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# Steeple and Spires: Exploring the Materiality of Built and Unbuilt Temples

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# Nidān

International Journal for the Study of Hinduism

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**Steeple and Spires: Exploring the Materiality of Built and Unbuilt Temples**  
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**Abstract**

This article looks more closely at how the very material presence of Swaminarayan temples, whether completed or not yet built, generates discourses that point to the experiencing of these sites. These discourses are interesting to probe for the ways in which they translate an experiential response to a Swaminarayan temple into perceptions and assessments about the BAPS community, about Hinduism, and about religion more broadly. And, as these narrative responses and their internal logics are predicated on their authors' informing categories and prior experiences, ones that, for example, allow the assessment about the BAPS community, Hinduism, and religion, they become available discursive arenas for understanding BAPS's American neighbours. Together, the BAPS temples can be seen as structures that stimulate responses, experiences, and actions, all of which form a causal chain that upon re-tracing and tracing allow us to better understand how a contemporary Hindu community manages to settle into a new neighbourhood. The temples, as objects, thus provide a means to contextualise, through materialised discourses, the temple publics that arise and become visible during the course of a Swaminarayan construction project. I am using the expression "temple publics," in the same sense offered by Reddy and Zavos in their discussion of the ways that contemporary Hindu communities are creatively interacting with public space and thereby contributing to the reshaping of the public sphere (2009: 242).<sup>1</sup> This public sphere is informed, supported, and shaped by existing discourses. And, how these intersect with the temple construction projects and stimulate further chains of narratives are what I shall explore.

**Robbinsville Township, New Jersey, U.S.A.**

The sky was bright blue, the air crisp, and the bare trunks and branches of the trees could be clearly seen in the distance. Into a clearing, where the furrows in the dirt were visible, a white American Ford Ranger truck appeared carrying a fifteen foot long red blimp with cartoon-like white tail fins. Two men tethered the blimp to a specific spot in the clearing and the blimp was raised to what seemed to be a pre-determined height. The same truck then drove off the clearing and began a circumambulation of the external perimeter of the site, driving slowly along local lanes and roadways. From the truck, a young man aimed a video camera above the tree line surrounding the site

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<sup>1</sup> See the special issue of the International Journal of Hindu Studies on "temple publics," volume 13, no. 3, 2009.

and methodically filmed the expanse of space above it, capturing at one point a water tower and a high-tension electric tower. On a few occasions, the red blimp did appear in the camera lens but mostly the video recorded a plain winter landscape of bare trees and lots of clear blue sky.

The choreography of filming the space surrounding the clearing was sponsored and performed by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha [henceforth "BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha" or "BAPS"]. This Hindu devotional community and organisation had purchased the land in order to construct a temple complex of multiple buildings including a central temple with a main dome and flagpole that would reach a maximum height of approximately 108 feet. The video of the blimp from a 360 degree route outside of the clearing was intended to show local and nearby residents that the red blimp, flying at the height of 110 feet was seldom visible even when the trees were without leaves. In a presentation in February 2010 before the community of Robbinsville and its town planning board, BAPS presented its case for why it was requesting a height variance, and photographs of the white truck, red blimp, and still images taken from the video camera were shown. BAPS was awarded its request to construct a central temple with a dome and added flag pole. Since the red blimp, with few exceptions had not been visible from the neighbouring areas, it was decided by the town planning board that the construction of the BAPS temple would not interrupt the "view shed" of local and nearby residents. In other words, in receiving permission for its formal request for a height variance for the tallest feature of its construction project, BAPS could now commence the creation of a central temple that would be largely invisible to the nearby residents unless of course one intentionally entered the temple complex site.

In the context of its Hindu temple building activities in the United States, BAPS finds itself engaging with local and national religious, legal, and cultural expectations that may or may not complement its efforts to support its devotional tradition. The temple publics, composed as it is of people, institutions, and discourses, is one that BAPS must interact with as it builds temples, some out of carved stone, and others from re-purposed buildings, throughout North America.<sup>2</sup> At the level of the local neighbourhood, the temple publics, consisting of residents and the local planning or land zoning boards, must be convinced that BAPS "fits" its conception of neighbour and member of the community. It is in this close geographical and social dimension, delimited to the local site of the proposed structure and including adjacent communities, where we can turn to for sources of discursive material that convey how BAPS's publics are responding to each other.

