

“Immigrant Sisters Organising for Change”: The Gujarati Mahila Mandal, 1930-2010

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ABSTRACT The formation of women's groups, clubs or networks has played an important role for ethnic and immigrant women in the construction of their cultural and religious identity. It has also served as a vehicle for adaption and acculturation, creating a 'home away from home'. This article traces the history and activities of a women's group, the Gujarati Mahila Mandal (GMM) which was established by Gujarati-speaking immigrant women from India in 1930. This article argues that, while it played an important role in sustaining ethnic identity, the GMM did not preclude women from empowering themselves. It provided women with a social platform: to meet, to socialise, to engage in decision-making, public speaking, fundraising, confidence building and to co-ordinate activities as well as opportunities for income generation and networking. This article will make an important contribution to the history of immigrant women to Natal, the role of women in public life, the history of women's organisations and the construction of ethnic identity in the context of religion and language.

INTRODUCTION

In November 1930, a group of immigrant women from the west coast of India, Gujarat, established the first Gujarati-speaking women's group in Durban. Their motivation for collective action was similar to those of their contemporaries from other ethnic groups in East Africa, Rhodesia, Europe and North America: to create a social space to raise women's issues and to sustain and transmit their cultural practices, religion and language to their children. Imbued with passion and dedication, and undeterred by meagre resources, the women established one of the most vibrant and active women's groups in Durban. Within a few decades, the Gujarati Mahila Mandal (hereafter cited as GMM) nurtured and sustained their ethnic identity through educational programmes, cultural shows, religious discourses and fundraising. Its flagship project, the Gujarati *Bal Mandir* (nursery school) established in 1959, to promote the Gujarati language and Hindu religion, has evolved, becoming more secular and catering for the needs of a multi-racial community. It also prides itself on being one of the oldest nursery schools in Durban. The activities of the GMM allowed women to become social reformers and to extend their influence beyond the domestic sphere.

Social networking and collective action were common amongst women in Africa, North America, Asia and Europe. Many women banded together to express concern for the welfare of the family and home. This expressed it-

self in the form of self-help groups, leagues, associations, clubs and voluntary organisations. Women used these structures to address educational, social and philanthropic issues and they also served as a base for political action. In the 1970s when women's history as a field of study began to gain momentum, well known American feminist, Gerda Lerner (1974) lamented the lack of "interpretative literature" on the importance of women's contribution to "institution building" which "has been seriously underestimated". Over the past two decades scholarly work has increased our understanding of not only why and what women did in the context of collective organisation, but also their relationship to the wider issues of feminism, conservation, ethnic identity construction, class, gender and racial ideologies (Lerner 1974; Jones 1982; Merchant 1984; Skocpol et al. 1993; Kaler 1999; Breaux 2002; Johnson 2004; Morris-Crowther 2004; Cohen 2009).

Studies by Lerner (1974) and Jones (1982) have shown that the emergence of Black women's clubs or self-groups, in the late nineteenth century in the United States, stemmed from an "urgent social need" (Lerner 1974) and "specifically to discrimination against Black women" (Jones 1982). Racial prejudice and the exclusion of Black people from existing social welfare institutions, prompted women to organise. Their activities contributed to the "survival of the Black community" (Lerner 1974). Moreover, they played an important role in "emphasizing race, pride and race advancement"

(Lerner 1974). For feminist historians, clubs or associations laid the seeds for the origins of modern feminism (Blair 1980, 1994; Clinton 1984; Watson 1994). Blair argues that club-women were representatives of “domestic feminism”; as guardians of culture and upholders of moral values they shifted their focus from the private to the public sphere, gained strength through collective activity and became involved in high degree of organised political advocacy. Studies by Wojniusz (1977), Ortlepp (2003) and Korytová-Magstadt (2005) highlight the importance of women’s clubs in the context of gender and ethnicity; ways in which they “actively shaped the production of a collective identity for their ethnic group” (Ortlepp 2003). In the colonial period, clubs or voluntary organisations served “as a training ground for participation in public life and nation-building”; they inculcated “the building blocks of democracy” (Cohen 2009) raising “...women’s consciousness about the injustices they all suffered” and facilitated women’s entry into politics (Higgs 2004).

In South African historiography there is very little interpretative literature on women’s collective activity in the early twentieth century. A few scholars such as Iris Berger (2001) and Catherine Higgs (2004) have focused on self-help organisations, the Zenzele clubs which were founded by mission-educated African women aimed at improving the lives of rural African women by focusing strongly on subsistence farming, cooking skills, cleanliness, child care and health care. But their focus has largely been on the Eastern Cape and Johannesburg. Recent research has sought to shed some light on ethnic women and collective activity in Natal. For instance, studies by Vahed and Waetjen (2009) illuminate the activities of a voluntary organisation, a Muslim Women’s Cultural Group in twentieth century Durban. They argue that the “Women’s Cultural Group laboured to bring about its own vision of the social good”, by negotiating a place for themselves within public life amidst apartheid legislation. They highlight the empowering nature of this voluntary organisation for women, both individually and collectively. However, their work focuses primarily on a predominantly Muslim voluntary organisation.

