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Thinking Through Akshardham and the Making of the Swaminarayan Self

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SWAMINARAYAN HINDUISM
Tradition, Adaptation, and Identity

Edited by

RAYMOND BRADY WILLIAMS

YOGI TRIVEDI

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THINKING THROUGH AKSHARDHAM
AND THE MAKING OF THE
SWAMINARAYAN SELF

HANNA KIM

Under an open-air workshop, consisting of a flat roof supported at regular intervals by rectangular yellow metal columns, scores of men squatted, perched on stone, or sat on the ground, using tools that appeared exceptionally minimal.¹ With a metal chisel and a hammer-like tool that also doubles as a blower, the men were carving stone by hand, stopping periodically to puff away the stone dust by blowing through the hole running the length of the hammer. The delicate soundscape produced by the hammer's metal ring hitting the chisel as it bore into the limestone coincided with the gradual emergence of flowers, faces, figures, curlicues, and other elaborate design motifs. Some men worked alone, others in pairs, and still others were in small groups arranged around a chunk of stone. The stone carvers would occasionally set their tools down to take a cup of hot tea from the roving worker who dispensed it from an aluminum kettle into small plastic cups. Just beyond the perimeter of the workshop, open to the sky, was the tool-sharpening station. One man turned a ground-mounted wheel attached to a grinding stone; the other man squatted before an open fire contained in a small three-walled stove. Next to the fire was a basin of

charcoal briquettes. There was also a ready pool of cooling water stored in what looked like a hollowed-out square of stone. A stone carver squatted near the fire as he waited for his chisels to be sharpened, reshaped, and then cooled in the water bath. All the while, the pinging and ringing continued, conveying a sense of industry and focus; of an age-old practice remaining alive; of beauty and craftsmanship coming together; and of wages being earned. In this workshop and various others in Pindwara, Rajasthan, men arrived each day of the week, working on a section of stone until the carving, in its detail and depth, was complete. From the carving to the subsequent polishing—a job performed by hundreds of women in another factory—to its careful packing and crating, each stone piece then journeys by ship to a small township in New Jersey called Robbinsville where, assisted by computerized choreography, it will join other carved pieces to become a 108-foot-high temple known as the Swaminarayan Akshardham Mahamandiram.

The Akshardham edifices are the stone jewels of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). Constructed and maintained by the devotees of BAPS, Akshardham is synonymously the elaborately carved temple and the extensively groomed campus in which the temple is centrally situated. When it is completed around 2017, the Akshardham temple in Robbinsville will join two other Akshardham temple sites, the Gandhinagar Swaminarayan Akshardham complex, opened in 1992 in Gujarat, and the New Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham complex, opened in 2005. This aggregation over time and space, of thousands of paid and unpaid volunteer hours of labour, and of materials, monies, ideas, and architectural elements crossing miles of land and ocean, certainly invites interpretations.² Given the scale and monumentality of the Gandhinagar and New Delhi Akshardham complexes, it is not surprising that they have dazzled millions of visitors since their openings.

Thinking through Akshardham in this chapter entails thinking about the BAPS categories that arise in devotees' observations and in BAPS discourse. This will be the strategy for exploration of who BAPS followers are and what is motivating the construction of Akshardham. Focusing on Swaminarayan ontological categories is an entry point for exploring what Akshardham is in relation to the categories that inform devotees' ways of understanding their devotional self. In

particular, the focus will be on two categories that are persistent in BAPS discursive contexts: the Akṣarbrahman guru (Aksharbrahman guru) and the status of *brahmarūp* (*brahmarup*). It will become evident that, from the devotees' perspective, neither Akshardham nor any BAPS project can be examined without understanding the relationships between the Aksharbrahman guru and God, and the desire of devotees to attain the state of being brahmarup, or of acquiring the qualities of Aksharbrahman guru. By presenting these ontological categories from the devotees' perspective and sketching out the links between these relations, this chapter offers the argument that Akshardham promotes the cultivation of an ethical Swaminarayan self that is traceable to these categories. A BAPS devotee is one who desires to reshape the self towards an ontological ideal by absorbing, embodying, and translating Swaminarayan teachings into daily life. Swaminarayan devotees, like the rough-hewn stones that eventually become part of Akshardham, undergo an intentional chiselling and polishing in order to move towards an endpoint that is not immediately graspable but deemed to be desirable. In this consideration of Swaminarayan ontological categories that inform devotees' project of self-transformation, the chapter concludes by suggesting that the Akshardham temple complexes are far more comprehensible by acknowledging the very categories that have made these sites possible in the first place.

