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The Play of History: The Svaminarayan Religious Community in Modern India

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Abstract

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Providing a window into the pre-nationalist phase of colonial rule in modern South Asia, this study examines the role that devotionalism (*bhakti*) played in shaping ideas about the individual self, community and in forging notions about public good through the nineteenth-century Hindu formation of the Swaminarayan community (*sampraday*) in Gujarat. Under its founder Sahajanand Svami, the formation gained authority across western India in parallel to British colonial and Indian princely rule. By advocating new ways of thinking about social identity and ethics, Swaminarayan devotion served as an adaptive strategy of survival for non-elite practitioners facing hardships in the period. Foundational to this model was the position of modern re-enchantment. Specifically, it was represented in a conceptual apparatus termed the “play of history” (*lila*), which braided together notions of devotion and temporality. Engaging in “play” helped practitioners locate the *sampraday* and themselves in the world and explore new self-possibilities that surpassed their surrounding social constraints. This powerful apparatus underwritten by a heterogeneous outlook of wonder and reason was a form of sacred historiography. Based on textual, archival and ethnographic research, the four chapters of the dissertation trace repositories of time and space and the archival institutions themselves—including published hagiographic texts, temples, materiality, natural landscapes and paintings—which produced individual and collective formations by re-envisioning daily existence. In considering devotion historically, this research shows how expressing, creating, documenting, recalling and articulating the past allowed both for creating religious power and for unleashing individual agency. Drawing on ideas of ethnohistory, the case study reveals that maintaining a systematic relationship with the past using textual and non-textual tools resulted in change for

the material conditions of practitioners. It promoted an attitude of hope and action to change one's life circumstances, rather than inhabiting a posture of despair or passivity.

In considering how devotion was a transformative force in society, this dissertation contributes to scholarship in the field of South Asian history by participating in wider discussions of historical continuity between the early modern period and the colonial modern period, early colonial statecraft, and the emergence of princely states and their role in larger political and social debates in colonial India. More broadly, this project participates in ongoing discussions about non-European historiographical technologies and the diverse avenues of modern re-enchantment of the world.

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations from Gujarati that appear in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise noted. To appeal to as wide an audience as possible, I have chosen to omit diacritical marks, including those commonly used to indicate long vowels (e.g., ā, ī, ū), from all Indic (namely Gujarati and Sanskrit) words (i.e., *gopī* will be written as *gopi*, *bhāv* as *bhav*, and *pūjā* as *puja*). Both ṣa and śa will be represented by "sha," both ca and cha will be rendered "cha," all dental consonants (e.g., ṭa and ḍa) and the valor ḷ and ṛ will be represented by the corresponding letter without diacritical marks (i.e., *Śikṣāpatrī* will be written as *Shikshapatri*, *Vacanāmṛt* as *Vachanamrt*, etc.). Va will be represented as "va," not "wa" (e.g. *gosvami* rather than *goswami*). All Indic words except proper names/titles (Vishnu, Holi, Sahajanand) and place names (e.g., Mathura, Vrindavan) will be put in italics. All proper names/titles and place names will be written as they are most commonly recognized in roman (e.g., Rama, Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, Vrindavan, Ahmedabad, etc.). Place names that are transliterated in various ways, including ways that reflect local or vernacular spellings, will be glossed with alternative spellings the first time that name appears in a chapter (e.g., Amdavad (Ahmedabad) or Vadodara (Baroda), etc.). The inherent "a" vowel will only appear in words that directly refer to a Sanskrit context or in the case of proper names or place names commonly recognized in roman (e.g., Rama, *Mahabharata*, *purana*, *Veda*).

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DEDICATION

For Suraj & Moti, Anjna & Arvind.

Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

At the start of the nineteenth century the region of present-day Gujarat in western India was a site of political fragmentation. Various forms of challenges across the region had left it without any singular dominant political course. Following the Second Anglo-Maratha War of 1802-03, large numbers of princely states, including the Gaekwar Maratha dynasty, which had gained prominence locally in the eighteenth century, entered into treaties of subsidiary alliance with the East India Company. The region of Gujarat thus remained a patchwork of directly and indirectly ruled territories and a large number of princely states survived into the colonial period, as only a slim part of central and southern Gujarat were ruled directly by the colonial state.¹ These nebulous conditions created a natural context for new forms of power to emerge by the start of the nineteenth century. The emergence of the Svaminarayan community under the leadership of Sahajanand Svami was one of many distinctive non-statist, but historically influential groups to emerge in this period in Gujarat and forms the subject of this dissertation. The complicated and multi-faceted kinds of authority forged by Sahajanand Svami offers an opportunity for us to see what new forms of self and community could be produced in this challenging context and also trace their historical influence on the configuration of modern Hinduism in the decades to come. Such forms of authority were bound to develop in an environment where contestations of political and religious authority dominant in the eighteenth century and would continue into the nineteenth century as the East India Company attempted to gain dominance in Gujarat. The pervasive effects of the eighteenth century have often remained overlooked in the historiography of the nineteenth century where colonialism has been posited as

¹ See map: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/schwartzberg/pager.html?object=092>

the most prominent factor in influencing nineteenth century Gujarati contexts.² While European institutions were certainly profoundly transformative, as historian Norbert Peabody has suggested about this period in South Asia, “one must locate the trajectories of social and political change as much in ongoing, indigenously constituted political struggles and social divisions as in colonially constituted ones.”³ The present investigation strives to remedy the disconnect between pre-colonial and colonial Gujarat with a study of the early nineteenth century, one that does not anachronistically read the height of empire into a time when the East Indian Company was still consolidating its rule and hence, not yet an age of absolute power so often featured as part of empire.⁴

In the eighteenth century the region of Gujarat, which was composed of small states under local chiefs, regularly experienced upheaval and disarray due to cycles of internal conquest and contestation amongst one another.⁵ In relation to various paramount powers that reigned over this area during the eighteenth century, the Mughals, Marathas and the English, the local hereditary chieftains remained politically independent by making tribute payments to the overarching powers.⁶ Nevertheless, the region had been particularly stressed by increasing Maratha dominance.⁷ Significant warfare during the last three decades of the eighteenth century

² In general, the nature of the transition between the two periods and its relationship to colonialism in South Asia has continued to be more a point of debate rather than consensus, Barrow and Haynes, “The Colonial Transition,” 471.

³ Peabody, “Knowledge Formation,” 4.

⁴ Peabody, “Knowledge Formation,” 5-6.

⁵ Copland, *The British Raj*.

⁶ Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*, 19.

⁷ Maratha rule had not been peaceful. At the start of the century while the Peshwas had risen to the helm of the Maratha confederacy and the polity expanded northward, the Gaekwars, generals of the Peshwa, assumed increased authority in Gujarat. By 1752, the Marathas succeeded the Mughals in Ahmedabad, as the latter empire declined. For the Gaekwars some areas of Gujarat were easier to settle while the peninsula of Kathiawar and the

marred the region.⁸ By the time their power waned, Maratha presence had profoundly changed the cultural forms and institutions of western India. Notably, none of the various paramount powers were ever able to wholly dominate Gujarat either politically or economically throughout this century. As Ghulam Nadri's study of this period in Gujarat indicates, political supremacy remained out of reach because sovereignty was uniquely shared between several groups in western India, more than it was in any other region of India. In the latter half of the century, the Company had a foothold in Gujarat but was unable to politically ascend to the heights it had reached in Bengal and south-eastern India because of the Company's reliance on the critical financial power and resources of local merchants. Corresponding to the distinctive nature of the region's commercial economy, imperial states were motivated to negotiate with local actors, including artisans and peasants, rather than to ineffectively use coercion to consolidate power. Overall, the political economy and the tough geographical terrain posed to be challenges to forging any absolute regional authority. Additionally, the many ruling chiefs, if removed from power, created an environment in which governance would be very difficult for an external party. Cumulatively, these factors helped to sustain a context of a "non-dominant state."⁹ With the weakening of the Maratha confederacy the region by the end of the century became a site for jockeying over power. Moreover, Gujarat had a "a culture of resistance to political

highlands of Gujarat persisted to be out of reach, since these principalities remained vigorously defended by warrior rulers and their mercenaries. Under these circumstances Gaekwar domination over the local chieftains was characterized by an economically extractive relationship of demanding tribute rather than as a political authority. Moreover, the annual tribute exorted from petty rulers by an army, *mulkigiri*, wreaked havoc on villages in Kathiawar that did not meet this demand, Copland, *The British Raj*, 10-17.

⁸ Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*, 17-8.

⁹ Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*, 21-2.

authoritarianism.”¹⁰ In other words, at the start of the nineteenth century Gujarat was a power vacuum.

NEW POWERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The lack of a dominant power was a tremendous opportunity, one taken up by two emergent forces in the early nineteenth century—one with statist authority and the other not—that would go on to have significant historical impact in the making of modernity in western India. While the East India Company’s historical impact is well-known, this dissertation is concerned with the rise of the lesser-known but deeply impactful non-statist authority: the growth of influential new religious communities such as the Svaminarayan *sampraday*.

In the early nineteenth century, a rich variety of Hindu and Islamic cultural practices were popular in western India. Particularly influential was the long-standing tradition of Vaishnava devotional thought, that is, thought focused on understanding the deity Vishnu and attendant texts, culture, rituals, and practice and normatively associated with Hinduism in the modern era. At this time Gujarat became the site of development of a new stream of Vaishnavism, the Svaminarayan *sampraday*, or community. Sahajanand Svami (1781-1830), the founder of this community, centered it on *bhakti*, devotion. The community was remarkable for its rapid ascent and spread throughout Gujarat during the first three decades of the century—gaining traction in Kutch, Kathiawar, and north and south Gujarat.¹¹ By the twentieth century the

¹⁰ Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*, 22.

¹¹ The early nineteenth century did not prove to be entirely free of violence, volatility or consistency that had been long associated with the eighteenth century. Sahajanand was based in Kathiawar (also known as Saurashtra) as he developed the community across areas of western India. Here, from the late eighteenth century and into the next century, sporadic warfare and violence between rulers were regular features of life, notes historian of Gujarat Howard Spodek. Correspondingly, the region was replete with fortified towns, marked by measures like iron guns, thick walls, ditches, and armies ready for defense against a neighbor attempting to take over territory or claim land revenue, Spodek, “Rulers, Merchants and Other Groups,” 450–55. Also see Spodek, “Urban Politics,” 254–56. Somewhat different than Kathiawar was Kutch, another area where Sahajanand worked intensively. Kutch had

Svaminarayan community had proliferated into several distinct and popular branches, expanding into a global presence wherever the Gujarati diaspora migrated, including Africa, Europe, North America, Asia, Middle East, whether in small or significant numbers.¹²

Bhakti has not been a religious practice commonly associated with modern forms of Hinduism, let alone a prominent theme in historiographical narratives of the nineteenth century, as William Pinch has observed, although it continued to have a considerable enthusiastic presence amongst the lower caste and class populations of northern India in the colonial period.¹³ This study argues for the tremendous role that a devotional force played in maintaining ideas about the individual self, community and promoting ideas about public good during the modern period. As such, through the devotional formation represented new ways of thinking about social identity alongside notions of individual and collective ethics, which had been unleashed by changes from the previous century. Here, we have a case of modern re-enchantment, a formation that was not representative of the textually oriented, rationalized, monotheism of modern Hinduism enshrined in many other states in this era, like Punjab and Bengal,¹⁴ but a vibrant interpretation of devotion with roots in early modern concepts, modeled as an adaptive strategy

escaped the troubles in the eighteenth century of the Maratha's *muligiri* because of its geographic isolation. However, with several repeated raids from Sindh and an unstable ruler (or Rao), Rayadhanji II (1778–1813), this area was deeply unruly in the early nineteenth century, and lacking a strong central authority to deter subjects from conducting piracy on ships or raids on Kathiawar. There were efforts to suppress this disorder, including treaties between the East India Company and local leadership, including Jamadar Fateh Muhammed, but without much success. It was only after an army supported by the Gaekwar and the Company captured Bhuj that the new Rao, son of Rayadhanji II, Bharmalji II, signed a treaty in 1815, providing a significant annual tribute to the Company and installing a Resident in Kutch. However, the Rao's curbing of rights of his noble subjects, *bhayats*, and the takeover of their villages, gave the East India Company a chance to intervene. On this note, they invaded Kutch on behalf of the local *bhayads*, dethroned the Rao and replaced him on the throne with his infant son. Thereafter, with a new treaty in hand, the British effectively became the paramount power over Kutch in 1819. The Resident's office once in the periphery location of Anjar, was relocated to the capital of Kutch, Bhuj, McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control*, 20–1.

¹² See Kim, “Transnational Movements,” 48-64; Zavos, “Hinduism in the diaspora,” 306-17.

¹³ Pinch, “Bhakti and the British Empire,” 164.

¹⁴ See Wessler, “Hindu Reform Movements,” 76-97; Salmond, *Hindu Iconoclasts*.

for survival in the nineteenth century. Moreover, beyond serving as a tool for day-to-day survival, Svaminarayan devotion, specifically through a creative conceptualization of temporality and space in relation to divinity, *lila*, became a mechanism for creating successful lives for practitioners in the challenging period of colonial transition, thus resulting in the community's broad appeal in western India. Nor was this an isolated incidence, while detailed studies of similar groups await further study, preliminary work by historians of Bengali devotionalism linked to Ramakrishnan and Sarda Devi in Bengal, the Radhasoami Satsang Beas in North India, and many similar new devotional groups speak to the continued and revived historical presence of *bhakti*-dominated devotional practices in colonial India.¹⁵

Notably, the *sampraday* had a keenly public orientation, propagating a set of universal norms for how one should engage actively in the material and spiritual realms of life. This cultural and social project pursued large segments of society by taking into account their various differences, but prompting them all to model themselves on a new idea of the individual, while advancing ideas of self-preservation, dignity and equality amongst them, and encouraging them to productively participate in a larger co-existence. From the outset, the *sampraday* approached devotion as a platform for widely broadcasting ethics across the region's population, views formulated for a context where the moral universe was not always easy to navigate and where life, in the eyes of the *sampraday*'s founder, required a proactive attitude. At its height, this was a project of modern re-enchantment. Ethics in the Svaminarayan model was both the promotion of a common, shared *dharma* amongst practitioners as well as with the acknowledgment of social particularities, the promotion of specific *varnashram dharma* for each person. This was the case as non-elite populations remained especially vulnerable during a time of not only economic and

¹⁵ For devotion in Bengal, see Sarkar, "'Kaliyuga', 'Chakri' and 'Bhakti,'" 1543-566; Chatterjee, "A Religion of Urban," 40-68; Chatterjee, *The Nation*; Juergensmeyer "The Radhasoami Revival," 329-58.

ecological change, but when social hierarchies were in flux and still remained an important factor of negotiation. In effect, the devotional institution harnessed a great capacity in Gujarat by formalizing the quality of adaptability in the nineteenth century: an ease with enfolding varied lifestyles, interests, and circumstances.

Over the course of the century, the Svaminarayan formation grew in its public prominence and became further rooted in western India. Increasing numbers of people became practitioners, with diverse segments of the population joining as devotees. A testament to its influence, elements of Svaminarayan culture, like its large festivities, became well-known and popular in region, weaving Svaminarayan identity into the local landscape over time. In addition to changing the social and cultural fabric of the region, the *sampraday* produced deep power structures and institutions that expanded its reach and marked its strength, proliferating in the form of social networks and temples. In sum, notions about structuring society and public good that emerged from outside the state were profoundly influential in shaping the dynamics of Gujarati society. The *sampraday* developed as a regional force in tandem with the growth of colonial power in western India.

The East India Company's rule was gradually but unevenly spreading in western India at this time, leading to a cluster of princely states under the indirect control of Company agents existing alongside established, directly-ruled areas.¹⁶ The landscape of the Bombay Presidency

¹⁶ Factors of time and space did not neatly link to a single political authority in western India in this period, posing some complexity in its translation to historiographical study. At the start of the nineteenth century vast territorial stretches of Gujarat were politically pre-colonial, or perhaps more aptly termed 'non-colonial.' While the Company's political authority in Gujarat had started in 1759 with the takeover of the Mughal castle in Surat (it was the start of the Company's political authority anywhere in South Asia, in fact), its power was limited there until 1800. In contrast to Gujarat, in Bengal the Company possessed the authority to collect land revenue starting in 1765. Though at the end of this century the Company engaged in military action, the English did not begin to gain substantial control over Gujarat until the nineteenth, Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*, 16-8. Even at this time, as more territories started to come under the Company's direct rule many still remained outside this absolute jurisdiction as indirectly ruled princely states. In other words, colonial presence was not static at this time in western India, and when its rule did iteratively extend there, the form of sovereignty was not uniform.

became bewilderingly fragmented over time, with British territories split and intermingled with Indian princely states. The level of dependence/independence of each province was based on agreements fixed with Company authorities. While the array of territorial claims clearly had implications for statist authority, the struggle for power based on the criteria of boundary also extended to challenges for sovereignty in economic and social life.¹⁷

SITUATING MODERN HINDUISM IN COLONIAL AND NATIONALIST NARRATIVES

The early nineteenth century context of the *sampraday* and the much later historiography that appropriated it, were quite different. The historiography of religious formations like Svaminarayan *sampraday*, strongly influenced by colonial and subsequent narratives, has viewed the community through the well-worn trope of religious and social reform movements.¹⁸ Early missionary and colonial government interests, as well as Svaminarayan efforts, contoured this depiction of the community. Specifically, European outlooks selectively focused on certain

Despite a varied empirical reality of British India and non-British India territories during the era of British rule, historian Hira Singh has observed that the “colonial mode of historiography” has remained prevalent. That is, insights from the study of British India have been indiscriminately applied to all of India. In effect, like the historian Frank Perlin’s critique, that Mughal-centrism in historiography limited a grasp of the various regional patterns in pre-colonial India, a singular dependency on British India sidelines the various local patterns and results in a less accurate characterization of modern South Asia as a whole. Singh finds a corrective for this to be the study of local relationships in agrarian relations, structures of power, and ideologies in princely states during the colonial era, Singh, “Colonial and Postcolonial Historiography,” 15-6.

¹⁷ In the realm of economics, trading rights were a source of disagreement between local rulers and the Company. Disputes arose from the persistence of pre-colonial commercial networks while the British increasingly made their own claims on territory in the early nineteenth century. The right to trade or cultivate land often became a matter of interpretation during the period of transition, rather than a matter of black-and-white policy. Additionally, the ongoing dynamics among local rulers involving frequent changes in territorial claims and the lack of fixity in political boundaries injected further ambiguity into the inchoate understanding of economic rights with the advent of British power, Boheme, “Smuggling India,” 697.

¹⁸ A prominent example of a reform-based characterization of the Svaminarayan community is in the foundational scholarship of Raymond B. Williams. In *An Introduction to Svaminarayan Hinduism*, Williams classifies the Svaminarayan founder as one of the earliest and most appropriate representations of “neo-Hindu reformers,” 31–2. See also Pocock, *Mind, Body, and Wealth*; Chavda, “Social and Religious Reform”; Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*; Jones, *Socio-religious Reform Movements*; Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*; Dwyer, “The Svaminarayan Movement”; and Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*.

aspects of the community, including the founder's power and large following in the region, and approvingly folded it into their imperial worldview. From this limited perspective, colonial representatives interpreted Svaminarayan features to be reform-oriented in the same spirit that they themselves propagated in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ These skewed perceptions had an acute impact on the subsequent historiography of the community. By the early twentieth century, the *sampraday*'s cultural clout had grown such that it made the community, from its hymns to some of its members, endeared to Gandhi and Sardar Patel, amongst others Indian nationalists, in their struggle for freedom against colonial rule. Thus, as nineteenth-century and twentieth-century nationalist writings were produced in close approximation to colonial writings, earlier nineteenth-century claims about the *sampraday* became cemented into truth, so to speak, with the accrual of nationalist interests. Notably, in Gujarat, religion had possibilities to expand in several directions in the nineteenth century, of which nationalism was only one historical possibility.

For instance, colonial Indology had seeped into the nationalist views of Kshitimohan Sen's *Medieval Mysticism of India* published in 1936, with its discussion of the Svaminarayan *sampraday*.²⁰ The insights of Partha Chatterjee have shown through the study of Bengal, Indian nationalist discourse was linked to colonial discourse,²¹ specifically with nationalist historiography drawing from nineteenth-century British writings about the history of India.²² Moreover, "social reform" became a key theme for nationalists in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. During this period a need for change in traditional practices and institutions

¹⁹ Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 261.

²⁰ "Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition," 28.

²¹ Chatterjee, *The Nation, Nationalist Thought*.

²² Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 99-100.

was recognized in Bengal, but unlike earlier notions of reform, it was aimed at doing so without any colonial intervention.²³ Of vital note is that the Indian historiography being produced at this time was not the work of professional historians but those guided by nationalist approaches and methods, writing with the hopes of understanding their collective self.²⁴ These patriotic writers, ironically, adopted a formulation of a periodized Indian history, a notion that had been introduced by James Mill, the British historian and political philosopher.²⁵ Gujarat's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elites were not very different in these regards.

As Riho Isaka has shown in her study of literati in Gujarat, British ideas were transplanted into the work of Gujarati intellectuals, such as the parsing of history by periods as well as portraying Hindu-Muslim opposition.²⁶ Kanaiyalal M. Munshi, popularly known as K. M. Munshi, a major nationalist, politician, and educator figure from western India, represents a potent example of modeling colonial historiography and lacing it with new nationalist interests. The prolific nationalist writer's intent was to shape Gujarati identity and bolster pride.²⁷ Hence, Munshi vocalized the greatness of the Hindu era, as he conceptualized it, and underscored decline in the period of Mughal and Sultanate rule, embracing a stance that earlier Gujarati writers had taken. But he went further. In discussing the period of Muslim rulers Munshi omitted

²³ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 6.

²⁴ Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 8–34.

²⁵ Under Mill's framework the course of time was marked with a communal and an evolutionary tone: the ancient past was Hindu and glorious, medieval India was the age of Muslim tyranny, and the modern era was one of energetic resurgence. Further, the scheme tarnished Islam by connecting Islam in India to its status in Europe, where it was viewed as the key adversary of Christianity. Further damaging was that Islam's presence in India was associated with the medieval, a category viewed with disdain in post-Renaissance Europe. In essence, the shared British and Indian imagined history, ancient Hindu India was positioned against the horrors and misrule of Muslim invaders during the medieval period, invaders who were ousted by British efforts, Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 16–21.

²⁶ Isaka, "Gujarati Intellectuals."

²⁷ Chandrani, "Legacies of Colonial History," 239–44.

any mention of economic prosperity from commerce and trade, though earlier Gujarati writers had appreciated this understanding of the period.²⁸ In his efforts, Munshi also expanded the terms that defined regional (and national) identity by portraying Gujarat as the home of Gandhi and of nationalism.²⁹ Notably, Munshi's nationalist initiative relied on the work of Alexander Forbes, the colonial administrator and judge who in 1856 authored *Ras Mala: Hindoo Annals of the Province of Goozerat*, based on accounts from local bards and genealogists.³⁰

The twentieth-century Svaminarayan community collective was appropriated into nationalist discourse and related literature for disparate purposes, quite different from the priorities of the early founder of the community. Specifically, Munshi discussed the history of the Svaminarayan community in 1935 in *Gujarata and Its Literature A Survey from the Earliest Times*, with an emphasis on generating regional pride and consciousness in Gujarati culture. This

²⁸ Isaka, "Gujarati Intellectuals," 4868–69.

²⁹ Isaka, "Gujarati Intellectuals," 4871.

³⁰ Forbes' narrative helped define western India on the basis of religion, positioning native Hindus and non-local Muslims as oppositional in history. Moreover, Forbes' proclamation of Rajputs as the rightful hereditary rulers of the region and of Islam and Muslims as peripheral in and alien to Gujarat's culture and political formation, worked to legitimate British conquest. Critically, historically demarcating space and a certain associated identity, discursively propped up British indirect rule. Forbes advanced the idea that British indirect rule could support the continuation of the rightful, ancient political tradition of the region: Rajputs at the helm of princely states. While he had admitted his source base for writing this history was limited, *Ras Mala* held an authoritative status, remaining deeply influential for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian writers and activists to explore Gujarat through as a region, identity and history, Chandrani, "Legacies of Colonial History," 217–39. Similarly, Bengali authors utilized Rajput 'folklore' written by the early nineteenth-century colonial administrator Colonel James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* in 1829, to promote ideals of heroism and pride toward nationalism, Freitag, *Serving Empire*, 18-19, 194. Tod was also influential for Gujarat's nationalist writers, Chandrani, "Legacies of Colonial History," 216–17.

In the case of Forbes, however, while Chandrani specifically refrains from classifying Munshi's writings as derivative of the judge's work or colonial projects of history, he posits that there are several strong parallels between their writings. The heritage of Rajputs was a proud theme in Munshi's writings, while in this vision Muslims did not figure in the development and definition of Gujarat, which was configured as a Hindu space. All of these ideas about Gujarat strikingly converged with those expressed earlier by Forbes in *Ras Mala*. Specifically, Forbes was a key reference for the nationalist activities of Munshi and Indulal Yagnik, Chandrani, "Legacies of Colonial History," 236-44. (Reportedly, it was Tod's *Annals and Antiquities* that had inspired Forbes to produce a work that would be its equivalent, Chandrani, "Legacies of Colonial History," 232). For further on the formation of Gujarati identity through colonial writing through an evaluation of Forbes' history writing, see Kapadia, "Alexander Forbes," and on the peculiar nature of colonial writing of Gujarat and the sub-region of Kutch, see Simpson, "Making Sense."

well-known work was written during the movement for Indian freedom from imperial rule, with a foreword by Mohandas K. Gandhi testifying to Munshi's nationalist credentials.³¹ Mainly prepared while Munshi was in jail after joining the Civil Disobedience movement, he wrote at the outset, "Nationalism, the most powerful sentiment inspiring Gujarāta since 1930, has also been wonderfully blended with Gujarāta-consciousness."³² The Svaminarayan community was again an object of Munshi's attention in his well-known 1939 book, *Gujaratni Asmita* (Pride in Gujarat).³³ Notably, the educational and cultural institute Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan also published a key scriptural text of the Svaminarayan community, the *Shikshapatri*, as part of its One-Rupee Series. The series' intention was to reach wider segments of the Indian public with such ideas.³⁴ Bhavan also came to publish several other Svaminarayan texts later.³⁵ Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, founded in 1938 by Munshi, was perhaps the ultimate tool to aid nationalists in publically generating deep affinity and identification with region and nation. According to Ajay Skaria, the creation of statist affection—by absorbing an understanding of Gujarat under Bharat—was predicated on a vital principle: the possession of history. The project of Bharat was the project of historians. Thus, at Bhavan, Munshi commissioned a major historiographical undertaking to produce a comprehensive history of India spanning several volumes. Alongside the approach to a new state through history, Munshi saw his own historical novels as efforts of national renewal. He viewed his production of popular works in light of the efforts of Bankim and Dwijendralal,

³¹ Munshi, *Gujarata and its Literature*, Foreword.

³² Munshi, *Gujarata and its Literature*, Preface.

³³ Quoted in Mukundcharandas, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 88.

³⁴ Sahajananda, *Shikshapatri*.

³⁵ Sahajananda, *Shree Swaminarayan's Vachanamritam*; Dave, *The Cup of Love*.

citing that both Bengali writers had organically and sporadically fueled “national and regional pride” even without intending to do so.³⁶

Championing the Svaminarayan *sampraday* could also be found in more moderate and sustained nationalist engagement through the writings of Kishorelal G. Mashruwala, a highly regarded philosopher and critical interlocutor of Gandhi, and a widely-published and widely-read author in Gujarat. But like several major intellectuals (such as Mahadev Desai and Kaka Kalekar) that formed the environment of the Sabarmati *ashram* in Ahmedabad, Mashruwala has been overlooked in developing a scholarly understanding of Gandhi and his work.³⁷ In addition to writing extensively for the freedom struggle, including in newspapers like *Navjivan* and *Harijan Bandhu*, Mashruwala wrote a book about Sahajanand Svami and the Svaminarayan *sampraday*. He made clear to his readers that he interpreted Sahajanand critically and thoughtfully in this work and kept aside the view of *bhakti*. Mashruwala thus shifted the focus in his own work in viewing Svaminarayan influence as a project of social reform analogous to Gandhi’s rather than a spiritual practice directed at very different ends in the early nineteenth-century context. Though he recognized that this might upset adherents, unlike his earlier writings about Sahajanand for the *Sahitya Parishad* in Ahmedabad, he found it a necessary position to take. Chiefly, Mashruwala felt that writing about Sahajanand was necessary to better familiarize the general public with the details of Sahajanand’s life, as he was the deity for much of the region’s population. Sahajanand was very important in developing Gujarat, Kutch and Kathiawar, the author noted, an undertaking that had been filled with great troubles for him. The nationalist pointed out, Sahajanand worked amongst low and high caste, Hindu and non-Hindu.

³⁶ Skaria, “Homeless in Gujarat,” 275–79.

³⁷ Suhrud, #621 “Comment”; Suhrud, #662 “Comment.”

Like Buddha, through ascetic-like qualities Sahajanand affected reform, or “sudharna,” in Gujarat. By the late colonial period, viewing Sahajanand as among the well-known social reformers of India was a familiar trope.

Nationalists re-envisioned the role of women and relations between men and women in the spirit of social reform, one that produced a new type of patriarchy.³⁸ A book of Mashruwala’s writings on this subject, according to Kaka Kalekar who had written its preface, was the product of Mashruwala thoughtfully weaving together his faith and his intellect, taking into account his study of Sahajanand’s principles along with Gandhi’s notions of celibacy and acceptance of women’s independence. At the outset of this work Mashruwala shared an anecdote from his youth. In doing so, he described his upbringing in a household deeply influenced by the Svaminarayan religion, and how this resulted in his father’s expectation that the author’s sister avoid being alone with a male relative in a room. The expectation was not out of ill will or disdain for women, Mashruwala explained. In fact, it was in the same spirit that accorded the women in his family with high regard. He affectionately observed, they were respected, capable, empowered and had socially full and free lives in their home. Mashruwala aligned the idea of a certain form of gendered relations alongside other “sudhāro” measures, which he recalled as being easily introduced into their home. Detering customs like self-flagellation at a time of mourning someone’s death, untouchability, as well as adopting *svadeshi* clothing, were measures embraced in their household.³⁹

Overall, the continued historiographical emphasis on “reform” for historically locating the Svaminarayan *sampraday*, a concept historicized in an excellent essay by Brian Hatcher, has

³⁸ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 116-34.

³⁹ Mashruwala, *Strī-purusha-maryādā*, 5-8.

obfuscated complexities of the formation and resulted in a narrow understanding of the devotional conception and its character as part of modern western India. Hatcher has provided a sharp analysis of how the concept of ‘reform’ evolved and was applied in writings on ‘modern Hinduism’ by colonial officials and observers, through the case of Svaminarayan Hinduism. Shifts in scholarly understandings of modern Hinduism and religious change resulted in a tenuous position for the *sampraday* in such discussions. Thus, Hatcher points out, the twenty-first-century scholarship of Raymond B. Williams was significant in re-introducing the community into the discourse of modern Hindu reform. However, Hatcher observes, there have been limits to this project. By honing in on the instability of terms like ‘medieval,’ ‘saint,’ ‘modern,’ and ‘reformer’—key in Williams’ framework—Hatcher encourages us to evaluate not only semantics and the usefulness of such categories but critically, to reconsider “the degree to which we wish to confront the history of colonial writing on India and the genealogy of the discursive categories it enshrines.”⁴⁰ Strikingly, a key reason the community has been closely linked to the rubric of reform is in its ideology that produced notions of the individual, collective and public good. With an emphasis on imbibing traits of thriftiness, self-reliance, and noble character in the nineteenth century, the Svaminarayan initiative was interpreted as being in line with liberalism. Although Sahajanand was defining the individual subject in a new way, liberalism was not his guide. The ideology of *bhakti* drove his approach to shaping private and public life, and jointly addressing material and spiritual aspects of a modern existence.

⁴⁰ Hatcher, “Situating the Svaminarayan Tradition,” 6–37.

MODERN FORMATIONS

This dissertation examines the development of the Svaminarayan *sampraday* over the course of the early nineteenth century, viewing it as an organizing force outside of the state, or as a non-statist authority, built on a particular moral vision. In highlighting this community's growth in western India I demonstrate how the colonial state was not the only major force shaping modern South Asian views of social order or communal identities. Svaminarayan efforts to expand their community did not focus primarily on issues of social reform, as earlier studies have indicated, but were more directly engaged with very different arenas of community and individual action. In this case, I argue, institutionalized *bhakti* produced new templates for individual and collective formations, and notions of public good in the nineteenth century. It was a means of creating material change through ideology, namely, through a perspective that accepted the nature of the world in a rapidly changing colonial context not through opposition or departure from these settings, but with an attitude of hope and engagement. Sahajanand advocated exercising agency to better one's position in the world, rather than retreating from the changing conditions of modernity. Such advice was not limited narrowly to the spiritual dimensions of lived experience, but also to the improvement of the material contexts of livelihoods, business contracts, and social obligations within and beyond the family circle. In publicizing his ideas Sahajanand also engaged individuals and institutions outside of the Svaminarayan fold, interacting with colonial officials, rulers of princely states, local chiefs, and the diverse communities populating western India. The tacit support of such influential players was key to growing and sustaining the community in its early years.

In examining the historical process of developing a non-statist authority, I locate two aspects that rooted the founder's power and authority in the new community. Of the two-tiered

process, one step was generating worldly power. While it was not a political state, Sahajanand's *sampraday* was premised on the creation of an infrastructure of legal measures, organized hierarchy, skilled specialists, social networks, organized territorial management, revenue collection, and most strikingly, archives, which were reminiscent of a kingdom. As such, the *sampraday* and its founder represented a form of sovereignty over its adherents. This formation's successful creation was a testament to the resilient attitude of the ascetics and adherents that contributed to it, fueled by an immense conviction of hope and an action-oriented approach to maximizing their material circumstances. This was vital. Set in a context of violence, insecurity, opposition and financial challenges in the early nineteenth century not only did individual survival required grit, *sampraday* building was an arduous process that necessitated ongoing efforts to maintain, defend and reinforce its features.

Towards creating authority, a parallel but foundational measure was necessary: the propagation of an ideology that specifically transformed the perception of adherents toward the world around them, its events and activities, people, and most of all, toward the *sampraday*'s founder as God. The ideology, *lila*, was one that centered on a contemplative interaction of human perception and existence with the cosmic play of the divine. Based on a non-dual perspective of reality, one that viewed the universe as a singular reality without the separation of the self and the divine, or of the sacred and the mundane, *lila* was an account of experiences of the divine. Specifically, the documentation and institutionalization of this practice by the community created an archive of experiences about interactions by Sahajanand and those around him in western India during the early nineteenth century. Holistically, as a type of perception and a form of practice, *lila* represented a creative, malleable way of thinking about the present and the past, what I term as, "the play of history." It also motivated practitioners to sustain

interactions in the mundane world rather than withdraw into spiritual asceticism. Overall, this was the mechanism that defined and underwrote the proliferation of the Svaminarayan *sampraday* and its practitioner.

In turn, the politics of time and space in the Svaminarayan community activated an instrumental way of being in the world. By allowing a practitioner to temporarily be in a liminal space and find freedom from the fetters of time and place, it unleashed an agency in the material realm toward creating new self-possibilities and relations with others. A peasant could survive through an unpredictable famine by pre-planning for it, a prostitute could find social honor, a lower-caste Vaghri could feed an upper-caste Brahmin, or a petty chief could find the strength to defend his territories from a king even when his status had diminished—this attitude of re-making one's self toward a better vision was undergirded by an adoption of hope for one's life in the world and beyond it. Enchantment was potent in modernity. It was one key that institutionalized devotion, formed a social collective and also the individual subject. In other words, rather than an escape from difficult conditions, such as political or environmental, *lila* instigated finding an avenue of power. On the other side of the *lila* ideology was a corresponding position inhabited by the practitioner: a heterogeneous ontology and epistemology, one that was neither fully (dis)enchanted and maintained an ease across the material and spiritual realms.

By extension, the representation of *lila* as the “play of history” was archived in modes beyond text, in visual, material and spatial forms—technologies that were accessible to the non-elite practitioner. Moreover, over the course of the nineteenth century, the ideology of understanding the present and past did not subside nor did these various archival forms weaken with the introduction of European historiographical methods, as we see in the case of the poet Dalpatram, who composed *lila* texts for the *sampraday* in the late nineteenth century. In other

words, colonial modernity was not totalizing for the Svaminarayans. Though aware of the rationalism of “Western” technologies, the community remained unmoved. It persisted with the pursuit of a certain kind of chronology and self-representation, electing to relate to the world in a manner out of synch with the colonialist thought paradigm of positivist historiography. In other words, “modernity” was not an either-or proposition—it was being accommodated for a diverse existence. As emotions were being civilized in colonial discourse, affect and reason were both being put to work in a formula of texts, images, physical and ritual culture to shape nineteenth-century Gujarat and a non-political collective experience.

In effect, the Svaminarayan *sampraday* arose and developed over the course of the century in a way that represented a slipstream of modernity: not overwhelmingly coerced by the state but moving toward and engaged with the modern. Its formation, in fact, was a highly thought out and deliberate project that sought to secure a place in a landscape of pre-existing identities, practices and powers. Leaders of the community recognized that political engagement with princely states was critical to further open or close opportunities in the region. Notably, the *sampraday* was not in opposition to colonial power nor wholly reliant on it at this time; Sahajanand appealed selectively to colonial authorities while never being moved or repulsed by them. In effect, he enacted his vision on the basis of strategically co-existing with the power of the East India Company, as well as other local stakeholders.

Successful endurance of the community over the century and its broadening appeal was rooted in a highly savvy approach to culture and politics—being seemingly non-committal but in reality, a position of subtlety. Sahajanand’s devotional teaching furthered moderation, avoiding radically changing social circumstances and being political contentious. Rather, an approach of gradual modification was adopted. The model, for instance, did not seek to radically overthrow

traditional norms like caste hierarchy, polytheism, or the theistic practice of *murtipuja* (worship of a physical image), but quietly chipped away at matters so as to not provoke even further opposition. The devotional model advocated being familiar with political and elite stakeholders for one's self-preservation, while otherwise remaining detached from the political. Thus, as the founder propagated, his followers remained politically sensitive while apolitical. Ultimately, this signified an agile orientation toward the world and invigorated a range of views—detachment, activity, worldliness, and emancipation, all at once. Straddling multiple worlds positioned Sahajanand and practitioners to retain control in a context of high variability.

By the end of the nineteenth century, *lila* was an attractive position, one ripe with possibilities. It granted the practitioner freedom to live out one's full ontological possibilities even when the material circumstances presented to them were restricted. In other words, *lila* was not a narrative about resisting forms of modernity, such as the political changes wrought by colonialism, but thinking about diverse ways of being successful within them. Thus, major figures like the public intellectual and poet of Gujarat, Dalpatram, who was a Svaminarayan devotee and an active figure in the *sampraday*, learned to co-exist with the colonial world in the latter of the nineteenth century. He was constructive, even positively collaborative with this regime, while still critical of it. Immersing in *lila* had oriented him to exploring new options rather than seeing restraints in his existence. This stands in contrast to how we have come to understand the role of religion, and specifically *lila*, in Bengal in the modern period. Religion, as prominently argued by Partha Chatterjee, became the “secret” grounds of national resistance, the “inner” realm from which patriotic Indians were inspired to launch their anti-colonial position.⁴¹ But as this study has shown, religion had possibilities to expand in multiple directions in the

⁴¹ Chatterjee, *The Nation*.

nineteenth century, of which nationalism was only one historical contingency. While religion and nationalism certainly had a relationship much later in the twentieth century in western India, it was not inevitable nor the sole outcome in modern South Asia. As this work demonstrates, in the nineteenth century *lila* proved to provoke something quite different than the act of political resistance: it was a practice of hope and positive engagement in everyday life, one focused on survival, co-existence, and seeking to create structures of stability in the community.

Excellent studies have detailed the nature of power in the early modern era in western India. It is striking, however, to note the emphasis in this literature on debates about continuity and change over the long and difficult period of historical transition over the course of the period in which Mughal power waned and that of the East India Company grew. The work of Farhat Hasan has nuanced an understanding of the nature of the Mughal Empire by stressing the importance of seeing the ways in which the Empire had to adapt to regional elites and their perspectives, and the more dynamic ways in which these elites adapted imperial forms.⁴² In his other work, he has also rightfully pointed out a historiographical disregard for connections between the early modern and modern periods in South Asia, or the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the lack of enriching an understanding of the modern era with earlier patterns.⁴³ Similarly, Ghulam Nadri has gestured toward a more *longue duree* perspective, considering the implications of the late eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century.⁴⁴ His work has shown that the political economy in the latter half of the eighteenth century has shown that western India experienced major economic growth, under conditions in which the state had a

⁴² Hasan, *State and Locality*.

⁴³ Hasan, "Forms of Civility," 85-6.

⁴⁴ Nadri, "Revisiting the 'Decline of Surat.'"

limited role; affluence was reflected in increased prosperity felt all the way down to local economic actors, merchants as well as artisans and producers.⁴⁵ On the other hand the well-known debates between Lakshmi Subramanian and Michelguglielmo Torri have largely been concerned with whether or not a “Anglo-Bania order” existed and sustained Company rule over this important port city, or if the British only had an uneven grasp over Surat. Their work generally is concerned with the latter half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁶ Cumulatively, in the various studies we are presented with a myopic view of the early modern era through merchant capital, and its role in sustaining political power in urban centers rather than an argument that helps us understand the wider historical repositioning of power in Gujarat. Similarly, in the studies by Hasan and Nadri, though they consider various segments of society besides merchants, they feed the myopia by viewing port cities and commercial centers as loci of imperial power, while overlooking the hinterlands.

Moving into the nineteenth century, while major studies have continued to focus on cities and elites in western India,⁴⁷ there have been more engaged studies of labor hierarchy in the context of industrialization,⁴⁸ as well as an expanded scholarly focus on smaller settings and artisan producers.⁴⁹ However, such discussions remain confined to the later part of the nineteenth century under colonialism. Though very significant, there are few evaluations of the social and

⁴⁵ Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*.

⁴⁶ Subramanian, “Capital and Crowd,” 205-237; Subramanian, “Banias and the British,” 473-510; Subramanian, “The Eighteenth-Century Social Order,” 321-65; Subramanian, “Arms and the Merchant,” 1-27; Torri, “Surat During the Second Half,” 679-710; Torri, “Ethnicity and Trade,” 377-404; Torri, “Trapped inside the Colonial Order,” 367-401; Torri, “Mughal Nobles, Indian Merchants,” 257-315.

⁴⁷ Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual*; Gillion, *Ahmedabad*.

⁴⁸ Breman, *The Making and Unmaking*; Mehta, *The Ahmedabad Cotton*.

⁴⁹ Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*.

political conditions of the earlier part of the century,⁵⁰ and those that look at the non-elite strata of society and their activities and concerns.⁵¹ Moreover, while there have been studies focused on the princely states in western India, for the most part these have remained afar from the earlier part of the century and the transition to colonial rule.⁵²

This present study, focused on the first half of the nineteenth century, addresses the larger social and cultural networks that spanned the hinterlands beyond urban areas, but it also suggests the connectivity of places across the region like Bhuj, Surat, Baroda, Junagadh, Ahmedabad and the rural areas around them. The Svaminarayan *sampraday* was woven throughout these different contexts, princely and colonial, and used them well in the formation of its community, decade by decade expanding and deepening its roots in these areas. Non-elite social groups formed the majority of the adherents, a segment of the population not as well-studied as the bankers and merchants of this period.⁵³ Specifically, the study has shown how a religious formation negotiated modernity in various ways. The creation of the Svaminarayan *sampraday* required continual investment. It was an extended process of construction, framing ideas, creating infrastructure, contemplating, planning, and most importantly making decisions. It was the construction of a community in a liminal space, when its character was still malleable. Choices that had implications for how radically a vision should be implemented, how inclusive a collective should be developed, and what powers should be pursued and who should be

⁵⁰ Spodek, "Rulers, Merchants and Other Groups," 448-70; Spodek, "Urban Politics," 253-75; Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*.

⁵¹ Bates, "The Nature," 771-882; Clark, "Limitations on Female Life," 1-25; Frost, "Coping with Scarcity," 295-329; Boheme, "Smuggling India," 685-704; Shah, *Exploring India's Rural Past*; Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*.

⁵² Copland, *The British Raj*; Wood, "British Versus," 65-99; McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control*; Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres*.

⁵³ Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*; Mehta, *Indian Merchants*; Tripathi and Mehta, *Business Houses*.

disregarded. In this period the region sustained various beliefs, practices and social identities. But this moment also represented fluidity between spheres—those later exclusively known as “Hindu” and “Muslim”—a possibility of overlap between spheres that Sahajanand elected to foster. On the other hand, decisions like strictly enforcing an absolute disregard for caste distinctions, he eased away from. This was a liminal moment, essentially, one in which the founder and early leaders chose to pursue certain avenues and leave aside others. Eventually, by the twentieth century some of these doors were closed for the *sampraday* and its character moved in another direction.

In sum, the study fleshes out the pre-nationalist phase of colonial rule in western India, in which aspects of modern Hinduism had not yet assumed an anti-colonial political bent.⁵⁴ Thus, the study of overlap between religion and nationalist politics that concerned populations like the “Patidar,” caste configuration, an internally diverse peasant group that in itself continued to evolve into the twentieth century and became increasingly affiliated with the *sampraday*, unwittingly assumes a static view of the Svaminarayan community, a depiction that was not the case beforehand. What was earlier a question of how to build a simple but ethical rural life signified something quite different in the twentieth century.

Moreover, in order to better understand the roots of nationalism, but also point to broader moral visions shared by other groups in western India, I suggest we might look at community development in this early colonial period more broadly, pairing together patterns of groups like the Svaminarayan *sampraday* alongside knowledge of patterns in other areas to build a larger picture of this moment preceding nationalism. It is worth reminding that even at the height of the

⁵⁴ Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists*; Hardiman, *The Coming*; Hardiman, “Class Base of Swaminarayan Sect,” 1907-12; Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time*; Mehta, *Regional Roots of Nationalism*; Mehta, “The Bardoli Satyagraha,” 597-605; Chaturvedi, *Peasant Pasts*.

Indian nationalist agenda, not everyone was a confirmed nationalist. But equally, even nationalists borrowed from ethical ideologies that were widely shared in these communities. Thus, seeing these shared moral visions for what they are is important, rather than examining modern South Asia only in terms of what produced nationalism or neo-Hinduism.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

As an ethno-historical investigation, I have followed the pulse of the subject matter in terms of employing the Svaminarayan *sampraday*'s materials produced in the nineteenth century alongside that of contemporaneous colonial and Gujarati sources. These sources beyond textual records include significant number of paintings, materiality, built environments and natural spaces. At the same time, because nineteenth-century *sampraday* leaders used a complex strategy of self-presentation by distributing specific texts for introduction to colonial authorities, and such authorities also had their own specific motives when they wrote of the *sampraday*, I suggest we need to be wary of reading colonial accounts of the religious formation, as well as the community's presentation. In turning to the vast Svaminarayan archives, I have read their making and that of the nineteenth-century institution as a process of construction, one of decisions, motives and options.

Chapter 2.

BEYOND THE LENS OF REFORM: RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN MODERN GUJARAT

The Svaminarayan community's introduction into colonial discourse came way of Bishop Reginald Heber, the second Lord Bishop of Calcutta, according to Hanna Kim. In 1825 while traveling in Gujarat, Bishop Heber heard about and met with Sahajanand Svami in Nadiad (Kaira). By Bishop Heber's own admission, as recorded in his journal, language barriers had limited his engagement with the "Hindoo reformer."¹ The publication of this meeting's account initiated what would become a widely influential narrative of the Svaminarayan devotional community.² Though Heber had been troubled by Sahajanand's confidence in the face of being probed with questions measuring his doctrine against the truth of Christianity, and though he was also disappointed by his own inability to sway the Hindu leader toward Christian sympathies, he conceded that Sahajanand was an effective force in western India. In Heber's eyes Sahajanand "had obtained a great power over a wild people" and might prove useful to the population.³ After the success of Heber's journal, a link between the Svaminarayan community and colonial interests continued to be underscored and cited in scholarly and travel accounts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴ It is likely due to this early account that the oft-cited view of

¹ Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, 143–53, 159–60.

² Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 261.

³ Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, 152, 160.

⁴ Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 260–61.

an intimate, mutually reinforcing relationship between the community and the British has persisted.⁵

Sahajanand Svami's distinctive status in the region was a recurring theme in colonial narratives, in which he was described as a social reformer whose peaceful approach and teaching of conservative behavior had helped ease tensions in a distressed area. Over time, this opinion came to be nurtured not by Christian missionary interests but by desires to regulate the local population, a prerequisite for the East India Company to achieve its economic and political goals.⁶ However, what is striking about this impression is how deeply mired missionary and

⁵ For examples, see the work of Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 49–50; Hardiman, “Class Base of Swaminarayan Sect,” 1908; Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 301. This bent also exists in the several, distinct branches of the community today. Contact between the historical community and the British is often magnified in the *sampraday*, regardless of the significance, context or outcome of the engagement. Such encounters, casual or monumental, official or non-official, are framed in writing, song, paintings, theatrical performances, exhibits, and dioramas. While the two parties often appealed to one another cordially, it is unclear to what degree rhetorical commendation translated into real benefits for either. For one instance, see *Narrative of a Journey*, 159–60 for Bishop Heber's response to Sahajanand's request.

⁶ Considering two major authorities in the region during the nineteenth century, religion and the colonial state, it is vital to take into account that the enterprise of social reform in princely states was shot through with struggles between the advancement of Company interests and that of local authorities in the early decades. Chiefs of princely states, areas that were under the Company's indirect rule, were promised internal sovereignty without fear of British interference. However, a series of treaties between the Company and rulers effectively transferred much state power to the British. Indirect rule made bold assertions. For instance, the Company might have had the full right to conduct foreign affairs of a princely state, manage the scope of its military size, as well as expect diplomatic alliances. This policy of ‘subordinate isolation,’ moving the British closer to becoming the paramount power in India, was essentially a dependent relationship, Copland, *The British Raj*, 43–4. In other words, the Company had control over a state's key strengths while simultaneously, the Company could maintain that it had little scope for intervening in affairs of the princely territories, which were technically independent and under the sovereign of the prince. In effect, the subsidiary relationship undermined princes. Local rulers were unable to efficiently run their states and were reduced in moral and political weight with the conditions created by engagements and agreements with the Company. As a result, argues Andrea Major, seemingly conflicting circumstances emerged—British expectations of better governance in princely states, but a reality of local rulers operating ineffectively because they were unable to fully exercise authority—and gave life to the notion of ‘misgovernment.’ In turn, citing misgovernment the British were provided with a due cause for intervening while still remaining grounded in the policy of non-intervention, Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 7–9.

The appropriate scope of intervention in the domestic affairs of local states was a topic of deliberation during the 1820's and 1830's, arousing a range of views. On the one hand stood those who advocated for an abstinence of intervention; in contrast were those who favored extending aid to rulers, a position championed by officials like Governor of Bombay John Malcolm. Notably, the interest in bolstering native governance proved to widen a path for further British presence in state affairs during the first half of the nineteenth century. In effect, discussions of social reform in the states, which addressed practices of as female infanticide and widow immolation, became a site for struggles over power and control between the British and princes to play out. Princes tried to shield this domain from external intervention, as the affairs of socio-religious rites represented an aspect of the domestic

colonial officials were in their shared perspective—a liberal framework with underlying developmental assumptions—so as to not be able to perceive the specific orientation from which Svaminarayan leadership acted.⁷ Even as far as the mid- to late-nineteenth century, records disclose a general unawareness among the British about the community beyond previously established terms.⁸

In light of this, I suggest that framing Sahajanand Svami’s teachings and the community’s formation as signifying an agenda of ‘reform’ distorts our historical understanding in a reductionist manner. The privileging of colonial-era observations transfers operative categories from divergent contexts inappropriately and reiteratively. It artificially stresses a marriage of local occurrences to European concerns about the nature of religion, which were grounded in particular ideals of Christianity, liberalism, and ‘modernity’ in this period.⁹ The perpetual reliance on reform forces a view of the community from a very restricted lens, and as a result omits deeper engagements with surrounding factors, like practices of other localized Vaishnava communities such as the Pushtimarg, and the environmental, economic, and social

sphere in which they Indian rulers already experienced the loss of much influence, Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 7–9.

⁷ Kim, “Being Swaminarayan,” 261, 271, 274.

⁸ In this later period, at the behest of Svaminarayan leaders, letters were written by British observers to acknowledge their having been visited by Svaminarayan representatives and to attest to the community’s usefulness. Over three hundred of these were carefully documented, and used for easing travel in Gujarat and beyond, like Agra. With varying levels of familiarity, the writers spoke of the community in laudatory terms but hardly reflected knowledge of its beliefs, ontology, or position relative to other local Hindu traditions. Instead, they mainly reproduced a discourse that had long enfolded the community since Heber: the community promulgated the traits of virtuous behavior and morality, Kim, “Being Swaminarayan,” 267–71. In these short writings, the founder became affixed to the platform of ‘reform.’ Their compilation manifested into a hierarchical layering of opinions; the late-century testimonials were introduced at the outset of the book by early influential accounts, Bishop Heber and Henry George Briggs, *The Swami Narayan*, 1–24.

⁹ For further analysis on the perceptions embedded in the category of reform, see Hatcher, “Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition.”

dynamics of a shifting political scene.¹⁰ Effectively, the outlook constrains more historically appropriate ways of grasping a modern event like the Svaminarayan emergence, and deters thinking with further subtlety about institutions that formed a powerful presence in spheres both inside and outside the direct influence of empire.¹¹ It is also a costly distraction. An over-investment in the category of reform or its parallels, like ‘social discipline’ and ‘moral improvement,’ makes one potentially insensitive to detecting alternatives, like the expressed motives of the subject.

