

**Identity and difference in a Muslim community
in central Gujarat, India following
the 2002 communal violence**

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London School of Economics and Political Science

PhD

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Declaration

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Abstract:

The broad aim of the thesis is to examine the impact of class, caste and religious identity in constructing notions of Muslim identity in a small town in central Gujarat, India and to challenge wider assumptions about the primacy of religious identity in ordering sociality in 'everyday life' in the region following the large-scale violence against the Muslim minority in 2002.

Based on fifteen months of ethnographic research, the thesis engages with debates about the impact of violence on inter-ethnic relations and the construction of a minority identity. My research focuses particularly on the Muslim Sunni Vohras in the town of Mahemdabad, a community whose language, residential patterns, dress and kinship system defy, both locally as well as more generally, dualistic notions of what constitutes 'Hindu'/Muslim' modes of conduct. As a merchant group, Sunni Vohras in the town have traditionally maintained closer ties with local Hindu merchants rather than other Muslims with whom they commonly eschew close affiliation. Through an analysis of various spheres such as kinship, gender, religious practice and local politics, the thesis examines how different notions of 'Muslim identity' are at once predicated on an opposition to 'Hindu identity' but likewise how competing definitions are brandished as a means of establishing status and honour.

On a wider level, the thesis presents an examination of how 'everyday coexistence' between different religious groups in the town following the 2002 violence and the way in which such coexistence is sustained and managed through informal networks. Unlike nearby cities, the town in which research was conducted had not previously experienced wide-scale attacks in the past and prided itself on the 'communal harmony' between Hindus and Muslims. The thesis argues that the ongoing salience of caste and class links between the two communities constitute a central factor in explaining how, despite the wider social and political context, religious identity has not succeeded in trumping previous forms of social stratification.

*In memory of Cleone Larson Heitmeyer (1918-2006)
and Albert Pontello (1910-2003)*

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Map 2: India

Map 3: Mahemdabad town

Plate 1: Mahemdabad train station

Plate 2: View of Mahemdabad on the Uttrayan (kite-flying) festival

Plate 3: View of Mahemdabad

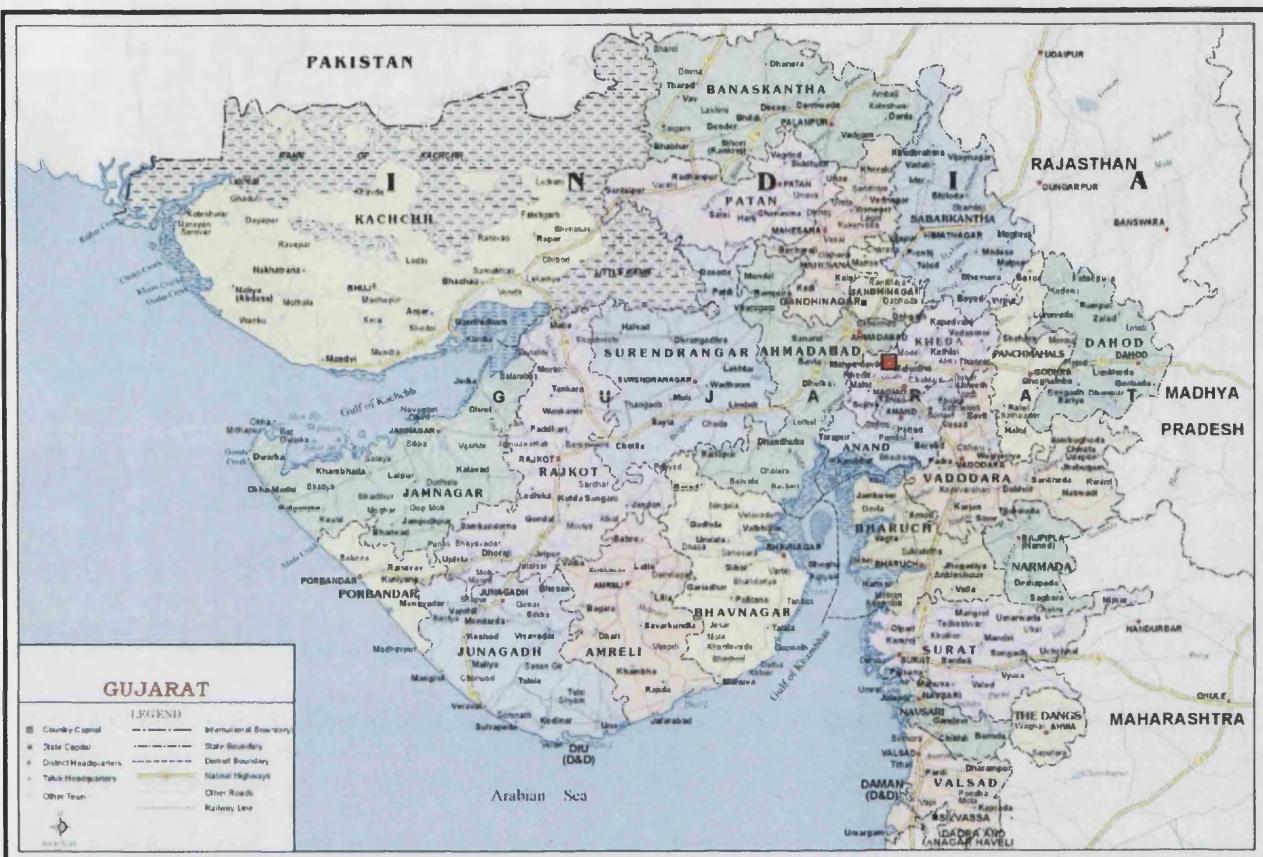
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Plate 6: *Mazar* in Mahemdabad with *mandirs* on each side

Note on transliteration:

I have transliterated Gujarati and Hindi terms according to the standard sanskritised system. Persian and Arabic words are transliterated according to the system used by Peter Jackson in *The Delhi Sultanate* (1999, Cambridge University Press). Frequently used terms can be found in the glossary.



Map 1: (above) Gujarat state

■ Mahemdabad

Map 2: (left) India with Gujarat state highlighted in red

(Maps courtesy TKK maps)





Map 3: Mahemdabad town

- 1 – Vohra Society
- 2 – Mahemdabad train station
- 3 – Nadiad Dervaja
- 4 – Kacheri Darvaja
- 5 – Navjivan Society
- 6 – Khatrej Darvaja
- 7 – Virol Darvaja
- 8 – Soni High School
- 9 – Luharvad
- 10 – Daudpura/Bhimraopura
- 11 – Narayan Society

(Map courtesy of Google Earth)



Plate 1: Mahemdabad train station

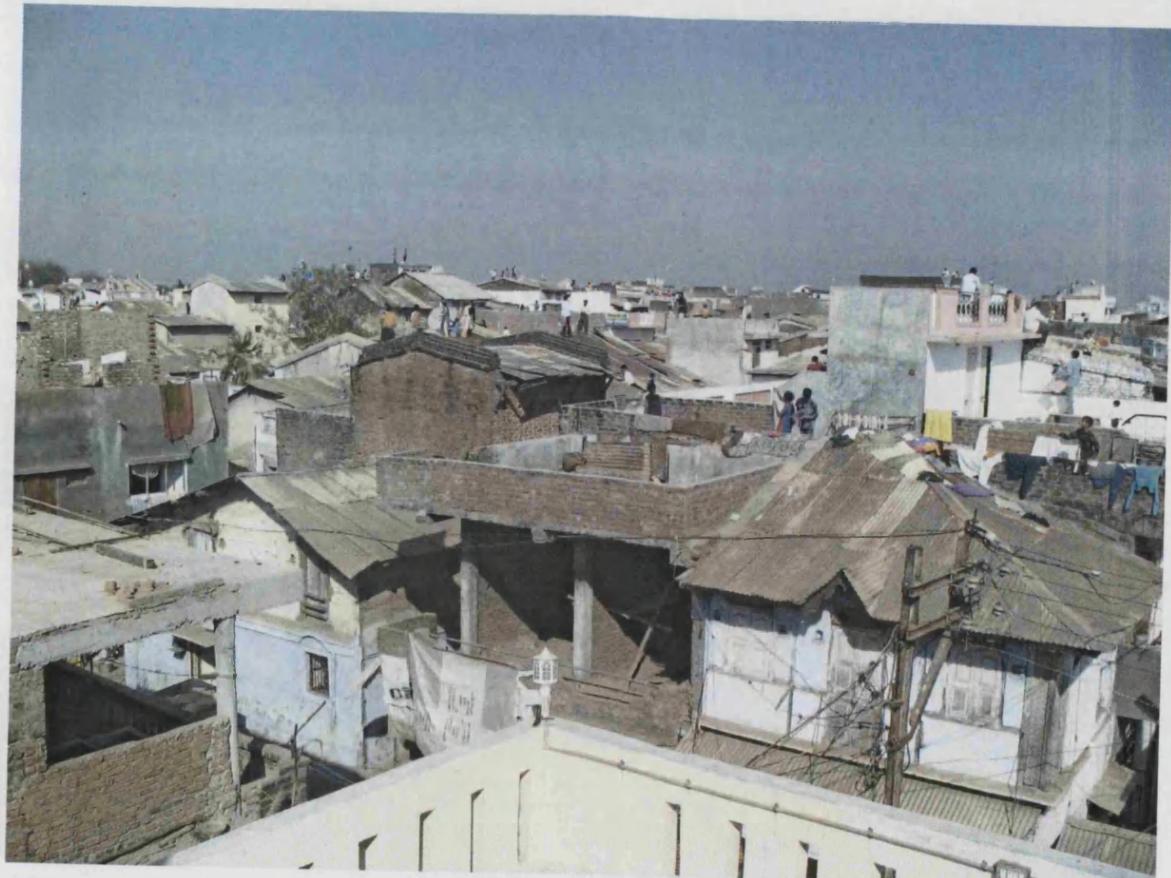


Plate 2: View of Mahemdabad on the Uttrayan (kite-flying) festival

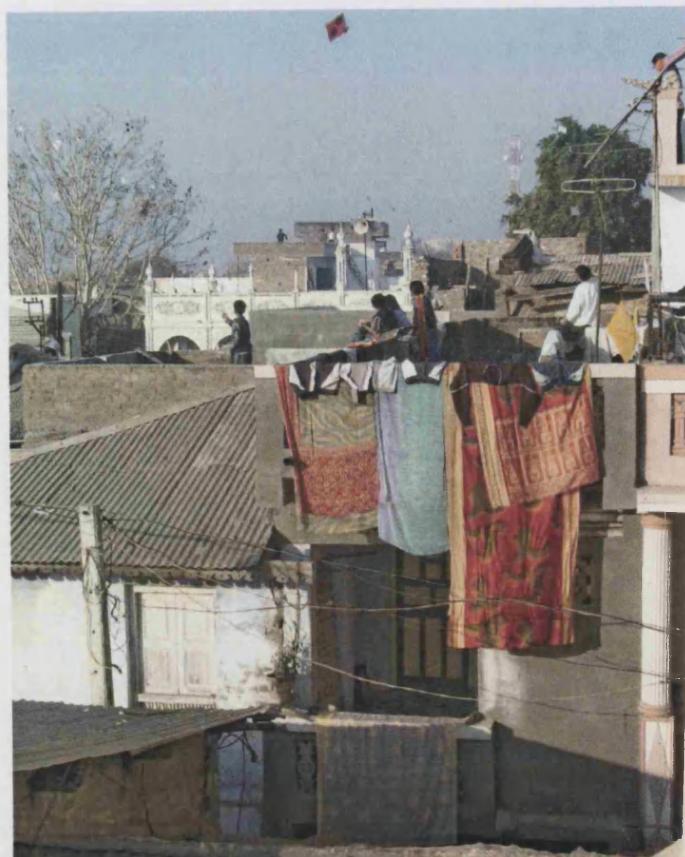


Plate 3: View of Mahemdabad



Plate 4: Luharvad neighbourhood, Mahemdabad

Introduction

I. Gujarat and the communal divide

Daily from 5 in the morning until closing time at 11 at night, Lubnaben,¹ a Muslim woman in her early forties, sits behind the counter dispensing various provisions to customers and operating the phone located just outside the shop. Her clientele comprises both Hindus and Muslims, and often family friends, business partners of her father and brother or acquaintances will sit on one of the two plastic chairs kept in reserve in the back of the shop and exchange chitchat or local gossip. For Muslims such as Lubnaben and her family living in the town's 'mixed' areas, it is not uncommon to forge close relationships with Hindu neighbours. Like the majority of other women in Mahemdabad,² a small town in central Gujarat in western India, Lubnaben's sister Parveenben spends most of her day engaged in the daily routine of household and child-rearing responsibilities but, when time permits, she joins her friend Sunita, a Hindu woman in her early twenties living in one of the nearby houses, to spend a couple of hours at 'Meera's beauty parlour' in the main *bajar* (market). Located on the third floor of a narrow building in which each floor comprises a single room, the beauty parlour acts as both a place to receive beauty treatments as well as a meeting point for younger women between the ages of 15 and 35 who come to learn the arts of waxing, embroidery and *mehndi* (henna) application. Sunita and Parveenben, as the two longest-standing apprentices, manage the parlour on the occasions when Meera, a Hindu Thakkar and the owner and teacher of the parlour, is absent. Daily, the parlour acts as a socially acceptable venue outside the home where local women can come to engage in banter, gossip and learn the arts of 'beautification', momentarily escaping the drudgery of housekeeping and the prying eyes of in-laws.

Everyday interaction between local Hindus and Muslims in the town of Mahemdabad remains an expected and regular occurrence. Unlike neighbouring cities such as Ahmedabad and Vadodara, coexistence as well as cohabitation between Muslims and

¹ The names of individuals have been changed in order to maintain their anonymity.

² In this thesis, the town which acted as the geographical focus of my research is referred to using the Roman-alphabet spelling 'Mahemdabad' although several other transliterations (from Gujarati script) are also frequently used elsewhere, notably 'Mahemdavad' and 'Mehmedabad'.

Hindus in various parts of the town are common. When I first began fieldwork in Mahemdabad, I maintained a keen eye for any evidence which might hint at latent communal tension: while three years had passed since the 2002 communal violence that had engulfed the town and many other parts of the state, my previous experience in Gujarat (namely, Ahmedabad) had convinced me that tension and conflict between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' in the state was the normal state of affairs and that, if not blatantly evident, they lay just below the surface of everyday life.

In the wake of the 2002 attacks, the state of Gujarat in western India has become widely synonymous with massive violence against the state's Muslim minority and the seemingly unbridled political success of the Hindutva³ movement. Following the carnage, Gujarat became popularly referred to as 'the laboratory of Hindutva', a testing ground for the religious nationalist ideology of the Sangh Parivar⁴ which, if successful, would be exported to other states in India. Judging from the continuing popularity of Chief Minister Narendra Modi (who since the 2002 violence has won re-election twice in Gujarat) and the BJP more widely, the Hindutva experiment continues to receive significant support from the middle classes as well as the Hindu majority population.

Reports from both the English-language media⁵ as well as NGO and academic studies depict the social and political climate in Gujarat as both dire and disheartening for steadfast proponents of secularism and human rights. The overwhelming consensus describes an alarming polarisation between the majority Hindu community and the state's minority Muslims along with a growing atmosphere in which members of the two communities have become increasingly estranged and suspicious of one another. The role of the state government in both abetting and assisting in the 2002 pogrom along with the fact that to date few of the perpetrators of the attacks have been

³ Literally meaning 'Hinduness', the term 'Hindutva' was coined in 1923 by one of the key ideologues of Hindu nationalism, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. The term has now come to refer on a general level to a political project whose central principle is the creation of a Hindu nation in which 'foreign' elements such as Christians and Muslims maintain but a marginalised position.

⁴ The Sangh Parivar, literally 'the family of the Sangh', comprises the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Together, these form the principal arms of the Hindu nationalist movement in India.

⁵ In contrast, the Gujarati-language media has been blamed for fomenting communal tension, particularly during periods of violence (see, for example, Breman 1999: 273-4 with reference to the 1992-1993 violence in Ahmedabad and People's Union for Civil Liberties 2002: 10 on the 2002 riots).

convicted has, according to most reports, further isolated Muslims living in Gujarat and reinforced intra-religious solidarity and consciousness. The well known human rights activist Harsh Mander (2007:847), a former senior member of the Indian Administrative Service, who quit his job in protest against the 2002 violence, writes:

There is ... a frightening communal chasm that is growing exponentially between people of different religious persuasions and an ominous subtext of re-engineered social relations, of settled hate, settled fear and settled despair in villages and urban settlements that were torn apart by the gruesome mass violence of 2002. Gujarat continues to be a society bitterly, and some now grimly fear, permanently divided.

The tone of this passage in its despairing depiction of current relations between Muslims and Hindus in post-2002 Gujarat is representative of much of the writing that has been produced about the state since the beginning of the violence. My own experience in the city of Ahmedabad confirmed many of the portrayals of ghettoisation and segregation between Hindus and Muslims living in the city. My first encounter with Gujarat took place between the end of February and July 2002 when I worked in Ahmedabad for the Dalit rights NGO, Navsarjan Trust. During this period, both my lodgings as well as the office in which I worked were located in the Vatva neighbourhood on the western side of the Sabarmati River which divides the city. While the eastern side of Ahmedabad, commonly referred to as the 'walled city', houses the city's main mosques, temples, bazaars and traditional *pols*⁶, the area to the west of the Sabarmati was established more recently and is home to the city's many flashy coffee shops, shopping malls, office buildings and more affluent housing societies. During this first stay in Ahmedabad (which, by coincidence, overlapped almost exactly with the period of the 2002 attacks), my impressions of the city were almost completely confined to these 'new' areas and, more specifically, to their middle-class Hindu and, to a lesser extent, Christian inhabitants. In fact, I only entered the walled city once during the entire period of my stay because of the many curfews that were imposed after the onset of the violence and the heightened danger brought about by the sense that, even during periods of *shanti* (peace), violence could break out at any given moment. Aside from during this one visit to the relief camp which had been set up in the Shah Alam area in the eastern part of the city, I never

⁶ *Pols* are residential streets or areas which are usually inhabited by members of a single caste or, at the least, members of castes of the same socioeconomic level.

met a single Muslim during the five months of my stay in Ahmedabad. While the circumstances surrounding this initial stay were certainly extraordinary, later visits to the city during the period of my doctoral research convinced me that even at the everyday level of interactions during so-called periods of *shanti*, the cleavages which have developed in recent decades between Hindus and Muslims in the city remain pronounced and deeply embedded.

Despite its proximity to Ahmedabad and the communal atmosphere in Gujarat more widely, Mahemdabad peculiarly appeared to lack a similarly intense focus on religious identity as a governing principle of local social organisation. As I noted earlier in the examples of Lubnaben and Parveen, instances of everyday interaction between Hindus and Muslims form part of the daily routine of chores, amusement and business in the town. In this sense, such instances are neither held as particularly remarkable nor commendable; rather, many locals see interaction between Hindus and Muslims as part of the nature of small town life. In such narratives, noise, pollution and communal tension are located securely within the confines of city life, while ‘traditional’ India remains the preserve of villages. Towns such as Mahemdabad, poised between the unwieldiness of cities and the simple and quiet pace of village life, occupy a comfortable medium ground in which everyday life is relatively provincial, neighbours familiar and routines predictable.

Given the contrast which I encountered between these two places, a central question orienting my research centred upon the role of collective violence (in this case, the 2002 violence in Gujarat) in structuring or producing particular forms of collective identity and organisation and, following upon this, the way in which local factors interact with the wider social and political context in dictating specific forms of social identification. My focus on the Sunni Vohra *samaj* (‘society’) of Mahemdabad, the largest and arguably most powerful Muslim group in the town, acts as a means of exploring both these questions. Given its status as both a prominent component of the larger local Muslim community as well as a group which has traditionally maintained important business and cultural connections with the town’s Hindu merchants, the Sunni Vohra *samaj* challenges simplistic Hindu/Muslim dichotomies which have become commonplace when speaking about contemporary Gujarat. Taking the Sunni Vohra *samaj* as its primary focus, this thesis explores the plurality of ‘Muslim

identity' as it is defined and negotiated in the town of Mahemdabad and, at a broader level, the functional role played by religious identity in the practice of everyday life through the forging and maintenance of business networks, friendships, political alliances, religious practice and housing patterns.

II. Approaches to the study of ethnic and religious identity

One of the main aims of this thesis is to interrogate prevalent facile assumptions about the opposition between 'Muslims' and 'Hindus' which have gained increased prevalence with the rise of religious nationalism in the Subcontinent. That there is no such thing as a unitary 'Muslim' or 'Hindu' identity has by now been well established and the wealth of ethnographic studies coupled with a basic knowledge of Indian social diversity are sufficient to establish this as an indisputable fact.

On a broad level, the study of identity has constituted a focus of academic debate for several decades spanning the work not only of social scientists but also literary critics and psychoanalysts. While a firm consensus has yet to be established regarding the particularities of the expression and properties of identity, the general scholarly consensus today rests upon the assertion that, in contrast to its portrayal in popular and media discourses, identity is neither a fixed nor singular essence which individuals or social groups possess. Rather, as Hall (1991, 1996) has argued, identities are multiple and fragmented and, at their core, 'constructed through, not outside, difference' (Hall 1996: 4). The notion that identities do not rely on an inherent essence but, rather, are constructed through 'the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks' (*ibid.*) demonstrates the interactional process through which they are created. Following on from this, scholars such as Moore (1994) have pointed out in relation to feminist studies and Hall (1991) with respect to debates on multiculturalism that individuals contain within themselves multiple identities simultaneously: at any given time, class, gender, caste, and sexuality identities, among others, are juggled, both orienting the subject and competing with one another for prominence.

What, then, are the factors that impel particular subjectivities or forms of identity to emerge at various points and in different contexts? Clearly, the larger economic and

political context in which groups and individuals exist has a profound impact on self-representation as well as the modalities of engagement with others. As Hall (1991) has recounted regarding his own experience as a Jamaican migrant in the UK, it was only after migrating to the UK that he began to classify himself (and was classified by others) as 'black'. Prior to this, as a Jamaican living in Jamaica, social classification and identity revolved not around race *per se* but around the various gradations in skin colour among 'black' Jamaicans.

In a similar way to the classification of all non-white British using the umbrella term 'black' in Hall's recounting, the significant diversity among Indian Muslims is often obscured under a larger communal discourse which casts monolithic and undifferentiated groups of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' against one another in the push and pull of local and regional politics. Yet, as several anthropologists working on South Asia (Hansen 2001: 2-3; Bénéï 2008: 3; van der Veer 1987: 284) have argued, identities are not primordial essences but rather are heavily shaped by wider political processes. In his study of the town of Ayodhya,⁷ van der Veer (*ibid.*) has addressed this very point, particularly with relation to the way in which religious identity cannot be seen as immune from larger social and political contexts:

The notion of Hindu identity— being a Hindu and acting as such— is an option open to the social actor who may articulate, underplay or stress the identity, depending on the situation, in which he finds himself. He is of course not 'free' to choose, since identity-formation can be seen as the result of forces operating on the individual and the group from within, and those impinging on them from without.

Identity, thus, is both highly flexible and deeply influenced by the larger context and particular situation in which an individual is located. With specific regard to religious experience, we cannot disassociate forms of subjectivity, while often understood as deeply personal and individualised, from wider social relations and group affinities. As such, individuals are at once shaped by caste, class, gender and religious factors which interact and surface in different ways depending on the larger political and

⁷ The city of Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, marks the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram and is one of the most important Hindu pilgrimage sites in India. Since 1992 when Hindu nationalist activists destroyed the Babri Masjid mosque which they claimed had been built on the ruins of a Hindu temple dedicated to Ram, Ayodhya has also become emblematic of the rise of Hindu nationalism and inter-religious conflict.

economic context as well as personal factors in everyday life. As I describe in the next section, contemporary notions of ‘Muslim identity’ in India have been moulded by the specific history of the Subcontinent as well as broader global trends of post-colonialism and the rise of the nation-state.

III. The question of Muslim identity in contemporary India

As several scholars working on contemporary Muslim societies have argued, it is important to understand ‘Muslimness’ not simply as a matter of religious faith but, moreover, as a source of cultural and social identity. In her work on Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, Bringa (1995: 7-8) has suggested that Islam constitutes ‘a moral system on which collective identity is based’ and, as such, it is important to make ‘a distinction between Islam as a social identity, as a set of formal doctrines, and as actual beliefs and practices’.

While there is no doubt a significant overlap between notions of Islam as a faith and Islam as a social demarcator (Jalal 2000), the way in which ‘Muslimness’ is constructed locally inevitably relies on both religious practice as well as cultural understandings of ethnic difference. As such, debates about ‘Muslim identity’ cannot be confined to theological questions about techniques of worship or the interpretation of holy texts but extend to modes of dress, habitation patterns, gender roles and understandings of morality, all of which can be said to lie both within and beyond the domain of everyday religion. As Manger (1999: 19) has argued, rather than attempting to classify particular beliefs, customs and identities as either Muslim or non-Muslim, scholars should instead focus on the particular discourses which ‘confer meaning to individual life wherever it is positioned, and help create “identity-space”, in which a person can lead a life that everywhere, including in Muslim communities, is characterized by change and flux’.

As is the case for other religious groups in India more widely, there remains enormous diversity among Muslims in India with regard to language, class, sect, religious practice, region and occupation. While the community as a whole often gets lumped together as a rhetorically and politically homogeneous entity, in fact there remain significant contestations regarding how Muslims should relate to other

religious communities in India, the Indian state and the wider Islamic *ummah*. Moreover, what it means to be ‘Muslim’ in India is a question that remains largely unanswered and, as I will show in this thesis, there exists significant disagreement even at the local level.

Contemporary sociological and popular understandings of Indian Muslims are inevitably constructed through and from particular political, economic and social contexts. Historians have aptly demonstrated the degree to which, contrary to common Hindutva narratives, the notion of bounded religious communities of ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ is in fact a relatively recent development in South Asia. As Gilmartin and Lawrence (2000: 4) and Khan (2004b) have noted, terms such as ‘Hindu’, ‘Turk’ and ‘*mleccha*⁸’ were often used in precolonial India to refer to ethnic and geographic groups without necessarily carrying particular religious connotations.

While several scholars have pointed to the specific policies implemented by British colonial administrators in explaining contemporary divisions along religious and caste lines in South Asian society (Dirks 2001, Pandey 1990; Cohn 1987), others have suggested that while state power plays an important role in community formation, it cannot be held as solely responsible. With relation to current conceptions of religious identity in India, van der Veer (1994: 30) argues that, in addition to acknowledging the role of the state in determining how ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ collectivities are defined, the way in which particular religious institutions and practices have contributed to these identities (namely, in the case of Muslims, Islamic reformist movements and Sufi cults) must also be taken into consideration.

The role of recent history since the end of British rule in India and the creation of separate Indian and Pakistani nation-states can likewise not be ignored. The events of Partition in 1947 with its momentous bloodshed and violence have, according to many, indelibly given way to a heightening in the importance of religious affiliation as the primary signifier of difference on both a state as well as ‘cultural’ level within South Asia. Writing on the importance of Partition and Independence in the reification of ‘Muslim’ identity, Pandey (1999, 2002) has suggested that these events

⁸ From the Sanskrit, meaning ‘impure’ or ‘unclean’. The term was used to denote non-Brahminical castes and tribes, including Muslims and members of other foreign communities (Khan 2004b: 160).

served at once to reinforce the status of Indian Muslims as a minority community in the new Indian nation-state and, concomitantly, to brand them as an endemically suspect population whose interests and loyalties were assumed to lie with Pakistan. In Pandey's words, since Partition:

Few people now cared to differentiate carefully among the Muslims of India. The regional, caste and occupational markers by which generations of Muslims had been known—and privileged, denigrated, or even declared to be only “half-Muslims”—seemed to lose much of their significance. The Muslims were now, more and more—in official documents, in journalism, and in common conversation—simply “Muslims,” and all of them were suspect as open or closet Pakistanis. (1999: 614-15)

The sense of a homogeneous Muslim community alluded to here is one that still holds considerable sway today: namely, the assumption that the ‘Muslim community’ is internally cohesive and unified, whether it be as a political voting bloc, underground terrorist network in tow with Pakistani intelligence agencies or a religious collective intent on maintaining conservative and out-dated social codes. Yet, as Hansen (2000, 2001) has demonstrated in the case of Mumbai, such assumptions do not hold water when examined at a grassroots level. Focusing on the period following the 1992-93 riots in the city, Hansen describes the competing factions within Mumbai’s Muslim community, all of which sought to speak for and represent their heterogeneous constituents. Contrary to colonial discourses which hold the realm of politics to be separate from that of culture and community, Hansen’s analysis undermines the idea of a reified Muslim community by showing how new forms of political assertion among lower-status Muslims in the *mohallas* had begun to compete with the authority of traditional figures primarily drawn from the religious elite and upper-status groups.

The subject of this thesis follows upon Hansen’s attempt to understand how ‘Muslimness’ is understood in the local context and the multiple forces which come together to construct a particular identity—one that is inevitably contested and negotiated. In the case of Mahemdabad, larger political forces such as the communal policies in the state and the legacy of the 2002 anti-Muslim violence combine with local networks of power, codes of moral behaviour and inter-group competition. In particular, I focus on the Sunni Vohra *samaj* (‘society’), a Muslim group which occupies a distinctive position within the interstices of local social, religious and economic relations. Through an analysis of the Sunni Vohras of Mahemdabad and

their relation to other local Muslims and Hindus, I explore questions relating to identity, Islam and the role of collective violence in regulating everyday social relations in the town.

IV. Muslims in India: Why the Sunni Vohras?

Indian Muslims constitute 13.5 percent of India's population⁹ and the second largest national Muslim population in the world (Zissis 2007). Despite making up the largest minority community in the country, however, Muslims continue to face significant social, economic and political disadvantages when compared to the Hindu majority and other socioreligious minorities. As documented by Rajinder Sachar Committee Report (SCR) commissioned by the central government and released in November 2006, the socioeconomic status of Indian Muslims is only slightly better than that of members of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and worse than groups denoted as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Citing overall trends in poverty and discrimination against Muslims, the report includes detailed data on indices ranging from literacy levels, participation in the formal economic sector and representation in policymaking bodies as evidence towards larger claims of the community's low socioeconomic standing.

Interestingly, Indian Muslims in Gujarat fare relatively well compared to Muslims elsewhere in India, particularly in relation to those living in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Data on literacy rates, employment in government positions and the number of Muslim sub-castes which receive reservations in educational and public employment quotas suggest that overall Gujarati Muslims occupy a comparatively good position, both with respect to Hindus as a broader category (including SCs and STs as well as caste Hindus) as well as Muslims in other regions of India. The higher position of Muslims in Gujarat reported by the SCR is also supported by other recent studies, such as that conducted by Hasan and Menon (2006) on the economic, political and social status of Muslim women in India, particularly in comparison to Hindu women.

⁹ Census of India (2001)

While studies such as the SCR and Hasan and Menon (2006) evaluate the status of Muslims from a state and regional perspective, by necessity they overlook the considerable diversity that exists at the local level. Gujarat continues to be one of the most diverse states in India, both with respect to the majority Hindu population as well as to other religious groups. Its key position on the Indian Ocean, long history of trade with the Middle East and East Africa, the length of its coastline and the significant migration to the state from other regions in India as well as from abroad has resulted in a wide spectrum of economic, social and religious strata which greatly exceeds many other areas of the Subcontinent. The Muslim community itself, which forms 8.8 percent of the total population for the state,¹⁰ ranges from the Sidi caste, descended from African slaves brought to India during the Delhi Sultanate, and indigenous trading groups such as Daudi Bohras, Sunni Vohras, and Khojas to recent migrants from other regions of India drawn to urban areas such as Ahmedabad and Surat looking for work.

Despite both the diversity of the community as well as its relatively high status when compared to its counterparts in other regions, Muslims in Gujarat continue to suffer significant discrimination, both in the form of institutionalised bias in communal policies at the level of local and state government as well as on a more informal basis. Since the 1980s, grassroots Hindutva campaigns have, in many parts of the state, successfully branded Muslims as anti-nationalist, extremist and deeply implicated in (if not responsible for) terrorist attacks in India. Combined with a backlash against the community as a result of perceptions that they have been favoured as part of larger electoral strategies utilised by the Indian National Congress party¹¹ in the state, such efforts have succeeded in creating a deeply communal atmosphere in Gujarat in which, for the most part, Muslims remain marginalised and stigmatised.

Yet, as alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, the status of Muslims and the wider relations between local Hindus and Muslims in Mahemdabad do not conform to easy generalisations drawn from media and academic depictions of contemporary Gujarat. In particular, the Sunni Vohra community which constituted the primary focus of my research defied early expectations on my part about how 'Muslims' in Gujarat interact

¹⁰ According to the Census of India (2001), the total Gujarat population is estimated at 50,670,017.

¹¹ Henceforth referred to as the 'Congress party'.

with other religious groups and locate themselves within the paradigm of ‘Muslim identity’.

At first glance, a focus on the Sunni Vohras may seem incidental to understanding larger patterns of communalisation (or lack thereof) and identity formation in South Asia. As a mercantile group indigenous to Gujarat, Sunni Vohras in many ways resemble local Hindus in their customs and practices more than other Muslim groups. As I show in Chapter 2, the large majority of Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad speak Gujarati as their primary language (rather than Hindi), Vohra women wear the *sari* on everyday as well as festive occasions, and Vohras have traditionally lived among other Hindu merchants in the main market area of the town. Moreover, many other Muslim groups in the town dismiss Vohras as motivated above all by profit and money rather than more salient concerns of honour and social respectability. As such, the community cannot be said to stand for a typical Muslim group in Gujarat, or western India more generally. Given this, how can a focus on what appears to be a largely atypical group tell us about either ‘Muslimness’ or communal relations in India on a larger level?

In this thesis, I argue that a focus on Sunni Vohras is important for two main reasons: firstly, and most obviously, it points to the ongoing diversity that exists among Muslims in India, despite ongoing efforts to privilege religious identity over other forms of collective identification in the state of Gujarat. In this respect, I concur with Hall’s characterisation of identity as fluid and negotiated. While Sunni Vohras maintain a distinct identity in some respects from other local Muslim groups, at the same time, there also exist particular modes of being ‘Muslim’ in the town, specifically within the confines of gendered behaviour and religious practice, and in relation to shared status as a target of communal policies and violence which unite the diverse Muslim groups in Mahemdabad. Given this, a study of the Sunni Vohras throws into relief the nuances with which religious identity and group formation are constructed, and the points of contention which exist alongside the general consensus.

Secondly, the thesis focuses on Sunni Vohras as a means to examine the continuing importance of caste and class, alongside religious identity, in everyday life in Gujarat. While the significance of particular factors fluctuates according to both macro- and

micro-events, the thesis posits that despite the current communal climate in Gujarat, not all can be reduced to a Hindu/Muslim dichotomy. The significant economic, political and numerical presence of Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad and their strong links with local Hindu merchants succeed in at once preventing the formation of a united Muslim community in the town and, simultaneously, contributing to occupational, caste- and class-based solidarities and alliances.

V. Researching Mahemdabad

The town of Mahemdabad, in which I conducted the majority of my research for this thesis, stands in distinct contrast to its larger urban neighbouring cities in which religious and class segregation are manifest. A dusty bazaar town, the largely dilapidated remnants of its glorious past as the centre of Mahmud Begra's renowned sultanate in the fifteenth century now stand alongside the cement edifices of recently built bungalows and businesses stained in parts by mildew marks brought on by past rainy seasons. The centre of the town is criss-crossed by the main streets of the *bajar* where merchants sell their wares from shops along the road, wooden carts parked in various conspicuous places and from pieces of cloth spread out on the ground.

Unlike many other more recently established towns in India which consist predominantly of concrete and dust, Mahemdabad's long history gives it a unique appeal, and it combines some of the modern amenities of larger cities with the provincial and tranquil atmosphere more characteristic of smaller villages. Indian towns have largely escaped the notice of both anthropologists and sociologists who have traditionally confined their studies to villages (beginning with what are now viewed as classic village ethnographies such as Srinivas [1952]; Mayer [1960]; Béteille [1971], to name but a few) or, beginning in the 1960s, larger urban cities and settlements (Singer 1961; Vatuk 1972; Rao 1974). While some notable exceptions do exist (Fox 1969; Gupta 1988; Simpson 2001), Indian towns have on the whole been largely neglected, or, at least, their political, economic and social context has been assumed to be commensurate with that of larger cities.

The research was carried out over a period of 15 months between January 2005 and April 2006. Given the politically sensitive atmosphere throughout much of Gujarat

during this period, particularly with respect to the Muslim minority, participant observation and informal interviews formed a significant component of my research. During the first few months in Mahemdabad, I conducted semi-formal interviews with local community leaders such as directors of banks, school principals, politicians, municipality employees and other prominent personalities. Such interviews enabled me to form a broad impression of the physical layout of the town as well as acquire a general understanding of local political, administrative and economic institutions, the inter-relation of caste and power structures, and the particular issues deemed pressing and salient to prominent locals.

During the period of research I lived with two families: for the first five-month stretch I stayed in the home of a friend with whom I had previously worked in Ahmedabad who lived with his extended family in Mahemdabad; following that, I lived as a 'paying guest' with a second family living in a nearby *pol* a few minutes walk away. Both houses were situated in the centre of the town near Nadiad Derwaja (the old gate to the town leading to the road for the city of Nadiad). The two families with whom I lived were both Hindu: the first from the Vania caste and the second from the OBC Kaccha-Patel caste. Given the focus of my research, I had originally planned to live with a Muslim family but, after making several inquiries, was told that no suitable accommodation was available. While such an arrangement would have been ideal as a means of understanding the intimate politics and relations of everyday life for Muslims living in the town, I am confident that living with Hindu families did not significantly hinder the final results of my research. As is true for many dimensions of everyday life in the town and conceptions of social status and propriety, what was most important to both Hindu and Muslim informants was that I was attached to a respectable family with a long-standing presence in the town who would be willing to vouch for the ethics of my character and the purpose of my research. My relation to the Vania family with whom I originally lived was seen as a good testament to these credentials: the now-deceased grandfather had, during his lifetime, been a wealthy businessman in Mahemdabad and the parents had been active in local politics. While their status in the town has somewhat waned after the wealth accumulated by the grandfather was depleted in failing businesses, the family has retained its middle-class and respectable reputation and the second son (my friend, Urvish), in particular, is locally admired for his successful career in journalism and progressive views.

The second family I lived with held a less prominent position within the town but had established a thriving vegetable business in Mahemdabad's central market, the proceeds from which they had used to buy and renovate a three-storey house in the *Vadni kadki* (literally 'Banyan tree *kadki*'), a *pol* inhabited primarily by Brahmins, Patels and Kaccha-Patels. In contrast to the Vania family with whom I first lived, Vinitbhai and his wife did not form part of the traditional elite of the town. Rather, they were part of a growing lower-caste contingent of the town who, through government reservations and the accumulation of financial capital, had begun to successfully achieve middle-class status. Despite a lack of 'pedigree', Vinitbhai and his wife were intent that their two sons would not continue in the vegetable-selling business and, like many other middle-class and elite families, put significant pressure on them to do well in school and, to this end, had invested large amounts of money in afterschool tuition classes.

As a means of establishing a broad demographic overview of the local Muslim community, I set out to complete a household survey in the first months of my research. While the task provided me with some information and allowed me to establish rapport with a number of Muslim families, I decided ultimately to abort the effort for two main reasons. Firstly, I was told in confidence that the survey cast me in a suspicious light by many respondents who did not understand the nature or purpose of my research. This was particularly the case given the recent history in the town of Hindutva activists allegedly posing as census-data collectors and government servants and visiting Muslim homes to compile a list of Muslim-owned businesses and property to later use in targeted attacks. Secondly, my status as an unmarried woman made the project questionable given that it required me to walk around the town on my own visiting the homes of strangers. Given these predicaments, I ultimately decided to rely on a handbook of the Mahemdabad Sunni Vohra Samaj, published in 1998, for the demographic data on the community. As I describe at greater length in Chapter 3, the handbook (or *pustak*) provides detailed information on each Sunni Vohra living in the town including their age, marital status, name, educational qualifications attained, employment and address. In addition, I was able to obtain similar handbooks produced for the cities of Ahmedabad and Thasra which were

useful in providing a comparative perspective as well as insights into the organisation of these communities more generally.

In order to conduct in-depth ethnographic research, I learned to speak and write Gujarati, both prior to the research as well as during my time spent in India through weekly lessons in Ahmedabad. My interactions with local respondents took place in both Gujarati and English.

During the second half of my research, I worked with a research assistant. As a member of the Ahmedabad Sunni Vohra community, her presence significantly facilitated my research: in addition to acting as a female chaperone during my visits to respondents' homes (a single woman wandering around on her own outside the home, I was told, was not commendable), her knowledge of the Sunni Vohras in Ahmedabad proved a helpful point of reference in my attempts to understand the similarities and differences in the social organisation of the various Muslim groups in Mahemdabad.

VI. Methodological challenges

The greatest challenges I faced in conducting the research lay in the larger communal atmosphere in Gujarat and the legacy of the 2002 violence in the town and other parts of the state. Understandably, my long-term presence in the town created a significant amount of suspicion, in particular from local Muslims, making it important for me to build relationships of trust and openness with local respondents. From the beginning of my research I clearly informed new acquaintances of both my background (and my American nationality) as well as the scope and purpose of my stay in Mahemdabad.

Apart from discussing the 2002 violence during the beginning stages of the research in semi-informal interviews with community leaders (who, as spokespeople for different social contingents in the town, showed little hesitancy in discussing the events), I treated the subject with particular reserve with other local Mahemdabadis. From prior experience in broaching politically sensitive topics, I chose to bring the subject up only once a relationship of trust had been built over a period of time or, instead, to allow respondents to allude to the topic of their own accord. While in other contexts such reserve may have been unnecessary, I found Mahemdabadis generally to be particularly wary of 'outsiders' (including, but not limited to, foreign

researchers) and, as such, my instinct was to avoid hasty inquiries regarding the 2002 violence.

A further challenge to the research involved difficulties typically encountered in urban ethnographic research. Given the size of Mahemdabad (population of 30,000), it was impossible to conduct in-depth research for the town as a whole or even, for that matter, the Muslim community in its entirety. While the focus of my study, the Sunni Vohra community, was generally concentrated in particular parts of the town (Khatrej Darvaja, Nadiad Darvaja, the Vohra Society), these sites were located in different parts of the town, ultimately compelling me to choose one as the primary site of my research. As such, the bulk of my research was conducted with families and respondents in a 'mixed' area of the town (in which I lived for the first five months of my tenure) and, additionally, in Muslim-only areas in the eastern part of Mahemdabad. The qualitative findings from participation observation and informal interviews were coupled with broader demographic data obtained through the handbooks to form my overall ethnographic conclusions.

Lastly, my status as an unmarried American woman presented a significant challenge in conducting interviews as well as research outside the home. As is usually the case with newcomers, when I first arrived I was seen as an object of fascination and local Mahemdabadis of various castes, classes and religious affiliations were eager to make my acquaintance and invite me to their homes. During this period, the novelty of my presence was enough to counter any suspicions about my intentions, background or character and it was not until several months into my fieldwork that local friends and acquaintances began to question the intentions of my research. Such ambivalences on the part of my informants were motivated, on one hand, by the fact that I am a US citizen which provoked suspicions that I was acting as an undercover agent of an American security agency bent on exposing 'Islamic terrorism' and, on the other, by my status as an unmarried woman whose family had apparently agreed to allow me to spend a significant amount of time in an unknown and unfamiliar place.

As a woman, the research proved to be more difficult to explain given the stringent gender norms common among local Muslims (and, to a lesser extent, among Hindus and Christians). That I was unmarried and 'roaming' about the town on my own,

visiting the homes of 'strangers' during the first period of my research was viewed with scepticism by many local Muslims who interpreted this as a potential sign of my lack of sexual chastity and respectability more generally. Given the importance that the majority of Muslim families place on women staying within the confines of the home, my conspicuous presence in the town and frequent trips to nearby cities was often questioned by respondents.

Establishing relationships with local Muslim women proved to be more difficult than originally envisioned and, despite the flurry of invitations on my arrival in the town, the main points of contact for such visits were often men. The majority of my female informants spent the bulk of the day within the home, waking early in the morning to wash the family's clothes and prepare food, and taking a few hours' break only once the mid-day meal had been served. By mid-afternoon, further household chores awaited and often the day's work would not end until the later hours of the evening. As such, the bulk of my meetings with local female respondents took place in their homes; visits with male respondents, on the other hand, generally took place either in shops which opened on to the street (and were, hence, visible to the public) or in the company of female kin.

Given the nature of the research, much of my time was spent paying visits to the homes of local women and participating in spheres of local social life deemed appropriate for women such as Sufi shrines, schools and beauty parlours, as well as accompanying respondents on occasional trips to visit relatives. Inevitably, certain areas of social life which would have enriched my research considerably were off-limits to me as a woman. Because of constraints on my mobility, I was unable to gain access to most male-only forums, particularly those in which younger unmarried men spent time. In particular, local political meetings (informal and formal), the late-night hot-spots of the town where young men would congregate and the inner chambers of Sufi shrines were spaces which, as a woman, I was not privy to. At the same time, I was able to access female spaces where a male anthropologist in my position would not be welcome and engage in intimate conversation and establish relationships which gave me an important insight into the experience of Muslim women in the town. Despite the methodological difficulties in gaining access to middle-class Muslim women who, aside from a handful of cases from more educated backgrounds, are

usually not consulted for their opinions on larger political and social issues, the research was important in providing a more gender-balanced perspective on the position of Muslims in contemporary Gujarat.

VII. Outline of chapters

The layout of the thesis reflects the two-pronged approach I adopted in understanding Muslim identity, entailing an assessment of the specific case of the Sunni Vohras as well as a broader analysis of how ‘Muslimness’ more generally was understood in the town among both Vohras as well as non-Vohra Muslims.

In the first chapter, I provide historical background to both the town of Mahemdabad and the larger region of Gujarat in order to situate the ethnographic argument of the study. Additionally, the chapter establishes the general setting of the town, including a description of housing trends, education and local politics. The chapter argues that in all these domains, factors of caste and class play an important role in dictating patterns of local social organisation and hierarchy. While religious identity is not irrelevant, it does not form the crux of everyday relations in the town.

Chapters two and three focus specifically on the Mahemdabad Sunni Vohra *samaj* and their place within the town as well as on the wider Muslim community. Chapter two examines ‘Vohra identity’ in Mahemdabad, in particular how it is construed in opposition to ‘Muslim identity’ as conceived by other groups within Mahemdabad such as Maleks. The chapter presents an analysis of the community from both a historical and ethnographic perspective and engages with debates concerning questions of social organisation among Indian Muslims, in particular with respect to the question of whether Muslims can be said to have a ‘caste system’. By examining discourses of ‘Muslimness’ in Mahemdabad among both Vohras as well as non-Vohra Muslim groups, I suggest that in the local context such questions revolve predominantly around issues of honour, proximity to local Hindus and everyday practices regarding dress, business networks and language. As such, Vohras base their identity more heavily on their status as a mercantile community than as a distinctly and overtly ‘Muslim’ group.

In Chapter three, the question of ‘Vohra identity’ is analysed through the lens of kinship and the strong emphasis placed on community endogamy among Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad. In contrast to other indigenous Muslim groups in the town whose marital preferences revolve around class, education, occupation as well as caste, Vohras place strict regulations on marrying within the *samaj* and, in this chapter, I detail the kinship organisation through which marriages are arranged. This practice, I argue, is a consequence of their status as a mercantile community which entails the heavy intertwining of business and kin alliances and ensures that notions of trust are key to both professional and family networks. Such practices, I argue, are central to encouraging unity within the wider Sunni Vohra regional network and are closely linked to the *samaj*’s strong sense of identity within the local landscape.

In contrast to Chapters two and three, the following three chapters take as their focus the Muslim community in Mahemdabad more generally. In analysing local manifestations and understandings of Muslim identity in Mahemdabad, I chose to focus on the Sunni Vohras as a means of examining both difference as it was construed among various Muslim groups in the town as well as the set of shared practices and ideologies which constitute Mahemdabadi Muslims as a group. Following upon notions of identity and difference (Hall 1991, 1996) as described earlier in this section, I argue that notions of Muslimness in Mahemdabad, while contested, are heavily shaped by local nexuses of power.

This duality is evident in the way in which gendered roles and norms are regulated among Muslim groups in the town. In particular, notions of honour (*ijrat*) are heavily influenced by the behaviour and conduct of women. While this is certainly not peculiar to Mahemdabad’s Muslims and is the case more widely within South Asia, Chapter four focuses on the way in which gendered norms and stereotypes unite the town’s various Muslim communities and contribute to a clear sense of ‘Muslim identity’ through a set of shared values regarding family and community honour. In this respect, while Vohras may differ from other local Muslims in some respects, the standards and ideals by which women and men are held function as a means of uniting them with the wider Muslim community in Mahemdabad.

As noted earlier, there is considerable overlap between ‘Islam as faith’ and ‘Islam as social demarcator’ and it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line between these two forms of subjectivity. From the considerable literature on *adab*,¹² or moral conduct according to Islamic tenets, it is clear that the behaviour expected for pious Muslims is intricately bound up with notions of personhood predicated on a distinctly Islamic lifestyle and morality. Moreover, the emphasis within Islam on individual members belonging to the larger *ummah* suggests that categories of ‘the individual’ and ‘the collective’ cannot be held in isolation from one another in the everyday practice of Islam.

On an ethnographic level, Muslims in Mahemdabad are fully aware of their status as members of the larger Islamic community and, more immediately, of their position as a marginalised minority within the state of Gujarat and the larger Indian nation-state. In contrast to other recent anthropological depictions of Indian Muslims, however, religious practice and ideology does not pose an area of contestation between rival factions within the town. As such, there is little debate within the community over practices such as Sufi ‘saint worship’ which have elsewhere in South Asia become hot-button issues for distinguishing ‘proper’ adherents of the Islamic faith from those deemed backward and superstitious. In Chapter 5, I highlight the degree to which ‘Muslimness’ on a local level need not necessarily be constructed around religious debates *per se* but rather, as demonstrated in previous chapters, social practices which are not located exclusively within the confines of religious worship.

Unsurprisingly, Mahemdabad has not been impervious to the legacy of the 2002 violence in Gujarat or the ongoing communal policies and atmosphere which continue to haunt the state. Chapter 6 focuses specifically on the ways in which social relations between Hindus and Muslims more widely, as well as within the Muslim community *per se*, have (and have not) changed since the attacks in March and April 2002 in the town. I argue that the violence, while ‘productive’ in the sense that it indelibly altered local perceptions of Mahemdabad’s immunity from ‘urban’ problems of communalism (as well as reinforced the generalised sense of insecurity among Muslims), was not in itself sufficient to either foment a long-standing solidarity

¹² See, for example, the edited volume by Metcalf (1984) for contributions on *adab* in the South Asian context.

between the various Muslim groups or severe ties between contingents of the Hindu and Muslim communities. The 2002 attacks in the town, levelled against Muslim property and businesses as well as, in the subsequent backlash, against local Harijan¹³ homes, provide an important touchstone with which to locate broader social relations within Mahemdabad and the position of Muslims in relation to the Hindu majority.

¹³ Although there are many terms that can be used to refer to the group formerly known as 'untouchables' because of their status at the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system, I will use the word 'Harijan' (the term originally coined by Mahatma Gandhi meaning, literally, 'Children of God') as it is the term that the group use themselves, as well as the term that my Muslim informants used.

Chapter 1: Setting and background

1.1. Introduction

On most mornings, the platforms of the Mahemdabad train station are lined with a motley crowd of commuters travelling to one of the nearby cities. Approaching trains are announced with a series of rings from the station manager: for those travelling in the direction of Ahmedabad, five rings indicate that the next train has just left the Nadiad station (15 minutes distance from Mahemdabad), three rings alert them that it will soon approach the station. Students of various levels and ages, industrial workers, office professionals and local farmers carting large iron jugs of milk appended to the outside rails of the train's windows all compete for space in the carriages heading to Ahmedabad, Nadiad and Vadodara. All compartments are usually full to the brink, even the earmarked carriage for *bhajan* sessions in which, often to the dismay of other passengers, a steady set of regular commuters carries out daily sessions of group singing followed by the distribution of *prasad*¹⁴ as the train nears its destination.

Among the many historical remnants in the town, Mahemdabad's train station dates back to when Gujarat formed part of the larger Bombay Presidency under British rule. With a current population of just over 30,000 (Census of India 2001), Mahemdabad has expanded considerably over the last century although it still remains a relatively provincial outpost when compared to its larger urban counterparts. Although its population has increased, however, it has experienced a decrease in its prominence in the region, from its inception in A.D. 1479 as the capital of Sultan Mahmud Begra's territory to its current (and more humble) status as a commuter town and administrative centre for the *taluka* (subdistrict) which bears its name.

In this chapter, I provide a rough overview of the larger setting in which my research was conducted including a brief historical glimpse of the state of Gujarat and the Kheda district in which the town of Mahemdabad is located along with a more detailed description of the town itself and, in particular, the way in which class and caste continue to impact upon everyday life with regard to local politics, education

¹⁴ Blessed food distributed to devotees.

and housing trends. Despite the prominence of religious identity in contemporary Gujarat, I argue that this form of collective identity is only one of various factors upon which social organisation is predicated. As such, local strategies and aspirations surrounding social mobility and prestige continue to be founded very much on the establishment of middle-class status and a set of consumption and lifestyle practices which are shared across both religious and caste boundaries.

1.2. Gujarat: Merchants, peasant nationalists and Hindutva

The state of Gujarat, located in western India, was formed in 1960 when the erstwhile Bombay State (formerly the Bombay Presidency prior to Indian independence from Britain) was split into two linguistic regions, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Ranked as the fourth in per capita income for the past two decades among the major states in India, Gujarat today stands out as one of the most industrialised states in the country contributing more than 13 percent of national industrial production (Hirway and Mahadevia 2004).

In the popular imagination, the state remains closely associated with its past as a mercantile gateway between the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East, Europe and West Africa, as well as the place of origin of the far-reaching Gujarati diaspora now dispersed throughout India as well as much of the rest of the world. With a coastline of 1,600 km (over one-fourth of the total coastline of the entire country), maritime trade has in the past been particularly central to the political and economic development of the region, and prominent Gujarati port cities such as Cambay (present-day Khambat) and Surat have acted as important gateways to the Indian Ocean. The immense human and material traffic which has travelled through the state has likewise impacted upon the sociological diversity of present-day Gujarat. *The People of India* series conducted by the Anthropological Survey of India in 1980 documents that Gujarat stands foremost in this regard among the larger states in India with 70 percent of the communities surveyed in the area reporting their origin outside the state (quoted in Yagnik and Sheth 2005: 2). This diversity is true for Muslims as well as Hindus: the same survey suggests that, while the percentage and sheer number of Muslims in the state do not rival those in larger states such as Uttar Pradesh,

Jammu and Kashmir, Gujarat maintains by far the highest diversity in terms of Muslim communities than any other state in India.

In addition to its importance as a mercantile hub, Gujarat has also played a pivotal role in India's political development, in particular during its struggle for independence from Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. Mohandas Gandhi, India's great nationalist leader, was born in the city of Porbandar in the Saurashtra region of the state and in 1917 founded his first ashram (which he called the '*satyagraha*¹⁵ ashram') on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Many of Gandhi's early *satyagrahas*, aimed at reforming the ills of Indian society and at protesting against British rule, were concentrated in Gujarat. The Dandi Salt March of 1930 is perhaps the most famous of these in which Gandhi led thousands of Indians from his Ahmedabad ashram to the town of Dandi in Surat District to protest against the salt tax imposed by the British and forge momentum for a national movement to gain independence.

In addition to Gandhi, other important figures in India and Pakistan's national inceptions have traced their origins to Gujarat including Muhammad Ali Jinnah,¹⁶ the first Governor-General of Pakistan and one of the foremost leaders of the Muslim League, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, another important leader in India's struggle for independence and the first Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of independent India.

Despite Gujarat's celebrated place in India's struggle for independence from the British Empire, the state has gained a resolutely different form of national and international notoriety in recent years due to the massive violence against and intimidation of religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians which has been perpetrated through various arms of the Sangh Parivar. Most notably, the state has gained a reputation as 'the laboratory of Hindutva' with the massive violence against the Muslim minority set in motion on February 27 2002 when two train carriages carrying *kar sevaks* (Hindu nationalist activists) on their way back from Ayodhya

¹⁵ The term *satyagraha* was originally coined by Gandhi and has been translated as meaning 'truth force' or 'demand for truth'. The concept of *satyagraha* refers more broadly to the philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance which Gandhi initiated in several campaigns such as the one he led in Kheda in 1918.

