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# Public Engagement and Personal Desires: BAPS Swaminarayan Temples and their Contribution to the Discourses on Religion

**Hanna Kim**

On an especially warm weekend in late May 2008, thousands of people stood under the mid-day sun, with no shade tree in sight, and waited for their chance to enter the elaborately carved Swaminarayan Temple before them. The sun appeared to dance on the temple's fully carved exterior, placing in bright relief the three-dimensional designs on the temple base, the domes, archways, and spires. The visitors, who could be overheard speaking languages as varied as Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Vietnamese, showed no signs of hurry and, with visible expressions of curiosity, took photographs of the temple as they moved closer to the designated entrance. This scene, with the visual centerpiece of the carved temple and its appreciative audience, was perhaps not so unexpected given the occasion, namely, the city of Toronto, Canada's annual "Doors Open Toronto" event, where the local habitués are invited to visit its "multicultural places of worship" and "national historic sites."<sup>1</sup>

As I stood outside the temple's *haveli* doors, where the entering and exiting visitors were being expertly guided by volunteers, it was clear that this Swaminarayan Temple, not yet one-year old, had impressed its guests. Speaking to people as they exited the temple, many holding their pink *prasad* boxes with an image of the Toronto Temple on the lid, I was both intrigued by the sincerity of their comments and their choice of words. Many said that they would return to the temple for a more contemplative experience, or in the words of one man, "to have a better appreciation of this spiritual atmosphere." A woman who had traveled by public transport to the temple said, "You can see this is a highly spiritual place, and it makes me want to know more about Hinduism." An elderly man, who was waiting for his wife to collect her shoes, shared, "This new temple really brings pride to all of us in Toronto. It teaches us how peaceful Hinduism is and gives us a real taste of living Hindu religion and spirituality, right here, in Canada." And, an Asian woman, in response to my question about why she had come to the temple, simply stated, "I saw it getting built as I drove to work everyday and I came to see what it is....We

Torontonians, we are truly multicultural: we love to spend time learning about our new neighbours, including their religion and faith.”<sup>2</sup>

In a different setting, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in December 2007, on the occasion of BAPS’s Swaminarayan centenary celebrations, a representative from Guinness World Records, Michael Witty, announced before an audience around three hundred thousand, that the Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple in New Delhi has been designated the “largest comprehensive Hindu temple in the world” and that another Swaminarayan record has been updated to acknowledge that Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the current leader of BAPS, has consecrated the largest number of temples as a single individual, totaling 713 by 2007. Witty described how “the design and construction of Akshardham works to stunning effect—the marble, stone, wood would not have worked under lesser hands.”<sup>3</sup> In a second appearance, the following morning, at the Ahmedabad Swaminarayan Temple, Witty noted that, “Yesterday was an amazing day for BAPS but also for Guinness World Records.” He acknowledged that neither he nor Guinness World Records had anticipated the extent of (media) coverage. Then, in a genuinely awed tone of voice, he added, “Having seen the BAPS organisation in London, Delhi, and here [Ahmedabad], the volunteers who have given up time for free, BAPS does not need Guinness World Records, Guinness World Records needs BAPS!”<sup>4</sup>

These responses, of Canadians and of the Guinness World Records, to Swaminarayan temples, bear mention for they stand in marked contrast to the more critical and less admiring comments of another group, namely, scholars of South Asia. With some exceptions, the more common response of academics to the newly constructed carved Swaminarayan temples is to see them as representative of a “monolithic,” “essentialised” Hinduism and as a disturbing indication of the “rich Gujarati” immigrant’s effort to camouflage an authoritarian and fundamentalist Hinduism in the guise of striking architecture, modern technology, and spectacle.<sup>5</sup>

Intriguing for the purposes of this paper are the ways in which the comments of non-Swaminarayan followers, approving and disproving, reveal a shared discursive space, one connected in different ways to the category “religion.” For the “Doors Open” visitors, the Swaminarayan Temple is inscribed in the positive space of religion and, as such, is filtered by the assumptions of those who accept the category religion as universal, given, and constituted of certain phenomena. These visitors, in appreciating the temple and its contents, frame their response from within their normative understanding of religion: the Swaminarayan community and its temple are implicitly knowable and approachable and seen to be a part of the universal family of world religions. From the visitors’ perspective, this could be deduced from the existence of a welcoming and grand house of worship, itself an unambiguous sign of a “faith community” with strong leadership and compelling “spiritual teachings.” For scholars and others who are less enthusiastic about Swaminarayan temples, their criticisms too reflect a conception of religion as a discrete entity, one that is separable from the rational, non-religious, and secular and recognizable by its structure and content. These scholars, and particularly those committed to more

politically liberal ideals of personhood and society, may diverge from subscribers and sympathizers of religion, including the appreciative visitors to the Toronto Swaminarayan Temple, in how they theorize about religion. Nevertheless, both the adherents to a common sense or normative conception of religion and the scholar critics begin from the position of conceptualizing religion as a given entity. More generally, in various scholars' responses to Swaminarayan temples or BAPS activities, one can discern the dichotomization of religion and religious commitment with conceptions of modernity and secularism and with ideas of private self, public space, and the shape of civil society.<sup>6</sup> As recent scholarship on the category religion and its related discourses have demonstrated, assumptions about modernity, secularism, and the relationship of the autonomous self to its publics are discursive formations *not* dissociable from the episteme of religion.<sup>7</sup>

For its critics, Swaminarayan practices, including temple building, are troubling owing to a variety of reasons including a perceived over-emphasis on a textualized or reified Hinduism.<sup>8</sup> The Swaminarayan community is also accused of supporting, passively or otherwise, Hindu nationalist agendas. In part, this latter allegation rests on the presumed alignments of the Swaminarayan geographic origin in Gujarat and its socially conservative and non-liberal ideals of behavior with the recent dominance of Hindutva politics in Gujarat.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the surface differences between the admirers of Swaminarayan temples and their critics, it appears that the Swaminarayan community has, perhaps spurred by its migration to places beyond Gujarat and India, entered a certain kind of epistemic landscape. Both the admirers and scholars who are critical of BAPS, in other words, appear to be located within and informed by the same epistemic reality, one that supports, imagines, and imposes certain articulations of religion and society.<sup>10</sup> It is this reality, inscribed by discourses on religion, which will foreground the analysis of Swaminarayan practices in this paper.<sup>11</sup>

My aim is to initiate an exploration of the apparent gap between Swaminarayan followers' understanding of their temples and the responses of its outside observers. The carved Swaminarayan temples are sites where we can more closely examine the ways in which this particular Hindu devotional community has, throughout its history, engaged with its publics while simultaneously nurturing the devotional desires of its followers. As a space where multiple discourses can be analyzed, from those that sustain and promote the needs of Swaminarayan followers to those generated by its critics and outsider admirers, my primary focus is on how discourses of religion have come to play an increasing role in Swaminarayan presentations of itself to followers and to its much larger audience of non-followers.

The Swaminarayan community, I hope to show, is engaged with its publics through various means, including the very visible mode of temple construction. In referring to the "Swaminarayan publics," this paper takes inspiration from recent efforts to theorize the publics and the discourses that animate their existence.<sup>12</sup> Michael Warner notes that trying to define the publics sharpens our awareness of a fundamental contradiction: What constitutes a public will depend on context or

setting, and yet, “The form seems to have a functional intelligibility across a wide range of contexts” (2002: 9). If what constitutes the publics is dependent on histories and contingencies, then, it might be tempting, Warner observes, to conclude that the public “is whatever people in a particular context think it is” (2002: 11). Sidestepping this nominalist resolution, Warner argues for the conceptualization of publics as circulating discourses that both engender a social entity and occupy a shared social space. As these culturally and historically located discourses circulate, they “require preexisting forms and channels of circulation” (Warner 2002: 106). The publics, in other words, are not entirely self-organized but arise from the accumulation of participants who acknowledge, explicitly or otherwise, a shared social space and thereby confirm the presence of those conditions allowing for discourse production (Warner 2002: 106). In the case of the Swaminarayan community then, as it reaches out to its publics and as it selects the ways in which its discursive modes will best attract an audience, it does so according to certain already established pathways in order to reach the widest possible circulation. Paradoxically, in the establishment of discursive techniques and strategies to attract a broad public, the Swaminarayan community necessarily limits or is limited by the discourses it participates in as well as by the discourses informing the much broader and undifferentiated realm of strangers. What is interesting for the purpose of this paper is to contemplate how Swaminarayan critics, seemingly distant from the social space of Swaminarayan publics, are, in fact, not strangers but co-participants, along with Hindu nationalists, liberal scholars, and conservative Hindu movements, in the “public representation of a religion called Hinduism.”<sup>13</sup>

Swaminarayan temples, in particular, are sites where, over the past century, its leaders and devotees have grappled with the challenge of balancing the needs of the growing Swaminarayan community within the various contexts in which it has settled. The issue of contexts and the discourses of majority and minority communities becomes magnified with the transnational expansion of the BAPS community, initially to East Africa and then to the United Kingdom and North America. This paper shows that from its founding, the BAPS community has demonstrated a cognizance of its publics, from its followers and potential followers, to the discourses of dominant oppositional groups, and the expectations of political and governmental authorities and institutions. And, from its inception, the Swaminarayan Temple has been an important space through which BAPS negotiates, accommodates, and debates its relationship with these various publics.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting the Habermasian conception of the publics as a contested space, BAPS is constantly trying to understand, even in situations of disagreement, its publics’ interpretation of Hinduism and Swaminarayan devotionalism (Habermas 1989). As we shall see, BAPS’ motivations to understand its publics and their informing discourses are predicated on its committed followers’ desires to better transmit their devotional teachings. Answering the question of what underlies, constitutes, and supports the discourses of the dominant society and its image of civil society thus becomes interesting for what it can reveal about the constitution of certain publics.<sup>15</sup>

This paper will look at a few strands of discourse that contribute to the insider devotees' conceptions of BAPS Swaminarayan devotionism and which therefore affect how they represent Swaminarayan Hinduism to their publics. Relying on ethnographic,<sup>16</sup> textual and historical materials, we will look at two periods of Swaminarayan carved temple construction in order to explore how conceptions of Swaminarayan devotionism are neither static nor immune to pre-existing dominant discourses. The two time periods include the first phase of BAPS temple building in India, 1907–51 and, second, temple building outside India, from the year 1995 to the present time.<sup>17</sup> This chronological scope will show some of the ways in which BAPS, throughout its history, has responded to competing discourses with the aim of propagating its own devotional teachings. The early history of BAPS temple building heightened the community's sensitivity to its publics. The historical trajectory of BAPS Swaminarayan temple building thus provides a platform for analyzing how BAPS has responded to shifts in the discourses of its publics, thereby allowing it to address the changing needs of its devotional community. It is precisely the intertwining of BAPS devotional objectives along with a historically attuned orientation towards its publics that can account for the measurable success of BAPS beyond India.

