

South African Hindu Maha Sabha: (Re) Making Hinduism in South Africa, 1912-1960

Karthigasen Gopalan

Department of Historical Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

E-mail: 205517849@stu.ukzn.ac.za

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ABSTRACT This article examines the South African Hindu Maha Sabha from its inception in 1912 until 1960, when the centenary of the arrival of Indians in South Africa was celebrated by the body. Established to unite all local Hindus and create a unitary Hindu identity, the Maha Sabha experienced long periods of inactivity during its early years. While its leaders and visiting Hindu missionaries stressed the importance of uniting Hindus under one banner, South African Hindus were a heterogeneous group who partook in a wide variety of diverging religious practices drawing from various traditions. By the 1960 centenary celebrations, the Maha Sabha had experienced steady growth and the 1950s saw it achieve a few important milestones. Through exploring periods of stagnation and growth of the Maha Sabha during these five decades, this article aims to address some of the ways in which Hindu identity was negotiated in accordance with the changing historical setting. In particular, the article examines the attempts of Hindu leaders to unite Hindus, the reasons behind these attempts, their level of representation amongst the larger Hindu “community” and addresses possible reasons for why the project of uniting Hindus in South Africa differed from that of other places with large Hindu populations.

INTRODUCTION

The South African Hindu Maha Sabha (henceforth Maha Sabha or SAHMS) was formed in 1912 at the inaugural national conference of South African Hindus. This conference was held in Durban under the presidency of Swami Shankaranand, a visiting reform-oriented Hindu missionary from Punjab, who had been brought to South Africa by local Hindus in 1908 to help propagate Hinduism among the masses. The Maha Sabha was founded to unite Hindus and deal with what its leaders felt were “common problems” that Hindus faced in the country (Desai 1960: 91). These included a lack of Hindu institutions, a lack of secular, vernacular and religious education for Hindu children, high levels of illiteracy, an emphasis on ritual-oriented Hinduism at the expense of philosophical Hinduism and the presence of Christian missionaries. According to the leaders of the Maha Sabha, these factors combined meant that Hindus would be more receptive to missionaries of other faiths and more likely to convert. The heterogeneity of Hindu practice was seen as a potential weakness since it was believed that this would divide Hindus who needed to coordinate their efforts to ensure the survival of Hinduism.

While the Maha Sabha celebrates its centenary this year, this article ends in 1960 for a few reasons. The centenary of the arrival of Indians in South Africa was commemorated in

1960 and Indians were granted South African citizenship the following year in 1961. Also important is that the 1960s saw the implementation of forced removals as a result of the National Party’s Group Areas Act which resulted in thousands of Indians across Durban being removed from their homes and resettled. This would affect the Maha Sabha, since Hindu religious leaders were also Indian political leaders and the implementation of the Group Areas Act was to mark a new chapter in the history of Indians in South Africa. The forced removals also saw the destruction of temples, Hindu institutions and the extended family system, all impacting on the religious practices of South African Hindus. Due to the absence of historical inquiry focusing exclusively on the Maha Sabha or institutional Hinduism up to this point, this article examines the Maha Sabha and charts its development up to 1960.

In looking at the early history of the Maha Sabha this article seeks to examine a few issues. Firstly it touches on the heterogeneity of South African Hindus to highlight the difficulties that the Maha Sabha faced. It also looks at the reasons put forward by local Hindu leaders for why it was necessary to overcome sectional divisions between Hindus, while at the same time creating an identity amongst South African Indians which excluded Muslims and Christians, during a period in which the importance of preserving an “Indian identity” was

emphasised by many Indian political leaders. The steps the leaders of the Maha Sabha took in order to unite Hindus in relation to the changing political climate during this period are also examined. Lastly, the article explores possible reasons for why the task of creating a unitary Hindu identity in South Africa was so different when compared to India and other places where Indians settled in large numbers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's. This is important as there is a much larger body of literature dealing with tensions between Hindus of different orientations and between Hindu organisations and Christian and Muslim organisations overseas. However these themes have not been examined in the South African context. Apart from a few historical studies that deal with the two first Hindu missionaries to arrive in Natal during the indentured period and the tensions that they exposed, nothing exists on the period after the departure of the second missionary, Swami Shankaranand in 1913. Other studies, a few historical and some ethnographic, contain useful information about Hindu practice but are descriptive and not concerned with tracing the historical development of institutional Hinduism (see Diesel and Maxwell 1993; Henning 1993; Kumar 2000; Kuper 1960; Meer 1969; Naidoo 1992).

