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Transposing *tirtha*: Understanding religious reforms and locative piety in early modern Hinduism

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Abstract

The paper deals with a historical and hitherto obscure case of de-commercialisation of sacred geography of India. Sahajanand Swami, an eighteenth century religious leader from Gujarat who became popular as Bhagwan Swaminarayan took an initiative to eliminate corruption in Dwarka, one of the most sacred destination in Hindu imagination. He also attempted to transpose the piety of Dwarka and recreate a parallel religious experience at Vadtal, an important site in Swaminarayan Hinduism. This process of making sacred sites more egalitarian is classified here as a 'religious reform'. The paper assesses this bivalent pursuit as an institutional reform within religion as well as a religious process in the context of piety, authority and orthodoxy. Through the example of Sahajanand Swami, it is argued to calibrate the colonial paradigm of reform that was largely contextual to social issues and western thought and failed to appreciate the religious reforms of that era. By constructing a nuanced typology of 'religious reform' distinct from 'social reforms', the paper eventually calls for a reassessment of religious figures who have significantly contributed in reforming the Hindu tradition in the medieval and modern era.

Keywords: Dwarka, Swaminarayan, Pilgrim tax, Religious reform

As culture is becoming an increasingly transnational phenomenon with expanding globalisation, modernity is carefully observing the process of grafting individual strands of culture and their contextual adaptation. There have been scrupulous studies concerning the South Asian transplanting of locative piety, a distinct strand of religion and culture, from their homeland to the Americas, or from an indigenous and homogenous culture to an alien and motley culture [cf. Fenton (1988), Prorok (1994), Prorok (2003), Bhardwaj and Rao (1988)]. This remaking of collective practice in an altogether distant space and time has some roots in the relatively ancient South Asian practice of transposing piety and recreating new spaces of sacerdotal and soteriological significance within their homeland. The instating and institutionalising of a sacred site as a historical case study is the subject of this article. The act of transposing piety studied here was not charged by predictable causes such as geographical, political, social, or ecumenical. It was motivated primarily to make sacred sites more egalitarian, a cause, and ensuing process, which can neatly be framed as a 'religious reform'. Through this article, I also attempt to construct a typology that distinguishes religious

reforms from social reforms, whereby emphasis is laid on religious reforms as a distinct process within religion.

The principle protagonist of this case is an eighteenth century religious leader called Sahajanand Swami, popularly known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He founded the Swaminarayan Sect in eighteenth century in Gujarat¹ with a distinct theology and scriptures, practices and rituals, iconography and symbolism, within the orthodox Hindu framework. With the global dispersion of Gujarati Diaspora in the last century, today the movement has become 'one of the most visible elements of Hindu life abroad' (Melton 2011, 9). Sahajanand Swami is also considered as a prominent social and religious reformer in Gujarat of the 'Hindu Renaissance' era. This article, however, discusses his unique reform agenda to contain corruption at Dwarka, one among the *char dham* or the four important places of pilgrimage in Hinduism. He took initiatives for the decommercialisation of sacred sites while remaking a parallel corruption-free religious experience in distant space for his followers.

For a comprehensive appraisal of this bivalent pursuit termed here as 'religious reform', one needs to evaluate it both ways – an undertaking to ameliorate an institution and a religious process that centres around a set of beliefs and tradition. Given that multiple themes of religiosity function non-uniformly across various strands of Hinduism and are linearly independent of the religious ecosystems they exist and function within, the reform process within a single strand of locative piety can be studied in isolation without giving up the liberty of extrapolating its implications to the entire sphere of religion.

The article is divided into four sections. The first part discusses the calibration of the concept of reform, the following two historical sections narrate the setting of the scene and the ensuing reform process, while the final section deals with the religious context of piety, authority, and orthodoxy. For scholars, a study of Swaminarayan Hinduism comes with a peculiar interest of time as the coinciding period is equally influenced by medievalism and modernity while social and political upheaval was rife because of condensation of British authority in India [Hatcher (2016, 7), Williams (1984, 24)]. Finally, the reform initiative at the dawn of modernity apart from historical significance can be of some interest to contemporary discourse of commercialisation of sacred sites (or commodification of sacred objects).

Sahajanand Swami's reform appraisal

The colonial authorities, thinkers, and missionaries have documented and appreciated the reforms that were undertaken in the Hindu society during the early modern period, which the Brahminical elite would have otherwise seen as an act of heterodoxy. In the first ever research on assessing Sahajanand Swami's reforms in colonial context, Hatcher (2016) evaluates the writings of colonial thinkers who produced a host of reform literature of that era. In a historiographical exercise on such writings about Sahajanand Swami, Hatcher's research unfolds the underlying concept of reform in colonial thought. Here, we attempt to characterise the erstwhile notion of reform that Hatcher terms as the 'colonial paradigm' based on his critical examination. Although this brief characterisation will by no means be exhaustive in defining then prevalent notion of reform, the heuristic approach shall suffice for our aim of reappraising Sahajanand Swami's religious reform.

First, the concept of reform largely rested on the substratum of socio-political developments of previous centuries in Europe, mainly the Protestant Reformation. Contemporary thought on understanding religion, the problems existing within, and possible reforms, all had Christian leaning. Sometimes it was so inaccurately and firmly entrenched in the Christian understanding that all incipient and deviant sects of Hinduism had become identical to reform movements [cf. Wilson (1846)]. The process of repression and upheaval in the homeland had boiled down the colonial discourse of reform to simply as 'the victory of liberty over tyranny and priestcraft' (Hatcher 2016, 26). In the Indian context, the tyranny was ascribed to the Brahminical elite who not only resided at the zenith of the quadripartite social system of India but also practised priestcraft. Thus, the second feature of colonial understanding of reform, applicable to even religious reforms, was to address the spectre of caste that was conceived almost synonymous with Hinduism, and any reform that failed to address it was merely scratching the surface. Finally, the recognition of reform had much bearing on the political interests of the British Raj. These factors along with the social benchmarks of British culture shaped the boundaries of notions such as 'corrupt practices' and 'reforms'.

While British executive machinery was investing political capital in establishing an indirect rule, the positive social and moral change enforced by Sahajanand Swami's incipient sect was conducive in containing depredations and savagery, obliterating the lines of caste, and improving the status of women by abandoning inhumane practices such as female infanticide and widow immolation. In a later survey of messianic movements of Hinduism during colonial era, notes Fr. Fuchs (1965, 214), 'The villages and districts which have received him (Sahajanand Swami) and his teachings soon became the best and the most orderly in the province of Bombay'. It is obvious that a figure capable of such mass reformation that significantly contributed to the stable social and political climate in the region would neither go unnoticed nor be of lesser interest to the British agents. A perfect example of reformer in conventional colonial sense, he was a 'potential ally' on the social front (Williams 1984, 7), or in other words a 'Christian saviour' (Purohit 2012, 109). However, the argument here is that the colonial appraisal of Sahajanand Swami's reforms that largely rested on social practices, caste system, influences of Christian reformation, and vested socio-political dividends failed to recognise and appreciate the reform process undertaken by him within the institution of religion. Thus, to a British pen, abolishing of widow immolation, non-violence, and preventing female infanticide were more virtuous, crucial, and worthy to note than ameliorating priestcraft by enforcing strict levels of the vow of celibacy or poverty.

