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The BAPS Swaminarayan Temple Organisation and Its Publics

Hanna H. Kim
Adelphi University

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Public Hinduisms

Edited by
John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy,
Maya Warrier, Raymond Brady Williams
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The BAPS Swaminarayan Temple Organisation and Its Publics

To think about the Swaminarayan Sanstha is to think as well about its publics. By this I mean that both the Swaminarayan community and those outside of it, that is, devotees, potential devotees and non-devotees, are located in discursive worlds, some shared, some barely overlapping and some without points of intersection. The 'publics' as construed here is neither a monolithic nor a static entity but a shifting humanity with multiple allegiances. It is constituted of people, institutions, laws and governments whose organising discourses mediate and interrogate Swaminarayan devotional practices. The general argument I will be making here is that in order to understand the transnational Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha or the

By Hanna Kim
BAPS Swaminarayan community, whether at the level of its devotional objectives, its institutional structures or its public representation of itself, we need to understand Swaminarayan practices and sensibilities as enabled by already existing body of discourses and the interface of these with a broader universe of discursive formations and power relations. BAPS is actively trying to situate its devotional tradition within competing or conflicting discursive contexts (Kim, 2010; Reddy, this volume, Chapter 23). By considering the interface of Swaminarayan devotional ideals with other circulating discourses, we can see some of the ways in which BAPS manages to thrive amidst the ‘messiness’ and ‘disorderliness’ of transnationalism (Ong, 1999; Srinivas, 2010; Zavos, 2012).

Swaminarayan practices are neither reducible to their own desired ontologies nor the political and ideological formations that inform their various publics. Yet, a closer look at how the BAPS Swaminarayan organisation engages with different publics underscores how this community employs variable strategies in order to better support its own devotional objectives and conceptions of living in the world. It is this orientation, one that does not overtly subvert hegemonies but instead appears willing to live within them, that makes BAPS an easy target for critics who view BAPS as passive or insufficiently distanced from institutions of power. In this chapter, we look at two events, separated in time and place, and reflective of the discursive complexities that a transnational devotional movement must negotiate. The events that I examine are: (a) the attack on the Swaminarayan Gandhinagar Akshardham complex in 2002, in Gujarat; and (b) two planning board meetings in 2008 involving BAPS and the township of Robbinsville in the state of New Jersey, US. How BAPS chose to respond to these events conveys the extent to which this organisation and its leaders are very much aware of the conflicting discursive and transnational political realities in which they are located. Furthermore, by looking at the ways in which BAPS acted and reacted in Gandhinagar and Robbinsville, we can see that it is neither willing to alienate its various publics nor to capitulate wholly to their expectations.

1 The Swaminarayan community in this chapter refers only to the BAPS community. ‘BAPS Swaminarayan’ is a somewhat redundant usage but it serves the purpose of clarifying the specific Swaminarayan community to which this chapter refers.


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LOCATIONS AND ONTOLOGIES

Founded in 1907, BAPS has undergone tremendous institutional transformation over the last 100 years. Originally a devotional or bhakti movement exclusively based in Gujarat and then East Africa, BAPS today is a transnational Hindu community that counts 1 million members throughout the world. In its successful transformation from a regional sect into the most visible of the numerous Swaminarayan groups, BAPS has attracted interest, admiration and criticism throughout its existence. In many ways, BAPS has, from its inception, been motivated by the need to define itself not only for its followers but for the world of outsiders, including other vaishnava sampradayas, colonial administrators, hostile Hindu organisations and, more recently, people, communities and countries who have little or no familiarity with Hindu traditions.

BAPS describes itself variously, in English, as ‘worldwide civic and religious organization’, a ‘socio-spiritual’ group, ‘non-profit charitable organization’ and an ‘NGO in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations’. The ability of the BAPS organisation to fulfil requirements, legal, social and governmental, provides a clear indication of its capacity to adapt to discursive constructs beyond its origin in colonial Gujarat. Not surprisingly, how BAPS categorises itself for its publics is not necessarily how its devotees, who are known as satsangis, would classify themselves or BAPS. For satsangis, BAPS is foremost a devotional community. Among the first reasons that satsangis will share for their participation in BAPS is their gratitude for having a satpurush guru, a living example of a perfect devotee, to guide them in life. It is through the relationship that devotees form with the guru that makes possible the process of comprehending the existence and power of the ultimate existential entity known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

The founder of BAPS, Shastriji Maharaj, highlighted the relationship between guru and bhagwan, also, respectively, referred to as Akshar and Purushottam, and hence this is reflected in the full name of the BAPS Swaminarayan community. It is this indispensable role of guru in guiding devotees towards knowledge of bhagwan that distinguishes the BAPS community from the predecessor ‘original’ Swaminarayan groups.

The connection between actions directed towards achieving desired ontological states and publicly visible BAPS activities can be seen in its temple construction and humanitarian service. The temple construction projects, for example, while appearing to be outwardly directed to wider
publics, are not separable from devotees’ hopes to transform their bodily selves into their ontological objective, of becoming like their guru by acquiring knowledge of the eternal self (atma). Satsangis desire to ‘please Bapa’ and in this guru-bhakta, or teacher-disciple, dynamic, an intense motivation for self-transformation and ethical living arises. Committed satsangis are seeking experiences that will promote the transformation of their beings into a desired ideal of the devotional self. BAPS’s transnational expansion has been made possible by the commitments of satsangis who have given their resources and skills to building a global BAPS community. Looking more closely, it is the ability of BAPS leaders to intervene with the not always consonant norms and assumptions of its publics that accounts for the global success of Swaminarayan bhakti.

