

The Role of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha in (Re) Making Hinduism in South Africa (1912-1960)

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at a history of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha for the first half century of its existence. Founded in 1912 to unite all Hindus and create a unitary Hindu identity in South Africa, the organisation experienced long periods of inactivity during its early years. While its leaders and visiting Hindu missionaries who visited the country from time to time stressed the importance of uniting Hindus under one banner, South African Hindus were a heterogeneous group who partook in a wide variety of diverging religious practices drawing from various traditions, and were hardly receptive to the idea. In 1960 when the Maha Sabha celebrated the centenary of the arrival of Indians in South Africa, it published a book which accounted for its history and reflected on its achievements. By this time the organisation had experienced steady growth and the 1950s saw it achieve a few important milestones. By exploring the stagnation and growth of the Maha Sabha at different times during these five decades, this paper tries to address some of the ways in which Hindu and Indian identities were negotiated by South African Hindus in accordance to the changing historical setting. This paper looks in particular at the reasons put forward and the attempts made by Hindu leaders to unite Hindus and briefly address their level of representation amongst the larger Hindu 'community' of South Africa.

Introduction

The South African Hindu Maha Sabha (henceforth Maha Sabha, which translates into 'Great Society') was formed in 1912 at the inaugural national conference of South African Hindus. This conference was held in Durban under the presidency of Swami Shankaranand, a visiting reform oriented Hindu missionary from Punjab, who had been brought to South Africa by local Hindus in 1908 to help propagate Hinduism among the masses. The most important development of the conference was the Maha Sabha founded to unite Hindus and deal with what its leaders felt were the common problems that Hindus faced in the country.¹ Studying publications produced by the body and speeches made by its leaders during council meetings show that these common problems included a lack of Hindu institutions, a lack of secular, vernacular and Hindu religious education for Hindu children, high levels of illiteracy, emphasis on ritual oriented Hinduism at the expense of philosophical Hinduism and the presence of Christian missionaries in the country. According to leaders of the Maha Sabha, these factors meant that Hindus would be more receptive to missionaries of other faiths and more likely to convert. The heterogeneity of Hindu practice was seen as a potential weakness since it was believed that this would divide Hindus who needed to coordinate their efforts to ensure the survival of Hinduism.

While the Maha Sabha aimed to function as a national body it should be noted that 90% of Hindus lived in Natal during the period under review and the Maha Sabha was and is largely

¹ Nagindas P. Desai. 'A History of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha' in R.S. Nowbath, S.Chotai and B.D. Lalla (eds). *The Hindu Heritage in South Africa* (Durban: The South African Hindu Maha Sabha, 1960), 91.

a Durban based organisation. The Maha Sabha still exists today, and celebrates its centenary this year. However this paper ends in 1960 for a few reasons. Firstly there are no existing academic studies that have focused on the early history of the Maha Sabha or the drive to unite Hindus. To focus on the Maha Sabha's entire history would be beyond the scope of this paper due to the broad changes that have taken place during the last century with different consequences for Indian and Hindu identity. While 1960 seems as an arbitrary year it was an important turning point since it marked the centenary of the arrival of Indians in the country and the Maha Sabha climaxed in size at this time. The following year saw Indians being granted South African citizenship for the first time. Also important is that the 1960s saw the implementation of forced removals as part of the National Party's Group Areas Act which resulted in thousands of Indians across Durban being removed from their homes and resettled. This would affect the Maha Sabha due to the fact Hindu leaders were also political leaders and the implementation of the Group Areas Act was to mark a new chapter in the history of Indians in South Africa. The forced removals also saw the destruction of temples, Hindu institutions and the extended family system all impacting on the religious practices of South Africa Hindus. Given the absence of texts which focus exclusively on the Maha Sabha or institutional Hinduism up to this point, this study examines the Maha Sabha and charts its development up to the year 1960.

Review of literature

Apart from ephemeral pamphlets and brochures highlighting the role of particular Hindu organisations and individuals, and a few studies that focus mainly on Hindu beliefs, customs, and practices, there is a dearth of studies that critically examine the history of Hinduism in South Africa.² *Hindu Heritage* published in 1960 by the Maha Sabha records the history of some Hindu bodies and a few personalities.³ While this text contains valuable information, it is not a critical study but of a celebratory nature which serves a different purpose to scholarly texts. Two important scholarly studies, Alwyn Diesel and Patrick Maxwell's *Hinduism in Natal*, and Pratap Kumar's *Hindus in South Africa*, contain some historical background but are largely ethnographic and provide descriptive accounts of religious practices, festivals, and beliefs. C.G. Henning⁴, Hilda Kuper⁵, Fatima Meer,⁶ and Paul Mikula et al⁷ also touch upon different aspects of the Hindu experience in South Africa but are also ethnographic and descriptive without tracing the historical development of Hinduism. Surendra Bhana and Kusum K. Bhoola have focused on the history of the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj which was one of several parochial Hindu bodies affiliated to the Maha Sabha, but that study is concerned only with one small group of Hindus.⁸ Thillayvel Naidoo's *Arya Samaj Movement in South Africa* provides a valuable outline and contribution of the Arya Samaj movement, which was the version of Hinduism favoured by most Hindu leaders in the country including the Maha Sabha. However, it is not a critical study in the sense of locating the Arya Samaj

² Nardev Vedlankar. *Religious Awakening in South Africa: History of the Arya Samaj Movement in South Africa* (Natal: Arya Pratinidhi Sabha).

³ Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*.

⁴ C.G. Henning. *The Indentured Indian in Natal 1860-1917* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1993).

⁵ Hilda Kuper. *Indian People in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, Natal University Press, 1960).

⁶ Fatima Meer. *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban: Avon House, 1969).

⁷ Paul Mikula, Brian Kearney and Rodney Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa* (Durban: Hindu Temple Publications, 1982).

⁸ Surendra Bhana and Kusum K. Bhoola. 'The dynamics of preserving cultural heritage: the case of Durban's Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj, 1943–1960 and beyond' in *South Asian Diaspora Special Issue: Religion and the South Asian Diaspora*, 3: 1 (2011).

movement within the broader Hindu community and examining the contestation between these groupings.⁹

Goolam Vahed's study of the Arya Samaj missionary Swami Shankaranand, under whose presidency the Maha Sabha was formed, shows that the swami was concerned with purifying Hinduism and abandoning aspects regarded by the Arya Samaj as 'degenerate'.¹⁰ Maureen Swan's *Gandhi: The South African experience* and Surendra Bhana and Vahed's *The making of a Social Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914* also depict the way in which the swami created tension among and between Hindus and Muslims. However these studies do not go beyond the indentured period nor are they concerned with the development of institutional Hinduism. Questions about the types of tensions that were exposed by the swami have consequently not been examined after his departure. Unlike the extensive literature on Hinduism in other places where Hindus settled in large numbers, there is a paucity of material on Hindu organisations in South Africa and whether or not they were actually representative of Hindus in general.

In *A politics of Virtue*, John Kelly explores how anti-colonial resistance by Indians in Fiji was threatened by internal tensions between proponents of the reform oriented Arya Samaj and those of the orthodox Sanathan Dharma. Kelly's concern was why attempts to foster a unified political resistance became fractured by religious disputes among Hindus.¹¹ Studies of other Hindu communities in Trinidad¹² and Mauritius¹³ have also explored these divisions. An important and currently unexplored question is whether religious tensions among Hindus, as was the case in Fiji, Trinidad, and Mauritius, surfaced in South Africa and, if not, why not?

Another important question under investigation is why successive leaders of the Maha Sabha saw it as vital to promote a broad 'Hindu identity', one that encompassed various strands of Hinduism, and the debates that this generated with those Hindus who were concerned at the exclusion of Muslims and Christians, as well as those who did not want to conform to a particular kind of Hinduism promoted by the Maha Sabha. The early indentured labourers lacked a 'common' Hindu identity as they arrived from various parts of India, bringing with them a myriad of traditions, languages, castes, and beliefs. International Hindu missionaries who arrived from the turn of the twentieth century worked with local Hindu leaders in an attempt to provide a common ground around which the heterogeneous groups of Hindus could coalesce. In addition to these sectional differences among Hindus, there was also an attempt to promote an 'Indian' identity by various political leaders, whether Hindu, Parsi, Christian, or Muslim.