Before moving ahead, we need to answer two questions: Is it absolutely imperative to distinguish religious reform from social reforms² against the normative trend of either circumscribing former within latter or studying them in unity under the portmanteau of socio-religious reforms? Second, if this approach is advantageous, how exactly do we define both reforms distinctly? While responding to the second question first, social reforms can be broadly described as humanist that are oriented towards either reinstating preconceived social values or establishing new axiological levels of morality at individual or collective level in a given social class. In contrast, religious reforms, albeit literally a subset of social reforms, can be defined as a process of ameliorating the system or institution of religion that is governed by the collective principles of larger public

good, standard ethics established by the society that it functions in, and idealism of tradition and scriptures. Because religion functions as a distinct cultural strand within a society, the study of reformation within may not be pursued in complete isolation without accounting for pertinent social factors nor that is intended by argument mentioned above. Similarly, iniquitous practices that are not in conformation to the socially acceptable ethics could probably exist within a religious tradition. Thus, the initiative to abolish the *devadasi* practice in certain societies of India can be equally termed as a social and religious reform. However, the call to exercise special labour for the study of religious reforms is neither redundant nor rebarbative for practical good.

First, religious reform would be of particular interest to a student of the history of religion, independent or comparative. When reforms within religion are studied as a process interior to a distinct religious ecosystem, it avails a religio-centric lens for challenges and ramifications within a religious society. Furthermore, the study can be conducted without the need to import the value benchmarks from another parallel system. It was not that colonial discourse was not completely oblivious to the concept of 'religious reform' as we argue here, but the benchmarks of reform were limited to the western religious import of unfettering from idolatry and polytheism. These major themes of Hinduism that are anathematic to the Christian worldview constricted the colonial notion of religious reform. It explains the making of Rammohan Roy as an unparalleled religious reformer of that era³ whose voice echoed like none other in the Unitarian literature in Britain and the United States. Thus, for the Bishop of Calcutta, Reginald Heber, Sahajanand Swami was a 'mass reformer' who was yet clinched in Hindu polytheism and thus, he was very distant from the truth (Williams 1984, 85).

The challenge with studying religious reform as a social function is that the imperative to use the indigenous religious principles as touchstone is compromised with either social ethics or shared religious values; or in the case of colonial observers, supplanted by the value system of the appraiser situated at an extrinsic social vantage point who fails to heed the religious sensitivities of the appraisee that are accrued over generations. It is not just that because the milieu who observed 'Hindu reforms' belonged to an alien socio-cultural setting that we find such a parallax. Even within the natives, an assessment of a religious phenomenon with a non-religious perspective may err the inference. Analysing an unusual status of 'maverick' earned by Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, writes (Sardella 2013, 10), '[t]he theory and practice of a personalist, theistic form of *bhakti*... was out of step with the progressive, highly politicised, and philanthropically oriented tendencies of his time'. Not to miss such tendencies evolved because of conflation or assimilation of imported liberal values.

Finally, there is an apprehension of misconstruing a religious figure as a social reformer or his religious reforms being subdued within the larger narrative of his social reforms. In the case of Sahajanand Swami, it is much fascinating that post-colonial indigenous scholarship, predominantly in the Gujarati language, has been overemphatic in describing him as a 'social reformer'⁴ perhaps being swayed by the colonial construct or never setting a precedence to define him as a 'religious reformer'.

As far as the late medieval or early modern era that neatly coincides with British Raj in India is concerned, religious reforms are mostly studied along with social reforms.⁵ This sometimes confounds both ideas. For example, while assessing reforms of Sahajanand Swami writes Mehta (2016, 41), 'he [Sahajanand Swami] was basically not a social but

a moral and spiritual leader'. Nevertheless, immediately in the following passages after this opinion what Mehta enlists is a set of social reforms. The identification of Sahajanand Swami only as a social reformer and not a 'religious reformer,' who created a religious sect within the orthodox Hindu framework employing new vigour to instil essential morality, can only be explained by the argument that religious reforms have not received serious and separate attention.

Sometimes, these religious reforms are appreciated in juxtaposition with the erstwhile corruption in the Vallabha Sect resulting in misconstruction of Swaminarayan Sect as 'formed in response to Vallabha Sect' [Monier-Williams (1877, 145), Farquhar (1920, 318), Majumdar (1964, 221)], a narrative that was later corrected by recent scholarship [Mallison (1974, 449), Chitkara (1997, 231-233)]. Nevertheless, in a recent comprehensive study of Swaminarayan Sect, a prominent scholar on the subject, Raymond B. Williams, presents a cursory survey of social and religious reforms undertaken by Sahajanand Swami in the prefatory biographical chapter (Williams 2001, 23–32). The following is a brief overview of the initiatives introduced by Sahajanand Swami that can be construed as reformative compared to the situation of religious institutions and vocation in eighteenth century Gujarat.

Sahajanand Swami's process of reform commenced with putting the religious vocation in order. He prescribed five vows to the ascetic class – eight-fold celibacy, non-attachment towards familial ties, humility, not to gourmandise, and poverty.⁶ Under these five religious vows, he made the ascetic life so rigorous that it prohibited an ascetic from travelling to one's native place, speaking with, looking at or keeping any contact with a woman, touching any form of currency let alone possessing it, and called for consuming food as a tasteless mixture of all items and water. Some of these practices may seem puritanical or repressive in the contemporary context, but a revival of religious class to a selfless level was inevitable given the amount of licentiousness, gluttony, greed, and all forms of decadence that had penetrated at all ranks of religious vocation. This renunciate class was then engaged in selfless services of the society, such as digging wells and water reservoirs, repairing roads, constructing new living quarter, food distribution during famine, etc. beyond their priestly duty of studying and preaching (Melton 2011, 4).

Among the stringency of his reformation process, one most contentiously debated issue is the separation of sexes. Some critics would, and have, argued the strictness of the sect as discriminatory. Notwithstanding the criticism, Mallison (2016, 53) writes in her recent article, "But this does not imply that women had to suffer from discrimination; on the contrary, spiritual and religious education were imparted to women by the sect, especially as some of them had to be gurus of their own folk."