I turn now to two unrelated events in recent Swaminarayan history, the September 2002 attack on Gandhinagar Akshardham in Gujarat, India, and two planning board meetings in 2008, in New Jersey, US. BAPS responded to these events, separated by time and space, in ways that underscore its sensitivity to its multiple and transnational publics. Each event provides a basis for analysing the translation of devotional ideals into ethical positions that affect both satsangis and their publics. From the BAPS perspective, its engagement with its publics underwrites its devotees’ abilities to pursue their devotional objectives which, arguably, are not rooted in territory. Yet, these case studies also show how a deterritorialised community is nevertheless dependent on an organisational structure that responds to its multiple global sites in highly context-specific ways. BAPS has gone global but its publics, as will become evident, are situated in local and regional arenas, informed by their own politics, histories and discourses.

SEPTEMBER 2002: GANDHINAGAR, GUJARAT

Situated on 23 acres of landscaped grounds, Swaminarayan Akshardham in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, is the first large-scale temple complex constructed by BAPS. It was inaugurated in 1992 and though somewhat eclipsed by the

3 See Kim (2007 and 2009) for further discussion about Swaminarayan temple construction projects, the publics in which these are located and their connection to Swaminarayan devotional ontologies.

4 For the considerable material on the Gandhinagar Akshardham 2002 attack, from newspaper clippings in English and Gujarati to internal BAPS Swaminarayan records and publications, I sincerely thank Dipal Patel, Yogendra Trivedi, Sadhu
more recently built New Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham inaugurated in 2005, Gandhinagar Akshardham nevertheless attracts over 2 million visitors annually.

In the late afternoon of 24 September 2002, two gunmen entered the Akshardham grounds and, with automatic weapons and hand grenades, fired at BAPS volunteer workers and visitors. Gujarat security forces and Indian National Security Guard elite commandos were summoned and operated through the night to capture the gunmen who were killed early the next morning. Thirty-three people died and 70 were injured during the attack. As news of the attack travelled around the world, for those familiar with recent Gujarat history, the memory of the horrific communal violence following the Godhra incident of February 2002 was very present. BAPS devotees around the world were alerted to the tragedy by telephone calls, faxes and email and many congregated at Swaminarayan temples where all through the night, they kept a prayer vigil, chanting the Swaminarayan mantra silently and in unison (dhun), while doing mala japa or turning rosary-like beads. Throughout the evening of 24 September and into the early hours of 25 September, television and radio coverage was extensive. Even in Denmark, where I was at the time, the CNN international television news station provided continuous coverage of the Akshardham siege, frequently characterising the attack site as having being built by a wealthy and well-connected Hindu group in Gujarat with a large following in Europe and America. The CNN coverage persistently hypothesised that the attackers, whose origins were unknown at the time of live coverage, were retaliating either for the communal violence again Muslims following the Godhra incident of February 2002 or for the ongoing India–Pakistan tensions, including the Indian occupation of Kashmir. These speculations rested on a communal framing of an already tense Gujarat society; satsangis later told me, this perspective was also present in the Gujarat media coverage. Some BBC and American reporters stretched the given-ness of

Mangalnidhidas and other BAPS sadhus who, through a male intermediary, very graciously assisted my work. For their thoughts during the time of the attack and for years afterwards, I thank the satsangis who took time to speak with me. I especially thank Shruti Patel for her assistance with Gujarati translations and for her willingness to engage with my ongoing fieldwork.

On 27 February 2002, a railway carriage of Hindu men, women and children, stopping in the town of Godhra, Gujarat, was burned, and all were killed. This ‘Godhra’ tragedy was followed by what some reporters have declared to be an unprecedented and prolonged degree of violence in many parts of Gujarat.
Muslim grievances even further, intimating that the Akshardham attack might be an extension of the destruction of the New York World Trade Center buildings in September 2001.

The Gujarat capital city of Gandhinagar is some 32 kilometres away from Ahmedabad, the centre of BAPS administration. As the attack unfolded, the leader and ‘president’ of BAPS, Guru Pramukh Swami, was 500 kilometres away, in Sarangpur. In Gujarat, satsangis I knew shared that as the attack was occurring, they knew that their 80-year-old Pramukh Swami was not in Ahmedabad due to illness. Yet, as the attack unfolded, ended and as a bandh, or strike, was imposed by national and Gujarat state leaders, Pramukh Swami’s quiet voice could be heard on radio and television throughout the areas surrounding Akshardham. The brief message, in Gujarati and in the first person, addressed ‘the people of Gujarat and India’ and plainly enjoined them ‘to maintain peace and unity in the wake of this national tragedy’. Pramukh Swami’s appeal did not speculate or suggest the attackers’ national or religious identity and it did not convey a sense of personalised victimhood. Satsangis pointed out to me that Pramukh Swami’s message effectively asked Gujaratis not to become violent owing to their own interpretation of which community the attackers belonged to.

Indeed, in the days and weeks following the Akshardham attack, there were no public outbreaks of violence. Within a fortnight, the complex was reopened.7 Once again visitors streamed into the landscaped grounds, the only visible change being the addition of police presence, metal detectors and separate areas for ladies’ and gents’ ‘frisking’. After one year, there was a memorial and prayer event to acknowledge the dead and wounded in the Akshardham attack. Since then, there have been no further public memorial events. The BAPS organisation announced that it did not wish to revive difficult and painful memories.8

Obscured by these already well-publicised facts are several details that require further scrutiny and provide a more nuanced portrait of the BAPS organisation and its leaders’ reactions during the Akshardham ordeal.