Finally, it is in these Western transnational sites, such as the US, Canada and UK, where BAPS temples compel a closer examination of the discursive and sociological dynamics of "religion" and their intersection with Swaminarayan *bhakti* (devotionism). Beginning from the premise that the category religion is constitutive of a Western episteme and that this in turn supports discursive formations and teleologies which are often assumed to be universal,<sup>18</sup> this paper considers how a non-Western tradition responds to its framing within "religion." I focus on ethnographic encounters that highlight how discourses on religion have been mediated by specific Swaminarayan practices such as temple building. Swaminarayan temples, it will be emphasized, are multivalent structures responding to both public expectations and personal devotional desires. The temple, or *mandir*, defines the ways in which its publics—that is, its followers, visitors, and guests and even critics—will inhabit its spaces.<sup>19</sup> And, yet, the *mandir* is also physically and figuratively grounded in multiple histories and epistemologies and supported by its own normative ideals, categories, power relations, and discourses. In other words, the Swaminarayan *mandir*, in spite of its structural solidity, is an evolving and flexible structure, neither separable from its devotional moorings, nor the historical and political contexts in which it is embedded.

The structure of this paper begins with a brief introduction to the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha and its philosophical principles. This is followed by a close look at the phase of BAPS temple building in India where the interface of BAPS's devotional objectives and its initial publics can first be witnessed. Next, we look at the expansion of BAPS to spaces where Hinduism and Hindu devotional practices are a distinct minority. The transplanting of Swaminarayan *bhakti* to the West has resulted in certain BAPS accommodations.<sup>20</sup> This is the phase where the relationship between

BAPS's teachings and devotional objectives engage more explicitly with the category religion. Given what appears to be the continuing global salience of religion as a concept and category of experience,<sup>21</sup> BAPS, with its increasing recognition of this reality, is able to satisfy its transnational communities and some of the expectations of its widening publics.

### Locating the BAPS Swaminarayan Community and its Upasana

This paper focuses on one specific group in the Swaminarayan *sampradaya* known as Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha. More commonly, this community refers to itself as “BAPS” or “the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha.” The BAPS community was founded in 1907 by Shastri Maharaj, and currently, according to its estimates, has approximately one million followers, with the majority residing in India. BAPS calculates about 30,000 followers, or *satsangis*, in the UK and 40,000 in the US.<sup>22</sup> It also has an order of *sadhus* (also *santo* or male ascetics) currently numbering over eight hundred men. BAPS *sadhus*, upon initiation (*diksha*), renounce attachments to family, kinship, and material desires and dedicate their skills and abilities wholly to Bhagwan, Guru, the Sanstha, and *satsang*, or the community of devotees.

There are numerous Swaminarayan groups, all of whom recognize the same founder, the historical person of Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830) who established the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* in 1801. At this time Gujarat, as a part of the Bombay Presidency, was not fully under British control. The different Swaminarayan groups share several core texts written during the time of Sahajanand Swami's life. It is the interpretation of these texts and particularly the matter of Sahajanand Swami's relationship to the broader Hindu pantheon as well as issues of succession that have brought about the existence of the BAPS community. Unlike the “original” Swaminarayan movement, where Sahajanand Swami is not necessarily seen to occupy the space of ultimate reality (or *purna purushottam*), the founder of BAPS, Shastri Maharaj, argued that Sahajanand Swami *is purushottam*, or the highest indivisible existential reality. From this perspective, the historical person of Sahajanand Swami, the same who was recorded for posterity in the colonial records as a well-regarded social reformer, was neither human nor an *avatara* of Krishna, but the all-knowing and all-pervading creator, known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan, or “God.”<sup>23</sup> Shastri Maharaj supported his interpretation of Sahajanand Swami's identity in various ways, including pointing to passages in one of the central Swaminarayan texts, the *Vachanamrut* (1989, 2008) wherein *purushottam* is the “cause of all *avataras*” including Krishna.

From the BAPS perspective, Bhagwan Swaminarayan is understood to have appeared in human form in Gujarat for a brief period. Furthermore, for the benefit of future generations, Bhagwan Swaminarayan promised to remain ever-present in the human form of Guru, also known as Aksharabrahman or Gunatit Guru. In English, the living Guru is also referred to as the “ideal *bhakta*” or “ideal devotee.” In the

BAPS community, this living Guru is always a celibate male whose identity as Guru is only known following his selection by his predecessor. Unlike the *guru-like acaryas* in the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, the BAPS Guru's position is not a hereditary one.<sup>24</sup> He is both an object of devotional practice and the one who guides and inspires his followers to achieve their devotional goals. The current living guru of BAPS, who has held this position since 1971, is known as Pramukh Swami Maharaj (born 1921). He is considered the fifth in a lineage of *gurus* (*guru parampara*) that, owing to Shastri Maharaj's understanding of the relationship between *akshar* and *purushottam*, is traceable back to Sahajanand Swami's time in Gujarat. The first Guru in the *parampara*, Gunatitanand Swami (1785–1867), is considered to be the foremost representative of the ideal *bhakta* and is always represented in the *murti* situated on the right side of Bhagwan.<sup>25</sup> The second *guru* and the only householder in the *parampara* is Bhagat Maharaj (1829–97). The third *guru* is Shastri Maharaj (1865–1951) himself. The fourth *guru* is Yogi Maharaj (1892–1971).

For Swaminarayan devotees, the singular motivation for their devotional commitments is to become like the Guru, or Aksharabrahman, and thereby have the ability to offer everlasting devotion to *purushottam*.<sup>26</sup> *Purushottam* is reached or realized only through *akshar*.<sup>27</sup> This is the basis for Swaminarayan *upasana*, or philosophy. With the establishment of this relationship of Guru (*akshar*) to Bhagwan (*purushottam*) in BAPS *bhakti*, Shastri Maharaj effectively distinguished the new Swaminarayan group from the original *sampradaya*. This is reflected in the formal name of the new Swaminarayan community, the “Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar *Purushottam* Swaminarayan Sanstha.”

The emphasis on the human forms of Bhagwan and Guru is an important foundation of BAPS *bhakti*, one that is visible, audible, and in other ways, sensorially present in Swaminarayan practices, rituals, and discourse (Kim 2008). Devotional behaviors such as the daily morning *puja* (worship) practised by all committed devotees include images (*murtis*) of Bhagwan, Guru, and the *guru parampara*. And, all BAPS *mandirs* reflect the *upasana* of the Swaminarayan Sanstha where *satsangis* direct their devotional gestures to Bhagwan and Guru and the *guru parampara*.

### Negotiating Gujarat Publics: 1907–1951

In 1905, when Shastri Maharaj broke away from the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, he and five other *sadhus* who supported his interpretation of Swaminarayan *bhakti* faced opposition and hostilities from *sadhus*, devotees, regional political leaders, and sympathizers of the original *sampradaya*. Out of this background of tension and enmity directed towards him, and with no monetary endowment or ostensible following, Shastri Maharaj set out to construct a *mandir* that would literally house the devotional representations of Bhagwan and Guru and inspire others to embrace this understanding of Swaminarayan *bhakti*. Unlike pre-existing Swaminarayan temples constructed in Sahajanand Swami's time, the new temples



would ostensibly reveal, in the forms of its *murtis*, the devotional significance and relationship between Bhagwan and Guru.

Historically, Shastri Maharaj's decision to construct a *mandir* as a means of both presenting his understanding of Swaminarayan *upasana* and guiding potential aspirants to consider its merits was not unique. It paralleled Sahajanand Swami's efforts to build *mandirs* during his lifetime that would allow for the propagation of his particular teachings.<sup>28</sup> During Sahajanand Swami's life, though facing opposition from Vaishnava *sampradayas* as well as others hostile to his reformist *bhakti* teachings,<sup>29</sup> he inaugurated six *shikharabaddha mandirs* in Gujarat of which five are extant.<sup>30</sup> These original Swaminarayan temples are still today maintained by the original *sampradaya* and its two official *gadis* and their respective network of temples. The *gadis* are "seats" geographically located in Ahmedabad and Vartal and are occupied by hereditary leaders known as *acaryas*. The main *murtis* in the central shrines (*garbha griha*) of these original Swaminarayan *mandirs* reflect the clear Vaishnava orientation of the early Swaminarayan *satsang* and contain respectively Nar-Narayan in Ahmedabad and Bhuj, Lakshmi-Narayan in Vartal, Radha-Raman in Junagadh, Gopinath in Gadhada, and Madan-Mohan Maharaj in Dholera.<sup>31</sup> For BAPS devotees, the dual *murtis* in the original Swaminarayan temples imply that Sahajanand Swami did install a *murti* of himself alongside the *murti* of his ideal *bhakta* or Guru. This, however, is not a view accepted by the followers of the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya*. Considering the opposition Sahajanand Swami faced from those who did not agree with his teachings or who found him and his growing popularity to be unacceptable, historical evidence suggests that early *sadhus* and devotees during the lifetime of Sahajanand Swami decided to suppress or minimize the knowledge of Sahajanand Swami as Bhagwan despite their own convictions that he was indeed such. One example of this is the recorded tension among *sadhus*, as recorded by the prominent *sadhu*, Nishkulanand Swami, about whether or not to publicly install *murtis* of Sahajanand Swami as Bhagwan Swaminarayan.<sup>32</sup> These early nineteenth-century records point to an awareness among Sahajanand Swami's *sadhus* and followers that the public hostility towards the new devotional community should not be provoked or allowed to erupt into violence. Towards the goal of sustaining Swaminarayan *bhakti* in the least publicly disruptive ways, the early community's leaders thus chose to minimize explicit public messages of Sahajanand Swami as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. For BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, there is no ambiguity in the correlation of Sahajanand Swami with Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In the limited instances where this knowledge is less clearly conveyed, as will be discussed below, these moments can be read as BAPS's strategy of sensitivity towards how its publics might interpret Swaminarayan Hinduism rather than a deliberate intention to obscure.