In this article, I look at the discursive material generated by some segments of the BAPS temple publics that subsequently circulates, and thereby has the potential to further inform the temple publics and even influence BAPS' interaction with the same

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<sup>2</sup> See Kim (2007) for an exploration of the connection between Swaminarayan temple building and Swaminarayan ontological ideals. See Kim (2009) for a specific examination of why temples and their construction are relevant to the BAPS community from the beginning of its origin.



publics.<sup>3</sup> What are the ideas of community, religious space, and Hinduism expressed by BAPS members and non-Swaminarayan local residents after a Swaminarayan temple is already constructed as in the case of the Lilburn, Georgia Swaminarayan temple? What are the terms of the discourse that appear when BAPS appeals to a community where it hopes to construct a temple as in the case of the proposed Robbinsville temple complex? In exploring the discursive record generated by a temple construction project, this article argues that the hyper material presence of the built and yet unbuilt temple allows an analytical entrée for approaching how these sites are conceptualised, imagined, and experienced by devotees and outsiders. Put differently, instead of trying to disentangle the reactions of various temple publics to BAPS and potentially demonising an oppositional community, my emphasis on looking at the discourse generated by the plans to build a Hindu temple draws our attention to the discursive implications of these sites.<sup>4</sup> We can witness how temples, built or unbuilt, “have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences” (Keane 2008: S124). We can focus on the ways that people talk about and respond to the temples arising in their communities and trace how this reception is connected to existing discourses that in turn lead to further imaginings, assessments, and conclusions about BAPS, Hinduism, religion, and community. As it turns out, whether a community would much rather see a church steeple over a Hindu temple spire and flag says much about how people experience objects and the discourses that support their experiencing.

### **The Materiality of Temples**

Webb Keane and others have convincingly argued that the materiality of religious objects provides rich avenues for approaching how these objects are enmeshed in circulating discourses while simultaneously generating new nodes of discourse (2008: S123). The objects, whether present or absent, convey the ways in which their owners, or in the case of BAPS, the temple builders, and their publics respond and how these responses in turn may generate new materialisations (Engelke 2009). We look at two Swaminarayan temples in this article and, building on the analytical scaffolding offered by Keane, the aim is to trace how the sites of Swaminarayan construction are not just indexical of a powerful Hindu devotional community. Rather, as objects that generate public reactions, they are evidence of experiences that are neither entirely hidden in the interiority of the subject nor dissociable from their own temporality (Engelke 2007; Keane 2008). The temple thus provides a tangible and experiential foundation from which to observe and analyse webs of interconnected experiences and their discursive

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<sup>3</sup> I owe much to John Zavos and the steering committee of the international network, “The Public Representation of a Religion called Hinduism,” which between 2008 and 2010 convened eight conferences concerned with the range of ways in which Hindu communities are supporting their practices in changing urban and transnational spaces. My own arguments in this article have developed from my participation in this network. For further information on the network, please see <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/hinduism/>.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that BAPS publics are not exclusively constituted of oppositional communities and discourses. Moreover, whether critical or supportive of BAPS activities, the “voices” or discursive content of BAPS’s publics, are necessarily heterogeneous.

expressions. In this sense, what becomes interesting to trace is how those unfamiliar with Hindu traditions, temples, and contemporary Hindu communities, come to experience the idea of, as well as the very real reality, of the Swaminarayan temple in their neighbourhood.

### **Who is the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha?**

More commonly recognised by its acronym, "BAPS," the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha has attracted attention outside of India for its carved stone temples. Consisting of a diaspora of one millions members with the majority residing in Gujarat State in western India, BAPS represents itself as a socio-spiritual and humanitarian organisation with a strong emphasis on teaching values through devotion, volunteerism, and self-disciplinary behaviour. With the expansion of BAPS outside of Gujarat to other parts of India and beyond, BAPS has been successful in transplanting its teachings and practices as well as its organisational hierarchy to new places of settlement. To a significant degree, the construction of temples is an important indicator of the strength of the BAPS organisation, particularly since the monetary and volunteer labour to create a temple, in most instances, comes from its local area members. From the perspective of Swaminarayan devotees, the creation of a temple is a profound sign of devotional commitment to their God, Guru, and organisation.<sup>5</sup> It is also a highly public means to convey and reinforce this devotee-God-Guru relationship. Devotees understand that the temple is the "home" of God; and, through their devotion to their Guru, they are inspired to support temple construction. This activity, while prompted by personal devotional objectives, is nevertheless strengthened through collective and large-scale projects such as temple building. The temples, in other words, while intense sites of devotional activity, are simultaneously edifices that foster a public awareness of the BAPS community.

