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Snapshot: Work-in-Progress: The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha on the Web

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Public Hinduisms

Edited by

John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy,
Maya Warrior, Raymond Brady Williams

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Snapshot

Work-in-Progress: The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha on the Web

Swaminarayan.org is the entry portal into the virtual dimension of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha or the BAPS Swaminarayan community.¹ Since the early years of computer mediated communication, BAPS has incorporated Internet technologies to nurture its specific Hindu devotional tradition. Before the development of the BAPS website, for example, Swaminarayan devotees with email accounts could receive an email known as 'Daily Prasang' containing an inspirational message. From 1999, or the beginning period of religious communities establishing themselves online, BAPS has maintained an address in cyberspace. Swaminarayan.org is mostly a English-language website where visitors can explore the various dimensions of Swaminarayan devotionalism. It is also an excellent arena in which to observe how BAPS represents itself towards its followers and non-followers.

¹ I thank the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, its lay leaders, devotees and especially the BAPS website volunteers and *sadhus* (through a male intermediary) who shared generously of their thoughts and experiences. In this chapter, all descriptions, quoted text and comments on Swaminarayan.org come from website visits in October and November 2009.

By **Hanna Kim**

The designers of the BAPS website appear to recognise the limitless quality of the Internet publics. The result is Swaminarayan.org where the needs of Internet-using devotees are met and BAPS is simultaneously exposed to a global audience. Indeed, like its changing publics, Swaminarayan.org is deliberately non-static: its website content providers call it a 'work in progress'.

THE BAPS VIRTUAL SPACE AT A GLANCE

The home page for Swaminarayan.org is the gateway and map to BAPS virtual geography. Against a backdrop of the Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham monument and the *tilak-chandalo*, or forehead markings specific to all Swaminarayan traditions, the opening page offers numerous entry points to explore BAPS's virtual space (see Plate 22.1).

On the far upper right hand of the home page are constantly updated links that will take visitors to the most recent photographs, articles and videos of a notable BAPS event, usually one where the current BAPS leader, Guru Pramukh Swami, is present. On the left side of the page, from the viewer's perspective, are the main categories for links that provide further levels of information. These main categories are grouped into three areas, each spatially clustered in a separate area on the home page: (a) 'Activities, Global Network, Bhagwan Swaminarayan & Divine Successors'; (b) 'What's new, Vicharan, BAPS News'; and (c) 'Introduction, Philosophy & Scriptures, Publications, Festivals, Calendar, Akshar Deri, Satsang Exams, Satsang Glossary, Daily Satsang, Enlightening Essays, Satsang Sabha, Prayer, ગુજરાતી [Gujarati], Thal, FAQs, and Herbal Care'. Near the bottom of the Web page are additional links for 'Download, E-Greetings, Guestbook, Newsletter, XML News Feed & Podcasting, Sitemap, Search, About Us, and Contact'. Further below there are regularly updated links on time-sensitive information, for example, to the 'Satsang Exam e-Registration', and immediate noteworthy news such as 'Diwali Celebrations at 10 Downing Street'. Finally, at the very bottom of the home page are links to individual BAPS websites whose Internet addresses are separate from the Swaminarayan.org site. These links are for 'kid.baps.org, Akshardham, London Mandir, Mystic India Film, and BAPS Charities'.

A closer look at the opening page suggests that there are at least two broad groups whom the website serves. Some of the main categories of information appear to be directed specifically to devotees, for example, Daily Satsang, Satsang Sabha and Satsang Exams. Other links, such as

Activities, Global Network; Bhagwan Swaminarayan & Divine Successors, Introduction and Philosophy & Scriptures seem directed to visitors who may not be a Swaminarayan follower. The general tone of the Web pages, including the 'FAQs', is fact-driven, with many of the Web pages reading somewhat like press releases. These pages, in other words, are distinctly explanatory and neutral in language rather than hagiographical. This is not to imply that the website is devoid of devotional sentiments. There are more explicitly devotional areas of the website, such as the 'Vicharan' link that takes visitors to essays sharing details of the *Guru's* activities, but all areas of Swaminarayan.org are mediated by the careful choice of words and well-edited English prose.²