It was in 1907 that the first BAPS *mandir* was completed in the village of Bochasan in central Gujarat. Sahajanand Swami was known to have visited Bochasan numerous times in his lifetime and to have said that he would build a temple here. The Bochasan *mandir*, with its spires and large central dome, was constructed of hand

carved stone and was ready for *murti pratishtha* (ritual installation of *murtis*) after six months of construction. While the entire *mandir* space was not yet fully built, the imperative, both devotional and pragmatic, was to publicly present the “correct” Swaminarayan teachings as quickly as possible. The Bochasan Swaminarayan *mandir* was the first to contain the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Guru, that is, the forms of *purushottam* and *akshar*, in the central *garbha griha*, or inner sanctum.<sup>33</sup> Remarkably, over the next four decades, Shastri Maharaj went on to construct four more stone-pinnacled, or *shikharabaddha mandirs*, in Gujarat, each with its own challenges of not just resources and manpower but of local and regional sectarian opposition. Much of the conflict appears, at least from BAPS accounts and the recollection of devotees, to have risen from the sense of rivalry between the new Swaminarayan community and the *sadhus* and followers of the original Swaminarayan *gadi* as the inspirational reputation and teachings of Shastri Maharaj spread throughout Gujarat. Textual records show that Shastri Maharaj overcame obstructions to land acquisition, temple construction, and the dissemination of his teachings and acquired a loyal and growing group of devotees, admirers, and political supporters, many of whom were formerly associated with the original Vartal Swaminarayan *sampradaya*.<sup>34</sup> BAPS devotees also share the knowledge that though Shastri Maharaj was numerous times the intended target of harm, including poisoning, he nevertheless maintained that his followers should continue to make donations to the original Swaminarayan temples while observing BAPS devotional practices.

The last *mandir* built in Shastri Maharaj’s lifetime was in Gadadha, in Saurashtra. It was inaugurated some days after his death in 1951. Interestingly, none of the first five BAPS stone *mandirs*—namely, Bochasan (1907), Sarangpur (1916), Gondal (1934), Atladra (1945), and Gadadha (1951)—was actually fully constructed before the *murti* installation rituals were performed. This, according to BAPS followers, was due to the constant shortages of labor and the lack of financial and other resources. Instead, as noted in BAPS texts, Shastri Maharaj was recorded to have said that with the installation of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Guru, the needs of the devotional community would be cared for.<sup>35</sup> For BAPS followers, the sense of urgency to complete the temples was reflected in BAPS *upasana*, that is, to install *murtis* of Bhagwan and Guru in order to most properly follow the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.<sup>36</sup> From the devotees’ perspective, there was pressure to publicly show the rightness of BAPS *upasana*. The feats of marshaling the material and labor resources and securing the political and local official approvals to construct a temple would send clear signals of the new community’s solidarity and organizational efficiencies and thereby underscore the power of devotion towards Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Guru Shastri Maharaj. Notably, the qualities of centralized administration, efficient organization, and dedicated volunteer base remain characteristics of BAPS today.

In assessing the stone temple construction in the early decades of the BAPS community, we cannot underestimate the strategy by which the early *satsang* sought to affirm its devotional teachings in the face of public opposition and hostility,

particularly from the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya*. Shastri Maharaj and his small group of followers are revered by *satsangis* for their resourcefulness and indefatigable efforts to build temples and thereby spread their understanding of Sahajanand Swami's teachings. Instead of directly responding to the verbal and sometimes physical attacks on his community, Shastri Maharaj expected his followers to demonstrate, by their thoughts and actions, their commitment to a peaceful devotional tradition, one that idealizes gestures that directly serve Bhagwan and Guru. As the community grew, the large gathering of BAPS *satsangis* listening to the teachings of Shastri Maharaj and *sadhus* appeared to attract new members. In BAPS texts, there are numerous accounts of especially rebellious and even violently belligerent persons who, upon meeting Shastri Maharaj, were transformed into humble devotees.<sup>37</sup> Such accounts were collected by *sadhus* and others and recounted for audiences, becoming, in time, an important aspect of BAPS understanding of its early history. Indeed, as a recurring motif, the stories concerning outsiders who had been transformed upon meeting the BAPS Guru greatly support *satsangis'* devotional emphasis on the pre-eminent role of *guru* in transforming people's lives (Kurien 2007: 109). These stories have also fueled *satsangis'* desire to share their Guru and devotional tradition to a wider audience.

In this look backwards to the beginnings of BAPS, we see a focused emphasis on the building of *shikharabaddha mandirs* as a means of conveying Swaminarayan *upasana*. Though not departing significantly from the architectural styles of the original Swaminarayan *mandirs*, the first carved stone BAPS *mandirs* are unambiguous heralds of a new devotionalism, one that celebrates both the ultimate reality, *purushottam*, and the means, in the form of the Guru, by which the devotee can offer eternal devotion to the ultimate reality. From a sociological perspective, the emphasis on directing devotion to Guru as the means to attain the desired ontological positions of offering eternal devotion to Bhagwan has resulted in the ability of BAPS to discern and respond to changing social and political contexts. BAPS's sensitivity to the lives and concerns of its devotees as well as the assumptions and attitudes of its broader public is possible due to the intimate and always available channels of communication between *satsangis* and the living Guru. The presence of the living Guru thus provides a mechanism for BAPS, consisting of the organization, its leaders, and *satsangis*, to accommodate and adjust to historical contingencies such as colonial and post-colonial regimes and transnational migration. Nowhere is this relationship between devotional needs and pragmatic response more visible than in the global spread of BAPS communities. It is in these new spaces, beyond Gujarat and India, and in dominantly non-Hindu societies, that Swaminarayan *mandirs* have taken on new roles. The temples have become not only sites of devotional practice but arenas in which the epistemologies and informing discourses of other histories and traditions are imbricated and interrogated. It is, in other words, the challenges of transplanting Swaminarayan *bhakti* beyond Gujarat and discerning the expectations of its mostly non-Hindu publics where *mandirs* take on new and largely unanticipated roles.

### Encountering Western Publics: 1995 to Present

From the middle 1960s onwards, the geographic contour of the Swaminarayan *satsang* changed dramatically, and this in turn catalyzed the transformation of BAPS from a regional Gujarat-based community into a transnational organization. The increasingly rationalized structure of management and institutionalized strategies for promoting and sustaining Swaminarayan devotionism that are visible today in BAPS can be traced to the Sanstha's expansion beyond India, initially to East Africa, and then to Britain and North America. This is not to suggest that BAPS efforts to systematize teachings or reach out to potential new members were solely initiated by migration. Owing to its relationship as a split-away group from the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, the BAPS community was especially aware of the need to present its distinctive Swaminarayan *upasana* in clear and compelling ways. In India, this included the establishment of youth-specific programs and publications that would encourage greater knowledge of BAPS *bhakti*. Following the death of Shastri Maharaj, Yogi Maharaj became the fourth living Guru of BAPS in 1951. Under his leadership *satsang* grew in Gujarat and the East African regions then under English colonial rule. In 1945, the first BAPS temple constructed outside of India was completed in Nairobi. Though not a *shikharabaddha mandir* at the time, the Nairobi temple—as some *satsangis* I spoke with in Canada and Britain vividly recall—was the locus of a close community of Gujaratis whose participation and commitment to BAPS became further strengthened by the highly anticipated visits of the Guru and *sadhus* and the exchange of letters between *satsangis*, *sadhus*, and Guru.

Spurred by migration out of East Africa due to the late 1960–1970s African nationalist movements and by the 1965 immigration law changes in the US that permitted the arrival of South Asian immigrants, Swaminarayan *bhakti* traveled to the UK, Canada, and US. As *satsangi* families in these adopted homelands outgrew their informal gathering places including their homes, they purchased buildings for conversion into *hari mandirs*. These *hari mandirs* often had previous uses such as an office building, church, toy factory, movie theater, and in one instance, a local bar and night club. Currently BAPS devotees have settled in many European countries, as well as the Middle East, Southeast and East Asia, Africa, and other Commonwealth nations. And, in a manner, not inconsistent with its history, the construction of *mandirs* has remained an important means of expressing and promoting Swaminarayan *upasana*. In the UK, US and Canada, as *satsang* communities increased in membership during a twenty-five year period and as their financial security strengthened, their desires to fund the construction of a carved stone, or *shikharabaddha mandir*, became more realizable.

