

Chapter 3

A Fortunate Family

From ancient times, the land of Gujarat has been instrumental in fostering countless facets of Hindu faith. This land has gifted us many of humanity's priceless gems, especially over the last two centuries. It has become a center for *brahmavidya*, spreading its divine radiance outwards, like the moon casting its soothing glow upon the surrounding constellations. In the Sahajanand era, Gujarat's glory had spread throughout India. While residing in the holy land of Saurashtra, Sahajanand Swami had shared a message of divine living with the universal spiritual community.

Nestled in that same Saurashtra region was the small town of Dhari, under the princely state of Baroda, about 25 miles southwest of Amreli. Dhari was blessed to become the birthplace of Yogiji Maharaj—a messenger of God who would continue to augment the

spirituality of Saurashtra's lineage of holy sadhus. While spiritual aspirants would surely be interested in a brief history of both the family and the town in which Yogiji Maharaj was born, I remain keenly aware of my limitations in providing even such a basic background of the extraordinary being that was Yogiji Maharaj—or in the immortal words of Kalidasa in the *Raghuvansh*,

“Kva sāryaprabhavo vamshaha kva
chālpaviāhayā matihi”

(What a distance between the luminous lineage descended from the sun and dim-witted me.)

Rural India of the eighteenth century remained a proud producer and nurturer of culture, mostly untouched by the winds of modernity. Within that India was the village of Dhari, inhabited mainly by good, simple folk. The geography and natural beauty of the village was aptly captured by a popular local saying: “Rocks, rivers, and breeze, these describe Dhari with ease.”

Kanjibhai Thakkar of the Lohana community had settled in the town of Dhari. He was a staunch devotee of Suryanarayan, and he would offer salutations to the Sun every morning and evening. He had a small business that provided for his simple lifestyle.

Around this time, Sadguru Ramanand Swami, who was considered the incarnation of Uddhav, was traveling around Saurashtra with a small band of followers and spreading the message of devotion to Krishna Bhagwan. Ramanand Swami's exceptional personality, inspirational teachings, and saintly life had earned him a place in the hearts of many within the region.

In 1774 (V.S. 1830)¹, Kanjibhai Thakkar traveled to the Bhal region for business. On his way back, he met Sadguru Ramanand Swami in the village of Machhiyav. Due to the positive spiritual impressions of his past lives, he instantly experienced a sense of inner serenity and a strong bond of love for Ramanand Swami. He accepted initiation from Ramanand

Swami and became his disciple on the spot. At Ramanand Swami's word, he forsook his worship of the Sun and became a devotee of Krishna Bhagwan.

In September 1786 (Aso, V.S. 1842), Kanjibhai's wife gave birth to a son named Jethabhai. As Jethabhai grew up, Kanjibhai was gratified to see that he was also a devout soul. From a young age, Jethabhai joined his father in the family business.

In January 1810 (V.S. 1866), Jethabhai had gone to Vadodara for some government work when he met his old friend Dhanjibhai, who was going to Dabhan. Ramanand Swami's successor, Bhagwan Swaminarayan, had organized a grand *yagna* in Dabhan in which Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami would be getting initiated as a sadhu. At Dhanjibhai's insistence, Jethabhai traveled with him to attend this sacred event in Dabhan. Upon having darshan of Shriji Maharaj's divine *murti*, Jethabhai was completely captivated. He placed a coconut, a packet of sugar crystals, and

a *kori* at Shriji Maharaj's feet and accepted initiation into the Satsang fellowship. Shriji Maharaj flashed him a compassionate smile, and due to his past spiritual merits, Jethabhai instantly attained the conviction that Shriji Maharaj was God.

So, in Dabhan, Gunatitanand Swami became a sadhu, and Jethabhai became a *satsangi* at precisely the same time. Meanwhile, back in Dhari, Jethabhai's wife gave birth to a son, and unbeknownst to him, Jethabhai became a father. Only when he returned home, fulfilled by Shriji Maharaj's compassion and his divine experience of the bliss of Satsang, did Jethabhai learn with delight about the birth of his son, whom he lifted up and tenderly embraced. Jethabhai named their son Virji.

His experience of the *yagna* at Dabhan gave Jethabhai a humbling appreciation of the grand festivals that Shriji Maharaj organized. As an expression of his devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Jethabhai began to observe his own dharma as explained in the scriptures.

Jethabhai had been captivated by Shriji Maharaj's divine *murti*, and in his heart, he felt a constant desire, and an occasional agitation, to have his darshan. So, when he heard that Bhagwan Swaminarayan was in Sarangpur, he decided to go there for darshan.

The monsoon rains had transformed Saurashtra into a verdant landscape enveloped in the vibrant fragrance of vegetation and renewal. Just as the gray thunder clouds laden with life-giving rains offered a new skyscape at every instant, similarly, to grant bliss to his devotees, Shriji Maharaj engaged in countless novel divine actions on every occasion. After bathing with the *paramhansas* in Sarangpur's Falgu River, Shriji Maharaj planted one foot on the muddy ground and launched himself onto his mare, Manki, to return to his accommodations. A deep impression of Maharaj's foot was left in the mud, and it instantly filled with the monsoon rains, forming a small muddy puddle. Jethabhai had been standing right behind this spot, and he

had witnessed the entire incident. With the divine glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in mind, he took a little of the sanctified water from that puddle into the palm of his hand and drank it. One of the devotees standing near him exclaimed, “Hey! You can’t drink that unfiltered, muddy water!”

Jethabhai declared, “Infinite Gangas and infinite Kashis become sanctified by the touch of God’s holy feet. So, when that God’s holy foot left an imprint in the mud, the water within that puddle is even greater than the holy water of these places of pilgrimage.”

