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# Transnational Movements: Portable Religion and the Case Study of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha

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# Hinduism in the Modern World

Edited by Brian A. Hatcher

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**Graham Stuart Hatcher**  
**1923–2014**  
*Per ardua ad astra*

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### 3 Transnational Movements

*Hanna H. Kim*

In a modest room at the Swaminarayan temple guesthouse, there were suitcases everywhere, on the floor, in between and around the two single beds, and in the adjacent outside bathroom area with its built-in clothes lines. These suitcases belonged to members of an extended family whose stop in Ahmedabad, Gujarat was the last one following their pilgrimage to BAPS Swaminarayan temples in New Delhi and Gujarat. In the closet along one wall of the room, there were even more suitcases amongst the clothes waiting to be packed. Also in one corner of the closet, piled on top of a suitcase lying flat, was an oddly charming heap of stainless steel pressure cookers. As it turned out, these were not new purchases, destined for stovetops far away from India. Rather, these used cookers had made the journey in suitcases from Australia, Britain, and Zanzibar, and were soon to be brought to the pressure cooker manufacturer's shop in Ahmedabad. Here the old cookers could be exchanged for a discount on a brand new model with its yet unstretched rubber gasket and shiny pressure regulator.

The journey of these cookers traveling via airplane to Gujarat and their replacements making a reverse trip back to their owners' home countries offers an accessible image for the ease of global travel and the circulation of goods across national boundaries. Behind the scenes, as it were, of these traveling pots is a much more complex story of Swaminarayan devotees and their relationship to a transnational Hindu movement known formally as Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). BAPS has, in just over a century, evolved from a regional devotional community into a globalizing religious movement with a highly organized institutional infrastructure to connect its members to the center of its administrative and religious leadership in Gujarat. The Swaminarayan devotees who were transporting the pressure cookers embody a story of devotional motivations and individual desires that contribute to the shape of transnational Hinduism today. Who are these Gujarati Hindu travelers and devotees from multiple nations; what connects them to India despite lives mostly lived elsewhere; and, what is the relationship between these devotees and Swaminarayan teachings and devotional practices?



This chapter is an introduction to modern Hindu transnational religious movements, with a particular focus on the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha as a case study. If we understand transnationalism ‘as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,’ then many Hindu communities can be considered to be transnational movements by virtue of the organized networks that connect them to the geographic locus, institutional center, and historical sources of their tradition (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc 1994: 7). Additionally, the concept of transnationalism calls attention to the construction of relational ties between ‘people, goods, information, and other resources across national boundaries’; in the context of global mobility, it thus raises questions about how these flows and relations are generated and sustained over space and time (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008: 211). A transnational religious movement, such as the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, is made up of followers who live in multiple countries and continents, including India.<sup>1</sup>

For their daily devotional practices and individual efforts to achieve a certain ideal of living as a Swaminarayan devotee, BAPS followers are not dependent on knowing about or even visiting India. This raises an important question: How is the leadership of BAPS able to ensure that its devotional teachings and practices can be circulated and realized throughout communities spread across the globe? Put differently, how is it possible that followers of a movement like BAPS—which possesses a strong historical, institutional, and ideological base in India—are able to pursue meaningful religious lives in places where Hindus are often a minority community? Needless to say, these are questions that could be asked of all transnational religious movements.

As noted in the Introduction, Hindus began traveling and settling outside the South Asia subcontinent long before the emergence of the modern nation-state; thus one might say Hinduism was ‘trans-local’ long before it was ‘transnational.’ While this observation is historically accurate, thanks to more rapid, fluid, and cost-effective modes of capital transfer, travel, and media communication, today’s transnational movements have developed more innovative ways to support and sustain their constituencies across territorial distances. Many contemporary Hindu transnational movements may be broadly described as devotional, or *bhakti*, movements; often they look for leadership to a single figure, typically regarded as *guru*, or religious teacher. The guru is the leader of the devotional community, or *satsang* and devotees are known as *satsangis*. The *satsangis*’ various acts of devotion to the guru constitute the core relationship in many Hindu transnational movements. Many, but not all, gurus travel extensively, visiting the transnational communities of their followers. Some gurus are comfortable with English and others speak only their mother tongue and regional languages. Most of these transnational movements embrace print media and new technologies for the dissemination of their movement’s teachings. Increasingly, many transnational movements are active in humanitarian causes, including the creation of educational, medical,

and social service institutions that serve a wider community both locally and internationally.