In 1995, the first *shikharabaddha* temple in the West, made of marble and stone imported from various quarries and carved in India, was inaugurated in Neasden, an area located northwest of London. Constructed in just over two years, this “London” *mandir* is of immense devotional and emotional significance for the many devotees who had contributed physical labor and monies and volunteered other resources

towards its completion. For many non-*satsangis*, including high-profile celebrities and well-known public personalities, the London *mandir* has become somewhat of a *de facto* representation of Hinduism. This was driven in part by media exposure that, while welcomed by the BAPS community, inaccurately portrayed the BAPS organization and community as representative for all Hindus of Britain. This elision of Swaminarayan Hinduism with all Hinduism is a result of what Kim Knott (1986, 1987), Steven Vertovec (2000), and other scholars of South Asian diasporas have previously described as a “singular and rather stereotyped view of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindus’ in British society” (Vertovec 2000: 104). The BAPS community, for its part, did not anticipate that it would be perceived by some of its publics as trying to speak for all Hindus in Great Britain. In fact, both before and after the opening of the London *mandir*, other Hindu temple organizations and communities have been involved with local governmental agencies, for whom they have acted in various capacities, such as religious and language education advisers and specialists on matters of religion, race, and other multicultural matters.<sup>38</sup> What distinguishes the BAPS community is perhaps the twinned physical visibility and scale of its membership and activities, exemplified by the London *mandir*’s lavish and public celebrations of Hindu festivals and celebrations, and its large and well-organized volunteer base.<sup>39</sup>

The inauguration of the Neasden Swaminarayan *mandir* was not the first public outing for BAPS in the West.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps most bewildering to the community’s *sadhus*, leaders, and devotees was the accusation by some visitors and scholars that the Sanstha was engaged in a sleight-of-hand operation, namely, of promoting a Hindu nationalist vision of India and Hinduism with a corresponding minimizing of BAPS “sectarian” biases. Moreover, in articulating its understanding of Hinduism, BAPS clearly embraces opportunities to engage with its wider publics, through publications, website, videos, and events open to all visitors. However, in also granting the mainstream media its needs for images of a multicultural Britain, BAPS has found itself criticized for contributing to the circulation of a universalized vision of Hinduism that too closely mirrors the agendas of overseas and India-based Hindu nationalist groups.

Indeed, it is not difficult to see how those outside of the BAPS community would claim that Swaminarayan *satsangis* appear to be acting as the representatives of the Hindu “religion.” The striking architecture of the London *mandir*, rising in layers of carved white stone, with arches and domes, and topped with stone pinnacles, golden *kalasas* (water vessel-shaped finials), and flags is a truly unexpected sight in the suburban landscape of northwest London. Having become a destination for tourists, many of whom are unfamiliar with Hindu traditions, the temple’s leaders and its members have responded by providing guided tours for its visitors.<sup>41</sup> From the perspective of BAPS *satsangis* I spoke with in London and elsewhere in the Swaminarayan diaspora, none acknowledged sympathies or membership with Hindu nationalist groups.<sup>42</sup> These *satsangis* further shared that they feel themselves to be part of an inclusive community that does not discriminate against other Hindus.

Rather, the *satsangis* I spoke with stated that “We are Hindus first.” This sentiment was not said for the purpose of obscuring differences among Hindu groups, but to show support and cooperation with other Hindu groups. *Satsangis*, for example, have participated in the festival events, fundraising efforts, and temple causes of other UK Hindu communities. One BAPS *satsangi* shared, “We are all Hindus and we support other Hindus. When ISKCON lost their [cow] Gangotri [in December 2007], many of us went on buses arranged by [BAPS] *mandir* to support them in their protest.”<sup>43</sup>

In its efforts to balance its representation of BAPS Swaminarayan Hinduism alongside its public service contributions to promote knowledge and appreciation of Hinduism more generally, BAPS is facing unanticipated criticism from Hindu as well as non-Hindu sources.<sup>44</sup> Again, from the BAPS perspective, theirs is a conscious and systematic effort to ensure that Swaminarayan Hinduism is able to survive, whether in dominantly Hindu or non-Hindu places. These efforts, including temple building, are firstly viewed by *satsangis* as devotionally motivated ones. Driven by these desires, BAPS *satsangis* and leaders are continuously striving to improve their youth groups, publications, and methods of teaching Swaminarayan *upasana* for its transnational communities. Also, BAPS constantly seeks to improve the appeal and accessibility of its numerous programs and materials for both its followers and broader publics. The new temples have become a focal point for these developments. Further, since the inauguration of the London Temple, English-speaking *sadhus* have taken up full-time residence in the *mandir*'s adjacent facilities and they have contributed substantially to the teaching of Swaminarayan texts and behavioral ideals for all age groups of *satsangis* in the diaspora. Clearly, as with many other immigrant communities, the fact of migration away from the homeland has provoked families and individuals, *satsangi* or not, to consider how to nurture certain cultural and subjective ideals. What BAPS and its *satsangis* did not realize was that the transplanting of its devotional ideals including temple building, to the Western or more specially Christian secularized places, would entail engaging and negotiating with other publics and their informing discourses. As BAPS discovered, the pluralist and multicultural ethos and rhetoric of Western places such as the US and UK did not translate into the automatic acceptance of South Asians or their traditions (Kurien 2007; Rajagopal 2000).

Against this backdrop of the Swaminarayan community's engagement with its new surroundings and publics beyond India, it is important to be reminded that the central impetus, from the Swaminarayan perspective, for constructing the stone-pinnacled *mandirs* or the more humble *hari mandirs* from converted buildings, is no different from that behind its construction of the *mandirs* in India and Africa and elsewhere. The most persuasive examples to underscore this point are the *shikhara-baddha mandirs* constructed both before and after the building of stone *mandirs* abroad. These include *mandirs* recently constructed in the more remote rural villages of Gujarat such as Kosumba (1999), Jadeshwar (2001), and Sankari (2001). Some of these stone *mandirs*, such as the one in the small village of Bhadra, are larger or

more intricately carved than those in either the US or the UK. And, though some temples are constructed owing to special associations such as the wish of a *guru* for a *mandir* in a particular place, most are the result of *satsang* growth and *satsangis'* commitment to seeing Swaminarayan *bhakti* deservedly represented by a *shikharabaddha mandir*. There is a clear progression of *satsang* motivation leading to the construction of elaborately carved temples, a sequence that begins with the maintenance of a home shrine, or *ghar mandir*, and expands to the support of the *hari mandir*, and then the *shikharabaddha mandir*. The carved stone *mandir*, in other words, reveals in the most concrete way, the devotional commitment of *satsangis* to Swaminarayan teachings and their determination to direct their resources towards its realization.

Historically, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha has, from its origin, placed an emphasis on the *mandir* as the “house” of Bhagwan and Guru, or in Pramukh Swami’s words, “the pillars of our tradition.”<sup>45</sup> From the fund-raising to the final stone polishing, thousands of *satsangis* have voluntarily contributed to *mandir* projects as a means by which to cultivate themselves into an image of the ideal devotee, the one whose behavior is mimetically connected to the Guru and is therefore, like the Guru, in a constant state of serving Bhagwan. As *satsangis* recount, this devotionally prescribed posture of service and sacrifice, as exemplified by the Guru, prompts their commitment to sponsor and build *shikharabaddha mandirs* in record time, ranging between sixteen months to just over two years. The London *mandir*, the completion of which is regarded as a watershed achievement in BAPS’s history, would become the prototype for the four *shikharabaddha mandirs* now completed in North America. At these *mandir murti pratishthas* in towns outside of Houston, Texas (2004), Chicago, Illinois (2004), Toronto, Canada (2007) and Atlanta, Georgia (2007), *satsangis* were very quick to share the feeling that the new *mandirs* are a devotional achievement that is not theirs alone, but the result of the “inspiration” generated by their Guru Pramukh Swami. The actual process of building a *mandir* on soil far beyond India, as many *satsangis* relate, is directly attributable to devotees’ translating an intense personal desire to please Bhagwan and Guru into the sacrifice of resources.<sup>46</sup> And, repeatedly at the temple inauguration events, Pramukh Swami dismisses any credit and gently turns the focus to Swaminarayan *upasana*, reminding the assembled to become like *akshar* in order to forever offer devotion to *purushottam*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

### Mapping Devotion with Religion

Beyond the devotional foundation for the existence of BAPS temples, it is what they contain and how they fit into and engage with the social and political contexts of their Western homelands that I briefly turn to now. *Satsangis* are often aware and openly share that their decisions to participate in BAPS may have originally been motivated by questions about Hinduism and matters of raising children. The Swaminarayan community is praised for addressing concerns of immigrants who are also

ethnic and religious minorities. BAPS, in other words, provides satisfying and accessible strategies by which its members and potential members can negotiate the challenges of new discursive arenas and their corresponding publics. The Swaminarayan Temple is one locus where *satsangis'* experiences of their publics are mediated by BAPS discourses which are themselves affected by the category religion and its epistemic reach. In this public sphere, spatially represented by the *mandir* and where multiple discourses, including discourses on religion, meet, the assumptions of what it means to "be Swaminarayan" are constantly clarified.

All BAPS *shikharabaddha mandirs* have associated facilities in addition to the structure housing the *murtis* or forms of Bhagwan and Guru. These spaces include a large meeting hall, kitchen, residence for *sadhus*, classrooms, and sometimes a gymnasium. In the *mandirs* located in the West, there is also a component known as the "Exhibition." While the original Swaminarayan *mandirs* did often have display areas, these were for exhibiting the *prasadi*, or cherished items once given to or used by Sahajanand Swami during his time in Gujarat. In the *shikharabaddha mandirs* constructed outside of India, the Exhibition is a consciously created space, designed like a museum, with appropriate lighting and labels, and topical sections.<sup>47</sup> The sections introduce visitors to Hinduism and its world contributions, outline the histories of the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* and BAPS Swaminarayan *bhakti*, and provide suggestions on living a life of "moral excellence."

