Devotional expressions in the Swaminarayan Community

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Contemporary Hinduism

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If you go to the village of Bochasau today, a village in Kheda district in the western Indian state of Gujarat, you can visit the very first temple constructed by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha Hindu community. This stone temple, with its tall carved pinnacles, each adorned with a red and white striped flag, is the daily site of pilgrimage and of intense devotional activity. It is also the physical beginning point of a remarkable history. On 5 June 1907, when the Bochasan Swaminarayan temple was inaugurated, there were few amenities for visitors, and no landscaping or leafy trees under which to seek some shade. There was only an unfinished temple that housed, in its central and therefore most important shrine (garbha griha), the precious icons, or mūrtis, of Akshar and Purushottam. Side by side, with Akshar standing to the left of Purushottam, this positioning of the two mūrtis would distinguish the Bochasau Swaminarayan temple from other existing and older Swaminarayan temples. The ritual awakening of these mūrtis (Figure 9.1) and
the corresponding consecration of the Bochasan temple signalled, in a public way, the inauguration of not just a place of worship but a new devotional community.

The community that grew out of the Bochasan temple debut becomes known, over time, as Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, or “BAPS”. In its formal name, the geographic locus of its beginning, Bochasan, is acknowledged along with the central foci of Swaminarayan devotionalism, the existential and eternal entities, Akshar and Purushottam. Who are Akshar and Purushottam? And how is the dynamic between devotee to Akshar and Purushottam experienced and cultivated by devotees? Or, to put it another way, what does it mean when a devotee happily declares, “I’m Swaminarayan”?

The story of the Bochasan temple is the story of Swaminarayan leaders, the gurus, and the devotees, who are known as satsangis. In its practices, rituals and Gujarati language use, BAPS satsangis share similarities with much older Swaminarayan and other regional Hindu communities. Yet, it is the ways in which BAPS satsangis turn towards Akshar and Purushottam in their practices and rituals that distinguishes BAPS bhakti, or mode of offering devotion. For many Hindus, questions about what remains following bodily death and what is reborn into another body are the basis of much reflection and concern. Ideally, for Hindus, it is escape from rebirth that is desired. BAPS bhakti from the devotees’ perspective provides a reassuringly attainable path towards insuring that the indestructible aspect of one’s self, the atman, will not be reborn into another being. In other words, for Swaminarayan devotees, the BAPS tradition succeeds in offering a convincing programme for how to live in the world while simultaneously cultivating one’s being, composed of the sentient and non-separable entities of the mind and body, to absorb the knowledge that will lead to the atman’s release from rebirth. This knowledge does not come naturally or easily. To understand the success and appeal of BAPS is thus to see how Swaminarayan devotionalism inspires and resonates within its followers.

The aim of this chapter is to approach the life of the Swaminarayan satsangi through two areas of devotional expression: nitya puja and seva. This is a limited focus, but one that can help us to appreciate how being a Swaminarayan devotee rests on understanding the self and body in relation to the entities Akshar and Purushottam.

Nitya puja is daily devotional worship that satsangis perform each morning. Seva is volunteered work that satsangis conduct in order to please Akshar and Purushottam. As we shall see, nitya puja and seva are crucial components of each individual satsangi’s devotional practice. Whether in the personal performance of nitya puja or the outwardly directed work that seva often entails, both devotional expressions highlight and reinforce the central relationships of satsangi to Akshar and Purushottam. Again, we can ask, what makes someone a Swaminarayan Hindu? How do satsangis sustain their devotional desires while living in the world? What makes BAPS a successful contemporary guru-based Hindu movement? In answering these questions, we will see that it is the concepts
of Akshar and Purushottam that permeate, guide, and influence Swaminarayan ways of being.

