanand's "Suddhi" movement emphasised re-conversion to Hinduism. This served two purposes for the Samaj. It brought back into the Hindu family those who had left its fold and became a vehicle to 'uplift' untouchables into *arya* status, the group regarded as most susceptible to Christian and Muslim overtures (Kelly 1991: 130). Thus, for example, one newspaper reported that when HYMS held its anniversary celebrations in 1908 "the usual ceremony of re-conversion was performed for Ramsamy Naidoo by Swami Shankeranand, and after singing some sacred hymns, the new convert was announced to have been admitted by the Holy man" (*African Chronicle* 16 October 1909).

### Education

In India, where the reformist movement had taken root in the late nineteenth century, reformists established Hindu schools to neutralise the effects of the many schools that had been established by Christian missionaries. As Jones (1976: 48) points out, "the vision of young Hindu boys submitting to daily Christian indoctrination haunted Aryas" (in Kelly 1991: 128). These new Hindu schools did not aim to offer an education content that went back to the pre-British era but to offer an equivalent secular education, but one with a strong Hindu component and identity, so that students graduating from these schools would be able to compete in the colonial structures with their counterparts from mission schools. The schools were also to serve as a medium to propagate Hindu teachings and

prevent conversion to Christianity (Beyer 2006: 195).

The Swami carried this attitude to Natal. He addressed his strong feelings on education formally in a letter to the 1909 'Commission on Education'. He considered it "cruel" that the education of indentured children was neglected since the "fertility and prosperity" of Natal depended "solely and entirely upon the hard labours of this section". The Swami noted that when he visited estates he found that most children were working instead of receiving an education. He demanded free and compulsory education for indentured children and their descendants.

An Education Report of May 1909 gave substance to the Swami's concerns. The Report noted that there were 7,000 white children but only 510 Indian children in school, at a time when there were more Indian than white children in the Colony. The Swami felt that if Indians were educated they would become better "supporters and defenders" of the government instead of "being a burden", and that "crime and vices of poverty would disappear, and the Government would have no botheration of putting Indians time after time in gaol". In the absence of government schools, the Swami was concerned that Indians were sending their children to mission schools "against the wishes of the parents as the missionary forces the study of the Bible upon the students" (*Indian Opinion* 7 August 1909). He felt that mission schools had been "established more for proselytising than imparting education" (*African Chronicle* 8 June 1912). By advocating a counter-Christian schooling project, he was echoing what reformists were arguing in India.

The Swami felt strongly that at the primary level, education should be imparted in the vernacular "by Indian teachers, who could mould their character much better than an English teacher, ignorant of their languages, customs and habits". The law compelled Indians to leave school at the age of 14. The Swami wanted the government to provide for higher education for Indians. He also wanted Indian and white children to attend the same (non-denominational government) high schools as "the mingling of students in the same school where they have to learn their lessons of Empire would lead to the better realisation of their common ideals and common destinies, and would tend to inspire

the Indians with patriotism and a determination to fight for the Empire side by side with the Englishman” (*Indian Opinion* 7 August 1909). The Swami gave practical expression to his ideas. For example, he called a meeting of residents in Isipingo on 13 February 1910 and implored “all sections of Indians to co-operate for the educational improvement of their children”. A *panchayat* of five was formed to build a school near the railway station (*African Chronicle* 19 February 1910).

In his submission to the Commission, the Swami stressed that he was not referring to the children of passengers, “as I do not represent their class”. However, he did opine that it would not be wise for the government to let passengers, who were largely Muslim, provide for their own education “as it might create a feeling of distrust and hatred between rulers and the ruled, and that it might give the latter a sufficient chance to diffuse ideas of disaffection into the minds of their children” (*Indian Opinion* 7 August 1909).

