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## 3

## Validating Identity, Spirituality, and Space for BAPS Hindus in India and the Diaspora

### Introduction

In December 2007, Michael Witty, a senior representative of *The Guinness Book of World Records*, travelled to New Delhi and Ahmedabad (Gujarat) in India to speak at events associated with the Hindu entity called Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). After attending the dedication of a BAPS facility in New Delhi, regarded as the largest Hindu temple in the world, Witty moved on to the next BAPS function in Ahmedabad where he remarked:

[H]aving seen the BAPS organization in London, Delhi and here [Ahmedabad], the volunteers who have given up time for free, [I believe] BAPS does not need Guinness Book of World Records, Guinness Book of World Records needs BAPS. (Kim 2009: 362)

In this chapter, I discuss how BAPS, a sectarian and schismatic branch of Hinduism, has successfully developed in India over the last 120 years and has now expanded into a worldwide movement serving Hindus in India and the diaspora. I start with a brief overview of Hinduism's main theological schools and locate BAPS in the overall scheme of Hinduism. I then identify some of the key elements of this movement by looking at its institutional and regional underpinnings. I argue that the primary motivation for BAPS' growth and expansion is twofold.

First, its revised theological position on reincarnation, which paves the way for devotees to become perfect and attain moksha—release from the endless cycle of rebirths.

Second, its perceived need to define and validate itself as an acceptable faith organization within mainstream Hinduism.

I demonstrate how BAPS validates itself through its own forms of spirituality and the establishment of mega temples. I also show the shifting constructs and contexts that BAPS negotiates and reveal how the movement has cleverly blended neo-Hindu spirituality with capitalism and materiality, as evidenced in its massive temple-building projects.

## Hinduism<sup>1</sup>

Hinduism, unlike other world religions, is a faith without a single founder. Neither can followers of the faith point to a definitive text or a central spiritual hierarchy. Recent studies on Hinduism have, therefore, introduced the concept of 'Hinduisms' (Knott 1998; Oddie 2006; Zavos 2012) as a means of explaining the breadth and variety of this faith. However, traditionally, and in practice, Hinduism has been understood as a faith with four broad theological schools—Shaivism, Shaktism, Smartism, and Vaishnavism.

1. In Shaivism, Shiva is the Supreme Being who is creator, preserver, destroyer, and revealer. Shaivism is also known as *Pantha* in Sanskrit. This form of Hinduism is practiced in India and Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Cambodia. Devotees strive to become one with Shiva through temple worship and the practice of yoga.<sup>2</sup>
2. Shaktism consists of the worship of Shakti or Devi—the Hindu Mother God. It is popular in the Indian states of Bengal and Assam.<sup>3</sup>
3. Smartism is different from the other schools because it is not bound to the worship of any particular deity. For this reason, Smartism is sometimes referred to as the 'liberal' school within Hinduism. Smartism is usually passed on through one's family, and when a woman marries a Smartist she usually converts to her husband's faith.<sup>4</sup>
4. Vaishnavism is based on the veneration of Vishnu and his 10 avatars including Rama and Krishna. Vishnu is the Supreme Lord in the Hindu *Trimurti* (three images of trinity). Adherents are nonascetic, monastic, and devoted to meditative and ecstatic chanting. Devotional or bhakti worship is prevalent in the Vaishna denomination and its religious texts are based on the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Puranas.<sup>5</sup>

Swaminarayan Hinduism is one of the sects of Vaishnava Hinduism. It was founded by Swami or Swaminarayan (1781–1830), a religious reformer in the Indian state of Gujarat. Swaminarayan Hinduism regards Swaminarayan as the ultimate and perfect manifestation of

God and an incarnation of Vishnu (New World Encyclopedia 2015a). BAPS devotees believe that Swaminarayan is superior to all previous avatars (manifestations of the divine in human beings) but, as we shall see in the forgoing section, BAPS takes this doctrine further.

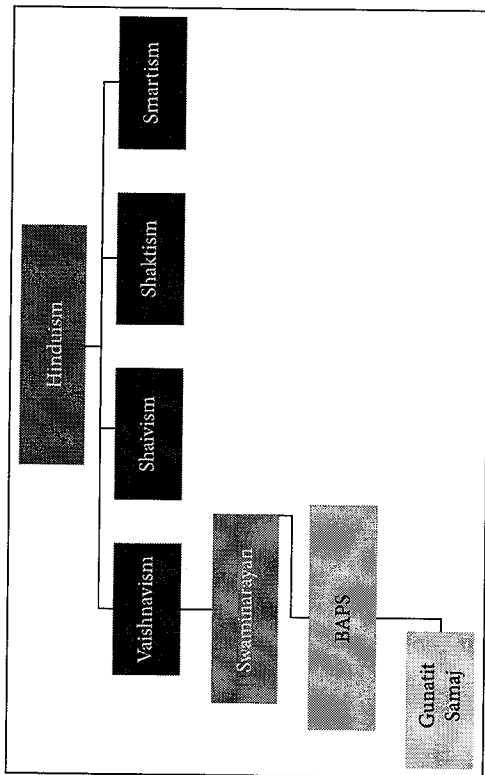
Prior to his death, Swaminarayan decided to establish a line of acharyas or spiritual overseers as his successors. After his death, several divisions occurred, each with a different perspective on the issue of leadership succession (New World Encyclopedia 2015a).

