

Swaminarayan Movement

The Swaminarayan religion was founded by Sahajanand Swami in the 19th century. Though two hundred years old the Swaminarayan religion is still considered new, “a modern development in Hinduism” (Williams 1984:xi), for the Hindu religions of India are very old, reaching back as far as 1500 BCE in the case of the Vedic religions. The faith took form in India’s western most state of Gujarat during a time when the British still held control. As the British developed political supremacy Sahajanand also spread forth his movement in the area. Sahajanand Swami’s movement was one of reform that came about when Gujarat was in the midst of rebellion, famine, social and political change. During this time Sir John Malcolm, the British governor of Bombay, also sought out similar reforms and looked for aid from respected Indian leaders such as Sahajanand Swami to help institute these reforms. The meeting between the two figures is today displayed in pictures in many Swaminarayan temples showing that two men of very different worlds both strived for the common goals of social order and harmony. In 1830 Sahajanand Swami died and left his disciples the teachings and ideas that he had tried to pass onto to others. The Swaminarayan faith is called a *sampradaya*, “a tradition which has been handed down from a founder through successive religious teachers and which shapes the followers into a distinct fellowship with institutional forms” (Williams 1984:xii).

The Swaminarayan religion is categorized as one that follows Vaishnavism. This is to say that the followers are worshippers of the Hindu God Visnu and the avatars associated with him such as Rama or Krsna. During the beginning of the 19th century the Indian state of Gujarat was experiencing civil war, famine, and disaster. It was also going through political and social change under the influence of the British who had established control in the area. Followers of the Swaminarayan faith believe that these times coincide perfectly with the rise of Sahajanand Swami his movement. As Vaishnavites it is traditionally believed that “such periods of decay and despair call forth a great religious teacher, a manifestation of god, to bring peace and order” (Williams 2001:8). Sahajanand Swami was born in a village outside of Gujarat called Chhapia. Chhapia is located near Ayodhya, the birth place of Rama in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. His day of birth falls upon the day of the festival that celebrates the birth of Rama. His birth name, Ghanashyam, is also known as one of the childhood names of Krsna who in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* is an avatar of Visnu. All this reaffirms the belief of Swaminarayan followers that Sahajanand Swami, also called Swaminarayan, was an incarnation of Visnu manifested on Earth to bring balance. It was during this time of depression and plight that the Swami took stage and developed a following of people, guided by the ideas of reform that he brought into action in the state of Gujarat.

Devotees of the Swaminarayan movement must all take vows, which Sahajanand required of all those who followed him. All followers are required not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to eat meat, not to drink intoxicants, and not to receive food from another person who belonged to a caste that was lower than their own. Those devotees who desired to become ascetics out of devotion to the Swami were required to take further vows such as the renunciation of worldly goods, abstaining from all forms of

violence, and a vow of absolute celibacy. The reasoning for this high level of discipline required of the Swaminarayan followers was due to the chaotic state of Gujarat society that Sahajanand believed was the cause for the breakdown of ascetic discipline. The Swaminarayan faith sought reform and change from the disorganized and uncontrolled state that many people had fallen into, requiring committed discipline that its followers must adhere to. Some ascetics during the beginning of the movement and at the point of greatest resistance were initiated to the Swami's highest state of asceticism. This state was known as *Paramhansa*, a state of "total renunciation, no rules or regulations that are prescribed in the scriptures applied to them and they had no actions to perform" (Williams 2001:22). This extreme form of asceticism was used so that the members of the Swaminarayan movement would go unnoticed by their enemies. By ridding themselves of all outwardly marks they would be invisible to those around them. Those of the Paramhansa status were characterized by ending their names in "ananda" to signify this status. These high class ascetics, however, were only temporary for the beginning of the movement. They were no longer ordained by Sahajanand after the Swaminarayan became more established and less targeted by those that did not support the movement. At this point, the movement was aided by the British who had established solid control in Gujarat during this time.

Further reform developed in the Swaminarayan works that strived to benefit the social welfare of the area. Followers of the movement helped rebuild destroyed buildings, dig new wells, and repair roads. This broke from regular custom found in Hindu society. Devotees of higher caste found themselves helping those of lower class. Ascetics who were believed to be above the station of those who did manual labor were found doing just that. All followers of the Swaminarayan movement were found working as carpenters, masons, and other professions to build homes, temples, and any other structures thought needed to construct a better society. During times of famine and plague the ascetics opened what could be called early day soup kitchens to provide aid for the sick and hungry affected by disaster. In this way the Swaminarayan faith and its followers are characterized by their project works to benefit social welfare. This particular show of compassion also resulted in converting many people to the faith once the realization was gained that even the ascetics, those who some considered a burden, were laboring just like everyone else. The people were attracted to the ideas put forth by the movement, "Sahajanand followed a strict moral code and had a profound influence for good in the lives of his followers, many of whom came from the least restrained portion of the population" (Williams 2001:69). The idea of those of higher caste giving aid in those places of lower caste was an alluring aspect.