### Hindu Loyalty to Empire

In March 1909, shortly after his arrival in Natal, the Swami boarded a tram car in Pietermaritzburg. He was ‘rudely’ ordered out of the car and ‘abused and sworn at’ when he asked for a reason. As a result of this ‘high-handed action’, local Indians held a mass meeting and appointed a committee to protest (*Indian Opinion* 27 March 1909). When this committee warned the Town Council that Indians would boycott tram cars, the Council replied that in future ‘respectably dressed’ Indians could sit in the car (*Indian Opinion* 3 April 1909). Unlike Gandhi who, when faced with racial discrimination, became determined to fight white domination, the Swami adopted a policy of “appeasement”. Influenced by the Swami, the Durban Veda Dharma Sabha chose the Durban Licensing Officer Mr Cole to present a political address to Sir Matthew Nathan, the retiring Governor of Natal, in 1909. Given the problems that Indians were experiencing at the hands of the licensing officer, the Swami’s opponents considered this gesture highly inappropriate. As *Indian Opinion* remarked, inviting the Licence Officer “implied all is well with Indians when the writing on the wall says all is ill” (*Indian Opinion* 25 December 1909).

When King Edward died in May 1910 the flag at the Durban Hindu Temple was flown at half-mast to mourn the death of a king who, according to one message of sympathy sent by local Hindus to the Royal Family, “was so universally loved by the Hindus” (*African Chronicle* 14 May 1910). The Swami issued a ‘Notice’ on 8 May 1910, published in local newspapers and circulated to all employers of indentured labourers via the Protector, which read:

*All Hindus are hereby informed that they as loyal subjects of the British Empire are to observe the strict rules of mourning and to take no part in any sort of amusements, except marriages already arranged, or other strictly religious functions, till the day of the funeral of our noble and beloved late Sovereign... and to offer prayers to Almighty Father to give peace to our new Sovereign and other members of the Royal family in their sad bereavement (NAB II/1/174, 1066/1910).*

The Swami successfully obtained permission from employers for Hindus to attend the funeral services. The attitude of the Illovo Sugar Estates Ltd. was typical. It granted workers time off in 1910 “in good time prior to the fixed hour of the Funeral... I hope this will meet with your approval and shall be glad to fall in with any suggestion you may think fit to make on this occasion” (NAB II/1/174, 1066/1910). At a mass meeting of Hindus on the Hindu Temple grounds speaker after speaker “eloquently dealt upon the great and irreparable loss which the British Empire and the civilised world have sustained by the death of the greatest monarch of modern times who will be remembered by posterity as Edward the Peacemaker” (*African Chronicle* 14 May 1910). The Swami’s plan to organise a ‘Grand Indian Sports and Festivities Day’ to mark the coronation of the new king failed because the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) formed pickets to warn Indians not to “dance to the tune of Corporation officials” (*Indian Opinion* 24 June 1910). In contrast to the Swami, the NIC’s message of sympathy included a “prayer that the reign of the new king may be characterised by a deep desire for the realisation of the sentiments of the Proclamation of 1858 and that his rule may be marked by the growth of wider sympathy for the Indian people” (*African Chronicle* 14 May 1910).

The Swami also observed Empire Day. For example, on Empire Day 1909 the Pieter-

maritzburg Veda Dharma Sabha organised a general meeting “to express loyal devotion to His majesty the King-Emperor”. The Swami told the audience that India had derived many positive benefits from British rule and that the destinies of India and England were ‘interwoven’. For him, Queen Victoria had “possessed an inexhaustible fund of perfect loving sympathy for her Indian subjects”. The Swami “exhorted the audience to be most sincere and steadfast in their devotion” to the King. The Swami proposed the following resolution which was adopted: “That this meeting wishes to convey the assurance of the sincere devotion and loyalty of the followers of the Vedic religion in this Colony to our beloved Sovereign, His Majesty the King, Emperor of India.” The festivities ended with the Swami offering prayers and long life for the King and the Royal family, and three cheers for the King, Governor of Natal, and Government of Natal. The Swami also advocated compulsory military training for the Empire for both Indians and whites (*Indian Opinion* 5 June 1909).

