

**“Defending Hinduism”! The South African Hindu Maha Sabha
and Religious Instruction at Schools during the 1950s¹**

Karthigasen Gopalan

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with debates and tensions over the issue of religion during the 1950s when the South African Hindu Maha Sabha (Maha Sabha) decided to approach the Natal Education Department (NED) to allow Hindu religious instruction in select Indian primary schools throughout the province of Natal. While important to the Maha Sabha, this move was controversial and attracted strong opposition from many quarters. Reformers sought to promote a “monolithic Hinduism” and recreate it; however, given the heterogeneity of South African Hindus, who were divided by class, caste, language, region of origin, and the presence of Christian and Muslim Indians, many critical voices feared that the teaching of religion at school would foster division within the “Indian community”, which was considered anathema when it was necessary to unite against the racist policies of the white minority apartheid government. In accord with recent perspectives of treating identity as fluid, multifaceted and mediated through particular historical contexts,² this study seeks to address a number of issues: Why did the Maha Sabha consider it necessary to provide a common Hindu instruction at school to produce “good South African citizens”?³ What were the reasons put forward to legitimize Hindu reform? What was the influence of other religious faiths in the shaping of Hindu reform? What does the religion-at-school debate tell us about Indian (Hindu) identities during the 1950s and the ways in which these were “negotiated”?

Defending Hinduism: Religious instruction at Schools?

A huge concern for many Hindu religious leaders was that over the years, South Africans of Hindu faith were converting to Christianity, and Islam to a lesser extent, thus

¹ This paper is part of an MA dissertation which focuses on the history of the SAHMS from its inception in 1912 till 1960, as a prism to unpack questions of Hindu and Indian identity in the country.

² S. Hall. “Introduction” in S, Hall and P, Du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. (London: Sage publications, 1996).

³ *Leader*, 27 May 1955.

“forsaking their religion” and abandoning their culture and traditions.⁴ They saw Hindu children as being the most ignorant of their religion amongst Indians and during the 1950s argued that it was vital that the basic tenets of Hinduism be taught to children attending government schools as an important way of maintaining a rich heritage. Reformers also defended the decision on grounds that religious instruction was a necessary part of the full development of the child to promote moral interrogatory and various forms of behaviour categorized as immoral were attributed to being the result of a lack of religious education as we will see.

A central aim of the Maha Sabha was to overcome the divisions between sects of Hindus to foster a common unity. As council member B. D. Lalla put it the Maha Sabha was formed when prominent Hindus in the country realised “that unless they co-ordinated their efforts, there was little hope for the survival of Hinduism which was threatened from all sides”.⁵ South African Hindus were heterogeneous, made up of four broad linguistic groupings Gujarati and Hindi (North Indian) and Tamil and Telugu (South Indian).

The Maha Sabha was a federal body and included most of the major Hindu bodies in South Africa, including the six founding members, Andhra Maha Sabha of South Africa⁶, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha⁷, Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj⁸, Natal Tamil Vedic Society⁹, Shree Sanathan Dharma Sabha¹⁰, Surat Hindu Association¹¹ as well others who joined subsequently, like Saiva Sithantha Sungam, Divine Life Society of South Africa, South African Tamil Federation and Mission of Eternal Religion. Thus the Maha Sabha was fully represented linguistically and denominationally; however, given competing

⁴ See various editions of the *Hindu*.

⁵ B. D. Lalla. “A review of the work of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha” in R. S. Nowbath (ed), *The Hindu Heritage in South Africa*. (Lorne Street: The South African Hindu Maha Sabha, 1960), 108.

⁶ Telugu-speaking Indians

⁷ Arya Samaji’s and other following the Vedic religion, tended to be Hindi speakers

⁸ Gujarati speaking migrants from Kathiawad

⁹ Formed when two major Tamil organisation merged

¹⁰ Followers of the “eternal religion” drawing religious authority a vast array of ancient Indian traditions including but not exclusively Vedic, also tended to be Hindi speaking

¹¹ Gujarati-Speaking Hindus migrants from Surat

definitions over what constituted authentic Hindu practices, it found itself in a precarious position in declaring what characteristics were common to all Hindus.

Reformist Hinduism and Education

Religious education was fundamental to the reformist Hindu agenda especially the Arya Samaj reformist missionary movement founded in Bombay in 1875, whose founder Swami Dayananda argued that the poor educational system in India was one of the primary reasons for its society's degradation.¹² He felt that an effective education system had to include "sound religious and moral training"¹³ and that the knowledge contained in the Vedas provided a template for a complete and productive way of life with moral and religious instruction deeply intertwined with scientific principles.¹⁴ During his stay in Natal, the founder of the Maha Sabha, Swami Shankaranand was critical of the education provided to Indian children and like advocates of religious education in the 1950s, he equated its absence with "crime and vices of poverty" and the "botheration of putting Indians time after time in gaol..." The Swami was especially angered that Indians were forced to attend Christian mission schools which he argued were "established more for proselytising than imparting education"¹⁵ and called for primary education in the vernacular "by Indian teachers, who could mould their character much better than an English teacher ignorant of their languages, customs and habits."¹⁶

A tendency of attributing the necessity of a common Hindu instruction for all Hindu children to promote the full development of the child does come out very strongly in arguments put forward by Maha Sabha members during the 1950s in various pamphlets and prayer booklets they distributed to affiliated institutions as well as a bimonthly journal known as *The Hindu* which sought to spread the teachings of Hinduism and serve as a voice for the for the Maha Sabha.

