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A Fine Balance: Adaptation and Accommodation in the Swaminarayan Sanstha

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Gujarati Communities across the Globe: memory, identity and continuity

Edited by Sharmina Mawani and Anjoom Mukadam

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Knowledge is like a vast ocean,
   without shore, without end.
It is fathomless, profound and immeasurable,
   containing infinite treasures.
Those who dive into this ocean
   and annihilate their own existence
Will obtain a priceless treasure,
   bringing to the surface a matchless pearl.

*Kalam-i Mowla*, attributed to Hazrat Ali
(Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, p164)
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In recent years, Gujarat has entered international consciousness for reasons that many Gujaratis find deeply troubling and painful to acknowledge. Since the Godhra tragedy of February 2002, Gujaratis, whether they live in India or elsewhere, and the scholars who study them, have grappled with trying to understand the factors that catalysed what was reported as the worst Hindu-Muslim violence since Partition. Among the reasons that have been offered are the history of Gujarat's party politics; the extreme unevenness of economic and social advancement opportunities for many Gujaratis; the peculiarities of Gujarat's caste proportions, including the economic and political dominance of the middle business castes and upper classes; the lack of a widespread radical, labour, or liberal movement; and an overall conservative population disinclined to question or challenge existing social and political structures. Foregrounded against these multiple variables, explicitly Hindu groups and organisations have, not surprisingly, become the focus of renewed scrutiny and criticism.

In this chapter, I look at the Hindu organisation and devotional community, Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, or BAPS, as it is commonly called.1 As a well-known Gujarati devotional (bhakti) community and charitable organisation with extensive transnational connections, BAPS has been criticised by those who find its activities and teachings
indicative of groups aligned with the Sangh Parivar or Hindutva organisations. In September 2002, BAPS itself suffered an attack on its Gandhinagar, Gujarat temple-monument-complex known as Akshardham (Narula, 2003). Over thirty people died and scores of others were injured. During the tense aftermath of the Akshardham tragedy, the world's media turned its lens on BAPS, as the organisation responsible for building Akshardham. Many asked whether the attack on this rich Hindu organisation, known for building elaborate temples and having a large following in the West trigger yet another round of communal violence in an already volatile Gujarat. No statements issued by BAPS during or after the Akshardham attack identified the attackers or attributed any motivation to them. Rather, the current leader of BAPS, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, made an immediate public appeal to the people of Gujarat and India to maintain peace and unity.

There were no outbreaks of violence in the wake of the Akshardham attack. Some press reports attributed this to a general weariness among the population of disruptions to their daily lives. Others speculated that the Central Government of India and Gujarat politicians had convinced the leaders of Hindu groups, including BAPS, not to use the Akshardham tragedy as a reason for further violence. What was little known and not well reported was the role of BAPS itself in suppressing the very real potential for further communal eruptions. It was only some time after the Akshardham attack that BAPS devotees around the world learned of the specific actions taken by BAPS leaders and Pramukh Swami to defuse the possibility of riots. Amongst these responses was Pramukh Swami's injunction that the death of a Swaminarayan sant (male ascetic), who was one of the victims in Akshardham, not be publicised. Thus neither the name nor the saffron-clad image of the sant was available to the public in the immediate aftermath of the Akshardham attack. Consequently, neither the general media nor Gujarati political entities, including Hindutva groups, were aware that a Hindu holy man had died at the hands of unknown militants.

The careful and measured ways in which BAPS reacted to the Akshardham tragedy are indicative of this well-organised group's historical responses to situations and events beyond its immediate control (Kim, forthcoming). In this chapter, my aim is to demonstrate that BAPS is a community attuned to the political, historical and social contexts in which it has settled. While remaining a conservative Hindu and social organisation with its distinctive forms of devotional practice, BAPS is clearly able to accommodate the expectations and needs of its followers as well as anticipate some of the assumptions of the outside, non-Swaminarayan community. The various BAPS projects
such as temple building, its publications of texts on Hindu traditions and practice and its creation of large-scale festival and cultural programmes, suggest an ability to balance the needs of devotees with an awareness of outsiders and their expectations.