Some, though not all, transnational movements have inserted themselves into religious, nationalist, or political movements originating in India (Nanda 2009; Rajagopal 2000). It could also be argued that all transnational movements, when settling beyond India, have had to engage with the governmental, political, and religious discourses of their new homelands (Eisenlohr 2012; Zavos 2013). Thus, even though some movements profess an apolitical stance, transnational movements are *de facto* situated within discursive fields with which they must necessarily engage, not least in their new host countries. This means that transnational movements are not immune to the categories, assumptions, and misconceptions operating in the context of their new homes. Often, the encounter between transnational movements and dominant discourses about concepts such as religion or religious pluralism will be a key factor in shaping how a movement reconstitutes itself in a new territory (Kim 2009). And these encounters between religious communities and new kinds of 'public' do not merely affect the life of transnational communities outside of India; ideas emanating from a community in one national context can travel to another and then reverberate across a range of transnational networks. In this way, even those movements that arose in very particular contexts generate ideas and practices that may in turn become universalized, exported, and subsequently reinstitutionalized in complex new ways (Srinivas 2010).

Transnational movements arising out of India have become visible owing to what are often savvy programs for public relations, to their skillful use of media technologies, and their ability to develop strategies for engaging with religious publics who are no longer residents of one region of India but members of communities now spread across many nations. This sophistication in reaching out to various audiences is not, however, achieved at the expense of the consolidation and effective transmission of their own devotional teachings and practices. In this respect, transnational movements provide an interesting area of modern Hinduism for us to closely examine how religious teachings become portable in different cultural and national contexts. It is well worth asking the question: What accounts for the appeal of these guru-led movements? Do our answers to this question tell us something about the expression of religious identity in the modern era? And can we at the same time come to understand something about religion in general as the human effort to live and find meaning in the world?

This chapter provides a sketch of one important transnational movement, the BAPS Swaminarayan community, drawing upon a range of ethnographic data. The chapter has two goals. First, to consider how BAPS maximizes the channels of global movement, most notably in technologies, travel, and communications, in its efforts to disseminate knowledge about Swaminarayan ways of being; second, to demonstrate how BAPS fosters the kinds of relationships and networks that—from the Swaminarayan perspective—are necessary for attaining the devotional goals and purposes of being a Swaminarayan Hindu.

The picture of transnational Hinduism that emerges from this exercise is one that stresses both the desire of Swaminarayan devotees to attain a particular kind of devotional knowledge and the challenge faced by the movement in translating this particular desire into a more universal language framed in terms of the modern concept of 'religion.' The chapter will conclude by reflecting on how the success of such a transnational movement is tied to the needs of devotees and the almost perennial human search to find satisfaction in one's life. In this search, devotees often turn to the teachings of a specific guru and find in the guru's teachings the inspiration to lead an ethical life. Despite the unpredictability of life in a global world order predicated on neoliberalism and pervasive strands of secularism and skepticism about religion, such devotees are able to experience what Jane Bennett (2001) artfully terms, 'the enchantment of modern life.'

### Flows, from Local to Transnational

'We are nomads,' said the 'Uncle' in the Swaminarayan guesthouse room as he saw me staring at the pressure cookers in the open closet. He added: 'We live in four places and we keep things in all four places.' The cookers belonged to his wife and her three sisters, all of whom had come from different Commonwealth countries and converged together in July 2014 in India. The main reason for the reunion was to visit BAPS Swaminarayan temples, beginning with the new and immensely popular New Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham temple complex, followed by a pilgrimage to the five historic temples constructed under the guru, Shastriji Maharaj, the founder of the BAPS.

For followers of BAPS, Shastriji Maharaj (1865–1951) holds the double distinction of establishing the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha and of being the third guru in the nonhereditary BAPS guru lineage. When he inaugurated the first BAPS temple (*mandir*) in 1907 in the central Gujarati village of Bochasan, the structure was incomplete due to a shortage of funds. Nevertheless, Shastriji Maharaj ritually installed two icons (*murtis*) of Akshar and Purushottam, respectively. For devotees, these represent the images of the ideal *sadhu* or guru (in whom God is fully present) and God himself. This moment marks the formal beginning of BAPS and, correspondingly, it signals the distinction between the 'breakaway' BAPS *satsang*, or community, and the 'original' Swaminarayan community, which dates back to 1801, having been established by Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830) in the region of Gujarat in western India.

It is important to note these dates and names because they help us situate the Swaminarayan Hindu tradition historically within colonial India. Sahajanand Swami, originally from north India, came to Gujarat as a wandering holy man. In Gujarat, he began teaching his new doctrine and took up projects of social reform. He was recognized early on by the British colonial administration as both a religious leader and notable social reformer. For BAPS devotees, or *satsangis*, Sahajanand Swami is the physical manifestation of God, also

known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who had temporarily come to Gujarat and whose presence on earth remains in the physical and always male form of the living guru. As a result, BAPS has a lineage of gurus (*guru parampara*) dating to Sahajanand Swami's time and it is the present guru in whom the power and divinity of God resides. This relationship between guru and Bhagwan is personified in the two icons of Akshar and Purushottam installed in the central shrine of all BAPS temples. Shastriji Maharaj, as the founder of BAPS, is revered by BAPS devotees as the third guru in the lineage of Akshar gurus; his tenure as guru was followed by Yogiji Maharaj (1892–1971), while the present BAPS guru is Pramukh Swami Maharaj (b. 1921).