This observation is evident from the noted discourses of Sahajanand Swami known as Vachanamrut, where a female devotee engages in a spiritual conversation with her master amidst an assembly composed of ascetics and lay devotees of both genders.⁷ Mallison, furthering her argument, describes the spiritual emancipation of women as a common feature in then Gujarat by illustrating prominent female religious figures from Santism and Satpanth. However, Mallison fails to juxtapose the ideological position of all three movements. Santism did not have a philosophical stance as a whole nor a firm position in the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy,⁸ whereas Satpanth was an independent syncretic movement mostly

constituting the outcastes who derived values and practices from Hinduism and Islam at whim. The establishment of an independent celibate female religious class called '*samkhya-yogini*' within the puritanical framework of Hindu orthodoxy was an innovative contribution when the female religious order was subject to the chauvinism of their male counterparts in major religious traditions (Stri Swatantrya 1995, 77-87).

Furthermore, Sahajanand Swami was a strong proponent of *ahimsa* or non-violence and abhorred suffering to life in any form. Usually, most eulogies to him, sectarian or otherwise, note his repudiation to animal sacrifice in religious ceremonies as a major religious reform. Although an important call, these sacrificial offerings were seldom instances. He laboured to imbibe the value of *ahimsa* at a micro- and meso-level in the life of his followers as lowly and nefarious as the Kolis. One instance, noted in the official records of Bombay Presidency, discusses the fall of cultivation of indigo in British-administered Kaira district, 'the preparation of the drug (indigo) is accompanied by much loss of insect life, a result most distasteful to the Kanbi, and since the spread of Svami Narayan sect to many of the Koli cultivators of Kaira' (Campbell 1879, 53).

The limited point here is that portrayal of Sahajanand Swami, excessively contrived as a social reformer in the wake of his significant social contributions and ensuing colonial interpretations, has somehow left his religious reform unheeded. This discussion is in the interest of the case studied here. Sahajanand Swami's act of recreating the religious experience of Dwarka at Vadtal or urging the rulers to check the corruption at the holy shrines of Dwarka, which we discuss in the following two sections, without the distinct attempt to study religious reform may be subdued in the extensive list of collective reforms undertaken by him or would be limited to historical case study in sacred geography of India. Finally, it is now that religious discourse is seriously incorporating 'commodification of religious objects' [Starrett (1995), Zaidman and Lowengart (2001)] into reform narrative. The case of Sahajanand Swami can be of historical relevance for the study of decommercialisation of the sacred sites in particular and religion in general.

Setting the scene

After seven years of spiritual vagrancy in his adolescence, Sahajanand Swami settled with a then prominent religious figure in Gujarat known as Ramanand Swami. Initially, Sahajanand Swami was ordained as an ordinary ascetic but later nominated as the head of the sect. With the elevation, Ramanand Swami granted him some latitude from the stricture of ascetic life, which included publicly preaching to women and donning of garish clothes offered by devotees. Despite the countenance of his guru to accept the devotional offering of his followers, his biographical accounts note that he usually draped white clothes and adhered to strict religious vows. After his assuming the holy seat, his status was not limited to that of a guru or the head of the sect. In the imagination of many, he was Krishna, and for others, his divinity was even beyond that.⁹

One among the vows for ascetics, preached and practised by Sahajanand Swami, was complete detachment from familial ties. After renouncing his family at the age of 11, he had never looked back towards his kin. Nearly, two decades after his elevation as the head of the sect, some senior *sadhhus* planned to call his former family to have benedictions from Sahajanand Swami,¹⁰ the once sober and devout child of the village

Chhapaiya, who was now popularly known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. By this time, Sahajanand Swami was not merely the inheritor of Ramananda Swami's sect, 'Swaminarayan *Sampradaya*' was the new identity of the movement. Swaminarayan was a household name; a name revered by the heads of princely states in Gujarat and Kathiawar, much discussed by British political agents, and uttered in devotion by thousands of followers.¹¹ The temples of Ahmedabad, Bhuj, and Vadtal were already dedicated to the public, and a couple of other temples were under construction. Except for Vadtal, Sahajanand Swami's idol was not installed in any of these temples; however, they captured public imagination as a 'Swaminarayan temple'.

It came as a serendipitous discovery for the family, and they headed towards Gujarat. Sahajanand Swami's brothers wished to retire and stay with Sahajanand Swami, whereas the rest of the family was ready to move back to their domicile Ayodhya. It was at this time, Sahajanand Swami suggested they pursue the pilgrimage of Dwarka and the episode that ensued created a history for the sect. On the request of family members who were unfamiliar with the geography of Gujarat, Sahajanand Swami appointed one of his prominent ascetic devotees Sachidananda Swami as an escort. They embarked on the *tirtha-yatra* or the pilgrimage on *Samvat* 1881, *Maha Sud Navmi* (28th January, 1825). After eight days of strenuous travelling, they reached the shores of the Gomti river, adjacent to Dwarka, on *Maha Vad Pratipada* (04th February, 1825 CE) (*Satsangijivan* 4.28/29).

Located on the tip of the Kathiawar Peninsula, Dwarka possesses a strategic geographical importance that dates back to the earliest period of the maritime history of Gujarat (Mehta 2009, 32–35). 'Dwaramati', as it is alternatively known in the religious texts, is believed to be the mythological city of Krishna,¹² and then a host to the famous Krishna temple. It is also the site for Nageshwara Mahadeva (one of the 12 *Saivite jyotirlingas*), Sharada Peetha (one of the four *maths* established by Adi Sankaracharya) and countless other shrine and temples of extreme mythological importance dedicated to various prominent Hindu deities.¹³

The Dwarka of the eighteenth century was, however, characterised not by piety, but by piracy and plundering. The Wagher tribe of the Okha Mandal, of which Dwarka was a part, relied on piracy of incoming sea vessels and plundering of pilgrims. The excesses of their piratical depredations were such that colonial reports mention Okha Mandal as a 'piratical province' [*Asiatic Journal* (1821, 591-592)]. Their skirmishes with the British East India Company started during pay-offs for ships ravaged by them between 1801 and 1804 CE. The feud continued intermittently until the British secured the territory of Okha Mandal in March 1816 CE.¹⁴ Given the British policy of non-intervention, the territory with immense religious importance was ceded to the Baroda State 14 months later vide article seven of a Definitive Treaty of 1817 CE (Aitchison 1876, 229). It seems that even for the Baroda State, it was too profane to meddle into the affairs of the shrines, a precedence set by the namesake administration of the Waghers.¹⁵

As the pilgrims were plundered outside of the shrines by the Wagher tribe, within they were exploited by another clan of avaricious Brahmin priests known as 'Gugli'. Taking folklore into account, Gugli Brahmins can be assumed to be the officiating priests at the Dwarka temple for more than a millennium.¹⁶ History suggests that their treatment of priestcraft was not as a service, but as a profession for pecuniary gains. The legend of Dakor symbolises the extent of their rapacity. Given the erstwhile

political instability, the corruption of Gugli Brahmins was at the nadir in the history. Any holy act on the holy land of Dwarka or adjacent Sankhodwar (Bet Dwarka) was unimaginable without tipping their coffers. They exacted money for all rituals and sacraments including bathing in the River Gomti, performing rites for the deceased, and taking the imprint of holy seals. As per the tradition, one was not allowed to enter the Dwarkadheesh (Krishna) temple without taking the imprint of holy seals on one's biceps. For the imprint received at Arambhada (a site near the Dwarkadheesh temple), notes political agent James Macmurdo during a visit sometime around c. 1809 CE, 'the tax per stamp is five cories,¹⁷ four of which goes to the Government of Arambra (Arambhada) and one to the Brahman who gives it' (Macmurdo 1977, 49). According to erstwhile conversion, four cories equals one rupee (Vaghela 2011, 33). In relative terms, comparing to an individual's earning, a camel man earned five rupees as a monthly wage during 1814 CE which slightly increased to seven rupees during 1828 CE (Martin 1839, 368).