With the expansion of BAPS from a regional Gujarati community into a transnational organisation, its ability to gauge the assumptions and, even more subtly, the epistemic underpinnings of dominantly non-Hindu societies, is arguably becoming more fine-tuned. Thus, the multiple ways in which BAPS satisfies its devotees can be simultaneously analysed for how these same projects also address the epistemic and ontological realms of non-devotees. It is this flexibility and capacity to accommodate the outside world and, in many instances, the ideals of the dominant society, that I would argue have contributed to the transnational visibility and growth in BAPS membership and its relative acceptance by the social and religious landscapes into which it has settled (Kim, 2009, forthcoming). And yet, it is also this accommodative stance, as I show below, that provokes some of the criticism, particularly from scholars, of BAPS.

This chapter attempts to go beneath the surface impressions of BAPS to explore some of the internal mechanisms and strategies whereby the organisation and its leaders calibrate its programmes to changing times. My aim is to better understand the motivations and internal BAPS rationale for some of its activities. I examine two BAPS events that took place in 2007. The first was a conference, the National Convention (NC07), held in Jacksonville, Florida (US), in July 2007, for young Swaminarayan followers. The second event, known as The International Women's Conference (IWC), took place in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, during BAPS's December 2007 centenary celebrations.

In analysing some of the content of the two conferences as well as the responses of Swaminarayan followers to these events, I show that the Swaminarayan Sanstha and its members are far from being passive or uncritical participants in the social worlds they inhabit. Rather, the Sanstha responds to its organisational and members' needs in ways that reveal a pragmatic and engaged orientation to both insiders and outsiders.

**BAPS in historical context**

In a recent book, Nussbaum (2007) explores a range of factors that are possibly responsible for the 2002 tragedies in Gujarat connected to the burning of a rail carriage and its passengers in Godhra. Among her arguments is the strong suggestion that clues might be found by looking at the people and activities of groups such as BAPS, a group that she barely acquires of Hinduutva.
ties (Kim, 2010). Nussbaum argues that there is an absence of ‘critical thinking’ among Gujaratis, presumably she means Gujaratis at large and not only BAPS followers. Nussbaum points to diasporic organisations such as BAPS, whose membership spans places beyond India, as one factor behind communalism in Gujarat. Following a visit to the Bartlett (outside Chicago, Illinois) BAPS temple, which is one of the four carved stone Swaminarayan temples in North America, Nussbaum (2007:303) writes, ‘Was the climate of religious hatred in Gujarat made in the USA? Many people think that the Hindu-Indian-American community has played a significant role in funding the spread of hatred in India in general, in Gujarat in particular’. She suggests that the ‘children of the diaspora’ must be guided towards ‘critical thinking, knowledge of the world and the imagination of otherness. These capacities do not grow automatically, and they have enemies: dogmatism, fanaticism, ignorance, false ideology and emotional obtuseness’ (ibid:329).

Nussbaum’s representation of BAPS is not an uncommon one. One of the more frequent criticisms of BAPS rests on the unexamined assumption that a socially conservative and overtly organised Hindu community is, in these modern and secular times, a suspicious entity. Indeed, there appears to be a paradox between the seemingly conservative teachings or expectations of a community such as BAPS and its willingness and ability to thrive as a transnational and outward-engaging community. For Nussbaum and several others who have written about BAPS, its embrace of devotional practices while maintaining a cosmopolitan openness to new technologies and other attributes of globalisation is troubling: Swaminarayan devotees are, it seems, perceived to be balancing contradictory impulses.

Nussbaum’s perspective is one that rests on particular conceptions of personhood and religious subjectivity. In this framework, devotional commitments are inward and insular rather than practices connected to understandings of personhood that are not dependent on liberal discourses. Nussbaum sees Swaminarayan followers as insular, uncritical and thus unmodern. Not surprisingly, in this formulation, Swaminarayan religious subjectivity poses challenges to liberal, secular and modern societies and states (Kim, 2010). While Nussbaum’s opinions about BAPS are not based on fieldwork or any extended engagement with Swaminarayan devotees, they rest on her assumption that certain Gujarati traits and behaviour might passively or otherwise support potentially violent sociological expressions.