One of the BAPS volunteers killed at Akshardham was a British-educated sadhu (monk). Like all fully initiated BAPS sadhus, Pujya Parmeshwar Swami wore only saffron-coloured clothes, a recognisable sign of a Hindu renunciate. Throughout the Swaminarayan diaspora, as the news of the death of a BAPS sadhu became known, it was relayed, as it was with me, in whispered and pained voices. The satsangis with whom I spoke suggested that overt publicising of the death of a ‘sadhu in saffron’ was not wise, no matter how devastated and angry many felt about his death. In fact, as I and many satsangis learned, the news of Parmeshwar Swami’s death was consciously suppressed by the BAPS leadership following the Akshardham attack. ‘We did not inform the press and the press was not invited to see the deceased sadhu in his blood-soaked robes’, shared one BAPS volunteer who was at Akshardham on the day of the attack. By this volunteer’s own reckoning, the more aggressively militant and Hindu nationalist groups in Gujarat were thus deprived of knowing that a ‘Hindu holy man was gunned down in a place built by his own community’. I confirmed this reasoning with other lay leaders in BAPS, one of whom shared in carefully chosen words that BAPS ‘is not about criticising other faiths’ and then he broke off his thoughts, suggesting that it would not be appropriate to say more given that ‘BAPS is after all a Hindu organisation that must live with its Hindu neighbours’.

- Throughout the Akshardham ordeal and afterwards, the BAPS guru, sadhus and householder leaders made no speculative or qualified references to the national origins of the two gunmen. Even following the media disclosure of potential evidence of origin and motive, BAPS in its public events and published materials refrained from making connections between itself, the attackers or Hindu-Muslim communal violence. And, to the surprise and relief of many, there was no post-Akshardham ‘communal outbreak’. As to why there was no violence similar to that following the Godhra tragedy of February 2002, some journalists and analysts of Gujarat speculated that either Gujaratis were weary from the riots and violence or that Indian national and regional leaders had finally prevailed in convincing people to remain non-violent. From the perspective of satsangis, it was their Guru

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9 Conversation in Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham, December 2005.
10 Ibid.
12 A more cynical suggestion is that Gujarat’s Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, who is considered by many to have a role in the Godhra violence, was in danger of losing his political clout if further riots occurred in Gujarat.
Pramukh Swami’s repeated calls for ‘prayer’ and ‘praying for peace’ that had allowed Gujarat to avoid further violence. Their guru’s simple words, satsangis felt, had the power to diffuse anger and mayhem.

In BAPS temples throughout the world, at condolence events, in BAPS publications and in the later speeches of Pramukh Swami and senior sadhus in the days following the attack, the singular emphasis was on the need for prayers: prayers for the peace of Gujarat, the nation of India, the families of the dead and wounded and for all people that they should not suffer tragedies such as that of Akshardham. ‘Pray’, Pramukh Swami urged, at a memorial event held four days after the attack, to have ‘strength’, that is the strength to overcome tragedy and to be inspired by right action. At the same event, after acknowledging the sadness and pain of the Akshardham attack, Pramukh Swami invoked Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his emphasis on not discriminating based on caste or community (nat-jat). Pramukh Swami noted that the ‘single point’ of Bhagwan Swaminarayan was to see dharma as sadacari, or ethical or virtuous living, and that this ‘beautiful’ way of seeing dharma allows that ‘whichever God one follows, whichever dharma one follows, follow it properly, but ethical behaviour remains a central matter’. Further in his ashirvad (blessing), Pramukh Swami noted that in a time of tragedy, one should pray to Bhagwan and that ‘Bhagwan is sitting to dispense fair justice’ and therefore, ‘there is no need for us to be the dispenser of justice’. Thus, ‘let us pray to Bhagwan that he gives everyone sadbuddhi (virtuous thoughts) and also gives everyone the strength to endure the sorrow at the time of such an event as this one’.

With its unadorned language and spare tone, Pramukh Swami’s memorial message seemed to some observers of Gujarat as insufficiently forceful and even passive. There was no strong denunciation of communal violence, nor any condemnation of the two attackers. Instead, satsangis and others who attended Akshardham memorial events noted that Pramukh Swami’s message consistently focused on prayer to a higher entity, Bhagwan, as the means by which people could achieve peace within themselves. Moreover, through prayer and ethical living, Pramukh Swami has many times stated that satsangis living for others’ happiness rather than others’

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14 For the Gujarati text, see Swaminarayan Prakash (2002: 18–20).
misery would generate happiness for themselves. Pramukh Swami closed his memorial speech by noting that distinctions made by people in life would have no relevance in death, and thus, why the insistence on attachment to these sources of misery?

To complicate the charge of BAPS’s passivity to Gujarat’s communal ‘problem’ is the perhaps less well-known response by Guru Pramukh Swami to a visit by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi whose critics hold him responsible for the 2002 Godhra violence. Modi had travelled to Sarangpur to see Pramukh Swami. As reported in the Gujarati press, Modi asked Pramukh Swami to ‘make a statement condemning the ISI [Inter-Service Intelligence] and Pakistan for sponsoring the attack’.