¹² T. Naidoo. *The Arya Samaj Movement in South Africa*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992), 36.

¹³ Naidoo. *Arya Samaj*, 36.

¹⁴ B. C. Singh. *Life and Teachings of Swami Dayananda*. (New Delhi: Jan Gyan Prakashan), 142.

¹⁵ *African Chronicle*, 8 June 1912.

¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 7 August 1909.

The Hindu

The Maha Sabha began publishing *The Hindu* in 1946, with Dr Nagindas Purshottamdas (N.P.) Desai, long time member of the Maha Sabha and its president from 1947-1949 playing a huge role in the editorial. Desai was one of the chief proponents of the idea of introducing religious education in schools and he represented strongly the reform tendencies claiming that the “decay and downfall of Hindus in India” was due to “people losing their faculty of rational thinking” which enabled Christian missionaries to take advantage.¹⁷ He used this claim to make his case for reforming Hinduism in South Africa by providing “them with first class religious and philosophical works produced in India”.¹⁸

Dr. Desai, who was of Gujarati descent, was born in Tongaat in 1905 and spent almost two decades in India completing his education before proceeding to London where he completed a medical degree. He returned to South Africa in 1940 and commenced his medical career in Durban.¹⁹ Desai was also a founder of the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj and prominent member of the APS and under the Maha Sabha had established numerous service organisations known as Seva Samitis to assist poverty-stricken Hindus in the province. It is interesting that while he sought to unite Hindus on one level, by forming the Kathiawad Samaj, he was sowing division among the Gujarati Hindus as a Surat Hindu Association was in existence from 1907. Although a proponent of vernacular education, namely Hindi and Gujarati he often assisted in writing common prayers in English so as not to favour any not to favour any particular linguistic group in South Africa.

The influence of Christian missionaries on “uneducated” Hindus was a major issue that the Maha Sabha confronted after the Second World War and an issue addressed at council meetings was the propagation of Hinduism to prevent further conversions.

¹⁷ N. P. Desai. “Propagation of Hinduism and Hindu Solidarity”, a paper given at the Maha Sabha Centenary Hindu conference 1960.

¹⁸ N. P. Desai. “Propagation of Hinduism”.

¹⁹ Dhane Bramdaw. *South African Indian's WHO'S WHO and commercial Directory 1960* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Witness Ltd, 1960), 66.

Throughout the Maha Sabha's existence it was concerned with defending Hinduism against the various "inroads" threatening it. The two main challenges often identified are the lack "of personal commitment to cultural and religious ideals by Hindus themselves" and "other religions more particularly Christianity whose inroads into Hinduism undermine its ancient heritage."²⁰ Christianity came to be seen as a problem by Hindu reformers who claimed the majority of Hindus in South Africa based their religion on ritual practices and lacked the proper theological knowledge to handle aspects of urban life in South Africa and ward off the approaches of Christian missionaries, who were taking advantage of this.

The "threat" posed by Christianity on South African Hindus comes out very strongly in *The Hindu*. For example an article on "Divine Healing and Conversions" claimed that "misguided Christian missionaries, in order to gain their ends, have been sent all over Natal to convert large masses of ignorant, illiterate and economically downtrodden Hindus to Christianity".²¹ Also very significant were articles written by prominent international figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Swami Vivekananda that dealt with this theme of universality of religious ideals and their defence of Eastern religions especially Hinduism for its longevity.

Christianity was targeted because of the large number of conversions to that faith but it wasn't exclusively Christianity that was seen as the problem but also Hindus who lacked knowledge of their own faith which made them receptive to such missionaries. In fact the lessons contained in Christianity, reformists argued, were parallel to those of ancient Hindu scriptures. The idea that Christianity was superior was condemned. The main emphasis was promoting Hinduism and preventing conversion. The July 1946 edition began with an account of the success experienced by the Maha Sabha in preventing a family of sixteen Hindus who were on the verge of converting to Islam, from "forsak[ing] their religion." The article ended with an important message to readers,

²⁰T, Naidoo (ed). *Challenge the papers and resolutions of the seventeenth anniversary convention of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha*. (Durban :South African Hindu Maha Sabha, 1982)

²¹ *Hindu*, May 1946, 3.