Indentured labourers lacked a "common" Hindu identity as they arrived from various parts of India, bringing with them a myriad of traditions, languages, castes, and beliefs. Broadly speaking, South Africans Hindus can be divided into four linguistic groups, viz. Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, which can be further divided along other communal lines. International Hindu missionaries who arrived from the turn of the twentieth century worked with local Hindu leaders in an attempt to provide a common ground around which the heterogeneous groups of Hindus could coalesce. Hinduism however, is not based on the teachings of a particular prophet, text or set of texts but on a variety of texts, beliefs and traditions that evolved over many centuries in a diverse and multilingual region; it therefore has multiple ways of interpretation (see Dalmia and Von Stietencron 1995; Pennington, 2005). The missionaries who arrived from India during the first half of the twentieth century were from the Arya Samaj missionary movement. Founded in Bombay in 1875 by the Maharishi Dayananda Saraswati (1824-

1883) to refine Hindu practices the Arya Samaj had a pivotal influence on South African Hindu leaders. Even a cursory glance at the Maha Sabha's history indicates strong tendencies toward this particular approach to Hinduism. The Maha Sabha consequently faced the dilemma of trying to unite Hindus while many of its leaders supported a movement that aimed to eradicate practices regarded by many local Hindus as fundamental to their religious heritage. Swami Dayananda was concerned over what he regarded as inherent weaknesses in Hindu practice, such as the hereditary caste system, idolatry, animal sacrifices, polytheism, child marriage, ancestor worship, unequal gender relations, and the belief that humans could be incarnations of gods. He argued that Hinduism should be based exclusively on the religious texts known as the four Vedas and sought to eradicate all of the above mentioned practices which, he maintained, had crept into Hinduism through the ages and had distorted its true essence (Naidoo 1992: 15-24). However there are many individuals and Hindu movements, both in India and abroad that challenge the Swami's notion of Hinduism as well as his interpretation of the Vedas.

Examining the origins, motives, successes and failures of the Maha Sabha, an organisation that attempted to function as the umbrella body for all Hindus in South Africa, provides an important entry point into the multiple identities within a group officially termed "Indian" or "Asian" and seen by others as homogenous. In reality a multiplicity of identities makes up what one might call "Indian" and this article focuses on aspects of the Indian experience other than the political or economic, which have been widely studied (See Mesthrie 2007).

The article also seeks to further our understanding of the development of institutional Hinduism in a different context. The Maha Sabha in South Africa was the first established outside of India. This was due entirely to the drive of Swami Shankaranand; the organisation faded after his departure in 1913 and only became active during the early 1940s. The South African Maha Sabha however, differed in many ways to similar bodies that tried to unite Hindus overseas. In British Guyana and Mauritius, the Maha Sabha promoted an orthodox approach to Hinduism (Sanathan Dharma) and provided an alternative to the Arya Samaj (Van Der Veer

and Vertovec 1991: 160). In Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname, Maha Sabha's were also national organisations dominated by Sanathanists and were, additionally, political organisations "which represented Hindus to non-Indian communities and government authorities" (Van Der Veer and Vertovec 1991: 161). The Fiji Maha Sabha, formed in 1926, was initially led by Arya Samajists, but in 1930 a faction that was unhappy with the organisation's Arya Samaj orientation, broke away (Kelly 1991: 5, 202). The Fiji Maha Sabha was also a political organisation and clashed with the Muslim League and Sanathan Dharma (Kelly 1991: 90-91).

The South African Maha Sabha was not a political force and did not create serious tensions between Arya Samajists and followers of the Sanathan Dharma; nor did it create noticeable conflict between Muslims and Hindus. In South Africa, more indentured migrants came from South than North India. Both the Arya Samaj and Sanathan Dharma are North Indian movements and had more influence on Hindi-speaking Hindus. South Indian indentured migrants as a percentage of the total indentured population constituted 6.3 percent in Fiji, 31.9 percent in Mauritius, and 6.3 percent in British Guiana (Lal 2006, 46-52). In Natal, the figure was 67.9 percent (Lal 2006: 51). The Hindi language played an important role as a tool to unite Hindus overseas whereas in South Africa, the large proportion of Tamils and Telugus meant that no particular language could be used to unify Hindus.

Another important difference is that in South Africa Indians constituted an absolute minority, whereas in Fiji and Trinidad they constituted almost half the population, and in Mauritius, which lacked an indigenous population, Indians came to constitute an overwhelming majority, and were in a position to contest for political control. The importance of preserving an Indian identity and fears that religion could divide Indians were always emphasised by South African Indian political leaders. Many leaders in the Maha Sabha also belonged to secular political associations where they worked alongside Christians and Muslims.

FORMATION OF THE MAHA SABHA AND THE INTERWAR YEARS

Of the approximately 152,184 indentured Indian migrants who were brought to Natal be-

tween 1860 and 1911, around 80 percent were Hindu (see Bhana 1990; Desai and Vahed 2010). Apart from the broad differences in religious practices between North Indians (Hindi and Gujarati) and South Indians (Tamils and Telugu), Natal's Indians came from numerous villages throughout large and heterogeneous regions bringing with them a variety of different traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices (see Bhana 1991).