## BAPS—A Schism Within This Sect

BAPS schismatic sect within Swaminarayan Hinduism (Figure 3.1) and the history of the organization bears witness to this fact. BAPS began when Shastriji Maharaj (born in 1865 as Dungan Patel) felt a strong leaning to promote a mode of worship that was based on the teachings of Swaminarayan who focused on devotional Hinduism called bhakti (Kim 2009). Maharaj's early efforts to propagate his interpretation of the faith were met with opposition from Vaishnava teachers and others hostile to Swaminarayan's bhakti teachings (Dave 2013; Kim 2009). In an effort to continue the practice of the Swami's teachings amidst growing opposition, some of the devotees attempted to revise Swaminarayan's teachings, omitting the disagreeable elements. However, in time, Maharaj was bold enough to reveal the fullness of Swaminarayan's teachings, which asserted that Swaminarayan and his closest devotee, Gunatitanand Swami, were essentially *Purusottam* (divine being) and *Akshar* (the abode of the divine being), respectively (Kim 2009). This controversial teaching about this doctrine was met with opposition from devotees and leaders who belonged to the Vartala diocese (Kim 2009; Williams 2001). As the opposition mounted, physical violence took place and eventually Shastriji Maharaj and his followers were forced to leave the Vartal group (one of the two dioceses in Gujarat). This was the inauspicious beginning of the new movement—BAPS.

The theological basis of BAPS rests on the doctrine of *Akshar Purushottam* whereby followers worship Swaminarayan as God (*Purusottam*), and Swaminarayan's choicest devotee Gunatitanand Swami as *Akshar*—the divine abode of God. The concept of *Akshar* has been interpreted variously by Swaminarayan denominations.

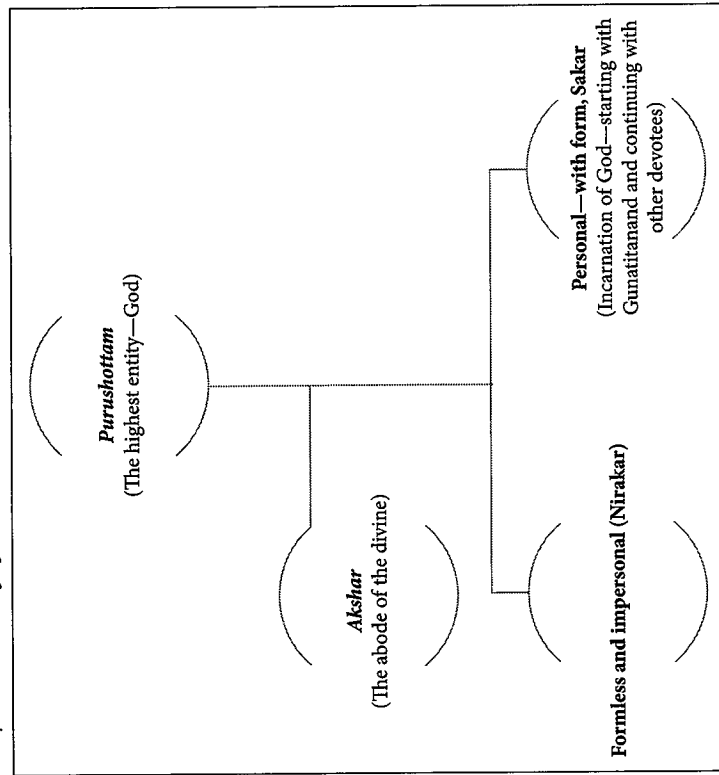
**Figure 3.1:**  
Where BAPS fits into the scheme of Hinduism



Source: James (2016).

The Swaminarayan *Sampraday*, the regional decision-making body in the cities of Vadtal, and Ahmedabad believes *Akshar* to be the divine abode of the supreme entity *Purushottam* (Kurien 2007). The BAPS denomination goes a step further to teach that *Akshar* is “an eternally existing spiritual reality having two forms, the impersonal and the personal” (Williams 2001: 8). Furthermore, BAPS claims that Gunatitanand Swami, the successor of Swaminarayan, was believed to be the first personal manifestation of *Akshar* and he started a spiritual line of ‘perfect devotees’ who provide “authentication of office through Gunatitanand Swami and back to Swaminarayan himself” (Williams 2001: 86). The Vadtal and Ahmedabad dioceses of the Swaminarayan Sampraday do not subscribe to this teaching (Williams 2001: 55–60). BAPS believes that the entity of *Akshar* continues in this world through a succession of ‘perfect devotees’, namely the spiritual leaders or gurus of the organization (Figure 3.2). These leaders are believed to continue spiritual succession through Gunatitanand Swami who is traced to Swaminarayan himself.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Pramukh Swami Maharaj (born in 1921), the current leader of BAPS, is regarded as the personification of *Akshar*, and Swaminarayan is present on earth through Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The living guru, and the continuing manifestation of God in the guru leaders, is what BAPS is all about.

**Figure 3.2:**  
The spiritual hierarchy of BAPS



Source: James (2016).

