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Ritualdynamik

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

Aesthetics

and the Dimensions
of the Senses

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SEEING THE DIVINE THROUGH WINDOWS

ONLINE DARSHAN AND VIRTUAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

A prime historical motivation for the rise of *bhakti* was a desire to dissolve the distance between the human and the divine. Today for Hindu devotees, *puja* is the most important ceremonial and experiential means for establishing direct communication with the deity. It is a very concrete form of worship meant to involve *all* the devotee's senses, leading to a transcendent experience of the divine that involves seeing, feeling, hearing, touching, and so on. One vital element of *puja* is *darshan*, "the seeing and being seen by the divine." Scholars and practitioners have opined that *darshan is* the central practice in puja for many devotees, privileging sight as the essential sensory experience.

In "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism," published in 1981, Lawrence Babb dealt with a basic definition of *darshan*ic religious experience: "it is the gaze or glance that is the real religious experience…. a 'fluid current of sight' which courses between the devotee and the image." In the same article Babb noted, "Virtually everywhere that Hindus live or work there are pictures of the gods."[1] At about the same time, in her seminal book *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in Hinduism,* Diana Eck explored the nature of the image and its perception by Hindus. "One might say this sacred perception [*darshan*] … the ability truly to see the divine image is given to the devotee … and the deity sees the worshipper as well. The contact between devotee and deity is exchanged through the eyes." In the most recent edition of this work, Eck noted that the meaning of *darshan* was being "transformed and extended … with temple Web sites and online images of the Hindu deities"[2] but she stops there: in 1996, the Internet had not yet gained its current status as a powerful worldwide instrument for the dissemination of all sorts of information. By 2009, Babb's "virtually everywhere" has taken on an additional dimension.

Heinz Scheifinger, commenting on the experience of *darshan* on the Internet, notes that "Hinduism is *particularly* suited to cyberspace … because the visual nature of the WWW utilizes image above all else."[3] As

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[1]   See Babb 1981, 5–7.

[2]   See Eck 1982, ix.

[3]   See Scheifinger 2008, 238.

such, an incredible number of websites are dedicated to online *puja*: some are free, some call for payment for puja to be done in India; there are *puja* ceremonies streaming live from India and elsewhere, and there are video recordings of past puja and Hindu festivals. While some sites mimic the different actions of *puja* – bells sound, chants are heard, fires are lit, flowers come raining down – the major online experience of *puja* is one composed of sight and sound. The deities shown for *darshan* on the websites are in their form as *murtis* as they appear in various temples or in their depiction as stylized paintings or lithographs.

The well-documented darshanic shifts from *murti*s to lithographs to movies and television demonstrates that the *darshan* experience itself is adaptable, readily portable from one or another medium. With regard to the advent of god posters, H. Daniel Smith observed in 1995 that the impact of industrialization "on devotional Hinduism in recent decades has been to make a new artifact available. Its availability in turn stimulates the invention of new, or the transformation of old, ways of 'seeing' theophanies in the midst of ordinary, everyday, mundane, mortal experience."[4] His description of the invention of new theophanic artifacts is entirely applicable to the rise of online *darshan*. As the flexibility of devotional Hindu practices demonstrates over and again, the visual and aural religious experience can be compelling in many forms, including the newly mundane form of the World Wide Web.

The very practice of using the computer for *darshan* demands modification of so-called traditional *darshan*, as my colleagues note in their presentations today. The Internet is a "cultural context in its own right"[5] that bridges the distance between the devotee and deity in new ways: the digital image is inches away in the virtual realm, its tangible referent miles away or even nonexistent. Yet, as Scheifinger has observed, "the nature of some of [Hinduism's] key characteristics – especially *Darshan* – which fit well with the online environment means that Hinduism is unlikely to undergo radical changes in cyberspace."[6] Like the Internet, *darshan* privileges connection with the image. For those who can afford or have access to it, especially in the diaspora, the computer is the next logical venue for darshanic experience: "If mass production for the bazaar meant that images were separated from existing contexts, it also meant that they were *re-embedded* [emphasis mine] in new ones."[7] With the ever-increasing influence of the computer, darshanic images can be re-imbedded, created, re-created, and manufactured, both in India and here, as I discovered while investigating the production and use of the website for a Southern California Swaminarayan mandir.

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[4]   See Smith 1995, 46.
[5]   See Radde-Antweiler 2008, 1.
[6]   See Scheifinger 2008, 247.
[7]   See Jain 2007, 91.

The Swaminaryan Movement

My fieldwork has been and continues to be directed at a "new face in Hinduism," as Raymond Brady Williams has described the Swaminarayan sect. I have engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the devotees, board members, webmaster, and sadhus of a temple devoted to the Swami Narayan Sampradaya, the ShreeSwaminarayan Mandal in Downey, California. This temple in a middle-class suburb of Los Angeles has a quite extensive website featuring, like the majority of Hindu websites, daily *darshan*. In this paper, I focus on interpreting the website itself, its links and pages, and its use by the satsangis and the *Sadhus* of the temple.