Given that the AryaSamaj was essentially counter-Christian and counter-colonial, and was committed to political action, both in India and other colonies such as Fiji (Kelly 1991: 123), the appeasing attitude of the Swami towards the Empire is striking. It may be that he felt that as a minority in South Africa, Hindus would be best served to win concessions by adopting a conciliatory attitude.

### Diwali

Festivals and rituals were not only visible markers of Hindu identity but also the means through which the basic tenets of Hinduism were learnt in the normal course of family life which included prayers at home, performance of ceremonies, festivals and reading and acting out religious works. The Swami condemned what he described as “ridiculous ceremonials adopted through unreasonable imitation and slavish fashion, costly rituals, these and such as these have arrogantly usurped the title and misnomer of religion” (*African Chronicle* 14 November 1907). In doing so, he was arguing the Arya Samaj line of ‘purifying’ Hinduism, but he was also irate that the main festival among Hindus at the time was the Muslim festival of Muharram which was observed annually on the tenth of

Muharram, the first month in the Muslim calendar. This festival commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein who was killed on the plains of Karbala on this day. The festival, as celebrated in Durban, entailed tiger dancing, a play depicting the scene at Karbala, wrestling, incessant drum beating, and the consumption of alcohol. It also led to fighting between Indians from different areas of Durban. After one such incident, the Superintendent of Police, Richard Alexander said that the festival “is only made an excuse for a day’s holiday in which to get drunk, and render themselves useless for the remainder of the week. Whatever the order will be, the Indians have no right to carry out this debauchery in our main streets” (*Natal Advertiser* 22 April 1902).

The Swami condemned the participation of Hindus in the Muharram. Speaking at the Umgeni Temple under the auspices of the Hindoo Progressive Society, he “in strong terms denounced and rebuked the Hindoos for taking part in such festivals as Muharram but ignoring their own, yet insisting on being called Hindoos” (*African Chronicle* 9 January 1909). The Swami was annoyed that employers granted Hindus the day off to celebrate Muharram but not Diwali, the festival of lights, in which physical light symbolises transcendent light. The gleaming lights during Diwali are a sign of joy at the homecoming of Shri Ramachandra to Ayodha 3,000 years ago, and a means of driving away the powers of darkness and evil.

The Swami requested that the Town Clerk set aside 12 November 1909 as a holiday for indentured Indians to celebrate Diwali. When the Town Clerk asked his assistant Mr Leslie to investigate, the latter reported that only the ‘better class’ of Indians celebrated Diwali, and concluded, “I am not at all convinced that the general indentured population of the Colony would wish this day set apart” (NAB II/1/1/70 2280/09, 11 November 1909). The Protector also warned that the Swami’s movement was a religious one “to induce Hindoos to keep their own festivals and have nothing to do with the Muharram... I think care will have to be taken lest the opinion of the few people living in Durban should be regarded as representing the opinions of the Hindoo Indians in the Colony.” The Protector added that on that very day he had had in his office four Indians, two from South and two from North India. When he

checked with them only one knew of the Diwali festival, and all considered the Feast of Pongal as more important (NAB, CSO 299/1910, Protector Polkinhorne to Town Clerk). That Diwali was essentially a middle class festival is a point also made by Dr Goonam who has written that when she was invited by her poor patients to festivals it “wasn’t the festivals that we had grown up with. Theirs was different. The real festival of Diwali was not seen by them very much. It was more important to most of us in the urban situation” (Interview 31 May 1989).

The Swami’s actions, however, yielded some tangible results. In his 1910 report, Deputy Protector Dunning reported that Muharram was always well attended by Hindu indentured workers “as an outing for a day or two, although it is a Mahomedan occasion of mourning”. However, in 1912 he noted that he was “pleased to see that a move is being made by the Hindus to celebrate their own religious occasions, ‘Deep-avali’, etc., instead of taking a prominent part in the Muharram” (NAB II 8/5, 1912). From 1910 the Durban Municipality granted its employees leave to celebrate Diwali. At the fourth Annual Meeting of the Durban Hindu Young Men’s Society in January 1910, the secretary reported that the Education Department had agreed to declare Diwali a school holiday and that “this Society, along with others, is now taking measures to prevent Hindus from participating in the Mohurram Festival” (*African Chronicle* 22 January 1910).

