

Stories of 'Martyrs' in the Maha Gujarat Movement*

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This paper examines the deaths that occurred in 1956 during demonstrations related to the Maha Gujarat movement, a movement that demanded the creation of a new state for the Gujaratis. It shows how these deaths resulting from police gunfire were narrated and utilized by different forces both at the time and later and what implications they had on regional and national politics. Those who lost their lives during these agitations were called '*shahids*' (martyrs) by the leaders of the movement and their memory was repeatedly invoked to mobilize public support and to question the legitimacy of the Congress government, which they claimed had used violence against the people. The deaths had a clear impact on the political situation in this region, and this became one of the causes that led to the bifurcation of Bombay state into Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960. Afterwards stories about 'martyrs' began to be incorporated into the state government's discourse on the formation of linguistic states in India as being a result of public demand and thus inevitable.

In reality, as this paper shows, the demand for the formation of a linguistic state of Gujarat was not necessarily strong until this incident of police gunfire and the deaths of 1956. However, in the eyes of a wide range of people, the stories of martyrs in Gujarat, along with similar stories that preceded them, proved the legitimacy of the idea to reorganize states on a linguistic basis, in spite of the fact that the same idea was initially opposed strongly by the Congress government at the centre. This paper examines the process through which the Maha Gujarat movement gained momentum after 1956 and tries to understand what meanings were attached to these deaths while different ideas of nation-building were discussed and implemented in post-colonial India.

The paper consists of three sections. In the first section, I will describe the historical background to the incident in August 1956, including a brief

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history of the movements in different regions of India that demanded the reorganization of provinces/ states (the word 'province' was replaced by 'state' in the Constitution of India, which came into force in 1950). The second section examines what happened in August 1956, and explores how the deaths were narrated by the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement. It further contrasts these narratives with those of the central and state governments. The third section analyses the *satyagrahas* organized in August 1958 by the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement, in which the memory of the 'martyrs' in 1956 was again invoked effectively. These *satyagrahas*, called the '*khambhi* (memorial pillar) *satyagraha*' and the '*smarak* (memorial) *satyagraha*', mobilized a significant number of people in different parts of Gujarat, especially in Ahmedabad, to erect memorials for the 1956 martyrs. Disturbances and deaths occurred once again, and this in turn further pressurized the central and state governments to divide Bombay state. During this period, the stories of martyrs were constantly narrated through public speeches and the media, while the governments began to change their attitude to these deaths and to the movement.

(1) DEBATES OVER THE LINGUISTIC REORGANIZATION OF STATES IN WESTERN INDIA

According to Paul Brass, the Indian government in the 1950s and 1960s, in the face of various movements that demanded the reorganization of states, developed a 'set of four formal and informal rules' that led to the acceptance of some demands and the rejection of others (Brass 1990: 149). The first rule was to not recognize groups 'which made secessionist demands'. The government was in fact ready to suppress such groups 'by all means necessary, including armed force'. The second rule was to not accommodate regional demands based upon religious differences. In contrast, the demands for separate statehood on a linguistic basis were not entirely rejected, but here the third and fourth rules had to be taken into account, that is, the demands had to have popular support and furthermore they had to be supported by all the important language groups concerned (Brass 1990: 150-1).

Brass's analysis is useful for understanding the way in which the states were reorganized in post-colonial India. The reorganization of administrative units was one of the major issues that the Congress government under the leadership of Nehru had to tackle soon after independence. Since the colonial period, strong demands for the creation of new provinces based on languages had been presented by members of the elite groups in several regions. The aim of each of these demands was that territories in which a particular mother tongue was spoken and which were then divided into different provinces and princely states,

should be united to form a new province for the linguistic community in question. The elite groups who made these demands envisaged that in the proposed unilingual provinces they could use their mother tongues for official and educational purposes and that their interests, which they often believed had been subordinated to those of other linguistic groups in the current multilingual provinces, would be protected.

These ideas were often expressed with great emotion, reflecting the growing influence of the notion of 'mother tongue' among the elites, most of whom became familiar with this notion through western literature and colonial education. As Lisa Mitchell points out in her work on Telugu language politics, by the early twentieth century, languages in many parts of South Asia were no longer regarded primarily as 'tools or locally available resources' but began to be 'refigured as the fundamental bases of individual identities' (Mitchell 2009: 14).¹

Noting the demands for the reorganization of the provinces, the Indian National Congress publicly accepted the principle of 'linguistic provinces' as early as 1920 and formed the Provincial Congress Committees accordingly (*Report of the Thirty-fifth Session* 1920: 109-10), though under colonial rule it had no power to redraw the actual borders of administrative units. Thus it was not surprising that expectations grew among regional elites on the eve of independence that the Congress would reorganize provinces once it came into power. To their disappointment, however, after independence, the Congress leaders at the centre demonstrated an unwillingness to create linguistic provinces. They expressed their concern that the provinces would strengthen linguistic identities and weaken the unity and stability of India, which had only recently gone through the great tragedy of Partition (King 1998: 97-111). The Linguistic Provinces Commission, appointed by the government in 1947, as well as the Linguistic Provinces Committee, appointed by the Congress in 1948 and consisting of three members, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, both presented negative opinions on the formation of linguistic provinces at this stage in view of the 'larger interests of the Indian nation' (*Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission* 1948; *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Committee* 1949).

Subsequently, however, a series of disturbances occurred in 1952, which changed the situation for the government completely. In December that year, a well-known Gandhian activist, Potti Sriramulu, died after having undertaken a 'fast-unto-death' in support of the demand for a separate Telugu-speaking state within India (King 1998: 112-14; Mitchell: 2009: 1-2). The news of his death was immediately followed by 'violence, processions, destruction of railway property, stoppage of trains, and looting' in various towns and cities in Madras state, including the city of Madras, and these disturbances resulted in police gunfire and deaths. The widespread disorder was read by journalists, politicians and

historians alike as 'irrefutable evidence of the collective will of the people' (Mitchell 2009: 2, 192). Facing this situation, Nehru declared the formation of Andhra State, the first linguistic state created after independence. The success of this movement became an example for those demanding their own linguistic states to follow, as it indicated that the central government would agree to establish a new state once strong evidence of public support was demonstrated. In reality, however, as Mitchell's research shows, the people who were shot dead in the disturbances included those who did not have any interest in the Andhra movement, let alone any intention of sacrificing their lives for the creation of a Telugu state. Yet, all these disturbances and the deaths that occurred in them were incorporated into a 'single narrative leading to the formation of a separate state' (Mitchell 2009: 190, 203-12).