While there is a paucity of information on the religious practices of indentured migrants in Natal during the formative period, we do know from the little evidence that exists that there was great diversity and an emphasis on ritual-oriented Hinduism (Brain 1990; Bhana and Vahed 2005: 51-68; Desai and Vahed 2010: 228-248). By the beginning of the twentieth century, this state of affairs became of increasing concern to a small group of reformist minded Hindus with their own interpretation of Hinduism. This group consisted of former indentured workers who had acquired wealth and status, as well as a small group of free migrants who arrived of their own volition and at their own expense. However in spite of their wealth and status amongst Indians, Vahed explains that they were "powerless to have a discursive impact on the mass of Indians" during the early decades (Vahed 2002: 90). One of these individuals, M.C. Varman decided that international Hindu preachers would be more influential and he raised money to bring two Arya Samaj missionaries from India to lecture in Natal. The work of these two missionaries, Professor Parmanand who visited between August 1905 and March 1906 and Swami Shankaranand who made two visits, first arriving in 1908 and finally departing in 1913, has been dealt with in some detail and is not necessary to repeat here (Swan 1985: 16-18; 200-103, 237; Vahed 1997; Desai and Vahed 2010: 237-247; Bhana and Vahed 2005: 57-68). They were instrumental in motivating local Hindus to establish reform-oriented Hindu bodies wherever Hindus had settled and their stay in the country also exposed tensions between groups of Hindus as well as between Hindus and Christian and Muslim Indians. At the end of May 1912 Swami Shankaranand chaired the inaugural Hindu conference where the Maha Sabha was established.

One year later on 17 May 1913, Swami Shankaranand returned to India. Two weeks

after his departure, on 31 May 1913, the Maha Sabha held its second national Hindu conference, which took place under the leadership of local Hindus, K.R. Naidoo, S.R. Pather and T.M. Naicker. However, nothing tangible transpired from this conference and although the Maha Sabha had been formed amidst much publicity and fanfare the previous year, it failed to build on this. The departure of the swami left a huge leadership vacuum among Hindus; the strike in late 1913 occupied the attention of many Indian leaders while the First World War from 1914 to 1918 resulted in many of the educated elite, who comprised the leadership of the Maha Sabha, volunteering as stretcher-bearers in East Africa. The Maha Sabha consequently lapsed into a long period of inactivity.

However while the Maha Sabha, which was concerned with an overarching Hindu identity, remained completely inactive during this time, parochial Hindu bodies continued to play an important role in the lives of many. Wherever Indians had settled voluntary bodies emerged to promote vernacular, religious and philanthropic endeavours amongst groups of Hindus in that locality (see Gopalan 2010: 47-57). However, the lack of a central body did concern a few Hindus, primarily those who led Arya Samaj bodies.

While not noted in most of the publications produced by the Maha Sabha which record its history, there was a brief period in 1918 when the organisation was revived. Two meetings, one in Durban and the other in Pietermaritzburg, were held with two reformist Hindu bodies playing central roles. When news that the Maha Sabha would be revived appeared in the *Dharma Vir*, an Arya Samaj newspaper, one of its readers wrote an article to explain the necessity of a national Hindu body. The correspondent argued that the Maha Sabha was “a vital necessity to us [Hindus] if our community is to progress with the times”. He added that since there was “no organisation at present to speak with authority on behalf of Hindus” the energies of the smaller organisations that functioned independently of each other “are consequently wasted to an extent”. The Maha Sabha, the writer went on, should pursue “first and foremost religious reform” as Hinduism contained “all the elements of a pure and noble faith” but in the course of centuries “certain practices and usages have crept into it which appear obnoxious to the

minds of the younger generation” (*Dharma Vir* 25 January 1918). This anonymous correspondent is quoted here because his views are very similar to those of Maha Sabha leaders during the 1940s and 1950s, when they argued that ritual Hinduism made the youth receptive to missionary overtures (see Gopalan 2010).

A central issue discussed at the first meeting was the influence of Christian missionaries on Hindu children and it was deemed necessary to impress “upon all Hindu parents the urgent necessity of protesting against any religious instruction being given to their children in Christian Missionary schools” as well as to urge the authorities to establish Government schools where there were none, resulting in Hindu children being sent to Christian Missionary schools (*Dharma Vir* 6 September 1918). Delegates also saw it as important to approach the education authorities about introducing Indian vernacular languages in government and government-aided schools (*Dharma Vir* 6 September 1918). By the end of the second meeting the delegates resolved to approach the government on several issues: recognition of Hindu marriage ceremonies, establishment of government schools in places where Indian children were forced to attend Christian mission schools, and introducing Indian vernacular languages at government schools (*Dharma Vir* 18 October 1918). However, there was no follow-up from these meetings and the Maha Sabha ceased to be active once one of the driving forces behind the two meetings, Bhawani Dayal left for India in 1919, to represent South African Indians at an annual convention of the Indian National Congress (Bista 1992:14).

THE REVIVAL OF THE MAHASABHA THROUGH THE APS

The birth centenary of Arya Samaj founder, Swami Dayananda was celebrated by Arya Samaj bodies worldwide in 1925. In South Africa commemorations took place from 16 to 22 February 1925 in Durban (*Natal Witness* 12 March 1925). On 22 February 1925, the delegates decided that in view of the success of the celebrations and in particular the high turnout of representatives from various Arya Samaj bodies throughout the week, they would constitute a formal structure, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (APS), to serve as the central umbrella organi-

sation for Arya Samaj bodies in Natal (*Natal Witness* 12 March 1925).