Different dispensations of local chieftains, Mughal, Maratha, Gaekwad, and even the British never challenged Gugli Brahmin's authority over the centuries. Their avarice left the pilgrimage a pursuit of the wealthy, and the penniless were a subject of contempt and cruelty. Such a religious expedition was not always a challenge for all those in the religious vocation. The spectre of amassing wealth in leaders of organised religious sects and, at least, securing sufficient coppers for one's subsistence among spiritual va-grants was a common practice across most religious traditions.¹⁸ It was for the ascetics such as Sachidananda who were devoid of a dime that the holy expedition was an inconceivable feat. In a discursive research on *tirtha*, Bharati (1970, 90-91) suggests a distinct relationship between lay and ascetic pilgrims as patrons and clients respectively, in any given place of pilgrimage in India. Notwithstanding the same, in erstwhile Dwarka, only the Gugli Brahmins were clients at the receiving end, whereas rest of all were patrons.

Sachidananda Swami was dejected after realising the plight of the poor pilgrims, facing personal vilification from Gugli Brahmins, and subsequently, getting precluded from taking bath in the Gomti River following which he went into a deep trance. Expecting his samadhi or the state of trance to go on indeterminately, the family continued to perform all holy acts leaving him aside. Once awake from trance, Sachidananda Swami found himself isolated from the group. His predicament worsened without food, holy bath, or entry into the temple. Disparaging comments from the Brahmins, who were envious of Sahajanand Swami, added to his woes. After eight days of suffering in the land of piety, he once again sat in an indefinite meditation to plead Dwarkadheesh or the ruler of Dwarka, i.e. Krishna for *darshan* (glimpse). Ranchhodraya, the form of Krishna presiding at the Dwarka temple, appeared in his vision and granted him the boon to reside in the idols of Lakshmi-Narayan in Vadtal and fulfil the wish of all ascetics and poor pilgrims similar to him. Subsequently, a joyous reunion took place; the group returned to Vadtal, and the episode was narrated to Sahajanand Swami.

Sahajanand Swami's call for change

The rampant corruption in Dwarka was a known fact to everyone. During his meeting with the ruler of Jamnagar, a nearby province, on the eve of his departure to Dwarka,

Sahajanand Swami expressed his concerns about the pilgrim tax levied in Dwarka and a need for reform (Haricharitamrut Sagar 5/28/39–42). His visit to Dwarka and associated sacred places with an entourage of ascetics and householder devotees is marked by both cordiality and contempt (Haricharitamrut Sagar 5/29–32). During this trip, despite noting all callousness of Brahmins, Sahajanand Swami did not find himself in a position to overthrow the vile tyrants or challenge their unsubstantiated authority. A ritual and intellectual distancing from the existing sacred site could have been only a plausible alternative. Sahajanand Swami's hagiographies¹⁹ depict the incident of Sachidananda Swami at Dwarka as a part of a divine plan, a precursor to further counteracts of Sahajanand Swami.

Sahajanand Swami's memory seemed rekindled by the agonising experience narrated by Sachidananda Swami. Later, Sahajanand Swami arranged a grand religious fete where he declared Vadtal to be as pious as Dwarka because Ranchhodraya (Krishna) and his consort Rukmani were now residing in the deities of Lakshmi-Narayan that were already installed by him²⁰ (ibid.). By then, the construction of a lake adjacent to the temple called Dharu was about to be completed. He supervised the remaining task and announced that 'Gomti' (lake) of Dwarka will reside in this Dharu lake' (Dave 2009, 140–141). Subsequently, the lake in Vadtal came to be known as Gomti lake in the popular tradition which continues till today. Alike Dwarka, he made arrangements for the imprints to be taken, a practice still extant in Vadtal. Two ascetics Vaikunthanand Varni and Vasudevanand Varni along with a young damsel Jamuna were entrusted the initial responsibility of giving imprints to male and female devotees, respectively (ibid. 142).

One very crucial fact needs to be reminded at this point. Few months subsequent to the episode, in the same town of Vadtal, Sahajanand Swami wrote the sect's rulebook known as 'Shikshapatri' (February, 1826 CE). In this constitutional document amounting to a meagre 212 verses, he commands his devotees to perform the pilgrimage of Dwarka (Shikshapatri verse 83). Taking into account this command of Sahajanand Swami, it can safely be assumed that the act neither meant disapprobation of Dwarka as a '*tirtha*' nor was it an ingenious gesture of appropriating the popularity of an established sacred site. Whether it was too early for him to substitute Vadtal for Dwarka to establish distinct theology centred around his form of 'Swaminarayan' in the only holy writ penned by him, or he actually wanted Dwarka to stay at the zenith of all holy places including the ones established by him is a matter of further speculation.

From further reading of the history of Dwarka, it seems that the menace of the Gugli Brahmins did not perpetuate indefinitely. The administrative report of Baroda State of 1943 (art. 558) notes that through an executive order, '[t]he Government has abolished the Pilgrims tax levied at Dwarka and Beyt and the fees for Gومتيسان' (Baroda Administrative Report 1943, 194). Through a careful reading of the literary history of Gujarat, we find some mitigation in the dreadful state of ascetic pilgrims even before this executive intervention for complete tax abolition. While describing one literary figure of Gujarat known as Narbheram (CE 1768–1852), Jhaveri (1914, 162-163), quotes one of his devotional songs composed at Dwarka.²¹ Unable to pay the toll to the Gugli Brahmins, Narbheram urges Krishna in a protesting sense in the song, 'Why discrimination between ascetics and householders? We both are your devotees, those dressed as ascetics do not have to pay the toll and the ones wearing a turban like me (the

householders) have to pay it'. From this protesting poetry, it is evident that ascetics were pardoned to pay the tax sometime during Narbheram's visit to Dwarka.