In response to the limitations of this scope, I propose one possibility to attain a sharper view of the *sampraday* by turning to the community’s rich archive, which has remained under-consulted for the purposes of historical insight. While I do not suggest that the traits of reform in the Svaminarayan community were entirely absent, my purpose here is to suggest that ‘reformation’ remains an inadequate characterization of its cultural project. Such a shift in

¹⁰ Reform has remained closely aligned with an understanding of colonial-era religion. While an urge to disavow this tendency can be detected in recent studies, it seems that an alternative has not been clear. For instance, in analyzing the Svaminarayan collective’s formation, Teena Purohit has concluded that the group’s presence in an area with indirect rule (princely states) made it qualitatively different from other Hindu reform movements developed in areas under direct rule, such as the Brahma Samaj. Drawing on Michael Fisher’s work *Indirect Rule in India*, she notes that the types of civic institutions or influences of ‘Western modernity’ and Christianity that were in the context of the presidencies did not exist in the princely states. Thus, the same type of native elites and sensibilities of reform could not emerge from princely states. But even while distinguishing the character of religion in spaces outside spheres of intense Western and Christian thought, Purohit has interpreted the community by returning to another facet of reform: social discipline. Rather than ‘modernist’ or ‘reformist’ Purohit has termed the Svaminarayan’s peculiar type of reform—a disciplinary trend she locates in its ritual conduct—as ‘traditionalist,’ Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 96–9.

Purohit has rightfully noted a general difference in cultural contexts under indirect and direct rule, however, I still hesitate to draw a hard line between the development of actors in these areas—Sahajanand’s own trajectory over a number of years moved across British India into princely Gujarat, and finally culminated in the building of an institution that spanned both contexts. Points of influence vibrantly existed across boundaries, sustained by the inseparable flow of people, ideas, and materiality in this period. At the same, I hesitate to assume the ubiquity of just one pattern across all colonial-era environments, reform, at the risk of overlooking other influences. For an example of another attempt to divorce colonialism from reform and religion see Christopher A. Bayly’s account of Sahajanand in *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, 160–61. See also Hatcher’s evaluation of Bayly, “Situating the Svaminarayan Tradition,” 30.

¹¹ In this historiographical discussion my use of the word ‘modern’ to qualify Gujarat, the Svaminarayan community or its context is a general chronological marker for the period beginning with the nineteenth century; the use of ‘early modern’ is to denote the period before. Such terminology is not intended to indicate quality of character, degree of development, colonial presence and influence (or lack thereof), or a pronounced rupture.

attention, then, requires that we allow the community's nineteenth-century records to yield their own insights, without the constant imposition of well-established conclusions. In doing so, the engagement with this archive can serve as a meaningful entry point into larger scholarly efforts to reconsider the nature of religious formation, practice, and identity in this period.

I open my analysis by briefly outlining an influential historiography that has helped shape an understanding of the community's trajectory. The narrative has deemed the Svaminarayan formation as a reform movement protesting an earlier Vaishnava tradition, the Pushtimarg. Hence, one aspect required in the project of rethinking nineteenth-century history is re-evaluating the conceptual pairing of these communities. Evidently, the Svaminarayan and Pushtimarg communities were interdependently created in colonial discourse. The second section of the chapter disentangles assumptions by demonstrating how the Svaminarayan *sampraday* held a complementary, reverential perspective of the Pushtimarg, rather than regarding it through a reformist lens. I argue that while the Svaminarayan connection to the older Pushtimarg was neither as a dissenting force nor as a target of moral improvement, an affirmative link was not entirely incidental. Actively maintaining an affiliation to the widespread culture of the Pushtimarg may have served the Svaminarayan community strategically, by helping it gain footing in western India. In other words, maintaining a contextual similarity to long-standing practices would have allowed a more confident introduction of a new approach. Having reframed the means by which Sahajanand Svami related to the local landscape, the third section of the study attends to some Svaminarayan features, attitudes, and practices, as demonstrated by approaches to growth, devotion, and lifestyle. An analysis of the formative years indicates that the founder's all-consuming efforts were invested in community creation, rather than reform. For Sahajanand, actively creating structural and social stability in Gujarat was a preparatory step in

the promulgation of his vision of *bhakti* (devotion). In extension of this argument, the fourth and final section examines the development of a new social subject: the Svaminarayan devotee. Looking to his context, Sahajanand had imagined nineteenth-century adherents to be multi-dimensional, resilient, and equipped to engage with the world unapologetically.

Overall, I illustrate how the emergence of the Svaminarayan community was more emblematic of an ‘elastic’ orientation: the new community symbolically referenced a prominent community with deep roots in the early modern period, while its central work activated a new set of priorities. That is, even as it somewhat affirmatively attached to the Pushtimarg tradition, the Svaminarayan project was stretching away in a different direction. Ultimately, the Svaminarayan *sampraday* formalized adaptability in its model of devotion, cultivating a space that allowed diverse ways of being a devotee.

MISTAKEN ENTANGLEMENTS

Scholarship and popular narratives on Svaminarayan origins have been generally oriented by late-nineteenth-century misperceptions that were formed in relation to mid-century debates. This circuitous process, observed by Raymond B. Williams, has identified the community’s birth as a reaction to the Pushtimarg, a longstanding Vaishnava devotional community.¹² The Pushtimarg (also known as the Vallabh *sampraday*), a distinct *bhakti* tradition centered on the deity Krishna with its roots in the sixteenth century, had become a prominent Vaishnava tradition across western India in this period. It was especially well-established in Gujarat, popular with a large follower base of *baniyas*, or mercantile class householders.¹³ I will briefly rehearse how the Svaminarayan collective came to be mischaracterized as antithetical to the Pushtimarg in the

¹² Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 26–8.

¹³ Saha, “The Movement of *Bhakti*,” 306–7.

spectrum of devotional culture.

Owing to Sahajanand Svami's work and contact with British officials, colonial writers located the founder's community with the compass of reform. In its background, while the Pushtimarg had made a lasting impact in the region since the seventeenth century,¹⁴ by the mid-nineteenth century it faced increasing scrutiny. By 1862, the Pushtimarg had been devastated by negative impressions founded on what was commonly known as the 'Maharaja Libel Case.' This widely publicized legal case centered on allegations against the *maharajas*, leaders of the Pushtimarg, of engaging in immoral habits—particularly of having inappropriate sexual conduct with female followers. As a result, colonial authorities and many adherents perceived the tradition's ideology, practices, and teachers as being unfit. David Haberman has argued that the case was overwhelmingly directed by European and Christian assumptions about what was moral, authoritative, and civilized, and its outcome reflected this. Eventually, the legal battle heightened suspicions about the misbehavior of the *maharajas* and the state of Hinduism.¹⁵ Peter Bennett noted that the impression produced lasting injury to the tradition.¹⁶

Nineteenth-century colonial depictions of 'religious' motivation—Sahajanand Svami's creation of the Svaminarayan community as a pointed act of reform, and the Pushtimarg community as an emblem of immorality—had both been shaped in relation to British Orientalist expectations of Hinduism. Writers positioned the Svaminarayan collective in direct opposition to the Pushtimarg.¹⁷ On the one hand, influential colonial narratives championed the Svaminarayan emergence while also holding disdain for Krishna-centered devotional culture. Bishop Heber's

¹⁴ Saha, "The Movement of *Bhakti*," 310.

¹⁵ Haberman, "On Trial."

¹⁶ Bennett, *The Path of Grace*, 10–11.

¹⁷ Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 275.

depiction emphasized Sahajanand Svami as a capable reformer and deemed his work worthy of general approval, despite Heber's distress upon learning of Sahajanand's worship of Krishna, a deity linked to "obscene and monstrous follies."¹⁸ Further, Henry George Briggs extracted from and reinforced Heber's view of Sahajanand as 'the Reformer.' In a laudatory manner, Briggs linked Sahajanand to the British in his work *The Cities of Gujarashtra* in 1849,¹⁹ while also identifying the founder as a bold critic of the 'irregularities' and 'vice' in the Pushtimarg.²⁰ Contrastingly, a few decades later the Libel Case confirmed legally for much of the public that the Pushtimarg community had indeed become corrupt. Rooted in medieval devotion, over time it had decayed and was symbolized by an unsavory deity and leadership.²¹ Put simply, the estimation of Pushtimarg character was no longer restricted to privately held views. It is not difficult, then, to imagine how earlier derisive opinions would have been further fueled in light of the judgment. In the colonial perspective the reputation of the Svaminarayan formation would be enhanced against the Pushtimarg, which remained inextricably tied to the pre-colonial and the degenerative. Specifically, late-nineteenth-century European writers paired these positions antagonistically in the arena of religious modernity, resulting in a flawed logic. Williams has affirmed conclusions originally raised by Françoise Mallison: namely, Western perspectives such as that of Monier Monier-Williams in the late nineteenth century, misinterpreted the Svaminarayan and Pushtimarg connection in relation to the earlier legal case.²²

There is no known contention between the communities in Sahajanand Svami's lifetime.

¹⁸ Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, 150.

¹⁹ Hatcher, "Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition," 13–15.

²⁰ Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarashtra*, 237–38.

²¹ Haberman, "On Trial."

²² Mallison, "La Secte Krichnaïte," 26–8. For an instance of this misunderstanding, see Monier Monier-Williams, *Hinduism*, 144–46.

In this period the Pushtimarg was already formally recognized in major Gujarati cities like Ahmedabad and Surat,²³ and its rituals adopted even in non-Pushti Krishna temples.²⁴ In fact, the Pushtimarg was specifically familiar to Sahajanand. Yet according to my reading as well as Williams' conclusions,²⁵ there is no evidence of criticism leveled at the historical founder of the Pushtimarg, Vallabhacharya, or the *maharajas* who were his descendants, in Svaminarayan literature authored or authorized by Sahajanand. A recorded interaction exists between several Svaminarayan ascetics and an unnamed *gosvami maharaja* of the Pushtimarg in Navanagar (Halar area of Kathiawar).²⁶ In response to the *gosvami's* doubts about Sahajanand's esteemed status, the ascetics justified their leader as *guru*, *acharya*, and *bhagvan* (teacher, preceptor, and God), and explained the principles of the Svaminarayan *sampraday* according to the *Shrimad Bhagavata*.²⁷ Nityanand Svami, a prominent ascetic scholar, noted this contact in the Sanskrit work *Haridigvijay*. The work had been composed at the behest of Sahajanand to account for scholarly debates in his career and to illuminate the community.²⁸ While Makrand Mehta, a historian of Gujarat, has passionately argued for Sahajanand's opposition to the Pushtimarg, I suggest otherwise. Mehta writes, "Sahajanand severely criticised the Vallabhacharis" in the text *Haridigvijay*, which Mehta interpreted as showing that "Sahajanand fought against the followers of the Vallabha sect on moral grounds."²⁹ Reading the nineteenth-century text (in Gujarati translation), I am unable to find evidence for this claim. In the account, the meeting hardly

²³ Williams, *An Introduction*, 27.

²⁴ Saha, "The Movement of *Bhakti*," 310.

²⁵ Williams, *An Introduction*, 27.

²⁶ *Gosvami* was a venerable title for leaders in the Pushtimarg.

²⁷ Nityanand Svami, *Haridigvijay*, Ulas 28, 291–308.

²⁸ Nityanand Svami, *Haridigvijay*, 3–4.

²⁹ Mehta, "Language and Communication," 42–43.

demonstrates moral critique. In contrast, the depiction discloses a desire to project the Svaminarayan community as self-assured, capable, and meritorious.³⁰

Furthermore, to make his case, Mehta cites the British Political Agent Captain James Macmurdo's notes on Kutch (1818) to conclude that notoriety in the Vallabh community did exist in the early years of the century, prior to the Libel Case. His point is to counter Mallison and Williams, who have argued that the Svaminarayan and Pushtimarg relationship was misinterpreted due to a retroactive application of the Libel Case.³¹ For this, Mehta refers to Macmurdo's observation of a *maharaj* who appears to be shaking from "debauchery of every kind."³² Though the observation was contemporaneous with Sahajanand, and Macmurdo was likely aware of such figures, his brief observation does not compel the understanding that Sahajanand pointedly constructed his project in opposition to the Pushtimarg, as Mehta argues. Thirdly, Mehta relies on his own earlier scholarship,³³ which is not without issue, as explored below. On a fourth note, Mehta argues for Sahajanand's protest against the Pushtimarg's licentiousness on the basis of two texts: Briggs' account of Sahajanand and a history of the region, *Amdavadno Itihas*, by Gujarati historian Maganlal Vakhatchand in 1851.³⁴ But if we account for how discourse around reform had already enveloped the Svaminarayan formation by this time, and furthermore, how Heber had influenced Briggs' account, we are compelled to reconsider taking Briggs' characterization of Sahajanand's "crusade against the Walab Kul

³⁰ Nityanand Svami, *Haridigvijay*, Ulas 28, 291–308.

³¹ Mehta, "Language and Communication," 42.

³² Macmurdo, "An Account of the Province of Cutch," 230–31.

³³ Mehta, "Maharaj Libel Case." The work was published in 1970 but has been mistakenly cited as 1971.

³⁴ Quoted in Mehta, "Language and Communication," 42.

[Vallabh's descendants]" at face value.³⁵ A similar case can be made for Vakhatchand. Isaka has argued that regional histories written by nineteenth-century Gujarati intellectuals were motivated by a desire to establish regional identity, and were dependent on British sources for content and framework. She specifically lists the work of Vakhatchand in the former category and that of Briggs in the latter.³⁶ In sum, there is ample reason to reconsider the historiography argued by Mehta, among others, which locates Sahajanand's work in opposition to Pushtimarg degradation.

Here, one can appreciate just how strong of a hold colonial-era assessments have had on post-colonial scholarship, thereby forcing out other arguments. In light of Mehta's reading of Sahajanand, David Haberman's evaluation of the Maharaj Libel Case's impact in post-colonial India is relevant. Haberman has argued that the Libel Case became a source of Indian pride, noting that it was celebrated by the government (High Court of Bombay) in 1962 as an episode of Indian morality brought to bear on society through the legal system. The case left an overwhelmingly positive impression on English-educated Indians—including Mehta, whose early scholarship about the case is reflective of this position.³⁷ Haberman observes that Mehta not only agreed with the case's judgment and its Orientalist depiction of the Vallabh community, but that he argued for the necessity of British rule.³⁸

For Mehta, change was just not possible before the nineteenth century because the region represented a context that was "antipathetic to change." By taking two quick steps, Mehta arrived at his position on the pre-colonial characters of the Vallabh and Svaminarayan communities: First, he briefly cited Gujarati writings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that

³⁵ Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarashtra*, 237–38.

³⁶ Isaka, "Gujarati Intellectuals," 2002.

³⁷ See Mehta, "Maharaj Libel Case."

³⁸ Haberman, "On Trial," 66.

referenced the Pushtimarg disparagingly, to argue that these indicated, in fact, that the Pushtimarg was corrupt. Secondly, he simply asserted that the Svaminarayan community “in the late eighteenth century emerged as a protest against the Epicurean tone of the Vallabha sect.”³⁹ Using these two points, Mehta concludes that movements in “pre-British Gujarat and other parts of India” were failed projects, unable to bring about change in the depraved culture. “Unlike the renaissance artists, teachers, philosophers, and literati in the West who glorified the role of reason and scientific method in order to create new conditions for the human progress, their Indian contemporaries clung to the authority of the Hindu Shastras as a divine source of inspiration to fight against the social and religious evils.”⁴⁰ At stake in such a reading is not only the historiography of the Pushtimarg, but those positioned as its interlocutors. Finally, it is of vital note that Sahajanand Svami died in the year 1830; the Pushtimarg legal controversy occurred in 1862, over thirty years later.⁴¹ Remarkably in spite of this chronology, the impression that one community served as a foil continues to hold currency.⁴²

Writers and commentators repeatedly cited the miscast relationship between the two

³⁹ Mehta, “Maharaj Libel Case,” 34.

⁴⁰ Mehta, “Maharaj Libel Case,” 34.

⁴¹ Anachronistic historiography has mischaracterized the relationship between the two communities. While Mehta has cited pre-colonial writings expressing general displeasure for the Vallabha culture, it is noteworthy that contemporaneous to Sahajanand, public interest was not yet consumed by this, as he has implied, Mehta, “Maharaj Libel Case.” According to Joshua Barton Scott, in the 1820’s and 30’s the Gujarati press, particularly the *Rast Gofar*, focused its attention on reporting commercial matters, not publicizing the issue of reform. Reform grew into a matter of public prominence in the 1850’s, when Gujarati Hindus, distinctively the Pushtimarg *maharajas*, came under critique in the press around topics like the lewd nature of *holi* celebrations, Scott, “Divine Exposures,” 117–18.

⁴² van der Veer has suggested that as the Libel Case damaged the Pushtimarg, it aided the Svaminarayan community, *Religious Nationalism*, 163. How and why the latter benefitted is not made clear in his analysis. See also: Wessler, “Hindu Reform Movements,” 85; Chavda, “Social and Religious Reform Movements,” 202; Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 296.

groups and over time, it became a well-established narrative.⁴³ This has bled into contemporary discourse of the community itself. In Kim's anthropological study of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), a prominent branch of the present-day Swaminarayan community, she observed that such misconceptions are held among some community members.⁴⁴ They have cited Sahajanand's valiant undertaking in relation to the

⁴³ Williams, *An Introduction*, 26–8. Colonial impressions continued into the twentieth century, such as in the work of missionary-scholar John Farquhar (*An Outline*). Likewise, in a nationalist view, Sen depicted the formation as 'protest against the decadent Vallabha school,' *Medieval Mysticism of India*, 53. Munshi stated in his discussion of Swaminarayan poetry, "Its [Swaminarayan sect] specialty lay in its antagonism to the gross epicureanism of the Vallabha sect." *Gujarata and its Literature*, 216–17. See also Majumdar, *Cultural History of Gujarat*. Anti-colonial resistance in early twentieth-century writings was focused on society and religion, rather than politically-centered narratives, Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 16–21.

⁴⁴ Munshi might present one influential avenue by which external views of the Swaminarayan formation, particularly nationalists, informed the community's self-perception. Besides writings that referenced the community, it seems that Munshi had other engagements with the *sampraday*. In 1967, close to the end of his career and the same year that Munshi's *Gujarata and Its Literature A Survey from the Earliest Time* was reprinted as a third edition by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Harshadaraya T. Dave wrote the book *Life and Philosophy of Shree Swaminarayan, 1781–1830* on Sahajanand Svami. It was an introductory text for readers of English. This was not an academic work, nor one by a professional writer or philosophical thinker, and was printed by the Swaminarayan press in Bombay, Akshar Bhavan. Evidently, Dr. K. M. Munshi contributed the Foreword, Dave, *Life and Philosophy*, xiii. In the book, Dave put Munshi in the ranks of 'modern thinkers' and referenced Munshi's thoughts on Sahajanand as a 'sadhu-cum-reformist' and the nationalist's observation that "a representative of the lost religious era was as if re-appearing on the threshold of the 19th century," Dave, *Life and Philosophy*, 44–5. The professional relationship between Dave and Munshi might have been at the root of Munshi's relationship to the Swaminarayan community. Dave was apparently a former employee of Munshi. He notes in the Introduction, 'In the end I am grateful to Dr. K. M. Munshi, President, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, but popularly known to us, the family circle of his staff, as 'Bapaji', under whom I have the privilege of working when he was the Home Minister to the Government of Bombay, for so kindly writing the Foreword to the book,' Dave, *Life and Philosophy*, xxiv. Dave's various writings on community history have been important in BAPS' historical self-understanding.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Munshi's vision was to be a leading institution where the ancient history and culture of India could be celebrated through teaching and learning for Indians, according to Manu Bhagwan. His articulation of "Indian culture" corresponded to tendencies in early twentieth-century Hindutva, subsuming traditions that he viewed as indigenous, like Buddhism, under the umbrella of Hinduism; at the same time, he simply did not account for historical traditions in India, like Islam or Judaism. This Hindu-centered culture represented the core and authoritative values of India, to which it was necessary to return and to celebrate. For Munshi, India was fundamentally and most authoritatively a Hindu culture and Bhavan's explicit aim was to align India's past and present as well as its future to these values. He closely oversaw the institution's workings for decades, including its significant publishing activity. The Indian National Congress's sheltering of Munshi at this stage of his career (he had been earlier estranged from Congress), despite his clear fidelity to Hindu nationalistic views and activities, facilitated Hindutva's entry into the post-colonial state. That is, on the eve of nationhood, Congress's endorsement of Munshi's ideological voice did anything but sideline communalism in the new landscape that was to emerge after colonialism. In addition to the major undertaking of the Bhavan academy, in the later years of his work Munshi's anti-Muslim and Hindu-glorifying sentiments were amplified through the case of the Somnath temple. This well-known temple in Kathiawar was historically raided numerous times by Mahmud of Ghazni and rebuilt since the eleventh century. Munshi depicted, in relatively tempered terms, a fictionalized account of Somnath's destruction in his historical novel *Jaya Somnath* ([1937] 1976). But his later portrayals during the late 1940's and 1950's gained an inflammatory tone. He shifted to using exceedingly laudatory terms for Hindus and despicable depictions for

faulted ethos of Pushtimarg.⁴⁵ Moreover, categories from narratives by colonialists, Orientalists, nationalists and other observers continue to be translated into literature produced by the community. In addition to relying on Svaminarayan sources, the use of external references seems to signal that such citations were evidence of a certain depiction: an unprecedented community that came about under a revolutionary reformer in an era of political, cultural, and social chaos, and ultimately, in a time of moral depravity.⁴⁶ Recent studies have similarly configured such a connection between the communities, although more subtly.⁴⁷

Effectively, colonial constructions of religious modernity shape the writing of South Asian history of the past few centuries. The treatment of the Svaminarayan community as an enterprise of reform remains influential through the colonial and post-colonial eras, whether through external observers, the community's own narratives, or scholarship. However, despite some association between the two communities, pigeonholing the Svaminarayan community's

Muslims in the accounts of Somnath, while he led the temple's reconstruction with the encouragement of Sardar Patel, Bhagavan, "The Hindutva Underground." Munshi's writings have proved enduring in contemporary Gujarat and India. In the 1980's and 90's as well as more recently, Munshi's writings have provided inspiration to L. K. Advani and then Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi, among others, on matters of Hindu identity, Bhagavan, "The Hindutva Underground," 46; Chandrani, "Legacies of Colonial History," 244–47; Pare, "Writing Fiction, Living History: Kanhaiyalal Munshi's Historical Trilogy*," 600–01.

⁴⁵ Kim, "Being Svaminarayan," 275, 312.

⁴⁶ For an example of this, see the work of Mukundcharandas Swami, *Bhagwan Svaminarayan—An Introduction*, 83–8. Such citations are increasingly common in several Svaminarayan branches today.

⁴⁷ For instance, Purohit has understood the Svaminarayan community as a reformation of the Pushtimarg, defining the Svaminarayan formation by juxtaposing it with the Pushtimarg and emphasizing how Svaminarayan changed from it. The underlying assumption is that the Pushtimarg was the model for structuring the nineteenth-century community. In comparing the two, Purohit has concluded that Sahajanand's theological orientation and practices, such as the playing of *holi* or avoiding men dressed as women, stood in *contrast* to the Pushtimarg, rather than being different, circumstantial, or unrelated, Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 102–3. This contrast remains debatable. Sahajanand played *holi* innumerable times and in fact quite enthusiastically and on a large-scale, as evidenced across sources. In terms of material culture from the nineteenth century, quite a few remnants associated with this specific celebration exist. On the point about remaining distant from men dressed as women, it appears that Sahajanand might have been speaking of *bhavai*, Gujarati folk theatre, to which he was opposed. In this reported bawdy theatre form there were only male actors thus they had to play the part of both men and women. *Bhavai* more broadly became a target of Gujarati reformers during the nineteenth century as they sought to disassociate from Hindu culture, since its chief patron was the goddess Bahuchara Mata, associated with offerings of meat and liquor, Sebastian, "Cultural Elites," 62.

inherent position as one of critique prioritizes explanations that mimic colonial concerns, even if unintentionally.

REVERENTIAL FOUNDATIONS

The impression that the Svaminarayan community advocated for religious reform in the nineteenth century stands at odds with the esteem with which they regarded the Pushtimarg. On the contrary, the newer formation adopted practices of the Pushtimarg, like its ritual worship, observances, and festivals, and praised its leaders.⁴⁸ While the historically erroneous entanglements have been revised, I further argue that their connection was not wholly incidental. Upholding a visibly agreeable relationship with the Pushtimarg could be attributed to Svaminarayan's chief aim: the establishment of a new *sampraday* in this era. The Svaminarayan community's venerable references to and imitation of the Pushtimarg represent the first aspect of Svaminarayan's elastic orientation: a clearly affirmative attachment to a principal, eminent identity. Consequently, this would allow the Svaminarayan formation to move securely in unique, dissimilar directions. I am not implying that forging a connection to the Pushtimarg excluded the possibility of genuine respect for it by Sahajanand, but retaining a likeness to the establishment certainly helped to sanction novelty.

Sahajanand Svami was not native to Gujarat and had only wandered into the region at the turn of the nineteenth century. After entering south Gujarat via Nasik in present-day Maharashtra in Samvat 1856 (August 1800) he came to Loj in Kathiawar (Junagadh area). Here, he briefly affiliated with the Uddhav *sampraday*, an established but relatively modest, local Vaishnava

⁴⁸ Williams, *An Introduction*, 27.

community.⁴⁹ Initially he was only an adherent but soon became the community's successor.⁵⁰ It was from this humble base that Sahajanand began to introduce his viewpoints, nurturing the cause of the Svaminarayan *sampraday*. Practically, this could have presented several challenges. Western India was a fresh setting for the recently settled itinerant. He likely would have been perceived as an upstart by those more seasoned and his position less relevant than prominent lineages. As a young man, he could not have enjoyed the same degree of authority as others long settled in the region, even upon joining the Uddhav community. Simply put, at the outset of the century it is probable that Sahajanand did not possess the means by which to disseminate his views or have them be seamlessly accepted in Gujarat.

For this reason, incorporating common and observable aspects of Vaishnava culture at the outset would have aided him in appearing less unknown, and his aims less drastic. Further, it would have contributed to advancing Sahajanand's influence in the region with an aura of rootedness. Identifying with the widely recognized Pushtimarg while worshipping Krishna would align the Svaminarayan foundation with an identifiable, solidified ethos. Particularly, assimilation could be achieved more effortlessly by adopting select Pushtimarg symbols without requiring the sacrifice of core ideas or independence. That is, philosophical agreement with the Pushtimarg was not necessary meant to achieve the effect of cultural congruence. The Svaminarayan inclusion of recognizable Pushtimarg practices, like the ritual worship of deities, and the high visibility of attendant cultural mirrors, like the publicly organized, mass

⁴⁹ *Sampraday* texts are dated according to the Hindu lunar calendar with the Vikram Samvat notation (S.).

⁵⁰ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.50.12–1.59.26. Sahajanand Svami was originally from the vicinity of Oudh (Ayodhya), arriving in Gujarat after approximately seven years of travel throughout India as a renunciant. According to the community narrative, after associating with the founder of the Uddhav *sampraday*, Ramanand Svami, and the philosophy of Ramanujacharya, Sahajanand was reportedly encouraged to adopt Pushtimarg culture. For an intriguing depiction of Ramanand Svami's earlier challenges with Vaishnava culture see Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.59.19–1.59.26. Prior to settling in western India, Sahajanand does not appear to have held an extensive relationship with a *guru* or a community. Only after entering the region did he attach himself in such a way.

celebrations of Vaishnava festivals, would have allowed integration into the region with more ease. Moreover, the Pushtimarg was not the only early modern reference to Krishna devotion by Sahajanand. In a study of the fifteenth-century popular saint-poet of Gujarat Narasinh Mehta, religious studies scholar Neelima Shukla-Bhatt has observed Sahajanand's reliance on Mehta's *bhakti kirtans*, devotional songs, to assist his own adherents in their *bhakti*.⁵¹

I would like to caution against reading the pointed but limited agreement with the Pushtimarg as a means by which to pin down the history of Svaminarayan development. On the contrary, the latter's self-presentation in the reflection of the former was to help the nineteenth-century collective move efficiently toward its goal—the implementation of its *own* program. By exhibiting resemblance, new developments could be introduced more gracefully across the region already bearing the mark of locally dominant features. Clearly, in the nineteenth century, the Pushtimarg had retained an appeal on the ground, as opposed to the tradition's diminished credibility in colonial views. To better decipher this relationship, I will examine two key sources, the *Shikshapatri* and *Satsangjivan*.

The most prominent mention of the Pushtimarg in Svaminarayan records is in the *Shikshapatri*, a short compilation of 212 verses of injunctions and codes of conduct composed in Sanskrit for Svaminarayan adherents on Maha Sud 5 S. 1882 (January 1826).⁵² It was authored by Sahajanand Svami in Vadtal, an administrative and cultural center for the community in the Kaira area of Gujarat, and according to Harshadaraya T. Dave, it was completed after he had

⁵¹ Shukla-Bhatt, *Narasinha Mehta of Gujarat*, 158. This adoption is noted in the *Vachanamrt*, a foundational Svaminarayan text, under Vadtal 11 and Vadtal 12. Citing the iconic early modern poet could have also increased the nineteenth-century formation's popularity in western India.

⁵² Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.44.211.

written for three consecutive months starting in the month of Kartik in S. 1882 (1825).⁵³ The *Shikshapatri* was not only a standalone text but also included within another foundational composition, the second source under consideration, the *Satsangi Jivanam* by Shatanand Svami (Shatanand Muni).⁵⁴

The *Shikshapatri* was central to setting personal, social and devotional norms in the community. It is one important source by which to understand the lived frames that the entire collective (leadership, ascetics, and laity) functioned within, as the text was explicitly oriented toward this subject. Upon examination of the *Shikshapatri*, it is plain that the Pushtimarg was regarded positively. In addition to providing a revision of the historiography of the two groups, the present study further suggests that understanding the linkage offers a means of interpreting the proliferation of Svaminarayan identity. Pushtimarg *vrats* (observances and fasts), *utsavs* (festivals), and *seva riti* (devotional ritual service), and worship are pointed out as habits to be adopted in the Svaminarayan *sampraday* via clear declarations. According to verses 79-82 of the *Shikshapatri*, guidelines for practices of *vrata*, *utsava* and *seva riti* were to be based on the norms established by the Pushtimarg's early teachers—the founder of the tradition, Vallabhacharya, and his son and early proponent of the community, Vitthalnath.⁵⁵

⁵³ Dave, *Bhagvan Shri Svaminarayan* (Bhag 1), 170. There are indications that an earlier version of the *Shikshapatri* existed, one that was not well-known and composed by Sahajanand Svami on Maha Sud Pancam S. 1879 (January 17, 1823). It was reportedly in circulation until it was retired for the newer version, which was composed and distributed in S. 1882 (1826). No explicit explanation has been given for the initial composition's retirement. However, Dave has detailed the process of editing and adding/deleting verses, Dave, *Bhagvan Shri Svaminarayan* [Bhag 5], 456. In this essay I refer to the composition from 1826, which has remained prominent. Further, based on Satpanth claims and textual parallels between the Svaminarayan *Shikshapatri* and two Satpanth *ginans*, Purohit has compellingly argued that the former text appears to have been influenced by the latter on the matter of ritual practice, Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 104–10.

⁵⁴ According to the *Satsangijivan*, Sahajanand pressed Shatanand Svami to first adapt the *Shikshapatri* verses into meter form for singing and to thereafter compose the larger *Satsangijivan*, Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam* 5.66.32.

⁵⁵ “The Digital Shikshapatri,” 79–82. For the translation of the *Shikshapatri* I refer to the ‘Default’ option in the online Digital Shikshapatri project. This translation is the result of collaboration between the project creators

Verse 79: All disciples shall practise Vrata devoutly, by observing fasting on Ekadashi, on Janamashtami and on birth anniversaries of other avatars, and Shivratri. They shall also celebrate them with great reverence and festivity.

Verse 80: On these days of self-discipline and fasting, one shall avoid sleeping in the daytime as it nullifies the fast, as does sexual indulgence on such days.

Verse 81: The days of Vrata and festivals shall be as prescribed by Shree Vithalnathji, son of Shree Valabhacharya, a king among the Vaishnavas.

Verse 82: My disciples shall observe these Vratas and festivals, and shall adopt adoration and the mode of worship of Lord Shree Krishna, as expounded by Shree Vithalnathji.

Sahajanand Svami's respectful acknowledgement of Vitthalnath's devotional format, his profound admiration for Vallabhacharya, "a king among the Vaisnavas," and a willingness to embrace the early modern design into the new community, hint at the appreciation that the Pushtimarg continued to enjoy in the nineteenth century in western India. Such citations were not inconsequential, as the *Shikshapatri* was authoritative for all adherents; it provided a lifestyle model for the spectrum of social standings represented in the community. In fact, in the text itself, Sahajanand positions the work prominently in the community's attention. He is insistent that all adherents engage daily with the *Shikshapatri* by reading it or having it read.⁵⁶ "If there is no one to read this Shikshapatri, they [disciples] shall worship it daily with reverence. My words in the Shikshapatri shall be considered sacred and the personified form of my divine self."⁵⁷

The second notable reference to the Pushtimarg occurs in the *Satsangijivan*.⁵⁸ Shatanand Muni, a devoted ascetic follower, composed the *puranik* text in Sanskrit, according to Peter

and several Svaminarayan branches. Other options include the original English translation published with the first scholarly edition of the *Shikshapatri*, by Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University Monier Monier-Williams, Williams, "Presentation of the Shikshapatri," 120.

⁵⁶ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 208.

⁵⁷ "The Digital Shikshapatri," 209. Sahajanand also emphasized this in a discussion dated June 1, 1826, *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 1.

Schreiner.⁵⁹ It was composed after the community had been well established, Magshar S. 1886 (November 1829).⁶⁰ The *Satsangijivan* is organized in five *prakarans* (volumes), with 16,536 verses, and is considered to be one of the most authentic compositions on the founder's life.⁶¹ Largely written under Sahajanand's supervision, a range of subjects including early history in Gujarat, legal matters, and liturgical issues principal to the institutional establishment of the *satsang*, or community, are covered in the lengthy composition.⁶² According to the author, the *Satsangijivan*'s narrative of the founder's life was meant to provide support for devotees upon his demise.⁶³ The *Satsangijivan*, or "Life of Those Belonging to the Community of the Good," was a substitute for engaging with Sahajanand Svami himself.⁶⁴ Like the *Shikshapatri*, the work was equated in some way with the founder's personage. Over two centuries, it has been one of the most comprehensive, consulted sources for community affairs, from soteriological to legal, in temple and in court.

In the *Satsangijivan*, a great deal of energy is spent describing devotional practices in the context of administration. Here again, the Pushtimarg is highlighted. One key intention of the *Satsangijivan* had been to set parameters, draw rules and regulations for the nascent formation,

⁵⁸ The composition's title is referenced in different ways in both the *sampraday* and in scholarship. It is identified as the *Satsangijivan*, *Satsangi-jivan*, *Satsangi Jivan* and at times, as *Satsangijivanam*.

⁵⁹ Schreiner, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 259.

⁶⁰ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 5.67.17. In my study I have used the Gujarati translation.

⁶¹ Schreiner, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 261.

⁶² Williams, *An Introduction*, 187–88.

⁶³ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 5.66.28–5.66.31. While a date for the work's completion is not specified, the author indicates that he continued to finalize the text after the founder passed, staying on in Durgapatan (Gadhada) for one year, Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 5.68.75–5.68.76.

⁶⁴ Schreiner, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 259.

and outline structures that would sustain it well after the founder's passing.⁶⁵ This is illustrated in one instance in the *Satsangijivan* during a discussion of the *acharya* system, a tradition of preceptors for continual community administration established by Sahajanand.⁶⁶ Two *acharyas* were to care for the entire institution's material wealth, temples, and ascetics, across directly and indirectly ruled areas, and retain spiritual authority after Sahajanand's passing. From the city of Ahmedabad, one *acharya* based at the Nar-Narayan Dev temple would oversee the community in the northern half of the region (colloquially known as Amdavad Desh), while another *acharya* associated with Vadtal's Lakshmi-Narayan Dev temple would oversee it in the southern half (colloquially known as Vadtal Desh).⁶⁷ A boundary running west to east, with Dwarka on one end and Calcutta on the other, marked the territorial division in Gujarat and beyond, according to Jyotindra Dave.⁶⁸

On the monumental occasion of the initiation of the first set of *acharyas*, Raghuviraji and Ayodhyaprasadji, the appointees ask Sahajanand how fasts and celebrations should be observed in the community (*Satsangi Jivanam* 4.54.24–4.54.26). In the reported exchange between the founder and the future nurturers of the still-solidifying collective, Sahajanand directs the *acharyas* to establish practices of *vrat-utsav*, observances and celebrations, by following the prescriptions of Vitthalnath. It is striking that the first generation of *acharyas*—the bearers and

⁶⁵ Schreiner, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 259.

⁶⁶ In this system only descendants from Sahajanand's family could fill the role of the *acharya*. As an heirless celibate, Sahajanand adopted his nephews to serve as the first two *acharyas*, Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.40.16–4.40.21.

⁶⁷ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.40.26–4.40.29.

⁶⁸ Dave, "Reappraisal of the 'Lekh'," 284. The administrative arrangements were established in a Gujarati document, *Desh Vibhag Lekh*. The original agreement was created as a brief outline and was publically authorized by Sahajanand in Vadtal in S. 1882 (October 1825). Another, more detailed version was created and authorized in Gadhada in S. 1883 (December 1826), Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.40.30–4.40.33. In an astute analysis, scholar Jyotindra Dave has traced discrepancies in the reported timing of these arrangements.

propagators of an entirely new community in the nineteenth century, and the representatives of Sahajanand Svami responsible for sustaining a distinct cultural identity after his demise—were being counseled by the founder to imitate the already widespread Pushtimarg norms for worship. Sahajanand justifies the use of an earlier mode by highlighting Vitthalnath's virtuous conduct of Vaishnava devotion. Again, Vitthalnath's ways are acknowledged as being far above those of others.⁶⁹ By regarding these customs as most superior and instructing that the Svaminarayan collective adopt them, Sahajanand championed the Pushtimarg as an ideal of *bhakti* practice and accordingly, elected to align select Svaminarayan habits with it.

Sahajanand continues by noting that some practices of Vitthalnath are different than that of the Uddhav *sampraday* (another name for the Svaminarayan formation due to its origins).⁷⁰ However, he then shifts to narrating the ways in which to observe Janmashtami, the birth of Shri Krishna, along the lines laid down in the Pushtimarg tradition. At this point, Sahajanand emphasizes that his instructions about festivals start with Janmashtami because it is the celebration of Krishna, the Svaminarayan community's *ishtadev*, or the principal divinity worshiped by an individual, family or collective.⁷¹ For the remainder of the text, much attention is given to describing the conduct of the *utsavs* and *vrats* for the calendar year, accompanied by a

⁶⁹ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.55.1.

⁷⁰ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.55.1.

⁷¹ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 4.55.2. Though Krishna is at the center of the Pushtimarg, in Svaminarayan *bhakti* Krishna's status is not uniformly understood. It is diversely interpreted in community sources as well as in early temples, with installations of the deity's various manifestations. In connection, Sahajanand's cosmological status has been increasingly contentious among key parties of Vadtal Desh during the last decade.

charting of detailed steps for their observations.⁷² The impressive roadmap spans seven methodological chapters.⁷³

Like the *Shikshapatri*, the *Satsangijivan* indicated a complementary relationship between the early Svaminarayan and Pushtimarg communities. Using elements resonant with the tradition, Sahajanand affirmed a prevalent mode in the region. He incorporated ceremonial practices from the Pushtimarg that were visible and observable, such as the daily routine and ritual worship of deities in the *mandirs*, or temples, and the monthly observances of *vrats* and popular festivals around the year. Having prevalent points of contact with the Pushtimarg, the Svaminarayan community would have felt familiar to the public while Sahajanand stayed focused on shaping its core character. Exercising a noticeable reference to the Pushtimarg, but doing so with restraint, the new project echoed the past while still standing apart as unique. The formation was well positioned to harness the advantage of legitimacy coupled with a claim to novelty, and thus find an avenue of appeal.

NEW DIRECTIONS: THE INSTITUTION

In the section that follows, I develop a more robust view of the Svaminarayan community through its early sources; the overarching portrait that emerges is one of adaptability. I suggest that this trait allowed for the convergence of diverse goals as well as social orientations, and is evidenced in the promotion of flexible measures. The following survey of the institutionalization process reflects the second aspect of Svaminarayan's elasticity: the community's expression of core ideas, which were distant from the early modern Pushtimarg terms to which it had visibly attached. Embodied in structures, practices, and attitudes, new features became predominant in

⁷² *Utsavs* were celebrations held through the course of a year, including Janmashtami, Vijayadashami, Rasotsav, Lakshmipujan, Dipotsav, Govardhanotsav, Tulsivivah, Vasantotsav and Dolotsav.

⁷³ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam* 4.55–4.61.

the Svaminarayan community and over time, its distinct identifiers in western India.⁷⁴ One additional note is necessary at the outset: although it has been valuable to examine how the Svaminarayan community engaged with the Pushtimarg, we should pause before implicitly extending this relationship to Sahajanand's entire vision. Cautious about understanding each group by reading its depiction against the other, I raise a gentle reminder to moderate our compulsions to interpret Svaminarayan features as outgrowths of Pushtimarg critique. Rather, the Pushtimarg (among other influences) was one reference point, rather than a catalyst for Sahajanand's initiative.⁷⁵ Thus, the following is an examination of what I view to be a series of intense efforts of creation; these are acts that were deeply generative. That is, they were in the service of producing a new entity, its self-definition, and public dissemination, and were doing so in a stalwart manner for the period. This nineteenth-century construction was not a mere adjustment of the Pushtimarg.

Finally, a vital note regards sources of history. One probable reason the community has remained in the cul-de-sac of reform is a disproportionate reliance on the *Shikshapatri*, a set of behavioral guidelines for Svaminarayan adherents, for deciphering early history. A recent example of this approach is Teena Purohit's assessment that the *Shikshapatri* must have been key in "recruiting the large number of low-caste and tribal groups" to the community in the early

⁷⁴ While early features were not static, they also did not become irrelevant or secondary over the course of two centuries.

⁷⁵ According to Francoise Mallison, Sahajanand drew from various Hindu traditions as he initiated his own cultural project. The long-standing Sant (ascetic) tradition in Kathiawar (Saurashtra) may have influenced Sahajanand in the late eighteenth century when he entered the region. Among the various Sant groups there were three important, distinct *nirgun sampradayas*—Mahapanthis, Nathpanthis and Kabir movements—which all relied on a collection of devotional songs known as *Sant-vani*. Communities oriented toward *Sant-vani* overlapped with one another in their songs and celebrations, however, they have reportedly been unaware that they also share some hymns, *ginan*, with the Satpanth tradition, a Muslim Shia Nizari community. Mallison's description of Kathiawar's cultural milieu in which there was much circulation and sharing of customs, implies that there was overlap between the developing Svaminarayan community and the pre-existing Muslim traditional Mallison "Gujarati Socio-Religious Context," 51-2. This corresponds to the aforementioned claim detecting parallels between Svaminarayan and Satpanth communities, Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 104-10.

years, as it was a simpler, brief version of the complex theological teachings that were found in the *Vachanamrt* or in the *Satsangijivan* in Sanskrit.⁷⁶ I propose a different view. While the *Shikshapatri* was important and its message circulated within the community via letters prior to the text's formal composition, it is unlikely that such a collection of guidelines was a tool for attracting followers; it was a list of rules for adherents to adopt *after* committing themselves. Secondly, the *Shikshapatri* composed in 1826 was in Sanskrit, and therefore, most people would have had limited access to it; it was not first accessible in Gujarati (nor in 1829, five years before the founder's death), as Purohit seems to have assumed.⁷⁷ On the other hand, the *Vachanamrt*, a collection of Sahajanand's teachings, would have very likely had a recruiting function because it was based on persuasion. The text was an edited record of discussions held publically throughout the region, frequently in the local language of Gujarati, over the course of a decade at the height of Sahajanand's work. Notably, the records show that the engagements were between the founder and people from a range of backgrounds—those whose understanding, attachment, and trust the founder was working hard to foster. Owing to the breadth of experience of the audience, examples were drawn from agrarian life and local culture to instruct philosophical points. Lastly, the function of the *Satsangijivan* should be understood beyond administrative and doctrinal matters. The work's oral exposition in Gujarati with its focus on Sahajanand's *lila* (life stories) had been so popular since the nineteenth century that the source would have likely served as a platform for attracting adherents from the public, especially at the seasonal celebrations.

A pattern of overemphasizing the *Shikshapatri* for understanding the early nineteenth century culture likely originates in colonial knowledge about the *sampraday*, which was informed by imperial preoccupations coupled with a reading of this text. To some extent,

⁷⁶ Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 107–8.

⁷⁷ Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 107–8.

Sahajanand's approach to public presentation is also reflected in colonial historiography. At first glance, it is surprising that for an introduction to his community, Sahajanand and later leaders of the community provided observers like Bishop Heber, Governor John Malcolm, and Monier Monier-Williams, among others, with the *Shikshapatri*, a manual of behavior—rather than the normative devotional and philosophical materials that were central to the community. But the founder had understood his audiences very well: he recognized that selectively advancing a template of adherents' lifestyle would compel outsiders, rather than a discussion of the *bhakti* ideology that sustained their spirits. All around him European opinions dismissed the culture of the deity Krishna and his popular tales, or his *lila*, as noted in Heber's diary.⁷⁸ Clearly, then, it would not have been benefitted Sahajanand to share with observers the vast quantity of *lila* materials about his own life being produced and disseminated.

Recognizing the limitations of the closed path of reform, one possible strategy is studying the range of early materials—those produced contemporaneously with the founder's life and those composed shortly thereafter. They represent a range of concerns and are works part of a nineteenth-century manuscript tradition, of which some have come into print in recent years. Here, I examine another foundational composition of the community, a key philosophical work titled the *Vachanamrt*, to grasp the founder's ideology aligning devotion with institutionalization. The *Vachanamrt* is an edited record of discussions between Sahajanand Svami, his *sadhus* (*svamis*), or ascetics, and householder adherents, in which Sahajanand presented his views. These exchanges held in various areas of Gujarat from at least 1819 to 1829, if not earlier, appear to be in a semi-formal context. Records of the discussions were ordered

⁷⁸ Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, 150.

chronologically, compiled and edited in Gujarati prose by *sadhus*.⁷⁹ In conjunction, I consider some works by a leading ascetic, Nishkulanand Svami, one of the more prominent and prolific writers of the community. Under examination are the *Bhaktachintamani*,⁸⁰ the community's earliest dedicated *lila charitra* (commonly classified as hagiography), select *lila* materials from the compilation *Nishkulanand Kavya*, along with the works of Adbhutanand Svami, Prasadand Svami, and Madhavdasji Svami. The vast body of *lila* literature in the community focuses on the life and works of the founder, but it qualitatively represents more than simply a 'hagiographical' record of the founder. Such sources can provide detailed, often close-up observations of nineteenth-century circumstances, opinions, and commentary on events and tensions surrounding the community. While the *Bhaktachintamani* is simple in literary style with its brief descriptions, its creation in the founder's presence has made the text noteworthy.⁸¹ It was completed in the month of Aso in S. 1887 (September 1831), composed as 164 chapters with 8,727 verses in Gujarati.⁸² Like Nishkulanand, certain ascetics were dedicated to literary creation for much of their lives.

Finally, I turn to the often overlooked but historiographically rich records from the period: the personal observations of ascetics in the formative years. These were collected into an informal series that has become known as the *Svamini Vato* (Talks of Svami). While the history of this literary genre is fragmented and sparse, a general sketch can be pieced together. The *Vato* texts are each attributed to a different Svaminarayan *svami* (or *sadhu*). They are the contributions

⁷⁹ The matter of there being four or five ascetic editors remains a point of historical debate.

⁸⁰ The title, "*A Wishing Stone for Devotees*" refers to Sahajanand's life as a source of fulfillment for devotees.

⁸¹ The *Bhaktachintamani* was written to fulfill Sahajanand's wish for such a work. It was largely finished and approved before his death, Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 8.

⁸² Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 8–9.

of Sahajanand's contemporaries who chose to keep personal records of their experiences as ascetics. Generally written in Gujarati prose and simple in style, the works present the authors' perspectives through casual narrations. In some cases, the *Vato* narrations are striking in their use of rustic language, references, and forthrightness with reference to the *sadhu*'s contemporary circumstances. The matter often addresses the *sadhu*'s thoughts on community teachings and is referred to as *satsang updes*. With varying degrees of detail and in a different tone than the *updes*, the *sadhu* offers an account of his experiences with the founder and fellow adherents; this is sometimes known as *lila* in *Vato* materials.⁸³ The latter set of comments focus on Sahajanand Svami, adherents, major events, and frequently, on details of life in western India. Owing to their presentation and tone, and to the fact that *Vato* accounts were not originally intended for public consumption or even as literature, the materials can be reminiscent of a private journal or of personal notes. In this sense, *Vato* are unlike any literary genre produced in the community. The text's content is mainly derived from early nineteenth-century discussions with and lectures by an ascetic, the one to whom the composition is attributed. More junior ascetics and householders would attach themselves as disciples to these senior ascetics in their locality, and make note of the exchanges for their personal benefit. During the latter half of the century, such notes were compiled into compositions known as *Vato*, and their manuscripts were retained among small circles of devotees. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these materials became known among broader audiences. Finally, in the last few decades an increasing number of *Vato* manuscripts have been published.⁸⁴ *Vatos*, along with

⁸³ Thus, texts like *Shrisvaminarayan Vicharanlilamrt*, which reflects the composition's original manuscript title, has also been published as *Sadguru Prasadand Svamini Vato*, albeit with some difference.

⁸⁴ For example, the *Gunatitanand Svamini Vato* is an important work for the BAPS branch's theological orientation and core reading for its contemporary followers. The *Vato* of Gunatitanand Svami, who spent the peak of his life in the princely state of Junagadh (Kathiawar), are both viewed as historical reference material and sacred.

dedicated *lila charitra* compositions and other foundational sources, offer a spectrum of vantage points from which to evaluate the nineteenth-century project.

One of the most prominent ways that Sahajanand charted out a new institutional framework was by initiating an ascetic order. The order was vital for enacting Sahajanand's vision with unfettered dedication. In fact, the organized *sadhu* fold, a highly active aspect of the community, itself became an identifier of Svaminarayan presence in Gujarat. The formalization of an ascetic arrangement in this period should not be read as a nod to critique or simply Sanskritization, but as the reflection of a genuine priority for Sahajanand: institutional development, advancement, and a highly attuned approach to these goals.⁸⁵ Simultaneously, the figure of the *sadhu* yielded a different interpretation from external observers, serving as a symbol that could become altogether muddled in colonial discourse. In these terms, the chaste celibate male, the *brahmacharya*, could be read against the erotic—the latter characterizing the Pushtimarg and the former, a Svaminarayan feature.⁸⁶ But as the following survey shows, Sahajanand's embrace of asceticism did not stem from a desire to point out the inadequacy of other modes of life; rather, it was a sharp focus on what he perceived to be the latent capabilities of asceticism.

A wide set of skills were needed for community building, and for shoring up morale to funnel into the construction of temples. It is estimated that there were two thousand renunciants devoted to Sahajanand. Male devotees dedicated themselves to the community with a lifestyle

⁸⁵ The Pushtimarg rejected asceticism and focused on householders, according to Richard Barz, *The Bhakti Sect*, 35–6.

⁸⁶ Notably, in an effort to remain agreeable with the British after the *Svaminarayan* founder's death in 1830, the community's temple in Vadtal would receive colonial officials. Further, senior ascetics would visit their local administrative officials, informing them of the community's work and conveying assurance of compliance with the government, Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 266–68. In meetings officials and observers perceived the community to have 'austere' rules and tenets, *The Swami Narayan*, 62, 64.

reflecting social and material renunciation, simplicity, and self-sacrifice.⁸⁷ *Vairagya*, or detachment, from mundane worldly elements, negating one's nature and ego, was centrally emphasized for all adherents alike. Nevertheless, it was ascetics who were dedicated to refining this virtue through their lifestyle. They gave up property, wealth, and family, cultivating self-discipline to lessen sensitivity to the fluctuations of external dynamics.

While immunity to change was framed in theological terms, western India demanded nothing less than steadfastness. Famines were familiar to the landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During Sahajanand's career (1800-1830), there were a number of environmental factors, such as repeated droughts along with invasions of locusts and rats, which together with politically motivated factors, contributed to famines.⁸⁸ The production of 'scarcity' would result in cycles of migration, starvation, exploitation, poverty, disease, and death among the population.⁸⁹ People exhibited a corresponding intensity in behavior. At times, this meant abandoning and selling children, engaging in prostitution, plundering, and reportedly even acts of cannibalism.⁹⁰ But this was not entirely novel; scarcity further exacerbated what were already day-to-day struggles for vulnerable populations, like peasants burdened with oppressive debt

⁸⁷ Williams, *An Introduction*, 23–4.

⁸⁸ Variables from climate to social policies to economic ideology had different roles in famines, which manifested to different degrees of ferocity. Nevertheless, George Adamson has shown that the British administration's experimentation with Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* ideology exercised considerable influence in Gujarat in the early nineteenth century. The non-interventionist approach to grain trade caused much distress in the monsoon-deficient years 1812 and 1824, "The Most Horrible of Evils," 86–8. See also Campbell, "Scarcity-Relief Policies."

⁸⁹ Though the British and Indians divided political authority in western India, the effects of degradation were not bound to territorial administration. Hopeless populations often migrated from hinterlands to cities, connecting the social and economic worlds of Marwar, Kutch, Ahmedabad, Kathiawar, and Bombay, Adamson, "The Most Horrible of Evils." On the devastating effects of famine, see also: Frost, "Coping with scarcity" and Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 2001.

⁹⁰ *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 59–62, 77, 220–22, 260, 293, 338; *Cutch, Palanpur, and Mahi Kantha*, 40, 108, 165, 207, 295–96, 346, 350–51, 371; ; *Kathiawar*, 168, 193–94.

obligations.⁹¹ Emerging in a context regularly pervaded by hardship, Sahajanand's vision was shaped by negotiation with the conditions of western India. Even while not wholly centered on remedying these circumstances, the various mediums of his message, as well as his approach to the institution and the individual, necessarily emerged through such dynamics.