¹⁶ Born in the present-day Pakistani city of Karachi, Jinnah's father was a Gujarati merchant from the Khoja community.

were set on fire while the train was passing through the city of Godhra in eastern Gujarat. Graphic images of the burnt carriages along with the corpses of the 58 people killed in the fire (the majority of whom were women and children) were broadcast on TV and printed in Gujarati-language newspapers across the state alleging that the fire had been started by Muslim food hawkers in the Godhra train station after a disagreement with the *kar sevaks* travelling on the train. Some news reports, furthermore, maintained that the mutilated bodies of female *kar sevaks* had also been found by the police suggesting that the Muslim hawkers had abducted and raped them (such reports, however, were later proven to be baseless).

While a government commission headed by retired Supreme Court judge Umesh Chandra Banerjee later concluded that the fire on the Godhra train was started as the result of an accident rather than by the Muslim hawkers as originally alleged (BBC 3 March 2006), the ensuing violence which took place across the state has been described as the most brutal and widespread since India's Partition in 1947.¹⁷ Even today, several years after the original carnage, Gujarat retains the reputation as a bastion of Hindu nationalism in which religious minorities continue to face persecution and anyone speaking out against the officially sanctioned Hindu nationalist discourse is bullied and intimidated into silence. Recent accounts (Mander 2007; Sheth and Haeems 2006; Robinson 2005) suggest that relations between Hindus and Muslims have reached an indelible state of polarisation while Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat and arguably one of the most charismatic leaders in all of India, continues to receive significant electoral support and an ongoing level of popularity among a large section of the state's Hindus.

As I describe in more detail in Chapter 6, the 2002 violence was also unprecedented in the extent to which it spread beyond large cities such as Ahmedabad and Vadodara (formerly Baroda) with a long history of communal tension and violence into more remote and rural parts of Gujarat which had previously remained relatively unaffected by the forces of communalism. The town of Mahemdabad in which I conducted my research is one such instance in which factors surrounding caste and class have in the past, and arguably still today, defined the main cleavages in social and political

¹⁷ This said, the destruction and deaths surrounding the Ayodhya campaign which took place in 1992-3 have also been cited as 'the worst communal violence since Partition'.

relations among its inhabitants. In the next section, I give an introduction to Kheda District in which Mahemdabad is located along with a brief historical overview of the town followed by a more detailed description of its current social and political organisation.

1.3. Mahemdabad: A market town in Kheda District

Kheda District, in which the town of Mahemdabad is located, is situated in central Gujarat in the region commonly referred to as the ‘Charotar’¹⁸, celebrated throughout Gujarat for its fertile soil and wealth. Formerly referred to as Caira (or Kaira) under British rule, the District was the site of Gandhi’s first *satyagraha* (the ‘Kheda *satyagraha*’) in 1918; an initiative which originally began as a protest to highlight local peasants’ inability to pay taxes because of failed crops. The Kheda *satyagraha* later developed into the Non-Cooperation Movement which called for the boycott of government titles, educational institutions, law courts, legislatures and foreign cloth. The region continues to attract a significant amount of academic attention particularly from historians (Bates 1981; Hardiman 1981; Chaturvedi 2007; Gidwani 2008) although it has likewise been the focus of anthropological studies such as Pocock (1976) on the Patidar Patels and socio-historical studies such as Shah (2002).

The town of Mahemdabad acts as the local market centre for surrounding villages and is the administrative centre of the Mahemdabad *taluka*. It boasts a hospital and maternity home, several government and private schools, two colleges, a library, the *taluka* court and the offices of the Mahemdabad Municipality. The Mahemdabad railway station lies on the main rail line between Ahmedabad and Bombay, providing easy access to other nearby cities such as Vadodara, Anand and Nadiad (as well as Ahmedabad) for the regular stream of daily commuters working or studying outside Mahemdabad. The bus station next to the railway station connects Mahemdabad to the surrounding villages as well as other local travel destinations.

¹⁸ The Charotar region of Gujarat refers to the area beginning in the city of Nadiad (Kheda District) and extending to the city of Vadodara. Although Mahemdabad does not technically fall into this region, many locals will loosely refer to it as part of the ‘Charotar’ given the region’s wealthy and celebrated reputation.

Despite its proximity to major urban centres such as Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Anand and Nadiad, Mahemdabad retains the feel of a provincial market town and the main *bajar* continues to act as the main gravitational centre of the town. Symbolising the town's energy and daily chaos, the *bajar* continually resounds with the noise of passing rickshaws, the chatter of neighbours and passersby, and the clamouring of bells emanating from Hindu temples or the *azan*¹⁹ of one of the mosques in the town centre. Even into the late hours of the night, the incessant barking of stray dogs, buzzing of mosquitoes and the sonorous rhythms of *bhajan*²⁰ singing are bound to make for a fitful sleep even for local Mahemdabadis. A local friend and native of the town who, under normal conditions was both mild-mannered and averse to conflict, habitually collected stones which he stored on his balcony to employ against the neighbourhood dogs when their howling began to reach particularly egregious levels in the middle of the night. In this sense, despite local assurances that Mahemdabad has none of the 'noise pollution' typical of nearby cities, it can hardly be branded as devoid of the usual energy and commotion found in the majority of Indian urban centres.

On all days save Saturday²¹ when the market is closed, the streets of the main *bajar* are lined with shops open from morning to night catering to local needs. While more specialised purchases are usually reserved for a shopping trip to Ahmedabad or Nadiad, everyday necessities can be easily procured from one of the town's many shops. The area functions as both the residential and commercial centre for many of the town's merchants whose shops act as the interface between the activity of the street and the inner sanctum of the family home. While numerous 'housing societies' have sprung up around the town in recent decades, many local Mahemdabadis continue to live in the traditional *pols* or *kadkis*: 'gated'²² residential streets or areas which are usually inhabited by members of a single caste or, at the least, members of castes from the same socioeconomic level. Imposing albeit slightly run-down mansions testify to the town's prosperous past and stand in opposition to modern

¹⁹ Muslim call to prayer.

²⁰ Hindu devotional song.

²¹ Because many of Ahmedabad's shops are closed on Sunday, businesses in Mahemdabad close, instead, on Saturday.

²² During the medieval period, the *pol* gates were guarded at night to ensure the security of the town's inhabitants (while nowadays the gates are usually kept shut at night, there is not the same level of surveillance except in unusual circumstances).

bungalows in outlying areas which have now come to embody recent financial wealth and success.

While locals often speak of Mahemdabad as a miniature version of Ahmedabad, the town never developed the same level of industrialisation which characterised Ahmedabad (formerly referred to as 'the Manchester of India' because of its many textile mills²³). According to one informant, the former MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) for Mahemdabad intentionally blocked any efforts at developing local industries because he believed that this would result in hampering his own political power. Given the lack of large industrial complexes in the town, there has been relatively little migration from outside to Mahemdabad and, in addition to its role as a market town, Mahemdabad also functions as a commuter town from which professionals, students, factory workers and day-wage labourers travel daily for employment.²⁴

While Mahemdabad remains only a provincial outpost compared to the many sprawling urban centres which surround it, the numerous medieval ruins which still dot the town's landscape testify to its former stature as a centre of political and military power. Many Mahemdabadis (both Hindu and Muslim) speak with pride about their hometown's history and recount the many tales of its namesake, the seventh Sultan of Gujarat and grandson of Ahmed Shah I,²⁵ Mahmud Shah I. Better known by his nickname, Mahmud Begra, he ruled Gujarat between A.D. 1458 and 1511 'in uninterrupted glory and prosperity' (Rajyagor 1977: 77). He founded Mahemdabad in 1479 and built strong embankments along the nearby Vatrak river and 'a palace, handsome buildings and extensive gardens' (*ibid*). During his reign, the longest of all the Sultans of Gujarat, Mahemdabad acted as the capital of the territory over which he presided and the remnants of what was clearly the height of the town's glory are still visible today, albeit more in the form of unkempt ruins which have now become part and parcel of the surroundings. An underground palace, the Bhamariya Kuva, was built around a pool of water by Begra as a means of keeping cool during

²³ The majority of Ahmedabad's textile mills have, since the 1980s, been closed. The resulting unemployment and informalisation of labour have resulted in significant social and economic repercussions, particularly for marginalised and low-income communities (see Breman 2004).

²⁴ According to local municipality officials, there are approximately 6000 people who regularly commute to nearby cities for work or schooling (one fifth of the local population).

²⁵ Ahmed Shah I, one of the first Sultans of Gujarat, founded Ahmedabad in 1411.

the hot summer months. Still fairly intact today, it can be viewed by visitors willing to risk an encounter with the rats and bats which have now become its main inhabitants. The Chandra Suraj Mahel ('Moon Sun Palace'), in contrast, was built by Mahmud Begra on what is now the outskirts of the main town as a monument in memory of his wives (Rajyagor: 78) and has now been reduced to just a few of its original walls. The central *bajar* also boasts one of Gujarat's famous step wells although, barring a sign next to the gate of the well explaining its significance and history, it remains unkempt and riddled with rubbish and other discarded items. As evidence of Mahemdabad's conception as a miniature version of nearby Ahmedabad, locals point to the four 'city gates' leading into the centre of the town which mimic Ahmedabad's twelve *darvajas* (gates)²⁶: Kacheri Darvaja, literally 'court gate' because it is located near the local court; Nadiad Darvaja, the gate leading to the road for the city of Nadiad; Katrej Darvaja leading to the road for the village of Khatrej; and Virol Darvaja leading to the road for the village of Virol.

1.4. Spaces and socialities: Changing living patterns in Mahemdabad

Despite the lack of industrialisation in and immediately around Mahemdabad, the town has certainly grown in the past 50 years although not with the same speed as nearby industrial towns and cities such as Vatva and Ahmedabad.²⁷ A local man in his seventies recounted how when he was married in 1954 the town of Mahemdabad only consisted of the area within the 'four gates' with a population of about 20,000. Today, it has expanded to include the burgeoning number of 'housing societies' and other colonies of Harijan or low-caste Hindus (although these latter must have likewise existed outside the 'four gates' of the town even in 1954).

Approximately one-third of the total population of Mahemdabad is Sunni Muslim (there are no Shi'a Muslims living in the town). Of these, Maleks and Sunni Vohras, both Muslim communities indigenous to India, occupy a dominant position

²⁶ Yagnik and Sheth (2004: 15) suggest that although in more recent times city gates in towns and cities across Gujarat have come to serve primarily as decorative entrances, in the past they functioned as an important means by which a town was fortified and protected.

²⁷ For example, Ahmedabad has grown by 1,900% over the twentieth century as the city's population increased from 185,889 in the beginning of the 1900s (Shani [2007: 25]) to 3,515,361 in 2001 (Census of India 2001).

numerically, politically and economically. Traditionally high-status or *ashraf* ('noble') groups such as Saiyeds and Pathans remain in a distinct minority, a fact that is reflected in their virtual absence from positions of power in local politics or among the town's Muslim business magnates. Aside from Vohras, many of whom continue to live interspersed with Hindus in the *bajar* centre, other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad mainly live in Muslim-only enclaves (which make up most of the eastern part of the town and the surrounding outskirts).

Apart from small pockets of Christians and Sikhs, Hindus comprise the bulk of the remaining population of which the most prominent castes are merchant communities such as Vanias along with Patidar Patels and Brahmins (both of which are also generally involved in business activities). Other prominently represented Hindu castes include service castes such as the Luhar (ironsmiths), Kumbar (potters), Sutar (carpenters), Darji (tailors), Dhobi (clothes washers), Vaghri (a low caste who earn their livelihood through wage labour), Soni (gold sellers), Rabari (cattle herders), Kaccha Patel (vegetable sellers), Bhoi (an Other Backward Class²⁸), Marwari and Sindhi, the majority of which live in the main *bajar* area and its surroundings.

The minority Christian community comprises approximately 100 families and is divided into Catholic and Methodist constituencies. As converts from low-caste Hindu groups, many continue to live on the outskirts of the town in what were formerly colonies for untouchable castes although in recent years the more socially-mobile elements of the community have successfully migrated to housing societies or founded their own housing society (as is the case with the Christian Methodist society). Within Mahemdabad, there is both a Catholic church (St. Xavier's) with an attached convent school, as well as a Methodist church.

²⁸ Other Backward Classes (OBC) are castes which, although higher in status than the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, have traditionally been subject to exclusion and have therefore been made eligible by the Indian government for benefits such as quotas in the educational system and in government jobs.

1.5. From qasbah to housing societies: Residential patterns

With its four gates, Mahemdabad distinguishes itself from other more recently settled towns in its historical status as a *qasbah*, a locale defined by the *Gazetteer of the Province of Oudh* II (1877: 312) as:

A Musulman settlement in a defensible military position, generally on the site of an ancient Hindu headquarters, town or fort, where, for mutual protection, the Musulmans who had overrun and seized the proprietary villages resided; where the faujdar and his troops, the pargana qanungo and chaudri, the mufti, qazi and other dignitaries lived; and, as must be the case where the wealth and power of the Moslem sect was collected in one spot, a large settlement of Sayyads' mosques, dargahs, etc. sprang up...²⁹

While Mahemdabad functioned less as a military outpost than a retreat for the Sultan Mehmud Begra, its layout as a 'walled town' suggests that, much like other *qasbahs* in India, it functioned as a court for the Sultan wherein both the artisan castes as well as members of his entourage dwelled (such as religious figures and *muftis*). Over time, with the decline of the rule of the Sultanate and Mughals and the rise of the Maratha chiefs, the town's role shifted from being a courtly settlement to a market town and political and administrative centre for the surrounding villages. Hardiman (1981: 264) has suggested that, in the early 1920s, approximately a fifth of the population of Kheda District lived in towns. Such towns, he states, functioned primarily as commercial centres with markets for agricultural produce from the surrounding villages and places where one could obtain credit from banks and money as well as visit specialist shops selling items such as clothing, shoes, spices and perfume. In addition, they also served as administrative and educational hubs with courts, land revenue offices and schools.

In recent decades, with the increasing availability and ease of local transportation, the importance of smaller towns such as Mahemdabad has been eclipsed by larger surrounding cities which offer greater variety of products and cheaper prices. Nevertheless, the original *pols*, *kadkis* and *bajar* of the 'walled town' remain central to much of the everyday life and business of the town and serve as meeting grounds where people from different castes, classes and religions live and conduct business

²⁹ More recent historical studies such as M. Hasan (2004:11-12) and Liebskind (1998: 47) have likewise drawn on this definition.

with one another. In addition to the various *pols* and *kadkis* which house members of a single caste or castes from a similar economic and social strata, there are likewise many areas in which there is significant diversity in the religion and caste identity of inhabitants. The area in which I lived for the first five months of my fieldwork is one such case: traditionally the living and working quarter for members of the Luhar caste (iron smiths), Luharvad combines a mix of Vanias, STs,³⁰ Muslim Vohras, Sindhis and Marwaris. Located next to the Desai *pol* which was predominantly inhabited by Vanias and Brahmins, Luharvad also extends north to include other low-caste Hindus such as Rabaris, a few migrant Marwari families from Rajasthan. Neighbourhood dinners in Luharvad are regularly organised in one of the nearby *varis* (halls) for which everyone in the neighbourhood dress up and spend the evening chatting and eating together. While it cannot be said that such diversity has led to a dissolution of caste and class divisions or that other *pols* in Mahemdabad necessarily demonstrate the same level of inter-caste and religious mixing, it certainly remains a feature of everyday life which is absent from larger and more polarised cities such as Ahmedabad.³¹

Despite the everyday occurrence of inter-caste and -religion interaction in the older part of the town, the development of housing societies in Mahemdabad in the last 50 years has slowly begun to reify social divisions with regards to habitation patterns. Generally, 'housing societies' consist of plots of land located outside the town centre which are bought in the name of a larger collective and then sold in plots to individual families (usually from middle- and upper-class backgrounds) to build a bungalow upon. Somewhat analogous to gated communities elsewhere in the world, housing societies in Mahemdabad are usually inhabited by families of a single caste or religion. The first such 'society' in Mahemdabad was the Navjivan Society,³² founded in 1955 and inhabited exclusively by members of the town's Hindu dominant castes (Patels, Brahmins and Vanias). The Narayan Society, likewise inhabited exclusively by the dominant castes, was founded shortly after. Today the local municipality lists

³⁰ Members of Scheduled Tribes (ST).

³¹ For a more in-depth account of the impact of segregated space on the level of communalism in Ahmedabad, see Sundaresan (2004).

³² Navjivan, or 'new life', is also the name of one of the two weekly periodicals in which Gandhi published many of his speeches and articles.

30 officially registered housing societies which exist alongside a handful of other unregistered ones.

Living in a housing society is generally restricted to middle- and upper-class families who have the financial means to both purchase land as well as fund the construction of a bungalow. Moreover, living in a ‘society’ is not open to anyone who can financially afford such expenditures: the individual or family seeking to join the society must also be approved by the other members of the housing society in which they are hoping to settle (or by representatives of the collective). In this way housing societies also function as a type of private club in which families must conform to particular social and economic criteria in order to gain admission. In talking about the proliferation of housing societies in Mahemdabad with a friend one day, I asked him whether there had ever been any Muslims living in the more elite societies such as the Navjivan and Narayan. As a local Mahemdabadi who commuted six days a week to Ahmedabad for work, he proceeded to ask his mother who also happened to be sitting nearby and who, having lived in Mahemdabad since marriage, had her finger firmly placed on the local pulse. After considering the question for a few seconds, his mother responded that such societies would not entertain the prospect of a Muslim family living in their midst (‘*na ape che*’, i.e., ‘they won’t/wouldn’t give it’), thereby hinting at the fact that despite the long history between Hindu and Muslim families in the town, certain basic divisions remain.

The makeup of housing societies is indicative of larger social and economic power structures within the town. Their location outside the town’s main centre of activity is cited as one of their main attractions, allowing for greater spaciousness than the often-congested houses in the *pols* and a consequent increase in ‘privacy’ from the prying eyes of curious neighbours. Additionally, a central motivating factor in moving to a housing society is often the increase in social status which accompanies such a move—although, in many cases, I was told that the modes of sociality from the *pol* become reproduced among the concrete bungalows of housing societies. It can certainly be argued that traditional *pol* life was and continues to be highly segregated in the extent to which particular streets or neighbourhoods are inhabited exclusively by one community (or communities of a similar social and economic strata). An important difference which makes the development of housing societies and their elite

status appear more problematic is the distinct lack of mixture between communities which they encourage and facilitate. The very names given to the housing societies ('Swaminarayan Society', 'Vohra Society') illustrate the degree to which a given housing society is often inhabited by members of a single community. While there also exist cases in which a society includes members of more than one community, the diversity is then limited to families from a particular social or economic class.

In contrast to the older residential areas within the 'walled town' of Mahemdabad, housing societies are generally comprised of unattached bungalows organised in neat rows or cul-de-sacs outside the four main gates of the town. Similarly to patterns of suburbanisation elsewhere in the world, upward social mobility has come to be associated with living on the outskirts of the town, areas which in the past have been largely reserved for Harijan Hindus, migrants and other members of socially and economically marginalised groups. More important, however, are the tangible changes that are being brought about by this relatively recent housing trend, particularly with regard to the role it plays in reinforcing community and religious divisions within the town. The Muslim-only housing societies represent one such case in point. Traditionally Mahemdabad's Muslim Vohras have lived independently from other Muslim communities in the town: either in Vohra-only enclaves or interspersed with Hindus in the main *bajar*. Other Muslim communities, in contrast, have lived in exclusively Muslim neighbourhoods in the eastern part of the town. In the past two decades, the development of housing societies such as the Vohra Society (comprising the National Park Society, the Jasmin Society and the Hina Park Society) and the Aman Society have shifted habitation patterns so that middle- and upper-class Muslims from all communities (Vohra as well as non-Vohra) live together. Thus, religious identity has come to play a more defining role for middle- and upper-class Vohra Muslims who have traditionally not lived side-by-side nor have shared much beyond their mutual faith and, for men and children, the fact that they worship and study in the town's mosques and *madrasas*. On the one hand, it is not surprising that middle- and upper-class Muslims, traditionally excluded from purchasing plots of land in more established Hindu housing societies regardless of their financial means,

should choose to set up a separate housing society.³³ What is of note, however, is the role of religious identity in dictating where upwardly mobile families choose to live and the inevitable ghettoisation that often results from such separate living arrangements. This trend is not particular to Mahemdabad and has been pointed out to constitute a more widespread pattern, particularly in cities and towns which have benefited from the economic liberalisation policies instituted in the 1980s. As Shani (2007) has pointed out with regard to Ahmedabad, many middle-class families living in the ‘walled city’ in the eastern part of the city began to move to newly constructed bungalows in western Ahmedabad in the 1980s, a trend which contributed to a larger pattern whereby the east/west divide became illustrative of larger class divisions.

To be sure, other middle-class members of local minorities in Mahemdabad have likewise followed suit and established their own respective housing societies: examples such as the Christian Methodist housing society and the Harshidh Park Society (for middle-class Dalits) demonstrate the degree to which caste, class and religious identity have become increasingly regimented with regard to habitation patterns. In contrast to the town’s Muslim community, however, more lenience has been afforded to local Christians who are generally deemed more suitable for predominantly Hindu housing societies. Naresh Parmar, for example, is a teacher at the local Soni high school whose family has been living in Mahemdabad for the past 50 years. When I met him he had recently bought a plot of land in the local Swaminarayan Society and was planning to begin construction of a bungalow for his wife, daughter and aging parents to live in. Naresh’s impending move from the basic two-room house in the Harijan colony on the confines of Mahemdabad (where he had grown up) to a bungalow in a housing society was a palpable step in becoming an accepted member of the local middle classes. From the Harijan Chamar community (traditionally leather workers by occupation), Naresh’s father had worked in a printing press in Ahmedabad earning only Rs. 400-500 per month. Often staying up late and studying with a kerosene lamp since the house only recently acquired electricity, Naresh earned three higher education degrees (MSc in Physics, a Bachelors in Education and a Masters in Education) and eventually secured a coveted position as

³³ The level of discrimination in admission to housing societies can range from ‘open secrets’ wherein everyone knows that only certain castes or religions will not be admitted, to more explicit means: one friend recounted to me how certain housing societies in Ahmedabad went so far as to put up signs openly declaring that Muslims and Sindhis would not be considered for admission.

teacher in the local high school (without, he claimed, having to pay the usual bribes necessary in obtaining such a position). When asked why he had decided to relocate his family to the housing society he cited the problem of ‘noise pollution’ in his current neighbourhood and complained that many of his current neighbours were uneducated and poor. Preferring to live among people more like himself (people who he ‘could have good conversations with’), Naresh saw his imminent move as a means of improving his station and that of his family.

As Donner and De Neve (2006) have recently pointed out with respect to urban localities in India, the organisation of space and place is intimately bound up with larger social relations and power configurations. As such, we must move beyond understanding place as simply socially constructed to explore the ways in which ‘places themselves are highly political and fluid—that is gender, caste and community identities are constantly produced, negotiated and challenged through spatial practices and shifting spatial concepts’ (*ibid.*: 3). In Mahemdabad, as elsewhere in India, the politics of class and status differentiation are closely connected with the specific localities in which people aspire to live, spaces that are deemed to be representative of both a particular social and economic strata as well as a distinctly ‘modern’ lifestyle. The new patterns in religious and caste segregation which have resulted from the transition in recent decades made by many from living in the central market area of the town to housing societies on the peripheries is, I argue, more a by-product of new notions of social mobility and modernity than indicative of a concerted desire to live only among ‘one’s own’. While segregation in housing is certainly not a new trend, the establishment of middle-class Harijan, Christian Methodist and Muslim societies in Mahemdabad initiates a new and different spirit of identity politics in which groups which have been traditionally marginalised at once mimic broader social trends as well as overtly set themselves apart from the dominant castes. As one older Muslim woman explained to me when I asked her why her son had moved his family from the main *bazar* to the Muslim-only Vohra society, the decision had revolved around their ability to purchase land at a good price and they thus opted for a change in living which would afford them more space and privacy. Although the move had followed the 2002 violence in the town, she stated that it was not linked with fear of living among Hindus but it was, rather, a pragmatic means to increase the family’s quality of life.

Aspirations of middle-class status and strategies towards achieving it are not confined to the sphere of housing however. Naresh, mentioned above, is a firm believer in the importance of education in enabling individuals to improve their social and economic status and attributed the fact that the Christian community in India had been able to advance more quickly than other minority groups to their contact with Christian missionary organisations. In contrast, he argued that the low-economic status of Indian Muslims is directly connected to the orthodoxy of the community and its reluctance to embrace modern (co-)education, particularly with respect to female children. While such a statement is hardly surprising given the prevalent belief in the connection between Islamic religious orthodoxy and wider conditions of 'backwardness' among Muslims in India, its identification of religious identity as a main marker in explaining differences in educational practices and beliefs remains at odds with my own findings in Mahemdabad. Rather, as I suggest in the next section, class and economic considerations also play a significant role in parents' decisions concerning where to send their children to school.

1.6. Education and class: Maintaining divisions

Mahemdabad boasts a total of seven schools of which three are primary schools (classes 1-7) and four are secondary (usually encompassing classes 5-12). In addition, two colleges have been established in the past three decades on the outskirts of the town: the Physical Education College (opened in 1985), a state-operated institution which trains physical education teachers, and the Arts and Commerce College (begun in 1977) which gives degrees in Gujarati, economics, accountancy and auditing.

As has been pointed out by scholars (Jeffery 2005; Fernandes 2006), the economic liberalisation policies of the 1980s have contributed to the rise and expansion of a new middle class, one that has become increasingly defined by new consumption practices. One of the more prominent forms of this new middle-class lifestyle revolves around English-language education, and the burgeoning number of private English-medium schools throughout India is demonstrative of the important role of schooling in marking middle-class status (in addition to its more obvious function of acting as a means through which parents provide their children with the intellectual

and social capital to achieve future success). Fernandes (2006: 69) has argued that English-language education is important both as a practical tool to achieve advancement in the labour market as well as a ‘structural marker of middle class identity’.

The trend towards privatisation in schools and focus on English-medium education is as evident in Mahemdabad as it is in other towns and cities with a significant middle class: while the children of the local social and economic elite primarily attend the private English-medium school, the two single-sex government schools (boys and girls) are frequented rather by students from the poorer sections of Mahemdabad as well as the surrounding villages. A teacher at the girls government school made this particularly clear when she lamented the fact that unlike in village schools in which all the local students attended the same school, in Mahemdabad the brighter and wealthier children attended private schools so that government schools such as hers had begun to cater primarily to those from poor and less educated backgrounds. As pointed out by Fernandes (*ibid.*) more generally, there is significant social prestige to be gained by sending one’s children to an English-medium school, often regardless of the quality of education provided. Not only is the ability to speak English seen as both ‘modern’ and an attribute of the elite, the fact that the large bulk of English-language schools require students to pay fees also ensures that only families with sufficient financial means are able to send their children to such schools.

Divisions in class, however, are apparent throughout the local educational system. Many of the middle- and upper-class students I knew turned their noses up at the prospect of attending one of the two local colleges and aspired rather to more prestigious institutions in Ahmedabad or Nadiad (even better, albeit considerably rarer, was the prospect of going abroad to pursue a university or postgraduate degree). This is clear from the enrolment at the Mahemdabad Arts and Commerce College in which the vast proportion of the students come from villages in the surrounding area and approximately half of the student body came from Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

The desire to display middle-class status through living in a housing society and sending one’s children to English-language schools is as prevalent among much of the town’s Muslims as it is among other communities. Unlike many of Mahemdabad’s

larger urban counterparts, there are no private trusts or schools built specifically for the Muslim community: while most Muslim children will attend one of the local *madrasas*, they will likewise be sent to one of the local government (or privately-run) schools. In general, there exists little interest among most local Muslims in setting up a school specifically for the Muslim community and several informants told me that if a Muslim school were to be set up it should be an English-medium institution rather than one in which Urdu functioned as the primary language of instruction. Moreover, while a handful of middle-class Muslim families sent their children to private English-medium schools in nearby cities, none of the Muslim children I knew attended the Urdu-medium schools in Ahmedabad or Nadiad.

In this sense, Mahemdabad presents a considerable contrast from nearby Ahmedabad: a study conducted by Sheth and Haeems (2006) of two schools in a mixed Hindu and Muslim area of Ahmedabad, for instance, reports that, following the 2002 violence, there has been heightened segregation in girls' schooling. The two schools investigated include a local Urdu-medium institution attended exclusively by Muslim students and a Gujarati-medium government school frequented by the neighbourhood Hindu children. Rather than as sites for 'social secularisation', the authors argue that the schools have instead acted as further sites for promoting communal antagonism and suspicion between sections of the two communities.

The relation between schooling and identity formation is a salient one which has been explored by several scholars working on India. In her study of Urdu-medium schools in the city of Kolhapur in southern Maharashtra, Bénéï (2008) argues that, for many of the Muslim families she worked with, sending children to Urdu-medium schools represents an important means through which local Muslims assert a separate linguistic-religious identity. The significance assigned to receiving an Islamic and Urdu-medium education is particularly emphasised in girls' schooling given the important role played by mothers in the early education of children (a point also made in Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey [2005] with regard to Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh). While an important component of the schooling in such institutions remains the language of instruction (wherein the use of Urdu constitutes an important marker of Muslim identity), the particular modalities of instruction employed by teachers tend to

emphasise a sense of belonging to the pan-Islamic *ummah* rather than the larger Marathi region.

The lack of Urdu schools along with the significance of class in how parents decide where to send their children ultimately mean that Hindu and Muslim students study, interact and form friendships in a way that is rare in nearby cities. As pointed out by Bénéï (2008), schools often play a central socialisation role in the development of both individual and community identities. In this respect, Urdu as a religious-linguistic signifier does not constitute a means through which status is established among local Muslims. Rather, similarly to local Hindus and Christians, education *per se* and, more specifically, English-medium education plays an important means through which local Muslims assert middle-class membership in Mahemdabad.

The importance of education as a marker of social status and acceptability across communities was evident in the general disdain that was expressed for illiteracy and lack of education. Ila is a young Rabari³⁴ girl of about 12 years of age (neither she nor her family knew for sure what her exact age was) whom I met because she would occasionally come to the house in which I was staying to help out with housework when the regular servant had returned to her natal village after a dispute with her husband. Tenacious and outspoken, Ila was married along with her younger brother and older sister shortly after I arrived in Mahemdabad although, following the ceremony, the three children continued to live with their natal family and the sisters would wait until they became older (approximately 18 years of age) before going to live with their spouses and affinal relations.³⁵ During the period of my research the two of us became unlikely friends and we often made trips together to the main *bajar* and occasionally to the houses of local friends. She was one of the few children, perhaps the only one, that I met during my time in Mahemdabad, who had no formal or informal education and could neither count to ten nor had any ability to read or even recognise the letters of the Gujarati alphabet. In many ways, Ila embodied the very opposite of social respectability: not only was she illiterate but she defied common understandings of how low-caste and -class women should behave and often

³⁴ Traditionally nomadic herders of cattle, goats and camels, Rabaris are classified as an OBC community and are predominantly found in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

³⁵ Rabaris in Mahemdabad continue to practise bridewealth and Ila's family received a significant sum from the future in-laws of Ila and her sister (approximately Rs. 10,000,000 each).

visited houses of both neighbours and strangers without any hesitancy or regard for social protocol. Among her many ‘faults’, however, local women were particularly derisive about her lack of education and would chide her to her face for what they construed to be laziness on her part. On one occasion, when we were visiting the house of a local Muslim family, my friend’s aging mother, herself ‘thumb’ (the local word for illiterate), shamed Ila by mentioning her lack of education and remarked that all children should have at least a basic education. The social stigma attached to illiteracy, *particularly* for children, was apparent: while it was not uncommon for older women to be illiterate, this was construed as excusable albeit emblematic of a lower position in the local social hierarchy. With regard to children, on the other hand, illiteracy and a lack of interest in receiving an education were considered antithetical to ideals of a progressive and ‘modern’ society and, as such, a sign of backwardness and low social standing.³⁶

Closely linked to education in regards to local ideas of social status is the ability to migrate abroad for the purposes of study or work. As in many other parts of Gujarat, most middle- and upper-class families in the town have at least one family member living abroad in the US, UK, Canada or, in the Muslim community, South Africa (the majority of these relations living outside India are engaged in either professional or manual labour although a handful of recent graduates from upper- and middle-class Hindu families are pursuing higher education degrees). Requests made to me to ‘sponsor’³⁷ a local friend or family member were a common occurrence and young men in particular often exchange tips among themselves on ‘agents’³⁸ who can

³⁶ While Ila attended school for a brief period, she stopped going because of what she alleged was her own lack of interest. Her family were mostly concerned with the education of her younger brother and did not appear to be particularly troubled with that of their two daughters. This said, her family’s finances were no doubt also reliant on the incomes derived from Ila and her sister’s employment, constituting a further disincentive for the two girls to continue schooling.

³⁷ To ‘sponsor’ someone entails that a citizen of the country to which the migrant will travel provides bank details proving adequate funds to maintain the sponsored friend or relative, proof of identity and a certification that he or she will assume all financial and legal responsibility for the migrant while abroad.

³⁸ Facilitating travel and work visas for local Indians wishing to go abroad remains a thriving business in Gujarat. Such ‘agents’ (as they are referred to) often sell their services to locals by portraying themselves as having special connections abroad or in foreign visa offices or the ability to fill out visa forms ‘properly’ in order to increase a client’s chances of obtaining the desired visa. Many ‘agents’ are simply crooks who demand an upfront payment or deposit (often sums as much as Rs. 15,000) and then disappear or change their contact number. The husband of one friend in Mahemdabad had been duped by an agent who, instead of providing him with a work visa and air ticket to South Africa, instead sent him to Zimbabwe on a tourist visa; he was then compelled to make the border crossing to South Africa through the dangerous wildlife reserve along the border of the two countries.

facilitate a work visa to go abroad. Many family members with relatives abroad showcase their prestigious connections through foreign items that have been gifted to them when their relations last visited India. As with other domains of social life, migration abroad is largely a concern for local Mahemdabidis who can financially afford such an investment and, moreover, have the social connections to facilitate the securing of a visa and employment in the migrant country. Two young Muslim men I knew in Mahemdabad of approximately the same age and educational background (both in their mid-twenties with vocational degrees from a local technical institute) were keen to obtain a work visa to go abroad. While both came from families that could afford such an expenditure, ultimately it was the man with elite family connections to a Brahmin family from Mahemdabad living in England who succeeded in obtaining a visa. While it is hardly surprising that social and family connections continue to play a significant role in the town's daily affairs, it is important to note that the links which united local elite Hindu and Muslim families in the past, while somewhat weakened following the 2002 violence, remain a viable social network evident in local politics in Mahemdabad, a point which I elaborate on further in the next section.

1.7. Local politics in Mahemdabad and the wider political context in Gujarat

The last several decades have been ones of intense political turmoil in Gujarat. In the mid-1970s, the Congress (I), led by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, began to include candidates from backward castes and minority religious communities. In Gujarat, an electoral alliance was devised between Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims (referred to under the acronym 'KHAM') for Congress (I) by then Gujarat Chief Minister Madhavsinh Solanki. In the 1980 Gujarat state elections, this strategy proved a stunning success and the Congress (I) won 86.5% of the total candidates who had been put up for election, gaining them a majority in the State Assembly (Sud 2008: 1261). More than merely an electoral strategy, as Sud (*ibid.*) has noted, the KHAM alliance further symbolised a democratisation of the political sphere and a means through which traditionally marginalised groups were able to attain social mobility and political power.

Such a democratisation, however, also created significant unease among the traditional social and political elite in the state—in particular, members of the dominant castes such as Brahmins, Vanias and Patels—over their own loss of dominance and control. The riots which took place in Ahmedabad in 1981 and 1985 in protest against the decision to increase reservation quotas for members of OBC groups and Dalits were largely instigated by members of these dominant groups against the lower-castes and Muslims (Shani 2007).

In the face of the success of the KHAM alliance (which united 70% to 75% of the Gujarati population), Sud (2008) argues that the *savarnas* (caste Hindus) became aware that in order to compete with Congress, they would need to build a wider electoral support network. The Sangh Parivar, in this respect, became a forceful means of unifying the disparate elements of the Hindu fold so as to counter the political prominence established by Congress.

Beginning in the 1980s, mobilisation campaigns and programmes were organised by Hindutva organisations, many of which specifically targeted Dalits and Adivasi groups across Gujarat. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the Sangh Parivar organised five major *yatras* (Hindu religious processions) in Gujarat through which they were able to mobilise and attract large sections of Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs (Yagnik and Sud 2004: 9).³⁹ The most famous of these, the ‘chariot pilgrimage’ (*rath yatra*) led by BJP leader L.K. Advani in 1990 began in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat at the site of Somanatha, a contested temple dedicated to Krishna which over the past nine centuries had been destroyed several times by Muslim rulers (Fuller 2004: 272). Such efforts were often explicitly sanctioned as well as supported by BJP politicians and other government officials in the state. For example, Sud (2008: 1270) notes that during the *rath yatra* led by Advani, several BJP ministers in the state escorted the procession in their official cars.

In addition to the large number of *yatras* carried out during this period in Gujarat as well as other parts of India, many welfare programmes such as youth groups and

³⁹ Van der Veer (1994: 126) has further noted that such *yatras* were used throughout the nation (in addition to Gujarat) to promote Hindu unity by incorporating untouchables and members of the ‘backward castes’ into the larger Hindu fold.

newly constructed schools were organised by the Sangh Parivar throughout the state, often enlisting unemployed men from backward castes to act as middlemen and lower-rung grassroots workers. While little ethnographic evidence exists to substantiate the success of such programmes, several scholars and commentators have attributed the participation of both Adivasis as well as low-caste Hindus in the 2002 violence against Muslims to the long-term penetration of Hindutva activists into rural areas populated by these groups. By combining the dispensation of social services with rituals and injunctions aimed at raising Hindu consciousness, such campaigns ostensibly worked to incorporate marginalised groups into the wider Hindu *rashtra* ('state' or 'nation') (Balagopal 2002; Lobo 2002; Shah 2002).

With the support of the Sangh Parivar, the BJP gained significant political gains and, by 1995, was able to establish complete political dominance at all levels of state and local government, which it has largely retained to the present. Yet, despite the success of the BJP in much of Gujarat as well as Kheda District, Mahemdabad *taluka* remains dominated by local Kshatriyas⁴⁰ who make up approximately 70 percent of the electorate in the sub-district and, as one of the key factions in the KHAM alliance, largely support the Congress party. Much of the surrounding areas of central Gujarat, in contrast, remain under the political and economic control of Patidar Patels who continue to act as a significant source of support for both the Sangh Parivar and the BJP. The dominance of Kshatriyas in Mahemdabad, unsurprisingly, has ensured that many of the local government jobs such as bus conductors, bus drivers and *panchayat*⁴¹ secretaries are likewise dominated by local Kshatriyas. According to informants, it is very likely that one of the reasons for the failure of significant communalism to develop in Mahemdabad is precisely this dominance of Kshatriyas in local politics and positions of power and the caste's historical enmity with Patidar Patels in the region.⁴²

⁴⁰ Locally, Kshatriyas include castes such as Dabhi, Parmar, Sodha and Gohel.

⁴¹ Village assemblies in charge of discharging local administrative services and settling disputes.

⁴² Shah (1975) argues that the antagonism between local factions of Kshatriya and Patidar Patel dates back to the Moghul period and today has extended to conflicts in both the economic and political arenas. This supports claims made by my informants that one of the reasons Hindutva organisations aren't as active in Mahemdabad *taluka* is due to the predominance of Kshatriyas in the area. While Patels in Mahemdabad act as one of the three dominant castes in the town, this position of power is diluted by the number of contesting factions and, moreover, contained within the confines of the town (rather than extending into the *taluka* more widely).

In October 2005, Mahemdabad *taluka* was one of only two *talukas* (the other being Matar *taluka*) in which the Congress party won over the local BJP faction in the village *panchayat* elections. In addition to local political alliances, issues such as the provision of electricity to villages, river-irrigation facilities, employment opportunities for villagers and the provision of necessary infrastructure for villages (roads, drinking water, primary education) remain central to local elections.

Within the town itself, the local town municipality, or *nagar pallika*, serves as the main administrative and political body. Established in 1863, the *nagar pallika* is organised into a total of nine wards, each of which comprises approximately 2,700 voters and is represented by three representatives on the municipality board. The two main factions in the Mahemdabad municipality consist of the Congress and BJP although, while nominally identified with the two respective national parties, political struggles inevitably revolve more around local alliances and issues rather than reflecting the larger platforms and agendas of the two national political parties.

In municipal as well as in larger *taluka* elections, votes continue to be cast primarily along caste lines. While Muslim representatives in the *nagar pallika* are generally elected from Muslim-majority constituencies, religious identity as such does not figure strongly in local power coalitions and, in fact, the two local Muslim leaders regularly find themselves in opposing coalitions. Aside from a short period (approximately two years) following the 2002 violence, rivalries and disputes between the town's two most prominent Muslim leaders have ensured that little effort has been directed towards building a united Muslim political coalition.

The important role of merchant families in Mahemdabad is, unsurprisingly, reflected in local politics, in particular in the elections and political alliances forged in the local municipal board. Ramesh, a journalist whose family has been based in Mahemdabad for several generations, told me that his family has retained strong relations to local Muslim families whom they had been aligned with in local politics. His grandfather was a wealthy and established businessman in Mahemdabad during his lifetime and, while the family's fortunes began to wane in subsequent generations, the family house continues to testify to their former position. Aligned with the Congress party, his grandfather as well as his mother and father all served as representatives for their

ward on the local municipal board. Ramesh suggested that during that time the political landscape was significantly different from the present: during his parents' political tenure, the Congress party was still the dominant political power and in Mahemdabad was represented by the social and political elite of the town and was essentially conservative in its vow to preserve the status quo.

Despite the traditional dominance of Congress in Mahemdabad *taluka*, the BJP succeeded in making significant inroads in local elections following the 2002 violence in Gujarat. Support for Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi remains high among many Hindus in Mahemdabad. The MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) for Mahemdabad *taluka* is Sudarsinh Chauhan, a Kshatriya affiliated with the BJP who, since 2005 has also served in the Chief Minister's cabinet as Minister of 'Welfare of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes'. When I first began my research in Mahemdabad in 2005, the local BJP coalition held 21 out of the total number of representatives (Congress holding the remaining six) having first come to power in the election held in December 2003 after the 2002 violence across the state. The president of the municipality, aligned with the BJP and from an OBC caste, had, according to local gossip established himself financially through bootlegging and won the election through various illicit tactics (many of his political opponents as well as other local Mahemdabadis criticised him as being illiterate). While charges of corruption can no doubt easily be made across the board, the shift in political leadership from the traditional social and economic elite such as Brahmins and Patels to members of marginalised groups such as OBC and SC castes marks a considerable change in local politics in the last three decades. In the Muslim community, the dominance of Vohras and lower-level Maleks has been a relatively recent phenomenon and a shift from the past when mainly Pathans and Saiyeds were deemed to be the most powerful Muslim communities.

Within Mahemdabad's Muslim community, an ongoing feud for political prominence and control between the respective leaders of the Sunni Vohra and Malek groups continues unabated. Mohammad Vohra, whose father and grandfather both occupied prominent positions within the municipality, was, until recently, the most powerful Muslim leader in the town (interestingly, according to one informant, his grandfather was a supporter of British rule prior to independence). In the past decade, his power

has been threatened by a low-status Malek, Imran Malek, a ‘self-starter’ who worked his way up from a poor village background to become educated and then rose within the local political ranks. He remains the primary oppositional leader and, unlike past generations of elected municipality representatives, is known as a populist leader who has pushed for changes to benefit the poor and more marginalised communities in Mahemdabad.

As in many other parts of India, the last three decades have witnessed a change in the structures of local politics in Mahemdabad in that the lower-castes have gained more prominence at the expense of leaders of the traditional social and economic elite.

During the first 35 years following independence, municipality politics were heavily dominated by Hindu and Muslim high-status groups such as Brahmins, Vanias, Patels, Saiyeds and the upper tiers of the Sunni Vohra and Malek communities. In contrast, the past 20 years have witnessed a shift whereby leaders from local OBC and lower-castes have been able to present an opposing front to challenge the traditional scheme of elite politics following new reservations policies as well as electoral strategies such as the KHAM alliance. As has been demonstrated by Jaffrelot with regards to north India more widely (2003), while in the past lower-status groups were compelled to appeal to the higher castes for access to local services and amenities, they have now been able to build sufficient political power to constitute a significant threat to the ruling elite.

1.8. Local ‘civil society’

Due to the small size of the town, Mahemdabad is largely devoid of the numerous NGOs and other civil-society organisations that exist in nearby cities. Caste and neighbourhood organisations remain influential and regularly organise community dinners in the caste *vari* (hall) such as those mentioned earlier in the Luharvad neighbourhood. In addition, many caste organisations such as that of the local Vania Vaishnav caste likewise organise charitable activities, including providing books to local students in the caste and awarding prizes for exemplary academic achievement.

Aside from the Mahemdabad Sunni Vohra Samaj (which I discuss at more length in Chapter 3), there are no comparable caste organisations for other local Muslim

groups. A few small charitable groups were set up following the 2002 violence but have now, by and large, become defunct. The Jolly Education Trust was set up by a group of young Muslim men in Mahemdabad to ‘uplift’ the more disadvantaged members of the local Muslim community following 2002 by supplying educational materials and organising blood donation drives but its activities have slowly dwindled so that today it exists more in name than actually fulfilling any concrete social function. Likewise, plans to establish a Muslim society in Mahemdabad (aptly named the ‘Mahemdabad Muslim Samaj’) during the period of my research to provide similar socially beneficial services such as organising group marriages and discouraging ‘harmful practices’ such as dowry have, as yet, not materialised. Moreover, many of my informants had never heard about the group and, if they had, dismissed it as a political ploy by Mohammad Vohra, the Muslim Vohra leader mentioned earlier, to reassert his flailing political prominence.

One exception to this is the Sarvodai Cooperative Bank, a cooperative society which draws its members predominantly from the Muslim community and acts as a savings cooperative as well as to provide welfare schemes for the local poor. Established in 1985 by Imran Malek, the local leader of the Muslim Malek community, the Sarvodai Cooperative maintains a core of vice presidents drawn from local established Muslim businessmen and other influential personalities who meet regularly and form the ‘inner circle’ of Imran Malek’s political allies. While Mohammadbhai Vohra has attempted to create a competing local Muslim alliance through the Mahemdabad Muslim Samaj, his efforts have thus far been unsuccessful and the Sarvodai Cooperative remains the primary institution in Mahemdabad serving local indigent and middle-class Muslims as well as acting as an informal administrative office for Imran’s political activities.

1.9. Everyday celebrations and institutions

In everyday discussions about the increasing level of communalism in India, one of the most cited indices of the current separation between religious communities is the diminishing degree to which Hindus and Muslims partake, celebrate and visit each other’s houses on the occasion of religious festivals and holy days. Nostalgic remembrances of times past when communalism had not yet taken a firm hold on

relations between the two communities are contrasted with the present-day state of affairs in which national political agendas have trickled down to affect intimate relations and generations-long friendships between families.

While such a rendition of the past as free from religious animosity is clearly overstated, several studies (Gottschalk 2000: 121-22; Assayag 1995) support the view that there has been a distinct decrease over the last decades in the degree to which Hindus and Muslims participate in and celebrate each other's religious festivals. With respect to Mahemdabad, some informants suggested that social visits between Hindus and Muslims had become more unusual than they were among previous generations, although, as I personally observed during the period of the research, they are far from extinct. Moreover, it remains common for local children to participate in the celebrations of religious festivals irrespective of their religion. Diwali, for one, remains a greatly anticipated occasion for children to spend saved-up pocket money on a range of fireworks of difference sizes and effects. In addition, some Muslim children participate in the late-night dancing (*garba*) which takes place over the nine nights of Navratri⁴³ and dress up in the traditional *chania choli* (for girls) or *salwar kameez* (for boys) to join in the festivities. Muslim children as well as adults also participate in the Gujarati festival Uttrayan during which much of the town climb onto their roofs and fly makeshift kites, often engaging in 'kite wars' in which one kite flyer seeks to cut loose another's kite. A notable exception with regard to Muslim participation in Hindu religious festivals is that of Holi, the Hindu holiday during which both children and adults 'play' and cover one another with brightly coloured powder and water. When asking a Muslim friend's young son why he didn't play Holi, he answered '*amari tahevar nathi*' ('it is not our festival'). Many of my older Muslim friends said that they had 'played Holi' when they were younger but did not any longer, while one informant suggested that it had become less socially acceptable for Muslims in general to participate in Holi after 2002 (given that, during that year, the day of Holi had coincided with the peak of the violence). Unlike other Hindu festivals, the uniform lack of participation by local Muslims in the festivities of Holi represents a notable difference. The fact that I did not come across any Muslim children who engaged in the Holi festivities was particularly remarkable given that,

⁴³ Literally meaning 'nine nights' in Sanskrit, the Navratri festival celebrates the victory of the goddess Durga in her battle with the demon Mahishasura which lasted a total of nine nights and days.

while Muslim adults rarely participated in the festivities surrounding Hindu festivals, it was more acceptable for children and teenagers to do so.

The resistance among much of the local Muslim community to the Holi festival is reflective of the fact that, while the town has hardly reached the same level of communalism as many cities, the past decades have nevertheless brought about changes in local social dynamics. As is clear from the increase in housing societies as well as the changes in municipality alliances, the town has not been unaffected by the larger economic and political changes that have taken place in Gujarat as well as India more widely. This said, caste in particular continues to be a central factor in social, kinship, political and economic organisation which, in the case of Mahemdabad, has played an important role in ensuring that state-wide efforts to promote divisions along communal and religious lines have not had as much sway as elsewhere.

1.10. Conclusion

To argue that caste and class remain the most salient means of social identification in Mahemdabad does not negate the fact that there continues to exist exclusion, as well as division, along religious lines, as exemplified by the refusal of Hindu dominant-caste housing societies to admit Muslims. Yet, it is clear that communal identification does not constitute the primary principle in defining local forms of social organisation, a point that I will elaborate on in the following chapter. Given Mahemdabad's status as a relatively wealthy market and commuter town, middle-class aspirations are central to strategies for upward social mobility for the majority of castes and religious communities. As such, conspicuous consumption of electrical home appliances, mobile phones, cars and motorbikes remain important markers of social and economic status. Moreover, longer-term projects involving property, educational qualifications and political alliances also constitute ways in which both individuals and families strive to establish themselves as distinctly 'modern' as well as part of India's growing middle class.

Status games between and within groups, however, are not solely confined to material consumption but likewise involve broader negotiations over identity and hierarchy. As mentioned earlier, the local Muslim community in Mahemdabad remains

splintered along ‘caste’ lines and competing political agendas among leaders and notions of what constitutes ‘Muslim identity’ are a source of contention and dispute. In particular, the Sunni Vohra community, which shares many cultural attributes with local Hindus while simultaneously practising the Islamic faith, complicate simple dichotomies of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ within the local landscape. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed ethnographic description of local Vohras and contending notions of what it means to be a proper ‘Muslim’ in Mahemdabad.

Chapter 2: Muslim identity and stratification in Mahemdabad

2.1. Introduction

On one of the many occasions when I was bombarded with questions about the nature of my research (why was I doing research in Mahemdabad? why was it taking so long? why did I choose to focus on Muslims?), the issue arose as to why I had chosen the Muslim Sunni Vohra community as my primary focus. On this particular occasion, my interrogator, Samir Malek, was a local contractor from Mahemdabad who proceeded to deliver a litany of reasons as to why Vohras were not ‘real’ Muslims: they had no ‘shame’ (*sharam*), they did any kind of work that came their way and they rented out their houses to gamblers in their quest to make money; moreover, Vohra women were ‘more forward than even Americans’ (American women, apparently, setting the bar for ‘forwardness’). Unsurprisingly, Samir then continued to propose his own community, Maleks, as a more suitable object of study as well as more representative of Muslims in India generally.

Vohras and Maleks are the two largest and most economically and politically powerful Muslim communities in Mahemdabad. Both indigenous to India (i.e., neither trace their origins to Arab traders, rulers or *pirs*⁴⁴), members of the two communities are often at loggerheads over which of the two are considered ‘higher’ in the local Muslim hierarchy. In discussing this conversation later with my research assistant, herself a Vohra from Ahmedabad, the two of us concluded that, despite the decidedly negative spin our argumentative friend had put on the issue, there were a number of accurate sociological observations in what he had said. Samir’s remarks, moreover, highlighted the distinct identity that Vohras in Mahemdabad maintain in opposition to both Maleks as well as other Muslim groups in the town.

In this chapter, I introduce the Sunni Vohra community of Mahemdabad through a historical analysis of their origins and a consideration of their current position among other Muslim communities in the town. In addition, this chapter problematises the notion of ‘Muslim identity’ through an analysis of how Vohras are perceived by other

⁴⁴ Sufi saints largely from the Middle East who came to South Asia to spread Islam.

local Muslims, and argues that despite the prevalence of monolithic categories of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ in much of the literature, there exist competing discourses regarding what defines a ‘true’ Muslim in Mahemdabad.

2.2. Historical origins of the Sunni Vohras in Gujarat

When discussing the Muslim community with which I conducted my research with others familiar with South Asia, almost without exception I am asked whether the Vohras with whom I worked are the same as the famous Ismaili Shi'a community known as Daudi (or Dawoodi) Bohras. While the two may appear on the surface to be one and the same (they share similar-sounding names, Muslim faith and the traditional occupation of merchants), today they maintain very little connection in practical terms. Yet, historical evidence suggests that in fact Sunni Vohras and Daudi Bohras originated from a single lineage. According to Engineer (1989: 31), the name ‘Vohra’ is the Gujarati equivalent of ‘Bohra’: both terms are most likely derived from the Gujarati and Hindi words for commerce (*‘vehvar’* and *‘vyapar’* respectively). Other sources have, however, suggested that the groups’ names were originally derived from the Hindu Vohra caste from which they are both descended (after converting to Islam) (Lokhandwalla 1955: 120; Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency 1899: 24).⁴⁵

One of the first Muslim communities to establish roots in Gujarat, Daudi Bohras today remain a significant numerical and economic presence both in Gujarat as well as in other major commercial cities and towns in India and abroad. According to historians writing on the history and sociology of Muslim communities in Gujarat (Engineer 1980, 1988; Misra 1985), the first Bohra missions arrived from Yemen in the port town of Cambay in central Gujarat as early as A.D. 1067, although the first official Da’is (Bohra religious mission) was not established until A.D. 1540. Around the year 1426, a major schism within the Bohra community occurred under the reign of Sultan Ahmed Shah I (1411-1442) during which, according to some historians, as many as 80 percent of the community converted to Sunnism (Abdul Husain 1920: 45

⁴⁵ A third explanation for the term ‘Bohra’ has been posited by Hardiman (2007: 59) as meaning ‘convert’. However, this appears less plausible given the existence of both Hindu and Muslim Bohras in Gujarat.

cited in Blank 2001: 315, footnote 69). Nevertheless, Blank (2001: 38-39) notes that despite this schism, Sunni and Shi'a Bohras retained close ties and that intermarriage between the two groups remained common for nearly a century afterwards. The division between the groups became solidified with the advent of a Sunni missionary from Sindh, Syed Ahmad Jafar Shirazi, who, working as an adviser under both Mahmud Begda (1457-1512) as well as Sultan Muzaffar Shah (1512-1526), launched a repressive campaign against non-Sunnis. Engineer (1988: 30) has suggested that the conversion of many Bohras to Sunnism took place predominantly outside the major cities, thus explaining the predominance today of Shi'a Bohras in urban areas while Sunni Bohras/Vohras are more evenly distributed between urban and rural sites.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Daudi Bohras developed into one of the wealthiest trading communities in Gujarat through the cultivation of 'intracommunity networks of trust and shared resources' (Haynes 1991: 74). In the southern Gujarati city of Surat during this period, Haynes notes that they distanced themselves from other Muslims in a number of different ways: sartorially and residentially, and also through religious practices (particularly the important role given to the *da'i*, or spiritual leader, in the community). Interestingly, he suggests that Daudi Bohras also continued to observe many 'Hindu' practices such as the celebration of Diwali (the Hindu new year) and participation in community feasts (*ibid.*).