The *bhakti* movement produced many saints associated with particular gods, and as the Kali Yuga progressed, several became identified as avatars of Krishna. Swaminarayan, the founder of this sect, was among the 19th century Hindu reformers who reacted to the British colonial rule by advocating "new" ways of practice Hinduism. By "new," however, Swaminarayan meant a re-formation of Hinduism *back* to very basic principles as expounded generally in the Vedas and particularly in other orthodox scriptures that pertained to Krishna. Swaminarayan manifested or was born near Ayodhya in 1781, and in his lifetime – he died in 1830 – came to be worshipped as the god, Krishna. In the *Gita*, Krishna had announced his avataric intentions: "Time after time I descend to the world to defeat *adharma* and restore *dharma*."[8] The human form is the avatar appropriate to the Kali Yuga: god manifests as a human being in this degraded era and is to be worshiped in *that* form. The manifestation of Krishna in the 19th century in the form of Swaminarayan is a direct consequence of the adharmic influences on a people who had to deal with the chaos of an essentially lawless Gujarat in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Krishna/Swaminarayan dealt with the adharma amongst the Gujarati throughout his life, first via his teachings and example, later augmented by his interactions with the British. He officially welcomed colonial rule and facilitated adaptation to what would become the prevailing, Anglo-inspired ideals and laws of the state.

The Swaminarayan Sampradaya facilitiated the transition to modern India, which remains marked by the colonial period: the 19th century reformers, whether gods or not, had to in some way confront the hegemony of Western religion and law. The Swaminarayan movement embraced the legal and perhaps some of the religious aspects of Western culture, while building on millennia of Hindu religious and philosophical discourses on the appearances of god on earth in mythic and historical times. In the very basic theology of the Sampradaya, Swaminarayan was and is described as "The One God." Most certainly, the sect is directly tied to traditional *Vishishtadvaita* as expounded by Ramanuja in the 12th century. As Frank Clooney notes, Ramanuja and his commentators clearly made especial mention of the notion that Narayana could "plausibly appear as Krishna in

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[8]   See *Bhagavad Gita* 4:8.

this world … divine births are as real as human births."[9] Yet, a learned and respected member of the Downey satsang wanted me to be very clear: "Ramanuja got it *almost* right: '[There is] One Supreme Being, The One and only one GOD, [who] incarnates himself into human form and manifests His glory (*Aishwarya*) as needed in every incarnation … He therefore established Deities of Narnarayana, Lakshmi Narayana, Radha, Raman Dev, Gopinathji and others in various temples to inculcate firm belief of oneness of GOD (*Ekeshwar Upasana*).'"

Williams, who has written extensively on the movement, contends that the "success of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya … is that it presents a human face of the divine."[10] In his introduction to this tradition, *A New Face: The Swaminarayan Religion* (1984), he notes, "[t]he face is an apt symbol for forms of Hinduism in the *bhakti* tradition where the emphasis is on intense devotion of almost face-to-face relationship between the deity and the devotee."[11] His apt usage of "face" as a leitmotif for this sect is instantly apparent on the Downey website:
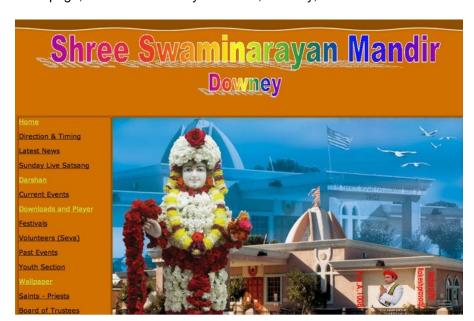
Figure 1: Website homepage, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

Click on '*darshan'* in the menu and the many faces of the *darshanas* of the week appear:

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[9]   See Clooney 2007, 330.

[10]   See Williams 2009, n.p.

[11]   See Williams 1984, xii.

Figure 2-4: Three of the online weekly *darshanas*, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, July 2009

Click on the 'links' in the menu and you are directed to the website for the Vadtal diocese in India, on which the face of the god is ubiquitous <http://www.vadtal.com/daily-darshan.html> The Swaminarayan Sampradaya provides a paradigmatic instance of religious and ritual accommodation, first to the age in which it arose and then to the digital age in which we now live.