By 2007, BAPS had constructed four carved stone temples, or mandirs in North America, in suburbs outside of Houston, Chicago, Atlanta in the United States, and in Toronto, Canada. These structures have arisen in social and historical landscapes considerably different from India where BAPS has built numerous stone temples over the past one hundred years.<sup>6</sup> The temple building committees based in the U.S. had to become familiar with local and state land ordinances and zoning rules as well as federal U.S. land use laws. This article does not specifically trace BAPS's history of encounters with legal matters as it embarked upon temple construction in the U.S. Instead, BAPS, in trying to obtain the approval of local planning boards, must present its organisation, community and purpose of temple building in ways that consider the informing discourses of their potential new neighbours. What is of particular interest is how the temple publics, while hardly a homogeneous entity, respond to the temple as an object of religious signification that stands in contrast to something else. The temple itself, in

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<sup>5</sup> The BAPS Swaminarayan devotional tradition emphasises specific relationships between God (that is, Bhagwan Swaminarayan), Guru, and devotee. See Kim (2007 and 2009). Also, see the extensive BAPS publications available in many of its temple bookstores or through its website, [www.swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org)

<sup>6</sup> For example, there are BAPS temples in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and New Delhi.

this argument, is the prime object of and generator of discourse but the generated discourse reveals perceptions and interpretations about something beyond the object. BAPS and its leaders recognise that their devotional Hindu tradition is not always easily understood by outsiders; nevertheless, the undeniably concrete presence of the temple, whether completed or not, confirms that whatever Swaminarayan traditions may be, the result is a solid and highly public form that, as Keane writes, are "objects for the senses and not confined to inner or subjective experience" (2008: S114). As a semiotic object, the Swaminarayan temple can "enter into projects that people work on" (Keane 2008: S 115). It is this quality of the temple, notwithstanding its devotional significance to Swaminarayan devotees, of a semiotic form that provokes varieties of responses and experiences that we now consider.

We shall look at two case studies, one set in Georgia and the other in New Jersey.<sup>7</sup> In each instance, it will become evident that the Swaminarayan temple provokes responses from its publics that implicate their informing ideas. These ideas no doubt pre-date the arrival or completion of the temple, but they become further reified in their encounter with the solid materiality of the new edifice in the neighbourhood.

### **Case One: A Completed Temple in Lilburn, Georgia**

The to-date largest carved stone BAPS temple outside of India was inaugurated on 27 August 2007. Commonly referred to as the "Atlanta" temple owing to its seven mile proximity to this major urban centre in the American southeast, the BAPS temple is actually located in Lilburn, Georgia, a small suburb of just over 11,000 residents (2000 U.S. Census). Unlike some of BAPS's other temple construction projects, the efforts to secure land and construct the Atlanta temple were supported by local leaders and there was relatively little community opposition. On the day of the murti pratishtha nagar yatra when the murtis or images to be installed were paraded around the temple area, there was a small protest group with placards that decried the glaring presence of 'idolatrous' Hinduism in Christian territory. Notwithstanding the overall lack of public protest, a search of the blogosphere does reveal more critical responses to the Atlanta temple. It is these that I share now for the purpose of understanding an area of discursive content in which BAPS is located.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The research that contributes to this article is part of my ongoing fieldwork with the BAPS community. I am grateful to the many BAPS devotees who have welcomed me into their lives. I particularly thank the leaders and volunteers in the BAPS North American region for making possible my fieldwork in the United States. And, I thank Dipal Patel who facilitated my correspondence with Sadhu Mangalnidhidas. All interpretations and arguments in this article are my own.

<sup>8</sup> It behooves repeating that while the focus of this article is on more negative critical responses to BAPS temples, this does not imply that such responses are the only ones in circulation. The blogosphere in the Atlanta region hosts other perspectives including those that are both critical and positive in their assessments to the Atlanta Swaminarayan temple. See, for example, <http://iwu2012breanna.wordpress.com/2011/03/14/atlanta-day-6-an-intricate-temple/>, a link which Sadhu Mangalnidhidas of BAPS shared with me (through the intermediary assistance of Dipal Patel.).

The following excerpted material is taken from the blogger called "VirusHead" who is also known as Heidi. For an entry dated 4 January 2009, and titled, "Visit to BAPS Hindu Temple," Heidi writes":

When we drove in, there was a small gatehouse. We stopped at the gate, and a man stuck his head out and asked, "What's your name?" John told him his own name. Ben and I were silent. He opened the gate. So, already, things were a little surreal. Why would he ask the name? How did we know that only John's name mattered, or were we wrong about that? Was he checking against some sort of list? Or just making a note of it? Why? ...

For all it cost to build, I think they missed something essential-- or maybe that was somehow the whole point? ...

Everyone was silent-- by decree of the signs-- but that seemed wrong to me. There should have been chanting, bells, singing, dancing! Perhaps it was just because we were there on an off hour-- I don't know. I also missed the smells of incense and candles.

I just couldn't shake the feeling that things were somehow slightly off – it was all too clean and pristine. There were plexiglass shields around the carved columns, when there should have been encouragement to touch them. What kind of temple is this, really? I don't know much of anything about this particular flavor of Hinduism, but there should be a sense of age – and at least a little grime – in a temple...