The Swaminarayan Sanstha did not come into existence with the intention of becoming a diasporic Hindu group or transnational organisation. Established
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in 1907, its founding origins are not unique but share a similar raison d'être to other communities formed as a result of differing and irreconcilable interpretations of foundational texts. In the case of BAPS, its founder, a sant named Shastriji Maharaj, broke from the original Swaminarayan sampradaya (tradition) which was founded in 1801 by Sahajanand Swami (Williams, 2001). Shastriji Maharaj broke away from the original community with its order of santo (male ascetics) and instigated the building of mandirs (temples) that would reflect his understanding of Swaminarayan teachings (Kim, 2009).

This is the beginning of the BAPS community, one that during the early twentieth century could not have imagined itself as a global Hindu devotional movement. It was, after all, a minority devotional community emerging into a field of established Swaminarayan and other Vaishnava groups and attempting to assert its own newly expressed traditions. The Shastriji Maharaj, through building of temples, creating his own order of santo and cultivating new devotees by travelling to villages and towns and giving talks, succeeded in nurturing a vibrant new Swaminarayan community into existence. Nevertheless, were it not for factors including historical events such as the migration of Swaminarayan Gujaratis to East Africa and their subsequent expulsion or voluntary migration in the early 1970s to the UK, Canada and the US, as well as other Commonwealth countries, it is possible that BAPS would not have evolved so rapidly into a transnational devotional movement.

The pattern of growth for today's postcolonial BAPS community is not that different from its development in colonial times. The members of the early BAPS community migrated to places where they established small communities of followers which then often grew into much larger groups of devotees. The growth of satsangis (devotees) is not, however, solely due to political or economic factors. The non-lay leadership of BAPS consists of the Guru, who is the highest leader and guide of the community, and the order of santo who dedicate their lives to personal devotional endeavours as well as the maintenance of the Swaminarayan community, including the overseeing of mandirs, satsangi activities and the devotional or other needs of satsangis. Following the migration of Gujaratis during colonial India to East Africa, the Guru and santo travelled to East Africa to meet satsangis and others who might become future members of the BAPS community. The significance of these vicharan (visiting tours) cannot be underestimated. For those whose first encounter with the Swaminarayan Guru and santo was not in Gujarat but in East Africa, the visits are often cited as the catalyst for a subsequent lifelong commitment to the Swaminarayan Sanstha. Besides the visits, the Guru and santo also wrote letters to satsangis. Thus in East Africa, and later in other
parts of the world, the leadership of BAPS found ways to remain connected to its satsangi communities, resulting in the consolidation of devotees and the extension of welcome to potential new members.

Today, of course, the realities of near-instant communications and the ability of people to travel more frequently between India and elsewhere have changed the ways the Guru, santo and satsangis communicate. Until recently, photographs of the present BAPS leader and Guru, Pramukh Swami, showed him writing letters in response to satsangis' questions. Nowadays, in his late 80s, he is more often seen dictating his responses to the santo who write on his behalf. For many satsangis, the easiest way to ask for advice and assistance from the Guru or santo is to make an inexpensive telephone call to India or to send an email to a contact in India or to the mandir where the Guru or senior santo are currently residing.

Furthermore, it appears that, given the current trajectory of BAPS, global expansion, satsangis and the organisational leadership are constantly trying new ways to sustain the intimacy that each satsangi would like with the Guru and santo. This would include, for example, the creation of spaces in a Swaminarayan temple or private home where the Guru or santo would stay while visiting satsangis; the organisation of month-long outdoor festivals to celebrate an occasion connected to an important BAPS anniversary and where the Guru would be present for certain portions of the event; and the production of multimedia works, from videos of the Guru's many vicharan to his discourses and celebrations of Hindu calendar festivals in India.