Despite the rapid growth and momentum that the APS experienced shortly after its formation in 1925, it soon faced a setback when the Areas Reservation Bill was passed later in the year. This resulted in a number of Hindu leaders who were also leaders in the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) including the APS's president being sent to India to raise support against the Bill. In the following years the Round Table Conference in Cape Town in 1926-27 between the Indian and South African governments, the question of repatriation and the difficulties faced by returning migrants as well as the difficulties faced by Indians as a result of the Great Depression, all captured the attention of leaders of religious organisations and it would take a few more years before they chose to revive the Maha Sabha (see Dayal and Chaturvedi 1951; Mesthrie 1985).

During the fiftieth year anniversary of the death of Swami Dayananda in 1933, Dayal was elected president of the APS for the second time and organised a conference where the revival of the Maha Sabha was discussed. During the conference, leaders of the APS discussed reasons for having a national body for Hindus. B.M. Patel stated that "the primary cause of weakening the community" was the absence of an organisation to "voice the opinions of the Hindu Community as a whole, nor is there a medium of bringing the people together under one banner" (APS Conference papers 1933). In his presidential address, Dayal implored delegates to "create a feeling among the Hindus that they are Hindus first and Calcuttas, Madrasis and Gujaratis, or Sanathanists and Arya Samajists afterwards". Without a Maha Sabha, Hindus, he said "cannot be protected and their interests cannot be safeguarded". He appealed to the delegates at the meeting not to miss this unique opportunity for the "formation of a central Hindu organisation thus proving [their] love and affection towards Hinduism" (APS Conference papers 1933). Dayal's call is interesting because he disapproved of the Indian version of the Maha Sabha, the Akhil Bharat Hindû Mahasabha (All India Hindu Maha Sabha). His opposition, he said in this speech, was due to that organisation's involvement in politics and the tensions that this caused between Hindus and Muslims. Dayal however believed that similar tension was unlikely in South Africa because Hindu (and Mus-

lim) institutions concerned themselves primarily with religious and welfare projects. There was no reason to believe, he said, that a South African Maha Sabha would get involved in politics. He insisted that this "would not be possible" (APS Conference papers 1933). Dayal was a central figure in secular political organisations such as the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), where he worked closely with Christian and Muslim Indians.

However news of the Maha Sabha's revival also attracted strong criticism from some Indians, such as the editors of the *Indian Opinion*. On 5 May 1934, *Indian Opinion* published an article dealing with what it regarded as a matter that was "taking an important turn in the history of Indians in South Africa" and has a "bearing on the whole Indian Community". The Newspaper's editorial drew comparisons with the All Hindu Maha Sabha of India to warn against the possible dangers of establishing a similar body in South Africa and expressed pride in the fact that South African Indians could hail from the "motherland" and "create a little India", and yet, in spite of all the "evils of caste and communal distinction", they lived as "Indians first and Indians last" in a "common brotherhood of men". The article noted that signs of communalism only became evident during Swami Shankaranand's stay in South Africa. The article concluded that, while the swami's lectures on Hinduism were followed with great enthusiasm, on the whole his activities did not receive unanimous support even from those in whose interests (Hindus) he was purportedly working (*Indian Opinion* 5 May 1934).

This newspaper article however, needs to be read in the following context. The All Hindu Mahasabha in India was in opposition to M.K. Gandhi at this time and Swami Shankaranand was also Gandhi's adversary during his South African stay. The editor of *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi's son Manilal, was probably opposed to a South African version of the Maha Sabha for similar ideological reasons to his father. Perhaps equally important to this opposition was division in the NIC. The decision by some South Africans to participate in the colonisation enquiry scheme which was looking at repatriating South African Indians to other British colonies had split the NIC, with a group led by Albert Christopher breaking away to form the Colonial Born and Settlers India Association (CBSIA) (see Bhana 1997:33-54). Manilal

Gandhi was part of this breakaway group, while the majority of those who sought to re-establish the Maha Sabha, including S.R. and V.S.C. Pather, Dayal, and T.M. Naicker remained part of the old NIC which cooperated with the scheme. Bitterness between the two groups was intense and leaders from each camp attacked one another in the newspapers. This may have influenced *Indian Opinion* to view the revival of the Maha Sabha with suspicion.

The article in *Indian Opinion* attracted criticism from readers who felt that it was “full of ignorance” and “portrayed the wrong perspective”. The Maha Sabha only intended to “combine the various minor associations into a powerful one” and “thereby unify the Hindu community”. The readers added that if Muslims and Christians were free to vigorously proselytise to Hindus, “why should the Hindus not try to fortify themselves against such attacks?” They also said that every responsible Hindu in the country realised the “urgent necessity of a body” such as the Maha Sabha to protect the interests of Hindus and to “disseminate the gospel of the greatest and certainly the best religion in the world” (*Indian Opinion* 14 May 1934).