This temple didn't seem to be about flows and movement and process, but more about a museum-type static series. It's an interesting, even fascinating, monument, but... well, again – we were seeing it at an "off" time. I'll go back and see the differences when the alter[sic] doors are opened.<sup>9</sup>

As described by Heidi on her blog, her visit to the Atlanta Swaminarayan temple was suggested by an extended family member and though the site was nearby to her, she had not known about it. From the moment of her arrival with her immediate family, Heidi's observations convey her wariness about the temple. "Why," she asks, does a temple person ask for the name of the car driver? Once inside the temple, Heidi shares her appreciation of the temple's carvings but it is clear that her perceptions and sensory reactions to this space are undergirded by a comparative bias that she is unable to shake off. The temple is too clean, too quiet, does not have the right aromas, and seems too much like a museum. Interestingly, she notes that the temple is missing "flows, movement, and process." She writes, "What kind of temple is this, really? ... there should be a sense of age – and at least a little grime – in a temple."

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.virushead.net/vhrandom/2009/01/04/visit-to-baps-hindu-temple>, accessed 15 July 2010

Heidi acknowledges that she is unfamiliar with the builders of the temple and yet she characterises the Swaminarayan temple in comparison to something other than what she is experiencing. Though recognising that her visit may have occurred in an “off” time, the temple has reminded Heidi of what she was expecting to experience but did not. Given the costs, which Heidi reproduces via a Wikipedia entry on the “Atlanta” temple, a reported \$19 million dollars, she did assume that the temple would be larger in size and, as she observes in her blog entry, certainly not within visual distance of an ordinary supermarket. The various details that Heidi observes about the temple site suggest that her experiencing of the Swaminarayan temple did not match with her sensory and aesthetic assumptions. Elsewhere her blog alludes to her cross-cultural interest in a variety of topics and her résumé indicates her doctoral degree from an interdisciplinary programme that included a focus on religion and culture. This background presumably provides Heidi with the confidence to produce a blog entry on a temple and community of which she admits she is not familiar. This combination of confident assessment alongside an acknowledged gap in knowledge opens questions about what makes an outsider’s perception about a Hindu temple relevant to understanding the temple publics. Whatever fuels the blogger’s convictions, the location of this blog entry on the internet invites others who may search for “Atlanta Swaminarayan temple” or some variation to enter a narrative that is predicated on personal experience. Heidi’s experience of the Swaminarayan temple has produced a material output that is available for others to respond to. Indeed, one respondent, Vance, notes,

Good commentary on the temple—gave a good feel for the place. My experience with Hindu temples matches yours, they usually have sort of a well-used feel to them—not particularly worried about dirt.<sup>10</sup>

From Heidi, to Vance, and to other respondents both affirming and critical, the chain of assessments become part of the discourse that accumulates and contributes to how the Atlanta Swaminarayan is viewed by its publics. And, while these views can hardly be taken as representative of how many others may experience the temple, their points of congruence and separation point to informing discourses that might be further probed. Are the views of Heidi and Vance, for example, influenced by their assumptions about Hinduism, their notions of religion, and their geographical location or age? Are their views informed by discourses in the United States about India, or even images of India generated by the Indian government’s office of tourism?

Heidi’s blog conveys an attitude of mild bafflement and indecision about what makes the BAPS temple not quite what she had imagined it to be. Since the visit to the temple provoked this comparative stance, the question comes forth as to what is the basis for Heidi’s imaginings in the first place? What underlies the assumption that a Hindu temple must not be too clean lest it not appear to be a real Hindu temple? What informs the assessment that the temple should have a certain aroma, noise level, and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.virushead.net/vhrandom/2009/01/04/visit-to-baps-hindu-temple>, accessed 23 November 2011.

movement of bodies? What we might begin to see, from this brief exploration of Heidi's blog, is the power of a sign. We do not really know what Heidi feels about the Swaminarayan temple other than what comes forth from her explication of this site which in turn reveals certain assumptions about Hindu temples. This is a chain of causality that directs our attention to the sign itself, that is, the Hindu temple.

As it turns out, other non-Swaminarayan devotees living in the Lilburn area of the BAPS temple have shared their thoughts on a local community blog associated with the town of Snellville, located only a few miles from Lilburn, Georgia.<sup>11</sup> From Michael, on 23 March 2007:

This is in response to an article that came on local newspapers under the heading "Hindu community prepares to open **Lilburn temple**" To the ignorant Indian guy named PATEL who gave interview to the Gwinnett Daily Post saying "**This temple is not like the Christian Church that is open only on Sundays** that is indeed a slap in the face of the millions of Christians from Baptists, Methodists to the Catholics, and I challenge him to go and peek in one of these churches and see for yourself!... Just because you have built a structure sparkling with idols from cows to snakes and birds and reptiles as your number of Gods increase every now and then... As of you who is trying to hide behind this marble structure which was a source to TRANSFER ILLEGAL TAX EVADED DOLLARS INTO THIS **NON PROFIT** organization named BAPS of a Particular CASTE society...from the Indian state of **GUJARAT** who are always raping and stoning Christian missionaries...No matter how sparkling your building is, your body is the kingdom of GOD; No matter how many idols you have polished on the outskirts of the temple from the snakes to the cows,\*\* JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY, THE TRUTH & THE LIFE! WAKE UP AAMERICA, THE FIRST THINGS THEY GONNA DO IS TO BAN STEAKS HOLY COW. [emphases, including asterisks and misspellings, in original]