Stones Uncut: Preparing to be Transformed

One July day, after the morning *kathā* (*katha*, religious discourse) given by a *sādhu* (*sadhu*, male ascetic) in the Swaminarayan mandir (temple) and world headquarters of BAPS in Ahmedabad, I visited Neetaben, a leader and Central Coordinator of BAPS Swaminarayan women's activities (*mahilā pravṛtti*). Neetaben had already spent the early morning consoling a family with a sick relation in the nearby Yogiji Maharaj Hospital, a facility constructed and managed by BAPS. She was due at her full-time job later in the morning and thus we had a short time during which she shared the memory of her first encounter with BAPS when she was twenty years old. She had not known about the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, its guru, or *satsang* (*satsang*, community of devotees), though she had some

familiarity with the Kalupur Swaminarayan temple as 'it was my Mother's temple'.³ On her first visit to the BAPS temple in 1976, she recalled:

When I entered the temple, people ... asked, 'Where are you coming from?' And they inspired me to join the activities of my [with emphasis] interest.... It is not that the temple binds you in their ideology, their interests.... Nobody forced me to go this way or that.⁴

Neetaben could see that the BAPS temple community was not restrictive but rather there was 'discipline', which any organization would find necessary in order to run smoothly. She experienced a complementary fit between her interest in serving something larger than herself and her commitment to the needs and issues of girls and women. The Swaminarayan temple, she quickly realized, gave her the freedom for 'exploring your ideas, based on your thinking, and for the betterment of society'. The temple for Neetaben became the site where she found support for her ideas about how to help others in her community. But she also learned, in her estimation, how to live a contented life though the act of serving others. Juggling the demands of a senior position in her government job, as well as what would surely amount to nearly full-time *seva* (volunteered work) for BAPS, Neetaben nevertheless said that she was happy. With a radiant smile, she noted that on occasions when colleagues from the government visited her flat, they appeared shocked at its lack of middle-class accoutrement. No dishwasher or flat-screen television, or household servants. Rather, as she cheerfully declared, she has 'everything required to be happy' because she has the right guru, 'Swamishri'.⁵ Her main objective, and one echoed by *satsangis* (devotees) everywhere in the BAPS community, is 'to serve my guru, and to take my example from how he is serving God'.

At age twenty, Neetaben began the process of reshaping her understanding of self in relation to something larger. And, by going to the temple she found the model in her guru. As she shared:

BAPS is building temples to teach discipline,⁶ to preserve heritage and culture, but at the same time, it also gives you a platform to explore your own thinking. These are temples of stones! But, BAPS is not only developing stone temples but *chaitanya* temples, human temples ... each individual is a temple.

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In order for the human mind to be guided towards achieving goals and attaining desired self-transformations, Neetaben has a clear typology of what is needed. To accomplish anything, for example, the construction of Delhi Akshardham in five years, she noted that something more than determination is necessary. For this and all other projects, she said:

I should get the focus, get convinced, and know that this is not a blind following ... they [devotees, including herself] need to follow with the intellectual mind, to have the self-esteem, to have self-fulfillment, and to achieve goals.

Neetaben then poses the question for those who, like herself, have dedicated their time and resources to BAPS: 'How are they inspired? What we see, the temple, is not just the organization [BAPS], but something much beyond. To get this, you need *guru bhakti*.'

In the BAPS tradition, recognizing the role of and offering service and sustained devotional love to the guru is central to understanding what motivates the *satsangi* (satsangi) to participate in projects and service activities for the Swaminarayan community and others. Neetaben's observation, that the way to appreciate Akshardham's existence is through *guru bhakti*, makes a direct link between large-scale project, guru, and devotee. *Satsangis* need to serve their guru who is lovingly referred to as *Swamishri*: they are motivated to engage in volunteering and other kinds of work to please him.⁷ This is *guru bhakti*. More specifically, *satsangis* are seeking to shape themselves into the kind of ideal devotee that the guru personifies and lives on a daily basis. For Swaminarayan devotees, serving the guru is the key to approaching the desired knowledge of self that will, as consistently revealed by the example of *Swamishri* himself, convey the rewards of living to serve others. Large-scale projects, at a basic level, are thus opportunities for serving the guru and simultaneously cultivating the qualities of the guru within oneself.