“we appeal that whenever any Hindu is in any difficulty anywhere, please get in touch with the secretary of the Hindu Maha Sabha”.²²

Promoting Hindu education at school was not purely for the purposes of preventing conversions but also defended by proponents as an integral part of the child’s development. They argued that religious instruction for children of all religions was necessary and were concerned that for too long Hindu education was neglected among South African Hindus. The first schools opened for Indians in South Africa were Christian mission schools and Muslim children not only had access to Islamic schools but also the network of formal and informal madrassahs across the province.²³

Reformist Hinduism

The reformist message was reinforced at Maha Sabha council meetings and conferences which portrayed an image of Hindus as being receptive to the message of other religions because of a lack of knowledge about their own. The strength of Hinduism was argued to be its tolerance of other faiths and universality. Reformers pushed the idea of Hinduism as a set of universal truths that could be expressed in various ways. The Maha Sabha produced literature that provided a good overview of the definition of Hinduism it sought to project in South Africa. *The Hindu* contained a section “Every Hindu should read these books” which listed the core works of a list of notable reformers.²⁴ While Hinduism was portrayed as a way of life that embraced fundamental morals common to all religions, was tolerant, and had a universal approach, the idea of one Supreme Being and focus on selected texts meant that they were enforcing a monolithic ideal of Hinduism.

Hindus believe in ONE GOD... Though they speak different languages, they are linked together by the common religion. The four Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmasutras, Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, Ramayana Mahabharata are the accepted scriptures of the Great Religion of the Hindus.²⁵

²² *Hindu*, July 1946, 3.

²³ S. Jeppie. *Language Identity Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban*. (Cape Town: Human Science Research Council, 2007) 19 and 45.

²⁴ *Hindu*, May 1946, 15.

²⁵ *Hindu*, July 1946, 7.

This from *The Hindu* captures this tendency of portraying a monolithic Hindu religion while the quote below shows the Sabha's effort to foster pride among Hindus.

I am a Hindu. My religion is known as Hinduism. My mother country is Hindustan or India. Hinduism is the oldest and best religion in the world and it is the source of all religions.²⁶

The majority of South African Hindus practiced what is referred to as Sanathan or ritual Hinduism which often lacked textual basis. In their attempts to overcome sectional divisions between Hindus and promote a common definition of Hinduism, the reformers risked becoming just as monolithic as the religions they criticized.

On one hand the Maha Sabha was concerned with maintaining a religious heritage and upholding traditions but on the other hand it tried to unite a very heterogeneous group of people (South African "Hindus") and to do this meant enforcing a monolithic ideal of Hinduism to forge a common Hindu identity. This led to the obvious dilemma of defending a Hindu heritage against inroads while at the same time enforcing a particular approach of Hinduism. *The Hindu* was also used to make a case that the wisdom in ancient religious texts of Hinduism were compatible with modern forms of Western science which it in fact preceded by centuries. The Maha Sabha was concerned about "reacquainting" Hindus with this view of Hinduism. A 1955 edition of the Hindu was full of articles with titles such as "The compatibility of Reason and Faith" and "Need For a Living Faith in Spiritual Values," which express a view that religious knowledge was necessary for the development of the individual. These articles also provide scientific explanations for the legitimacy of Hindu faith.²⁷ The form of Hinduism to be taught at schools was portrayed as a universal approach to life through moral education that incorporated the universal truths of Hinduism, which were deemed to be common to all religions.

The Maha Sabha Conference of 1944

²⁶ *Hindu*, July 1946,

²⁷ *Hindu* 1955

Hindu instruction at schools was first proposed by Swami Shankaranand when the Maha Sabha was formed in 1912. However, the Swami returned to India shortly after the conference and nothing was done until the fourth Maha Sabha Conference in 1944 when it was formally decided to approach the NED to introduce religious education in Indian schools. However, nothing transpired and it would be another nine years before the issue was taken up again. It should be remembered that in the period following the conference Indians were weighed down by a number of pressing issues: the passive resistance campaign on 1946-48; the victory of the National Party in 1948, the 1949 Indian African riots, and the Defiance Campaign of 1952 were some of the weighty matters that concerned them. While religious education did not occupy any significant place in the debates in the years following the 1944 conference, the more general issue of Indian education came increasingly under the spotlight. The two major challenges facing Indian education were the low wages of teachers and high number of Indian children who were turned away from schools due to a lack of accommodation.

Fifth Maha Sabha Conference, 1953

The Maha Sabha held its fifth conference from 9-11 October 1953 at the A.I. Kajeje Memorial Hall in Durban which attracted 57 affiliated institutions, the highest ever in the Maha Sabha's history to that point. 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 inaugurated by a stirring speech by the secretary R.S. Naidoo in which he argued that Hinduism was "under constant attack" and the time had come to implement measures to reverse this trend.²⁸

The high turnout of affiliated institutions "animated by a spirit never before evident" impressed commentators like Joe Francis who claimed that the conference marked the emergence of "a rejuvenated and virile organization".²⁹ However others like Y.M. Naidoo were critical that the Maha Sabha was not doing enough for the upliftment of Hindus. As

²⁸ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

²⁹ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

“the parent organization of the Hindus,” Naidoo argued, the Maha Sabha should “set a lead to their people.” Naidoo complained that officials only met during conferences and national celebrations and resolutions passed were quickly forgotten. He complained that while a few individuals preached Hinduism, the majority “do not know the teachings of Hinduism” and expressed concern over the large number of Hindus being converted to Christianity, a religion that he identified as “a challenge”. He called on the Maha Sabha to “organize its branches, establish its prayer meetings in every little district and town in the country and conduct vernacular schools to preserve our religion, customs and culture.”³⁰