For those unfamiliar with Hindu traditions, the Exhibition might be seen as a "user-friendly" introduction to Hinduism, the Hindu Swaminarayan community, and the basis for moral living "the Hindu way." On its various temple websites, BAPS describes the Exhibitions as a place where "the public can see the universality of Hinduism, discover the Origins of Hinduism, understand the Hindu People and the Beliefs, marvel at India's contributions...experience the continuity of Hinduism, and enjoy the Peace offered by a traditional Hindu Mandir."<sup>48</sup>

Since the 1995 opening of the London *mandir* and its "Understanding Hinduism" Exhibition consisting of panels, dioramas, murals, handcraft artifacts and video segments, BAPS has created increasingly more sophisticated Exhibitions for its carved stone North American temples. All Exhibitions, however, put forth the same messages. One enters the Exhibition space and is greeted by subdued lighting. Backlit wall panels introduce the visitor to the Hinduism's "tolerant, resilient, and peace-loving" qualities. The visitor learns through panels, of the history of ancient India, the philosophical concepts in "Hindu Beliefs," and the achievements of "Vedic Civilization." For the visitor seeking some parallels to a familiar "religion," the panels situate Hinduism as the "world's oldest living religion," with "no one single Founder" but a "Supreme, all-powerful God." The Hinduism introduction also provides several lists, organized around common academic categories that enumerate the achievements of ancient Hindus. These include: in language, Sanskrit; in literatures, the "first Scriptures of the Human Race, the Vedas"; in education, the "world's first university," Takshashila; in mathematics, the invention of "0"; in medicine, the invention of plastic surgery.<sup>49</sup>



In the section on BAPS Swaminarayan Hinduism, there are painted panels, dioramas, and video segments that introduce the visitor to the biography of Sahajanand Swami and BAPS's devotional emphasis on Bhagwan and Guru. This section suggests the seamless continuity of Hinduism with the founder of the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, and then with BAPS Swaminarayan Hinduism. Owing to its focus on core ethical and spiritual values and the broadmindedness of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and all BAPS *gurus*, the visitor may leave the Exhibition with a sense that BAPS Hinduism is emblematic of "Hindu dharma," or Hindu religion, in the twenty-first century. The Exhibition ends with artful panels conveying messages of unity and peace. What was stated at the beginning of the Exhibition could also apply to the ending, namely, that "the Truth of Hinduism aims to sustain the whole of creation, not just one particular group of people, belief or specie."<sup>50</sup> The visitor might conclude the same of BAPS Hinduism, as did many of the Doors Open Toronto visitors earlier mentioned.

From a critical perspective, the Exhibition can be seen as putting forth a distilled and selective interpretation of Hinduism's origins and history. The even tone of the carefully worded descriptions might suggest that the "facts and figures" presented are well-accepted, non-disputed, and objective. For example, in the Toronto Temple Exhibition, Hinduism is noted as a living religion with "roots over 10,000 years old." Further, Hinduism is presented as having survived "uninterrupted even by innumerable intrusions and invasions." Some critics may also discern a BAPS perspective in the section on Hindu philosophy. Overall, there are no materials to contradict the picture of India as a homogenously Hindu land; no materials that point to the various antipathies between divergent Hindu schools or communities; no explanation for the institution of caste and its persistence in the Hindu social order; and no dioramas to illustrate the interconnected histories, cultures, and aesthetic contributions of the various other traditions and groups of the subcontinent. The Swaminarayan Temple Exhibitions, in other words, could be read as an earnest and naïve effort to promote a particular religion from a narrowly defined perspective. Interestingly, these critical assessments of the Exhibitions are not representative of the views shared by hundreds of South Asians and non-South Asians who have expressed, in contrast, their appreciation of an accessible and appealing introduction to Hinduism. From the conversations I had with visitors to the Toronto Swaminarayan *mandir* during the Doors Open event and from comments I overheard, many of the temple's visitors, while not grasping or noticing any distinctions between Hinduism or BAPS Hinduism nevertheless did feel that the Exhibition helped them to understand "Hinduism" as a "religion," with "spirituality," and "people of faith."<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, for scholars of South Asia who are critical of BAPS, its temple-based Exhibitions on Hinduism are troubling. While few have published analyses of the Exhibitions, their perception of BAPS as a contributor to the promotion of Hindutva or Hindu nationalist sentiments is reaffirmed by the language and content of the Exhibitions which are openly universalizing and unselfconsciously reifying of "Hinduism." For Chetan Bhatt (2000), Parita Mukta (2000) and Sandhya

Shukla (1997, 2003), BAPS's efforts to showcase and promote Hinduism as a distinct religion with clear geographic location, doctrines, and ecumenical qualities are indicative of its Hindutva affinities. These critics and others who have analyzed the intersection of the South Asian diaspora and some of its members' attraction to religious nationalist agendas argue that BAPS, owing to its financial strength and Gujarati membership, is attempting to "hegemonize the space of Hindu representation in the UK" (Bhatt 2000: 588). While Shukla writing about BAPS in the US does not quite go so far in her assessment of BAPS, she argues, "The material reality and demands of United States interest group politics, produce in Indians the need and desire to formulate themselves as a group, both for their current country of residence and for the outside world" (1997: 307).

From the perspective of BAPS, the impetus for creating Exhibitions in its carved temples was neither as self-absorbed nor as pro-Hindutva as some of its critics allege. *Satsangis* who are familiar with scholarly analyses of BAPS are aware of the charges that BAPS is underwriting a possibly benign but "Puritannical" Hinduism at best, or endorsing more extreme visions of a monolithic and ethnically cleansed vision of India's past at worst (Bhatt 2000; Mukta 2000; Nussbaum 2007; Simpson 2008). On several occasions when I asked Swaminarayan leaders to talk about the Exhibitions, they have shared the view that these additions to the *shikharabaddha mandirs* were the result of requests from both Swaminarayan *satsangis* and outside visitors for explanatory details. Persistent questions about Hinduism and of Swaminarayan Hinduism thus prompted the idea of creating permanent Exhibitions dedicated to "understanding Hinduism." Not unexpectedly, South Asian Hindus, including those from Swaminarayan families, have often discovered that living in places with a dominantly Christian historical legacy has brought about questions that they had not previously encountered (Knott 1986; Kurien 2007; Vertovec 2000).<sup>52</sup> These include outsider queries such as "What is your religion?" and requests for explaining Hindu ritual practices. Many of the *satsangis* I spoke with noted that such questions from their children made them aware of their own "ignorance about Hinduism, our religion." It also made them ask how it was that they did not experience these questions when living in India. As a prominent woman leader in the Sanstha said, "Look at the Muslims and the Jews. They know how to explain to their children. Why can't we explain ours? I think our problem is that we Hindus don't know how to explain our religion. Parents don't know how to teach about Hinduism."<sup>53</sup> This woman's self-assessment is not unfamiliar to Hindu parents of all backgrounds who have found that living in Christian or secularized Christian places has brought about a need to know how to explain Hinduism in terms of a "religion." In sharing this argument with learned *sadhus* of the Swaminarayan Sanstha, I received this response through a male intermediary:

...while most aspects of the *mandir* are fulfilling the spiritual needs of followers, certain aspects, primarily the Exhibitions, are self-consciously incorporated to help explain the tradition to outsiders. While the tradition of explanation (*jnan*) has

been an integral facet of the Swaminarayan *mandirs* since its inception, the idea of a permanent Exhibition explaining Hinduism and Swaminarayan traditions as a part of the *mandir* is fairly new and was influenced by Western ideas of presentation. This was because Swaminarayan devotees in a foreign environment are forced to explain themselves to the dominant communities in order to practice religion peacefully.<sup>54</sup>

The comments of Swaminarayan devotees in the US and UK as well as the responses of the Swaminarayan *sadhus* highlight a particular aspect about being Hindu in the Western world. Whereas the Swaminarayan parents I talked with recognized that their experiences with Hindu tradition in dominantly Hindu contexts in India could not be the same as being a Hindu minority in dominantly Christian nations, what they had not anticipated was the need to explain, as one college graduate confided, “our religion in terms of the Christian platform.”<sup>55</sup>

In trying to portray and explain Hinduism at large and Swaminarayan devotionism more specifically in accessible ways, BAPS has come to realize that this is an ongoing project that is always contingent and subject to continuous adjustments. Sensitive to its critics and their charges of essentialism and fundamentalism, leaders and *sadhus* responsible for the activities of *satsang* communities outside of India are currently in the process of trying to formulate ways of presenting BAPS for its publics such that they cannot be so easily assailed or misinterpreted. These inside-BAPS efforts to understand the assumptions and informing epistemes of the dominant society are inevitably works-in-progress. BAPS could not have foreseen that its narrative thrust on Hinduism, one that embraces the oft-repeated trope of Hinduism’s inclusiveness and tolerance and, without irony, the Orientalist scholarship’s emphasis on Hinduism’s longevity and unchanging qualities, would provide its critics with ample material. As the words of the *sadhus* above indicate, some within the community are beginning to realize how BAPS is perceived by those unfamiliar with Hinduism and by its more informed critics. These *satsangis* recognize that to be Swaminarayan in the West is to be inscribed within and identified as a religion and that to be a religion is to participate in a discourse with its own conventions, assumptions, and expectations.

In his analysis of Indian immigrants’ support of Hindu nationalism, Arvind Rajagopal argues that, “Religion offers Indians a relatively safe and familiar means of defining themselves in the US as well-educated but dark-skinned immigrants confronting their ambivalent class status” (2000: 472). The domain of religion as a source for insider and outsider identification, Rajagopal posits, is an artifact of early American history and its religious legacy. Hence, in the US, Rajagopal asserts, “Religion has thus become a culturally acceptable means of identifying one’s particular place in the social hierarchy” (2000: 472). For newcomers, then, to participate in and be recognized as members of the American publics would require a religious affiliation. This argument is a powerful one. The category religion and its supporting discourses are indeed an influential aspect of American publics. At the very least, the

ethos of religious pluralism that circulates in the American public ensures that religion is a category from which behaviors can be analyzed and known about. Religion, as Hindu nationalist groups have discovered, is a ripe arena in which to promote their own visions of culture and homeland. For BAPS, religion has become the means by which it can engage with its dominantly non-Hindu public while sustaining its own devotional traditions and teachings.