Examining the origins, motives, successes and failures of the Maha Sabha, an organisation that attempted to function as the umbrella body of all Hindus in South Africa, provides an important entry point into the multiple identities within a group termed officially as 'Indian'

⁹ Alleyn Diesel and Patrick Maxwell. *Hinduism in Natal: A Brief Guide* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993) and Pratap P. Kumar's *Hindus in South Africa: Their traditions and Beliefs* (Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 2000) and Naidoo. *AryaSamaj*.

¹⁰ Goolam Vahed. 'Swami Shankeranand and the Consolidation of Hinduism in Natal, 1908-1914' in *Journal for the Study of Religion*; 10:2, 1997.

¹¹ John, D. Kelly. *A Politics of Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹² Steven Vertovec. *Hindu Trinidad: Religion, Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Change* (London: Macmillan Education LTD, 1992).

¹³ Suchita Ramdin. 'Folk Religion of the Hindu Immigrant-a case study' 109-137 and Pahlad Ramsurran. 'The Mauritius AryaSamaj', 95-108 in U. Bissoondoyal. (ed). *Indians overseas: The Mauritian Experience* (Moka, Mauritius: The Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1984).

or 'Asian' and seen by others as homogenous. In reality a multiplicity of identities makes up what one might call Indian. By focusing on aspects of the Indian experience other than the political or economic, which have been widely studied, this study contributes to a fuller study of the South African Indian experience.¹⁴

Defining Hinduism

Some scholars argue that the term Hinduism is a British colonial construct to categorise the wide variety of religious practices that they encountered.¹⁵ While other scholars¹⁶ challenge this view, even the fiercest critics admit that the complex set of encounters that took place between the British Christians and Indian Hindus during a period lasting little more than a century was decisive in the way that we have come to understand Hinduism in the contemporary period.¹⁷ While careful not to take a particular stance in this debate, and acknowledging the existence of religious identity on the sub-continent long before the arrival of the British, what she calls 'fragmented identities', Sharada Sugirtharajah nevertheless argues that 'the notion of a monolithic Hinduism emerged in the colonial era'.¹⁸ The fact that Hinduism is not based on the teachings of a particular prophet, text or set of texts but on a variety of texts, beliefs and traditions that evolved over many centuries in a diverse and multilingual region, highlights the difficulty of defining the term, and has led to multiple ways of interpreting Hinduism.

South African Hindus reflect this diversity. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into four linguistic groups viz. Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, which can be further divided along other communal lines. For example, Gujaratis can be divided into Kathiawadis and Suratis, depending on their region of origin. And there are caste and class divisions as well. Apart from these divisions, there is a further important division between so called 'reformers' and 'orthodox' Hindus. The situation is complex and the Maha Sabha found itself in the precarious position of trying to unite this variety of Hinduisms under an umbrella South African Hindu identity. The fact that South Africa has slightly more (two thirds) migrants from South India (Tamil and Telugu speakers) than from North India (Hindi and Gujarati speakers) is also important as the differences between these two groups in India are significant and migrants brought traditions to Natal which were noticeably different.¹⁹ North Indians are believed to be descendents of the Aryans and South Indians of Dravidians.²⁰ These groups see themselves as different on a number of levels. Kuppusami argues that differences are largely the result of physical features such as the Narmada and Tapti Rivers, the Vindhya and Saptura Hills and dense forests called the Mahakarta, all of which have

¹⁴ See Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. 'The Place of India in South African History: Academic Scholarship, Past, Present and Future' in *South African Historical Journal*, 57:1 (2007).

¹⁵ This is the view held by Dal Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich Von Stietencron (eds). *Representing Hinduism. The constructions of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 1995); Robert Frykenberg. 'The Emergence of Modern 'Hinduism' as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India' in G.D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (eds) *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997); and Pankaj Mishra. *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond* (London: Picador, 2006).

¹⁶ See David N. Lorenzen. 'Who Invented Hinduism?' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 41:4 (1999) and Brian K. Pennington. *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Pennington. *Was Hinduism invented*, 6.

¹⁸ Sharada Sugirtharajah. *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2003), xi.

¹⁹ See Surendra Bhana. *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860-1902: A Study Based on Ships' Lists*. (New Delhi: Promilla & Co, 1991).

²⁰ See Hillary Rodrigues. *Introducing Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8-16.

acted as a barrier separating North India from South India and inhibiting movement between these two regions in past centuries.²¹ Traditions evolved separately to a large extent and today many texts that are seen as synonymous with Hinduism, such as the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana* and the four Vedas are regarded as North Indian by many South Indians who have their own set of religious texts, which includes the *Gnana Bodham*, *Thirukural*, *Thevaram* and *Thiruvaimoli*.²²

Travelling missionaries belonging to the Arya Samaj missionary movement founded in Bombay in 1875 by the Maharishi Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) to refine Hindu practices, had pivotal influence on South African Hindu leaders.²³ Even a cursory glance at the Maha Sabha's history indicates strong tendencies toward this particular approach to Hinduism in spite of the organisation's attempts to represent all South African Hindus. The Maha Sabha faced the dilemma of trying to unite Hindus while many of its leaders subscribed to the ideals of a movement that aimed to eradicate practices regarded by many Hindus in South Africa as fundamental to their religious heritage.²⁴ Swami Dayananda was concerned over what he regarded as inherent weaknesses in Hindu practice, such as the hereditary caste system, idolatry, animal sacrifices, polytheism, child marriage, ancestor worship, unequal gender relations, and the belief that humans could be incarnations of gods. He argued that Hinduism should be based exclusively on the religious texts known as the four Vedas and sought to eradicate all of the above mentioned practices which, he maintained, had crept into Hinduism through the ages and had distorted its true essence.²⁵ Swami Dayananda was a source of inspiration and an exemplar for many South African Hindus, including members of the Maha Sabha, as well as the international Hindu missionaries who visited periodically. However, there were many Hindu individuals and organisations, both in India and abroad, who challenged his definition of Hinduism. Regardless of this opposition and the fact that Arya Samaj practices were contrary to the popular religious practices in South Africa, the ideas of the Arya Samaj movement were influential on Hindu organisations and leaders during the period of the study.

Indentured Hindu migrants and the formation of the Maha Sabha

Of the approximately 152,184 indentured Indian migrants who had been brought to Natal between 1860 and 1911, around 80 per cent were Hindu.²⁶ Migrants came from two ports, Madras (South Indian) and Calcutta (North Indian). Apart from the broad differences in religious practices between North and South Indians, these ports covered vast and diverse

²¹ C. Kuppasami. *Tamil Culture in South Africa* (Durban: Rapid Graphic, 1993), 10.

²² Kuppasami. *Tamil Culture*, 10.

²³ For a biography on the swami see Bawa C. Singh. *Life and Teachings of Swami Dayananda* (New Delhi: Jan Gyan Prakashan, 1871).

²⁴ It is interesting that certain practices performed in the country, including the *Kavady* and fire walking ceremonies, continue to exist in spite of various attempts by reformers, both local community leaders as well as international missionaries, to eradicate them. While individual Maha Sabha members may have been members of other institutions that sought to eradicate these practices, in Maha Sabha produced literature they tended to accept or at least tolerate them. See copies of the Maha Sabha journal the *Hindu* (1946-present) for articles that show Maha Sabha members throughout its existence describe these practices but aim to provide a philosophical justification.

²⁵ Thillayvel Naidoo. *The Arya Samaj Movement in South Africa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992), 15-24.

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of indentured labour in Natal, see S. Bhana (ed). *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1990); Henning. *The Indentured*; and Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed. *Inside Indian Indenture. A South African Story, 1860-1914* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010).

presidencies and Natal's Indians came from numerous villages throughout these regions.²⁷ The Madras presidency, for example, covered 141 704 square miles which in 1901 contained a population of approximately 38 million and was divided into 22 districts with 55 000 villages.²⁸ Migrants disembarking from the port of Calcutta came mainly from the Bihar and the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, which in 1901 contained approximate populations of 24 and half million and 48 million respectively.²⁹ Bihar was divided into Patna which contained 35 towns and 34 169 villages and Bhagalpur which contained 15 towns and 21 656 villages.³⁰ The United Provinces covered a territory of 107 164 square miles and contained nine divisions in 1901, each containing a population of between five and six million.³¹ Needless to say Natal's Indians came from various locations throughout large and heterogeneous regions³² bringing with them a variety of different traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices.³³ Hinduism was diffuse, and largely a household religion with variations in practices and beliefs. Indians embraced a variety of practices and traditions in the rural villages that they lived in and there was no sense of an overarching Hindu identity.³⁴

While there is a paucity of information on the religious practices of indentured migrants in Natal during the formative period, we do know from the little evidence that exists that there was great diversity and an emphasis on ritual oriented Hinduism.³⁵ Migrants sought to recreate their religious life in their new surroundings and practiced a form of populist Hinduism. They celebrated a vast array of different festivals and there was no central organisation or occasion that represented Hindus as a group.³⁶ In fact the mostly widely celebrated religious festival amongst Hindus in Natal was Muharram, a Muslim occasion.³⁷ By the beginning of the twentieth century, this state of affairs became an increasing concern to a small group of more reform minded Hindus with their own interpretation of Hinduism. This group consisted of ex-indentured workers who had acquired wealth and status, as well as a small group of free migrants who are referred to as 'passenger' migrants in the literature, comprising predominantly but not exclusively migrants from Gujarat who arrived of their own volition and at their own expense.³⁸ However in spite of their wealth and status amongst

²⁷ Bhana. *Indentured Indian*, 50.