Today, Daudi Bohras remain one of the wealthiest Muslim business communities in Gujarat and continue to maintain a distinct identity from other Muslim groups, both Shi'a and Sunni. In writing about Daudi Bohras, Engineer comments that today the community continues to actively distance themselves from other Muslims:

Muslims are generally despised both by the Khojas and Bohras, and they are referred to as 'miyabhais', a word of contempt. They are considered of lowly origin, backward and aggressive ... The Muslims are even held responsible for riots as they are aggressive and interested in politics ... (1980: 8)

While Engineer puts a distinctly negative spin on the attitude of Bohras towards other Muslims, both scholarly as well as on-the-ground evidence confirms that the group does indeed maintain a strict separation from other Muslims through group endogamy, distinct religious practices and organisation, as well as through more

mundane customs such as dress. In this sense, while the historical link between Daudi Bohras and Sunni Vohras has now become largely defunct, both groups continue to share similarities in the separate identity each cultivates with respect to other Muslims as well as their shared status as both merchants and indigenous Gujarati Muslims. As is clear from the rendition above, group divisions such as those between current-day Daudi Bohras and Sunni Vohras are the product of particular social and historical circumstances. In this respect, the particularities of social organisation are heavily influenced both by the larger context and by more local factors relating to inter-group competition and status games, a point which becomes clear when examining the debates that have taken place around the question of whether Indian Muslims can be said to be organised into ‘castes’ in a similar way to their Hindu counterparts. As I examine in the next section, such questions are intimately linked with negotiations over what constitutes ‘Muslim identity’ as well as the way in which Muslims situate themselves in relation to the Hindu majority population.

2.3. ‘Caste’ or ‘community’? Debates on social stratification among Muslims in South Asia

How to best characterise the social stratification of Muslims in South Asia remains a contested debate among scholars. While ‘caste’ and ‘community’ continue to be the most common words used to describe different Muslim groups in India, both terms remain problematic and many studies have opted to avoid such difficulties by drawing upon more specific terms such as *khandan* (‘family’), *qabila* (‘tribe’), *jamat* (‘congregation or religious association’⁴⁶) and *biraderi* (‘lineage’ or ‘marriage circle’), depending on the particular group being discussed.

With regard to questions of ‘caste’ and ‘community’ among Muslims in Mahemdabad, many of my Muslim informants used both the Gujarati/Hindi term *samaj* (for instance, ‘Charotar Sunni Vohra Mahemdabad Samaj’, the title of the handbook containing demographic information pertaining to the town’s Vohra community) as well as *nat* (‘caste’).⁴⁷ When speaking English as well, many informants used the word ‘caste’ in describing their own community or in referring to

⁴⁶ Simpson (2001: 125).

⁴⁷ The use of the term ‘*nat*’ (or ‘*nyat*’) by Gujarati Muslims to refer to ‘caste groupings’ has also been noted by S.C. Misra (1985 [1964]) in his study of Muslim communities in Gujarat.

the larger social organisation of the town more generally. Given this, I have chosen in this thesis to rely upon the term ‘community’ with reference to both Sunni Vohras (‘the Sunni Vohra community’) as well as Muslims more generally in Mahemdabad (‘the Muslim community’) although I am aware of both the problems and ambiguities associated with this term.⁴⁸

To date, the debate among scholars regarding the degree to which Indian Muslim systems of social stratification can be likened to a caste system such as that adhered to by Hindus has largely revolved around ‘the analytical question of “ideology” versus practice’ (Vatuk 1996: 229). On the one hand, it is clear that Islam is theologically based on the premise of equality among all members of the *ummah* and, as such, constitutes a social system which does not hierarchically rank different groups as is the case with Hindu *varnas*.⁴⁹ In this respect, Hindu notions of ritual purity (and, conversely, untouchability) explicitly contradict the egalitarian tenets enshrined in Islamic religious law apart from with regard to gender relations: as Vatuk points out, gender inequality is specifically set out in the *shari’ah* (1996: 257).

Despite the egalitarian ethos enshrined in Islamic notions surrounding the *ummah*, however, many Muslim communities in South Asia in practice are divided into endogamous and often occupationally differentiated groups which *de facto* appear extremely similar in nature to Hindu castes. Muslim groups which trace their descent to Arab traders, rulers and saints (commonly referred to as *ashraf*, or ‘noble’, and comprising Saiyeds, Pathans, Mughals and Sheikhs) are generally ranked at the top of the social hierarchy while indigenous Muslims (*ajlaf*, or ‘common’, i.e., descendants of Hindu converts) occupy a relatively lower status.⁵⁰ While notions of the ‘twice-born’ are clearly absent from Islamic theology, Saiyeds are generally accepted as having the highest status within the Muslim community due to their alleged direct

⁴⁸ See Raj (2003: 8-10) for a discussion of the way in which the term ‘community’ has traditionally been used to refer to primordial and homogeneous groups within the context of ethnic minorities in Britain and North America.

⁴⁹ The four *varnas* in the Hindu caste system are ranked hierarchically. At the top of the ritual hierarchy are Brahmans (priests), followed by Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and artisans) and, lastly, Shudras (servants). As their name suggests, ‘outcastes’ (or ‘untouchables’) fall altogether outside the caste hierarchy.

⁵⁰ While the large majority of converted Muslims do trace their origins to low-caste Hindus, there are likewise Muslim groups such as the Meos in Rajasthan (Jamous 1996; Mayaram 1997) and Satpanthi Patels (Khan 2004) who claim descent from Rajputs and Patidars respectively.

descent from the Prophet Muhammad (tracing their lineage to the Prophet both through his daughter Fatimah as well as his cousin Ali [Misra 1985: 118]).⁵¹

As such, the answer as to whether there exists a caste system among Muslims depends very much on the specific context on which one is focusing and, moreover, the very definition of ‘caste’ being used— whether it be closer to Dumont’s original theorisation of the *jati* system (1980) in which there is a clear ritual hierarchy along with occupational and economic interdependence between different groups or, alternatively, a more horizontal system of social differentiation in which different castes more closely resemble ‘culturally distinct groups’ (Fuller 1996: 17).

Earlier scholars such as Barth (1960), Ahmad (1973c) and Dumont (1980) generally hold that Muslim forms of social stratification should be seen as akin to the Hindu caste system. Ahmad (*ibid.*) has argued that while Muslims themselves deny that they have a caste system, in reality (according to the anthropologist) caste or an analogous system of stratification does indeed exist among Indian Muslims. This, according to Ahmad, is a result of the fact that Muslims in India have historically lived among, and are largely descended from, Hindus. Similarly, Dumont (1980: 207-08) has echoed this point and argued that even with respect to questions of commensality and inter-marriage, Indian Muslims imitate Hindu codes of caste purity when it comes to forms of interaction between *ashraf* and non-*ashraf* groups (although he concedes that these ‘caste-like’ codes are less rigid given the influence of Islamic laws).

Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of Muslims are descended from Hindu converts, more recent scholarship has distanced itself considerably from earlier studies such as Ahmad (1973c) and Dumont (1980).⁵² On a general level, the very notion that caste constitutes an intrinsic element of South Asian social organisation (regardless of the religious group being referred to) has been heavily contested by post-colonialist scholars such as Dirks (2001) and Cohn (1987). Contrary to many Orientalist and early anthropological writings depicting caste as central to ‘traditional’

⁵¹ The heightened position of Saiyeds, however, is often contested as well, as documented by Simpson (2001, 2006).

⁵² Imtiaz Ahmad makes a similar case for the Hindu influence on Muslim religious practice (1981) and kinship systems in later edited volumes. For example, see the four volumes on Indian Muslims edited by Ahmad (Ahmad 1973b, 1976, 1981, 1983).

indigenous forms of social stratification since their very inception, such scholars have posited that it is in fact a distinctly modern phenomenon. The caste system as it exists in contemporary Indian society should be seen, according to Dirks, as a ‘product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule’ (*ibid.*: 5) rather than an intrinsic dimension of a timeless Indian tradition. While Bayly (2001) has emphasised the need to examine both the role of colonialism as well as the changes which were taking place within Indian society prior to the advent of British rule in the production of ‘modern’ understandings of caste, the current common consensus among scholars remains one which eschews ahistorical renditions of the role of caste in patterns of Indian social stratification.

In light of such critiques, theories such as those presented by Ahmad and Dumont which assert that the presence of a caste system among Indian Muslims can be attributed to the ‘acculturative influence of Hinduism’ (Ahmad 1973c) appear to neglect the extent to which the larger historical, social and political context is deeply implicated in matters of social organisation and stratification. As Vatuk (1996: 229) has argued with regard to these debates:

There has been an unfortunate tendency in the literature to use an idea as idealised and essentialised concept of Hindu ‘caste’ as a model against which to measure observed Muslim social patterns and modes of thought. In so doing, insufficient recognition is given to the diversity and variability of over space and time of ‘caste’ as it operates among, and is rationalised by, Hindus themselves.

In her historical account of the Nawwayat *khandan* (‘family’) in Hyderabad and Madras, Vatuk suggests that it is a recognition of difference rather than an assertion of occupying a distinct hierarchical rank that best describes the way in which this Muslim group currently sees itself in relation to other South Indian Muslims. The Nawwayats, descendants of religious scholars and legal specialists who originally came to the Subcontinent from Arabia to spread Islam, have in the past practised strict endogamy and justified this preference through references to maintaining blood purity, although this has changed somewhat in recent decades. While viewing themselves as a ‘unique and special group’ (*ibid.*: 235), they likewise emphasise the egalitarian ethos within Islam when prompted to clarify their comparative status in relation to other Muslims.

Vatuk's analysis highlights the degree to which, as pointed out by Dirks (2001) and Bayly (2001), understandings and practices relating to caste change both through time as well as from region to region. This is true not only for pre-colonial and colonial India, but also, arguably, has been the case more recently. As Fuller has suggested, talk of caste in contemporary India has now largely been eliminated from 'legitimate public discourse' and replaced with euphemistic terms such as 'community' (*samaj*) through which 'status [is] coded as cultural difference' (1996: 13). To take Fuller's conclusions a step further, it is possible to argue that discourses of difference rather than inequality have become widespread not only among India's Hindus but likewise among Muslims who publicly downplay hierarchical relations (particularly with regard to *ashraf* and *ajlaf* distinctions) and emphasise cultural difference.

Contemporary debates on the historical dimensions of caste as a pan-Indian social institution likewise resonate with notions regarding the construction of the idea of 'community', a term which has been increasingly used to refer to religious formations and groups (as well as, in certain cases, particular castes). Through a historical analysis of the evolution of the use of the term 'community' in nineteenth-century Bombay through case studies of the Khojas and the Pushtimarga Vaishnavas (also known as 'Pushtimargis'), Shodhan (2001) highlights the way in which colonial and larger social transformations within India served to reify the boundaries between classifications of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. Both Khojas and Pushtimargis are considered 'heterodox' in the extent to which they both draw upon orthodox conventions within Sunni and Shia Islam and Hinduism as well as incorporate practices that deviate significantly from the commonly accepted tenets of their respective religious laws.⁵³ Shodhan argues against scholars such as Freitag (1989) and Pandey (1997 [1990]) who, while accepting the historical construction of 'communities', still take for granted their 'empathetic and pre-legal' nature (2001: 26), thereby reinforcing colonial discourses linking religious life to a larger 'church'. As part of her larger discussion regarding the shift by which groups such as Khojas

⁵³ Khoja religious traditions draw upon both Shia and Sunni practices as well as Hindu sources. For example, they recognise the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, along with other members of the Shia sect of Islam. Their holy books include both the Muslim Qu'ran as well as the Dasavatara, the story of the ten avatars of Vishnu, a work composed by the *pir* who is believed to have originally converted Khojas to Islam (Masselos 1973: 7).

and Pushtimargis went from being seen as self-governing caste groups to subsections of the larger Muslim and Hindu ‘communities’ respectively, Shodhan suggests that in nineteenth-century Gujarati, ‘caste’ was referred to through words derived from both Sanskrit (*‘jnati’*) and Arabic (*‘jamat’*). Such terms were used to refer indiscriminately to both Hindu and Muslim groups; thus, while in contemporary understanding, *‘jamat’* is used exclusively to refer to Muslim groups, in the nineteenth century the term did not carry the same religious implications and could be used just as easily to refer to Hindu groups. Shodhan therefore describes the way in which, as a result of particular colonial modes of governance, what had previously been small and relatively fluid ‘caste groups’ became more firmly lodged within wider categories of religious ‘communities’.

Shodhan’s historical analysis clearly suggests that, much like caste, notions such as ‘community’ have not remained untouched by larger social and political developments in South Asian history. Greater pressures and efforts at Islamicisation have, as Fuller has argued, compelled Indian Muslims increasingly to distance themselves from the idea that they subscribe to a caste system in the same way as Hindus (1996: 19-20). In fact, discourses among Muslims which reject the idea of a ‘Muslim caste system’ have been strategically utilised as a means of forging a separate Muslim identity and unity. Yet, while this is certainly true on a general level, particularly with respect to more elite Muslim groups whose higher status within the Muslim community is deeply invested in differentiating themselves from Hindu practices and beliefs, the same cannot be said to apply universally. Groups such as the Khojas described by Shodhan and the Sunni Vohras with whom I worked in Mahemdabad occupy a more liminal position vis-à-vis the larger Muslim community and, in this respect, have less to gain through such strategies. Ultimately, the larger social and political context is decisive in determining how a particular group aligns itself with regard to Hindu practices and customs. Jasani (2007) has reported that in the context of the neighbourhood of Juhapura in Ahmedabad, many Sunni Vohras have embraced a more stringent Islamic reformist lifestyle (which resolutely rejects any form of ‘Hindu influence’) in an attempt to achieve upward mobility given their status as an indigenous Gujarati group operating within north Indian Muslim leadership structures. In the context of Mahemdabad, in contrast, the dominant economic and political position which Sunni Vohras occupy in relation to other local

Muslim groups is reliant on maintaining strong links with local Hindu merchants and any attempt at publicly rejecting ‘Hindu’ practices would surely endanger this privileged status.

Fanselow (1996: 202) has convincingly argued that ultimately the question as to whether or not Muslims have caste is something of a red herring: the answer depends on who you are asking—Muslims, Hindus or the anthropologist. He likewise notes that such a question is inherently tied to larger questions of identity: for his Muslim Tamil informants, to have caste implicitly suggests that one isn’t a ‘true Muslim’ (the logic being that only Hindus have caste). The importance of the question of caste, then, lies in the extent to which it highlights current undertones of intra-Muslim differentiation and stratification (which are formed through assessments of proximity or distance from the majority Hindu identity). In this respect, Fanselow suggests that the question of whether Indian Muslims ‘have’ caste is not one which should be analysed along the lines of ideology versus practice. Rather, he argues:

It is ... a matter of two competing interpretations and strategies for behaviour, which are employed to make sense of changing economic and political realities, and therefore have to be understood in the context of these realities. (1996: 223)

As suggested above, the question of caste among Muslims is important as well as contentious because it highlights larger questions about the position and identity of Indian Muslims as a minority living in a majority Hindu state. Such a discussion would quite obviously not have taken the same form had it taken place during a different period when social and political distinctions were couched in terms more along the lines of ‘Turk’ and ‘*mleccha*’ (Khan 2004b). Vatuk’s emphasis on ‘cultural difference’ as a means through which groups such as the Nawwayats differentiate themselves from other Muslim groups is certainly applicable in some cases. As I will show, however, competition between Vohras and Maleks over status within Mahemdabad’s Muslim community takes a decidedly more competitive tone, particularly in relation to questions of honour and ‘Muslimness’. In this sense, Fanselow’s argument that ‘caste’ works as a marker of ‘ethnicity’ among Indian Muslims, creating boundaries between groups who are, for all intents and purposes, very close, is helpful in identifying the competing claims made by Maleks and Vohras regarding ‘Muslim’ identity. The debate on caste among both scholars and Indian

Muslims is important not solely in the extent to which it provides a means of understanding questions of social organisation but, more generally, as a lens through which to view wider conceptions of how a minority group defines itself in regard to the Hindu majority population. As such, it points to wider issues such as where Muslims fit within the current Indian political and social landscape, and the push and pull which occurs between constructing a separate 'Muslim' identity in opposition to what is conceived as 'Hindu' on the one hand and, on the other, maintaining a low and inconspicuous profile in relation to the majority Hindu community.

2.4. Ethnographic depiction of Sunni Vohras in Gujarat

As I describe in this chapter, Vohras in Mahemdabad at once occupy a position of economic and political dominance within the local arena and, simultaneously, maintain a profile at odds with what is generally seen as constituting normative Muslim practices in the town. On a general level, in comparison to the significant scholarly attention which has been devoted to Daudi Bohras, considerably less is known about Sunni Vohras in Gujarat. It is certainly the case that today Sunni Vohras lack the tight cohesiveness that characterises the Daudi Bohra community and, given the lack of scholarship on the former, it is difficult to gain a strong sense of how the community across Gujarat is dispersed as well as how its different sub-groups are related to one another. In his overview of Muslim communities in Gujarat, Misra (1985 [1964]: 123) classifies the Sunni Vohras of Gujarat into four regional communities (or *ekadas*), namely, Patani Vohras, Kadiwal Vohras, Charotar Vohras and Surati Sunni Vohras.

As I describe in this chapter, Sunni Vohras are distinct from other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad in the many similarities they share with local Hindus (linguistic, occupational and social). Given the paucity of studies on Vohras, however, it is difficult to gauge whether this has been true in the past and whether it is also currently the case in other parts of the state. The ethnographic evidence available on Sunni Vohras presents a conflicting portrayal of the community and it is difficult to draw conclusive generalisations, particularly with respect to the relations between Vohras and local Hindus.

The only anthropological study of Sunni Vohras in Gujarat is that by Ismail Lambat (1985 [1976]) who conducted research into kinship and marriage rituals among the Surati Sunni Vohras. Lambat describes Sunni Vohras as a predominantly rural community who earn their livelihood mainly as petty landowners and agriculturalists. The Surati Sunni Vohras, who constitute the primary focus of his study, are described as having 'no linkages with the Hindu castes' (*ibid.*: 53); moreover, 'the situation of the Surati Vohras appears to be even more striking in this respect as they do not form linkages even with the Hindu service castes, like carpenters, blacksmiths, etc., on whom they have to depend constantly for repairs to their agricultural implements.' (*ibid.*)

Sunni Vohras are also given brief mention in Pocock's seminal work on the Hindu Patidar caste prevalent in the Charotar region of Gujarat, although his characterisation differs significantly from that put forth by Lambat. In describing one of the villages in which he conducted research, Pocock presents the resident 'Voras' as Muslims by name only, noting that they were largely ignorant of the basic tenets of Islam, to the point that they were not even aware of a distinction between the Shi'a and Sunni sects. Moreover, Pocock maintains that:

... the Prophet was represented as a holy man, one of many, who was born in India and was the originator of the sect to which they belong ... In the village they are vegetarian but have no aversion to eating meat outside, although they tend to be secretive about this. In Sundarana, one Muslim boy was a keen participant in a *bhajan mandali*—a Hindu hymn-singing association—although one or two of his elders mildly disapproved, on the general ground that there was a difference between them and the Hindus which should be maintained. These Muslims were treated much as a Hindu caste by the Patidar. (Pocock 1972: 44)

According to Pocock, the name 'Vora' suggests that these Muslims are connected with the well-known Daudi Bohras although, in my opinion, this is unlikely given that, as mentioned above, the latter generally do not reside outside major urban areas and towns (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Gujarat Population: Musalmáns and Pársis 1899: 28). Rather, given the presence of Sunni Vohras in smaller towns and more rural areas across Gujarat, it is more likely that the 'Voras' referred to by Pocock are from the Sunni Vohra community.

What is striking, however, is the contrast between Pocock's characterisation of 'Voras' and that presented by Lambat; Pocock describes a setting in which there is relatively little religious differentiation between 'Voras' and their Hindu neighbours (in the paragraph cited above, Pocock goes so far as to suggest that they were treated as another Hindu caste by Patidars in the village) while Lambat characterises 'Voras' as separate from other Hindu villagers.

A third perspective on Sunni Vohras in Gujarat is presented by Professor M.G. Bombaywalla,⁵⁴ a scholar of the Sunni Vohra community as well as a Sunni Vohra himself, who works as the head librarian in the Pir Mohammad Shah Trust, a library of Urdu documents in Ahmedabad. Bombaywalla described the Sunni Vohra community to me as predominantly confined to the three main Gujarati cities of Surat, Vadodara and Ahmedabad. Outside these three cities, sections of the community can also be found in the four districts of Sabar Kantha, Mehsana, Banas Kantha and Surat, all of which, except the latter, border with Rajasthan. The Sunni Vohra community as described by Bombaywalla is highly Islamised and those residing in urban areas speak predominantly Gujari Urdu (a mix of Gujarati and Urdu) while those living in rural and semi-rural locales are apt to speak Gujarati.

As evidenced from the above citations, scholarship and knowledge about the history and the present-day organisation of the Sunni Vohra community in Gujarat remain both scarce and highly contradictory. The Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad conform most closely to the 'Voras' described by Pocock although they have a more informed knowledge of Islamic law and principles as well as a stronger sense of group identity distinct from both Hindus and other Muslim communities, a point I discuss in more depth in the next section.

2.5. Profile of the Mahemdabadi Charotar Sunni Vohra community

The Sunni Muslim community in Mahemdabad trace their origins to the Charotar area of central Gujarat and form part of the Charotar Sunni Vohra *ekada*.⁵⁵ According to the leader of the local Vohra community, one of the early inhabitants of Mahemdabad

⁵⁴ Personal communication, 8 February 2007.

⁵⁵ Regional sub-group.

was a Vohra descended from an Arab merchant who had originally come to India through the Gulf of Cambay. Given the evidence that up until the fifteenth century the division between Daudi Bohras and Sunni Vohras was considerably less pronounced, this is certainly possible although it is also likely that this claim represents an effort to identify Mahemdabad's Vohras as direct descendants of the original Bohras who arrived in Cambay in A.D. 1067. Regardless of the origin of local Vohras in Mahemdabad, a majority of the families living in the town have been there for several generations, a fact which is attested to by their *atak* (sub-sub-group), 'Mahemdabadi'.

A detailed contemporary profile of the community can be gleaned from the town's Vohra handbook. Published in 1998, the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj handbook lists 287 Sunni Vohra families living in Mahemdabad and a total of 1,804 people. Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad live primarily in the area of the *bazar* referred to as Khatrej Darvaja (near to the town gate leading to the village Khatrej) where they constitute the overwhelming majority of that area's inhabitants. Other families are scattered in various parts of the main *bazar*, also located in the town centre. A significant number of the wealthier families are concentrated in one of the town's Muslim housing societies (National Park Society, Ashyana Park Society, Hina Park Society, Aman Society) while poorer members of the community live in the slum in the eastern part of the town known both as Daudpura (its Muslim name) or Bhimraopura (its Harijan name).⁵⁶

Today, the Vohra community in Mahemdabad constitutes the town's most economically powerful Muslim group and its numerically second largest caste after the Maleks. Many Vohras are still engaged in the traditional occupation of cloth merchant, selling goods (particularly *sari* and 'dress material'⁵⁷) either from their homes or shops in the main streets of the *bazar*, or door-to-door. An overwhelming majority are involved in business in one way or another and often a single household operates a number of businesses (the size of which can vary from a street-side *pan* shop to a lucrative lumber yard). A fairly industrious example can be seen in the family of one of my Vohra informants. This joint family with three adult sons

⁵⁶ Both names ('Daudpura' and 'Bhimraopura') were given by respondents of the survey.

⁵⁷ The English term 'dress material' is used to refer to the sets of cloth used for making a *salwar kameez*.

operates a total of five businesses: selling firewood from their house, raising goats for milk and meat, delivering milk from the dairy cooperative to local shops, running a watch-repairing shop in the market area of the town as well as a small road-side shop selling basic provisions on one of the main streets in the Muslim area of Mahemdabad.

Besides business (*dhando*), other professions listed in the handbook include for-hire drivers, rickshaw drivers and a handful of government servants. The primary occupation listed for women is housework (*gherkam*) although a few women are listed as working in salaried employment (*nokri*), as teachers in a *madrasa*, or in 'business'. This said, my personal experience suggests that while most women are primarily engaged in housework, many also regularly assist in the family businesses, albeit usually from the confines of the home. For example, Aminaben, a member of the family mentioned in the preceding paragraph, plays a lead role in administering the many small businesses which her husband and sons carry out (in the survey her occupation is listed as 'housework'). Likewise, Lubnaben, whose occupation is also listed as 'housework', is the primary attendant in the provisions shop which is run on the ground floor of her family home. As such, the occupational status listed for many Vohra women somewhat obfuscates their participation in the running and operation of family ventures: while 'housework' may be their primary occupation, it remains the case that they are significantly more involved in non-housework activities than other local Muslim women.

Most households are joint, unsurprising given the business orientation of the community and the participation of several generations in the operation of the family business(es). The head of the household is usually the eldest active male in the family although when a parent is still alive and living within the household, he or she is listed as *pote* (head). Approximately one-fifth of all Vohra households in Mahemdabad (57) listed a widowed mother as the head of the family (all other members were described in accordance to their relationship to her—i.e., 'son', 'daughter-in-law', granddaughter, etc.). While her sons may still have a presiding role in decisions made about the household and family businesses, the fact that widowed women are listed as *pote* is representative of the more expansive roles accorded to older women in the Vohra community, a point that I discuss further in Chapter 4.

Many Vohras in Mahemdabad (and elsewhere) have, within the last generation or two, taken on the surname Mansuri. Most people whom I spoke to agreed that Mansuris and Vohras form part of the same community (often known collectively as Mansuri-Vohras) and when asked why Vohras decided to change their name to Mansuri, my informants usually cited the fact that as Mansuris they were entitled to government benefits and reservations as members of an OBC. Misra (1964) observes that some Ghanchi-Vohras in areas such as Chhota Udepur and Idar in northern Gujarat also started adopting the name of Mansuri, a common Muslim surname which allegedly alludes to Mansoor al-Hallaj, a Persian Sufi mystic who lived in the late ninth/early tenth centuries. In several families I knew in Mahemdabad, different generations have different surnames. For example, the youngest generation in one family (children ranging in age from 3 to 16 years) all hold the Mansuri surname while their parents' generation have retained the Vohra name.

Various explanations were offered to me to explain why children are given the surname 'Mansuri', although all inevitably revolved around questions of social mobility. One which I found particularly interesting was that, because children are seated in alphabetical order at school, Vohra students had in the past been forced to sit alongside low-caste Hindus such as members of the Vaghela or Vaghri castes. As Mansuris, they now sit next to children from higher-status Hindu groups. While I find it improbable that most Vohras would go to such trouble to avoid contact between their children and low-caste Hindus, I encountered several other similar episodes in which middle-class Vohras showed a strong distaste at the prospect of interacting with low-caste Hindus. Despite the obvious unease expressed about interacting with lower-status Hindus, however, none of my Vohra informants suggested that they felt embarrassment over classifying themselves as an OBC group for the purposes of gaining government reservations. Rather, as I describe with regard to the 'diplomacy' that the group demonstrates towards other religious groups in the town, these measures were seen as pragmatic attempts to improve their circumstances and opportunities.

As a business community, Vohras have traditionally downplayed the importance of formal schooling in lieu of vocational training or apprenticeship and this still remains

the case for the majority of families. This said, it is clear from the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra survey that there has been a significant shift in the level of education attained by both men and women within the community. For men and women under the age of 25, it is quite common to have obtained at least a seventh standard education, although a significant proportion of students continue to attend school up until the SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and a minority will continue further to pass the HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) exam or attain a university degree. Among the older generation (25-45 years), it is not uncommon for both members of a married couple to have attained the same level of educational qualifications and, in some cases, the wife is listed as having obtained a higher level of education than her husband. While this may appear unusual at first glance, it reflects the emphasis placed by Sunni Vohras on vocational training over more formal schooling, particularly for men (girls being allowed to remain in formal schooling for longer while boys begin vocational training or an apprenticeship).

The centre of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community is the city of Anand, located approximately one hour by train from Mahemdabad. Relative to other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad, Vohras have a particularly strong ‘caste’ organisation whose local activities include producing the survey mentioned above, organising group marriages and discouraging practices deemed as socially detrimental such as dowry. This aspect of the local Vohra community strongly resembles local Hindu caste organisations which undertake similar activities as a means of promoting unity and increasing the overall status of the caste, and is an institutional mechanism which was largely absent among other local Muslim communities. In this and other respects, Vohras in Mahemdabad often appear closer to local Hindus than other Muslim groups in the town, a notion that is supported by the fact that locals of all religions regularly differentiate between ‘Vohra’ and ‘Musulman’ (the latter term indicating ‘Muslim’ in a general sense). This differentiation highlights the way in which Vohras both see themselves, and are seen by others, as distinct from other ‘Muslims’ in the town. As such, there is no clear-cut social hierarchy among local Muslim groups; rather, discussions regarding the status of a particular group vis-à-vis others are often fraught with ambiguity and contestation.

2.6. Status and differentiation within the Muslim community

While among Muslims in Mahemdabad, debates concerning ‘Muslimness’ are not focused on the question of ‘caste’ *per se*, ideas concerning sacred or foreign genealogy do play a role in assessing differences between groups; however, as I argue, this strategy of assessing status generally remains secondary to more instrumental approaches used by Muslims to obtain prominence such as local politics, financial wealth and, as argued in the previous chapter, consumption and lifestyle patterns associated with the middle classes.

As I discuss in Chapter 3, *ashraf* Muslims generally practise strict endogamy in comparison to indigenous Muslim groups who are more apt to intermarry with groups from different communities which have similar economic and social status. It is important to note that much in the same way that lower-caste Hindu groups have attempted to increase their social status by claiming upper-caste origins,⁵⁸ many lower-status Muslims have likewise appropriated common *ashraf* names as a means of claiming a higher status within the Muslim community (for example, see Ahmad 1973a). This is certainly the case in Mahemdabad where many indigenous Muslims have taken on names such as ‘Sheikh’ or ‘Pathan’. As I was warned by a Malek informant, however, such families are in fact descendants of Hindu converts and, according to him, at the time of conversion adopted whichever Muslim name came to mind. That certain families constitute ‘true’ Sheikhs and Pathans while others have merely taken on the surname at some point following conversion is common knowledge and does not ultimately upset the local hierarchies which accord increased respect to ‘foreign-born’ Muslim families. Consequently, it is important to remember that so-called *ashraf/aljaf* distinctions are in fact flexible and susceptible to change and reinterpretation in the same way in which *jati* remains fluid among Hindus.

As is commonly the case for groups whose elite status is predicated on descent, *ashraf* Muslims in Mahemdabad have a strong sense of their genealogical ancestry and are able to trace back their family’s history for several generations, in some cases to the time of their forefathers’ original arrival in India in the fifteenth century. While in a

⁵⁸ Rowe (1991) describes one instance in which members of the low Sudra Noniya caste in Madhya Pradesh began to make claims of having been descended from Cauhan Rajputs in the early part of the twentieth century as a means of achieving upward social mobility.

distinct minority, such families generally held a privileged status among Mahemdabad's ruling elite in the past, and to a lesser degree, continue to do so in the present, retaining strong ties with local Hindus of the dominant castes such as Patels, Brahmins and Vanias. In such circles, a high level of education (particularly among men but in some cases also among women), family connections abroad and a certain degree of financial wealth are important markers of high status. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many such families have also been strongly involved in local municipality politics in the past, generally as Congress representatives. As I have argued previously, members of the traditional elite cultivate a certain secular ethic and, while religious differences are not necessarily irrelevant, class and education generally overrule other considerations.

In Mahemdabad, while elite status on the part of *ashraf* groups such as Pathans and Saiyeds is generally accepted, there exists no clear (or uniformly accepted) hierarchy among the remaining indigenous Muslim groups in Mahemdabad. The vast majority of other Muslims in Mahemdabad comprise indigenous Muslims such as Maleks, Sunni Vohras, Kokars, Diwans, Faqirs and converted Pathans and Sheikhs. Of these, Maleks and Sunni Vohras make up a significant and conspicuous portion both numerically as well as in positions of leadership in local business and politics. The fact that, while local *ashraf* families are certainly accorded due respect, it is indigenous Muslims who hold the reins of local power within the Muslim community at large has no doubt exerted influence on local conceptions of status and the strategies adopted for facilitating social mobility. As such, it is necessary to differentiate between what may be termed the 'cultural' status of families who claim *ashraf* status and a second form of status which is accessible to non-*ashraf* groups through the accumulation of financial wealth and political prestige. As I have suggested earlier, while there certainly exist cases in Mahemdabad in which indigenous Muslims have taken on *ashraf* names such as 'Sheikh' and 'Pathan', in the larger scheme such strategies have relatively little influence when compared to more instrumental approaches to improving one's status in the local arena.

As I describe in further detail in the following section, contentions between Vohras and Maleks about what constitutes 'true' Muslim identity rely more heavily on this second form of status but are also influenced by proximity or distance in relation to

local Hindus, notions of honour and the pragmatics of local political and economic alliances.

2.7. Contested Muslim identity: ‘Vohras’ or ‘Musulmans’?

The debate surrounding the applicability of the term ‘caste’ to Muslim communities in South Asia is particularly relevant given the propensity of Vohras to identify themselves as Muslims while, at the same time, sharing significant cultural similarities with Gujarati Hindus. As Fanselow (1996) argues in relation to the Tamil Muslims with which he worked, assertions made that other Muslim groups are ‘like Hindus’ say more about distinctions within the larger Muslim community than about relations between Hindus and Muslims. In general, the Vohra community remains detached from other Muslim groups in the town and retains an identity distinct from other non-Vohra Muslims (including, but not confined to, Maleks). While cleavages and hierarchies no doubt also exist between other (non-Vohra) Muslim groups, Vohras present something of an anomaly in the sense that they practise the Muslim faith while aligning themselves on a cultural level more closely with local Hindus (at least in the eyes of non-Vohra Muslims).

The distinction between Vohras and other Muslims in Mahemdabad was made explicit to me by the way in which people talked about the two groups. As noted earlier, I was struck by the fact that, upon asking whether a given person or family was Vohra, the respondent (whether him or herself Vohra or non-Vohra) would often reply that ‘No, he/she is Musalman’, thereby drawing an evident distinction between ‘Vohra’ and ‘Musalman’. While there is a clear conception among both Vohras as well as the other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad that Vohras are Muslim in the sense that they practise the Islamic faith, the two groups are rarely lumped together aside from in exceptional cases such as during the 2002 attacks on the Muslim establishments in Mahemdabad (which I elaborate on in Chapter 6). That ‘Vohra’ and ‘Musalman’ constituted mutually exclusive terms for many of my informants (both Hindu and Muslim) is indicative of cleavages within the local Muslim community and, furthermore, of the fact that the term ‘Musulman’ does not necessarily refer to a

general group united by common religious beliefs (in this case, Islam) but rather a particular social sub-set within a religiously defined community.⁵⁹

That distinctions between Vohras and non-Vohra Muslims are not simply a matter of rhetoric is apparent to anyone who has a basic familiarity of the local Muslim community in Mahemdabad. On a purely superficial level, the outward appearance of Vohras is closer to that of local Hindus in Mahemdabad rather than to other Muslims. Everyday dress for many older Vohra women in Mahemdabad is the *sari*, a clothing item generally associated in the public imagination with married Hindu women; in contrast, non-Vohra Muslim women of various ages and classes uniformly wear the *salwar kameez*.⁶⁰ While many middle-class Hindu women also wear the *salwar kameez*, within the context of the Muslim community in Mahemdabad it takes on a heightened meaning in delineating Vohra and non-Vohra Muslim sartorial codes and practices. This division in clothing is furthermore exemplified by ceremonial dress: Vohra brides wear a red *sari* (again, similarly to Hindu women in the town) and Vohra women often wear a *sari* on special or ceremonial occasions, again contrasting with other Muslim women who are more apt to wear a more elaborate version of the two-piece *salwar kameez*.

While there is no such equivalent distinction in dress among men, it is nevertheless true that Vohra men seldom grow a beard, one of the more visible signs distinguishing Muslim men from men of other religions. In most schools of Islamic jurisprudence, in fact, growing a beard is considered mandatory for Muslim men and generally seen as a sign of piety and religiosity. Although there are several exceptions to this rule, the degree to which a long beard stands as a marker of Muslim identity throughout much of South Asia is demonstrated by the fact that, during the 2002 violence in Gujarat, many Muslim as well as non-Muslim men shaved their beards off in fear of becoming the targets of communal attacks. Yet, as my Vohra friend Rashidaben recounted to

⁵⁹ Since the completion of my fieldwork, I have learned from researchers working in Kachchh (western Gujarat) and Madhya Pradesh that similar distinctions are also made between 'Vohras' and 'Muslims' in these regions.

⁶⁰ Also referred to by the English terms 'Punjabi suit' or simply as 'dress', the *salwar kameez* is worn by both men and women (although in different colours and styles according to gender) and usually consists of a long shirt that ends at the knees and pyjama pants (women also wear a *dupatta*, or scarf, draped across their chest). During my time in Mahemdabad, I never met a non-Vohra Muslim woman, irrespective of community, wearing a *sari*.

me, many Vohra men differ from Muslim men of other groups in that they do *not* grow beards, not merely as a matter of personal choice but often as a consequence of social pressure from within the community. In recounting how her father became a Sufi *pir*, Rashidaben recalled how her father was taken over by a spiritual directive to grow a beard. As his facial hair began to develop, however, his brother strongly objected to his new appearance, arguing that Vohra men don't grow beards, and proceeded to cut his beard off (his brother later fell ill, presumably in divine retribution for this intervention). In contrast, the practice of growing a beard is more common among non-Vohra Muslim men in the town and, while exceptions exist in both cases, this custom constitutes a further way in which local social divisions are evident through embodied practices.

On a linguistic level, Vohras distinguish themselves from other local Muslims in their use of Gujarati⁶¹ rather than Hindi (or, to be more exact, the Gujarati-Hindi *kichra*, or mixture, spoken by other Muslims at home). Given the many regional languages spoken throughout India, a large majority of the country's population is able to speak at least two regional languages and, depending on factors such as educational qualifications and migration, often more. Most people in Mahemdabad are able to speak both Gujarati and Hindi to varying degrees and both these languages along with English are taught in the local primary and secondary schools. Yet, the language which one speaks at home remains a significant marker of regional as well as ethnic identity, in Mahemdabad as well as much of India. For the majority of Mahemdabadis, their first language—that which they use at home, speak to friends with and conduct local business transactions in—remains Gujarati. Hindi, on the other hand, is relied upon to communicate with non-locals (from outside Gujarat) and retains an important role in popular culture through Bollywood songs and films as well as serial television shows and national news programmes, many of which are predominantly in Hindi.

The question of which language is spoken at home is, for many Muslims in Gujarat, closely linked to one's distinct identity as a Muslim, often in opposition to Hindus. In Mahemdabad, relatively few Muslims can speak Urdu and none that I encountered

⁶¹ The principal language in Gujarat is Gujarati although there exists a multitude of local dialects and regional variations (a local saying states that 'the dialect changes every seven miles').

spoke it on an everyday basis. Rather, non-Vohra Muslims often express pride in their use of Hindi at home which they exalt as '*the* national language', thereby aligning themselves more closely with north India, the traditional centre of gravity for Indian Muslims, rather than with fellow Gujaratis. Vohras, however, mimic Gujarati Hindus (as well as Christians) in their use of the Gujarati suffixes *-bhai* (literally 'brother') and *-ben* ('sister') which are appended to the end of a person's name in order to denote that a close or familiar relationship is shared with them.⁶² Non-Vohra Muslims in Mahemdabad, by contrast, rarely use the Gujarati suffixes, opting rather for Hindi suffixes such as *-banu* (for younger women) and *-bibi* (for older women).

While such linguistic distinctions between Vohras and non-Vohra Muslims may appear at first glance to be rather superficial given that most Mahemdabadis are proficient in both Gujarati and Hindi, in fact these differences have larger consequences in terms of regional identification. That Vohras rely on Gujarati in both business and family spheres is reflective of their status as Muslims of Gujarati descent, placing them in a similar category to other Gujarati indigenous Muslim groups such as Khojas, Menons and Daudi Bohras, as well as other Gujarati speakers such as Hindus and Christians. In contrast, Muslims who speak Hindi in the home are more likely to be descendants of migrants from north India (although the original migration may have occurred several generations prior). As such, Vohras' use of Gujarati provides a further means through which they are seen as different from other local Muslim groups and, simultaneously, more akin to Hindus in Mahemdabad.

Vohras, moreover, differ from other local Mahemdabadi Muslims in the fact that they have traditionally resided (and many still do reside) alongside Hindus in the main streets of the market area of Mahemdabad. As Mines (1976) has argued in his study of a Muslim merchant caste in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, living near the market area is, unsurprisingly, closely tied to a group's traditional occupation as merchants. This contrasts with other Muslims in Mahemdabad who generally live in Muslim-only enclaves on the outskirts of the town centre and in the eastern part of Mahemdabad. Exceptions in which Vohras live with other Muslims, however, can be found at both extremes of the economic spectrum: middle- and upper-class families

⁶² In addition, suffixes such as *-bhai* and *-ben* are often appended to one's given name as a matter of course (for example, in identifying oneself in a formal document or signing one's name).

who can afford to build a bungalow in one of the Muslim ‘housing societies’ in which Muslims of all communities live, and families who live outside the confines of the town in areas such as Daudpura with Muslims of various groups and low-caste Hindus (particularly ‘Safai’ Harijans⁶³). Within the traditionally Muslim-only areas of Mahemdabad, however, I only came across one Vohra family living there who, having previously lived in a house on the grounds of the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*,⁶⁴ had temporarily relocated to a house in the Muslim area off Iqbal Street following the 2002 anti-Muslim violence. During the period of my research, they bought a plot in the nearby Vohra Society and were planning to begin construction on a house.

Living in close proximity to other Hindu merchant castes is closely linked to Vohras’ traditional status as a business community and highlights the degree to which the distinct ‘Vohra identity’ has arguably been founded more upon their occupation as merchants than their religious identity as Muslims. This was highlighted to me while perusing the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj handbook mentioned earlier in this chapter. In addition to the demographic information about the Vohras in Mahemdabad cited earlier which the book provides, I was surprised to find that the majority of adverts are, in fact, for Hindu businesses. Peppered throughout the various lists, many such adverts are adorned with images of various Hindu gods (Baby Krishna [see Fig.1], Hanuman, the adult Krishna) and emblems such as the swastika along with typical Muslim symbols such as the Islamic star and crescent. Revealingly, the book contains many more adverts for Hindu businesses than for non-Vohra Muslim businesses which, while partially attributable to the fact that Vohras are the predominant Muslim merchant community in Mahemdabad, also points to the close economic and social links between Vohras and local Hindu merchants.

⁶³ The term ‘*safai*’ (literally, ‘cleaning’ in Gujarati) refers to a group on the lowest rungs of Harijans whose traditional occupations are scavenging and cleaning latrines.

⁶⁴ Shrine built around the grave of a Sufi saint.

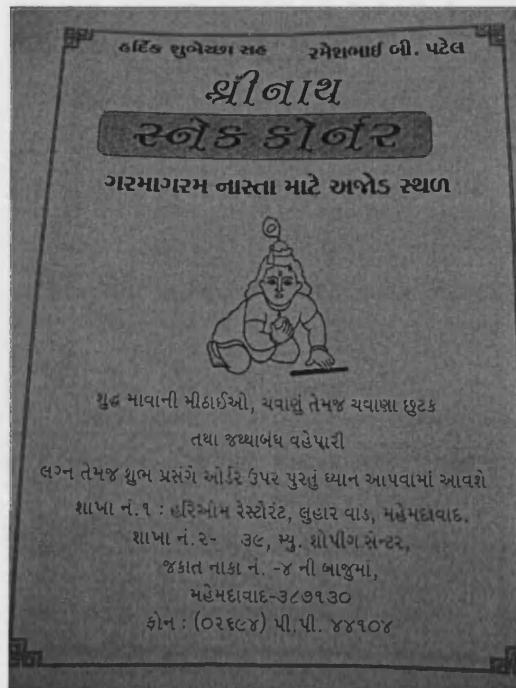


Fig. 1: An advert in the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj handbook for a local snack shop with a design of Baby Krishna

With regard to their kinship system, Vohras in Mahemdabad differ from many other local Muslim groups in their practice of strict endogamy and, similarly to the Patidar Patels described by David Pocock (1972), in their adherence to the *ekada* system in which brides are exchanged only between a certain set, or ‘circle’, of villages, which is often referred to by the number of villages within that circle (in Pocock’s study he focuses specifically on the ‘Seven’ marriage circle). I will describe this in more detail in the next chapter.

For many non-Vohra Muslims in Mahemdabad, the similarities that Vohras share with local Hindus mean that the group are perceived as rejecting their ‘Muslim’ identity, according to which ‘Muslim’ is defined through everyday practices such as living in a Muslim-only neighbourhood, speaking Hindi at home, wearing the *salwar kameez* and intermarrying according to income and status. As I argue, however, larger notions of ethics and moral values are extrapolated from these seemingly mundane and quotidian customs which serve as the basis for differing, and often oppositional, notions of ‘Muslim identity’.

2.8. Being a ‘Muslim’ in Mahemdabad

The conversation with Samir recounted at the beginning of this chapter is illustrative on a practical level of the way in which Vohras are perceived as ‘different’ from other Muslims in Mahemdabad as well as, more generally, how definitions of what constitutes a ‘true’ Muslim are often contingent on who the speaker is. Samir, himself a Malek, placed great emphasis on the question of honour in how ‘Muslimness’ is defined and derided Vohras for their lack of *sharam* (shame) in their eagerness to do whatever necessary to earn money. While sitting in his friend’s photography studio on the afternoon of our conversation, he recounted the story of a Vohra man who had migrated abroad and had come back to India for a holiday to visit his family. During this visit, the man was given the opportunity to work on a temporary basis as a truck driver while he was back in Gujarat. Despite his heightened status as an NRI (Non-resident Indian) and, moreover, his lack of a financial motive in taking on the additional work, the man duly accepted the opportunity presented to him which Samir clearly viewed as sheer folly. Samir also recounted the example of Jiviben, an 85-year-old Vohra woman living close to him in Mahemdabad, who had, until five years ago, owned an oil business, at which time one of her hands was cut off in the oil press. After relinquishing her business, she apparently continued to work with her remaining hand doing housework despite her old age.

After drawing my attention to these two examples, Samir concluded that Vohras do not feel shame in doing work that is not commensurate with their social status (*‘sharam na aveche’*) and, as such, are lacking in honour and should therefore not be held as representative of Muslims more generally. That respectable figures such as older women and NRIs continue to engage in routine jobs despite the lack of a pressing financial need, stood as clear evidence for Samir that Vohras do not share the same ethos and moral values as other local Muslims. In contrast, other Muslim communities, particularly Maleks whose traditional occupations have been as soldiers and landowners, show a strong concern with only taking jobs which befit their social rank and adhering to explicit rules which prioritise honour over financial gain. Samir’s nephew is a case in point in illustrating the Malek view of the relation between honour and work. As the son of an advocate in the local magisterial court, he

failed his SSC exam⁶⁵ and afterwards gained a certificate from the local vocational college (known locally by the acronym ITI). Given his lack of formal educational qualifications, he considered starting up a small business selling snacks (*pakori*) but later gave up interest in such a project since it would be an inappropriate occupation because of his family's high status.⁶⁶ Likewise, another Malek friend whose father had worked as a government servant held similar notions and would only consider jobs that were concordant with his perceived self-image as a *bona fide* 'journalist'. Needless to say, both these young men were for the most part unemployed and financially supported by other sources of income (in Samir's nephew's case, his father's income and in the second case of the journalist, his father's pension and the income generated by the family's provisions shop which he himself would not condescend to work in).

Accusations of a lack of honour, such as those levied by Samir against Vohras, are not uncommon against groups whose primary occupation relies on trade and business and, in fact, similar charges are often levelled against Gujaratis in general who have a notorious reputation nationally for being parsimonious, industrious and astute businesspeople. Vohras in Mahemdabad pride themselves on having a strong work ethic and do not view this as adversely affecting their sense of 'honour'. On the contrary, Vohras draw notions of respectability from this work ethic and hold that there is something intrinsically good in work, a notion which is encapsulated in the common Vohra saying '*aram haram che*', literally, 'rest is forbidden' (the word *haram* is usually used in a religious context as meaning something that is forbidden by Islamic law). My research assistant, a Vohra from Ahmedabad, cited as example of the Vohra work ethic the fact that she herself, the daughter of a well-respected and wealthy medical doctor, had worked at a photocopying shop when she was younger despite the lack of a financial motive for such work. Rather than adversely affecting notions of 'honour', hard work carries a positive ethical value for many of my Vohra informants and, as such, constitutes an important aspect of their notion of what it means to be Vohra.

⁶⁵ The SSC exam is taken by all students in order to continue past 10th standard.

⁶⁶ The important relation between work and status among Maleks is evident in the fact that Samir's nephew's family derive much of its social prominence as a result of the father's work in the local magistrate.

This strong work ethic is also reflected in the position of Vohra women within the family. While many Vohra women are engaged primarily in household chores, it is nevertheless the case that many, particularly older women have a degree of independence and mobility which I did not find among many other middle-class women, be they Muslim or Hindu, in Mahemdabad. In the family of the three adult sons cited earlier in this chapter, it is the mother who runs the various business operations and has been the instigator of new business projects. She confided to me that when she married her husband he had been a common *pan* seller and it was only through her own initiative that her three sons learned from her brother to repair watches and subsequently set up a watch-repairing shop in the main street of the *bazar*. Recently, she has been in the process of training her daughter-in-law to manage the various aspects of the milk and firewood business, albeit with limited success (she claimed that her daughter-in-law felt shame in such work and preferred to stick to household chores). Both Samir and my research assistant agreed that it is not uncommon to see Vohra women waiting on customers on occasions when their husbands or fathers are away from the shop (or even for them to be the main point-person for one of the family's businesses); by contrast, in similar circumstances, most other Muslim women will usually, at best, sit in the shop but tell customers to return later when their male kin will be available. Unsurprisingly, Samir pointed to his own honourable wife as an ideal example of female behaviour; she was, according to him, very happy to focus her energies on housekeeping and childrearing rather than venturing out of the home for paid employment.

When I asked my Vohra informants themselves how they differed from other Muslim groups, however, they usually couched their differences in terms of practicality—they are businesspeople, after all, and their profession requires a certain element of 'diplomacy', particularly when it comes to other communities. In contrast to themselves, other Muslim communities were often cast as *jhubra*, i.e., quarrelsome and argumentative, and I was repeatedly warned to keep my distance from them as much as possible. The distrust between Vohras and other Muslims is apparent in everyday interactions: while Vohras cultivate amicable relations with local Hindus in various spheres, they are otherwise more reclusive, socialising, marrying and cultivating business relations with other members of their own Vohra community

rather than with other local Muslim groups. At the beauty salon mentioned in the previous chapter, the women who regularly attended the instruction sessions were Vohra and Hindu (the owner being a Hindu Thakkar⁶⁷). Beyond religious and educational spheres such as the mosque, the *madrasa* and schools which Vohras and other Muslims both attend, interaction between Vohras and other Muslims is generally kept to a minimum given the mutual distrust between the two groups.

The heightened emphasis among Vohras in Mahemdabad on their identity as businesspeople is reminiscent of other Muslim merchant communities in Gujarat such as the Daudi Bohras, Khojas and Menons who have generally distanced themselves from other Muslim groups and remained detached from the realm of politics (Engineer 1989). As with Vohras in Mahemdabad, Engineer suggests that all three of these communities are not interested in taking part in politics and, moreover, 'mind their own business', noting that given the relatively small numerical concentration of Muslims in Gujarat in comparison to north India, they have relatively little opportunity to have any real influence over political decision-making (*ibid.*: 12-13). This penchant for maintaining amicable relations with different groups and classes often serves as a fundamental business strategy for merchants, both Hindu and Muslims. As Pache Huber (2002: 67) has described with regard to the Maheshwaris:

... the power of merchants resided in their understanding of the socio-economic conditions and value systems of their business contacts ('interlocuteurs'), in their talent as actors, their taste for strategy, their economic capital and their acceptance of a subordinate position in the public domain'.⁶⁸

In short, the very livelihood of merchants is contingent on their being able to present themselves as neutral arbiters who can be trusted by members of various communities to provide good credit and for their reliability. Likewise, while it is necessary for them to have the ear of the powers that be, at the same time, they must not be seen as politically aligned with any specific faction. While the figure of the merchant does not occupy the same lowly position in Islam as it does in Hinduism (the Prophet

⁶⁷ A local Rajput caste.

⁶⁸ My translation: '... le pouvoir des commerçants sur les hommes reposait sur leur connaissance des conditions socio-économiques de leurs interlocuteurs et de leur système de valeurs, sur leurs talents d'acteurs, leur goût pour la tactique, leur capital économique et leur acceptation d'une place subordonnée dans le domaine public' (Pache Huber 2002: 67).

Muhammad himself was a merchant), it is nevertheless the case that on a practical level, the prerequisite that business communities maintain close relations with various groups and communities often relegates them to a position of suspicion in the eyes of other Muslims.

That Vohras do not see their so-called ‘Hinduised’ (as perceived by other Muslims) customs as a threat to their identity as Muslims but rather have constructed an alternate Vohra identity which is at once Muslim by faith and, at the same time, not congruent with norms held by other Muslim groups is therefore not surprising. As Pache Huber (2002) has argued in relation to the opposition between Hindu Baniyas,⁶⁹ and Rajputs’ notions of honour, while merchant castes in India are dismissed as lacking ‘courage’ because of their reticence to use physical force, the merchants themselves, in contrast, perceive bravery and courage as residing in notions of boldness and persistence:

While commerce does not necessitate the use of physical force, it does, on the other hand, require temerity and tenacity: the conquest of new markets requires in effect that the merchant travel to distant places, thus confronting all sorts of dangers.⁷⁰ (Pache Huber 2002: 73)

In the same way in which Malek and Vohra notions of honour are based on opposing dispositions and ethics, so too are definitions of courage among Rajputs and Baniyas. As such, Pache Huber describes how, particularly prior to the building of the rail lines, merchants had to resort to a number of strategies of self-protection during their travels including appealing to intermediaries to mediate between buyers and sellers, tightening inter- and intra-caste bonds in order to create a guarantee system against losses during transport of goods and developing partnerships with kin and members of their caste as well as other castes (Pache Huber 2002: 74). Moreover, she suggests that the difference in attitude between Baniyas (or members of merchant castes) and Rajputs is entirely predicated on different spheres and means of obtaining power. In order to enjoy a high status among one’s caste fellows, the Baniya must be rich, able to demonstrate that he is solvent from generation to generation and, lastly, must reserve part of his profits for religious and charitable causes. In contrast, the Rajput

⁶⁹ Elsewhere in this thesis referred to as ‘Vanias’.

⁷⁰ My translation: ‘Si le commerce ne nécessite pas l’usage de la force physique, il exige en revanche de la témérité et de la ténacité: la conquête de nouveaux marchés oblige en effet le commerçant à voyager dans des endroits distants, le confrontant ainsi à toute sorte de dangers.’

must affirm his pre-eminence in the public sphere through displays of generosity and physical courage.

On a practical level, the fact that Vohras remain the most economically powerful Muslim community in Mahemdabad exonerates them from showing too much concern over allegations made by other Muslims that they lack the necessary qualities to qualify as 'true' Muslims. At the end of the day, they are wealthier, have bigger and more elaborate bungalows and more successful businesses than any other Muslim group in the town and thus such allegations can be easily dismissed as 'sour grapes'.

On a more general level, however, the fact that the two largest and most powerful Muslim communities in Mahemdabad are both indigenous to India also impacts on the way in which 'Muslim identity' as such is constructed locally. In my conversations with Muslims in Mahemdabad about Muslim identity, religious practice as such played a relatively minor role in contributing to what constituted a 'true' Muslim. In contrast to much of the recent literature on Islamic reformism in South Asia (Osella and Osella 2008), Muslim identity is rarely defined around or against issues of 'un-Islamic' beliefs and practices such as saint worship and, aside from Samir's critique of Vohras allowing gambling to take place on their property, critiques are generally not couched in a larger discourse about proper religious conduct as a important prerequisite of a 'true' Muslim. Rather, notions of honour, work ethic and 'diplomacy' towards other communities figured most prominently in such discussions (I elaborate on religious practice in Mahemdabad further in Chapter 5).

