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Edifice Complex': Swaminarayan Bodies and Buildings in the Diaspora

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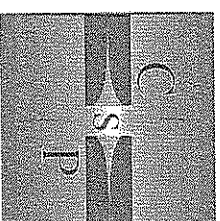
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**Gujaratis in the West:
Evolving Identities in Contemporary Society**

**

Edited by

Anjoom A. Mukadam and Sharmina Mawani



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Gujaratis in the West: Evolving Identities in Contemporary Society, Edited by Anjoom A. Mukadam
and Sharmna Mawani

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This book is dedicated to the first generation of Gujaratis, the pioneers, for their tolerance and resilience as they embraced change whilst keeping true to their cultural traditions. Their sacrifices and hard work have given their children a life very different from their own, one which is full of opportunities and potential.

Notes

¹ The Nizari Ismaili Muslim community will be referred to from this point on simply as Ismailis.

² The current owner is Ishwar Patel.

CHAPTER FOUR

“EDIFICE COMPLEX”¹: SWAMINARAYAN
BODIES AND BUILDINGS IN THE DIASPORA

HANNA H. KIM

Introduction

On the day of the Hindu New Year in 1875, the great Orientalist scholar Monier-Williams (1882) found himself at a Swaminarayan temple in Western India. He noted the ten thousand strong crowd, the solemn numbers of *sadhus* (male renunciates), and the general sense of order among the “disciples.” In an article published in the *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, Monier-Williams (*ibid.*, 316) wrote that the Swaminarayan movement, though unlike other Hindu sects he had observed, would nevertheless succumb to a predictable entropy:

As a reforming sect, the followers of Svami-Narayana will, in my opinion, increase and extend their influence for a time; but their system lacks the true vivifying regenerating force which can alone maintain it in vigour, and, like other Indian reformations and religious revivals, is, I fear, destined in the end to be drawn back into the all-absorbing vortex of corrupt Hinduism.

One hundred and thirty years later, during the first week following Diwali in November 2005, the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sansha inaugurated a large monument complex in New Delhi. Thousands of devotees came from around the world and, along with the President and Prime Minister of India, participated in the opening ceremonial event. This one hundred acre complex, known as “Akshardham,” is already printed on Delhi tourist maps as a destination to visit alongside the modern multi-level shopping malls and the ancient architectural sites, from Mughal tombs and forts to English colonial structures.

What was Monier-Williams alluding to when he observed that the Swaminarayan sect lacked the "true vivifying regenerating force?" The unexamined assumption in his observation is the juxtaposition of Hindu traditions with the dominant Christian religious institutions and practices of the West: Hinduism, when compared to Christianity, would be found wanting. For Monier-Williams and his contemporaries writing about non-Western traditions, their Western conception of religion formed the epistemological basis for their efforts to explain unfamiliar practices. What was observed elsewhere, in other words, was indexed and evaluated against a Christian conception of religion. From this perspective, religion is universal and present in some form in all cultures; however, all religions are not perceived to be equal to each other. Even if Monier-Williams had not subscribed to a universalising notion of religion, he most likely could not have predicted that the followers of the Swaminarayan community would travel beyond the boundaries of India and would establish their devotional practices throughout the West and elsewhere such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific. Further, he could not have foreseen that in migrating to the West, the contours of the Swaminarayan tradition would shift to accommodate Western notions of "what it means to be a religion" and that these shifts in turn would invigorate the tradition in its original homeland.

The Swaminarayan community is flourishing. I argue, owing to a carefully thought-out and evolving plan that is intended to insure its long-term survival. The trajectory of my argument rests on 1) the multiple significances of Swaminarayan edifices, specifically the temple or *mandir* and, more recently, the monument complex, or *smarak* complex; and, 2) the relationship between edifices and Swaminarayan ontological principles. The argument I "build" from this examination of Swaminarayan bodies and buildings is that the endurance of the Swaminarayan tradition rests on the imbrication of its devotional (or *bhakti*) traditions with the dominant discourses on "religion". More specifically, the Swaminarayan organisation, preoccupied with the needs of its followers both "home and away," is, at this historical moment, actively engaged with the assumptions and expectations of what constitutes a "religion" in the Western context. This concern however is not at the expense of Swaminarayan tenets or practices. Rather, a close examination of the Swaminarayan community today shows how the proliferation of Swaminarayan edifices in the diaspora cannot be understood without considering the meaningfulness of Swaminarayan devotional ideals and their ongoing interface with the dominant epistemological categories in their new places of settlement.

This chapter begins with the assumption that "religion" is a dominant epistemological category not just in the West but wherever this term has achieved common usage. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the mechanisms by which the category religion has attained its epistemic status,² it is well accepted that religion has not disappeared along with the processes of modernisation and secularisation. This seeming paradox hints at the possibility of religion being a category with the constitutive capacity to organise other discursive formations. For the Swaminarayan community and its leaders, the emphasis, particularly in the diaspora, on outlining the contour and content of Swaminarayan devotionalism has catalysed an ongoing initiative to clearly map out and explain this Hindu tradition in terms of the language of "religion". Furthermore, this project, while initially motivated by the specific concerns of the diaspora has engendered a dialogic and mutually constitutive relationship between the diaspora and its centre of organisation and leadership in Gujarat, India: what is happening in southern California or northern England is not ignored in India. Rather, concerns affecting the Swaminarayan diaspora are often incorporated by its leadership into a worldwide programme thereby influencing the shape of Swaminarayan devotionalism both within and beyond India.