Indian Opinion, however responded by claiming that given that the objectives of the Maha Sabha were not clearly articulated by its founders, it was reasonable to believe that they were similar to those of the Indian version and “we have reason to believe that it is the desire of the Hindu Maha Sabha to affiliate with the body in India”. The notion of uniting Hindus, it argued, was a “distant ideal that not even the greatest leaders in India have been able to achieve”. There were three distinct sects of Hindus, one which “believes in the universal brotherhood of man”, another that “believes in the caste system”, and a third that “believes in proselytising and denounces idolatry” (*Indian Opinion* 14 May 1934). These sects had failed to unite in India and therefore “we cannot believe that they can come together in this country”. *Indian Opinion* reiterated that a Maha Sabha was unnecessary and that the purported aims of the new body could be achieved via existing institutions such as the APS and the Veda Dharma Sabha’s (*Indian Opinion* 14 May 1934). Support for the APS and Veda Dharma Sabha’s dispels the notion that *Indian Opinion*’s disapproval of the Maha Sabha was based on opposition to the Arya Samaj. In fact, the two interna-

tional missionaries who were brought to Natal to chair the Maha Sabha’s third Hindu conference, Pandit Mehta Jaimini (Arya Samaj) and Swami Adhyananda (Ramakrishna movement) were both held in high regard by *Indian Opinion* in its editorials.

The conference took place at the Durban Town Hall on 27 May 1934 and attracted delegates from 62 institutions, the largest number thus far. One factor that ensured a large turnout was the presence of the two visiting Hindu missionaries whose countrywide lectures had proved extremely popular. The widely travelled and highly experienced Pandit Mehta Jaimini was invited to South Africa by leaders of the Maha Sabha to raise the enthusiasm that they felt was necessary to draw support for the conference which he also presided over. Swami Adhyananda gave the opening address. Despite opposition from some quarters, there was broad support for the conference. B.M. Patel, chairman of the reception committee, claimed that such a gathering was “unprecedented in the annals of the South African Indians” and that the presence of representatives from all provinces showed that the Maha Sabha’s “representative character was unquestionable” (*Natal Mercury* 28 May 1934).

In spite of the enthusiasm shown during the visit of the two missionaries and especially during the conference, the Maha Sabha once again fell into dormancy shortly after the departure of the two missionaries the following year. The 1930s were characterised by political contestations that fractured the political elite and the alignment and realignment of political parties consumed much of the energy of local Indian leaders. This impacted on the Maha Sabha which was organised by individuals who also led secular political organisations. Also significant is that the SAIC’s decision to participate in the colonisation scheme resulted in the division of the NIC with the likes of P.R. Pather, S.L. Singh and P.B. Singh amongst those who broke away to form the CBSIA because they rejected the scheme. These individuals were important Hindu leaders and their absence from the Maha Sabha was significant.

REVIVAL OF THE MAHA SABHA: THE 1940S

The arrival of another widely travelled Hindu missionary, Pandit Rishiram in August 1937

once again sparked a short-term interest in the activities of the Maha Sabha. According to a Maha Sabha council member writing in the 1960s, Dr N.P. Desai, part of the reason for the Maha Sabha's inactivity following the 1934 conference was the absence of "true leadership". This leadership void, he argued, was filled with the arrival of Pandit Rishiram who helped to raise enthusiasm and create a momentum that eventually led to the 1942 biennial general meeting (Desai 1960: 94). When the leaders of the Maha Sabha met to organise his lectures they began to discuss some of the plans that they had put forward at the 1934 conference (SAHMS Council Meeting 17 May 1939). One important and tangible development during the visit was the establishment of the Gandhi-Tagore Lecture-ship Trust by the pandit in 1937, with the aim of collecting funds to invite Hindu lecturers from India in the future so that this would not depend on private benefactors (SAHMS Biennial General Report June 1945 to March 1947).

The pandit departed for India at the end of 1937. However, the momentum was maintained with the visit in 1938 of Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, a notable Hindu philosopher and reformer, and future Vice-president of India, who suggested that the Maha Sabha's functions be amalgamated with those of the Trust (SAHMS Council Meeting 17 May 1939). Radhakrishnan had also played a role in mending political contestations between "radicals" and "moderates" (Kuper 1960: 47). On 2 January 1942 the Maha Sabha organised their biennial general meeting in Durban, which was a breakthrough in a couple of ways. According to Dr Desai, an important feature of this meeting was that it attracted a large number of Hindu leaders who had previously avoided the Maha Sabha on the grounds that it was a "communal organisation" (Desai 1960: 94). At the meeting, a new constitution and agenda were set in place and soon thereafter the Maha Sabha launched various projects discussed at this meeting in its attempts to foster pride amongst Hindus and take a leadership role in religious activities.

