

HISTORY OF THE SHREE PRETORIA HINDU SEVA SAMAJ 1932 - 1980

ONCE UPON A TIME.... A HUMBLE, MEMORABLE BEGINNING

INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the movement of people from one place to another can lead to progress. Man is forced to use all his powers and talents in a new environment and to make it worthwhile and successful. "No matter how timid a man is, he is capable of the loftiest heroism when he is put to the test". The beginning, however, is always humble and difficult, challenging and even frustrating, but the end product is thrilling and often permanent. The history of the Gujarati community in Pretoria in particular and in South Africa in general bears testimony to the sentiments expressed above.

ARRIVAL AND PROGRESS

The first Indians to set foot on South African soil were the so-called indentured labourers who were brought to South Africa from 1860 onwards to establish the hugely successful sugar cane industry in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The Gujarati-speaking community followed this initial wave from around 1885 after the discovery of gold and diamonds in the heartland of the country. The adventurous, pioneering struggling spirit of the Gujarati inhabitants of Surat, Navsari, Kathiawad and surrounding districts culminated in a small band arriving in the Pretoria region as they did in other areas of the "Witwatersrand" and South Africa. These early immigrants saw no need to organise as they left their families behind, intending only to amass a little wealth and return to the "motherland". But in a decade after arrival, the lure of Africa was still strong and despite many hardships, the early settlers began seeing a future for themselves in their adopted fatherland. From very humble beginnings, these early pioneers proved to be astute businessmen, resulting in the local White business population feeling threatened. Consequently, they agitated and were successful in having discriminatory measures passed against Indians, aimed primarily at restricting their ability to trade and to deny them the right of citizenship.

ESTABLISHMENT

In this cauldron, at the turn of the century (what was the exact date that Gandhi first arrived?), a young Gujarati lawyer from India was called to Pretoria, South Africa to help resolve a family business dispute. The humiliation that this young, inexperienced lawyer was subjected to upon arrival in South Africa set the scene for the birth of the great "Mahatma" as Mohandas Gandhi later came to be known. After settling the family dispute, having lived for a short while in the Asiatic Bazaar of Pretoria, he was prevailed upon by the local Indian population to help them fight against the discriminatory laws. Under the Mahatma's leadership, the Indian community agitated non-violently for their right of domicile, and this was eventually granted in 1927. Wives and children arrived in greater numbers and thus a more stable community in Pretoria, as elsewhere in Gauteng, was born. With the arrival of women and children, the need for retaining language, religion and culture of the mother country became an urgent necessity thus creating the impetus for the formation of organised groupings. In 1931 Mahatma Gandhi fasted in jail in India during the Independence Struggle against the British. In sympathy, the Pretoria community held daily prayers as long as the fast lasted for the national leader. Here the idea of forming an organisation appears to have germinated. An organisation in Johannesburg was named the Transvaal Hindu Seva Samaj. This prompted the Pretoria community to establish the SHREE PRETORIA HINDU SEVA SAMAJ in 1932. Incidentally, the first meeting of the Samaj was held at the Royal Cinema in Grand Street,

Asiatic Bazaar.

PIONEERS

The founder members of the Shree Pretoria Hindu Seva Samaj that are mentioned in the records amongst others are: Nathalal G. Kala; Ramabhai Naran; Ranchhodbhai Bhoola; Chibabhai Kara; Pemabhai Lala; Nanabhai Sita; Gosaibhai H. Mistry; Parbhoobhai Nana; Jivan Patel; Jivanbhai Gordhan; Ramabhai Jeram; Bhimabhai Vala; Chhaganbhai Bhana; Bhooolabhai Naran; Pemabhai Panchia; Chaganbhai S. Jivan; Morarbhai S. Mistry; Narsaibhai M. Patel; Pranlalabhai M. Joshi; Danjeebhai Chiba; Valjeebhai Madhavjee; Govindbhai Bhana; Ramlalabhai Mooloo; Narsaibhai Pema; Jamnadasbhai Ranchhod; Jamnadasbhai R. Govind and Parbhoobhai Manga.