The Swaminaryan Mandir in Downey and its Website

A few years ago … [online *darshan*] would have been rejected as illegitimate and inadequate, quite like watching television, or eating outside, for instance, is seen as 'polluting.'[12] Now, followers of the Swaminarayan sect, including divisions such as BAPS and the ISSO, sponsor the growth and development of websites dedicated to devotion to Swaminarayan. The website maintained by the Downey *mandir* is kept very current,

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[12] See Brosius 2009, 10.

with photographs of the *murtis* and their decorations and dress for the weekly *darshan*. The website text is in English, save for a few *pictures* of texts in Gujarati, yet because services at the temple are conducted in Gujarati exclusively, all audio recordings of *kirtans, bhajans*, prayers, and filmed or streaming sermons heard on the website are in Gujarati. The total satsang number's about 300, as does the Listserv membership, and at least three-quarters of the congregants attend services on Sundays between 3:30 and 7:00 p.m., with *prasad* following. The website and its links are accessed for daily or weekly *darshan* by over one-third of the satsangis, including Gujarati-only speakers, based on my interviews and survey results. My survey questions on e-*darshan* were written in both English and Gujarati, and, not surprisingly, older members preferred to answer in Gujarati, while younger members, students and business people preferred to answer in English. My data clearly indicated that the followers do not necessarily regard the website as a supplement for temple *darshan*: it is utilized extensively by the satsangis who *also* attend temple every Sunday. The onsite and e-use of the original language of the Swaminarayan tradition ties the diasporic followers not only to the edicts of its founder but also to the sacred history and geography of the sect. While the younger people in the diaspora may not know Gujarati, authority is maintained and transferred to the temple and to the website through the integration of the sacred language.

Recent and state-of-the-art technology are not restricted to the website. The men and women are separated during services as prescribed by the Swami by means of a line drawn on the floor down the middle of the sanctuary. The men may cross this line into the women's space, but the women cannot step into the men's space. Moreover, when the sadhu speaks, stanchions are set up along the line and a cloth draped over them so that the he cannot be defiled by seeing the women, who are forbidden to ever speak to him.

Figure 5: Puja services, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

This temple is very techno-savvy in its accommodations of the tradition: on the women's side of the sanctuary, a wide-screen plasma HD TV allows the woman to see the *murti*s and the sadhus up close and personal.

Figure 6: Women's side of the sanctuary, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

There is also a TV in the lobby in addition to one in the kitchen on top of the refrigerator (again mainly the province of women), so that wherever you are in the temple you can have *darshan*.

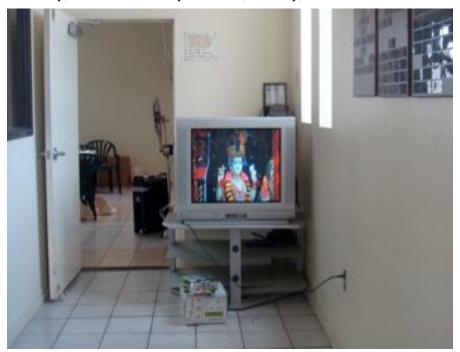Figure 7: Television in lobby, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

Figure 8: Television in kitchen, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

All Gujarati *kirtans* and *bhajans* as well as the sermons by the sadhus are on loudspeaker and can be heard literally everywhere in the temple and out into the parking lot and beyond. In one of the services I attended, the nexus of technology and sacred sound extended even further: a Gujarati blessing from the Chicago sadhu to one of the sadhus of the Downey Mandir was piped live from the sadhu's cell phone over the loudspeaker. His voice filled the room, and no one but me seemed at all astonished by the use of the phone during the service itself. The older members, the primary speakers of Gujarati, were listening and smiling as they heard the sadhu's long-distanced blessings.

The sadhus of the Downey mandir are traditionally dressed and housed austerely in the temple itself, yet the president of the mandir proudly proclaimed to my male research assistant that *these* sadhus are "masters of the computer." When interviewed, the three sadhus made it very clear that they are monitoring the website and have approval over its content. They especially monitor it for correct and appropriate theology. One sadhu stated, "I am very aware of the website and visit it frequently – five or six times daily to do *darshan* (emphasis mine) [and] … to keep in contact with what is going on with the members and their activities."[13] In his opinion, however, while it *is darshan* to see and be seen by the *murti* on the computer screen, that e-experience should not completely displace in-person temple *darshan*.

He and the other sadhus have a massive state-of-the art-desktop computer in their quarters at the mandir in addition to each having his own laptop. They use both types of computers for e-*darshan* of the *murti*s in Downey *and* in the home diocese temple in Vadtal. One sadhu showed off the PowerPoint presentations that he had put

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[13]   Interview by Nicholas Alexander, August 16, 2009.

together on the desktop computer for educational purposes for the satsang. Among the topics covered were the basics of the Swaminarayan practice (how to do meditation and *darshan*) and the theology of the sect, including learned analyses of the sacred texts of the Sampradaya. I noted that during a three-day youth camp, most of these presentations were handed out in hard copy. The students were also given hard copies of the "religious articles" posted on the website.