Pramukh Swami’s response, as reported, was to emphasise ‘restraint’ and to point out:

Whatever has happened at Akshardham has happened. Whoever has done it, we don’t want to blame anyone. There is no need to drag any names into this now. And I think you should also stop referring to the ISI and ‘Miya Musharraf’ and make efforts to maintain peace.

These comments of Pramukh Swami were confirmed by a senior BAPS sadhu, Vivekjivan Swami, who echoed his guru’s words and added ‘He [Pramukh Swami] told him [Modi] that this is not the time to do anything irresponsible or blame anyone for anything. He asked for peace in the society to be maintained’.

In my conversations with BAPS lay leaders who were in communication with Pramukh Swami and senior sadhus during and after the Akshardham attack, these leaders recalled that politicians and organisers of pro-Hindutva or Sangh Parivar organisations approached BAPS to offer condolences as well as suggestions for responding to the attack of a prominent ‘Hindu pilgrimage and tourist site’. BAPS firmly declined to endorse any of these visitors’ suggestions and offers, including those for organised public vigils and ‘purification rites’ in remembrance of the dead. Some of these visitors later threw charges of cowardice against BAPS and Pramukh Swami for choosing not to leverage the Akshardham attack in furtherance of broader

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15 For the Gujarati text, see Swaminarayan Prakash (2002: 19).
16 ‘Modi gets a lesson from Pramukh Swami: asks for a hand, gets a rap: show restraint, leave ISI, Pak out of this, he’s told’, in Sunday Express (Indian Express), by Janyala Sreerivas, 29 September 2002.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
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Hindu nationalist agendas. One of my interlocutors shared that ‘people have called me, people I know personally ... they are angry saying that Pramukh Swami and we are all cowards ... [They are saying that] we should be doing more than just offering prayers’. In contrast to the charge of cowardice, satsangis pointed out that Muslim clerics had been personally invited by BAPS to speak with Pramukh Swami and to attend a prayer meeting. An editorial in the Indian Muslim newspaper *The Milli Gazette*, pointedly observed:

The poignant irony of it is that the Swaminarayan leadership publicly forgave the attackers, and used the occasion of the reopening of the temple for reconciling the alienated Hindus and Muslims by bringing Muslim leaders to the condolence meeting.... Even Modi, who was there at the meeting, had to talk of brotherhood.

This recounting of BAPS’s responses to the Gandhinagar Akshardham 2002 attack underscores certain actions and dispositions on the part of Pramukh Swami and BAPS leaders’ and their interactions with their publics. This publics, within and beyond Gujarat, received several consistent messages: of the capacity of prayer to ease grief and defuse violence, of the possibility of a peaceful and stable society if human-created distinctions and attachments could be transcended and of the need to live a life that focuses on other’s happiness.

In the context of Gujarat, where violence and instability have often been attributed to the politicisation of religious, caste and community distinctions, BAPS contravened by rejecting mobilising discourses that could well have prompted another communal disaster. Thus, the irony of a well-known Hindu group whose literal architectural representation of devotion was attacked, turning this occasion not into a further reification of secular or communal ideals but the promotion of strategies that might foster individual responsibility for virtuous and ethical living. In the immediate years following the attack, satsangis commented in different conversations that they were saddened and angry that people of all ‘caste and creed’ were killed in Akshardham, a place that clearly attracted visitors from many backgrounds. Pramukh Swami’s messages following the attack point to another mode of response, one influenced by BAPS’s alertness to the political and governmental logics of its Gujarat location and its own unswerving objective to ensure the survival of BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu

19 Telephone conversation on 13 March 2009.
traditions. Though relayed in sectarian terms, Pramukh Swami’s messages nevertheless emphasised the need to see differences as humanly constructed and therefore transcendable.

OCTOBER 2008: ROBBINSVILLE, NEW JERSEY

In the US, BAPS, similar to other recent immigrant groups in search of sites for ‘houses of worship’, has frequently purchased existing buildings in order to subsequently transform them into mandirs or Hindu temples, or it has purchased land on which to build a temple. Often not discussed with much detail in the South Asia diaspora literature are the various barriers for communities and organisations such as BAPS to successfully retro-fit or construct a ‘purpose-built’ Hindu temple. These obstacles are not obviously informed by racism or ideological bias, but along with various political and legal processes, they assure the maintenance of certain ideals of community and space.21 In its navigation of local planning authorities, BAPS realised that a significant hurdle to temple building projects was the general publics’ ignorance about Hinduism and Hindus and a corresponding suspicion about BAPS’s motivations and activities. Indeed, BAPS’s history of mandir building in the US beginning in the 1970s reveals a variety of public responses framed within predictable concerns about traffic flow, building aesthetics, noise pollution and even worries over cooking smells.22

On the evenings of 22 and 29 October 2008, BAPS and its team of lawyers and experts in engineering, architecture, environment, traffic and BAPS Hinduism went before the members of the Robbinsville planning board.23

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21 For excellent and detailed accounts of the challenges faced by Hindu and other groups in the UK context when trying to build ‘houses of worship’, see Gale (2008), Gale and Naylor (2002) and Nye (2001). I thank John Zavos for these references.

22 During a Parsippany, New Jersey (US) town planning meeting where BAPS hoped to receive approval for a zoning variance, a member of the public stepped forth and demanded to know what BAPS would do to control ‘food odors’ that would emanate from the mandir kitchen.

