



Swaminarayan Sect and Transition in Gujarati Society During the 19th Century

KEYWORDS

Dr. Dllip Kataria

Assistant Professor, Department of History, The M.S. University of Baroda, Baroda- 380002

ABSTRACT *During the nineteenth century Social reform movement in the Gujarat was divided in to mainly two phase. During the first phase (1844-1880) the reformer emerging from the various upper castes and social groups inspired by the certain ideas of west and reform the society on the basis of this ideas, but during second phase (from 1880 onwards) they challenged those ideas and norms which they thought were uprooting the indigenous cultural tradition. In this process they tried to synthesis the sects of clashing value system. During the first phase this reforming movement on western thought and the Swaminarayan sect on traditional way play important role in the reforming the Hindu society. The Swaminarayan movement was founded by the Sahajanand Swami in 1802. Sahjanand Swami championed the cause of women, convincing people to abandon the cruel practices of sati, female infanticide and dowry and even encouraged women's education. He inspired people to give up their addictions to tobacco, alcohol, gambling and other vices. Sahjanand Swami's influence spread through all stratas of society, from the elite classes to the lower classes, inspiring them to forsake their wayward lifestyles and adopt a morally pure, God-centered life. This paper sketches the role of Swaminarayan sect in reforming the Gujarati society in 19th century and also highlight relevance his idea which still playing major role in the economic and moral development of Gujarat Society.*

A period of transition always stimulated by the crucial phenomena of social and cultural transformation provides a challenge as well as it proves rewarding to a student of history. The Nineteenth Century Gujarat which interfaced with west, mainly through its reformers passed through a period of cultural transition in its social history. Social reform movement in the Gujarat during the nineteenth century was divided in to mainly two phase. During the first phase (1844-1880) the reformer emerging from the various upper castes and social groups inspired by the certain ideas of west and wanted to reform the society on the basis of this ideas, but during second phase (from 1880 onwards) they challenged those ideas and norms which they thought were uprooting the indigenous cultural tradition. In this process they tried to synthesis the sects of clashing value system¹. During the first half of nineteenth century Gujarati society have made encounter with Swaminarayan sect, a Vaishnavite Hindu reform movement with a renewed commitment to bhakti (devotion) and dharma (purity of conduct), founded by the Shri Sahjanand swami. This sect play important role in stabilizing the politics of Saurashtra and later on Gujarat. The role of this sect in emancipation of women and crusade against evils practice in Vaishnavite tradition has far reaching effect on the Gujarati society. His work among backwards classes accelerated the process of sanskritization². He affected the new moral climate but his method and approach to the social change were based on traditional value system. Based on the weberian thesis "Protestantism and British Capitalistic Development" this movement play crucial role in capitalist development in Gujarat. This paper put light on the role play by this movement in reforming the Gujarati society and also study the professional ethic of the Shiksha-ptri (religious scared book) which makes the follower of this sect economical prospers.

GUJARATI SOCIETY AT EVE OF BRITISH EXPANSION

"No culture however can live on through the centuries unless it can also develop a stable self sufficient politic system strong enough for defense against attacks from without an elastic enough to allow ample latitude for the play of individual freedom within when the Hindu society could not develop first it instinctively turned to the other alternative perhaps the only other, viz, the strengthen of social framework. This frame work over period of time so rigid that the other indispensable requisites viz, individual freedom and imitative were progressively sacrificed through imperceptible but complicate stage³. After the death of Auargenzeb in 1707

led towards process fragmentation of mighty Mughal Empire in to the various regional states and created power vacuum within the Indian political structure. This development also affected the Gujarat, Maratha replaced the Muslim sultanate in Gujarat. The Peshwas had established their sovereignty over Gujarat including Saurashtra, and collected taxes and tributes through their representatives. However, before the Maratha inroads into Gujarat, the Europeans had made their presence felt, with the Portuguese leading them, followed by the Dutch and the English. Later on the internal dissensions among the Marathas were fully exploited by the British and ultimately⁴, as a result of treaty with Gaikwad in 1817-18 and the final settlement of the dominions of the Peshwa in 1819 the administration of nearly the whole of the province passed in to the hands of the British. This political instability, which in turn created social and economical insecurity the resulting in to moral terpitued in the society the mental horizon of the people was gradually shrinking, as a result fake form of religious belief dominated the social and religious relationship. People lived under all sorts of superstitions, inhuman custom like sati, and female infanticide prevailed in some parts of Gujarat⁵.