Swaminarayan temples and monument complexes, in other words, can be approached and understood not simply as responses to diasporic longings and immigrant needs or as concrete representations of an influential organisation: they are also a means by which to be recognised as a "religion" in the West. Additionally, the creation of Swaminarayan edifices is intimately connected to Swaminarayan ontological and devotional ideals. The temples sustain devotees as well as attract new followers and they are an accessible arena where devotees can engage with and cultivate Swaminarayan devotionalism. As the Swaminarayan sect becomes more adept in its efforts to participate in the discourse on religion, it is also becoming a distinctive Hindu addition to the landscape of world religions. And, given the speed and ease by which ideas borne in one part of the world are connected to ideas elsewhere, the reification of a transnational Swaminarayan religion is already under way.

This transformation, from a Gujarat-specific devotional movement into a transnational Hindu religion, is something that even Monier-Williams might have acknowledged as embodying a regenerative power. This chapter aims to show that this process is neither accidental nor entirely intentional but the outcome of an epistemological encounter between Swaminarayan devotionalism and the concept of religion.

The Swaminarayan Community

There are several contemporary Swaminarayan sects and they all connect themselves to the same early nineteenth century founder, Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830 CE), who established the first Swaminarayan community in present-day Gujarat State in Western India. In this chapter, all references to the "Swaminarayan community" correspond only to the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha ("BAPS" or "Swaminarayan Sanstha"), the fastest growing and most visible of Swaminarayan sects.³ Dating back to 1907, BAPS came into existence when a sadhu from the first, or original, Swaminarayan community left to form a new Swaminarayan sect which is today known as BAPS. The basis for this new Swaminarayan formation was the irreconcilable interpretations of central Swaminarayan texts. Today, BAPS is a devotional Hindu movement with an expanding global presence. The sect has migrated to wherever its Gujarati followers have settled, including East and South Africa, Great Britain, and the United States. Additionally, there are BAPS communities in more recent areas of Gujarati migration such as Northern Europe. BAPS estimates one million worldwide followers and of these, approximately 100,000 members live in the United States and 30,000 in Great Britain. While all of the Swaminarayan sects are Vaishnavite in their forms of practice and ritual content, BAPS distinguishes itself from the still extant original Swaminarayan communities by its emphasis on the "living Guru". The living Guru has the physical form of a human and is always male. Followers believe the Guru to embody the power and reality-controlling capacities (*antaryami shakti*)⁴ of Sahajanand Swami who is also known as "Lord Swaminarayan". In contrast to the other Swaminarayan sects, BAPS has a dual focus in its devotional practice where "Lord" (or "God") and "Guru" are worshipped together. The current living Guru is known as Pramukh Swami. Considered to be both the "spiritual and administrative head" of BAPS, Guru Pramukh Swami has no permanent residence and is constantly moving from one Swaminarayan temple and community to the next. BAPS does have a worldwide headquarters which is located in Ahmedabad, Gujarat where, under the direction of the living Guru, the institutions and persons, both lay and ascetic, administer the international body of Swaminarayan followers and all of its activities.

In addition to its devotional emphasis on Lord and Guru, the BAPS community is also recognised for upholding specific behavioural prescriptions. These include vegetarianism, avoidance of onion and garlic and intoxicating substances, tithing of ten percent to the Swaminarayan

Sanstha, performance of daily morning devotional acts (*puja*), and adhering to gender-specific rules. There is a clear division between the rules for male ascetics, known as *santos*, and the rules for lay persons or householders, known as *satsangis*. Santos, like the Guru, lead celibate lives and can only be male.

Male and female satsangis participate fully in the world but are required to follow the prescription for gender separation (*stri-purush maryada*) in all Swaminarayan temples and temple-based activities. Furthermore, there is an absolute rule that santos and Guru cannot be in the immediate presence of female satsangis. Notwithstanding the seemingly restrictive aspects of stri-purush maryada and the other Swaminarayan behavioural expectations, women, according to Sanstha leaders, constitute the majority of its membership and hold parallel positions of leadership in all areas of the organisation with the exception of the ability to become santos or Guru.⁵

In the US, BAPS dates itself to the early 1970s when Swaminarayan devotees first arrived in New York City via East Africa and Great Britain and began to host weekly gatherings for interested families. As the group grew, lay leaders began the process of acquiring property for a Swaminarayan temple and meeting place. Then, according to lay leaders, once their children attended schools, and as the numbers of followers increased paralleling the overall demographic growth of South Asian immigrants in the US, it became apparent that the children needed more than a weekly gathering to reinforce Swaminarayan devotional ideals. Faced with questions such as, "what is my religion?" and "what is Hinduism?" Swaminarayan parents, similar to parents from other Hindu backgrounds, were not always able to answer their children's queries. The parents themselves had many questions:

"How to explain Hinduism, we didn't learn about Hinduism as a religion?"

"What books should we read?, isn't Hinduism really a way of life?"

"How do we teach Swaminarayan is our religion?"

Distinctive Edifices: On Mandirs and Smaraks

Today, what is striking about the Swaminarayan diaspora, is the consistency of responses one can collect from satsangis throughout the world on a range of subjects from BAPS tenets to the merits of its devotional ideals and practices. Swaminarayan devotionalism appears to have transformed from an indigenous, local Hindu tradition into a codified, transnational religion, complete with a developed language for talking about and explaining faith, belief, and the correct ways to be

Swaminarayan. This was not always the case. The argument can be made that the increase in systematisation of Swaminarayan teachings and practices and the streamlined methods for propagating and sustaining Swaminarayan tenets are the logical byproduct of the growing numbers of overseas Gujaratis. A closer look at the significance of Swaminarayan edifices demonstrates the ease of accommodating the discourse of religion and the benefits of adopting this Western cultural logic. Secondly, we can also see the dynamics by which diaspora-engendered needs influence the contours of Swaminarayan devotionality in the Indian context.