23 In full disclosure, I was asked by BAPS to speak on their behalf, if called by their attorney. My role as an ‘expert witness’ was based on my long-term fieldwork and scholarly engagement with BAPS. This relationship between interlocutor, in this case a Hindu organisation, and academic in the context of local planning boards is not unique. Malory Nye and Kim Knott, scholars of the ISKCON community in the UK both testified as expert witnesses in cases connected to the ISKCON group’s efforts to secure local planning authorities’ permission for the use of an existing place for ‘public worship’. See Nye (2001).
The 102 acre land purchased by BAPS in this small New Jersey township of population of 10,275 (Census 2000) was already categorised as 'permitted use' including religious purposes. BAPS was seeking approval for the construction of five buildings within a temple complex to be called ‘Hindu American Religious Center’. The setting of the planning board hearings was a room in a senior citizens’ community centre. On the evening of the hearings, seated in the front of the room were the 18 people, including board members, township experts and consultants, arranged in a semicircle. The BAPS ‘team’ was seated before the board in chairs grouped around rectangular tables. Arrayed around the sides and back of the room were numerous ‘exhibits’. These exhibits included architectural renderings of the proposed buildings propped on easels, along with aerial images of the overall site, drawings of projected building elevations and large format colour photographs of temple carvings and proposed landscaping.

There are a few moments in the two nights of hearings that provide points from which to analyse how BAPS was sensitive to its publics, in this case those with the power to vote on whether BAPS would receive approval to construct its proposed temple complex. As each BAPS expert witness spoke before the planning board, it was notable to hear much emphasis placed on the ‘religious’ character of the proposed buildings. Legally, the land was already zoned for ‘houses of worship’ and yet each expert appeared intent on reassuring the board that the proposed buildings would support an identifiable and recognisable religious purpose. For example, the project engineer and planner observed:

In many ways, it [BAPS proposal] is a unique application. In many ways, it is an example of other houses of worship ... The facility is extraordinarily unique. Its construction is unique ... but from other standpoints, it is not so different from other houses of worship ... [there are] youth groups, weekly meetings. After services, they serve full vegetarian meals ... there is nothing abnormal here ... there are misperceptions out there, on the internet.

Concerning how the temple complex would fit in the small village of Robbinsville, several experts took care to acknowledge the character of Robbinsville and thereby its suitability for the proposal. One said: ‘As

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24 I thank Kanu Patel, Pankaj Patel, Trushar Patel and Sunil Suthar for their generous assistance in making my time in Robbinsville, official and anthropological, possible. All quoted statements come from notes taken during the two October 2008 Robbinsville Planning Board meetings.
I learn more about Robbinsville, I come to see that Robbinsville shows evidence of the same values, same ideas [as BAPS]. Another expert pointed out the BAPS proposal 'will be another significant achievement for Robbinsville ... Robbinsville has been ahead of its time. This is another crown jewel to be proud of the community [sic].'

It was on the second night of board hearings that a contingent of residents from the adjacent village of Windsor appeared and presented their opinions in the ‘public comment’ portion. Several Windsor residents expressed their concern that the BAPS project, which they pointedly noted had been rejected by an adjacent village, East Windsor, two years prior, was now resurfacing in Robbinsville.25 One woman identified herself as having ‘married’ into the town 21 years ago. She commented that ‘Windsor is a 19th century rural village’ and then proceeded to provide a history of the village, emphasizing its rural American character. A second member of the public, also a woman from Windsor, stated:

I would like the applicant and board to understand that Windsor village is a place on the [New Jersey] National Register [for Historic Places] and that the size and shape of the houses in Windsor have remained unchanged ... the village, its view shed, steeple ... [voice quivering with emotion] has to stay intact, forever!

Another Windsor resident, referring to the traffic expert’s accounting estimate of site ‘trips’ and traffic patterns, queried: ‘Could we expect 900 trips on a Sunday, on your “high-holy days”? I googled your festival site—there are a dozen. Should we expect 900 people on all these days?’

These excerpts do not convey the tension in the air when the public comments segment of the hearing began. Until this point in the hearings, the BAPS team had put forth a well-organised data-heavy presentation on the merits of its construction plans. The Robbinsville planning board, judging by their questions and responses appeared to be favourably affected by BAPS’s efforts. In contrast, Windsor residents, or at least those at the Robbinsville hearing, conveyed a wariness or possibly anger towards BAPS, its proposal and even the Robbinsville board. These residents were unambiguous about their wish to see their environment remain unchanged and maintained as close as possible to an idealised image of a ‘one postal-clerk village’, a point made by a resident.

25 Windsor is an unincorporated area within the Robbinsville Township. East Windsor is an adjacent separate village.
At the end of the second hearing, on 29 October 2008, by unanimous vote, the Robbinsville town planning board approved the BAPS application for the Hindu American Religious Center. Several board members noted that the BAPS presentation was surely the most thorough and well-organized of all that had come before the board, and that the extensive package of BAPS-provided materials answered ‘many of our questions’. One member cheerily added that the site ‘looks like a peaceful place. If nothing else, the girl scouts always need a place to go!’ Another member observed, ‘even if one did not want to partake of the site, people would go to the green spaces.’