²⁸ Bhana. *Indentured Indian*, 43-44.

²⁹ Bhana. *Indentured Indian*, 46 and 48.

³⁰ Bhana. *Indentured Indian*, 48-49.

³¹ Bhana. *Indentured Indian*, 46.

³² For a discussion of the heterogeneity of the regions and the caste hierarchy that existed see Bhana. *Indentured Indian*, 43-65.

³³ See ships lists containing names and places of origin of each migrant which are available on the Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre website <http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/>.

³⁴ Some scholars argue that the impetus to unite Hindus was politically motivated by the Hindu nationalist movements to form a homogenous 'Hindu identity' that did not exist previously. See Christophe Jaffrelot. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996); Bruce D. Graham. *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Dal Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich Von Stietencron. 'Introduction' in Dalmia and Von Stietencron (eds). *Representing Hinduism*.

³⁵ See Surykanthi Chetty. "The Creation of south African Indian Identity in Relation to Hinduism" (BA Hons dissertation, University of KwaZulu Natal, 1999); J.B. Brain. 'Religion, Missionaries and Indentured Indians' in Bhana, S. (ed). *Essays in Indentured Indians in Natal* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1990); Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed. *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010) 228-248; Bhana and Vahed. *The Making*, 51-68; and Mikula et al. *Traditional Hindu Temples*.

³⁶ Bhana and Vahed. *The Making*, 55-57.

³⁷ See Goolam Vahed. 'Constructions of Community and Identity among Indians in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910: The Role of the Muharram Festival' in *Journal of African History*, 43: 1 (2002).

³⁸ The term 'passenger Indian' has led to the stereotype of the wealthy Gujarati trader which fails to capture the entirety of this migrant stream. There was a small wealthy elite of Gujarati traders but this stereotype masks

Indians, Vahed explains that they were ‘powerless to have a discursive impact on the mass of Indians’ during the early decades.³⁹ One of these individuals, M.C. Varman however decided that international Hindu missionaries would be more influential and he raised money to bring two Arya Samaj missionaries from India to lecture in Natal. The work of these two missionaries, Prof Parmanand who visited between August 1905 and March 1906 and Swami Shankaranand who made two visits first arriving in 1908 and finally departing in 1913, has been dealt with in some detail and it is not necessary to repeat here.⁴⁰ However it is important to highlight the fact that they were instrumental in motivating local Hindus to establish reform oriented Hindu bodies wherever Hindus had settled and their stay in the country also exposed tensions between groups of Hindus as well as between Hindus and Christian and Muslim Indians as well. Swami Shankaranand was highly instrumental in getting Diwali recognised as the nation celebration of Hindus and at a meeting with local Hindus in April 1912 decided to hold a Hindu conference to establish a national body at the end of May 1912. According to a Maha Sabha council member writing in 1960, the Maha Sabha was established when Swami Shankaranand convinced local Hindus that ‘that unless they co-ordinated their efforts, there was little hope for the survival of Hinduism which was threatened from all sides’.⁴¹

One year later on 17 May 1913 Swami Shankaranand sailed for India. Two weeks later, on 31 May 1913, the Maha Sabha held its second national Hindu conference, which took place under the leadership of local Hindus, K.R. Naidoo, S.R. Pather and T.M. Naicker. However, nothing tangible transpired from this conference and although the Maha Sabha had been formed amidst much publicity and fanfare the previous year, it failed to build on this. The departure of the swami left a huge leadership vacuum among Hindus; the strike in late 1913 occupied the attention of many Indian leaders while the outbreak of the First World War from 1914 to 1918 resulted in many of the educated elite volunteering as stretcher-bearers in East Africa. The Maha Sabha consequently lapsed into a long period of inactivity.

While the Maha Sabha concerned with an overarching Hindu identity remained completely inactive during this time, parochial Hindu bodies continued to play an important role in the lives of many. Wherever Indians had settled voluntary bodies emerged to promote vernacular and religious endeavours amongst groups of Hindus in that locality.⁴² The lack however of a central body did concern a few Hindus, primarily those who led Arya Samaj bodies. One such individual was D.G. Satyadeva, president of the Arya Yuvuk Sabha (AYS) which was founded in 1912 to primarily to ‘preserve and pursue, protect and propagate the essential purity of Vedic culture’ and promote a Hinduism ‘shorn of all its superficial and extraneous

important aspects of passenger migration. According to Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie: ‘The term passenger Indian imported into writings about the Cape from the Natal and Transvaal historiography requires redefinition. Its simplified definition leads to a divisive understanding of migration from the Indian subcontinent and contributes to the stereotype of the rich Gujarati. The term needs to embrace workers and in terms of regional origins to include not just those from west India and certainly not just Gujarat but also those from other parts of India..... [Many] Passenger Indians secured work in ... in menial positions and some remained in these for more than just an initial phase’. Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. ‘The Passenger Indian as Worker: Indian Immigrants in Cape Town in the Early Twentieth Century’ in *African Studies*, 68: 1(2009), 129.

³⁹ Vahed. ‘Constructions of Community’, 90.

⁴⁰ Maureen Swan. *Gandhi: A South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 16-18, 200-103, 237; Vahed, ‘Swami Shankaranand’; Desai and Vahed. *Inside Indian Indenture*, 237-247 and Bhana and Vahed. *The Making*, 57-68.

⁴¹ B.D. Lalla, ‘A review of the work of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha’ in Nowbath et al (eds). *The Hindu Heritage*, 108, 107-111.

⁴² See Karthigasen Gopalan, ‘Caste, Class and Community: The Role of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha in (Re) Making Hinduism in South Africa 1912-1960’ (MA thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2010), 47-57.

growth that shrouded the Vedas and Vedic faith'.⁴³ The AYS worked closely with an individual named Bhawani Dayal who was born in Johannesburg in 1892 but spent several years in India where he became a trained Arya Samaj preacher. He returned to South Africa in 1912 and in 1914 he began preaching and establishing Hindu and Hindi bodies first in the Transvaal and later in Natal.⁴⁴

While absent from most publications produced by the Maha Sabha which record its history, there was a brief period in 1918 when the organisation was revived and held a council meeting in Durban and general meeting in Pietermaritzburg, with two reformist Hindu bodies, the Veda Dharma Sabha of Pietermaritzburg and Hindu Young Men's Association playing central roles.⁴⁵ The meetings were organised by amongst others Satyadeva and Bhawani Dayal as well as some of the original leaders in the Maha Sabha in 1912, such as S.R. Pather. At the beginning of 1918 when news that the Maha Sabha would be revived appeared in the *Dharma Vir*, an Arya Samaj newspaper edited by Bhawani Dayal, one of its readers wrote an article to explain the necessity of a national Hindu body. The correspondent argued that the Maha Sabha was 'a vital necessity to us [Hindus] if our community is to progress with the times'. He added that since there was 'no organisation at present to speak with authority on behalf of Hindus' the energies of the smaller organisations that functioned independently of each other 'are consequently wasted to an extent'. The Maha Sabha, the writer went on, should pursue 'first and foremost religious reform' as Hinduism contained 'all the elements of a pure and noble faith' but in the course of centuries 'certain practices and usages have crept into it which appear obnoxious to the minds of the younger generation'.⁴⁶ This anonymous supporter of the Maha Sabha is quoted here because his views are so similar to those of Maha Sabha leaders during the 1940s and 1950s when they argued that ritual Hinduism made the youth receptive to missionary overtures. The solution was to 'reacquaint' Hindus with their texts as this would appeal to the youth who received a secular education.⁴⁷

A central issue addressed at the council meeting on 1 September 1918 in Durban was the influence of Christian missionaries on Hindu children and it was deemed necessary to impress 'upon all Hindu parents the urgent necessity of protesting against any religious instruction being given to their children in Christian Missionary schools' as well as urge the authorities to establish Government schools in the towns and districts where there were none resulting in Hindu children being sent to Christian Missionary schools.⁴⁸ The council also saw it as important to approach the education authorities about introducing Indian vernaculars in government and government aided schools.⁴⁹ The issue of religious education at school concerned Hindu leaders throughout the period examined in this paper and was addressed at the first Hindu conference of 1912. The first schools for Indian children in Natal were

⁴³ AYS. 'A Souvenir Brochure in commemoration of the Diamond Jubilee of the Arya Yuvuk Sabha (1912-1972)', 89.