The concept of *vairagya* was a long established attitude in Indian life that manifested diversely among nineteenth-century ascetics. For example, William Pinch has traced the phenomenon of warrior ascetics to the pre-colonial era, found among men who were active in the military endeavors of Mughal and Company powers. An entrepreneurial existence, they represented a model of asceticism that embraced the accumulation of wealth and power through armed service.⁹² The Svaminarayan *sadhu* also represented detachment without the outward signs, though he was explicitly non-violent and without worldly aspirations. The Svaminarayan *sadhu* was not divorced from the world, not living as a recluse, wandering, or socially disengaged. Absolute freedom was not this ascetic's marker. Moreover, he did not solely represent a personal commitment to *vairagya*, free of external responsibilities and the worldly knowledge necessary to execute these duties. Rather, Sahajanand deemed Svaminarayan ascetics in the nineteenth century to be responsible for the workings of the organization. They were to be accountable for the maturing community's functional needs, along with fulfilling, sustaining, and overseeing its spiritual development. To conduct *pravrtti* (activity) knowledge of and engagement with the pragmatic affairs of the material world were necessary. Thus, the chief attitude was that being dedicated to the community's establishment and expansion was itself a commitment to *bhakti*, rather than a lack of asceticism or even a tension with it. Renunciants

⁹¹ While famines were not ordinary events, they did not represent a stark new reality for peasant, Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy, and the Colonial State*, 4.

⁹² See Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*.

were essential to building the collective's social, intellectual, and physical capabilities. Regularly traveling on preaching tours for months at a time, organizing festivals, generating literature, and constructing temples across the region, along with holding other responsibilities, the ascetics were incessantly active in the early years. Always building, organizing, managing—always doing, which was favored to *nivr̥tti*, or a lack of external engagement and activity.

Sahajanand Svami's teachings upheld this brand of asceticism. He elaborated on the importance of activity and larger public engagement, and the role of these endeavors in devotion. In the *Vachanamrt* compilation, Sahajanand describes how a *sadhu* who exclusively spends time in worship and meditation, one who is truly indifferent to the world and understands himself to only be the *atma*, pure soul, rather than his body, is not considered the ideal renunciate. Alternatively, another ascetic who follows the path of *prav̥rtti* and while remaining consumed in activity battles lust, anger, greed, arrogance, desire, and all the weaknesses of ego that can accompany an active engagement with the world, he is superior. How can this be? For Sahajanand, adopting the path of activity in order to serve God and his devotees *was* the definition of *bhakti*. He states that if the active *sadhu* possesses *nivr̥tti*, that is, if in his heart he essentially identifies himself with his soul while simultaneously engaged in organizational activities with the singular purpose of offering *seva*, service, then he is unmatched.^{93,94} On another occasion, the ascetic Yoganand Muni inquires which of the two behaviors are better: one who observes a state of passiveness and is never verbally offensive to others, or another who is occupied in the constant service of God and his *bhaktas*, devotees, but in the process of being

⁹³ *Vachanamrt*, Vadtal, 17. The *Vachanamrt*'s citations specify the village/town in Gujarat where Sahajanand held discussions. Sahajanand made these particular comments in Vadtal on February 6, 1826.

⁹⁴ Note the overlap of activity and service: if *prav̥rtti* was done with the right mindset, it actually became *seva*.

active he occasionally says something hurtful.⁹⁵ Sahajanand confirms the various replies offered by his senior ascetics, stating that the one who is in *seva* is superior to the one who remains in *nivrtti* without serving anyone. Sahajanand adds that the one who does not serve should be understood as feeble, while the one who serves is better because his actions deem him to be full of *bhakti*.⁹⁶ In other words, to channel real-world experiences and reconcile ascetic tendencies toward giving shape to the larger institution was to animate devotion. Adherents struggled with the teaching. Consequently, the contradictions of devotion, activity, and detachment remained an ongoing point of discussion in early years.

Evidently, to fulfill individual and organizational aspirations, moderation was required in *tyag*, the renunciation of the material world. Sahajanand reflects on this in the *Vachanamrt* when he claims that when there is too much renunciation or too much compassion, asceticism cannot be maintained. With a decline of devotion, the strength of one's *upasana*, the philosophical framework or core set of principles of a *sampraday*, is threatened. Sahajanand cautions this could result in a lineage of ignorant followers. In his view, being active by offering flowers and vegetables to God, cultivating gardens, and building temples are all purely acts of *bhakti*. Hence, such necessary actions justify a moderation of emphasis on renunciation and the idea of quiet retirement or inaction. It is for the sake of sustaining *upasana*, Sahajanand explains, that he has chosen to focus his energies on the endeavor of temple building.⁹⁷ Ultimately, this model of devotion required action, not absolute renunciation.

While recalibrating the concept of detachment away from its extremes, boundaries were

⁹⁵ The pliability of *seva* in the Svaminarayan context allowed for more than a relationship between the individual and divine, as was the case in the Pushtimarg. Svaminarayan *seva* also emphasized lateral awareness. It was a focus on one's externality and social relations, aspects that would need management in the process of institutionalization.

⁹⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada, I, 31. Sahajanand made these comments on January 2, 1820.

⁹⁷ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada, II, 27. Sahajanand made these comments on November 25, 1822.

necessary. Sahajanand outlined that an individual who was engaged in *pravrtti* as a form of *seva* should at the same time remain within his *niyams*, prescribed rules. These should be observed with an attitude neither overzealous nor lackadaisical. The founder firmly assured that if such alertness for self-maintenance remained, then one would never be at risk of forming attachment under any circumstances, even if occupied in worldly events.⁹⁸ Sahajanand supported ascetics by providing them signposts for spiritual progress. He also sought to shield them by securing their public standing despite their lifestyle of intense engagement. He promised that even though society would deem an involved ascetic a depraved person and a seemingly disconnected ascetic respectable, if the active ascetic's mind was pure in the midst of service work, then nothing detrimental would happen to him.⁹⁹ In other words, piety would not be threatened by associating with the world.

How *should* a *sadhu*, essentially a renunciate, behave while pursuing a lifestyle filled with worldly engagement? Sahajanand counsels that regardless of what activity one engages in, whether singing or playing an instrument, if they do not remember Bhagvan (God) while performing such work then they will not experience peace. Without mindfulness the performance of activity is merely routine, equivalent to any other common person who undertakes the same task elsewhere in society. He reminds followers that it is important for a person to constantly practice the habit of being engaged with the divine while performing any activity, from walking to working.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps to serve as an exemplar of how to behave or to unburden ascetics from fears of spiritual stagnation, Sahajanand stressed his life's active patterns, disclosing that it was filled with social immersion. He expresses that his inherent preference is to stay alone and retreat

⁹⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Vadtal, 17. Sahajanand made these comments on February 6, 1826.

⁹⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada, I, 38. Sahajanand made these comments on January 16, 1820.

¹⁰⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada, I, 23. Sahajanand made these comments on December 21, 1819.

to the forests or mountains, rather than live in large cities. But putting this aside he chooses to be in society amidst hundreds of thousands of people for the sake of serving Bhagvan and his devotees. And yet, the founder confirms for adherents that in spite of this life of *pravṛtti* in order to serve he remains unattached, thinking of his state as one of *nivṛtti*.¹⁰¹ Notably, Sahajanand's affinity for activity and public presence accommodated asceticism toward enhancing devotion, not challenging it. Here, a long-standing conception like asceticism was being put to work for various ends in the nineteenth century.

Sahajanand's attitude couched purposeful activity in a mindset of disengagement. The ideology correlated worldly envelopment to worldly renunciation—external participation to inner struggle—and provided a social position while giving exemption from public judgment. This was a tremendous mechanism. It managed forging a community by contouring together individual piety with organizational progress in Gujarat. Critically, *pravṛtti* was equated with devotion. In other words, the ascetic fold and householders embodied *nivṛtti* while being in *pravṛtti* and thus strengthened *ekantik bhakti*, the very conception that fundamentally underwrote detachment. In this model of devotion, known as *ekantik bhakti* or *ekantik dharma*, four components were necessary. In *ekantik bhakti* the elements *bhakti* proper (devotion), *jnan* (true knowledge of oneself), and *vairagya* (detachment) did not stand at odds with one another. Neither did these factors diminish real-world matters of the fourth element, *dharma*, or rules needed to govern mundane affairs of the world. Rather, Sahajanand advocated that all four characteristics were necessary and complementary to please Bhagvan. The achievement of each aspect guaranteed spiritual success.¹⁰² I suggest that this theorization of existence that Sahajanand advanced was a self-constrained formulation, one designed to function as something

¹⁰¹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 21. Sahajanand made these comments on August 31, 1827.

¹⁰² See *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 11; Gadhada I, 19; Gadhada I, 21 Gadhada I, 47.

of a system of checks and balances in devotion. The formula asked an ascetic, a woman, or a householder of modest means or of low caste, to temper their expectations with contentment. In an era of few guarantees, it was necessary to maintain a measured outlook.

From private to public settings, individual to collective action, the scope of *pravrtti* varied. Writings of ascetics discuss activities in the early years. In the *Bhaktachintamani* Nishkulanand Svami describes how *sadhus* would be organized into *mandals* (collectives) and told by Sahajanand to travel near and far.¹⁰³ They were to be occupied by activities such as singing *kirtan*, devotional songs, engaging people through *katha*, sermons, and *vato*, conversation. In this process, Sahajanand tried to condition ascetics' attention to remain on matters of emancipation. The *sadhus* were to aid those they encountered in becoming free from the cycles of birth and death, rather than worry about their own clothes and food as they traveled. He assured them that their physical needs would be met incidentally during the work.¹⁰⁴ *Vato* literature emphasizes that ongoing travel and preaching by both Sahajanand and his ascetics were common to the lifestyle, one might say foundational, in the initial years;¹⁰⁵ the occupations were viewed as necessary for redeeming the population.¹⁰⁶

Sahajanand designed mechanisms to maximize energy in uncertainty. Maintaining long-term stamina and focus required agility, and steering best accomplished by the founder himself. For this, the institution's direction was ensured through affective ties between Sahajanand and

¹⁰³ *Sadhus* travelled widely, including to present-day Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

¹⁰⁴ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 50.18–19, 50.22–24.

¹⁰⁵ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 137. This source of Adbhutanand Svami's talks is based on the entire original composition. It was printed even though the composition had been already published several times earlier from Vadtal Desh, because the latter set of editions were reportedly selective in printing the manuscript, Kundaldham representatives, email message to author, December 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani* 50.52, 54.7.

his ascetics. *Ajna*, command, given by Sahajanand was accorded the utmost importance by his adherents and set the pace and tone of activity. Attempting to fulfill his wishes, in spite of hardship, was an important achievement for *sadhus*,¹⁰⁷ as Sahajanand emphasized that fulfilling command was *pritinu lakshan*, a characteristic of love.¹⁰⁸ Very often, hardships included diminished food supplies. *Sadhus* were counseled to do their best with the little food they received.¹⁰⁹ This difficulty corresponded to *sadhus*' dependency on the public's charity at a time when issues of limited food resources were common and ongoing scarcity could take a turn toward famine. Since the late eighteenth century, areas like Kaira experienced such conditions nearly every decade, according to Marcia Frost's study of the peasant economy in western India.¹¹⁰ Turning to wild food sources that could be collected from common property lands, like non-cultivated plants and non-domesticated animals, was part of the ongoing coping strategy.¹¹¹ However, in order to sustain themselves in dire times, agriculturalists, pastoralists, and artisans had to dramatically alter their lifestyles, adopting measures such as reducing caloric consumption and even withholding food from less productive family members.¹¹² It was precarious for ascetics to rely on others in this context, and moreover, their opportunities were ruthlessly limited under Sahajanand's guidelines, which forbade entry or occupation of private property

¹⁰⁷ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 71.31–71.34.

¹⁰⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Kariyani, 11. Sahajanand made these comments on November 16, 1820.

¹⁰⁹ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 65–6.

¹¹⁰ Frost, "Coping with Scarcity," 302.

¹¹¹ Frost, "Coping with Scarcity," 316.

¹¹² Frost, "Coping with Scarcity," 297.

along with taking flower, wood, and the like without permission from property owners.¹¹³

Emotional sustenance was crucial in such times.

Another hardship the ascetics faced was the scarcity of safe places that were free of violence and harassment. This concern arose not only because of the new culture that Svaminarayan represented, but also due to the ongoing political conditions. Besides the occurrence of violence, poor roads and gangs of thieves that targeted travelers made the landscape of Gujarat generally insecure, according to Kate Boehme.¹¹⁴ Adbhutanand Svami writes of ongoing troubles during travels in Kathiawar, recalling how they were beaten and robbed in Dhrangadhra (Surendranagar area).¹¹⁵ But ongoing intense activity and dissemination of teachings was essential to establish the formation in western India. Thus, the founder had to provide constant assurances and encouragement in order to invigorate ascetics to continue forward, as well as develop resources to adapt to volatility. For example, *sadhus* were told to live incognito for some period to avoid harassment on their travels. They were to discard specific physical signs of their identity, like the *tilak chandlo*, an auspicious mark on their forehead, their *mala*, or rosary, and change other aspects of public presence and behavior.¹¹⁶ Facing violence in the broader form of banditry in Kathiawar, or targeted attacks from other non-Svaminarayan ascetics or members of the public who opposed the community, would have been enormously difficult for Sahajanand's willfully unarmed forces.

Violence by ascetics and followers was to be avoided in all forms, from the ritual sacrifice of animals to human mutilation, and of course, homicide. Without any ambiguity, the

¹¹³ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri* 17, 33.

¹¹⁴ Boehme, "Smuggling India," 692.

¹¹⁵ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 235.

¹¹⁶ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 49.9–49.17, 50.50.

founder underscored a key principle: *ahimsa*, non-violence, was the highest *dharma*.¹¹⁷ This feature proliferated in the culture of Gujarat and, along with a series of other community factors in later decades, provoked intense interest among Indian nationalist thinkers—most notably Gandhi. For instance, in the twentieth century as Gandhi theorized that non-violence could exist in violence, he came to feel that Svaminarayan and Vallabhacharya had created a disempowered society toward this goal. They had not discussed the true character of non-violence, which according to Gandhi was about keeping the mind’s compulsions in check, especially in relation to one’s fellow man. Instead, the idea of love the two teachers promoted was “all sentimentalism,” and was therefore unable to “make one a man of true love”; these teachings were not to be confused with the “age-old truth” of Vaishnavism. Gandhi’s concerns arose from the perspective that, though the teachings of Svaminarayan and Vallabhacharya had been valuable, they had “robbed us of manliness” and made the people of Gujarat “incapable of self-defense.”¹¹⁸ However, his views varied considerably on Svaminarayan ideology as he continued to seriously engage with it while developing his own ideas about *satyagraha*, non-cooperation, and reform.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri* 12, 13, 16.

¹¹⁸ Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol.14, 504–5. (Non-)violence was a corporeal feature, not only a function external to oneself, as Gandhi conveyed to his follower Maganlal Gandhi on July 25, 1918. For instance, non-violence was the observation of true *brahmacharya*, refraining from sexual indulgence despite a physical urge. It was a strengthened resolve to not commit a violent bodily function.

¹¹⁹ According to N. A. Thoothi’s 1935 study, Gandhi was “perhaps most influenced in his inmost being by the teachings of orthodox Hinduism in general, and by the teachings and activities of the Svaminarayan Sampraday above all.” Despite Gandhi’s exposure to the ideas of Vallabha and Christianity, “most of his thought, activities and even methods, most of the institutions which he has been building up and serving, have the flavour of Svaminarayanism, more than that of any other sect of Hinduism,” Thoothi, *The Vaishnavas of Gujarat*, 279. In fact, Gandhi does appear to have been emboldened by Sahajanand while reflecting on the “perfection of satyagraha” and on how to bring about change without using force. In reaction to ongoing reports in Gujarat of “Kabulis terrorizing people” in April of 1924, Gandhi considered what might be the best form of protection for people, whether they were participating in non-cooperation or not, that was not reliant on Government aid. Gandhi noted that the Government’s chief intent was not to protect people but rather to secure British commercial interests. Thus, it was justified, manly and even dutiful for one to take up arms in self-defense, despite one’s commitment to non-cooperation and non-violence; even if under the conditions of *svaraj* people should not heavily rely on the

To be able to take hold effectively, Sahajanand's vision for the individual and society was bound into certain forms. He appears to have wanted to offer public stability and to do so rapidly. In a desire to provide more wide reaching hope, *pravrtti* required broader orientation.¹²⁰ The *Purushottam Prakash* in *Nishkulanand Kavya* details how *sadavrats* (*annakshetra*), public kitchens or alm-houses, were enthusiastically set up in many areas across Gujarat for distributing pure food widely, including to *brahmans* and *sadhus* (non-Svaminarayan), alongside

Government, according to Gandhi. For Gandhi, as a person who “wish[ed] to become an image of Truth” on the path of *satyagraha*, he would not be able to adopt armed force. The nature of *satyagraha* was beyond differences of community and creed. At its perfected state, *satyagraha* was also beyond speech and simply mobilized by the heart. Sahajanand animated this principle. “What was accomplished in Gujarat by one person, Sahajanand, could not be accomplished by the power of the State.” It was the power of Hindu *sanyasins* and Muslim *fakirs* that had quelled troubles in the country's past, like Chaitanya in Bengal. Among mendicants and ascetics in Gujarat, he advocated, “The Age of Sahajananda has not come to an end. It is only devotion and self-control like his that are wanted” to protect people from the trouble of the Kabulis, the petty traders and usurers from the region between India and Afghanistan, Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 23, 467–9. A few months later in 1924, Gandhi invoked Sahajanand during his discussion of dacoity. One solution for deterring the act was counseling dacoits against the immorality of what they were doing. This, Gandhi said, was the work of “reform” and it was best undertaken by *sadhus*. “I do not mean *sadhus* who wear ochre robes and go about begging, but those whose hearts are dyed in ochre and who have dedicated themselves to service of others.” In this capacity, “reformers in the modern times” who had been effective on a “big scale” were Sahajanand, Chaitanya, and Ramakrishna, among others, Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 316–7.

In addition to being influenced by Sahajanand, the culture of Kathiawar that had shaped Sahajanand's nineteenth-century project also deeply transformed Gandhi's imagination, positioning him somewhat antithetically to Bengali nationalists. Specifically, historian Howard Spodek and some Kathiawari scholars have observed that Gandhi's approach to resistance was developed from statecraft practices of the peninsula's princely states during the twentieth century. The political strategies that had been in use since before the onset of indirect rule in the early nineteenth century worked by putting pressure on personal relations which generally undergird princely politics in Kathiawar. Fasting, self-inflicted punishment (Bhats performing *traga* or sitting *dharna*) and passive resistance (*risaamanu*) were methods of political leverage between parties. Gandhi adapted these acts toward *satyagraha*, Spodek, “Gandhi's Political Methodology,” 361–64. Inspiration from Kathiawar and more broadly Gujarat, as well as his own *baniyaa* heritage gained Gandhi irritation from another stronghold of anti-colonial nationalist leadership: Bengal. In rejecting the West, to upper class *bhadralok* Bengali leaders, Gandhi represented the position of an uncultivated anti-intellectual. He was an ascetic, an energetic organizer, and one, to their worry, who brought the mass public to politics. Bengalis derided Gandhi as being weak after he decided to end national efforts of non-cooperation in reaction to violence at Chauri Chaura. To their dismay and in their view, Gandhi's ideas of non-violence were rooted in religious thought. For instance, the Vaishnava teachings of Chaitanya Dev that the Bengalis associated with Gandhi, were not considered the real or complete Vaishnava religion for Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The notable Bengali writer declared that God was not simply love, but he was also power. Overall, unlike Gandhi the *bhadralok* were generally well-heeled, landholding, philosophically-oriented, and focused on channeling their energy verbally. Differences more fundamentally hinged on region. Unequivocally, they were Bengali and Gandhi was Gujarati, Spodek, “Gandhi's Political Methodology,” 371.

¹²⁰ Notably, this public activity was categorically distinct from internal activity done for the organization's functional needs. The latter, acts oriented to Parmeshvar and his *bhaktas*, God and his devotees, appears to be categorized as ‘*seva*’ in the record dated January 2, 1820, *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada, I 31. Thus, *sampraday* activity in the public and private domains was qualified to maintain distinction along the spectrum of devotion.

promulgating devotion.¹²¹ The literature makes clear that Sahajanand was impatient for reaching as many people as possible for *uddhar*, uplift, his driving desire. People would be pleased after eating at the *sadavrats*, according to the author, and subsequently, upon understanding the Svaminarayan *satsang*, or the teachings of the community, they would reportedly choose to give up other matters for devotion to ‘Shyam.’ The focus, in these accounts, was on consumption in the public kitchen so that partakers could obtain Paramdham, the ultimate state of bliss and celestial abode.¹²² While guided by theological motives, discussions show that such efforts were not devoid of humanitarian motives; Sahajanand is described as very affectionately distributing food without any discrimination. In the context of early nineteenth-century Gujarat, electing to provide food would have been a highly relevant, if not necessary, form of comfort to offer in peasant society. However, records show that this activity was stressed in a resolve to spread Svaminarayan thought. I argue that Sahajanand had recognized that more so than bodies, minds and spirits needed feeding, given the dispiriting circumstances of the transition from Maratha to Company rule.

Drawing as many people as possible to his devotional message, from across socio-economic borders, was Sahajanand’s prime interest. It shaped heavily the nature of early activities.¹²³ To remain effective in western India mandated adjusting initiatives. Sahajanand was attuned to fluctuations and would account for this with flexible programming. For instance, while he had previously told ascetics to run the many public kitchens that were organized across

¹²¹ Public kitchens included locations spread across areas of Kathiawar such as Jamnagar (Navanagar), Junagadh, Bhavnagar, and Amreli, as well in the vicinity of Ahmedabad, Nishkulanand Svami, “Purushottam Prakash,” 9.7–9.9. This practice may have likely been adopted from Kathiawar’s eighteenth-century important Sant-vani culture. According to Mallison, Sant-vani groups observed *sdavrats*, a vow to daily feed poor visitors, Mallison, “Guajrati Socio-Religious Contxt,” 52.

¹²² Nishkulanand Svami, “Purushottam Prakash,” 9.3–9.10.

¹²³ Sources do not indicate an overt interest in attracting devotees from other communities, closely aligned or otherwise. Rather, the main intent expressed was to broadcast Sahajanand’s message as widely as possible.

the region, he later canceled this work due to trouble from other (unspecified) ascetics who felt that Sahajanand was stealing their followers into the Svaminarayan fold. Instead of public kitchens, then, Sahajanand re-directed the energies of his ascetics to traveling.¹²⁴ Moreover, Nishkulanand describes that while Sahajanand's food distribution efforts had been a means to abate people's fear of death and save them from the miseries of life, he was not satisfied by what they could achieve and decided to begin conducting public *yajnas*, or ritual sacrifices (without animals).¹²⁵ Through *yajnas*, Sahajanand thought to have found an opportunity to engage people on a larger scale in the region. The provision of food became key because he believed purity would be achieved for those partaking in such meals.¹²⁶ He proceeded to often hold *yajnas* and reportedly feed hundreds and thousands of people, cutting across caste lines of *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, and *shudra*. It was the potential for vast portions of the population to achieve redemption—in some sense the ultimate consolation—that appears to have strengthened Sahajanand's campaign through far reaching public activities in the region.¹²⁷

What is most striking in these accounts is a passionate drive for spreading ideology. An important clarification is that the word used throughout sources, *uddhar*, uplift, does not indicate an improvement in one's physical or social circumstances. Rather, upon closer examination we find that the term referenced the idea of redemption: that is, benefits in the *spiritual* realm, which in this instance were gained through the medium of material aid.¹²⁸ Ascetic authors stressed the

¹²⁴ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 50.11–50.19.

¹²⁵ There is no specification about what Sahajanand hoped to achieve with the *sadavrats*, but one can infer from contextual verses that his deep discontent was with the number of people engaged and at the pace of outreach for spreading the redemptive message of devotion.

¹²⁶ Note, it was not participation in ritual activity that was important for gaining purity, but in food consumption.

¹²⁷ Nishkulanand Svami, "Purushottam Prakash," 9.11–9.19.

promise of salvation as a golden opportunity. It was one that was generously, compassionately, and easily being made available by Sahajanand to all of humanity through initiatives like *sadavrats* and *yajnas*. Clearly signaled in the records, Sahajanand's vision provided the public assurance through a *soteriological* promise, while at the same time offering some degree of tangible ease. Acts of freely giving food were certainly helpful and empathetic, but what is apparent from a survey of Sahajanand's career in the records is that social welfare had not been the key motive. Aid, like food distribution, was one means by which to develop the larger vision of a community in western India. On the other hand, social reform had been an ongoing preoccupation of the East India Company in this area, as it sought to increase its presence.

Before we continue to understand Sahajanand's parallel project, the Company's epistemology and motives behind the subject of reform, especially in light of indirect rule, require closer attention. In terms of understanding certain social issues, British views were partly based on Orientalist constructions of Rajputs, participants in these practices. Rajputs were demographically a major presence in western India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spread well outside Rajasthan to regions including Gujarat.¹²⁹ Rulers of many of the largest princely states came from the Rajput community, making them the predominant power in Kathiawar and Kutch. The Jadeja (sometimes spelled as Jhareja) was one such Rajput clan. They had first entered and settled in western India about 1250, becoming rulers of modern Kathiawari states of Navanagar and Dhrol (both states were anchored to the area of Halar), Rajkot, Gondal,

¹²⁸ Clearly, the term did not represent the conflation of social reform and spiritual emancipation at this time. But in the mid-nineteenth century it did gain this mix of resonances in another Vaishnava context. Scott has demonstrated that *uddhar* was a critical concept for the Pushtimarg reformer, Karsandas Mulji, as an ideological convergence of the Enlightenment, *bhakti*, and neo-Vedic orthodoxy, Scott, "Divine Exposures," 129–30. The term had not changed in the theology of the communities itself, but in the discourses that depicted them.

¹²⁹ Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 27.

and Morvi, and making Bhuj their capital in Kutch.¹³⁰ The Jadejas were at the very top of Gujarat's Rajput hierarchy by virtue of their prestige and extensive territorial prowess over Kathiawar and Kutch.¹³¹ Indian bardic accounts indicate that as migrants to the area, Rajputs had a long history of intermarriage with local Muslim rulers in Kutch. Similarly, in Kathiawad they married their illegitimate daughters to Muslims who were eager to expand political power by aligning themselves with more established Rajputs. There was a history of vibrant interaction in the medieval era, even before the Mughal reign.¹³² But British understandings of Rajput history and their rites ignored local accounts and formulated narratives severely lacking in accuracy, according to Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Renu Dube, and Reena Dube in their penetrating co-study of female infanticide. The British relied on racial theory to form their knowledge of Rajputs and infanticide. Colonel Tod's 1829 work on Rajput history and heritage, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* ([1829] 1920), advanced the idea that prideful Rajput men were concerned about the contamination and degradation of their racial heritage. Harboring a noble desire to preserve their own purity, they practiced infanticide, Tod explained.¹³³ As the initial British Political Agent in Mewar and western Rajputana from 1818 to 1822,¹³⁴ Tod's perspective, albeit contrasting to local history, would have carried much weight among fellow administrators and observers. The scholarly trio argues that Tod's narrative about Rajputs crafted a justifying motive for the crime of infanticide.

¹³⁰ Copland, *British Raj*, 4–7.

¹³¹ Vishwanatha, "Colonial State," 1104–105.

¹³² Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, *Female Infanticide*, 67, 91, 94.

¹³³ Tod, *Annals and Antiquities*, 57–99.

¹³⁴ Ramusack, *Indian Princes*, 13.

The reality was that infanticide in the nineteenth century was one practice of social violence, among others, practiced on Rajput women by ambitious families and clans. That is, productive interests motivated instances of infanticide. Rajput violence on women facilitated social climbing, or Rajputization, a process similar to but distinct from the process of social ascent in Sanskritization. Rajputization was linked to an ability to increase prosperity—not integrity of caste or race. Thus, in this framework, practices like infanticide would have helped consolidate power for Rajputs. It was an especially effective mobilizing tool for accumulating military–political dominance, economic rights to cultivatable land, and entitlement to govern.¹³⁵ Similar to infanticide, the social issue of *sati*, the rite of widow immolation, suffered from skewed colonial interpretations. The occurrence of *sati* in Rajput and Maratha princely states significantly affected perceptions of the practice in non-British India after 1829, Major has argued. Here again, Tod played an influential role in disseminating peculiar views on the Rajputs, which were cited often and thus perpetuated by later colonial writers. Rajputs were understood as a “martial” race and correspondingly, *sati* was an inherent practice of the warrior race. It is worth noting that while *sati* was understood in the first two decades of the century in British India on the basis of close, nuanced study on the ground in areas like Bengal, Company officials tried to identify the practice in princely states, like western India’s Rajputana, by simply privileging their romantic notions of the Rajputs and assumptions about what the "pre-colonial entailed.¹³⁶

Overall, the objective of British involvement with social issues in princely states was shaped by not only a ‘civilizing mission’ but was very much driven by their desire to secure

¹³⁵ Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, *Female Infanticide*, 57–99.

¹³⁶ Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 32–40.

imperial power. Beginning in the late 1820's, the British placed more pressure on princes to obliterate 'social evils' such as slavery and infanticide, while *sati* remained somewhat tolerated for a time.¹³⁷ The British authorities' decision about whether to act on *sati* was not solely harnessed to moral compulsions, notes Major; rather, it was dictated by their worries about local sensitivity and by practical estimations of reactions that might occur.¹³⁸ Similar to the Company's conflicting goals in addressing *sati* in princely states, the objective of empire remained a pressure point in discussions of infanticide. For instance, British writers and administrators strived to discursively associate female infanticide with poorer and landless Rajputs. Guiding crime towards the lives of more vulnerable populations, those possessing less political and economic clout, was far less uncomfortable for the British than confronting the upper-class practitioners of the crime: landed Rajput elites. Ultimately, social reforms propagated by the Company were "designed not to question class domination or patriarchal domination, but to reconfigure class and gender domination in the interests of empire."¹³⁹

Reform facilitated the Company's position as the supreme moral and civilizing force of Kathiawar and in turn, justified the forging of empire. Colonial historiography had attributed the reported success of the humanitarian imperative of infanticide reform in Kathiawar to a prerequisite step: the Company's conquest of the region. In the early nineteenth century, British presence in Kathiawar was initiated under the Resident at Baroda, Alexander Walker, to extract

¹³⁷ In 1835 the Political Agent of Kathiawar James Erksine constructed *sati*, which had been outlawed by the East India Company in 1829, as a practice easier to deter than infanticide because of its public nature. Contrastingly, his writings depicted infanticide as a secret occurrence, in the realm of the private and beyond detection. Bhatnagar et al. suggest that Erksine's framing of the issues may have been a strategy to deflect the question of why no law against infanticide had yet been created. Employing a filter of public/private helped distinguish the two issues and provided a rationale for why one had received administrative attention and the other had not. Using the same rationale in the 1850's, colonial documents cited cases among Rajputs in Oudh and Jats in Punjab, Bhatnagar, Dube and Dube, *Female Infanticide*, 50–3.

¹³⁸ Bhatnagar, Dube and Dube, *Female Infanticide*, 43.

¹³⁹ Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, *Female Infanticide*, 64.

tribute on behalf of the Gaekwar government from resistant Jadeja chiefs.¹⁴⁰ Under a fixed revenue settlement agreement, the chiefs only paid a steady tribute despite increasing revenues in the region. To help the Company benefit more generously from this increased revenue flow, Walker devised an agreement in 1808 with the addition of an arrangement known as “infanticide engagements” that forged terms between the chiefs and the Company and bypassed Gaekwar involvement. Propagating the reform of infanticide through the use of punitive fines against its practitioners allowed the Company to extract revenue where it was simply out of legal bounds to do so. In decades thereafter, the writings of Company officials showed that the cause of infanticide suppression served as the key to allowing the Company to position itself as a legitimate authority in Kathiawar—a place where it did not have the legal authority to rule. In reality, the initiative was a major failure and the practice prevailed despite the imposition of fines, though the British continued to write about their successes.¹⁴¹

While they were concerning matters to Sahajanand and he was profoundly empathetic, social reform was not critical to community formation. For instance, wholly dismantling caste was negotiable. Sahajanand personally expressed great disinterest in caste and strongly encouraged others to do the same, but he also sensed its importance to others and formally elected a moderate stance; caste distinctions were preserved with prescriptions for householders as well as in the ascetic fold.¹⁴² Additionally, narratives have stressed that Sahajanand fought against female infanticide, or *dudh piti* as it was termed in western India. While this was certainly the case, I have not found evidence of it as a driving motive. Only few and peripheral

¹⁴⁰ For an analysis of the role of the resident and its importance to the notion of the Indian ruler as sovereign of indirectly ruled states, see Fischer, *Indirect Rule in India*.

¹⁴¹ Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, *Female Infanticide*, 101–15.

¹⁴² See Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*.

mentions of the subject exist in the primary sources. One observation is found in the writing of Madhavdasji Svami, an ascetic that was in Sahajanand's presence for sixteen years and had reportedly maintained a diary recording events he witnessed. In a composition based on the diary, likely to have been compiled in the year S. 1930 (c. 1874), he reveals one instance when Sahajanand tried to reason with some *girasiya* (petty chiefs, local landholders) about their practice of infanticide. Sahajanand offered them financial aid in exchange for cessation, but he was unable to convince them, and was somewhat resigned upon hearing their defense of the practice as a means of elevating their social status.¹⁴³ On this subject, he had also appealed to the Jadeja Rajputs, but to no avail.

In parallel, as noted earlier, infanticide was of interest to British administrators from the late eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries in Kutch, Kathiawar, and central Gujarat. They had attempted a method of citing sacred texts to deter it, but remained unsuccessful. In 1830 they ended their appeal to religion, having recognized as early as 1808 that infanticide in Gujarat was not related to Hindu norms, but to specific caste customs.¹⁴⁴ Similar to infanticide, banning *sati*, widow immolation, has been noted as a popular initiative of Sahajanand, but I have not been able to locate early references indicating this, though he did welcome widows and outlined a lifestyle for them.¹⁴⁵ Further, over the course of my research, the BAPS branch representatives also stated that they were unaware of references to social matters in early sources. On the other hand, both social issues were concerns of John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay from November 1827 through December 1830, which were also the last three years of Sahajanand's life.

¹⁴³ Madhavdasji Svami, *Shri Harikrishna*, 89.14–31.

¹⁴⁴ Vishwanatha, "Colonial State."

¹⁴⁵ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 163–172. He elaborated on general guidelines for women in Shatanand's *Satsangijivan*, and had those adapted into a distinct composition *Sati Gita* by Muktanand Svami, Williams, *Introduction*, 188. See also Mallison, "La Secte Krichnaïte."

Company officials did not adopt a blanket approach to social issues across regions under their indirect rule. For example, debate about reforming *sati* in the princely states of Bengal and Bombay presidencies developed into diverse approaches, as the British were cognizant of the specific relationships they had to maintain in these states with Rajput, Maratha, Sikh, and Muslim rulers.¹⁴⁶ It follows that, alert to political sensitivities, British authorities would consider approaching non-statist leaders like Sahajanand, in their attempts to manage princely states. I suggest that such alliances offered Company administrators a further avenue of local influence in administering indirectly ruled areas. Historian Anand Yang has shown the vital role of the Indian intermediary in sustaining the British Empire in his case study of agrarian relations in Bihar. Even in directly ruled areas like the provinces of Bengal, British governance was limited in its capacity to execute policies and hence, reliant on collaborative relationships with local elites.¹⁴⁷ The same can be said in the case of colonial intelligence gathering. As Bayly has shown, it was an enterprise that depended on local informants to aid the British rule.¹⁴⁸ It should also be kept in mind that tensions had long existed between the Bombay government and the central Government of India concerning how to approach the princely states, among other matters; it was not unusual for leaders like Malcolm to manage the region of Bombay according to localized policies. Governor Malcolm had actually refrained for six months from applying the 1829 Bengali Sati Regulation law, which made the practice of *sati* illegal in British India, to the Bombay Presidency. Instead, he opted for collaborating with Indian elites on the issue. Malcolm justified this approach by claiming that it was a more apt course of action for the particularities

¹⁴⁶ Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 41–78.

¹⁴⁷ Yang, *The Limited Raj*.

¹⁴⁸ Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

of Bombay, even if such an approach might be inappropriate for Bengal.¹⁴⁹ In other words, customizing solutions to local patterns must have been necessary because little was known about the nature and context of *sati* in the princely states up to that point.¹⁵⁰

It was for help addressing issues on the ground that Malcolm was eager to meet Sahajanand on February 26, 1830 in Rajkot (Kathiawar).¹⁵¹ This was after having completed his own tour of Kutch 1829–1830 to evaluate if British presence should continue or not in these challenging areas.¹⁵² However, British views about social reform were not entirely confined to their own conceptions, but were given form by Indian outlooks on the matters in princely states.¹⁵³ In Madhavdasji's account, Malcolm reportedly asked Sahajanand's thoughts on why *sati* occurred and whether Sahajanand would make efforts to stop it; the founder thereafter agreed to counsel people against the practice. Sahajanand, however, also expressed doubt. He noted that if *sati* were stopped, then a widow might simply end her own life by some other means because she would be in a determined state. Sahajanand then raised his own discontent with Malcolm, over the recent killing of cows and *brahmans*.¹⁵⁴ Overall, Madhvdasji's account indicates that Sahajanand saw limits on being able to influence *sati*—similar to his experience with infanticide—and that his own concerns at this stage did not revolve around issues of social reform. It is also worth remembering that the meeting, initiated by Malcolm, was intended to

¹⁴⁹ Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 52–3.

¹⁵⁰ Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 18.

¹⁵¹ Williams, *Introduction*, 5–12.

¹⁵² *Gazetteer: Cutch, Palanpur, and Mahi Kantha*, 265–77.

¹⁵³ Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform*, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Madhavdasji Svami, *Shri Harikrishna*, 116.45–49.

catalyze change at a *future* point. But such efforts went unrealized because Sahajanand passed away on June 1 of 1830.

In sum, the occurrence of such a meeting between Sahajanand and Malcolm, coupled with the latter's concerns about liberal reform in Gujarat,¹⁵⁵ should not retroactively characterize Sahajanand's three-decade career as that of a social reformer. Further, this should also give some pause to the prevalent assumption that Sahajanand was an intimate and effective partner of the British. In sum, while mention of social issues in community sources does imply that Sahajanand was opposed to and did try to weaken certain practices, it also clarified that they were not the top priority of his work, a position that would have emerged unequivocally in records if it were the case. It bears mentioning that community accounts were produced actively not to simply document, but also to advocate ideas. It is unlikely that these materials would have detailed principles, norms, activities, and injunctions to live by, while neglecting to note a key agenda (social reform, in this case). One final point on this subject: Williams has interpreted Sahajanand's activities, such as building temples and digging wells in temple towns, as "reforming work" benefitting "social welfare." Undistinguished in his view are acts that strengthened institutional capabilities, like the construction of a temple and surrounding infrastructure, from public efforts to spread ideology while providing relevant aid, such as the activities of the alm-houses. For many communities in South Asia, however, running free kitchens and providing water through tanks, irrigation ditches, as part of building temples, Sufi Khanaqahs, or gurdwaras was not particularly new. These practices had a long established history in South Asia.

¹⁵⁵ Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 95–8. Among Malcom's motivations for reform was his prominent interest in retaining economic and political strength.

Other activities for members of the formation were grounded in physical creation. The earliest Svaminarayan *mandirs*, temples, were built under the responsibility of *sadhus*. These marked the *sampraday*'s permanent presence in Gujarat and have collectively gone on to become its trademark, serving as places of worship but also as anchors for community building, public gatherings, and productivity. From negotiating for political and social support, locating land, designing building plans, organizing and managing labor, gathering materials, and financially sustaining the projects, ascetics were wholly immersed in the physical undertakings of the 1820s. Just in the last decade of Sahajanand's life, six large temples were constructed in areas across Gujarat, Ahmedabad, Bhuj, Vadtal, Junagadh, Dholera, and Gadhada, and work on two more temples was initiated in Dholka and Muli.¹⁵⁶ Temples large and small continued to proliferate over the decades in settings from villages to towns and major cities. *Sadhus* functioned within the purview of Sahajanand and communicated with him through messengers and letters about ongoing work, but sources indicate that they were responsible for day-to-day operations. Construction of large temples was often undertaken simultaneously, like the Kathiawar temples of Junagadh and Gadhada. Accordingly, ascetics had to be appointed across projects for efficient work.¹⁵⁷

Severe financial and logistical challenges often characterized construction undertakings. Accordingly, the ambitious temple plans for Muli (Jhalawar area of Kathiawar) and Vadtal brought about resourcefulness in their making. The works required solutions in the context of restricted infrastructure, time, and money. Bhramanand Svami, the architect of both temples,¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ The status of Dholka and Muli as early temples is debated since they were completed after Sahajanand's death.

¹⁵⁷ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 325–26.

¹⁵⁸ Williams, *Introduction*, 189.

was also the ascetic responsible for managing the projects. He configured work around limitations by joining ascetics and householders together. They focused on building roads, transporting materials, laying bricks, in addition to householders providing financial support.¹⁵⁹ Building endeavors were accomplished with extreme industry, relying on the cooperation of adherents across rank and association. For example, the property of Dada Khachar, the chief patron who had provided his estate in the area of Bhavnagar in Kathiawar to Sahajanand as a base for many years, was the site of one such initiative. Here, Gadhada temple was constructed with the participation of the founder, ascetics of varying status, and lay men and women; *sadhus* broke down the existing property and cleared the land, *parshads* (ascetics also known as *pala* or *bhagat*) quarried rocks from the Ghela (a river close to the site), *sadhus* and men carried the rocks from one side of the river to the other, and thereafter women moved these materials from the Ghela bank to the construction site. Finally, *sadhus* proceeded to build the temple.¹⁶⁰ After the project of building temples during the 1820s, ascetics did not rest, as the temples required oversight. In this phase, they proceeded to have major capacities, like *pujari* and *mahant*. In addition to spiritual affairs and caring for deities, they managed human resources, property, and event planning. In authorized roles, *sadhus* could powerfully shape affairs with ritualistic, social, and material means.¹⁶¹ Upon becoming an ascetic, one was delegated considerable authority in the *sampraday*.

Men from castes and status that included high, mid- and low-level status groups, such as *brahman*, *girasiya*, *kanbi*, *charan-barot*, *kshatriya*, *baniya*, *lohana* as well as several artisan communities, joined the rank of ascetics. Some of these men were already ascetics but then

¹⁵⁹ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 299–303.

¹⁶⁰ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 327.

¹⁶¹ Williams, *Introduction*, 33, 38.

decided to commit to Sahajanand's *sampraday*. They came from various areas of present-day Gujarat, as well as from Marwar, Lucknow, Oudh, Ujjain, Calcutta, and South India. Unlike the lay devotee population, one does not generally find Koli or Bhil representation, or Dalit, recorded amongst early ascetics.¹⁶² Notably, while social background was taken into account when one was initiated into one of the several ascetic groups in the community, the overall result of taking on this new lifestyle was erasure of past social identities. It must have been particularly meaningful for these men that their respective birth affiliations were replaced in one instance by the *sampraday*.

As the early formation extended its reach it required projection of an identity shared internally and externally. Sahajanand allotted an extraordinary amount of energy to creative production and scholarship for identity construction. The early nineteenth century was a truly prolific phase.¹⁶³ Literary output of the early decades included philosophical, hagiographical, and poetic works ranging in several languages, including Gujarati, Braj Bhasha, Rajasthani, Marathi, and Sanskrit. *Sadhus* were especially attributed roles, such as composers and scribes. For example, an order was given to the senior ascetic Muktanand Svami to dedicate himself to crafting literature until his death.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, groups of *sadhus* were regularly sent to parts of the region such as Ahmedabad for education and to study *shastras* (scriptures) under various

¹⁶² See series from 2002 to 2006 by Haripriyadas Svami, "Paramhans Nandsanto."

¹⁶³ From my survey since 2008, it remains difficult to account for the range of this production. Countless works remain uninvestigated and unpublished, in the form of manuscripts distributed between different branches of the larger community across western India, and therein, dispersed across official temple archives, unofficial holdings, with ascetic 'clans' of various lineages, as well as in private libraries. The cumulative implication of these conditions is that ease of access is uneven, precarious, and dependent on a variety of circumstances, of which one factor is the interest of administrative authorities. It is fair to say that knowledge of the existence of the vast majority of the materials is limited, as they are unused and out of public view. In recent years, however, significant efforts for preservation have taken hold, specifically in the Shree Swaminarayan Museum and Kundalidham.

¹⁶⁴ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 58. Sahajanand made these comments on July 29, 1824.

teachers.¹⁶⁵

Sources provide some insight into the efforts required to define the institution through creative production. Prasadnanand Svami, a very skilled scribe who remained with the founder to compose literature and copy manuscripts, describes the facilities organized on Dada Khachar's estate in Gadhada. The retreat included writers such as Nishkulanand who were engrossed in completing the *Bhaktachintamani*, *sadhus* who served as scribes, others who were singers and those who were students. There was an ongoing problem, Svami recalls, of there never being enough available hands to manage daily functions, like cooking and cleaning, since all were consumed in their respective projects.¹⁶⁶ In this environment affective ties were central in evoking constructive action. For instance, Sahajanand took much interest in knowing how ascetics, who were students, were progressing. Prasadnanand recalls that as students they would report to the founder what materials they had mastered and onto which topics they were proceeding. Upon hearing of one's accomplishments Sahajanand would reward them, allowing them the honor of having his *darshan*, an auspicious viewing of him, and performing his *pujan*, ritual veneration with sandalwood paste. Then, Sahajanand would kindly gift ascetics with an imprint of his footprint, *charanarvind*, on their chest.¹⁶⁷ Sahajanand would be truly pleased as they advanced in their studies, encouraging them further by showing such favor. Such an enactment of rituals was the fulfillment of a reward for ascetics, but more specifically, an act that presented a deep emphasis on loyalty and devotion to Sahajanand. In other words, adulation for the founder and prizing Sahajanand as the object of the community's affection was in itself

¹⁶⁵ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 55.28–55.40.

¹⁶⁶ Prasadnanand Svami, *Shrisvaminarayan*, Vishram 46. In citations taken from this source I specify 'Vishram' rather than a page number, as this organizational feature in the text is the most relevant reference marker.

¹⁶⁷ Prasadnanand Svami, *Shrisvaminarayan*, Vishram 76.

intended to be a source of fulfillment.

Besides an environment that feverishly pursued self-development, institutionalization required presenting ideas in broader contexts to secure public standing. Sahajanand instructed leading ascetics to represent the *sampraday* in philosophical debates, such as sending Muktanand Svami to the court of Sayajirao Gaekwar,¹⁶⁸ and instructing Nityanand Svami to engage in a debate with Shastri Narsihn Pandya, a representative of the Nagar *brahman* community, which was associated with prominent scholars and bureaucrats in western India. Reportedly, a common discussion that ascetics had with others concerned why adherents revered Sahajanand Svami as Bhagvan, frequently asserting this status during debates in political settings like at the court of Junagadh,¹⁶⁹ a premiere state amongst princely states in Kathiawar during the colonial era and one that had since the early eighteenth century marked its independence from the Marathas.¹⁷⁰ Nagar Brahmins were a formidable force as ministers and bureaucrats in Junagadh since the early modern period.¹⁷¹

A survey of the early community reveals that its leadership was consumed in energetically building a foundation, both practically and rhetorically, across western India. Ascetics functioned in numerous energetic capacities toward the maturation of the community. However, while the ascetics were far from peripheral, the inheritance of spiritual and

¹⁶⁸ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 183.

¹⁶⁹ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 219.

¹⁷⁰ Bhalodia-Dhanani, "Princes, Diwans and Merchants," 40; Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 213.

¹⁷¹ Nagar Brahmins had been prominent in serving the Mughal state with their skills in Persian, as well as later serving princely and colonial states with English, Bhalodia-Dhanani, "Princes, Diwans and Merchants," 2-3. Thereafter, they also clearly held a significant role in reform-oriented issues and public life during the nineteenth century, as the work of Aarti Bhalodia has shown, Bhalodia-Dhanani, "Princes, Diwans and Merchants." In Junagadh specifically, the Nagar community was influential since the early modern period, Shukla-Bhatt, *Narasinha Mehta of Gujarat*, 8, as well as later in the nineteenth century, when the Diwan of Junagadh was the Nagar Brahman Ranchodji Amarji, the author of the influential history of the region in Persian, *Târikh-i-Sorath*.

administrative leadership for the Svaminarayan organization remained anchored to householders as members of the *acharya* lineage. The *acharya* office may have represented another pivot in western India. It was a structure similar to that of the *acharya* tradition in the Pushtimarg and thus, it created a distinct space for the Svaminarayan formation while reflecting a loose parallel.

In the spectrum of nineteenth-century religious initiatives, Sahajanand's interests stand apart from the activist mode that has come to characterize projects in the colonial era. Sources reveal that rather than extensively centering on larger Hindu or social reform issues, such as wide-ranging literacy projects or widow remarriage, or vocalizing critique of other practices such as caste discrimination or child marriage, Sahajanand was motivated to enact a specific devotional vision adapted to the contemporary political and social hierarchies of Gujarat. While Sahajanand certainly critiqued practices he believed to be unethical and took an interest in the education of ascetics, the same large-scale projects of reform undertaken by groups such as the Brahma Samaj or later the Arya Samaj did not rise to the top of his priorities. Instead, building communities, temples and networks across western India appears to have most occupied his attention. Unequivocally, records of the period make apparent that enormous attention was invested in the synchronization of actors, mechanisms, and underlying orientations in service of building influence across western India.

NEW DIRECTIONS: THE INDIVIDUAL

The chief objective of Sahajanand's attention was constructing the individual subject, while using the instruments of an ascetic order and activities to manifest his organization and authority. For this, he publically disseminated new standards through which to measure a respectable life. The spirit of this existence was exemplified by holistic self-preservation. Sensitivity to his surroundings led the founder to cultivate an attitude that regularly put the

spiritual and mundane in close conversation. Sahajanand was unapologetic about the exchange. Thoughtfully, he accounted for material dynamics concurrently with ritualistic ones, the seemingly apolitical with the political, and crafted such porousness into a natural feature. Thus, part of an adherent's daily morning devotion was not only enacting normative worship but also reading about practical, safeguarding procedures in the *Shikshapatri*. In the absence of a robust state, Sahajanand introduced norms by which to shape self and society, promulgating a set of ethics that were conditioned by historical reality rather than simply being an uncritical extension of classical ideas. The *Shikshapatri*, at its core, was a map to navigate one's path through the tumult of agrarian and commercial cultures that were regularly tugged at in diverse and often unpredictable ways. Sahajanand seems to have been trying to envision how the period's volatility could be met defensively. The resolution he came to was to provide definite models for individual and collective formations, which were at once widely inclusive in their constructedness, yet still provided latitude for re-definition.

The composition outlined common guidelines for upright conduct with injunctions against stealing, adultery, and theft, as well as ideas that resonated with traditional Vaishnava culture, like instructions about diet¹⁷² and worship.¹⁷³ But beyond normative devotional culture, the *Shikshapatri* worked hard to summon matters that affected the daily lives of adherents, chiefly comprised of vulnerable groups like peasants and artisans. I consider how else we might read these recommendations, departing from an interpretation of the prescriptions as disciplinary reform. Generally speaking, though many of these guidelines could have been beneficial, social improvement was not the aim. I suggest that an underlying motive for innovating lifestyle and

¹⁷² Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 15, 18.

¹⁷³ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 49–58.

social customs in the nineteenth century was the desire to gain personal stability necessary *in the course* of the prime target: devotion. Such stability was derived not only from mastery over oneself, but additionally, from remaining shielded from external challenges.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the Svaminarayan framework undertook measures that included financial, familial, domestic, and cultural considerations. These were meant to enhance life in the mundane world, by providing adherents with the strength required for immediate material sustenance, while also offering the tools to focus on the larger otherworldly goal.

The individual was extended protection rather than censured for his/her circumstances when their social, economic, ecological, natural, and political circumstances were readily acknowledged in devotional discourse. At this time, rather than acknowledging the state's failure, accusations of irrationality and moral failure were being leveled by colonial officials against peasants for being ensnared in cycles of financial debt, according to David Hardiman.¹⁷⁵ Sahajanand offered an active alternative to the abundance of blame placed on subjects and the lack of state action in this context: exercise anticipatory behavior, self-restraint, and caution. This form of empowerment was realized through measures requiring adherents to keep personally handwritten accounts of daily expenses and income,¹⁷⁶ while not spending beyond their means. Adherents were taught to expect that such behavior would bring suffering¹⁷⁷ by injunctions that grew out of the threat of financial exploitation prevalent at the time.¹⁷⁸ Self-sufficiency was

¹⁷⁴ Sahajanand's model of *ekantik bhakti* simultaneously accounted for material and otherworldly realms, self and other, in the ultimate goal of spiritual attainment.

¹⁷⁵ Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*, 43–61, 129–53.

¹⁷⁶ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 146.

¹⁷⁷ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 145.

¹⁷⁸ Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*, 1996.

underscored in the fortification of well-being. By formally establishing norms, Sahajanand was converting practiced strategies of survival in western India into mandates for his followers living in the region. In Gujarat, a common practice for long-term sustenance was to save food materials in stable times for use in days of scarcity ahead.¹⁷⁹ In turn, the founder instructed that his devotees should regularly practice such planning: a person should maintain adequate grain and money for their family's future needs, including fodder and water for livestock. Just as important, he directed that one should practice hygienic habits, an initiative that was likely intended for disease prevention at a time of public health concerns like endemic infections.¹⁸⁰

Good financial sense was a theme addressed specifically in relation to social standing. This factor remained important because the reputation of a peasant and his/her family was at risk in a caste collective if they exhibited economic weakness. Thus, wealth and debt were to be carefully managed in order to preserve *abru*, or honor.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, agrarian family life was oriented not only toward producing necessities for one's sustenance, but also cash crops for commercial sale. Rural populations depended heavily on a chain of strong working relations with their peers as well as those beyond their milieu, such as merchants and bankers.¹⁸² The *Shikshapatri*'s guidelines required that adherents employ written contracts and witnesses for any land or money transactions made with another party, even familiar parties such as one's friends or children.¹⁸³ Similarly, oral affirmations were not sufficient for payments exchanged by parties

¹⁷⁹ Frost, "Coping with Scarcity," 297.