Also, from the Snellville blog, Tonya writes, on August 24, 2007:

... I was indeed planning to stop by the temple since I live near Hwy 29 when I saw all the rules: **No shoes inside; No shorts**, Blah blah of several others. As for your comment "You can walk into a Hindu temple any time of the day for a blessing." From whom? Blessings from Rats, Cows, Reptiles....and for that kinda blessing we have to take our **shoes off** and meanwhile If I am jogging by, wearing shorts, I can't come because I have to cover my knees. I would gladly go inside a church, Thanks. [emphases in original]

The comments of Michael and Tonya are emphatic in tone and content and unambiguous in their orientation towards a Christian framing of the Hindu temple.

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[http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/shared-blogs/ajc/snellvilletalk/entries/2007/08/23/ministrys\\_close.html](http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/shared-blogs/ajc/snellvilletalk/entries/2007/08/23/ministrys_close.html), accessed 14 March 2009

While Tonya appears to have considered an actual visit to the temple, neither Michael nor Tonya appreciate what each interprets to be an idolatrous iconography, one that includes a too-wide variety of animals. Michael notes the “sparkling” and “polished” aspects of the temple but he is clear that these qualities do not mitigate what he perceives to be a simply wrong religion. Tonya reacts to the temple dress code and concludes that she is able to enter a church in jogging clothing and this she would rather do than dress according to the temple standards and receive blessings from an animal source. From Michael and Tonya’s comments, we can discern that their inability to appreciate the Swaminarayan temple is provoked in some substantial way by their preferences, overtly and implicitly for the Christian church. The Swaminarayan temple, from its dress code to its aesthetic dimensions is too alien a space; it is not Christian enough; it is too offensive to be an approachable site. From Michael’s overwrought posting, we can sense too, how the temple is a disruptive spectacle, one that can only point to a less-than-legal or legitimate basis for its construction.

From the three blog postings of Heidi, Michael, and Tonya, we can discern the discursive formation of an American and Protestantised ‘religion’ and its strong framing of these individuals’ reactions to the Lilburn Swaminarayan temple. Their feelings of suspicion to the space and their assumptions about the people who have constructed it point, minimally, to an epistemic foundation that provides a means of indexing their encounter with the Swaminarayan space to their own informing assumptions about religion and its proper form. These observers do not acknowledge the Swaminarayan devotional foundation that has made the temple possible other than, in Michael and Tonya’s postings, to assert the primacy of the Christian church. As for the actual subjectivity of Swaminarayan follower, this is overlooked or perhaps it is not to be permitted.

### **Case Two: A Yet Unbuilt Temple in Robbinsville, New Jersey**

In 2008 and 2010, the BAPS temple building committee and its expert witnesses came before the Robbinsville town planning board.<sup>12</sup> BAPS had purchased 102 acres in the New Jersey township of Robbinsville (pop. 13,642, 2010 U.S. Census). The land was already zoned for religious use and thus BAPS would not have to convince the board members that it intended to use the land for religious purposes. Rather, BAPS was seeking approval, in 2008, for the particular religious structures that it hoped to build. This consisted of a multi-phase and multi-year plan that would produce a temple complex containing a mandir (temple), main meeting hall, class room facilities, large kitchen, residences for sadhus (monks), and gymnasium. While the Robbinsville planning board would be constrained under the RLUIPA Act (Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act) to prevent the construction of religious buildings on land already zoned for permitted religious purposes, BAPS still needed to prove that its request for multiple buildings would meet the religious use criteria. BAPS received

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<sup>12</sup> In full disclosure, I attended the Robbinsville planning board hearings as an unpaid expert witness on behalf of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. My role was to share my understanding of BAPS and the relevance of the BAPS proposed building plans in light of its Hindu devotional tradition.

unanimous planning board approval for the temple complex construction.<sup>13</sup> In 2010, BAPS went again before the Robbinsville planning board to request a height variance for its central structure, now referred to as a mahamandiram. This modification in construction plans necessitated hearings in which BAPS attempted to clarify the differences between mandir and mahamandiram and in doing so, also support its request to have the tallest point of the mahamandiram reach 108 feet. In its arguments, BAPS argued that the proposed mahamandiram would be very similar to a carved-stone temple with a few ritual exceptions. Through a series of expert witness reports, BAPS explained that the architectural guidelines for building a mahamandiram were entirely dependent on the temple building prescriptions specified in ancient texts known as Sthapatya shastra. The expert witnesses specified that the appearance, dimensions, and significantly the height of the proposed structure are dependent on the height of the murtis, or images, which would be installed. In requesting a height variance, BAPS made clear that this was not a random height but one predicated on mathematical calculations established in ancient texts.