Many of the efforts to create events where the Guru and senior santo would be present for extended periods require enormous skills of organisation and coordination of thousands of volunteers, as well as the cooking and feeding of upwards of hundreds of thousands of guests on a daily basis. Again, Nussbaum in her efforts to understand the connections between Gujarat and communal violence intimates that the BAPS followers' ability to subordinate themselves to their devotional convictions while embracing sophisticated technology results in a certain 'ideological docility' (2007:303). It is this orientation, of a non-liberal submission of the self along with a talent for modern technology, that Nussbaum intimates is the locus for a violent behaviour. From the Swaminarayan satsangis' perspective, Nussbaum's assessment overlooks the dimension of bhakti, their devotional turning towards their Guru and the creative ways in which devotees express their devotion. Arguing from within a secular liberal framework for being, Nussbaum in other words, has missed how BAPS and its followers have managed to remain committed to their devotional
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teachings while constantly adjusting and accommodating to the social and epistemic expectations of their new places of settlement.

Situating BAPS today
Undoubtedly, the Sanstha of today is a product of migration, globalisation and the economic dynamics between India and the West. These factors, however, only provide an explanation for the presence of BAPS in certain locations. They do not account for the growth in Swaminarayan membership both within and beyond India; neither do they help us to understand why tens of thousands of satsangis donate portions of their annual income to support BAPS and its activities, including the construction of carved temples known as shikharbaddha mandirs. Moreover, the political economic model overlooks the matrix of factors within each migration destination that would determine who does or does not join the Swaminarayan community.

Today, BAPS numbers one million followers worldwide with roughly 40,000 in North America and 30,000 in the UK. Out of these numbers, over 55,000 men and women of all ages regularly volunteer their time for BAPS events. Currently, the Sanstha has an order of all-male santo which numbers over 800 men and includes those born and brought up entirely outside India. Among its many awards, in late 2007 BAPS achieved the Guinness World Records distinctions for having consecrated the largest number of temples, totalling 713 at the end of 2007, and for having constructed the world’s largest comprehensive Hindu temple. These numbers and kinds of achievements suggest that something more than material factors is driving BAPS development and depth of satsangi, or devotee, commitment.

One area to which attention can be directed is the mechanisms of Swaminarayan devotionalism itself. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to look specifically at upasana (Swaminarayan teachings), there is an important connection between the devotional goals of satsangis and the actions and projects of BAPS (Kim, 2008). What is more directly the focus here is to see how the devotional orientation of satsangis is cultivated and sustained, not in isolation from the wider world of non-satsangis, but often in engagement with it. Since its founding, BAPS has directed its energies to building temples, supporting an order of male ascetics and maintaining its specific behavioural prescriptions alongside an open attitude towards the institutions of dominant society, if not its habits or customary practices. Within Gujarat, both the original Swaminarayan communities and the breakaway BAPS group have been criticised for a range of socially conservative practices such as stri-purush maryada (female-male separation) in temple spaces, strict vege-
tarianism and what might be broadly labelled traditional family values. Both groups have always expected their lay followers to become literate and educated and to be full participants in worldly life. In the BAPS community in particular, though the celibate santo are highly respected and many are from outside India, often well educated, there is no expectation or pressure that male devotees should aspire to become ascetics or that renunciation of material possessions and attachments, such as kinship ties, is the ideal devotional path. Thus BAPS devotees, while clearly valuing the role and contribution of santo, do not appear to experience tensions owing to their own non-ascetic life choices.

The Swaminarayan Sanstha is most generally well known for its temple and monument-building projects (Kim, 2007). From the mandirs, whether constructed out of carved stone or converted from a previous structure, to the homes of satsangis, Swaminarayan devotional practices take many forms. They require discipline and persistence and are motivated, as satsangis are, by the desire to please Swami [Guru]. As devotees frequently observe, to achieve the desired goal of moksha (release from rebirth), requires a keen awareness of one’s atma (the sentient self) as being distinct from the mind-body and its various constituents. To reconceptualise the sentient self from the Swaminarayan perspective requires a process of cultivation, of wishing and striving for one’s atma to be matched to a pre-existing ideal.

As for the Guru, he is himself an eternal ontological entity called Akshar. The indivisible Akshar is, in Swaminarayan devotionalism, also the abode of the eternal existential entity of Purushottam, also known as Bhagwan (God). In BAPS devotionalism, atma, Akshar and Purushottam never merge and each remains eternally indivisible, a separate ontological entity. As the abode or location of Bhagwan, Guru is understood as the pragat swarup (manifested form) of Purushottam or Bhagwan. Thus, while Guru is outwardly male and human, he is nevertheless understood to be the embodiment of the indivisible principle of Akshar, or that ideal to which satsangis aspire. For all committed satsangis, it is an important aspect of daily living to recognise the role of the Guru, who is the route by which each satsangi might escape rebirth and eternally be in the position to serve the ultimate reality, Purushottam.