The Robbinsville planning board hearings demonstrate BAPS’s sensitivity to easing the anxieties of those who are unfamiliar with Hindu traditions and who might therefore feel uncertain about its building proposal. At no time did BAPS take a pedantic tone or attempt to lecture the board members about Swaminarayan practices or teachings. Part of the BAPS materials sent to board members prior to the hearings included an appealingly produced volume on BAPS Hinduism and Hinduism more generally. This handbook provided definitions, colour images and descriptions about various aspects of Hinduism. For its Robbinsville ‘team’, BAPS found local New Jersey educated and practising experts who conveyed a visibly sincere interest in BAPS Hinduism and who spoke in an accessible manner to the board. For example, one expert prefaced his description of the proposed ‘Hindu’ kitchen facility by describing his first experience of an entirely vegetarian dinner he ate at a BAPS temple. His appreciative description of what he ate began with, ‘to be honest, I’m a meat-potatoes guy’.

The experts with their New Jersey accents gamely pronounced the Sanskrit names BAPS had assigned for the proposed buildings and their efforts to communicate the qualitative experience of being in a stone-carved Swaminarayan mandir and interacting with satsangis of all ages was both moving and effective.

The appreciative reaction of Robbinsville planning board members to BAPS was in contrast to the critical statements made by residents of Windsor. In fact, it was BAPS’s unsuccessful 2006 efforts to obtain East Windsor approval for a similar temple complex proposal that had prompted the land acquisition in Robbinsville. As described to me by satsangis who were present at the failed East Windsor hearing, East Windsor residents stated in various ways that the BAPS project would ‘destroy our community’.  

negative public reaction along with other less-welcoming incidents with local residents at various proposed temple building sites in the US have given BAPS reasons to feel that a certain amount of their publics' concerns about BAPS temple building are provoked by not knowing about Hinduism and its practitioners. One BAPS leader familiar with several BAPS temple proposals insisted that 'we shouldn't think of these people as prejudiced'. Rather, he pointed out:

The images they have of Hinduism have hardly been positive ones and, in most instances, sharing about Hinduism and BAPS has gone a long way to helping ease the relationship between BAPS and its future and current neighbours. Every individual has a fear of the unknown. Until they [local residents] have a chance to interact with us, then I can understand why there would be concerns about us.27

Similarly, when I initiated conversations with satsangis familiar with the unsuccessful East Windsor application, though some gingerly intimated possible racial or religious bias, many others offered that it was understandable that people would not want to see their towns change. One satsangi shared:

We showed up for the [East] Windsor hearing, so many of us, because we were excited to finally have a shikharbaddha [stone carved and pinnacled] mandir in New Jersey and we thought that everyone would be excited too. We just thought this but that obviously does not mean that everyone [else] was as we quickly found out!28

From the unsuccessful application in East Windsor, BAPS sought to find ways that would mitigate misunderstandings of their temple building proposal. Thus, for the Robbinsville application, great care was given to producing forms of self-presentation that would highlight Swaminarayan Hinduism from within the vocabulary and discourse of religion.

Each BAPS expert involved in explaining a substantive aspect of the Robbinsville proposal, whether building design and physical orientation, water retention or rubbish recycling, focused on relating these activities to the most accessible vernacular conception of 'religion'.

Throughout the detailed presentation of its temple building plans, the team of experts consistently described BAPS in terms of other religions, most notably Christianity and Judaism. Its kitchen structure was described

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27 Telephone conversation on 13 March 2009.
28 Conversation in New Jersey, 29 October 2009.
in terms of 'kosher kitchen' rules and its parking needs and crowd control measures were explained in terms of calculations made elsewhere for 'high holy days'. And, its 'gymnasium cum dining hall' was described as 'what you would find in churches, you know, the Sunday school basement that doubles as the coffee-tea social area'. Since the temple would also include residence for monks, the experts made clear that such monks, 'as in the Catholic Church', do not marry and, therefore, do not have children who would pose an 'educational use burden' to the village. The proposed site's impact on Robbinsville's municipal services was described as having 'no physical impact, and a very positive physical and spiritual impact'. And, at the conclusion of the first hearing night, 'cultural pluralism and humanitarian services' were stressed as attributes of Hinduism and BAPS.

Without actually defining 'religion', the BAPS presentation before the Robbinsville board assumed a common appreciation for a universalised religion, one that consists of shared values, morals, appreciation of other cultures, community service and even a commitment to protecting the environment. BAPS sought to reassure the board that neither the proposed temple complex nor the devotees would disrupt the town and they answered questions about temple-related noise, temple visibility, outdoor lighting and the purpose for having resident sadhus. They assured the board that the site would not be rented out for marriages and parties. Even the local turnout from the nearby highway to the BAPS site would be privately funded and fixed, benefiting the site and the town, and enhancing a separation of temple-going versus local residents' traffic patterns. The temple site, owing to its geographic location and self-contained purposes would not, therefore, interfere with local life. At the same time, all persons, regardless of religion, would be welcomed into the temple complex. BAPS wanted its potential new neighbours to see its receptiveness to their concerns, an attitude that would confirm the openness of BAPS and Hinduism more broadly as a religion tolerant and embracing of difference.