The Robbinsville Township ordinance specifies that religious buildings are permitted a height of 45 feet, and that certain "accessory structures" meeting specific criteria would be permitted, allowing a building to have a maximum height of 55 feet. For accessory structures, the ordinance specifies that such must be unoccupied and made of non-combustible material. An accessory structure must serve the 'principal use structure' in function; it must be an integral part of the principal use structure; and, it must be subordinate in square feet to that of the main use structure (Robbinsville 2010a: 87). Permitted accessory structures are listed as unoccupied domes and flagpoles. As for steeples, there is no height restriction. The consultant hired by BAPS to explain the overall temple complex and mahamandiram construction plans to the Robbinsville planning board noted, "Steeple, of course, are significant in other religions. The ordinance does restrict, however, the height of unoccupied domes and flag poles" (Robbinsville, 2010a: 89-90). The consultant pointed out that for BAPS, the domes and flag pole are effectively the "steeple" for the mahamandiram.

The entire roof structure above that 33-foot elevation is unoccupied space, and it consists of a combination of domes, spires and flag poles. And that all affectively[sic] is a steeple. Steeple, by definition, does not have a minimum percentage or maximum percentage of roof area. Steeple's essentially a decorative or monument-type structure that's typically pointed and extending up and usually is typically a spire. And that is what is occurring here at the Mahamandiram. I would have actually taken the position that this was a steeple and we didn't need a variance at all. Except that the ordinance does specifically address unoccupied domes and flag poles (Robbinsville 2010b: 116-117).

The BAPS initiated discussion about the proposed height variance for its main temple structure did raise a number of intriguing puzzles: why is there no Robbinsville height

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<sup>13</sup> See Kim (Forthcoming) for a discussion about the 2008 Robbinsville hearings.



restriction for a steeple though there is an ordinance height restriction for a religious building? And, if making a parallel between a church and Hindu temple, and if assuming that the latter is a religious structure, then could the unoccupied church steeple and the unoccupied dome and flag pole of the Hindu temple be seen as equivalent? More sensibly and more effectively, rather than parse the significance of the spire viz. the dome and flag pole, BAPS and its consultants conducted the "visual impact study" described at the beginning of this article. This study, involving the red blimp that was flown at an approximate height of 110 feet, succeeded in demonstrating that whether or not local townspeople accepted the "religious" functional equivalent of dome, spire, and flag pole to steeple, there were two already existing structures connected to the BAPS Robbinsville property that stood even taller. These two structures, namely a water tower (124 feet) adjacent to the BAPS property and a high-tension electric tower (128 feet) located directly on the BAPS property were much higher than the proposed height of the mahamandiram (108 feet) and far more visible from a distance beyond the property. The video footage of the blimp taken from the circumference of the BAPS property revealed that the blimp, flying at 110 feet was invisible 95% of the time and only partially visible in a few points around the property. This might raise the question of what structure would be more appealing to glimpse, a water tower, electric tower, or a carved stone dome with flag pole?

The matter of the BAPS temple project and its visibility was indeed a serious one for some residents of Robbinsville, the village of Windsor, and East Windsor.<sup>14</sup> During the planning board hearings between the Robbinsville planning board and the BAPS temple project team, the public was invited to express thoughts on the proposed land use and subsequent height variance request. As members of the audience stood before the planning board during the public segment, each was asked to state his or her name and address. From this, it became clear that many in the audience were actually residents of Windsor, a village within Robbinsville. These members of BAPS's publics, in this instance of encounter, were those who were mostly critical of the proposed temple complex and requested height of the main structure. The Windsor criticisms, in particular, were mainly framed in terms of the unwanted transformations that the temple complex would allegedly bring to a historic village. Cathy Lubbe, who stated her place of residence as "Village of Windsor," pleaded,

The village was placed on the National Register because it has maintained the same size for 150 years. You cannot tell me that this [BAPS proposal] is not going to create a problem with the village (Robbinsville 2010a: 128).

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<sup>14</sup> The present-day areas of Robbinsville, Windsor, and East Windsor in the state of New Jersey (U.S.) share a long history dating to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and including shifts in borders and various name changes. Some members of the public in the Robbinsville Township hearings described in this article are residents of Windsor, a "village" within Robbinsville and others may be from East Windsor, an adjacent town where BAPS had purchased land for building a temple. This latter plan was not approved by the local planning board. In this article, to avoid the error of determining whether a public member is a resident of Windsor or East Windsor, I have opted to use "Windsor" alone. I thank Dipal Patel for pointing out the territorial distinctions of the two Windsors to me.

Another Windsor resident, Eric Feigenbaum said,

I moved into Windsor about three years ago, and I moved here for the rural characteristics of the town, the history of the Village...if you want to think about the town as historical, you wouldn't see these things back then...(Robbinsville 2010a: 135-136).