The BAPS community

More than a hundred years after the Bochasan temple was built, BAPS has expanded from Gujarat to other parts of India, Europe, Asia, Australia and North America. From one temple to over seven hundred, Swaminarayan Hindus are shaping the contours of a global Hinduism that perhaps could not have been imagined in its colonial Indian beginnings. Its temples and the more recent “Akshardham” temple-monument complexes have attracted much interest and have become popular tourist destinations. BAPS counts its membership to be around one million followers, nearly all of whom are of Gujarati heritage. Included in this community, or satsang, are the more than eight hundred men who have taken vows of celibacy and dedicate their time and skills fully to BAPS. These men are called sadhus (in Hindi) or santo (in Gujarati). In addition to cultivating their personal devotional practices, sadhus are responsible for supporting the growth of the global BAPS community and insuring that Swaminarayan teachings and practices are properly disseminated. There are currently sadhus living in most of the areas of the world where BAPS devotees have settled.

We can think of the broad BAPS satsang as consisting of three sections. The smallest section consists of the sadhus. The second is the international core of approximately 55,000 followers who are regular volunteers for Swaminarayan projects. The third section is the balance of devotees whose degree of commitment to BAPS events and to Swaminarayan prescriptions for behaviour, diet, and devotional practices varies. The entire satsang is centrally administered from Ahmedabad, Gujarat by a board of trustees and the most important BAPS administrative role, the administrative president and religious head who is also known as guru.

Swaminarayan satsangs meet in a temple (mandir) for a weekly get-together that includes hearing and singing devotional songs (bhajan) and listening to lessons on the main Swaminarayan texts, the Vachanamrut and the Swamini Vats. The Gujarati language remains important for participating in BAPS, though publications are available in English, Hindi and several other south Asian languages. Devotees follow rules of behaviour that are prescribed in the Shikshapatri, a “code of conduct” consisting of 212 verses. The Shikshapatri includes dietary rules on avoiding certain substances such as onion, garlic, and intoxicants, to proscriptions for behaviour in temples, at home, and between males and females. Devotees also regularly read the Vachanamrut, a collection of discourses given by Sahajanand Swami from 1819 to 1829. For BAPS, the historical person of Sahajanand Swami is called Bhagwan Swaminarayan.
Nitya pujā: an ethnographic moment

Sector 29 Flats, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, November 1992

In the cold and dark stillness of the morning, the sound of buckets clanging travelled easily through the shuttered windows. Men and women, having arisen well before dawn, were collecting hot water from a large cauldron in the courtyard. The water was brought back to the Sector 29 flats surrounding the courtyard. Next came the sound of cold tap water noisily streaming into empty buckets followed by the addition of hot water to achieve a bearable temperature, one that would cancel out the bather's breaths spiralling into the air. As the sky slowly lightened, the sounds of water splashing onto concrete walls and floors, buckets clanging, and more and more people queuing in the courtyard to collect hot water became layered onto a perceptible quiet in the rooms where those who had completed their bath were now performing nitya pujā, or daily morning acts of devotional worship. Before carefully arrayed laminated cards with printed images, these BAPS devotees were beginning their day with a sequence of meditative and ritual gestures that would bring them into closer relationship with guru and Bhagwan. Sitting cross-legged on small cloths placed directly on the cold concrete floor, each devotee was absorbed in her own devotional performance, proceeding at her own pace.

In fact, all throughout the Swaminarayan diaspora, men, women and children, upon arising in the morning and completing their bath, begin their daily pujā, trying to envelop their physically cleansed body with the purifying love and peacefulness that devotion to guru and Bhagwan would bring. Within fifteen to twenty minutes, having finished nitya pujā, each devotee carefully repacks the laminated cards and other pujā accessories into a small bag. Then the day officially starts.

I share this moment from my fieldwork with BAPS because, although I have witnessed countless morning pujā, the memory of living with Swaminarayan devotees in Sector 29, all of whom had travelled from the USA to Gujarat, highlights how distance from home, different timing and unfamiliar facilities do not change the requirement of beginning one's day with nitya pujā.

Let us look more closely at how nitya pujā unfolds. What are the components of this devotional ritual? And, what is happening to the devotee who is “doing” nitya pujā?

Nitya pujā “up close and personal”

Each morning, after awaking, going to the toilet, bathing and dressing in clean clothes, Hiral, a college freshman, does her nitya pujā (daily morning worship). Unlike the many other types of pujā, or devotional worship, that Swaminarayan followers participate in, nitya pujā is deeply personal, is performed daily, and
 involves only the devotee and her relationship to two central entities, Akshar and Purushottam. Nitya piyā can be performed nearly anywhere though ideally it should be in a quiet place with minimal distractions. Nothing is needed beyond the devotee and a few piyā items that are easily stored in a small bag or case.