The Swami encouraged communal celebration of Diwali. The *African Chronicle* reported that the Sydenham Hindu Young Men’s Society celebrated Diwali in a ‘fitting manner’ in 1910. The officiating pundit, Chickurie Maragli said that in the three decades that he had been in Natal this was the first time that Diwali had been celebrated communally. After lunch the Havan was sung and a concert performed for the people (*African Chronicle* 20 November 1997). As substitute for pagodas, the Swami organised a chariot procession through the streets of Durban to celebrate the birth of Rama. This ‘Ramnanmi Festival’ was first held in April 1910 by the Hindu Temple in Umgeni Road. Also present were officials such as Harry Smith, the Immigration Restriction Officer, and Mr Daugherty, the Sanitary Inspector, who attended with his wife and addressed the crowd before being garlanded “amidst roars of cheers”. Ac-

ording to a newspaper reporter, “I was rubbing my eyes and wondering for it certainly seemed as if Ram, Luchman and Sita were being garlanded”. Polkinghorne, the Protector, and Chief Constable Donovan were also invited but sent their apologies (*African Chronicle* 23 April 1910). Almost 4,000 people, accompanied by chariots, marched through the streets of Durban chanting ‘Shree Ramchandraji’ and carrying banners on which were inscribed ‘Ram Jayanti’, ‘Rath Yatra’ and ‘Om’. The procession returned to the Umgeni Temple where there was a feast and wrestling bouts between north and south Indians at which the “indentured Indian was the best” (*African Chronicle* 23 April 1910). Despite the influence of the Swami the participation of Hindus in Muharram continued long after his departure but the Swami, importantly, introduced Hindu festivals and in subsequent decades Diwali would become the most significant festival for all Hindus.

#### MARKET BOYCOTT AND HINDU IDENTITY

The attempt by the Swami to construct a Hindu, rather than ‘Indian’, identity in South Africa paralleled developments in India where a form of Hindu-flavoured cultural nationalism was developing around the turn of the twentieth century. The intellectuals who were involved in debates about the essence of Hinduism (MG Ranada, Nabagopal Mitra, Rajnarayan Bose, Bankimchandra Chatterji, Swami Vivekananda, Bharatendu Harishchandra, Balgangadhar Tilak, and others) were also involved in “defending Hindu national identity”. Indian nationalism first emerged in the cultural and religious terrain and only later involved political action. The previously domestic Ganapati Puja was made into a public festival in the 1890s; public processions were marked by the singing of patriotic songs such as *Vande Mataram*; and when the province of Bengal was partitioned in 1905, the family rite of *raksa-bandan* (in which sisters tie a thread around their brothers’ wrists) was given a nationalistic twist as people tied threads around one another’s wrists to signify Bengal’s indivisibility.

One result of this increasingly Hindu-flavoured nationalism was that Hindu-Muslim unity declined, with Muslims forming the All-India Muslim League in 1906 as a counter to

the Indian National Congress and Hindu-Muslims riots broke out in 1907 in East Bengal. The national movement became polarised along religious lines. The Swami was in India during this period, a time in which Hindu 'revivalists' and 'reformers', orthodox and Arya Samaj, banded together in the quest for a common identity. At the 1909 Indian National Congress meeting, Lajpat Rai declared that Hindus were "a nation in themselves, they represent a type of civilisation all their own" (Heehs 2008: 270). It was only after 1916, when Gandhi returned to India that moderates among Hindus and Muslims tried to work together. The Swami's actions in Natal, which aimed at forging a pan-Hindu identity, were consistent with this position.