BAPS and its consultants were more than prepared for concerns about altered landscapes. As demonstrated by the red blimp visual impact study, BAPS had already planned for the possibility of contention over its height variance request and had undertaken the blimp test well before the commencement of the February 2010 planning board hearings. This "balloon test" was intended to prove that the Swaminarayan complex and its tallest structure would not disrupt the Windsor or Robbinsville "view shed" or sightline of those areas adjacent to the BAPS property. BAPS also produced a signed acknowledgement from a New Jersey Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer who noted that the proposed construction would not endanger the national and state historic district and that no "historic properties" would be affected by the proposed BAPS temple project.<sup>15</sup> Yet, neither the blimp test nor repeated demonstrations that the temple complex would not disrupt the existing way of life for Robbinsville and Windsor residents appeared to satisfy some of the assembled publics. At least one member of the public asserted that BAPS was lying to the planning board and assembled public.<sup>16</sup>

The efforts by BAPS and its consultants to elide the temple dome and flag pole with a steeple might suggest an effort to minimise the distinctiveness of temple architecture in favour of something more familiar to its audience while at the same time supporting the idea that steeples, domes, and flag poles are part of religious structures more generally. That Hindu temples have domes, spires, and flag poles are, in other words, no different from churches that have steeples. In this framing of architectural accessories, the subtext is that different material expressions of different religions nevertheless point to the universal dimensions of religion, at least in an architectural sense. As for the balloon study, this effort by BAPS to demonstrate its sensitivity to the uneasiness of its neighbours' perceptions about a Hindu temple complex suggests BAPS's willingness to prove that its dome and flag pole would be all but invisible. We can begin to see here that unintentionally or otherwise, BAPS's careful plan to help its publics appreciate its proposed temple project has resulted in two seemingly contradictory objectives: the dome and flag pole are presented as materially synonymous with the steeple; and, the publics living in the vicinity of the yet unbuilt temple complex are to be assured that they will barely see the tallest structure in the

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<sup>15</sup> This document was shown by BAPS during its Power Point presentation on 17 February 2010. It was signed by Department State Historic Preservation Officer, Daniel D. Saunders, dated 11 February 2010.

<sup>16</sup> This accusation was strongly criticised by a Robbinsville planning board member. He apologised to BAPS and its consultants on behalf of the board and excoriated unnamed members of the public for intimating that BAPS was unethical in its presentation methods and data analysis. See the comments of David Boyne (Robbinsville 2010b: 5-6).

complex. There is, thus, in BAPS's representation of itself to its publics, both a reassurance that BAPS Hinduism is not different from other religions in terms of architectural need; and, for those unable to or unwilling to appreciate the Hindu temple complex, there would be little visible evidence of its presence.

### **Consuming Materiality and its Consequences**

The BAPS temple project committee recognised that it needed to find a vocabulary that would translate the material dimensions of its proposed temple complex into an accessible religious object. However, as became clear in different moments of BAPS's Robbinsville presentations, its temple complex project was also protected under U.S. federal law. As the lead attorney for BAPS pointed out,

The municipality can't discriminate between what's accepted for one religious denomination and prohibited for another. There must be a compelling government interest to deny a variance which is of critical importance to a religious institution (Robbinsville 2010a: 7-8).

BAPS effectively needed to demonstrate that its temple project was thus as motivated by its leaders' devotional reasons to build a complex as it was to satisfy the existing assumptions of the category "religion". During the concluding portion of the second February 2010 hearing, BAPS observed that its request for a height variance was, in the final analysis, a matter of terminology more than an intent to challenge Robbinsville's zoning ordinance. At the conclusion of the hearing on 24 February 2010, the Robbinsville planning board, with one dissenting member, accepted BAPS's application for a height variance. As one board member noted, just before the final vote was taken,

I just would like to say that I have gotten a tremendous education here...it's a very impressive religion, and it's things I've never known. And I appreciate the enlightenment...everything I've seen and heard, you know, through the testimony, with the pictures, you know, it's a slight visual impact. Obviously you know, it's going to be a gorgeous structure. It's not a nuclear reactor... (Robbinsville 2010b: 117-119).