For seekers and *satsangis*, it is the right guru who provides guidance for how to overcome the demands of bodily senses and organs, and the desires that occlude knowledge of the self. The BAPS *satsangi* comes to understand that the guru, irrespective of his human-like body that ages much like anyone else's, is nevertheless not a man and not a god. The guru, for *satsangis*, is *satpuruṣ* (*satpuruṣh*) or *guṇātī*

guru (*gunatit* guru): his being is beyond ordinary and not subject to the sensory needs and desires of the human body (Sadhu Aksharvatsaldas 2008). Rather, the satpurush is one whose focus, without fail, is serving Bhagwan Swaminarayan who is, for Swaminarayan followers, God, the cause of all creation and the ultimate existential entity.

In finding her guru, Neetaben experiences what satsangis, both householders and sadhus, in the transnational BAPS Swaminarayan community also know from their own personal memories of 'finding the right guru'. Having found 'Swamishri', or 'Pramukh Swami Maharaj', as BAPS's present current guru is formally called, satsangis begin the lifetime process of seeking to emulate the ways in which the guru serves and demonstrates his devotion to God, 'Bhagwan Swaminarayan'. This mimetic stance is not negotiable for only by becoming like the guru is the devotee, in the BAPS tradition, able to begin the subsequent process of coming to understand Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Kim 2014). Thus, in BAPS devotional practice, there is a relationship dynamic and link between devotee, guru, and God. Only through the guru can satsangis gain the knowledge to potentially serve 'Bhagwan Swaminarayan' eternally. In other words, by having the model of a guru who is beyond worldly desires and whose behaviour underscores his singular focus on serving Bhagwan Swaminarayan, satsangis have an unambiguous visual, bodily, and material manifestation of the 'God-realised' sadhu. It is the occupant of this category, the BAPS Swaminarayan guru—the satpurush or *gunatit* guru—who holds the key for all devotees to potentially serve god eternally in the heavenly abode known as 'Akshardham'. The BAPS devotee is foremost a seeker who, while living in the world, is willing to undergo a transformation, via devotion to a guru, that will ensure the ability to remain in eternal service to Bhagwan Swaminarayan.⁸

Required Tools: Guru and God

Almost all devotees know that there are five metaphysical entities in Swaminarayan teaching that are eternal and forever distinct from each other. They are:

1. Puruṣottam (Purushottam), also Parabrahman and Paramatma
2. Akṣar (Akshar), also Brahman and Akṣarbrahman (Aksharbrahman)

3. *māyā* (*maya*: eternal and primordial substance; cause of ignorance)
4. *īśvara* (*ishvar*: a being with powers greater than *jīva* but still bound by *maya*)
5. *jīva* (*jiva*: embodied soul that is bound by *maya*), also *ātman* (*atman*)

In brief, Purushottam is God, who is also Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the cause of all creation.⁹ For BAPS satsangis, Bhagwan Swaminarayan is always with form (rather than formless) and he is the ultimate existential entity, creator, and doer of all. Purushottam or Bhagwan Swaminarayan resides in Akshardham, the abode of Akshar where he remains separate from Akshar. For devotees, Purushottam did manifest as the historical personage of Sahajanand Swami between 1781–1830 CE, and he continues to be present on earth, always through the form of the living guru. Notwithstanding his human-like form, Purushottam's sheer brilliance and majesty are, according to Swaminarayan teachings, so intense, that it is only his grace that makes him fathomable to jivas. It is the entity Akshar that makes Purushottam knowable and in whom Purushottam resides, both in Akshardham and in the earthly form of the Aksharbrahman guru. It is this relationship between Akshar and Purushottam, or between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Aksharbrahman guru, that distinguishes BAPS devotional teachings, or *upāsana* (*upasana*), from older and newer Swaminarayan communities.¹⁰ Devotees offer devotional love and attention to both Bhagwan and the guru, and the lineage of gurus that, according to BAPS tradition, are connected directly to Sahajanand Swami's manifestation in Gujarat in the early nineteenth century. This dual devotional focus on Bhagwan and the guru is reflected in the formal name Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha.