The Swami was bent on forging a distinct Hindu identity and demonstrated this when he organised a boycott of the Indian market. Prior to 1890 Indian market gardeners had difficulty selling their produce because the Town Council levied high fees and only allowed Indians to sell their produce after white farmers had disposed of their produce. From 1890 the trustees of the Grey Street Mosque allowed farmers to sell their produce on mosque premises. Farmers were initially granted free use of the facilities but the trustees later requested a gratuity which, according to a Mosque official, was used to keep the compound clean and in good order (*Indian Opinion* 10 December 1903). Shortly after his arrival in Durban, the Swami formed the Indian Farmers' Association (IFA) which represented Hindu market gardeners. The IFA organised a meeting on 30 May 1909 to discuss how to set up a Hindu-controlled market. As soon as their meeting was over, these members of the IFA attacked a meeting of Indian banana growers which had been organised by ML Sultan, a Muslim, to discuss problems facing banana growers, with "sticks, schambocks [whips] and a few rounds of revolvers" (*African Chronicle* 2 June 1909).

The Swami formed an Indian Market Committee. Hindu farmers embarked on a market boycott and asked to meet with the Town Council to discuss a separate market for Hindus (*African Chronicle* 2 June 1909). The editor of the *African Chronicle*, PS Aiyar, criticised the boycott because he saw it as divisive. He pointed out that it had taken "Mr Gandhi twenty years of solid, strenuous work to place the Indian community on the basis it now stands.... This move-

ment is a messenger of death that has hailed here to put an end to the political existence of the Indian" (*African Chronicle* 5 June 1909). Aiyar felt that the Swami was exploiting the grievances of farmers to further the cause of the Arya Samaj movement and warned that boycotters were "blindly paving the way to sow the seeds of Arya Samaj which though it now appears to be as small as the mustard seed, may yet grow to be a gigantic tree and take a firm stand and uproot Hinduism" (*African Chronicle* 3 July 1909).

In evidence to the Town Council, the IFA argued that the mosque was accruing profits which were used to benefit Muslims, while money was also sent to Gandhi to "help him carry on his political propaganda". However, Rooknoodeen, a trustee of the mosque, stated that the market was run on a non-profit basis. Hindu farmers started an alternative market at a building rented in Victoria Street. The Swami had hoped that profits would be used to propagate Hinduism and build a college for Hindus (*African Chronicle* 7 August 1909). During the boycott there was an altercation between some Muslims and Hindus and seven Muslims were charged with assaulting Hindus on 20 May 1909. In his verdict Judge Warner stated that "the whole affair is a quarrel over religion... the accused were provoked by criticism of their religion". The judge discharged four of the accused, fined the other three and concluded:

*This is the first time to my knowledge of the Mahomedans and Hindus having a disturbance of this nature. They have always in the past lived amicably together until the arrival of the Swami Shankeranand who seems to have stirred the Hindus and created strife.... I think the sooner this man Swami Shakeranand abstains from fostering agitation amongst these people, the better it will be for the Indian community at large or otherwise he had better leave the country* (*African Chronicle* 14 August 1909).

The Town Council met with 'representatives of the various classes' of Indians on 31 August 1909 to discuss the dispute. Hindu, Muslim, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians sent their own representatives (*African Chronicle* 4 September 1909). In its written submission the IFA stated that it represented Hindu farmers and had been formed under the guidance of the Swami, "who was a great religious teacher" and "who had advised these communities (Hindus)

to leave politics to the Mahomedans and Mr Gandhi". They hoped that "in everything the Town Council did they would seek the aid of the great Swami Shankeranand who is highly respected by Indians in the colony". This was disputed by Vincent Lawrence, representing the Roman Catholic community, who said that "Mr Gandhi was a far more highly respected gentleman, not only in Natal but the whole of South Africa and the British Indian Empire, than the so-called Swami", who was the "cause of the troubles as Indians had lived amicably before his arrival" (*African Chronicle* 4 September 1909).