The Swaminarayan Temple

As young satsangis have often remarked to me, “Swaminarayans are known for building temples.” Over ten years ago, this statement was said by youth followers with the sense that “Swaminarayans are known for temples and nothing else.” Today, without exception, young satsangis remark not with criticism but with astonishment and pride at the ability of BAPS to construct so many temples, or *mandirs*, around the world. Many of the early Swaminarayan temples, particularly in the diaspora, were converted or rehabilitated buildings transformed into temples after ritual installations of deities. However, since 1995, the Swaminarayan Sansha has constructed several “traditional” carved stone and marble temples outside of India.⁶ Following ancient architectural guidelines and incorporating new technologies for stone cutting, the traditional Swaminarayan mandirs built in the West are the result of elaborate logistical arrangements from the importing of pre-cut stone to the management of teams of stone carvers in India. In the United States, two such elaborately carved marble and stone temples were inaugurated in Houston (Texas State) and Chicago (Illinois State) during the summer of 2004 (Fig. 4-1). In the next few years, four additional traditional temples are scheduled to be completed in North America, joining the more than 500 BAPS temples already in the Swaminarayan diaspora. In Britain, the first BAPS traditional temple was completed in 1995 and, located just outside of London in Neasden, it attracts over 500,000 visitors annually. (Fig. 4-2).

As BAPS becomes more visible in the West owing to its temple structures, the question arises, “Why the emphasis on temple buildings?” At first glance, beyond the purpose of housing icons, Swaminarayan temples are clearly multi-purpose structures. All temples, for example have cooking and eating areas along with a main meeting hall, classrooms and office spaces. However, the much larger traditional temples have

significantly extended the form and content of the mandir into an integrated complex of ritual, devotional, and educational arenas. These carved stone mandirs are adjoined to a “temple complex” which consists of a spacious meeting hall, industrial-design kitchen, classrooms, gymnasium, library, bookstore, exhibition areas, and special living quarters for the santos and the visiting Guru. In all temples, irrespective of size, devotees can focus on their transformation into ideal satsangis by meeting other followers and engaging in activities intended to promote their understanding of Swaminarayan devotionality.

Figure 4-1: Chicago BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Temple following a Winter Snowfall

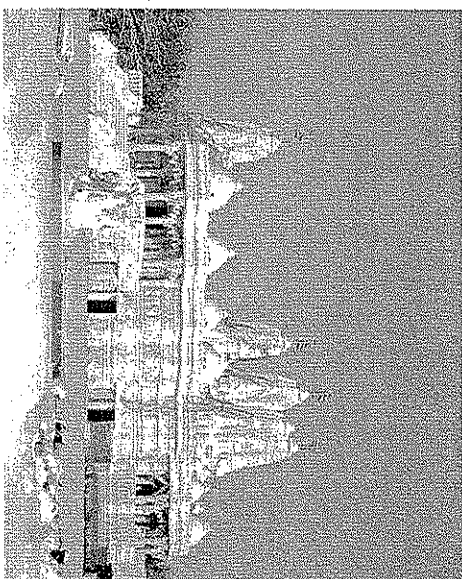


Photo courtesy: BAPS Swaminarayan Sansha

The attention provoked by outsiders' responses to the temples appears to have fueled a desire in devotees to explain Swaminarayan Hindu traditions. Young satsangis remark that their understanding, commitment to, and ability to express to outsiders “what our religion is about” comes directly from the greater interest shown by non-devotees to the temple. As one youth observed, “our temples show others what a pure religion we have. How else do you explain that everything was funded entirely by volunteers and their sacrifices.” Similarly, throughout the diaspora, during weekly mandir meetings and regional events, one can hear the call for devotees to become more learned about “our religion so that we can tell others properly what our religion is about.”