The Swaminarayan guru thus occupies multiple roles: he is the one in whom God is manifest; he is the one through whom devotees can serve God; he is the one who personifies the existential entity Akshar and therefore the realm in which God resides; he is the one who guides satsangis to realize the necessary knowledge that will allow them to sit in Akshardham, offering service to God eternally.¹¹

As the 'house' or *dhām* (*dham*) of Purushottam, the entity Akshar also houses the released *jīva*. *Jīva* and *ishvar*, unlike Akshar and Purushottam, are subject to *maya*, which is understood to disrupt a

seeker's ability to realize the jiva as an eternal entity separable from the transitory body in which it resides. BAPS devotees recognize that the Aksharbrahman guru traceable to the time of Sahajanand Swami makes possible the recognition that the jiva can be guided away from the trappings of being in the body. Devotees also acknowledge the mistaken assumption that the biological reality of the somatic and sensing body is the true self. Overcoming this misconception would allow for knowing that the jiva, which is eternal, and the body, which is a transient dwelling place, are not the same. Only after release from a false sense of the body's emotions, senses, and other confusions provoked by maya, can the jiva attain the brahmarup state and be released from rebirth and enter Akshardham. For the devotee, this trajectory from not realizing the jiva as distinct from the body to living eternally as jiva in Akshardham, is only possible through the guidance of the Aksharbrahman guru. The goal of the satsangis who know that they have found the 'right guru', is to 'become like him', that is, to acquire the characteristic of Brahman (the same as Aksharbrahman), the ideal servant of god. This goal, which is central to BAPS Swaminarayan devotionalism, or bhakti, rests on the pivotal form of the Aksharbrahman guru to inspire and lead ordinary beings towards the necessary knowledge that, if embraced by the seeker, leads directly to Akshardham. This process of becoming brahmarup in order to serve god in Akshardham is arduous due to the tenacity of maya in disguising jiva as inseparable from the body, mind, and senses. Yet, for willing seekers, Swaminarayan Aksharbrahman guru, by his demonstration of serving god and living untouched by the demands of the senses, is a visible signifier of living in the world with contentment while also serving god. The Swaminarayan devotee is thus one who wishes to become brahmarup, in mimesis of the Aksharbrahman guru, and enjoy the eternal bliss of serving god as a liberated jiva (also atman) in Akshardham, forever freed from rebirth and the unwanted disruptions caused by the unfocused mind and sensory desires.

Carving and Polishing: Becoming Brahmarup

Akshardham, devotees know, is the heavenly abode of God and released jiva, and also the name of its three large temple complexes. While the former location is not accessible to fieldwork research,

the Akshardham temple complexes provide a materially tangible and real-time setting in which to connect the ontological ideal of becoming brahmarup with satsangis' desire to serve and please the guru and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Thousands of satsangis, from sadhus and technical specialists, daily project managers of the construction site and stone-cutting factories, stonemasons, and Swaminarayan volunteers from around the world worked together to create the Akshardham complexes in Gandhinagar, New Delhi, and at the Robbinsville, New Jersey site (which is not yet completed). In conversations with the various organizational layers in BAPS, what remains consistent is satsangis' unanimous response when reflecting on the achievement of creating Akshardham. Without any variation, all satsangis attribute Akshardham to the divine inspiration of their Aksharbrahman and gunatit guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Furthermore, satsangis acknowledge that their willing participation in building Akshardham is wholly dependent on their wish to please their guru and earn his blessings. In other words, while Akshardham does serve as a tourist destination and leisure site for many, satsangis see something more explicitly connecting themselves to their guru: the existence of Akshardham reaffirms the godliness of the guru whose own unswerving devotion to *his* guru makes these complexes possible.

The link between Akshardham, Aksharbrahman guru, and the devotee's desire to earn the guru's *rājīpo* (*rajipo*) or 'divine approval'¹² or blessings is, perhaps not surprisingly, not necessarily visible or notable to non-satsangi visitors at the Akshardham sites. While the observant and inquiring visitor may notice references to Pramukh Swami and Swaminarayan, there is no clear indication of the monumental Akshardham as paralleling the heavenly abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. What are only too visible are the strikingly landscaped acres and the stone-carved architectural dimensions of Akshardham in Gandhinagar and New Delhi. Also visibly present throughout the grounds of Akshardham are the hundreds of uniformed and lanyard-bedecked Swaminarayan volunteers who are guides, shoe-stall attendants, bookstore clerks, and security personnel among other roles. Millions of visitors have now passed through the Gandhinagar and New Delhi Akshardham complexes and each site has contributed significantly to the circuit of tourist destinations in Gujarat and the

capital city of India.¹³ BAPS too has curated its own collection of visitors' comments to Akshardham, and some of these are available through the Akshardham websites.¹⁴ From these mementos of past visits, one can discern a range of ways in which non-devotee tourists respond to the central temple-monument as well as other attractions on the site. Focusing on Delhi Akshardham, a large majority of remembrances reveal visitors' delight, surprise, and appreciation of a very clean-swept, litter-free, and peaceful campus with stunning vistas and 'spirituality' all around. Still other comments show appreciation for the large-format film on the biography of the young boy who would become Swaminarayan; the indoor exhibitions on Sahajanand Swami's life and moral living; and the boat-ride excursion through animated selections of Indian Hindu history. Visitors' comments suggest that tourists are responding to this 'newest attraction' in Delhi as a religious and cultural site and entertainment destination, appropriate for all ages. These comments do not overwhelmingly point out the connection of Akshardham to the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha.