Hence, *Akshar Purushottam* is the main doctrine and forms the two middle names of BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha).

Gunatit Samaj, a splinter group from BAPS, was established in 1966 (Figure 3.1); this group believes that Gunatitanand, the closest devotee of Swaminarayan, is the true successor of the movement. Gunatit Samaj also had a major disagreement with BAPS on the place of women in the temple activities. BAPS is male-dominated and has clear rules separating women from men in temple activities, such as: Sadhus are strongly advised not to even look at women. Gunatit Samaj, now a worldwide movement in its own right, has a more inclusive approach to women joining its ranks as ascetics and close devotees unlike BAPS (Williams 2001).

## Revised Theology and Practices

One of the distinguishing theological doctrines of the BAPS movement is based on a new interpretation of the traditional Hindu teaching of reincarnation. For centuries, most of the Hindu schools subscribed to the doctrine of reincarnation—a foundational doctrine of Hinduism—in which the soul, which is seen as eternal and part of the larger spiritual realm, returns to the physical realm in a new body—either human or animal (New World Encyclopedia 2015b). Through reincarnation, an individual soul will undergo this cycle many times, learning new things and growing each time. In a lifetime, people build up karma (the law of cause and effect), based on their actions within that lifetime. This karma affects their future lives and existence. This cycle of reincarnation is called *samsara* and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived (karma). *Moksha* is the end of the death and rebirth cycle, and it signifies release and unification with Brahma—the ultimate source of all life (New World Encyclopedia 2015b).

BAPS' revisionist theology teaches that it is not necessary for devotees to go through successive rebirths to arrive at *moksha*. Devotees:

... with exceptionally good karmas, having attained some form of contact with God or the God-realized *Sādhu*, maybe released from having to undertake birth within the cycle of 8.4 million life forms. Instead, he would continue to take human births until, offering devotion to God, he earns the pleasure of God or the God-realized *Sādhu* and attains *moksha*.<sup>8</sup>

In one of his speeches, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the current BAPS leader, said:

On the path of *moksha*, serving at the wrong place is like trying to pass through a wall by banging one's head against it. It is not possible. But if one uses the door one can easily pass through; the God-realized *Sadhu* is the doorway to *moksha*. Pleasing such a *Sadhu* pleases God. Serving such a *Sadhu* bears fruit because he has no worldly desires, no wish for worldly fame or glory. (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha 2000c)

Therefore, BAPS believes that followers can transcend what it considers the miserable and perpetual cycle of rebirth. This is the attraction of BAPS.

Swaminarayan taught that the mind is often swayed by desires that would impede the devotee's release from *samsara*—the endless cycle of rebirths (Kim 2013). But if the mind and body were reshaped through discipline and useful action, the devotee will be freed from the cares of this world thus enabling *moksha*—release from the cycle of rebirths (Kim 2013). The teaching of *Akshar* plays a critical role in the overall scheme of ultimate liberation (Dave 2012). Swaminarayan's manifestation as *Purusottam* through the personal form of *Akshar* means that all BAPS devotees would be guided and helped both in this life and in the final release of their souls from the endless cycle of rebirths (Kim 2013).

To ensure this release from rebirth, devotees must adhere to the prescribed practices. *Nitya Puja* (daily prayer) is a daily devotional worship that entails a prayer ritual performed every morning. Devotees may recite a Sanskrit verse and invite Swaminarayan and *Akshar* to be present at their puja. This practice helps devotees to clear their minds, resulting in a calming effect on them. *Seva*, a stint of voluntary work for the benefit the community, is another BAPS requirement for devotees. Both these practices are pleasing to *Akshar* and *Purusottam*. Whereas social and relief efforts are encouraged, most of the voluntary work by BAPS members seems to be focused on the building of BAPS temples worldwide. Volunteers take time off and travel to overseas locations to help build in their area of expertise. BAPS has built a record number of mandirs, which are Hindu places of worship and centers for social and cultural activities. The BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir was completed in Atlanta, Georgia in August 2007 within a record time of 17 months, primarily because of the sacred *seva* (service) of volunteers 'utilizing 1.3 million volunteer hours'.<sup>9</sup>

BAPS has registered its charitable arm as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) affiliated with the UN, and it holds general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.<sup>10</sup>

## The Institutional Location in Gujarat

Swaminarayan was born with the name Ghanshyam Pande in Chhapaiya, Uttar Pradesh, India in 1781. In 1792, he began his pilgrimage

across India, and later settled in the state of Gujarat around 1799. In 1800, he was initiated into the Uddhav Sampraday<sup>11</sup> by his guru Ramanand Swami and was given the name Sahajanand Swami. In 1802, his guru handed over the leadership of the Uddhav Sampraday to him. Through this office, Swaminarayan introduced reformed teachings on Hinduism. After his death, the Swaminarayan Sampraday continued in two dioceses and splits took place within the organization and BAPS is one of the groups that emerged from such a split.