The Downey Mandir website took two weeks and four people to construct in 2007. All four reported that what they were doing was not only *seva* but also brought about the experience of "a *darshan*" for them as they built the site and embedded the various images in the pages. The basic architecture and content of the website has been maintained for about two years, with the exception of the on-going weekly updates to the *darshan* page and the additions of the Sunday Satsang Sabhas. Every one of them from January 2009 to the present is recallable by clicking on "Current Events". The Downey website is also the source for a virtual pilgrimage: from Downey to the home diocese, <Vadtal.com> in Gujarat, and back again. Downey is one of the three mandirs in the United States that have links on the Vadtal site – the others are San Francisco and Austin – and, in August 2009, the Vadtal homepage even featured pictures of the Downey temple's incredible work on the *Hindola* festival, wherein arches were formed with intricately folded rupees:

Figure 9: *Hindola* arch, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

Everyone who used online *darshan* accessed the Indian Vadtal.com website either directly or thru the link provided on the Downey website. The Downey mandir officials are very proud of their website, carefully watching the number of hits – over the past eight months, the traffic on the site has almost doubled! This is true even though an important aspect of e-*darshan* from the Downey mandir is that the webmaster maintains a Listserve of satsangis, and each Monday, he posts weekly *darshan* to their email inboxes. Thus, one need not go the website for *darshan*: it comes to you.

During interviews, some satsangis told me that they used god posters or home shrines with *murtis* for extra-temple *darshan* as much as or more than the computer. The primary reason they cited for not using e-*darshan* was lack of computer skills; only a few told me that the other aspects of *puja,* such as smell, taste, and *arti*, could not be experienced online. Nonetheless, when I showed the Downey mandir webmaster the Dallas/Fort Worth temple site in June 2009, where *puja* can be done with a mouse click, he and the board of the temple determined that, in order to meet a suddenly perceived need for interactivity, that was the new goal of *their* website. Interestingly, all the computer-literate members who responded to my survey stated unequivocally that just the Downey website and its links to the home temple in Vadtal were enough for *darshan*.

How many times a day, a week, or a month members accessed the website itself varied as did the time of day. Most reported that they did e-*darshan* in the morning, and the majority did it daily. In my fieldwork, I came across students who went on the website when away from home, for example, in school libraries. As one informant stated, "When I need to pray and establish a connection, I can do so wherever and whenever I need it." He has god posters and calendar art (to let him know about special days in the Swaminarayan festival cycle) in his dorm room, where he can do *puja* the new old-fashioned way, but his electronic access to the deity was available anywhere and anytime (provided the Internet was up). He and other respondents were adamant that the computer allowed them to "make a connection" with god, both literally and spiritually. The idea of "connection", which was brought up several times by the satsangis with regard to online *darshan,* seems a viable indicator of what might be going on – a modern expression of "the vagaries of human emotion"[14] by the ebb and flow of ones and zeros across cyberspace. While going to temple to perform *darshan* is always best, many who were interviewed stated that the same or similar feelings arose when accessing online the images and sounds provided by the website.

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[14] See Wright 2009, 81.

Creation or Re-creation of Community Maintained in Cyberspace

Lorne Dawson and others have attempted definitions of online communities, especially online religious communities, stating that "The notion of community implies a shared experience amongst a reasonably large number of people."[15] The Downey website is not only a site of e-*darshan* but also an example of the ability to create and maintain the ideal of online communities both with India and within the diaspora. On the Homepage, the link to Vadtal is first, establishing the ties to the diocese with which this group is associated. As noted before, everyone went to this site because, according to one satsangi in Downey: "the Vadtal *murtis* were installed by Lord Swaminarayan and His Acharya and therefore more adorable emotionally than the *murti*s in Downey." On Vadtal.com, there are not only the *murtis* for *darshan* but pictures of the Swaminarayan satsangis there taking part in those services. I re-iterate that on Vadtal.com, there are links *back* to North American mandirs, notably including Downey. Under "Current Events," on the Downey menu, there is the weekly *darshan* of the local *murti*s as well as extensive pictures of the congregation in *Downey*:

Figure 10-11: Website photographs of a service at the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, July 2009

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15   See Dawson 2004, 85.

The webmaster of the Mandir is beyond diligent in his taking of shot after shot and recording of the *bhajans* and sermons during the services.

Figure 12: Mandir webmaster at work, Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

Thus, during any day of the week or month, the sense of the local community is not lost but re-enforced over and again, not only here but with the corresponding group in Gujarat. This online ecumene is literally produced and maintained by the webmaster and very much supported by the sadhus and the Board of Trustees of this temple. Brosius speaking on the BAPS sect, notes "an online ecumene is shaped that appears to be intimate and close, where worship can take place and where the local (sacred) language Gujarati is promoted."[16] As all services are in Gujarati in Downey, her description is indeed valid for the Downey mandir. The instant, repeatable, and transnational community is up and running by 11:00 pm the night of the services and is sent out on Monday! Thus, a student in Florida, a businesswoman in downtown Los Angeles, family and friends in Gujarat and elsewhere can see the *murtis* and see and hear fellow satsangis via the windows of the Internet. This aspect of the Downey website situates it within both the local and the global Swaminarayan community. Wherever you are in the world, God is just a click away.