¹⁸⁰ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 30, 32, 141–42.

¹⁸¹ Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*, 92–117.

¹⁸² Boehme, "Smuggling India," 692–93.

¹⁸³ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 143–44.

during marriage alliances. Firm written agreements and witnesses were necessary.¹⁸⁴ Public transparency was vital to be able to retain control over one's material and social affairs. The text notes that certain types of acts as well as information should never remain hidden, like the repayment of one's financial debt, family lineage, and the marriages of one's daughters.¹⁸⁵ Sahajanand had sagaciously understood his ability to attend to the era's difficulties. In authoritatively formalizing new terms, he could provide people a way out: permitting them to behave against the dictates of custom without fear.

Generally speaking, Sahajanand's initiative was a provision of leadership and reliability where there existed a larger lacuna of statist governance. Sahajanand sanctioned acting and feeling confident. He invested adherents with agency while providing templates, guiding them to pliability rather than desperation. For instance, it was stressed that behavior and decisions should be attuned to a person's personal and local context. Sahajanand qualifies that arrangement for the care of one's family and livestock should rest on the devotee's circumstances and means. Thus, if the appropriate provisions cannot be made for maintenance, then animals should not be kept.¹⁸⁶ Suicide and self-mutilation are forbidden, irrespective of how one might have erred (or not).¹⁸⁷ Vitally, the injunctions advocated living in tempo with one's changing needs whether dislocated by ecology or politics, and lessened stigma for such accommodations. The text states that when there is natural, man-made, or disease-related disaster, the adherent should focus efforts on self-preservation and aiding others, but not act in any way that would yield adverse results.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 143.

¹⁸⁵ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 152.

¹⁸⁶ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 141–42.

¹⁸⁷ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 14, 16.

¹⁸⁸ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 119.

Emergencies were also acknowledged. If an adherent's life, personal property or reputation was at stake due to troubles from an enemy or a ruler, or due to natural disaster or famine, then the adherent should move away elsewhere without hesitation.¹⁸⁹ Migration from one's native village or property under difficult circumstances is underscored in the injunction: "My followers who are wise and discreet shall immediately leave that place even if it is their birthplace, the place of their livelihood, or an inherited estate."¹⁹⁰

Again, Sahajanand was making compulsory what were generally considered to be astute practices for the times. A willingness to migrate was crucial for survival. From the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the peninsula of Kathiawar was rampant with violence. With civil unrest triggered by either a long simmering matter among neighbors or sudden conflicts over land claims between competing rulers, it was safer for local inhabitants to move out of harm's way. Additionally, when non-landed peasants negotiated to farm the territories of landed rulers, if they did not receive favorable terms, peasants could move to other states. In other words, if they were willing, peasants could leverage the factor of mobility in negotiations in Kathiawar, a region where peasants were not always easy to come by.¹⁹¹ Finally, migration would be a necessary option if severe food shortage, caused by civil disturbances, pest infestations, and inopportune rains, were not mitigated. Without the availability of even wild foods from private lands or common property, to deter starvation households would be broken apart, voluntarily or by force, leaving family members to forage for themselves.¹⁹² Thus, the founder required people to maintain an attitude of ease towards migration if leaving a hereditary

¹⁸⁹ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 153–54.

¹⁹⁰ "The Digital Shikshapatri," 154.

¹⁹¹ Spodek, "Rulers, Merchants and Other Groups."

¹⁹² Frost, "Coping with Scarcity," 297, 318.

or long-term home would aid their chances of survival.

Overall, doubt did not have a place in aligning affairs to the particularities of each context. It was relevance to the world and its shifting nature, without shame, that remained central to the sense of self that Sahajanand advocated.

Individual consideration is needed for the adoption of secular conduct (dealings in worldly matters and business affairs); behaviour in the practice of religious duties, rites and rituals; and ceremonies for the expiation of sins. All three should be made adaptable according to the place and time, as well as the social class, age, means, and ability of devotees.¹⁹³

Effectively, an examination of verses shows that with the aim of restoring dignity, Sahajanand prioritized practical topics. In the realm of devotion, social commentary was not held apart from conventional concerns, like rituals.¹⁹⁴ Adherents' daily worship included meditation on real world needs. Now, matters necessary to sustain life were integrated as inherent terms of *bhakti*. Nineteenth-century society was being prompted to achieve a new type of individual: one who was able to interchange the material and spiritual with ease, and as part of a ritual life that appeared to flow naturally from familiar precedents.

CONCLUSION: SUPPLENESS

This chapter has proposed a new way of approaching the history of religious production and identity in the development of modern South Asia. To more effectively situate the Svaminarayan community I have worked closely with early local sources, rather than relying on pre-established colonial narratives (and their legacies) about the development of nineteenth-century religio-political movements. At the same time, my method has been elastic in a way that

¹⁹³ “The Digital Shikshapatri,” 120.

¹⁹⁴ According to Paul Arney, the *Bade Shikshapatra*, the Pushtimarg manual for conduct, focused on teaching proper ritual service, *seva*, and composing oneself for the experience of devotion to Krishna. Emilia Bachrach explains that Pushtimarg sources did not reflect explicit worldly concerns in the same spirit exemplified in Svaminarayan literature, Bachrach, personal communication, Ahmedabad, January 2012.

echoes the Svaminarayan community's own method of formation. The study has had to keep its finger on the pulse of colonial discourse and internal community histories, even as it pulls away to rethink this historiography. Effectively, the approach has led me to engage with patterns that stand in tension with the established narrative—that is, the narrative that whitewashed the historical complexities of the nineteenth century by consistently ignoring local context in favor of a well-recognized trope of “reform” and “revival” in the colonial era.

Sahajanand had quite perceptively understood his various audiences, from colonialists to peasants. In order to fruitfully institutionalize the community in western India, he targeted these diverse audiences and appealed selectively to their various interests. In historiographical terms, Sahajanand's strategy of complex self-presentation, coupled with the cultural limitations of early British observers, resulted in the production of a narrative that was compounded in its re-telling over two centuries. I suggest that the Svaminarayan founder had not been driven to advance liberal reform, but was instead eager to articulate a specific ontological position and strengthen a platform for its sustainability in the modern period. It was with these aims that Sahajanand prepared a new culture while being acutely aware of the pre-existing traditions and circumstances that epitomized his surroundings. By formalizing adaptability, the Svaminarayan project aspired to a powerful capacity—an ease for enfolding diverse lifestyles, interests, and circumstances. Ultimately, the community signified suppleness in a new era and invigorated concepts of detachment, activity, worldliness, and emancipation, all at once.

Chapter 3.

CRAFTING AUTHORITY

The *sampraday* found a path to power in the lack of a centralized, functional state in western India, despite the difficulties of such a context, and paradoxically because of the opportunities it presented. At various times, individual princely powers were an obstacle for Sahajanand's project of developing the community, as it gained a footing in different parts of the region. But the splintered nature of power allowed a situation in which even while some parties did not support the cultural project. Among those who did were the Kathi Darbars, petty chiefs whose own political, social, and economic status was constantly being threatened by powerful encroaching neighbors, and who were, as a result, a vulnerable and dispirited group in Kathiawar. Kathi Darbars were a dominant caste of rulers of small estates in Kathiawar who, as Harald Tambs-Lyche noted, "exemplify, with their martial tradition, the continuum between warrior and robber as well as that between landlord and peasant."¹ Tambs-Lyche has suggested that the Kathis experienced years of political frustration from their small chiefdoms being threatened and overtaken by the expansion of the larger states of Bhavnagar and Jamnagar (Navanagar). Mired in a set of repeated political defeats, they may have found the non-violent approach that Sahajanand offered appealing.² Perhaps even more crucially, I suggest, Sahajanand

¹ Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 113-8. In Kathiawar, Rajput culture was a dominant force, thus the term 'darbar' was used. While the term has several meanings—including the title of a prince, the princely state itself, or a court or council—it is best described as a social category signifying those who possessed control and authority. Kathi Darbars were chiefs who possessed cultural and economic rank and power Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 96-7.

² Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 275-82, 298. Sahajanand vehemently insisted upon non-violence, but in those years, there were some instances of bloodshed. For self-defense, fighting was invoked during attacks on Sahajanand and Svaminarayan ascetics. The sheer insecurity of the western Indian landscape necessitated that Sahajanand travel with armed protection. Kathis were experienced fighters because of their need to protect their territories and acquire new ones. For this reason, they frequently provided Sahajanand with protection in his travels. While textual sources tended to downplay these circumstances, the material culture of the early community makes

offered dignity to those politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised. Thus, Sahajanand was able to take advantage of a fragmented central state and garner support toward community-building due to the popularity he had gained among the public across these areas—from Kathis, who tried to maintain an independent base of power, to non-elites like Kolis and Bhils, who remained on the margins of power.

Popular and political support for Sahajanand had not always gone hand in hand. Mixed levels of political support influenced opportunities for the *sampraday* to build temples, and construction itself was subject to the vagaries of different rulers.³ However, over the course of the century, these barriers seem to have weakened. A key reason why the *sampraday* continued to make gains, slowly but steadily, in areas under various rulers is that Sahajanand had sown

this situation evident. The Svaminarayan Museum in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, for example, houses a significant collection of weapons—like swords and shields—from the early community. Moreover, the homes of Kathi descendants of Sahajanand’s early patrons, who live in the vicinity of Gadhada today, prominently exhibit a warrior-like culture with their display and discussion of a collection of family swords. Tambs-Lyche has made similar observations about *darbar* culture Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 98-99.

³ In general, the process of temple building began with the donation of land by devotees, but in conjunction, permission and goodwill had to be obtained from the ruler to allow the process of temple construction to proceed. Of course, this took place under Sahajanand’s guidance, and was a manifestation of his desire to build temples in various locations. In one case, Kathi Darbar Zinabhai donated his mansion and land for constructing a temple in Junagadh in Kathiawar in c. 1826 Bhumanand Svami, *Shriharililamrutgranth*, 278-80. In another example, in Bhuj in Kutch, the locally prominent wrestler Gangaram and Hirjibhai (whose family was close with the princely family) wrote a letter to Sahajanand confirming that they had bought land to create a temple after having received Sahajanand’s instructions to do so. The founder replied that he was sending a group of ascetics with *murtis* (sacred statues) from Dungarpur, Rajasthan Prasadand Swami, *Vicharanlilamrt*, Vishram 63. On the other hand, it was Sahajanand who told followers he wanted to build a temple in Dholera, and when they said they would donate land but still found the proposition difficult, he told them to ask ‘*saheb*’ about the matter, referring to a local government official, I believe Prasadand Swami, *Vicharanlilamrt*, Vishram 63.

I would like to point out that that it is not always precisely clear or consistent as to how princely rulers patronized Sahajanand for temple building. Nevertheless, it is apparent that they could exercise their power to either create roadblocks for or facilitate the projects of the *sampraday* in a given region, and the *sampraday* was quite cognizant of this. *Lila* sources vary on the matter, at times indicating that a ruler needed to be appealed to in order for the *sampraday* to gain land, at other times saying the same ruler *wanted* a Svaminarayan temple himself (for instance the Nawab of Junagadh wanted a temple according to the narrative cited above, yet according to other accounts he simply gave permission). I interpret diverse accounts on this subject as part of a strategy of self-presentation in line with one of the motives that the *lila caritra* genre was being utilized for—showcasing the divinity of Sahajanand. In this case, we see a greater desire to portray Sahajanand and the *sampraday* as independent of other forces, especially sources of worldly authority, than might have been the case. Thus, a king that permits a temple in his region is also in other instances a patron of land or even a faithful devotee. Hence, surveying a range of *lila* and non-*lila* sources around certain events, reading them with and against the grain, as well as turning to sources outside the *sampraday*, remain necessary analytical strategies in order to understand historiographical patterns.

seeds that bolstered his popularity and created ideological familiarity in the first two decades of the century, and continued to do so thereafter. That is, prior to efforts like acquiring permission for architectural projects in the last decade of his life, his reputation preceded him. Groundwork for creating a community had been achieved through constant mobility, actively spreading devotional ideas, and cultivating networks of well-wishers, patrons, and committed devotees. Another factor in the *sampraday*'s remarkable spread was the perseverance of his ascetic followers, who had been conditioned by their ideology to consistently push past the harsh realities of the time; as a result, they were able to remain mobilized toward community establishment—one that was a highly structured entity. Finally, the lack of political governance that represented the needs of various segments of society by existing states provided an opportunity for other forms of leadership to emerge in the early nineteenth century, which would have been more effective among those less represented by the status quo.

The *sampraday*, despite facing frequent violence during the early years, was able to take advantage of the erratic types and conditions of patronage in the context of political crisis. This was a possibility because of the agility of the community and its inclusiveness, as it accepted support and adherents from all walks of life.⁴ The *sampraday* thus had remarkable success in a challenging environment, achieving overall prosperity from a proactive approach to community building by reaching groups that had less representation in the existing power structure of western India. The regional context of discontent also may have welcomed alternative ethical visions that lauded character traits such as endurance, as opposed to a retreat from mundane concerns. The sheer strength of the community's vision of immunity to worldly volatility, their

⁴ Caste distinction, as discussed in Chapter 2, was not entirely dismantled in the *sampraday*. Even into the late nineteenth century, certain caste groups were allowed or not allowed into the various ranks of ascetics, each rank with their specific duties, *Gazetteer: Kaira*, 179-80. Moreover, in early post-Independence India, we find the matter of caste exclusion in the *sampraday* taken up in the judicial courts, see Galanter, "Hinduism, Secularism."

socially and geographically expansive network based on affective ties, the tendency of the founder and ascetics to move (by force or will), to persuasively appeal to one party when another was unresponsive, as well as the lack of an overarching state apparatus, were factors that would have coalesced to serve the *sampraday*'s growth at the grassroots level in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Similar to Norbert Peabody's study of the pre-colonial Kota kingdom of central India during the eighteenth century—in which there were dynamic relationships between religion, economy, and the political sphere—the nineteenth-century case in Gujarat also exemplified an interactive relationship between the *sampraday*, state authorities, and more elite patrons like the Kathis.⁵ At the same time, the Svaminarayan community appears to have been relatively independent from the surveillance and supervision of colonial state institutions unlike the way that other groups experienced colonial coercion. For instance, in the Khoja community, the colonial judicial court's view of caste, religion, and sect dramatically transformed the collective into a religious identity through the Aga Khan case of 1866. In another lawsuit, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, the 1862 Maharaj Libel Case profoundly reformulated Pushtimarg identity.⁶

⁵ Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship*. The wealth derived from the Dada Khachar's Kathi family in Kathiawar was one key basis on which Sahajanand operated the *sampraday*, at least in Kathiawar. For instance, he turned to Dada's chief estate administrators, who had served the Kathi family, to receive money for clothing ascetics, Paramchaitanyanand Svami, *Gadhurni Lila*, Caritra 30. The Khachar family members also patronized Sahajanand's *brahman* family, providing them with land, money, and cattle, Paramchaitanyanand Svami, *Gadhurni Lila*, Caritra 59. That area in Gadhada, Laxmibaug, along with other donated tracts of land, over the years became exclusively associated with the *sampraday* by way of being the property of Sahajanand's family, or the *sampraday*'s *acharyas*.

⁶ Amrita Shodhan, *A Question of Community*.

WORLDLY POWER

Overall, the *sampraday* established its authority through dual approaches: generating earthly power and cultivating an appreciation for an enchanted aura, centrally around Sahajanand. In historical terms, this was the process of constructing institutionalized authority. This section evaluates the first part of this process. Here, I suggest that the *sampraday* provided a widely applicable shelter in society when a centralized state apparatus was not dominant in western India. By examining how the *sampraday* crafted worldly power to grow the community, I do not intend a reductive move of equating modern religious growth in South Asia, especially Hinduism, with ploys for simply gaining political prowess. Indeed, the growth of any form of social power inevitably has consequences for the political hierarchies in a community. Individuals can seek whether to deploy that power towards political ends or not, but that does not mean they do not hold a latent form of political power, or that other players will not try to influence the use of that power towards their own needs. Though the *sampraday* was clearly not a state power, observing the *sampraday* as a kingdom-like model captures the intentional and structured governing character of the entity, and yields a better understanding of its influential early workings, which had been designed to propagate devotional ideas.

The *sampraday*'s engagement with colonial government has been interpreted as an exclusive self-serving strategy of the *sampraday*—one that helped further enmesh colonial power in the region and the subjugation of its people. But this conclusion has formed from overlooking the expressed views and agency of actors on the ground. Mapped against the complex discursive arena of the nineteenth century, such historiographical readings fail to recognize the complexities of the different narratives, and the respective interests and values that were at play in western India during this period. This was a space in which multiple epistemologies and ontologies were

operating in concert or in contrast with one another, a factor that has resulted in layers of misreadings. Kim has pointed to a key omission in the scholarly narrative, which is that “the only agency granted is in the sect’s capacity for self-serving rationalism while the possibility of *rationalized* action to achieve its ontological desires is denied.” At the basis of this position is the notion “that behavior which appears to endorse the actions of governing authorities is in fact a mimetic desire to emulate the ways of the oppressors rather than an independent action born of an entirely different antecedent.”⁷ Developing this observation, I demonstrate how Sahajanand carefully crafted an institutional framework that could further his set of values among the public, and give shape to the assemblage of people who chose to associate with him. Certainly, his dual objectives of shaping individual subjectivities and creating a collective around shared ethics and practices required the ability both to influence others and to exercise power, and to do so efficiently and uniformly across a vast geography and population. Thus, many of these structural features continued to characterize the *sampraday* beyond the early years, as they were inherent to sustaining a particular identity. Simply put, devotional values and institution building were intertwined.

Oriented toward institutionalization, from the outset adherents were conditioned toward productive behavior. Ascetics and leading devotees were not only consumed by the expected ritualistic affairs of a devotional setting, but additionally by discussing and planning matters of finances, administration, and architectural projects, as noted in Chapter 2. Accordingly, to best manage people and activity, ascetics were pegged into hierarchies and assumed different levels of ritual and administrative authority and responsibility, as well as being organized into

⁷ Kim, “Being Svaminarayan,” 276. Kim refers to the scholarship of David Hardiman, “Class Base of Svaminarayan Sect” and Makrand Mehta, “Sampradayaaki Sahitya.” The latter is an interesting evaluation of the formation of the *sampraday*. The former is a defense of Mehta’s work.

collectives headed by senior ascetics. A focus on mobilizing people toward building a collective meant that the leading ascetics invested energy in grooming specialists and junior ascetics—developing scribes, musicians, scholars, artists, architects, poets, theologians, and speakers. In addition to honing specialized capabilities, ascetics and householders were also to be politically alert to be able to engage with local authorities, if needed, to be able to conduct community affairs.

Throughout the region, there was a pattern of prominent adherents interfacing with political authorities on behalf of the *sampraday*; these interactions were intended to make acquaintances, exchange social pleasantries and at times requests for support, or to voice concerns. Sadhu Paramtattvadas and Raymond B. Williams examined early contact between the community and the British as recorded in the diary of William Hodge Mills, Principal of Bishop’s College of Calcutta and a fellow at Trinity College of Cambridge. During his travels through Gujarat in 1822, Mills discussed the community with fellow British civil and religious authorities, as well as with some devotees. For instance, in Ahmedabad, Kubersinh Chhadidar, a prominent Kshatriya member of the community and a former Vaishnava, made himself available to British authorities as Sahajanand’s representative to sort out details about acquiring land to construct the community’s first temple. At one time he was also given power of attorney on behalf of the founder to sign legal papers. Kubersinh had been specifically sent as the community’s representative to meet with Mill upon the latter’s visit to Ahmedabad. Along with the ascetic Bhajanand Svami, he spoke to Mill about the violence the community faced. Kubersinh’s own brother, Officer Motiram Chopdar, was a clerk in the Ahmedabad office of the Company.⁸ While I am unaware of the specific role of Motiram in the Company’s office or as a

⁸ Paramtattvadas and Williams, “British Contacts,” 58-66

devotee, it would stand to reason that individuals in contact with local rulers or British authorities would have helped facilitate meetings between government representatives and the *sampraday*. Narupant Nana, a former Gaekwar clerk and a devotee, played a role in speaking with Bishop Heber about Svaminarayan in 1825 in Baroda.⁹ In another instance, the devotee Ajubhai Amin helped excuse the tax on stones being used to construct the Vadtal temple, as the materials had been accruing a great deal of tax from the Nawab of Khambhat (Cambay).¹⁰

Focus on spreading the *sampraday* and securing it in western India required efforts to disseminate a specific culture through mechanisms like producing *murtis* (small printed images of deities for worship), literary compositions, and poetry—ideological tools that could travel widely and consistently.¹¹ For instance, small *murtis* (some intended to reference the founder, if

⁹ Paramattvadas and Williams, “British Contacts,” 73.

¹⁰ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 357-58. Similarly, in the case of Bhuj, Sunderji Suthar, a devotee of Sahajanand and previously a devotee in the Uddhav *sampraday* under Ramanaand Svami was also an influential administrator in the local court, and thus, able to guide the *sampraday* in the region. Sunderji was the twelfth-generation in his family closely associated with the rulers of Kutch since Khengar I (r. 1548-85), who unified the region. His forefathers were from Kathiawar and were rewarded for their assistance to Khengar with *giras* and a residence Mathak (in Anjar) and esteemed status in the royal court, and received a copperplate agreement from the court that promised to continue patronizing the family. Over the generations, the family was associated with the rulers through their craftsmanship. In the mid-eighteenth century they were highly skilled carpenters that did fine work in ivory, wood, and gold, and one of them, Devshi (Sunderji’s uncle), served as an architect-engineer for the creation of Aina Mahal in Bhuj, along with work by Sunderji’s father, Nagjibhai. Aina Mahal was created by the ruler Lakhpati (r. 1741-61) to support the arts and house his collection, after Lakhpati’s enthrallment with the refinement of courtly culture he experienced at the Mughal court in Delhi. The Mahal was constructed with aesthetic and cultural influences from artistic and architectural practices of Holland, see Mallison, “Teaching of Braj,” 172. Nagjibhai was also given *giras* in Mandvi and granted an administrative role. His major contribution was helping to mitigate the piracy of the Waghers, whom he defeated in Shivrajpur (an area between Dvarka and Okha). Nagji helped established a security station named Kutchi Gadh there. His two sons, Hirji and Sunderji, were prominent followers of Sahajanand. Because Sunderji’s family had been tied to the local rulers, he was able to acquire the permission to construct a Svaminarayan temple from Maharao Shri Deshalji II (r. 1819-1860), close to the ruler’s *darbar*, see Gajar, *Shrijina Ekantik Bhakta*. Interacting with government officials for the sake of assuring the *sampraday*’s existence was not an uncommon practice for devotees in even the later decades of the nineteenth century (see *The Swami Narayan Sect* [1877] 1906). Some connection with the state is evidenced by the late nineteenth-century colonial census records, which indicate that state messengers in Kutch were Svaminarayan. Devotees also came from mid-level status groups like writers (*kayasth*), employed by the state apparatus or employed elsewhere as accountants, clerks, and merchants, *Gazetteer: Cutch, Palanpur, and Mahi Kantha*, 46, 48.

¹¹ Formulating a specific identity was an endeavor of such import that literary professionals outside the community’s ascetic fold were employed to portray Sahajanand. Dinanath Bhatt, frequently mentioned in narratives

not directly represent him) were created and distributed with great effort so that they could be personally kept and venerated by followers spread across the region. Today, the Svaminarayan Museum displays a set of *murti* blocks designed at Sahajanand's behest to stamp and distribute these images among his adherents. Sahajanand told his devotee Narayanjibhai Suthar, a carpenter in Bhuj, to make printing blocks of his *avatar's murti*. Suthar created an image named Vrundavan Vihari, which was precisely like the form he observed of Shri Hari (Sahajanand), according to sources. The second image was an image of Vrundavan Vihari with Radhika, the third image depicted the present and visible form of Shri Hari (Sahajanand) with Dharmabhakti (Dharma and Bhakti were epithets for Sahajanand's parents), and so on for nine different printing blocks. Thereafter, Sahajanand had the ascetic Adharanand Svami print thousands of images from these blocks, which Sahajanand himself then distributed to adherents.¹² Similarly, poetic *kirtans* were composed that could be known and sung by common people.¹³ Beyond distributable tools, the mobility of ideas took hold through the ascetics themselves. Geographical districts were divided among ascetics for seasonal travel intended to champion the *sampraday's* founder and deliver devotional ideas to the public through meetings and preaching, and amongst scholars, in debate.¹⁴

Another aspect of community development that exhibited characteristics reminiscent of a kingdom was the ongoing process of claiming geographical space to mark community identity

of the *sampraday*, was a *brahman* of Ahmod who had been employed to compose literature about Sahajanand, Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarashtra*, 239.

¹² Akhandanand Svami, *Bhaktishastra*, 4.7.24-4.7.35. The original text of *Bhaktishastra* is in Sanskrit, however, I have used the Gujarati translation.

¹³ Sahajanand explicitly directed ascetics to produce hymns and incorporate the subjects of his behavior, *lila*, personal qualities and his form, into them, Akhandanand Svami, *Bhaktishastra*, 4.7.4-4.7.5.

¹⁴ Notes in William Hodge Mill's diary indicate that Sahajanand sent his ascetics to deal with debates or what Mill has called "disputes," which he saw as "not worthy to contend with himself," Paramtattvadas and Williams, "British Contacts," 60.

and construct edifices in which people could gather. This was evidenced in the constancy of efforts, decade after decade throughout the nineteenth century, to acquire land to build temples and develop surrounding environments—like farms or housing for *sadhus* and devotees—all the while dotting the landscape with other physical markers year after year.¹⁵ Institutionalizing a collective devotional culture meant activating temples daily with elaborate rituals in veneration of its deities, including *murtis* of deities that were intended as representations of Sahajanand, and the participation of adherents. The sustenance of the culture also meant holding regular, smaller forums for devotion called *sabhas*, or assemblies, in which devotional discussion and prayers took place. Gatherings were not confined to the boundaries of a temple, nor did they always resemble mass celebrations. Meetings took place in other spaces, like a field, under a tree, or outside someone’s home. The habit of gathering reflected more than simply an adherents’ devotional inclination, they were also fueled by a desire to widely spread and deepen the ideas Sahajanand propagated. Overall, the *sampraday* enacted a philosophy of flexibility, which drew populations of diverse social standing into its fold. Among the diverse adherents, continual

¹⁵ While early temples, like that of Dholera, were recorded as they were originally built in the colonial records of the late nineteenth century, *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 335, other early temple estates underwent expansion in the mid to late nineteenth century. As the *sampraday* grew in reputation, it expanded its infrastructure to meet its needs. Gadhada, where Sahajanand had spent much time on the estate of Dada Khachar, had grown to become a major center for the community and a Sanskrit school had been started there by the last quarter of the century, *Gazetteer: Kathiawar*, 437-8. Similarly, while the first temple of the community had been constructed alongside a mosque in the walled area of the city in Ahmedabad in 1822, by the late nineteenth century ethnographic data notes that there was also now a “large palace” (this is where the Acharya and his family came to reside), *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 279-80. Moreover, at the time of this observation, a rest house for devotees was being built outside the city, in the suburbs of Ahmedabad, *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 329, reflecting the need to accommodate the growing base of adherents that traveled to the city.

New temples generally formed when there was a base of local adherents’ patronage. Thus as different segments of society joined the community or strengthened their affiliation to the Svaminarayan identity temples were built to affirm the relationship, sustaining the growing popularity across the region. For instance, by the end of the nineteenth century, Dhrangadhra, the main base of the Jhalas in Kathiawar, had a Svaminarayan temple, *Gazetteer: Kathiawar*, 432, as did Idar, where an elaborate temple costing 50,000 rupees was constructed, *Gazetteer: Cutch, Mahi Kantha*, 435. By this time as well, Khuntavada, a village of Bhavnagar, had a “good temple,” *Gazetteer: Kathiawar*, 516. With the financial backing of devotees in Kathiawar and workmen from the region, a temple was built in Surat, *Gazetteer: Surat and Broach*, 327. A survey of the ritualistic calendar, *nirnay*, listing temple anniversaries, indicates the immense growth of the community with many temples being built since the early nineteenth century. See “Nirnay,” <https://vadtalmandir.org/nirnay>.

gatherings characterized by teaching, discussions, and singing, as well as celebrations, created shared knowledge and bonded networks into a community that cut across social and economic strata.¹⁶

For the long-term sustenance of the *sampraday*, an office of authority that continued leadership after the demise of the founder was established. Successive authority was vested in the hereditary position of the *acharya*. Though the overall *sampraday* was undivided, its administrative and spiritual power was shared between two *acharya* seats. Accordingly, under the two leaders, geographical boundaries were set and legal frameworks were implemented for managing the *sampraday*, formalized in the *Desh Vibhag no Lekh* (Document of Territorial Division) and also discussed in various texts in the community. The subcontinent's territory was

¹⁶ It appears that affiliation with the Svaminarayan community did not foreclose fluid identification with other practices and beliefs. Even in the early nineteenth century, the *brahman* scholar Dinanath Bhatt, although employed by Sahajanand to generate literature, did not renounce the faith associated with his family for Svaminarayan identification, Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarashtra*, 239. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as the community grew with followers from across castes, it is not clear if adherents absolutely gave up the long-held beliefs and practices associated with their respective caste groups (albeit, dietary habits were often changed on account of joining the *sampraday* according to the late nineteenth-century census). As has been convincingly demonstrated by Amrita Shodhan and Teena Purohit, colonial understandings of “community” and other aspects of social and religious identity were not representative of the self-identification that practitioners and believers of a given religious tradition adopted. Thus, for instance, the constructed categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” determined by the colonial court apparatus could not precisely account for the fluid reality with which the local population identified, Shodhan, *A Question of Community*; Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*. For a closer evaluation of caste fluidity specifically in the case of Khojas in western India, see Asani, “From Satpanthi to Ismaili.”

For instance, according to the colonial census in Kutch, the groups of Jethimal, wrestlers and state messengers, were associated with goddess traditions, except reportedly those of them that joined the Svaminarayans, according to colonial observation, *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 46. Similarly, Svaminarayan followers emerged from craftsman groups that were frequently associated with goddesses, like the *gujar luja'rai*, blacksmiths and carpenters, and tailors, *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 72. Other groups from where people became Svaminarayan adherents, like goldsmiths, were known to be diverse in their beliefs and practices, with different families affiliating with different goddesses, some linked to Vishnu, and some affiliated with Muslim saints. Similarly, among *gujar sutha'rs*, or carpenters, families were linked to various goddesses, as well as to Shiva, Ramanand, Vishnu, and Svaminarayan, *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 70-72. Svaminarayan followers were from occupation groups of stone masons and leatherworkers in Kutch, *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 73, 82, as well as from Rajput and Vania collectives in central Gujarat, *Gazetteer: Kaira*, 180, leather workers in Kathiawar, *Gazeteer: Kathiawar*, 157. Kanbis from the Leva and Kadva groups were usually devotees of the goddess Bhavani but had started to join the community recently, according to the 1881 census, *Gazetteer: Kathiawar*, 143. Overall, by the late nineteenth century the *sampraday* had grown enough in size and prominence that it was accorded a distinct category in the colonial census reports, *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 42; *Gazetteer: Rewa Kantha* 21, 184; *Gazetteer: Surat & Broach*, 55, 379. Notably, one of the biggest Svaminarayan populations was in Ahmedabad at the time of the census in 1879, *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 34. Even the ascetics, numbering 315, were recorded separately, *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 294.

divided into northern and southern jurisdictions between the two leaders, with their oversight encompassing the ascetics residing in the respective territories, as well as properties and incomes therein. Of the temples already established in these two regions, headquarters were established on each side of the geographical divide, Ahmedabad for the northern *desh* and Vadtal (Kaira) for the southern *desh*.¹⁷ The *sampraday*, thus, was linked to centers of power in a key urban setting and among rural farmlands; Ahmedabad represented a major political and cultural center of western India, and Vadtal, the heartlands of agrarian prosperity in central Gujarat.

Certainly, while the *sampraday* had no political authority in the region, and the Lekh concerned the management of particular *sampraday* affairs in areas that were in reality under some form of political rule, the Lekh's division of territories cutting across regional and political boundaries of the subcontinent implied a political-like vision by a religious authority over the same geography. The *sampraday*, conceptually, was analogous to the entity of a local kingdom, an apparatus for imagining society and public governance in modernity. That is, though the *sampraday*'s arrangement did not make explicit claims to challenge any princely or colonial state or its rule, it conceptually and implicitly paralleled itself with political authority. For instance, according to its self-representation as an authoritative body, the *sampraday* politely framed itself as an exclusive power by envisioning its authority over a people, a region that was however already under another type of rule. By polite, I mean that the *sampraday* communicated its self-conceptualization to its adherents in a way that did not deny actual state authorities as legitimate rulers, but neither did it significantly note the political powers that formally held sway over them and affected lives in the region. This subtle way of overlooking the state, or looking past it, was

¹⁷ Williams, *Introduction*, 36-37. The Lekh can be found in pages 138-49 of a popular book dedicated to explaining the role of the *acharya* and his family to adherents, published by the administration of Amdavad Desh, Patel, H. N., *Dharma-Vanshi*. For an evaluation of the *Lekh* and Patel's book about the document, see Dave, "Reappraisal of the 'Lekh'," 292. Other texts elaborating on the role of the *acharya* include the Sahajanand Swami, *Shikshapatri*; Nishkulanand Svami, "Purushottam Prakash"; Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*.

emblematic of the larger heterogeneous conceptualization of the world in which the *sampraday*'s existence and that of Sahajanand's was presented as independent of the world and as surpassing it. And yet, simultaneously a need for political awareness was quickly invoked whenever discussing concerns of the *sampraday* or self.

Western India's ongoing political changes and troubles, along with environmental and economic influences, were important factors in the *sampraday*'s development. Surprisingly, by the end of his career, Sahajanand had not established the southern seat of the community in Bhavnagar or elsewhere in Kathiawar, where he had long created a base for himself under Kathi patronage, relying on both their financial and physical protection. Perhaps Kathi power was not enough to ensure sufficient support for the ongoing growth of the community, as they themselves were on less stable political ground in Kathiawar. Moreover, Kathis were only one segment of a diverse community largely made up of members from low-status occupational groups as well as those on the margins of society. Sahajanand's decision about the location of the two seats of authority points to what must have been the founder's recognition during the last decade of his life: the Company was increasingly consolidating its power over western India and while Kathiawar and Kutch were still experiencing violence, Ahmedabad and Kaira were cumulatively more stable under direct British rule. He might have considered that in an area of stability, these territories would allow the new power to emerge. A cultural project could not continue in the long run without a stable context. Sahajanand had already experienced years of difficulties trying to forge a new cultural entity across princely states, having to appeal to distinct polities in each area—from the Nawab in Junagadh, the Gaekwar in Baroda, Peshwa representatives in

Ahmedabad, the Rao in Bhuj, or the Raja in Bhavnagar—for permission to build a temple or conduct his activities, or simply to be able to stay in the area, with mixed results.¹⁸

Sahajanand had developed guidelines from his experiences. He stressed the importance of being synchronized with political and environmental elements as part of one's devotion, and applied this model of decision-making toward the institutionalization of the community. Thus, he also seems to have elected locations for the administrative centers according to the contextual factors of the areas, having already experienced the precarious state of his followers' economic health. Unlike the famines and natural disasters experienced in Kathiawar and Kutch, the green pastures of Kaira's vicinity would have been generally less prone to overall economic suffering and food shortage. A more prosperous rural area could maintain a strong center of power as well as accommodate the attendant ascetics, large in number. Such a space could also serve as a quiet, safe retreat from the insecurities that the ascetics faced when traveling or exposed in certain areas. Moreover, this could spatially and economically absorb frequent, mass gatherings of devotees for festivities.

Long-term growth and maintenance of the collective was an explicit responsibility of the leaders. Generation after generation of *acharyas* were to initiate ascetics and followers into the fold, support the creation of new temples by consecrating *murtis*, patronize the production of literature, educate ascetics, and appoint an ascetic in each temple who would manage the operations of the temple. In terms of a power structure, the office of the *acharya*, divinely and administratively vested, was established with guidelines for appointing a successor on the basis

¹⁸ For instance, in 1822, leading devotees Kubersinh and Bhajanand Svami disclosed to Mr. Mill that the community faced much violence in the region but were taught by Sahajanand not to retaliate. However, their reliance on an unresponsive government also left them in a precarious situation. They reported to Mill that the Gaekwar government had not supported them, as the government's judges said they would not make decisions on matters among Vaishnavas. Sahajanand sent a petition to Governor John Malcolm in 1827 requesting protection against violence directed against himself and his followers in Gujarat, Kathiawar, and Surat, Paramatvadas and Williams, "British Contacts," 65-67.

of lineage, but also the criteria of merit.¹⁹ The office in the nineteenth century underscored Sahajanand's value by being tied to Sahajanand's genealogy: in addition to being the founder of the *sampraday*, he was also its very definition. Thus, the perpetuation of this office through the succession of authority within Sahajanand's own family helped give the *sampraday* defining value. The distribution of administrative, ritual, and financial powers and social status between *acharya*, ascetic, and householder—and their interdependent relationships that developed as a result—created a type of system of checks and balances between them, although there was clearly a spiritually-oriented hierarchy undergirding the structure. For instance, if there was a dispute between the *acharyas*, then a committee would adjudicate on the matter.²⁰

Financial contributions were regularly expected from householder community members, whether *girasiya*, merchants, agriculturalists, or others.²¹ Since devotees were affiliated with one of the two leaders based on their residence within certain geographical boundaries, so were their donations.²² Sahajanand advised his devotees to make annual donations of 10% of their monetary income, or of their agricultural income in the form of grains.²³ If a devotee did not have that level

¹⁹ Williams, *Introduction*, 37-9; Jyotindra Dave, "Reappraisal of the 'Lekh'," 285.

²⁰ Patel, H. N. *Dharma-Vanshi*, 148-9.

²¹ Patel, H. N. *Dharma-Vanshi*, 143.

²² This had implications for associating prosperity (or lack) with certain territories. Moreover, over the decades these boundaries would matter in new and charged ways. One implication of geographically-based religious authority was devotees' voting rights in elections of Vadtal Des in the twenty-first century. Votes in these (Gujarat government-administered) competitive elections determined which ascetics and householders (and their parties) would lead the southern seat of the *sampraday*.

²³ See Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 147. Donations included cattle, vehicles, villages, land, farms, buildings, mansions, houses, gardens, trees, stones, jewelry, rubies, pearls and other precious stones, among other forms of wealth and property, Patel H. N., *Dharma-Vanshi*, 142-5. Kathi darbars regularly donated a significant amount of grains from their farms each year, Thadrupanand Svami, *Thadrupanand Svamini Vato*, Vishram 48. A striking parallel to the Svaminarayan notion of annual contribution lies with the community of Satpanth Islam. Teena Purohit has examined how the Satpanthi community from the town of Pirana near Ahmedabad, a group that had been experiencing shifts in the categorization of its identity under colonial authority in the nineteenth century, had also stressed the importance of contributing tithe to their leader, Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 65-6. Over time, the Satpanthis claimed in their oral tradition and written histories that Sahajanand had suspiciously created his

of financial strength, then a 5% donation of money or grain was recommended. Additionally, the head of each household registered their family with the *sampraday* by paying an annual tax, or *namvero*, of .5 rupee each year. Despite larger donations from Kathis, Sahajanand justified this collection in c.1828 by explaining that he wanted everyone to make the nominal donations, be they a king or an old woman who spun cotton. From this collection, Sahajanand explained, he would feed ascetics and gift *brahmans*.²⁴ The act of making financial contributions was a way of strengthening affective bonds between the devotee and the founder and the *sampraday* itself, tying people to the idea of the community by creating a sense of personal sacrifice and an actual investment in it.

At its peak, the *sampraday*'s authority was bolstered by Sahajanand Svami's ruler-like role.²⁵ During his lifetime, Sahajanand, known among devotees as Shriji Maharaj and also as Svaminarayan, had been perceived in diverse roles, from popular leader to divinity.²⁶ But he was also actively stylized in multiple ways: as a teacher, an ascetic, a *guru*, a divine incarnation, as

sampraday on the basis of their practice of tithing, though the basis of this claim is not entirely sound, according to Purohit, Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 100-1, 106-7. Purohit notes the “porous” context in which Svaminarayan practices developed, absorbing practices of different traditions, like the Satpanthis, Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 109. For more on this link according to oral history in the Imamshahi tradition of Pirana, see Khan and Moir, “Coexistence and Communalism.” Notably, the Patel caste, specifically the Leva Kanbi, was a group associated with the Satpanthis (Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 101) and also with the Svaminarayan community. In fact, the late nineteenth century census shows that members of this caste group also reserved grains from their harvests to donate at the Svaminarayan temple and went to Ahmedabad on pilgrimage in this period, *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 69-70. As far as I am aware, the ‘obligatory’ aspect of donations in the Svaminarayan community during the early nineteenth century did not have any way of being compelled from devotees, and were not tied to conditions like those in the Aga Khan Case. However, the issue of how donations and the ‘tax’ from devotees were to be directed—to the *acharya* or deity of the temple—surfaced in the northern and southern seats of the Svaminarayan community in court cases during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see Williams, *Introduction*, 43-5.

²⁴ Bhumanand Svami, *Shriharililamrutgranth*, 331

²⁵ This was not like the explicit claims to power and territory made in other religious communities like the Sikh tradition. In that case, the Sixth Guru was understood to be sovereign over the spiritual (*piri*) and worldly (*miri*) affairs of the Sikh community, or *panth*, plainly making claims of authority that rivaled the Mughal emperor, Dhavan, *Sparrows*, 31.

²⁶ “Maharaj” was also how the *guru* was addressed in the Pushtimarg community.

Supreme God, and even in a kingly manner. While there was a parallel association made between the authority of a king and divine authority in medieval and early modern South Asia among Hindu and Islamic rulers, and similar expressions and rituals were used to honor superior beings, be they kings or gods, these notions shared between the political and religious were being put to use for an inverse aim in the nineteenth century.²⁷ Blurring identifications of secular and religious, divine and human in imagery, and by using rhetorical vocabulary interchangeably in the performance of ceremony, produced a continuum between worldly and supramundane power, which was relevant to the project that Sahajanand had undertaken within the context of political fluctuations in western India. Like envisioning a king in divine terms (even if not always *as* divinity), Sahajanand may have been trying to conjure an image as a worldly lord to reinforce his otherworldliness. That is, in attempting to convince audiences of his status as divinity-in-human-form, the terms typically reserved for a king may have been utilized to refer to Sahajanand. Being aligned with images of a benevolent ruler, an overlord, a leader, and a savior in human form would likely have made Sahajanand's authority more credible to his contemporaries. An esteemed social depiction could have helped gain acceptance of Sahajanand as a divine figure. Additionally, the intimation of Sahajanand as a noble ruler could have rendered immediate influence in a setting that consisted of divisive parties jockeying for power and territory.

There is no reason to believe that Sahajanand was a political or landed ruler in the normative sense, but using the trope of kingship while persuading others of his divinity and building the *sampraday* would have coalesced to powerful effect. The visual portrayal of Sahajanand as king-like was found in paintings. In a perceptive study of the visualization of

²⁷ A conceptual relationship between kings and divinity has long existed in pre-colonial India, as studies have shown. See Breckenridge, "The South Indian Temple"; Inden, *Imagining India*; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*; Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*.

Sahajanand, art historian Ankur Desai explored Sahajanand's varied depictions. As a divinely revered figure in the nineteenth century, Sahajanand was depicted in painted and sculptural *murtis*, as might be expected. However, the community's founder was also articulated through portraiture, which implied a historical representation. Desai observes how such portraits of Sahajanand were akin to royal portraiture of Gujarati rulers, and yet depictions of Sahajanand with a nimbus simultaneously underscored his divinity. Most striking are the correspondences of portraits from the religious domain of nineteenth century Gujarat to portraiture of actual royalty from early and distant regimes such as Mughal Delhi and Ottoman Turkey.²⁸

Perhaps more than visual terms, it was Sahajanand's king-like depiction in court-inspired compositions that were publically performed that most widely broadcast the notion of founder as king. He was described not simply in the expected devotional manner of Vaishnava culture—with epithets for Krishna like Shyam—but was lauded in ways a ruler or other high-status person would be by his ascetics. In Kathiawar, retaining a *charan* bard was a common practice among Kathi Darbars, and one that the *sampraday* emulated around its founder.²⁹ Some ascetics had a talent for this, familiar with the conventions of praise from their experience in secular settings.³⁰

²⁸ Desai, "From Head to Toe."

²⁹ Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 115. For instance, the hymn '*divya sabha pati rai*' refers to a king that is seated on a comfortable, plush seat at the head of a *sabha*, a gathering or a council, in an environment that is wholly luminous. The hymn describes this king as divine in all ways. Even the umbrella that he holds above his head is divine, as is the fly used for him, *Kirtanmuktavali*, 210.

³⁰ Extensive and impressive skills of literature and statecraft entered the *sampraday* through some of its adherents. For instance, Bhrahmanand Svami was a leading poet in the *sampraday* who prolifically created compositions about Sahajanand and his family, eulogizing the founder in vernacular literary styles. His expertise prior to joining the community was as a member of the *charan-barot* community in Rajasthan, a community associated throughout Gujarat and Rajasthan with oral record-keeping and composing genealogy. For more on the importance of the role and function of the *barot* in western India, see Shah and Shroff, "The Vahivanca Barots"; Basu, "Practices of Praise." Prior to his devotional commitment, Ladudanji or Ladu Barot (his uninitiated name) had been a well-respected poet in various courts of western India, even training at the regionally influential Bhuj Brajbhasha Patshala, also known as the Kavyashala under the patronage of the local king, see Mallison, "The Teaching of Braj," 172, 176. He was the sixth generation in his family after his forefather, Malaji Urfed Dalaji, who was a court poet in the late sixteenth century to the ruler of Sirohi (Rajasthan), Gala, *Kavi Bhramanand*, 116. As a young man, Ladudanji accompanied his father to the court of Sirohi and presented his poetry to the king, who was

Moreover, the notion of Sahajanand as a leading figure was also reinforced among Kathis, who indirectly projected him into a familiar cultural and social vocabulary, which could have held an alternative appeal in relation to Sahajanand's divine status. For instance, among Kathi Darbars, the practice of owning a horse as a luxury and status symbol was revered;³¹ Sahajanand also took to keeping one. He is often depicted with this horse on the cover of published *lila* texts and in *lila* paintings.

Sahajanand's assistance in managing the financial and political lives of followers was as much about the *sampraday* as about them, since they were the very community with whom the founder was bound through affective ties. Moreover, in practical terms, the relative stability of adherents created ripple effects for the *sampraday*, as it relied on its patrons' contributions of cash, grains, and land. Sahajanand seems to have become a leading figure among the Kathis at a time when their financial, political, and social status was threatened. For instance, he not only played a paternalistic role to his chief patron, Dada Khachar, in organizing his marriage, but also

pleased and requested Ladudanji's father to send his son to Bhuj for further education. Here, for a decade, Ladu Barot studied *pingal* at Lakhat Braj Patshala.

Under his *guru* Abhaidanji Ladudanji learned about *avatacharitra*, *rajniti*, and other *granths*. He also was also educated in various *avdhans* as well as *dingalsa*. Ladu Barot engaged competitively with poets of other rulers' courts. Upon completing his education, he received recognition from the Maharaj with numerous titles, Gala, *Kavi Bhramanand*, 118. After his education in Bhuj, in Dhamalkaa under Bhattacharya Vipra Ladu Barot studied Sanskrit and several musical instruments, laudatory poetic conventions, and treatises about political statecraft, ala, *Kavi Bhramanand*, 119. After his extensive education Ladudanji was called to and honored by several princely courts in western India, though he did not permanently reside at any of them and eventually joined the *sampraday* as an ascetic, causing great distress to his family and in several courts where he was admired. At some point before becoming an ascetic Bhramanand had been sought after or patronized by the court of Jamnagar, Junagadh, Bhavnagar, and Dhanghdra, Gala, *Kavi Bhramanand*, 120-21. However, even after his new path in the *sampraday*, he continued to engage with those outside the *sampraday* on matters of his expertise, like Chandramani Sharma, a learned expert of *kavya shastra* of Sidhpur, Gala, *Kavi Bhramanand*, 131-32. Bhramanand was not the only devotee with vital cultural and political talents that served the *sampraday*. Over the course of the latter half of the century Dalpatram (1820-98), the poet who go on to become very famous in the region and contribute in profound ways to Gujarat's modern cultural programming, was a critical voice for strengthening the *sampraday*'s identity internally and in the region through the medium of literature. Recognizing his talent as a young man, the *sampraday* nurtured Dalpatram's talents and sent him, a *brahman* originally from Wadhwan (northern Kathiawar), to study in Bhuj at the school where Bhramanand studied. Later in life, in addition to becoming a major public figure, Dalpatram would return his talents in poetry, Braj, and modern Gujarati by writing for the *sampraday* at a juncture of major cultural and intellectual shifts in western India.

³¹ Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 99-100.

seems have been involved in managing his affairs, accounts, and estates. Thus, Sahajanand gained the ill will of those who were troubled by his support of his followers. For instance, there were ongoing feuds between Kathis, even in Dada's own family, about lands and money and competition to curry the favor of the Bhavnagar king, Wajesingh; Sahajanand became involved. Eventually, Sahajanand faced opposition from the Bhavnagar king when he wanted to build a temple on Dada's estate, and reportedly, Sahajanand later firmly told the difficult king that it was not a fort but simply a (non-threatening) temple that had been built in Gadhada and that the Dada Khachar was not trying to take any part of Wajesingh's kingdom.³² In other words, Sahajanand was perceived as a *guru* and also as the influential driver of decisions that affected local affairs. He was extensively involved in the affairs of his devotees. He worked side-by-side with them to ensure their well-being on matters related to local personal, financial, legal, and political spheres.

In sum, Sahajanand was driven to create a collective entity, the *sampraday*, around a devotional ideology that strove to be widely engaging, inclusive, deeply empathetic, and one that advocated for non-violence. He formulated a specific set of ethics for those joining the community but varied them according to individual needs, and sustained this with a well-developed infrastructure. As the *sampraday* became rooted, it constituted itself as a significant source of public authority. To be clear, while I do not posit that Sahajanand intended the *sampraday* as a political formation, nor did he perceive himself as a king for making claims to regional political authority, I have demonstrated the development of a significant source of power, and the kingdom-like features of this authority—a cultivated ideology with well-established networks, and formalized mechanisms that furthered its goals and presence across the region. With the combination of western India's challenging and fractured political environment,

³² Paramchaitanyanand Svami, *Gadhpurni Lila*, Charitra 125, Charitra 126.

and Sahajanand's approach to a hardy existence, the *sampraday* was able to gain major local influence.

CLAIMING DIFFERENCE

Historically, demarcating and defining community identity has been a continual process since the *sampraday*'s inception in the nineteenth century; however, Svaminarayan proponents might view their philosophical stance as emanating from an eternal, fixed truth. To succeed in an immensely diverse landscape of religious communities, traditions, practices, and beliefs in the nineteenth century in western India, the Svaminarayan *sampraday* had to distinguish itself. Since long before this period, the region had been a richly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic context, as historian Samira Sheikh has shown in a study of medieval Gujarat. This region in the medieval era was characterized by linguistic multiplicity with Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian, and medieval Gujarati coexisting in a varied social context, where many religious entities rivaled one another for adherents and resources. The understanding of such a diverse past and its trajectories has otherwise been obfuscated or neglected, especially in light of later claims about Gujarat, such as those by the influential nationalist writer Kanaiyalal M. Munshi.³³

At the center of Indian Ocean trade networks, western India had long been a space of comingling ethnicities, cultures, and religious activities and it continued well into the nineteenth century. In his study of Islamic production in the city of Bombay in western India, Nile Green offers the theoretical model of "religious economy" to explain why religion thrived in the modern era, and its pervasive reach that linked the port city's vernacular modernity with the Indian Ocean and to places like Gujarat and Hyderabad. The religious activity of Muslims and

³³ Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, 1-24. For a discussion of how the idea of the region of Gujarat has been shaped and reshaped by different narratives of its history, including by the nationalist Munshi and the late colonial state, see Simpson, "Introduction," 1-8.

other groups was further spread and diversified alongside Christian missionaries' proselytization of the city's industrial labor force in the nineteenth century. However, to emerge and succeed in a rich, diverse landscape of religious communities and traditions, the new *sampraday* had to be distinct from others and compelling to the people of the region.³⁴ By the start of the nineteenth century, it was necessary for Sahajanand to firmly anchor himself and his spiritual leadership in terms that would be persuasive, acceptable, and appealing to his contemporaries.

In developing a community, Sahajanand allied with the cultural establishment in western India and referred to familiar Vaishnava themes, as discussed in the previous chapter. While Sahajanand's reliance on established cultural tropes helped introduce the new formation with greater ease, distinguishing himself from previous formations was vital for justifying the new community's existence. Sahajanand acknowledged that he shared the same fabric as those already popular in the region and represented a familiar experience, and yet, he projected that his community maintained a distinct stance from others. As Andrew Nicholson's major study about pre-colonial reflections on the consolidation of Hindu identity shows, intellectual dialogue on the subject progressed over seven centuries; the Indic intellectual landscape was unquestionably evolving. In other words, the creation of an identity was a matter of process.³⁵ Similarly, Christopher Minkowski demonstrates that during the early modern period philosophical stances were continuously changing, rather than fixed.³⁶ The same pattern was underway in the Svaminarayan *sampraday* in the modern period since its inception. Furthermore, the process of

³⁴ Green, *Bombay Islam*, 2-16.

³⁵ See Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*.