Naidoo echoed the views of a number of Hindu South Africans. Also significant was the length to which he went to show that Christianity was a threat to Hinduism.³¹ He presupposed that Hinduism needed to be preserved and defended in South Africa. However, this view of Hinduism differed to that of many other Indian South Africans. For example, during this period were a series of debates taking place about whether or not Tamil people were in fact “Hindu.” Some claimed that they were not Hindus.³² One Tamil commentator argued that “all Tamils who call themselves Hindus are the only people in the world to adopt a foreign religion without undergoing baptism.”³³

Y.M. Naidoo, however, saw Hinduism as synonymous with Indian culture. Separated in India by linguistic, religious and social differences, Hindus became united in South Africa by a common Hindu culture. Converts were seen as abandoning that culture and embracing Western culture. One commentator argued, “properly imparted it [religious instruction] can ... help make the Indians of South Africa more conscious of the great traditions of which they are the heirs and of which their race has been the creator.”³⁴ The writer defended religious instruction in the form of one all-encompassing form of Hinduism in that it would help prevent “the Indian in South Africa as lying exclusively in

³⁰ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

³¹ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

³² *Graphic*, 23 January 1954, 20 February 1954 and *The Leader*, March 1955

³³ *Graphic*, 23 January 1955

³⁴ *Leader*, 15 July 1955.

the adoption of the Western beliefs and Western was of life.”³⁵ Since it was important to Hindu reformers to show that conversion to Christianity did not take place because Hinduism was inferior, it became important to teach a universal form of Hinduism that contained all the fundamental truths that were common in all religions.

Special Education Conference, 1954

The most important development at the fifth conference was a paper by council member Sunbhuder Panday on “The need for religious instruction in primary schools and our national heritage” which argued that educating children with the tenets of Hinduism was necessary for maintaining Hindu heritage.³⁶ This resulted in a special session of the conference on 23 January 1954 in Durban which dealt solely with this issue. The conference became a four hour long heated discussion ended with a resolution to approach the Natal Education Department proposed by Panday who was supported by S.L. Singh, B.A. Maghrajh and S.R. Naidoo who, like most other leaders of the Maha Sabha were prominent in business and community matters.

There was opposition from a faction led by another council member P. R. Pather who was supported by three representatives of the Natal Indian Teachers Society (NITS), P. Raidoo, Jogee Naidoo and K.C. Naidoo. P. R. Pather, of Tamil descent, was a land and estate agent, who was one of the highly influential figures in Indian politics at the time. His family immigrated to Natal from Mauritius in 1903. During his late teenage years he had become involved in various political, religious and welfare organisations.³⁷ P. R. Pather opposed the resolution “on grounds that it would endanger the general [secular] education of the Indian child” and, that the “ideal before the Indian people is to build up a homogeneous Indian community” and introducing religious instruction at schools for different religious groups would divide them “into water tight compartments”.³⁸ This marked the beginning of a long series of debates between the Maha Sabha and other critics of the decision to introduce religious instruction.

³⁵ *Leader*, 15 July 1955.

³⁶ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

³⁷ Bramdaw. *WHO'S WHO 1960*, 171.

³⁸ *Graphic*, 30 January 1955.

The Maha Sabha was boosted by a change of heart by P.R. Pather who, in fact, led the Maha Sabha's deputation to the NED in October 1954 to argue for the establishment of religious instruction at schools. The delegation consisting of Govan Mani, P.R. Singh, G.R. Padia, S. Panday, S. Chotai and N. P. Desai argued that religious instruction should be imparted in English, be broad in scope, and be taught by official members of the teaching staff rather than priests.³⁹ One benefit, according to Pather, was that the "the incidence of delinquency will be allayed considerably."⁴⁰ Pather also clarified the Maha Sabha's position that "every child whether he is a Hindu, Muslim or Christianity shall receive his or her own religious instruction."⁴¹

It was during this time that the Maha Sabha began to clarify what it meant by religious instruction. Its newly elected president, Govan Mani, criticized *The Graphic* for doing the Maha Sabha a "great injustice" in its portrayal of the issue of religious education.⁴² Mani (1899-1963) exemplified the trading class dominance of the Maha Sabha. He was a prominent businessman who was born in 1899 in Kathiawad and immigrated to South Africa in 1911 as a passenger migrant. After completing his schooling at the Durban Indian Institute, he opened a business as a general dealer in Grey Street. He was also president of the Surat Hindu Association and Hindu Smashan Fund (Crematorium).⁴³ Govan Mani said that that the Maha Sabha was simply asking the education department to replace the 90 minutes per week dedicated to "moral teaching" with "Hindu religious instruction to all Hindu children."⁴⁴ P.R. Pather added that by "religious instruction," the Maha Sabha was referring to the teaching of a general form of Hindu instruction limited to 90 minutes per week. To him, this was preferable to building religious schools which, by "providing religious teaching for each section of our children tend to disintegrate the Indian community."⁴⁵ Pather's change of attitude was extremely important, as an editorial in *The Graphic* explained:

³⁹*Graphic*, 26 February 1955.