An empirical mapping and enumeration of the growth of BAPS, beginning from 1907, would show that this community began as a small, financially pressed, and localized Gujarat-based group. Shastriji Maharaj, as BAPS history recounts, expended tremendous energy to ensure the survival of the new devotional community he founded. Under the guidance of the next guru, Yogiji Maharaj, there was a direct effort to reach those Gujaratis who by this time—owing to colonial labor migration—were living in East Africa. Through his visits to East Africa, Yogiji Maharaj nurtured a growing community of East African devotees. He was particularly noted for encouraging youth participation, and among his BAPS legacies are age-grade temple groups, regularized weekly meetings for *satsangis* at BAPS temples and centers, and the institutionalization of examinations for the testing of *satsang* knowledge. Yogiji Maharaj also built up the BAPS institution of *sadhus*, or male monks, who, in the service they gave to the Sanstha, were to play an enormous role in its growth. The various activities of BAPS, along with the guru's teachings and travels were recorded and distributed in publications printed by the Swaminarayan Aksharpath press, which also published the central BAPS devotional texts, histories, and hagiographies. All of these items traveled to wherever *satsangis* lived; they brought not just news of guru's latest activities, but a tangible feel and aroma of India, from the texture of the paper to its particular smell.

### Circulations

During the late 1960s and into the '70s there was a large-scale, second migration of Indians from East Africa to Britain and other Commonwealth countries. The BAPS leadership, including guru and *sadhus*, undertook the requisite travel to support the development of communities in these new contexts. This pattern of guru traveling outside of India would be significantly increased under the leadership of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who succeeded Yogiji Maharaj in 1971. Indeed, it might be said that under the leadership of Pramukh Swami, BAPS has fully emerged as a transnational movement. He was the first BAPS guru to travel to the United States where people of Indian origin had begun to immigrate after 1965 thanks to changes in official immigration policy. Pramukh Swami is credited by devotees for having nurtured the thriving American *satsang* from a small handful of *satsangis* into a North American community with temples and centers in many states.

Today, BAPS boasts one million devotees. They are nearly all Gujarati and the majority live in India, but significant communities exist in North America, Europe, parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. With this global expansion, BAPS is ever more dependent on a rationalized organizational structure in order to reach its worldwide members and sustain its devotional tradition. The order of *sadhus*, as of October 2014, numbers 970 men and Pramukh Swami, at nearly 94 years of age, remains at the apex of BAPS administration—even if there are senior *sadhus* initiated under Yogiji Maharaj who oversee the management of *satsangis*, temples, and the larger BAPS temple complexes known as Akshardham.

For BAPS devotees, Pramukh Swami is the physical form in which Bhagwan Swaminarayan is fully present. As a celibate without any possessions or attachments to worldly things, the guru is the visible locus for Swaminarayan devotional practice. Devotees see no contradiction that their guru, who has no interest in matters of money and handles no money himself, has consistently endorsed the incorporation of the latest technologies in the dissemination of BAPS teachings, including the use of social media, the internet, and technologies for multimedia and filmmaking. As devotees point out, Pramukh Swami's willingness to support forms of social media and modern entertainment (such as the IMAX theaters found in some Akshardham complexes) is specifically tied to his devotional objective to ensure the widest possible reach for the transmission of BAPS bhakti. Alongside his approval of technologies to sustain his global following, Pramukh Swami has focused on temple construction as a central means to inspire devotees, current and potential, in their commitment to Swaminarayan teachings. These temples, ranging from repurposed buildings to edifices of entirely carved stone to the striking Akshardham temple complexes, are obvious signs of a devotional community with the resources to acquire land and build. These temples also provide something like a material testament to BAPS's skills at negotiating its new publics and the complex bureaucracy—legal, political, regional, and national—that temple construction entails (Kim 2009).

At the one hundred year anniversary celebration of BAPS held in Ahmedabad in 2007, Pramukh Swami was awarded a Guinness World Record for inaugurating the largest number of Hindu temples by a single individual. This award was presented along with the Guinness World Record for constructing the 'world's largest comprehensive Hindu temple,' in reference to the New Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham temple complex (see Image 3.1). Images of the guru, with his simple ochre cloth wrapping and matching head covering, holding one side of the framed Guinness certificate, were broadcast around the world via satellite television. Not more than a day later, those who had missed the satellite feed could relive the movement through the internet, via the BAPS website. Throughout the transnational Swaminarayan community, the circulation of the images of Pramukh Swami during anniversary celebration days was meticulously recorded and shared via various technologies. Despite the tens of thousands *satsangis*, the elaborate stage settings, and the use of technology to broadcast the nightly events across a massive outdoor field,

Pramukh Swami appeared to have a singular focus: To convey the importance of knowing that through offering devotion to guru and God, devotees come to understand the relationship of their eternal self to God, Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Only then are they able to realize the possibility of serving God eternally.