³⁶ Minkowski, "Advaita Vedanta," 220-21.

redefining ideas was exacerbated over time with the emergence of various branches within the *sampraday*.³⁷

According to Svaminarayan accounts, Sahajanand grew the Svaminarayan community out of a smaller, local Vaishnava presence. Sahajanand's engagement in western India began as a disciple of Ramanand Svami in the Uddhav *sampraday*. Sahajanand had been initiated into the

³⁷ Sahajanand's philosophical model was not known by a distinct name at the time of the *sampraday*'s founding in the nineteenth century. During approximately the past thirty-five years, the BAPS branch has adopted a peculiar nomenclature: Navyavishishtadvaita, neo-qualified non-dualism (for one example among many, see *Handbook* 144), apparently derived from the scholarship of Ramesh M. Dave, Dave, R. M., "Vedanta Philosophy" and Dave, Navya-visistadvaita. However, Jyotindra M. Dave's study debated the nomenclature and noted several alternatives, all still distinct from the identifier Vishishtadvaita, including the identifier "Sri Svaminarayan Darsana," Dave, J. M., "Harivakyasudhasindhu," 286-290. In recent years, BAPS also shifted away from the identification Navyavishishtadvaita and moved toward terming Sahajanand's philosophy Svaminarayan Darshan (for example, see Mukundcarandas, *Bhagwan Svaminarayan*, 69), though at present many of its website pages (<http://www.baps.org>) continue to reflect the earlier naming convention. Notably, in 2007 Swami Bhadreshdas, a scholar ascetic of the BAPS, wrote 'Svaminarayan Bhashyam,' a Sanskrit commentary on the teachings of Sahajanand Swami in the Vachnamrt, by which the Svaminarayan *sampraday* could be affixed as an independent school of thought in the landscape of Vedanta. Over two centuries after the founding of the *sampraday* the production of a classical model of commentary was intended to establish Sahajanand Swami's philosophy as a distinct school, Svaminarayan Darshan. According to the BAPS branch's website, the twenty-first century intellectual project is in the context of the major commentarial traditions of theologians such as Shankarcharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhavacuar, Nimbakacharya, and Vallabacharya, who established distinct schools of Indian thought.

While the BAPS branch distinguishes Sahajanand Swami's nineteenth-century theological position with distinct nomenclatures and commentaries, other major branches, like Vadtal Desh, have vehemently argued that Sahajanand Swami's philosophy should simply be identified as Vishishtadvaita. Some Vadtal theologians today also emphasize that the current name of the *sampraday*, Svaminarayan, is certainly a popular and appropriate as an identifier but its original identification is the Uddhav *sampraday* (Sahajanand himself uses this identification in the *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 10). In effect, Vadtal Desh is keen on outlining an older and unchanging pre-nineteenth century lineage for the *sampraday*. At first glance this seems to be a matter of relatively minor differences, but they also hint at related, key theological differences between the branches. Vadtal Desh's claim to Sahajanand's adherence to the Vishishtadvaita position could be to counter or refute BAPS' recent twentieth-century foundations. The ascetic Yagnapurushdas Svami, also known as Shastriji Maharaj in BAPS, founded BAPS in 1907 after separating from Vadtal Desh. This separation concerned theological differences about the acceptance (or not) of the manifestation of *akshar*. Uncompromisingly, BAPS upholds that *akshar* has a personal manifest form. The conception of *akshar* is a historically based corporeal reality that has translated into a succession of *gurus* in BAPS, each the embodiment of *akshar* at a given time (Shastriji Maharaj was understood to be one such form of *akshar*).

Vadtal Desh, as well as Amdavad Desh, among others, strictly denies the view of a manifest form of *akshar*. This, then, could possibly explain why there exists a debate over whether or not Sahajanand's philosophical position in the nineteenth century was a novel view requiring a new name, or the continuation of centuries-old *Vishishtadvaita*: the principle of *akshar* was not part of Ramanujacharya's *Vishishtadvaita* model. However, *akshar* was introduced by Sahajanand during discussions about his philosophical position. Thus, to formally recognize how Sahajanand's articulations expanded beyond Ramanujacharya's discussion would open up an avenue that emphasizes one of those new elements—*akshar*—which in turn would strengthen the position of those that depend on this principle. In sum, (re-)articulating ideas in new terms has been part of differentiating the Svaminarayan *sampraday* in relation to a variety of others, internal and external to the community, over the past two hundred years.

fold and was given two names: Sahajanand (the name by which he became popular) and Narayanmuni, in the year c. 1800 in the village of Piplana (in Kathiawar).³⁸ For two years the young devotee served Ramanand.³⁹ As Ramanand Svami was aging he decided upon his successor, appointing Sahajanand as the *acharya* to head the *sampraday* in Jetpur (in Kathiawar). The relatively newer devotee was chosen in this capacity despite the presence of ascetics more senior in age and status, those who had had been long committed disciples and would have been suitable for such a position.⁴⁰ Upon Ramanand Svami's death in Farneni in c. 1802,⁴¹ Sahajanand helmed the Uddhav community.⁴² As the new *acharya*, Sahajanand would have not only possessed some public familiarity but also an important spiritual lineage from his association with Ramanand Svami. Upon joining this local community Sahajanand was connected to the cultural personalities of Uddhav and theologian Ramanujacharya at the start of the nineteenth century, an esteemed history that would have aided the young teacher as he started the Svaminarayan *sampraday*.

Sahajanand's authority as a religious guide was actively reinforced in front of the community with an honorable depiction of this spiritual lineage, and because of an emphasis that knowing this lineage was vital for adherents. In 1826, many years after having undertaken leadership, Sahajanand ardently expressed the need for his followers to be equipped with knowledge for the sake of collective preservation and to help steady their own individual views. Seated in an assembly, he counseled that adherents should be well informed about particular

³⁸ The date of the initiation was Kartik Sud 11, S. 1857.

³⁹ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.57.45-1.57.46, 1.58.37-1.58.38, 1.59.15.

⁴⁰ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.59.19-1.59.74.

⁴¹ Svami passed away on Maghsar Sud 13, S. 1858.

⁴² Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.60.5.

issues so as to not be in a position of having no answers when questioned by others, and be in possession of information to remedy doubt that they might ever experience personally. In other words, being conscious of institutional and spiritual genealogy fulfilled the requisite of community self-awareness. Hence, Sahajanand stated, according to the *Vachanamrt*, that Ramanand Svami, their eighteenth-century *guru*, was the incarnation of the close associate of the deity Krishna, Uddhava.⁴³ On a philosophical plane Sahajanand relates Ramanand Svami to Ramanujacharya (c. 1017-1137 CE), the twelfth-century founder of Sri Vaishnava community and proponent of the Vishishtadvaita school (qualified non-dualism) of Vedanta thought.⁴⁴ Explaining that Ramanand's initiation into Ramanujacharya's fold was at the hands of Ramanujacharya himself, as experienced by the initiate in his dream, Sahajanand also gained an esteemed linkage. To ensure that little room was left for other interpretations, Sahajanand remained firm on the subject. Sahajanand, again, explicitly lays out the teacher-student lineage. He outlines, Ramanujacharya was Ramanand Svami's *guru* and Ramanand Svami was Sahajanand Svami's own *guru*.⁴⁵

Philosophical genealogy was a crucial matter in the creation of the *sampraday*. However, presenting a longer genealogy was not necessarily an interest of Sahajanand. Ramanand Svami's *guru* in the eighteenth-century, Atmanand Svami, is not accounted for in the intellectual pedigree. Atmanand Svami initiated Ramanand Svami, a *brahman* aspirant from Bihar who, like Sahajanand, was said to have undertaken a pilgrimage at a young age to learn from scholars, and

⁴³ In the *Bhagavata Purana*, an especially revered and important text in Vaishnava culture, Uddhava has a significant role as he received the knowledge of *bhakti* from Krishna. In a similar hierarchical role of devotee and God, Sahajanand in *lila* narratives is said to have been the divine figure that Ramanand had all along been waiting to announce to the world.

⁴⁴ Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 135-38.

⁴⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Vadtal, 18. Sahajanand made these comments on February 7, 1826.

eventually arrived in Dvarka, Kathiawar.⁴⁶ Dvarka was closely tied to the deity Krishna as it was considered to be his kingdom, and was a magnet for pilgrims since the fifteenth century. Samira Sheikh notes that because the town's status as a major Vaishnava cultural symbol was so significant, as was the revenue generated from its temple complexes especially since the early modern period, various religious sects and rulers vied to control it.⁴⁷ Yet, despite a linkage to the highly regarded Vaishnava site, Sahajanand did not seek to align the new *sampraday* with this aspect of the lineage. In my estimation, Atmanand Svami was omitted from the genealogical articulation likely because he was a proponent of the Advaita philosophical school (non-dualist). Differences, whether nominal or major, mattered in delineating ideological boundaries.⁴⁸ As Christopher Minkowski has shown, Advaitins during the early modern period were preoccupied by theological disagreements with other schools including Vishishtadvaita. The crux of the longstanding debate among dualists and non-dualists was focused on the ontological position of God, and whether there was difference between the individual soul and the Godhead.⁴⁹ In the later period in South Asia such debates continued to have prominence, passionately sustained by the dedicated efforts of not only concerned Hindu intellectuals but in other collective formations like the Sikh community.⁵⁰

Overall, the background of Ramanand Svami and his followers would have enriched Sahajanand's own work in the nineteenth century. It is not clear if Ramanand's earlier adherents

⁴⁶ Williams, *Svaminarayan Hinduism*, 16.

⁴⁷ Sheikh, "Ruling Dvaraka," 113.

⁴⁸ See Horstmann, "Theology and Statecraft," for the role of articulating theological differences for the purpose of securing sectarian identity in western India during the eighteenth century.

⁴⁹ Minkowski, "Advaita Vedanta," 211-12.

⁵⁰ Mandair, "The Politics."

characterized Ramanand Svami this way prior to Sahajanand's arrival in Gujarat at the turn of the century, but it is likely that many of them did come to adopt, even if slowly or partially (or at least not vehemently refute) this lineage after Ramanand's death;⁵¹ for it was these same followers, ascetics and families, that then served as the base of the nascent Svaminarayan community taking shape under Sahajanand in the following century. Records show that community members around Sahajanand supplied vital energy for building the new formation in the region.⁵² In addition to providing a social base for enacting his vision, the link to a teacher provided Sahajanand a well-regarded genealogy that would lend authority to his status and work. While on the one hand presenting a genealogy at the outset of the century facilitated the transformation of student into teacher, over time, this same lineage would serve as a *pre*-history of Sahajanand's divine authority. He would become a figure understood to have certainly (but reverentially) surpassed his own teacher, and ultimately, society itself. Accounts of Sahajanand's status as a divine figure, a deity living on earth, reflect historical efforts by Sahajanand to persuade his contemporaries of this understanding of his identity, and efforts to discursively establish a position (whether or not it was accepted at the time) that would continue to provide a template for the future.

In parallel to grounding the new *sampraday* by its regionally embedded lineage and associating some of its features with influential aspects of early modern Vaishnava culture, the community's founding might have also been bolstered by a lack of extensive lineage. Sahajanand had arrived in the region after an extended solo journey throughout India. Young itinerant men,

⁵¹ By 1829, the narrative of Ramanujacharya's initiation of Ramanand Swami is also recounted in foundational *sampraday* literature. See Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.14.45-1.14.57.

⁵² Some dissent is said to have occurred after Sahajanand Swami was appointed as the head of the community, Williams, *An Introduction*, 17, but those followers of Ramanand Swami did not continue in the new fold, rejecting Sahajanand's leadership. Sustaining authority in the new *sampraday* remained a continual process.

meditating on questions of existence and wandering in places like the Himalayas, were a common sight in the nineteenth century. Sahajanand's contemporaries—religious reformers like Ram Mohan Roy and later Dayanand Saraswati—had both undertaken such journeys.⁵³ The narrative of the founder's history prior to entering Gujarat conveyed that over the course of his travels, Sahajanand had surveyed and studied a range of ideologies, experienced and contemplated different social circumstances from Bengal to South India, and mastered yoga in the Himalayas.⁵⁴ Throughout the years Sahajanand traveled on a spiritual quest as a young man, *sampraday* narratives imply that he did not possess strict spiritual leanings.

As a result of the image of an unaffiliated spiritual background, Sahajanand could have gained a reputation of having less bias and fewer preconceived motives at the start of his activity in Gujarat. The absence of longstanding loyalty might have yielded him greater clout. Moreover, although Sahajanand's non-native status could have conjured a view of him as less stable, in contrast, it seems to have advanced the perception of his ethnic, social, and political neutrality by virtue of being unaffiliated with ongoing dynamics and ties in the region. Rather than a deficit, this background would have been a source of empowerment. Finally, Sahajanand's childhood as a young *brahman* in the late eighteenth century was scholastically grounded. He had studied scriptures under his father's tutelage in Avadh or Ayodhya (Oudh) and had reportedly, even victoriously, participated with his father in debates on Vishistadvaita in Kasi (Benares).⁵⁵ After

⁵³ Williams, *Introduction*, 14-15.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Introduction*, 15.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Introduction*, 14. In this period, Christopher Minkowski has shown that the social networks of Advaitin intellectuals included senior family members. Fathers taught their children as pupils, Minkowski, "Advaita Vedanta," 213-14. Owing to the significance of Benares for Vedanta intellectual activity, it was not uncommon in this period for young men to travel to Benares for education. Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy, a contemporary of Sahajanand, was also a student of Vedanta at Benares, Minkowski, "Advaita Vedanta," 223.

years of travel, Sahajanand ended his journey in Gujarat.⁵⁶ Such reported details about Sahajanand cumulatively yielded the portrait of a wise, deeply experienced young person when Sahajanand arrived in western India: he was a well-educated and thoughtful aspirant, one who was a sincere seeker, yet discriminating of the teachers and ideas encountered on his travels. Considering this perception, Sahajanand's leadership in the Uddhav community soon after joining it and his subsequent introduction of new ideas would have garnered merit among his audiences. Perhaps it was in recognition of his potential to lead that Ramanand Svami named him as successor. For example, very soon after Ramanand Svami's death, Sahajanand Svami introduced the recitation of a new chant in the *sampraday*, "Svami-Narayan," in lieu of the long-held hymn, "Ramkrishna Govinda Hare Narayan."⁵⁷ This was clearly a bold shift in the conventions of the established community.

The character of the Svaminarayan community, as already evidenced, was not as strictly bounded or unprecedented as it presented itself, but was based on incorporating and negotiating different aspects from the shared fabric of existing religious cultures.⁵⁸ In this vein, Sahajanand developed his theological view by first adopting Ramanujacharya's philosophy of qualified non-

⁵⁶ It was in Kathiawar where Sahajanand's journey ended. Here, he met some of Ramanand Swami's ascetics, whereby he joined their ashram and order and accepted Ramanand Swami as his *guru*. As an aspirant, Sahajanand is said to have reportedly asked questions about the nature of *jiva*, *ishwar*, *maya*, *brahman*, *parabrahman* to these ascetics—the five principles that became the basis of the philosophical position he later claimed for the Svaminarayan *sampraday*. See Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 1.51.23-1.57.37. While the distinct label 'Navyavishishtadvaita' is a twentieth-century development, Sahajanand had a more subtle, or perhaps hesitant, approach to making a new philosophical proclamation in the nineteenth century: he simultaneously acknowledged both his adoption of Vishishtadvaita, the position of his *guru* Ramanand Swami, and yet, at other times discussed his philosophical platform as a modification of this foundation with the addition of two eternal realities.

⁵⁷ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 33.

⁵⁸ Sahajanand combined elements from the theistic Vedanta philosophy of Vallabha and from the schools of Samkhya and Yoga. G. N. Joshi describes his approach as "a kind of eclectic synthesis" that did not hesitate to combine different positions, and in turn, worked advantageously to appeal to diverse viewpoints, "Shri Swaminarayan," 96.

dualism, Vishistadvaita, as did his *guru*.⁵⁹ However, he distinguished his own philosophical identity from Ramanujacharya's position by adding two more principles to the three principles Ramanujacharya discussed.⁶⁰ Sahajanand incorporated the elements of *parabrahman* (*purushottam*), Supreme God, and *brahman* (*akshar*), the abode of *parabrahman* (*purushottam*), both eternal realities, into his model. For Sahajanand, *purushottam* and *akshar* were beyond and unaffected by the illusory *maya* (*prakriti*), the entity that formed the material world. *Akshar* (or *Akshardham*) represented an abode and a state of being, and an impersonal form. In the larger cosmic scheme, various deities and manifestations of God existed in their respective abodes or states. In this hierarchy, *purushottam* was the utmost Supreme God and in parallel, Akshardham was the highest abode or state of existence.⁶¹ Sahajanand's own authority was imbricated in this model. Critically, he advocated in ambiguous ways that he had manifested on earth from his original form as *purushottam* as the master of Akshardham. Beyond serving as their *guru*, Sahajanand promoted himself to his adherents as a living form of divinity and also the embodiment, experience, and proof of this divinity.

Since strict communal identities had not entirely crystalized and Sahajanand's approach was inclusive, his community's composition also reflected a mix of identities reflecting backgrounds that would later fall under modern categories of "Islamic." As the work of Teena Purohit has shown through the study of the transformation of the Satpanthi tradition's identity, its earlier form was a more expansive identity. It exemplified the particular nature of South Asian

⁵⁹ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 121. *Vachanamrt*, Loya, 14. Sahajanand made these comments on December 31, 1820.

⁶⁰ Sahajanand differed from the traditional medium of commentaries through which Ramanujacharya communicated. Rather, Sahajanand taught his theological views through an exchange of questions and answers, Williams, *Introduction*, 186. His audience spanned ascetics and laity, from scholars to petty chiefs and peasants, men and women, as recorded in the *Vachnamrt*.

⁶¹ Williams, *Introduction*, 83-85.

Islam, a religious orientation that put Indic and Islamic cultures in conversation in ways not discernable in the sectarian terms prevalent today.⁶² Francoise Mallison's work has detailed the overlap and mutual influences between religious communities and *sampradays* in Kathiawar and Kutch, with shared or similar practices, beliefs, and texts circulating between popular saints and groups like the Satpanthi, Pranamis, as well as the site of where the Svaminarayan community emerged. While certain aspects of regional religious culture transcended the boundaries of any single community, this is not readily acknowledged by the respective communities today.⁶³ Although he did not believe in caste distinctions even while observing some of its features, such as separate dining, Sahajanand had Muslim followers during the 1820s.⁶⁴ Moreover, because he was building a *sampraday* through a socially inclusive approach, and to underscore his specific identity across a population committed to diverse traditions, Sahajanand practiced *samadhi*. That is, Sahajanand would put people, including those from different *sampradays* and associated with Jain and Islamic traditions, into a meditative trance. They would reportedly perceive him to be their savior in the form of their respective deity.⁶⁵ This enfolding of various beliefs was reflected in Sahajanand's claims to Bishop Heber that multiple *avatars* of the same God had manifested in different places on earth, for Christians, Muslims, and Hindus.⁶⁶

⁶² Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 4.

⁶³ See Mallison, *Saints and Sacred Places* and Mallison, "Delami-Aradh."

⁶⁴ Paramtattvadas and Williams, "Swaminarayan and British Contacts," 60, 62; Heber, *Narrative*, 152.

⁶⁵ Akhandanand Svami, *Shriharicharitra*, 1.9.10-1.9.25. This practice was not without opposition in the *sampraday*. Clearly, there were debates about what was reasonable or irrational. Muktanand was quite disturbed that Sahajanand was claiming to put people in *samaadhi*, a deeply meditative state believed to only be achieved with intense yogic practice. He viewed this practice as misleading and illusory, and unsound, Akhandanand Svami, *Shriharicharitra*, 1.10.2-1.10.7. The widely practice was also discussed in colonial writings, Paramtattvadas and Williams, "British Contacts," 63; "Indian Sect," 348. The promotion of enchantment was troublesome; struggle occurred throughout Sahajanand's career, revealing that adherents were not readily comfortable with all aspects of the enchanted portrait that was being advanced.

⁶⁶ Heber, *Narrative*, 150-51.

Dominique Sila-Khan and Zawahir Moir have evaluated some of the threads of overlap between the Satpanthi and Svaminarayan communities through the Patidar caste collective. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the majority of Satpanthi Imamshai community members were from the agrarian Patidar community. During the early colonial years, they maintained their identity as “Gupti,” hiding their identity with a Hindu affiliation. But as new religious boundaries were becoming fixed under colonial influence, and upper-caste Hindus started seeking new affirmations of their identity in opposition to Christians and Muslims, the Patidar Satpanthis were also affected. A new awareness emerging from economic and educational growth, and by the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, the Patidar Imamshahis wanted to reconcile with their fellow caste members who held Hindu identities, and so joined them as Ramanandis, disciples of the Arya Samaj and Sanatana Dharma, as well as the Svaminarayan community.⁶⁷ Even as recently as in 2000, Zawahir Moir and Dominique Sila-Khan have observed cases of the Satpanthis in Kutch leaving behind Imamshahi tradition for new affiliations, like Svaminarayan.⁶⁸

Of note, in regard to the early Svaminarayan formation and its connections to other local practices and beliefs, is that the village of Pirana, the key site of the Satpanth community, was very close to Jetalpur. Jetalpur was where Sahajanand frequented to gather people and conduct sacrifices; eventually, a Svaminarayan temple was built there. A *lila* source reveals that Sahajanand once visited Pirana while traveling from Jetalpur. Reportedly, at the time of the visit Sahajanand had the Pir (Muslim master) give up his authority and clothed him in an *alfi* (type of

⁶⁷ Moir and Khan, “New Light,” 222-27.

⁶⁸ Moir and Khan, “New Light,” 213. In broader terms for an evaluation of the phenomenon of how certain religious groups in western India have not consistently and neatly matched the distinct categories of “Hindu” or “Muslim” in their historical and contemporary formulations of identity, see Khan, *Conversion and Shifting*.

garment) but the *Pir*'s followers became upset and had 'kaka' remove the *alfi*.⁶⁹ Without any other details provided in context of these verses in the narrative, and without other sources that discuss related matters, the brief, vague mention of the submission of the leader and teacher of Pirana to Sahajanand is not a historical claim that can be substantiated. Nevertheless, cumulatively it seems likely that there was some engagement in the early nineteenth century between the closely residing communities. While the exact nature of their historical relationship remains ambiguous, the ethnographic evidence of linkage from late nineteenth-century that Purohit cites is significant, including the conversion of caste *patels* from Satpanthi to Svaminarayan, among other overlaps between practices of the two collectives.⁷⁰ Other compelling ethnographic observations of this period indicate that Hindu caste groups like *brahman*, *vania*, *leva*, and *kadva kanbi*, goldsmiths, and carpenters among others, honored the Imamshah at Pirana while at the same time they observed rules and festivities associated with their respective castes.⁷¹ These late nineteenth century records generally show a continuity of Hindu-Muslim religions in beliefs and practices in various areas of Gujarat, like among the Jadejas of Kutch who were classified as being half-Hindu and half-Muslim. Notably, the Jadejas exempted from this fluid identity categorization in in the late nineteenth-century census records were those who were Vaishnava or Svaminarayan.⁷²

However, for the new *sampraday* to become embedded in such a diverse context, Sahajanand worked especially hard to nurture one group: *brahman* ritual specialists and theologians. Though Sahajanand's early collective was not dominated by caste or class elites, he

⁶⁹ Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 56.25-26.

⁷⁰ Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 101-2.

⁷¹ *Gazetteer: Ahmedabad*, 289-90.

⁷² *Gazetteer: Cutch*, 64.

focused on gaining the goodwill and approval of *brahmins* because of their broad importance as social, cultural, and administrative elites. Further, Sahajanand had to preserve his standing among them as a fellow *brahman* while he formed a new *sampraday* and publically projected its identity. His work could not succeed without wider approval and recognition, thus he had to make cultural negotiations. Accordingly, the Shaivite tradition, which was patronized by many *brahmins*, was reverentially incorporated into Sahajanand's injunctions.⁷³ Overall, *sampraday* building, ethics, and the state legitimation were ongoing processes linked to one another, but also in flux as each category was under re-formulation in the nineteenth century. This was not new in the period, though it was heightened. This pattern of drawing out, defining, or denying religious and political identities, happened through the forum of debate had occurred since the early modern period. Monika Horstmann has argued in her study of the Jaipur court of Jaisingh in the eighteenth century that Vaishnava intellectuals, who were ritual specialist and theologians, played dual roles in the royal court. On the one hand, they served as tools of statecraft for the ruler. That is, they were compelled to use the forum of theological debate as a religious symbol to legitimate the king, helping to assert his superiority over competing rulers in a period when states were trying to re-establish their authority as regional successors of imperial Mughal rule. On the other hand, in the hope of securing state patronage to bolster their own sect's recognition and sustain their livelihood in the region, these intellectuals, through debate with one another, were forced to clarify their respective principles and protect their positions by safeguarding orthodox *dharma*, like *varnasrama*. Specifically, since one of the goals of the Jaipur court through intellectuals had been to affirm Vedic Vaishnavism, a form of religious coherence to counter the increasing number of *gurus* and practices emerging and claiming sole legitimacy,

⁷³ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 79, 84, 149.

maintaining Vedic ritual tradition had become critical.⁷⁴ In Gujarat after the turn of the century, similar dynamics were at play.

Unlike in other arenas, princely states had a major role in the creation of religious agency. They either opened up or narrowed religious power in their jurisdiction in a way that did not simply parallel colonial authorities. Sahajanand had to consider this factor throughout the various jurisdictions of Gujarat in the process of bringing his vision to life: effectively, one that presented a new social and cultural identity, claimed unprecedented validity, re-adjusted ethics, and presented the dramatic idea of divinity as currently manifest in western India. With the intention to actualize this project under different polities, Sahajanand then had to remain attentive to appeasing *brahmans*, especially by vociferously opposing one of their predominant orthodox practices: the use of animal sacrifices in Vedic rituals.⁷⁵ In these cases, the founder had to give careful thought to *brahmans*, a source of theological approval as well as facilitators of royal patronage. Royal supporters were necessary to the formation's penetration into various areas early on. Sahajanand fed and gifted *brahmans* at the mass, public animal-less *yagnas* he organized from as early as c. 1809.⁷⁶ Sahajanand's attitude toward the authorities among *brahmans* and the state was practical, and thus somewhat distant, but also able to appease through giving honor and praise. To advance his objectives, many of which were unwelcomed, he remained steadily cordial and as inoffensive as he could be with diverse audiences. Yet, he does not seem to have subsumed himself under any particular influence, nor did he nor abandon his controversial work—but indeed, he does seem to have courted these influential parties.

⁷⁴ See Horstmann, "Theology and Statecraft."

⁷⁵ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 12.

⁷⁶ Bhumanand Svami, *Shriharililamrutgranth*, 32-34. In turn, the nurturing of *brahmans* became institutionalized. Today, the Nar-Narayan Des branch still feeds great numbers of *brahmans* in the city of Ahmedabad annually amidst great ceremony.

Ultimately, this was an approach of an emerging non-statist power, a *sampraday* that needed to remain in the good favor of existing powers to secure a position in western India.

Svaminarayan ascetic scholars who trained in Sanskrit at Sahajanand's behest, were active participants in various philosophical debates. The format for these debates was prefigured in the early modern courts, Horstmann notes.⁷⁷ Frequenting debates ascetics experienced some success in this format, likely because on most subjects, Sahajanand's approach toward religious and social identity was moderate. He was slightly modifying fundamentals—whether philosophy or his position on *varnashramdharma*—not radically undoing them. However, Sahajanand's disavowal of animal sacrifice did acutely hit a nerve because of the region's deep Shaivite and Shakti affiliations. In c. 1809 in Jetalpur (outside Ahmedabad), Sahajanand organized a major *yagna* that excluded animal sacrifice, and attempted to convince leading *brahmans* of their missteps in goddess worship, including the killing of animals and use of alcohol.⁷⁸ Not only did he gain the ire of local *brahmans*—who in turn provoked the government in Ahmedabad to take action, deterring his subsequent plans—it led to questioning of Sahajanand's background, whether indeed he was a *brahman* as he claimed, along with several attempts on Sahajanand's life. An assassination was attempted at the court of the Peshwa government in Ahmedabad as well as in areas between the city and Jetalpur, as Sahajanand and ascetics appear to have been pursued by mercenary warrior ascetics. From that point, Sahajanand was banned from the city of Ahmedabad, and was unable to safely return until the British administration of the city was established in 1818.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Horstman, "Theology and Statecraft," 189, 198.

⁷⁸ Bhumanand Svami, *Shriharililamrutgranth*, 32–35.

⁷⁹ Bhumanand Svami, *Shriharililamrutgranth*, 36; Akhandanand Svami, *Shriharicharitra*, 1.40.15-1.40.19; Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Mul Vato*, 69–70, 72–74.

Similarly, in the city of Bhuj in Kutch, the Nagar *brahman* Jagjivan Mehta also had adversarial relations with Sahajanand over the issue of animal sacrifice. Mehta was a key adviser to the regent in Kutch, Fateh Muhammed (r. 1804-13). As a devotee of the goddess tradition, Mehta had organized a *yagna* and invited Sahajanand. But upon learning of there being animal sacrifice, Sahajanand opposed the ritual and debated the merit of this act according to the Vedas. The opposition upset Mehta enough to seed a grudge against Sahajanand.⁸⁰ But Sahajanand was not entirely subject to the whims of cultural and political adversaries. Some of his followers retained power as government bureaucrats or local elites throughout the region. In the case of protection from Mehta, Sahajanand found security in Bhuj with Sunderji Suthar, who was associated with the Bhuj court and known to Mehta, as well as with a well-known wrestler in Bhuj, Gangaram, who was also linked to the local government. Eventually, Mehta, like the government in Ahmedabad, pursued Sahajanand with mercenaries, but Sahajanand appears to have remained unharmed.⁸¹

Sahajanand was strongly opposed to the goddess and left-handed Tantric traditions, long-held affiliations among the local populations.⁸² Besides *brahmans*, the objection to animal sacrifice would have been quite challenging for Sahajanand's Kathi patrons, who shared practices with Rajputs, such as being non-vegetarian.⁸³ Moreover, the many low-status groups that Sahajanand worked so hard to incorporate into the community were also linked to devotion of goddesses; Shakti and Tantric practices were relevant to these groups. Pastoralists since

⁸⁰ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 2.19.1-2.19.81

⁸¹ Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 49-51; Madhavdasji Svami, *Shri Harikrishna*, 40.4-40.30.

⁸² Williams, *Introduction*, 28.

⁸³ Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 113-15.

medieval times had worshipped various forms of mother goddesses in Gujarat, often making them into clan goddesses.⁸⁴ Similarly, several clans of chieftaincies, especially in Kathiawar, appealed to non-Brahmanic culture to help authorize their status, as lower-ranked pastoral groups also turned to this culture because of its local characteristics. This meant the worship of local hero-gods and deities, often with both Hindu and Muslim associations, and associations with the left-handed Tantric practices.⁸⁵ Essentially, Sahajanand was disengaging with factors prevalent across the diverse ranks of society to whom he tried to appeal. It is not surprising, then, that while establishing a *sampraday* in a new vein, he had to court the most influential party, *brahmans*—those who could sway rulers and powerful religious voices. On the other hand, in terms of those that joined the *sampraday*, those mainly from non-Brahmin backgrounds, perhaps a different perspective was in place when Sahajanand elected to de-emphasize features from their culture—one that loosely paralleled local elite and colonial views.

From pre-colonial and colonial perspectives, the link between the practices and beliefs of non-*brahman* groups, as well as the actual status of these groups, mattered. In a study of the Bahuchara temple in the princely state of Baroda in eastern Gujarat, dedicated to the goddess Bahuchara Mata who was significant in Gujarat and Rajasthan, Samira Sheikh notes that pre-colonial and colonial governments and elites viewed the goddess worshippers as culturally and politically deviant. Devotees, which included Rajputs as well as non-*brahman* groups until at least the mid-nineteenth century, were associated with what were deemed unseemly practices, like animal sacrifice and cross-dressing. Some of the adherents—Kolis, Solankis, and Thakardas, of which many claimed affiliation with Rajput identity—were landholders wielding powerful control over territories north of Baroda. Their territorial power had been held before the

⁸⁴ Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, 130, 158-59.

⁸⁵ Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, 161.

nineteenth century, as well after the first decade of the century, though at this time the East India Company had negotiated with the Gaekwars to allow the latter to have control over these territories. Thus, the challenge and violence that landholder groups represented to Gaekwar or the Company, along with other low-status occupational groups that patronized the temple, discounted adherents of the goddess.⁸⁶ Similarly, from the eighteenth century and well into the mid-nineteenth century, even after Walker's settlement had halted state formation in Kathiawar, Kathis, who were in small periphery chiefdoms outside the major states, experienced and participated in unrest. The pattern of defending themselves against intruding forces and their role as outlaws earned the Kathis the classification of a 'criminal caste' by nineteenth-century administrators.⁸⁷ Alongside Kathis, Sahajanand had devotees from the Koli and Bhil communities, who were also deemed 'criminal' by colonial authorities and were characterized by local stereotypes in this vein even before British judgments.⁸⁸

Sahajanand's general disinterest in goddess traditions and associated practices paralleled local elite views about cultural beliefs and practices, but not his view about those that practiced them. Unambiguously, Sahajanand was deeply empathetic toward non-elite groups, and strove toward a relationship of intimacy through fostering affective ties. Thus, interestingly, nineteenth century Svaminarayan sources subtly reinforced elite views by representing the *sampraday's* work as favorable in light of British authorities. Several texts cite British commendation of Sahajanand's efforts among the Kathi, Koli, and Bhil populations, who were his devotees, and the gratefulness of the British for the *sampraday's* effect on them. The term used to describe

⁸⁶ Sheikh, "The Lives of Bahuchara Mata," 85, 88.

⁸⁷ Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 114, 289-91.

⁸⁸ Piliavsky, "The 'Criminal Tribe,'" 335. For an understanding of what drove groups like the Bhils to gain the label of "criminal tribes" under British administrators, see Stewart, "Bhils." For colonial histories of Kathiawar, see Wilberforce, *The History of Kathiawar*; Macmurdo, *The Peninsula of Gujarat*.

Sahajanand's engagement with the two parties is in exercising "vash," or control, over them.⁸⁹ However, across sources, the broader perspective that emerges of Sahajanand's attitude does not point to an agreement with British views about the incorrigible nature of Kathi and Koli groups, or a disparaging view of any part of the population. Citations of such British opinions reflected an interest in noting the colonial government's recognition of the *sampraday*. Moreover, Sahajanand inculcated a deeply affectionate social atmosphere amongst its members and repeatedly voiced the perception of social distinctions as the result of ignorance or misunderstanding. That is, in reality while he attempted to persuade others of the irrelevance of difference, in formal textual prescriptions the distinctions were not entirely abolished. Caste was another instance of the complex ways that Sahajanand presented himself: diversely engaging parties that were in his community and those without, representing the *sampraday*'s position differently to political authorities and the local public, and claiming certain formal injunctions while behaving otherwise.

With historiographical distance, one might assume the success of such measures seemed possible with the cooperation of ascetics and lay followers. But institution-making and authority-making, especially the remarkable nature of divine authority that Sahajanand wanted others to accept, his divinity, were continual exercises of persuasion and building trust. Undoubtedly, there was unease about ideas of enchantment, sources reveal.⁹⁰ The idea of divinity, let alone the

⁸⁹ Madhavdasji Svami, *Shri Harikrishna*, 22.44-64.

⁹⁰ While *lila* accounts lean toward glossing over tensions, close historiographical readings suggest that there was not immediate ease with Sahajanand's status. For example, leading and venerable figures like Muktanand Swami, Ramanand Swami's senior-most ascetic disciple who was over twenty years older than Sahajanand but who had reportedly accepted the young novice's appointment to head the *sampraday*, still reflect hesitancy about the changing authority. Despite Sahajanand's appointment, Muktanand had continued to offer his original guru, Ramanand Swami, chief respect. It was later on that Muktanand's views altered and he went on to become one of Sahajanand Swami's closest associates and a leader among ascetics. Notably, it was Muktanand who eventually composed a deeply laudatory song praising Sahajanand, which became the central hymn sung daily in the *sampraday*, Williams, *Introduction*, 75-76. Simultaneously, Muktanand was the voice of hesitation about certain

presence of divinity in nineteenth century Gujarat, could not simply be produced through a linear or teleological process of construction or even persuasion. In her study of the Khalsa formation in the eighteenth century Punjab, Purnima Dhavan has insightfully observed the oft-overlooked role of affect in studies of South Asian history. Arguing for the importance of emotional bonds in community formation, the study illustrates how affective themes critically tied the loyalty of diverse social groups to a single religious authority, the last Sikh guru.⁹¹ This pattern holds in western India and the formation of the Svaminarayan *bhakti* collective. In the coming chapter, we will see how affect was the means of strengthening the *sampraday* among adherents of various backgrounds.

CONCLUSION: (DIS)ENGAGING THE POLITICAL

Sahajanand's intentions in operating with an awareness of the political context were not statist, but were rather *sampraday*-related. Ultimately, Sahajanand's subtle but potent position converged the stances of being explicitly disengaged and explicitly engaged politically—that is, a cautious orientation in which he was distant from government but aware of its presence, avoiding the extremes of either disavowing or vociferously supporting polities. Sahajanand, ascetics, and lay adherents engaged with various government officials, and political and religious leaders, to introduce the *sampraday* and solicit support for their activities. Kim has made the relevant point that meeting Bishop Heber, a local Indian ruler, or the Governor General of Bombay were events that must have held fairly equal weight for Sahajanand—at the very least

approaches used by Sahajanand to establish the *sampraday*. As a measured and thoughtful personality, on occasions he was doubtful about aspects of Sahajanand's propagation of his own divinity.

⁹¹ Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*, 149-69.

they were all occasions to engage with figures whose voices could speak of the community to broader audiences, if not also serve as influential associates.⁹²

Sahajanand's stance in the political field was moderate. Thus, since some of his devotees were small-time rulers, Sahajanand's prescriptions for lifestyle and ethics included guidelines for princely rulers,⁹³ such as knowing where to send spies.⁹⁴ More to the point, as part of the very devotional ideology of the Svaminarayan formation, Sahajanand asked all his adherents to be astute about their political environment and modify their individual lives accordingly. Practically speaking, when appealing to the colonial state through unofficial intermediaries like Bishop Heber Sahajanand presented himself and his ideas with an air that exhibited steadiness and self-possession, even when he was not easily accepted.⁹⁵ Heber was a figure, albeit a religious one, that could serve as a voice to reach the Bombay Government with Sahajanand's requests. Similar to his steadiness with Heber, in later years Sahajanand was confident about airing grievances and his frank views with Governor Malcolm. Yet, on the other hand, when speaking to his adherents Sahajanand voiced a position of being unimpressed by socially or politically elite figures like princely rulers. He expressed to his followers that he did not bother with trying to win over local kings as devotees because he was uninterested in people of high status. In fact, he he did not get on with them, he expressed. Their pride was in their kingdom and his was in detachment and devotion.⁹⁶ And yet, on occasion, Sahajanand indicated that he had warned his devotees of the

⁹² Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 273-74.

⁹³ Shatanand Muni, *Satsangi Jivanam*, 5.22-5.29.

⁹⁴ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 157-58.

⁹⁵ Kim, "Being Swaminarayan," 260.

⁹⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Vadtal, 16. Sahajanand made these comments on February 4, 1826; Bhumanand Svami, *Shriharililamrutgranth*, 319.

shvet or “white” government, while in other instances he indicated that that government was a positive force. Notably, however, changes in political powers during the early nineteenth century were generally not discussed as a matter of divine will in the *sampraday*’s sources.⁹⁷ This is different than how political events were recorded in *puranic* historical narratives of the past and the present in Bengal, prior to the introduction of European historiographical methods to the educated Bengali, according to Partha Chatterjee. In such cases, for instance, the victory of the East India Company at the Battle of Plassey was presented as divinely ordained.⁹⁸ Ultimately, the *sampraday*’s efforts at simply maintaining a working, positive relationship with the local and colonial government were motivated by Sahajanand’s sense that there was no choice: the state had to be engaged for individual and institutional life in the nineteenth century. The position of cooperation and accommodation was one of necessity for survival, reflecting recognition that one’s well-being required active engagement with other powers of the world. While seemingly disengaged, this was a strategy of precaution, awareness, and a stance of restraint in overturning conventions or external relationships in the nineteenth century. The politics of detachment, or moderation, carefully balanced different cultural, social, and statist power players and made the best of circumstances, as Sahajanand worked to embed his views in the region.

Cumulatively we have seen in this chapter that constructing institutionalized authority to hold wide influence in western India required generating practical influence on the ground. Hierarchy, specialists, financial, legal, and territorial arrangements were vital instruments in this process, which worked jointly to advance a specific approach to existence in modernity. The

⁹⁷ Amongst the views about the state that I have come across, only in one source is Sahajanand depicted as claiming that he brought the British rule and that this should not be doubted, that is, his divine will, Madhavdasji Svami, *Shri Harikrishna*, 77.19. Governance as the result of divine will was not the general view, however, that was projected by the early *sampraday*.

⁹⁸ Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 77-85.

emerging cultural project had to be positioned in a religious landscape of a richly diverse set of traditions by voicing novelty. Claiming distinctiveness was key to gaining success among the various identities in western India. Ultimately, constructing collective identity and effecting influence was an ongoing process, of adopting, creating, combining, and re-articulating a position distinctively.

Chapter 4.

A THEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT-PAST: RE-ENCHANTING PERCEPTION

At the foundation of creating sources of practical strength in the region, *sampraday* influence required a fundamental aspect: achieving a particular understanding of Sahajanand and the world. The powerful ideology fixed Sahajanand as not only an authority figure in the community, but as its key object of devotion—a tactic that was at the heart of achieving regional authority. In other words, this specific perception defined the *sampraday* and located it in the time and space of the world, as well as located those who were its adherents. Thus, the security of the nascent community depended on the strength of this viewpoint. Svaminarayan ideology was reflected in the community's tremendous repositories, but also reflected in the very institution of archives and their related practices. A central aspect of this ideology was a form of historical imagination. Anne Murphy's study of historical imagination in the Sikh community, or *panth*, is an apt parallel to the *sampraday*, as it makes the important consideration of how a conception of the past allowed for non-statist representations of religious and political social formations. Concerns about time and space worked to persuade people to hold an enchanted view of Sahajanand and the world. Accordingly, this required a process of fundamentally re-orienting people's perception. Thus, great energy was expended authorizing the nature of Sahajanand's leadership: as a male, scholar, leader, *guru*—but most of all, as ultimate divinity manifest on earth. To understand Sahajanand's nature as divinity, it was imperative that adherents became confident of certain theological principles and of his place in the cosmological scheme. In the present chapter, we move into a discussion about this ideology.

The Svaminarayan *sampraday*'s particular theological interpretation of non-duality provided a platform on which to claim the location of divinity in the present worldly context, Gujarat in the early nineteenth century. The expression of non-duality rested on several key concepts, to be discussed in this chapter, which Sahajanand taught. Fundamentally regarding the nature of reality as being one with the divine, these non-dualistic concepts represented an amalgamation of the otherworld alongside the spatial and temporal conditions of the material world, a creative fusion that pervaded the work of the *sampraday* and the behavior of its members. Blurring the separation between the self and the larger world, and merging normative devotional practices with seemingly routine activity, these devotional stances themselves stemmed from a larger cosmological refusal to see the concerns of the *laukik* and *alaukik*, the mundane world and divine world, as divergent. The Svaminarayan use of the apparatus of *lila* exemplified this convergence. The reality-bending ideology not only collapsed the empirical world's time and space with that of the divine, but nurtured this through a tangible experience of Sahajanand. For his devotees, Sahajanand's life as *lila*, was essentially was a certain way of viewing the world and of being in it. *Lila* was ultimately a medium for transcending the world. Through this medium, emotional, intellectual, and physical attunement to enchantment could help attain freedom from the worldly context in which they were embedded. At its height, *lila* provided a wider scope for existence than the mere empirical context. By extension, its rationale opened up the possibility of having otherworldly, or divine, experiences within mundane existence. Perceiving the re-enchantment of modernity created a platform for devotee populations to claim access to the supernatural in everyday life.

This orientation made adherents cognizant of the present, and in turn, became the basis for the habit of documenting and re-documenting this existence. In other words, a keen focus on

knowing and sustaining the present led to the impetus to create archives for it: recording the present to eventually provide a record of the past.¹ At its height, the idea of non-duality extended to human and divine fusion, as reflected in the personhood of Sahajanand. For this reason, adherents' documentation of the present contributed to their perceived (extra)ordinary experience of Sahajanand. Sahajanand had provided an outlook for observing, a template for being, and a reason for archiving this experience—by energetically defining the scope of divinity, the world, and the self, and campaigning for a deep engagement with them. Ultimately, this was a truth claim. It was an observation of reality, as perceived by the Svaminarayan community, parallel to other observers, like the colonial or princely states, which perceived reality in a different way.

The ideological reconfiguration of space and time was anchored in an understanding of the historical figure of Sahajanand Svami as a divine entity, sustained by concepts to be discussed this chapter: *pragat/prakat*, to be manifest or displayed;² *pratyaksh*, to be evident or perceptible; *sakar-nirakar*, to possess a definite-indefinite shape; and *divyabhav-manushyabhav*, to perceive divine-human characteristics, as well as an understanding of the empirical realm, broadly classified as *maya*. While Ramanujacharya presented his theology through commentaries, Sahajanand taught through an exchange of questions and answers with his socially-diverse base of adherents,³ as recorded in the *Vachanamrt*.⁴ The collective utility of these concepts, discussed

¹ This tendency that will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

² *Pragat* and *prakat* are used interchangeably in the *Vachanamrt*; *pragat* is the Gujarati rendering of the Sanskrit term *prakat*, *Vachanamrut [Spiritual]*. Unless otherwise noted, throughout this chapter I cite the 2010 edition of the *Vachanamrt*.

³ Williams, *Introduction*, 186.

⁴ Whether or not the references recorded Sahajanand's words verbatim, the records are reflective of his views rather than anyone else's. The editors are said to have compiled the records of discussions at the assemblies by comparing their respective notes and concluding on a final account of the discussion that took place. As part of the editorial process, Sahajanand read or listened to these drafts, as has been noted in one discussion record itself, *Vachanamrt* Loya 7; Mukundcharandas Svami, *Handbook*, 53. Based on the *Vachanamrt* compilation the intellectual history of the early years of the *sampraday* is a partial one. For reasons unknown, it dates only to the last

with his followers—men, women, and ascetics—in *sabhas*, mainly in rural areas of Gujarat, was toward making authority claims about Sahajanand Svami’s identity as a divine figure—arguably as the Supreme God himself, Bhagvan—anchored in the material world. This, then, led to conceptually locating him in his context in relation to the lives of others, activities, and events

decade of Sahajanand’s life. Moreover, only one-tenth of the drafts documenting all the discussions, reportedly numbering 2,000, were edited to remain in the final composition Mukundcharandas Svami, *Handbook*, 53. Nevertheless, since the content of the compilation was obviously an intentional act and meant to capture Sahajanand’s teachings to shape the *sampraday*, a history of motivation is arguably more or less complete.

Historically while there has not been a difference of opinion between the many branches of the *sampraday* about the veracity of these records, there has been a different version of the compilation that each of the major three branches has propagated. This is evident from the printed editions I have consulted. Since the editorial process in the nineteenth century left most discussions out of the final composition, the result was not necessarily a representative sample of the various geographical sites where the founder had gathered assemblies and spoken, and not representative of how frequently this must have happened at a given site. Ultimately, the final compilation had an overwhelming number of recorded discussions that took place in territories under the jurisdiction of Vadtal Desh, the southern seat of the *sampraday*. It is said that the northern seat, Amdavad Desh, came to feel that they were unevenly represented in the early history of the community. Whether or not this is true, the discrepancy between the Amdavad Desh’s edition (*Vachanamrt Amdavad*) and that of other major branches is that the former edition includes eleven more records of assemblies that took place in areas that are located in Amdavad Desh (these are records Amdavad 4-8, Ashlali, Jetalpur 1-5), totaling in 273 Vachanamrt records. Secondly, the edition of the Vachanamrt published by Kundalidham (*Vachanamrt [Spiritual]*), an active territory that falls under the southern seat of Vadtal Desh, has 262 records and has been adopted throughout the Vadtal Desh. The edition adopted by the BAPS branch in Gujarati (*Vachanamrt BAPS*) and the one in English (*Vachanamrt [Spiritual]*) also have 262 records, and have a little over 1% of their records originating in Amdavad Desh. Otherwise, all other records are part of Vadtal Desh, from lesser-known locations of Kaira or Kathiawar. The breakdown of 262 meetings is: 78 records of *sabhas* over nearly 8 months in Gadhada (Bhavnagar area), 18 records over approximately 18 days in Sarangpur, 12 records over approximately 2 months in Kariyani (vicinity of Botad, Bhavnagar), 18 records over approximately a month in Loya (vicinity of Chuda, Surendranagar), 7 records over approximately 22 days in Panchala (vicinity of Keshod, Junagadh), 67 records over approximately 4 years in Gadhada, 20 records over nearly 2 months in Vadtal (Kaira area), 3 records in approximately 21 days in the city of Ahmedabad (Amdavad), 39 records over approximately 3 years in Gadhada. This breakdown perhaps alludes to Sahajanand’s more established base in Kathiawar as opposed to Ahmedabad, where he had been banned by the Peshwa government and welcomed again after Company rule.

It is worth mentioning that while BAPS has maintained its *Vachanamrt* records fairly regularly according to those of Vadtal Desh (from which it formally separated in the year 1907), and thus the BAPS (*Vachanamrt BAPS*) is parallel to the Kundal edition (*Vachanamrt*), the BAPS branch has absorbed the eleven records of Amdavad Desh (*Vachanamrt Amdavad*). However, in their presentation the texts are identified as additional, separate from the core collection. The reason for choosing to incorporate these records is not made clear, however it is worth noting that these records are where he founder’s proclamations of his own divinity as Supreme God are most explicit, *parabrahman* (*purushottama*), the other element in addition to *brahman* (*akshar*) that Sahajanand added to Ramanujacharya’s model and with which the branch of BAPS is aligned.

If I am not mistaken, none of the major branches considers the eleven records to be without merit, but rather unintended (along with other records that were left out) for the final edition. Correspondingly, attention was given to noting a compilation history. Providing a survey of its records the end of the *Vachnamrt* includes Sanskrit verses citing the names of editors, the number of discussions and their respective locations, *Vachnamrt*, 716-17; *Vachnamrt BAPS*, 761-62; *Vachnamrt Amdavad*, 519-20; Mukundcharandas Svami, *Handbook*, 225-26. There are differences in the verses between that of the Amdavad edition (*Vachanamrt Amdavad*) and those in the editions of Kundal (*Vachanamrt*) and BAPS (*Vachanamrt BAPS*). In the Amdavad edition the first three verses differ from those in other editions, and secondly, the former has nineteen verses, one more than the others. This is attributed to the *sabhas* that were held in Jetalpur and Ashlali. In my work, I have considered the fuller set of Vachanamrt records, numbering 273.

around him. In Svaminarayan terms, the aforementioned concepts effectively defined a conception of history. Here, the past and present was pegged to a life, that of Sahajanand, to some degree, but it was as much about the very space of history, that is, empirical reality, or *maya*. The sources associated with documentation inspired by this ideology, explored in Chapter 2, were not strictly hagiographical, but were rather sources encompassing a larger experience.

Corporeality was at the center of discussions concerning physical reality. Sahajanand had a compelling offer in the early nineteenth century: Supreme God had arrived on earth. The advantage this model of divinity offered was to provide an accessible human being rather than an abstract entity, promising immediate fulfillment to people while they were living in the world. The orientation's strength was in its uncompromising, foundational nature: a body. A body itself was an irrefutable physical fact, not a matter of opinion. While the reality of divinity could be a subject of debate, a human being's existence was beyond controversy. A living, socially esteemed person could, by virtue of being plainly actualized, pose something of a challenge to simple dismissals of his divine status.

Supported by Sahajanand's extensive explanations and pronouncements, the key concepts appeared to simultaneously push toward starkly divergent directions: earthly and divine, human and suprahuman. But upon closer examination, this was far from being the case. In fact, the very opposite seems to have been the case in the framework that was used to shape the new community in Gujarat. In conjunction, these concepts made the extraordinary feasible and natural. The concepts were upheld in such a way that they aggressively affirmed two different aspects, the divine and the mundane, which in turn enabled emphasis on their vigorous orientations *toward* one another in an organic relationship. Holistically, the enmeshment of Sahajanand's ideas worked to make certain realities plausible for nineteenth-century populations:

divinity assuredly existed in western India; it was self-evident in that it could be perceived and accessed in the space of the everyday. Effectively, Sahajanand's principles resolved an underlying struggle of mutual exclusivity in the nineteenth century between either having a divine experience of life or a disenchanted one. The theology of the Svaminarayan *sampraday* embraced both aspects. Combined with an orientation toward the larger world and society, adherents could unapologetically integrate engagement with Sahajanand Svami's personality, the Svaminarayan community, the individual self, and their larger context.

PRESENCE

In the Svaminarayan framework, the concepts of *pragat* and *pratyaksh* addressed the actual presence of Sahajanand Svami in western India. The role of Sahajanand Svami went beyond founder and teacher of the community; arguably most critically, he served as a divine object of worship in the *sampraday*. Specifically, *pragat* presented the logic that the divine had an earthly manifestation. It was public, an open expression of his form as it eternally existed in his divine abode, Akshardham, and subsequently, there was the adoption of human-like characteristics for his worldly existence. The idea of *pratyaksh* served as an evidentiary reminder to his contemporaries that Sahajanand was, indeed, unequivocally visible and present before them. It emphasized Sahajanand's irrefutable physical fact and the concept that the divine does manifest on earth, sustaining the view that Sahajanand Svami was a thoroughly supernatural entity. Overall, these worked to create a deeply presentist leaning—one that emphasized observation and engagement with the contemporary.