To be able to “explain our religion” is perhaps one of the most noticeable consequences of the Swaminarayan Sanstha’s settlement in the West. This desire, while not always framed as the need to “explain,” is nevertheless discernible in how young *satsangis* are experiencing the interface of Swaminarayan *bhakti* with other “religions.” During a conversation one evening at a New Jersey *mandir*, a young girl asked me:

How do you explain to others what Swaminarayan religion is about? Isn’t it hard? In my school, my friends are Pakistani and Korean. I have invited both of my friends to *mandir*, one is Muslim and the other is Christian. My Korean friend invited me to her church and I try to explain things to her in our religion that are connected to hers. It’s hard. I am always trying to figure out how to explain my religion.<sup>56</sup>

*Satsangis* are aware of some broader contour of “religion” though they do not explicitly state it in these terms. They know, at the very least, that they are expected by their public to “have a religion.” Among the *sadhus* and leaders of BAPS, there is recognition of the need to help *satsangis* and their public understand Swaminarayan *bhakti* in ways that are accessible to both groups. As the *sadhus* responsible for the content of the *mandir* Exhibitions recognize, the challenge of framing Swaminarayan teachings and practices in more graspable terms and images is a long-term project open to missteps. One *sadhu* writes:

Currently, translating concepts into the dominant framework was something for which BAPS does not have much expertise. Nonetheless, translation of concepts into this dominant framework (which is still very much a work-in-progress may eventually come to help Swaminarayan concepts be better understood by the Swaminarayan community’s own youth who are growing up in a predominantly Christian environment. Thus, interestingly, by being forced to explain their traditions in the dominant framework, BAPS, if successful, may help in the continued transmission of its traditions to a younger generation less aware of the original Swaminarayan style of discourse.<sup>57</sup>

The *sadhu*’s reflections echo the first emphasis in BAPS which is to provide ways for *satsangis* and interested others to become knowledgeable about Swaminarayan *bhakti*. Yet, *sadhus* and *satsangis* pragmatically recognize that their devotionalism is not isolatable from the discourses in which it is situated. Thus, even the youngest

*satsangi* child I have met is able to share the awareness that the Swaminarayan *mandir*, whether made of stone or not, has increased the “outside” public’s interest in Hinduism. Certainly in all of the areas where there are *shikharabaddha* temples in the West, local citizens who are not Hindus may likely be attracted by the striking edifices and thereafter acquire some exposure to Hindu festivals and celebrations. Out of this number, a few will go on further to learn about the BAPS community, and some fewer may actually choose to participate more fully in Swaminarayan *bhakti*. Such was the story relayed by a young German, Markus, when I met him at a Swaminarayan celebration in Gujarat and asked about his interest in BAPS. He noted that while living and working in London, he and his wife heard about the “Neasden Swaminarayan Temple and its Diwali celebrations.” He went to the temple, met a kind *satsangi*, and “it all started from there.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Juggling Discourses and Publics**

Analysts of Hindu nationalist sympathies in the Indian diaspora have focused on factors of racial, political, economic, and social marginalization in the new homeland that, the argument goes, have provoked Indians to turn towards ethnic markers of identity in order to achieve a sense of belonging and recognition (Bhatt 2000). This viewpoint is helpful in trying to discern the motivations of many overseas Hindus who tacitly or openly support Hindutva programs and politics. However, this viewpoint patently excludes the realm of devotional subjectivity and the range of reasons for why people submit themselves to a devotional community. Looking at the discourses on religion allows for a better appreciation of the BAPS Swaminarayan community’s ability to recognize the hegemonic power of religion and why it has chosen to accommodate rather than circumvent some of the discursive expectations of this category.

At the minimum, discourses on religion assume that “religion” is a universal category, consisting of beliefs, doctrines, practices, texts, and centralized authority. These constituents are not static; however, they are susceptible to mechanisms that ensure a minimum basis for entry. Discourses on religion are supported by political and governmental institutions, such as states, laws, and militaries as well as by practices and ideologies that circulate and reinforce ideas of religion through political, economic, cultural, and even academic channels.<sup>59</sup> Though there is no single or official discourse on religion, this possibility having been eliminated by Western historical events including the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation, its minimal constituents contribute to the commonsense and vernacular assumptions about religion. That these discourses are attached to and circulated by their publics is clear. What is less obvious, perhaps, is how a non-Western community and tradition with its own informing histories and discourses will interrogate the category religion and what consequences these actions will generate for both the transplanted tradition and its publics.

BAPS, by its own admission, is accommodating some of its Western publics’

assumptions about “religion” and this has influenced the outer shape and expression of BAPS Swaminarayan *bhakti* in the West. From its now more than forty years of settlement in the West, the Swaminarayan Sanstha has not remained unaffected by the dominant ideals and secularized Christian assumptions about religion.<sup>60</sup> What is striking about the Sanstha today is its pragmatic capacity to frame its specific tradition from within the discourses on religion. The result is a portrait of Swaminarayan *bhakti* that fits some but not all of the expectations of religion in the West. Already, from its founding, BAPS placed emphasis on texts and textual knowledge of Swaminarayan *bhakti*. BAPS, furthermore, has historically been centralized in its leadership and organization. Following its transnational expansion outside of India, it is the area of publications and multimedia as well as departments of public relations and youth services that have increased in scope and sophistication. Swaminarayan publications have considerably expanded to cover the questions and concerns of its followers who are no longer living in Hindu majority societies. BAPS publications cover a wide range including historical and hagiographical accounts of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the *guru* lineage and explanatory essays concerning proper devotional behavior and practices. Many of these publications also provide citations and bibliographies. The explanatory emphasis is also visible in the official BAPS website, [www.Swaminarayan.org](http://www.Swaminarayan.org), where essays illuminate the textual, historical, and religious bases for rituals, festivals, and personal devotional practices. In temple-based youth groups, much time is given to encouraging a positive awareness of Hindu and BAPS Swaminarayan identity, such as the benefits of proper eating habits and maintaining bodily and sensory control. Through dance, public speaking, drama and music, young *satsangis* are encouraged to cultivate an appreciation for the richness of “Indian culture.” And, through local, regional and national conferences and camps, *satsangis* in their respective age groups meet together and learn about Swaminarayan topics and ideals of behavior and how these can be successfully maintained outside of India. From these temple sponsored and often temple-based activities, youth *satsangis* are forming strong bonds of friendship and learning how to articulate their Swaminarayan religious identity.

What is notable about these programs taking place in *mandirs* outside of India is their representation of BAPS in the language of “religion,” “belief,” and “spirituality” and the strategies they provide for *satsangis* who are attempting to strengthen their devotional commitment in dominantly non-Hindu contexts. Young *satsangis* whom I have met are in unanimous agreement that the temple and related activities have played a significant role in helping them to embrace “Swaminarayan religion” and to speak with confidence about “my religion.” And, of their publics, BAPS has made many efforts to attract the goodwill of its non-Swaminarayan Hindu and non-Hindu neighbors. From inviting local citizens to its temple events and festivals, to producing high-quality pamphlets with explanations about Hinduism and BAPS Hinduism, to providing organized tours of its temples for groups, and to contributing to charitable concerns including schools, scholarships, hospitals, local and international causes, *satsangis* have become more visibly involved in their new communi-

ties of settlement. Many of these BAPS initiatives to extend the *mandir* to its publics have been well-received. *Satsangis* I have met, for example, speak of how their non-Indian co-workers and friends have come to appreciate the inviting and inclusive atmosphere of BAPS events. And, at major festival events, there are frequently representatives of charities and communities who speak gratefully of the services and volunteer help that BAPS and its volunteer corps have provided.

In its interaction with its publics, BAPS strives to demonstrate the openness of “Swaminarayan religion” and it does so through the discursive arena of religion. It proudly emphasizes the universality of truths in the religion, “Hinduism.” Its publications and Exhibitions endeavor to make Hinduism explainable and knowable through the discrete categories of faith, belief, worship, and doctrines—the recognizable constituents of a religion. And, *satsangis* too, self-consciously or not, are influenced by the everyday assumptions of the discourse on religion. In the Toronto Doors Open event, I overheard a *satsangi* woman tell a visitor, “Yes, we have many gods in Hinduism, but we really worship only one, just like the monotheistic religions. You have your church, we have this temples...both are meant to inspire us by their beauty to think of God.” And, in response to the guest’s exclamation, “Oh no, this [gesturing to temple] is much more beautiful than our churches,” the *satsangi* gamely added, “Well, what about the old churches in Europe!”<sup>61</sup>

From a deeper historical perspective, both BAPS and the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* have been conscious of the need to explicate and situate their devotional practices and texts.<sup>62</sup> This was undoubtedly due to the original *sampradaya*’s emergence as a “reforming sect” in early colonial Gujarat and its identification with teachings and behavioral prescriptions that were not widely accepted. The argument being made here is that living in the West has engendered new concerns that were not present when the *satsang* was evolving in a dominantly Hindu landscape. The question might be legitimately asked: Was BAPS always a religion, prior to its encounter with the West? The answer is surely no, for BAPS is not entirely a religion in the post-Enlightenment Christian sense. Following the broad contours of “religion” as an empirical reality that has been discursively constructed and is inseparable from the evolution of the state, ideas of sovereignty, law and even the constitution of public spaces and private behaviors, BAPS today may, in fact, look like a “religion,” but its discursive heritage is one that is situated in the western part of India and influenced by the textual, linguistic, political, and cultural factors of this region.<sup>63</sup>

Comparatively, BAPS can be sociologically examined alongside the category religion and its vernacular contents: however, its devotional content is not historically locatable in the same discursive, and hence, shared epistemic context. Thus, while there is an historically strong culture of learning about and being able to explicate Swaminarayan tenets and practices, these actions are not intended to highlight or hierarchize Swaminarayan devotionalism to “other religions.” BAPS does not assume that there are exclusive paths to knowledge; it does not attempt to classify other cultures or ontologies from within its own epistemology; it has not

modified its *mandirs* or *mandir-smarak* complexes, known as “Akshardham,” to conform to North American or European aesthetics of religious space.