⁴⁰ *Graphic*, 26 February 1955.

⁴¹ *Leader*, 8 October 1954.

⁴² *Graphic*, 26 February 1955.

⁴³ Bramdaw. *WHO'S WHO 1960*, 50.

⁴⁴ *Graphic*, 26 February 1955.

⁴⁵ *Graphic*, 5 March 1955.

Now Mr. P. R. Pather is no callow youth. A seasoned and veteran leader who is respected by all sections of the community even by those who may disagree with him on matters political, he occupies the unique position in the community wherein he is a leader not only of Hindus, but Muslims and Christians as well. His long experience in the affairs of the community but serves to underline the gravity of his warning. And if we may say so, Mr. Pather's sentiments on this issue coincide with our own.⁴⁶

There was much heated debate over this issue. The 12 March 1955 issue of *The Graphic*, for example, contained four articles on the front page that dealt with religious education. Two were critical of what was termed "the propagation of religious sectionalism" and "religious apartheid."⁴⁷ Some Muslims criticized Pather's view of Islamic schools. One correspondent to the *Graphic*, A.R. Shaik, for example, felt that Pather was being hypocritical. Shaik claimed that Muslim schools did not lead to the disintegration of the community as "Mr. Pather puts it. The very fact that he is an official representing a section of the community Indian community [Maha Sabha] shows that he is helping split the community faster than religious schools could do."⁴⁸ Pather was also criticized by his political colleague in the Natal Indian Organisation (NIO), A.M. Moola, who argued that Muslim religious schools had been in existence for over half a century in South Africa and no one had ever accused them of leading to indoctrination or sectarianism.⁴⁹

The Natal Indian Congress (NIC) entered the fray when it claimed that "the majority of Indian people will condemn any move to introduce apartheid on a religious basis in Indian schools."⁵⁰ The NIC was particularly concerned with proposals that they claimed had been made which suggest that if a school was attended primarily by members of one religious group, then it should teach the religion of that majority. The NIC feared that this would lead to the attachment of labels like 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'Christian' among children and that this would also lead that the staffing of teachers and principals "taking

⁴⁶ *Graphic*, 5 March 1955.

⁴⁷ *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

⁴⁸ *Graphic*, 19 March 1955.

⁴⁹ *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

⁵⁰ *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

on the colour of the religious group.”⁵¹ One article expressed concern that taxpayer’s money was used to finance religious schools which were often well camouflaged.⁵²

Religious schools or Religious instruction at schools?

On 27 February 1955, Govan Mani gave a speech in which he attempted to deal with criticisms against the Maha Sabha by forming an explicit distinction between “religious schools” and “religious instruction” at schools.⁵³ He argued that the Maha Sabha was against religious schools which taught a specific religious dogma because they had the potential to divide Indians. Instead, the Maha Sabha sought to promote a form of secular religious education similar to that practiced at white schools.⁵⁴ In religious schools, Mani went on, “the whole education is to be charged with a religious basis” whereas with religious instruction “it is merely a subject in schools with a secular basis.”⁵⁵ He added that this is the situation “present in all European secular schools” and that “none of them have lost their secular character.”⁵⁶

But the debate was still far from over. One correspondent to the newspaper expressed confusion about the distinction that Mani drew between religious schools and religious instruction, and raised the question of how the Maha Sabha “could claim that religious instruction would not promote sectionalism while it acknowledges the heterogeneous composition of Indian society.”⁵⁷ This was a concern about how a universal form of religious education could cater for the needs of a group of people with different religious practices. Dr. A. D Lazarus made a similar point in his response to Mani’s statement by arguing that religious instruction at schools would stimulate an increase in exclusive religious schools because common religious instruction could not “be implemented in

⁵¹ *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

⁵² *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

⁵³ *Graphic*, 19 March 1955.

⁵⁴ *Graphic*, 19 March 1955.

⁵⁵ *Graphic*, 19 March 1955.

⁵⁶ *Graphic*, 19 March 1955.

⁵⁷ *Graphic*, 25 March 1955.

Indian schools when the Indian people as a whole do not form a homogenous group religiously or linguistically.⁵⁸

Meeting with the Education Department

On 9 March 1955, Dr. W.O. McConckey, director of the Department of Education, met with the delegations of the Maha Sabha, Natal Indian Teachers Society (NITS), and Orient Islamic Educational Trust (together with the Allied Muslim Organization), to discuss the question of religious instruction at Indian Schools. The NITS delegation was led by its president Dr. A. D. Lazarus who strongly objected against the proposed move.⁵⁹ Lazarus was a school principal born in Durban in 1903 who had completed an MA dissertation on the “Racial Determinant of an immigrant group-A study of the Indian in South Africa” at Yale University in the United States.⁶⁰ The Maha Sabha’s delegation consisted of P.R. Pather, Vice-president Dr N. P. Desai, Sookraj Chotai and P.B. Singh. Sookraj Chotai, born in Clare Estate in 1912, was a school head master and had previously represented the NITS before the Education Department on educational and salary questions.⁶¹ The NED eventually agreed in principle to setting aside 90 minutes per week for religious instruction, on condition that the medium of instruction be English and that the Maha Sabha prepare the syllabus in conjunction with the NED.⁶²