The Svaminarayan framework viewed supreme divinity—or Purushottam Narayan in allusions to Sahajanand himself in *sampraday* sources—as manifesting on earth for the purpose of granting liberation to humans from the unending cycle of birth and death. It seems that the

precise nature of Sahajanand's divine status must have been a source of debate in the community; nevertheless, Sahajanand's intention seems to have been to confirm for adherents that he was a manifestation of the Supreme God. His ambiguity appears in his hesitation to make this claim—arguably bold—when even his nature as a divine manifestation (rather than human) went unchallenged.⁵ Sahajanand confidently affirms during one discussion recorded in 1829 that God is *pragat*, manifested on earth, out of compassion for the liberation of souls and God is visible to the sight of all those who are listening to him speak at that moment,⁶ while characteristically maintaining the third-person voice in speaking about himself as divinity. These teachings safeguarded the view that Sahajanand was of supernatural status, while the strength of community affective ties was reinforced by the centralization of his earthly presence. Sahajanand exhorts his devotees to think to themselves, “The same form (*murti*) that is full of light in Akshardham is this very same Maharaj⁷ that is evident (*pratyaksh*) before me.” If one cannot convince themselves of this parallel [but partial] ocular proof, he urges, then they should at least note to themselves that Sahajanand is able to see the divine *murti* that exists in Akshardham. He

⁵ Frequently throughout the recorded (and edited) accounts in the *Vachanamrt*, there is a seamless quality to the extension made between discussing the divine in the form of the third-person, to Sahajanand himself. There was a profoundly strong intent to equate Sahajanand with not only divinity in general, or at times with Krishna, but with Supreme God, Purushottam, however without often explicitly saying so. While Raymond Williams observes this diversity in claims and notes that Sahajanand adjusted his teachings about himself in accordance to his audience's receptivity, Williams does not find any conclusive evidence of a systematic program or progression over time in these claims toward identifying with one specific identity, Williams, *Introduction*, 74-82. After cumulatively considering various (non-)textual sources, I do interpret the diverse as revealing a dominant intent, to explain Sahajanand as God, Purushottam, throughout the early years. I believe that Sahajanand's ambiguous status and language was a form of caution to help buffer against criticism among contemporaries. This was a time when claims about Sahajanand's divinity, let alone supremacy, were not easily accepted. As Williams noted, Sahajanand adjusted his teachings to public reception. By considering the various discursive claims beginning in the first decade of the century, as well as diversely interpreted identities of the deities installed by Sahajanand in his temples in the 1820's, and Sahajanand's claim to Bishop Heber about being a manifestation of Krishna there is good reason to believe the key desire was to make the claim that Sahajanand was indeed, Supreme, but this had to be cautiously and adjusted to critique. As noted earlier, the claim about the founder was not only difficult to accept, there was already ongoing resistance to recognizing Sahajanand's status as a Brahmin inside and outside the community, as the new *sampraday* tried to establish itself in the region.

⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 31. Sahajanand made these comments on February 7, 1829.

⁷ Shriji Maharaj was another name for Sahajanand Svami.

advises that the possession of this understanding is especially important for the maintenance of followers' affection toward him and for their ultimate liberation. Thus, this thought should remain ever-fresh for devotees.⁸ The rationale helped sustain Sahajanand's status as otherworldly, in spite of his pronounced worldly presence.

Discussions on the aspect of God's apparentness explained God's essential form by detailing the characteristic of otherworldliness, despite Sahajanand's evidently humanlike character. The *Vachanamrt* shows that devotees were prescribed the degree of this understanding they should maintain. He states that even if devotees do not have the immense devotion of *gopis* for Krishna, they should know that while God appears to be like a human, it is only for the sake of pleasing his devotees. Further, he explains, this divinity is the ruler of various divine abodes, with an essential form that is divine and luminous; each of his pores⁹ are illuminated by the light of tens of millions of suns. When the various universes are destroyed only this manifest form of God, *pragat* Bhagvan, continues to exist. Relating to the manifest form this way, Sahajanand correlates his existence to a cosmic entity, one that generates innumerable universes at the time of creation through *prakruti* and *purush*.¹⁰ It is with exceeding confidence that the founder speaks of his state and authorizes his position. He explicitly proclaims to the audience that he is able to continuously see the extraordinary form of divinity that is seated in the celestial space of Akshardham. The form in Akshardham is exceedingly luminous and is surrounded by aspirants who are absorbed in looking at God's *murti*.¹¹ As Sahajanand elaborates on his vision of God in the otherworldly realm of Akshardham, he relays to his audience in Kathiawar that at the very

⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 13. Sahajanand made these comments on August 27, 1821.

⁹ This translation is taken from *Vachanamrt (Spiritual)*, 123.

¹⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 56. Sahajanand made these comments on February 11, 1820.

¹¹ In these discussions, the term *murti* does not refer to a painted or sculptural representation of God, but God's form himself.

moment he is speaking with them, he can see the proof of manifestation, *pragat pramarn*, of God in Akshardham. Sahajanand's powerful ability to see such proof even encapsulates his own unmanifest state. He confesses that he could also see this very form when he had not yet come to the community in Gujarat, also while he was in his mother's womb and even before he was in her womb.¹² With the self-possessed voicing of a fairly dramatic self-depiction, Sahajanand nurtured the correlation of himself as a historical figure in Gujarat to the entity of God.

Facets of God's identity were not restricted to himself, but were transferrable; these effectively enhanced his context and those within it with divinity. Belief in Sahajanand as divinity incorporated an enchanted perception into nineteenth-century space, by virtue of his divinity having a fundamentally transformative effect on his context. Though seated in Gadhada at Dada Khachar's estate in Kathiawar, Sahajanand reveals to those listening to him that he does not see the town of Gadhada or the porch on which he is seated. Rather, he only sees himself speaking to them while sitting in Akshardham, and he sees that those he is addressing are all also seated there.¹³ Sahajanand promises that if an adherent was firmly committed to the vision of God that he taught, even if God (Sahajanand in this case) went about behaving in a way that masked his supernatural powers, then the follower was assured to be free from human conditions. Devotees with such a perspective would no longer be restrained by time, action, or illusion caused by ignorance, Sahajanand proclaims to the audience. A person who knows God rationally¹⁴ in this way then has nothing else left to do.¹⁵ This framework was intended to persuade devotees toward an enchanted view of empirical reality, *maya*. Further, while human

¹² *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 13. Sahajanand made these comments on August 27, 1821.

¹³ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 13.

¹⁴ Here, the phrase used is *tattva karine*.

¹⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 63. Sahajanand made these comments on March 7, 1820.

experience was compelled by time, locale, and senses, and thus limited by these conditions, Sahajanand himself transgressed these constraints and moreover, could be a conduit to the otherworld for others around him. Thus, the outcome from being in Sahajanand's vicinity was one not limited by worldly constraints, as would be the case for a distant observer of him. His effect was one that re-classified a person as his interlocutor by virtue of being in proximity to his divine jurisdiction.¹⁶ Such a perception also reshaped the understanding of the shape of history itself as *maya*, an understanding that permeated through the region and applied to the population of the physical human plane. Sahajanand's corporeal body functioned as a physical and social site on which to direct, bound, and extract affect. This in effect, overcame the dualistic perception of a divine reality versus a human illusory world, connecting both through a newly enchanted vision that saw through this seeming duality to the larger truth, which was singular.

A fundamental theme reiterated throughout early discussions addressed precisely why God could be encountered in western India. The founder claimed that, while Supreme God, *Sarvopari Purshottam Bhagvan*, resides in Akshardham, he only becomes manifest in the world out of compassion for the liberation of souls, and there is no divergence at all between these entities. He says, "there is no difference at all between that which is the form (*svarup*) of *pratyaksh* Purushottam Bhagvan and the form (*svarup*) resident in Akshardham; the two are purely one."¹⁷ Moreover, the forms of God in the celestial mode and the one that is a *manushya*, human, are beyond and above the qualities of the manifest reality, *maya*.¹⁸ He states that the

¹⁶ Similarly, Sahajanand stated in the *Shikshapatri* that a devotee became *nirgun*, without worldly characteristics and their related drawbacks, by intensely and devoutly associating with God who is inherently *nirgun*, Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 59.

¹⁷ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 38. Sahajanand made these comments on May 17, 1829.

¹⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 31. Sahajanand made these comments on February 7, 1829. *Maya* as manifest reality is also referred to as *prakriti*. Specifically, *maya* is the inanimate primordial matter from which the empirical world is created, Mukundcharandas Svami, *Handbook*, 148. God remains undefiled by the qualities of *maya*.

follower whose heart has devotion for God understands that even at the time of cosmic destruction, the way in which *pragat* God resides on earth continues to remain the same.¹⁹ The two are defined by a relationship of singularity—they are the one and the same. Effectively, this reinforced to followers that Sahajanand was not influenced by elements of the world and that he remained immune to conditions that would otherwise affect an ordinary person. Sahajanand was the far-reaching nature of the divine in the world. This was the phenomenon of otherworldliness made discernable in the mundane world, *maya*, by way of an expressed physical presence.

While his life was firmly rooted in local society, Sahajanand Svami's identity was discursively articulated to be distinctive and superior. Extensive descriptions of God's nature in his essential form residing in the otherworld were made part of the various conversations on *pragat*. In 1820, Muktanand Svami, one of the most senior ascetics of the community, asked Sahajanand how to understand the forms of *Shripurshottam* as possessing attributes, *sagun*, or being without attributes, *nirgun*, as both are discussed to be features of God in key texts.²⁰ Sahajanand explains at length that the *nirgun* form of God is exceedingly subtle whereas the form with exceeding enormity is *sagun*.²¹ A doubtful person may wonder, he observes, if God is both greatly subtle and also immense, which one is truly God's original form? Sahajanand affirms that the evidently manifest human shape that can be seen is precisely the eternal original form of God.²² Sahajanand's direct correlation of the essential appearance of divinity with human physicality helped to reinforce his position.

¹⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 37. Sahajanand made these comments on January 14, 1820.

²⁰ The specific texts he mentions are the *Vedas*, *Shastras*, *Puranas* and *itihās*.

²¹ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 8. Sahajanand made these comments on November 9, 1820.

²² *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 8. Sahajanand made these comments on November 9, 1820.

The range of discussions about the nature of divinity and specifically the manifest aspect of divinity, illustrate how Sahajanand thoroughly equated human physicality to divinity while at the same time, he described the original form of divinity in a wide-ranging way, thereby affording vast imaginative expanse with which to equate him. Sahajanand explains that possessing *nirgun* and *sagun* characteristics are features of the *murti*'s otherworldly supernatural power. It is by his own volition and the use of supernatural prowess that God chooses to manifest in *nirgun* and *sagun* forms and subsequently absorbs them back into himself. Sahajanand affirms that while that very same God appears to be a human, there is no limit to his greatness.²³ A year before he passed away, the words of the *sampraday*'s founder continued to reflect preoccupation with underscoring claims about the nature of Supreme God in the community. He described to followers in 1829 that Supreme Divinity is beyond the state of being perishable or imperishable.²⁴ He is even the cause of all causes and at whose feet innumerable aspirants serve.²⁵

Physical depictions of God and his devotees in the otherworld were constructed in the Svaminarayan imagination based on earthly models. They were also to be understood as distinct from divine forms described in early modern traditions, forms that were socially dissimilar to people. For this reason, the association made between God's original form and a familiar human-like form whether manifest in Gujarat or in the otherworldly realm, must have served as a vital depiction for Sahajanand's audience and thus found repeated elucidation in early discussions. Unlike the prior incarnations of God (referred to in various discussions in the *Vachanamrt*), the

²³ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 8. Sahajanand made these comments on November 9, 1820.

²⁴ Perishable-imperishable (translation from *Vachanamrut [Spiritual]*, 736). *Purushottam* is beyond *akshar* and beyond the perishable qualities of *maya*.

²⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 31. Sahajanand made these comments on February 7, 1829.

animal incarnations of Vishnu in forms such as a fish, a tortoise, and a lion, the nineteenth-century manifestation of God and the very essential form of God, are unequivocally human-based.²⁶ In the early modern period, it was possible to think of God through an animal form because the boundaries between animals, the environment, and people was more porous. But as Harjot Oberoi's study of popular religion has shown, enchantment was being disciplined: God could not be an animal in the modern context.²⁷

In 1821, while describing God's otherworldly form, Sahajanand shares what he is able to see and experience while he speaks to devotees in Gadhada in Kathiawad. He narrates that his heart is only pervaded by light and in that light, he observes God's *murti*, corporeal form, which is full of great light. While the form is dark, it does not appear to be dark due to there being so much light—but rather, it appears white. Providing a description of God's appearance, Sahajanand posits a potent idea. Unambiguously, he describes Bhagvan's form as two-armed and with two feet and very attractive, but he also clarifies that the form does not have four arms or eight arms or a thousand arms. "This *murti* is very amiable, it has a human-like form and is youthful."²⁸ Sahajanand's position appeared to have centered on not only insisting that God's appearance was like that of a human being,²⁹ but also on actively upholding the same for others in his celestial vision. He observes with precision that the form of both Bhagvan and his *muktas* in Akshardham is two-armed, like a man,³⁰ who eternally exists and is consciousness and bliss.³¹

²⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

²⁷ Oberoi, *Religious Boundaries*, 139-203.

²⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 13. Sahajanand made these comments on August 27, 1821.

²⁹ While he does not explicitly state that God is a male, it can be assumed so.

³⁰ The term *purush* here references a human. I believe this reference to a human being is distinct from the philosophical-figurative use of *purush* thus far in the theological discussion, referencing a cosmological conceptualization.

By privileging depictions of a human body, Sahajanand provided greater ease for audiences to apprehend this idea of the divine, creating greater potential likelihood for the acceptance of Sahajanand's vision. The emphasis on the theanthropic sphere in the *sampraday*, Williams observes, set a human form at the top of the hierarchy.³² Now, it was no longer possible for God to be an animal, or even a generously-limbed person. In the early nineteenth century, a historically-based corporeal form became crucial. God had to look exactly like everyone else in the world. Freedom to imagine divinity was decreasing in another way: God's *lila* was not imagined, in this case, through deeply popular expressions of male-female courtship, specifically as the Vaishnav deity couple Radha-Krishna.³³ *Lila* in the nineteenth-century Svaminarayan context was becoming more restricted to a male semi-ascetic figure. This portrayal authorized spiritual status in human form and restricted it to a male form, even in a region where the goddess tradition had long been woven into the local fabric.³⁴ Devotion to goddess was increasingly seen as "ideologically suspect in Gujarat, where it was associated with sexuality and

³¹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 38. Sahajanand made these comments on May 17, 1829.

³² Williams, *Introduction*, 71-2.

³³ This was similar to the notion of the divine and the cosmological structure of the non-dualist tradition of Pranami (Nijanandi), for whom supreme divinity was Aksharatit Brahman (or Nur Jamal), a spiritual pair that was distinct from a romantically linked male and female couple. The divine resided in Paramdham, an abode that also encompassed Akshar Dham, Khan, *Pranami Faith*, 25. Notably, the Pranami (Nijanandi) *sampraday*, associated with Sindh and Kutch, Kathiawar, and urban areas of Surat and Ahmedabad since the sixteenth century, is among the lesser-known religious communities in India that have histories with Islam but today are mainly categorized as Hindu. These strict divisions do not reflect the early history of such groups that emerged from medieval *sant*-poets and had interactions with diverse traditions, specifically Islamic culture, according to Khan. Over time it has been difficult for such groups to sustain their location "on the threshold" between faiths as popular perceptions have grown to see Hindu and Muslim identities as oppositional. In this case, religious communities have shifted to adhere their identities more strictly to categories of either Hinduism or Islam, Khan, *Pranami Faith*, 4-5, 8-12. For an account of how the foundation of eclectic mix of influences of Vaishnava, Sufi, and Ismaili beliefs in the community, once vibrant in many cities of Mughal Gujarat, became increasingly blurred and led to a perception of the community as anti-Muslim among hardening attitudes, see LaRocque, "Mahamat Prannath," 342-75.

³⁴ Sahajanand's anchoring of religious authority in male rather than female identity, at least among his followers, was made more explicit through an injunction in the *Shikshapatri*. He stated that men should neither listen to knowledgeable talk (religious teaching) nor enter into debate with women, Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 34. On Kathiawar's goddess culture, see Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit, and Poetry*, 32-35.

non-vegetarian practices,” in contrast to the reformulated ideas of Vaishnavism, Jainism, and vegetarianism that had been gaining significance here since the sixteenth century.³⁵

In every respect, Sahajanand tried to persuasively accelerate the ways that those he spoke to could fathom divinity. Simultaneously, he was alert to carefully maintaining distinctions between the entity of God, albeit human-like, and humans, and the factors that conditioned their ordinary existence. In the *Vachanamrt*, Sahajanand says that he has concluded from reading the scriptures of *Samkya* and others that all forms created from the empirical realm, *maya*, are false because these forms are destroyed by the effects of time. But the shape of God in Akshardham and that of his liberated souls all are true, divine, and very bright.³⁶ By explaining in various ways that the divine appears as a human when manifest and yet is remarkably unlike any figure in his earthly context, nor prone to factors like time, Sahajanand’s statements were an impressive stream of rationalizations for the existence of human-like divinity. Evidently, great rhetorical efforts were being made over the years to sustain the founder’s alignment with divine qualities, and to advocate for the alliance of human and surprahuman features.

One’s spiritual advancement required the acceptance of the notion of manifestation in the *sampraday*. Under this condition, the portrayal of Sahajanand as supreme divinity could be even further embedded among followers. During a conversation in 1820 about training one’s attention³⁷ on God rather than on mundane things of the world, Bhramanand Svami asks Sahajanand, “By what tool can one maintain their attention on Bhagvan?” To this, Sahajanand replies that the key is in *antardrasti*. While *antardrasti* was normatively understood as introspection, in this discussion it was a perception through realms. The practice involved

³⁵ Sheikh, “Lives of Bahauchara,” 85.

³⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 38. Sahajanand made these comments on May 17, 1829.

³⁷ This is attention based on one’s senses, inner faculties, and soul.

continuously looking at the form of the visible Bhagvan that they have come to know and possess. In other words, self-reflection was linked to meditation on the apparent image and the experience of the divine that was present before them in western India. Sahajanand explains that even if without this form, one is capable of seeing the various sites of energy within their body or the other celestial abodes of God, this is still not *antardrasti*. Specifically, *antardrasti* is to behold the image of God in one's heart and to look at it constantly, or to continuously look at the external *murti*, form, of God. He sharpens his definition by qualifying that wherever else one's attention remains, apart from this form, is considered a focus on that which is outside oneself.³⁸ Inner, mindful reflection was being correlated to training one's entire focus—sensual and intellectual—on observing the earth-bound form of divinity, Sahajanand, as a meditative device, and ceaselessly renewing this vision for oneself.

Followers' stature within the *sampraday* was cast through their ability to grasp the divine's nature and affirm that such an otherworldly form existed before them. While Sahajanand clarifies that God is just like a human whether incarnated on earth or in another realm, he extols the virtues of grasping the entire spectrum of God's form, from its subtlety to its vastness. For a devotee who understands God's *murti* as possessing *nirgun* and *sagun* qualities, for him the features of time, action, and illusion are not strong enough to bind him. Such a devotee who understands God in this way continues to experience wonder in his heart throughout the entire day.³⁹ On another occasion in 1820, in reference to a discussion about adherents noticing the faults of fellow followers, Sahajanand elucidates that an adherent's greatness actually lies in his certitude in the evidently visible form the divine; and further, in obeying the commands of that God. Without these two qualities, even if one is esteemed in worldly affairs, he is still merely a

³⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 49. Sahajanand made these comments on January 28, 1820.

³⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 8. Sahajanand made these comments on November 9, 1820.

small person.⁴⁰ The establishment of such criteria shifted emphasis away from ongoing internal tensions among adherents, who were clearly invested in the ways of the world and its measures of social success. Instead, Sahajanand's authority was strengthened by reorienting followers to equate self-worth with how well they identified their founder and teacher as the irrefutable physical presence of God, and how well they followed his directives. Adherents that most passionately upheld Sahajanand's authority, both ideologically and practically, were those considered of greatest consequence.

The principle of earthly manifestation had a role in community development itself. The central adoption in the concept of *pragat*, manifestation, worked to create confidence, intimacy and affection among one another in the community. In 1820, Sahajanand Svami muses that greatness exists in the community all around him. He explains that greatness is present among the devotees because of their realization that they have obtained in the manifest form, Purushottam Bhagvan, one who is beyond *akshar*. Thus, Sahajanand says, those in the community experience a feeling of satisfaction.⁴¹ On another occasion, he shares with his followers that God is wholly resonant with a devotee who possesses the understanding that the countless wonders of the world are all owing to the same manifest God with which the devotee has come in contact.⁴² Such statements appear to be implicit references to Sahajanand, God undisguised in Gujarat. It was being made apparent to those around Sahajanand that the perfect understanding was one in which their founder, leader, and guru was perceived as being qualitatively different. This was a perception beyond according Sahajanand veneration as a prominent, respectable person. Sahajanand plainly states to an audience in Gadhada on one

⁴⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 31. Sahajanand made these comments on January 2, 1820.

⁴¹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 31. Sahajanand made these comments on January 2, 1820.

⁴² *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 27. Sahajanand made these comments on December 28, 1819.

occasion: the incarnated form of God on earth is visible before you, he is your deity and he accepts your service.⁴³ Sahajanand promoted a culture of powerful, confident, persuasive affirmations to adherents about the nature of divine manifestation and their relationship with this entity, which would have aided consensus building and strengthened a bounded collective.

These discussions illustrate how the concept of *pragat*, the open and public manifestation of God, and *pratyaksh*, the quality of being tangible and observable, served as emphatic correctives to any claims that Sahajanand Svami was an ordinary human and to the incredulity of God in western India. Establishing the theological principle that God had incarnated in the realm of humans served as an assurance to people as to why they were able to witness, and why they could believe if they chose to do so, that a person who claimed to represent divinity had manifested in the course of their ordinary lives. More broadly, I argue that the concept of *pragat* resonated deeply with adherents valuing a presentist perspective by emphasizing the physical and social practices around the divine figure that had unfolded before them. This framework asked the adherent for the development of not simply visual, observational, and contemplative qualities, but an active participatory role, which required acute awareness of one's sensory, social, and intellectual experiences of Sahajanand and of the very context of the material world, theologically classified as *maya*, in which Sahajanand was being engaged and in which adherents' lives unfolded. This marked a subversion of older forms of *bhakti* practice that would have viewed such an orientation as sinking into a worldly, illusory existence of the here and now. For instance, the early modern *bhakti* poet Surdas disparaged the ill effects of *maya*.⁴⁴ In the nineteenth century, in other words, while individual charisma had proven effective, so had the divinized context—thus, the contemporaneous world of Sahajanand was to be keenly observed.

⁴³ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 38. Sahajanand made these comments on May 17, 1829.

⁴⁴ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 258.

There were the wondrous experiences of everyday life to document. For the community, while *pragat* confirmed God's very real existence in the world, and *pratyaksh* underscored it as being discernable, other aspects such as *sakar* focused on anchoring divinity to definitive matter—a corporeal body.

DEFINITE SHAPE

Nurturing the position that God has a human form and can be physically known, seen, and related to allowed Sahajanand's contemporaries to build love for him as the immediately identifiable figure present in their lives. Thus, accounts about Sahajanand Svami and the community's practices were a set of records of tangible experiences had by devotees and recorded by them. Fundamentally, the experiences represented ongoing engagements with life in the nineteenth century through a particular lens and served as the basis of broader institutional documentation. *Sakar*, the quality of God having a definitive shape, was an additional element to understand the nature of the divine. From the Svaminarayan outlook, it provided a specific aspect of a positivist understanding, grounded in presence—corporeality.

This principle was another key. During a discussion Sahajanand Svami asks his ascetics and householder followers, “What is an uncommon tool for the liberation of this soul, by which one's soul would be absolutely redeemed and by which no other obstacle would deter one's liberation? Also, what is a great challenge on the path of liberation by which one definitely loses liberation?” Upon finding their answers unsatisfactory, Sahajanand resolves his own question. He states that the way toward liberation is to understand Purushottam Bhagvan as being eternally *sakar*, to know that all incarnations are only from him, and then to take refuge in the manifest

form of Bhagvan.⁴⁵ In fact, to think of God as shapeless, *nirakar*, after reading the Shrimad Bhagvat reflects a lack of devotion, claims Sahajanand. He says that if the things that are created by Bhagvan have a form, then it does not make sense for God himself to be formless.⁴⁶

Scriptures, or *shastras*, were a prominent source of concern in the adoption of *sakar* by adherents in western India. He advised which scriptures should be heard and studied and which should not. Sahajanand gave general guidelines about works to be disregarded, including scriptures that had not established God's attribute of having a form or those that discuss the incarnation of God, but are pure Vedanta, and promote formless non-duality. He advises that even if someone quite intelligent composes them, the books should never be studied or heard. On the other hand, even if hymns like those by Ranchod Bhagat⁴⁷ describe Bhagvan's form, they should be sung and heard, and similarly, such books should be studied and heard.⁴⁸ Sahajanand emphasizes that one who has firm resolve in God's form, his conviction just does not dissolve even if he himself becomes like *brahm (aksar)*.⁴⁹ Even if such a devotee hears all types of *nirakar*-endorsing compositions, nevertheless, he only thinks of God's entity as eternally possessing a definite shape. Sahajanand is passionate on this point. He says, no matter whatsoever might be stated in the scriptures, such a person upholds only the idea of God as having a figure and absolutely does not let one's principled belief and worship be harmed. In this way, one who has firm understanding is said to possess principled belief and worship;

⁴⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 36. Sahajanand made these comments on May 4, 1829.

⁴⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 10. Sahajanand made these comments on August 16, 1821.

⁴⁷ Ranchod Bhagat was an eighteenth-century devotee from Kaira who wrote thousands of *pads* on the divine's *sakar* aspect. See *Vachanamrt*, 300, footnote #3.

⁴⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Loya 6. Sahajanand made these comments on December 6, 1820.

⁴⁹ *Brahmarup*, to become similar to *Brahma* (or *akshar*).

Sahajanand defines this clearly.⁵⁰ An understanding of divinity fused with visual, tangible perception was thus vigorously upheld in the community.⁵¹ Apparentness helped combat any sense of indefiniteness that lingered in this period. In prescribing to his audience what to read and not to read, Sahajanand was firmly setting boundaries of the new *sampraday* and defining its character. The diversity of beliefs rooted in the region's traditions was being edged out in favor of affiliation with a consolidated, uniform identity. We find parallels in Oberoi's analysis of the evolution of Sikh traditions, which early on were pluralistic, but by the end of the nineteenth century under the Singh Sabhas, came to be viewed by many as the clearly demarcated, homogenous, and codified identity of modern Sikhism.⁵²

As noted in the passage, Sahajanand was astutely cognizant of viewpoints that were not supportive of a physically-oriented understanding of the divine. Thus, he deeply criticized his contemporary Vedantis who believed that everything that was to be gained spiritually could be found in oneself. Sahajanand claims that those who do have knowledge serve the eternally form-possessing manifest God, knowing that he gives rise to *prakruti-purus* and *aksar*, that he is the cause of all matters, and the support of all beings. Those who do not understand this and on the basis of the scriptures announce "*aham brahmasmi*," "I am Brahma," and say that there is no difference between Ram, Krishna, others, and myself, one who is *brahmarup*—this makes Sahajanand deeply upset. He says vehemently that his contemporary Vedantis are exceedingly evil and greatly sinful. When they die, they descend to hell and in no way can they be freed.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 40. Sahajanand made these comments on January 19, 1820.

⁵¹ Thus, visual culture has a significant role in the *sampraday*. For a close study of Svaminarayan painting history, see, Dave, *Svaminarayana Citrakala*. See also Desai, "Crafting Abodes."

⁵² Oberoi, *Religious Boundaries*.

⁵³ *Vachanamrt*, Loya 7. Sahajanand made these comments on December 8, 1820.

Along these lines, he warns that being in contact with *shushka*-Vedantis is a hindrance in spiritual advancement. He forewarns that if one is in contact, one might develop affection for a Vedanti, who would emphasize the benefit of understanding the *nirakar* principle and criticize the form of God's *murti*. Effectively, this would be a great obstacle in one's process for liberation because one would fall away from God's image. Thus, counsels Sahajanand, one should never associate with a *shushka* Vedanti as he is greatly ignorant and there is no obstacle as significant as this in the path of God's devotion.⁵⁴ In essence, a good devotee is one who understands that God has a form and is the cause of all that happens.⁵⁵ Boundaries of the collective were being outlined through a theory that linked divinity to tangible definition. Moreover, the Vedanti challenge for Sahajanand does not seem to have hinged solely on the idea of God having shape, but also on a vital implication of this assumption: without a form, God would not exist in historical time and place. A *nirakar* divinity would fundamentally undermine the idea of Sahajanand as God manifest in Gujarat, let alone as a *guru* for those who might claim "*aham brahmasmi*."

Sakar, along with the concepts of *pragat* and *pratyaksh*, jointly emphasized to adherents that divinity was evidently manifest and present before them. The empirically provable, familiar and ever-accessible qualities, keenly presentist and positivist in orientation, then served as a natural platform for exercising larger observation practices in reference to Sahajanand and the world beyond—concerning the self and other, or life in Gujarat—and thereafter documenting testimonies of these experiences, as will be further explored in Chapter 5. For the Svaminarayans, their life in the present, which would eventually become the past, was perceived through a divine lens, and recorded accordingly. Furthermore, the web of concepts represented a

⁵⁴ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 36. Sahajanand made these comments on May 4, 1829.

⁵⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Vadtal 2. Sahajanand made these comments on November 23, 1825.

perspective about truth claims and more specifically, a peculiar judgment about what truth entailed.

While theological statements in sources, especially the *Vachanamrt*, might at first glance appear declarative and seamless, upon closer examination they reveal that an immense amount of persuasive energy was expended to nurture a shared imagining of a united community. It was a continuous, complex, and delicate project. Convincing others of the merit of Sahajanand's ideas was initially necessary to form the institution; maintaining the import of these ideas was crucial, as they were difficult to accept due to the challenge they posed to rational thought. In turn, the founder had to address hesitation, proactively curtail doubt, and remind listeners of the value of certain ideas and the dangers of others, as discussed above. With forthrightness, the founder addressed his listeners on this. On one occasion, he raises the discussion as to why, if two people are both of equal intellect in the community and have faith in God, one detects faults in God (among others) day after day, while the other person sees absolutely no flaws in the divine. If they both have the same conviction in God then what is the fault, Sahajanand specifically asks, of the intellect of the person who incessantly perceives flaws? The conclusion is that this devotee's intellect is cursed as a result of some bad behavior in the past. The remedy for a defective intellect that lets one find faults, implicitly in Sahajanand, is for the devotee to make even more intense, extreme efforts in their *bhakti*, as opposed to the normative efforts others make, Sahajanand counsels.⁵⁶ In sum, because of the likelihood of skeptical views regarding Sahajanand's status, the concept of *divyabhav-manushyabhav*, which will be discussed in the next section, was required. This principle targeted the heart of the matter: how a nineteenth-century person might or might not perceive Sahajanand Svami to be a fellow human being.

⁵⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 2. Sahajanand made these comments on October 9, 1820.

Although the idea of a living divinity was not new to the nineteenth century, it is striking to observe how many communities appear to have nurtured such views. In the case of the Indo-Islamic context, views expressed in the literature of Ismaili *ginans* show the centrality of messianic authority in the form of an *imam*, *guru*, or *avatar*, in the Satpanth community. The idea of a messianic figure who would guide the devotee on a righteous path of practice and redeem the follower at a time when the world might end was applied to the Aga Khan in this period.⁵⁷ In the Pushtimarg during the mid-nineteenth century, the ongoing debate around the complexities of the Maharaja as *guru*, led to questioning whether he was divine or human.⁵⁸

Unlike the critique of *murti puja* made by his contemporaries and vocal reformers later in the century, Sahajanand was not worried about the taint of human qualities sullyng divinity. He took the issue head on, attaching human nature, even with its earthy *gunas*, qualities, to the idea of the divine. Furthermore, Sahajanand extended the conflation of human and divine beyond *murtis* that visually represented God in painting or stone; he proposed himself as a *living murti*—divinity embodied. While others might have seen this as a remnant of the medieval period, or even philistinism, Sahajanand remained undeterred. He approached matters pragmatically. Holding a moderate position, he was ready to acknowledge a range of ideas, focused on the goal of keeping people’s attention as they struggled with ethical questions in the course of everyday life.⁵⁹ For instance, while it was not ideal to distinguish people on the basis of caste identities, Sahajanand was a realist on the matter and hesitantly did so.

⁵⁷ Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*, 57-86. For more on Ismaili *ginans*, see Shackle and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns*.

⁵⁸ Scott, “How to Defame a God,” 399-401.

⁵⁹ This is similar to the interweaving of ethical concerns into daily life in the culture of Marathi vernacularization in pre-modern western India, Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*.

Upon their meeting, Bishop Heber in 1828 encountered Sahajanand differently than he had expected after having heard about the local leader.⁶⁰ Specifically, Heber was disappointed by what he perceived to be Sahajanand's lack of monotheism,⁶¹ and his image worship practice,⁶² as the Bishop had been privately harboring hopes that Sahajanand might help spread Christianity in western India.⁶³ In general, caste, *murti puja*, and polytheism were features not being disarmed by Sahajanand, though he acknowledged the limitations or difficulties of these features to others. Notably, these same features were integral to the forms of authority Sahajanand created, even though he did not explicitly say so. In his diary, Heber writes that when others disagreed strongly with Sahajanand on the subject of image worship, in reaction the community's founder frequently "expressed his conviction of their vanity, but pleaded that he feared to offend the prejudices of the people too suddenly, and that, for ignorant and carnal minds, such outward aids to devotion were necessary." Heber disparaged this self-defense.⁶⁴ Sahajanand generally gave the same line of reasoning about offending the public at large on the matter of caste distinctions, which he personally thought were irrelevant. Thus, though he thought all were equal, he did not deter people from eating separately among his diverse community members.

In parallel, while British religious representatives and Company officials were engaging the Svaminarayan community in some capacity, Ram Mohan Roy, the well-known reformer of Bengal, was also on the minds of figures including Bishop Heber, Henry Briggs, and later,

⁶⁰ Heber, *Narrative*, 152-53.

⁶¹ Heber, *Narrative*, 149-51. Sahajanand asked his adherents to worship a variety of deities, Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 84, 127.

⁶² Heber, *Narrative*, 150, 152, 159-60.

⁶³ Heber, *Narrative*, 143, 149.

⁶⁴ Heber, *Narrative*, 160.

Monier Monier-Williams.⁶⁵ William Hodge Mill, Principal of Bishop's College of Calcutta, discussed the merit of Roy's teachings and his opposition to Brahminical influence with Company representatives and other British counterparts during his visit to Gujarat in 1822—the very same visit during which he met with Svaminarayan members. During this trip, Svaminarayan followers were made aware of Roy and became interested in acquiring his writings.⁶⁶

Sahajanand's self-presentation in his meeting with Heber and elsewhere indicate a constant measured presentation in response to the other party. This approach also helps explain why Sahajanand turned to the intellectual and devotional platform of *lila* in the nineteenth century. He recognized that comfort was in that which was familiar to the non-elite populations, and *lila* was a longstanding idea. Employing a more moderate and balanced approach rather than dramatic change, he appears to have recognized that it would not be wise to rescind a notion that had been enmeshed in the cultural landscape for centuries. Moreover, and importantly, besides its familiar characteristic, *lila* was an ideology Sahajanand turned to for its great capability: it was a device for thinking about reality and its counterparts and by extension, an apt means by which to aid people in their adjustment to modernity. Sahajanand was sensitive to multiple perspectives and aware of the disjuncture between them. Thus, what seemed acceptable within the community would not have been perceived as rational from the perspective of others. Accordingly, he showcased and justified aspects of the *sampraday* to different parties, as discussed in Chapter 2.

⁶⁵ See Hatcher, "Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition."

⁶⁶ Paramtattvadas and Williams, "British Contacts," 60, 65, 66.

HUMAN-LIKE

In the Svaminarayan framework, the concept of *manushyabhav*, the perception of manifest God as being like an ordinary human, *manushya*, was crucial. It was given significant attention as it served as the lynchpin that uncompromisingly transfigured the mundane into the divine. The concept was framed in opposition to *divyabhav*, the maintenance of divine perception. This was the understanding that the manifest form of God was indeed God, a wholly divine being and not a human, despite his humanlike appearance, actions, and co-existence with others in society. By taking the form of a human, God was becoming accessible, knowable, familiar, agreeable, and intimate with others, Sahajanand Svami explained. Nevertheless, he strictly cautioned that God was not simply human, let alone a perfected humanity. Though followers were witnessing their leader's life alongside their own, the concepts of *manushya-divyabhaav* prevented contemporaries from classifying what they were experiencing in relation to Sahajanand as a human life unfolding in parallel to their own, or documenting it as such, as history or biography. Obliterating a human perception of manifest God was an utmost priority in Sahajanand's teachings.

Why would God ever become manifest as a human, leaving the otherworldly realm—his original dwelling—for the material plane? The question was answered by the avowal that Bhagvan's human manifestation was necessary for the liberation of human souls. Throughout the *Vachanamrt*, this reasoning is cited frequently, providing the context in which to frame Sahajanand. Sahajanand explains that out of compassion for the salvation of ordinary humans, God elects to materialize on earth as a *manushya*—man or human being.⁶⁷ God's form is beyond the empirical realm of *maya* and its qualities, yet for the redemption of mortals he appears to be

⁶⁷ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 72. Sahajanand made these comments on April 9, 1820; also *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 63. Sahajanand made these comments on March 7, 1820.

human.⁶⁸ To further clarify the purpose for God's appearance on earth, Sahajanand pressing his ascetics asks, why would God ever incarnate in the mundane world if he can grant liberation in any manner he wishes? He responds to his own query that he takes an *avatar*, or incarnation, on earth solely to fulfill the wishes of devotees who possess immense love for him. To grant pleasure, God takes the particular form that devotees wish for and then fulfills the wishes of these seekers. Moreover, by manifesting as a human, God also liberates countless other souls and establishes righteousness.⁶⁹ Sahajanand's human-ness was explained to his contemporaries as divinity conforming to the parameters of those living in the world.

A specifically human manifestation on earth met the need for a means of comprehending God's essential form, which was out of reach for most people. Sahajanand describes God's original state as so immense that within each of his pores are millions of universes. Even the deities that rule this universe are not capable of seeing or serving God in his immensity. He rhetorically asks, what can be said for the case of mere humans in comparison to the deities?⁷⁰ In other discussions Sahajanand describes God as being full of immense power and light, one who subsumes all of his divine capabilities in order to become like a human for the sake of liberating souls.⁷¹ Outlining the vast qualitative differences between God and humans furthered the idea that there was an aspect of Sahajanand, his essential form, which was beyond normal perception and approach.

Sahajanand insisted that being inherently beyond reach, God had to manifest on earth as an accessible human; a non-human form could not achieve what was necessary. But it is

⁶⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 24. Sahajanand made these comments on December 23, 1819.

⁶⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 5. Sahajanand made these comments on November 4, 1820.

⁷⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 72. Sahajanand made these comments on April 9, 1820.

⁷¹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 63. Sahajanand made these comments on March 7, 1820.

precisely because divinity unfolded in the world and God became so accessible that he was undecipherable from the rest of society. The consequential blurring of divinity and reality required a corrective. In 1820, Sahajanand explicates why Purushottam Bhagvan, implicitly Sahajanand, appears so similar to those that he interacts with and lives among. When God takes a human form, *manushya murti*, and moves about, he exhibits behavior, *charitra*, exactly like that of a human. This is why he has the same *maya*-based worldly nature, like a normal human would: to be defeated, victorious, filled with fear, sorrow, lust, anger, greed, possessiveness, conceitedness, envy, hope, desire, and jealousy, etc. There is no reason for doing all this except for the sake of redeeming others, claims Sahajanand.⁷² In another discussion, he says that God behaves like a human and undergoes routine experiences. In possession of a human body during the age of Kali, God's lifespan and strength follow the norms of the age he lives in. The way a person is conceived, matures in a womb, is born, experiences the stages of childhood, youth and old age, and then passes, it is just like that; God acts precisely like a human.⁷³

Emphasizing a human form for God contributed to strengthening affective ties within the community. A human manifestation provided ordinary people access to the divine, explained Sahajanand, and moreover, it facilitated social intimacy. Sahajanand claims that when deities like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva request God to descend and give an auspicious audience in their respective universes, he takes the form of a body familiar to that specific realm. Conforming to the activity of the context that God must appear in, he behaves according to local norms.⁷⁴ To practically build cohesion in a collective, it was essential that divinity took a form that resembled those around him. Sahajanand rationalizes that if God behaves with perceptible divinity,

⁷² *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 72. Sahajanand made these comments on April 9, 1820.

⁷³ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

⁷⁴ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

divyabhaav, then humans do not develop affection for him nor do they develop any empathy. He explains that while humans build close affection and intimacy with one another, humans and animals do not experience this type of a bond. Animals find affection and closeness with one another because a species loves its own kind, not another. Similarly, explains the founder of the *sampraday*, God actively suppresses his *divyabhaav*, divinity, and becomes human-like so that his devotees may develop affection in him.⁷⁵ Besides Sahajanand's preference for the physical, human form of divinity, his statements reveal wanting to distinguish his *sampraday* from contexts where understanding a manifestation in animal form had been normative, something that he does not see as a possibility or with much regard. Showing disdain for animal forms at times, Sahajanand effectively hierarchized humans above animals in his nineteenth-century conceptualization.⁷⁶ This correlated to Sahajanand's cosmic view, in which non-human forms of deities and their abodes were lower on the hierarchy.⁷⁷ Additionally, it advanced the notion that intimacy between devotee and the divine was only achieved when the latter possessed human qualities. Finally, the idea that God took on an indistinguishable local form was important to injecting flexibility into perceptions of the founder. Sahajanand's behavior (rather than his identity) was allowed interchangeability in this imagination, between appearing human-like or divine, while nevertheless being wholly classified as divine.

Social norms became pliable, if not secondary, in service of fostering attachment between the human form of the divine and devotees. Since devotees are physical and possess a body, God adopts a worldly character, manifests in human form and lovingly indulges them, explains

⁷⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

⁷⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Loya 14. Sahajanand made these comments on December 31, 1820. Sahajanand discusses his preferences for various manifestations of God. Utmost affection is by far reserved for Shri Krishna.

⁷⁷ Williams, *Introduction*, 83.

Sahajanand. Hiding his powers, he behaves like a son with devotees, or like a lover, or a relative, or friend, and consequently the follower does not retain much social propriety with God. Then, whatever the wishes of that devotee are, in that way God indulges him/her, according to Sahajanand.⁷⁸ Though explanations like these may have been oriented to explaining the nature of the deity revered in the community, such as Krishna in the reference to God being a lover, rather than himself explicitly, the spirit of the logic would certainly have been extended to his life, in light of the larger ideology. Acknowledging a lack of rigid social and ritual ordering in this environment would have eased the forging of the new community and individual lives at a time when those lives were in flux for the population in western India.

Emphatically, Sahajanand related that God was required to suppress his powers while living in human society. For instance, according to Sahajanand, God does not let his divine characteristics be known, or others would perceive him as being categorically different. With some intensity Sahajanand asserts that there is a critical need for maintaining similarity between the divine and the mundane, despite the inherent difference between the two. He elaborates on this position by discussing the interesting (and amusing) challenges for God adopting life as a “human” on earth, like the practical difficulty of trying to avoid being detected by others as divine. In fact, when the divine becomes a human, his attention is focused on simply maintaining the concealment of his own divinity. However, while going about hiding his identity, if perhaps he is hasty in the midst of some activity, then God’s divinity unwittingly becomes known to others. Apparently, even divinity is ‘imperfect’ under the conditions of the world. In contrast to such a slip, on occasion and by his own volition God elects to make his divine qualities known to

⁷⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 5. Sahajanand made these comments on November 4, 1820.

someone who is his own devotee, Sahajanand reveals.⁷⁹ Discussions imply that listeners were being shown that if one was a close, adoring follower of their deity, then this could translate to being granted the privilege to witness divinity unambiguously in Gujarat. Ongoing discussions like this nurtured the view that it was reasonably possible, even expected, that experiences radically outside the ordinary *could* occur in daily life around them or through a fellow person.

Preserving the perception of himself as an otherworldly entity among contemporaries, Sahajanand elaborated on understanding God's divine nature despite his own exhibition of human traits. In a lengthy discussion in 1821, he exclusively focuses on this topic. Gathered in the village of Panchala, Sahajanand asks ascetics to pose questions to one another among themselves. In one such instance, Muni Bava queries Bhramanand Svami: "Initially, one has conviction in Bhagvan [God] and worships and remembers Bhagvan, and then, having seen Bhagvan's human-like behavior (*manushyacharitra*) one experiences doubt in their conviction. What is the reason for this?" To this, Bhramanand Svami tries to respond but is unable to do so, the record shows. Sahajanand then speaks his mind. According to scriptures like the Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharata Smruti and others, the original and eternal form of God that resides in his divine abode, Akshardham, does not look like any form that can be seen, does not sound like any sound one can hear, does not feel like anything that can be touched, does not smell like any scent that can be smelled, and cannot be described by the tongue. God is not one that can be fathomed by the mind, thought about, understood by the intellect, or comprehended by the ego with thoughts like, "I am Bhagvan and that Bhagvan is mine." God is imperceptible to the senses and to the inner faculties.⁸⁰ Teaching the logic of God's original form as ineffable, completely

⁷⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

⁸⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821. *Antakaran* are the inner faculties composed of mind, intellect, lower mind, and ego, Mukundcharandas Svami, *Handbook*, 241.

beyond sensory and intellectual perceptibility, bolstered Sahajanand's divine status and curtailed doubts that would have accompanied adherents' acceptance of Sahajanand's expansive authority. Audiences were to keep in mind that the person seated before them was an aspect of a non-human entity. In other words, ongoing discussions were a call to consistently remember that while Sahajanand appeared to be human, he was essentially unlike them. This was not to be forgotten, despite his relatable nature.

In order to conceive of God's human form, it was vital to reinforce that despite his human appearance, the divine was actually above *maya*—wholly otherworldly and beyond time and space. Sahajanand states that no other creature in this universe has the form possessed by God. The contrast is that all creatures having shape in this universe are *mayik*, whereas God is *divya* and *amayik*, divine and free of *maya*. Thus, if these two are so full of difference, then how could they be called similar? The point is underscored by an example he offers about a pair of identical twins in the community, Bhago and Mulo. Sahajanand observes that even if the two look alike they are actually dissimilar; once you begin to spend time with them you understand that they are quite different from one another. He asserts that if no two humans are alike, then how can you compare one element that is full of *maya* and another that is not associated with *maya*?⁸¹ In the nineteenth century, the similarity between Bhagvan's identity and that of ordinary humans was described as a purposeful, necessary act of concealment. One who asks, "why doesn't Bhagvan manifest any powers?" is a fool, Sahajanand declares. In response to such questioning he explains, God has to actively hide his powers for the sake of liberating souls. If he reveals his greatness then even the universe would be rendered negligible, so what can be said of an ordinary *jiv*, or soul?⁸² In cosmological terms, it was reinforced that the *sampraday*'s leader was

⁸¹ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

fundamentally different from those he lived among—he transcended the very elements of time and space that bound worldly beings. Though Sahajanand was perceived from within the community to not be of the realm of *maya*, it remained the context in which he lived and was observed by his contemporaries. Clearly, Sahajanand’s experience worked itself out in western India in the early nineteenth century. For the Svaminarayans, this site, *maya*, was the site of history.

A key measure of ideal Svaminarayan devotees in the nineteenth century was how firmly they held the belief that the human manifestation of God was not human. If this belief was adopted, a devotee was deemed to be in possession of certainty that Sahajanand’s *lila*, his actions, were substantially divine in nature. The perfect adherent was one who had forgone *manushyabhav*, the perception of Sahajanand as human. Sahajanand qualifies that one who is a devotee and sings the *charitra* of God is also labeled *vimukh*, a person who is outside the community, if he finds flaws (i.e. doubts divinity) in the *charitra*. Clearly, some devotees acquired the social status of “outsider,” or a diminution of their status, to less true or intimate with the founder (if not being fully excommunicated), as a result of experiencing feelings of doubt about Sahajanand’s divinity. The founder justifies these actions by asserting that God shows in himself behaviors just like an ordinary person with a *maya*-based nature—he experiences feelings like defeat, victory, fear, despair, lust, anger, greed, desire, conceit, hope, jealousy, and so on; this is done for the sake of liberating all souls.⁸³ Along these lines, Sahajanand continues to correlate human traits to God and reinforce the noble status of a follower who accepts this relationship. When the divine manifests in a human body, he takes on the attitude that exists in a human, from having physical impulses such as hunger, thirst, and

⁸² *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 63. Sahajanand made these comments on March 7, 1820.

⁸³ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 72. Sahajanand made these comments on April 9, 1820.

sleepiness, to exhibiting personality traits like loyalty, attachment, discrimination, joy, pain, fear and so on. One who listens to and meditates on the essential form and human form of God, which are both narrated in the scriptures, and develops firm conviction in those two forms,⁸⁴ never harbors doubt about God. Sahajanand exalts such an individual. A person possessing this perspective is intelligent because such a devotee thinks that God has lust, but it is not like that of an ordinary human; just as anger, greed, taste, ego, etc. are in God but they are absolutely not similar to that which exists in other people. An intelligent person realizes that there is divine nature, *divyabhav*, in this figure.⁸⁵

Sahajanand strictly warns that others should not imitate his seemingly human behavior. If one assumes that they can also remain pure among such pleasure they will only suffer. Sahajanand himself is beyond such suffering because he does what he does with absolute self-mastery. When he eats delicious foods made by someone or looks at someone with affection, Sahajanand narrates, or when he accepts fine clothing and jewels brought to him by someone, or partakes in being honored with garlands and gifts, he does not do this for his own pleasure but for the sake of the soul of the person who is offering him devotion.⁸⁶ In effect, the early environment of the community was sensitive to the ways that contemporaries perceived Sahajanand and continuously attempted to direct and redirect their outlook. In the process of guiding audiences toward adopting an enchanted view of himself, the founder strengthened its appeal by demarcating who was in and who was out of the *sampraday* on the strength of their conviction in this ideology. As could be expected, in the course of institution building, such criteria were configured to prevent and address subtle or overt dissent. The belief that

⁸⁴ *Rup*, or form.

⁸⁵ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821.

⁸⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 18. Sahajanand made these comments on December 7, 1819.

Sahajanand's life, work, and outlook were divine acts of God, *charitra*, was upheld in opposition to the outlook that deemed his behavior to be like that of a normal person. Whatever Sahajanand did, it could never be deemed unexceptional, nor strange or unfitting behavior. Rather, it was to be understood as charming, because it was another aspect of divinity.

Crucial to the human form of the divine was the affirmation that God *could* be experienced through the senses, socially, and be adored and venerated in person. On several occasions, Sahajanand claims that when God becomes like a human, then humans can see him, partake in his audience, touch him, offer worship to him in various ways, and are able to perform nine types of devotion.⁸⁷ Sahajanand's physical presence was the means and the end for sensory knowledge—visual and otherwise—and consequently, for adherents, the body and person served as concrete proof of an experience of the divine. For example, nurturing the view of the founder as divine, there were vigilant reminders to adherents that while God's manifestation appears to be attuned to human physicality and behavior, he should not be mistaken for one. The ease of experiences with Sahajanand should not be confused with usual human exchange. Sahajanand explains that possessing an ignorant or illusory—*mayik*—vision is the reason one would mistakenly view God to be like oneself, an ordinary human and soul. Such a person thinks the divine has the very same experiences as oneself, of birth, being a child, youth, old age, and death. He justifies being able to see God's stages of childhood, youth, and old age as well as birth-death by noting that this a result of the divine's capability to conjure illusion; in reality, God is only the way he actually is.⁸⁸ Sahajanand Svami's resemblance to a human with particular

⁸⁷ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 4. Sahajanand made these comments on March 21, 1821; *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 63. Sahajanand made these comments on March 7, 1820; *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 7. Sahajanand made these comments on March 29, 1821; *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 72. Sahajanand made these comments on April 9, 1820.

⁸⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 7. Sahajanand made these comments on March 29, 1821.

social and biological characteristics—a Brahmin, a scholar, a male—was explained to his contemporaries as a purposeful illusion that achieved the concealment of his essence.

The benefit in upholding the perception of *divya charitra*, divine acts, was its powerful virtue as a catalyst for personal transformation. By nature, Sahajanand was not bound by time or space. In this view, he was simply not entirely comprehensible through human senses. Thus, by attracting and wholly pulling a devotee's attention and senses into himself as the object of devotion, he could help those around him also transgress worldly limits, despite their lives being otherwise defined by them. The advantage of seeing God as completely faultless is that the devotee who holds this view, even if filled with negative qualities, becomes extremely faultless, explains Sahajanand.⁸⁹ Sahajanand explains to adherents that there are those who recognize the essence and understand that the way God's form exists in Akshardham is precisely the form of God as manifested on earth (as a human). Sahajanand notes, adherents with this insight do not see a single difference between that form and this form (his own). He goes on to say that one who understands the divine in this way is said to have understood God rationally or perfectly,⁹⁰ and such a person is made free from ignorance, *maya*.⁹¹

Explanations were provided to address not only why divine experiences could credibly be had in the material realm, but also to account for their potency; these engagements freed one of illusion and consequently the constraints they imposed on a person living in the world. By extension, these teachings immunized people against ongoing changes in their context without encouraging them to recoil from them. With remarkable success, Sahajanand constructed an underlying steadfastness in individual subjects through an ideology that was a call to suspend

⁸⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 24. Sahajanand made these comments on December 23, 1819.

⁹⁰ *Thathva karine*, or truthfully.

⁹¹ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 7. Sahajanand made these comments on March 29, 1821.

disbelief and participate in the world through a re-enchanted perception because it was precisely in *that* experience of freedom that an individual could make iterative efforts toward a better version of oneself. Experiencing a feeling of awe changed the individual's relationship with time and space and could unleash a vibrant existence through self-transformation. The platform could also help a person imagine others and the world around them in a new way, leaving them empowered to live out their own full set of ontological possibilities, even if the actual circumstances of western India were restricted. Of vital note, Sahajanand as divine intercessor between the devotee and the otherworld did not obliterate the adherent's will—a living divinity functioned as the catalyst for devotees to act even more instrumentally on their own behalf. Sahajanand advocated for self-reflection and rational thought in the exercise of decision-making according to individual circumstances, despite conventional or collective norms.⁹² In this role, God on earth translated to advocate for the modern subject in the nineteenth century. Overall, Sahajanand's counsel implied that one was in the world but not of it; an individual was accountable to the world but beyond its conditions. Although individuals could change their empirical circumstances, ultimately, they had to focus on realities beyond that immediate world. The lived aspects of the material and spiritual were deeply integrated in this vision. Sahajanand was not withdrawing from modernity, but coping with it through the tool of re-enchantment.