This article focuses on the activities of the first, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, Gujarati-speaking women’s group, the Gujarati Mahila

(women’s) Mandal. Although the founder members were all Gujarati-speaking it incorporated women from various denominations: Hindu, Muslim and Parsee. This article seeks to explore ways in which the GMM as a women’s organisation, promoted and sustained their ethnic identity. By examining these issues, it will explore the empowering nature of this organisation in redefining women’s role within the private and public sphere. This study will shed important light on the early history of Gujarati immigrant women, their role in the public sphere and the history of collective organisation in the context of gender, class, race, religion and identity. The histories of immigrant women in twentieth century Natal have yet to be fully explored and understood.

Theorizing Ethnicity and Agency

Over the past two decades there has been much discussion on ways in which ethnic identity is constructed and reconstructed in plural societies. Studies by Barth (1969), Alba (1990), Nagel (1994), Sander (2002), Hall (2003) and Wimmer (2008) have argued that ethnicity is fluid and situational, a product of social process, negotiated and defined through cross-group interaction. Cultural and behavioral traits are just partial components of a group’s identity; it is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Sanders 2002). Nagel (1994) in her very interesting study on “Construction of Ethnicity” problematizes notions of ethnicity. She identifies two basic building blocks of ethnicity: identity and culture and through the construction of these two blocks, “individuals and groups attempt to address the complexities of ethnic boundaries and meaning” (Nagel 1994). She adds that the “construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of structures and agency- a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society” (Nagel 1994). Nagel (1994) also highlights the role of “cultural construction techniques” in the construction of ethnicity, which involves the “*reconstruction* of historical culture and the *construction* of new culture”. These techniques include the creation of cultural centres, the revival of ethnic languages, of cultural traditions, history and educational programmes. They “aid in the construction of community and they serve as mechanisms of collective mobilization” (Nagel 1994).

Debate on the role of women's collective activities in actively shaping the production of an ethnic identity has begun to gain momentum in scholarly works. Studies by Wojniusz (1977); Ortlepp (2003) and Korytová-Magstadt (2005) have highlighted the relationship between gender and the construction of ethnic identity. Women engage in a variety of activities such as: fundraising, hosting social events and celebrating cultural roots and ethnic languages to shape their collective identity. Using the approach adopted by Nagel (1994), Wojniusz (1977), Ortlepp (2003) and Korytová-Magstadt (2005) this article examines the activities of the GMM. One of the primary aims of this group was to propagate the Gujarati cultural practices, language and religion. The article examines ways in which the GMM actively shaped the production of their ethnic identity. By examining these activities this article also seeks to explore notions of agency. The term "agency" has been contested and theorised in new and variegated writings of feminist scholarship (Ypeij 2000; Jain 2006). Recent research has shown how collective organisation has had an empowering effect on women (Lerner 1974; Watson 1994; Ortlepp 2003; Johnson 2004; Morris-Crowther 2004; Cohen 2009). "Agency" is constructed here as "someone who acts and brings about change", to "effect change in themselves and their situations" (Bartky 1995; Jain, 2006). The researcher argue that the GMM provided women with a social space, an opportunity to become social agents: to meet, to socialise, to engage in decision-making, public speaking, fundraising, confidence building and co-ordinate activities as well as opportunities for income generation and networking. By examining notions of agency this article also challenges the popular image of South Asian women in the sub-continent and in the diaspora as being marginalised and "passive".

Arrival of Gujarati-speaking Immigrant Women

The GMM was largely formed by immigrant women from Gujarat, India. They arrived as free or "passenger" Indians. This type of migration, as elsewhere in the British Empire, followed in the wake of indentured labourers. Unlike the latter, "passenger" Indians were unencumbered by contractual obligations, and began arriving