On 22 and 23 January 1944 the Maha Sabha held a conference in Durban to establish a Devasthanum committee to consider "the best method of making the temples living institutions for spreading the eternal principles and truths of the Hindu religion in South Africa". An advertisement in *Indian Opinion* requested

that all temples not affiliated to the Maha Sabha should consider this "as a matter of urgency" (*Indian Opinion* 7 January 1944). Temples played an important role in the lives of many South African Hindus and the members of the Maha Sabha realised that mediating their affairs was important if the Maha Sabha was to play a leadership role among the Hindu masses. While the conference attracted representatives from only 26 temples, there was enough encouragement from those present to form the Devasthanum Committee (Lalla 1960: 110). In early 1943, the Maha Sabha began a project to bring about the legal recognition of Hindu marriage officers. During the 1940s, its leaders organised a number of council meetings and meetings with the Protector of Indian Immigrants. Their aim was to take a leadership role in the appointment of Hindu marriage officers who would be able to conduct ceremonial weddings between Hindus of different sects and languages (SAHMS Council Meeting 6 October 1943). However this issue became complex due to the heterogeneity of South African Hindus and the variety of ceremonies that characterised Hindu weddings (SAHMS Special General Meeting 30 October 1943).

While nothing tangible emerged from the meetings, the Maha Sabha's efforts to establish uniformity in Hindu marriage ceremonies as well as to appoint candidates that it saw fit as marriage officers are one of the first indications of the organisation's attempts to assume an authoritative role amongst Hindus.

The Maha Sabha had more success in its efforts to raise a Hindu consciousness. For example, in 1944 it began manufacturing an emblem bearing the "AUM" sign, which is an important mantra in Hinduism. The first batch of 1,000 emblems sold out quickly and further orders were made (Minutes of SAHMS Council Meeting 16 December 1944).

This was viewed positively by its leaders who concluded in their biennial report that "it is apparent from the sales of these badges that there has at least dawned on the once indifferent Hindus a real awakening of religious consciousness". The report added that "if the Maha Sabha has not been enabled to do something more tangible, this alone is worth its existence and resuscitation for infusing this religious mindedness to our people" (Biennial General Report 1945-1946). Beginning in 1946 mem-

bers of the Maha Sabha declared that the first Sunday of October every year would become a “Pledge Taking and Flag Hoisting Day” throughout the country (Nowbath et al. 1960: 100). This symbolic act was another means through which the Maha Sabha attempted to promote Hindu consciousness. The *Leader* was confident that at schools, temples and even at homes this flag “will infuse enthusiasm in the people whenever and wherever hoisted, and give them food for thought in the cause of Hinduism” (*Leader* 16 August 1946).

Beginning in 1944 council members started distributing circulars urging schools and businesses to grant pupils and employees time off on Diwali (SAHMS Biennial Report 31 December 1944). The biennial report produced at the end of 1944 stated that the efforts by the officials had been successful “to a very large extent” (SAHMS Biennial Report 31 December 1944). While it is not clear how many schools and businesses followed the Maha Sabha’s prescription, the section on Diwali in the report urged officials to be persistent until “this holiday is officially recognised by all authorities where Hindus or Indians generally are concerned” (SAHMS Biennial Report 31 December 1944). The promotion of Diwali was very important to the Maha Sabha’s aim to foster a unitary Hindu identity. Swami Shankaranand had laboured to get the celebration acknowledged as the national celebration of Hindus regardless of sectional differences.

Religious Education

The Maha Sabha held its fourth Hindu conference in Pietermaritzburg in April 1944, and one important issue agreed at the conference was a decision to approach the Natal Education Department (NED) about introducing Hindu instruction at government schools, although it would be a number of years before this dream materialised (SAHMS Biennial Report 31 December 1944). However during the 1940s the issue of Hindu instruction at schools remained a concern of the Maha Sabha and at a meeting in August 1946, council member Sunbhuder Panday argued that the first step in this regard would be to compile a common prayer in English to be recited at Indian schools. The decision to publish the prayer in English was intended to avoid marginalising any particular lin-

guistic group by use of a common language to unite Hindus (SAHMS Council Meeting 25 August 1946). Dr N.P. Desai, assisted by Pandit Rishiram who was on his second visit to the country, compiled the Hindu prayer booklet. By the time of the biennial report of March 1947 the Maha Sabha had distributed more than 5,000 copies without charge to government-aided schools across Natal (SAHMS Biennial General Report March 1945-March 1947).

Countering the Missionary Threat

The post-Second World War period was characterised by the Maha Sabha’s concern about the influence of Christian missionaries on “uneducated” and economically downtrodden Hindus. The biennial report produced at the end of 1947 described the “large number” of conversions of Hindus to Christianity and Islam as a “standing disgrace to the Hindu community”. It warned that Hindus were “inviting a grave disaster” and that it was sinful to “watch and permit our economically down-trodden people to be converted”. Council members felt that the social services provided by missionaries, such as hospitals, maternity homes, and schools “paved the way of conversion” (SAHMS Biennial General Report March 1945-March 1947). The Maha Sabha’s strategy to combat this “threat” was to produce “enlightened literature” to educate Hindus about Hinduism, and to provide charity to indigent Hindus who were perceived as being the most receptive to the hand-outs of missionaries of other faiths (SAHMS Centenary Hindu conference papers 1960).