What was so attractive for those who grew their affection and loyalty for Sahajanand was the hopeful promise that mundane people, places, and things could change in their nature—or at least the experience of them could change. According to Sahajanand, the empirical realm of *maya* becomes altered upon having contact with divinity. Such an association provokes an entity to become *nirgun*, marked by no characteristics, flaws or otherwise. He illustrates this point with

⁹² Broadly speaking, these patterns of religion and modernity were reminiscent of the relationship between Islamic reform and modernity, see Robinson, "Islamic Reform."

the example of Shrikrishna Bhagvan and Arjun riding a horse-driven chariot, establishing that the horse and chariot were substances with the qualities of *maya* and of gross matter. Yet by having contact with Shrikrishna, they became very subtle and were given a cosmic form, achieving the *nirgun* Brahmasadham of God. Sahajanand elucidates that the power to mutate physical matter into subtle qualities is a feature of Shrikrishna's *nirgun* aspect.⁹³ In other words, Sahajanand's enchantment overpowered and remade any element that came into its association. In this period, people did not shy away from discussing dramatic possibilities. These were, on the contrary, outlined with a roadmap. In clear terms, adherents learned from the *sampraday*'s founder that interacting with God or his ascetic in ways that absorbed one's senses would result in the transformation of their minds. Engaging with the divine by touch and sight, by enjoying the scent of his flowers and sandalwood, or simply absorbing divinity through the senses without harboring any discrimination would purify one's inner life, hence enabling an unending recollection of God. On the other hand, a person's inner faculties would become polluted if one simply relied on their senses without any thought.⁹⁴ An association between Sahajanand and a person could cause the most remarkable change, if relations were infused with affect and wonder.

The divine's actions were so valuable to know and be part of because of their transformative power; it was therefore necessary for them to be archived and for this history to be repeatedly engaged. Thus, Sahajanand decreed that documentation of *lila*, the history of the divine, and recording of perceptions of Sahajanand, were practices to be incorporated and institutionalized within the community, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5. He says, while God may seem powerless like any other human, he liberates all *jivas*. Thus, all the *charitra* that

⁹³ *Vachanamrt*, Karyani 8. Sahajanand made these comments on November 9, 1820.

⁹⁴ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 18. Sahajanand made these comments on Dec 7, 1819.

God does while in the form of a human are appropriate to sing. Either because of ongoing matters Sahajanand was facing or in anticipation of how he might be received, he states that one should not think, “Why does he do that though he is Bhagvan [God]?” An adherent’s duty is to understand that *all* the *charitra* are redemption granting.⁹⁵ With precision and weight, Sahajanand concludes that only a person who understands this is a complete devotee of God.⁹⁶ In other words, all the behavior of Sahajanand, or *charitra*, was appropriate to be noted as the content of history. Along these lines, the founder of the nineteenth-century community incessantly reminded devotees of the otherworldliness of the person before them in every respect, all the while evaluating their spiritual advancement according to the degree to which they adopted his outlook. Creative perception and reason were being tied together. Sahajanand’s desire to dually encourage devotees to immerse themselves in enchantment, and simultaneously to note what they saw and felt as proof, was an implicit way of warranting the experience; essentially, it was a refusal to choose between an exclusive existence of enchantment or disenchantment.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s monumental project argues that the notion of historicization has certain underlying European assumptions, which underlie the social scientist/historian’s work. While there is awareness that the discipline of history and modern historical consciousness are recently developed categories, historical time has been assumed to be natural and universal in its applicability, despite a given culture’s distinctive understanding of temporality. “History is supposed to exist in the same way as the earth.”⁹⁷ Since history holds the assumption of a

⁹⁵ The emphasis is mine.

⁹⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 72. Sahajanand made these comments on April 9, 1820.

⁹⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 74.

universal, natural, secular, homogenous time, any ideas emerging from a specific culture about agency claimed through the supernatural or religious—and thus any non-modern historical consciousness—must then be translated to the reported universally-shared understanding of time and outlook on the world. But, Chakrabarty argues, a universality or naturalness of historical time does not exist. “Although the sameness of our sciences can be guaranteed all over the world, the sameness of our gods and spirits could not be proved in the same objective manner.”⁹⁸ Hence, “historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody’s belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be to go against the rules of evidence that give historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past.”⁹⁹ In his diagnosis of a hesitant relationship between Subaltern Studies historians and exponents of religious consciousness, scholar of religion Christian Novetzke draws attention to the under explored role of the subjectivity of religion for historical subjects in South Asia.¹⁰⁰ Historian Purnima Dhavan makes the valuable observation that with few investigations of subjectivity and constructs of history outside post-Enlightenment concerns, a gap continues to exist in scholarly understandings of non-European sources, especially pre-modern ones.¹⁰¹ The Svaminarayan case helps to locate some avenues toward such an exploration, situated at the crossroads of the early modern and modern. As historians, we will decipher that the means by which the world was enchanted for the Svaminarayan community was not by a supernatural entity exclusively. Sahajanand, with whom supernatural qualities were associated and who was a deity in the community, was nevertheless a historical person. As a result, when Sahajanand helped inspire

⁹⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 72-76.

⁹⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 104.

¹⁰⁰ Novetzke, “Subaltern Numen,” 99-126.

¹⁰¹ Dhavan, “Reading the Texture,” 525-26.

the actions of those around him, the agency of the inspired devotee adhered to, not just a supernatural entity but, from the historian's perspective, a historical person (and his ideology) in the nineteenth century. It is this overlap—but epistemological difference—in the way an entity was regarded as divine by the non-elite peasant or artisan, while being regarded as a human being by the historian,¹⁰² that could help mitigate challenges for the historian confronting historical reasoning in analyzing the subjectivity of adherents.

Secondly, it is necessary to acknowledge that there was intensive participation required of people in order to support the ideology. Novetzke draws on the work of Rudolph Otto, demonstrating that humans' belief and engagement with the “nonrational” religious realm—or the “numinous”—is the result of electing to be in such a mode.¹⁰³ Moreover, “dissolution of self and deity” is precisely at the heart of Indic traditions of non-duality. In other words, to be in a position of experiencing the numinous is a mode of activity, not a passive encounter. On this basis, he argues, “there is no reason to assume that ascribing motivation to one's deity restricts humans' historical agency.”¹⁰⁴ Still, Sahajanand's theological outlook could not be sustained on its own. His divine authority was given form for listeners and interlocutors, but adherents had to fulfill this status by accepting it. As discussed in this chapter and the previous, the perception of Sahajanand as divinity was a position not wholly natural or unchallenged. Despite being continuously persuaded in teachings and discussions day after day and year after year,

¹⁰² This view is not intended as a judgment or negation of non-elite views.

¹⁰³ Interestingly, Otto specifically influenced Manilal C. Parekh, the author of the early twentieth-century text *Shri Svami Narayana*, on this idea when Parekh wrote about Svami Narayana (Sahajanand Svami). The author was struggling between depicting a “faithful” account of Sahajanand, yet determining that a “historical” account required it to be free of supernatural and miraculous elements. While Parekh decided to give some space to these elements in his writing because of his restrained belief in the supernatural, he notes that it was also because Otto had specifically advised him to discuss such ideas for the sake of advancing comparative study of religions, Parekh, *Shri Svami Narayana*, xi-xii.

¹⁰⁴ Novetzke, “The Subaltern Numen,” 102, 124.

ultimately, for the holistic success of re-enchantment, the follower was an indispensable party who had to exercise a “willing suspension of disbelief,” a phrase the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined in the nineteenth century to describe the ways in which a reader could defer judgment about fictive elements of literature and participate in its wonder.¹⁰⁵ Fundamentally, to uphold Sahajanand as supernatural first required a decision to do so. Moreover, the reason-challenging commitment of this position required a person to take initiative and repeatedly rationalize this view to maintain conviction.

During the 1820s, the numerous and passionate declarations on the subject of *manushya-divya* portrayals of God reflect a sharp awareness of contemporaneous debates that must have surrounded Sahajanand’s divinity in the nascent community. An unhesitant attitude of acceptance of the belief that a supremely divine entity was presently living in the world and routinely moving about in rural and urban areas must have presented a serious struggle for elements of the population that encountered the phenomenon. It must have been even more difficult to accept because, generally speaking, Sahajanand discouraged exhibitions of miracles and magic and considered this expectation a form of weakness in one’s conviction about the nature of God;¹⁰⁶ however, he asked devotees to examine their experiences of him with limitless positivity and ultimately, to view these through an enchanted lens. This enchantment was best developed and sustained through a foundation built on constant reflection, a meditative relationship with the divine. Moreover, Sahajanand’s existence as a human being was not a liability or even a cause for doubting divinity, according to the theology propagated in the community. It might have even been an affirmation of the framework. There was an intellectual

¹⁰⁵ Ferri, *Willing Suspension*, 1-12.

¹⁰⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 38. Sahajanand made the comments on September 26, 1823; *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 66. Sahajanand made these comments on January 5, 1825.

circularity to this logic that would not have unequivocally resulted in perceiving Sahajanand as divine. Nevertheless, the perception of contradiction seems to have been dealt with in a satisfactory manner, evidenced by the sustained growth of the *sampraday* over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its popularity into the twenty first century, with the divinity of Sahajanand Svami immovably at the center.

EMPIRICAL REALM

The imagined space of the community was also the empirical realm in which they lived, generally understood to be *maya*, but without the negative association this concept of “world as illusion” had formerly held. God was the origin of *divyabhav* and this quality pervaded all that was around him, thereby enchanting the empirical reality and all therein. Effectively, *maya* became *amayik*. This was a reflection of the continuum understood to exist between Sahajanand and the physical world he inhabited. Sahajanand’s theological vision conflated the *laukika* and *alaukika*, the worldly and otherworldly, collapsing experiences of the mundane and supernatural. Sweepingly expansive and inclusive, the outlook of adherents divinized their context. Enchantment was encouraged as a sensory-based experience; thus, in addition to being an intellectual perception, it had a physical counterpart.

The community was hardly without a normative understanding of location. Sahajanand explicitly designed guidelines for his adherents concerning appropriate behavior for private and public spaces, as well as pilgrimage sites, with recognition of the worldly dynamics of place.¹⁰⁷ But the founder also conjured a more unique sense of place for himself in the same text, the *Shikshapatri*. In the opening verse, Sahajanand writes that he meditates on Shrikrishna and

¹⁰⁷ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 33, 83, 120, 124, 151, 153-54.

evokes Vrindavan as the place where Shrikrishna performed *lila* with his devotees.¹⁰⁸ In the verse immediately following, the founder moves from the forests of Vrindavan and the larger region of Braj—well-established in Vaishnav culture as a place infused with otherworldly qualities—to one of the two administrative centers of the *sampraday*, Vadtal in central Gujarat. He details that he is writing to his own devotees located in various areas while he is living in Vadtal.¹⁰⁹ Discursively Sahajanand linked the values, sentiments, and aesthetics of the cosmological-geographical place of Vadtal to Vrindavan, the enchanted land of Krishna.¹¹⁰ For pragmatic concerns of administration, he also implicitly joins the geography of western India and northern India. In the verse following the mention of Vadtal, the first set of readers that Sahajanand addresses by name are his nephews from Ayodhya (Oudh), the first set of Svaminarayan Acharyas Ayodhyaprasadji and Raghuvirji.¹¹¹ Establishing the importance of Ayodhya was crucial because it was not only from where the founder originated, it was where the lineage of Acharyas originated—Sahajanand’s descendants, who were to be revered as figures of authority in the *sampraday* for perpetuity.¹¹² In this case, Sahajanand was attentive to

¹⁰⁸ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 1-2. Similarly, Sahajanand was explicitly linked by his ascetic, Premanand Svami, to the region of Braj, with the title of ‘Vrajraj’ for Sahajanand in the composition “Vandu Sahajanand,” *Kirtanmuktavali*, 114. This composition was meant to be sung daily by devotees as they recalled Sahajanand Svami’s form. When celebrating the Fuldol festival with Sahajanand in Vadtal, Vadtal’s beauty was said to surpass Vishnu’s abode, Vaikunth.

¹¹¹ Sahajanand Svami, *Shikshapatri*, 3.

¹¹² Prasadand Svami notes that one of Sahajanand’s most senior ascetics, Muktanand Svami, encouraged the founder to present information about himself to his followers who were now numbering in the hundreds of thousands: *sant*, *paramhans*, *sanyasi*, *brahmachari*, men and women. Sahajanand was counseled to share where he was born, along with information about his parents, family, and caste lineage. Muktanand also suggested presenting family from Uttar Pradesh—one that Sahajanand had lost social contact with since his departure from UP—to satisfy the curiosity of devotees. Thereafter, Mayajitanand Svami and Sukhanand Svami were dispatched with a letter to the family’s home in Chappaya (in the vicinity of Oudh) to bring the family to Gujarat, Prasadand Svami, *Vicharanlilamrt*, Vishram 44. Other sources mention that the family arrived in Gujarat at the time of the Vadtal temple’s consecration, in 1824, Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 90.34-90.48. In parallel to the energy

both disenchanted and enchanted viewpoints. Thus, in order to sanction authority as the community's leader, it was important for Sahajanand to be able to prove his social identity as a person. At one point, he seems to have needed to publically affirm his caste background as a non-native presence in Gujarat, owing to concerns about him as a leader and perhaps as a preventive means of addressing questions about legitimacy. Because of Sahajanand's extensive social engagement with members of lower castes, the founder had earned the reputation in Gujarat of not actually being a Brahmin. In addition to quelling critics outside the community, it seems that proving family lineage became vital even when the *sampraday* was at its height. And yet curiosity about its founder remained among adherents.

Since the early modern period, Vaishnava theologians had framed Braj as a geographical space that could help devotees attain transcendence and eternal participation in God's play, *lila*. If one participated wholly in the worldly forests of Braj and embodied the *rasa* of erotic love, as a *gopi* coupled with Krishna, using the mechanisms of faith and effort, they could attain the perceptible form of Krishna. Sahajanand's theological model similarly emphasized participation in his *lila* to achieve transcendence through geography in the various territories of western India and through the *murti*, image, established in his temples, but also through participation in direct experiences of *lila*—with Sahajanand, fellow adherents, and in community activities. The nineteenth-century Vaishnava model expanded beyond visual terms for engaging the divine to also include first-hand encounters: bodily and social relationships with a historical figure.

directed to underscoring the divinity of Sahajanand, managing Sahajanand's worldly background was as vital and correspondingly, measures were put in place to clarify Sahajanand Svami's human background. Discursive mechanisms bolstered personal claims. In the *Bhaktachintamani*, a composition authorized by Sahajanand, Nishkulanand Svami lays out the founder's background, providing family genealogy and then writes that Sahajanand's wishes are that the *sampraday's* *acharyas* should descend from this esteemed family, Nishkulanand Svami, *Bhaktachintamani*, 91.15-91.401. Overall, there seems to have been recognition at the *sampraday's* peak that the popular leader's background should be made known publically in the region to secure authority and for the sake of progeny.

Modern Gujarat was unquestionably enchanted. Community members adopted this view not only by virtue of Sahajanand's local presence, but also through the physical structures that marked the space in a definitive manner. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sahajanand and his ascetics were immersed in activity determined by local geography and politics. They had been strategically mobile, constantly working to spread the Svaminarayan ideology and moving about to avoid the insecurity caused by political and ecological dislocation.¹¹³ While these efforts eventually translated into an expansive regional *sampraday*, it was the built environment of temples and their *murtis* that actualized and authorized Sahajanand's ideas, a physical manifestation of *lila*.¹¹⁴ Thus, in the way that the human manifestation of God on earth was a conduit for the otherworld to those who engaged with Sahajanand, so were his associated geographies. In this case, the tangible representations of the divine were also permanent. In Svaminarayan theology, a person could be transformed for the better through sensual engagement with their environment, geography, and physical materials. These were different passageways toward truth, which trumped a wholly disenchanting reality.

The architecture of Hindu temples was intended to be transformative for visitors through a sensory experience. Temples were not static sites, but were intended to provoke ontological transformation in the individual through interaction. The physical temple was geometrically planned to reflect the perceived structure of the universe, and further, it was a spatial and

¹¹³ In his study of visualizing natural landscapes in Braj during the sixteenth century, art historian Sugata Ray suggests that aesthetic practices of visualizing water in painting and architecture changed in relation to significant changes in the habitat due to famine and drought, as well as Vaishnava theology of space, Ray, "Hydroaesthetics." Similarly, stress on the population due to environmental and economic changes were also factors for modern Gujarat, as discussed in Chapter 2, reformulating the significance of space, but also materiality, the body, and social relations in Svaminarayan theology.

¹¹⁴ Similarly, Norbert Peabody's work on the Kota in western India demonstrates how the possession of the divine's image/statuary helped further religious and political power in the Hindu kingdom, Peabody "In Whose Turban," 726-54. For an excellent art historical study of arguably the most salient aspect of Svaminarayan visual culture, temple architecture, see Ankur Desai, "Crafting Abodes."

physical identification with the universe. Thus, the temple would serve as a conduit toward a non-earthly plane by unifying a person's senses in a devotional context. A physical meeting between a person and the temple was not the entirety of the encounter for a devotee. Complementary to the tangible event of reaching the temple's center was a parallel psychological experience that helped prepare the devotee for ascending to an elevated spiritual state. Thus, the devotional experience of moving through temple space began with preparatory steps that iteratively primed a person for their ultimate encounter with divinity, the *murti* of a deity seated at the heart of the temple.¹¹⁵ During Sahajanand's life, temple structures were built in various parts of western India and the architectural tradition proliferated in and beyond the region in subsequent years.

The concept of *maya* had several interpretations. It either served or obstructed one's devotion to God. Anything of the world that came before a person and became an obstacle in their ability to meditate on God's form was *maya*.¹¹⁶ Sahajanand explains to followers that *maya* is attachment as well as carelessness in oneself; it is also attachment to oneself and attachment and possessiveness toward one's bodily relations.¹¹⁷ That is, a form of God's *maya* is the deep affection one has for kin, like the love between a man and a woman. Sahajanand claims that *maya* in the form of love was the reason why the world continues to propagate the way it does and why the *jiva* remains tied.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, he clarifies that God's *maya* was not simply a source of pain, as was the common theological belief, but *maya* also produced profound joy. He once asks others during a discussion how *maya* could be knowledge inducing if it was also

¹¹⁵ See Michell, *The Hindu Temple*, 61-67.

¹¹⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadahada I, 1. Sahajanand made these comments on November 21, 1819.

¹¹⁷ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhadra III, 39. Sahajanand made these comments on July 25, 1829.

¹¹⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Pancahla 3. Sahajanand made these comments on March 11, 1821.

misery inducing. He answers himself by noting that it could actually nourish an adherent's devotions. On the other hand, for someone outside the community, *maya* could cause pain and bondage, he adds.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, however, the goal was to surpass *maya*. It was by being wholly human and using one's senses that this could be achieved. According to the founder, *maya* can be transcended only by engaging with the evident form of the divine, Purushottam, through knowledge, meditation, singing, and speaking.¹²⁰ Thus, Sahajanand defines that a devotee of God is one who sees the elements of the world as *maya* and develops detachment toward them, while finding pleasure by maintaining his attention focused on God, Sahajanand in this case.¹²¹ Sahajanand was vehement about the useless and false nature of the world. All the pleasures in the world derived from the five senses were deemed of extremely low quality. Such pleasures were akin to the pithy leftover food thrown at a dog by a wealthy man, as opposed to the superior quality that the man's own fine food signified. Similarly, the bliss of God (Sahajanand) was eternal and infinitely greater than the lowly pleasure derived from the senses engaged in the perishable matters of the world.¹²²

While *maya* was the source of attachment to one's body and relations, God's presence in the empirical realm eradicated its qualities. People were no exception. By remaining ever-close with the divine, a person and an environment could be transformed. Performing intense devotion and participating actively in God's enchantment, directly through him and through the *sampraday*, would catalyze personal change. Sahajanand claims that consumption of the world

¹¹⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Loya I. Sahajanand made these comments on November 30, 1820.

¹²⁰ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 32. Sahajanand made these comments on August 11, 1823.

¹²¹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 34. Sahajanand made these comments on January 11, 1820.

¹²² *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada III, 39. Sahajanand made these comments on July 25, 1829.

through the five senses is false; nevertheless, it is appropriate if the senses are exclusively applied to God. In fact, this is immensely joyous. Sensory pleasures derived from engaging God are not be judged as an activity of *maya*.¹²³ Moreover, an accurate understanding of God would not be solely achieved by knowing him through one's inner faculties, it was necessary to know the manifest form through the senses and through experience, those in attendance at an assembly in 1820 are told.¹²⁴ In Sahajanand's framework, it was unproblematic to distinguish between sensory fulfillment from mundane human experiences while possessing a disenchanted view—that is, acts performed without a physical or psychological connection to Sahajanand—from the sensory pleasure derived from mundane human experiences with an enchanted mindset, namely, those acts performed in relation to the community or Sahajanand, or mundane acts in a secular space but with mental engrossment in Sahajanand.

In sum, a historically grounded divinity, rather than a wholly transcendent divinity, posed a peculiar challenge. To evolve as a person and surpass *maya*, immersion in God's life, *lila*, was necessary. But the requirement was at a contradictory juncture. The main object of devotion, Sahajanand, was a being that was contemporaneous in the nineteenth century. Thus, the only way to gain the benefits of immersion was by electing to suspend one's disbelief or *manushyabhav*, and embrace Sahajanand as something other than human. An important point to note is that this view, arguably difficult, was not a retreat from the world. To be immersed in the world was not exceptional; it was an aspect of Svaminarayan devotion. More precisely, countering disbelief was a personal reconciliation with what was intellectually unbelievable while already being committed to the ways of the world. Devotees had to connect reason with creative perception. In other words, for adherents, the notion of a human as God must have been

¹²³ *Vachanamrt*, Panchala 3. Sahajanand made these comments on March 11, 1821.

¹²⁴ *Vachanamrt*, Loya 7. Sahajanand made these comments on December 8, 1820.

doubly difficult to accept because they were being asked to embrace this alongside an ideology that already validated reason and encouraged full engagement with modernity.

A person would be allowed experiences beyond the empirical context if they accepted the Svaminarayan proposition. Participation in *lila* was about inhabiting a blissful disorientation. While dwelling in this imaginative place, a person's intention was not to try to know whether their perception and experience corresponded to reality; rather, it was to exist in a groundless position between the divine and the rational—and from *this* ambiguity, sensitivity to fresh possibilities could arise. Embodying a position of engrossment in reason-challenging views, a human being's potential could be achieved. *Lila* emboldened the individual with freedom to imagine self and others anew. But *lila* was not escapist, nor was it an alternative to modernity: it was instrumental. Disorientation had a social function. It guided adherents toward diverse ways of being human while also thoroughly being of the world.

Viewing empirical reality as *lila* was not without its challenges. Michael Saler writes, “Modern enchantment often depends upon its antinomial other, modern disenchantment, and a specifically modern enchantment might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: one that delights but does not delude.”¹²⁵ While I am not claiming that Sahajanand's adherents participated in what they viewed to be fictional imaginary worlds, early members of the *sampraday* wrestled with accepting an enchanted perception, and correspondingly, there is overwhelming evidence in the *Vachanamrt* of continual efforts to rationalize what did not seem immediately reasonable (rather than just claim it). Such a tricky struggle had been expected. By advocating that people intentionally benefit from the spiritual and material, the suspension of disbelief alongside the suspension of belief, reimagining the empirical world through *lila* while also embracing the “real” world as is, Sahajanand had to work

¹²⁵ Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment,” 702.

hard to deter the prospect of rational and creative perceptions canceling each other out in people's minds.

Modernity was not totalizing in the Svaminarayan framework. Critically, neither was it positioned alongside enchantment in a mutually exclusive binary. While the central claim asserted that Sahajanand embodied God in the world, his heterogeneous ontological position was built with the flexibility to be able to move along the spectrum of belief and disbelief, to allow his being in the world with as much reason as creativity. A wholly pragmatic understanding was nurtured in individuals so that they might be successful as members of society. For instance, Sahajanand did not simply acknowledge the inevitable shifting nature of the world but taught adherents to be deftly in sync with them. By living in the world, people were predisposed to geographical place and time and had to accommodate these factors, Sahajanand habitually counseled. This multivalent approach created not only successful individuals, but brought the *sampraday* into existence. From building infrastructure, to creating discursive mechanisms, to providing people the experience of transcendence—efforts toward institutionalization used a two-pronged outlook, both pragmatic and wondrous. Svaminarayan *ekantik bhakti* (*ekantik dharma*), as discussed in Chapter 2, refused to disavow either. But even though a range of perspectives was regularly acknowledged, Sahajanand claimed that the sensory perception of reality based on God should be privileged over the realistic experience of it. In this case, he was trying to advocate that it was important to cease doubt and revel in a liminal position, the space of in-between, despite one's rationality. By pausing in the indefinite, one would be available to the immense opportunity for self-transformation. Uncertainty was invaluable.

CONCLUSION: HISTORY AND ENCHANTED PASTS

Vehement acknowledgement of human-like divinity was at the center of the community. The idea that God is human-like so that people may know him fully on earth enabled Sahajanand's life to occur among, and be witnessed by, contemporaries as more than a historical occurrence. For those that subscribed to the idea, their fellow human who was grounded in the conditions of the nineteenth century, offered an experience of divinity occurring in the realm of *maya*. The principle that God could only be intimately known, accessed, and worshipped when present in society in human form allowed Sahajanand to be available for sensory, social, and intellectual consumption. Consequently, Svaminarayan adherents were primed for intense contemporaneous observation of him, and to behold experiences in his vicinity. In sum, there was a direct pipeline between the theology taught by Sahajanand Svami and the claims about him, those around him, and their context, as objects of documentation.

Specifically, Sahajanand's vision imbued mundane aspects of phenomena with divinity. The logical result of the principles of *pragat, pratyaksh, sakar* was that God was indisputably accessible for human perception and engagement. The self-evident knowledge as experienced by a person in body, mind, and emotion was filtered through the lens of *divyabhav*. The non-dual outlook that collapsed otherworldly and earthly time and space,¹²⁶ and made sensory and suprasensory experiences one, emerged in the phenomenon of *lila*. *Lila* did not remain in the confines of perception but was also an expressed position with practices. It was a devotional and intellectual apparatus manifesting in social, physical, and textual forms.

¹²⁶ See one of the additional records in the *Vachanamrt* on the subject of Sahajanand's view of geography and astronomy, *Vachanamrt BAPS*, Additional 12; Sahajanand made these comments on November 21, 1806. It is a fascinating blend of a cosmological view and that of empirical reality. It also evaluates and judges different regions of Bharat-khand diversely, deeming areas as Gujarat, Braj, and Punjab as being more noble and Bengal, Nepal, and Iran as less so.

Fundamentally, *lila* was characterized by a divine-mundane perception that enacted and produced an enchanted history.

If experience provides the proof for history, the experience of the divine was the proof for a history of the divine for adherents. This account of present circumstances that eventually became the past is one perspective among others. By being the site of their experience, *maya* was the setting for history—the space in which the life of Sahajanand and the community unfolded. Simultaneously and without contradiction, they came into being in the realm of western India in the early nineteenth century.

Sahajanand Svami enacted the theology propagated in the community. He lived his life and performed activities which produced and represented what would be termed *lila*. As this chapter has outlined, Sahajanand's existence was intended to be understood as simultaneously human and divine. Sahajanand was both affiliated with the category of divinity and simultaneously within human experiential reach. Thus, those around Sahajanand attempted to reflect on his experiences as a person in western India as being experiences of divinity, not simply social aspects of an ordinary person and yet, not entirely devoid of those qualities. For this reason, adherents did not produce historical records in the modern sense, which would have corresponded to a strictly rational perception of reality, but neither did they produce a miraculous account. The goal was not to necessarily write a verifiable history because from the perspective of the devotee God could not be fully known, but to document an experience of a person that signified divinity. Thus, they yielded *lila* records, an archive of accounts tied to Svaminarayan-directed concerns—Sahajanand's life, the *sampraday*, its *satsangis*, all of which existed in the contextual realm of *maya*. The discourse of *lila* was a history of a *sampraday*, but also a creative

account of modernity, told from a significant subjectivity of perception, itself a source of value and merit.

Lila, or *lila charitra* was a conceptualization that was most apt for discussing Sahajanand for followers of the *bhakti sampraday*. How else might a Vaishnava adherent write about supreme divinity in early nineteenth-century India? Sahajanand may have been correlated with a variety of identities in his lifetime, stylized by himself and others as a king, a *guru*, a renunciate—but it was the sum of these aspects conflated with divinity that exemplified him for devotees. *Lila* would be the expected rubric through which to discuss what Sahajanand represented to his contemporaries. Additionally, using the trope of *lila* helped to sustain the idea of the founder as divine over the long-term. Correspondingly, only *lila charitra* as a literary genre could wholly express the entity of divinity, or at least attempt to do so, in a suitable way. Contemporaneously in the Sikh context, we find that the choice was being made to use hagiographical genres for narrating the past, *sakhi*, rather than the more predominant literary styles in South Asia of *itihas* and *tarikh*.¹²⁷ The formula of using a hagiographical genre to record the past has a long history. In the thirteenth-century and also rooted in western India, the formula of *lila charitra* was used to write a life account of the founder and deity of the Mahanubhav community, Chakradhar. In this and similar cases, we see that genre choices were not defined by a lack of historical elements, as the writings functioned as a particular way of recording the past, but rather related to the presentation preferences for certain subject matters and audiences.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Dhavan, “Reading the Texture,” 518-20.

¹²⁸ For an extensive analysis, see Novetzke, *Quotidian*, 170-210.

In the Svaminarayan case, relying extensively on genres like *itihas*, which literally means “thus it was,” could have opened up room for an error that Sahajanand wanted to avoid.¹²⁹ That is, it could make a human being (albeit a prominent one) or a mythic figure out of its subject. But Sahajanand was an entity of modern re-enchantment—he was a human-based, manifest God, not a social elite or a mythological figure, who could not risk what might emerge from using literary forms other than more hagiographic genres like *lila charitra*. At the same time, notably, the subject of Sahajanand’s *lila* was not strictly relegated to presentation in the literary style of *lila charitra*. For example, the *Satsangi Jivan Granth* is a key text with *lila* content, but the composition was modeled on the *purana* genre.¹³⁰ *Lila* was also part of some compositions of the *vato* genre, both as the subject of its content matter and as an interchangeable genre identifier.

It would be a misstep to correlate the use of a specific genre for narrating the present (and past) to an author’s possession or lack of a rational perspective; rather, the choice of genre was dictated by an author’s specific goals. Purnima Dhavan has shown through a study of a parallel context, Punjab during the early nineteenth century, an important period of transition between independent Sikh kingdoms and colonial rule, that authors wrote about the Sikh past by selecting narrative modes on the basis of how well the genres could satisfy specific expressive needs and appeal to relevant audiences.¹³¹ In the case of the Svaminarayan community, *lila*

¹²⁹ On “*itihas-purana*” genre and on the changing nature of expressions of historical consciousness see Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, 137-73.

¹³⁰ Interestingly, Peter Schreiner concludes in his study of this Sanskrit composition, “there can be little doubt that the author had a sense of historical reality,” Schreiner, “The Bhāgavatapurāṇa,” 157. The *itihas-purana* genre, which combined earlier Sanskrit myths and epics with actual contemporary occurrences, was a tool tied to aiding state-formation, Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, 137-73. Accordingly, the Svaminarayan text’s use of the *purana* genre and modeling on *Bhagavatpurana* makes sense, because the composition was meant to be an authoritative, liturgical, doctrinal text to establish and guide the *sampraday*.

¹³¹ Dhavan, “Reading the Texture,” 516.

charitra was an obvious literary choice as it corresponded to the status accorded to Sahajanand. Moreover, as discussed earlier, neither enchantment nor disenchantment were totalizing outlooks for those in the Svaminarayan *sampraday*. Early nineteenth-century followers recognized Sahajanand as human, and thus had ongoing struggles with the idea of divinity, and yet they were not impeded from writing about him in hagiographical fashion. In western India at this time, *lila* had aspects that were didactic, entertaining, rational, irrational, particular, transcendence inducing, biographical, historical, and human-like—but always, singularly, beyond the world. *Lila/lila charitra* was the most secure net to keep its subject, Sahajanand, intimately close yet safely above humanity and its earthy way of recording people and experiences: history, so to speak. If motives and genre are to be better understood, we can instrumentally use materials to draw historical insight.

The application of the concept and style of *lila* does not make its subject less human or the surrounding phenomenon less invested with empirical veracity. That is, western India in the early nineteenth century is not escaping from or becoming less approachable for historians when the discussion involves materials other than secular bureaucratic records. Specifically, *lila* offers a very rich archive of how a specific genre can be used to study the history of affect and perception in the human experience. Again, I stress that Sahajanand's contemporaries would have deliberately used the *lila charitra* genre to discuss Sahajanand regardless of his being a human being. Though a person living in society with a personal experience unfolding in the world similar to that of others, these factors did not preclude him from having an otherworldly classification for a certain segment of the population. *Lila* would not have been an obvious model to adopt for documentation of a living individual unless, contemporaneously, there was widespread belief in his non-human origins or at the very least, a motive to bolster the notion. On

a related note, because of the way in which an enchanted outlook encapsulated the empirical reality that the beholder encountered, the spirit of *lila* theoretically affected everything that existed or happened in the context of the *sampraday*. This means that even while recognizing the specific literary genre of *lila charitra*, contemporary Svaminarayan archive administrators simultaneously put aside the exclusivity of that convention and also include materials that would be normatively consulted by a scholar trained in the modern discipline of history. Land deeds, geographical places, material objects, accounting books, tax records, as well as manuscripts of philosophical commentaries, and later in the century postcards and receipts, all easily slip into instances of and representations of *lila*, reflecting mundane events and exchanges alongside Sahajanand's wondrous feats. What has been a historical discipline for the modern scholar of India had been a play for the community.

But *lila* does offer us one more way into the past. In the Svaminarayan case, modern *lila* records, written and non-written, let us see how they were alert to historical sensibilities. I am not claiming historical veracity of all matters in these archives, or that some of these matters were even rationally possible, but I would like to consider how we use such materials to provide insight into South Asian intellectual and cultural history, and think about the nature of subjectivity. Moreover, while these materials are not generally considered sources of history, one reason because they have theologically-inspired motives (the way that the colonial state had its own motives as did the *karanam*, the village accountant in early modern South India), people were nevertheless compelled to note down their experiences of a period and place through their interest in a documenting the divine.¹³² The intensity of one's devotion and the process of

¹³² *Karanam* sensibility is identified as a mode of historiography in the rich study of early modern South Indian historiography by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam in their study *Textures of Time*, 93-139. Recent studies of Indic historical consciousness in South Asia include Sreenivasan, *Rajput*

institutionalizing the *sampraday* was strengthened through the practice of a type of historiography based on an intensity of faithful documentation, which produced accounts invested with realism. We find evidence of this same mode as early as six hundred years before. Christian Novetzke, in his study of the emergence of Marathi literary culture western India, classifies an orientation toward intense historical detailing in religious biographical writing, as historical literary realism. Despite a text's normative hagiographical classification and its devotional content, patterns emerge that are akin to pre-modern chronicle genres.¹³³

As the adherent might find *lila* records to be an objective view of reality, these accounts were no more or less 'objective' as colonial accounts. Neither the modern *sampraday* nor the modern state were without motive; both forms of power were produced with the help of narratives constructed in records about the present and past. Both were coming into being and trying to bear influence over the population with particular ideas. In this study of the Svaminarayan community's development, we see that its elaborate ideology was not developed for the goal of building an organization, but was chiefly for promoting a certain type of individual subjectivity, which in turn was institutionalized and authorized. In parallel, during the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, British figures like Elphinstone and Malcolm, both of whom had served as Governors General of Bombay, were driven to understand and write about India from the perspective of its history.¹³⁴ To be clear, I am not equating the projects of colonialism and *sampraday*-building, nor am I justifying or judging either; rather, I am pointing

Queen; Kumkum, *The Cultures of History*; Desphande, *Creative Pasts*; Zutshi, *Contested Pasts*; Mayaram, *Against History, Against State*.

¹³³ Novetzke, *Quotidian Revolution*, 106, 173-75.

¹³⁴ Dirks, "History as Sign," 26-7. For an in-depth understanding of Malcolm's influential development of historical ideas about British imperialism in India before 1857, see Harrington, *Sir John Malcolm*.

to what might be parallels between the developments of state or non-state forms of power that have implications for historiography.

As historians, we might expect that recognition of the lack of objectivity in any account would expand the base of sources to analyze South Asia. But in debates about the nature of historical consciousness and historiographical genres in South Asia, religious phenomenon and sources remain outside consideration.¹³⁵ Thus, we have seen for instance that the personal accounts of someone traveling through western India for the first time, Bishop Heber, whose journal revealed an attempt to find a messenger for Christianity in Sahajanand, had been an important source for understanding the community in the local landscape. Reason is necessary in order to develop a modern historical understanding, but the presence of this feature is not the bearer of “history” on its own. On the other hand, the diary-like observations of ascetics about Sahajanand and life in western India in the *vato* genre—whose content matter, poetry or prose, led it to be interchangeably termed ‘*lila*’ and thus became commonly referenced as hagiographical literature—is viewed as less relevant, if at all. But these ascetics were embedded locally and traveled extensively to the corners of Gujarat’s hinterlands and cities, and well beyond into other regions for decades, enchanted or disenchanting. How should we understand the imbalance in our approach to sources? Does distinguishing materials by their European or Indic origin, or separating sources by the narrative genre, personal diary or a hagiography, offer a precondition for granting them a role in constructing history?

While by now scholars have served the former assumption something of a blow, the latter observes a tendency for scholars to sidestep religious materials in the debate about locating

¹³⁵ Novetzke, “Subaltern Numen,” 112-16. For instance, while in search of non-statist accounts colonial-era religion, devotional literature is a challenging source because it is “the complete ideological negation of history”, van der Veer, *Religion in South Asia*, 176.

historical consciousness in India, an omission pronounced for Hindu materials.¹³⁶ Even for scholars of Europe, religious materials are excluded from among those characterized as reflecting historical consciousness. For instance, studies have productively turned to Christian hagiographical materials to form an understanding of gender and social life in medieval Europe, but at the same time such materials themselves are not regarded as reflecting historical consciousness.¹³⁷ On the other hand, I am not suggesting that a rational understanding is not key for modern historical investigations but rather that a glimpse of rationality is not a glimpse of the unadulterated past. It is a glimpse of rationality. Similar to the European studies, in Chapter 2 seeking a more thorough understanding of the early nineteenth century, I have incorporated *lila* accounts (written as *vato* as well as formal *lila* compositions), which resulted in a historical reconstruction of the process of *sampraday* creation and revealed social and cultural aspects of western India. Admittedly, the use of these sources was not a literal reading, but one which involved critical evaluation. Nevertheless, applying a process of analysis to sources does not amount to a denial of historical consciousness to the writings or their authors from the religious realm, as I have tried to show in this chapter. That equation would be mistaken. The case is complex. Or more precisely, the case is different than the criteria we pose and the assumptions we hold fast. Historical consciousness in the nineteenth century was not presented in the specific voices and forms we have come to expect, as historians.

Considering historian Nicholas Dirks' regard for history as an indicator of the modern, Novetzke observes that the category of religion, a modern construct, serves as an enduring reminder of the non-modern. "Figured this way, religion and history mark mutually exclusive

¹³⁶ Novetzke, "The Theographic "; Novetzke, "The Subaltern Numen," 172-73.

¹³⁷ Novetzke, "Theographic," 172-73.

domains.”¹³⁸ Perhaps part of the hesitation as modern scholars in turning to materials associated with the religious is a discomfort in acknowledging genres such as *lila* as possessing a particular ontology and epistemology during a seemingly universal, totalizing modernity. That is, *lila* in the early nineteenth century and onwards would be regarded as a paradoxical remnant of the ‘pre-modern,’ registering as a lively but lingering presence on colonialism’s watch—“the ancient and spiritual invading the contemporary and scientific.”¹³⁹ But the early modern did not cease at the doorstep of colonialism. Religious materials in the nineteenth century, like sacred narratives associated with *lila*, continued to have a vibrant existence—and not merely as remnants from the past, but as appropriate apparatuses for the nineteenth century, in spite of European-introduced practices of historiography.¹⁴⁰ This is not entirely a surprise, as vernacular modes of history had been emerging throughout pre-colonial India.¹⁴¹ On this note, Dhavan’s historical study of subjectivities, expressions, and viewpoints in non-European sources is an intervention into the practices of examining religious materials, which argues that it is vital to jointly study materials of different genres that are contemporaneous to one another, like hagiographical and secular writings. In tandem, we can understand how they demonstrate competing claims to the past in the early nineteenth century, an era when historiographical practices were undergoing significant changes.¹⁴²

If non-secular discourse is regarded as being outside the sphere of rationality, then as

¹³⁸ Novetzke, “Subaltern Numen,” 118.

¹³⁹ Novetzke, “Subaltern Numen,” 118.

¹⁴⁰ “Redemptive Pasts,” 41. Similarly, Purnima Dhavan has shown that *munshis* of the early nineteenth century in Punjab developed their local narratives of history based on an affinity for pre-colonial intellectual patterns with a cognizance of contemporaneous colonial modes of recording. The emergence of vernacular narratives of the past was not necessarily the product of a dramatic reaction to colonial thought.

¹⁴¹ Aquil and Chatterjee, *History in the Vernacular*, 8.

¹⁴² Dhavan, “Reading the Texture,” 518.

historians, we do not let ourselves encounter such patterns despite their forceful and salient nature. Perhaps this betrays confidence in an unwitting but damaging assumption: agents of history have never emerged from a vast and vibrant part of society. The consequence of maintaining an almost knee-jerk approach to the practice of history is that we disfigure the subject of study. That is, such assumptions actively cleave the subject apart from any characteristics it exhibits that are already assigned to the category of the modern. Bifurcating materials of the 'religious' and 'secular' for historical consciousness or reason, in this case, would be a failing in the form of taking constructed categories far more seriously than the empirical realities behind them.

Moreover, in narrowly defining sources of history through specific classifications, we are likely to lose valuable sight of non-European sources that have a historiographic mode but do not correspond to secular categories of historical narrative. As has been demonstrated for medieval and early modern South Asia, historical consciousness is reflected in the historical texture that can be detected in different genres of writing, including materials associated with the religious.¹⁴³ However, such sources cannot always manage to fit themselves into exclusive, bounded genres of the past, even in vernacular frames. Thus, applying European genre boundaries becomes blurry when the same source is referenced with multiple labels, such as personal accounts as *lila*, or land deeds as *lila*, and secondly when a single source has varied content, from administrative concerns to fantastical discussions, and thirdly, when a single source has diverse audiences/uses, from addressing a legal court to persuading non-elite audiences.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Novetkze, "Theographic and the Historiographic," 180.

¹⁴⁴ Novetkze, "Theographic and the Historiographic," 181. Texts should be treated as internally diverse and aimed at a range of audiences.

Such sources invite the attention of historians, recognizing that while the terms by which this set of actors engaged and documented the world are different, the materials are not unproductively fantastical and the actors are not devoid of reason. As emotions were being civilized in the political project of colonialism, affect and reason were both being put to work in a formula of texts, images, physical, and ritual culture, to shape what I have suggested is a non-statist ordering of society.¹⁴⁵ Sahajanand was using the emotions of empathy and love—toward the divine and toward one another—to help disintegrate social hierarchy and construct a collective formation. From the study of cultural and social history of the nineteenth century through the Svaminarayan case, as well as the related intellectual history, it becomes plain that the use of reason was not mutually exclusive from the possession and use of other modes of understanding. Secondly, this ontologically diverse complexity did not match neatly with our expectations of corresponding literary styles. Thirdly, literary expression was not acceptable on its own to represent the robustly pluralist mode—reason and enchantment turned to spatial, visual and material expressions to bear their testimony, as we will see in Chapter 5. The question for us as scholars is not whether Sahajanand, while viewed as God in the *sampraday* and documented in a genre appropriate for such a subject, should be considered to have historically existed. Rather, while recognizing the historical founder of the community, we can turn to such materials to further excavate aspects of the past.

The challenge lies in how to constructively gain from non-European sources even when scholarly approaches and their objects of study are a mismatch. Dipesh Chakrabarty's

¹⁴⁵ As the object of civilizing missions, emotions were tied to a project of global ordering and modernity, see Perneau and Jordheim, "Introduction," 4-6, 9-10. Margrit Pernau has recently argued that while emotions have been oft-overlooked in scholarship on Indic contexts, and they have unconstructively been rendered as opposed to rationality and interests, historical studies of emotions can enrich our understanding of communities and the relationship between the feeling of an emotion with its external realities, like political and economic activity, Perneau, *Feeling Communities*.

monumental project signaled how modern academic disciplines and their foundations pose limits to discussing the full range of social phenomena, as some phenomena simply cannot be encountered in disciplinary terms. European social sciences that frame human existence without gods and spirits are unable to capture a human experience that is detached from that way of being.¹⁴⁶ By extension, this discloses that the scholar appears to be epistemologically ‘enchanted’ when staying strictly within the boundaries of the discipline, with the trust that it is productive for capturing the range of human experience. That is, a firmness in this position implies that the historian also has to be allowed to guard materials, reconstructions of the past, and ontologies that emerge from the realm of religion from any strains of disenchantment. A totalizing ‘enchanted’ epistemological understanding of the religious justifies an ontology that correspondingly cannot ever recognize expressions of reason, agency, or even outright submersion in the material, secular, and public spheres, as well as historical consciousness, when originating from the realm of religion.¹⁴⁷ Heterogeneity cannot exist *within* the subaltern position itself, whether enchanted or disenchanting. Overall, if religion is pre-conditioned to be outside the ontologically singular view of social sciences, it remains mute in modern historical discourse. It is by design, then, that an easy solution cannot emerge from within the discipline of history for “subaltern pasts, pasts that cannot ever enter academic history as belonging to the historian’s own position.”¹⁴⁸

At the same time, it should be noted that in remaining exclusively aligned to one discipline for understanding modern South Asia, we can miss and misread some of its features. To

¹⁴⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ See Novetzke, *Subaltern Numen*, 99-126. Perhaps this viewpoint also requires an inability to detect “theographic” textures that exist in historical narratives, Novetzke, “Theographic and the Historiographic,” 175.

¹⁴⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 105. Also see Chakrabarty, “Politics and Possibility.” Even ethno-history, dedicated to indigenous frames and expressions about the past, tends to circumvent religious materials, Novetzke, “Theographic and the Historiographic,” 172.

gain better insight into subjects, one might consider employing a patchwork of approaches, while acknowledging the limits of the enterprise for capturing the variability of human experience and constructs of the past. Here, hope is in approximating a representation of a specific ontology, though not justly appropriating it. As a result, one can approach non-secular materials with expanse and be rewarded with more meaningful historiographies, if still perennially incomplete ones. One's study can at least catch a glimpse of the different ways of being, and sensitively give voice to the subjectivities; it can describe a reason, albeit religious, for action in the world. This is to momentarily "stay with the heterogeneities without seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that speaks for an already given whole," before objectifying or secularizing them in a historical analysis.¹⁴⁹ Applying this to the Svaminarayan case, by first recognizing that Sahajanand's personality and the community were wedded to peculiar characteristics for the producers of *lila* archives, we can then accordingly turn to the materials to ask important historical questions like how new cultural forms might have borne ontological dualities productively for the purposes of individual cultivation, collective organization, the construction of authority, and private and public institution building in modernity. These repositories of the past can be included alongside the normative range of historical sources for mining knowledge about the South Asian history and for better charting intellectual history itself.

¹⁴⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 107.

Chapter 5.

THE TIME OF HOPE

I have demonstrated how the Swaminarayan *sampraday* emerged as an influential entity in a region where statist authority was fractured. Its own configurations loosely paralleled features of a kingdom. Sahajanand and early supporters designed various mechanisms to organize the *sampraday* in relation to the region and society in western India, and reinforced this through a consistent ideology about the founder and the world. At its height, the *sampraday* expended a tremendous focus on sustaining itself through the institutionalization of a practice of sacred historiography. In some ways narrating the recent Swaminarayan past incorporated earlier practices of hagiography, but, as we shall see, the specific forms of narration also reproduced documentary practices that closely paralleled those of secular states and their record keeping. This re-narration of the past was crucial to the creation and substance of the Swaminarayan identity. Engaging with the present and the past was actively pursued through the tool of *lila*, which intertwined devotional and intellectual forms. With *lila*, the community aimed to actively generate its contemporaneous circumstances, and then account for them in representations for posterity. In the nineteenth century such an outlook stressed a sensory-intellectual perception of reality underwritten by a suspension of disbelief, and the organizing of this experience in diverse forms for future growth. Thus, this was both a practice of creation and documentation of experience in various forms.

At one level, this was an institutional enterprise. By conducting an ethnography of *lila* archives in this chapter, I consider a finer understanding of emerging forms of non-secular influence in the early nineteenth century, evaluating the *sampraday*'s epistemology, objectives,

recording practices, the nature of its intellectual products, and systems of knowledge classification as related to its pasts. By looking closely at the factors that made the world intelligible and produced a rubric about time and place, and as a result created corresponding archives, one can understand a particular configuration of a modern religious power. Anthropologist Ann Stoler has suggested a view that moves beyond a solely extractive relationship with state archives, and toward a study of their placement and form, recognizing that state archives represent “monuments of state” as well as “sites of state ethnography.”¹ An investigation of knowledge production is not a disavowal of archives as repositories of the past, she notes, but rather, a more extensive relationship with these repositories, with a recognition of “archives as cultural artifacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making, and of disparate notions of what made up colonial authority.”²

But as has been argued throughout this study, *bhakti* and its attendant practices and ideas were a project of individual cultivation as well as an organizational one. The two were not contradictory but were dependent on one another in the modern period. Hence, on one level while the practice and perception of *lila* defined and expanded the authority of the *sampraday*, it did the same for the individual by unleashing the potential of participants. Specifically, the instrumental use of time produced hope. *Lila* cultivated an immense experience of ontological freedom, and in turn, a way for non-elite community members to confidently imagine new futures for themselves. This was not wishful thinking. Adherents were being invested with dignity and then encouraged to seek new avenues for themselves, forging toward possibilities beyond their perceived limits. Ultimately, participating in *lila*, in all its diverse ways, created

¹ Stoler, “Colonial Archives,” 90.

² Stoler, “Colonial Archives,” 90-91.

optimism and thus, a springboard for action in a period when everyday survival was difficult, let alone having an opportunity for success. Gaining an inspired form from *lila* one was able to seek the world out confidently to make more of it. Specifically, *lila* or play, created the grounds on which one's material circumstances was not necessarily one's imminent fate. Old circumstances could be erased and new ones enacted, and at the very least one could hope to feel less bothered by circumstances that could not easily change. Under these conditions the unimaginable could be translated, albeit daringly, into new empirical possibilities. A low-caste Dhedh ("Untouchable") could sit next to a high caste Rajput in public.³ Moreover, play created an environment that was inherently joyous. When participating in this context or carrying the memory of it, a person was not relentlessly consumed by the burdensome financial debt they had or reminded of one's status as a recent widower. Certainly life's circumstances were to be dealt with, and dealt with ethically, but they were relieved from these as binds that would tie one down permanently or inevitably. Essentially, even when certain conditions could not be changed they were not be inculcated as one's defining identity. Divinity was engaged by the devotee it was the individual's will inspired from this contemplative relationship that produced action in life.

The *sampraday* asked people not to avoid resolving challenges arising from the instability of the period. Rather, the *sampraday* actively engaged with new colonial tropes of modernity by restructuring how devotees perceived material reality and their place within it. This entailed not only a repositioning of and understanding of the present, but critically of temporality itself. Partha Chatterjee's discussion of religion in nineteenth-century Bengal, at the heart of colonialism, highlights the way in which middle-class Indian society conceptualized their outlook toward life under difficult political conditions. Instigated by fear of their fate in the

³ Mangalnidhidas, "Sahajanand Swami's Approach to Caste," 124-25.

world, nationalists divided their outlook and life into binaries of private/public, inner/outer. Fear catalyzed survival, causing nationalists to withdraw from the ways of the world into inner and private realms including that of *bhakti* and its associated *lila*. From here, they could imagine a collective self to resist colonialism. But this resistance remained a “passive revolution.”⁴

In contrast, the sphere of *bhakti* amongst non-elite populations in Gujarat, earlier in the century, was not at odds with the secular one. Devotion did not assist practitioners to shy away from the struggles the larger world brought, including that of changing political situations. *Lila* unlocked hope that translated into action for survival and even success. Prepared for dealing with the intense challenges of life in the nineteenth century, adherents could be more confident in pursuing new possibilities, not restrained. Western India in the early nineteenth century at once had a power vacuum and yet no shortage of polities. Numerous Indian rulers, many with states that were quite small but nonetheless contentious, often jockeyed against one another for power. These often-violent engagements between states and rulers of vastly different rank, as well as negotiations with colonial power, which was still consolidating its power in the region, meant a region that was in flux and one in which new social identities were being formulated. Here, narratively the *sampraday* reflected an engagement with the colonial that both showed a desire to be part of it and resist it in *lila* narratives.