The Swaminarayan movement experienced a lot of controversy because of its reforms. One such aspect that caused others to frown upon the movement was its attitude towards the caste system. Although prescribed in their vows not to accept food from those of lower caste, the Swaminarayan movement still acts in a manner as to help others, which includes the high class ascetic Brahmins helping those of lower classes. Being a vegetarian and being against all forms of violence were both vows that needed to be taken by all followers. With these ideals held high and strictly followed, many traditional customs and practices of regular Hindu society were considered for change. Sacrificial

rituals, for instance, could not be done by the Swaminarayan. To ritually sacrifice an animal involved both the killing of an animal and an act of violence. Such actions were condemned by the faith. Sahajanand believed that rituals could be done in a different manner, “In AD 1808 he staged a large sacrifice (*yajna*) without animal sacrifice in Ahmedabad” (Williams 2001:24). This was not taken well by more traditional Hindus. Other large bloodless sacrifices were performed as demonstrations to others that such traditions could still be done without the need for spilled blood. Eventually it was decided upon that sacrifices would no longer be used to preach the ideals of the Swaminarayan. Instead it was decided upon that the Swaminarayan would congregate in organized meetings of members of the faith that would be held twice a year. Other ritual such as the *sati*, a ritual in which the wife of a dead husband burns herself on the funeral pyre along with the deceased is also condemned by the Swaminarayan sect.

The Swaminarayan is a monotheistic group, but not in the Western religious sense. As stated the Swaminarayans are Vaishnavites or followers of Visnu. As a reformer, Sahajanand moved away from several traditional beliefs and practices that other Hindu religious sects followed. Not all people were ready to throw away such beliefs and their worship of more than one God but some were. Although the Swaminarayan devotion focused mainly on Visnu, they still gave worship to four other deities that were deemed very important “Siva, Ganapati, Parvati, and Surya, the major deities worshiped by Smarta Brahmins” (Williams 2001:25). This did not mean that they did in fact worship more than one God. In March of 1825 Sahajanand Swami met with the Bishop Heber and discussed the Swaminarayan religion with him. The main focus that the Bishop was interested in and topic they discussed most was the monotheistic ideals that the Bishop had heard the Swaminarayan followed. In Sahajanand’s opening statements to the Bishop he said “Many names there may be, and have been, given to him who is and is the same, but whom we as well as other hindoos call brihm” (Williams 2001:70) which is to say that there are many ways to say the name God or as the Hindu people call it, Brahman. To identify God with another name such as Visnu is only to give character to one aspect of that which is Brahman. It is not to say that all deities they give worship to are called God.

Today the Swaminarayan movement is still thriving. In 2001 it was estimated that the faith was numbering upwards of five million members, the bulk of which reside in the homeland of Gujarat. However, it is important to note that there are two main divisions of the Swaminarayan movement. At the time in 2001 it was believed that “3.5 million associated with Vadtal and Ahmedabad and 1.5 million associated with the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushattam Sanstha” (Williams 2001:68) but it is hard to tell exactly how many belong to each division and how many follow both. It is difficult to judge just how many there are but it is reasonable to believe that there may be even more devotees today. One thing that is now used to gather hundreds of thousands of people are modern mega-festivals. These festivals attract “both faithful followers and the idly curious – to religious events that concentrate the transmission of tradition in various media at a single site over a specific period of a few days or a month” (Williams 2001:176) which relates all the way back to when Sahajanand Swami decided to have large organized meetings with the

members of his faith instead of non-violent sacrifices. The Swaminarayan are mostly consolidated in India but have expanded all over the world in smaller numbers.

References and further recommended readings

Williams, R. B. (1984) *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, R. B. (2001) *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press

Related topics for further investigation

Ahmedabad

Vadtal

Bochasanwasi akshar purushottam sanstha

Muktas

Smarta Brahmin

Paramhansa

Sampradaya

Gujarat

Vaishnavism

Note Worthy Websites

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swaminarayan#cite_note-73

<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/sects/swaminarayana.asp>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaishnavism>

http://www.indianetzone.com/8/sahajananda_swami.htm

<http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/sects/vaishnavism.htm>

<http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/hindu/devot/swamin.html>

Article written by: Kevin Storoz (March 2010) who is solely responsible for its content.
(Revised on April 10, 2010)