EMARGANCE OF SWAMINARAYAN SECT IN GUJARAT

The Swaminarayan movement was founded by the Shree Sahajanand Swami in 1802. He was born on 3rd April 1781, in village Chhapaiya, which comes in district Gorakhpur of Uttar Pradesh in the Brahmin or priest caste of Sarvariya. After the death of his parents, he left his home on 29 June 1792, at the age of 11. He travelled across India and parts of Nepal in search of an ashram, or hermitage, that practiced what he considered a correct understanding of Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, the four primary schools of Hindu philosophy. After visiting over 177 shrines, scared place and monasteries, he reached in Saurashtra peninsula in 18006. In Loj, village near Junagadh he met Muktanand Swami, a senior disciple of Ramanand Swami later with Ramanand Swami. Influenced by the magnetic personality of Ramanand Swami he received sannasya on 20 October 18007, and with he was granted the names Sahajanand Swami and Narayan Muni to signify his new status. At the age of 21, Sahajanand Swami was appointed successor to Ramanand Swami as the leader of the Uddhav Sampraday by Ramanand Swami, prior to his death. The Uddhav Sampraday henceforth came to be known as the Swaminarayan Sampraday⁸. He proclaimed the worship of one sole deity, Krishna or Narayana. Krishna was considered

by him his own ista devata. Shree Sahajanand Swami was later known as Swaminarayan after the mantra he taught at a gathering, in Faneni, a fortnight after the death of Ramanand Swami. Under the visionary leadership of Shree Swaminarayan Maharaj, this sect spread all over the Gujarat mainly Saurashtra peninsula and central Gujarat. Basically influenced by his Vaishnavite tradition, so many cast and community of this land accepted this sect. This sect play important role in maintaining peace and prosperity in this region. This sect also crucial role in reforming the society and accelerated the process of Sanskritization. The scriptures of this sect like Shikshapatri, Vachnamurt awaken the mind of the people and lead them to simple life. The Shikshapatri, originally written by Lord Swaminarayan on 11 February 1826 is read daily by the Swaminarayan devotees. Apart from practical spiritual guidance, it provides guidelines on every aspect of life - familial, financial, managerial, social, ecological, and even health and hygiene.

EMINICIPATION OF WOMEN AND POOR

One of important contributions of Swaminarayan sect was to started movement to reform the condition of women in society. In the 19th century Sahajanand Swami was the first person who starts actual work to enhance the condition of women. Some practices he removed while others he refined. First, He advised people to abolish the practice of Sati. This involved the forced or voluntary immolation of a widow on the cremation pyre of her dead husband. Swami explained women about the invaluable opportunity of a human birth graced by God⁹ and only a human birth facilitated moksha in transcending the cycle of births and deaths. Sati defies this grace and was in essence Atmahatya (suicide) and therefore a sin. His practical and patient approach successfully eliminates Sati system from most areas of Gujarat. He had raised the issue of female infanticide quite prevalent in the Rajputs and Kathis. He also offered parents financial aid to settle dowry costs, on the condition they give up this practice. He reveal that by doing this practice you involved three great sins killing an innocent relative, Stri hatya - killing a helpless female and bal-hatya - killing a child. He warned them that if they did not abandon this practice voluntarily now, they would have to later, when a powerful political ruler arrived. This referred to the British, who began to establish themselves in south Gujarat around 1803. Later, on behalf of the East India Company, to support Gaekwad of Baroda Col. Walker entered Kathiawad in 1807, to make a financial settlement with the chiefs of the sub states¹⁰. The British later prohibited female infanticide. In addition to see his effects, Sir John Malcolm on his visit to Kathiawad in 1830, also wished to check female infanticide among the Jadeja Rajputs. He also starts efforts on the religious education of women. Female education in general had practically disappeared from society as a result of foreign rule over the centuries.. His first step provided special worshipping areas for women. He appointed women well-versed in the Satsang lore to preach to other women. In some towns, even separate mandirs were built for them and males were prohibited entry. Women could now offer devotion to God on a par with men. This encouraged women to think independently and attain leadership skills to teach each other. An advantage of this surfaced about twenty-five years after his demise. Under British rule, schools for female education sprung up in the cities of Gujarat. Among them first women teachers arrived from the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. His segregation of the sexes during religious gatherings not only provided women the freedom to manage their own activities¹¹, but also shielded them from the promiscuous behavior of males, which he had frequently observed in His teenage sojourns

He also forbade selling the daughter; His view was expressed in the Shikshapatri

मात्रा स्वला दुहित्रा वा विजने तु न्यःस्पया ।
अनापदि न तैः स्थेयं कार्यं दानं न योषितं ॥१३६॥

(They shall never stay alone in a lonely place even with their young mother, sister or daughter, except in emergencies and shall never give away in alms their wives to anybody)¹²,