The message of Pramukh Swami—conveyed with his unadorned style of self-presentation, even amid the most grandiose of settings—has inspired *satsangis* to dedicate innumerable hours of service, or *seva*, for the growth and support of BAPS activities. The offering of volunteered service is a significant means by which *satsangis* seek to cultivate a deeper understanding of their relationship to guru and to Bhagwan Swaminarayan. This service is not performed to allay a devotee's sense of debt to Pramukh Swami, but to support the devotee's desire to understand the self as separate from the biological and somatic being. Acquiring this knowledge of an eternal self, distinct from the sensory being that eventually disintegrates, is hard work. According to BAPS teachings, it is the guru who is the perfect devotee and the one who gives the guidance and inspiration for offering continuous service to God. The Swaminarayan guru is thus the model for an ontological ideal, a state of being whose devotional postures and gestures are those that devotees strive to emulate. To achieve the knowledge that one's *atma* is separate makes possible the attainment of a state of being, *atmarup*, without which devotees cannot offer continuous devotion to God (Kim 2013).

In this trajectory from desire to ontological goal, there is a direct connection between the Swaminarayan understanding of eternal self and its relationship to



Figure 3.1 Akshardham complex, New Delhi

guru and God. When the massive Akshardham temple complexes were inaugurated by Pramukh Swami, his message was typically simple and direct; he encouraged devotees to offer devotion and service to God and to inspire others to do the same. The construction of the Akshardham complex, though impressive by any number of measures, is, according to Pramukh Swami, part of a singular objective to foster the conditions for offering devotion to God by whose side devotees hope to gain a permanent position in eternity. Thus, we can see that there are highly specific ontological goals for the Swaminarayan devotee. However, for those who are not necessarily focused on these same goals, there is nevertheless the physical reality of the Swaminarayan temple. These temples, with their lush carvings and inspiring towers, exert a larger-than-life kind of magnetism over visitors and devotees alike. The moment of encounter that occurs between either a committed seeker or a casual visitor might well be understood as a crucial point of departure for interest in BAPS.

From the *satsangis*' perspective, the hundreds of Swaminarayan temples and centers for *satsang* throughout the world are predicated on a specific Swaminarayan devotional teaching that guru is 'the bridge that connects man with the Divine' (Brahmaviharidas 2004). For devotees, there is a wish to serve the 'Divine,' that is, Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Yet, this can only occur by learning from and emulating the guru and by trying to reshape the subjective being into a physical being who, like the guru, can become fully immersed in the joyful service of God. This relational connection between *satsangis*, guru, and God is the central engine of Swaminarayan transnational growth, of its temple building projects, its publications, and humanitarian services. As a technology of the self—a means by which to shape one's being into a desired conception of the self—the act of performing *seva* to guru is what underwrites the expansion of BAPS bhakti throughout the world.

### Necessary Relationships

Darshan, for many Hindus, is the very individual devotional act of seeing and, in return, being seen by a divine entity who is accessible in some iconic form (*murti*). The *murti* may be made of paper, stone, or metal and be physically located somewhere such as at home, or in a temple, or even mediated by the internet. In fact, according to devotees, the BAPS website provides a highly appreciated means for 'doing darshan' in any number of settings—wherever an internet connection is available. The action of 'doing darshan of guru and Bhagwan Swaminarayan' sustains a cognitive and emotional relationship between devotees and their guru and God without which the *satsangis* cannot attain the devotional knowledge they desire. Thus, *satsangis*, no matter where they live, seek ways to maximize their darshan. The actual portability of BAPS bhakti is, one might argue, made possible by the ritual practice of darshan that does not require the devotee to be in the actual physical presence of guru. Rather, darshan supports a conscious orientation of *satsangis* toward looking, remembering, and thinking about guru and God while gazing directly into the eyes of these *murtis*.