Hirai begins by putting a āsana, a mat or small cloth, on the floor. She sits cross-legged on the āsana and unpacks her piyā kit, a cloth bag in which her piyā items are stored. She takes out an āsana reserved only for her piyā items and places the Shikshapatri and Vachanamrut. It is now time to sit in quiet meditation, with back straight and eyes closed. Hirai is concentrating on trying to quieten her thoughts and focus on Akshar and Purushottam. Akshar, for all BAPS devotees, is the same as the living Guru and Purushottam is Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In the BAPS tradition, the devotee can offer bhakti, or loving devotion to Purushottam, only by becoming akshar-rupa, that is the state of “becoming like Akshar”. Thus, in her meditation, Hirai concentrates on the knowledge that she wants to become like Akshar.

In order to become akshar-rupa, Hirai must recognise that within her physical self is an indestructible and eternal self or soul, her ātman. The ātman is clothed and embodied in a being that will eventually deteriorate and die. Through nitya piyā, Hirai hopes to cleanse her ātman of the complications that arise from its embodiment within her. If she succeeds, then she feels that she can live life without fearing death or pain. Hirai’s ontological goal, in other words, is to achieve the contentment that comes from knowing that her ātman identifies with Akshar, thereby enabling her to offer devotion to Purushottam while she is alive.

Hirai keeps her breathing even. She silently dwells on the thought “I am ātman”. Hirai repeats this phrase, “I am ātman”, while also acknowledging that “guru is my ātman” and “Bhagwan Swaminarayan resides within my ātman”. This is a three-part relationship of devotee to guru, of guru to Purushottam and of devotee to Purushottam. Nitya piyā is a daily opportunity to remind oneself of the connection of these relationships to the devotee’s own devotional growth.

It is the guru who has the significant role in BAPS bhakti. Guru embodies the full immanence of Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan and operates in the terrestrial world by helping devotees and seekers to come closer to knowing Purushottam. Hirai focuses on how her guru is the model for a continuous devotional stance toward Bhagwan. Guru may appear to experience physical discomfort, illness, and even old age, yet, his unwavering devotion to Bhagwan is reflected in his devotional actions towards the murti of Bhagwan: in serving Bhagwan, guru is also following the commands of his own guru to serve BAPS. And all satsangīs point to guru’s state of knowing ātman, of being ātman personified, and therefore of being beyond rebirth.

By repeating “I am ātman”, Hirai is following the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan who specified in the Vachanamrut that the real self or ātman is clothed by the body. In her daily piyā, Hirai mentally disentangles this “real self”, the ātman, from the self that is intertwined with bodily sensations of desire.
attachment and the sense of “ego”. Her body is promoting a sense of “ego”, and this unfortunately muddles her ability to see that “I am ṝman”. In her meditation on the forms of Akshar Guru and Purushottam Bhagwan, Hiral is engaging in an intense introspection, antardṛṣṭi, for the purpose of trying to become like Akshar and therefore to be able to live in-the-world without being derailed by bodily and mundane desires. To become akshar-rupa does not nullify Hiral’s more worldly and personal goals; neither does it preclude being married and having a family. If Hiral can “become like Akshar”, or become like guru (for the two are synonymous), then she can, following the death of her physical self, experience the “eternal bliss” of serving Bhagwan Swaminarayan in his “heavenly abode”. According to the Vachanamrut, Akshar is in fact both the living guru and the place where Purushottam resides. Thus, for all devotees, the goal is to be able to serve Bhagwan, much as Akshar does, eternally, and from Akshardham.