in colonial Natal in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The initial phase of "passenger" migration to Natal, that is, prior to 1910, was primarily male-centred. Young males arrived from the 1890s onwards, worked as an apprentice and later set up a store. They would make periodic trips to India to reconnect with family and to secure marriage ties. Once established they would call for their wives and children. "Passenger" Indian women arrived as sponsored immigrants to Natal at the turn of the century and was largely characterized by family migration; in other words, women migrating either with their husbands or minor children as part of family reunification. Statistically their numbers in the early twentieth century were relatively small. For example, in 1903 the total number of women and children who arrived totalled 260; in 1904, 42 women and 134 children arrived; in 1905, 48 women and 195 children; in 1906, 69 women and 237 children and in 1907, 71 women and 139 children arrived (*Indian Opinion* 22 February 1908; *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 1908). The small numbers were possibly the result of a number of factors: the fact that the initial aim among some immigrants was to make their fortunes in Natal and return to India; the financial cost of supporting wives and children without a steady income and the restrictions on free immigrants on their entry to Natal which in many cases hindered family migration. Several amendments to the immigration laws in the post-union period were aimed at containing the "Asiatic" population. For example the Indian Relief Act of 1914 allowed for the entry of only one wife and the minor children of a domiciled Indian and repatriation to India was to be encouraged for any Indian (whether indentured origin or not) who abandoned his, his wife's and his minor children's right to domicile in South Africa (Joshi 1942; Mesthrie 1987). Nevertheless, both the 1914 Act and later the Cape Town Agreement of 1927 facilitated family migration. Subsequently, the number of women and children steadily increased as reflected in the following statistics: 1914: 53; 1915:115; 1916:137; and 1915:108. By 31 December 1940 the total number of new immigrants that is, wives and children to Natal and the Transvaal totalled 2,212 (Report of the Asiatic Inquiry Commission 1921; Report of the Indian Colonization Enquiry Committee 1933-1934; *Indian Views* 17 February 1941).

The vast majority of “passenger” Indian women hailed from little towns and villages in the Bombay Presidency. Some came from Rander, Kadod and Tadsvar in the District of Surat, whilst others came from Navasari and Etchapore, from the District of Valsad. There were also women migrants who came from the province of Kathiawad. They came from places such as Porbander, Rajkot, Ranavav and Tarsai. The ages varied from 17-21 years (Immigration Restriction Department 162/1898; Colonial Secretary’s Office 1593 5118/1897; Bhana and Brain 1990). Cultural norms, patriarchal attitudes and the practice of “purdah” also characterised women’s migration and restricted their social and economic mobility. Women rarely travelled alone. They were often accompanied by their husbands, relatives or friends. In most instances they travelled with their minor children. Women rarely received education and their primary role was to be a good wife and mother, to be the guardians of culture and upholders of moral values as espoused by traditional Indian society. For the vast majority of “passenger” Indian women their journey to Natal was their maiden voyage outside their natal homes. Thus women’s position was socially constructed and culturally defined. Migration to some extent provided women with an opportunity to redefine their roles within the private and public sphere. This was most noticeable in their endeavours at social networking and collective action.

Women’s Collective and Networking Efforts in Natal 1900-1930

The formation of women’s organisations or associations in Natal was already gaining momentum in the early twentieth century. Women marginalised by more traditional society felt the need to create a social space to address female concerns and community issues. Subsequently they established small clubs and groups and from these there emerged a variety of organisations and associations. Some groups catered for specific communities whilst others brought diverse communities together for social purposes. For instance, one of the earliest women’s groups formed along racial lines in colonial Natal was the Indian Women’s Association in 1907. Its membership included women of diverse religious origins: Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Parsee as well as diverse linguistic ori-

gins: Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu-speaking. Between 1907 and 1909 the Association held 10 general meetings and largely depended on the goodwill of the public and committee members for assistance with venues, stationery and furniture. In 1909 the Association’s activities were largely carried out by the astute work of its executive, among them: Acting Secretary Miss C. Sigamoney; Vice-President, Mrs V.R. Moodaly and Secretary R. Goonaruthinumammal. The Association’s work largely revolved around “moral and intellectual education” (*Indian Opinion* 6 November 1909). It actively promoted female education even embarking on a fundraising campaign to establish a small girls’ school as these facilities were lacking for Indian females in Natal. Whilst the organisation was not politically inclined it did not hesitate to protest against discriminatory laws and labour exploitation. In 1910 it sent a petition to the Colonial Secretary outlining its abhorrence of the £3 tax which was placed on men and women over the age of 16 after their terms of indenture had expired (*Indian Opinion* 6 November 1909). Its sister organisation the Transvaal Indian Women’s Association shared similar goals. This Association was very supportive of women activists during the 1913 Satyagraha campaign undertaken by Natal and Transvaal Indians against discrimination and racism (*Indian Opinion* 28 January 1914).