Swaminarayan.org is directed towards devotees, potential devotees and the larger publics of non-devotees which could include possible donors, grant agencies and even virtual and real tourists. This polyphony can be experienced by linking deeper into nested pages of text, image and sound. Visitors could find themselves browsing vegetarian recipe pages where units and measurements are for American cooks but the pressure cooker instructions require the Indian whistle-counting brands (link via 'Thal') or, one may listen to video (a technology added in 2007) and audio clips of the current *guru* giving his blessings (link via 'Satsang Sabha') or, one could browse thousands of photographs and audio clips that could be used to study 21st century Vaishnava *murti* ornamentation or Gujarati devotional songs (link via 'New'). One could also parse how BAPS describes itself and its many charitable activities as well as see how devotees celebrate various Hindu festivals. There are essays on a range of Hindu texts, rituals and practices and in different parts of the website, years of visitors' comments about Swaminarayan.org, its temples, festivals and charitable events. Much of this information is presented in language that suggests BAPS's sensitivity to how Hindus and Hinduism might be perceived by a global audience unfamiliar with Hindu traditions.

UP-CLOSE: THREE WEBSITE LINKS

To see in closer detail how Swaminarayan.org addresses both devotees and non-devotees, we turn to three areas of the website, all accessible from the Swaminarayan.org home page.

² Though Swaminarayan.org is managed from Amdavad, Gujarat, a number of its content managers and providers have been educated outside of India.

Global Network of BAPS

Entering this node provides a snapshot of the transnational dimension of BAPS (see Plate 22.2).

The worldwide community is grouped into five geographic regions, Africa, India, the UK and Europe, Far East (specifically Australia and New Zealand) and the USA and Canada. Within these regions, as the Global Network page indicates, 'BAPS reaches out to millions of individual through a network of mandirs and centers ... they are permanent sources of peace and reformation for people of all ages, background and beliefs'. *Mandir*, or temple, is not defined here, but for those unfamiliar with this term, there is a Satsang Glossary link on the home page.

The Global Network pages share the addresses and telephone numbers for 'more than 700 mandirs and 3,300 centers'. For the casual visitor, the sheer numbers of temples and meeting centres and the ability to locate each address and telephone number conveys not only the geographical breadth of the BAPS community but its organisational capacity and willingness to share this information with its publics. For Swaminarayan devotees, this information enhances the planning of pilgrimages to Swaminarayan temples around the world. It makes accessible information that devotees would find useful when wishing to 'take *darshan*' or to view the *murtis* (iconic representations of deities) in specific temples. Not incidentally, for devotees who may not be aware of the location of more recently opened temples and centres, the Global Network becomes an indispensable resource.

Introduction

Visiting the 'Introduction' page on the BAPS website, one arrives at a concise statement of BAPS self-representation.

Many ask, 'How can you mix spirituality and social service?' We ask, 'How can you separate the two?' Those who wish to sincerely serve society must be spiritually pure and only those who are spiritually pure can sincerely serve society! Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) is a socio-spiritual Hindu organization with its roots in the Vedas ... Founded on the pillars of practical spirituality, the BAPS reaches out far and wide to address the spiritual, moral and social challenges and issues we face in our world. Its strength lies in the purity of its nature and purpose. BAPS strives to care for the world by caring for societies, families and individuals. (<http://swaminarayan.org/introduction/index.htm>, accessed 6 November 2009)

From this 'Introduction' page, one might discern an emphasis on BAPS as a multipurpose social and humanitarian organisation. The 'Introduction' page and corresponding links, while locating BAPS as a Hindu community, are careful not to alienate visitors, some of whom may hold assumptions about Hinduism or contemporary Hindu groups. Instead, the sense one derives from these introductory pages is of a community translating its 'spiritual' foundation into a wide range of social service activities.

Daily Satsang

Visiting the 'Daily Satsang' section of Swaminarayan.org, one senses a change of public focus (see Plate 22.3).