Following the antardṛṣṭi phase of nitya pūjā, Hiral enters the phase of mānsi pūjā, of mentally offering devotion to guru and Bhagwan. This form of bhakti allows any devotee, irrespective of sex, age, or status, to care for guru and Bhagwan in a loving and intimate way. Within her mind, Hiral visualises awakening guru and Bhagwan, guiding them through the morning routine, including, for example, helping to brush their teeth. She dresses Bhagwan and guru in seasonally appropriate clothing and adorns them with ornaments and flower garlands. Mānsi pūjā helps Hiral to develop her devotional commitment to Bhagwan and guru in that she personally thinks of ways to insure their comfort and to demonstrate her desire to be thoroughly focused in serving them. In mānsi, Hiral also recollects the few times that she has actually seen her guru. She recalls the excitement of looking at her guru from afar, of seeing him settle into his chair on the stage, and of watching his every gesture towards his own mūrti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. She remembers too the excitement of the women around

Figure 9.2 Female nitya pūjā (photo courtesy of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha).
her as they all craned their necks to look intently at guru in an effort to renew their love towards this embodiment of Akshar, this perfected devotee, always in total devotion to Bhagwan. Hiral recalls thinking how guru’s noticeable commitment to Bhagwan has made him impervious to his bodily needs, this is how she wants to be, “like Akshar”, a state of both living in-the-world and being dedicated to one’s job, and also at the same time, never losing concentration on serving Bhagwan.

For the next part of nitya pūjā, Hiral takes out five laminated cards that are imprinted with mūrtis or images (Figure 9.2). She carefully arranges these cards in a particular order. In the central place on the pūjā āsana, Hiral places a card with the mūrtis of Akshar and Purushottam. Akshar in this card is Gunatitanand Swami, the first guru of BAPS who lived during the time of Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s historical presence in early nineteenth-century India. Both mūrtis are full-bodied and dressed in nineteenth-century clothes; Gunatitanand Swami is often referred to, in English, as the “ideal” or “god-realized” sādhu. For devotees, Gunatitanand Swami represents the first in a lineage of BAPS gurus (guru paramparā). To Hiral’s left of this central card, is the mūrti of the second guru, Bhagatji Maharaj; and to the left of Bhagatji Maharaj is the mūrti of Yogiji Maharaj, the fourth guru in the BAPS lineage of Akshar Guru. To the right of the central Akshar–Purushottam mūrti, Hiral places the mūrti of Shastriji Maharaj, the third guru and the one who constructed the Rohan Swaminarayan temple. Further to the right of Shastriji Maharaj’s mūrti, Hiral places the mūrti for the fifth and current form of Akshar Guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Hiral now focuses her attention on the mūrtis and begins her devotion to them by praying and requesting that Bhagwan please be present in her pūjā. She gazes at each mūrti. This is known as “taking” darśana, or offering submission to each mūrti while simultaneously receiving the grace of each mūrti’s return gaze. Hiral turns the beads of her rosary of 108 beads (mālā), relying on this action to help keep the focus of her darśana.

Following darśana, Hiral arises from her āsana and circumambulates the mūrtis in a clockwise direction, taking care not to step on the pūjā āsana. This movement is called pradakṣiṇā and is the same that Hindus perform when circling the main shrines or outer perimeters of temples. The pradakṣiṇā emphasizes the centrality of Akshar and Purushottam and the lineage of BAPS gurus in Hiral’s life. She does a number of pradakṣiṇās of the mūrtis while still continuing to turn her mālā. Following this, she then sits down again and stretches her body, tipping it forward from her knees and resting on her elbows; with face down, she extends her arms and points her hands with palms together and fingertips stretched towards the mūrtis. This act of prostration is one of physical submission to Akshar and Purushottam. Hiral does a number of prostrations before sitting once again on her āsana.

Again, Hiral engages in māntra pūjā and the opportunity to offer a plate (thali) of foods. She opens her hands, with the palms facing upward as if she were holding a plate of food. She visualises the loving presentation of food items to
Akshar and Purushottam. Following the thāl offering, Hirai closes her pūjā with heartfelt prayers (prārthaṇā). She prays that Bhagwan and Guru will protect and guide her from heeding the temptations and sensations generated by her own mind-body and by living within society. She asks Bhagwan's help for her objective of doing well in college and securing a job that will help to support her immigrant parents. Hirai lightly touches each mūrti's feet with her fingertips and then she touches her closed eyes, a gesture of reverence and adoration.