In the following year, the Indian government appointed the States Reorganisation Commission to re-examine the issue of linguistic states in order to avoid further disturbances in other areas. Based on the report of this commission, a large-scale reorganization of states, mainly on a linguistic basis, was conducted in 1956, mostly in southern India. In contrast, in western India, the committee recommended that the government should avoid creating the linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. In this region, there had been a demand among the Marathi-speaking elite since the late nineteenth century that all the Marathi-speaking territories, then divided into different provinces and princely states, should be united as a single administrative unit. The movement for the formation of this 'United Maharashtra (Samyukta Maharashtra)' developed further in the late 1940s.² The central government, however, repeatedly stressed that it was difficult to accept this demand, as it envisaged significant opposition among the Gujarati-speaking elite to the division of the existing Bombay state, which would be necessary if Maharashtra was to be created.³ As Paul Brass argues, the central government would not reorganize states in a region where opinions were divided among major linguistic groups (Brass 1990: 149-51). The States Reorganisation Commission, in its report submitted to the government in 1955, noted that along with the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, there had been a movement among some Gujaratis for the formation of a separate state of Gujarat, and yet found its influence rather limited. It observed:

Alongside the Samyukta Maharashtra movement there has also grown up a demand for the formation of Maha Gujarat by uniting the States of Saurashtra and Kutch with the Gujarati-speaking areas of Bombay. This demand, however, cannot be regarded as pressing, because, by and large, the Gujarati-speaking people would now seem to be content to remain in the composite State of Bombay, if it continues more or less as at present constituted. (*Report of the States Reorganisation Commission* 1955: 112-13)

This attitude of the Gujarati speakers might have something to do with the recent history of the region, in which the nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi had exerted a great influence. As a result, members of the elite, including professionals, traders and industrialists, were generally hesitant to organize a political movement based on their linguistic identity. For instance, K.M. Munshi (1887-1971), a famous Gujarati writer and politician, criticized such a movement as 'linguism' and 'modern parochial nationalism' (Munshi 1948: 6; Isaka 2012). However, a more important reason for the Gujaratis' lack of interest in the creation of a separate state was their attachment to the city of Bombay. The Gujarati elite in Bombay city and those in Gujarat who had strong links with this city, especially those involved in trade and commerce, preferred not to divide Bombay state on a linguistic basis, in part to avoid the possibility of losing their claim on Bombay city.⁴ There were however also some Gujarati groups who advocated the creation of Gujarat or 'Maha Gujarat', consisting of the Gujarati-speaking areas in Bombay state and the Gujarati-speaking states of Saurashtra and Kutch, with the expectation that they would be able to establish their dominance in this new state without the Marathi-speaking elite (Maha Gujarat Parishad 1954). Yet the influence of these groups was evidently limited as the States Reorganisation Commission pointed out.

The unique position that Bombay city occupied in western India had been noted by the Congress leaders at the centre even as early as 1920. At this time they created Provincial Congress Committees, each of which was allocated a 'Congress province'. These Congress provinces were formed on a linguistic basis in principle. However, the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC) was created separately for Bombay city, along with the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC), with its headquarters in Pune, and the Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee (GPCC), with its headquarters in Ahmedabad. It was also officially recognized that Bombay city was an area for both Marathi and Gujarati speakers (*Report of the Thirty-fifth Session* 1920: 109). From the view-point of the Congress, it was difficult to ignore the economic dominance that the Gujarati-speaking communities, which included Parsis, Vaniyas (including Jains) and Muslim trading communities, such as Bohras, Khojas and Memons, occupied in this city. For the Gujarati speakers, Bombay was not only the centre of their political and economic activities but also that of social and cultural activities. For instance, people from the elite families in different parts of Gujarat, including many high-caste Hindus, came to Bombay to receive higher education or to look for job opportunities. The Gujarati publishing industry developed in this city and there were also various social reform and literary organizations for the Gujaratis. When the reorganization of states began to be examined by the central government after independence, the Gujarati elite both inside

and outside Bombay city presented strong objections to the inclusion of this city in Maharashtra. According to them, Bombay had always been a multilingual and multicultural city, and its metropolitan character had to be protected. They also emphasized the contribution that the Gujarati-speaking communities had made to the development of this city. They argued that either the composite Bombay state should be retained or the city of Bombay should become a separate state.⁵

Having examined the situation, the States Reorganisation Commission concluded that the Bombay state should be reconstituted as a bilingual state, with all the Marathi and Gujarati territories that had so far been outside of Bombay state merged into it and with the Kannada region excluded and merged into Mysore state. However, the central government, in view of the persistent demand from the Marathi leaders, changed its mind and rejected this idea, proposing instead in November 1955 to form three administrative units in this region, that is, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Bombay city. This proposal was bitterly criticized by many Marathi leaders, who believed that Bombay city should be part of their state. One of their demonstrations against this 'three-state formula' resulted in a clash between the demonstrators and the police near Flora Fountain in the central part of Bombay city on 21 November 1955. The police resorted to *lathi* charges and the firing of tear gas shells and then even opened fire, causing the deaths of over a dozen people (Palshikar 2007: 55-60; Phadke 1979: 135-8; *TOI*, 22 November 1955: 1).