Mayor Walter Greenacre informed Indians that the Corporation would take over the market at a new site in Victoria Street, with revenue going to Corporation coffers. Although Hindu farmers protested, the Mayor insisted that this decision was final (*African Chronicle* 4 September 1909). The new market opened on 1 August 1910. The *African Chronicle* lamented that as a result of the Hindu boycott of the market "the mosque authorities lost, and the Hindu farmers did not get it, and, in the bargain, the Corporation has become the sole possessor of this precious source of wealth. Where are those imposters and hypocrites who harangued the mob, and instigated them to make a division between the Hindus and Mahomedans?" (*African Chronicle* 18 September 1909).

Other accusations against the IFA were that it could not account for £500 collected during the market boycott, that its constitution had never made public, and that it also organised lavish banquets, including one on 31 May 1910, when the Union of South Africa came into being, at which the Swami rendered religious sermons (*African Chronicle* 7 September 1910). Aiyar questioned the involvement of the Swami in the IFA and his attendance at this banquet: "Why was the high priest of the Hindoo-Vedic Arya-Samaj religion invited to preside at the banquet? On what did he speak? On market gardeners or Union - neither belongs to the domain of religion. What has a Sanyasi got to do with vegetables and bananas and the Union Ministry?" (*African Chronicle* 9 July 1910).

### SOUTH AFRICAN HINDU MAHA SABHA

In April 1912 the Swami began preparations for a conference of South African Hindus to

"unite Hindus and systematise Hinduism". Advance notice was given in both the *Indian Opinion* and *African Chronicle*. All Hindu Associations, Temple Committees and Temples in South Africa were invited to send delegates. The Minister of Interior was informed so that he could issue passes to facilitate the entry of delegates into Natal and the Minister of Railways was requested to issue cheap rail tickets to delegates. Space was reserved for 500 delegates (*African Chronicle* 18 May 1912). The conference was held in Durban between 31 May and 2 June 1912. The agenda circulated before the meeting comprised of the following: "to devise means to popularise the teachings of the Hindu religion", "to devise means to make this Religious Conference a permanent institution", and "to appoint officials to further the cause of the Conference by communicating with the various Hindu Societies in South Africa" (*African Chronicle* 8 June 1912).

Hindus attended from all parts of the country. In his capacity as president, Swami Shankeranand rendered a highly controversial address in which he was contemptuous of Indians and critical of Gandhi. He pointed out that "Hindus have always served their masters most faithfully and industrially as long as they were not given a free hand, but whenever given freedom to accomplish independently they could not agree among themselves, and failed quite miserably". The Swami was making the case that a strong national body was needed to guide Hindus in South Africa. The Swami was determined to work within the existing *status quo* and opposed Gandhi's passive resistance campaign against racial discrimination. He argued that the result of opposition to the government was that "the authorities become prejudiced against the actions of such people, and in their efforts to re-establish law...the whole race has to suffer for the follies of a few". The mass of Hindus, he felt, were suffering because of Gandhi's actions. The Swami was openly critical of Gandhi:

*Mr Gandhi pays much less attention to the poor Hindus than to the people of wealth. Once when Mr Gandhi came to see me I asked him why he had not taken up the cause of the poor Hindus in order to elevate them from their unfortunate and miserable condition. He replied that at the commencement of the political struggle, save a few Hindu clerks employed by the merchant community, there were no others. I was surprised to find that he did not consider*

*the thousands of Calcutta and Tamilians to be Hindus, who had paid thousands of pounds to house his pet political institutions (Indian Opinion 8 June 1912).*

The Swami wanted a 'proper' Hindu to lead Hindus in South Africa:

*Many elderly Indians have invariably told me that they were much happier here and under the Boer Government of the Transvaal before the advent of Mr Gandhi.... I do not believe that if the Hindus had an absolute Hindu as their leader instead of a Tolstoyan, the Government of South Africa would have ever hesitated to better the condition of so useful an asset to the Colony, if properly approached (African Chronicle 8 June 1912).*