⁴⁴ Veer, D. Bista. 'A Brief Biography' in R. Rambilas (ed). *Karma Yogi: Swami Bhawani Dayal Sanyasi* (Durban: Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 1992), 13.

⁴⁵ One reference is made to the general meeting which took place in Pietermaritzburg on the 13 October 1918 in Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*, 96 under the title 'provincial convention'. The same meeting is referred to as the 'Maha Sabha General Meeting' in the *Dharma Vir*, 18 October 1918.

⁴⁶ *Dharma Vir*, 25 January 1918.

⁴⁷ See Gopalan, 'Caste, Class and Community'.

⁴⁸ *Dharma Vir*, 6 September 1918.

⁴⁹ This is interesting since the Maha Sabha sought to unite all Hindus in South Africa whereas the SAHSS was primarily concerned about promoting Hindi and even saw it as necessary that all government circulars affecting Indians be published in Hindi. For more on the SAHSS see *Dharma Vir*, 11 January 1918.

established by Christian missionaries and the absence of Hindu education for children was something that leaders of the Maha Sabha feared could result in Hindus converting to Christianity. Also addressed at the meeting was the possibility holding a third Hindu conference in December 1918.⁵⁰

While the third Hindu conference did not take place, the Maha Sabha held another general meeting on 13 October 1918 in Pietermaritzburg. The meeting was chaired by R.G. Bhalla. Charlie Nulliah, Dayal, Satyadeva, S.R. Naidoo, S.R. Pather and V.S.C. Pather, all of whom had been present at the first Hindu conference of 1912. During the meeting Dayal read out a letter from Swami Shankaranand who expressed his desire to visit South Africa after the war. The delegates resolved to approach the government on several issues: recognition of Hindu marriage ceremonies, establishment of government schools in places where Indian children were forced to attend Christian mission schools, and introducing Indian vernaculars at government schools.⁵¹ However, there was no follow-up from these meetings and the Maha Sabha ceased to be active once Bhawani Dayal left for India in 1919, to represent South African Indians at an annual convention of the Indian National Congress.⁵²

The revival of the Maha Sabha through the APS

The year 1925 marked the birth centenary of Arya Samaj founder, Swami Dayananda. The occasion was celebrated by Arya Samaj bodies worldwide. On 4 November 1924 Satyadeva convened a meeting to discuss how the occasion should be commemorated in South Africa.⁵³ The meeting attracted delegates from ten Arya Samaj bodies and was chaired by Dayal who had returned to South Africa, with Satyadeva as secretary.⁵⁴ Dayal, was elected to preside over the commemorations from 16 to 22 February 1925 in Durban.⁵⁵ On 22 February 1925, the delegates decided that in view of the success of the celebrations and in particular the high turnout of representatives from various Arya Samaj bodies throughout the week, they would constitute a formal structure, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha ('Representative Society for Nobles'), to serve as the central umbrella organisation for Arya Samaj bodies in Natal.⁵⁶ The APS became an important Hindu organisation and given its role as the umbrella Arya Samaj body, it is no surprise that Naidoo argues that it filled the gap left by the non-functioning Maha Sabha.⁵⁷ Interestingly in 1927 when the APS held a Vedic conference, its leaders suggested reviving the dormant Maha Sabha. However according to Nardev Vedalankar this did not materialise due to the reluctance of other Hindu institutions present at the conference.⁵⁸

In spite of rapid growth and momentum that the APS experienced shortly after its formation in 1925, it was soon faced a setback when the Areas Reservation Bill was passed later in the year which saw a number of Hindu leaders who were also leaders in the South African Indian Congress including Dayal being sent to India to raise support against the Bill. In the following years the Round Table Conference in Cape Town in 1926-27 between the Indian and South African governments, the question of repatriation and the difficulties faced by

⁵⁰ *Dharma Vir*, 6 September 1918.

⁵¹ *Dharma Vir*, 18 October 1918.

⁵² Bista. 'A Brief Biography', 14.

⁵³ Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*, 157.

⁵⁴ *Natal Witness*, 12 March 1925.

⁵⁵ *Natal Witness*, 12 March 1925.

⁵⁶ *Natal Witness*, 12 March 1925.

⁵⁷ Naidoo. *AryaSamaj*, 70.

⁵⁸ Vedalankar. *Religious Awakening*, 35.

returning migrants as well as the difficulties faced by Indians as a result of the Great Depression, all captured the attention of leaders of these religious organisations and it would take a few more years before its leaders were able to revive the Maha Sabha.⁵⁹

During the fiftieth year death anniversary of Swami Dayananda in 1933, Dayal was elected president of the APS for the second time and organised a conference where the revival of the Maha Sabha was discussed. During the conference, leaders of the APS discussed reasons for having a national body for Hindus including B.M. Patel who stated that 'the primary cause of weakening the community' was the absence of an organisation to 'voice the opinions of the Hindu Community as a whole, nor is there a medium of bringing the people together under one banner'.⁶⁰ In his presidential address, Dayal implored delegates to 'create a feeling among the Hindus that they are Hindus first and Calcuttas, Madrasis and Gujaratis, or Sanathanists and Arya Samajists afterwards'. Without a Maha Sabha, Hindus 'cannot be protected and their interests cannot be safeguarded'. He appealed to the committee not to miss this unique occasion for the 'formation of a central Hindu organisation thus proving [their] love and affection towards Hinduism'.⁶¹ Dayal's call is interesting because he disapproved of the Indian version of the Maha Sabha, the Akhil Bharat Hindū Mahasabha (All India Hindu Maha Sabha). His opposition, he said in this speech was due to that organisation's involvement in politics and the tensions that this caused between Hindus and Muslims. Dayal however believed that similar tension was unlikely in South Africa because Hindu (and Muslim) institutions concerned themselves primarily with religious and welfare projects. There was no reason to believe, he said, that a South African Maha Sabha would get involved in politics. He insisted that this 'would not be possible'.⁶²

The conference resulted in the formation of a prospective Maha Sabha which held its first general meeting on 26 December 1933 at the Tamil Institute in Cross Street. The meeting was attended by representatives from more than 30 institutions who agreed unanimously to revive the Maha Sabha. While the likes of Dayal and Patel argued that it was essential to revive the Maha Sabha in order to advance Hinduism, some Indians, such as the editors of the *Indian Opinion*, viewed this with great misgiving. On 14 May 1934, the *Indian Opinion* published an article titled 'On the wrong lines', which stated it was 'averse' to the Maha Sabha's revival. While acknowledging the 'delicacy' of the matter and warning that the newspaper 'could not dedicate too much space to a religious matter', the paper nevertheless published a relatively long article which began on the front page because the 'matter is taking an important turn in the history of Indians in South Africa' and has a 'bearing on the whole Indian Community'. *Indian Opinion* drew comparisons with the All Hindu Mahasabha of India to warn against the possible dangers of establishing a similar body in South Africa. The article expressed pride in the fact that South African Indians could hail from the 'motherland' and 'create a little India', and yet, in spite of all the 'evils of caste and communal distinction', they lived as 'Indians first and Indians last' in a 'common brotherhood of men'. The report noted that signs of communalism only became evident during Swami Shankaranand's stay in South Africa. Then too, the report concluded, while the

⁵⁹ See Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. 'The Cape Town agreement and its effects upon Natal Indian politics, 1927-1934' (Paper presented to the conference of History of Natal and Zululand, University of Natal, Durban, 1985) and Bhawani Dayal and Benarsidas Chaturvedi. 'A Report on the Emigrants Repatriated to India under the Assisted Emigration Scheme from South Africa' an independent study published B. Dayal and B. Chaturvedi. 15 May 1951.

⁶⁰ APS Conference paper 1933.

⁶¹ APS Conference paper 1933.