INITIAL ACTIVITIES AND NOTES

The venue and headquarters of the Samaj was the property purchased by the Community on the corner of Tenth and Mogul Streets. The building that was constructed was also used as the Gujarati School. The Seva Samaj also owned a vacant plot on Ninth Street. The properties served as a source of income for the Community as parts of it was rented out to businessman. The building initially also served as residence for teachers from India.

A perusal of the minutes of the meetings held indicated that the main activities of the Samaj during this early period was the normal discussions regarding progress and problems; hosting of farewell receptions for members visiting the Mother Country; and welcoming of celebrities arriving from India. It is noteworthy that by 1945 the Samaj opened its meetings with the Gayatri Mantra and terminated with Gita Vanchan and shanti-paath: a forward step in the blessed beginning. The meeting even resolved to terminate by 10:30p.m sharp

Some highlights from the Samaj minutes:

- Regular consultations with various Hindu bodies related to Diwali and New Year Festivals: also with the Bharat Samaj of Lourenco Marques (Maputo).
- Contributions for the 1942 “Quit India” campaign against British rule in India.
- Fund-raising for the Bengal-Relief fund in 1943
- Relief to victims of a tornado in Mauritius in 1945
- Visit of Dr. Mirzah in 1944, a Parsee at the Orient Hall who lectured on East-West culture - sponsored by both the Samaj and the Muslim Council
- Visit of Pundit Ravishankar Vidyalankaar in 1945 from Lourenco Marques
- Visit of Pundit Rishiram in 1945 for religious lectures
- Visit of Kumar Palana in 1946 for gymnastic demonstrations: he performed a balancing act on the highest building in Pretoria
- Visit by Swami Gajananda in 1947 for religious discourse and stories
- Visit of Pundi Kunjroo from 1947 to 1950 for political and cultural lectures

In later years, the following personalities visited Pretoria for religious, political and cultural discourses:

- Shakuntala-devi (1968-69) – a mathematics genius
- Krishnand Saraswati (1974) from Mauritius;
- Swami Narayan sect (1974, 1977);
- Pundit Shiv Maharaj (1975 - 6);
- Abram Bhagat (1975);

- Yogiraj Jayantkumar Yagnik (1976-7);
- Pradyumna Shatri (1976);
- Swami Chidananda: ceremony for foundation of Hall;
- Ram Bhagat (1978);
- Mahant Ram Swarup Dasji (1978);
- Swami Premanand - attached to Avoca, Natal.
- Ooma Bharti (1979);
- Swami Deeskshanandji (1979) who conducted Sanskrit classes for over two months.

PERMANENT SITE

In the 1940's, the desire for a more permanent site led to the acquisition of a property in Jerusalem Street for the erection of a Temple, School and Hall. A proper plan was drawn up and a Committee was elected to raise funds. However, a larger site was needed and in 1946 a site of 10 stands was identified by the Samaj near the old football ground area. The minutes state that "the request of stands to build a school, temple, hostel and gymnasium could not be granted because the City Council was considering laying out a residential area for the benefit of the Indian Community (Pretoria News 11/2/46)". Finally, the ten promised stands near the Asiatic Bazaar football ground were given to the Community on a twenty year lease.

GUJARATI SCHOOL

By 1933 the Gujarati School was established. Initially, the school was run by lay persons who had studied in India but who had no formal teacher training or teaching experience. By 1939 it was decided to obtain qualified teachers from India. On 7 December 1941, a deputation approached the South African Commissioner for Immigration to discuss this need and again, on 5 January 1942, the delegation also met the High Commissioner of India. But it was only in 1944 that permission was finally received and that led to the arrival of three teachers, namely Mr. Nichhabhai S. Patel, Chhotubhai Mehta and Mrs. Ambabehn Cyclewala. Ambabehn was expected to be helpful in teaching girls, but later left for Durban. The need for a well-educated, well-qualified teacher and guide remained unsatisfied until finally, the Immigration Authorities, after numerous requests, allowed Mr. Babubhai D. Patel to come to South Africa on a five-year teaching contract. Once again the language was injected with a professional touch.

CREMATORIUM

A Crematorium site was acquired in 1935. A fence was constructed around the area but it was only after the election of 1943 that enthusiasm for the building of the Crematorium began in earnest. The Crematorium, meant for all Hindus, was finally completed in 1946. The Pretoria News of 28 March 1946 stated the following of the official opening: "The Crematorium was erected by the Pretoria Hindu Social Service League at a cost of £3500 of which £500 and the ground were granted by the Council." The article also highlighted the need of the Indian Community for land for recreational facilities which was still sorely lacking at that time.