BAPS is described as a socio-spiritual organization, with 3,850 centers worldwide and more than 1 million followers:

... with its roots in the Vedas ... [BAPS is] founded on the pillars of practical spirituality, the BAPS reaches out far and wide to address the spiritual, moral and social challenges and issues faced in our world....<sup>12</sup>

It was founded in 1907 in Bochasan, Gujarat and was restricted to servicing Gujaratis until it expanded its spiritual operations to East Africa in 1969 because of the large numbers of Gujarati immigrants there.<sup>13</sup>

Its main nexus remains as Bochasan in Gujarat where the first stone temple was built; however, the world BAPS movement is administered from Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India by a board of trustees, with the spiritual head holding the twin roles of administrative president and religious head.

For many Indians, historically, Gujarat emanates a lot of religious sentiments. It was in this state that communal violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims and spiraled out of control, with clashes lasting for months. What was even more troubling was the fact that the violence reeked of the state government's involvement in favor of the Hindu majority (Jaffrelot 2007). Gujarat, a stronghold of the ruling BJP party, has also been seen as a testing ground for the nation of India especially in the context of the controversial issue of communalism and the BJP's vision of a Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu nation; Sinha 2014).<sup>14</sup>

Vijayakumar (2015) argued that BAPS temples are sites for a grand revision of Hindu devotional practices and their underlying meanings, which are informed by the historical reality of centuries of colonial and Islamic rule that in part led to India's partition. However, this assertion needs further substantiation. In fact, it would appear that BAPS has distanced itself from these past issues of communalism and nationalism to stay focused on the spirituality of its Hindu reformed faith.

Gujarat is also home to the Patel caste<sup>15</sup>—mainly landed peasants who prospered in farming to such an extent that they now control almost all the vital segments of the state's economy in trade, industry, and business enterprise. Gujaratis, like the Patel families, have also travelled and migrated to the West; and hence, the formation of BAPS in the countries outside of India mainly follows Gujarati migration patterns. BAPS' entry to countries beyond India started when Gujaratis immigrated to the former British colonies in Africa—Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (Dwyer 2004). Invariably, BAPS communities were started there in the late 1950s and soon temples were built. After the Africanization policy in the late 1960s, many Gujaratis began migrating to the United Kingdom, Canada, and then later to the United States; hence, BAPS began to blossom in these new lands (Dwyer 2004). The wealth and business acumen of Gujarati families, like the Patels, is a key reason for the rapid growth, expansion, and massive building programs of the movement worldwide.

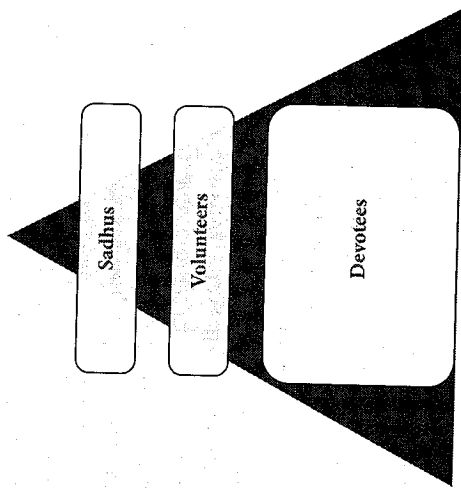
Therefore, it is fair to say that BAPS originated as a regional sect, then it became a national entity, and now it is a transnational movement.

Most of the 1 million followers worldwide are of Gujarati background and 970 are guru leaders—men called *sadhus*—who have taken vows of celibacy (Figure 3.3). Rigorous study, culminating in examinations, is required before *sadhus* can be formally initiated into leadership.

BAPS is a purist group and has strict prohibitions. For example, all adherents take a lifetime vow, which includes “No alcohol, No additions, No adultery, No meat, No impurity of body and mind as their five vows. Such pure morality and spirituality forms the foundation of the humanitarian services performed by BAPS.”<sup>16</sup>

At the apex of the BAPS organizational structure (Figure 3.3) is the current spiritual and administrative leader Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Below him are the 970<sup>17</sup> *sadhus*, followed by volunteer followers (around 55,000). At the base of the organizational pyramid are the devotees who carefully negotiate a purist lifestyle. Devotees called *satsangis* meet to sing *bhajans* (spiritual hymns) and listen to lessons based on two texts—Vachanamrut and Swami Vato. There is also a BAPS code of conduct contained in a book called *Shikshapatra*, which consists of 212 verses with injunctions that include dietary rules, such as avoiding garlic, onions, intoxicants, and the like.<sup>18</sup> Life in a BAPS

Figure 3.3:  
The organization of BAPS



Source: James (2016).

community also includes strict rules of engagement between males and females, and behavior at home and at the temples. The Gujarati language is important for active participation in temple worship, although teachings and texts are also available in Hindi and English — especially for devotees outside of India.

Anyone who attends the weekly assemblies at the nearest mandir (temple), or participates in the daily *arti* (worship) and follows the precepts and codes of conduct prescribed by Swaminarayan is considered to be a follower of BAPS.<sup>19</sup>

In answer to a question on whether women can take the role of sadhus (a male-dominated office), the current spiritual leader, Pramukh Swami Maharaj answered:

No, Lord Swaminarayan has not given any such *agna* [ruling], so we do not accept ladies as *sadhvis*. However, they may be initiated as *sankhya yogis*. These are mostly widows or women who wish not to marry and ... who remain in the *agna* [spiritual covering] of their parents or brothers and stay in the ladies' temple to spend their days engrossed in bhakti [devotion]. But as *sankhya yogis*, not *sadhvis*.<sup>20</sup>

BAPS's Hinduism is monotheistic and exclusive: there is only one divine being, one continuing revelation through the living BAPS leader and one way for followers to attain eternal bliss according to Swaminarayan.

