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Devotional expressions in the Swaminarayan Community

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Contemporary Hinduism

Edited by
P. Pratap Kumar

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>A note on terminology</i>	x
Introduction	1
<i>P. Pratap Kumar</i>	
Part I: Hinduism in diaspora	
Introduction	15
1. Diasporic and indigenous Hinduism in North America	17
<i>Jeffery D. Long</i>	
2. Nepali Hindus in southern California	32
<i>Deepak Shimkhada</i>	
3. Trinidad Hinduism	45
<i>Paul Younger</i>	
4. Hinduism in the Caribbean	57
<i>Indrani Rampersad</i>	
5. Tamil Śaivism in Norway	67
<i>Knut A. Jacobsen</i>	
Part II: Contemporary Hinduism in north India	
Introduction	81
6. The Indrajatra festival of Kathmandu, Nepal	83
<i>Michael Baltutis</i>	
7. Vernacular Hinduism in Rajasthan	97
<i>Antoinette E. DeNapoli</i>	

List of illustrations

1.1	Central altar of HARI temple, with priests Śrī Seetharamaswamy and Śrī Naranji Pandya	20
2.1	Newar girls participating in a <i>yihī</i> ceremony in southern California	33
2.2	Women going to celebrate a <i>Tij</i> party in southern California	39
3.1	The priest making offerings to the goddess	53
3.2	Calm temple setting with a few worshippers entering	54
4.1	Several <i>jhandis</i> outside a Hindu home	59
5.1	Priests and worshippers during evening <i>ārati</i> in Sivasubramaniyar Alayam, Oslo	69
5.2	Rathotsayam, Sivasubramaniyar Alayam, Oslo	70
6.1	A man performs <i>pūjā</i> to Indra's pole before it is pulled to the palace	90
6.2	Captive image of Indra inside the courtyard of Kathmandu's royal palace	91
7.1	Female Hindu ascetics in Rajasthan	99
7.2	Female <i>Sādhus</i> holding <i>satsang</i> with devotees in a village	102
8.1	Guru Granth Sahib under a canopy in a Singapore temple	116
8.2	Image of Jhule Lal in a shrine in Lucknow temple	119
9.1	<i>Mūrtis</i> of Akshar and Purushottam	126
9.2	Female <i>nitya pūjā</i>	131
11.1	Two <i>Vārkarī</i> women perform a <i>bhārūd</i> for fellow pilgrims	156
11.2	<i>Vārkarīs</i> accompany the Eknāth <i>pākhī</i> on its way to Pandharpur	157
12.1	<i>Satnāmi</i> devotees performing a ritual trek to the Girodpuri temple	169

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

12.2	Rāmnāmi in ritual dress	172
13.1	Chaitanya and his companions dancing	180
13.2	Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavas dancing, Baruipur	184
14.1	Women engaged in worship activities at a grouping of stone snake images in the courtyard of a goddess temple in Chennai	192
14.2	Nāga image decorated by a young engineering graduate	197
15.1	A <i>kuḷam</i> , or bathing tank	208
15.2	An image of Śāsta	212
16.1	Āṅṅāl reclining	226
16.2	Āṅṅāl at her wedding	227
17.1	Moolavirat (Śrī Venkateswara)	234
17.2	Temple procession	238

9. Devotional expressions in the Swaminarayan community

Hanna H. Kim

If you go to the village of Bochasan 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 Bochasan Swaminarayan temple from other existing and older Swaminarayan temples. The ritual awakening of these *mūrtis* (Figure 9.1) and



Figure 9.1 *Mūrtis* of Akshar (right) and Purushottam (left) (photo courtesy of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha).

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.¹ 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 *ātman*, 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 *ātman*’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 pūjā* and *sevā*. 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 pūjā is daily devotional worship that *satsangis* perform each morning. *Sevā* is volunteered work that *satsangis* conduct in order to please Akshar and Purushottam. As we shall see, *nitya pūjā* and *sevā* are crucial components of each individual *satsangi*’s devotional practice. Whether in the personal performance of *nitya pūjā* or the outwardly directed work that *sevā* 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.² 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 *sādhus* (in Hindi) or *santo* (in Gujarati). In addition to cultivating their personal devotional practices, *sādhus* are responsible for supporting the growth of the global BAPS community and insuring that Swaminarayan teachings and practices are properly disseminated. There are currently *sādhus* 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 *sādhus*. 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 *satsangis* 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 Vato*. The Gujarati language remains important for participating in BAPS, though publications are available in English, Hindi and several other south Asian languages.³ 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 1829.⁴ For BAPS, the historical person of Sahajanand Swami is called **Bhagwan** Swaminarayan.