CULTURAL REVIVAL

A visit by the girl guides from the Arya Kanya Maha Vidyalyaya from Baroda to Pretoria in 1936 gave impetus to the formation of a Vidyamshala that concentrated on the physical developments of the youth. A group called the Bhartiya Kishori Mandal was formed that concentrated on the development of cultural and craft activities for the youth. The Navyuga Mandal assisted by serving during weddings and even undertook to repair and paint the Samaj building and later the Crematorium.

There was a religious, educational and cultural revival. There was a re-organisation of the School Committee and its valuable role in the Community and school was defined. The Community took special pride in activities of Krishna-Jayanti, Raksha Bandhan, festivities of Diwali and Navaratri. A second-hand open army truck was purchased by the Samaj to allow pupils living in the Prinsloo Street area to attend the school at the Asiatic Bazaar. The Gujarati school was truly a model in South Africa at the time. The Divine Life Society's request to use a classroom for Hindu classes was a further boost to the progress of the Pretoria Gujarati Community.

LIBRARY

On 26 April 1942 a make-shift library based at the Gujarati School was formed. A youth organisation affiliated to the Samaj called the Arya Yuvak Mandal was given permission to run the library. Books and cupboards were donated and for a while utilisation was reasonably good. In 1960 there was renewed enthusiasm for literature and culture which resulted in a dedicated classroom being allocated for the first time. New tables and chairs were purchased; new shelves were built and more books purchased. This helped to keep interest in Gujarati at a high level during the fifties and sixties. However, as a result of the Apartheid policy of forcibly relocating Pretoria Indians to Laudium, there was a gradual decline and the books were finally donated to the Pretoria State Library.

INDEPENDENCE DAY OF INDIA

15 August 1947 marked not only India's independence from British rule, but also freedom for Indians all over the world. Pretoria Gujarati's, together with the Tamil community, decorated their shops and houses with flags and buntings. An informal Independence Day holiday was declared and all businesses closed their doors. Even the Pretoria City Council co-operated by charging only a nominal rate for the hiring of light decorations! A large procession led by the Hindu Brigade marched from town (Prinsloo Street) to the Asiatic Bazaar assisted by the Police and the Traffic Department. A huge marquee was put up on the old Pretoria Sports Grounds. A variety concert and a speech by Pundit Kunjroo from India marked the highlights of the celebration.

PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY

The National Party came to power in 1948 and the political climate changed dramatically. The Indian community felt insecure and saw a dim, bleak future. Consequently, the Samaj building projects - Hall and the Mandir - were shelved. This uncertainty seems to have permeated the consciousness of the community and resulted in the lack of constructive activity. Worse still, the community became fragmented with the decade between 1948 and 1956 being marked with personality clashes, the formation of a private Gujarati school, the resignation of teachers, enquiries and distrust. All of these happenings left the community in disarray. But by the late 1950's, there were sparks of improvement and an increase in communal harmony. This regeneration was especially evident after the elections of 1956 which started with everyone wishing each other the best of luck. A period of unity of purpose began to prevail.

POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT

In 1964 the Community Development Board took over the Asiatic Bazaar from the Pretoria City Council. The Seva Samaj was accordingly given notice to hand over the ten stands allocated to it by the City Council. By now, the new Indian residential area of LAUDIUM was established and the Indian community protested vehemently against this development, with Nana Sita, a prominent Gujarati businessman, leading the charge. Gradually however, resistance was eroded and the

Pretoria Indian community migrated to the new township over a period of 10 years. Initially, the Pretoria Hindu Seva Samaj was not allocated a site to develop its religious, educational, cultural and social structures. However, through the constant advocacy and persistence of its officials, sanity finally prevailed and the Samaj was awarded erven 250 - 251 at the cost of R6 000.00. This flat site, situated on 13th Avenue, was rezoned as a cultural site earmarked for the establishment of a temple, school and community hall.

CONCERTED COMMUNITY EFFORT: THE BUILDING OF THE MANDIR AND SCHOOL

"The salvation of a people depends upon themselves, upon their capacity for suffering and sacrifice".