There can be only one such Satpurush [living incarnation of God]. Shriji Maharaj manifests only through Aksharbraman and eternal Aksharbraman is only one. God's manifestation is naturally, therefore, through one. A King may have more than one son, but only one ... inherits the throne. (Akshar Puroshottam Upasana 2012: 96)

## Opulence and Materiality

In the twenty-first century, BAPS temples have increasingly become postmodern sites of capitalism, consumption and tourism, as well as places to reinforce neo-Hindu beliefs and practices for devotees. The Swaminarayan Akshardham complex (SAC) in New Delhi, supposedly the biggest temple in the world, attracts more than 2,000 visitors and tourists on a week day and more than 5,000 on weekends (Brosius 2010). Interestingly, the BAPS leaders who built SAC by the banks of the historic Yamuna river failed to get the usual clearances from the local environment Ministry: "serious concerns were set aside ... the state bent backwards and broke its own laws" (Nanda 2009: 135). However, no penalties were imposed, and SAC's opening of the temple was unhindered. The lack of environmental clearance and penalty could be due to the fact that the authorities view the temple as a commercial enterprise. It is no secret that SAC is treated as a tourist destination by the Delhi Tourism who describe it as a monument that:

... epitomizes 10,000 years of Indian culture in all its breathtaking grandeur, beauty, wisdom and bliss. It brilliantly showcases the essence of India's ancient architecture, traditions and timeless spiritual messages.... The Swaminarayan Akshardham complex was built in only five years through the blessings of HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj ... and the colossal devotional efforts of 11,000 artisans and thousands of BAPS volunteers....<sup>21</sup>

Seventy percent of visitors are followers of Hindu beliefs including the BAPS faith. The SAC is located in 60 acres of land with a temple, buildings, themed landscaped gardens, a musical fountain, a cafeteria, shops, and an IMAX theatre. The temple charges an entrance fee and on top of that there are ticketed events such as exhibitions, demonstrations, tours, as well as the large food court and picnic grounds. In the week days, there are lectures and classes.

Visitors to SAC worship, gain more information of Swaminarayan through multimedia presentations, and witness the musical fountain at sunset and sunrise; both these times are considered holy times for Hindus and so the fountain is intentionally built to fit in with Hindu practices and beliefs (James 2010).

However, SAC has not been accepted by all. For example, it has invited critical responses from scholars such as Vijayakumar (2015), who questions this new kind of religious experience that blends Western high tech media with ancient devotionism and turns "sacred spaces into 'spectacles' through an uninhibited adoption of entertainment technology and an unmistakable touch of Disney" (Vijayakumar 2015: 1).

Temples are significant for every Hindu but for BAPS members the temple takes on additional significance, pointing to identity and legitimacy. Festivals are the times when the temples become 'larger than life' sites. The temples are filled to capacity during festivals such as Vasant Panchami, a Hindu festival celebrating the advent of spring but for BAPS, this festival has added significance, as it points to the time when Swaminarayan compiled the sacred code—*Shikshapatri*. During the Diwali festival,<sup>22</sup> these temples are transformed into Indian cultural centers where week-long celebrations showcase Hindu art, images, and color in a spectacular manner using multimedia presentations. BAPS temples reinforce the faith and reify neo-Hinduism<sup>23</sup> at home as well as outside India. When the BAPS Bochasan temple celebrated its centenary as the first BAPS temple in Gujarat in April 2007, a grand Vedic *yajna* (worship according to the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures) was held in Bochasan, graced by the presence of the BAPS leader Pramukh Swami and some 20,000 devotees.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the BAPS temples are made of marble and handcrafted in the most intricate design and religious artistry. In London, half a million pilgrims and tourists visit the magnificent BAPS Neasden Temple

every year. Built in 1995, this BAPS temple was constructed entirely from marble and limestone.<sup>25</sup>

The first traditional Hindu mandir in Africa was built by BAPS in Nairobi, Kenya. It boasts of being constructed entirely from intricately carved wood.<sup>26</sup> BAPS continues to break its own records in its large-scale temple-building projects. Currently the world's largest Hindu temple outside of India is a BAPS temple in Robbinsville, New Jersey (USA). It is a 162-acre complex built with the help of 2,000 artisans in Rajasthan (India) who handcrafted the designs in Italian and Rajasthani marble. The finished pieces were then assembled in New Jersey by a team of master craftsmen (Wang 2014; Yagniki 2014). Previous to this, the largest temple was a BAPS temple built in the Bible Belt region of Atlanta, Georgia (USA) occupying 30 acres at a cost of US\$90 million.