Dr. Desai, in making a case for religious instruction at a meeting of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh, created a major controversy when he claimed that this form of education was necessary to promote moral development, which was “severely lacking” in the existing education system. A headline in an April 1955 issue of *The Graphic*, “Prominent Hindu Sabha member says: educated men corrupt, debased,” captured the furore. Desai said that it was “common knowledge to find educated men, professionals, graduates in arts and science, matriculants, etc debased and of an aimless life, lacking character, life

⁵⁸ *Graphic*, 19 March 1955.

⁵⁹ *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

⁶⁰ Bramdaw. *WHO'S WHO 1960*, 116.

⁶¹ Bramdaw. *WHO'S WHO 1960*, 59.

⁶² *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

corrupted with liquor and gambling.”⁶³ He claimed that this was the result of a lack of religious education and that it was “gratifying to know that Provincial Administration and the Education Department have accepted the principle of religious instruction in government aided schools”.⁶⁴ The editorial in *The Graphic* criticized Desai for accusing the educated Indians as “being guilty of all the sins imaginable.”⁶⁵

A.D. Lazarus also took offence with Dr. Desai’s claim and these two notable members of the community, a doctor and a respected principal would lay strong allegations against each other. Lazarus accused the Maha Sabha of false allegations and accusing Indian teachers of being responsible for the decline in morals. Dr. Desai responded that the views were his own and not those of the Maha Sabha. He also argued that he was not condemning Indian teachers specifically but “graduates, professionals etc.”⁶⁶ Dr. Desai added that the “general tone of the Indian community is on a downward trend” and that “we [the Indian community] have advanced economically and educationally but morally and culturally we have degraded ourselves.”⁶⁷

Following negotiations with the NED, representatives of the Maha Sabha, communicating via the *Indian Opinion*, attempted to clarify differences between various viewpoints and sought the close cooperation of NITS. They felt that there “appeared to be no difference in essentials between the respective viewpoints.”⁶⁸ The Maha Sabha reiterated its position that it stood for “religious instruction to all Indian children in all Indian schools as opposed to the establishment of religious schools”.⁶⁹ This latter course, it argued, would not be a “deterrent to the building up of a homogeneous Indian community” because it would simply mean replacing a form of moral education with Hindu education, educating the child in their own faith, a right which Christians were already enjoying. Govan Mani’s argument was that a form of Christian secular education was already taking place at schools and that the Maha Sabha merely wanted to replace it

⁶³ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

⁶⁴ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

⁶⁵ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

⁶⁶ *Graphic*, 9 April 1955.

⁶⁷ *Graphic*, 9 April 1955.

⁶⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 13 May 1955.

⁶⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 13 May 1955.

with Hindu secular instruction.⁷⁰ The proposed Hindu instruction would “embrace all shades of thought and belief, and represents the religious outlook of all four linguistic groups - the Tamil, Hindi, Telugu and the Gujarati speaking Hindus.”⁷¹

However an article in the *Indian Opinion* by an anonymous author propagating the necessity of religious instruction for the moral development of the child explicitly stated that one common code of religious education was required to “remove the heathenish practices, which are misinterpreted as being part of the Hindu religion, of fire walking and killing animals as offerings to God” which the author associated with “evils” such as drinking and gambling.⁷² Tendencies of the Arya Samaj reform programme are evident in these sentiments and arguments in favour of an all-embracing form of Hinduism, which in actual fact meant one that was shorn of many of its populist rituals, and was a refined version. This author claimed that he/she was in support “Gandhi’s tolerance of universal truths contained in all religions” but expressed concern of the dominance of Christianity in all schools and criticised the NITS beginning their meetings with Christian prayers regardless of the many non-Christian members.⁷³

Given the vast differences among Hindus, let alone Indians, there were concerns that religious instruction would cause exclusions. Another anonymous commentator argued that the religious views of Indian South Africans were extremely diverse and any religious instruction in schools would introduce sectional bias. The writer congratulated the Sydenham branch of NITS for favouring the “retention of moral lessons on the timetable” but rejecting the idea of it having “a religious basis.”⁷⁴ He claimed that the “Maha Sabha, on the contrary advocates the teaching of the Hindu religion” which will be unable to “preserve the unity of the community when one adopts such a narrow minded, distorted sectional outlook.”⁷⁵ A proponent of religious education countered that the decision to introduce religious instruction should be merited given that the “morals”

⁷⁰ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

⁷¹ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

⁷² *Indian Opinion*, 11 March 1955.

⁷³ *Indian Opinion*, 11 March 1955.