In January next year, there were further incidents of the police using guns in Bombay, and these again caused the loss of many lives. On 16 January 1956, the Indian government announced the creation of the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat and the placement of Bombay city under central administration. This was severely criticized by Marathi leaders and was followed by a series of large-scale disturbances in the city. Buses and trams were attacked and shops, offices and houses were looted. A curfew was announced and a large number of police were called out to quell the riots (*TOI*, 17-23 January 1956). What made the situation further complicated this time was that in these disturbances there were a number of attacks on Gujarati shops and houses, and a significant number of Gujarati residents were forced to move to safer places both within the city and outside. Morarji Desai, the then Chief Minister of Bombay state, who himself was a Gujarati, blamed the leaders of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement for the disturbances (*BLCD*, Part II, 34.26, 1956: 951-3; Desai 1978: 58-9).

With the situation in Bombay state highly unstable, the central government once again changed its policy on the reorganization of Bombay state in August 1956. This time it decided that Bombay state be reconstituted as a bilingual state, as originally suggested by the States Reorganisation Commission.⁶ The sudden change of the government's

policy once again led to disturbances and deaths as the result of police gunfire, this time in Ahmedabad.

(2) AUGUST 1956: 'MARTYRS' AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAHA GUJARAT MOVEMENT

The government's decision to create a bilingual state of Bombay, without proper negotiations with political forces in Gujarat, was received by the elite in Ahmedabad, in particular the students, with great shock and disappointment (Pathak et al. 1966: 57; Phadke 1979: 189).⁷ The previous proposal of the central government to create three administrative units—Maharashtra, Gujarat and Bombay city—had been in fact welcomed by the Gujarati elite in north and central Gujarat, if not in other Gujarati-speaking regions. The belief was that their political and economic influence would increase with Ahmedabad as the capital of the new state (Pathak et al. 1966: 57; Pathak 1976: 124; Sinha 2005: 309; *TOI*, 18 January 1956: 1). The fact that the city of Bombay was not to be included in Maharashtra according to this proposal also encouraged them to accept it, as they believed that the interests of the Gujarati community there would be thus protected.

On 8 August, an organisation called the National Students' Union held a meeting in the morning, and afterwards students and others marched toward the Congress House in the centre of Ahmedabad to protest against the central government's decision to form a bilingual state (*TOI*, 9 August 1956: 1).⁸ When the demonstrators assembled in the open ground in front of the Congress House, the police opened fire, and this resulted in the deaths of several people. As to how and why the police opened fire, there were different narratives. According to the *Times of India*, a peaceful protest went out of the organizers' control and burst into violence, causing the police to resort to gunfire, tear gas and *lathi* charges (*TOI*, 9 August 1956: 1). Chief Minister, Morarji Desai, shared this view. In his opinion, the police resorted to the use of firearms 'very properly and legitimately' and that 'those who had died had taken part in violent actions' (Desai 1978: 69). In his reply to questions posed in the Bombay Legislative Assembly, Desai also stated that nobody gave orders to the police to open fire and that the police did so in self-defense (*BLAD*, Part I, 32.5, 1956: 276; *BLAD*, Part I, 32.10, 1956: 436).

In contrast, the narratives by those involved in the Maha Gujarat movement argued that the police suddenly opened fire on demonstrators and emphasized the brutality of the police and the Congress government behind it (Bhatt n.d.: 29-31; Yagnik 2011: 450-1). They even compared this brutality with that of the British government during colonial times. According to records, some died on the spot and others died later in hospitals (*BLAD*, Part I, 32.6, 1956: 276; Bhatt n.d.: 30; Kotval 1959: 15;

Yagnik 2011: 451; *TOI*, 9 August 1956: 1). The victims included both students and workers. Although most of those who lost their lives in the police shootings on 8 August and afterwards were people working in local shops and factories, some of whom were apparently not involved in the Maha Gujarat movement (Yajnik Papers, subject file 95),⁹ it was the deaths of young students that attracted much public attention and were actively discussed in the political arena.

According to the figures given by Morarji Desai in the Legislative Assembly, twenty-four persons were killed in encounters with the police in Gujarat between 8 and 26 August 1956, out of whom nineteen died in Ahmedabad and five in other places such as Nadiad and Kalol, where agitations also took place (*BLAD*, Part I, 32.10, 1956: 433-4; Yajnik Papers, subject file 95). Only five of these victims were students (*BLAD*, Part I, 32.10, 1956: 439). In view of the contemporary and later narratives that stressed the deaths of 'innocent' and 'unarmed' young students, the actual number of the students among the total number of victims seems rather small. This is probably because the stories of these students could be easily incorporated into the narrative, which tried to stress the genuine and powerful demand among the public for the formation of Gujarat state. The stories of those who were not involved in the movement and yet who died in the police shootings were, in contrast, difficult to relate to this narrative, even though they were also called '*shahids*' by the leaders of the movement.¹⁰ It should also be noted that there were three Muslims among these twenty-four victims (Yajnik Papers, subject file 95; *Shahadat*: 27). The fact that there were Muslim victims was stressed repeatedly by the leaders of the movement in order to present the image of Hindu-Muslim unity. One of the leaders later argued in his memoir that the 'blood of Hindus and Muslims was spilled in the same place' and thus an 'atmosphere of Hindu-Muslim unity' pervaded in the movement (Bhatt n.d.: 31).

Soon after the incident of the police shootings and the deaths in front of the Congress House, various meetings and agitations took place in other places in Ahmedabad, some of which resulted in police gunfire and more deaths (Kotval 1959: 15; *TOI*, 9 August 1956: 1). The news of what had happened in front of the Congress House clearly incited a wide range of people in Ahmedabad. For instance, the Ahmedabad Bar Association immediately sent telegrams to Prime Minister Nehru and demanded an independent judicial inquiry into the 'wanton, indiscriminate, brutal and excessive police firing on innocent unarmed young students' (*TOI*, 9 August 1956: 9). It also appointed its own inquiry committee to gather information (Kotval 1959: 16; *TOI*, 9 August 1956: 9). One of the participants in the Maha Gujarat movement, whom I interviewed in Ahmedabad in 2009, remembered that the students who were at the scene of the incident carried the dead body of a victim to the Gujarat Club, which was located near the Congress House. A similar story appears in

the memoirs of Brahmakumar Bhatt, one of the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement, though in this story it is the 'skull' of the victim that was carried to the club (Bhatt n.d.: 30).¹¹ The Gujarat Club was known as a place for social gatherings of the elite, especially lawyers. Having seen the shocking evidence with their own eyes, the lawyers were immensely agitated, the story says. Workers also participated in the movement soon after this incident by observing a *hartal* (strike) (*TOI*, 10 August 1956: 1). The protests and disturbances that followed spread also to other cities in Gujarat, such as Baroda, Rajkot, Nadiad, Kalol, Jamnagar, Surat and Amreli (Bhatt n.d.: 37; Pathak et al. 1966: 58; *TOI*, 9-14 August 1956).