For the North American BAPS *satsang*, the weeks from 6–19 August 2014 represented an unprecedented fortnight of ‘unbelievable *darshan*.’ During this fortnight, Pramukh Swami traveled to Robbinsville, New Jersey, where he was scheduled to inaugurate an elaborately carved stone temple in an as-yet-unfinished Akshardham temple complex. Known as Mandir Mahotsav or ‘temple festival’ 2014, this event would celebrate the opening of the first carved-stone temple in the northeastern United States. Robbinsville additionally marked the location of the first fledgling BAPS community in the United States (Williams 2001). Pramukh Swami had performed the inauguration of carved-stone temples in Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and Toronto, but Robbinsville would be an historic occasion as it was some forty-five years after the beginning of the American *satsang* in 1970 in New York. Far off in Ahmedabad, I met *satsangis* who asked me whether I would be going to Robbinsville to see Pramukh Swami. Besides marveling at how a small town in New Jersey of 11,000 residents was now known to so many *satsangis* in Gujarat, I also wondered if these same devotees might not themselves travel to the United States for this occasion. But as my circle of interlocutors went on to tell me, by living in India, ‘we have much more opportunities to do *darshan* of Swamishri’ (i.e. Pramukh Swami).<sup>2</sup> As one *satsangi* confided, ‘let the Americans have a peaceful *darshan* without all of us coming from India!’<sup>3</sup>

On Wednesday, 5 August 2014, many hours before nightfall, *satsangis* who had just arrived in the United States from various locations around the world began preparing for the arrival of their guru. As the website, [www.baps.org](http://www.baps.org), reported, Pramukh Swami was en route from Gandhinagar in Gujarat. He would fly into Newark, New Jersey via a private aircraft that included onboard medical facilities to address his current treatment needs. As for those unable to be present in Robbinsville, the BAPS media and internet teams ensured that a steady stream of photographs and videos were placed on the BAPS website. Devotees could even sign up for text messages from the username ‘MM14’ (Mandir Mahotsav 2014); in tones of great excitement, these messages kept devotees updated regarding Pramukh Swami’s current location, his destination, the timing of his itinerary, as well as suggestions on where devotees should situate themselves in order to best see their guru.

According to BAPS, some ten thousand people had lined the pathways and open spaces of the Robbinsville temple site by the time Pramukh Swami arrived at 12:52 am on 6 August 2014. The video coverage on the BAPS website, expertly edited, produced, and uploaded, showed devotees with the palms of their hands held together and poised near their hearts, and their bodies craned in the direction of Pramukh Swami’s arrival. He appeared in a white multipurpose vehicle, altered to accommodate his wheelchair. The faces of the *satsangis*, all turned toward Pramukh Swami, glow with happiness. The official BAPS video and photographic coverage of this moment are riveting; they capture the intensity of the relationship that *satsangis* feel with their guru. For many of the young children, this was their first actual encounter with Pramukh Swami. For older devotees who had not traveled to India since their



guru's restricted his movements, this darshan was memorable for the sheer fact of its having happened at all. These days, at nearly ninety-four years of age, Pramukh Swami is largely confined to a wheelchair; he no longer speaks easily nor eats much. And, yet, as *satsangis* told me, such was their guru's desire to serve devotees that he readily ignored the discomforts of his body to share with them his divine blessings.

Throughout the two weeks of his stay, *satsangis* were keenly aware that their guru was present on the temple grounds. As a number of young Swaminarayan *satsangis* shared with me, the 'atmosphere was indescribable.' Referring to their guru in the reverential manner of address, 'Swamishri,' these young *satsangis* expressed their enormous happiness knowing that 'Swamishri has come for us,' and 'the darshan Swamishri gave us was just amazing.'<sup>4</sup> More than one person observed with awe that, despite being 'much older and unwell,' Pramukh Swami had made the 'selfless' decision to journey from Gujarat to New Jersey to share his grace. 'Doesn't he look so well?' one young woman asked me. And, an older man commented with hopefulness, 'Bapa [guru] looks so well here [in New Jersey] that maybe he will stay past the 19th [of August].'<sup>5</sup>

On the evening of 10 August 2014, the day that the Robbinsville Swaminarayan temple was inaugurated, sixteen sets of brides and grooms were married in a large outdoor tent that had earlier been used for viewing the inauguration rituals on large screens. As the wedding couples, elaborately dressed and surrounded by family and friends, paraded to their allotted areas in the designated tent, a male *satsangi* volunteer carrying a camera called out: 'Isn't it wonderful that during a time when many want to make the day all about themselves . . . it isn't about them but about receiving Swamishri's blessing?'<sup>6</sup> The shimmer of the gold and silver threads in the wedding finery and the sparkle of the brides' jewelry in the still-bright evening sun, along with the palpable air of family members' excitement and anticipation were perhaps surpassed by the even greater realization that Pramukh Swami was close by. Following the marriage rituals, the new husbands and wives would have the privilege of darshan of their guru. And their new lives, like the awakening of the murtis in the new temple just a few hours earlier, would begin in the same auspicious way, within the divine presence of guru and God.