While the conference formed the South African Hindu Maha Sabha on 31 May 1912, the Swami's speech angered many delegates who considered the attack unnecessary and felt that they had been misled into attending. P. A. Joshie and C. B. Gihwala of the United Hindu Association of Cape Colony, who had travelled from Cape Town to attend the conference, complained that the "movement seems to be political rather than religious... We are not a party to the remarks passed against Mr M.K. Gandhi.... We hereby completely dissociate ourselves in the name of the United Hindu Association of Cape Colony from the South African Hindu Maha Sabha which has been formed as a result of the Conference" (*African Chronicle* 8 June 1912). K. Kalidas Patel, who represented Kimberly Hindus, announced that Kimberly Hindus would also be withdrawing from the South African Hindu Association (*African Chronicle* 15 June 1912). A meeting of Kimberly Indians on 26 June 1912 resolved: "That this public meeting of the Kimberly Hindu Community... wishes to dissociate itself from the Maha Sabah inaugurated at the Conference so long as Swamiji is the president; and deplores the attitude adopted by the President towards Mr Gandhi and the subterfuge of calling a Religious Conference and converting it into a Political one" (*African Chronicle* 6 July 1912).

In Johannesburg, a meeting was organised by the Tamil Benefit Society on 12 June 1912 to hear a report from V. A. Chettiar and V. Naidoo who had represented the Society in Durban. Chettiar, chairman of the Tamil Benefit Society, said that although the Swami was supposed to have dealt with religious and social matters, he concentrated on political affairs; the "stric-

tures he passed on our respected leader Mr Gandhi, was greatly resented". Chettiar added that his request for an opportunity to challenge the remarks of the Swami was 'declined.' Naidoo complained that all delegates had believed that this would be a "bona fide Hindu social and religious gathering, and also with the implicit belief that a Sanyasi (Hermit) was going to give utterance to sage-like wisdom, we at immense sacrifice decided to attend and we find the result is not what was expected from it". Most delegates felt that they had been "misled, hood-winked and humbugged", and the following resolution was passed: "That this meeting of the Tamil Benefit society of Johannesburg dissociates itself entirely from the Presidential address delivered at the Hindu Conference... and urges that no confidence be placed in Mr Shakeranand and repudiates allegations and insinuations by him against the recognised leaders of the Indian community in South Africa" (*African Chronicle* 22 June 1912).

Differences between Gandhi and the Swami went beyond political differences and were rooted in their conceptions of Hinduism and vision of a future India. As Kapur points out, the Gandhian vision was one that "embraced a self-reliant, democratic, multireligious nation state" which would be an "inclusive society where all of India's citizens, irrespective of class, caste, religion or region might achieve and enjoy their full citizenship rights" (Kapur 2008: 120). This went against those, like the Arya Samajists in the early twentieth century, who wanted to 're-Hinduize' Indian public life. The Arya Samajists were prepared to confront Muslims and Christians as they insisted on the superiority of Hindu faith. This line of Hindu nationalism would crystallise into what is known as Hindutva. Although Vinayak Damodar Savarkar is generally associated with the term because of his 1923 book *Hindutva*, the term had been in currency among Indian writers from at least the 1870s (Heehs 2008: 272).

Notwithstanding the attitude of some delegates, the conference was a landmark event for Hindus in South Africa. A year later, the first annual conference of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha was held on 31 May 1913. Gandhi had written to Swami Bhawani Dayal on 12 May 1913 that "if the Swami is invited to the Hindu Conference or if it seeks his support in any way, no sensible Hindu can participate in it" (Gandhi nd: Vol. 13). The Swami was to have attended

but left at short notice for India on 17 May 1913 due to his brother being ill. In the Swami's absence, the tone was conciliatory. In his Presidential address, Ramsamy Naidoo made it clear that the organisation was:

*...solely for the advancement and progress of the followers of the Vedic Dharma spiritually, morally, mentally and physically. We have no desire to observe the deterioration or destruction of our Indian brethren of other sects or religions. In fact we feel that the progress of some 130,000 Hindus cannot fail to have its healthy effect on the remaining 20,000 Indians whom ... we wish every peace, progress and happiness (African Chronicle 7 June 1913).*