In response to this incident, a series of demonstrations were organized by the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement, among whom were the leaders of the students' organizations such as the Maha Gujarat Vidyarthi Samiti (Students' Committee) and those of the Praja Socialist Party and the Communist Party. In these agitations, the leaders criticized the use of firearms by the police while protesting at the same time against the central government's decision to create a bilingual state of Bombay. Thus the deaths resulting from police gunfire were now repeatedly mentioned by these leaders and effectively incorporated into their movement. In their narratives, the images attached to these deaths often overlapped with those attached to the deaths that had occurred in the nationalist movement. From the viewpoint of the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement, both groups of deceased were 'martyrs' who dedicated their lives to their 'homeland'. On 9 August, a day after the incident, students and leaders gathered in the Gujarat College compound, in which there was a memorial to a college student named Vinod Kinariwala, who had been shot dead by the police on the same date in 1942 during the Quit India movement (Gujarat College n.d.). A hymn written by a famous nineteenth-century poet, Narmadashankar Lalshankar (1833-86), with a well-known phrase 'Jay jay garvi Gujarat (Victory, victory to glorious Gujarat)', was sung on that occasion. Indulal Yagnik (1892-1972),¹² a well-known social and political activist, who had once been associated with Gandhi and the nationalist movement, attended this meeting. In his words, he felt then that he was listening to the 'new state anthem of the new Gurjar state' (Yagnik 2011: 456).

It is evident that now the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement were trying to legitimize their demand for the formation of Gujarat state by referring to the 'great sacrifice of the martyrs'. According to Yagnik, the 'ground consecrated by the blood of martyrs' became 'a place of pilgrimage for the people of Gujarat' as well as 'a place of inspiration for the new struggle' (Yagnik 2011: 460). The stories of martyrs were narrated again and again in the movement to establish the legitimacy of their claim and to project their campaigns as moral acts.

In relation to this, it should be also noted that memories of the

nationalist movement and of 'tyrannical' British rule were constantly invoked in describing the relationship between their movement and the central government, which, in their view, not only ignored the public demand for a creation of Gujarat but also used violence to suppress their movement. The methods that became well known during the nationalist movement under Gandhi's leadership, such as *hartal* and *satyagrahas*, were actively adopted by the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement, which also emphasized these overlapping images. Although it seems that there were instances of violence on the part of the movement too, the idea of non-violence was repeatedly stressed by the leaders to give legitimacy to their agitations and to underline the fact that the government showed no hesitation to shoot people.

On 13 August, which was declared to be the '*Shahid Din*' (Martyrs' Day), the Maha Gujarat Vidyarthi Samiti organized demonstrations that marched toward the Congress House (*TOI*, 14 August 1956: 1). On 15 August, that is, Independence Day, the same organization held a flag-hoisting function at the Law College grounds, which, according to the *Times of India*, was witnessed by ten thousand people, mostly students (*TOI*, 16 August 1956: 7). A mother of a student who had been shot dead by the police exhorted the students not to let the sacrifice of her son go in vain. On 19 August, the Maha Gujarat Vidyarthi Samiti called on students, workers and others in Ahmedabad to observe a '*janata* curfew' (people's curfew) and stay inside their houses (Yagnik 2011: 473). The Praja Socialist Party and Communist Party, along with the Textile Workers' Union, also asked workers to observe a *hartal* on the same day (*TOI*, 19 August 1956: 9). It was known that on this day, the GPCC was to discuss and accept the government's decision to form a bilingual state of Bombay and then hold a public meeting in which Desai was to make a speech. The '*janata* curfew' turned out to be extremely successful, and the Congress had to cancel the public meeting as there was no audience (Bhatt n.d.: 50-3; Yajnik Papers, subject file 65; *TOI*, 20 August 1956: 1). This result was described by the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement as evidence of public opinion, while the Congress leaders attributed it to the coercive measures that they believed had been adopted by the leaders of the movement (Bhatt n.d.: 50-3; Desai 1978: 66; *TOI*, 20 August 1956: 1).

On the same day, Desai, to the great surprise of his colleagues, declared that he would fast till Ahmedabad became 'peaceful enough to listen to him' and that he would not leave the city until then (Desai 1978: 66-7; *TOI*, 20 August 1956: 1). In response, the Maha Gujarat Vidyarthi Samiti announced on 21 August that a group of a hundred students would go on a three-day fast and another group of fifty students would also undertake a twenty-four-hour fast (*TOI*, 22 August 1956: 3). Although fasting was not the invention of Gandhi, this method was closely linked with his memory

in the context of post-colonial Gujarat. Desai adopted fasting as a way of stressing the righteousness of the government. In response, the leaders of the movement adopted the same method to deny this claim of the government. One of its leaders explained the purpose of their fast as follows: 'We want to make it clear and known to the world that Mahagujarat [*sic*] does not want a bilingual State. The fast is against the authority which tried to suppress the aspirations of the people by violence' (*BLAD*, Part II, 32.2, 1956: 36).

On 23 August, the students organized a torchlight procession and paid homage to the 'martyrs' at the Congress House once again (*TOI*, 24 August 1956: 7). The next day was declared to be 'Mahagujarat Day' and 'Narmad Day' (Narmad is the poet, Narmadashankar, mentioned above), and again meetings were organized by the students and others, in which their demand for the formation of Gujarat and for a judicial inquiry into the police shootings were repeated (*TOI*, 25 August 1956: 8). On 26 August, a public meeting was held by the Congress in Ahmedabad. Desai addressed the audience, after which he stopped his eight-day fast. The meeting itself, however, was hardly a success. Stones and *chappals* (sandals) were thrown at Desai, his wife and other Congress members during his speech, and the police had to intervene (Desai 1978: 67-8; *TOI*, 27 August 1956: 1).