According to various sources (Majumdar (1977, 654), Shastri (Narbheram 1891, 1-2), Jhaveri (1914, 219-221)), Narbheram was an indigent bard, originally from the village of Pij, who later moved to the Gomtipur suburb of Ahmedabad city where he earned a precarious livelihood by entertaining masses. Although the aforementioned poem is undated, it seems highly unlikely that he would have taken up the pilgrimage in the last decade of his life. For a penurious octogenarian such as Narbheram to travel to Dwarka from Ahmedabad for a pilgrimage in the 1840s when the state of infrastructure and transportation were dismal seems extremely challenging. This fact brings Narbheram's meta-narrative ballad crying of favour to ascetics in temporal proximity to the given episode by less than a decade. Interesting enough, post-Narbheram literary figures who document his life and work have never contested the substance of this poesy.

To further establish the veracity of Narbheram's claim, I tried to disinter the erstwhile administrative records of the Baroda Administration. Unfortunately, much political correspondence of Okha Mandal from c. 1821 onwards is missing from the State Archives.²² Thus, we are left at the mercy of whatever little has been published in the Historical Selections of the State Archives. Looking at the culled printed records of the period concurring Sahajanand Swami and Sayaji Rao Gaekwad II (hereafter Gaekwad), the erstwhile ruler of the Baroda State (c. 1819–1830 CE), three distinct letters post-1826 CE are found that are relevant to the subject. All three letters,²³ which are executive in nature, are written for some prominent religious figure pardoning their retinue from paying taxes at Dwarka. Interestingly, from the language of the letters, originally written in Marathi, it is very apparent that these religious figures are accompanied by an entourage of lay followers in large numbers for whom the favour is granted. In one letter (#171), the language is pretty apparent 'pardon the levies of people accompanying [him]'. A similar phraseology is observed in another letter (#65) (Historical Selections from Baroda Records 1955). Although this is a very literal and stringent interpretation, still, neither a letter granting exclusive favour to any single ascetic is found, nor any of these executive favours are in direct contradiction to Narbheram's claim.

This claim of favour to ascetics made by Narbheram, when viewed in unity with noted history of the sect and Baroda State, accords one the rational liberty to draw historical conclusions in favour of Sahajanand Swami as a proactive figure in containing the corruption at Dwarka. From the hagiographies of the sect and whatever little historical evidence is traceable, we are able to discern that Gaekwad held Sahajanand Swami in much esteem and consequently, the sect enjoyed a fair amount of patronage of the Baroda State. The sectarian literature exudes exceptional veneration of the ruler towards Sahajanand Swami. However, it would not be historiographically injudicious, or at least excessive for the purpose of this study, if these exchanges are perceived as a strong bonhomie between two heads, of a state and a sect, given that religious sects and provincial governments functioned in proximate nexus during that era.

Paradoxically, the genesis of this profound amity can be found in vehement antagonism of the priestly class of Baroda State towards Sahajanand Swami's new movement. Given the altruistic and undogmatic policy of the Gaekwads, a myriad of sects and centres of faith flourished in their territory. The established sectarian leaders began to fret by the sudden popularity of Sahajanand Swami's movement that was perceived as a

potential challenge to their following. To prevent it from further spreading in the Baroda State, they inveighed against it as a 'non-Vedic' heretical cult. Nevertheless, many elites of the state were already followers of Sahajanand Swami.²⁴ Thus, to settle the contention, a conventional Hindu practice of polemical debate was adopted by the State administration. Sahajanand Swami's senior most ascetic disciple Muktanand Swami represented the sect for this debate. The annals of the sect boast Muktanand Swami's monumental victory against a collective cohort of variegated thoughts. Following this incident, there were a few exchanges of letters between Sahajanand Swami and Gaekwad through emissaries,²⁵ subsequent to which Sahajanand Swami was extended a state reception of three days.

One scholarly Brahmin devotee of the sect Mul Sharma (2013) has extensively recorded the happenings with much minutiae running for hundreds of printed pages. These accounts are not simply another example of typical discursive Indian sacred biography sharing common hagiographical pattern [cf. Smith (2000)], they are symptomatic of an intense patron–client relationship between the Baroda State and the Swaminarayan Sect. Although Sahajanand Swami's documented history abounds with state receptions, this incident is uniquely embedded and preserved in the memory of the sect etching its marks not only just in the capacious hagiographical corpus but also the iconography, artefacts, frescoes, and visual depictions as well as other traditional means of transmission.

One example of the profound rapport in general and this reception in particular that has endured in the iconography, and so to say the tradition, of the sect is the headgear of the *acharyas*.²⁶ When Sahajanand Swami travelled to Baroda, the two newly initiated *acharyas* were also a part of his retinue. Gaekwad presented them with fineries of all sorts on day one of the visit (M. Sharma 2013, 296). The oral tradition within the sect suggests that a typical Marathi turban known as '*babasahi pagh*' was presented to the *acharyas* during that visit which became a part of their ceremonious attire.²⁷ This Marathi raiment was a sartorial exception introduced in a sect that still continues to be entirely Gujarati in its orientation. Another mark of the conviviality and patronage were the two villages whose revenue was granted for the maintenance of the Swaminarayan temples. The copper plates on which the decrees were inscribed are an important artefact on display at the Swaminarayan Museum in Ahmedabad.²⁸ Furthermore, to testify the strength of this relationship perpetuating in time, there exists a letter by Ayodhyaprasad, the first *acharya* of the Ahmedabad diocese, to Khanderao II, the younger brother of Sayaji Rao II, congratulating Khanderao II on his ascension as the head of the state around c. 1856 CE, some 26 years after the departure of Sahajanand Swami.²⁹ Here, Ayodhyaprasad is feeling grateful and obliged by the continued patronage of the state for the maintenance of the Swaminarayan temple at Ahmedabad.

The inception of this enduring camaraderie and religious philanthropy was the state reception. On the second day of this three-day state reception, there was an 'administrative exchange' notes Mul Sharma (2013, 317), between Sahajanand Swami and Gaekwad which no one was privy to. It is highly plausible that Sahajanand Swami may have wielded influence over Gaekwad to fulfil his longstanding desire of eliminating corruption and taxation from the places of worship in favour of the pilgrims. Nevertheless, he would not have been able to convince the ruler for complete abolishment as it was a significant source of revenue to the state exchequer.³⁰ Still, Gaekwad would have

agreed to contain the menace of Gugli Brahmins granting an exception to at least the ascetics similar to Sachidananda Swami. Gaekwad was very generous with religious endowments so much so that even unclothed vagrants in the Baroda State enjoyed his patronage.³¹ Neither anyone was privy to the exchange between the two historical figures nor much of the executive documentation preserved. However, this absence of direct evidence '*anupalabdhi*' should not preclude us from deducing epistemological inference accorded by the 'overlapping' elements of history, a precedence that I am following from a recent historical work pertinent to Swaminarayan Studies.³² Between the two historical events – Gugli Brahmins demanding the tax to ascetic Sachidananda Swami and no taxation for ascetics as claimed by Narbheram – occurring in the proximity of nearly a decade, seemingly no other historical trigger exist in chronicles of Dwarka that is so closely associated with the plot and characters and could precipitate a change. To an antiquarian's eye, the traumatic trip of Sachidananda Swami and the subsequent meeting of his guru and god Sahajanand Swami to the ruler of Baroda State comes up as the only pertinent and potent event that can pan out a favourable situation for the ascetic class. Hence, it would not be rationally subjective to credit Sahajanand Swami, a religious leader who evidently attempted to recreate a corruption-free religious experience within his tradition, for the broader reform of relieving ascetics to pay pilgrim tax with the help of executive intervention.