An question which naturally arises at this point is: what about local Hindus? Do they likewise differentiate between Vohras and other Muslims? While it is more difficult to give a conclusive answer on this point given that the scope of my research focused more heavily on the Muslim community in Mahemdabad, it is definitely the case that given the greater spatial and 'cultural' proximity of Vohras, they remain more familiar, as business partners, neighbours, friends and acquaintances than other Muslims in the town. It is no doubt also the case that some Hindus, particularly those living outside the 'old town' in one of the multiple Hindu housing societies, are apt to group all communities practising the Muslim faith together in one large group. Furthermore, it is difficult to speak of the 'Hindu community' as one large aggregate:

Hindu Harijans living alongside Muslims in the Daudpura slum have different relations with their Muslim neighbours from members of the dominant castes, particularly those not involved in business, living in the exclusive Navjivan Society. This said, it is interesting to note that those Hindus with whom I spoke regarding the focus of my research were generally not aware of the subtle differences between Vohras and other Muslims which I have described. While this does not negate the importance of such distinctions, it ultimately supports Fanselow's argument holding that the creation of oppositions between groups, while invoking a wider set of social relations (in his case, those with the Hindu majority), in fact serves to demarcate what are often very close and blurred boundaries.

2.9. Conclusion

As pointed out originally by Frederick Barth in his seminal work on ethnicity (Barth 1970 [1969]), a central focus of ethnic identity is the creation and maintenance of interethnic boundaries. Thus, rather than the 'cultural stuff', as he terms it, of an ethnic group it is the ethnic boundaries which, in essence, define the group. In the analysis above, this can clearly be said to apply to how 'Muslim identity' is defined by different groups in Mahemdabad. In this respect, when delineating the differences between the two prominent Muslim communities, Vohras and Maleks, scant attention is placed on similarities such as their mutual practice of the Muslim faith and the many common customs, eating habits and beliefs which this entails. Rather, notions of 'honour' and cultural proximity to Hindus are drawn upon in constructing local definitions of 'true' Muslim identity.

In the next section, I provide an in-depth analysis of Vohra kinship in Mahemdabad so as to elucidate better the importance of kinship in the creation of a separate Vohra identity.

Chapter 3: Kinship, endogamy and the cultivation of intra-group unity among Sunni Vohras

3.1. Introduction

As is true for many young Indian men and women, for young people in Mahemdabad the prospect of having a ‘love marriage’ is often compelling and romanticised. Love marriages among both Hindus and Muslims are not uncommon in the town and many of my unmarried informants often confided in me that, while they trusted their parents to find a suitable match for them, they also dreamed of a romantic love affair with an individual of their own choosing.

Yet, as scholars such as Fuller (2006) have pointed out, the two primary foundation stones of caste cohesiveness in South Asia remain the principles of endogamy and commensality and while rules on inter-caste eating have somewhat eased in recent decades, the pressure to marry within one’s own caste remains strong. Among Vohras in Mahemdabad, group endogamy persists as a central principle in how the community defines itself and, as I will argue, their distinct identity in relation to other local Muslim groups is closely linked with larger kinship practices and the group’s status as a business community.

In this chapter I provide a detailed analysis of the kinship and community organisation of the Mahemdabad Charotar Vohras and the importance they place on group endogamy in comparison to other non-*ashraf* Muslim communities in Mahemdabad. I argue that the high level of caste endogamy practised by Mahemdabad’s Sunni Vohras is closely linked to the strong sense of a separate identity that is cultivated by the community on both an informal level through social taboos on inter-caste marriage as well as on a formal organisational level encouraged by the regional Sunni Vohra Samaj. Moreover, I suggest that the group’s discouragement of giving and receiving cash dowries and, concomitantly, emphasis on the positive value of group marriages are closely linked to their distinct ethos of cultivating unity and intra-group regional ties across the economically and socially disparate sections of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community in Gujarat.

3.2. Theories of Muslim kinship system in India

As with scholarship on Islam as well as Muslim communities in South Asia more widely, the material on Muslim kinship and marriage systems is significantly more limited than that which has been produced on Hindu kinship systems. With regard to marriage, Islamic law holds that the ideal marriage is one in which the bride and groom are equally matched with respect to their education, class, community, looks, etc. (Vatuk 1996: 242), a point which was often alluded to by my informants in Mahemdabad. In contrast to Hindu kinship systems prevalent among many north and western Indian Hindu castes which enforce village exogamy, the preferential marriage for the majority of Muslim communities both in South Asia as well as elsewhere in the Islamic world calls for patrilateral parallel cousin marriage (FBS or FBD).⁷¹

Among the majority of Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, caste endogamy continues to retain a primary role in decisions about marital matches. While hypergamy (in which a lower-status female is married to a higher-status male) has been cited by several scholars working on South Asian kinship systems, the majority of hypergamous marriages take place between different status groups within the *same* caste. Caste endogamy often exists alongside bans on marriage between close kin among many Hindu groups in west and north India. In particular, systems of 'marriage circles' such as those observed by the Gujarati Patidar described by Pocock (1976) constitute an additional means through which marriages are regulated among a closed set of families of the same caste and sub-caste.

On a generalised level, the majority of studies on the subject suggest that there is relatively less emphasis on caste and sub-caste endogamy among most Muslim communities when compared to the bulk of South Asian Hindu castes (although there are clearly exceptions to this rule). In a study of Muslim kinship and marriage in Hyderabad, Ali (2002: 610) reports that among his informants, 'caste' figured less prominently in searches for potential spouses in comparison to other criteria such as

⁷¹ There remain exceptions to this generalised pattern. As described by Bénéï (1996: 55) with relation to Maharashtra, the preferential marriage pattern for both Hindus (including Brahman castes) as well as Muslims is matrilateral and patrilateral cross-cousin marriage.

income, education and occupation. While he states that his informants were wary of having *too* large a 'caste' gap between potential spouses (Saiyeds, for example, should practise strict caste endogamy since they held the highest status), caste endogamy, hypergamy and hypogamy occurred largely on an incidental basis (in contrast to the more decisive role played by other criteria). While it is clear that factors other than caste figure prominently in how a prospective marital match is selected among Hindus as well, Ali's study reveals that these trends are more pronounced among Muslims in South Asia (particularly for non-elite groups).

The lack of a strong focus on caste (or *samaj*) endogamy among many Muslim communities has also been noted by Mines in his study of kinship among Muslim merchants in the town of Pallavaram in Tamil Nadu:

... the stress of intergroup relations is on equality. The presence of intergroup marriages among the Tamil Muslims clearly reveals this ... In no instance does anyone express the feeling that such marriages are improper. No social ostracism takes place, and the children of such marriages suffer no social stigma. (Mines 1976: 306)

Mines deduces from the 'popularity' of marriages between different Muslim groups that the divisions among Tamil Muslims are ethnic rather than corporate⁷² and, furthermore, that purity of blood is unrelated to social status. While I would argue that Mines tends to overstate the extent to which equality is practised (rather than simply preached) among Muslim communities in South Asia and elsewhere, he is clearly aiming his discussion in the article at the larger question of the existence of a 'caste' system among Muslims. Thus, unlike the majority of Hindu castes who are ranked hierarchically, Mines suggests that the Islamic principle calling for egalitarianism within the *ummah* is reflected in the kinship system of Muslim merchants in Pallavaram and the high number of intergroup marriages.

While Mines is correct in asserting that, on a general level, strict endogamy is less prevalent among South Asian Muslims than it is among their Hindu counterparts, intergroup marriage is not as common and unproblematic as he suggests. As noted by Lindholm (2001: 494), the absence of a strong *ashraf/ajlaf* distinction among the

⁷² Mines (1976: 305) defines 'ethnic group' as a subdivision which is united by place of origin, shared customs and language. 'Corporate groups', in contrast, refer to 'caste' subdivisions.

majority of Muslims in Tamil Nadu is not accounted for in Mines's analysis and therefore the egalitarian ethos he documents with regards to marriage is less striking given that the groups he refers to are all of more or less the same status.

In fact, many *ashraf* groups elsewhere in India as well as some non-*ashraf* groups such as Sunni Vohras, Khojas and Daudi Bohras place strict emphasis on 'caste' endogamy. Moreover, studies such as Ahmad (1973a) on the Siddique Sheikhs in Uttar Pradesh demonstrate that endogamy has also functioned historically as a means of achieving social mobility for a caste as a whole, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical distinction between *ashraf* and *ajlaf*. Ahmad relates how after an unsuccessful attempt to improve their social status within the Muslim community through 'Ashrafisation',⁷³ the Siddique Sheikhs community adopted a strict policy of caste endogamy as a means of differentiating themselves from other *ajlaf* ('common') Muslims. Ahmad argues that by confining the selection of potential spouses to candidates within the community, Siddique Sheikhs were able to claim a 'ritual purity of the blood and the bone' (*ibid.*: 224). Thus, the practice of enforcing community endogamy became a component of larger attempts at 'Ashrafisation' by Siddiqui Sheikhs to improve their social status within the wider Muslim community and strengthen their public association with non-indigenous (*ashraf*) Sheikhs. Given this, while Mines may be correct in asserting that the theological tenets within Islam emphasising egalitarianism produce a more generalised appreciation for intergroup marriages, the same conclusions cannot be extrapolated to apply to South Asian Muslim groups more widely. While endogamy is not as common among these groups as among South Asian Hindu castes, it remains a key strategy which many continue to draw upon as a means of promoting group cohesion, achieving social mobility or maintaining their elite status.

3.3. Muslim kinship in Gujarat

The varying levels to which endogamy is practised by different Muslim communities is evident in Misra's categorisation of kinship systems in Gujarat. Misra (1985

⁷³ 'Ashrafisation' (the Muslim equivalent to the process of 'Sanskritisation' among Hindus), denotes the process whereby Muslims of low status adopt the religious practices and social customs of the so-called *ashraf* groups as a means of improving their social status.

[1964]: 150-2) has suggested that Gujarati Muslim communities can be divided into four main groups with regard to marriage rules and the prevalence of endogamy. *Ashraf* Muslim communities which maintain strict endogamy in order to preserve their position of high status in relation to other Muslims constitute one obvious group. A second endogamous group is that of trading communities such as Daudi Bohras, Memons and Khojas which also practise strict endogamy within their own communities (*ibid.*: 151). The bulk of other Muslims, according to Misra, while generally preferring intergroup marriages, will also consider matches from other groups which are considered to be equal or higher to their own. Lastly, Misra cites ‘a polyglot group of very loosely organised communities’ who freely intermarry within their own community or with other communities⁷⁴ (*ibid.*: 152).

Ethnographic material on Muslim kinship in Gujarat likewise remains scarce in contrast to the seminal works by Pocock (1957; 1972), van der Veen (1972) and Shah (1974; 1998) describing Hindu kinship systems among such groups as Patidars, Anavil Brahmans and Rajputs respectively. An exception to this is Lambat’s study mentioned in the previous chapter of marriage practices among Sunni Surati Vohras (1985 [1976]), a Sunni Vohra community (loosely related to the Charotar Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad) which exists predominantly in the districts of Surat and Bulsar in south Gujarat. Lambat describes the three potential circles from which marriages can be forged: the ‘circle of kin’ (FBD, FZD, MBD or MZD), the ‘circle of *khandan*’ (a group of families bearing the same name or surname which occupy a similar rank or have similar prestige within the larger Sunni Surati community) and a ‘circle of villages’ (a closed number of villages with which marriage ties already exist) (*ibid.*: 59-66). While a high level of endogamy is practised by the Sunni Surati Vohras studied by Lambat, he notes that economic considerations also play an important role in spouse selection and that sometimes a girl’s parents will opt to marry their daughter to a wealthy groom from a lower *khandan* rather than to a poor groom from a higher *khandan*. The endogamy practised by Sunni Surati Vohras bears similarities to that practised by Mahemdabad’s Vohras although, as I describe in detail in the next section, significant differences also exist.

⁷⁴ This category includes primarily urban communities such as non-Gujarati migrant labourers as well as smaller groups whose minimal size makes strict endogamy difficult.

3.4. Kinship organisation and marriage practices among Muslims in Mahemdabad

Most Muslims in Mahemdabad (Sheikhs, Maleks, Kokars, Pathans⁷⁵) generally correspond to the third category cited by Misra: while marriage within the community is considered ideal, intermarriage between members of different communities is not uncommon nor is it seen as particularly problematic since, as is common in most patriarchal and patrilineal groups, the wife takes on the caste/community and name of the husband's family after marriage. In line with Ali's observations (2002) on Muslims in Hyderabad, criteria such as income, education and occupation are just as, if not more, important than community affiliation. In contrast, more high-status families in Mahemdabad such as Saiyeds are strictly endogamous, particularly when it comes to daughters: while it is permissible to marry one's son to a highly qualified non-Saiyed girl, it is inconceivable that parents would agree to an intercommunity marriage for a Saiyed daughter (among many high-caste Hindu communities in which prospective grooms are scarce, it is preferable that a daughter remain unmarried rather than marry outside the caste). Among both *ashraf* as well as *ajlaf* groups in Mahemdabad, the preferential marriage is the patrilateral parallel cousin marriage although, in practice, such an ideal is not always an option nor consistently seen as an optimal match. A disparity between what is decreed to be the ideal marriage and what takes place in practice is not confined to Mahemdabad's Muslims and has been noted for other Muslim societies as well. As asserted by Bourdieu, the heightened status of parallel-cousin marriage in Kabyle society is attributable not to the fact that it is the most common form of marriage alliance (in fact, his survey suggested that only 4% of marriages among his informants were actually of parallel-cousin marriages) but because it is the type of marriage which is consistent with the 'mythico-ritual representation of the sexual division of labour, and more particularly of the functions assigned to the men and the women in inter-group relations' (1995 [1990]: 184). Vatuk (1996: 242) has made a similar suggestion with regard to Muslims in South Asia.

⁷⁵ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the majority of Sheikhs and Pathans in Mahemdabad were descendants of low-caste Hindu converts (rather than members of so-called *ashraf* groups). With relation to kinship alliances, the converted Sheikhs and Pathans were more apt to intermarry with other Muslim groups while those Sheikhs and Pathans who traced their origins outside India strictly adhered to endogamous marriages.

Among Vohras in Mahemdabad, however, there is no clear consensus concerning marital preferences and while some women suggested that cousin marriage is preferred (both cross and parallel forms), other respondents replied that they did not marry their cousins because it would be like marrying one's brother or sister, a tenet which is ironically more in line with north- and western-Indian Hindu marriage rules which require that one avoid marriage with close kin.⁷⁶ While in the past it was more common for Mahemdabadi Vohras to give only their daughters to other local Vohra families, in recent generations this has changed, particularly among members of the 68 *utara*⁷⁷ in which families do not like to give their daughters to close relations.

This said, there was a strong consensus among my informants that Vohras must marry within the community and those who breach this tenet are heavily penalised. During the period of my research, I only knew of two cases in which Vohras in Mahemdabad married outside the community: the first case was an older Vohra man who married a Hindu woman and the second was a woman named Mumtazben who was socially boycotted by her parents. In cases in which the out-marrying Vohra is a woman, strong repercussions almost always ensue. Mumtazben, now in her mid-twenties, eloped when she was 19 with a local Malek neighbour whom she subsequently married. Ever since then, her family has cut off all public communication with her and her two sons although she concedes that in the last few years they have occasionally spoken on the phone. From an economic perspective, Mumtazben has fared very well: her husband's family is financially comfortable and she lives with her husband and sons in a separate bungalow while her in-laws live next door. Her husband works for a large cement company which, in addition to paying him a respectable salary, offers generous perks to its employees (Mumtazben and her husband have travelled to both Himachal Pradesh and Nepal on company-financed holidays). Her husband has a university degree, solid middle-class status and comes from a locally respected family—making him a good match according to the criteria of income, education and occupation which for most non-*ashraf* Muslims are central in ranking and selecting a

⁷⁶ The specific rules governing which consanguine groups one cannot marry differ from caste to caste. According to Karve (1965: 117), a general principle in dictating exogamy is that one should avoid marriage with kin who are less than seven degrees removed from the father of Ego and five degrees removed from the mother of Ego.

⁷⁷ While I have been unable to trace the term '*utara*' in Gujarati-English dictionaries, its meaning as it was explained to me by informants was 'sub-group', specifically in relation to the 14 and 68 sub-sections of the Charotar Sunni Vohra *ekada* (endogamous marriage circle).

potential spouse. While it can be argued that the act of eloping in itself was cause enough for her family to publicly cut her off, the general prevalence and tolerance of love marriages in Mahemdabad make this an unlikely explanation. Rather, Mumtazben's case is illustrative of the heightened importance ascribed to caste endogamy by Vohras as a means of maintaining a distinct separation from other local Muslim groups.

Aside from regular trips to the local beauty salon frequented primarily by young Vohra and Hindu women, Mumtazben now has very little contact with other Vohras since her house is located in an area inhabited exclusively by non-Vohra Muslims. Although romanticised by many of the younger Vohras, inter-caste love marriages occur rarely within the community and, when they do, are viewed with great scepticism. Farhanaben, a Vohra woman in her early thirties, told me that two of her husband's sisters had made love marriages to non-Vohra Muslims. While her parents-in-law would occasionally receive them for visits, she had never met them as they only came to their natal home when neither she nor her husband were present. Farhanaben regarded the matches as severely problematic, particularly the marriage between her sister-in-law and a Bihari Muslim who worked in embroidery: such marriages were frowned upon by the *samaj* and ultimately threatened a family's *ijjat* within the community.

In addition to the strict emphasis placed on community endogamy, the kinship structure of Charotar Sunni Vohras suggests stronger similarities with local Hindu castes than other local Muslim communities. This is particularly the case with regard to the system of *ekadas* ('marriage circles') which constitutes an important part of prevailing kinship structures among many Hindu castes in Gujarat. According to such a system as described by Pocock (1972) and Shah (1998) in relation to Hindu Patidars and Vanias, a caste is divided up into various 'units' (*ekadas*) or 'circles' (*gols*⁷⁸) of intermarrying villages with strong sanctions in place to discourage against marrying outside one's particular 'circle'. Often, *ekadas* and *gols* are further divided into smaller groups called *tads* ('splits') which are hierarchically ranked according to

⁷⁸ According to Shah (1998: 137), '[I]literally, *ekada* means 'unit', and *gol* 'circle', and both signified an endogamous unit. Each *ekada* or *gol* was composed of a definite number of families living in certain villages and/or towns'.

economic wealth and, among Hindus, the level of so-called 'Brahmanization' (Pocock 1957: 22).

The kinship system as described by Pocock (1972) and Shah (1998) with respect to Patidars and Rajputs in Gujarat mirrors closely that of the Charotar Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad. The Charotar Sunni Vohra *samaj* is further divided into two main sub-groups, or *utaras*. Each *utara* is divided into a number of different *ataks* (sub-sub-units). Among Mahemdabad's Vohras, the 'higher' of the two *utaras* is referred to by the number 14 (in Gujarati, *chaud*) while the lower *utara* by 68 (in Gujarati, *ersat*). It is difficult to conclude what exactly these two numbers (14 and 68) refer to: while a natural hypothesis might be that they refer to the number of *ataks* within each *utara*, none of my informants could tell me for sure whether this was indeed the origin of the numbers. Furthermore, as far as I was able to conclude, there exists no conclusive list detailing the exact organisation of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community and various informants provided me with diverse opinions on whether certain *ataks* (such as the Tarapura, Borsadi, Khanbati and Dabhaniya) were part of the 14 *utara* or the 68. The majority of *ataks* derive their names from specific places in the Charotar region, particularly from towns (since the Charotar Vohra community has primarily settled in urban areas). Obvious examples of this are the Mhemdavadi *atak* (the predominant *atak* in Mahemdabad), as well as the Amdavadi *atak* (Ahmedabad city), Petladi *atak* (Petlad town), and Borsadi *atak* (Borsad town). Some *ataks* also refer to the family's traditional occupation (for example, Munshi [accountant] or Dudhwala [milk vendor]). According to the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj handbook, the bulk of families in Mahemdabad come from the Mahemdabadi *atak* (182/277 or 67% with 11 families' *atak* unspecified) while the remaining 35% are divided among other *ataks* (both 14 and 68) of which the largest contingent is Makeriya (68).

Utara	14	68	Unclear
<i>Audya</i>	<i>Malavadiya</i>	Tarapura	
<i>Nepada</i>	<i>Mahemdabadi</i>	<i>Borsadi</i>	
<i>Pinjara</i>	<i>Amodiya</i>	Khambati	
<i>Mogriya</i>	<i>Makeriya</i>	Dabhaniya	
<i>Metrala</i>	Vasoya		
<i>Piyeja</i>	Anandiya		
<i>Bharja</i>	Khadola		
<i>Amdavadi</i>	Munshi		
Musela	Sinhujiya		
Tarajiya	<i>Kanjeriya</i>		
Devatiya	Dudhvala		
	Nariya		
	Sunjiya		
	Kahra		
	Umretha		
	Aslaliya		
	Mankdiya		
Total	12	20	3

Figure 2: Names in italics indicate *ataks* present in Mahemdabad.

Figure 2 above lists the *ataks* of members of the Charotar Sunni Vohra communities of Ahmedabad and Mahemdabad (Amdavad Charotar Sunni Vhora Mandal Vasti Gantri Patrak 2004; Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj 1988). Many of my younger female informants in particular did not know which *utara* they belonged to but only which *ataks* their families gave their daughters to in marriage: thus, Rashidaben's natal family is from the Metrala *atak* (14) and only gives brides to three other 14 *ataks* (Bharja, Nepada and Amdavadi). In the next section, I argue that the focus on caste endogamy among Vohras is one of the ways in which members of the community differ from other local non-*ashraf* Muslim groups and that it is closely tied to larger efforts made by the group's caste organisation, the Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj.

3.5. Status and difference among Charotar Sunni Vohras

The emphasis among Mahemdabad's Vohras on maintaining group endogamy is a consequence of both their status as a business community and larger efforts by the Sunni Vohra Samaj to foster unity among the different sub-sects of the community, namely the 14 and 68 *utaras*. As with the vast majority of communities throughout South Asia (as well as more generally), marriage among Vohras remains a central

means of forging alliances, consolidating ties within a caste and improving a family's social status. Unlike among other Muslim communities in Mahemdabad, Vohra women play a dominant role in the engagement and it is possible for both the girl's family as well as the boy's family to make a marriage offer. Among other Muslim communities in Mahemdabad, as is the case more generally among Indian Muslims (Vatuk 1996: 242), only the boy's side can officially propose to the bride: while the girl's family can send an intermediary to informally communicate their interest in a match, it cannot formally make an offer. The common acceptance of proposals made by the bride's side is further evidence of the more prominent role assigned to women within the Vohra community, a point which I will discuss further in the following chapter.

Among my Vohra informants, there was a clear consensus that families from the 14 *utara* are regarded as higher in status than those of the 68. Several reasons were offered to me to explain this difference in status between the two *utaras*: mainly, it is believed that members of the 14 *utara* originally came from families of a higher socio-economic background. Enthoven (1920: 206) has suggested that among Sunni Vohras ('Bohoras'), those who converted to Islam from high-status Hindu castes such as Rajputs and Banias refused to marry with lower-caste converts such as Chamars and Dheds, even after conversion to Islam. It is possible then that the difference in status between members of the 14 *utara* and those of the 68 can be ascribed to the castes from which members of each derived prior to conversion. According to some of the elder members of the Vohra community in Mahemdabad, however, the Charotar Sunni Vohra community was not always split into two separate *utaras*. Although the division between higher- and lower-status Vohras was already present on an informal basis, a community-wide meeting was held in the 1950s which formally distinguished the two as endogamous sub-units. According to one informant, the schism was a consequence of a dearth in 68 brides which had resulted from a trend by which daughters from 68 families were given in marriage to 14 boys while 14 families refused to give their daughters to 68 families (thereby asserting their higher status as wife-takers rather than wife-givers). In order to instil a greater balance in

marriage patterns in the community, a meeting was held in which the two *utaras* became formally split and strict *utara*-endogamy encouraged.⁷⁹

Today, the stated preference is for marriages between families of the same *utara*. Members of the 14 *utara*, in particular, are seen as '*ekla kutumb*' ('a single family') and have established ongoing relations and mutual *viswas* (trust) over several generations. While, at least in Mahemdabad, there is not a significant economic disparity between members of the two *utaras*, it remains widely accepted that there is a clear differential in status between these two groups. This is evident mostly in the fact that families from the 14 *utara* are relatively more Islamised than those from the 68 (for example, the women in the former cover their heads with their *dupattas* when leaving the house, there is greater separation between male and female spaces within 14 households, and 14 women are less likely to play an active role in the family business, etc.). Such differentiations are also evident in the generalisations that are made between a family's status and respectability and the *utara* to which it belongs. For example, when questioning a family from the 14 *utara* one day about the Vohra kinship organisation and the affiliation of various local Vohra families, I was told that one particularly disreputable family whose women were regarded as 'loose' and which claimed to be from the Bharja *atak* (14 *utara*) was, according to these informants, in reality from the 68 *utara*. The fact that the women from this family were openly known to have extra-marital affairs was proof to my informant that its members surely could not be from the 14 *utara* whose superior status distinguished it from the lower and less refined 68 *utara*.

Among the Vohra, the stated preference for the intermarriage of families within the same *utara*, however, exists alongside ongoing efforts by members of the 68 *utara* to contract hypergamous marriages with families of the 14 *utara*. Jubedaben's family is from the Mahemdabadi *atak* (68 *utara*) and her daughter made a hypergamous marriage with a boy from the 14 *utara* (Bharja *atak*). Her family is financially comfortable with a bungalow in the Muslim housing society and a number of small businesses such as a watch repair shop and a milk delivery business. Jubedaben spoke

⁷⁹ The informant who recounted this to me was from the 68 *utara*. It is likewise possible that the formal split between the two *utaras* was initiated by members of the 14 *utara* in order to secure and maintain their higher status.

to me several times with great pride about her daughter's fortuitous match which she attributed to her daughter's impressive educational qualifications (she had obtained an 'HSC pass' and had taken a course in Gujarati stenography). Marriages such as that of Jubedaben's daughter serve as evidence that, despite the earlier efforts made to encourage intra-*utara* endogamy in the 1950s, hypergamous marriages continue to take place.

The split between the two Sunni Vohra *utaras* in the 1950s and ongoing efforts of 68 families to marry their daughters into 14 families is reminiscent of similar hypergamous trends and efforts at caste reform among the Patidars (Pocock 1972) as well as the Rajputs of Kangra (Parry 1979). Pocock relates how in 1956 a formal meeting was held by the heads of prominent Patidar families which outlined the rules of the *ekada* system through which Patidar villages were grouped together in endogamous marriage circles as a means of ensuring continuity in marital exchanges between subsets of families across succeeding generations. This *ekada* system was, moreover, devised as a key means to encourage caste endogamy and correct the inherent imbalance in the larger kinship structure created by the drive for hypergamous marriages (the net result of which was a dearth of brides for the lowest-status Patidar men).

The tension inherent between, on one hand, preserving caste endogamy and, on the other, individual efforts at social mobility through the enactment of hypergamous marriages, is also captured in Parry's depiction (1979) of Rajput kinship alliances in Kangra. As with Pocock's Patidars, men from lower *biradari* (clans) attempt to forge affinal linkages with higher-status Rajputs by marrying their daughters into these families as a means of improving their status within the larger caste. Parry argues that the presence and implicit acceptance of hypergamy, despite the concomitant importance attributed to *biradari* endogamy, is representative of an inherent contradiction within the larger Rajput kinship structure. Efforts at reform, similar in nature to the creation of *ekadas* among the Patidars, were likewise made around the same period by lower-status Rajput groups (1930-55) who began to refuse to give their daughters to families who would not return brides to them in exchange (*ibid.*: 247). While the reform movements eventually failed in their goal of instilling greater

equality between bride-givers and bride-takers, such efforts highlight the inherent instability of the larger system.

The coexistence of larger efforts to instil endogamy within an *ekada* and the persistence of hypergamy among Sunni Vohras can thus be read as an inherent contradiction within the kinship system itself which at once emphasises unity within the community while also allowing for hierarchical divisions between wife-givers and wife-takers to be replicated across generations. Moreover, hypergamous trends in marriage alliances potentially threaten to disrupt the unity within the caste since men on the bottom rungs of the caste order are left without brides and compelled to forge inter-caste marriages. Despite the prevalence of hypergamy, however, Sunni Vohras' status as a business community ultimately provides for a higher impetus towards maintaining unity with the *samaj* than either Pocock's Patidars or Parry's Rajputs (both of which were predominantly landowners by occupation), as I argue in the next sections of this chapter.

The majority of my informants showed very little reserve in voicing a general preference for hypergamous marriage, a point which contrasted with an avid and outspoken denial, if not a strong condemnation, of the practice of *dahej*, or dowry, in the community. While the former of these is openly acknowledged and practised, the latter, on the other hand, is the target of strong social sanctions within the Vohra community. The leader of the Vohra community in Mahemdabad himself declared to me that a special committee called the Mahemdabad Muslim Samaj was in the process of being set up specifically to counter socially pernicious customs such as dowry and to promote group marriages (his son was to act as the president of the group). Group marriage and *dahej* are, in this sense, presented by most Vohras as oppositional forces: the former seen as an important and socially valuable means of promoting unity and equality in the Vohra community, and the latter as constituting a shameful practice common among greedy and base people. The attitude towards each, I argue, is closely linked to the community's traditional occupation as businesspeople, necessitating the promotion of equality among Vohras of different socio-economic strata as a means of maintaining unity within the caste and, ultimately, the retention of property and cash flows within the *samaj*.

3.6. Community organisation among Charotar Sunni Vohras in Gujarat

The strong emphasis on caste endogamy among Mahemdabad's Sunni Vohras is curious given that they neither make pretensions to elite status as descendants of 'foreign' Muslims (whereby the maintenance of blood purity is necessary to preserve the heightened status of the group) nor does this focus appear to make up part of a larger strategy for social mobility (as in the case of the Siddiqui Sheikhs described in Ahmad [1973a]). Given that other Muslim groups of similar status in Mahemdabad are less apt to enforce strict endogamy, how might this trend among local Vohras be explained? I argue that the answer to this question lies firstly in the Vohras' identity as merchants and businesspeople and, secondly, in the powerful efforts of Vohra community organisations to promote cohesion within the community.

Unlike other Muslim communities in Mahemdabad, Vohras have a formal *samaj* or 'caste organisation'. The term '*jamat*', elsewhere used to refer to a Muslim social organisation, endogamous marriage group or political unit (Simpson 2001: 131), was neither used with me in conversations nor contained in any of the Sunni Vohra handbooks that I have reviewed. Many towns and cities in Gujarat with substantial Sunni Vohra communities have in recent years produced a census of all Sunni Vohras in the area along with other information about the communities such as lists of local Vohras who have completed the *haj*, lists of local Vohras working in government positions, messages from the president and other representatives of the organisation as well as practical information such as local train and bus schedules. The bulk of each book consists of a census which details each Vohra family in the town or *taluka* (sub-district), the family's *atak* and address along with each family member's name, age, position within the family (for example, *pote*, or head, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, grandson), occupation, marital status and completed educational qualifications. All three books that I have been able to track down (Mahemdabad, Ahmedabad and Thasra taluka) are written in Gujarati and have an identical layout for the census suggesting that this was an overarching project conceived by the community's organisation, the headquarters of which are based in the city of Anand (approximately an hour and a half from Mahemdabad). Moreover, the censuses recorded in these handbooks (or *pustak* in Gujarati) were carried out and the books subsequently

published within a few years of one another (Mahemdabad's book was published in 1998, Thasra's in 2000 and Ahmedabad's in 2004). All members of the Vohra community were provided with a copy of the book gratis and many families in Mahemdabad still had them by the time I started fieldwork (seven years later). For each town, city or taluka in which such a handbook had been produced, a local committee of Vohra members went from house to house recording the data. The handbook published by the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj was compiled by the 'Ten Star Group', a committee of nine local Vohras.

According to Mohammadbhai Vohra, the leader of the Mahemdabadi Vohra community and president of the 'Ten Star Group', the handbook was primarily designed as a means by which Charotar Sunni Vohra families could find potential spouses for their children.⁸⁰ While there may have been other purposes to the book as well, its role in facilitating intra-community marriages is clear: the handbook lists not only the marital status of each member of a family but through the detailed demographic information it is also possible to gain a strong sense of a family's socio-economic position as well as the particular *atak*, or sub-sub-group, to which it belongs.

The Ahmedabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Mandal (ACSVM) produced a similar book in 2004. The preface to the book, written by the group's secretary, recounts the history of the group in Ahmedabad which began in 1984 when a number of prominent local Vohras met and decided to conduct a census in order to produce a public record containing the demographic details of the group's members in the city. Since then, the membership of the ACSVM has grown considerably: from 220 families when the group was first founded in 1984 to 484 families when the book was published 20 years later. During this time, the ACSVM also succeeded in raising funds from among its members to build a Charotar Sunni Vohra 'Community Centre' in the area of Dani Limda, Ahmedabad in which to hold public meetings, marriages and other functions (ACSVM handbook: 1-3).

⁸⁰ Interview, 26 January 2006.

The handbook compiled in the Thasra taluka (which comprises the towns of Thasra, Dakor, Vangholi, Kalsar, etc.) is similar to those of Mahemdabad and Ahmedabad. Additionally, it contains various sections such as pointers on proper *adab* (religious and moral conduct) in cemeteries and etiquette guidance for merchants ('Sweet speech brings good fortune', 'Bribes encourage sin'). In all three books, statements written by the respective representatives for each organisation highlight, on one hand, the importance of self-sufficiency while, on the other, the importance of the censuses in providing a genealogical record for future generations of Charotar Sunni Vohras. Furthermore, the introductory statements in all three books also highlight the importance of education, especially for women, in improving the status of the community as a whole. For example, in the Mahemdabad handbook, the president of the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj states that:

In our society people believe that young people should become involved in business rather than become educated. This type of mentality is problematic for the next generation. Education enables development and invaluable changes in life. The world needs female education. If women are educated, other generations will also be more educated and have a brighter future.⁸¹

As mentioned earlier, none of the other Muslim communities in Mahemdabad have had a similar census produced and, while it is probable that other such communities in larger cities do publish similar books, on a local level the book is illustrative of the highly organised and structured nature of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community in Gujarat. Such books function to facilitate marriages within the community, but also as genealogical records. Moreover, they play an important role in their symbolic materialisation of the larger Sunni Vohra community. They do this both on a local level with respect to enumerating the conglomerate of Vohra families living in a particular town or area as well as on a more general level through their introductory statements which detail the composite factors constituting the community's moral ideals (i.e., Vohras are business-minded, self-sufficient, observant in their faith and cognisant of the importance of promoting education within the family and larger community).

In this sense, the Sunni Vohra censuses are both indicative of a strong sense of a separate Vohra identity from other groups and function as a key means through which

⁸¹ Translated from Gujarati, Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj handbook (1998: 2).

this identity is perpetuated. As Cohn (1987) has argued in relation to the way in which the colonial census in British India functioned to 'objectify' Indian culture and social organisation to Indians themselves, the Vohra handbooks likewise play a crucial role in creating and sustaining the 'imagined' Vohra community spread throughout the towns and cities of central Gujarat.

The formalised organisational structure of the local Sunni Vohra *samaj*, absent for other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad, also contributes to the sense of a distinct 'Vohra identity' as delineated in the previous chapter and encourages the cultivation of social and business networks trans-regionally among other Vohras. At the same time, the publication of such books and, in particular, the many adverts in their pages subsidised by local merchants of various castes and communities, also function to reinforce business ties more generally. A comparison between the adverts placed in the respective books is illustrative of the nature of local business relations in each locality: as mentioned in the previous chapter, the Mahemdabad book contains no adverts from non-Vohra Muslim businesses (the bulk are either from local Hindus or other Vohras), that for Ahmedabad contains adverts from mainly other Vohras and non-Vohra Muslims and the Thasra book includes adverts from all three groups (Vohras, non-Vohra Muslims and Hindus). This suggests that while Vohras in different localities in central Gujarat maintain business relations with various groups to different degrees, those in Mahemdabad have cultivated closer links with local Hindu merchants rather than non-Vohra Muslims, most likely due to their shared 'cultural' attributes as well as to the fact that there are no other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad primarily devoted to business.

The strong emphasis on cultivating intra-group links and networks within the larger Vohra community suggested both in the content of the books as well as the very presence of the Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj is also evident in the kinship practices of Vohras in Mahemdabad. Unlike other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad who openly acknowledge practising dowry, my Vohra informants uniformly condemn it and insist that sums of money are not exchanged or given by either the bride's or groom's families prior to or after marriage. Moreover, my Vohra informants all hold group marriages as a praiseworthy and socially-commendable practice which enables all members of the community, even those in the lower economic rungs, to become

married. In this respect, the Vohra community closely resembles the Maheshwari Hindu merchant caste described by Pache Huber (2002) whose caste organisation, the Maheshwari Mahat Sabha, employs a number of diverse strategies to foster unity and cohesion among its culturally and economically disparate members. While Pache Huber (*ibid.*: 256-7) describes the impetus for fostering such caste unity among the Maheshwari as deriving from a sense of religious duty, or *dharma*, the same is less likely to be true of Vohras. In both the handbooks as well as my conversations with local Vohras, there is little invocation of religiously based motivations for projects fostering unity within the Vohra community. Rather, as I argue, notions of social welfare and inclusion are the foremost reasons provided in explaining the ethos of the activities of the Vohra organisations.

3.7. Group marriage and ideals of equality

In my conversations about kinship practices among local Vohras, my informants were often anxious to praise the financial and social merits of group marriage both on practical as well as moral levels. The practice of group marriage is one which has become increasing popular in recent decades among many communities (Bénéï 1996; Pache Huber 2002), particularly among merchant groups such as Maheshwaris and Jains. Often organised by caste associations or extended families, such events seek to reduce the exorbitant expenses that are usually involved in many South Asian weddings by consolidating the number of couples that are married into a single 'mass' ceremony so that the costs are spread out over a number of families or, in some cases, absorbed by the caste association of the marrying couples or a few local prominent benefactors. Such ceremonies can involve anywhere between a handful to hundreds of couples and, while generally aimed at low-income families who otherwise would have to go into debt in order to marry their children, they also aim to build solidarity and may also serve as public performances of a given caste's status within the larger social arena. A further and more implicit purpose of group marriages is also to discourage the practice of dowry: often the caste association or benefactors will donate necessary items such as *saris*, utensils and home appliances to the newly married couples.

Group marriages are routinely organised by the Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj and during the time of my research a preliminary planning meeting was scheduled to take place in August 2006 to make arrangements for the next group marriage (covering the venue for the ceremony and feast, gifts to be given to the marrying couples and other practical details). The group marriages organised by the Samaj usually involve approximately 20-25 couples and each member of each couple is given 25 tickets for friends and family to attend the ceremony and partake in the feast following the marriage.

While few of my informants had been married in a group marriage or had married their children in one, many routinely extolled the merits of this practice and highlighted the fact that it enabled even the poorest members of the community to have a proper wedding. Aminaben stated that group marriages were fiscally practical because they involved fewer expenses on the part of the couple's family (in marriages organised by the Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj, the couples getting married receive many gifts courtesy of the Samaj). She had considered the possibility of marrying her second-born and favourite son in such a ceremony given its many advantages although later conceded to me that her dream was that he should ride to the girl's house on a horse and that the ceremony be followed by a marriage party (a practice which is not permitted in a group marriage). Sahil, the son in question, likewise later interjected to say that, as far as he was concerned, he was not keen on a group ceremony because he intended to invite all his friends to attend (whom he claimed were numbered in the hundreds). Moreover, he complained that in the last group marriage he attended he and his friends ultimately had to eat in a local restaurant near where the ceremony had taken place because by the time they had reached the eating area for the wedding guests all the food had already been consumed.

Group marriages are indeed generally meant for poorer families and the limits on guests and food may be problematic for couples and their families who, despite the large expenses, envision a more elaborate ceremony. Nevertheless, it is a practice that has been taking place for at least 40-50 years. The president of the Mahemdabad Vohra community was himself married in such a ceremony, thereby also attesting to the fact that while it is more common for poorer sections of the community to partake in a group marriage, this is not always exclusively the case (his father had been the

president of the district-wide Kheda Vohra Samaj as well as a local politician). The promotion of group marriages as a tool for fostering unity and cohesion within the community is also an important aspect of their popularity as attested by their continued sponsorship by caste organisations and prominent leaders. Group marriages are sometimes used on a neighbourhood level: in February 2006, the local police in the religiously segregated neighbourhood of Dariyapur in Ahmedabad sponsored a group marriage for both Hindu and Muslim couples as a means of counteracting their negative communal reputation.

Whether in fact group marriages succeed in their alleged aims of fostering greater community solidarity and discouraging the practice of dowry is ultimately difficult to conclude: while, as I describe in more detail later in this chapter, dowry as such is uncommon among the majority of Mahemdabadi Vohras, my research assistant suggested to me that in some group marriages large amounts of cash and gifts are still given by the families of the couples and that the only aspect of the marriages which remains simple is the ceremony itself. In the next section, I describe the prestations that are given surrounding Vohra marriages and continue with a discussion on attitudes towards dowry within the community.

3.8. Marriage prestations and the question of *dahej*

3.8.1. Prestations before and on the day of the wedding

While no Vohra in Mahemdabad would openly concede to accepting or giving dowry (*dahej*), women (as well as children) routinely go into great detail about the series of prestations which take place between the bride and the groom's families during the engagement (*sagai*) and up to the day of the wedding ceremony (*nikah*). While the content of the prestations differs slightly between the two Vohra *utaras*, it generally constitutes a number of 'gifts' given to both the bride from her natal family and the groom's family and to the groom's family from the bride's family.

Customarily, the gift exchanges between the boy's side (*chokravala*) and the girl's side (*chokrivala*) begin at the time of engagement when the boy's side gives a steel *dabba* (box) full of sugar (*misri*) to the bride's family as well as a silver *payal* (anklet) and a gold ring or gold chain to the bride. Sugar is used as a symbol of sweet relations

between the two families and, on a more practical level, because it's cheaper than sweets and affordable for people from all economic backgrounds. Because of the inherent inferiority of the wife-givers (bride's family) to the wife-takers (groom's family), gifts are rarely, if ever, given by the groom's family to the bride's mother. On special holidays when gifts between the two sides are customarily exchanged such as Eid, the groom's family give a gift to the bride's brother's wife (*bhabhi*) rather than to her mother. Contrarily, the bride's family routinely makes gifts to the groom's mother.

In addition, the groom's family give the bride's family a *pavali* (vessel made of steel for storing water) containing sweets, sugar, dates and nuts on the day of the wedding. In the past it was more common to give the bride's family a *pittal* (vessel made of brass) but now it has become too expensive and has been replaced by a similar container made from stainless steel. The groom's family also give the bride bangles and a gold chain to wear at the *nikah*. While in theory this is seen as a gift from the groom's family to the bride, in practice in-laws often demand that such ornaments or gold be returned to them if they need ready cash. For example, one informant told me that her in-laws later demanded that she return the gold jewellery they had given her on the day of the wedding ceremony because they had obtained it on loan and could not afford to buy it in full.

The nature of the particular items exchanged between the two sides is also closely linked to the higher social status of one *utara* or the other. When speaking about the differences between the two *utaras*, many of the Sunni Vohra women I worked with predicated the distinctions upon customs surrounding marital exchanges between the bride's family and that of the groom. According to one middle-aged Sunni Vohra woman, her *utara* (14) did not 'practise dowry' and both the girl's side as well as the boy's side gave items according to their financial capacity. She went on to say that the 68 *utara* also did not practise dowry but two *saris* are presented to the bride by the groom's side (one to be worn on the day of the engagement and the other on the day of the marriage). According to her, the fact that the girl's side asked for two *saris* was an indication of the general greediness of the 68 *utara* (whom she claimed are more interested in the number of *saris* received on the occasion of the marriage than the fate of the bride). In contrast, a Vohra woman from the 68 *utara* made the opposite

point: the 68 *utara* demonstrates the extent to which they value the bride by the fact that they generously give her two *saris* (rather than the single *sari* given by the 14).

3.8.2. The gifts given to the bride

In addition to the many prestations exchanged between the bride and groom's families before and on the day of the marriage, the bride is also given several gifts by her family prior to and on the day of her marriage. Commonly known as *stridhan* among Hindus, these gifts serve as the inheritance which a woman receives from her natal family and are given to her at the time of her marriage when she formally gives up membership in her natal family to join the family of her husband. *Stridhan* should be distinguished both from the prestations described above given between the families of the bride and groom as well as 'bridegroom price', the cash and commodities given by the bride's family to the family of the groom, as I describe in more detail shortly.

Prior to the day of the marriage ceremony, the bride's family present her with several new outfits that she will take with her when she leaves for her husband's home.

Depending on the wealth of the family, the number of outfits can range from 11 to 51 and each outfit may consist of only the three-piece *salwar kameez* (tunic, pyjama and *dupatta*, or scarf) or may also include matching shoes and purse. Among Vohras, a bride is entitled to keep the gifts that are given to her by her friends on the occasion of her marriage; gifts given to her by relatives, on the other hand, are retained by her natal family since, as it was explained to me, they will have to 'repay' such gifts in the future (i.e., when the children of the relatives are married, they will have to make a similar gift).

In addition, the bride's family (in particular her mother) give her a gold chain or other gold ornaments which the daughter will be able to draw upon after marriage in case of financial need. These items, in principle, are given to a bride from her mother as a form of inheritance although, in certain cases, other members of the family give her gold ornaments that form her inheritance and financial 'safety net'. For example, one Vohra woman with four daughters gave gold to her first and second daughters when they were married but had to rely on her son to provide the gifts for her third and fourth daughters. Similarly, a young Vohra woman who had grown up living with her

mother's natal family (her parents were divorced) was given gold by her mother as well as her aunt. Gold, and the financial 'safety net' which it represents, constitutes an important means through which female kin provide for one another as well as a symbolic link between a woman and her natal family after she has married. In this respect, many of my female Vohra informants were adamant that such gifts should remain as their personal possessions and some told me that they kept these items in the safekeeping of their mothers to ensure that their in-laws would not be tempted to demand them after the marriage.

In some cases, my female informants had been asked by their husbands or in-laws to hand over the gold they had received from their mothers as a ready source of cash that could be put towards a large investment or to settle business troubles. Many of them expressed deep resentment over this practice and suggested that items given to them by their mothers at the time of their wedding should be regarded as off-limits by their husbands and their families. A Vohra woman recounted to me how she was made to hand over all of her gold (amounting to a total of 15 *tolas*,⁸² the bulk of which was given to her by her natal family when she was married) to put towards her husband's ailing business. Likewise, a second Vohra woman was made to hand over three pairs of gold earrings and one gold ring by her in-laws that had been given to her by her mother as her inheritance. Her husband eventually was able to give her the money back in order to have the ornaments made again.

Older women, in contrast, defended the practice to me as necessary for the good of the family. A Vohra woman in her fifties, recounted that several years earlier her husband had asked her to hand over her gold in order to finance the construction of a new family house. While reluctant at the time, she now sees it as a good decision given that it was used for a house in which she too would live (moreover, she noted that it was also a good investment since the house is now worth considerably more than what they originally paid for it).

In addition to the many prestations that take place between the two sides surrounding the engagement and wedding ceremonies, a small sum of money is also given or

⁸² A tola is a unit of weight used for gold in India which is approximately equal to 3.75 ounces or 117 grams.

promised to the bride in the form of the *mehr* (also referred to as ‘dower’) by the groom or the groom’s family at the time of marriage. According to Islamic law, all marriage contracts must include the amount to be given as *mehr* which, if not provided at the time of marriage, must be handed over to the wife in case of divorce. Within the Vohra community, at the time of my research, the *mehr* was set at Rs. 421 for higher-status *ataks* (generally those belonging to the 14 *utara*) and Rs. 65 for lower-status *ataks* (belonging to the 68 *utara*). As other scholars have noted in relation to South Asia more widely, the *mehr* has now primarily been reduced to a token amount given to the bride in standing with the requirements of Islamic law with regard to the marriage contract. While in some cases, a high *mehr* is given among families of a higher socio-economic status, in general it is clear that its original purpose of providing women with a means of livelihood in case of divorce has now long disappeared. Moreover, even when a high *mehr* is set by the groom’s family, it is not necessarily handed over to the bride at the time of marriage and, should divorce take place, it is not unheard of for the husband to intimidate or convince the wife to either ‘forgive’ the *mehr* or initiate the divorce herself in which case she will forfeit her earlier right to the *mehr*. The token aspect of the *mehr* is exemplified by the case of my research assistant, an Amdavadi Sunni Vohra (14 *utara*) who said that in her family it was customary for the bride to use the money received for the *mehr* to throw a party for her and her friends, thus hinting at the relative low financial worth of such a sum and the improbability that a woman would be able to live off it should divorce or widowhood take place. This said, while in most cases the *mehr* is given as a token gesture in order to conform to Islamic law, there have also been a few cases in which more substantial amounts have been given. In the case of Karisma, a Saiyed woman from Mahemdabad who defied her family (and was later disowned) when she married a local Malek man, she was given Rs. 5000 as her *mehr*. While Karisma cited her high status as a Saiyed as the reason she received such a high *mehr*, another possible explanation could be that her in-laws were compensating for the fact that she had been cut off both financially and otherwise by her natal family.

Nevertheless, for both the Sunni Vohras as well as other Muslim women in Mahemdabad, the main source of financial security remains the gold given to them by their natal family at the time of their wedding. Whether they are able to give it in safe-keeping to their mother or made to give it up to their in-laws to lock away in the

family *tijori* (to which daughter-in-law rarely holds the key) depends from family to family.

3.8.3 *Dahej* or bridegroom price: The gifts given to the groom and his family

All my Vohra informants were ardent in their denunciation of the practice of accepting and giving *dahej* and many maintained that this was one of the ways in which Vohras are distinct from other local Muslim groups. Among Vohras in Mahemdabad, the term traditionally associated with dowry, ‘*dahej*’, is not commonly used because of the many negative connotations it has acquired. Rather, the term ‘*jej*’ is often preferred given its meaning as ‘a gift which is voluntarily given’ (in contrast to the compulsory connotations of ‘*dahej*’). In addition, the term ‘*kariyavar*’, meaning ‘a mutual understanding’, is also often used.

In discussing *dahej*, it is important to differentiate between the gifts that are given to the bride by her natal family (*stridhan*) and the practice described by Caplan (1984) as ‘bridegroom price’, the gifts and cash sum which the bride’s family provide to the groom and his family and which the bride has no control over. In my analysis, I will draw upon Caplan’s terminology to differentiate between *stridhan* and bridegroom price to avoid unnecessary confusion.

As has been widely noted, the practice of bridegroom price is closely tied to social prestige: by giving large amounts of cash and expensive gifts, the bride’s family demonstrate publicly their own financial prestige and ‘generosity’ while receiving a large dowry shows the merit of the groom in that his family are able to demand a large sum. In contrast to *stridhan* which remains legal, the practice of giving and receiving bridegroom price has been outlawed in India for over 40 years. In 1961, the Dowry Prohibition Act was passed, making it illegal for either the bride’s family or the groom’s family to receive or give this form of dowry (dower for Muslims, or *mehr*, was excluded from the stipulated definition of dowry). Later amendments to the act codified in 1984 further specify that the bride should keep a detailed list of gifts received upon her marriage and identify the penalties to be incurred by the husband’s family in case the bride dies in suspicious circumstances in the first seven years of the marriage (Bénéï 1995: 33). Alongside this has developed a greater stigma and

awareness attached to the 'evils' of bridegroom price and social activists and the media have increasingly presented the issue as an ongoing social problem which victimises women and their families and, in extreme cases, results in death or disfigurement. Ethnographic reports suggest however that, despite such legal impediments, the amount of money and the value of gifts given as bridegroom price have grown significantly in the past 50 years in many communities across India (Caplan 1984; Nishimura 1998; Sharma 1993).

Despite the ample literature on the subject of dowry in South Asia, considerable ambiguity remains regarding what exactly the term refers to and the English term is often used by Indians themselves (for example, the Madras Christians featured in Caplan's study (1984) refer to 'dowry evil'). Interestingly, Bénéï (1996) relates how the ambiguity regarding the exact definition of dowry is not peculiar to ethnographic accounts but likewise prevalent among her own informants in the state of Maharashtra. In all the cases she studied, '*hunda*' (the Marathi word for 'dowry') included both the many marital prestations that were given by both sides and the expenses for the feasts and marriage ceremony as well. In instances in which the bride's family provided the groom's side with a cash payment, her informants stated that its purpose was to cover the bride's jewellery (uniformly given to her by the groom's family) as well as the expenses incurred from the marriage ceremony. Bénéï suggests that, despite these assertions, ultimately it is the bride's family which very often foots the majority of the bill for the marriage and, additionally, contributes significantly to off-setting the expenses incurred by the groom's family placing the net advantage in such affairs decidedly on the groom's side.

With regard to the actual definition of '*hunda*' as used by Bénéï's informants, she concludes that it is ultimately necessary to accept that there exists some variation in how the term is used:

In almost all of the cases, a watch is now given to the groom ... and, often, a cash sum ... On the part of both the bride's side as well as that of the groom, certain families do not consider prestations meant specifically for the young

man (watch, scooter, etc.) as *hunda*: other families, in contrast, do. Likewise, this applies to the sums of cash.⁸³ (1996: 203)

More generally, cash sums are largely identified with bridegroom price given that often the largest part of a woman's inheritance is given to her in the form of gold and ornaments. According to Nishimura (1998: 165-175), the common usage of such items derives from the fact that gold and jewellery are particularly easy to convert into ready cash should a woman find herself in a difficult situation and gold, in particular, is seen as constituting a safe investment against inflation. Moreover, Nishimura points out that gold and ornaments also enhance a woman's position as a status carrier and the bride's family is often measured by the amount of gold that a woman brings with her to her new home following marriage.

In general, the practice of giving large gifts and sums of cash to the groom's family is much less common among Muslims than among Hindus in India and there is convincing evidence that when it does occur, the value of the bridegroom price bestowed is rarely on the same scale as that given by many upper-caste Hindus (Jeffery 2001: 9; Fazalbhoy 2005: 71). This can be attributed to a number of reasons ranging from the higher incidence of cousin marriage among Muslims (and the consequent decrease in the transference of wealth through marriage since it remains within the extended family) to the fact that only bridewealth (in the form of *mehr*), rather than dowry, is sanctioned by Islamic law.⁸⁴

According to my Vohra informants, members of the community practise neither *dahej* nor *jej* and, in fact, it was alleged that for families in the 68 *utara* it was more common for the groom's family to present the bride's family with gifts rather than vice versa. The gifts that are exchanged between the two families are instead presented as a means through which affinal relations are built and solidified. In contrast to the majority of marriages discussed by Bénéï in which the bride's family

⁸³ My translation: 'Dans la quasi-totalité des cas, un bijou est maintenant donné au marié, ... plus, souvent, une somme d'argent ... Du côté de la fille comme du garçon, certaines familles ne considèrent pas la prestation personnellement destinée au jeune homme (bijou, scooter, etc.) comme *hunda*; d'autres, oui. De même s'agissant de la somme d'argent.'

⁸⁴ This said, Bénéï has noted that in the context of Maharashtra the fact that the preferential marriage takes the form of cross-cousin marriages (and therefore both families are kin) does not in itself reduce the wedding expenses for the bride's family nor does it mean that there is a more equitable distribution of the costs with the groom's family (1996: 131).

both give a bridegroom price and cover the costs of the wedding ceremony and feasts, Vohras traditionally have two wedding ceremonies, one organised by the bride's family and the other by the groom's. This point is important to note since Bénéï (1996:129) notes that the marriage expenses were often considered by her informants in Maharashtra to be in a similar vein to the *hunda* (dowry) which the bride's family were deemed chiefly financially responsible for. That Vohra marriages are covered by the bride's family and that of the groom on an equal basis is thus indicative of an effort to make both parties contribute equivalently to the expenses incurred by the marriage.

In my conversations with non-Vohra Muslims in Mahemdabad, discrepancies regarding what exactly was implied by the term *dahej* showed similar variations as those reported by Bénéï with regard to Maharashtra. As mentioned earlier, non-Vohra Muslims freely admitted to giving or receiving non-cash goods (clothing, household goods, jewellery and, in some cases, cash) and there was little hesitancy when showing off a new *tijori* (closet) or bed that a family had recently acquired through a brother's or son's marriage (which were specifically alluded to with the term 'dahej').

A Malek friend stated that although it is common for members of the Malek community to give and receive *dahej*, generally families don't make demands for specific items or amounts of cash. Furthermore, it was expressed that there is an expectation that families who are known to be financially well-off will give according to their means: in such cases, a groom's family will ask for a TV or a fridge from the family of the bride if the latter is deemed capable of relatively more expensive items (this form of dowry adhering more closely to Caplan's 'bridegroom price').