For one, there is no explanatory text. Whereas many of the BAPS Web pages provide explanations, entering the 'Daily Satsang' page requires specific devotional knowledge about what to do with these pages and how to respond to the daily changing photographs of Swaminarayan *murtis* and of Guru Pramukh Swami taken in temples and other settings from around the world. Devotees can visit these pages, take *darshan* of the *murtis* and read the changing selection of inspirational lessons (in English and Gujarati). A woman with whom I stayed in London in 2008 shared that Daily Satsang allowed her to maintain her devotional practices at home rather than make travel arrangements with her in-laws to go to the temple. This, she noted, had created 'greater harmony in the household.' From the opinions of website visitors (accessible via 'Guestbook' on the home page), 'Daily Satsang' and related pages which allow devotees to hear and see their *Guru's* voice are among the most popular and appreciated by Swaminarayan devotees.

FORMS OF PUBLIC REPRESENTATION

Though it was not intended to be an archive, Swaminarayan.org has become a generous repository of materials. This is evident from published scholarship confirming that scholars too have found Swaminarayan.org to be a useful archival source. In fact, the Internet and its capacity to be a powerful instrument of discourse circulation has compelled BAPS content providers to upload more materials for sharing.

From the Gujarati students studying in China or working in Africa, the men and women, young and old, who are staying away from home or visiting relatives in India, or the devotee who lives too far away to attend a Swaminarayan temple, the website has made the acquisition of Swaminarayan

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knowledge and more particularly, the image of *Guru*, his voice, words and postures, much more accessible. Recent and more long-standing devotees openly comment on how their regular visits to the website have inspired them to discard certain habits and to seek improvement in their relations with family, friends and co-workers. One 'Guestbook' contributor, for example, announced that his bad behaviour as a father has been eliminated by daily visits to the BAPS website.

As for the thoughts of non-devotees' found on the opinion pages, most are comments on BAPS temples and monuments. The general tenor of these responses is one of appreciation and awe at BAPS's volunteers, their *Guru* and this community's success in sustaining 'Indian Culture' and supporting social and humanitarian services.

VIRTUAL AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

The constantly refreshed content of Swaminarayan.org nurtures devotional needs and strengthens devotees' ties to BAPS. Yet, while the BAPS website is substantially motivated by the devotional needs of its followers, it also conveys a more complex portrait of a global Hindu community and its efforts to represent itself in the contexts of multiple and competing discursive spaces. Mark C. Taylor has argued that we are living in a pivotal moment characterised by 'the formation of network culture' (2001: 20). Technologies underwrite this new form of culture that departs from predecessor forms in its multiplication of and simultaneous reliance on Web-like networks. A noticeable result of network culture is the generation of new kinds of relations and discursive logics. Swaminarayan.org is a clear expression of a technologically motivated network that has extended the BAPS community beyond its already transnational dimensions and engendered new relations between BAPS and its existing and potential publics. This both narrows and complicates the space between BAPS's need to ensure the continuity of its particularities and to broaden its appeal. Over time, and no doubt supported by even newer technologies, it will be interesting to see how and to what degree the content and language of Swaminarayan.org balances its devotional priorities alongside its visible willingness to engage with its virtual publics.

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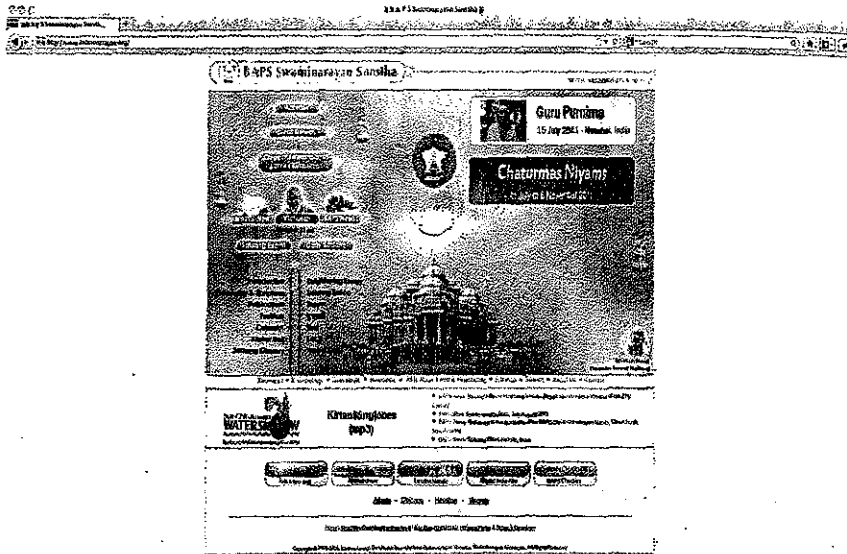