Other groups established included the Indian Women’s Sabha inaugurated in Durban in 1914, of which Katurba Gandhi (wife of Mohandas Gandhi) and Mrs Millie Graham Polak (wife of Henry Polak, close friend of Gandhi) were active members; the Colonial Women’s Club; Indian Women’s Reading Circle and the Indian Women’s League (*South African Indian Who’s Who*, 1940, 1960). Some groups were established along ethnic lines. Among them were the Natal South Indian Women’s Association, of which Mrs Mariemuthamma Veerasamy was not only an active member but also co-founder (*South African Indian Who’s Who*, 1960) and the Durban Women’s Zionist League founded in 1933 (Vahed and Waetjen 2010). Other groups took a more religious orientation, for example, the Natal Hindu Women’s Association; Christ Church Mothers’ Union; the Durban Women’s Arya Samaj, with branches in Pietermaritzburg (*South African Indian Who’s Who*, 1940; 1960) and the Stree Arya Samaj established in 1929 (Nowbath et al. 1960).

Two women's organisations which were instrumental in pioneering the concept of social work were the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society and the Durban Indian Women's Association. The Durban Indian Child Welfare Society was established in 1927. Many Indians were living in very overcrowded and poor conditions which impacted seriously on their lifestyles and the Society sought to improve the lives of the poor and destitute (*The Passive Resister* 12 August 1946; *Cape Times* 19 August 1998). The Society's Chairperson Mrs S. Moodley, was one of the driving forces of the Society. Between 25 September 1927 and 26 August 1928, 1,378 cases were handled by the Child Welfare Society. Most of these were ear, nose and throat, eye and skin complaints. The Durban Indian Women's Association was established in 1933 under the guidance of Lady Kunwarani, wife of India's Agent General to South Africa, Sir Maharaj Kunwar Singh. During the first year of its existence the Association sponsored the first Indian Red Cross detachment noting that this was the beginning of Red Cross work among the non-Europeans in South Africa. In 1936 the Association took the lead in supplying the first free meals to schools. Among its other activities were the formation of a Reading and Educational Circle where plays and poems were read and seminars held. The Association also embarked on fundraising drives for worthy projects such as the Blind Society, Friends of the Sick Association (FOSA), the Aryan Benevolent Home (home for the aged) and the African Child Feeding Scheme. Female students at local Indian schools, such as Stanger High, Merebank, Dartnell Crescent, St Anthony's and Clairwood High, were recipients of bursaries, uniforms, food parcels and transport allowances.

Thus by 1930 several women's groups had already been established along ethnic, religious and racial lines. However, the GMM was the first Gujarati-speaking women's group encompassing both religious and ethnic diversity and comprised of individuals largely of immigrant and "passenger" origin.

Formation of the Gujarati Mahila Mandal (GMM)

In 1930 Sarojini Naidoo a well-known Indian poet, politician and champion of women's

rights met members of the local Gujarati community during a visit to Durban and encouraged them to form a women's organization. Subsequently on 2 November 1930 the GMM held its first meeting at the Surat Hindu Association Hall in central Durban (*Sunday Tribune Herald* 18 August 1985). At the meeting Mrs Jhaverbhen Patel was elected first President; Mrs Parvatibhen Desai and Mrs Navalbhen Dhupelia as Secretaries and Mrs Vrajkaurbhen Soni and Ambaben Kooverjee were Treasurers. An executive committee of 21 women was also constituted (*Indian Opinion* 14 November 1930; *Sunday Tribune Herald* 18 August 1985). At the time the GMM was largely an informal women's organisation with no structured constitution. It was only 20 years later in 1950 under the counsel and guidance of the Vedic scholar, Pandit Nardev Vedalanker, that a proper constitution was drawn up and adopted (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Publication 1985). Initially the early members were of diverse faiths: Hindu, Muslim and Parsee. Objections were raised when some women suggested that the name be changed to the Gujarati Hindu Mahila Mandal. However, whilst the Mandal membership was open to diverse religious groups Hindu women predominated in the later years. The aim of the GMM was to provide a platform to raise women's issues, create opportunities for their upliftment and to propagate the Gujarati culture, language and religion. The GMM was in some ways a prototype of Gujarat-speaking organisations in Africa and Asia. For example, in Bombay there were several that were multi-ethnic and multi-religious: the Bombay Ladies Association and the Gujarati Hindu Stri Mandal; in Rhodesia there were the Salisbury Indian Women's Association and the Hindu Women's Society (*Indian Opinion* 7 January 1914; *South African Indian Who's Who* 1940).