In this encounter between BAPS and a local American community's planning board, BAPS carefully translated its Hindu devotional tradition to fit within the contours of a universalised conception of religion. This strategy, in other words, of engaging with informing discourses of its publics and of seeking ways to achieve rapport through the demonstration of competency with these discourses has worked well for BAPS in the diaspora. That BAPS can rely on a discourse on religion to enhance similarities rather than amplify differences has resulted in expressions of public representation that have supported Swaminarayan devotionalism as well as attracted the positive interest of its majority non-Hindu neighbours.
RELIGION, STATE AND THE PUBLIC REPRESENTATION OF BAPS

In looking more closely at BAPS's engagement with its publics, it becomes clear that a transnational Hindu devotional community, while focused on the transmission of its teachings and practices that are theoretically not tied to a particular space or territory, is nevertheless constrained by territory in how its teachings can be discursively framed and supported. A global religious movement such as BAPS must remain attuned to the political, legal and governmental logics that inform its multiple publics. Thus, on the one hand, Swaminarayan devotionalism transcends national borders and the particularities of national histories, ideologies and classification systems; yet, on the other hand, the leaders of BAPS must be especially sensitive to these particularities in order that they can be navigated in ways that allow Swaminarayan devotionalism to sustain itself. It is precisely BAPS's sensitivity to the informing discursive formations of its publics that has made possible the Swaminarayan community's growth, numerous temple projects and visible role in a new global Hinduism.

The 2002 Aksărdhām attack and the 2008 New Jersey planning board hearings show how BAPS's responses are indicative of its understanding of its publics in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, and in Robbinsville, New Jersey. In Gujarat, where issues of religion have been politically leveraged for mobilising social groups with often devastating consequences, the BAPS response, in the form of Pramukh Swami's appeal and memorial message, ignored the opportunity to politically benefit from the attack. In New Jersey, where land use permitted for religious worship allows groups to establish a religious presence in supposedly secular spaces, BAPS appealed successfully, within the discourses on religion, to be accepted as a worthwhile addition to the neighbourhood. These responses of BAPS highlight its skill at discerning how to represent itself before its publics and how to do so in terms that demonstrate recognition of and an engagement with dominant informing discourses.

Both in Gujarat and in New Jersey, it seems that the category of 'religion' and its supporting discourses have played a role in how BAPS interacted with its publics. In Gujarat, Pramukh Swami, speaking in the context of communities recently affected by communal violence, did not elaborate on the terrorists' origins or alleged religious background; neither did he magnify any details of their actions. His public message, framed in the devotional language of Swaminarayan bhakti, pointed out that people do not need to
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dispense justice on their own since doing so is the provenance of 'Bhagwan Swaminarayan'. His appeals were pointedly directed to an unmarked humanity, one with known ‘religious’ attachments, around which he skirted in order to offer a humanist message of civility, common sense and collective civic-mindedness.

In New Jersey, BAPS framed its performance in local board hearings within the parameters of a recognisable and universal conception of religion. This direct appeal to the category ‘religion’ in instances of land use for religious purposes is one supported by US federal law. Thus, legal discourse exists on communities’ rights to guide their development as well as local planning boards’ obligation to not discriminate against those seeking permits for the purpose of exercising their religion. In fact, the Robbinsville board, during the course of two hearings with BAPS, did not ask any questions about the ‘religious use’ of the BAPS proposed structures while the BAPS team, as described above, repeatedly indicated the religious significance of all proposed structures. BAPS appeared to be openly confirming for its publics’ benefit that it would, in a legal sense, unambiguously fit the land use specifications connected to the building site. As for the members of the public not in favour of the BAPS proposal, the ‘religion’ of BAPS and its followers did not appear to be an explicit problem. However, as has been argued by those who have analysed disputes between local boards and ethnic religious minorities, it may well be that genuine anxieties about a global Hindu community with the capacity and funds to build a large temple complex were masked by the more acceptable and all-too-common concerns about noise, traffic and disruption of existing ‘quality of life’.

Another example of BAPS’s willingness to engage with the discourse on ‘religion’ in a context outside of India is explored by Zavos (2012). Looking at how BAPS has become a visible example of ‘ethnic citizenship’

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29 The US federal statute that prohibits discrimination against those who seek permit(s) to exercise their religion is called RLUIPA, for the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (42 U.S.C. § 2000cc). See Salkin and Lavine (2008) for an overview and critical analysis of RLUIPA, including the circumstances leading to the pairing of ‘religious land use’ with ‘institutionalized persons’.

30 As Gale and Naylor (2008) and Nye (2001) have demonstrated for the UK context, for community members not in support of a religious minority group’s planning board application, their suspicions or dislikes about the applicant are verbally neutralised by sentences such as ‘it’s not about the religion but ...’. Though such sentiments were not aired at the October 2008 Robbinsville hearings, they were uttered in hearings held in February 2010 between BAPS and the publics.
in the British context, Zavos argues that BAPS's activities support a discourse on religion that is complementary to the British government's promotion of community cohesion particularly through faith organisations. The Swaminarayan emphasis on charitable and volunteer work, for example, framed within the language of 'faith', allows BAPS to fit into British imaginings of community, where cultural and religious differences are permissible and applauded but all the more so if they are perceived to be contributing to a cohesive British society.

In contrast to its ease of engagement outside of India with the discourse on religion, Pramukh Swami’s response to the Akshardham attack in Gujarat, reminds us that the ways in which BAPS frames itself and allows itself to be framed does indeed depend upon context and loci of power. The dynamic between BAPS, the nation, the state and other authorities, such as a township planning board, is a relationally constituted one and, as such, it is guided by the discourses and channels of power that intersect with BAPS in a given space. These locally situated factors significantly complicate this transnational organisation’s main objective, namely, to broadly disseminate devotional teachings. The actions of BAPS in Britain and New Jersey might suggest that its willingness to engage with outsiders in terms that are both particular and yet universal substantiates BAPS’s ecumenical perspective towards its Hindu and non-Hindu publics (Williams, 2004). That in spite of its devotional expectations and behavioural proscriptions, BAPS is able to put forth a public representation of Hinduism that reflects its openness to interacting with broad publics. This representation, informed as it is by discourses on religion, points to a new Hindu sociability, one catalysed by transnationalism and exposure to various informing discourses. What is perhaps less resonant with its publics, and sometimes easily dismissed, are the ways in which BAPS’s flexible interventions and its confidence in interacting with its publics are from the devotee standpoint guided and inspired by devotional motivations.