Recently, scholars, including S. N. Balagangadhara (1994), Richard King (1999) and Brian K. Pennington (2005), are engaged in looking more closely at the interface of the category “religion” with the discourse on Hinduism. These works and others have sharpened our awareness of how the relationships between colonizer and colonized, or Western scholar and non-Western subject, are never a uni-directional one. Both the outsider and the insider are enmeshed in making their respective discursive worlds appear as coherent frameworks for living and being. Ultimately, these seemingly unconnected worlds, that of the British colonial administration on the one hand, and the reforming Swaminarayan *sampradaya* on the other, are in fact participating in a shared discursive space, one of multiple and sometimes overlapping audiences and publics. The historical records from the early nineteenth century onwards show that the early *satsang* community of devotees was well aware of the colonial presence.<sup>64</sup> That BAPS is flourishing today suggests its abilities to accommodate its representations of itself to its publics, colonial and post-colonial, Hindu and non-Hindu, beyond and within India.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The learned Swaminarayan *sadhus* who are engaged in assisting diaspora *satsangis* to become more knowledgeable about Swaminarayan *upasana* are all too aware, to borrow from King (1999), of the “paradigms of knowledge” that they must mediate. One *sadhu* commented:

While it is true that living in the West places unique demands on the fellowship, the fact is that BAPS buildings have always been built as a center for worship and learning and have adapted to the needs of Western-based followers. One interesting issue, therefore, really is how this Western definition of religion forces religions to express their ideals in the dominant discourse, highlighting power inequities between dominant and minority groups.<sup>65</sup>

Swaminarayan *shikharabaddha mandirs* in the UK, US, and Canada are visible edifices of religion and religious difference that point to the challenge of nurturing a Hindu devotional community in the secularized public spaces of modernity. As observed by Talal Asad, the secularization thesis presumes that religion in modern life must remain privatized in order for the modern democratic state to be free from the controlling dynamics of religion. Asad points out that this argument overlooks the reforming capacities of the state itself in the areas of private and social life. Thus for non-Western religious groups, one challenge is how to mediate the expectations of secular society where religion is theoretically meant to remain outside the public arena while they simultaneously uphold their location from within the boundaries of religion.



A senior official at the New Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham told me, “Most of Hindu organisations say we are not Hindu enough. And, most of academic world says we are too Hindu.”<sup>66</sup> In choosing to frame its *bhakti* tradition in terms that are accessible to followers living outside of India as well as interested others, BAPS appears to be participating in the endorsement of “religion” as a given and universal category. It has done so not with the intention of promoting an exclusivist vision of either India or Hinduism, but for the purposes of situating its tradition within an already existing category, “religion,” and its associated discursive pathways.

By adjusting to the dominant discourse on religion, BAPS indicates its awareness of where it is historically and politically located, both in India and beyond. This pragmatic move, like all conscious and unconscious strategies of groups determined to survive, is not free of subjective editing and elisions. Yet, it is the quality of accommodation without compromise to its central tenets that has allowed BAPS *mandirs* to be constructed wherever *satsangis* have settled. Paradoxically, what has been left out of the *mandirs*, Exhibitions, and Akshardham complexes and what has been created intentionally for these sites are motivated by the same discourse on what is and what constitutes a religion. The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha hopes to make Hinduism an approachable and appealing religion for all visitors and yet it also seeks to sharpen awareness of its own devotional tradition. This is a predictable dilemma for religion, and one that is built into the discourses on religion and visible in many ways in plural, democratic, and secular states. This dilemma is further inherent in the structure of the Swaminarayan publics, where the ability to reach the amorphous body of strangers depends on a careful balance between specifying discourses and those that will resonate in a more general way. Insofar as BAPS can align its devotional discourses with the dominant epistemes informing its publics, then its choices for the public representation of Swaminarayan Hinduism will continue to attract both those who appreciate the enchantment of “secular” and modern spaces and those who decry it. Undoubtedly, we shall have this same discussion, of discerning the epistemic reach of religion and its assumptions of what is a modern religion, when the first Swaminarayan Akshardham complex is constructed outside of India. In the meantime, many stone cutters in the villages of western India are chiseling and polishing marble from Italy, limestone from Turkey and sandstone from North India, reviving their art, educating their children, and perhaps contemplating the ironies of being fully employed in India because of BAPS’s temple building in the suburbs of the US.

## Notes

1. From the “Doors Open Toronto” webpage: <http://wx.toronto.ca/inter/it/newsrel.nsf/82f55f14f8d6b46285256ef500408475/06325112B6302D068525742F00579F05?opendocument>.

2. All conversations with “Doors Open Toronto” visitors occurred on Sunday, May 25, 2008. The website for “Doors Open Toronto” reports that “17,000” people

visited the Toronto Swaminarayan Temple over the two-day event, the highest total for a single Doors Open venue.

3. Announcement made on the final day of the BAPS Centenary Festival, Ahmedabad, December 17, 2007.

4. Speech in response to being felicitated by BAPS, Shahibaug Swaminarayan *mandir*, Ahmedabad, December 18, 2007.

5. See Bhatt (2000); McKean (1996); Mukta (2000); Nussbaum (2007); Shukla (1997, 2003) for pointedly critical assessments about BAPS from different perspectives. See also Kim (forthcoming), for a critique of these authors' interpretations of BAPS.

6. It should be clarified that neither I nor BAPS see all critics of BAPS as a homogenous group. Further, it bears emphasizing that to be critical does not preclude the ability to appreciate or to remain neutral in one's response. In making reference to "scholar critics," I am specifically directing focus to the critics whose published views of BAPS clearly illustrate my argument, namely, that to subscribe to a discrete concept of religion results in the support of binaries, such as religion versus other categories (for example, modernity and secularism) that ultimately occlude a more nuanced understanding of a community.

7. Works helpful to developing this argument include Abeysekara (2008); Asad (1993, 1999, 2003); Fitzgerald (2007a,b); Mahmood (2005); McCutcheon (1997); Smith (1991).

8. See Sugirtharajah (2003) for an extended exploration of the connections between overseas Hindu communities, Hindutva groups, and the valorization of a "textualised" Hinduism.

9. It need not be overly elaborated here that the assumed isomorphism between culture and place and correspondingly between religious communities and space must be problematized (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997). Furthermore, the BAPS community is not the only socially conservative Hindu community to be framed within the discourse on Hindu fundamentalism or Hindutva. See Reddy (2006) for a critique of the assumptions underlying the charges of fundamentalism and religious nationalism. Reddy provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted reasons why Hindus choose to identify with, or in other ways support, Hindu ideologies, or what Reddy terms "Hindu ethnicism."

10. See Kim (forthcoming) for an analysis of BAPS Swaminarayan criticism and its relationship to the categories of religion and secularism and secular liberal conceptions of personhood and religious subjectivity.

11. See Asad (1993); Fitzgerald (2007a,b); Masuzawa (2005); McCutcheon (1997); Smith (1991) for critiques of the category "religion" from different disciplinary perspectives. See Balagangadhara (1994); King (1999); Pennington (2005) for critical assessments of the relationship between Hinduism and "religion."

12. See Calhoun 1992; Hayden 2003; Hirschkind 2006; Warner 2002. I thank Deepa Reddy for alerting me to the work of scholars such as Hayden (2003) who address the intertwined relationships between scientists and their publics, each with

its myriad communities, conflicting aims, and desires.

13. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the inaugural meeting of the research network, “The Public Representation of a Religion called Hinduism: Postcolonial Patterns in India, Britain and the US,” in Manchester, England, 2008. A special thanks to John Zavos for his invitation to participate in this exceptionally rewarding event. Sincere thanks, too, to the network’s steering committee, network participants, and members of the audience for their thoughtful questions and comments.

14. Publics are clearly as differentiated as the discourses that constitute them. In referring to a “Swaminarayan publics,” I am not positing a reified or homogenous conception of the followers, strangers, outsiders, critics, or admirers who constitute the public sphere. However, publics, insofar as they are constituted of pre-existing and circulating discourses, can be conceived as a coherent entity, albeit a constantly shifting and contingent one. For further readings of the publics, see Calhoun (1992); Coombe (1998); Habermas (1989).

15. Though beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to trace in what ways “public” and “private” are useful for analyzing communities whose histories and cultures are removed from the intellectual and material foundations of these concepts. Following Habermas, eighteenth-century bourgeois society and its changing relationship to state authority and the church engenders the ideas of public and private spheres and their interventions in structures of political authority. See Hirschkind (2006) for an insightful inquiry into a “counterpublics” that is not motivated by oppositional claims to dominant bourgeois discourses.

16. The ethnographic observations and data for this paper come from my long-term, continuous, and multi-sited fieldwork with the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, dating to 1991. Among the sites of my research are Swaminarayan temples, events, festivals, and devotees’ homes in the US, Canada, UK, and India (Ahmedabad, Mumbai, and New Delhi). In India and the US, more recent participant-observation fieldwork was conducted in 2005 and 2007 during festivals, celebrations of significant Swaminarayan dates, and temple inaugurations. I owe sincere thanks to the BAPS Swaminarayan devotees and lay leaders who have always welcomed my questions and intrusions in person, over the telephone, and through the internet and who have thereby contributed to the collaborative quality of my fieldwork. I also extend my gratitude to the male ascetics who, through male intermediaries, provided extensive commentary and critique to this paper at an earlier stage. All errors and interpretations remain my own.

17. The division of Swaminarayan temple building into these two phases (1907–51 and 1995–present) is intended to highlight certain issues and contrasts. Carved stone temples were built outside of Gujarat from 1951–94. As will be discussed, 1995 marks the point from which Swaminarayan carved temples are inaugurated in Great Britain and North America.

18. See Asad (1993); Balangadhara (1994); Fitzgerald (2007a,b); McCutcheon (1997) for critiques of religion as a universal category.

19. This is not to imply that the *mandir* is intentionally designed to separate the publics from the personal or private. Rather, as will be shown, one of the accommodations to “religion” made by the Swaminarayan community and reflected in its *mandir* design, is its willingness to acknowledge the assumptions of its publics in the matter of “religion.”

20. References hereafter, to the “West” are intended as shorthand for the US, Canada, and the UK, all areas where currently the highest numbers of BAPS followers outside of India have settled. The use of “West” is not intended to reify geography to a single ideology or to reduce the “West” into a homogenous history or culture.

21. For penetrating analyses of how religion as a category is interpreted in different legal and cultural contexts and the social consequences thereof, see Beaman (2008); Jacobsohn (2005); Sullivan (2007, 2009); for ethnographic analyses of religious experience from within the globalized category of religion, see Coleman (2000); Engelke (2007); Robbins (2004); and for innovative theorizing about religion and its epistemic ramifications, see Abeysekara (2008); Cannell (2006); Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1997); Viswanathan (1998).