After the first police shootings occurred on 8 August 1956, the central and state governments continued to criticize the Maha Gujarat movement mainly from two perspectives. Firstly, according to them, this movement was of a 'sectarian' and 'parochial' nature. Desai stated publicly that where local interests and regional interests were in conflict with larger national interests, patriotism demanded that 'those interests should be sacrificed in the interest of the greater good of the country' (*TOI*, 10 August 1956: 1, 7). Nehru also described the Maha Gujarat movement, along with the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, as narrow-minded and parochial. In his opinion, they ignored the 'large conception of Indian citizenship and India's unity' (*SWJN*, 34, 2005: 144). The central and state governments thus tried to invoke the feelings of nationalism in justifying their attitude to the movement. Their narratives present a clear contrast to those presented by the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement, according to whom the movement was based precisely on patriotism toward their homeland, Gujarat. Their perception was that, just as the nationalist leaders fought against the British government to free India from colonial rule, they fought against the Congress government to free Gujarat from the dominance of the Marathi-speakers. The story of Hindu-Muslim unity in the movement also enhanced their claim that theirs was the movement of and for the Gujarati people as a whole, just as the nationalist movement was of and for the Indian people as a whole.

Secondly, the central and state governments were not yet convinced

that the Maha Gujarat movement had obtained broad public support. In their opinions, the leaders of this movement tried to impose their ambition on those who did not share it in an 'undemocratic' manner. Desai, for instance, stated in his memoir that those who had been shot dead by the police had resorted to violent actions, which was against the 'traditions and principles of democracy' (Desai 1978: 69). He could not think of these people as 'martyrs' and turned down the demand for a judicial inquiry into the police shootings. In this regard, Nehru also held a similar opinion, though he later clearly changed his tone. With regard to the case of Ahmedabad, Nehru condemned these demonstrations, which he described as 'opposed to the whole democratic conception and method'. They were, in his opinion, challenging the decision of Parliament 'in the streets and in a violent way' (*SWJN*, 34, 2005: 140).

Significantly, the deaths in the police shootings in Ahmedabad not only contributed to the growth of the Maha Gujarat movement but also diverted public attention from the 'battle for Bombay', that is, the conflict between the Marathi and Gujarati communities over the status of Bombay city. While the government of Bombay state tried to project itself as the protector of peace and of the people, especially after the attacks by Maharashtrians on Gujaratis in Bombay city in January 1956, now the same government was criticized not only by Maharashtrians but also by Gujaratis for having attacked the people.

On 9 September, the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad (MGJP) was founded and Indulal Yagnik became its first president. According to the *Times of India*, about a thousand representatives of various citizens' committees from Gujarat, Saurashtra and Bombay city gathered and declared that they would carry on a 'non-violent and constitutional' movement for a separate state of Gujarat (*TOI*, 10 September 1956: 7). The Parishad declared itself as a body independent of all the existing political parties. It in fact included people of 'various political shades' (Pathak et al. 1966: 59-60).

Along with the demand for the formation of a separate Gujarat, the MGJP also insisted that a judicial inquiry be made into the police shootings of August 1956. In his speech made at the public meeting at the Law College grounds to publicize the foundation of the MGJP, Yagnik stated that the 'big leaders of today' would be obliterated, while the memory of martyrs would remain immortal in the hearts of the people 'so long as the waters of the river Sabarmati flow into the ocean' (Yagnik 2011: 489). He then gave a call to fight the coming elections on the basis of Maha Gujarat. Here again the stories of martyrs were clearly incorporated into the narrative of Gujarati history, which projected the formation of a linguistic state as a historical necessity. Yagnik, in another meeting, also stressed that the idea of Gujarat state was taught to them by Gandhi himself, who supported the idea of linguistic provinces at the annual

session of the Congress in 1920. Yagnik also referred to the name of another well-known Gujarati leader, Vallabhbhai Patel (Sardar Patel), who, according to Yagnik, had stated at the time of the formation of the state of Saurashtra in 1948 that now only one dream remained and that was to create Maha Gujarat (Yagnik 2011: 488). Thus the names of the prominent Gujarati leaders in the nationalist movement, Gandhi and Patel, were also incorporated into the story of their struggle to establish Gujarat state. In reality, Patel was one of the members of the Linguistic Provinces Committee, whose report, published in 1949, strongly opposed the formation of linguistic states. However, in the discourse of the Maha Gujarat movement, the leaders of this movement were trying to fulfil the dreams of Gandhi and Patel, who were no longer alive, while Nehru and the Congress government at the time denied the wishes of these great leaders by refusing to create Maha Gujarat. Although the MGJP tried to project itself as a representative body of the Gujaratis as a whole, in reality its supporters were mainly limited to north and central Gujarat. The elite in south Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch did not show much interest in this movement even at this stage, as it was likely that the creation of the new state of Gujarat would result in the loss of Bombay city for them and the dominance of Ahmedabad over these areas (Phadke 1979: 189). However, the foundation of a united political organization for Maha Gujarat was an important step toward the bifurcation of Bombay state.

In October this year, the MGJP held a public meeting in Ahmedabad on the same day that Nehru was to address a public meeting in this city. Here again, the memory of martyrs was used effectively to attract public attention. A big map of Gujarat with its all borders lined with electric lights was placed behind the dais, and twenty-five lamps with ghee were placed on the dais and lighted by woman volunteers in the memory of the twenty-five martyrs (Yagnik 2011: 493, 499). Along with the hymn of Narmadashankar, songs about martyrs were also sung and according to Yagnik, the 'grief reached its climax' (Yagnik 2011: 500). It seems that this meeting of the MGJP was a great success, while Nehru's meeting, on the other hand, could not attract a large crowd (Bhatt n.d.: 72-9; Yagnik 2011: 501).