A brief biographical profile of a few of the pioneer and prominent members of the GMM provides interesting insight into their personal and public lives. Jhaverbhen Patel who held the reigns of the GMM for almost 20 years after its inception, was born in Nadias, district of Kaira, in July 1896. She was educated at Nadias and arrived in Natal in 1917 as a young bride. She married Bhailal Mathoorbhai Patel who ran a retail business in Durban and was an active community member. He played a prominent part in the 1913 Satyagraha campaign and was Treas-

surer of the Sir Kurma Reddi Unemployment Committee. Jhaverbhen, also affectionately known as “Jhaverba,” was engaged in social reform causes even prior to 1930. She was Vice-President of the Durban Indian Women’s Association, served the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society for several years and was the first Gujarati women to acquire a driver’s licence in 1951 (*South African Indian Who’s Who* 1971-1972). Sushila Gandhi, wife of Manilal Gandhi and daughter-in-law of Mohandas Gandhi, was active in community affairs. She was born in Akola, state of Maharashtra in 1907. As noted earlier, she was co-founder of the Indian Women’s Sabha in 1914 and like “Jhaverba” was also a member of the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society and the Durban Indian Women’s Association. She was an active member of the GMM until the 1970s and also served as President (Mesthrie n.d.). Savitabhen Naik was born in Kosamba, Gujarat and arrived in Natal as a young bride in her twenties. Prior to her marriage she was employed as a Gujarati school teacher at a local school in Kosamba. Like “Jhaverba” and Sushila, Savitabhen spoke minimal English but was fluent in Gujarati and Hindi.

Thus the early founder members of the GMM shared similar characteristics with their contemporaries elsewhere, in that they had very little education, were well versed in their ethnic languages, were largely “inexperienced” in collective action, but were imbued with great zeal and determination to engage in social and charitable work.

Re-constructing Ethnic Identity in Natal

a. Links with India

From the activities of the GMM it becomes quite evident that during the early years the GMM displayed a dual ethnic identity and consciousness. Whilst the women resided in South Africa and had married South African citizens their ethnic roots were still very much tied to India. This was expressed through the GMM generously supporting various causes in their homeland. They supported various charities, national and political movements, and paid tribute to India’s statesmen, poets, intellectuals and activists. For example, during the first GMM meeting on 2 November 1930 the women set up

a “Freedom Struggle Fund” and supported Gandhi’s “Quit India campaign” against British rule in India. The women raised a total sum of £133-0-3 within a month (*Indian Opinion* 14 November 1930). In 1931 they sent a further 1,500 rupees to Kasturba Gandhi. The GMM also hosted several receptions for prominent members of the Indian political and intellectual elite: in November 1931 they hosted Professor Karve, founder of the Bombay Women’s University. The GMM donated 15 guineas to the University. In 1934 they hosted Lady Kunwarani Maharaj Sing; in 1938 Mrs B. Rama Rau and Shrimati Dhanvanti Devi and in 1940 they hosted a reception for Pandit Nehru’s daughter, Indira. Upon the death of Kasturba Gandhi on 22 February 1944, the GMM held a prayer meeting in central Durban. The women also assisted in food relief programmes in India. In 1943 2,765 rupees were sent to Gujarat for famine relief and in 1950 £275 was sent for the Assam earthquake relief fund. Patriotic fervour was also displayed on India acquiring independence. This was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony at the Surat Hindu Association Hall on 15 August 1947 and later became an annual event (*Indian Opinion* 24 October 1947; 20 August 1948). Moreover, the birthdays of renowned Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore and “Father of the Nation”, Gandhi, were celebrated annually. Gandhi’s birthday celebration became known as “Gandhi Jayanti”. Celebrations took the form of cultural shows and prayer songs (Brochure Gujarati Mahila Mandal 1930-1985).

b. Language Preservation

Language preservation was essential to the preservation of ethnic identity. Desai (1997) in her study on the role of language and ethnic identity in the Gujarati community in Natal, states that “Language tends to become the focus of feelings of ethnic identity”; she adds that “It is through their mother tongue that they maintain their ethnic boundaries”. The GMM sought to preserve the Gujarati language through young children. Consequently on the 15 June 1959 the GMM opened the first Gujarati speaking nursery school, *Bal Mandir*, at the Surat Hindu Association Hall in Prince Edward Street, Durban. The nursery school started with eight children and by 1964 had an enrolment of 64. The children were taught everything that they