The affluence and wealth of the BAPS movement has invited scholarly concerns about its underlying motivations (Brosius 2010, 2012). Certainly there is a definite disjunction between the current display of wealth and materiality and the original BAPS teachings. Swaminarayan's teachings are clear that his followers are to take the five vows and to "forswear all worldly goods and all concerns of this world. They are not even to possess any article made of metal...." (Williams 2001: 20–21). Brosius (2012) pointed out that village visitors to SAC in New Delhi were overwhelmed by the flagrant display of modern technology at the temple—for some, this was the first time they saw change machines (for money) or lawn-watering machines.

The conspicuous materiality of the temples has situated BAPS as a prestigious sociocultural faith community and one definitely associated with middle class wealth. This, according to Brosius (2012), encourages a modern-day form of sensitization, a term used by the sociologist Srinivas (1952) to refer to the lower classes in India who desire to move up in the social and economic ladder by joining appropriate groups.

Brosius acknowledged that BAPS attracts people of all classes, but he argued that some come into the movement to draw on the "well-oiled social and professional networks of the members" (Brosius 2010: 166). And there is no doubt that the global network of the movement has created a transnational religious grouping known not only for its faith but for its socioeconomic status and opportunity.

From his study of the movement in Fiji, Kelly (1988) defended BAPS' infatuation with materiality, by asserting that bhakti devotionism and

capitalism are 'two influential grammars' and that Gujaratis 'relate to God through capital' (Kelly 1988: 5). However, the opulence and the magnitude of the temple-building projects continue to disturb both Hindu devotees and scholars alike.

### A Habitus for Diaspora Hindus

Foucault (1926–84) concluded that power in society was 'ubiquitous' and beyond agency or structure, and Bourdieu (1930–2002) saw power as cultural creations using symbolic representations to relegitimize itself (Gaventa 2003). According to the latter, the principal means for the creation of power is what he calls 'habitus' or socialized norms that reinforce behavior and thinking. Habitus is "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Navarro 2006: 16). Habitus is enduring and transferrable from one context to another; "it is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period" (Navarro 2006: 16).

Arguably, BAPS' habitus is primarily defined by the devotional life of its devotees who enter into a lifelong worship experience out of intense gratitude to the living guru who takes the form of *Akshar* and is linked to Swaminarayan who is *Purushottam* or the divine being. From Gujarat, the Hindu reformed movement has transported its ideas and practices to major cities in the world where BAPS followers are found. So, American Hindu Indians from all sectors of society meet weekly in one of the 100 mandirs (temples) in the United States to gain the path of bliss.

The central religious tenet for BAPS satsangis is bhakti, or devotion to God. Bhakti, when combined with dharma, gnan (spiritual knowledge), and vairagya (detachment), leads to one becoming an ideal devotee, or an *ekantik bhakta*. This is achieved in the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha by devoting oneself to God as per the example set by the guru. The guru is the ideal bhakta of God; hence, the guru guides spiritual aspirants on the path to spiritual bliss, a state that he enjoys continuously.<sup>27</sup>

BAPS devotees are also encouraged to participate in the early morning puja, a prayer time that particularly includes Swaminarayan and his living *Akshar*, Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

The word 'puja' comes from the Sanskrit word 'puj', meaning to worship or to adore. A devotee can communicate with God during daily puja and convey one's concerns and feelings directly to God. Puja helps an individual concentrate on the divine murti of God and his Gunatit sadhu.<sup>28</sup>

Arranged marriages still prevail within the BAPS community but in the case of the diaspora BAPS families, parents may not have to look to India for brides for their sons because the community of Indians in the West may provide what they need. Social gatherings organized by the temples cater for this. However, strict observance is upheld in temple worship where males and females are seated separately even in the Western countries. Ballard's (1994) study of diaspora Indians revealed the concept of what he termed *Desh Pardesh*—the activity of Indian groups reconstructing their own norms and habitus from their homelands in newly settled areas, to give them a sense of belonging, self-respect, and acceptance.

BAPS members are involved in social service (*seva*) and as noted in the previous section, I pointed out how *seva* has been linked to BAPS' view of reincarnation. However, social service is also a form of transnational citizenship in the diverse areas where BAPS operates, thus enhancing globalized partnerships (Brosius 2010, 2012).

Whereas BAPS' authenticity was contested in India, especially in the early days of its formation, it is now accepted in the West and furthermore it is presented as mainline Hinduism to non-Hindus and even some diaspora Hindus. Peach and Gale (2003) have shown how Western landscapes are changing, primarily because the value of Western tolerance has brought about a new engagement with the exotic and mystical aspects of Eastern religions.

The first wave of Indian migration to the United States took place in the 1960s when migrants sought to congregate in large cities such as Chicago, Houston, and New York. The early Indian immigrant generation focused on India, and Hindu meetings were held in the homes of Hindus. However, the second generation of Hindus seems to be motivated by the urge to articulate their faith as a way of life to Americans. Their desire is not so much to win converts (Hinduism

is not known for its 'missionary' intent) but "it's about making their faith less exotic to others while making it more meaningful to their own modern American lives" (Gilgoff 2011).

Therefore, BAPS' purist Hinduism is still observed by Hindu Indians in America—at home, in the temple, and in social and recreational spheres of life. BAPS Hindus are still Hindu in faith but they are also engaged with the broader American culture and in the process forging a distinctly American Hindu identity that is interwoven into the national fabric.