On 1 November a bilingual state of Bombay was established while the movements for the creation of Maharashtra and Gujarat both continued. In 1957, the Congress lost a significant number of seats in the Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. These results threw the future of a bilingual state into question. Most of the seats in western Maharashtra went to the candidates supported by the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS), the main organization that led the Samyukta Maharashtra movement. In the city of Bombay, the seats were shared almost equally by the Congress and the SMS. In Gujarat, the Congress won on the whole, though in Ahmedabad district, the MGJP-backed candidates gained more

seats than the Congress in the assembly election (Devavrat et al. 1966: 66, 76, 136; Sanghvi 1996: 148-9; Sirsikar 1995: 40-1). Even though the Congress still won as a whole in Bombay state, the results gave a clear warning to the Congress about the future of this bilingual state.

A further development was observed in November of the same year, when a meeting of the representatives of the SMS and the MGJP took place to discuss the possible forms of their future states. Now the MGJP accepted the claim of the SMS that Bombay city should be included in Maharashtra, while at the same time demanding safeguards be made in the new state to avoid discrimination on a linguistic basis (Phadke 1979: 258). The MGJP also suggested that financial support be provided by Maharashtra for Gujarat as the latter, without Bombay, would find it difficult to balance its budget. Now, as far as these organizations were concerned, the 'battle for Bombay' was no longer an obstacle for the bifurcation of Bombay state.

With the Congress still in power and the bilingual state of Bombay still intact, the MGJP began a series of demonstrations in August 1958, which further encouraged the central and state governments to revise their policy on the reorganization of states, now with much more urgency. This time the demonstrations focused on the issue of erecting martyrs' memorials, which succeeded in attracting great public attention and once again caused disturbances and deaths in Ahmedabad.

(3) AUGUST 1958: MEMORIES OF 'MARTYRS'

After the general elections in 1957, the influence that the MGJP had established in Ahmedabad and several other parts of Gujarat began to decline, to the relief of the state government led by the Congress. The membership of the MGJP rapidly decreased from 182,000 in December 1956 to 37,600 in June 1958 (Kotval 1959: 21). In the bye-elections to the Legislative Assembly, two seats previously held by the MGJP went to the Congress. In the elections to the Local Boards conducted in eleven districts, the Congress secured 360 out of 390 seats, while the MGJP won as few as 11 (Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee 1958: 3-4). The situation compelled the leaders of the MGJP in 1958 to revive large-scale demonstrations. This time, they chose the issue of erecting memorials for the martyrs of August 1956 as the aim of their campaigns.

The first series of campaigns were called the *khambhi satyagraha*. The MGJP leaders actively organized public meetings before 8 August, and in their speeches, the 'unjust' 'undemocratic' and 'atrocious' rule of the Congress was repeatedly criticized and the memory of the martyrs was invoked in a passionate tone (Kotval 1959: 26; Yajnik Papers, subject file 69). In his speeches, Yagnik associated the proposed memorials even with holiness and spiritual power. He argued that these memorials were

like idols and that 'no one can dare to touch them' (Kotval 1959: 28). A person who touched them, Yagnik stated, would experience burning pain. Yagnik even said that people would be most blessed if their blood was sprinkled on the martyrs' memorial. In his view, the erection of the memorials was a holy act. He argued that any further sacrifice would make the Chowk more sacred (Kotval 1959: 21). In public meetings, slogans such as '*Mahagujarat Zindabad*' (Victory to Maha Gujarat), '*Shahido Amar Raho*' (Make the martyrs immortal) and '*Shahid Smarak Banana Hai, Bhulo Mat, Bhulo Mat*' (We have to erect the martyrs' memorial. Don't forget, don't forget) were shouted (Yajnik Papers, subject file 69, 76).

On 8 August, which was declared by the leaders of the MGJP to be '*Shahid Din*', a large number of demonstrators marched toward the Congress House, where the memorials were erected—one on a traffic circle opposite the Congress House and the other on the footpath near Sardar Bhavan (*BLAD*, Part II, 6.4, 1958: 215-16; Kotval 1959: 31; Yagnik 2011: 640). The authorities did not take any action initially, which was interpreted by the demonstrators as their victory. The meeting held on that evening attracted a large crowd. According to the police record, as many as 75,000 people attended. In the words of the official commission that later investigated the cases of police gunfire in 1958, the memorials then acquired in the eyes of a large number of citizens a 'sentimental significance'. The District Magistrate observed, for instance, that people constantly gathered round the memorials and women offered prayers, which resulted in congestion on the road and required the authorities to take some action (Kotval 1959: 40). The stories of martyrs once again played a significant role in attracting public attention, which the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement tried to use in order to put pressure on the central and state governments to revise their policy on the reorganization of states.

The memorials were suddenly removed by the police in the early hours of 12 August in accordance with a government decision. The removal of the memorials triggered off serious disturbances in the city. A curfew was soon imposed and again there were cases of police shootings between 12 and 15 August, resulting in the deaths of three persons. Two of these were Muslims, and their deaths again contributed to the stories of Hindu-Muslim unity (Kotval 1959: 108-12; Yajnik Papers, subject file 69). The worst affected area was a ward called Khadia, where the Quit India movement had been active in 1942 (Kotval 1959: 47-8; Yajnik Papers, subject file 76; *TOI*, 14 August 1958: 7). Yagnik, as the leader of the MGJP, began a seven-day fast as a protest against the removal of the memorials (*TOI*, 13 August 1958: 1). Again, fasting was used here as the method of protest and of proving the legitimacy of their claim.

This *khambhi satyagraha* was soon followed by the *smarak satyagraha*,

which began on 17 August and which was conducted on a smaller scale but for a long period. Each day, several *satyagrahis* marched toward the place where the martyrs had been shot, which was now in the curfew area, to be arrested by the police. For example, on the first day, Yagnik and six others crossed the curfew line and were arrested (*TOI*, 18 August 1958: 1). The *smarak satyagraha* was continued by volunteers from different parts of Gujarati-speaking areas for 226 days until 1 April 1959 (Bhatt n.d.: 217-94).