Many older satsangis still recall how their Guru would come to their villages on a regular basis. Now, though they are highly aware of the advanced age and health limitations of their Guru, satsangis nevertheless wistfully say that Swami Bapa is too busy. Notwithstanding his physical absence, satsangis also recognise that their Guru is nevertheless present in all instances and expressions of individual and collective devotional practice.
The two events are examples of how BAPS creates gatherings where it can bring together its membership and initiate conversations that will help devotees, as individuals and as a collective, attain their devotional goals. The format and content of these gatherings, a convention and a conference, are utilised by BAPS as opportunities to help the willing Swaminarayan devotional subject gain inspiration through interaction with members of a like-minded community (satsang) and thereby come closer to achieving his or her ontological goal. These events are also sites where the BAPS leadership can better understand the needs of a much broader satsang.

National convention for Yuvak-Yuvatis

Since the founding of BAPS, the religious and lay leadership have been aware of the importance of addressing the needs of its youth members. Under the guidance of Guru Yogiji Maharaj (1892-1971; as Guru, 1951-1971), the focus on youth satsangis led to the formation of age-grade mandals (groups), youth-oriented publications and the establishment of satsang examinations to encourage the study of Swaminarayan texts and to provide a means of assessing students' progress. As BAPS has grown, and particularly for the community living outside India, its leaders are sensitive to the needs and expectations of a changing demographic both within and outside the community. I turn now to a large gathering of over two thousand young people who met in Jacksonville, Florida during July 2007. Called the National Convention, this event was divided into programmes for age-grade mandals, each with its own theme, special speakers, lectures, and cultural programmes. The mandal I look at here are the Yuvak-Yuvatis, the group of young men and women roughly between the ages of 22 and 35. There are other age-grade mandals in BAPS, most notably the ones for young children called Bal-Balikas (aged 6 to 13), and for young people in high school and college, Kishore-Kishoris (aged 14 to 21).

In the spring of 2007, I received an invitation to participate in the 2007 National Convention (NC07) and to present a lecture to the yuvatis (young women) and yuvaks (young men). I was asked to talk about how BAPS has been viewed by academics and to address, from my perspective, how BAPS might respond to outsider perceptions of itself. I was informed that the audience would consist of young devotees who might be contemplating further studies in the social sciences and humanities and was asked to encourage these students to pursue graduate studies in areas not yet popular with second-generation Indians.

Contrary to what many outside BAPS might suspect, the Sanstha's interest in hearing about how it is perceived by outsiders was not motivated by a desire...
to polish its image or to set certain public-relations machinery in motion. Neither was the Sanstha interested in responding in combative ways to those scholars with whose work it might not agree. Instead, it soon became clear to me that the religious and lay leaders of BAPS wanted to understand how and why their particular teachings and activities were being interpreted in certain ways, in order to better understand the wider non-Hindu and non-Swaminarayan social worlds in which BAPS is situated outside India. Moreover, the leaders who invited me to speak noted that many young satsangis are not aware that the Sanstha is negatively viewed by some scholars. Hence, I was asked to introduce the audience to the knowledge construction of Hinduism and to include the connections between the academic discourse on Hinduism and the criticisms of Swaminarayan Hinduism. The Swaminarayan leaders' orientation towards knowledge, of wishing to have a better grasp of how an influential community of academics has the power to define others struck me as a particularly pragmatic position.

Following my presentation, I received numerous comments from the audience of 2,545 participants, 49 per cent of whom were women and 51 per cent men. Nearly all with whom I spoke expressed a desire to become more knowledgeable about the 'Swaminarayan religion' in order to be able to discuss its teachings with others in a way that would not be negatively interpreted. In other words, many of the participants noted that they felt motivated to read and study about 'religion' in particular, and South Asia in general, and to be more comfortable in articulating their thoughts within the discourse of academia. These participants were not hostile towards their critics but in fact appeared to want to join the discussion in their interlocutors' terms. One physician asked for a reading list and added:

At the hospital, colleagues come up to me and ask me to explain about some Hindu rituals or practices. They ask me about my religion. I try to tell them something but I must not be talking in a way that they can understand. This is something I want to improve on, being able to talk about Swaminarayan religion so that others can understand me.