The menace of corruption at sites of trans-sectarian importance such as Dwarka was not only discouraging for the pilgrims but also daunting as a contagion that could easily vitiate other sacred sites by the precedence of Dwarka. For example, during c. 1883 at Dakor, another prominent pilgrimage site in the proximity of Dwarka, the temple priests instituted a fee of four *annas* (equivalent to a quarter of a rupee) during particular auspicious days following the precedence of Dwarka (Chaturvedi 2007, 52–53). Dakor drew its religious significance from Dwarka and originally sprouted as a symbol of devotion as well as a breakout from the manacling priestcraft of the officiating Gugli Brahmins. Nonetheless, with time it also got ensnared in the corruption of the priestly class. Thus, Sahajanand Swami's reform act could be credited as the first step in dousing the wildfire of corruption that was blazing across the sacred geography of Gujarat.

Locative piety in context

The last part briefly deals with the form and functioning of locative piety as a religious phenomenon that empowered Sahajanand Swami to follow the course of reform. As Radhakrishnan (1923, 25) qualifies the nature of ever-evolving Indian philosophy with two epithets – experimental and provisional that attempts to keep pace with the progress of thought, the forms of religiosity of Hindus and the norms governing them also represent progressive ideologies. The strand of locative piety construed of geographical, social, ecumenical, liturgical, historical, and political factors needs to be mapped in the relative context of time, sect, and authority to understand the formation of an emerging *tirtha*. Thus, in this section, we shall attempt to answer three relevant questions: Why Sahajanand Swami choose Vadtal? Was the act of transposing the piety heretical by a conventional standard? What determines *tirthatva* or the sanctity as a sacred site for Vadtal in that era of Hindu thought?

By the time of this episode, Sahajanand Swami was already leading the sect for nearly 22 years. Although the sect started actively in Saurashtra, by 1820s, the movement had

a pan-Gujarat presence. Sahajanand Swami built first temple at Ahmedabad and later at Bhuj while his permanent dwelling was in Gadhada. Numerous kings and satraps from metropolises to smaller chiefdoms in Saurashtra were his followers. He had a remarkable following in major trade centres such as Surat and had new *mandirs* under construction at the port-city of Dholera and the metropolis of Junagadh. Despite the movement spawning geographically in all directions, Vadtal eclipsed all other options to become a major *tirtha* of the sect. Presumably, there were a few favourable factors.

Linguistically, the movement was Gujarati dominating and geographically, Vadtal lied somewhere in the centre of 'Gujarati Cosmopolis'. Vadtal was a part of Kaira district that was independently administered by the British forces. Given the brash attitude of British troops and political agents towards the truculent and turbulent actors, the law and order situation was comparatively better. Simultaneously, there was political stability compared to other chiefdoms where succession altered policies at whim. Although the formal census in British India started from 1871 CE, from the hagiographical accounts, it can be inferred that there was much concentration of followers in and around Vadtal. In the first census of 1871 CE, nearly 30,000 individuals from the Kaira district identified themselves as followers of Swaminarayan within the Hindu religion (Campbell 1879, 27). Few months subsequent to the given episode, Sahajanand Swami excogitated the administrative scheme of the sect wherein two dioceses were carved, each having seats at Ahmedabad and Vadtal, respectively. Out of the six temples,³³ Sahajanand Swami erected during his time, only Vadtal was the one where he installed his own idol proclaiming a distinct theology for the sect. Unlike the previous two temples in Ahmedabad and Bhuj where central presiding deities were Nar-Narayan – a twin male manifestation, the central deities in Vadtal were Lakshmi-Narayan which technically resembled more to the duet of Ranchhodraya (Krishna) and his consort Rukmani. Finally, there was a dedicated water body in the extreme proximity of temple, a prerequisite in Indian imagination of sacred geography as antique as the Vedas [Taittiriya Samhita 6.1.1.2–3, Eck (1981, 326-327)] and also much necessary for emulating Dwarka.

Whether any or some of the reasons mentioned above motivated Sahajanand Swami to choose Vadtal, or there was personal discretion in the decision, for an academic assessment, Vadtal far outweighed other centres in advantages. It was this blend of authority and advantage that determined the fate of Vadtal as a new centre of pilgrimage for the sect. Unlike Dwarka, Vadtal has never turned into a site of trans-sectarian importance. Nonetheless, its audience is not strictly limited to just the followers of the Swaminarayan sect. However, it can be said that Vadtal has successfully supplanted Dwarka for a distinct strand within Hindu tradition, i.e., 'Swaminarayan Hinduism'.

In Hinduism, if Vedas are the anchor of orthodoxy, precedence determines unwritten norms of orthopraxis. That locative piety, a crucial strand in Hinduism, is conceived through theological significance, soteriological implications, and ritualistic precision within the frame of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, a heresiological incision is warranted to gauge the incident on the scale of traditionalism. This act of approximating, or appropriating, the merit of a sacred site was not an unconventional departure albeit distinct in cause, process, and function. In India, usually the significance of smaller shrines or sacred sites of relatively lesser importance, in terms of associated myth, presiding deity, or thronging pilgrims, are boasted as 'x' (major pilgrim centre) of (locality) 'y', for

example, 'Kashi of Southern Andhra' (Bharati 1970, 98) or there may be nearly a dozen sites across India known as 'Chhoti Kashi' (lit. Small Kashi), to extol them and qualify them at par with Kashi (or similar other sites of greater importance). Although Sahajanand Swami was remaking a sacred space in distance, his act was not intended to qualify Vadtal as 'the Dwarka of Charotar' or 'the Dwarka of Swaminarayan Sampradaya'. With his authority, he was actually recreating a new Dwarka aloof of and immune to corruption and rapacity within the ecosystem of the sect which was no lesser than historical Dwarka for his followers. Thus, Dwarka as a place of pilgrimage in the verse of Shikshapatri can be tacitly supplanted by Vadtal as both centres accrue equal, if not greater, religious merit.