needed to be taught, but in Gujarati. The curriculum included learning the Gujarati alphabet, storytelling, poems, grammar, translations and music. By the late 1960s the school had adopted a bilingual approach, teaching both in English and Gujarati. In the early years the *Bal Mandir* depended on the community for financial support. The state under Nationalist Party rule provided minimal support for the preservation of vernacular languages. Subsequently, the GMM resorted to fundraising activities such as staging live cultural shows and showcasing Hindi movies. Between 1959 and 1963 the women collected £302-30-5 in private donations and £1009-37-8 in school fees. Community donations to the school took the form of cutlery, crockery, cupboards, tables, stationery, clock, chalkboards, chairs, toys and partition boards. School fees also provided much needed income as the GMM and the *Bal Mandir* were non-profit organisations and funds were required to meet school expenses such as staff and cleaners' salaries, consumables and equipment (Pamphlet *Bal Mandir*). However, by the late 1980s the GMM sought to relocate the *Bal Mandir* to bigger premises as the enrolment figures had increased. By 1989 the school had approximately 70 students with a waiting list of 25. The demographics of the school were no longer ethnic (Gujarati) in orientation but included children from diverse racial and religious backgrounds. English became the main medium of instruction. The GMM was largely motivated by the growing political climate of non-racialism and a desire to transform the nursery school in post-apartheid South Africa. In the early 1990s the *Bal Mandir* was relocated to Surat Centre in Prince Edward Street, Durban and registered with the Department of Education in 1992. It became known as Gujarati *Bal Mandir* Pre-primary School. Whilst Gujarati was no longer the main medium of instruction the teaching of the language was undertaken by the Surat Hindu Association, a male-dominated Gujarati organisation, also tasked with sustaining the Gujarati ethnic identity. For the pioneer members of the GMM the *Bal Mandir* was an important "cultural construction" project in the preservation of the Gujarati culture. Significantly, in the decades that followed the nursery school evolved and became a symbol of non-racialism in post-apartheid South Africa, hence fulfilling a key aim of the GMM that of community upliftment.

Currently, the school has an enrolment of approximately 50 students of diverse religious and racial backgrounds.

The GMM also sought to promote the Gujarati language *via* annual cultural shows and eisteddfods. Participants were encouraged to sing, dance and recite poems in Gujarati and rewarded with gifts. Drama productions were also held in Gujarati. Members of the GMM would often act in leading productions. For example, during their Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1955 they produced and hosted the play, *Koine Kahes ho Nahi (Do Not Tell Anyone)*. Quiz programmes for students and adults were regularly hosted to promote the Gujarati language. In 1987 the GMM introduced Gujarati lessons for youths and adults (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 1988-1997). Similar cultural shows and prize-giving events continue to the present day.

Religion and Festivals

The GMM sought to preserve their religious identity through different channels such as observing auspicious religious festivals, hosting cultural shows, religious discourses and prayer meetings. In the early years the GMM hosted several religious discourses on Hinduism. International religious leaders, scholars and priests, mainly from India were invited to Natal: in July 1934 his Holiness Swami Adyanandaji Pandit Anandpriyaji and the Indian Girl Guides from the Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya of Baroda, India were hosted at the Parsee Rustumjee Hall; on 9 August 1937 a welcome reception was held for Vedic scholar, Pandit Rishiram and in January 1950, Indian scholar, Pandit Ganga Prasad gave a lecture on "Women and Religion". The GMM also hosted weekly and monthly prayer meetings. It comprised of *Bhajans* (devotional hymns accompanied by music) and *aarti* (songs sung in praise of a deity). In addition, the women hosted religious discourses on the Hindu scriptures such as the *Bagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana*. For example in December 1950, the GMM held a *Gita Jayanthi* afternoon session followed by a three-day recitation of the *Haran's Katha* (the story of Ram and Sita) (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Notices 1935-2010).

Auspicious religious days on the Hindu calendar were also celebrated: *Holi* (the spring festival); *Shivarathri* a festival devoted to Lord

Shiva; *Jamashdami* (the celebration of Lord Krishna); *Diwali*, the festival of lights and the Gujarati New Year were all celebrated with songs, cultural shows, exhibitions and social gatherings. In the early years the *Navaratri* festival (dedicated to the worship of Hindu deity, Durga) was accompanied by nine nights of devotional songs, prayers and dances. The GMM was tasked with organising the venues, making the *Prasad* (food offerings to the deities) and catering. During the Diwali and *Best Varas* (Gujarati New Year) the women hosted cultural and musical shows. The GMM also sought to promote Hindu folk art, *Rangoli*, decorative designs made on the floors of living rooms and verandahs during Hindu festivals. The GMM encouraged women to showcase this practice during religious festivals, auspicious observances and at social gatherings.

Social and Community Upliftment

The GMM also played an important role in local community upliftment. This took various forms: supporting orphanages and educational reforms, assisting in flood relief programmes, and making donations in the form of food and financial aid. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s during Diwali and Christmas the women distributed food hampers at the Friends of the Sick Association (FOSA), the Aryan Benevolent Home (Home for the Aged) and several orphanages. They also donated books and stationery to schools amongst them the Natal African Adult Education Institute and funds towards the building of the VN Naik Deaf and Dumb school. The GMM also contributed funds for the maintenance of the Gandhi Ashram in Phoenix, Durban. It liaised with other ethnic organisations to collaborate in the preservation of the Hindu culture: the South African Hindu Maha Sabha; the Natal Gujarati Parishad; the Surat Hindu Association; the Natal Rajput Association and the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra. The GMM also interacted with local women's groups and prominent international women diplomats and feminist activists. For example, the President of the Women's Cultural Group, Mrs Zuelika Mayat was invited to lectures and workshops held by the GMM; in 1994 members of the GMM were invited to meet Lata Reddy of the Indian Foreign Office during her visit to South Africa and Pamela Bridgewater, the High

Commissioner of the British Council, in Durban (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 5 December 1994).