From the perspective of sadhus, including Sadhu Ishwarcharandas, one of the seniormost, and Sadhu Aksharvatsaldas,¹⁵ there is no BAPS intention to convince Akshardham visitors to become Swaminarayan devotees. There is, however, an intention for those who come to Akshardham to sense that the space is intended, through its cleanliness, organization, and emphasis on maintaining a quiet demeanor, to promote reflection and contemplation. Many visitors do comment on their feelings of peace and even perhaps divinity but it is not clear that those who are unfamiliar with BAPS can sense the role of the BAPS guru in making Akshardham possible. As one dedicated satsangi shared in discussion of the BAPS conception of its publics' relationship to Akshardham, 'If there are only a few out of crores who feel that coming to Akshardham has effected some kind of change in personal life, then for Pramukh Swami, this would be a goal accomplished by building Akshardham.'¹⁶ Swami Ishwarcharandas offers the same answer when he shares a recollection about a prominent businessman who visited the Delhi Akshardham and was intensely emotionally affected by his viewing of the large-format film on the life of the young Sahajanand Swami. The businessman and his associates did confirm that the former's

tendency to act hastily in anger had been considerably tempered after his Akshardham visit. Sadhu Ishwarcharandas suggested gently that while an aspect of personality such as the tendency to be angry could not just go away, nevertheless the fact that it could reduce considerably would suggest that Akshardham was having some success in inspiring self-transformation.

From the perspective of sadhus and satsangis, many of whom have a direct involvement in the construction of Akshardham, Delhi Akshardham's existence begins with Pramukh Swami Maharaj's wish to fulfill the desire of his own guru, Yogiji Maharaj (1892–1971; as guru, 1951–1971), to have a Swaminarayan mandir on the banks of the Yamuna. It is this expressed wish that Pramukh Swami set out to fulfill. Satsangis, therefore, were aware from the beginning that their guru wished to please and serve his guru and therefore they would wish to please Swamishri by contributing their seva to him. This simple connection, one that affirms the saliency of the *guru paramparā* (*guru parampara*, guru lineage) for BAPS, is what satsangis know to be the reason behind the New Delhi Akshardham project. As narrated by Sadhu Ishwarcharandas, the search for the Delhi Akshardham land continued for decades and was never easy.¹⁷ When at last a spot along the Yamuna River was found, BAPS spent several years securing permission from the governments of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and from various Indian government institutions connected with roads, bridges, rivers, and railways. Since the proposed site would be on the banks of the Yamuna River, BAPS submitted its Akshardham plans to agencies (for example, National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) in Nagpur) that tested for riverbank flooding and other environmental issues. There were challenges against BAPS for the Akshardham project, including issues of population displacement and flood plain degradation, and yet, according to its senior sadhus and volunteers, Pramukh Swami quietly persisted in seeing the project plans accepted without compromising BAPS's integrity and by gaining approval from all required agencies.

Sadhu Ishwarcharandas emphasizes that Pramukh Swami has had only one objective in building the Akshardham complexes. 'Akshardham is only for *kalyāṇ* (*kalyan*, liberation from rebirth) and this was the reason 22 years ago [Gandhinagar Akshardham was opened in 1992], 25, 50, or 100 years before, and 100 years after!'

Chuckling, and with a tone of finality, Sadhu Ischwarcharandas added, 'Our perspective [on Akshardham] is the same—our purpose is only one—that's it.' In mentioning kalyan, that is, *mokṣa* (*moksha*, liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death) as the sole purpose for constructing Akshardham, Sadhu Ishwarcharandas connects the final dots that bring together the desires of the guru to serve god and the desires of devotees to serve the guru with the end result that the devotees serving the guru will gain their final ultimate reward upon attaining liberation from rebirth, of being able to serve Bhagwan in Akshardham as faithfully as their guru serves god on earth.