Figure 4-2: London BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Temple

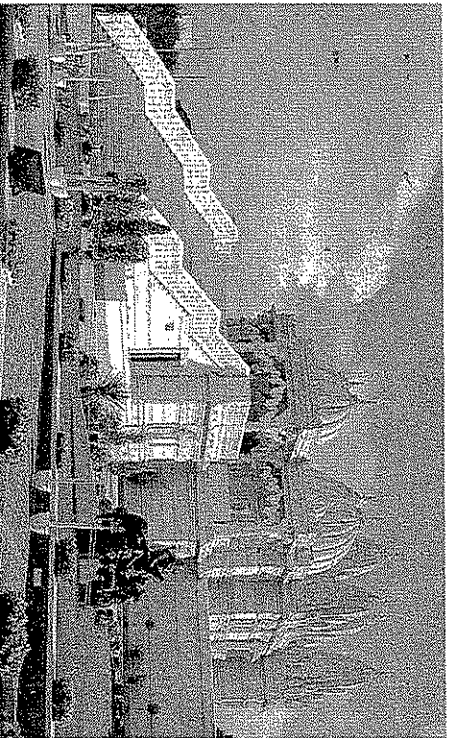


Photo courtesy: BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha

It appears then that the Swaminarayan temple is central to the reification of Swaminarayan devotionism into Swaminarayan religion. As an important site of collective and individual devotional practice and sect-specific celebrations, the temple serves a traditional function. More recently though, the temple provides the most tangible means by which the Swaminarayan community can participate in the dominant discourse on religion. While outsiders are responding to the temples as signifiers of a prominent religious organisation, the Sanstha has initiated or strengthened existing programmes to more systematically teach devotees about Swaminarayan devotionism. These initiatives include: publications and BAPS website material written by santos that explicitly outline Swaminarayan teachings, prescriptions, and ritual expectations; discourses given by santos and lay leaders which encourage a deeper grasp of Swaminarayan tenets and texts; local, regional, and national forums for different age groups to reinforce their awareness of the Swaminarayan religion and Hinduism; leadership events where the next generation of satsangis are enlisted to disseminate Swaminarayan knowledge; cultural events, festivals, and social work projects which expose Swaminarayan religion to a wider public. And, especially in the diaspora, there is an increased emphasis on “satsang examinations” or tests administered by BAPS, which are intended to promote a consistent understanding of Swaminarayan teachings.

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Throughout the diaspora, devotees are thus learning how to conceptualise and explain their tradition in terms of the beliefs and practices of Swaminarayan Hinduism. As many adult satsangis now living in the United States have commented to me, temple-going was at most a weekly event in India. Today, these same satsangis observe that living in the United States has motivated them to “know more about Hinduism and our religion so that we can teach our kids when they ask us”. The temple fulfills something unplanned for, namely the expectation, particularly in the West, for everyone to have a religion. The Swaminarayan organisation has acknowledged this need and, without any compromise to its devotional traditions, is currently engaged in constructing temples and filling them with the recognisable elements of rationalised religion. To “be Swaminarayan” is now synonymous with having “Swaminarayan as my religion.” This sentiment is echoed by satsangis throughout the diaspora as well as by santos writing for Swaminarayan publications. For example, in the English language magazine, *Swaminarayan Bliss*, following the opening ceremonies for the London Swaminarayan temple, one sant wrote,

Millions of people in the western world for the first time in their lives were witness to the pulsing vibrant life of Hindu worship and adoration. To most, it was the dawning of a new respect and regard. Long ingrained prejudices describing Hinduism as primitive and heathen were being dissolved away to reveal a living religion gifted in both beauty and joy, sacredness and wisdom, generosity and broadness of outlook (Mandir Mahotsav 1995, 56-57).

Thus, for both devotees and outsiders, the temple, especially outside of India, provides a tangible sign by which Swaminarayan followers can be identified as co-religionists, as Hindus in an overwhelmingly non-Hindu world.

The Swaminarayan Monument Complex

Complementing the multivalent significance of the Swaminarayan temple is another type of edifice, the Swaminarayan monument or *smarak*, which is perhaps among the most striking new strategies for promoting the Swaminarayan religion. Where the traditional Swaminarayan mandir provides devotees a place to express and experience their devotional and ritual commitments, the Swaminarayan monument complexes literally and figuratively expand the multiple functions of the temple into another level of devotional experience. The monument complexes, in other words, are

intended to serve all Hindus as well as non-Hindus by sharing the Swaminarayan understanding of Hinduism with the broadest possible audience. These smarak sites, known as “Akshardham”⁷ have multiple purposes and significances: they allow Hindus from different traditions to find an expression of their devotion; they are intended to direct devotees and “outsiders to contemplate the inspiration behind the monument’s construction; they confirm the Swaminarayan community’s success in attracting devotees whose volunteered skills and resources underwrite these sites; they promote a vision of Hinduism and Indian culture that is meant to instill pride and appreciation of India’s heritage. Inside the monument are iconic representations (or *murtis*) of the Swaminarayan founder and guru lineage as well as murtis from the major Hindu sects. Other structures in the monument complex include exhibition halls which highlight the “Swaminarayan religion,” the “history of Hinduism,” and selected aspects of Indian history and culture. These halls employ interactive and large-scale animated tableaux to convey their messages which, overall, pay tribute to the achievements of Hindu and Indian civilisation and the role played by the Swaminarayan Sanstha in reviving Hinduism for the contemporary world. The monument complexes also house a research centre for “applied research in social harmony” that, in addition to supporting visiting scholars’ research on aspects of Hinduism, hosts academic-style conferences with invited international and Indian guests.

The first Akshardham smarak was completed in Gandhinagar, Gujarat in 1992. More recently, in November 2005, a second and even larger complex was inaugurated in New Delhi. Outside of India, plans are underway for an Akshardham complex to be constructed in New Jersey. The New Delhi complex sits on one hundred acres of reclaimed land along the banks of the Yamuna River. Constructed in just five years and evoking architectural motifs and styles from a number of Indian historical periods and regions, the Delhi smarak site has attracted some five million visitors since its opening (Fig. 4-3). Besides the exhibition halls, central monument, and research centre, the Delhi Akshardham complex has a large-screen format theatre dedicated to showing a BAPS-made film on the childhood of the Swaminarayan founder. Another already popular destination within the complex is the exhibition hall with an amusement park-style boat ride that glides past reconstructions of famous Indian artistic achievements and full-scale staged scenes of sages, scholars, and others who have contributed to the intellectual and cultural heritage of India. Throughout the complex, its public orientation is further stressed

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by the English and Hindi languages used in the exhibition displays, audio materials, and large-screen film.⁸