The E-Uses of Swaminarayan Texts

Many websites offer English translations of the two fundamental texts in the Swaminarayan tradition, the *Shikshapatri* and the *Vachanamrit*. There is also *darshan* of the Internet texts themselves. One text, the *Shikshapatri*, "has gone digital as a seminal sacred scripture and object of veneration."[17] A British Millennium Project of the New Opportunities Fund has placed a digitalized form of the manuscript currently in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England. Personally presented by Swaminarayan to Sir John Malcolm, then the governor of Bombay, in 1830, the Bodleian *Shikshapatri* was until recently physically available at the library for *darshan*. It was also virtually available for *darshan* at http://www.*Shikshapatri*.org.uk (note that this website has been unavailable since May 6, 2009). A Google search readily turns up a website that chronicles in pictures the pilgrimage to the Bodleian by Acharya Swamishree Purushottampriyadasji Maharaj, spiritual head of Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan, Maninagar, in 2002 along with a picture of the *Shikshapatri* in a glass display case.

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[16] See Brosius 2009, 8.
[17] See Williams 1984, 58.

Figure 13: Pilgrimage to the *Shikshapatri* at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, England, 2005

Figure 14: *Shikshapatri*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England, 2006

The Downey Mandir website states that "Satsangis even today treat *Shikshapatri* as strict orders from the divine mouth of Lord Swaminarayan. They look upon it as an *idol* [sic!] of Lord Swaminarayan depicted in words" and quotes the Swami as saying, "I promise you all that henceforward I will meet you all through My idols established in the temples and through My *Shikshapatri*." It is noteworthy that *Shikshapatri* was written not in Gujarati but in the sacred language of Sanskrit, the very vehicle for sacred works in India for millennia.

The other text, described as central to the Sampradaya, is the very large *Vachanamrit*. Written in Gujarati, it is made up of discourses given by the Swami during a ten-year period, and it is arranged by the locations (*gadis*) where he spoke. The Vadtal web site, accessible from the Downey link, provides links to transcriptions and translations of the text, which is described on the Vadtal site: "The Vachanamrut is a self-evident scripture summarizing the other scriptures like the Vedas, the Bhagawat, the Bhagwad Gita, the Upanishads and the six systems of Indian philosophy." The *Vachanamrit* is currently not mentioned or depicted on the Downey website itself. However, the Downey sadhus stated in September 2009 that they are working on remedying this lacuna: they are actively picking out translations of that work in several languages (including Hindi and English) so that all who use the website can have access to this text along with the English translations of small parts of the *Shikshapatri* already posted.

And yes, there is an app for that: you can, since June 2009, download the texts of both the Shiksapatri and the *Vachanamrit* to your iPod and iPhone, for free, from iTunes, courtesy of "Jumpn Crew." In August 2009, the website for Jumpn Crew encouraged you to have the "whole Vachanamrut and the *Shikshapatri* in hand wherever you go." The translations are in English, but a blogger on the site adds, "I would hope that Gujarati version of this [The *Shikshapatri*] would come out because there are so many people who prefer reading it in Gujarati." The website also states that both translations were developed by *acharyas* of the ISSO. Recently it has even become possible to download the sounds of Swaminarayan puja to your MP3 player or as a ring tone for your mobile phone. And the Swami himself appears on Facebook at Swaminarayan.info | Facebook – in an eerie echo of William's book, *A New Face of Hinduism.* Cell phones, handhelds, and computers all contribute to a newly sharable sacred reality.

Although the Downey website lags behind when it comes to digital versions of the sacred texts themselves, the menu on the homepage offers seven short "Religious Articles." The first item, "The Shiksapatri and the Universe," is a two-page description of the sacred text's contents. The final four items discuss *karma*, describe *arti*, list the *acharyas*, and offer a brief text in Gujarati. The second and third articles are somewhat different in tenor.

The second article, entitled "Observations and Opinions by Admires [sic!]," comprises two pages transcribed from a book that a satsangi lent to me.

Figure 15-16: Second religious article posted on the website for the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, 2009

OBSERVATIONS AND OPINIONS BY ADMIRES

Page 1 of 2
Raman Patel, Fullerton, CA

Lord Swaminarayn had a magnificent personality who had admired this by the renowned scholars and well known individuals of India and foreigners.

1) Reginald Huber: Bishop of Calcutta (1824-25)

"But in moral grandeur, what a difference was there between the troop and mine! Mine neither knew me nor cared for me, though they escorted me faithfully. The guards of Swaminarayan were his own disciples and enthusiastic admires, men who voluntarily repaired to hear his lessons, who now took a pride in doing him honor, and who would cheerfully fight to the last drop of blood rather than suffer of his garment to be handled roughly."