Nearly two years following the Robbinsville approval for the height variance, blog respondent John writes,

I live on Hankins Rd. It is the worst. Property values are going to plunge to the gutter.. I called the local Real Estate agent to appraise my beautiful home, and she said Hankins Rd is not an upcoming area where people want to live bc of the temple coming up. I am getting 100,000 less than what I should be getting, but her advise is to sell before the temple goes up.. bc after the temple goes up the traffic is going to be crazy. and value of properties are going down.. so my advice to my fellow Hankins Rd neighbors... sell your houses.. or ure gonna

smell cury everyday you wake up.. and these people are dirty they walk on ur property they don't care.. they liter.. I went to the site and some indian refered me to the edison temple.. they destoryed the area... SO BYE BYE ROBBINSVILLE!![emphases, spelling, and spacing in original]<sup>17</sup>

This posting illustrates how the Swaminarayan temple, no matter the success of its presentations before a local planning board, is situated in a limitless field of individual responses that can circulate and perhaps stimulate further responses. And, yet, the responses are not entirely random or unexpected. To trace a very real concern of many homeowners, even before its construction, the temple's anticipated existence spurs emotions that may have an effect on how local citizens as well as potential newcomers interpret property values. It is not the temple that causes house prices to tumble but rather people's perceptions and assumptions about the temple that in turn influence their thoughts about living in Robbinsville. This chain of events, as catalysed by the unbuilt Swaminarayan temple, can have measurable material effects, not only to worried or disgruntled home-owners but to others who, for example, might stumble upon the mostly hostile pronouncements in the Robbinsville blog, and then decide not to settle in this local region. As Matthew Engelke argued for a very different ethnographic context, it is not merely the presence but the absence of something material that can engender responses and subsequent materialities (2007).

The Swaminarayan temple, whether built or not, or visible or invisible, has the capacity to shape behaviours not only of its devotees but a larger pool of people who constitute its temple publics. What we can discern from our brief view of the Lilburn, Georgia and Robbinsville, New Jersey cases are the ways in which the temple sites trigger particular reactions which then become nodes for further responses. This web of triggered responses becomes itself a necessary arena for analysis. The cases discussed here suggest that the category religion plays a significant role in the reactions of the temple publics. The Lilburn and Robbinsville area residents, though reacting to the Swaminarayan temple in different ways, nevertheless convey an anxiety about BAPS that appears to reside in their conception of acceptable religion(s) and of what this religion is constituted. Religion, it seems, is the common semiotic form that underlies the temple publics' experiencing of the temple. For example, why must BAPS both try to appear as a recognisable religion and yet make efforts to render some aspects of its material expression invisible? To answer this is to recognise what some of the residents of Windsor, New Jersey and the blog respondents from Snellville, Georgia felt, namely, that BAPS is an unfamiliar religion with architecture, practices, and large resources that do not complement the social and religious landscape of local villages in New Jersey and Georgia. The deep anxieties and hostilities in some of the local residents, as described above, suggest that further ethnographic research is necessary to fine-tune the connections between religion as an informing discourse and a strong contender for influencing a publics' responses to the new temple in the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/robbinsville-nj/T9L5AH9O61F02P8CN>, accessed 25 November 2011.

neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> The semiotic richness of the category religion and its privileged place as an historical form are confirmed by BAPS's recognition that it must place emphasis on the religious character of its temple project. It should be noted that this strategy, in contrast, is not one that necessarily arises when BAPS is seeking permission to build temples in India.

Finally, to consider, how do the responses, perceptions, and behaviours of temple publics become the force for material changes in Hindu communities? And, do these changes offer new ways of looking at India, the Indian diaspora, and the making of global Hinduism? By navigating the discursive field of "religion" the BAPS temple committee's actions highlight the challenges of creating understanding from misunderstanding about Hindu religious communities. The cultural translations of ideas and practices, imaginings, and ideals are, as Tulasi Srinivas has recently argued a process dependent on both the transmitting and receiving sides (2010). Global Hinduism, not surprisingly, is the product of multiple factors, including an increasingly established diaspora population, particularly in North America, and the strikingly easy flow of ideas, objects, and practices from here to there. Robbinsville and Windsor residents, for example, looked up BAPS on the internet and discovered that hundreds of thousands of people visit BAPS temple complexes in India. This fact certainly made an impression and added to the anxiety of the BAPS proposed temple complex. In the diaspora of South Asians, global Hinduism is the product of engagement and interrogation by people whose conceptions of Hinduism are inevitably affected by the discourses on religion and whose efforts to accommodate or contest these discourses result in novel ways of sustaining a livable Hinduism beyond India. That the processes of "cultural translation" are often perceived to be faulty and inadequate to one party or another is not surprising. Srinivas argues that when ideas and things travel, the multiple and usually less-than-obvious ways in which they interact with already existing and about-to-be created discourses makes translation a process that is unpredictable. As BAPS and other minority religious communities encounter already established discursive contexts, it is those communities that are able to address competing and antagonistic discourses and to find ways to map these onto their own understandings of their traditions that will likely thrive. Towards this end, the language games that connect steeples to domes, spires, and flag poles are well worth playing.

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<sup>18</sup> The support of nearly all members (minus one) of the Robbinsville Township planning board for the BAPS request for height variance points to the variations in the BAPS publics' receptivity towards an unfamiliar edifice, religious tradition, and community. Clearly, not all members of the Robbinsville publics feel hostile towards BAPS.

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