Given the widespread poverty among Indians and the fact that the economic advancement of Hindus was a founding principle of the Maha Sabha, the organisation formed a charity committee in 1945. The Maha Sabha also began discussions to organise bursaries for destitute school children (Nowbath et al. 1960: 99). R.B. Chettiar suggested at a council meeting that the Maha Sabha establish a central depot and distribution centre to assist the large number of poor Hindus who were begging. His suggestion led to a discussion with Dr Desai, S.L. Singh, Satyadeva and Sunbhuder. They concluded that while the suggestion was laudable it would be too difficult to implement because of their limited resources. Chettiar was asked to draw up a proposal to initiate the project (Council Meet-

ing 6 May 1945). The Maha Sabha's reluctance to get involved in such activities can be explained by the fact that it was struggling to raise funds for other projects such as the Swami Shankaranand Hall, which was proposed by Pandit Jaimini at the 1934 Hindu conference to serve as the Maha Sabha's headquarters (SAHMS Biennial General Report 1945-1946).

At the Goodwill Conference organised by the Maha Sabha in 1946, Dr Desai identified the two main causes of Hindu conversion to other faiths as poverty and the ignorance of Hindus about the true nature of Hinduism. He had been stressing this in council meetings and called poverty "the root cause of conversion" (SAHMS Council Meeting 1 June 1946).

One practical step taken by the Maha Sabha was to form a provincial Hindu Charitable Institute and place charity boxes at Hindu businesses (SAHMS Council Meeting 16 July 1946). The 1946 biennial report stated that "extreme poverty is one of the factors that missionaries from other faiths exploit to convert large numbers of Hindus" and identified the establishment of a centralised charitable institute as a means to combat this (SAHMS 1946 Biennial Report). With Dr Desai taking the lead, the Maha Sabha formed a number of Seva Samitis across Durban to assist poor and destitute Indians during 1946 (Vedalankar 1948: 61). In 1946, the Maha Sabha also began publishing its own bimonthly journal, the *Hindu* with Dr Desai playing a major role in the editorial. This journal was to serve as the mouth piece of the Maha Sabha among the wider Hindu community. While it could be seen as a breakthrough in the Maha Sabha's attempts to communicate its message to the Hindu public, the paper's circulation was by no means representative. The journal was distributed to affiliated bodies and in any event, only a limited number of Hindus were literate. However the articles in the paper nonetheless provide a vivid description of the type of reform-oriented Hinduism that the Maha Sabha tried to promote. Articles included short extracts from notable international Hindu reformers, requests from the Maha Sabha leaders to promote education and warnings against missionaries of other faiths, particularly Christianity, as well as reading lists of texts that they expected "all Hindus" to be familiar with (see editions of *Hindu* May 1946, July 1946 and September 1947).

THE FIFTH HINDU CONFERENCE AND HINDU RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AT SCHOOLS

The Maha Sabha faced a few setbacks toward the end of the 1940s, notably a lack of funds. Also crucial was the 1949 Indian African race riots which resulted in 44,738 Indian refugees, which meant that Indian leaders were preoccupied with relief work for months (Vahed 2001: 123). As a result, the fifth Hindu conference which was originally scheduled for 1949 was postponed. The conference eventually took place from 9 to 11 October 1953 in Durban and attracted 57 affiliated institutions. It dealt with issues such as social services, unity between different Hindu linguistic groups, the advancement of women, and religious instruction in primary schools. The conference was characterised by the opening speech given by its secretary S.R. Naidoo, in which he argued that Hinduism was "under constant attack" in South Africa and that the time had come to implement measures to reverse this trend (*Leader* 16 October 1953). Given the concern during the 1940s amongst Maha Sabha leaders that Hindus were converting in large numbers, this "constant attack" that S.R. Naidoo referred to was clearly a fear associated with missionaries of other faiths, especially Christianity.

The high turnout of affiliated institutions, according to a reporter for the *Leader*, "animated by a spirit never before evident" and impressed commentators like J.M. Francis who claimed that the conference marked the emergence of "a rejuvenated and virile organisation" (*Leader* 16 October 1953). However, other commentators, such as Y.M. Naidoo, were critical that the Maha Sabha was not doing enough for the upliftment of Hindus. As "the parent organisation of the Hindus", Naidoo argued, the organisation should "set a lead to their people". Naidoo complained that members only met during conferences and national celebrations and that resolutions passed at such meetings were quickly forgotten and rarely implemented. The majority of Hindus in the country, Naidoo added, remained "ignorant" of their religion and did "not know the teachings of Hinduism". He expressed concern at the large number of Hindus being converted to Christianity, a religion that he specifically identified as "a challenge to Hinduism" (*Leader* 16 October 1953).