Extending the religious merit and the significance of a divine agency associated with a sacred site, the way Sahajanand Swami did, though not normative for highly important sites such as Dwarka, was not the first case in the history of sacred geography let alone the history of Dwarka. Two noted prominent cases in the past history and one among them in the geographical proximity of Vadtal would have not only inspired Sahajanand to act accordingly but also exculpated him from heresy or heterodoxy by then religious standards. The first case passed on through oral tradition dates back to the eleventh century when the idols of Dwarka travelled with one devout named Bodano and eventually a new sacred site Dakor (in Gujarat) came up as a pilgrimage centre associated with Ranchhodraya (Krishna) (Mallison 1990, 30). Similar to the case reported here, Gugli Brahmins played an antagonistic role in the narrative of Bodano. The other famous case features twelfth-century theologian Madhvacharya. When an idol of Krishna from Dwarka traverses the ocean and reaches the southern coast encompassed in huge clay lump. Madhvacharya identifies the clay lump, disinters the idol based on divine intuition and installs it in the Udupi Math (B. N. Sharma 1962, xiii). In the noted biographical accounts (esp. Madhva Vijay 9/40–43), the immediate miracles shown by the idol after Madhva's discovery construes a sense of divine volition to get re-established from Dwarka to Udupi.

Despite the precedence saving Sahajanand Swami from the sin of flouting the tradition, his act differed in many aspects. Distinct from the previous cases where idols moved physically, here the divine spirit from Dwarka was invoked and the manifestation of divine was corroborated by the spiritual authority of Sahajanand Swami. Second, Bodano and Madhva acted as devotees in a traditional sense while Sahajanand Swami was perceived either as a manifestation of Krishna or the almighty himself. Thus, his authority to converge the divine spirit into the idols of Vadtal far eclipsed the devotional and invocative sense of the two predecessors. Finally, the previous cases were either instantiation of providence or mere happenstance, however, the case of Vadtal was a purposive and reformative act of a religious leader to ameliorate the institution and spurn the authority of his ilk that was characterised by immorality.

It is this authority of a religious leader that was the most distinguishable aspect in early modern and modern Hinduism. Although we are not delving into a discursive characterisation of this era of Hinduism, one distinct feature was the convergence of authority into the visible human manifestation. *Tirtha*, which was once associated with some myth from the sacred epics of Ramayana or Mahabharata or the colossal corpus of Puranas, no more emanates from an antique sacred narrative. The religious authority of the founder substitutes the necessity, as well as the process of 'Sanskritisation' of the

sacred narrative associated with a site that accentuates its soteriological and ritualistic importance and catapults it in the higher axes of sacred geography. The concentration of piety around the founder of a particular sect or movement of Hinduism led to 'pilgrimisation' of sites once associated with them (Bharati 1963, 150) which was once mostly limited to *avatars* of Hindu mythology. This process of alteration of locus of authority from myth, oral, and written, to an individual needs separate academic attention. Nevertheless, for the present case, it can be deduced that the anthropocentric model of authority that established the sanctity of Vadtal was conducive for Sahajanand Swami to pursue his reform agenda.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to calibrate the colonial paradigm that was somehow encapsulating and appreciating social and cultural reforms together. The independent study of the process of reforming religion adds nuances to the character of religious institutions and traditions beyond their monotonous chronological history. It warrants for reassessment of Hindu reforms and reformers of the colonial era whose colonial appraisal continues to sway the present narrative. This episode is also another striking example of a paradigm shift in Hinduism where religious authority is increasingly swaying around sectarian leaders from myth and scriptures. Finally, it adds to our understanding of Sahajanand Swami who was largely construed as a social reformer of the colonial era.

Endnotes

¹Though an anachronism, it is useful in identifying the Gujarati speaking area roughly equivalent to the present - day Gujarat state.

²For a similar kind of typology of reforms in medieval Britain, see Burns and Innes (2003).

³Notwithstanding the mainstream colonial admiration of iconoclastic reformers, we see one rare instance of admiration for Sahajanand Swami over Rammohan Roy. To summarize a long commendation of Henry George Briggs, '[t]he splendid career of the former [Sahajanand Swami] leaves too indelible an impression grateful to the vanity of our race to be erased so speedily; and while Rammohan Roy's name is about to be forgotten, [Sahajanand Swami's] will be brighter by that waning influence' (Briggs 1849, 241–242)

⁴There are dedicated monographs on Sahajanand Swami that either describes his social reforms or narrate his life through a similar lens. For example, Mashroowala (1980), Chaudhary (1981), Parekh (1984), Sadhu Aksharvatsaldas (1999), Swami Satya-prasaddasji (2010).

⁵For example, most of the following works study social and religious reforms in India together: Jones (1989), Sen (2003), Ingham (1956), Nag (1988). Though some works are focused specifically on religious reforms Farquhar (1915), Baird (1988) but their approach and narrative is predominantly social.

⁶These are broad translations of the words *nirman*, *niswad*, *nisneh*, *nishkam*, and *nirlobh*. For a detailed explanation of the norms followed under each vow, please refer Williams (2001, 150-162).

⁷For example, see Vachanamrut Gadhada III, 25. Despite the engagement of women in spiritual discourses, we do not see them asking philosophical questions regarding

Vedanta like their male counterparts nor is there any substantial literature produced by *samkhya-yoginis* of that era.

⁸For a detailed study on Sants and the variety in their beliefs, see Vaudeville (1987).

⁹For a cursory overview of the theology of the sect see Williams (2001, 71-82).

¹⁰There are various reasons suggested why Sahajanand Swami's family was brought into the fold. Among recent scholarship, Williams (1984, 26) suggests that after the dismissal of one venal administrator Gopinath Bhatt, Sahajanand Swami decided to call his family for administrative succession. However, the primary hagiographies seem to suggest an altogether different cause. Vaghela (2011, 268-80) outlines a critical survey of slanderous canards about Sahajanand's caste that were spread by his opponents to diminish his credibility. Given Sahajanand Swami's indifference to prevalent caste rules and his vast following of lower castes, he was accused of not being a Brahmin. As noted in sectarian works, his family was brought into the fold to testify his caste. One such discussion is noted in Haricharitamrut Sagar 7/4 which enlists both reasons, calumny and future succession, but not administration. Even if succession is considered as a possible reason, Satsangijivan 3/53/10 notes the presence of family in Samvat 1875 (c.1819 CE) in Vadtal, three years before the consecration of temple in Ahmedabad which apparently contradicts Williams' claim.

¹¹For a discussion on the number of devotees accepted and ascetics ordained by Sahajanand Swami, see Williams (2001, 20).

¹²For a detailed study of the mythological importance of Dwarka, based on Harivamsa, a part of the epic Mahabharata, see Couture (2003).

¹³Bharati (1970) proposes a tripartite typology of Indian sacred sites. Dwarka is classified in the foremost category of most revered trans-sectarian sites.

¹⁴To see a brief political sketch of British intervention in the administration of Okha Mandal by a colonial agent refer Jacob (1844, 157-163). Though the territory was ceded to Baroda State in c. 1817 CE by the British, the Waghers continued to revolt frequently against the combined forces of the British and the Gaekwad until they were annihilated by the British in the 1890s (Aitchison 1909, 85-86).