Various audience members expressed their 'amazement' at how BAPS had managed to 'surprise' them by exposing them to an unfamiliar area. Some attendees also share their dismay at learning that there are scholars who find BAPS and its activities objectionable. Parag, a male participant I met at another large Swaminarayan event, noted that 'It was amazing to see at the Yuvak-Yuvati shibir [seminar], the mixing. This was strictly no in earlier times. We boys grew up not knowing how to talk to girls!'
The usual arrangement in BAPS gatherings, to conform to the Sanstha's tenet of *stri-purush maryada* (male-female separation) in *mandir* and *mandir*-sponsored activities, is to seat men in front of women. This is a custom that originally arose to respect the *santo* who discourse before audiences and whose rules of celibacy proscribe their interaction with women. At NC07, shortly before my own presentation, the seating in the large ballroom was efficiently rearranged to create left and right portions of the room rather than front and back sections. *Santo* were not present during my talk. Yet, as indicated by Parag’s comments above, the room arrangement suggested something beyond the absence of *santo* for a lecture given by an outside female speaker. After all, at many other *satsang* events involving outside male speakers and the absence of *santo*, the seating arrangements of men in front and women in back remained unchanged. Thus, for the young attendees of NC07 the room arrangement signalled the transformation of BAPS and its capacity to modify some habits of its organisation without any compromise to its devotional tenets.

In other ways too, the Convention disrupted some common perceptions about BAPS, including ideas about its *santo*. Guru Pramukh Swami, senior *santo*, and, not insignificantly, a number of *santo* who were born and raised in the West, were present throughout the Convention. Their hotel residences were separate from the young attendees and their attendance at Convention events was highly anticipated and frequently acknowledged by the youth attendees themselves as the primary reason for their participation. For many *yuvatis* (young women) and *yuvaks* (young men) I met, the sight of Guru and senior *santo* moving easily through a large hotel in Florida was a novel one and added to the distinctive quality of the NC07 experience.

The ways in which *santo* presented their lessons were, for many, unexpected and therefore very memorable. For example, one morning there was a section presided over by *santo* and a crew of male *satsangi* actors. A drama was performed whose intended target appeared to be the young men in the audience. The basic theme was how to be better partners and husbands at home. Some time after the Convention, I spoke with a number of *satsangis* who expressed their good fortune to have witnessed first-time BAPS actions. It was repeated by many that the ability of BAPS to hold a Swaminarayan event in a clearly *non-satsangi* location, a well-known hotel, its encouragement of men and women to meet and speak with each other and the shifting of seating arrangements for a speaker, were all signs of an organisation willing and capable of timely transformations. 'It's all because of Swami,' more than one young woman shared. 'It's because of him that this convention happened.
the way it did.' Or, as a senior lay leader observed, 'This convention pushed the envelope and set a new standard [for BAPS].'

**International women's conference**

In December 2007, the Sanstha hosted a four-day International Women's Conference (IWC) for Swaminarayan women and male lay leaders. The event was held in Gujarat and was intended to bring together the global community of female satsangi leaders to discuss issues, problems and concerns, and to share strategies for ensuring the maintenance of Swaminarayan bhakti within and beyond India. BAPS female leaders from around the world attended the conference along with a much smaller number of lay male leaders who are responsible for conveying women's requests to the Guru and santo who, as noted above, do not interact directly with women. This conference was the first of its kind for BAPS and brought together a group of twenty-three women and five men whose places of residence reflected the transnational spread of the Sanstha. The women were the main speakers and following each presentation, the men and women attendees spoke with each other.