2) Mr. Williamson: The collector of Baroda (1825)

"Swaminarayan morality was said to be far better than any which could be learned from the Shastras (scripture). He preached a great degree of purity, forbidding his disciples so much as to look on any woman whom they passed. He condemned theft and bloodshed and those villages and districts that had received him from being among the worst, were now among the best and most orderly in the provinces. Nor was this all in so much as he was said to have destroyed the yoke of castes, to have preached one God, and in short to have made some considerable approaches to the truth, that I could not but hope he might be an appointed instrument to prepare the way for the Gospel."

3) Henry George Briggs:

"But the genius of Lord Swaminarayan was not confined simply to the rigid re-establishment of Hindu worship in virgin integrity. It was also directed against the irregularities of the age and to the recovery of thousands Gujarat, whose means of subsistence hitherto were equally lawless and precarious of his success in this latter respect there is abundant testimony from the vast hordes who have been reclaimed to honest and industrious pursuits, while the present undisturbed the state of the country compared to its condition previously, will speak volumes for him."

4) Sir Monier Williams: Boden Professor of Sanskrit, Oxford (1887)
"Lord Swaminarayan was a celibate, virtuous, self controlled, austere, ascetical, yet withal large hearted philanthropic, with a great aptitude for learning."

5) James Burgess:

"Lord Swaminarayan was a prophet. Without taking help of any rich man, he released thousands of people from all sort of vices and unrighteousness and made them to lead moral, pious, virtuous and righteous life. Swaminarayan was worshipped equally right from the great kings to the poorest in the society or from highly learned spiritual scholars to the illiterate and brute people. His humanity squeezed the deviltry or wickedness of his enemies.

At death of Lord Swaminarayan five hundred thousands heads of families holding his tenets and about five hundred Sadhus ascetics."

6) Mr. Bavis:

"Those who are initiated as Sadhus in this sect are behest to endure all sorts of persecutions and tortures from wicked people. Also they are forbidden to oppose them and not to keep any grudge for them in their hearts. This is the magnanimity of this sect by his sermons; the morality to the society was raised to a very high level."

Page 1 of 2

7) Professor Pryns Hopkins, London University: Page 2 of 2

"Swaminarayan had unique super talent and personality. He being the Almighty was never found reserved. Even though he was living an austere life of an ascetic, he was always cheerful and humorous. He used to sing, play, wrestle and cut jokes also. Such luminous wonderful extraordinary personality did not vanish after leaving this world. He has manifested himself to many people at the time of leaving this world and even after it."

8) Bow-Bells: who wrote in his article.

"The most intelligent people in the India, even while they regret (as Hindus), the leveling nature of his system, acknowledge their belief that Swaminarayan preaching has produced great effect in improving the morals of the people."

9) Poet Nanalal: (well known kavi)
The spiritual atmosphere in the temples of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, the saintness and detachment of its sadhus, the purity of its disciples, enthusiasms in its festivals, the decency of its moral self-control, its open-depth ness for other faiths. If you sit below the dome of a Swaminarayan temple and one experience that the soul is pacified, all distress are soothed, streams of nectar are experienced and one feels as if divine bliss is showering from heaven. Only if you experience these, accept the Swaminarayan Sampradaya as the true pathway to God.

10) Kishorlal Mashruwala: Proficient Author

"Swaminarayan wad the first to incorporate non-Hindus into Hindu Dharma. The famous Ardeshar Kotwal of Surat, a parsi and some khoja Muslims adopted the Sampradaya. At a time when Gujarat-Kathiawad was engrossed in darkness, Lord swaminarayan has enlightened innumerable souls, and fired thousands with a spirit of do-or-die on His commands, subjugated the looting instinct of Kathis and Kolis. He has uplifted women by giving them their rightful status in society."

11) The Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade:

"Lord swaminarayan was acclaimed as the last of the old Hindu Reformers."

12) G. Sukumaran Nair: Vedanta Philosopher

"Mahatma Gandhi of Gujarat also imbibed this religious universal message of Swaminarayan and his doctrine of Ahimsa to liberate our nation from foreign domination and restore to us our dignity and status."

13) Mahatama Gandhi: The father of India

There are many religious sects in India, but the Swaminarayan fellowship is very attractive and worthy to be praised. I have a great honor for it."

14) Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: Deputy Prime Minister of India

The fragrance of high morality was spread up all over Gujarat by the effect of the pious and virtuous conduct of Shree Lord Swaminarayan and his saints. This fellowship has played a great deal in changing over the thousands of ordinary illiterate brutal hearts into highly moral and cultural ones."