Figure 4-3: Delhi Swaminarayan Akshardham in December 2005

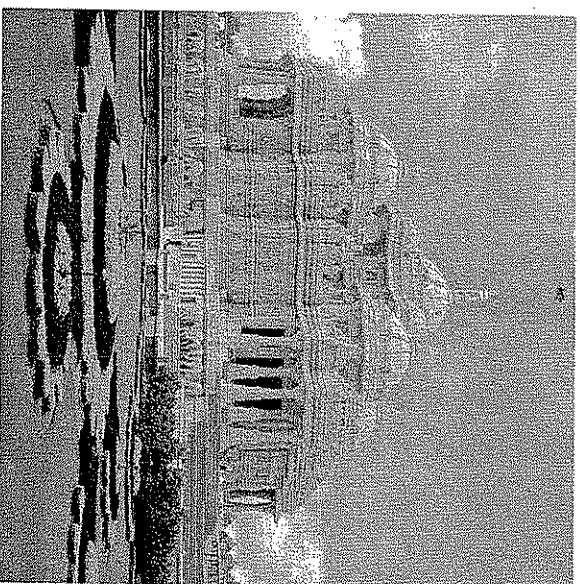


Photo courtesy: BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha

From the BAPS official website to its publications, Akshardham visitors have recorded their wonderment at the achievements of the Swaminarayan Sanstha and their appreciation to BAPS for commemorating the “contributions of Hinduism to Indian culture and civilisation” (see www.akshardham.org). Already travel agencies, touring companies, and tour guides outside of India have included Swaminarayan Akshardham as a Delhi destination. Furthermore, many devotees visiting the Delhi Akshardham have reacted with pride that a BAPS monument complex appears to be making an impact on the ways in which modern Hinduism might be conceptualised. Several satsangs from South Africa and Australia who were able to participate in the opening events for Delhi Akshardham observed that “[Delhi] Akshardham makes us proud to be Hindus” and “our Swaminarayan religion is proving that Hinduism is not about violence but about peacefulness.”

Both types of Swaminarayan edifices, the temple and monument complexes, convey the impression of a powerful and efficiently organised

institution and devotees attribute these characterisations to the forces constituting the "Swaminarayan religion." In the UK, the London Swaminarayan temple has generated sufficient media and celebrity attention that, in symbolic and literal senses, the temple is often equated with Hinduism-at-large in Britain.⁹ As for the Delhi Akshardham complex, it is currently featured on the Government of India's official tourism website (www.Incredibleindia.org) where it is described as "one of the biggest and most intricate places of worship ever constructed." Swaminarayan religion, it appears, has arrived in the West but it has also circled back to its country of origin with sharpened purposes: the revitalisation of Hinduism, and the use of technologically sophisticated ways to deliver its devotional and social ideals.¹⁰

In Gujarat, the popularity of the Gandhinagar Akshardham complex may have been a factor in a devastating incident in September 2002 when gunmen began to shoot at visitors. The attack resulted in 33 deaths including the death of a Swaminarayan sant. Throughout the world, the incident was reported as a "terrorist attack on a temple" built by a "powerful Hindu religious sect" that has also built a "large temple in London." In the diaspora, devotees reacted with shock and grief at the loss of life in the Akshardham complex. Some expressed fear that the attack, occurring in the same year as the Godhra tragedy, would spark further communal outrage in Gujarat. Guru Prannukh Swami immediately dispatched a public message emphasising that there must be no communal retaliation but prayers for peace and harmony.

Given Gujarat's continued state of communal volatility, the Swaminarayan organisation recognises the need to address suspicions of its alleged role in Hindu fundamentalist agendas. In becoming a successful Hindu religion and especially one with the resources to showcase its interpretation of Hinduism, BAPS now finds that it must discover ways to defend its devotional principles and projects while simultaneously proving its distance from its fundamentalist neighbours.¹¹ When there appeared to be no outbreak of violence in Gujarat associated with the Akshardham attack, many devotees noted that their Guru had successfully defused a potential communal tragedy by virtue of his quiet plea for peace and tolerance. Throughout the diaspora, satsangis expressed hope that the Swaminarayan religion would now be seen as a "peaceful" and "peace-loving religion" rather than as a partner in Gujarat's history of communal atrocities.¹²

Swaminarayan Postures of Being

For the non-devotee, Swaminarayan temples and monuments are impressive for many reasons. For the satsangi, these edifices are also tangible means by which to engage with, participate, and cultivate Swaminarayan *bhakti* or devotional ideals. Swaminarayan edifices, consequently, are more than just substantial buildings.

In accordance with Swaminarayan *bhakti* principles, Lord Swaminarayan is the highest existential reality, or *purusottam*, and remains an individual and separate entity from the penultimate entity, that of *akshar*, who is also individual and separate and realised in the form of the living spiritual leader, today known as Guru Prannukh Swami. In translating Swaminarayan devotional and ontological principles into practices, devotees or prospective satsangis must develop an understanding of their physical body and its central role in the process of becoming Swaminarayan. As satsangis become more involved in temple life and activities, as they listen to discourses by Prannukh Swami and santos and, as they read the core Swaminarayan texts, they become more aware of the body and its relevance to their devotional goals. The devotional and ontological objective is to become an ideal Swaminarayan devotee, understood as the phase where the body and its sensual aspects, its needs and intentions, gestures, and postures are aligned away from worldly desires and towards continuous meditation of Lord and Guru. For devotees, it is the Guru and his already perfected posture towards serving the highest existential reality who must be emulated. The challenge, understandably, is how to achieve this stage of embodied belief while "living in the world" and in the physical body.