22. For plural forms of Gujarati or Hindi words, I follow the convention of Gujarati speakers in BAPS to add the English “s” or “es” to the end of singular forms. Hence, singular, *satsangi*, plural, *satsangis*. One exception to this common practice is for the plural of *sant* (singular), or male ascetic. While *sants* (plural) is used by speakers, more often one can hear *santos*, that is the addition of the English “s” to the Gujarati plural *santo*. In this paper, instead of *santos*, an admittedly informal usage, I use *sadhus*, also meaning male ascetics, and a term preferred by several of my key informants.

23. The English translation of “Bhagwan” as “God” is explicitly reflective of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha usage and translation practice.

24. The original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* is still extant. See Williams (2001) for historical information on the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* and its present-day organization and leadership structure.

25. The only exceptions to this are the temples where the main *mandir* sanctum contains three *murtis*, that of Bhagwan, Guru and Gopalanand Swami, who is the representative *murti* for *muktas* or *jivas* forever released from rebirth.

26. In BAPS, Guru is referred to in many ways, including “Satpurush” and “Gunatit Satpurush” as well as more familiar and affectionate terms such as “Bapa” or “Swami Bapa.”

27. See Kim (2007, 2008) for further description of BAPS ontological objectives and their relationship to Swaminarayan *bhakti*.

28. Schreiner (2003), from his close analysis of an important Swaminarayan text, the *Satsangijivanam*, written by Shatanandamuni during the lifetime of Sahajanand Swami, argues that Sahajanand Swami intentionally constructed *mandirs* as part of a strategy to ensure the continuation of the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*.

29. In the Gujarat region of India, early opponents of the Swaminarayan *sampra-*

*daya* included Pushtimarg followers, Shaivite devotees, various *shakti* and tantric *panths*, and other more loosely defined communities. See Mallison (2000).

30. Of the six original Swaminarayan temples, the *mandir* in Bhuj was destroyed in the 2001 Kutch earthquake.

31. This information on *murtis* was provided through personal communication with BAPS *sadhus*, through a male intermediary, July 2, 2008.

32. Personal communication, February 26, 2007, from BAPS *sadhus*, through a male intermediary. The *sadhus* point out that Swaminarayan texts have recorded the ambivalence of early Swaminarayan *sadhus* who embraced Sahajanand Swami as Bhagwan Swaminarayan, but who felt that public opposition to this knowledge was too great for it to be affirmed in temple *murtis*. These texts include Nishkulanand Swami, *Bhaktachintamani* (2005) and Dave, *Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan Brhad Jivancharitra* (2004).

33. For BAPS devotees, the older Swaminarayan Temple in Vartal is considered to house the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the form and name of “Harikrishna Maharaj.” BAPS *sadhus*, in correspondence sent through a male intermediary (March 3, 2009), point out that the *murti* of Harikrishna Maharaj was made to have the “same height and other dimensions” of Sahajanand Swami. The texts documenting this include *Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan Brhad Jivancharitra* (Dave 2004), *Harililamrt* (Acharya Viharilalji Maharaj 1997), and *Bhaktachintamani* (Nishkulanand Swami 2005).

34. Among the notable supporters cited in BAPS and original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* texts are rulers of several princely states such as the Gaekwad of Baroda and the ruler of Gondal. Shastri Maharaj also met Mahatma Gandhi during the Dandi March in 1930. According to BAPS accounts, Gandhi knew of Shastri Maharaj’s activities and had requested the latter’s blessings for the success of his mission.

35. I thank BAPS *sadhus* who, through a male intermediary, pointed out the Gujarati texts in which the challenges and successes of Shastri Maharaj’s early temple building are recorded. These include *Likhtan Shastri Yajnapurushdas* (Sadhu Vivekpriyadas 2007), *Shastri Maharaj Jivan Charitra* (Dave 1998), and *Yajnapurush Smrti* (1965).

36. Learned devotees and *sadhus* will point to, for example, *Vachanamrut*.

37. These accounts can be found in the above-mentioned Gujarati texts (see note 35), as well as English publications that recount the life of Shastri Maharaj (see Dave 1998).

38. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for reminding me of this important fact.

39. See Wood (2009) whose comparative research on food offerings in Hindu temples reveals tensions between UK Hindu groups. Some groups express concern that their festival and temple events (such as Diwali and *annakut*) are overlooked by the media and others in favor of BAPS versions that are not perceived by these groups to be correctly representative.

40. BAPS had previously organized two one-month long events called the

“Cultural Festival of India,” in London, UK (1985) and in New Jersey, US (1991). The festivals were criticized by some visitors and scholars for portraying Hinduism in a sectarian and yet universalizing manner (see Shukla 1997, 2003). Particularly since the 1991 festival, BAPS has been determined to mitigate some of the ways in which it has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. This process, however, is one of constant evolution and illustrates the willingness and ability of BAPS leaders and followers to accommodate its publics, critical scholars included.

41. The British Tourist Authority selected an image of the Neasden-London Swaminarayan Temple for its “Visit England” marketing campaign. See <http://www.swaminarayan.org/news/uk/2004/01/enjoyengland/index.htm> (accessed December 20, 2008).

42. This does not imply that all Swaminarayan followers are disinterested in Hindu nationalist organizations. Several senior BAPS leaders willingly shared the thought that there are quite possibly Swaminarayan devotees who are sympathetic to Sangh Parivar organizations and groups but that this was not endorsed or encouraged by BAPS leaders, *sadhus*, or Guru.

43. Conversation with a British *satsangi* in her home in northwest London, July 12, 2008. The Gangotri affair concerned a cow cared for by The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals euthanized Gangotri against the wishes of ISKCON, and this catalyzed public protest from many Hindu groups and organizations.

44. In conversations with South Asians in the diaspora who are Hindu and non-Hindu and with scholars of South Asia, I have heard a range of opinions about BAPS. They span tempered concerns over BAPS’s possible relationship to Hindu nationalist organizations with admiration of their charitable and immigrant good works, to criticisms about the community’s social conservatism, motivations for charitable work, and alleged cooperation with Hindu fundamentalists in Gujarat and the diaspora. For published critiques, see Bhatt (2000); Mukta (2000); Nussbaum (2007); Shukla (1997, 2003); Simpson (2008).

45. Spoken on the occasion of the Bhavnagar *murti pratishtha* (Swaminarayan Bliss 2006: 9).

46. The connection between Swaminarayan *upasana*, volunteered work (*seva*), and *mandir* building is dealt with at length elsewhere (see Kim 2007, 2008).

47. There are also Exhibition halls in the Swaminarayan Akshardham complexes in Gandhinagar and New Delhi. These contain similar themes to temple Exhibitions in the diaspora but with less emphasis on explicating Hinduism as a religion and grander and larger focus on the legacies of Hindu culture and civilization. See Srivastava’s (2009) analysis of the New Delhi Akshardham Exhibition in terms of aspiring middle-class patterns of “surplus” and “moral consumption.”

48. See, for example, <http://houston.baps.org/Exhibition.html> (accessed June 19, 2009).

49. All citations are from the “Understanding Hinduism” Exhibition in the Neasden (London) BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir and the Toronto (Canada)

*mandir* Exhibition whose formal name is, “Canadian Museum of Cultural Heritage of Indo-Canadians.”

50. From a panel in the Canadian Museum of Cultural Heritage of Indo-Canadians in the BAPS Sri Swaminarayan Mandir, Toronto, Canada.

51. From fieldwork on May 25, 2008, Toronto, Canada.

52. Consider, for example, the popularity of Hindu Summer Camps modeled along the lines of summer camps organized by the much longer-standing Jewish organizations in the US (see Neela Banerjee, “Camp Joins Summer Fun with Teaching Hindu Faith,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2007, section A).

53. Conversation with A. Masi, Ahmedabad, December 16, 2007.

54. Correspondence from BAPS *sadhus*, through a male intermediary, January 24, 2008.

55. Conversation with philosophy graduate, New Jersey, US, November 19, 2008.

56. Conversation in Edison Swaminarayan *mandir*, New Jersey, US, November 20, 2004.

57. Correspondence from BAPS *sadhus*, through a male intermediary, January 24, 2008.

58. Conversation outside of Shahibaug Swaminarayan *mandir*, Ahmedabad, December 18, 2007.

59. See Fitzgerald (2007a,b) and Sullivan (2007, 2009) for excellent accounts of how discourses on religion are monitored and controlled, by whom and to what end. For background on discourses on religion, see Asad (1993, 1999); Balagangadhara (1994); McCutcheon (1997).

60. To follow Balagangadhara, the secular world is nearly synonymous with the “de-Christianized religious world” (1994: 500). Neither “religion” nor Christianity can be maintained in perpetuity, in Balagangadhara’s argument, without the process of secularism to ensure its continuing, never-quite-attainable but always to-be-strived-for mission. See Abeysekera (2008) for a bracing Jacques Derrida-inspired examination of religion-secular discourses.

61. Conversation overheard outside the doors of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Toronto, May 25, 2008.

62. See especially Schreiner (2003) whose analyses of early Swaminarayan texts demonstrate that the original Swaminarayan *sampradaya* was very much invested in the textualization of its teachings. In other words, the Swaminarayan historical relationship with texts much predates the rise of Hindutva ideology.

63. See Purohit (2007) and Schreiner (1999) for analyses of early Swaminarayan texts and their kinship with pre-existing materials. Purohit draws connections between the Imamshahi *satpanthi ginan* poetry of nineteenth century and a core Swaminarayan text, the *Shikshapatri*; Schreiner compares the language of the *Bhagavatpurana* with the *Satsangijivanam*, another early Swaminarayan text.

64. It is the ability and willingness of the nineteenth-century Swaminarayan leaders to interact with the colonial administration and its emissaries that has sustained outsider suspicion towards and criticism of the Swaminarayan community.

65. Correspondence from BAPS *sadhus*, through a male intermediary, January 24, 2008.

66. Conversation with Shri Jyotindra Dave at Shahibaug Swaminarayan *mandir*, Ahmedabad, December 19, 2007.

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