### Negotiating Other Cultures and Systems

From colonial days, Swaminarayan was an astute student of cultures, and he made regular contacts with colonial rulers, including the Governor of Gujarat and the Bishop of the Anglican Church.<sup>29</sup> He kept records of all correspondence, especially letters of commendation from British officials. This practice of keeping records has continued.

BAPS' foray into global contexts has gained recognition, commendations, and awards from secular, media, and government officials and has successfully positioned the movement positively in the public sphere. On 8 July 2000, representatives from the Guinness World Records presented the current leader of BAPS, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, with certificates marking his entries into the world famous record book (BAPS 2000a).

In October 2000, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was warmly welcomed to the US House of Representatives and just prior to that, he addressed the UN-sponsored Millennium Peace summit at the UN headquarters in New York (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha 2000b). In November 2005, the former president of India A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the former prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh, and the former leader of opposition Lal Krishna Advani, together with the BAPS leader Pramukh Swami Maharaj, inaugurated Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi, India.<sup>30</sup> In 2007, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was awarded the Guinness World Record for a single individual inaugurating the largest number of Hindu temples worldwide (Kim 2016).

BAPS has negotiated the discursive practices of local councils in Western nations where its plan to build BAPS temples was many a

times contested by local residents and government officials. Kim (2012) documented how BAPS' failed attempt to receive temple-building approval from the East Windsor Council in the United States enabled the leadership to take great pains in submitting the application for the Robbinsville temple in New Jersey, USA. BAPS was armed with a team of lawyers, experts in engineering, architecture, environment, traffic, and BAPS Hinduism. Kim remarked that even the engineering and other experts not related to Hinduism made reference to the religious aspects of the BAPS movement (Kim 2012). They focused on similarities of their faith with Western conceptions of faith in an effort to be more appealing: "BAPS translated its Hindu tradition to fit the contours of a universalized conception of religion" in dealing with the Robbinsville Planning Board (Kim 2012: 419). All this reflects a potpourri of cross-cultural skills (legal, political, cultural, and regional) that BAPS has amassed at negotiating new public spheres.

### Conclusion

From one temple in Gujarat, BAPS has become a global movement reaching millions of people around the world with more than 800 mandirs and 3,850 centers.

BAPS is a reformed Hindu movement, which traces its roots to the illustrious Hindu reformer Swaminarayan. BAPS is a subset of the Swaminarayan organization, based on its controversial belief that since Swaminarayan's death, he has become *Purushottam* (God) and his successors are *Akshar* or the incarnation of God. Swaminarayan adapted the best of the religious traditions known to him to create "a new ... sacred world [revitalizing] the experience of sacred person, sacred space and sacred time" (Williams 2001: 100–01).

Since its inception in 1907, BAPS has had to define itself not only to its followers but to its contenders—the Vaishna Hindu School, other Hindu organizations, the colonial administration, and also more recently, to government officials and the general public in Western countries where BAPS has rapidly established itself. Its prolific and massive temple-building projects are in part motivated by the need to authenticate itself in the face of its new ideological framework within Hinduism. The wealth of the Gujarati followers enables BAPS' dreams

to be fulfilled as a transnational Hindu organization. BAPS members' high involvement in social and voluntary work could be attributed to BAPS' doctrine that sacred works can save devotees from the endless cycle of rebirths and bring moksha.

Despite having attained the status of a transnational movement, BAPS' organizational philosophy and structure may need to be continually changed and sharpened to reach and sustain its worldwide membership. Meaning-making in diasporic contexts is a continuous struggle to ensure that the movement is reproducing itself in its changing environments.

BAPS has successfully established a Hindu habitus for its followers in India and in the West for the diaspora Indians. The key challenge for BAPS is that its intersection with capitalism and materiality may mean that over time, the spiritual foundations of the movement slowly erode and BAPS becomes merely what it is now categorizes itself as 'a worldwide civic and religious movement' and 'a socio-spiritual group' (Kim 2012: 419).

Another possible challenge BAPS will face in the coming years is whether it can sustain its purist Hindu teachings as new generations of Hindus are born in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other Western nations; in all likelihood, future Hindus will become immersed with the prevailing cultures of the day and lose their connection to Gujarat—the spiritual headquarters of BAPS. If so, McCarthy Brown's (2008) description of what she terms the 'cosmological problem'—practicing religion which is linked to a place when the followers are no longer in that place—may be relevant to the BAPS movement.