The Samaj hardly had funds, but a furious debate arose about how the development of the site should proceed. The public had to sacrifice. What should come first? Discussions and criticisms followed. Some argued that the school was a more pressing requirement and a temple should follow the building of the school.

Much of this argument was settled when Dr. Bhavanbhai Jogee of East London, in memory of his parents, donated R8 000 towards the laying of a firm foundation for a Mandir. A further R80 000 came from the coffers of the public-spirited, generous and charitable people of Pretoria. The Satsang Mahila Mandal and the Kishori Mandal contributed R5 000 each. The front wing of the school wall reflects plaques with their generous donation. In spite of numerous difficulties, the project was finally completed. An official opening of the Mandir and the induction of the murthis, specially imported from India, was held on 14 May 1972. Invitations were sent out to all Hindu organisations throughout South Africa. Each Hindu family of Pretoria was invited for lunch provided by the Mahila Mandal. A truly historical and religious day began with thanksgiving and a procession of religious floats. The Ramakrishna Band highlighted this memorable activity with pomp and rejoicing. This was the day of climax that gave the Gujarati inhabitants of Pretoria a source of pride and satisfaction. Everywhere one could hear the refrain of each community member: "after nearly forty years of yearning and achievement, our very own Mandir and Gujarati Shala"

AUDITORIUM PROJECT

Upon assuming the chairmanship of the Samaj in 1974, Chaganbhai S. Jivan, began the task of mobilising the officials to build an auditorium that would serve as the cultural heart of the community. Events taking place at the time gave impetus to the idea that an auditorium or hall was sorely needed. Chief amongst these was the Gandhi Centenary Celebrations and which was followed by the Transvaal Speech Competition where Pretoria was the host. Nonetheless, this project was not easy as there were many competing ideas and plans on how it should be built.

A band of dedicated fund-raisers once again arose to the task and after much effort the Shree Pretoria Hindu Seva Samaj Auditorium was completed and an official opening was held on 9 March 1980. A special commemorative brochure was also published. Today, this auditorium serves as the cultural nerve centre of the Samaj.

TRIBUTES

The Samaj would be remiss if it did not acknowledge the hard work and sacrifice made over the years by various individuals who undertook the onerous and often thankless task of spending many days and hours raising funds for the building of the Mandir, the Gujarati School and the

Auditorium. In no particular order the following are remembered and honoured: Narsibhai Manga, Mohanbhai P. Lala, Morarbhai Mistry, Diarbhai Daya Patel, Valjeebhai Madhavjee, Amratbhai Desai, Ramanbhai Rama, Jivanbhai Kalyan, Naginbhai Bhana, Kandoobhai Nichha and Chunilalbhai Chhagan Gandhi.

CONCLUSION

Since the earliest pioneers, the Gujarati Community of Pretoria has progressed culturally and also economically during the period 1900 and 1980. This is despite numerous setbacks and challenges, none more so than the deliberate political attempts to delegitimize the rights of Indians from the time of their arrival. Since the belated acceptance by the Apartheid Government in 1961 that the Indian community were a permanent part of the South African population, roots have become firmer; houses and living conditions have improved; old caste divisions have gradually broken down to be replaced by a more cohesive and united community. The broader Gujarati community can feel proud and be thankful that they have managed to adapt and prosper in difficult and changing times whilst at the same time upholding the eternal values of their glorious faith.

The progress of the South African Indian community in the years after 1980 to the present time will be covered separately but the following quotation perhaps sums up the motto of the current generation of leaders in the Pretoria Gujarati community, namely:

"If we are to make progress, we must not repeat history, but make new history. We must add to the inheritance left by our ancestors"

Hari Om Tat Sat

Rameshbhai Chhagan
Secretary-General

(With grateful acknowledgement to Tapidasbhai Bhana & Maganbhai Parbhoo, former secretaries of the Samaj, who did most of the spade work and who provided much of the material that this adapted article has been based on).