CONTOURS OF *LILA*

Lila, a long-standing devotional concept in medieval and early modern South Asia, has been commonly understood as the contemplation of the enchanting playfulness of a divine figure, one that engages the cosmic universe and everyday life. The idea has historically varied

⁴ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 75.

in Hinduism-to indicate divine spontaneity, sport and even performative drama to stage and relive the memory of such playful actions. It has been used to theologically describe the creative and whimsical nature of God, often these are mythic stories of the deity Krishna, at times full of deception but also innocence, playful as a mischievous lover or a joyful child. *Lila* is God's manifestation in the world. It is also a way of understanding life itself as a type of purposeless, but powerful, play.⁵ Since the sixteenth century the notion of *rasa*, a way of enjoying aesthetic pleasure, was intertwined in *bhakti* culture emerging in the sphere of *lila*, allowing the devotee an experience of an unadulterated transcendent love. That is, the experience of loving the divine in a variety of emotional relationships. While *laukika* (worldly) and *alaukika* (other-worldly) referenced the experience of everyday versus transcendent, *rasa* in its theological inflection made participation in *lila* an experience that was distinct from the ordinary.⁶

Swaminarayan *lila* was formulated for engaging the circumstances of early colonial Gujarat, a politically and intellectually mixed bag of British and princely territories. The power of the *sampraday* was expansive. It attracted a diverse public from the deserts and warring hinterlands, as well as the agrarian belt of Gujarat. With the aim of restoring dignity to vulnerable populations, Sahajanand armed practitioners in the *satsang*, or collective of truth, with the means to direct life. This perspective argued that exercising an ordered material-spiritual lifestyle was required to achieve soteriological success. Upholding ethics was vital in matters such as financial and agricultural dealings, but so was leading an enchanted existence.⁷ At its

⁵ Studies discussing these various aspects of *lila*, include: Haberman, *Journey Through*; Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*; Sax, *Gods at Play*; Bryant, *Bhagvat Purana*; Dimcock, "Līlā."

⁶ Buchta, *Rasa Theory*, 623; Holredge, *Bhakti and Embodiment*, 86-93.

⁷ For instance, in 1827 when cultivating indigo was a lucrative practice, Captain Cruikshank unsuccessfully tried to get people in Kaira to grow the crop. One reason, he thought, for this failure might have been the immense investment of capital and labor required for indigo production and its limited profits, but there was also another

peak, this convergence emerged in practices of and narratives about *lila*. Fundamentally, *lila* represented an ontological claim about the nature of reality and an epistemologically complex understanding of time. In this sense, to narrate *lila* (or *lila charitra*) meant both to produce the literary compositions by the author and also the content of what that writing.⁸ While a familiar older trope, *lila* was not an arcane remnant of early modern *bhakti* that had passively survived into modernity.

Sahajanand adapted the configuration into his community with a purpose, invested with a specific understanding, form and content to meet contemporary circumstances. *Lila* was a tool to grasp the past and present in a manner crucial to the definition of the *sampraday* and its sustenance. The classical expression of *lila* as the playfulness of a divine figure continued to hold in the Svaminarayan community around its magnetic founder, but it also served as a mechanism of documentation, rather than just adoration. It was an account of the devotee's experience of Sahajanand Svami's life, the institution and the context, intently intertwining engaging the past and devotion. Toward the of creating *sampraday* authority and secondly, generating day-to-day positive outlook for its practitioners in the nineteenth century, the Svaminarayan context of engaging the past was concerned in peculiar ways with testimony, authenticity, documentation, and preservation of the past. In other words, *lila* for the Svaminarayan community was far from strictly devotional—"the play of the divine," as it had been known in early modern India—rather, it recorded the community's sensory and intellectual experiences of the divine and the mundane in western India during their own lifetime. The concept expressed itself so

factor: a great deal of insects were killed in the production of indigo, a reprehensible occurrence to the Kanbis but also to the Koli community ever since Svaminarayan ideas had become prominent in Kaira, *Gazetteer: Kaira*, 53.

⁸ This is parallel to an observation Partha Chatterjee makes about history, both as the written product of a historian's efforts and the subject of that product. In other words, the knowledge produced is equated to the phenomenon itself. Chatterjee and Ghosh, *History and the Present*, 10.

prominently, forcefully and freshly as a way of understanding the movement's own present and past, I term this, Svaminarayan's emphasis on the device of *lila* a creative sensibility of self-preservation and temporality, as "the play of history." While *lila* was an alternative mode of enquiry into the past, certainly distinct from the post-Enlightenment conception of history and associated notions of temporality and historicity, it was flourishing in an age when European positivist historiography was being slowly introduced and developed in India.⁹ Moreover and importantly, *lila continued* to flourish in the *sampraday* well past the mid-nineteenth century when Gujarati history writing modeled on European frames was popular.¹⁰ Despite extensive exposure to such a history-writing conception, *lila* was the model retained by *sampraday* leaders in the late nineteenth century to continue writing about the community and its founder in the past.¹¹

FUNCTIONS AND AIMS

Lila functioned as both a tool of perception and practice. As a perception, it provided a way of observing the figure of Sahajanand, one who was understood to be a divine presence, *bhagvan*, manifest on earth with an unusually human-like form. The epistemological thread, as discussed in the last chapter, extended to representations of observations, which were created in various registers of *lila* narratives. The Svaminarayan framework nurtured engaging divinity intellectually but also visually. Visual terms were part of the Vaishnava theology in Braj, which

⁹ In Europe itself, the notion of history and a historical method were changing significantly during the nineteenth century. As the understanding of history as a rational, scientific pursuit emerged in Britain, it was also propagated in colonial India, see Mantena, "The Question of History," 399, footnote #7.

¹⁰ Isaka, "Gujarati Intellectuals," 2002.

¹¹ Here, I intentionally leave aside an extended evaluation of the matter, as shifts in the *sampraday* during the latter-half of the century remains outside the scope of this dissertation's focus.

expanded the concept of *rasa* to help express the culture of adoring the deity Krishna.¹² But the outstanding difference between the early modern circumstances and the younger *sampraday* was that in the nineteenth century *sampraday* devotion was oriented to a living *murti*. Hence, followers were encouraged to engage *Bhagvan*, Sahajanand, beyond solely ocular means and to possess multisensory awareness. Heightened awareness was the result of corporeal and ritual participation, and at the least by simply maintaining a presence in the community. Physical and social experience was also a way of knowing. As a device of perception and practice, *lila* was formulated for normative devotional interests, and also key to bolstering the overall *sampraday*. For the community, the devotional endeavor was personal and collective, propelling individual enlightenment while creating the infrastructure of material narratives and resources that would support the enlightenment of others and sustain the community. Fundamentally, *lila* provided access to a form of knowledge that as an ideology evoked legitimacy for the *sampraday*. The ideological origins, development and future of the *sampraday* rested on the truth-claims encoded in the idea of *lila*.

Lila, in some sense, was the sum of everything. This is not a convenient interpretation but the way that the phenomenon was conceived from the earliest days of the founder, as we shall see. *Lila* was central to the community, its presence as a practice and perception was ubiquitous in the collective culture, and had an all-encompassing nature. So as *lila* had a defined meaning, one centered on Sahajanand, it was also very generous. Moreover, the concept's sheer malleability characterized it with creativity and range in intent, form and content. The apparatus's foundational principles can be pinpointed to Sahajanand's discussions with his followers. Unambiguously records of early discussion in the *sampraday* show that *lila* was

¹² Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*; Haberman, *Acting as a Way*; Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment*.

conceived to be purposeful and expansive, fulfilling hope-inducing, soteriological, infrastructural and long-term sustainability aims.

Most immediately and profoundly, *lila* created prospects in the struggles of daily life. It was prominent in the community because of its pragmatism. Rather than extensive theological discussions that might remain appealing and accessible mainly to scholars and ritual specialists, *lila* was widely accessible across the population. Prior to the soteriological role that *lila* played in the extremity of a person's nearing death, it had an ongoing role as a source of solace. Thus, whenever one was despondent, doubtful, confused or simply unsettled about something, it was not the foundational theological discussions to contemplate but *lila charitra*—adherents were to meditate on the interactions with and observations of the divine, Sahajanand in this case, and those around him, and the various activities, places and mundane or remarkable memories of experiences. Moreover, for succor at a time of pain one was to constantly listen to narratives about Sahajanand's life as a child, his travels, his meetings, his activities, as well as the behavior of his devotees.¹³

Secondly, *lila* was the key to one's liberation. During the year 1819 while in Gadhada in the vicinity of Bhavnagar, Sahajanand counseled others that *lila* should be regarded dually, for normative devotional goals and as an institutional norm.¹⁴ For the devotee the aim was to achieve an enchanted perception, an individual exercise of remembering the sanctified past for liberation. Amongst those gathered during the discussion, Sahajanand drew the attention of followers to the need to constantly recall the *lila* of Bhagvan's various *avatars*, despite one's ability to already see Bhagvan's form in their heart. Such *lila* should be specifically remembered along with the

¹³ Mahanubhavanand Svami, *Shri Harikrishna Lilamrut*, 4. This text was originally composed in Sanskrit. I refer to a Gujarati translation.

¹⁴ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 3. Sahajanand made these comments on Nov 23, 1819.

different locations where it occurred, he explains. Elaborating on the act of reminiscence, Sahajanand incorporates contemporaneous *lila* into the discussion.¹⁵ He counsels followers to preserve affection for fellow adherents in the community, *brahmacaris*, *sadhus* and *satsangis*, and keep memories of them, in addition to those of Bhagvan, that is, implicitly Sahajanand. Essentially, followers were to observe and remember the acts and being of Sahajanand as well as that of other virtuous people, their fellow practitioners. Essentially, salvation was promised through a mnemonic chain. If at the time of one's death even if one cannot remember the *murti* of Bhagvan, if one recalls Bhagvan's life, *lila*, or the various locations of *lila*, or the events and behavior of Bhagvan, or alternatively if one recalls any of the community members, then eventually Bhagvan himself will come to mind, he said. And as a result, the dying person's soul would achieve high status and greatly benefit. In sum, the aspirant's emancipation was linked to habits of affection and recalling what they witnessed of Sahajanand. But just as importantly as knowing this figure's specific life account in the nineteenth century, or divinity's *lila*, was for one to know the contextual factors of *lila* in western India, the various places and people they encountered in the space around Sahajanand. Perceptions of diverse experiences and relationships could all serve as effective prompts for evoking Bhagvan's *murti* and fulfilling a soteriological aim. Effectively, *lila* encompassed the community in Gujarat just as well as the divine figure at its center.

Thirdly, *lila* was also an exercise of actively doing. Sahajanand established *lila* as a practice, an institutional activity of continuously creating experiences through ordinary and

¹⁵ It is this seamless representation of Sahajanand discussing himself and the *sampradaya* while also discussing other divine entities, and using methods such as invoking the third-person voice to implicitly reference oneself when speaking of Supreme Bhagvan, that allows for the founder to be interpreted as Supreme Being in the Vachnamrut records. As noted in Chapter 3, having a lack of unequivocal voice about his identity allowed Sahajanand to make a claim about his identity to contemporaries with caution, providing some room for his identity to be interpreted in other ways for those that did not accept his Supremacy but thought of him as an *avatar* or a human *guru*.

remarkable means. In other words, it was the instrumental engineering of experiences in the present, or the content-matter of what at an upcoming point in time would become a memory for the person who had the experience, and a narrative of the past when it was formally documented. During the discussion in 1819, Sahajanand also established the need for and practices of a robust infrastructure for activities in correlation to *lila*'s liberating aim.¹⁶ He explains to his audience that the reason for regularly organizing activities, such as *yagnas* and celebrations of seasonal *utsavs* year after year, and the reason that he brings together ascetics and devotees for these events, is to allow for the creation of redeeming experiences for people. Specifically, memories of experiences in the nineteenth century were tied to redemption. If memories or *smruti*, of participation in previous occurrences or observations come to mind at the time of one's death, then even a sinful person will attain Bhagvan's abode, or be emancipated, Sahajanand assured. Essentially, the founder's view established an institutional practice of present-making (or narrative-of-the-past-making) to in turn provide individuals for participation and an opportunity for an experience of freedom, and subsequently, ultimate soteriological freedom through a retrospective perception, or memory. Thus, the *sampraday*'s character developed around a habit of constructing the present, *lila*. Overall, as the circumstances of celebrations, meetings, or merely an existence together, *lila* correspondingly also catalyzed practices of creation and participation and recollection. These were individual and collective processes that were the fulfillment of soteriological and institutional aims.

Finally, *lila* targeted posterity. In a gathering in 1824 Sahajanand established the need to compose *lila*-centered literature recognizing the significance of *lila* for *sampraday* self-

¹⁶ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada I, 3. Sahajanand made these comments on November 23, 1819.

definition.¹⁷ Situated in Kathiawar, Sahajanand questioned his leading ascetics about their thoughts on what might be the means by which the *sampradays* of *acharyas* of the past had flourished for a long time. After some discussion, in which ascetics offer various answers to longevity like the preservation of *varnashram dharma*, behaving according to one's place in society on the basis of age, gender, marital stage, and caste, Sahajanand himself provides the conclusive answer: institutional longevity can be achieved only when a community knows the reason for which their *sampraday's* central deity was born on earth, and knows all the *charitra* he has done and the ways he has behaved after having taken birth. In other words, fascinatingly, Sahajanand had alternatively posited *lila* and its contemplation as a universal *dharma*, propagating a shared practice that was not limited by social and material boundaries of the nineteenth century.

Sahajanand claimed, it was by knowing this behavior, *achran*, that one can easily acquire *dharma*, a righteous life, and one can gain appreciation for the deity.¹⁸ Notably, in this discussion it was the deity's 'birth' on earth rather than a manifestation that Sahajanand cited, and furthermore, he spoke of the deity's conduct as a performance of *charitra* as well as *achran*, the latter a term associated with normative human behavior. Employing the idea of human birth and referencing both divine and mundane typologies of behavior seems to have been an acknowledgement of Sahajanand as human-like divinity and as the community's object of worship. But the references also signal the inchoate context in which people were constantly being convinced of Sahajanand's status. Authorizing the living founder as a divine figure was a

¹⁷ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 58. Sahajanand made these comments on July 29, 1824.

¹⁸ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 58. Sahajanand made these comments on July 29, 1824.

delicate, ongoing process, one that would have been strengthened by bringing together the tendencies of men and gods.

For long-term institutional health it was vital to create an ideological system focused on their deity, the person that was also the founder of the *sampraday*. Other influences were useless for furthering one's own community and could be kept at bay. Sahajanand explains that a *sampraday* flourishes because of scriptures, *shastras*, which are based on the *charitra* of one's own deity from birth up until death.¹⁹ It is a principle about which Sahajanand was firm. Again, he lays out firmly, that only such scriptures dedicated to one's deity foster one's own *sampraday*, regardless of whether they are written in Sanskrit or the vernacular, but books besides these do not aid the *sampraday*. On this subject Sahajanand reserved judgment about the status of language and the merits of expression in one or another; rather, he was focused on ensuring that *lila charitra*, narratives of his own existence, were made widely known and not simply constrained to audiences of ascetics or Brahmin intellectuals. *Lila* was necessary to shape followers and inspire them based on the life and works of their deity. While participating in activity and perceiving this experience with enchantment mattered at an individual level, vital for the health of the *sampraday* was thereafter documenting (or creating narratives of this perception through experience) and through this documentation knowing again the acts of the divine. More precisely, *bhakti* itself required the production of a narrative of the past and its consumption. That is, in its orientation toward the past *lila* underscored a specific view fundamental to furthering the *sampraday*; furthering the institution was explicitly defined by Sahajanand as a measure of *bhakti*. Secondly and in the more normative sense of devotion, a narrative of the past was required because it called forth memories of the deity, which in turn helped increase adoration for the deity.

¹⁹ *Vachanamrt*, Gadhada II, 58. Sahajanand made these comments on July 29, 1824.

The codification of a peculiar practice regarding the past and the centralization of the institution of *lila* archives not only defined the *sampraday*, they were crucial to its sustenance. Sahajanand provides examples to make his case, but notably, examples offered are those of divinities in the remote mythical past. He notes that followers of Ramachandra will be encouraged in their *sampraday* only because of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and for devotees of Srikrishna Bhagvan only the *Shrimad Bhagvata's* eleventh and twelfth cantos can help them prosper in their *sampraday*. But neither of this set of devotees would be nurtured, toward their respective deities in their respective *sampraday* he explained, because of the scriptures of the *Vedas*, the most ancient of the scriptures. Without any uncertainty Sahajanand concludes, at the end of the day it is only scriptures written according to the manner of one's own *sampraday* that can aid the progress of that *sampraday*. This commentary not only underscored the importance of focusing exclusively and intently on one's central deity, but also suggested that narratives had to speak to their own time and place, accessing living memory as opposed to remote pasts.

Sahajanand in this discussion also singled out a senior ascetic, Muktanand Svami, for the said purpose. Muktanand was told in this public setting that for the remainder of his life, he should in this manner continue speaking and producing scriptures about his own *sampraday* and his own deity. Sahajanand added that this was the one and only command he had for Muktanand until he lived. We find similar mentions of Sahajanand giving commands and assurances to ascetics in various *lila* texts. Mahanubhavanand Svami, for instance, had been told to compose a work that gave people peace of mind and helped them achieve Akshardham at the end of their lives. Moreover, Sahajanand encouraged that the ascetic should write about the founder's

supreme divine quality without fear of what others might say and how they might taunt the author.²⁰

Cumulatively, *lila charitra* for posterity was a project of first practicing observation and then creating narrative and subsequently of re-perceiving or re-absorbing this narrative of the past. While *lila* had been the content matter of recollection and a form of action (dually constituted as the act of *lila* event creation by the *sampraday* and the act of participation by the devotee), *lila* was also a practice of documentation and narrative creation aimed at nurturing the individual and collective through the circulation of knowledge of the past. *Lila* accounts were intended to inspire devotees by bolstering a specific collective identity and set of views, and ensuring institutional sustainability by an account of its founder and community in a specific time and space, or a type of non-statist, vernacular past.

Most powerfully, *lila* pervaded the present and the past. To some extent, by attempting to “create” present circumstances through event organization and then documenting that production with its particularities, *lila* was also producing the past-as-it-would-be-proclaimed-in-the-future. Of course, the present was an experience that would not exist later in the same way—it was the inverse of history, something that no longer existed and therefore can only be accessed through memory, text, or material remnants. Pasts could also be distorted, and for this matter the collection and ordering of lived experience deemed authentic in any community must be believed to hold authenticity, in part due to the authority of the narrator. Here, I suggest that the practice of creating the present and past was a way of bringing forth a collective. *Lila* repositories represented an ideological “monument” of *sampraday*, as well as defined the collective and promised individual freedom but also strengthened the institution. As we have seen through the institutional process of intentional present-making (and thus past-making), and

²⁰ Mahanubhavanand Svami, *Shri Harikrishna Lilamrut*, 4.

the individual process of subjective memories of experiences, the difference between organically occurring reality and constructed reality became blurry. So incessant and simultaneous were practices of creation, consumption, and then individual interpretation, they appeared to be a game of reality for practitioners but historically also represented an act of “gaming” reality through cultural production. In sum, the many-sided aspects of *lila*, of living, acting, perceiving, documenting, creating and recalling narratives about the past, were about re-envisioning the social reality of everyday existence and affirming authority.

PLURALITY OF TIME AND SPACE

The configuration of *lila* resisted secular governability as represented in both the colonial and princely states, as the authorization of space and time sanctioned within these sacred archives came from the authority of Sahajanand, and extended this authority beyond the temporality of human experience. Therefore it allowed situating oneself in new ways outside the empirical conditions of space and time, but doing so without denying them. This itself was a plural experience in which adherents adopted a perspective of multiplicity, neither wholly enchanted or disenchanted. Toward constructively thinking about political modernity in the contexts of colonial and postcolonial India, Dipesh Chakrabarty vitally alerts us to be wary of reliance on two ontological assumptions embedded in secular notions of the social and political: “the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelopes other kinds of time” and “is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end “social facts”.²¹ The case before us represents not solely a non-secular understanding of time and an existence alongside the divine, but a resistance to a strict totalizing adoption of it. The Svaminarayan framework in itself was

²¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 15-16.

plural, a playful relationship with space, time and reason and consequently not easily determinable.

Spatially, *lila* conflated this world and the other world, as already demonstrated in the last chapter. Enchanted narratives of the past were markedly tied to empirical space, a space intimately familiar to the lived experience of devotees, rather than remote or inaccessible. Thus, while space was a key element of history and Sahajanand and his ascetics moved across it and were affected by it in the expected mundane ways, there was also a wondrous view of this shared space. For instance, one reason for Sahajanand's movement from place to place was to avoid attempts on his life, to avoid trouble or to appease various parties, resulting in unplanned activities. In many *lila* records such events are disconnected from one another and violence is glossed over, instead presenting Sahajanand's movement as an aspect of divinity. Sudden movement from one village to another or departure from a city, are depicted as pleasant though unexpected visitations of the divine. Sahajanand's surprise appearances are divine acts of his bestowing on even wider and wider segments of the population an opportunity to meet him through whimsical unplanned visits in new parts of the region. Similarly, Sahajanand changing his physical appearance and living incognito for months, or hiding on someone's property to avoid being found, are all deemed to be especially pleasurable and memorable, *lila* done for providing even further joy than the 'average' *lila* to his devotees. Unexpected behavior is a sign of his generosity in creating even more than usual remarkable memories of himself for devotees. Under the historical gaze, it should be noted that avoiding armed mercenaries and other forms of trouble were not uncommon reasons for the mobility of the founder or his ascetics.²² I would

²² Akhandanand Svami, *Bhaktishastra*, 1.40.20-23, 1.40.28; Adbhutanand Svami, *Adbhutanand Svamini Mul Vato*, 72-74.

suggest that these peculiar ways of speaking about empirical reality was a means at once of enchanting space and of grounding the authority of the supramundane in western India.

The manipulation of the principles of disenchanted time was most apparent in this free condition when temporality was unregulated. *Lila* narratives disturbed a linear notion of time by not committing to a divorced relationship of the past and present. In this mode there was comfort with remaining in the past, when so desired. It was a non-modern relationship with the past but yet, it was not wholly so. Simultaneously, it required a past to recall (thus a divorced relationship with the present), but in some aspects it saw the past as never having ceased, as will be further discussed later in this chapter.²³ Here, we find a striking parallel to the Sikh theological position reflected in its historical representations through early eighteenth century texts, which required framing the Sikh community as both being in the past and in the present.²⁴ In addition to a relationship with the past that was reflective of both the rational and non-rational modes, *lila* literature did not consistently use secular time in its narratives. Some *lila* narratives were composed free of temporal markers. Though all *lila* narratives generally presented materials according to Sahajanand's life stages chronologically and without repetition, there was some liberty in the sequencing of incidents narrated within a stage of Sahajanand's life. On the other hand, certain *lila* compositions were intentionally tied to secular time in their presentations. They were recorded not only by their years but the compositions were organized around this feature.

²³ For instance, today at the Swaminarayan Museum in Ahmedabad, the material artifacts on display related to the early years of the community, including Sahajanand's personal effects (like clothing and shoes), have been described by community leaders as "giving off vibrations"—in other words, being somehow agentive and presently so.

²⁴ Murphy, "History in the Sikh," 360-61.

I have suggested throughout the dissertation that the Svaminarayan imagination was heterogeneous, neither with a singular commitment to enchantment or disenchantment, and nor in a passive state of unawareness about their employment of different modes. From a more macro perspective, beyond the diverse modes within the *lila* literary corpus itself, this is even more apparent. For instance, the *Vachanamrt*, essentially meant to indicate the speech and view of Sahajanand, was systematically produced with the details we associate with disenchanted history. The text's presentation style does not disclose aesthetic, affective or theological motive, though its content is certainly about theological matters. At the start of each recorded discussion there is a deliberate and careful notation of the date, time of day, the regional location, the town/village, as well as the specific site of the meeting, such as the courtyard of an estate.²⁵ This is a practice remarkably close to the secular documentary practices of contemporary states, particularly of news reports such as *akhbarat*.²⁶ Additionally, the direction Sahajanand was facing and the posture he was seated in, the color and style of his clothing, adornment such as the various types of flowers on his body and their placement, as well as who was present at the meeting seated were meticulously recorded. Moreover, it can be observed that this compiled records of assemblies and discussions about theological views does not reflect an enchanted intent in its presentation. But that might have been the key in its persuasive power. Using a matter-of-fact and straightforward framework for presenting discussions, discussions that concerned managing an existence in the realm of humans but also offered explanations about Sahajanand's divinity, in effect join together enchantment and reason in a highly productive way. Starkly unlike *lila* narratives, which had instances of the supernatural, fantastical and apparent

²⁵ Also see, Carman, "Vachanamritam: A Note," 204-20.

²⁶ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 14-15.

embellishments in its narrative of events, the *Vachanamrt*, a work of the community's principles, was overwhelmingly without the world of gods during its account of the discussions held in rural areas of Gujarat, though the discussions themselves did include such elements.

Here, an important parallel is worth noting. *Lila*'s function as a historical-like record in Gujarat was not a singular case during the nineteenth century. Later in the century, we find that this conceptual frame was also used to narrate the life story of Ramakrishna, a mid-nineteenth century saint popularly associated with educated middle-class Bengalis. While his life was portrayed as one of eternal play in the text *Lilaprasanga*, Ramakrishna's spoken words were compiled into a text called the *Kathamrta* like Sahajanand's *Vachanamrt*. The *Kathamrta* was also ordered chronologically with the specifics of date, time. Partha Chatterjee has argued that in the later part of the century the middle-class devotees of Ramakrishna, profoundly wrestling with colonialism, were stifled by their European learning and wanted to escape, as they felt "oppressed in the prisonhouse of Reason," and instead wanted to turn to *bhakti*, the realm that was without debate. However, *bhakti* in the Svaminarayan framework was precisely what pushed its adherent outwards. It itactivated the non-elite to engage in the world and be energetic toward one's well-being in it, rather than move away from its challenges.²⁷ In fact, the *Vachanamrt* reflects that in the devotional setting Sahajanand had created debate and dialogue, an environment that invited intense discussion and certainly, exhibited reason.

It should be kept in mind that the *Vachanamrt's* compilation was contemporaneous to Sahajanand's directives to create *lila* materials and his laying out objectives for *lila* as a practice. Moreover, *lila* literature, at the height of play, was not along the same lines as the *Shikshapatri*, in terms of being based on exercising reason and content about mundane matters, all reflecting a head-on engagement with the conditions of the nineteenth century. As noted in Chapter 2,

²⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 46-61.

Sahajanand and others in the *sampraday* did not regularly provide the vast *lila* materials that they regularly produced, to those outside the *sampraday* for introducing and explaining the community to them. Rather, sampraday founders kept aside *lila* and distributed the *Shikshapatri* as a form of self-representation, recognizing circumstances in which reason was valued for different audiences. The mixed approach to time, perhaps, reflected an interest in two non-contradictory interests: one was the desire to know the unadulterated experience of Sahajanand without the distraction of features, like markers of secular time, in an experience that was about putting aside disbelief and remaining in a free and indefinite position. That is, the use of secular time might be distracting and anchor one to the everyday, puncturing the experience of being in a liminal state from which new and vast possibilities to refashion oneself could emerge. Another interest in a mixed approach to time was the desire to know *lila* quite well and to wholly consume it with as much minutiae as possible, a theological virtue, including the particular details like time and date by which to recall Sahajanand. In sum, while *lila* had a documentary perspective it was contoured by the politics of time to accommodate a plural existence. In the Svaminarayan framework, adherents were intended to derive pleasure from engaging and re-engaging the past and creating something new.²⁸ In the case of the Svaminarayan archives we find the plural view of (dis)enchanted time and space.

²⁸ This is one key reason, I suggest, why an abundance of *lila charitra* texts have been produced contemporaneously to one another in the nineteenth century: each instance of articulating *lila* (through writing or otherwise) was an opportunity to re-enliven the past in the present for the author (and correspondingly, the consumption of each *lila* representation provided another opportunity to experience the past for partakers of this media). Secondly, there numerous *lila* accounts because nineteenth-century authors claimed to be “sakshi” or eyewitness to *lila*, thus they had their respective perspectives to pen down. Under these circumstances overlaps in the subjects of discussion amongst the many works was not a concern and clearly, not viewed as unnecessarily redundant. The nineteenth-century produced narratives of *lila* were characterized by an earnest authorial voice that indicated an intent to remain faithful to what had been the author’s experience, as evidenced by some ascetic writers describing their expressions as being nothing more than that which was “haqiqat” or truthful, at the start of their compositions. (Notably, locally produced, secular histories about a given area or region have also often used the term haqiqat/hakikat in their titles. Modern scholars when investigating South Asian history frequently cite such sources.) Finally, there was an abundance of literature because constantly reinvigorating the past through practices of discussing, writing, speaking or singing about it was the fulfillment of the soteriological objective. Achieving

RECORDING PLURALITY

The repositories reflected a sense of realism as well as more fantastic elements. On the one hand they were embedded in the world, realistic, balanced in tone, accounts filled with particular details of a person or an event or local place, marked by precise and peculiar references to time like year or date, the overall narrative sequenced accounts indicating a chronological sequence and the logical movement of a larger story, not repetition.

Simultaneously, some *lila* materials brought into being the otherworld with references to deities that existed in the nineteenth century landscape in western India, containing descriptions of events that were not reflective of a rational understanding of an experience. These were filled with adulation for Sahajanand, often used classical tropes to describe aesthetic ideals of Sahajanand, provided generic non-specific descriptions of a place and event, was undated, not ordered in a fashion that indicated a chronological sequence, and represented by discrete units of accounts within a single narrative. Moreover, this was not an economical or efficient narrative, but capacious, as well as sharply minimal. In other words, as a whole, the larger imagination of *lila* provided much latitude as reflected in archives.

Several factors sustain this plural ontology that corresponds to a specific epistemology. Firstly, the subject of Sahajanand himself epitomized divinity, doing so in the physical and social form of a human being. His status was viewed as wholly divine but his actions were initiated in the environment of and in the category of what it meant to be a human being. As discussed in

emancipation was based on the prominence of the past in one's present condition and for the future (the later, imminent time of one's death), whether practiced through constantly immersing in *lila* by writing about it as a witness or a participant or as a person who had heard former accounts of it. This explains why *lila* accounts continue to be written to this very date even when such authors were clearly not witnesses to the past. These writers are producing written *lila* based on ideologies from their present conditions, thereby also constructing it. Incessantly towing along the past was an act of not only recollecting a memory, but being affected by an experience of enchanted knowledge of the past to in turn become emancipated from human conditions.

Chapter 4, the more overtly non-ideal or mundane human behavior, such as a fickle mood or eating or defecating or non-normative behavior, were considered divine but with an intellectual recognition of their unseemly qualities for a god or esteemed person. A difficult position, this was resolved through an understanding of such behavior as *manushya lila*, or human-like action. This perception considered such acts to be only *seemingly* unseemly, and in reality to rather be another aspect of divinity, one that was strikingly memorable even if puzzling or difficult to reconcile for a devotee. As the theology underscored, it was one's lack of understanding and correct attitude that would prompt an individual to misunderstand such behavior to be like that of any other human. In other words, the perception of observers yielded heterogeneous *lila* accounts because of the various aspects they saw in Sahajanand. Disenchantment cracked through an enchanted perception, even if some of those aspects were termed *manushya lila* and consolidated into a seemingly singular view of *lila*, all which was deemed to be utterly *divya*. Even the language used to speak of Sahajanand's mundane and historically-based behavior was termed *lila*. For instance, the narration of Sahajanand's historical travels or meetings would be termed as, "Maharaj then did such a *lila* that he...", as opposed to disenchanting language like, "Maharaj then travelled to Ahmedabad...." Another prime factor for this plural perception of observers was that Sahajanand was living before the observers and writers of *lila*. Authors were not writing about Krishna, for instance, a deity that was understood as either having existed in the past or as a figure of the otherworld or mythical. Observers in the nineteenth century were concerned with someone who was certainly a contemporary, immovable from present time and place, and one that they were trying to absorb as human-like divinity rather than as a perfected human.

Secondly, *lila* reflected plurality, because the observers themselves were not static but people trying to attain some form of betterment in this world. This existence as a hopeful

individual and forming of a collective were neither easy nor linear projects, sources show. The process of *sampraday* building in western India, though perceived as enchanted, was besides joyful and hopeful, also challenging with violence, opposition, social indignity, financial and environmental insecurity and requiring constant assurances, motivation, and comfort against the experience of struggle while trying to imbibe Sahajanand's ideas and practices. Successfully participating in the vision required periods of suspending one's disbelief. Thus, during this challenging process of re-shaping perception, the world was recorded from the diversely viewpoints held by an individual, through enchanted and disenchanting lenses. Moreover, this multiplicity of perception was doubly difficult because the process of creating a *sampraday* and surviving in daily life explicitly required embodying disenchanting outlook and character. Without it there would be no successful individual in the material world. At its essence the *satsang*, community and learning of truth, was itself diverse in nature.

On a third note, the theological underpinnings of *lila* strongly encouraged a keen sense of observation, since knowing as much of what happened was invaluable. The more perceptive one could be the more to know and the more to gain. As a result *lila* observers tried to encapsulate times with Sahajanand and the community in their richness, and that meant capturing a wide-ranging set of details and capturing details of the mundane, those that did not particularly add value in line with the motives with which the text was composed.

To comment on the general narrative structure in its literary form, *lila*'s depiction of Sahajanand's early life, his childhood was certainly much more reminiscent of normative 'hagiographical' terms. Often the actual names of his father and mother were replaced with idealistic references, Dharmadev and Bhaktimata, respectively. While the stories of his childhood, when he was known by the name Ghanshyam, were set in Chhapia, outside Oudh,

where his family of Sarvaria Brahmins came from, they were deeply miracle-filled. Narratively, this is also a period of life that references Sahajanand's other family members and his life, though quite supernatural, in northern India. Once he is a teenager and embarks on a solo and itinerant lifestyle in the subcontinent well-beyond his home region, Neelkanth, the name by which Sahajanand is known at this age, is narrated in a life story of great learning, travel, self-reflective, nobility, but also one that is mainly a narrative centered around the individual and encountering people and ideas. However, it is at the point of Sahajanand's adult life, once he had entered Gujarat and initiated his activities, that the narrative takes on a significantly different quality in comparison to earlier life narratives: one that is more realistic feel, diminished in miracles, replete with the personalities, lives, events. Unlike the first two periods, this narrative is markedly different and less enchanted, so to speak, and plainly tugged at by the fluctuations associated with the nineteenth-century, and life in it. In other words, the first two sections, function as an enchanted frame or a sacred pre-history, one deliberately and acutely enchanted, to frame the chiefly disenchanting narrative of work and life in western India. The latter is not without supernatural elements, but holistically this feature appears to function as a narrative accessory, secondary to reality as the guiding principle of the *lila*. This is a common sequence in *lila* narratives.

I arrive at these conclusions from two perspectives. Earlier chapters have already familiarized us with the process of *sampraday* construction and Sahajanand's ascetics as well as hired literati framing the founder's life and that of his family's in terms appropriate for this purpose. Additionally, whether due to Brahmins at the courts of various rulers in Ahmedabad, Baroda, Bhuj, groups of (often armed) ascetics moving throughout the region, the general public, or even adherents, there had cumulatively been enough doubt about Sahajanand's identity as a

Brahmin. For this reason, after many years the founder's family was physically located in Oudh and relocated to Gujarat, publically introduced in society, and established in the *sampraday* as its *acharyas*, invested with divinity. Secondly, there was comfort engaging between mythic and realistic elements in *lila* writing because they were part of the claims that the authors were trying to achieve in accordance with the theological framework—the adoration of Sahajanand through close observation of his life coupled with wonder-filled perception. Fact and non-fact together could add up to a specific type of truth. Ultimately, it was this formula that produced hope and prompted the best out of the individual that consumed *lila* narratives.

TRANSMISSION

Lila was inside and outside the domain of text. It should be noted that literary compositions were one form of capturing *lila* along with speaking about *lila*. There is no doubt that in the Svaminarayan context literary production was important, active and instrumental, however, oral narration of *lila* was likely to have been more important than literary compositions in terms of expanding the community, largely non-elite, during Sahajanand's lifetime.²⁹ Speaking about *lila* in its basic form was an immediate act, and one not limited to only literate ascetics who wrote compositions in various genres, or those designated as authors to coalesce ideas, or those that were gifted in singing *kirtans* dedicated to *lila*—any ascetic could speak of the qualities of the founder and the community, and indeed they did. The act of speaking about these matters on travels was at the very crux of spreading the identity and ideas of the *sampraday*. Correspondingly, literacy was a limited feature of the populations that Sahajanand and ascetics

²⁹ Literary materials enduring after what was likely a more capacious oral context from which the texts originated, is often a feature of *bhakti* cultures. The remaining literary record, then, can give the impression that the literary mode was the chief medium of expression in a certain culture, rather than simply employed, Novetzke, *Note to Self*, 170.

moved amongst, making speaking of and listening to *lila* the chief means of engaging the subject.

Hence, the practice of collecting into a *sabha* (community gatherings) and disseminating ideas through informal talking and *katha* (narratives, but written and recited orally), was a habitual feature as evidenced by the *Vachanamrt* records and throughout *lila* sources. Moreover, literary compositions were still in development in the 1820s, being composed, revised, and copied on the estate of the Kathi Darbar Dada Khacher in Kathiawar, amongst other places. For instance, some of the earliest *lila*-related books were not completed until around Sahajanand's demise, such as *Bhaktacintamani* and *Satsangi Jivan*. But as we have seen in the instance of the *Shiksapatri* composition, parallel to generating literature that cemented ideas into formal expressions by the 1830s, the same ideas were first enacted in the culture of the 1820s. Sahajanand's thoughts were being circulated and discussed in the community through methods like *sabha* and *katha*, but also disseminated through letters sent by Sahajanand. Letters communicating schedules, new ritualistic and social practices, as well as soteriological assurances, amongst other matters, would be sent to various areas of western India to clusters of devotees and ascetics, who would broadcast the contents to those around. These communications reflected early versions of what would be revised into literature over time.³⁰ Essentially, this was not an environment in which ideas of *lila* were circulating widely amongst community members through distribution of manuscripts amongst them, but through ongoing meetings and discussions. At seasonal celebrations when the vast majority of the community came together

³⁰ This major archival body of letter correspondence is beyond the scope of an analysis here, but will be the subject of forthcoming study. It is worth noting that the archival materials are also classified as sanctified materiality, *prasad ni vastu*, or *lila*.

from various areas, *lila* related talks would be communicated. To speak to the many that attended festivities, ascetics would each address different groups of audiences.

KNOWLEDGE FORMS

Lila was diversely captured. Besides an immense canon of literature, it was represented in the visual archive of paintings, directly on nineteenth-century temple ceilings and walls, but also in standalone paintings.³¹ These recorded Sahajanand and his devotees, often labeled with their specific names, as they were seated in a *sabha*. In the twentieth century the production of these visuals markedly increased along with dedicated set of painters, and began to represent specific *lila* events or occasions of Sahajanand that were popular and familiar from the written narrative. Beyond textual and visual representations, *lila* records included physical culture: built sanctified spaces, natural geographic terrain as well as material artifacts. This spatial and artifact-based physical culture was represented by the places that Sahajanand visited, often in rural settings on a farm or in a village, and frequently marked by a physical structure, and the items he used and distributed himself or those collected by others, like his clothing and utensils to his own clothing and teeth. Non-textual forms of *lila*, in other words, thrived in modernity because this was a sensory experience of the past and devotion, so there is no reason to assume that non-literary forms would fade with modernity. In fact, they have thrived well into the contemporary period. Physicality mattered because sensory experience is valued in many Indic traditions as a form of knowledge production as well as of acquiring blessings. Importantly, by paying attention to non-literate technology we skip over the problem of the lack of non-elite access to the past and avoid simply thinking from the perspective of the *sampraday*'s authority figures.

³¹ These paintings did not evoke admiration from all corners. The colonial state's observation about *lila* paintings in the dome of the major temple of Vadtal was that these were "gay but tasteless paintings from scenes in Krishna's life," *Gazetteer: Kaira*, 179.

Lila in its most immediate, personal and thus prized form was in spatial and material registers. Sahajanand's visit to one's well for a drink of water, or a scarf that he left behind at one's home, were invaluable. The ownership of such land or materiality, as well as the memory of these moments, enriched life and invoked the potential of a devotee toward becoming a better person. In turn, the individual's agency was unleashed by this joyous and affection-filled experience, inspired to act in the material realm in a way that created change for success in accordance with Sahajanand's guidance. In this aspect the ethical codes recorded of the *Shikshapatri* would have helped with this process of creating change in material reality.

This brief glimpse into the non-textual records of *lila*, ample, diverse and rich, should give us pause in thinking about the exclusive use of texts for learning about past, as they were only one knowledge form amongst others. Similar to the Sikh context, these elements were all part of a larger, undivided historical imagination. Anne Murphy has argued in her study of the Sikh community's self-production through its representation of the past using visual and material representations, that materiality and texts were not oppositional. Objects and sites operated in conjunction with textual narratives rather than supplanting them.³² Materiality and the space of *lila* specifically let us understand how *lila* was engaged at an individual level, and how non-elite adherents preserved it. This was opposed to solely representing *lila* in narrative and painting, which was produced by authority the *sampraday*.

PLAYING WITH KNOWLEDGE

While colonial representatives constructed theories of "wildness" about groups like Bhils, according to historian Ajay Skaria, characterizing them in the 1820s and 30s with an array of

³² Murphy, *The Materiality*, 12.

descriptors, like “wild” “predatory” and as “tribes” “castes” “bands”,³³ Sahajanand freely celebrated with them in *lila* events and acknowledged them a dignified status. Those very groups had expressive, lively experiences as Sahajanand’s followers, regularly traveling across the region to gather with fellow *satsangis*, people of all castes, and participate in large celebrations. For instance Bishop Heber³⁴ and the Kaira collector Mr. Williamson,³⁵ amongst others, saw groups like the Bhils coming under Sahajanand’s disciplinary control. But the mobility and armed nature of the Bhils who were seen as criminal in colonial views, was actually empowering under Sahajanand’s context and not simply controlling.³⁶

European officials and observers relied on texts, especially the *Shikshapatri*, to understand the behavior of Svaminarayan practitioners in society. But this was one side of the coin. What they were unaware of was what drove the behavior they saw in empirical realm was an ideology of a formula of play, not simply “discipline.” The proliferation of the community was not reliant on Sahajanand’s promise to “discipline” adherents; rather, the vulnerable population of this period would have found attractive the Svaminarayan model’s of optimism and ability to help practitioners achieve new possibilities in their lives. Here, inspired lives emerged from the deeply positive experience of *lila* through meetings and festivities with Sahajanand and other community members, as well as by listening to, singing, discussing *lila*. Moreover, *lila* fueled the behavior of people through another form: the veneration, showcasing

³³ Skaria, “Shades of Wildness,” 729.

³⁴ Skaria, “Shades of Wildness,” 118.

³⁵ Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, 111.

³⁶ Reportedly, according to some (unnamed) *sampradaya* sources, Bhils protected large gatherings with bows/arrows during celebrations, because of the insecure environment. One such instance was the, because of the insecure environment. One such instance was the yagna in Dabhan in 1809, Paramtattvadas and Williams, “Swaminarayan and British,” 79, Footnote 17. As noted in Chapter 3 these animal-less sacrificial *yagnas* were seriously opposed and threatened with disruption.

and engaging of sanctified materiality, which they safeguarded in their home, and through the sanctified land that they owned or frequently visited.

Why would *lila* work with impact to bring about change? In the context of the early nineteenth century, one of highly fractured political conditions and uneven daily life in this environment, Sahajanand promised to empower adherents. That was a major promise in a tough period with ongoing and seemingly unresolvable problems. In a context of few assurances or reliable authority, Sahajanand was a figure from whom to receive comfort and security, and to whom they could return affection and reverence, whether or not they fully accepted his status as divinity. In mundane terms, the notion of a king could socially fulfill the nature of the relationship.

Fundamentally, the proposition of *lila* itself was inherently appealing. Play was relaxing. Participation in play was voluntary, enthusiastic and often a collective process. Here, freedom came from leaving behind day-to-day stresses, discarding excessive social pressures while contemplating the divine. That meditative state was the occasion to be able to imagine self and other anew, and then strive to achieve living by it. Overall, the value of play was that it let aspects of life be erased and start again. It also permitted that certain conditions of the world not be taken as seriously. It was flexible and accommodating. If everything was play, then that was a major ideological source of pleasure in life. But clearly, life did matter. It could not be taken passively but was to be engaged as evidenced by the *Shikshapatri*. In fact, it required an active, preventive, cautious, safe-proofing approach. This duality revealed that Sahajanand recognized that while the 'real' world operated one way practically it could be effectively perceived, dealt with and taken advantage of more creatively. Moreover, this view was not simply about taking

maximum advantage of life in the world but about the ability to recognize that beyond the mundane life, there was something else.

CONCLUSION: REVERSE ENLIGHTENMENT

The chapter discussed patterns from outside the epistemological confines of colonial public and intellectual spaces that directed collective and subjective formations. Specifically through a major initiative of practicing sacred historiography, the *sampraday* institutionalized hagiography, *lila*, as a tool of recording in some new ways in the nineteenth century. These genre shifts exhibited qualities associated closely with record keeping in secular states. In producing such specific types of narratives of *lila*, what I term “the play of history,” a two-fold aim was fulfilled: one was to empower individuals to immerse productively in the world, even successfully, and secondly, to bolster the *sampraday* as an institutional authority. In doing the latter, the *sampraday* had to find a way to negotiate the role of a competing regional powers, the colonial state, while remaining focused on underscoring its own authority.

Looking at the spectrum of *lila* sources in the nineteenth century, as well as the ways in which *lila* has been rehearsed in new representations in texts and performance in the contemporary period, one sees diverse relationships with British colonialism based on different objectives of self-presentation. At the most fundamental level, noting interactions with European administrators, missionaries, and observers was simply part of the function of *lila* to note the experience of reality. But additionally, this provided an opportunity and a challenge for the *sampraday*. Citation of British administrators located the Svaminarayan project in regional history by noting contemporary witnesses, especially political actors.³⁷ Moreover, these forces were depicted as well-wishers and as important figures (generally it was British authority figures,

³⁷ This is a common feature of South Asian hagiographical writing, Novetzke, “The Theographic”.

not Indian rulers, that *lila* authors recognized). But while citing European authority raised the *sampraday*'s status by virtue of exhibiting approval by a foreign power, it also appears to have held drawbacks. One problem in the self-presentation was that it framed Sahajanand and the community at the same level of power, if not reliant on, the worldly authority with which they interacted in western India. A second and related problem to the lessening of one's status by discussing and relying on European powers, was that both parties would be on one temporal plane. Then, through such discussions Sahajanand was removed from being exclusively and wholly divine, the definition of Supreme God. Divinity rested on remaining untouched by human history. Time crucially separated the gods from the men.

Importantly, these positions, seemingly canceling one another out, reflect a larger plural ontology and epistemology, possessing various interests and instrumentally using different tools to fulfill them. On the one hand there was a desire to be represented in the records of modernity as an actor in western India—the fulfillment of this goal was constructed on knowledge of what a mundane experience of reality was and what an account of this looked like. Simultaneously, there was a goal to establish divine authority—the success of this goal required understanding the criteria that defined non-human identity and the kind of presentation would sustain this perception. Ultimately, however, representations aimed to position Sahajanand at the very top of the hierarchy by inserting telling portrayals. Specifically for internal audiences, the *sampraday* was frequently represented in textual narratives as well as in paintings as being in a position of exercising a “reverse enlightenment.” Namely, Sahajanand exhibited a superior, benevolent, patriarchal role as a divine teacher or guide to colonial figures. In *lila* texts this was expressed by Sahajanand's divine will exercised to rescue British officers when their life was endangered during a hunt, or by his blessing their newly born children. While those events are out of the

realm of possibility, Sahajanand and John Malcolm did meet in 1830 as discussed at the start of this study. *Lila* paintings capture this moment in a unique way. Enlightening the colonizer, Sahajanand possesses a nimbus and a knowing smile, giving a humbled John Malcolm the *Shikshapatri*.

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION

In this study, I have examined how the idea of the past in the Svaminarayan Hindu formation shaped the community's engagement with the world during the period of colonialism in western India. In the power vacuum of early nineteenth-century Gujarat, a region politically fractured between Indian and British rule and marked by ecological hardship, religion found a significant avenue of influence. The Svaminarayans gained authority across western India (Gujarat) in parallel to British colonial and Indian princely rule by institutionalizing a physical infrastructure, bureaucracy, revenue extraction, territorial management, laws for governance, and most strikingly, the creation of archives. The regional power was mobile, attracting a diverse public from the deserts and warring hinterlands, as well as the agro-belt of Gujarat. This study has argued for the immense force of devotion in bolstering conceptions of the individual and community, and promoting ideas about the public good during the modern period. As such, the devotional formation represented new ways of thinking about social identity informed by notions of individual and collective ethics in the early nineteenth century.

By returning dignity and providing a steady stream of confidence to non-elite populations, members of low-caste groups, peasants, and women were equipped with the means to proactively shape their lives. The key tool for this individual empowerment was enchantment. Modern re-enchantment emerged in the form of *lila*, "the play of history." *Lila* was a conceptual apparatus that braided notions of devotion with temporality; devised as a sensory and intellectual perception of reality undergirded by a suspension of disbelief, the conceptual and empirical classification of this experience allowed for resurgence in the future. This experience of

inhabiting a liminal position enabled individuals to realize their various self-possibilities, despite the material conditions that bound them.

Thus, despite one's background or circumstances, this model propagated the notion that exercising an ordered material-spiritual lifestyle was compulsory to achieve soteriological success. Adopting consistent ethics was vital in daily life, such as in financial and agricultural dealings. It infused moral value into practical acts that brought benefit to oneself, but at the same time also positively affected others. Hence, a tremendous individual subject was fashioned: one empowered to interchange the imagined with the mundane, and benefit across religious-secular and private-public spheres. In other words, the propagation of worldly action rather than a disposition of despair or passivity in light of unsteady political, social, and economic dynamics was fundamental to the message. Devotional ideology, in the case of western India, was the key to material change—namely, through a view that accepted the nature of the world in a rapidly changing colonial context.

The study intervenes by tracking changes in what practices of sacred historiography entailed, and specifically representations by which this knowledge production created archives and new forms of modern religious power. I argue that historiographical technologies that were created outside European influence are not only important for understanding how the Svaminarayan community manifested itself and advanced in the world, but also that these technologies present a prime opportunity to re-interrogate the way local rulers and indigenous actors formulated new identities in the transition to empire in ways divergent from colonial sources. The study demonstrates how religion has been a transformative agent in the history of the modern world, not simply the state. As emotions were being civilized within colonial

discourse, affect and reason were being put to work in a formula of texts and images, in physical and ritual culture to shape nineteenth-century Gujarat and a non-political public experience.

Thus, *The Play of History* moves away from the view of colonial-era religiosity as always derivative of—or acutely reactive to—Western thought, and reveals important patterns from outside the epistemological confines of colonial public and intellectual spaces that directed such collective and subjective formations. My research shows that sustaining a systematic relationship with the past was key in engendering a project of modern re-enchantment in South Asia; it gave rise to a “heterogeneous” being, one that was simultaneously (dis)enchanted. In other words, modernity was not an either-or proposition for the Svaminarayan community—it was being stretched to accommodate a highly pliable existence. *Lila* as the “play of history” mirrored the ways the Svaminarayan community was not wholly moved by the rationalism of Western technologies; it persisted by fostering a particular kind of chronology and self-representation, electing to relate to the world in a manner out of synch with the colonialist paradigm of positivist historiography. Thus, what had been a discipline for historians of modern India was a play for the Svaminarayan community.

Standing apart from the patterns in Gujarat, some scholars have argued that in the latter half of the nineteenth century in Bengal, religion, specifically *bhakti*, became the means by which adherents, middle-class educated nationalists, withdrew from the world and the troubles of the colonial polity. While *lila* in this case brought forth a passive engagement with the world and a mode of anti-colonial resistance, the notion of *lila* and its instrumental use in western India, as I have shown, provoked non-elite adherents to better their circumstances by being proactive. In fact, in the case of the Svaminarayan model, *lila*'s ripe promise of opportunity made it an attractive choice for the population, and thus the movement grew over the course of the

nineteenth century. Thus, I suggest that *bhakti*'s varied contexts are more deserving of historical study and recognition due to the very different forms of engagement these expressions had with colonial politics, and because they did not coalesce into modes of nationalist resistance in every instance.

While Indian nationalists in Bengal represented one relationship to religion in the modern period, this study of an earlier period critically intervenes to show that political resistance was only one possible outcome of *lila*. This project has shown that while *lila* in Gujarat could have the latent ability to move in a political direction, nationalism or political resistance was not an inevitable outcome. One telling example is that of Dalpatram Kavi, a public intellectual and poet popular in Gujarat during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Dalpatram was also an active Svaminarayan practitioner, and applied his literary gifts toward a major project of creating *lila* narratives, amongst other contributions, for the *sampraday*. From decades of immersion in Svaminarayan devotion, Dalpatram advocated change but at a moderate to slow speed, rather than radical transformation. Specifically, his orientation to the increasing colonial presence in western India was not one of being restricted to any position. For him, *lila* did not serve as a narrative of resistance in the latter half of the century, but rather offered a route to discovering new possibilities and circumstances. As an energized writer, Dalpatram encouraged forming a regional and national collective; nevertheless, he was reserved in his critique of colonialism. Rather, he joined some of its key projects, like vernacular language development and related literary activities, working closely with its proponent Alexander K. Forbes.¹ The Gujarati intellectual invested great effort, contributing extensively to this realm. This was not a random or coerced act, but one that he embraced, recognizing the diminishing opportunities for his beloved

¹ See Vasunia, "Aristophanes' Wealth and Dalpatram's Lakshmi," 125-134; Chand and Kothari, "Undisciplined History," 69-87.

work as a poet in the princely courts of western India in this period. In other words, Dalpatram adapted himself, and did so enthusiastically, to remake himself in the context of colonialism.

Conclusively, by detailing and analyzing the lesser-known dynamics of the pre-nationalist phase of colonial rule in western India, this study has considered a close view of modern Hinduism before it assumed an anti-colonial bent. In order to better understand the roots of nationalism, but also vitally point to broader moral visions shared by other groups in western India, I suggest we look at community development in this early colonial period more broadly, pairing patterns of groups like the Svaminarayan *sampraday* with patterns in other areas to build a larger picture of this moment, preceding nationalism. Even at the height of the Indian nationalist agenda, not everyone was a confirmed nationalist, and moreover, nationalists borrowed from ethical ideologies already shared in these communities. Thus, it would be valuable to construct an understanding of moral visions on the community's terms, rather than examining only those matters that led to nationalism or neo-Hinduism.

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