Household items such as beds, mattresses, wardrobes, and other utensils are also common items given along with new clothing for the members of the groom's family. An unmarried Saiyed woman responded to my inquiry about dowry by admitting with pride that, although it was against both Islamic and Indian law, her father was ready to give a large *dahej* consisting of both cash and goods when she married. That her father was capable of giving a substantial *dahej* was seen both to confer status on her family as financially capable of such an investment as well as indicate her own merit as a desirable bride. *Dahej*, for her as well as for non-Vohra Muslims more widely in Mahemdabad, is seen as a potent means through which economic and social status can be demonstrated, both with respect to the bride's family as well as that of the groom.

While modest bridegroom prices are thus regularly given among many non-Vohra Muslims, more substantial gifts and cash sums in Mahemdabad are generally given only in cases when a bride is older or otherwise less desirable (whereby a significant cash sum helps to ‘offset’ negative attributes) or for marriages among wealthier families. This was the case for a Malek woman whose father, a wealthy government servant, had given Rs. 5 lakhs to the groom’s family since his daughter was above the ideal age for marriage and her family were desperate to have her married. The marriage of the granddaughter of Mohammadbhai, the Vohra community leader in Mahemdabad and a wealthy businessman and a prominent local politician, also involved a significant cash bridegroom price. The marriage cost a total of 15 lakhs and, according to Mohammadbhai, was the largest in Mahemdabadi history with the feast alone catering to a total of 7,000 guests (2,000 Hindus and 5,000 Muslims). In addition to the expenses of the wedding, a large sum was given as bridegroom price to the in-laws of his granddaughter when the marriage later dissolved shortly after Mohammadbhai’s granddaughter joined her husband’s family in New Jersey, USA. Upon filing for divorce, Mohammadbhai demanded that the cash from the bridegroom price be returned and, when the family refused, filed charges against them alleging his granddaughter had been raped and emotionally abused, thereby making any future visits to India on their part impossible.⁸⁵

According to all my informants, both Vohra and non-Vohra, it was agreed that the bride’s family give ‘according to their capacity’, i.e. in a way that is financially viable for them. Mohammadbhai had himself been married in a ‘group marriage’ and often extolled the merits of such ceremonies. For his granddaughter, however, he maintained that as a prominent figure in the community it was his obligation to hold a large and expensive ceremony. The significant bridegroom price he had paid can also be attributed to the distinct status imbalance between the two parties: while wealthy and powerful on a local level, Mohammadbhai’s family were from the Mhemdavadi *atak* (the lower 68 *utara*) while the family of the groom, in contrast, were established

⁸⁵ A well known threat against local Gujaratis living abroad is to file (generally fraudulent) charges against them and thereby bar them from leaving or returning to India until the case has been resolved. Due to the exorbitant length of time required for any given court case to make its way through the Indian legal system, the defendants are unlikely to be able to return to their adopted home or, if already abroad, return to India for some time for fear of becoming trapped there.

NRIs. A large bridegroom price enabled Mohammadbhai to marry his granddaughter to a Vohra family which had settled in the United States, establishing a strategic link which would bring both social prestige as well as the possibility that his own family might be able to settle overseas in the future, or at least make several visits. Cases such as that of Mohammadbhai and the Malek government worker in which large bridegroom prices are given both for practical necessity (such as when the bride is older) as well as a means for establishing or maintaining high social status are, however, more of an exception than the rule in Mahemdabad.

In contrast, the majority of Vohras avidly denied that they either accepted or gave cash within the scope of marriage arrangements, except in nominal amounts in the form of *mehr*. In some cases, informants suggested that it is the groom's family which must always give more to the bride's family rather than vice versa (thus, it was explained to me that if the bride's family gives something worth Rs. 100, the groom's family should give them an item or items worth Rs. 200). Many Vohra women that I spoke to regarded bridegroom price as a practice common with people or communities that were greedy (*luchcho*) or base (i.e., non-Vohra Muslims).

The varying definitions of *dahej* allow ample room for manoeuvre in terms of what is classified as dowry and, as such, they are often manipulated by contending factions to accuse one another of greediness or impropriety. In one instance, a Vohra woman listed for me the customary marital practices according to different *ataks* in the Vohra community. According to her:

the Bharja *atak* give according to their capacity—they give money and goods to the boy's family (but not *dahej*). The Bharja, Pieja, Mujela and Amdavadi all look at the position of the girl's family and then expect a gift based on that (although this is not like *dahej*).

As is clear from this citation, customary rites for higher-status *ataks* (such as those listed above) require that the bride's family give various items as well as, potentially, money to the groom's family which, according to some definitions, could be arguably classified as bridegroom price. At the same time, a concerted effort is clearly made to make sure that such 'gifts' are not represented as *dahej*. Significant expenditures are also cloaked under the custom of *mamiru*, generally practised by lower-status Vohras, whereby the mother's brothers (particularly the eldest) are responsible for presenting

the bride with household items and clothing prior to the wedding. The extent of what is given can vary but one woman, Fatmaben, recounted that her sons spent an estimated Rs. 20,000 altogether for the *mamiru* of her granddaughter, a considerable sum given that one of her sons worked as a rickshaw driver while the other sold eggs from a moving cart. It is important to note, however, that *mamiru*, while requiring significant financial expenditure, does not include cash gifts and consists of items primarily intended for the bride's use in her new home (but which can obviously also be of benefit to her husband's family).

What I wish to highlight here is that, despite divergences according to higher- and lower-status *utaras* in terms of what is given by the bride's family to the bridegroom and his family, there exists a strong ideology among Vohras which holds that *dahej* is not a custom which is practised within the community and, in particular, large sums of money are not given by the bride's family at the time of marriage. While marriage within the community does entail financial expenditure on the part of the bride's family, significant efforts are made to present the items that are given at the time of marriage as part of the bride's inheritance (as a form of *stridhan*) rather than a pay-off to the groom's family.

The adamant denial on the part of all my Vohra informants that *dahej* was not practised in their community marks a contrast with the general ease with which members of other Muslim groups listed and displayed items and cash that they had received through the marriage of a son or brother. This point is further demonstrated by the fact that other Muslims in Mahemdabad specifically maintained that Vohras' resistance to giving cash dowries constituted evidence of the community's negative reputation. The Malek contractor, Samir, mentioned in Chapter 2, maintained to me that there was a particularly high divorce rate among Vohras in contrast to other local Muslim groups. This, he asserted, was a consequence of the fact that they did not give cash payments as part of *dahej*, presumably suggesting that when large sums of money are given, the bride's family has more impetus to encourage the marriage to last. Given that Samir had no intention of representing Vohras in a positive light and was, rather, keen to emphasise the community's shortcomings, his allegation that cash dowries are not common among Vohras plainly implies that there is an element of truth in the claims of my Vohra informants.

In conclusion, I would argue that while the emphatic denunciation of *dahej* among Vohras does not necessarily correlate with a complete absence of giving and receiving bridegroom price, it is part of a wider ideology within the community which, combined with the lofty praise that is expressed for group marriages, differentiates Vohras from other Muslim groups in Mahemdabad. As I discuss in the next section, this ethos of unity and equality among members of the *samaj* is closely tied to their status as a business community.

3.9. The importance of endogamy and caste unity among mercantile communities

As other scholars working on Indian merchant castes such as the Maheshwari (Pache Huber 2002) and the Nagarattar (Nishimura 1998) have noted, the tenet of caste endogamy is particularly important for business communities in that it serves as a means of both consolidating business ties as well as ensuring that financial assets do not flow outside the caste (as they would in the case of intermarriages). As Pache Huber describes, the Maheshwari caste association has set up an extensive network of local, regional and national associations as a means of encouraging unity among the geographically and economically disparate sub-groups of the caste. The various local Maheshwari organisations regularly organise both group marriages and pre-marital events for eligible young women and men to meet one another and their families ('*foires de rencontre*'). In addition, elaborate and expensive weddings are strongly discouraged and specific limits are set on the amount of dowry given by the bride's family. As scholars such as Parry (1979), Pocock (1972) and van der Veen (1973) have all noted, exorbitant dowries which often accompany hypergamous marriages increase the tendency of the economically lower members of the caste to marry outside the community.

In her study of the Nagarattar caste in Tamil Nadu, Nishimura (1998) likewise emphasises the importance given to maintaining caste endogamy as a larger moral tenet within the caste, which is intimately connected to caste members' traditional occupations as merchants and moneylenders:

Marrying a non-Nagarattar is considered to be detrimental, not because it creates ‘impurity’ in the Brahmanic sense, but because it allows property to flow out of the caste and breaks the reciprocal relationship of marriage alliance between the wife-givers and the wife-takers. Complete isogamy is based on the compatibility between these two. (*ibid.*: 53)

The restrictions on marrying outside the caste among Nagarattars are strictly enforced: children from inter-caste unions are not accepted as authentic members of the caste because caste membership must be inherited from both the maternal and paternal sides (in contrast to many other castes in which caste membership is determined solely by one’s paternal line). The offspring of such alliances are barred from marrying back into the Nagarattar caste and are formally referred to as belonging to the ‘Second House Chettiyars’.⁸⁶

The emphasis on both caste endogamy and isogamy is, as Nishimura argues, predicated on the fact that the *stridhan* received by Nagarattar women at the time of marriage remains in their own name even have joining their husbands’ families. Divorce, then, implicitly means that a man forfeits both his business linkages with his wife’s family as well as the capital that she has brought into the marriage (*ibid.*: 75). Given the importance of marriage as a means of establishing business networks, Nagarattar women enjoy a heightened position and autonomy relative to women from other castes as a consequence of their continued ties with their natal families after marriage.

The emphasis on caste endogamy among Sunni Vohras is likewise strongly linked to their status as a business community. Despite the ongoing incidence of hypergamous marriages between 68 *utara* brides and 14 grooms and the potential threat which such matches have in giving way to inter-caste unions at the bottom of the social ladder, explicit efforts at discouraging *dahej* and promoting group marriages have developed as a means of preserving the unity of the *samaj*. Thus, efforts of individual families at social mobility through ‘marrying up’ (and the hierarchical notions implicit in such alliances) coexist with a broader ideology which emphasises equality and unity between the socially and economically disparate members of the *samaj*. The importance attributed to cohesion within the community likewise contributes to the

⁸⁶ Chettiyar, literally ‘merchant’, is the more generalised caste name of the Nagarattars.

distinct 'Vohra identity' described in the previous chapter which remains more pronounced due to the lack of substantive interaction between Vohras and other Muslims in the realms of both kinship and business spheres. Given the close connection between kinship strategies and larger business alliances, caste endogamy is fundamental in ensuring that property and capital remain within the community. Kinship, thus, constitutes a central means through which a separate 'Vohra identity' is maintained and, moreover, an important way in which other forms of alliances (business and political) are kept within the confines of the Vohra community.

3.10. Conclusion: Endogamy, dowry and cohesion

In this chapter I have argued that the social organisation and marriage practices of Sunni Vohras in Mahemdabad differ from those of other local Muslim groups in many respects. Firstly, the community places a strict emphasis on endogamy whereby inter-caste marriage is discouraged more fervently than among other 'indigenous' Muslim groups. Secondly, the community is part of a formal institutionalised network of other local Vohra communities which organises group marriages, produces census books and engages in other similar activities which contribute to the formation of a Charotar Sunni Vohra 'imagined community' in the area. Lastly, the emphasis on group marriage as a practical and socially valued practice and the concomitant status of bridegroom price (or *dahej*) as taboo, particularly with regard to cash payments, likewise set apart Vohras from other local Muslims.

Such practices are employed, as I have argued, to encourage unity and cohesion within the community, on both the local and regional level. Moreover, they are closely linked to the strong sense of identity shared by Vohras as being different from both other local Muslims as well as Hindus. The fact that among 'indigenous' Muslims in Gujarat it is mostly merchant communities such as Sunni Vohras, Daudi Bohras, Khojas and Menons who practise strict endogamy suggests the existence of a link between kinship organisation and functions and a particular mercantile ethos. This is not surprising given that many such communities operate family businesses which are run by the larger joint family as a collective. On another level, however, such Muslim merchant communities have also cultivated a detachment from more political causes and other Muslim groups that are perceived as *jhubra* (quarrelsome)

and, as Pache-Huber has pointed out, this ethos can be read as a necessary means by which the merchant attempts to maintain social and business links with a groups from various socioeconomic strata. The strict endogamy practised by communities such as Mahemdabad's Sunni Vohras is thus intrinsically associated with their traditional occupation as merchants and, as Gujaratis, a mercantile ethos which prioritises business relations over other potentially polarising forms of communal identification.

Chapter 4: Gender, sexuality and *ijjat* in Mahemdabad

4.1. Introduction

The past two chapters have presented the many ways in which Vohras in Mahemdabad both see themselves and are perceived by others as being distinct from other local Muslims. In interrogating local notions of what constitutes ‘Muslim identity’, the following three chapters will focus instead on the various ways in which Muslims in Mahemdabad are united through shared cultural codes, religious practices and beliefs and, finally, their shared sense of marginalisation as a result of recent violence and state government policies against Muslims.

This chapter examines how notions of gendered behaviour are intricately bound up in locally defined understandings of ‘Muslim identity’. While in previous chapters I have emphasised the way in which Vohras are perceived by other Muslims (and concomitantly perceive themselves) as having a specific ‘Vohra identity’ which differentiates them from other local Muslim groups, within the context of gendered modes of behaviour I argue that there is considerably more consensus on how ‘Muslimness’ is enacted across various groups. Specifically, the greater seclusion of younger women and the ideal of the virile Muslim man represent social expectations which are shared across the various Muslim groups in the town.

Across cultures, gendered roles and behaviour remain a key way in which social and ethnic identities are performed and transmitted. While strict gendered boundaries are enforced throughout much of South Asia, the forms and priorities given to particular expectations regarding male and female behaviour often differ from one community or caste to another. In this chapter I focus on the strong link between a family or community’s *ijjat* (honour or reputation) and the image and behaviour of its women for Muslims in Mahemdabad. While Hindutva stereotypes project Muslim women as oppressed as a result of religious dictates, the ethnography suggests that it is, rather, local social and cultural norms which place great emphasis on the seclusion of younger women in Mahemdabad. Moreover, despite the shared emphasis on seclusion

of young women, there remains clear variation in the extent to which women are expected to contribute to non-household activities across local Muslim communities.

Vohras, similarly to other local Muslim communities in Mahemdabad, place great emphasis on the seclusion and chastity of younger women. This is unsurprising given that as a merchant community a family's reputation of trustworthiness in business networks is closely linked with the honour and prestige of its women (Pache Huber 2002; Laidlaw 1995). As I will demonstrate through the example of one Vohra family in which the women carried out extra-marital liaisons, such relations are seen as impugning both the 'character' and reputation of a family along with its 'creditworthiness'. In this respect, the allegations made against the women were couched in a larger discourse condemning both the women as sexually promiscuous and the family more widely as financially irresponsible.

In contrast to younger women, there is significant variation in the status enjoyed by older women across different Muslim groups in Mahemdabad. While older Vohra women experience both relative autonomy and mobility, their counterparts from other local communities are more restricted. Thus, the emphasis on controlling female sexuality as a uniformly important marker of *ijjat* exists alongside a competing ethic among Vohras which stresses the importance of hard work and, according to which, all members of a family are encouraged to take part in the running and managing of the family business.

While strict constraints are imposed on the movement and behaviour of pre-menopausal Muslim women, involvement in romantic and sexual liaisons is, unsurprisingly, widely tolerated for men of all ages and is viewed as unrelated to notions of *ijjat*. Rather, as I will describe, the liaisons between local Muslim men and Hindu women are projected as evidence of their increased virility and strength when compared to their Hindu counterparts. Within this context, Vohra men are not differentiated from other local Muslim men: as with the importance of female seclusion, this gendered set of expectations remains central to local notions of what it means to be Muslim across the spectrum.

4.2. Women and honour

The relation between family and community honour, or *ijjat*,⁸⁷ and the status and behaviour of women in the South Asian context has been well documented (Papanek 1971; Pastner 1972; Fruzzetti 1982; Raheja and Gold 1994; Wadley 1994; Tarlo 1996). Both *ijjat* as well as *sharam* (shame, modesty) are central markers of the ideal woman in much of the Subcontinent and these attributes must be performed through particular modes of behaviour, clothing and the way in which a woman interacts with others. In particular, a family's *ijjat* is heavily reliant on the modesty and chastity of its women and any semblance of interaction with unrelated men can be construed as evidence that she might be sexually promiscuous, hence wreaking profound damage both on her own reputation as well as on that of her family. The importance of maintaining a woman's reputation is thereby heavily dependent on her seclusion within the home: the less that she is seen in public spaces by male non-kin, the lower the risk of anyone impugning her reputation and character.

In this chapter, I examine in detail notions of *ijjat* among Muslims in Mahemdabad with particular reference to how such a concept is understood in relation to the position of women. I focus primarily on women for two main reasons. Firstly, as a woman myself, I became intimately aware of the significant pressures on local Muslim women to maintain an image of respectability and a reputation of having a 'good character'. Given that the majority of my informants were women due to the gendered divisions of many aspects of everyday life in Mahemdabad, I also began to understand the importance for a woman of preserving a respectable reputation through the many words of caution and advice and general wariness of my female informants regarding spending time, or merely projecting the image of spending time, with non-kin males. Watching other young women carefully calculate each trip outside the house and noting the furtiveness which often accompanied such expeditions became a routine phenomenon and, correspondingly, much of my time with informants was spent in their homes.

⁸⁷ 'Ijjat' is the Gujarati word for honour (usually referred to elsewhere in north India by the Hindi term 'izzat').

Secondly, I highlight the importance of female sexuality and ‘character’ in local ideas of *ijjat* because the seclusion of young women in particular proved to be uniform across the Muslim community in Mahemdabad, in contrast to the prevailing attitudes I found among many local Hindus, Jains and Christians with respect to female education and employment. While ‘girls’ education’ was often touted by Muslim community leaders as important and closely linked to a community’s ‘development’ and ‘modernity’ (as described in the previous chapter), ultimately few of the young Muslim women in Mahemdabad I encountered were willing to risk the strong social sanctions levelled against women who spent significant amounts of time outside the home. In contrast, older women in Mahemdabad are granted significantly higher degrees of mobility and independence than their younger counterparts, a point which, as I argue in this chapter, is particularly true for older Vohra women.

The popular stereotype of Muslim women oppressed by Islamic orthodoxy continues to have wide currency both within South Asia as well as more generally. In the context of India, Hindutva activists and politicians in particular have strategically employed this stereotype as a means of further propagating notions of the oppressive Muslim male who poses a threat not only to the Hindu nation as a whole but, moreover, to the welfare of Muslim women (Jeffery and Jeffery 2006b: 8).

Recent sociological literature (Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey 2005; Hasan and Menon 2006) has attempted to shed light on the multiple factors that contribute to the relatively low socioeconomic position of Muslim women. Ultimately, many such studies argue that non-religious criteria such as class and the region from which a woman comes play a more important role in the level of education, age at marriage and decision-making abilities of Muslim women. Most notably, the Muslim Women’s Survey (MWS)⁸⁸ conducted by Hasan and Menon focuses on both Hindu and Muslim women in different regions of India in order to chart the role of religious affiliation in determining their social and economic status. The authors report that in south India they found higher literacy, life expectancy and educational levels among Muslim women (as well as Hindu women) and that female seclusion and patrilocal residence

⁸⁸ The survey was conducted in 2000 across 40 districts in 12 states in India. Of the female respondents who were interviewed (who were all above the age of 18), approximately 80% were Muslim while the remaining 20% were Hindu.

were practised to a lesser extent than elsewhere in India (particularly in the north). In contrast, the north was characterised by ‘extreme female powerlessness, restricted freedom of movement, limited inheritance rights in practice and access to economic resources, and inadequate opportunities for sustained employment’ (Hasan and Menon 2006: 240).⁸⁹ Through their systematic study, Hasan and Menon present a strong counterargument to stereotypes of Islam as the root of female oppression; while Muslim women continue to be one of the most disadvantaged and poorest groups in India (second only to Scheduled Caste women), religion *per se* is not at the root of their low socioeconomic status.

In this chapter I argue, however, that among the majority of Muslim groups in Mahemdabad, the seclusion of pre-menopausal women was more highly emphasised than among other religious communities (in contrast, the emphasis placed on female chastity is uniformly shared across religions). While rejecting simplistic stereotypes which denote Muslim women as inherently oppressed by their religion, I suggest that particular ideas about gendered behaviour constitute a means through which a normative Muslim identity is expressed in Mahemdabad. While in previous chapters I have focused predominantly on how distinctions *among* Muslims in Mahemdabad are expressed and performed (with particular reference to Sunni Vohras), in this chapter I investigate, rather, one of the means through which Muslims in the town differentiate themselves from other religious groups.

The ultimate impact of the heightened level of female seclusion is that educational and employment opportunities outside the home are significantly more restricted for Muslim women which, in turn, contributes to reduced levels of financial autonomy and independence. Hasan and Menon (2005b) have argued that two factors in particular have contributed to the overall devaluation of education among Muslim women: firstly, the lower educational attainment of Muslim men more generally and ensuing pressures to limit girls’ education to ensure that they are seen as ‘marriageable’ and, secondly, the prevalence of early marriage among Muslims in many parts of India.

⁸⁹ Western India, including Gujarat, was found to be between north and south India in terms of the socioeconomic status of Muslim women.

It goes without saying that exceptions to this rule are many and the large diversity in class, caste, region, sect and urban/rural locations among India's Muslims make any general conclusions tentative at best. As I will show in the context of Mahemdabad, there exist both patterns of uniformity with relation to gendered relations and ideals as well as significant variations.

4.3. *Purdah* among young Muslim women

The notion of *purdah* (literally, 'curtain') has been defined as 'the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty' (Papanek and Minault 1982: 4). While on a more global level, the veiling of women is typically identified with Islamic societies, in the context of South Asia it is widely adopted by both Hindus and Muslims, particularly in north and central India, as the ample literature on the subject testifies (Vatuk 1982; Jacobson 1982; Sharma 1978, 1980; Papanek 1973). On a general level, the practice entails a strict separation of male and female spaces, both within the household and outside, and often requires that women cover themselves to varying degrees (either their head or their entire body depending on the level of orthodoxy) when entering public spaces. Scholars such as Vatuk (*ibid.*) and Papanek (*ibid.*) have convincingly pointed out that *purdah* fulfils different functions for Hindus in contrast to Muslims: while among Hindus it is mainly used as a means of showing respect towards a woman's male affines, for many Muslims its practice serves to delineate relations between male kin and 'outsiders'.⁹⁰ Practices connected with *purdah* such as the wearing of a *burqa* by women when leaving the house, preserving separate female and male spaces within the household, and the veiling of women in front of elder male affines have typically been associated with higher-status castes and communities, and has increasingly been adopted by many lower-status groups wishing to improve their social standing.

Among Muslims in Mahemdabad, the seclusion of women remains an important means of preserving a family's women from the threat of unapproved sexual relations and, in so doing, the honour of the family as a whole. The prevalent notion that younger women should leave the house on as few occasions as possible is widely

⁹⁰ Thus, the practice of *purdah* separates male kin who are allowed to have relations with a family's women and those outside this 'trusted circle' who are not given this access.

shared among Vohras as it is among other local Muslim groups, both by women themselves as well as men. While short excursions to the local beauty parlour or Sufi shrine are generally deemed acceptable, women should be accompanied by either a family member or female friend when walking to their destination. Longer distances are generally frowned upon and younger women often feel considerable unease with the prospect of walking around alone. The fear that 'society', or *samaj*, in the auspices of neighbours or local acquaintances, might cast aspersions on their 'character' and question the intention of a woman's whereabouts was a significant source of concern among many of my younger female informants. In this sense, the discomfort experienced when straying from the confines of the home ultimately succeeds in reinforcing the lack of confidence that many of the women I knew felt about travelling even short distances on their own: one friend told me that every time she took the train alone to visit her in-laws her heart would beat faster than usual from the fear of being on her own away from home. While there were a handful of cases in which young Muslim women from Mahemdabad regularly travelled to nearby cities to attend university or paid employment, such instances remained rare and the women who did so felt the brunt of social disapproval as a result of going against the ideal of the house-bound married woman whose top priority is the caretaking of the family and household.

As a woman, I was likewise advised not to wander around by myself or in the company of men and, furthermore, that my research could, and should, be done from within the confines of my house. As I began to understand the importance of maintaining the semblance of a respectable woman by local standards, I began to work with a female research assistant who accompanied me on house visits around the town. Likewise, I rarely left the house after 7 p.m. and, when necessity dictated that I go out at night, I made sure to travel to and from the house I visited in a rickshaw.

The threat of social boycotting to a woman and her family if she is seen as not living up to ideals of female respectability is considerable and, despite occasional praise by local leaders for 'girls' education', the decision to take up regular studies or employment outside the town is not one to be taken lightly by either a woman or her family. Among my Muslim informants, three young women were often cited to me as

particularly bright and capable. One Vohra woman in her twenties had scored one of the highest marks for the entire district in the HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) exams but had ultimately decided against pursuing university studies in order to marry. The other two women, both of whom I developed close friendships with over the course of my research, struggled considerably with their own desire to continue their studies or employment in a nearby city, and the risk which this would incur of being seen to defy local gender expectations and inciting the disapproval of in-laws or the larger community. One of these women, Rehana, travelled to Ahmedabad regularly for her studies and, for these trips outside Mahemdabad, routinely wore a *burqa*⁹¹ during the commute between home and college. Extremely talkative and pudgy, Rehana did not conform easily to the poised and modest ideal of a young Indian woman; rather, she aspired to be a journalist like the famous TV reporter Barkha Dutt whom she admired for her work and short hair. Moreover, she had achieved impressive educational qualifications by local standards: not only did she speak English well but she had amassed three degrees (two Bachelors and one Masters). Given that few Muslim women in Mahemdabad wore *burqas*, Rehana's decision to wear a covering which left only her face exposed when travelling to Ahmedabad is suggestive of the difficulty felt in leaving the house in order to pursue her studies, in particular since she never wore such a garment when leaving the house in Mahemdabad. While she explained her decision to me as one resulting from her discomfort at having strange men stare at her, the fact that she struggled to conform to standard ideals of *sharam* and female submissiveness and, while still unmarried, travelled alone to nearby cities, also clearly played a role in her choice. By projecting the image of conservative piety generally associated with high-status women living in larger cities, Rehana attempted to assuage some of the criticism from 'society' (*samaj*) that might condemn her for leaving the house on a regular basis rather than staying within the safe confines of the home.

A central concern among my informants when speaking about either *burqas* or interaction between non-related men and women more generally was the theme of the 'male gaze' directed at women, a subject which was spoken of as both intimidating as

⁹¹ The covering worn by Rehana consisted of a loose piece of dark fabric which covered the upper part of her body while leaving her face uncovered. Rehana herself used the term '*burqa*' to describe this covering although more generally this word usually denotes a garment which also covers the face.

well as potentially menacing for its female targets. The gaze upon a woman by a strange male not only poses a threat to her *ijjat* and that of her family but also transforms her into a sexualised object: the act of seeing a woman without a *burqa* or within the public domain is therefore an act of exposure and, even without physical contact, threatens the chastity and sanctity of a woman. Many of my female informants warned me not to spend significant time with prominent male figures in the town who were cast as dangerous for the lascivious way in which they *looked* at women (with the implication that such *looking* could lead to more immediately threatening actions). The importance of female seclusion and *burqas*, thus, consists in their means of acting as protection by maintaining both a physical and, moreover, visual division between male and female spaces.

Wearing a *burqa*, the most publicly visible sign of female seclusion, was not typically practised by the majority of my informants although, again, many of the female kin of my Mahemdabadi informants living in nearby cities regularly wore one when leaving the house. As mentioned earlier, in Mahemdabad it is not often that younger women leave their house but when an opportunity arises most women either cover their heads with their *dupattas* or simply go out without covering their heads; women wearing *burqas* for local outings in the town are generally in a distinct minority and I never became personally acquainted with any. This said, the wearing of the *burqa* remains a contentious issue and, in general, a practice that is highly thought of but rarely enforced or observed. Young unmarried men often talk at length about the merits of *burqas* and the importance of marrying a woman who wears one. An unmarried Muslim man in his late twenties asserted that his Hindu girlfriend of two years was going to wear a *burqa* after marriage (which, to my surprise, she assented to). Likewise, Sahil, a young Vohra man, spoke highly of a woman that his mother had inquired into for his marriage because she, along with the other women in her family, regularly wore a *burqa*. He clarified that he would allow her to work but that it was good for a woman to wear a *burqa* because he didn't like the idea of other men looking at his wife. The irony in the adamant support that both these men gave to *burqas* is that none of the women in their own families wore them and it was highly doubtful that when they did eventually marry, their wives would do so. When repeating Sahil's words to his sister-in-law, she smirked and made a comment suggesting that his talk about *burqas* was simply that—talk. The discrepancy between

the ideal advocated by younger men and the reality, which is that most local women rarely veil when leaving the house, is reflective of a wider divergence between a distinctive 'Muslim' identity asserted by many Muslims in Mahemdabad and the more banal, everyday reality in which there is significant overlap in lifestyles, religious practices and accepted codes of behaviour between religious communities.

As is the case among many other communities across India, while many Muslim women are allowed to study beyond a basic education, finishing high school neither guarantees that they will be allowed to continue for a university degree nor seek paid employment outside the home. In this respect, marriage continues to be the topmost priority for young women across Muslim communities (as well as more generally). Even in communities such as the Tamil Brahman Vattimas studied by Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) in which university education and salaried employment for women is very common, such pursuits are seen as beneficial primarily in that they enhance a woman's chances in the marriage market. Educated wives, as Béteille (1991) and Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) have pointed out, are preferred because they are viewed as more 'congenial' companions for educated men and, moreover, are capable of helping with their children's education.

In Mahemdabad, as is the case almost universally, a girl who is perceived to be too highly educated may experience difficulty in finding a suitable spouse (and she, in turn, may be less willing to engage exclusively in housework and child rearing). Rubina, a 18 year old Vohra woman, was engaged to a boy who was working on his LLB (Bachelor of Laws). She had studied through 12th standard (gaining her HSC, Higher Secondary Certificate) but was not allowed to continue on to college by her in-laws although she professed that she would have liked to have done so as well as have had a job. Her situation was not unlike that of many other girls her age: assuming that the family can afford to do without a girl's help around the house, she will be allowed to study through either 10th or 12th standard after which her family will begin the search for a suitable marriage match for her (if not earlier). Many of the younger women that I spoke to who had studied up to 'HSC pass' claimed they would have liked to have continued their studies but were forbidden to do so by their parents. The very few who had been allowed to continue on to university rarely had the opportunity to be employed on a full-time basis. A few women earned a nominal

income by providing private tuition to local children in their own homes, others (usually those who were less educated) did patch-work embroidery and *mehndi* jobs or, alternately, operated modest beauty salons from their homes. In all cases, the importance of staying within one's home remained primary and, even though these same women left the house with their head uncovered or spoke fluent English, the status quo (if not the rhetoric) within the community remained firm.

For many Muslims in Mahemdabad outside the traditional elite, education in general continues to be seen as less important than learning a trade. This is particularly true among Vohra men who, despite the praise for formal education expressed in the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra handbook, continue to learn vocational trades (such as phone and watch repairing) and work in the family business(es).⁹² Although the majority of children attend school for several years, it is not uncommon for a girl to be made to quit her education when a sister gets married and she is needed for domestic work. Rabiaben, a Vohra widow whose son worked as a local rickshaw driver, asserted that it was more important for girls to receive a religious education given that, according to her, in the Muslim community women are more apt to become housewives and it is therefore important to be able to pray properly (*padvanu*) and adequately learn religious customs.⁹³

The pressure to conform to the dominant female ideal with respect to marriage and sexuality is also clear from the significant social stigma attached to divorced women. Despite the fact that Islamic law allows for both divorce and widow remarriage, divorce in particular continues to be a highly taboo subject and, as among other religious communities, there remains strong social condemnation of divorced women. It is very often the case that, despite the situation surrounding a divorce, it is the woman who is deemed responsible for the break-up of a marriage on account of her 'bad character' or that of her family. Islamic law allows for divorce and recognises three different means of dissolving a marriage. The most famous of these, which has

⁹² Generally, many of my informants believed that given the large financial and time investment required for a university degree, and the uncertain prospect of finding a job upon completion, it was considerably more practical for younger men to learn a vocational trade or contribute to the family business.

⁹³ Jeffery and Jeffery (2006) have made similar assertions about the importance ascribed to *madrasa* education for Muslim girls in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh (although in Mahemdabad there is much less concern about co-educational education than is the case in Bijnor).

been strategically brandished by the Hindu right as evidence of the oppression of Muslim women, is called *talaq* whereby the husband pronounces the word ‘*talaq*’ three times (although this needn’t be done in front of his wife). A second means is *fask* in which divorce is brought about through the mutual consent of both parties in front of a judicial or legal authority. Lastly, a woman may take the initiative of ending the marriage through *khula*⁹⁴ (Ahmad 2003: 20). Despite its legality according to Islamic law, however, divorce continues to be a target of significant stigma which is applied to both the divorced woman as well as to her natal family. Such stigma was made apparent in the way that many of my informants mistrusted local divorced women in Mahemdabad, often exaggerating the number of times that a woman had been divorced and pointing to various defects in her personality to explain the ended marriage(s). For the divorced women I knew, incredible shame surrounded their status as divorcees and many feared that it constituted a permanent stigma which would continue to condemn and haunt them. While remarriage remains a common means for divorced women to escape their taboo status, the prospect of suffering further abuse from a new set of future in-laws is a concern and many women prefer to simply live with their natal family.

The deep suspicion with which many of my local informants viewed single or divorced women, particularly those who regularly left the confines of their home, was mainly confined to younger women above the age of puberty. Older women (both widows and married), in contrast, were relatively free of such social constraints, as I describe further in the next section.

4.4. Older Muslim women

A woman’s status within the household is intimately linked with her position in the life cycle. As described by Vatuk (1980: 295-6), a woman’s life is divided into three main stages. Prior to the onset of puberty and marriage, a girl grows up amid her natal family in a relatively carefree and comfortable environment in which the demand for hard work and the restraint on mobility is comparatively little. Following marriage, a

⁹⁴ This said, for the cases which I was familiar with in Mahemdabad, such formal procedures were rarely invoked and an informal settlement was generally agreed upon by the families of the couple (this is also confirmed by Jeffery with respect to her informants in Uttar Pradesh, 2001: 109).

woman moves to the house of her husband and begins a life in which she remains under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law and, in comparison to childhood, endures a much heavier workload and a larger constraint on her ability to move and speak freely. The third stage is that in which she becomes the senior woman in the household and, with the marriage of her sons, enjoys increased freedom of movement and decision-making powers within the household, not to mention a position of power with relation to her new daughter(s)-in-law. While this depiction is generalised, it is no doubt the case that in the vast majority of Indian families, senior women in the household hold considerable sway over younger women and enjoy levels of freedom and mobility which younger married women are not allowed.

In comparison to other local Muslim communities, older Vohra women generally occupy a more prominent position with respect to both running the household as well as contributing to the family business(es). While this applies in differing degrees to families of the 14 and 68 *utaras*, there is a greater tolerance of women actively contributing to business activities, although ideally from within the confines of the home. In keeping with the Vohra dictate '*aram haram che*' ('rest is forbidden'), hard work is expected from all family members and, if there remains time after the completion of household chores and child rearing, women are generally expected and encouraged to contribute to other outstanding work. The elderly Vohra woman Jiviben who was described pejoratively by my Malek acquaintance, Samir, for continuing to run an oil press well into her old age and up until her hand was cut off is one such example. Likewise, Aminaben, a Vohra woman in her fifties, operated a milk business from her home as well as a small firewood business and also raised goats. Additionally, she had two of her sons learn watch-repairing under her brother and the family also had a small watch business in the main *bajar* as well as a general provisions shop near their home. During one of my visits to her house, Aminaben complained about her daughter-in-law who was resistant to learning about how to run the family businesses because she felt 'shame/shyness' (*sharam aveche*) in performing such tasks. In contrast to many Maleks, particularly those of a certain social and economic ilk who could afford not to have their women engage in non-domestic work, Aminaben found her daughter-in-law's attitude to be problematic and indicative that she was not willing to contribute to the same extent as other family members to the various tasks at hand. It is likely that many Maleks, on the other hand,

would have found the reaction from Aminaben's daughter-in-law as natural and, moreover, commendable. Samir spoke to me with pride about his own wife who had been educated in a prestigious convent school but who was, according to him, very happy now to stay home and mind the house and children. While I unfortunately never had the opportunity to meet Samir's wife personally to confirm this assertion, it is clear that the options available to the majority of Malek women in Mahemdabad are almost exclusively confined to tending to the house and caring for family.

The difference between how older women are perceived in Vohra and how they are perceived in other local Muslim communities is also evident in how female family members are represented in genealogical records. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Mahemdabad Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj handbook lists widows as the *pote*, or head, in families in which the eldest male has deceased, rather than the eldest son in the joint family. An illuminating contrast can be gleaned from a family genealogy produced by a local Malek man which includes only men in the lineage (wives, sisters and mothers are altogether absent from the family tree). Cases in which families have no children or only daughters are treated in the same way: the lineage for that particular branch is represented as terminated. The difference between these two examples of how the respective communities conceive of both family roles and family lineages is revealing. The listing of a widow as the head of a family, according to my experience in Mahemdabad, is unusual not only among Muslims but likewise for other religious groups and points to both the elevated status of older, generally post-menopausal women, as well as an emphasis on age and gender in assigning status within the joint family. This contrasts both with other Muslim communities as well as Hindu families with whom I was acquainted during my research: in a fairly progressive Hindu Vania family that I lived with for several months, all decision-making fell to the son once the father had become largely house-bound following a stroke. His mother, despite good mental and physical health, inevitably deferred to him for any decisions on how the household or family was run. Among the Vohra families I was acquainted with, in contrast, older women held considerable sway both with their daughters-in-law as well as with their sons.

The heightened status of older Vohra women can likewise be seen in the freedom of movement which they enjoy, in contrast to both younger Vohra women as well as

women of different ages from other communities. With the marriage of sons and the subsequent arrival of daughters-in-law, older women are largely freed from the responsibilities of child rearing and housework and often embark on activities that were neither approved of nor possible when they were younger. In several instances, older women had undertaken long journeys either by themselves or accompanied by others to visit family, attend funerals or to make pilgrimages to Sufi shrines. One older Vohra woman in her sixties had travelled alone to the city of Calcutta on several occasions to visit one of her daughters who had moved there after marriage despite a train journey of three days which involved crossing through dangerous areas such as the state of Bihar (during one such journey she had her gold bangles and chain stolen). Pilgrimages to local Sufi shrines are also popular destinations for older Vohra women who, in some cases, undertake journeys by foot which might last several days. Such journeys are rarely embarked upon by Malek women who, I was told, are not generally permitted to go to Sufi shrines regardless of their position within the family or age (rather, in my experience, sons and younger men bring them back rose petals or other blessed items from shrines upon returning home from a visit).

Such levels of mobility for older Vohra women also carry through to taking more responsibility in handling family matters, whether finding a suitable spouse for their children or providing for ailing family members. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Vohras are unique among many other Muslim groups in that both the family of a boy *as well as* that of a girl can make offers of marriage (in contrast, the custom prevalent among other Muslim communities is that only the boy's side can make a formal offer). The older woman mentioned above who regularly visits her daughter in Calcutta, 'Dadi' (paternal grandmother), showed similar levels of tenacity with regard to making sure other family members were being adequately cared for. Her sister-in-law, she told my research assistant and I one day, had developed paralysis in her left arm and her husband was refusing to provide for her despite being relatively wealthy and had recently taken up with another woman. Now in her early sixties, she ran the risk of remaining destitute and Dadi decided to take it upon herself to take charge and bring the matter to court in order to ensure that her sister-in-law would be provided for in her old age (she had no children to rely upon since both her children had died shortly after childbirth). While I never found out the outcome of the situation, this instance is telling not only in the fact that it was Dadi, rather than Dadi's husband (the

brother of the woman in difficulty), who had taken control of the situation but likewise that a woman, regardless of age, should possess the wherewithal and confidence to pursue such a matter in a court of law, a space largely associated with the male 'public sphere'.

While Dadi can be seen as particularly exceptional in the way in which she asserted herself in traditionally male spheres, the majority of other older Vohra women I knew in Mahemdabad demonstrated a similar, if not quite as resolute, command of household management, business ventures and family affairs. As highlighted by Salim, the Malek contractor mentioned in Chapter 2, who remarked on the reputation of Vohra women as being more 'forward' than even American women, there is a greater general proclivity for, as well as a tolerance of, a strong managerial role for older Vohra women in the various affairs of the family when compared to their counterparts in other local groups.

The independence and mobility of older Vohra women in contrast to other communities can be potentially explained by the group's traditional profession as merchants and the community's emphasis on hard work as a central value and ethic. A similar case is reported by Saiyed (1976) of a community of Kokni Muslims in a village in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. Merchants by profession, the men in the community are absent from the village for long periods of time for their work, thereby requiring the women to take an active part in both the management of the household and family business. The conspicuous absence of *purdah* is explained by Saiyed, albeit rather unconvincingly, to be a result of the increase in confidence in the community's women which 'has prevented an excessive concern for Islamization' and '[this] failure of the fundamentalist groups has thwarted the acceptance of orthodox Islamic practices, including the acceptance of *purdah*' (Saiyed 1976: 249). While the degree of Islamisation adhered to by particular communities is significantly more complex than simply a question of the level of confidence placed in women, the tie between the involvement of women in business affairs and their increased status in the public sphere is, nonetheless, notable.

Nishimura (1998), in her study of property rights among the Hindu Nagarattar merchant caste in Tamil Nadu, argues that married Nagarattar women (*aacchis*)

occupy a higher status relative to women from other castes of the same social and economic standing. She ascribes this to the greater economic independence enjoyed by Nagarattar women, a result of the caste's custom whereby women derive their inheritance through their mothers as well as the prevalence of cross-cousin marriage which enables a woman to retain the support of her natal family even after marriage. In addition to reserving the right to inherit their mother's property, it is also very common for Nagarattar women to engage in paid employment outside the home which, in turn, further contributes to their sense of independence and autonomy. While women's paid employment has traditionally been seen as problematic by many upper castes (as well as Sanskritising lower-castes), among the Nagarattar the active participation of women in business networks as well as occupations perceived as prestigious is seen as conferring status and vital to the operation of the caste as a whole.

It is certainly the case that not all mercantile groups accord the same level of independence and mobility to women as the Kokni Muslims and the Nagarattars. Nevertheless, it is understandable that communities such as these as well as Vohras should have different ideas about the relation between female work and *ijjat* from traditional land-owning castes such as Rajputs. As suggested by Pache Huber and noted in the previous chapter, a community's understanding of honour and reputation is inevitably intimately linked with the larger ethos and pragmatic requirements associated with the group's traditional occupation, social and economic standing within society at large and religious affiliations. That Vohra women exert a level of assertiveness uncharacteristic of other Muslim women in Mahemdabad, while giving rise to external criticism about their lack of *sharam* and *ijjat*, is simply seen by members of the community as a matter of difference between themselves and other Muslims.

4.5. ‘Open secrets’: Female sexuality and *izzat*

The importance of the reputation of women to a family's honour became clear to me while sitting one day in a friend's shop discussing the case of a local Vohra man who had committed suicide the day before by drinking poison. One of the man's sons was a notorious troublemaker, as well as a friend of my informant, and spent prodigious

amounts of money on various disreputable activities. The family was poor and of low-status, living in a mixed Hindu and Vohra neighbourhood, and the father ultimately took his life, I was told, out of desperation and shame. When I asked whether the family lacked *ijjat*, my friend Sohil responded that there were no daughters in the family and so, despite their low economic and social status within the larger community and the disreputable activities and reputation of the son, they were not in danger of being perceived as lacking *ijjat*. Immodesty and sexual promiscuity on the part of the women in a family remain a strong influence on its *ijjat* within the wider community and, while men may commit adultery and engage in illicit liaisons and other activities, their reputation is generally left untarnished.

Sohil contrasted this family with that of a local Vohra wood businessman which lived nearby: this family, in comparison, lacked any trace of *ijjat* and was socially boycotted by other members of the local Vohra community. I knew the family that Sohil referred to well: during my first few months in Mahemdabad I had befriended the eldest daughter, Lubnaben, who ran a small provision shop across from the house in which I was staying. Outside the shop was a small cubicle with an STD/ISD phone which I would regularly use in the evenings to call family or friends abroad. After a few visits, I was invited to sit inside the shop and, eventually, I was asked if I would tutor the son of the younger sister in English. Unlike the family mentioned above, Lubnaben's family had five adult daughters and two sons. Three of the daughters, having married, lived in nearby cities such as Anand and Vadodara, and the two sons continued to live at home, the eldest married with three children and the younger son unmarried and commuting regularly to Ahmedabad for work.

Lubnaben, mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, was the eldest daughter, had been divorced twice and now lived with her natal family in Mahemdabad running the provision shop seven days a week. She had one daughter, Sayeda, whom she had raised alone and who had recently married and was living in Ahmedabad with her husband and young daughter. The fourth eldest daughter, Farhanaben, whose son I was asked to tutor, also lived at home: her husband had left India for Malaysia seven years prior and had not been able to return because of his status as an illegal migrant. Farhanaben spoke to her husband regularly on the phone and, during the time I spent in Mahemdabad, was constantly readying herself to travel with their son to join him in

Malaysia, a trip that was postponed again and again throughout the period of my research. Plans for him to come to India for a visit were likewise repeatedly cancelled and Farhanaben continued with her daily routine, waking at five in the morning to collect the water in buckets for the day ahead, cooking breakfast for the family and seeing her son off to school.

Lubnaben's family had no *ijjat*. Their marginal position within the Vohra community was not obvious to me at first although as time passed and I spent more time in their home I began to wonder at the fact that guests visited the family seldom, apart from a few exceptions. Even the sisters who had moved to nearby cities after marriage only came back rarely and I later found out that the second eldest sister had visited Mahemdabad on one occasion without even coming to see her natal family. Those people outside the family who spent considerable time in the family's home included 'Firojmama' ('maternal uncle Firoj'), a young male relative I was told, who would sit on the top stair connecting the upper room to the shop for hours on end while Farhanaben cooked and took care of household chores. Farhanaben's Hindu neighbour and friend, Sunita, also visited regularly and they would walk together to the beauty parlour in which they worked as apprentices during the afternoon on a regular basis.

Apart from the many clients in the shop, business partners of Farhanaben and Lubnaben's father and brother would occasionally spend time sitting in the plastic chairs held in reserve next to the counter. Among these, 'Iftanmama' ('maternal uncle Iftan') was the most regular and I often found him sitting with the sisters' father while Lubnaben went back and forth between chatting with the two men (and her mother if present) and catering to the needs of customers. Both Firoj and Iftan were referred to by the children in the family as 'mama', a designation which strategically placed the two men as 'maternal uncles' and, in so doing, cast them as belonging to the category of male kin who could not have sexual relations with the women in the family but with whom close social interaction was acceptable.

Only much later did I discover that the two men, Firojmama and Iftanmama, were not blood relatives of the family and had been carrying out long-term affairs with the two sisters, and that my own association with the family cast me as suspicious in the eyes

of other members of the local Vohra community. The affairs were spoken about freely as an 'open secret' among other Vohra women who would spend countless hours gossiping and going into great detail about the evildoings of the women in the family. Not only were the women in the family *chalu* (literally 'open', i.e. sexually promiscuous) but, moreover, they borrowed money from people without returning it. These two attributes, indebtedness and sexuality, were held up as the central markers of honour and reputation among Vohras in Mahemdabad and pejorative accusations would often combine both these elements.

The social boycott levelled against the family, and in particular against the two women, was handled by each of them very differently. Lubnaben, much like other older Vohra women, was an assertive woman and ran the shop with an iron fist, allowing neither her father nor brother to tamper too much in its affairs beyond sitting behind the counter while she took a short break for tea or a meal. Fastidious as well, she maintained an aura of piety unusual among local Mahemdabadi women; she refused, for example, to wear nail polish (since it was *haram* to have any adornments when offering *namaz*) and only left the house or shop on the rarest of occasions. According to her sister, Lubnaben refused to eat at anyone else's home ostensibly because she did not feel comfortable eating food prepared by members outside the family. On one occasion her brother and sister exploded into laughter after she ate snacks which I had brought to share with them and which, they later discovered, had been prepared by a Harijan friend of mine. While neither her sister nor brother were particularly concerned with the origin of the snacks, I was told that she did not eat food prepared by low-caste Hindus because of their 'dirtiness' and thereafter refused to eat any more. Impenetrable and fiercely independent, Lubnaben, along with her mother, presided over the rest of the family, if not in name then in deed.

Farhanaben, in contrast, welcomed new friends, albeit timidly. As mentioned earlier, she regularly went to the beauty parlour where Vohra and Hindu women met, gossiped and practised the arts of beautification such as waxing, *mehndi* and embroidery. Like Lubnaben, she was also extremely wary about leaving the house and repeatedly warned me against being seen with men because of their tendency to look at women lasciviously. Incredibly concerned about how people outside the family judged her, she condemned 'love marriages' by asserting that she had trusted her

mother to find a husband who was best suited for her and 'society', *samaj*, considered women who had 'love marriages' as lacking *ijjat*. Her husband's two sisters had both had love marriages which she condemned and, while her in-laws had maintained relations with their out-married daughters, she had not.

While less fastidious than her sister, Farhanaben regarded her faith very seriously, praying during the day when time allowed and maintaining a strict fast during the month of Ramjan (Ramadan). When not going to the beauty parlour, Farhanaben passed her spare hours reading the Qu'ran, sitting by her window which overlooked her lover's shop. Such displays of religious piety were generally construed by other Vohra women as insincere attempts at social redemption for her extra-marital transgressions and as a convenient excuse to spy on Firoj (certainly, she kept a keen eye on her lover's comings and goings, on one occasion quoting to me the exact amount of time I had spent speaking to Firoj at his shop and what I had eaten there). My own view, however, was that such moments also provided her with a rare escape from the pressures and anxieties which haunted her during the rest of the day. Nevertheless, the sexual chastity of women carries significantly more weight in establishing *ijjat* than overt displays of religious observance among Vohras in Mahemdabad and both sisters were no doubt aware of this.

4.6. Money, sex and creditworthiness: The end of the affair

The focus on the borrowing, lending and giving of money as central criteria in discourses about honour and reputation among Vohras is, as argued in previous chapters, closely related to their occupation as merchants. Money and credit act as a means through which relationships are negotiated, defined and mediated among Vohras as with many other merchant groups. As pointed out by Laidlaw (1995: 355) in his ethnography of Jain merchants in Rajasthan, credit and kinship are intimately linked:

The notion of reputation (*izzat, nam*) is a broad notion of creditworthiness which applies indistinguishably to the businessman and to his family, to the family and the family firm. Sharp practice in business, and failure in business, equally rule out a family as desirable marriage partners; and recklessness among the men, or immodesty among the women, damages the credit of the family, and hence the business standing of the family firm.

As noted by Laidlaw, one's reputation of 'creditworthiness' (to use Laidlaw's term) impinges strongly not only on a family's business alliances but likewise on potential marriage alliances given that, as Laidlaw goes on to argue, business practice depends heavily on trust, and a person's moral conduct and financial liability are regarded as interdependent. In other words, if a family is seen to have a bad reputation with regard to the conduct of its women or an ostentatious lifestyle, such qualities are assumed to also reflect on its trustworthiness in business alliances.

Among Vohras, the link between a family's reputation of creditworthiness and the reputation of its women became clear to me during the break up of the three-year relationship between Farhanaben and Firoj through the manner in which it was described by other members of the Vohra community. When Farhanaben decided to end the relationship, Firoj responded by making a public demonstration by going to her house, yelling up to her window that he wanted her to return the Rs. 8,000 that he had given her and shouting accusations about her lack of sexual chastity.

Farhanaben's brother eventually came outside and the two men began to fight until the police were summoned and the onlooking crowd of approximately 50 people which had gathered to watch the action were made to disperse.

The following day, Farhanaben recounted to me what had happened, stating that Firoj had demanded that she hand over her gold chain and passport in place of the money he accused her of owing him. She then pulled out a piece of paper from one of the shelves over the stairwell in which was listed every item she had given him, its value in rupees and any other sum which she had loaned or gifted him in the past three years of their relationship. The total, according to the list, was Rs. 9,100 proving, she claimed, that he owed *her* money rather than vice versa, as he had maintained.

The previous night's events were on the tip of all the local Vohra women's tongues that I met the following day. Unsurprisingly, the affair between Farhanaben and Firoj was uniformly interpreted as a means through which Farhanaben and her family had attempted to extort money from Firoj: one woman hypothesised that the cause of the fight had been the fact that Lubnaben had refused to pay Firoj the money for the milk that his family delivered to the shop (Firoj's family ran a small wholesale milk

business which delivered milk daily to various shops in the town). With respect to Farhanaben, the woman suggested that her husband had been away for many years and she needed male companionship.

Other women advanced less charitable theories: the family was bad and the women (including Lubnaben's married daughters) had affairs with local men as a means of obtaining money from them. They were from the 68 *utara* and their loose morals were typical of such lower-status families. Eventually, I was able to talk to Firoj's mother herself about the situation who, surprisingly, was anxious to give her family's side of the story. As with others I had spoken to, she recounted how Farhanaben's family borrowed money from others without returning it and that its women used men for their own financial benefit. She spoke of how Firoj had lent Farhanaben Rs. 15,000 from the milk business and how her family had provided milk to Farhanaben's family at wholesale price because they were from the same community (Vohra). She also recounted how her older son had had an affair with Lubnaben's married daughter during a period when he had fought with his wife who had returned temporarily to her natal family in Anand. Lubnaben's daughter, like her aunt, had taken substantial amounts of money from him.

When speaking with other local Vohras about Lubnaben and Farhanaben's family, the two sisters' extra-marital affairs were explained as a means for the women (and more generally their family) to obtain money from their lovers. In regular gossip sessions, local Vohra women would decry the 'looseness' and 'bad character' of Farhanaben and Lubnaben, and allege that the two sisters were simply using the men to extract money from them through gifts and other favours.⁹⁵ Moreover, the family's 'bad character' was likewise attributed to the fact that they often borrowed money from various places without, ostensibly, settling the debt. Interestingly, the emphasis was placed on the act of *borrowing* money rather than not paying it back, thereby suggesting that the principle fault lay in the family's economic mismanagement or financial dependence on others for subsistence.

⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, the men's behaviour was never criticised despite the fact that Iftan was married and lived with his wife in a nearby housing society. Rather, the evil of the affairs was the doing of the women alone; the men involved were mere pawns who had been taken in by the wiles of the two sisters.

The primary interpretation of the liaisons among local women was that the two women had become engaged in extra-marital affairs to ‘trap’ men and thereby render them powerless to resist demands for money from them and their family. Female sexual promiscuity and creditworthiness were thus closely linked in the way in which local Vohras explained the affairs, pointing to the importance of both these elements in notions of *ijjat* in the community. The two women were seen as corrupt in the fact that they and their family were able to extract significant amounts of *cash* (not gifts) from the men. That the family of the two sisters (in particular, the parents and the elder brother) allowed non-kin males to spend significant time in the house, thereby putting into question the respectability of the family’s women, merely confirmed their complete lack of *ijjat* and, moreover, suggested that the ultimate purpose of the relations was in fact to procure money from the men.

Despite such allegations, it is ultimately extremely unlikely that financial profit constituted the primary reason for the women’s involvement in the affairs. The family was fairly comfortable and between the profits from the provision shop along with the remittances which Farhanaben received regularly from her husband in Malaysia, both women had bank accounts in their own names providing them with a fairly secure financial cushion. More likely is the explanation that both women, one separated from her husband and the other divorced, were motivated to begin sexual and romantic relationships out of loneliness and a desire for companionship.⁹⁶

As illustrated by the example of the community’s condemnation and social boycotting of Farhanaben and Lubnaben, considerable emphasis is placed on the reputation and ‘character’ of young women and, in this respect, the importance ascribed to female seclusion is shared by Vohras with other local Muslim groups. Additionally, within the Vohra community, the added implications for a family’s reputation as creditworthy are also clear: as demonstrated in the previous chapter by the strong aversion expressed by local Vohra families to the giving and receiving of cash dowry, kinship (and extra-marital affairs which threaten it) is closely intertwined with a family’s business reputation. The efforts of both Farhanaben and Firoj to blame the

⁹⁶ Given the sensitivity of the topic, literature on extra-marital affairs in South Asia is scarce with a few exceptions (for example, Parry 2001).

other for indebtedness are suggestive of the intimate interconnectedness of kin, business reputation and *ijjat* among Vohras in Mahemdabad. In the next section, I turn to the impact of gendered stereotypes of Muslim men and consider the way in which they both play into as well as undermine Hindutva propaganda.