⁷⁴ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

⁷⁵ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

were questionable and that “teachers should be the last to object.”⁷⁶ Religious education, this argument went on, should be viewed in a broad sense as one that “encompasses the fundamentals of all religions.”⁷⁷

At a Maha Sabha council meeting on 14 May 1955, it was decided to organise a special conference with P.R. Pather as chairman and Sookraj Chotai as secretary to clarify the situation with the public and discuss how best to approach the task of imparting religious instruction at all Indian schools in Natal.⁷⁸ The Maha Sabha issued three notices which it distributed to delegates and the advertisement on one of which points to the importance of the issue:

PLEASE ACT NOW. The matter is urgent. The Sabha seeks the whole hearted assistance, co-operation and collaboration of all individuals and institutions in making the forthcoming Conference a great success.

Due to the importance of the decision, the Maha Sabha was trying to include all view points and sought to allow a discussion with the public so that the decision would be unanimously accepted. The conference, held on 3 July 1955, attracted around 350 delegates representing 50 cultural, religious and educational institutions from all parts of Natal and was described as a “huge success.”⁷⁹ Sookraj Chotai delivered the opening paper in which he challenged the “alleged inherent dangers” of religious instruction in schools. Chotai said that the Maha Sabha had “no sinister intensions” but simply wanted to provide Hindu children with “the privilege enjoyed by his Christian counterpart - tuition of religious teaching of his own faith.”⁸⁰ Chotai explained that there were many linguistic, religious, social and economic differences among Indians. But given that Indians “still have to find our place politically” in South Africa, the Maha Sabha did not want to “spilt the community” and for this reason opposed religious schools. The Maha Sabha advocated religious instruction in the form a universal set of morals that would not

⁷⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 1 April 1955.

⁷⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 1 April 1955.

⁷⁸ *Leader*, 20 May 1955.

⁷⁹ *Leader*, 22 July 1955.

⁸⁰ Chotai, “Hindu Religious instruction in Indian Schools”, A paper read at the special conference on religious instruction, 2.

divide Indians. The imperative for religious education, Chotai argued, was indubitable: “every child in order to develop into a well balanced individual needs a religious and spiritual background.” The absence of religious training led to delinquency which, Chotai said, was higher among Hindu children than their Christian or Muslim counterparts because they received an inferior level of religious training.⁸¹ Chotai underscored the Maha Sabha’s argument that religious education was an indispensable part of the education of Hindu children.

Chotai dealt in detail with what he identified as objections against the introduction of religious instruction in schools. He dismissed the notion that it would stimulate the growth of Hindu, Muslim and Christian schools because of an ordinance passed in 1949 which forbade the establishment of religious schools except for those in existence prior to 1942.⁸² Chotai rejected the argument that religious instruction would lead to “estrangement and communal feelings,” claiming that there was no record of friction arising out of the teaching of lessons from the Bible to both Christian and non-Christian Indian children, nor did the teaching of Islam to Muslim schools lead to communal tension.⁸³ Chotai also rejected the idea that religious education would cause divisions among Indians. The Indian community, he said, was not homogenous and 90 minutes of religious instruction at schools would not pose any threat to the project of trying to achieve a homogeneous identity.⁸⁴

Chotai emphasized that the Maha Sabha did not intend teaching religious dogma and that the syllabus would be drawn up in consultation with officials of the NED and qualified Hindu teachers to “take care to see that no assignment is included which will permit any dogmatic teaching or indoctrination as that would be infringement of the regulations”.⁸⁵ Govan Mani, who followed Chotai, argued that “no one had condemned religious Instruction at schools, but the objections have been centred on a belief that it would

⁸¹ Chotai, “Hindu” 7.

⁸² Chotai, “Hindu” 9.

⁸³ Chotai, “Hindu” 9.

⁸⁴ Chotai, “Hindu” 10.

⁸⁵ Chotai, “Hindu” 11.

disunite an alleged united community.” He branded this fear “fanatic.”⁸⁶ P.R. Pather described the education department’s acceptance as “the greatest achievement since the creation of the Sabha.”⁸⁷

Despite the conference of 3 July, NITS was not totally satisfied and invited P.R. Pather to attend its conference on 8 July, five days after the special conference, as a representative for the Maha Sabha to address any doubts that teachers may have still harboured. Pather used his reputation as a community servant to good advantage: “my reputation in my public career I hope will be sufficient testimony to the fact that I should not be a party to taking any steps that might affect the interests of the community.”⁸⁸ He defended religious instruction on moral grounds arguing that “freedom of religion is one of the principles that democracy is founded on.”⁸⁹ After P.R. Pather left, the teachers discussed the issue and resolved in favour of religious instruction in schools, but it was a close call. The victory margin of 130 votes in favour to 127 votes against showed just how divided the community was on this issue.⁹⁰

The issue was concluded by long time member of the NITS P. Raidoo who originally opposed the idea, but now whole heartedly supported it. He claimed that the NITS was not against religious instruction at school but the religious schools “that came into being after 1943 because appointments were being made on religious grounds not merit” and he expressed frustration that they were being imparted in vernacular and not always taught by permanent teaching staff. He expressed strongly the view of the Maha Sabha that a common instruction in English as opposed to a particular vernacular for particular sects would not foster division.