The Gujarati Mahila Mandal - A Social Space for Agency?

Studies by Jones (1982) have shown that collective activity provided a training ground for women's agency, they "became laboratories for training women for leadership roles in society traditionally dominated by males"; an entry into public life (Cohen 2009) and "an awakening of feminine consciousness" (Watson 1994).

The GMM provided women with an opportunity to develop good organisational and planning skills. Prior to 1950, the organisation operated on an informal basis. The adoption of a proper constitution in 1950 formalised the GMM. Thus women were tasked with greater collective decision-making processes, accountability, planning and responsibility. To sustain the organisation women organised meetings, arranged venues, circulated notifications and drafted agendas. Meetings also had to be chaired and the minutes accurately noted and circulated to members. Between 1930 and 1960 meetings were conducted and documented in Gujarati. Meetings were mainly held at the Parsee Rustomjee Hall and the Surat Association Hall in Durban. Moreover, women held elections for office bearers and voting was done by secret ballot.

The GMM also afforded women the opportunity to engage in project management and in decision-making. This is clearly demonstrated in their efforts to upgrade the Gujarati *Bal Mandir* to a Pre-Primary School registered with the Department of Education in the late 1980s. Registration with the Department would provide an opportunity for the *Bal Mandir* to receive state subsidies. Funds were required as student enrolment had increased and larger premises were required. To register the nursery school the GMM was involved in lengthy negotiations with state officials between 1989 and 1992. They had to abide by strict departmental guidelines regarding safety, staffing, child-care facilities, curriculum development and feasibility of location. Consequently the GMM was tasked with writing proposals and letters of motivation and liaising with several state departments: Department of Health and Welfare,

Director of Fundraising, Minister of Housing, Fire and City Engineers as well as professionals such as architects, attorneys, insurance agents and bank managers. The GMM submitted detailed reports on the school curriculum, staffing, sketch plans for the new premises, insurance quotes and financial statements to the Department of Education. Despite the required documentation being submitted the Department refused to approve the application. Frustrated, the President of the GMM, Mrs Hemabhen Mistry wrote to M.K. Naidoo, the Chief Executive Director of Education, stating that the GMM "was shocked at the rejection" and argued that "the pre-School was planned according to specifications of your department and plans were submitted to your office. At no stage were we asked to put in burglar guards and hence had not budgeted for." They further added that, "we find ourselves in a vicious circle. Without the grant, we are unable to put in the burglar guards and without the guards, we are unable to get the registration and the grant. We appeal to you to break this vicious circle by giving us registration and the grant" (Letter: Mrs H.V. Mistry to The Chief Executive Director, Department of Education and Culture 28 May 1992). This was quite a challenging period for the women as the restructuring of the nursery school was done on a part-time basis with limited resources. This fact was conveyed to the Minister: "...unlike business persons, we cannot devote as much time in trying to get everything done in time. We are a women's organization, most of us are housewives, serve voluntarily and consider this a community service for the good of the future of the children" (Letter: Mrs H.V. Mistry to The Chief Executive Director 28 May 1992).

After intense negotiations the Gujarati *Bal Mandir* Pre-Primary school was finally registered in 1992 as per the Indian Education Act of 1965 (Act 61 of 1965) and the Department even provided a subsidy at a rate of R30-00 per pupil (Letter: Department of Education and Culture to President of the Gujarati Mahila Mandal 3 March 1989; Chief Executive Director to the President Gujarati Mahila Mandal 10 July 1992; Gujarati Mahila Mandal to Chief Executive Director 24 July 1992). In 1992 the nursery school relocated to Surat Centre in Prince Edward Street in central Durban and is currently still in operation.