### Portable Sociality

The presence of Gujaratis in different parts of the world is attributable to well-known patterns of postcolonial migration, the labor needs of established nations, and shifts in late twentieth century immigration laws in places like the United States. These political and economic shifts cannot of course explain why some Gujaratis have chosen to become devotees of BAPS. It is common among immigrant-oriented religious communities for new migrants to seek out the possibility of shared language, foods, customs, as well as the opportunity to discuss and learn from fellow immigrants, but this too cannot account for the particular nature of *satsangis* involvement in BAPS. We have

to think of these BAPS devotees as more than just immigrants who seek out Swaminarayan temples in hopes of finding a network for job hunting, a symbol of middle-class success, or tips on preparing Gujarati food in the diaspora. For devotees from all caste and class backgrounds, there is something more ontological, more connected to a conception of how to be in the world, that plays a motivating role in their commitment to 'being Swaminarayan.' Devotees yearn for a personal relationship with their guru, and *satsang* activities, rituals, and *seva* are connected to strengthening this desire. So too does the construction of temples and activity spaces, the circulation of guru and *sadhus*, and the vast publishing capacities of BAPS support the individual's cultivation of devotion to guru and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In other words, being in BAPS provides a structure for those who are trying to experience their lives, actions, and consequences of actions according to a different ontological scheme. In the process, of course, *satsangi* devotion also works to reshape not just personal, religious lives but notions of cosmopolitanism (Van der Veer 2004), global citizenship (Zavos 2013), and religious subjectivity.

The success of BAPS as a transnational movement is clearly attributable to numerous factors. We may think of some of these as being external to the movement's teachings and some as directly tied to it. Devotional ideals are not immune from global channels of migration, individual desires for economic stability, and the controls established by governments and states for the regulation of religious institutions. And yet to reduce Swaminarayan devotion or religious ontology to these material and ideological realities would be to say very little about why young men and women, raised in Gujarat or India, are attracted to the Swaminarayan Sanstha; it would not be sufficient to explain why they will go on to contribute to the transmission of BAPS teachings on to future generations. One American male *satsangi*, brought up near Chicago in the United States, said that his reason for choosing to become a Swaminarayan *sadhu* was motivated by the happiness he felt when he was 'doing things like bhakti and *seva*.'<sup>7</sup> This young man received admission into a competitive six-year medical program, but left after receiving an undergraduate degree in chemistry. 'Personally, my only goal as a *sadhu* is to live my life in such a way that it pleases Bapa [Pramukh Swami] and I can earn his blessings,' the *sadhu* shared. This *sadhu* is among numerous young men of Gujarati heritage who were raised in places like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and who have made a decision to dedicate their lives to serving guru, God, and BAPS. As another *sadhu* who grew up in the Washington, D.C. area said:

I was motivated by my guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj. I mean that Swami never asked me to become a *sadhu*. He never mentioned it, or hinted it to me. But, I mean he is such a good person, so humble, so kind, so gentle. And, I have always trusted him. . . . Seeing Swami motivated me to become a *sadhu*.<sup>8</sup>

One can trace the desires of these young men to become *sadhus* to a number of motivating factors, including the migration history of their family, their

identities as religious and ethnic minorities in the United States, changes in the political economy of postcolonial India, the legal and political language of religious pluralism, and more readily accessible modes of travel and communication. Even these factors, however, do not satisfactorily explain the relationships of trust, affection, and devotion that *sadhus* or lay followers have with their guru. For this, we must attend to the dimension of religious subjectivity, the experiencing of life through the lens of ‘being Swaminarayan.’ This is something that appears to be at least somewhat independent of other variables like economic status, nationality, or patterns of migration. Despite its obvious connections with Gujarat, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha is an example of a Hindu transnational movement that can ‘go global’ precisely because it is possible for present and future devotees to sustain meaningful relationships with their guru and leaders of the movement wherever they may reside.

For *sadhus* and lay followers who are refining their relationship to the guru and who intentionally seek ways to increase their knowledge about BAPS bhakti, theirs is an ethical posture that is explicitly connected to the question of ‘how do I live my life to help others so that I may gain knowledge about my own self, or *atma*?’ This deeply personal quest to ‘know one’s *atma*’ becomes an individual ethical project that ideally turns *satsangis* toward serving their guru; this in turn motivates service to others. The success of BAPS’s growth can be connected to the ethical project of devotees who, in pursuing their personal devotional goals, are reshaping themselves to be good neighbors and cosmopolitan citizens. This formula—where individual energies are directed toward a personal goal that in turn requires thinking beyond the self—is one that can be identified in other Hindu transnational movements, in which personal devotion supports an outward emphasis on social or humanitarian service (Van der Veer 2004).