¹⁵A letter dated 07.03.1820 by Gaekwad sanctions a statement of expenses of Dwarka temple emphasizing that everything shall continue to be the same as it was in the previous Wagher dispensation (Historical Selections from Baroda State Records (1819-1825) 1943, 919). Similarly, in a letter requesting for special hospitality for a visiting priest Rev. Wilson who expressed his wish to visit Dwarka, Gaekwad asks not to obliterate the tradition anywhere and escort him only to the places accessible to him (ibid., 307).

¹⁶The period is assumed based on the narrative of one Bodano, a devotee of Krishna, who takes away the idols of the Dwarka temple and subsequently, the Gugli Brahmins entering into negotiation with him. The event has been noted to happen in the year c. 1156 CE or Samvat 1212 (Mallison 1990, 30).

¹⁷Cories were the currency mainly in the princely state of Bhuj. However, many other states minted cories in Saurashtra. For a numismatic study of period coinciding to Sahajanand Swami, see Vaghela (2011, 30-41).

¹⁸From the Historical Selections of Letters (Vol. VII), we notice that heads of many affluent religious institutions acted as financial agents in the absence of banking infrastructure. For example, we find letters by Gaekwad to the *mahant* or head of the

Nathdwara temple requesting to advance money (Vol. VII Letter #87), settlement of dues including remittance charges (Vol. VII Letter #95), or exchange of elephants from their barn for cash or kind (Vol. VII Letter #169).

¹⁹Sadhu and Williams (2016, 91) enlists 11 odd hagiographies of Sahajanand Swami. Barring two modern ones, most of them are first-hand accounts through Sahajanand Swami's contemporaries or were written in historical proximity. I would enlist the historical ones with a few missed in their list while including the chapters where the episode of Vadtal is described in parentheses: Satsangijivan (4/28–33), Bhaktachintamani (92–93), Satsangi Bhushan (n.a.), Shri Hari Digvijay (40), Shri Hari Lila Pradeep (3/6-8), Shri Haricharitamrut Sagar, Shri Hari Charitram (4/12–14), Shri Hari Sambhav Mahakavyam, Shri Hari Lila Sudhakar (n.a.), Shri Hari Charitramrut (n.a.), Shri Hari Lila Kalpataru (9/20-37), Purushottam Charitra (92–93), Harililamrut (8/37), Shri Hari Lila Sindhu (133/11–12), Shri Swaminarayan Vicharan Lilamrut (60–61), Shri Harikrishna Lilamrut Sagar (122),

²⁰In the central shrine, initially Lakshmi-Narayan were consecrated. Later the Ranchhodraya form of Krishna was installed to commemorate theological equivalence of Vadtal to Dwarka. (Harililamrut 9-12/13)

²¹The song can be located in collected works of Narbheram called 'Kavita' (Narbheram 1891, 162)

²²The bunch of letters piled under 'Political correspondence – Okha Mandal' (#759-152-Okh/3 - 1821 onwards) is completely missing from the State Archives of Gujarat that is presently holding all the political correspondence of the Baroda State from c. 1700 onwards.

²³Historical Selection Vol. 1 (1) Letter #31 d. 03.12.1827 for Swami Sankaracharya (2) Letter #65 d.28.02.1829 for Narsinh Dikshit (3) Letter #171 d. 30.06.1833 for Sitaram Bawa.

²⁴Mul Sharma (2013) who discursively describes the development of the sect in the city of Baroda has described at stretch the conversion of the elites of the state through Sahajanand Swami's principle disciple Gopalanand Swami. However, from the style and substance of the narrative, it is difficult to separate fact from the apocryphal material. Noted among them are (1) Chapter 2.6 Royal physicians Ramachandra and Harishchandra (2) Chapter 2.7 Brother-in-law of the ruler and army commander Babasaheb (3) Chapter 2.9 Advisor Bhau Puranik and personal secretary Narupant Nana. (4) Chapter 2.11 Representative to Ahmedabad district Chiman Rao.

²⁵The import of the letters is put into verses in Haricharitamrut Sagar. Letter one is noted in Chapter 28/102, the reply is in the following Chapter 28/103. The second letter is noted in Chapter 28/110, and the reply can be found in Chapter 28/117.

²⁶Acharya is the administrative and religious head of each of the two dioceses that were originally established by Sahajanand Swami.

²⁷This information was availed by emeritus *acharya* Shri Tejendraprasad Pande of the Nar-Narayan diocese at Ahmedabad during a personal interview on 08.10.2016. As he described, this information was passed down to him orally by his father who was fifth in the lineage of acharyas.

²⁸The plaque at the museum (Hall 3) describes that during the state visit, the one discussed here, ruler Sayaji Rao Gaekwad bestowed the income of the two villages Sonarada and Isand to the temple recently inaugurated by Sahajanand Swami. There

are three copper plates in display, all bearing nearly identical text, stating that the revenue of Sonarada being granted to the Nar-Narayan Dev institution at Ahmedabad. The plates related to Isand are not on the display. The language of the plate and the symbol of a down-facing sword are much in conformation to the official decrees of the Baroda State that I have observed at the State Archives of Gujarat, Vadodara.

²⁹This letter is on display at Swaminarayan Museum, Ahmedabad Hall 9.

³⁰A record of a few decades later can be used comparatively to figure out the importance of pilgrim tax as a source of revenue. According to noted figures, pilgrim tax surpassed land tax and customs duty in absolute terms. It amounted to nearly one-third of the total income generated from the administrative division of Okha Mandal (Hornell 1909).

³¹For example, see a letter dated 12.08.1823 granting ordinary rations to the nude mendicants staying on the outskirts of Baroda (Historical Selections from Baroda State Records (1819-1825) 1943, 1049).

³²In an exploration of the Ismaili Khoja community, Purohit (2012) presents a comparison between the Swaminarayan sect with the outcaste group of Ismaili Khojas functional at Pirana. The chapter draws parallels from both traditions to infer that Sahajanand Swami was originally a follower of Pirana Panth who later started his own sect. To the disadvantage of that inference, none of the works of colonial agents and Gujarati/Marathi intellectuals that have noted the life and works of Sahajanand Swami stand by its side. The sources taken into account are undated unverified set of *ginans* and testimonies of a few recent followers. The testimony of recent followers, common ethnographic following, and common didactics between the commanding texts of the two sects are 'overlapping' elements to substantiate the argument of Sahajanand Swami's former life. In comparison to that precedence, the case presented here has a stronger set of 'overlapping' elements to credit Sahajanand Swami for the reform.

³³Some accounts of the sect claim it to be nine.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the State Archives of Gujarat, Baroda for granting access to the archival material of the erstwhile Baroda State.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare(s) that they have no competing interests.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Received: 21 December 2016 Accepted: 15 May 2017

Published online: 17 June 2017

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