This second conference focused on social upliftment. This included education so that "we would have men possessed of the intelligence to make the best use of the visits of great spiritual teachers we may invite to gain a thorough knowledge of our shastris". Raising the status of women was another priority: "We can ill expect to advance nationally when one half of our nation are immersed in ignorance and superstition". The system of early marriage "deserves our emphatic condemnation. It has enabled our nation to degenerate physically besides injuring us to no mean degree spiritually, morally and mentally". Delegates were urged to remedy the "many defects which time has wrought on our social system which urgently call for speedy reform" (*African Chronicle*, 7 June 1913).

The Swami's contribution must be viewed in the longer term. Pandit Bhawani Dayal, an important South African Hindu religious figure from the 1920s to the 1940s, assessed Swami Shankeranand's impact as follows:

*On reaching Natal I noticed the effects of his religious propaganda. To have created in the Hindus who at one time were groping in darkness faith in Vedic Dharma, devotion to Aryan culture, interest in Sandhya and Haven, pride in their festivals, devotion to Aryan culture, practice in greeting one another with namaste, a feeling for the mother tongue, respect for the mother country and confidence in the bright future of the Aryans" (Vedalankar 1950: 22).*

## CONCLUSION

Swami Shankeranand, who had arrived in South Africa in October 1908, left for India aboard the *S.S. Umona* on 17 May 1913 when

his brother Swami Bhaskaranandrao took ill. The Swami's stay in South Africa was important for the establishment of institutional Hinduism. While some of his actions were controversial, and resulted in tension between Hindus and Muslims which undercut attempts by Gandhi to forge an Indian identity, the Swami's immediate concern was to regenerate Hinduism. Most Hindus were poor and lacked education and resources to form organisations. The Swami shunned politics and placed on emphasis on education, economic mobility, and establishing Hindu organisations. He repeatedly pledged his loyalty to the government and the British Empire, and hoped that, in return, the authorities would improve the conditions under which Hindus lived. The Swami used the market boycott, the cow incident, the struggle over Diwali, and the national conference to project himself as a *de facto* 'Hindu' leader. He did succeed in winning the support of large numbers of Hindus.

The Swami nevertheless had an important influence in conscientising Hindus and establishing important institutions. It was through his efforts that the previously middle class festival of Diwali became a major Hindu festival in South Africa; he helped form small Sabhas all over Natal, 12 major Hindu organisations emerged between 1905 and 1912; and his most significant achievement was the formation of a national South African Maha Sabha. While the initial meeting was marked by acrimony, the Sabha grew in importance and became the voice of Hindus in South Africa. At the same time it is striking that while the Samaj was essentially counter-Christian and counter-colonial, and was committed to political action, the Swami's attitude towards Empire was one of appeasement. Perhaps this was for tactical reasons as Hindus were in the minority.

While Swami Shankeranand was highly influential, the Arya Samaj movement had limited impact on the Hindu masses when compared to a place like Fiji where they opened a network of schools, a newspaper *Fiji Samachar*, enforced social discipline, created serious religious discord between Hindus and Muslims, and were politically active. While this is speculative there were probably several reasons for this. One was that the movement emphasised the use of the Hindi language whereas most migrants to Natal were of South Indian origin and spoke Tamil and Telegu. Another factor may have been that as a minority group, they were forced by

circumstances to unite politically to challenge the *status quo*. And Indian Hindus, Muslims, and Christians worked side-by-side in political, social welfare, educational, and sporting organisations. The role of Gandhi in the early twentieth century, as a figure who reached out to all Indians across the religious and often class and caste divides, should not be underplayed. Periodic visits by Hindu and Muslim missionaries did create religious discord, but by and large relations between Hindus and Muslims have been relatively harmonious.

**NOTE**

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published in "Swami Shankeranand and the consolidation of Hinduism in Natal, 1908-1914", *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 10, no. 2. (2000): 3-35.

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