Transport and Final Placement

Becoming brahmarup is, as satsangis will attest, a lifetime commitment. Given that most devotees, including sadhus, do not live in seclusion from the world, the desire to achieve the ontological goal of becoming brahmarup demands volition, conscious reflection, and a desire to follow the guru's example of unceasing devotion to Bhagwan. The shaping of the bodily self in order to learn that the eternal self is distinct from the body, informed as it is by sense perceptions and reactions to internal and external stimuli, is not, as satsangis would agree, an easy process for everyone. Moreover, seekers are trying to confirm for themselves that following the Aksharbrahman guru and trying to become brahmarup are necessary and achievable existential goals. As many circulating narratives in the Swaminarayan community reveal, potential devotees have often started their journey to serving Swamishri through an unforeseen event or experience of seeing Pramukh Swami and realizing his divinity. The variety of these experiences followed by their common denouement whereby many seekers have become convinced that offering devotion to the guru does indeed bring contentment in daily life, suggests that being Swaminarayan is not an unexamined form of living.

A satsangi volunteer who has also dedicated most of his life to serving BAPS full-time and who played a significant role in creating media and other visual productions for the Sanstha shared that he was a 'hard-core atheist' but became attracted to the cultural programmes, including the classical Indian musicians who performed at a major

BAPS festival.¹⁸ He began to visit the temple and was able to meet several sadhus. In all the time that he visited the temple, he said that no sadhu asked him to become a Swaminarayan devotee. One sadhu, Sadhu Anandswarupdas, did talk about Bhagwan Swaminarayan and over time these talks, combined with other personal events, convinced the young man to try serving guru and Bhagwan. The volunteer said:

My attachment to satsang is this: it is a real change in my thinking, and in living a better, happier life ... satsang puts seeds of thoughts into you which you do not know when they become effective, in what time of struggle in your life.¹⁹

This man's transformation through the gradual association with BAPS temples, sadhus, and guru, and his recognition that, over time, he became consciously aware of his own changing ways of living, is not unique. These accounts of devotees discovering a capacity for devotional service, of dramatic personal transformations following an encounter at a BAPS temple or event, of cultivating a passion for creating something for others' enjoyment, and of a willingness to take risks to serve their guru, have contributed to a genre of narratives within BAPS known as *prasaṅga* (*prasang*).²⁰ As the volunteer concluded, 'As for my understanding of why Pramukh Swami Maharaj wants to make Akshardham and mandirs, it is this intention, that somehow, somewhere, someone gets the inspiration to lead a happier life.'

The creation of Akshardham on earth points to a determined community of devotees whose sense of happiness in daily life has arisen due to their wish to serve the guru as unrelentingly as he, in his daily life, serves God. While this may seem overly sentimental if not somewhat restrictive, the thousands of satsangis who have contributed to the making of Akshardham would be confused as to why this connection between Akshardham, devotion to the guru, and personal satisfaction cannot be seen. On the occasion of the opening of the Delhi Akshardham on 6 November 2005, Pramukh Swami gave a simple but straightforward message. In a blend of Hindi and Gujarati, Pramukh Swami said: 'Whoever will come here and see this Akshardham, they will be inspired to do good for all.'²¹ He made it clear that the building of Akshardham was 'not made in competition with anyone'. Instead, he pointed out that Akshardham is for the

'kalyan of all'. Akshardham, in other words, is intended to leave some impression on all visitors of the possibility of living in the world differently, whether the impression develops into an inquiry into being Swaminarayan or whether it remains as a pleasant memory of a visit to an architectural oasis. Consistently, Pramukh Swami's message has been for followers and seekers to seek self-transformation by serving others first, and the Akshardham complexes, much like the hundreds of temples built by BAPS, are intended to inspire, provoke reflection, and potentially initiate the desire among Swaminarayan publics to cultivate a different way of being.²² While not every visitor is interested in the connections between the guru and heavenly Akshardham, satsangis and sadhus hope that Akshardham remains a powerful signifier of what awaits those who, at another time, wish to learn more.