⁶² APS Conference paper 1933.

swami's lectures on Hinduism were followed with great enthusiasm, on the whole his activities did not receive unanimous support even from those in whose interests (Hindus) he was purportedly working.⁶³

This newspaper article however needs to be read in the following context. The All Hindu Mahasabha in India was in opposition to Gandhi at this time and Swami Shankaranand was also Gandhi's adversary during his South African stay. The editor of *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi's son Manilal, was probably opposed to a South African version of the Maha Sabha for similar ideological reasons similar to his father. Perhaps equally important to this opposition was division in the NIC. The decision by some South Africans to participate in the colonisation enquiry scheme which was looking at repatriating South African Indians to other British colonies had split the NIC, with a group led by Albert Christopher breaking away to form the CBSIA.⁶⁴ Manilal Gandhi was part of this breakaway group, while the majority of those who sought to re-establish the Maha Sabha, including S.R. and V.S.C Pather, Dayal, and T.M. Naicker remained part of the old NIC which cooperated with the scheme. Bitterness between the two groups was intense and leaders from each camp attacked each other in newspapers. This may have influenced the *Indian Opinion* to view the revival of the Maha Sabha with suspicion.

The article in the *Indian Opinion* attracted criticism from readers which the paper published a fortnight later, together with response to these criticisms. Critics felt that the subject matter beyond the author's expertise and the article was 'full of ignorance' and 'portrayed the wrong perspective'. The Maha Sabha only intended to 'combine the various minor associations into a powerful one' and 'thereby unify the Hindu community'. The authors added that if Muslims and Christians were free to vigorously proselytise to Hindus, 'why should the Hindus not try to fortify themselves against such attacks?' The critics also said that every responsible Hindu in the country realised the 'urgent necessity of a body' such as the Maha Sabha to protect the interests of Hindus and to 'disseminate the gospel of the greatest and certainly the best religion in the world'.⁶⁵

Indian Opinion, however, remained unconvinced. The newspaper claimed that given that the objectives of the Maha Sabha were not clearly articulated by its founders, it was reasonable to believe that they were similar to those of the Indian version and 'we have reason to believe that it is the desire of the Hindu Maha Sabha to affiliate with the body in India'. The notion of uniting Hindus was a 'distant ideal that not even the greatest leaders in India have been able to achieve'. There were three distinct sects of Hindus, one which 'believes in the universal brotherhood of man', another that 'believes in the caste system', and a third that 'believes in proselytising and denounces idolatry'.⁶⁶ These sects had failed to unite in India and therefore 'we cannot believe that they can come together in this country'. *Indian Opinion* reiterated that a Maha Sabha was unnecessary and that the purported aims of the new body could be achieved via existing institutions such as the APS and the Veda Dharma Sabha's.⁶⁷ Support for the APS and Veda Dharma Sabha's dispels the notion that *Indian Opinion's* disapproval of the Maha Sabha was based on opposition to the Arya Samaj. In fact, the two international missionaries who participated in the conference, Pandit Mehta Jaimini (Arya Samaj) and

⁶³*Indian Opinion*, 5 May 1934.

⁶⁴Bhana.*Gandhi's legacy*, 33-54.

⁶⁵*Indian Opinion*, 14 May 1934.

⁶⁶*Indian Opinion*, 14 May 1934.

⁶⁷*Indian Opinion*, 14 May 1934.

Swami Adhyananda (Ramakrishna movement) were both held in high regard by the *Indian Opinion* in its editorials.

The Maha Sabha held its third South African Hindu conference at the Durban Town Hall on 27 May 1934. The conference attracted delegates from 62 institutions from Natal, the Cape and the Transvaal which was the highest up to that point. One factor that ensured a large turnout was the presence of the two visiting Hindu missionaries whose countrywide lectures had proved extremely popular. The widely travelled and highly experienced Pandit Mehta Jaimini was invited to South Africa in order to preside at the conference, while Swami Adhyananda gave the opening address. Despite opposition from some quarters, there was broad support for the conference. B.M. Patel, chairman of the reception committee, claimed that such a gathering was 'unprecedented in the annals of the South African Indians' and that the presence of representatives from all provinces showed that the Maha Sabha's 'representative character was unquestionable'.⁶⁸

In spite of the enthusiasm shown during the visit of the two missionaries and especially during the conference, the Maha Sabha once again fell into dormancy shortly after the departure of the two missionaries the following year. The inactivity can be attributed to a number of factors. One was that religious organisations were dominated by individuals who also led secular political organisations. The 1930s was characterised by political contestations that fractured the political elite and the alignment and realignment of political parties consumed much of the energy of local leaders. The SAIC decision to participate in the colonisation scheme resulted in the division of the NIC with the likes of P.R. Pather, S.L. Singh and P.B. Singh amongst those who broke away to form the CBSIA because they rejected the scheme. These individuals were important Hindu leaders and their absence from the Maha Sabha was significant. For example, P.B. Singh, who would become an influential leader in the Maha Sabha, was the CBSIA representative who was sent to India in January 1934 to conduct a study on effects of the repatriation scheme.⁶⁹ Those members of the NIC who led the Maha Sabha at this time were preoccupied with political matters. This is hardly surprising and when looking at the Maha Sabha's history it is easy to notice that its leaders were Indian political leaders first and Hindu religious leaders second.

Revival of the Maha Sabha: The 1940s

The arrival of another widely travelled Hindu missionary, Pandit Rishiram in August 1937 once again sparked a short-term interest in the activities of the Maha Sabha. According to Dr. N.P. Desai, part of the reason for the Maha Sabha's inactivity following the 1934 conference was the absence of 'true leadership'. This leadership void, he argued, was filled with the arrival of Pandit Rishiram who helped to raise enthusiasm and create a momentum that eventually led to the 1942 biennial general meeting.⁷⁰ The Maha Sabha organised his lecture tour which dealt with the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁷¹ When leaders of the Maha Sabha met to organise his lectures they began to discuss some of the plans that they had put forward at the 1934 conference.⁷² One important and tangible development during the visit was the establishment of the Gandhi-Tagore Lectureship Trust by the pandit in 1937 with the aim of collecting funds to invite Hindu lecturers from India in the future so that this

⁶⁸ *Natal Mercury*, 28 May 1934.

⁶⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 30 March 1934.

⁷⁰ Desai. 'A History', 94.

⁷¹ Vedalankar. *Religious Awakening*, 60.

⁷² These are the sentiments of S.R. Pather in Minutes of Council Meeting, 17 May 1939.

would not depend on private benefactors.⁷³ The pandit departed for India at the end of 1937. However, the momentum was maintained with the visit in 1938 by Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, a notable Hindu philosopher and reformer, and future vice president of India, who suggested that the Maha Sabha's functions be amalgamated with those of the trust.⁷⁴ Radhakrishnan had also played a role in mending political contestations between 'radicals' and 'moderates'.⁷⁵ By the 2 January 1942 the Maha Sabha organised their biennial general meeting at the SHA Hall, which was a breakthrough in a few ways.⁷⁶ According to Dr. Desai, an important feature of this meeting was that it attracted a large number of Hindu leaders who had previously avoided the Maha Sabha on the grounds that it was a 'communal organisation'.⁷⁷ At the meeting, a new constitution and agenda was set in place and soon thereafter the Maha Sabha began various projects discussed at this meeting in its attempt to foster pride amongst Hindus and take a leadership role in religious activities.

On 22 and 23 January 1944 the Maha Sabha held a conference in Durban to establish a Devasthanum committee to consider 'on the best method of making the temples living institutions for spreading the eternal principles and truths of the Hindu religion in South Africa'. An advertisement in *Indian Opinion* requested that all temples not affiliated to the Maha Sabha should consider this 'as a matter of urgency'.⁷⁸ Temples played an important role in the lives of many South African Hindus and the members of the Maha Sabha realised that mediating their affairs was important for the Maha Sabha to have a leadership role on the Hindu masses. While the conference attracted representatives from 26 temples only, there was enough encouragement from those present to form the Devasthanum Committee.⁷⁹

In early 1943, the Maha Sabha began a project to bring about the legal recognition of Hindu marriage officers. During the 1940s, its leaders organised a number of council meetings and meetings with the Protector of Indian Immigrants. Their aim was to take a leadership role in the appointment of Hindu marriage officers who would be able to conduct ceremonial Hindu weddings between Hindus of different sects and languages.⁸⁰ However this issue became complex due to the heterogeneity of South African Hindus and the variety of ceremonies that characterised Hindu weddings.⁸¹ While nothing tangible emerged from the meetings, the Maha Sabha's efforts to establish uniformity over Hindu marriage ceremonies as well as to appoint candidates that it saw fit for the position of marriage officers is one of the first indications of the Maha Sabha seeking to assume power within the community.