FIGHT AGAINST SUPERISITION AND BAD PRACTICE

Swaminarayan movement introduced changes in the manners and the morals of the people. Evil customs such as singing vulgar songs - known as fatana - during marriage ceremonies and using abusive language during the festival Holi were prevalent in the society. He requested his follower to forbid this system¹³. He told his poet Paramhansas, namely Muktanand and Premanand, to compose kirtans glorifying the marriage episodes described in the scriptures, such as Tulsi vivaha and Rukhmani vivaha, to be sung instead¹⁴. This revived sacredness in marriages. He also asked people to give up bad practices of gambling and taking wine and Bhang. His view was expressed in the Shikshapatri

व्यभिचारो न कर्तव्यः पुष्मिः स्त्रीमिश्र मां श्रितैः ।
शूलादि व्यसनं त्याज्यं नाचं भङ्गादि मादकम् ॥१८॥

(All my followers, males and females, shall never practice adultery and/or gambling and such other bad habits, nor shall eat or drink intoxicants like hemp, opium etc)¹⁵

न मश्यां सर्वथा मांसं यज्ञशिष्टमपि क्वचित् ।
न पेवं च सुरामद्यमपि देवनिवेदितम् ॥१९॥

(None shall ever eat meat, even if it be an offering in a sacrifice or shall ever drink liquor or wine even if it be offered to a deity)¹⁶

Whenever political, social and religious darkness prevails, superstition reigns. Individuals weaken mentally and are prone to develop faith in mantra, tantra, black threads, evil beings and village exorcists or sorcerers known as bhuwa¹⁷. When a family experienced problems such as: poverty, illness, internal quarrelling or possession by a ghost or spirit, it first resorted to jantra mantra for succour. Evil spirits in turn had to be appeased by sacrificing animals, and prasad feasted upon. And so the vicious cycle of blind faith perpetuated. To free people from this choking grip, he wrote an inspiring letter to devotees everywhere, in whom He instructed them: 'Each individual experiences happiness and misery according to his karmas. Beings such as Bhairav and Bhavani cannot overrule these karmas to give pain or grant happiness, or determine life or death. Only Parameshwar Narayan (the Supreme God) is powerful enough to do this. He also forbade his devotee to not believe in this Superstition.

ABOLITION OF ANIMAL SACRIFICES

One of the important aspects of this movement was to stop animal sacrifices which were common during that time. , He was against animal sacrifices as carried out by Brahmin priests during Vedic rituals, such as yajnas (fire sacrifices), influenced by the Kaula and Vama Marg cult. The priests consumed

कस्यापि प्राणिनो हिंसा नैव कार्याऽत्र मामकैः ।
मूशमयूकामःकुणादेरपि बुद्ध्या कदाचन ॥२१॥

(None shall ever eat meat, even if it be an offering in a sacrifice or shall ever drink liquor or wine even if it be offered to a deity)¹⁸

To solve this problem, he conducted several large scale yajnas involving priests from Varanasi. He was successful in reinstating ahimsa through several such large scale yajnas.

CASTE SYSTEM

This sect play important role in ending the caste system in Gujarat, allowing everyone into the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. However par taking in the consumption food of lower castes and caste pollution was not supported by him. A polit-

ical officer in Gujarat, Mr. Williamson reported to Bishop Herber that Swaminarayan had "Destroyed the yoke of caste"¹⁹. He selected his paramhansas from lower cast also and appointed people from the lower strata of society as his personal attendants. He ate along with lower castes. He asked this people to change his food habit, personal and domestic cleanness in all his sect. he forbade to eat garlics and onion. Thus, this sect attracts very large number of followers from lower cast²⁰. It is said that Swaminarayan dispelled the myth that moksha (liberation) was not attainable by everyone. He taught that the soul is neither male nor female and that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. He made no distinctions concerning personal religion and moksha. When He took the bold step of taking meals with the lower castes, He invited the calumny of society. It was taboo for a person to have food with those lower in caste than himself. Therefore society branded Him as uncouth. This slur on His personality pained the sadhus and devotees. But as always He Himself remained undaunted²¹

MAINTAIN PEACE AND STABILITY WITHIN SAURASHTRA REGION

This sect play important role in maintaining the peace and stability in Saurashtra region. His followers cut across religious boundaries, including people of Muslim and Parsi backgrounds. His work among The Kathis and Rajputs maintain peace in this region. The peninsula of Kathiawad derives its name from the Kathis, a tribe renowned for its pugnacity, chivalry, fighting prowess and fine horse breeding. Apart from the overall political chaos that reigned in the region, Kathiawad also owed its destitution to the Kathis²². Famed for their ruthlessness, the Kathis held life cheaply; frequently feuding with each other, plundering, pillaging crops and stealing cattle from villages inimical to them.