Interestingly, the attitude that the central and state governments took in 1958 toward these demonstrations and the deaths as the result of police gunfire was quite different from their attitude two years previously. Soon after the deaths occurred in 1958, the then Chief Minister of Bombay state, Y.B. Chavan, had publicly stated that no democratic government could take pride in causing deaths and injuries by firing upon the people (*TOI*, 22 August 1958: 5). He stressed that he had in fact asked the police not to open fire for as long as possible. Chavan apparently even said that he was the 'saddest man' in the state after what had happened in Gujarat. In his words, there was no intention on the part of the government to hurt people's sentiments or to show any disrespect toward their 'martyrs' (*BLAD*, Part II, 6.4, 1958: 216). Two months later, the Bombay government appointed Justice Kotval to hold an inquiry into these cases, which again presents a striking contrast with the way in which Desai turned down the demand for a judicial inquiry into police shootings of 1956.

The change in attitude toward the demonstrations and the deaths could also be observed in the central government. In one of his letters to the Governor of Bombay state in March 1957, Nehru expressed the view that the people were excited not because of the formation of the bilingual state but because of 'the firings and the deaths and also the lack of any expression of regret and sympathy'. In this letter, Nehru also mentioned that he had met Chavan at that time and told him frankly that the Bombay government apparently lacked the human touch and this hurt people 'even more than any actual occurrence' (*SWJN*, 37, 2006: 322-3). Apparently both the central and state governments now found it necessary to show a more sympathetic attitude toward the victims of the police shootings. These people might not yet be *shahids* in official discourse, but they were no longer criticized as 'undemocratic' forces who were responsible for their own deaths. The repeated disturbances and the deaths, which were publicized widely, had already caused the governments considerable damage to their reputation and legitimacy, as they had become increasingly associated with violence. The coming general elections in 1962 also had to be considered. In view of this situation, it was not surprising that the Congress leadership began to change their attitude to the 'martyrs'.

This change on the part of the Congress was further facilitated by the development of the close relationship between the SMS and the MGJP.

On 16 August, the Executive Committee of the Bombay City Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti decided to organize a demonstration in front of the Council Hall two days later to protest against the removal of the martyrs' memorials and the police shootings in Gujarat (*TOI*, 17 August 1958: 1). The next day a mass meeting was held in Bombay under the same organization to observe 'Maha Gujarat Day'. S.M. Joshi, General Secretary of the SMS, presided over the meeting and declared that the SMS would send volunteers from Maharashtra to participate in the *smarak satyagraha* in Ahmedabad (*TOI*, 18 August 1958: 1). Around the same time, some leaders of the SMS also mentioned the plan to erect a martyrs' memorial at Flora Fountain in Bombay for those killed in the police shootings in November 1955 (*TOI*, 17 August 1958: 1; 18 August 1958: 1).

In the eyes of some Gujarati politicians, who did not support the Maha Gujarat movement, this development of an alliance between the SMS and the MGJP was rather puzzling. One Gujarati member in the Legislative Council pointed out that not a long time ago the leaders of the Maha Gujarat movement were busy criticizing Maharashtrians as they believed that the latter had been involved in the disturbances in Bombay city in 1956, in which the Gujaratis had been attacked and their shops looted (*BLCD*, Part II, 6.3, 1958: 119). However, stories of conflicts between Gujaratis and Maharashtrians with regard to the city of Bombay had now receded into the background.

At the end of 1959, the Indian government finally decided to divide Bombay state into Maharashtra (in which Bombay city was included) and Gujarat. Among the Gujarati politicians in the Congress, strong opinions still remained that the bilingual state of Bombay should be retained. This was indicated in the comment of Jivraj Mehta, who was to become the first Chief Minister of Gujarat, at a public meeting on 30 April 1960, a day before Gujarat was founded. He stated that although the Gujaratis did not actively support the bifurcation, they would accept the reality and work for the progress of the new state (*TOI*, 1 May 1960: 1).¹³ As the politicians who held such opinions continued to occupy important positions in the government of Gujarat, it took some time for the government to revise its stories of those who died in the Maha Gujarat movement.

In contrast, the Maharashtrian leaders in the Congress soon began to incorporate the stories of martyrs presented by the leaders of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement into the official discourse of the state. For instance, Chavan, who became the first Chief Minister of Maharashtra, now confessed that he had in fact supported the idea of a unilingual state of Maharashtra even when the central government decided to form the bilingual state in 1956 (*BLAD*, Part II, 10.9, 1960: 392). In 1961, a year after the bifurcation, Chavan publicly paid homage to the *shahids* in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, when the foundation stone of the martyrs' memorial was laid near Flora Fountain by the SMS on

21 November, the same date on which the police had opened fire in 1955 (TOI, 22 November 1961: 1, 7).

In Gujarat, the government changed its position more gradually than its counterpart in Maharashtra. In the Legislative Assembly, which was dominated by the Congress, the issue of the erection of a martyrs' memorial was sometimes raised but no action was taken by the government for several years. The Shahid Smarak Samiti (Martyrs' Memorial Committee) meanwhile continued to ask the government to allow them to erect a memorial in front of the Congress House (Bhatt n.d.: 213-14). On 8 August 1966, ten years after the incident, the MGJP organised a movement to demand the erection of a memorial, though it failed to attract much public support (Yajnik Papers, subject file 128; TOI, 9 August 1966: 1, 9). At last, in 1967, negotiations began between the government and the Shahid Smarak Samiti through a former leader of the Maha Gujarat movement, Brahmakumar Bhatt, who had by then become the General Secretary of the GPCC (Bhatt n.d.: 214). As more than ten years had passed since the incident, and as Gujarat had been developing steadily as an industrial and commercial state since the bifurcation, the Congress leaders were now willing to revise their interpretations of the Maha Gujarat movement and the deaths related to it. They gave permission to the Samiti to erect a memorial on the footpath in front of the Congress House. In 1968, the memorial was built by the Samiti, and its inauguration ceremony was held on 19 September, which was Gandhi's birthday according to the Vikram calendar (Bhatt n.d.: 216; Yagnik 2011: 653). Compared to its counterpart in Maharashtra, the size of this memorial was notably smaller. It consisted of a base, with inscriptions in Gujarati and English saying 'In the sacred memory of the martyrs who have fulfilled our dream of Maha Gujarat'. The statue above the inscriptions was that of a man holding a torch in his right hand and a book in his left, which clearly invoked the image of a student. The inauguration was presided over by Indulal Yagnik, who represented the Shahid Smarak Committee, in the presence of Brahmakumar Bhatt, as the General Secretary of the GPCC, the Minister of Education as the representative of the state government and others (Bhatt n.d.: 216). The families of *shahids* also attended the function. This event indicates that the state government at last agreed to incorporate the stories of martyrs into official discourse. In other words, the people who lost their lives in the police shootings in 1956 finally became *shahids* in the government's narratives and their role in the formation of Gujarat state was now officially acknowledged.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has described the way in which the deaths in the police shootings in Ahmedabad in 1956 were narrated by the leaders of the