It is interesting to consider that many of the more well-known transnational movements such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, Satya Sai Organization, and the Swadhyay Parivar all emphasize social service and volunteer work (*seva*), as the central means to achieving desired changes in the self and society. This dual focus on service as helping others and service as refining one’s ontological self may in fact be one aspect of modern Hindu movements that is distinctly portable. Tulasi Srinivas argues that the globalization potential of a particular religious movement is enhanced if there are ‘cultural forms’ in one location that can undergo ‘cultural translation’ into another location (Srinivas 2013: 238). This process does not occur automatically but passes through four phases. First, Srinivas suggests, a cultural form is intentionally selected for its potential translation and then ‘disembedded’; second, the dislodged cultural form is then ‘codified’ by a guru or religious leadership in an effort to translate it into more universalist terms; third, outfitted to travel, the codified form seeks an anchor site in some new location; and, fourth, once such a site is located, the cultural form can undergo ‘re-embedding and contextualization’ in the new location (Srinivas 2013: 238–243).

Srinivas's typology for cultural translation suggests that the success of a transnational movement may in some measure rest on the very practical consideration of just what ideas and practices can attain portability, since not all such forms may prove 'translatable' within different cultural contexts. Srinivas's focus on the Sathya Sai movement provides ample evidence that this transnational movement, reputedly one of the largest arising from India, owes its success to the flexibility it provides for the interpretation of its devotional ideals. This flexibility of meaning allows for what Srinivas terms a 'strategic ambiguity' where devotees have the agency to be active interpreters of their devotional practice (2013: 244). That the logics of devotees' praxis in one area may not match with the logics of devotees in another area is not itself troublesome to the overall devotional focus on attaining a Sai Baba understanding of the moral and virtuous devotional self.

The interpretive flexibility available in the Sathya Sai Baba movement is not obviously present in the Swaminarayan community. Such flexibility may in fact be less necessary within BAPS since *satsangis* share a distinctly Gujarati heritage compared to the extensive diasporic membership of the Sathya Sai movement. Nevertheless, BAPS, like other transnational movements, does face the challenge of engaging with publics outside of India that are not necessarily familiar with Hindu traditions. In these interactions—which range from bureaucratic negotiations around the acquisition of land for temple building and legal requirements for recognition as a 'religious' organization to the sheer building of trust among new communities—the leadership and members of BAPS have acquired significant knowledge about how to represent the movement. From the perspective of BAPS leaders, this active engagement with new publics who are unfamiliar with Swaminarayan Hinduism is a necessary feature of *satsangi* life wherever the community finds itself; it is a requirement to be met if devotion to guru and Bhagwan Swaminarayan are to continue in new contexts. As such, BAPS continues to seek out appealing and creative ways to present its vision of Hinduism and India, whether through cultural festivals, volunteer service, or large-scale public facilities like the Akshardham complexes, which are now so closely associated with the movement.

## Conclusion

Hindu transnational movements, by virtue of their migration from the global south to metropolitan centers in Europe and North America serve to challenge the idea that prestige, value, and desirable goods move only from the north to the south. Indeed, global movements such as BAPS compel a reexamination of the migratory networks of modern religions and their efflorescence outside of their homeland in a colonial and postcolonial context; in addition, such movements should lead us to consider how best to make sense of modern religious subjectivity without either clouding it in the abstractions of theology or reducing it to the play of material and economic forces. Tracing the histories and strategies of such movements as they endeavor to inhabit, adjust to, and

interact in new cultural and political spaces provides important opportunities to explore why and how modern devotees sustain their values and ideals across not just vast distances, but also across different discursive arenas, including political, legal, and sociological ones.

Do transnational movements contribute to religious pluralism or do they promote religious factionalism and the persistence of religion in an otherwise secular world? Does a religious community that evolves into a transnational community do so by accommodating a particular set of assumptions about what in fact constitutes a religion? When a regional religious movement becomes transnational, does it qualify to be labeled as a 'world religion'? The case of the BAPS, Swaminarayan Sanstha suggests that focusing on the relationships and forms of sociality or engagement that devotees have with their fellow *satsangis* and those outside of their tradition can lead to a more fine-tuned appreciation of why people join transnational movements and what they gain from this membership. Such a focus can also point to areas of stress and strain that inevitably appear when religious movements brush up against certain hegemonic projects, whether these are regional, national, or global. Once again, the Swaminarayan Sanstha has provided ample occasion for such reflection, since its regional roots in Gujarat are tied closely to the caste dynamics of western India while its success in contemporary India has (in the minds of some critics) been gained by forging comfortable alliances with the kinds of Hindu majoritarian projects we associate with Hindutva. Beyond India, one might well ask how the highly visible and clearly well-funded BAPS movement works to foster a particular vision of what it means to be Hindu.