स्तेनकर्म न कर्तव्यं धर्मार्थमपि केनचित् ।
सस्वामि काष्ठपुष्पादि न ग्राह्यं तदनाज्ञया ॥१७॥

(None shall ever commit theft, even for the sake of performing an act of Dharma. Even articles such as firewood, flowers, etc. owned by others shall never be taken without their permission²³)

To reform then Sahajanad swami always keep kathis with them. He allowed them to accompany Him, serving as guards during His preaching tours, for travelling alone in the countryside invariably posed dangers from thugs, looters and wild animals. With love and laughter He change their hearts. The Satsang soon envied their spirited devotion. A typical transformation can be observed of a Kathis. The same young chief later absorb Satsang ideals and moulded a virtuous character. When Bhagwan Swaminarayan first arrived in Gadhada, in 1805, Dada Khachar was only four years old. On the death of his father, King Abhel Khachar, he assumed a role as Dada's father. He lovingly taught the young prince horsemanship, weaponry, diplomacy and the technicalities of managing his state²⁴. The singular reason for the his loving grace on him centred on his unalloyed devotion at such a young age. His inseparable association with excelled to such height that whenever He left Gadhada to visit other parts of Gujarat, Dada and his sisters, unable to bear the separation, would either resort to self-abnegation in the form of fasts until His return or would have to accompany Him to escape grief. His words contained formidable spiritual prowess; able to eradicate the militant nature of people.

CAPITALISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF FOLLOWER

One of the most important contributions of this sect was play crucial role in the capitalistic development, the Shikshapatri,

sacred religious text, infuse so many business ethics among the follower. It asked follower that their expenses are never in excess of their income for it should be borne in the mind that great misery awaits him who spends more than what he earn.

आयद्रव्यानुसारेण व्ययः कार्यो हि सर्वदा ।
अन्यथा तु महद्दुःखं भवेदित्यवधार्यताम् ॥

(Expenses shall always be in proportion to the income but shall never exceed it. All shall clearly understand that those who spend more than what they earn shall verily land themselves in great miseries²⁵)

Thus they asked follower to live simple life and asked do not accompany those kind of people have bad character. It also asked follower to store gain and save money in view of time and circumstances. It compelled follower to keep cows and other animal only they can afford to take care them with grass, water etc. Even he ask follower to keep account of his income and expenditure with own self. Shikshapatri advised follower to have written account of his dealing of money and

द्रव्यस्याऽऽयो भवेद्यानान् व्ययो वा व्यावहारिके ।
तौ संस्पृश्य स्वयं लेख्यौ स्वधरैः प्रतिवासरम् ॥१४६॥

(Recollecting their income and expenses incurred during routine and/or special transactions, they shall daily write clearly in their own hands, an account thereof²⁶.)

ससाक्ष्यमन्तरा लेखं पुत्रमित्रादिनाऽपि च ।
भूवित्तदानादानाभ्यां व्यवहार्यं न कर्हिचित् ॥१४३॥

(They shall never enter into any transaction regarding land and/or money even with their own sons and friends, without putting it in writing with proper attestation²⁷.)

It asked none should abide by a mere verbal agreement in respect of amount of money due upon his or another betrothal, but all must make a written contact and dully attested. In business dealing Shikshapatri asked follower to remain moral right. They shall not have pay remuneration as promised to workmen engaged by them they never conceal the clearness their debt, their lineage or the matrimonial engagements of their daughter nor shall they maintain social connection with those who are moral degraded. Majority of follower of this were kunbis, kathi and other occupational based lower cast. This teaching of Shikshapatri play important role in development and commerce of Gujarat. He asked his follower if it is necessary to migrate other places for development of trade commerce's do not hesitate. Many followers of this sect living in the different part of the world, following tradition of the sect.

दुष्कालस्य रिपूणां वा नृपस्योपद्रवेण वा ।
लज्जाधनप्राणनाशः प्रातः स्याद्यत्र सर्वथा ॥१५३॥

(When loss of prestige or estate or life is threatened in a place where they reside either due to very bad times like famines or by enemies or by a king My followers, who are wise and discreet shall immediately leave that place²⁸.)

CONCLUSION

Thus with all his limitation this sect play crucial role in the transforming Gujarati society. Being a religious sect it cannot cross religious tradition of that time but, still under divine leadership of Shri Sahajanad swami this sect stabiles the society of the Gujarat. By process of sanskritization he reform the society and upgrade the moral of people in Gujarat and bring this people in national mainstream.