The GMM also empowered women with financial management and planning skills. These

are essential skills for the survival of any organisation. The GMM was tasked with managing and collecting membership and school fees, private donations and the payment of staff salaries. This led to the opening of bank accounts and meetings with retail and investment bankers. To keep the finances afloat the GMM resorted to innovative methods of fundraising. In 1959 the nursery school income from school fees totalled £209-7-0 and the GMM made a profit of £3-19-6; in 1961 school fees totalled £178.0.6 with a profit of £3-15-6. However between 1962 and 1963 the *Bal Mandir's* expenses exceeded its income. The GMM rectified the situation by embarking on a fundraising campaign. Financial appeals were made to the community. A Gujarati drama production titled *Savathrie* was staged and Bollywood movies were shown in community halls. These events raised a sum of £366 (Pamphlet Gujarati Mahila Mandal nd). In the 1980s to raise funds for the upgraded nursery school the GMM embarked on a more vigorous fundraising campaign. The estimated costs for upgrading the school totalled R350,000 in 1987, in 1992 they escalated to R625,000. In 1988 the GMM made an application to the Department of Health and Welfare seeking "authority as a fundraising organization" adding that "Having in our possession an authority to collect funds will be a sign of our bona-fide and an inducement for the Community to give donations" (Letter, Mrs H.V. Mistry to Department of Health and Welfare 9 June 1988; Department of National Health and Population Development to the President of the Gujarati Mahila Mandal 8 May 1990). Between 1988 and 1993 there were protracted negotiations between the Department and the GMM. Finally in 1993 their application was successful.

Other forms of fundraising adopted by the GMM for the Gujarati *Bal Mandir* Pre-School project included: establishing food stalls at live local and international shows, jumble and cake sales and raffled prizes. To educate, inform and create public awareness for the project the GMM liaised with newspapers editors, advertised in print media and appeared on radio talk shows. In the 1990s the GMM conceptualised the "Diwali Dinner Dance" which became an annual event with all proceeds invested in the *Bal Mandir*. The women also negotiated with local theatre companies to stage live shows between 1991 and 1995: in 1991 they staged two plays,

Sacrifice, based on the life of 1913 Satyagraha heroine, Valliamma Munusamy (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 23 February 1991) and *My Second Wife*, directed by local artists such as Essop Khan and Mahomed Alli (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 7 May 1991); in March 1992 *Natya-utsav*, a dance extravaganza (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 21 March 1992) and in 1995 *Money in Law* (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 20 July 1995). Thus fundraising activities gave women an opportunity to develop relationships with private and public institutions, businesses and individuals. It also led to the acquisition of skills: communication, public relations, mobilising resources, marketing concepts and ideas for non-profit purposes. For the vast majority of women this was not only a new experience, but also educational.

The GMM also served as a platform to educate, inform and empower women through motivational lectures and skills-based workshops. In 1953 the GMM invited Indian scholar, Umiashankar Jokakar, to lecture on women's issues. In the 1990s well known South African activist, Mrs Radhi Singh, gave a lecture on struggle heroines (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 17 March 1990); in May 1992 during South Africa's transitional period to democracy, Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) delegates, among them Ela Ramgobin, Nozizisiwe Madlala, and Nkosazane Dlamini Zuma, gave a talk on "Women's Role in the New South Africa". Skills-based workshops focused on leadership, finance, health, education and handicrafts. For example in September 1991 Professor D Garach of the University of Durban-Westville hosted a seminar on "VAT" (Value added Tax); in August 1994 Naseema Japp, an academic delivered a lecture on "Women and Leadership" (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes 23 May 1992; 26 July 1994).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the Gujarati Mahila Mandal played a pivotal role in sustaining the Gujarati ethnic identity as well as providing a platform for empowering women. Most Gujarati women lived very secluded and caste-bound lives. Their collective organisation illustrates their transition from domestic seclusion to more defined roles in the public sphere. Women became more

assertive and engaged in decision-making, project management and fundraising. The GMM provided a platform for women to find collective solutions to social and welfare problems and initiate group consciousness. Whilst the GMM did very little to reverse gender roles within the home it certainly made women more visible in the public sphere. Women's groups like the GMM not only provide us with useful ways to understand their role in the construction of ethnic identity and agency but also their contributions to community upliftment. A closer examination of similar women's groups deserves to be fully explored.

NOTES

- ¹ "Passenger" Indians was a term used frequently in Natal to refer to individuals who arrived unencumbered by contractual labour obligations. The term "passenger" was self-coined by migrants. In many sworn statements for domicile applications, marriage certificates, affidavits, they constantly, referred to themselves as: "I was a passenger on board the *SS Reichstag*" or "I came as a 'passenger'". The early passenger migrants were assigned multiple labels: "Arab" or "Bombay" or "Banyan" traders, largely because they hailed mainly from Bombay, were predominantly Gujarati-speaking Muslims, and were conspicuous in their traditional attire, a *kurta* and *izaar* (trousers) and a skull cap (*turkitopee*). Others labels assigned were "free Indians". Many ex-indentured Indians returned to India and later arrived as "passenger" Indians.

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