Becoming Swaminarayan thus requires a reconfiguration of bodily selves away from dispositions and activities that would occlude spontaneous remembrances of Lord and Guru and towards those that promote a continuous devotional attitude. Achieving this seamless orientation towards Lord and Guru requires an understanding of the three units of the body, mind (*antahkarama*), senses (*panchvishayas*), and sense organs (*indriyas*), and their respective constituents.¹³ In Swaminarayan teaching, the individuated self or *atma* (or *jiva*) in the spiritually undeveloped being is obscured by its seeming assimilation with the senses. Only with proper bodily discipline and the adoption of techniques to train the components of the sentient being can the necessary knowledge arise that one's *atma* is a separate and eternal entity from one's impermanent physical body (*atmanishtha*). It is Prannukh Swami, whom devotees equate with the form of *akshar*, who provides the immediate

behavioural template for satsangis to emulate in order that they may reach closer to the position of the ideal devotee. Pramukh Swami, as the manifest form of the "ideal sadhu" is considered to be the perfect servant (*bhaktā*) of Lord Swaminarayan. Through his own bodily postures and actions, devotees believe that the Guru graciously reveals the attitudes and behaviours necessary for acquiring knowledge about Lord (or God) and one's atma. For those who accept these principles, there arises the possibility of release from rebirth (*samsara*). This is the ontological endpoint for committed satsangis, namely, to achieve liberation (*moksa*) from rebirth and, towards this objective, the body is perceived to be both the obstacle and the means (Kim 2001).

To consider now the behaviours of satsangis as they go about being and becoming Swaminarayan: this conscious orientation requires mechanisms to help cultivate a greater awareness of the body-mind-senses and to frame the resulting postures of belief they engender. These disciplinary mechanisms include fasting, performing austerities, and taking vows, as well as performing *seva*, or work. Of these, I here discuss the concept of *seva*.

Seva, as satsangis will describe, is more than work volunteered to the temple and the satsang community. It is a form of ideal behaviour that refers directly to the relationship between *sevak* and Swami, that is, between the devotee and the Guru and analogically between bhakta and Bhagwan, the supplicant and God. Satsangis observe that Pramukh Swami is constantly involved in doing *seva* on behalf of the Swaminarayan Sanstha while never neglecting his *seva* to the murti of Lord Swaminarayan, the iconic form of God. *Seva* can take many forms, for example, donating financial resources, serving food in the temple, or doing research on behalf of a temple press release. Especially given the heightened need for resources during the often simultaneous construction of multiple edifices, one of the biggest areas of *seva* are the building projects, whether in the form of voluntary labour, donation of monies and other services, or solicitation of donations from other sources.

For the *sevak*, the critical posture the satsangi must adopt is to "be like Swami," that is, to submerge the mind, the senses, and bodily desires to one aim, that of "pleasing God." Before, during, and even after the completion of large-scale projects, there are innumerable opportunities for "doing *seva*" and the many thousands of satsangis who participate in these events vividly recount with satisfaction their experiences of bodily fatigue and emotional exhilaration at having exhausted their physical selves in service of God and Guru: of "wanting to sacrifice everything for *seva*," "becoming lost in thought on Swami while doing *seva*" and "forgetting

about everything, eating, sleeping, my job." It is the emphasis on doing some activity, however monotonous, unpleasant or physically demanding, which allows the *sevak* to become temporarily suspended from what are perceived to be the worldly and more social needs of the somatic self. Ideally, it is not so much the action of doing *seva* but its perceived benefit of providing a means to align the body-mind-senses towards serving the Guru that spurs satsangis into offering their time and abilities. This is the posture that satsangis strive to develop, of having the Guru constantly before them, in their minds.

Bodies, Buildings, and the Making of Religion

The techniques of the body available to the satsangi, such as *seva*, are an essential link between individual devotional practice and the Swaminarayan ontological objective, to become free from the cycle of rebirth. This is where we can begin to see *one* connection between the building of the Swaminarayan edifices and the actions of the satsangis. From its inception to its opening to the public, Swaminarayan buildings are seen as concentrated opportunities where devotees can see, experience, and sense the imminence of their Guru's inspiration. As satsangis confess, without the exemplary model of Guru Pramukh Swami and his inspiration, the temples and monument complexes could not possibly have been built:

When you consider that satsangis, from very young to very old, collected recyclable aluminum cans for three years to donate for this [London Swaminarayan] temple, can you believe that?

Can you believe that this [Delhi Akshardham] complex was built in just five years? It could only happen because of the inspiration of our Guru.

Likewise, even the renovations for more humble temples have generated stories about how devotees stretched their limited resources and made numerous personal sacrifices to transform buildings such as warehouses and former churches into Swaminarayan temples.

The construction of edifices makes literally possible the settlement of bodily memories, of feelings lodged in muscles and mind, and of energies spent in maintaining devotional attitudes. As one sant writer recorded,

The construction team basically comprised of members of the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission [London Swaminarayan temple], all of whom had given their time free, and many taking extended holiday, leaving jobs or taking a year out from studies. Including everyone from

the site manager to labourers, there were some 100 full-time volunteers working on the site at any one time and a pool of more than 1000 part-time volunteers, who fitted in shifts on-site after a day's work or over weekends. Doctors and shopkeepers, students and pensioners worked hand in hand in this extraordinary labour of love to please their Guru, Prannakh Swami Maharaj (The Construction 1995, 38).