The Maha Sabha had more success in efforts to raise a Hindu consciousness. For example in 1944 they began manufacturing an emblem bearing the 'AUM' sign, which is an important mantra to Hinduism. The first batch of one thousand emblems was sold out quickly and further orders were made.⁸² This was viewed positively by its leaders who concluded in their biennial report that 'it is apparent from the sales of these badges that there has at least dawned on the once indifferent Hindus a real awakening of religious consciousnesses'. The

⁷³ Biennial General Report, June 1945 to March 1947.

⁷⁴ Minutes of Council Meeting, 17 May 1939.

⁷⁵ See Kuper. *Indian People*, 47.

⁷⁶ All of the Maha Sabha conference meetings referred to in this paper took place in the SHA Hall, Victoria Street, Durban, as the Maha Sabha only completed the construction of its hall in 1960.

⁷⁷ Desai. 'A History', 94.

⁷⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1944.

⁷⁹ B.D. Lalla. 'A review', 110.

⁸⁰ Minutes for council meeting, 6 October 1943

⁸¹ Minutes for Special General Meeting, 30 October 1943.

⁸² Minutes for council meeting, 16 December 1944.

report added that ‘if the Maha Sabha has not been enabled to do something more tangible, this alone is worth its existence and resuscitation for infusing this religious mindedness to our people’.⁸³ Beginning in 1946 members of the Maha Sabha declared that the first Sunday of October every year would become a ‘Pledge Taking and Flag Hoisting Day’ throughout the country.⁸⁴ This symbolic act was another means through which the Maha Sabha attempted to promote Hindu consciousness. The *Leader* was confident that at schools, temples and even at homes this flag ‘will infuse enthusiasm in the people whenever and wherever hoisted, and give them food for thought in the cause of Hinduism’.⁸⁵ Beginning in 1944 council members started distributing circulars urging schools and businesses to grant pupils and employees take time off on Diwali.⁸⁶ The biennial report produced at the end of 1944 stated that the efforts by the officials have been successful ‘to a very large extent’.⁸⁷ While it is not clear how many schools and businesses followed the Maha Sabha’s prescription, the section on Diwali in the report urged officials to be persistent until ‘this holiday is officially recognised by all authorities where Hindus or Indians generally are concerned’.⁸⁸ The promotion of Diwali was very important to the Maha Sabha’s aim to foster a unitary Hindu identity. Swami Shankaranand had laboured to get the celebration acknowledged as the national celebration of Hindus regardless of sectional differences.

Religious education

The Maha Sabha held its fourth Hindu conference in Pietermaritzburg in April 1944, and one important issue agreed at the conference was a decision to approach the Natal Education Department (NED) about introducing Hindu instruction at government schools, although it would be a number of years before this dream materialised.⁸⁹ A more pressing concern was that the majority of Indian children of school going age were still not attending school owing to poverty and a lack of adequate facilities. The matter of increasing the number of children in school and the low salary of teachers featured prominently in Indian newspapers and by the early 1950s there were great improvements in both areas. Then the Maha Sabha made a concerted effort to pressure the NED to permit Hindu religious instruction at schools.

However during the 1940s the issue of Hindu instruction at schools remained a concern of the Maha Sabha and at a meeting in August 1946, council member Sunbhuder Panday argued that the first step in this regard would be to compile a common prayer in English to be recited at Indian schools. The decision to publish the prayer in English was intended to avoid marginalising any particular linguistic group and use a common language to unite Hindus. Panday suggested that this should be completed before the Education Department was approached.⁹⁰ Dr. N.P. Desai, assisted by Pandit Rishiram who made his second visit to the country, compiled the Hindu prayer booklet. By the time of the biennial report of March 1947 the Maha Sabha had distributed more than 5000 copies without charge to government-aided schools across Natal.⁹¹ This was typical of the work undertaken by Dr. Desai, who is credited in many circles for his attempts to unite Hindus.⁹²

⁸³ Biennial General Report, 1945-1946.

⁸⁴ Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*, 100.

⁸⁵ *Leader*, 16 August 1946.

⁸⁶ Council Biennial Report, 31 December 1944.

⁸⁷ Council Biennial Report, 31 December 1944.

⁸⁸ Council Biennial Report, 31 December 1944.

⁸⁹ Biennial Report, 31 December 1944.

⁹⁰ Minutes of council meeting, 25 August 1946.

⁹¹ Biennial General Report, March 1945-March 1947.

⁹² Vedalankar. *Religious Awakening*, 61.

Countering the missionary threat

The post Second World War period was characterised by the Maha Sabha's concern about the influence of Christian missionaries on 'uneducated' and economically downtrodden Hindus. The biennial report produced at the end of 1947 described the 'large number' of conversions of Hindus to Christianity and Islam as a 'standing disgrace to the Hindu community'. It warned that Hindus were 'inviting a grave disaster' and that it was even more sinful to 'watch and permit our economically down-trodden people to be converted' than it was to convert. Council members felt that the social services provided by missionaries, such as hospitals, maternity homes, and schools 'paved the way of conversion'.⁹³ The Maha Sabha's strategy to combat this threat was based on producing 'enlightened literature' to educate Hindus about Hinduism, and providing charity to indigent Hindus who were perceived as being most receptive to the handouts of missionaries of other faiths.⁹⁴

The Maha Sabha formed a charity committee in 1945. This was a logical development given the widespread poverty among Indians and the fact that the economic advancement of Hindus was a founding principle of the Maha Sabha. The Maha Sabha also began discussions to organise bursaries for destitute school children.⁹⁵ R.B. Chettiar suggested at a council meeting that the Maha Sabha establish a central depot and distribution centre to assist the large number of poor Hindus who were begging. His suggestion led to a discussion with Dr. Desai, S.L. Singh, Satyadeva and Sunbhuder Panday.⁹⁶ They concluded that while the suggestion was laudable it would be too difficult to implement because of their limited resources. Chettiar was asked to draw up a proposal on how he planned to initiate the project.⁹⁷ The Maha Sabha's reluctance to get involved in such activities can be explained by the fact that it was struggling to raise funds for other projects such as the Swami Shankaranand Hall, which was proposed by Pandit Jaimini at the 1934 Hindu conference to serve as the Maha Sabha's headquarters.⁹⁸

At the general meeting of 16 March 1946 S.L. Singh pointed to the elitist nature of the Maha Sabha. He argued that the work of affiliated institutions as well as 'the fate of unfortunate Hindus who through lack of finance and other support suffered many hardships in the way of burial, begging, and conversion of their faith into another' were not known to the Maha Sabha. It was decided that the Maha Sabha's affiliated institutions and 'prominent men' should provide reports to the council.⁹⁹ The minutes do not define prominent men but it was probably taken for granted that it referred to the many educated individuals who participated in a myriad of community activities.

At the Goodwill conference organised by the Maha Sabha in 1946, Dr. Desai identified the two main causes of Hindu conversion to other faiths as poverty and the ignorance of Hindus about the true nature of Hinduism. Dr. Desai had been stressing this in council meetings and called poverty 'the root cause of conversion'.¹⁰⁰ One practical step taken by the Maha Sabha

⁹³ Biennial General Report, June 1945 to March 1947.

⁹⁴ See SAHMS Centenary Hindu conference 1960.

⁹⁵ Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*, 99.

⁹⁶ Minutes for council meeting, 6 May 1945.

⁹⁷ Minutes for council meeting, 6 May 1945.

⁹⁸ Biennial General Report, 1945-1946.

⁹⁹ Minutes of council meeting, 16 March 1946.