4.7. Gendered stereotypes and Muslim men

Pre- and extra-marital relationships between young men and women in Mahemdabad are, as is more widely the case in India, vehemently discouraged and when they do occur, are conducted on a very discrete basis. Such 'relations', as they are referred to (using the English word), are highly variable in the extent of the interaction between the couple and do not necessarily involve sexual intimacy. They could, in their most basic form, involve simply exchanging looks and smiles when passing one another in the street according to one of my informants in Mahemdabad. More advanced relationships might, on the other hand, involve speaking to one another regularly on the phone (which has become easier with the proliferation and accessibility of mobile phones), exchanging love letters or even simply giving one's beloved a 'missed call' if money is scarce. In some cases, couples might meet occasionally in one of the nearby cities, away from the prying eyes of neighbours and kin.

In stark contrast to young women, Muslim men in Mahemdabad are allowed a high degree of freedom and, while constrained by the responsibilities of work during the daytime, are free to come and go from the house at will. Many of the young men I knew spent countless hours hanging out, chatting, drinking tea and eating snacks, beginning after the evening meal, often until the early hours of the morning. Last-minute late-night trips to visit friends or a local Sufi shrine were not uncommon and, providing that adequate transportation was available in the form of a motorbike or car, few questions were asked by their family members as long as they returned in time to begin work the next day.

Similarly, sexual exploits on the part of both young unmarried men as well as older men are rarely commented upon and, as mentioned earlier, are seen as having little relation to a family's honour or reputation. Rather, as noted elsewhere (Gutmann 1996), pre- and extra-marital sexual exploits are often seen as boosting the status and

masculinity of a man. Occasionally, I was warned by female informants to stay away from particular young men who were known locally to be flirtatious and given to various illicit intrigues. Such advice, however, was given as a means to protect my own reputation rather than as a negative commentary on the characters of the men in question.

Many of my Muslim informants took pride in the sexual attractiveness and perceived 'masculinity' of Muslim men when compared to their Hindu counterparts. This became particularly clear within the realm of romantic liaisons between Muslim men and Hindu women. Given the larger political and communal atmosphere, I was surprised by the number of instances in which a Muslim man had married or had carried out romantic affairs with a Hindu or Christian woman (by contrast, liaisons between Hindu men and Muslim women were extremely rare).

Interracial and interethnic liaisons more generally are a common focus for social condemnation and regulation in societies in which there are pronounced economic and social disparities between different racial and ethnic groups. In particular, sexual and marital relationships between a man from a marginalised ethnicity and a woman from the dominant ethnic community are often viewed as particularly threatening to the status quo. As Stoler (1997) has written with regard to French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies in the early twentieth century, gender-specific sanctions and prohibitions on sexual and marital relations between members of the 'colonised' and the 'coloniser' were integral aspects of larger colonial practices of governance and racial differentiation. Sexual relations between these two groups, in particular between European women and colonised men, were particularly threatening to the maintenance of clear barriers between the subjugated and subjugators. Not only did the progeny of such unions blur the boundaries between these two communities but, on a more symbolic level, such interracial sexual and intimate relations posed a challenge to the moral and cultural superiority of white European imperial rule.

Within the context of Mahemdabad, it is clear that the existence of sexual liaisons between Muslim men and Hindu women is not a new phenomenon, nor one which is particular to contemporary Gujarat. What is notable, however, is the evident Hindu anxiety about such rapports and the strategic use of such tensions in the larger

Hindutva political project as well as the appropriation and positive spin given to the threatening stereotypes of Muslim male virility and sexuality by many Muslims themselves.

One of the more serious of such relationships that I encountered was that between a local man, Rafiq, and a Hindu girl from a nearby town. Rafiq, a Malek Muslim man in his mid-twenties, lived with his mother, two sisters and brother in one of the Muslim sections of the town. Like many other men I knew who had become involved with Hindu women, Rafiq met his Hindu girlfriend Sunita as a student in Ahmedabad on a postgraduate course. Based in the nearby city Nadiad, Sunita worked as a writer for a small local magazine and, at the time of my research, had begun to collaborate with Rafiq on various small publishing ventures. Rafiq and Sunita spoke on the phone at least once a day (through a special mobile phone scheme) and met up regularly in one of the nearby cities in which they were less likely to encounter acquaintances or relations who might report back to others. Rafiq had cautioned me not to speak to anyone about their relationship, suggesting that it could create problems given the current political situation in Gujarat although Sunita had visited his family on a few occasions and his mother and sister were cognisant of the relationship (this, however, was not the case with Sunita's family). In this sense, his concern that the relationship might become public knowledge was more predicated on a fear of retribution by Hindutva activists and politicians rather than members of the local Muslim community. Rafiq often expressed his desire to have a love marriage and the couple planned to get married once Rafiq became more established with his career and his elder sister had married.

As argued in the previous chapter, the preferential marriage for Muslims and the majority of Indians more generally continues to be one in which the caste, class and lifestyle for both members of the couple are similar. While Rafiq's family did not express open opposition to the match, his father at the time of my research was gravely ill and Rafiq remained the *de facto* head of the household (two elder siblings had mental disabilities and the remaining elder sister was unmarried). Given this, Rafiq has relatively less pressure than most other young men his age to conform to local social expectations in choosing a spouse. This said, other local Muslims likewise did not present open opposition to the match, which was unsurprising since one of the

prominent local Muslim leaders had also married a Hindu woman from a nearby city who later converted to Islam prior to the wedding.

On a practical level, the higher number of relations between Muslim men and Hindu women (in contrast to relations between Muslim women and Hindu men) is to be expected. Firstly, young Hindu women in Mahemdabad generally enjoy a higher level of mobility and many of them attend colleges or universities in nearby cities where they come into contact with men their own age from various classes and religious backgrounds. In this respect, the opportunities for interaction and getting to know members of the opposite sex on comparatively neutral ground are more numerous for men in general and Hindu (and Christian) women than Muslim women. Secondly, in the rare instance that a couple decides to follow through with marriage, it is possible for a Hindu woman to convert to Islam while the converse (a Muslim woman converting to Hinduism) is virtually impossible as the Muslim woman's past meat consumption would make her 'impure' in the eyes of her husband's family, particularly if from the middle or upper class.

One young Muslim woman in Mahemdabad suggested that Muslim men's greater strength and attractiveness were intrinsically linked to the fact that they eat meat in comparison to many Hindu men who do not. Meat consumption, while seen by many Hindus as implying ritual impurity was, in contrast, spoken of by many of my Muslim informants as a distinctive sign of their identity as Muslims and, more generally, as a sign of male virility and strength.⁹⁷ This is true for beef, in particular, a meat which according to one of my female Muslim informants should only be eaten by men because of its high potency (other types of meat such as fish, chicken and mutton are considered to be appropriate for consumption by both men and women). In addition to their virility, many of my informants suggested that Muslim men are better at protecting their women and children and, while Hindu men might run away at the onset of danger and abandon their families, a Muslim man could be counted on to remain behind and protect his loved ones. Muslim men, I was also told, are more concerned with treating a girlfriend well and would spend greater amounts of money

⁹⁷ The explicit connection between meat eating and virility is also made by many Rajputs who identify the consumption of meat as a central aspect of their Kshatriya ethos (Parry 1979: 89). As I argue in the following chapter, meat eating takes particular importance in designating Muslim identity given the strong social and political sanctions against the consumption of non-vegetarian food.

on her than Hindu men in the same position. In cases in which he didn't have any money at his disposal, a Muslim man would borrow it from a friend in order to demonstrate his affection. Implicitly, Hindu men are cast as uncaring and unromantic and it is thought that they would not go to the same trouble for the sake of a woman as a Muslim man.

Such characterisations, albeit from a more positive viewpoint, are eerily resonant of larger cultural stereotypes which have traditionally cast Muslim men as inherently aggressive and lustful and, conversely, Hindu men as effeminate and weak. Scholars such as Kakar (1996), Gupta (2002a, 2002b), Sarkar (2001) and Basu (1995) have argued that such discourses have played a central role in mobilising the Hindu community to commit acts of aggression and violence against the Muslim 'Other'. Such religious stereotypes have a long history in popular discourse and have been effectively used recently by Hindutva organisations as a means of galvanising disparate groups of Hindus to unite in the face of the perceived threat posed by the Muslim minority. According to Gupta (2002a, 2002b), similar stereotypes of the extra-virile and uncontrollable Muslim male were also widespread during the late colonial period in India. In particular, fears about the abduction and forcible conversion of Hindu women by Muslim men were drawn upon by groups such as the Arya Samaj as well as orthodox Hindu organisations to incite anxiety about the Muslim threat to the unity and honour of the 'Hindu community'. During the late colonial period in India, Gupta suggests that new and marked efforts were being made to forge unity among Hindus and, with the growth of communal identities, 'social and cultural boundaries were being hardened, both deliberately and inadvertently' (Gupta 2002: 219). The figure of the Hindu woman, in particular, became a highly symbolic motif whose vulnerability and victimisation at the hands of Muslim abductors functioned as grievances which the entire community could rally round.

Gendered dichotomies have likewise been extended to the nation as a whole, as noted by Butalia (74: 1995) with relation to Partition when the (male) Muslim aggressor was viewed as threatening not only the honour of Hindu women but, on a symbolic level, the honour and sanctity of the Hindu nation as a whole. This violation, according to Butalia, in turn 'reflects on the weakness and emasculation of Indian [Hindu] men, and, in the eyes of some, the Indian state' (*ibid.*).

With the rapid rise of Hindutva politics in Gujarat, it is not surprising that the threatening figure of the sexually voracious Muslim male and his exploits of Hindu women has again attained widespread resonance in striking an emotive chord with the Hindu public. Most recently in the 2002 violence in Gujarat, leaflets and politicians warned Hindus that Muslim men were intent on kidnapping Hindu women and ‘put[ting] them in harems’ (Concerned Citizens’ Tribunal: 278) as a means of galvanising the Hindu community to participate in the attacks. Moreover, in recent years a well known Bajrang Dal activist based in Gujarat has set up an NGO to, among other activities, ‘free’ Hindu girls who have supposedly been ‘abducted’ and ‘forced’ into marriage by Muslim men.⁹⁸

While scholars have largely focused on the way in which gendered stereotypes have been brandished to galvanise Hindus, few have documented the use of such religious stereotypes by Muslims themselves. In the case of my own informants, this same discourse was used as a means to explain the greater sexual attraction of Muslim men on the mundane level of everyday romantic affairs between members of the two communities. Muslim men, as well as women, thus inverted the negative characterisation and took pride in the fact that Hindu women found them sexually attractive, interpreting such liaisons as a minor triumph in the face of the dominant Hindutva political hegemony.

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how gendered norms and stereotypes unite the various Muslim communities in Mahemdabad and, despite some variation, contribute to a clear sense of ‘Muslim identity’ and shared notions of family and community honour. This said, in contrast to prevalent stereotypes which draw causal connections between Islamic doctrine and particular gendered patterns, I have argued that notions of *ijjat* are rarely inspired by what informants conceive of as ‘proper Islamic conduct’ and,

⁹⁸ Bapu Bajrangi, as he is known, has served prison time for his involvement in the massacre of Muslims in the Naroda Patiya suburb of Ahmedabad in 2002 and was found by a police inquiry to regularly kidnap Hindu women and force them to divorce their Muslim husbands and, for women who are pregnant, to have abortions.

given the relative marginalisation of Islamic reformist groups in the town, should be attributed to social rather than religious codes of conduct.

In previous chapters I have argued that Vohras share an identity distinct from other Muslim communities in Mahemdabad, one which locates them more closely to local Hindus with respect to language, and sartorial and residential patterns. As we have seen in this chapter, however, with regard to gendered norms and ideals, the importance attributed to female seclusion and the adherence to strict tenets of modesty and honour is shared uniformly by both Vohras and other local Muslim groups. While female sexuality is tightly controlled among Mahemdabad's Hindus as well as Christians, the greater levels of acceptance within these groups for women's higher education and paid employment (particularly in 'respectable' positions such as teachers, nurses and office workers) are demonstrative of different notions of social status with respect to women. In this sense, while marriage continues to be the top-most priority for middle- and upper-class Hindu and Christian women, the prestige associated with university education and professional employment has generally come to outweigh the negative consequences of such pursuits (the onus and pressure of balancing family responsibilities with extra domestic work is, however, placed squarely on the shoulders of women regardless of the added economic and social value of her qualifications to the family).

Among the majority of Muslims in Mahemdabad, the seclusion of younger (post-pubescent) women is an important aspect of a family's reputation and social esteem. While among lower-class Muslims this is not always possible, it nevertheless remains the ideal and daughters-in-law are expected to devote themselves entirely to household and child-rearing affairs. While Vohras expect daughters-in-law to contribute to the family business when time permits, they are expected to remain within the confines of the home. In contrast, the strict requirements regarding mobility for pre-menopausal women are significantly more relaxed for older women in the community who, in addition to enjoying the increased decision-making power and mobility which is common for senior women across India, wield a level of independence and freedom which sets them apart from their counterparts in other local Muslim groups.

The ethnography cited in this chapter thus both supports and problematises wider gendered stereotypes of Muslims which have gained renewed legitimacy with the rise of the Hindu Right in recent decades. While my research suggests that Muslim women experience more pressure than the majority of their Hindu and Christian counterparts to conform to *purdah*, the extent to which they do depends both on age as well as community. With specific reference to the Vohra community, given the general lack of *de facto* importance ascribed to formal education and *nokri* (professional employment), it is hardly surprising that younger women are expected to remain home and devote themselves to child rearing, household responsibilities and, when time permits, contributing to the family business.

Chapter 5: Everyday religious practice and belief in Mahemdabad

5.1. Introduction

Scattered throughout much of Mahemdabad's landscape are the tombs of Sufi saints or holy men. Of varying sizes, some consisting of only a lone rectangular tomb (*mazar*) of a deceased saint while others comprising elaborate architectural edifices (*dargah*, literally 'royal court' or 'shrine'), these sites of worship attract a diverse and eclectic range of people who come to seek guidance or help in confronting difficulties. Whether seeking help to conceive a child or rid themselves of a possessing spirit (*bhut* or *jinn*), or requesting an amulet to cure an ill family member, people from various social and economic strata of society and religious affiliations believe that there is significant power and knowledge residing in both the *mazar* of the deceased saint as well as, if present, the 'living saint' affiliated with the shrine.

With the rise of Islamic and Hindu reformist groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the impact of colonial governance policies in South Asia, everyday religious practice has become intimately intertwined with larger social and political projects. As is clear from recent history in Gujarat, the particular modalities and forms adopted in religious worship have become indicative of an individual or group's relationship with other co-religionists, members of other religious communities as well as the state. Thus, many Islamic reformist groups see the practice of 'saint worship' as denoting a rejection of a 'pure' Islamic lifestyle and use this as a means of constructing divisions among the wider Muslim community. Conversely, the very practice of Islam has come to denote, for many Hindutva activists and sympathisers, one's status as an enemy of the Indian nation and Hindu people.

Much of what has been written in recent decades on religion in South Asia has highlighted the increasing influence of both Hindu and Islamic revivalist groups and movements. With specific reference to Islam, scholars have demonstrated a continuing increase in Islamisation and a concern with adhering to 'proper' Islamic conduct among many Muslim groups in South Asia. As I describe in this chapter, the battle over what constitutes 'true' Islamic practice and belief continues to take place

both on the ground as well as on the level of scholarly and anthropological debate. Taking up Eickelman's suggestion that rather than debate how Islam is accommodated within local contexts, scholars should focus on how particular interpretations come to be considered normative in certain places (1982: 17), this chapter examines the religious practices and ideology which structure everyday life for local Muslims in Mahemdabad and the continuing popularity of 'saint worship'⁹⁹ among both Muslims and Hindus in the town and the surrounding villages. Despite a growing academic literature on the importance of Islamic reformist and revivalist movements across South Asia, the case of Mahemdabad is one in which such groups remain a marginalised presence. As I will demonstrate through the examples of the narratives of three local *pirs* (Sufi saints), great respect continues instead to be given to persons considered to have *barakat* (spiritual charisma), representing a means for 'ordinary' men to attain social mobility, material patronage and spiritual authority.

In many contemporary contexts, the practice of 'saint worship' is viewed as being in direct contravention of the Islamic tenets which prohibit *shirk* (deviation from monotheism) and *bid'a* (innovation). Moreover, on a more sociological level, it has become widely associated among many middle-class adherents to Islamic reformist movements with the ignorance and backwardness of rural and lower-class Muslims in opposition to the more enlightened and 'correct' form of Islamic worship and lifestyle.

While a distinct 'cultural' differentiation with local Hindus continues to remain an important means of structuring local notions of Muslim identity in Mahemdabad, participation in Sufi rituals and 'worship' is not seen as impinging upon or threatening a generalised sense of 'Muslimness' despite the Hindu presence in such activities. Although the two main Muslim groups in Mahemdabad, Vohras and Maleks, generally patronise different local shrines, the practice of 'saint worship' itself is accepted by both as legitimate and fulfilling an important practical and spiritual need. In contrast to Simpson (2006) who highlights how disputes over 'saint worship' and Islamic reform have become a dividing means through which local Muslim groups

⁹⁹ The term 'saint worship' refers to Sufi beliefs and practices. I have put it in quotations because, as Robinson (2003 [2000]: 48) has correctly pointed out, attendance at saints' tombs does not automatically imply that practitioners are 'worshipping' the saint but, instead, they might be engaged in a number of different practices, including simply offering *namaz* to Allah.

compete for social status, the large majority of my Mahemdabadi Muslim informants were united, rather than divided, over such questions. As such, I argue in this chapter that local understandings of the factors denoting 'Muslimness' are not focused around questions of everyday religious practice and belief.

5.2. Islamic reform and 'saint worship' from a historical perspective

Before describing the ethnographic setting for this chapter, it is important to provide a background of the larger context of South Asian Islam. While the Middle East is typically viewed as the centre of the Muslim world, the Islamic reformist movement in South Asia which developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has gained significance far beyond the confines of the Subcontinent. The Tablighi Jamaat (or 'preaching society'), founded in the 1920s to 'purify' the Meo community of Mewat in Rajasthan, has now become one of the most—if not the most—*influential Muslim societies in the world*. Since the second half of the twentieth century, Robinson (2006: 260) argues that many Islamic societies, including those in South Asia, have undergone a process of renewal (*tajdid*) which has evolved in response to increasing Western influence, industrialisation and global capitalism. Defined both in opposition to Western cultural and political hegemony while at the same time modelled as a response to it, this movement 'claimed that revelation had the right to control all human experiences and that state power must be sought to achieve this end' (*ibid.*).

The burgeoning importance of Islamic reformist movements in South Asia has been noted by numerous scholars including (but not confined to) Metcalf (1989), Sikand (2002), Robinson (2008, 2003 [2000]) and van der Veer (1982, 1994). These stand in stark contrast to more traditional sociological representations of South Asian Islam which have emphasised the heterodox and heteroprax nature of everyday worship. Such accounts focus in particular on the way in which Islamic principles and doctrine are integrated with 'indigenous' customs such as Sufi beliefs and rituals as well as other practices essentially 'Hindu' or indigenous in their origin (examples include 'saint worship', the evil eye and spirit possession). Most notably, Imtiaz Ahmad (1981:12) has argued that Islam in India exists on three, relatively 'autonomous' levels: the beliefs and practices belonging to 'formal or scriptural Islam' which have

little relation to actual religious behaviour; practices which do not necessarily have a basis in Islamic scriptural literature but which Indian Muslims view to be part of ‘formal Islam’ and which correspond more closely to actual religious behaviour (*ibid.*: 13); and, ‘pragmatic or practical religion’ (*ibid.*: 13). Implicit in this analysis is not only the classical division between ‘orthodox’ and ‘practical’ forms of religion, but furthermore a division between a more authentic form of Islam which is scripturally based and one which has become modified through its integration of indigenous (or ‘Hindu’) practices. This becomes particularly evident a few pages after Ahmad’s description of the three levels of Islam, in his historical analysis of the evolution of ‘saint worship’ (‘the institution of shrines’) in India as a means through which Islam became absorbed in the Subcontinent by adapting itself to local customs. Thus, he suggests that with regard to the practice of ‘saint worship’ in South Asia:

...what seems likely is that Indian Islam accepted the entire corpus of beliefs and practices associated with shrines and transformed the reverence for shrines within Hinduism into a typically Islamic institution by putting an Islamic content into it. (Ahmad 1981: 16)¹⁰⁰

Ahmad’s view of the evolution of Sufi shrines in South Asia, and the nature of Indian Islam more generally, has been widely criticised on several levels. On one level, Sufi shrines are not confined to South Asia but also found throughout the Middle East and many parts of Africa and therefore cannot be solely viewed as essentially ‘veiled’ Hindu institutions (Werbner and Basu 1998: 17). Likewise, his analysis implies a representation of Hinduism and Islam as historically bounded and unitary traditions. As Eaton (1993) and Khan (2004b) have suggested, the evolution of contemporary religious categories such as ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ is in fact the result of a complex and long historical process and it is only recently that the popular imagination has perceived the two as distinct, often opposing, mutually exclusive religions. Eaton (1993) has convincingly argued in his discussion of Islamic conversion in medieval rural Bengal that the notion of what he calls ‘Islam’ and ‘non-Islam’ as two bounded traditions is a distinctly modern phenomenon associated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious reformist movements (*ibid.*: 273). When ‘Islamic’ practices were introduced into Bengali communities, they were not perceived as

¹⁰⁰ A similar argument is made by Saiyed (1981) and Schwerin (1981).

representing a challenge to local norms but rather as a new technique which, if seen to be effective, could be integrated into the pre-existing cosmology (*ibid.*: 274-5).

Robinson (2003 [2000]) has likewise taken issue with Ahmad's sociological focus and his insistence that, despite the inroads made by Islamic reformist groups, the everyday practice of Indian Islam continues to defy such orthodox realisations in its inclusion of 'syncretic' practices and beliefs. To this end, by focusing on the 'ethnographic present', Ahmad ignores the ongoing process of Islamisation which has been taking place in South Asia over the past two centuries which, albeit slowly, has brought about profound changes in the way in which Indian Muslims understand and realise 'the pattern of perfection' offered by Islam and contained in the Qu'ran.

On a more general level, Ahmad's work is representative of traditional scholarly attitudes which, according to Osella and Osella (2008b: 249), have presented Sufi Islam in the Subcontinent as 'tolerant, plural and authentic' in contrast to the depiction of Islamic reformist movements and adherents to such groups as inherently 'foreign' and 'extremist'. Such a discourse, according to the Osellas, serves to contribute to a wider Hindutva rhetoric which casts Muslims as outsiders, aligned with the larger Islamic world rather than the Indian nation. The Osellas' own work (2008c) on the Mujahids of Kerala (Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen) highlights a particular Islamic reformist movement which, while maintaining strong links with the Arab world, likewise defies such facile stereotypes in its use of vernacular religious materials, focus on women's education and encouragement of women's mosque attendance, and support of the middle classes. Adherents to this movement regard religious reformism as inherently modern and contrast their own forms of religiosity with those practised by rural and lower-class 'Sunni' Muslims which are seen as backward, superstitious and un-Islamic.

In writing about contemporary South Asian Islam, it remains virtually impossible to avoid speaking about Islamic reformism without the mention of Sufi practices and beliefs or vice versa as demonstrated in many of the articles included in a recent special volume on Islamic reformism in South Asia (Osella and Osella 2008a). While groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat and Jamaat-e-Islami make their primary purpose 'purifying' Islamic practice and instilling 'correct' Islamic values, an important means

through which such efforts are enacted lies in the discouragement of 'saint worship' as *shirk* (deviation from monotheism) and *bid'a* (innovation). In my own informants' explanations of such groups, as in many academic studies on Islamic reformism, their very premise was perceived as being contingent on a resolute rejection of Sufi beliefs and practices.

While the Osellas' criticism of the celebration of Sufi Islam in much of the academic work to date is valid, it is important to point out the concomitant assumption in much of the more recent literature on the subject which, mirroring the attitudes of many Islamic reformists themselves, associates 'saint worship' with the superstition and ignorance of rural and low-class Muslims. As van der Veer (1994: 61) has pointed out, however, such stereotypes are overly facile and my own research confirms that socioeconomic factors alone can hardly explain the attendance or rejection of Sufi beliefs and practices. The family of my research assistant, a Sunni Vohra from Ahmedabad, exemplifies this fact: wealthy and cosmopolitan, her parents have been on the *haj*¹⁰¹ several times but while her father, a medical doctor, rejects *dargahs* as superstitious, her mother is a avid believer, making regular pilgrimages to Sufi shrines and practicing the various requisite rituals during such visits. My research assistant herself is highly educated as well as trained in Islamic *talim* (teachings of Islam) and, while also a medical doctor, regularly accompanies her mother on visits to local *dargahs*, subscribing to a certain degree to many of her mother's beliefs.

Following on from this, it is important to avoid false dichotomies between Islamic reformist 'orthodoxy' and Sufi 'mysticism'. While these two are often presented to be discrete schools of thought and religious practice, in fact Sufism played a major role in Islamic revival and reform in both South Asia as well as the Middle East (Weisman 2007: 115). Despite this, both South Asian Muslims as well as scholars writing on the topic, continue to work under the assumption that the two are mutually exclusive in practice as well as doctrine.

¹⁰¹ Completing a pilgrimage to Mecca (*haj*) constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. All able-bodied Muslims who can afford to do so must undertake the *haj* at least once during their lives.

5.3. Everyday religious practice and belief among Muslims in Mahemdabad

My own research presents a significant contrast to other recent work on Islam in South Asia which has highlighted the increasing importance of Islamic reformism in many Muslim communities in the Subcontinent. In comparison to scholars such as Osella and Osella (2008b) and Robinson (2008), I argue that for many Muslims, particularly those in semi-rural and rural communities, Sufi 'saint worship' continues to play a dominant role in everyday religious life and, moreover, remains a shared space to which both local Muslims and Hindus turn on a regular basis. While this does not in itself deny the significant influence which reformist groups such as the Mujahids and Tablighis have steadily gained in many parts of India (in particular, in urban areas), much of the recent literature has downplayed the extent to which 'syncretic' practices such as 'saint worship' and '*urs*' festivals remain a central tenet of everyday religious life for many South Asian Muslims.

The conflation of heightened religious piety with 'true' Muslim identity which has become widespread among many Islamic reformist groups is not in evidence as such in Mahemdabad. Rather, while religious piety is seen as commendable and praiseworthy, it does not make one a more devout Muslim. 'Muslimness', as such, is a given: one is born Muslim or, in a few rare cases, converts to Islam and becomes Muslim. One eats meat, performs *namaz* in the mosque (or, in the case of women, in the home), attends *madrasa* as a child, greets co-religionists in a particular way, etc.

As such, there is not the same level of pressure to conform to 'correct' Islamic practice as portrayed in ethnographic accounts such as Jasani (2008), Simpson (2008) and Osella and Osella (2007). Most of my informants did not perform all five daily *namaz* although most men I knew went to one of the six local mosques for the evening prayer and, on Fridays and Muslim holidays, offered *namaz* in the Jama Masjid (main mosque) located in the main *bazar*. Aside from the Tablighi mosque, mosque attendance is not dictated by community or sect (i.e., Vohras and Maleks do not pray in different mosques) and men and boys generally pray in the mosque which is closest to their home or place of work. Women are not allowed to pray in the local mosques and none of my female informants (nor myself) had ever been in one and

instead offered their *namaz* in the privacy of their homes.

During the Holy month of Ramadan (or *ramjan*), it is mainly women and some of the children who keep the fast (*roj rakeche*) from sunrise to sunset. Apart from retirees and a handful of the particularly pious, on the other hand, most men I knew did not keep the fast except for perhaps the few days leading up to 'Eid (the Muslim new year and end of the month of Ramadan) because, as I was told, they needed their energy for work. Likewise, while the bulk of children also keep the fast, it is not uncommon for some to refuse to do so and this is generally tolerated among the families I worked with. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a very small minority of women observe full *purdah*, both with regards to the wearing of *burqas* by individual women as well as the maintenance of a strict separation between male and female spaces within the home.

All Muslim children attend for varying periods the necessary training at one of the town's two *madrasas* where they learn to read and recite the Qu'ran. The religious training offered in local *madrasas* is largely confined to recitation of the Qu'ran and does not incorporate further religious education (*talim*) such as how to dress properly, offer *namaz*, etc. which remains an important component of religious education in larger cities such as Ahmedabad. Families with superior financial means have the option to pay one of the local *maulanas* (religious teachers) to come to their homes to give instruction but the bulk of children attend the *madrasa* during the morning or afternoon (depending on what period of the day they attend school). Unlike the Muslim children in Uttar Pradesh described by Jeffery and Jeffery (2005), *madrasa* education is never seen as a substitute for regular school attendance but rather both are seen as necessary to achieving a well-rounded education.

In Mahemdabad, the *haj* constitutes an important sign of religiosity as well as material wealth, and local Muslims who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, as is the case more generally among Muslims, are given special recognition through the titles of 'Haji' (for men) and 'Hajiyani' (for women). Completing the *haj* marks a heightened status in terms of notions of piety but likewise, and just as importantly, in terms of local social and economic hierarchies. Those who can afford to make the pilgrimage

remain a small minority and are overwhelmingly drawn from the town's traditional elite.

What might be construed elsewhere as a generally lax attitude towards religious observance was not seen to impinge on my informants' perception of their identity as Muslims. Unsurprisingly, in this respect, Muslims in Mahemdabad see their identity as oppositional in different respects from the majority Hindu population in the town and, in addition to the religious distinction of worshipping in the mosque versus in a temple, cited cultural differences with regard to their consumption of meat, observance of monotheism, and greater levels of cleanliness. The consumption of meat or egg dishes ('non-veg') in particular stands as a major marker of differentiation between local Muslims and Hindus. While a large majority of Hindus in western and northern India are vegetarians, Gujarat in particular, with its influential Jain and Vania communities, stands out as an area in which vegetarianism is adhered to with particular severity and, with the rise in power of the BJP and Hindutva organisations, is enforced rigidly. In the nearby city of Ahmedabad, many of the restaurants in the western part of the city serving 'non-veg' stopped including meat items on their menus after being intimidated by local RSS and Bajrang Dal groups. Butchers in Mahemdabad are unfailingly located in all-Muslim neighbourhoods and Muslims living among Hindus in the *bazar* area of the town maintain a certain amount of discretion about their own meat-eating habits in the face of Hindu neighbours (the only 'hotel', or restaurant in Mahemdabad, while Muslim-owned, does not serve non-vegetarian foods).

Moreover, Muslims in Mahemdabad consider cleanliness as particularly important and view this as another means through which they differ from local Hindus. One informant spoke with derision about how Hindus do not wash before offering prayer in the temple, in contrast to Muslims who are required to wash their bodies before entering the mosque or offering *namaz* in a *dargah*. Women, in particular, are vigilant about maintaining a strict distance from anything considered sacred while menstruating and are forbidden from praying, entering the confines of a *dargah*, fasting during Ramadan or even touching the Qu'ran while on their periods.¹⁰²

¹⁰² While such allegations against Hindus of being 'unclean' were often made by my Muslim

With regard to religious practices and notions of what constitutes 'proper Islam', Muslims living in Mahemdabad differ not only from communities such as the Koyas described by Osella and Osella (2008c) but likewise even from their own kin and friends living in nearby cities. On several occasions when I accompanied Muslim informants from Mahemdabad to visit relatives in cities such as Anand, Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, I noted that Mahemdabadis observed *purdah* and Islamic tenets such as the five daily prayers with less strictness than their urban relatives. During these visits, my Mahemdabadi informants were cognisant of different rules and behaviour and abided to them accordingly but made no attempt to import such practices upon returning back home. Rather, such manifestations of piety were associated with a more Islamised middle-class urban lifestyle which did not conform to accepted and preferred modes of sociality prevalent among the majority of Muslim Mahemdabadis.

Exceptions, obviously, exist in Mahemdabad and I occasionally spotted a woman wearing a *burqa* accompanied by a male relative on the street or a man in the train station rolling out a prayer mat to offer *namaz*. The brother of one of my close informants had become significantly more observant and scrupulous about conforming to a strict Islamic lifestyle after the town's Muslim community was attacked in the 2002 violence. His sister showed me pictures of him before this transformation had taken place: clean-shaven and wearing the standard fashionable 'pant-shirt' combination preferred by the majority of local Muslim men, he stood in stark contrast to the highly religiously observant young man that I would occasionally meet at the train station dressed in a white *kurta-pajama* with a skull cap and a now well-grown beard. While friendly, he rarely spoke or looked directly at me and his sister explained his behaviour as conforming to the Islamic principle wherein unrelated men and women should not freely associate with one another.

However, while such exceptions existed, their heightened religiosity did not imply an association with Islamic reformist groups which are generally looked upon with suspicion and unease. Of the Islamic reformist groups prevalent in Gujarat, only the

informants, in reality many of these claims are unfounded and similar restrictions and prohibitions for menstruating women are also common in Hinduism.

Tablighi Jamaat maintains a presence in the town and has a separate mosque (the 'Sakina Masjid') wherein local adherents to the movement pray and meet. Among my informants, only one older Vohra man identified himself as Tablighi and had spent three months on a missionary trip travelling around India to teach rural Muslims 'correct' Islamic practice. The other members of his family, however, were not part of the Tablighi Jamaat and regularly visited local and regional Sufi shrines.

In contrast to other recent works on Indian Muslims (Simpson 2008; Jasani 2008; Osella and Osella 2008c) which describe the unease which many Muslims feel with admitting to visiting *dargahs* and practising 'saint worship', most of my Muslim informants were more likely to forcefully deny membership in the local Tablighi Jamaat than their patronage of Sufi *dargahs* and *pirs* (saints). As was the case more generally, such 'outsider' groups were viewed with strong suspicion and my informants questioned the motives behind their recent arrival in Mahemdabad and the founding of the new Tablighi mosque (which, they claimed, had been completely funded by donations from abroad). No doubt, their unease also stemmed from the potential claims by such groups that their own levels of religiosity did not conform to 'true' or 'correct' Islam. Given the relative marginality of such groups in the town, however, such anxieties were more easily dismissed than in other areas in which Islamic reformist groups carry wider influence.

The case of Mahemdabad, in this sense, differs significantly from the situation in nearby Juhapura (a Muslim 'ghetto' located in the western part of Ahmedabad) as described by Jasani (2008). In contrast to the relative marginalisation of Islamic organisations in Mahemdabad, Jasani describes how groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat, the Jamat-e-Islamic and the Jamiaat-e-Ulema-Hind played a key role in the resettlement process in which Muslims displaced by the 2002 violence were relocated into new housing colonies constructed by these organisations. The author argues that such groups made use of the substantial influence which they wielded in the resettlement process to promote a particular form of religiosity, one which discouraged 'saint worship' and other 'superstitious' practices in lieu of a lifestyle more in line with reformist principles. While Jasani is careful not to present a simplistic cause-effect explanation for the burgeoning of Islamic reformism among many of the displaced in the violence, her analysis convincingly demonstrates the way

in which competing notions of what it means to live an ‘Islamic lifestyle’ are often heavily influenced by larger social, economic and political factors.

Unlike the displaced Muslims in Juhapura described by Jasani, for the bulk of my informants visiting a *dargah* remains an accepted part of everyday religious practice and does not constitute a challenge to their identity as ‘true’ Muslims. As I demonstrate in the next section, a genealogical or spiritual connection to a saint is considered by many a source of pride and status. *Dargahs* constitute an important place for pilgrimage and for assistance in resolving life’s many problems and, moreover, there is rarely the sense of any competition between ‘saint worship’ and offering *namaz* in the mosque (or, for women, in the home). Most Muslim households in Mahemdabad are bedecked with images of renowned Islamic holy sites such as Mecca and Medina along with pictures of the Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti *dargah* in Ajmer in nearby Rajasthan or other local favoured *dargahs* such as the Bawa¹⁰³ of Umreth.

Moreover, *dargahs* are also significant in that, unlike mosques, women as well as men regularly make visits, a fact that is surprisingly rarely pointed out in the academic literature on the subject. Although women are not allowed into the inner chamber of the *dargah* (i.e., that containing the *mazar*), they can offer *namaz* in the outer chamber facing the *mazar*. For many younger Vohra women, in particular, a visit to the *dargah* on a Thursday afternoon offers a socially sanctioned opportunity to momentarily escape from the pressures and responsibilities that occupy them at home and provides a few precious moments of time to themselves. Older Vohra women as well regularly embark on pilgrimages in the company of relatives or female friends to favourite *dargahs*, sometimes travelling for two to three days by foot to reach the shrines. In one family, three generations of women make the several-hour journey to a *dargah* near the town of Sidhpur every year in the final days of Muharram after the grandmother of the family first sought help three decades ago from the *pir* to conceive a child. Malek women, as a result of the greater emphasis in the Malek community on female seclusion, are less likely to visit shrines although men in the community

¹⁰³ *Bawa* is another term for *pir*.

remain active in *dargah* rituals and the processions of men and boys through the town every Thursday.

In the next section, I provide a detailed description of one of the most popular and lively of Mahemdabad's *dargahs*, the Mustak Ali Baba shrine, and the ways in which it draws upon, and to an extent capitalises upon, a combination of Hindu and Muslim motifs and practices. This shrine is particularly popular among local Vohras while local Maleks frequent a second shrine located on the opposite side of the town. Given that Malek women, unlike their Vohra counterparts, are not encouraged to visit shrines, as a female researcher I concentrated more heavily on the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*. While this makes my ethnography somewhat biased, I maintain that from the accounts related to me by non-Vohra informants, similar conclusions may be drawn for *pirs* and *dargahs* elsewhere.

5.4. ‘Saint worship’ in Mahemdabad: The Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*

Located a five-minute walk from the central *bajar*, the grounds of the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah* give one the impression of a world unto itself, sheltered from the heat by the over-hanging trees and removed, both physically as well as spiritually, from the hectic activity and responsibilities of everyday life. Named after the Sufi saint Mustak Ali Baba around whose tomb the shrine is built, the *dargah* constitutes one of the larger and most active Sufi shrines in Mahemdabad and attracts local visitors, travelling *fakirs*¹⁰⁴ and devotees from nearby villages and cities. The *dargah* distinguishes itself from other local shrines both in its size and elaborate décor and also in the fact that a living saint, or *pir*,¹⁰⁵ resides on its premises. Known as ‘Bapu’ by devotees to the *dargah*, the main disciple (*murid*) of Mustak Ali Baba, donning a white turban, or *hamama sharif*, and saffron or white *kameez* and *dhoti*, greets the many visitors that come from near and far, listening to their problems or requests for *mantras*¹⁰⁶ or special amulets (*tavij*). Muslim devotees of the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah* generally come from a variety of communities and economic levels, and from both

¹⁰⁴ I use *fakir* here to denote wandering Muslim holy men or ascetics but the term can also be used to refer to a Muslim caste whose traditional occupation is begging (Misra 1985 [1963]: 71).

¹⁰⁵ The term *pir* can be used to refer both to living as well as deceased saints.

¹⁰⁶ My informants generally used the term *mantra* to describe the secret and magical words which the *pir* breathes into a *tavij*. Elsewhere in South Asia, the term *dhamm* is also used.

urban and rural backgrounds. Hindus who come to the *dargah*, on the other hand, are mostly from lower-castes and classes or from the surrounding villages of Mahemdabad.

The compounds of the *dargah* include the shrine containing the *mazar*, freshly painted in green and white and surrounded by marble steps, and opposite it, the lodge (*khanaqah*) in which Bapu resides. The shrine itself comprises three rooms: an inner sanctum containing the tomb of Mustak Ali Baba (in which only men are allowed to enter), an outer room to which both male and female visitors come to offer *namaz*, and a third room to the right of the inner room which contains various objects which belonged to Mustak Ali Baba as well as decorative pictures of other famous *dargahs* in the Iraqi cities of Basra and Baghdad (associated with the Rifaiyya Sufi order to which the *dargah* belongs¹⁰⁷). In the lodge which stands opposite, Bapu lives with the two boys who act as caretakers of the shrine and occasional wandering ascetics who come and stay for varying periods.

In many respects, Bapu himself embodies the sense of ‘liminality’ often attributed to Sufi shrines. Born in Mahemdabad in 1933 as a Hindu Parmar (member of a Scheduled Caste), he was orphaned early in his life. After living in an orphanage for some time, he was adopted by the then-living *pir* Mustak Ali Baba and was raised by him as his main disciple (*murid*). During this time, Bapu converted to Islam.

Both Bapu and Mustak Ali Baba are *malangs*—unmarried holy men who do not engage in sexual relations with women. In contrast to most *pirs* and Sufis who pass along their secret knowledge through male primogeniture, the condition of celibacy which *malangs* observe requires them to employ an alternate means: instead, they adopt young boys from poor backgrounds whom they raise in the way of the *malang*. This, according to Bapu, avoids the perils of favouritism and nepotism usually encountered among other Sufi orders. Once the disciple has reached adulthood, he has the option of deciding whether to become a *malang* himself and be inducted in the order or to marry and retain only a peripheral relation to the *dargah*. The current

¹⁰⁷ The *dargah* is part of the Rifa'i Sufi order (or *tariqa*), originally founded by Ahmed ar-Rifa'i in Basra, Iraq and, much like other Sufi orders, subsequently brought to South Asia through the work of holy men and saints. The four main orders in central Gujarat are the Rifa'i, Qadiri, Chisti and Nizami *panths* ('paths').

primary caretaker of the *dargah*, Mohammad, was, like Bapu, orphaned as a young boy when his father died and his mother returned to live with her natal family in Pakistan. He was taken in to live at the *dargah* and raised by Bapu but eventually decided against following in the footsteps of the *pir* and married and settled in Mahemdabad.

The shrine over which Bapu presides is, much like himself, a hodgepodge of both Hindu and Muslim imagery and practices. As countless other scholars of Sufism and popular religion in South Asia have pointed out, Sufi *dargahs* are generally unique in the way in which the lines between Hinduism and Islam, or, at least, the way in which the two traditions are popularly conceived, become blurred and porous. This ‘composite culture’, to borrow a term coined by Assayag (2004: 44), is evident both with respect to the rituals and imagery in the *dargah* as well as to the demographic makeup of the visitors to the shrine.

Such an ‘overlapping’ of motifs and rituals has been the topic of many scholarly works on Sufism in South Asia and Sufi shrines and is likewise evident in the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*: images of Mustak Ali Baba, Bapu and other revered Sufi saints and *dargahs* are interspersed with a portrait of the Sai Baba of Shirdi, a popular saint from the neighbouring state of Maharashtra whose teachings drew upon both Hindu Vedanta as well as Sufi traditions (despite this ‘syncretic’ origin, he is nowadays identified primarily as a Hindu saint). The silver-plated door leading to the inner room which contains the *mazar* of Mustak Ali Baba is likewise decorated with an array of symbols drawing from various Islamic motifs (the crescent moon and star popularly used to represent Islam, sacred numbers such as 786, and words from the Holy Qu’ran written in Arabic) as well as the Hindu mantra ‘Om’, which, as Bapu explained, can also be read as the Arabic word for ‘Ali’ if read sideways.¹⁰⁸ Other practices including the blessing of food items such as coconuts, sweets or fruits (called *niyaz*) by the living or dead *pir* hold strong similarities to the practice of *prasad* found in the majority of Hindu temples. Likewise, the *loban* (literally ‘sandalwood’) ceremony held every day in the early evening combines devotional drum-beating and bell-ringing with the circulation of sandalwood incense throughout the grounds of the

¹⁰⁸ This has also been reported by Khan (2004: 86).

dargah. Similar to the practice of *sambrani* in many Hindu temples, devotees take turns putting their hands over the smouldering coals and then covering their eyes or touching their foreheads.

The Mustak Ali Baba *dargah* attracts devotees from Mahemdabad and the surrounding area for a variety of reasons: some come to seek solace or temporary respite from the hectic pace of everyday life, itinerant ascetics or *fakirs* stop at the shrine on a break from their travels and regular disciples come to pay their respects to the *pir*. Many devotees, however, come to the *dargah* to seek relief from a particular affliction. In her study of a transnational Sufi movement, Werbner (2002) aptly suggests that a central, if not the primary, role of *pirs* is that of spiritual and physical healers. I first witnessed Bapu's curative powers during my initial visit to the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*; two men from one of the nearby villages arrived at the shrine and approached Bapu requesting him to cure the older man of the unrelenting toothache which had clearly become a source of great frustration and pain for him. I watched confused as Bapu was handed a hammer and nail by one of the boys who lived on the *dargah* grounds, and then approached a large tree into which he proceeded to hammer the nail. With the nail firmly stuck in the tree, Bapu looked inquisitively at the young man who then asked his father as to the status of the toothache. The old man gave a look of consternation, clearly still troubled by the tooth, and Bapu proceeded to bang the nail further into the tree. This, finally, seemed to have cured the toothache and the two men, after expressing their profuse gratitude to Bapu, turned and walked out.

As I was still very much a novice in the 'services' which Bapu along with other *pirs* and *mujawars* (priests) perform for their devotees, I was unaware that central to such rituals is the *mantra* which is blown by the holy man on to the nail in order to cure the problems at hand.¹⁰⁹ During my future visits to the *dargah*, I witnessed or was told about many other such cures for a range of afflictions, ranging from helping a local

¹⁰⁹ The use of nails in healing devotees of spiritual and physical afflictions is quite common among *pirs*. During a visit to the Mira Dattar visit in the central District of Mehsana (Gujarat), several lemons were nailed to a tree. It was explained to me that the *mujawar* blows a mantra into the lemon half and then nails it to a tree as a means of getting rid of the problematic *bhut*. The use of nails in healing practices is also mentioned by Flueckiger in the ritual *utara* enacted to rid a patient of the evil eye (2006: 88) as well as by Kakar as a means of banishing *bhuts* (1991: 29). Similar practices are also common in Hindu ritual (see Hiltebeitel 1991:191 for the use of nails in Draupadi temples in South India).

farmer with problematic buffalo (who weren't producing milk) to providing a protective *tavij* to a woman seeking to give birth to a child.

Seeking cures for bodily ailments and barrenness are, however, only a couple of the reasons why people come to the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*. Bapu prides himself on the number of people who have written to or visited him from as far away as the United States, requesting him to get rid of the *bhuts* (or spirits, also referred to as *prets*) which have taken possession of them or loved ones. During one of my visits, he brought out a number of photographs of people he had 'cured' and told me the story of two sisters from Pakistan residing in the US who had become afflicted by a *bhut* which possessed their bodies whenever they drove a car. As Bapu described it to me, whenever the two sisters (Muslim Sheikhs) began driving a car, they would, all of a sudden, forget how to drive and begin pulling out their hair. If asked later about what had happened, they would respond that someone must have guided them to act in such a way but they had no recollection of it themselves. Ultimately, it was uncovered that the new house which they had built was inhabited by a *bhut*. Bapu became aware of the causation of the sister's problem and spoke with the *bhut* (through the body of one of the two sisters) who told him that he was a male *bhut* who wanted a sexual relationship with the sisters and would not allow them to marry anyone else. A number of remedies were used to temper the power of the evil spirit and eventually force him to abandon the sisters including holy water, burying one of the sisters in sand (covering her entire body except for her nostrils in order to allow her to breathe) and reciting verses from the Qu'ran. After the enactment of such rituals, Bapu conceded that it was necessary to wait for a certain amount of time ('as with a court case').

Depending on the success of the cure prescribed, visitors present Bapu with a monetary or material reward as compensation for his trouble. Bapu maintained to me that many other, less ethical healers than himself demand a payment upfront (in Mahemdabad, a cure for barrenness can run up to Rs. 3,000 from a local female healer). As Werbner (2002) has pointed out, there generally exists an unspoken policy that the *pir* or *mujawar* will never demand outright compensation for his services. Rather, devotees voluntarily offer money or other items (anything ranging from food items and cash to mobile phones and even cars) out of gratitude, respect and

recognition of the saint's power. The amount of wealth amassed by some of the more popular saints has been used by several Islamic reformist movements as a means to question the veracity and ethics of 'saint worship'. In addition to material compensation, devotees sometimes also make a promise or vow (*badha*) to undertake a periodic pilgrimage to the *dargah*, a journey which often involves walking long distances, if their problem or request is resolved. On one of the days that I visited the shrine, a family had come from the nearby city of Ahmedabad (approximately 35km from Mahemdabad) to pay their respects to Bapu. He later explained to me that the mother of the family had been seriously ill and her husband had come to the *dargah* in search of help to cure her. The woman soon after recovered and now the family makes a yearly trip to the shrine (the father and son walk the entire distance by foot while the other family members arrive via local transport). Several of my informants similarly made regular pilgrimages to *dargahs* whose *pirs* had granted them a request or had cured them of a disease or problem.

Devotees seeking spiritual or physical healing such as those whom I have described above are generally evenly split between Hindus and Muslims who, in the words of Bapu, are attracted to the *dargah* 'like butterflies to a flower'. In this respect, the religious identity of a saint is less relevant than his power to resolve a problem or cure an ailment. A similar phenomenon is described by Flueckiger (2006) in her study of a female Muslim spiritual healer in the South Indian city of Hyderabad. Flueckiger notes that the devotees who come to seek guidance and help from the spiritual healer, Amma, are comprised of a mixture of men and women from a variety of religious affiliations.¹¹⁰ She suggests that while the religious diversity of the devotees of Amma may appear paradoxical to outside scholars and students such as herself, the way in which 'religious healing works across religious boundaries is implicitly assumed and understood by patients' (*ibid.*: 9).

Several ethnographies have highlighted the fact that while many Sufi shrines attract both Hindu and Muslim devotees, members of these two groups interact with the shrines in different ways. In his study of the annual '*urs* celebration at the Rifa'i *dargah* in the southern Gujarat city of Surat, van der Veer (1982) posits that although

¹¹⁰ Kakar (1991) and Narayan (1989) have also noted a similar trend of attracting devotees from other religions not only among Muslim *pirs* but, moreover, among Hindu *sadhus*.

Hindus participate in ‘*urs*, they do so on a limited scale, ultimately ‘remain[ing] at the edge of the celebration as spectators or people possessed by spirits’ (*ibid.*: 562).

Similarly, Assayag (1995: 165) describes how at a *dargah* in rural Karnataka, while Muslim devotees walk around the shrine (‘décrivent un cercle *haj*’), Hindus, although performing a similar practice, conform more closely to the Hindu *pradakshina* (in which devotees circumambulate in a clockwise direction a shrine containing a Hindu deity). Assayag further notes that while male Muslim devotees enter the inner sanctum of the shrine to touch the saint’s tomb, Hindus remain outside and have a *darshan* (*ibid.*: 197-98).

In both the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah* as well as the space inhabited by the religious healer cited by Flueckiger, there is no confusion among the devotees that these sites of healing are distinctly Muslim and, furthermore, there is no uncertainty among devotees about their own religious affiliations. Rather, Bapu is seen and revered as a figure with heightened spiritual knowledge and power, and devotees from various religious affiliations accord him the respect and deference warranted by such a figure. Both Hindu and Muslim devotees and regular visitors to the shrine show their respect for him through such acts as massaging his legs and fetching tea or *nasto* (snacks) for the *pir* and through material donations such as mobile phones and televisions. When in physical proximity to the saint, Hindu devotees enact their reverence by touching his feet and then bringing their hands to their chest (as is usually done to show respect towards elders) while Muslims kiss his hand and then touch their eyes and foreheads to the saint’s wrist.

5.5. From beggar to saint: Rifai Baba and Abdul Baba

Claiming the status of *pir* and the exalted position which it entails has been traditionally reserved for members of the Saiyed community who, according to common belief, can trace their ancestry directly back to the Prophet Mohammad and, through this sacred genealogy, justify their position as the religious elite within the Muslim community and as the sole possessors of the sacred blessing wielded by Sufi saints. For aspiring *pirs* from more common backgrounds, however, claiming the heightened spiritual power and status accorded to Sufi saints must be summoned

through other means. In the case of Bapu, his spiritual genealogy to Mustak Ali Baba (a Saiyed), sexual asceticism and reputation as a powerful healer suffice as evidence to support his heightened status as a genuine *pir* rather than a mere charlatan.

The respect accorded to *pirs* locally is, as demonstrated above, something which must be cultivated but, if successful, can act as a powerful means of achieving social mobility for men at all levels of the social spectrum (and, arguably, particularly those from a low socioeconomic position). This is likewise demonstrated by the father of one of my informants who began as a lowly rickshaw driver and gradually reinvented himself as a powerful and respected *pir* who, upon his death, passed his spiritual legacy and knowledge on to his son. His daughter, Rashidaben, lived across from me in Mahemdabad in the upper rooms of a house owned by her in-laws (who lived on the bottom floors with the eldest son and his family). Despite her father-in-law's status as a *maulana*, both she and her husband are ardent devotees of her brother, a *pir* in his mid-thirties known as Abdul Baba, whose picture formed the 'wallpaper' on Rashidaben's husband's mobile phone. When I came to visit them, Rashidaben and her husband often showed me the DVD of the annual '*urs*' in her father's *dargah* from a previous year, avidly pointing out her brother when the camera focused on him. Their small one-room flat is bedecked with images of both her father as well as her brother in saintly positions and I would often be given strict instructions on the proper way to address Abdul Baba before being offered the phone to talk to him.

Rashidaben's father's long journey from rickshaw driver to *pir* was one which, as with Bapu, entailed both self-imposed deprivation as well as renunciation. From the Muslim Sunni Vohra community, Rifai Baba spent the first part of his life in a rather unexceptional manner: married with three daughters and a son, his early days were spent in various unglamorous pursuits such as working on and off as a rickshaw driver and unsuccessfully launching different types of small businesses. As his daughter recounted to me, his life began to change when he decided to grow a beard. While a rather unremarkable decision for most other Muslim men, he encountered strong opposition from other family members who protested that men from their community (Vohra) did not grow beards. When Rifai Baba persisted his brother attempted to cut it off and became very ill afterwards. Eventually, his family relented and, after one family member had a dream prophesising that Rifai Baba's unusual actions were

divinely inspired, gave him leave to follow the mystical instincts which had begun to dominate his life. From that point on, Rifai Baba took up the life of a *fakir*, living outside the confines of conventional society ('like a *sadhu*'¹¹¹ in the words of his daughter), wandering from place to place with little contact with his family or, for that matter, any elements of his former life. One day, he had an apparition of the long deceased *pir* of a famous *dargah* in the city of Ahmedabad¹¹²—the saint's shadow fell upon him and took over his body. From that point on, people said that he had the 'soul' of Sayed Ahmad Kabir Rifai, the eighth son of Gospak Bawa outside whose *dargah* he had originally had the apparition.

Soon Baba Rifai became widely accepted as an authentic holy man and devotees approached him in large numbers to seek solutions to the many problems afflicting them. He continued to lead a life detached from worldly conventions, apart from his family and outside the confines of society. His daughter recalls that when a devotee approached him with a problem or a wish he would fast for several months consuming only yoghurt and smoking profusely until the problem was solved or the wish fulfilled. In addition to speaking in the voice of Sayed Ahmad, the *pir* who had taken over his body, his divine connection was manifest through his ability to divine future events including his own death at the age of 42.¹¹³

Rifai Baba's spiritual legacy was inherited by his son, Abdul Baba, who presides over the annual '*urs*' celebration¹¹⁴ at the shrine in the Panch Mahals district of eastern Gujarat in which his father is buried, and he travels regularly throughout India and abroad acting as a representative of his father's shrine. While adhering to strict rules of conduct regarding dress and demeanour (he wears a woollen or knitted cap at all times and either a white- or saffron-coloured *kurta*), his lifestyle differs significantly from that of his father as I came to understand from both him and his sister. For one,

¹¹¹ Hindu ascetic.

¹¹² Piran *pir dargah* in the area of Jamalpur.

¹¹³ His daughter suggested that, much like her brother and the inheritor of Rifai Baba's spiritual legacy, her father 'knew everything that was to happen' such as the fact that after marrying she would no longer have *ghee* (clarified butter) on her *roti* (bread), meaning that she would be mistreated, or at least would be deprived of many of the luxuries that she was used to in her natal home. Likewise, she told me that her father 'knew' upon meeting her husband that she would be happy with him, despite the fact that his family came from a poorer background than herself. Both these predictions turned out to be true: although being mistreated by her in-laws, she and her husband have had a happy marriage.