Among the topics discussed were matters specific to the smaller Swaminarayan communities, for example in the Middle East, Italy and Wyoming, USA, and to areas of larger Gujarati population but fewer committed followers such as South Africa. Questions were raised as to how to match areas needing more logistical and personnel support with established Swaminarayan communities. Concerns were also expressed about Swaminarayan communities unable to take advantage of technologies due to uneven technology access, lack of communication skills and lack of resources. It became evident that many of the BAPS communities located in the West were much more able to communicate, due to the size and skills of their more educated female volunteers, with a larger number of satsangs and therefore to experience a greater sense of a connected community across the world. The women from India and other satsang communities not located in the West pointed out that it was not reasonable to expect the women and girls of their areas to communicate and interact in ways parallel to their counterparts elsewhere. Thus, while BAPS is clearly a global organisation, not all of its devotees are able to participate in and take advantage of a borderless exchange of information and know-how. And, as the American women at IWC pointed out, any proposed broader BAPS initiatives for building women's satsang participation in the global Sanstha might not succeed in the US given that the majority of American women devotees are working outside the home.
The IWC was, as its participants noted during and afterwards, an unprecedented BAPS event. While not all the women I spoke with felt that the dialogue with the male lay leaders reflected a genuine intention among the latter to change BAPS into a more proactive organisation with respect to women’s leadership and concerns, most did feel that the IWC recognised the importance of trying to adjust prior and current ways of engaging with each other with the realities of running a fast-growing, geographically dispersed and multigenerational organisation. The male attendees appeared sincere in their commitment to support women’s activities and leaders and to train male satsangis in communication and interpersonal styles that would be more appealing to women. Both women and men openly acknowledged gaps and problems of communication between each other, and there were group discussions, sometimes heated, on how to remedy these gaps. Not all issues raised by the women or men involved the necessary structural reliance on male intermediaries for communicating with the Guru and santo.

The conference showed generational, class and educational differences between the women themselves. There were also challenges such as how to guide communities that were acknowledged to possess much enthusiasm but relatively little satsang knowledge; how to decide, as leaders, between English and Gujarati usage; and how to discern and address the specific needs of satsang populations situated in dominantly non-Hindu environments.

All the women at IWC reaffirmed the need for working together, old and young, educated and uneducated, India and non-India based, to support the Swaminarayan Sanstha and its teachings. One male attendee pointed out that the senior santo ‘feel that girls and women are the future of the Sanstha and that helping them will allow BAPS to really take off.’ Effectively the Guru and santo conveyed to the lay male leadership that it is women who will play a central role in the continued success of the Sanstha and therefore it is women’s voices that must be more carefully heeded. Though these sentiments may not seem extraordinary to many outside the BAPS community, it is relevant to see that for the IWC female participants, the conference underlines the sensitivity of the Guru and santo to a key constituent of BAPS, far beyond what many women indicate male satsangis have demonstrated. And, for all the conference attendees, the IWC emphasised BAPS’ commitment to women’s concerns in order to support and enhance their devotional objectives rather than to promote acquiescence to the preferences or expectations of dominantly non-Swaminarayan societies.
Conclusion
These brief examples of BAPS’ programmes showing how and why BAPS is perceived by scholars in certain ways and recognising the role of women in securing its future, underscore the Swaminarayan Sanstha’s capacity to respond to its members in new and evolving ways. Clearly, BAPS is able to adapt to changing circumstances, a trait which has also served it well in its relationships with changing political and power structures. This includes the relationship of BAPS to all governments and political leaders of Gujarat and, more recently, with the opening of the Delhi Akshardham monument in 2005, to the political leaders of Delhi and the Central Government. The Sanstha’s leadership at all levels, lay and non-lay, realises the need to address the shifting particularities of its membership within a given social and political context, within the dimensions of gender, age, variations in degree of satsang commitment, and even language preferences. These particularities further include migration and immigration and the disruptions to identity that these processes engender. And, perhaps most significantly, but beyond the scope for this chapter, BAPS recognises the influence of dominant Western ideologies and categories that affect its activities and discourses. This influence may be felt in ways that are not necessarily reflective of the Sanstha’s own objectives or ideals but must nevertheless be addressed thus serving BAPS’ own devotional aims (Kim, 2007, 2009, forthcoming).