*Satsangis* are aware of such critical questions and often take them very much to heart. Near the end of a long conversation in the Swaminarayan temple in Ahmedabad, a *satsangi* shared his bewilderment that BAPS's global presence and successful program of temple building might be interpreted as a sign of BAPS's intention to claim Hinduism as its own. Gaining control of his emotions, the *satsangi* said,

Our only purpose is to work constructively in society, to live a better life, to use our energy in constructive, creative directions. . . . I am so happy, so happy but I also want to serve others so that they can lead a better life. It is one thing to write books, another thing to come up with concrete solutions to inspire people to lead a better life. You can bloody write hundreds of books, but how do you inspire people to live?<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, this *satsangi*'s response is framed by the Swaminarayan vision of how to live a moral and religiously meaningful life; his commitment to living well individually is clearly joined with a desire to live well with others. As we have seen, this dual conception of service may be a central factor in the success of the BAPS movement. Like other transnational movements, it thrives in part because of its specific teachings about finding personal religious fulfillment wherever the devotee may live. It remains a compelling question to ask why

some are attracted to such a teaching while others are not. At the very least, the global vitality of modern Hindu movements suggests that they are social formations that can, at least for some, arrest the spread of the hypertrophic modern 'individual' in favor of an alternate religious subjectivity predicated on the sharing of spiritual wonderment as a higher personal and devotional priority.

### **Summary**

Modern Hindu movements are not necessarily dependent on proximity to an Indian place of origin or a founder's institutional locus in order to thrive. Transnational Hindu communities, in particular, are composed of members who are settled inside and outside of India and whose growth across national boundaries is mediated by communication technologies as well as the ease of global travel and different channels of migration. This chapter considers some of the factors that support a portable Hinduism. How does a Hindu movement 'go global' and how are religious teachings and practices circulated and supported among the transnational membership? And, in what ways does the minority status of Hindus and their religious traditions in places of settlement outside of India influence the ways in which transnational movements interact with their publics? To sketch some answers to this question, this chapter looks at one example of a transnational movement, the BAPS Swaminarayan community.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What makes transnationalism today different from the movements of peoples and ideas in the past?
2. What are some characteristics of a transnational religious movement or community?
3. Based on the ethnographic material in this chapter, describe some challenges that transnational Hindu movements can encounter that may not arise in the Indian context. What are some reasons for these challenges?
4. Consider your concept of a world religion. How does the globalization of Hinduism through transnational movements disrupt or support the concept of world religions?

### **Notes**

- 1 BAPS followers are especially oriented towards India and the western Indian state of Gujarat, since the latter is the historical center of their devotional tradition. In this sense, BAPS is itself a kind of diaspora; its members, while living in a transnational context, retain an attachment to Gujarat, the place of origin for the Swaminarayan Sanstha. In fact, most members of BAPS are Gujaratis. By contrast, one might note that there are other large Hindu transnational movements such as those centered on figures such as Mata Amritanandamayi Math or Sathya Sai Baba whose followers are both Indian and non-Indian.

- 2 Conversation in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, 30 July 2013.
- 3 Conversation in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, 13 July 2014.
- 4 Conversations in Robbinsville, New Jersey, 9–10 August 2014.
- 5 Conversations in Robbinsville, New Jersey, 9–10 August 2014.
- 6 Conversation in Robbinsville, New Jersey, 10 August 2014.
- 7 Conversation recorded, via a male intermediary, in Sarangpur, Gujarat, 21 July 2013.
- 8 Conversation recorded, via a male intermediary, in Sarangpur, Gujarat, 22 July 2013.
- 9 Conversation in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, 22 July 2014.

### Suggested Readings

Jacobsen, Knut A. and P. Pratap Kumar, eds. (2004). *South Asians in the Diaspora*. Leiden: The Netherlands: Brill.

Transnational religious movements are often connected to specific diaspora communities. This edited volume offers chapters on Hindu and other South Asian communities, including Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Muslim, Parsi, and Sikh diasporas, some of whom are part of transnational religious movements seeking ways to sustain their traditions and practices.

Richardson, E. Allen (2014). *Seeing Krishna in America: the Hindu Bhakti Tradition of Vallabhacharya in India and its Movement to the West*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.

The Pushtimarg followers in the Vallabha tradition are the focus of this highly accessible account that weaves history with an ethnography of Pushtimarg devotees in the United States. As its devotees strive to sustain their traditions in the United States, the author argues that Pushtimarg, in its American form, is evolving into an American religion.

Williamson, Lola (2010). *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*. New York: New University Press.

This engaging ethnography looks at the genealogical influence of Hindu gurus, concepts, and teachings on American meditation movements with a mostly non-Indian following. The author teases out the Christian and Hindu-inspired inflections in three meditation communities and shares insights into American practitioners' motivations for participation in these movements.

Zavos, John, P. Kanungo, D. Reddy, M. Warriar, and R. Williams, eds. (2012). *Public Hinduisms*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

Transnational Hinduism is constituted of leaders, devotees, and organizations aiming to adapt practices and teachings in the context of familiar and unfamiliar geographies, publics, and political contexts. This edited volume focuses on the myriad ways in which Hindu groups represent and become representations of a public Hinduism both within and beyond India.

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