As Swaminarayan edifices continue to attract a growing audience, the Sanstha sees the potential for its ideals to be more widely disseminated. Swaminarayan temples and monument complexes are meant to be more than signs of a particular religion or accommodations to the needs of a diasporic community: they are intended to situate Swaminarayan bhakti firmly in the discourse on religion and, in doing so, they bring insiders and outsiders together to better understand how this religion operates and how it appears to be sustained by its committed body of followers.

Conclusion

While the Swaminarayan organisation and its transnational following are still evolving, its activities, from building temples to constructing large-scale monuments, though sectarian in detail, have resulted in the overlap of Swaminarayan devotionalism with "Hinduism" in general. Put differently, while transforming itself into a recognisable religion, specifically the "Swaminarayan religion," BAPS has demonstrated an ability to accommodate its own objectives while also anchoring these objectives into the broader discursive landscape of religion.

Swaminarayan devotionalism appears to have successfully equipped its followers with the conceptual tools to participate in the discursive tradition supported by "religion." Young followers speak easily and concisely about their "Swaminarayan faith," "religion," and "beliefs" and the more committed devotees speak of the need to be aware of "doctrines that are part of our religion." As a discursive formation, religion sustains what Masuzawa (2005, 291) has aptly phrased, "a taxonomic regime" that is, the classificatory components of belief, faith, doctrine and the corollary processes of codification, conversion, and secularism. For immigrants settling in the West, to be able to answer the question, "what is your religion?" is as necessary as answering the usual question, "where are you from?" The BAPS community has, through its systematic, organised, and centralised system of leadership and teaching, taken on the contours of an organised religion along with some of its attached taxonomy.¹⁴ For a devotional tradition entirely dependant on the singular presence of the Guru, BAPS has managed to address the expectations of its followers as

well as the assumptions about religion held by the dominantly non-Hindu societies in which it is increasingly settled. For devotees, the Swaminarayan edifices are concrete representations of the Guru's inspiration; for devotees and non-devotees, they are also the means by which the Swaminarayan tradition is now comfortably anchored into the landscape of plural religions. The Swaminarayan Sanstha has created for itself a sphere of existence and recognition in the Western religious topography and, in doing so, has provided its followers a "religious" identity and basis for ongoing cultural reproduction.

To return to Moner-Williams' charge that the Swaminarayan community would not outlast the alleged degenerative tendencies in Hinduism: what would he think of the fact that the Swaminarayan community has outlasted many a nineteenth century Hindu and Christian movement? And, how would he respond to the present reality that the Swaminarayan Sanstha has solved the challenge of living in the West by embracing the contours of universalising religion as its central organisational strategy?

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Notes

- ¹ This chapter is an expanded version of a paper originally presented in a panel at the 2005 American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference. My thanks to Professor Charles Lindholm, who as discussant to the AAR panel, provided the first part of the chapter title as well as several pages of thoughtful comments. I also thank Prof. Rachel Dwyer and Dr. Anjoom Mukadam for their incisive responses, shared during the proceedings of the first Gujarat Studies Association Conference in May 2006, to the main argument in this chapter. For their timely assistance in providing the photographs used in this chapter and for the updated numbers of their community, I thank the lay leaders and sadhus of the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha. All errors remain my own.
- ² See Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1991)[1962], Talal Asad (1993, 2003).
- ³ The ethnographic data, including all direct quotations, in this chapter are drawn from current field research and earlier fieldwork conducted between 1991-2001 in the United States, United Kingdom, and India.
- ⁴ All Sanskrit-derived, Hindi, and Gujarati words in this chapter appear in the first instance in italics. All non-English words will appear without diacritics and in the romanised forms most often used in BAPS printed materials. Also, following common BAPS and Indian-English usage, plural forms of non-English nouns are constructed by adding an English suffix "s" as in "santos" (sing. *sant*) and "satsangis" (sing. *satsangi*).
- ⁵ While there is no institutionalized order of women ascetics in BAPS, there are women *satsangis* who have taken the vow of celibacy. These women have explicitly chosen to dedicate their lives in service first to the Sanstha and their Guru rather than accept the dominant social expectation that women's primary roles are as married women and mothers. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the intersection of celibacy, devotional ideals, and social norms,