The nītya pūjā is over. However, before packing up her pūjā kit, Hirai silently reads five verses from the Shikshapatri and a section from the Vachanamrūt, though this latter reading is not a required part of the daily pūjā. She sometimes skips this part of her morning routine due to time constraints but Hirai knows that knowledge of ātman (ātmanajñān) also arises from reading and reflecting on the words of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. BAPS has made the acquisition of knowledge much easier for those who cannot read or understand Gujarati easily. Hirai has chosen to do her satsang reading in English. She makes a mental note that she will pay more attention to the discourse (kathā) on Swaminarayan texts that is given at each weekly temple gathering. After reading, Hirai touches both books with her fingertips and then touches her eyes.

Carefully, Hirai gathers all her pūjā materials and stores them in the pūjā bag. She puts the bag away and is ready to begin her day, including having some breakfast. She feels that she has had her personal time with Akshar Guru and Purushottam Bhagwan. For Hirai and all committed BAPS devotees, nītya pūjā marks the start of the new day: it is an opportunity to remind oneself of necessary knowledge, and it is a chance to have a personal conversation with Akshar and Purushottam. Hirai shared with me that going to college has been a learning experience in the expected areas of time management and living away from home for the first time. However, Hirai did not expect that doing her daily morning pūjā would sometimes be sacrificed due to having stayed awake most of the night and needing to rush off to classes. She soon realized that the tension she felt between trying to maintain her devotional practice and being a good student was greater when she skipped her pūjā. Foregoing daily pūjā in fact meant that Hirai could not justify eating or drinking anything, the lack of which contributed to her fatigue and problems in concentration. Hirai also discovered that skipping her pūjā resulted in the lost chance to have a daily “check-in” and “one-on-one” with Bhagwan and guru. She found herself eating prepared foods with onion and garlic, something not permitted for satsangis. She also found that she was quickly irritated and more frustrated with fellow students. Without pūjā, Hirai described herself as too focused on the “I-ness” and “me-ness” of her situation. When she returned to performing daily pūjā, Hirai noted that she knew immediately that Akshar Guru and Purushottam Bhagwan had been waiting for her return. She knew that she was ever more in need of a compassionate teacher, her guru, who would guide her, without judgement, to recognize that daily activities and obligations could indeed be better met while satisfying the requirements for eternal fulfilment.
Sevā: an ethnographic moment

Swaminarayan temple kitchen, Neasden, England, February 1993

On a cold winter night in February, I watched as an elderly man stood in a dimly lit and unheated kitchen, and kneaded a large ball of dough. He teased a single strand of dough from the ball until it became as slender as a thread, and as he gently pulled the thread longer and longer, he dribbled ghī (ghee) into the dough, and he worked it further and further into a growing nest of coiled threads. He made many coils of finely pulled dough and he worked silently. These coils would later be deep fried to a light golden colour, and sprinkled with an aromatic blend of crushed pistachios, almonds and cardamom. I recall this image from 1993, of this “Rasoi” Kaka (kitchen uncle) making the delicacy sūtarfēnī through the night in the BAPS temple kitchen. He had volunteered to do this sevā, working mostly alone and, in spite of pains in his legs, standing through the night to make a wide variety of Gujarati sweets too time-consuming for busy women to make at home. Kaka said that this sevā was one that he could not miss. Fatigue, cold, and sleepless nights were all worth suffering through because of “sevā for my guru”. Thus, thousands of sūtarfēnī rounds, ghīrī, jalebhī and many varieties of nāsto (fried snacks) were hand-prepared and then sold. Two years later in 1995, from the labour of “rasoi kaka” and thousands of other sevaks (volunteer workers), of all ages, the Neasden (London) BAPS Swaminarayan temple was completed and the BAPS community, nearly overnight, became a recognisably public face of diaspora Hinduism.

In the years following the opening of the Neasden temple, BAPS has constructed four carved-stone temples in North America. Many thousands of satsangīs contributed material resources and physical labour to these projects. This is sevā – that is, work done for which there is no monetary payment. Sevā is work offered as an act of devotion. Given that sevā can strain a donor’s resources and even physical comfort, why do satsangīs do sevā? What does a devotee hope to gain from doing sevā?