## Notes

1. Knott's definition of Hinduism is becoming more accepted in religious studies circles.

Hinduism defies our desire to define and categorize it. It is both a dynamic phenomenon of the modern world, evolving from the combined imaginations of many individuals and groups, Hindu and non-Hindu, and the sum of its many parts—its traditions, myths, institutions, rituals, and ideas—its many Hinduisms. It has the power and diversity to capture the imaginations of Hindu and non-Hindu alike,

and the capacity to challenge all preconceived ideas about what a religion is. (Knott 1998: 117)

2. See <https://www.himalayanacademy.com/readlearn/basics/four-sects>
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. The Vedas are the primary texts of Hinduism. There are four main Vedas and they contain hymns, incantations, and rituals for Hindu living. The Upanishads are a continuation of the Vedic tradition. This is where the teaching on the possibility of the soul's unification with Brahman is mentioned. The Puranas are post-Vedic texts. They contain narratives of the history of the universe from creation to destruction. Also, see <https://www.himalayanacademy.com/readlearn/basics/four-sects>
6. Vartal is a town in Gujarat where BAPS has deep and historic connections.
7. See <http://www.swaminarayan.org/lordswaminarayan/>
8. See <http://www.swaminarayan.org/faq/bapsgeneral.htm#3> (para 9).
9. This BAPS temple is constructed with three types of stone—Turkish Limestone, Italian marble, and Indian pink sandstone. "More than 34,000 individual pieces were carved by hand in India, shipped to the USA and assembled in Lilburn like a giant 3-D puzzle." See <http://www.baps.org/Global-Network/North-America/Atlanta/Visitor-Info.aspx>
10. BAPS Charities (formerly BAPS Care International) is an international non-religious, charitable organization. Its focus on service to society is stated in the organization's vision statement that "every individual deserves the right to a peaceful, dignified, and healthy way of life. And by improving the quality of life of the individual, we are bettering families, communities, our world, and our future" (See: <http://www.bapscharities.org/>, accessed on 5 May 2016).
11. BAPS Charities carries out this vision through a several development programs which include health, education, the environment, and natural disaster recovery. *Sampraday* can be translated as a spiritual order, tradition, or a religious system. It relates to a succession of masters and disciples, which ensures stability to the religious order.
12. See <http://www.baps.org/Spiritual-Living.aspx>
13. See <http://www.baps.org/About-BAPS/TheFounder%E2%80%93BhagwanSwami%20naranjan/Life/Timeline.aspx>
14. The concept of a *rashtra* is usually related to the *Hindutva* vision of an India for Hindus only. However, Sinha (2014) argues that the connotation is actually inclusive in its origin and does not necessarily allude to a Hindu theocratic state. The etymology of the *rashtra* is from the Hindu legendary Bharat, the son of Shakuntala and Dushyant. Therefore, in terms of epistemology, the term 'Bharat' is more religious than Hindu (see Sinha 2014).
15. The founder of BAPS Shastriji Maharaj was of the Patel caste. His birth name was Dungan Patel.
16. See <http://www.baps.org/Spiritual-Living.aspx>
17. This was the number of sadhus in 2014. As examinations are held regularly, more sadhus are initiated upon the successful completion of all the requirements.

18. The Shikshapatri is a key scripture to all followers of Swaminarayan followers and the BAPS community. It is considered the basis of the sect. The Shikshapatri was written in Vadtal in 1826. It is a dharma text, providing detailed instructions on how to live a spiritually uplifting life. Originally written in Gujarati, it is available in Hindi and English. There is also a digital version.
19. See <http://www.swaminarayan.org/faq/bapsgeneral.htm#3>
20. The place of women is a contested topic in BAPS. Although there is strong evidence for concluding that women and men are not equal, the concept of inequality in BAPS does not necessarily indicate subordination or domination by one gender over the other. Women often find ways to negotiate their own forms of power in different roles which at time seem equally as important as those forms of power traditionally held by men (Rudert 2004). BAPS has taken pains to shed off these negative perceptions by hosting women's conventions and other such activities. See <http://www.swaminarayan.org/pramukhswami/searchingquestions/156.htm>
21. See [http://www.indiatourismcatalog.com/india\\_states\\_travel\\_guide/delhi/delhi\\_akshardham.html](http://www.indiatourismcatalog.com/india_states_travel_guide/delhi/delhi_akshardham.html)
22. Diwali, also spelt in two other ways: Diwali or Deepavali, is an ancient Hindu festival known as the festival of lights. It is usually celebrated in autumn in the Northern hemisphere and in spring in the Southern hemisphere.
23. Neo-Hinduism is a label that has been in use since the 1950s. Earlier labelling of 'Neo-Hindu' was already in existence prior to the 1950s but it was used more in a pejorative way. In 1893, critics of Swami Vivekananda questioned his faithfulness to Hindu traditions by calling his methods neo-Hindu. Contemporary scholars use the term variously, but in essence the term depicts the blending of Hinduism with modern concepts and ideas, that is, new religious movements that have arisen within Hinduism.
24. See <http://www.swaminarayan.org/lordswaminarayan/>
25. See <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/england/london-neasden-temple>
26. See <http://www.baps.org/Global-Network/North-America/Atlanta/Visitor-Info.aspx>
27. See <http://www.baps.org/Spiritual-Living.aspx> (para 3).
28. See <http://www.baps.org/cultureandheritage/Traditions/HinduPractices/Puja.aspx> (para 1).
29. Bishop Heber and Sir John Malcolm were some of the first colonial leaders to be acquainted with Swaminarayan. Swaminarayan also influenced Professor Monier Williams of Oxford University and later India's great social reformer and activist—Mahatma Gandhi (*Swaminarayan Bliss* 2009: 32). *Swaminarayan Bliss* is a collection of archived articles available from <https://www.swaminarayan.org/publications/magazine/bliss/archive.htm>
30. See <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1481> (para 1).

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