¹¹⁴ The word '*urs*', meaning 'wedding', commemorates the day on which the saint dies and is joined with Allah.

he maintains a traditional family life, living with his wife, mother and two sons, and retains a close relationship with his sisters and their families. Material renunciation is observed on more of a theoretical level than a practical level: while maintaining an attitude of disinterest to the many gifts that are presented to him by devotees, he lives with his family in a spacious bungalow replete with luxuries such as an air-conditioner, multiple mobile phones and a car. When I visited him in his bungalow, his mother and sister proudly commented that each and every object in the house had been given to Abdul Baba by his devotees, thereby confirming the popularity, and thus spiritual power, of the *pir*. Significantly, Abdul Baba has ordered his household along strict Islamic tenets: in contrast to the majority of Muslim households I encountered in Mahemdabad, gender relations and separation is strictly enforced. All women coming into contact with Abdul Baba are required to cover their heads, different rooms are maintained in which men and women eat and sleep, and Abdul Baba's wife wears a *burqa* whenever leaving the house. While cultivating a distinctly Muslim lifestyle and image, Abdul Baba maintains devotees from a spectrum of religious backgrounds and many of his benefactors are, in fact, Hindu.

While living 'in the world' with regard to family and material comforts, Abdul Baba cultivates the distinct air of detachment that might be expected from a mystical Sufi. He spends several hours a day closed off in his air-conditioned room in silent meditation and is addressed by even his close kin with heightened reverence and respect (i.e., not by his birth name but by his formal title 'Abdul Baba').¹¹⁵ In many ways, Abdul Baba conforms more than Bapu and Rifai Baba to the conventional archetype of the contemporary Sufi *pir* in India. While a certain element of detachment from everyday life is observed, most *pirs* are far from being estranged from the material rewards that come with gaining a reputation among devotees as a powerful saint. Rather, material wealth attests to the fact that a *pir* has many, and moreover powerful, devotees which in turn contributes to his reputation as possessing significant spiritual blessing and knowledge.¹¹⁶ As is true for both Bapu and Rifai

¹¹⁵ For example, Abdul Baba's brother-in-law Salimbhai keeps a photograph of him as the background image on his mobile phone. Family members, particularly those living apart from Abdul Baba such as his sisters, are given an audience with him much in the same way as other devotees.

¹¹⁶ While a simple and modest lifestyle is expected from a *pir*, Werbner notes that 'worldly trappings [such as new cars, a large house, money to provide an education for his grandchildren] are regarded as embodiments of God's grace, a divine blessing which proves that [a] *pir* is endowed with respect and honour unrivalled in the land' (2003:99).

Baba, Abdul Baba draws upon his sacred knowledge and powers to help his devotees resolve quandaries ranging from finding a suitable husband, curing a disease or achieving success in employment or studies, thus fulfilling the typical duties of a popular and effective *pir*.

While conforming to a more Islamised lifestyle when compared to his father and Bapu, Abdul Baba does not eschew the patronage of Hindu devotees and continues to integrate various ‘syncretic’ elements into his persona such as a saffron-coloured *kurta* and presiding over celebrations for the annual ‘*urs*’ at his father’s *dargah*. This said, his father’s shrine is in a rural village in eastern Gujarat and many of his devotees are from rural backgrounds. While *dargahs* in larger cities such as the Shah Alam and Sarkhej *dargahs* in Ahmedabad continue to draw thousands of devotees, the popularity of Sufi shrines is particularly prevalent in rural and semi-rural parts of India. In the next section, I examine the implication of this trend and its relation to larger concepts of religious identity.

5.6. Bounded identities and ‘syncretic’ spaces

While historically the practice of both Hinduism and Islam have remained relatively fluid, it is clearly the case that in contemporary India the bounded categories of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ have become significantly more fixed and politicised. At the same time, several anthropological studies in recent years have demonstrated that, as I have described in Mahemdabad, there remain spaces in which blurred boundaries between the two are far from extinct (Khan 2004b, 1997; Mayaram 1997, 2003; Assayag 1996; Gottschalk 2000). In this respect, Sufi shrines in many parts of South Asia continue to act as sites of worship for not only Hindus and Muslims but also, in some cases, Christians, Sikhs and Jains.¹¹⁷ As is the case with the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*, it is not uncommon for shrines to integrate elements associated with both Hindu and Islamic traditions in the practices and rituals conducted within *dargahs* as well as in the architectural styles of the shrines themselves.

¹¹⁷ The Chishti *dargah* of Mu'in al-Din Chishti in Ajmer, Rajasthan is a notable example of this (Khan 2004b: 37).

Given this, how do we reconcile the rise in religious and communal identities in many parts of India with the ongoing popularity of ‘syncretic’ practices such as ‘saint worship’? While scholars such as Ahmad (1981) and Nandy (1990) have suggested the existence of a causal relation between communal harmony and the presence of ‘folk-syncretic’ religious practices such as ‘saint worship’ (and, in tandem, the polarising impact of more orthodox forms of religiosity), historical as well as ethnographic evidence has shown that such a link is tenuous at best. Both Khan (2004a) and Sikand (2004) have related separate instances in which particular *dargahs* have become the object of contestation and conflict between elements of local Hindu and Muslims communities (in the Pirana *dargah* in Gujarat and Sufi shrines in Karnataka respectively). In his exploration of communal conflict in the eighteenth century, Bayly (1998) has likewise demonstrated that even in places steeped in ‘syncretic’ culture such as the Punjab where the Sufi Chishti order was particularly influential, conflict between religious communities over the control of festivals and holy places still occurred. Moreover, despite current stereotypes prevalent among many scholars and Western audiences associating Sufism with a tolerant and peaceful form of Islam, historians such as Eaton (1978) have shown that, in fact, in medieval India ‘warrior Sufis’ accompanied the invasions in the Deccan and helped legitimise the war against Hindus.

In the case of Mahemdabad, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that the lack of a significant history of communal conflict in the town is explainable through the relative marginalisation of Islamic reformist groups and the popularity as well as social acceptance among local Muslims of ‘saint worship’. An integral purpose of Islamic reformism has ostensibly been to ‘purify’ belief and practice to conform completely to the dictates set out in the Qu’ran and other established sources of Islamic doctrine, although there remains considerable contestation between different schools of Islamic jurisprudence over what these consist of. Implicit to the majority of interpretations, however, is the purging of any ‘indigenous’ or folk customs from the repertoire of everyday life. Given the stress on adhering to a specifically ‘Muslim’ lifestyle, a concomitant emphasis on one’s identity as a Muslim over other forms of identity is likely to result.

Yet, as I will argue, the marginalisation of Islamic reformist groups in the town reveals less about the presence or absence of communalism than about how status games are played out among different Muslim groups. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, questions of 'Muslim identity' in Mahemdabad are more focused on notions of honour and comportment outside religious spheres than on questions of piety and conformance to a particular interpretation of what constitutes a 'correct' Islamic lifestyle.

That most Mahemdabadi Muslims do not see the participation of Hindus in *dargah* rituals as problematic suggests that these are not seen as forums through which their identity as Muslims is realised or, moreover, threatened. Rather, Hindu participation in such rituals is generally seen as confirmation of the heightened power of shrines: one local Muslim rickshaw driver explained that the fifteenth-century *dargah* located on the confines of Mahemdabad referred to locally as Roja Roji, in contrast to other *dargahs* in and near the town, was left unscathed in the 2002 violence because it was considered 'too powerful to touch' (*sachivali*) by the Hindutva mobs which looted and burned the Muslim homes in the adjacent village.¹¹⁸

What is clear, however, is that on a wider regional level, the practice of 'saint worship' has come to threaten political agendas premised around an oppositional binary between 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. As the Hindu nationalist movement has gained strength and popularity in Gujarat, popular notions of the difference between these two communities have become more pronounced and divergent. The attacks on *dargahs* in Gujarat, including the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah* in Mahemdabad, during the 2002 pogrom in the state indicates an increasing trend to identify *dargahs*, along with mosques, as representatives of the Muslim 'tradition', a domain distinct and in essential opposition to Hinduism (several reports indicate that in many instances makeshift Hanuman temples were erected in the place of the destroyed *dargahs* and mosques). In Mahemdabad, the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah* suffered severe damage at the hands of the mob which attacked the town in March 2002. Ironically, however, the *dargah* was partially rebuilt through the financial contributions from one of Bapu's Hindu devotees from the Maninagar area of Ahmedabad (the constituency of the

¹¹⁸ A similar observation has been made by van der Veer (1982: 562) in his study of the Rifai Sufi shrine in the southern Gujarati city of Surat.

Chief Minister Narendra Modi, the infamous figurehead of the Hindu right in Gujarat).¹¹⁹

That *dargahs* are seen as a threat to both Hindutva groups, on one hand, and Islamic reformist groups, on the other, underlies the fact that while one cannot draw simplistic conclusions about the causal correlation of ‘syncretism’ with communal harmony, the inter-religious aspect of many Sufi shrines poses an inherent threat to efforts aiming to remodel religious communities along lines which are premised on oppositional notions of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’. As I argue in the next section, the lack of a strong discourse regarding the notion of ‘correct’ Islamic practice among Mahemdabad’s Muslims is a product of how social hierarchies are locally conceived.

5.7. Religious contestation and local hierarchies

During the period of my research, the most forceful rejection of ‘saint worship’ that I came across was, surprisingly, from upper-caste Hindus who described devotees of shrines as ignorant and superstitious. Even upper-class and educated Muslims such as Aisha, a Pirzada Saiyed and a descendant of Sufi *pirs* who had come to India from Iran 400-500 years ago to spread Islam, held that while she herself did not feel the need to rely on anyone to act as an intermediary between herself and God, she did not condemn the practice on a general level but rather considered it a matter of personal choice.

In his monograph on Islamic reform in the Gujarat region of Kachchh, Simpson (2006) argues that the rejection of ‘saint worship’ among his informants acts as a means of contesting the traditional religious and social hierarchies within the broader Muslim community. The Bhadlas, traditionally low-status Muslims who now own and operate the shipyards near the town of Mandvi in Kachchh, have embraced Islamic reform and vehemently reject the ‘professional magic men’ associated with Sufi shrines and beliefs which are controlled and managed by Saiyeds. In such a way, ‘pure’ Islam is reinterpreted as detached from any ‘syncretic’ practices which might be connected with Hinduism and, instead, is entirely premised on the teachings and

¹¹⁹ Burman (2005) reports a similar story in which a Bajrang Dal (the militant youth wing of the Hindutva movement) worker in rural Gujarat worked to raise money to construct a *dargah*.

practices contained in the Qu'ran and propagated by reformers (*ibid.* : 73). The dispute between 'saint worship' and Islamic reform is thus interpreted not merely as a theological debate about the true nature of Islam but, on a more implicit level, as a product of competing social and religious hierarchies.

That everyday religious practice is often deeply implicated in larger social and political contests is not surprising, as demonstrated by the rich literature on religious conversion in South Asia (see, for example, Robinson and Clarke 2003). In particular, the tensions surrounding the conversion of Dalits to Christianity, Islam and Buddhism as a means of escaping their lowly position in the caste system, and the efforts of Hindutva organisations and activists to minimise such efforts as well as reclaim converts as 'Hindus', reflects the power struggles that continue to take place on a regular level over religious affiliation.

As suggested earlier regarding the way in which class distinctions and rural/urban contexts play into conventional stereotypes of 'saint worship', economic factors are also at stake in the degree to which Islamic orthodoxy (or 'purism') is accepted by local communities. With relation to the region of Sylhet in Bangladesh, Gardner (2001: 166) emphasises the significant role of class in dictating which forms of religious practice are deemed to be most authoritative and 'correct':

The powerless are associated with unrespectable forms of worship and are thus accorded even lower status, whilst the rich reiterate their power and status through their participation and knowledge of a system of beliefs which is of great prestige.

Gardner argues, however, that the different modes of religious worship practised by the rich and the poor cannot be reduced to a difference between adherence to religious reformist doctrines and the practice of 'saint worship'. All ends of the economic spectrum are devotees to *pirs*, although the saint cults popular among the economic elite are cast as holy men with heightened religious knowledge and piety while those worshipped by the poor are mere charlatan 'miracle-makers'. Similarly to Simpson, Gardner underscores the extent to which the particular forms of religious practice are intricately linked to larger social and economic relations to the point that while different groups might adhere to cults of *pirs*, the nature of the particular *pirs* is cast in very different terms.

The case of Mahemdabad presents a different scenario in that the 'living' *pirs* that dominate popular local shrines are not representative of social and religious hierarchies in favouring the traditional elite (as Saiyeds do). Rather, all three saints that I have described come from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Bapu began as a low-caste Hindu orphan while Rifai Baba and, to a similar albeit lesser extent, his son originated from what was until recently a lower-middle-status Muslim group and made a living as a rickshaw driver. All three premise their *barakat* on practices of renunciation along with spiritually (rather than genealogically) inherited knowledge derived through a connection to a deceased Saiyed. The genealogical connection remains important, however, in that, whether through apprenticeship as in the case of Bapu or mystical revelation as in the case of Rifai Baba, they can trace their heightened status to Saiyeds (Mustak Ali Baba and Saiyed Ahmad Kabir Rifai, respectively). The heightened spiritual power of these men was rarely contested among the bulk of my informants and, while some local healers in the town have been dismissed as charlatans, *pirs* such as Bapu and Abdul Baba are generally accepted as genuine.

While it is clear that Islamic reformist groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat have made some inroads in recent years in terms of gaining increased popularity in Mahemdabad as demonstrated by the building of the new Tablighi mosque, the dominant discourse remains one in which 'saint worship' is an accepted and valuable part of everyday religious worship and one which is practised among the vast majority of my informants. In contrast to Simpson's ethnography, local ideas about status among Muslims in Mahemdabad are not articulated through contestations over the forms of belief and practice. That the *pirs* I have described come from lower social and economic backgrounds and are therefore not representative of the traditional elite (in the same way as the Saiyeds in Simpson's study) is ultimately in keeping with the fact that those holding the reigns of local political and economic power, Vohras and Maleks, are likewise indigenous Muslims whose claims to status do not revolve around genealogical assertions of religious prestige. As argued earlier, questions surrounding 'Muslim identity' generally take a decidedly secular form in that competing forms of Muslimness are largely defined by work ethic, honour codes and the chastity and *sharam* of women.

In this respect, there is little of the ardent rejection of ‘Hindu ways’ in Mahemdabad which has been described by other scholars working on ‘saint worship’ among South Asian Muslim communities. While, particularly with regard to Vohras, my informants openly admitted that in many respects they shared similarities with the majority Hindu community, this was not seen to threaten their own identity as practising Muslims. The basic religious practices which defined them as Muslims (offering *namaz* in the mosque or in the home, attending *madrasa*, fasting during *Ramjan*) as well as the cultural distinctions detailed earlier in this chapter constitute the main ways in which Muslim identity is articulated locally.

5.8. Conclusion

It can be argued that, much in the same way in which Islamic and Hindu reformist groups base their livelihood, and thus agenda, on the construction of distinctive and opposing religious identities, many Sufi shrines likewise encourage the ‘composite culture’ that has traditionally been associated with shrines so as to maintain as large a pool of potential devotees as possible. In cases such as the Mustak Ali Baba, as well as other Sufi *pirs* such as Abdul Baba, attracting and maintaining one’s devotees remains a primary goal given that their livelihoods and reputations are closely linked to the number of devotees who come to them seeking solace or healing. Despite the efforts of Hindu and Islamic groups at hindering the practice of ‘saint worship’, many people from both religious communities continue to believe in the sacred power of *dargahs* and the possibility that *pirs* will be able to rid them of the spiritual and physical afflictions from which they suffer.

As Robinson (2003 [2000]) has argued, however, in assessing the impact of Islamisation on South Asian Muslims, it is important to tackle the question from both a historical as well as sociological angle. By suggesting that ‘saint worship’ remains an important part of religious belief and practice for many Mahemdabadi Muslims, I am not arguing for a rendition of Indian Islam along the lines of Ahmad (1981) according to which everyday religious practice is projected as a ‘cloaked’ form of Hindu ritual and practice. Rather, I suggest that local factors contribute to the degree to which Muslims locate themselves in their everyday practice and beliefs with

competing definitions of ‘Muslimness’. Given the current political atmosphere in much of Gujarat, a growing emphasis on religious identity over different forms of social differentiation is something that could, and probably will, filter beyond the larger urban areas into smaller towns. The construction of the Tablighi mosque in Mahemdabad in recent years is one such indication and, while it remains largely marginal in the lives of many of my informants, it is nevertheless beginning to establish a local presence during a time in which Muslims are being increasingly forced to recognise themselves first and foremost according to religious criteria. As Simpson (2008) has recently noted, moreover, conflicting behaviour and views regarding ‘saint worship’ among Muslims is not in itself surprising and with the growing sense of communalisation in the state, acceptance of ‘syncretic’ practices such as ‘saint worship’ has become increasingly problematic for many Muslims.

At the time of my research, the majority of Muslim Mahemdabidis saw Tablighis as outsiders and associated the group with a distinct and highly urbanised lifestyle which was contrasted with the slow pace and relaxed life in Mahemdabad. In the next chapter, I describe the ideas surrounding city life versus the *shanti* (peace) of Mahemdabad—a notion shared by both local Muslims as well as Hindus—in relation to the 2002 violence and its impact on communal relations in Mahemdabad.



Plate 5 (left): Bapu (centre) sitting with the grandson of Mustak Ali Baba to his left and devotees

Plate 6 (bottom): *Mazar* in Mahemdabad with small *mandirs* on each side



Chapter 6: ‘There is peace here’: Managing Hindu-Muslim coexistence in Mahemdabad after the 2002 violence

‘We have forgotten that we are lions and have become lambs... If your aim is to make India free, we should be lions.’

Gandhi, speech given in Mahemdabad on 1 November 1920

6.1. Introduction

Four months following the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement on 1 August 1920, Mohandas Gandhi came to Mahemdabad to convince the local population to join other local towns and villages in the surrounding area of Kheda District to boycott British-sponsored schools and the newly formed Municipality. In his speech, Gandhi warned that locals could only adopt non-cooperation if they fulfilled two conditions:

The first condition is forbearance or non-violence. Even assuming that this is the virtue of the weak, so long as you do not possess the strength to wield a sword, there is no other way which can be shown you. The second condition is that there should be unity among Hindus and Muslims—among all communities in the country. You can adopt non-cooperation only if you fulfil these two conditions. (Gandhi 1984: 409)

Parshotamdas Chunilal Parikh, a wealthy Vania trader, had recently been elected as the first president of the town’s municipality and, along with the prominent and powerful leader of the Muslim community, Badumiya Malek,¹²⁰ successfully co-opted other members of the local elite to reject Gandhi’s pleas to support *swaraj* against the British. In the words of one of Parikh’s grandsons who still resides in Mahemdabad, his grandfather ‘decided to put his personal interest and interest of wealthy people of the town above the interest of Freedom of the nation’.¹²¹ Mahemdabad’s elites were neither lions or lambs; rather they placed themselves squarely on the side of the status quo so as to ensure that their own best interests would be preserved.

Mahemdabad’s elite of the time did not disobey Gandhi on either of the two conditions stipulated in his speech, although with a very different end in mind to that

¹²⁰ Malek maintained close links with the local British administrators and was awarded the title of ‘Khansaheb’ of Mehmabad Kasaba (Nagar) by the British Kheda District Collector.

¹²¹ Bipinbhai Shroff, personal communication (3 June 2009).

of joining the *swaraj* movement. Firstly, there occurred no instances of violence against the British Government as had occurred in nearby towns and cities (such as derailing trains, cutting telegraph wires and setting fire to the homes and offices of loyalists and British administrators). Secondly, recollections of my informants suggest that there was in fact ample Hindu-Muslim unity, particularly amongst the town's economic and social elite who were intent on retaining their position of power within the town and, in so doing, remaining loyal to the British.

Today, the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity in contemporary Gujarat is generally seen as an anomaly, or at best, a rare exception to the communal rule. Yet, as I have detailed in preceding chapters, caste and class continue to play a deciding role in the social organisation of the town, often trumping religious identity in the forging of formal alliances and informal everyday relations among both the elite as well as other strata of local society. As evidenced by the case of Parikh and Malek's alliance against Gandhi's nationalist movement, Hindu-Muslim solidarity has been deployed for various purposes, often in the interests of preserving the political and economic dominance of the traditional elite.

During the early days of the Indian Nationalism Movement, Mahemdabad's refusal to align itself with Gandhi's *swaraj* campaign stood in strong opposition to much of the surrounding area of Kheda District. It can be argued that again in 2002, despite the attacks on the town in 2002, Mahemdabad continues to remain aloof from larger social movements which have taken root in its vicinity and in the aftermath of the violence has not succumbed to the communalism which has become entrenched in other parts of Gujarat.

The question of changing relations between Hindus and Muslims in the town following the 2002 violence constitutes an underlying theme in this thesis. In this chapter, I examine the dominant discourse among the majority of my informants which suggested that the attacks in Mahemdabad should not be taken as representative of the relations between the two communities in the town and that, rather, they constituted the product of outside intervention and political agendas. Contrary to other academic studies on the aftermath of ethnic and communal violence which argue that such 'normative discourses' should not be taken wholly at face value (Jeffery and

Jeffery 1994; Navaro-Yashin 2003; Green 1994), I argue that the violence has not succeeded in completely reconfiguring previous social relations in Mahemdabad. Rather, it reveals the underlying caste and class divisions within the town which, in a similar way to the economic and political alliances in the early 1920s, on most counts continue to trump communal identities. As such, despite the significant impact and trauma of the 2002 attacks on the town, the violence has not been able to bring about long-lasting cooperation within the local Muslim community nor has it erased pre-existing ties between local Hindus and Muslims.

On a more general level, I will take issue with current theories regarding the relation between ethnic conflict and the presence or absence of civil society institutions (Varshney 2002) to suggest that, in the case of Mahemdabad and the 2002 violence in Gujarat more widely, ‘civic networks’ as such were not able to prevent the outbreak of attacks. Despite the many levels of interaction between the two communities, particularly between Vohras and Hindu merchants, as well as a concerted effort by members of the traditional elite in the town to protest the violence, attacks against both Muslims and Hindu Harijans were not ultimately averted. At the same time, the prevalence of the ‘normative discourse’ in everyday life in Mahemdabad regarding the violence and the ongoing strength of links between sections of the two communities demonstrates that, while suspicion and distrust between the two remain embedded under the surface, a strong increase in overt communalisation following the 2002 attacks in the town has been successfully contained and, by and large, thwarted.

6.2. Representations of communal violence

The 2002 violence and destruction which took place across Gujarat has been represented as one of the worst instances of communal conflict in South Asia since that surrounding the partition of the Indian Subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947. Certainly, it was unprecedented in many respects, particularly in the active involvement and participation of the Hindu middle classes, women and Harijans as well as in the degree to which the violence spread beyond the traditional urban centres of communal conflict into villages and towns which had not previously experienced such attacks. As such, for many the 2002 violence represented not just another instance in which the ever-present undercurrent of Hindu-Muslim animosity bubbled

to the surface but symbolised the triumph of the forces of Hindutva over India's long-standing traditions of secularism and democracy.

Although the phenomenon of communal violence is certainly not new to many parts of South Asia, it remains a topic of contested debates among scholars as well as in popular and media fora. While facile representations continue to link historic and present-day conflagrations between Hindus and Muslims as the product of primordial tensions between these two groups, a closer look at the rich and prolific literature on the topic reveals that the phenomenon of religious violence in the Subcontinent is significantly more complex. In fact, scholars have yet to reach any consensus on either the factors or causes underlying communal conflicts, or the way in which current instances of communal violence are linked to the historical development of religious identities.

While Hindutva organisations have projected communal conflicts as part of an ongoing historical struggle between the indigenous Hindu population and the 'foreign' Muslim invaders of the Subcontinent, historical studies have amply demonstrated that violence between members of these two groups cannot be interpreted as a simplistic battle between homogeneous blocs for political dominance. Many scholars have argued that so-called Hindu-Muslim violence, while often projected as conflict between the two communities at large, must be understood within the particular social, economic and political context in which it occurs.

In this vein, with relation to the communal riots in early twentieth-century Bengal, Das (1993) has argued that the meaning behind Hindu-Muslim violence differed significantly from one period to another. Thus, up until the 1930s, riots were more reflective of class antagonisms in that poor Muslims attacked wealthy Hindus (such as Marwari traders, Hindu *zamindars* [landlords] and *mahajans* [trade guilds]) in the form of unorganised lootings and desecrations. Later instances of violence, on the other hand, were more overtly communal (i.e., directed at the Hindu or Muslim community as a whole) and were the result of larger institutional politics. While both sets of violence took place between members of the larger Hindu and Muslim communities, Das rightly points out the inaccuracy of classifying both sets of attacks indiscriminately under the wider rubric of 'communal violence' given that the riots of

the 1930s were largely provoked by class tensions while later attacks were more religiously-based. Rather, scholars must pay close attention to both the wider context in which violence takes place and the particularities in the forms in which riots occur.

The characterisation of historical instances of violence between Hindus and Muslims as inherently ‘communal’ in nature has also been critiqued by a number of subaltern historians who have argued that such constructions played a key role in legitimising the British colonial state. Focusing primarily on riots in the city of Banaras in 1809, Pandey (1990) examines subsequent reports on these events written by colonial administrators and notes that, with the progression of time, such recounts increasingly project the riots as emblematic of the inherently fixed nature of the colonised population as ‘irrational’ and governed by religious passions. As such, instances of inter-religious violence such as the 1809 riots are drawn upon by British colonial writers as evidence of the fundamental opposition between the rulers and the ruled (whereby the colonial administrators stand for the ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ nature of the British Empire whose domination over Indians is legitimised by the latter’s impulsive and irrational nature). Pandey thus critiques the characterisation of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims as represented in colonial records as a timeless phenomenon and suggests, rather, that underpinning such accounts of Hindu-Muslim riots is a wider political project premised on the legitimisation of colonial power and rule. Ultimately, the current sectarian strife between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India must, according to Pandey, be seen as a result of the British policies of ‘divide and rule’ during the colonial era.

While compelling, the notion that the blame for current communalism in India can be attributed entirely to the colonial era has been critiqued on several levels, not only with respect to the fact that such a theory implicitly denies any agency to Indian subjects of the British Raj but, moreover, because it does not consider the state of Hindu-Muslim relations in pre-colonial India. Subrahmanyam (1996) has argued that a closer look at evidence from medieval India suggests that there was significant sectarian violence prior to the colonial era, not only following the advent of Islam but also between other religious orders such as the Vaishnava and Saiva sects. As such, it is overly simplistic to view current communal conflicts and identities as either solely

a result of colonial policies or, concomitantly, as a righteous battle against ‘foreign’ Muslim elements.

On a definitional level, the term ‘communal violence’ has become used in popular, media and academic discourses to subsume any number of conflicts regardless of whether in fact such instances of violence are rooted in disputes over religious ideology or practice. Brass (1997, 2003) has argued that the meaning attributed to particular instances of collective violence is later manipulated or ‘interpreted’ by individuals or groups with particular political agendas. Thus, disputes rooted in causes altogether removed from caste or religious factors but which happen to take place between members of different social groups are redefined along the lines of larger discourses on communal or caste enmities.

Moreover, as Tambiah (1996: 28-29) has pointed out, the term ‘riots’ has traditionally been deployed by both scholars as well as the social and political elite to refer to the irrational and uncontrollable group action of the lower classes and, in such contexts, has retained distinctly ‘conservative, illiberal, and authoritarian connotations’. Within the South Asian context, moreover, the term is often used in both popular and media representations to refer to unorganised outbreaks of Hindu-Muslim violence such as looting and killing in which both sides of the dispute participate equally (or, at the least, attacks and damages are suffered on both sides). A ‘pogrom’,¹²² on the other hand, suggests an organised persecution of a minority community which is aided and abetted by the state. Much in the same way that instances of communal violence can be attributed ‘meaning’ with regard to larger political agendas, the terms that are used to define the way in which the violence takes place likewise have important implications. The 2002 violence in Gujarat is a prime example: while NGOs and other ‘secular’ and left-leaning activists or commentators have described the attacks as instances of a pogrom or, in some cases, ‘genocide’¹²³ (see, for example, the report published by the group Communalism Combat [2005] entitled ‘Genocide in Gujarat’), BJP and Hindutva politicians have, on the other hand, explained them as sudden

¹²² The term originates from the anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹²³ ‘Genocide’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group’.

outbursts caused by injured Hindu pride following the deaths of the *kar sevaks* in Godhra.

Communal violence in India has traditionally been largely contained to urban areas and much of the resulting literature has reflected this tendency (to name but a few: Brass 2003; Das 1990, 2007; Hansen 1999, 2001; Kakar 1996; Robinson 2005; Sen 2007; Shani 2007; Spodek 1989, 2008; Tambiah 1997; Varshney 2002). In Gujarat alone, deaths resulting from communal violence in Ahmedabad and Vadodara account for 80 percent of such deaths in the entire state between the years of 1950 and 2005 (Varshney 2002: 7).¹²⁴ Given this, it is not surprising that an overwhelming proportion of the literature on communal violence in Gujarat has focused on these two cities, particularly Ahmedabad.

In contrast, relatively scant attention has been given to religious violence in more rural and semi-rural areas of India. Nandy et al. (1995) have pointed out that during the 1990 *Rath Yatra* led by L.K. Advani several instances of Hindu-Muslim violence took place in rural areas of Gujarat, particularly in places which the procession passed through. Moreover, following the Ramshila Pujan organised by the VHP during which sanctified bricks were collected for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, the state government reported that 180 villages and towns in Gujarat experienced Hindu-Muslim violence (*ibid.*: 108). Thus, while communal conflict has certainly taken place outside of major urban centres in Gujarat, it generally remains under-reported by both the media as well as the majority of academic studies.

Despite the occurrence of communal conflict in more rural areas, the 2002 violence across Gujarat has been marked as an anomaly from the traditional narrative of urban-based Hindu-Muslim strife. In the next section I will describe the violence which took place in Mahemdabad between March and April 2002 and, specifically, the way in which the memory of these attacks was handled and recounted through a larger discourse which held that the violence in the town represented no more than an aberration in local Hindu-Muslim relations.

¹²⁴ On a national level, during the same period, only 4 percent of deaths from communal violence took place in rural India where approximately two-thirds of the population live (Varshney 2002: 6).

6.3. Shattering peace: The 2002 violence in Mahemdabad

When I began my fieldwork in Mahemdabad, three years had passed since the attacks of 2002; however, my previous experience in Gujarat (namely, Ahmedabad) had convinced me that tension and conflict between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' in this area was the normal state of affairs and that, if not blatantly evident, they lay just below the surface of everyday life. The city of Ahmedabad, which lies just 31 km away from Mahemdabad, marked the site of the most extreme instances of violence during the 2002 pogrom (in the suburbs of Naroda Patiya and Gulmarg Society). While the attacks in Mahemdabad were not anywhere near as extreme as those in Ahmedabad and other parts of the state, they nevertheless came as a shock to locals who had held their hometown to be a refuge from the perceived havoc and communal tension of large cities.

According to all of my informants, Mahemdabad had not experienced communal violence in the recent past before that of 2002 and, while sceptics may find such claims unlikely, the only reference to communal tension in the town that I have come across in historical records dates back to 1927 when local Muslims protested against anti-Islamic literature which had been circulated by members of the Arya Samaj (Hardiman 2007: 58). Despite Mahemdabad's relatively peaceful history, however, it is clear that the 2002 violence left a considerable imprint on intercommunal relations as well as local notions about the town's immunity from what are generally considered to be urban problems. At the same time, I was constantly reassured during the period of my research by Mahemdabadiis that everyday life and social relations within the town had now returned to the way they had been prior to the attacks. My knowledge of what happened in Mahemdabad in March and April 2002 derives largely from the personal narratives recounted to me during various moments of my fieldwork, the majority of which were generally unprompted. Aside from more formalised interviews with community leaders, each individual's narrative was recounted as he or she had personally been affected by the violence. Sometimes such narratives would overlap, other times no mention would be made of attacks that had taken place in a different part of town or at a different moment.

The first attacks on Mahemdabad took place on 1 March 2002, two days following the burning of the carriages in Godhra. The initial attacks specifically targeted Muslim businesses and property and resulted in five deaths, two of which were the result of police firings, and an approximate total of Rs. 33 million in damages suffered over the course of the next two weeks by local Muslims according to the Mahemdabad Taluka Muslim Relief Committee Trust.¹²⁵ Areas of the *bazar* with a significant number of Muslim-owned businesses were targeted as well as more elite Muslim housing societies on the peripheries of the town. In addition, seven local Sufi shrines in the town were attacked along with one of the Muslim cemeteries although, interestingly, none of the town's six mosques were touched. A relief camp was set up in the main Muslim housing society to shelter the many Muslims from surrounding villages who had fled their homes after the onset of violence and which remained in place for seven months following the initial attacks.¹²⁶ A two-week curfew was called in Mahemdabad by the police and people were only allowed to leave their houses for short periods of time each day to fetch food and daily necessities.

Sahil lives with his family in one of the bungalows in the Muslim housing society known commonly as the 'Vohra Society' which was first targeted by the mobs on 1 March. Working as a driver for a number of local Hindu families, Sahil had been driving a 'party' (usually members of an extended family or sometimes a group of friends) from a local Hindu family to Mount Abu¹²⁷ when he first heard about the burning of the train carriages in Godhra. Sahil made it back to Mahemdabad in time for the first attack on Friday, 1 March. He recalled how Muslim men were told by community leaders that day to perform the Friday *namaz* in the community hall of the main Muslim housing society (the 'Vohra Society') rather than in the Jama Masjid ('main mosque') located in the *bazar* farther away from the Muslim area of the town. In addition, the *namaz* was scheduled for 1.15 p.m., half an hour earlier than usual. The change from the usual schedule proved to be fortuitous as it was around this time that a mob of several thousands approached Mahemdabad armed with *lathis*,¹²⁸

¹²⁵ The Trust was set up by the two local leaders of the Muslim community in Mahemdabad and was financed by the leaders themselves and other prominent merchants in the town.

¹²⁶ The refugee camp was funded largely, if not exclusively, by Muslim business and community leaders in Mahemdabad.

¹²⁷ Situated along the Rajasthan-Gujarat border, Mount Abu is a popular tourist resort among middle-class Gujaratis.

¹²⁸ A long cane which is often used as a weapon.

*trishuls*¹²⁹ and *dhariyas*.¹³⁰ The Vohra Society along with the area of the *bajar* inhabited primarily by Vohras seem to have been particularly targeted and in the clashes that followed, two friends of Sahil's, both young Muslim men from the Vohra Society, were killed by police fire while another older man was killed by the mob when he attempted to confront the attackers. Additionally, a fourth man's hand was cut off by members of the attacking mob when he refused to leave his house. While those in the mob were well armed, Sahil recounted that most of the Muslim men were forced to resort to makeshift weapons since they had been caught unprepared. The attackers, according to Sahil, were villagers from the surrounding area along with some local Vaghris.¹³¹

Following the initial attacks on March 1, much destruction was levied against Muslim-owned property and business: a petrol pump about 1km outside of Mahemdabad owned by one of the Muslim business leaders, an open-air cinema as well as many smaller Muslim-owned businesses on the outskirts of the town and in the *bajar* area were destroyed. In addition, several villages in the surrounding area suffered large-scale destruction and killings. Notably, in the nearby village of Godasar, 14 Muslims were murdered while attempting to flee from the attacking mobs and their corpses were found several days later in the surrounding fields. According to the Mahemdabad Taluka Muslim Relief Committee, a total of 747 homes and 170 businesses were destroyed and 23 people killed in Mahemdabad Taluka (comprising Mahemdabad town and the surrounding villages).

Prominent Muslim leaders were likewise targeted, particularly following efforts by prominent local Hindus and Muslims to organise a silent peace march in protest at the alarming violence which had by then engulfed both the town as well as a remarkable proportion of the state. Shortly before the day of the peace march, a crowd surrounded the bungalow of the leader of the Muslim Vohra community and one of the foremost political and business personalities in Mahemdabad. A former president of the Mahemdabad Nagar Pallika (town municipality) and currently serving as a councillor

¹²⁹ A trident, commonly associated with Hindu mythology and the god Shiva, which can be used as a weapon.

¹³⁰ Sharp farm instruments.

¹³¹ Vaghris are a low-caste Hindu group but the term is also used by many of my Muslim informants as a catch-all category to refer to low-caste and -class Hindus more widely.

representing the ward in which he lives, Mohammadbhai Vohra lives with his extended family in a pristine and exclusive bungalow on the outskirts of the eastern part of town. He recounted how the mob surrounded and began to throw stones at his house and how he was eventually able to force them to disperse after firing his revolver several times in the air. Both his house and the petrol station he owned on the outskirts of town suffered severe damage from the attacks. As was more generally the case, he was later offered the paltry sum of Rs. 3,700 (£45) by a government official which he refused, as he maintained, out of principle.¹³²

This second set of attacks targeted not only prominent Muslims but was likewise directed at anyone deemed as openly going against the larger Hindu nationalist agenda. A local fertiliser merchant and political activist, Nilesh (from the Hindu Vania merchant caste) is one of the more noted personalities in the town and a self-declared ‘radical humanist’ with a penchant for controversial opinions. A day prior to the scheduled march, Nilesh recounted how a group of about 500 men descended on his home in a comfortable middle-class Hindu housing society to demand that the peace march be cancelled and shouting ‘Where’s Nilesh? We want to cut him to pieces!’ while throwing stones and bricks at the house. Upon hearing the demands of the mob, Nilesh agreed to post an announcement the following day cancelling the march at which time the men dispersed. Later that night, however, the mob returned, this time armed with weapons, and surrounded the house once again, shouting insults and throwing rocks. Eventually the police were summoned and a team of National Security Guards (‘Black Commandos’) was stationed around his house and remained there for the following four days. The attacks that day succeeded in their purpose: the members of the peace committee were sufficiently intimidated and the peace march was, in fact, cancelled.

While the Muslim community in Mahemdabad no doubt suffered the worst of the violence which followed the burning of the carriages in Godhra, low-caste Hindus

¹³² The original sums offered to Muslim victims of the 2002 violence were often extremely low. Most notably, the initial sum proposed for the families of the Hindu victims of the Godhra train burnings was Rs. 200,000 while that for the families of Muslims killed in the violence which followed was half this, although this discrepancy was later retracted following allegations of discrimination by NGOs and the media. In May 2008, the Indian central government announced a further compensation of Rs. 3,200,000,000 to the victims of the post-Godhra riots (BBC, 23 May 2008).

were targeted in the backlash initiated by Muslims¹³³ on 20 April in which Hindu businesses and several houses were destroyed.¹³⁴ In particular, houses of low-caste Hindus living in the eastern Muslim-dominated part of the town suffered significant damage. In the Daudpura slum inhabited by a mixture of Hindu Harijans and Muslims from various communities, several Harijan homes were attacked and damaged. One Harijan man living there recounted how since the attacks some Hindu families with sufficient economic means had moved out of what previously had been a mixed neighbourhood evenly split between Hindu Harijans and Muslims. While the area had certainly become more heavily populated by Muslims following the attacks in April, a number of Hindu families did eventually move back after leaving temporarily following the peak of the violence.

While the above instances are somewhat selective, they reflect not only the specific targeting of the Muslim community by the mobs which attacked the town but likewise the repercussions of these attacks on Hindus who either openly spoke out against the violence or were caught in its backlash. Moreover, it can be argued that the attacks were focused primarily on sites which were construed as fostering intercommunal links. Several of the residential areas targeted such as Khatrej Darvaja, near the main *bazar*, and the Vohra housing society are ones predominantly inhabited by Vohras, a group which, as I have argued in this thesis, maintains links with both local Hindus as well as other Muslim castes. Moreover, numerous *dargahs* in the town, such as the Mustak Ali Baba *dargah*, which cater to members of both the local Hindu and Muslim communities were likewise attacked (and some destroyed). Interestingly, the attacks targeted the home of the leader of the local Vohra community, Mohammadbhai Vohra, although not that of the local Malek leader, despite the latter's status as perhaps the most powerful and respected Muslim figure in the town.

This said, it is difficult to draw conclusive assertions about these patterns: many of the mosques in the villages surrounding Mahemdabad were, in fact, attacked and destroyed and many of Mahemdabad's *dargahs* are located on the confines of the town making them easier targets than the more centrally located mosques in the town.

¹³³ As will be discussed more at length later, the perpetrators of the attack on Hindu homes in Daudpura were identified by local Harijans as 'outsiders' rather than local Mahemdabadis.

¹³⁴ One informant postulated to me that the number of Muslim and Hindu businesses destroyed during the 2002 violence in Mahemdabad were ultimately the same in number.

Moreover, the house of the Vohra leader is likewise located on the outskirts of the town whereas the Malek leader's house is situated in the middle of the predominantly Muslim area in the eastern part of Mahemdabad. Yet, a report published by Communalism Combat (2002) has suggested that the 2002 violence, in addition to targeting Muslim lives and property, also focused on symbols of 'composite culture' such as *dargahs* and inter-religious couples on a wider and more systematic level.

Such patterns were not brought to my attention by local Mahemdabadis. While most people were more or less candid when it came to recounting the facts concerning the damage and destruction that took place, the narratives they offered were usually couched in a larger discourse that held that the violence had targeted the Muslim community as a whole and was the work of outsiders while local members of the other community had offered valuable help and assistance. Above all, the majority of my informants maintained that, despite the 2002 violence, order had now been reclaimed and 'there is peace here'.

6.4. In the aftermath of violence: 'Normative discourses' and spatial shifts

While the violence did not bring about a complete reorganisation of the local landscape, tangible remnants of the 2002 attacks still remained three years later when I began to carry out research. Walls constructed around the time of the violence between Hindu and Muslim localities remained in place and the charred remains of several of the houses deserted during the peak of the attacks had yet to be reclaimed. Some of the Muslim families who had previously lived in predominantly Hindu locales had relocated permanently to areas in which they were surrounded by other Muslim families. One young Muslim Malek woman living with her mother in the Daudpura slum stated that they had decided to move from their previous house in the main *bazar* area following the attacks to an area which was inhabited predominantly by Muslims. She admitted that their previous neighbourhood was considerably better than the area in which they now lived. Daudpura, she said, was frequented by drunkards and other disreputable characters but because she and her mother lived on their own, it was necessary for them to relocate to a majority-Muslim neighbourhood for safety reasons. Their new residence is one of the several small stand-alone houses

in the slum which were abandoned by their Hindu tenants after the retributive attacks on Harijans by Muslim crowds. Other such houses remain empty and the damages done during 2002 have been left untouched and unrepaired.

The Daudpura slum which, apart from the main *bajar* is perhaps the most mixed area in the town, has witnessed significant upheaval and is increasingly inhabited by mostly low-income Muslims of various communities. In contrast, many Vohras living in the *bajar* area did not relocate, a fact which is not surprising given that, as merchants, they have a strong need to remain close to the business centre of the town. Yet, even the Vohra families I knew whose livelihood was not immediately predicated on conducting business in the central *bajar* had likewise not shifted their homes following the 2002 violence. The family of Rashidaben (mentioned in the previous chapter) is one such case: she lives with her husband and three children on the second floor of a house in a neighbourhood surrounded predominantly by Hindus of various castes (Brahmins and Kaccha-Patels on one side and Rabaris and other lower-caste groups across from her). Her father-in-law is one of the local *maulanas* and her husband is often away from the town working in a nearby city operating a business selling various knick-knack items. Prior to the 2002 violence, her husband had owned a shop selling spare parts for agricultural vehicles in another nearby town but the business was destroyed in the attacks and he was forced to find a new source of livelihood.

Rashidaben's in-laws and husband's elder brother's family live on the first floor of the house but, due to uneasy relations with them, she remains largely confined to her own two-room flat. During the peak of the violence she and her family temporarily left for Gandhinagar to stay with her natal family and returned a couple of months later after order was re-established. She stated that her husband and she would like to move to a bungalow in a housing society in Anand and that, while she got along well with her Hindu neighbours, she did not feel safe in Mahemdabad and now kept her jewellery and gold in the safe-keeping of her mother in case violence were to again break out. While Rashidaben's desire to relocate was likely also motivated by her troubled rapport with her in-laws, her situation reflects many Vohra families living in mixed areas who, although somewhat uneasy about the threat of future attacks, have not ultimately changed their residence.

Mohammad, the Vohra caretaker of the Mustak Ali Baba shrine, marks an exception to the broader pattern. Prior to the attacks, he and his family had lived in the lodge opposite the *dargah* along with the *pir*, Bapu. After the shrine was attacked and suffered significant damage in 2002, his family moved to live in a house in a predominantly Malek neighbourhood in the eastern part of Mahemdabad which was owned by one of Bapu's devotees. This arrangement, however, was only temporary and at the time of the research Abdullah and his wife had begun construction on a new house in the Vohra housing society. As such, Mohammad's case represents only a partial exception to the rule in that his family's move from the lodge opposite the *dargah* to a separate bungalow in the town's main Muslim housing society was motivated both by fear of a recurrence of the attacks and, moreover, a desire to obtain social mobility and a more independent residential status.

As suggested by the examples above, relocating to a purely Muslim neighbourhood was rarely a clear-cut decision. While greater safety is achieved in numbers, large Muslim-dominated areas likewise remain an obvious target for communally inspired violence. Often decisions about whether to relocate were deeply entwined with more everyday concerns such as achieving social mobility or escaping from fractured relations with in-laws. Moreover, as demonstrated by Jasani (2008) with regard to the Juhapura suburb of Ahmedabad to which many of the displaced Muslims from the 2002 violence relocated, new pressures to conform to a stricter Islamic reformist lifestyle promoted by groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat and the Jamaat-e-Islami often constituted an additional factor in decisions about moving house.¹³⁵ Given the more relaxed atmosphere in much of Mahemdabad as opposed to the many large Muslim-only housing societies in nearby cities, it is not surprising that many local Muslims chose to remain living in their original homes.

For the majority of Muslims in Mahemdabad who decided to continue living in mixed neighbourhoods, there remained the sense, however, that their situation remained precarious given the ongoing communalised atmosphere in the state. As such, if

¹³⁵ My own observations during visits to informants' relatives' homes in Muslim-only housing societies on the outskirts of the city of Anand as well as in the Ahmedabad neighbourhood of Dani Limda also confirmed this.

'everyday peace' and coexistence were to be maintained, it would be largely at the behest of minority groups who would be the primary beneficiaries of it (as well as the main victims in the event it failed). On a more obvious level, shifting the blame to people who are not local can be seen as an attempt at self-protection. It is hardly surprising that when faced by a relatively unfamiliar researcher from abroad, victims of the attacks might hesitate to openly point the finger at local aggressors who had played a hand in the violence. The 'normative discourse' which both Muslims and Hindu Harijans in Mahemdabad drew upon in public spheres, however, should also be read as a means of securing their tenuous positions and maintaining the delicate balance of ethnic coexistence within an environment which held that the two communities were inherently at odds with one another.

According to both Muslim and Harijan informants, the violence was not the result of local tensions but, rather, had been perpetrated by villagers from the surrounding area and other 'outsiders' (such as low-caste Hindus) from within Mahemdabad as well as prompted by larger political manoeuvrings in Gujarat which had been in the works, so to speak, for some time. Various anecdotes were recalled to me to serve as evidence of outside involvement in the attacks. One Muslim friend, in cautioning me against undertaking a household survey, recalled how several weeks prior to the attacks men posing as census workers had made their way from house to house collecting various demographic information (which was ostensibly used later by the mobs in distinguishing Muslim homes and businesses from Hindu-owned buildings). A second informant suggested that prior to the attacks against local Muslims, Hindutva units from outside the town had distributed weapons (which were allegedly later systematically collected once the attacks had been successfully carried out). While such accounts do not deny the possibility of local participation and complicity in the attacks, my informants uniformly insisted that the violence would not have taken place without external intervention.

Many of my Muslim informants suggested that in addition to Hindutva organisers, villagers from the surrounding areas as well as lower-caste and -class Hindus living on the outskirts of the town had also participated in the attacks. In this respect, a clear differentiation was drawn between local 'known' members of the other community and 'outside' Hindus (or Muslims) who did not constitute part of the daily landscape,

or at least occupied a liminal position. Maryam, an unmarried woman in her early twenties, recounted how Muslim women and children living in her area had all been herded together while the men in the community went to stave off the attacking crowds which had descended on the predominantly Muslim area in the eastern section of the town. She pointed at the small ramshackle huts that lined the opposite side of the street from her house, mostly inhabited by low-caste Hindus. Many of them, she said, had participated in the attacks against Muslims and, according to Maryam, were seen after the violence had quelled riding new bicycles which Muslim neighbours assumed had been given to them by Hindutva groups in remuneration for their participation. They left their houses shortly after the height of the violence and did not return for several months for fear that they would be threatened or attacked by their Muslim neighbours in retribution for their role in the attacks—neither of which happened, Maryam then asserted to me in a haughty tone. Nevertheless, when queried on current relations between Muslims such as herself and their Hindu neighbours, she did not hesitate to quip back with the standard response that ‘peace’ once again was the order of everyday interaction.

In contrast were the many recollections of assistance from neighbours or acquaintances from the other community, instances which were recounted to me not only by Muslims in Mahemdabad but by many of the Harijans who had suffered damages. Among the many Harijan houses destroyed during the Muslim backlash on 20 April was that of Raj and his family. Raj, a Harijan man in his twenties, lives with his extended family in a three-room house in the Daudpura slum and works as a rubbish collector for the Mahemdabad Municipality. When the roof of his house was destroyed by the Muslim mob on 20 April, he recounted that it was only through the contributions of an older Muslim woman whose ill father he had cared for a few years earlier that his family had been able to rebuild it once the violence finally subsided.

Another Harijan man in Daudpura, Suresh, recounted how the Muslim Vohra family living across from him (who, he said, were like his own family) dissuaded the Muslim mobs from attacking and destroying his house and ensured that, when he and his family temporarily relocated to another house in a Hindu area, nothing happened to their house or possessions. Suresh maintained that prior to the 2002 attacks more than 900 families had lived in the Daudpura area and were evenly split between Hindu

Harijans and Muslims but that since the onset of violence those Hindus who could afford to had moved out, giving way to Muslim families who had taken over their homes. Daudpura was a particularly easy target for the attacking mobs: not only is it inhabited by lower-caste and -class families but, moreover, it is located on the confines of the town bordering surrounding agricultural land making it readily accessible to assaults originating outside the town. During the peak of the violence, many families in Daudpura patrolled the surrounding fields at night (when the mobs were most likely to come) for signs of potential attacks with large spotlights. Suresh also echoed the words of many of my Muslim informants in saying that this had been the first ever instance of communal violence in the town and that the attacks had been planned and executed by 'outsiders'. Despite the changes since 2002 in the religious makeup of Daudpura's inhabitants, he stated that relations between Harijans and Muslims in the area remained strong and that everyday life had now returned to the way it had been previously.

Similar stories were also shared with me by Muslims in Mahemdabad. One informant described how her daughter had been in such a rush to flee her house at news of the approaching mob that she had left her baby behind; her daughter's Hindu neighbour had subsequently rescued the baby and reunited it with its mother. A local Muslim student recounted how she was hosted by her Hindu teacher in Ahmedabad during the period of the violence so that she would be able to take the final exams at her university. Such stories were often unprompted and suggested a clear distinction being made between the pernicious acts of 'outsiders' and the succour and assistance offered by local members of the other community.

In discussions about the larger political situation in Gujarat and the continuing prominence of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, seen by many as one of the key orchestrators of the 2002 violence, many local Muslims, while expressing their dismay and anger over the overtly communal policies, would reiterate the distinctiveness of Mahemdabad in its relative communal unity, or *ekta*, compared to nearby cities replete with the noise, pollution and communalism typical of large urban areas.

6.5. Theoretical approaches to ‘everyday peace’

The use of such ‘normative discourses’ is not, in and of itself, particularly remarkable and has been noted by other scholars studying the aftermath of communal and ethnic violence (Jeffery and Jeffery 1994: 555; Navaro-Yashin 2003: 109). As Jeffery and Jeffery have argued in relation to the communal violence that took place in the town of Bijnor in rural Uttar Pradesh in 1990 (a town which, like Mahemdabad, had also been hailed as a haven of communal harmony):

...to blame outsiders; or to pass the riots off as momentary madness, are clearly too conveniently aimed at removing responsibility from the shoulders of all locals and encouraging a return to ‘normal’ life which does not look too closely at local causes. (1994: 555)

That Mahemdabad is a haven of religious harmony and unity is simply not the case nor is it a fact that the 2002 attacks and destruction in the town have been thoroughly erased from the collective memory. This said, while the violence has certainly left a tangible imprint, it did not succeed in entirely reconfiguring previously existent social relations. As demonstrated in previous chapters, political rivalries within the Muslim community along with the continued salience of caste- and class-based loyalties have ensured that, apart from an understandable amount of inter-religious suspicion and mistrust, communal identity has not, in the long run, triumphed over other forms of collective identification. Accordingly, I argue against notions that ‘normative discourses’ should be seen merely as a form of pretence or ideology on the part of victims of violence. Rather, efforts at sustaining an appearance of coexistence must be seen as both a practical necessity on the part of local Muslims as well as a concerted attempt to preserve an idealised image of the town as immune from the pollution, crowds and communalism which locals inherently associate with nearby cities. While distinct shifts have taken place since the time of the initial attacks with regards to local communal relations, what is more pronounced are heightened levels of fear and suspicion of outsiders, particularly on the part of Muslims.

In a recent article, Yael Navaro-Yashin (2007) addresses the use of ‘normalising discourses’ in her own fieldwork in Turkish Cyprus and argues that anthropology, in its quest to focus on ‘the everyday’ and ‘the life cycle’, runs the risk of missing out on aspects of the contexts it studies which lie beyond such quotidian domains and, in so

doing, 'normalis[ing] disruptive experience' (*ibid.*: 109). Thus, rather than taking statements such as 'everyday life goes on' at face value, the anthropologist must 'work against the normalising discourses of our informants' (*ibid.*) by looking for evidence of the alienation and catastrophe that underlie the mundaneness of daily routine. It is only in so doing that it is possible to understand and adequately represent the undertones of daily life in communities which have experienced significant violence and trauma, such as Navaro-Yashin's informants in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, who live in a 'pariah' state unrecognised by the international community and still reeling from the 1974 Turkish invasion and the subsequent forced migration which many were forced to undergo.

Pursuant to Navaro-Yashin's call to look beyond the normative discourses of informants, I am led to reassess the accounts narrated to me surrounding the present state of affairs in Mahemdabad. Are the reassurances that 'everything has gone back to normal' merely evidence that my informants, akin to the Turkish Cypriots described by Navaro-Yashin, have become numb to their own position of alienation wherein they remain, accordingly, 'betwixt and between life and death'? Or, rather, do such responses suggest instead an outright denial of both the past as well as the present state of communalism in Mahemdabad?

While I would agree with Navaro-Yashin that one of the greatest strengths of anthropology lies precisely in its ability to grasp the underlying dimensions of social life which exist beyond the confines of 'consciously articulated words', it is premature to dismiss completely the normalising discourse of informants as simple pretence or 'ideology'. Rather, I suggest that in the case of Mahemdabad it is crucial that both the normalising statements made by informants along with more subdued recollections and narratives are taken into account; both are, in essence, constitutive of ways of addressing the legacy of the communal violence. For anthropologists, as well as their informants, reconciling the seeming 'ordinariness' of daily life with the memory or even the continued presence of violence is a delicate balancing act which can often lead to either an over-determination of the presence of violence and conflict in everyday life or, on the other hand, a 'normalising discourse', such as that critiqued

by Navaro-Yashin, which does not adequately address the impact of violence on individual or community life.¹³⁶

In this regard, Laura Ring's ethnography of 'everyday peace' in a multi-ethnic apartment building in Karachi (2006) is an exception to much of the existing literature on ethnic and communal violence. Ring suggests that 'despite a wealth of information on ethnic violence, we actually know very little about the micromechanics of coexistence—about the neighborhoods and colonies that achieved and maintained inter-group peace in the midst of ethnic strife' (Ring 2006: 3). Focusing specifically on the patterns of exchange that are maintained by women within the apartment building through 'neighborly assistance and affection' (*ibid.*: 88-9) as well as the routine borrowing and bringing of goods between households, she argues that such relationships between women from different ethnic backgrounds stand in contrast to, and function to collectively contain, the male anger which often threatens to disrupt the tension of everyday coexistence within the apartment building. In this respect, Ring argues that 'peace', rather than a resolution of violence and conflict, is better described as a state of tension which must be continually cultivated and managed.

Such a tension, however, carries a price and Ring suggests that this 'psychic cost' is born by the same women who work to forge the 'everyday' inter-ethnic peace within the apartment building. The threat of male anger, management of sociocultural differences and the reification of gendered identities (whereby male anger is contained by submissive women) are all costs which the women who engage in the inter-ethnic female socialities are made to bear (*ibid.*: 181).