15) M.C Parekh: Historian and Christian author

Indeed, so remarkable are the life and work of Lord Swaminarayan that is no exaggeration to say that these constitute a very important chapter not only in the religious life of India, but in the history of the Religion in general. In Him, Hinduism approximates to the perfect Form of religion as in few others, and his life, work and the movement he led, have few parallels in the entire range of History.

The first of the fifteen observations and opinions in this article is from Bishop Reginald Heber, a chronicler of the beginnings of the Swaminarayan sect and one who had conversed with the Swami on theological questions. With regard to Bishop Heber, Williams reports elsewhere that "Some accounts circulated [at the time] that Heber was so favorably impressed by ethical teaching and the theology of [Swaminarayan] that he decided it was not necessary to send Christian missionaries to Gujarat." However, Williams continues, Heber himself noted that "[o]n the whole it was plain that his [Swaminarayan's] advances towards truth had not yet been so great as I had been told."[18] The quotation on the website (no. 1) does not address theology but rather sour grapes: Heber's aloof guards escorted him faithfully but impersonally, while the loving disciples of the Swami would, he thought, "cheerfully fight to the last drop of blood rather than suffer of his garment to be handled roughly." Other British

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[18]   See Williams 2001, 99.

and Europeans are quoted on the excellence of the values and ideals of the Swaminarayan sampradaya. Following them are opinions in the same vein by Indians, including Mahatama Gandhi. The last opinion on the second page comes from an Indian described as a "Historian and Christian Author," stating, "Indeed, so remarkable are the life and work of Lord Swaminarayan that these constitute a very important chapter in … the history of the Religion in general. In Him, Hinduism approximates to the perfect Form of religion as in few other." It is apparent that the views of the British and then the Christian West toward the movement were and are very important to underscore.

The third article – which depicts and describes the gifting of the *Shikshapatri* to Sir Malcolm – appears not only on the Downey website also on other Swaminarayan webpages. Both the Vadtal and Downey Mandirs' websites paste the picture and article describing Malcolm's receipt of the *Shiksapatri* directly from the BAPS website.

Figure 17: Third religious article posted on the website for the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, 2009

All three divisions of the Swaminarayan movement (BAPS, ISSM, and ISSO) regard this event as pivotal in the history and nature of the Sampradaya. Recognition by the British seems to be a touchstone for the Swaminarayan's followers. His spiritual and political power impressed not only Hindus but also – and especially – representatives of the British Raj, such that the sect gained the status of a modern and viable religious tradition in the West as well as in India. *This* sect of Hinduism is to be highly regarded by and in the modern Western world.

The Manufacture of New Religious Artifacts

Cyber religion can be infinitely mutable in a way texts cannot. No immediate textual literacy is required for daily *murti darshan* (ritual of glancing at the deity).[19] All that is needed is an image of the deity. As such, it does not matter who posts the picture of a *murti* or whether a picture is manipulated. Every image of a *murti* is authoritative merely by its presence. This is born out by several popular offerings on the Downey mandir's website. Its digital wallpapers and its homepage illustrate the startling truth that Photoshop has become a powerful tool in manufacturing new religious artifacts in the cultural context of the Internet.

The website's home page features a photoshopped composite of the temple signed by the webmaster himself:

Figure 18: Homepage for the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, 2009

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[19]   See Brosius 2009, 19.

A stylized figure of Swaminarayan wreathed in red, white, and yellow flowers for *darshan* stands in the street before the temple, and the façade of the temple is decorated with a portrait of the acharya of the Vadtal diocese, Acharya Maharaj Shree Rakeshprasadji Maharaj, flanked by the acharya's name and "H.H.A. 1008." This four-color image is superimposed on a larger, reversed image of the temple, in monochrome, from which flies the American flag. Neither the archarya's portrait nor the American flag are to be found on the temple itself on Lakewood Boulevard.
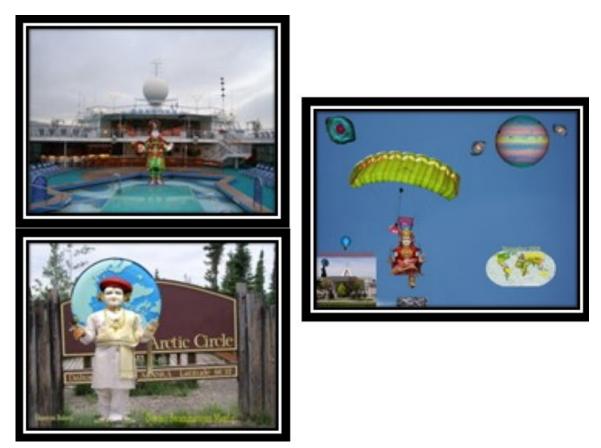
Figure 19: Front of the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Downey, 2009

The entrance to the *website* immediately signals the Downey temple's triple allegiance, to the Swaminarayan sampradaya, the Vadtal diocese, and America (as of October 2009, two clocks have been added: one for California time and one for the time in Vadtal, India).