BAPS, while still administratively centred in Gujarat, is nonetheless a community whose shifting boundaries do not allow it to be easily mapped. As new Swaminarayan communities appear, such as the one Gujarati family who live in the remote state of Wyoming in the US or the handful of Swaminarayan families based in Italy, the leadership, through its extensive and rationalised administrative structure, is constantly striving to accommodate the specific and situational needs of its expanding membership. The growth and success of BAPS beyond India has occurred in ways unanticipated by the early Swaminarayan community and its lay leaders. Yet the community has managed to retain its distinctive devotional traditions in spite of migration. This is due, in part, to its conscious effort to help consolidate its dispersed membership and transmit its teachings in a systematic way. These standardisation activities, from holding national conventions and conferences, to gradual transformations from all-Gujarati language use to a growing inclusion of Hindi and English in events and temples outside Gujarat, suggest a pragmatic decision to steer the Sanstha into a global organisation, one that neither ignores the expectations of dominant society and institutions nor capitulates to its assumptions.
As BAPS continues to develop ways to sustain its transnational community, it must also contend with persistent negative perceptions and criticisms. BAPS is not exclusively composed of Patels as it is too often assumed; it is not mostly rich Gujaratis who are involved in business enterprises, though indeed many Gujaratis and not just Swaminarayan satsangis are business people; and it is not hostile to women, at least not according to the hundreds of thousands of women who are Swaminarayan devotees. As for its ideas of Hinduism, one participant at the NC07 commented, ‘If BAPS tries to portray itself as part of Hinduism, it is accused of being outside the mainstream of Hinduism. If it sets itself apart, it is accused of trying to create a new form of Hinduism.’ Interestingly, this sentiment has been expressed by several devotees in their separate conversations with me.

Under its current Guru and administrative leadership, BAPS is trying to promote greater awareness of its devotional history and teachings. It is also, through the encouragement of its learned sant and lay leaders, supporting events that will allow multiple perspectives on BAPS, insider and outsider, to be shared and discussed. Such efforts will not necessarily convince the critics of BAPS of its institutional and devotional worthiness. Arguably, this disjunction, between the community of global Gujarati Swaminarayan devotees and their critics is itself a necessary area of further study.

In the aftermath of the Gandhinagar Akshardham attack in 2002, the transnational Swaminarayan community provides one hopeful example of how an indigenous tradition has managed to balance its highly prescriptive ideals with living peaceably amongst other communities. Journalist Tavleen Singh (2002), in an article detailing her trip from Godhra to Akshardham just before the Gujarat elections, writes:

‘So, maybe, the answer to Gujarat’s problems could come from a religious sect that has its origins in this state. When the election is over and there is finally time for reconciliation it could be in Akshardham that the religious and secular leaders of Hindus and Muslims come together under the auspices of the Swaminarayan sect to understand how to stop the hatred and violence.

Following the National Convention for youth and the International Women’s Conference, many newly invigorated young men and women and their more middle-aged counterparts expressed a determination to sustain Swaminarayan ideals with a heightened consideration of the differences within their own satsang communities and between themselves and the wider non-satsang worlds in which they live. This is surely an act of balance, and one that forces the question, perhaps directed to the critics of BAPS, why is it when a
socially conservative community demonstrates a capacity to extend its teachings and ideals in creative ways, that this is less recognised than if the same group were to participate in projects that support secular liberal images of progressive behaviour?

Notes
1 It should be noted that there are various Swaminarayan 'sects' and that the events, interpretations and arguments shared in this paper are specific to BAPS. Similarly, incidents that have occurred in other Swaminarayan communities should not be assumed to have occurred in BAPS.
2 The critics alluded to here include scholars of South Asia from various disciplinary perspectives and others who are of South Asian and non-South Asian origin. It should be noted that these critical voices are not monolithic and not all who find BAPS problematic necessarily see it as sympathetic to Sangh Parivar agendas.
3 I owe sincere thanks to the organisers, devotees and Swaminarayan ascetics who made possible my observation and participation in the National Convention (2007) and International Women's Conference (2007). Without their welcome, the ethnographic research from which this paper draws would not have been possible. I also wish to thank the BAPS ascetics who, through a male intermediary, contributed their time and written thoughts for my benefit. All interpretations and errors remain my own.

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