¹⁰⁰ Minutes of council meeting, 1 June 1946.

was to form a provincial Hindu Charitable Institute and place charity boxes at Hindu businesses.¹⁰¹ The 1946 biennial report stated that ‘extreme poverty is one of the factors that missionaries from other faiths exploit to convert large numbers of Hindus’ and identified the establishment of a centralised charitable institute as a means to combat this.¹⁰² With Dr. Desai instrumental, the Maha Sabha formed a number of Seva Samitis across Durban to assist poor and destitute Indians during 1946.¹⁰³ In 1946, the Maha Sabha began publishing its own bimonthly journal, the *Hindu* with Dr Desai playing a major role in the editorial. This journal was to serve as the mouth piece of the Maha Sabha to the wider Hindu community. While it could be seen as a breakthrough in the Maha Sabha’s attempts to communicate its message to the Hindu public, the paper’s circulation was by no means representative. The journal was distributed to affiliated bodies and in any event, only a limited number of Hindus were literate. However the articles in the paper nonetheless give a vivid description of the type of reform oriented Hinduism that the Maha Sabha tried to promote. Articles included short extracts from notable international Hindu reformers, requests from the Maha Sabha leaders to promote education and warning against missionaries of other faiths in particularly Christianity as well as a reading list of texts that they expected ‘all Hindus’ to be familiar with.¹⁰⁴

The fifth Hindu conference and Hindu religious instruction at schools

The Maha Sabha faced a few setbacks toward the end of the 1940s, in particular a lack of funds. Also crucial was the 1949 Indian African race riots which resulted in 44,738 Indian refugees which meant that Indian leaders were preoccupied with relief work for months.¹⁰⁵ As a result of the riots the fifth Hindu conference which was originally scheduled for 1949 was postponed. The Maha Sabha held its fifth conference from 9 to 11 October 1953 in Durban. This conference attracted 57 affiliated institutions, the highest ever in the Maha Sabha’s history to that point.¹⁰⁶ It dealt with issues such as social services, unity between different Hindu linguistic groups, the advancement of women, and religious instruction in primary schools. The conference was characterised by the opening speech given by its secretary S.R. Naidoo, in which he argued that Hinduism was ‘under constant attack’ in South Africa and that the time had come to implement measures to reverse this trend.¹⁰⁷ Given the concern during the 1940s amongst Maha Sabha leaders that Hindus were converting in large numbers, this ‘constant attack’ that S.R. Naidoo referred was clearly a fear associated with missionaries of other faiths, especially Christianity.

The high turnout of affiliated institutions, according to a reporter for *The Leader*, ‘animated by a spirit never before evident’, impressed commentators like J.M. Francis who claimed that the conference marked the emergence of ‘a rejuvenated and virile organisation’.¹⁰⁸ However, other commentators, such as Y.M. Naidoo, were critical that the Maha Sabha was not doing enough for the upliftment of Hindus. As ‘the parent organisation of the Hindus’, Naidoo

¹⁰¹Minutes of council meeting, 16 July 1946.

¹⁰²1946 biennial report.

¹⁰³Vedalankar. *Religious Awakening*, 61 and Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*, 100.

¹⁰⁴ For example see editions of *Hindu*, May 1946, July 1946 and September 1947.

¹⁰⁵ Goolam Vahed. . ‘Race or Class? Community and Conflict amongst Indian Municipal Employees in Durban, 1914-1949’ in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27: 1 (March, 2001), 123.

¹⁰⁶ While the Hindu conference of 1934 attracted 62 institutions this conference of 1953 was the highest number of affiliated institutions. Affiliated institutions paid an affiliation fee and were entitled to send delegates to Maha Sabha council meetings.

¹⁰⁷ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

¹⁰⁸ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

argued, the organisation should ‘set a lead to their people’. Naidoo complained that members and officials only met during conferences and national celebrations and that resolutions passed at such meetings were quickly forgotten and rarely implemented. While a few individuals preached Hinduism, the majority of Hindus in the country, Naidoo added, remained ‘ignorant’ of their religion and did ‘not know the teachings of Hinduism’. He expressed concern at the large number of Hindus being converted to Christianity, a religion that he specifically identified as ‘a challenge to Hinduism’. Naidoo implored the Maha Sabha to organise 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’.¹⁰⁹

Naidoo’s comments are ironic in the sense that shortly after the conference the Maha Sabha began its most important project to date and that was approaching the Natal Education Department to permit Hindu religious instruction at consenting Indian schools throughout the province. This decision became highly contentious and attracted strong criticism from other Indian leaders who feared that it would divide Indian children into ‘water tight compartments’ and lead to religious sectionalism and was even referred to by some as ‘religious apartheid’.¹¹⁰ Crucial to critics, was the idea of a unity that existed amongst Indians and that had to be preserved especially given the political climate during these years. However as the Maha Sabha began to explain and reiterate to the public what it meant by religious instruction, fears began to subside. In fact P.R. Pather who would become the Maha Sabha’s spoke person to the general public and especially to the Natal Indian Teachers Society about the issue, was in fact opposed to the idea when it was addressed at a special conference dedicated exclusively to religious instruction at schools, organised by the Maha Sabha on 23 January 1954.¹¹¹ When it was made clear by proponents of the decision that by religious instruction they meant a general form of Hindu instruction limited to 90 minutes per week taught in English, Pather became a supporter.¹¹² It took some time for convincing other critics but their fears were revealing of the idea that religion could foster division amongst Indians. Also of concern was the idea that Hinduism was too diverse and that a Hindu instruction would favour some groups over others. The fact that the proposed syllabus would be conducted in English was very important. By the end of March 1955 the Natal Education Department had agreed to permit this form of instruction to schools who requested it.¹¹³ A Syllabus Committee comprising of members of the Maha Sabha and a few Indian teachers was established to draw up the syllabus. Between 17 September 1956 and 28 May 1958, the Syllabus Committee met six times and the draft syllabus was presented to members of the Indian community including the Natal Indian Teachers Society for comments and suggestions.¹¹⁴ The syllabus was finalised in 1958 and by 1959 a number of schools began introducing religious instruction.

Conclusion

When looking at reasons put forward by leaders and supporters of the Maha Sabha, the central justification was that Hindus in South Africa needed an organisation to safeguard their interests and help deal with the ‘common problems’ that they faced as a group. Maha Sabha leaders were concerned that South African Hindus were abandoning aspects of their heritage

¹⁰⁹ *Leader*, 16 October 1953.

¹¹⁰ See *Graphic*, 30 January 1955 and *Graphic*, 12 March 1955.

¹¹¹ *Graphic*, 30 January 1955.

¹¹² *Graphic*, 5 March 1955.

¹¹³ *Graphic*, 2 April 1955.

¹¹⁴ Chotai. “Hindu Religious instruction”.

and becoming receptive to the influence of Western culture and in some cases even converting to other religions. The fact that the first schools established for Indians in South Africa were Christian mission schools was a special concern. Reformist minded Hindus also believed that the emphasis on ritual Hinduism was leading to moral degeneration and disgrace of the Hindu community and they associated Sanathanist practices with alcoholism and gambling.¹¹⁵ While many individuals took it upon themselves to establish Hindu organisations to provide religious education, the leaders of the Maha Sabha believed that a central body would be better able to achieve this task.

A central body, proponents of the scheme hoped, would unite and coordinate the activities of existing parochial Hindu religious and cultural bodies so that Hindus could unite into a powerful force. This attempt to unite Hindus was undertaken by reformist minded Hindus who favoured a textual or philosophical version of Hinduism as opposed to the populist, ritual orientated Hinduism that the vast majority of South African Hindus practised. Office bearers of the Maha Sabha were mostly secular educated professionals or businessmen. With a few exceptions, D.G. Satyadeva being a good example, the Maha Sabha was led by teachers, lawyers, estate agents, clerks, interpreters, and other traders. In the early decades most of these leaders were migrants from either Mauritius or India, though a few leaders were descendents of indentured Indians. They showed a preference for the reformist version of Hinduism and sought to unite Hindus to ensure that this reformist Hindu message flourished, as they regarded the populist ritualistic Hinduism of the masses as an embarrassment and a relic of the past. The projects of the Maha Sabha were aimed at fostering pride and promoting Hindu consciousness. They sought to bring the activities of temples under their control, distribute religious tracts, start a journal which they hoped would show Hindus the 'correct' way to go about practising their religion, and educate the young through vernacular and religious education at school.

While the Maha Sabha was established in 1912 it was moribund for extended periods until the 1930s. The organisation usually received a fillip when an overseas missionary visited. The arrival of missionaries such as Professor Parmanand, Swami Shankaranand, Pandit Mehta Jaimini, Swami Adhyananda, Pandit Rishiram, and others inspired locals into action. Visiting missionaries were very popular and attracted large crowds wherever they lectured, but when these learned scholars departed, locals too seemed to disappear. Dr. N.P. Desai, who came to the helm in the 1940s, was probably the first South African-born leader to commit himself totally to the Maha Sabha and drive its agenda with passion and determination. It is significant that while he was involved in other religious, cultural, and educational organisations he was not involved in any particular political organisation, as many earlier leaders were.