Maha Gujarat movement and by those in the central and state governments. Eventually the stories of the former, that is, the stories of 'martyrs', gained significant influence in certain parts of Gujarat, as demonstrated in the results of the general elections in 1957 and the renewed *satyagrahas* and disturbances in 1958. With the formation of Gujarat state in 1960, these stories were incorporated into official discourse.

The stories of martyrs are politically utilized in certain contexts even today. On 1 May 2010, there was a series of functions to celebrate the jubilee of Gujarat state, organized by its government. Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, together with other leaders, paid tribute to those who dedicated themselves to the Maha Gujarat movement, first at the statue of Yagnik and then at the martyrs' memorial. Later, they also attended a function at the Sabarmati Gandhi Ashram, where the family members of martyrs were invited and honoured. On the same day, parallel functions were also held in Maharashtra, where its Chief Minister, Ashok Chavan, paid tribute to the martyrs of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement.¹⁴ It is evident that stories of martyrs continue to play important roles in proving the legitimacy of the present forms of the states as well as in invoking the attachment of the people to a notion of a linguistic identity. The fact that in the 1950s other possible ways of reorganizing states had been considered hardly attracted attention afterwards. Yet in view of a continuing situation in which the existing borders of states are questioned in several parts of India and in which demands are still made by different groups to create their own states, it seems important to re-examine various ideas concerning the reorganization of states that were proposed and almost implemented, but then receded into the background during this period.

NOTES

1. This development was observed in different regions in the subcontinent. For other regions, see, for instance, Dalmia (1997), Deshpande (2007), Orsini (2002), Ramaswamy (1997) and Isaka (2002).
2. For the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, see, for example, Hansen (2001), Palshikar (2007), Phadke (1979) and Stern (1970).
3. The central government and the commissions appointed by the government also noted the demand from some sections in Marathi-speaking Vidarbha for a separate state, which would be independent of Maharashtra (*Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission* 1948: 11; *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission* 1955: 122-5).
4. The leaders of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement claimed strongly that Bombay should be part of Maharashtra for the majority of its population were the Marathi speakers (*Maharashtra's Case* 1948; The Samyukta Maharashtra Parishad 1954; The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti 1956). It is noteworthy that B.R. Ambedkar, who expressed the view that Maharashtra and Bombay were 'one and integral' in 1948, later changed his opinion and began to argue that Maharashtra should be divided into four states, that is, Bombay city, Western Maharashtra, Central Maharashtra and Eastern Maharashtra (Ambedkar 1948, 1955). I have examined these debates on Bombay city in detail elsewhere (Isaka 2010, 2011).

5. The organizations that presented this view to the States Reorganisation Commission include the following: the Bombay Citizens' Committee, the BPCC, the GPCC, the Maha Gujarat Sima Samiti, the All-India Sindiwork Merchants' Association and the Parsi Federal Council (The Bombay Citizens' Committee 1954; Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee 1954; Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee 1954; Maha Gujarat Sima Samiti 1954; Thakurdas Papers). The Bombay Citizens' Committee was formerly known as the Bombay Committee and it included leading figures in Indian commerce and industry, such as Purshottamdas Thakurdas, J.R.D. Tata and Rameshwardas Birla (The Bombay Committee 1948; The Bombay Citizens' Committee 1954; Stern 1970: 45-6). It should be noted here that there had been opposition to the inclusion of Bombay city in Maharashtra not only among Gujaratis but also among non-Gujaratis.
6. As a result, new Bombay state was to comprise the territories of the existing Bombay state minus the Abu Road *taluk* of the Banaskantha district (which was to be merged into Rajasthan) and the Kannada region (to be merged into Mysore), plus Marathi-speaking Marathwada (then included in Hyderabad) and Gujarati-speaking Saurashtra and Kutch (*TOI*, 8 August 1956: 1).
7. In this bilingual state of Bombay, it was expected that the Gujaratis would become a minority as a linguistic community after Vidarbha and Marathwada were added (Sanghvi 1996: 147; Sinha 2005: 309).
8. This demonstration and the subsequent development of the Maha Gujarat movement were described in detail in memoirs written by the leaders of this movement, such as Bhatt (n.d.), Khambholja (2004) and Yagnik (2011).
9. In the debates in the Bombay Legislative Assembly in October 1956, one of the members enquired about the cases in which those who had not been involved in the movement had been shot dead by the police in Ahmedabad in August (*BLAD*, Part I, 32.6, 1956: 326; *BLAD*, Part II, 32.2, 1956: 57-8).
10. Among the victims, there was even a central government officer who was originally from Madras and who had come to Ahmedabad only two days before (Yajnik Papers, subject file 95, *Shahadat*: 14).
11. Later, a booklet entitled *Shahadat* (martyrdom) was published by those involved in the movement to record the details of the people who had died in the disturbances in August 1956.
12. In publications and records in English, his name was also written as Indulal Yajnik.
13. According to Sinha, the formation of the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, with Bombay becoming the capital of Maharashtra, was received by the newly formed state's elite and popular opinion within Gujarat with 'mixed feelings' (Sinha 2005: 181).
14. <http://www.hinduonnet.com>; <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>; <http://www.indianexpress.com>. 1-2 May 2010.

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