* * *

'When I am his age, can I do what he does at 93?' I heard this question from a young woman who was attending the Mandir Mahotsav Robbinsville Akshardham celebrations in August 2014. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had made the journey from Gujarat to New Jersey in order to preside over the consecration of murtis in the stone temple on the Robbinsville campus and to perform the ritual consecration of the ground where the golden murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan would eventually be placed in the Robbinsville Akshardham temple. Satsangis were so excited to see Swamishri on US soil that many could not articulate their thoughts other than to say that his arrival at Robbinsville was truly a divine gesture of love to the *haribhakto* (dedicated devotees). Why else, as more than one satsangi asked me to consider, would Swamishri, in frail health and moving only in a wheelchair and with the constant aid of his sadhu assistant, travel thousands of miles in a medically-equipped aircraft? The satsangis I met in Robbinsville interpreted their guru's long journey to 'be with us' as the only explanation. And judging by the enormous amounts of volunteered labour that had gone into preparing the Robbinsville site for the numerous events scheduled for each day of the guru's two week stay, it appeared that more satsangis than anticipated had converged to see the guru and receive his blessings. Although BAPS

is customarily well-organized for large-scale festival events, some devotees confided that the delayed notice of Pramukh Swami's arrival, given his age and health condition, had resulted in some scrambling to accommodate the large crowds of devotees and other visitors.

Even as the guru arrived, there was still much last-minute work on the mandir, in which the consecration of murtis would take place, and hours of food preparation in order to feed thousands. A young woman from near Robbinsville, Prapti, shared that while she had not slept much in the past several days, the opportunity to 'do this seva for my guru makes everything worth it'. When asked if she had had the time, as a monitor of foot traffic near the portable bathrooms, to see her guru or to attend some of the festival events, she replied: 'No, but Bapa [Pramukh Swami] gave a long *darśan* [*darshan*, seeing and being seen by the divine] for the volunteers, and I was able to see him then. That's all and that is enough. I have seen him and I am happy. I cannot tell you how happy.' For Prapti and so many volunteers, serving in the kitchen, the huge tented meeting halls, the outdoor areas and walkways, or directing traffic in the baking hot parking lot, prevented them from actually participating in festival activities. Yet, the satsangis who were offering these services, much as those who dedicated their time for the making of the Delhi Akshardham, did so with a goal in mind: to serve Swamishri, to become like him, to transform themselves, by Swami's grace, into someone who is not at the mercy of personal needs over the needs of others.

Since the ontological objective to become brahmarup is a lifelong endeavour, BAPS devotional practice is predicated on a fundamental optimism that is yet rooted in the realities of daily living. By doing, performing, acting, praying, giving, and serving in ways that would promote the desired knowledge that one is *ātman* (atman, the already released jiva), satsangis are ordering their lives with the view to ensure their entry into Akshardham. Yet this ordering is not entirely self-oriented. The process of becoming brahmarup requires a conscious engagement with daily life and the reflectiveness to discern if one's actions and thoughts are supporting the happiness of others. This other-directed sociality, one that is prompted by the desire to serve others so that one can acquire a deeper sense of oneself beyond the demands of the self-centred self, is a way of being that emanates from within the webs of Swaminarayan categories. It is, put differently,

an ethical posture that is traceable to the Swaminarayan ontological objective of becoming brahmarup. Altogether, Swaminarayan upasana, its five existential entities, and the ontological goals that these entities support, create a devotional assemblage that makes possible the construction of Akshardhams. It fosters an ethical way of being in the world that includes reflection, correction, and the vigorous desire to live a life both inspired by and inspiring to others. Satsangis cannot merely emulate the guru because, as devotees know, it is difficult to sustain a devotional stance towards serving God continuously. In the act, however, of trying to become brahmarup, devotees are creating monumental signs of marvel and devotion that challenge more long-standing ideas of religious subjectivity and agency.

From blocks materializing out of the stone-cutting workshops in Rajasthan to the creation of the Swaminarayan Akshardham temple complexes is a story that cannot solely be framed within middle-class desires, aspirational mobility, or organizational agendas. In many ways, BAPS devotionism has a simple operating principle, to serve the Aksharbrahman guru. And yet the ways in which devotional service can be offered is as varied as the technologies that BAPS willingly embraces to attract the possible seeker. Pramukh Swami has been quoted as saying that the Akshardham temple complexes are, in the end, a 'side project' to the far greater project of offering bhakti to god and inspiring others to do the same.²³ If this imperative to do bhakti has produced Akshardham on earth, one might wonder what further side projects might result from the Swaminarayan devotee's unceasing desire to please and be pleased by the guru.

Notes

1. The ethnographic material in this chapter was collected during 2012–14 and was supported, in part, by the Adelphi University Faculty Development Grant (2012–13). I also received tremendous assistance with fieldwork in Gujarat from the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (BAPS) headquarters in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. For my research in Pindwara, Rajasthan, I thank Sadhu Ishwarcharandas, Harshadbhai Chavda, Kanubhai Patel, and Kalpeshbhai Bhatt and his family. For their help as intermediaries for my interaction with BAPS sadhus, I thank Kalpesh Bhatt, Arun Brahmhatt, and Ritesh Gadhia.