Following on from Ring's theorisation, I argue that the 'normative discourse' prevalent in Mahemdabad after the 2002 violence can be seen as functioning to maintain the inherent tension of coexistence. To entirely dismiss such daily attempts at coexistence as mere 'pretence' or ideology as suggested by Navaro-Yashin would be to disregard the ways in which the violence of 2002 has not succeeded in completely redrawing the terms of previous social relations between different

¹³⁶ In a similar vein to Navaro-Yashin, Scheppe-Hughes (2002: 348) has argued that much of twentieth-century ethnographic literature has traditionally been guided by the premise of 'see, hear, and report no evil (and very little violence) in reporting back from the field'.

communities in Mahemdabad. At the same time, it is clear that the burden of maintaining a sense of coexistence falls more heavily on local Muslims than their Hindu counterparts given that it is ultimately their livelihoods and wellbeing which are most at stake should communal violence again overwhelm the town's newly vulnerable boundaries.

6.6. Beyond 'normative discourses' in Mahemdabad

On one level, it is important to note that substantial documentation exists to confirm that the attacks throughout Gujarat were both planned and abetted by local and state governments with the active participation of Hindutva groups such as the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. For Mahemdabad and the surrounding villages, the timeline of the violence reveals that the same day on which Muslim neighbourhoods and businesses in Mahemdabad were attacked, similar destruction and killings also took place in many other places across Gujarat. In particular, various NGO reports (Communalism Combat 2002, Concerned Citizen's Tribunal 2002) have documented that similar large-scale attacks took place in several of the surrounding villages on the same day as those levelled on Mahemdabad (1 March 2002)—facts which were confirmed by my own informants. The significant documentation gathered during and following the three months of violence in Gujarat has convincingly demonstrated that, contrary to Chief Minister Narendra Modi's assertion that the attacks represented 'the natural and justified anger of the people' (Human Rights Watch 2003: 13), considerable forethought and planning had, in fact, preceded them.¹³⁷

While the attacks in Mahemdabad were thus not solely a product of local tensions suddenly erupting, there is credible evidence which suggests that there was also local collusion. In contrast to the normative discourse described above, several of my more educated and socially established Hindu and Muslim informants, all of whom came from families of the traditional elite in the town (typically Saiyeds, Brahmins and Vanias), maintained that there had in fact been a number of locals in both the Hindu as well as Muslim mobs which attacked various areas in Mahemdabad. Nilesh, the

¹³⁷ The complicity of the state in both the planning and execution of the 2002 attacks is supported by several fact-finding missions and reports investigating the attacks (Human Rights Watch 2002, 2003; Coalition Against Genocide 2005; People's Union for Civil Liberties 2002; Concerned Citizens' Tribunal 2002).

Hindu fertiliser merchant mentioned earlier, stated that the crowd which attacked his house included many young Hindus whom he recognised as local students from one of the Mahemdabad colleges, day-wage labourers as well as local BJP leaders such as Mahemdabad MLA (member of the state legislative assembly). Paradoxically, Nilesh added that he maintained friendly relations with the BJP MLA who had helped to organise the crowd which attacked his house and he suggested that, given that they had known each other for a long time, he had no intention of breaking off this relationship.

Local collusion in the attacks was also evident in the fact that few Hindus in Mahemdabad actively spoke out against the violence. A close Hindu informant from a locally reputed Vania family suggested to me that many of the local Hindus who had not taken part in the attacks nevertheless had supported them through their inaction and silence, remaining in their houses while secretly feeling that 'Muslims were finally getting their just dues'. Support for Chief Minister Narendra Modi, moreover, remained and continues to remain strong among many Mahemdabadi Hindus. Hindus of varying socioeconomic backgrounds who I knew saw him as a strong leader who accomplished what he set out to do and would make Gujarat a developed and economically powerful state. In praising Modi to me, however, no mention was made of the 2002 violence nor of his role as one of the foremost spokespeople for the Hindutva cause and anti-Muslim sentiment. This stood in direct contrast to the experience of fellow scholars working in Ahmedabad who were routinely subjected to vitriolic diatribes about 'the Muslim threat' to both Gujarat as well as India more widely.

Moreover, some of my Muslim informants intimated that there had been local collusion in the attacks. Aisha, an older Muslim woman from a well respected Saiyed family, recounted to me how during the peak of the violence Hindus had thrown burning rags into Muslim houses in her locality and her relatives' cinema had been destroyed by the attacking crowds, leaving the family bereft of their main source of livelihood. Likewise, she recalled how she had implored a Hindu neighbour to help to arrange transport for a Muslim who had been injured in the attacks. The neighbour refused to do so, suggesting that he would suffer consequences from his own 'community'. Aisha still lived in the house which her family had owned for several

generations on a street bordering a Muslim neighbourhood and on the edge of a Hindu area in which her home was one of three Muslim houses interspersed with an equal number of houses inhabited by Hindu families. She made a point of going to the houses of her Hindu neighbours every year on Diwali (the Hindu new year) to give them her best wishes but in recent years they had not returned the gesture of good will. While the significance of such visits may not be readily obvious, the diminishing frequency with which Hindu and Muslim neighbours and friends offer felicitations and sweets to one another on such occasions was mentioned frequently to me as a larger sign of the breakdown in relations between the two communities and the greater polarisation that has developed in the last few decades. Both Hindu and Muslim informants spoke of these exchanges as representative of an ideal past in which religious affiliation played a significantly less decisive role in structuring relations between neighbours, business partners and acquaintances than it has come to do in the present.

In 2005, Aisha's Hindu neighbours had, for the first time in several years, visited her house on the day of 'Eid.¹³⁸ She related this to me with great gusto and it was clear from her tone that this seemingly small gesture had held great meaning for her. At the same time, Aisha maintained that there is still significant anti-Muslim sentiment in Mahemdabad and that there is little hope that relations between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat will improve. Rather, a repeat of 2002 is possible, particularly given the use of communal sentiments and violence as an electoral tactic by state and local politicians. Aisha's combination of pessimism about wider communal relations in Gujarat and her deliberate efforts to maintain links with neighbours and friends across the religious divide is indicative of both ongoing distrust between members of the two communities and a prevalent desire to move beyond the divisive memories of the 2002 violence. As I describe in the next section, however, despite the general atmosphere of 'communal harmony' in the town, the fear of a repeat of the 2002 attacks on Mahemdabad remains a constant undercurrent in everyday life.

¹³⁸ 'Eid (or Eid ul-Fitr) marks the end of the month of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar year and is one of the main Muslim holidays.

6.7. Fear in everyday life

As suggested to me by Aisha, there remains a distinct feeling among Muslims in Mahemdabad that the town is susceptible to further attacks if the larger political context in the state were to support violence against religious minorities. Furthermore, there was little sense among many of my Muslim informants that outside Mahemdabad or beyond the Muslim community in Gujarat there existed an awareness of or interest in the violence and trauma that the victims of the 2002 attacks endured. This point was made clear to me when I offered to lend my friend Rubina a book; written by the well known journalist Dionne Bunsha documenting these very aspects of the 2002 pogrom (Bunsha 2006), the book was received with great interest by Rubina who told me later that she had read it cover to cover in a single sitting, passed it along to her brother who, after having read it himself, had lent it to a friend of his. While I never recovered my copy of the book, what I found remarkable about this incident was that the book was only one of countless books and reports that had been written about the violence, documenting the atrocities and the complicity of local politicians and law enforcement officials. Despite this, most of my informants, even those who were highly educated and with relatives living abroad or in Bombay, had little sense that there was any such 'official' recognition of the violence during the height of the carnage.

The discovery of the book not only stirred up great interest among my Muslim informants but the many instances of violence recounted in its pages, often gruesome and explicit, also reignited fears about their own precarious position as Muslims living in a state in which the local government as well as a significant part of the population regarded them as a dangerous threat. Karisma, an educated Muslim Saiyed woman in her mid-twenties whose natal family had moved abroad several years prior, told me that since reading the book she had been reconsidering her previous plans to begin work as a clerical assistant in Ahmedabad and enrol her young son in an elementary school there because of the highly communalised character of the city and its distance from Mahemdabad.¹³⁹ Rather, she was thinking instead of finding a

¹³⁹ The train commute between Mahemdabad and Ahmedabad is approximately 45 minutes. Most offices in Ahmedabad are located in the western part of the city, another 45-minute commute by bus from the main Kalupur train station. Karisma explained to me that, in the event that violence were to

position in the smaller and closer city of Nadiad and sending her son to a new Swaminarayan English-medium school which was opening up outside Mahemdabad. The tension evident in Karisma's words reflected that prevalent among many of my Muslim informants: reassuring statements about Mahemdabad's uniqueness with respect to the communalisation in nearby cities was counterpoised with the memories of 2002 and the fear that such violence could repeat itself in the future.

Many Hindus in Mahemdabad, however, were also on the alert for potential signs of trouble. One night, as I was sitting in the room which I rented in Mahemdabad, my landlord exploded through the doors without the usual knock announcing his arrival. A Hindu Kaccha-Patel,¹⁴⁰ Vinitbhai revealed to me the latest breaking news. 'Sister! *Varanasima bomb blast thayu!*' ('There has been a bomb explosion in Varanasi').¹⁴¹ He proceeded to tell me about the twin bomb explosions that had taken place that morning in the northern Indian city of Varanasi. Not only had there been explosions, but one bomb had been detonated in *Bhagwanni mandir* ('God's temple'), ostensibly by Muslims. Clearly incensed, Vinitbhai asserted that violence was sure to break out 'everywhere' in retribution for the attacks on Hinduism and Hindu people. While this fortunately did not turn out to be the case, from that day onward neither Vinitbhai nor his wife would address or acknowledge my Muslim research assistant when she came to the house, a distinct change from the earlier welcoming and friendly demeanour they had shown to her.

As demonstrated by the intense interest in the Dionne Bunsha book shown by many of my Muslim friends, there remains little awareness of campaigns and efforts to bring the perpetrators of the 2002 attacks to justice or shed light on the massive violence which took place during that period. Given this, along with a clear sense of their precarious position as Muslims both within Mahemdabad as well as Gujarat more widely, it is hardly surprising that the dominant discourse among Muslims remains one in which the 'peace' of the everyday is continually recalled and reinforced. While

break out, she would not only be in a dangerous and communalised city but far away from her son and her home.

¹⁴⁰ Kaccha-Patels are an OBC (Other Backward Class) caste traditionally working as vegetable vendors.

¹⁴¹ The two bomb explosions took place on 7 March 2006 at the Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple and the Varanasi Cantonment Railway, killing at least 20 people and injuring many more (BBC, 7 March 2006).

local Harijans were also impacted significantly by the backlash which followed the original attacks in Mahemdabad, they were more open with me about recounting their experiences, even in cases in which they had only just met me and there had been little opportunity to build trust or familiarity. Both groups adamantly maintained that order and peace had been re-established in the town although the openness with which Harijans talked about the violence contrasted with the intense unease which many local Muslims demonstrated when speaking about the attacks (even those with whom I was well acquainted) is revealing of the current fault lines in the varying level of marginalisation of different groups in contemporary Gujarat. While Harijans living in Muslim areas certainly remain at risk, ultimately Muslims continue to be the main target of larger communal policies and sentiments, even within the seemingly safe confines of the provincial market town of Mahemdabad.

6.8. Marginalised outsiders: Maintaining caste and class divisions after the violence

As mentioned earlier, the more candid as well as pessimistic recollections of the violence and the current state of communalism in Gujarat were generally offered by members of the traditional elite whose families had in the past played a prominent role in the town's economic and political affairs. Families such as those of Aisha and Nilesh generally subscribed to a strong anti-communalist ethic and, while their influence has now somewhat waned with the increase in power of OBCs and lower-status political figures (both Muslims and Hindus), many of these informants belonging to the upper tier of the community continued to maintain longstanding ties of friendship across religious lines. The committee which was formed to organise the aborted peace march mentioned earlier was largely composed of members of this group and, in this respect, they remained the ones who expressed the most concern to me over the communalism which had engulfed the town and state more widely in 2002.

The use of the 'normative discourse' by other, lower-status, informants reflects both the unease that local people no doubt felt with speaking about the events with an outside researcher but likewise their own precarious positions as either Hindu Harijans living in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods or Muslims whose

livelihood and very existence remain uncertain and vulnerable given the larger political atmosphere in the state. Members of the old elite, on the other hand, all had family connections abroad as well as, more importantly, social links to rely upon in case they became personally targeted. Following the attack on Nilesh's home, for example, not only was an article published in the *Times of India*¹⁴² concerning the incident but four black commandos were installed around his house for several days to protect him from further attacks.

This said, the blaming of local low-caste Hindus as well as Hindus from the surrounding villages reveals the ongoing importance of caste and class in everyday life in Mahemdabad. That the Muslim backlash attacks primarily targeted Harijan homes in Daudpura makes pragmatic sense given that this area is located in a predominantly Muslim part of Mahemdabad. Moreover, while Hindu businesses in the main *bazar* were likewise attacked, the fact that the only Hindu homes which were destroyed were those belonging to the more marginalised members of the Hindu community can be seen as a means of exacting 'revenge' on a symbolic level without necessarily compromising business and political alliances with the more powerful and influential Hindu personalities in the town.

While on a pragmatic level it is easier to place the blame on marginalised groups with little social or political clout, this pattern points to larger fault lines in local social organisation. There is significant evidence that Harijans and other low-caste Hindus played a prominent role in the 2002 attacks across Gujarat (Shah 2004) although, as has been noted elsewhere, it is often the poor and lower classes who bear the largest brunt of collective violence. Nevertheless, as I have suggested earlier, it is clear that local college students and the MLA for Mahemdabad were also in the crowds which attacked Muslim localities. The dominant narrative among many of my Muslim informants which contrasted Hindus who were considered 'insiders' and trusted and blameless with the pernicious 'Vaghris' (also Hindus but of lower status) who were blamed for the attacks is illustrative of larger class and caste divisions within the town which transcend religious identities.

¹⁴² I am omitting the specific reference here to the article in order to preserve the anonymity of my informants.

Class and caste divisions among the Muslims have also become more evident in the years following the violence in the town. At first, the immediate aftermath of the attacks contributed to the formation of a new-found solidarity among previously opposing factions within the Muslim community. The leaders of the local Malek and Vohra communities, who had previously been locked in a competition for political dominancy among local Muslims, united to set up the Mahemdabad Taluka Muslim Committee Relief Trust which organised and funded the local relief camp and conducted a survey of the destruction and killings which had taken part in the town and the surrounding villages. A group of younger Muslim men likewise came together to form a committee to perform charitable activities such as providing books to school children and organising blood donations as a means of promoting the ‘upliftment’ of poorer members of the community. While social and rehabilitation work for those displaced in the violence and the lower stratum of the Muslim community was reinvigorated throughout much of Gujarat following the deaths and destruction of 2002, the efforts in Mahemdabad were ultimately short-lived. By the time of my fieldwork, both of the above-mentioned groups had become largely defunct and the temporary cooperation between Vohras and Maleks had been replaced once again by political rivalries, disputes and more mundane exigencies.

6.9. ‘Violence’ and ‘peace’: Towards a middle ground

Coexistence and communal harmony, although nominally espoused by many Mahemdabadis, was also clearly contested and questioned. The claims that everyday life had returned to normal existed alongside recollections of the 2002 violence, the financial consequences of the destruction and loss of business and livelihood as well as an underlying fear of a repeat of the attacks. While many of my informants suggested that violence could break out at any given moment, this anxiety often remained below the surface, submerged under daily worries about negotiating with in-laws, caring for children, finding a suitable husband for one’s daughter, paying back loans, and so on—worries that were more immediate and pressing to the maintenance of everyday life. In this respect, most people felt that there was not much use in publicly reliving the events of 2002 and that if the ‘normality’ of the everyday was to be preserved, any exchange of personal experiences of the violence was best kept

within the close confines of the Muslim community (be it local or from another nearby area).

During the 15 months of my research, only once did I witness the open acknowledgement of the violence between local Hindus and Muslims in a public setting. Sitting on the front porch of Rabiaben's house one day, a group of local women were enjoying the early hours of the afternoon, gossiping about local intrigues and other salacious topics. When the topic of the 2002 violence came up in conversation, Rabiaben, a Muslim Vohra widow in her sixties, remarked to her Hindu friend Bhavnaben that on the day of the attacks local Hindus had eaten with Muslims in the morning and subsequently attacked them later that same night. While in itself unremarkable, this statement was evocative of the betrayal felt by many Muslims in Mahemdabad in the face of local Hindu collusion in the violence and was also significant in that it was pronounced in a semi-public sphere and was thus in direct contravention of the normative discourse which would usually have been espoused in such a setting. Rabiaben's remark at once highlighted the close relations which had existed between members of the two communities (through a reference to their mutual commensality) and contrasted them with the distrust that had evolved since 2002.

During the greater part of my research, in contrast, discussion of the violence remained strictly confined to the private sphere. Aside from formal interviews which I conducted with local community leaders, recollections and occasional accusations regarding the 2002 violence were only made within the context of private conversations. Often, local women exchanged personal experiences of the attacks with my research assistant, herself a Muslim Vohra from Ahmedabad. On such occasions, I remained peripheral to the discussions and, while my presence was not seen as problematic, neither was it of any great consequence to the topic at hand. Such conversations among women played a key role in fostering a sense of their shared identity as victims as well as Muslims and acted as a means of building intimacy between new and old acquaintances.

Periods of 'violence' and 'peace' are rarely, if ever, neatly divided, a point that has been accurately suggested by several scholars working on ethnic and communal violence (Ring 2006; Brass 1997: 277; Das 2007). In comparison to nearby cities such

as Ahmedabad and Vadodara, however, Mahemdabad appears an oasis of communal harmony despite the attacks on the town's Muslims and Harijans in 2002. The prevalence of 'normative discourses' in Mahemdabad functions as a means of containing the potentially divisive memories and aftermath of the attacks and restoring a sense of unity, stressing Mahemdabad's uniqueness as well as the anti-communal nature of its inhabitants. Thus, statements which declare that the state of Gujarat as a whole has become utterly divided and polarised along communal lines (Mander 2007; Sheth and Haeems 2006) do not accurately describe the wide spectrum of ways in which different locales deal with the memory or continuing presence of communalism and violence. Rather, the very nature of smaller towns and villages makes coexistence between different religious communities both more viable as well as more necessary. Not only that, but it is arguably something that many local people see as *desirable*—a mode of life which is set in opposition to the pollution, crowds and unwieldiness of nearby cities, places where many locals regularly journey for work or brief shopping sprees but from which they would recoil at the prospect of living in. While on a broader level, cities are often viewed as more cosmopolitan and tolerant when compared to the often narrow-minded and insular nature of small towns and villages, the general view in Mahemdabad in large part reverses this stereotype. As such, cities can be viewed as both more cosmopolitan *as well as* more communalised.

6.10. Accounting for the 2002 violence

An underlying question in this thesis relates to the contrast between the contained tension between local Hindus and Muslims in Mahemdabad cloaked within the normative discourse of the resumption of everyday life and the overt polarisation and segregation between the two communities which I repeatedly witnessed during visits to nearby cities. More to the point, why did local Muslims and Hindus make a concerted effort following the 2002 violence to re-establish a sense of 'communal harmony' when it was clear that there had been both collusion from within the town in the attacks and an ongoing feeling of suspicion between the two groups following them? Moreover, given the insistence that Mahemdabad differed significantly from nearby cities in terms of harmonious relations between Hindus and Muslims, how can we explain local collusion in the first place?

Theories attempting to account for communal violence have often focused on the instrumental role of riots. In his comparative study of collective violence in South Asia, Tambiah (1996) has argued that 'ethnonationalist conflict' should be read as a means through which members of competing groups attempt to eliminate what are perceived as unfair advantages held by other ethnic or religious communities.

Intimately linked with 'the failure of the homogenizing and centralizing nation state-making project' (*ibid.*: 26), collective violence can be seen as a form of mass politics through which social inequalities are addressed through non-state mechanisms.

Tambiah suggests that collective violence represents a 'bottoms-up' form of enacting social justice which is resolutely divergent from goals of national integration promoted by political leaders in contrast to scholars such as Brass (1997, 2003) who have highlighted, rather, the pivotal role of elite interests in the occurrence of riots.

Varshney (2002) and Brass (2003) have instead emphasised the institutional frameworks in a given locale which either facilitate the outbreak of violence (as in Brass's 'institutionalised riot systems') or contrarily prevent potential conflicts from evolving into large-scale riots through intercommunal civic networks (Varshney 2002). Varshney suggests that the probability of a given city being more or less 'riot-prone' hinges upon the strength of what he terms its 'institutionalised peace system', specifically the degree to which a particular region or city has strong intercommunal networks of civic life. Such networks can be either 'institutional' in the form of trade unions, film clubs, business associations or political organisations, or 'everyday' links between the two communities (i.e., Hindus and Muslims eating together, allowing their children to play together, etc.). Varshney explains the absence of communal conflict in rural India as a result of the prevalent 'everyday' networks which, unlike in cities, are sufficient in averting riots between communities.

In contrast, Brass (2003) suggests that regardless of the level of intercommunal civic networks in a particular place, 'the creation of institutionalized riot systems overrides and displaces whatever forms of civic engagement and interethnic cooperation exist at specific sites' (*ibid.*: 27). Riots and other forms of communal violence take place because of vested interests which orchestrate events and incite collective sentiments through 'specialists'—professionals who facilitate the occurrence of violence at the

behest of larger agendas. Brass, thus, takes an inherently functionalist approach to communal violence: riots occur at the prompting of the elite who manipulate popular antagonisms and tensions to produce collective violence.

While generalised theories on the nature of communal conflict such as those described above are useful as a means of understanding how instances of collective violence function on a wider political and economic level, they are rarely applicable in their entirety to particular contexts. Given the absence of the institutional frameworks referred to by both Varshney and Brass outside large cities, it is difficult to judge the accuracy of such theories in cases such as Mahemdabad. With this caveat in mind, however, given the strong informal intercommunal links between elements of the local Hindu and Muslim communities, pursuant to Varshney's theory one would have expected Mahemdabad to have been able to resist the threat of communal attacks such as those which took place in 2002. The case of the 2002 violence in Gujarat more widely, which involved scores of villages and towns which had previously not experienced communal strife appears to support Brass's notion that, despite the presence of intercommunal civic networks, the larger 'institutionalised riot systems' (in this case the Gujarat state government along with Hindutva groups such as the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal) were ultimately able to override or intimidate into silence the forces of civil society. The violence occurred because it served a vested political purpose for the powers that be, in this case the state and national governments. Tambiah's theory of collective violence as a means through which crowds 'level' the playing field with regard to unfair political and economic advantages enjoyed by minority groups is compelling given the strong resentment felt by many Hindus over the KHAM electoral strategies enacted by the Congress (I) in Gujarat in the late 1970s.¹⁴³ Yet, as has been pointed out earlier in this chapter, the significant abetment and collusion by high-level state actors in the attacks suggests that the 2002 violence was not a sudden explosion of discontent among resentful Hindus (particularly given the active participation of low-caste Hindus in the attacks, a group which overall profited significantly from the KHAM alliance).

¹⁴³ While politically successful, the KHAM electoral strategy ultimately contributed to the development of deep-seated anxiety and resentment among many Hindu upper-caste groups who had traditionally maintained political dominance in Gujarat (Shani 2007: 70).

Specifically, with reference to the communal violence in Gujarat in the last two decades, a number of economic and political explanations have been offered by historians such as Shani (2007) and Spodek (1989, 2008) as well as by anthropologists (Breman 2002, 2004). Most agree that in the past three decades, substantial economic shifts have taken place throughout the state along with a drive towards neo-liberal reforms which have succeeded, on one hand, in creating great wealth while on the other, enlarging the gap between the rich and the poor. Breman (2004) has argued that a consequence of these changes has been a significant shift from formalised to informalised labour and a concurrent increase in economic uncertainty and instability for many Gujaratis at the middle and bottom rungs of the labour force. In relation to Ahmedabad, Breman (2002) has cited the closure of the textile mills in the early 1980s as a primary cause underpinning the explosion of violence in 2002. The aftermath of the closures included not only massive economic and employment destabilisation for thousands of workers but, furthermore, the collapse of the social infrastructure provided by the labour unions which had in the past functioned to promote class solidarity between low-caste Hindus and Muslims working in the mills. As such, he argues that while the Hindutva movement is certainly partially responsible for the 2002 violence, it is necessary to look to the wider historical and economic context in the state for a more nuanced explanation for the upsurge of anti-Muslim attacks during this period.

Historians have likewise attempted to place the 2002 violence in a wider contextual framework of changes occurring in Gujarat. Focusing specifically on Ahmedabad, Shani (2007) has linked the 2002 violence in the city with the concomitant development of communalism and a distinct Hindu identity uniting the disparate castes and classes within the Hindu fold. This movement, which she labels 'EthnoHinduism', resulted from a combination of various factors including the reservations policies instituted in the 1980s and the closure of the textile mills in the city during that same decade. Shani argues that as some Dalits¹⁴⁴ began to improve their class station but still lacked the social capital to be accepted by traditional members of the middle classes, many poorer upper-caste Hindus found themselves in the opposite situation whereby their material circumstances compelled them to live

¹⁴⁴ Another (more politicised) term to refer to ex-untouchables.

among lower-status groups such as Dalits and Muslims. This conflict within the Hindu community was exploited by Hindutva groups who were able to unite these disparate elements and focus their angst and uncertainty on local Muslims who, as one of the perceived beneficiaries of reservations, ultimately bore the brunt of these fissures.

Spodek (1989, 2008), while concurring with Breman and Shani with regard to the massive toll on communal relations of recent neo-liberal economic reforms in the state, the closure of the textile mills in Ahmedabad and the success of Hindutva political campaigns, argues that the Gandhian legacy on the region has, paradoxically, also contributed to Gujarat's penchant for violent collective action. With reference to both the 1985 riots which followed the Mandal Commission's ruling for reservations for OBC groups¹⁴⁵ as well as the more recent 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, Spodek suggests that the culture of grassroots mobilisation and political militancy which Gandhi and his supporters cultivated for over a generation in Ahmedabad have, in recent decades, been successfully channelled against the very institutions which once formed its bedrock, in particular the Textile Labour Association, the national Congress party, *mahajans* and neighbourhood *panchayats*. As such,

Other cities have not seen their civic tensions explode so violently because, ironically, they have not wound so tightly the two parallel springs of mobilization and institutionalization which Gandhi had successfully controlled and balanced in Ahmedabad. (Spodek 1989: 791)

Thus, Spodek suggests that the apparent paradox of Ahmedabad and Gujarat acting as both the site for Gandhi's non-violent resistance movement against the British as well as for repeated instances of large-scale communal violence in the decades following is not as contradictory as it may first appear. Rather, both necessitate an intense level of political mobilisation and militancy which, during his lifetime, Gandhi was able to successfully control but as his legacy waned in the decades following his mobilisation campaigns in Gujarat has remained unchecked.

¹⁴⁵ Large-scale violence erupted in the city of Ahmedabad in protest against the decision by the V.P. Singh government to implement the recommendations set forth in the second Backward Classes Commission, headed by B.P. Mandal, which recommended the implementation of an increase in reservations in government and educational quotes for members of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

As both the largest and most important city in the state, as well as one with a long history of communal violence, Ahmedabad continues to be the focus of the large majority of studies on communal violence in Gujarat (Robinson 2005; Breman 2002, 2004; Shani 2007; Spodek 1989, 2008).¹⁴⁶ In comparison, Mahemdabad has neither the long legacy of communalism which has marked surrounding cities nor has been affected by economic changes in the same way that the closure of the textile mills has impacted upon Ahmedabad. The attacks in Mahemdabad, while shocking and terrifying to many locals, did not reach the same level of brutality that was experienced in other parts of Gujarat in 2002 and, in this respect, a returning sense of coexistence between Hindus and Muslims in the town is less surprising than it would be in a place such as Ahmedabad. This said, Mahemdabad can hardly be said to exist in a self-contained bubble (however much locals would like to think it does), a fact which was brought to the fore in 2002. In this respect, the 'normative discourse' maintaining that everyday life and 'normality' has returned can be seen as a collective attempt at reinstating previous modes of relations. Moreover, such narratives can be seen as a larger attempt, particularly on the part of many local Muslims, to deny the disquieting prospect that Mahemdabad, too, has succumbed to the forces of communalism and Hindutva which for so long locals had relegated to the status of exclusively urban, and hence extra-local, phenomena.

A clear factor enabling the re-establishment of coexistence between Muslims and Hindus in Mahemdabad (and the sustainability of the 'normative discourse') is the economic and political prominence of the Vohra community in the town. The business alliances as well as the shared attributes described in Chapter 2 which Vohras maintain with local Hindus ultimately work to prevent the formation of a unified Muslim community. That many Vohras continue to live and work with Hindus in the central *bazar* is crucial to the maintenance of channels of everyday interaction between the two communities which otherwise might have easily been closed following the 2002 violence.

Moreover, while members of the older traditional elite no longer hold the same sway they once did over the community as demonstrated by their aborted attempt to hold a

¹⁴⁶ Since Independence, communal riots in Ahmedabad have taken place in 1969, 1981, 1985, 1986, 1993, 1999 and, most recently, 2002 (Spodek 2008: 20).

peace march through the town, there still remain significant allegiances which cross religious lines, particularly among members of the upper castes and classes. Their continued political, social and economic presence in the town, although contested, can likewise be seen as a further reason why a more strident level of communal polarisation has not developed following the 2002 violence.

Ultimately, I argue that the ‘normative discourse’ which has largely succeeded in containing the troublesome legacy of local collusion in the attacks, has been successfully maintained as a means of preserving the intercommunal links on which the livelihood of many of the town’s business leaders, Hindu and Vohra, depend; these links have also been maintained through the leadership and intervention of the town’s elite who, while united through an affinity of caste and class, continue to reject the communalised ethic which has become prominent in Gujarat in recent decades. The incentive to re-establish a sense of ‘normality’ should thus be interpreted both as a psychological mechanism to overcome the traumatic and disruptive legacy of 2002 and, moreover, a practical necessity to sustain the business and political networks which are crucial in the town’s everyday life.

6.11. Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to analyse the different ways in which the 2002 violence is spoken about and recollected in Mahemdabad. Given the history of communal violence as a largely urban phenomenon, there has been relatively little written on how violence is dealt with in smaller places and those without a significant past of communal tension. Towns such as Mahemdabad, in spitting distance of Ahmedabad and Vadodara, cannot be understood in the same light as their larger urban neighbours with long histories of communal violence and regimented segregation between religious communities.

As I have argued in previous chapters with regard to Mahemdabad’s Muslim community, significant divisions remain pronounced with respect to local politics and notions of status and honour between groups such as Vohras and Maleks, and the 2002 violence in the town has not succeeded in overriding such rifts despite initial cooperation and efforts to that end. Given the economic interdependence between

Vohras and local Hindu merchants, the ‘normative discourse’ echoed by many of my informants can be construed as a practical attempt to re-impose previous links between the communities and, as such, should not be dismissed as mere ideology or pretence, as suggested by Navaro-Yashin.

While there is an enormous emphasis on the continuing communalisation of everyday life in Gujarat in much of the academic literature, scant attention is paid to the many instances of coexistence and the sustained efforts made against the strong pull of communalist identification. Ultimately, while it is necessary to counterpose the normative discourses which I have described in this chapter with other competing narratives, such discourses can be said to represent a strategy of sustaining what Laura Ring has termed an ‘ethic of suspense’. In this sense, both coexistence more broadly as well as individual relations between Hindus and Muslims in Mahemdabad must be continually cultivated and managed given a wider environment in which the threat of violence is always potentially present. To this end, notions such as ‘peace’ and ‘violence’ are more accurately conceived as theoretical constructs, two extremes on a larger spectrum. ‘Peace’, therefore, should not be envisioned as merely the absence of violence but rather as a process which is ongoing.

In conclusion, the project of sustaining communal coexistence, although nominally espoused by the majority of Mahemdabidis, is one which inevitably falls more heavily on the shoulders of local Muslims given the wider political context which ensures that ultimately it is their livelihoods, lives and well-being which remain most at stake. The seemingly incongruous statement made by many of my informants that ‘everything has gone back to normal’ should be read not necessarily as a denial of the memory and legacy of the 2002 violence but rather as an attempt to maintain the tension of ‘ordinary life’, in all of its un-ordinariness and fragility.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

‘Who is a Muslim? In one sense, whoever declares himself a Muslim is a Muslim, and yet this declaration also has to be accepted by others. This has been the subject of continuous debate—a debate that, to some extent, itself constructs the Muslim community.’
(van der Veer 1994: 58)

7.1. Constructions of ‘Muslimness’ in the aftermath of violence

On a very basic level, any individual who has recited the Muslim declaration of faith can be termed a Muslim. Yet, as pointed out in the quotation above, identities are also highly interactional and contextual: ‘Muslimness’, similarly to other forms of collective identification, is both a state of individual consciousness as well as a social mechanism delineating difference and commonality between social actors. As such, being Muslim at once denotes individual ascription to a particular set of religious beliefs and practices as well as acts as a relational demarcator which orients individuals both to fellow Muslims as well as to members of other religious communities.

In contrast to earlier anthropological conceptions of Islam which emphasised its coherence as a ‘blueprint of a social order’ (Gellner 1981: 1), more recently scholars have highlighted the diversity in the way in which Muslim identity is understood and practised at the local level (Gilsenan 1982; Manger 1999; Soares and Osella 2009). Through the lens of particular historical, political and social contexts, such studies enable us to understand both the variety as well as the commonalities in the ways that Islam is experienced in contemporary societies.

This thesis contributes to the wider literature on the anthropology of Islam through an in-depth ethnographic account of the Muslim community in the town of Mahemdabad. Through a focus on the Sunni Vohra *samaj*, I have argued that discourses and practices surrounding ‘Muslimness’ in the town serve at once as a unifying principle across groups, classes and genders while also providing a forum for competition and contestation. Moreover, the study has demonstrated how, in the

context of Mahemdabad, the means through which Muslim identity is understood and communicated extends beyond the domain of theological debates and religious practice to encompass a wide range of routines, relationships and discourses which cannot be neatly confined to the religious sphere.

Identity is not constructed in a vacuum nor is it a matter of 'free choice' on the part of individuals or groups. Rather, it is deeply influenced by wider historical and political processes. The massive violence perpetrated against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 has served to heighten and reinforce the role of religion in group formation and collective identification in many parts of the state (Robinson 2005; Jasani 2008). In the case of Mahemdabad, social relations and subjectivities have shifted in the years following the 2002 attacks. Yet, I have demonstrated that these changes have not taken a simple or predictable route: rather, inter-religious alliances, friendships and networks remain commonplace in the town and, similarly, competition among different Muslim groups remains a salient feature of town life.

In describing the way in which 'Muslim identity' is constructed in the context of Mahemdabad, I have emphasised three primary themes. Firstly, I have described the ongoing importance of caste and class in structuring everyday life in the town. Secondly, I have addressed the multiple and contested ways in which different Muslim groups understand and defend particular notions of 'Muslimness'. Lastly, I have demonstrated the way in which coexistence and 'everyday peace' have been forged in the aftermath of the 2002 violence.

7.2. Summary of the conclusions

7.2.3. Caste and class in Mahemdabad

Throughout the thesis I have highlighted the salient roles played by caste and class in structuring everyday life and the ways in which these forms of collective identification construct alliances and networks and play into local conceptions of status and power. This argument was laid out in Chapter 1 in the overview of social relations in the town, particularly with reference to patterns in education, housing, local politics and social networks.

A significant factor in the town's history has been the changing dimensions of economic and political power. Until the 1970s, there existed a clear convergence between, in the famous words of Béteille (1971), 'caste, class and power' whereby members of the upper castes dominated economic and political life and, concomitantly, the lower-castes were economically and politically marginalised. The past three decades have witnessed a shift in this pattern with the rise in power of lower-caste groups (both Hindu and Muslim) and a resulting shift in relations as members of the OBCs have gained prominence and come to constitute an increasing threat to the traditional elite in the town. While this shift is not particular to Mahemdabad and has likewise been visible in other parts of Gujarat as well as India more widely (Shani 2007; Jaffrelot 2003), the consequences of such changes locally have been a split between the highly educated Hindu and Muslim secular elite (who promoted the peace march following the 2002 violence) and the leaders of the newly franchised Hindu OBC castes who have built stronger ties with the Sangh Parivar. The resulting changes in alignment between caste, class and economic and political dominance have produced new means through which traditionally marginalised groups are able to access power and status.

Despite such shifts in the traditional patterns of social stratification, caste remains one of the primary means through which community is forged and, while there is significant variety within particular caste groups, it continues to constitute a central device through which individual and group affinities are structured and experienced. As demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3, this is certainly true of the Sunni Vohra *samaj* in Mahemdabad which, in comparison to other non-*ashraf* Muslim groups in the town, practises strict caste endogamy and forms part of a regional caste organisation which promotes inter-group networks and unity among its members. While significant disagreement exists among scholars as to whether the patterns of social stratification practised by Indian Muslims can be described as a 'caste system', what is clear is that Vohras share a particular identity, kinship structure and value system which differentiates them from other Muslim groups in the town. To be 'Vohra' in Mahemdabad is associated with a distinctly mercantile ethos which, whether interpreted pejoratively or positively depending on the speaker, is predicated on the

moral value of hard work and the maintenance of alliances with other religious communities.

Class, likewise, retains a position of primacy, both as a strategy for upward social mobility as well as an idiom through which social distinctions are expressed. Conspicuous consumption of material goods such as electronics, clothing and more expensive items such as motorcycles and cars combined with choices regarding the schooling of children, living in one of the housing societies and access trips to kin and business networks abroad constitute new ways in which social status is conceived and expressed. Such consumption and lifestyle patterns function as markers of 'middle-class status' and allow previously marginalised groups, by adhering to such patterns, to transcend traditional caste/class hierarchies.

7.2.3. Muslim identity: consensus and contestation

The means through which 'Muslimness' is expressed and assessed constitute both a site of contestation as well as a unifying force within Mahemdabad's Muslim community. The liminal position of Vohras among other local Muslim groups problematises facile notions of the existence of a uniform code of 'Muslimness' and, concomitantly, highlights the many ways in which the notion of separate and bounded groups of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' is untenable at the level of everyday life. That Vohras have traditionally lived among Hindus in the main *bazar* of the town, speak the regional Gujarati language at home and share sartorial similarities with local Hindus points to the blurring of fault lines separating the two religious communities.

Despite the current polarisation of religious groups in many parts of Gujarat, the historical legacy of conversion and the physical and often social proximity in which Hindus and Muslims have lived for centuries remain obstacles to the successful completion of political projects which aim to promote religious identity as the primary factor in collective identification and mobilisation. The Sunni Vohras of Mahemdabad illustrate the ongoing importance of other forms of identity in Gujarat (in this case, their traditional occupation as merchants), as well as the clear diversity among Muslims in the state. While there is significant evidence to suggest that prior to and following the 2002 violence in Gujarat there has been a steady increase in the level of

communal segregation and mutual suspicion in everyday life, this thesis has argued that, despite the rhetoric on both ends of the spectrum, a complete polarisation between the two communities has yet to take place.

This said, religious identity is not negligible in everyday life in Mahemdabad. Being Muslim forms an important element in the construction of individual and group subjectivities, particularly with the rise in violence and the propagation of Hindutva rhetoric and policies in recent decades. As a minority community, Muslims necessarily view themselves through and against the prism of 'Hinduness' (as conceived generally) as well as within a larger context in which Muslims are routinely branded as anti-national, anti-Hindu, and religiously and socially 'backward'. Yet, at the same time, 'Muslimness' as such remains a contested category whose particular attributes are defined differently by competing groups: to lay exclusive claim to 'true' Muslimness represents a means through which prestige, status and social capital can be gained at the local level.

This study has demonstrated how in the context of Mahemdabad, in contrast to other recent ethnographic studies of South Asian Muslims, debates about the defining nature of 'Muslimness' generally fall outside the domain of religious practice and ideology. While institutions such as Sufi 'saint worship' have elsewhere taken on a polarising role in distinguishing 'correct' Islamic practice from a more 'Hinduised' or 'bastardised' Islam observed by the supposedly ignorant and superstitious, similar divisions remain largely absent among Muslims in Mahemdabad. The forging of a Muslim community takes place not only in the mosques and *madrasahs* but also in the *dargahs* through the general acceptance of 'saint worship' as an important and acceptable means of accessing the spiritual power of living and deceased *pirs* in resolving problems, be they in the form of physical ailments, problematic social relations or possessing spirits. The presence of Hindus among the devotees in Sufi shrines does not threaten the status of the *dargah* as a distinctly Muslim institution but, rather, contributes to its reputation as a source of spiritual and instrumental power which is patronised by devotees across religious lines.

Contestations over 'Muslimness' in Mahemdabad are thus less reliant on overt displays of piety through outward appearance and conformance to a distinctly Islamic

lifestyle than on criteria which often fall outside the strict confines of religious ideology and practice. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the degree to which Vohras are seen to constitute ‘true’ Muslims is often contested by other groups, namely Maleks, who regard the Vohra emphasis on work and earning money as contrary to their own community’s ethos. In such debates, ‘Muslimness’ is closely associated with issues such as the conduct of women, the importance of engaging in work suitable to one’s social status and broader considerations regarding moral conduct and ethics.

Despite such contestations, it is nevertheless the case that the forging of a generalised ‘Muslim identity’ in Mahemdabad can concomitantly be said to rely on some of these same principles. While Vohra women take a more active role in the running of family businesses than Muslim women in other communities, specific gendered codes of conduct remain an important shared value among Muslims in Mahemdabad, differentiating them from Hindus and Christians in the town. In particular, the seclusion of pre-menopausal women is closely linked with collective ideas of *ijjat* (honour) and, while older Vohra women generally retain higher degrees of mobility and autonomy vis-à-vis other Muslim women, the chastity and reputation of younger women from all Muslim groups are closely monitored and enforced. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4, gendered ideals are likewise applied to Muslim men who are contrasted to Hindus in their heightened virility and chivalry. While Hindutva rhetoric has used such stereotypes as a means of mobilising their ranks against the vilified figure of the lustful and over-sexed Muslim man, these same characteristics (albeit with a more positive spin) are seen by local Muslims as a badge of pride which distinguishes them from other religious communities.

Discourses on the nature of ‘Muslim identity’ cannot be understood in isolation from local contestations between Vohras and Maleks over political and economic power in the town. More generally, such discussions must be understood in the wider context of debates within the Muslim community about where it situates itself as a minority community in relation to the Hindu majority population. Whereas social and business alliances form a crucial part of both the economic livelihood of Vohras as well as their group identity, Maleks remain more self-sufficient in this respect and have less to gain from an overt affiliation with Hindus in the town. As such, the way in which ‘Muslimness’ is defined in relation to the ‘Hindu Other’ also reflects the specific

exigencies and perspectives of groups and individuals taking part in the debate. On a wider level, such debates are reflective of broader issues pertaining to where Muslims fit in the current Indian political and social landscape, particularly given the sharp increase in communal policies and violence which have gained wide popularity in Gujarat in recent decades.

7.2.3. Violence, identity and ‘reconciliation’ post-2002

The relation of Muslims to the Indian state as well as to the Hindu majority has changed dramatically following the events of early 2002. The significant evidence that the state government abetted the violence against Muslims through both inaction as well as, at times, active support along with its close connections to the Sangh Parivar has succeeded in many places to reinforce a sense of isolation, self-reliance and solidarity among many Muslims in Gujarat. Following the violence, religious identity gained new prominence as a unifying principle of collective identification cutting across other forms of identity such as caste, class, gender and occupation. In the context of Mahemdabad, previously opposing Vohra and Malek factions temporarily joined forces to provide relief for refugees and conduct a survey of the deaths and destruction caused by the attacks.

As is clear from this thesis, forms of collective identification are neither stagnant nor fixed over time and must be understood within larger political and social contexts. While significant scholarly attention has been focused on understanding the causes of ethnic and communal violence, less emphasis has been concentrated on how particular communities reconstruct relations and everyday life in the wake of collective violence. The immediate impact of the violence in Mahemdabad was in fact to reinforce religious identity over other forms of collective identification. During the period of the research, which began three years after the initial attacks in the town, however, only subtle traces of the aftermath of the attacks remained visible amid the cacophony of daily life in Mahemdabad. The original solidarity between Vohras and Maleks had largely dissipated and been replaced with a ‘normative discourse’ asserted in the public realm which held that the patterns of everyday life between local Hindus and Muslims preceding the violence had been re-established.

In the final chapter of this thesis I do not argue that the legacy of the 2002 violence in the town has been thoroughly erased from the public conscience: distrust and the fear of a repeat of the attacks remain beneath the surface, emerging occasionally from behind closed doors or during moments of tension and unease. This approach has been informed no doubt by practical considerations on the part of local Muslims who have sought to maintain a low profile given the wider atmosphere of communal policies and discrimination in the state. Moreover, the 'normative discourse' advanced by many of my informants, both Hindu and Muslim, should also be understood as a mechanism by which local Mahemdabadis have reasserted control over the local social landscape of the town.

7.3. Theoretical contributions of the research

This thesis contributes to current anthropological debates on the nature of identity, violence and agency. On a large scale, the case of Mahemdabad illustrates the complexities of group relations, understood broadly to include both those within the Muslim community as well as those between local Hindus and Muslims, in the wake of collective violence.

With reference to South Asia more broadly, Spencer (2007: 133) has noted that collective violence:

is not simply a reproduction of local structures of antagonism, but also an opportunity for a remaking of the local social order. In that respect the violence, like the political more generally, is productive.

A key concern of this thesis has been to investigate the particular ways in which violence *produces* and *transforms* social relations and, moreover, to investigate the ways in which such transformations take shape in local communities. On a basic level, one might naturally assume that the impact of collective violence enacted along the lines of religious identity might serve to reify social divisions along these same lines at the expense of other forms of identification such as caste, class and gender.

This thesis has argued that violence does indeed transform social relations, albeit not in clearly delineated ways which can be predicted or engineered beforehand. It is clear

that the 2002 violence has changed the way in which Gujarati Muslims (and, arguably, Indian Muslims more generally) understand themselves in relation to the state, the Hindu majority and other Muslims and, in this regard, ‘Muslim identity’ has indeed been inalterably changed since 2002.

At the same time, the way in which communities have dealt with the legacy of the 2002 violence is highly dependent on local contexts. With respect to Mahemdabad, coexistence and ‘everyday peace’, while fraught with tension and uncertainty, have been largely restored and remain buttressed by a ‘normative discourse’ which allows for the perpetuation of pre-2002 political and economic power relations in the town.

On a global level, the question of how to deal with the legacy of genocide and collective violence has become a central concern in both developmental, NGO and policy circles. In recent decades, there has been a conspicuous proliferation of national and international institutional bodies set up to address past crimes and human rights violations in post-conflict societies through public hearings, tribunals and written documentation. The ethos underlying such projects maintains that a fundamental precondition for establishing harmonious relations within formerly war-torn and ethnically divided societies is that accounts and testimonies are brought into the *public* realm. It is only through such means that a new sense of ‘community’ or ‘nation’ can be established and forged which, while not banishing the memory of suffering and death in the past, enables the creation of new social relations and, potentially, new understandings of national or social belonging and identity.¹⁴⁷

Such projects have been employed particularly as a means of addressing the legacy of large-scale violence in the context of nation-states. Most notably, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to bring about national reconciliation and healing by allowing victims of apartheid-era human-rights violations to publicly give witness to their experiences. Similar commissions have been established in the last three decades in Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, Liberia, Fiji and the Solomon Islands (although none of these were given as broad a mandate as that in South Africa).

¹⁴⁷ Notably, neither revenge nor redistributive justice play a role in these understandings of social and communal healing.

In contrast, this thesis has highlighted a common, if not particularly celebrated way in which many communities seek to deal with the memory of collective violence and trauma: namely, through public ‘denial’ and silence. On one hand, the ongoing political atmosphere and dominance of the BJP in Gujarat is hardly conducive to promoting public measures aimed at redressing the wrongs committed in 2002, whether in the form of convicting perpetrators or conducting public hearings of the experiences of victims. While the Indian central government has recently taken steps to remunerate victims and their families as well as prosecute suspected leaders of the violence, there is little evidence of political will on the part of the state government to redress the legacy of the 2002 violence. Given the ongoing communal atmosphere and popularity of Narendra Modi in the state, speaking out openly against the violence is likely to be a risky venture.

On the other hand, however, I suggest that it is important to question the extent to which the re-establishment of ‘everyday life’ through silence in the public realm should inherently be interpreted as a failure or an impediment to community ‘healing’. The use of public hearings of past crimes and abuses can be viewed in light of Foucault’s analysis of the use of confession in Western society as a technique of producing ‘truth’. While his discussion focuses primarily on the discursive narratives surrounding sex and sexuality in the nineteenth century, Foucault suggests that the confession more generally has become intrinsically linked with processes and ideas of truth. As he notes, the ritual of the confession constitutes ‘a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation’ (1978: 62). To confess, whether from the standpoint of victim, perpetrator or witness of violence, can be viewed according to such logic as an intrinsically positive act redeeming both the individual and the community more generally.

In light of dominant ideas regarding the redemptive role of confession, I argue that it is important to problematise conventional understandings about the relation between silence, healing and reconciliation. Is the management and relegation of the precarious memories of 2002 to the private realm a further form of symbolic

violence? Or, conversely, should the resumption of 'normal life' through the inhabiting of old routines and the claiming of previous patterns and relations—ones which have now lost their previous meaning through the rupture of violence—be seen as a *creative* and *productive* act which can likewise bring about community 'healing', albeit in a different form?

The use of silence and 'denial' as a tactic for dealing with post-violence trauma and suffering goes against the grain of current conventional wisdom. Yet, despite the proliferation of commissions which seek to publicly address legacies of suffering and violence, it is only relatively recently that it has become the accepted norm to emphasise the importance of verbalising and publicly addressing pain and trauma so as to bring about individual or collective healing. As Tony Judt (2008) has written with reference to the post-World War Two era in Europe:

Far from reflecting upon the problem of evil in the years that followed the end of World War II, most Europeans turned their heads resolutely away from it. Today we find this difficult to understand, but the fact is that the *Shoah*—the attempted genocide of the Jews of Europe—was for many years by no means the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe (or the United States). Indeed, most people—intellectuals and others—ignored it as much as they could... And even though I am Jewish and members of my own family had been killed in the death camps, I did not think it strange back then that the subject passed unmentioned. The silence seemed quite normal. How does one explain, in retrospect, this willingness to accept the unacceptable? Why does the abnormal come to seem so normal that we don't even notice it? Probably for the depressingly simple reason that Tolstoy provides in *Anna Karenina*: 'There are no conditions of life to which a man cannot get accustomed, especially if he sees them accepted by everyone around him.'

While Judt does not view the silence which followed the *Shoah* in either a distinctly positive or negative light, he suggests that it should be seen as an element of human instinct to continue with life 'as normal', even when conditions and circumstances remain profoundly abnormal. Similarly, in Mahemdabad, and probably in Gujarat more generally, the silence in everyday life about the 2002 violence has been a means through which individuals and groups have reclaimed older patterns of meaning. The productive potential of violence, in this respect, always comes up against the comforts of habit, of known socialities and landscapes. While such habitual patterns may have altered after the rupture of violence, they nevertheless retain aspects of their former

intimacy, and such familiarity becomes all the more important in the face of sudden change.

This thesis has described Mahemdabad as a town still mainly governed by the traditional tenets of caste and class, where the boundaries between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' are not dictated by religious identification but rather the degree to which individuals or groups are recognised as having historical and genealogical claims on the town, and through these, a recognisable badge of familiarity and credence. While it might have been predicted that a natural consequence of the 2002 violence in Mahemdabad would be an affirmation of religious divisions in the town, I have argued that, in the long run, this has not been the case. Rather, the research suggests that the boundaries which have become reified following the violence are constructed around older caste and class divisions separating Vohra from Malek, the traditional elite of the dominant castes from the newly powerful OBCs, the middle-class professionals from the uneducated. In this sense, previous forms of inequality have been reasserted with a vengeance, imposing a firm dictum which asserts that periods of violence can, and must, be separated from the mundane peace of everyday life.

Glossary:

ādāb – proper or moral conduct according to Islamic tenets

ajlāf – literally ‘common’, used to refer to Muslim converts from lower Hindu castes

ashrāf – literally ‘noble’, used to refer to Muslims descended from saints, nobles and traders who came to South Asia from the Middle East and Central Asia

atak – sub-unit of an *utara*

āzān – Muslim call to prayer

badhā – promise or vow made to a Sufi saint in compensation for a request or problem being solved

bajār – market

barākāt – charisma, blessing or spiritual power

bāwā – another term for ‘pīr’

ben – sister

bhābhī – brother’s wife

bhāī – brother

bhajan – Hindu devotional song

bhūt – spirit or ghost, usually malevolent in nature

bid’ā – illegitimate innovation

burqa – garment worn by Muslim women which covers the entire body, usually worn over daily clothing

chokrāvalā – groom’s family

chokrīvālā – bride’s family

ḍabbā – box

dargāh – literally ‘royal court’ or ‘shrine’, used to refer to Sufi shrines

darśan – sight or vision (of a deity)

darvāja – gate, door

dhando – business

dhariyā – iron hook mounted on a long wooden handle, used as an agricultural implement and as a weapon

dahej – dowry

ekāda – endogamous marriage circle

fakir - wandering Muslim holy man or ascetic; can also be used to refer to a Muslim caste whose traditional occupation is begging

gherkam - housework

haj – pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam required of all able-bodied and financially capable Muslims

ijjat – honour, reputation

jāti – caste or genus

jej – dowry, literally meaning a gift which is voluntarily given (carries less pejorative connotations than the term ‘*dahej*’)

jhubrā – feisty, quarrelsome

kaḍkī – similar in meaning to *pol*, neighbourhood

kar sevak – Hindu nationalist activist

kariyāvar – literally ‘a mutual understanding’, a term used for dowry

khāndān – family, lineage

khānaqāh – building located on the grounds of a *dargāh* in which the *pīr* lives or in which gatherings take place

lathi – a long cane which is often used as a weapon

lobān – sandalwood

madrāsā – Muslim religious school

mahājan – trade guild

malang – celibate Sufi ascetic

māmā – maternal uncle

mantra – a sacred utterance believed to possess spiritual efficacy

mandir – Hindu temple or shrine

maulanā – Muslim religious teacher

masjid – mosque

mazār – tomb in which a *pir* is buried

mehr – dower required by Muslim law, the amount given or promised by husband to his wife prior to their marriage

misrī – sugar

mujāwar – Islamic priest

murīd – disciple of a *pir*

namāz – Muslim prayer performed five times a day

nāsto – snack

nāt – caste

nikāh – Islamic wedding ceremony

niyaz – blessed or auspicious food

nokri – salaried employment

pāvalī – vessel made of steel for storing water

pāyal – anklet

pittal – vessel made of brass

pīr – Sufi saint

pol – neighbourhood usually inhabited by members of a single caste or of the same socio-economic level

pote – ‘head’, used to refer to the head of a family or lineage

pradakśinā – Hindu ritual in which devotees circumambulate a shrine or icon

pardā – literally ‘curtain’, the system of female seclusion used by both Hindus and Muslims

puṣtak – book

qasbah – country town or settlement

Ramjan/Ramadan – the ninth of the Islamic calendar in which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and which culminates in the festival of ‘Eid ul-Fitr

sādhu – Hindu holy man or ascetic

sagāī – engagement

salwār kameez – a type of clothing worn by women which usually consists of a long shirt that ends at the knees, pyjama pants and a scarf (*dupatta*) draped across the chest.

samāj – society, community, caste organization

sāmbrāni – Hindu ritual involving the burning of incense

sharī'a – Islamic religious law

shirk – polytheism

strīdhan – gifts by to the bride by her family prior to and on the day of her marriage

swarāj – literally ‘home-rule’, used to refer to the Indian nationalist movement for independence from Britain

tajdid – literally ‘renewal’, used in the Islamic context to refer to periods of social and religious reform

talāq – one of the three forms of divorce allowed by Islamic law in which the husband pronounces the word ‘talaq’ three times to divorce his wife

tālīm – teachings of Islam, religious education

taluka – an administrative sub-division of a district

tarīqā – path or way, specifically used to refer to teachings of a Sufi order

tāvīj – amulet

tijorī - wardrobe

tola – South Asian unit of weight, often used for gold

trishūl – trident which can be used as a weapon, commonly associated with Hindu mythology and the god Shiva

ummah – the nation of the Prophet, global Islamic community

‘urs – literally ‘marriage’, the celebration of the death anniversary of a *pir*

utara – sub-unit of *ekada*

varṇa – the four ‘classes’ of Hindu society: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra

yātra – pilgrimage, procession

zamīndār - landholder

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