SHREE PRETORIA HUNDU SEVA SAMAJ

LIST OF OFFICE BEARERS

<u>CHAIRMAN</u>		<u>SECRETARIES</u>	<u>TREASURERS</u>
5-12-37	Late Mr Nathalal G. Kala	Mr G.H. Mistry	Mr Ramabhai Jairambhai
5-12-37	Late Mr Jivandas Gordhandas	Late Mr Chhaganbhai S. Modi	
7-12-41	Late Mr Nathalal G. Kala	Late Mr Chhaganbhai S. Modi	Late Mr Jamnadasbhai Ranchhod
11- 4-43	Mr Bachoobhai Joshi	Late Mr Jamnadasbhai Ranchhod	Mr Morabhai S. Mistry
		Late Mr Liladher Gopaldas	
12-11-44	Mr Bachoobhai Joshi	Late Mr Liladher Gopaldas	Mr Hiralal Rambhai
		Mr D.D. Patel (resigned 12.4.45)	
		Late Mr Chhaganbhai S. Modi	
22-12-46	Late Mr Liladhar G. Kala	Mr Parbhooobhai Nana	Mr Dhirajlal Mohanlal Joshi
		Late Mr Jivanbhai Bhoolabhai Patel	
18- 1-48	Late Mr Jamnadas R. Gouind	Mr D.D. Patel	Mr Dhirajlal Mohanlal Joshi
		Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	
27- 2-49	Late Mr Jamnadas R. Gouind	Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	Mr Dhirajlal Mohanlal Joshi
		Late Mr Jivanbhai Bhoolabhai Patel	
25- 4-54	Late Mr Liladhar G. Kala	Mr Morarabhai S. Mistry	Dr Bhagoobhai V. Mistry
		Mr D.D. Patel	
23- 1-55	Late Mr Jamnadas R. Govind	Mr D.D. Patel	Mr Mohanbhai P. Lala
		Mr Narsaibhai M. Patel	
13- 5-56	Mr Dalooobhai R. Patel	Mr Bhanoobhai Lala	Mr Naranbhai Bhana
		Mr Dajeobhai Pemabhai	
7- 4-57	Mr Dalooobhai R. Patel	Mr Bhanoobhai Lala (Resigned 10-5-57)	Mr Naranbhai Bhana
		Mr Dajeobhai Pema	
		Mr Maganlal Dhirajbhai	
19- 6-60	Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	Mr Bhanoobhai Lala	Mr Choonilal C. Gandhi
		Mr Thakorabhai Nathoo (21-8-60)	
		Mr Naranbhai Bhana	
26- 8-62	Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	Mr Naranbhai Bhana	Mr Choonilal C. Gandhi
		Mr Thakorabhai Nathoo (6.10.63)	
		Mr Jivanlal Kalianjeebhai	
20- 3-66	Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	Mr Jivanlal Kalianjeebhai	Mr Choonilal C. Gandhi
		Late Mr Savjeebhai Bhima	
3- 8-69	Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	Mr Jivanlal Kalianjeebhai	Mr Choonilal C. Gandhi
		Mr Ashwinbhai P. Joshi	
2- 8-70	Mr Narsaibhai Mangabhai Patel	Mr Mohanbhai P. Lala	Mr Jhinabhai S. Mistry
		Mr Hasmukhbhai S. Gordhan	
21- 4-74	Late Mr Chhaganbhai Sita	Mr Mahendrabhai Sita	Mr Jhinbhai S. Mistry
		Mr Tapidas Chhaganbhai Bhana	Mr Dhiroobhai Kalan Vala
11- 4-76	Mr Jivanlal Kalianjeebhai	Mr Tapidas Chhaganbhai Bhana	Mr Jhinabhai S. Mistry
		Mr Maganbhai Parbhoo	Mr Baboobhai Gokal
9- 4-78	Mr Jivanlal Kalianjeebhai	Mr Tapidas Chhaganbhai Bhana	Mr Jhinabhai S. Mistry
		Mr Maganbhai Parbhoo	Mr Choonibhai C. Gandhi

CONGRATULATIONS ON THIS GLORIOUS OCCASION
OF YOUR OFFICIAL OPENING



Welfit Tailors & Outfitters

503 Boom Street, Asiatic Bazaar, Pretoria
American Centre Phone: 33347



Tip Top Tailors

490, 9th Street, (Cnr. Boom Street)
Asiatic Bazaar, Pretoria. Phone: 33347



Ocean Tailors

423 Boom Street, Asiatic Bazaar
Pretoria. Phone: 35877