Sevā and its consequences

From contemplation to actual work, BAPS devotees do sevā for reasons that are explicitly connected to their devotional desires to please Akshar-Guru and Purushottam Bhagwan. Sevā is thus an important dimension of satsangīs’ daily lives; it is an opportunity to put into practice their understanding of guru’s constant devotion to Bhagwan. Of course there are those who will donate large sums of money for a temple project and those who will jockey for more desirable kinds of sevā over the more back-breaking options. The committed satsangī, however, knows that no matter what sevā one is doing, it is the opportunity to try and be like Akshar, or to be like guru, that sevā allows one to experience.
Thus, at large festivals, satsangis may be assigned to collect rubbish from the grounds, to clean the public toilets, and to stir hot cauldrons of food that will be distributed free. And, while satsangis may occasionally complain of fatigue and physical discomfort, what one most frequently hears is that guru has “inspired all of us to do this”, and “guru has made this opportunity” for satsangis to develop a better knowledge about their mind-body and its obscuring of their ātman. Sevā, in other words, allows satsangis to physically, and in a very visceral way, apply their awareness of “I am ātman” to contexts where the discomforts of the mind-body are sure to dominate. In hard labour, financial sacrifices, and donated time, satsangis are being reminded by their mind-bodies that bhakti is indeed hard work: that giving devotion to Bhagwan full-time when the needs and desires of the physical body are clamouring for attention requires commitment and persistence. Sevā thus works as a somatic reminder of the devotee’s wish to be free of the body and to experience the self as only ātman. As Hansa Masi, a middle-aged married woman, noted, “we need a guru in this time of samsāra ... otherwise there is no way that we can know that we are ātman”.

For a small percentage of satsangis, the desire to be the perfect sevak and to please guru, and therefore be closer to Bhagwan, has translated into full-time sevā for BAPS. This could involve teaching new Swaminarayan devotees how to follow ritual practices, giving discourses on Swaminarayan texts, organizing and coordinating volunteers in BAPS projects, contributing to publications, and working in large Swaminarayan temples. For others, doing sevā is living with much less, for example not leasing an expensive model of car and downsizing from a multi-room house to a smaller apartment, with the difference in monies being donated to a BAPS project. For all sevaks, it is the awakening of knowledge that, with complete devotion to guru, who has inspired the work, the sense of “I-ness” will dissolve. Only then can the sevak begin to recognize that ātman can indeed be separated from the body.

Many satsangis acknowledge that without guru’s own non-stop example of full-time devotion to Bhagwan, they would not be willing to dedicate their efforts for a BAPS event or project. Satsangis repeatedly point out, “I am only here because of our guru, Bapa”. They further share that guru is “old and ailing, and does not think about himself ever” and “I want to become like him!” Satsangis know that if they can mimic the guru’s devotional orientation toward Bhagwan, and if they can conquer their bodily desires, then guru will help them to become akshar-rupa, “to become like Akshar”.

Swaminarayan bhakti and its ontological objectives

In the Vachanamrut, Bhagwan Swaminarayan mentions how the mind is too easily affected by desires. To conquer this state of being, one that will impede the devotee’s desire to be released from samsāra (rebirth), Bhagwan Swaminarayan describes the process of making scented oil whereby sesame seeds are layered...
between alternating layers of flowers. Much as the fragrance of the flowers seeps into the seeds which when pressed will yield the scented oil, Bhagwan Swaminarayan notes that “the mind should be similarly saturated with flowers in the form of the constant remembrance of God’s [Bhagwan’s] divine actions and incidents, coupled with an understanding of His greatness” (Gadhada 1:38). This image, one that conveys the potential of the mind-body to be reshaped through discipline and focused action, is what lies at the heart of Swaminarayan ontology: the ideal form of being is the atman, the self that is freed from the sensations, ignorance, and causal leanings of the body. However, as Bhagwan Swaminarayan observed, “a diamond can only be cut by a diamond”, and therefore only through the devotee’s “profound association” with Akshar Guru can the devotee hope to achieve an eternal darsana of Bhagwan (Gadhada 1:50).