Swaminarayan devotionalism makes possible BAPS’s engagement with its publics. And, in these interactions across different discursively constructed spaces, we can point to an organisation that has consciously developed strategies for adjusting to the dominant authorities, legal apparatuses and political institutions in its various global locations. This kind of flexibility, according to Ong (1999, 2004), allows families and communities to take advantage of their economic and social capital and optimise their participation in neo-liberal economies. Ong (2004: 57) sees ‘flexible citizenship’ as an ‘assemblage of transnational practices for gaining access
to different global sites’. One can see this capacity in those Asian citizens whose transnational positioning through kin and social networks permits participation in global flows of capital, labour and knowledge which can then be leveraged into entry into other domains of global membership such as elite educational institutions and real estate deals (ibid.). In other words, certain citizens, owing to their particular cultural logics, are able to participate in transnational processes which are themselves governed by the logics of capital (Ong, 1999). When these multiple logics fit together well, citizenship, nation and transnational flows interact not as opposing forces but ones that can produce mobility, financial success and ‘new citizen heroes’ (Ong, 2004: 63).

Ong’s ‘citizen hero’ appears to be primarily, if not solely, motivated by the desire to participate in transnational spaces for the purpose of gaining wealth, status and power. The BAPS organisation and its leaders, while demonstrating their skills at adjusting to different historical and discursive contexts, are doing so, not necessarily to become better players in the neoliberal economic landscape. There is a difference, in other words, between the deployment of flexible strategies and cultural logics to gain entrée into global sites of power for political and financial mobility and doing the same to support specific devotional and ontological objectives. The BAPS guru and leaders, for example, do not appear to shy away from interaction with more difficult or even controversial publics in order to support and further the growth of the Swaminarayan community. This stance, whether perceived to be naïve or overly instrumental, does create the perception that BAPS is angling for power rather than strengthening its devotional aims. Thus, for example, devotees are aware that people outside of India often question why Pramukh Swami allows politicians to visit Swaminarayan temples and to have photos taken with him. The answer, they noted, has to do with.

...where do we live, who are our neighbours, and why would we alienate ourselves from those we live with—politicians want to come to our temples, they can come and all of them [irrespective of party affiliation] do come.31

The Swaminarayan publics, it appears, is to be known about rather than to be ignored.

KNOWING ONE’S PUBLICS

Globalising religious movements such as BAPS are rich sites for tracing dominant discourses and their imbrication on cultural logics and practices. The events shared in this chapter suggest that we can trace ideas of religion and their circulation in public discourses. The BAPS organisation is an example of how one body of discourse, in this instance the Swaminarayan devotional tradition, intersects and intervenes with another body of discourse, that on religion. The outcome is a programme for ethical living that is not dependent on the binaries of religion-secularism, tradition-modernity and local-global, but on a politics of flexible being that upholds a liberal perspective of human potentialities. This is visible in the pragmatic approach that BAPS follows when engaging with its Hindu and non-Hindu neighbours.

In Gujarat, BAPS has taken what some see as a passive middle path by not putting forth a strongly condemnatory position on communal, class and caste tensions. Neither has BAPS hidden its interaction with Gujarati political leaders, such as Pramukh Swami’s meeting with the Chief Minister during the period of the 2002 Akshardham attack. From the BAPS perspective, it is indeed challenging the status quo, but in ways that allow it to sustain its devotional community, one that is never separate from but located within the same space of its publics. In the US, BAPS has had to accommodate vernacular assumptions and various legal definitions of what constitutes a ‘religion’. This is the minimum requirement for participating in what has been described as the ‘religious secular’ landscape of American publics, or the seemingly secular yet ‘religious but in name’ contours of civic and national life in the US (Sullivan, 2009: 229–36). Ironically, it seems that the overdeterminant aspects of religion as an epistemic category have only further reified Swaminarayan Hinduism as something different. Simultaneously, at the levels of legal and lived reality, there is much indeterminacy over what exactly are the qualifying parameters of a religion. BAPS actions show that it sees the blurriness of discursive areas as opportunities to locate Swaminarayan bhakti in ways that do not compromise its traditions but allow both accommodation and critique of dominant discourses.

Notwithstanding its successes and failures when engaging with certain discourses, BAPS is in a challenging position. In the US, and increasingly in India, the liberal commitment to ideals of freedom, individualism and
pluralism have revealed the unreliability of state mechanisms to adjudicate different visions of the ethical life in a neutral or non-violent manner. Not surprisingly, when religion or its numerous forms of secularity become the site of ideological struggle, those within religious communities are perceived to be the problem. Such religiously framed communities and the possibilities they might offer for other kinds of secular or even post-secular futures remain untapped. BAPS, owing to its placement within and beyond India, and its ongoing efforts to understand its publics offers evidence that communities can, through hard work, transcend the limitations of their respective epistemic and discursive locations. A particular devotional community can successfully intervene with its publics' expectations. In Gandhinagar, Gujarat, and in Robbinsville, New Jersey, this suggests the possibility for other kinds of futures to arise.

REFERENCES