Part of the explanation for the failure to sustain the activities of the Maha Sabha may, in fact, lie in the fact that many of the leaders involved in the Maha Sabha were also involved in political bodies and trades unions and were having to deal with the attempts of the state to repatriate Indians and segregate those who remained in South Africa, and generally treat Indians as second class citizens. This was taking place in a context where large numbers of Indians were afflicted by poverty. The likes of S.L. Singh and Bhawani Dayal were caught up in these struggles. On the other hand, influential leaders such as P.R. Pather and S.R. Naidoo were concerned about the repercussions of forming a national body exclusively for Hindus as they worked closely with Christians and Muslims in political organisations. These individuals

¹¹⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 11 March 1955.

belonged to parochial religious, cultural, and vernacular organisations where they did important work, but it was an overarching Hindu organisation that they were concerned with, because they believed that such an organisation could potentially create religious tensions between Hindus and other Indians.

The formation of the Maha Sabha in South Africa in 1912 was significant because it was the first Maha Sabha to be established outside of India. This was due entirely to the vision, energy and drive of Swami Shankaranand and the organisation faded after his departure in 1912. The Maha Sabha in South Africa was different to its counterparts in India and abroad. In British Guyana and Mauritius the Maha Sabha promoted an orthodox approach to Hinduism (Sanathanism) and provided an alternative to the Arya Samaj.¹¹⁶ In Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname, Maha Sabha's were also national organisations dominated by Sanathanists and were, additionally, political organisations 'which represented Hindus to non-Indian communities and government authorities'.¹¹⁷ The Fiji Maha Sabha, formed in 1926, was initially led by Arya Samajists,¹¹⁸ but in 1930 a faction that was unhappy with the organisation's Arya Samaj orientation, broke away.¹¹⁹ The Fiji Maha Sabha was also a political organisation and clashed with the Muslim League and Sanathan Dharma.¹²⁰

The Maha Sabha in South Africa differed from its counterparts in several respects. It was not a political force, it did not create serious tensions between Arya Samajists and followers of the Sanathan Dharma, nor did it create noticeable conflict between Muslims and Hindus. One possible explanation for the difference is that in South Africa Indians constituted an absolute minority, whereas in Fiji and Trinidad they constituted almost half the population, and in Mauritius, which lacked an indigenous population, Indians came to constitute an overwhelming majority, and were in a position to contest for political control. South Africa is also different from other colonies that received indentured labour because there were more migrants from South than North India. Both the Arya Samaj and Sanathan Dharma are North Indian movements and had more influence on Hindi-speaking Hindus. South Indian indentured migrants as a percentage of the total indentured population constituted 6.3 percent in Fiji, 31.9 percent in Mauritius, and 6.3 percent in British Guiana.¹²¹ In Natal, it was 67.9 percent.¹²² Another difference between South Africa and other Hindu communities is that whereas there were serious tensions between umbrella 'reformist' and 'orthodox' bodies, it was only in 1941 that a Shri Sanathan Dharma Sabha was established to unite Sanathanists in Natal.¹²³

While the Maha Sabha as an organisation did not get involved in politics many of its members did do so in their individual capacities. In fact Bhawani Dayal, a fundamental figure in the history of Hinduism in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, expressed public dissatisfaction with the Maha Sabha in India because it could potentially generate religious tension, yet gave a speech in 1933 as president to the umbrella Arya Samaj body of Natal on the necessity of (re)establishing the Maha Sabha in South Africa. He was confident

¹¹⁶ Peter Van Der Veer and Steven Vertovec. 'Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion' in *Ethnology*, 30: 2 (April, 1991), 160.

¹¹⁷ Van Der Veer and Vertovec. 'Brahmanism Abroad', 161.

¹¹⁸ Kelly. *A politics*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Kelly. *A politics*, 202.

¹²⁰ Kelly. *A politics*, 90-91.

¹²¹ Brij V. Lal, 'The Indenture System' in B.V Lal. (ed). *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), 46-52.

¹²² Lal, 'The Indenture System', 51.

¹²³ Nowbath et al (eds). *Hindu Heritage*, 134.

that the tensions between Muslims and Hindus, so prevalent in India, would not be replicated in South Africa because a Maha Sabha in this country would stick purely to religious, cultural and welfare activities, and not get involved in politics, as was the case with other existing Hindu institutions in South Africa, because several political organisations already spoke for Indians. Dayal emphasised the fact that the context in South Africa was radically different to that in India.¹²⁴ Dayal wanted to unite Indians, on the one hand, but also unite Hindus specifically. He wanted to unite Indians so that they could collectively resist the discriminatory laws designed to oppress them, and his reason for uniting Hindus was that if they worked together they would be better able to preserve their cultural and religious heritage.

Indians in South Africa constituted a minority and there was little incentive for Hindus to form a political body that excluded Muslims and Christians. The work of Gandhi in promoting 'Indianness' is also important. While many individuals in the Maha Sabha were part of secular political associations they did not use the Maha Sabha as a platform to voice political differences. The biographies of various Maha Sabha leaders confirm that they were involved in a multitude of community organisations.¹²⁵ This included secular political, welfare, sporting, and religious bodies. At no time did they use the Maha Sabha to voice political concerns. Throughout the turbulent years that would characterise the Indian political scene in South Africa, there is a glaring silence on these issues in the minutes of the Maha Sabha council meetings and conferences.

One of the major themes at virtually every Maha Sabha conference and meeting from the 1920s was that of conversion to Christianity. Kuppusami, for example, states that during the 1930s there was a sudden increase in the rate of conversion.¹²⁶ While the issue of preventing conversion was emphasised by Swami Shankaranand, there was a new urgency amongst its leaders to combat this occurrence after the revival of the Maha Sabha in the 1940s. For Kuppusami, three factors led to increased conversion during the 1930s. These were the lack of spiritual knowledge imparted to Hindu children by parents, the persuasiveness of Christian missionaries, and a lack of collective counter-measures by Hindu spiritual leaders.¹²⁷ Also important was the rapid urbanisation of many Indian families following the First World War.¹²⁸ To what extent was the fear of Hindu conversion to Christianity a fact and to what extent it was a perception? Table 1 makes interesting reading in this regard for it shows that for the period from 1920 to 1960, Hindus as a proportion of the Indian population increased marginally, as did the Muslim and Christian components, at the expense of the category 'other'. Overall, there was no significant shift even though Maha Sabha leaders felt that this was the case.

Table 1 Religious compositions of Asians in South Africa¹²⁹

	1921		1951		1960	
	Pop.	%	Pop.	%	Pop.	%
Hindu	109,163	(65.86)	246,234	(67.15)	327,783	(68.58)
Muslim	26,917	(16.24)	78,787	(21.48)	99,068	(20.72)
Christian	8,716	(5.25)	22,883	(6.24)	36,620	(7.66)

¹²⁴ APS Conference paper 1933.

¹²⁵ Gopalan, 'Caste, Class and Community'.

¹²⁶ Kuppusami. *Religions, Customs*, 147.

¹²⁷ Kuppusami. *Religions, Customs*, 147.

¹²⁸ See Freund. *Insiders and Outsiders*, 29-49.

¹²⁹ The figures include approximately 8000 Chinese.

Other	12,974	18,760	14,476
Total Asian	165,731	366,664	477,947

Source: Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen. 'Major Religions' in B. Pachai. *South Africa's Indians: The Evolution of a Minority* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979), 558.

These population figures suggest that conversion only became a major factor in the period after 1960.¹³⁰ By the time of the 2001 census, Christians made up around 24 per cent of the Indian population. Notwithstanding this, the perceived fear of Hindu conversion was a powerful force in shaping and giving urgency to the programmes of the Maha Sabha, which was driven to safeguard the interests of Hinduism.

By the time that Indians celebrated their centenary in South Africa in 1960, the Maha Sabha was an established institution. The process of establishing it was gradual and support was not unanimous. But through its various conferences, council meetings, and publications, the Maha Sabha provided a forum for Hindus to discuss their common problems and exchange ideas. Importantly, Sanathanist, Saivite, Arya Samajist, and other Hindus of divergent linguistic, ethnic, social, cultural, educational and religious backgrounds were able to work under a common umbrella. The need for a body to represent Hindus in South Africa was viewed negatively by some who feared sectionalism. Regardless however, the Maha Sabha restricted itself to pursuing religious and welfare projects and never got involved in politics as some feared.

¹³⁰ For more on conversion see Pillay. *Religion at the Limits?* and Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen. *Pentecostal penetration into the Indian community in metropolitan Durban, South Africa* (Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 1975).