Nitya pūjā: 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 pūjā*, 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 *pūjā*, 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 pūjā*, each devotee carefully repacks the laminated cards and other *pūjā* 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 *pūjā*, 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 pūjā*.⁵

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

Nitya pūjā "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 pūjā* (daily morning worship). Unlike the many other types of *pūjā*, or devotional worship, that Swaminarayan followers participate in, *nitya pūjā* is deeply personal, is performed daily, and

involves only the devotee and her relationship to two central entities, Akshar and Purushottam. *Nitya pūjā* 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 *pūjā* items that are easily stored in a small bag or case.

Hiral begins by putting a *āsana*, a mat or small cloth, on the floor.⁶ She sits cross-legged on the *āsana* and unpacks her *pūjā* kit, a cloth bag in which her *pūjā* items are stored. She takes out an *āsana* reserved only for her *pūjā* items and spread this before her. On this, to one side, she places the *Shikshapatri* and *Vachanamrut*. It is now time to sit in quiet meditation, with back straight and eyes closed. Hiral 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 first becoming *akshar-rupa*, that is the state of “becoming like Akshar”. Thus, in her meditation, Hiral concentrates on the knowledge that she wants to become like Akshar. In order to become *akshar-rupa*, Hiral 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 pūjā*, Hiral 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. Hiral’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.

Hiral keeps her breathing even. She silently dwells on the thought “I am *ātman*”. Hiral 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 pūjā* 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. Hiral 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 unswerving devotion to Bhagwan is reflected in his devotional actions towards the *mūrti* of Bhagwan: in serving Bhagwan, *guru* is also following the commands of his own *guru* to serve BAPS. And all *satsangis* point to *guru*’s state of knowing *ātman*, of being *ātman* personified, and therefore of being beyond rebirth.

By repeating “I am *ātman*”, Hiral 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 *pūjā*, Hiral 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 *ātman*”. 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 *mānsī 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. *Mānsī 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 *mānsī*, 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

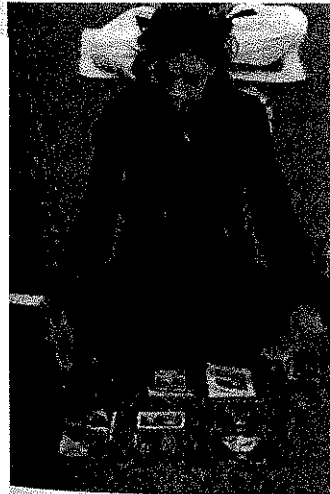


Figure 9.2 Female *nitya pūjā* (photo courtesy of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha).

her as they all craned their necks to look intently at *guru* in an effort to refuel 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 Gurus. 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 Bochasan 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* emphasises 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 *mānsī pūjā* and the opportunity to offer a plate (*thālī*) 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, Hiral closes her *pūjā* with heartfelt prayers (*prārthnā*). 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. Hiral lightly touches each *mūrti*'s feet with her fingertips and then she touches her closed eyes, a gesture of reverence and adoration.

The *nitya pūjā* is over. However, before packing up her *pūjā* kit, Hiral silently reads five verses from the *Shikshapatri* and a section from the *Vachanamrut*, 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 Hiral knows that knowledge of *ātman* (*ātmaññān*) 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. Hiral 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, Hiral touches both books with her fingertips and then touches her eyes.

Carefully, Hiral 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 Hiral and all committed BAPS devotees, *nitya 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. Hiral 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, Hiral 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 Hiral could not justify eating or drinking anything, the lack of which contributed to her fatigue and problems in concentration. Hiral 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*, Hiral described herself as too focused on the "I-ness" and "me-ness" of her situation. When she returned to performing daily *pūjā*, Hiral 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 “Rasoī” Kaka (kitchen uncle) making the delicacy *sūtarfenī* 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 *sūtarfenī* rounds, *ghārī*, *jalebī* 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 *sevak*s, 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 I-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 *ātman*, 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 *darśana* of Bhagwan (Gadhada I-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 *ātman* to be freed from *saṃsāra*; 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 [*ātman*] 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 *ātman* to be released from the bondage of the mind-body and from *saṃsāra*. They see that *guru*’s life of continuous devotion is real and unwavering. Hence, *satsangis* such as Hiral and Rasoi Kaka above know that by offering devotion to *guru*, he will guide them towards eliminating the physical body’s grip on the *ātman*.

“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” (*kusaṅg*). The instant attraction to *guru* is not unique to BAPS. However, what is notable about Swaminarayan devotionism is that it provides a readily accessible means of shaping the devotee’s mind-body. Through certain means, such as *nitya pūjā* and *sevā*, devotees can experience a new ontology as well as strengthen their commitment to Swaminarayan *bhakti*. *Nitya pūjā* and *sevā* 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. *Pūjā* and *sevā* 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.

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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 Puṣṭi Mārḡa, 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 *Shikshapatri* 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 pūjā*, 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.