To be Swaminarayan is thus to accept the immanence of Purushottam Bhagwan in Akshar Guru and to accept Akshar Guru as one’s guide. As numerous observers of modern Hinduism have noted, the more popular and expanding Hindu communities are those that are led by charismatic gurus. BAPS is indeed led by a guru, but as satsangis know, he is more than a mortal being with human-like qualities. Purushottam Bhagwan made possible, through his grace, the possibility for atman to be freed from samsara; however, this must occur through the guidance of the Akshar Guru. In an essay, “The Infinite Glory of Akshar”, Sadhu Anandswarupdas (2004) writes:

Akshar cleanses the soul of its ignorance, its evil instincts, hatred, jealousy, anger... Then he [Akshar] presents that pure soul [atman] to God [Purushottam]. Only then does God accept the soul’s devotion and services. Only then does he become fit to stay with God and enjoy His bliss perpetually.

We can see that in BAPS, the guru’s role is paramount in Swaminarayan ontology. Satsangis wish their atman to be released from the bondage of the mind-body and from samsara. They see that guru’s life of continuous devotion is real and unwavering. Hence, satsangis such as Hiral and Rasol Kaka above know that by offering devotion to guru, he will guide them towards eliminating the physical body’s grip on the atman.

“I knew he was my guru, from the moment he touched my head and looked into my eyes”, said a young man from London who admitted that he had favoured “bad company” (kusan). The instant attraction to guru is not unique to BAPS. However, what is notable about Swaminarayan devotionalism is that it provides a readily accessible means of shaping the devotee’s mind-body. Through certain means, such as nitya pujâ and sevá, devotees can experience a new ontology as well as strengthen their commitment to Swaminarayan bhakti. Nitya pujâ and sevá are but two means by which this is achieved. There are many others such as going to the temple, listening to discourses, and educating oneself through Swaminarayan texts. Pujâ and sevá are nevertheless two expressions of
devotionalism that directly signal a devotee’s desire to achieve knowledge of an eternal self that is impermeable to the demands of the physical self. What is remarkable about BAPS is that this modus operandi for personal transformation via intense devotion to Akshar and Purushottam has resulted in the transformation of modern Hinduism itself. The sevak’s desire to please guru and to serve Bhagwan has resulted in the construction of well over 700 BAPS temples and the growth of a transnational community of devotees, many of whom have never visited the Bochasan temple or even India! Akshar and Purushottam, it could be said, are indeed anywhere and everywhere, always separate and yet always together. Perhaps it should not be surprising that many Gujarati Hindus are finding this fact enormously satisfying, for their present and future lives.

Acknowledgements

The ethnographic data, including quoted conversations, for this chapter come from ongoing fieldwork in the BAPS Swaminarayan diaspora (1991–2010). I thank the BAPS community, its leaders, sādhus, and individual devotees, for their always generous engagement with my research.

Notes

1. See Williams (2001) for an English-language introduction to the variety of Swaminarayan groups that connect themselves to the same historical founder, Sahajanand Swami. In BAPS, Sahajanand Swami is Bhagwan Swaminarayan. BAPS shares ritual similarities to the Vallabha Sampradāya or Puṣṭī Mārga, a much older Hindu devotional community well-known in western India.
2. Visit www.swaminarayan.org and link to “Global Network” to survey the extent of the Swaminarayan diaspora.
3. Also, assemblies for children and youth are usually conducted in English where English is the dominant national language, such as in North America, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia.
4. The Shishupalatī and Vachanamrut are significant for not just BAPS but the older Swaminarayan communities who predate BAPS and are still extant in Gujarat. There are, however, significant differences in the translation and editing of these texts.
5. This ethnographic material was collected during the “Yogi Shatabdi” event held in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, from 29 October to 2 December 1992 to commemorate the hundredth birthday of Guru Yogiji Maharaj.
6. In describing this sequence of Hiral’s nitya pūja, it should be noted that this is a pattern that pertains to an unmarried young woman. Hiral, in this article, is a composite of several young women. In BAPS, there are small variations for males versus females and married versus unmarried females, and acceptable modifications for the elderly, very young and the infirm.