The syllabus was finalized in 1958 and by 1959 a number of schools began introducing religious instruction. According to Lalla, the NED’s regulations did not make religious instruction mandatory but offered this option to schools who wished to introduce

⁸⁶ *Graphic*, 9 July 1955.

⁸⁷ *Graphic*, 9 July 1955.

⁸⁸ *Graphic*, 16 July 1955.

⁸⁹ *Graphic*, 16 July 1955.

⁹⁰ Chotai “Hindu Religious instruction.” A paper given at the SAHMS Centenary Hindu conference 1960.

religious education.⁹¹ The Maha Sabha made it clear though that it would offer its fullest support to any school wishing to incorporate religious instruction. On 18 November 1960, during a speech marking the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Indian in South Africa, Chotai claimed that “at least 34 four schools have already made a start” and that the Maha Sabha had ordered 100 sets of 22 books from India which would sell at £7 10.0 per set to each school that introduced religious instruction.⁹²

Conclusion

In evaluating the decision to introduce Hindu religious instruction during the centenary celebrations in 1960, a number of Maha Sabha officials claimed that the criticisms were not against the idea or importance of religious education in schools but for the implications that it may promote sectionalism. In their defence they claimed that this was a result of ignorance of Hinduism, since the teachings of Hinduism could not promote sectionalism. Regardless of the legitimacy of this view these debates and fears over the provision of religious instruction nonetheless provide a lens through which to examine various fissures among Indians generally but Hindus specifically.

In the first instance, the discourse suggested that Hindu leaders attributed Hindu conversion to Christianity to a lack of knowledge about Hinduism among Hindu children, and the corollary of this, that the provision of Christian education strengthened Christian identity. While not a subject of this particular, the reasons for conversion were much more complex.⁹³ While conversion is a complex support meriting greater research, for the purposes of this paper it suffices to state that the analysis of Hindu leaders that ignorance of their religion was causing many Hindus to convert to Christianity was superficial.

A second theme that emerges is the fear of certain individuals and organizations like the NIC, who were pursuing a project of constructing an “Indian” identity in the political

⁹¹ Lalla. “A review”, pg 107.

⁹² Chotai ‘Hindu Religious instruction.’ 1960.

⁹³ See G. Pillay. *Religion at the Limits? Pentecostalism among Indian South Africans*. (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1994).

arena, that the provision of religious instruction at schools would foster separatist communal and sectarian identities among Indians, which would hamper their project to construct Indian identity. Here, it became apparent that this division was in some ways tied to political perspectives of leaders. The NIC had been taken over by “radicals” under the leadership of Dr. Monty Naicker, who were bent on pursuing a broad non-racial political alliance with Africans, Whites and Coloureds. Many of the members of the NIC belonged to the Communist Party of South Africa and remained communists after the banning of the CPSA. They wanted to avoid communalism. The likes of P.R. Pather and Govan Mani belonged to the old ousted NIC and were part of the NIO which they subsequently formed. While politically moderate, they did a great deal to establish social welfare, education, and religious institutions. SAHMS went to great lengths to show that the fears of critics that religious education would lead to divisions were based on false assumptions but not all critics were convinced.

This debate also raised the question: “Which Hinduism?” It showed that “Hindus” were not simply “Hindus.” There were divisions resulting from differences of class, language, ethnicity, region of origin, and the impact of reformism. While large numbers of Hindus continued to practice a popular or sabalarn version of Hinduism, called Sanathanism, some embraced reformist traditions like the Arya Samaj, Divine Life Society of South Africa, and Ramakrishna, nineteenth-century reformist traditions which sought to locate the core of Hinduism in the ancient Vedas. They came to be known as the Neo-Vedantic tradition. Despite the myth of homogeneity, Hindu beliefs and practice were, in reality, diverse and attempts of reformists reject popular practices as a distortion of true Hinduism did not resonate with the masses. The comprehension of Hindus as to what constituted Hinduism differed, markedly in many instances, and it was impossible to impose a hegemonic Hinduism.

These debates and tensions not only demonstrate how powerful a force religion was and how controversial it can become, but also the plurality of identities. Individuals were Indian, Telugu or Tamil, passenger or indentured, South or North Indian, Sanathan or Neo-Vedantic, and so on. These identities came into play in different circumstances.

Thus P.R. Pather and A.M. Moola could unite to lead the moderate Indian political faction but differ over religious education, when they became Hindu and Muslim respectively. These plural identities are important in preventing individuals from drawing sharp boundaries around single all-encompassing identities.

While not directly connected to this study, it also fascinating to notes that whereas there was so much concern about sectionalism in the 1950s, in the post-apartheid era, when South African society has opened up, when the world has become a global village, when we are living in an era of mass movement of peoples across border, or what some refer to as cosmopolitanism, identities are hardening. Thus, the very thing that leaders were so careful to avoid in the 1950s, religious schools, are sprouting up everywhere. There are literally hundreds of Islamic school throughout the country, with Hindu schools following in their wake.