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2. By not directly engaging with the critical responses to Akshardham temples sites, this chapter should not be understood as taking an apologetic stance. The intention, rather, is to place emphasis on the voices of BAPS devotees and to better understand these in light of ethnographic and textual materials.
3. See Williams (2001) to understand the basis for the difference between the older Swaminarayan communities and BAPS. The temple in Kalupur is connected to one of the two original divisions specified by Sahajanand Swami for the continuation of the Swaminarayan Sampraday. The Kalupur temple is the headquarters for the Ahmedabad 'diocese' as termed by Williams.
4. Composite of multiple conversations in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, 13–22 July 2014.
5. 'Swamishri' is an especially affectionate term of address used by devotees to refer to their guru.
6. The use of 'discipline' in this context is to suggest devotees' awareness and desire to reshape their selves into a devotional ideal, a process that requires intention and effort. Neetaben's choice of 'discipline' should not be construed to indicate that BAPS aims to control devotees' actions or agency.
7. Other ways in which devotees serve and thereby please the guru include reading texts that are central to BAPS teachings, taking and keeping vows, and giving offerings to their temples.
8. For a more detailed treatment of BAPS's two-part typology of bhakti, first *sāadhan* bhakti, followed by *sādhyā* bhakti, where the former is necessary in order to attain the state of brahmarup, and the latter is performed after attaining brahmarup, see Kim (2014). I owe this distinction to the research of Sadhu Paramtattvadas whose dissertation and commentary were shared with me, via a male intermediary.
9. For a more detailed outline of the relationship of the five existential entities, see Kim (2014).
10. See Williams (2001) for an introduction to the different Swaminarayan sects or communities, which, in addition to BAPS, connect themselves to the historical person of Sahajanand Swami.
11. I have benefited enormously from correspondence with BAPS sadhus in Sarangpur and the specific help of Sadhu Mangalnidhidas in the US,

via male intermediaries. Their thoughts are reflected in my understanding of the multiple roles of the Aksharbrahman guru. The errors in this chapter, however, are my own.

12. I am thankful to Kalpesh Bhatt for suggesting this accessible translation for *rājīpo*.
13. See, for example, popular travel websites such as TripAdvisor (http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g304551-d626913-Reviews-Swaminarayan_Akshardham-New_Delhi_National_Capital_Territory_of_Delhi.html, last accessed 6 September 2014) to read posted reviews by tourists to Akshardham.
14. For Gandhinagar, see <http://www.akshardham.com/gujarat/opinions/index.htm>; for Delhi, see <http://www.akshardham.com/opinions/index.htm> (both links last accessed on 6 September 2014).
15. Sadhu Ishwarcharandas's comments in this chapter were received through a recording file, mediated by a male intermediary, and recorded in Shahibaug Swaminarayan Mandir, Ahmedabad, 15 July 2014. Sadhu Aksharvatsaldas's comments incorporated into this chapter were received through a recording file, mediated by a male intermediary, and recorded in Shahibaug Swaminarayan Mandir, Ahmedabad, 17 July 2014. I am indebted to Kalpesh Bhatt for taking time out of his research to conduct these recorded conversations on my behalf.
16. Conversation in Shahibaug Swaminarayan Mandir, Ahmedabad, 17 July 2014.
17. From the 15 July 2014 recording in Shahibaug Swaminarayan Mandir, mediated by Kalpesh Bhatt.
18. The mentioned bicentenary festival was the Gunatitanand Aksharbrahman Bicentenary Festival, Ahmedabad, 1985.
19. Conversation in New York USA, 8 April 2014.
20. Prasang, as a narrative genre for notable incidents, is most often used for inspirational stories about Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahman guru.
21. From *Swaminarayan Prakash*, January 2006, pp. 102–3, original in Gujarati.
22. See Kim (2009) and (2012) for further examination of the relationship between temple building and the BAPS orientation to its publics.
23. My thanks to Kalpesh Bhatt for sharing this comment made by Pramukh Swami on the occasion when he met a prominent cardiologist after the Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham inauguration in 2005. Pramukh Swami was responding to the doctor who has a long association with BAPS, though not as a satsangi, and who asked, following his visit of Delhi Akshardham, 'What is the next project?'

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