Naidoo's comments are ironic in the sense that shortly after the conference the Maha Sabha began its most important project to date; approaching the NED to permit Hindu religious instruction at consenting Indian schools throughout the province. This decision became highly contentious and attracted strong criticism from other Indian leaders who feared that it would divide Indian children into "water tight compartments" and lead to religious sectionalism; it was even referred to by some as "religious apartheid" (see *Graphic* 30 January 1955 and 12 March 1955). Crucial to critics, was the idea of a fragile unity that existed amongst Indians and that had to be preserved especially given the political climate during these years. However as the Maha Sabha began to explain and reiterate to the public what it meant by "religious instruction", fears began to subside. In fact P.R. Pather, who would become the Maha Sabha's spokesperson on the matter, opposed the idea when it was addressed at a special conference dedicated exclusively to religious instruction at schools, organised by the Maha Sabha on 23 January 1954 (*Graphic* 30 January 1955). When it was made clear by proponents of the decision that by religious instruction they meant a general form of Hindu instruction limited to 90 minutes per week taught in English, Pather became a supporter (*Graphic* 5 March 1955). It took some time to convince other critics, but their fears revealed the notion that religion could foster division amongst Indians. Some critics were concerned that Hinduism was too diverse and that Hindu instruction would have to be separate for Hindus of different linguistic groups. The fact that the proposed syllabus would be a universal form of Hinduism conducted in English was very important. By the end of March 1955 the NED had agreed to permit this form of instruction at schools that requested it (*Graphic* 2 April 1955). A Syllabus Committee comprising of members of the Maha Sabha and a few Indian teachers was established to draw up the syllabus. Between 17 September 1956 and 28 May 1958, the Syllabus Committee met six times and the draft syllabus was presented to members of the Indian community, including the Natal Indian Teachers Society, for comments and suggestions (SAHMS Centenary Conference Papers 1960). The syllabus was finalised in 1958 and by 1959 a number of schools had begun introducing religious instruction.

CONCLUSION

An examination of the reasons put forward by leaders and supporters of the Maha Sabha for the existence of the organisation reveals that the central justification was that Hindus in South Africa needed an organisation to safeguard their interests and confront 'common problems' that they faced as a group. There was a fear that Hindus were abandoning aspects of their heritage and becoming receptive to the influence of "Western culture", in some cases even converting to other religions. While many individuals took it upon themselves to establish Hindu organisations to provide religious education, the leaders of the Maha Sabha believed that a central body was better able to achieve this task.

In South Africa this attempt to unite Hindus was undertaken by reformist-minded Hindus who favoured a textual or philosophical version as opposed to the populist, ritual-orientated Hinduism that the vast majority of South African Hindus practised. Maha Sabha office bearers were mostly secular, educated professionals or businessmen. With few exceptions the Maha Sabha was led by teachers, lawyers, estate agents, clerks, interpreters, and traders. In the early decades most of these leaders were migrants from either Mauritius or India, though a few were descendents of indentured Indians. They showed a preference for the reformist version of Hinduism and sought to unite Hindus in order to ensure that this reformist Hindu message flourished, as they regarded the populist ritualistic Hinduism of the masses as an embarrassment and a relic of the past. The idea of a body to represent Hindus in South Africa was viewed negatively by some who feared sectionalism. Nonetheless, the Maha Sabha was committed exclusively to pursuing religious and welfare projects and never got involved in politics, as some feared it would. Maha Sabha projects were aimed at fostering pride and promoting a Hindu consciousness. They sought to bring the activities of temples under their control, distribute religious tracts, start a journal which they hoped would show Hindus the 'correct' way to go about practising their religion, and educate the young through vernacular and religious education at school.

One of the major themes at virtually every Maha Sabha conference was conversion to Christianity. While preventing conversion was emphasised by Swami Shankaranand, there was

a new urgency amongst leaders to combat this occurrence after the revival of the Maha Sabha in the 1940s. Various factors were responsible for increased rates of conversion from the 1930s, as evidenced by the minutes of Maha Sabha meetings. This included the lack of spiritual knowledge imparted to children by parents; the powers of persuasion of Christian missionaries, a lack of collective counter-measures by Hindu leaders; and rapid urbanisation and the disruption of family life. Perception differed from reality and censuses conducted in 1920, 1951 and 1960 show that during these years Hindus as a proportion of the total Indian population did not decrease, contrary to the opinions of Maha Sabha leaders. Hindus made up 65.86% of the total Indian population in 1920 and 68.58% in 1960. Conversion became a major factor in the period after 1960. Yet the perceived fear of Hindu conversion was a powerful force in shaping and giving urgency to the programmes of the Maha Sabha.

While the Maha Sabha was established in 1912 it was moribund for extended periods. The organisation usually received a fillip when an overseas missionary visited. Visiting missionaries were very popular and attracted large crowds wherever they lectured, but when these learned scholars departed, locals too seemed to disappear. Dr N.P. Desai, who came to the helm in the 1940s, was probably the first South African-born leader to commit himself totally to the Maha Sabha and drive its agenda with passion and determination. Part of the explanation for the failure to sustain the activities of the Maha Sabha may, in fact, lie in the fact that many leaders were involved in political bodies and trade unions and were having to deal with pressing problems affecting Indians in South Africa. Some leaders were also reluctant to commit to a national Hindu organisation because they feared that it would create religious tensions among Indians. A final observation is that while many individuals in the Maha Sabha were part of secular political associations they did not use the Maha Sabha as a platform to voice political differences. There is a glaring silence on these issues in the minutes of the Maha Sabha's council meetings and conferences.

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