Plate 22.1 Swaminarayan.org Home Page

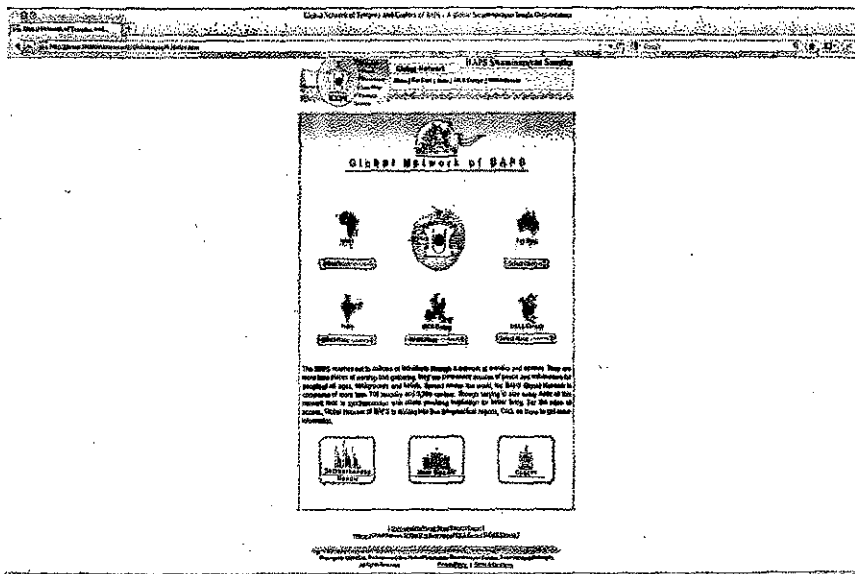
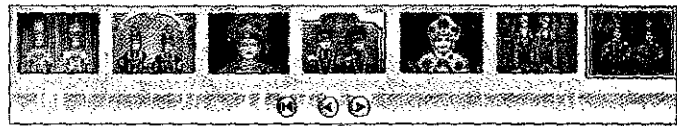


Plate 22.2 Swaminarayan.org Global Network Page



Shri Akshar Purushottam Maharaj, Raleigh, NC, USA



Latest Updates

BAPS News: Rhador's Digital Presence Swaminarayan Akshardham a 'Wonder of the 21st Century' (14 days)	Vicharan: Video - Swaminari in Maribak (27 days)	Enlightening Essays: Brijesh SHRI Yogi (Part 7) (17 days)
Prediction: Swaminarayan Bites, July-August 2011 (4 days)	BAPS News: Rath Yatra by BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Kolkata, India (17 days)	Original / Satsang: Santosh, Anandakrishna, Shriprasad Swaminarayan Rangitavav...Panchalima Aushadhi rangi ni rangi... (23 days)
BAPS News: Mission to Investigate the New BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Christchurch, New Zealand (6 days)	Vicharan: MDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Vicharan: Maribak (11 days)	Vicharan: MDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Vicharan: Bharuch (16 days)
BAPS News: Satsang Shree, Kolkata, India (6 days)	Announcements: Tama Changes, Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi (16 days)	BAPS News: Rathiyatra Celebration with Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Bharuch, India (16 days)
Video: Guru Purnima Celebration, Mumbai, India (6 days)	Announcements: Guru Purnima Announcement (16 days)	Announcements: Extra Nyamra for Devotees During Chaturthas (16 days)
Vicharan: Guru Purnima Celebration with Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Mumbai, India (16 days)	Guest Book: Opinions of visitors of June month regarding website (17 days)	