All the devotees were astounded by the extent of Jethabhai’s understanding of God’s greatness.

Jethabhai’s son, Virji, had benefited from the holy association of Satsang from birth. Like his father, he had exceptional devotion for Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and consequently, the villagers had great respect for him. In those days, the people of the Lohana community typically earned a living selling vegetables, and

accordingly, Virjibhai ran a small greengrocer's shop. On the side, he would spend time in Thakorji's service in the newly built Swaminarayan mandir in Dhari. As sadhus from Junagadh mandir would often visit Dhari, Virjibhai regularly benefited from their company. He had received the blessings and witnessed the spiritual glory of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami as well as Jaga Bhakta Swami, Yogeshwara das Swami, Madhavcharandas Swami, Balmukund Swami, and other great sadhus. Due to their blessings, Virjibhai had a large and illustrious family.

Virjibhai had three sons and a daughter. His oldest son, Devchandbhai, was a commissioned lawyer who drew up land deeds and other legal documents for his clients. Devchandbhai was both extremely intelligent and very affectionate. In almost all instances, he would attempt to resolve his clients' disputes through compromise before the case went to court. Due to these and other virtues, he had garnered the

respect of both community leaders and townspeople.

Devchandbhai was deeply influenced by the theology of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya and its focus on improving one's life. His father, Virjibhai, had understood the greatness of Gunatitanand Swami through Jaga Swami, and he had passed this knowledge down to Devchandbhai. Devchandbhai had also regularly spent time receiving spiritual guidance from Jaga Swami. Moreover, he considered Balmukunddas Swami, Krishnacharandas Swami, and other torchbearers of the knowledge of Gunatit as his gurus.

Devchandbhai's youngest brother, Mohanbhai, was very devout. In his father, Virjibhai's old age, Mohanbhai had assumed responsibility for serving Thakorji and taking care of the town's Swaminarayan mandir. Although he continued his grocer's business, devotion to God was paramount to him. Early every morning, he would go to the mandir for

Thakorji's puja and *arti*, after which he would read scriptures. He would offer Thakorji *thal* at noon, then put him to sleep, and wake him in the afternoon. In the evening, he would do *sandhya arti* and sing *stotras* and kirtans to please God. Due to his devotional activities, he was unable to focus on his business or worldly responsibilities. Often, he would rush off to the mandir, leaving his shop open or unlocked. His preoccupation with the spiritual life led the townspeople to compare him to Janak Videhi.

One day, Mohanbhai was late for *mangala arti*. As he hurried to the mandir, he heard the melodious sounds of the *jhalar* and *nagara* and saw a divine glow coming from the direction of the mandir. Intrigued by the otherworldly lights, a woman of the carder community who lived adjacent to the mandir peeked over her fence to see the *arti* happening on its own, bathed in an ethereal radiance. She shouted in astonishment and ran to wake her husband. Her shouts caused her neighbors to come running. While everyone had heard the

sound of the *jhalar* and *nagara* coming from the mandir, by the time the neighbors arrived, the divine light had disappeared. However, the carder woman breathlessly described what she had seen.

Meanwhile, as Mohanbhai rushed to the mandir, he prayed to Shriji Maharaj to forgive his tardiness. As soon as he arrived, everyone surrounded him and began excitedly describing the miracle they had witnessed. Mohanbhai was overwhelmed by God's compassionate grace, and his heart and eyes filled with loving devotion. The townspeople bowed down before his sincere devotion.

Devchandbhai enjoyed a happy married life with Puriba, a gentle and affectionate woman from Babapur (Vakiya). Like her husband, Puriba remained engaged in the devotion and worship of Sahajanand Swami. She was a very patient and pragmatic woman who deftly managed the household through the peaks and valleys of householder life. The many virtues of

both parents were also evident in their children.²

From the modest lights enkindled one by one in this brilliant lineage, there would soon emerge the eternal light of Brahman that would cast its radiance upon all. With the advent of that divine being, the supreme spiritual knowledge would spread throughout the world.

¹ The Hindu lunar calendar system of Vikram Samvat has three prevalent variants, Chaitradi, Ashadhadi and Kartikadi, with the year beginning in the month of Chaitra, Ashadh and Kartik, respectively. All Hindu lunar calendar dates mentioned in the text are based on the Kartikadi standard, in which the year starts on Kartik sud 1. This is the standard prevalent in present-day Gujarat and is commonly known as just Vikram Samvat, abbreviated V.S. The corresponding Gregorian dates (common Western dates) used in the text have been calculated using Calendrical Calculations: The Millennium Edition by Edward M. Reingold and Nachum Dershowitz (Cambridge University Press, second printing, 2002). The Gregorian date will be placed in the main text, while the corresponding Hindu lunar calendar date will be placed in parenthesis next to it for reference.

² Devchandbhai's second eldest son, Kamalshibhai, was also a great devotee with a strong inclination for vairagya. The sadgurus of Junagadh were very pleased with him. Kamalshibhai worked as a clerk in the fabric store of Purushottam Modhvanik in Dhari. Both the owner and the clerk enjoyed a reputation for the highest integrity amongst the townspeople. After some time, Kamalshibhai wished to open his own fabric store, but he decided not to do so in Dhari as it would put him in direct competition with his boss. So, taking his parents' permission and the blessings of the sadgurus of Junagadh, he opened a fabric store twenty miles away, in Visavadar. His youngest brother, Nanjibhai, joined Kamalshibhai in Visavadar. Tribhuvanbhai did not have any children, and Chhaganbhai, by guru Shastriji Maharaj's command, served as the accountant and administrator of Akshar Mandir, Gondal for his entire life. The oldest

Chapter 3 — A Fortunate Family

brother, Vallabhbhai, had not married, and he remained in Dhari engaged in smalltime trade.