The wallpapers, which all but one of the respondents (including the sadhus) had downloaded to their computers, exemplify the assertion of the omnipresence of Swaminarayan. A couple of the wallpapers are mainstream images of *murti*s and temples (cut and pasted from other Swaminarayan websites, including BAPS). Most, however, are more liberal: with the help of Photoshop, Swaminarayan appears on a cruise ship, in the Arctic Circle and parasailing.

Figure 20-22: Wallpapers downloadable from the website for the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, 2009

Viewing the Downey Mandir wallpapers online, Brosius commented by email that while many of the temple's wallpapers "have a clear affinity to mainstream pilgrimage iconographies, studio photography and religious teleserials and films," she was very surprised by others. Several of them clearly demonstrate the omnipotency of Swaminarayan by using photoshopped images to conflate new realities and new religio-political *darshan*s that serve to both "locate the satsangi in the Western diaspora and reinforce the ties to an emergent and powerful India (be proud of India and the U.S. military force)."[20] She went on to say that the military-inspired ones "demonstrate an intimacy to U.S. war iconography…which could reveal much about the position of the Indian diaspora in the multicultural context and national identity."[21]

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[20] See Brosius, email message to author, October 16, 2009.

[21] See Ibid.

Figure 23-24: Two of the "militarized" wallpapers downloadable from website for the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, 2009

In answer to my questions about the guns and the fighter jets (which he misidentified as B-52s), the webmaster seemed to support Brosius's thesis: he stated that such pictures were of not Indian but American war planes and guns. The Grand Canyon wallpaper (see fig. 17) was created on India Independence Day, so the picture the Grand Canyon was used because the rock formation on the rim from which the Indian flag flies resembles the Red Fort in Delhi. Still, when Swaminarayan is superimposed on the wing of a Stealth bomber, he is dressed in the colors of India and carries the Indian flag in one hand and large armaments in the other.

Figure 25: "Militarized" wallpaper downloadable from the website for the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, 2009

The webmaster's explanation of these conjunctions of Swaminarayan and lethal weapons was that he was again referencing Indian Independence and, especially, the power of modern India. One of the sadhus had the Grand Canyon picture as the wallpaper on his laptop.

During an interview, my research assistant asked about the wallpapers. The sadhu initially waved his hand over all of them dismissively, stating that he and the other sadhus cared only about the theology presented on the site. When asked about the guns and fighter jets that appear in several, the sadhu vehemently proclaimed that a gun placed in the Swami's hand purifies it, as the Swami had promoted nonviolence. "It is Swaminarayan saying, 'No, you do not need this gun – throw it away.'" This picture is analogous, he said, to the image, found on many websites and in the temple itself, of the Swami sitting with peacefully with lions and tigers. "Both are elements of violence, but both are irrelevant and harmless in the presence of Swaminarayan." That evening, after the interview, the wallpaper of the Swami on the stealth bomber was removed from the site.

The Downey website is constructed purposefully to tie the traditional to the realities and especially geographies of a diasporic religion. Theologically, as the wallpapers pointedly illustrate Swaminarayan is everywhere – and, through the World Wide Web, so are the mandir in Downey and its head diocese in India. I could perceive no problems within the sampradaya about the content of either website or the Swaminarayan's presence in cyberspace. Indeed, the overwhelming response to everything on the Downey mandir's website was

favorable, and the number of hits testifies to its popularity. The websites exist with the approval of the sadus and acharyas and thus are self-evidentially sacred sites for *darshan* and instruction. Given these realities, a palpable tension developed between the scholar and practitioners as I pressed for explanations for the choices of material posted on the site.

The computer and its applications have inspired the invention of new, or the transformation of old, ways of 'seeing' theophanies. Chris Helland makes the case that "For those individuals who participate in online religious activity, there is no separation between their offline life and experiences and their online life and experiences, and their religious activities and worldview permeate both environments. For those people who practice online religion, the Internet is not some place 'other' but recognized as a part of their everyday life."[22] Thus, to discuss the website's content is not ever a casual discussion of the posting of a selection of texts and images. It is a venture into the realm of theological discourse – specifically, into what Alex Wright has identified as "the computer world's unexplored frontiers," the territory where "translating the slippery stuff of [religious experience and] human language into binary values will always be an imperfect science."[23] Still, if any religion can get close, it is Hinduism: Hinduism celebrates the sight of God, encouraging its adherents to gaze upon incarnated deities at every opportunity and in any space, from the dashboard of a taxi to the inner sanctum of a temple. As we increasingly live in the digital mode, cyberspace has become, however oddly, increasingly tangible. As Jeff Zaleski has noted, the computer no longer brings about "a break from the body,"[24] whether human or divine.

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[22]   See Helland 2005, 12.
[23]   See Wright 2009.
[24]   See Zaleski 1997, 233.

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