- it should be noted that the vow of celibacy in the context of devotional practice is neither unique to the Swaminarayan Sanstha nor to Hindu traditions in general.
- ⁶ BAPS uses the designation "traditional" for *shikharbaddha* temples, or temples with domes and spires, that have been constructed according to the *Shilpashashtra*, the ancient Sanskrit manual for architecture, stone cutting, and carving temples and statuary.
- ⁷ "Akshardham" as a name has immense significance for devotees of the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha sect: it is the abode of the ultimate reality, Purushottam, who is Lord Swaminarayan. According to BAPS teachings, Purushottam is manifested in the form of Akshar who is the living Guru. The *atma* (or *jiva*) of devotees who have achieved *moksha* are called *muktas* and these entities reside in Akshardham, alongside but never merging with the separate principles of Akshar and Purushottam. From the perspective of devotees, Akshardham is thus a divine abode as well as an ontological objective.
- ⁸ Hindi is one of India's official national languages but it is not widely spoken in Gujarat. The higher visibility of Hindi over Gujarati in the Delhi Akshardham complex underscores the intention of BAPS to make this monument site more broadly accessible to the Indian public.
- ⁹ The assumption by the media and celebrity visitors that the London Swaminarayan temple is representative of Hindus and Hinduism in Britain is not necessarily welcomed by non-Swaminarayan Hindus whose own temples, communities, and activities do not receive as much sustained attention. In the United States, non-Swaminarayan Gujarati organisations are aware of the appeal of Swaminarayan temples, festival celebrations, and activities for all age-groups. Some groups such as the Pushi Marga or Vallabhaacharya Sampradaya are responding by developing their own youth-oriented programmes and teaching materials. See for example www.tavasmi.org.
- ¹⁰ The BAPS leadership is aware of the misunderstandings that can arise from the association of Swaminarayan Hindu practices with an essentialised portrait of "Hinduism." For example, a senior lay leader for the US community has regrettably observed how BAPS has been automatically assumed by its critics to be sympathetic to fundamentalist agendas owing to BAPS efforts to explain and teach Hinduism. This situation in part is an artifact of diaspora where living in predominantly non-Hindu societies has provoked a need among overseas Gujaratis to clarify their understanding of Hinduism. Thus, within Swaminarayan temples and monument complexes it may appear that BAPS is intentionally putting forth a sense of Swaminarayan devotionism as Hinduism *par excellence*. Clearly, the insider devotee may hold this opinion; however, senior lay leaders in the United States, United Kingdom, and India argue that BAPS is not willfully misleading either its followers or others into accepting a monolithic conception of Hinduism.
- ¹¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the relationship of BAPS to Indian politicians and religious leaders, whether Hindu nationalist or otherwise. Historically, from its inception, the Swaminarayan community founded by Sahajanand Swami cultivated relations with those in positions of power from

British colonial administrators to local rulers, landholders, and village elites. This pragmatic orientation has allowed the community to maintain its activities and temples without disruption. Since the ascendance of Hindu fundamentalism especially in Gujarat State, the relationship of BAPS to persons in power has become more complex. BAPS is often assumed to be associated with Hindu fundamentalist leaders, most ostensibly owing to the latter's presence at various publicised BAPS events. Yet, it should be noted that during the week of ceremonies to mark the 2005 opening of Delhi Akshardham, political leaders from all parties including the current ruling Congress Party were present. As for accusations that BAPS has not vigorously condemned communal violence in Gujarat, the Sansha is more openly highlighting its humanitarian work and charitable contributions on behalf of Muslim communities and other disenfranchised communities in Gujarat and elsewhere, for example, tsunami-devastated villages in South India, Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans, Louisiana State, and earthquake victims in Kutch, Gujarat. It is unlikely that critics of BAPS, particularly those writing from a liberal secular platform, can agree with all of BAPS' various projects and programmes. It is interesting to note that this disagreement is often leveraged into the basis for categorising the Sansha as fundamentalist. This assessment overlooks the specific ways in which BAPS is searching for ways to mediate the realities of communal violence, not through the modification of its own devotional practices but by addressing the social realities in which it is located.

¹² In the wake of the Gujarat Akshardham attack and the ensuing absence of communal violence, India's national leaders publicly expressed their admiration for and gratitude to Guru Prannakh Swami for quickly appealing for peace and calm. Furthermore, the Swaminarayan Sansha did not publicise the death of the Swaminarayan sant and many in the Swaminarayan diaspora remained unaware of this fact.

¹³ The Swaminarayan body, as delineated by its founder in the central Swaminarayan text, the *Vachanamritam*, is dependent on a non-dualist conceptualisation of the body and mind. See Dave (1974) for an extended discussion of the relationship between the physical self and Swaminarayan principles.

¹⁴ This does not include conversion, a concept that is not indigenous to Hindu traditions. BAPS thus does not expect conversion from those who wish to make a commitment to being Swaminarayan devotees and there is no renunciation of a previous religious commitment. Similar to other devotional movements, the aspirant repeats a mantra and agrees to follow core tenets and practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY ON A JAIN TEMPLE IN DIASPORA

PRAKASH SHAH

As an academic who can best describe himself as a socio-legal scholar, but hardly an indologist, a specialist scholar of religious studies or of Jainism, the task of writing about a *derāsar* (Jain temple) appears onerous to say the least. However, having appointed myself as the narrator of events surrounding the building of a *derāsar* at the Oshwal Centre in England's semi-rural Hertfordshire (Fig. 5-1), I ought to explain how I find myself in this position. My self-appointment can be put down to several facts. I count myself as a first-generation migrant member of the community of Halari Visa Oshwals, who have settled in Britain over the last few decades of the post-war period. To some degree, therefore, I might be considered an "insider" to this community of Oshwals, the particular "ethno-religious" construction of which I venture to explain further below. The building of a temple and, in particular, the occasion of the *pratiśṭhā mādhoṣav* (installation of the *tirthankara murti*/images) celebrations, after which the temple is considered ready as a place of worship, provided an opportunity to record events of some importance to this community. Also, as a scholar in the field of ethnic minorities and law I have come to be increasingly aware of the very minor status of Oshwals—a conglomerate group of castes of similar standing—and Jains—a religious group—among the minority ethnic and religious communities who have come to characterise Britain's ever more ethnically plural character. Even among South Asians, who together can count themselves as the largest component of Britain's ethnic diversity, Jains are a hardly-heard-from and rarely noticed element, and Visa Oshwal Jains even less so. The last UK Census of 2001 recorded some 15,132 Jains, although it is argued that there may be up to 33,000 (*Jain Spirit* 2004), of whom Halari Visa Oshwals may constitute the biggest section.